Journeys on the Margins

A collection of migrant girls’ stories from Ivory Coast; Nepal and India; Myanmar and Thailand
Purposeful Productions is a movement building hub for adolescent girls in the Global South. As part of our Insights and Influencing initiative, we facilitate and publish groundbreaking research that centres the stories and experiences of the girls most removed from power. Together with our partners, we use these insights to advocate for girls at the local, national and global levels. To find out more about the organization and other research projects, please go to: www.purposefulproductions.org

“Journeys at the Margins” is the result of collaboration between grassroots community organizations, researchers and local advocates in India, Ivory Coast, Myanmar, Nepal and Thailand. The project was convened with support from the NoVo Foundation.

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A collection of migrant girls’ stories from Ivory Coast; Nepal and India; Myanmar and Thailand
My mama used to work sewing some things, we survived like that. My father died when I was very little. After my mama died there was no one to look after us. My older sisters were already married and had to survive themselves, so they couldn’t look after us. In my home it was just my older brother, my younger brother, and me. But we were all really little. We had a very difficult time trying to survive in the village – we couldn’t find any work to get money to get food. There was also the [Maoist] conflict at that time. The Maoists would come to our house and always ask to take my older brother with them, but we didn’t want that because we didn’t have anyone. So my brother thought that it would be better if I left the village, it was for my safety. I didn’t have money – I just walked from the village to Kathmandu. It was a very long way and I just stayed some nights on the road, I don’t know how long it took. It was my first time in Kathmandu.

When we arrived I lived in the street by myself. I asked lots of people for a job, but because of my caste they wouldn’t give me one – they thought I was untouchable. I used to eat food from the garbage. In that time the caste system was very bad - my caste is ‘Damai’, and everyone has the last name ‘Nepali’. I didn’t know how to lie, that’s why I told them my name. They would ask my last name, because people here care a lot about last names. I was going door to door knocking and asking for work, but as soon as they realised my caste they would say “uh, go go” and shoo me away. Then I decided I would have to lie about my caste. So I knocked on a door and they opened it, and asked the same things, and I lied about my name so they thought I was from a different caste – and they said ok, we need a housemaid.

I started to work there and I asked them, ‘can I study as well?’ – they said yes. They gave me some pen and pencil and exercise books, but I didn’t know how to read and write, so I couldn’t use them. I had only been to school for a short time in the village before my mother died, so I could only write
some numbers and some letters in Nepali. At first they were very nice, but after some time they also started to change their behaviour. They had around 25 people in the house. I had to wash all 25 people’s clothes and dishes and take care of all the children, and do all the cleaning, washing, sweeping. Everything in the house I had to do myself, there was no one to help. I had to cook meals in a big big pot, bigger than me, that was very hard to wash. Sometimes I had to get inside the pot to scrub it. It was really hard. The only thing that made me happy working there was that I got food. In my 11 years that was all I needed – only some love, and some food, nothing more than that. I didn’t have more ambitions. They continuously changed their behaviour. They had a child my age, but they were treating me as an animal. They started to beat me and give me so much torture. They had no reason. Sometimes when I washed clothes and I found money and gave it back to them they said that I was stealing that money, and would beat me. I didn’t need money because I had nowhere to go, I didn’t know where to buy things. Since I entered that house they didn’t let me outside. And if I broke a glass by accident, they would beat me. They said that I did it on purpose because I didn’t want them to have nice glasses. They think like that. In the cold season I had to wake up at 3:30am and I could only go to bed at 1 or 2am. That’s why sometimes when I was washing clothes I would be feeling sleepy, and they would come and beat me with a stick. Even sometimes they said I was lazy, but I was just so tired. They didn’t give me food. They had lots of parties, lots of food, but they always gave me the bad food that was supposed to be thrown away.

There was one man who always came to the house – I don’t know if he was from the family, but he would come often. He convinced me that he would give me a better opportunity. But I didn’t believe him. He was an old man – 40-45 maybe. I said I wouldn’t listen to him, but my life was like hell there. They beat me everyday, they scolded me everyday, but the thing that hurt me most was that they would always scold me using my mama’s name – “your mama didn’t teach you anything” – and I don’t have mama, so it always pinched me.
I always remembered my family, because I wished I still had my family, I wouldn’t have to suffer all of those things. I started to not believe in anyone. I went through trauma. In the winter time they didn’t give me anything warm to wear – I was wearing a sleeveless shirt, working in the night time. My hands were so cracked. And they would beat my hands, and the blood was coming. After spending 2 years there, that man again told me he would give me an opportunity. It was the same day that the house owner and his wife beat me so much because I had broken a glass. I couldn’t tolerate all of this. I had a very bad fever, I was very very sick, very thin. The man started to convince me, saying “you are like my daughter, I know they are like this, they did the same thing to that last maid and that’s why she ran away. You also want to run away, but you can’t go – if you ran, where would you go, you don’t have anywhere. I will give you the good opportunity”. And I thought, because of my child mind, that maybe he would give me a good opportunity, I can’t tolerate this anymore. So I went with the man without telling my house owner. He hired a taxi for us – I don’t know which way we went. He took me to Tamal area - at that time I didn’t know where I was. For me, Kathmandu was like America because I hadn’t been outside the house. I was amazed seeing these big buildings, and good roads. And I thought that now my life would be changed, I’m going to change my life. But it was the opposite of what I thought. He took me to a house that was very very dark, down a narrow road. The staircase had very dim light, and the room was very small and cold. He introduced me to the owner, and said he is your owner – you just have to do the sweeping and cleaning and some washing. You don’t have to do so much work. And I thought, I have done work for 25 people, so I can do this much. And at this time I had a new hope that I would have a new life. The man had a wife and children. He said I can live there, and sometimes I would have to do some care of their children. He would give me money and food and shelter. I was very happy, because my house owner touched me in a very loving way – that what I needed and hadn’t got since my mama died. I thought oh I will change my life again. The man left me there, I don’t know
where he went or if I would recognise him now. I think if I found him I would be very very angry. The day I arrived the owner gave me very warm clothes and good food – I never thought that I would get these things. I was very happy, because I had never found that love. I remember this moment, I cried at the time, because I was very very happy after so many years – only for that day – I hadn’t got new clothes for so long, new clothes for us is like a dream, you have to be at a special festival, and he gave me so nice things, I don’t know how much it cost. I felt like I was a princess in this dress. I had never got a dress like this before. That dress was very expensive for my life.

The man would take me to his office where I spent some time cleaning, some washing bed sheets, and during this time I was having lots of rest. The owner would always get me into a taxi from the house to the office, and the office to the house. It was maybe one week it was like this. But I felt a little bit weird because there were lots of girls. Lots of them were a bit older than me, but some a similar age, they were like 14, 15, 16, 17 and some of them were like 25 years old also. Some boys would come and take some oil and something wrapped in paper. Now I know that that was a condom, but at that time I didn’t know what it was they wrapped in paper. They would go to a room and after some time they would come back out. I didn’t know what they did, but I thought who cares – now I have good food, and they might send me to school – I had my own dream. I was happy for a week, and I thought I would finally be able to study. I was probably 12 years old.

After a week a man who was around 50 years old came – he was very tall, very fat, wearing a motorbike helmet. He went to the room. After he came, my owner came and said take this glass of juice and this wrapped paper to that man and come back. And I thought this is really easy work for me, so I went to the room. I thought I was supposed to just put the tray on the table, but he locked the door. I was so scared because I had never seen a man face to face. I asked him what he was doing – he started to touch me everywhere on my body and pushed me onto the bed and I started screaming. My owner knocked on the door and slapped me and he said he can do as
he wants to you, or I will beat you. I didn’t know what he was doing. He threw me onto the bed and I hit my head and I was unconscious. I can’t remember the rest. I think that man came into me and I don’t know what happened. Then I remember the door opened, and I felt cold in my body. I felt so hurt in my body. I didn’t know what happened to me, but I now I know that I was raped. I had never seen a man like that.

Another girl from the office took me to the bathroom and changed my dress. I had a very bad fever and was shaking all the time, I asked everyone what happened to me. They didn’t say, because if they said my owner would beat them. The girls said nothing happened to you, but I was bleeding continuously. They gave me some pills and pads to stop the bleeding. I was still living at the owner’s house, but I didn’t know where I was. After that I had to work everyday like that. I had to please 25-30 people a day. And if I said no, my owner would beat me. And he always threatened me if I ran from there, he had very good connections with everyone, he would find me and kill me. He always gave me mental and physical torture. Sometimes the customers were not good, some speak very softly and try to convince us. Others say “I have paid money to you, your body is mine”. My owner said you have to please your customer or he won’t come again. I was the youngest one, so every customer wanted me. Also my owner wanted to send me with people because if he sent me, he would get all the money. If he sent other girls, he would have to pay them some money. Whenever I felt sick or fever, they would give me a drug and I would feel unconscious, so I don’t know how many people had sex with me. Sometimes the girls would say you have done 30 or 40 people, and I was like what, I don’t remember anything. Every time in the night my owner would send me with random men who would take me to a hotel with lots of people and I was like their doll. I don’t know how many times any of this happened. My owner would come to the hotel after and find me alone and say, “oh, you are alive!” Again and again I had to do the same things. My owner and his wife made me like a dummy, like a doll, like very beautiful, I don’t know what cosmetics they used. I really didn’t want that
because I didn’t know what was the meaning of beauty. I don’t know what that means. None of the other girls looked like that. If I said no, they would threaten me and not give me food. I had to do whatever they wanted.

After half a year they started to trust me because they knew that I didn’t have anyone and didn’t know where to go. And I earned lots of money for them, so they never let me walk outside my own – I only went by taxi. And they always made sure the taxi zigzagged through lots of streets so I wouldn’t be able to remember the way. One day I was sitting in the office and my owner was not there. I turned on the radio and was listening to the programme of Raksha, because I love music and I like singing and dancing – when they are there I wasn’t allowed to touch it, but when they weren’t I would sometimes use it. The programme was talking about programmes for girls. Before that they played a very good music, and that’s why I listened. Then they talked about helping children who don’t have parents, or something like that, and they announced lots of times the phone number to call. I could hardly write the number because I only know 1,2,3… in that time I didn’t even know if the number I wrote was correct or not. But straight away I dialled the number in the office and I spoke to Mam. She said yes, she would come. But I was hopeless and I didn’t have trust in anyone because customers had come, and lots of people from organisations, and they always said this is not a good job for you, I will give you a better life, or a better opportunity. They would take the information and then they would go and never come back. And the customers always said, “you are a child, this is not good for you to do this job”. They paid for me and they would take me to the room and tell me this, and I would think they were good men. They always said they would help me, but they only said that because they wanted a good service from me. He would say that in the room, but as soon as we went to the office he would say the same things to other girls. I didn’t have any hope in anyone, not even God. I thought that everything happened to me, God is doing all of this to me, so when mam said she would come I didn’t believe it. But some people came to the office with her, and she took me. She
said to the people in the office that if they refused, she would call the police.

When I came to Raksha for the first year it was really hard for me. I felt quite scared. Everyone in my life had misused my trust and my innocence. But slowly I felt like maybe there was something good again. And also you feel scared because you have a lot of suffering and everyone has broken your trust. But everyone here, the staff and all of the people were so nice to me. I came here and I started to be sick because all of the medicine they had given to me had stopped me from feeling anything. So when I got good care I became very sick. I vomited a lot and I got depression and trauma. First they started to cure my health. I called Mam mama and she helped me a lot – without her support I couldn’t have recovered. Because of her I came here, so I really needed her a lot at that time. I slept in her bed with her; she cared for me like a child. She was always there, cleaning up when I vomited from all the bad medicine. When my health recovered I went to counselling, and got good food, everything. It was the first time that I was very happy because I got love, which I hadn’t had for so many years. I had been at the massage parlour for 2 years, so I was like 14 when I came here. After that I changed my life – you can see now how I am. I am a survivor. Raksha sent me to lots of training – first for personal development, and then to sewing training. And I started to study at the age of 18 in class 8 and I got first position in the class. It was my happiest moment. I always wanted to study, but no one gave me the chance. I learnt everything I need from here. Especially I found my own family here.

When I came here one thing I realised is that I was there working only for me. All the girls who are working there are working for their family, for their children, for their husbands, for their parents who are helpless – and I thought that I had suffered a lot. I have suffered for myself, but others have suffered for others. For their family. That helped me a lot to recover. Now I am going to counselling class to learn how – because I know how girls from there need a lot of counselling, what kinds of problems they have, because I know the pain. I remember that the girls from there don’t look happy, but I
didn’t know why they were like that, but now I can feel why. I feel that I am very strong. I want to work with Raksha to help these girls. And I want to save those girls like me.

I think we need to give girls lots of opportunity. Many girls are doing it for their family, their children. So if we can find the root cause why the girl is doing this, and if we can work on the root cause then maybe it will change. I feel like my past is my strongest point for right now. Everyone says experience is the greatest thing. I know I had that life, and that is why I have this life now. Everyone has their one priority in their life. I only needed a family with whom I can share my feelings, my pain. So mama, even though she has lots of work, she is always there for me. I can say that she is my living God. I don’t know where God is, every time in the morning I wake up and pray for God but I haven’t seen. Maybe you haven’t seen, but I have seen my living God – smiling and taking care of others. I am here because of her. I always found negative about myself, but she always showed me the positive and gave me the new life. Raksha Nepal is the temple and she is the God”

22 year old, living at Raksha for 8 years
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A BRIEF SUMMARY OF MIGRATION IN OUR THREE REGIONS</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MIGRATION TRAJECTORY</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction
‘Journeys on the margins’ is a collection of stories shared by migrant girls across Ivory Coast, Myanmar and Nepal, as well as Thai and Indian border towns. Over 10 weeks in late 2016, we met girls at home in their natal villages, in transit stops and rescue centres, in factories, tea shops and gold mine brothels. Some of these stories are deeply harrowing, others hopeful, but always they are moving accounts of the hidden lives of girls living and journeying at the margins of society.

Each year, over 18 million girls are caught up in the fraught and dangerous path of migration, a long and varied journey that only increases girls’ marginalization, vulnerability and isolation. By listening to and learning from their experiences, we hope to identify interventions that could improve conditions for migrant girls — at departure, during transit, and upon arrival — as they seek factory work, domestic work, or refuge in a different country altogether.

**WHY GIRLS?**

For most girls, simply being young and female places them at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. While the specifics vary by geography, the overall picture is the same: individual potential is unrealized while systemic cycles of inequality persist.

At the root of all of this is patriarchy, the global system of male supremacy that keeps power situated in the hands of men, by conspiring to control the minds and bodies of women and girls. Sometimes this control is exercised in obvious ways – the reality, or fear, of violence including sexual violence. And sometimes it is more subtle, woven into the fabric of social, cultural and economic life – diffuse, obscured, but omnipresent.

These cultural norms of control affect the choices girls are offered and, even more foundationally, the choices she can imagine for herself. Cultural narratives about control make it more appealing for families, parents and communities to close off options for girls, and more frightening for them to leave them open – distancing girls from the assets, networks and services they need to thrive. And ultimately, they affect the choices a girl can envisage for themselves: creating not just ambivalence but fatalism about lives of violence and oppression.

As such, any meaningful efforts to transform the lives of adolescent girls will ultimately require a radical restructuring of power and a new paradigm in which all girls are valued.
WHICH GIRLS?

Whilst patriarchy universally ranks men and boys above women and girls, some girls are the very worst affected. Race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, ability and other factors can deepen their exclusion. When we think about phenomena like migration, social determinants such as age and educational attainment are likely to be key markers in the experience of migration for girls:

“Much like gender, ‘age’ is not simply a variable to be measured, but a framework that facilitates, constrains and ultimately contours migrant experience”

UNESCO

Adolescent girls – young, poor, illiterate, rural, and so on – are battling the compound effects of multiple forms of structural inequality, and it is therefore no surprise that they are also the girls who are most hidden and whose voices are most silenced.

Although the multiple forms of oppression they face should rightly see them front and centre of donor priorities and policy agendas, they are most likely to be shut out or forgotten. This is how patriarchy – omnipresent but obscured – exerts its control over girls even through the very structures that are meant to act as forces for ‘development’ and ‘progress’.

Any meaningful efforts to transform the lives of these adolescent girls requires us first to listen, deeply, to their stories. And in order to do that, we must first locate them within a system designed to keep them hidden.
WHY MIGRATION?
While norms of control affect the choices girls can access across many areas of social life, there are particular moments in which they are most vulnerable to patriarchal oppression. Migration is one such moment, representing a time of pronounced risk.

And yet, unlike some of the worst forms of violence girls face, migration is neither inherently positive nor inherently negative. In fact, for many people around the world, the experience of migration is one of hope, of new opportunities, of the chance for discovery and learning. So whilst we want to end manifestations of patriarchy – for example phenomena like Child Marriage or FGM – we are most interested in transforming the experience of migration for the most marginalised adolescent girls, so that it becomes one of possibility.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?
In the short term, this means making migration safer for adolescent girls – tackling the pervasive physical, social, psychological, cultural, economic violence that is the reality of their daily lives. And this in turn means designing or finding, funding and promoting service for adolescent girls across the migration trajectory – at home, in transit and on arrival. But in the long term, to genuinely transform girls’ lives, we need to be more radical in our intent.

Our ultimate desire is that migration is not just inevitable, but part of a stock of options from which girls can meaningfully choose. Choices that would include when and who they marry, the kinds of labour they are able to engage in at home and away, and, if they do decide to migrate, when, where and if they come home. But it also includes a broader set of choices that recognises the simultaneity of girls’ power and vulnerability – of their right to be held, to heal, to play, and to lead.

This, very simply, is the world we envision for girls. A world where they are able to access and actualise choices about their own lives.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY MIGRATION?
Migration – in its broadest sense – can be defined as the movement of a person either across an international border, or within a state. It encompasses any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes. And it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification (ILO, 2012).
In short, migration is a broad concept that encompasses a range of more empowering or potentially more damaging situations. In current narrative however, there is significant preoccupation as to whether a (female) migrant has ‘voluntarily’ migrated, or been ‘trafficked’ against her will. Whilst binary definitions such as these are the driving force behind local and international legislation and INGO intervention, the definitional boundaries between trafficking and migration are blurred at best.

“Trafficking, refugee situations, undocumented migration and smuggling are smaller parts of the larger migration picture. It could be possible for a person to have... travelled with a third party to another country, not have legal status, be exploited and would have been forced to move. This person could potentially be a migrant, a refugee (if there was a certain kind of force), a smuggled person (if payment was given), a trafficked person (if there was a certain kind of force) and an undocumented person all at the same time. Categories may, thus, get very blurry, and it may be hard to tease out one label for every person who moves from their home”

GAATW, Beyond Borders: Exploring Links between Trafficking and Migration, 2010

At the very least, we hope that it becomes clear through this reading that almost all girls will have complex intersections of motivations, hopes and fears, and one factor is unlikely to be the whole story. Individual girls cannot be expected to articulate the often complex socio-economic, political dynamics that shape larger migration patterns; in addition, gendered social pressures may shape the phrasing and manner of girls’ responses (for example, encouraging them to down weight economic motivations or up-weight reasons to do with sacrifice, or familial piety, fate, and so on).

In the same vein, discussions of agency can dominate both theory and practice and create a circular, self-defeating loop. There are, within this particular academic context, significant amounts of discussion about the level
of ‘agency’ or ‘decision making power’ that we can conceptualise as resting with individual girls. While an important piece of terminology in some ways, these discussions can become stuck on this point and fail to move forward to more nuanced and textured cultural analysis. It is clear that even relatively young girls are often making complex decisions for themselves and succeeding in making the best of their circumstances; it is equally clear that girls are choosing among a restrictive and often dehumanising palette of options with limited access to reliable, objective information.

However we conceptualise agency in these discussions, ultimately the aim should be to improve the choices on offer, and in order to understand how to do that, we need analysis to move beyond the question of complicity or force, and into the precise nature of the cultural and social structures which constrain (or have the capacity to liberate) girls.

**PULLING BACK: ADOLESCENT GIRLS’ MIGRATION IN CONTEXT**

From the early 1600s, Imperialist colonialists relied heavily on the glut of free labour in the form of slaves to expand their power and accumulate capital on a world scale – the ‘capital that made capitalism’ (see for example Blackburn, 1998).

“Since trade ignores national boundaries and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed against him must be battered down. Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process. Colonies must be obtained or planted, in order that no useful corner of the world may be overlooked or left unused”

*Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, 1919, Quoted by Noam Chomsky, On Power and Ideology,*
As slavery was abolished (although racist extractive imperialism was not) and capitalism took on a new guise as it entered its later stages, the transnational movement of people across the world continued in newly exploitative ways.

And so although migration has been a feature of human history since the beginning of time, since the end of the Cold War – when neo-liberal globalisation was able to proliferate unabated by ideological boundaries (or curtains made of iron) – it has taken on a very particular form.

“...under capitalist globalization a new global immigrant labour supply system has come to replace earlier direct colonial and racial caste controls over labour worldwide. There is a new global working class that labours in the factories, farms, commercial establishments and offices of the global economy – a working class that faces conditions of precariousness, is heavily female... and is increasingly based on immigrant labor”


If neo-liberalism is the defining paradigm of our time – concerned with the accumulation and concentration of the majority of wealth in the hands of the few – migration, that is the global reserve army of capitalist labour, is the very central tenet of its thesis (see Engels, 1845).

Today – while acknowledging that migration can be a time of betterment and advancement – the vast majority of migrant workers, in their role as reserve labour army, are engaged in the very worst, most dangerous, most soul degrading forms of work.

What of poor adolescent girls in this system?

“It is my thesis that this general production of life – mainly performed through the non-wage labour of women... as slaves, contract workers and peasants in the colonies... constitutes the perennial basis
If patriarchy birthed all other forms of domination, including capitalism (see for example Mies 1986 and 1994; Federici, 2004; Eisenstein, 1977), it logically follows that within the neo-liberal [imperialist, racist, expansionist] world order, girls and women are the very worst affected. And so it also follows that the contours of labour and of national and global movement of girls and women therefore take on a very particular and destructive form.

This is not merely theoretical, nor academic. As we will hear in the following chapters, these forces play out directly, explicitly, tangibly, on the minds and bodies of real life girls in everyday places – not simply as drivers of migration, but also through the experience of being a migrant in new place and time.

For now, it is also worth noting that perhaps the final and cruellest blow of capitalist patriarchy is the way in which it has evolved – socially and culturally as well as economically – both to need and despise the bodies of migrant female labour. If, according to Marxist doctrine, contradiction sits at the heart of capitalism, that contradiction only becomes compounded for girls migrating at the intersections of imperialist patriarchy (see Lowe and Loyd, 1997).

Just as cheap migrant labour is a primary driver of neo-liberal profit, so too is repression and criminalisation of migrant workers a means of “hyper-surveillance” and “super-exploitation” within that same system. As such, surveillance, militarised borders and criminalisation, along with the stoking of hysteria about the social dangers of migration, are absolutely essential for capitalist domination over workers and the creation and reproduction of a global reserve army of migrant workers (Robinson and Santos, 2014). For women and girls, this hyper-control is likely to play out in very particular ways:

“The fear of the female body’s impurity has a close relative in the fear of having one’s nation or culture infected by foreign blood. Internal border controls, that is, the surveillance of a live-in maid’s intimate
And this finds truth not only in the private households of the domestic worker, but in the factories controlled by zealous foremen, or the hidden brothels where migrant girls are policed by madams and pimps just out of sight. And it is this – the attempt to both co-opt / exploit and keep separate / cast out – that marks the contradictory, existentially painful experience of migration for poor girls.

**CONTOURS OF VIOLENCE IN MIGRANT GIRLS’ LIVES**

Violence is both by-product and tool of systems of domination. That is, violence against and between people, between people and nature – and, with particular roots in Enlightenment and Industrialisation – of mind over body.

“... direct violence was the means by which women, colonies and nature were compelled to serve the white man, and without such violence the European Enlightenment, modernisation and development would not have happened”

*Maria Mies, 2014*

Violence unites poor migrant girls across space and time. From rural West Africa to the factories of Myanmar, it is a fundamental marker of her social life. Drawing on Galtung’s seminal 1966 work, the violence we refer to here is both physical and psychological – violence that works on the body, the mind and the soul – as well as personal and structural – violence with a clear perpetrator and victim, and the violence that shows up as unequal structural power.

Violence against girls on the migration trajectory shows up in many different ways – from the acute sexual violence she flees at home,
to the exchange of sex for shelter on the journey; the profound bodily violence of 18 hour days spent at work on a factory floor; to the psychological violence wrought when she discovers the lie at the heart of important relationships: when sister becomes trafficker, when father becomes broker. Whilst the quest for a better life is a primary driver of migration (as both individual act and as social narrative), violence profoundly diminishes girls’ potential in ways that make this extremely difficult. Most notably, as she moves through the migration trajectory, violence diminishes her capacities in several key ways as identified by Nussbaum in her seminal 2005 work).

**SENSES, IMAGINATION AND THOUGHT**

“The threat of bodily violence is a way in which women have for centuries been silenced, prevented from using their thought and imagination to stake out a place in the world.” We will explore in depth the ways in which structures of power have swept girls up in transnational flows of labour, presenting migration as inevitable and discouraging the critical imagination needed to envisage an alternative

**ON EMOTIONS**

“Frequently, one of the worst damages violence does to women is to enlist them as its accomplices. Instead of anger and rebellion, women feel guilt.” As we move through girls’ stories in the coming chapters, we will hear at the root of many a deep sense of fatalism about experiences faced as migrant girls, a fatalism that dampens the potential for solidarity and resistance

**ON PRACTICAL REASON**

“a woman who is used violently, or who fears violence, will not be very good at forming a conception of the good and engaging in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life.” When we look across the migration trajectory we will see how girls have been actively discouraged from critical thinking – making them highly susceptible to predatory advances and illusionary protection

**AFFILIATIONS**

“the affiliations that women are able to form are obviously limited by the ubiquitous threat of violence. In the family, actual violence deforms marital love and/or the relationship of female children to their parents
and their surrounding world”. For cultures and communities living in the pathways of migration flows, the drive above all for economic betterment drives wedges between people, creating competition in place of community, and limiting female solidarity

RELATIONSHIP TO THE WORLD OF NATURE
“to affect a woman’s ability to enjoy leisure, laughter, and play. Although this capability might be thought frivolous, there is nothing sadder than to see the removal of laughter from the eyes of a girl, through repeated sexual or physical abuse, or through persistent fear”. Perhaps the most striking characteristic uniting the girls we met was their commitment to working constantly – for fear of punishment – and a belief that they don’t deserve leisure, play and time in nature outside the working environment

But while in the face of all of this violence it may be tempting to adopt a protectionist strategy to girls’ migration, we caution against this approach. Whilst many governments have begun to put in place restrictive legislations that seek to prevent women and girls (of certain ages, in certain places) from migrating, unsurprisingly these strategies do little more than make her inevitable migration more dangerous and clandestine.

“Government bans and restrictive prevention campaigns focus mainly on women because women are perceived to be vulnerable, powerless and needing protection. But often the bans and campaigns end up being overly protective – restricting, rather than increasing, women’s choices”

GAATW, Beyond Borders: Exploring Links between Trafficking and Migration, 2010

Choice, indeed, is the only genuine counter to lives of violence and domination – choices that girls can access physically but can also, critically, imagine. As we move towards the final recommendation chapter of this analysis, we hope that holding these capabilities as central will help us imagine lives in which girls are not only protected from dangerous migration experiences, but also have access to a proliferation of genuine choices which mean that they can thrive.
MIGRATION, THE COLONISED IMAGINATION AND CULTURAL VIOLENCE

“It is precisely in its oppression of non-market forces that we see how neoliberalism operates not only as an economic system, but as a political and cultural system as well”

Chomsky, Profit Above People, 1999

Perhaps most insidious in its all-consuming invisibility is the violent colonisation of the mind wrought by capitalist patriarchy. In the 1990 re-working of his 1960s thesis on violence, Galtung includes a new category of cultural violence – which he argues dulls us into thinking that exploitation is both natural and inevitable.

For migrants girls this cultural violence shows up in a very specific way – through the proliferation of myths of the city, and the all pervasive narrative that presents migration as not only inevitable, but the only route to accumulation and thus fulfilment.

This myth compounds her fatalism about her role as active agent in the face of fast flowing migration currents, and teaches her to endure the violence she faces on the journey as fair sacrifices for the prize that waits at the end. But it also wrecks a particularly insidious form of psychological violence when she realises that the streets of the city are not, in fact, paved with gold.

“The global city [is cast as] a site of liberation for ‘third-world’ migrant women only insofar as it exists as a site for financial exchange, for working and buying and selling, for the blood and breath of the capitalist economy”

Ziegler, East of the City: Capitalism and the Global Metropolis, 2007
WHAT NEXT?

“The most burning question now is how do we get out of this situation? And what would a society be like in which women, nature and colonies were not exploited in the name of the accumulation of ever more wealth and money?”

Maria Mies, Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale, 1986

30 years after this question was first posed, it’s clear that we still have a very long way to go. And yet its very framing helps remind us of the world we are trying to build.

Many critics of patriarchal capitalism have argued that a return to (or reimagining of) rural life is a critical first step in countering the automated, industrialised violence of neo-liberal city life. This would – in part – be achieved through analogue manual labour, self-sufficiency in food and energy, and self-governance of peoples organised into small-scale communities. Most importantly, it necessitates a return to agricultural production and to village life. For many of the girls we met, the potential for a genuine future in her natal village – a future where she has opportunities to engage in meaningful work, acquire daily sustenance, and have her emotional and social needs met – would be profoundly transformative.

But we caution against an overly sentimental vision of ‘the village’, and of an idealised version of the past.

The village for many girls is a place where they are exposed to abuse and violence but lack the protection or power to resist or fight it. This may be both her reason for leaving and the thing trapping her from moving on.

And in any case, the idea of ‘stable’ villages in the Global South is largely an ethnographic myth. A multiplicity of global and local factors shape these complex and shifting understandings of ‘home’ and ‘away’. In Bangladesh, for example, climates have always disrupted permanent residence and encouraged seasonal and cyclical migration, not only disrupting the idea of home as a fixed geographical point, but working inwards to influence the national psyche. In India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the legacy of colonialism not only disrupts a stable sense of national identity but opens up geographic flows of migration among the former Empire. Any intervention that attempts to impose a fixed geographic understanding of a ‘natal
community’ as home risks cultural dissonance in many of these places.

How then should we understand ideas of ‘home’ in a context where both the physical fixity and the psychological security of natal communities is by no means intuitive for many girls?

In her famous analysis of statelessness, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt described it as a condition of lacking ‘a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective’. This is a conceptualisation of home, of belonging, which relies not so much on protection as power – or rather, which sees protection as stemming directly from power. And it’s a useful framing when we think about what it is that we want girls to have, and how we should go about getting there.

Ultimately, we must recognise that for girls, true belonging is achieved not necessarily by fidelity to family or location, but by a secure understanding that their ‘opinions are significant’ and their ‘actions are effective’: that they have a chance to shape, control and remake their worlds – wherever they may be.
A brief summary of migration in our three regions
The Ivory Coast is a resource-rich nation on the coast of West Africa. The port city of Abidjan has long been the country’s economic capital and largest city, gaining a coveted reputation and drawing migrant populations from across the region. The country is squeezed at its borders by less prosperous countries: Guinea and Liberia in the west, Burkina Faso and Mali in the north, as well as Ghana to the east.

Colonised by the French in 1843, Houphouët-Boigny led the country to independence in 1960, going on to rule for 33 years. By 1979, the Ivory Coast was the world’s leading producer of cocoa. This, along with relative political stability, saw an influx of migrant workers from neighbouring countries, which greatly stimulated production. This period, which saw an annual growth rate of nearly 10% a year for 20 years, was coined the “Ivorian miracle”.

Tides however changed in the 1980s as the country experienced economic crisis, pulled down by the global recession. Ethnic and political tensions grew, and two brutal civil wars followed. During the second civil war of 2010-11, over one million people were displaced and numerous human rights violations were committed. In both periods of conflict, rape and sexual violence were widely used as weapons of war, leaving behind a legacy of trauma bubbling just under the surface of society.

Violence, on many levels, is a feature of life for Ivorian girls, with child marriage, FGM and other forms of sexual violence rife. Although there is absolutely no formal legislation that specifically addresses domestic violence, data from the 2011-2012 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) suggests that gender based violence is endemic. Abortion is illegal and deeply stigmatized socially, with contraceptives and other sexual and reproductive health services extremely hard to access.

Economically however, Ivory Coast is slowly beginning to recover – with 9% economic growth reported in 2016, the fastest growing economy in West Africa. Its success is largely based on revived cocoa plantations, rubber production and gold mining industry, and its central role for transit trade for its landlocked neighbours. This has unsurprisingly drawn migrant workers from neighbouring countries. Today about 20% of the total popula-
tion consist of labourers from Liberia, Burkina Faso and Guinea. There have also been steady cross-border migration flows from Mali, Ghana and Benin, as well as from further away on the continent, notably Nigeria.

In addition, there is considerable internal migration within the country, primarily from rural villages to Abidjan – ‘the little Manhattan of Africa’ – or to secondary city centres, including Bouake and Aboisso near the Ghanaian border.

Like elsewhere in West Africa, the ‘feminisation of migration’ is a major trend. In 2010, girls accounted for 53.6% of international migrants under the age of 19, with the majority of girl migrants between the ages of 8 and 17. In the country as a whole, over a quarter of all girls aged 5 to 17 are thought to be economically active, and many of these will have travelled for work.

In particular, the call of domestic work brings vast numbers of girls to Ivorian cities. Recent estimates set the number of domestic workers in Abidjan at one million, with almost all being female, which finds its roots in the deep cultural tradition of ‘entrusting’. This is the oldest form of movement of children in West Africa.

Whilst the tradition continues, it is increasingly commercialised and depersonalised; with growing numbers of girls likely to be placed with people with whom they have no ethnic, regional, biological, or social ties. The ‘behind closed doors’ nature of these kinds of relationships make girls very vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

The commoditisation of young girls manifests particularly explicitly at the Marché des Jeunes Filles (Market of Young Girls) in Abidjan, which sees girls from all over the Ivory Coast, as well as neighbouring countries, sold for as little as $6 to work in people’s homes. Other forms of earning taken up by migrant girls in Abidjan include work as street vendors, head porters, and in restaurants.

Commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) also thrives in a context where movement of girls is largely unregulated and exploitation is the norm. Girls are trafficked into Ivory Coast from across the region, most notably from Senegal, Nigeria and Ghana, often lured with the false promise of work as hairdressers or tailors in other parts of West Africa or Europe. Many rural migrant girls from within the country are forced into CSE in maquis (street bars) or in rural camps near gold mines. There is also evidence of girls’ migration to urban centres in order both to escape forced marriage, and to fulfil marriage contracts.
Return migration is not common: according to a report in 2015, only one in five children are thought to return to their villages permanently. The vast majority of those who do return are girls who have become pregnant. Within this complex and dynamic landscape, increasing attention is being paid to child migration. Most recently, local NGOs in Ivory Coast, Mali and Burkina Faso began implementing a significant, large-scale Save the Children initiative. Despite this, a strong analysis of the particular needs, vulnerabilities and potentials of migrant girls sadly appears to be missing from the region.

**OUR RESEARCH LOCATIONS**
The diversity of our route meant we were able to meet girls in a range of sender villages, on the move, and at ‘destination’.

We started in the north, at Korhogo, centre of the Savannes district, not far from the Burkina and Mali borders, where gold mines attract men to work in the quarries and women to work in the bars (‘les maquis’) at the camps, often finding themselves forced to sell their bodies to survive. Trafficking here is rife, but the scale of the problem is seemingly little recognised, and, in a context where the rule of law barely exists, little policed.

We then made our way to Katiola, a small urban centre which for many girls represents a transit stage of the journey en route to Abidjan. Next we reached Bouake, the second largest city in Cote D’Ivoire, and the de facto capital of the ‘north’ during the civil wars. Here we spent much of our time in the villages surrounding urban centres, meeting girls as they prepared to migrate, or as they returned.

Crossing the country, we entered Bondoukou at the heart of Zanzan country, and then on to the south via Abengourou within the Comoe district, and Aboisso in the south-east at the border with Ghana, an important migration centre given the presence of rubber plantations and other agricultural activity. We concluded our journey in Abidjan – the final destination for many girls.
Wedged between Tibet and north-eastern India, Nepal is a country of extremes. From the jagged peaks of the Himalayas at its northern border, to the working plains of the Terai that feed into India to the south, the contrasts are dramatic. The central Kathmandu valley is nestled amongst the elevated mid-hills – with a deep history as the country’s cultural and economic capital. Despite its small size and historical positioning between two of the world’s great empires, Nepal has fiercely maintained its independence. Nevertheless, its geographical position means it has not escaped the burden of imperialism, acting as a buffer between Colonial British and Chinese powers.

Through much of 20th Century Nepal was under the autocratic rule of the Rana monarchy. Although the country has been slowly democratising over the last 20 years, success has been mixed. The Maoist Uprising led to the long Nepali Civil War of 1996-2006, disrupting rural development and forcing the displacement of an estimated 150,000 people.

On 25 April 2015 Nepal was struck by natural disaster, the worst in living memory. The Gorkha earthquake, with a magnitude of 7.8 on the Richter scale, resulted in the deaths of nearly 9,000 people, with nearly 22,000 injured. A second, similarly powerful, earthquake followed just two weeks later. The disaster also saw hundreds of thousands of people lose their homes, including entire villages that were flattened, across many parts of the country. This has left deep scars and psychological trauma, particularly amongst the worst hit rural population in the hilly and mountainous belts of the country. Girls and women were disproportionately affected by the disaster, not least because they were more likely to be inside tending to domestic duties, whilst men were outdoors labouring.

Nepali society operates under the Hindu caste system, which enforces rigid hierarchical divisions – people from lower castes (Shudra and Dalit), and of those girls in particular, still have limited access to education, health-care and other resources. Traditions of acquiescence to patriarchal norms and female subservience (e.g. feeding ones husband before oneself), as well as a cultural reticence in discussing sex, puts girls at further risk of exploitation. There are high rates of domestic abuse (both familial and mar-
Nepal’s development continues to be hindered by political uncertainty, recovery from emergency, and long-standing social divisions. Despite vast improvements, about a quarter of Nepal’s population continue to live below the international poverty line (earning less than US$1.25 per day), with the majority employed in agriculture. However, the contribution of the service sector to the economy is increasing. Nonetheless unemployment and underemployment in Nepal affects almost half of the working-age population. This drives many people to seek employment internationally, most notably in the Gulf States and parts of Southeast Asia. Remittances are the largest source of foreign income in the country, estimated to contribute up to 30% of GDP. Approximately 77% of all Nepali migrants can be found in India. With historical migration flows dating back centuries, the phenomenon is facilitated by the porous border and has its roots in the countries’ continued close relationship, socially, culturally, ethnically, linguistically, as well as politically and economically.

The top destinations for international female migrants are the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Lebanon. The primary employment for girls in these countries is domestic work. Labour laws do not cover migrants who have come through illegal channels, but even when legally migrating, the Kafala (sponsorship) system in the Gulf States puts girls entering unskilled jobs (i.e. domestic work), totally under the control of their employers. In this environment, abuse and exploitation are rife and legal remedies few and far between.
Government efforts to ‘protect’ citizens have resulted in a blunt outright ban on female migration to the Gulf States for domestic work. Unsurprisingly, girls continue to find alternative routes to bypass government laws, relying on traffickers and false documentation.

Conversely, internal migration, as well as cross-border migration into India, is neither tracked nor regulated, putting girls at perhaps the greatest risk of exploitation. Conservative estimates suggest that 150,000 Nepali girls are in situations of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) in India at any one time. In this context, the line between migration and trafficking is extremely blurred.
OUR RESEARCH LOCATIONS

Our research started in ‘sender villages’ in mountainous Sindhupalchowk and the flatlands of Parsa, from where many girls migrate to India for marriage; in transit to Kathmandu and over the border into India via Birgunj and Raxaul Junction train station; and at destination, in the bustling cities of Kathmandu and Delhi. Locating our research in these diverse places allowed us to speak to Nepali girls with a range of experiences, from more chaotic to more fixed contexts, and at different stages in their migration journeys.

Situated in the hilly ecological belt of the country, northeast of Kathmandu and bordering Tibet, Sindhupalchowk was one of the districts most severely affected by the earthquake in 2015. Despite its proximity to Kathmandu, it is one of the least developed regions, with one of the lowest human development indices in the country – and therefore some of the highest numbers of out-migration. The majority of girls migrate to Kathmandu and over the border into India. Travelling down from the mountains to the capital, anti-trafficking booths line the route.

Kathmandu is the major destination for internal migration, and while there may be increased opportunities here for girls compared to the village, most sectors are largely unregulated, including domestic work, brick kilns, carpet factories, construction and agriculture. Inevitably, a booming ‘entertainment industry’ has also emerged – including hotels, pubs, dance bars, restaurants and massage parlours – all of which are sights of CSE, and which suck in huge numbers of girls. Kathmandu also serves as a through-route for many girls who are waiting to go further afield, and a holding ground for traffickers.

From Kathmandu, we made our way towards the border with India, stopping in the district of Parsa. Here, in highly conservative agricultural villages, child marriage including cross-border marriage is the norm. Conversely, formalised economic migration is not common at all. We also spent time in the district’s bustling border-town of Birgunj, the gateway to the busiest trade route between Nepal and India and a key transit point for people migrating from the central and western hills. The Raxaul-Birgunj border crossing also continues to be used by traffickers, although they are forging new routes due to increased surveillance and civil society activity. Girls who don’t make it across the border can end up in underground brothels (dance bars were banned in the district in 2006), or in transit homes, where they are likely to be placed when ‘rescued’ or ‘intercepted’ by NGOs.
From Birgunj, we crossed the border into the Indian state of Bihar – one of the poorest in the country, with the highest rate of child marriage, and a trafficking hot spot for both Nepali girls in transit and Indian girls at source. Key destinations for trafficked (and migrant) girls within India include Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai, with some girls also being taken further afield to the Gulf States. Raxaul Junction train station is an immediate landmark once over the border, served by regular direct trains to both Delhi and Kolkata. Notably, the anti-trafficking NGO presence falls away on the Indian side of the border, with no booths or posters in sight.

Our final destination was the sprawling metropolis of Delhi – a place many girls dream of reaching. But dreams are often not fulfilled. The city serves as both cross-border destination and transit point for international migration for Nepali girls. Nepali colonies [residential settlements] have taken shape, and girls can be found working in a host of professions; including shopkeepers, beauticians, domestic workers, food vendors and in call centres. Nepali girls are also in high demand in Delhi’s sex industry – building number 64 on GB Road in Delhi’s red-light district is a notorious brothel known to house Nepali girls, prized for their lighter skin, and their status as cure for HIV.
Gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Myanmar embarked on a course that has seen it veer between nascent post-colonial democracy and repressive military dictatorship. Illogically drawn colonial boundaries have been a catalyst for the insurgency and ethnic repression Burmese peoples have had to endure for decades. With military rule slowly coming to an end and the country opening up to outsiders, life is changing at a rapid rate. And yet, strong family structures, collective communities and distinct, culturally rich, traditions are still to be found. Despite myriad ethnic groups, Buddhism is the dominant religion, a unifying (and sometimes repressive) force.

Burma was subsumed into the British Empire in the 19th Century, after three Anglo-Burmese wars, and remained a key British outpost in Southeast Asia until independence in 1948. There followed a short period as a democratic nation, until 1962, when Myanmar (as it was recast) entered into a long period of oppressive military dictatorship. Human rights abuses, political repression, and isolationism defined a period of military rule that lasted until 2011. Low-level civil war, involving struggles for regional, ethnic or religious autonomy, persisted through the late 20th century and into the new millennium.

Myanmar’s military rulers relinquished some power after 2011, but the first recognizably democratic elections were not held until November 2015. This led to the formation of a new government, with Htin Kyaw as president. Even now, though, the extent to which the new government can be called sovereign is unclear, with the military a continued and formidable presence at all levels of political life. Kyaw is thought to be a proxy for Aung San Suu Kyi, who is in effect running the country from her position as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Suu Kyi is a key figure in the recent history of Myanmar, becoming one of the world’s most prominent political prisoners and a global symbol of Myanmar’s oppressive regime.

Despite being ringed by Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand, its political isolationism has meant that Myanmar has remained largely impervious to the forces of globalization that have transformed its neighbors. Today it remains one of the poorest nations in Southeast Asia, ranking 148th
out of 188 countries in the 2014 Human Development Index. A quarter of its population live below the poverty line (US$1.25/day). Two-thirds live in rural areas, with agriculture making up 40% of GDP. However, the country is rich in natural resources – with large deposits of oil, natural gas, jade and gemstones. Myanmar is also the world’s largest producer of opium. These valuable domestic products fuel a strong black-market economy, aided by a lack of comprehensive regulation. It remains one of the world’s most corrupt nations, and human rights abuses persist – evident in the continued persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority.

The average age of marriage is significantly later than the rest of Southeast Asia, at 26 years old for women. However females do migrate for marriage, with 19% of migrant women citing this as their primary reason for leaving home. There is a strong and pervasive cultural concept of “dutiful daughter” – with society expecting girl-children to support the family economically before marriage. According to this cultural narrative, it is a daughter’s responsibility to help the family acquire more wealth – to reach a state of betterment – before she can move on to someone else’s home. Many suggest that this is the reason for higher marriage ages in Myanmar, rather than an inherently more progressive attitude to girlhood.

Migration is a widespread phenomenon across Myanmar. The majority of migration is ‘irregular’, happening through illegal channels. This means it is incredibly difficult to document or monitor. Officially, female migrants make up 39% of the total migrant population. However, there is a widespread belief that ‘women’s labor activity’, most notably domestic work, is not included in this figure, and so the number is likely to be much higher. The most significant patterns of migration are from rural areas to urban centers for domestic work and industry, cross-border to Thailand and China for low-skilled manufacturing industries, and to Singapore, Malaysia and the Gulf States, predominantly for domestic work.

Female migration usually occurs through existing (albeit informal) networks, as these are viewed as the best way to stay safe. This emulates longstanding historical migration patterns within Myanmar, particularly rural to urban migration, in which girls would be sent to live with wealthier families to earn money. Misinformation is a huge problem, fuelled by recruitment agents and brokers, an industry that is both growing and becoming increasingly informalised. Once employed by an agency, girls may be forced to pay off debts working in bonded labor, and are often kept separate from one another and from their families.
Whilst relatively little is known about internal migration in Myanmar, much greater attention locally and internationally has been paid to migration to Thailand. Looming over eastern Myanmar, this economic behemoth shares a long, spindly border that forms the backbone of a longstanding relationship. Thailand has had significantly greater cultural influence on Myanmar than any other country, even during the years when it was ostensibly closed off from external influence. Cross-border migration to Thailand has been the main migration flow for decades, with 70% of all Myanmar migrants estimated to be based in Thailand, particularly concentrated along the border.

In general, Thailand’s economy offers better employment opportunities and higher salaries in comparison to the homeland. Additionally, the long porous border, relatively liberal immigration policies, the insatiable demand for low-skilled workers, and cultural and linguistic similarities, have encouraged this history of migration. Most migrants cross illegally, at least initially. Despite economic opportunity being relatively open to both males and females, inequality persists. Females consistently report earning lower wages in Thailand, and face other increased forms of discrimination and exploitation.

Female labour migration to China is already substantial and is thought to be increasing. However, little information is available to migrants about working and living conditions due to the irregularity of the migration flows and a lack of transparency from the Chinese government. 46% of females planning to migrate to China for work did not know what they would be paid, in contrast to just 9% of men. There is also evidence of the largely unreported trafficking of girls from Myanmar to China for forced marriage and child bearing, fueled by the unbalanced ratio of men to women in China.

In Singapore and Malaysia and in the Gulf States, girls are commonly employed in domestic work. Migration usually occurs through agencies and trafficking networks. Local police are often bribed to circumvent any bans on migration, or checks on the girls leaving. These bribes are often then passed onto girls, in addition to travel costs and visa fees. Girls are then made to work off these debts before receiving any payment. Often lacking documentation, girls are not protected by labor or migration laws.

There have been several bans on migration from within Myanmar, such as a temporary ban on females leaving Myanmar to work abroad as housemaids in 2014. However, these have only served to endanger girls further by pushing migration deeper underground. Agents and traffickers continue to find ways around laws, for example by providing fake documents to allow girls to travel under the guise of ‘nurse’s aid’.
Myanmar has yet to establish a policy structure fit for the task of managing its large migration flows, despite formal recognition by the Government that there are major gaps and inconsistencies within the existing legal framework.

**OUR RESEARCH LOCATIONS**

We began in an industrialized township on the outskirts of Yangon, before moving on to Southern Shan State, the ‘sender’ region of Mandalay, and then south to Kayin State, which shares borders with Thailand. Finally, we made the crossing into Mae Sot via the seedy border town of Mywaddy.

Established in 1995, the Hlaing Thar Yar Industrial City, which rubs alongside the city of Yangon, is the largest industrial area in the country. As of January 2016, there were over 650 factories and 13,000 workers operating in the zone. Of these, nearly 98,000 are migrant girls working in garment factories. Workers live in settlements, often on the factory premises, in extremely cramped quarters. In recent years, female workers here have raised the issue of gender inequality, labor exploitation, and poor living conditions. Whilst the factories are the major source of employment, many young women have to settle for informal jobs in adjacent industries because of a lack of documentation.

Taunggyi is the administrative capital of Shan State, and offers employment opportunities to those from surrounding rural areas, particularly in service industries – including teashops and domestic work for younger girls, and pubs and restaurants for older girls. Southern Shan shares a border with the northwest of Thailand and is a source of cross-border migration, predominantly for factory and domestic work. As we moved to more rural areas within the state – including the Pa-O autonomous zone, infamous for poppy cultivation – almost every teenage girl we met had been to work in Bangkok at least once.

Our next destination was the Kyaukpydaung Township in the Mandalay region, or ‘Dry Zone’ – a major source of both internal and international migration. The region suffers from food insecurity, endemic poverty, low farming wages and limited employment opportunity. Here we spoke to girls from wildly different communities, united by their extreme isolation and young ages. Girls as young as 9 or 10 were being sent to work away in factories, teashops and private homes. Destinations were diverse, but largely fixed within each community – including Myitkyinar, Yangon, and further afield into China.
We then travelled to Hpa-An, the administrative capital of Kayin State, which also shares borders with Thailand. There are three main ethnic groups residing in the region: Kayin, Mon and Pa-O, with a history of decades of ethnic conflict. This, along with human rights violations, limited work and education opportunities, and close proximity to Thailand, has resulted in many local residents seeking both refuge and employment over the border. A new highway between Hpa-An and Myawaddy, the border town on the Myanmar side, and a ‘Friendship Bridge’ (over Moei/Thuangyin River) connecting Myawaddy to Thailand opened in August 2015. This has facilitated an increased flow of people across the border.

Following this highway en route to Thailand, we stopped off in Myawaddy, the sister border town to Mae Sot. Like many border towns, its function as a transit point for both people and goods lends it an unsettling air. The main road that approaches the border control point is lined with shops selling everything from white goods to clothing, whilst its backstreets host a shady array of KTVs (karaoke bars) and hotels. It is also home to a glistening Thai run casino, attracting tourists from across the Thai border and from China. The border crossing itself is controlled, with long queues of people forming daily to show their documentation and cross. Illegal migrants cross the river further downstream. Of all the girls we met in Thailand who had completed this journey, none had made the official bridge crossing.

Trade with Myanmar constitutes the largest portion of Mae Sot’s economy. This is Thailand’s busiest land portal with Myanmar, and hosts a mix of rebels, refugees, NGOs and smugglers, along with hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from Myanmar. The total number of migrants estimated to be working in the Mae Sot area is between 200,000 and 300,000, with 60,000-80,000 estimated to be working in garment factories. Of these, 70% are thought to be female.

In many ways, Mae Sot feels like an extension of Myanmar, with Burmese spoken everywhere, and a range of services directed at mass-migrant communities. Most significantly, this includes the Mae Tao Clinic, established to “contribute and promote accessible quality health care among displaced Burmese and ethnic people along the Thai-Burma border.” The Mae Sot region also has around 70 migrant schools, but only 7,000 out of 30,000 children are estimated to be attending. Although there are pockets of support, human trafficking, forced labor, exploitation, and corruption of local Thai police continue to be major problems for Myanmar migrants in Mae Sot.
The migration trajectory
This chapter of our analysis groups girls’ stories into four key phases of the migration trajectory: what we call ‘home’, ‘journey’, ‘arrival’ and ‘return’. Each of these phases is extremely complex, amorphous, and as experienced by girls, unbounded. As such, what we offer is by no means a conclusive analysis. Instead, we have framed our findings as a series of interconnected stories and spotlights that seek both to honor girls experiences – as told by them – and direct the reader towards critical moments that require particular attention.

This is not accidental. In a space where girls’ experiences are so hidden, and their voices so silenced, rather than analysis of the structural factors that compel migration, we start with the girl, the moments she inhabits and the people she encounters, in order that we might offer suggestions for transformation deeply rooted in her everyday life.
HOME: is perhaps the most amorphous stage of the trajectory. Here, in order to keep our analysis focused squarely on the experience of migrant girls, we start with the catalytic moments that occur just before departure. Critical still – but beyond the scope of this particular study – is a tighter analysis of life trajectories for village girls in sender villages at the moment preceding migration. In particular, a longitudinal perspective on outcomes for girls who do and do not migrate is sorely missing from the field.

THE JOURNEY: for almost all of the girls we met before departure, the journey loomed large in the imagination, not least because almost all of the services designed to support her are geared towards ‘sensitization’ about this moment. And yet, girls who have completed the journey find it extremely difficult to recall, and as such an entirely accurate picture of her journey(s) is hard to grasp. Our analysis here points to particular, physical places where she is most likely to encounter risk, in the hope that more energy is spent trying genuinely to find and then serve her. But much more work is required here – training girls to become peer researchers, so that they might more accurately record the precise nature of the risks and opportunities they face on the journey, could be an exciting first step.

ARRIVAL: daily life after arrival is divided into two distinct parts for girls. The first 36 hours – a clearly bounded moment – is a time of pronounced psychological and physical risk, as the reality of a new life in a new place sinks in. What come next is much less clear – a series of moments that occur over months, years, decades, as she seeks her first, second, third job in a new place. Here, we frame our findings around the disparate ways in which she earns a living – from highly structured wage work, right through to the most hidden, unwaged forms of girl migrant labor. Given the wildly diverse nature of employment types, it is impossible for us accurately to reflect all of the many forms of hidden oppression, or moments of potential liberation, that she moves through. Here especially, a multi-sited ethnographic study of employment could help shed more light on migrant girls’ experiences across the spectrum of work.

RETURN: while in some countries like Ivory Coast very few girls return, in places like Myanmar seasonal and cyclical migration is much more common. Across countries, some forms of labor, for example agricultural work, are much more likely to result in return. But for those girls caught in
the vicious trap of CSE, social stigma is likely to make her journey home extremely difficult. Nonetheless, the reality, or indeed ability, of return for migrant girls is a critical part of the trajectory that is often overlooked. Here especially, a deliberate quantitative assessment of absolute numbers of migrated and returned girls could help ensure services are distributed appropriately across the trajectory.

Despite all of this, we would caution against a reading of the trajectory that is too linear or fixed. For most girls, migration is experienced as a series of catalytic moments, many journeys, and multiple arrivals and re-arrivals that happen over the course of a lifetime. Migration, rather than a set of bounded moments to be moved through and completed, is a social act in constant process and flow.
DIFFERENT GIRLS; DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES

And of course, different girls experience this trajectory in different ways based on their background and circumstances. Each and every girl is different; each and every girl is special. But, as a simplifying device, we can identify 6 key segments of girls based on the most crucial differences that impact upon how they live the trajectory. We’ll learn much more about these girls as we start to hear their stories. But for now here are some of the key differences between them, and some illustrative examples from the different countries we visited.

YOUNGER VS. OLDER

YOUNGER

Younger girls generally have fewer informational, educational and critical thinking assets, and are therefore susceptible to the control of those more powerful across their trajectory. However, they may be more likely to have the support and protection of family members during their (first) migration experience.

Meet Chit Su. She is 10 years old and from the Dry Zone in Myanmar. Her family are not able to grow many crops as the land is arid and she has never been to school. Her parents think that she is old enough to start working and able to leave home. But her tender age will see her placed under the control of proxy parents, as although she is seen as having economic value, she is not deemed able to make decisions on her own. She currently spends her day weaving bamboo baskets to be sold, but all of the children from her village go to Yangon to work in teashops or in factories. Chit Su’s parents know that she will be safe at the teashop, as she won’t be allowed to leave. But she is worried she will miss her parents, she gets scared when she is alone.
OLDER
Older girls quite literally have more time to prepare, whether consciously or not; their experience and maturity enables them to build up a stock of intangible assets. However, there is likely to be greater pressure on them to make a success of their migration, and they are likely to be afforded less protection by their family as a result of their age.

Meet Saya. She’s from a village in Sindhupalchowk in Nepal. She is 17 years old and she finished school last year. She has a close group of friends she met at school, but now she’s ready to leave her village. She has seen other girls come back to visit from Kathmandu in nice clothes and she wants that for herself. She plans to find a job when she arrives, her parents trust her to sort it out. She has a friend who is renting a room there that she can stay with. She feels that she is ready to start earning and thinks it may even be fun.

FLEEING VS. PLANNED
FLEEING
Girls who are in escape mode, often running away from a life of violence, are more focused on what they are leaving behind, than what they are travelling to. By nature, this gives them little to no time to prepare, and their trajectory will be marked by chaos and uncertainty – making them particularly vulnerable to predatory forces.

Meet Desiree. She’s from a village in Mali. She’s only 15 but she’s had to grow up quickly. Her mother died when she was small. Her father remarried, and her stepmother beats her. She was made to leave school at the age of 10 – she would have loved to have stayed. She does all of the housework, and is scolded if she does something wrong. She has no friends, and cannot speak to anyone about her problems. Desiree dreams of finding a new family that will love her.
PLANNED
Girls whose migration is ordered and planned are dependent upon the
decisions and arrangements of others. This can mean greater security, with
more checks and balances, however it also involves the passing of control
from one power-holder to another. This severely limits girls’ ability to make
active choices about their own life

Meet Lin Lin. Lin Lin is from Hpa-An in Myanmar. She is 13
years old. She left school last year, and has been working in the
paddy fields. But now her family needs more money; her mother
and father want to renovate their house. Many people in the
village have told Lin Lin about Thailand. Her sister works in a
garment factory in Mae Sot – she says a job has opened up.
Her parents have been saving money and are organising
travel arrangements. Lin Lin is nervous but is happy to go;
she wants to be a dutiful daughter and provide for her family

NO ASSETS VS. SOME ASSETS
NO ASSETS
Girls who have grown up with very little, and have been distanced from any
assets that might have been available to them, are in an extremely vulnera-
ble position from the outset. Indeed their chances of thriving in the future
are limited. Their lack of assets forces them to be totally reliant upon others,
and make brutal compromises in order to survive

Meet Rasmita. She is 15 and is from a village in Eastern Nepal.
Her family survive by working in other people’s fields. She left
school in class two, and cannot read or write. She is jealous of
the girls who could stay in school and have lots of friends. She
does not have any identification documents but she’s planning
to leave to make money for her family. She thinks she will be
able to find a job in India, as there are many more opportunities
than here. No one has told her about the journey, but a broker
is offering to take her and fund the journey – it will be difficult
for her family to say no
SOME ASSETS
Girls who have accrued multiple assets, both tangible and informational, prior to leaving home are starting their migration trajectory on a stronger footing. Ostensibly, these assets act as protective factors, however there are also associated risks in having them. Furthermore, their usefulness is dependent upon girls’ ability to navigate and utilize them.

**Meet Nawa.** She’s 16 and from a village near Korhogo in Ivory Coast. She stayed in school until 14 so can read and write. There was an NGO programme about ‘safe migration’ in her village last year so she’s learnt a bit about what migration will entail. Her family have borrowed money from another relative in the city in order to fund her journey. Nawa has a mobile phone and has saved the number of her uncle in Abidjan. She is waiting for a couple of other girls to get ready to go, so they can travel together. She is excited about seeing the city, and has dreams of what’s to come.

As we explore the trajectory, we’ll see that these different circumstances inform different starting points for girls. And yet, because they are young, poor and female, for all the girls we spoke to, their lives will never totally be free from violence or the fear of violence.

What’s more, as we’ll see now, intervening forces can see the trajectory diverting in many different, and often unexpected, directions...
Home
“Life here, we are happy but we know it’s hard. The adults, they work in the fields all day. The women have babies, put them on their backs, and go out and work the day after they are born. Everyone comes back, the mothers make dinner and the men drink the palm wine. That’s just the way it is.

But they say they want better for me. My mother and father and my grandma.

I liked school, I studied hard and always did well. I stayed until I was 13. But then it was too far to get to the secondary school – they say there is just one school for the 200 villages that surround us. There used to be a boarding school before the conflict. Maybe I would have gone there. They talk about bringing it back but I’m not sure. Would there even be enough room for all the girls who want to study? I don’t know.

So I’m leaving now – of course I am. What else can I do? I think I’m going to go to Abidjan. I’m not quite sure what I’ll do there but I know I need to try. There was a celebration in the village last week and one of my mum’s brothers came back, he lives there. I’m not sure what he does. But I know people from here who have gone and lived with family there. Some girls came back to the village last week – they didn’t talk much about what happens there but they had some new clothes and they seemed happy I think.

I begged my uncle so hard to take me back with him. I think my parents asked him too. He said no but he gave me his phone number so now I’m calling him everyday asking if I can go and stay with him. I hope there’ll be another family event soon and then I’ll just make sure I leave with him, I won’t give him a choice.

Otherwise who knows? There are other relatives in other cities I think so maybe I’ll wait until one of them needs someone to help in their house and then maybe I can go with them”

Girl, 15, village near Bouake, Ivory Coast
Studies of migration have traditionally referred to “push” and “pull” factors – those compelling people to leave their homes, versus those inducing them to move to new places.

This type of analysis can no doubt be helpful. And yet, for the girls we met in the places we visited, there are bigger, less visible forces at play, which transcend and ultimately obscure these factors, and coalesce into what we are calling a latent propensity to migrate.

Essentially, amongst all the girls we met, migration was rarely characterized as a choice or even an option – instead it is simply the default for girls of a certain age or the default response to all sorts of difficulties. Of course it’s not the case that every girl will migrate, but instead that there is an underlying normativity around girls migration.

WHY MIGHT THIS BE?
The regions we visited are all characterized by the presence of an economic behemoth: Thailand, India and Ivory Coast. The assumptions of capitalism – a constant striving for economic self-improvement, the drive to seek better elsewhere – mean that these countries exert an extremely powerful hold on the region. In the words of a girl from Myanmar: “as long as there is this place called Thailand, we won’t starve to death”. Thailand (or Delhi, or Abidjan) is the end game, and anything else is explicitly a compromise – a disappointment compared to what might be.

“People from this village started migrating seven or eight years ago. Before, everyone just worked in the fields here. Nowadays, every household has someone who goes. The village has changed a lot. We can renovate houses, buy jewellery, dress in nice clothes – you can see so clearly how it has changed. It didn’t look like this before”

Girls 16-24 discussing migration to China for work in noodle factories. Yone Village, Mandalay Division, Dry Zone, Myanmar
This has significant implications for rural life: the constant flow of people away from the village limits investment in communities in both a very literal sense, and a psychological one – almost everyone we spoke to agreed that “there’s no future in the village”.

"Of course there’s no future in the village – why would you even ask such a stupid question?"

Girl planning to migrate, 16, a village near Bouake, Ivory Coast

Of course, there are certain inherent elements of village life that limit opportunities in the short to medium term – for example limited soil fertility, and difficult access to roads and other infrastructure assets (one village we visited in Myanmar required an hour’s off-road journey by tractor to reach it... and that’s the tip of the iceberg when it comes to access there). And yet it’s the pervasive myth around the lack of opportunity for everyone that truly limits potential. To stay in the village is considered, at best, a non-choice, a concession to the force of inertia. The extent of this depends on a number of factors including how well established migration paths are, and proximity to an economic centre. But nowhere we visited did we see a positive, progressive vision for the future of rural life that comes anywhere close to rivalling myths of the city.
“All the young people in the village here leave. It’s a good thing. There’s nothing for them to do here, apart from going to the fields. Where they go they can learn a trade, the girls can follow training somewhere. They can bring us back some money for the holidays or send something, maybe rice, for us to have at the village. This is the life now, they have older brothers or sisters who have gone, so they can ask them for advice and go with them. It’s a good thing they’re going. The dream for most of them is to go Europe, because there’s more jobs than here, but even Babi [Abidjan nickname] is good for them”

Father, near Bouake, Ivory Coast

Men, women, boys and girls are all implicated in this myth. However the latent propensity to migrate takes on a particular form for adolescent girls, subject not only to the forces of capitalism, but also patriarchal control. The intersection of the two contributes to, as we have seen, a bewildering array of forms of violence perpetrated on teenage girls constantly and simultaneously.

Put simply, while girls are able to perceive clearly the migration ‘pathway’, what happens if they stay at home is often less clear, and certainly less appealing. There are few positive examples of female adolescence that don’t involve migration; if she stays at home, marriage and childbirth is the assumed route. This is both a very practical matter – there are few tangible choices for her at home, and girls are often extremely marginalized at the periphery of village economies – and one of imagination: the lack of culturally resonant role models who have stayed at home but followed a different path.
“It’s important our daughters don’t turn out like us – life is so difficult for women here, day after day”

Mother, 36, village near Dry Zone, Myanmar

To go means to engage in hope for what her life could be. To stay is to submit to a life where boredom, inertia, and a profound lack of choices are all assured.

In this light, we can see why “push” and “pull” factors may miss the point. The idea of a “push” implies that girls require some sort of significant force to move away. In reality, a small nudge is often all it takes. And the strength of the cultural, social and economic narrative, explicit and implicit, on the lack of ‘stay’ factors for girls, means that any “pull” factors relating to the desirability of where they’re going are generally obscured by the story of the undesirability of where they are.

“Because of my health I’m not able to go to Thailand with the other girls from here. Life is hard and boring – of course it’s nice still being here with my family but I’m so jealous when the other girls leave and come back with mobile phones and clothes”

Girl, 19, village near Taunggyi, Myanmar

The realities of life as it stands serve to limit the choices girls can access and imagine at home, but the ways in which this happens take on different forms in different cases.

In many situations, girls face a variety of forms of cultural and structural violence that limit their abilities to imagine different futures. But they also face acute forms of personal violence – physical, sexual and psychological. As such, not only are there no actual or perceived alternatives for girls beyond marriage or migration, but even these futures that she can imagine are extremely bleak – overshadowed by the constant threat of affronts to her bodily integrity (in particular the near inevitability of abuse within marriages). Girls feel hopeless, life feels inconsequential, and ‘fate’ can quickly take over – in this way it is clear how she can be swept into existing migration ‘flows’, lacking any genuine choice over her life path.
“I think nearly all husbands here still hit their wives, that’s just life”

Girl, village near Indian border, Nepal

We saw this in some communities in Ivory Coast particularly, where patriarchy and capitalism have combined violently to disconnect family members from each other. Trust is very limited, and ‘western’ notions of a protected childhood even less so. This plays out worst for girls, afforded the lowest status in the family. Whilst older girl children might grow up to look after parents or grandparents, or work on the family farmland, younger girls quickly internalize the sense in which they are simply burdens on their family – making economic migration an obvious option.

Elsewhere, we saw many cases of younger girls being fed a myth of studying hard as the route to escape from village life. (There’s an irony here: school, as well as obviously having many benefits – both rational and emotional – is one of society’s tools for containing girls). When these girls become aware that education is not the panacea they hoped for – because of a lack of genuine choices that follow graduation – hopelessness sets in. We saw this amongst certain communities in Nepal, and also deeply conservative communities in northern Ivory Coast near the Malian border – after school, migration is the only real alternative to marriage.

“If she is forced to leave school, her parents will make her marry”

15 year old girl speaking about her friend, village near the border with Mali, Ivory Coast

Of course, the situation is not quite so bleak everywhere, particularly some of the communities we visited in Myanmar. At the very least, some of the acute personal violence girls face in other contexts is peeled back. However, the deeply capitalist patriarchal backdrop, and the resulting structural and cultural violence perpetrated
against girls, means they are still perceived as commodities, even if as an asset to be cashed in rather than a liability for disposal. As such, even in these slightly more hopeful contexts, girls’ choices remain severely circumscribed: they need to follow whichever path will allow most value to be realised. Where significantly higher salaries are available elsewhere, migration is a ‘no brainer’.

Where control over girls is culturally paramount (and indeed this is a central tenet of patriarchy), migration can represent a way of transferring control to another party outside of the family when school ends and before she is handed over for marriage. This is particularly the case in very regimented factory jobs in Thailand, where free time and the ability to interact with the outside world is so limited, and the factory foreman becomes a kind of proxy, highly conservative, highly watchful parent.

“Boys from here might go to work in teashops from 13 years old, but 16 is the youngest that girls can go. Parents don’t allow girls to go younger than that because they might be exposed to things that they are not able to self-control – they might come back ruined. That’s also why we always go in groups, and to the factories that we know. We go when there is a job opening. We get called for – we hear about it from other girls from the village when they come back, that either someone else has left or they themselves won’t be going back. It’s mainly the girls who wait to be called for, the men are more likely just to go. That’s because when you’re a man it doesn’t matter so much where you sleep or where you work, but it does for girls. Men can take the risk of finding a job when they arrive. But not us, that’s why we only go when we are called and when we know there is a job in place”

Girls 16–24 discussing migration to China for work in noodle factories, Yone Village, Mandalay Division, Dry Zone, Myanmar
On the other hand, the distance created by migration can also allow communities to reconcile themselves to the ceding of control – we can see this in the many stories we heard of families turning a blind eye to girls moving away for commercial sexual exploitation, with the old adage ‘out of sight, out of mind’ particularly true in this context.

“Parents tell girls to just do what the other girls do in the city – they know they can’t look after their daughter anymore – it’s one less mouth to feed”

NGO worker, Ivory Coast

**SPOTLIGHT: BUSTING MYTHS, CHANGING NARRATIVES**

There is clearly much to be done to make migration safer, if girls do choose to leave. But an under-explored area remains ‘the village’ – in other words, the options for girls if they stay, both tangibly and conceptually. The first step in creating a more positive, varied set of choices for girls will be unpicking the myth that says migration is unambiguously the better option than staying home. And of course this rests on the need for a broader range of genuine economic and social choices for girls, as well as for access to information about what leaving really entails. This is a big job and one we will return to in the recommendations. However this point is worth making here, if only to underline that when we talk about ‘migration’, we need to think about our perspective: specifically, are we as practitioners also falling prey to myths about the underlying normativity of migration? Challenging this requires those focussing on ‘migration’ to think just as much on what happens at home – a currently underexplored area – versus what happens if she leaves.
THE CATALYST FOR MIGRATION
As we’ve seen, almost all poor girls in the regions we visited are ‘primed’. Often it takes just a very small catalyst to start the process of migration. When thinking about these catalysts, it is helpful to consider how planned and ordered or violent and chaotic the precipitating moment is.

Why is this important? Because it is here that the ‘migration dice’ are loaded, with ramifications for just how damaging, or potentially more positive, the experience will be. Amongst all the girls we met, it was clear just how much the mode in which they’d left home impacted throughout the entire migration trajectory. As such, our stories and spotlights here distinguish between planned and unplanned migration departures. This is not to say that one type is ‘better’ than another, necessarily, but instead acts as a reminder to all those working with migrant girls just how important it is to understand a girl’s experience holistically across the trajectory of migration, starting with the catalytic moment that prompts her departure.

PLANNED MIGRATION:
We encountered many girls experiencing the migration trajectory in a highly ordered and planned way. We can think of this girl as caught up in the transnational flow of capital and of labour exchange. These types of migration trajectories tend to be those marked by the passing of control from one power-holder to another, severely limiting a girl’s ability to make active choices about her own life. There were certain key power-holders we encountered within this moment (though there may of course be many more): husbands, other relatives and brokers.

In many parts of the world – as is the case in Nepal, Ivory Coast and Myanmar – girls of a certain age migrate to be married. Although sometimes occurring across borders – like Myanmar to China, or Nepal to India – her journey normally takes place within the confines of one country, or even one state or province. Unlike girls who travel in cohorts, or work together in particular professions, marriage migration can be an extremely
lonely act. By its nature, this is one of the most hidden, undercounted forms of migration – for which there is little structured support on offer from civil society or Governments. This being an invisible, unacknowledged form of labour exchange, means that even the few laws aimed at protecting child migrant labourers do little to protect the girl migrating for marriage.

We also met many girls whose migration was catalysed by a relative. In Ivory Coast in particular, where ‘entrusting’ is a well established, deeply normative process, we saw many examples of girls taken from their village by a relative already based in a town or city. This can be as random as the relative unexpectedly visiting the village for a family funeral, or an act pre-planned and promised long ago.

The power afforded to the ‘entrusting’ relative is significant: the girl’s fate – across the migration trajectory – is literally in their hands. And so, like much of the experience of migration overall, the experience of entrustment is one of random good luck. Sometimes motivations are positive – a genuine commitment to supporting the children of brothers and sisters by aunts or uncles who have made a better life for themselves. Sometimes motives are more blurry, with the need for unwaged labour in the home compelling the move. And at the furthest end of the spectrum are those motives most sinister, where aunt becomes madam, uncle trafficker.

Beyond this, many girls we met were following a straightforward economic migration path, often catalysed by the ubiquitous ‘broker’.

“There is no girl in the village who doesn’t work as we are all poor. The girls work in the fields, and the boys go to the town to do street business, selling things, from when they are 10 years old. The girls can’t go to town, we can only work in the fields where it is safer. We mostly work for Indian men who have land because our village is right on the border. We always go with a group of us from the village, walking through the fields, and spend the day, or sometimes one or two days there to finish the work.

But once we are 14 or 15, all the girls get married and go to their husband. The boys stay and bring money home to their parents. Everyone here has an arranged marriage. That is our tradition – it hasn’t changed. The only change is that girls go to school now before they are married. But once you show signs of being a woman, then it is time to be married and go to
your husband. The culture says our parents will be harmed if they see their daughter’s face once she is matured if she is not married. What happens is once you are married you spend a few days with your husband, and then come back to your family for one or two years to get your body ready before going to live with him. Once you start menstruating you are ready to go to your husband’s house.

Most girls get married to men outside the village – our parents say that if a girl is married in the same village, they are scared that they will have a bad relationship with their in-laws and have disagreements over things like land. For example, if their land is bordering their in-laws’ land and they accidentally plough it, or an animal grazes there, there can be big problems. And the daughter’s parents just have to compromise and give up, they can not argue with the in-laws. But if their daughter goes far away, they will not risk being in touch with them and having these problems. A distant relationship is always better.

In my case, a man in the village brought information to my parents about my husband, and that is how it was arranged. He is a man in India, so that is good. I’m not sure how old he is, I think he is over 30 years old. But my parents say I will have a good life there and it will be easier than here. It is better to marry an Indian man than a Nepali man, as the government provides things for everyone – like food, fuel, toilets, and clothes.

I went to spend 5 days with him after the wedding, at his house in India. It felt very strange being away from my family, and I was a bit nervous because I was with all of his family and I have to look at him as my husband. In a year I will leave my family and go to live with them for good. Sometimes I get scared of that. I’m scared that he is much older, and I am small, and he is going to touch me. He hasn’t touched me yet. There is no tradition that he shouldn’t touch you when you spend those few days together after the wedding, but he spoke to me and said we would do that when I come back in 2 years and I will like it.
When I spent those days with him he gave me a phone as a wedding gift so that we could speak to each other when we are apart. We speak every day after 7pm when he finishes work. Most girls here are given a phone when they get married because they don’t live together straight away. When we go to the temple all the girls speak about their husbands – most of my friends are already married, and the rest of them will be soon. We talk about what our husbands say when they call and that kind of thing... we all say we are very happy because our husbands will earn well for us and provide for us.

I talk with my friends and my parents about what it will be like. I know it will be different when I go to live with my in-laws. They just want their daughters-in-law to stay at home and do housework, and I want to keep going out to work in the fields with my friends. They think girls who go outside get spoiled, and I will have a lot of domestic duties to do. My parents tell me to talk very nicely to my in-laws and my husband, to do the housework well and look after them. I guess it won’t be all that different, I will just have to do as they say. I hope that they like me – I think they will because my father has arranged a good dowry.”

*Girl, 15, married to Indian man for one year, Amarpatti village, Parsa, Nepal*

“When I was 9, I used to live in a village near here [Korhogo]. There was a woman who used to visit in the village – she worked with our family sometimes, selling things and buying some things from us that she could sell on. We would mainly buy things that we couldn’t grow in our village, and she would spend time at our house talking to my family.

When she came to our house she saw me and I think she took a liking to me... She would always say how good I was, and how pretty I was. I always called her auntie. She asked my parents if she could take me to Daloa [a city in the West of Ivory Coast, cocoa region]. She told my parents that she
would arrange for me to go to school there and I could have a good education. I think my parents discussed with each other, and with the auntie, and decided that it was a good idea. They thought it would be stupid to turn down the opportunity, and she was always nice to me. I didn’t know what to expect, but I liked the idea of going to school. And at least I already knew the auntie and I could go with her, not on my own.

At the end of one of her visits, when I was 10 years old, we took the bus together. I remember it was in the morning and I said goodbye to my parents and hugged them, and walked with her to the bus stop. I didn’t have any money myself, but my parents had given the auntie some money for my bus ticket. But it wasn’t enough for the full price of the ticket, so they had to ask for a bit of help from her to make up the full fare. She said that it was no problem to lend them the money, and they could pay her back later. My parents also gave her the contact number of one of our relatives in Korhogo to give him some of my news. They said that way he could let my parents know how I was doing and give them updates, but she never gave the number to me.

When we arrived in Daloa, she said I couldn’t stay with her straight away, because she didn’t have room, because her nephews were visiting her, so I was to stay with one of her friends. She left me at the house of another auntie [generic name given to older women usually in charge of a household]. I felt scared, and my mind was heavy and concerned, because I didn’t know what to expect. I didn’t know anyone in Daloa, apart from her and she left me right when we arrived. I couldn’t speak to my family because I didn’t have their number. I didn’t know what to expect in this new house.

The first few days were ok, the auntie was nice to me. But I was sad because they said I couldn’t go to school, although the auntie had sons and daughters who were going to school everyday, and me I was staying behind crying because I wanted to join them. After a few days the auntie revealed her true face and it became very difficult. She mistreated me. She made me get up early, at 5, sometimes 4am to start cleaning around the house and help in the kitchen, and then I
had to go sell oranges by the road to car and truck drivers entering the city. She beat me if I hadn’t sold all the oranges at the end of the day, saying I had been lazing around. She said I had gone to see the boys. She wouldn’t give me dinner if I hadn’t sold all of them. I cried and was hoping to see the auntie who had brought me, but she never came back, and so I couldn’t tell her about how I was being mistreated. The only solution was to run away.”

*Girl, 13, northern village near Korhogo, Savanes district, Ivory Coast*

**SPOTLIGHT: FINDING HIDDEN GIRLS**

Girls who migrate for marriage and to be entrusted to a relative are some of the most invisible girl migrants. Although the experience can sometimes be a positive one, married and entrusted girls are most likely to end up hidden away as unwaged labourers within family members homes, subject to multiple and compounding forms of violence. As the field begins to sit up and take notice of the phenomenon of adolescent girls migration, a critical first step is ensuring all vulnerable migrant girls are counted, even if the kinds of labour they engage in is highly informal, or indeed doesn’t appear to be labour at all. This may mean going beyond traditional ways of quantifying girls’ migration, with a view, ultimately, to thinking about how we provide services to girls who are very firmly under the supervision of one power-holder.

**SPOTLIGHT: INTERCONNECTED OPPRESSIONS**

Child Marriage is part of an interconnected web of oppressions that denies girls fundamental choices over their own lives. In the short term, girls migrating for marriage require specific support and protection pre-departure and on arrival. But in the long time, transformational work to increase the choices girls can access and imagine for themselves will be key to transforming not only the experiences of migration and of child marriage, but the life chances of girls overall.
“This village has one of the highest rates of child labour in the region. All of the parents send their children to work in factories and tea shops, mostly in Yangon. They need the money, so they want to send them. I took some training with an NGO, so I am more aware of these things and why it is bad than most people in the village. It all happens through brokers – they come and recruit the children. The broker usually gets 15,000 Kyat in fees per child from the employer. I have counted more than 100 boys and girls who have left to work. Some may come back, but others never do. Most children only stay in school until maximum grade 3 (7 or 8 years old), even though we now have a middle school here. Once they finish second grade, parents will take them out of school and send them to work somewhere else. The mentality is that as a child moves up the grades in school, they cost more, so what’s the point if they won’t be able to afford to send them all the way through school? And even if they graduate there is no guarantee they will earn... so the parents would rather send them off with someone who offers them a job with a guaranteed income which they can send home.

I’m not saying that we shouldn’t send the children and they shouldn’t work – because to stop that would be impossible, you can’t say no to families because of their financial hardship – but we should make it safer. There has to be something on paper that lays out their pay, the conditions and terms in writing before they go. If we had these on paper agreements the brokers and employers would have to take more responsibility and accountability for the children – it would force them to behave better. And it should be done in front of the community leader as a witness, so it’s not just the parents agreeing to something. It has to be a collective effort by the village to change things.

The brokers don’t like me because they think I am making trouble for them suggesting these things - I used to work with the old village leader on child protection. He was much better at trying to put in place new processes, but in 2013 our leader changed and we had an administrative shift in the community. The new administration doesn’t care as much about protecting the children. They have relationships with the brokers, and they...
communicate with each other when there is a job opening, or when there is a family who have a child who is ready to go. They help to set it up, but they don’t arrange anything in writing.

The other problem that makes this so hard to solve is that the brokers are also trying different approaches to recruit children – at least when the brokers come to the village administration and discuss the work, more people know where the child is going and who is taking them. With these new approaches the brokers just send messages back to the village with the children that have gone before, so that they ask their parents directly and don’t have to go through the community at all.”

Female community development worker, Ywar Lu Village, Kyaak Pa Duang Township, Myanmar

“We come every year in December and spend 7 months here. We arrived 3 or 4 days ago, but there isn’t any work yet. The first year I came I stayed for the whole year and worked for 6 months in the brick kiln, and 6 months in construction. Since my family only has girl children, there wasn’t anyone to support them. And my older sisters were already married, so I decided to come to Kathmandu. Lots of people from the village go and come back, and talk about the brick kilns and how you can earn. In 15 days this place will be full – usually there are families, children, single girls, husbands – everyone roaming around. When people arrive they build their home using any spare bricks that are here, and bits of tarpaulin and sheet metal. The owner provides water in the big drum in the middle, and we pay a small fee for electricity. There are lots of 16 and 17 year old girls who come, but girls as young as 13 used to come to work. Nowadays most girls that age study in the village. The village back home does gossip a bit about us working in Kathmandu, but we have no other options, so we ignore what they say. It’s worse if you come when you are single, without a husband, then they raise questions about your character and say you are spoiled.

The broker comes to your house in the village and says
that there is work, and gives you an advance from the brick kilns. We pay that off when we arrive. When I first came, I could only get an advance of 5,000 Rupees. Now I can get 50,000 Rupees advance because I have been working here for a long time, so the owner trusts me. It takes about 15-20 days to pay off 10,000 Rupees. The first time you come with the broker and other boys and girls from the village, but now we come without the broker as we know the way. The broker is well known in the village and trustworthy – she used to work in the brick kilns for many years, and then she became a broker. Now she has opened a hotel here where she lives and serves food to the workers. There are also 2 other brokers, 1 is from my village and works in the kilns still. They are good people – they talk politely and don’t cheat us. We have heard stories of brokers who don’t pay workers, but not us. Nowadays you sign a paper with your signature or fingerprint as a contract when you leave the village. The broker also tells us to note down how much advance we take, so that we have our own record. The owner of the brick kiln is also a good man, and treats us fairly. Nothing bad has happened to us here. We haven’t been trafficked; our main fear is being cheated. We realise that contracts are very important. Also travelling in groups from the village protects us against being trafficked.

We didn’t hear about any other work, just the brick kilns. It was only after working here that we heard about other jobs, like construction and other daily wage labour. The brick kilns are better because they pay more. Here they pay us on the number of bricks we carry. We carry the unbaked bricks to the oven, and then the baked bricks to the stack. People from different districts do different jobs – men and women from the same village do the same job. Making the bricks is very hard, as you have to wake up at 1am. We start at 5am to do the carrying, and work until 11am. Then we have a lunch break, and work again from 1pm-7pm. If we work at a fast pace, we get 900 Rupees per person each day, but if we work slowly, or if there is rain, we only make 200-300 Rupees per day.

If girls in the village have stopped their studies, and have nothing to do, I tell them it is better to earn for your family. But
if they are studying, I tell them to stay. Girls ask me what the work is like in Kathmandu and I say that earning is good, but the work is hard. I tell them to come with me if they want to. Most come unmarried, but after 1 or 2 years they get married to other workers, or construction workers, or the men who drive the lorries to take the bricks. We don’t have a tradition of arranged marriage in our caste.

My husband said to me that I could stay in the village and he would go to work in Kathmandu, but I didn’t want him to go alone, I was suspicious in case of other women. Since we all work in the same place, and the same people come back each year, we make friends. There is some fighting on Saturdays as we have the afternoon off and some of the men drink. And I know there are some husbands who hit their wives, but the broker tries to stop this. The brokers roam around to keep an eye on everyone all the time, even on Saturday. The male workers don’t obey the female broker, so they will keep fighting, but they are scared of her husband and the male brokers – they listen to them.

There aren’t any places for socialising, but we go to the market when we have time off. You are more free here than when you are in the village with your in-laws. We should know our limits and behave properly, that way we are safe here. I am happy and satisfied.

I have heard that girls working in the brick kilns are a bit dirty because we have to play with mud, while the girls working in other sectors are more beautiful and smart – people look at the girls here and say they are dirty and unhygienic. But I say they are making good money. Girls in brick kilns don’t look for work elsewhere”

Girls 21 and 23, working in a brick kiln on the outskirts of Kathmandu from ages 15 and 16. Both now married with children
“I am originally from Daloa, in the West country. Life was not so good there. My sister Yasmin kept ringing me, insisting that I had to come here to Korhogo, that there would be work here. She’d always wanted to be a hairdresser, and she had tales of how there were money in Korhogo, lots of money to be made, and with her skills she could show me, we could both work at the salon where she said she was working.

I travelled on my own because my sister had paid the bus driver for my ticket already. When I arrived in Korhogo at the bus station, some men who knew my sister were there and they brought me here in their car. I saw she was living here and what she was actually doing [CSE in a maquis in the middle of a camp, near an artisanal goldmine]. I felt bad in myself, I didn’t like the camp, I felt I had to be on my watch all the time, couldn’t relax, and my sister kept trying to persuade me to do the job while I didn’t want to.

I ran away. From the camp to Korhogo, I walked for a bit then I jumped on a bus. I stayed there in town for a while, I met a man from Mali there and he became my good friend. He helped me, gave me some money. These two are his babies. I was pregnant with the second one when he had to go back, to visit his family and do seasonal working. I wanted to go with him but we didn’t have enough money to pay for me to travel with him. So I stayed behind with the baby and I was pregnant at the time, so I felt very desperate, I didn’t know what to do. My sister knew I was there because she had some contacts, some people who could tell her how I was doing. One day, my sister’s male friends, they came over and forced me to come back here to the camp. They threatened me so I came back with my two babies. Now my sister keeps saying I would make money here but I don’t want to, so I look after my babies and I do the cooking, the cleaning, I stay around but I try not to get involved. They keep making jokes about me not wanting to do what they do, but the truth is it’s dangerous. They never wear short skirts or dresses in the evening when clients are here, they sell alcohol but until one decides to go back to a tent with one of the men, they all stay grouped together. Me I try to stay away.
The other girls... We don’t really talk to them. There is my sister and a few other girls from the West country. Even though I’m unhappy here and it’s also because my sister made me come, she tries to look out for me at the camp, so I stay with her. I want to go back home after this, and I know my sister wants to go back too.”

Girl, 19, artisanal goldmine camp near Korhogo, Savanes district, Ivory Coast

**SPOTLIGHT: THE INFORMALIZATION OF BROKERS**

With growing numbers of girls migrating, communities report encountering a bewildering array of brokers whose role is becoming increasingly informalized, and whose threat is sometimes worryingly obscured: the ‘brokers’ who make deals with families are often in some way linked to the community, having been born there themselves or with links to family and friends – indeed sometimes they are very close family members like uncles and aunts, even sisters and parents. The lines between family member and broker, broker and trafficker, are blurred and confused.

Sometimes, the broker engages with the whole community, as in certain villages we visited in Myanmar. Here, migration has become so much the default, so normalized and expected, that the calculation about girls’ migration is made at the level of the whole village: who can slot in to a vacant factory job, who can replace another girl who has returned ill or pregnant, and so on. This can mean increased protection for the girl – for example we heard stories of community leaders providing a consistent form of representation for girls in their communities in negotiations with brokers. But, stepping away from the immediate term, it’s clear how this community-level calculation commoditises girls, separating them explicitly from their labour, from the future that awaits them.

What does this mean for programmers? Current programming teaches girls to look for traffickers in expensive cars with blacked-out windows. Whilst a simple, easy to convey message, the reality is much more complex and insidious. Brokers employ sophisticated tactics to lure girls and their families into their orbit. Teaching girls and families how to recognise and negotiate with brokers will be key. So will the challenging job of helping girls and women resist taking on this role themselves, which may require work at migration destinations.
“We were eating roasted meat outside and a woman who was renting a room in the village came and sat with us and started chatting, asking about our families, and the village. It was the first time we met, and we continued meeting after that. We used to go to her room sometimes, she never came to our house. She never said about her work and we never asked. We would call her our big sister. We were friends with her doing this for one and a half years, and she would come and go from the village. In September or October she came back again and said she had been somewhere west in Nepal.

It was only in the last 3 or 4 days before leaving that she started mentioning work. I lived with my stepfather and mother. My mother has jaundice and drinks a lot, so I had lots of problems at home and started thinking of going somewhere to work. My friend doesn’t have a family – she worked as a construction site labourer in the village. The woman said we could go with her to Birgunj for a job dancing in an orchestra. We didn’t realise we were being taken to India, we thought it was just to another place in Nepal. She promised us 15,000 Nepali Rupees a month. Our first question was what kind of job is it? Is it good work? Can we wear normal clothes? She said yes. We didn’t really know about dancing. And we didn’t know she used to bring other girls too, until the NGO at the border told us they had seen her many times before.

We just had our clothes and 135 Nepali Rupees with us when we left. We had a phone but we didn’t know who we would call or what we would do if we had problems. I didn’t know if the SIM would even work in different places. We just left with her and took the local bus out of the village.”

Girls from Eastern Nepal intercepted in Raxaul on Nepal/India border by workers at anti-trafficking booth. Staying in shelter home for past month waiting for case against traffickers to close.
SPOTLIGHT: MIGRATION GROOMING

The kind of grooming we can see in these stories represent a clear example of the psychological violence wrought on girls forced into positions of naivety and passivity by society. In the immediate term, we need to help to support girls to stay vigilant to – even understand the existence of – ‘brokers’ and ‘traffickers’, whilst acknowledging that relationships like these can shift in nature very quickly. In the medium to long term, those working with girls need to help foster the critical thinking assets and voice needed to navigate and respond to a diversity of social interactions with power-holders like these.

“We are seeing a worrying trend of brokers targeting girls using Facebook. These girls are so naïve, they have never had any attention in their life, so they’re so susceptible to the charms of men. They believe this guy is their boyfriend and that they’re moving away as a ‘couple’ – she only realised she’s been the victim of trafficking much later. I’ve even heard a few stories of men literally dialling numbers until a girl picks up, and starting a relationship with her that way. It’s so scary because it’s totally hidden – on the phones. The techniques they use for grooming are so sophisticated. But it’s hard for us to gather lots of data on it or really understand the scale of the problem. I’m worried about how we can help girls resist these kind of men”

NGO worker, Kathmandu, Nepal
UNPLANNED MIGRATION:
We also met a number of girls whose migration is precipitated by an extreme act (or series of acts) of violence. We can think of this girl as the runaway – more focused on what she is leaving behind, than what she is travelling to. These types of migration trajectories tend to be those marked most by chaos and uncertainty, where she is leaving with very few accrued assets, and where the unknown nature of her journey makes her particularly vulnerable to predatory forces.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence emerged as a key catalyst for chaotic unplanned migration. Childhood sexual abuse is one of the most insidious forms of violence faced by girls – omnipresent, deeply hidden, and too often perpetrated by those who hold the greatest power over their lives – including parents, grandparents, uncles, or other carers.

And the betrayal and violence exist beyond the obvious perpetrator: inter-generational poverty has a profound effect on a mother’s ability to protect and care for her child. Similarly, we heard of stepparents (particularly stepmothers) as key perpetrators of violence against girls, and by extension, catalysts for leaving.

Another violent catalyst for girls’ migration we witnessed was extreme economic hardship – including the sudden loss of employment within the family, or the threat of reprisals for unpaid debt. It is striking that girls are often left to bear the brunt of such events, migrating to find work to send remittances home, or simply to lessen the economic burden on the family.

“My father is a bad man. I think it is in the blood – my grandfather before him was also bad, and I fear that my brother has badness in him too, although I don’t think he has shown it yet. When I was 12 years old my grandfather raped me. My mother and father were working in the fields, and my brother and sister were at school. I was at home making food for the family. It only happened once. But I couldn’t tell anyone - I didn’t know what they could do, they couldn’t make him leave.

Then one year later my father raped me when my mother was out of the house. He did horrible things to me, over and over. It continued for three years. He made me take contra-
ceptive pills to stop me getting pregnant – he made me take so many because he was afraid of me having his baby. I took so many pills each day it made my insides burn.

My mother realised what was happening – she looked at me differently. Especially when my body started to change. She was scared of him, and she was scared of me telling someone at school. So one day when we were alone she said to me, “you can never tell anyone about what your father does to you. We have to worry about our family’s reputation. He is a respected man in the community and our family is not doing so badly - we have food to eat, we have a good house to live in. So you must keep this to yourself”.

After that I knew I could not stay there. I was scared to leave my sister alone and I did not know where I would go, but if I stayed I knew that my life would just be like that and it would never stop. There was no one I could speak to; you can’t betray your own family. I thought that if I left maybe I could find a new family who would love me and treat me well. I wanted to go to a new place, a bigger place, where I would meet new people and could have a new life. I thought maybe I could find someone who would let me do their cooking and cleaning and they would let me study. Somewhere I wouldn’t feel scared of trying to sleep in my bed.

So one morning I woke up earlier than usual, and I didn’t make the breakfast. I took a few things in my school bag – some clothes, some sanitary pads and a little bit of money and food. And I walked to the bus stop near the village and waited by the side of the road.”

Girl, 15, Sindhupalchowk District, Nepal
“My mum died when I was little. I can’t remember how old I was
but not old, and my father remarried to my stepmother. She
didn’t like us, me and my brother, but my brother was older so he
could just go without having any problems. I know it’s because
we are not her children, so she didn’t want to care for us. She
told my dad it was a waste to send me to school, and I cried and
cried for days when he told me I’d have to leave school the next
class. Me I get along with my father, we get along. I talked to the
teacher at school, who went to discuss with my father and they
agreed I could stay in school.

But then a few days later she picked me up from school
with the car because I was in secondary school, there is no
secondary school in the village, and she drove me far to a
place I didn’t know and she told me to get off the car and never
come back. I was lost, I walked by the road for a while. Then I
arrived in Abengourou, but even though I didn’t know where
I was initially, and I didn’t want to ask anyone because I was
scared. I stayed out a few nights, late at night near the maquis
sometimes they throw away leftovers. You also have the men
coming to you, offering their help, but they want something
so I was trying to hide to not have to talk to someone. I asked
the name when I got there though so I knew I had been there
with my dad because my uncle lived in Abengourou so I tried
to find him asking about him, and eventually I managed. He’s
the brother of my mum so I went to stay with him, I told him
what happened. He said I could stay but I couldn’t go to school
because he didn’t have the money to send me, and so instead
I had to sell things for him at the market. I did that for a few
months I think?

But then one day I was coming back from selling cashew
nuts by the road and a man attacked me. I didn’t say anything
to my uncle, but a few months later I was pregnant. It was hor-
rible. They accused me of having a man friend, of being a bad
Christian, not having good morals. My uncle called my father
to tell him, and both him and his wife said I had shamed them,
they didn’t want me back home.

It was very difficult, I felt very sad, very ashamed, and I
didn’t want the baby. I kept saying that I didn’t want it [to one of
the therapists at the NGO looking after her]. They said I have to accept the baby in my heart, and for the grace of God be good to the baby. It was a very difficult time for me. I know they talked a lot to my father and his wife, to try to sensitize them, tell them they’d have to accept me back home with the baby. Then I had the baby and I did the psychological accompaniment with the people at the NGO, and they told me it wasn’t my fault, or the baby’s fault, and they tried to get my family to forgive me. Now I’m back with my uncle, and I’ve started to sell things again but I do it at the market, with other people around, not by the road”

Girl, 18, from surrounding villages to Abengourou (Comoe district), Ivory Coast

**SPOTLIGHT: WHEN CHAOS CREATES MORE CHAOS**

Chaotic departures have ramifications across the migration trajectory. Because of their desire to evade detection, opportunities to prepare are limited, weighting the dice against girls in flight mode as the journey continues.

And yet, few services exist for girls at source. Programing for migrant girls broadly exists along crisis management lines – most girls must wait to be picked up by caseworkers and supported to enter a shelter far away from home, in the big city, by which point they are likely to have experienced multiple additional forms of violence during their flight.

The field needs to think more holistically about a girl’s migration trajectory, and in particular the kinds of services she’ll need in order to avoid fleeing home – either so that she can migrate more safely if she does eventually choose to go, but also so that she can remain in her home community too. This, of course, will require a meaningful increase in the flow of funding to service providers.

**SPOTLIGHT: PATHWAY TO CSE – VIOLENCE AT HOME**

The pathway to commercial sexual exploitation that follows chaotic departures can be more direct – particularly when she needs to access
finances for her journey, or food and shelter on arrival when nothing has been prepared in advance. But sometimes the pathways for these girls are far more obscured, linked to the psychological trauma of early childhood sexual abuse.

Girls who are sexually violated often internalize a deep sense of shame, with many reporting that a life of commercial sex is not only the only one available to them, but the only one they deserve as ‘spoilt’ girls. In Nepal, we spoke to some amazing psychologists working with young girls aiming to support healing from this kind of deep trauma and shame, but the work required is long, profound, and needs funding. For now, for the purposes of the “going” phase, it’s clear that sexual violence as the “catalyst” severely loads the dice against a girl, even before she’s set out on the journey.

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR GIRLS**

For many of the girls we spoke to, direct physical, sexual and / or psychological abuse is the catalyst for departure. And as we’ll see later, leaving in ‘escape mode’ like this aggravates vulnerability at all moments of the trajectory. Many girls at this stage are also subject to the psychological domination of brokers (of varying degrees of formality), who both catalyse girls’ departure, and exert significant control over the latter stages of the trajectory too.

Beyond this however, there is a pervasive, widespread psychological violence perpetrated on girls culturally and structurally, which is all the more sinister for being invisible. This is the myth of migration, the narrative that there is no future for girls in the village beyond marriage and motherhood. Overcoming this by ‘reimagining the village’ will be a central task for those aiming to make migration not just safer but more of a genuine choice for girls.

Whilst the myth of migration is clearly pervasive, we did meet some girls in the places we visited who had thought more carefully about their migration experience, and may even chose a life at home – these girls have much to teach us.
“Will I leave home? I don’t know. Life here is hard and almost every girl goes to China, that’s just what happens. Every house has someone who goes.

My older brother and sister have already been. I think my sister might have a boyfriend there, I’m not sure. I try to follow what they’re doing on Facebook. They come back once a year for a couple of weeks. I ask them what China is like... they tell me bits but they say I will find out when I get there. But I keep asking! Maybe it’s easier for me because I have older siblings so there’s less expectation. I think I will be ok living with my parents for longer. If they say I have to go I will ask why.

Last time she came back from China my sister brought me a mobile phone. Not many other girls who haven’t been away have one yet. I think the village is poor but I don’t really know – we don’t meet a lot of outsiders like you [laughs].

But we are also lucky here. There’s a monk in the community who looks after all of us like his children. He prizes education, even though our village is very cut off and there aren’t many jobs.

What will I do if I stay? I’m not quite sure. Maybe teach. Or some women have businesses selling food. There’s a woman here, I think she’s about 40, she never got married, and she runs a women’s group in the village. They meet and talk and I think help each other with money. Her life looks ok. I think some of the other people – maybe they look down on her because she never left? Or because she never married? Maybe they think that is worse. But I don’t know if that would be so bad as long as I wasn’t the only one.”

Girl, 17, village of Yone, Dry Zone, Myanmar
The girls like this who we met who stayed at home were not necessarily better educated than their peers who migrate. But they did have the confidence and critical thinking skills to weigh up the possibilities ahead. They were also part of social networks of girls in their communities, which help them to learn about migration from peers who have experienced it first hand. Increasing information and busting myths around migration, through peer-support, will be critical if girls are going to be able to see migration as just one of many options, rather than the default path.
Journey
If the metaphorical dice are weighted at home, and rolled when the girl sets off, they remain up in the air for the journey stage: a time of profound risk and uncertainty.

The journey is surprisingly difficult to define, and often obscured. This may be because for many girls the lived experience of migration is a series of journeys, or, as we frequently saw, the same journey repeated a number of times. The idea of one, fixed, linear journey rarely exists.

In addition, there are a huge variety of journey types, especially for runaway girls, who will have undertaken minimal or zero planning before they set off. Further still, a girl’s view of migration is often cobbled together from an array of sources – mass media, word of mouth and indeed their own imaginations – creating a set of confusing ‘myths’ about what is to come.

“We warn girls about organ traffickers, and also about the men who might kidnap them on the road. It’s harder to talk to them about the jobs they might do as we don’t work with the organisations in the cities they’re migrating to”

Village-based NGO, Ivory Coast
More broadly, this means that the journey can act as a screen or barrier for what’s on the other side. The movement, that is the physical act of journeying, somehow becomes the primary source of imagery and language for the migration experience overall. In this way, we can see how the journey become a very singular focus for many girls pre-departure – and for the few organisations that are ostensibly there to support her. Indeed, If we were to label the majority of NGO activity, it would fall into three broad buckets – all preoccupied with journeying in some way: ‘help her go’, ‘stop her going’, ‘send her back’.

The result of this? Girls are ill prepared. We’ve already seen how little attention is paid to the drivers of migration at source, and we’ll see in the pages to come how little there is for girls on arrival.

“I’d been so panicked about the journey with the broker, about travelling in his car and hiding at the border that I really didn’t think about what lay ahead. When I got to the factory where I was going to work it wasn’t the same as what I’d imagined from all the girls coming back from Yangon with phones and new clothes”

Girl, 16, migrated from the Delta Region to Yangon, Myanmar

Even worse, some girls literally have nothing waiting for them. They get off the bus alone, or discover during the first day in a new place that they’ve been deceived – that the experience isn’t what they imagined. Hopes, dreams or ambitions they might have nurtured until this time are shattered.

“I feel silly when I think about it now, but before I left I had no idea what my life in India would be like”

Girl, 19, migrated from a village in Nepal to India
But perhaps most fundamentally, responses to the journey – by communities and NGOs alike – are ideologically driven. Those who believe that migration is a positive social force espouse its virtues while leaving huge holes in the information about the likely dangers she’ll face. Conversely, those who operate within ‘protectionist’ frameworks seek to deter her from leaving. And this of course has a profound impact on the tangible, intangible, and informational assets a girl is afforded by society – with very few girls having the full ‘migration-picture’ in mind before they depart.

**SPOTLIGHT: BEYOND THE JOURNEY FOR HOLISTIC MIGRATION SUPPORT**

Currently, significant migration programming is focused on preparing girls for the journey. This is understandable – it enables NGOs to focus their efforts on homes and villages, which is somewhat easier than finding girls in transit, and it focuses on the next, most obvious stage of the migration trajectory. However, this means that support at other trajectory stages is patchy at best, and specifically girls are hearing less about what they might expect – good and bad – when they arrive in ‘the city’. Most of what they know or assume about what happens there is based on myths they’ve absorbed from those returning. We will consider next what girls need to prepare them for the journey, but in addition to this, it seems there is a need for programmers to think about how to educate, inform and support girls on the migration experience more broadly.

We need to look for a more fluid model that can begin to provide her with a greater sense of stability, security and support across the stages of her overall trajectory rather than targeting specific phases of it – calling for a fluid, inter-connected stream of people and professionals that can aid and support her.
PREPARATION

Preparation is experienced very differently by different girls, often dependent on whether their migration is planned or not. In some cases, preparation can take up to a few months – this is generally to allow the girl and her family time to save up the money needed for the journey, and may be more likely in situations of international migration, where papers need to be prepared.

Often however the preparation period can be much shorter, for example when an arrangement of entrustment is activated with the arrival of an ‘aunt’ in the village, or when money for travel has been borrowed, and needs to be paid back quickly.

For girls in ‘escape mode’, even this small luxury of time is missing. By definition i.e. because they are escaping people at home, they are unlikely to talk to anyone about their plans, and the physical and / or sexual nature of the violence they face often prompts immediate flight.

Having said this, all girls are latently prepared to some extent, having imbibed some sort of information about migration in the village.

However the impact of this is mixed at best. Much of this consists of absorbing information from NGOs, who are funded to ‘sensitise’ girls pre-migration. Across regions, a pervasive narrative about the dangers of the journey persists: organ harvesters, devils in blacked...
out cars, and traffickers waiting to poison her and pounce. Hyperbolic and cartoon-like, these narratives rarely match up with the real insidious and pernicious dangers she’s likely to face.

Additionally, the limited preparation time afforded to many girls means that at the point of departure she is often leaving with limited tangible assets. Even in the cases with least personal violence perpetrated on the girl, she will still be leaving with very few, or at least not a consistent set of, possessions, reflective of the structural economic violence perpetrated against all nearly all girls in the villages we visited. Indeed, it is often only by leaving that girls will get the very things that will make the journeys safer in the future – a mobile phone, a passport, or money for the first weeks of accommodation, for example.

City: Abidjan – Yopougon

Graduate student, professional, worker, seller, unemployed, ‘hustlers’ you want to come to work or study in Morocco, contact us.

Favourable working conditions, employment stability with a contract as a factory worker, call center agent, teaching languages or in primary cycle or educator, secretary, assistant, accounting assistant, journalist, media agent, cook, gardener, cleaner agent, security guard for wealthy families, waiter in restaurant, cashier assistant, hotel manager... Reliable jobs that match your profile: with or without a diploma, with or without experience, minimum salary from 130,000 CFA [e.g. 200 USD] up to 350 000 CFA [e.g. 570 USD]. No matter what the job is, even the babysitter and the house worker can earn minimum 130 000 CFA. For students, school fees are taken cared of.

Recruitment advert in national newspaper, Ivory Coast
“I am from a village quite near to Kathmandu. I married my husband when I was 14 years old and moved in with him. Our marriage was ok, but he was quite jealous, especially because he was away a lot working abroad. He got angry about me going out of the house to do things – he said I shouldn’t be going out with people without him. The day before I left I had argued again with my husband – we spoke over the phone as he was away. I had gone to a fair with my relatives to pass some time, and when I told him he shouted at me and told me to get out of his house and that I couldn’t live there if I was going to do those things.

I had a bit of money from working in the fields, so I woke up early the next morning, packed a bag, and walked to where I knew the bus stopped near the village. I didn’t really have a plan. I thought maybe I could go to Kathmandu as I have an uncle there. I knew there was a bus that came at 6am and that it would take me out of the village. I thought I could spend some time away and that things would be better when I came back. I was upset and angry at him for telling me to leave. I don’t think he really believed I would do it.

The bus pulled up and the driver opened the doors and I got on. I didn’t think about anything, just that I had to catch the bus. I was travelling alone, and no one saw me leave. After some time, the bus stopped at a bus park. The driver told everyone they had to get off the bus. I asked someone where we were and they said we were in a place that I hadn’t heard of before. I can’t remember the name. The bus park was a strange place – it was different to anywhere I had been. It was busy, there were lots of people, and noise. I didn’t know where I would go if I left the bus park, so I just got on another bus that had opened its doors and people were getting on. I’d heard about girls getting kidnapped from the road if you wait around on the journey, so I thought it was better to get straight onto another bus.

After many hours I came to another place. It looked like a city, I thought it had buildings like Kathmandu, so I got off the bus and started walking around. I was cold so I spent some of my money on sweaters – I had 1500 Rupees left after that. I didn’t know how I would find my uncle, I didn’t know where he lived and I didn’t know my way around the city. I have another
relative in a place beginning with ‘S’... I think it is Siliguri. I had been there before so I thought maybe it would be better to go there. But I couldn’t find a bus. I found a railway station – I just thought that maybe one of these trains will take me there.

I kept changing trains, I didn’t know what else to do. I think I took 5 trains before I arrived here. I didn’t mean to come here – I didn’t know where I was, I hadn’t thought about coming to India. I just thought I’d stay some time with my relatives and then go back to my village. When I got off the train I tried to ask people where I was, but they didn’t speak the same language as me. I kept asking if anyone spoke Nepali. I saw some policemen so I asked them – they told me I was in Patna, in India, and they took me to the police station for one night. The next day they brought me to this NGO. I still want to find my way home.”

Girl, 20, staying with an adoption agency in exchange for domestic help for the past 3 years, Patna, Bihar, India

“Education is really important in this community... we all study hard and that’s what makes us good girls in the community here... and even some of us [points at girl in the group] have come here from Mali because the schools here are better.

Someday yes maybe we’d like to go away. But it is scary for girls like us to leave the community – some girls do go but they are the bravest, the strong ones. Often the girls who have come here from somewhere else already. The rest of us? We don’t know. Marriage, maybe? But we hope for much more – to be teachers, or nurses in the hospital... or maybe work for an NGO like that one that comes here to arrange social skills sessions for us.

We are taught lots about how dangerous it is to travel on the road for girls like us. There are lots of things we hear about – the main thing is men who might kidnap us. We are very vulnerable to that as young girls. Maybe it helps if you travel together with other girls – but they are strong and we are very weak. Even if you can avoid them though there are also the witches who if they find you will eat your soul and that might mean that your family’s crops fail or you have bad luck when you reach the city”

Girls 12-17, village near the Malian border, Ivory Coast
SPOTLIGHT: THE REAL INFORMATION SHE NEEDS
For communities – and indeed countries – where migration is inevitable, social, cultural and environmental structures and practices have emerged that seek broadly to prepare citizens for the migration journey. Much of this is led by NGOs but they have also put in place legacy structures (like migration information ‘committees’) for this very function. Much of this activity, though, is geared to ‘migrants’ generically. And where they do focus on girls, the information that is shared, and the norms that are upheld, can be deeply problematic.

Whilst cannibals and organ harvesters may well exist, they are dramatisations. And expending so much time and energy on warning girls about the real dangers she’ll face doesn’t isn’t just obscuring, but potentially aggravating. Many girls become so frightened by the thought of the journey that they are encouraged into accepting illusory protection in transit from brokers and traffickers, or making rash and badly thought out decisions. And this is often where the real, and certainly more widespread, danger lies.

The existence of structures to provide migration information is a great starting point for those looking to help girls during the migration trajectory. However, it is critical that these are imbued with what girls need specifically, rather than what migrants might need generally, and that they focus not just on the top-down dissemination of information, but on a conversation with girls about what is to come. This may include a focus on ‘street smarts’: the less singular and specific, much more transferable ability to navigate new and unfamiliar situations. Hearing about the journeys of girls that have gone before them, and understanding their varied and distinctly non-singular nature, can help girls to ‘expect the unexpected’, which may be the most useful preparation there is.

“We started going to Bangkok when we were 16 or 17. When you have all of your friends going, you feel lonely if you are left behind. The first time is the hardest – you go with the broker but you don’t have a passport yet, so it’s very nerve-wracking. You don’t know if you will make it across the border, and you wonder what will happen to you if you get caught. All the money your family has saved to get you to Thailand is with the broker, so you just have to hope for the best. You have to stand on your own, everything you have is in his hands.
None of us had phones or passports the first time we left the village – you have to save up to buy them in Bangkok. It’s very difficult to organise a passport in Myanmar – it takes a long time and it’s more expensive, and we would have to travel far to be able to do it. No one does that until they have made it to Bangkok and are earning some money. You can apply in Thailand, you just need a household census copy – and then you can travel back and forth without so much worry.

If you’re lucky, it might take one or two months of working until you can buy a phone. That makes it much easier every time you go after that – you can arrange your journey yourself through your contacts and set up your work before you arrive. You can stay in touch with your family once you are there, which makes it easier being away for a longer time. And we can use the phone for Facebook and Viber when we are there to find other girls from Myanmar to meet up with. There are even Facebook groups for girls in Myanmar with the names of villages in Burmese so you can find other people who have migrated.”

“I’d been wanting to leave the village for a while, and I wanted to go to Abidjan with one of my friends. One day, her brother came back to the village, from the city. I didn’t remember him, I was too little when he left, but he came back for the holidays and all the aunties and men in the village were happy. He had a new fancy phone and fancy clothes, and he stayed for a little while, but not very long. It was strange because on the one hand his family and my friend were very happy to see him, and he brought back some money and food for them so they kept saying he was a good son. But also you could tell he didn’t want to stay too long.

My friend and I we tried to talk to him, to persuade him to take us with him. He didn’t want to take us with him at first. He said we were stupid, we had to stay in the village, go to school, help our parents at the field. I thought maybe he doesn’t want to take both of us, maybe if it’s just me I will stand more chance.
So I talked to him in private, I asked him if I could go with him. I even begged him! At the end he said ok, that we were leaving the next morning, but I couldn’t say anything to my friend or my parents, because they would have tried to prevent me from going. I really wanted to go so I didn’t say anything. I didn’t take much because we left really early, I took my clothes and a bit of food with me and that’s all. I didn’t really have anything else. I knew my big sister was in Abidjan so I thought I was going to find her there. So I left with him in his car. I was really tired but I couldn’t sleep because I was worried. We stayed in the car for a few hours, even though it was a very long trip and not comfortable, I didn’t want to stop because it’s dangerous on the road. I remembered people coming to the village to warn us against the dangers of the road for children, about the men who tried to kill you for your tongue or your eyes. Yes it happens.

One of the times we stopped I had to hide in one of the big baskets, under some clothing, because there were some policemen at a control on the route. I was small so it wasn’t a problem anyway. Then we arrived here in Bouake, and he left me at the bus station, he said he needed to do some things before we could get back on the road. I stayed there and I waited for him a long time, but he didn’t come back. I had to sleep on the street for some nights and it was very difficult, I was hungry and miserable. I ended up with the AEJT here and they found me a shelter family so I’m staying with them for now. I miss my family, but I don’t want to go back to face them, because I ran away.”

Girls, 15, who migrated from small village near Katiola to Bouake (thinking she was going to Abidjan), now living in a shelter and taking sewing class at the local IFEF (Institution de Formation et d’Education de La Femme), Ivory Coast
“It wasn’t my say to leave home. I was sad to leave my friends. But my mum said the whole family was moving to live with my father in Yangon and work in a factory close to where he works. There wasn’t much to do in the village, it was just work in the fields and being at home. There are security problems there and drugs. Work in the village is lonely which puts us at danger – at least here there are more people.

But it’s hard. There was so much to plan. To work in the factories here you need an ID card. In the villages we never needed one. And there are so many documents you need to get even before you can get one. I don’t really understand it. But then things got really really bad – my grandmother was ill and crops were bad and we needed to come here to get some money quickly.

So my mum managed to get my aunt to lend us her ID card which says I am her age. I was so grateful. But I was so nervous too.

We travelled here by bus with other people from the village. It was so hot and I was scared of having my ID looked at and having to make up a lie. We were lucky here. Some people come here and just have to make a tent in one of the informal settlements which makes it really hard to look for work.

At least we already had a space in the dormitory where my dad was living. But he said we should prepare for much less space than in the village. He was right, it’s so cramped.

He took us to the factory where my mother and I were going to start working. It’s a new factory making electrical equipment. All the managers are men and all the staff are women and girls. He had to say we were sisters. When I handed over my ID card I was sweating. I thought I was going to faint or be sick. But the manager said it was ok. I don’t know if he believed us. But he needed us to do the work. There are new factories opening all the time here.

Now I feel sorry for the girls who don’t have ID cards as they need to make arrangements with brokers and do different things to earn money. Maybe they can’t live with their family. Even though the dormitories are cramped at least we are all together.

Life here is ok. All the women and girls from my factory
get the same bus to work everyday. It’s dark when we’re on our way back so we stick together to avoid the men who sniff glue. I feel sorry for the girls who don’t have family working with them – one girl’s brother comes to collect her from the factory everyday as he says it’s not safe enough for her to travel back alone.

I don’t really go out very much. Sometimes maybe I go to the temple with some girls from the factory if we get a day off. But that’s not very common. And I know I shouldn’t get into trouble as if anyone found out I was using my aunt’s ID card that would be the end for us. My family is relying on me.

Anyway, my favourite place to be is the factory as that’s where I’m earning money!! Now that I’m here I’ve started to hear about some jobs in Thailand – maybe if I earn enough money here I can afford to travel there where the pay is better. But that needs a passport and more documents – there are people you can speak to here to sort out that kind of thing but I think it costs a lot of money”

Girl, 15, Hlaing Thar Yar Township, Yangon, Myanmar

**SPOTLIGHT: THE ASSETS SHE NEEDS**

In a context where the girls we met are often leaving with very little, every tangible asset is meaningful – the note with an uncle’s phone number could mean the difference between a place to stay and possible economic opportunity or a life of ongoing sexual violence.

And yet the tangible assets that can afford girls protection are becoming more complex in a context where governments are putting placing more legislative restrictions on girls migration, especially cross-border migration going away in response to trafficking – meaning she’ll often need fake documents or more money for bribes.

Tangible assets don’t straightforwardly afford protection in any case. They can be taken away, and they can also be a very blunt instrument without the intangible, informational assets that enable her to navigate information and make critical choices.

For example, PHONES offer a mixed bag of protection: on the plus side they open up networks, give girls more power and capacity to drive
their own experiences, and help them identify other girls in a context where female solidarity is not normally encouraged; on the negative side however we heard stories of girls falling prey to traffickers via Facebook on their phones, particularly in Nepal.

DOCUMENTS can evidently be helpful; we heard some encouraging stories of girls being given notes of recommendations from village leaders – helping girls in e.g. securing a job in their destination, and also giving them the psychological boost of knowing someone cares about their experience and being able to prove that someone knows where they are. On the other hand, fake passports or ID cards, while no doubt potentially helpful at some points on the trajectory, can increase family debt and may even increase the risks of the journey if they are ‘uncovered’.

And of course, MONEY for the journey is no doubt incredibly precious and important for girls, helping them avoid or reduce the need to sell their body for the transport fare. And yet travelling with cash can make girls vulnerable – in both reality and perception. They are more likely to be the target of thieves who may abuse their intrinsic vulnerability to steal meagre cash reserves; girls are also likely to feel more vulnerable where they’ve been told to look out for people stealing from them.

Programmers should continue to focus on the tangible assets girls need, but our encounters in the field have suggested that these need to be accompanied by intangible, informational assets to help girls use them more safely.

ON THE MOVE
Girls make their varied, multiple migration journeys in a number of ways.

We heard stories of train, bus, and plane journeys. Direct journeys and some with many stages. In the car with a broker, or hitchhiking in the open air. We heard stories of girls having to sleep overnight by the side of the road or in fields, often in hiding, for fear of detection. Girls doing large parts of their journey on foot when they run out of money. And girls waiting at the road to hitch the next stage. These are potentially very vulnerable moments where the risks of all types of violence from personal theft to rape are pronounced, and all the greater if she is alone.
Whilst infinite in their diversity, there were some common features of the stories we heard. For many girls, the fear engendered during preparation means that they often seek and accept illusory protection on the journey, from the likes of brokers and traffickers. The cruel irony of all of this really can’t be overstated – in attempting to protect herself from cartoon-like evil, she ends up giving over what little power she has left.

This illusory protection emerges in certain places and spaces on the journey where her vulnerability is highest, and from a range of predatory actors. These are often moments of extreme confusion and even psychological trauma, where the entire trajectory may end up being diverted in profoundly harmful directions.

Contrasting with this situation of profound need, the protection offered by NGOs and other service providers on the journey and as they arrive is extremely limited. Many girls reported being totally unaware of the help out there, and certainly not encountering any NGO that felt like it was giving girls what they really needed, during the journey.

“We have all been to Myitkyinar to work as domestic help. In the village we have to do physical work, but in Myitkyinar there is more stress. Most of us went the first time when we were 14 years old. You always go with other people from the village that have been before, but you usually don’t know who you will work for the first time you go. Usually you’re accompanied by an older girl who already has a job there, and she will take you to her employer to stay there for the first night.

We travel with our friends, but when we get there we all split up. First you have to take a bus to Mandalay from the village. Then the journey is 1 night and 2 days by train from Mandalay. We have to take 30,000 Kyat to cover the transport costs – either our family saves up or we borrow it from other families, and pay it back with 10% more. The train is really cramped and you don’t know when it will arrive – it’s very unpredictable”

Girls in early 20s who migrate to Myitkyinar for domestic work, Myinthaung village, Dry Zone, Myanmar
“She dropped out of school after primary age, when she was in grade 5. A close friend, an older guy, approached her family and asked “does she want to make money?” He said he could organise for her to work abroad as a nanny through an employment agency. My niece wasn’t poor, and she could live well in the village, but she envied the girls who went abroad. Plus, the family’s rubber plantation was growing badly at the time – that was the reason why she eventually left. A woman from Yangon came to pick her up in a nice car – she was very well dressed, wearing fancy jewellery and the villagers were all impressed.

In Yangon they organised fake documents for her as a nurse’s aid – because Myanmar has banned young girls from leaving as domestic help. I gave her parents awareness packs telling them what might happen to her in Singapore, which made them worried, but by then my niece had already left. Her parents got in contact with her when she was in Yangon. She was meant to be leaving for Singapore in a week, but after the call they rushed her to Singapore more quickly. She told me what ended up happening. The agency got the documents that would allow her to get on the plane in Yangon. She said she was so confused and worried at the airport - she thought someone from the employment agency would come with her on the plane but she was all alone. She was told to destroy the documents on the plane. She didn’t know exactly when to do it so she waited for a long time until she heard that the plane was about to land and then had to do it in a rush. She’d never been on the plane before and I think she was really scared”

NGO worker for safe migration telling story about her niece who was eventually rescued through combined effort of the NGO, ILO & Anti-Trafficking Task Force, Taunggyi, Myanmar
Many girls we met are taken on their journey in the car of a power-holder, e.g., a family member or broker, often alone. These car journeys are often sites of extreme confusion and distress. She rarely knows where she’s going, or how long the journey will take, and is entirely at the mercy of the person driving her.

Girls in these modes of transport are “closed off” to some extent while they’re on the move, possibly protected from some forms of physical violence but less reachable by potential protectors and very vulnerable to the whims of the powerholder(s) with them. For programmers, this can appear to be a dead end: how to reach girls in these scenarios? The key is helping girls to navigate these in advance: this is where some of the street smarts and critical thinking – the ability to navigate new and foreign situations – that we discussed earlier are absolutely vital.

“I was living in Abobo, it’s in a neighbourhood in Abidjan. I wanted to join my aunt here in Bassam, because my big sister told me she has a hairdresser salon and I could work with her. I wanted to do a formation with her, you see, so I can become a hairdresser myself.

So I decided to take the bus from Abobo to Bassam. But I didn’t have any money so I couldn’t pay, and the driver found me out so I couldn’t get on the bus. But I really wanted to come so I decided to walk. It was very long, and my feet were hurting. Still I didn’t want to get in the car with someone, because I had heard stories. I was scared but I was very focused, I kept praying to God that I could find my aunt in Bassam, that I could work with her in the salon, that I wouldn’t be stopped on the road.

I had been once before to Bassam, walking with my sister, so I remembered the route, but still some times I got it wrong and it took a very long time to get there, more than 16 hours! I had to sleep by the road because I couldn’t walk in the dark but it was very scary. I slept behind a small wall not far from a maquis because I could hear the voices and people, so I thought maybe it’s safer, but in the end I just couldn’t sleep because I was so worried.
One of the customers at the maquis saw me and said he could give me a ride to Bassam, he said he could help me to find my aunt if I wanted. I thought it was too dangerous so I ran and hid, and he didn’t come after me. Then the next day I found my way again and I continued to walk. I went straight to the house of my aunt when I arrived in Bassam and it was fine, but I’ll never forget how scary it was, and how tired I was when I arrived.”

*Girl, 21, from Abidjan to Grand-Bassam, Ivory Coast*

“My sister was meant to come and join me here to work in the garment factory together. I came the year before her, with other girls from the village. I know she got to Myawaddy by car, she was coming with a broker and other people from Myanmar. But when she tried to cross the border she was discovered in the car - she didn’t have any passport or documents to pass. It’s expensive and hard to get a passport and documents in Myanmar. She was planning to organise that once she arrived in Mae Sot. The people working at the border just said to that she couldn’t cross, not without the documents.

My family had saved up money for her to come, to pay the broker to do the journey and the crossing, but now that is all used up. The broker doesn’t give people their money back if they aren’t successful. She didn’t have enough money to get home, and besides, she still wanted to get to Thailand. But she also needed more money to pay for another crossing, so her only option was to do some kind of work in Myawaddy, on the border, and wait until she could save up enough money to try and cross again. She wouldn’t tell me what work she was doing, she just says that its hard labour. But everyone know that the way you make money when you get stuck at the border is in a KTV [Karaoke Bar and Brothel]. I know that’s what she did.”

*Girl, 17, from Rakhine State, Myanmar, working in garment factory in Mae Sot, Thailand*
On the border between Myanmar and Thailand, in a town called Myawaddy, commercial sexual exploitation is rife. Lax taxation laws and a history of cronynism means that huge and unregulated casinos dominate, filled with pleasure tourists from across the region, who come to gamble and buy sex from women and girls. Karaoke brothel bars abounded, and like border towns in many parts of the world, the atmosphere is one of seedy impermanence. When girls get stuck at the border – unable to move on to their final destination, or to return home – there are few other options available beyond selling their sexual body.

“The first time you go to Bangkok you go with a broker, and after that you just go on your own or with friends. It’s two or three days of journey. The first time you go in a vehicle with lots of other people who you don’t know. We had many difficulties and for some time we wanted to come back to our family – you feel sad and you wonder how you will know if people are good or not? How long you will be gone for? We just had a few clothes and some phone numbers of relatives in Thailand and Myanmar, and 700,000 Kyat to pay the broker and so we could make a passport once we were in Thailand. The only ID we had was a school registration card.

They stop the car at checkpoints, and you just have to say you are going to visit relatives in Myanmar near the border. You are in the car with about ten other people – men, women, other girls – everyone is going to Thailand for work. At night you all sleep in a room together. But usually you are scared so you can’t sleep. You can’t trust anyone, you just have to focus on yourself and only rely on yourself. You are your own guardian.

At the border crossing you have to go through the river, under the bridge, because you don’t have a passport the first time. Sometimes they ask girls to hide in baskets of cabbages, and then they go over the bridge. This happened to my cousin – the police search the baskets with a metal rod and they stab in the basket and listen for people’s shrieks to find them. You can pay more to go VIP, but I have heard it’s still really cramped and
it’s expensive. Whichever way you do it, the border is always scary, especially the first time without a passport… so you hope for the best and know people will congratulate you that you made it to Thailand in the end”

Girls, 17-22, migrants to Bangkok for domestic work from PAO, Taunggyi, Myanmar

“Lots of people are arrested at the border by the Thai police. They catch people once they make it over to this side and take them to unofficial checkpoints, and then they are exploited there – they ask them for bribes and things. Or other things for the girls. Sometimes they will take them to jail, if they can’t pay. People from Myanmar always suffer a lot of harassment in the Thai jails. We offer paralegal assistance to the migrant workers because they face a lot of problems and unfairness here”

NGO worker, Mae Sot, Thailand

“We have a post in the bus park about four or five kilometres from the border. Most girls are brought to Kathmandu first, where they are ‘trained up’ by brokers for a few days – they are convinced and told what to stay if they are questioned. It’s not as suspicious if Nepali girls are seen there in the bus parks wandering around, especially if they are from the Hilly regions. Then they come here. In the Terai it is obvious if you see girls who are from other parts of Nepal, they look out of place when they get off the bus. They wait to be met by someone, or until they
figure out where to go next. Birgunj is a major transit point for migration and trafficking – it’s the last stop before they cross the border into India. We have six or seven branches in other districts of Nepal – all with posts in the main transit areas. Research has been done which shows that girls are most vulnerable in transit zones: bus parks, airports, train stations, transport junctions. That’s why we have to focus our efforts in these places and make sure we have presence there”

Anti-trafficking NGO worker, based on Birgunj-Raxaul border, Nepal

**SPOTLIGHT: PLACES TO REACH GIRLS**

No matter the mode of transport, there exist spaces that girls are likely to move through on the journey that represent points of heightened risk. Although these spaces are as myriad as her potential journey type, two places consistently emerged – across regions – as places of greatest vulnerability and as such where services should be reaching her: borders and transit stops. These also represent, pragmatically, areas that programmers physically can reach, compared to e.g. more closed-off modes of transport.

Whilst not all of the girls cross national or state BORDERS, and not all border crossings are the same, they do represent a significant moment of structural violence where the power imbalance leaves girls vulnerable to a number of risks. Corrupt officialdom and the uneven power dynamics at the border present a very specific threat. Many girls travel on fake or incomplete documentation and even when they do have legitimate passports they are often unsure of the paperwork required to cross the border. Put simply, even if they do absolutely everything right, they are always at a structural disadvantage.

Even before any physical violence is faced, the psychological trauma at this stage of the journey cannot be over-estimated, and this is especially heightened if she is travelling alone. Her biggest fear is of being stopped and sent back, or being stuck at the border – both of which constitute a sense of ‘failure’. She may well do almost anything to continue the journey, especially if she’s in ‘escape mode’, running away from dangers at home. On top of this, the general chaos at border towns creates a context of confusion in addition to the anxiety already faced.
TRANSIT STOPS are more diverse in nature than borders, but there is still some consistency in where waiting girls can be found: terminus waiting rooms at core transport hubs at the end of the day. Even if expected, these places can be times of profound risk, especially if the transit stop involves a night’s wait.

If waiting is provoked by running out of money, transactional sex may be the only way that a girl who’s already subject to huge structural economic violence can earn the money that’s required to continue with her journey. Across regions, we heard an almost bewildering array of moments in which girls are forced to extract value from their bodies to move on – for food, water, shelter, for protection from ‘worse’ forms of exploitation, for bus tickets, and even just to enter train stations.

What’s clear is that the longer she waits the more vulnerable she is to the predatory forces who know all too well the places and space she inhabits on her journey, and are ready and waiting to pounce.

“There was a man from our village who said he could get us a job abroad in a hotel or restaurant. He asked us for any documents we had and said he would get us a visa and a passport if we paid him the money in advance. The whole family raised money for us to go, and they did a big leaving ceremony for us when we left. He told us to come to Delhi to prepare the visa and that we would get a flight from there. We were so excited. But when we were travelling to Delhi we got stopped at the border, by an NGO who had an anti-trafficking booth there. They said they would bring us back to our village in Nepal. They said they could help us, but we told him that’s not the point – we don’t want to go back, that’s not the help we need. We want to get our money and documents back and go abroad to work. After everything, we can’t go back to square one. If we really wanted to, we could find our way home ourselves. Other people have told us that NGOs try to rescue as many girls as possible to reach targets, and they pay 15,000 Rupees for rescuing us. But that’s not what we want. And if we tell our family what actually happened, that we were conned, they wouldn’t let us go again. How can we go back empty-handed?”

Two sisters, 16 and 18, from Dang, Nepal
SPOTLIGHT: NGO INTERCEPTIONS

As we’ve seen, girls encounter a range of actors in different places on her journey: police and other officials, traffickers, drivers, fellow travellers and many more.

However, in the state of heightened anxiety that girls often find themselves in during the journey – where the only goal is to get there, to complete the journey – the role of different actors takes on a new and often converse framing. The desperation to continue the journey trumps future safety concerns and it is very unclear who her real allies are and what genuine rather than illusory protection might look like.

Specifically, traffickers can feel like a protective asset, helping their journey and often specifically their transition across borders and other sticky points on the journey.

On the other hand, NGOs can feel like blockers threatening to send girls back home, cast as predator in their minds. From most girls we spoke to, we heard little about NGO help on the journey, and much more about the threat they represent as a potential interception.

The main problem is that many of these ‘rescue’ services treat anyone under the age of 18 as a kidnap victim, assuming she has been taken against her will and would like to return home. It’s here that the complex, sticky discussion about migration and trafficking really rears its head. Because whilst some girls have no doubt been captured and held against their will, the majority of cases are much less clear cut.

Understanding this situation from girls’ perspectives is therefore vital: whilst NGO interceptions are of course well-meaning, it’s worth considering that these often feel unwelcome, and as such may actually have the unintended consequences of pushing girls into the hands of traffickers. NGOs are expending significant energy on attempting these kinds of interceptions.

Based on what we saw, it may be worthwhile thinking about whether some of this time and thought could be diverted to the types of help, particularly food and shelter, that are clearly vital for girls en route.
“I had to leave my village because my parents wanted to marry me to a friend of the family. He was 44 years old. Too old. I didn’t want to marry him, but my parents wouldn’t listen to me, even my mama she wouldn’t change her mind or listen to me, even though I was crying so much. For a while nobody was talking about it, but then I failed an exam at school and they said that I couldn’t continue school and I was to be married the next year to this man.

I had no choice, so I left. I ran away so I didn’t have time to prepare, I didn’t want them to guess or to prevent me from going, so I just went with my clothes on. I walked to the bus station and I followed on the bus some people who said they were going to Abidjan. They asked me what I was doing so I lied, I said I was going to see my uncle who lived there. One man in particular, he said to me in the bus that if the police asked questions I could say I was traveling with him. I thought he offered me his help so I didn’t say anything. The journey was quite long, we didn’t stop much and I slept a bit on the bus. Sometimes we would stop by the route so the driver could rest, and we’d get outside to go to the bathroom and once or twice one of the aunties handed me a pouch of water so I could drink something. I was really hungry though, I hadn’t eaten anything when I left.

When we arrived in Abidjan, I couldn’t pay for the bus ticket and I did not know what to do. The driver didn’t want to let me go. I didn’t know anyone but the man who was traveling too offered to pay and to bring me to his home to help me. I didn’t know what to do so I went with him. I was worried but I had no other choice, so I stayed with his family.

At first I was so grateful to him for taking me. But after a few weeks of staying, he raped me. It kept happening again and I became pregnant. It was actually his wife who threw me out in the end. I guess she was angry and embarrassed. Now I don’t know what to do”

Girl, 14, originally from Mali, to Abidjan and Grand-Bassam, South-east Ivory Coast, rescued by AEJT Grand-Bassam who looked after the case. She was wandering on the streets until she was welcomed in a transit centre in Grand-Bassam.
SPOTLIGHT: SPOTTING REAL PREDATORS

As we can see, girls encounter a confusing cast of characters across the journey.

Whilst girls pre-departure consider the police and other authority figures sources of support to be trusted, this picture quickly changes once they have embarked on their first journey. Rape, intimidation and bribes at border points are par for the course. And even if police don’t abuse girls physically, we heard about teasing and intimidation of migrant girls, for example at the border between Myanmar and Thailand, where girls become a ‘plaything’ for bored officers, who abuse their power to manufacture ‘jeopardy’ for girls for their own amusement.

Girls on the journey are extremely vulnerable to those claiming to offer them protection. Whilst these people rarely have benign motives, the extent of the threat they pose may emerge only later in the trajectory. Compared to the imagined risk of kidnapping or being eaten by cannibals, a man offering his help, even if she’s never met him before and isn’t sure of his motives, can ostensibly appear to be just what she needs. Even if she has suspicions, going with a trafficker may still feel like the best option if the other is being sent home or having to wait in a chaotic border town.

Girls need help en route to distinguish real from illusory protection. Of course, not all these people have malicious intentions. But in a context where she may rarely have left her natal village before, she needs help navigating the various people she’ll meet, helping hone her instincts to understand who might offer protection and who is a genuine predator. This is a tough job for anyone. But networks of girls, who can share information about traffickers they’ve accounted, may be able to help with this, as well as providing more practical advice on how to navigate interactions with police and authority figures on the journey.
SPOTLIGHT: PATHWAY TO CSE – TRANSACTIONAL SEX FOR PROTECTION

CSE districts are often located in close proximity to waiting areas (particularly transport hubs, bus stations etc.) so at this moment there is an increased risk of girls being offered false promises of shelter and protection and being duped into either commercial or non-commercial sexual exploitation.

This is why providing girls with shelter at this stage will be so vital, reducing the need to sell their body to move on, which can have ramifications not just on the journey nor the migration trajectory, but for their lives beyond.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR GIRLS

Like the trajectory overall, the journey is fraught with risks – but this stage is all the more potentially harmful because the genuine risks are often obscured. The preparation girls receive focuses significantly on specific dangers around kidnappers, organ traffickers and so on, which are rarely a feature of girls’ journeys in reality. And yet, when girls have been taught to look out for these, any offer of protection can seem benign. This can leave them very vulnerable to offers of protection from brokers or traffickers, or indeed the bribes of police or border officials. Borders and waiting moments are major flashpoints for this. These are also moments where she finds herself vulnerable to interceptions by well-meaning NGOs who play a key role in creating this climate of fear.

In short, the focus on extreme and specific risks during the preparation phase has left her ill prepared for the more insidious, subtle, diffuse and frankly baffling actual risks encountered on the journey.

And yet, because girls are so primed for danger on the journey, this can encourage preparation, sometimes to more helpful ends. In particular, we heard tales of girls travelling in groups, a vital source of protection.
“I was 13 when I finished school and my parents decided that I would go to Myitkyinar for work. A girl from my village had come back from there to get married here in the village, so the job opened up. I was so nervous, especially about doing the journey by bus and then train – I’d never gone on the train before and I knew we’d have to sleep on it for one night. But I’d heard about the journey from older girls who have gone there before, and my parents arranged it so I’d be going in a group of lots of girls who work there. I left with 30,000 kyat for the journey which my family had saved, as well as my clothes, a school ID card, and a reference from my village leader.

I felt so sad to say bye to my parents. But in the end the journey wasn’t as scary as I’d feared – it was good being with the other girls from my village who told me not to speak to certain people and made sure that at least two of us were always awake during the night part of the train journey to guard our things. In fact I felt really safe in the group.

When I arrived in Myitkyinar I was worried because the job that I thought was there for me didn’t actually exist. I didn’t know what I was going to do – all the girls I travelled with from home were going off to the houses where they do domestic work or tea shops – and I was worried I would end up on the streets all alone.

But luckily there was a girl with me, Phu Phu* [not real name], who had made the journey before and had a good boss. She is one of the girls everyone looks up to because she’s older and has worked in Myitkyinar for a long time and has won the respect of her boss’s family. She even watches TV with them! She asked her boss if I could stay with them for a short time while I looked for a job. Thank goodness I had a roof over my head that first night. The next day I woke up early to help Phu Phu with her chores so that we could both go out in the afternoon to find me a job. I felt so lucky because she knows quite a lot of people there, and I knew nobody. She managed to use her contacts to track down a house where they were looking for a domestic worker. And that’s where I started working”

Girl, 18, from Myinthataung village, Myanmar
As we’ve seen, the critical protective asset in this case is other girls – the watchful, protective eyes and ears for the whole group, vessels of experience. Girls who have experienced the journey before can also be a great source of real, useable information for other girls, challenging the often obscured nature of the journey and the warnings against its imagined dangers. Of course, the girl whose story is told here benefits from her journey being more planned – and of course this is not the case for all girls, especially those in escape mode. And yet, the leveraging of girls as a source of protection and information for other girls may well have broader application. We can also learn from the agility displayed by the girl in this story who was able to change her plan – again, other girls may not have access to these alternative opportunities structurally, but may be able to learn from stories like these about how to deal with unexpected obstacles.

With this in mind, in the final section, we will explore how we can use what we’ve learnt to transform the journey from a time of heightened risk to a safer experience.
Arrival
At some point girls will experience ‘arrival’ – not necessarily their final stop, but a place from which they don’t immediately intend to move on.

As we’ve seen, their first hours at destination are most often marked by both confusion and disappointment – if not outright depression – when they discover that myths of the city are in fact just that. Often, girls have been sold (literally) a compelling dream of a better life – going to school or learning a trade – which contrasted sharply with their relative lack of options in the village.

We heard numerous stories of girls believing they were travelling for domestic work, and instead being told upon arrival to sell water on the street, or work in a tea shop. At worst, we heard many stories of girls being forced into work at brothels, maquis, massage parlours or entertainment bars.

As such, the first hours represent moments of profound disillusion for girls. The realisation they’ve been ‘tricked’ or ‘fooled’ can take a destructive toll. Their mental assets – morale, self-esteem, confidence – are heavily damaged, and with long-lasting consequences.

“She’s barely been able to speak to us since she arrived here. It’s so difficult that things here are so much more different than she expected”

*NGO shelter worker, Abidjan, Ivory Coast*

After the first few days of arriving the daily realities begin to take shape for migrant girls and young women in their new environment. This daily reality can last anywhere from day to months to years; the same girl can experience multiple realities as a migrant in numerous settings. She may migrate initially to a peri-urban setting; then onto an urban setting; return home for a period of time; and set out again on a cross-border or international migration trajectory. Migration may be seasonal or indefinite.

Whilst these daily realities are of course diverse, there are certainly similarities across all girls’ experiences. Namely, the additional risk of being alone in a new place acts as a compounding factor on top of the disadvantage she already faces as a result of being young, poor and female.

And it is this that distinguishes the situation of migrant girls from that of poor non-migrant girls, even if life for the latter group is, of course, still extremely hard. Put simply, migrant girls’ key priorities are, firstly shelter – at
least ensuring a roof over their heads – and, secondly, overcoming their isolation. The combination of these two key needs can make them extremely vulnerable.

“When I got off the bus and realised I didn’t know where to go... the job had fallen through... I was so scared. I asked another girl from my village what I might do. She said the only way was for me to stay with the man who had brought us here”

*Girl, 15, from Dry Zone village, Myanmar*

This vulnerability commonly manifests in their having to accept offers of illusory protection, as we saw in the “journey” stage, but it also means they are likely to have to make significant compromises in terms of how they earn their money. And this is taking place in a context where options for girls are already profoundly limited.

As such, inherent protective and risk factors matter significantly here. Many of the most critical determinants of her daily reality and type of employment will have come prior to her getting the first job or training, some through experiences on the migration trajectory, but primarily her life in the natal home. So, in shaping her settlement situation, her STOCK of protective and risk factors matters:

**EDUCATION AND LITERACY LEVELS MATTER.** Girls with some or average educational or functional literacy levels are more likely to be employed in shops, as salesgirls, or in some factory jobs. Girls with no education or very little education are more likely to be constrained to domestic work, some factory jobs, and the ‘entertainment’ industry

**AGE MATTERS.** Younger girls (below 14) are more likely to be put to work in ‘hidden’ jobs – domestic work, the back of a tea shop, some factory jobs, and the more unregulated end of
the commercial sex industry. Older girls (between 15 and 19) are more likely to be put to work in the front of the tea shop, domestic work including in hotels, and in dance bars and karaoke bars.

MARITAL (AND MOTHERHOOD) STATUS MATTERS. Girls who have been married and fled an abusive/alcoholic husband or partner; have fled abusive in-laws; have fled domestic violence or have fled for their children’s safety; are more likely to end up in the commercial sex industry. Brokers, pimps and madams generally prefer girls ‘with experience’, and certainly those without close ties to home. Adolescent mothers are more likely to be those in the most economically desperate situations, with more restricted options available. Factories, private residences, and many shops and cafes, are unlikely to employ unwed teenage mothers.

SOCIAL NETWORKS MATTER. Girls who know other girls at their destination will be more likely to be kept up to date on job opportunities or be travelling to fill a specific vacancy. Even if this doesn’t mean a more appealing or better paid job, it may be more likely to result in long-term, or at least relatively reliable, paid employment – rather than piecemeal day labour. Similarly, girls with somewhere to stay or basic support from friends or family on arrival had significantly more freedom to look around at job opportunities vs. those who have to prioritise immediate shelter above all else.
“I know that my experience has maybe been a bit better than for other girls from Nepal. It was still hard but I was lucky to be able to stay with relatives in Kathmandu while I saved up and planned my move to Delhi”

Girl, 21, working in a Delhi call centre

When we consider these assets in detail – assets that she needs to have accrued at home, in order to thrive at arrival – we see one of the cruellest ironies of the migration myth emerge. For whilst girls will have migrated to escape seemingly constrained options in the place they’ve come from, their options at destination remain constrained precisely because they have migrated as poor (illiterate, rural, indebted) girls.

As such, as the dice settle, at least for a while, the cruelty of the migration myth is exposed. Girls may have been taught that village life holds no future, but for the majority of girls, migration simply means a continuation of social control, just in a different place where she is more vulnerable than ever.

SPOTLIGHT: BUSTING MYTHS, CHANGING NARRATIVES

Clearly, the streets of cities are not paved with gold for poor migrant girls. As the cruel irony of the migration myth is exposed, we see the urgency of the need to improve options for girls in the village that we spotlighted in “home”.

This should also serve to remind practitioners of the importance of providing open and honest information to girls and communities about the sorts of lives and livelihoods that await them if they migrate – not forcibly ‘stopping’ or ‘blocking’ migration, but helping girls critically assess if this is a path they want to take.
THE FIRST 36 HOURS

It’s on arrival at their destination that the ‘migration dice’ land for girls, almost always accompanied by various and intersecting layers of violence. Indeed, the story of this stage is the extreme vulnerability faced by girls relative to the trajectory as a whole. The first 36 hours are fraught with danger: not just because arriving is intrinsically dangerous, but because girls have often ‘traded off’ safety at this point for protection on the journey, due at least in some part to the focus by NGOs on the dangers of the journey specifically. Compounding this, there is a distinct lack of protection afforded by NGOs at this stage.

The first hours post arrival are critical, both in terms of what they mean for girls’ experience, and how this experience impacts across the rest of the trajectory.

Many layers of violence intersect: there is significant physical abuse, and sexual violence is common, but we also witnessed a very particular type of psychological violence. This relates to a critical moment of realisation for girls: when they get off the bus alone, or discover during the first day in a new place that they’ve been deceived – that the experience isn’t what they imagined.

At the level of personal violence, girls’ life, health and bodily integrity are particularly at risk, often owing to a lack of planned shelter or livelihood on arrival. As such, the first 36 hours are primarily about basic survival needs. Girls’ other needs, including wellbeing, identity, freedom and so on, become relegated, to be tended to later.

In this survival mindset, girls become particularly vulnerable to illusory forms of protection. Exploitation is par for the course, as girls are shuffled upon arrival between the hands of different people. Whilst pathways to CSE exist throughout the trajectory, the risk at this stage is particularly heightened.
“When I arrived in Yangon I was so scared. I was supposed to be working in the house of a woman. It had all been agreed. But when we got to her house she said she didn’t need me anymore. The broker, he was so angry with me. He said it was my fault that the family didn’t want me. I felt so sad. I blamed myself. I was so scared. I thought I would have to sleep on the street and I heard about what happens to girls there.

I guess I was lucky because the broker said I could stay with him. I stayed for two days. He said I had to pretend to be ‘his wife’. I think he has a wife already. It was horrible. I don’t want to talk about it. After two days I couldn’t take it anymore so I waited until he was out and I ran away. I didn’t know where to go. I had never been to Yangon before.

I walked around and around but didn’t know where I could go. In the end the broker found me near his house. I had to go back with him. Now I’m staying with him until he finds me a new job. Sometimes other men come to the house and I need to do the same things with them that I do with him.”

Girl, 17, migrated from the Dry Zone to Yangon, Myanmar

“I ran away when my parents tried to make me marry a friend of the family. He was over double my age. I knew my family couldn’t look after me anymore. I’d finished school and they said it was time for me to be married to a husband.

I had heard about Abidjan from other girls. Even in Burkina we hear all about it.

I got on a bus which got me over the border but then there was a long wait at Korhogo. Buses came and went and I didn’t get on because the drivers wouldn’t let me because I had no money to pay. I sat in the bus station the whole day. It was hot. Men tried to bother me but I just stayed quiet. I was scared it was getting dark.

Then an overnight bus came, going from Korhogo all the way to Abidjan. The driver said I could get on even though I didn’t have the money. He seemed nice. I was so grateful.”
We travelled for the whole night. Imagine if I’d had to stay out on the street.
When we got to Abidjan I said thank you and tried to get off but he told me to wait. He waited until all the other passengers had got off and then said that I would have to pay him back. I said I had no money and he knew that. He told me there were other ways I could pay him back. Then we had to have sex. It was horrible. I tried to block it out. I still think about it now”

*Girl, 14, from village in Burkina Faso to Abidjan, Ivory Coast*

“You go with someone from the village. Your parents say to go nicely, and don’t trust that man even though he’s from the village. Because he’s a man, don’t tell him everything. Don’t tell him you had to go because of your economic condition, as he will try to take advantage of that. Don’t say that you are poor and you had to come to Kathmandu. You trust him, but you will not share this information. You go by bus with him.

If you get separated from the man from the village, a dalal [broker/trafficker] will approach you. They might even approach the man from the village when you are with him, and offer him money to take you off his hands. You are most likely to get separated at the bus stations when you need to change bus, or when you arrive and it’s time to move on somewhere else. That’s where all the dalals linger and look out for girls they can pick up. They can tell if you look scared, or don’t know where you’re going. They will try to be nice to you and persuade you they can look after you. They try to talk with you and offer you something to eat. You cannot eat it – it will make you confused and he can do anything he wants to you. He will take you with him”

*Girls, 13-15, in Kathmandu for 2-5 years, arrived to Raksha Nepal that day. All in dance bars or street-based prostitution*
SPOTLIGHT: PATHWAY TO CSE – PAYBACK
The need to pay back her transport fare to a driver (or more broadly for food, or the first night’s accommodation) often constitutes a direct path to CSE, as reported by a range of girls across geographies. Girls traveling on their own are particularly at risk here. And, as we’ve seen in other stages, the experience of CSE, with its associated stigma and shame, means that this first time is unlikely to be the last.

This is where providing girls with means of sustainable finance for their journeys, along with other survival assets – even (especially) if they’re in escape mode – will be absolutely vital.

SPOTLIGHT: HANDOVER
Another critical and often deeply harmful moment within the first 36 hours is handover – when girls are passed from the person who has brought them, often a relative or broker, to another person – often pimp or employer.

Extreme deception is often manifest at handover, but even without this, there is intrinsic psychological damage wrought at this moment, as control is transferred to a person she may never have met before. And this trauma is compounded by virtue of being in an entirely new place. This handover moment may also result in new forms of economic violence, as the girl accrues even more debt to a new facilitator, which she’ll be forced to pay off, in yet another form of payback.

Beyond this, there are also situations where a planned handover doesn’t happen – leaving girls extremely vulnerable and potentially exposed to the worst forms of sexual and economic exploitation.
THE ECONOMIC ICEBERG

Everywhere, girls need to earn money. But, as with the trajectory as a whole, these experiences differ vastly. Migrant girls across the majority world undertake a bewildering range of formal and informal jobs, and are forced into horrible compromises as a result of their desperate need to earn a living. Whatever the situation, it is clear that migrant girls are undertaking some form of labor almost all the time, and leisure or free time rarely features.

Whilst, naturally, we didn’t encounter every different type of job being done by migrant girls, amongst those who we did meet a distinction began to emerge – between girls in very fixed, formalized and singular employment types – particularly brick kilns and factories – and girls forced to engage in a much wider variety of labor types, increasingly less formalized, and sometimes unpaid.

Whilst neither situation is ‘better’ than the other, and almost all girls no matter the situation are forced to work all hours of the day, the employment structure has significant implications for the types of violence girls face, and how likely it is that they will be able to access support services. Drawing on the ‘economic iceberg theory’ of feminist economic geographers Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, we can conceptualize employment types as such:
FORMAL WAGE LABOUR

We met many girls in very structured factory, manual or agricultural jobs, working long hours, completing the same task over and over again, and with constant supervision.

The experience of factory work, in particular, is made appalling by its very efficiency and ruthlessness. Girls working in factories often face a terrifyingly punishing working schedule with no room for any deviance. Everything is timetabled for maximum productivity: bathroom breaks are minimized; girls may be allowed one (inward) phone call per month. Girls reported finding these jobs profoundly monotonous, and the constant supervision extremely draining. What’s more, girls working in these kinds of automated industries are often literally exhausted, working long days and doing a job that limits genuine engagement.

And yet in many ways this is considered a ‘good job’ – regular, known, and often with the added benefit of accommodation.

“We were 12 and she was 14 when we went to Yangon. We are cousins. Our parents just told us to “be good, look after your health. We don’t want to hear any bad news about you”. We knew we would be together, but we didn’t know what work it was. We were happy before leaving because we’d never been. And other people from the village who came back from Yangon, their skin tone had lightened and that made us envious. We were a bit scared about meeting strangers and we knew there were lots of con men in Yangon. Other girls told us about them. Sometimes they might trick you and sell you to someone else. The other girls told us not to go out too often, to be careful when you get off the bus, and try not to fall asleep on the bus. They said “try to be happy, don’t cry”.

At first when we got there we were not happy. I cried. It takes some time, maybe a few months, to get used to it. We slept together in a small room that could fit six of us. Girls and boys were kept separate. Sometimes we would confide in each other at night before bed when we were feeling sad.

We had a 6 month contract – that is what our uncle agreed before he took us there. He got 15,000 Kyat from the factory for each of us. They paid 1 month’s salary in advance, and then
60,000 Kyat per month, which we took back to our family. We didn’t want to stay for longer because here in the village time is more flexible, you feel more free. There were lots of rules there... If you spoke too loudly you were scolded, you were not allowed to speak to boys, you had to keep the radio volume low, you were scolded if it you took too long doing your powder or in the wash room. The water was limited. We had women supervisors. The youngest boys were 10 and the youngest girls were 12. You get up at 4:00, and go to the washroom. Then you start work at 4:30. Breakfast was at 10:00, and then you work again until 15:00. Then you have lunch quickly and work again until dinner at 23:00. Then at 23:30 you can go to the washroom and get ready for bed. We worked seven days a week. We wouldn’t have gone if we knew the schedule. There were also restrictions on phone calls – your family has to call the factory to be able to speak to them. And you can only speak to them once a month. You feel very constrained there. You can’t live the way you want. Even when you have a bath you feel restricted”

*Girls, 14-16, who worked for 6 months in bean cake packaging factory in Yangon, Myanmar*

“I feel confined in the factory, I have no freedom to go where I want. And because I don’t have a passport or document I feel very restricted. I’m worried about the police finding me. We are not from this country, so we are not treated the same. Once you are over 18 you can get a pink slip from the Thai government. Some girls get ID cards issued by the factory, an employee card that says you are 18. Before it was really flexible, just in the last year restrictions have got tighter. Now younger girls might have to lie about their age, or they get sent back. Sometimes the factories do dental checks on girls who look younger.

We live at the factory. We came because our sister was here so we thought it would be fun. We can send remittances to our family and buy some clothes for ourselves with the money we earn. We have a saying, “it is to pay back to our
parents the work that they have done for us”. I have been here for 2 years. I would like to go back to the village for the festival next year. My cousin has only gone back once in 3 years. It’s expensive to go back, and you have to buy presents for all your family when you go back.

We get around 15 days leave a year, depending on the demand of the factory. If you want to take any more than that, they say you may as well leave for good. And if you do try to come back, you won’t have the same pay as before. You have to start at the bottom again.

I have gone every day for 2 years, except for when the factory is closed on public holidays. Whenever they offer me work I take it. I also do overtime, but this has dropped this year because the factory is less busy. On days off I do ironing, cooking, I go to pilgrimage, call my family back home, or come to the NGO. We don’t have time for boyfriends - we just have to work. For now it is about supporting our family”

Girls, 16-19, working in garment factory in Mae Sot, Thailand

SPOTLIGHT: THE EVERYDAY VIOLENCE OF MONOTONY

Model factories – those that employ only girls over 18, and make at least some provision for break time and reasonable accommodation – still expect long and tiring days spent at the sewing machine, up to a sanctioned 16 hours a day, 6 days a week, for months at a time. At the unregulated end of the scale, in the bean factories of Myanmar, the noodle factories of China, and the mobile phone factories of Bangkok, lives are violently constrained, monotonous, contained and constricted. Girls report feeling listless, disengaged, disconnected from those around her, and unable to think, laugh or play.

“Sometimes it feels like we can’t breathe properly because there are so many girls in the room, even when you are trying to go to sleep”

Myanmar Girl working in Thai garment factory, 15 years old
Although the violence of everyday life in factories is made benign in its very order and sanitization, made legitimate by the capitalist structures that both need and feed them, the girls we encountered in factories in Myanmar and Thailand deserve better from their lives. As we design strategies that seek to transform fundamentally the lives of girls so that they are filled with genuine choices, we need to imagine for her a world in which exploration and variety are all possible. This means designing services that move beyond purely protectionist strategies that keep her safe from harm, into a more holistic view of capabilities that expand her ability to enjoy leisure, laughter, and play.

“I worked in a tea shop in Yangon for two months. I was 10 years old when I went, my parents put me on the bus from the village and the lady from the tea shop met me off the bus at the other end. It was my first time away from home and my parents just said to me to be good, try to be happy, and do not cry. I worked serving the tables there, giving tea to the customers. The customers sit around, watching sports and things on TV, and we have to ask them what they want, bring things to the table, and then clear the table and wash the glasses and things. It’s only the girls who have been here for longer who are allowed to make the tea – it takes a long time to learn and you get scolded if you do it badly. There were a few other girls who worked there with me, it was an all-girl tea shop. We all wore matching clothes. We slept together in a room at the back, it was very cramped. We just did as the boss told us to do – it was the same every day, and we could never leave. Besides, I wouldn’t know where to go in Yangon, I had never been there before. The lady paid me 60,000 Kyat ($44) which was for my parents. I came back to the village because I wasn’t happy”

Girl, 12, Ywar Lu Village, Myanmar
SPOTLIGHT: CONTROL TRANSFERRED

Girls in industrial or manual labor are significantly controlled by their employers, and fit into tightly defined, often extremely brutal, labor conditions. What’s more they often live in their place of work: highly supervised, 24 hours a day. Jobs like these rely on girls ‘following the rules’, having the right documentation, sticking to very fixed hours, living communally and so on – in contrast, those who, for whatever reason, can’t follow these rules slip out of the system.

These are often considered by communities to be ‘good jobs’ that girls are encouraged to travel for. Indeed, the curtailing of girls’ freedom is precisely the thing that appeals to families back home. As girls hit puberty and parents fear unwanted pre-marriage pregnancy, sending them away to a place of work where physical and psychological control is guaranteed can be very appealing. Even more progressive voices within migrant communities – including those concerned with labor rights in factories – can see the social benefit of keeping girls safe and contained within the factory walls.

The following is an excerpt from a conversation with a Burmese labor-rights organizer in Mae Sot:

INTERVIEWEE: “...things like girls should have more regular breaks, a full lunch hour and also classes in the evening. They also need to have a fair amount of time off so that they can visit home and return to find their same jobs available. Those are some of the things we are working for”

RESEARCHER: “what about regular leisure time during the week and at the weekend? Lots of the girls we’ve met say they only work, sleep and eat except for national holidays”

INTERVIEWEE: “well yes they need time off in their rooms to study and relax with friends. Working for 18hrs a day is bad”

RESEARCHER: “what about time off to leave the factory, go out visiting or shopping, on a regular basis?”

INTERVIEWEE: “well yes but we need to be careful, its still the factory’s responsibility to make sure these girls are behaving properly, not going with boys, being home before the night time”

How do we change this? In the immediate term, it will be important for us to consider how girls in these types of jobs can be given more freedom to think, move, and experiment. And in the longer term, as we start to think about job opportunities for migrant girls, it will be vital that we don’t simply replicate structures of social control.
“People in cities go to villages to find girls to work because they are cheaper than city girls, more naïve so she won’t go out late. She will work harder than a girl from the city. Here in Bouake, there are no cocoa plantations, but kids tend to go to San Pedro or in that region to do seasonal work in the cocoa fields. They go for 6 months and then they come back. The Baoulé [ethnic group] people especially tend to do this the most. They don’t have the chance to work in cocoa here. The best times to go are usually before December that’s the main time, you get a 6 months contract until the end of the year, then go again in April around Easter, and then in September. There’s no formal contract though, the kids agree on a certain sum and they go, but when they’re paid at the end, it’s not what they’re given.

They get the info from other people who have gone already. But cocoa is mainly for boys. Some girls go too, but it’s to gather the cocoa beans at the end, before the crops, so it’s less physical work. They can also carry the ‘fagots’ [pieces of wood] around to help, but it’s a much shorter time period when girls are needed. Girls tend to go normally because a parent or family member asks them to go, but they are more vulnerable than boys on the road, so parents don’t like it too much that their girls go”

_Jekawili NGO, Bouake, Ivory Coast_

“Here in my field I only hire boys. All over 18 years old. In these fields I have a bit of cocoa, but not that much. It used to be coffee, but coffee work is really work, not so good on investment. For cocoa I only hire boys, it’s too difficult work for women, you have to use the machete and everything. But we’re currently trialing a new way of growing banana plantain. You always pair them with cocoa plants because it makes them grow better. With this new method, you have to open the banana plantain seedling, here you see? All these little seeds, you can extract them and use them for new trees. But it’s very tiny, so you have to have very little fingers to do that, so we hire girls in factories not far from here to do it, so they can pick the little seeds. It demands attention to detail, focus, nimbleness so it’s better to have girls”

_Local farmer, Bouake, Ivory Coast_
SPOTLIGHT: BETTER CONDITIONS WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Working in the brick kilns in Nepal, the cacao plantations of Ivory Coast, or rice paddies of Myanmar is extremely tiring, due to the extremely punishing, physical nature of the work itself. These tend to be industries where there is a significant child labor problem, and as such attract closer attention from international organizations. Much of this is of course welcome, and will be a vital part of programming to reduce harm for adolescent girl migrants.

But in addition to this, we should acknowledge the unintended side-effect whereby children, and particularly girls, working in these industries may be ‘hidden’, as their employers attempt to mask the use of child workers. We saw this first hand visiting a cacao plantation in Ivory Coast, where the manager denied any use of child labor, whilst we simultaneously heard stories about girls engaging in a range of paid tasks (often the most dangerous) just out of sight.

In the long run, the job to be done is of course to help girls access and imagine broader job opportunities. And yet, in the here and now, helping girls advocate for working rights and better conditions is key. The African Movement of Working Children and Youth, our strategic project partner in Ivory Coast, are already doing innovative work coordinating children to speak up for rights themselves. Building on this to acknowledge the particular dangers faced by girls may be a fruitful route forward for practitioners looking to support girls who are often hidden within these industries.
BELOW THE SURFACE: FORCED TO SELL OBJECTS, HER PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL AND SEXUAL BODY

Contrasting with those in single, fixed, employment types, we met many girls forced to work much more fluidly – possibly in a number of ways simultaneously – often hidden from view, below the tip of the economic iceberg. These are the traditionally female types of labor that go unacknowledged and uncounted by the system (indeed, as Marie Mies famously put it “if capitalism were actually to remunerate reproductive housework, the system would collapse”).

These types of work include girls living with a domestic employer working all hours of the day, and sometimes forced out onto the street to earn more; girls in commercial sexual exploitation (CSE); and married migrant girls.

Marriage in particular is one of the most ‘hidden’ daily realities migrant girls face. Girls who migrate for marriage are often extremely isolated: beyond the difficulties that afflict married women and girls all over the developing world, their isolation is compounded by the lack of social networks, unfamiliarity with local customs, or even language.

More broadly, girls in these fluid labor situations lack the (albeit brutal) simplicity of living in their place of work that we saw in some of the more structured employment types. The fundamental need for shelter forces girls to seek alliances with a whole cast of characters – including proxy parents, sexual partners, madams, pimps and so on – all of whom are likely to exert significant power over girls’ lives.

Another, insidious, ‘below the surface’ situation girls encounter is unpaid training. With opportunities for girls so constrained, it might seem logical that NGOs and the world of development more broadly are making the case for more training opportunities for girls, with the aim of helping them secure more sustainable, better quality, better paid jobs. In theory, this is to be encouraged. And yet the practical reality of many of the training opportunities we saw simply doesn’t live up to this ideal. At their worst, these initiatives themselves become a form of economic exploitation.
“In Singapore she thought she would be a nanny and domestic help, but when she arrived she was taken to her employer and realised that she was the only cleaner for a three-story building. She didn’t have enough to eat – they would hardly give her any food and she slept in a tiny room in the building. She said sometimes they just fed her dog food. They didn’t pay her anything for the first seven months because they said that she had to pay off her travel costs. The working conditions were awful, but there wasn’t anyone she could go to for help and she didn’t have a phone to call her family.

There was a woman from Myanmar who lived nearby, and walked past the building often. She saw my niece starving and looking very unwell and spoke to her when she saw that she was alone. My niece had kept a piece of paper with the phone number of her parents, and the women called them for her and explained her situation. Her parents contacted the broker who had taken her – she said that my niece was just complaining, that she was lucky she had good work in Singapore, and there was nothing she could do to bring her back. When they tried to track down the employment agency they couldn’t find any record of it.”

NGO worker for safe migration telling story about her niece who was eventually rescued through combined effort of the NGO, ILO & Anti-Trafficking Task Force, Taunggyi, Myanmar

“It’s very hard working at the dance bar. In the worse case scenario, you feel really bad, and you regret your decision to go. You may want to call your parents, but the owner doesn’t allow you to. You might get tips from customers, but it won’t be enough to save up for a phone. The salary should be 10,000 but you probably only get 2,000. You work 7 days a week, even when you are unwell you have to work. You have backache, leg aches and headaches. I have never heard of any girls going home to visit their parents. 13 is too young to have a boyfriend, but maybe in 2 or 3 years we will. I have never heard of any girls running away.

Sometimes they give you medication to make your body look older. We get commission on bar tabs, so the more we
drink and smoke with customers, the more money we get. So the work is never ending. You want to stop, you want to go to sleep sometimes but there’s the constant pressure to earn money. You think of your family and think you might as well try to make the most of the situation here. Maybe being here will improve things for them.

Girls leave from here and go to Bombay or Delhi, by people offering more money, better jobs. Would I go? Maybe... It’s got to be better than here.

The good customers are businessmen, government, and police. The bad customers are the taxi drivers. You think you cannot tolerate more than this. This is my limit. You cannot go out, you cannot roam around. You feel like you could even jump from a window.”

Girls 10-13, Kathmandu, Nepal

“I came here from Yangon because I needed urgently to earn money. I had a fight with my husband, he started hitting me, and he threw me out of our house. I heard from a friend that opportunities like this [would not talk about CSE explicitly] existed here for girls like me. It’s really hard work. I hate the irregular hours and the clients can be bad. We get paid 6,000 kyat [just over $4] for an hour of karaoke. But the good thing about it is that I’m living far away from my family so they don’t need to know what I’m doing. That’s the situation for all the girls here – even though we miss our kids so much we’re all happy that this is happening far away from our families. And we’ve got the support of each other which is something at least”

Woman, 23, from Yangon to Taunggyi, Myanmar
“I’d never been to Abidjan, so when my tantine (‘auntie’) brought me here I was initially quite happy even though I was worried about missing my family in the village. She dropped me at the house where she’d found me work. For the first few days it was so nice and the woman treated me like her actual daughter. She didn’t make me work too hard, just do a few things around the house. But then things really changed. She made me go out to sell water every day, when I thought I was going to train to be a dressmaker. It was horrible because she put me under so much pressure to come back every day with all the water sold. If I came back with water unsold my boss accused me of being lazy and not working. And that meant I needed to do things like have sex with men so that they’d pay me for the water. I just can’t believe how different this is from what I imagined. I could only talk to my father on the phone in front of her because I don’t have a phone, so I had to pretend everything was ok.

I got so desperate. One day when I was dropping the daughter of my boss at school I blurted out everything to her teacher. She said she’d help. But then she called the house and spoke to the lady I live with who said to her everything was fine. She was so angry with me for telling. The only option I had was to escape.”

*Girl, 17, from northern village to Abidjan, Ivory Coast*

“I was 15 when my husband, who is also originally from Burkina Faso like me, came to my village to take me back to Ivory Coast as his wife. We came here on the bus. It was a long journey, and we had a few stops, but I was with him so the trip was really fine, nothing much happened, I felt safe. He paid for everything, I think his family also had given him some money to help paying for our two tickets.

When we first arrived in Aboisso, I lived with his family and spent all my time inside. I think for about one year I must have stayed with his family without any outside contact, apart from my husband when he was coming back. His family kept
saying it was better for me, I shouldn’t worry, I was not speaking the language anyway, I should be happy with staying home. But I was so bored, and so lonely I couldn’t talk to anyone. I like my husband but he was not there much because he was out working, sometimes at the hevea fields, sometimes in town.

After one year I plucked up the courage to ask if I could go out and find a job. Now I work in this restaurant. The owner knows the family of my husband. So I come here early and leave after the last service. When I arrive I clean then I help my boss with some of the cooking, then waiting tables for most of the day and same thing at night. It is lonely. All the girls from Burkina I knew here have now gone to Abidjan, that’s often how it is, you don’t stay in Aboisso. In Abidjan there are more opportunities. I sometimes chat to some Togolese girls because it’s easier to understand each other, when we’re all walking home at the same time, but we’re not that close.

If I had enough money, I would love to travel home to see my family, just once. It’s a lot of money, but it’s been 7 years and I really miss them.”

*Girl, 15, originally from Burkina Faso, Aboisso, Comoe district, Ivory Coast*

**SPOTLIGHT: ISOLATION**

Whilst not impacting upon all girls, many will find themselves all alone on arrival, with zero or limited knowledge of their destination, limited informational assets to help them navigate it, and sometimes without the local language. This represents a profound form of psychological violence. In addition to this, their isolation may incorporate physical violence too: we heard a disturbingly large number of stories particularly from girls who migrated for marriage or into domestic work about being detained in the house by their new husband or employer family.

This state of isolation often leaves girls with nowhere to turn in times of trouble – forced to seek help from the only person she might encounter, randomly, outside the home, when things get truly desperate (e.g. a sympathetic teacher of a child they are caring for) because they literally have nowhere else to go. Even if they genuinely wish to help, migration ‘bystanders’ in receiver communities are often ill aware of the reality of life for migrant
girls, and if they are, have few reasonable ways of finding her support.

Of course, many girls do have wider peer networks, but the extent of their contact with other girls is to some extent self-perpetuating: girls in cities with good social networks help these multiply by e.g. setting up Facebook groups to locate other girls they know; girls who are totally isolated fear going out and attempting to meet people because of the uncertainty wrought by isolation.

So what? Girls need allies, but these can be tricky to access in a context where her working reality often leaves her profoundly isolated. Helping to coordinate girls will be critical in a context where structural violence often cleaves them apart.

“Where I lived near Lagos, there was this man my friend knew who kept telling us about the life in Ivory Coast, how people were more at ease here, how he knew people who could hire us in Abidjan. I went to school until I was 12 and he said I could find a job and start a business easily here, better than in Nigeria... I have a baby there, she stayed with my mother but I wanted to send them money too.

He showed me pictures of the shop where I was going to work, so me and my friend we went with him on the bus. We stopped here when we arrived in Ivory Coast, and he said it was only for a while, so he could sort out our jobs in Abidjan. But it’s been months and now he’s asking me and my friend for 1,500,000 CFA to pay him back for our transport from Nigeria...

I don’t have that money and I’m not in touch with my family... No, I don’t want to ask them for the money, because they think I’m in Abidjan working in a fashion shop. I don’t have the money so what can I do? I work in the maquis [bars / brothels] in the goldmine like my friend here, to earn money and pay him back.

I’m going to continue until I have enough money to go home and start my fashion business. I know how much I need, then I’ll go home. It’s difficult though, you’ve got to be careful, work in a group, and be careful because things get stolen in the camp, we all sleep in the tents. But us and the other girls... we don’t really talk. During the day and at night I try to stay close
to my friend, and with some other girls from Nigeria we’ve met here, we tend to hang out during the day, when the men go work at the goldmine.

Some of the other girls came on purpose because it is known you can make more money in the camps here because of the gold mines.

I didn’t know it was going to happen like this, it’s a foreign country so it’s different from home, you can’t know for sure what it’s going to be like. But I want to go back home after”

Nigerian girls, 15-19, artisanal (non-official) goldmine near Korhogo, Savanes district, Ivory Coast

“I’ve lived here all my life, I have two hairdressing salons. I hire girls that the IFEF (Institution de Formation et d’Education de La Femme) sends me, and I put them in training in one of my salons. Currently in this one I have 5 girls, and one of them is staying with me at home. I’m her host family. She’s been here 5 years.

I think she got here initially because one of her parents passed away during the crisis and they couldn’t find the other one...There’s been lots of conflicts in this region during the crisis, lots of soldiers and militaries still around today. I’m a charitable woman, it was important to me that she had somewhere to go, so of course I said yes when the IFEF asked me if I could take her home with me. Now she works with me at the salon with the other girls, I train her.

Sometimes we argue though, I don’t want her to drag around the streets in the evenings, I don’t want her to chase boys. The problem is, I know she had had sex when she was little, even before her first period, before she came to stay with me. Once they know it it’s harder to prevent them. That’s why many host families don’t want girls to stay with them, if they become pregnant... I mean I have daughters of my own, so I can’t care for everybody!
The thing is they have to pay for the training, and most of the time the IFEF or their families pay me – sometimes late though, but what can I do, I can’t put them out on the streets! But some girls they don’t even have money to eat, so they go all day without food! When they work for me I make sure they eat at least one meal a day.

Once we argued a lot because she wanted to be paid for some of the client’s work more than she has. I think I’m fair, I’m giving them back some of the tips, not many bosses do that. I just couldn’t afford it and I told her so. So she ran away. I was so upset and angry at her. I said to her comrades at the shop “good for her, tell her I don’t want her back here for at least two weeks!” That gives them the time to think. At the end, she came back and asked me for my forgiveness, she apologized and said she understood why I had acted the way I did.

I try to talk to them about sex too, give them some advice, make them go to the hospital to take the tests even if they don’t want to. My advice? I tell them not to have sex, even those who already have, to limit the risks. I think it works, one of the girls who were sleeping around a lot she’s not seeing that many men now, she has learnt the boundaries, she even teaches the other girls now!”

Katiola, host woman and hairdresser employer

“I was 15 when I first went to Bangkok. I saw other girls coming back from there, doing well, and I had already left school – so I wanted to go. I knew I could earn more there, because here all we can do is work in the fields. I had also seen pictures of people from the village – dressed nicely, with lighter skin and looking very beautiful. They would show pictures of them with the families they stayed with, and they all looked very happy, with nice places in the background of the photos. But when I arrived it felt very different – you are confined to a compound, or even just inside the house.

My first employer was a Chinese family who lived in Bangkok. They had other house help too, it was a very big fam-
ily. All of the house help were from Myanmar, so we supported each other. That family was good, but I didn’t really realise because that was my first family and I felt a bit homesick, so I came home for 2 months for a festival. After that I felt bad for leaving the family and embarrassed, so when I went back to Bangkok I found another job.

The second family were short-tempered. If you did something wrong they would blame you. They don’t remember scolding you, but for you it sticks in your head and you always remember the harsh words. I’ve been cursed at a lot, but not badly beaten. I have heard stories of really bad beatings, so I feel lucky. I didn’t get any days off and you had to ask permission to rest. They would only let me rest if I had already finished all the work and they were in a good mood. Sometimes, if they were in a really good mood, they would even let me watch some TV. They had children a similar age to me. Otherwise I would just lie in my room and rest. I always locked the door when I was in my room to feel safe. I didn’t always feel happy working and I missed my village a lot. It wasn’t so easy for me to leave that family, even when I said I needed to go home – I had to wait until they found a replacement for me”

Girl, 20, Warsuu Village, Hpa-An Township, Myanmar

**SPOTLIGHT: PROXY PARENTS**

Many girls, especially younger girls within our sample, and particularly those in countries, like Ivory Coast, where the practice of ‘entrusting’ is common, will live with some sort of proxy parent when they migrate. Although some girls integrate into the family, proxy parents often double as employer – with the girl essentially becoming part of the household domestic workforce.

Anecdotally, these proxy parents are some of the people who treat girls the worst, abusing their power and profiting from the sense that they’re ‘helping’ girls, making them work without limit in their homes in return for basic food and shelter. And because these girls are very isolated, they lack the opportunity to seek support from other girls in similar situations.
NGOs are already thinking about working with these host families in contexts where this infrastructure is better developed – for example, in Ivory Coast programmes exist to help proxy parents with food for the entrusted girls living with them, designed to relieve the pressure on both host and hosted. Thinking more expansively – and considering the critical need for shelter that keeps girls locked into many of these relationships – the provision of safe accommodation for migrant girls would be a logical next step.

But to begin with, the inclusion of domestic, inter-familial labor in analysis of migration would help divert much needed resources towards hidden girls.

“I love hairdressing, I want to learn the trade. But it’s difficult. If you have time on the side, you can sell cakes by the road, you can have money to eat, but otherwise it’s very difficult. It’s a problem because I don’t have any money, my dad and my mum are not here, my grandma is sick, so often it’s my colleagues who help me.

Often you might have a project in life, but you don’t know how to do it, you’ve got issues. You can run into someone who wants something from you [sex – unspoken]. Even if you don’t want it, you’ve got a plan in your head, so you can be tempted to do it. I think it’s the same for the girls here and those who come from elsewhere. It happened to me. So, well… When I called him, he asked me how much money I needed. I told him the amount. He told me ‘if you need money, come find me at the hotel’. I told him it is not possible, if you want to help me you have to give me the money. He said I didn’t really want the money. It happens to a lot of girls here.

This stays in my heart, it hurts and I can’t talk to anyone about it. At work, your colleagues are like your sisters. If they can do something for you, if it’s a money problem, they can contribute together, but when there’s no money, there’s no money you can’t force anyone, you’ve got to give up.
If you meet a girl in a bad situation, you can tell her: take care of yourself, come work with us, don’t walk the streets at night. If she wants to talk about it, she will, but if she doesn’t… sometimes there are things you don’t want to talk about to your friend because you think she might tell someone else.

With men, often, if I need money and I don’t know how to do, I’ll go and then I’ll lie, say I don’t feel well. I take the money and go. It works most of the time. But sometimes no, they want you to undress first, they say “you undress and then I give you the money”. If they don’t want to just give you the money, it can be dangerous, if they have the illness it can kill you. We talk a lot about it, illnesses, between ourselves and also at the hospital. And the boss too she talks about it, she talks to us as if we were her daughters, she gives us some advice. They say to go to the hospital.

Last week, there was a man who came around: he was looking for a girl to sell eggs at the market. He told me about it, and I said I understand. But it’s in Bouake, how would I continue with my training? But here, I don’t have money to eat. I think I want to go because if I’m going to move into a house with my friend we need money to pay the rent. It’s always about the money.

There are so many hairdressers here in Katiola so when I know my craft, my idea is to go to Bouake. But to be a hairdresser, not to sell eggs. It works well there, the city is bigger, there are more opportunities”

Girl, 16, from Grand-Bassam to Katiola, Ivory Coast

SPOTLIGHT: PROGRAMMING AROUND TRAINING

In Ivory Coast particularly, “formation” (training) has become the gospel solution for young migrant girls. And yet, as we witnessed vividly, time and time again, girls are losing out here. Firstly, the training is unpaid, in fact she needs to pay to do it. As such, she will need to find a host family to provide her shelter for the duration. The host will often expect the same kinds of duties undertaken by domestic workers – in effect therefore she’s work-
ing two jobs. But that still leaves her with no or little money for food and
clothes. The result of this? As we see, CSE can often appear to be the only
option.

As for the training itself, it is long (often many years) and more like a
job than education – providing free labor for the employer. It is available for
girls in a very small range of careers (cooking / hairdressing / dressmaking) –
these are available to boys too, but skills like mechanics and electronics are
deemed male only. As such, the over-supply of girls trained in these areas
results in little guarantee of any kind of relevant position once the course
has ended.

As such, this posited route to betterment for girls is really just another
form of social control, and often a direct pathway to CSE.

Some NGOs are trying to improve the situation for girls in training –
helping them with stipends for food for example. The intention behind this
– improving girls’ lives from day to day, helping with the basics so they’re not
forced to sell their bodies – is to be applauded. And yet, without acknowl-
edging just how much girls are losing out from the current training structure,
this is ultimately tinkering around the edges of a system that remains deeply
structurally oppressive. A critical first step for practitioners is therefore to ac-
knowledge the control implicit in training and think more imaginatively about
more useful and less exploitative options that will truly expand girls’ choices.

“I do this on the side, my full time job is real estate. Usually, the
girls have heard of me before they come to Abidjan. Most girls
who come from further away than Abidjan are Baoule or Agni
girls [from Bouake or Bondoukou]. Youngest ones are 15 years
old. It’s either the little sister of another girl I’ve placed in a house,
or just someone she knew from the village, who pass on the
contact of the agent. So when they arrive into town, they’re
coming to see a placement agent like me.

There are two categories of girls: those who migrate be-
cause their parents are poor and they want to find a job to send
money to their parents; and those who want to earn money for
savings, so they can start their business after. These ones are
more determined, confident, it’s less easy to trick them.

I can take less than a day to find a place for a new girl. I
try to prioritize those who come from the North so they have
a place to sleep in the evening, or else they sleep on the streets. That’s not safe. Those in Abidjan take more like 2-3 days as they have a place where they can stay in the evenings, either at home with their parents or with family.

The market still hasn’t fully recovered since the crisis, before that I placed more girls. The problem is they don’t have any qualifications these girls, they can’t even use a microwave. So training would be good. I also don’t place many girls in families around the holiday time as they’re more likely to steal. But in general the women don’t ask for qualifications for the girls, only for the nannies, because they’re with their kids, so the women asked they’ve been in school until 3ème (end of secondary school).

I try to stay in touch with the girls – if something goes wrong. Like that time one of the girls called me because the lady had put her suitcase into the shower. I told the woman don’t treat her like that, like an animal. I pulled the girl back into another job after.

I negotiate their salary directly with the woman who is looking for a girl, usually about 50-70 000 CFA a month [80-100 USD, but we’ve heard 15 year old girls talking about 20 000 CFA (about 30 USD) and girls under 14yo 5000 CFA (8 USD)]. But then the employer is free to re-negotiate the salary with the girl if she accepts. My fee is 5000 CFA and the employer pays me directly.

Yes of course it is hard work being a domestic worker. The problem is the employers sometimes they mistreat the girls. But that is because they don’t even know the law, that they could get punished! And the girls they’re often too young, or too isolated to dare say anything. Some of them will run away, but it’s difficult because they don’t know anyone, they might end up sleeping on the street, out, and that’s dangerous. If they know someone, they try to work at the market selling oranges, or water, or cakes for the auntie, either by the road or at the market here. The youngest ones, you see them carrying back for the women who come shopping, in exchange for a few pennies, but these ones are really young, 7-8 years old. Other girls are too scared to tell their employers they want to leave. So when there is a big holiday, like Christmas or the Prophet Day they say they’re going back home for the holiday, and in fact
they never come back to the house. Either they come to me to find another house, or they do the street market thing.”

*Placement agent, Abidjan, Angre neighborhood*

“I was working as a flower-seller for about 6 months. My family didn’t have enough money, so I needed to work. I would stand by the side of the road, selling flowers to passers by. At first business was good, but after a while I couldn’t sell enough flowers to make enough money for my family. My father was a bit unwell, so he couldn’t work that much. And my mother spent most of her time looking after him. So I decided it would be better for me to find another job where I could earn more.

I had heard of girls working in pubs and KTVs [karaoke bars] and that you could earn a lot very quickly - there were some that I passed when I was selling flowers, and I would see the girls there chatting together, looking very beautiful with makeup and dressed nicely.

I spoke to them sometimes and they said I could easily get a job there, I just had to encourage customers to drink and smoke, and I would be paid well. If they ask to sing some karaoke they can pay 6,000 Kyat to have a private room, and that includes one girl going to sing with them. I’m not the best singer, but some girls, the ones who have been here for longer, sing really well and they get more tips. If I could earn a different way, then I would, but I didn’t know what other work I could do”

*Girl, 20, working in a karaoke bar for 2 years in Taunggyi, Myanmar*

**SPOTLIGHT: SHIFTING JOBS**

In light of the limited earning opportunities for migrant girls, which all involve some (and often many) forms of violence, girls may move jobs frequently, often justifying this on the basis that nothing could be worth than what they’ve left behind. As things stand however, rather than reducing violence, this may actually have potential to compound it.
The circumstances that may force a girl to leave jobs are myriad, but with the emphasis on shelter and protection in her new destination, the catalyst for leaving a job is rarely a positive one based on new or improved opportunity. Instead it is more likely to come either from a negative desire to escape danger or an extrinsic force such as factory closure or being fired. Girls may have built up social networks that can help with the finding of a new job, but especially if they’ve been in the more isolated jobs we described these are often lacking.

“If you really don’t like the job and the employer is treating you badly, then you can leave. But you have to tell lies to your employer, and say that you have to go back to the village because someone in your family is sick. Usually they believe you and will let you leave, but only if you have paid off your transport costs and your advance and your contract is up. Then when you leave you have to find work elsewhere, because you still need to earn for your family and if you back to the village early they will be disappointed. If you don’t have any contacts there, then it is very difficult. You have nowhere to go. Especially if you have left a few different employers already, news travels fast – then it can be impossible to find another job. No one will want to take you. And if you don’t have enough money saved you can’t even get home. So then you just have to take whatever job you can get, and the employer could be worse than your last one.”

*Girl, 20, first went to Myitkyinar at 14 for domestic work, Dry Zone, Myanmar*

“When you get to Kathmandu you will probably stay with an auntie first and do domestic work. Sometimes they even let you study while you do the domestic work. For the first few days they will be nice and love you, but then they get annoyed about having you there and treat you badly. They might start to beat you and touch you where they shouldn’t. It might be after some time.

You probably stay for two or three years, and save a little of the money that they give you. But you can’t go back to the
village - you don’t have enough money saved. So you have to find another job in a hotel or bar and rent a room to sleep in. The only job you can get is as a waitress or dishwasher. It’s better to work in a hotel than in a bar. In a bar you have to sit with customers. You get paid more, from tips. We’re not allowed to work there at this age, but you just have to hide if the police come. The rest of your life will be like hell. Many guests come and touch you. I used to work there, for 1 month. I got out because the owner was good and let me go. He said I could see if I liked it and leave if not. I was 12 years old then”

Girl, 15, in Kathmandu for 3 years - now in street-based CSE, Nepal

**SPOTLIGHT: THINKING BEYOND THE FIRST ‘JOB’**

As we think about improving options for migrant girls holistically, it is important to remember the dynamic nature of their earning situation. In this context, helping them shift jobs may be just as important as getting them their first one. This means thinking carefully about the ‘scope’ of programming for migrant girls, and remembering that they may face particular problems in shifting jobs because they are migrants. In other words, our preoccupation shouldn’t only be with newly arrived girls as they seek their first jobs, but for those caught up in the systems of migration for months or indeed years. For any migrant girl, it should never be too late to remake their world.
WHAT THIS MEANS FOR GIRLS

Despite the myth of migration propagated in all the countries we visited, the reality is that for most girls, once the dice have landed and settled, daily survival options are confined to experiences that include actual violence or the threat of violence on multiple levels of several types.

Compared to other stages of the trajectory, the settling experience is much more amorphous, certainly less time bound. As such, thinking about its transformation is a huge job, which intersects with work aimed at improving the life chances of adolescent girls overall.

There is hope though. Even before putting our minds to the huge task of transforming lives and livelihoods for girls – helping them access and imagine more choice – there are things we can learn from girls who have defied their circumstances to carve out a better migration experience.

For girls with some sort of social network, one or two key assets, and the critical thinking skills to navigate a complex and strange new world, migration clearly can be a time of opportunity. In the recommendations section, we’ll look at how these situations, rare currently, can become closer to the norm for migrating adolescent girls.
“Our family had many economic problems and my father was finding it very difficult to educate me for few more years without any promise of a job. My parents said that Kathmandu would be best but Delhi was where I really wanted to be.

Delhi has a very bad reputation, especially for girls from Nepal or the North East who get into wrong jobs very easily once they reach the city. That is why Nepali families are very apprehensive to send their daughters to Delhi or Bombay. In our society, relatives create doubts in people’s minds about girls. They often make stories about girls and like to talk about where they are going or what they are doing. But my mother really supported me. She was the first to resent my leaving the house, but when I explained to her that I will earn and come back, and at least this way my younger sister can study and be educated, she had faith in letting me go.

I was very scared when I came to Delhi. I travelled alone straight from Kathmandu by bus. One of my ‘aunties’ found me a job as a cleaning lady in some people’s house. I have done that work too, considering our economic condition. When I came here, I just knew my auntie from my village. I did not know the work I would be doing or where I would stay. I was taken straight to my employer’s house when I arrived. The work was okay.

One of my relatives connected me with this opportunity so I am very grateful. I don’t have a very exciting life style. I don’t go out much. I just go to my office and come home and sleep and eat food. I save enough money to send home for my sister’s education. My work starts at around 9.30 at night and I come back home at 7 in the morning. In my job now I get to meet more people than before, and I am lucky that I found decent employers, but in Delhi I hear many horror stories of employers who treat girls badly.

But it is worse on the streets. The minute I step out of the house it is such an uncomfortable feeling, and if someone passes a comment like that it upsets me for days to come. They ask us our price and they look at us as if we are naked. Maybe it’s because they know we are not from here, or many Nepali
girls in this area do that kind of work. I just look down and walk. At first I used to be very scared and very angry, I used to cry every day at the way men looked at me and stared at girls. My friends from Delhi say they don’t face such behavior because the people know where they are from. [Laughingly] I even considered creating a community in Delhi to fight against such behavior and I used to discuss it with my friends. Now I have learnt such good Hindi that I can answer back in a rude manner without worrying about the consequences.

I was very excited about coming to Delhi and full of hope as I knew that I would earn for my family and see a different life. I feel happy now, I don’t want to go back because the money is good and I love my job. I feel so independent and good and I have made friends here. But Delhi doesn’t feel like home because of the men, no girl would feel happy in such an environment. But we must be here for work. Work counts”

17 year old working in a call centre in Noida near Delhi, India. Migrated from Manang, Nepal at 16
Return
As we have seen, girls’ migration experiences are complex and multi-faceted, and they rarely have a defined end. For many girls, the process of leaving, journeying and arriving will occur multiple times over the course of her lifetime, each time precipitated by a new roll of the weighted dice.

And even for the girl whose journey has come to an end, there will be another girl who follows in her footsteps. In many families, a baton is passed from one sister to the next – so there is always at least one girl somewhere else, away from home. And, indeed, as girls come and go from town to village and back again, they feed the myth of migration – with the stories they choose to share or keep secret, and with the material goods they display.

For most, the journey home is at least as complicated as the journey back – both practically, but also psychologically, as she attempts to reintegrate into her old life momentarily or for good.

Like with departure, the nature of her return will differ according to how planned and ordered or violent and chaotic the precipitating moment is. In other words, the form of social control she’s been subject to is likely to continue as the migration trajectory completes its circle.

In this way, we once again see the cruelty of the myth of migration for these girls at the margins: the reality that migration may not have changed things at all.

For those whose departure was planned – ‘swept along’ metaphorically and literally in migration flows – their return is likely to be similarly controlled. And those who fled with few assets, are likely to be forced to flee once again.

As we’ve seen, where control over girls is culturally paramount, girls return when they are deemed ready to marry, thus freeing up space for a new, usually younger, girl to make a fresh migration. In this way, the network feeds itself, and the cogs of the machine continue to spin.

In this way, she is primed to go home, and the choices that are available to her when she does are extremely limited – with marriage quickly upon return almost inevitable.
Similarly, those who initially migrated in chaos will likely experience return similarly chaotically. For these girls, ‘returning’ is not part of the plan, because there is no plan. For girls whose lives have been in greater flux – who have not followed a well-trodden path, who may have moved several times already, have found a range of ways to survive, and are viewed by their communities as assets to be disposed of – the propensity to return is much lower.

Most commonly in these cases, if she does go back the catalyst comes in the form of ‘rescue’ by NGOs, or deportation by authorities, and an ensuing process of family reunification, which often includes a combination of police processing, stay in transit homes, counselling and so on. If reunification fails, ‘rescue’ can eventually result in transferal to more permanent shelter homes. What is clear is that her return – whether to her natal home or to some form of liminal space ‘in-between’ – is marked by a profound lack of choices, few accrued assets, and a potential load of trauma.

Below we will examine some of the catalysts that result in a girl’s migration trajectory coming to an end – at least for now.
PRIMED FOR RETURN:
Many girls will return to their village as part of the migratory norm, making reintegration relatively easy. Their migration experience has been defined by control – she has often been socialised with other girls who are part of the same system, creating acceptance of and expectations around what her future will hold.

The catalysts for primed return revolve around the transferral of value extraction – both from one girl to the next, and from the economic to the domestic, particularly embodied by girls returning to marry or care for ageing parents.

But despite the forces that have brought her back home, there is every probability that another catalyst will create a need that sees her migrate again. These catalysts can include: the death of a spouse, marital separation, the need to support a child, familial debt accrued once more, or a husband migrating for work. This highlights the social control she is continually subject to – she is ‘swept along’, and her life is never truly the result of her own choices.

A crucial element of this girl’s return is the way in which she plays a role in restricting choice for other girls. For girls primed to return, it is likely that she will be a key catalyst for other girls to migrate – through verbal encouragement, sharing her experience, creating a job opportunity, or more indirectly by conforming to the norm and supporting the narrative of the inevitability of migration.

More symbolically, this girl comes to embody the myth of the city. She carries these myths back to the village and germinates them further. In doing so, she herself supports, ferments and encourages the latent propensity to migrate.
“I worked in Bangkok as a domestic help for three years. I liked working there and earning money, and I had made some friends. On my days off we would go out to the shops together and spend some of our pocket money. It was nice to have some money to spend, I don’t get that here. But I had to come back to care for my father when he got sick. My mother wasn’t able to do it on her own and look after the rest of the family. So now I spend my days tending to him. I still want to go back to Thailand, but the situation with my father won’t allow. I know it’s more important that I look after him right now.”
Girl, 20, Warsuu Village, Hpa-An Township, Myanmar

“I went to China near the border to work in the noodle factory when I was 16, with other girls from the village. We got back a few weeks ago. I didn’t mind working there, I was with other girls from the village. I met a boy at the factory who was from a nearby village in Myanmar, also in the Dry Zone. When we had free time we would talk with each other, and even when we were working we would see each other and it would make me feel nice. We would see each other most days because we were working in the same section. I got pregnant when I was there, so we have come back to the village to get married. That is what my parents said we should do, so that we can start a family here and follow tradition. He is going to stay in our village with my family and work in the fields. Most girls stop migrating to China when they get married, that’s the main reason why girls from here stop going to China. It just happened a bit more quickly for me because we fell in love.”
17 year old girl from Yone Village, Mandalay Division, Myanmar

“I came to the brick kilns when I was 14 years old because of my family’s economic condition. A group of us from the village all came together. Now I run a hotel here that I set up with my earnings from the brick kiln. I have brought 50-60 labourers
each year from my village. If you can bring more than 5 girls from the village, you are a broker. You get commission for the number of people you bring. For hard working labourers you get more. If you bring lazy workers, or ones who fight, you get less. Girls are less risky to bring – there are many cases of men running away with the advance, and then the broker has to pay the employer back. There are no cases of girls doing this – girls have no place to go, so they are scared of doing anything wrong. But many girls get married, so they don’t come again – you have to find new girls to replace them.

Most of the girls who come are 16 or 17 years old, have left their studies and need money. They decide to come – they aren’t forced. There are also lots of couples and families who come to work here together. The difference is that when girls come with their husbands they know their limits, what they should and shouldn’t do. But unmarried girls, not all – most are simple, but 1 in 10 are ‘flickering’ characters – they want to look beautiful, talk to strangers, and laugh with them. These 1 in 10 girls have given a bad name to all brick kiln workers. If they behave badly, first I give them a chance to improve, but if they don’t change their behaviour, then I scold and slap them. If they don’t improve, I will tell their parents about their behaviour and send them back to the village. Usually their parents will take them back, but first they consult other workers to check if what I’ve said is true. There was one case of a family filing a trafficking case as a girl I brought eloped with a man here to India. The police came and questioned everyone, but the workers defended me and the case was closed.

I reserve a vehicle and go back to the village and spend some time there gathering people. I then bring all of the workers in the vehicle to Kathmandu, and take them back once the work is completed. I pay their travel expenses. As I brought them, they are under my guardianship, so I should keep track of them... they might run away from the middle of the road, especially if they have fallen in love. The workers are like family, as we work together for 6 months a year.

There was a sad story this year – a male labourer brought one girl with him promising her a job. He tried to rape her
along the way. I found out and filed a case against him, but the man ran away. She is working here now. The girls share their problems with me. I am the guardian of all these girls. If a girl has fallen in love with a boy of her choice, she won’t share with me. But if boys are harassing girls, or sexually abusive, they will tell me and I will look for a solution. I will scold him first, and if it doesn’t stop I will take strict actions. We have beaten boys up for this. There was one case of a foreman who went into the girls’ room when they were changing – all the women workers gathered and beat him up until he ran out of the room. We talked to the owner about it and he made him leave. I support all of the girls here. The girls say that since our broker is female we can talk to her, she understands our problems – for example when they are menstruating, I can give them light work. A man would make them work hard still, until they got rashes on their thighs. I personally feel that I should not do wrong. Being bad becomes a habit, but being good will come back to you.”

Female broker working at the brick kilns, outskirts of Kathmandu

**SPOTLIGHT: GRADUATION TO BROKER – THE EXPLOITED BECOMES THE EXPLOITER**

One of the worst damages violence does to girls and women is to enlist them as its accomplices. Instead of anger and rebellion, girls feel guilt and fatalism. A critical moment for migrant girls is deciding whether or not they will tell other girls at home ‘the truths’ of migration; whether they will share both practical facts and personal stories so that other girls can make better, safer, more informed decisions; or whether they are themselves enlisted into the cycle of violence.

In its most extreme form, a significant minority of girls become brokers themselves. Whilst many girls return to the village and encourage migration more subtly, ‘a broker’ can be identified as a girl capitalising on her own experience and extracting value from someone else. The transition often happens gradually, with girls returning periodically and persuading more and more girls to leave with them. Indeed the role of broker can take on varying degrees of explicitness, misinformation, and violence. We heard of girls
recruiting other girls in a wide range of situations, into the more seemingly benign employment of factories, to trafficking into CSE.

This is the most explicit, clear way the migration myth feeds itself and recruits women as its agents. And as with the phenomenon of migration grooming, it will be vital for NGOs to look out for these more hidden, subtle forms of violence if we are to transform the migration experience and break out of the circular flow that makes migration feel inevitable for many girls.

More fundamentally still, work to encourage local and transnational solidarity between migrant girls – in the face of systems that work hard to keep them separate and in competition – will be a critical precursor to a genuinely transformed world for girls.

**VIOLENT RETURN:**
In these cases, desperate circumstances result in a sudden dislocation from her life as migrant girl. In any of these scenarios, reintegration is made challenging both by the likelihood of significant social stigma when she returns, and by an internalised sense of shame and guilt that her quest has been unsuccessful.

We know that girls in a chaotic migration situations often find themselves extremely reliant upon the employer or host providing them with food or shelter. If however, her relatives (or “relatives”) are no longer willing to look after her, as she has not found work; if she falls ill and is no longer to perform in her job; or simply if either of these key figures decide they are bored with her, she has is forced to go. While some girls seek worse and worse forms of work to survive – often forced into destructive situations that are sexually exploitative – other girls are forced to return home.

The stigma attached to ‘returning’ under these circumstances can be significant, and it is greatly intensified when a girl’s family, or even in some cases the whole community, has saved up to enable her to migrate (to pay for her travel, her visa and agency fees, her training etc.) – here there is far greater pressure on her to ‘succeed’.

Indeed, stigma often results in girls either running away again, made more likely when there is little to occupy them at home – and where the cultural fear of female ‘idleness’ can be pronounced. These circumstances can lead to even more risky migration, as she is no longer viewed as worth protecting. And most heartbreakingly, girls often feel that this is the fate that they deserve.
“I was working for a couple in a house in Bassam. Almost as soon as I started, the man started coming on to me and proposing sex, which I didn’t want. I said I’d tell his wife but he said I wouldn’t dare, because he said I’d lied, so they’d fire me without giving me my wages. So after just three months I decided to leave - I was making 15,000 CFA [approx. 24 USD] per month but the final month the boss lady gave me 20,000 so I could pay for transport to go back to Katiola. That was enough money so I knew I had not earned nothing, but he kept trying to force me so I had to leave.

I came by car from Bassam, because the parents of my mum live here [Katiola]. But I didn’t know them, I’d never met them. I called my sister because I had her number – she lives in Abidjan. She said to go to your grandparents, and so I paid the bus driver with the 20,000 CFA that the auntie gave me with my salary when I left the house. I told my sister why I had left the house job, but I didn’t tell my grandparents, we don’t talk of these things, plus I don’t know if they’d have believed me, it’s not easy to talk about these things. I know these things happen a lot, there are some other girls here in town who’ve had similar things happening to them, or worse”

Girl, 16, returning from Bassam to Katiola, Ivory Coast

“I think it was at the end of last year, we heard of that little girl who had been brought to the police. She’d been found by this truck driver, just roaming the streets. Initially he thought she might have gotten lost, she wouldn’t say much, so he kept her home and went to tour some of the mosques in their neighbourhood to see if someone had talked to the imams about losing the girl. After a couple of days and no news he brought her to the police, and then they brough her to us. We learnt she was from Mali originally, from the 4th wife of her father, with 14 brothers and sisters, a poor family.

She said she was stressed her father wanted to marry her off to his friend, a 45 year old man. She refused and came to Ivory Coast by hitchhiking and getting on big trucks and
she managed to cross the border like this. But soon after she couldn’t carry on and she had to get off the truck and that’s when she was found on the streets. Now she’s awaiting at a transit centre here, we’re trying to track down her family in Mali, so that the RAO (Reseau Afrique Ouest) can take her case over and reunite her with her family.

Some girls choose to escape forced marriage like this, but girls are also victims of trafficking: people claim to bring them here for school or job... then the child comes and realises it’s not why she’s here. What protection mechanisms can help her before she moves? What services can be put in place in the host country?”

*Girl, 15, from Mali to Korhogo, as told by AEJT overseeing her return in partnership with RAO*

“We don’t want to stay or do training here, we don’t want to be associated with this NGO because then our family will not accept us. They’d know that we ran away, or were trafficked, so we haven’t told anyone we are here”

*2 girls from eastern Nepal in transit home in Birgunj, intercepted on Nepal/India border*

**SPOTLIGHT: RESCUE AND RETURN**

Similar to the journey, settling is a time of significant NGO activity revolving around ‘returning’ displaced girls, and indeed there are many girls rescued by NGOs each year. Often these are the girls in the direst circumstances, who have been subject to violence throughout their lives, and left to escape difficult family dynamics in the first place. NGOs will attempt to locate the girl’s family and start a process of mediation to establish whether return is an option. If they believe it is, the girl will be sent back to the village. This is perceived to be one of the most efficient options in a resource-constrained context.
And yet, whilst acknowledging this difficult context, it’s clear that the gravity of the reasons for leaving in the first place may not always be recognized by NGOs during the rescue and reunification process. In short, much of the return we encountered was forced, and rarely welcomed by the girl.

Furthermore, families often won’t accept her for the very reason she’s been rescued (e.g. rape, CSE, violence) – particularly if she is perceived to have made a choice to leave in the first place. In this context, choice is synonymous with culpability, and culpability diminishes her chances of reintegration. The focus of NGOs on getting her family to accept her, but not on the broader dynamics she’s returning to, can be extremely damaging.

We should also be aware of an additional layer of stigma simply attached to being rescued by an NGO – particularly those with a well-known focus on anti-trafficking activity – due to perceptions that the girl must have been ‘spoilt’ or made ‘impure’ if an anti-trafficking NGO is interested in her wellbeing.

If rescue and reintegration are not handled extremely carefully, with the necessary care and support provided to each girl, it may result in the girl running away, either from her family, or as in some cases we heard, from the NGO itself. Her psychological state, compounded by a total lack of tangible assets to support her survival, creates extreme vulnerability and sometimes a direct pathway (back) into CSE.

“It was very hard for me because I was the eldest. My mother used to go away for a long time. I don’t know where she went. It was for a year or 6 months at a time. When she came back she would beat us. Out father looked after us. Mother used to drink and fight, and then leave. Whenever she came back it was very scary. I left school at class 6, when I was 13, to look after my siblings because she wasn’t able to. My mother always said it was my fault she left. She told my father I was a bad influence. So they arranged for me to go to Kathmandu when I was 16 and stay with relatives. I worked in a garment factory there for 6 months and they treated me well.

I heard from my father that my mother had gone to Kuwait for domestic work for one year, so I went back to the village. My father had met another woman, my stepmother. She did not like us, so she would beat us and she didn’t allow my siblings to go to school. My stepmother got pregnant and her and
my father went to live separately. Then my mother came back from Kuwait and she came back to our house. My stepmother found out she was back and she left with her baby, so my father moved back in with us. It was going well for a few months, but my mother started drinking again and fought with us. All she wanted to do was keep drinking, but we were running out of money. I found out after that she borrowed money from a man in the village in exchange for promising him me. I knew him from the village so I trusted him – he had a wife and children. He said to me “let’s go to a town to repair my phone”.

I went with him, not knowing anything. But the bus didn’t stop at the town – it went straight to Kathmandu. We stayed in a hotel for a night. He said “stay here in Kathmandu and work, I will find a job for you, I have a contact”. I tried to get a job at the garment factory, but they didn’t have any openings. I didn’t want to go home because I had argued with my parents. The man sold my gold earrings and rented a room with the money. We stayed there for four days, and that’s where he raped me. Then he ran away back to the village and left me there.

I went back to my village, but everyone pointed at me and said bad things, because I had gone away with a man. I spent three days at home and then I found out that my mother had got money from him for me. So I came here to the home. I had taken training a few years ago with the Women’s Development Office, so that’s how I knew about this place.

My mother filed a trafficking case against the man. I could stay here at the transit home while the case was going on, but they didn’t have any evidence of trafficking against him. He paid bail and the village all say he is innocent. They blame me for taking him away from his family. He is back in the village now. The case is closed, so I will have to leave here – you can only stay for up to 6 months while the case is going on. My family and the village don’t want me to come back, so they are coming to collect me tomorrow and sending me abroad to work. I don’t know where, maybe to Kuwait. I don’t know what to look out for. I don’t know what it will be like. But my family doesn’t want me in Nepal, so if they decide I should go, then I will go.”

18 year-old, in transit home for 5 months, Sindhupalchowk, Nepal
“Here at the centre, children are supposed to stay no longer than three months, ideally only one month, then they have to be moved, either in a host family, or if their parents or family have been found, returned to their families. But the truth is some kids have been here for 2 years now, because their families haven’t been found. It’s difficult because children love it here almost too much! What more do you want, there are no parents and a fixed schedule and meals. So they don’t want to go back, sometimes they don’t always help us with identifying their parents. Kids who end up here have often run away from their home, especially from conflicts with parents, if one of the parent has remarried for instance.

Her, her name is Mimi, she’s around 14 we think, she’s been here for 3 weeks but so far the associations haven’t managed to identify her family. Initially the centre was only meant for boys and we had a few beds for those staying, but now we have so many more kids and obviously girls too but we don’t have the capacity for a separate dormitory, nor for mattresses, so all the kids sleep here, on the wooden beds”

Primary school teacher, working at Bouake Raoul Follerau transit center, Ivory Coast

“I came to Kathmandu when I was 11 years old. I worked in a dance bar as a cleaner. They gave us a shared room for three of us that was a 25 minute walk away. They would try to make me do other things, but I would cry and run away to the toilet and lock myself in. The older girls were all involved in sexual entertainment. At first they don’t want to go, but then they get used to it. And they do it for the money. I was there for 3 years. I had some contact with my mother, and she said she would pick me up, but she never came. After 3 months there, they paid me between 500 and 1000 Rupees [$9] every 3 months, and I got the room and food. They didn’t give any medicine – so I used that money mainly to buy things for stomach ache, back relief gel, and sanitary pads.

Raksha staff saw me walking to work every day, so that’s how they found me and got me out. Menuka walked in and took
157
me out of that place. I have a new life here. Life here with Raksha is better than life in the village. I get the love that I never got from my family, and we have services that you could never have access to in the village. Also we have freedom. Because of our economic condition in the village, I couldn’t do anything I wanted to do. Here there are facilities, transport, education, opportunities – it’s much better in Kathmandu if you are in good hands. I also do yoga and Taekwondo here - one of the girls went to Korea and won a gold medal for Nepal! I want to become a dentist when I’m older to help people. My friend wants to become a lawyer to fight cases for girls like us, and then a judge”

17 year old girl in Kathmandu for 6 years, living at Raksha Nepal for 3 years

SPOTLIGHT: SUPPORTING SURVIVORS

The first stage of attempts to reintegrate rescued girls is often a stay in a transit home or shelter. These homes act as holding-houses for ‘damaged’ girls, helping to find families and arrange for her return, offering some level of psychological support, and sometimes fighting legal cases against traffickers.

Whilst the level of care received by girls in different transit homes varies greatly depending on convening organisation, geography and other external factors, family reunification remained the end goal in the overwhelming majority of cases – even when we heard from many girls that they had little desire to return home, and would likely leave again. Worryingly, numbers of girls ‘returned’, and speed at which handover to parents takes place, is often the primary success factor used by funders of these kinds of shelters – rather than a holistic look at girls’ outcomes post-intervention.

For girls who are seen as unable to be reintegrated with their families and communities, there are some (albeit very few) more permanent shelter homes. These girls are often those who left in the most desperate of situations, with the fewest assets, and written off by family.

For the ‘luckiest’ girls – like those supported by the Nepali NGO we met at the every beginning of this report – these shelter homes have the potential to genuinely support healing and a new kind of life. The ingredients? Love, care, connection, psychosocial support, safety, friendship, food, healthcare, the chance to be a child again... in other words, a home.
With organisations like Raksha all too often representing exceptions to the norm, it is critical that we expand these kinds of holistic support services for girls across their trajectories if we are to genuinely create potential for transformation.

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR GIRLS**
The “return” phase of the trajectory ostensibly signals a return to family, safety, and security. However, the reality is that social control continues to act upon girls, and sadly but all too often relatively little has really changed in the time between going and returning.

As we have seen, planned return is socially normative, and at its root represents a continuation of structural, cultural violence, where her life is pre-ordered and pre-planned by those around her, the outcome a life with few choice outside marriage, motherhood, and the domestic sphere. On the other hand, unplanned return consists of direct personal violence against her, sometimes even when under the guise of protection by NGOs or other civic authorities. The experience of violent dislocation from one, often deeply damaging life, and reinsertion into another, compounded by the burden of social stigma, makes the potential for any kind of positive future very difficult.

However, we did meet girls who were consciously pushing back against expectations and norms. For example, there were girls who had decided to make a life for themselves in their place of destination, setting up a small business and marrying someone outside of their caste or nationality. There were girls who had turned their lives around despite all odds. And most critically, there were some girls who had used their experience to turn the myth of migration on its head – returning to their village to share reliable information about the experience and educate other girls in order to empower them to make informed decisions about their own future.

“When I left for the first time I felt like I didn’t have much choice, my mum died and there was a new stepmum who brought in her old children, she hated me and my brothers.

I was 12.

My stepmum told me I’d be going to stay with a friend of her family but I didn’t know this woman. I
had just a few hours of warning and then we were in the car to Korhogo. I didn’t know what was happening.

I lived in the lady’s house for 3 years. At first it was so hard. I had to work all the time and I didn’t know how to use the machines. I cried all the time. I saw her children going to school and I begged her to let me go but I was not allowed. Sometimes it was too much to bear. They ask you to do so much.

One day another family member came to see how I was doing, I think maybe my father thought they should check I was ok. She saw how difficult things were for me and said I could come and live with her. I still had to do the household tasks but she was kinder and gave me some time to rest. She encouraged me to continue my studies too. So I enrolled in the IFEF [Institution de La Formation et L’Education de la Femmes – continued education for girls] and started with literacy. Then I moved on to dressmaking which is what I really want to do. That’s where I met some girls who were from similar situations to me – also from villages. Now I spend time with them when I’m not working or studying, even though I don’t have very much time.

I think I will stay here now. I don’t know where else I can go. I feel lucky in a way. I see how hard life is for girls here. Sometimes I go to the local branch of ANAED (local NGO) and speak to the girls there. I’d love to start dressmaking classes for them so they can have some of the opportunities that I have.”

Girl, 17, Korhogo, Ivory Coast

In these instances, a girl’s self-worth has been rebuilt, and often for the first time in their lives they are able to imagine a future full of possibilities beyond marriage. What was consistent amongst these girls is that they had a strong support network, often other girls and women who they had met through a support service. Understanding how girls can become role models for other girls, rather than accomplices of violence, is a critical space for potential intervention. In the final section, we will explore how to foster such moments of solidarity and connection.
Recommendations
IN SUMMARY
With girls’ voices so systematically silenced, this analysis has very deliber-ately set out to build a picture of the critical, most violent elements of the migration experience – so that they may be transformed. To do this, we drew on girls’ stories to spotlight a range of key areas that we believe are particularly ripe for intervention.

To create genuine change, we believe the task is twofold:

1) MAKING GIRLS’ MIGRATION IN ITS CURRENT FORM SAFER:
Firstly, in exposing the multiple violences girls face, it has become clear just how much needs to be done to make the migration experience as it stands safer, right now. To do this, we need to think about the practical, tactical ways we can reach migrant girls.

2) COUNTERING BROADER SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL CULTURES OF CONTROL:
Our exploration has also shown us just how much girls’ choices are structurally, culturally and economically constrained. Even if we could make migration as it stands less immediately, existentially violent for girls, this wouldn’t change the damaging culture in which it’s experienced.

As we’ve seen, cultural norms of control affect the choices girls are offered: a highly limited range of livelihood options if she stays at home, and a heavily gendered suite of badly paid, limiting ways of eking out a living if she goes.

At the same time, norms also limit the choices a girl can envisage for herself, creating not just ambivalence but fatalism about lives of violence and oppression, and particularly a belief that the only possibility of a posi-tive future lies outside the village.

As such, as we begin the long journey towards undermining this culture, we also offer up a set of recommendations that more broadly seek to increase the choices girls can access and imagine across the trajectory.
The vast majority of our spotlights highlight the need to make the current migration experience safer. This is unsurprising given that they derive directly from girls’ stories themselves. In a context where their survival is never guaranteed, this is naturally the priority.

WHEN: LOCATING INTERVENTIONS IN KEY MOMENTS
A key first step is to really get to grips with the migration trajectory, understanding WHEN – temporally and from their own perspective – girls are experiencing migration. This could include, for example, the precise catalytic moment before departure, or the importance of the first 36 hours on arrival. Of course, by virtue of being young, poor and female she will never truly be free from danger, but there are some points within the migration experience where violence against her is at its most severe and it is at these points that we should be directing our attention. On this basis, two key recommendations for practitioners emerge:

MORE HOLISTIC SUPPORT ACROSS THE TRAJECTORY
As we’ve seen, girls’ departure often sets the tone for the whole migration experience – as such, from the girl’s perspective, the stages of the trajectory are intrinsically linked. And yet, current programming struggles to look beyond individual trajectory stages. Of course this relates to some extent to the scope and resources of NGOs. Many may struggle to imagine how they might programme across space and time, when migration is in reality so expansive, even boundless. And yet, there are small practical steps that the field might take towards a more fluid model that can begin to provide girls with a greater sense of stability, security and support across the overall trajectory, and thus her lifecycle. These include:
BETTER COORDINATION AMONGST NGOS: from the field we heard that few NGOs working at different stages of the trajectory are communicating with each other, but when they do, for example to pass on information about a girl who is travelling to a particular area, the results can be powerful. Putting in place networks of programmers working with girls across the trajectory – for example linking village programmes to interventions in the city, or accommodation on arrival to employment services – will be a vital first step. The idea of grassroots co-ordination between service providers is certainly not new. Funding or otherwise supporting the development and maintenance of networks for girls’ migration therefore should feel like an achievable first step in programing more holistically.

LISTENING TO GIRLS: there is clearly much to be done to understand exactly what girls need at different moments of the migration experience. This feels particularly stark in the context of NGO interceptions, which can often feel incredibly unhelpful to girls when they do appear. Supporting girls – through e.g. safe spaces and community forums at migration destinations – to share their experiences and advocate for what they need will be an important step in ensuring that resource- and time-constrained NGOs are focusing their energies on the right moments, with the right services.

HOLISTIC INFORMATION PROVISION: providing information at home which relates not just to the next stage of the trajectory – the journey – but beyond too, feels really critical in helping girls understand the trajectory more holistically and make more informed choices. Peer-learning initiatives could be particularly helpful here (more on which later).

PROGRAMMING AGAINST PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE
Experiences of daily violence at home, and migration more broadly, are intimately linked. And yet, organizations working with migrating girls, and those working with victims of violence, are often working in silo. We call on practitioners to consider these two forces more holistically. In practice, we think this means the following:

TACKLING VIOLENCE AT HOME TO REDUCE UNSAFE MIGRATION: reducing violence at home may decrease the incidence of girls in ‘escape mode’, who often end up migrating most unsafely. There are already a number of brilliant organizations working across regions to reduce violence
against girls, and we believe this can and should be recognized as part of more holistic migration programming. What’s more, on a very practical level, we believe that some of the most unsafe migration experiences could be lessened by helping girls and communities with strategies to reduce and respond to violence that expand the options for recourse and resolution beyond running away.

APPLYING GBV EXPERTISE TO GIRLS ON THE MOVE: it’s clear that some girls facing violence at home will continue to see running away as their only option. And as we’ve seen, the trauma they leave with, and their lack of assets and allies, means they are likely to face violence again during their migration experience. With this in mind, we believe there is value in encouraging or supporting those currently working to reduce violence faced by girls (the GBV sector) to engage with what we hope will become a burgeoning field focused on adolescent girls’ migration.

WHERE: LOCATING INTERVENTIONS IN REAL PLACES
In exploring the reality of girls’ migration experiences, it has become clear that girls are hidden: the forgotten players in regional migration landscapes that are already, for everyone, crowded, chaotic and confusing. As such, understanding WHERE girls are situated is a vital pre-cursor to reaching them. In building recommendations around place we draw on a number of key spotlights to make two key recommendations:

REACHING MIGRANT GIRLS AT SCALE
Key here is to think about where girls are actually – not merely theoretically – situated in order to meaningfully reach them. This might seem obvious, but there is a shocking lack of place-based programmes for girls – with many organizations falling back on broad brush ‘sensitization’ or ‘rights-based advocacy’ training that does little to support girls to access the tactical, practical and tangible services they need to survive.

In particular, borders and transit stops on the journey, or brick kilns and brothels on arrival, would be fruitful places to situate services. Although some organizations are already beginning to work in this way, we would encourage more of this sort of work. More specifically, thinking about safe spaces, transit and shelter homes across the trajectory, including
on the journey, could be a really vital way of addressing girls’ most immediate needs and blocking pathways to commercial sexual exploitation.

These are of course high touch, high investment projects, and as such, understanding where they can most usefully be situated is a crucial first step in ensuring the effectiveness of programmatic activity.

COUNTING ALL MIGRANT GIRLS

The migration trajectory is somewhat amorphous and confusing, and all the more so because girls experiencing it are often hidden. They may travel in a car with a relative, work inside a home, and hence never show up in the places discussed above. This obviously presents a significant challenge, and the field will need to galvanize if it’s to really ensure it is helping all migrant girls. We certainly don’t claim to have all the answers, but can offer a couple of thought starters to stimulate thinking at this stage:

GETTING GRANULAR ON COUNTING GIRLS: whilst still in development, there are some promising mapping tools being used literally to count girls and map their relation to assets within the Global South – for example the Sierra Leone Girls’ Roster. This is work intensive and means empowering programmers, and indeed ideally girls themselves, to take responsibility for locating all the vulnerable girls in communities. The complexity is of course then compounded by the dynamic nature of migration. Having said this, there could be some value in focusing on this kind of mapping at the ‘home’ stage. In conjunction with some of the suggestions above, around more holistic programming, this information could then be cascaded across the trajectory.

PROVIDING CHECK-IN SPOTS FOR ‘HIDDEN’ GIRLS: whilst as much as possible practitioners need to focus on getting to girls, for these more hidden girls we should also consider allowing them to access more public places for support. We’ve seen that desperate isolated girls look anywhere they can for support, and in the immediate term we need to think about providing more of these places. These should bear in mind where hidden girls may be likely to spend their limited time outside the home e.g. religious spaces or markets; thinking about creating safe spaces or migration hubs within these for girls could be a good place to start.
WHO: UNDERSTANDING THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE THE POWER TO MAKE OR BREAK HER EXPERIENCE

There exists a broad cast of characters WHO are responsible, proximately, at a personal level, for the violence that girls face. Some of these are more obvious – abusive husbands, violent traffickers, and so on – and some more surprising, with this latter category even include well-meaning NGOs. Picking apart the web of people who have a stake in girls’ experience – helping her to both spot them and respond to them - will be critical to effect long term change. Across our spotlights, two key recommendations thus emerge:

SUPPORTING GIRLS TO SPOT PREDATORS

Whilst our ambition in the longer term is a peaceful migration landscape for girls, in the immediate term, people seeking to exploit her will continue to exist across the migration trajectory. As such, girls need help recognizing and negotiating with predators. Of course, some of this depends on increasing assets to girls directly to rebalance the power dynamics in these negotiations – we’ll discuss this in the next section. But there remain a series of steps practitioners might consider in order to help girls with these interactions:

MORE, BETTER QUALITY, INFORMATION ABOUT THE PEOPLE THEY’LL ENCOUNTER: girls need help identifying the brokers, traffickers, pimps, proxy parents and so on she will inevitably meet at some point on her travels. Much of the infrastructure needed to share this information already exists – the key will be re-examining the curriculum for village-based trainings, to ensure they are grounded in real life, fact-based, holistic information. In this context, inviting returnee girls to share their experiences feels like a ‘no-brainer’.

LISTENING TO GIRLS (AGAIN!): sadly, some NGOs take on the role as predator in girls’ eyes, because they are seen to intervene at the wrong time, in the wrong places, with the wrong services. In particular, those engaged in ‘interceptions’ and ‘returns’ appear particularly dangerous to the migrant girl as she desperately attempts to complete her journey. Although unintentional, these services can serve to push her further into the hands of predators who promise to support her to do this. Resolving this dissonance is everyone’s responsibility – certainly, it calls for individual
NGOs to set up mechanisms that allow girls’ hopes, fears and desires to be meaningfully integrated into programming. But more broadly, funders need to think carefully about the ways in which they measure progress. While the numbers of girls returned continues to be a marker of a successful project, such destructive behaviour will continue.

AMPLIFYING ALLIES

One of the best ways for girls to speak power to power, is through the peers and allies that will ultimately provide the support they need to resist. Part of this is about harnessing existing empathy and networks of solidarity – connecting girls with other girls – but we also think there may be unexpected, surprising potential allies waiting in the wings too.

CONNECTING GIRLS: girls are natural allies of each other, but both logistically – through living and working apart – and culturally – through e.g. the competition to earn money – they are often driven apart. And yet, we heard promising stories about girls using social media to find each other in migration destinations; and girls and women going out of their way to help others they saw in violent situations. How to amplify these positive shoots? The field needs to think about means of connecting girls to each other across the migration trajectory. This could be via social media, as we’ve seen working successfully in some places, or it could be more physical – for example the safe spaces or migrant hubs that we discussed in the context of hidden girls. A critical part of this is working with girls who have already migrated to try and turn them away from the pathway to broker. In some places in the world girls are paid to take on an official job as a community role model / girl ally; we might consider doing that here, so that – at least in the immediate term – we can compete with the financial and cultural allure of exploiting other girls.

TURNING BYSTANDERS INTO ALLIES: beyond girls’ more obvious allies, we believe there exists a broader category of bystander primed to help and support girls on the migration trajectory. This might be the older traveller who stays close to young girls on the bus to provide some immediate protection, or the kind employer who takes on another worker he may not be able to afford so she has somewhere to sleep. As the “feminization of migration” continues apace, we think it’s time to start an honest conversation within societies about the vulnerability of migrant girls, and rally for support.
There is precedent in culture, across regions, for successfully gathering momentum behind support of particular vulnerable groups: could be done for young migrant girls?

**WITH WHAT: UNDERSTANDING THE TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE ASSETS SHE NEEDS TO SURVIVE**

In a profoundly unjust, unequal world, poor girls are structurally distanced from assets. In a world of finite funding for girls, it’s critical that we get really sharp on the minimum viable pack of resources she needs to make her migration safer in order to mitigate violence and risk:

**PORTABLE TANGIBLE ASSETS**

When thinking about the assets girls need for migration, in a context where – as we’ve said – they need so much, it’s helpful to think about the portability of assets, that is to say those that have use across the migration trajectory, and that are difficult to take away from her. We’ve already spotlighted how some key assets may or may not provide protection (or worse may invite risk) depending on how they’re used; taking this a step further we can think about the elements of greatest utility to girls within these assets, that might be thought of as the “non-negotiables” when setting out on their journeys.

**PHONES AND COMMUNICATION:** whilst phones can be used for good (contacting other girls, relatives, NGOs), they can also be used for bad (as a way of grooming girls). Rather than necessarily thinking about providing girls with phones, it may be more useful, and lower cost, to share knowledge on the importance of contacts and allies. NGOs working with girls at home (of which there are several) might consider ensuring that every girl leaves home with at least, say, 3 phone numbers in her head – one of someone back home, one of a person / shelter in transit, and one of someone at her destination.

**DOCUMENTS:** this area is extremely complex. In short, as we’ve seen and heard, many girls do not officially have the documents (ID cards and passports) that make migration legal, and therefore potentially safer. Girls need these documents, but getting them isn’t always easy – in Ivory Coast par-
particularly, where national identity has been so central to conflict, getting an ID card can be tough if not impossible for anyone, not least for vulnerable girls. So what for the immediate term? Thinking about less formal means of identification – like the letters of reference we saw village leaders providing in Myanmar – might be a good place to start. Even if these have limited clout with officialdom, they at least convey a message to power-holders that people know and care where girls are, and may therefore reduce some physical and sexual violence.

MONEY: girls need access to money for their migration so they aren’t forced to sell their body for transport and shelter. That much is clear. But getting money can be fraught – forcing girls into debt, piling onto them serious pressure and sometimes meaning that they arrive at their destination in a form of bonded labour. There are many examples from the Global South of innovative female collectives that help girls and women save, and access funds at low or no interest. It would be interesting for practitioners to think about what this might look like in the migration context: how girls can access money for their journey that they may not be able to be paid back imminently; or how such networks could operate across the migration trajectory.

**INTANGIBLE ASSETS AND INFORMATION**

Much of this has been covered elsewhere – specifically, the importance of the critical thinking skills and ‘street smarts’ that girls will need in order to navigate the migration experience more safely. The key here is allowing girls to learn from the experience of each other – we saw this happening organically in several communities, but equally we’ve also seen the risk of girls being enticed by the commercial gain of turning broker, or at least not admitting to others the reality of their experiences. As discussed above, programmers may need to think more disruptively about setting up frameworks for girls to provide information to each other about the reality of the migration experience and what they really need to do to survive.
ADVOCATES AND ALLIES

Clearly some services girls need go beyond what other girls can provide – in particular legal representation to advocate for better labor rights and conditions. This is a vital part of working with migrant girls, but it also comes with a warning – because some well-meaning legislative activity has actually turned out very badly for girls, pushing their migration underground, and making it even more unsafe. As such, this kind of intervention needs to be accompanied by listening to girls, hearing what they want and need, and then advocating for this at the levels of society that girls can’t access themselves.

The African Movement of Working Children and Youth is already at the forefront of convening young people to speak up for their rights, not just in Ivory Coast but across several countries in Africa. We believe there is exciting potential in thinking about adding a gender component to this, helping girls become leaders themselves, and connecting them across state and national borders. This will require radical thinking by NGOs prepared to invest in raising young girls’ voices and transcend scopes of work that tend to be limited by geography.
While acknowledging the need, in the immediate term, to make the migration experience safer for girls, the rest of our spotlights go further, concerned instead with longer term expansion of opportunities for girls.

This is a big job and one that – very purposefully – starts to overlap with broader, transformation work with adolescent girls, because what we’re seeking here is to make migration just one of many options in a life filled with choices. This will require a series of approaches in tandem, increasing the choices she can access and imagine home and away.

MORE CHOICE SHE CAN IMAGINE: CULTURALLY RESONANT ASPIRATIONS AWAY AND AT HOME

The first step is unpicking the myth that says there’s no positive future for girls in the village. This is complex, and may look slightly different in different contexts.

As we saw in the ‘home’ chapter, whilst not exhausting the types of situations faced by girls in the Global South, there were a couple of dominant visions of female life within the communities we visited. In some places, girls are literally assets to be disposed of, and economic migration – with no fixed time span, possibly forever – can feel like a significant improvement compared to a bleak life of violence on offer at home. Elsewhere, girls exist in a tightly controlled context, which sees them as assets to be mined, first as migrant wage earner and then as wives and mother.

In the first context – girl as liability to be disposed – the job to be done is to construct a positive model of womanhood per se. This is in many ways a huge challenge, but the absence of any competing ‘positive’ narrative may
actually work in our favour. Rather than peeling back existing myths about a woman’s worth, we are building these in a vacuum – allowing us to paint plural new visions of femininity that may or may not involve migration. Mass media may be a helpful tool here – with the power to engender new perspectives and norms at scale, helping girls speak up for themselves and develop their own self-worth, but also targeting the community.

In the second context – girl as asset to be cashed in – the task may possibly be more challenging. Norms are more fixed, and most believe these to be relatively benign for women – after all, they are largely protected from the most proximate forms of physical and sexual violence. So how to unpick these? This is where positive deviance may be most useful – identifying girls who have bucked the trend to carve a path for themselves which may not involve migration, and instead forge a positive life at home, beyond only domestic duty. Sharing and exposing these stories may be an effective way to get girls and communities thinking differently about future possibilities, envisioning paths forward outside the standard migration ‘flow’.

**MORE CHOICE SHE CAN ACCESS: BUILDING LIVELIHOODS IN THE VILLAGE**

Unpicking myths is vital to help girls imagine other options, but if home is to match the appeal of away, this needs to be supported by tangible opportunities in the village. Of course this will look very different in different geographical contexts. While the importance of rural transformation and living economies is becoming more mainstream as a concept within international development practice more broadly, little of this work appears to be girl- or migration-focused. Here, it would be useful for practitioners to keep in mind a couple of key points:

LIVELIHOODS: put simply, girls need new ways of making money at home. During our trip we heard several suggestions for how we might move beyond existing, limited, livelihoods options at home – for example opening new factories in villages, or training girls to set up their own businesses. Critical here is also working with communities to break down the gender barriers that exist for certain jobs – and help girls access parts of village economies that remain closed off to them.

ACCESS / MOBILITY: as we’ve discussed, many villages in the places we visit
ed are incredibly remote, and this does have implications for the commercial viability of certain livelihood schemes. As such, while building opportunities in the village, we should also think about creating access networks between villages, opening up markets and enabling diversification.

MORE CHOICE SHE CAN ACCESS: JOB OPPORTUNITIES AT DESTINATION

‘Job opportunities’ for migrant girls are confined to a highly limited, heavily gendered, and profoundly controlled set of options. Changing this situation requires a number of interventions – and this in particular is where our recommendations start to overlap with broader transformation programming.

MORE EMPLOYMENT OPTIONS: in Ivory Coast, the job opportunities open to girls are described as the ‘3 Cs’: couture (dressmaking), coiffure (hairdressing), cuisine (cooking). The limited nature of opportunities is reflected across regions too, albeit with a slightly different complexion. Very simply – and like for women and girls in many places – migrant girls need access to many more types of employment if we are to expand their stock of choices.

MORE TRAINING OPTIONS: this broadening of opportunity also needs to be reflected in training – both the subjects she can access but also the nature of the training itself. In particular, training needs to be much easier to access – this may imply lower cost and shorter length at least.

UNDERMINING CONTROL: perhaps most importantly, but also most challengingly, across jobs and training, practitioners, programmers, advocates and donors need to think much more critically about the way in which opportunities for girls serve to reinforce tools of control, and prop up exploitative systems. With this in mind, how can we think about fostering girl-led, local and transnational movements of solidarity that seek to break out of current economic structures – to reimagine labor in a new kind of world?
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- ANAED
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- Association des Femmes Juristes Cote D’Ivoire
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• Friendly Child
• Karen Baptist Convention
• Golden Future Network
• Labour Rights Defenders and Promoters
• Foundation for Education and Development
• ISSARA
• Caritas
• Migrant Network
• Myanmar Migrant Workers Rights Network
• Women’s Organisation Network
• Yangon Karen Baptist Women Association
• Sein Le Ayeyar
• Swang Saung Shin women group
• Myanmar Council of Churches
• Ar Yone Oo Social Development Association

IN ADDITION IN MAE SOT
• Mae Tao Clinic
• MAP Foundation
• Suwannimit Foundation
• Committee for Promotion and Protection for Child Rights
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• Swatantrata Aabhiyan
• American Himalayan Foundation
• Tiny Hands
• Sano Paila
• Emmanuel Health Association, Duncan Hospital
• Prayas, Raxaul
• Sampark
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