

# I AM STILL HERE

## My Lens

















**“My Lens” is a photo series exploring the lives and perspectives of survivors of human trafficking for sexual exploitation and modern slavery by Newsha Tavakolian, a photographer for Magnum, a global photographic agency.**

In collaboration with [The Salvation Army](#), [Stop Trafficking Africa](#) and [Hope Education Project](#), this exhibition uses the power of photography to tell the different stories of survivors, revealing their journeys from harsh realities to healing and empowerment.









FIGHT



Theresa grew up in Anambra State, facing hardship from a young age. After her father’s death when she was eleven, she became the primary provider for her family. Working in Lagos and Mali, she met a woman who promised her a job in Dubai, allowing her to repay her travel costs with half her earnings.

Upon arriving, Theresa discovered the job was a front for sexual exploitation. When she refused to comply, she was brutally beaten and suffered broken arms while resisting her traffickers. For over three years, she endured relentless abuse and made multiple escape attempts, spending time in prison and nights in abandoned buildings.

Through a connection made in prison, she found support from Stop Trafficking Africa, who arranged for her return home after medical treatment. Now back in Nigeria, Theresa is determined to support her ill mother and open her own shop. She warns young women, “If you want to do sex work, do it by yourself – don’t believe in what someone promises you”.

# Theresa





“I was born a fighter”.







**"It's better for you to kill me  
than to force me to do what I cannot do".**







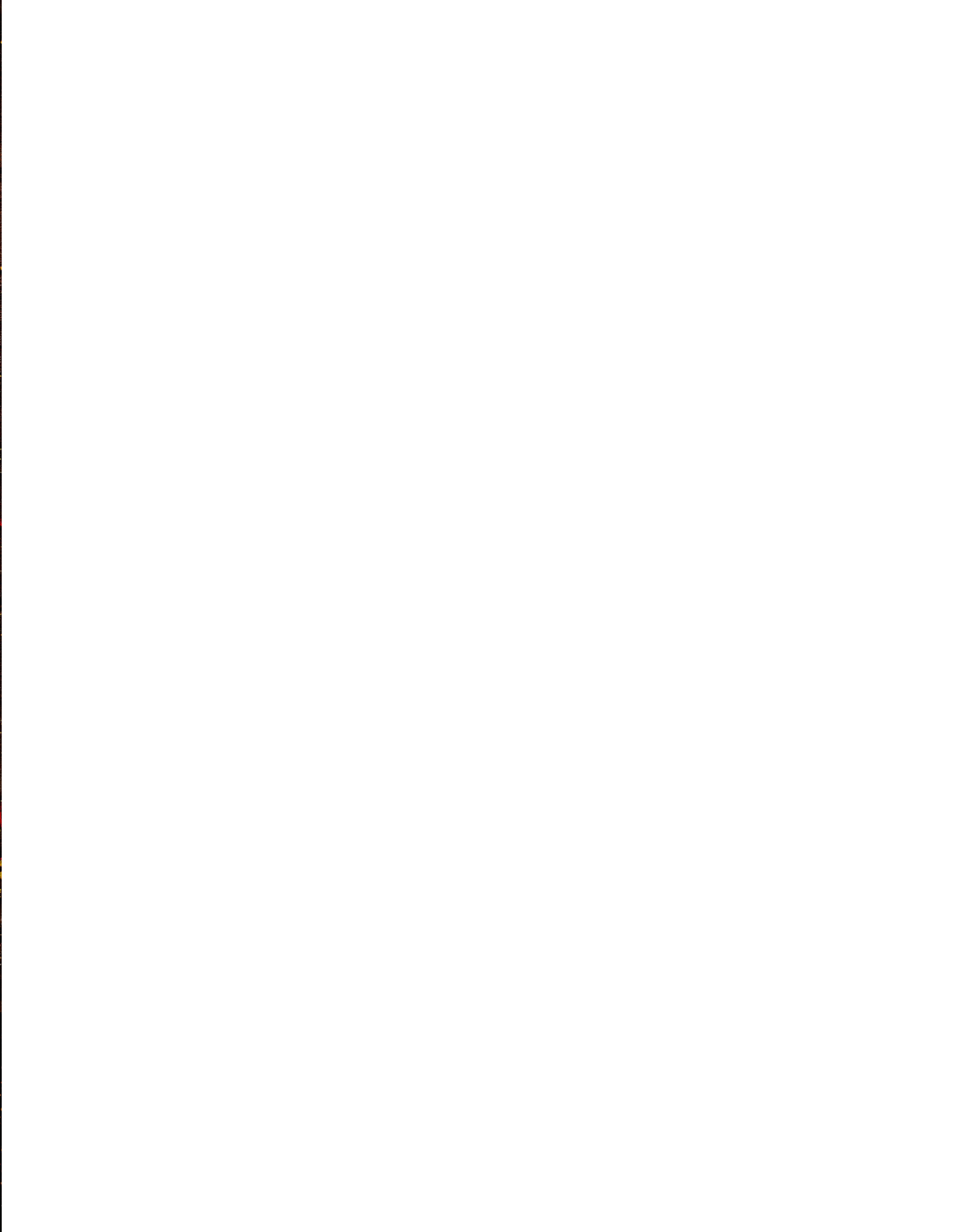


**"Don't believe what someone promises you".**



Theresa











Joy faced a challenging upbringing, living at home with her seven siblings, stepmother, and father who couldn't afford to support her education. She became self-reliant at a young age and started living with friends and working as a hairdresser. One day she was approached by a lady offering her a job in a hairdressing salon in Dubai.

She was excited by the opportunity to travel, and the promise of a good salary. Joy stayed with her new employer and their family for two weeks before she left to the United Arab Emirates on December 25th.

When she arrived in the UAE, it soon became clear that she wouldn't be working as a hairdresser, and instead had been trafficked to perform sex work. She was forced to visit and work in several bars and hotels.

Joy begged to stop working and return home, but her handlers showed no mercy and threatened to beat her, starve her, abandon her in the desert, and even kill her if she didn't bring them enough money. Failing to bring enough money resulted in severe punishments, including being forced to roll on chili peppers and having them placed in sensitive areas.

Her fortunes changed when she met another girl, who connected her with Angus Thomas and put her in contact with a Nigerian immigration officer. Now Joy is safe and back in school. She is still coping with the psychological impact but is hopeful for the future.

# Joy









My hair and the flowers  
Feeling Peace and comfort at the  
quariden  
me and the brush that i used to  
Paint over my Past  
.  
  
My Past doesn't define who  
I am now.  
I am not affaid I will move  
on.





"She showed me marks like beating marks over her body... This is what our fates are".

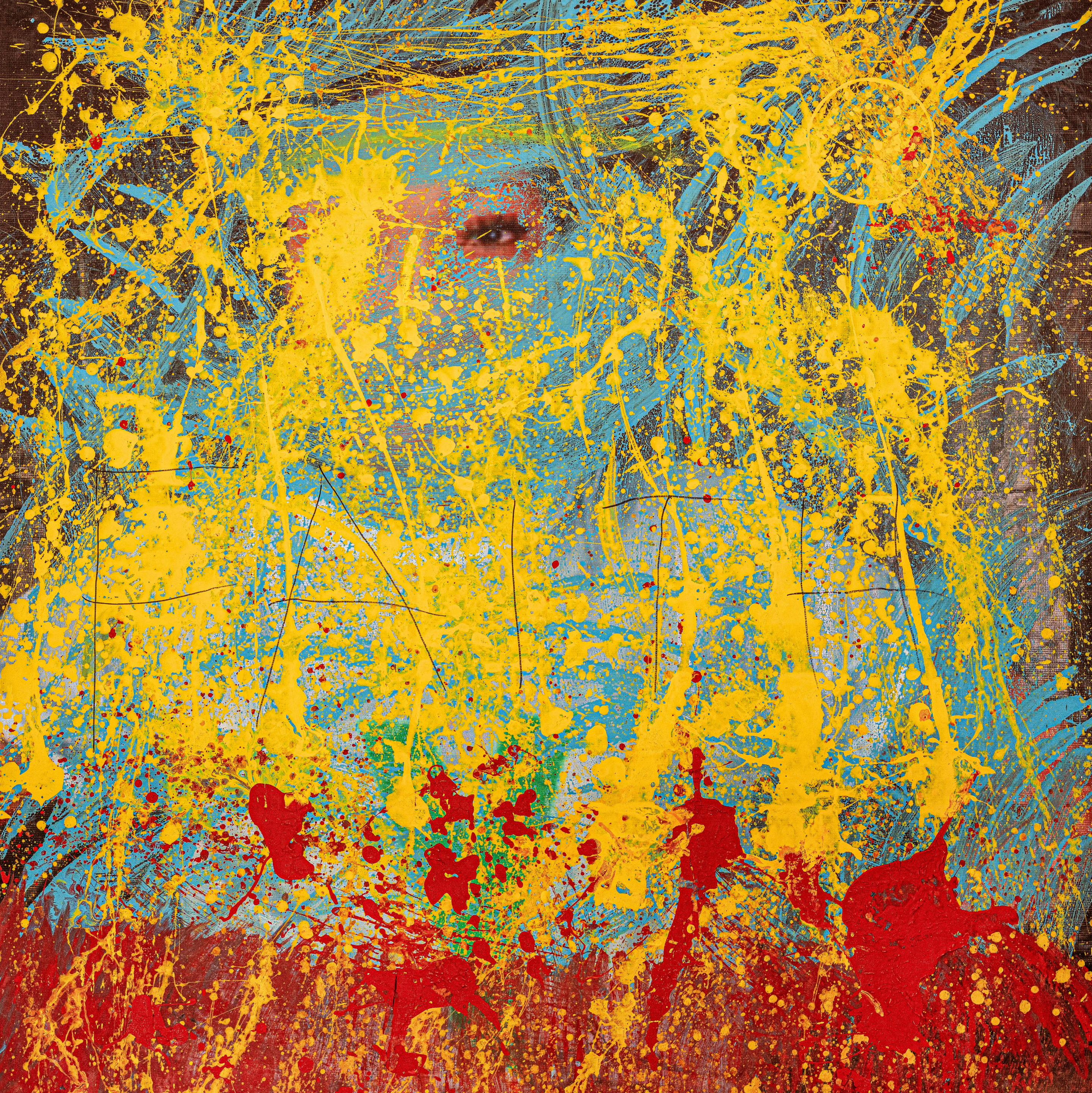


**"If I do not do it, they told me that I will  
not come out alive".**



Joy











While Elizabeth's childhood presented its share of challenges, she had a supportive mother who helped her complete her education and attend university. Elizabeth faced financial difficulties, struggling to cover both rent and tuition fees, which ultimately prevented her from receiving her degree certificate. One day, while working at a construction company, a family friend told her about a lady they knew who recruited women for sales assistant roles in the United Arab Emirates.

Motivated by the opportunity to provide for her family, Elizabeth contacted the recruiter. It was only when she arrived in UAE and met other girls who had been trafficked for sexual exploitation and realised her fate. If she said that she didn't want to participate in the sex work, her handler would threaten to take her to the Sahara Desert and kill her.

When Elizabeth was working one day, she happened to meet Angus Thomas. When he discovered that she had been trafficked, Angus asked her if she wanted to go home. Although she was scared, she was also desperate to leave her situation, and asked for his help.

To escape her residence, Elizabeth told her handlers that she was off to meet a client. With help from Angus and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) in Nigeria, she was able to return home and be reunited with her mother.

Back home, Elizabeth reported her trafficker to the authorities, which led to an arrest. Though she bears physical and emotional scars from her ordeal, she is now focused on her goal of becoming a nurse and is determined to rebuild her life.

# Elizabeth





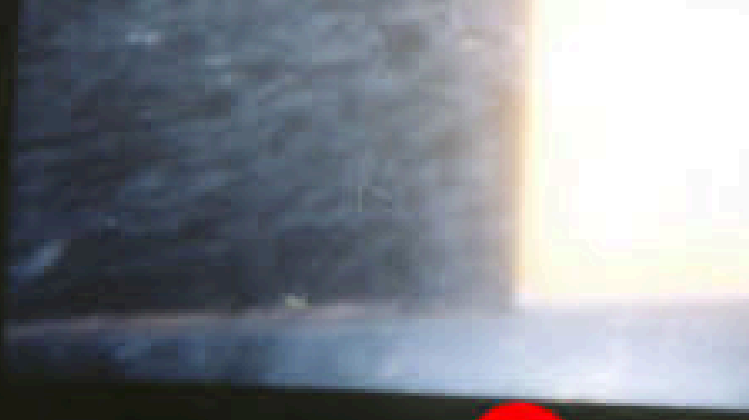






**“My plan for the future is... I want to go for nursing school...  
maybe if I want to travel out”.**





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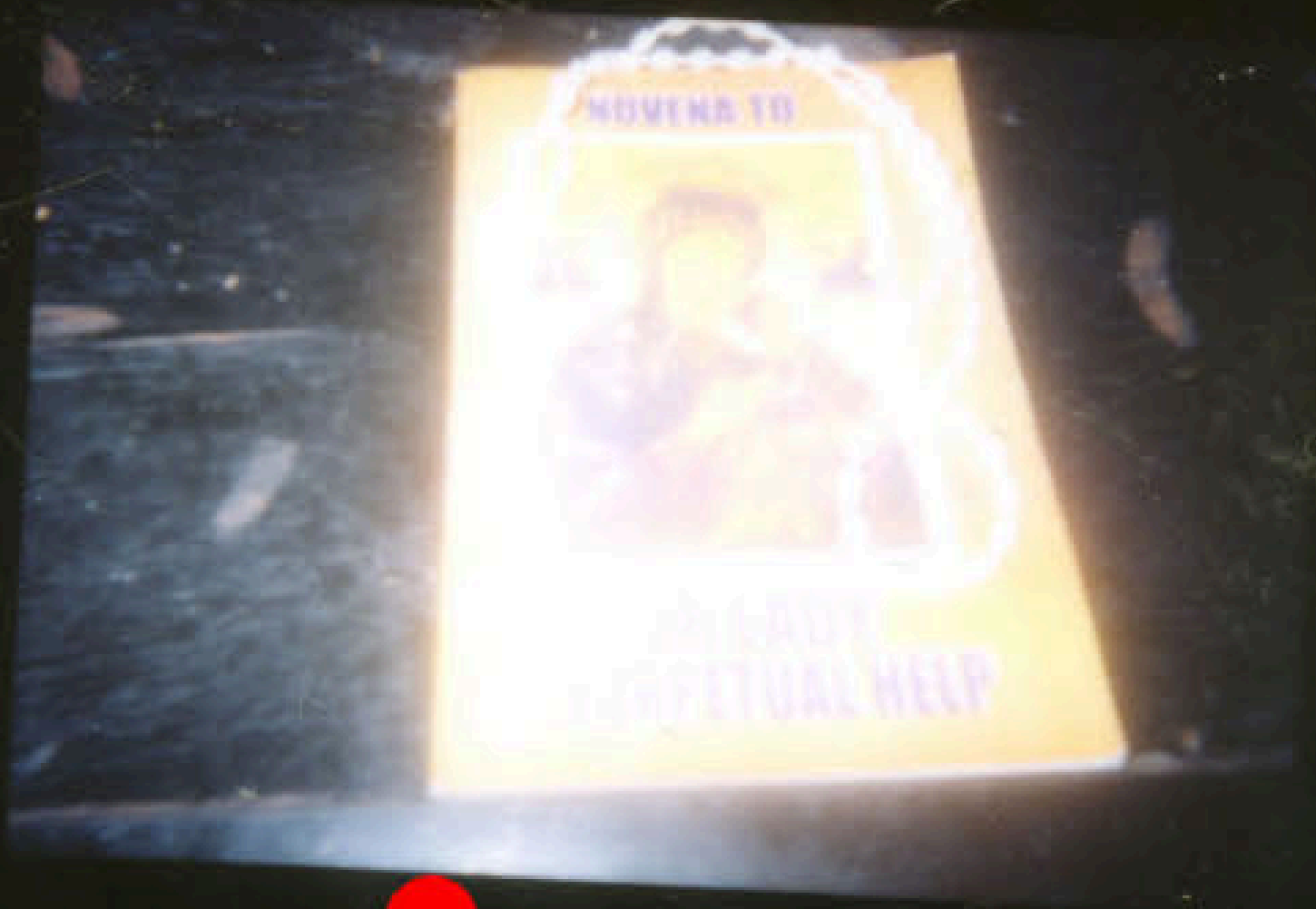
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**“It didn’t take me time to heal because I’m a strong woman”.**





I AM STILL HERE   Elizabeth



Elizabeth





it is nice







Grace was 22 when she was offered a high-paying job at a restaurant in Dubai. The opportunity was arranged through a trusted community elder, who assured her that this was her chance to make a better life for her family. Keen to help her struggling parents and six siblings in Nigeria, she accepted the opportunity.

When she arrived in Dubai, Grace’s passport and phone were taken away from her. She started working in the restaurant, but was soon forced into sex work on the side. Under constant threat, Grace was compelled to work tirelessly, with her trafficker demanding that she repay a fabricated “debt” of 50,000 Dirhams.

In a desperate bid for help, Grace managed to use a client’s phone to call a friend. Her friend had found Stop Trafficking Africa and reached out to Angus for help. Angus was able to coordinate her safe return to Nigeria. Today, Grace is collaborating with the Nigerian courts to bring her trafficker to justice. She is committed to doing all she can to prevent other women from experiencing what she went through.

# Grace







“I had never travelled in my life. This was my first experience”.





**"You cannot let your past become your future".**





I AM STILL HERE    Grace





**“They did black magic, saying that if I disappoint her, my family  
will pay a huge amount of money”**



Grace











Wendy fled to Kuwait after escaping her violent husband and his family's threats, she made the heartbreaking decision to leave her young son behind, believing a job opportunity abroad would give them both a better life.

However, Wendy soon discovered the wealthy family who employed her had malign intentions. For six years, she endured relentless abuse while caring for their six children and parents. They withheld her passport, salary, and any contact with her son. Forced to sleep in a leaking laundry room, she eventually became ill, but they refused her medical care.

Through a chance encounter at a mall, where a stranger lent her a phone, Wendy found her path to freedom. Using twenty pounds given as an Eid gift, she contacted an old high school friend. “I was so scared I couldn't even get into the car”, she recalls. “They had to carry me inside. But it was a successful escape”.

Now after twelve years with a loving family who took her in, Wendy rebuilds her life piece by piece. While there were moments she wanted to give up, her faith and new family give her hope.

Through support from The Salvation Army in London, Wendy has found healing in unexpected places. She joined a survivors' singing group, where her own lyrics speak to her journey – “When life seems empty, no tomorrow, and I feel I'm drowning in my sorrow, then I remember I'm a survivor”. The group has performed for royalty and politicians, raising awareness about modern slavery.

While the trauma remains, Wendy focuses on her future. She studies for her GCSE English, pursues a teaching assistant course, and attends therapy. She is hopeful the Home Office will grant her asylum so she can finally be reunited with her son after twenty years.

# Wendy







**“This is the first time I have a camera in my hand...”**



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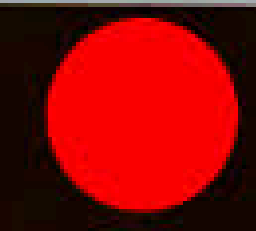
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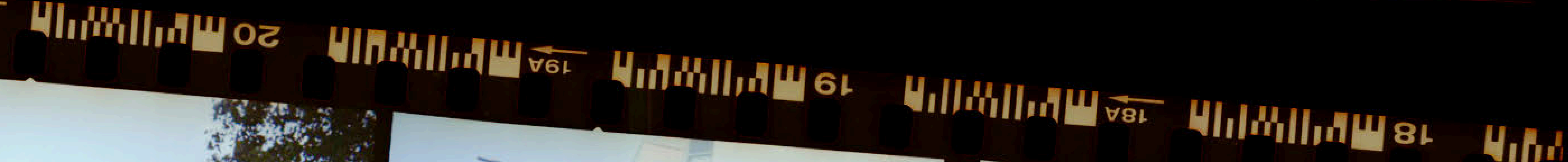
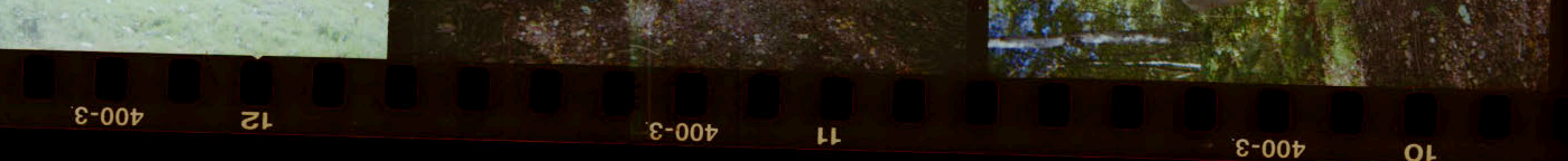
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**“I have experienced a lot of things as well... the violence I have experienced from my husband.”**



**Wendy**











Maryam was a mother in Kenya desperate to provide for her children. Through a friend in Mombasa, she connected with a Nigerian man who promised work opportunities in Dubai, leading her to believe she would be doing cleaning work.

Upon arriving in Dubai, Maryam was moved between apartments until she reached a building filled with other women. It was then that she learned the harsh reality, that they were there for sexual exploitation. Maryam's resistance resulted in violent beatings that cost her teeth, and she faced starvation for refusing to comply.

For four months, she endured unimaginable abuse while her trafficker took every dirham she earned. Eventually, she escaped with another woman, and they spent three days on the streets before being arrested. They were detained for three months in jail before being deported to Kenya with only the clothes on their backs.

Back home, Maryam's body bore the scars of her suffering, eventually requiring surgery for stomach injuries sustained during her ordeal. With support from Stop Trafficking Africa, which covered her medical care, she began to rebuild her life. Today, she sells charcoal to support her children – the very ones she had hoped to provide for at the start of her journey.

# Maryam













“We were sleeping outside... we slept there for almost two to three days, then police arrested us”.





I AM STILL HERE Maryam







**“They start to bring... I see men coming  
in that apartment”.**

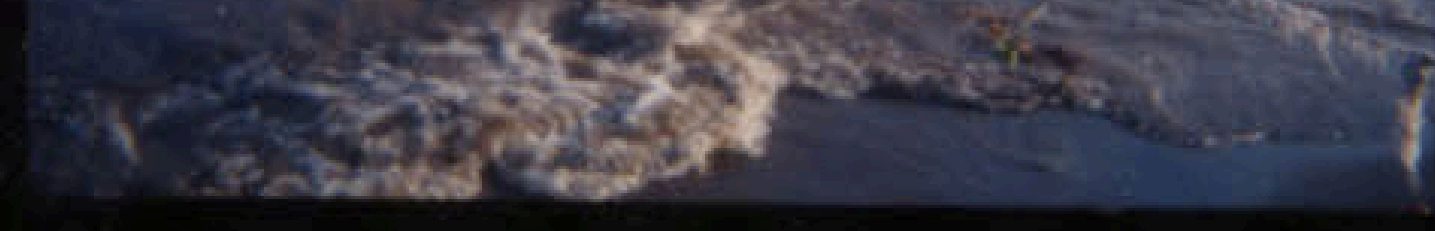












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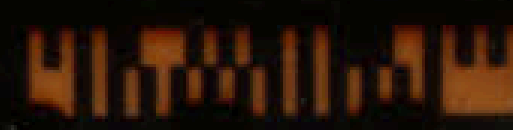
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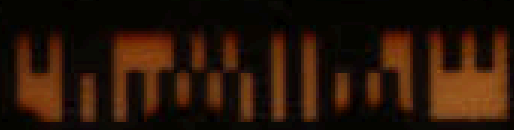
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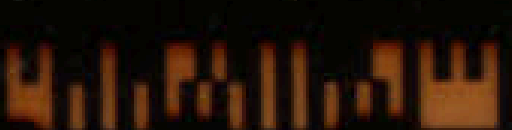
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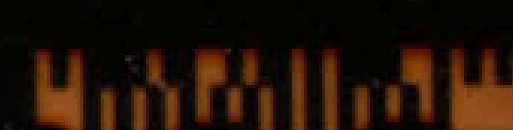
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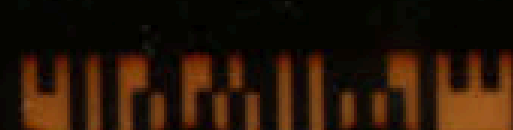
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Maryam











Jennifer was brought to the United Kingdom from Ghana by her aunt, whom she deeply trusted from childhood. After caring for her and funding her education in boarding school in Ghana, her aunt promised to help Jennifer study nursing in England. What seemed like a path to education became a nightmare of exploitation and abuse.

For four years, she endured domestic servitude and sexual abuse at the hands of her aunt's husband. They seized her passport upon arrival, using her undocumented status to instil fear. Instead of studying, she was forced to cook, clean, care for children, and cater church events – all without payment. When she revealed the abuse at their church, they refused to believe her because her aunt was an influential church member.

Her first escape came when her aunt finally threw her out. Desperate and homeless, Jennifer fell into another exploitative situation when a man promised her childcare work. After fleeing again, she survived by cleaning at a gym and a shop in exchange for a safe place to sleep. A turning point came when a social worker noticed her burn injury and referred to the hospital, where she was then connected with The Salvation Army.

Through therapy and support from The Salvation Army, Jennifer has begun rebuilding her life. She's finally attending college and working part-time supporting people with disabilities. “This is the first place I've lived where I've been safe” she reflects. “The Salvation Army has given me wings to fly”.

Jennifer finds further healing in a small garden, where nurturing plants and growing vegetables has become her pathway to recovery. “As I began to nurture the plants and grow vegetables, I started feeling happier and more fulfilled. Caring for something living and watching it thrive has been a therapeutic experience that has brought me immense joy and peace.”

# Jennifer







**“The photography has helped me deal with the anger I had about my past. When I am painting it’s a way of telling my story.”**









**"The small garden that I have now has been helping me overcome depression."**







**Jennifer**











Lima came to England from Bangladesh country as a young student, excelling in science with dreams of becoming a doctor. Her arranged marriage in her second year of college promised continued education and a fresh start in England, but instead led her into a nightmare of domestic servitude.

For years, she endured relentless control and abuse from her husband. He locked her in the house, denied her basic necessities, and subjected her to constant psychological torment. When she discovered his affair, the abuse intensified. Even during a severe asthma attack – which had been aggravated due to her husband’s excessive smoking.

Her escape came in stages, first fleeing to her home country to stay with friends. But her husband's threats followed – he sent people to find her and threaten to kill her. After a frightening incident where a stranger grabbed her in a shopping mall, she returned to England, where she finally found help through the police who recognised her situation as domestic servitude.

With the help of the police, Lima was referred to The Salvation Army. Now in a safe house hundreds of miles from her abuser, Lima is gradually getting her life back. The enthusiastic spirit that once said ‘yes’ to every challenge now fuels her recovery. She embraces every opportunity for healing, from therapy to activities, even completing a charity skydive in 2024 to raise funds for The Salvation Army’s modern slavery work.

# Lima











**“I made the right decision to leave and now I’m free;  
I’m a different person.”**



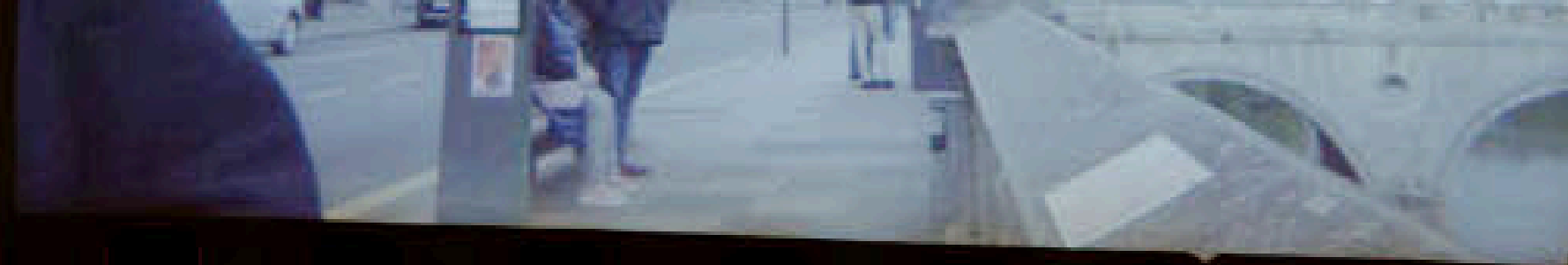
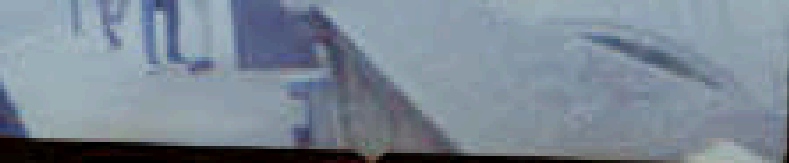


“So I forgot my dreams.”









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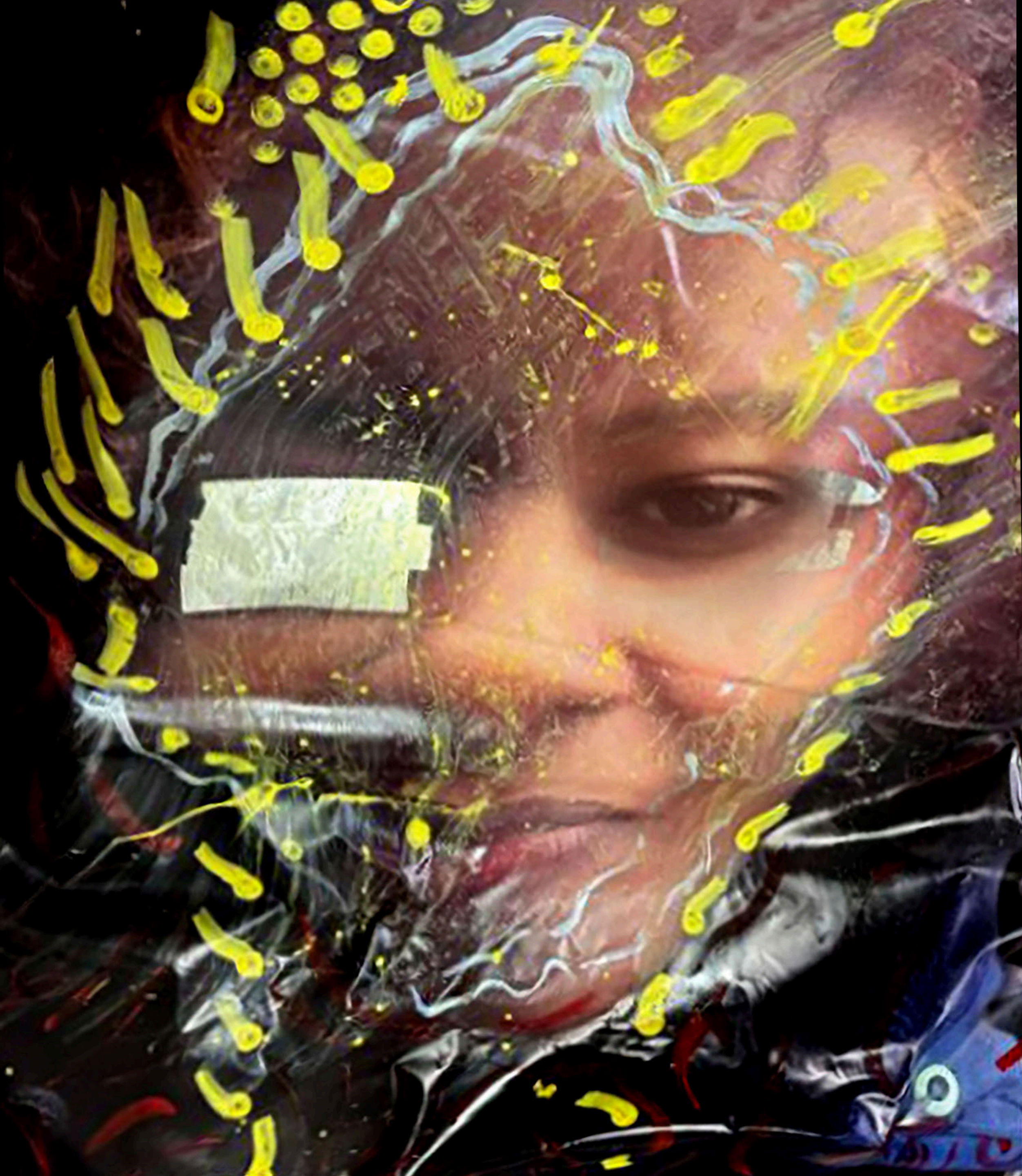




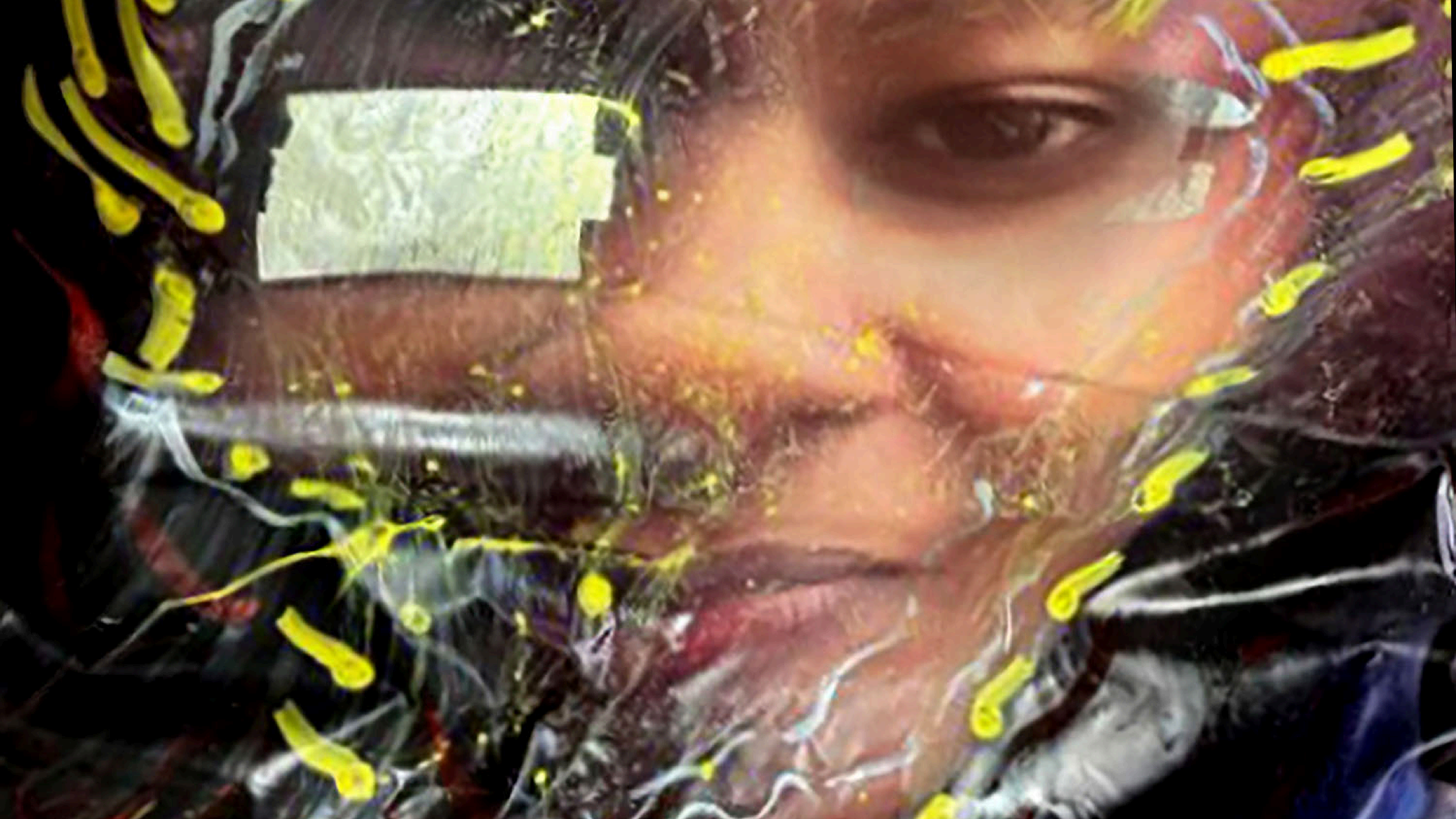


Lima











Layla a Kenyan woman, was raised in captivity and subjected to force labour and exploitation by a British man. This continued all the way into adulthood. "Being exploited made me feel inadequate," she reflects. "it erodes self-worth until you feel your needs and desires don't matter". Years of abuse stripped away her sense of self, leaving behind depression, anger, and resentment that seemed impossible to overcome.

Her path to freedom came through The Salvation Army which has provided safe accommodation, access to legal advice, healthcare, and counselling. Giving her "hope to a brighter future having been trapped into modern slavery for many years without life's purpose".

But her most profound healing emerged through an unexpected source: art. In creative expression, she discovered a powerful tool for processing her trauma. "Art helps me find new depths to my thinking," she says. Through painting and drawing, she enters a meditative state that reduces stress and brings a sense of completeness. Each brushstroke represents another step in reclaiming control of her life, processing complex emotions that words alone cannot express.

Today, Layla channels her experiences into empowering others. "I am always trying, I am always surviving," she affirms with quiet determination. Her dreams extend beyond her own recovery – she aims to inspire change through collaboration and advocacy. "To be independent, climb the highest successful ladder and excel in all aspects; onwards and upwards!".

# Layla





I AM STILL HERE      Layla





**“Being exploited made me feel inadequate. I had feelings of being unappreciated, loss of self-esteem, depression, anger, resentment”.**







**“I’m always amazed by my own resilience, I’m always trying,  
I’m always surviving”.**





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Layla



A project by Newsha Tavakolian

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