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Project

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- **Move Coalition** (Belgium),
- **M.A.R.S** (Action Movement for Social Renewal, or “Mouvement d’action pour le renouveau social” in French, Togo),
- **Mai più lager - No ai CPR** (Never again concentration camps - No to immigration detention centers, or “No ai Centri di Detenzione per il Rimpatrio” in Italian, Italy),
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Glossary of terms

Undocumented people or irregular migrants lack formal authorisation to reside in a country and are therefore considered to have an irregular migration status. Many may have had residence permission linked to employment, study, family, or international protection, but permits were either temporary or very precarious and their validity expired. Some, due to the lack of regular migration pathways, will arrive to a country without a residence permission, seeking for example asylum. People who are undocumented include those subject to a deportation order.

Immigration detention is understood as the deprivation of liberty for reasons related to a person’s migration status.

Deportation or **return** refers to the system for removing third country nationals that have not been granted the right to stay. The term ‘deportation’ reflects the coercive nature of these measures, particularly in contexts where people have no access to regularisation or regular permits, are deprived of their liberty or forcibly removed. In some cases, including in legal and academic texts, the term is replaced by ‘**return**’, which may be further described as “**forced**” or “**voluntary**”. However, in practice, the line between a person’s return made out of free will and one carried out in compliance with a deportation order can be very thin, as illustrated in the stories below.

Regularisation refers to any process allowing undocumented people to obtain a residence permit from a relevant authority permitting their stay in the country they reside, often based on work, family ties, or humanitarian grounds.

Introduction

Across Europe, how we deal with migration in media, policy and in practice, shapes not only who may enter or stay, but also **how millions live, wait, and return**. *Unseen Lives* traces the human realities behind bureaucratic borders: from life without papers, to confinement in detention, to the uncertain homecomings of return.

To **live undocumented** in Europe is to exist in a fragile state between belonging and erasure. Scholars describe this as “hyper-precarity”¹ – when a person’s life is extremely insecure and they have almost no safety, rights, or stability. People in this situation have almost no protection or support from the government or society. They often are not allowed to work, lack residence papers, healthcare or safe housing. Because of this, they can easily be **exploited**.

Those who are detained face another form of invisibility: confinement without crime. Across the continent, immigration detention centres operate as hidden infrastructures of exclusion. Research shows detention functions as a visible and structural form of injustice, causing serious psycho-social, medical, legal, and even mortal harm.²

For those who have **returned** to their country of origin, whether voluntarily or by force, the struggle often continues. Reintegration is treacherous and not adapted to the needs of those returning: they may face extreme exclusion, stigma and poverty.³

These stories show the quiet perseverance of people navigating systems that were never designed to see them. Unseen Lives invites you to look beyond the statistics and **confront the shared humanity of those who move, wait, and begin again** in the shadows of Europe’s migration landscape.

A note to readers

This booklet contains photographs and testimonies that depict experiences of confinement, displacement, and hardship. Some images and stories may be distressing.

In preparing this booklet, we followed a rigorous ethical process to ensure that all participants were given the opportunity to provide informed consent for the use of their stories and photographs as part of the FAiR project. Every effort was made to mitigate potential risks and uphold the highest ethical standards. Participants were fully informed about the potential risks of using identifiable photographs and explicitly consented to their use for research and visibility purposes. To protect the identity of those who have shared their stories, some names and locations have been altered, unless the participants explicitly asked for their name to be used.

1 MORE Project (2025). *Policy recommendations for the dignified treatment of irregularised, non-removable third-country nationals in the EU*. <https://www.moreproject-horizon.eu/sdc/download/11197/?key=7eohlr973emugn1pria78sclgh3vzf>

2 Baird, T. (2016). *Who is responsible for harm in immigration detention? Models of accountability for private corporations (Global Detention Project Working Paper No. 11)*. Global Detention Project. Retrieved from https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/baird_global_detention_project_paper_feb_2016.pdf

3 FAiR Project. (2025). *Returnee voices matter: Towards more inclusive return policies (Policy Brief D9.4)*. https://fair-return.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/FAiR-D9.4_Policy-Brief_Returnee-Voices-Matter_Web-version-1.pdf



Living
undocumented

Life in the shadows in Europe



To live undocumented in Europe is to exist between visibility and disappearance – to build a life that the law refuses to see.

Millions of people are living in the EU without official papers,⁴ for example, because their visas have expired. These numbers capture only part of the story, but they show the scale of uncertainty, vulnerability, and resilience experienced by people living on the margins of European society.

This chapter is about life in that limbo. It's about the lawyer who becomes a target for defending the invisible, the graduate who is denied papers and loses his job, and the couple whose love is an administrative problem to be solved.

This chapter invites you to confront the human reality behind statistics, the resilience and everyday resistance, the quiet labour, and the longing to belong that persist in the margins of Europe's societies.

⁴ MirreM project, *Resources for journalists* (2025). Available at: <https://irregularmigration.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/MirreM-resources-for-journalists-v1.pdf>

Emmanuel



From student to worker to undocumented

Emmanuel (a fictitious name) is a Togolese citizen currently living in France. After completing his studies in France and Hungary, he found a job with a French NGO. However, when he applied for a change of status, his application was rejected, and he became undocumented.

I live in the space between two lives.

The first life is the one on paper: the one with two master's degrees, in International Relations and Project Management. The one where I worked as an administrative assistant for a French NGO, paying my taxes and following every rule. The one where I believed that education and hard work were the keys to building a future.

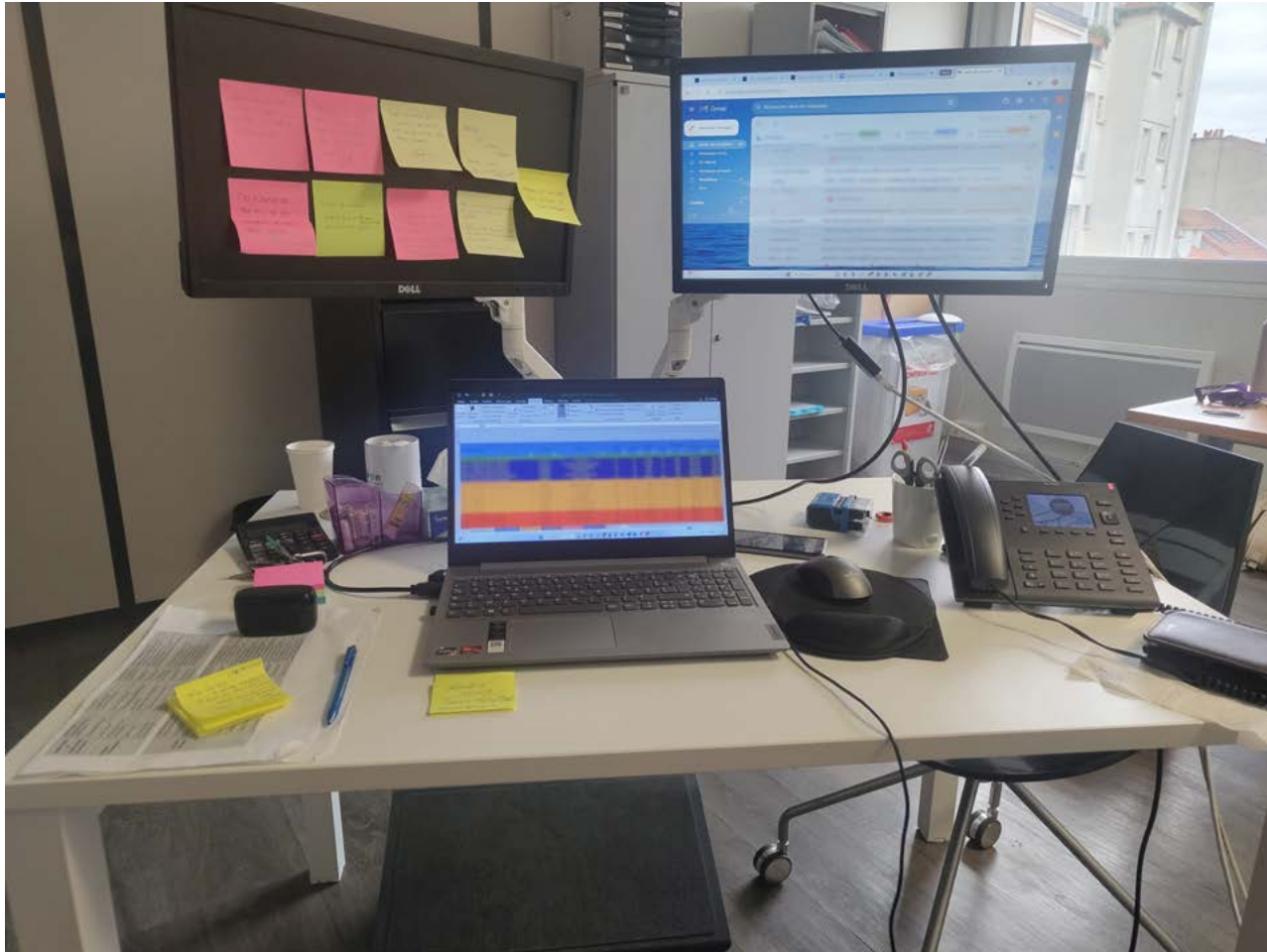
The second life is my reality: the one where a prefecture can look at my salary – 1.5 times the minimum wage – and my job title and decide they are not quite enough. The one where a judge can rule in my favour, and the prefecture can simply ignore that ruling, issuing another order to leave the territory. The one where I am suspended from the job I need to survive, trapped in a legal paradox that steals my present and threatens my future.

This is what it means to be undocumented in France. The anxiety is a constant companion, with constant calculation of whether you can afford both food and rent this month. Back in Togo, life was economically modest, but it was peaceful. I had my family, a roof over my head, a sense of belonging. Here, everything is a struggle against a system that sees me not as a person with skills and aspirations, but as a problem to be eliminated.

They have reduced my life to a checklist I cannot seem to complete, no matter how hard I try.

But I refuse to be reduced. I hold onto a stubborn hope. I didn't come here to flee my country forever. I came to gain experience, to learn, so that one day I can contribute to the development of Togo and of Africa. This dream is what the paperwork fails to capture. This potential is what the system is determined to waste.

I am not asking for a handout. I am asking for the right to build the life my qualifications have earned, and to use them, one day, to help build a better world.



↑ A photo taken in Emmanuel's office during the time when he was still able to work.

Living undocumented in France is incredibly difficult. Even small 'undeclared' jobs are rare, and I live in constant anxiety about the future.



Sarah

Love and life with an undocumented partner

Sarah (a fictitious name) is an Australian citizen living in the Netherlands. Her partner, with whom she has built a life, is undocumented.

The man I love doesn't exist here – not officially, not on paper, not in any system that recognizes his degree or his fingerprints.

So when he sands the floorboards of our rented apartment, each stroke smooth and precise, I watch him with quiet tension. Sawdust floats in the afternoon light, catching on his sleeves. I keep antiseptic and gauze close by, just in case. "I'm his emergency room," I sometimes joke. If the saw slips, if a nail goes in too deep- I can't call an ambulance.

His hands used to build tooling machinery. Now they repair floors and hang shelves in a home only I legally occupy. "I fix what others cannot," he says. "But not our future."

At first, I thought it would be simple. I have a high-paying job. A permanent contract. A clean record. Dutch permanent residency. Surely, I thought, there must be a way to make this work- to get him papers, to register him, to prove what we are.

We can't marry – he has no valid passport to present at the local administration. We can't apply for a partner visa – because we're not married. I can't register him at my address – because that would be illegal. And I can't move to another EU country to trigger the right to family reunification under EU law- because I have a child here. I can't leave my child behind just to legalize my love.



Sarah and her partner's red EU passport ornament – a tradition they hang on their Christmas tree every year.

We can't open a joint bank account. His name isn't on the lease. Not on the electricity bill, not on the phone plan, not on the water service. We share everything – meals, chores, dreams – but nothing that counts as “evidence.” And that's the cruellest part: the burden of proof. “Prove your relationship is real,” the system says. But how do you prove a relationship with someone who is invisible to the system? When the very act of trying to prove it could put them in danger?

I have everything the system says you're supposed to have: stability, income, a tax number. But I'm missing one thing: the right kind of passport.

There's no box to tick for what we are. No process to recognize a love that didn't start on paper. And so we live in the margins.

I registered a business in my name. On paper, it's mine. But in practice, it's us. He does the work – skilled, careful, precise. He paints homes, sands beams, builds custom furniture like it's second nature. Clients love him. They just don't know his status.

Everything runs through me. Invoices in my name, contracts signed solely by me, payments to my business account – a paper trail erasing his labour. I'm the face, the signature, the tax number. He's the hands, the mind, the reason people call us back.

It's not a real solution. It's a way to survive with dignity. Because the alternative? Is letting him be exploited for fifty euros a day – doing hard, dangerous labour with no protection, no insurance, no rights.

He's been there. Most people in his situation have. You show up early. You work until your back breaks. You're paid in cash, sometimes not at all. If something happens to you, no one's liable. You just disappear.

There's not a day I don't calculate risk. It becomes automatic – like muscle memory. He takes the trash out late, and I glance at the window. Four minutes. Five. What if he doesn't come back? We don't attend protests, even when we believe in them. We avoid crowds. We cross the street when we see police. We keep everything tidy, quiet, contained.

My passport should make me feel safe. But now it just reminds me what I could lose. Because if they find him - if someone reports him, if he gets stopped, if

his face ends up in the wrong database - he's gone. Gone like gone. Deported. Disappeared.

I'm a mother. I think about worst-case scenarios as a reflex. But this isn't just a nightmare - it's a legal possibility. If they arrest me for helping him - harbouring, aiding a rejected asylum seeker - I could lose custody of my child. I could lose everything. And we've done nothing to hurt anyone.

We pay taxes. We work hard. We don't ask for help. And still, we live like fugitives. People say love is brave. And maybe it is. But sometimes it's also terrifying.

We don't dream big. Not really. We dream of a driver's license. A joint bank account. His name on a utility bill. A holiday - nothing extravagant. Just being able to book flights, go through passport control together, hold hands in line without one of us flinching.

Every December, we pull out the Christmas box. My child hangs their favourites first – snowflakes, stars, the glittery plastic things they made in school. And then there's ours. A small red EU passport, hollow and glittery, bought once at a holiday market as a joke. It hangs from a string on a pine branch like it belongs there.

We're not asking to be rescued. We're just asking to live. To keep building what we've already built. To love without fear.



←
Portrait of Valeria Ilareva.



Valeria

A lawyer's fight for justice, in and out of court

Valeria Ilareva is a Bulgarian lawyer and the Chairperson of the Foundation for Access to Rights. For decades, she has defended the rights of refugees and migrants. Her story intertwines the landmark legal fights, one was at the Court of Justice of the European Union for “Mr. Changu.” This case exposed the reality of legal limbo and the state’s positive obligations. The other was at the European Court of Human Rights in Ilareva and Others v. Bulgaria. This case revealed personal cost of defending rights through her own experience of online hate.

My work is built on a simple idea: rights must be real, not theoretical. Access to rights is the key because when justice is achieved in one person’s case, it opens the door to justice for many others.

For twenty-four years, I have been the lawyer for a man from Tanzania, Mr. Changu. He arrived in Bulgaria in the 1990s. For twenty-nine years, he lived in a state of legal limbo: no residence status, no identity documents, no right to work, and no way to legally marry his partner or recognize his children. He could not be deported because Tanzania would not issue him a new passport without his biometric data, which he could only provide at an embassy in Germany – a country he could not legally travel to from Bulgaria.

He submitted eleven applications for international protection. Each time, he explained that he had no place to live, no food, and no medical care. The authorities rejected every application, insisting that his only option was to apply for a D visa from the Bulgarian embassy abroad responsible for Tanzania. But he could not travel there, since he had no valid Tanzanian passport. It was a perfect, cruel circle.

We took his case all the way to the Court of Justice of the European Union. The Court made it clear: even those with no right to stay are protected by EU law. States have a positive obligation to guarantee access to fundamental rights on the basis of human dignity alone.

On April 23, 2025, the Bulgarian Supreme Administrative Court declared that Mr. Changu’s human dignity had been violated and that Bulgaria’s legal system had created a “legal vacuum.” The Court instructed the administrative authority to grant him humanitarian status – a monumental victory and validation of a quarter-century of struggle.

But this professional victory exists alongside a more personal story about the dangers of defending the vulnerable in an often-hostile environment.

While I was pursuing Mr. Changu’s case and carrying out my daily work as a lawyer defending refugees, I was also facing coordinated online attacks. In January 2015, a Facebook user posted a hyperlink to an interview I had given. Under it, he wrote: “Die, carrion. Cyanide for you and for all traitors to the nation.” Another user commented: “I will skin this one alive, the treacherous bitch! Memorise the office and crumble!”

The post had gone viral. Thousands of users commented enthusiastically, echoing the threats and sharing the address of my office. Together with two other colleagues, I was featured in a photo-montage titled “Freaks of the Year”, and special Facebook pages and even a website were created with the sole purpose of spreading hatred against us and inciting others to take action. These were not just insults. They were death threats, incitement to violence, and hate speech, all motivated by our work helping migrants. The fear was real and constant.




Together with my colleagues, I filed a criminal complaint with the Bulgarian authorities. What followed was a second legal battle – for our own safety and dignity. The prosecutor’s office refused to open a case and the investigation was a masterpiece of indifference. We took our case to the European Court of Human Rights. In 2025 that Bulgaria had violated our rights. It found that the investigation was ineffective, that the authorities had downplayed the gravity of the threats, and that they had failed to address the racist and xenophobic prejudice at their core. The Court affirmed that States’ obligations to protect fundamental rights apply as much online as they do offline.

These two stories – the victory for Mr. Changu and the victory in *Ilareva and Others v. Bulgaria* – are two sides of the same coin. One shows how the system can fail to recognize a human being’s rights for decades; the other shows the personal price of working to change that system.

The application of the law can uphold the rule of law or erode it. My life’s work has been to make sure it upholds it.

And even when justice is won in court, the struggle continues. Despite the Bulgarian Supreme Administrative Court's ruling in April 2025, which affirmed his rights and condemned the "legal vacuum," Mr. Changu has since received another negative decision on his humanitarian status from the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees. The administration simply disregarded the judgment.

And so, we appeal again. The cycle continues – but so does hope. Every case, every effort, every act of persistence matters. Because as long as we do not give up, each victory – no matter how small – becomes another brick in the long history of human rights progress, bringing us closer to making rights truly accessible for all.



The law can be a tool for justice or a weapon for impunity. My work, and my life, have been defined by the fight to ensure it is the former.



Living in Detention

Structural violence in Europe's detention centres



Across Europe, hidden from public view, are places where people are locked up without having committed a crime. Immigration detention centres are the physical manifestation of a system that treats human beings as problems to be managed.

Inside, time blurs, and dignity is stripped away. People are referred to by numbers, not names. Psychiatric medication replaces care. Solitary confinement is justified as “protection.” Some lives end in silence – the ultimate logic of this system is revealed in its most extreme outcome: death.

The stories in this chapter – from a doctor, a lawyer, a volunteer, and those who were detained – expose the systemic and structural violence of these places.

Immigration detention centres are dotted around Europe. Six in Belgium, eleven in Italy, twenty-seven in France. More than 100,000 people are locked up every year for immigration reasons, subjected to psychological trauma and physical control.⁵

These institutions have become sites of systemic neglect. As a doctor working in one of these centres explains, the dehumanisation, violence, and neglect are so structurally ingrained in their purpose, that immigration detention centres cannot be reformed, **they must be closed forever.**

⁵ PICUM (2025). *Migration policies, detention and return*. <https://picum.org/blog/migration-policies-detention-and-return/>

Nicola

Doctor and advocate on trauma and violence in immigration detention

Nicola Cocco is an infectious disease specialist and a humanitarian doctor who has visited Italian immigration detention centres multiple times and has been campaigning for their closure.

I entered my first immigration detention centre as a doctor, but I left as a witness. What struck me most wasn't the physical decay – though it was significant—but the profound dehumanisation. The detainees responded not with their names but with their identification numbers. This, more than the filth or the self-harm, revealed the system's core: an erosion of human dignity.

My role was one of inspection, but I developed a method. First, a human-centred clinical assessment: listening to detainees to understand their lives and suffering. Only then would I conduct the technical health inspection, checking infirmaries and medical tools.

I have seen open bathrooms and showers without privacy, because the administration fears detainees could use them to harm themselves or others. I have seen people injured and scarred during forced returns, where detainees were dragged on the ground and beaten with batons. I have also seen the misuse of strong drugs given to calm detainees, not for their health, but to make things easier for the facility or the police. Sometimes these drugs are used to keep people quiet all day without really waking up. Protests are almost impossible, and even a hunger strike can now be treated as a “riot.”

After several years of these visits, I no longer believe in “monitoring” alone. We already know these institutions are harmful. Witnessing this suffering firsthand compels a moral conclusion.

We document evidence from detainees, conduct visits, and campaign publicly. But our ultimate goal is not reform. It is abolition.

Immigration detention centres are institutions that cannot be reformed. The dehumanisation, violence, and neglect are structurally ingrained in their purpose. I no longer enter these centres merely to document conditions.

Witnessing the suffering of detainees firsthand compels me to advocate for their removal and for the abolition of these centres altogether. Anything less would be complicity with a system that inflicts trauma and denies basic human dignity.

Mai più lager - No ai CPR

The network Mai più lager – No ai CPR (in English “Never again concentration camps – No to immigration detention centers”) was founded in 2018, advocating for the closure of Milan immigration detention center. The network receives reports and evidence from detainees via a hotline run by NAGA, a local NGO, documenting images, videos, and testimonies. It conducts access visits alongside parliamentarians or ombudspersons to gather firsthand information and compile reports, engages in public advocacy through campaigns and demonstrations, and coordinates nationally and internationally, particularly on issues related to immigration detention abroad, such as in Albania. The network advocates for the complete abolition of administrative detention, rather than merely the closure of individual immigration detention centers.



↑ The photos show two people bearing visible signs of violence experienced during their detention and deportation attempts while in immigration detention custody. The first photo shows the scraped back of someone dragged on asphalt during a forced deportation attempt. The second shows a person's back hit by a baton during protests. Both photos were taken in Milan detention centre and shared with Mai più lager – No ai CPR.

© Mai più lager- No ai CPR

Moussa

When a crime victim finds death in immigration detention

Moussa Baldé was a young man from Guinea, who committed suicide inside an Italian immigration detention centre in Turin. His story is told by Carolina Di Luciano and Lorenza Della Pepa, who are part of the team of lawyers who followed his case.

Moussa Baldé's story begins not with a number in a detention file, but with a life. He arrived in Italy from Guinea when he was eighteen years old. Friends and social workers in Italy knew him as generous, eager to learn, and curious. He helped people with disabilities and studied Italian, hoping to build a stable life. But years of uncertainty, waiting for his asylum status, left him in limbo.

In May 2021, his precarious life turned to tragedy. While begging outside a supermarket, he was the victim of a violent, racist assault – beaten with an iron bar by three Italian men. He was hospitalised for his serious injuries.

But instead of being protected as a crime victim, the system he sought refuge in marked him for deportation. While still recovering from the attack, he was issued a deportation order and transferred to the immigration detention centre in Turin. For days, his friends and lawyers searched for him, finally locating him inside the detention centre, visibly shaken and wounded.

The detention centre in Turin contained an isolation block called the *ospedaletto* – “the little hospital.” Despite its name, it was a set of barred, single cells, long denounced by civil society for its prison-like conditions and lack of medical oversight. Despite having no legal basis for solitary confinement in immigration detention, officials placed Moussa there.

On 23 May 2021, just two days after his lawyer's visit, staff found Moussa dead in the *ospedaletto*. He had hanged himself.



↑ Moussa's parents in front of the tribunal in Turin. © ASGI

His death sparked outrage and a criminal investigation, but over time, most charges were dropped. Judges noted the absence of clear regulations made long-standing, brutal practices difficult to prosecute. However, the centre's former director and its doctor are still on trial for allowing his isolation despite his fragile mental and physical condition. The *ospedaletto* was closed, and the Turin detention centre eventually shut temporarily. But it has since reopened under new management.

This is where Moussa's story should have ended. But it is also where another story began.



His parents and siblings in Guinea, learning of his death through his lawyers, repatriated his body and then travelled to Italy to seek justice. They demanded not only accountability for Moussa but the closure of all detention centres.

Their struggle soon intertwined with another. Ousmane Sylla, a young man also from Guinea, died by suicide in another detention centre near Rome. His sister, Mariama, contacted Moussa's family. Bonded by grief, the two families now speak publicly together, appearing at demonstrations and parliamentary events.

←
A protest in Turin in support of Moussa Baldé and against immigration detention, with demonstrators showing their hands painted red to denounce state complicity in his death.
© ASGI

They have visited the sites where their loved ones died. The shock of seeing those places compelled them to campaign for all those still confined there. Their solidarity, born from unimaginable loss, has become a persistent, unified cry for justice: a demand to close the centres that killed their sons and brothers, and to end a system that treats human lives as disposable.

For the families, the fight has become larger than their personal loss. Visiting the sites where their loved ones died shocked them profoundly, but it also compelled them to campaign for all those still confined in these centres.

Hélène



Witnessing inhumanity in detention as a volunteer

Hélène (a fictitious name) visited people detained in the Caricole immigration detention centre, outside Brussels. She recounts her experience visiting this centre as a volunteer of JRS Belgium in 2020-2022.

The first thing that struck me is the resemblance of the centre to a prison: the whole infrastructure, the railings and the cameras are reminiscent of a proper detention centre. It's also isolated and difficult to reach, it took me an hour to get there by public transport. The centre is located near the Brussels Airport. You can see planes leaving every day from there, which always reminds people of how close their deportation might be.

As a visitor, you have very little time to speak with the people inside. You must leave your phone at the entrance. You can only enter one at a time, so family gatherings are impossible. COVID-19 brought additional obstacles, with masks and Plexiglas barriers. There's no way to speak confidentially as often you share the room with guards who talk loudly.

Inside, I encountered a profound sense of injustice. The most common question people ask is *Why am I here? and then, When will I get out? Will I be deported or not?* The longer people remain in the centre, the more their mental health deteriorates. Being locked up chips away at people's vitality. They become less and less optimistic, growing disillusioned and angry towards an unjust system that locks you up for no reason.

The sheer absurdity and violence of it all became more and more evident with every visit. Many people inside the centre are asylum seekers who tell you that they escaped their countries to run away from war, violence, poverty. Many have physical trauma or torture scars. Their physical pain is then compounded by the isolation the detention brings with it. In some cases, people are already isolated by language barriers, when there is no one who can speak their

language in the centre.

You also have people seeking to visit a family member in Europe who are stopped at borders and locked up for months because the authorities think they are fraudsters. Often this is simply because the person isn't able to answer geographical questions about Belgium like "Where is the port of Antwerp?". A Tunisian lady who worked in Belgium, whose husband held a regular residence permit in Brussels, had been stopped and locked up for months simply because of administrative misunderstandings. Her husband was in the same country, but she still spent months locked up for no reason – losing her job and everything else.

Another shocking thing I witnessed was the logic of solitary confinement. In one case, a man was put in solitary confinement because he had attempted suicide several times as he was afraid of being tortured in his country of origin. In that cell, everything is put in place so that people don't kill themselves – there's the helmet that prevents you from banging your head against the wall, things to prevent you from biting yourself, and you're left with no blankets so you don't hang yourself.

I realized the system stops you from harming yourself not to prevent suicide, but to increase the number of deportations. They preserve your life only to then put you on a plane to a country where you can be tortured and killed.

It pained me to hear people making plans for when they would leave the centre, some would even invite you to lunch at their home, while I knew they would most likely be deported in the end.



Mehmet

Story of violence in detention and deportation

Mehmet (a fictitious name) is a Turkish citizen who lived in Italy for fifteen years before being deported to Türkiye. He tells us about his experience in the Milan and Turin immigration detention centres, and about his deportation.

I had built a life in Italy over fifteen years. My brother was here. My nephews were here. It was home. I made mistakes – I dealt drugs, I served my time in prison for it. But the day I finished my criminal sentence, I learned of a new punishment. The judge told me I would never get documents, that I was a danger, and confirmed my expulsion. My life in Italy was being erased.

They locked me up in the immigration detention centre in Milan. Let me be clear: it was worse than prison.

In prison, there were rules. I could eat better, sleep better, take a shower, and request to see my family. But in the detention centre, there are no rules. Each inspector made up their own.

The food was scarce and bad. The environment was violent and dirty. The rooms were small, with four beds and filthy mattresses. The blankets were always dirty. If you called someone, no one answered. If you wanted to hurt yourself, no one cared.

And there was nothing to do the whole day, just staying in your room. They treat you like an animal in a cage, not like a person. They think that you will be deported, so why should they care about you? The only freedom was being able to use our own phone.

I appealed the deportation order. But after 30 days, they took me to Milan Airport. I refused to board the plane. I fought back, and the pilot refused to take off. During the struggle, I hurt my arm. The doctor was there, but he didn't write anything down; he seemed to agree with the immigration office.

For refusing to leave, I was punished. I was taken back to the detention centre, where I was held for over six months. Then they transferred me to the location in Turin because in Milan they didn't want more problems. There, they took our phones away. I went on a hunger strike for 16 days. I lost 16 kg, but they told me no one cared if I died.





In the end, exhausted and broken, I accepted what they called “voluntary” return. But there was nothing voluntary about it. They took me by force: they tied my legs, threw me into a van, and threatened me. They boarded me in Turin, even if they wrote on my passport that I could only be deported from Milan and didn’t even put a stamp to register that I was leaving the country, and I was taken back to Türkiye.

I had lived in Italy since I was a young man. I never went back to Türkiye in all those fifteen years.

I want to return to Italy. I had built my life there; it is the only place that truly feels like home.



↖ ↗ Mehmet is not depicted in these photos. They are included here as their experiences closely reflect his own. The first photo shows a person protesting against his detention by sewing his lips shut as a form of resistance. The second photo shows a person with visible signs of violence suffered during detention and deportation attempts, including bruising around the neck. Both photos were taken at the Milan detention centre and shared with Mai più lager – No ai CPR.

© Mai più lager – No ai CPR

Eleonora

The ongoing struggles of working as an immigration lawyer

Eleonora Celoria is an immigration lawyer in Italy. In her testimony, she shares her experience in defending people in detention and subjected to a deportation order.



I met him in the Turin immigration detention centre - an educated man, articulate and resilient. He had avoided psychiatric drugs his whole life, even in prison. But after weeks in the immigration detention centre, his spirit was breaking. "It feels as though there is no way out," he told me. **Several people held in immigration detention accept to take sedatives like Lexotan just to endure the day.** These medications are often abused by those who manage the centres as a way to control people.

This is a system of rushed hearings and scarce communication. I am often notified in the afternoon either the day before or on the very day of a detention validation hearing. Until recently, the detention centre had only landline telephones, so a detainee's ability to call me depended entirely on the goodwill of the staff. If contact with the lawyer of choice is impossible, the court appoints a public defender who receives the file the same day - often just a deportation order and a claim of "dangerousness" without explanation.

The environment itself is striking. You enter through a huge gate into a courtyard. There is a room where detainees wait before their hearing, completely bare except for a single bench. Police officers and security personnel are also there - often two to four officers for each detainee, a visibly overwhelming ratio. Interpreters are rarely available. If someone does not speak Italian we rely on another detainee or even Google Translate. I have started to learn Arabic myself, just to bridge the gap.

My clients come via diverse paths, but they all describe the same void. Life inside the detention centre is harsher than prison. There are no activities, no schedule, and - unlike in prison - no release date to hold on to. Less than half of detainees are eventually deported from the Turin immigration detention centre, often suddenly. People are not told in advance and may wake up to find themselves surrounded by officers and forced onto a plane. The others are trapped in a limbo, their lives on indefinite hold.

This limbo creates ruptures that break my clients and challenge my work. Access to medical records is a constant struggle; there is no clear procedure, and each case is different. When there was an uprising in the Turin centre, some of the detainees were suddenly moved to Bari. It took five days before we could speak again. One of them was later sent to Albania. Detainees are never allowed their own cell phones, so contact remains fragile. But when they manage to find a way, they often call every day just to hear a voice from the outside.

I think of my client, and all the others, calling just to hear a voice. I think of the Lexotan, the void, the sudden and violent transfers, and the legal battles fought in rooms surrounded by four officers for a single detainee. I also think of their families, children and partners waiting for them - people they don't know if they'll ever be able to return to - and with whom they struggle to communicate.

This is the daily reality of my work: rushed hearings, scarce communication, limited medical access, and clients living in a limbo that many describe as worse than prison.



A protest by justice practitioners against immigration detention systems in Turin.
© ASGI

Anoek



When deportation separates a family

In September 2022, Sam, a Rwandan man was held for nearly four weeks in the Caricole detention centre near Brussels, Belgium. After his deportation, he was arrested in Rwanda. The Move coalition, a Belgian campaign against immigration detention, spoke to his Belgian wife, Anoek, to recount his story. A version of this story first appeared on the Move Coalition website.⁶

My husband, Sam, is a professional dancer from Rwanda. We were living together in Tanzania, building a life that felt full of movement and possibility. In the summer of 2022, he went on tour in Europe. After a string of sold-out shows in France, he stopped in Belgium for a few days to see his family and friends before heading on to Romania for another performance. When the tour ended and he tried to return to Belgium, everything fell apart. Even though he had a valid biometric passport and a return ticket to Tanzania, he was arrested at Brussels Airport — without explanation.

A visa in his passport from 2021 was suddenly deemed suspicious. He was interrogated for hours, accused of fraud, and transferred to the Caricole detention centre near the airport. He is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. A large part of his family was massacred when he was six years old. He spent long months in a refugee camp in Congo. Then, he lived under harsh conditions in Kigali, searching for his family. Sam didn't speak for seven years as a child. He told me later, 'I could have died that day,' referring to the interrogation at Brussels Airport.

For nearly four weeks, he was locked up. He didn't tell me much about Caricole, except that he shared a room with several men and the lights stayed on at night. As a dancer used to ovations, he suddenly felt treated like a criminal. We were in the middle of adopting our second child. His presence was required to continue the legal adoption procedure before the court.

Belgium initially wanted to send him back to Romania. In a desperate move, his lawyer secured a deal for a "voluntary" return to Tanzania on one condition: the page of his passport containing the 2021 visa had to be physically removed on the instruction of the public prosecutor.

We thought this was the solution and that he would be able to come back home safely. But we were wrong.

When he left Zaventem (Brussels Airport), the police handed Sam's passport directly to the airline crew. During the stopover in Rwanda, the airline crew gave it to the Rwandan police. Not only was this done without any explanation to the Rwandan authorities (despite the Belgian immigration detention services having promised an accompanying letter), but his passport was filled of stamps marked "FAKE" on multiple pages. And worse: the page with the alleged fake visa had been cut out and then perfectly re-glued — a copy of the original.

Sam was imprisoned in a Rwandan prison for terrorists. We found him only after forty-eight hours thanks to some family friends. Thanks to the Belgian consul, he was released after three weeks, but he cannot leave the country. He lives in a small room in Kigali, and the stress has ravaged him. He suffers from migraines, dizziness, and respiratory problems.

For me, it has been extremely stressful too. I had a demanding job as an architect, and two vulnerable and traumatised children asking for their dad. In the evenings and at night, after several hours spent comforting the children,

⁶ Move Coalition. Available at: <https://movecoalition.be/temoignage/anoek-sam-wou-terug-naar-huis-naar-zijn-familie/>

who eventually fell asleep in tears, exhausted from crying, I tried to contact organisations, lawyers, consuls, ambassadors and Sam's connections in Kigali. My hair was falling out. I was gaining weight. I even lost my voice, literally.

In June 2023, ten months after his arrest, the children and I could finally visit him in Rwanda. We had only seven days together. Our family was whole for a brief moment.

This affair has broken our entire life, both as a couple and as a family. Sam now teaches dance to underprivileged children in Kigali. In the beginning returning to Tanzania was impossible because, under Tanzanian law, a man cannot be dependent on his wife. Now this law has changed, however, it is impossible to obtain a work permit as a dancer because it is considered that there are already enough dancers in Tanzania.

We will never be able to forget what happened.

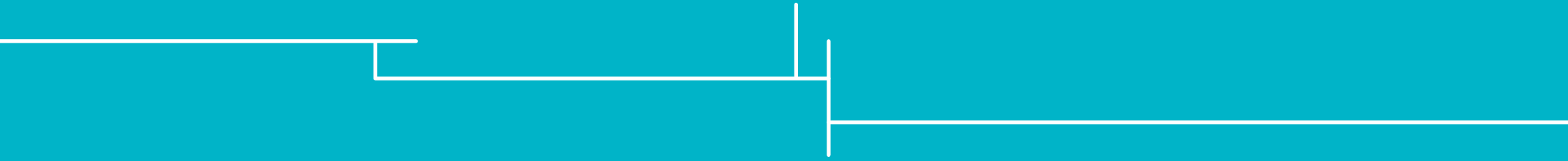
The decision made that day by a Belgian immigration officer has had a permanent impact on the course of our lives. It has marked the children forever. It separated us (even though we were married in Belgium). It has cost us our health, psychologically and physically, and has had a heavy financial impact.

The consequences are enormous and continue to be felt today, three years later. We are pursuing the case in court – not only for ourselves, but also for the hundreds of voiceless people who face similar, or even worse, situations.

The hope for justice is the fire that gives us strength.



↑ Photo of Sam and Anoeck with their children.



Life After Return

Reintegration after returning from Europe



Return is often portrayed as an ending. For those who experience it, it is just the beginning of a new struggle.

Whether by force or by choice, coming 'home' after life in Europe is a profound dislocation. It can mean the abrupt end of medical treatment, a return to economic hardship, and the pain of social stigma. The person who returns is not the same person who left; they are often caught between two worlds, fully belonging to neither.

The support available, if it exists at all, is rarely enough to mend the rupture. For some, home offers a sanctuary of family love. For others, it is a cage that traps the skills and spirit they developed abroad.

Research shows that deportations – **forced returns** – **tend to produce heavy burdens**: psychological distress, weaker family links, and more difficult economic recovery than for those who prepare for return voluntarily.⁷ Yet, these stories show fragile this distinction can be. **The thin line between “voluntary” and “forced” return is often blurred by pressure, fear, or lack of a real choice.**

These stories dismantle the myth of a simple homecoming.⁸ They reveal that deportation processes do not end at the border; rebuilding life with dignity requires commitment – from governments, communities, and society at large – to those who begin again after return.

⁷ FAIR project, *Working paper: outcomes of enforced return and post-return* (2024). Available at : <https://fair-return.org/working-paper-outcomes-of-enforced-return-and-post-return/>

⁸ Kalir, B. (2017), *Between 'voluntary' return programs and soft deportation. Sending vulnerable migrants in Spain back 'home'*. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315619613-4/voluntary-return-programs-soft-deportation-barak-kalir>



One day, the immigration police arrived at our home and informed us that we were being deported. It was a shock. One moment we were living our lives, the next, we were being forced back to Georgia.



Photo of Maia during an interview with Samuel Hall's researchers in Rustavi, Georgia.

© Tornike Begiashvili for Samuel Hall



Maia

When deportation disrupts vital medical treatment

Maia currently lives in Georgia, her home country. She had moved to Austria to seek medical care for her daughter but was eventually deported back to Georgia.

One moment, we were living our lives. The next, the immigration police were at our door. “You are being deported,” they said. It was a shock. Just like that, our world was turned upside down.

We had come to Austria in 2017 out of desperation. My infant daughter had been misdiagnosed with meningoencephalitis in Georgia, and the wrong treatment left her with severe disabilities. We were calling an ambulance twice a week. The doctors here couldn’t help her. So, we sold a piece of land my mother had given me and moved, hoping for a miracle.

The kindness we found in Austria surpassed anything we could have imagined. They didn’t treat us like strangers. My daughter finally received the medical care she needed. Her condition improved, and for the first time in years, I felt hope. In Georgia, I had a career as a painting teacher, but I would have given anything to see my daughter healthy.

Then, life tested us again. In December 2017, I was diagnosed with cancer. At forty-four, I fought through surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. I was determined to survive for my children. Our life stabilized again. My son excelled in school and football. We were integrated. We had found a fragile peace.

But in February 2024, that peace was shattered. One day, the police arrived at our door. We were given no time to prepare, to pack our lives, to arrange for the continuity of our medical care.

The journey back to Georgia was heartbreaking. We arrived without support; without the medical care we relied on. Since our return, we’ve struggled to readjust. The medical system here is not what it was in Austria. My daughter still needs surgeries. I need ongoing cancer treatment. The stability we fought so hard for was ripped away.

I left Georgia because I couldn’t find the medical services my daughter needed. We were deported back to the very same reality we had escaped.

From my personal experience, I would say the same thing to the EU countries: people who come for treatment should not be deported. Their situation should be carefully studied, and their needs should be met. We should be given the chance to receive full treatment.

Obaseki

A journey of hopes, hardships and return

Obaseki (a fictitious name), a man in his forties from Benin, attempted migration to Europe but was deported in 2021. Returning to Nigeria, he relied on his family for support and now reflects on his journey, advocating for safer migration pathways and greater recognition for returnees.

I returned to Nigeria in 2021 carrying a deep sense of shame. I had left with my family's support and their hopes riding on me. I came back with nothing.

My plan was ambitious, but it was born from necessity. My father had lost his job, and our family had returned to farming just to survive. I saw no future. So, I crafted a pathway: from Nigeria to Türkiye, then to Russia, and finally through the forests of Belarus and Poland to Germany. My brother agreed to fund my journey, investing in this dream of a better future for all of us. I believed in the pathway.

But in Russia, the plan crumbled. The price for the next leg of the journey skyrocketed. My agent told me I would have to work to afford it, but as an immigrant with expiring documents, finding work was impossible. The cold was relentless. In 2021, my papers expired, and I was deported.

Back in Nigeria, the shame was a physical weight. I couldn't face people. I went to Cotonou for two years, hiding, hoping for a different outcome. When I finally returned to my family in Nigeria in 2022, they welcomed me, but they also held me accountable. "You need to be honest about what happened," they told me. "You need to show that decisions don't always lead to the expected outcomes."

Their honesty forced me to rethink my own shame. I began to see the system clearly. The problem isn't just the dangerous journeys; it's the lack of safe, regular pathways.

However, I believe that European governments should increase the number of visas for regular migration. This would reduce the number of irregular migrants and improve the situation for everyone involved.

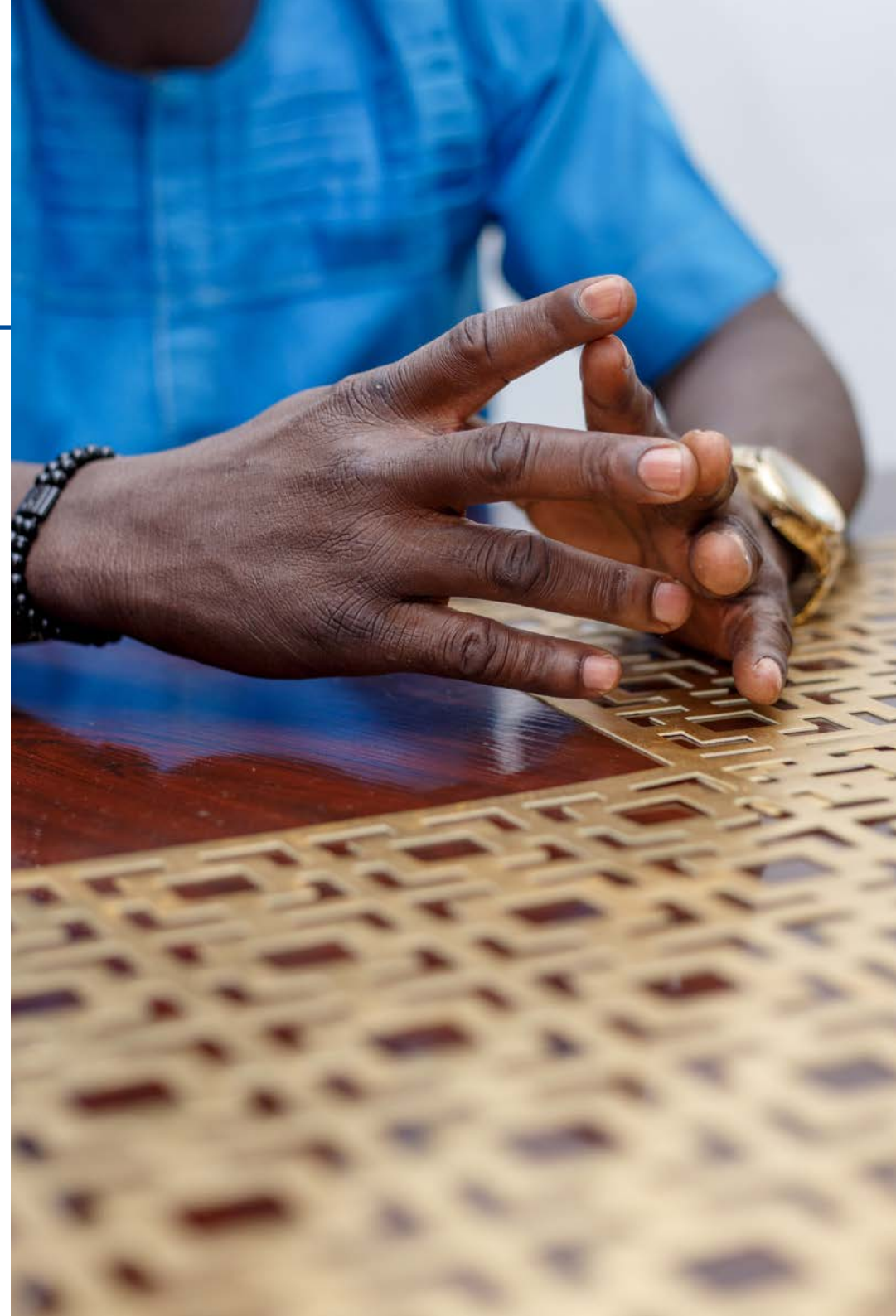


My perspective now is not just that of a failed migrant, but of a critic. Before returning migrants, Europe should ask if they are needed elsewhere in the EU. Someone might not be needed in Germany but could be valuable in Slovakia or other places lacking workers. It's not just about economics; it's about cultural assimilation, too.

My family's lesson in honesty was a gift. It allowed me to finally say what I now believe: **Most people who travel don't intend to come back. They go to seek success, not failure. We shouldn't be treated as though we've come back empty-handed.**

The courage to seek a better opportunity should be respected. My return is not a mark of failure, but a chapter in a story that is still being written. People who return should be seen as individuals who had the courage to try, and who have returned with experience and a clearer vision, not empty hands.

→
Photo of Obaseki during an interview with Samuel
Hall's researchers in Benin City, Nigeria.
© Ofure Ighalo for Samuel Hall



Rayan



Seeking safety, finding hardship

Born in Iraq, Rayan fled with his family in 2004 to seek safety in Europe. After years in the Netherlands navigating asylum centres and uncertainty, his family was denied residency in 2011 and returned to Iraq, facing challenges of reintegration and limited support.

I learned a brutal lesson as a child: home is not a place you can always return to.

My journey began in 2008 when my family, seeking safety and stability, left Iraq in the midst of political unrest. My parents, worried about our future, decided to head to Europe. We travelled by land to Türkiye, where we spent one month waiting for the right opportunity to continue our journey. The smuggling networks that promised us safe passage to Europe were costly.

We embarked on our journey flying from Türkiye to Thailand where we stayed for a week. From Thailand we flew to Macao, in China. There, we were closely scrutinized by the police in the airport as they noticed our passports were fraudulent. However, after staying for a week in Macao, we flew to the Netherlands. I was just a young boy at the time, and I still remember the fear of being caught, the nervousness we as family experienced.

For the next seven years, the Netherlands was my life. We moved between asylum centres, living in cramped, uncertain conditions. But as a child, you adapt. I learned Dutch. I made friends. I built a life, always with the quiet hope that this would become permanent. It was a fractured existence, but it was the only one I knew.

Then, in 2011, the rejection came. The stability we had pieced together was shattered. My parents were given no choice; we were forced to return to an Iraq I barely remembered, a country still grappling with the instability we had originally fled.

The return was a different kind of shock. I struggled to adjust to the local customs, the language, the political realities. It felt like stepping backwards into a life I barely remembered.

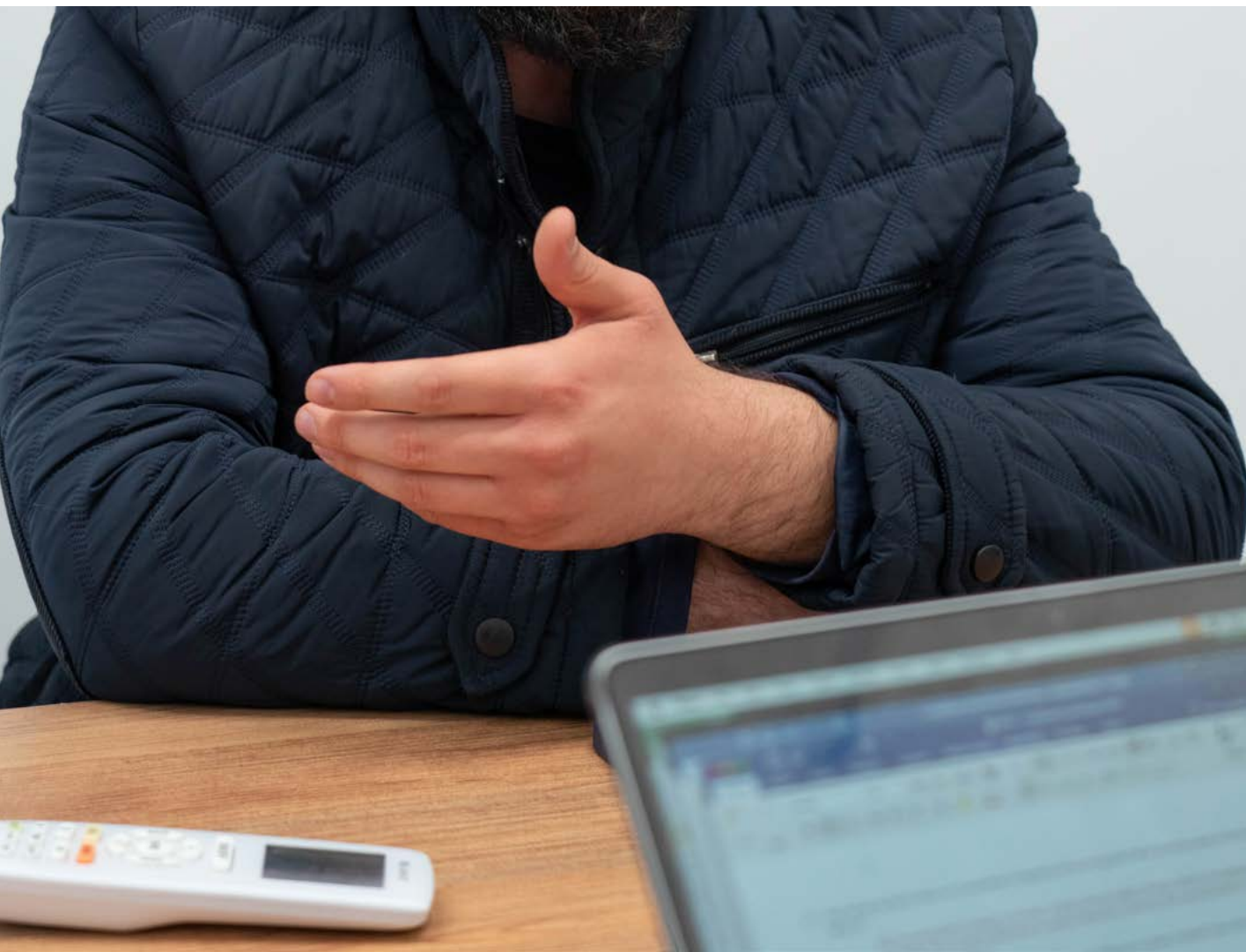
But amidst the hardship, there was one pure, welcoming moment. My grandfather, upon hearing we were coming back, told my mother, “**Come back, even if I sell my shirt, please come back.**” His home became our sanctuary. In his relief, I felt the unconditional love of a family, a stark contrast to the conditional tolerance of the immigration system.

That love is why I stay now, even as I see the same cycle beginning again. I have a cousin who talks constantly about migrating to Europe. He has a job, a family, a house. But he is convinced that Europe is the answer.

Every time he mentions it, I try to discourage him. “Why would you even do that?” I ask him. I tell him about the high cost of an uncertain future. I explain that the journey itself is a trauma, and the welcome is never guaranteed.

My family lost our chance at a future in Europe. But in losing it, I found a responsibility. The government should aid people who return, both financially and emotionally. They should talk to us, understand our needs.

But until they do, I will be the one to offer a warning, born from lived experience: sometimes, the dream you are chasing is a mirage, and the home you left behind, for all its flaws, is the only sanctuary you have.



Life in the Netherlands was far from what we had hoped. Yet we kept hoping our stay would become permanent.

↑ Photo of Rayan during an interview with Samuel Hall's researchers in Duhok, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.
© Abdulwahab for Samuel Hall





Hajar

The weight of coming back

Hajar, a 35-year-old man from Kurdistan, left for Germany in 2015 seeking freedom and opportunity but returned home in 2016. Despite his skills and experience, he faces unemployment and instability, highlighting the need for better support and recognition for returnees.

Once I returned, life has been full of struggles. There's unemployment, instability, and a lack of safety, despite my advanced skills and experience. I feel trapped and underappreciated.

They say migration is a journey. For me, it was a snap into a different life. In Germany, I worked hard, but I experienced freedom. The law protected you. Everything was available. I felt like I was finally living, not just surviving. I was in my thirties, but I felt young. If I had stayed, I might still look twenty-one.

Then, I had to come back to Kurdistan in 2016.

Coming back was like a door slamming shut. Every day since has felt darker, like living in a deepening shadow. The freedom, the safety, the structure—it was all gone, replaced by the same sadness and problems I had left behind. The system itself becomes a cage.

My mind is my biggest curse. It remembers what it's like to function. In Germany, my brain worked perfectly. I could do anything. I installed sewage systems for entire camps. I know construction like an engineer. I thought, why don't I do this here? Start a business? But the moment I returned, my brain felt locked. Problems, oppression, and the constant stress of having no salary or stability struck my mind like a physical blow. I know how to build, but here I am, jobless.

The people around me are a constant reminder. They look at me and ask, "Why did you come back? Don't you see the hardship here?" Their judgement is a weight. You return expecting challenges, but these looks, these questions – they crush your spirit. When I see friends who are still abroad, I feel a deep sorrow. Nobody in my shoes would be happy.

Now, my friends tell me they'd go abroad no matter what, even if it's hell. I warn them. I say, "It's not like 2015 anymore. They deport people now." But they insist, "Even if they deport me twenty times, I'd still go." I understand them completely. Because I know what they're fleeing.

I am a skilled man living like an unskilled one. I am the ghost of the person I was abroad. NGOs, development agencies and the government need to understand this. We aren't lazy. We are trapped. The support promised often vanishes, misused by the system. If they truly want to help, they should support us in building real things – houses, businesses – and find us sustainable jobs.

I have the will and the skill to contribute. I just need someone to unlock the door.



Rethinking Return: Alternatives, Partnerships and Human Rights

The stories in this booklet have been collected at a crucial time for EU migration policies. In March 2025, the European Commission proposed a new regulation establishing a ‘Common European System for Return’, which aims at escalating and speeding up deportations. Yet, FAiR research shows that focusing on deportations, punitive policies, coercion, and detention is not the long-term solution it is presented to be. It is not working the way we are currently doing it.

Instead, alternatives to return, policies adapted to the needs of returnees, and serious upholding of fundamental rights offer a more effective and humane approach to migration policy.

Alternatives to return should be prioritised.

FAiR research highlights alternatives to return, such as more accessible and stable regularisation options and inclusive policies enabling access to rights. These policies create social cohesion, support labour markets, and provide long-term economic and social benefits. Recognising non-return as a structural reality allows policymakers to plan more effectively and humanely.⁹

Invest in return and reintegration programmes that truly take into account the needs of returnees.

Support for people returning to their home country should be sufficient and adequate to respond to their needs. Their voices and experiences should be

included in policy-making, so that return and reintegration approaches are sustainable and truly helpful.¹⁰

Human rights must be protected and applied.

Every person, regardless of their status, deserves protection and serious access to fundamental rights throughout the return process. This is fundamental to European values. Procedural justice, independent human rights monitoring and post-return oversight are essential to ensure human dignity.¹¹

Finally, any policy response should prioritise the voices of people who are undocumented or who have experienced return or deportation, as well as civil society actors. Without these measures, FAiR research reveals that this population will continue to live undocumented in the shadows of Europe’s migration system. FAiR recommendations foster safety, build public trust and create sustainable solutions that protect human dignity both in the EU and in non-EU countries. Ultimately, migration is not a crisis to be managed. It is a shared human condition to be governed with care, accountability, and vision.

More information about the recommendations and the research developed by FAiR, can be found on the Project’s website: www.fair-return.org.

9 FAiR. (2025b). *Policy brief: Alternatives to return policies*. FAiR. <https://fair-return.org/policy-brief-alternatives-to-return-policies/>

10 FAiR. (2024). *Discourse and policies: silencing returnees and the need for more inclusive return policies*. FAiR. https://fair-return.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/D4.1_Policy_Stances_web.pdf

11 FAiR. (2025a). *Legal review of fundamental rights in return processes*. FAiR. <https://fair-return.org/working-paper-legal-review-of-fundamental-rights-in-return-processes/>

Finding Agreement in Return (FAiR) is a 3.5 year research project funded by Horizon Europe and coordinated by Erasmus University Rotterdam. Bringing together nine partners from both European and non-European countries, the project aims to strengthen the governance of return migration in the EU. The project brings together multidisciplinary expertise from academic, policy research, governmental, and migrant advocacy organisations across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.



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