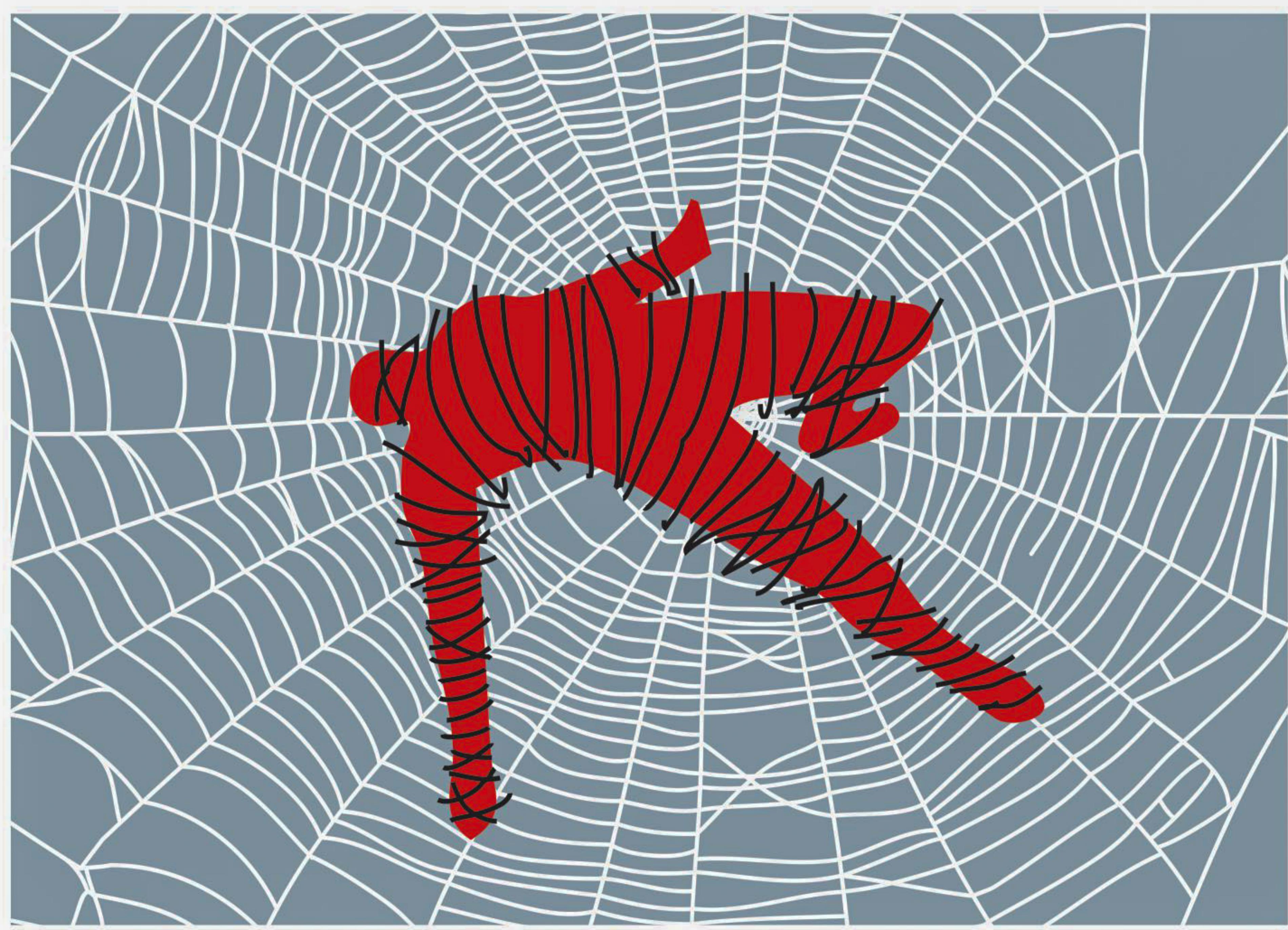


FROM THE SHORES OF HELL AND BACK

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MOHAMMAD SAIDUL
KANDI, 35

On the night that I was supposed to get on the boat to Italy from Libya, I was very scared. The currents were very rough and the boat was overcrowded. I told my driver that I don't want to go. He put a gun on my chest and forced me to get on the boat. It was dangerous. After traveling for 17 hours, the Libyan coastguard caught us and sent us back.



Those who brainwash these people, do so in such a way that they have no other option but to take the bait," says Abrar.

As such, it's not a surprise that there are a few among the 157 returnees who want to go abroad again, despite being cheated. 22-year-old Shahnewaz Khan is one of them. He paid a dalal eight lakh taka to go to Italy via Libya. He was, however, beaten up with PVC pipes, sold and resold in Libya before the police came to his rescue.

"I feel like I need to go outside again and earn money. If I could have gotten a loan here, then I could have started a business. But that's not happening. My education background isn't too good either. I have no other option," explains Shahnewaz.

Giorgio Gigauri, chief of IOM mission in Bangladesh, explains that they are up against very 'powerful criminals.'

"For at least a decade, we have been working on evacuating Bangladeshis out of Libya... migrants are still going through Libya trying to get to Europe," he says. "There is something about the information given to people that the human mind only processes selectively...for some reason, the brain will process the one good story and will ignore the thousand bad stories," Gigauri tells Star Weekend.

"There are very powerful criminal elements at play here—smugglers and traffickers who are basically modern-day slave traders and make millions. They prey on the most vulnerable," he adds.

Problems also lie in their reintegration into society. Government agencies mainly focus on the physical injuries of the

migrants and till date, lack a policy to focus on the psychosocial counseling of these victims.

A number of the victims who returned from Libya last week told Star Weekend that they have no clue as to what their next plan of action would be. Most of them are being pressured to return the borrowed money. Many of them broke down in tears while talking of their experiences in Libya.

21-year-old Mannan Kazi says that he begins to shiver whenever he thinks about his days in Libya. Even though he has returned home, he can't eat properly.

"After returning to Bangladesh, my

MOKSED MAMUN, 22

It was a team effort. The Bangladeshi dalals there would talk to us and threaten us for money, and then they would send the Libyans to come and beat us up. They tortured us in a very organised manner

YOUSEF MOLLA, 26

I think even people who are given death sentence in Bangladesh live better lives than those who are jailed in Libya. The way they tortured us was despicable. People were even kidnapped by the mafia from the jail.

parents took me to a doctor. I got on a weighing scale and realised that I had lost almost 20 kilos. I was 65 before going to Libya. My parents started crying at the sight of my weight," says Kazi

"My situation is very bad. My family lost all its money because of me. My family also had to take a loan just to take me to the doctor. My chest pains every time I think about the days to come," he laments.

Kazi had gone to Libya last year along with his cousin's husband Tofail. Like many other Bangladeshis, he too was cheated and sold and resold a number of times. According to Kazi, Tofail's father suffered a stroke and died soon after he was told that his son was trapped in Libya and that they needed to send more money.

Researchers believe that the government hasn't been doing enough to solve this crisis.

When the Director General of the Wage Earners Welfare Board, Gazi Mohammad Julhash, was asked regarding the 157 Bangladeshis who arrived last week, he

said: "IOM brought them. We just went to the airport and received them. I am not really aware about how they went to Libya or what they did there, we just received them at the airport."

The inadequate implementation of the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act has only made things worse. There have been at least 4,152 cases filed under the trafficking act. However, the number of convictions is just around 10 to 15 per year. According to the Bangladesh Counter Trafficking-in-Persons, of the 778 trafficking cases filed in 2017, only one witnessed a successful conviction.

These are numbers that can definitely hurt Bangladesh. As Shakirul puts it: "Bangladesh is currently in Tier 2 (Trafficking in persons report). We could not do much last year. Not a lot of cases have been filed and there haven't been many convictions. There is a chance for us to go below tier 2 and that is just a shame."

*THE NAMES OF THE VICTIMS HAVE BEEN CHANGED.