

REPAIR PROJECT

# FRANCE

## JULIA'S STORY



***Fleeing an abusive marriage, Julia\* was granted protection in France in 2021 but bureaucratic delays and administrative barriers mean that two years later she and her children are still waiting to be safely reunited.***

"I was separated from my children in 2019 when I left Gambia following a forced marriage.

The father of my three children died and I was forced to remarry. My new husband was controlling and abusive, and one of my daughters was forced to undergo female genital mutilation. I feared for my other daughter, and even for myself, that we would be forced to suffer the same.

When I left, I made arrangements for my children to go into hiding and be looked after at a friend's house. Unfortunately, after I arrived in France I lost contact with them several times because my friend was also forced to flee. Her husband didn't want any

*\*Name has been changed*

trouble and threatened that he would tell my new husband where the children were, so she went into hiding with my children so that they would be safe.

We finally made contact again in 2021. Since then, my kids have been living with my sister in Banjul, another city in the Gambia, where they are safer but conditions are still difficult. They are now 7, 11 and 14 years old.

I was granted subsidiary protection in France in 2021 and became eligible for family reunification. In November 2022, the Restoring Family Links (RFL) service of the French Red Cross started helping me with my application. We had to gather all the information needed to complete the visa application files for my three children. Unfortunately, there is no French embassy in Gambia so we have to apply through the French Embassy in Dakar in Senegal. Once the files are ready, my children and a legal representative have to book an appointment at the embassy and travel there from Gambia to submit their visa applications in person.

In February 2023, the French Red Cross emailed VFS, the service provider that operates the online platform for making appointments at the embassy. We explained we wanted to make an appointment to submit my children's visa applications. Following



This project is funded by the European Union



To find out more about the achievements and findings of the REPAIR project – read our online report, and access our online toolkit using the QR Codes.



Online Toolkit



Online Report

our initial email request to VFS, we tried to log on to the website to make an appointment. We kept trying again and again, but every time we get the same message: "no slots available for this appointment category". Without this appointment, my children cannot submit their application to the embassy and it is impossible to start the process.

Two months after the first attempt to make an appointment, a lawyer took charge of my case to appeal the embassy's failure to register my children's visa applications within a reasonable period of time. The lawyer explained that it had been impossible to make an appointment on the VFS website for more than two months, that we had not received any reply to our email requests to the embassy or the VFS service provider, and that it was urgent for my children and myself to be reunited in view of the separation and trauma we have already experienced.

A few weeks later, I received a decision from the court. They did not recognise the urgent nature of my children's situation. According to the court's decision, the fact that my children are being looked after by my sister is sufficient to guarantee their safety. For the court, the separation we have already suffered and the risks and hardships my children still face don't seem to count.

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My sister is currently looking after a household of seven children, my three and four of hers. They don't go to school and live in difficult conditions. Every month, I send some money to my sister to help cover their basic needs.

Every day, I wait. I still haven't been able to make an appointment with the embassy. My children's applications have been ready to be submitted for months, at the moment this failure to give us an appointment is the only thing holding up the process and prolonging our separation. The situation is unbearable; for me, my sister, and my children, and every day I miss them more."

*Images are for illustration only*