



# Shattered Dreams and Return of Vulnerability: Challenges of Ethiopian Female Migration to the Middle East

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## Introduction

In October 2013, the Government of Ethiopia officially banned domestic workers from moving abroad for employment (Al Jazeera, 2013). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson stated: "This exodus, being pushed by illegal human traffickers, has created immense problems for the people of the nation, for the image of the country... It is affecting a lot of youngsters who are pushed out, deceived by the human traffickers, that has created an immense socio-economic problem for the country" (Al Jazeera, 2013). The Government of Ethiopia has recognized and is working to address the challenges of female domestic worker migration to the Middle East. Over the past decade there has been an unprecedented rise in Ethiopian female migration to the Middle East for domestic work, such

that this is now the primary migration and return corridor from Ethiopia. Figures on the scale of this flow are unknown as the vast majority of women migrate irregularly, however, it is estimated that up to half a million women emigrate annually (Stichting Dir, 2010).

The challenges of this flow are receiving increasing attention in Ethiopia, and as highlighted above are recognized by the Government of Ethiopia as having a negative impact on the country. This brief highlights the unique elements of this flow, the challenges emerging from this migration and the policy implications of this migration stream. The information in this brief is based on 41 interviews conducted with domestic

worker returnees in Addis Ababa, 19 key stakeholder interviews, interviews with migrant brokers, survey data collected for the IS Academy on Migration and Development<sup>1</sup> project from February to April 2011 and observations made in Addis Ababa.

### Ethiopia Domestic Worker Migration to the Middle East

**Poorest of the Poor can Migrate-** It is widely accepted in migration that it is rarely the poorest that migrate (Skeldon, 1997; de Haas, 2005). Migration involves having initial capital to pay the costs of migration. In the case of Ethiopia, women migrating for domestic work do not have to pay any significant up-front costs to a broker. A broker will pay the costs associated with their migration in exchange for their first three months of wages. In some cases, this will even include the broker paying their fees to get a passport. When women pay the costs of a passport and medical check themselves, their upfront costs can be as low as US\$ 60. The fact that women do not require any significant upfront costs to migrate means that the poorest of the poor can migrate in Ethiopia. This migration flow is, therefore, accessible to women in situations of extreme vulnerability, and furthermore, is highly attractive to them as an option to provide a potential opportunity to leave their situations.

**Regularization of migration does not offer protection over Irregular flows-** In 2011 the ILO conducted a study on female migrants to and from Ethiopia and concluded that women that migrate regularly do not have significantly different experiences than women who migrate irregularly. This is due to the fact that there are no options for protection provided by the Government of Ethiopia or Labour Brokers once women are in the Middle East. The primary determinant of women's experiences in the Middle East is the character of their employer. The vast majority of women migrate through a broker and has no idea of the households that they are going to work for, meaning that they play a game of chance in hoping to receive a good employer.

**Poor Treatment of Domestic Workers in the Middle East-** There are several reports of human rights abuses of domestic workers in the Middle East, however there are no official statistics on the frequency and forms of abuse (HRW, 2008; ILO, 2011; Mahdavi, 2011). Ethiopian female returnees cite several different forms of abuse including: beatings, indentured labour, not receiving food, not receiving payment, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and restricted movement (Kuschminder, forthcoming). Kuschminder also found that a normal situation

for a domestic worker in the Middle East is to be working 18 hours per day with no day off per week. In this situation, if the domestic worker is treated decently by their employer, this is a good situation from a comparative perspective. Treatment can be much worse including burnings, beatings resulting in hospitalization, and even death. In a socio-legal analysis of the situation, Vlieger best characterizes the situation as: "under the best of circumstances a domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia may be treated right, but she has no rights" (2011: 11).



<sup>1</sup> For more on the IS Academy on Migration and Development project see: <http://www.merit.unu.edu/themes/6-migration-and-development/is-academy/>



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### *Lack of Protection of Ethiopian Domestic Workers in the*

**Middle East-** Domestic workers are excluded from the labour legislation in most countries in the Middle East and lack rights to protect themselves against workplace abuse (Chammartin, 2004). Women have a lack of knowledge of their rights and the options available to them in the event of abuse. Women reported calling their broker when they were mistreated by their employer. In some situations the brokers would change the worker to a new house; however, in a few situations the brokers beat the women and sent them back to their employers. In some cases, women in negative situations fled the house of the employer and went to the police. By leaving the house of their employer, they violate their work contract, and are then placed in jail by the police. In some countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, women were relieved to be in prison where they had food and a bed, but this was greatly different in countries such as Syria where the prison conditions were poor. When in prison, women who attempted to contact the Ethiopian consulate reported not receiving any support. The Government of Ethiopia does not provide assistance to women in the Middle East as they do not have official embassies in most Middle Eastern countries and do not have the capacity to support the needs of their expatriates.

**Lost Dreams-** The majority of domestic worker returnees do not achieve their goals in their migration to the Middle East. The poor working conditions and challenges they face do not enable the majority to achieve their financial goals and change their living situations in Ethiopia. The average salary in the Middle East for an Ethiopian domestic worker is US\$150 per month. The majority remits all of this money to their families and in rare cases the families are able to save some of this money for their return. Upon return, most women have limited money that they have been able to bring back with them. Dreams of being able to “improve themselves” are not achieved and many women are in a worse situation from when they left. In the IS Academy: Migration and Development Survey over one quarter of female return migrants from the Middle East stated that their migration had been a mistake.

**Situations of Vulnerability upon Return-** A key challenge is that upon return many women remain in situations of vulnerability. Kuschminder found that over 60 per cent of returnees in her study were unemployed upon return, and of those that were employed, nearly half reported being underemployed. The lack of employment opportunities upon return was driving several women to consider re-migration, despite the challenges that they had faced.



**Lack of Support Services for Returnees-** Female returnees from the Middle East regularly require support services upon return. For women in situations of severe vulnerability, there is one shelter in Addis Ababa that provides support and comprehensive mental health and reintegration assistance. This shelter is struggling to find consistent funding to maintain its services and only provides assistance to those in dire need. There are several women however, that would benefit from general counseling, training opportunities, and employment opportunities.

### Root Causes of the Problem

In Ethiopia, there are several elements that are driving this migration flow. The first is poverty and unemployment. The majority of women that migrate to the Middle East do so for the employment opportunities. The female unemployment rate in urban areas of Ethiopia was 27 per cent in 2005 (Kirbu, 2012). In addition, underemployment is a large issue. Ethiopia has experienced high levels of inflation in recent years and wages have not increased to match inflation rates. Low skilled women's wages, therefore, often barely cover their transportation to their job, food, and shelter.

Secondly, there is a lack of effective regulation of illegal brokers in Ethiopia. In September 2009 the Government of Ethiopia passed a proclamation on Employment Exchange Services which increased the rules and regulations for Private Employment Agencies (PEAs). The unintended consequence of this policy is that the majority of PEAs were not able to meet the new conditions and became illegal agencies. From an outsiders perspective it is difficult to know if a PEA is legally registered or not, and business continued as usual for the now underground PEAs. A lack of enforcement has allowed the PEAs to continue to operate.

Thirdly, in instances where it is found that a woman has been trafficked and coerced into migrating, it is very difficult for the police to make an arrest. The police need evidence to prove that the woman has been trafficked, and often this evidence lies outside of Ethiopia, meaning that the police cannot access the information. Due to this situation, police are unable to arrest known traffickers.

In the Middle East, the lack of protection and assistance for domestic workers perpetuates the abuse faced by migrants. Ethiopian domestic workers do not have support from the Government of Ethiopia, as do domestic workers from countries such as the Philippines. The Government of Ethiopia acknowledges that they would like to provide such support to their national's abroad, but simply do not have the capacity.

### Policy Implications

As stated in the introduction, the Government of Ethiopia recognizes the gravity of this situation. Despite increasing knowledge in Ethiopia regarding the poor conditions in the Middle East, women continue to migrate to try their luck in hopes that they will be able to improve their own situation and that of their families. Too commonly, women return to Ethiopia in a worse situation then when they left. There is a question as to the burden and impact on society when so many young women are returning after a negative migration experience.

### Policy Recommendations

Although several recommendations could be made for the Government of Ethiopia, the objective of this policy brief is to put forth recommendations for international governments and organizations.

#### 1. Work with the Government of Ethiopia on Regulating Irregular Migration-

The Government of Ethiopia has shown great interest in working to manage this issue. Donor countries and international organizations should work with the Government of Ethiopia to develop effective solutions for managing emigration from Ethiopia to the Middle East. This could include providing support to create an organization such as the Philippines Overseas Employment Agency to regulate emigration and provide protection for emigrants abroad. This could include essential items such as: standardizing contracts, standardizing wages, registries of Ethiopians abroad, and creating mechanisms to provide protection to expatriates while they are abroad.





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**2. Increase Access to Information-** There is a great need for women to have access to information prior to their migration regarding the options available to them if they are in need. This information could include a list of emergency shelters and phone numbers that could be contacted if they need assistance and support upon arrival. Creating a handbook with information for women on their rights abroad in the countries of migration, and who can be contacted for support under different circumstances, would empower women to be able to reach out when necessary.

A second recommendation for increasing access to information is to work with an agency such as the ILO to create a website wherein domestics can rate employment agencies and employers in the Middle East (Vlieger, 2011). Making this an international website wherein domestics from all countries can provide access to information to each other would give women increased access to information in their decision making and potentially allow them to request or decline certain employers.

**3. Assistance in Countries of Migration-** Vlieger (2011) found that most safe houses in Saudi Arabia and the

United Arab Emirates are overly full, suggesting that there is a need for increasing safe houses and support for women in countries of migration. Agencies, such as, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) provide support to domestic workers in some Middle East countries and this is an acceptable agency for such support from the host country perspective. Vlieger (2011) suggests that free paralegal support could be provided to domestic workers in need through Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives of organizations in Saudi Arabia. Embassies and donors could work to support these initiatives with organizations in the Middle East to provide increased assistance to domestic workers.

**4. Reintegration Support-** There is a need for increased support services to returnees. This includes psycho-social support, shelters, training opportunities, and assistance in finding employment. Donor agencies could provide assistance to existing organizations, such as the Agar Shelter or the IOM in Addis Ababa. The Government of Japan has provided funding for reintegration support for returnees from the Middle East, but this program recently ended. Evaluating the effectiveness of such a program would assist to understand how to implement effective programs for reintegration support for this group.



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