



## GLOBAL ACTION PROGRAMME ON MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES



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# Promoting and protecting the rights of migrant domestic workers in transit: The case of Ethiopian women migrants

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## Summary

In the absence of a definition in international law and policy, transit migration is often described as migration to one country with the intention of seeking the possibility there to emigrate to another and final country of destination. It is often associated with undesirable irregular migration, human trafficking, circular and shuttle migration, and refugee movements.<sup>1</sup>

Women and girl migrants seeking employment as domestic workers abroad, are often compelled to transit through one or more hubs (internally and cross-border) prior to reaching their intended destinations due to bans on the deployment of women for work abroad, limited financial resources, labour brokerage, conflict, gender-based violence and social norms that chasten women. Migrants also transit through third countries due to lack of appropriate documentation and/or inability to meet the entry requirements of the intended country of destination.<sup>2</sup>

While their intention might be to transit briefly through the country, they are in many cases compelled to stay in the transit cit(ies)/countr(ies) for months or even years. Many migrant women seek employment in order to survive and fund their travel onwards to the intended countries of destination. Most migrant women in transit work in the informal sector where employment can be hazardous and undignified and where labour protections do not extend to them, especially if they are in irregular status. They are frequently vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

On arrival in the intended countries of destination, Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) often fall outside the protection of national laws as well as those of their home country. Repatriation is often complicated by

their inability to pay the penalties accumulated as a result of their working without permits and circumventing official exit channels in the country of origin. Consequently, domestic workers risk criminalization on both ends of the migration journey.

This brief is based on 30 in-depth qualitative interviews with returning women and girl migrants from South Wollo and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia who have sought employment abroad as domestic workers and ended up working in transit for a period equalling or exceeding six months. The interviews examine the determinants of transit migration among women who end up integrating the domestic work sector in transit, the working and living conditions of MDWs in transit destinations, the recruitment complex that interacts with transit women migrants along the different legs making up their migration route, and the extent to which their experience in transit affects their working and living conditions at destination.

The case of Ethiopia was chosen to illustrate the vulnerabilities of transiting migrant domestic workers with greater depth. The vulnerabilities of women in transit countries are not unique to Ethiopian women and similarities can be found in the accounts of, for example, Madagascan and Nepalese women domestic workers in transit.

### Determinants of migration among Ethiopian women

The majority of women migrants who were interviewed in the context of this research shared the belief that migration was the only means to escape poverty.

Failing the national examination, or lacking enough formal education (most subjects interviewed for this study had attained between three to ten years of formal schooling) are key impediments to finding decent employment opportunities in Ethiopia. Educational barriers are more significant among Ethiopian women because patriarchy leaves them with limited access to resources, education, and training opportunities relative to men, especially in rural areas.<sup>3</sup> As a result, Ethiopian women aged 20-46 are migrating at a higher rate than males. It is estimated that 200,000 women leave Ethiopia annually to work as domestic workers in the Gulf States and the Levant.

Divorced women, and particularly those with children, are more inclined to migrate as their economic conditions deteriorate following the breakup of the marriage. Divorced women also encounter stigma in Ethiopia, where they are often seen as “disgraced”.

“The most important reason for migrating was the conflict I had with my husband. I had to raise my child, and at that time, I didn’t have any money or source of money to do it. I decided to go to Saudi Arabia in order to raise my child. On top of everything, people in rural areas do not accept divorce and the woman gets all the blame for it,” 30-year-old divorced migrant woman.

Women who live in rural areas and agricultural settings are particularly encouraged to migrate as male household members provide the essential labour on the farm.

## Recruitment, migration route and conditions from transit to destination

### Recruitment of Ethiopian Domestic Workers

The Government of Ethiopia imposed a total ban on the deployment of Ethiopian domestic workers abroad in 2013. For travel, migrant women rely on informal networks of traders and informal financial services.<sup>4</sup> *Dalalas* or returning Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) who become brokers are the usual first point of contact for Ethiopian women wanting to migrate.<sup>5</sup> These networks are cheaper and provide women with a less restrictive alternative than working with recruitment agencies.<sup>6</sup>

With private employment agencies (PEAs), the recruitment process begins by registering the job seeker. In order to register for overseas employment, applicants must produce a valid passport, a recent photo and a guarantor with a copy of his/her valid identity card. PEAs sometimes keep recruits’ passports, particularly after the applicant has completed her/his medical examination to ensure “exclusivity”. Additionally, many applicants will have already paid a “head hunter” fee to an intermediary.

### Migration routes

**Illegal brokers, typically the initial point of contact at the village level (here South Wollo)**, facilitate migration to the city, where applicants meet second-tier brokers and smugglers. The move is an opportunity to work for higher wages in the city and to continue their journey. Migration for women from South Wollo involves travel by sea in unsafe vessels, crossing borders on foot and traveling at night to avoid being detained at borders and checkpoints.

**In contrast, most women migrants from Addis Ababa use PEAs**, reaching transit countries via air, particularly Yemen which is a preferred destination, Djibouti and Kuwait, before continuing by car to Saudi Arabia.

Whereas migrants from **Addis Ababa plan on settling temporarily in a transit country** to work and save money to continue their journey, those **from South Wollo usually stay in transit countries due to unforeseen and/or accidental costs** that appear after they have started their journey.

The length of stay in transit countries varies between several months and two years.

Migrants following irregular paths, are transported from Ethiopia to Djibouti hidden in cargo holds and typically, walk the Djibouti desert to the Red Sea before reaching Yemen. Some use Bossasso, Somaliland as a route to Yemen. It is known that a third tier of brokers and smugglers at transit routes in Djibouti and Yemen demand additional payment to bring migrants to the next destination. Migrants usually travel in 10- to 20-person groups when travel is via land and up to 140 individuals via boat. Many migrants spend up to four months in transit countries waiting for the necessary number of passengers to assemble before being able to depart.

## Working and living conditions in transit

Migrants who undertake irregular routes frequently encounter “unexpected costs” which often surface when migrants have reached a “point of no return”. Migrants must pay these additional costs by any means possible including by taking up jobs in transit countries. Smugglers advertise employment opportunities and a better life in the destination country to encourage the migrants to pay for the additional fees or offer loans, leaving migrants in a vulnerable situation.

“I did not have enough money when I began my journey. So I chose to stay in Djibouti and work to save some money to go to Yemen. However, after working for a while I understood that it would be difficult to save the money in a short time so I borrowed it from the broker.”

Those who migrate through irregular channels, because they perceive it as less costly or as their only option, are often unaware of the associated risks, and the living and working conditions in transit and destination countries. In general, South Wollo migrants who resort to illegal brokers experience great suffering in their journey. Women in particular, face physical and sexual abuse by smugglers or other criminal actors.

“I have experienced so much suffering... more than I ever imagined. I was raped by one of the brokers in Yemen. I was beaten, tortured, arrested and bullied in the journey (crying). Migrating this way makes you more determined to reach your destination. If you choose this journey, you will have to sacrifice your dignity, risk your health, and bear the excruciating pain, both physical and mental. There was one brave man who came with us in the boat from Tigray who was willing to give his life for the sake of us women. However, he couldn't protect us from the cruel brokers.”

27-year-old migrant from South Wollo: “The bandits in Ethiopia got to us as we were walking through the desert. We were six when we left Ethiopia. Three of us made it to Arabia but the other three died in route. The only reason we are here is because God wanted us to live. We have encountered many problems in our journey.”

Some migrants are taken for ransom.

24-year-old migrant from South Wollo: “I was made prisoner for two months in Yemen as I did not have money to pay. They demanded me to ask money from family or friends or from whatever source. If you cannot produce the amount they demand, you suffer a lot, and remain arrested until you bring the money. After two months, I borrowed the money from people I know in Saudi Arabia and gave it to the bandits. They released me as soon as I paid the requested amount.”

Others fall prey to trafficking/slave trade in the Yemen-Saudi border, where a broker can obtain USD 200 for “selling” a domestic worker to another broker.

34-year-old migrant from Addis Ababa: “After we got to Yemen, the brokers kept us in a small and dirty room until employers approached them. We had to sell our personal belongings one by one in order to survive. Before I started the journey, I was told that I would get employed right away, but the reality was the opposite. Employers come and choose whomever they wanted from the group. If you are lucky, you get picked, otherwise you are kept in a cage until the time comes when someone actually wants you.”

Conditions in transit countries are difficult. Employment and job security are not guaranteed for migrants especially those in an irregular situation.

Addis Ababa migrants who used air transport to reach Kuwait or Yemen where most have a job contract waiting for them, find themselves in relatively better conditions. Migrant workers hired through PEAs have official status in the country of transit and are able to work legally – even if most workers do not understand their contracts which are written in Arabic.

In contrast, South Wollo migrant domestic workers labour from early morning to late evening and are subject to low wages or do not receive wages even after months of employment. Salaries as domestic workers in Yemen and Kuwait range between USD100-200; others work in exchange for food and lodging. The working situation in Djibouti is similar to that of Ethiopia where domestic workers are paid a monthly salary of USD50-75. Under these circumstances, saving to continue their journey is a long process.

Ethiopian women in the Arab States are exposed to occupational safety and health risks, and exhibit mental health problems due to stress and fatigue. Many migrant workers in Yemen and Kuwait say they have been exposed to chemicals and not given the necessary protection. Many of those we have interviewed were once injured but did not receive necessary medical care. Employers simply replaced workers who had sustained injuries with more able workers.

Many Ethiopian migrant domestic workers experience culture shock on arriving in transit countries where they are exposed to different lifestyles and languages (Arabic), which they do not speak. Many have no privacy or space to accommodate their spiritual, social or familial interests. They are also required to abide by the cultural and religious rules of their employers.

“I was required to wear shelia and tub (clothes that they use to cover their head and body parts in Islam). My employer told me that she does not want to see me in front of her husband without it. I had no choice but to comply in order to keep my job,” 25-year-old migrant from Addis.

Extremely harsh working conditions, poor pay or lack of pay, barter activities such as food-for-work, and absence of labour protection drive many migrant workers to undertake illegal activities in transit countries.

39-year-old migrant from Addis Ababa: “As I arrived in Djibouti, I started working in a house as a domestic worker. The problem was that my salary was so low that I could not even cover my life expenses let alone save for my continued journey. My employer owned a hotel. There, I became a prostitute. I knew it paid better than being a domestic worker. I experienced assaults from customers; they believed they owned me because they paid.”

“I chose food-for-work over starvation. I worked for a man for more than three months. After the three months, I realized that if I ever wanted to leave I had to let him believe that I loved him and convince him to give me some money. I promised him that I would return his money and marry him. After some time, he trusted me and gave me the money that enabled me to go to Saudi Arabia by car. I never had any contact with him after I reached Saudi.”

## Working and living conditions at destination

Migrants that arrive in Saudi Arabia via the Yemen-Saudi border often do so with the help of brokers/smugglers and/or other Ethiopians who have already settled there.

These women have described their working conditions at destination as far better in terms of wages, rest days, benefits, and a steady salary than in transit. For example, Ethiopian domestic workers earn between USD 430-571 in Saudi Arabia.

Language barriers which are often stumbling blocks in transit, seem to fade away once migrants arrive to destination countries. Spending some time in Yemen and Kuwait can provide migrants with language and housework skills, which help prepare them to negotiate higher wages. Occupational health is better in the destination country (from using gloves to other protective gear) and usually provided by the employer. Even if employers fail to provide such protective equipment, migrant domestic workers are able to buy it themselves thanks to what they view as fair salaries.

Many irregular migrants lead their lives in constant fear of arrest and deportation, face job insecurity, are subject to exaggerated living expenses and are prone to abuse.

As noted previously, some migrant workers reported engaging in illegal activities to pay for living expenses and save money.

“Many migrants do not end up working as domestic workers at the destination. Particularly in GIZA, a border town between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, many engage in prostitution, production of local liquors, work at hookah places or find other informal work.”

27-year-old migrant from South Wollo: “I used to get paid around \$500 in my first job in Saudi Arabia. I was a domestic worker for three months. In the fourth month police started a door-to-door search for illegal migrants. My employer was afraid that they would arrest her if they found me in her house, so she helped me escape. I went into the nearest forest and began living with other Ethiopians there. Then, we began making alcohol in the desert to sell. Even though it’s illegal, it brought much more profit than working as domestic workers. I made around \$4,000 in that business until I got caught by the police and was arrested for three years.”

### Return and Reintegration

Only a few returnees are able to successfully reintegrate economically upon their return. This usually occurs when they are able to invest their remittances or accumulate savings. When this happens, re-migration is seen as a natural option.

A 30-year-old migrant appreciates life in Saudi Arabia: “I have been sending a significant amount of money for my family through informal money transfer schemes. They have been saving the money I sent and I built a house for me in South Wollo after I returned. I also sent a certain amount of money on a monthly basis for my family’s household consumption. I am definitely returning back whenever I get the chance.”

Although most women were grateful for their safe return, they were not always positive about their future in Ethiopia, especially if remittances failed to lift them from poverty.

Many of those interviewed for this study admitted that the remittances sent home were not enough to start an income-generating business upon their return; many still had to pay back the loans they took out for migrating. In Ethiopian rural areas, families live in extended clans. For many, the money received from remittances is just enough for household consumption or to provide education for children left behind. Many returnees admit that even though their life at the destination was far from perfect, at least

they were able to contribute to support their families and felt empowered. They too, see re-migration as the best option.

The return experience largely differs for those in South Wollo and Addis. For South Wollo natives, return means getting back the freedom to do what they like, to eat and drink what they choose, to go wherever they want, to get a good night’s sleep in their own bed no matter how small or rough. Unpleasant experiences in transit countries such as Djibouti and Yemen, give them a greater appreciation for their situation in Ethiopia. Migrants from Addis Ababa however, are more convinced of the benefits of migration, even when using illegal routes to reach the destination.

The meaning of return also differs for those who have been forcefully repatriated from Saudi Arabia. Most of these migrants express a desire for re-migration as soon as possible.

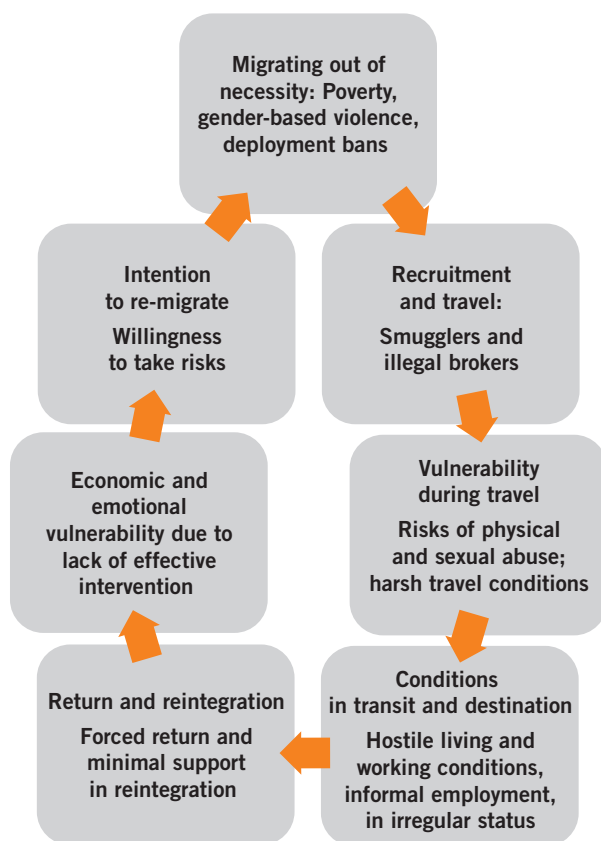
None of the returnees received governmental support upon return in South Wollo.

The Ethiopian diaspora is well respected in rural communities. They are seen as persons who have migrated to improve their families’ lives. Those who return without savings though are shunned by their families.

There is little or no awareness in the return communities, of the situation that women face in their migration journey. For some of these women, returning is disappointing.

24-year-old migrant from Addis Ababa: “My family wanted me to go back and work to help them. They do not understand what I went through. I also blame them for spending all the money I sent without investing it. I was mad because there was no improvement in their lives. They didn’t even replace the old furniture; they didn’t even repaint the house.”

**Figure 1. Vulnerabilities of MDWs in transit**



## Recommendations

- Design effective poverty reduction and employment policies to make migration a choice rather than a necessity for migrant women, including by providing vocational training with a focus on migration prone areas.
- Promote social dialogue on labour migration between countries of origin, transit and destination.
- Strengthen the capacity of trade unions in and between countries of origin, transit and destination to extend maximum protection to workers across their migration journey.
- Institute fair recruitment practices that eliminate discriminatory restrictions on the mobility of workers with a view to limiting the power of informal recruiters and ensuring the accountability of labour recruiters across the supply chain through proper regulation and effective monitoring and enforcement systems.
- Reconsider the effectiveness of deployment bans. The latter are known to further irregular migration through risky transit routes, limit prospective migrants' access to pre-departure orientation and training programmes from official sources, and exclude migrant women from the benefits of repatriation programmes, financial compensation in the case of accident of death and reintegration programmes.
- Promote efforts to strengthen the financial and human capacity of local organizations and relevant government agencies that facilitate return and reintegration; also, of micro financing schemes to help deliver comprehensive legal, social, medical and employment services to returnees.



## End Notes

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## Project partners

The project is implemented by the ILO in collaboration with the following partners and associates:



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