



Rethinking the 'Maid Trade'

Experiences of Ethiopian
adolescent domestic workers
in the Middle East

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Overview

Recent research on child migration has largely departed from the early trafficking narrative and tends to highlight agency and the ways children's migration can play a key role in their 'future seeking'. Indeed, with some caveats, migration is increasingly regarded as a vehicle for improving children's opportunities for schooling and work, enabling them to build more secure futures for themselves and for their families. While we acknowledge that Ethiopian girls migrating to the Middle East in order to undertake domestic work primarily move voluntarily, for economic reasons, our research findings highlight the tightly constrained environment in which this choice is made, suggesting the earlier trafficking narrative may, in this case, represent the most appropriate lens through which to view girls' choices and experiences.

Family pressure borne of poverty, combined with limited employment opportunities that are reasonably remunerated for young people, leaves an increasing number of girls feeling as if they have few options other than migration. Their reliance on illegal brokers – who provide at best partial information about the employment girls are entering into – combined with the overwhelming exploitation most young girls face on their arrival means the line that separates Ethiopian girls' voluntary migration from trafficking all but fades into invisibility.

This briefing synthesises findings from a report investigating the relationships between poverty, migration and children's wellbeing in Ethiopia. It is one of three country case studies undertaken as part of a two-year research programme funded by the Oak Foundation to explore the potential for greater linkages between child protection and anti-poverty work in low- and middle-income countries. The research draws on qualitative and participatory methodologies to explore the drivers of migration, to assess the key threats girls face in destination countries and to consider improvements in programming that could afford better protection, reflecting the views of the girls and families involved in the research.

While a number of recent studies have explored the experiences of Ethiopian women who have migrated to the Middle East in order to undertake domestic service, our research is unique in that it is located in rural origin communities, rather than Addis Ababa or destination countries, and focused on adolescent girls and young women. Furthermore, in order to better triangulate drivers and experiences, we include a broader spectrum of respondents than is typical for research of this type – not just migrants and government officials, but also parents, siblings and peers.

Ethiopian context

Despite strong economic growth over the past decade, Ethiopia remains one of the world's poorest countries. Still almost entirely reliant on subsistence agriculture, and with one of the world's highest birth rates, its per capita income is about a third of the regional average, and its Human Development Index (HDI) ranking is one of the lowest globally. While the country is making progress in some areas – the poverty rate fell from 39% in 2004 to 30% in 2011, and its primary completion rates climbed from 35% to 58% – most Ethiopians find it difficult to earn a living and remain highly vulnerable. Two-thirds of people live on less than \$2 a day and nearly half are undernourished. Girls are particularly vulnerable: they remain less likely to have access to formal education, are more likely to be married as children (to men who are, on average, five years older) and are growing up in a culture in which gender discrimination permeates social institutions.

Migration – and the remittances it brings – is increasingly vital to Ethiopia's economy and significantly related to poverty reduction. However, given the recent explosion of the 'maid trade', with up to 1,500 girls and women leaving Ethiopia each day to work as domestics in the Middle



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East, there is mounting concern about reports of these young women suffering physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Brokers, long responsible for moving the 60-70% of migrants who migrate illegally, have infiltrated even legal migration channels, building a veritable industry that feeds off poor women's dreams of a more secure future and exposing many to horrific abuse worthy of tabloid headlines. Indeed, recognising the endemic nature of the exploitation, in recent weeks the government of Ethiopia has moved to ban all work-related migration, citing concerns about migrants' safety. Ironically, this ban comes at the same time that Saudi Arabia, home to millions of migrant workers, including over 1.5 million from Ethiopia alone, has begun to expel (at times violently) those who are there illegally; nearly 140,000 Ethiopians, including more than 7,000 children, have already been repatriated.

Study sample and methodology

Our research was conducted in Amhara regional state, one of the country's largest regions, situated in the north west of the country. It is overwhelmingly rural, suffers from a high level of food insecurity, has a poorly educated population and has the lowest average age at first marriage. It is also the natal home of hundreds of thousands of girls and young women who have migrated to the Middle East to become domestic workers. Working in two middling-poor locations – Hara, a Muslim village with a well-established culture of migration, and Tis Abay, an Orthodox town that has recently seen migration rapidly increase – we selected a broad range of informants, including returnees, school girls planning to migrate in future, parents, young adults who have chosen to not migrate and local officials.

We employed a multi-layered, participatory and qualitative research approach. Focus group discussions, conducted with groups of adolescents and adults, allowed us to explore general community-level definitions of wellbeing, including how they are gendered. They also allowed us to investigate broader views about the drivers of migration, the mechanisms on which it is built, returnees' vulnerabilities and the local impacts of migration. In-depth interviews with former child migrants gave insights into the abuses many girls face when working out their contracts, as well as the coping mechanisms they use to protect themselves. Interviews with key informants allowed for elaboration about local communities' attempts to stem the rising tide of migration. A variety of participatory techniques were used (including body mapping, rankings, timelines and community drawings) to stimulate conversation regarding the push and pull factors (vulnerabilities and opportunities) behind girls' migration and to elicit ideas about what might be done to better protect their wellbeing in the future.

Drivers of migration

Economics

Adolescents in Ethiopia, like their peers around the world, want better lives than those of their parents. They also (in part fed by significant parental pressure) want better lives *for* their parents. Improvements in education and growing exposure to media mean even children who have not yet left their rural villages have glimpsed a world beyond the drudgery of subsistence agriculture – and they want to participate in it. However, the local options for achieving their goals do not appear strong. Earning a livelihood from agriculture is proving increasingly difficult, given land fragmentation, environmental degradation and recent shifts in weather patterns; and non-agricultural jobs are few and far between. Civil service jobs such as teaching or medicine are no longer seen as a path to a better future. Given that civil servants' salaries are low compared with the amounts that can be earned through migration, families are beginning to question the wisdom of investing time and money in an education that does not appear to offer any future guarantees.

'We parents do not consider the problems our daughters suffer; we focus only on the money they send us. We regret it only when they come back to their country after sustaining serious bodily damage.' (Participant, focus group discussion with women, Hara)

Education

The Ethiopian exam schedule, which leaves rural children – whose schools are poorly resourced compared with those in urban areas – at a significant disadvantage and eliminates the option of future study for all but the brightest and most supported adolescents. This further pushes many young girls into migration. Exams at the end of Grades 8, 10 and 12 are nationally scored, and broadly determine children's future options. Indeed, even entrance to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges requires children to pass Grade 10 exams. Poverty further limits the options of many children who do pass the exams. Because TVET and preparatory classes (Grades 11 and 12) are available only in larger towns, requiring families to finance independent living for their students, motivated poor students are often pushed out of education and into migration simply because they cannot afford the rent.

Discriminatory gender norms

Gendered norms that shape girls' interactions with a broad array of social institutions also drive their migration. Girls are less likely to pass exams because of the heavy demands

household chores place on their time, and are less likely to be allowed to continue their education even when they do pass exams. Parental concern about their safety from sexual predators – and the safety of the family’s reputation – leads many parents to insist girls remain at home after the onset of puberty. In Hara, in keeping with tradition, many girls marry at this point. With secondary school ruled out, and ‘girl-appropriate’ local jobs particularly rare, parents often fall back on the reality that daughters are more dependable remitters than sons, and insist they migrate to the Middle East – divorcing first, if they are already married – to ensure remittances accrue to them rather than to their daughters’ marital families.

Migration mechanisms

While laws regarding economic migration in Ethiopia are well intentioned, our respondents noted a wide variety of gaps – most related to implementation. For example, while the law specifically prohibits the migration of children under the age of 18, respondents’ experiences suggested it was relatively easy for girls as young as 13 to obtain false identification that can add up to 10 years to their age. Furthermore, although the costs of migration are explicitly delineated and quite small, there is an ever-growing number of illegal brokers, who charge exorbitant fees to help girls navigate the migration process as quickly as possible, avoiding the lengthy delays involved in legal migration. These brokers work in well-financed rings that run from rural communities, through Addis Ababa and into destination countries; they are not only fuelling migration by highlighting its potential benefits over and above its risks, but also subverting the legal migration system designed to protect migrants’ rights by fleecing them for sums of money large enough to lead to distress sale of assets by their families and to unhealthy debt ratios. Occasionally colluding with the police and other government officials (with some reported to have paid large cash sums to evade prosecution), brokers appear to be above the law, even when they risk their victims’ deaths by arranging for them to cross the sea and desert illegally.

‘I was 14 years old when I went to Saudi Arabia. I got my identity card with the falsified age of 26 years old. There was no problem to get an identity card.’ (Hara returnee)

Migration experiences

The travel experiences of migrants differ greatly according to whether they travel illegally or legally, as contract workers. The illegal route is highly hazardous, with migrants exposed to potential abuse by brokers *en route* and then by gangs once they reach the Yemeni border. For girls and women, the risks are higher still owing to the

ever-present danger of sexual violence on the overland journey. By contrast, migrants with a legal two-year contract travel by air and are seldom exposed to problems or abuse *en route*. Although often frightened because of being alone in a strange land, and typically passed from broker to broker when they arrive at their destination, their exposure to serious risks appears to start only once they reach their employer’s home.

In destination countries, overall our findings reveal relationships between employers and Ethiopian migrants are largely negative, with only limited exceptions (see Box). Many experience excessively long hours, delayed or partial payment and physical and sexual abuse. Moreover, these experiences appear to be neither new nor unique, but rather routine, as echoed in a number of other studies. Employer abuse appears to happen irrespective of the destination country, is perpetuated by women (largely physical abuse) and men (largely sexual abuse) and is meted out to girls and women irrespective of their age and religion (although psychological trauma seems to be more common among Christians, given religious bigotry).

The potent combination of racism, patriarchy and (for Christians) religious bigotry that many domestic workers face, and that renders many girls physically and psychologically powerless, means sources of assistance should something go wrong are frighteningly limited. The girls and young women in our sample all come from relatively impoverished rural areas, where there is limited social diversity. Not surprisingly, the sociocultural and economic contrasts they encounter when they reach their destination country are overwhelming, and all the more so as they usually lack any friends or peers in whom they can confide and who can help them gain familiarity with a new and alien world. Typically, respondents were confined to the home (or homes) of employers; even those who did have time off generally had very restricted mobility opportunities.

In theory, as per Ethiopian national law, brokers should step in when employer–employee conflicts cannot be resolved; without exception in our case studies, neither brokers in the Middle East nor those in Ethiopia provided any meaningful assistance. Typically, agents told girls who complained about their employment situation to either stay with the family or go home, often with some form of financial penalty or threat.

On return to Ethiopia, our returnees – many of whom had limited if any financial reward to show for their time abroad – highlighted that material and psychosocial support for girls was often very limited or non-existent. For the most part, the returnees we talked to were disappointed and sometimes even ashamed by their ‘bad luck’ and were frequently planning to migrate again in order to pay off their debts and deliver on their promises to their family. Typically, the drivers that propelled them to migrate – primarily poverty and a lack of employment opportunities locally – are still present and have in fact been compounded by the stigma associated with unsuccessful migration. Outside of family and friends,

Box 1: Overworked and abused

Zem Zem is an 18-year-old Tis Abay resident recently returned from a brief – and highly unsuccessful – sojourn in Saudi Arabia. Convinced that ‘nothing is worse than this – death is preferable’, she does not plan to try again.

Zem Zem’s father is a tailor and, while the family is poor, her parents have always been deeply committed to her education. Insisting she not work, so she could concentrate on her studies, her parents kept her in school through the end of Grade 12, and were prepared to send her to university. Zem Zem sat her final exams, but explained that, because it was so hard to study, as she was worried about the hardships her parents were enduring on her behalf, she knew instantly she did not do very well. Without even waiting for her results, she decided to migrate to Saudi Arabia, where salaries were reputed to be the highest.

‘It made me aspire to migrate to the Middle East because I could send money to them, rather than taking from them. You don’t care for your education – seeing your parents suffering like that,’ she said.

Zem Zem spent nearly 10,000 birr preparing to migrate – of which she borrowed 6,000 from a broker. She spent a week in Addis, getting her paperwork in order. While she was underage when she applied for her passport, and immigration officials initially refused to believe her when she told them she was 24, in the end, she explained, ‘I acted confident and so had no problem convincing them to give me the passport.’

Zem Zem reported that her pre-departure training was both hurried and unbalanced. She said, for example, that her class, of which she estimates half were under the age of 15, was ‘shown films of the good things’. They were told they would only be expected to work eight hours a day, be paid monthly, get one day off each week and have time to meet other Ethiopian migrants. They were assured that ‘training for three months would be provided after you reach the Middle East’. However, when she asked for time to read the agreement she was asked to sign, ‘officials told us that they have no time and just to sign’.

When Zem Zem arrived in Saudi Arabia, she was taken to an isolated family compound in the middle of the desert and told, despite her midnight arrival, that she was expected to begin serving the entire extended family immediately. Working day and night, and ‘beaten by the daughter in the house and the daughter next door’, Zem Zem told us language barriers were significant. When she was asked to fetch something, for example, she did her best to fetch the item requested. However, if she fetched the wrong item, her employers ‘would beat me with the object’. Desperate to leave, especially after one of the daughters used laundry chemicals to burn her hands, Zem Zem was rarely allowed to call her parents – and saw no way to cross the desert on her own.

Several months after her arrival, Zem Zem was overpowered by one of the family’s sons while she was in the shower. She said the last thing she remembered, before she lost consciousness, was an overwhelming smell of chemicals. The first thing she remembered, when she came to, was blood.

Soon after her rape, which left her confined to bed sobbing for days, her employers terminated her contract and sent her home without pay. She said that, on the plane coming home, she found her story was far from exceptional. Few of the young returnees had finished their contracts. Most had been abused.

Zem Zem, who has not told her parents that she was raped, because she does not feel they could deal with the strain, said that, in her opinion, ‘there is no solution’ to migration other than totally ‘shutting it down’. She added, ‘We can talk about experiences, but the girls wouldn’t listen. From 100, 15% might have a good income. They just see 15% success stories rather than the failures.’

formal support services for returnees are non-existent in both our study sites. Even in Hara, where the government is making increasing efforts to curb trafficking, officials noted that there was still no focus on returnees.

Policy and programming implications

Recent research, including the widely cited Population Council report *Girls on the Move*, has tended to highlight the ways in which children’s work, and their migration for work purposes, can be instrumental in helping them build better futures for themselves and their families. However, it is vital that policymakers recognise both the constraints under which children labour and the reality that there are places in the world in which exploitation and abuse remain endemic. Focusing solely on the positives of girls on the move risks overlooking the threats migration may pose to

young girls – particularly when it involves internationally sourced, private domestic work, in a context often laden with intersecting racial, religious and gender discrimination. Based on our research, we recommend policymakers take the following actions to better protect the physical and mental health of Ethiopian adolescent girls:

- *Address the drivers of migration* by ensuring young people have reasonably remunerated local employment options; role models to inspire them and their families to invest in their education; and the opportunity to pursue relevant education, including apprenticeships, in their home community. In addition, parents need to be educated about their children’s rights, lest they focus solely on their instrumental value as income generators. Finally, girls need to be protected from the rampant sexual violence that limits their social mobility outside the home,

and their opportunities for education and employment. This includes better enforcement of the gender-based violence law at local level and the provision of safe spaces for young girls in schools and the community.

- *Make legal migration safer and more streamlined* by strengthening the enforcement of existent policy instruments such as Proclamation 632/2009; expediting migration processes in order to reduce the incentives for girls to use the faster, illegal migration channel; ensuring migrants and their families understand how the legal migration channel operates; and providing the training girls need to deal with situations ranging from interpersonal conflict to how to use modern appliances. It is vital that awareness-raising activities are targeted not only at communities in which migration is endemic but also at those in which it is only just emerging. Origin-based programming should be supplemented with better destination-based safety nets that give migrants a way out of situations in which their human rights are being abused. To facilitate all of these reforms,

investment in better data collection efforts both on adolescent girls at risk of international migration and of young migrants is vital.

- *Eliminate illegal migration and trafficking* by enforcing existing laws (including cracking down on false identification cards) and punishing brokers with imprisonment, rather than fines that are all too easily avoided. Local efforts to prevent girls and their families using illegal migration channels need to be bolstered with financial and logistical support from higher-level government departments.
- *Invest in rehabilitation services* by enforcing existing laws and expanding the nascent efforts of non-governmental organisations in Addis Ababa to ensure affordable, quality services are available to meet the medical, psychological and legal needs of returnees who were abused during their time overseas. It is critical, given the near absence of services available to returnees in rural areas, that the government invests in decentralised support, including building staff capacity.



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