



# ‘A Job at Any Cost’

Experiences of African Women Migrant Domestic Workers in the Middle East



## 'A Job at Any Cost'

### Experiences of African Women Migrant Domestic Workers in the Middle East

#### AUTHOR

**Nkirote Laiboni**, Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)

#### LEAD RESEARCHERS

**Ann Dela Apekey**, Domestic Services Workers Union (DSWU), *Ghana*

**Biubwa Sultan**, Conservation, Hotels, Domestic, Social Services and Consultancy Workers Union (CHODAWU), *Zanzibar*

**Meaza Ayalew**, CVM (Comunità Volontari per il Mondo), *Ethiopia*

**Mwanamboka Mlowezi**, Conservation, Hotels, Domestic, Social Services and Consultancy Workers Union (CHODAWU), *Dar es Salaam, Tanzania*

**Namaganda Assumpta**, Uganda Hotels, Food, Tourism, Supermarkets & Allied Workers' Union (HTS-Union), *Uganda*

**Sophia Njiru**, Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA), *Kenya*

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was a joint effort between the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) and six affiliates of the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) in Ghana, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania Mainland, and Zanzibar. We thank these partners for undertaking the field research, whose findings are the basis of this report. The contribution of all individuals and institutions who participated in the research and shared their insights and expert opinions was immense. But most of all, we are grateful to the African women who braved long distances and took from their valuable time to share their lived experience of working as migrant domestic workers in the Middle East with us.



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

**Swiss Agency for Development  
and Cooperation SDC**

This research was made possible with the financial support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The views expressed here are only the authors' and they do not necessarily represent the views of SDC.

## Table of Contents

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	1
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	3
<b>2. OVERVIEW OF LABOUR MIGRATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA</b> .....	5
2.1 Context .....	5
2.2 Economic Migration .....	6
2.3 Migration of African Women for Domestic Work .....	9
<b>3. FINDINGS</b> .....	12
3.1. Labour Migration Patterns and Trends .....	12
3.2. Labour Migration Process .....	14
3.3. Working and Living Conditions.....	17
3.4. Return and Re-integration .....	22
<b>4. CONCLUSION</b> .....	24
Recommendations .....	26
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	28

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As demonstrated by media and research reports, countries in the Middle East are increasingly looking at East and West Africa as sources of labour. A study by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) confirms this trend and indicates that between 1990 and 2017 there was a significant and consistent rise in the number of African migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. According to the study, 12% of the 28.1 million migrant workers in the GCC in 2017 were African, with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE hosting almost 90% of these migrant workers, a reflection perhaps of the fact that these three countries have the largest economies in the region.

Due to the high demand for domestic labour in the GCC and other Middle Eastern states, a large number of East and West African migrant workers in the Middle East are women working as domestic workers. While some experience abuse and exploitation in the process of migration and/or at work places, many also achieve some degree of economic independence and support their families through their migration.

To gain a greater understanding on this and other recent trends, processes, challenges and opportunities around the migration of African women to the Middle East for domestic work, and with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) undertook a research in East and West Africa between November 2018 and June 2019. This research was conducted by six IDWF affiliates in Ghana, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania Mainland, and Zanzibar.

### Methodology

The research, which was qualitative in nature, applied principles of Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) which GAATW has used since its inception. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is carried out under the premise that 'when people are directly involved in an analysis of their situation, they are often stimulated to find answers to these problems'.<sup>1</sup> PAR therefore aims both to produce an analytical description of a complex issue and to radically change it. The researcher is involved in the social setting being studied as both observer and participant and works together with research participants not only to analyse and interpret their social reality but to transform this reality with rather than for them. The research process is made more powerful when the researchers are individuals directly affected by or working to address the social issue under study. For our study, the lead researchers in the six locations were staff or affiliates of five trade unions in Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania Mainland, Zanzibar and Kenya and a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Ethiopia. The lead researchers worked closely with local and returnee migrant domestic workers as well as fellow trade unionists and community workers to plan the research, recruit research participants and collect data. The lead researchers were appointed to carry out the

---

<sup>1</sup> Boesveld, M. and Boontinand, J. 'Practicing Feminist Participatory Action Research Methodologies'. GAATW Newsletter, January 1999, pp14-17

study due to their grasp of the issue under investigation through their lived experiences and their work. Due to this experience, the researchers, following the provision of research methodology training and technical support by GAATW, were well-placed to refine research questions, mobilise research participants, undertake field research, and work with migrant domestic workers and other stakeholders to identify solutions that would bring about change.

In order to generate information on the experiences of migrant domestic workers before, during and after migration, the researchers interviewed returnee migrant domestic workers and their families, migrant domestic workers currently working in the Middle East, prospective migrant domestic workers, and government institutions involved in labour migration governance, recruitment agencies, NGOs that support migrant domestic workers, and trade unions that represent local and migrant domestic workers.

Following the preparatory phase in November and December 2018 during which GAATW provided training to the country researchers on participatory action research and qualitative research methods, the country researchers carried out the field work between January and March 2019. Data was collected using the following qualitative research methods: document analysis, observation, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews. Data analysis and report-writing was undertaken between March and June 2019. The report-writing process was a collaborative effort between the lead researcher and GAATW.

This report summarises the findings from the above-mentioned interviews and focus group discussions as well as from desk research. As organisations committed to end the abuse and exploitation of workers, including migrant workers, and to enable migrants and their families to reap the benefits of migration, SDC, IDWF, and GAATW hope that the findings of this research will enable them and other relevant stakeholders to strategise for better protection of the rights of migrant domestic workers nationally, regionally and internationally.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF LABOUR MIGRATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

### 2.1 Context

In the last decade, the population of Sub-Saharan Africa has grown from 991.2 million in 2008 to over 1.2 billion in 2018 (African Union, 2015). Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda are among the ten most populous countries on the continent, with Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania having some of the highest annual population growth rates on the continent. With the continued decline in child and infant mortality, it is expected that Africa's population will more than double by 2050.



A rapid population growth would not only mean a larger labour force for Sub-Saharan Africa, it would also bring about social, economic and geopolitical opportunities and challenges including reduced economic opportunities and pressure on natural resources. Of note is the effect that Africa's population trends would have on migration. Already, almost 60% of the population in Africa are youth under the age of 25 years, and while the youth population in the rest of the world is likely to decrease in the next three decades, Africa's youth aged under 24 years is projected to go up from 628 million in 2017 to 945 million in 2050 (Gates Foundation, 2017). It is therefore likely that as the continent's population grows and the demand for jobs among young people increases in coming years, migration from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe, the Middle East and other regions will intensify.

IMAGE 1: RETURNEE MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKER AT A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION IN NAIROBI © KUDHEIHA 2019

### Migration Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa

According to Mixed Migration Review 2018, most Sub-Saharan African migration occurs within the continent, usually to neighbouring countries. The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that 78.5% of migrants on the continent were born in Africa (UNCTAD, 2018, p. 45). While migration in West and Southern Africa is largely economically driven, migration in the Eastern Africa region is primarily driven by conflict or political instability with conflict-affected countries like Somalia, South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) producing the largest numbers of migrants in the region. East Africa remains the region that is the worst affected by extreme poverty in Africa, with 54% of its population living under USD 1.25 per day and 77% living under two dollars per day. There is an increasing number of people also moving for economic reasons primarily within the region.

According to UNCTAD's Economic Development in Africa Report 2018, the countries producing the largest number of migrants in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2017 were: Somalia (almost 2 million migrants), Sudan, South Sudan, DRC, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Mali. The report also noted that South Africa, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Nigeria are the main receiving countries

of intra-African migration. The primary driver for migration to these six countries is demand for labour including in the mining sector (South Africa), agriculture (Côte d'Ivoire), and domestic work and informal trade (Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Nigeria).

A study by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) indicates that the rate of internal and intra-African migration is higher than that of migration to countries outside the Continent primarily because international migration is expensive. However, there are countries such as Kenya where migration to other countries is more widespread than internal migration. With 65% of households in Kenya having migrants (internal and international), the country has one of the highest migration rates on the continent (FAO, 2017).

African men and young people between the ages of 15 and 34 years are more likely to migrate (FAO, 2017). However, UNCTAD reports that the number of women migrants in Africa increased in 2017, making up 47% of African migrants. At 50% of the total of migrants in Eastern Africa, the number of women migrants moving out of Eastern Africa was higher compared to other regions on the continent. In Ethiopia especially, female migrants are the majority among international migrants from the country (FAO, 2017). The rising number of women migrants within and outside the continent is partly influenced by increased job opportunities within Africa as well as in the Middle East and Eastern Asia particularly in care work, domestic work and in the health sector.

## **2.2 Economic Migration**

Economic migration is increasing in Sub-Saharan Africa. FAO reports that many African households see “migration as a strategy to improve their livelihood, minimize their risks and diversify their income sources” (FAO, 2017). Within the Continent, there remains a demand for low and semi-skilled labour in agriculture, mining and construction and this remains a driver of economic migration while the demand in the service sector (domestic work, hospitality) and highly-skilled sectors like finance and information technology is growing.

Economic migration in Africa is both male and youth-dominated. With the median age of Africa at 31 years, economic migration patterns within and outside the Continent are a reflection of the high levels of youth unemployment. Young people are therefore likely to migrate within and outside of their countries for economic opportunities including education and work. According to UNCTAD, women migrants from Africa are on average younger than their male counterparts at the time of migration: for example, women migrants from Uganda and Ethiopia are on average between 18 and 21 years at the time of migration.

Low-skilled migrants dominate economic migration within and outside Africa, with a concentration in domestic service, agriculture and informal trade sectors. Demand for domestic workers within Africa, particularly in urban areas, and increasingly in other regions around the world is a key driver for rural-urban, intra-African (for example Ugandan and Tanzanian women migrate to Kenya for domestic labour), and inter-continental migration. In Eastern Africa, the demand for domestic workers in the Middle East is today a significant driver of women's migration from Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. Women migrants from Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda to the Middle East are on average better educated than other low-skilled migrants.

## Labour Migration Trends in East and West Africa

According to the United Nations Statistics Division, over 20 countries and territories make up the greater Eastern Africa region. Six of these (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan) are members of the East African Community (EAC) regional economic bloc and make up a sub-region that is commonly referred to as East Africa. Some of these countries are also members of the regional body Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) which is made up of eight countries in East and Horn of Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea and South Sudan). This section of the report will focus on the labour migration trends of four of these countries: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Ethiopia.

The labour sector in most East African countries is characterised by high labour force participation in agriculture and informal sectors, as well as high unemployment rates particularly among young people. The highest rates of unemployment in the region are in Kenya and Uganda, with most countries in the sub-region reporting higher female unemployment rates. Unemployment and underemployment - the inability of those who work to earn a decent living – particularly among youth, remain key drivers of migration within and outside the sub-region. Research has found that those displaced by conflicts are more likely to stay within East Africa, while migrants from countries that are more politically and economically stable such as Kenya and Uganda are more likely to move further abroad.



**Kenya:**  
Population: 51 million (2018, UNFPA)  
Annual population growth rate: 2.6%

**Uganda:**  
Population: 44.3 million (2018, UNFPA)  
Annual population growth rate: 3.3%

**Tanzania:**  
Population: 59.1 million (2018, UNFPA)  
Annual population growth rate: 3.1%

**Ethiopia:**  
Population: 107.5 million (2018, UNFPA)  
Annual population growth rate: 2.5%

FIGURE 2: SOURCE: [WIKIMEDIA COMMONS](#); [UNFPA WORLD POPULATION DASHBOARD](#)

Besides being a major host of refugee populations, **Kenya** is a destination hub for labour migrants from the continent and beyond, including economic migrants from South Asia (India, Bangladesh and Pakistan) and the West. The attraction to Kenya's labour markets is largely attributed to the country's strategic position in the EAC, its vibrant economy and the fact that it hosts the regional headquarters for United Nations agencies, international NGOs, private companies and technological start-ups. Kenya's immigration department is rife with corruption, making labour migrants who are either transiting or arriving without proper documentation able to obtain fake or real documents and avoid arrest by paying bribes to immigration and police officers. Unlike its neighbours in the East and Horn of Africa, most of the migration out of Kenya is regular and largely characterised by the migration of skilled Kenyans for educational or work purposes. Main countries of destination include other African countries, as well as Europe, the United States of America (USA), Canada, and Australia. Countries in the Middle East are key destinations for low-skilled migrants, with estimates of around 100,000 Kenyans working in the Gulf States in November 2014, with approximately 40,000 in Saudi Arabia alone (MGSOG, 2017).

Labour immigration rates in **Uganda** have also been increasing, in particular due to the relaxing of visa requirements for citizens of the East African Community. As in Kenya, the major countries of destination have historically been the West including Europe and USA, although recently there has been an increase in Ugandans traveling to the Middle East for work. On the other hand, Uganda also attracts skilled migrants primarily from Asia (mainly India and China) to work in the oil and infrastructure sectors as well as from the EAC (primarily Kenya).

**Ethiopia** has a long history of labour migration, particularly to the Middle East, which started in the 1980s and has increased in volume significantly in recent years. It is estimated that approximately 1,500 girls and women leave Ethiopia every day to work as domestic workers in the Middle East and that there are over 1.5 million Ethiopian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia alone (ODI, 2014). There is limited information available on labour migration to Ethiopia.

Similar to Kenya and Uganda, there is a growing trend of migration of women from the United Republic of **Tanzania** to the Middle East and Gulf States to work as domestic workers. According to a recent research by Human Rights Watch, the majority of Tanzanian migrant domestic workers in the Gulf are from Zanzibar and most of them go to Oman, and that while there is no publicly available data on the number of Tanzanian domestic workers in the UAE, there could be approximately 9,000 Tanzanians living and working in UAE.



FIGURE 3: SOURCE:  
[HTTPS://WWW.EASYTRACKGHANA.COM/TRAVEL-  
 INFORMATION-GHANA\\_MAPS.PHP](https://www.easytrackghana.com/travel-information-ghana_maps.php)

Unlike Eastern Africa where migration has historically been driven by political and humanitarian factors, in **Ghana** and the rest of West Africa migration is primarily economically-driven and largely occurs within the sub-region. While Ghana has a history of attracting labour migrants from other countries in West Africa, the slow decline in the country's economy since its independence from colonial rule in 1957 has shaped the country into a key origin for migrant workers.

Now there are more Ghanaians leaving the country than non-Ghanaians entering it (Migration and Development Civil Society Network, 2017). Countries in West Africa and Europe remain key destinations for Ghanaian migrants. However, the rising youth unemployment and the demand for cheap labour is pushing Ghanaians to migrate to the Middle East to work in the domestic and care industries.

### 2.3 Migration of African Women for Domestic Work

Demand for domestic labour in Sub-Saharan Africa is a key driver in rural-urban and inter-country migration on the continent. In addition, growing poverty and limited economic opportunities even for well-educated people serve as push factors for the migration of African women in the domestic work sector. Each region in Sub-Saharan Africa has unique dynamics when it comes to migration for domestic work. In West Africa, inter-country child labour migration dominates the sector, with for instance, Togolese children and women working as domestic workers in Central and West African countries including Ghana. In Southern Africa low-educated, low-skilled women migrants from Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states dominate the sector in wealthier countries including South Africa and Botswana. Migrant domestic workers in Southern Africa largely originate from poorer or politically unstable countries such as Zimbabwe and Lesotho and are more often than not undocumented, a status that often forces them to accept low wages and be vulnerable to exploitation from their employers and the authorities. Eastern Africa is characterised by an increasing rate of migration of women particularly from Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda to the Middle East to work as domestic workers. (Migration and Development Civil Society Network, 2017).

## Migration of East and West African Women Domestic Workers to the Middle East

The Middle East region, and in particular the six countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), is home to the world's largest population of labour migrants, a trend that began in the mid-1970s. Historically migrants have been coming from South and Southeast Asia. With the exception of Ethiopia which began to send its citizens to the Middle East in the 1980s, East African nations had not until recently seen much labour migration to the Middle East.

Today, millions of women and men from Asia and sub-Saharan Africa migrate to the Middle East to work as caregivers and domestic workers, as well as in the construction, manufacturing and agricultural sectors. The demand for semi- and low-skilled migrant labour in the Middle East has increased significantly over the past years, and as the region opens up to the world as a destination for global events, the number of migrant workers is set to go even higher. According to Migration and Development Civil Society Network, the Dubai Expo which will be held in the UAE in 2020 is expected to create more than 275,000 jobs across the region, while the World Cup in Qatar, also planned for 2020, will require between 500,000 and one million migrants to work in construction, hospitality, domestic work, and other industries.

The legal status of domestic and other migrant workers in the GCC and some countries in the Middle East such as Jordan and Lebanon is governed by the *kafala* system. *Kafala* is a migration management policy under which a migrant worker's immigration and employment status is legally bound to an individual employer or sponsor (*kafeel*). The migrant worker's entry into the country of destination is sponsored by her employer, and she remains tied to her employer for the duration of the employment contract. The *kafala* system has been criticised for being 'anti-integration' and for the amount of control it assigns employers over the lives of migrant workers, including their 'entry, renewal of stay, termination and transfer of employment , and, in some cases, exit from the country' (Migration and Development Civil Society Network, 2017). The *kafala* system has also been found to foster the abuse and exploitation of migrant workers, particularly domestic workers who operate in private spaces. Employers can exert control by for instance, confiscating passports, increasing their employees' responsibilities and withholding wages. Due to the power imbalance between the employer and the migrant worker, *kafala* places migrant domestic workers with little protection or means of redress (Migrant Forum Asia, 2017; Motaparthi, P., 2015).

This labour migration environment has not stopped African workers from migrating to the region. In countries like Ghana and Uganda where there are total or partial labour migration bans,<sup>2</sup> family members, social networks and unregistered or illegal brokers play a key role in enabling migrant domestic workers' travel and job placement in the Middle East. Recruitment agencies, however, remain the primary actors that migrant domestic workers turn to in order to identify and broker employment opportunities in the Middle East. Often, as was discovered through our study, recruitment agencies in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Ethiopia and Ghana work closely with employment agencies in countries of destination to facilitate employment for African domestic workers. While countries like Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia now require that recruitment agents

---

<sup>2</sup> In Ghana, the government banned the migration of all labour migrants to the Middle East while in Uganda, labour migration is only limited to countries in the Middle East that have signed bi-lateral agreements with Uganda.

that provide services to migrant workers be registered and accredited with the ministries responsible for labour, there is still a high number of unregulated agencies and brokers operating in there. These unregulated recruitment agencies and brokers pose risks to migrant domestic workers: as was found by this research, brokers often misinform prospective migrants and this deception ranges from the nature of work, salary, and even the destination country. Even registered recruitment agencies – both in countries of origin and destination – are responsible for exploiting and sometimes meting out violence on migrant domestic workers. The migrant domestic workers who participated in our study spoke of paying exorbitant fees to both registered and unofficial agencies and brokers in countries of origin, having their wages withheld by agencies, and experiencing physical and sexual abuse at the hands of agencies in countries of destination.

In addition, there are increasing media reports of abuse against African migrant workers in the Middle East as was the case of two Kenyan domestic workers assaulted by a group of people Lebanon in mid-2018 (Hall, 2018) and the reports of Ethiopian domestic worker Lensa Lelisa who jumped off a balcony in March 2018 to flee her abusive employer (Ayoub, 2018). To address such risks and other difficulties experienced by African domestic workers particularly in the Middle East, African governments have in recent years imposed bans on the migration of their citizens for work in the Middle East (Ethiopia in 2013, Kenya in 2014, Uganda in 2016 and Ghana in 2017), revoked migrant recruitment firms' licenses (Kenya in 2012), and signed bilateral agreements with Middle Eastern countries (such as between Kenya and the United Arab Emirates in 2015, between Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia in 2017, and between Uganda and Jordan in 2016).

At the same time, migration to the Middle East for work offers African women an opportunity to improve their livelihoods, become economically independent, and better their lives and those of their families. While African governments have in the last decade or so woken up to the reality of labour migration to the Middle East, they could do more to protect their nationals. Bans on labour migration have not stopped people from migrating for work: Uganda's 2016 ban was lifted the following year once the government recognised that migration to the Middle East had continued but been driven underground. Furthermore, bilateral agreements between African and Middle Eastern governments could provide terms that are as favourable as those signed between Asian and Middle Eastern countries. For instance, the minimum wage for Ugandan nationals in Saudi Arabia is \$200 while that for Filipinas is \$400. More protections are required, including pre-departure training, stricter regulation, trained consular staff, provision of shelter by African embassies, and improved oversight of the recruitment process.

---

“There is high unemployment in Ethiopia. Women prefer to migrate to the Middle East and get jobs as domestic workers rather than to live in their country without work.”

- Zonal Office of Labour and Social Affairs (ZoLSA) official, Amhara region, Ethiopia

---

### 3. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of the field research undertaken by IDWF-affiliated country researchers in partnership with GAATW in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania Mainland, Zanzibar, Ethiopia and Ghana.

#### 3.1. Labour Migration Patterns and Trends

**Kenya:** The Kenya research was carried out Nairobi and Mombasa, two locations that host international airports and a majority of government-accredited recruitment agencies. Interviewees pointed to Saudi Arabia as the main country of destination in the Middle East. Seventy percent of the current and returnee migrant domestic workers that were interviewed have worked there. Other countries of destination included Jordan (9% of participants), Qatar (5%), Lebanon (5%), United Arab Emirates (5%) and Egypt (5%). Kenyan returnees were a mix of first-time and repeat migrants. They pointed to the lack of decent jobs and high unemployment, family responsibilities, and influence from friends as the key factors that pushed them to migrate. Some of the interviewees were not only financially responsible for their own children but also for siblings, parents and spouses.

The returnee migrant domestic workers were 40 years old and below, an indication that most women migrating from Kenya for domestic work in the Middle East are young women. An interviewee from the Kenya Association of Private Employment Agencies (KAPEA) confirmed this trend, noting that a majority of the migrant domestic workers who utilise registered employment agencies for job placements in the Middle East are women in their 20s. A majority of the interviewees had completed primary school at the time of migration. Of note is that most of the research participants who reside in or near Mombasa had only completed primary education while most participants in Nairobi had completed secondary education.

No conclusive figures could be found for the exact number of Kenyan migrant domestic workers in the Middle East although media and research reports indicate that between 100,000 and 300,000 Kenyans could be working in the Middle East. Research reports also indicate that the number of Kenyan women moving to the Middle East for domestic work went up significantly after Ethiopia introduced its ban in 2013. The Kenyan coast, whose population is primarily Muslim, and which has a long history with the Middle East and in particular Oman, remains a key region of origin.

**Uganda:** In Uganda, the research took place in three locations: Kampala (Central region), Gulu (Northern region), and Busia (Eastern region) with eight migrant domestic workers. Out of the four current migrant domestic workers interviewed, three were working in Saudi Arabia and one in Oman. From the four returnees, one had worked in both UAE and Oman, one in UAE, and two in Oman. It should however be noted that Uganda has only signed bi-lateral labour agreements with Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

The research found that there has been an increase in demand for cheap labour from Uganda in the Middle East, particularly in the last five years. While the exact figures of Ugandan migrant

workers in the Middle East is not clear, Uganda's Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development established a database in 2016 which indicates that the number of Ugandans working in the Middle East is rising every year. According to an article by the Daily Monitor published in May 2019, while the official figure for Ugandan citizens who migrated to the Middle East for work between 2016 and 2018 was 31,859, the total number of Ugandan migrant workers in the Middle East in the last decade could be over 100,000. Discussions with an official from the Ministry of Labour revealed that between 2016 and early 2019, there were 21,716 Ugandan migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and Jordan: 17,597 in Saudi Arabia and 4,119 in Jordan.

**Ethiopia:** In Ethiopia, the research was carried out in Addis Ababa and Amhara (East and West Gojjam) regions, two regions that have for years seen a significant trend of outward migration.

While the researchers could not find the exact number of Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers currently in the Middle East, desk research and discussions with Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs representatives indicate that the number of Ethiopian women working in the Middle East is on the rise. Studies indicate that the number of female domestic workers from Ethiopia's three key regions of origin – Amhara, Addis Ababa and Oromia – who were legally working in the Middle East between 2008 and 2013 was 297,512. It is estimated that double this number migrated using unofficial or irregular channels. The number of Ethiopian workers migrating irregularly is said to have gone up following the government ban on labour migration to the Middle East in 2013, which was a reaction to the expulsion of over 100,000 Ethiopians from Saudi Arabia in the same year.

The labour migration ban was lifted by the new Prime Minister in 2018. Following the lifting of the ban, the Ethiopian government signed a bilateral agreement on labour migration with Saudi Arabia which in January 2019 came into full effect. At the same time, Ethiopia has been working to improve its labour migration regulatory framework, and recently the amended Overseas Employment Proclamation No. 923/2016, which regulates labour migration and seeks to enhance the protection of Ethiopian migrant workers.

Discussions in Addis and Amhara pointed to Saudi Arabia as the most popular country of destination for Ethiopian migrant domestic workers, followed by Lebanon and Kuwait. The five current migrant domestic workers who participated in the research were working in Lebanon. It is expected that since Ethiopia lifted its five-year ban against migrant domestic workers moving to the Middle East and signed a bi-lateral agreement with Saudi Arabia which came into effect in January 2019, the number of Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in Saudi would go up (media reports point to 20,000 Ethiopian domestic workers arriving in Saudi in March 2019 alone). The returnees who participated in the research were a mix of first-time and repeat migrant workers.

**Ghana:** In Ghana, the field research was carried out in two regions: the capital, Accra and Koforidua in Ghana's Eastern region. Out of the 15 interviewed returnee domestic workers, six had worked in Libya, three in Saudi Arabia and the rest had in Qatar, Egypt, Bahrain, Oman, UAE and Kuwait. All the returnees in Ghana were first time migrants. Unlike in the other five research locations, a majority (eight) of the returnees had previously worked as local domestic workers.

The Ghanaian migrant domestic workers were more diverse in terms of age, education and marital status compared to respondents in the other countries. Out of the 15 returnees, four had

completed tertiary education, five had completed secondary education, and the remaining six had only achieved a basic level of education. The respondents were aged between 15 and 55 and were either single, divorced or widowed.

It should be noted that although the Ghanaian government banned labour migration to the Middle East and withdrew private employment agencies' licences, research participants were not only able to migrate to the Middle East for work, their work assignments and travel were facilitated by private recruitment agencies. While the Ghanaian returnees signed employment contracts – some at the airport a few hours before their departure – the contract terms were not clear and not always respected by the employers and recruitment agencies. For example, some of the returnees received lower salaries than what was stated in their contracts. One common feature was also the fact that the domestic workers had to arrange for and pay for their own return.

**Tanzania Mainland and Zanzibar:** Officially, the recruitment of Tanzanian nationals for jobs abroad is done through the government-run Tanzania Employment Services Agency (TAESA). While the Tanzanian researcher was not successful in interviewing officials from TAESA, the research found that the trend of Tanzanian nationals migrating to the Middle East for work has been on the rise in the last decade: for example, almost 1,400 migrant domestic workers were recruited through TAESA to work in Oman and Dubai between July 2011 and March 2012 alone. Fourteen returnee migrant domestic workers from Tanzania Mainland (Dar es Salaam) participated in this research and from discussions with them, Saudi Arabia, Oman and UAE were identified as the main countries of destination. In Zanzibar, while the Ministry of Labour could provide information about the main destination countries for male and female migrant workers (Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and UAE), they could not provide information on the exact number of Zanzibari migrant domestic workers in the Middle East, although they estimated the number to be between 2000 and 3000. Out of the 15 Zanzibari returnees and three current migrant domestic workers, a majority have worked in Oman, indicating that Oman is the main country of destination in the Middle East for Zanzibari women migrant domestic workers.

### 3.2. Labour Migration Process

Interviews with migrant domestic workers indicate that family and other social networks, brokers and recruitment agencies all play a role in facilitating the employment and travel for migrant domestic workers from the six countries.

Research suggests that women from the six research locations are migrating to the Middle East for work using both regular and irregular means. In Ethiopia, the returnee and current migrant domestic workers said that their travel was facilitated primarily by brokers and in a few cases by recruitment agencies, some of which were unregistered or otherwise operating illegally and required the migrants to pay exorbitant fees in order to facilitate their travel. Even those whose travel was facilitated by legal PEAs spoke of paying high fees to the agencies, in contravention to the Overseas Employment Proclamation No. 923/2016, which regulates labour migration and seeks to enhance the protection of Ethiopian migrant workers. For instance, all the five current

migrant domestic workers in Lebanon who participated in the research noted that they paid the private employment agencies a fee ranging from \$143 to \$529.

In Ghana, while all the 15 respondents' travel was organised by PEAs, the migrant domestic workers indicated that details of work contracts were not discussed with them. In addition, most did not know the exact country they were migrating to; some were only informed about it at the airport as well as given the terms of engagement. Travel documents were prepared by the PEAs and some only got their passports at the airport. Some respondents indicated that they had been promised jobs in a particular country but ultimately sent to a different one.

In Uganda, while there is an official recruitment process outlined under Guidelines on Recruitment and Placement of Uganda Migrant Workers Abroad, 2015, the study found that migrant domestic workers may choose to bypass this official process and use unofficial brokers because of the shorter turnaround time they offer. Three out of the four current migrant domestic workers followed the recruitment procedure as per the migration policy. None of the four returnees had followed it.

The assessment revealed that both male and female brokers are the driving force behind the mass migration of African girls and women to the Middle East. Brokers typically make promises that are far from reality. The fact that some of these brokers were themselves previously migrant domestic workers also made it easier for prospective migrants to fall prey to their enticing tales. In Kenya, the interviewees noted that their travel to the Middle East was facilitated by brokers or recruitment agencies, although there was a lack of clarity on the migrants' part on whether these officials were brokers or unregistered agencies, or staff of accredited recruitment agencies. It was, however, established that in Mombasa and surrounding counties (Kilifi, Kwale) where door-to-door recruitment of prospective migrant domestic workers is common, agents use community members including neighbours and relatives as brokers. Prior to this research, most of the current and returnee migrant domestic workers were not aware of the government requirement that all recruitment agencies be registered and accredited, and that a list of accredited recruitment agencies is available to the public.<sup>3</sup> Interviews with Ethiopia's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs representatives in Amhara region revealed that the presence of illegal brokers was one of the major challenges that the government was facing while governing labour migration.

While some governments in East and West Africa have now made pre-departure training a requirement for migrant domestic workers, the research revealed that few women are aware of or indeed are accessing the training. In Zanzibar, the Ministry of Labour, Economic Empowerment and Cooperatives organises weekly pre-departure information sessions for migrant workers who are about to travel. Together with the migrant workers, the government representatives review the terms on the employment contracts, discuss what to do if they face challenges in the Middle East, and what to expect there. Discussions with Zanzibari Ministry of Labour officials revealed that these weekly pre-departure information sessions focused largely on reviewing employment contracts and providing prospective migrant workers with general information, and did not for instance, include financial, workplace or life skills training.

---

<sup>3</sup> A list of accredited PEAs is available on the Kenya National Employment Authority's website. See: [http://www.nea.go.ke/web/?page\\_id=11](http://www.nea.go.ke/web/?page_id=11)

In Uganda, the Employment (Recruitment of Uganda Migrant Workers Abroad) Regulations 2005 require that all prospective migrant workers undergo mandatory pre-departure orientation training. Orientation is carried out by training institutions accredited by the Ministry of Labour and without a training certificate, migrant domestic workers cannot be issued a visa. The pre-departure orientation is required to cover as a minimum the following topics: living in a foreign country, self-defence, how to operate and use household appliances such as washing machines, dress code in the Middle East, domestic workers' duties, and basic Arabic language skills. Interviews with recruitment agencies revealed that some agencies provide financial literacy training to prospective migrant workers with a focus on saving, investing and opening bank accounts. Three of the four current migrant domestic workers confirmed that they had received pre-departure orientation and this was provided by the agencies that had facilitated their employment. However, all of the respondents felt the training was insufficient and there were some issues that the training did not cover, including financial literacy and how to deal with their foreign employers' hostility and/or exploitation. This affected their ability to transfer their salaries to their own personal bank accounts and knowledge on how and where to seek redress in case they experienced abuse at the hands of their employers. The researchers observed that recruitment agencies hesitate to invest time in providing pre-departure information to prospective domestic workers because there is no profit to be made from this service, given that the law requires that it is offered free of charge.

None of the Ethiopian migrant domestic workers had received pre-departure training, and most noted that they had limited information about the destination countries as well as their employment terms and conditions or indeed how and where to access refuge and redress in the countries of destination if need be.

In Kenya, none of the returnee or current migrant domestic workers had received pre-departure training, or were even aware at the time of travel that this training is an official requirement by the Kenyan government and something that foreign employers expect. In 2018 the Ministry of Labour launched a comprehensive training syllabus for 'homecare' workers within which it embedded a pre-departure curriculum for migrant workers, and authorised seven institutions to offer this pre-departure training. However, trade unions and civil society organisations working with migrant domestic workers argue that there still remains a lack of clarity regarding pre-departure training requirements, procedures and responsibilities. Migrant domestic workers also noted that in addition to the labour migration procedures, processes and labour rights, the pre-departure training should cover the destination countries' geography, culture and language. It should be noted that the pre-departure curriculum provides information on geography and culture of countries of destination but no language training is offered under the syllabus.<sup>4</sup> Discussions with workers' representatives – trade unions and civil society organisations working with migrant domestic workers – revealed that there was some confusion as to which institutions had the mandate to provide pre-departure training to migrant workers.

---

<sup>4</sup> See pages 38 – 53 of the Homecare Management Course Syllabus and Regulations for the Pre-departure Training Syllabus : <http://www.nea.go.ke/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Home-Care-Management-Syllabus.pdf>

---

*A friend of mine referred me to a recruitment agency and within three days [of visiting the agency], I had received my visa. I was handed an agreement to read and sign and that was it. No, there was no pre-departure training.*

*Joyce, Kenyan migrant domestic worker in Jordan*

---

A few of the returnees revealed that they had used clandestine channels to get to the Middle East. For example, two respondents who left Ethiopia during the period of the ban travelled to Saudi Arabia by walking to Somalia, crossing over the Red Sea to Yemen by boat, and travelling to Saudi from Yemen on land. The rest travelled to the Middle East by plane, confirming that they had obtained official travel documents and visas prior to their travel. It was not clear, however, if these visas were short-term tourist visas or the work and residence permits that migrant domestic workers are required to obtain.

### **3.3. Working and Living Conditions**

#### **Pre-migration Perceptions and Expectations**

Prior to their migration to the Middle East, domestic workers who participated in this study had high expectations. In Ethiopia, returnees shared that prior to their departure, they expected to carry out work and get their monthly wages without any challenge or restriction and ultimately improve their lives and those of their families. Many noted that they did not consider the culture of and working conditions in the countries of destination prior to their departure. This included language barriers in the countries of destination.

In Uganda, one respondent, Jane,<sup>5</sup> was made to believe that domestic workers in Saudi Arabia do not live with their employers. This respondent was not a first-time migrant: she had worked in Oman and had specifically made a request for a live-out work arrangement because of her negative experiences as a live-in domestic worker in Oman. The Ugandan recruitment agency had also promised Jane that she would get a salary of UGX 2,000,000 (\$541) a month and work for 8 hours a day. On arrival to Saudi Arabia, she discovered that she was expected to work as a live-in domestic worker, earning much less than what she had agreed upon with the agency. Because she had not signed a contract prior to her departure, there was no basis for any of her claims.

Prior to their departure to the Middle East, research participants in Kenya – at least those who were not deceived about the nature of their new jobs – expected that their duties would be similar to those of a domestic worker in Kenya. One returnee said she expected to perform ordinary housework, similar to what they performed in their own homes.

---

<sup>5</sup> Not her real name

There were some positive outcomes. Abbo<sup>6</sup> left for Saudi Arabia expecting the worst. She had read and heard of stories in the media of migrant domestic workers in the country being beaten, raped and left hungry. This, however, has not been her experience: she has enough meals, gets enough rest, and compared to the other migrant domestic workers who participated in the research, her duties are quite light and only involve house cleaning and laundry.

### **Working Conditions**

The migrant domestic workers who participated in this research worked as live-in whose daily duties were heavy and varied and included child and elderly care, laundry, dusting and cleaning and food preparation. Recurring descriptions of inhumane treatment, cultural isolation, undermining of cultural identity, and disappointed expectations dominated the discussions. Interviewees talked about exploitative day-to-day living and working conditions, which they perceived as a threat to their physical and mental integrity.

Long working hours, working in multiple households and limited rest time were some of the common complaints made by research participants. Employers' households in the Middle East, as described by the returnees, are mostly three to five-storey houses comprising many rooms. Some households, particularly those in which extended family members lived, employed more than one domestic worker. A majority of the research participants regularly worked in at least two households. In addition to their employers' homes, they were required to work in homes belonging to their employer's relatives, neighbours or even friends. In some situations, the employers' relatives would bring over clothes for laundry whenever they would visit, in contradiction to the migrant workers' expectations. One Ugandan respondent who is currently working abroad shared that after her arrival in Saudi Arabia she first worked for a family of two adults and two children. Later, her work was split between two homes: every week she worked four days at her employer's house then went to her employer's mother's house the remaining days where she would clean the house, wash utensils, do laundry, and feed the children. Even with this heavy workload, the domestic worker is not paid on time and often she has to follow up with her employer in order to receive her wages.

As a result of the size of their employers' households as well as the additional duties in other households, the migrant domestic workers worked long hours with limited rest, with a majority working between 17 and 20 hours a day. None of the 20 Kenyan returnees was given a weekly day off, although one woman shared that her employer compensated her in lieu of a rest day. Conversely, the Kenyan research participant who is currently working in Jordan stated that all the domestic workers in her employers' household are entitled to a weekly day off. In Ghana, returnees stated that typically, their working hours began at 4.00 a.m. and ended at 10.30 p.m. In Ethiopia, only three returnees indicated that they were allowed to take a day off, although these entitlements varied depending on the employer: two of these returnees were allowed to take a day off each week whereas the other one was only entitled to two days off each month. In Ghana, most of the returnees reported that they had had no rest periods and were not allowed to take breaks even when they were chronically fatigued or sick. According to the Ghanaian

---

<sup>6</sup> Not her real name

respondents, their employers considered taking a rest during working hours a luxury that the domestic workers were not entitled to, since they were getting paid.

None of the research participants enjoyed health insurance, sick leave or pension. Sick leave was counted as days they did not work and were deducted from their salaries at the end of the month. One Ghanaian respondent was denied food and medication and threatened by her employer after she fell ill for three days. Few of the respondents received medical attention from a doctor when they fell ill: in most cases their employers provided them with pain killers regardless of ailment. One Ugandan respondent dislocated her thumb while working in Oman; she was never taken to the doctor and instead she was asked to wear an arm re-strainer to keep the thumb in position. This did not stop the pain. When the situation worsened, she asked to go back to Uganda.

---

“I used to eat once a day. One when I fell ill for three days, I didn’t eat because my madam said I didn’t work to earn my meals. She warned me not to tell her husband or otherwise she could blackmail me and get me jailed for theft which didn’t even happen. She asked me to call the agent who recruited me to come and pick me to the hospital. I called the agent, he didn’t come. He only sent me medication a day after my call. I was lucky, I recovered and continued with my work.”

- Returnee migrant domestic worker, Ghana

---

## **Income**

Most of those interviewed were paid monthly in cash. The average monthly earnings for Ghanaian migrant domestic workers was \$250. In Uganda, salaries largely depended on the workers’ individual bargaining power, leaving the research respondents at the mercy of their employers and highly vulnerable to exploitation. For example, a Ugandan migrant domestic worker in Oman protested the heavy workload in her first employer’s home and the recruitment agent found her a job with another – a house in which, she came to discover, six men lived. Given the heavy workload in this new home, the respondent successfully negotiated with her new employers for her salary of 65 Omani Rial (\$169) to be increased to 75 Omani Rial (\$195). The savings that she made following this salary increment were sent to the brother.

A majority of the Kenyan returnees received a monthly wage in the range of KSH 15,000 (\$150) to KSH 25,000 (\$250). Only three earned a salary of more than KSH 30,000 (\$300) a month, and this was as a result of their negotiating with employers due to added duties. Among these three was a returnee who had worked in Egypt and received a salary of approximately KSH 60,000 (\$600), which was the highest wage among the 20 Kenyan returnees.

Some of the research participants did not receive any wages from their employers. Some had delays until the following month and in the cases where the PEAs received their salaries on their behalf directly from their employers, some of the salaries were reduced and some of them never received their salaries that went through their agents.

Returnees who received their full wages in a timely manner were successful in sending money home. This money was used by their families in countries of origin to pay for daily and large expenses such as rent and utilities, school fees and medical care. A small number of the returnees invested some of their savings in property, including land and rental houses, while still in the Middle East. Such investments have proved to be a major economic boost for these women upon their return to home. In Ghana, one returnee bought a parcel of land. Others were able to use their savings as capital for different business ventures.

### **Living Conditions**

Most respondents worked and lived in their employers' homes. Most had access to private sleeping quarters, although some shared bedrooms with their employers' children. This limited their privacy: one woman said she could only sleep after the four-year old boy that she shared a room with fell asleep. Another, who works for a family of two adults and two children, shares a room with one of the daughters, whose regular smoking affects the respondent's health.

Some of the returnees from Ghana said they slept in the kitchen or under the staircases in the homes of their employers. There were situations where the key to their doors were removed, making them vulnerable to intrusion and harassment from male family members. One respondent recalled there were CCTV cameras in her bathroom and bedroom. When she protested, they were not removed.

Other respondents said that although they had private rooms, beddings are of very poor quality and are usually made up of old clothes. Some employers provide bed sheets in place of mattresses. There was limited privacy in the domestic workers' bedrooms, and anyone could walk in any time. Some employers specifically required that the workers' bedroom doors be kept open at all times.

### **Abuse and Exploitation**

By nature, domestic work takes place inside private spaces and is excluded from the public. This is especially the case in the Middle East where women are often not involved in community activities and spaces. This makes migrant domestic workers in the Middle East even more vulnerable to abuse and harassment with little or no recourse.

In Ghana, returnees confirmed that most of them experienced verbal abuse by employers. Some spoke about physical assaults by their employers and their children, like slapping. Even some of the younger children were very rude and abusive because they had no respect for domestic workers. Incidents of sexual harassment from their male employers and their older sons were also shared. Sexual harassment issues were very delicate and if the madam had any suspicion her husband was interested in a domestic worker, one had to pack and get out of the house for fear of being framed for theft and handed over to the police.

In Kenya, respondents indicated that one common form of harassment meted by employers and their friends and relatives was bullying and threats, including regular insults due to the migrant workers' race and religious beliefs. Some employers would threaten to call the police and falsely

accuse the domestic workers of stealing the employers' money or worse, threaten physical violence and murder.

All eight Ugandan interviewees acknowledged that they had experienced violence and harassment while performing their duties. For example one returnee's passport was destroyed and wages of one month withheld by her employer for refusal to work in a relative's household. All the four returnees said that they had been forced to work while sick, and one respondent was beaten for refusing to work when sick.

All respondents said that their salaries were sometimes delayed or even withheld by their employers. One Ugandan respondent's wages were deducted for necessities like bathing soap, toothpaste, Vaseline and sanitary towels, which were supposed to be provided by the employer.

In addition to employers in the Middle East, the research found that recruitment and placement agencies are perpetrators of violence and harassment too. Some agencies 'give permission' to employers to beat up migrant women who question them. Employers will often return migrant women to the agencies' offices whenever the domestic workers have an issue with the working conditions, are too ill to work or if the employers are simply unhappy with the worker. In such cases, respondents observed that agents will beat up and sometimes rape the domestic workers before forcing them to return to their employers' homes without resolving the issues.

One respondent witnessed an agent in the country of destination beating up a domestic worker. A second respondent's employer warned her that the agent would beat her if the employer ever returned her; this scared the respondent enough to keep working in harsh conditions with nowhere to seek help. A respondent who is currently working abroad had her mobile phone confiscated by her employer, upon orders from the agent, who argued that by calling the authorities and the Ugandan embassy to complain about the poor working conditions, she was misusing the phone. One of the returnees spoke of witnessing the rape of girls and women who had been returned to the agent's office. The agent warned her that the same fate would befall her if her employer ever sent her back to the office. This hit her so hard that when she left the agency for her employer's house she vowed to do all she could to ensure that she would not be returned to the agency, forcing her to tolerate the abusive environment. Another returnee was locked by her agent in a non-ventilated room with an open gas cylinder and left to suffocate. This was in reaction to her refusal to return to her sponsor's house due to falling ill and insomniac after her employer had overworked her and denied her treatment.

### **Coping Strategies**

For many girls and women leaving East and West Africa to work as domestic workers in the Middle East, their trip was their first experience to travel out of Africa. At first, life in the Middle East for them can be very challenging due to the culture shock by the climatic, cultural and even diet-related differences between their home countries and the Middle East.

A Ugandan respondent who had been promised a job as a supermarket attendant in the UAE and instead found herself in Oman working as a domestic worker was shocked when she was asked to wear a *hijab*. The food portions offered by her employer were small, and meals lacked nutrition. Due to the type of meals she was fed on she started suffering from mineral deficiencies and getting wounds. She adopted by using the medical ointments used for the wounds of the old

lady she was caring for and started to steal vegetables which she hid away in her bedroom and also increased her food portions whenever the family went away.

Two respondents in Saudi Arabia confirmed that they usually steal medication from their employers' cabinets. These cabinets are usually locked and the domestic workers can only access them whenever their employers ask them to clean them. This is a survival strategy brought about by the fact that employers refuse to take the domestic workers to hospital whenever they fall ill, leaving them with no choice but to self-medicate. The domestic workers are aware how dangerous self-medicating is, and to ensure they do not take the wrong medication or dosage, they searched online to identify the medication and the right dosage.

One respondent used to be beaten by her employer's relative who visited the family home regularly. Her employer had spoken up against this abuse, which gave the domestic worker confidence to one day return a slap after the relative had once again beaten her. Because this had happened in a secluded room, there was no evidence that the domestic worker had retaliated. So when the relative reported no one could believe her and at that point the relative has never visited again.

The respondents worked long hours – an average of 18 hours a day – with little to no rest. To cope with this inadequate rest, one of the current migrant domestic workers in Oman usually takes naps in the toilet or at the tap which is located outside the main house pretending to be fetching water or watering the grass.

All eight Ugandan current and returnee domestic workers confirmed that their employers had at some point withheld their salaries, with some keeping these wages for over three months. The risk does not end there: when the domestic workers are finally paid their wages, their employers, employers' children and other relatives search the domestic workers' luggage in a bid to steal the workers' money. The solution, as shared by the respondents, is to keep the money hidden in their undergarments and elsewhere on their bodies until time comes to send the money to their families.

### **3.4. Return and Re-integration**

On average, the work contract for migrant domestic workers in the Middle East is two years. All returnees agreed that besides the opportunity to earn a regular salary and save, one of the key benefits of their migration was how it enhanced their resilience and confidence to overcome personal and work-related challenges.

Most of the interviewees returned at the end of their contracts. In Ghana, the main challenge faced by returnees was that they had to make their own travel arrangements to return and buy their own tickets. One of them said she was helped to return by "a good Samaritan".

At the time this research was being conducted, over two years had passed since the lifting of Uganda's labour migration ban that barred domestic workers from migrating to Saudi Arabia. Domestic workers who participated in this research therefore did not return to Uganda because of the ban but because of a mix of reasons, some related to the poor living and working conditions

in the countries of destination. Respondents who returned to Uganda before completing their two-year terms gave as reasons for their return overwork including working long hours and working in more than one home, and illness. Several returnees went back to Uganda after completing their contracts, particularly girls and women who had travelled irregularly and to countries that have not signed bilateral agreements with Uganda – specifically Oman, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait.

In Kenya, at least ten of the women returned after completing their two-year contracts. Several were deported after the premature termination of their contracts. One stated that she could not put up with the poor working conditions in Saudi Arabia and resigned after four months of work. She was however put in detention for four months until her family had gathered enough money to cover her travel expenses back to Kenya. For a majority of the returnees, their travel back to Kenya was processed by their employers. In some cases, employers were hesitant to release the domestic workers at the end of their contracts and other people had to intervene. For example, one returnee's parents collaborated with the recruitment agency in Kenya to facilitate her return. Another said that her cousin who was working in Saudi helped her to return. Some of the domestic workers had to lie that they would return as they had observed that the employers would be hesitant to pay for their flights back to Kenya.

On return to the country, returnee migrant domestic workers are faced with a myriad challenges ranging from illness, chronic fatigue, isolation, and financial difficulties. Some were victims of malicious gossip instigated by relatives and other members of their community, and this was especially the case for returnees who had faced abuse in the Middle East, came back with health problems or who had saved little or no money. Such social pressure was based on expectations that the migrant workers would be successful, and oftentimes, that they share this success with friends, which often led to isolation. For instance, one Kenyan returnee said that she had to stay home for two months before being able to openly interact with other people in her community.

In Ghana, most of the returnees said that their families were supportive of their return since they came with enough money and were in good health which was to them a fulfilment of their reason for going to work. Some also said their families wanted them to return earlier than the contract time due to the ill treatment meted out to them by employers. However, some families have been hostile to the returnees because they thought they should have stayed longer to work and send more money home. In Ethiopia and Uganda, there is a growing trend of trade unions and civil society organisations providing support to returnee domestic workers. For instance in Uganda, HTS-Union provides counselling, makes claims on the behalf of migrant domestic workers' whose salaries were withheld, provides them with information about safe migration and also enhances their financial literacy. However, a lot more can be done to support returnees to live a healthy fulfilling life back home.



FIGURE 4: A RETURNEE DOMESTIC WORKER SHARES HER EXPERIENCES AT A RESEARCH FINDINGS WORKSHOP ORGANISED BY HTS-UNION IN UGANDA IN JULY, 2019. (c) HTS-UNION

## 4. CONCLUSION

As the global demand for domestic and care work increases, we hope that this study has contributed to a greater understanding of the trends and working conditions of African domestic workers in the Middle East.

As the stories of the research participants show, the everyday reality for a majority of East and West African female domestic migrants in the Middle East is mired with violence, abuse and exploitation. At the pre-migration stage, migrant girls and women face unnecessary difficulties, starting from gathering funds to pay exorbitant migration-related expenses and the bureaucracies of obtaining passports and other travel documents. In countries of destination, migrant domestic workers' fate is more or less in the hands of their employers and overseas agents. Poor working conditions are a reality for many and they include long working hours, little to no rest time, unpaid or delayed wages, and confiscation of passports by employers. Inadequate legal protection in destination countries including a lack of employment contracts and social security and other benefits, can increase vulnerabilities in countries of destination. Lack of mechanisms to safeguard migrants in destination countries, and the risk that poses to the migrants' emotional, mental and physical well-being. In situations where domestic workers find their living conditions to be intolerable, they take drastic measures such as escaping from their employers.

Governments in East and West Africa have recently taken a number of measures to address the difficulties migrant domestic workers face in the Middle East, and to assist the reintegration process for returnees. This has included drafting and reviewing labour migration policies, signing

bilateral agreements with countries of destination, and providing safe migration information online. For instance, a labour migration regulatory framework exists in Uganda. This includes the Employment (recruitment of Ugandan migrant workers abroad) Regulations 2005, and Guidelines on Recruitment and Placement of Uganda Migrant Workers Abroad. Ethiopia's Overseas Employment Proclamation was adopted in 2016 and went into force in 2018 following the amendment of older labour migration-related policies (IOM, 2017; Nelson, P., 2018). The remaining three research locations did not have comprehensive national labour migration policies in place at the time this study took place, though Kenya and Ghana had draft policies.

In addition, governments in some of the research locations, specifically Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, have signed bilateral labour agreements with some, but not all, destination countries in the Middle East. For instance, Uganda has signed bilateral agreements with Jordan and Saudi Arabia that are specific to migrant domestic workers, but not with other countries that its citizens migrate to for work including Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE and Bahrain. It should be noted that these gaps in the labour migration regulatory framework have not impeded migration, and in fact, even when there have been labour migration bans to the Middle East as was the case in Kenya and Ethiopia, domestic workers have continued to migrate there.

Even in countries where the labour migration policy is operational, migrant domestic workers are not receiving enough protections primarily due to a lack of information and the desperation to find work. Few of the returnees from Kenya, for instance, knew of the requirement that recruitment agencies be registered and accredited by the government. This was also the case in Uganda where migrant domestic workers are still getting jobs in the Middle East through local unregistered recruitment agencies. The research also found that besides local and foreign recruitment agencies, in Uganda, Tanzania Mainland and Kenya there also exist brokers, who are either appointed by recruitment agencies or working independently, and whose primary role is to enrol prospective migrant domestic workers. These brokers and recruitment agencies, it was found, sometimes perpetrate misinformation, violence, harassment and abuse against migrant domestic workers before and after migration. In Kenya, even registered recruitment agencies are increasingly targeting Kenyan women who have little or no information about their labour rights, the migration process or the realities of life as a migrant worker in the Middle East. However, some governments are making efforts to address these informational gaps, not only by facilitating pre-departure trainings but also by leveraging technology. In January 2019 for instance, the Kenyan government through the National Employment Agency launched a website to provide comprehensive labour and travel information to prospective migrant workers seeking employment in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, labour migration stakeholders in East Africa and Qatar in early 2019 launched Just Good Work, a mobile application that provides Kenyan and Ugandan migrant workers with information on the migration and work experience in Qatar in English and Swahili.<sup>8</sup>

It remains to be seen what impact these policy measures and interventions will have on the rights of African girls and women who travel to the Middle East to work as domestic workers.

---

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://kenyamigrantworker.org/>

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://justgood.work/>

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and the views of the participants, several gaps were identified and together with migrant domestic workers and their advocates, the researchers propose the following interventions as ways to address these gaps:

- **Improve the labour migration regulatory framework in all six research locations.**

With the exception of Uganda and Ethiopia, which both have policies in place that are specific to labour migration, the remaining research locations do not have comprehensive labour migration frameworks in place, although some like Kenya and Ghana are drafting labour migration policies (Kenya developed a draft National Labour Migration Policy in 2010 but it is yet to be adopted while in Ghana, a draft labour migration policy was validated in December 2018 but was not available to the public at the time of this research). An assessment of these labour migration policies, including those in draft form, is necessary to establish best practices and gaps, as well as the impacts of these laws and policies on the rights of migrant domestic workers as well as on labour migration trends.

When signing bilateral agreements, African and Middle Eastern governments should come up with frameworks to monitor and review their implementation. This would ensure compliance and respect for migrant workers' rights by all parties. The involvement of stakeholders such as trade unions and CSOs when drafting and negotiating bilateral agreements with Middle Eastern countries would ensure that the interests of African migrant domestic workers are represented.

Governments should ratify and implement the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) to enhance and promote decent work and protection of the rights of local and migrant domestic workers.

Remove all bans and restrictions on labour migration, such as that for domestic workers to the Middle East currently in Ghana, since such restrictions promote irregular migration and consequent extortion and ill-treatment of migrant domestic workers.

- **Collect and effectively manage data on labour migration trends and patterns**

One of the key gaps identified by this study was the lack of reliable and up-to-date labour migration data that is consistently collected and available to the public. To address this, it is recommended that East and West African governments invest in regularly collecting and updating comprehensive data on labour migration trends, patterns and protection indicators, including the number of people migrating, key countries of destination, and their experiences. This would ensure evidence-based policy-making and programming.

- **Strengthen the support and protection to migrant domestic workers in the countries of destination.**

Where embassies are present, trained Labour Attachés equipped with the resources and mandate should be deployed to cater for the needs of migrant workers. Migrant domestic workers should be encouraged to register with their embassies in their host countries upon arrival to enable the various missions to monitor them throughout their stay. Where no embassies are present, governments in sending countries should open up embassies in all key Middle Eastern countries with which they have diplomatic relations to ease the process of assisting migrant workers. Shelters can be set up to provide assistance to victims of mistreatment. Trade unions in countries of origin should explore bilateral relationships with trade unions in receiving countries.

- **Public awareness creation on safe migration and official migration processes.**

Structured and regular informational campaigns at the community level – including among in-school adolescents, out-of-school young people and parents – and through the media would enhance the public’s understanding of safe migration and official migration processes. Trade unions, NGOs and government officials all have a role to play in creating awareness on safe and official policy. Awareness creation on resources available to migrant workers such as Kenya’s newly-launched online information platforms is also key. Furthermore, governments in countries of origin should support the provision of pre-departure information and training to prospective migrant workers.

- **Promote better return and reintegration**

Promote efforts to strengthen the financial and human capacity of local organisations and relevant government agencies that facilitate return and reintegration to enhance the delivery of comprehensive legal, social, medical and livelihood services to returnees.

- **Collaboration and partnerships among stakeholders within and between countries of origin and destination**

The study identified different stakeholders in each research location that are working on labour migration issues. These include trade unions and domestic workers’ association, local and international NGOs working with domestic workers, faith-based organisations, private recruitment agencies, donors and local and national government agencies. A gap identified by these stakeholders during the research was the fact that they often work in silos. For instance, stakeholders at a research findings workshop in Mombasa in June 2019 agreed that there was a duplication of services provided to migrant workers particularly among workers’ representatives and civil society organisations. The need for enhanced information-sharing and collaboration is therefore key. Partnerships among stakeholders in countries of origin and destination would also enhance the protection of the rights of migrant workers.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Andall, J., 2018. "Intra-African Female Labour Migration: Common Issues, Work and Rights: Background Paper No. 1", in *UNCTAD Economic Development in Africa Report 2018: Migration for Structural Transformation*. Available at: [https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/edar2018\\_BP1\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/edar2018_BP1_en.pdf)
2. Achakoma, A.K., Mayah, E., and Odigie, A. (2018). *Labour migration to the GCC States; The case of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda*. Retrieved from [https://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/ituc-africa\\_study-africa\\_labour\\_migration\\_to\\_the\\_gcc\\_states.pdf](https://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/ituc-africa_study-africa_labour_migration_to_the_gcc_states.pdf)
3. Achakoma, A.K., Ansah, F.O. and Agyemang, P. (2015). *Labour migration in Ghana: an analysis of emigration, return migration and reintegration*. Retrieved from <http://www.fesghana.org/uploads/PDF/Labour%20Migration%20Study.pdf>
4. Admassie, A., Nuru, S. & Ferede, T. (2017). Migration and Forced Labour: An Analysis on Ethiopian Workers. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-addis\\_ababa/---sro-addis\\_ababa/documents/publication/wcms\\_621555.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-addis_ababa/---sro-addis_ababa/documents/publication/wcms_621555.pdf)
5. African Union Commission, 2017. *Report on Labour Migration Statistics in Africa in 2015*. Available at: [https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/33793-file-1st\\_labour\\_migration\\_statistics\\_report\\_in\\_africa.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/33793-file-1st_labour_migration_statistics_report_in_africa.pdf)
6. Begun, R. (2017). *Working like a robot: Abuse of Tanzanian Domestic Workers in Oman and the United Arab Emirates*. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/11/14/working-robot/abuse-tanzanian-domestic-workers-oman-and-united-arab-emirates>
7. Demissie, F. (2017). Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East and Gulf States: an introduction. *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 11 (1), 1-5. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17528631.2017.1405518>
8. FAO, 2017. *Evidence on internal and international migration patterns in selected African countries*. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7468e.pdf>
9. Horwood, C., Forin, R. & Frouws, B.(Eds.). (2018). *Mixed Migration Review 2018. Highlights. Interviews. Essays. Data*. Geneva: Mixed Migration Centre. Available at: <http://www.mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Mixed-Migration-Review-2018.pdf>
10. Maastricht University, University of Oxford & Samuel Hall (2017). *Understanding labour migration in the East African Community*. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/understanding-intra-regional-labour-migration-east-african-community-eac-literature>
11. Malit, F. Jr. and Al Youha, A. (2016). *Kenyan Migration to the Gulf Countries: Balancing Economic Interests and Worker Protection*. Retrieved from

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/kenyan-migration-gulf-countries-balancing-economic-interests-and-worker-protection>

12. Shimeles, A. 2010. *Migration Patterns, Trends and Policy Issues in Africa*. Working Papers Series N° 119, African Development Bank, Tunis, Tunisia. Available at:  
<https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Procurement/Project-related-Procurement/WORKING%20119%20word%20document%20AA.PDF>
13. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2018. *Economic Development in Africa Report 2018: Migration for Structural Transformation*. Available at:  
[https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/aldcafrica2018\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/aldcafrica2018_en.pdf)
14. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2015). *Migration and Human Rights: Improving Human Rights-Based Governance of International Migration*, Retrieved from  
[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Migration/MigrationHR\\_improvingHR\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Migration/MigrationHR_improvingHR_Report.pdf)
15. Von Maurtius, L. (2017), *Mapping the challenges: Labour Migration from West and East Africa to the Gulf and MENA region*. Available at:  
[http://madenetwork.org/sites/default/files/Recruitment%20Africa%20Gulf%20MADE%20Europe\\_0.pdf](http://madenetwork.org/sites/default/files/Recruitment%20Africa%20Gulf%20MADE%20Europe_0.pdf)

