

An Investigation into the Experiences of Female Victims of Trafficking in Ethiopia

Study overview

Ethiopia is a major exporter of labour to Middle Eastern countries, particularly in the domestic service industry. Many women and children who migrate to the region to work as housemaids, however, are victims of human trafficking and exposed to various types of abuse and exploitation.

By using a constructivist framework and conducting in-depth interviews with five returnees, this study aims to provide an insight into female human trafficking from Ethiopia to the Middle East and the psychosocial impacts experienced by survivors upon return.

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Background

In order to understand the stories of Ethiopian women who have been trafficked to Middle Eastern countries under the false promise of legitimate employment, it is necessary to place their experiences within a broader geographic and legal context.

Country Context

With a population of around 139 million, Ethiopia is one of the most populated countries in Africa. Because of cultural values that are common mainly in rural Ethiopia, women have limited access to education and training opportunities, meaning that, in comparison to men, they have lesser access to employment opportunities.

The study underlines that a lack of job opportunities and limited income are two of the main factors which draw women into deceitful agreements with brokers offering false promises of employment.



Map of Ethiopia with flag.
Attribution: [Vecteezy](#)

Understanding Human Trafficking

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime defines human trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.”

The study highlights two forms of trafficking in the context of Ethiopia: **internal** and **external**. The former consists of predominantly women and children migrating within Ethiopia to for work as domestic workers or as weavers in the ‘shema’ industry.

The latter refers to multinational operations by which mainly women are deceived and brought to Middle Eastern countries for domestic service or sex work. Upon arrival, their movement is limited and they are exposed to various human rights violations.

Key Findings

Drawing from in-depth interviews with five returnees who had been trafficked to Lebanon and the UAE, the study presents various key findings about the experiences of trafficked women.

Point 1

Recruitment, Travel and Means of Placement

- Most women had contacted agents through friends, relatives and family members.
- All women were given false promises by agents of attractive jobs and good payment.
- All women had their passports confiscated upon arrival by immigration officers, agents and employers.
- Employers and agents utilised different means to prevent women from leaving and returning home.

Point 2

Working and Living Conditions

- The most common forms of abuse and exploitation faced by women and young girls working as domestic workers in the Middle East are sexual abuse, overwork, confinement, physical abuse, insult, belittlement and withholding of salary.
- Women recounted being regularly beaten as well as sexually and verbally abused by employers.
- Women were forced to work until after midnight without a break as well as being denied adequate food and medical treatment.

Point 3

Psychosocial Effects

- Upon returning, some women required a combination of financial, medical and emotional support.
- Some women experienced pressure from family members who had the perception that they had failed and should have endured the suffering.
- Most women experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress including feelings of sadness, frustration and helplessness.
- All women expressed loneliness and social isolation during the trafficking, which for some extended after returning home, including fear of losing social and familial acceptance.