



POLICY BRIEF



FROM INSIGHTS TO ACTION:

ADVANCING THE RIGHTS OF ETHIOPIAN MIGRANT WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS

Photo: UN Women/ Joe Saade

Summary

Nearly half of Ethiopian migrants globally are women, many migrating with the desire to better their lives or for economic motives, including for domestic work. Because migration patterns are highly gendered and in the absence of gender-responsive migration laws, policies and services, many Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers end up migrating through irregular channels, finding themselves in vulnerable situations at high risk of rights violations. Accessing accurate information on and services for regular migration is not easy; Ethiopian women may rely instead on informal networks and unregistered recruitment agencies. Ethiopian migrant women travelling via irregular overland routes, as opposed to travelling by plane, face high risks of sexual and gender-based violence, including trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation. Upon reaching their destination countries and taking up domestic work, they often face abusive and exploitative situations. Health issues, including physical injuries and high rates of suicide, are widespread among Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers. Despite these harsh realities, some women secure relatively high salaries in comparison to those in Ethiopia and send significant portions of their salaries home to support their families. Upon returning to Ethiopia, many women face stigma, limited economic opportunities and psychological distress. Limited gender-responsive reintegration support further complicates their efforts to rebuild their lives and attain economic independence.

Leaving Ethiopia

WHY ETHIOPIAN WOMEN MIGRATE

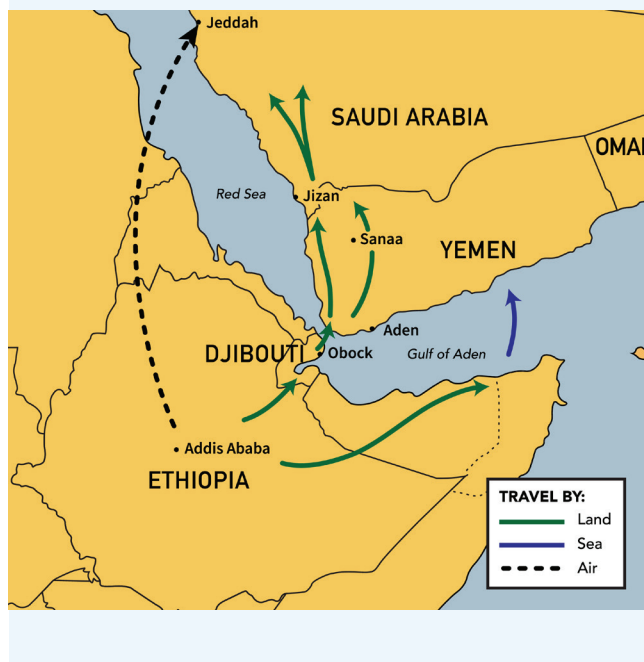
Women and girls account for 46 per cent of migrants leaving Ethiopia.¹ Due to prevailing gender inequalities, discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes, migrant women usually find work in occupations associated with traditional gender roles. Approximately 95 per cent of Ethiopian labour migrants heading to the Middle East via regular channels are women hired for domestic work,

indicative of the large proportion of Ethiopian migrant women who are employed in this sector.²

Ethiopian women and girls migrate for myriad reasons. They may choose migration as an avenue to escape gender inequalities, including domestic violence, early marriage and the practice of female genital mutilation and cutting, and to flee conflict, persecution and natural disasters.³ But they may also have economic motivations and aspirations for mobility and improvement in their standard of living.⁴

BOX 1

The Eastern Route from Ethiopia



In Ethiopia, women's rate of unemployment (11.7 per cent) is more than double that of men's (5 per cent), making migration for domestic work a promising opportunity for women to earn and remit money.⁵ In recent decades, Ethiopian women increasingly migrate to the Middle East, particularly to Gulf Cooperation Council countries, owing to the rising demand for domestic workers in a context of rising wealth but limited provision of public care services.⁶ This trend has connected the Horn of Africa to the Middle East via the Eastern Route, making it one of the most-travelled migration corridors with an estimated half a million Ethiopian women migrating along it annually.⁷

OBTAINING EMPLOYMENT AS A MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKER

Ethiopian women's experiences in preparing to leave and migrate in search of domestic work can vary widely. Most private employment agencies are based in Addis Ababa, facilitating migration for domestic work for women living in the capital.⁸ Ethiopia's Overseas Employment Proclamation covers licensing requirements for private employment agencies and criminalizes non-registered recruiters. However, many illegal non-registered recruiters are still in operation, particularly outside of Addis Ababa.

Despite awareness campaigns promoting regular migration and the perception that using registered private employment agencies is safer, many women still lack information about how to identify and verify the status of private employment agencies.⁹ Moreover, prospective migrants often prioritize ease and speed in arranging their departure, and unregistered agencies promise a less cumbersome and faster process.¹⁰ At least four documents are required for Ethiopians to migrate – a passport, medical certificate, certificate of competency and police report – all of which can be difficult and take time to acquire.¹¹ Women may also not know how to obtain these documents. Rural women face more obstacles given the high costs of travelling to and staying in Addis Ababa to access private employment agencies and wait for document approvals.¹² These factors combine to turn women to the services of unregistered recruitment agents or brokers, despite the additional risks and costs.¹³

Many migrant women end up using smugglers to cross borders via irregular channels for exorbitant fees, putting them in precarious situations, including being trafficked through deceptive, coercive, violent and exploitative means. Women brokers can be more reliable in some cases, connecting prospective migrant women directly to their contacts and providing more accurate information when they are the first link in the 'chain'.¹⁴ However, trusted community members, often women, have been reported to recruit and groom prospective migrant women on behalf of local and international traffickers.¹⁵ Ethiopia has attempted to raise awareness about the risk of trafficking and has stipulated imprisonment and fines for traffickers.



Photo: IOM / Beyond Borders Media 2022

PREPARING TO LEAVE

Migrant women's access to full information enables them to make more informed decisions and claim their rights as they prepare to migrate. Ethiopia's Overseas Employment Proclamation stipulates that the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) and private employment agencies must provide pre-employment and pre-departure orientations and training sessions, including for those migrating for domestic work. MoLSA, with support from the European Union, ILO and UN Women, published the *Pre-Departure Training Manual for Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers* to guide the trainings. It covers information on travel procedures, building working relationships with employers, labour rights for migrant domestic workers, health and occupational safety issues, protection from sexual violence, managing and sending money back to Ethiopia, coping with stress and shocks, dispute settlement, religious and cultural practices and returning home.¹⁶

BOX 2

Increasing awareness on safe migration in Ethiopia

Under the Germany-funded Making Migration Safe for Women programme, UN Women works with local organizations to support potential migrant women and provide information on their rights, the importance of safe labour migration and the risks of irregular migration. Various approaches are used for outreach, including partnerships with returnee migrant women alliances and associations, school clubs, community-based organizations and local media. Migrant women returnees can share stories about the realities of their migration experiences to help increase awareness and tackle misinformation about labour migration.

Yet, training quality and impact are inconsistent.¹⁷ For example, only 47 per cent of migrant women, most migrating for domestic work, received information in the six months preceding their departure for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ Returnee migrant women domestic workers recommend tailoring trainings to provide more practical and language skills and to include sessions carried out by returnee migrants themselves.¹⁹ Prospective migrant

women tend to rely heavily on word of mouth from family and friends, agents and returnees,²⁰ which often offers inaccurate and biased accounts about life as a domestic worker, emphasizing success stories and minimizing potential risks. In contrast, many returnee migrant women domestic workers have reported finding conditions abroad to be significantly worse than they were led to believe.²¹ Women migrating via irregular channels are unlikely to have accessed orientation and training sessions, wishing to begin their journey as quickly as possible. As such, they have little preparation and often migrate without key information and skills, increasing their risks of abuse and exploitation.



Photo: UN Women/ James Ochweri

The journey

Gender discriminatory laws can increase the likelihood of women turning to irregular migration channels.²² Ethiopia's ban on migration to the Middle East for domestic work from 2013 to 2018 and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's temporary suspension of Ethiopian migrants over a disagreement on the content of domestic workers' contracts between 2019 and 2020 are examples of gender discriminatory migration laws as disproportionately impacted migrant women. Even with the lifting of these restrictions, many Ethiopian women migrating for domestic work continue to use irregular channels, despite some awareness of the associated risks gained from information campaigns and word of mouth. For instance, approximately 60 to 70 per cent of Ethiopian women migrating to the Gulf Cooperation Countries are in an irregular situation.²³ Irregular channels provide an easier and faster process and, in some cases, allow migrant women to bypass legal requirements, such as obtaining an employment contract or meeting the minimum age of 18.²⁴ For some women, irregular migration is an option of last resort when their efforts to use regular migration channels fail.²⁵

Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers employ various means of travel to reach their destination countries. Women who used private employment agencies and depart with a legal contract for domestic work are more likely to travel by air and are less exposed to risks during their journey.²⁶ In contrast, women migrating via irregular channels for domestic work frequently cross harsh terrain by foot or travel in overcrowded vehicles or boats, often provided by smugglers in exchange for large sums of money.²⁷ For example, a common route might include travel from Ethiopia to Djibouti hidden in cargo holds, walking the Djibouti desert to the Red Sea, a boat journey to Yemen and then additional land travel to destination countries.²⁸ Overland travel can be dangerous, with inadequate access to food and water, extreme weather conditions, exhaustion and a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence and other forms of abuse. Sexual and gender-based violence can take place anywhere, at checkpoints, in border areas, during overland travel and in detention centres²⁹ and is perpetrated by smugglers, traffickers, authorities (i.e., police and border guards), intimate partners or other migrants.³⁰ In some cases, smugglers were reported to be responsible for almost 90 per cent of acts of violence.³¹

“Go now, pay later” schemes commonly employed by smugglers allow migrants to start their journey without having the necessary funds upfront.³² Consequences of such schemes range from precarious and never-ending cycles of debt bondage³³ to instances of migrants being stranded as smugglers demand payment before taking them further, which can lead to forced labour or sexual exploitation, as means to ‘pay’ their way, or taking up jobs in transit countries, where they could remain stuck for potentially months or years.³⁴ In other cases, the cost of the journey is deducted from the worker’s monthly salary in the country of destination until the debt is repaid. For example, Ethiopian women traveling to Sudan for domestic work often had to work for several months without salary to repay smugglers.³⁵

Women are the primary targets for trafficking and migrant women who use smugglers are at a heightened risk of being trafficked. Dense ‘chains’ of brokers, smugglers and traffickers work together, starting in rural areas and connecting across borders to multiple countries of destination.³⁶ Ethiopian migrant women may be trafficked at the Yemen–Saudi border, where one broker can ‘sell’ a domestic worker to another for US\$200.³⁷ Data indicate

that 71 per cent of trafficked individuals with Ethiopian citizenship are women, with 66 per cent trafficked for forced labour and 16 per cent for sexual exploitation.³⁸

Life as a domestic worker

BOX 3

A day in the life of an Ethiopian migrant domestic worker

Many Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers are professional housekeepers, completing tasks such as cleaning rooms and bathrooms, washing and ironing clothes, washing dishes after each meal and taking out the household waste. Many also perform tasks related to cooking, such as completing the shopping and preparing food. Domestic workers also engage in care work which might include the provision of childcare, eldercare or caring for members of the household who have fallen sick.

Depending on the employer, an Ethiopian migrant domestic worker might be responsible for both domestic and care tasks. In other cases, especially when a household employs multiple domestic workers, they might only be responsible for a portion of tasks. Most Ethiopian migrant domestic workers are live-in workers, although some do engage in freelance work, living outside of an employer’s household and, in some cases, providing services for multiple households.³⁹

PAY AND REMITTANCES

Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers can sometimes find reliable employment in countries of destination with higher salaries than in Ethiopia, supporting their economic empowerment and independence. For example, 63 per cent of Ethiopian women who entered the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were able to find employment as domestic workers with relative ease, earning on average around US\$500 per month.⁴⁰ However, pay varies widely between and within countries, with many Ethiopian migrant domestic workers earning as low as US\$150 per month.⁴¹ This is still a significantly higher salary than what a domestic worker would earn in Ethiopia at some US\$28 to US\$36 per month.⁴²

Ethiopian women are considered more reliable remitters than Ethiopian men, sending on average US\$526 a year compared with US\$337, respectively,⁴³ and Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers may send up to 80 to 90 per cent of their monthly income home as remittances.⁴⁴ Moreover, migrant women domestic workers tend to stay in countries of destination for longer periods of time and their remittances are more stable. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 53 per cent of migrant women domestic workers stayed for over five years compared to 16 per cent of men.⁴⁵ Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers often use Western Union to send funds to a family member's account in the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia,⁴⁶ but some may send cash with friends returning to Ethiopia if they lack control of identity documents and cannot access formal financial institutions.⁴⁷ Lack of mobility and time off from work also affects the ability to send remittances.⁴⁸

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Migrant women domestic workers are subject to extreme human rights abuses. Sexual and gender-based violence is prevalent and committed by employers and their relatives and friends, among other perpetrators. An alarming 18.5 per cent of returnee Ethiopian migrant women surveyed had experienced some kind of violence during their first year of employment as a domestic worker.⁴⁹ Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers have shared accounts of sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, as well as beatings, food deprivation, confinement, social isolation and acid and chemical attacks.⁵⁰



Photo: UN Women/ Tensae Yemane

Despite the growing body of research in this area, it is estimated that incidents of sexual abuse and violence against domestic workers are higher than reported as the taboo and stigma associated with these topics in Ethiopian culture militate against disclosing these experiences.⁵¹ A majority of Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers in one study in Sudan experienced physical and emotional violence, yet none of them had ever talked about their experiences.⁵² Stigma can also prevent survivors of violence from seeking assistance. Some countries allow migrant domestic workers to change employers if they have experienced abuse; however, this process can be cumbersome. For example, in Jordan, a domestic worker would need to prove through the judicial system that they have been physically or sexually abused.⁵³

Lack of labour protections and restrictive migration policies in destination countries fuel the abuse experienced by Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers. Temporary migration schemes push migrants into the informal economy and create a shadow industry that operates outside the legislative framework.⁵⁴ When the demand for domestic work is significant, these schemes can encourage longer-term migration via irregular channels,⁵⁵ making it difficult to prevent exploitation and guarantee the human rights and safety of migrant women domestic workers. The Kafala system practised in many Gulf Cooperation Countries is an example, putting Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers at risk of rights violations and legally binding their immigration status to an individual employer or sponsor ('kafeel'). Because domestic work is in the home, laws and policies to regulate domestic work and protect migrant domestic workers are limited since they are viewed as intruding into household and family life.⁵⁶ Under the Kafala system, employers have disproportionate and unregulated power over the autonomy and mobility of migrant domestic workers, leading to situations of exploitation and abuse that are hard to escape. The freedom of migrant women domestic workers is extremely constrained; employers can confiscate their passports to keep them from leaving.⁵⁷ If migrant women do manage to escape abusive households, they fall into irregular migration status and risk imprisonment, deportation and trafficking.⁵⁸

Much of the abuse directed towards Ethiopian women migrant domestic workers is intensified by racialized and gendered discrimination in countries of destination. Multiple studies have confirmed a hierarchy of domestic workers based on country of origin and skin colour in the Middle East, with Filipino women having the highest status and therefore the highest salaries, followed by Indonesian and Sri Lankan women, and African women at the bottom,⁵⁹ with Ethiopian women generally facing the highest levels of discrimination and abuse.⁶⁰ Harmful stereotypes about Ethiopian women having “loose morals” can manifest in verbal or physical harassment, abuse and violence.⁶¹

LABOUR RIGHTS ABUSES AND DECENT WORK DEFICITS

Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers, especially those who migrate via irregular channels, may not have formal contracts with detailed employment terms, increasing the risk of labour rights violations. Even with a contract, enforcement mechanisms are limited because domestic workers are employed in private households. Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers in the Middle East work on average 15 hours a day compared with 11 hours reported for other sectors.⁶² They also reported withheld, delayed or partial payment of salaries and a lack of benefits, with 59 per cent receiving none.⁶³ Inadequate and abusive living conditions prevail; food is often withheld or is distinct from that of their employers or they are forced to eat leftovers or food waste.⁶⁴ They are often isolated, both from Ethiopian diaspora communities and from maintaining relationships back home. Many Ethiopian migrant domestic workers have reported employers confiscating their phones and restricting and monitoring their calls and limiting the number of minutes per call.⁶⁵ They are often barred from leaving the workplace and afforded little to no privacy within the home.

Social protection provisions covering health insurance, employment injury, maternity, unemployment and old-age pensions, are almost non-existent for Ethiopian migrant domestic workers abroad. Although the Ethiopian Overseas Employment Proclamation requires employers to provide various benefits, including insurance, it is almost impossible to ensure that employers meet these conditions, given that most migrant women domestic workers are employed in households and lack contracts. Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers face additional challenges in accessing

social protection due to their overrepresentation in the informal sector, underrepresentation in trade unions and lack of labour inspections.⁶⁶

HEALTH RISKS

Abusive working conditions mean physical and psychological health issues are common among Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers – occupational injuries, including exposure to harmful or toxic chemicals, unwanted pregnancies, crises situations (due to accidents, suicide attempts or assaults) and inadequate treatment for chronic illnesses.⁶⁷ Studies have found that 15.9 per cent of returning migrant adolescent girl and young women who had worked as domestic workers had symptoms of depression⁶⁸ and that a shocking 37 per cent of documented suicides in Saudi Arabia were committed by Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers, despite it being highly condemned in Ethiopia’s religious traditions.⁶⁹ Moreover, Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers have reported feeling trapped, scared, hopeless and helpless.⁷⁰

Due to fears of deportation, lack of information and access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health, and psychological services, and social stigma related to sexual violence and mental health, Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers rarely seek assistance.⁷¹ Migrants in an irregular situation are doubly constrained in accessing formal healthcare services due to their migration status.⁷²

Returning home

Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers tend to regard overseas employment as a temporary stepping stone to improve their economic situation, which is reinforced by the prevalence of temporary migration schemes for domestic workers. Ethiopian migrants have also been forcibly returned in recent years, especially those who migrated via irregular channels. Forced return rarely allows for preparation and can include arrest, detention, imprisonment and abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence, as well as confiscation of belongings and earnings.⁷³ The sudden forced return of Ethiopian domestic workers from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was found to negatively affect their economic, social and psychosocial reintegration in Ethiopia.⁷⁴



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Returning Ethiopian migrant women face social stigma and isolation, with domestic worker returnees finding it difficult to restore previous relationships with friends, relatives, neighbours and communities. For some, this is due to the failure to meet economic expectations while abroad.⁷⁵ Communities are also resistant to behavioural, cultural, religious and ideological changes that migrant women might show upon return.⁷⁶ Migrant women returnees from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia reported discrimination and lowered social status in their communities due to perceptions that they had been sexually abused.⁷⁷ While the Ethiopian diaspora is often well respected in rural communities and instrumental in improving family livelihoods, migrant women domestic workers who return without savings may be shunned by their families.⁷⁸

Mental health problems acquired abroad are a barrier to psychosocial reintegration for Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers returning from the Middle East.⁷⁹ Due to the stigma, many returning domestic workers do not seek psychological support and instead try to leave their painful migration experiences behind them and move on with their lives.⁸⁰

Lack of access to the labour market and training opportunities to increase skills and employability compromises the long-term economic reintegration of migrant women domestic workers. Many find that the remittances sent home are not enough to start a business or remittance recipients had spent all the funds on basic needs and were in debt.⁸¹ Most returning migrant women domestic workers were either unemployed and looking for work (42 per cent) or continued employment domestic workers (45 per cent), while others made an income through home-based activities.⁸²

While some returning migrants receive basic assistance, formal support services for returnees, both from the government and non-governmental organizations, are inconsistent and limited in scope and duration.⁸³ The Ethiopian government has made efforts to expand support for returnees, including a new draft migration policy that emphasizes the importance of return management, rehabilitation and reintegration and Directive 969/2023 to implement the reintegration of migrant returnees who are survivors of violence. However, no specific reference is made to the needs of returning migrant women domestic workers.

Limited reintegration and capital, lack of employment, and complex family and community dynamics, including experiences of stigma and isolation, can contribute to women's re-migration despite the associated risks and challenges.⁸⁴ Former Ethiopian migrant domestic workers also cited the feeling of empowerment and ability to support their families as reasons to migrate again.⁸

Recommendations

These recommendations seek to support Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers and promote and protect their human rights at all stages of migration:

DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT TARGETED LAWS AND POLICIES

- Ensure gender-responsive development and implementation of national migration policies and bilateral and multilateral migration agreements that recognize and protect migrant women domestic workers in line with key normative frameworks and international standards.
- Ratify and implement international and regional instruments relevant to migrant women domestic workers, including ILO Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers and ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment.
- Expand and diversify safe, orderly and regular migration pathways for women migrant domestic workers through coordinated policy interventions and abolish gender discriminatory migration policies that contribute to irregular migration, including temporary migration schemes.
- Combat smuggling and trafficking of persons through enhanced collaboration between common countries of origin and destination for migrant domestic workers and enact and implement laws to criminalize and punish perpetrators.
- Improve the collection, analysis, dissemination and use of sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics on migrant domestic workers and their financial and social contributions to improve evidence-based policymaking.
- Promote multi-stakeholder dialogues with migrant women domestic workers and their organizations to develop and implement policies and programmes that promote and protect their rights at all stages of migration.

GUARANTEE DECENT WORK FOR MIGRANT WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS

- Adopt and implement labour laws and policies that guarantee decent work for migrant domestic workers, including fair wages, standard employment contracts, normal hours of work, weekly rest, paid annual leave, occupational safety and health, workplaces free from

- violence and harassment, and social protection inclusive of maternity leave, old-age pension and unemployment benefits.
- Adopt and implement laws and policies that allow freedom of association and collective bargaining for migrant domestic workers.
- Expand fair recruitment practices for migrant domestic workers and improve regulation and monitoring of private employment agencies and unofficial recruitment agencies.
- Provide vocational training and skills development for migrant domestic workers, including employment options beyond domestic work.
- Promote the recognition, formalization and professionalization of domestic work performed by migrants.

STRENGTHEN THE PROVISION OF GENDER-RESPONSIVE INFORMATION ON SAFE MIGRATION

- Provide access to reliable and comprehensive information on safe migration for migrant domestic workers and ensure that all information is gender-responsive and human rights-based, provided in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner and separate from migration enforcement activities.
- Create or strengthen pre-departure and post-arrival training programmes for migrant domestic workers that provide comprehensive and accurate information on rights and risks at all stages of migration, employment contracts, requirements for regular migration, available support services, sociocultural norms and conflict resolution.
- Provide migrant women domestic workers with information on how to access services in case of rights violations, including the relevant contact information for labour attachés in the destination country.

ENSURE THE PROVISION OF GENDER-RESPONSIVE SERVICES

- Provide access for migrant domestic workers to the full spectrum of gender-responsive essential services, including health, justice and policing and social services, for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and those that have been trafficked.

- Provide access to justice and legal advice for migrant women domestic workers who have experienced labour and rights violations, including specific complaints mechanisms for harassment and discrimination.
- Enhance the financial inclusion of migrant women domestic workers by facilitating access to bank accounts, developing gender-responsive financial services, reducing remittance transfer costs and providing training on financial literacy, digital literacy and remittance transfer systems.

ENSURE THE PROVISION OF GENDER-RESPONSIVE RETURN AND REINTEGRATION SUPPORT

- Provide tailored, gender-responsive reintegration services for returning migrant women domestic workers covering livelihood support, skills training, decent work,

social protection, psychosocial counselling and access to healthcare, legal and justice services and essential services for victims and survivors of gender-based violence.

- Create or strengthen post-return and reintegration training programmes for returnee migrant women domestic workers that provide comprehensive and accurate information on access to available services and support, repatriation, financial inclusion and vocational learning opportunities, including in sectors that are traditionally not associated with women.

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