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RAPID ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION OF WOMEN MIGRATING FROM, INTO, THROUGH AND BACK TO ETHIOPIA



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Suggested citation: UN Women. 2024. *Rapid Assessment of the situation of women migrating from, into, through and back to Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: UN Women.

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December 2024

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This rapid assessment provides an analysis of the situation of women migrating from, to, through and back to Ethiopia based on existing literature and a review of relevant policies, legal frameworks and services related to migration governance in Ethiopia, with a gender lens.

Migration dynamics in and out of Ethiopia show distinct gender patterns. While more Ethiopian migrant men remain within the continent, Ethiopian women predominantly migrate to and work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with most of them performing domestic and care work.¹ Beginning in the early 1990s, women began to migrate to GCC countries to engage in domestic work due to relaxed mobility restrictions for Ethiopians, compared to much of the preceding decades that were characterized by a large-scale, forced migration that involved young, educated and urban men. Some 200,000 Ethiopian women migrate annually to work as domestic workers in GCC countries.² Saudi Arabia is the single largest destination for Ethiopian women migrants. This is partly due to the nature of the work available.

Migratory flows are influenced by women's lack of decent work in Ethiopia and the rising demand for their labour in the destination countries, particularly domestic and care work. Women's labour migration from Ethiopia is often temporary, highlighting the fact that it serves as a means to improve livelihoods,³ in addition to overcoming the immediate economic challenges they or their families are facing.

The rationale and decisions to move differ between migrant men and women. Ethiopian women often migrate to escape deeply entrenched gender inequalities, including gender-based violence, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, in search of better livelihood opportunities and

living conditions, as well as greater personal freedom.

Ethiopian migrant women are not just reliable remittance senders but also tend to send higher amounts of remittances than men and tend to transfer them through official channels. Remittances positively affect the lives of women, girls, boys and other community members; they are used by the recipients to access food, education and health services, which can reduce gender disparities, especially in rural areas of Ethiopia.

While migration can empower migrant women socially and economically and significantly improve their own well-being and that of their families, it exposes migrant women to the risk of human rights violations. The human and labour rights of migrant women are frequently violated in the unprotected, underserved and unregulated domestic work sector.

Neither are migrant women immune to abuse and mistreatment when returning home. Women returnees without income face challenges reintegrating into their families and communities due to social stigma and discrimination. Stigma and social isolation are even worse for those who return home with a child born out of marriage and those considered to have experienced gender-based violence.

Although young women with low educational status represent the largest proportion of Ethiopian migrant women, women with high levels of education also participate in domestic work

- 1 The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, also known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), was founded in 1981 as a union of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The countries are often known as the GCC countries and are the destination countries for women migrating from, to, through and back to Ethiopia. While various references refer to these countries as the Middle East, the Arab States, Gulf countries and GCC states, this UN Women report will use 'GCC countries' for consistency.
- 2 International Labour Organization (ILO). 2016. *Promoting and protecting the rights of migrant domestic workers in transit: the case of Ethiopian women migrants*. Marie-José Tayah and Adamnesh Atnafu.
- 3 K. Schewel. 2022. "Aspiring for change: Ethiopian women's labour migration to the Middle East". *Social Forces* 100(4): 1619–1641.

abroad due to limited employment and decent job opportunities in Ethiopia. However, many migrate without receiving adequate training in domestic work and social skills.

Ethiopia has also become a significant transit hub for women migrating from Eritrea and Somalia to Sudan and beyond through the Northern Corridor. The experiences of women migrating to and through Ethiopia have been less documented compared to those who left and returned to Ethiopia. Some migrate directly to Sudan via Ethiopia, while others stay in cities such as Addis Ababa before continuing their journey. Prior to the ongoing conflict, Sudan was a major destination for Eritrean and Somali migrant women. However, this is no longer the case. Although gender is an important variable in shaping migration from, through and to Ethiopia, it is often not adequately addressed in research, policy and programmes. Moreover, the integration of gender equality considerations into policymaking and programming is often missing; they therefore do not effectively address the needs of women on the move. It is vital to use an intersectional approach, taking into consideration factors in addition to gender such as age, disability, ethnicity, class, legal status and other forms of discrimination that intersect to exacerbate the vulnerability of migrant women.

Migration programming, including reintegration interventions, does not yet adequately respond to the unique and specific needs of women migrating from, to, through and back to Ethiopia. Migration campaigns that focus on the risks associated with irregular migration tend to be gender neutral, mainly focusing on migrant women's need to have equal access to information about safe and regular migration options and local livelihood alternatives. Reintegration packages overlook the children of migrant women and unaccompanied girls. Moreover, there is a lack of gender-specific

mental health services and psychosocial support for women migrants who have experienced gender-based violence, including sexual violence.

The experience of migrant women is complex and multilayered. The protection risks, vulnerabilities and challenges which migrant women face during the entire cycle of migration are interconnected and increasingly affect migration outcomes, as well as perceptions by families and local communities.

Ethiopia's migration profile shows a comprehensive and, to some extent, advanced compendium of migration policies. As a signatory to various international instruments, its governance landscape has undergone various reforms to align not only with its international commitments but also with its internal development action plans, which have equality and non-discrimination as key pillars.

This rapid assessment concludes by proposing policy recommendations to enhance decent employment opportunities for migrant women and to tackle entrenched gender disparities, including gender-based violence, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Ensuring gender-responsive bilateral agreements and providing timely, accurate and gender-sensitive information and skills trainings are essential for ensuring the safe and orderly migration of women.

Implementing gender-responsive reintegration programmes, engaging migrant women's organizations, gathering sex-disaggregated data and integrating gender-specific regulations into existing labour migration policies are essential for enhancing the social protection of migrant women and maximizing the impact of their migration experiences. This assessment underscores the importance of developing and implementing effective measures to prevent and combat the smuggling and trafficking of women migrating from, to, through and back to Ethiopia.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND

Ethiopia has experienced a rise in cross-border migration over the last five decades, due to economic, social and political crises compounded by environmental factors.⁴ Ethiopia is primarily a country of origin but also a transit and destination for migrants, including economic migrants, returnees, asylum seekers, refugees and unaccompanied minors. According to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, as of 31 July 2024, Ethiopia is home to over 4.5 million forcibly displaced populations, including more than 1 million refugees (with women and girls making up 52 per cent) and some 3.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), 51 per cent of whom were women and girls.⁵ Some 200,000 women leave Ethiopia annually to work as domestic workers in GCC countries,⁶ increasingly via the Eastern Corridor, a key migration route connecting East Africa to GCC countries, through Yemen, Somalia, Djibouti and Ethiopia.⁷ Interviews with Ethiopia's Ministry of Labour and Skills indicated that some 345,000 Ethiopians migrated to GCC countries, including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Qatar during the

2016 Ethiopian fiscal year (2023/24) in pursuit of employment opportunities, with women constituting 98 per cent of this group.⁸ This shows an increase of migrants by 60 per cent between 2016 and 2024.

During the 1970s and 1980s, conflict and war forced many young, educated and urban Ethiopian men to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, such as Sudan, Kenya and Djibouti. From there, they were resettled in third countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.⁹ This was later followed by women who migrated to these countries through family reunification programmes. Some Ethiopian women migrated to Yemen in the 1960s and 1970s, primarily following their husbands¹⁰ and seeking employment in major cities¹¹. Since the mid-2000s, Yemen has shifted to a prominent transit country for Ethiopian women migrating to Saudi Arabia.¹² Ethiopian women began to migrate to GCC countries for work starting in the mid-1990s, as travel restrictions eased after the collapse of the military regime (1974–1991).¹³ In the past, fewer

4 G. A. Zewdu. 2018. "Ethiopian female domestic labour migration to the Middle East: Patterns, trends and drivers". *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 11(1): 6–19.

5 UNHCR. 2024. Ethiopia: Refugees and Asylum-seekers (as of 31 July 2024). Infographic. 19 August.

6 ILO. 2016. Promoting and protecting the rights of migrant domestic workers in transit: the case of Ethiopian women migrants. Marie-José Tayah and Adamnesh Atnafu.

7 International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2022. *A Region on the Move 2021: East and Horn of Africa*. IOM, Nairobi.

8 The Ethiopian fiscal year 2016 runs from 8 July 2023 to 7 July 2024.

9 Assefaw Bariagaber. 1999. "States, international organisations and the refugee: reflections on the complexity of managing the refugee crisis in the Horn of Africa". *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 4: 597–619.

10 Marina De Regt. 2007. "Ethiopian women in the Middle East: The case of migrant domestic workers in Yemen". Africa Studies Centre, Leiden 15: 1–24.

11 Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS). 2014. *Blinded by Hope: Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices of Ethiopian migrants*. Mixed Migration Research Series. Study 6. June.

12 Ibid.

13 Marina De Regt. 2007. "Ethiopian women in the Middle East: The case of migrant domestic workers in Yemen". Paper for African Studies Centre Leiden seminar of 15 February 2007..

Ethiopians had migrated to GCC countries because of the difference in religious backgrounds.¹⁴

The migration of women and girls from Ethiopia is often attributed to poverty and unemployment. For example, some 93 per cent of Ethiopian women who migrate along the Eastern Corridor state that economic reasons are the primary reason for their migration.¹⁵ They often migrate to seek more autonomy and status, while also seeking to leave behind deeply entrenched gender inequalities, such as gender-based violence.¹⁶ In Ethiopia, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and early marriage are very common, particularly in rural areas. Family and peer pressure also drive women's migration and remitting of funds. In some cases, the successful employment experiences of migrants have served as a significant motivation for other women to migrate to GCC countries as domestic workers.

Initially, Ethiopian women migrating to GCC countries came from urban areas; however, this trend later shifted to them coming from small towns and rural villages.¹⁷ There are four factors that may explain this shift from urban to rural. First, limited livelihood opportunities and prospects for a better life in rural areas, together with violence and discrimination against girls and women, may have increased the migration of women and girls to urban areas. In rural areas, socioeconomic and cultural influences often hinder women and girls from attaining their desired livelihoods, leading them to emigrate.¹⁸ Second, the expansion of unregistered employment agencies in small towns and rural areas, initially concentrated in Addis Ababa and other major cities, has resulted in women and girls migrating within Ethiopia and beyond. The intense competition and regulations in Addis Ababa

have led employment agencies to move to smaller towns.¹⁹

Third, the demand for domestic workers has been steadily increasing. Migrant women from Ethiopia and other countries in the region tend to provide cheaper labour than migrant domestic workers from Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.²⁰ The temporary labour ban to Saudi Arabia imposed by the governments of Indonesia and the Philippines between 2008/09 and 2012/13 over abuse and low wages opened up additional space for Ethiopian women to migrate and fill these roles.²¹ Fourth, local and transnational migrant smuggler networks have facilitated irregular labour migration to GCC countries, leading to an increase in the migration of women and girls within Ethiopia and beyond.



Photo: UN Women / Tensae Yemane

14 Ibid.

15 IOM. 2020. *The desire to thrive regardless of the risk: Risk perception, expectations and migration experiences of young Ethiopians migrating along the Eastern Route towards the Arabian Peninsula*. April.

16 L. Carruth and L. Smith. 2022. "Building one's own house: power and escape for Ethiopian women through international migration". *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 60(1): 85–109.

17 G. A. Zewdu. 2018. "Ethiopian female domestic labour migration to the Middle East: Patterns, trends and drivers". *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 11(1): 6–19.

18 K. Schewel. 2022. "Aspiring for change: Ethiopian women's labour migration to the Middle East". *Social Forces* 100(4): 1619–1641.

19 G. A. Zewdu. 2018. "Ethiopian female domestic labour migration to the Middle East: Patterns, trends and drivers". *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 11(1): 6–19.

20 Ibid.

21 A. Kefale and Z. Mohammed. Editors. 2016. *Ethiopian labour migration to the Gulf and South Africa*. African Books Collective.

1.2. INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN ETHIOPIA: AN OVERVIEW

Data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) show that Ethiopia has an estimated 1.1 million international migrants, with the share of women rising slightly and steadily over three decades until it reached 50.5 per cent in mid-2020. This contrasts with the official figure from the Ethiopian government of some

3 million Ethiopian nationals who reside and work abroad, mostly in North America, GCC countries and Europe. There is a lack of sex-disaggregated data for the Ethiopian diaspora residing abroad. In 2020, some 246,000 Ethiopian migrants resided in the United States, with women making up 51 per cent of the population.²²

Table 1: Ethiopian international migrants' stock by sex

Migrants by sex	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
MIGRANT MEN	607,284	424,117	322,219	269,725	297,534	591,876	536,807
MIGRANT WOMEN	548,106	382,787	289,165	244,517	270,186	570,700	547,710
TOTAL MIGRANT STOCK	1,155,390	806,904	611,384	514,242	567,720	1,162,576	1,084,517
MIGRANT WOMEN AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION STOCK	47.4	47.4	47.3	47.5	47.6	49.1	50.5

Source: UN Population Division: Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020).

In an effort to increase the flow of remittances and reduce the pressure of youth unemployment in Ethiopia, post-military regime policies were in favour of facilitating international labour migration, especially among women who migrated to GCC countries as domestic workers.²³ An example is the issuance in 1998 of the Private Employment Agency Proclamation²⁴ under which more than 400 Private Employment Agencies committed to sending

migrant women to GCC countries as domestic workers.²⁵

Over the past three decades, there has been an increase in the number of women migrating via irregular migration channels to GCC countries, South Africa and, to a certain extent, Europe.²⁶ There has been limited or no access to regular migration options for women migrating from Ethiopia in much of the last decade due to the migration ban by Ethiopia, which lasted from late

22 UNDESA. 2020. *International Migrant Stock 2020*.

23 G. Adugna. 2021. "Once primarily an origin for refugees, Ethiopia experiences evolving migration patterns". Migration Policy Institute. 5 October.

24 However, this proclamation does not refer to women, although they constitute a significant percentage of international migrants.

25 Marina De Regt and Medareshaw Tafesse. 2018. "Deported before experiencing the good sides of migration: Ethiopians returning from Saudi Arabia". *Ethiopians in an age of migration*. Routledge: 104–118.

26 G. Adugna. 2021. "Once primarily an origin for refugees, Ethiopia experiences evolving migration patterns". Migration Policy Institute. 5 October.

2013 to March 2018.²⁷ This was in addition to Saudi Arabia's temporary suspension of migration, which prevented Ethiopian migrants from entering Saudi Arabia over a disagreement between countries on the content of domestic workers' contracts. The suspension was for 19 months, between May 2019 and November 2020. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing conflict in different parts of Ethiopia have affected women's ability to migrate using regular channels.

Migrant women from and travelling through Ethiopia tend to migrate along three major corridors: the eastern route to the Persian Gulf and GCC countries (the Eastern Corridor), the southern route to South Africa and the northern route to Sudan and Europe.²⁸ A considerable number of migrant women and girls have travelled to Saudi Arabia through the Eastern Corridor, especially in recent years. For example, women and girls represented a quarter of the more than 260,000 migrants who left Ethiopia for Djibouti and Somalia along the Eastern Corridor in 2023.²⁹

The southern migration corridor to South Africa is dominated by young men from the Hadiya and

Kambata communities in central Ethiopia.³⁰ In 2021, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that around 41,000 Ethiopians had crossed the Ethiopia–Kenya border and a quarter of them (10,243) travelled to South Africa. Only 1 per cent of those migrating to South Africa were women and 8 per cent were unaccompanied boys.³¹ However, women have begun to migrate to South Africa through regular channels in recent years. This is due to transnational marriage arrangements, family reunification and employment. Most Ethiopian women choose to fly to Mozambique and travel overland or take a direct flight from Addis Ababa to South Africa.³²

In recent years, the number of migrants using the Central Mediterranean route has decreased significantly, from more than 31,000 in 2016 to 3,089 in 2020. While men make up the majority of those using this migration corridor, the proportion of women is increasing, particularly those using this route to reach Khartoum and apply for visas to Lebanon.³³ Last year, women accounted for 10 per cent of the 380,000 irregular crossings into Europe.³⁴



Photo: UN Women / Tatjana Buisson

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 IOM Regional Office for the East and Horn of Africa. *Migration along the Eastern Corridor*. Report 44 | as of 31 October 2022.

30 Yordanos S. Estifanos and Laura Freeman. 2022. "Shifts in the trend and nature of migration in the Ethiopia–South Africa migration corridor". *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies* 5, no. 1/2: 59–75.

31 IOM. 2022. *Migrating in Search of the Southern Dream: The Experiences of Ethiopian Migrants Moving along the Southern Route*. May.

32 Obi Anyadike. 2023. "From Ethiopia to South Africa: The human cost of a neglected migration route". *The New Humanitarian*. 22 November.

33 United States Department of State. 2023. *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ethiopia*.

34 Frontex. 2024. "Significant rise in irregular border crossings in 2023, the highest since 2016". 26 January.

2. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS ON MIGRATION

Ethiopia's migration governance has evolved significantly. This is due to increased international commitments and a growing focus on strengthening migration governance in Ethiopia. Some of the international commitments have been translated into national legislation and policies, focusing on the vulnerability of migrant women and girls. The main legal and policy frameworks governing migration in Ethiopia are:³⁵

- Proclamation No. 923/2016: Ethiopia's Overseas Employment Proclamation and its amendment Proclamation No. 1246/2021.
- Proclamation No. 1178/2020: Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons.
- The draft National Migration Policy.

These legal efforts that exist in the form of proclamations and a draft policy to address migrant smuggling and human trafficking are concluded in accordance with the Ethiopian constitutional provisions on prohibition against inhumane treatment³⁶ and succeeding sections included in the criminal law³⁷.

The following analysis considers the existing policies and laws and provides an assessment

on the availability and accessibility of protection mechanisms and services, particularly for migrant women and girls.

Ethiopia's Overseas Employment Proclamation No. 923/2016

The Ethiopia Overseas Employment Proclamation 923/2016 regulates labour mobility to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration. The proclamation sets up strong institutional frameworks to ensure and strengthen the protection of migrants across their migration journey. However, the proclamation uses the term 'gender' only one time and for the most part remains gender-neutral rather than including any gender-specific provisions.

The proclamation aims to establish regulatory measures and decent work opportunities for migrant workers. It establishes model contracts as the minimum standards of operation for decent work by including minimum wage, working hours and fringe benefits, among others.³⁸ Furthermore, it provides safeguarding measures including recruitment options, as well as strict licensing requirements for employment agencies to respect the rights of vulnerable migrants, especially women and girls.³⁹ The proclamation further identifies acts

35 Despite the positive trends Ethiopia has made to strengthen its migration governance, Ethiopia has still not ratified key international instruments for the enhanced protection of migrants including C097 – Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97); Ratifications of C143 – Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143); International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990); Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (1961); and Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (1954).

36 Article 18 of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

37 Article 596 (enslavement), Article 597 (trafficking of women and children), Article 598 (illegal deployment of Ethiopians for work abroad) and Articles 635 and 636 (trafficking involving women and minors AND aggravation to the crime respectively).

38 Article 17 of the Proclamation No. 923/2016: Ethiopia's Overseas Employment Proclamation.

39 As part of its protection measures, the proclamation has put in place indicators in some provisions in which reference is made to specific protection needs for different categories of migrants such as in Article 42/2/d. The proclamation specifies that employment agencies will have their licence revoked for recruiting a worker below the working age.

of sexual harassment by an employer or agency representative as valid grounds for prohibition from engaging in any activity relating to Ethiopian overseas employment. This measure is a critical step in safeguarding the rights and dignity of migrant workers, particularly women, who are often vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

The Overseas Employment Proclamation 923/2016 also specifies that migrants can use public institutions, employment agencies and self-employment for legal recruitment. However, the proclamation details specific recruitment methods for certain types of work. Article 6 sub-article 2(c) in particular classifies domestic work (housemaid services as specified in the proclamation) as a type of overseas employment where direct recruitment is prohibited. This form of employment may only be facilitated through the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs or an authorized agency.⁴⁰

There is high demand for domestic work in GCC countries, primarily undertaken by women. However, migrant women domestic workers are unfortunately and disproportionately subjected to exploitation and abuse in GCC countries. The lack of public oversight and discriminatory practices, such as the kafala system, contribute significantly to violence and mistreatment faced by migrant women and girls.⁴¹ The reason behind the official restriction on the type of recruitment available for domestic work is unclear. However, given the scale of abuse and exploitation experienced by migrant women in destination countries, the prohibition of direct employment for domestic work could signify a protection strategy that is gender-responsive.⁴²

The proclamation also stipulates additional protection measures such as Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) as an essential prerequisite for any overseas recruitment or deployment. Unfortunately, however, these agreements typically fall short of protecting migrant women's rights, further exacerbating women's vulnerability.⁴³

The Overseas Employment Amendment Proclamation 1246/2021 (Amendment to Ethiopia's Overseas Employment Proclamation No. 923/2016)

The Overseas Employment Amendment Proclamation 1246/2021 demonstrates the increasing significance of taking gender into account when regulating and promoting the employment of women domestic workers. This amendment offers some positive changes over the previous legislation such as the removal of educational requirements for domestic work and the promotion of equal employment opportunities for migrant women.

Furthermore, the revised proclamation distinguishes domestic work from other professional jobs and introduces the term 'skilled worker'. However, the term 'skilled worker' as mentioned in Amendment Proclamation 1246/2021 differs from the term 'domestic work'.⁴⁴ This separation of domestic workers (usually women and girl migrants) from skilled workers (usually men), could have adverse effects in practice, including in terms of pay, working conditions and access to social protection.

40 Although the proclamation refers to the Ministry as the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, following the restructuring of some ministerial offices, it is now referred to as the [Ministry of Labor and Skills](#).

41 ILO. 2013. *Tricked and Trapped: Human Trafficking in the Middle East*. Hélène Harroff-Tavel and Alix Nasri: 26; International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). 2017. *Facilitating exploitation: A Review of Labour Laws for Migrant Domestic Workers in Gulf Cooperation Council Countries – 2017 Update*: 7. The Kafala system is a sponsorship system linked to overseas employment and labour mobility in the Mashreq and Gulf Cooperation Council countries which grants employers and governments (in countries of destination) extraordinary control over migrant workers.

42 The kafala system disproportionately affects women and girl migrants, given that in some countries, such as Lebanon, women migrants compose the majority of kafala workers. Council on Foreign Relations. 2022. "[What is the Kafala System?](#)". Kali Robinson. 18 November.

43 Celine Bauloz, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Rose Jaji and Taehoon Lee. 2024. "[Gender and Migration: Trends, Gaps and Urgent Action – Promoting Gender-responsive Migration Governance: The need for urgent action](#)". Chapter 6 in IOM. 2024. *World Migration Report 2024*. M. McAuliffe and L.A. Oucho (eds): 165–196.

44 Article 7 (1), (2) Overseas Employment amendment proclamation 1246/2021.

Proclamation No. 1178/2020 – The Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Persons

Proclamation No. 1178 recognizes the vulnerabilities of migrant women and girls, especially in situations of trafficking and smuggling. It further emphasizes the importance of addressing gender-specific needs and specialized support services for women and girl migrant victims. The proclamation also attempts to provide protection measures to victims, witnesses and whistle-blowers who file a complaint. Proclamation No. 1178 ensures privacy and dignity for victims, with special consideration for women, children and persons with disabilities. This is done by providing appropriate social and legal services.⁴⁵ The articles do not explicitly mention protection in reporting mechanisms or guarantee anonymity during reporting, but by outlining general protection measures necessary during this process, the proclamation attempts to extend the same adequate level of protection.

However, the proclamation does not make reference to gender and uses the word ‘women’ only three times. It does however define and recognize ‘sexual activities’, which can disproportionately affect migrant women and girls, and specifies them as including forced marriage, surrogacy and prostitution. It also particularly condemns sexual exploitation practices. However, the penalties associated with such criminal acts and practices do not appear to adequately reflect the serious nature of these offences compared to the punishments for other crimes under Proclamation No. 1178. Ensuring effective implementation and enforcement of Proclamation No. 1178 is vital to protect and support migrant women and girls who are susceptible to trafficking and exploitation. These protection measures should be implemented in parallel with strengthening victim support services and gender-responsive legal remedies.



Photo: UN Women / Tensae Yemane

Draft National Migration Policy

Ethiopia is signatory to various international and regional conventions that promote the protection of women’s rights. Ethiopia is implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’s Sustainable Development Goals and has drafted national development plans that further strengthen its international commitments towards gender equality and inclusion. Ethiopia has also established a 10-year development plan (2021–2030) which aligns with its national economic reform agenda and has strategic priorities that focus on gender and social inclusion.

In order to leverage migration for development, the Government of Ethiopia has drafted a national migration policy, yet it is not yet ratified. The policy recognizes the impact of traditional gender roles and how they shape migration dynamics. Consequently, it integrates gender into each pillar of the migration governance architecture and emphasizes it as a cross-cutting theme across all goals and priority areas.

45 The provision does not provide an explicit definition of appropriate legal and social services but it lists the type of services that are available, such as psychological and support assistance and providing temporary shelter.

The policy acknowledges the agency and empowerment of migrant women as a primary area of focus. It highlights the importance of implementing gender-responsive measures and mechanisms. The draft policy outlines measures, including gender-responsive overseas employment policies and gender-responsive data collection and analysis models, among others. This implies the existence of modalities tailored to migrant women's gender-specific needs.

Gender considerations in data collection are further emphasized in the draft policy as a way to ensure evidence-based, gender-responsive policymaking and responses that cater to the specific needs of migrant women. Linking migration policies with the development goals of Ethiopia is another key strategic approach of the draft migration policy.



Photo: UN Women / Tatjana Buisson

3. WOMEN'S MIGRATION: RECENT TRENDS AND EMERGING ISSUES

Reasons for women's migration

Ethiopian women and girls migrate as a result of various interrelated factors, such as poverty, a lack of viable employment opportunities, food insecurity and entrenched gender inequalities.⁴⁶ These inequalities are evident in the prevalence of gender-based violence, which includes domestic violence, early marriage and female genital mutilation, as well as multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.^{47, 48} Gender discrimination impacts women's access to education and employment and their ability to make informed and independent choices about migration. Moreover, women face challenges in accessing resources such as capital, land and agricultural inputs, as well as loan and credit facilities.⁴⁹ These constraints may factor into Ethiopian women's decision to migrate within the region and beyond.

Migration may provide women with pathways to financial independence and enable them to support their families beyond what education can offer. Many women and girls migrate after finishing or dropping out of school. A study found that 60 per cent of Ethiopian women who were travelling

towards Saudi Arabia through Djibouti and Yemen never went to school and 25 per cent had only completed primary education.⁵⁰ Women from rural areas make up the largest group of migrants with little or no education.

Links between internal and international migration of women

Understanding the connection between internal and international migration of women is crucial. In Ethiopia, many rural women initially secured the means to migrate to GCC countries by working as domestic workers in urban areas such as Addis Ababa. Some migrant women, especially those hired by wealthier families in Addis Ababa, can benefit from this, as they can save money for their international migration while gaining valuable skills in areas such as housekeeping, childcare and operating modern household appliances such as refrigerators and washing machines.⁵¹ Moreover, some migrant women and girls have the opportunity to start or continue their education in evening classes while working as domestic helpers in major urban centres, including Addis Ababa.⁵² This relocation to urban centres also provides better

46 T. Ayalew. 2024. "Drivers and Patterns of Ethiopian Youth Migration to Global Destinations". *The Global Ethiopian Diaspora: Migrations, Connections and Belongings* 98(1): 206.

47 Celine Bauloz, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Rose Jaji and Taehoon Lee. 2024. "Gender and Migration: Trends, Gaps and Urgent Action – Promoting Gender-responsive Migration Governance: The need for urgent action". Chapter 6 in IOM. 2024. *World Migration Report 2024*. M. McAuliffe and L.A. Oucho (eds): 165–196.

48 L. Carruth and L. Smith. 2022. "Building one's own house: power and escape for Ethiopian women through international migration". *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 60(1): 85–109.

49 Includovate. 2020. *Policy mapping: Women's economic empowerment in Ethiopia* Ottawa, ON Canada: International Development Research Centre.

50 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC). 2021. *Opportunities and Risks: Ethiopian women on the Eastern mixed migration route between the Horn of Africa and Yemen*. June. Research report.

51 T.A. Lowe. 2018. "Domestic Work: A Destination or a Journey? Understanding the life stories of domestic workers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia". Master's thesis.

52 Louise Yorke, Robbie Gilligan and Eyerusalem Alemu. 2024. "Moving towards empowerment? Rural female migrants negotiating domestic work and secondary education in urban Ethiopia". *Gender, Place & Culture* 31, no. 6: 749–770.

access to private employment agencies that allow them to migrate abroad.

In 2022, women in urban areas of Ethiopia earned an average of US\$77 a month, compared to US\$113 a month for men.^{53, 54} Notably, domestic work is the lowest paid sector, with women wage labourers in the textile and garment industry earning an average

of US\$35 per month, while housemaids in Addis Ababa mostly earn between US\$8.70 and US\$17 per month. In 2020, out of 826 surveyed domestic workers in Addis Ababa, only 6 per cent earned more than US\$35 per month, more than half (56 per cent) between US\$9 and US\$17, and a quarter earned between US\$17 and US\$35 per month.⁵⁵



Photo: UN Women/ Tatjana Buisson

3.1. WOMEN'S MIGRATION FROM ETHIOPIA

Data from UN DESA indicates that women account for 50.5 per cent of the 1.2 million Ethiopians who resided outside Ethiopia as of mid-2020. A recent national survey shows that Ethiopian women migrants make up 46 per cent of the total Ethiopian migrant population abroad.⁵⁶ The majority (95 per cent) of these women have originated from the Oromia, Amhara and Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's (SNNP) regions.

Interviews with the Ministry of Labor and Skills showed that over 338,000 Ethiopian women migrated as domestic workers in the 12 months between July 2023 and June 2024, with most

travelling to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Qatar. This migration is often temporary and aimed at improving livelihoods and overcoming immediate economic challenges, emphasizing the gendered and precarious nature of lower-skilled labour migration. It is notable that the choice of destination countries reflects a strong gender bias, as Ethiopian men tend to stay within Africa, while women opt to live and work in GCC countries due to the high demand for domestic workers.

Women, on average, make up 95 per cent of all migrants moving through regular migration

53 As of mid-June 2024, 1 USD equals ETB 57.50. [National Bank of Ethiopia exchange rates](#).

54 Ibid.

55 Alem K. Ejigu, Zahra R. Seraj, Mahlet W. Gebrelibanos, Tolesa F. Jilcha and Yodit H. Bezabih. 2020. "Depression, anxiety and associated factors among housemaids working in Addis Ababa Ethiopia". *BMC Psychiatry* 20, no. 1: 231.

56 Central Statistical Service (CSS). 2022. *Ethiopia 2021 Labour Force and Migration Survey: Key Findings*.

channels between 2008 and 2014.⁵⁷ In a 2024 survey of 1,794 potential job seekers in Addis Ababa, 60 per cent of respondents, regardless of gender, expressed interest in migrating to GCC countries for a hypothetical job offer, while women more frequently opted for formal migration channels than informal ones.⁵⁸

In recent years, due to factors such as the labour migration bans by Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia, the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict in northern Ethiopia, a significant number of women have

been migrating to GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, through irregular channels. Over the past six years, most migrants arriving in Yemen with the intention of moving to Saudi Arabia were from Ethiopia; 18 per cent were women and 4.8 per cent were girls. In 2023 alone, 93,526 Ethiopians arrived in Yemen, with women and girls representing 30 per cent of all migrants, more than three times the share compared to 2017.⁵⁹ Moreover, some migrant women travel to GCC countries on tourist visas and become undocumented by overstaying their visas.⁶⁰

3.2. WOMEN'S MIGRATION INTO AND THROUGH ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia, situated in the Horn of Africa, is a primary transit country for women migrating from Eritrea and Somalia towards Sudan and beyond via the Northern Corridor.⁶¹ This occurred extensively prior to the onset of the Sudanese war in mid-April 2023. Some Eritrean and Somali women migrate directly to Sudan through Ethiopia, while others do so after staying some time in Addis Ababa and other major cities before proceeding. However, accurate estimates on the volume of migrant crossings are unavailable. A smaller group of migrant women entering Ethiopia are skilled or employed by international organizations, UN agencies, private companies and higher education institutions.

The experiences of women migrating to and through Ethiopia have been less documented compared to those leaving and returning to Ethiopia. The migration of women transiting Ethiopia is largely unrecorded due to their clandestine migration with smugglers.⁶² It is also likely that these migration patterns are of little interest to Ethiopian policymakers and practitioners due to other pressing national challenges and priorities. Moreover, many migrants do not officially register upon arrival in Ethiopia and some manage to leave Ethiopia through different means such as family resettlement, secondary irregular migration or UNHCR resettlement schemes.

3.3. RETURN AND REINTEGRATION OF MIGRANT WOMEN

The challenges women face when returning and integrating into society stem from what they went through while they were away and even after they came back. Some 900,000 migrants, with 15 per cent

being Ethiopian women, were forcibly repatriated from Saudi Arabia between 2013 and 2023 as part of an unparalleled crackdown on irregular migration. More than 163,000 Ethiopians, including one third

57 G. A. Zewdu. 2018. "Ethiopian female domestic labour migration to the Middle East: Patterns, trends and drivers". *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 11(1): 6–19.

58 Anne Krahn. 2024. "Gender and formality as determiners of labour migration from Ethiopia". International Growth Centre. 26 March. Blog.

59 IOM Yemen. 2023. Flow Monitoring Registry: Non-Yemeni Migrant Arrivals and Yemeni Migrant Returnees in October 2023.

60 M. Ayalew, G. Aklessa and N. Laiboni. 2017. *Women's labour migration on the Africa–Middle East corridor: Experiences of migrant domestic workers from Ethiopia*. Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women.

61 F. Adugna, M. Rudolf and M. Getachew. 2022. "A matter of time and contacts: trans-local networks and long-term mobility of Eritrean refugees". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48(18): 4328–4346.

62 Ibid.

women, were deported from Saudi Arabia between late 2013 and early 2014.⁶³ These harsh measures were intended to generate jobs for Saudi citizens, particularly young women, and enhance labour market governance. However, these actions have not resulted in significant changes, as Saudi women remain reluctant to take low-skilled jobs and they lack the necessary qualifications for the available jobs in the private sector.⁶⁴

These large-scale repatriations posed substantial challenges for migrant women, their families and communities of origin, as well as for the Ethiopian government and its humanitarian and development partners.⁶⁵ Migrant women and their families suffered adverse effects, often facing financial debts due to related expenses, while low-income families relying on remittances suffered from the disruption of livelihoods.⁶⁶ The situation has been worsened by other crises such as COVID-19, conflict and drought in Ethiopia and across the region, leading to millions of internally displaced persons and refugees from Sudan and Somalia. Moreover, gender inequalities and the economic, social and psychosocial challenges faced by women during and after migration, which tend to not be addressed, further impede their effective and sustainable reintegration.

In the domestic work sector, Ethiopian migrant women face an alarmingly high risk of human rights and labour exploitation.⁶⁷ This phenomenon persists during the entire migration process, including the return journey. At home, migrant women are vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment. Women who have been deported without savings face heightened social stigma and discrimination.

These women are derogatorily referred to as ‘teterza yetemeleseh’ meaning ‘tied up and deported.’ A recent study found that one in eight returnees felt economically insecure after returning to Ethiopia, while over a third reported that they felt ashamed with a sense of failure and unmet expectations.⁶⁸ As success is often measured against financial return, such feelings of failure are more pronounced among those who were forcibly returned, regardless of gender.⁶⁹ Studies have found that a high proportion of migrant women, 60 per cent, are unemployed or underemployed upon their return. Targeted gender-responsive support is needed for them to reintegrate into the workforce.⁷⁰



Photo: UN Women / Tatjana Buisson

The journey to GCC countries and life in the destination country pose various challenges for women returning home, including issues related to their physical health such as sexual and reproductive health issues as well as mental health

63 Ruta Nimkar, Emily Savage, Isaias Tesfalidet and Girmachew Adugna. 2020. *Reintegration of migrants returning to Ethiopia: An analysis of needs and program options*. Norwegian Refugee Council Ethiopia.

64 Gulf Research Centre. 2014. *Demography, migration and labour market in Saudi Arabia*. Françoise De Bel-Air. GLMM - EN - No.1/2014.

65 Ruta Nimkar, Emily Savage, Isaias Tesfalidet and Girmachew Adugna. 2020. *Reintegration of migrants returning to Ethiopia: An analysis of needs and program options*. Norwegian Refugee Council Ethiopia.

66 G. A. Zewdu. 2018. "Ethiopian female domestic labour migration to the Middle East: Patterns, trends and drivers". *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 11(1): 6–19.

67 W. Zeleke, A. Minaye and G. Kygana. 2015. Mental health and somatic distress among Ethiopian migrant returnees from the Middle East. *Int J Ment Health Psychiatry* 1: 2.

68 MMC. 2023. *Reintegration experiences and future aspirations of Ethiopian returnees*. MMC Eastern and Southern Africa Snapshot – April 2023.

69 Ibid.

70 Katie Kuschminder. 2014. "Female return migration and reintegration strategies in Ethiopia." Volume 42 of Maastricht Graduate School of Governance Dissertation Series.

challenges like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression.⁷¹ A recent study found that 16 per cent of Ethiopian adolescent girls and women who returned from working as domestic workers in GCC countries showed depressive symptoms.⁷² Ethiopian returning migrant women often report feelings of entrapment, anxiety, hopelessness and helplessness. These factors have further impacted their ability to find employment in an already challenging socioeconomic environment.

Upon returning to Ethiopia, many women have limited access to services and resources for dealing with the psychological and emotional effects of their past experiences. Migrant women and girls who have experienced gender-based violence and/or trafficking often face challenges in accessing crucial services such as healthcare, social support and assistance from law enforcement and the judicial system. Around 38 per cent of migrants received support, with a lower share of women (17 per cent) benefiting from assistance than men (46 per cent).⁷³ Notably, nearly two thirds (64 per cent) of assisted returnees received post-arrival assistance, while only 21 per cent of forced returnees did.⁷⁴

Moreover, their family members, neighbours and local communities may lack the knowledge, skills and resources to provide proper support for migrant women and girls dealing with psychosocial issues.⁷⁵ Migrant women and girls require comprehensive support, including economic, legal and medical assistance, with a particular emphasis on psychological and mental health services, given the prevalence of abuse and discrimination they often face at all stages of migration.⁷⁶

According to a recent national survey, 7 out of 10 returnee migrant women intend to migrate again due to insufficient reintegration support or the belief that meaningful changes can only be achieved through migration.⁷⁷ Social networks such as close family ties, migrants abroad, returnees and brokers play a crucial role in facilitating another migration, as migrant women often trust their informal networks more than formal institutions, including local government officials and private recruitment agencies. However, women who migrate again without adequate preparation and resources are at a higher risk of exploitation and abuse.⁷⁸

The reintegration support that is available to returnee migrant women in Ethiopia primarily focuses on economic assistance, neglecting other important aspects such as social, cultural and psychosocial support.⁷⁹ Economic assistance often emphasizes self-employment in traditional small businesses like hairdressing, small shops, restaurants, and tea and coffee houses, rather than exploring other training and skills-building opportunities. The skills of migrant women have largely been overlooked in wage employment opportunities, spanning across sectors, such as hospitality (chef and catering services in restaurants, hotels, food preparation training centres), preschool childcare and social services, and jobs such as Arabic translation. Business support for migrant women is often hastily implemented without considering their interests and skill sets and without conducting a gender-sensitive market assessment in the areas where migrant women are trying to reintegrate.

Migrant women are being urged to reintegrate into rural villages where their families reside, despite

71 Ruta Nimkar, Emily Savage, Isaias Tesfalidet and Girmachew Adugna. 2020. *Reintegration of migrants returning to Ethiopia: An analysis of needs and program options*. Norwegian Refugee Council Ethiopia.

72 B.L. Nisrane, R. Ossewaarde and A. Need. 2020. "The exploitation narratives and coping strategies of Ethiopian women return migrants from the Arabian Gulf." *Gender, Place & Culture* 27(4): 568–586.

73 MMC. 2023. *Reintegration experiences and future aspirations of Ethiopian returnees*. MMC Eastern and Southern Africa Snapshot – April 2023.

74 MMC. 2023. *Mind the information gap: Access to information and assistance of Ethiopian returnees throughout their migration journey*. June.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Central Statistical Service (CSS). 2022. *Ethiopia 2021 Labour Force and Migration Survey: Key Findings*.

78 T.A. Mengiste and T. Abebe. 2023. "Ethiopian girls narratives of risk and governance of circular migration to the Arabian Gulf" *Children & Society*.

79 Ruta Nimkar, Emily Savage, Isaias Tesfalidet and Girmachew Adugna. 2020. *Reintegration of migrants returning to Ethiopia: An analysis of needs and program options*. Norwegian Refugee Council Ethiopia.

their reluctance to return, as it is believed to be the best environment for their reintegration. Some migrant women are reluctant to return to their home villages due to fear of rejection or having initially escaped difficult family situations.⁸⁰

Moreover, reintegration interventions often fail to address the very reasons that women migrants left Ethiopia in the first place nor do they enable them to successfully re-establish themselves

into families and communities of origin.⁸¹ These interventions often focus only on the migrants themselves, neglecting the crucial involvement of family and local communities, which can worsen the emotional and psychosocial challenges faced by migrant women before and after migration. Furthermore, the lack of understanding of gender-specific challenges in the migrants' communities of origin may hamper successful reintegration.⁸²



Photo: UN Women / Tatjana Buisson

3.4. WOMEN'S REMITTANCES

Given that women make up almost half of the Ethiopian diaspora and that they contribute more to remittances than men, it is important to note their contributions to Ethiopia's remittance inflows. Remittances have become a major source of foreign financial flows in Ethiopia, surpassing both Foreign

Direct Investment and Official Development Assistance. In fact, Ethiopia now receives more from remittances than from export commodities like coffee and khat, with remittances totalling US\$4.2 billion in the 2021/22 fiscal year, compared to US\$1.16 billion a decade ago.⁸³

80 Ibid

81 Katie Kuschminder, Zoë Ogahara and Iman Rajabzadeh. 2021. "Evaluations of return within a mass deportation: Ethiopians' experiences of return after expulsion from Saudi Arabia". *International Migration* 59, no. 2: 167–185.

82 Ruta Nimkar, Emily Savage, Isaias Tesfalidet and Girmachew Adugna. 2020. *Reintegration of migrants returning to Ethiopia: An analysis of needs and program options*. Norwegian Refugee Council Ethiopia.

83 National Bank of Ethiopia. 2024. *Annual Report 2022–2023*.

The lack of sex-disaggregated data in remittance statistics affects understanding of the gendered dimensions of remittances, both in Ethiopia and globally. Despite this lack, micro-level research reveals gendered aspects of remittances at the household level. Existing literature indicates that women are more likely to remit a larger portion of their income, despite earning less than men due to the gender wage gap.⁸⁴ For instance, a study involving 1,200 households across four regions of Ethiopia revealed that women who migrate internationally are more likely to send remittances in both higher volume and frequency than men.⁸⁵ The average amount of international remittances sent by women, in both cash and in kind, was notably higher at US\$526, compared to men at US\$337.⁸⁶ Moreover, women migrating to work in the domestic work sector in Arab States often have their accommodation, food and return tickets paid for by their employers, enabling them to save and send a higher portion of their earnings to families and relatives in their home countries.⁸⁷

Ethiopian migrant women are more likely to send remittances through formal channels compared to men,⁸⁸ but they also send significant amounts through unofficial channels, including family and friends returning home and through the hawala system,⁸⁹ as they have limited access to financial services, either because they lack information or documentation to use official channels or because recipient families in rural Ethiopia have limited access to financial institutions. Migrant women, especially those with irregular status, encounter major obstacles in accessing formal banking and financial services and technologies, as they require



Photo: UN Women / Tatjana Buisson

proof of residency or documentation.⁹⁰ More broadly, however, women in Ethiopia have a lower rate of financial inclusion than men, with only 29 per cent of adult women having accounts in formal financial institutions compared to 41 per cent of adult men.⁹¹ There are some promising practices to improve financial inclusion. For example, Enat Bank, a women-focused bank, provides business consulting, financial literacy training, loan and credit programmes and improves women's access to market connections.

Ethiopian migrant women often send more food, household and school items, while men tend to send shoes, clothes and mobile phones. Remittances have a positive impact on the lives of women and girls as they enable access to food, education and health services, which can help reduce gender disparities, particularly in rural areas of Ethiopia. Norms and attitudes towards women and girls among families and rural communities as resource dependants have shifted over time, in part thanks to the remittances sent by migrant women abroad.⁹² In Ethiopia, men are predominantly seen as the 'breadwinners' for their families. However, this is

84 UN Women. 2020. *Migrant women & remittances: exploring the data from selected countries*. Policy Brief.

85 Asmelash Haile Tsegay and Julie Litchfield. 2019. *Changing patterns of migration and remittances in Ethiopia 2014–2018*. Migrating out of Poverty: Research Programme Consortium. Working Paper 59. September.

86 Ibid.

87 Ruta Nimkar, Emily Savage, Isaias Tesfalidet and Girmachew Adugna. 2020. *Reintegration of migrants returning to Ethiopia: An analysis of needs and program options*. Norwegian Refugee Council Ethiopia.

88 Ibid.

89 The hawala system refers to an informal channel for transferring funds from one location to another through service providers, known as hawaladars. It is a method of transferring money without any money physically moving from one place to another. IMF. 2002. "Hawala". Mohammed El-Qorchi. Finance & Development. December, Vol. 39, No. 4.

90 UN Women. 2021. *Policies and Practices: A guide to gender-responsive implementation of the Global Compact for Migration*.

91 World Bank. 2021. *The Global Findex Database 2021: Financial Inclusion, Digital Payments, and Resilience in the Age of COVID-19*.

92 Asmelash Haile Tsegay and Julie Litchfield. 2019. *Changing patterns of migration and remittances in Ethiopia 2014–2018*. Migrating out of Poverty: Research Programme Consortium. Working Paper 59. September.

starting to change due to the economic support provided by migrant women, and other factors.⁹³

Remittances also come with challenges. They can exacerbate local inequalities and cause family conflicts between senders and recipients, particularly among recipient family members. In Ethiopia, some migrant women send remittances

to their families to save a portion of the funds for themselves, as they often do not have bank accounts in their names before leaving. Nonetheless, the recipient families may misuse these funds, despite the migrant women's desire to use the money to rebuild their economic standing upon their return.⁹⁴ It is worth noting that remittances are more likely to be saved when the recipients are women.⁹⁵



Photo: UN Women / Tatjana Buisson

93 Includovate. 2020. *Policy mapping: Women's economic empowerment in Ethiopia*. Ottawa, Canada: International Development Research Centre.

94 Bulti Gutema. 2019. *Report on migration, return and remittances of Ethiopian domestic workers from Lebanon*.

95 Seife Dendir. 2017, "Saving out of remittances: Evidence from Ethiopia and Kenya". *International Migration* 55, no. 4: 118–140.

4. MIGRATION CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN

Ethiopian migrant women face a multitude of challenges at each stage of their migration journey, starting from pre-departure, during the migration itself and upon their return, as outlined below.

4.1. Lack of timely and accurate access to information

Access to information significantly influences women's migration decisions⁹⁶ and the absence of timely and accurate information hinders women's ability to make well-informed migration decisions. Ethiopian migrant women, including returnees, find it challenging to obtain detailed and accurate information on migration procedures, employment prospects, human rights and cultural norms in their destination countries and after return.⁹⁷ A study showed that most women returnees, 85 per cent, were not given information about the risks of irregular migration and life challenges in destination countries by NGOs or government entities.⁹⁸ Over one third of the migrants and returnees reported that they had not been briefed about the nature of the job and slightly more than half, 54 per cent, lacked knowledge of their employers.⁹⁹ As a result, migrant women are deprived of crucial information before departure and unable to negotiate the

terms and conditions of their future jobs with their employer or employment agency.

Many women in rural areas of Ethiopia lack access to smartphones and internet connectivity, which is further limited in conflict-affected regions. Ethio telecom reports a digital gender gap in Ethiopia, leading to unequal access to digital financial services and migration information for potential migrant women and returnees.¹⁰⁰ The main barriers for migrant women in Ethiopia to adopt mobile internet are illiteracy, a lack of digital skills, financial constraints and its limited relevance.¹⁰¹ In other words, migrant women's access to information is hindered by inadequate services, financial limitations, limited knowledge and insufficient infrastructure.

Migrant women face difficulties finding accurate information about available services. Even when briefed on their rights, they often lack confidence in their ability to protect themselves from abuse or exploitation. While they are advised to open a bank account before leaving, migrant women are not given specific instructions on how to do so.¹⁰² Moreover, the pre-departure information for migrant women does not consider the unique situations of each destination country.¹⁰³

96 Celine Bauloz, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Rose Jaji and Taehoon Lee. 2024. "Gender and Migration: Trends, Gaps and Urgent Action – Promoting Gender-responsive Migration Governance: The need for urgent action." Chapter 6 in IOM. 2024. *World Migration Report 2024*. M. McAuliffe and L.A. Oucho (eds): 165–196.

97 MMC. 2023. *Mind the information gap: Access to information and assistance of Ethiopian returnees throughout their migration journey*. June.

98 Ibid.

99 ILO. 2020. *Migrant Information Center: Operational Manual*. Geneva: ILO.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 IOM. 2021. *Pre-Departure Information Needs of Migrant Workers in the East and Horn of Africa-Gulf Corridor: Background Report*. Bahrain: CIOP Hub.

103 Ibid.

Ethiopian migrant women gather pre-departure information from social networks, media, social media, awareness campaigns and pre-orientation programmes.¹⁰⁴ Current migration campaigns highlight the benefits of regular migration and local livelihood options over the risks of irregular migration. However, smugglers exploit a lack of information to deceive and manipulate potential migrants, particularly women.¹⁰⁵ A survey of 169 Ethiopian migrant women in Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen revealed that, while only 4 per cent initially consulted smugglers, 1 in 6 used them after departing.¹⁰⁶

Women in rural areas often rely on information from returned migrants, family and friends living abroad and other potential migrants. However, the information they receive may not always accurately reflect the risks involved in unsafe and irregular migration. It is important to recognize that women's migration decisions may also be influenced by underlying social norms and values and are not solely 'forced' or driven by purely economic choices.¹⁰⁷ Migrant women have limited knowledge and access to reporting mechanisms due to complications relating to legal identification. Ensuring any accessibility to information is just as crucial as providing equitable access to information for migrant women and their families.¹⁰⁸

4.2. Access to official employment agencies

Women who seek to migrate to GCC countries must rely on personal networks, smugglers and brokers due to limited or no access to licensed recruitment agencies in their regions, increasing their costs and safety risks when they ultimately travel to Addis Ababa to access these services. Moreover, the

services provided by these agencies are often only available in Amharic, which further hinders access for migrant women who speak other languages. Women's irregular migration frequently arises from insufficient access to legitimate employment services and a lack of information about available opportunities.

In Ethiopia, unauthorized intermediaries and employment agencies are infringing on the rights of migrant women and girls. They engage in exploitative behaviours such as providing false information about the type and conditions of employment, charging exorbitant recruitment fees, which leads to significant debt, the confiscation of ID documents, the use of threats and intimidation, and the withholding of wages.¹⁰⁹ Such unethical practices increase the likelihood of women resorting to irregular channels.



Photo: UN Women

104 Celine Bauloz, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Rose Jaji and Taehoon Lee. 2024. "Gender and Migration: Trends, Gaps and Urgent Action – Promoting Gender-responsive Migration Governance: The need for urgent action." Chapter 6 in IOM. 2024. *World Migration Report 2024*. M. McAuliffe and L.A. Oucho (eds): 165–196.

105 G. Sisay. 2024. "A scoping review of empirical studies on human trafficking in Ethiopia". *Cogent Social Sciences* 10(1): 2341957.

106 Ibid.

107 L. Carruth and L. Smith. 2022. "Building one's own house: power and escape for Ethiopian women through international migration". *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 60(1): 85–109.

108 Ibid.

109 International Labour Organization (ILO). 2018. *Baseline survey: Improved Labour Migration Governance to Protect Migrant Workers and Combat Irregular Migration in Ethiopia Project*. Geneva: ILO

In February 2018, the then Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs approved licences for 20 private employment agencies out of 923 applications. Furthermore, 72 agencies involved in malpractices had their licences revoked and sanctions were imposed on 178 other agencies. Currently, there are 1,221 agencies sending domestic workers to Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (all GCC countries) as well as to Jordan. However, most agencies are only licensed to send migrant women to a single destination, particularly Saudi Arabia, with only a few of them sending migrants to two or more countries. Moreover, the majority of agencies operate in Addis Ababa, which is far from the regions where many migrants come from. There is only one registered employment agency in each of the Oromia and SNNP¹¹⁰ regions and no licensed employment agency in the Amhara and Tigray regions. The agency registered under the Oromia region operates on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, making it inaccessible for migrant women from other parts of the region, including Arsi, Bale and Jimma.

4.3. Limited access and availability of high-quality skills training

Migrant women from small towns and rural areas often face challenges in accessing quality skills training for domestic work despite the growing demand in the industry. Limited education and resources make it difficult for them to attend training in urban areas and existing facilities do not adequately cater to their needs. This results in lower competence levels, unequal wages and an inability to meet the demands of the labour market abroad. A significant number of trainees still fail to pass their exams to receive a Certificate of Competency.¹¹¹ Some trainees, with the help of smugglers, illegally acquire or forge the certificates.

Migrant women attending the mandatory training in Technical and Vocational Education Training centres lack access to the necessary equipment found in typical households in many countries of destination, hindering their practical training. Poor quality training and inadequate inclusion lead to a challenge in meeting the demand for skilled migrant women for care and domestic work. Lack of training can lead to migrant women receiving unfair contracts or no contracts at all.¹¹² Ethiopian

women domestic workers in Saudi Arabia earn lower wages of SAR 1,000 (US\$266) a month due to their perceived lower competence and lack of protection, compared to their Asian counterparts, including Filipino maids who earn SAR 1,500 (US\$400) a month and Nepalese domestic workers who earn SAR 1,300 (US\$346) a month.¹¹³

4.4. Lack of access to decent work

Access to decent work often depends on the ability to get the necessary documents needed to travel and work. Migrant women from key migrant origin areas such as the Amhara, Oromia, Tigray and Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's (SNNP) regions face major difficulties in obtaining official documents like Kebele identification (ID) cards and passports. A Kebele ID card is required for obtaining a passport, accessing basic services, securing loans, applying for jobs and receiving reintegration assistance. Obtaining Kebele IDs and passports is associated with a long waiting time, high costs and significant hurdles when travelling from rural areas to urban centres. Consequently, many women seeking to migrate to GCC countries resort to irregular and more dangerous methods, heightening their risks of violence and exploitation.

110 Ibid.

111 Joanna Busza, Zewdneh Shewamene, Cathy Zimmerman, Annabel Erulkar, Eyasu Hailu, Lemi Negeri, Elizabeth Anderson and Yuki Lo. 2023. "Accidental traffickers: qualitative findings on labour recruitment in Ethiopia". *Globalization and Health* 19, no. 1: 102.

112 ILO. 2019. "SKILL-UP Ethiopia: National Multi-stakeholder Roundtable". Workshop. 22 February.

113 HelperChoice by Yoopies. "Domestic Worker's Salary in Saudi Arabia: A Guide for Employers".

The challenges faced by migrant women in destinations like Saudi Arabia are well-documented, particularly in the workplace, where they are vulnerable to violence and discrimination within a more private, domestic setting. The kafala system, which makes migrant women dependent on a single employer for their migration status in a country, increases the risks of human and labour rights violations, including forced confinement, food deprivation and severe abuse, as well as denial of freedom of movement.¹¹⁴ Attempting to hold their sponsors accountable can result in physical or verbal abuse, blackmail or the withholding of their passports.¹¹⁵

Three quarters of Ethiopian women domestic workers surveyed in Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon reported experiencing one or more types of abuse, including physical, sexual and financial abuse; having their passport or mobile confiscated; or being denied days off.¹¹⁶ Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers in GCC countries work longer hours, around 15 hours a day, compared to the average of 11 hours in other sectors.¹¹⁷ They are generally confined to their workplaces with minimal privacy at home.

Ethiopian migrant women who are domestic workers abroad have limited access to social protections like health benefits, employment injury benefits, maternity benefits, pensions and unemployment benefits. Despite the requirement of the Ethiopian Overseas Employment Proclamation that employers cover various expenses, including insurance, it is a significant challenge to ensure compliance at the household level, where most migrant women domestic workers are employed

without contracts.¹¹⁸ Ethiopian women domestic workers face mistreatment due to insufficient labour protections and stringent migration policies.¹¹⁹ They commonly experience feelings of entrapment, fear, despair and powerlessness.

4.5. Gender-based violence

Women and girls with limited resources, information and networks face a higher risk of abuse and exploitation as they take riskier migration routes. Irregular migration puts women and girls at a higher risk of violence and discrimination. Women's and girls' migration can lead to, as well as be triggered by, acts of violence and discrimination. Factors such as sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence; early, child and forced marriage; and other traditional harmful practices can also influence women's and girls' decisions to migrate, in addition to economic drivers such as poverty and unemployment.

The absence of safe and regular migration pathways increases the vulnerability of women and girls to gender-based violence, while limited access to services, language barriers and restricted employment and educational prospects exacerbate their situations.¹²⁰ Sexual and gender-based violence can occur at checkpoints, in border areas, during travel and in detention centres. It can be committed by various perpetrators such as smugglers, traffickers, authorities, intimate partners and other migrants.¹²¹ Ethiopian migrant women have reported cases of sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, beatings and physical abuse, among other forms of violence.¹²²

114 Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS). 2014. *The Letter of the Law: Regular and Irregular Migration in Saudi Arabia in a Context of Rapid Change*. April. Mixed Migration Research Series.

115 Christina Bouri. 2023. "The Kafala System Is Facilitating Labor Abuses in the Middle East". *Lawfare*. 17 September.

116 Meredith Dank and Sheldon Zhang. 2024. *Between hope and hardship. Migration and work experiences of Ethiopian domestic workers in Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon*. The Freedom Fund. May.

117 ILO. 2018. *Baseline survey: Improved Labour Migration Governance to Protect Migrant Workers and Combat Irregular Migration in Ethiopia Project*. Geneva: ILO.

118 Ibid.

119 UN Women. 2024. *From Insights to Action: Advancing the Rights of Ethiopian Migrant Women Domestic Workers*. Policy Brief. New York: UN Women.

120 UN Women. 2021. *From Evidence To Action: Tackling Gender-Based Violence Against Migrant Women And Girls*. Policy Brief. New York: UN Women.

121 UN Women. 2024. *From Insights to Action: Advancing the Rights of Ethiopian Migrant Women Domestic Workers*. Policy Brief. New York: UN Women.

122 G. Sisay. 2024. "A scoping review of empirical studies on human trafficking in Ethiopia". *Cogent Social Sciences* 10(1): 2341957.

Migrant women who are survivors of sexual violence often lack access to healthcare services, including sexual and reproductive health, leading to unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and other health issues, along with enduring social stigmatization.¹²³ Many migrant women are reluctant to report incidences of gender-based violence due to the fear of losing their job, partner or residency status.¹²⁴ Unmarried women face a negative impact on their marriage prospects upon returning, due to the prevailing stereotypes regarding their involvement in commercial sex work or exposure to sexual abuse.

Global and Ethiopian news outlets have frequently covered the deaths and disappearances of Ethiopian migrants as they attempt to cross the Red Sea or Gulf of Aden to reach Saudi Arabia through Yemen. For instance, Human Rights Watch documented the mass killing of hundreds of Ethiopian migrants (655 deaths between March 2022 and June 2023) along the Yemen–Saudi Arabia border in August 2023.¹²⁵ According to the 2021 Labour Force and Migration Survey, 51,089 Ethiopian nationals are classified as missing migrants, with women accounting for 15.4 per cent of them.¹²⁶

Ethiopian women and girls seeking to move to Saudi Arabia usually stay in transit countries such as Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen for a period ranging from four months to two years. During this time, they may take on domestic work with meagre pay in order to save up for their onward journey.¹²⁷ This situation is common when women migrate

without having the full funds upfront to do so, leaving them more susceptible to exploitation and unfair treatment.¹²⁸ Ethiopian women migrating through Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen, where armed groups are prevalent, face heightened risks of suffering from hunger, thirst, exhaustion, rape and imprisonment.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, there is limited knowledge about the challenges and risks faced by migrant women in transit countries.

4.6. Discrimination and racism

Racially marginalized migrant women face various forms of discrimination due to systemic racism and sexism, as well as other systems of inequality.¹³⁰ In GCC countries, a deeply ingrained culture of discrimination against migrant women of African descent exists, resulting in a hierarchy of domestic workers based on their country of origin.¹³¹ Filipina women are considered at the top of the hierarchy, commanding the highest salaries, followed by Indonesian and Sri Lankan women, while African women, including Ethiopian women, are at the bottom.¹³² Studies have shown that among African migrant domestic workers, Ethiopian women experience the highest levels of discrimination and abuse.¹³³ They also face occupational safety and health risks, receive lower wages due to racial discrimination and live with the constant fear of detention and deportation. Ethiopian women domestic workers in GCC countries face prejudice and social disapproval that can strain their relationships with employers.

123 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). 2022. *Abused and Neglected: A Gender Perspective on Aggravated Migrant Smuggling Offences and Response*. Vienna: UNODC.

124 UN Women. 2024. *From Insights to Action: Advancing the Rights of Ethiopian Migrant Women Domestic Workers*. Policy Brief. New York: UN Women.

125 Human Rights Watch. 2023. “Saudi Arabia: Mass Killings of Migrants at Yemen Border Systematic Abuses of Ethiopians May Amount to Crimes Against Humanity”. 21 August.

126 Ethiopian Statistics Service. 2022. *Statistical Report on the 2022 2nd Round Urban Employment Unemployment Survey*. 1 December. Statistical Bulletin 595. Addis Ababa.

127 ILO. 2016. *Promoting and protecting the rights of migrant domestic workers in transit: the case of Ethiopian women migrants*. Marie-José Tayah and Adamnesh Atnafu.

128 UN Women. 2024. *From Insights to Action: Advancing the Rights of Ethiopian Migrant Women Domestic Workers*

129 Ibid.

130 UN Women. 2022. *Racially marginalized migrant women: human rights abuses at the intersection of race, gender and migration*. Policy Brief. New York: UN Women.

131 G. Sisay. 2024. “A scoping review of empirical studies on human trafficking in Ethiopia”. *Cogent Social Sciences* 10(1): 2341957.

132 Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) Network. 2016. “Escaping the heat into the fire: Migration of Ethiopian women domestic workers to the Gulf countries”. 4 July.

133 Overseas Development Institute (ODI). 2014. *Rethinking girls on the move. The intersection of poverty, exploitation and violence experienced by Ethiopian adolescents involved in the Middle East ‘maid trade’*.

The lack of support for Ethiopian domestic workers from Ethiopian missions abroad, combined with their lack of Arabic language skills and the absence of a familiar support network, results in Ethiopian migrant women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination in Arab countries, including based on their social identity, class, race and religion.¹³⁴ Although Ethiopian women are at a higher risk of racial abuse and discrimination in GCC countries, Muslim domestic workers from Ethiopia have been found to experience better treatment compared to their Christian counterparts.¹³⁵

4.7. Trafficking in persons

In Ethiopia, women are disproportionately targeted for trafficking due to gender inequalities and the nexus between smuggling and trafficking.¹³⁶ Gender-specific restrictions on migration combined with a lack of regular migration options can increase the use of irregular migration channels, placing migrant women at greater risk of abuse, exploitation and trafficking.¹³⁷ This increases the chances that migrant women and girls might be traded to other traffickers who operate within networks, leaving them vulnerable to further exploitation and sexual assault.

In Ethiopia, most traffickers are small local operators, usually drawn from the victims' communities, but there are also well-structured, hierarchical, organized crime groups that facilitate irregular migration flows and trafficked women for forced labour or sexual exploitation.¹³⁸ Most instances of Ethiopian migrant women being trafficked occur in

transit and destination countries.¹³⁹ At the Yemen–Saudi Arabia border, Ethiopian women migrants are vulnerable to being trafficked by brokers who can earn US\$200 from selling a domestic worker to another broker.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, substantial sums of money are usually needed in order to free them from captivity, which can lead to debt bondage.¹⁴¹

Women migrating to, from and through Ethiopia are particularly vulnerable due to the widespread violence and instability in border areas, making it easier for traffickers to exploit these often-unregulated spaces.¹⁴² This is particularly significant along the Eastern Corridor. However, it is also common along other irregular migration routes. A recent study found that 51 per cent of Ethiopian migrants returning through the border towns of Metema, Galafi and Moyale had been victims of



Photo: UN Women / Tensae Yemane

134 N.B. Ketema. 2014. Female Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers: An analysis of migration, return-migration and reintegration experiences. Master's thesis. Graduate School of the University of Oregon.

135 Ibid.

136 UN Women. 2024. *From Insights to Action: Advancing the Rights of Ethiopian Migrant Women Domestic Workers*. Policy Brief. New York: UN Women.

137 Celine Bauloz, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Rose Jaji and Taehoon Lee. 2024. "Gender and Migration: Trends, Gaps and Urgent Action – Promoting Gender-responsive Migration Governance: The need for urgent action." Chapter 6 in IOM. 2024. *World Migration Report 2024*. M. McAuliffe and L.A. Oucho (eds): 165–196.

138 United States Department of State. 2023. *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ethiopia*.

139 Expertise France. 2017. *Ethiopia Country Statement: Addressing Migrant Smuggling And Human Trafficking*. September.

140 ILO. 2016. *Promoting and protecting the rights of migrant domestic workers in transit: the case of Ethiopian women migrants*. Marie-José Tayah and Adamnesh Atnafu.

141 Lemma Dershe Gezie, Alemayehu Worku Yalew, Yigzaw Kebede Gete and Florence Samkange-Zeeb. 2021. "Exploring factors that contribute to human trafficking in Ethiopia: a socio-ecological perspective". *Globalization and Health* 17, no. 1: 76.

142 G. Sisay. 2024. "A scoping review of empirical studies on human trafficking in Ethiopia". *Cogent Social Sciences* 10(1): 2341957.

trafficking. Women were more likely, 59 per cent, to be trafficked than men at 45 per cent.¹⁴³ Traffickers manipulate women and girls in precarious situations with false promises of a better life in GCC countries.¹⁴⁴

Ethiopian women frequently disappear from the group of migrants they are travelling with after being intercepted by criminal networks in Yemen. While there is scant evidence on what happens to these women, there is a high risk that they are subjected to sexual violence, trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labour.¹⁴⁵ Migrant women who travel to GCC countries through regular channels are also at risk of being trafficked by employers or unlicensed employment agencies in the destination country.¹⁴⁶

4.8. Smuggling of migrant women

Smuggling of migrants is widespread in Ethiopia, especially among women and girls. Ethiopian migrant women often struggle to discern between legal and illegal recruitment agencies. Some licensed recruitment agencies illegally engage in smuggling and expose women to the risk of trafficking.¹⁴⁷ Despite the existence of multiple-person networks along the migration route, potential migrant women often trust the first person to establish links with a smuggler. Although initially appearing trustworthy, smugglers may turn violent towards migrants, including women, during their journey, and thus turn smuggling into trafficking. Migration chains tend to be long and complex and the people involved, including migrants, their families and

brokers, may not fully understand how the process works across borders.¹⁴⁸

Smugglers facilitate the acquisition of forged documents, including training certificates, Certificates of Competency, passports and health checks, enabling migrant women to exploit public and private networks through corruption.¹⁴⁹ The Ethiopian government now electronically verifies barcodes at Addis Ababa Bole International Airport to detect forged or unauthorized documents. Although many irregular migrants travel over land, there are limited efforts in place at land borders to stop them. The prevalence of sexual violence along the smuggling routes is particularly significant for migrant women along the Eastern Corridor. Over the past decade, this route has witnessed unparalleled levels of migrant traffic handled by smugglers and others.¹⁵⁰

According to a 2019 report, smugglers earned over US\$15 million by smuggling Ethiopian migrant women through the Eastern Corridor to Saudi Arabia.¹⁵¹ In that year, the average cost of migrants for entering Saudi Arabia was between US\$795 and US\$900.¹⁵² Often, migrant women who depend on smugglers using the ‘go now, pay later’ approach end up taking on short-term employment in transit nations to cover the costs of the smugglers. Smugglers subject migrants to torture, extortion, kidnapping, indefinite detention, debt bondage and unpaid work, acting as both facilitators and exploiters.¹⁵³ The vast majority of gender-based violence incidents, 90 per cent, on the East and

143 Lemma Derseh Gezie, Alemayehu Worku Yalew and Yigzaw Kebede Gete. 2019. “Human trafficking among Ethiopian returnees: its magnitude and risk factors”. *BMC Public Health* 19: 1–11.

144 G. Wakgari. 2014. “Causes and consequences of human trafficking in Ethiopia: The case of women in the Middle East”. *International Journal of Gender and Women’s Studies* 2(2): 233–246.

145 Danish Refugee Council (Regional Office for the Horn of Africa & Yemen) and Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS). 2012. *Desperate choices: Conditions, risks & protection failures affecting Ethiopian migrants in Yemen*. October. Rebecca Roberts.

146 United States Department of State. 2023. *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ethiopia*.

147 G. Sisay. 2024. “A scoping review of empirical studies on human trafficking in Ethiopia”. *Cogent Social Sciences* 10(1): 2341957.

148 Joanna Busza, Zewdneh Shewamene, Cathy Zimmerman, Annabel Erulkar, Eyasu Hailu, Lemi Negeri, Elizabeth Anderson and Yuki Lo. 2023. “Accidental traffickers: qualitative findings on labour recruitment in Ethiopia”. *Globalization and Health* 19, no. 1: 102.

149 Ibid.

150 G. Sisay. 2024. “A scoping review of empirical studies on human trafficking in Ethiopia”. *Cogent Social Sciences* 10(1): 2341957.

151 MMC. 2021. *Opportunities and Risks: Ethiopian women on the Eastern mixed migration route between the Horn of Africa and Yemen*. June. Research report.

152 G. Sisay. 2024. “A scoping review of empirical studies on human trafficking in Ethiopia”. *Cogent Social Sciences* 10(1): 2341957.

153 Ibid.

Horn of Africa migration corridors were perpetrated by smugglers.¹⁵⁴

Some smuggling networks in Ethiopia and beyond exploit women migrants.¹⁵⁵ Ethiopian and international law enforcement, researchers and international organizations confirm this. In Ethiopia, smuggling networks range from loose criminal enterprises to sophisticated transnational crime syndicates.¹⁵⁶ The criminality of smugglers on these migration routes is more pronounced than in other parts of the world where they are often viewed as benign facilitators.¹⁵⁷ While most government institutions view smugglers as criminals, the view of migrants and their families is exactly the opposite, notably along the Southern Route to South Africa via Kenya and Tanzania.¹⁵⁸ Instead of

being labelled as criminals by local communities, these smugglers are seen as agents facilitating employment opportunities for jobless youth aiming to reach South Africa.¹⁵⁹

It has been challenging for Ethiopia to identify and prosecute traffickers and to support victims of trafficking, despite its efforts to strengthen law enforcement measures, including the amendment of the Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Persons Proclamation (No. 1178/2020). A complex network of traffickers, law enforcement personnel, border guards, local leaders, former migrants and unofficial armed groups operate along the borders between Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti and Yemen.

The government of Ethiopia issued Proclamation No. 1178/2020 to help prevent irregular migration, specifically human trafficking and smuggling, by rehabilitating victims and bringing perpetrators to justice. In 2022, the government of Ethiopia stated that 608 suspected traffickers were prosecuted in 497 cases. In 2023, 264 victims of trafficking were identified; 63 were used for sexual exploitation, 188 were subjected to forced labour and 13 were victims of unidentified types of trafficking. A share of 87 per cent of the victims were women and girls. Despite the government's substantial efforts, Ethiopia has been placed on a Tier Two Watch List for Human Trafficking for over the past two decades. This indicates that Ethiopia has not yet met the requirements for properly tackling the problem of trafficking in persons.

154 UNHCR and MMC. 2020. *'On this journey, no one cares if you live or die': Abuse, protection and justice along routes between East and West Africa and Africa's Mediterranean coast*. July.

155 Expertise France. 2017. *Ethiopia Country Statement: Addressing Migrant Smuggling And Human Trafficking*. September.

156 Ibid.

157 Ibid.

158 Tekalign Ayalew, Fekadu Adugna and Priya Deshingkar. 2018. "Social embeddedness of human smuggling in East Africa: Brokering Ethiopian migration to Sudan". *African Human Mobility Review* 4, no. 3: 1333–1358.

159 Ibid.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to strengthen the rights of migrant women at all stages of migration, the following recommendations are proposed and assigned to the relevant stakeholders:

► IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION

The government of Ethiopia

- Promote local livelihood opportunities for women, especially from low-income, resource-poor, and rural and peri-urban households in common communities of origin for migrant women.
- Address structural factors and norms that exacerbate gender inequalities—such as sexual and gender-based violence, discrimination, early and forced marriage, and harmful traditional practices—that trigger migration.
- Address gender-specific barriers to women’s access to the labour market and enhance women’s access to gender-responsive education, health and vocational training.
- Offer decent employment opportunities and protections to migrant women, including domestic workers.

UN agencies, international NGOs (INGOs) and civil society

- Build the capacity of relevant government bodies and migrant women’s organizations.
- Conduct and analyse gender-responsive labour market assessments in key regions of origin for migrant women.
- Support Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) to improve the quality of skills training for migrant women and returnees.

► PROMOTE SAFE AND REGULAR MIGRATION OPTIONS FOR WOMEN

The government of Ethiopia

- Ensure existing labour migration laws, policies and frameworks incorporate gender-specific regulations and procedures.
- Provide timely and affordable access to identity, civil registry and travel documents for migrant women and returnees.
- Develop gender-responsive bilateral labour agreements to enhance the protection of migrant women and maximize the impact of their migration.
- Provide accurate, timely and gender-responsive information to enhance awareness about safe and regular migration options for women. This can be achieved through providing tailored information campaigns using various platforms including media, social media influencers, community conversation sessions and language-specific free hotlines for migration. Establishing migrant resource centres in key areas of origin for women migrants can further support this goal.

UN agencies, INGOs and civil society

- Enhance the Ethiopian government’s capacity to develop and implement human rights-focused and gender-responsive labour migration policies including multilateral labour agreements.
- Advocate for the inclusion of gender-specific regulations and procedures in Ethiopia’s labour migration laws, policies and frameworks.

► DEVELOP GENDER-RESPONSIVE BILATERAL LABOUR AGREEMENTS

The government of Ethiopia

- Ensure that bilateral labour agreements in GCC countries extend beyond short-term labour contracts for migrant women across skill levels and include specific protections for women in the sectors where they mainly work, including domestic work.
- Include women's organizations and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission in bilateral labour agreement negotiations for adherence to international labour standards.
- Adopt a regional approach when negotiating labour agreements with receiving countries to enhance bargaining power and ensure the protection of migrant women.

UN agencies, INGOs and civil society

- Enhance the capacity of the Ethiopian government and trade unions to effectively negotiate and implement gender-responsive bilateral or multilateral agreements.
- Facilitate experience-sharing visits for relevant line ministries, recruitment agencies and trade unions to promote the protection of the rights of migrant women.

► ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF SKILLS TRAINING SERVICES AND GOVERNANCE

The government of Ethiopia

- Develop migrant women's skills to meet labour market demands.
- Enhance migrant women's competencies in Arabic language proficiency, communication, negotiation skills, financial and digital literacy, social interaction, self-defence, remittance management and conflict resolution.
- Maintain an up-to-date and accessible list of licensed Private Employment Agencies and those that have had their licences revoked due to violations of recruitment regulations.
- Encourage private recruitment agencies to regularly engage with women migrant domestic workers via the online channels they use, such as WhatsApp, Telegram and imo.

UN agencies, INGOs and civil society

- Train private recruitment agencies and their associations on safe, ethical and gender-responsive recruitment methods.
- Provide certification to those recruitment agencies which comply with labour recruitment regulations.
- Build the capacity of TVET providers to provide quality training for migrant women.

► PROMOTE DECENT WORK AND SOCIAL PROTECTION MECHANISMS FOR MIGRANT WOMEN

The government of Ethiopia

- Incorporate social protection procedures and complaint mechanisms for women migrating from, to, through and back to Ethiopia.
- Deploy a dedicated team of labour attachés in key destination countries, as specified in the Ethiopian Overseas Labour Proclamation.
- Strengthen the existing national and international case management and referral mechanisms for protecting migrant women migrating from, to, through and back to Ethiopia. Ensure that referral mechanisms are simple, accessible and gender-responsive.
- Set up efficient reporting, complaint and redress procedures to safeguard women and girls who are on the move. The reporting procedures should be simple, clear, free and responsive, as well as safe and confidential, to encourage migrant women to report incidents of abuse. Moreover, it is crucial to address language barriers to improve the inclusivity of the reporting mechanisms.

UN agencies, INGOs and civil society

- Advocate for the ratification of significant relevant international instruments, including the ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, by the government of Ethiopia and major destination and transit countries situated along the Eastern Corridor.
- Support Ethiopia's foreign diplomatic missions to provide gender-responsive safe houses for migrant women and girls in need of them.

- Provide gender-specific training to the labour attachés on migration management prior to their deployment.
- Strengthen labour inspectors' capacity to protect migrant women from abuse and to quickly identify and respond to their rights at work.

► **STRENGTHEN PREVENTION AND RESPONSE MECHANISMS TO ADDRESS THE SMUGGLING OF MIGRANT WOMEN**

The government of Ethiopia

- Encourage collaboration between state and non-state actors in implementing gender-responsive prevention and reporting of smuggling at the national and subnational levels to protect women migrating from, to, through and back to Ethiopia.
- Ensure access to essential health, justice and social services for victims of sexual and gender-based violence, regardless of their documentation status, for all migrant women.
- Reinforce existing structures to aid and find smuggled women and girls along the major migration routes, especially on the Eastern Corridor.

UN agencies, INGOs and civil society

- Enhance the capability of institutions managing migration to efficiently perform their tasks, particularly through improved coordination at the regional and local levels, involving the Regional Partnership Coalition.
- Support the Ethiopian government in enhancing border security and combating document forgery, specifically identity and travel documents.
- Train health, justice and social service providers to address the specific needs of migrant women and girls.

► **COMBAT TRAFFICKING IN MIGRANT WOMEN AND GIRLS**

- Promote human rights-based and gender-responsive migration management, with a focus on preventing trafficking in persons. Collaborate with the Ethiopian Parliament, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the private sector, national NGOs, local

community structures and law enforcement agencies, particularly those located along key irregular migration routes and in migrants' areas of origin.

- Improve information sharing, protection and assistance for victims of trafficking, including migrant women transiting Ethiopia.
- Establish, operate and enhance cross-border cooperation mechanisms to prosecute traffickers, support victims of trafficking and avoid immigration detention.
- Provide essential services for survivors of trafficking including free access to justice, healthcare and counselling.
- Strengthen penalties for those involved in trafficking and smuggling, along with additional factors reflecting the different vulnerabilities of migrant women.

UN agencies, INGOs and civil society

- Build the capacity of the Ethiopian government to effectively implement Proclamation No.1178/2020 (the Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Persons Proclamation) from a gender perspective.
- Support the government of Ethiopia and civil society to prevent and combat trafficking in person by providing gender-responsive training for law enforcement bodies.
- Strengthen rehabilitation centres for women and girls who have experienced gender-based violence and trafficking.

► **IMPROVE WOMEN'S ACCESS TO FORMAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS**

The government of Ethiopia

- Offer financial and digital literacy training to migrant women before their departure, focusing on savings and managing remittances. Assist migrant women in setting up bank accounts prior to their departure.
- Provide access to easy and affordable means for migrant women to transfer remittances.
- Encourage financial institutions to involve migrant women and returnees to enhance savings and access to credit and promote entrepreneurship to ensure their protection by offering insurance before they leave.

UN agencies, INGOs and civil society

- Promote gender-responsive financial inclusion initiatives, including digital financing to maximize the benefits of women's migration.

► PROVIDE GENDER-RESPONSIVE REINTEGRATION SERVICES

The government of Ethiopia

- Promote needs-based and skills-oriented reintegration measures for migrant women, informed by a gender assessment of the labour market.
- Provide migrant women returnees with access to skills training, loans and credit to facilitate their reintegration into the labour market.
- Provide psychosocial and mental health support to migrant women in vulnerable situations.
- Establish a welfare fund for migrant women as a social protection mechanism to facilitate their reintegration through the operation of small businesses and to enable them to overcome some of the challenges they face during and after migration.
- Arrange insurance agreements with both public and private entities to insure migrant women in their destination countries.

UN agencies, INGOs and civil society

- Map and build on existing local, indigenous, community-based reintegration programmes to promote social cohesion and reduce community-based discrimination and prejudice against migrant women.
- Strengthen health institutions and civil society to provide mental health and psychosocial support for vulnerable migrant women and girls.

► PROMOTE THE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF MIGRANT WOMEN

The government of Ethiopia

- Ensure meaningful representation of migrant women and women's organizations in decision-making processes and forums.
- Enhance the social integration of migrant women by ensuring their participation in both diaspora and local domestic worker communities or networks.

UN agencies, INGOs and civil society

- Create an enabling environment for the establishment of migrant women's associations in Ethiopia and key destination countries to advocate for and champion their rights.
- Strengthen women's voices at all stages of migration to ensure protection and access to basic migration and reintegration services.

► IMPROVE THE COLLECTION OF SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA AND GENDER STATISTICS IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

The government of Ethiopia

- Incorporate sex-disaggregated, gender-specific migration statistics, including on remittances, in national surveys and upcoming Ethiopian censuses.



UN agencies, INGOs and civil society

- Conduct research on women migrating to, from, through and back to Ethiopia to inform gender-specific migration programmes and policies.
- Enhance the Ethiopian Statistical Service's capacity to create, analyse and disseminate migration data disaggregated by age and gender, including data on smuggling, trafficking and remittances.
- Develop indicators to measure gender equality measures in the migration sector in the context of Ethiopia.

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UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



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