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# **“THEY CHANGED THEIR LIVES BECAUSE THEY WENT TO ARAB COUNTRIES”**

## **LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN’S OVERSEAS MIGRATION FOR DOMESTIC LABOUR IN AMHARA REGION**

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*Findings from a pre-project assessment to inform the development and  
evaluation of Freedom Fund’s Ethiopia Hotspot Programme*

May 4, 2016

# “THEY CHANGED THEIR LIVES BECAUSE THEY WENT TO ARAB COUNTRIES”

## Local perceptions of women’s overseas migration for domestic labour in Amhara region

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) was commissioned by the Freedom Fund to conduct a rapid qualitative assessment on decision-making around international migration for domestic labour by girls and young women from Amhara Region, Ethiopia. The aim of the study was to explore how communities in the area where the Freedom Fund plans to implement its Hotspot programme obtain and interpret information on how to migrate, and their perceptions of risk and protective factors associated with different approaches to migration.

The research questions were:

- Where do women and girls access information on migration and how do they interpret it?
- What factors influence decision-making around migration, including selection of how to migrate?
- How are “safe” and “unsafe” migration understood by prospective migrants and their communities?
- What might increase a woman’s vulnerability to negative migration outcomes and what might increase women's chances of having a safe and positive migration experience?

For all the above questions, the study focused on practical information or “tips” from respondents that could be used to advise future migrants and their families on how to minimise the risks of migration.

### **Methods**

The rapid assessment was qualitative and consisted of focus group discussions, semi-structured key informant interviews, and in-depth interviews. Research was conducted in 4 kebeles (villages) in one woreda (district) located on the outskirts of Hayk.

Qualitative research collects in-depth and open-ended data from a small sample of respondents in order to understand perceptions of a specific event or activity from the perspective of those most closely affected by it. While it cannot be described as representative of the larger population in a statistical way, qualitative data offers a “snapshot” of current norms, patterns of behaviour, and interpretation of behavioural trends and can highlight existing diversity of opinions and experience, all of which are useful in designing context-specific interventions.

Findings have been used to develop a draft programmatic Theory of Change to help guide selection of specific Hotspot activities in Amhara Region so that they increase the knowledge and skills identified as likely to be associated with safer migration outcomes.

### **Findings**

In the study area near Hayk, migration abroad by girls and young women seeking domestic work appears to be widespread and accepted as a means to further the life chances of migrants and their families. Study participants were aware of negative outcomes during migration, at destination, and following return, and community members could identify potential risks based on the experiences of relatives or peers, as well as from information disseminated by government. Nonetheless, reports of positive experiences shared by returnee migrants appear more persuasive and encourage others to take their chances, particularly as viable income opportunities in the area are considered scarce.

Young women reported having made their own decision regarding migration, some in opposition to spouses or parents. On the other hand, family members of migrants or returnees described an environment of expectation that may make the choice to migrate nearly inevitable. Concerns about the poor state of the local economy and weak agricultural productivity appear to further shape local risk-benefit analysis regarding migration.

Participants reported that local contacts assist women in the migration process, some of whom are family members or acquaintances and some more formal brokers. They link migrants to individuals

or agencies in Addis Ababa that finalise the arrangements with agents in the destination countries. While people associated legal migration with greater protection and saw illegal migration as “unsafe”, in reality there appears to be considerable difficulty differentiating between the two options. Some differences recounted between the legal versus illegal included costs (legal seemingly less expensive), time from application to travel (shorter for illegal migration), level of preparation provided before departure (which varies even between legal and illegal arrangements), access to assistance following migration (better for legal migration), etc., but, based on women’s reports, these distinctions are not always clear, often resulting in decisions about migration made based on which form of migration seems more convenient at the time.

Whether women have good or bad experiences in the destination country are considered to be a matter of “luck” or “chance,” and to depend on the character (kind/unkind) of employers. Examples of both good and bad employers were provided by returnee migrants and family members. Participants described a continuum from employers who have badly abused or even killed migrant women to those who treat them like family, provide gifts, and pay for holidays back in Ethiopia. Respondents explained that women with bad employers can try to seek redress from local or Ethiopian employment agencies, or terminate their contracts and try to work illegally outside their visa. The success or failure of such strategies varies, depending partly on the agency (seemingly regardless of its legal status) and whether they secure better employment/ living conditions and avoid arrest /deportation if they break the terms of their visa.

A key objective of this rapid assessment was to identify protective factors and respondents were encouraged to think beyond the role of “luck” and “chance” and to consider how migration outcomes could be influence by what migrants knew or how they acted.

Although many said that successful versus unsuccessful migration was a matter of “chance”, returnee migrants also described knowledge, skills, and interpersonal attributes they believe to be associated with safer outcomes (summarised in the table below).

KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic Arabic</li> <li>• Cultural expectations (clothing, religious observation, gender relations)</li> <li>• Personal hygiene (using and disposing of sanitary pads)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of modern appliances and domestic products</li> <li>• Cleaning toilets or other unfamiliar household items</li> <li>• Financial planning, e.g. opening an account prior to departure</li> </ul>
INTERPERSONAL ATTRIBUTES	RESOURCES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Assertiveness</li> <li>• Obedience</li> <li>• Older age/ maturity</li> <li>• Being Muslim/ pretending to be Muslim</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phones and local sim cards</li> <li>• Contact details of agency, local Ethiopians, family</li> <li>• Leaving copy of contract and agency details with family</li> <li>• Access to Facebook, WhatsApp, VIBER etc</li> <li>• Arriving with foreign currency for any delays on arrival</li> </ul>

They suggested that desirable or protective skills include familiarity with the destination country’s culture and expectations (such as basic hygiene), understanding modern appliances and domestic products, rudimentary language ability, access to a mobile phone and local sim card, possession of contact details for employment agencies and local Ethiopians, and adopting a demeanour combining confidence, assertiveness and obedience. Participants explained that it was an advantage to regularly send money back to someone’s bank account in Ethiopia rather than rely on accumulating cash or being paid at the end of the contract. It was commonly reported that older women appear to have the kind of maturity required for handling difficult situations.

Women seemed to assess the success of their migration based on whether they returned with earnings or found that the money sent was put to good used or saved by a family member. Returning with nothing or finding their hard-earned funds had already been spent was perceived as failure. Either outcome may encourage a woman to re-migrate, either to consolidate wealth or make up for the lost income.

## INTRODUCTION

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This report presents findings from a rapid qualitative assessment undertaken by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) as part of its collaboration with the Freedom Fund for monitoring and evaluation of the Ethiopia Hot Spot programme. This formative research was commissioned to take place in the Hotspot programme area of Amhara Region in order to identify local understanding of women's migration, current decision making practices around the means of migration, and perceptions of risk and protective factors; these themes will help inform the design of intervention activities and key messages supported by the Freedom Fund and their implementing partners.

The formative research questions were as follows:

- Where do women and girls access information on migration and how do they interpret it?
- What factors influence decision-making around migration, including selection of how to migrate?
- How are “safe” and “unsafe” migration understood by prospective migrants and their communities?
- What might increase a woman's vulnerability to negative migration outcomes and what might increase women's chances of having a safe and positive migration experience?

The focus of the study was on identifying factors associated with pre-departure, transit, and in-country experiences that could be translated into realistic messages and practical advice for prospective migrants and their families to increase the chances of positive migration experiences in future.

Findings have been used to develop a programmatic Theory of Change to help guide selection of specific Hotspot activities that will increase the knowledge and skills identified as likely to be associated with safer migration outcomes. The Theory of Change suggests ways in which information from this assessment can be used to identify a realistic pathway through which specific intervention activities can lead to enhanced community capacity and an enabling environment for safe migration choices. In turn, this pathway provides guidance for evaluation research to track the programme's progress along this pathway to change.

## METHODS

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The rapid assessment was entirely qualitative, consisting of focus group discussions (FGD), semi-structured key informant interviews (KII), and in-depth interviews (IDI). Research was conducted in 4 kebeles (villages) in one woreda (district) located on the outskirts of Hayk and considered to be typical of the surrounding area in terms of its socio-demographic profile, accessibility by road, and reliance on agricultures by most of the population.

Following discussion with woreda authorities, sampling was conducted in each kebele through a combination of purposive recruitment (seeking individuals likely to provide a diversity of perspectives, e.g. representing different age groups, religious backgrounds, education levels) and opportunistic selection (interviewing respondents with relevant experience who are available and willing to participate at the time of data collection). The final Amhara data set consisted of the following:

- 12 in-depth interviews with returnee migrant women
- 1 in-depth interview with a woman planning to migrate in the near future
- 7 key informant interviews (School Director, Muslim Leader, Police Officer, 2 mothers of migrants, 1 former Women's Affairs kebele representative, and 2 Woreda Women and Children's Affairs authorities who were interviewed together)
- 3 focus group discussions with returnee migrants (5, 8 and 10 participants each)
- 1 focus group discussion with 6 husbands of migrants

- 1 focus group discussion with 4 fathers of migrants

Qualitative research collects in-depth and open-ended data from a small sample of respondents in order to understand perceptions of a specific event or activity from the perspective of those most closely affected by it. While it cannot be described as representative of the larger population in a statistical way, qualitative data offers a “snapshot” of current norms, patterns of behaviour, and interpretation of behavioural trends and can highlight existing diversity of opinions and experience, all of which are useful in designing context-specific interventions that will be meaningful to the local population.

Data were collected during December 2015 and January 2016 by an independent research consultant and fieldwork assistant, both of whom are female, Ethiopian, and fluent in the local language (Amharic). All interviews and group discussions were digitally recorded and translated into English by the fieldworker. Two members of the research team read all the transcripts and used thematic content analysis to categorise text into topic areas that were both pre-selected prior to the research (how do prospective migrants obtain and interpret information? What “tips” can they provide for others to reduce risks and maximise positive outcomes?) as well as identify ideas emerging directly from the data (the role of God and luck in determining experiences, the importance of how earnings are spent in perceptions of “successful” migration).

The voices of respondents are prioritised throughout this report, with extensive use of direct quotes from the expanded notes to ensure fidelity to respondents’ language and how they contextualise their perceptions and experiences within their own lives. Excerpts from interviews and group discussions provided throughout the text have been lightly edited to improve English grammar and syntax from the original translation.

Although this study was qualitative and thus not conducive to presenting numbers or proportions, terms such as “most” “a few” “commonly” or “rarely” are used throughout the report to provide some indication of which findings appeared more frequently in the data than others. Although specific numbers are avoided, where certain ideas or experiences were universal or, on the contrary, clear outliers, this is sometimes quantified, e.g. “all returnees...” or “only one respondent...”.

To help interpret experiences and direct quotes of individual interviewees, a brief summary of key socio-demographic and migration-related variables for the 12 returnee migrants who participated in in-depth interviews is provided in Table 1. In-depth interviews allow exploration of personal experiences, beliefs, and perceptions, all of which are likely to be influenced by personal history and current circumstances.

The same information is not provided for participants of focus group discussions in which the aim was to elicit group norms and acceptable ways of talking about migration, obtain background information to guide the study, and help select respondents for follow-up interviews, rather than ask about individual experiences. Additional details have also not been provided for the key informants and one prospective migrant interviewed to avoid inadvertent loss of anonymity.

All direct quotes are identified by data collection method, type of respondent, and age (except for key informants holding formal community roles who might be more easily identified).