

# BETWEEN HOPE AND HARDSHIP

Migration and work experiences of Ethiopian  
domestic workers in Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon

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**Charts and figures in this report only reflect the characteristics of the respondents we interviewed and should not be considered representative of the Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East.**

# ENGLISH EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This exploratory study sets out to understand the decision-making, migration patterns, employment experiences, social networks and help-seeking behaviours among Ethiopian migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in three Middle Eastern countries: Lebanon, Kuwait, and Jordan.





Through individual and group interviews, as well as field observations, we sought to understand:

- 1 What personal and structural vulnerabilities put Ethiopian domestic workers at risk of labour trafficking in the Middle East?
- 2 What are the experiences of Ethiopian women who have encountered labour trafficking in the Middle East? How do regional policies and practices affect the help-seeking behaviour of labour-trafficking survivors?
- 3 How do Ethiopian domestic workers travel through various migration routes as well as establish and maintain communication with families and friends?

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges faced by Ethiopian migrants, particularly domestic workers, several key actions are necessary:

### IN ETHIOPIA

-  Expanding the Ministry of Labor and Skills' branches into rural areas is crucial to provide accessible information and services for prospective migrants, lowering the barrier to formal migration.
-  Training in financial literacy before departure can empower women to manage their income effectively, ensuring they can make informed decisions about remittances and savings.
-  Informal pre-departure information sessions can better prepare women for the realities of working abroad, including understanding destination-specific challenges and basic skills.
-  Planning ahead for emergencies, including social protection schemes and insurance, could support migrants in leaving abusive situations and facilitate their safe return.

### IN DESTINATION COUNTRIES

-  Establishing migrant worker helpdesks within Ethiopian Embassies, staffed by NGOs, can offer critical support to migrants who are suffering abuse.
-  Strengthening oversight of recruitment agencies and ensuring adherence to protective standards are imperative for safeguarding migrant rights.
-  Additionally, enhancing post-arrival orientation to include rights awareness, financial literacy, and familiarisation with local customs and laws can significantly improve migrants' experiences and outcomes.

# ENGLISH COUNTRY SPECIFIC FINDINGS

## DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

Across the three study sites, a total of 36 female Ethiopian migrants were interviewed for this study. Most participants across all three sites were between 20 and 30 years old, had children, and held between a 9th to 12th grade education. In Lebanon, most participants were separated or divorced; in Kuwait, most were married; in Jordan, most were single.

## LEBANON



- **Official count of Ethiopian's living in country:** 26,745 migrants, 98 percent female
- **Previous migration experiences:** Most participants had exclusively worked in Lebanon for a period ranging from one to nine years, in order to financially support their families and themselves. All participants arrived there prior to the Lebanese economic and governing crisis in 2020.
- **Recruitment and migration:** Participants often migrated informally to Lebanon through an agent and did not know which type of visa they were holding at the time of arrival. Overall, it took less than three months for most of the women to get all the required paperwork and plane ticket to migrate. On average, the migrants paid ETB 6,156 (~USD 113) in recruitment fees.
- **Work conditions and human trafficking:** Most participants were either engaged in freelance domestic work, cleaning jobs, or were unemployed. Many disclosed that they were in desperate situations, struggling to find work and earn a living. For those who were working, they reported long working hours, as well as financial, physical and sexual abuse. While many reported being confined to their workplaces, a significant number were still able to communicate with family and friends.
- **Help-seeking:** Almost all respondents were aware of at least one organisation that could assist them in Lebanon. However, many found the Ethiopia Embassy unhelpful, either from personal experiences or accounts from acquaintances, often citing mistreatment by embassy staff.

## JORDAN



- **Official count of Ethiopian's living in country:** 33,000 migrants, gender breakdown not available
- **Previous migration experiences:** Participants had frequently migrated to other countries for employment, typically between one and nine years, before moving to Jordan. Their migration was motivated by the desire to support their families and improve their own prospects.
- **Recruitment and migration:** All participants went through official government channels with an agent to secure the job. On average, they paid ETB 12,476 (~USD 229) in recruitment fees even though it should have been free.
- **Work conditions and human trafficking:** All participants reported running away early on during their time in Jordan, due to frequent abuse and severe restrictions on their freedom. The violations included being confined to the workplace, limited access to a phone or calling card, restricted permission to communicate with family and friends, confiscation of passports, financial exploitation and physical mistreatment.
- **Help-seeking:** A small number of participants reached out to the Ethiopian consulate in Jordan for help, but only a few received assistance. Additionally, only a limited number of women were aware of organisations capable of providing them with legal support, and even then, only under specific conditions.

## KUWAIT



- **Official count of Ethiopians living in country:** 36,657 migrants, 62 percent female
- **Previous migration experiences:** Many participants in Kuwait had only ever worked in Kuwait and had migrated there to financially support their families back in Ethiopia. All participants had been employed abroad, predominantly in Kuwait, for more than ten years.
- **Recruitment and migration:** Participants often found their work through an agent or a friend and entered on a Visa 20 (specific for domestic workers) on a direct flight from Addis Ababa. The average cost of recruitment and migration was approximately ETB 14,027 (~USD 258).
- **Work conditions and human trafficking:** The majority of participants were documented and employed. Most were allowed access to a phone or calling card, and able to freely communicate with their friends and family. However, many reported that they worked long hours, were not given breaks or days off, and were not allowed to leave the workplace.
- **Help-seeking:** Only a few participants were aware of an organisation in Kuwait that could offer them assistance. Many found the Ethiopian Embassy unhelpful due to experiences of mistreatment or lack of support from the embassy staff.

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# GLOSSARY

<b>BLA</b>	Bilateral labour agreement
<b>ETB</b>	Ethiopian birr
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>JOD</b>	Jordanian dinar
<b>KWD</b>	Kuwaiti dinar
<b>LBP</b>	Lebanese pound
<b>MDW</b>	Migrant domestic worker
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>SNNPR</b>	Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region
<b>TIP</b>	Trafficking in persons
<b>USD</b>	United States dollar

Image: Migrant rehabilitation centre in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. ©UNICEF Ethiopia/2013/Ayene

Image: Amman, Jordan.  
Photo by Who's Denilo ? on Unsplash



# ማጠቃለያ

ይህ ገላጭ ጥናት በሰባት የመካከለኛው ምስራቅ ሀገራት ማለትም በሊባኖስ፣ በኩዌት እና በዮርዳኖስ የሚኖሩ ኢትዮጵያውያን የቤት ሰራተኞችን የውሳኔ አሰጣጥ ሂደት፣ የፍልሰት ሁኔታ፣ የስራ ልምድ፣ የማህበራዊ ትስስር እና እርዳታ የመፈለግ ባህሪዎቻቸውን ለመረዳት የተደረገ ጥናት ነው።

የምርምር ቡድኑ የተናጥል እና የቡድን ቃለ-መጠይቆችን እንዲሁም የመስክ ምልከታዎች በማድረግ የሚከተሉትን የምርምር ጥያቄዎችን ለመመለስ ሞክሯል።

- 1 በመካከለኛው ምስራቅ የሚገኙ የቤት ሰራተኞችን ለጉልበት ብዝበዛ ተጋላጭ የሚያደርጉ ግላዊ እና መዋቅራዊ ሁኔታዎች ምንድን ናቸው?
- 2 በመካከለኛው ምስራቅ ለጉልበት ብዝበዛ ሰለባ የሆኑ ግለሰቦች ተሞክሮ ምን ይመስላል? በመካከለኛው ምስራቅ ያሉ ቀጠናዊ ፖሊሲዎች እና አሰራሮች የጉልበት ብዝበዛ ተጠቂዎችን የእርዳታ ፈላጊነት ባህሪ ላይ እንዴት ተፅእኖ ያሳድራሉ?
- 3 ኢትዮጵያውያን የቤት ሰራተኞች በተለያዩ የፍልሰት መንገዶች እንዴት ይጓዛሉ? ከቤተሰቦቻቸው እና ከዳኞቻቸው ጋር እንዴት ግንኙነት ያደርጋሉ?

## ምክረ ሐሳቦች

ኢትዮጵያውያን ፍልሰተኞች በተለይም የቤት ውስጥ ሰራተኞች የሚያጋጥሟቸውን ፈተናዎች ለመፍታት በርካታ ቁልፍ እርምጃዎች ሊወሰዱ ይገባል።

በኢትዮጵያ፡

- የሰራተኛና ክህሎት ሚኒስቴር ቅርንጫፎችን ወደ ገጠር አካባቢዎች ማስፋፋት ለመፈለስ ለተዘጋጁ ሰዎች መረጃን ከማድረስና የመደበኛ ፍልሰት እንቅፋቶችን ከመቀንስ አንጻር ከፍተኛ ሚና አለው።
- ሴቶች ከሀገር ከመውጣታቸው አስቀድሞ በሂሳብ አያያዝ ስልጠና እንዲያገኙ ማድረግ ገቢያቸውን በብቃት እንዲቆጣጠሩ ቁጠባና የገንዘብ አላላክን በተመለከተ በመረጃ የተደገፈ ውሳኔ እንዲያሳልፉ ያስችላቸዋል።
- መደበኛ ያልሆኑ የመረጃ ክፍለ ጊዜያት ለመዳረሻ ልዩ የሆኑ ተግዳሮቶችን እና መሰረታዊ ክህሎቶችን መረዳትን ሴቶች ወደ ውጭ አገር ከመፈለሳቸው በፊት ለሚጠብቃቸው እውነታ በተሻለ ሁኔታ እንዲዘጋጁ ይረዳል።
- የመድሀን አገልግሎትን ጨምሮ ለድንገተኛ አደጋ አስቀድሞ ማቀድ ፍልሰተኞች አስቸጋሪ ሁኔታዎችን ለቀው እንዲወጡ እና በሰላም ወደ ሀገራቸው እንዲመለሱ ሊያመቻች ይችላል።

በመድረሻ አገሮች፡-

- በኢትዮጵያ ኤምባሲዎች መንግስታዊ ባልሆኑ ድርጅቶች የሚሰሩ የፍልሰተኞችን ጉዳይ የሚመለከቱና ድጋፍ የሚሰጡ ክፍሎችን ማቋቋም በደል ለሚደርስባቸው ፍልሰተኞች ወሳኝ ድጋፍ ሊያስገኝ ይችላል።
- የፍልሰተኞችን መብቶች ለማስጠበቅ የቅጥር ኤጀንሲዎችን/ወኪሎችን ቁጥጥር ማጠናከር እና የመከላከያ ደረጃዎች መከበራቸውን ማረጋገጥ አስፈላጊ ነው።
- በተጨማሪም፣ ለተመለሰች በመብትና በሂሳብ አያያዝ እንዲሁም የአገሪቷ ደንቦችና ህግጋትን እንዲረዱ የሚሰሩ የግንዛቤ ማስጨበጫ ስራዎችን ማሻሻል የፍልሰተኞችን ልምድና ውጤት በከፍተኛ ደረጃ ሊያሻሽለው ይችላል።

# የየሀገራቱ ግኝቶች::

## የስነህዝብ ምልክታ

በሦስቱም አገራት በጥናቱ ላይ የተሳተፉ አብዛኞቹ ተሳታፊዎች ከ20 እስከ 30 ዓመት የዕድሜ ክልል ውስጥ ያሉ ናቸው። በሊባኖስ ከተሳተፉት አብዛኞቹ ከትዳር አጋራቸው ጋር የተፋቱ ወይም የተለያዩ ናቸው። በዮርዳኖስ፣ አብዛኞቹ ተሳታፊዎች ያላገቡ ወይም በትዳር ያልተጣመሩ ናቸው። በሁሉም ሀገራት አብዛኞቹ ተሳታፊዎች ወላጆች ሲሆኑ ከ9ኛ እስከ 12ኛ ክፍል ትምህርታቸውን ያጠናቀቁ ናቸው።

## ጅርዳን



- **በአገሪቷ ውስጥ የሚኖሩ አትሎጅያውያን ይፋዊ የህዝብ ብዛት:** 33,000 ስደተኞች፣ የጾታ ክፍፍል የለም።
- **የቀደመ የፍልስጥ ልምድ/ሁኔታ:** በዮርዳኖስ የጥናቱ ተሳታፊዎች ወደ ዮርዳኖስ ከመምጣታቸው በፊት ቤተሰቦቻቸውን ለመርዳት እና ህይወታቸውን ለማሻሻል በሌሎች ሀገራት ከ1 እስከ 9 ዓመታት ያህል ሠርተዋል።
- **ቅጥርና ፍልስጥ:** ሁሉም ተሳታፊዎች ስራ ለማግኘት በወኪልና በህጋዊ መንገዶች የሄዱ ናቸው። ነጻ መሆን የነበረበት ቢሆንም ለቅጥር በአማካይ የአትሎጅያ ብር 12,476 (~USD 229) ክፍለዋል።
- **የስራ ሁኔታና ህገወጥ የሰዎች ዝውውር:** ሁሉም ተሳታፊዎች በዮርዳኖስ ቆይታቸው በከፍተኛ ጥቃት፣ የመንቀሳቀስ እና የግንኙነት ነፃነት አጦት ምክንያት፣ ስራ ጀምረው ወደያውኑ ከስራ ቦታቸው እንደጠፋ ተናግረዋል። እነዚህ ጥቃቶች፣ ከስራ ቦታ መውጣት አለመቻል፣ ስልክ ወይም የመደወያ ካርድ የማግኘት ውስንነት፣ ከቤተሰቦቻቸው እና ከጓደኞቻቸው ጋር የመገናኘት የፈቃድ ውስንነት፣ ፓስፖርታቸውን የመቀማት፣ የገንዘብ ክልከላ እና አካላዊ ጥቃት ይገኙበታል።
- **እርዳታ ፈላጊነት:** የተወሰኑ ተሳታፊዎች በዮርዳኖስ የቆንፅላ ፅ/ቤት እርዳታን መጠየቃቸውን በመግለፅ፣ ጥቂቶች ብቻ እርዳታ ማግኘታቸውን ጠቁመዋል። በተጨማሪም፣ ጥቂት ሴቶች ብቻ እርዳታ ሊሰጧቸው ስለሚችሉ ድርጅቶች እንደሚያውቁ በመጥቀስ፣ እነዚህ ድርጅቶች የሕግ ድጋፍ የሚሰጡት ግን በአንዳንድ ሁኔታዎች ብቻ መሆኑን ጠቁመዋል።

## ሊባኖስ



- **በሀገሪቱ የሚኖሩ አትሎጅያውያን ይፋዊ የህዝብ ብዛት:** 26,745 ስደተኞች፣ 98 በመቶ ሴቶች
- **የቀደመ የፍልስጥ ልምድ/ሁኔታ:** በሊባኖስ አብዛኞቹ የጥናቱ ተሳታፊዎች ከአንድ እስከ ዘጠኝ አመታት በሊባኖስ ውስጥ ሲሰሩ የቆዩ ሲሆን፣ ይህም በዋነኝነት ቤተሰቦቻቸውን እና አራሳቸውን በገንዘብ ለመደገፍ ነው። በተለይም ሁሉም ተሳታፊዎች ሊባኖስ የገቡት በ 2020 የተከሰተው የሊባኖስ የኢኮኖሚ እና የመንግስት ቀውስ ከመከሰቱ በፊት ነው።
- **ቅጥርና ፍልስጥ:** አብዛኞቹ ተሳታፊዎች በኤጀንሲ በኩል በ ኢ-መደበኛ መንገድ ወደ ሊባኖስ የፈለሱ እና በደረሱበት ወቅት የተጓዙበትን ሺዛ አይነት ለይተው የማያውቁ ነበሩ። በአጠቃላይ፣ አብዛኞቹ ሴቶች ለመፈለስ የሚያስፈልጓቸውን መረጃዎች እና የአውሮፕላን ትኬት ለማግኘት ከሶስት ወር ያነሰ ጊዜ ፈጅቶባቸዋል። ፍልስጥኞቹ በአማካይ 6,156 የአትሎጅያ ብር (~USD 113) ለቅጥር ክፍያ ከፍለዋል።
- **የስራ ሁኔታና ህገወጥ የሰዎች ዝውውር:** አብዛኞቹ ተሳታፊዎች በግል ወይም በኮንትራት የቤት ውስጥ ሥራ ማለትም የጽዳት ሥራዎችን የሚሰሩ ወይም ሥራ አጥ ነበሩ። ብዙዎቹ ሴቶች ተስፋ አስቆራጭ ሁኔታ ውስጥ እንዳሉ እና ስራ ወይም መተዳደሪያ ማግኘት እንዳልቻሉ ገልጸዋል። በተጨማሪም ረጅም የስራ ሰዓታት፣ ጾታዊና አካላዊ ጥቃት እንዲሁም ገንዘብ የመክልከል ጥቃቶች ደርሶባቸዋል። ብዙዎች ከስራ መውጣት ባይፈቀዱላቸውም ቤተሰቦቻቸውን እና ጓደኞቻቸውን በስልክ የማግኘት እድል እንዳላቸው ይናገራሉ።
- **እርዳታ ፈላጊነት:** በሊባኖስ ምላሽ ከሰጡት ውስጥ ሁሉም በሚባል ደረጃ ሊረዳቸው ስለሚችል ድርጅት እንደሚያውቁ ጠቁመዋል። አብዛኞቹ ምላሽ ሰጪዎች ከግላዊ ልምዳቸው ወይም ከሚያውቁት ሰው ታሪክ በመነሳት እና ሰውን ከሚያንገላቱ የኤምባሲው ሰራተኞች መኖራቸውን በመጥቀስ የአትሎጅያ ኤምባሲ ጠቃሚ አለመሆኑን ጠቁመዋል።

## ኩዌት



- **በአገሪቷ የሚኖሩ አትሎጅያውያን ይፋዊ የህዝብ ብዛት:** 36,657 ስደተኞች፣ 62 በመቶ ሴቶች
- **የቀደመ የፍልስጥ ልምድ/ሁኔታ:** አብዛኞቹ ከኩዌት የተሳተፉት አትሎጅያውያን የቤት ሰራተኞች ለመጀመሪያ ጊዜ ወደ ኩዌት መጥተው በስራ ላይ የተሰማሩ ሲሆን፣ የፈለሱትም ሰርተው በአትሎጅያ የሚኖሩ ቤተሰቦቻቸውን በገንዘብ ለመደገፍ ነው። ሁሉም ተሳታፊዎች በውጪ ሀገራት፣ በቀዳሚነት በኩዌት ከ10 አመታት በላይ ቆይተዋል።
- **ቅጥርና ፍልስጥ:** ተሳታፊዎች ብዙ ጊዜ ስራቸውን በወኪል ወይም በጓደኛ ያገኙ ሲሆን በሺዛ 20 (ለቤት ሰራተኞች የተለየ) ከአዲስ አበባ በቀጥታ በረራ የገቡ ነበሩ። የቅጥር አማካይ ዋጋቸውም የአትሎጅያ ብር 14,027 (~ USD 258) ነበር።
- **የስራ ሁኔታና ህገወጥ የሰዎች ዝውውር:** በኩዌት ጥናቱ ላይ ከተሳተፉት አብዛኞቹ ህጋዊ ሰነዶች እና ስራ አላቸው። እንዲሁም አብዛኞቹ ስልክ ወይም የመደወያ ካርድ በመጠቀም ከጓደኞቻቸው እና ከቤተሰቦቻቸው ጋር የመገናኘት ፈቃድ ተሠጥተዋል። ይሁን እንጂ ብዙ ሴቶች ለረጅም ሰዓታት እንደሚሠሩ፣ የስራ መሀል አረፍትም ሆነ የዕረፍት ቀን እንደማይሰጣቸው።
- **እርዳታ ፈላጊነት:** ጥቂት ምላሽ ሰጪዎች በኩዌት ውስጥ እርዳታ ሊሰጥ የሚችል ድርጅት መኖሩን ያውቃሉ። ነገር ግን አብዛኞቹ በኤምባሲው በኩል የደረሰባቸውን እንግልት ወይም ድጋፍ ያለማግኘት እንደሚኖሩ ምክንያት በመጥቀስ የአትሎጅያ ኤምባሲ ጠቃሚ አለመሆኑን ገልጸዋል።

# INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this study, commissioned by the Freedom Fund, is to explore and understand decision-making, migration patterns, employment experiences, social networks and help-seeking behaviours among Ethiopian domestic workers in three Middle East countries: Lebanon, Kuwait, and Jordan.

Due to the hidden nature of human trafficking and employment in private households, accurate and detailed information about labour trafficking and domestic servitude in the Middle East is difficult to determine (Tyldum & Brunovskis 2005). The goal of the project was to explore the context and nature of exploitation and trafficking of domestic workers in the Middle East, to inform efforts for preventing labour trafficking and protecting survivors. Given the scarcity of research about the dynamics of domestic work and servitude in this region, the study attempted to fill an important knowledge gap and lead to increased understanding of labour trafficking of domestic workers in the Middle East.

This project sought to achieve three main objectives:

- Explore victim experiences from recruitment through abuse at employment among domestic workers who are trafficked;
- Enhance understanding and knowledge of domestic servitude in the Middle East to improve prevention and responses in the region—especially by governments; and
- Identify strategies that can make this exploitation and crime more visible and provide survivors with greater opportunities for protection and justice.

This qualitative research was led by Meredith Dank, PhD (Research Professor at New York University) and Sheldon Zhang, PhD (Professor at University of Massachusetts Lowell). Through individual and group interviews, as well as field observations, we sought to understand:

- 1 What personal and structural vulnerabilities put Ethiopian domestic workers at risk for labour trafficking in the Middle East?
- 2 What are the experiences of Ethiopian women who have encountered labour trafficking in the Middle East?
- 3 How do regional policies and practices affect the help-seeking behaviour of labour-trafficking victims?
- 4 How do Ethiopian domestic workers travel through various migration routes as well as establish and maintain communication with families and friends?

# LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, a shift has been observed in many Middle Eastern countries towards a non-Arab workforce, with a commensurate increase in the employment of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) originating from Asian and African countries (Fernandez, 2014). Ethiopian women constitute a significant portion of MDWs heading to the Middle East, with Lebanon and Kuwait being some of the most common destinations (Shewamene et al., 2022; Demissie, 2018). This is due in part to high rates of unemployment and the deteriorating economy in Ethiopia (Dessiye & Emirie, 2018), which is driving many women to reluctantly go abroad (Schwel, 2022). Some MDWs choose their destination countries because they have an existing network of family and friends (Kuschminder, 2016), while others follow their employment agents' connections in countries such as Kuwait and Lebanon (Dessiye & Emirie, 2018). Even though there are many stories about abusive situations in these countries from returnees, many feel obliged to go abroad as a household strategy to support their families financially (Dessiye & Emirie, 2018).



Image: Addis Ababa Bole Airport.  
Credit: XPlane.org

MDWs often experience high levels of abuse and restrictions of freedom while working overseas, not only from their employers but also from abusive middlemen or agents. Although Ethiopia has laws regulating agencies that facilitate overseas job placement, many abuses still occur, especially by unlicensed or illegal brokers and agents (Fernandez, 2013; Shewamene, et al. 2022; Busza, et al., 2023). Many Ethiopian women travel through irregular channels because of expediency and fewer restrictions (Shewamene, 2022). However, irregular migration can place these women at even greater vulnerability to abuse and exploitation once they arrive in the destination country. One study found that over 93 percent of Ethiopian MDWs travelling to Lebanon did so through illegal brokers collaborating with partner offices inside Lebanon (Gutema, 2019). Furthermore, most of these women reported being deceived by their brokers about employment conditions in the Middle East (Gutema, 2019).

Limited legal protections, a lack of awareness by law enforcement officials, and the unregulated nature of domestic work in countries such as Lebanon and Kuwait place MDWs at high risk of exploitation and abuse once in-country (Reda, 2018). Even if women obtain and sign a contract detailing employment terms, there are limited mechanisms in place in these countries to enforce these contracts or to offer protection from abuses for these women (Fernandez, 2014). Although Lebanon has signed a number of treaties and installed a domestic legal framework to combat human rights abuses and human trafficking violations, one study found that 65 percent of Ethiopian MDWs “had experienced a situation of forced labour, servitude, or slavery at some point during their time in Lebanon” (Hamill, 2010). The levels of abuse experienced by Ethiopian MDWs in Lebanon were so high that the Ethiopian government was compelled to ban migration to Lebanon in 2004 (Schrover et al., 2008) and later to ban all migration to Arab countries in 2013. Without viable alternatives, these moratoria enhanced demand for irregular migration until the ban was lifted in 2018 (Zewdu, 2018).

A main contributing factor to the abusive situations that many MDWs find themselves trapped in is the practice of kafala in Gulf countries. This keeps migrant workers indentured to their employers who sponsored their work visas; an employee cannot leave without the employer’s consent (Brace & Davidson, 2018). Furthermore, MDWs under the kafala system are often excluded from national labour legislation providing protections for workers in the Middle East (Aoun, 2020). Covid policies that restricted MDWs in countries such as Kuwait and Lebanon from leaving their places of employment also increased their vulnerability to labour abuse and gender-based violence (Aoun, 2020). Although many horrific stories of abuses against MDWs in the Middle East (Reda, 2018) are documented, ambiguous definitions have led to questions of whether these situations actually constitute trafficking, thus hampering efforts to address these situations (Jureidini, 2010).

This research study specifically focused on Ethiopian MDWs employed in Lebanon, Kuwait, and Jordan. Table 1 summarises the key aspects of the working conditions as stipulated by law in these countries. Although stipulations differ across the three states, there appears to be very limited protection for migrant domestic workers against common labour violations, such as wage withholding, restrictions on freedom, and constant surveillance by employers. Legal protections are generally confined to severe cases of abuse, such as physical and sexual violence, and only if the case can be substantiated by local authorities.

**Table 1. Legal agreements and protection for migrant domestic workers (at the time of writing)**

	Lebanon	Kuwait	Jordan
<b>Official stock of Ethiopian migrants living in country</b>	26,745 migrants, 98 percent female.	36,657 migrants, 62 percent female.	33,000 migrants, gender breakdown not available.
<b>Bilateral labour agreement with Ethiopia</b>	Yes, signed in April 2023.	Yes, signed in June 2023.	Yes, signed in July 2023.
<b>Wage for Ethiopian MDWs</b>	Not stipulated.	KWD 90 (~USD 293) per month.	USD 275 per month.
<b>Work hours</b>	No more than 10 hours per day.	No more than 12 hours per day.	No more than 8 hours per day.
<b>Rest periods</b>	One rest day per week. Six days of annual leave per year.	One rest day per week. 30 days of annual leave after 11 months of service.	One rest day per week. 14 days of annual leave per year.
<b>Workers’ passports</b>	No law preventing employers from confiscating passports.	Law prohibits employers from confiscating workers’ passports.	Law prohibits employers from confiscating workers’ passports.
<b>Penalty for MDWs to change employers</b>	Only with permission of the current employer, up to three times.  Otherwise, the Ministry of Labour can also transfer the worker in cases of abuse or non-payment of wages for three months.	Only with permission of the first employer.  Otherwise, the Public Authority of Manpower has the power to transfer the worker if they can prove that a sexual act has been committed against the domestic worker.	Only with permission of the employer. Or, after two full years of service.  Otherwise, workers can leave the employer if they can prove, through the judicial system, that they have been physically or sexually abused, or suffered other forms of serious violation.
<b>Ability for MDWs who ‘run away’ from employer</b>	Employer can submit a complaint and the worker’s permit will be cancelled, leading to residency offences.	Worker’s immigration status is tied to the employer. If they no longer live at the address, they risk being fined and deported for residency offences.	Unless the employer is at fault, otherwise the worker is responsible for all financial obligations in the contract, including the cost of returning to home country.
<b>Ability to leave the country anytime</b>	Exit permit not required.	Exit permit not required.	Exit permit not required.
<b>Presence of embassy, consultant and labour attaché</b>	Ethiopian Embassy in Beirut. Does not have a labour attaché.	Ethiopian Embassy in Kuwait City. Does not have a labour attaché.	Ethiopian Consulate in Amman. Does not have an embassy or labour attaché.
<b>Source</b>	Ethiopian Statistics Service, 2021; International Labour Organization (ILO), 2023c; Middle East Eye, 2023	Arabian Business, 2023; Ethiopian Statistics Service, 2021; ILO, 2023b	Fana Broadcasting Corporate, 2023; ILO, 2023a; Jordan News, 2023



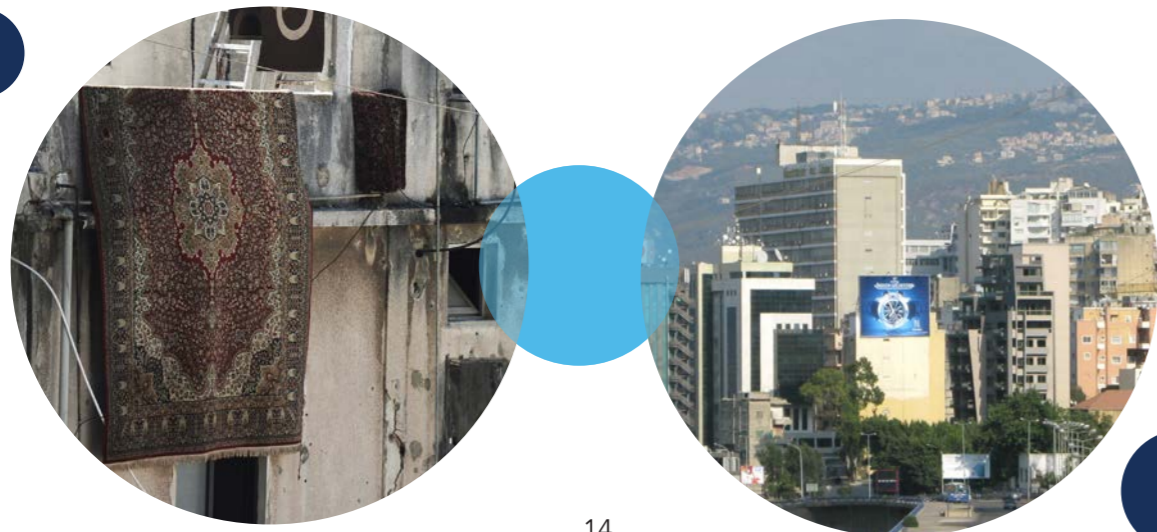
# METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory, qualitative research design, which involved recruiting participants through snowball sampling to participate in in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions. The field procedures and all interview guidelines were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at New York University. As one of the largest-scale studies to date focusing on recruiting and interviewing migrant women currently working in the Middle East as domestic workers, there were a number of specialised ethical considerations. Foremost was the safety of the MDWs, given the nature of their work and their status in the host country. The research team needed to ensure that any risks taken in meeting with us were outweighed by the benefits of participating in the study. We relied on local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in all three countries, which worked directly with Ethiopian MDWs or were an MDW-led organisation.

In total, 36 Ethiopian MDWs participated in the study, and data collection involved several field challenges. Firstly, identifying currently employed MDWs proved difficult, as many were isolated with limited opportunities for communication or movement outside of the homes where they were working. Secondly, even if they were able to leave their place of employment for an interview, arranging a safe and convenient location for the interview required extra logistical planning and execution, and incurred associated costs.

For this study, we partnered with en.v, a Kuwait-based NGO that conducts participatory advocacy to connect and support a wide swath of stakeholders and individuals in the migrant-worker communities. en.v was instrumental in connecting us to Mesewat, an organisation for Ethiopian MDWs in Lebanon, and also to Sandigan Kuwait (a partner of en.v), an NGO that organises and supports migrant workers, including Ethiopian MDWs, in the country. In March 2023, both Principal Investigators (PIs) travelled to Lebanon and Kuwait to interview Ethiopian MDWs in-country. In total, 14 women in Lebanon and 12 women in Kuwait were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. An Amharic-English interpreter facilitated the interviews, and notes were taken via laptop without audio recording. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Participants received approximately USD 25 in local currency for contributing their time to this study.

Jordan was added as a third site and data collection took place in August 2023. Both PIs worked with a local Jordanian NGO, Tamkeen for Legal Aid and Human Rights, which specialises in labour, migration, and combating human trafficking. Tamkeen provides legal support to migrant workers and has a long history of supporting Ethiopian MDWs. Similar to en.v and Mesewat, Tamkeen recruited study participants through its networks and provided space for the focus groups and interviews. We conducted a three-hour focus-group session with eight Ethiopian MDWs on the first day and two individual interviews on the second, totalling ten participants in Jordan. All women were fluent in Arabic, and the focus group and interviews were conducted in Arabic with a Tamkeen representative assisting with English translation. Notes were taken via laptop without audio recording. Participants received approximately USD 25 in local currency for participating in the study.



# LIMITATIONS

- 1 The findings reported here are based on a sample of 36 Ethiopian migrant workers, fluent in Arabic as a second language, and were recruited via convenience sampling through NGO partners. Although efforts were made to increase diversity in key variables such as age and years worked in the host country, the findings should be considered exploratory. While we do not doubt that many more MDWs from Ethiopia have experienced trafficking violations, the findings presented here cannot be generalised.
- 2 Given the limited freedom of movement and communication typically experienced by full-time domestic workers, it proved very challenging to reach them and arrange their safe participation in this study. As a result, almost all the Ethiopian MDWs who participated in the study in all three countries were either doing freelance domestic work or cleaning jobs, were unemployed, or had employers who allowed the MDW a certain amount of freedom to participate in the interviews and focus groups. The only exception was one full-time MDW in Lebanon who told her employer that she was going to visit her sister, which the employer allowed on occasion, but instead met with the researchers for an interview. Thus, most of the information gathered during the interviews and focus groups focused on past events, particularly regarding their migration history and experiences working as a full-time MDW. For some women, this was many years in the past. Additionally, many of the women were not documented at the time of the interviews and preferred not to go into too much detail about their current situation.
- 3 Due to the extensive traumas many of the women had experienced over their lifetime, and particularly in the Middle East, the timelines and some of the facts of their stories did not always align. The researchers were careful to take a trauma-informed approach to their interviews and focus groups, and when possible, tried to clarify certain parts of their story, but never pushed the issue if the women could not recall a precise timeline or follow the line of questioning. As a result, we were not able to obtain answers to all of the questions in the interview guide, which resulted in some missing data.

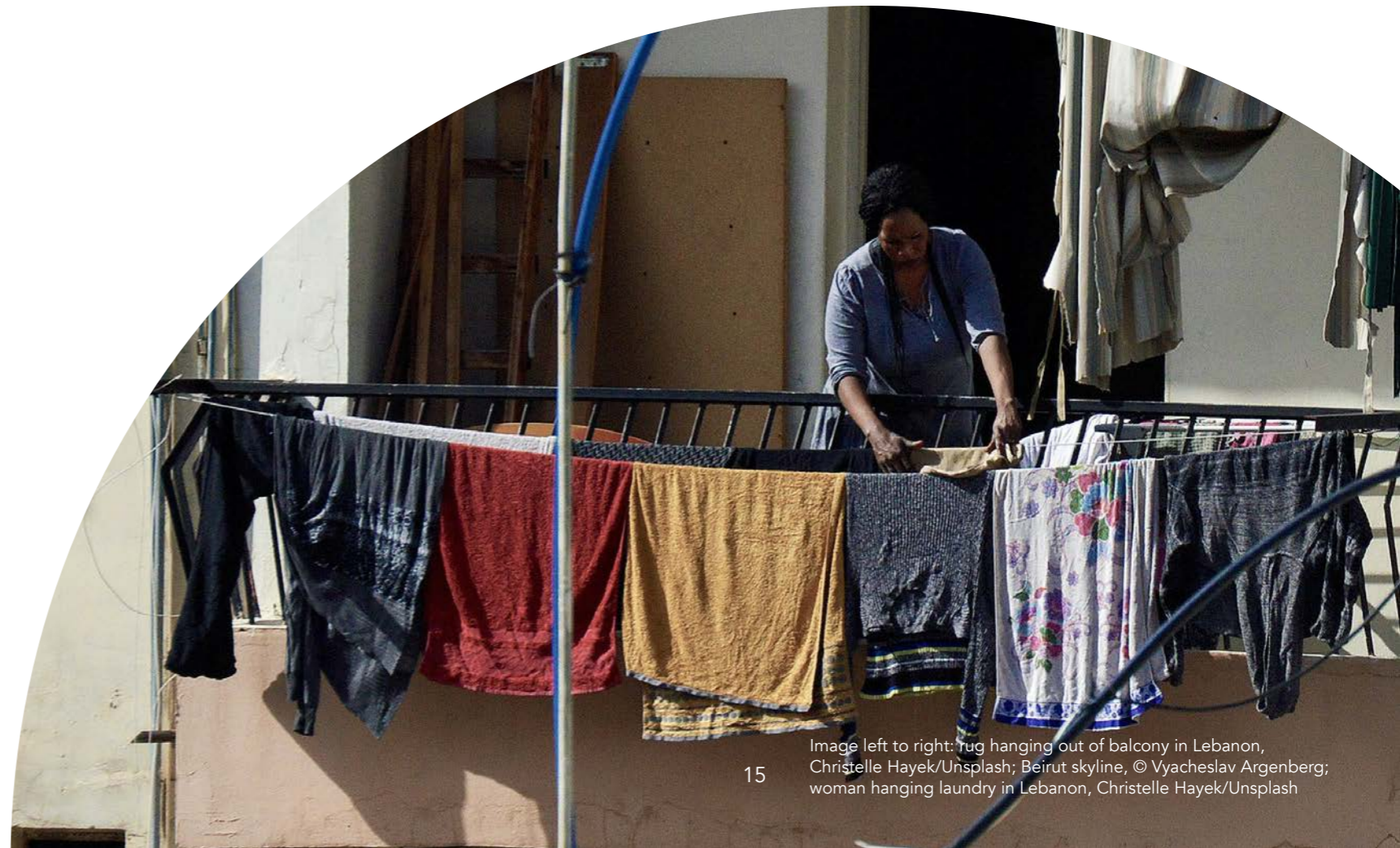


Image left to right: rug hanging out of balcony in Lebanon, Christelle Hayek/Unsplash; Beirut skyline, © Vyacheslav Argenberg; woman hanging laundry in Lebanon, Christelle Hayek/Unsplash

# FINDINGS

## PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHICS

As shown in Table 2, the demographic profiles of the Ethiopian MDWs in all three countries were similar.

### LEBANON

Nine out of the 14 (64 percent) MDWs in Lebanon were between 20 and 30 years old. A little over a quarter (29 percent) were currently married, while half were separated or divorced. Compared with Jordan and Kuwait, Ethiopian MDWs in Lebanon were more likely to have at least one child. Twelve of the women had children with them in Lebanon, with a total of 22 children. A major issue faced by women with children in Lebanon is that in order to leave the country with their child, the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs requires the father's signature. Because many of the children's fathers have abandoned them, obtaining their signatures is nearly an impossible feat. Thus, the women and their children are essentially "stuck" in Lebanon, unable to return home or go elsewhere to work. Two of the women had children living in Ethiopia. Half of the participants grew up in Addis Ababa, with the next most common origin being the Oromia region, as shown in Table 2.

### KUWAIT

Six of the 12 participants (50 percent) in Kuwait were between 20 and 30 years old. Unlike Lebanon, half of the women in Kuwait were currently married, and five (42 percent) reported that they were single. Seven participants (58 percent) had either one or two children. Only two women had given birth while living in Kuwait and had the children currently living with them, whereas eight had children living in Ethiopia whom they were supporting. In Kuwait, having a child out of wedlock is illegal and can lead to detention and deportation of both the mother and child. Non-Kuwaitis cannot be officially married in Kuwait, even if there is a ceremony, resulting in children born out of wedlock. This law is strictly enforced. About one-third of participants grew up in Addis Ababa, and a little less than half were from the Oromia region, as shown in Table 2.

### JORDAN

Seven of the ten Ethiopian MDWs (70 percent) interviewed in Jordan were between 20 and 30 years old. Half of the sample was either married, separated or divorced, and 40 percent were single. Similar to Kuwait, 30 percent of the women had no children and 70 percent had one or two children. Five women had children living with them in Jordan, while four, including two who had children with them in Jordan, had children they were supporting back in Ethiopia. The majority of women (70 percent) grew up in Addis Ababa, followed by the Amhara region (20 percent), as shown in Table 2.

Image left to right: Beirut, Michal Gadek/Unsplash; Kuwait City, Shahed Mufleh/Unsplash; Amman citadel, Jordan, Hisham Zayadneh/Unsplash



Table 2. Demographics of Ethiopian domestic workers in Lebanon, Kuwait and Jordan

	Lebanon (N=14)		Kuwait (N=12)		Jordan (N=10)		Total (N=36)	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<b>Age</b>								
20–25	3	21%	1	8%	4	40%	8	22%
26–30	6	43%	5	42%	3	30%	14	39%
31–35	3	21%	1	8%	1	10%	5	14%
36–44	2	14%	5	42%	2	20%	9	25%
<b>Marital status</b>								
Single	1	7%	5	42%	4	40%	10	28%
Married	4	29%	6	50%	3	30%	13	36%
Engaged	1	7%	1	8%	0	0%	2	6%
Separated/divorced	7	50%	0	0%	2	20%	9	25%
Widowed	1	7%	0	0%	1	10%	2	6%
<b>Number of children</b>								
0	1	7%	5	42%	3	30%	9	25%
1	6	43%	3	25%	3	30%	12	33%
2	2	14%	4	33%	4	40%	10	28%
3	3	21%	0	0%	0	0%	3	8%
4	2	14%	0	0%	0	0%	2	6%
<b>Highest level of education attained</b>								
No formal education	1	7%	0	0%	0	0%	1	3%
Up to 8th grade (primary)	3	21%	4	33%	2	20%	9	25%
9th–12th grade (secondary)	8	57%	8	67%	8	80%	24	67%
Higher education	2	14%	0	0%	0	0%	2	6%
<b>Region where respondents grew up</b>								
Addis Ababa	7	50%	4	33%	7	70%	18	50%
Tigray Region	1	7%	1	8%	0	0%	2	6%
Amhara Region	1	7%	0	0%	2	20%	3	8%
Oromia Region	3	21%	5	42%	1	10%	9	25%
Sidama Region	0	0%	1	8%	0	0%	1	3%
SNNPR	2	14%	0	0%	0	0%	2	6%
Don't know/Did not answer	0	0%	1	8%	0	0%	1	3%
<b>Language spoken at home</b>								
Amharic	14	100%	11	92%	10	100%	35	97%
Oromo	1	7%	2	17%	0	0%	3	8%
Tigrinya	1	7%	1	8%	0	0%	2	6%
Gurage	1	7%	1	8%	0	0%	2	6%

# PREVIOUS MIGRATION EXPERIENCES

## LEBANON

Figure 1 shows that 12 out of the 14 study participants (86 percent) had only ever worked in Lebanon, and more than half (65 percent) have been there between four and nine years. All arrived in Lebanon prior to the Lebanese economic and government crisis. When asked about the primary reason for migrating, the predominant response (71 percent) was to financially support their family in Ethiopia, Figure 2, followed by aspirations to improve their own lives (21 percent). Two of the women stated that they migrated for work to escape a bad situation at home in Ethiopia.

## KUWAIT

Eight of the 12 Ethiopian MDWs (67 percent) in Kuwait had only ever worked in Kuwait, whereas a third (33 percent) had worked in two or more other Middle Eastern countries prior to coming to Kuwait, Figure 1. Like the women in Lebanon, most in Kuwait (83 percent) had migrated for work to help their family financially in Ethiopia, followed by 17 percent who migrated to join family members already working overseas. Nearly all of the participants (92 percent) have been working overseas, primarily in Kuwait, for over ten years, as shown in Figure 2.

## JORDAN

Unlike the Ethiopian MDWs in Lebanon and Kuwait, nine of the ten Ethiopian MDWs in Jordan had worked in another Middle Eastern country prior to Jordan, including three who had worked in Sudan before the 2013 South Sudanese conflict (Figure 1). The reasons the women migrated abroad for work were slightly more diverse than in Kuwait and Lebanon; three-fifth (60 percent) had migrated to financially support their family, and 30 percent with the intention of improving their own lives. As outlined in Figure 2, the majority of the women (70 percent) had been working in the Middle East for six years or fewer.

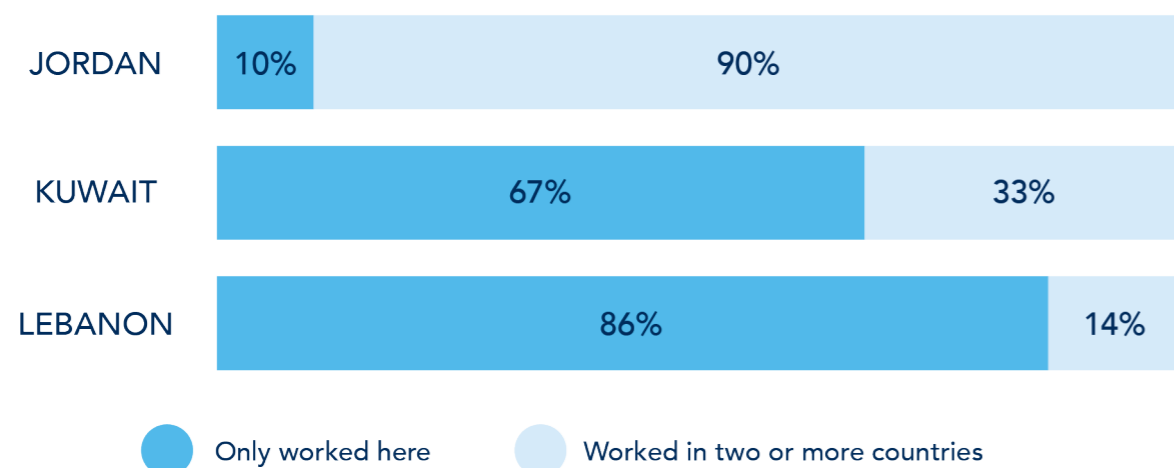


Figure 1: Previous migration experiences of Ethiopian domestic workers by current country of residence

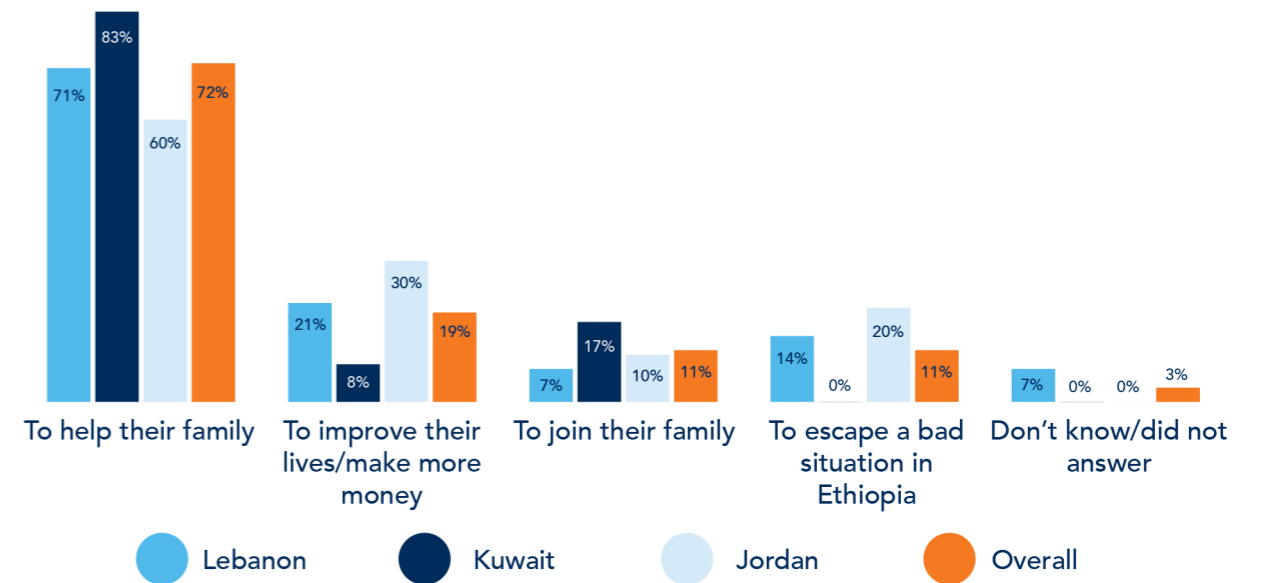


Figure 2: Primary reason(s) that Ethiopian domestic workers migrated by current country of residence

Table 3. Previous migration experience of Ethiopian domestic workers in Lebanon, Kuwait, and Jordan

	Lebanon (N=14)		Kuwait (N=12)		Jordan (N=10)		Total (N=36)	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<b>Age when first worked in the Middle East</b>								
Under 18	2	14%	3	25%	4	40%	9	(25%)
18-22	3	21%	3	25%	4	40%	10	(28%)
22+	2	14%	1	8%	2	20%	5	(14%)
Don't know/did not answer	7	50%	5	42%	0	0%	12	(33%)
<b>Length of stay in the Middle East</b>								
1-3 years	0	0%	0	0%	3	30%	3	(8%)
4-6 years	4	29%	0	0%	4	40%	8	(22%)
7-9 years	5	36%	1	8%	2	20%	8	(22%)
10-13 years	1	7%	8	67%	1	10%	10	(28%)
14+ years	4	29%	3	25%	0	0%	7	(19%)

Ethiopian women migrate to the Middle East primarily for economic reasons, driven by the political and economic instability in Ethiopia, which has led to fewer livelihood opportunities. Consistent with the migration literature (for example, Marlowe 2010; Aysa-Lastra & Cachón 2015), most of the women had received some formal education and were intent on finding ways to provide for their families and themselves. A consistent theme among the MDWs was their strong desire and need to help their fam-

ilies, suggesting a gendered social expectation or burden on women to contribute financially. As one 40-year-old woman working in Kuwait stated,

*I have kids and a family, and I left to help them back home. My husband doesn't have proper work, my father has passed away, and my brothers and sisters live with my mother and kids. I support all of them. I have four siblings — one brother and three sisters. I am the only one who works overseas.*

Another 35-year-old woman

*decided to come to Lebanon because my father passed away, and after that my mother had cancer and no one helped to pay the bills.*

Others reported leaving Ethiopia due to a bad situation at home and deciding that working overseas was their best option. One 32-year-old woman living in Jordan explained,

*I used to have problems with my husband's family. It was a way to exit from that situation. I wasn't allowed to see my baby and my husband's family took the baby from me.*

Another 36-year-old woman living in Jordan said that

*My father killed my uncle and there was going to be a revenge killing against me, so I fled.*

A 29-year-old woman in Lebanon similarly stated that she had married and divorced someone in Ethiopia,

*He was a high-ranking police officer and he threatened to kill me. So I decided to come to Lebanon.*

Most of the women in the study were under 22 years old when they first arrived in the Middle East to work as MDWs. However, the age on their passport often differed from their real age since some of them migrated for work when they were minors (under the age of 18). Thus, researchers had to make it clear that they were asking the women for their actual age and not what was printed on their passport. One 24-year-old woman working in Jordan claimed,

*I was very young when I first went to Dubai, and it was hard, but I got used to it. I had a good experience in Dubai but had to go home to Ethiopia. I wanted to go back to the same family in Dubai but then covid happened and so when everything opened back up, it was only possible to go to Jordan.*

Although some women reported positive experiences working overseas, many did not. Several described being abused and exploited by their employers, while others were arrested and ultimately deported back to Ethiopia after fleeing these abusive situations. One 29-year-old woman working in Jordan stated,

*I went through a contract to Dubai and the family wasn't good to me. I ran away from that family and worked undocumented without my passport or residency permit. One day the police caught me, and after spending one month in jail, deported me back to Ethiopia. Now I can't go back to Dubai.*

Another 37-year-old woman working in Kuwait claimed that

*When I was 16, I worked in Qatar for ten months. I was the only housemaid for 21 people in one home. They beat me. I cried every day, and they eventually gave me a ticket to go back home.*

## RECRUITMENT AND MIGRATION

### LEBANON

As detailed in Table 4, 11 of the 14 Ethiopian MDWs in Lebanon (79 percent) had found the work in the Middle East through an agent. Although our interview guidelines deliberately avoided questions about informal migration practices, it was immediately clear that the majority of the participants in Lebanon had migrated irregularly. Most knew that they would be heading to Lebanon, except for one woman who was told that she would be going to Dubai but ended up in Lebanon. Nine out of the 14 women (64 percent) recalled not knowing the type of visa they were holding at the time of arrival. Additionally, a little over a quarter (29 percent) of the women transited through Yemen, which suggests an informal migration route.

Over one-third (36 percent) of the women took one month or less to get all the required paperwork and plane tickets to migrate to Lebanon. This suggests the use of brokers, known to be able to obtain all the necessary paperwork and plane tickets faster than official government channels. That said, the average cost of recruitment was less than what the participants in Kuwait and Jordan reportedly spent to get to their destination countries. Half of the participants in Lebanon had a medical exam prior to leaving Ethiopia. Several women also mentioned receiving a "mystery shot," which they later found out was some form of birth control to prevent them from getting pregnant. The women were told that they would earn on average USD 150 per month (see Table 5).

### KUWAIT

Half of the 12 participants in Kuwait found their work through an agent, followed by referrals through a friend (25 percent). Roughly two-thirds (67 percent) entered Kuwait on a domestic worker visa ('Visa 20'); however, it is unclear if they knew this prior to arriving in Kuwait or found out only once they were in country. Unlike the women in Lebanon, over half of the Ethiopian MDWs (58 percent) in Kuwait arrived in Kuwait City on a direct flight from Addis Ababa. The visa type and direct flight suggest that most of the women entered Kuwait through formal government channels. The average cost of recruitment and migration was the highest in Kuwait and costed the women approximately ETB 14,027 (~USD 258), despite being initially told that they would not have to pay for the process (see Table 5). The women were told they would earn on average KWD 50 (~USD 163) per month as an MDW.



### JORDAN

All ten Ethiopian migrants in Jordan were placed into domestic work through an agent (see Table 5). Most reported going through official government channels, but a few disclosed that they went through a broker, including one woman who received her passport and plane tickets in less than 48 hours. On average, they paid ETB 12,476 (~USD 229) in recruitment fees, despite the fact that for those going through the formal process it should have been free. The vast majority (80 percent) entered Jordan on a domestic-worker visa. The women were told they would earn approximately JOD 177 (~USD 250) a month as an MDW.

**Table 4. Travel experience**

	Lebanon (N=14)		Kuwait (N=12)		Jordan (N=10)		Total (N=36)	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<b>Person most responsible for arranging travel</b>								
Agent	11	85%	6	50%	10	100%	27	75%
Friend	3	21%	3	25%	0	0%	6	17%
Aunt/cousin	2	14%	1	8%	0	0%	3	8%
Sibling	3	21%	1	8%	0	0%	4	11%
Don't know/did not answer	0	0%	1	8%	0	0%	1	3%
<b>How long the migration process took</b>								
1 month or less	5	36%	2	17%	NA	NA	7	19%
2–3 months	6	43%	4	33%	NA	NA	10	28%
4+ months	2	14%	2	17%	NA	NA	4	11%
Don't know/did not answer	1	7%	4	33%	NA	NA	15	42%
<b>Type of paperwork/visa on arrival</b>								
Domestic worker visa	0	0%	8	67%	8	80%	16	44%
Business/tourist visa	2	14%	2	17%	1	10%	5	14%
Worked without a visa	3	21%	1	8%	0	0%	4	11%
Don't know/did not answer	9	64%	1	8%	1	10%	11	31%
<b>Transit points</b>								
Direct flight	3	21%	7	58%	NA	NA	10	28%
Transit through Dubai	3	21%	2	17%	NA	NA	5	14%
Transit through Yemen	4	29%	0	0%	NA	NA	4	11%
Transit through other countries	3	21%	0	0%	2	20%	5	14%
Don't know/didn't answer	1	7%	3	25%	8	80%	12	33%
<b>Medical exam taken</b>								
Only before departure	7	50%	5	42%	1	10%	13	36%
Before departure and in destination country	5	36%	NA	NA	NA	NA	5	14%
Only upon arrival in destination country	1	7%	NA	NA	NA	NA	1	3%
Don't know/didn't answer	1	7%	7	58%	9	90%	17	47%

**Table 5. Recruitment fees and salaries<sup>1</sup>**

	Lebanon (N=14)	Kuwait (N=12)	Jordan (N=10)
 Average cost of recruitment	ETB 6,156 (~USD 113)	ETB 14,027 (~USD 258)	ETB 12,476 (~USD 229)
 Average salary in host country	150 USD <sup>2</sup>	KWD 50 (~USD 163)	JOD 177 (~USD 250)

Given the lengthy delays that many Ethiopian women experienced when migrating through formal government channels, many sought faster, informal ways of migrating abroad for work. Most of the women interviewed found work through brokers or local employment agencies, which they identified themselves or were referred to by their community, networks of friends, or relatives already overseas. A 24-year-old woman working in Jordan claimed, “I paid the broker so the process can go faster and so I didn’t have to go through the government-mandated training sessions. I got my visa and plane tickets in less than one month.” Paying the broker often involved borrowing money from family and friends for recruitment and travel fees, but some had saved enough money to pay their own way. Another 24-year-old woman working in Jordan found a recruiter who was sending people to Jordan. “I gave him my passport in the morning and got a tourist visa the same day. I paid the recruiter USD 150, which I got from my family. I got my plane ticket the same day and left the next day.” Although this respondent was able to easily borrow money, most women had to borrow money from family members and friends, which often took months, if not years, to repay. One 42-year-old woman working in Kuwait stated,

*An agent told me about a job in Kuwait. He was an informal agent. I paid the Ethiopian agent ETB 15,000 [~USD 275], which included everything. I borrowed ETB 15,000 from my aunt and other people. It took two years to pay back the loan. It took three months to get my paperwork*

Another 34-year-old woman working in Kuwait reported going through an informal agent, but was told she would be working in a shop, not as a domestic worker.

*I went through an informal agent. I met a woman in a cafeteria in Ethiopia, and she told me that I could work in Kuwait in a small shop. She promised me work in a shop, but it was for domestic work. The whole process took 15 days. I was shocked how quickly it went. I thought I was going to be working in a shop, but I had no choice. The employer broke the news. There was no training in Ethiopia — you come in blind.*

Some of the women in Lebanon stated that although they did not pay any money to the recruiter or agency, they had the first two months of their pay seized (approximately USD 300) by the agency/recruiter to pay back the cost of the travel, visa, medical exam, etc. One 32-year-old woman working in Lebanon reported having to pay the recruitment agency USD 4,000, and only finding out after she had started working for her employer.

<sup>1</sup> The exchange rates used throughout this report reflect the average historical rate during period of field work (01 Mar to 31 Aug 2023), which were: USD 1 = ETB 54.4689, USD 1 = LBP 15,003.98, USD 1 = KWD 0.3070, USD 1 = JOD 0.7086. (Investing.com, 2024)

<sup>2</sup> At the time of data collection in Lebanon, the value of the Lebanese pound had fallen drastically. As a result, the US dollar was often the currency most valued and used; thus the women reported their salaries when they first came to work in Lebanon in US dollars, not Lebanese pounds. <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-economy-crisis-currency-pound-dollarization-44f8173d75d2e1a37526b3e1252c5a92>

*I found out about the job through a friend who told me to contact the recruitment agency and provide a copy of my passport. The whole process took three months. I was told the visa was free, but they took the first year and a half of salary to pay off USD 4,000 in debt. I didn't know I was going to have to pay that much money. The Ethiopian recruiter on the Lebanon side picked me up at the airport and brought me to her house. The recruiter then told me that I would have to pay USD 4,000 and then USD 1,000 a year for insurance and paperwork. After two years, I got tired and ran away and hid away at my children's father's home. I never saw any money from the work I did.*

Most of the women knew that they were going overseas to work as domestic workers, and the majority were either picked up at the airport by their employer or by an employment agency representative. Most were placed with their employer within 24 hours. However, those not placed immediately with their employer were forced to stay at the employment agent's residence or temporary housing for an extended time. Often, they lived alongside over a dozen Ethiopian women who were also waiting — some had just arrived, others were waiting to switch employers or trying to return home to Ethiopia. As the following women described, sustenance was often kept to a minimum and odd jobs were assigned to them, such as cleaning offices, but without compensation. Their passports were held by the employment agencies and access to a mobile phone was rarely provided. Some were also forbidden from talking to the other Ethiopian women waiting at the office or temporary home.

*I used an informal agency to get the job. There was a woman in my village, and she had worked here (Lebanon) and connected me to the agency. I paid ETB 4,000 [~USD 73] to the recruiter in Ethiopia. I was originally told I was going to work in Dubai, not Lebanon. I stayed in the agency for two months before I was connected to an employer. I don't know why it took so long. When I was at the employment agency, I didn't have any freedom to even close the door. I also had to clean the office but never got paid. I got fed very little — just bread, potatoes, and tea. There were about 20 women waiting there, and he would bring sick women back to the office as well.*

#### **32-year-old woman working in Lebanon**

*Someone I didn't know picked me up and put me in the recruitment agency office. I stayed in the office one week. I never saw him again. I thought I was going to go straight to the madam's house. I was very angry when I got taken to the office. At the office, more than 10 people were there and we didn't get fed and they didn't tell us anything. We were locked in the office and not allowed to leave. They were all Ethiopian women. I contacted my family when I got to the agency. At that time I started to cry, but I was ok, I just missed home.*

#### **23-year-old woman working in Lebanon**

One 30-year-old woman working in Kuwait provided some insight on what happens if someone does not have an employer already identified upon arriving in the destination country, or if an MDW is trying to switch employers with the help of the recruitment agency:

*All the families come to the agency. The girls sit there and the family asks them how much each girl is. They want to know why they are expensive — is it because they have experience? If they aren't chosen, they sit there for months.*

## **WORK CONDITIONS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

The Ethiopian women migrants in this study were commonly subjected to work conditions and other violations that fall under the U.S. Department of State's trafficking in persons (TIP) designation. TIP, as it relates to domestic servitude, is a type of forced labour in which an employer, or other facilitator, uses force, fraud, or coercion to exploit a person for their labour or services (U.S. Department of State, 2022). This section discusses these experiences among the MDW sample in Lebanon, Kuwait and Jordan.

### **LEBANON**

Given the political and economic crisis in Lebanon, only six of the 14 women were earning through freelance domestic work or cleaning jobs, or as a full-time domestic workers. An equal number were unemployed, as shown in Table 6. Many of the women disclosed that they were in desperate situations, unable to find work to earn any kind of living. Almost all were single mothers and trying to support more than one child.

Reflecting on the working conditions when they first arrived in Lebanon, many had harrowing stories to tell. Compared to MDWs in Kuwait and Jordan, those in Lebanon experienced far higher rates of sexual (29 percent) and physical (21 percent) abuse, as well as an inability to leave the workplace (43 percent), Figure 5. Ten out of the 14 women (71 percent) were allowed to use their employer's phone occasionally to make personal calls, however, most of these women reported that they were limited to 10 to 15 minutes per call. Almost all had worked in one or two households before running away and becoming undocumented. For those who reported the number of hours they worked, five out of six worked 17 to 19 hours per day. The most common form of abuse was financial (43 percent), typically not getting paid what they were promised or not getting paid at all, Table 6.

### **KUWAIT**

The majority of the 12 study participants in Kuwait were regularised and employed at the time of the interview. Only one respondent was still working as a full-time domestic worker. Almost two-thirds of the women (58 percent) were working outside of domestic work, primarily as saleswomen in retail which offered higher wages, Table 6. These women were able to secure a different visa to work in these positions by either paying an exorbitant fee to an employment agency, or by finding a sympathetic employer willing to sponsor them. These women typically rented a room in group apartments with other migrant workers of different nationalities. Most of the women the researchers spoke with were regularised, given that it was very dangerous to move around Kuwait without the proper documentation.




Recalling the working conditions when they first arrived in Kuwait, three-quarters of the MDWs were allowed access to a phone or calling card, and a little less than half (42 percent) were able to freely communicate with their friends and family. Similar to Lebanon, the MDWs in Kuwait had to borrow their employers' phones to call their family in Ethiopia and often had a limited number of minutes to use per call. However, half of the women reported that they were not allowed to leave the workplace. Among those who described their working hours, five out of eight (63 percent) typically worked 11 to 16 hours per day. More than half (58 percent) reported that they had experienced abuse while employed as a full-time domestic worker, with the most common form being not allowed to take breaks or have days off (33 percent), Figure 5.

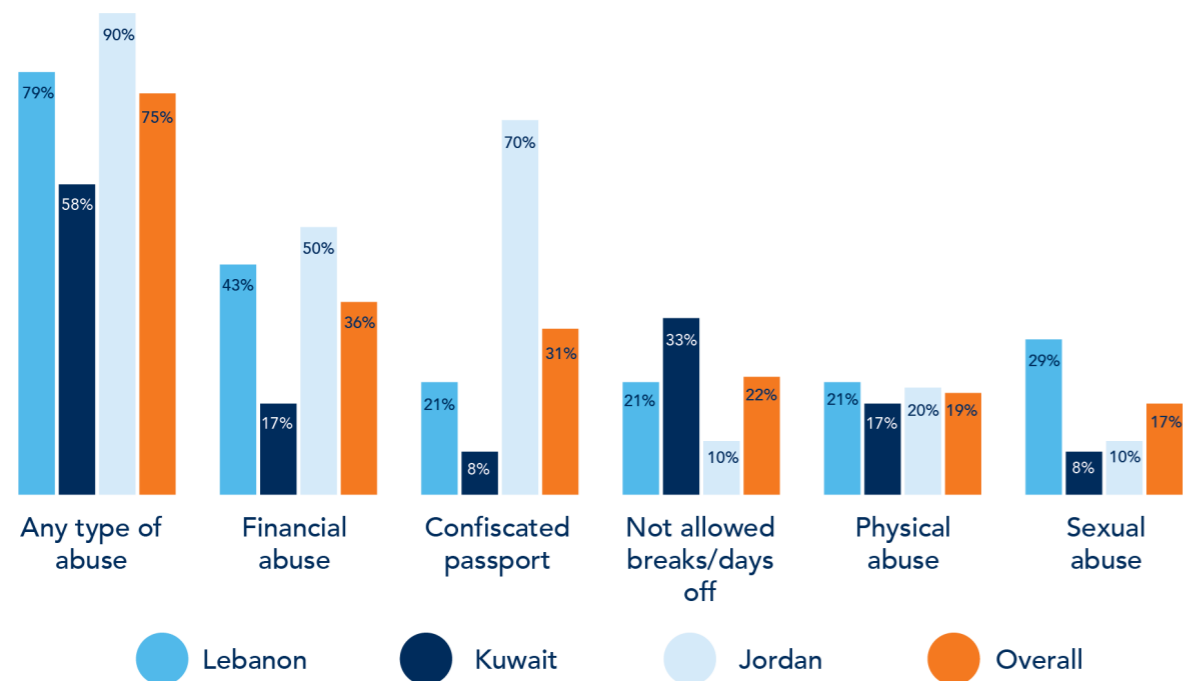
### **JORDAN**

Eight of the ten Ethiopian women interviewed in Jordan were currently working as freelance domestic workers or cleaners. Only one was still employed as a full-time domestic worker, and another had opened her own business with her husband. All had reported running away early on during their time in Jordan due to high levels of abuse and a lack of freedom of movement and communication.

Across the three countries, MDWs in Jordan had the least freedom. Reflecting on the working conditions when they first arrived, nine out of ten women were unable to leave the workplace, and only three were able to speak with their friends and family back in Ethiopia. Almost every respondent (90 percent) reported abuse, as shown in Table 6. The most common form was having their passport confiscated (70 percent), followed by financial abuse (50 percent) and physical abuse (20 percent), as shown in Figure 5.

**Table 6. Working conditions and abuses**

	Lebanon (N=14)	Kuwait (N=12)	Jordan (N=10)	Total (N=36)
<b>Current job</b>				
 Freelance	36%	17%	80%	42%
Outside of domestic work	0%	58%	10%	22%
Unemployed	43%	8%	0%	19%
Household domestic work	7%	8%	10%	8%
Don't know/didn't answer	14%	8%	0%	8%
<b>Number of hours per day they worked as a domestic worker</b>				
 11-16 hours	7%	42%	0%	17%
17-19 hours	36%	17%	0%	19%
20-24 hours	0%	8%	0%	3%
Don't know/didn't answer	57%	33%	0%	19%
<b>Number of employers as a domestic worker</b>				
 1-2 households	64%	42%	70%	58%
3-4 households	0%	25%	30%	17%
5+ households	0%	17%	0%	6%
Don't know didn't answer	36%	17%	0%	19%



**Figure 5: Experiences of abuse during time as a domestic worker by current country of residence**

The vast majority (75 percent) of the Ethiopian women interviewed in all three countries reported experiencing abuse and exploitation, often from more than one employer. Few were currently working as full-time domestic workers, and many had chosen to run away from their abusive employers to become undocumented, rather than continue enduring the exploitation.

The abuse often included financial abuse (wage theft), physical and sexual abuse, and restrictions on movement and communication. Having their passports confiscated by the employer or recruitment agency was so normalised that many did not even identify it as a form of abuse. Even those women who had received human-rights training prior to leaving Ethiopia stated that there was little they could

do or say if the employer or agency took their passports from them. The fear of being sent home or not being paid far outweighed the fear of not having possession of their passports.

Because their workplace is also where the full-time domestic workers live, working long hours was expected. Nearly all reported having to work from early morning till late at night, often without a break. One 38-year-old woman in Kuwait reported that “I would wake up at 5 a.m. and go to sleep at 2 a.m. I had very little sleep.” Some employers required their MDWs to work in multiple homes, typically those of their parents, children or other relatives. Additionally, most of the MDWs (58 percent) were not allowed to leave the house, and even if the doors were not locked, they reported that they would not know where to go if they left. One 42-year-old woman working in Kuwait reported experiencing multiple abuses, including financial abuse, working 18 hours a day for a large family, food deprivation, verbal abuse, and a lack of communication and freedom.

*There were ten family members in the house. I was the only domestic worker. I had to do everything: cooking, cleaning, taking care of kids. I wasn't allowed to call my family, I could only write them letters. One time I was able to call home. The madam and her two kids treated me very badly. . . They would yell at me and tell me that I was eating all of their food. I would wake up at 5 a.m. and go to sleep at 11 p.m. I worked 18 hours each day. I had no freedom and had to stay in the house. I couldn't go anywhere. If I finished my work, I could sit but not sleep. I worked for them for one year and three months and they withheld payment of KWD 270 (five months of work). They said they would give the money to the agent, but they never did.*

Another 35-year-old woman working in Lebanon said that she could only sleep for four hours each night and had to hide food in the bathroom, since she did not have access to much food.

*I was expected to wake up at 5 am to clean and cleaned until midnight. I also cooked... I did everything. There were five family members. I received my salary every two to three months. The family treated me very badly. I ate in the bathroom where I hid the food, since they didn't feed me. All day I worked with the grandma, since the children were in the university, but I had to wait for the children to come home to eat.*

Some of the employers did not allow the Ethiopian women to express their religious and cultural practices, and some of the women reported lying to the recruiter about their religious affiliation, since many families in the Middle East request Muslim MDWs. Thus, it was rare for any of the MDWs to receive permission to attend church or pray in the house. Being shouted at by female employers was a frequent event, whereas sexual harassment, and in some cases rape, by the men in the house were also reported.

*I worked morning to middle of the night — even if I finished my work, I had to clean the car, clean everything. I was not allowed to leave the house unsupervised. I slept in the kitchen and couldn't even pray. I had no privacy. The daughter of the employer would verbally abuse me. The husband would follow me and sexually abuse me.*

**25-year-old woman working in Lebanon**

Some of the women who disclosed sexual assault stated that the wife or mother of the family member assaulting them was not only aware of what was happening, but often turned a blind eye or would leave the home so they were not present while it was happening.

*I worked for them for 1.5 months. There were two children. The husband would sexually assault me, and the wife knew. One time, when the wife went away for three days and left me with the husband, I locked the door to my room for two days. When the husband was sleeping, I took the wife's laptop and contacted my family, who contacted the employment agency in Ethiopia. People from the agency came to the house three days later. They interviewed me with the family and decided I was fine.*

**24-year-old woman working in Jordan**

*The mister kept pushing to come into my room and he wanted to kiss me. He was very pushy. The madam was out of the country a lot and I was home with the husband alone. They had two kids, and they were in school. His mum was home with them, and the mum knew how her son was with me. For 1.5 years I was kept inside, and I wasn't allowed to leave the house on my own. I woke at 6 a.m. and went to sleep at midnight. I had the madam keep the money for safekeeping and when I asked for it, they didn't have it. She knew that the husband was raping me, and I thought the madam would kill me.*

29-year-old woman working in Lebanon

Several women reported switching employers through their agency since they did not want to run away and become undocumented. Some women were placed with decent employers relatively quickly, whereas others went through several employers and were never placed with anyone equitable and kind. One woman working in Kuwait stated that she had worked for more than eight employers, which included being sold by one employer to the next, until she finally decided to run away and become undocumented:

*I worked for one woman, but it was like working for 10 women. She was 35 years old and lived alone. I would stay there and wait for the woman to tell me what to do. I wasn't allowed outside at all, even to throw out the garbage. She would beat me with shoes, and she would not give me all my money or let me have my clothes. She would leave me at her mum's house, and she took my documents. The employer dropped me off at the embassy because the employer thought she could get her money back. The embassy didn't treat me well. They don't care.*

*I only worked for her for 1.5 months. I would go house to house and each house was as bad as the last. I worked for one woman for one year and three months, and that woman asked me why I became fat and sold me to a friend. That friend sold me to another friend. I had no documents with me. The employers were the ones changing the paperwork. This went on for three years — selling from one to another. I worked in more than eight houses.*

A common theme among the respondents in Jordan was being extorted by their employer to get their passports back or to have the employer “release them” so the worker could find a new employer. One 36-year-old woman had to pay the employer JOD 800 (~USD 1,129) to get her passport back, which she had to borrow from her friends. Another 24-year-old woman had to pay JOD 1,000 (~USD 1,411) to be “released” from her employer. A 30-year-old woman ran away from the home she was working in and was immediately picked up by the police and brought back to the same home. The employer said to “pay him JOD 1,700 (~USD 2,399) to release me. I paid him JOD 700 (~USD 988) and he made me sign a JOD 1,000 (~USD 1,411) post check to pay him the rest later. I collected JOD 1,000 (~USD 1,411) from all of my friends, and I just paid off all of the loans. I have a deportation case against me and if I get caught, I will be deported.” Given that Ethiopian MDWs in Jordan on average earn only USD 250 per month, repaying this debt would take months - assuming no other debts, bills or financial obligations, which is highly unlikely. As a result, most of the women had to borrow from friends or pay off the debt over an extended period.

## COMMUNICATION AND NETWORKS

Few respondents reported having access to their own mobile phone, and most were reliant on their employer to grant access, if at all, to the house phone or the employer's mobile phone to call home. All of this despite the fact that all of the respondents working in Jordan were told by their recruiters in Ethiopia that they were legally allowed to keep their mobile phone and their passports. In reality, the phones and passports were collected by the recruitment agency and given to the employers upon arrival. A few of the women were able to regain access to their phones eventually or used their salary to purchase a new one. That said, it was rare for any of the respondents to have had regular access to a mobile phone while working as a full-time domestic worker. One 29-year-old woman working in Lebanon stated that she was able to speak to her mother for ten minutes every 15 days, but “I didn't want to tell my mum (what was happening) because I didn't want to make her sad.” Another 23-year-old woman working in Kuwait stated,

*I was never allowed to call my family. My aunt came every three to four months and told me about my family. I asked my aunt about my family. That is all. I worked for the family for four years. My aunt gave me one phone, and the children threw the phone in the water and ruined it. I asked my aunt not to give me another phone, since I don't have time to call them anyway.*

Not all of the women were completely isolated from other Ethiopian MDWs. Those who were allowed to accompany their employers to social gatherings, or to take the employers' children to the playground, often encountered other Ethiopian MDWs. Some were forbidden to speak to others, but those who weren't used the opportunity to talk about their experiences and share information on whom they could contact if they needed assistance. One 34-year-old woman in Kuwait stated that when she went to her employer's mother's home, there was another Ethiopian MDW. However, “We would talk about our country and not our employers. We were being recorded. Some Kuwaiti women would take the recording to have it translated.”

Another 36-year-old woman working in Lebanon shared how she escaped from her employer with the help of a freelance domestic worker working in the same apartment building.

*I couldn't leave the home for three years — they locked the door. I had no contact with anyone on the outside. In the building I worked in there was an Ethiopian freelance worker who worked on the 5th floor, and I was on the 3rd floor. We would speak to each other via the balcony. The woman told me that I wasn't making enough money and she sent me her phone number and told me to run away. When I ran away, I called the woman. The Ethiopian woman and I met up and she took me to her place. I stayed at the woman's home for 20 days and then I started work. I get paid USD 250 a month and every Sunday I had a rest day.*

## HELP-SEEKING

### LEBANON

With regards to help-seeking, ten out of 14 respondents in Lebanon (71 percent) knew of an organisation that could assist them. This is most likely because many had received help from Mesewat, an NGO for Ethiopian MDWs, at some point during their stay in Lebanon and knew that they could turn to this organisation for assistance. Most of them learned about Mesewat after they had escaped from their employer and connected with other undocumented Ethiopians who had received help from Mesewat. When asked if they would approach the Ethiopian Embassy for help, almost two-thirds of the women (64 percent) commented that the embassy is not helpful, either based on their own personal experience or that of someone they knew. Over one-third of the women (36 percent) stated that they had been mistreated or not helped by the embassy staff. The mistreatment they reported ranged from being denied assistance to being asked to pay a large sum of money for a renewed passport or documents for their children. Only two of the women (14 percent) said they would go to the embassy for help (see Figure 6).

### KUWAIT

Only two of the 12 participants in Kuwait (17 percent) knew of an organisation that they could turn to for help. The members of Sandigan Kuwait, who are primarily Filipino, relied on a small network of Ethiopian women to recruit other Ethiopian MDWs for this study. Thus, few respondents were familiar with Sandigan or en.v, and only learned about the organisations as part of the interviews. Similar to Lebanon, half of the respondents (50 percent) thought that the Ethiopian Embassy is not helpful, and an equal number reported that they were mistreated or not helped by the embassy.

### JORDAN

Unlike Lebanon and Kuwait, Ethiopia does not have an embassy in Jordan. Instead, there is an Ethiopian Consulate that is run by a Jordanian. A few of the women had tried contacting the consulate for assistance, and only one woman stated that she received help as a result. Additionally, few women knew of organisations that could help them outside of Tamkeen, which could provide them legal support only in certain circumstances.



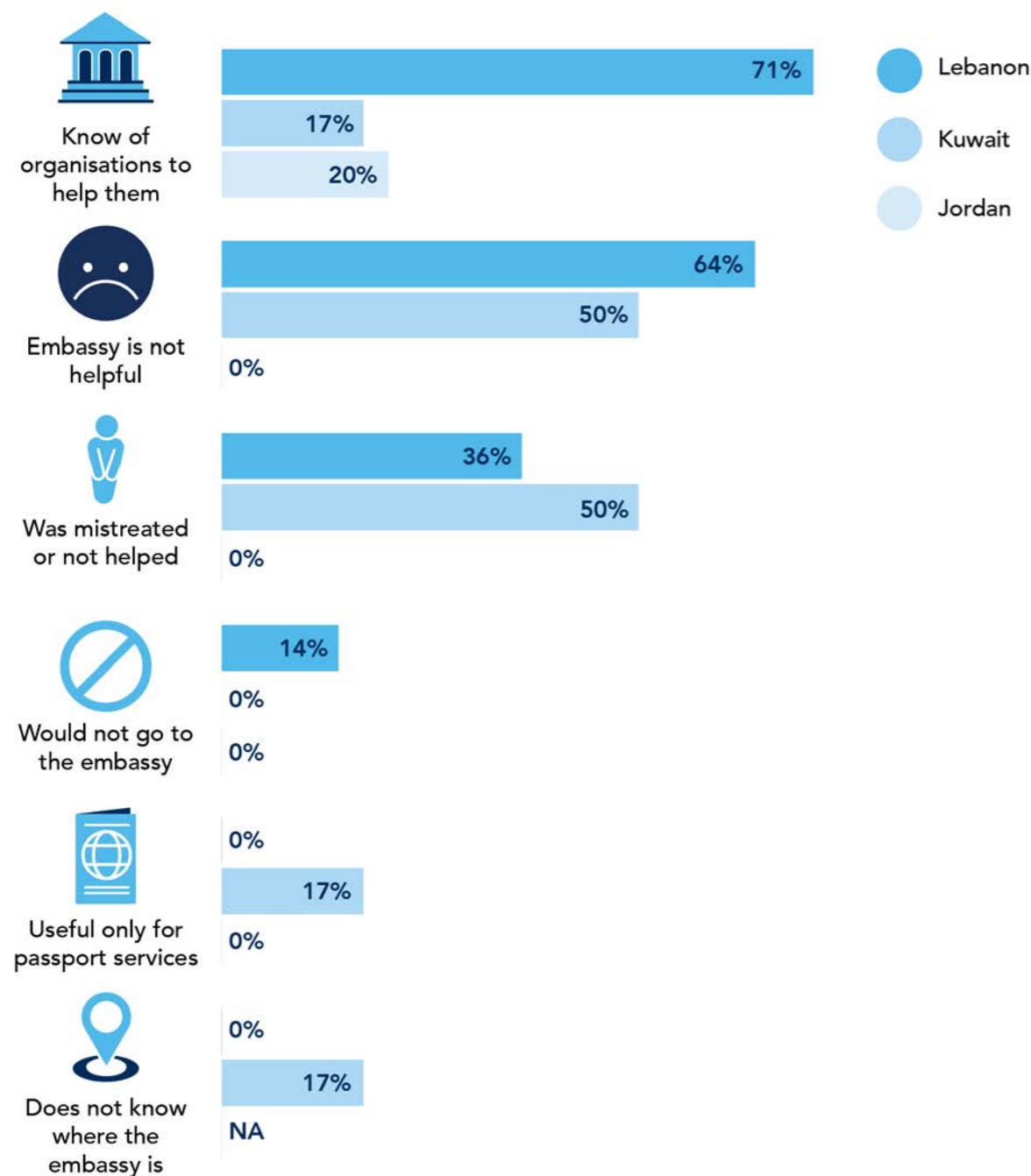


Figure 6. Help seeking

Almost all the women interviewed had run away from their initial employer, and in some cases, from subsequent employers as well. Methods of escape varied, many relied on other Ethiopian MDWs in the same neighbourhood, contacts they encountered on social media (for those who had access to a phone), or friends and family members living in the same country. Sometimes, migrant women made logistical arrangements on pieces of paper thrown to each other. In moments of desperation, some MDWs simply ran away without any knowledge of where to go.

Once away from their first employers, these women depended on other Ethiopians, and occasionally locals, to survive and find new work. Below are a handful of escape stories as told by the respondents. Each tale not only highlights the desperation felt by these women, but also their resilience and perseverance to find a better situation to live and work in.

*I knew a domestic worker who got a day off and would go to a church. She knew of a church where Ethiopian women would go to meet and so I got in a cab and went there.*

**29-year-old woman working in Jordan**

*I used to work for a bad employer, but the daughter was very good, and she had Nigerian and Ethiopian domestic workers. We would gather together, and they told me that if I need help to let them know, since they knew the employer was very bad. I didn't have a phone, so another girl who worked for the daughter called this woman and said I am sending you a woman to help and called a taxi and I went to this woman's home.*

**36-year-old woman working in Jordan**

*I left the house in the morning when the family was sleeping. I started walking and found an Ethiopian woman on the street and asked her for help. She worked outside and helped me.*

**25-year-old woman working in Jordan**

*Sometimes the male employer would give me money after abusing me. I took the money and took the mother's hijab so no one would know I am Ethiopian. I went a long way on the road walking and found a minibus. I got dropped off in Kola [a major bus station in Beirut] and found Ethiopian people.*

**25-year-old woman working in Lebanon**

*I worked for them for one year and ran away. I didn't know where to go and didn't take anything with me. I had nothing in my pocket. I went in the bus and the driver asked for the money, and I said I didn't know where I was going. The bus driver called an Ethiopian worker to help, and she told me to go [to] this area where there are Protestants who can help me. The shop owner, who was Lebanese, called an Ethiopian pastor (a couple) and they let me stay with them for free for several months.*

**35-year-old woman working in Lebanon**

*Inside the employment agency's office, I overheard other migrant workers talking about running away, and I kept it in mind. They said that drivers can help you. After one week, the house owner (man) was working at home and the madam went out to work. The man tried to sexually abuse me and told me he would give me money to send to my family and I finally got fed up and ran away. I walked a lot and after that I saw a bus and told the driver I had no money. I asked him to take me to Ethiopian people, which he did, and I met an Ethiopian woman who helped me find work.*

**23-year-old woman working in Lebanon**

When the respondents were asked if they would consider going to the Ethiopian Embassy for assistance, only two women in Lebanon said they would. In Jordan, this was not an option since Ethiopia does not have diplomatic representation there. However, in Lebanon and Kuwait, women reported either having a negative experience when they approached the embassy for help or heard through word of mouth not to waste their time going to the embassy for assistance.

In Kuwait, one 24-year-old woman stated,

*I have never gone to the Ethiopian Embassy for assistance. They are not good. They take KWD 100 to renew the passport and the Philippines Embassy charges only KWD 15.*

Another 39-year-old woman working in Kuwait claimed,

*The Philippines Embassy is very strong, and the Ethiopian Embassy is very bad. If you call them, they don't pick up the phone. So, the Kuwaitis know this and treat us poorly because they know the Ethiopian Embassy won't help us.*

In Lebanon, one 29-year-old woman declared, *"I would never contact the Ethiopian Embassy for help. I gave them my passport to be renewed. They told me I would have to pay USD 10. I couldn't pay it."* To obtain a passport and other legal documents for their children born in Lebanon, they were told they needed the signature of the father of the baby. For many of the women interviewed, this was impossible as the men had abandoned the mother and child during pregnancy or shortly after the child was born. One 39-year-old woman in Lebanon recalled trying to seek assistance from the Ethiopian Embassy for her child's passport and documents, only to be told it was not the embassy's problem, but rather her problem.



Image: Vital documents of migrant workers in Lebanon.  
Credit: John Owens for VOA

## SERVICE NEEDS

- 1 Access to healthcare was by far the most significant problem, particularly for those living with their children in the Middle East. MDWs are heavily dependent on their employers to grant access to the healthcare system. For the minority who were able to see a doctor or go to a hospital, they relied on the employer to choose the doctor and help pay for the medical expenses. Some of the women described being given expired or unmarked prescription medicine by their employer. Many children of MDWs had never been to a doctor, and some were heavily reliant on local NGOs to address serious medical needs. For instance, there was a period in one of the interviewees' lives when she had resorted to living at a garbage dump with her husband and children, and was dependent on a local NGO to provide her children's nebuliser on a monthly basis.
- 2 Access to school for children of migrant domestic workers was unheard of in all three countries, which also hindered the women's ability to secure full-time employment. Some of the women were able to find interim solutions within the Ethiopian community and would help one another with childcare, but these were rarely long-term, sustainable solutions.
- 3 Shelters for runaway domestic workers is an acute need. While Ethiopian women tended to help one another, they lacked information on where and whom to turn to in case of emergency. Contact information of Ethiopian communities who could offer assistance was often passed through word of mouth. Even when Ethiopian community members offered to let the women stay with them, the MDWs were careful not to overstay their welcome and felt pressure to find longer-term housing. Shelters could also provide or refer residents to other legal aid organisations for MDWs who prefer to continue working in the country or secure documents for their children.
- 4 Financial literacy training prior to departure from Ethiopia would provide valuable knowledge for the women, for example, setting up a bank account in their own name and learning how to safely and cheaply wire money back to Ethiopia. This could help MDWs retain control over their finances, such as deciding if and how much money to send their family, and avoid situations where MDWs depend on their employer to safeguard their money.
- 5 Stronger support from Ethiopian Embassies and Consulates. Ethiopian MDWs wanted better assistance from the Ethiopian Embassy, noting how official support has protected other migrants from abuse, such as those from the Philippines. The women interviewed are especially eager for help with resolving disputes with employers, renewing passports, getting documentation for family members, as well as repatriation assistance when needed.
- 6 Ethiopian government intervention. The laws in the destination countries, which prevent a child born out of wedlock from obtaining a passport or a birth certificate without the father's consent or a court order, place many migrant women in a hugely difficult position. Most Ethiopian women in the study, who have given birth abroad, are unable to return to Ethiopia or provide their child with the necessary healthcare or schooling in their current setting – adversely affecting their children's futures and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. It is imperative for the Ethiopian government to intervene and work with governments in the destination countries to establish clear pathways for these women to obtain the documentation they need to build secure futures for themselves and their children, free from exploitation.
- 7 Options to switch employers. Many MDWs wanted a better system to change employers or pursue non-domestic work without needing to be "released" by their initial employer under the kafala system. Trying to obtain this release and the return of the workers' passports often entailed negotiating exorbitant fees, further indebting the worker and pushing them to take on even riskier work.

# CONCLUSION

The majority of research conducted to date on the experiences of Ethiopian MDWs in the Middle East has relied on interviews with women once they have returned to their home country. This study helps fill a notable evidence gap by including the voices of Ethiopian MDWs currently working and residing in the Middle East. Many of the Ethiopian women in this study expressed their hope for a better future, underpinned by aspirations for increased financial stability and recognition as contributing members of their families. Yet, they are acutely aware of the hardships and challenges that accompany their roles as MDWs. Their experiences reflect a complex blend of resilience and vulnerability, highlighting their persistent pursuit of a brighter future despite the well-known adversities of migration.

Given the often-desperate situations that these women were in, waiting months to complete the official process was not a viable option, and so many chose to migrate irregularly through the help of brokers and personal networks. This often required the aspiring migrant to take out loans from family and friends, which in some cases took years to pay back. Once abroad, most women had their passports and mobile phones immediately confiscated by the employment agency or employer, and often did not regain possession of either. The MDWs suffered a range of concurrent abuses, including verbal or physical abuse by the female employer or sexual abuse by the male employer. Few, if any, had breaks throughout their seemingly endless workdays, and almost none received a day off throughout the entirety of their employment.

Communicating with their family members was sporadic and, in some cases, forbidden. In the majority of cases, the women weren't even allowed to leave their employers' homes. On the rare occasion that they were able to call home, usually once or twice a month, they were limited to only 10 to 15 minutes of conversation. The few women who had their own mobile phone were careful to use it only at night while their employers were sleeping. Through chance encounters with other Ethiopian migrants, some of the women were able to exchange information, such as tips on running away, and in some cases, obtain contact information for other Ethiopians who might be able to help or places to run to for assistance (such as the Ethiopian church).

Many of the MDWs felt that their only option was to flee their abusive employer, which meant becoming undocumented and at risk of arrest, abuse, and deportation. Although some of the women were able to gather information on people or places who could assist them, most took a chance and fled at the first opportunity – in hopes they would find a helpful person along the way. Once they were on the outside, they were able to discover a network of other Ethiopians who assisted them in finding other employment and housing, and in some cases connected them to NGOs serving migrant workers. That said, many Ethiopian MDWs remain trapped inside employers' homes, with no access to phones or the outside world. Most of the women we interviewed were at a loss as to how to best assist these women.

Most of the women interviewed for this study were no longer working as full-time domestic workers. Many were desperate for stable work and assistance from the Ethiopian Embassy to secure documentation for themselves, as well as for the children living with them. A significant number of interviewees who were informally employed wanted pathways to legal work and the ability to switch employers if they encountered another abusive employer. Despite all the hardships many of them were facing, most preferred to remain in the country they were living in, as they saw limited prospects to meet their financial needs back in Ethiopia.

# POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

The present political and socio-economic conditions will make any cross-border intervention planning and implementation challenging, but not impossible. In fact, the situation may allow for more innovative counter-trafficking efforts. By proposing these measures, we hope to bolster policies and services designed to protect MDWs from abuse and support them in realising their goals for migration.

## IN ETHIOPIA

- 1** **Open more service branches of the Ministry of Labor and Skills in rural areas** to offer services closer to the communities where women are likely to migrate from. Investment in ensuring the lowest level of government bodies has a working office for migrant workers and their families to access information and services in a timely and efficient manner to meet demand. Documentation required for formal migration often requires in-person attendance to a particular office. With few offices located in rural areas, the added expense of travel to and from these locations, as well as the long wait times for documents make the formal route less accessible. Recent improvements to the migration system, such as the digital tracking of migrant information, require resourcing for local level bodies to be able to understand and utilise systems effectively.
- 2** **Train migrant women prior to their departure on financial literacy** so that they are able to retain control over their own income and decide if and how much will be transferred to their family. Such an intervening mechanism is critically important for equipping these women with the necessary skills to become financially astute about budgeting and saving. So that the earnings from migration can be used to realise their dreams back in Ethiopia, whether that is building a house or opening their own shop.
- 3** **Share pre-departure information and training in more informal settings, such as community conversations and school clubs**, to reach women and girls who are likely to travel irregularly. As the research shared, there are contexts, like Lebanon, that have high levels of irregular migration for domestic work. Ensuring communities are aware of the different economic and contextual challenges of destinations, as well as how to use basic electrical equipment, could be an important protective measure in properly preparing migrants regardless of the way they migrate.
- 4** **Connect migrants with relevant social protection schemes before they depart**, by ensuring they have completed the necessary processes and possess the required documents.\* Under Ethiopia's Overseas Employment Proclamation 1246, migrants are entitled to life and disability insurance, as well as coverage under a Financial Guarantee fund which compensates those facing severe abuse such as human trafficking. Furthermore, migrants should be provided information on migrant insurance for additional health and income protection. These measures would increase the incentives for regular (rather than irregular) migration, as well as strengthen protection of migrants when they are working abroad by making it easier to report and leave abusive employers.
- 5** **Build a regional coalition of sending countries, who can use their collective power to influence bilateral agreement policies and protections.** Many Eastern and Central African countries now send migrants to the Middle East, but agreements for labour remain bilateral, and therefore prone to favour the richer destination country. If more sending countries shared their experiences, consulted on their agreements, and negotiated as a block, this would lessen the power differential and lead to fairer standards for all migrant workers.

## IN DESTINATION COUNTRIES

- 1 Create migrant worker helpdesks housed in embassies and consulates, manned by non-governmental organisations,** to improve services to migrants in Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon. Embassies and consulates are relied upon by Ethiopian MDWs to renew papers, and get documentation for their children born in destination, which are both time consuming and expensive processes. Additional support from the embassy/consulate is required to defend the rights of migrant workers in destination countries, particularly in cases of abuse, trafficking and exploitation. Creating a specialised helpdesk within the embassy/consulate, would enable more migrant workers' issues to be documented, those workers to be supported and build valuable trust between the MDW community and consular staff.
- 2 Improve the oversight of destination country recruitment agencies** – where Ethiopia has bilateral agreements, and/or consular services – by expanding the monitoring regimen on domestic recruitment agencies within Ethiopia to their international partners, to ensure all protective standards of the Overseas Employment Proclamation 1246 are met. The embassy must have the authority and resourcing to assist with work issues that can lead to meaningful help and change. Embassies should be capacitated to utilise the authority to suspend, cancel or revoke the registration of destination-side offices with their corresponding Ethiopian recruitment partners once a violation or case of negligence towards a migrant worker is registered with them.
- 3 Counter the lack of pre-departure training for migrants using irregular routes by taking a stronger approach to post-arrival orientation,** which includes destination-specific and market-responsive skills. As the majority of women interviewed for this study seemed to have travelled to the Middle East through irregular channels, they would not have accessed any pre-departure training – something that is required in the formal migration process. It is imperative that these women access training on their rights and financial literacy, as well as key aspects of language, customs and laws for the country they are working in. Taking a strong approach to post-arrival orientation will ensure that all women working in countries with high rates of violations have basic knowledge and protective skills, regardless of how they are travelling abroad.
- 4 Engage a specialist unit or NGO partner in the Ethiopian Embassy to provide care and support to victims of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking** when they are referred to officials. Experiences from women still in, and those who have left, destination countries prove the need for on-the-ground support endorsed and resourced from the Embassy for the protection of its citizens. Formally tracking the number of cases of abuse can help to sanction destination country recruiters while also supporting Ethiopia's tracking of irregular migration facilitators, to inform responses to cross-border organised crime.
- 5 Increase the visibility of messaging on migrant worker rights, and organisations led by migrant workers,** to support Ethiopian migrant women in destination countries. Pre-departure, women should be given the correct information about social and legal support options through the use of booklets, flyers, and other visible rights/legal-aid materials. This should be augmented with the work of migrant-worker-led organisations in destination countries on visibility and messaging initiatives. For example, creative campaigns that involve NGO staff walking around migrant communities, playgrounds, and supermarkets in t-shirts with key information written in country-of-origin language, has been a successful method when targeting other migrant worker communities, such as the Filipinos.

- 6 Encourage leadership and self-organising among the Ethiopian domestic-worker community and strengthen the capacity of existing community leaders.** These leaders should be well-connected enough to serve as referral points for migrants needing access to services and legal aid. Such community leaders should receive comprehensive training from legal professionals and social workers so that they are equipped with the resources and knowledge to support MDWs, particularly those in distress who need immediate intervention. This will also contribute to the Ethiopian community's representation and ability to collaborate within broader migrant-worker-led initiatives. Migrant worker support hubs are a primary point of contact that is utilised by Ethiopian migrant workers in distress and would therefore benefit from more active engagement with this target group to promote and tailor the support available.
- 7 Introduce support options like migrant workers' co-ops that can coordinate mutual aid for Ethiopian migrant workers in destination countries.** Following another Filipino example, these women can mobilise to act as a conduit for advice, forge connections with local NGOs and be another point of referral for social, financial and health related issues. Further resourcing can support a call centre or hotline staffed by paid employees from the migrant community who can connect migrants in distress to services, including shelters, in times of need.
- 8 Strengthen connections between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the domestic worker community in destination countries as an entry-point for new migrants.** The presence of the church has become a gathering location where MDWs meet and greet one another. Attending religious services has also become one of the "acceptable" reasons for these women to leave their employers' homes for a couple of hours each week, thus providing valuable opportunities for them to meet their compatriots and seek advice and assistance.
- 9 Innovate around existing communication platforms to assist migrant women to develop personal networks with other Ethiopian domestic workers** prior to departure and upon arrival. Many MDWs find ingenious ways to communicate with one another and provide mutual aid and young women these days are likely to be on multiple social media platforms. These platforms can be used to share further advice to DWs on advocating for themselves with their employers, information on their rights, and report abuse to organisations that can support them.
- 10 Create a registration portal for employers, with key information and references from other migrant workers, for them to be able to employ a migrant worker.** By registering employers' information in a central database, follow-up on the placement of a migrant worker can be more easily carried out, while offences committed by the employer can be documented and the employer even barred from the platform.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

### Recommendations from the Ethiopian domestic workers in Jordan, Kuwait, and Lebanon

#### JORDAN

- 1** A lack of diplomatic representation of Ethiopia in Jordan is a huge problem. If there was good representation and we were able to contact someone, things would be better. I had a friend who tried to contact the consulate since she was really sick, but no one picked up the phone. I have no idea if my friend is ok. I haven't heard from her.
- 2** We would like to have a blacklist for recruitment agencies. The bad ones are really well known. People know these recruitment agencies are bad, but don't care and will use them anyway. The recruitment agencies in Jordan have branches in Ethiopia. They are told what their rights are in Ethiopia but once the women get to Jordan, the connection is cut. There is no one enforcing that these rights are upheld.

**3** The major problem we are facing is because of recruitment agencies. We receive two–three months of pre-departure sessions about our rights, etc. But the problem is that when we come to Jordan, it is different. Once at the airport, our passports are taken, the mobiles are taken, so what can we do? We can't speak up even when we know it's our right to have them. A lot of cases of women working in Jordan now are brought in through brokers, and they have to get out loans, etc. They come to Jordan because the agencies bring them here without having an employer in mind, and they are stuck at the agency since they don't have an employer, so they start working part-time and the money goes to the recruitment agency. The recruitment agencies are taking JOD 10 (~USD 14) and the women are left with only JOD 5 (~USD 7) to pay for food. Something Dubai is doing is that there is only one agency in Dubai and one in Ethiopia, so they are only able to recruit through them. We want the same here, so there is more enforcement, and we can be treated like human beings.

**4** The agencies in Ethiopia lie about what life is like in Jordan — that everything is good and easy. The women come and hear and see the ugly truth. The agencies should be honest. If I knew how it was going to be here, I would never have come.

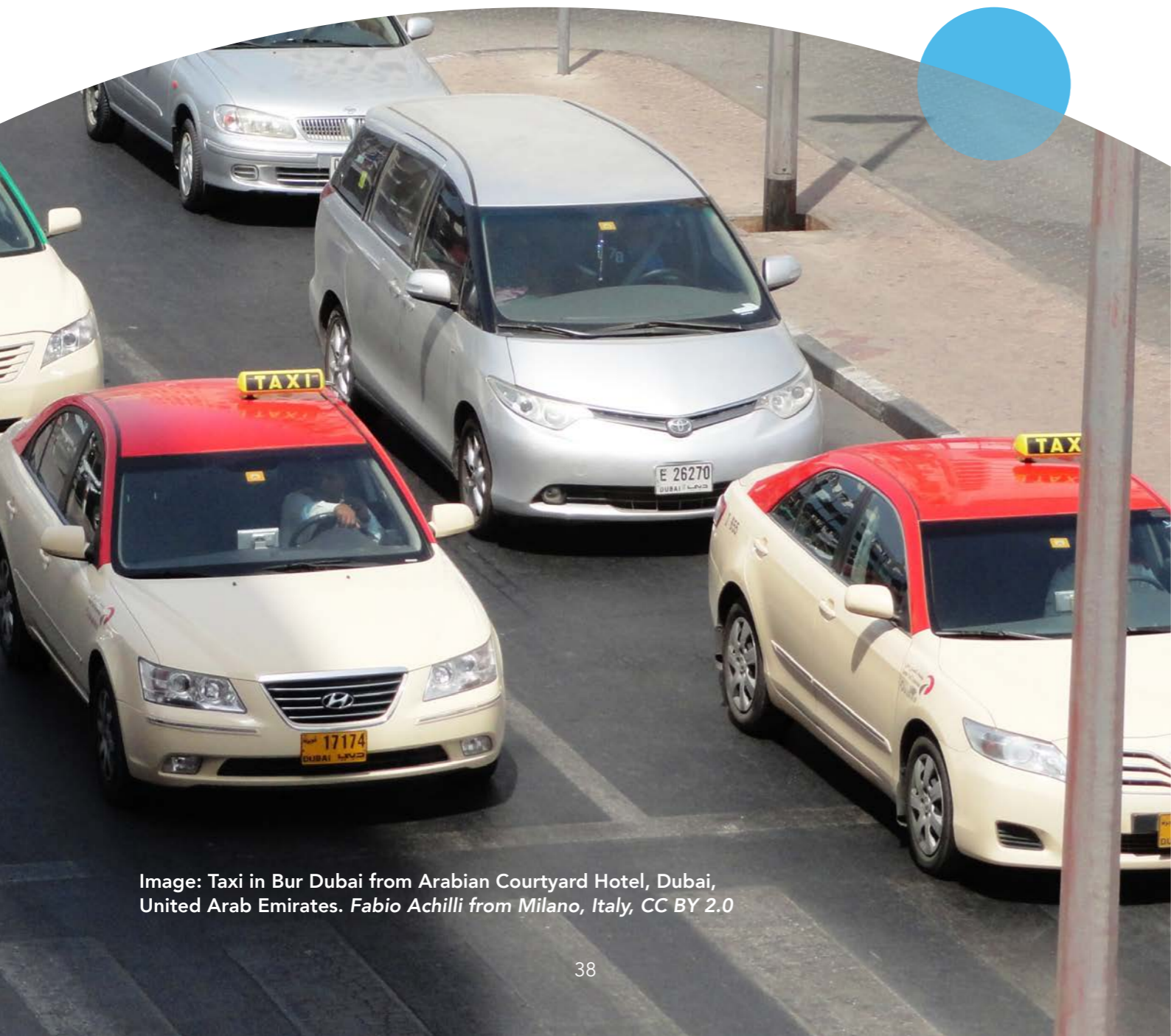


Image: Taxi in Bur Dubai from Arabian Courtyard Hotel, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Fabio Achilli from Milano, Italy, CC BY 2.0

## KUWAIT

**5** I would tell the women to come to Kuwait to work. But they need to be strong and patient. Life is hard in Ethiopia, and they need to work. They need to find a legal agent and get training. If they get the wrong agent, they will not get real papers.

**6** A lot of migrant women don't know their rights. They want to change their employer but don't know how to do it, or feel like they can't do it. We need to teach Ethiopian women their rights and how to access help when they are in prison or in the hospital. They need more help.

**7** We need help forming a collective so we can help each other.

**8** I don't want the women to be undocumented. They need to be legal to feel free and work. If they are undocumented it makes their lives harder, the police will catch them and put them in jail.

**9** Women need help processing paperwork to release them from their employer, so they stay legal. No one helps them process the papers. No one takes them to the hospital.

**10** I would tell other Ethiopian women about the cultural rules—e.g., during these months you can't go outside, you can't touch other people, don't be seen with men outside, knowing your rights around days off and vacations, don't run away. Make sure you go to the embassy if you need help.

**11** I would tell them not come to Kuwait to work. The employers think we are animals. They are not kind. I don't want them to come. I lost my young age; I lost my health.

## LEBANON

**12** I would tell them not to come to Lebanon. I would tell them to not get married or have children. It is very difficult with children.

**13** I wish the Ethiopian government would open companies in Ethiopia, so women wouldn't have to go abroad to work. I would like to have a woodwork company, gold company, plastic and paper company, agriculture, baby food, sanitary pads, dry food, hair oil. I wish the government supported this kind of work.

**14** A lot of mums don't have access for their kids to go to school or healthcare. So the mums need to stay home to take care of children and can't work.

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Image: Returnees from Saudi preparing to be taken home. ©UNICEF Ethiopia/2013/Ayene



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