

# "THEY DON'T GIVE YOU ACCURATE INFORMATION ABOUT ANYTHING"

Pre-migration experiences of Ethiopian migrant domestic workers

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Above all, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the migrant domestic workers who generously shared their time and personal experiences, as well as their hopes for migrating and working abroad. We sincerely hope that the findings of this research will raise awareness and lead to better support for these workers, ultimately improving their working conditions and preventing abuse.

The charts and figures in this report only reflect the characteristics of the respondents we interviewed and should not be viewed as representative of all female Ethiopian domestic workers migrating to the Middle East.

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Front cover image: 17 years old Halima Seid Mohamed, walks towards the exit of the migrant rehabilitation center after the interview with UNICEF.

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# PRE-MIGRATION EXPERIENCES FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS

Ethiopia is one of the largest source countries for low-wage domestic work in the Middle East (Shewamene et al., 2022). Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) engage in both regular and irregular migration for work (Marchand et al., 2017). “Regular” migration represents formal channels used by migrants to move across borders for employment. For example, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have a bilateral agreement to improve labour migration and protect migrant labourers, including MDWs (ILO, 2018). Employment agencies are commonly used by prospective MDWs as formal avenues to gain employment in the Middle East and handle their training and paperwork prior to departure (Busza et al., 2023).

However, research suggests that many employment agencies, brokers, and other handlers in the labour-migration process pose as formal agencies, so that prospective workers are unaware that they are being deceived (Shewamene et al., 2022). Using these fraudulent services or engaging in other informal ways to migrate abroad (for example, friends, family, or other contacts to facilitate migration) are known as “irregular” migratory practices.

A third avenue to finding work combines both regular and irregular migratory practices, with family members or friends finding jobs for prospective MDWs, but the travel procedure is handled through an employment agency. These recruits may have a better chance of traveling quickly than do regular recruits.

Whether MDWs are aware or unaware of the legitimacy of various ways to seek employment overseas, both regular and irregular migration pose risks for the workers. Facilitators of the migration process can connect MDWs with abusive employers, which can increase their risk of exploitation, confiscation of important documents, restrictions on their movement, unsafe living conditions, sexual violence, occupational injuries and other health-related harms (Richards, 2014; Fernandez, 2018). Furthermore, most Gulf countries follow the Kafala system (a legal framework heavily privileging the rights of employers over those of employees) that informs the working relationship between MDWs and employers (Khan & Harroff-Tavel, 2011). This system can foster exploitative conditions for MDWs, and migrant workers more broadly, due to lack of regulations and employment protections for migrant labourers. Specifically, the workers’ visas are tied to their employers, giving employers unchecked power and removing agency from the employees. The conditions under the Kafala system often result in infringement on workers’ rights, reduced wages, poor working conditions, and abuse, which increase MDWs’ vulnerability to labour trafficking and exploitation (Qadri, 2020).



A Saudi returnee has her photo taken by one of the volunteers at the migrant rehabilitation center.

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Since migrant workers in both regular and irregular migration channels may face abuses, the pre-migration process becomes an important juncture to explore and understand how vulnerabilities may be linked to employment options and migration procedures. Local Ethiopian researchers used purposive snowball sampling to recruit MDW participants for interviews and focus groups. In other words, we relied on community contacts to develop leads and relied on personal networks to recruit women who were planning to leave Ethiopia to become MDWs in the Middle East. We sought to increase the scope and diversity of our recruitment by seeking out participants from different regions of Ethiopia and with different backgrounds, including experienced and first-time MDWs.

The data collection period spanned from October 2022 to October 2023. A total of 173 female Ethiopian MDWs participated in the research, 100 through individual interviews and 73 through focus group discussions. Although not a probability-based random sample, our respondents represented a diverse range of demographics, as shown in Figure 1. Participants were all women ranging from 18 to 38, hailing predominantly from the Oromia (63.0%), Amhara (18.9%), and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR) (18.1 percent). Most women had completed between 7th and 12th grade (73.3%) and were single (51.6%). There was an even split between participants with children (49.6%) and those without (50.4%; see Table 1).

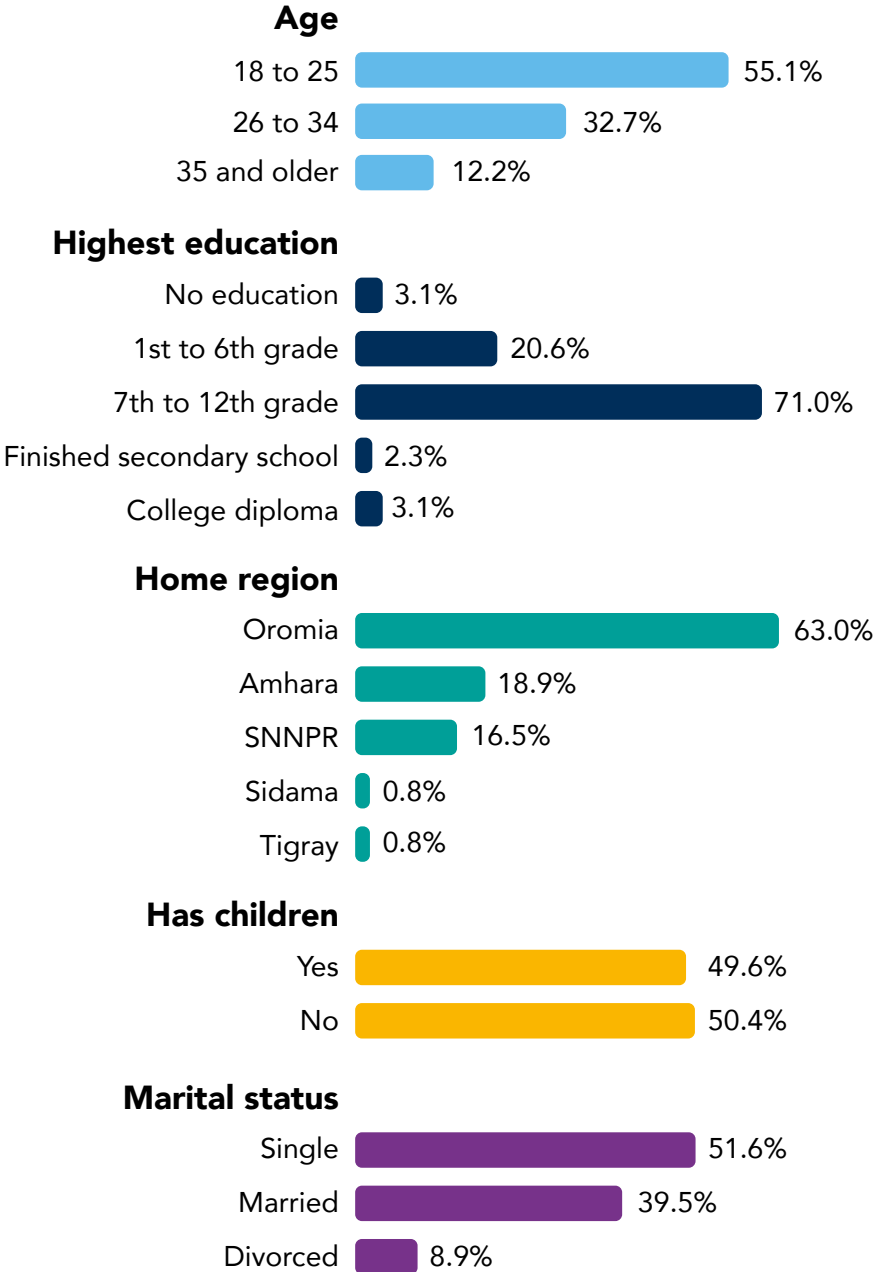


Figure 1: Interviewee & focus group participant demographics (N=173)

## DESTINATION COUNTRY

Middle Eastern countries are the top destinations for MDWs from Ethiopia (Dessiye & Emirie, 2018). They provide access to domestic work for many who seek shorter-term employment contracts. Interviewed Ethiopian MDWs (n=100) discussed several destination countries they were seeking to travel to for these types of jobs. In our sample, Jordan (n=48) and UAE (n=36) were overwhelmingly the top responses; Qatar (n=12) and Bahrain (n=1) were also named (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> At the time of the initial focus groups and interviews, there was no Bilateral Labour Agreement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Thus, the women were not actively seeking to work there.

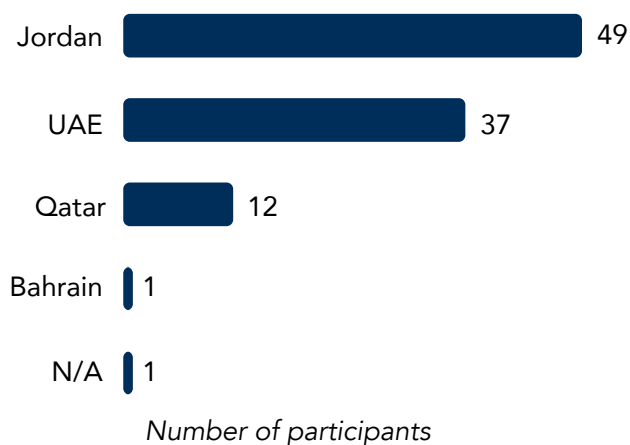


Figure 2: Destination country for employment (n=100)

MDWs found employment in these countries through several channels. Figure 3 shows that participants mostly found work through an employment agency<sup>2</sup> (n=73) or informally through family and friends (n=16). Some found work through a broker or recruiter (n=5) or other MDWs (n=4). Field researchers reported that brokers played a pivotal role in the migration process. There were no significant differences across destination country when it came to how the participant found out about the job and the participants who reported broker or recruiter was evenly split in responses from Jordan and the UAE.

In most “formal” migratory processes, the women had been connected to the employment agency by brokers, who take advantage of the information gap and tell the women they can facilitate their recruitment and travel for a fee. Some participants had paid up to ETB 25,000 (USD 1,846<sup>3</sup>) for this service, while the median was ETB 25,000 (USD 462). The brokers then take the passports and bring them to the office of the employment agency, as the workers’ handlers. It is understood that the passport stays with the broker until the visa is issued, which gives the brokers considerable power to demand payment. Some of the women reported that once they were at the employment agency and in the subsequent processes, they understood that they could have come directly to the agency and paid much less. However, the employment agencies do not actively discourage the brokers’ role.

<sup>1</sup> Participant age did not produce any significant relationships in comparison to destination country.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that there is a possibility that the “employment agencies” that participants described were not officially registered agencies. Therefore, participants may have been misled to think their process was formal, when in fact, it was informal. Based on the participants’ varied understandings of whether the employment agency they used was officially registered, the research team was unable to parse out the difference.

<sup>3</sup> The average exchange rate during the period of fieldwork (October 2022 to October 2023) was USD 1 = ETB 54.1597. Source: <https://investing.com/currencies/usd-etb-historical-data>

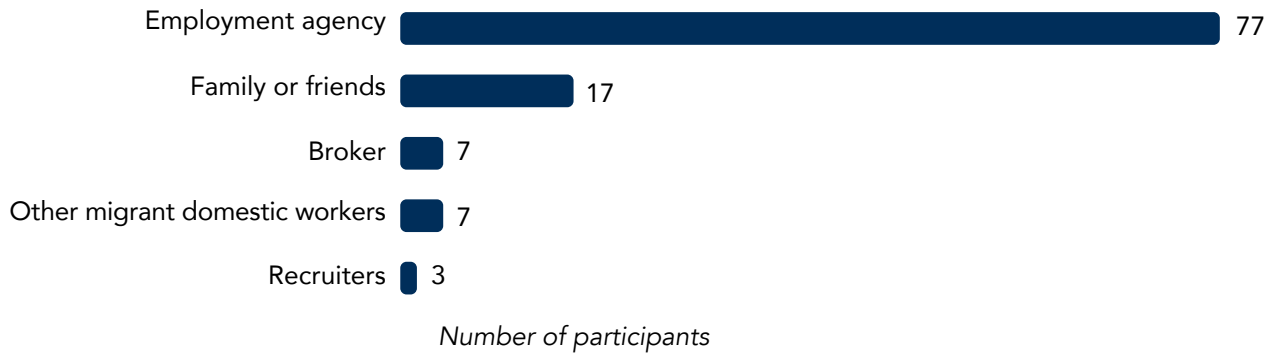


Figure 3: Party who helped migrant domestic workers find work in destination country (n=111)

### THE PROCESS TO TRAVEL TO THE MIDDLE EAST

Prospective Ethiopian MDWs often started the process to secure employment and prepare for departure several months prior to their travel to the destination country. At the time of data collection, most participants who provided this information (n=54) had been waiting up to three months (n=31) to begin work in the destination country (Figure 4). Many participants were without a job in Ethiopia to sustain them while they waited. This delay can also be attributed to the waiting time to get a new passport or to renew an outdated one, which can take more than three months. Additionally, the time it takes for the employer to select their domestic worker can further extend the waiting period. Prospective MDWs described sending their photos to be used in the selection by employers, but they did not mention their housekeeping skills or language proficiencies being taken into account during this process.

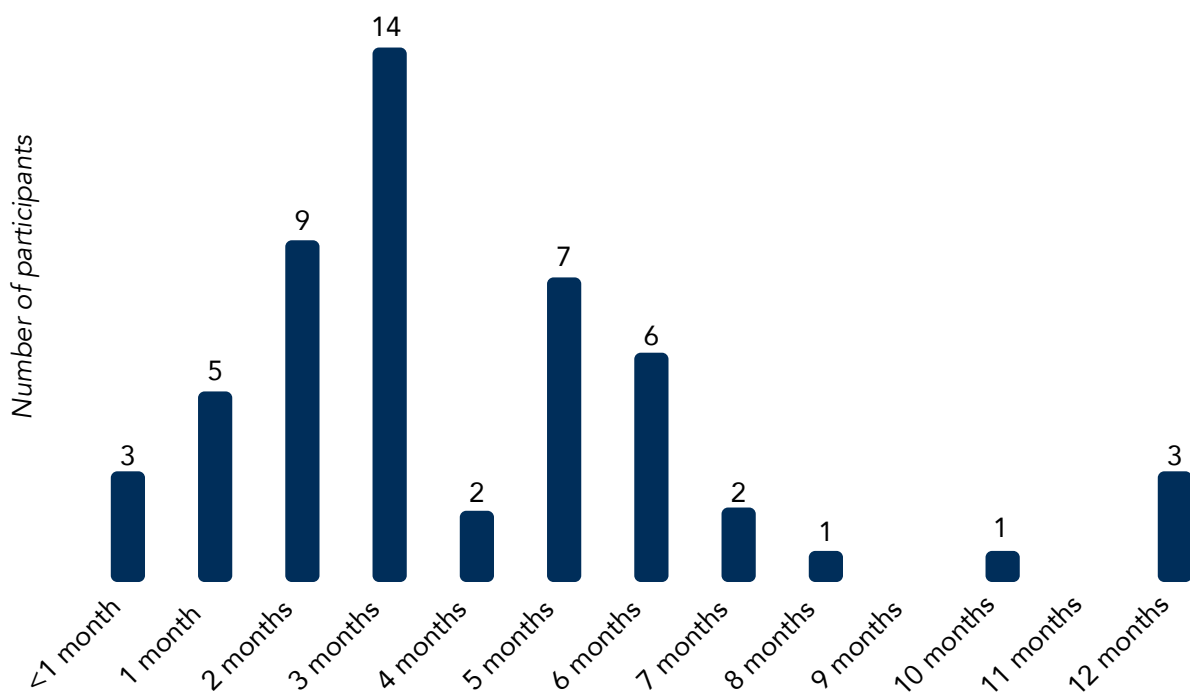


Figure 4: How long ago domestic workers started the travel process to the Middle East (n=53)

Participants noted the lack of clarity about how long they could expect to wait to start working overseas:

*I thought I would go right away. I didn't even have money, so my husband and I had to sell household equipment to pay for it. Then they [employment agency] gave me an appointment to come back after four months for fingerprints. I got my passport the following month, but I didn't have money to pay for the COC [Certificate of Competence] training so I put everything on hold. Then I heard the COC is being offered for free. We were told the visa process will take fifteen days, but it ended up taking two months. They don't give you accurate information about anything. I asked when I will be getting my ticket, but they kept giving me different dates. They told me they will give me the exact date three days prior to the flight.*

**(Focus Group 1-Addis Ababa, 27-years-old)**

Other participants noted the delays in receiving their documents, which caused them to incur more fees:

*It depends on how soon you can get your passport. The government needs to do something about that. They keep giving us all sorts of reasons why they don't give us our passports. We made the payments for the passport, but if three months pass and the passport is [delayed] due to their own problems, they will make us pay the fee again. We have to pay another ETB 2,375 (USD 44) again just because the process takes longer than three months.*

**(Focus Group 1-Addis Ababa, 37-years-old)**

## PRIMARY INTERIM JOB

While waiting to go abroad, participants were most likely to be unemployed (n=56) or have no formal employment, typically describing their occupation as a housewife as a housewife (n=11, Figure 5). A participant expresses how overseas domestic work will remedy her unemployment: "I don't have a job right now. That is why I want to go to Jordan" (Interview 74, 23-years-old). It was uncommon for participants to be employed during this waiting period (n=33). Those who had interim employment often worked as a domestic worker (for example, cleaner, housekeeper, maid; n=8), a merchant or small business owner (n=6), a factory worker (n=5), a waitress (n=4), a student (n=2), or in other forms of work (salesperson, day labourer, farmer, cook, nurse, school worker, beauty salon employee; n=8).

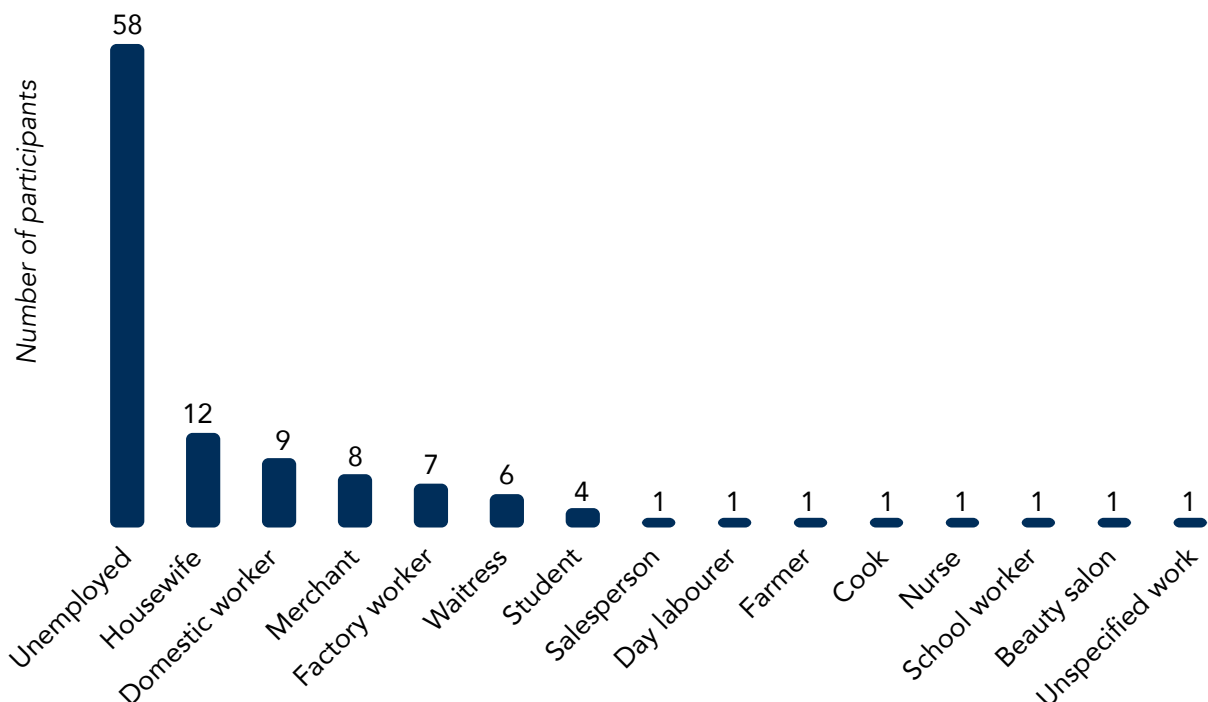


Figure 5: Primary job while waiting to go abroad

## COMPLETED CERTIFICATE OF COMPETENCE TRAINING

While MDWs waited to secure employment and begin their journey to their destination country, they were required to complete a Certificate of Competency (COC) training. These trainings consist of local facilitators showing prospective MDWs how to navigate their destination countries and reviewing existing rules and procedures (Busza et al., 2023). Since most of the study participants were recruited at pre-departure training sessions, the majority of them (n=72) had already completed the COC training. A smaller sample had not participated in the training (n=17), some were currently in training (n=5), a few (n=4) did not need to take the training because they had a COC from prior round(s) of migration, one received a COC from their employment agency without completing the training, and one paid for a fake COC (n=1; Figure 6): *“I paid ETB 4,500 [USD 83] for the fake certificate because the certificate is required to process the overseas employment”* (Interview 77, 19-years-old).

Participants noted that their COC training assisted them in understanding foundational information about the job: *“When I first went, I didn’t know anything about rights or training. Now being trained and learning my rights – I know what my working hours are, and proper accommodations, etc., and if not in place, I can complain to the agency.”* (Focus Group 1-Addis Ababa, no age given) For some participants, these trainings helped make them aware of crucial information as they prepared for their departure.

However, while the training was helpful for participants to learn about their rights, there can be limitations for MDW to exercise these rights once they arrive in the host countries. For example, MDWs were often on their own to figure out how to navigate the power imbalance between them and their employer that can create conditions where they are exploited:

*We were told we have a right to be properly fed, get a clean sleeping place, work for only eight hours, etc. But what power do we have to ensure we get these conditions? If we call the agency, they will not even pick the phone up or return our call.*

**(Focus Group 1-Addis Ababa, 32-years-old)**

It was uncommon during these trainings for prospective MDWs to receive information on the Ethiopian embassy or consulate as a viable option in case of an emergency. Lack of information in the training on how to assert their rights in exploitative circumstances were also of concern:

*[The COC training said] that we have a right to work for only eight hours a day. But conditions are not like that, from what we hear. Most women don’t even get enough sleep because of the long hours they have to work*

**(Focus Group 1-Addis Ababa, 24-years-old)**

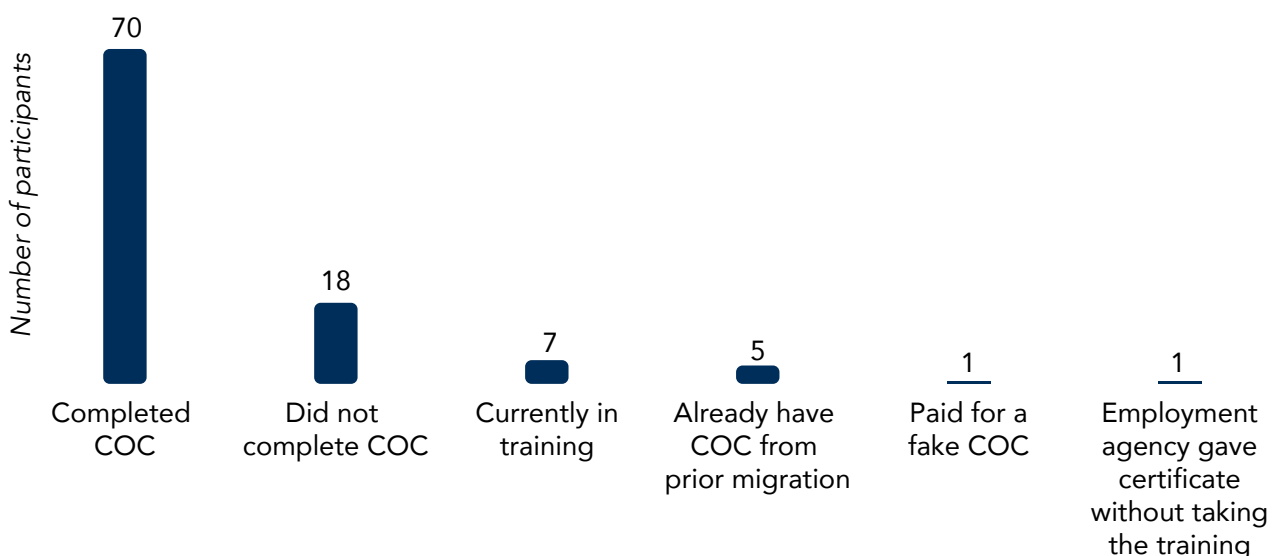


Figure 6: Domestic workers who completed Certificate of Competency training (n=94)



**TOTAL COST TO GET TO DESTINATION COUNTRY**

Prospective MDWs must often pay numerous fees to secure their employment and facilitate their travel. Figure 7 shows that these costs ranged from ETB 5,000 (USD 92) to ETB 60,000 (USD 1,108) for the entirety of the process. However, the majority of participants (n=55) reported that the total payment they must make is unknown to them, as new fees arise as they navigate the employment process: *“I paid 10,000 birr [USD185] so far. The agency did not tell me how much the process will cost me in total.”* (Interview 81, 25-years-old)

These fees accumulate over time for the various services that prospective workers have to pay their employment agency. Participants paid for services spanning trainings, certificates, exams, and broker fees. One participant describes how her payment is broken down:

*When I gave my passport, I was told the visa needed to be here before I could take training. I paid 3,000 birr [USD 55] for training and 2,500 birr [USD 46] for medical exam and 250 birr [USD 5] for COC exam. The same training is given by the government for free. 20,000 birr [USD 369] to the employment agency as well. Nothing in writing – they’re saying that this money is so they don’t have to pay the first two months’ pay.*

**(Focus Group 5, 25-years-old)**

Ultimately, because the COC training is mandatory for regular migration, all prospective MDWs must either take the formal training or pay for a fake certificate to move through the overseas employment process. It is also important to note that just because an MDW completes the COC training, it does not mean that they will receive the proper work visa. Some unofficially registered brokers and employment agencies may send workers on tourist visas that they will ultimately overstay. This puts MDWs in a situation where they, often unknowingly, become undocumented in their host country (Olynyk, 2020).

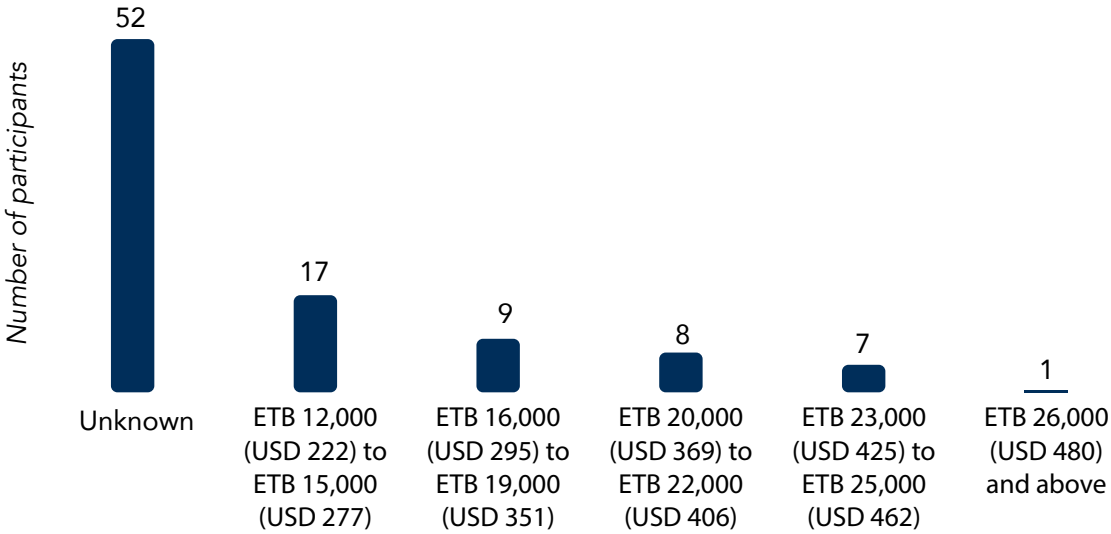


Figure 7: Total cost to get to destination country (n=94)

Due to the costs, many MDWs (n=39) reported that they had to fund their journey (Figure 8). For those workers who reported that they had not borrowed money (n=60), it was often because they do not know the final total of their fees, and therefore they had not borrowed money yet: *“For now I didn’t borrow any money, but I will in the future to pay for my travelling.”* (Interview 76, 22-years-old) Additionally, some of the women reported saving money from previous work, overseas or in Ethiopia, to finance this upcoming journey. Others said that their family or friends lent them money without any expectation that they would be repaid.

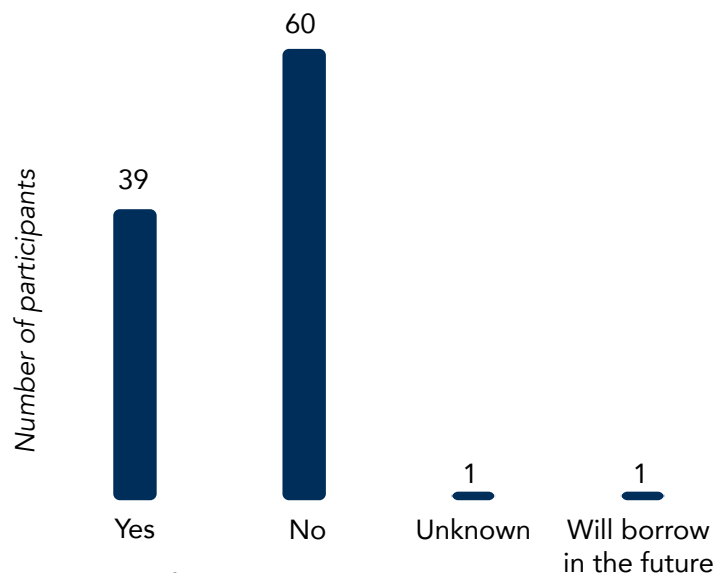


Figure 8: Need to borrow money to finance the journey

### ABILITY TO NEGOTIATE SALARY

When participants secured employment overseas, the majority were not able to negotiate their salary (n=69; Figure 9). Many never asked their employer what their pay would be, and therefore were unable to discuss the terms of their contract. As MDWs are often unable to discuss the details of their contracts, this can contribute to their inability to receive the legally mandated amount or be paid regularly. In a separate study conducted in host countries (Dank and Zhang, 2024), Ethiopian MDWs reported not receiving their salary payments despite having an agreement, or payments were made to the recruitment agent and not paid to the MDWs. Further research is necessary to quantify the scale of these abusive practices by employers and recruitment agents, as well as the value of wages owed to MDWs.

Reluctance to talk to employers about salary may be attributed to the steep power differential between MDWs and their employers under the Kafala system (Qadri, 2020). Field researchers reported that MDWs expressed fear of asking too many questions about pay and employment conditions. Participants were worried they may be labelled “difficult” by the employment agency, which compromises their chance of securing employment. Fewer participants were able to negotiate their salary (n=25), and they reported having open lines of communication with their employer: “I had a video call with my employer and negotiated” (Interview 14, 19-years-old).

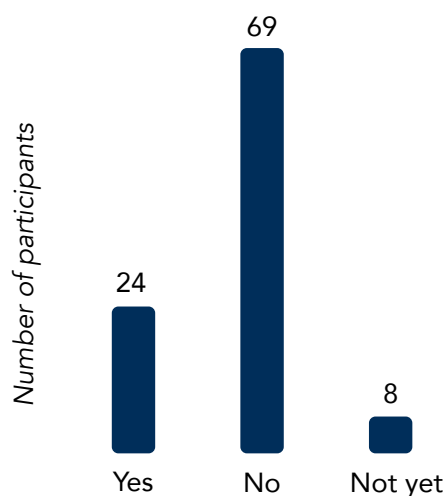


Figure 9: Migrant domestic workers' ability to negotiate their salary



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## SALARY AND EMPLOYMENT AGREEMENT

Nearly half of all participants (n=48) did not know how much they would be paid for working as an MDW abroad, this is common among both first-time migrants (n=27) as well as those who have prior experience working abroad (n=21). Among those who do have information about their pay, monthly salary ranged from ETB 12,000 [USD 222] to ETB 30,000 [USD 554] (Figure 10): *“Max I will make is USD 250 per month (in the UAE). No information on pay. What I heard is USD 250 per month.”* (Focus Group 3; 30-years-old). It seemed that the women with prior experience working abroad generally were told a better pay rate compared to the domestic workers going for the first time.

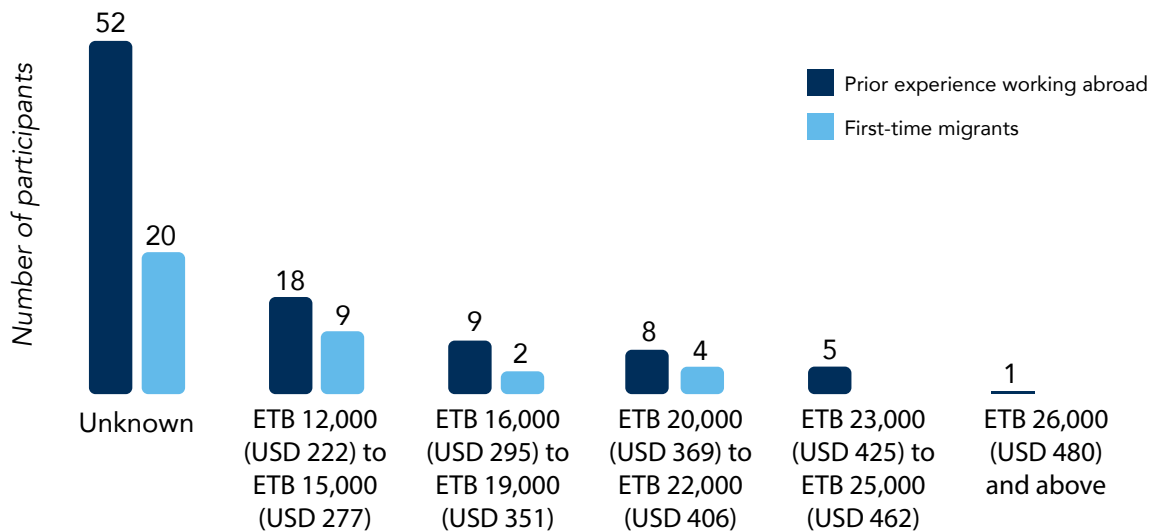


Figure 10: Expected monthly salary reported by the migrant domestic workers (n=128)

Similar to the vagueness around pay, most participants described that they had no formal agreement in place (n=61; Figure 10) that describes the terms of their employment in their destination country. Fewer reported they had a verbal agreement in place for their employment (n=33): *“Verbal agreement through employment agency on conditions of journey, but not about salary and living conditions.”* (Interview 29, 38-years-old). This verbal agreement often included the number of family members per household, their job duties (e.g. cleaning, cooking, childcare, looking after the elderly or infirmed), and in some cases their monthly salary. Only a few stated they had a written agreement for their employment (n=3). Some who reported having a written agreement in place did not understand what it said: *“The agency made me sign a document. But I don’t know what it says. It was written in another language that I don’t understand. I think it was Arabic.”* (Interview 44, 25-years-old)

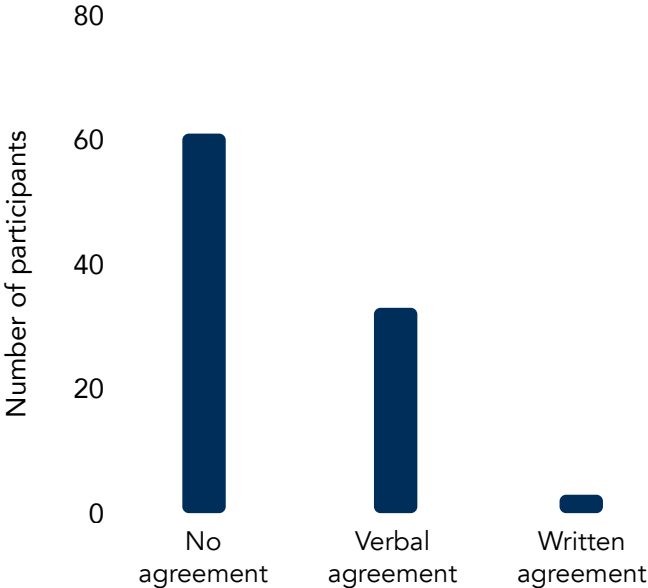


Figure 11: Type of employment agreement (n=97)



# CONCLUSION

Prospective Ethiopian MDWs encounter numerous barriers throughout the process of planning their migration. They must fulfil numerous pre-migration requirements, pay for a long list of services, and often endure long waiting periods while making little or no income. The women in this study reported a general lack of clarity about the costs and the steps required to secure work abroad. Some recruitment agents exploit these information gaps, charging additional fees and circumventing official processes. Their employment is under the Kafala system, which places power in the hands of their employer and may cause workers to agree to conditions that violate their rights and expose them to abusive employment circumstances.

Employment terms and salary details are often vague, with little enforcement mechanisms to ensure that employers will uphold the agreed terms. In all the host countries where the women in this study plan to migrate, the Kafala system grants significant power to employers, often forcing MDWs to accept conditions that violate their rights and expose them to abuse. Structural changes, in both Ethiopia and host countries, are crucial to create a clear and effective migration pathway that provides MDWs with the protection and respect they deserve.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from this study suggest several recommendations for private entities and/or government agencies to consider and design possible intervention strategies.

- 1 Work with government officials at Ethiopia's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs to shorten the turnaround for passports.** Government agencies may institute mandates for specific costs and the timeline to receive the proper documentation to go abroad for work. These mandates could reduce the variability of the time it takes, standardise the costs to receive proper documentation, and improve the value of other steps in the formal process.
- 2 Implement stricter scrutiny for visit visa applications from Ethiopians going to the destination countries listed in this report.** Since only degree-holders can have this visa type transferred to a working visa, the availability of visit visas increases the vulnerability of those migrating for domestic work to ending up in a situation of non-documentation or illegal overstay.
- 3 Publish a formal plan for monitoring and evaluating the digitalised labour migration process, including the Ethiopian Labor Market Information System (E-LMIS) and Ethio-Migrant Database Management System (EMDMS).** Government actors should have accurate information on whether the new system is in fact improving the speed and safety of migration, as well as on any unforeseen loopholes that have been identified and exploited by bad actors. This plan should additionally track how embassies abroad have been trained on accessing the available data to identify and protect Ethiopian citizens while they are abroad, as well as whether and how the online system is known and perceived by prospective migrants compared to irregular migration routes.
- 4 Increase transparency around costs of migrating abroad for work.** Government agencies and private entities that support formal migration for overseas employment may engage in advocacy for awareness of the regular migration process that includes standardised costs, trainings, and timelines to migrate abroad for work.
- 5 Standardise technical, vocational, and education training (TVET) across Ethiopia.** In addition to reducing potential migrants' exposure to fraudulent training (or payment for a non-existent training), a nationally standardised TVET curriculum would increase the perceived competitiveness of Ethiopian MDWs by destination countries and potential employers, as the skills of new MDWs would be more predictable and consistent at the time of arrival.
- 6 Ensure that human rights concepts are incorporated in all COC trainings.** It is imperative for prospective MDWs have knowledge of their fundamental rights as migrants and employees in the destination countries where they work. This information could include rights to keep their documents, their pay, breaks, living conditions, working conditions, and freedom to communicate with others outside the home. Additionally, information regarding which agencies (such as Ethiopian embassies, civil society organisations) to contact for help and strategies to assert their rights to their employer may be helpful during mandated COC trainings.
- 7 Formalise a role for returnee/survivor groups to administer part of the standardised training for prospective, and especially first-time, migrants.** These groups should remain independent, and returnees from a variety of host countries should participate to increase general understanding of whether there are different considerations of importance when selecting a destination country.
- 8 Decentralise formal services from Addis Ababa to other parts of the country, including Amhara and Tigray.** Recruitment agencies and certificate providers including TVET trainers and medical examiners should open offices at local district level to encourage migration. More direct ties between migrants and formal service providers would help eliminate unqualified middlemen and improve transparency, accountability and protection for MDWs.

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