

# MANAGING UNCERTAINTY

## Factors shaping Ethiopian women's migration decision making

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The charts and figures in this report reflect only 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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## FACTORS INFLUENCING MIGRATION DECISION MAKING

Considering the well-documented human rights abuses that domestic workers endure when working in the Middle East (Busza, Shewamene and Zimmerman, 2022; Begum, 2020), it is important to understand why prospective workers remain motivated to seek this type of labour abroad. Prior literature indicates that several factors push people to seek work abroad, including financial need, fleeing conflict or violence, or environmental factors (OHCHR, 2015; Parreñas, 2015; Marchand et al., 2017).

In Ethiopia, migration is often viewed by women from rural areas as a short-term strategy to achieve personal goals, as well as a collective strategy to ameliorate financial stress on the family system (Schewel, 2022). Aside from these push factors, foreign workers have long become an inseparable part of all labour markets in the Middle East, particularly in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, such as Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Abri et al., 2023). According to a report issued by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Vainio, 2019), all GCC countries are heavily dependent on foreign labour and are among the top 20 countries worldwide where non-nationals outnumber national citizens. In certain labour sectors, such as domestic work and construction, over 90% of the workers are migrants (European Parliament, 2021).

Despite widespread reports of poor working conditions and human rights abuses in the Middle East, many Ethiopian women still migrate to the region for domestic work. This study sought to understand the motivations behind prospective migrants' decision to seek employment abroad, identify the major influencing factors, and assess their preparedness to deal with potential problems.



The data and findings in this report form part of a larger study “Exploring Vulnerability and Resilience to Forced Labour among Ethiopian Domestic Workers in the Middle East: A Panel Design,” for which local Ethiopian researchers used purposive snowball sampling to recruit migrant domestic workers (MDWs) for interviews and focus groups. In other words, the research team relied on community contacts to develop leads and 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 both 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 participants represented a diverse range of demographics, as shown in Figure 1. All participants were women ranging from 18 to 38 years old, hailing predominantly from the Oromia (63.0%), Amhara (18.9%), and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR) (16.5%). Most women had completed between 7th and 12th grade (71.0%) and were single (51.6%). There was an even split between participants with children (49.6%) and those without (50.4%).

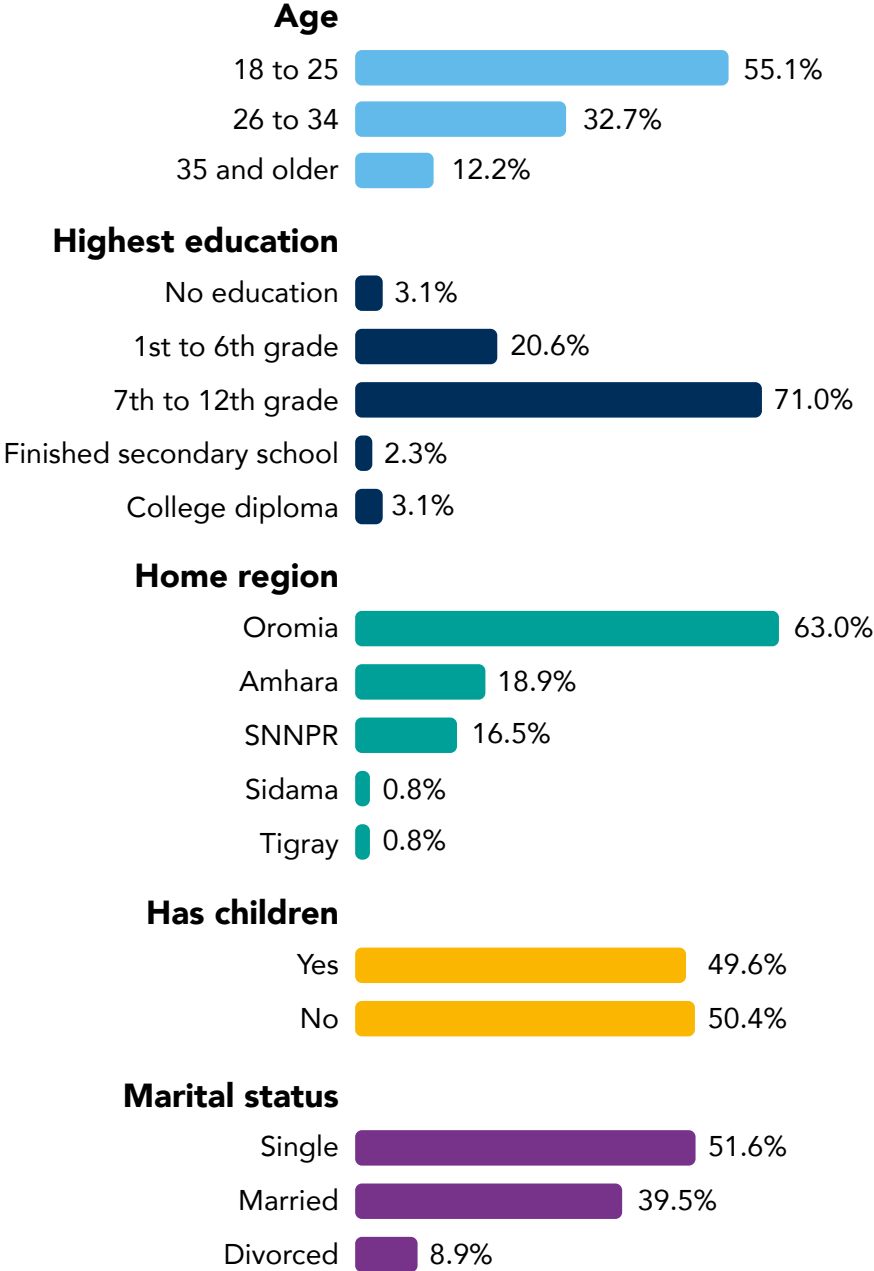


Figure 1: Interviewee and focus group participant demographics (N=173)



## REASONS FOR MIGRATING

Poor economic prospects in Ethiopia were the leading reasons why participants considered moving abroad for work (Figure 2). Nearly all participants cited various financial reasons for leaving the country to work overseas. As one woman explained:

*It's mainly due to a lack of work. We rent a place to work at and the rent will immediately increase, or we will often be told to move from that area. There is no incentive given to us by the government. We know it is possible to work and change our situation here, but working in our own country is becoming very difficult due to the increasing cost of rent for a place to work. On top of that, the places we work at often get demolished. So, it is the problem with finding space and desperation that is forcing us to go to Arab countries.*

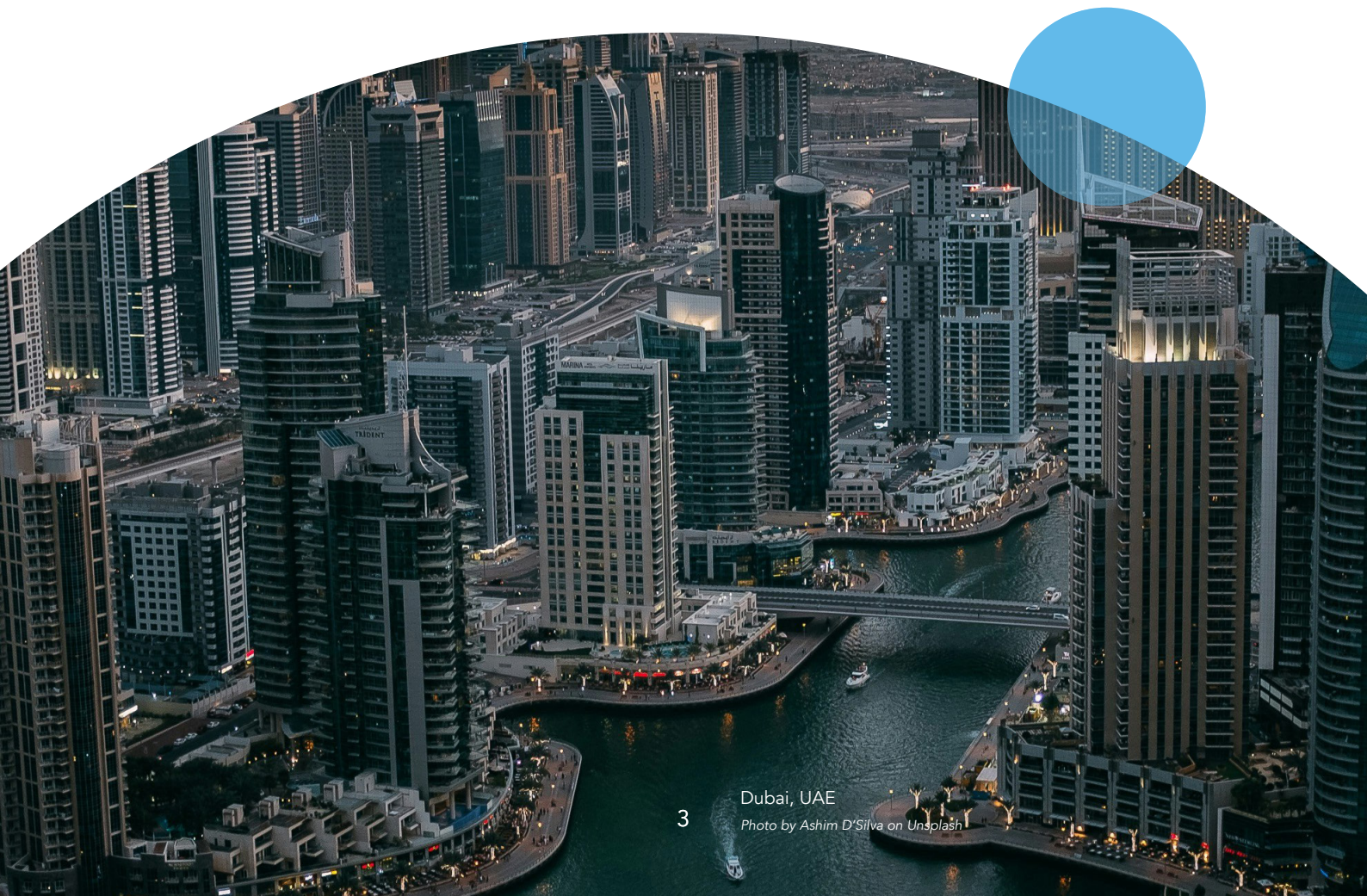
**Focus Group 1, Addis Ababa, 27 years old**

Another woman added:

*Life is getting very expensive here. The money I make here is not even enough to cover rent and food. I would rather not go. I would rather continue my education and make something out of myself here. But things are getting out of hand here. They ask for more than ETB 8,000 (USD 140)<sup>1</sup> to rent a small place where I can sell coffee on the side of the street. It requires a large sum of money to start any kind of business. So, I am forced to make this decision, but I am not even sure if I will succeed in going.*

**Focus Group 1, Adama, no age given**

<sup>1</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>.



While the majority of participants cited “better employment opportunities” as the primary reason for deciding to migrate (68.0%), others put forth concrete examples of what they had in mind when working abroad. One stated:

*I don't have a job here. I want to make more money and change my life.*  
**Interview 80, 25 years old**

Another wanted:

*To help my family, especially my younger brother, and also to make some money for myself.*  
**Interview 77, 19 years old**

Another woman said:

*I want to make money to raise my children.*  
**Interview 81, 25 years old**

**Primary reason to work overseas**

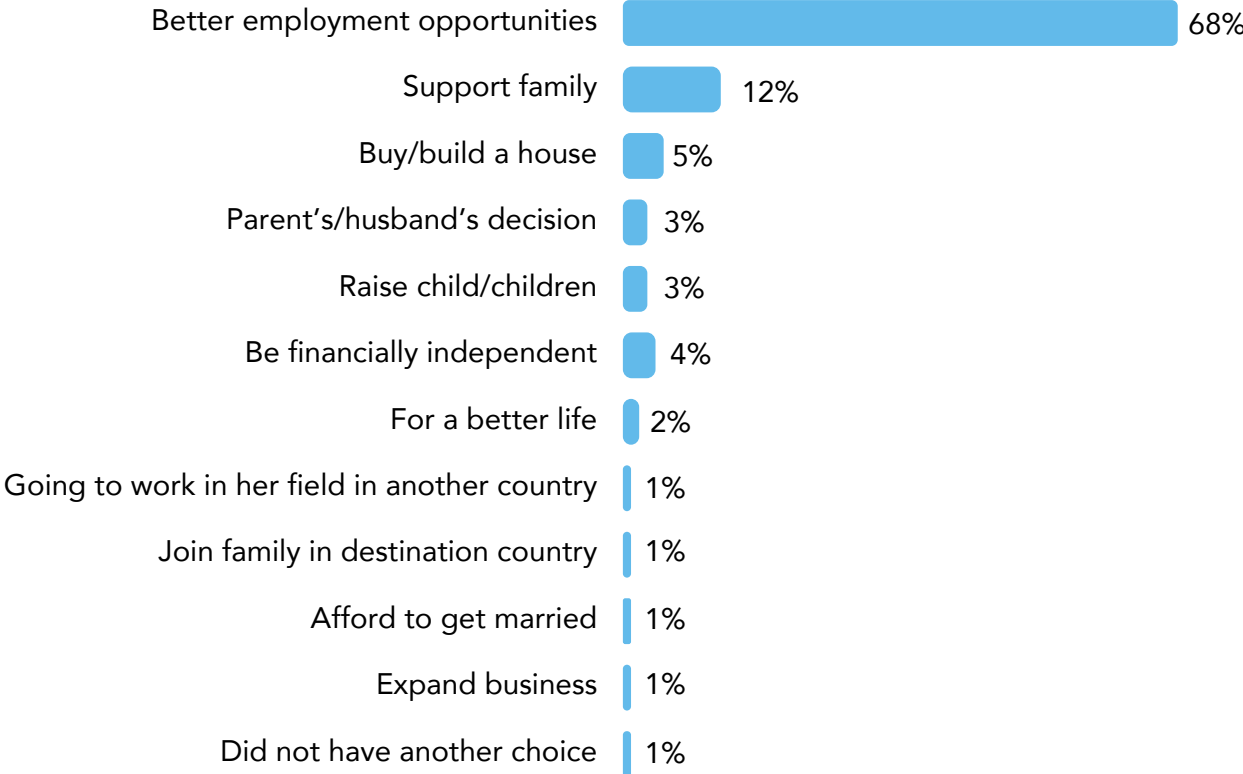
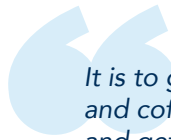


Figure 2: Primary reason to work overseas (n=99; some participants noted more than one reason)

Focus group discussions with prospective migrant workers preparing to depart for jobs in the Middle East revealed the strong determination among participants to leave behind their home country in search of a better economic future. One woman said:

*The situation here is getting difficult so I decided to go to afford a better life. I want to work there and open a shop or something else here with the money.*  
**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, 26 years old**

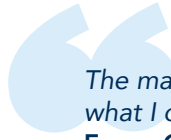
Another added:



*It is to get something better. I was not successful with my education and now I am selling tea and coffee. I have seen the situation here and now I want to see what it is like to work there and get something better.*

**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, 37 years old**

Participants overwhelmingly reported that looking for better employment opportunities was the most important motivating factor. As one woman reported:



*The main thing is how much we get paid. Why would I go if what I get paid is not higher than what I can earn here?*

**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, 21 years old**

However, there was variation across participants in the factors that influenced their choice of destination countries (Figure 3). Analysis of their responses found that “better working conditions” were a significant factor, influencing 37.4% of participants’ decisions, followed by “better pay” (29.3%). “Better working conditions” encompassed terms of employment such as days off, working hours each day and living conditions at the employer’s residence. Participants appeared to have obtained such information from their friends and the migrant community at large, as well as from what their employment agencies told them. Other factors included the employment agency’s designated destination (13.1%), having family members/relatives there (8.1%) and availability of jobs (5.1%). Only a small portion of the participants (2.0%) noted that they chose a specific country because the process of seeking employment was easier than other countries, all of them noting that Jordan had an easier process to go abroad than other Middle East countries.

### Reason to choose a specific country

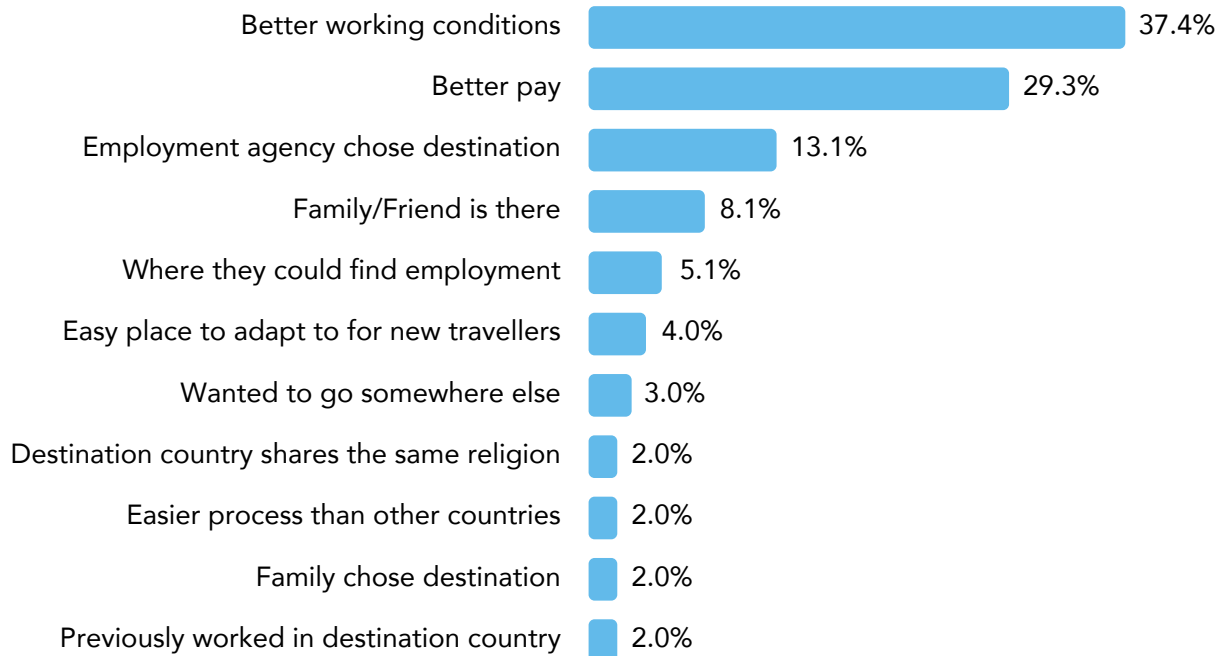


Figure 3: Reason to choose a specific country (n=99; some participants noted more than one reason)



## AGENCY EXERCISED DURING DECISION MAKING, INCLUDING CHOICE OF DESTINATION COUNTRY

The women interviewed demonstrated varying degrees of agency in their decision to migrate. Many succinctly summarised their reason to migrate overseas as:



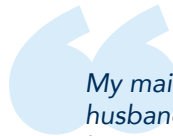
*To work and change our lives*  
**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, no age given**

or,



*To change my and my family's lives.*  
**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, no age given**

One divorced woman said:



*My main reason is to make enough money to build a house. I had built a house with my ex-husband with the money I sent him. But when we got divorced, he claimed that it was his house and took it from me.*  
**Interview 78, 36 years old**

Women, both with and without prior overseas experiences, shared significant similarities in their motivations to go abroad, with no distinct differences observed between the two groups.

Participants often exercised agency by opting for informal migration practices, typically due to the onerous requirements and long waits associated with formal government channels. Many women interviewed in Ethiopia followed the same path as many of their compatriots; that is, resorting to irregular migration channels. Expediency and personal trust appeared to strongly influence these women's preference for informal channels, which often involved migration facilitators and networks of friends and relatives already overseas to help arrange the journey. These irregular migration practices are consistent with the mainstream literature and are mostly a strategy to circumvent legal migration control because of inadequacies of official migration policies or channels (OHCHR, 2015). Women migrants' ability to act is often conditioned by their social relationships and family resources, within which their transnational-migration decision is made (Crossley, 2011). Those contemplating working abroad typically rely on knowledge generated from within their circumstances, and irregular migration is mostly a by-product of restricted, inefficient or insufficient official channels.

Aside from seeking informal migration routes, participants also sought and exchanged information about working overseas. This included the type of employment opportunities, where to find recruitment agents or government programs, earning potential and working conditions in different countries. It is important to note that while the women actively sought information about procedures for travel, fees and working conditions, they did not report seeking information on their rights as domestic workers and what to do if these rights are violated. The women often obtain their information about working overseas from their friends and relatives in the community, social media posts and other sources such as recruitment agents.

Regardless of whether the information was biased, inaccurate or even misleading, participants actively sought and shared knowledge with each other, consistent with the literature on other ethnic groups engaged in transnational migration (Massey et al., 1998; Zhang, 2007; Zhang, 2008). Focus groups conducted in Addis Ababa revealed common tips participants had acquired from their compatriots, which influenced the types of jobs and destination countries they sought (see Figure 4).





Figure 4: Reasons mentioned by prospective migrants for choosing certain destination countries



Kuwait City, Kuwait  
 Photo by shahed mufleh on Unsplash

This exchange of information among prospective Ethiopian domestic workers illustrates their varied savviness in their decision making. As one woman explained:

*I wanted to go to change my life and achieve my goals. I don't have anything of my own so far and I want to have something that belongs to me. I paid ETB 5,500 (USD 97) for the certificate of competence (COC) and I wanted to attend the training. But they told me the training venue is too far located in another city, so I just got the certificate without attending.*

**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, 21 years old**

A strong desire to change their life circumstances emerged as a common theme in describing why, despite all the poor experiences relayed to them from other workers, participants still decided to go abroad for work. Another woman stated:

*It is for a better life. Working here is not making any difference in my life. I think it will be better there, so I started the process four months ago, that was when I gave them my passport. I paid ETB 5,500 (USD 97) for the COC and I attended the training and got the certificate.*

**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, 24 years old**

As shown in Figure 5, at the time of fieldwork, most participants were seeking domestic work in Jordan (49.5%) and the UAE, particularly Dubai (37.4%). That said, the choice was also influenced by the presence of overseas employment agreements signed between the Ethiopian government and the destination countries. For example, after the first round of focus groups and interviews were conducted, the KSA signed an overseas employment agreement with the Ethiopian government, creating a seemingly abundant pool of work opportunities. This development would have likely influenced participants' decisions, and if the interviews were conducted today then KSA would likely be listed as a common destination country.

Amman, Jordan

Photo by Who's Denilo ? on Unsplash





Figure 5: Destination countries (n=99)

Country	Percent of respondents
Jordan	49.5
Dubai	37.4
Qatar	12.1
Bahrain	1.0

Within the limited range of destination countries that women migrants could choose from, the potential for better income clearly made the decision-making process easier, as one woman described:

*I heard the salary of domestic workers in Jordan is better compared to other Middle East countries.*  
**Interview 71, 30 years old**

For some women, however, the availability of job openings was the primary factor, with any country deemed acceptable. As one stated:

*I chose Jordan because I don't have any other options. That is where I could find employment right now*  
**Interview 3, 35 years old**

## SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION OF AND RESPONSE TO ADVERSE CONDITIONS

Despite widespread stories in the news media and among migrant communities about human rights violations and poor working conditions overseas, participants seemed determined to migrate to Middle East countries for work. Their determination might be driven by the visible financial success of many who had migrated before them. Additionally, participants with prior experience working abroad were more prepared for the realities of the job and more pragmatic in their expectations. When asked for their reactions to the negative reports of abuses and poor working conditions in the Middle East, participants described their own interpretations of these negative risks and solutions. Their perspectives fall broadly into the following three categories of mental preparation in anticipation of adverse working conditions.

### 1. Optimism

As with many transnational migrants, stories of abuses and hardships in the news media or shared by people in the migrant communities tended to have less impact than those told by people in the participants' immediate social circles. Some of the women had been exposed only to rather positive experiences from their friends and family and saw negative stories as remote and unlikely to occur to them. One woman shared:

*So far all I heard is the good part. I haven't heard anything bad. My sisters are there and they haven't told me anything bad about it. Why would I go if I heard it was bad? Since there is nothing bad about going there, I decided to go and achieve my goals.*  
**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, 21 years old**

Another woman expressed a more balanced view on the experiences of Ethiopian women working abroad as domestic workers:

*I don't think there are no dangers. I know there will be problems, but I think I will overcome the problems. I have convinced myself that I can handle the workload unless I get physically assaulted. We were told on the training to ask for overtime if we were made to work for longer than eight hours in different households, but the language is an issue. I have also heard some women get accused of stealing while items are being planted in their luggage. We hear lots of stories. There are also women of bad character who give us bad names. I have already made up my mind that I will be very careful to stay away from the husbands and just focus on my work.*

**Focus Group 1, Addis Ababa, 27 years old**

## 2. Faith

When confronted with stories of abuse and tragedy, some participants drew strength from religion and the belief in a higher power to protect them. One woman shared her solution:

*A woman from my country went there and died at her employer's house. That was around 14 years ago. We also hear stories about women who bought houses after working there for a few years. There are both good and bad. Only Allah knows what our fate will be.*

**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, no age given**



Other women similarly expressed that their religious faith would keep them safe abroad:

*Like they said, there are good things and there are bad things. I will just put my trust in God and go. I heard about a woman who was pushed out of the window from a multi-story building because she argued with her employer. I also hear about women who work there for few years and change their lives here with the money.*

**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, 37 years old**

### 3. Pragmatism

Despite the widespread stories of abuses and hardships, some participants remained practical in their assessment of the unpredictable nature of securing a good employer, prepared to accept both possibilities – good or bad. As one woman stated:

*I heard about a poor girl who came from the countryside. She went to an Arab country for work and stayed there for some time working and supporting her mother. Someone gave her some sort of a potion which made her very sick. She returned to Ethiopia and her family took her to church for exorcism with holy water. All sorts of creatures used to come out of her mouth, including snakes. She eventually died. But I also know a good story about a woman who changed her life after working there. She used to raise her three children as a single mother selling charcoal on the street. She returned after working in an Arab country for two years and used the money she saved there to open her own small business. So, there is good and bad.*

**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, no age given**

Another added:

*A relative of mine worked for three years in Beirut. She had a disagreement with her employer, I don't know what the reason was. They kicked her out without paying her for the three years' work. She wasn't even allowed to take her own passport and luggage. A few years later, she started another process to go to Dubai. She is now in a much better situation in Dubai – she even came back to visit once.*

**Focus Group 2, Addis Ababa, 26 years old**

These women emphasised the importance of good training prior to departure, preparing for possible bad situations, maintaining connections with friends and relatives, and taking the pre-migration services offered by the government. They anticipated difficult employers and believed that success required competency in their job skills as well as patience during difficult situations. As one woman explained:

*Above all, patience is very important. You need to know how to do housekeeping very well. You need to be very good at cleaning, doing the laundry and ironing. Pay very close attention when they show you how to do things in the kitchen and how to prepare food. Be very patient when they tell you off. Observe what they show you. Be patient and obedient... Patience is very important while working there. They will understand if we tell them we are tired. They don't like it when we pout or have an angry expression on our faces. I used to get along very well with my previous employers, they still call me and ask if I am OK and if I am in need of money.*

**Focus Group 1, Adama, 31 years old**

## CONCLUSION

Despite widespread stories of human rights violations and hardships circulating among migrant communities in Ethiopia, participants in this study remained steadfast in seeking work abroad. Far from being naïve, the women demonstrated a keen awareness of the potential hazards and challenges of working abroad, developing their own defence mechanisms and rational coping strategies to mitigate the risks. Their decisions to work abroad were typically driven by financial needs and the deteriorating economic conditions in their home country, while their own aspirations to get ahead in life were also palpable throughout their conversations.

These findings align with existing literature (for example, Schewel, 2022) on Ethiopian women using overseas employment as a long-distance yet short-term strategy to improve their economic status. Clearly, the women exercised their agency by seeking out informal social networks to learn about destination countries with better pay or working conditions, demonstrating a high degree of resourcefulness in their decision-making and migration planning process.

Despite the potential dangers and uncertainty of migrating for domestic work, participants in this study employed various mitigation strategies to inform and reinforce their decisions to work abroad. They developed mental frameworks to interpret and rationalise reports of hardships in destination countries, while actively leveraging their social networks to identify solutions that could improve their safety and maximise their earnings. Their responses revealed three main approaches to managing uncertainty and risks: optimism, faith and pragmatism. These approaches underscore the resilience and determination of prospective Ethiopian domestic workers as they prepare to embark on their journeys.

Ultimately, the insights shared with this study serve as a testament to the participants' courage and tenacity. Their ability to navigate challenges, seek out opportunities and adapt to difficult circumstances reflects their clear determination to transform their lives and the lives of their families. These women's journeys underscore the importance of supporting migrant workers through informed policies and programs, ensuring that their resilience is met with opportunities for safer, more dignified migration experiences.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from this study provide several recommendations for private entities and government agencies to consider when designing intervention strategies.

- 1 Incorporate peer coaching as part of pre-departure training for prospective migrants.** Pre-departure training is vital for equipping Ethiopian women with essential life skills and knowledge about their right to a dignified work environment. It is equally important for civil society organisations (CSOs) and government agencies to establish networks or organisations through which recently returned domestic workers can meet and share their experiences and insights with prospective migrants.
- 2 Strengthen rights enforcement and accountability mechanisms in destination countries in the Middle East.** Most Middle Eastern countries with a large migrant labour force have codified anti-trafficking laws and/or labour laws. However, the enforcement of these laws is often weak or non-existent, thus emboldening employers to violate migrant workers' rights with impunity. While CSOs may have limited direct influence on governments in the Middle East, they should explore a wider range of approaches for advocacy, including civil litigations, public denouncements of exploitative recruitment agents and employers, and engaging with international bodies to promote accountability.
- 3 Promote the benefits of regular migration, including the recently implemented digital system for formal migration.** The digital system is designed to improve data sharing between migration officials in Ethiopia and their counterparts in destination countries, providing more accurate and timely information on migrants. This would help improve support to migrants overseas, as well as identify negligent recruitment agents and abusive employers.
- 4 Raise awareness of one-stop service centres in source communities.** Potential migrants should have access to accurate, credible information before deciding to migrate. Currently, the TVET (technical and vocational education and training) orientation in Ethiopia lacks sufficient information on conditions in specific destination countries, such as the existence of active bilateral labour agreements, the implications of the *kafala* system for migrants and whether Ethiopians can legally migrate to work there. Providing such information before migrants commit to leaving their home community will improve their resilience against deceptive recruitment practices and help them avoid costs that could entrap them in precarious migration.
- 5 Formally recognise and leverage the expertise of returned migrant domestic workers to build community trust in these individuals as experts on migration.** Returnee groups could be tasked with promoting the benefits of regular and safer migration, offering insights on working and living conditions that is based on their lived experience in select countries. This will help prospective migrants make informed choices, reducing reliance on and the influence of recruitment agents, whose advice can often prioritise profit over the wellbeing of migrants. Returnee expertise can be shared through multiple platforms, information campaigns, community outreach activities or as part of TVET sessions.





Taxis in Bur Dubai.

Fabio Achilli from Milano, Italy, CC BY 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons



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# VISION

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