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## **Towards safer recruitment of Ethiopian women into domestic work abroad: Early findings from the Meneshachin 'Our Departure' qualitative study**

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# Towards safer recruitment of Ethiopian women into domestic work abroad

Early findings from the Meneshachin 'Our Departure' qualitative study

May 2022

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## **Acknowledgements**

This report was prepared by Joanna Busza, Zewdneh Shewamene and Cathy Zimmerman from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), and is based on early findings from a qualitative research study developed by LSHTM, Population Council in Ethiopia and the Freedom Fund.

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# Contents

---

<b>2</b>	Executive summary
----------	-------------------

---

<b>9</b>	Introduction
----------	--------------

---

<b>12</b>	Methods and study participants
-----------	--------------------------------

---

<b>15</b>	Results
15	1. Pre-departure risk
21	2. Experiences during departure and transit
24	3. Employment challenges at destination
27	4. Return and re-migration
29	5. Perceptions of current efforts to promote responsible recruitment in Ethiopia
31	6. Stakeholder recommendations for responsible recruitment

---

<b>33</b>	Discussion: Enablers and barriers to safer recruitment across the migration cycle
-----------	---

---

<b>36</b>	Annex 1: Profile of respondents
-----------	---------------------------------

---

<b>39</b>	Annex 2: Surveys with female migrants repatriated from Lebanon
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<b>42</b>	Endnotes
-----------	----------

# Executive summary

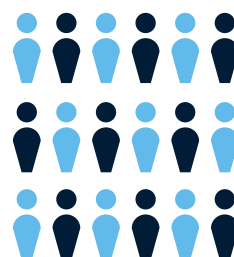
This report presents preliminary findings from the first phase of data collection of the Meneshachin 'Our Departure' qualitative study (August 2020-May 2021) conducted by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) in collaboration with the Population Council in Ethiopia and the Freedom Fund, with support and funding from the U.S. Department of State.

The research examined how Ethiopian female migrants seeking to enter domestic work in the Middle East and Gulf States use formal and informal recruiters, facilitators and overseas employment agencies to arrange their journeys. The Meneshachin study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the roles and tasks undertaken by formal and informal recruiters and individual facilitators engaged in placing Ethiopian women and girls into domestic labour in the Middle East? How do their practices increase or reduce risks of and responses to human trafficking and forced labour?
2. How do prospective and returnee migrants (including survivors of trafficking), their families and other community members perceive the relative benefits and risks of different types of recruiters? How do social norms govern the way in which intermediaries carry out their roles and treat migrant workers?
3. What are current government policies and programmes that promote responsible recruitment of low-skilled migrant workers in Ethiopia? What are the current gaps? What models can be introduced and adapted to the Ethiopian context?
4. How do stakeholders in Ethiopia view current and potential initiatives led by the community, workers and the private sector to promote responsible recruitment of low-skilled migrant workers? Which models or approaches are innovative and could be trialled or scaled up to improve standards for protection of workers?

Phase One of the study focused on stakeholders and recruitment agencies based in Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa. Findings from this phase will inform data collection in Phase Two, which will be conducted at regional, *woreda* (district) and *kebele* (sub-district) level to better understand community perspectives.

Data from Phase One of the research consisted of 69 in-depth interviews with three types of respondents based in Addis Ababa:



18 national level stakeholders working on issues related to migration or prevention of trafficking;



24 labour recruiters, of whom 21 represented registered overseas employment agents and three were unregistered agents;



27 domestic workers recently returned from Lebanon



All respondents were asked about migrants' use of different kinds of recruiters and facilitators, and their views on enablers and barriers to migrants' safety. Thematic content analysis identified emerging themes across the migration cycle, relating to risks and protective factors experienced by migrants:

- During **pre-departure**, when migrants planned their journeys;
- during **transit**, including arrival at the destination country;
- while engaged in **domestic work abroad**;
- during and after **return** to Ethiopia, and in some cases, **re-migration**.

Framing the findings by each stage of the migration cycle reflects the process as experienced by migrants themselves and highlights how their risks and protective factors differ over time.

### Pre-departure

Recruiters were most engaged with prospective migrants and their families prior to migration, during the decision-making and preparation stage. Recruiters took responsibility for liaising between migrants and employment opportunities overseas, guiding the process of selecting the destination country and the means of travel. They also often assisted with arrangements, including checking eligibility criteria, processing visas and other paperwork, and purchasing flights.

Findings indicate various factors relating to the role of recruiters and facilitators during the pre-departure stage that might influence either exploitative or safe outcomes for women migrating for domestic work.

- **Access to verifiable information about work and living conditions abroad.** Because migrants do not have access to verifiable information about work and living conditions abroad, they are vulnerable to being misled about their earning potential, the nature and difficulty of domestic labour, and the likelihood of abuse.
- **Registered versus unregistered recruiters.** Although migrants are increasingly encouraged to select only legally registered private employment agencies, in reality, there appears to be little difference in how registered and unregistered recruiters operate. Moreover, it is

difficult for migrants to distinguish whether a recruiter is registered or unregistered because they each offer similar services.

- **Accountability at the destination side.** Returnee migrants did not associate the quality of their experience in-country with their choice of recruiter in Ethiopia. Positive or negative experiences were understood to be associated with the specific circumstances in the destination household, particularly their treatment by employers, for which most women felt the recruiter could not be held responsible.
- **Compliance and oversight.** Respondents described how registered agencies sometimes facilitate illegal migration by failing to comply with regulations, such as accepting forged documents for age and education level. Insufficient supervision and oversight of registered agencies and across the migration process means that unscrupulous practices can flourish. While there are over 800 overseas employment agencies registered with the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Skills,<sup>1</sup> the Ministry does not appear to have the capacity to monitor them.
- **Legislative environment.** Respondents felt favourable toward the Overseas Employment Proclamation (2016) and the Anti-Trafficking Law (2020), which were seen as a good policy foundation, and increasingly recognised by the public. Recruiters noted that prospective migrants have started to ask more informed questions of registered agents, including about safeguards. A revised proclamation was introduced in 2021, following the data collection reported in detail in the main body of this report.

### Implications of pre-departure findings.

Ultimately, findings about the pre-departure stage suggest a number of challenges in relation to improving the services women access so that they can migrate knowledgeably and safely. First, it will almost always be difficult for women to gain up-to-date information about the true work terms and conditions in their destination country and in specific households where they are placed. Because recruiters are selling their services in a competitive market, they are likely to present the most promising image of overseas work. In fact, they also may not be able to predict the actual nature of each individual job. Second, there are so many different individuals and organisations offering migration services that it will be difficult for women to know which ones are registered.

Moreover, it remains unclear whether registered agencies will in fact be more trustworthy than facilitators who may, for example, be individuals who have a closer personal connection to the prospective migrant. Finally, the large numbers of registered agencies and the limited capacity of the Ministry make it unclear whether effective oversight and penalties for bad actors are possible.

### Transit

Because female domestic workers tend to migrate to the Middle East and Gulf States by air, departure from Ethiopia is considered relatively straightforward and safe. Key findings on how the transit stage might influence a woman's exposure to exploitative conditions are as follows:

- **Travel costs.** One difference between registered and unregistered recruiters seems to be that the former cover costs of the flight and visa but the latter often ask migrants or their families to pay for travel.
- **Unexpected arrival arrangements.** Migrants may find their arrival at destination differs from the agreed protocol. Registered recruiters are required by Ethiopian law to ensure their overseas counterparts meet migrants at the airport and check contractual agreements prior to taking them to their place of employment. However, returnees described having been collected at the airport by their employers and having no contact with in-country agents.
- **Lack of accountability of local destination agents.** It is not uncommon for recruiters in Ethiopia to have limited contact and control over the actions of the agents at the destination. The gap between what is promised according to the Ethiopian policy and what happens in practice at the destination has been blamed on lack of accountability of local agents in the destination countries who operate outside the control of Ethiopian recruiters. Larger employment agencies may have their own staff in some destination countries, including Ethiopian nationals, but this was reported as rare and occurring only among the largest, most established agencies.

**Implications of transit stage findings.** Among the more substantial findings about the risks for migrant women when they are transiting are the weak links between the agents who arrange their travel from Ethiopia and the agents at the

destination. For example, the agents who arrange travel appear to be unable to effectively ensure that women are met as promised at the airport and have their employment contracts reviewed for compliance.

### Working at destination

It is generally the conditions at destination, and specifically those related to employers' behaviour and treatment of the worker, that determine whether a woman is in 'decent' work conditions versus exploitative or even abusive circumstances. It is unclear how often women report or refrain from reporting problems or attempt to get assistance from local agents. In principle, migrants should be able to seek assistance from employment agencies either in-country or from Ethiopia. However, getting assistance for problems at the destination is likely to be challenging for domestic workers in private households. Returnees shared a wide range of their experiences when they sought assistance.

- **Local agents generally offer limited or no assistance after placement and payment.** While some women reported that they were able to negotiate with employers or change their place of work with the help of a recruiter or their local agent, others described being unable to locate a local agent or contact the Ethiopian recruiter. Others even experienced further exploitation and abuse from local agents.
- **Recruitment and placement are financial activities and post-placement assistance is rare.** Stakeholders largely agreed that recruiters are motivated by financial gain and are likely to abandon domestic workers once they have been placed into work. While there are rarely any means of enforcing agents' legal obligations to provide ongoing assistance during the placement, a few examples of how recruiters had intervened when migrants required help were described by both returnees and recruiters.
- **Assistance by Ethiopian embassy or consulate.** As part of its responsibility for protecting national citizens abroad, the Ethiopian government has committed to appointing a Labour Attaché in countries with which it has bilateral agreements for labour migration. Respondents reported that the introduction of Labour Attachés was a positive step, but that their capacity to respond was

still limited, albeit improving with time. Given the economic crisis leading to repatriation of migrant workers in Lebanon, all the women interviewed had returned to Ethiopia with diplomatic support, and thus may have been more aware of assistance offered through embassies.

#### **Implications of destination stage findings.**

The destination phase is when the greatest number of problems and abuses arise. Women are often advised or assume that assistance will be available from the local agent if they have problems. However, there appear to be few formal processes put in place at destination to ensure women have access to assistance or to oversee the responses provided by local agents. Instead, reports suggest that assistance for women is often arbitrary. These assistance and accountability gaps are not surprising given the commercial nature of the enterprise and the fact that recruiters have very little to gain by assisting women after they have been paid for placement services. Assistance gaps raise the question of whether the destination states are willing or able to establish oversight and accountability mechanisms that can genuinely identify and penalise unresponsive or bad actors.

#### **Return and re-migration**

While recruiters often have little involvement during the return stage, their services at this stage could help ensure that an individual is able to come home in a safe and timely manner. Return services will be especially important to individuals who are returning because they have had a difficult or abusive experience. Recruiters are more likely to become involved when returnees wish to re-migrate. This study identified roles that recruiters can play after an individual has completed their term of overseas employment.

- **Support for returnees.** Some recruiters described measures they took to support returnees after their return to Ethiopia. These included enrolling migrants in financial programmes and savings and investment schemes, as well as offering financial literacy training and support.
- **Legal restrictions to re-migration.** Prior to Proclamation 1246 (June 2021), experienced domestic workers who wanted to re-migrate faced a legal barrier that made any worker that had not attained an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education ineligible for out-migration. Many women without the required education level were

forced to seek unregistered recruiters and irregular migration. Proclamation 1246 has revoked the education prerequisite, replacing it with a requirement of training and a certificate of occupational competence. The need for training does not apply to workers who have previously worked overseas. However, it is currently unclear how the new requirement will be enacted in practice and whether migrants will still face barriers to re-migration through legal means.

**Implications of return and re-migration stage findings.** Findings indicate that there is no formal or informal practice for recruiters to support a woman's return home or assist with any aspects of reintegration. Government assistance for this process is not presently available. However, when asked about these services, several recruiters reported that they had provided help to their returning clients. The next research phase will explore what types of assistance women might want and might reasonably expect from recruiters. It will be especially important to learn what types of assistance should be provided when the placement is abusive and the woman requires emergency intervention and return, and potentially post-trafficking support such as mental health counselling.

#### **Encouraging responsible recruitment**

When respondents were asked specifically about initiatives targeting improvements to recruitment practices to reduce migrants' risks, they focused on three areas:

- **Strengthening enforcement of existing laws.** Good policies are in place 'on paper' and should be implemented in practice. Respondents highlighted that useful measures have already been put in place over recent years, including joint liability (i.e. holding Ethiopian recruiters responsible for any exploitation or abuse perpetrated by their staff or counterparts in the destination countries) and a 'migrant protection fund' for recruiters (i.e. requiring recruiters to deposit \$100,000 USD in a migrant protection fund in order to obtain a licence). However, respondents were not familiar with any cases where the protections provided by these measures had been invoked. There was less enthusiasm for introducing new measures, which may not be easy to implement.

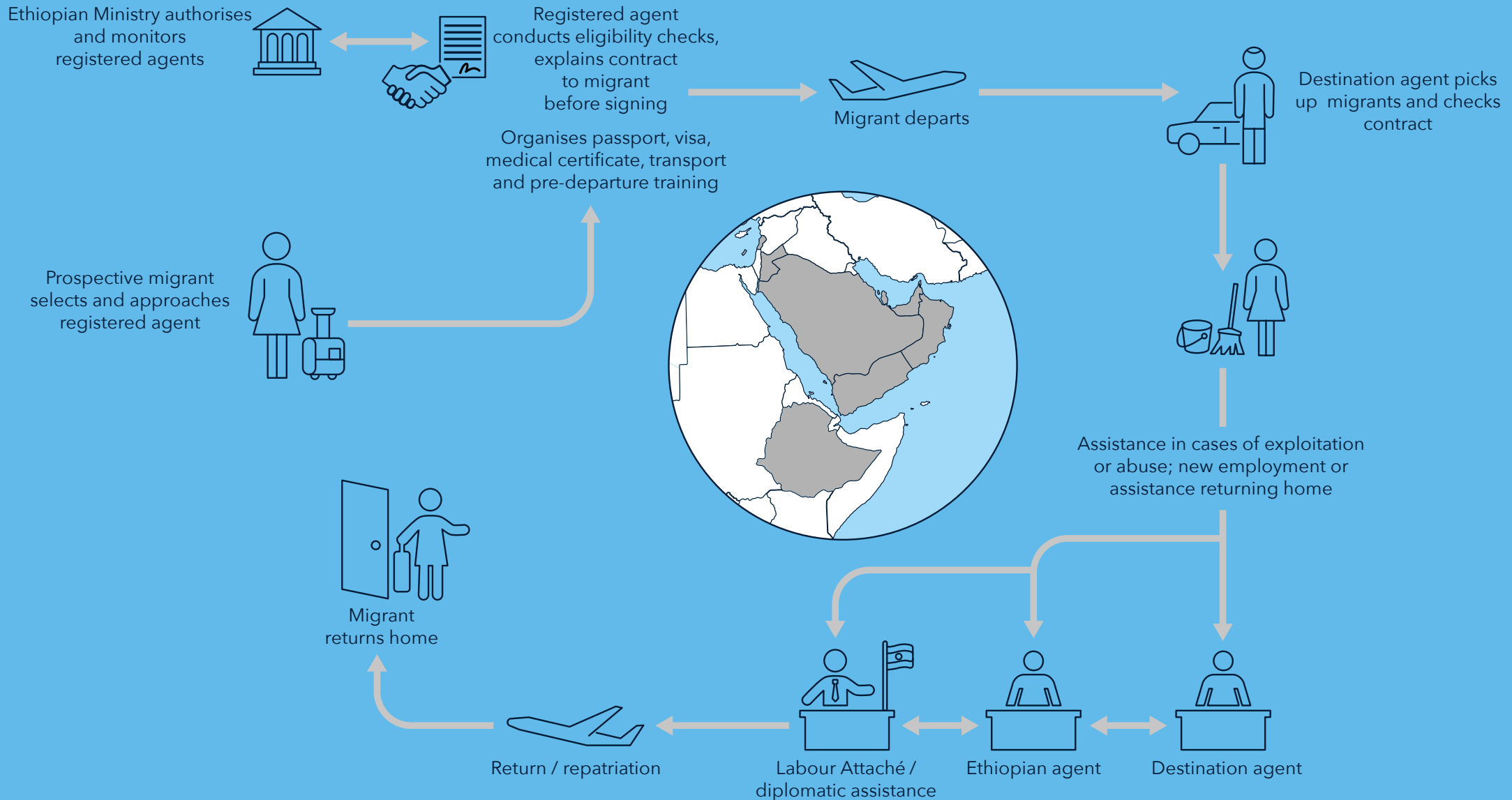


- **Increasing diplomatic measures.** The Ethiopian government should make greater effort to increase the role and substantial actions undertaken by Labour Attachés in destination countries. As most labour abuses occur primarily in the destination locations, destination-country agents are better placed to protect and assist workers than recruiters in the country of origin. Much greater diplomatic investment should therefore be made into both ensuring support is available to victims of exploitation and pressuring Ethiopian and local officials in destination locations to increase mechanisms to prevent and respond to labour exploitation.
- **Improving community awareness.** While awareness alone will not prevent all cases of neglect or exploitation, greater awareness of the rights of migrant workers and obligations of agents, including local regulations, will pave the way for better implementation of protection mechanisms.

Additional perspectives will be sought at regional, district and community level in Phase Two of the research.

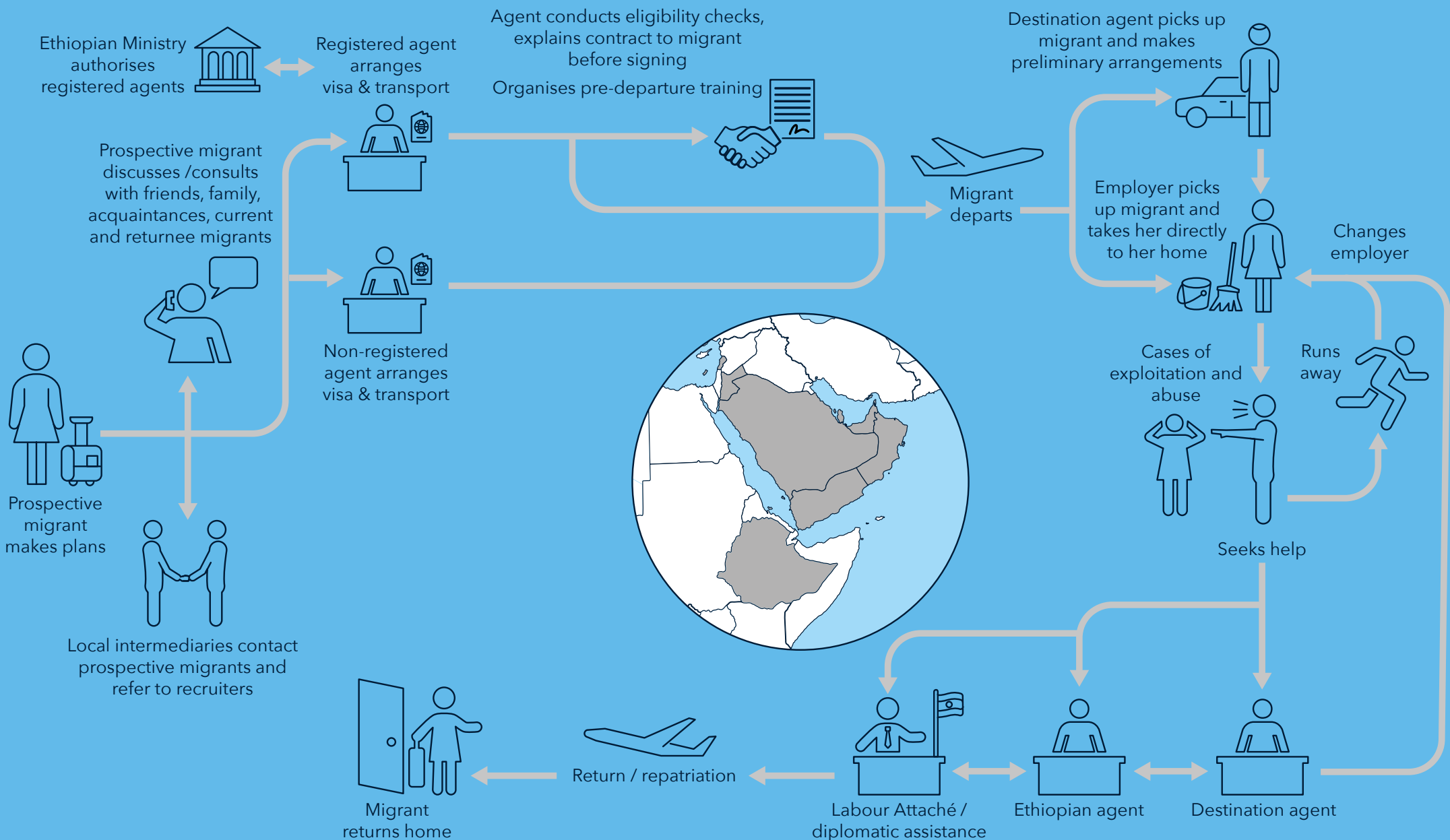
# Figure 1: Migration in theory

Based on interviewees' understanding of the official migration process and regulations in place at the time of fieldwork



# Figure 2: Migration in reality

As described by respondents reflecting their experiences of migration, which may have pre-dated existing regulatory framework



# Introduction

This report presents preliminary findings from the first phase of data collection of the Meneshachin 'Our Departure' qualitative study conducted by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) in collaboration with the Population Council in Ethiopia and the Freedom Fund, with support and funding from the U.S. Department of State. The study aims to inform the development of feasible responsible recruitment measures that could reduce the risk of labour exploitation and trafficking experienced by Ethiopian migrant women seeking domestic work abroad. The research focuses on the role of different actors in arranging Ethiopian women's migration to the Middle East and Gulf States for the purpose of domestic labour, and how these actors' activities exacerbate or mitigate risk of harm.

The poor living and working conditions experienced by Ethiopian domestic workers abroad, including exploitation and/or abuse, have been well-documented. Ethiopian media and government messaging emphasise negative migration experiences and attempt to prevent these by discouraging out-migration or restricting it to officially recognised and authorised procedures. Previous research<sup>2</sup> by LSHTM and the Freedom Fund demonstrates, however, that it is often difficult for Ethiopian migrants to identify differences between regular and irregular migration, or they opt for the latter because of convenience, lower cost, or to select someone familiar from within their social networks. Yet, to date, relatively little research has been conducted into the migration planning process and the role of labour intermediaries, particularly which actors are involved at what stages of the migration cycle.

To help fill this gap and identify opportunities for improving the safety of out-migration for domestic work, the Meneshachin study examines how women's migration from Ethiopia to the Middle East and Gulf States is currently facilitated, and what role the policy environment plays in shaping patterns of migration, associated risks and potential protection mechanisms. The study is designed to identify different types of

intermediaries who assist with the migration process, including recruiters (both registered and unregistered) and facilitators at community level.

In particular, this study intends to respond to the following research questions:

- 1.** What are the roles and tasks undertaken by formal and informal recruiters and individual facilitators engaged in placing Ethiopian women and girls into domestic labour in the Middle East? How do their practices increase or reduce risks of and responses to human trafficking and forced labour?
- 2.** How do prospective and returnee migrants (including survivors of trafficking), their families and other community members perceive the relative benefits and risks of different types of recruiters? How do social norms govern the way in which intermediaries carry out their roles and treat migrant workers?
- 3.** What are current government policies and programmes that promote responsible recruitment of low-skilled migrant workers in Ethiopia? What are the current gaps? What models can be introduced and adapted to the Ethiopian context?
- 4.** How do stakeholders in Ethiopia view current and potential initiatives led by the community, workers and the private sector to promote responsible recruitment of low-skilled migrant workers? Which models or approaches are innovative and could be trialled or scaled up to improve standards for protection of workers?

This report presents preliminary findings from Phase One of a two-phased research programme. Findings are driven by the above research questions and the first phase of data collection, which was conducted between August 2020 and May 2021 in Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa. Following a summary of the study methods and overview of the dataset, the results

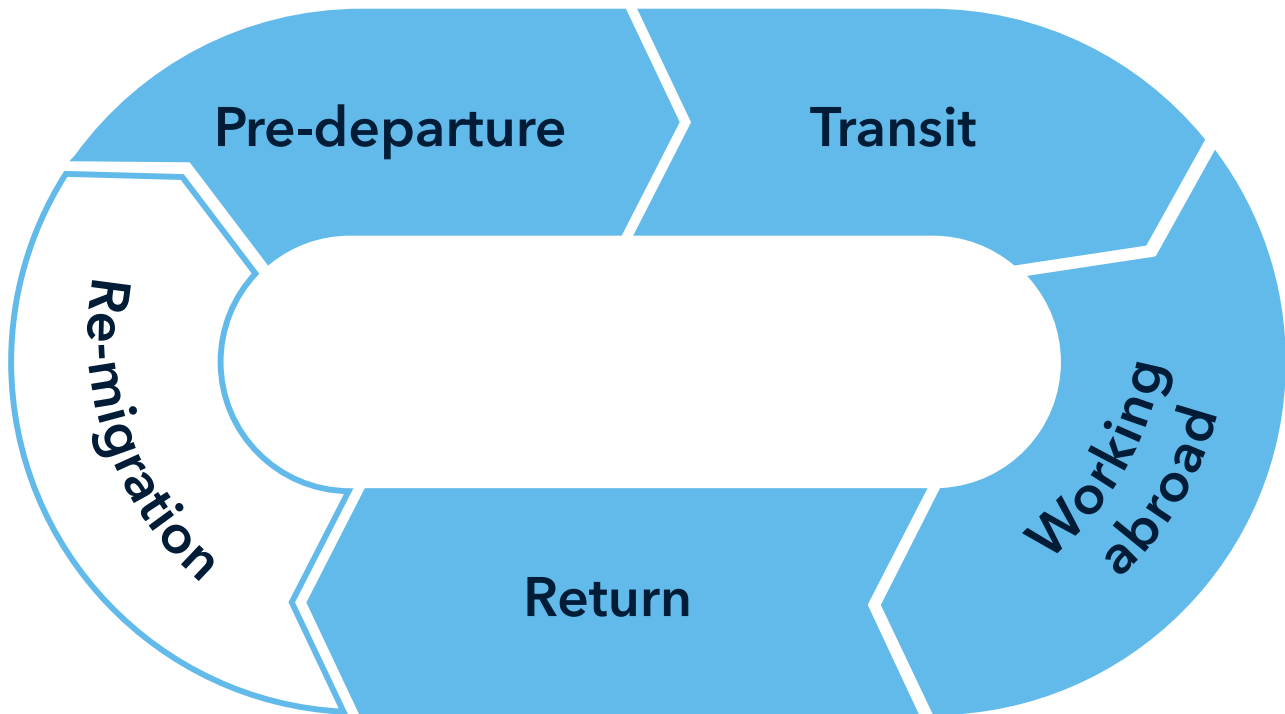


Figure 3: Stages of the migration cycle  
 Adapted from original illustration in Zimmerman, Kiss and Hossein (2011)

are structured following the stages of migration (depicted in Figure 3), building on a framework by Zimmerman, Kiss and Hossein (2011).<sup>3</sup> This framework depicts the chronological and geographical migration cycle from pre-departure planning, through departure, transit, and the period spent working in the destination country, to return to the country of origin. It is also noted that not all migrants follow the same cycle, because this may or may not involve circular migration, detention, involuntary return, and/or re-migration to the same or new destination countries.

Presenting Meneshachin study findings by each stage of the migration cycle reflects the various experiences migrants may have over the course of the migration cycle and highlights how they encounter risks or protective factors over time. Although recruitment activities are usually concentrated during the pre-departure and transit periods, there may be ongoing engagement between labour recruiters and migrants at each stage, including possibilities for a labour intermediary to mitigate emerging risks or respond to abuses.

The first results section describes the pre-departure period of preparing for migration. Findings indicate respondents' perceptions of regulations, requirements, and procedures mandated by official proclamations and how experiences differ in reality.

The second results section covers experiences during departure, transit and arrival at destination, including respondents' views on the roles of the different actors involved in recruiting and sending migrants. These included registered recruiters, unregistered recruiters (locally referred to as 'brokers'), and local facilitators (community members involved in linking prospective migrants to both registered and unregistered recruiters).

The third results section presents respondents' views on determinants of migrants' safety, health, well-being and rights while they are working abroad.

The fourth results section discusses the role of formal and informal actors in supporting migrants to return home, including in emergency situations such as forced deportations or economic crisis.

The fifth results section reviews stakeholders' opinions on the potential applicability and utility of different models of responsible recruitment for implementation in Ethiopia.

The final results section presents stakeholders' own recommendations for alternative measures.

The report concludes with a discussion of challenges and opportunities to promote safer recruitment practices throughout the migration cycle.



### Note on terminology

Throughout the report, **recruiter** is used to refer to an individual who is engaged in sending a female migrant abroad for the purposes of domestic work, including placing her in employment.

Recruiters can be *registered*, which means they are licensed by the Ethiopian government and authorised to arrange regularised migration if they follow the requirements stipulated by law. Registered recruiters are also known as Private Employment Agencies (PEA), although this term was not used commonly by interview respondents. In interviews, registered recruiters were also referred to as *legal agents*.

Recruiters can also be *unregistered*, meaning they operate outside government structures, and are not formally licensed or authorised. In interviews, unregistered recruiters were also referred to as *informal brokers* and *illegal agents*.

**Facilitators** are individuals (returnees, community members, relatives or neighbours of prospective migrants) who assist prospective migrants in some way, often by providing information and links to recruiters. They are not significantly involved in sending or placing migrants, and may or may not receive payment or benefits from either the migrants they help or the recruiters to whom they make referrals.

# Methods and study participants

The study used semi-structured qualitative interviews to elicit individual opinions, experiences and perspectives across three types of respondents. In the first phase of fieldwork, we collected data from national and sub-national stakeholders, people identifying as migration recruiters, and Ethiopian domestic workers who had recently returned from Lebanon as part of the Bete assistance programme organised by the Ethiopian embassy and a migrant support service in Lebanon, supported by Agar, a registered Ethiopian non-governmental organisation and the Freedom Fund. Trained qualitative researchers followed a topic guide specifically designed for each type of respondent. Interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and were conducted at a location convenient to the respondent, e.g. over the phone or in the offices of the stakeholders and recruiters, and at a rehabilitation centre where returnee domestic workers stayed following their return to Ethiopia. Topic guides addressed respondents' involvement in migration-related policy or programming, knowledge of migrants' use of different kinds of recruiters and facilitators, and views on enablers and barriers to migrants' safety.

Sampling and recruitment procedures varied by type of respondent and are described below.

## Stakeholders

Participating stakeholders were identified drawing on contacts and professional networks of the Population Council, LSHTM, and the Freedom Fund. Identified stakeholders represented a mix of institutions working on migration and labour issues, including international organisations (UN agencies, development and humanitarian organisations), government ministries and agencies at federal and regional level, and national civil society associations. Stakeholders were contacted by phone and if they agreed to an interview, an in-person or telephone appointment was arranged.

Topic guides for stakeholders also asked them to consider three different approaches to responsible recruitment that are currently

promoted in the global safe migration discourse: Migrant Resource Centres, streamlined registration for employment agencies, and joint liability clauses. At the end of each interview, stakeholders were asked to suggest other key informants who might have information relevant to the study to increase the sample size through peer-referral. A total of 18 stakeholders completed interviews out of 26 approached. Those who declined cited lack of time, competing work demands, or unfamiliarity with the topic.

## Recruiters

The sampling strategy for migration recruiters combined use of a national database of registered private overseas employment agencies with peer-referral. At the time of data collection, the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA) website for registered agencies was no longer operational. Instead, a printed list had been posted on the walls of the MOLSA offices. Over 400 registered agencies were identified, among which just 45 had working telephone numbers or other contact details. Of these, 23 were contacted by phone or through in-person visits to their work premises and nine agreed to interview. The relatively high non-response rate was likely influenced by the sensitivity of the research topic and the use (due to covid-19 restrictions) of telephone rather than face-to-face interviews, which can increase suspicion amongst potential respondents. An additional 15 respondents, including three unregistered recruiters, were identified through peer-referral and all agreed to interview.

It proved particularly difficult to locate and enrol unregistered recruiters as they operate outside the legal system and fear possible repercussions if identified. Recent anti-trafficking legislation and the media's focus on trafficking and exploitation of Ethiopian migrants abroad has increased the sensitivity of the topic of migration and hardened attitudes against irregular forms of recruitment and travel, which likely contributed to potential informants' reluctance to participate. Thus, while 24 recruiters were interviewed, only three of these were unregistered.

Topic guides for recruiters focused on how they identify potential migrants, the activities they conduct as part of their role in facilitating migration and job placement, and their views on determinants of risk for women seeking domestic work in the Middle East and Gulf States.

### Returned migrants

Finally, 27 returnees from Lebanon were interviewed within two months of their repatriation to Ethiopia with assistance from the Freedom Fund. After arrival in Addis Ababa, returnees received support over a few days at a rehabilitation shelter run by a local non-governmental organisation until being reunited with their families. Returnees identified as having higher levels of vulnerabilities were provided with further medical and psychological support, depending on needs, and were provided with a range of additional services, including psychosocial and livelihood support. In such cases, women were invited to stay for several weeks/months at the shelter in order to receive comprehensive reintegration services. For this research, only those women who were not considered to be suffering from acute mental health problems were recruited for interview.

Three trained female fieldworkers conducted interviews at the shelter. Interviewers received specialised training focused on ensuring that the women participated voluntarily, and instructions on safeguarding measures for when participants become emotionally distressed or agitated when recalling bad experiences in Lebanon or throughout the repatriation process. A psychologist was available on location and referrals made for counselling if respondents became upset. Interviewers also took measures such as pausing during interviews to give participants time to deal with their emotions and help them feel comfortable.

### Research ethics and data collection process

Interviews with all three types of respondent were conducted in Amharic or Oromiffa, digitally recorded, transcribed and translated into English. All respondents provided written informed consent, which emphasised that the information they provided would remain anonymous, that they could terminate the interview and withdraw their consent at any time, and that any data shared in reports or other research outputs would be anonymised to prevent identification

of respondents or individuals they may have named. Returnees were further assured that refusal to participate in the study would in no way affect their access to services received at the rehabilitation centre. Ethical approval was obtained from LSHTM (ethics reference number 19127) and the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers and Anthropologists (ESSSWA) in Ethiopia (ethics reference number ESSSWA/L/AA/0449/20).

Both data-driven and targeted content analyses were conducted to identify themes, conceptual categories, commonalities and differences in participants' responses. First, two researchers (one from the UK and one Ethiopian) undertook data familiarisation by reading the transcripts. Data checking was conducted by the Ethiopian researcher by listening to the recorded audio interviews while reviewing transcripts to ensure accuracy of translation and provide quality control for transcriptions. Through a process of data immersion (carefully reading and re-reading each interview transcript), researchers reflected on the entirety of the data set to understand and interpret the worldviews of respondents. This was followed by initial open coding (data-driven) of transcripts using NVivo, generating as many codes as possible. The initial coding framework was formulated inductively, with the open codes subsequently grouped together into emerging themes.

In total, 69 individual interviews were conducted consisting of 18 policy and program stakeholders, 24 recruiters, and 27 returnee migrants from Lebanon (see Annex 1 for profiles of respondents). The majority of policy and program stakeholder participants were male (13 out of 18). Participants in this category were diverse in terms of their roles in relation to safer migration of low-skilled domestic worker migrants from Ethiopia to the Middle East corridor. Policy stakeholders represented national government institutions (7), government agencies at Ethiopian regional level (4), international organisations (1), and local non-profit organisations (6). Most recruiters were representatives of registered overseas employment agencies (21 out of 24, 14 male and 7 female) while only three unregistered recruiters were interviewed (2 male and 1 female). One interviewee (representative of a registered agency) did not consent to being audio recorded although gave permission for notes from the interview to be included in the study.

Returnee participants were all female, low-





Photo: Nina R

skilled domestic workers who were repatriated from Lebanon following the economic crisis in the country. They represent a unique study population as they had been repatriated after being made homeless during the combined crises of Lebanon's national economic collapse and the covid-19 pandemic. These were highly vulnerable migrants requiring emergency assistance and thus likely to differ from other returnees who had worked in other countries and/or arranged their own travel back to Ethiopia. Data from the shelter where they were assessed on arrival demonstrated extremely high levels of trafficking and exploitation (see Annex 2). For example, among the 222 returnee domestic workers at the shelter, only 38% had received a written contract and they reported an average working week of 112 hours. Applying the U.S. Department of State definitions for human trafficking resulted in a trafficking prevalence of 97%. Furthermore, most of these returnees had departed Ethiopia more than three years before the study, meaning they migrated prior to the ratification of new Ethiopian

laws and regulations. Their accounts need to be understood within this context, although they nonetheless provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of Ethiopian migrant women in the Middle East and Gulf States.

The interviews with these repatriated returnees from Lebanon were not included in the original research protocol, but rather were an opportunistic addition to the study. During Phase Two fieldwork, returnees from a range of Middle East and Gulf State countries will be recruited for interview, purposively selected for diversity of background characteristics and migration experience.

# Results

## 1. Pre-departure risk

Findings on the pre-departure phase indicated three factors that contribute to migrant domestic workers' vulnerability to recruitment-related abuses while they were still in Ethiopia. These included:

- poor access to accurate information about the destination work conditions, and origin and destination immigration and labour regulations;
- unclear distinctions between registered and unregistered recruiters;
- insufficient oversight of the pre-departure migration process.

### Unrealistic expectations

Participants suggested that various forms of misinformation, particularly an absence of accurate information about the work conditions, contributed to migrants' unrealistic expectations prior to leaving Ethiopia. Most Ethiopians seeking work abroad are not familiar with the culture, language and practices of people living in the Middle East and Gulf States, particularly the prejudice and discrimination that many foreign domestic workers face. Women often do not fully understand the difficulties of working in a private household, their lack of control over workload and living conditions, or how poorly they may be treated by their employers. Moreover, many prospective migrants anticipated higher earnings than were realistic.

*“They did not know the type of work, culture and civilisation in the destination country. Most of them come from rural areas and they don't even have knowledge about how hard domestic work is.”*  
(Recruiter #1)

Several reasons were offered as to why women might have had an inadequate understanding of the circumstances faced by migrant domestic workers. Some study participants suggested that for some women, their decision to migrate may

have been somewhat impulsive, leaving them little time to gather information, and they might be relying solely on widely disseminated 'success stories' that highlight how women working as maids in 'Arab countries' returned with enough money to build a house or start a business.

However, even when women heard negative stories in the media or from previous migrants, returnees reported having focused solely and uncritically on the notable examples of local women who had been able to improve their lives and those of their family members.

*“Most of us, when we decide to go, we don't have that much information about the place we are going and the things we might face there.... I didn't know anything but my heart was set on going and earning money blindly and that is what hurts us the most, I think.... I had worries but I was not focused on the negative part. When I saw the experience of others who went and came back before me, some were hurt and some had a good life there. **I focused only on the good part** when I decided to go to an Arab country for work.”*  
(Returnee #19, emphasis added)

Women reported trusting local advice without considering many details in advance of travel, including, in some cases, even to which country they were migrating.

*“I had no idea about the place where I was going except for the information our recruiter told us. I didn't know where Beirut was located. What I knew at the time of travelling was that I was going to an Arab country.”*  
(Returnee #17)

Family members, relatives, other returnees and current migrants abroad were among those described as portraying an overly positive image of opportunities. Because prospective migrants were particularly likely to trust their accounts, local community members were often used by recruiters to encourage migration, which may have led to exaggerated benefits. For example, in



the case below, it is unclear whether the woman's relative provided advice and a link to an Addis Ababa-based recruiter to be helpful, or whether this relative received some form of benefit from the referral. The respondent herself may not have known, and many returnees described situations where there could be multiple motivations for community members' provision of support and advice.

*"My uncle's daughter who had just returned from an Arab country advised me to go to an Arab country and earn money in order to change my life and the life of my parents instead of wasting my precious time in vain in my country. She told me I would be able to find a job as a domestic worker without much difficulty. She further stated that at first (as a new migrant worker) I would get 150 US dollars monthly salary ... [and] after two years my monthly salary would rise to 200 US dollars per month.... She advised me to get an ID card from the kebele administration office first and then to go to Addis Ababa to get my passport.... Then she gave the telephone number of the broker [who was also a relative or close friend of the uncle's daughter]."*  
(Returnee #9)

According to stakeholders and returnees, recruiters are the worst offenders in exaggerating positive experiences of domestic work abroad and downplaying its challenges. The use of 'false promises' by recruiters was considered actively deceptive and a deliberate means of increasing the numbers of women signing up with them.

*"Recruiters recruit individuals starting from the village level by providing false information to girls and their families by using different convincing strategies such as by telling them that they will earn enough money and live a better life and they tell them that they know the best route to reach the Middle East and convince them by using local languages."*  
(Stakeholder #12)

*"When I went to the Arab country, I was told I would be paid 250 dollars per month but when I got there it wasn't true, I was paid 150 dollars instead and the woman I worked for made me do work at two households, her and her mother's, and she sometimes took me to her sister's house too when she wanted to."*  
(Returnee #19)

While recruiters claimed this was a common strategy among other (usually informal) recruiters and facilitators, none admitted that *they themselves* would engage in deceptive practices, although the implication was that it was a widespread practice.

*"We first advise them about the situation in the receiving country. We tell them it is not as they expected or have been told by brokers or relatives. Most of them did not tell them the correct payments, burden of work and culture in the receiving countries. Most are not aware of the lifestyle in Arab countries."*  
(Recruiter #1)

On the contrary, the majority (19) of interviewed recruiters stated that it was their responsibility to provide as much detail as possible to pre-departure migrants to ensure they knew what to expect. In addition to practical information about domestic work, they reported educating prospective migrants about daily life, local customs, and cultural expectations regarding interpersonal behaviour that might reduce the chances of the domestic worker coming into conflict with her employers. Providing background information was considered protective in that it prepared migrants for hypothetical difficult situations, and recruiters view this as helpful for preventing misunderstandings and conflicts between the worker and their employer.

*"Before I send the workers, I make sure that they learn Arabic language in order to make their stay there easier. I make sure they know how to clean the house there properly and I give them some insights on how the holidays are celebrated so that they can be familiar with the culture. The employers there don't attack the workers out of nowhere, they do that when the employees make a mistake. Some of the employers are good and some are bad."*  
(Recruiter #21)

*"We share our practical experience of the destination countries in relation to culture, food and other aspects through the training. It has been proven that our training could take them away from any kind of hardship."*  
(Recruiter #11)

Recruiters explained that this was not only acting responsibly towards migrants, but also avoids wasting their own time and risking their

professional reputations by placing poorly prepared migrants in posts where they might terminate their employment contracts early.

*“There are females whom we declined to recruit after we assessed them, concluding they will not be effective and will rather create problems for our organisation [recruitment agency]. Besides, there have been females who changed their interest [changed their mind] within a week or a month after they had gone. They were unable to cope with the challenges, unable to adapt to the environment, feeding habits, and the difficulty communicating with their employer. There are also females who did not have awareness about the high workload abroad at their employer’s house.”*  
(Recruiter # 4)

The recruiter’s view is that some women may not fully appreciate the nature of their future work and this perception gap might affect their ability to take up and stay in their job.

**Implications.** While many of these findings point to poor knowledge and low awareness as risk factors for negative experiences, there is little evidence globally that more pre-migration preparation time, awareness or knowledge will reduce risks of exploitation. Findings from a five-year evaluation of a pre-migration knowledge and awareness intervention in South Asia indicated that even when women are equipped with better migration knowledge, they are unable to assert their rights or reduce their exposure to exploitative conditions in Gulf State countries.<sup>5</sup>

It is also interesting to note how comments by recruiters and returnees can be interpreted to mean that the women are somewhat to blame for their bad experiences because they were impetuous or poorly prepared. These comments reflect findings from other studies that suggest how difficult it is for women to truly understand the harsh, lonely, discriminatory conditions they will have to endure as domestic workers in the Middle East.<sup>6,7</sup>

At the same time, our data does suggest some recruiters create false impressions of work conditions or at least omit descriptions of potential hardships. Individuals explained that because of the financial aspects of the recruitment business, including for local community members who may gain a commission for referrals,

monetary motivations might lead to misleading portrayals and promises. Yet, interviews with many recruiters indicate that they understand the value of informing their clients about the destination culture and work conditions and try to impart this type of knowledge. Some intermediaries appear to understand the risks to their reputation (and their future business) if women return with complaints.

### Similar practices between registered and unregistered recruiters

While policy stakeholders and recruiters were clear about the distinction between recruitment agencies that were registered (and therefore legal) and those operating without registration (and therefore outside the mandate of the law), this was not at all clear to migrant domestic workers, according to the returnees interviewed for this study. Furthermore, from their experiences, whether they relied on registered, unregistered or a mixed network of agents did not appear to determine the outcomes of their migration.

Even before departure, respondents described how both registered and unregistered agencies operate outside the law to be able to send migrants more quickly. Recruiters described how their registered agencies used local community members to identify prospective migrants in rural communities (which is not legal practice), accepted forged documents as evidence of age or education level, and expedited certain procedures, such as obtaining false certification of pre-departure training.

*“Usually the migrants do not come to our office directly. There is a third party, a broker, who arranges the deal. The migrants are brought here by the brokers.”*  
(Recruiter #10)

*“There are some [prospective migrants] who come to us through referral of middle men/ brokers, especially those who come from the countryside.”*  
(Recruiter #15)

Thus, not only do registered and unregistered recruiters *appear* similar to community members, they sometimes *operate* in the same ways, something acknowledged by all three types of respondents.

*“It is difficult to differentiate the roles and responsibilities of each actor in migration. People find it difficult to differentiate between illegal and licensed overseas employment agencies. There is a misunderstanding about the role of legal and unlicensed agencies.”*  
(Recruiter #18)

*“The problem is that agencies that have a legal status are involved in illegal activities. It is difficult for us all to distinguish a legal agency from an illegal one. They all speak the same thing.”*  
(Returnee #1)

*“Most legal recruiters and all illegal recruiters are doing illegal things because their main target is getting profit, they are doing their business and they are not doing charity work.”*  
(Stakeholder # 12)

The one small-scale unregistered female recruiter we interviewed was herself unclear on why her work would be considered *illegal*. As a returnee, she helped her relatives, friends and other community members find domestic work abroad through personal connections. Although she understood the differences between a registered employment agency and her role as an unregistered recruiter, she nonetheless considered herself not to be breaking any laws due to the fact that she was offering favours rather than earning a profit.

*“Yes, [I am] a regular one [recruiter] because I sent these people using my connections and the people I know who lived there personally. I think irregular travelling is when they [migrants] use illegal agents to get there. These agents make them pay a lot of money. I do it out of goodwill in order to help as many people as I can by treating them as if they were my family. I don't get any money from doing it.”*  
(Recruiter #21)

Ultimately, returnees rarely blamed poor experiences on the labour intermediary, but instead on their employer's behaviour and 'the luck of the draw' where they were placed. Women frequently attributed their migration outcomes to 'fate', which determined how they were treated in the destination household.

*“Whether one uses the legal or illegal channel to go to Arab countries, eventually our fate is determined by the behaviour of our employers.”*  
(Returnee #10)

It was not unusual for women to consider that their experience might have little to do with the recruiter, or whether they rely on registered versus unregistered agents, as noted by this returnee:

*“We may encounter lots of difficulties [poor treatment, exploitation, etc] even if we go legally. We have to get prepared to face the challenge.”*  
(Returnee #11)

Importantly, this woman viewed that a substantial part of the migration experience will be down to domestic workers' own fortitude to deal with potential hardships, which will have little to do with who helps them to migrate.

**Implications.** Findings from this study indicate that labour recruitment operates with a hybrid network of registered and unregistered recruiters, including community members who provide informal links. Particularly in situations where women do not reside in urban areas near registered agencies, local (informal) facilitators will serve as their conduit to the official agencies. These can be friends, returnees or relatives. Furthermore, Ethiopian agencies must rely on the cooperation of agencies abroad, who operate outside the control of the Ethiopian agencies and authorities. Therefore, it is very difficult for migrating women to assess who is in the network of recruiters and which agencies or individuals may be operating legally or illegally. It is thus not surprising that when trying to migrate, women try to rely first on an individual who has a good reputation with community members or someone who they have a reason to trust. Prospective migrants are not primarily concerned about, nor can they easily differentiate between registered or unregistered recruiters, or know whether the process they are being told to follow is legal or illegal.

Women believe their migration experiences really comes down to luck or 'fate'. This has been found in many studies, including from Ethiopia, in which returnee migrants rarely blame their recruiters.<sup>8</sup> Especially for women who are recruited by friends, relatives or neighbours, they may not wish to



Photo: UN Women / Joe Saade

cast aspersions on individuals from their local community, and who they cannot be sure are responsible for their situation at destination.

Ultimately, governments and agents in destination countries are much better placed to prevent and respond to exploitation in Gulf States than recruiters in countries of origin. However, intermediaries in origin locations could be responsible for providing forms of migration insurance and should be in a position to support women's safe return, when requested.

### **Insufficient supervision and oversight over the formal migration process**

One factor that contributes to similarities in how registered and unregistered recruiters function may be insufficient supervision and oversight over the formal migration process and thus weak enforcement to ensure registered agencies comply with their requirements. Stakeholders and recruiters reported that registered employment agencies could easily flout regulations and unregistered agencies could operate without fear of being closed down because there was inadequate government capacity to monitor and penalise them.

At the time of the fieldwork, over 800 agencies had registered with MOLSA, outstripping its ability to monitor each agency closely.

*“There are a large number of licensed agencies in Ethiopia. Too many [agencies]... apply for license and are registered.”*  
(Stakeholder #6)

The lax monitoring is further illustrated by the research team's own attempts to contact the list of licensed recruiters posted at the MOLSA office and finding that only one in 10 of those listed had working telephone numbers or other contact details. The large number of agencies makes it unlikely that any given agency's behaviour will be scrutinised, suggesting the system relies on registered recruiters' professional integrity and willingness to self-govern.

*“[Registered agencies] make a pledge or a series of formal promises to protect the safety of migrants if they are given a license. Of course, ultimately it is your integrity or the quality of having strong moral principles that determine the outcome; no one will check or control the agencies after licensing.”*  
(Recruiter #10)



Nonetheless, policy stakeholders expressed favourable opinions about the national proclamations relevant to responsible migration introduced in the few years prior to the study, the 2016 Overseas Employment Proclamation (923/2016) and the 2020 Anti-Trafficking Law (1178/2020). Introduction of these laws was seen to be 'a good start', providing a foundation for a functioning migration system.

While policy stakeholders praised legal measures introduced over the past few years, they also identified gaps in translating policies into practice. The very existence of laws and new requirements were considered a positive step that could lead to greater accountability throughout the migration system. They raised concerns about difficulties in implementation so that changes 'on paper' would result in real improvements for migrants' lives.

*"This [anti-trafficking] proclamation has mobilised a lot of people, got popular support, is common to see in the media, and got the attention of law executives.... What is important now is to strengthen these measures and empower the law-executing bodies."*  
(Stakeholder #2)

*"These laws and policies are good to protect migrants, but if not translated properly on the ground, it is possible to say that [they are like] "a lion without teeth". The government has to seriously focus and work hard to execute the laws and policies that have been formulated so far."*  
(Stakeholder #1)

Respondents also believed awareness of how to identify registered agencies was growing. Some recruiters said that prospective migrants and their families specifically seek them out because of their licenses, and check what protections for migrants they put in place. Some recruiters said that migrants prefer unregistered agencies because these are perceived to offer a more rapid departure from Ethiopia. However, others said that in recent years they received more questions about legal protections than before, suggesting diffusion of awareness into the community about the benefits of the new legal framework, as well as of migrants' rights throughout the process.

*"They ask whether the agency is legal, how much money will I pay in general. Will I pay [commission] after I have gone there? ... They also ask "can we change the home where we are going to work if it is inconvenient?"*  
(Recruiter #4)

**Implications.** Findings on regulatory oversight suggest that implementation is a serious limitation to the new policies. Although new policies continue to be produced, these are light on detail for how the government will enforce the new legislation, particularly with the very unregulated, fairly chaotic current recruitment environment. The laws may have been implemented with all the right intentions but, to date, it is unclear how well the government considered the human resources and logistical planning necessary to oversee the behaviours of such a wide array of migration intermediaries.

However, at the same time, growing public awareness of migration rights and regulations related to recruiters may place greater pressures 'from below' on recruiters to comply with certain aspects of the law. Aside from monitoring and penalising recruiters who are violating due processes or knowingly putting migrants at risk, the Ethiopian government could also consider how to identify and give credit to recruiters who are fulfilling their responsibilities to place women into overseas jobs in a safe and accountable manner.



## 2. Experiences during departure and transit

### Leaving Ethiopia

Actual departure to the Middle East and Gulf States was not considered difficult for domestic workers as they were likely to travel by air rather than overland, which was considered the most dangerous route. Registered recruiters were meant to cover costs of the flight and visa but migrants or their families usually paid for travel if they used personal contacts or informal brokers. These payment distinctions comprised one of the few clear differences between regular and irregular forms of migration.

*“There won’t be any expense [for the illegal recruiter]. The travellers pay the money before they start the journey ... and the illegal agents won’t have any expense during the journey.... She [migrant] covers her own expenses and pays for her own transportation.”*  
(Recruiter #22)

Returnees from Lebanon also reported having sometimes paid more than once for a flight if a first recruiter proved unable to finalise arrangements.

*“I gave him [recruiter] ETB 8,000 to do the process. But he did not live up to my expectations. After that I asked him to give me my passport and money back.... But I found [received] only the passport.... I was able to find ... a broker through the girl from Gondar. I paid ETB 5,000 for him.... But I refused to give ETB 5,000 to the broker in advance. I told him that he will be paid after I board the plane from Bole international airport.”*  
(Returnee #6)

There are currently few mechanisms through which individuals can recoup such losses, but clearly lessons can be learned and prospective migrants can be advised to take more risk-mitigating measures (such as partial payments).

### Recruitment agents at destination

Once migrants reach the country in which they will work, they often experience divergence from what was promised. Registered recruiters are required by Ethiopian law to ensure their overseas counterparts meet migrants at the airport and

look after them at a designated processing centre prior to introducing them to their employers and checking contractual agreements and the domestic worker’s understanding of her rights.

*“Once a visa is issued for the migrant workers, we schedule their flight and arrange transportation to and from airports in collaboration with our agency in that country. Similar to brokers and licensed agencies in our country, there are legal agencies and brokers overseas.... Such brokers arrange houses where women stay until they get work.”*  
(Recruiter #18)

*“We [in this agency] never allow migrant workers to be taken to their employer’s house directly from the airport. First, they must be taken to the agency’s office. There are two fundamental reasons for this. Firstly, the migrants must be acquainted with the [local] employment agency that facilitated their journey to the recipient country. They must have information about the nationality of the broker (whether he is an Arab or an Ethiopian). [However, in reality] migrants [sent by other agencies] are usually taken directly to the employer’s house from the airport. This is not correct [against regulations]. The [destination] agency is supposed to receive the migrant from the airport, and give her a rest for a day or two before she is transported to the employer’s house to begin her work.”*  
(Recruiter #7)

Many returnees confirmed these accounts, describing having been collected at the airport by employers directly, having had no contact with the agent in the destination country prior to starting work. This meant there was no opportunity to review the contract or receive detailed instructions on how to report a complaint or request termination of the work agreement and/or transfer to another employer.

*“After I arrived in Beirut I stayed in the airport until Madam transported me to her house. After that I was not allowed to go anywhere such as a shop to buy some articles.”*  
(Returnee #7)

*“Soon after I reached Bahrain airport, they told me to take rest in a waiting room until my employer comes. After a while, my employer called my name and took me to his house.”*



Photo: UNICEF Ethiopia / NahomTesfaye

*There were other passengers along with me waiting for their employers too.”  
(Returnee #16)*

Even those who were met at the airport by a local agent could find that the expected procedures were not followed, and they were poorly treated while waiting to be taken to their employers.

*“When we arrived at Beirut airport, we were welcomed by a broker. Then we were transported to a rural area and told to stay in a room. There was a mattress and a bed in the room. It was a very cold day. But there were no [warm] clothes in the room to protect ourselves from the cold weather.... We stayed there for seven days.”  
(Returnee #12)*

Recruiters and returnees felt that local agents did not cooperate with Ethiopian recruiters, and thus how the woman was received and transported from the airport to her place of employment depended on the local agent’s behaviour.

Normative practices differed by destination country. One migrant had experience of both Dubai and Lebanon and perceived that the differences in how she was treated reflected the respective country contexts.

*“Here lies the difference between Dubai and Beirut. In Dubai we go from the airport to the agency directly. Then the Madam/employer signed an agreement with the broker before she takes delivery of the employee. But in Beirut the employer is not expected to sign an agreement. She takes the employee to her house directly from the airport. Therefore, there is no way of verifying their authenticity/legitimacy.”  
(Returnee #8)*

Because returnees had left Ethiopia prior to the introduction of Proclamation 923 and did not always know whether they were being managed by registered brokers in either Ethiopia or the destination country, it is not possible to associate their experiences during transit with the type of



recruiter used. However, two Addis Ababa-based registered recruiters expressed frustration about working with counterparts abroad.

*“Currently we are recruiting and sending individuals to Jordan. I am working with one [local] agency; the behaviour of Arabs is difficult in timely paying the commission and they are not trusted.”*  
(Recruiter #6)

*“We have not resumed sending citizens to UAE (Dubai) because the counterpart agency in that country has failed to fulfil some legal obligations. In Dubai we are facing tremendous challenges to protect the safety/well-being of our citizens.”*  
(Recruiter #7)

**Implications.** As noted previously, the international low-wage labour migration system relies on a network of distinct agents and business agreements and procedures that is labour-intensive to monitor or enforce. Given the for-profit nature of organising overseas employment,

women migrants can easily be treated like a transported commodity that becomes the responsibility of the particular individual in the location where she is received. Accountability for the woman’s safety, well-being and fair pay across international borders is extraordinarily difficult if not impossible to ensure between independent private agencies, particularly without government enforcement mechanisms linking the network of agents across jurisdictions and making them jointly responsible for the safe departure and arrival of each migrant. Monitoring, oversight and enforcement will require political will, most likely based on the initiative of origin states because it is generally their citizens who are being harmed. Destination country governments have very limited incentive to invest resources to stop bad actors or help migrant women in exploitative situations. Certainly, it is currently difficult to imagine destination countries prosecuting their own citizens for abuses committed against disadvantaged migrant women from low-income countries or recouping compensation from exploitative recruitment agents on their behalf.

Photo: Genaye Eshetu / Freedom Fund



### 3. Employment challenges at destination

#### Requirement to safeguard migrants

The role of local agents in destination countries becomes even more important during the employment period. Ethiopian government regulations stipulate that registered agencies are responsible for ensuring the well-being of the migrants they place into domestic service, and that they must provide assistance on request and facilitate migrants' change of employers and/or return to Ethiopia. This can be done from Ethiopia or, more practically, through Ethiopian agency staff based abroad or their locally contracted counterparts. One of the Ethiopian recruiters shared how they did this.

*“We also follow them after they are assigned at workplaces. We communicate with them over phones when they face problems and we communicate back with agents in the respective countries to solve their problem. The [local] agent takes all the responsibility to deploy individuals to the agreed households and follow [monitor] the working condition.”*  
(Recruiter #6)

All interviewed registered recruiters reported that they complied with these regulations, and that they remain in contact with the migrants for whom they are responsible. However, it was unclear if and how they do this in practice, especially if in-person visits are needed. At least two recruiters reported to have Ethiopian staff based in the destination countries, while others relied on local employment agents who may or may not be licensed in the countries where they operate (which may be difficult for the Ethiopian agencies to verify in any case).

On the other hand, one of the three informal recruiters whom we interviewed explained that her personal connections and experience of the destination country put her in a better position to ensure the safety of migrants. She operated on a small scale and placed migrant domestic workers with families she knew or found through word of mouth. She said that she worked on a volunteer basis and did not charge the migrants whom she placed in employment, and felt strongly that unregistered recruiters like herself were more likely to prioritise migrants' safety.

*“I prefer those people [informal recruiters] who take workers they know personally and who the workers know as well. Even the illegal agents have a better contact there and I know those [migrants] who have been supported by their agents even though they travelled illegally. The legal ones take their money ... they only care about the money, and they are not sensitive to the complaints of the workers when they ask for a better house to work at.”*  
(Recruiter #21)

#### Diverse levels of support from recruiters

Among stakeholders, however, there was a strong feeling that recruiters were unlikely to prioritise migrants' needs and would only do so if held to account. Stakeholders generally believed recruiters to be motivated by financial gain and likely to abandon domestic workers once they had been placed into work. Policy stakeholders differentiated between types of recruiters: they characterised all unregistered recruiters as likely to be neglectful or abusive, but believed the chances of assistance for migrants while abroad increased if they had used registered recruiters.

*“As long as recruiters are illegal, they are all the same and there is no way that they help and protect migrants. They only pursue their [own] benefit and advantages. But there might be legal recruiters who help migrants in protection and help them while they are employed abroad.”*  
(Stakeholder #11)

*“Illegal recruiters ... do not take the responsibility to return the out-migrants if they face challenges. The definition [of responsibilities] is clear for [registered] agencies - they bring job orders and sign bilateral agreements and they facilitate transportation, provide counselling and help them to return to Ethiopia in case of problems or when they finish their contract.”*  
(Stakeholder #14)

To date, however, there is limited evidence comparing the practices and migration outcomes between unregistered versus registered agencies, particularly for women who requested assistance. Returnees shared a wide range of experiences of what happened to them in practice when they required assistance. Requesting help from the original recruiter in Ethiopia was difficult, and many did not know how to locate the in-country agent, while several described being pressured



or even verbally abused by the local agent and threatened by the employer when they asked to be removed from their employers.

*“I called the woman [recruiter] in Ethiopia and told her of my lack of interest to stay there and [asked her] to bring me back to my country. But she said to exercise restraint and keep on working. Also, the broker who used to live there [Lebanon] threatened to beat me if I did not keep silent and control my behaviour.”*  
(Returnee #12)

*“The local brokers change their name and office address frequently. Accordingly, I did not know where the broker’s office was located.”*  
(Returnee #6)

On the other hand, several reported good experiences, including where their employer helped contact a local agency to revise the contract and where a local agent involved the police in rescuing a woman held captive at her employers’ home.

*“It was the agency office that helped me to change my workplace and move into the second one. However, as I did not know the whereabouts of the agency office, it was my first employer who took me to the office to discuss the matter of my salary and hiring by the second employer.”*  
(Returnee #14)

*“I spent seven months alone in closed room which was very challenging and painful... Finally, I was able find the recruiter’s phone number ... and called them for help. They came with police and took me out.... We had continuous contact. They tried to help us by making the employers keep our rights. We used to call them whenever we faced any problems.... Sometimes they called us and checked whether our work is good or bad. They helped us change house if we were not on good terms with our employers, lobbied them to increase our salary if we complained regarding our payment. They have contact with recruiters in Addis Ababa too.”*  
Returnee #17)

As has been mentioned previously, the returnees who were interviewed for this study had migrated out of Ethiopia before the new proclamations on labour migration and trafficking had been

introduced, and thus before increased emphasis on registered agencies’ stringent legal obligations to protect migrants. It was not possible to link returnees’ experiences to any specific type of recruiter, although some interviews did hint at whether the migrant had relied on regular or irregular means.

Recruiters also reported being aware that some recruiters turn off their phones or change phone numbers to avoid ongoing contact with migrants abroad, suggesting that even following the new registration policies, not all agencies comply with requirements.

*“Some agencies don’t respond to phone calls from migrants, rather, they totally close their phone. So, some recruiters have no concern about the safety of migrant workers.... They [migrants] are our citizens; we should not work for cash only - we have to protect the rights of our citizens.”*  
(Recruiter #6)

**Implications.** These findings further highlight the problems associated with a disconnected network of labour intermediaries and weak accountability for the woman’s circumstances and assistance needs. However, positive reports about agents’ responses to problems in destination countries suggest opportunities to build on these practices. Some recruiters took greater responsibility for women’s safety and well-being while others ‘changed their contact details’ to avoid complaints – and based on migrants’ accounts there is limited evidence that registered and unregistered recruiters provide markedly different responses. These findings again raise questions about government enforcement capacity and how governments can hold both origin and destination agencies jointly accountable for the fair treatment and employment of their client.

### Diplomatic assistance

While many migrant workers may experience harsh treatment, it is primarily those who suffer serious or extreme forms of abuse who seek assistance from the Ethiopian embassy or consulate. Contacting the embassy is usually a measure of last resort, after workers have failed to find other ways to escape their situation or go home. As part of its responsibility for protecting national citizens abroad, the Ethiopian government has committed to appointing a Labour Attaché in countries with which it has



bilateral agreements for labour migration. Respondents reported that the introduction of Labour Attachés was a positive step, but that their capacity to respond was still limited, although improving with time.

*“I received the consulate’s telephone number when I arrived in Beirut. However, I was told that the consulate does not respond to any call made by citizens. But after [name] was assigned, things have started to improve. Now employees of the consulate are starting their duty in time. They are now responding to our call.”*  
(Returnee #11)

However, several recruiters suggested that migrant women are still generally left to their own devices if they come across problems:

*“The proclamation contains an article that talks about a Labour Attaché. But I have not seen any Labour Attaché discharging responsibilities. Ethiopians in a foreign land are like a herd of sheep without a keeper.”*  
(Recruiter #7)

*“The government and Ethiopian embassies in Middle East countries are not able to protect migrants and fail to translate bilateral agreements even if they are written on paper.... It is too early to say this agreement is effective, weak or strong, but it is a good start and it needs strong commitment.”*  
(Stakeholder #1)

Although there were limited comments about the involvement of diplomatic staff in facilitating irregular migration and trafficking, two participants suggested that there was some corruption within the system, given the potential for personal gain.

*“The other thing which I can tell you about with certainty is that several people working for the Ethiopian embassies to the respective countries are to a large degree involved in human trafficking. These people are protected by the embassy. We have made a complaint to the government about the involvement of these individuals in human trafficking. But no one was able to listen to our complaints.”*  
(Recruiter #7)

It is outside the scope of this study to corroborate these assertions, but civil society organisations in Lebanon have documented cases of diplomatic staff making deals with local employers and deporting Ethiopian workers without their consent or due wages.<sup>9</sup> Other reports from around the world have found illegal involvement of consular officials in migration processes, with staff receiving kick-backs and bribes to, for example, facilitate paperwork or look the other way. This practice has been reported in other parts of Ethiopia, where illegal migrants rely on border guards to facilitate entry into Kenya.<sup>10</sup>

**Implications.** Foreign embassies and consular services are often viewed as a woman’s most reliable source of assistance but there is not much evidence from these interviews on how often or how the Ethiopian embassy, or other embassies, have intervened to support migrant women who have been abused or exploited. The women interviewed for Phase One were a unique population in that all of them had received diplomatic assistance for their eventual return to Ethiopia. Nonetheless, they reported mixed experiences with attempts to receive assistance from consular staff over the years. In Phase Two, when a greater diversity of returnees will be interviewed, the role of Ethiopian Labour Attachés, both positive and negative, will be explored further.

## 4. Return and re-migration

### Support with planning for return to Ethiopia

Recruiters described measures they took pre-departure that would support migrants after they have returned. These measures are designed to help ensure migrants can maximise the benefits, especially their income, of their labour abroad and reduce their likelihood of re-migrating unsafely. These measures focused on the problem of returnees losing their earnings by sending them to family members who spent everything before the migrant's return. In response, several recruiters reported that they offered migrants advice on financial literacy and savings schemes before their departure. In some cases, this involved providing advice on opening and managing bank accounts, making provisions to save regularly, and planning for the future.

*“The first thing migrant workers do is to send money to their parents here. But the money will be partially or wholly used by their parents. As a result, the migrants will eventually go back to their previous position. Thus, we offer them advice to have two separate bank accounts, one for their parents and the second one for themselves. We are all helping our parents. But there must be a limit to that effect. So it is advisable to save some 20% or 30% of their monthly income/salary.”*  
(Recruiter #10)

*“We advise them to open bank accounts and save the money they got by working abroad. We provide awareness on improving their saving experience, rather than periodically sending the money to the family members.”*  
(Recruiter #19)

Some recruiters reported that they worked directly with banks and facilitated migrants' enrolment in a range of financial packages that have been developed to assist migrants - for example, special bank accounts with easy international transfer mechanisms to encourage direct remuneration by employers.

*“My agency contributes ETB 50 as an initial deposit to each and every migrant, and assists them to open a savings account at Wegagen Bank. Every migrant will be given a barcode of her savings account so that her employer can easily deposit her monthly wage on a regular basis.”*  
(Recruiter #20)

Savings incentive schemes have also been established, which are set up prior to departure but benefit migrants after their return, providing easier access to business loans.

*“To begin with, my agency offers assistance to returnees in collaboration with United Bank... Each female migrant is given assistance to open a diaspora savings account, which would allow them to make regular dollar deposits. The savings account would enable them to get a loan of ETB 500,000 if they are depositing 75% of their monthly salary for a year or a loan of ETB 1,000,000 if they deposited 75% of their monthly salary for two years.”*  
(Recruiter #11)

*“Our agency also plays a facilitating role for the migrants to get a ETB 500,000 loan from formal sector financial institutions for business start-up or expansion. We have discussed this issue with senior officials of United Bank / Hibret Bank.”*  
(Recruiter #7)

The returnees interviewed for this study had not been back in Ethiopia long enough to avail themselves of possible business development or loan schemes, and would have left Ethiopia prior to the introduction of the diaspora savings accounts.

**Implications.** Although we do not yet have reports of these return and savings assistance services from returnees, the descriptions provided by recruiters offer good ideas for future recruiter practices. Phase Two of this research will explore further these types of services and consider how government policies and regulations might foster women's financial empowerment through pre-departure preparations for their financial management and savings plan.

### Returning to Ethiopia

Officially, employers of migrant domestic workers are responsible for funding their return journey to Ethiopia at the end of the contract. If the placement proves exploitative, the employment agency is also responsible for arranging the trip home. However, returnees reported that employers often avoided paying for return flights by accusing the migrant of a misdemeanour or crime (such as theft), and that migrants did not then receive support from employment agencies. In such cases, Ethiopian embassies may intervene.

All the returnees interviewed for this research were repatriated from Lebanon under an emergency assistance scheme arranged through the Ethiopian embassy with support from non-governmental organisations, including the Freedom Fund. Due to the combined effects of Lebanon's economic collapse and the covid-19 pandemic, many domestic workers were rendered homeless when they were forced out of their employment, and most had not received payment for several months.

**Implications.** Based on findings from this study and other research, it is not uncommon for migrant domestic workers who have difficulties with their employers to have few alternatives for assistance. Currently, it appears that there is no systematic process through which workers can seek and be assured they will be provided assistance. It seems to be a matter of trial and error, as evidenced by the participants' experiences of seeking support to return home from either the employer, recruiter or their embassy. Again, this appears to be a matter for clearer regulations, better enforcement and increased legal accountability of agents in both destination and origin countries.

### Re-migration risks

While the savings and investment schemes described by recruiters are designed to prevent women feeling pressured to re-migrate, there will always be some who seek multiple placements abroad. Among the returnees interviewed, at least four returnees had worked in two or more countries.

Women who had previously worked abroad and wished to re-migrate reported being subject to new regulations that did not exist when they previously left Ethiopia. As a result, many returnees found themselves no longer eligible for out-migration at the time the fieldwork was conducted, for example if they have not attained an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education.

Several stakeholders and recruiters explained that this created particular risks during re-migration, as those women who did not meet the criteria introduced through Proclamation 923 would not be able to migrate through registered agencies. Their only option was to travel through irregular channels, using unregistered recruiters. Yet, these were often women who were best prepared for domestic work abroad as they already had basic

Arabic language proficiency and familiarity with the local work context.

*“The proclamation [923/2016] states the expected level of education of migrants is above 8<sup>th</sup> grade. However, some individuals who fluently speak Middle East Arabic language but have [achieved] less than 8<sup>th</sup> grade are prevented from migrating to those countries.... The proclamation is exposing migrants who do not fulfil the level of education to illegal recruiters and smugglers.”*  
(Stakeholder #9)

*“The law says that the migrant should be a graduate of 8<sup>th</sup> grade to be eligible to migrate to Arab countries in search of a job. Let me tell you my own experience in this regard. There was one young Ethiopian woman who lived and worked in Arab countries for 10 years. Then she returned to her country because of some problems. Now she is planning to return [abroad]. But she did not complete 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. Therefore, she will use [unregistered] brokers.”*  
(Recruiter #10)

*“I remember a woman who begged me to assist her, she is a single mother of three children and had remarkable experience in housekeeping but no 8<sup>th</sup> grade certificate. I wish I could give her my [helping] hand but I can't because of the rules and regulations applied to my agency.”*  
(Recruiter #13)

In June 2021, Proclamation 1246 revoked the requirement of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade certificate. Instead, prospective migrants must show they have received training and possess a certificate of occupational competence. The need for training does not apply to workers who have previously worked overseas. However, it is currently unclear how these measures will be implemented in practice and whether the changes will remove barriers impeding re-migration or introduce new ones.

**Implications.** This finding indicates the importance of research and advocacy that voice women's concerns and provide evidence of their experiences. Given the recent nature of the changes, it will be important to have sufficient monitoring of the knowledge of and the effects of the revised requirements.

## 5. Perceptions of current efforts to promote responsible recruitment in Ethiopia

One of the objectives of the Meneshachin study is to explore the possibilities of implementing current models of safe recruitment measures in the Ethiopian context. In Phase One of the research, three initiatives, discussed below, were described to policy stakeholders to elicit perceptions of their feasibility and potential effectiveness. In Phase Two of the research, community-based data collection will seek to better understand private or locally-driven measures at grassroots level.

### Migrant Resource Centres

Migrant Resource Centres are designed as a 'one-stop shop' for migrants and their families to obtain information and advice on procedures for regularised labour migration, including registered overseas employment agency contact details, explanations of bilateral agreements and how these translate into domestic workers' rights and conditions in various destination countries, and assistance with completing pre-departure requirements. While several Migrant Resource Centres exist in Ethiopia, just four of the stakeholders interviewed were aware of their activities and supported this approach but felt efforts to make the Migrant Resource Centres effective needed to be intensified.

*"We have tried to establish a migration resource centre in Dessie town, south region and even under federal level, but it is not sufficient. As many as possible of these centres should be established and what has been done so far has been very little. It is not possible to say that this effort has been successful because there are significant numbers of service seekers from various locations of the country, but these centres are working in very limited places with bare minimum capacity."*  
(Stakeholder #10)

*"The approach is being practised in Ethiopia but it's not strengthened as expected ... the migration information centre is not properly functional and the centre is not working in coordination with MOLSA."*  
(Stakeholder #9)

Others felt that it would be highly unlikely for prospective migrants to seek information from

formal establishments in this way, particularly in rural communities.

*"I don't think we will be able to get women using these centres because there is no strong culture in our country that values information. Some women who are living in cities might use these centres, but women in rural areas might not use these centres."*  
(Stakeholder #1)

*"I don't think this will be highly effective with the expectation we have for its success because there is a culture in our community that people will not go out for searching information like this."*  
(Stakeholder #11)

However, Stakeholder #1 went on to say that Migrant Resource Centres would be an approach worth trying, particularly if accessible by phone or internet; while Stakeholder #11 believed information should be taken door-to-door within communities, rather than expecting community members to attend a centre.

**Implications.** Migrant Resource Centres appear to be well-accepted in concept, as they provide women with more accurate information to inform their migration decisions. However, in practice, participants have concerns about how to make them practically useful and logistically feasible for a sufficient number of prospective migrants. For example, will women in remote areas be able to know about, access and feel comfortable seeking information from a formal rather than a locally known and trusted resource? There is also the question of whether resource centres would be able to help women select the most trustworthy, registered agencies or still leave this up to the individual women to identify which recruiters will provide responsible labour intermediation in reality.

### Streamlined registration of agencies

One suggested approach to increase protection for migrants is to reduce the cost to recruiters of obtaining their licenses but ensure stringent standards of practice are met. This includes limiting the fees that can be charged to migrants and requiring overseas employment agencies to hold large cash reserves to use to assist migrants in difficult situations.

Ethiopia has already worked toward streamlining the registration process. Currently to obtain a license recruiters need to deposit \$100,000 USD in a migrant protection fund. Only seven stakeholders had heard of this approach, and there were mixed views about its likely benefit among both those who were and those who were not familiar with it.

The main concern was that it would be difficult to enforce.

*“No, I haven’t heard about this approach, but I do think that would be a good system if implemented in Ethiopia because it will create accountability of recruiters to some extent and will guard migrants from financial exploitation. The main challenge in implementing new systems is that it is very perfect on paper, but fails to be executed exactly as it is written.”*  
(Stakeholder #11)

*“It makes recruiters conscious and more responsible because they don’t want to lose the money they deposited. It is challenged by a lack of strong and continuous follow-up from concerned bodies because in our country there is no problem in having a new policy or proclamation, but there is weak implementation, follow-up and sustainability.”*  
(Stakeholder #7)

One recruiter raised a concern that the system was unduly arduous and discouraged unregistered recruiters from seeking to obtain a license.

*“It [registration] is very difficult. It is five years after we came back to work and it was challenging to get the permission [license]. There is a challenge to fulfil the criteria to get the work permission and to engage in the work fully. It took almost one year after the new proclamation was endorsed.”*  
Recruiter #4)

It is unclear how common these delays were for all agencies, but given the government’s seemingly limited human resource capacity to maintain a working list of licensed recruiters, it is likely that there is similarly limited capacity to conduct due diligence on and approve new applicant agencies.

**Implications.** These suggestions regarding streamlining the registration process, while useful, again raise questions about how effective measures can be if registration and regulation is primarily targeted at agents in origin countries. The potential impact of this intervention is also linked to questions about whether there are observable differences in migration outcomes if organised through a registered versus unregistered recruiter. Our findings also showed that registered recruiters sometimes use their registration as a cover, and then flout regulations in order to speed up the process of sending migrants abroad. There is also limited evidence to show that women are less likely to experience exploitation and abuse if they rely on a registered

agency. Many women may well continue to prefer recruiters that they know personally or who have been recommended by reliable local family members or friends – regardless of the recruiter’s registration status.

### Joint liability

Finally, stakeholders commented on joint liability measures, which hold Ethiopian recruiters responsible for any exploitation or abuse perpetrated by their staff or counterparts in the destination countries. Respondents broadly agreed with the principles of joint liability, and believed that it was part of the changes to the registration process in Ethiopia, for example, requiring a monetary sum to be held to compensate migrants for human rights violations they experience. As with their views on other policy measures, government stakeholders mentioned that joint liability measures were already included in Ethiopian law and assumed them to be working as intended, while respondents from non-governmental organisations pointed to the recurring problem of weak implementation of laws and inadequate monitoring of agencies.

*“Yes, this is also clearly indicated in the employee and employer proclamation and it has been implemented based on the legal procedure, besides it is also indicated in the contract agreement. If recruiters bypass the preconditions, they will be punished and even their licence will also be taken. It is helpful and successful so far.”*  
(Stakeholder #10)

*“Yes, I have heard about this, but I don’t know that it is working at the ground level, and it will be helpful if it is implemented.”*  
(Stakeholder #4)

**Implications.** While trying to make origin country recruiters responsible for the behaviour of their destination country counterparts is a strong feature of any future labour intermediary regulations, origin country agencies are unlikely to be able to take any serious action against non-compliant agents in destination countries without the intervention of destination country governments. Further, if joint liability is more strictly enforced, there may be unintended consequences that will need to be carefully considered. For example, recruiters may become even less empathetic or even hostile to migrants who are alleging mistreatment, in order to avoid cases being formally filed and resulting in a fine for the recruiter.





Photo: Genaye Eshetu / Freedom Fund

## 6. Stakeholder recommendations for responsible recruitment

In addition to their feedback on the specific initiatives proposed to them for discussion (see previous section), stakeholders were invited to offer suggestions for encouraging responsible recruitment. This section describes the recommendations offered by the participants. While these suggestions also informed the recommendations of this report, the recommendations set out in this section do not necessarily represent the report or authors' recommendations.

### Strengthen enforcement of existing laws

Stakeholders expressed widespread agreement that existing laws and systems need to be strengthened, with a particular focus on stronger enforcement of these laws and systems. This includes:

- **Better monitoring of registered agencies.**
- **Working with unregistered recruiters to help them regularise their practices.**

*“The government has to work hard to bring illegal recruiters into the legal system and has to closely work with illegal recruiters by giving them recognition and giving opportunity for them to work in the government system. The government should build a strong system to work closely with recruiters and make regular follow-up.... It is not enough to give recruiters legal licence and punish them when they are found guilty, but there should be a mechanism to work with recruiters very closely.”*  
(Stakeholder #8)

- **A dedicated governmental migration body with powers to enforce regulations** - the lack of which was seen to hinder a fully functioning migration process down to grassroots level.

*“There is no one single government body responsible for effectively executing and making strong follow-up.... This proclamation lacks standard operation procedures to effectively implement the proclamation. It has no details when it is implemented at the lower level.... The activities related to this proclamation have to focus on the ground level.”*  
(Stakeholder #7)

- **More actions taken against those who violate due processes** – as those who were registered struggled to compete with the faster and less complicated services offered by unregistered agencies.

*“And there are many illegal recruiters who are a problem for licensed agencies....The problem is that there are illegal recruiters here who can deal with agencies abroad with lower payments ... then they receive money from migrants to compensate the deficit. Their practice puts us [licensed agencies] out of competition. That is the main reason that currently I did not renew my license. There is no control, everybody can do this job without a license.”*  
(Recruiter #1)

### Increase diplomatic efforts

Bilateral agreements as well as committed and engaged Labour Attachés were seen as necessary to ensuring protection of domestic workers. Recruiters and returnees also echoed this sentiment, and felt there could be no real prevention or redress of abuse without the in-country presence of dedicated embassy or consular staff.

*“The government must work hard in building strong diplomatic relationships with destination countries to protect migrants like other countries such as the Philippines and India.”*  
(Stakeholder #1)

*“The government should take the primary responsibility to protect its citizens from harm.... In collaboration with other entities, the Labour Attaché is expected to make sure that the well-being of our citizens is well protected and their human rights are not violated.”*  
(Recruiter #16)

*“The newly appointed officer to run the Ethiopian embassy to Lebanon is a good person. He has let us know his address on social media/facebook. He gives us a quick response when we are calling.”*  
(Stakeholder #1)

### Improve community awareness

All types of respondents emphasised the need for better awareness among prospective migrants and their families, but stipulated that this meant a realistic understanding of living and working conditions in different countries and how to seek assistance. Stakeholders, recruiters and returnees all acknowledged that women would continue to migrate into domestic work, particularly following the economic deterioration in Ethiopia due to both the covid-19 pandemic and political unrest. That they should make informed decisions about how to do so safely was the paramount concern.

*“We [migrants] have to have awareness about our assignment, monthly remuneration, and leisure time/leave.... Would-be migrants must be informed of the advantages and disadvantages of going to Arab countries. They must be aware of the duties they are going to perform during their stay in the countries of destination. They must be aware of their rights. If the migrants have the necessary information they will be able to defend their rights. It is worth noting that not all migrants will become successful.”*  
(Returnee #11)

*“They need to know where they should go, what criteria need to be fulfilled and should learn from others to follow the best legal procedure before migration.”*  
(Stakeholder #15)

# Discussion: Enablers and barriers to safer recruitment across the migration cycle

Study respondents described the role of recruiters, their expected responsibilities and actual behaviours, and how these shaped migrants' risks of harm or safety throughout the migration cycle. The perspectives of policy stakeholders, recruiters, and a select sample of domestic worker returnees highlight the complex and diverse nature of how women engage with different types of recruiters and facilitators.

This study was conducted at a time soon after new legal regulations had been introduced, which specified prerequisites for legal migration practice for both recruiters and migrants. There was growing awareness of these requirements, and general support for them. While policy stakeholders were most likely to endorse the positive measures introduced 'on paper', all respondents agreed that the new proclamations were 'a good start'. Recruiters reported that community members and prospective migrants were starting to enquire about the registration status of overseas employment agencies and demonstrated that they were more aware of mandated protections.

On the other hand, the majority view remained that the system was weak and that laws were not being adequately implemented for a range of reasons, including the large number of agencies that had been registered in Ethiopia, the lack of government capacity to monitor compliance and penalise violations, and examples of agents and Labour Attachés in destination countries not offering support to (or even turning away) migrant women in need of assistance.

## What puts migrants at risk?

The confusion expressed by returnees about whether they had migrated using a 'registered' or 'unregistered' recruiter is a persistent challenge for prospective migrants and their families. There is also often a network of agents in the labour migration process, some of whom may or may not be registered. We found there is a continuum of 'legality' even among registered agencies, some of which use their legal registration to conceal activities that do not comply with regulations

(such as accepting forged documents for age and education level). Unregistered recruiters often operate in similar ways to those who are registered, for example by liaising with in-country agents and personal contacts in the destination countries. Known contacts were often seen as *safer* by some respondents due to their relationships of trust with local facilitators, such as previous returnees.

Importantly, Ethiopian recruiters rarely have influence over the behaviour of counterparts in destination locations and little ability to seek direct assistance for migrant workers once they are in the destination location, particularly if the national officials are unwilling to engage. This weak linkage means that migrants do not have reliable access to assistance if they encounter difficulties while abroad, regardless of the 'registered' vs 'unregistered' status of their Ethiopian recruiter.

All categories of respondents agreed that it was very difficult to protect migrants while they were abroad given the high prevalence of exploitation and abuse among employers and poor legal enforcement of unskilled migrant workers' rights in the countries commonly selected by Ethiopian migrant domestic workers. Diplomatic agreements and designated embassy staff were seen as a growing part of Ethiopia's labour migration strategy, and these were portrayed as having been largely ineffective in the past but gaining credibility. Several returnees mentioned by name a new Labour Attaché posted to Lebanon and praised him for making concerted efforts to intervene during the crisis that led to their emergency repatriation.

To date, many of the policy and program interventions to prevent the exploitation of low-wage migrants have focused on origin countries. This is understandable as it is families and governments in origin countries who are most motivated to take action to protect the well-being of their fellow citizens. While Phase One of this research has uncovered a number of potential interventions at the pre-migration, departure and return stages of migration, ultimately migrant domestic workers are most vulnerable to abuse

while they are working in a private household in a foreign country. It is clear that until destination governments can be persuaded to participate in efforts to protect migrant workers and punish bad actors in their jurisdiction, there will be few ways to enforce responsible recruitment throughout the migration cycle. More shared responsibilities are needed between recruiters in source and destination countries, as well as joint actions between both governments to provide assistance and seek justice for exploited workers.

### How do recruiters protect migrants?

Where recruiters operated responsibly, they were able to offer some protective advice, particularly by giving detailed information to prospective migrants about conditions in their destination country of choice, their legal rights and how to seek redress, and assisting with putting financial arrangements in place to increase the likelihood of regular payments and accumulation of savings for the worker herself. Recruiters invariably highlighted their positive role and gave concrete examples of measures they took to safeguard migrants, including linking them to bank-supported savings and investment schemes,

taking time to explain details of the migration process to prospective migrants and their families, and, where possible, placing Ethiopian staff in destination country offices to liaise with domestic workers while employed abroad.

Returnees, in turn, described their lived experiences with both good and bad recruiters in both Ethiopia and destination countries, and these could not be clearly matched to registration status. However, most of the interviewed returnees left Ethiopia before the relevant Overseas Employment Proclamations (632/2016 and 1246/2021) came into force. Recruiters reported that prospective migrants and their families were increasingly familiar with the new legal framework and there had been a rise in the number of queries specifically about agency registration status and protective measures.

The table below summarises the enablers and barriers identified by respondents at each stage of the migration cycle. These provide an indication of where measures could be introduced or strengthened to bolster existing enablers and mitigate barriers.

### Enablers and barriers to safer recruitment across the migration cycle

	Enablers	Barriers
<b>Pre-departure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accurate knowledge of living and working conditions, labour rights, and migration procedures</li> <li>• Financial literacy and preparedness</li> <li>• New regulatory framework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement of trusted community members in irregular facilitation</li> <li>• Weak monitoring structures that hold recruiters to account</li> <li>• Complicated procedures that make registered agencies slower and less efficient than unregistered recruiters</li> </ul>
<b>Transit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good connection between Ethiopian and in-country recruitment agents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation of diplomatic and official staff in migration outside the law</li> </ul>
<b>At destination</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication links to local recruitment agents</li> <li>• Electronic payment mechanisms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of accountability within destination countries; lack of redress for abuse</li> <li>• Weak linkages between origin and destination agents, resulting in women's poor access to assistance</li> <li>• Poor government oversight and penalties for bad actors</li> <li>• Poor access to redress or compensation from local employers or agents</li> </ul>
<b>Return and remigration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial incentives for accumulating savings</li> <li>• Business development loans</li> <li>• Engaged Labour Attachés</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor diplomatic assistance</li> <li>• Inappropriate eligibility requirements for re-migrating women (this has been somewhat addressed through the new Proclamation 1246 enacted in June 2021)</li> </ul>



For the most part, the respondents we interviewed recommended improving the capacity of laws and regulations to create a functioning system, rather than to introduce new measures. Although some recruiters found the requirements of registration arduous and likely to decrease their competitiveness over unregistered recruiters, for the most part there was widespread support for both the \$100,000 USD migrant protection fund requirement and the introduction of joint liability. While 'improved awareness' was mentioned repeatedly, there was some scepticism that centralised Migrant Resource Centres were useful in reaching a largely rural and geographically dispersed population.

The main change suggested to existing requirements was to relax the 8<sup>th</sup> grade education level eligibility criterion, particularly for women who had already worked abroad in domestic service and were likely to be well-prepared despite a lack of formal education. Some women who had returned to Ethiopia on a brief visit to family or to renew their passport and visa had found that due to these newly imposed requirements, their only choice was to rely on unregistered agents who flouted these rules. In June 2021, Proclamation 1246 removed the 8<sup>th</sup> grade requirement for migrant workers, replacing it with a need for training and possession of a certificate of occupational competence. The need for training does not apply to workers who have previously worked overseas. Nonetheless, it is currently unclear how these measures will be implemented in practice and whether the changes will remove all certification barriers faced by prospective migrant workers wishing to leave Ethiopia in search of overseas domestic work.

### Limitations of the research

The sensitivity around the topic of labour migration in Ethiopia has been amplified over the past few years due to several waves of forced deportations and emergency repatriation from a number of countries. During the covid-19 pandemic, the Ethiopian media profiled cases of Ethiopian men in Saudi Arabia held in unsanitary and dangerous detention centres for migrant workers while waiting to be deported, as well as homeless Ethiopian women living around the Ethiopian embassy in Lebanon following their loss of employment. Social media also circulated stories about mistreatment and abuse of migrants by their employers. As a result, policy stakeholders were wary of interviews about human rights

violations of migrants and were likely to self-censor the opinions they expressed, particularly those critical of the government.

In the case of recruiters, there appears to be a large disconnect between the official list of registered overseas employment agencies and those who were possible to contact. Various explanations were provided by the recruiters who did agree to interview, including that some agents regularly changed their contact details in order to avoid scrutiny. This makes it likely that the recruiters included in the study were those most law-abiding and compliant with government regulations. Reaching informal recruiters and facilitators proved even more difficult as they operate outside the law and were concerned about legal repercussions of participation. The self-selection of recruiters into the study (rather than a more purposive sampling frame as originally planned) introduces a likely positive bias on the responsible practices of recruiters, although they did highlight that *other* recruiters, whether licensed or not, were likely to routinely engage in illegal practices 'under the radar'.

The interviewed returnees were drawn from a convenience sample of 250 women residing at a shelter in Addis Ababa over a period of several months, having been repatriated from Lebanon. As they had all returned from the same country, under similar circumstances, and were disproportionately victims of trafficking, they are reflective of only one small type of former migrant domestic workers in Ethiopia.

Finally, due to covid-19-related restrictions on in-person meetings and travel in Ethiopia, the first wave of data collection took place solely in Addis Ababa, and some interviews with policy stakeholders were conducted by phone. Original plans to collect community-based data from community-based policy stakeholders, formal and informal recruiters, and returnees have been postponed to the first half of 2022.



## Annex 1: Profile of respondents

A. Policy and program stakeholders on migration				
File code	Sex	Type of organisation	Location	Role of the participants' organisation in migration protection
Stakeholder #1	F	Local NGO	Addis Ababa	Provide support for women returnees who have experienced physical harm, emotional harm, faced gender-based violence and/or are vulnerable
Stakeholder #2	M	Local NGO	Addis Ababa	Helping unemployed women get empowered through skill trainings, psychological and life skill trainings and engaging them in income-generating activities to minimise migration
Stakeholder #3	M	Local NGO	Addis Ababa	Helping unemployed women get empowered through skill trainings, psychological and life skill trainings and engaging them in income-generating activities to minimise migration
Stakeholder #4	M	Regional level government organisation	Jimma	Protect women and child rights
Stakeholder #5	M	Federal level government organisation	Addis Ababa	Provision of emergency responses and managing protracted refugee and returnee situations
Stakeholder #6	M	Federal level government organisation	Addis Ababa	Provide legal support to prevent human trafficking and smuggling of migrants
Stakeholder #7	M	Regional level government organisation	Dire Dawa	Prevention of human trafficking through criminal investigation
Stakeholder #8	F	Regional level government organisation	Dire Dawa	Protect women and child rights
Stakeholder #9	M	Federal level government organisation	Addis Ababa	Migration regulatory authority (licensing and monitoring of recruiters)
Stakeholder #10	M	Federal level government organisation	Addis Ababa	Migration regulatory authority (licensing and monitoring of recruiters)
Stakeholder #11	F	Federal level government organisation	Addis Ababa	Provision of health services to migrants
Stakeholder #12	M	Federal level government organisation	Addis Ababa	Prevention of human trafficking through criminal investigation
Stakeholder #13	M	Federal level government office	Addis Ababa	Foreign policy and provide support to returned migrants
Stakeholder #14	M	Workers' association	Addis Ababa	Provision of recruitment agencies
Stakeholder #15	M	Regional level government organisation	Dire Dawa	Migration regulatory authority (licensing and monitoring of recruiters)
Stakeholder #16	F	International organisation	Addis Ababa	UN agency – provide overall protection to migrants
Stakeholder #17	F	Community-based organisation	Addis Ababa	Provide shelter for returnees
Stakeholder #18	M	Local NGO	Addis Ababa	Facilitate shelter and reintegration support for returnees

## B. Recruiters

<b>File Code</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Type of Recruiter</b>	<b>Location</b>
Recruiter #1	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #2	F	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #3	F	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #4	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #5	F	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #6	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #7	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #8	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #9	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #10	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #11	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #12	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #13	F	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #14	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #15	F	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #16	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #17	F	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #18	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #19	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #20	F	Licensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #21	F	Unlicensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #22	M	Unlicensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #23	M	Unlicensed	Addis Ababa
Recruiter #24	M	Licensed	Addis Ababa

### C. Returnees from Lebanon

<b>File code</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of destination countries where they have worked</b>	<b>Length of time working abroad (in years)</b>
Returnee #1	F	25	3	9
Returnee #2	F	28	1	4
Returnee #3	F	45	3	13
Returnee #4	F	not known	2	4
Returnee #5	F	20	1	2
Returnee #6	F	23	1	2
Returnee #7	F	29	1	13
Returnee #8	F	30	3	8
Returnee #9	F	28	1	7
Returnee #10	F	28	2	11
Returnee #11	F	24	1	2
Returnee #12	F	31	1	10
Returnee #13	F	30	1	8
Returnee #14	F	20	1	2
Returnee #15	F	20	1	1
Returnee #16	F	27	2	9
Returnee #17	F	22	1	4
Returnee #18	F	24	1	4
Returnee #19	F	22	2	3
Returnee #20	F	24	1	2
Returnee #21	F	20	1	9
Returnee #22	F	Not known	1	9 months
Returnee #23	F	25	1	2
Returnee #24	F	21	1	3
Returnee #25	F	Not known	1	2
Returnee #26	F	24	1	3
Returnee #27	F	21	1	3

# Annex 2: Surveys with female migrants repatriated from Lebanon

## Background

In December 2020, the Freedom Fund and its Ethiopian partner Agar (a registered non-governmental organisation) began the Bete project with the support of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The Bete project was established in response to the economic and political crisis in Lebanon, and it aimed to repatriate Ethiopian women from Lebanon back to their homes in Ethiopia. The women assisted by the Bete project had primarily been working as domestic workers during their time abroad. The project initially set out to support the repatriation of 250 women during the first half of 2021. The project has since been extended and will be continued in accordance with need.

The project set out to support recent returnees to re-establish their lives after returning back to Ethiopia. Shelter services and immediate relief were provided in addition to support to return back home, and longer term psychological and vocational support was provided for those who needed it.

Given the levels of isolation many domestic workers face when working in the Middle East, engaging them and understanding more about current working conditions can be a challenge, and is often focused on the abuses suffered by female migrants without acknowledging the potential rewards that draw them to work abroad. In order to generate insight about recent experiences of domestic workers in Lebanon, a survey was introduced as part of the Bete project, referred to here as the 'migration history survey'.

## Method

Data collection for the migration history survey had three phases:

1. Instrument development and training of Agar staff
2. Completion of surveys
3. Data analysis

The survey tool was developed by the Freedom Fund in coordination with Agar staff. This tool comprised of questions about general work experiences and more specific questions which are based on U.S. Department of State's human trafficking statistical indicators.<sup>4</sup> Many of the survey questions were taken from another survey which has already been tested for understanding and validity within the Ethiopian context. The survey was also designed to avoid overlap with Agar's other intake forms to avoid fatigue experienced by participants.

All 254 returnees who were received at Agar's shelter were invited to take part in the research. A total of 250 returnees chose to participate, some chose not to and in a few cases the Agar staff were unable to survey the returnees before they left the shelter. A standardised informed consent process was followed and each participant had to give permission prior to their information being collected. It was made clear that participation was entirely voluntary and would not affect the person's access to Agar's services. Covid-19 safety measures were followed during the administration of the survey and in line with the operational procedures for Agar's shelters. The full survey was only completed with returnees who had worked as a domestic worker at some point in the past two years.

Agar staff, all of whom were trained counsellors, administered the survey. Training was provided beforehand on the survey instruments themselves and the basic principles of conducting surveys. Population Council provided the training to Agar staff and assisted with data quality checks and data cleaning. The analysis presented here was prepared by the Freedom Fund.

### Summary findings from survey with female returnees

The following provides an overview of migration history survey findings from 250 female returnees, 222 of whom had been a domestic worker within the last two years before they were repatriated from Lebanon.

#### Profile of workers

- The average age of the returnees was 25 years old, the youngest returnee was 19, the oldest was 45.
- Average time spent in Lebanon was 3.5 years, however this varied from 6 months to 13 years.
- 89% of the returnees had worked as a domestic worker, other jobs held by returnees included cleaners outside of private residences and restaurant staff.

#### Terms of employment as a domestic worker

- Average income earned was \$185 USD per month, and incomes ranged from \$50 USD to \$500 USD per month.
- Domestic workers worked 112 hours of work per week, on average. The number of hours worked per week ranged from 30 to 154 hours.
- Only 38% of women had a written contract for their employment.

### Use of intermediaries to organise migration

- The majority of domestic workers had used an intermediary of some sort to help them migrate.
- 43% used only recruiters who were not personal contacts, whereas 31% used only personal contacts.
- Fees were paid to both types of intermediaries.
- On average the fees paid to personal contacts were higher, however the difference in fees to the two types should not be overstated.

### Experiences of exploitation

- Nearly all returnees had experienced trafficking and other severe forms of exploitation.
- 97% of returnees who worked as a domestic worker in Lebanon had experienced working and living conditions that amounted to trafficking, following the U.S. Department of State's statistical indicators.<sup>4</sup>

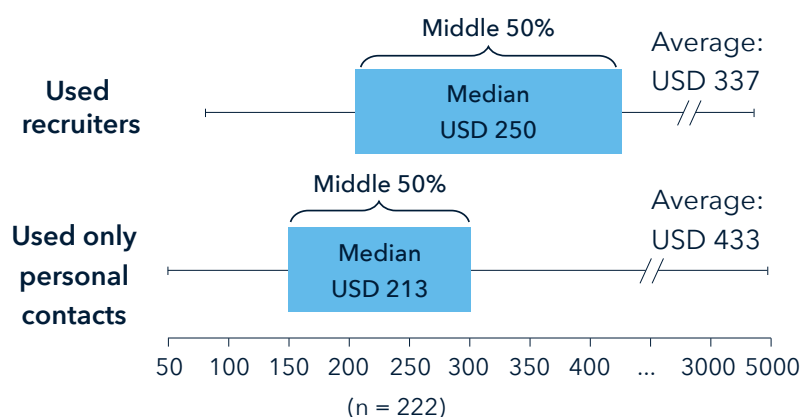
### Type of intermediary and experience of exploitation

- No clear pattern that shows the use of recruiters is linked to higher or lower risk of exploitation - both groups (those who used recruiters and those who used only personal contacts) experienced high levels of exploitation.

### Use of intermediaries to organise their migration

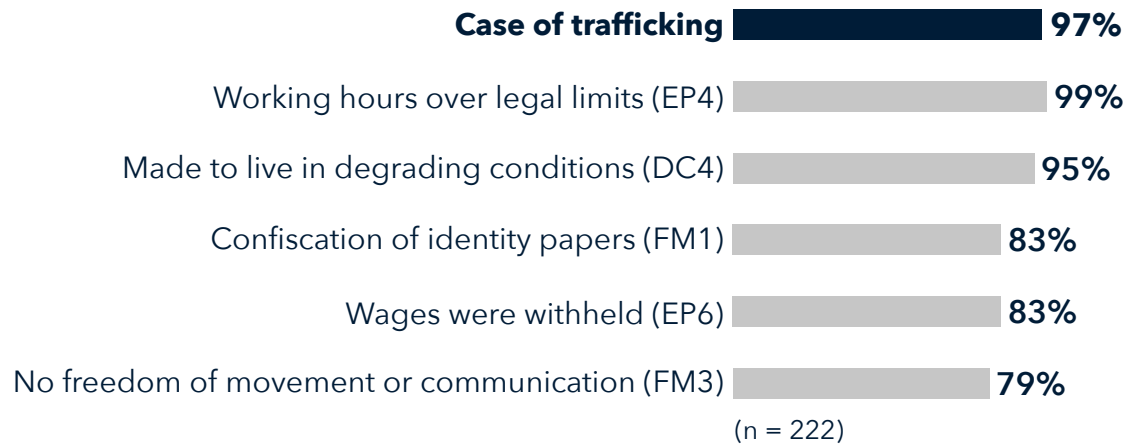


### Fees paid to organise their migration

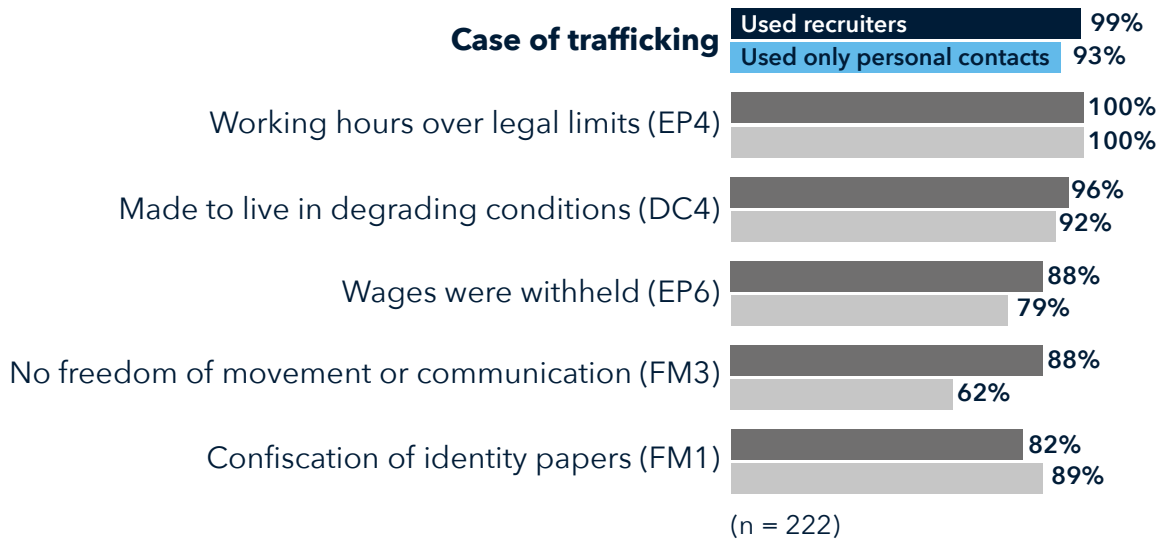




**Most common indicators of trafficking experienced by domestic worker in Lebanon**



**Experience of exploitation by use of recruiter vs. personal contact to organise migration**



# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Referred to as the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs at the time of the research.
- <sup>2</sup> London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (2019) *“But now, I know how to migrate properly, safely and legally”*: Final report for the process evaluation of Freedom Fund’s Ethiopia hotspot programme, [https://freedomfund.org/wp-content/uploads/LSHTM\\_Final-Report.pdf](https://freedomfund.org/wp-content/uploads/LSHTM_Final-Report.pdf)  
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- <sup>3</sup> Zimmerman, C., Kiss, L., and Hossain, M. (2011) ‘Migration and health: A framework for 21st century policy-making’, *PLoS Medicine* 8(5): e1001034, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001034>
- <sup>4</sup> Okech, D., Aletraris, L., and Schroeder, E. (2020) *Human trafficking statistical definitions: Prevalence Reduction Innovation Forum*, University of Georgia African Programming and Research Initiative to End Slavery and U.S. Department of State Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, [https://cenhtro.uga.edu/\\_resources/documents/PRIF-Human-Trafficking-Statistical-Definitions-1.pdf](https://cenhtro.uga.edu/_resources/documents/PRIF-Human-Trafficking-Statistical-Definitions-1.pdf)
- <sup>5</sup> Zimmerman, C., Mak, J., Pocock, N. S., and Kiss, L. (2021) ‘Human trafficking: Results of a 5-year theory-based evaluation of interventions to prevent trafficking of women from South Asia’, *Frontiers in Public Health*, 9(400), doi:10.3389/fpubh.2021.645059
- <sup>6</sup> Dessiye, M., and Emirie, G. (2018) ‘Living and working as a domestic worker in the Middle East: The experience of migrant returnees in Girana town, North Wollo, Ethiopia’, *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 11(1), 69-86, doi:10.1080/17528631.2017.1342984
- <sup>7</sup> Ghaddar, A., Khandaqjiab, S., and Ghattasbc, J. (2020) ‘Justifying abuse of women migrant domestic workers in Lebanon: The opinion of recruitment agencies’, *Gaceta Sanitaria* 34(5), 493-499, doi.org/10.1016/j.gaceta.2018.11.001.
- <sup>8</sup> Busza, J., Teferra, S., Omer, S., and Zimmerman, C. (2017) ‘Learning from returnee Ethiopian migrant domestic workers: A qualitative assessment to reduce the risk of human trafficking’, *Global Health*, 13(1), 71, doi:10.1186/s12992-017-0293-x; Zimmerman, C., Mak, J., Pocock, N. S., and Kiss, L. (2021) ‘Human trafficking: Results of a 5-year theory-based evaluation of interventions to prevent trafficking of women From South Asia’, *Frontiers in Public Health*, 9(400), doi:10.3389/fpubh.2021.645059
- <sup>9</sup> Anti-Racism Movement (2019), *Open Letter to the Ethiopian Government from Ethiopian Groups in Lebanon*. Available at: <https://armlebanon.org/content/open-letter-ethiopian-government-ethiopian-groups-lebanon>
- <sup>10</sup> Adugna, F., Deshingkar, P., and Ayalew, T. (2019) *Brokers, migrants and the state: Berri Kefach ‘door openers’ in Ethiopian clandestine migration to South Africa*. Retrieved from Brighton: University of Sussex

The Freedom Fund is a leader in the global movement to end modern slavery. We identify and invest in the most effective frontline efforts to eradicate modern slavery in the countries and sectors where it is most prevalent. Partnering with visionary investors, governments, anti-slavery organisations and those at risk of exploitation, we tackle the systems that allow slavery to persist and thrive. Working together, we protect vulnerable populations, liberate and reintegrate those enslaved and prosecute those responsible.

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