

Assessing the Benefits, Causes and Effects of Female Migration from Silte Zone of Southern Ethiopia to the Middle East and Gulf States



Eshettu Tesfaye Retta

Department of History and Heritage Management, Wolaita Sodo University, Wolaita Sodo, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT: A significant trend in the contemporary period is the increased number of women migrants due to the changing labour demands caused by globalization. Over the past century, women's employment has shifted from the industrial to the service sector and also to the informal economy. The development of the informal economy has allowed women to be active participants in this sector and also to migrate from developing countries to developed countries with better economies. This migration and foreign employment has the potential to bring positive benefits for these women; but simultaneously, there is also a great risk of exploitation and abuse associated with such migration. Despite its considerable economic growth in the last decade, unemployment especially youth unemployment is still high in Ethiopia. And much household level with hardships due to income that is below the poverty line and due to the number of people depends on agriculture which endures increasing spells droughts. Given the ecological and demographic pressures on the land and the lack of local employment opportunities, many families pressure their children to migrate, while many young people want to go abroad in search of better employment options and a possible better future. Qualitative research methodology was applied to describe the issue under consideration.

This paper attempts to assess and critically examine the possible benefits, causes and potential human right violations faced by Ethiopian female domestic workers by taking Silte Zone of southern Ethiopia as an example that are migrating to the Middle East and Gulf States.

KEY WORDS: Benefits, Causes, Effects, Female, Migration, Middle East and Gulf States.

I. INTRODUCTION

Migration has become one of the most significant political, social and economic issues of our time and concern about large scale population flows from the global south to wealthier countries dominate media attention and global debate (Joanna, et. al., 2017; International Organization for Migration Report, 2018). International migration for employment and associated pressures will continue to grow in volume and complexity due to globalization, supply and demand of the labor market as well as other factors. Today, there are over 244 million migrants in the world, out of which 150.3 million are migrant workers, accounting for 61% of people living outside their country of origin (Assefa, Seid and Tadele, 2017; International Organization for Migration Report, 2018) Famous for being the only sub-Saharan African country that was never colonized, Ethiopia is the second most populous nation on the continent (Meaza, Geremew and Nkirote, 2020; ILO, 2017). The country has a population of more than 100 million, 39% of which is below the age of 35. As of mid-2019, there were approximately 11 million youth job seekers and that every year two million more youth join the labor force. As the population and school enrollment rates increase, the demand for jobs will continue to rise in the coming years. The economy is therefore, not generating enough adequate jobs to address Ethiopia's increasing demand, which partly explains the country's high unemployment rates (Meaza, Geremew and Nkirote, 2020)

Ethiopia is a large "source" country for female domestic workers to the Middle East and Gulf States (Joanna, et.al. 2017; Beza, et.al. 2017; Girmachew, 2019). An estimated 170-180,000 women depart each year among whom 60-70% are estimated to be irregular migrants. Conditions for Ethiopian workers abroad are marked by frequent exploitation due to weak labor laws and regulations and the fact that many women procure work on tourist visas or through other irregular means, reducing any access they may have to redress for abuses. Exploitation, neglect, physical and sexual abuse against Ethiopian domestic workers has been documented (Joanna, et. al., 2017). The Middle East countries, especially those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) currently accommodate large numbers of female

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Ethiopian domestic laborers. Such immigration is historically recent and unprecedented. It is principally a result of increased purchasing power by these countries, which are getting increased oil revenues and enjoying stable economic development (Bedouin, 2006). The importation of labor that comes alongside the increased household income of the GCC countries at the beginning was focused on men-dominated work of construction. However, in the past two decades, there has been an overwhelming increase in inflow of women domestic workers (ILO, 2004)

In one study across five regions of Ethiopia, half of all migrants were in the Middle East and the Gulf countries compared to 20% in Africa and 22% in North America or Europe. Sixty percent of these migrants were women (Karylyn, 2018). Migration out of Ethiopia relates to the early 20th century, when elite Ethiopians began going abroad for education, although few in number. Following the 1974 revolution and the Marxist Military regime's (the Derg) takeover of the government, hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians fled the country. Many bolted due to the political tension, while others (mostly families) saw an opportunity to escape poverty and relocate to neighboring countries in East Africa. In 1991, after the Derg fell, some of those migrants returned to Ethiopia (Daniel, Thitaree and Karen, 2018, Girmachew, 2019; Naami, 2014)

The total number of Ethiopian migrants abroad estimated to be approximately three million. Of these between 2008, and 2014, 1.5 million migrated through irregular means. During this period, 480,480 Ethiopian migrated to the Middle East and Gulf States through regular means. Research indicates, however, that most migrant workers traveled abroad through unregistered agencies and irregular networks, indicating that the number of migrant workers is likely to be much higher. With both Ethiopian men and women are migrating to the Middle East for work, there have been increasing reports in media and literature of abuse and exploitation that female domestic workers face in the Middle East and Gulf States. Assessment conducted with 1,152 returnees in 2014 highlighted, high levels of verbal abuse (52%), discrimination (39%), physical violence (23%), theft (22%) and rape (5%) (Meaza, Geremew and Nkirote, 2020)

The ethno name Silte is a common denomination for various sub-groups that are related each other culturally, socially and religiously. The major communities under the generic name Silte are: the Silti community, the Melge (Hulbareg), Alichu Wuriro, Azernet Berbera and Wolena Gedebano. Abzana and Zahra communities have also been identified as sub-groups of the grand Silte ethnicity by current studies. Apart from Wolena Gedebano communities, all other sub-groups live in Silte Zone (Kairedin, 2013). Historical settings for the Silte and the neighboring people changed drastically after the southern conquest by Menelik II. The homeland of the Silte was also put under the authority of the Ethiopian empire in 1888, soon after the alliance of Qabena, Sebat Bet and the Silte (Islaam) was defeated by *Ras* Gobena, one of Menelik's general. *Neftenna* or armed northern (mostly Amhara) settlers built towns throughout the newly conquered south to exercise administrative and economic control of the people. Ironically, this change enabled the Silte to expand the geographical and economic sphere of their livelihood. Since the presence of *neftenna* provided security of travel across the southern part of Ethiopia, the Silte started to build their own commercial network connecting Addis Ababa and towns in the south (Makoto, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to assess the possible benefits, causes and effects of female migration from Silte Zone of south-central Ethiopia to the Middle East and Gulf countries.

II. STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

2.1. Description of the Study Area

Silte Zone is located in Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State of Ethiopia. The majority of the Silte people live in Silte Zone. Some Silte people also live in the surrounding Gurage, Halaba and Hadiya Zones. The people are also found in significant number in various urban centers of Ethiopia. The Silte have settled in the area stretching for up to 60 kilometers to the east and west from the main road. Their territory covers more than 3000 km². The Zone is bordered to the north and northwest by Gurage Zone, to the east by the Oromiya Regional State, to the southeast by Halaba Zone and to the south by Hadiya Zone. Geographically, Silte Zone is located at 7^o 54' 59.99'' North latitude and 38^o 19' 60.00'' East, longitude. Administratively, Silte Zone is structured into eight Woredas and one town administration, namely: Dalocha, Silti, Merab Azernet Berbera, Misrak Azernet Berbera, Alichu Wuriro, Sankura, Hulbareg, Lanfuro and Worabe town administration (Kairedin, 2018)

According to the Central Statistical Agency (CSA) Population and Housing Census Report of 2007, the total population of the Silte was estimated to be more than a million in 2017. The same source indicates that 51% of the population was female. As the source further indicates, 91.5% of the people live in rural areas, while 8.5% live in urban areas. Muslim accounts for 97.6% of the population; while 2.03% practiced various domains of Christianity; Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity takes the significant share of this. The Silte lands have two agro-ecological Zones, namely highland (Dega), and temperate (Woine Dega), each of which covers 20.5% and 79.5% of the total area of the land respectively. The average temperature of Silte Zone ranges from 12^o c-26^o c, and its average annual rainfall is from 780 mm-1818 mm. The Silte Practiced mixed agriculture and cattle breeding. Like in many parts of the country, the Silte economy largely depends on agriculture based on plow animals. The people main income source is agriculture. Silte peasants widely produce also livestock like goats, sheep, cattle and chicken (Kairedin, 2018).

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2.2. Methods and Procedures

The study was designed qualitatively as a historical study research technique was largely employed. Primary data was collected through interview. Though primary data was very scanty specifically about Silte, review was made to the very few literatures related to the subject. The data obtained from different sources was filtered and organized for triangulation and systematic analysis was made appropriately.

2.3. Objectives

The main goal of this study was to methodically indicate the benefits, causes and effects of female migration from southern Ethiopia to the Middle East and Gulf States with special emphasis on the Silte Zone.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Benefits of Migration

Sources assert as migration can generate very large benefits for migrants, their families and countries of origin. The wages that migrants earn abroad can be many multiples of what they could earn doing similar jobs at home. In addition to benefiting individual migrants and their families, the wider beneficial effects that emigration can have for the country. Emigration can reduce unemployment and underemployment, contribute to poverty reduction and with the appropriate supportive policies foster broader economic and social development in a variety of ways. For example, the remittances sent by migrants back to their countries of origin provide significant financial capital flows and a relatively stable source of income. Remittances are generally a less volatile and more reliable source of foreign currency than other capital flows in many developing countries. In general, immigration adds workers to the economy, thus increasing the GDP of the host country. In 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that remittances from overseas migrants workers significantly contributed (USD 3.7 billion in 2015) to the country's Gross Domestic Product even exceeding the total value of exports (Daniel, Thitaree and Karen, 2018)

3.2. The Causes of Migration

Numerous interconnected factors can be accounted for in the high demand and the subsequent influx of domestic workers in the Middle East and Gulf region. One of the major factors related to the way in which economic development in the Middle East and Gulf States has changed family dynamics and gender roles. Such social changes created an increased demand for labor work especially the gendered domestic and care work (ILO, 2004). The oil boom transformed these countries into some of the wealthiest nations in the world beginning about high standard of living and improved infrastructures of education and health services; such development increases the involvement of women in the market creating a gap in the household work where local women are not willing to take up paid domestic work (Naami, 2014)

The major push factor identified as economic reasons and cultural/attitudinal factors. Some of the major push factors that emerge in studies are the following. First, unemployment is one of the causes of migration. Indeed as the Central Statistical Agency 2012 national urban employment and unemployment survey shows, there is a high rate of unemployment in the urban areas. Assessment from all regions shows that unemployment rates are closer to the national average, 17.5%. Second, shortage of land and landless are the major problems that explain unemployment and underemployment in rural areas, due to higher level of population growth and land degradation. Agriculture is not only the dominant employer, but also the main economic activity in Ethiopia, yet there is a scarcity of farming land. The average landholding has been declining from time to time. Third, low payment (or wage differential) as another push factor. Soaring prices/inflation exacerbates the problem of low income/wage. Fourth, family pressures on young people to migrate on the basis that are lots of opportunities for youth abroad. Studies show that it becomes common for husband to send their wives to work overseas countries as domestic workers. Lastly, there is widespread belief among potential migrants that the only way to change their life is through moving out of the country (International Labour Organization, 2017; Assefa, Seid and Tadele, 2017). Besides studies also forward that, the pull factors are mainly related to the need to meet basic necessities, ranging from descent housing and consumables to saving and sending home considerable amount of money to families, to purchase assets. Social networks (with family members and friends abroad) are also found as pull factors. Traffickers are putting migrants at risk through propagating the positive aspect of migration to potential migrants and their families (International Labour Organization, 2017; Daniel, Thiatree and Karen, 2017)

According to Naami, the common denominator for most women's decision to migrate lies in both the growing demand of labor in international markets and the empowering aspiration cultivated in the minds of these women by such opportunity. The prospect of earning an income and exercising autonomy is attractive to these migrant women who, in their home countries have predetermined gender roles with constricted opportunities. While the promises of empowerment and autonomy are appealing propositions, the experiences of labors, particularly women domestic workers may take a given path as well (Naami, 2014)

The aspiration for change is widespread among young women in Silte. To change my life was frequently repeated as a reason to leave. Many young women could not envision significant change through the opportunities they had locally, especially once education was no longer an option for them. Migration to the Middle East and Gulf States was often framed as an investment for

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themselves and their families. For young Silte women, the most common aspiration expressed was to save enough money to build a home in a city and open their own business. Some return migrants of Silte opened corner stores with basic goods, soap, water, coca cola, biscuits or chat-not very lucrative enterprises in the major towns of the area, but relative to other income-generating opportunities, a significant source of financial independence. In Silte, the women who migrated abroad are most often young (in their teens or twenties), unmarried and fail to finish their secondary education. Their decision to leave falls at an important moment of transition in their life-course, as they navigate the path from childhood to adulthood. In some cases, the decision to leave is an active pursuit of capital, one worth leaving their education for. Migration becomes a way to avoid an early marriage and a rural future. Under a variety of circumstances, young women mentioned migration to the Middle East and Gulf States and the capital it gives access to, as a way to not only improve their lives materially, but to gain freedom to do something with their life, to change their life and the life of their families.

Many young women in Silte find themselves unable to continue their education for several reasons. First, they may fail the regional exam at grade 8 or the national exam at grade 10. If they do not pass the grade 10 exams and most do not, for many young women their future options are limited. If they fail, they have two opportunities, to marry someone or to fly outside to the Arab countries. The government is aware of low pass rates, and students who fail are encouraged to pursue technical and vocational schooling or certificate awarding courses, like the Teacher Training Institutes or Colleges of Teachers Education in the region. There are also opportunities for other educational certificates among the growing number of private institutions. But the majority of female youth in Silte did not want to exploit these opportunities.

In short, high employment, underemployment, avoiding early marriage and family pressure due to poverty and extended family responsibilities are some of the key factors that pushed most female from Silte Zone to seek a job in the Middle East and Gulf States.

3.3. Effects of Migration

Migrant workers often become victims of exploitation by their employers and employment agencies. It is important to note that all migrant women in the Middle East and Gulf States may not necessarily share similar problems. The discrimination suffered varies depending on their race, ethnicity and religion. But, in general Filipino, Sri Lanka and Ethiopia women in the Middle East and Gulf States face double or triple oppression emanating from their gender, class and race (Firehiwot, ND)

Most of migrants leave the country through illegal means by following three main migration routes. The choice of irregular ways depends by the barriers to regular migration. Returnees choose irregular routes because of their cheapness compared to regular routes, the inaccessibility of regular routes, their lengthy and costly bureaucracy and finally for the persuasion of brokers (Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, 2017). Most migrants from North-East part of the country, particularly from North and South Wollo and Southern Tigray Zones travel to Galafi (border town between Afar region and Djibouti). From there, they have to walk for several days through the desert to reach Djibouti town. There they wait for a few days until they get a boat to cross the Red Sea to Yemen. Migrants from Silte Zone follow the same route to Migrate to Middle East and Gulf States. Those who migrate to the Middle East and Gulf States go to Dire Dawa-Harar-Jijiga and then to Togowochale (Somaliland). They travel to Hargessa (Somaliland) and then to Bossasso (Somalia). From Bossasso they proceed to Yemen crossing Red Sea by boat (International Labour Organization, 2017)

The problem faced by women migrants usually begins in their home countries, especially through unethical practices by illegal brokers and private employment agencies. Migrant workers end up in exploitative working conditions due to a lack of accurate information on the living and working conditions in receiving countries. In Ethiopia, Article 12 (2) of the Private Employment Agency Proclamation states that agents have the duty to provide the necessary information for the workers regarding their work and the country of employment before the contract of employment is signed. However, as returning migrants have indicated, agencies do not properly communicate the real working conditions for fear of losing business, so they paint an idealized picture which encourages workers to migrate. It is often told that young women and girls, uneducated and facing desperate economic circumstances are deceived by the false promises of brokers into appalling work conditions, only to return to their area with broken spirits, and nothing in their hand (Firehiwot, ND)

The nature of domestic work means women have limited opportunities for social interaction outside of the workplace often becoming isolated and thus encountering greater risk of abuse. Physical and sexual violence is also common. There are limited avenues for these women to seek redress. The domestic migrant workers are mostly uneducated and know very little useful information about the destination country, such as support services that can help them. Hence, they tend to keep problems to themselves until they cannot bear it any more. Some manage to escape from their employer. They are likely to return to Ethiopian empty-handed but with irreversible damage to their health including psychological impacts. After returning home and finding no viable opportunities, some women end up re-migrating. Due to their low level of education and lack of access to information, most migrants are not well informed about the working and living conditions in a destination country. Upon arrival, many encounter unexpected issues with their employer. In extreme cases, migrants are sexually abused or raped; unwanted pregnancies have occurred. Isolation is common among women doing domestic work.

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Information about the risk of migration has increased in recent years and introduced some trepidation among those considering migration. This information comes from two sides; from the experience of women leaving the area, and from the government and television media. Regarding experiences, as more women go abroad, stories of bad experiences make their way back. Some women were rumored to have returned with a broken leg. Another never received her salary after working for a family for two years. Even if these experiences are fewer, than those who remit or return with significant capital; these stories become known. At the same time, the government and international organizations have begun campaigns and community education endeavors to educate the Ethiopian population about the dangers of (particularly illegal) migration, many women in town said they had primarily heard about the evils of Arab migration from watching television.

Some scholars question on the long-term contribution of remittances to human development. Some research indicates that in the long-term, remittances may not contribute significantly to human development, despite the fact that they significantly contribute to the GDP of countries. They strengthen their argument by mentioning the failure of small businesses funded by remittances due to lack of technical assistance or sustained funds and the spending of most remittances on consumer items. Remittances in Ethiopia do directly contribute to the foreign exchange reserves of the country. Families also spend their remittances on health, education and nutrition and this also supports social and economic development. As far as migrants send remittances, their families and left behinds increase their livelihoods, creating a dependence linkage. If the migration experience ends, families return to suffer human insecurity (Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, 2017; Firehiwot, ND)

In addition to abuse and exploitation in many instances young women seeking domestic work in the Middle East and Gulf States need to reinvent themselves culturally and religiously in order to easily assimilate in to the host country employers rather conservative expectations. While this cultural metamorphosis may be helpful in integrating better with the employer in the host country, it could be detrimental for many of the workers in their reintegration with the customs and traditions of their home town after their return. Cultural transformation enforced cultural isolation pervasive exploitative treatment and disappointment in not achieving expectations were the prominent self-identified threats to mental health by Ethiopian in general and Silte women domestic workers returnees in particular from the Middle East and Gulf countries (Tarekegn, 2019)

The final risk is arrest and deportation as happened in Saudi Arabia in 2013-2014. Deportation is a harsh experience of migrants: they were unable to collect their property, they were confiscated and suffered stigmatization. In fact, there were large numbers of Silte deportees from Saudi Arabia in 2013-2014, although we have no accurate data on the case. The returnees had few reintegration support and many of them turned to be a financial burden and economic dependent on relatives and friends. This situation pushed them to consider again the need to re-migrate. An equally important but often sometimes neglected challenge faced by migrant women domestic workers is that of return migration and reintegration. The cultural, social, linguistic and religious transformations migrant women usually go through in the Gulf region. Oftentimes, forcefully-have a lifelong impact that unravels in the reintegration process after returning home.

CONCLUSION

Silte Zone of southern Ethiopia is one of the largest female migrants sending area to the Middle East and Gulf States. A large number of Silte women migrate to the Middle East and Gulf countries and employed as housemaids. This is mainly due to the fact that job opportunities for women within the country in general and in the Zone in particular are very limited. In case of migration to the Middle East and Gulf States, where Ethiopian women subject themselves to high levels of risks and vulnerability to achieve a better future, a particular narrative has taken roots of young women deceived by brokers into horrific working conditions and returning with nothing to show for it. Silte migrants are more often portrayed as trafficked, deceived or blinded by hope.

The experiences and decision making of young women of Silte Zone illustrates how migration can be a reasonable decision, even considering the risks entailed. Going beyond a singular lens of victimization does not mean we should go to other extreme and focus only on the economic and social advantages of migration. An appreciation for the real constraints young women face as they transition into adulthood remains essential to understand their migration decision making. In this research area, I show how migration to the Middle East and Gulf States can be a reasonable and capabilities enhancing project at the same time that, it is a response to a critical lack of capabilities in other aspects of their lives. It is possible to recognize the social and structural injustices that drive this form of low-skilled migration without casting migrants as forced to leave.

Silte women are driven by different factors to migrate to the Middle East and Gulf States to serve as domestic workers in private households. The migration process exposes them to both risks and opportunities. Financial benefits and personal development are few of the advantages emanating from their migration. Human rights violations and poor working conditions are some of the dangers faced by these workers.

As research show, the everyday reality for a majority of Ethiopian female domestic migrants in the Middle East and Gulf States is mired with violence, abuse and exploitation. At the pre-migration stage, migrant girls and women face unnecessary difficulties starting from gathering to pay exorbitant migration related expenses and bureaucracies of obtaining passports and other travel documents. In countries of destination, migrant domestic workers fate more or less is in the hands of their employers and their

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overseas agents. In situation where domestic migrants find their living conditions to be intolerable, they take drastic measures such as escaping from their employers and joining prostitution rings or even committing suicide.

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