Being Housemaid in Middle East: The Experiences of Returnee Migrants in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia

Yonas Tesema Amaya
Department of History and Heritage Management, Dire Dawa University, Ethiopia

Abstract
This article discusses the experience of returnee women migrants from the Middle East countries. These returnee women are living in Dire Dawa city in eastern Ethiopia. A number of women migrants moved to the Middle East from the city either irregularly by the human smugglers across Djibouti to Yemen to other Middle East States or regularly by private employment agencies via airports. This study entirely employed qualitative research approach and focused on causes and challenges of migration and experiences of these returnee women. Returnee women from Saudi Arabia and Lebanon are selected and they shared me their experiences accordingly. Poverty, unemployment and family and peer pressures are the main driving force of migration for these returnees. They all employed as housemaid in their respective destinations. Lack of regulating labor policy of these countries, overload working hours and integration problems of migrants to Arab culture have all contributed for exploitative relationship between the employer and employees.

Keywords: migration; returnee women; housemaid; abuse; Middle East

Introduction
Dire Dawa is a city located at about 505 km at the east of the capital Addis Ababa. According to 2007 census, the total number of population in Dire Dawa city is 233,224 and a large rural area with a population of 108,610 is also attached to the city and hence gives the official name Dire Dawa City Administration. Female’s population slightly higher than that of male population and constitutes nearly 51% of the entire population of the city administration. According to CSA (2007), the urban population is annually growing by 4.1% due to the influx of rural-urban migration. Dire Dawa is a secondary city and located closer to the port of Djibouti which makes it an important transit hub for international migration via Djibouti and Somalia to the Gulf States and Europe (Dereje 2018).

Since the recent years, Africans are on the move to reach somewhere abroad. Only in 2016, more than one million Africans migrated irregularly and reached Europe across Mediterranean (Polydoroff 2017). In addition to reaching Europe across North Africa, Ethiopian migrants are heading to Middle East countries. The pouring of young Ethiopian women to the Middle East is one of the largest female migrations in Ethiopia’s history (Fassil 2018). This article therefore explores the reminiscent and experience of 20 returnee women migrants from Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. Of this number, four of them went to Saudi Arabia regularly through Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage and left and employed there as housemaid. The majority of them (12) moved to Saudi Arabia across Djibouti and Yemen illegally and the rest four returnees moved to Lebanon legally and all of them hired as housemaid too. As these returnees claim, some of them have signed contractual working agreement while others started working through verbal and non-binding agreement. Those who have not signed agreement have lost their money and dignity and were exploited by their employers. As a result, theses returnees have faced occupational injuries, molestation and psychological related problems. This act ascertains the incongruity between home as workplace and employing family as employer (ILO 2008).

Methodological and conceptual frameworks
The data collection for this study was conducted for a month in January of 2018. A mixed data collection mechanism was used. It includes interview, focus group discussion (FGD) and life history methods. According to Bryman (2004), interview method could help researcher acquires different kinds of information about interviewees and others’ attitudes, beliefs and behavior. Two FGDs each composed of 6 to 8 participants were also conducted. As Darlington and Scott (2002) suggest, I was acting as moderator of the discussion. The other method I employed was life history. As Lundy (2008, 398) notes, “life history is a biographical writing in the form of an extensive record of a person’s life”. Gough (2008, 484) also states the importance of life history method as it can convey a sense of the social construction of individual lives. By these methods, I had tried to discover the challenges and opportunities these returnees faced both in Middle East and Dire Dawa after their home return. Therefore, returnee migrants were separately approached and requested to describe their experiences. I easily got their phone numbers and home address from Dire Dawa city administration bureau of labor and social affairs. For the sake of confidentiality, I used pseudonyms in this study.

Conceptually, this study is built on global care chains (Isaksen et al 2008; Fernandez 2011) and citizenship rights (Ong 2006) approaches. Fernandez (2011, 436) clearly explained how global care chain approach works:

In a global care chain, the migrant domestic worker enables her female employer to enter and
remain in the workforce and pursue a professional career, as she looks after the latter’s children and home. In turn, the children of the nanny or migrant domestic worker are often taken care of by another (non-migrant) woman, who may be a paid nanny from an even poorer family, or who may be an unpaid female relative of the migrant woman.

The global care chains approach argues for the protection of the welfare of migrant domestic workers to enable them sustain their families and children in their country of origin. In this regard, the global care chains approach helps to comprehend the challenges of the absence of migrant women on her families back home and the support and care her children deserve. Ong (2006) argued for the protection of the rights of the domestic workers in alien countries. These rights include social and political rights, decent and paid work. In this regard, the returnee women migrant’s experiences, emotions and perceptions about the labor conditions in the country where they came from discussed in line with these conceptual frameworks.

Driving factors for migration

Since recent years, the world is experiencing the unprecedented influx of migrants. People are moving to alien countries either to escape conflicts or for the search of better life. The major driving force for migration in 1970s and 80s in Ethiopia was to escape rampant civil war and violence (Asnake and Zerihun 2015; Carter and Rohwerder 2016). According to the informants, poverty, unemployment, family and peer pressure are among the major driving forces of migration to Middle East. Let me discuss these pushing factors as follows:

Poverty

Ethiopia is one of the poorest nations in the world with 26 percent poverty rate and ranked of 173rd out of 187 countries (World Bank 2015; UNDP 2015). Mesfin and Guday (2017) cited poverty as the major pushing factor for Wollo women migration to the Middle East. Here also in Dire Dawa, poverty played a pushing role and one of the driving forces of female migration. In light of this, one of the informants described why she moved to Saudi Arabia as follows:

I was 18 when I moved to Saudi Arabia. I was born and grew up here in Dire Dawa. I was forced to end my education at grade 10 and I went to Saud Arabia irregularly. This was a sudden decision for me. We are four children in poor house. I lost my father due to car accident when I was 7. I also lost my mom owing to heart attack when I was 17. I am the firstborn of my family and the duty to support my younger siblings shouldered up on me. Consequently, I went to Saudi Arabia via Djibouti and Yemen illegally. My family problem and poverty forced me to work as housemaid there.

From this story, one can understand that she took risks to support her family and that poverty forced her toward irregular migration.

Unemployment

As illustrated by the returnee women, the other driving force for migration is unemployment. Youth unemployment is one of the major drivers of migration (Carter and Rohwerder 2016) in Ethiopia in general and in Dire Dawa in particular. The following story reveals how unemployment forced Fetiya to go to Lebanon:

I was graduated from university in BA history. I sought job for two years and I couldn’t get it. I decided to go to Middle East legally and I consulted my family. They refused at a time and gave me a go ahead sign later. I went to Lebanon via private employment agency in 2012. However, the actual labor condition there was not as I expected and being housemaid there is very challenging. Almost, I returned to Ethiopia barehanded. Fetiya’s case is not surprising that she is university graduate but unable to get job. Thousands of university graduates in Ethiopia couldn’t get job since the last decade. This is emanated from the failure of government policy of education and job creation. The government of Ethiopia plans to organize graduate students in different small and medium enterprises for urban graduates. However, the expansion of small and medium enterprises could not curb migration due to the volatility of the income generated from these enterprises (Asnake and Zerihun 2015).

Family and peer pressure

The other pushing factor for migration as pointed out by returnees is family pressure. When the family sees their neighbor receiving the sent money from abroad (mostly Middle East where their daughter working), they began to pressure their daughter to go there and send money as of their neighbor’s daughter. The following Zahara’s story catches it well:

I was born to relatively poor family in Dire Dawa. I was grade 9th student when my mom pressured me to go to Saudi Arabia. Our neighbor’s daughter named Meron was working in Saudi Arabia and she sent money back home and her family’s life was relatively progressing when compared to ours. Meron’s mom approached to my mom and told her the benefits she is getting from her daughter who is working as housemaid in Saudi Arabia. Now, my mom begun to nagging me to go to Saudi Arabia and send her money as Meron did. She repeatedly forced
me to drop my education and heading to there. I love mom and I couldn’t convince her to change her mind. As a result, I went to Saudi Arabia irregularly via Djibouti and worked there for two years. I was deported to Ethiopia in 2013 by the Saudi government measures. Unfortunately, Meron (who my mom perceives her as heroine) was also deported in 2013. Meron’s family did not save money she sent in her bank account. Sadly, Meron committed suicide.

Zahara’s story clearly shows the pressure of her family and neighbor on her life. She went there to satisfy her mom’s needs and faced life challenges there. She claimed her life is troubled due to her mother’s pressure.

Friendship networks and peer pressure are strongly linked to migration patterns to the Middle East. In encouraging their friends or relatives to join them, women migrants to Middle East tend to minimize the difficulties and hardships they face and instead exaggerate their accomplishments. The proximity of Dire Dawa to Djibouti and technology (via Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram), which have made travel and information exchange much easier, thereby encouraging migration. Before their departure, some of them have contacted their friends who were working in Middle East via social medias.

**Escaping for dignity**

Apart from above causes of migration, two of returnee migrants asserted that they moved to Middle East to escape for dignity not because of poverty or unemployment. Let me substantiate with cases here below. The first story reveals how Baredu’s dismissal from university forced her to migrate even if she is from rich family:

My name is Baredu. I was 1st year student at Haramaya University in 2011. I joined physics department and stayed there only for a semester. My first semester grade result was below standard and I was dismissed for good. I am the last child for my family. My elder brothers and sisters were high-profile students and all of them are university graduates. Some of them are employee of federal government institutions and others are running their own business. Being part of this family was a proud for me but I felt ashamed when I couldn’t get pass mark at university. Therefore, the hard option I took was leaving this country by any means without telling my result to my family. I collected money from by elder brothers separately cheating them to do something by the money and I left for Saudi Arabia irregularly.

On the other hand, the following story illustrates the mismanagement of technology and how it leads Mulu to escape for dignity. Technological innovations are changing people’s way of life for better and worse. Many individuals have smart phones in Dire Dawa when compared to other parts of the country, as the area is prone to the contraband activities along the borders of Djibouti and Somalia. As many use the phones for better, some uses it for the worse. Mulu escaped to Middle East owing to mobile video scandal. She narrates the incident:

I had boyfriend whom I loved very much. Initially, he loved me too. I had a sex with him repeatedly as I believe we are true lovers. One day, he wanted to take the video our sex and I refused. He tried to convince me that he just wants for memory. I strongly opposed his recording and he vowed to cut our relationship unless he records the video. Accordingly, he stopped calling and getting me for a month. Due to my intrinsic love for him, I agreed to everything he wants to do and he promised not show the video to anyone. I allowed him to record for I loved him. And then, whenever we had a sex, he started to record while I am unclothed. His body was not visible in the video (only his penis and legs shown) while I was fully visible. Through the time, our relationship deteriorated and cut off at the end. Consequently, he posted that video online via Telegram and Facebook. I was shocked and attempted to committed suicide. Instead, my colleague advised me to leave this country before my family heard the news. I went to my uncle’s house and cheated him 10,000 Ethiopian birr (350 USD) assuming that my father sent me to my uncle for borrowing. I left Dire Dawa for Saudi Arabia. After I reached there, I called my family that I left Ethiopia and they told me that I did the right thing. Hadn’t I left the country, my father would have proudly killed me. After two years of stay there, my family sent me invitation to come home. My ex-lover was jailed by the help of women and children affairs bureau of the city.

From these above two cases, one can understand that people migrate for dignity. Unlike to material problems, people left one’s own nation for the family and self-respecting cultural reason which is embedded in Ethiopian cultural system. If we look at Baredu’s story, her family has better economic stand. However, she migrated for fear of breaking the line of successfulness of her family. In addition, Mulu’s story illustrates that she migrated for breaking cultural norms and degrading familial or societal status. It is done in the form of sacrifice in order to sustain the values of the society. Using internet is free and irresponsible people can post what degrade other’s dignity. This corresponds with the suicide of an Italian woman after she struggled “to get videos of her having sex removed from the web has rekindled a national debate on the perils of social media and the internet” (New York Times, September 16, 2016). Therefore, the use of internet certainly needs national and international regulations.
Irregular routes of migration

There are three irregular migrant routes to abroad from Ethiopia. These are eastern, southern and northwestern routes (Carter and Rohwerder 2016). The eastern route gathers migrants from Dire Dawa, Jijiga, Afar and Harar through Djibouti or Somalia to Yemen and other countries in Middle East whereas the southern route takes migrants from Moyale to Kenya to South Africa. The northwestern route helps migrants to move to Sudan to Libya and Europe.

In addition, regular route through Bole International Airport is also functioning. Migrants who have fulfilled minimum requirements as approved by Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) and Private Employment Agency (PEA) managed to go to abroad (Asnake and Zerihun 2015). However, one of the informants claims the insignificant difference of the actual condition in Middle East whatever the route could be. Concerning the reality in destination countries, Asnake and Zerihun (2015) have also succinctly underlined that there is not observable difference between irregular and regular migrants.

How do smugglers approach migrants?

The current influx of Ethiopian women to Middle East is often made through trafficking (Fransen 2009). The role of smugglers in deceiving the migrants is immense. They approached the potential migrants and informed very attractive but false information. One of my focus group discussants told me how the smuggler deceived her:

I failed grade 10th national examination and I gave up about my future life. I talked to my colleague about my frustration to continue to live here. My colleague consulted me to search for better job which in Middle East. I decided to go there by any means. My friend gave my phone number to ‘unknown’ smuggler and he contacted me on phone for several times. After realized that I am not from government bodies and my decision, he met me in person in a much secured place. He exaggerated about the salary I get, about the working conditions and about the ‘safe’ route to go to Saudi Arabia. However, the reality on the ground there is quite different.

The above story is excerpted from Shukria who is residing in Dire Dawa. It conforms to what Jones et al (2017) identified broker’s view as the more one works hard the more he/she would be treated as family by employers.

The numbers of smugglers have dramatically increased since recent years. According to MoLSA, there are over 1,000 estimated smugglers are engaged in recruiting and sending of migrants to Middle East (Girmachew 2017). Human trafficking remains a large activity and largest source of income for smugglers (Anwar 2016). Some of the smugglers in Ethiopia run other business and work as brokers at the same time. They have networks in and out of the country. While they contact the potential migrants by their regular business, they just poke about the issues of the rise of cost of living and that something has to be done to be out of quagmires of poverty. Now, the potential migrant starts to be attracted to this broker’s rhetoric. The migrant shares his life history with this grassroots level broker. The broker now plans how to convince him/her and deceives him/her by giving exaggerated information. This is mostly how brokers approach and recruit migrants for the irregular journey to Middle East.

Re/integration and psychological effects

According to informants, the process of integration to the new culture in Middle East and reintegration to their family back home after their return was very difficult. These migrants went to Middle East without having necessary skills like Arabic language and foreign food cooking skills. Regarding the challenges of integration to the culture of the destination countries, Elsabeth shared me her story as follows:

I went to Lebanon in 2010 through PEA having fraud visa. The agency’s network there welcomed me when I arrived in Beirut. They took me their home and I stayed there for a week until they get job for me. I only speak Amharic language and I couldn’t speak Arabic. I was not much good at cooking of their food. As a result, I faced challenges. On the other hand, I am the follower of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity while I was serving Muslim family. They forced me to fast with them during the holy month of Ramadan.

Elsabeth story illustrates the negative employee-employer relationship and the difficult of integration process to the new working environment. Jones et al (2017) also pointed out the punishment of Ethiopian Orthodox women for the failure of respecting Islamic laws and customs.

On the other hand, returnee migrants are facing challenges of reintegration to their family. The ILO has been providing technical support in collaboration with Ethiopian government and EU to address some challenges experienced by some Ethiopian returnee migrants. It is aimed at developing the skill of migrants in areas of life skill, financial management, entrepreneurship and vocational skills training. It was hoped that having these skills strengthen the reintegration efforts of the returnee migrants. However, the returnees claim that they did not get much support from Dire Dawa city and other NGOs which can facilitate their reintegration. Because of lack
concern from some families and government bodies, some returnee migrants are considering to go back to Middle East. In light of this, Hayat forwarded the problem of reintegration she is facing as discussed below:

I worked in Riyadh for 6 years. I had worked in four houses as maid. I was raped and sexually abused three times. I was also repeatedly beaten and physically abused. I have a big scar on my face which entirely changed my original face outlook. I needed medical treatment when I came here. My neighbors and family begun to talk about my physical outlook and my stay in Saudi Arabia and hence I am feeling loneliness and isolation. If I get chance, I will go back and die there. I am troubled by situations here.

Hayat story is annoying and needs due consideration by the concerned bodies. Alemu (2017) has also dealt the problem of reintegration process of returnee women migrants from migration.

Psychologically, returnee migrants have many stories to share. They are totally shocked and abused mentally. They were treated as sub-human and inferior by their employers. Among all returnees, two of them had experienced the worst case of psychological and mental abuses. Lensa said:

I went to Jeddah illegally through Djibouti to Yemen to Saudi. In the course of my movement, I was raped three times. Those who raped me were all Ethiopians by birth but ‘not by culture’. They are Satan. They dragged me on the ground and forced me to have sex with them one by one. Fortunately, I took emergency quinine with me to prevent unwanted pregnancy and I swallowed it. The problem here is not only having sex with them, other affiliates also have access to watch from a bit distance while they have sex with somebody else.

Apart from sexual abuse by traffickers in the course of irregular migration, Semira has also abuse story to share while she was in Lebanon.

I was employed by a family of seven members in Beirut. I was busy with household duties and had rare time to off. My women employer was very bad person. She undermined me, insulted me, kicked me and treated me as inferior to her. She always intimidated me to cut my contract without any back payment. Her husband was approaching and treated me whenever she insulted me. I thought he was good person unlike her. However, when madam left for shopping he forced me to have sex with him and urged me not to disclose this state of affair. Unfortunately, due to on-and-off nagging with me, madam cut my contract and I came to Ethiopia within a month after I had sex with her husband. When my period ceased, I went to clinic for check up and the doctor told me that I am expectant of nearly one and half month. I decided not to bear the half-caste and had aborted the fetus. I suffered from it.

The experience of Lensa reveals the inhuman and barbarity acts of the human traffickers in the course of irregular migration. Other returnees from the group also concerned the potential of forced sexual relationship between the traffickers and migrants up to the final destination. The personal story of Semira also suggests the inevitability of low status of housemaid and sexual abuse. The hostile employer-employee relationship in Middle East is more or less emanated from superior-inferior complex. In addition, Semira’s sexual abuse shows either what Kempadoo (2001) identified black women as hyper-sexualized or what Juredini (2003) viewed the Middle East as the commonplace for the sexual abuse of domestic workers.

**Legislative Framework for migration**

Ethiopia has recognized the threat posed by human trafficking and has put an appropriate policy framework in place to deal with this threat. Ethiopia has no problem of formulating policies and legislation but has problem of its implementation. MoLSA has formulated different directives and proclamations to prevent and manage outgoing and incoming migrants. Concerning Ethiopian migrants, the ministry attempted to deal with following legislations.

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<th>Policy</th>
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<td>Labor proclamation No. 691/2003</td>
<td>It defines how Ethiopian and foreign nationals employed</td>
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| Employment exchange service proclamation No. 409/2009 | • It strengthens labor migration and its management  
• It encourages the supervision of PEs |
| Prevention and suppression of trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants proclamation No. 909/2015 | This proclamation proposed serious punishment for traffickers and smugglers up to 19,500 USD and death penalty based on the severity of the case. The proclamation has also came up with reform in relation to procedures of investigation, protection of smuggling by creating national committee led by Deputy Prime Minister to oversight the implementation of the law. |
Ethiopia stuck its law of prohibiting human trafficking in 2015 by above No. 909/2015 proclamation. The government is also working with IOM to tackle irregular migration through awareness creation up to the grassroots level (IOM 2017). Universities and broadcast medias are working on the awareness raising campaign. Since the proclamation No. 923/2016 proclaimed, the country encourages labor migration to the countries with which Ethiopia has bilateral labor agreement. The government determined to sign bilateral labor agreement after the 2013 Saudi shock and labor migration ban by the Ethiopian government. The labor migration ban of 2013 came after the launching of brutal crackdown against undocumented Ethiopian migrants by the Saudi government (Asnake and Zerihun 2015). The government claimed the importance of the ban so as to protect Ethiopian from abuse, exploitation and violation of human rights. The ban was officially lifted after overseas employment proclamation No. 923/2016.

There are also several international laws which guide the course of migration and combat the irregular migration. For instance, UN Palermo Protocol was initiated to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in person. This protocol was adopted in 2000 and entered to force in 2003. It aimed to combat human trafficking through prevention, protection and prosecution. Ethiopia was blamed for not endorsing the Palermo Protocol until recent years. Its Parliament ratified the protocol by 2012. Ethiopia has already ratified a number of international conventions that protect the rights of migrants. Some of them are Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations against Women of 1979, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1996, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966 and ILO conventions (The Private Employment Agencies Convention No. 181/1997, The Abolition of Forced Labour Convention No. 105/1957 and The Discrimination Convention No. 111/1958) (Emebet 2002).

Conclusion

This article has shed some light on the stories and experiences of returnee women migrants from Saudi Arabia and Lebanon who are residing in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. The prime motive behind the exodus of these migrants is to get out of quagmires of poverty, unemployment, pressures from family and personal networks. In Dire Dawa, the prevalence of irregular migration to the Middle East is high as a result of the proximity of the city to Djibouti and Somaliland. To satisfy their needs, migrants took risks of irregular migration and they also faced difficulties in the course of migration and there in destination countries. Violation of human rights, psychological and physical abuses, sexual molestation and lack of decent and paid job are among the problem they encountered. Therefore, the government is expected to minimize irregular migration by creating ‘decent’ job opportunities. I said decent because the flimsy and volatile nature of small and medium enterprises (Asnake and Zerihun 2015) which Ethiopia takes it as achievement is not preventing youths from illegal migration. The international organizations and NGOs are also expected to support the returnees to both socially and economically reintegrate in a vivid manner. There should be guiding law that forces both private and government medias (TVs and Radios) to work on awareness creation campaign about the agenies of illegal migration, and religious and clan leaders should also participate in the campaign. In addition to broadcast medias, MoLSA should also work on awareness creation via social medias as many youths are active online. Moreover, the government should closely work with destination countries to end the violation of human rights and facilitate better labor conditions.

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