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Research article

Work-related abuse and exploitation among Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries

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Abstract: *Ethiopian women have been migrating to countries in the Middle East for work more frequently in recent years. However, research on these migrants' working conditions is still scarce. This study examines the prevalence of work-related abuse and exploitation among Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers. It also explores whether these experiences vary by legal status or destination country. A mixed-methods approach was used. Quantitative data was gathered from 224 randomly selected female returnees and analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics. The qualitative part included four focus group discussions with eight returnees each, 18 in-depth interviews with returnees, and six key informant interviews with representatives from government agencies, private employment agencies, and NGOs, analyzed through thematic content analysis. The findings show that most migrant domestic workers faced serious work-related abuse and exploitation. This included being forced to work long hours, performing tasks beyond what was originally agreed upon, working in multiple households, enduring poor working conditions, and overstaying their contracts. The statistical analysis revealed no significant differences in abuse experiences based on legal status and destination country differences. This may be due to similar labor systems, like the kafala system, across Gulf States, which provides little protection for migrant workers. Moreover, although it needs further study, many returnees reported discriminatory treatment and work assignments based on nationality. The study suggests creating bilateral and multilateral labor agreements with destination countries to reduce abuse/exploitation and ensure fair treatment for all migrant workers.*

Keywords: Female migrant, work-condition, abuse, Ethiopia, Middle East

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Introduction

Migration has always been an important part of human societies. It has happened throughout history and across the globe since people first began to move (IOM, 2022). Among the different types of migration, labor migration is one of the most common. Recently, more women have participated in this type of migration. As of 2022, women accounted for 38.7% of the 169 million international migrant workers worldwide, which totals about 65 million female migrant workers (ILO, 2022). The growing involvement of women in global labor

migration reflects a larger trend known as the feminization of migration. This trend is closely connected to three related global processes: more women entering the labor markets of high-income countries, the increase of poverty among women in low-income countries, and the effects of globalization, which has made it easier for people to move across borders (UNDESA, 2013; IOM, 2022).

A large number of female labor migrants work in low-wage, low-skilled jobs including domestic work, caregiving, and the service industry. Among these workers, migrant domestic workers are one of the most prominent groups. According to the ILO (2015), around 11.5 million international migrant domestic workers were employed worldwide, with roughly 8.5 million, or 75%, being women. More recent data show that women still make up 73% to 80% of this workforce (ILO, 2021; Migration Data Portal, 2024). This underscores their important role in supporting household care economies, especially in countries that receive labor migrants.

The Middle East, especially the Gulf States, along with Lebanon and Jordan, has become a major destination for millions of migrant women who work as domestic workers. Most of these workers have traditionally come from South and Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. However, recent years have seen an increase in migrants from sub-Saharan African nations, including Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Kenya, and Uganda (Sabban, 2002; ILO, 2015; Abebaw & Waganesh, 2017). Since the late 1990s, the number of Ethiopian women migrating to the Middle East for domestic work has risen sharply. This increase is driven by poverty, unemployment, and political instability (Fernandez, 2010; IOM, 2017; ILO, 2023). Every day, hundreds of Ethiopian women start their migration journeys through both regular and irregular routes to seek better lives (Bereket, 2013; USDOS, 2016; Fassil, 2018).

Despite this growing trend, improvements in the working conditions of migrant domestic workers have not kept pace. The harsh realities of abuse and exploitation that many women encounter upon arrival are frequently hidden by the promise of economic opportunity (Fernandez, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2012). Numerous reports by international organizations have documented widespread abuse and rights violations among Ethiopian migrant domestic workers (IOM, 2023; ILO, 2023; UNHRHC, 2015; Human Rights Watch,

2012; 2016; Freedom Fund, 2024). For instance, a recent report by the Freedom Fund (2024) found that 75% of Ethiopian women working in Lebanon, Jordan, and Kuwait reported experiencing abuse, including physical violence, sexual assault, wage withholding, and denial of rest days.

Although these issues are becoming more recognized in international advocacy and organizational reports, academic research is still limited (Wickramage & Siriwardhana, 2016; Malhotra et al., 2013). The few studies on this subject (e.g., Abebaw, 2013; Ketema, 2014; De Regt & Tafesse, 2016;

Fassil, 2017) are mostly qualitative. These studies highlight personal stories and experiences, but they lack the methods needed to measure the frequency or trends of abuse on a larger scale. To address these gaps, this study systematically investigates the extent and frequency of work-related abuse experienced by Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers in the Middle East. Moreover, this study contributes to the literature by examining whether experiences of work-related abuse and exploitation differ significantly according to legal status and destination country of migrants. Additionally, a few prior studies (e.g. Polity 2014; Fernandez & de Regt 2014) indicated that migrant domestic workers in countries in the Middle East are subjected to unfair treatment. Fernandez and de Regt (2014), for instance, demonstrated that domestic workers frequently face discrimination based on their nationality, with Ethiopian workers typically subjected to more severe treatment than their Asian counterparts. This study also explored how Ethiopian migrant domestic workers viewed and experienced their treatment in comparison to migrants from other nations or areas. In sum, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the subjective experiences of work-related abuse among Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers, and how frequently do these abuses occur?
2. Do overall work-related abuses vary based on the country of destination?
3. Do overall work-related abuses vary based on the workers' legal migration status in the destination country?

2. Materials and methods

Description of the study area: This study took place in the Amhara National Regional State, one of Ethiopia's twelve administrative regions located in the northwestern and north-central areas of the country. The administrative capital of the region is Bahir Dar, which sits on the southern shore of Lake Tana, Ethiopia's largest lake. The region is mostly rural, with more than 80% of its population involved in small-scale, rain-fed agriculture (MoFED, 2020). Most people follow the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, although there are also significant Muslim and Protestant minorities. Administratively, Amhara is divided into 14 zones, each containing multiple *woredas* (districts) and *kebeles* (local administrations).

Study design: This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the nature and extent of work-related abuse and exploitation experienced by Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries. A retrospective approach was used, as participants were asked to reflect on their experiences abroad following their return to Ethiopia.

Study population and site selection: The target population consisted of Ethiopian female returnees who had worked as domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries. The Amhara region was selected as the primary study area based on its high rate of labor out-migration to the Middle East (Habtamu et al., 2017; Asefa et al., 2017). In addition, Addis Ababa was included as a supplementary site to access federal-level data.

Sampling procedures and sample size determination: A multi-stage sampling technique was used for the quantitative part. First, four hotspot zones (North Wollo, South Wollo, North Gondar, and West Gojjam) were purposively selected from the Amhara region. Within these zones, 10 towns (Debark, Dabat, Wogera, Gondar, Bahir Dar, Woldiya, Kobo, Hara, Mersa, and Dessie) were purposively selected based on returnee density. However, due to the incompleteness of official returnee registration lists, a probability-based sample size calculation was not feasible. Instead, the sample size was determined based on established guidance for social research particularly when complete sampling

frames are unavailable. This approach is supported by existing literature, including works by Gelo et al. (2008) and Yoshikawa et al. (2008), which likely provide specific recommendations for sample size determination in such contexts. Accordingly, a total of 224 returnees were randomly selected from available community-based lists in the identified towns, which were verified with the assistance of local authorities and community representatives.

On the other hand, the sample size for the qualitative part of the study was determined based on the principle of data saturation as recommended by Patton (2002). Accordingly, 18 in-depth interviews, and 3 focus group discussions (each involving 8 participants) were conducted with returnees. A combination of random and snowball sampling was used to identify participants for the interviews and FGDs, ensuring variation in background and experience. In addition, 6 key informants were purposively selected from relevant institutions: the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Amhara region's Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs, two NGOs (Agar Ethiopia and Good Samaritan Association), and a representative from a licensed private employment agency.

Instrument development and data collection: Since no standardized instrument was available to assess work-related abuse among Ethiopian domestic workers abroad, the researcher developed an original survey tool. Items were informed by a systematic review of the related literature on domestic worker exploitation and expert consultation with professionals. The preliminary scale consisted of multiple items reflecting work condition abuse. The instrument was pilot-tested and achieved a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.768, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The final version included five items, each rated on a four-point Likert scale: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently. Higher mean scores indicated greater levels of work condition abuse.

Furthermore, for the purpose of detailed interpretation and to determine the level of work-condition abuse, the mean score of work-condition abuse was classified into high, moderate, low, and none levels of abuse. Therefore, in order to make cut-off points for high, moderate, and low levels, the researcher did the following simple calculation based on the consultation

of experts and professionals: (Maximum- Minimum / n). "Maximum" refers to the highest score of the given Likert scale (4, in this case); “Minimum" refers to the lowest (1), and "n" refers to the number of categories that are intended to create. Thus, (4- 1/ 3) =1. Upon calculation 1 is the interval value. Then, just add up the score of interval value to the three categories, as in the following: Low (1 – 1.99), Moderate (2. 00 – 2.99), High (3 - 4). Then, the frequency and percentage of participants in each of the four categories were computed separately.

Method of data analysis: Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, percentage) were used to describe prevalence and intensity of work condition abuse. Moreover, inferential statistics (Mann–Whitney U test and Kruskal–Wallis H test) were employed to explore variation in abuse by destination country and legal status at destination (legal vs. illegal). Non-parametric tests were employed due to non-normal data distribution. Accordingly, when an independent variable has only two levels, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed. However, when the independent variable has more than two levels, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was performed.

On the other hand, to analyze the data generated from the in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews, the thematic content analysis method was employed. Textual data were coded using ATLAS. ti software and patterned themes were identified. Exemplary quotes from the transcriptions are presented to illuminate these themes.

Ethical Consideration

All ethical standards were adhered to. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant regional and local authorities. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, and verbal informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured throughout the research process.

3. Results

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants

In this study, about 280 individuals participated in the qualitative and quantitative parts of the study. Of which, a total of 224 migrant returnees participated in the quantitative part. The

profile of the participants in the survey is presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, 66.5% of the respondents were from urban areas, while 33.5% were from rural areas. Most migrated at a young age, with 30.4% under 18 years. About 73.7% were unmarried at the time of migration. Regarding education, about 8% were illiterate, while most had primary or secondary education. Few reached preparatory or higher levels. Religiously, 60.7% were Christian and 38.8% Muslim.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants in the survey (n=224 returnee)

Variables		Frequency	Percent
Place of birth	Urban	149	66.5
	Rural	75	33.5
Age during departure	Less than 18	68	30.4
	18-22	101	45.1
	23-26	49	21.9
	Greater than 26	6	2.7
Marital status during departure	Never married	165	73.7
	Married	44	19.6
	Divorced	14	6.3
	Widowed	1	.4
Educational attainment during departure	Never attending school	17	7.6
	Grade 1-8	91	40.6
	Grade 9-10	93	41.5
	Grade 11-12	12	5.4
	Above grade 12	11	4.9
Religion status during departure	Orthodox Christian	136	60.7
	Muslim	87	38.8
	Protestant	1	.4

Ways of Migration

Ethiopian women domestic labor migrants have used both legal and illegal channels of

migration. Accordingly, the study examined the percentage of survey respondents who used legal and illegal ways of migration. As shown in Table 2, Ethiopian women labor migrants use legal and illegal ways of migration. Out of the total surveyed participants, about 50 percent of the participants migrated through a legal channel of migration, meaning they were recruited through licensed private employment agencies. The remaining half of the participants (about 50 percent) migrated in illegal ways of migration. This 50/50 distribution illustrates the ongoing reliance on both regular and irregular migration channels.

Table 2. Distribution of survey participants by way of migration (n=224 returnee)

Way of migration	Frequency	Percent
Legal	111	49.6
Illegal	113	50.4

Source: Field survey, 2019/2020

Destination Country

The influx of young Ethiopian women domestic labor migration to the Middle East, especially to the Gulf countries has increased over time. In this study, the distribution of survey respondents based on their destination countries is presented in Figure 1. Saudi Arabia is the major destination country for Ethiopian migrant domestic workers, with 59.8 percent of the returnees, while the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Kuwait receive a lower number of migrant workers from Ethiopia as compared to Saudi Arabia but are still significant destinations for Ethiopian migrant domestic workers.

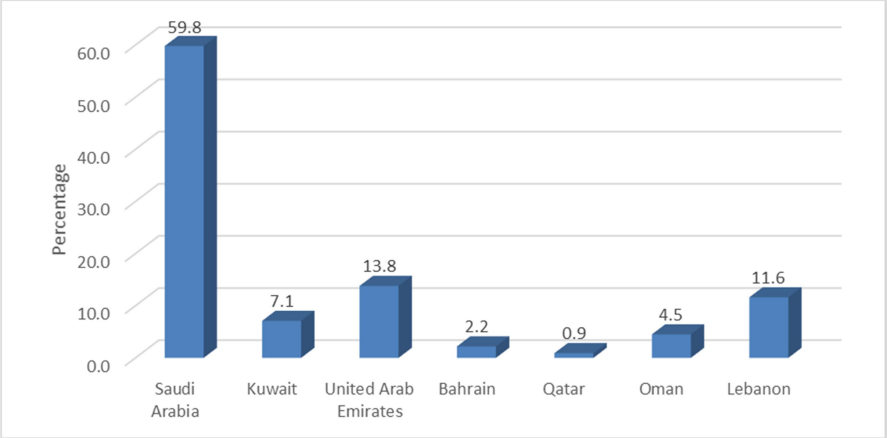

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by destination country (n = 224) (Source: Survey data, 2019/2020)

Prevalence and forms of work-related abuse and exploitation

Ethiopian women migrate every day to Middle Eastern countries and get employed as domestic workers. However, this migration is not free from abuse. Migrant domestic workers suffered from different forms of abuse, ranging from low to high-level abuse. Types and frequency (level) of work-related abuses are presented in Table 3. The findings reveal significant experiences of work-related abuses among Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in the Middle East. The item with the highest mean score was "forced to work for longer hours than agreed or promised" (M = 3.34, SD = 0.944), indicating that the majority of the respondents experienced extended working hours that exceeded the terms of their original orally promised or written employment agreement. This result highlights the normalization of exploitative labor practices, such as overwork without proper rest, which is not only a breach of contract but also a serious violation of international labor standards.

The second most frequently reported abuse was "forced to perform other activities not agreed or promised" (M = 3.18, SD = 1.142). This suggests that a large proportion of domestic workers are coerced into taking on duties beyond what they were initially hired for. Beyond domestic work, employers forced them to engage in cleaning, gardening, and other roles. This reflects a breach of informed consent and demonstrates how job roles are often arbitrarily expanded and become source of exploitation.

The third most frequent abuse is the experience of being "forced to work in different houses" (M = 2.99, SD = 1.160), such as at the homes of employer's relatives or friends. This practice can be considered as "contract sharing" or "labor trafficking within kin networks'', and it violates the principle of fixed workplace agreements. Being moved between households not only intensifies workload but can expose workers to multiple abuses and exploitations.

On the other hand, "forced to work in unfavorable conditions" (M = 2.42, SD = 1.161) and "forced to stay longer than agreed with the employer" (M = 2.17, SD = 1.270) were found to be relatively less frequent but still significant. Unfavorable conditions may include exposure to risky cleaning chemicals, working in poorly ventilated areas, or living in confined spaces with limited access to basic amenities. These working environments are not only dehumanizing but can also lead to severe physical and psychological harm. Similarly, being compelled to overstay their agreed-upon contract period implies a form of coercive control, where workers may be denied the right to return home, often under threats of delay or denial of payment and confiscation of necessary documents including passport.

Table 3: Mean scores and standard deviations for types of work-related abuse among migrant returnees (n = 224)

Items		Mean	Std. Deviation
Types of work-related abuse			
1.	Forced to perform other activities not agreed or promised	3.18	1.142
2.	Forced to work for longer hours than agreed or promised	3.34	0.944
3.	Forced to work in different houses (employer's relatives or friends)	2.99	1.160
4.	Forced to work in unfavorable conditions	2.42	1.161
5.	Forced to stay longer than agreed with the employer	2.17	1.270

Source: Survey data, 2019/2020

In addition to the item-level analysis, the study also examined the overall experience of work-condition abuse among Ethiopian migrant domestic workers by computing a composite mean score. As presented in Table 4, this abuse subscale comprises five individual items, which were aggregated to generate a total score reflecting the respondents' overall experience of work-related exploitation during their employment in Middle Eastern countries.

As shown in Table 4, the overall mean score for work-condition abuse is 2.82 (SD = 0.82), which falls within the moderate range of abuse, based on the established interpretive scale. This suggests that, on average, Ethiopian migrant domestic workers experienced a moderate degree of exploitative work conditions while employed in destination countries. However, reliance on the mean alone may obscure significant variations in individual experiences. Therefore, a frequency distribution was calculated to further disaggregate the respondents by level of abuse.

Table 4: Composite mean score for overall work-condition abuse among migrant returnees (n = 224)

Abuse subscale	Mean	Std. Deviation
Work-condition abuse	2.8214	0.81921

Source: Survey data, 2019 /2020

As depicted in Table 5, only 4% of the survey respondents reported zero levels of work-condition abuse. On the other hand, about 96% of the survey participants were victims of work-condition abuse ranging from low to high levels of abuse during their employment period in Middle Eastern country. This implies that the prevalence of work-condition abuse among Ethiopian migrant domestic workers was very high.

Table 5: Distribution of respondents by levels of work-condition abuse (n = 224)

Abuse types	Level of abuse	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Work-condition abuse	Zero level abuse	9	4.0	4.0
	Low level abuse	40	17.9	21.9
	Moderate level abuse	79	35.3	57.1
	High level abuse	96	42.9	100.0

Source: Survey data, 2019/2020

Similarly, the qualitative data supports the quantitative findings. Most of the participants in the in-depth interview and focus group discussion (FGD) reported experiencing various forms of work-related abuse and exploitation. The participants emphasized that the working conditions of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East largely depended on the nature of their employers. If their employers were good, they may have relatively favorable conditions

such as working 8 to 10 hours per day, being assigned to a specific task, receiving one day off per week, and not being required to work in other households. But, such chance was very rare.

The majority described harsh working conditions, including excessively long working hours, being responsible for all domestic tasks (cleaning, cooking, child care, etc.), receiving no time off, and being forced to work in multiple households. In relation to this, one in-depth interview participant who had been in Saudi Arabia reported:

> *I was working on multiple tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children while I was abroad. I could not refuse any kind of work given to me by the employer. If you refused it, they would beat me, and sometimes they will fire me from their house.*

Similarly, an in-depth interview participant shared the experience she passed through while she had been in the UAE:

> *Having a day off was unthinkable because the task was so huge and impossible to complete on time. Even when I finished my task, the madam would provide me with an additional task. I was also forced to work in the house of the relatives of my employer. It seems that the madam did not want me to take a break. So I don't remember a day when I rested.*

Another domestic worker also explains:

> *I had been to Saudi Arabia. I worked long hours. Usually, I woke up at 5a.m. just to start working and keep working all day, and then I went to bed around 3 a.m. Moreover, they woke me up anytime if they needed something to make. This means that I worked around 19 hours a day. In this workload situation, I stayed for 11 months.*

Being forced to work in different houses was their challenge during their stay abroad. When migrant workers refuse to do tasks in another house, their employers become angry and not accept it. During the focus group discussion, many participants noted that some employers do not believe that migrant domestic workers have the right to rest and the right to refuse to do work in another house. They are repeatedly told by their employers as they are here to work, not for vacation.

Key informant interviews with representatives from MoFA, MoLSA, regional offices, and NGOs also confirmed that abusive working conditions are a serious issue for Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in many Middle Eastern countries. They emphasized the need for adequate protection to reduce these challenges. One key informant from the FDRE MoLSA stated:

> *Abuse and exploitation of migrant domestic workers have increased over the past decade in Middle Eastern countries. Due to ongoing reports of serious beatings of Ethiopian domestic workers, the Ethiopian government implemented a travel ban in June 2012 to prohibit migration to these countries for domestic work. However, despite the ban, Ethiopian women continued to migrate through irregular channels. Unfortunately, those who ignored the ban faced severe abuse during travel and at their destination. The ban was a short-term solution, as it neither stopped migration nor protected those who had already migrated. After five years, the government lifted the ban, and many women continue to migrate and face various abuses.*

Those NGOs working on care and support for victims of migrant returnee reported that many Ethiopian migrant domestic workers experience various forms of abuse and exploitation. Work condition related abuse is one the common reported cases. In this regard, one of the key informants from Agar Ethiopia said:

> *We have received many migrant returnees who are victims of various forms of abuse, including work-related exploitation during their stay abroad. Many of them reported that they were denied adequate rest due to overwhelming workloads, which in turn led to physical exhaustion, as well as mental and emotional distress.*

Another critical issue that needs attention is the type and intensity of work assigned to migrant workers is not uniform and equal. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions participants repeatedly reported that African domestic workers, including Ethiopians, are more likely to face abusive working conditions than workers from other regions and nations. For example, the participants noted that employers tend to avoid assigning heavy workloads or extended family duties to Filipino workers. Moreover, Ethiopian domestic workers in many Middle Eastern countries are paid significantly less than others despite performing similar tasks. For example, in Saudi Arabia, Ethiopian MDWs had long earned 800 Riyal per month, which increased slightly to 900 Riyal in 2018 and more recently to 1000 Riyal.

However, this remains far below the 1500 Riyal paid to Filipino MDWs, often by the same employer. Such treatment gaps may reflect discriminatory practices or result from stronger labor negotiations by other labor sending countries. In fact, further research is needed to explore this disparity, and including the experiences of migrant workers from different national backgrounds is also important to avoid one side explanation.

In addition to descriptive statistics, a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to examine whether the mean score of work-condition abuse varied based on the destination country of the migrant domestic workers. As shown in Table 6, Kruskal–Wallis H test results showed no statistically significant difference in abuse scores across destination countries ($\chi^2(6) = 10.112$, $p = .120$). This suggests that, overall, respondents reported similar levels of abuse regardless of the country in which they worked. However, due to the small number of respondents in some countries (e.g., Qatar, Bahrain and Oman), results should be interpreted cautiously. To build on these findings, future research should aim to include a more balanced sample size across countries.

Table 6: Summary of Kruskal-Wallis tests for the relationship of overall work-condition abuse experience and differences in destination country among survey respondents (n=224)

Variable	Destination country	N	Mean Rank	Test values
Working-condition abuse mean	Saudi Arabia	134	121.16	(χ2)=10.112 ; df=6; p=0.120
	Kuwait	16	79.88	
	United Arab Emirates	31	106.92	
	Bahrain	5	124.00	
	Qatar	2	139.00	
	Oman	10	82.10	
	Lebanon	26	102.06	

Source: Field survey, 2019/2020

The qualitative data further support this finding. Despite having been in different countries, they experienced almost similar level and type of work condition abuse. The data obtained from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions indicated that the challenges faced by Ethiopian migrant domestic workers such as long working hours, denial of rest days,

restrictions on movement were common across the Middle East. This was also supported by key informant interviews with relevant government officials, who noted that most Gulf States operate under similar legal and policy frameworks concerning migrant domestic labor. In particular, it was highlighted that many of these countries exclude domestic workers from the protections granted by national labor laws and instead operate under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system. This system places high power in the hands of employers, effectively tying workers' residency and legal status to their employer which limits their ability to change jobs or seek legal redress. The exclusion from labor protections and the exploitative nature of the *kafala* system appear to be shared features across most of the destination countries. These structural and policy-level similarities likely contribute to the uniformity in the levels of abuse experienced by migrant domestic workers.

Furthermore, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine whether the mean score of work-condition abuse differed based on the legal status (i.e., legal vs. illegal) of migrant domestic workers in their destination countries. As indicated in Table 7, the mean difference in work-condition abuse scores between legally and illegally migrating workers was not statistically significant (U = 5655.000, Z = -1.276, p = 0.202). However, the higher mean rank among irregular (illegal) migrants (117.96) compared to regular (legal) migrants (106.95) reflects a modest trend indicating that undocumented workers may face greater levels of work condition abuse.

Table 7: Mann–Whitney U test results for differences in work related exploitation by legal migration status (n = 224)

	Migration Status(legal vs. Illegal)	N	Mean Rank	test of significance
Work-condition abuse mean	Legal	111	106.95	U=5655.000. Z=-1.276, P=0.202
	Illegal	113	117.96	
	Total	224		

Source: Survey data, 2019/2020

This quantitative data is further supported by qualitative findings. Many in-depth interview and focus group discussion participants argued that being undocumented significantly

heightens a migrant worker's susceptibility to exploitation and mistreatment. The participants explained that irregular migrants often lack access to legal protection mechanisms and are unable to claim their rights. Employers who are aware of this precarious legal position are more likely to take advantage of undocumented workers by imposing excessive workloads, withholding wages, etc. On the other hand, irregular migrants may abstain from reporting such abuses or seeking help from authorities or consular services due to fear of detention, deportation, or other legal consequences. However, the participants also noted that having legal migration status does not necessarily protect migrant workers from abuse because they witnessed that legally migrated individuals also have faced exploitative working conditions. This indicates that legal status alone is insufficient in guaranteeing fair treatment, as systemic issues including weak labor law enforcement, employer impunity, power imbalances, and cultural attitudes toward migrant labor continues to pose significant challenges for all migrant workers.

4. Discussion

According to the socio-demographic profile of the participants of the study, many migrants migrated while they were young and had poor levels of education, which may make them more susceptible to exploitation and abuse. For instance, 45.1% of the respondents left the country when they were between the ages of 18 and 22, and 30.4% of the respondents left before the age of 18. International labor norms, including the ILO Minimum Age Convention (No. 138), are violated by this migration, particularly when it occurs before the age of 18 (ILO, 2016). This pattern indicates a critical protection gap for underage girls, who are typically unequipped to assess potential risk or defend themselves, making them susceptible to coercive recruitment practices and abusive employment conditions (Emebet, 2014; Fernandez, 2011). Likewise, 7.6% had never gone to school, and almost half had only finished grades 1–8. This lack of education restricts knowledge of legal safeguards, safe migratory procedures, and work rights. According to some studies, being illiterate makes one more susceptible to human trafficking and deceived by unlicensed brokers (ILO, 2017; Natnael, 2015). According to Mahdavi (2013) and Human Rights Watch (2012), poor education also reduces understanding of employment contracts and legal recourse, making migrants more prone to exploitation.

The most commonly reported form of work condition abuse among Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in the Gulf and other Middle Eastern countries was being forced to work excessive hours, often far beyond what was agreed upon in oral or written contracts. Many Ethiopian migrants reported that their workday began early in the morning and lasted until midnight, while others reported being expected to remain beyond the midnight. These findings are consistent with previous studies that highlight the widespread denial of rest and overwork among different countries migrant domestic workers in the Gulf and other Middle Eastern countries (Human Rights Watch, 2016; ILO, 2021; Amnesty International, 2019; Eelens & Speckmann, 1990). Moreover, previous studies conducted on Ethiopian returnees also showed the presence of overwork and denial of rest among Ethiopian migrant domestic workers (Emebet, 2014; Ermias, 2021; Human Rights Watch, July 2016; Fernandez, 2014; Natnael, 2015). Reports indicated that such kind of exploitation not only constitutes a breach of labor agreements but also violates the standards of ILO Convention No. 189, which guarantees domestic workers the right to reasonable working hours, weekly rest, and overtime regulation even though most Gulf countries have not ratified the convention (ILO, 2013; HRW, 2020).

Being forced to perform tasks beyond the scope of their original agreed duties was the second most frequently reported work related abuse. Employers use their power and force domestic workers to engage in additional tasks such as cleaning multiple residences, gardening, and caring for the elderly or sick relatives of the employer. This form of exploitation where roles become blurred and workloads expand is also well-documented in previous research. For example, many studies on Ethiopian migrant domestic workers showed that migrants are required to perform tasks beyond what was initially agreed upon (Fernandez, 2014; Human Rights Watch, July 2016; Kebede, 2002). The expansion of job roles without consent or compensation has been shown to increase both physical strain and emotional stress for migrants. A study by Abdulrahim and DeJong (2015) also found that domestic workers in Lebanon regularly performed tasks for extended family members without additional pay or consent.

Another frequently reported experience was being forced to work in multiple households, a practice commonly referred to as contract sharing or informal subcontracting, often

embedded in kinship-based labor networks. This phenomenon is not unique to Ethiopian migrants (Natnael, 2015; Emebet, 2014; Human Rights Watch, July 2016; Hussen, 2018) but has also been reported among Filipino, Sri Lankan, and Indonesian domestic workers in the Gulf (IOM, 2020; De Regt, 2009; Jureidini, 2003; Sabban, 2002). Employers forced their employees to work in their relatives' or friends' homes without providing them any extra payment. Being foreigners, not knowing the language and having had their travel documents confiscated upon arrival, they have no choice but to submit to the demands of their employers (Chammartin, 2004; Emebet, 2014; Human Rights Watch, July 2016).

Although reported less frequently, other abuses such as unsafe working conditions and being forced to overstay contracts remain critical issues. In some cases, migrants were coerced into staying beyond the agreed contract period due to threats, manipulation, or the confiscation of passports and other documents. Consistent with the findings of this study, previous studies have shown that women and girls employed in private households encounter a wide range of human rights violations in the workplace, including overstay contracts and poor working condition. For example, Ermias's (2021) and MoLSA's (2017) assessments confirmed that confiscation of passports and extension of contracts under coercion are not uncommon. A study conducted by Emebet in 2014 on the situation of Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries revealed that once migrants reached their destination, their travel documents are confiscated. In their attempts to escape abusive working conditions, they were detained and subjected to inhuman treatment at the hands of the authorities (Emebet, 2014). These practices mirror elements of modern slavery, as described by UN OHCHR (2022) and Anti-Slavery International (2021).

When it comes to legal status, the study indicated there was not a statistically significant difference between documented (legal) and undocumented (illegal) workers regarding overall abuse. Both groups shared similar experiences, although undocumented migrants did report slightly higher levels of work-related abuse. This suggests that while there is not a major statistical difference, undocumented or irregular migrants might face a bit more mistreatment in the workplace. Further qualitative data supports this, showing that undocumented workers encounter higher risks due to a lack of legal protections, limited access to justice, and the constant fear of being arrested or deported. However, it is important to note that just having

legal status does not guarantee safety. Broader issues like the weak enforcement of labor laws, lack of accountability for employers, and ongoing discriminatory cultural norms still undermine the rights of migrant workers. Previous studies and reports (Emebet, 2014; ILO, 2015; Natnael, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2016) have also shown that both documented and undocumented Ethiopian women experience various forms of abuse, including denial of breaks, violation of contracts, and confiscation of documents. These studies stress that legal status by itself does not ensure protection from abuse, while also pointing out that irregular migrant workers are often more vulnerable to coercion, deception, and mistreatment.

It was thought that the differences in destination countries could affect the kind and level of abuse that migrant domestic workers face. However, the study revealed that there was no significant variation in experiences of abuse among Ethiopian migrant domestic workers across different host countries. This finding can be mainly linked to the structural similarities found in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, particularly their common reliance on the *kafala* (sponsorship) system. Under this system, a migrant worker's legal status is connected to a specific employer, which greatly restricts their mobility, bargaining power, and ability to seek legal help. Additionally, in many of these countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Lebanon, domestic workers are left out of national labor laws. As a result, migrant domestic workers endure similar forms of exploitation regardless of the country where they work. Reports from Human Rights Watch (2012), the ILO (2016), and Mahdavi (2013) also pointed out that the *kafala* system effectively institutionalizes the mistreatment of migrant domestic workers by giving employers excessive power and limiting workers' options for legal recourse.

Domestic workers in the Middle East are not treated equally. Many Ethiopian migrant returnees complain that migrants in the Middle East are not treated equally. Study participants frequently mentioned that the type of work assigned to Ethiopians is different from the work of Filipino migrants. Ethiopian migrants are often forced to engage in cooking and cleaning, whereas the Philippines are often assigned to care tasks. In fact, past studies have also shown that migrant domestic workers are not treated equally regardless of their country of origin. For example, studies from Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE reveal that Ethiopian and Sri Lankan domestic workers often earn lower wages and experience more

degrading tasks and treatment compared to Filipina workers, who are perceived as more "skilled" or "modern" (Jureidini, 2011; Fernandez & De reget, 2014). Filipinas frequently serve as childcare providers and receive higher wages (up to USD 340/month), whereas Ethiopian and Sri Lankan domestic workers may earn as little as USD 150/month (ILO, 2020). In fact, such kind of comparison needs further study to avoid one side reports and to explore how other countries migrant workers perceive it.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the high prevalence of early-age migration with low educational attainment among Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers in the Middle East, and the widespread work-related abuse and exploitation they experience. Interestingly, while undocumented migrants reported slightly higher instances of abuse, the difference was not statistically significant. This suggests that simply having legal status does not necessarily provide protection. Additionally, the levels of abuse did not seem to differ much between host countries, likely due to the structural similarities among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, notably their shared reliance on the *kafala* system and the fact that domestic workers typically aren't covered by national labor protections. Given these insights, it is crucial for the Ethiopian government to increase pre-departure training, enforce age restrictions, regulate and oversee recruitment agencies, and forge stronger bilateral agreements with destination countries to safeguard the rights of migrant workers. These steps are vital for reducing the risks of abuse and exploitation faced by these workers. Furthermore, host countries should take steps to protect the rights of migrant domestic workers, especially since they benefit from the labor that these workers provide in filling labor shortages.

This study, however, is not without limitations. It relies on retrospective self-reported data from returnees, which may be subject to recall bias. Moreover, the study focused solely on Ethiopian migrants and did not include perspectives from employers or migrant workers of other nationalities, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research shall incorporate comparative, multi-stakeholder perspectives particularly including employer views and workers from other nationalities to better understand power dynamics, discrimination, and structural conditions shaping migrant labor in the Middle East.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares no competing interests. The views expressed in this study are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the funder or affiliated institutions.

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