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Women Trafficking in Ethiopia and its Mitigation

(The Case of Arsi Zone, Oromia)

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Abstract:

Human trafficking is a persistent global socio-economic problem, also prevalent in Ethiopia. This study focused on the trafficking of Ethiopian women to the Middle East to work as domestic workers and documents how some of these trafficked women are recruited and transported, and often subjected to severe abuse. Only a few of the trafficked women can escape such abuses, depending on their “employers” and family or social networks they may appeal to in the host country. Forms of abuse and inhumane practices in the Middle East – the prime destination - take place under the ambiguous framework of the *kafala* (‘sponsorship’) system.

This study looked at the phenomenon of ‘trafficking’ as known in the Arsi Zone of Oromia Regional State, one of the primary sources of women trafficked, and was motivated by a desire to understand its causes, its persistence and the process of trafficking itself, and to work towards policies to tackle the issue. Better measures at prevention, protection, and prosecution are needed (inter)nationally.

Primary data were collected from trafficked women themselves (including returnees), from their families, from middlemen and agents, and from government officials, using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection in a complementary manner.

Keywords: *Human trafficking, (illegal) labour migration, female domestic labour, Arsi Zone, Ethiopia*

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1. Introduction

Human trafficking is a world-wide phenomenon. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2004) defines it as: "...the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation". This definition can be taken as a starting point to indicate the organized exploitation of dependent, irregular migrants in search of jobs outside their home area/country, a phenomenon that has taken criminal shape. The International Labor Organization estimated that globally over the past two decades there were about 12.3 million people in forced labor, bonded labor, forced child labor, and/or sexual servitude at any given time.

Human trafficking in this sense is recognized as a growing and persistent problem, urging the United Nations (in 2000) to promulgate a Special Protocol to call attention to and address it, notably the trafficking of women and children. While human trafficking is transnational it is propelled by specific socio-economic factors and actors in various countries and lead trans-regional and transnational mobility.

In Africa in recent years, trafficking of women and children, e.g. as commercial sex workers or as exploited domestic servants, has assumed such an alarming proportion that African leaders are breaking the normal culture of silence to address the issue with the urgency it deserves. Over the past years, the number of trafficked Africans has increased both internally (within the continent) and externally (to other parts of the world), particularly the Middle East and Europe. In 2016, it was estimated by UNODOC that trafficked child victims in sub-Saharan Africa accounted for the majority (about 55%).

Having noted that human trafficking is transnational and traverses several regions and countries, Ethiopia is not an exception: many Ethiopians have become engaged in or fallen victim to human trafficking. Ethiopian women working in domestic service in the Middle East were mostly trafficked and often subjected to severe abuse, including physical and sexual assault, denial of salary, sleep deprivation, passport confiscation, and confinement. Ethiopian women who migrate for work or later flee abusive employers in the Middle East are also vulnerable to sex trafficking. Ethiopian men and boys migrate to the Gulf states and other African nations, where some are subjected to forced labor. Ethiopian women and children bear the brunt of many negative physical abuse outcomes.

The purpose of the research project (defended as a PhD thesis in 2020) was to explore the nature, prevalence, several root causes, and societal consequences of (female) human trafficking in/from Arsi in Oromiya State, Ethiopia, predominantly to the Middle East, and also to assess intervention and prevention measures. The overarching question was *why* (female) human trafficking persists despite the known risks and the myriad of legal and policy frameworks and institutions established to mitigate it.

2. *Methods*

The empirical data and information used for this study were collected from trafficked women themselves, from their families, from middlemen and agents, and from relevant government officials. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were used, in a complementary manner – i.e., mixed methods (formal and informal interviews, key informants, focus group discussions, questionnaires, and document study). The study has also investigated the trafficking *process*, i.e., how those trafficked within Ethiopia and to Middle Eastern host countries are recruited, by whom, and how they travel, are treated, tried to retain agency over their life and to cope. The field data also shed light on the role of women *returnees* from being trafficked, and on their (mostly negative) experiences and problems encountered.

3. *Human Trafficking in Arsi (Oromia Region, Ethiopia) and Its Challenges*

The study focused on women trafficked from the (two) Arsi administrative zones of Ethiopia to the Middle East, and relates the description of the empirical case to national and international anti-trafficking concepts and to legal and administrative instruments. This focus was in part determined by the scarcity of studies on women trafficked from Oromia State, specifically Arsi. While the problem is substantial, the exact number of trafficked people from the area is hard to obtain. Trafficking has to be seen also in its socio-historical context: there is a ‘culture of migration’ in terms of the culmination of ideas, practices and cultural artifacts that reinforce the ‘celebration’ of migration and migrants. In the case of Arsi Zone, as in other parts of Ethiopia, migration to the Arabian Peninsula is rooted in the history of Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, as well as in intra-Ethiopian mobility traditions related to great social pressure/ambitions to migrate, exerted by livelihood insecurity and poverty from which (young) people seek to escape and improve their wellbeing.

Commonly, those trafficked come from marginalized backgrounds - they may be socio-economically disadvantaged, of lower education, and unemployed, from minority groups, and often youngsters and women. Neither have the local economies the absorptive capacity for the large numbers of people unemployed. Their status as marginalized people places them in a diminished, often dependent state, more vulnerable and less capable or established than the mainstream classes of the employed, property/business owners, etc. In human trafficking, (young) women and adolescents easily make up the largest category proportion and are most vulnerable. The intermediaries and traffickers are almost all men. Agencies assisting irregular migrants from Arsi are engaged in both legal *and* illegal migration schemes (i.e., trafficking) and thus play an ambivalent, complicating role. The Middle East *kafala* (‘sponsorship’; ‘guardianship’) system in place does not offer guarantees for protection of the migrants; more often it is the contrary: exploitation.

Due to the prevalence of serious abuse of the trafficked (female) persons, the phenomenon needs urgent study and policy measures. The study therefore also discussed existing anti-human trafficking laws and policies (in Ethiopia) to combat the phenomenon. It was found

that efforts at prevention, protection (of trafficked persons) and prosecution (of traffickers) are weak and that despite the existence of a whole array of pertinent laws and regulations, there is a lack of (the capacity for) proper implementation. In addition, in the Arsi Zones the tacit societal support for women migrating irregularly as well as the great difficulty in finding *legal* ways to out-migrate make efficient governmental anti-trafficking policy difficult.

4. Discussion and Recommendations

The field research data show that overall the persons trafficked try to retain agency but virtually have bad experiences. They faced deception, insecurity and practices of labor abuse, upheld by the *kafala* system and the faulty legal regimes in Middle Eastern countries. Despite that a few of the returnee women trafficked were able to start a new life in Ethiopia after returning and engage in some income-generating activities, the majority of them faced myriad of difficulties, and were *not* prepared to go back and try again. But new generations, driven by the desire to find work and improve their lives, often ill-informed and not prepared, will keep trying to find ‘their luck’ abroad.

Still, better government policy and implementation are needed to tackle the crime and abuse in the human trafficking business. Specific recommendations for this are the following.

- a) As human trafficking (also in Ethiopia) is increasing rather than decreasing, despite the existence of a multitude of legal, policy and institutional frameworks and instruments to mitigate it, a more robust overall policy of improving the socio-economic and environmental conditions in Arsi and Ethiopia in general, is needed.
- b) The multiple routes that women in socio-economically depressed areas take or get entangled in, from abusive human trafficking to personal choices to engage in irregular migration, should be recognized and addressed in hands-on policy approaches.
- c) Gender inequality in areas such as schooling (boys preferred over girls), the presence of social values which discriminate against women in land ownership and inheritance, and unequal job opportunities for women, must be discussed and addressed on a local, communal basis. Exclusion of girls/women in these fields contributes to fuel their being trafficked.
- d) ‘Criminalizing’ and punishing the intercepted people while they are attempting to be trafficked is not a good option, but releasing them into the same low socio-economic conditions which ‘forced’ them to consent to being trafficked also has serious problems. The need for developing victim protection, both legally and in terms of safety net to cushion them against the push factors of trafficking, is important.
- e) A large number of respondents – even among government functionaries – have no clear idea about Ethiopian legal and policy instruments and institutions. These texts should therefore be translated into all major Ethiopian languages and disseminated widely. Easy to understand, popular versions should be published to increase people’s awareness of the legal and policy instruments/institutions responsible for mitigating human trafficking in general and women trafficking in particular.

f) Human trafficking cannot be mitigated with the current level of human and financial resources made available by the Ethiopian government. Anti-human trafficking units are understaffed, poorly trained, and with meagre possibilities for promotion. While we are faced here with a critical bottleneck, ultimately, the increasing and improving of the level of human and financial resources is critical for mitigating human trafficking and therefore reducing the current high levels of women trafficked.	162 163 164 165 166 167 168
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Human trafficking in Arsi Zone (Oromia) and in Ethiopia in general is a serious problem with dramatic human effects, with the majority of people trafficked (female) being victimized and abused. An in-depth understanding the socio-economic and also cultural backgrounds of the phenomenon of constant out-flow of candidates for irregular migration is a prerequisite for comprehensive policy implementation and community engagement to combat the excesses. Laws and institutions do engage this are in place in Ethiopia but are underfunded and under-staffed, with officials lacking the capacity and often the detailed knowledge to be efficient. A combination of robust economic policies, legal-judicial reform, educational efforts and attitudinal changes is required to systematically address the problem and reduce the need and desire of local people to expose themselves to irregular migration and trafficking to foreign destinations.	170 171 172 173 174 175 176 177 178 179 180 181
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