

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Ethiopian Female Labor Migration to the Middle East Countries: an Investigation of Migrants' Readiness Level Prior to Departure

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## Abstract

*A large number of Ethiopian girls and women have migrated to Middle Eastern countries for employment, where they often face exploitation and abuse. Enhancing pre-departure awareness is crucial to mitigating these risks. This study investigates the level of pre-departure preparedness among Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers and assesses whether legal migrants are better informed than their illegal counterparts. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, data were collected from both legal and illegal migrant returnees through a survey (n=224), in-depth interviews, and FGDs. In addition, key informant interviews were also employed. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the survey data, whereas thematic analysis was applied for the qualitative part. The findings reveal generally low levels of pre-departure awareness among migrants. Statistical significance difference was not found between legal and illegal migrants despite legal migrants expected to be better prepared and informed. This finding raises critically question about effectiveness of legal migration process and highlight the necessity of thorough and successful pre-departure orientation programs in addition to encouraging migrants to actively participate in their own preparation so that they can make well-informed decisions before leaving.*

**Keywords:**Pre-departure awareness, migration, migrant domestic Workers, Ethiopia, Middle East.

## Introduction

Domestic labor migration is one of the recent rowing patterns of migration, with women constituting nearly 80% of global domestic workers. This migration is largely driven by economic disparities, poverty, and gender inequalities in their home countries, leading many women to seek employment as caregivers, cleaners, and nannies in wealthier nations (ILO, 2021; UN Women, 2020). Additionally, the growing participation of women in paid or more professional employment, along with the increasing aging population in relatively wealthy countries has increased demand for domestic and care workers, which has given rise to the idea of a “global chain of care (O’Neil, Fleury, and Foresti, 2016; Hugo, 2012). In

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this context, the concept of a 'global chain of care' has emerged, where domestic workers from poorer regions support households in wealthier nations, often leaving caregiving responsibilities behind in their home countries (Wojczewski et al., 2015).

The Middle East has become a major destination for this migration, with approximately 83% of domestic workers in Arab states being migrants (ILO, 2017). While many of these workers come from South and Southeast Asia, there is a growing influx from Sub-Saharan African countries (Sabban, 2002; Abebaw and Waganesh, 2017). Beginning in the early 1990s, Ethiopia has seen a steady increase in labor migration to Gulf States and other Middle East countries using both regular and irregular channels. Approximately 95% of the migrants who have been documented are women, and it is estimated that even more are engaging in irregular migration (MoLSA, 2009).

Administrative data from Ethiopia's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) estimated that approximately 200,000 Ethiopian women moved to the Middle East, mainly migrated to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait for domestic work in 2012 using legal way, before the government imposed a ban on labor migration to the regions in October 2013 (ILO, 2017). Surprisingly, in the same year, around 300,000 -350,000 of Ethiopians migrated irregularly, including via smuggling or trafficking (US Department of State, 2016; Abebaw and Waganesh, 2017). Though, the ban was short lived and lifted in the beginning of 2018,, many Ethiopians, especially women, continued to migrate during the ban period through unofficial channels, often with the help of brokers (Alden, 2018; Völkerrechtsblog, 2018). The exact number of migrants remains unclear since Ethiopia does not have a centralized system for recording such data, and irregular migration is quite common (Röthlisberger, 2019).

Despite the benefits of migration for both sending and destination countries, domestic work remains one of the least protected sectors (ILO, 2013; ILO, 2016), and vulnerable to different forms of risks, abuse, and exploitation during recruitment, travel, and working periods at their destination. Irregular/undocumented migrant domestic workers are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Fudge, 2012; ILO, 2013; ILO, 2015). Therefore, minimizing migrants' vulnerability is crucial, as migration remains a persistent reality.

Protection efforts must begin before departure, involving migrants themselves, governments, and recruitment agencies. According to IOM report, ensuring high levels of pre-departure readiness and awareness is one of the key protective measures that can be undertaken by government and recruitment agencies to reduce migrants' vulnerability and exploitation (IOM, 2019). Pre-departure orientation programs can assist prospective migrants in anticipating difficulties, understanding their rights and responsibilities, and creating coping mechanisms for living and working overseas (Asis & Agunias, 2012). In addition to attending official orientation sessions, migrants can improve their readiness by consulting with returnees and obtaining information via social media and the media (IOM, 2019).

Based on this fact, different labor-sending countries have implemented mandatory pre-departure orientation programs to ensure their citizens are equipped with the necessary information, skills and knowledge prior to migration (Watanabe, 2019). Many labor-sending countries in Southeast Asia, such as Philippines, Nepal, and Indonesia, for instance, have implemented mandatory pre-departure orientation programs for their citizens who wish to work abroad (Asis and Agunias, 2012). In Ethiopia, some efforts are being made to provide pre-departure orientation through government and recruitment agencies but often limited in scope, duration, and effectiveness (ILO, 2017; Asis & Agunias, 2012; Busza et al., 2017). In the Ethiopian context, existing studies suggest that prospective migrants frequently rely on informal sources of information, such as returnees, relatives, and brokers, rather than institutional mechanisms (Busza et al., 2017; Abebaw & Waganesh, 2017). This study is partially guided by Migrant Network Theory (Massey et al., 1993), which emphasizes the role of social networks in facilitating migration by reducing costs and uncertainty than transmitting the types of practical and rights-based knowledge required for effective pre-departure preparedness. Networks often circulate selective narratives that emphasize economic opportunity while underrepresenting risks, labor rights, and everyday challenges at destination (De Haas, 2010; Lan, 2006). As a result, migrants may embark on their journeys with confidence derived from social reassurance rather than substantive readiness.

Despite growing policy attention to pre-departure orientation, empirical research on migrants' preparedness remains limited, particularly in the Ethiopian context. Few studies (e.g., Abebaw and Waganesh, 2017; Emebet, 2002; Girmachew, 2014; ILO, 2017) attempted to examine the issue and showed that many Ethiopian migrants leave the country without adequate awareness of the potential risks associated with migration and their destination. However, most of these studies lacked detail and did not specifically assess the pre-departure readiness of Ethiopian female migrants. Additionally, earlier studies have not extensively compared the pre-departure level of awareness and readiness across ways of migration and educational status.

In response to these gaps, this study assesses the extent to which Ethiopian female migrant domestic worker were prepared before starting their migration journey, and examines whether levels of pre-departure readiness and awareness differ by ways of migration and migrants educational status. The specific research questions guiding this study are:

1. What is the overall level of pre-departure awareness among Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers?
2. Does a pre-departure awareness level differ between legal and illegal migrants?
3. Does a pre-departure awareness level differ by educational status?
4. What gaps existed in the previous pre-departure orientation programs, and how might they be improved to better protect migrants?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to policy-relevant insights for improving pre-departure programs in Ethiopia to enhance migrant safety and well-being.

## Materials and Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to triangulate and comprehensively assess pre-departure awareness among Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers. Creswell noted that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either approach alone (Creswell, 2014).

The target population of this study was female migrant returnees who had previously migrated to different Middle Eastern countries for domestic work using either legal or illegal channels. In this study, legal migrants are those who migrated before the 2013 ban and after the ban was lifted in 2018 using government-authorized procedures, whereas illegal migrants were those who migrated using illegal migration channels. Accordingly, the study included migrants who departed before the ban, during the ban (2013–2018), and after 2018 and returned following contract termination or experiences of exploitation. However, mass deportees of 2013 were purposively excluded from the sample as the majority of these deportees were illegal migrants, and would disproportionately inflated the number of illegal migrants and affected the meaningful comparison between legal and illegal migration pathways.

Specific study sites were purposively selected from areas with a high concentration of migrant returnees. Among Ethiopia's nine regions, the Amhara region is the one that has been the primary source of labor migration to the Middle East (Habtamu et al., 2017; Asefa et al., 2017). Accordingly, the Amhara region was selected as the main study area. Four hotspot zones (North Wollo, South Wollo, North Gondar, and West Gojjam) were purposively selected from the Amhara region, and then from these zones, ten hotspot towns (Debark, Dabat, Wogera, Gondar, Bahir Dar, Woldiya, Kobo, Hara, Mersa, and Dessie) were chosen. Survey participants were then randomly selected from available lists of returnees in each selected town. However, incomplete and unregistered records of returnees prevented the use of statistical formulas to determine sample size. In line with pragmatic sampling approaches recommended in similar contexts (Gelo et al., 2008; Yoshikawa et al., 2008), a total of 224 female migrant returnees were randomly selected from the available data.

The sample size for the qualitative component was determined based on the principle of data saturation. Accordingly, about 18 in-depth interview participants and 32 FGD discussants (distributed into three groups) were selected from migrant returnees using both random sampling and snow sampling techniques. Similarly, six key informants representing the Amhara Region Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), two non-governmental organizations (Agar Ethiopia and Good Samaritan Association), and a representative of a licensed Private Employment Agency (PEA) were purposively chosen to provide their perspectives on the readiness and knowledge of migrants about their

destination country prior to their migration journey.

Given the need for standardized measurement, the questionnaire drew inspiration from a prior study by Abebaw and Waganesh (2017), which identified five items for measuring pre-departure awareness. However, for the present study, the researcher modified and expanded upon this, incorporating two additional items through literature review, and expert consultations. Accordingly, a seven-item scale was developed, utilizing a four-point Likert scale response form. Each item ranged from 1 to 4, representing “totally unaware,” “a little aware,” “aware,” and “very aware,” respectively. Higher mean scores indicated a high level of pre-departure awareness/readiness. Experts were consulted in order to establish a cutoff point, with a mean value of 2.50 acting as the midpoint, to differentiate between high and low awareness levels. Thus, weighted mean scores ranges from 1.00-2.50 as low awareness and 2.50-4.00 as high awareness. The frequency and percentage of participants falling into each category were then calculated. A pilot study was conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the pre-departure awareness scale, and obtained 0.847 Cronbach’s alpha value which is acceptable (refer to Table 1 below).

Table 1. The summary of the pilot study reliability scale test for pre-departure awareness scale

Cronbach’s alpha value (n = 30)	No. of Items
0.847	7

Source: Field survey, 2020

Data collected through quantitative and qualitative methods was analyzed separately, but integrated into interpretation (discussion). Quantitative data were initially entered into Epi Info version 3.4.5 software for preliminary processing. Subsequently, for thorough cleaning, frequency checks, and in-depth analysis, the dataset was exported to SPSS version 25 software. The information was then coded, organized, and encoded using SPSS tool. Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to analyze survey data. On the other hand, ATLAS.ti software version 8.4 was used to facilitate the systematic coding of textual data, and then, thematic content analysis was used to examine the qualitative data in order to find recurrent themes, trends, and insights from the experiences of the participants. This dual-method analysis, combining quantitative rigor and qualitative depth, ensured a comprehensive understanding of Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers’ pre-departure awareness levels.

According to Creswell (2003), ethical issues should be critically considered from the beginning of the study to the results presentation and dissemination. In line with this, the study received prior ethical approval from relevant authorities at all study sites. All participants received thorough explanations of the study’s goals, methods, and procedures

prior to any data collection, allowing them to make an informed choice regarding their participation. Study participants were informed of their rights, such as the fact that participation was entirely voluntary, and that they could leave at any moment. Measures were also put in place to maintain confidentiality and anonymity in order to further protect participants.

The researcher acknowledges the limitation of this study. The study does not assess the current pre-departure orientation program (the post-2018 standardized pre-departure orientation program, which became operational after the lifting of the ban) because most of the sample (study participants) were those who had migrated before 2018 (see Table 3). So, the study findings, instead, primarily reflect the period before 2018 programs, including pre-2013 and ban-era migration governance. Despite its limitation, it will serve as baseline data for those who want to compare the recent migrants' pre-departure awareness/readiness level with the previous data.

## Results

### Demographic Characteristics of Participants

In this study, demographic profiles of survey participants were examined to understand the diverse background of Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers who had been employed in the Middle East. Accordingly, the finding of the study is displayed in Table 2

Table 2: Demographic profile of study participants (n=224 returnee)

Variables		Frequency	Percent
Place of birth	Urban	149	66.5
	Rural	75	33.5
	Less than 18	68	30.4
Age during departure	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
	Never attending school	17	7.6
Educational attainment during departure	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

Source: Field Survey, 2020

As shown in Table 2, out of the total survey participants, about 66.5 percent reported they were from urban areas while there remaining 33.5 percent were from rural areas. Regarding age, the large number (45.1%) of them left Ethiopia between the ages of 18 and 22. Moreover, about 30.4 percent migrated when they were under the age of 18 years. This indicates that girls are migrated at a very young age which violates the minimum working age. The majorities were never married during departure (73.7%), and diverse educational backgrounds were observed, ranging from those who never attended school (7.6%) to those with educational background beyond Grade 12 (4.9%). In terms of religion, the predominant religious affiliation was Orthodox Christian (60.7%) followed by Muslim (38.8 %). In general, this varied profile provides valuable information into the diverse backgrounds of these returnees, and contributing to a deeper understanding of the demographic patterns among Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers in the Middle East.

## Migration period

The study asked all survey participants about their departure/migration period. As shown in Table 3 below, about 73.2% of them departed between 2011 and 2013 (the pre-ban period), whereas 22.3% migrated during the ban period (2013–2018), indicating the persistence of migration flows despite official restrictions, largely through irregular channels. A small number of respondents (4.5%) reported that they migrated after the lifting of the ban in 2018, suggesting limited participation in post-ban migration within the study sample.

Table 3. Distribution of survey participants by years of migration (n=224 returnee)

Migration Period	Frequency	Percent
Before 2011	6	2.3%
2011-2013	164	73.20%
2013–2018 (Ban)	50	22.30%
Post 2018	4	2.2%
Total	224	100%

Source: Survey Data, 2020

## Channels of Migration

Ethiopian female domestic labor migrants have migrated to Middle Eastern countries through both legal and irregular channels. In line with this, the study assessed the proportion of respondents who utilized each migration pathway. The finding of the study is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. 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, 2020

As shown in Table 4, Ethiopian women labor migrants use legal and illegal ways of migration. Out of the total surveyed participants, about 50 percent of participants migrated through a legal channel of migration, which means that they migrated through a licensed private employment agency. The remaining half of the participants (about 50 percent) migrated in illegal ways of migration.

## Destination Country

The influx of young Ethiopian women domestic labor migration to the Middle East, especially Gulf countries has increased over time. In this study, the distribution of survey respondents based on their destination countries is presented in Figure 1.

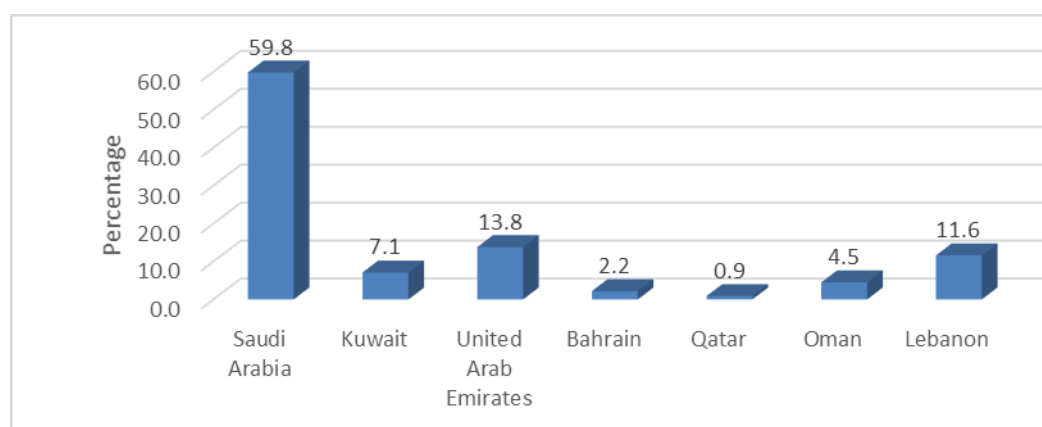


Figure 1. Destination country of sample respondents

Source: Survey Data, 2020

As shown in Figure 1, Saudi Arabia is the major destination country for Ethiopian female migrant workers, with 59.8 percent of respondent returnees, while the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Kuwait have a lower as compared to Saudi Arabia but are still significant destinations for migrant workers. Other countries like Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar are also found to be the destination of migrants though the proportion of migrant domestic workers in those countries was few.

**Return period of Migrants**

The study assessed survey participants return period. As shown in table 5, the majority of returnees came back in 2018 and followed by 2017. Earlier return years such as 2014–2016 account for a smaller proportion of returnees. There were also some returnees who came back in 2019. This implies that study participants were diverse in terms of return period.

Table 5. Distribution of survey participants by years of return (n=224 returnee)

Years of Return	Frequency	Percent
2014	32	14.3
2015	12	5.4
2016	15	6.7
2017	56	25
2018	104	46.4
2019	5	2.2
Total	224	100

Source: Survey Data, 2020

**Pre-departure Level of Awareness**

Pre-departure preparedness regarding job requirements, cultural aspects, potential risks, and coping strategies is crucial for migrant workers to mitigate the risks of abuse and exploitation while working abroad. However, the extent to which migrants adequately prepare before departure remains uncertain. This study conducted an assessment to collect insights from returnees of Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers, focusing on their level of pre-departure awareness when migrating to Middle Eastern countries. Accordingly, the findings obtained from the study are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6: Item analysis for the pre-departure level of awareness among survey participants of the study (n=224 returnees)

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Nature of job in the destination country	1.61	0.744
Cultural context of the destination country	1.59	0.815
Rights and duties in the destination country	1.61	0.779
Language of the destination country	1.35	0.692
Risk of abuse in the destination country	1.64	0.830
Coping skills if abuse facing	1.53	0.868
Where and how to report problems while facing problems	1.47	0.763

Source: Survey data, 2020

As depicted in Table 6, the mean scores for pre-departure awareness across all indicators were very low, ranging from 1.35 to 1.64 on the four-point Likert scale. This indicates that migrant domestic workers were insufficiently prepared and had limited understanding of the language, job responsibilities, cultural environment, rights and obligations, and potential risks of abuse in their host countries. Their awareness and readiness regarding coping strategies and procedures for reporting problems were also notably low. These results demonstrate how urgently improved pre-departure orientation programs are needed to properly prepare employees and protect their wellbeing.

Moreover, in assessing the overall pre-departure awareness among the surveyed participants, the mean score was computed by aggregating the scores from the seven items related to pre-departure awareness. Table 7 presents the results, providing a comprehensive overview of the participants' collective awareness.

Table 7. The mean score of the pre-departure level of awareness among survey respondents (n=224 returnees)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-departure level of awareness mean	224	1.00	3.71	1.5415	0.55725

Source: Survey data, 2020

Table 7 depicted that the minimum, maximum and mean values for the overall pre-departure awareness. The calculated mean score (1.54) reflect a generally low average awareness level among the surveyed participants, highlighting the imperative need for more comprehensive and detail pre-departure orientation initiatives to enhance their

preparedness for overseas employment.

Furthermore, alongside computing the total mean score, a cutoff point (2.50, serving as the midpoint) was applied to differentiate between high and low awareness levels. Subsequently, the frequency and percentage of participants categorized into each level were calculated. The finding of this study is displayed in Table 8.

Table 8. Percentage distribution of survey respondents who had high and low levels of awareness during their departure abroad (n=224 returnees)

Level of pre-departure awareness	Frequency	Percent
Low	207	92.4
High	17	7.6

Source: Survey data, 2020

As shown in Table 8, the result of the study shows that among the 224 surveyed participants, a substantial majority, comprising 207 individuals (92.4%), demonstrated a low level of awareness (using a cut-off point of <2.50), while a minority of 17 participants (7.6%) exhibited a high level of pre-departure awareness. This percentage shows that the majority of migrant domestic workers migrated to the Middle East countries with lacking sufficient pre-departure awareness. This could be attributed to the absence or inadequate level of pre-departure training or orientation. Additionally, nearly half of the participants migrated through illegal routes, limiting their access to information and advice.

An assessment was also conducted to check whether ways of migration (legal / illegal) have an impact on migrants' pre-departure level of awareness or not. So, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed to assess the existence of a significant relationship between the level of awareness before departure and the migration status of individuals. The outcome of this finding is displayed in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Mann-Whitney U test for the relationship between the pre-departure level of awareness and ways of migration (n=224 returnee)

	Ways of migration	N	Mean score	Mean Rank	Std. Deviation	Test of significance
Pre-departure level of awareness mean	Legal	111	1.5586	116.67	0.501	U=5809.000, Z = -0.962 p=0.336
	Illegal	113	1.5247	108.41		

Source: Survey data, 2020

Table 9 illustrates the relationship between the pre-departure awareness level of the survey respondents and their migration ways (legal and illegal way). Nevertheless, the

investigation found no statistically significant difference in the pre-departure awareness levels of legal and illegal migrant domestic workers ( $U = 5809.0$ ,  $Z = -0.962$ ,  $p = 0.336$ ), with mean awareness scores of 1.56 for legal and 1.52 for illegal migrants. Despite the expectation for legal migrants to exhibit a higher pre-departure awareness, both legal and illegal migrants displayed a low level of awareness. Although statistical significance was not established, the mean value for legal migrants was slightly higher than that for illegal migrants. This suggests that, while legal migrants may have slightly better access to pre-departure orientation, the overall orientation remains inadequate for both groups.

Furthermore, among different demographic factors, educational attainment was examined as a potential factor influencing pre-departure awareness. Accordingly, a Kruskal–Wallis H test was conducted to examine differences in pre-departure awareness across levels of educational attainment. As shown in Table 10, the results indicates a statistically significant difference in awareness scores among the five education categories ( $H(4) = 11.97$ ,  $p = 0.018$ ). Mean rank scores increased consistently with higher levels of education, with the lowest awareness observed among respondents who had never attended school and the highest awareness among those with upper secondary and post-secondary education. This finding suggests that educational attainment plays a significant role in shaping migrants' pre-departure awareness.

Table 10. Pre-departure Awareness by Educational Attainment (Kruskal–Wallis Test) (n=224)

Educational Attainment during Departure	N	Mean Score	Mean Rank	Std. Deviation	Test Statistic
Never attended school	17	1.24	73.24	0.894	$H(4) = 11.97$ , $p = 0.018$
Grade 1–8	91	1.54	108.85		
Grade 9–10	93	1.54	115.79		
Grade 11–12	12	1.75	144.29		
Above Grade 12	11	1.81	140.86		
Total	224	1.54			

In addition to survey data, the data obtained from in-depth interviews, FGDs, and key informant interviews supports the findings of the survey data and shows that Ethiopian female migrant domestic workers have been migrating without an adequate level of readiness and awareness about their rights/duties, cultural aspects, language, job requirements, potential risks, and coping strategies used in their destination countries. The detailed qualitative findings are presented in the following subsequent paragraphs.

Understanding one's rights and duties before arriving at the destination is very crucial for migrants to mitigate the risk of abuse. However, the findings from in-depth interviews and FGDs unveiled that a majority of migrant domestic workers lacked substantial information about their duties and rights before migrating. In this regard, one of the in-depth interview respondents, Alemitu, shared, " Before I migrated to Kuwait, I had no awareness of my rights and duties. Moreover, I was illiterate and did not speak English and Arabic as well. I was not ready at all."

Moreover, preparing oneself with adequate information about the culture of the destination country is very important to reduce cultural shocks and to integrate easily with the destination country's society, particularly with employers. Nevertheless, the qualitative data indicated that large numbers of migrant workers were not well informed about the culture of their destination countries before leaving. This knowledge gap not only poses challenges for their cultural adaptation but also potentially impacts their interactions and relationships within the new environment.

Equipping prospective migrants with comprehensive information about the complexities of migration and strategies to alleviate challenges is paramount. Despite having some prior information about the risks of abuse and exploitation in Middle East countries, many were unaware of where and how to report problems. The result of both in-depth interviews and FGDs showed that most of them do not know where and how to report problems. For instance, one of the in-depth interview participants, Sara, who had been in Saudi Arabia stated,

My employer abused me frequently. When my employer mistreated me, I felt lost and helpless because I did not know where or how to report it. During those difficult moments abroad, all I could do was cry. It was an incredibly distressing experience, one that I prefer not to revisit.

Proficiency in the destination country's language, particularly Arabic, is essential for migrant workers to communicate effectively with their employers in predominantly Arab countries. However, of this study in-depth interview and FGD participants revealed that most migrants were not well prepared for the language spoken in their destination country. This language barrier poses a significant risk and become a challenge for migrants to communicate with their employers. In this regard, key informants from the MoLSA and MoFA also emphasized that the inability to understand and speak Arabic not only increases the chances of misunderstandings but also makes migrants more vulnerable to potential abuse and conflicts.

Proficiency in occupational skills, particularly in using modern household technologies, is crucial for migrants, as it equips them with the ability to operate efficiently and reduces the challenges they may face in their destination countries. Insights from in-depth

interviews and FGDs with migrant returnees revealed that many Ethiopians, especially those from rural areas, lack familiarity with advanced cooking appliances, cleaning tools, and washing equipment commonly used by employers in Arab countries. This significant knowledge gap increases migrant's vulnerability to the risk of abuse and exploitation as their inability to handle modern household technologies not only compromises their job performance but also makes them vulnerable to mistreatment due to perceived incompetence.

Key informants from MoLSA and PEA, Agar Ethiopia and Good Samaritan Association also noted that addressing this knowledge gap is very important for enhancing their adaptability to contemporary technologies, and mitigating the vulnerabilities they face in foreign employment settings. They highlighted the need for comprehensive pre-departure training that includes not only cultural awareness and language proficiency but also practical skills tailored to the specific demands of their work environments. Such training would equip workers with the necessary skills to handle modern household technologies, thereby reducing the risk of exploitation and improving their preparedness for the challenges encountered abroad.

Although legal migrants are expected to have an adequate level of readiness and awareness before migrating, many still embark on their journeys with insufficient preparation. Participants who migrated through legal channels shared that they often lacked adequate awareness and preparation. While further research is required, the interviews and discussions conducted in this study shed light on possible reasons for this low level of preparation.

One of the reasons is migrants themselves are rushing to go abroad than preparation due to different pushing factors such as poverty and unemployment. In this regard, one of the returnee said, "All I wanted to do was travel overseas and make money to help my family. Therefore, I did not place a lot of focus on being prepared for departure". Key informants from MoLSA also indicated that over the past decade, Ethiopians migrating to Middle Eastern countries frequently did so with limited pre-departure awareness and preparation. Prospective migrants often show little interest in attending these training sessions, prioritizing their eagerness to go abroad over proper preparation. Further data from regional and district-level social and labor offices, as well as from the Women, Children, and Youth Office, reveal that severe economic pressures and limited job opportunities at home are primary drivers of migration for many Ethiopians. The urgent need to escape challenging conditions often takes precedence over preparing for the difficulties they might face abroad. Consequently, migrants are more focused on leaving their current situation than on adequately preparing for their future circumstances.

The lack of proper and adequate pre-departure preparedness training for potential migrants is another contributing issue. Migrants who attended the orientation argued that the orientation was not effective because it was too short and also delivered at the

big hall with large number of participants, making the orientation ineffective. Moreover, in this regard, key informant interview participants from government office also support this idea. For instance, a key informant from MoLSA argued, “a half day orientation was often delivered for prospective migrants before departure but this three-hour orientation was insufficient to provide them with adequate information and knowledge”.

Recruitment agencies also contribute to this issue by failing to provide the necessary information and knowledge to the migrants they recruit. Key informants from Agar Ethiopia and Good Samaritan repeatedly mentioned that overseas labor recruitment agencies are primarily concerned with collecting payments than focusing on preparing and informing migrants about the situation of labor receiving countries. As a result, migrants are often inadequately briefed on what to expect.

Furthermore, many Ethiopian migrants rely heavily on informal sources of information about their destinations, such as advice from brokers and returnees who have previously migrated. In this regard, participants of FGD and key Informants from MoLSA and Agar Ethiopia reported that informal networks often provide incomplete or misleading information, creating significant gaps in migrants’ understanding of what to expect. Some returnees also tend to downplay their negative experiences, sharing only the positive aspects of migration and work abroad. This heavy reliance on informal channels, combined with inadequate official information, leads to a considerable lack of comprehensive preparation among migrants.

The overall finding of this study show that the majority of migrant domestic workers are not well prepared before leaving their home countries, frequently lacking basic information about their legal rights, working conditions, and cultural norms. They are often lacking essential knowledge about their new environments and, thus unprepared for the challenges ahead. Their lack of preparedness may make them less able to handle the difficulties they face overseas, making them more susceptible to abuse, exploitation, and contract violations.

## Discussion of Results

Migration to Middle East countries for precarious domestic work becomes the continuing realities of many women and girls until the Ethiopian economy meet the demand for labor. Hence, pre-departure readiness and awareness before departure is very crucial to make informed decision of migration and minimize possible risks at destination countries and adapt the culture and working environment of their destination country. However, based on the finding of the study, large numbers of Ethiopian migrant domestic workers were not adequately prepared before leaving for their destination. This implies that most migrant domestic workers lacked sufficient prior knowledge and readiness before departure. Many of them migrated with poor understanding of their destination country’s

culture, language, working environment, specific job responsibilities, potential challenges they might encounter abroad and strategies or techniques for coping with the challenges they will face.

Consistent with the findings of this study, studies like Abebaw and Waganesh, 2017; Emebet, 2002; Girmachew, 2017; and ILO 2017 have shown that Ethiopian migrants often migrate to the Middle East and Gulf states without adequate preparation. According to ILO report, about 54% of Ethiopian migrants were unaware of their employers and that over 30% of them were not informed about the nature of their job (ILO, 2017). Similarly, Abebaw and Waganesh (2017) found that many Ethiopian migrant domestic workers face hardships in the Middle East partly due to their inadequate preparation for the different work and lifestyle there, often assuming domestic work is the same as in Ethiopia. Emebet (2002) also highlighted that while some migrants had heard of cases of abuse before departure, most lacked awareness of the actual living and working conditions of the host countries. Decisions to migrate were often based on no information at all, leaving most Ethiopian domestic workers unprepared for the job requirements and cultural differences abroad. This lack of preparation could not only exacerbate the vulnerabilities of these workers but also limit their capacity to navigate the challenges they encounter abroad.

It is commonly assumed that legal migrants would have a higher level of pre-departure awareness compared to their illegal counterparts because following legal ways of migration has comparative advantage in terms of making informed decision of migration. However, the findings of the survey data revealed no statistically significant differences in pre-departure awareness between legal and illegal migrants. Similarly, the qualitative data also confirm that most Ethiopian migrants regardless of ways of migration are migrating with low level preparation and sometimes with no information at all. Based on this finding, one can understand that the mode of migration, whether legal or illegal, does not significantly impact the level of pre-departure preparedness. This finding raises critical questions about the influence of ways of migration on migrants' preparation and readiness level.

However, several factors explain this lack of significant difference. One of the reasons is all migrants, regardless of legal or illegal, they are rushing to go abroad than preparation due to different pushing factors such as poverty and unemployment. Consequently, migrants are more focused on leaving their current situation than on adequately preparing for their future circumstances. So, they do not give much emphasis on preparation. Moreover, many Ethiopian migrants rely heavily on informal sources of information about their destinations as mentioned above.

Therefore, theoretically, this low level of pre-departure awareness observed in this study can be partially explained through Migrant Network Theory (Massey et al., 1993), which highlights how social networks facilitate migration by reducing costs and uncertainty but are less effective in transmitting practical and rights-based knowledge. Qualitative findings indicate that these networks emphasize income opportunities and success

stories while providing limited information on workers' rights, contracts, language skills, cultural adaptation, and coping strategies. Consequently, migrants entered migration with confidence derived from social reassurance rather than substantive preparedness, contributing to persistently low levels of pre-departure awareness.

The other one is the available orientation program was not adequate and effective in terms of preparing migrants before departure. Due to these factors, both legal and illegal migrants depart with low level of readiness. This explanation is supported by earlier studies. For example, according to ILO report, many labor-sending countries, including Ethiopia, lack standardized, thorough pre-departure programs (ILO, 2017). ILO reports also note that the existing training often provides incomplete or misleading information, leaving migrants unaware of their rights and available support (ILO, 2013). Similarly, other labor sending countries like , Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Kenya, Indonesia are also criticized for failure of preparing their citizens with adequate orientation before departure though better than Ethiopia (Emebet, 2002; Chammartin, 2004; Rodriguez, 2010; Asis & Agunias, 2012). For instance, a study conducted among Nepal migrant domestic workers showed that the quality of the orientation program was very poor and was just given for the sake of formality than equipping migrants with necessary information and skill (Regmi, 2019). In contrast, the government of the Philippines is better in terms of equipping its citizens with appropriate information and skill before departure (Emebet, 2002; Asis & Agunias, 2012).

On the other hand, among the demographic variables examined, education emerged as the most significant factor influencing pre-departure awareness. Migrants with higher educational attainment demonstrated better readiness and awareness than those with lower levels of education. This shows the role of education in enhancing information-seeking behavior, critical thinking, and risk assessment, all of which are essential for informed migration decisions.

## **Conclusion, Recommendation and Policy Implication**

A high level of readiness is very important, and it is a prerequisite for prospective migrants to diminish their vulnerability to abuse and adapt to the environment. However, the study demonstrates that the majority of Ethiopian migrant domestic workers, regardless of ways of migration, have migrated to Middle East countries with a low level of pre-departure awareness. This critically raises questions on the effectiveness of legal migration in terms of equipping prospective migrants with appropriate and adequate information compared to illegal migrants. In fact, the low level of preparation can be influenced by different factors, including migrants depending too much on informal social networks and informal sources of information as well as migrants rushing to migrate rather than taking time for preparation. On the other hand, education was found as a significant positive factor for improving migrants' pre-departure readiness level. This clearly shows how educational attainment helps migrants to navigate and be aware of their destination

country's culture, risks, and coping/minimizing risk mechanisms.

Based on the findings, the study recommends several key actions to improve pre-departure awareness and readiness for Ethiopian migrant domestic workers. Pre-departure orientation programs shall be made mandatory and comprehensive, covering cultural adaptation, language skills, job responsibilities, and coping with abuse. Training duration should be extended to include practical sessions that simulate real conditions. Additionally, prospective migrants shall proactively seek out information about their destination's conditions, legal rights, and cultural norms to better prepare them. More importantly, the results highlight the importance of creating real job opportunities to prevent people from resorting to dangerous migration options. Clear consideration of the demographic profiles of migrants is also very crucial to see migrants are proactive and make informed decision of migration.

The finding also acknowledges the limitation of this study including not applying to current migrants' readiness level and pre-departure orientation program. Hence, the study calls for further future studies to assess the current migrants' readiness level in comparison with the previous study findings including this study finding. Future studies can also assess the current government effort on preparing its citizens before departure, and compare with this study finding to see if any progress is made. So, comparative study would give a more comprehensive data that guides the future migration policy in Ethiopia.

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## **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The author of this work has no competing interests and is completely responsible for its content.

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