



Female Ugandan labour migration to Middle East: Is it a reflection of a non-resilient public sector?



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Introduction and Background

- Female Ugandan labour migration to Middle East is an open practice with government's endorsement.
- The public sector of Uganda has made a number of policies and interventions to manage international female labour migration although a lot of work remains undone.



In Middle East...

- In the last three decades there has been a growing influx of migrants from Asia and Africa into Middle East.
- There are no quotas on the number of migrants allowed in Middle East.



Meaning of a migrant



- An international migrant worker is a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in paid work in a country of which he or she is not a national (UN, 1990)



Problem & Context

- Every day, hundreds of Ugandan women and girls, mainly with limited education travel to Middle East in search of jobs.
- They migrate majorly with the knowledge of government (public sector) and with the assistance of hiring agencies.





Problem & Context (cont'd)

- Some Ugandan women have turned Middle East into a key destination for job search suggesting that employment availability in Uganda is in a questionable state.
- Ugandan women continue to flock to Middle East mainly to work as maids, despite harrowing tales of enslavement, torture and discrimination. In fact, many go back for a second and third stint, even after they have spoken very badly about the way they were treated while they worked in homes there”.
- This scenario reflects badly on the government of Uganda and specifically the public sector that is at the centre-stage of human resource development, policy setting, implementation and employment creation.



The paper seeks to answer four questions:

- Why have the female Ugandan workers continued to migrate to Middle East in spite of the risky conditions of work that such workers face while there?
- What attempts has the Ugandan public sector made in streamlining working conditions for women and girls employed in Middle East?
- What forms of non-resilience does the public sector exhibit in the process of managing the female Ugandan migrant workers to Middle East?
- What can the public sector of Uganda do to mitigate the plight of female migrant workers in Middle East?



Resilience

- Resilience = a fundamental quality to respond productively to significant change that disrupts the expected pattern of life
- Resilience can be classified as: “defensive resilience pointing to the ability to react, recover, and bounce back to a state of normality; and **offensive resilience denoting** ...the ability to anticipate emerging problems and prevent them” (Boin & van Eeten, 2013)



Resilience (cont'd)

“The main difference between defensive and offensive resilience is that defensive resilience defends an old belief, practice, value, service, or status, whereas **offensive resilience either replaces something old with the new or adopts a novel belief, practice, value, service, or status while replacing nothing**” (Rajala & Jalonen 2023, p.9)



Literature: Conditions of work for female labour migrants in Middle East

- The number of female migrant workers from third world countries to Middle East has been increasing in the last three decades.
- Most women are mainly in domestic work; hence their work requires limited levels of skills and expertise.
- Low levels of education make them vulnerable to poor working conditions and low wages.
- Quite often these female migrant workers meet very unfavourable working conditions characterised, for example, by; assault, delayed salaries, sexual abuse, discrimination, and excessive work



Literature: Conditions of work for female labour migrants in Middle East

- There exists a system known as the Kafala.
- In Islamic family law *kafala* refers to a formal agreement to provide temporary support for orphaned children until adulthood.
- It later evolved to go beyond orphan care and covered employees under private arrangements. Under this framework, the state issues sponsorship permits to local individuals or entities, granting them the authority to engage foreign labourers for employment.



Literature: Conditions of work for female labour migrants in Middle East

- The kafala system tends to be repressive to the workers including denying them several rights.
- “Condemned as dangerous and abusive, the kafala labour system not only disregards migrant workers’ rights but depends on exploitation...with the region’s most vulnerable migrants hidden behind closed doors” (McQue, 2024, p.1).



Literature: Conditions of work for female labour migrants in Middle East

- In Middle East, patriarchal norms devalue domestic labour as “women's work” & confine women within the household & make them less visible to authorities.
- “Female domestic workers, generally excluded from the labour protection laws by working in private homes, are heavily dependent on their employers”
(McQue, 2024, p.1).



What makes women migrants vulnerable

- Unrealistic expectations, lack of proper information on the migration process and procedures and on employment opportunities.
- Concentration in a more limited number of occupations.
- The migration of women is mostly unrelated to career advancement and skill acquisition.



What makes women migrants vulnerable

- Most migrant women end up performing the 3D jobs and are in isolated situations
- Women tend to occupy jobs within the informal sector which is not covered by any social protection.
- Women migrants themselves lack knowledge of their rights, & fear the authorities
- Most women migrate to overcome poverty and limited viable employment in their home country.



Methods

- **Interviews:** senior civil servants from the MGLSD.
- **Document reviews:** from MGLSD reports, ILO reports, IOM reports, and articles.



Results: the dilemma for PS

The state of labour in Uganda

- Uganda has a population of about 45.9million people with 55.6% of them being of working age population (14-64 years) (UBOS, 2024).
- Popn growth rate is about 2.8% p.a.
- About 700,000 young people reach working age every year (WB 2020).
- 700,000 people can not be fully absorbed in the Ugandan job market.



Results (cont'd)

Large scale female labour migration

- Btw 2016 and mid-2022, over 220,000 Ugandans left for work in Middle East. [Of these,] 85 percent were domestic workers, with women taking up the larger share of 75%.
- Hence, within 7 years, over 140,000 female workers migrated from Uganda to Middle East





Results (cont'd)

Economic benefits as drivers of migration

- The search for money. E.g. domestic worker in Uganda are paid between Uganda Shillings 60,000= (USD 15) to 150,000= (USD40), but while in Middle East they are paid between UGX800,000= (USD216) to 1,000,000= (USD270) p.m.



Results: Unemployment in Uganda as a driver of migration

The women and girls in destination countries communicate about both the good and bad in their jobs but the mere presence of jobs and reasonable (good) money overshadows the other job risks in Middle East labour market.





Results (cont'd)

Labour export companies and vulnerability of female labour migrants

- Several labour export companies in Uganda are registered and authorised to facilitate the labour migration to Middle East.
- As of June 13, 2022, there were 235 licensed private recruitment companies. Every two years, each company pays Uganda Shillings two million [approx. USD538] in license fees.



Results: Labour exploitation and human rights abuse

- Abuse has been in existence for over two decades.
- “This is nothing like labour migration: This is modern slavery. Almost every day, I register a complaint of a Ugandan woman complaining about her rights being abused. The system in Middle East empowers employers to do so” (Mwizi, in Nakamyia, 2023, p.6).





Results (cont'd):

Dangerous illegal migration

- About half of the migrants from Uganda travel illegally to Middle East.
- Irregular migration can undermine public confidence in the integrity and effectiveness of a state's migration and asylum policies (IOM, 2005).
- People who enter or remain in a country without authorization can be at risk of exploitation by employers and landlords.

54 Ugandans stranded in Qatar





Injuries and deaths of migrants

- In Middle East, in some workers lose their lives under unclear circumstances. E.g. from 2019 to 2022 Uganda registered 88 deaths of migrant workers.
- Of these, Saudi Arabia had 69; the UAE and Jordan with 5 deaths each; Somalia with 3, and Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain with 2 deaths each; Saudi Arabia 5 & Iraq 2 (Nangonzi & Serugo 2022)



Signs of public sector resilience

- ***Enactment of some regulations:*** Legislations to streamline the working conditions of citizens' employment abroad especially in Middle East. E.g. *The Employment (Recruitment of Ugandan Migrant Workers) Regulations, 2021, Statutory Instruments Supplement No. 26; etc*
- ***Signing of bilateral agreements: e.g.*** Bilateral Relations Agreement with the Saudi Arabia for domestic workers.



Signs of public sector resilience

- **Building of partnerships with agencies:** The public sector of Uganda has registered and cleared several companies to handle labour export, especially to Middle East.
- Agreements have been made to and fixed periods of time within which they must first return to Uganda.



Signs of public sector resilience

Attempts on migration pre-emptive measures:

- Some efforts, although minimal, have been mooted regarding the need for discouraging Ugandans from migrating to Middle East.
- E.g. Skilling young people with marketable competencies for them to be able to compete for decent jobs.
- Youth livelihood programmes and parish development funds meant for local economic development.



Signs of a non-resilient public sector

- Limited coherence across government MDAs
- Govt weaknesses and some successes
- The remittance dilemma





Signs of a non-resilient public sector

An example: Remittance dilemma

- In 2020, “Ugandans working abroad contributed approximately 4.5 percent to Uganda’s GDP, placing it above the Sub-Saharan Africa average of 2.8 percent” (IOM Uganda, 2020, p. 1).
- “from migrant workers, the government annually collects US\$1.2bn globally – Middle East alone sends in \$600millions.



Conclusions

- Women are migrating to Middle East in big numbers mainly because of high levels of unemployment in Uganda.
- The highly publicised unfavourable working conditions for the minority of workers are a lesser evil than total unemployment. Therefore, when labour faces high unemployment, the precarious jobs become acceptable.
- Even though the suffering female Ugandan migrant workers might be a minority, the predicament of those citizens abroad that persists unresolved is one of the signs of a low-resilient public sector of Uganda.



Recommendations

- The migrant women should be sensitised and given opportunities to press charges in case of need including a provision for legal representation.
- Public sector of Uganda should further regulate the local recruitment agencies in a stringent manner.
- Domestic workers should not go directly to the homes of their employers immediately upon arrival in Middle East; rather, there should be administrative procedures in place by which they are briefed on the dos and don'ts
- Focus on prior-prepared professionals who can access specialized jobs abroad in well-organised labour markets.



Recommendations

- The public sector adopts strategic plans for the nation to facilitate sustainable employment of labour e.g. thru relevant education & training, investments opportunities, etc.) that minimise the flight of human capital abroad while creating alternative occupations at home.



Finally, always remember:

“No country can grow beyond the capacity of its public sector” Prof Uketor Moti Gabriel, 2024, Nigeria)

Thank you for listening to me