An investigation into the experiences of female victims of trafficking in Ethiopia

Asefach Haileselassie Reda

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The purpose of this study is to tell the stories of female victims of human trafficking from Ethiopia. It discusses the causes of trafficking and how it affects the social and emotional well-being of women. The study is conducted using a constructivist framework and involves in-depth interviews with five returnees whose experiences as victims are explored. The goal is to provide insight into the challenges faced by the wider population. Emergent themes in the stories are discussed in line with relevant literature. The study shows lack of job opportunities, limited income, and false promises made by brokers as the major factors drawing women into human trafficking. The findings also show that even after return, the victims experience further difficulties as a result of post-traumatic psychological factors. Looking at the significance of the research outcomes, the gleaned information could be of value for organizations working on migration and countering human trafficking.

Introduction

Ethiopia – with a population of 90,873,739 inhabitants – is one of the countries known as major exporters of labor to the Middle East (Central Intelligence Agency 2011). Ethiopia being one of the most populated countries in sub-Saharan Africa, has three-quarters of the general population of Ethiopia consisting of women and children who are exposed to widespread poverty (Kebede 2002). Because of existing cultural values that are common mainly in rural Ethiopia, women have limited access to education and training opportunities. Hence, in comparison to men, women have lesser access to employment opportunities. Moreover, women and children in Ethiopia experience serious challenges that affect their survival and development as a result of socio-economic, political, and cultural factors (Bezabih 2008). In addition, women have no right to negotiate on the condition of their employment, and in cases of such negotiation, it is often done between the agent of the women and the employer. Where there is a contract, it is written in Arabic, a language which the Ethiopian migrants do not understand at all. The women do not have any right to complain when conditions are breached by their employers as they are not cognizant of the terms agreed upon (Tekle and Belayneh 2000).
Women and young girls who migrate to Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia have experienced various types of human right abuses (Agrinet 2004). A large number of Ethiopian women and children who migrate to Middle East countries to work as housemaids are victims of trafficking and are exposed to different kinds of abuse and exploitation. The most common form of abuse and exploitation faced by women and young girls working as domestic workers in the Middle East are sexual abuse, overwork, confinement, physical abuse, insult, belittlement, and withholding of salary. Moreover, their movement is restricted by the employers and illegal agents, and they are also expected to work between nine and 19 hours a day with limited hours for rest and they have no time off (Belayneh 2003).

The trafficking of women and children from Ethiopia, especially to countries in the Middle East, is considered as a significant problem. About 84 percent of women who had migrated for employment in domestic work were trafficked and most of them do not envisage the prospect of leading a good life within Ethiopia (Agrinet 2004). Furthermore, a little less than 91 percent of the hotline counseling service beneficiaries was young women from Ethiopia looking for information on working in the Middle East (IOM/SLM Addis Ababa 2004). The report of Agrinet (2004) clearly shows that the majority of migrants are female. Hence, the reason why this issue has been chosen for study is to reveal the extent of the problem of trafficked female Ethiopian migrants are facing by bringing their personal experiences to be heard.

Lebanese families employ an estimated 200,000 migrant domestic workers, primarily from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Nepal, who are not protected by law (Human Rights Watch 2010). Furthermore, among 42,900 refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers, over 36,000 were Ethiopian domestic workers seeking help as they were exposed to various abuse and exploitation (Sayah 2011). The labor laws of Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) give minimal legal protection to migrant domestic workers. The report further indicates that women domestic workers in an unregulated and undervalued job sector are at high risk and face various kinds of abuse and various forms of exploitation (Human Right Watch report 2010). The travels of female migrants are often arranged in such a way that it exposes them to challenging situations at the different stages of their journey, as well as to risks of becoming victims of human trafficking, which may well lead to permanent psychological damage (Tekle and Belayneh 2000).

Human trafficking is a crime under the Criminal Code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (CCFDRE). However, the awareness of the public and the law enforcement officials of human trafficking are limited. The study also indicated that there is a substantial lack of awareness among many law enforcement officials about the particulars of all the important provisions dealing with trafficking. There was a tendency amongst some law enforcement officials of not considering the trafficking of women and children as a crime by itself, unless it is accompanied by other acts, like rape, bodily injury, and the like. Because of social stigma, victims are reluctant to report their complaint to authorities or share their problems to families; rather, they prefer not to reveal their problems and the suffering they have faced. Moreover, Victims of trafficking are essentially ‘hidden’ that they are difficult to access. This is not only true for victims still living in exploitative situations, but also for returnees who were victims (Endeshaw, Gebeyehu, and Reta 2006).
Focal conceptions

This section briefly discusses some conceptual issues relevant to the discussions in this study. Female, human trafficking, victims of trafficking, migration, migrant workers, and psychosocial consequences are the key issues of analysis here.

To begin, human migration refers to a process of moving, either across international borders, or within a state. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition, and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, uprooted people, and economic migrants (IOM 2004, 41). International migration is the focus of this study and according to United Nations (1990, 262) ‘a migrant worker is a person, who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not a national’.

Human trafficking is a negative side of migration and according to UN (2000a), trafficking in persons or ‘human trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other means of the abuse of power 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’. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs.

The UN (2000a) definition shows that the distinctions between trafficking and smuggling are overlapping but do have some differences in that that trafficking is a crime committed against an individual through deception, coercion, repeated exploitation, restricted movement, and other means, whereas smuggling is a crime committed against a state through illegal border crossing. A victim of human trafficking is a concept closely related to human trafficking and is defined as ‘An individual who is a victim of the crime of trafficking in persons’ (IOM 2004, 69).

Constructivism is the study of how individuals create their own ‘realities’. In this article, the word realities are placed in inverted commas to accentuate that from a constructivist point of view because there are no absolute truths or realities, just interpretations. Every person attaches meaning to her/his observations and interprets the world from her/his own unique point of view. (Fuks cited in Macliam 2003). The assumption is that each person makes sense of her/his own world in terms of one’s own unique perspective. For the purpose of this study, the researcher attempts to comprehend the participants’ world from their own perspective and interpret such views accordingly. The constructivist framework is particularly relevant to this study where the experience of trafficked women is told from their own perspective or view. Stories were told through the conversation with the researcher. The focus is on the content as articulated by each participant. It is in this framework that the paper attempts to investigate and understand the experiences of Female victims of trafficking in Ethiopia.

Methodology

The researcher has employed qualitative techniques with the belief that it provides the most appropriate way of investigating the research questions using in-depth interview. The data are interpreted under the assumption of social constructivism and the epistemological
framework. The participants have been selected using a purposive sampling method from a list of victims of trafficking identified by the IOM in Addis Ababa as a result of their applications for assistance between the years 2004 and 2008. Hence, data were collected from primary sources which consisted of five women residing in Addis Ababa.

Regarding their background and place of origin, they are from Amhara, the central, Oromiya, the south west, and Tigray, the northern part of Ethiopia and others from Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. All participants are from poor families and have no job before migration and some completed high school education and some are dropped out due to financial problem. Participants were between the ages of 19–29 when they migrated.

**Trafficing of women and children: from internal to external and the psychosocial effects**

According to IOM (2003, 61) trafficking of persons, especially women and children, has evolved into one of the most tragic features of contemporary global migration and the situation of victims is described as follows: ‘victims of trafficking are exposed to physical and psychological violence and abuse, denied labor rights, are illegal before the law and are often found in a forced and unwanted relationship or dependency with their traffickers’.

Trafficing of humans generates an estimated $9.5 billion income annually to traffickers and is closely connected to crimes such as drug trafficking, document falsification, and human smuggling, where organized crime thrives, the rule of law are undermined (US Department of State 2006). A study indicates that though trafficking affects hundreds of thousands of people every year, getting accurate figure for persons trafficked in is not easy to obtain (Endeshaw, Gebeyehu, and Reta 2006).

In addition, According to the UN (2000a), these difficulties may be attributed to the complexity of the problem, the ambivalence of decision makers and a lack of resources to ensure adequate legislation to enable/implement vigorous strategic interventions for the fight against trafficking of women and children. Because of these and other related reasons, there are no accurate statistics on the extent of the problem and estimates are unreliable.

When an individual falls prey to a trafficker, the consequences for the person are extremely serious. According to Bezabih (2008) during the process of trafficking, a victim’s basic human rights are violated because they may be beaten, raped, and/or threatened. When victims fall under the control of the traffickers, they are mostly too afraid to seek help and often do not know where to go for assistance. There are numerous reports which relate to cases where clandestine migration puts victims at risk of death, starvation, suffocation, accidents, and other harmful conditions. For example, ‘The Reporter’ (cited in Tekle and Belayneh 2000) refers to 67 deceased women's bodies coming from Arab countries in the years 1997–1999.

**Trafficing in Ethiopia**

Research findings show that in searching for job opportunity or income is not detrimental by itself, for many countries gain significantly as a result of remittances of citizens
working abroad. Nevertheless, what is unacceptable is that, migrants are trapped into a situation where they become victims of trafficking during the migration process and are made to suffer abuse and exploitation. A report/study further comments on the issue of migration becoming trafficking as follows: ‘while all trafficking involves migration, not all migration is trafficking’ (Agrin et 2004, 1).

According to United Nations Women Watch (2008), migration in Ethiopia is increasing both in magnitude and significance. As it is stated in the National Action Plan of Ethiopia, about 27 million people are living in poverty, with women comprising a majority of those living in absolute poverty. This is because of the gender differentials that persist at all levels of society, as reflected by social indicators. The action plan also shows that though education has been given attention by the government and factors such as the early marriage of girls diminish the prospect of women gaining admission to higher education. The action plan further states that the rate of student dropouts among girls is higher than boys by a large margin, and girls are furthermore usually held responsible for a multitude of tasks in the household, which may interfere with their education.

According to Kebede (2002), in Ethiopia, women are seen as the ‘natural’ providers of domestic service including cooking, cleaning, and care taking and general household maintenance. This is coupled with the biological role of childbearing and related domestic responsibilities. In addition to the above, many Ethiopian women are engaged in paid labor in factories, homes, or restaurants to supplement the household income and are often exposed to rigorous and labor-intensive work environments. A study shows that most victims of external trafficking have either completed high school or are school drop-outs. Consequently, because of the unfavorable circumstances existing in the country, women, and young girls are at risk of trafficking because of their hope to improve their lives and support their families (Belayneh 2003).

**Internal trafficking**

According to Forum on Sustainable Child Empowerment (FSCE), internal trafficking of women and children is widespread throughout the country and even seems to be tolerated by the society. The main purposes of internal trafficking are to engage women and children as domestic workers and/or as weavers in the ‘shema’ industry (FSCE 2004). The report further shows that, a large number of women and children suffer from different types of inhuman abuses and exploitations as a result of trafficking within Ethiopia. Existing studies such as those by Bezabih (2008), Eshetu (2003), and Endeshaw, Gebeyehu, and Reta (2006) point out that trafficking of women and children from rural to urban areas is a prevalent and steadily increasing practice in the country. However, reliable and comprehensive data on the emergence and development of trafficking or the number of women and children who have fallen victim to trafficking in the country are not available in their communities (Endeshaw, Gebeyehu, and Reta 2006). A study indicates that a substantial proportion of women and children are working as prostitutes, domestic workers, beggars, weavers in the traditional weaving industry, and children living on the streets are also victims of trafficking (FSCE 2004).
Studies show that trafficking of women from Ethiopia to countries in the Middle East is currently recognized as a major problem. Studies have revealed that women are mainly trafficked for the purpose of domestic service and at other times for the purpose of prostitution. The studies mentioned above also indicate that widespread poverty, unemployment, and the unfavorable economic and social position of women are the major push factors. The above studies have further shown that a large number of Ethiopian women who migrate for work to Middle Eastern countries are victims of trafficking (Agrinet 2004; Eshetu 2003; Tekle and Belayneh 2000). According to Pearson (2003), Middle Eastern countries such as Bahrain, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates are the main destinations for women and young girls trafficked for domestic labor and in Lebanon alone there are about 20,000–25,000 Ethiopian domestic workers and a significant number of who are trafficked.

Ethiopia is mainly a source country for trafficking and young Ethiopian women trafficked to Djibouti, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain for domestic labor (Pearson 2003). According to a local Amharic newspaper (cited in Agrinet 2004) there are around 130,000 Ethiopian males and females residing in the Gulf States, and all of them are labor migrants. The above newspaper further notes, even if Ethiopian women wish to migrate for work purposes, many of them become victims of trafficking, lured by false promises of good job, high salaries, and an easy life. Trafficking of women is almost inevitable, whether the mode is legal or illegal, and in both modes intermediaries are involved in the process and only a small proportion of migrants go through legally registered employment agencies, as compared to those who traveled through local brokers (Agrinet 2004). The study further shows that from the small number of respondents it can be inferred that the majority of the migrant women were trafficked and the study concludes that this is a cause of concern, and the contribution of legal employment agencies in curbing the trafficking of women and children should be investigated. Moreover, it further found that 85 percent of migrant women who were managed by brokers at the destination countries were trafficked.

According to Human Rights Watch (2010), current Lebanese law does not permit domestic workers to leave their job without the consent of their employers. The report further discussed the restrictive visa policies in Lebanon dissuade many domestic workers from pursuing grievances against their employers.

The study by Tekle and Belayneh (2000) indicates that most victims of external trafficking are from the capital city, Addis Ababa. This is because Addis Ababa is a metropolitan city and large numbers of people migrate there from different corners of the nation, mainly in search of jobs within and outside the country. Similarly, Agrinet (2004) points out that about 75 percent of trafficked women to the Middle Eastern countries were from urban areas of Ethiopia.

**Findings**

After the interviews were transcribed and field notes were made seven main categories or themes emerged based upon content analysis: (1) reason for leaving, (2) recruitment and travel, (3) arrival and means of placement, (4) living and working condition, (5) means of
return, (6) aftermath, and (7) emotional experiences. Furthermore, the above-stated categories will be subdivided into subcategories.

**Reason for leaving:** Most of the women in the study mentioned when they faced financial problems and lack of job opportunity. These are the main things which motivated them to think about migrating.

**Decision-making:** Most women indicted that the false promises of brokers about attractive jobs had influenced them to decide to work abroad. There were other influences as well. Two women mentioned that beside their own interest of migrating, relatives, women they know, and friends who are working abroad have encouraged them to decide. One woman stated that her husband and his friend has significant role in her decision.

**Recruitment and travel arrangement**

Most of the women in the study had contacted brokers through friends, relatives, and family members.

**Negotiation with brokers:** All the women in the study mentioned that they were given false promise of attractive jobs and good payment by the brokers and/or relatives. Most of the women paid money in cash to brokers, who claimed that the money would be utilized to cover the women’s travel costs.1

**Travel, arrival, and means of placement**

Lebanon and UAE are the destination countries where the research participants were placed as migrant workers and all the five women in the study mentioned that they traveled by themselves. Most women traveled by air with direct flight to destination countries. Two women traveled with transit visas through Djibouti and Egypt with special arrangement of the brokers. One woman traveled via Egypt with other group of migrants to Beirut. Another was promised by the broker to be escorted to the destination but the broker did not keep his promise.

**Conditions at arrival:** All the women stated that their passport was confiscated by Immigration Officers, agents, or employers upon their arrival. One woman stated that the agents had taken her to a place that looks like a prison where migrant women cry for help and were not allowed to leave the place. Another indicated that she was transferred from one agent to another. One woman stated she was picked up from the airport after long hours of waiting by an agent through the contact of her cousin. Two women were picked up by anticipated employers directly from the airport.

**Means of placement:** All the five women stated that they had no formal agreement with employers before departure or upon their arrival. All women have a perception that the brokers in Addis Ababa have some kind of connection and agreement with the agents or employer in the country of destination, which they had not been aware of.

**Working and living conditions**

**Overwork:** Most of the women complained and have faced challenges because they were expected to work without a break and were forced to stay in the home until after midnight. Selam described her condition this way:
My employer expected me to work until midnight and sometimes even later than that. When everything is not done perfectly, she shouts at me and pushes me to work harder. She thinks that I am like a machine that can work 24 hours.²

Most of the women had to get up early and were obliged to finish all the housework without having a break. All the five women talked about how their employers withhold their salaries as a means of keeping them working. Most of them mentioned that though they regularly reminded their employers to give them their salaries, the later refused to pay their wages in a timely manner.

Restriction of movement, food deprivation, and denial of medical treatment: All the five women reported that employers restricted their movement and forced them to remain in the houses of their employers and were not allowed to communicate with their families or seek help from agents or from other sources. Two women said that their employers denied them adequate food and medical treatment and that they experienced health problems and Abebu expressed it this way:

I was serving day and night without rest and had no sleep at all. I was given a small amount of rice and a cup of milk a day and nothing more and I was getting weaker and weaker.³

Physical and emotional mistreatment and sexual harassment: All the women reported that they were either beaten and/or insulted, faced shouting or being pushed to work harder by employers or family members of the employers. In this regard, Hanna said:

…I was beaten by my employer almost every day … I was humanly incapable of taking any more of the beating.⁴

Two of the women were beaten by their employer and another recounted that her employer had frequently shouted at her and pushed her to work harder. Sara has faced repeated sexual harassment by her male employer and she expressed it this way:

It was terrible! My male employer used to frequently come to where I sleep in the middle of the night and ask me to have sex with him. He would try to convince me and constantly bothered me by saying ‘if you have sex with me, you can call your family and I will provide you with everything you need’.⁵

Means of return

Awareness of being deceived
All of the women reported that at some point they realized that they had been deceived by the brokers. Some of the women realized that they were deceived when they saw that their working and living condition were not what they had been led to expect. The point in time when they realized that they had been deceived varies from one case to the other. For example, one woman realized that something was wrong when the agent refused to acknowledge the problem she had with her employer. Another woman recognized that something was wrong when the agent in Dubai forced her to work for two employers and her employers refused to pay her wage.

Ways and means utilized to convince employers and agents to send them home
All the five women reported that they had been in need of help and had wished to get some kind of assistance from agents, employers, family members, and Ethiopian
Embassies in the counties of destination. For example, one woman was fortunate to get a call from her parents at the time the agent had refused to send her home and she said she asked her parents over the phone to send her an air ticket. Another woman explained that she had dared to ask her employer to help her in calling her brother living in the United States (US). She said she had asked her brother to send her an air ticket and her brother had given her the contact number of an Ethiopian women living in Dubai to facilitate her return.

The actual process of leaving the working place
Most of the women reported that they had tried their best to leave but the employers and agents had resisted requests to send them home. Employers and agents had utilized different means to prevent the women from leaving. The women indicated that the major challenge had been because their salaries had been withheld. One woman said that her continued appeals to the agent to send her home and the follow-up by her parent had helped her to leave. Another participant has mentioned that the Ethiopian woman whom her brother has given her contact number had sent her an air ticket through a delegate of the Ethiopian community in Dubai and this delegate had acted as if he was from the Ethiopian Embassy in Saudi Arabia. She said that for this reason her employer had allowed her to leave with the delegate to Dubai, believing that the delegate was a high official. When she arrived at Dubai airport, the Ethiopian woman explained the situation to the immigration officials at the airport and the Ethiopian woman gave them her own passport as a guarantee for the participant to board to plane. Furthermore, the participant said that the immigration office had kept the passport of the Ethiopian woman until they had made sure that she had boarded to plane.

The psychosocial effects and emotional experiences of victims
All of said the women expressed that they had experienced or were experiencing physical, social, and/or emotional health problems due to the overwork and emotional mistreatment which they had encountered. Most of the women elaborated and said that they had faced serious injury and required regular medical follow-up and emotional support and Almaz expressed it this way:

I could not remember on how I returned back home as I was not fully conscious and was occupying a space that would have been a seat for 3 people in the aircraft.

Responses from family and others
All five women mentioned that their parents or family members did not understand the challenges they had experienced. The women mentioned that the financial expectations of parents, family members, and neighbors had become an additional burden to them. One woman mentioned that her parents were displeased with her because they were expecting her to succeed but she has prolonged health problems and diagnosed with high blood pressure due to the serious injuries she suffered on her head and back and her medical expenses were increasing from time to time. Another woman explained that her family members were expecting money from her and she said they did not understand the challenges she has faced.
Dealing with effects
All five women reported that they had faced challenges in handling issues related to the aftermath of trafficking. All the women implicitly or explicitly expressed worries about their means of living and expectations of families and neighbors. Most of the women mentioned they were worried about the debt they had to pay that was incurred to cover travel expenses and family expectations that they would return with a lot of money.

All five women implicitly or explicitly said that they had been in a better situation before their migration. All the women reported that life was now more difficult for them because they needed to deal with various issues which had emerged upon their return. They explained that before migration, their main challenges were financial problems but after their return, they need financial, medical, and emotional support due to the challenges they had faced. All the women were looking for some kind of assistance to cope up with the challenges they had to face after their return. Hence, the women mentioned they had contacted the IOM for financial, medical, and counseling support. IOM had provided financial assistance, counseling, and basic business skills training, and some participants were organized to form mini-businesses.

The main emotional effects were associated with the challenges faced during recruitment, placement, in the destination and upon return related to trafficking are described as follows.

Feeling of sadness, frustration, and helplessness
Based on observations by the researcher, most of the women in the study were feeling sad and helpless when they talked about their experiences. Most of the women cried when they remembered their experiences. Two women stated that they had been highly frustrated and had a fear of death. They had been concerned that their lives had been in danger and had thought that they may not be able to return home alive. One woman mentioned due to her frustration, she has taken an acidic fluid substance, wishing to commit suicide.

Feeling of loneliness and isolation
All of the women said that they had been feeling lonely and had been physically and socially isolated because they had had no communication with their families and friends. Most of the women tried to seek help from agents and Ethiopian Embassies, but could not find the support they had required at the time they needed it and they had felt isolated and lonely. Most of the women said that they were feeling lonely and socially isolated even after they returned.

Feelings of regret and disappointment
All the women reported that they had felt regret and had been disappointed because their plans and expectations did not come true. One woman explained she had been expecting to work as a waitress in one of the big hotels in Dubai with attractive salary. But she said her plans were not met. Another woman mentioned that she had anticipated to work as a babysitter with a good salary. However, she said her expectations were not met at all and it was a big loss not to get the type of job and salary she had expected. Selam explained the things she has done instead in this way:
I was not expecting such things to happen to me and it never crossed my mind that I would be forced to work for two employers for nothing.7

**Fear of being rejected and stigmatized**

All the women implicitly or explicitly expressed that they had fears regarding losing social acceptance of their family, friends, and the community at large. One woman said that she always thinks about what her family will feel and say. Another participant described the fear of being stigmatized by some people in the community, who have assumptions about migrant workers being engaged in prostitution.

All the women reported that they had thought that their family would understand the type of challenges they had experienced abroad but had found that things were not as they expected. One woman said that she felt that her parents were unhappy with her and another woman indicated that she had thought her family would understand the kind of hardship she had gone through. Another participant indicated that her parents did not understand the suffering she has gone though. They told her that it would have been better if she had been able to tolerate the situation and had continued working abroad.

**Discussion**

The findings of the study show that one of the major factors pushing the women to seek work in other countries is lack of job opportunity. Most of them had envisaged no prospect of leading a normal and productive life in their country. The women had no job, and in some cases they have been unemployed, had very limited income and were forced to take any opportunity for working abroad. Thus, this is an indication that the factors exposing women to trafficking in Ethiopia are interrelated, with poverty being the pressing issue as in other parts of the world (Agrinet 2004; UN Women Watch 2008).

The study further indicates that the false promises of brokers that draw attractive pictures of life in the destination countries has influenced the women to fall for the stories and become trafficked (Kebede 2002). The study further shows that victims are influenced by friends, relatives, or other women they know who claim to know people who work in certain Arab countries. As evident in the study, brokers were recruiting participants through contacts with families, friends, and relatives. In one of the cases, the particular woman had a direct contact with a broker. In another case a woman whose cousin lives in Dubai had her travel facilitated through the intervention of a broker in Addis Ababa. This shows that traffickers do not follow a consistent type of recruitment or means of contact but utilize all available means (UN 2000a).

The study shows that brokers work privately through facilitators to provide the women with travel documents. They were also making easy-money as most of the women had paid cash as demanded by the brokers, who claimed that the money would cover the cost of travel (Endeshaw, Gebeyehu, and Reta 2006). The study also indicates that most women usually make contact with brokers in different locations, and they usually do not know the exact addresses of the brokers. This makes them vulnerable to the deception of the brokers, a practice which is also attested by a similar study done by (Endeshaw, Gebeyehu, and Reta 2006; Tekle and Belayneh 2000).
The study revealed that during recruitment, the women were not in a position to negotiate the amount of payment and travel arrangements mainly due to lack of information and the high pressure the brokers have put on them. In one case, the broker asked one of the women to pay him half of the total amount and persuaded her to pay the remaining installments from her salary, which put her in debt. In another case, a broker convinced the woman to sign a statement that he is her uncle, warning her she would not get the job he had promised her otherwise. This shows the kind of fraud the brokers usually utilize to convince their potential victims and get them to agree to their plans: (Endeshaw, Gebeyehu, and Reta 2006; IOM 2003; Tekle and Belayneh 2000). The study shows that during their journey the women traveled by themselves and in some cases, and brokers use transit to neighboring countries such as Djibouti (where entry visas are usually not required). Although direct air transport from Addis Ababa to the destinations is available, brokers choose to do otherwise to avoid government requirements set at that time, which would require filing out travel arrangements for the women.

The study also revealed that though the women were not forced during the recruitment and transportation, the process involved abuse of power and deception related to the amount of payment and the conditions of employment. The research participants attested that they lacked access to reliable information and brokers had exploited their vulnerability. This confirms that, while the recruitment process may not have involved force, a certain level of exploitation was nonetheless involved (UN 2000a).

As is evident from this study, the women’s passports were confiscated. They were also ill informed as to what would happen to them, partially due to language problem and absence of someone to help them understand the situation. This study confirms that human trafficking does not necessarily involve illegal or underground movement, but it can be the product of a whole system which encompasses an entire movement process through the existence of trafficking network extending from source to destination (Endeshaw, Gebeyehu, and Reta 2006; UN 2000a).

It was also found that none of the woman had obtained any formal agreement with their future employers before departure or upon their arrival in the country of destination. However, most women assumed that the brokers in Addis Ababa had some kind of agreement with the agents or employers in the destination, about which they were not aware. This shows how trafficking does not occur in a single event or step; rather, it entails a series of organized acts and circumstances with an extensive range of actors involved, exposing the women to various kinds of abuse and exploitation which is difficult to prevent (Agrinet 2004; Kebede 2002).

Most victims were kept isolated by traffickers to prevent them from contact with others and then transferred or sold to employers. Similarly, the study shows a case where a woman was taken to a place where a prospective employer came and had verbal agreement with the agent (the payment or working condition was not communicated to the woman) (Agrinet 2004; Beydoun 2006).

The study revealed that the heavy work load, deprivation of food, and sleep and restriction of movement by employers led to various physical and psychological problems for the women (see also Bezabih 2008; Kebede 2002). In spite of the risk that she may encounter (which she has already witnessed before), the research subject referred to as Case 5 has again decided to re-migrate, this time in a legal way. This shows that because of socio-economic conditions, the trafficking of women is almost unavoidable (Agrinet 2004).
The women in the study had been threatened by employers and had experienced deprivation of food and sleep, denial and withholding of salaries, and sexual harassment. In addition, they had been imprisoned and confined and had been threatened by employers that they would be sent back home without receiving their salaries. In one case, a participant had been forced by the agent to work for two employers (to replace her cousin who was sick and had been sent home). It had been required of her to work like a machine with no breaks ‘as if she was not human’ without any payment. This led her to become worried that she might become sick like her cousin and would be sent home with nothing (Bezabih 2008; Kebede 2002; Tekle and Belayneh 2000).

The study also shows that at a particular point after arrival all of the women had realized that they had been deceived by brokers. However, when and how they realized the deception differed from one woman to another. Some had realized it only after they saw their working and living conditions. The study further revealed that all the women had experienced physical, social, and/or emotional abuse due to the overwork and emotional mistreatment inflicted by employers (Agrinet 2004; Tekle and Belayneh 2000). The study revealed that all participating women experienced feeling of sadness, frustration, and helplessness. Some of them have experienced fear of death and the thought of not being able to return home alive as they felt their life was in danger. Abebu stated her situation in this way:

I was given small rice with cup of milk a day and expected to serve day and night. I was 60 Kg when I left Ethiopia and became 35 Kg during my stay and due to extreme frustration; I have ingested an acidic fluid substance wishing to kill myself.\(^8\)

This happened because she was unable to cope with her desperation related to her work condition: serving people who came to her employer’s house for witchcraft activities day and night, a situation that caused her mental disturbance (see also Bezabih 2008; Human Right Watch 2010). The study further shows that the women have experienced feeling of loneliness and isolation due to strict control by their respective employers. They also had no protection from abuse and exploitation, a case that agrees with studies conducted by Bezabih (2008) and IOM (2003).

According to other studies, migrant workers are reluctant to return home even after suffering abusive conditions (until they have made enough money). The same was true for the participants of this study who found themselves caught in the dilemma of experiencing hardships as they tried every means available to them to return back home and at the same time trying to stay because they had not been paid their salary. They had felt that it would have been unacceptable for them to return home with nothing (Kebede 2002; Tekle and Belayneh 2000).

Through this study, it was found that the process of returning to their home country was made possible for the women as a result of family support and the women themselves who were constantly complaining to their agents and employers. In one case, it was found that the technical and financial assistance of Ethiopian Community in the destination country had facilitated the return of a participant.\(^9\) The study indicated in some cases that the women were forced by their employers to work until they had become critically ill. This had caused them to finally collapse and lose their consciousness.

The study further revealed that in such cases women had assumed their employers have contacted the Ethiopian Consulate to send them back home (Agrinet 2004). All the women reported that they had experienced difficulties in handling issues related to
opening a case in court against the trafficker, paying their debts and looking for a means of living. It was often noted in the study that most of the women were worried about the debt they have to pay. In one case it was found that the woman has opened a file in court to persecute the trafficker but is not having an easy time proceeding because of the prolonged court process along with the health problems she has developed. Such has also been observed by the report of the US Department of State (2007).

The study further shows that all the women had been expecting their family and friends to understand the hardships they have endured and the challenges they had faced. In addition to the physical and emotional abuse they have suffered, the study shows that there has been other after effects. The financial expectations of families had subsequently become an additional burden. In one case, it has noted that a woman was rejected by her husband and this is similar to the findings of Bezabih (2008). Most of the women indicated that they were worried and felt insecure about the responses of families and neighbors and were afraid of rejection. An assumption by the community that ‘migrants could be engaged in prostitution activities’ was referred to, which led to fear of stigma and its effect on friendship and social interaction. This point is similar to the finding in the study by Bezabih (2008).

The study also shows that since their return, the women had experienced feelings of regret and disappointment in relation to their original plans and expectations that had been thwarted. The women also had to explain why they had decided to stay in the abusive situation. In response, it was noted that expectation that things would improve, even if it entails health problems and leaving their wages behind, were among others (see Agrinet 2004). As is evident from the study, the participants reported that life had become very difficult for them, and in some ways even worse than before migration, and that they had no choice other than looking for some kind of assistance (Kebede 2002).

Conclusion

What has been learned from this study is that the stories of the participants clearly indicate how women fall prey to traffickers and experience abuse. They thus are exposed to social and psychological traumas. It is evident from the study that because of the emotional problems, the women in this situation had experienced the need for financial assistance and emotional support during the process of return. The study found that the experiences of the victims of trafficking had a profound social and psychological impact, which prevented the women from working and earning their living after they had returned home. In conclusion, the study shows how important it is to see the world of human trafficking through the eyes of the victims. If one aims to assist victims and combat trafficking, it is of utmost importance to understand why they chose to migrate to work, the mistreatment that they endure, the psychological and physical effects, as well as their need for support when they return home, if viable ways of helping them reintegrate into their communities and homes are to be developed.

Notes

1. When the returnees arrange labour migrants in 2002/2003, the amount of money of each returnee owned was 10,000 Birr (1000 USD in 2010). But with increasing inflation rate in
Ethiopia since then, labour migrants to the Gulf region and Lebanon currently need probably threefold of this sum.

2. Case 2, one of the research participants interviewed, explaining the challenges she faced on the working and living condition, during the interview, May 2010, Addis Ababa.

3. Case 1, one of the research participants interviewed explaining about the physical abuse she has faced from her employer, during the interview, May 2010, Addis Ababa.

4. Case 5, one of the participants, explaining how the food and sleep deprivation affected severely her health, in the interview, May 2010, Addis Ababa.

5. Case 3, one of the participants, explaining the sexual harassment by her employer, during the interview May 2010, Addis Ababa.

6. Case 4, one of the participants explaining how she was not fully conscious and occupying a space that would have been a seat for 3 people in the air craft.

7. Case 1 explaining that she faced things beyond her expectation in her work place.

8. Case 5 that explained about her food deprivations in her work place.

9. According to Jemal (2010, Personal communication, Ministry of Florien Affairs (MFA)), it is confirmed that repatriation assistance of stranded migrants in the Middle East is usually facilitated by the Ethiopian Consular Mission in the host countries through discussion with the relevant bodies in the destination countries, such as labour office, police and courts. Due to budget constraints, the Consular Mission usually organizes fundraising from the Ethiopian community in the destination to cover the travel cost of the stranded migrants. In cases where migrants are alleged to have run away from their employers and end up in detention centres, the migrants are usually assisted to return home after the Consular Office has checked the necessary requirements. If the stranded migrants have no travel documents, the Mission usually checks their citizenship status by contacting their families in Ethiopia.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


