

# GHANAIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

SUMMARY REPORT (SEPTEMBER 2019)



This report has been produced with financial assistance from the project “Protecting Vulnerable Migrants in West and Central Africa” financed by the Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migrants (PRM) of the Department of State of the United States Government and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The report was written by Dr. Leander Kandilige, Prof. Joseph Teye, Dr. Mary Setrana and Prof. Delali Margaret Badasu of the Center for Migration Studies, University of Ghana.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) conducted a study on Ghanaian Domestic Workers in The Middle East as part of its project titled “Protecting Vulnerable Migrants in West and Central Africa”, funded by the United States Department of State. The study examines the flows of domestic labour from Ghana to the Middle East, investigates the specific vulnerabilities of Ghanaian domestic workers in the region, and provides key stakeholders and the general public with information relating to their profiles and recruitment processes. The findings of the study enhance the quality of national discussions, policy formulation, and coordinated interventions and programmes for the protection of this particular category of vulnerable migrants.

## METHODOLOGY

Data for the study was obtained through quantitative and qualitative research methods. Secondary data was elicited from key ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) in Ghana, including the Ghana Immigration Services (GIS), the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations (MELR), the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit (AHTU) of the Ghana Police Service (GPS), the Human Trafficking Secretariat of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration (MoFARI), and the Ghana Association of Private Employment Agencies (GHAPEA). Primary data was collected from 26 key stakeholders, comprising six officials of embassies of countries in the Middle East; eight agents of licensed and unlicensed recruitment agencies who recruit domestic workers for the Middle East; and 12 officials of relevant ministries and social partners. In addition, 113 return domestic workers from the Middle East were surveyed and 12 of them were interviewed in-depth. During data collection, the domestic workers surveyed returned from Saudi Arabia (38 workers), Kuwait (36), Qatar (16), and other countries including Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Oman and United Arab Emirates (UAE) (23 in total). Domestic workers in other countries in the Middle East were not surveyed due to the relative insignificance of these flows in the secondary data collected by key MDAs.

## BACKGROUND

Ghanaian migration to the Middle East became prevalent in the 1980s, with many male professionals migrating to work in the Saudi Arabian petrochemical industry. The number of Ghanaians migrating to the Middle East has increased significantly between 1990s to the present. This increase has been facilitated by the proliferation of labour recruitment agencies in Ghana, licensed and unlicensed, that recruit migrant domestic workers for both internal and external placements. Data from the Ghana Labour Department, for instance, indicates that recruitment agencies have increased from three registered/licenced agencies in the mid-2000s to nearly 200 recruiting domestically and another 43 recruiting for employment abroad. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are also many individuals and syndicates that operate as recruiters in the migration industry. Often, potential migrants depend on these middlemen, popularly referred to as ‘connection men’, to secure travel documents and other forms of travel assistance.

Popular countries of destination are Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait and Jordan. Data indicates that 1,755 Ghanaian workers were recruited by private employment agencies to these countries (excluding Jordan) in 2015. In 2016, the total number of migrants to the four countries and Jordan was 2,372, representing a 53 per cent increase in the flow of labour to the region. The number of Ghanaian workers recruited by private employment agencies to the region within the first five months of 2017<sup>1</sup> was 1,589. Ghanaian domestic workers also migrated to Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Oman, and Lebanon. The Embassy of Lebanon in Ghana, for instance, issued 1,500 and 2,000 visas in 2016 and 2017 respectively.

1. Data collection stopped after the Government of Ghana issued a temporary ban on recruitment to the Gulf Countries.

## WHAT IS THE AVERAGE PROFILE OF A GHANAIAN DOMESTIC WORKER?

The majority of persons recruited for employment in the Middle East are female (82 per cent) domestic workers. Of the interviewed domestic workers, 79 per cent were between 20 and 34 years old. The average age in the countries of destinations was 32 in Saudi Arabia and 30 in Kuwait and Qatar. The majority (77 per cent) had at least junior or senior high school education; less than 8 per cent had education beyond secondary level. Before migrating, domestic workers surveyed resided in the following regions: Greater Accra (44 per cent), Brong Ahafo (27 per cent), Eastern (23 per cent), other (6 per cent). The majority of returnees were not married (65 per cent). 57 per cent of the migrants were Christians and 43 per cent were Muslims. Given that 17.6% of Ghana's population is Muslims, it can be suggested that this group is significantly represented in the number of Ghanaians who migrate to the Middle East to work as domestic workers.

Migrants by Gender



## WHY DO GHANAIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS MIGRATE TO THE MIDDLE EAST?

Interviews revealed that the decision to migrate to the Middle East as domestic workers was predominantly made by the domestic workers themselves and that economic factors were the overwhelming motivation for migration. In fact, 96 per cent of respondents indicated that they migrated to search for jobs/better job opportunities, with many reporting having no jobs in Ghana, coming from an underprivileged background, and not having access to income generating activities. Others indicated that they migrated as a result of peer influence, or due to the desire to have the 'been abroad' label, oftentimes associated to real or perceived higher social prestige.

With regards to the preferred country of destination, the domestic workers interviewed revealed that this played a limited role in their decision to migrate. In some cases, prospective migrants received visas for countries that were not the ones previously indicated by their agents. Even in such cases, given the lack of familiarity with the Middle East, the prospective migrants did not question the change, and assumed that the new country had been selected for the availability of employment opportunities.

The lack of knowledge on migration issues has consistently been a major challenge to potential migrants since they become vulnerable and are exposed to all forms of risk. Some migrants did not have any knowledge about the Middle East countries, and heard about them for the first time through their recruiters.

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I had never even heard of the name Kuwait before. It was the agent who mentioned it, and later I also found out that some ladies in this town were travelling over there around that same time. But none of them had come to tell their story, so I was convinced to go. I chose Lebanon but when they brought the passport, it was Jordan. So, I went to Jordan. That agent also took people to Oman. I didn't know anything about those countries.

(returned domestic worker)

## WHAT IS THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS LIKE?

Once contacted by migrants, the recruitment agency or agent (be it registered or unregistered), informs them on available job opportunities. Almost all interviewees had some form of interaction with their recruiter or intermediary at the initial stages. However, these were mainly informal, with only about 39 per cent reporting that they were formally interviewed by their recruiters. Interestingly, everyone assisted by a registered recruitment agency undertook a formal interview. The interview included questions on the person's skills, the available vacancies they could fill, wages in the host country, the dos and don'ts of the process which included, for some, not revealing to family and friends the date of departure until the migrant would have arrived at destination.

While a written contract is a critical requirement needed by both registered and unregistered recruitment operators for the purposes of acquiring a visa, the content of this document can differ. According to the returned domestic workers who were assisted by a 'connection man', their contracts contained either false or little information. Some of the contracts only indicated salary, balance due, and the kind of treatment to receive abroad. In a few cases, the contract was verbal and the information provided very minimal.

Domestic workers are recruited under three scenarios . For the first type of arrangement, the domestic worker is recruited into a home to work for a family. For the second type, the domestic worker is recruited to work for a company. The third type of arrangement is the case where the domestic worker is recruited by a company for the purpose of working in the homes of the company's top managerial staff. Generally, the direct home recruitment hardly follows rigid procedures, and is more often done by 'connection men' and individual recruiters. According to one of the interviewees, documents provided are false, and produced by the 'connection man' himself.

### Experience: Use of registered agency vs 'connection man'

	Registered Agency	'Connection Man'	
% who received information about their employer prior to departure	>90%	18%	
% who received information about their conditions of service prior to departure	86%	25%	
% who received training prior to departure	64%	11%	
Average cost of migration in GHS	3,592	2,327	Travel Agency: 3,950
% of travels facilitated by	19.5%	62.8%	7.7 % by a travel agency; 5.3 % by relatives; 4.4 % by other individuals

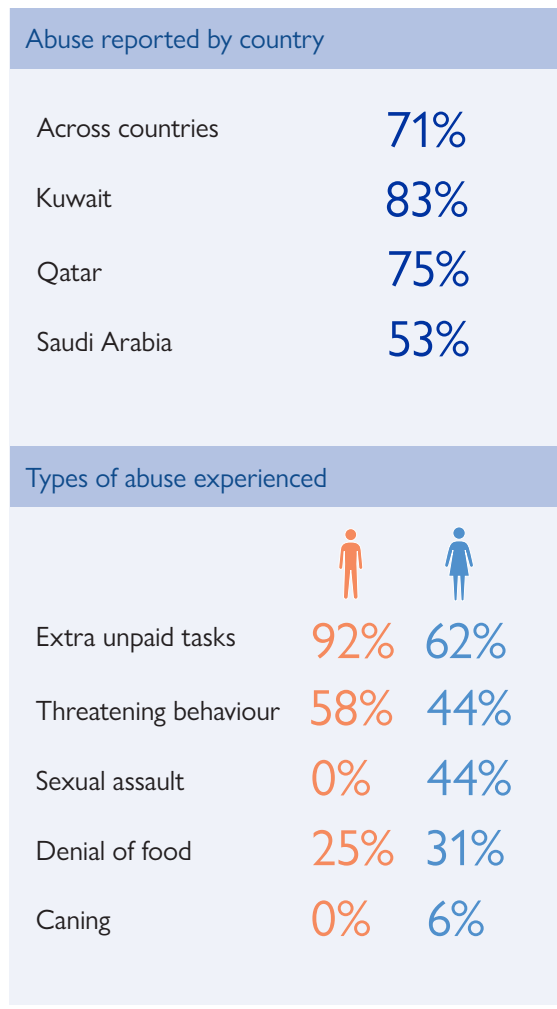
# WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF GHANAIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

70 per cent of the return domestic workers reported that their migration experience in the destination countries did not match the promises that were made by their recruiters and their own expectations. In fact, 76 per cent were not allowed to negotiate their own wages and 62 per cent reported that upon arrival, their passports were seized by their employers.

The overwhelming majority (99 per cent) were employed by families, either directly or through recruitment agencies, rather than by companies. While persons recruited by a company to work for a manager at home are more likely to be covered by written contracts, family recruitments are mostly based on informal verbal agreements with the intermediary or broker.

The informality that is inherent in such relations can allow for abuse of migrant workers' rights and weakens workers' ability to seek formal redress. For domestic workers who were placed with families directly, the main source of redress is through the recruitment agent. However, families have also been reported to retain contact details for agents and could decide not to share them with domestic workers.

A significant percentage of returned Ghanaian domestic workers reported that they suffered various forms of abuse during their period of employment in the Middle East. Across the countries surveyed, 71 per cent of respondents judged their experiences in the Middle East as abusive.



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...it was after I tried to escape that they chained me and I nearly died. The police did this to me in the house, which was situated in the capital Muscat, the agency had other offices in Al-Kuwait. I was chained in the room, denied food for 21 days, when I asked for water, I heard them saying “giver her henam”, meaning give her urine....

(returned domestic worker from Oman)

# WHAT HAS GHANA DONE TO LEGISLATE

## ON THIS ISSUE?

Recruitment of Ghanaian citizens for domestic work to Gulf States, such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and United Arab Emirates (UAE), used to be managed by the Ghanaian government under a framework called Visa-20. Visa-20 was issued solely to labour migrants seeking to travel to the Gulf States as house helps or domestic workers.

In response to reports of abuse in Gulf States, the Government of Ghana banned, in June 2017, the issuance of visas to Ghanaian domestic workers to work in the region. While all relevant government ministries acknowledge the potential benefits from migration, including to the Gulf States, they supported the imposition of the ban as a temporary measure to allow time for appropriate safeguards to be built into the protection regime specifically for migrant domestic workers. However, in practice, they admit to the weaknesses in the ability of the ban to comprehensively curb the abuse that is associated with irregular migration of domestic workers to the Gulf States.

The ban has halted the operations of the duly registered and licensed recruitment agencies that previously recruited workers for placement in Gulf States, but it has not led to a complete cessation of migration of domestic workers to those countries. Continuing activities, according to the Labour Department, Mol, MoFARI, the AHTU of the GPS, Migrant Watch, and SEWA Foundation, are carried out by unlicensed recruitment agencies that operate illegally.

The ban has resulted in the movement of Ghanaians seeking to enter the Gulf States through neighbouring countries, as well as some unlicensed recruitment agencies channel their clients through neighbouring countries to avoid detections and sanctions - a trend that has raised new challenges in terms of monitoring the migratory patterns towards the Gulf States.

Ghana has a number of frameworks for addressing issues on labour migration generally. They are directly or indirectly related to the migration of domestic workers, and managing cases of abuse and violation of the rights of migrant domestic workers. The Labour Act, 2003, has some specific provisions on domestic work and for the protection of migrant domestic workers.

The Labour Department is the main public sector institution responsible for regulating the recruitment of migrant domestic workers by recruiting agencies as it licences them and monitors their activities. Data on the migrant domestic workers is incomplete and unreliable as some migrant domestic workers are recruited by unlicensed recruiting agencies. Meanwhile data on the flows and stock of migrant domestic workers is crucial for protecting them and adopting interventions to address issues related to their work and wellbeing.

While government agencies and civil society groups are working together to implement the regulatory frameworks aimed at protecting migrant domestic workers, there are still a number of policy gaps that need to be addressed. One, which was highlighted by respondents, is the absence of labour agreements between Ghana and the destination countries in the Gulf States.

### International framework

At international level, the ILO Convention 189 advocates a set of standards regarding the recruitment and placement of domestic workers both internally and internationally. Among the rights that the convention seeks to protect are rights to a written contract, days off, decent working environment, regularly paid wages, rights to join labour unions, and non-discriminatory practices. Ghana has not yet ratified the ILO Convention 189 but lobbying by civil society organizations and organised labour are being undertaken to expedite the ratification process. As most of the Middle Eastern states have also not ratified Convention 189, it complicates efforts to achieve a standardised approach to observing basic rights of domestic workers. The Labour Department of Ghana attempts to enforce international standards on working conditions for migrant workers, but the oversight measures only apply to licensed recruitment agencies.

## GOING FORWARD & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conversations with the respondents, it can be concluded that, while legislative action such as banning the issuance of Visa-20 to domestic workers might provide temporary reduction of the numbers, legislation alone is insufficient in eliminating the risks that are inherent in the migration chain from the origin, through transit locations to the destination countries. Visa restrictions do not necessarily stop migration, but rather change the pattern of migration as well as types of intermediaries used by migrants such as human smugglers and traffickers.

- A constructive engagement between Ghana's MELR and the diplomatic missions of Middle Eastern countries in Ghana is recommended in order to fashion out safeguards to protect domestic workers in the destination countries.
- Formal labour contract agreements with destination countries should be considered by the Ghanaian government to help streamline employment relations, working conditions and ethical recruitment of domestic workers. The involvement of Ghana's MoGCSP in such negotiations would help forestall the common gendered vulnerabilities that are associated with domestic work in Middle Eastern countries.
- The establishment of Migration Information Centres across all regions of Ghana, especially dominant migrant-source areas, could help educate potential migrants on the risks associated with different typologies of migration, including migration to Middle Eastern countries.
- The various public agencies and CSOs involved in protecting the migrant domestic workers should be well resourced for the performance of their tasks.
- The impacts of the ban of the Visa-20 suggest a need for a comprehensive policy on the movement of migrant domestic workers and their wellbeing issues.
- The improvement of management and access to adequate data to support public-sector institutions and the CSOs to effectively address the needs of the migrant domestic workers.
- There is the need to build the capacity of labour officers at the Labour Department and resource them to enhance their ability to monitor the activities of both registered and unregistered recruitment agencies.
- Ghana's ratification of the ILO Convention 189 would help protect migrant domestic workers.





