

Ethiopian women increasingly trafficked to Yemen

by Marina de Regt

Few know about the large numbers of Ethiopian women who migrate to the Middle East to take up domestic work.

“**M**ay what happened to me not happen to you,” begins a letter sent to *Gebetta*, a magazine for Ethiopians in Yemen. Many women have written to *Gebetta* with testimony of how they were trafficked to Yemen to be employed as domestic workers. They speak of deception, isolation, maltreatment, heavy workloads, unpaid salaries, confiscated passports and physical and psychological abuse. Many regret ever deciding to leave and advise other women not to follow in their footsteps. But the flow of young Ethiopian women desperate to improve their lives and those of their families continues to grow.

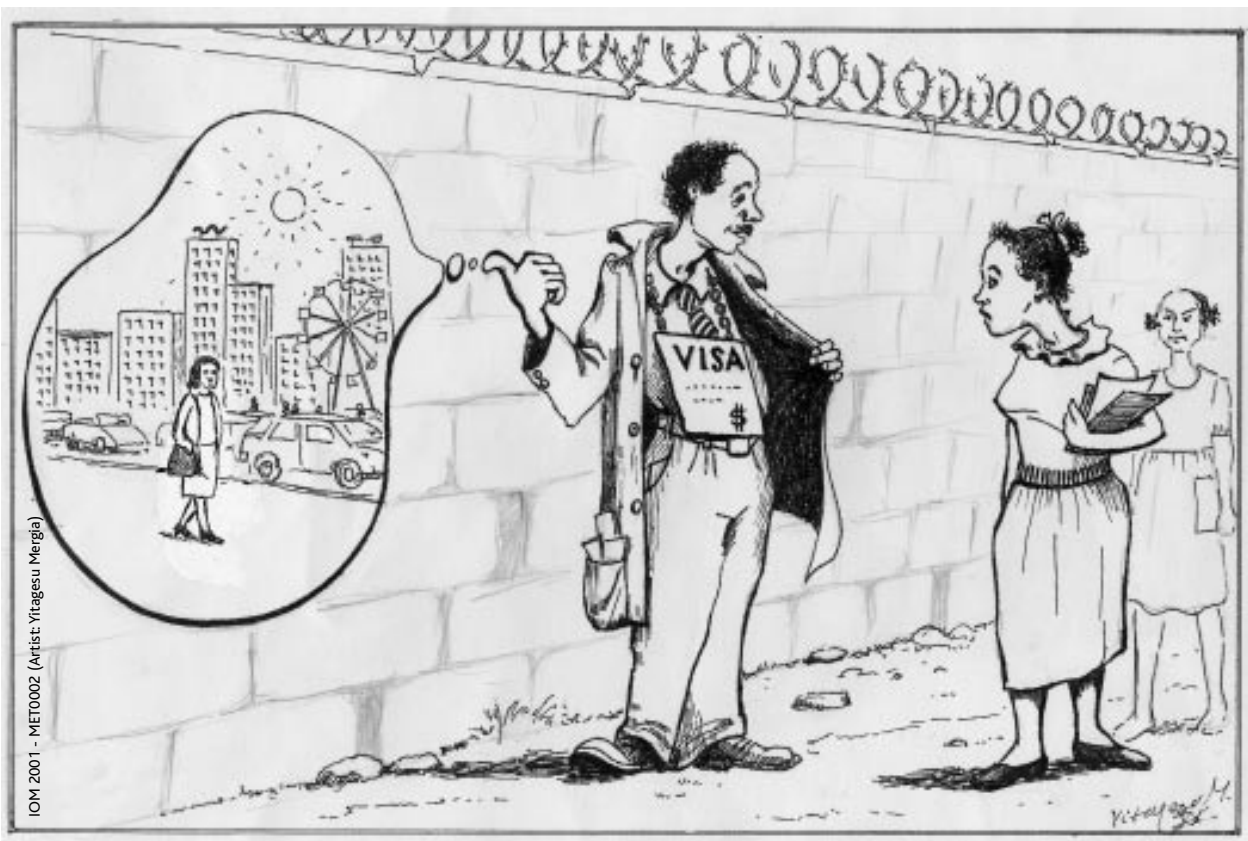
Until the early 1990s few Ethiopians – except those of Muslim/Arab origin – were interested in going to the Middle East. After the overthrow of the authoritarian regime of Mengistu Haile Meriam

in 1991, Ethiopians were given the right to free movement. Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States have subsequently become major destinations for Ethiopian women in search of a better future.

Even a relatively poor country such as Yemen attracts many female Ethiopian migrants who take up paid domestic work. Changing family structures, the increased educational levels of Yemeni women, the growing number of employed women and changing attitudes towards domestic work explain the increased demand for domestic labour in Yemen. Socio-cultural constraints prevent Yemeni women from working as domestics – so migrant women meet the demand. Wealthier Yemenis prefer to employ Asian women but middle-class families predominantly employ Ethiopians because they are available and

seen as good domestic workers. Somali refugee women also work as domestics but, unlike Ethiopians, do not generally ‘live in’.

Many Ethiopian women come to Yemen on tourist visas and find work via relatives and friends. Those illegally recruited by agents and employed on a contract basis are particularly vulnerable. All of the many recruitment agencies that arrange Ethiopian women’s employment as domestic workers to the Middle East are non-registered and can be considered traffickers. Women are approached by the traffickers themselves or are introduced to traffickers through friends, neighbours and relatives. Trafficked women themselves are sometimes even involved in recruiting other migrants. Traffickers are often either of mixed descent – having a Yemeni father and an Ethiopian mother – or are Yemenis born or brought up in Ethiopia. The Yemeni authorities lack the capacity to control the



Poster by Ethiopian artist, Yitagesu Mergia, for an IOM counter-trafficking information campaign.

activities of illegal recruitment agents and it is often the case that traffickers are able to use influence with people in power to ensure that any legal actions against them are halted.

Debt bondage

Women who have borrowed money from the agent or broker may end up in debt bondage, required to work long periods before they are able to pay off their debts. Many women have great difficulty leaving their employers and agents and physical abuse is common. Employers and agents often confiscate the women's passports and forbid them to leave their place of employment unaccompanied. This makes it impossible for women to look for better jobs, to escape or to have contact with other Ethiopians. Trafficked women may, however, become aware of their rights and decide to run away and find better jobs. Some families therefore prefer to employ young rural Ethiopian women as they are thought to be more malleable and less likely to leave. As a result, traffickers in Ethiopia are purposely recruiting young uneducated women from poor families in rural areas, convincing them with stories about high salaries and educational opportunities.

there are enormous challenges to be overcome in order to protect trafficked women and migrant and refugee domestic workers.

With assistance from the International Organization for Migration, the Ethiopian authorities have made an effort to control trafficking of Ethiopian women to the Middle East. Since July 2004 women who want to migrate to the Middle East can only do so when their migration and employment are organised via a legal agent, recognised by the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The agent has to make sure that the employer signs a contract, pays the ticket and health insurance for the domestic worker, and pays her a monthly salary of at least \$100. The agent is responsible for

solving any disputes between the women and their employers and finding alternative employment. However, the bureaucratic procedures involved in legal migration are so time-consuming that many prefer to use traffickers, despite the major additional costs. Ethiopian embassies in receiving countries often lack the capacity to control the activities of traffickers. As a result, illegal agents continue their business without regulation.

Domestic workers who run away from their employers find it relatively easy to integrate into the growing Ethiopian community in Yemen and often move in with other Ethiopian women and find work as freelance domestic servants. Freelancers earn higher salaries but are responsible for their own living costs and work and residence permits. Many such women continue to live in Yemen without documentation or permission. While undocumented migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Lebanon run the risk of being arrested and deported, government control in Yemen has been weaker.

Yemen is the only country in the Arabian Peninsula that has ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and where Somalis are recognised as refugees.¹ Controls are tightening, however, as Yemen responds to the increasing number of people illegally crossing the Red Sea to Yemen – a two-day journey for which people pay around \$50 – and to pressure from the US to enforce stricter border controls to prevent terrorism.

The Yemeni government regularly announces that it will arrest and deport everyone who does not have a residence permit. Non-legal residents will not be allowed to leave Yemen without paying a penalty for the time that they did not have a residence permit. This means that many Ethiopian women who work as freelancers are unable to return to Ethiopia, even

temporarily. So while the mobility of trafficked contract workers may be restricted because they are not allowed to leave their employer's house unaccompanied, the mobility of freelancers is restricted because they are in most cases undocumented and therefore unable to leave Yemen.

Supporting migrant domestic workers in Yemen

In Yemen there are no official organisations that defend the rights of migrant domestic workers. Their embassies in Sana'a are the only place to which they can turn. The embassies, however, are often unable to effectively solve their problems.

A support group for migrant and refugee domestic workers in Yemen was established in March 2005. Its main objectives are:

- networking and research to gather and share information
- awareness raising on and empowerment of domestic workers
- lobbying and advocacy to put the issue on the policy agenda

The network is but the first step. In Yemen, as elsewhere in the region, there are enormous challenges to be overcome in order to provide national systems to protect trafficked women and migrant and refugee domestic workers. Fortunately, international organisations such as the International Organization for Migration and the International Labour Organization² take the issue very serious. Together a change can be made.

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1. See Nesya H B Hughes (2003) 'Yemen and refugees: progressive attitudes', FMR 16 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR16/fmr16.12.pdf

2. In 2005 the International Labour Organization financed a mapping study on migrant domestic workers in Yemen, which will hopefully lead to concrete actions.