

IMAGENU______Policy Brief

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Partnership and labour migration: Ugandans in the Middle East

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Executive summary

Despite media reports and public debates on the challenges faced by Ugandan domestic workers in the Middle East, there is a rising trend in youth migration due to factors like population growth, youth unemployment, and demand for labour. This policy brief focuses on female domestic workers, exploring how working in the Middle East shapes their lives and expectations of the future. The research emphasises both economic and non-economic motives. Findings reveal that migration offers opportunities for financial independence, challenges traditional gender roles, and addresses the needs of female-headed households. Recommendations include intensifying efforts to prevent illegal migration, enhancing pre-departure training, strengthening bilateral agreements, and recognizing migrants' skills and experiences. Addressing gender conflicts and acknowledging women's roles as providers in households are crucial for fostering positive change.

Introduction

This brief addresses the growing labour migration industry between Uganda and the Middle East (ME). It is aimed at young men and women searching for jobs outside Uganda, the private companies who export labour from Uganda and the Uganda Government that benefits from remittances of labour exports. It is based on a study carried out under the Imagining Gender Futures in Uganda (IMAGENU) Project, a collaborative research project carried out by researchers from Gulu, Aarhus and Copenhagen Universities.

Despite media reports highlighting the brutal treatment of domestic workers in the ME, the number of young Ugandans seeking employment in the region continues to rise. Factors driving this trend include high population growth, youth unemployment, low wages in Uganda, and demand for labour in destination countries. While economic drivers are

The Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies (IPSS), Gulu University is implementing the Imagining Gender Futures in Uganda (IMAGENU) project, a four-year research collaboration bringing together researchers from Gulu University (Uganda), Aarhus University and University of Copenhagen in Denmark. This project is supported by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs through Danida Fellowship Centre in Denmark and aims to build research capacity in universities between the global North and South.







crucial, our study also delves into non-economic motives for migration, offering a nuanced view of push and pull factors in migration debates. We focus on female domestic workers and how working in the ME shapes the lives and future aspirations of these women. We scrutinize the complex dynamics of forming, contesting, negotiating, and transforming marriages and partnerships as part of pursuing livelihoods abroad. Two central questions guide the inquiry: 1) Why is labor migration to the ME a significant alternative for young people's livelihoods? 2) What prompts individuals to return to the ME multiple times despite previous adverse experiences?

Background

Since the early 2000s, Uganda has been exporting labour to the ME. A headline in the Daily Monitor in March 2023 stated that "84,966 Ugandans left for the Middle East in search of jobs in 2022", alone. It is estimated that at least 165,000 Ugandans work in various sectors in the ME with the demand increasing annually. There has been a surge in the number of women migrating to the Middle East, predominantly for domestic care work.

The employment status of domestic workers, in the ME is regulated by a sponsorship system—Kafala—where a worker's immigration and legal residency is tied to an individual employer. The kafala system creates particular kinds of challenges for women including abuse and exploitation. However, in a bid to protect the rights of migrant workers, Uganda has entered bilateral labour agreements with some countries and ensured the process of licensing and monitoring of private labour exporting agencies.

Approach and methodology

We talked to young men and women who had been to, were in or had plans to go to the ME. We took our starting point with our personal contacts and used a snowball strategy to find other participants. Using a "follow the actor" principle led us to our interlocutors' networks of families, friends and co-workers. We carried out a total of 50 in-depth interviews with young people in Gulu, Pader, Kampala, Jinja and Tororo between 2019 – 2023. Following the lockdowns due to the outbreak of covid-19 globally, between 2020 and 2021, we quickly adapted to online sites and spaces, which allowed us to carry out interviews and follow our interlocutors on WhatsApp, Facebook and even by telephone.

Our findings

Money first or marriage first?

Young women prioritize self-sustainability over marriage, valuing financial independence to support themselves and their families. Gainful employment in the ME is seen as a pathway to escape hardship and poverty, influencing their decisions to delay or opt out of (a difficult) marriage, as it provides the means to plan for a more secure future.

Stepping towards a better future with the "Arab experience"

Despite the documented challenges, including racism and abuse, Ugandan migrants in the ME describe the "Arab experience" as a journey marked by endurance, perseverance, hard work, and resilience. They view it as a valuable stepping stone, believing that the skills acquired there make them adaptable to work anywhere. Understanding their perspective requires considering their comparisons with alternative opportunities, and their aspirations, such as using the ME as a gateway to future possibilities, including work in Europe.

Having a home and new beginnings

For many young women, the dream of building a home drives them to work in the ME, especially if they are unmarried or no longer married and therefore do not have a home. Motherhood, however, remains an unconditional necessity, thus making the need for a home more urgent. Employment in the ME often leads to savings that can help women achieve their dreams of homeownership or starting businesses. But others face setbacks, prompting multiple returns to the ME in pursuit of new beginnings.

Female-headed households empowered

Migrant women often leave their children with their mothers or sisters while financially supporting them from abroad. Many women become primary providers, sending money for essentials, and thus challenging traditional gender roles, especially where men are absent. This status is usually empowering for women. What we find is that migration to the ME offers female-headed households a means to address the challenges faced by unmarried, and often single mothers.

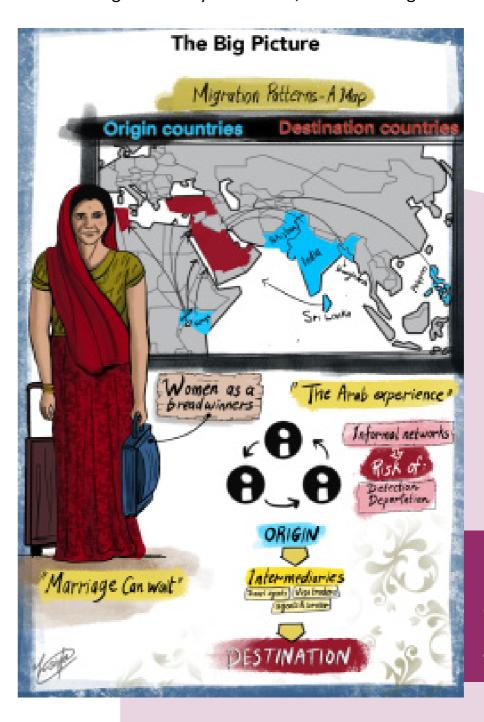


Image by Jordanian artist Laila Ajjawi: Visual summary of the Conference on Migrant Domestic Workers, held in Amman – 15.02.2022

Conclusion: Looking beyond exploitation and abuse

Undeniably, several of our interlocutors have experienced suffering and severe challenges. A look beyond this, however, tells another side of the story. Experiences of bravery, resilience and perseverance – a search for freedom and independence of oneself before, while or after pursuing relationships with partners or the fathers of their children. Migrating to the Middle East tells a story about the challenges facing Uganda as a country, but also about how individuals struggle to overcome these challenges.

Recommendations

- Government through the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development needs to intensify efforts to prevent women from engaging in illegal migration which increases their vulnerability. This can be done through expanding and strengthening bilateral agreements.
- Labour export companies should implement comprehensive pre-departure training programs for migrants, educating them about their rights and working conditions in host countries.
- Ugandans should also recognise the positive skills and enriching experiences migrants bring back, challenging the negative perceptions of work in the ME.
- Families and traditional institutions should tackle gender conflict resulting from changing gender roles by fostering discussions and new ways of thinking about provider roles and expectations between men and women. Women's roles as breadwinners and heads of households should enter discussions in schools and family settings.
- More research can be done to understand the experiences of Ugandan male labour migrants in the ME.





