



The Ugandan Journal of Management and Public Policy Studies (UJMPPS)

December 2024, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 130-150

ISSN: 2078-7049 (Print), 2959-4316 (Online)

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Published by Uganda Management Institute

Female Ugandan Labour Migration to Middle East: Is it a reflection of a Non-resilient Public Sector?

Sebastian Bigabwenkya

Uganda Management Institute, Kampala

Corresponding e-mail: sbigabwenkya@umi.ac.ug

Article History

Received: September 30, 2024

Revised: December 12, 2024

Accepted: December 18, 2024

Abstract

The growing number of female workers migrating from Uganda to the Middle East countries through formal and informal arrangements casts a shadow on the resilience of the public sector in Uganda. While the Government of Uganda, through the public sector, has legalized the externalization of labour, it has not yet done enough to minimize the risks involved in female labour migration to the Middle East. Meanwhile, work conditions in that sub-region have been widely described as hazardous. Hence, this study sought to answer four questions: Why have female Ugandan workers continued to migrate to the Middle East despite the reported precarious conditions of work that such workers face while there? What attempts has the Ugandan public sector made to streamline working conditions for women and girls in the Middle East? What forms of resilience or non-resilience does the public sector portray in managing female Ugandan migrant workers to the Middle East? What more can be done by the public sector of Uganda to mitigate the plight of female migrant workers in the Middle East? The study used documents review analysis method plus interviews of two purposively selected senior labour officers from the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development in Uganda. The data management processes involved qualitative methods of primary and secondary data. The findings suggest that the envisaged economic benefits from migration have overshadowed all the risks involved, including life-threatening risks, which the female labour migrants face in the Middle East. I argue that the massive female labour



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migration to Middle East existing today (although not a crime) is a pointer to the weaknesses of the public sector of Uganda that has failed to create sufficient employment opportunities in the country and has thereby compelled the citizens to find alternative occupations abroad. I, therefore, recommend that the public sector should not only smoothen the processes of migration but pay more attention to the national labor force retention strategies.

Keywords: *Female migrant workers, Ugandan public sector resilience, migration to the Middle East*

1.0 Introduction

Public sector resilience in Uganda requires analysis concerning the issue of female labour migration to the Middle East. The public sector has made some policies and interventions (e.g. *The employment Regulations, 2021*) to manage international female labour migration although a lot of work remains undone. International female labour migration is a global phenomenon that is widely manifested in form of women and girls moving from one country to another; mainly from developing countries to the developed world, either legally or illegally. Female labour migration also takes the form of permanent or temporary stays in the host country. Meanwhile, migration is not a crime if officially done. However, migration can raise concerns if the circumstances under which it happens are precarious. As such, this article focuses on female migrant workers who have left Uganda for the Middle East (i.e. UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon and Qatar); why they left; and what interventions the public sector of Uganda has made to streamline the entire process. Besides, attention is paid to the extent to which the public sector of Uganda portrays offensive resilience in managing the female labour migration.

2.0 Background

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, as cited in Wickramasekera, 2002). A migrant worker could be a product of push and or pull factors between sending and receiving countries. According to the ILO, the differences in economic capabilities are widening between labour shortage in high-income countries and labour surplus in low-income countries across the globe. Hence, “in sending countries there is an inability to provide workers with decent employment opportunities and living standards and a decline in real wages in addition to high unemployment and underemployment rates. In receiving countries, there is an ever-growing demand for low status, low skilled and low paid jobs...” (ILO, 2003 cited in Kawar, 2004, p.72). Therefore, the flow of labour from poor to rich countries persists year after year.

In the last three decades there has been a growing influx of migrants from Asia and Africa into the Middle East. Actually, as Jureidini (2003) reveals, there are no quotas on the number of migrants allowed in the Middle East. Meanwhile, their local labour laws and regulations do

not cover temporary contract migrants. Besides, the domestic workers and other related blue-collar workers are excluded from any legal protections, thereby making the contract migrants cheap to hire. This scenario has opened up room for abuse of the foreign workers especially the low-skilled persons, usually women and girls.

In the Middle East, there exists a system known as *Kafala*. The *Kafala* system, makes domestic workers fall under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, while all other foreign-born workers fall under the Ministry of Labour. As a result, the migrant workers are excluded from national labour laws, and their labour complaints are often dealt with by police only (Malit & Youha, 2013). Malit and Youha further reveal that by 2013 there were about 65,000 to 135,000 unauthorised migrants in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with an unknown significant number lacking any identification papers after having been abandoned by abusive employers who had withheld their passports. Incidentally under the *Kafala* system, this misdeed passes as a non-issue in the eyes of government authorities. Meanwhile, the UAE claims to have abolished the *Kafala* system in 2021 although the treatment of foreign domestic workers has largely remained degrading, with women being treated as second-rate workers.

Most migrants from Africa and Asia are blue-collar workers. For example, “Saudi Arabia takes mainly drivers, housemaids, cleaners, teaching assistants, waiters, and waitresses, while Qatar employs labourers, security guards, carpenters, cleaners, personal assistants, administrators, and waiters and waitresses. In the UAE, the most significant chunk are security guards, labourers, loaders and cleaners” (Nangonzi & Serugo, 2022, p.2). All such workers earn relatively low wages (below USD 260 p.m.) while working under tough conditions.

As for domestic workers, their jobs were in the past covered by nationals. But later, as the economies of the Middle East quickly advanced, such jobs were relegated to the foreign women and girls. And unlike the migrant workers, the nationals “were less vulnerable because even if the father visited only once a year, it was as much an act of protection as an opportunity to collect her wages. There was a shared culture with an understanding that family honour was at stake. This honour enforced a certain sense of responsibility on the part of the employing family” (Jureidini, 2003, p.3). However, this relatively fair treatment has since deteriorated in the last one and a half decades. And, it is during these last two decades that Ugandans women and girls have migrated to the Middle East in big numbers.

Currently, female Ugandan labour migration to Middle East is an open practice with government’s endorsement: migration not a crime and humans have a choice migrate to where they can live a life of their choice. To this end, there is a sharp increase in the number of migrant workers during the past decade to the Middle East. Actually, the majority work in informal jobs for an average salary of UGX 1 million [approx. USD260]. Acute unemployment and a lack of access to financing for business are the main causes of the increase (Okafor, 2023). Indeed, every day, hundreds of Ugandan women and girls, mainly with limited education (below college education) travel to the Middle East in search of employment. They migrate majorly with the knowledge of government (public sector) and with the assistance of hiring agencies that promise better pay, good working conditions and life-changing opportunities.

3.0 The problem and questions

Despite the fact that the public sector of Uganda has demonstrated interest in streamlining labour externalisation through a number of measures (e.g. through legislation and bi-lateral agreements), a lot of loopholes still exist in the aspect of managing female labour migration from Uganda to the Middle East countries. Noticeably, there is a big number of women leaving Uganda to the Middle East for low-level occupations. And, some Ugandan women have turned the Middle East into a key destination for job search, suggesting that employment availability in Uganda is in a questionable state.

Reports indicate that between 2016 and mid-2022, over 220,000 Ugandans left for work to the Middle East. Of these, 85 percent were domestic workers, with women taking up the larger share of 75 percent. [These figures do not include workers who left the country illegally] (Balikuddembe, 2023). Every day, hundreds of Ugandan women travel to the Middle East in search of employment. Recruitment agencies promise ‘heaven on earth’: better pay, good conditions of work and life-changing opportunities (Bwowe, 2020). But, as Balikuddembe (2023, p.1) further indicates, “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.

This feminisation of migrant labour from Uganda to the Middle East needs to be analysed in order to understand what the public sector of Uganda could do to improve the protection of migrants and even minimise migration. To this end, the study sought to answer these four questions: Why have the female Ugandan workers continued to migrate to the 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 the Middle East? What forms of non-resilience does the public sector exhibit in the process of managing the female Ugandan migrant workers to the Middle East? What else can be done by the public sector of Uganda to mitigate the plight of female migrant workers in the Middle East?

4.0 Theoretical review

The study used the *migration networks theory* to explain the process of human movement, with an emphasis on labour migration. The migration network theory was propounded by Massey *et al.* (1987) to explain the transmission of the destination experience from migrants to relatives and friends in the countries of origin as a motivator to international migration. The theory seeks to explain how migration happens and how it has been sustained through social networks (Sha, 2021). It postulates that links to groups, family or friends (networks) in receiving countries influence migrants’ decision in sending countries to choose their migration destinations. Besides, it attempts to explain the complex nature of migration as a multi-directional and circular process. Furthermore, the theory explains the intricate relationship between structures and agency. Mi-

gration is seen as a complex process that takes place, becomes consolidated, changes in nature and shape, and emerges anew over time (Kawar, 2004). In the view of Castles and Miller (2009) social structures and individual actions determine decision-making processes and migration outcomes. In addition, migration networks theory postulates that movement tends to cluster, can be circular, and take shape within broader contexts and systems, including government systems. Therefore, international labour migration being a transitory phenomenon in response to temporary shortages and surpluses of labour is influenced by the systems and social networks in both receiving and sending countries.

5.0 Public sector resilience

The public sector in Uganda consists of government ministries, departments, and agencies working together to manage employment services for citizens both in the country and those migrating to other countries for work. The public sector's resilience depends on the amount and quality of disposable resources it possesses and the contextual demands of the situation. Resilience is a fundamental quality to respond productively to significant change that disrupts the expected pattern of life or an event without engaging in an extended period of regressive behaviour (Horne & Orr, 1998). And, organisational resilience refers to, "the maintenance of positive adjustment under challenging conditions such that the organization emerges from those conditions strengthened and more resourceful" (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007, cited in Rajala & Jalonen 2023, p.9). It has also been argued that organizational resilience, encompasses identifying potential risks and taking proactive steps to ensure that an organization prospers in the face of hardships (Somers, 2009). Hence, resilience has to do with agility and withstanding tough conditions while taking *pro-active actions* to prosperity.

Resilience has been categorised by some authors depending on their personal perspective. Some scholars classify resilience in two ways 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 cited in Rajala & Jalonen, 2023, p.9). Rajala and Jalonen (2023, p.9) argue that "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" (p.9). It can be argued that in Uganda, the public sector style of managing female labour migration to the Middle East calls for both offensive and defensive responses. However, the major thrust should be an offensive one where government can anticipate emerging problems of migration and prevent them through deliberate action.

6.0 Conditions of work for female labour migrants in Middle East

The number of female migrant workers from third world countries to the Middle East has been increasing in the last three decades. These women and girls are mainly involved 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. Most of these female workers come from Asia and Africa. Some of them have families that they leave behind back at home as they head to the Middle East countries. Quite often, these female migrant workers

meet very unfavourable working conditions characterised, for example, by: assault, delayed salaries, sexual abuse, discrimination, and excessive work.

Studies on the working conditions for low level jobs in Middle East paint a gloomy picture on migrant labour. Jureidini (2003), for example, studied the migrant workers and xenophobia in the Middle East and established a typical working situation:

In the case of Sri Lankan and Filipina women, their families are remote. They come from a different culture... Mostly travelling alone and in a foreign country, with little or no communication with the outside world, their contractual arrangements are such that they have few rights, no freedom and are kept as virtual prisoners in the households in which they work. They cannot form or join unions, and there is no serious regard for their well-being... Given the numbers of migrant workers involved, diplomatic missions cannot keep track or monitor the many thousands of their nationals in the host countries” (Jureidini 2003, p.6).

By implication, female migrant workers in domestic jobs tend to face unfavourable conditions of work. They are treated as second-rate citizens. The now diminishing *Kafala* system has influenced such rigid treatment of foreign workers in the Middle East.

Kafala is a significant concept in the Islamic tradition, that has its social, moral and business dimensions. In Islamic family law *kafala* refers to a formal agreement to provide temporary support for orphaned children until adulthood. The *kafala* sponsorship system was originally adopted in the 1950s by the Gulf Cooperation Council nations. 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.

The practice of the *kafala* system has been prevalent in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is widely used by those countries because of the need for cost-effective labour. In practice, the *kafala* system tends to be repressive to the workers including denying them several rights. For example, in Lebanon and Kuwait, female migrant domestic workers face specific challenges under the *kafala* system. It has been reported that, “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). McQue further reveals that women who are domestic workers in the Middle East operate under appalling situations facilitated by the state’s employment status.

In the Middle East, patriarchal norms that devalue domestic labour as ‘women’s work’ confine women within the household and make them less visible to authorities. In fact, “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). Actually, *Human Rights Watch* has decried the *kafala* system because of its loopholes. This human rights organisation reveals that, “the *kafala* system exposes migrant workers to abuse in many forms, including exploitative working conditions, poor living accommodations, restrictions on

freedom to organize or bargain collectively, and nonpayment of salaries” (HRW cited in Malit & Youha, 2013). Basically, most of the domestic workers have little or no room to resign their jobs. They are more or less enslaved in some of form of forced labour.

The UAE government recently abolished the kafala system and introduced certain reforms in 2021 that gave domestic workers the right to regular breaks and days off, and the right to switch employer. However, the UAE's 2021 labour law has not dismantled the kafala system in full: “even in states where kafala laws have been amended or reformed, as in Qatar after the UN report, little has changed and women report conditions that experts say amount to forced labour” (McQue, 2024, p.3). Most women work seven days a week and have their passports confiscated by their employer, while others face violence and sexual abuse.

In all this domestic employment, quite often the foreigners are easily identifiable in their work places, and this positions them in the path to abuse. At times they have natural features that can be detected easily. As one scholar observed, “African and Asian migrants are physically distinguished and often looked upon as inferior, or simply ignored or dismissed. Their presence, however, is largely associated with their prevalence in positions of servility of one form or another” (Jureidini, 2003, p.1). Foreign women workers in the Middle East suffer more than men. Women are subjected to harsh working environment mainly due the perception that women are inferior to men. Indeed, there are many disadvantages and risks that women face as compared to men: Kawar (2004, pp.73-75), for example, lists a number of factors that position women migrants to Middle East at a disadvantage. The factors include:

- During the decision to migrate many women may have unrealistic expectations, lack of proper information on the migration process and procedures and on employment opportunities. They may also lack the know-how and ability to cover expenses. Thus, they may end up in irregular and exploitative situations.
- As compared to men, women migrant workers tend to be concentrated in a more limited number of occupations.
- The migration of women is mostly unrelated to career advancement and skill acquisition. There is enough evidence to suggest that a significant number of migrant women possess skills and qualifications often not recognised or unneeded in the types of work that they perform.
- As compared to men, most migrant women end up performing the 3D jobs and are in isolated situations with limited opportunities to build networks. Therefore, they have limited access to information and social support.
- Women more than men tend to occupy jobs within the informal sector which is not covered by any labour legislation or social protection.
- Women migrants themselves lack knowledge of their rights, fear the authorities and are not organized.
- From an individual perspective, most women migrate to overcome poverty and limited viable employment opportunities in their home country. Most see their employment as temporary to achieve certain personal / family objectives (e. g. savings to establish a business, build a house, pay debts or for the education of the children). However, these

objectives are difficult to achieve in the short term or over a single contract period due to a variety of reasons: problems with debt bondage, withholding of wages, receiving less wages than original contract, lack of knowledge on money management and savings, among many others.

- The authorities in most destination countries treat women migrant workers as workers with limited or no legal rights. In cases of exploitation and abuse, the judicial system is not always construed in favour of the abused worker.

Kawar further notes that, unlike most European states, Middle East destination countries have not yet recognized and upheld the rights of migrant workers. This mentality positions migrant workers in risky work situations. Meanwhile, the return and reintegration process of women migrant workers can also be more problematic than men, for example on matters of socio-psychological effects, and family relationships.

7.0 The methods and population

This study used qualitative approaches, specifically exploratory cross-sectional case study design: the case being the public sector of Uganda. The study involved senior civil servants from the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD). There were two senior officials selected from the Ministry under the departments dealing directly with internal labour and external labour employment. Data were also collected from documents that the researcher analysed. The documents were from individual researchers, MGLSD reports, ILO reports, International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reports, and newspaper articles. But this being a qualitative study, only a small sample of documents was picked and was deemed adequate for generating the required data for such a short article. The documents were picked on grounds of relevance, richness and coherence. This mixing of sources was done because, as Yin (1998) argues, combining different data collection methods is an often-used approach in methodological triangulation, and it enhances construct validity.

To collect data, I obtained permission from the relevant interview participants. The two senior civil servants were accessed at the MGLSD premises after clearance from the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry. Participation was voluntary, anonymous and confidential. The participants were also given liberty to skip certain questions that the researcher asked. Regarding the instruments, the study used interview schedules for the civil servants in the MGLSD. The participants were interviewed directly and individually through face-to-face interviews. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that lasted an average of one hour and 20 minutes each. The study also used a document review checklist to identify the relevant messages and themes from the documents accessed. The collected data (from interviews and documents) were concurrently analysed through thematic analysis to generate the relevant information in form of themes. The themes were categorised, interpreted and the relevant findings were generated and presented in this article.

In the analysis, attention was put on why female Ugandan migrant workers continue to migrate to Middle East in spite of the apparent precarious work conditions; and what efforts public sector of Uganda has put to streamline the conditions of work they experience. Besides, evidence of public sector resilience or non-resilience was explored; and finally, what else

could be done by the public sector to streamline the entire migration process including finding alternative occupations back in Uganda was equally analysed.

8.0 Findings on female Ugandan labour migration to Middle East

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) (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2024). The population growth rate is about 2.8% per annum. According to the 2020 World Bank second report on the state of the job market in Uganda, around 700,000 young people reach working age every year. This figure is expected to rise to an average of one million in the decade from 2030 to 2040 (World Bank, 2020). It was actually confirmed that, “between 600,000 to 700,000 new persons enter the Ugandan labour market every year...and compared to the number of jobs that are created, they are quite fewer” (MGO 01). This figure of jobseekers cannot be fully absorbed in the Ugandan economy and hence it puts a lot of pressure on the country’s small labour market thereby necessitating the citizens to seek employment abroad.

Large-scale female labour migration network

The number of female Ugandan migrant workers to the Middle East has been growing. Actually, document reviews and interviews with labour officers in Uganda revealed that there was a big number of them in the Middle East. For example, it was reported that, “between 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%. Those figures do not include workers who left the country illegally” (Balikuddembe, 2023, p.1). By implication, in a space of seven years, over 140,000 female workers migrated from Uganda to Middle East. Besides, a related but higher figure was also found out from document reviews: “there was a time, before the outbreak of Covid-19 when we would take about 3,000 domestic workers monthly to Middle East. Now that travel restrictions are relaxed...between 1,500 and 2,000 migrant workers are leaving the country every month,” (Egulu cited in Nangonzi & Serugo, 2022, p.1). And, another source revealed that, “in the 11 months leading up to December [2023], there were 4,870 cleaners and 1,476 security guards from Uganda, in Middle East” (Okafor, 2023). These figures suggest that there are big numbers of female Ugandans moving to Middle East for work. Most of these workers’ migrations were influenced by the stories of their friends or family members who had migrated and made some success. Ugandan workers in Middle East told stories about the high possibilities of earnings from that sub-region. The government of Uganda eventually came in to facilitate the migration process when the actors had already made a decision to leave the country [Uganda]. This scenario resonates with the migration network theory that considers migration to be a function of social networks where groups, family or friends in receiving countries influence migrants’ decisions in sending countries.

Financial benefits as drivers of migration

The reasons for this large-scale migration of Ugandans to the Middle East are several but key among them is the search for money. As one interview participant reported, “remuneration,

especially the females, you find that most of the female migrant workers are less educated... they are between senior four and senior six...and if they choose to work here [in Uganda] as domestic workers, they would be paid between Uganda Shillings [UGX]50,000= to 100,000=, but while in Middle East they are paid between UGX800,000 to 1,000,000=. So, the opportunities there are quite many” (MGO 02). This money can be put to different uses that make a lot of economic sense. Consequently, even when conditions of work are not friendly enough for workers they still persist and migrate to Middle East. Actually, as another interview participant revealed:

As compared to the precariousness [of jobs], the benefits are much higher: many of them have improved their standard of living; they have gotten payment; they have gotten money; they have bought land, and so on. That is why you see someone will take a risk. Hence, as compared to the challenges most of them have gained.... The benefits are there, actually those who gain are more than those who lose (MGO 01).

This significantly higher pay coupled with attendant benefits of high pay coupled with a general lack of jobs in Uganda have been the key drivers of Ugandan female labour migration to Middle East. Therefore, women and girls migrate in order to earn high income.

Unemployment and economic gains in Uganda as drivers of migration

As already indicated, most of the female migrant workers serve in the capacity of housemaids in the Middle East. Generally, they earn little from such low-level occupations. In 2022, some Ugandan researchers revealed that, in Middle East, “domestic workers earn between UGX900,000. [approx. USD240] and UGX1,200,000= [approx. USD320]. Despite the soaring cases of abuse of migrant workers, the numbers are climbing due to limited gainful employment opportunities for skilled and unskilled youths here [in Uganda]” (Nangonzi & Serugo 2022, p.1). In addition, other reports further reveal that, “most migrants are women, often single mothers unaware of contractual obligations and their employment rights, drawn by the opportunity to earn a monthly wage of between UGX 900,000= (237 dollars) and 1,200,000= (Approx. USD316.) – three times higher than what a skilled Ugandan worker could expect to earn. According to the 2021 National Labour Force report, 60 per cent of Ugandans earn UGX 200,000 (54 dollars) per month (Nakamya, 2023, p.6). The women and girls in destination countries communicate about both the good and the bad in their jobs but the presence of jobs overshadows other occupational risks in the Middle East labour market.

Labour export companies and vulnerability of female labour migrants

There are some labour export companies in Uganda that 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. USD535] in license fees. The companies process the entire migration process for individuals at a fee. These private companies treat potential migrants differently depending on a number of factors such as the profession of a potential migrant worker and country of destination. For example, it has been reported that for Ugandan teachers, drivers, security experts, and plumbers searching for professional jobs in Middle East have to pay dearly to

secure them. The costs include an air ticket, passport, medical and visa expenses. In fact, Ugandan companies have been charging up to UGX 7million (approx. USD1,870.) for a professional job in Middle East. But the domestic workers do not pay for as long as they are willing to work as housemaids (Nangonzi & Serugo, 2022). This price discrimination exists because professionals are likely to access high-paid jobs when they work in the Middle East. Besides, domestic workers being majorly women there could be feminist issues where girls are foreseen as potential soft workers for all forms of exploitation including sexual or financial.

In general, for low-level occupations, the potential migrant does not pay. In most cases, according to document reviewed:

To get domestic workers, a Ugandan recruitment company instead gets paid to look for workers. If a company in Saudi Arabia demands about 100 workers, they can pay between \$1,000 and \$1,300 depending on one's negotiation. Since most Ugandan companies have no cash up front and the Saudi company is providing it, the business becomes more attractive – a reason why most Ugandans go for domestic jobs (Egulu cited in Nangonzi & Serugo, 2022, p.2).

Moreover, Nakamya (2023, p.5) reports, “Ugandan low-skilled workers in the Gulf and wider Middle East rely on the kafala system, a process which requires migrants to have sponsors before acquiring a work permit. This gives the employers widespread powers over their work, legal and financial status”. Most of the domestic migrant workers are female who are economically disempowered. Since they do not pay upfront, their jobs start off on a wrong footing of subservience thereby putting them on high risk of abuse and all forms of exploitation. And, as already indicated, quite often their passports are withheld by their employers, thus escalating their vulnerable position.

Today, the number of companies has increased in spite of some companies having been suspended in line with Regulation 13 of The Employment (Recruitment of Uganda Migrant Workers) Regulations 2021. The companies had been found with forged training reports, contract renewal documents, accumulated refund claims from clients, forged Covid-19 results, and evidence of trafficking people. Such malpractices revealed that local companies were also actors in illegal migration including migrant labour exploitation cycle that starts in Uganda and stretches up to the Middle East.

Labour exploitation and human rights abuse

Labour exploitation and human rights abuse were found to be prevalent in the Middle East. Evidence abounds about the existence of human rights abuse among the female domestic migrant workers in the Middle East. This has been in existence for over two decades. Female Ugandan migrant workers have been at the centre of this predicament. As one author revealed; “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 cited in Nakamya, 2023, p.6). This reported scenario suggests that female migrant workers face a lot of human rights abuses at the hands of their employers. That fact notwithstanding, one interview participant from MGLSD described the abuse of labour as almost normal. He said:

When you look at labour markets every where [in the world], domestic work is precarious. It is just that elsewhere it is not hyped as it is in Middle East. When a migrant worker [in Middle East] dies, it is put in the media; but when a Ugandan gets a problem here [in Uganda] it will not be publicised (MGO 01).

This divergent view of the interview participant suggests some possible indifference by the public sector representatives on the mistreatment of migrant workers and probably explains one of the reasons why MGLSD has handled abuse of female Ugandan migrant workers in the Middle East in a soft way. The MGLSD has covertly underplayed the dangers involved in employment of female Ugandans in the Middle East.

Dangerous illegal migration

As already indicated, about a half of the migrants from Uganda travel illegally to the Middle East. This situation poses a risk to both the individual migrant and Uganda as a nation. As the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) indicates, “irregular migration can undermine public confidence in the integrity and effectiveness of a state’s migration and asylum policies. In addition, irregular migration can also endanger the lives of the migrants concerned” (IOM, 2005). Similarly, Jureidini (2003) posits that, “people who enter or remain in a country without authorization can be at risk of exploitation by employers and landlords. Migrants with irregular status are often unwilling to seek redress from authorities because they fear arrest and deportation”. Therefore, while the female Ugandan migrant workers take a risk every time they travel to the Middle East for employment, the risk is escalated in case they travel illegally.

Injuries and deaths of migrants

The situation of migrant workers to the Middle East has in some cases been deadly. Workers lose their lives under unclear circumstances. For instance, it has been reported that from 2019 to 2022 Uganda registered 88 deaths of migrant workers. Of these, Saudi Arabia had the highest number at 69. It was followed by the UAE and Jordan with five deaths each; Somalia with three, and Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain with two deaths each. Following the suspension of Jordan, the MGLSD no longer tracks the illegal trafficking of migrant workers and deaths in that country. On work-related injuries, only seven were registered between 2019 and 2022 in Saudi Arabia (five) and Iraq (two) (Nangonzi & Serugo, 2022). These figures suggest that migrant workers in the Middle East operate under dangerous employment conditions. However, one interview participant underplayed this predicament when he argued, “there is no work without challenges: people die everywhere” (MGO 01). Such a response suggests that some officials in the public sector of Uganda do not consider the labour conditions in Middle East jobs to be any different from elsewhere and therefore they can be tolerated.

9.0 Role of public sector in female labour migration: resilience vs non-resilience

The public sector of Uganda is central in the management of all forms of labour (human resource) in the country whether skilled or unskilled, and in private or public sector. The public sector oversees all the activities of all employment agencies in the country and is mandated to plan for the national human capital. Through the different Ministries such as MGLSD;

Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, plus the National Planning Authority the public sector is expected to balance the supply and demand of labour and manage labour migration considering the socio-economic strategic targets of Uganda. Therefore, the resilience or non-resilience of the public sector can, among other considerations, be explained from the perspective of female Uganda labour migration.

9.1 Signs of public sector resilience

Enacting some regulations

The government of Uganda has instituted a number of legislations to streamline the working conditions of citizens' employment abroad especially in the Middle East. For example, *The Employment (Recruitment of Ugandan Migrant Workers) Regulations, 2021, Statutory Instruments Supplement No. 26*; and Uganda passed a draft of legislation relating to labour externalisation in 2010, with agreements renewed in 2023. According to one interview participant, by September 2024 the MGLSD had already finalised a study on employment and was soon passing the report over to Cabinet for consideration and launching within the year 2024. And she also revealed, "we have revised the Employment Policy of 2011 and we have sent it to Cabinet...plus other programmes to improve employment" (MGLSD 01). These efforts suggest that government (public sector) is interested in managing labour migration. However, the effectiveness of these legal efforts are questionable as female Uganda migrant workers in the Middle East remain abused.

Signing of bilateral agreements

Government signed some bilateral agreements meant smoothen the working conditions of Ugandans abroad, especially in the Middle East. As per July 2022, Uganda had signed one Bilateral Relations Agreement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for domestic workers. As a government official in an interview indicated:

We have an embassy in Saudi Arabia, based in Riyadh. We have also an embassy in United Arab Emirates and we have a bilateral agreement with the Emirates except for domestic workers... But with Jordan, government suspended having an agreement because of the conditions of work there. Where we see unfavourable conditions, we don't have agreements: for example, Oman we don't have any, same with Bahrain, Iran and Iraq, we don't... The demand for domestic workers is highest in Saudi Arabia (MGO 01).

It was further reported that the employment agreements with Jordan and Oman were still under negotiation. Meanwhile, Nangonzi and Serugo (2022) reveal that in Turkey, Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait where negotiations to sign agreements have been ongoing, an unknown number of Ugandans were already employed in those countries And, where the agreements exist, they cover the working conditions of migrant workers including the provision of medical insurance, standard employment contracts, and agreeing to implement Ugandan laws in their countries.

Building partnerships with agencies

The public sector of Uganda has registered and cleared several companies to handle labour export, especially to the Middle East. As recent as 2023, there were about 300 licensed companies to facilitate labour migration from Uganda (Nakamya, 2023). This authorisation of private companies to operate in labour externalisation suggests public sector effort and interest in providing employment to the citizens, albeit abroad. Furthermore, the government made some efforts to protect the interest of Ugandan migrant workers through partnerships with companies and or through government structures in Middle East. For instance, in an interview, a participant reported:

For Saudi Arabia, there is a labour attaché who takes over matters of different neighbouring countries including UAE and Qatar. And, we do constant monitoring with these migrant workers. As we speak, we have a team that travelled to Jordan to assess the situation. We have a minister who travelled to UAE and we have a minister who will travel next week to assess the situation. So, we keep in constant touch with destination countries (MGO 01).

Besides, on matters of partnerships with countries in the Middle East, agreements have been made to the effect that workers have a fixed period of time (usually two years) within which they must first return to Uganda. Actually, one interview participant explained, “for migrant domestic workers, returning is a must...you cannot renew your contract automatically from Middle East. At the end of a two-year contract, you must return. If you wish to go back, you have to be cleared afresh so that you start again” (MGO 02). It was further revealed that the major objective for frequent periodic returns was to account for these workers. Ideally, even the employers in Middle East are supposed to indicate on the MGLSD electronic system that so has returned to Uganda. Such efforts illustrate government’s attempts to manage and streamline the system of Uganda labour migration to Middle East.

Making attempts on economic pre-emptive measures

Some efforts, although minimal, have been mooted regarding the need to discourage Ugandans from migrating to the Middle East. For example, one respondent explained:

Government’s opinion is that Ugandans should find jobs in Uganda. That is the core and that is the reason why [in the MGLSD] we have internal employment services, under the department of employment services... One of our responsibilities is to ensure that Ugandans have access to employment services within Uganda. What you hear about labour migration is a temporary measure by government... Government allowing Ugandans to seek jobs abroad is not a permanent solution: it’s a temporary measure set up by government to cushion this underemployment hype in the country (MGO 02).

This view sounds strategic although it is not clear to anyone (including government officials in Uganda) regarding how temporary the internationalisation of labour is going to be. And, how temporary is temporary? Otherwise today, the strategy to keep labour within Uganda is mainly focused on skilling young people with marketable competences for them to be able to compete

for productive and decent jobs. In addition, there are some youth livelihood programmes and parish development funds meant for local economic development. These strategies, although riddled with several loopholes are strategic and are meant to help keep more female workers in Uganda where they can be engaged in some productive occupations.

9.2 Evidence of a non-resilient public sector

Persistent human capital flight

The non-resilience of the public sector of Uganda is implied by the mere fact that there is a big number of female Ugandan migrant workers in the Middle East. The departure has been triggered by the quest for jobs and reasonably higher pay than would be found in Uganda. The massive departure presupposes the absence of job opportunities back home which points to a public sector that is devoid of offensive resilience to be able to hold such a human resource within the country. While migration is not a crime, massive migration of workers from one country to another reflects negatively on the sending country.

Inadequate public sector efforts

The government of Uganda, through the public sector has not yet fully immersed herself in the plight of female Ugandan migrant workers in the Middle East. Government priorities in matters of labour management seem to lie elsewhere, probably because there is excess labour in the country. The women and girls continue to migrate with minimal restrictions and guidance. Actually, as one researcher recently established:

The regulation of labour externalization by the Ugandan government gives many women false comfort that travelling to Middle East to work is safe, but that is far from the reality. On arrival in Middle East, the women are exploited and abused with little or no payment. Some women are repatriated by relatives or well-wishers while others are ignored by recruitment agencies and the government, left for the dead in a foreign country” (Bwowe, 2020, p.1).

While attempts have been made to negotiate for the improvement in the working conditions of migrant workers abroad, little has been done in the area of legislation-implementation and refining the entire process of migration and placement of female Ugandan workers in the Middle East. Besides, government has not satisfactorily created effective and strong channels through which such workers in desperate conditions of work can be helped. But what is in place are possibilities of a distressed individual reporting to an attaché in the embassies in Middle East or through online complaints all of which could be difficult to access if an abused domestic worker is locked up in a home in Middle East.

Furthermore, on migrant labour legislation, the public sector weaknesses in the enforcement of the laws have also been highlighted in the *Business Insider Africa* – a magazine that documents the current issues in Africa regarding business. It is reported that “a portion of Ugandans, the bulk of whom work in Middle East, have criticized the government for failing to implement government-to-government rules that safeguard the rights of the Ugandan migrant workers” (Okafor, 2023). This observation suggests that the Ugandan migrant workers feel

neglected by the home government (read public sector) in terms of labour protection.

Unprofessional companies and individuals flourishing

As already indicated, the MGLSD suspended the operations of 11 recruitment (labour externalisation) companies in 2021 that had breached the standards. This was done in line with Regulation 13 of The Employment (Recruitment of Uganda Migrant Workers) Regulations 2021. These companies were suspended to minimise the suffering of migrant workers they (companies) were handling. Actually, as Nakamya (2023) attests, those companies had been frequently criticised by labour rights campaigners for prioritising profit over safety and often neglecting their responsibilities towards workers once they arrived in the Middle East. As a result, the government suspended the licenses of several of these companies, while others remained under scrutiny for adherence to standards. The company owners had appealed for reconsideration but the majority of them had not been successful because of failure to fulfil the MGLSD requirements to operate again.

Some female semi-skilled migrants who largely depend on loaned resources such as tickets, visa and passport fees entered the Middle East as extremely vulnerable workers. They are entangled in some kind of, what Jureidini (2003) calls ‘debt bondage’. When such loans were from agents and destination masters, all parties involved in the equation risked losing money. Incidentally, in such arrangements, “some untrustworthy clients also fleece companies when they eventually settle on the job” (Nangonzi & Serugo, 2022, p.2). By implication, either side (agent vs migrant worker) could cheat the other. This scenario suggests a loophole, limited guidance and poor controls from government which the public sector should have ideally managed.

The remittance dilemma

In the equation of female Ugandan labour migration to Middle East is the issue of national revenue. As already indicated, government of Uganda collects revenue from recruitment companies. Government also enjoys a lot of foreign exchange earnings through tax on migrant workers’ remittances to their families. For example, “remittances from the labour force in Middle East reached 1.2 billion dollars by December 2022, with 796 million dollars from Saudi Arabia alone” (Nakamya 2023, p.7). Earlier on in 2020, it had been reported that “Ugandans working abroad contributed approximately 4.5 percent to Uganda’s Gross Domestic Product, placing it above the Sub-Saharan Africa average of 2.8 percent” (IOM Uganda, 2020, p. 1). It was equally re-echoed from other sources that, “from migrant workers, the government annually collects US\$1.2bn globally – Middle East alone sends in \$600 million. This money, wired directly to the Uganda Revenue Authority accounts, is collected from Middle East-based recruitment companies that are charged \$30 [about UGX110,000=] for each worker” (Nangonzi & Serugo, 2022, p.6). These figures represent a significant amount of revenue from the migrant workers and is probably a big incentive for the government to continue allowing Ugandan migrant workers to move to Middle East. But, to have such financial benefits without cleaning up the entire labour migration process could as well be considered a sign of a non-resilient public sector. By implication, the public sector has limited offensive resilience since

the emerging problem of the lost labour is underplayed.

Limited coherence across government ministries, departments and agencies

The MGLSD is currently at the forefront of managing female Uganda labour migration to the Middle East. The ministry is desirous of designing and implementing a number of reforms, legislations and intervention in matter of labour migration but is constrained by limited financial resources that plague most government ministries in Uganda. For example, in 2022, the labour officials were concerned that, whereas the MGLSD brings in the country lots of remittances and non-tax revenue, funding remains a hindrance to the Ministry. It was noted:

We know how to generate this money for the government but we do not see it. I would have loved to keep track of the girls and boys in Middle East by establishing labour attaches in all those countries and distress centres, among others, but we are cash-strapped. This money goes to the treasury and we must negotiate to get it...We must be entitled to 40 percent of the remittances because we know best how to generate more for you. These have been long proposals and discussions that have not yet materialized (Egulu, 2022 cited in Nangonzi & Serugo, 2022, p.6).

This remark suggests that coherence in the activities of different public sector ministries, departments and agencies is weak. The remittance resources are not allocated in favour of facilitating the line ministry (MLGSD) to improve performance in the management of migrant labour that generates them.

Government's limited socio-economic strength

In the global context, Uganda as a country has limited powers. The country can only use a few limited diplomatic efforts to sort out any squabble with a country in Middle East. Middle Eastern countries have higher economic clout than Uganda. This relatively vulnerable position puts Uganda in a weak position. For instance, on Ugandan migrant labour problems:

It is only through engagement that any positive step can be taken...At times we visit prisons, like in Jordan we visited prisons and saw our people and negotiated for the review of their cases. One of them was even brought back. She had been given 20 years in prison...but on our side she was innocent. On their end she was very guilty. But through our diplomatic engagement she was brought back here and set free...because she had not committed any crime by our standards (MGO 02).

Such negotiations, although rare, help a few lucky Ugandan migrant workers to access justice. These negotiations need to be intensified in order to convince the Middle Eastern countries to treat female Uganda migrant workers fairly. Meanwhile, with inadequate funds to support migrant workers, the distressed ones in Middle East can either report to the Ugandan embassy based in Riyadh or report to the MGLSD through its recently developed online system. Alternatively, a worker can complain through a relative based in Uganda who in turn logs into the system to file a complaint or manually report to the permanent secretary of the ministry for assistance. However, this is usually difficult since the distressed person rarely has an opportunity to communicate with the outside world.

10.0 Conclusions

While female Ugandan labour migrants to Middle East have largely been engrossed in problems of mistreatment and human rights abuse, not all migrant workers are treated poorly. The majority of migrants are treated with reasonable respect and dignity; are paid on time; are given time off and return to Uganda having earned up to three or four times what they could have earned at home if they had not migrated to Middle East. The successful cases have been the major point of reference and driver for the new migrations through references and invitations. Just like the migration network theory postulates, the transmission of the migration experience from migrants to relatives and friends in the countries of origin is indeed a motivator for international migration.

Even though the suffering female Ugandan migrant workers might be the minority [among migrants], the predicament of those citizens abroad that persist unresolved is sign of a low-resilient public sector of Uganda. It is also a sign of a mishandled national human resource at the hands of the public sector of Uganda. Government's piecemeal response has created room for dangerous migration. By implication, when a minority of ordinary citizens experience a disadvantage in a given circumstance, the public sector tends to respond slowly.

11.0 Recommendations for augmenting the resilience of the public sector

As already indicated, the public sector of Uganda through the MGLSD is involved in managing the issue of female labour migration to the Middle East. It is against that background that I present some recommendations here. The public sector should, through the relevant ministries, departments and agencies (e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Justice; MGLSD; & Ministry of Internal Affairs), engage in bilateral and multi-lateral negotiations with all Middle Eastern countries for improved conditions of work for the migrant persons, especially female workers. This intervention might help in generating legal amendments and instruments that can be adopted to improve labour and human rights of migrant workers. For instance, as Kavar (2004, pp.73-75) reports, certain arrangements have been done by the Western European countries with Middle Eastern countries to streamline the working conditions for their nationals in those countries. Likewise, other countries such as Uganda can negotiate for more a humane treatment of her migrant workers in the Middle East.

In addition, the public sector should work out an arrangement with Middle Eastern states concerning the official ways and means of handling illegal practices and abuse by Arab nationals. Just as Jureidini (2003) advises, opportunities can be created for court proceedings in the event of withholding of wages, or breach of contract in one form or another. The migrant women should be sensitised and given opportunities to press charges in case of need including a provision for legal representation. These cases should have high media publicity to act as a deterrent when judgements are made in favour of aggrieved migrants.

The public sector of Uganda should further regulate the local recruitment agencies in a more stringent manner. The behaviour of the local recruitment agencies has been a mixed-bag of failures and successes. While some Ugandans (probably the majority) have succeeded in dealing with them, there is a category of female Ugandan migrant workers that have suffered

at the hands of scrupulous or incompetent agencies. Such agencies need supervision, guidance, training or even prosecution so as to bring order to the sector. This intervention should be done in consultation with the receiving Middle East countries.

Besides, there should be some detailed pre-departure joint briefings that involve both the public sector representative (e.g. MGLSD) and the recruitment agencies to prepare the departing Uganda labour migrants to the Middle East for the new work environment. Today, the existing training offered by the agencies appears to be insufficient. It appears that the departing workers are not briefed enough about their rights and obligations through some form of orientations or seminars on proper employment codes of conduct and practice. So, the public sector needs to do more detailed briefings for mental preparation of the migrating Ugandans to Middle East. Equally important, arrangements should be negotiated with receiving countries to ensure that on arrival they are re-oriented before deployment. This arrangement would be in line with what Jureidini (2003) suggests that domestic workers should not go directly to the homes of their employers immediately upon arrival in a receiving country; rather, there should be administrative procedures in place by which they are briefed on the dos and don'ts. Such briefing can mitigate a number of would-be problems for different categories of female Ugandan migrant workers seeking jobs abroad.

It is further recommended that the public sector adopts strategic plans for the nation to facilitate sustainable employment of labour. The public sector leadership can direct the National Planning Authority (an agency of Government) to continuously generate and disseminate strategies (e.g. relevant education and training, investments opportunities, etc.) that minimise the flight of human capital abroad while creating alternative occupations at home. The ongoing skilling of Ugandans together with industrialisation processes should be accelerated and continuously promoted by the government in full force with the view of promoting job creation.

Even when the public sector opts to maintain the current labour externalisation strategy, there is need to focus on prior-prepared professionals who can access specialized jobs abroad in well-organised labour markets. And as Egulu (cited in Nangonzi & Serugo 2022, p.6) notes, “there is a need to expand the skills base beyond Middle East because Uganda is not a country that should pride herself in exporting domestic workers”. Indeed, Uganda should consider a wide range of external labour markets. Such markets can be an avenue for decent jobs for Ugandans migrating abroad with well-negotiated terms and conditions of service. This arrangement could generate high remittances plus expertise improvement among the Ugandan professionals working abroad.

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