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Summary

Human trafficking is a persistent global social and economic problem, and part of international organized crime, involving local regional, national, and global agents and networks, and victims whose social characteristics traverse age (as they can be children, youths, or adults) and gender (women and men). Ethiopia is not an exception in this regard, and many disadvantaged Ethiopians have fallen victim to human trafficking. This study focuses on the trafficking of Ethiopian women to the Middle East to work as domestic workers. It documents how some of these trafficked women are recruited and transported, and often subjected to severe abuse, including denial of salary, sleep deprivation, passport confiscation, confinement, and physical and sexual assault. It is recognized that some women actively aim for irregular migration and ‘try their luck’, i.e., not all are by definition ‘trafficked’. They thereby aim to stay clear of trafficking agents and dependency but most become entangled in it. Only a few of the trafficked women can escape the above-mentioned abuses, depending on their ‘employers’ and family or other social networks they may build up or appeal to in the host country. Forms of abuse and inhumane practices, however, predominate against most trafficked Ethiopian women and take place within the ambiguous framework of the ‘kafala’ system, which is prevalent throughout the Middle Eastern countries.

This study was motivated by at least two main concerns, one personal and the other academic. Personally I was intrigued by this tenacious phenomenon causing multiple problems for young women, often marking their lives, and by a concern to see the abusive aspects of the trafficking addressed. Academically, although there is a myriad of studies on the trafficking of Ethiopian women to the Middle East, there are few if any major academic research inquiries undertaken on the Arsi Zone, which is however one of the primary sources of Ethiopian women trafficked to the Middle East. Second, beyond responding to the need to study the root causes of human trafficking, a perplexing question is why human trafficking, in general, and women trafficking, in particular, is still on the increase, despite the proliferation of international, regional and national policy and legal frameworks and institutions established with the central aim of mitigating human trafficking – through *prevention, protection, and prosecution*.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the nature, prevalence, root causes, and societal consequences of human trafficking in the two Arsi zones of ‘Arsi’ and ‘Arsi West’ of Oromiya National Regional State, so as to inquire why they have persisted. To realize this objective, the data and information used in this study were collected from trafficked women themselves, from

their families, and from middlemen and agents, and relevant government officials, using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection in a complementary manner. The study has investigated the trafficking *process*, i.e., how those trafficked within Ethiopia and to Middle Eastern host countries are recruited and how they travel, are treated, tried to retain agency over their life, and tried to cope. It also sheds light on the role of women *returnees* from being trafficked, their experiences and tribulations, and (very occasional) successes.

Theoretically, this study argues that although trafficking is a transnational phenomenon, its root causes are local, often determined by social and economic factors conducive to poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, and food insecurity, to mention the main ones. Therefore, mitigating women trafficking *cannot be treated only as a matter of law and order* in the liberal tradition of the individual-civic freedom and emancipation paradigm without giving due recognition to the persistent socio-economic factors which propelled trafficking in the first place. Integrating these two perspectives, which this study advocates, would have critical academic and policy implications for conceiving any credible and practicable interventions to mitigate human trafficking.