

Personal reflection

The other side of 'economic migration': psychosocial issues affecting young people returning to Ethiopia

Jack Obali Odolla

Families in Ethiopia, with few opportunities to generate income, sometimes send a young family member to work abroad. In many cases, the family sells property to raise the necessary funds, and therefore, expect that much of the income earned will be sent home. However, young migrants are often vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and may want to return home, or need to return after violence breaks out in their country of migration. Yet, returning home raises a number of challenges, not least those involved in returning empty-handed. In this personal reflection, I discuss working with the International Organization for Migration assisting young returnees to Ethiopia, explore the psychosocial issues affecting those who migrate and return, and put forward suggestions as to how their psychosocial wellbeing can be strengthened.

Keywords: economic migration, Ethiopia, family conflicts, returnees, young migrants

Introduction

Getachew was 20 years old and had recently returned from Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia, with an injured leg from a fight he had had while working abroad. He was receiving treatment for his injuries from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Addis Ababa. His father had sold family property to send Getachew to work abroad when he was 17 years old. Now, three years later, Getachew was scared and ashamed to return home with no money. He began to sabotage his treatment, deliberately harming his leg so it would not heal, in fact it was getting worse. When he was finally taken home by the IOM, the family welcomed him. It

was an agricultural area and they knew he could work, so were happy to have him home. However, this positive response from a family to a returned child, is unusual. In my experience of assisting returnees to Ethiopia, families are generally reluctant to take a child back under these circumstances, and more often want to send them back to where ever they had been working. In this personal reflection I will share my experiences as Nurse Health Assistant with IOM (Migration Health Division, Assisted Voluntary Returnees) in Addis Ababa and will explore the reasons for, and consequences of, this reluctance. Additionally, I will offer some suggestions as to how the psychosocial wellbeing of young people returning (voluntarily or forced) to Ethiopia after working abroad (legally or illegally) can be strengthened.

Context and background

IOM Ethiopia provide support to migrants who want to return home voluntarily from countries including Libya, Lebanon, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The term 'voluntarily' in this sense also covers migrants who do not see any other possibilities than to return home and feel forced by circumstances to make this decision.

All migrants had gone abroad hoping to find a better job and send funds home to their families. Most of the migrants who return under 'Assisted Voluntary Return' are male, and most of the minors who return home voluntarily are aged 15–17. The minors are more vulnerable to exploitation, so they return

home more readily than the older migrants. Most are from rural areas.

Some have gone legally, with the assistance of the Government of Ethiopia, which helps them find a job and facilitates an agreement between the migrant and the overseas employer, before the migrant travels. This agreement is intended to establish expectations in advance, and to protect migrants. However, only certain types of jobs are included in this scheme, such as domestic help, driving and cutting flowers. The majority of female migrants go under this scheme, as they are willing to work as domestic workers. Young men who are unable to work as drivers and are unable or unwilling to work in the domestic sector are more likely to go illegally and try to find a job as casual labourers once they arrive.

As mentioned above, sending young people to work abroad usually entails selling of family property, and therefore, carries an expectation that funds will be sent home.

On arrival, migrants may experience a range of difficulties. Those who have accepted a job as a domestic worker may be unprepared for the conditions they face; long working hours, very little free time, and being unable to go outside of the house. Some migrants tire of their situation very quickly, and become vulnerable to *'brokers'* who tell them that they can find them a job with better conditions. Should a young migrant run away from their employer to take up the broker's offer, they often leave their documents behind as many employers take custody of them on arrival. Then, they find that the offer does not materialise. In this way, some young female migrants have been forced into sex work, with others forced into hard labour, often living in squalid, overcrowded conditions. Others leave their job as domestic helpers after being sexually abused by their employers or relatives of the employer, in some cases, pregnant. This has led to being assaulted by their employer's wife, who blames the young woman for

the husband's behaviour. I have seen a case where a male employer of an Ethiopian housemaid started taking advantage of the girl, and the man's wife became so jealous, she threw the girl from a third floor balcony. Others have had hot water thrown over them by the wife of the abusive man.

For those who migrate illegally, they can be even more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. With no documentation, they can be picked up by the police at any time. They are also vulnerable to promises made by *'brokers'* who may sell them into slavery, forcing them to carry out hard labour for little or no money. Other young migrants are sexually abused. The *'broker'* can become aggressive if the young migrant complains or tries to leave as they are treated as the broker's property, beaten and forced to carry out the broker's will. As the young migrants have no papers, the brokers can force them to do anything they like.

Young people in these situations sometimes seek out an opportunity to approach an organisation that can help them return to Ethiopia or the Ethiopian embassy. These organisations then refer the young person to IOM, which arranges for their transport back to Addis Ababa.

In other cases, migrants see no other way than to return home after outbreaks of violence in the country of migration. This was the case in Saudi Arabia in 2013 and 2014, when around 260,000 migrants returned to Ethiopia within three months, due to conflict between the migrants and the Saudi Arabian government. Currently, the Ethiopian government is evacuating its citizens from Yemen due to the conflict there, so large numbers of migrants, including young people, are arriving in Addis Ababa every day.

On arrival, the adults are given money for transport so they can return home. However, young people aged under 18 are housed in a transit centre where IOM provides medical and psychosocial support in preparation for being reunited with their families.

Challenges faced by young people on return

Young people, whether returning voluntarily or forced by the situation they were in, often arrive back in Ethiopia feeling very disoriented. Usually, they had travelled over land to their country of migration, but are returned by flight, landing at the international airport in Addis Ababa, often at night. Many of the migrants are from rural areas and, as Addis Ababa is so unfamiliar to them, they often do not believe that they are in Ethiopia. Some believe they are still in the country where they were working, or in some other place entirely.

They are often very fearful and mistrusting of strangers, including IOM staff. They expect to be beaten or abused, and are very wary for a long time. They are afraid to speak about their experiences, and do not often give away any details.

In contrast, they build strong relationships with each other and are unwilling to be separated from those who shared their experiences in the country of migration. They feel safe and protected with each other, especially if they had been abused.

However, in their interactions, both with each other and with staff, they can become angry easily. We see high levels of hopelessness. Some feel as if they have no future and speak of killing themselves. They see themselves as worthless because their experiences in the country of migration were beyond their capacity to cope with as children. They know that when they go back to their family, they may not be respected or well thought of, and may be rejected. They may feel resentful towards their families for putting them in this position in the first place. As a result, some decide they are better off finding their own way and seek opportunities in the city, where, in fact, they are even more vulnerable.

The fear of returning home to their families is considerable. As mentioned, families often sold property to send them to work in

another country, there is a lot of fear related to returning home empty-handed. For girls and women who have become pregnant while they were away, sometimes through rape, they fear the reactions of their families. Some young people want IOM to assist them to return to the country they have just left, rather than help them to return to their families.

In my experience, these fears are well-founded. For families in rural areas, it is a source of pride to have your child working abroad, but if the child returns with nothing then the parents may feel shame and may reject the child. This is especially true if a girl is pregnant, or if a young person has been seriously injured or disabled by attacks or accidents in the country of migration. Some young people say they regret coming back to Ethiopia because they face so many problems with their families. This is especially true when their return was not voluntary, but they had no other choice due to (armed) conflict in the country of migration.

Psychosocial support

When their return to Ethiopia is assisted by IOM, young people are given the help they require, whether that is medical care, psychosocial support or referral to another organisation. Staff from UNICEF meet with the young people in groups and talk to them about what to expect when reunited with their families, and how to manage challenges that may arise. They are also encouraged to share with their families their experiences and how they have been affected. We tell them that in every family there are people who love them, and they should find someone they trust and talk to them openly.

We try to build relationships with these young people through games and sports, but find that we often need to go slowly, and give them time and space to adjust. As time goes on, we start to work with them and their family to achieve reunification

and reintegration. Additionally, IOM gives them materials to start a small business (e.g. a small shop, or keeping goats), so they do not return home completely empty-handed.

Despite this, families are often angry when the young person returns home with less than the family expected of them. In many cases, the family is both shamed and financially disadvantaged by their child's return, and often ask IOM staff whether the child is capable of going back to the place they were working. If the staff member says they are not capable, due to mental distress or physical problems, the child may be sent away from home.

In some cases, the young person becomes tired of the abuse and neglect at home and decides to leave voluntarily. Although it is difficult to find out what happens after they leave home, I suspect they come to Addis and try to survive as best they can. There are agencies working with street children and unaccompanied children in Addis, but as there is no connection with IOM's work with voluntary returnees, it is difficult to know how many of the children and young people living on the streets were rejected by their families after an unsuccessful attempt to earn money overseas.

Discussion: recommendations for improved protection and support of young people sent abroad to work

Culturally, especially in rural areas, children are expected to obey their parents, not to discuss their opinions or experiences. Children do not have power to say they do not want to go abroad, or to say they want to go to school. Therefore, it is usually the families, rather than the young people, who make the decision to send a young person to work abroad. The parents are often unaware of the consequences of this decision, and expect only benefits. They have limited knowledge of the situation abroad, and do

not know what their child is likely to experience. They only hear the 'success stories' because few people, including the parents, listen to those children who are forced to return home after experiencing conflict, exploitation or abuse. So often they are unaware of how their child has been affected by their experiences and want to send them back to work immediately.

The key point here is that it is not sufficient to only work with these young people once they return. It is their families who refuse to accept them back after they have returned home damaged, either physically and/or emotionally. Parents and families need to know the facts of what children and young people experience once they are sent to work abroad, especially if this is done illegally. In my opinion, it would not be effective to tell parents not to send their children abroad, because they are living in situations of poverty and limited opportunities. However, they could be encouraged to wait until their children are at least 18 years old before sending them, and to keep children in school as long as possible. This will provide some protection for the young person, if they do go abroad, and reduce the likelihood of their being exploited. It would require a community based approach, in which relationships are built with families and key individuals in each community. Trust is essential for this type of sensitive attitude change.

Education for young people who do go abroad is also key. Whilst cultural orientation programmes exist, they are only available for those who go legally, under the government scheme. There should be opportunities for all young people to access information about their rights, and what to do if they have problems. They should also be warned about the brokers, who will mislead them.

Finally, there is an urgent need for enhanced coordination between agencies working with young people living independently, often on the streets, in the large cities in Ethiopia. We suspect that many of these young people have returned home after working

abroad. They are either fearful of returning to their families, or have been rejected by them, resulting in trying to survive in the cities. They are at extreme risk of abuse and exploitation, and increased coordination would enable agencies to facilitate reunification with their families where possible, or refer them to other forms of support designed to reduce their exposure to harm.

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¹ This is not the young man's real name.