

Wails Inside Arab Homes: Examining the lived experiences and exploitation of returnee Ugandan migrant domestic workers from Saudi Arabia

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EDITORIAL INFORMATION

Received: 02 May 2024

Revised: 25 June 2024

Accepted: 28 June 2024

Published: 02 July 2024

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DOI: [10.38140/ijms-2024.vol1.05](https://doi.org/10.38140/ijms-2024.vol1.05)

Abstract: The study aimed to investigate the experiences and exploitation of Ugandan migrant domestic workers who returned from Saudi Arabia. The study followed a constructivist paradigm, an interpretive framework that focuses on individuals' understanding of the world and their creation of unique meanings. A qualitative approach was utilised, specifically employing a phenomenological case study design. Data was gathered through unstructured interviews with twenty-eight (28) migrant domestic workers. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. The findings regarding the lived experiences and exploitation of returnee Ugandan migrant domestic workers were visualised through concept maps created using NVivo version 10.0. The study discovered that the returnee workers' experiences were primarily related to their interactions with various individuals in their employers' households, including dealing with abusive employers, inconsiderate children and relatives, and challenging working conditions. Other experiences involved working in an unfriendly environment, carrying out difficult tasks, facing heavy workloads, experiencing occupational health difficul-

ties, enduring physical abuse, inadequate rest, food deprivation, sexual advances, and false allegations. Consequently, providing legal protection for domestic workers in Saudi Arabia is crucial. Although progress has been made in addressing legal gaps, particularly regarding weekly rest days, more work remains. This includes implementing or expanding minimum wages and aligning working hour restrictions with those applicable to other workers. It is therefore recommended that Uganda and Saudi Arabia revise labour export laws to ensure that the rights of migrant domestic workers are respected.

Keywords: Lived experiences, migrant domestic workers, returnees, exploitation, Ugandan migrant.

1. Introduction

One wonders about the dynamics within Arab households when migrant domestic workers carry out their duties, especially after hearing the distressing accounts of Ugandan migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. These accounts depict a combination of sorrow and regret. It is reported that once a contract is signed, workers are unable to quit and must fulfil their obligations until completion. Nevertheless, millions of young individuals from South Asia and Africa still travel annually to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) in search of better opportunities (Naufal & Genc, 2020). While migration inherently involves both risk and opportunity, migrant domestic workers, in particular, experience a mix of success and exploitation (Murphy et al., 2020). Putul and Mia (2020) explain that many of these workers are subjected to exploitation by their employers, facing various forms of abuse that are corruptive, confrontative, and coercive. Such abuse can shatter their dreams and family goals, compromise their health, and degrade their overall wellbeing. This exploitation is partially attributed to the fact that national laws often fail to provide adequate protections for these workers, and international standards have yet to comprehensively address the specific circumstances of this sector (Au, 2023). In 2010, the International Labour Organization (ILO) negotiated a new instrument

How to cite this article:

Asiimwe, F. M. (2024). Wails inside Arab homes: Examining the lived experiences and exploitation of returnee Ugandan migrant domestic workers from Saudi Arabia. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Management Sciences*, 1, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijms-2024.vol1.05>

on decent work for domestic workers, which presented a rare and crucial opportunity to enhance protections for this historically neglected and undervalued sector (Blackett, 2011).

In recent years, the abuse of domestic workers, often occurring within private households and hidden from public view, has gained attention from scholars, countries of origin, humanitarian agencies, and international organisations (Parreñas, 2021). Other risks faced by domestic workers include physical, psychological, and sexual assault; forced confinement in the workplace; unpaid wages; and excessively long working hours without rest days. These abuses are perpetrated by employers and labour agencies (Hussain & Shimul, 2023). In the most extreme cases, women and girls in this sector are trapped in forced labour situations and are sometimes trafficked into conditions resembling slavery (Brennan, 2014). According to Nampewo (2021), the hostile experiences encountered by migrant domestic workers are severe and intertwined with social, economic, health, cultural, environmental, and gender-based factors. These experiences are exacerbated by the Kafala sponsorship system, which perpetuates the exploitation of migrant domestic workers. The Kafala system is characterised by an imbalance in power relations between the Kafeel (employer) and the Kafir (migrant worker) (Asiimwe & Musinguzi, 2024). Although the specifics of the Kafala system vary from country to country, all migrants working under this system are affected (Jureidini & Hassan, 2020). Despite the severe exploitation documented by various scholars, such as Blackett (2011), Kandilige et al. (2023), Parreñas (2021), and Silvey & Parreñas (2020), millions of people around the world continue to engage in domestic labour to support themselves and their families.

1.1 Statement of the problem and research question

According to Karim et al. (2020), migrant domestic workers play a crucial role in the economic growth of their countries. By 2019, Uganda's remittances as a percentage of GDP had reached 4.0%, surpassing those of any other sub-Saharan nation since the start of migrant domestic labour exportation (Ikpesu, 2023). To ensure the smooth functioning of the industry, the Ugandan government has taken steps to facilitate the externalisation of the workforce. This includes the enactment of legislation and regulations, such as the Recruitment of Ugandan Migrant Workers Regulations of 2021, overseen by the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MoGLSD). Additionally, a bilateral labour agreement (BLA) was signed with Saudi Arabia to export migrant domestic workers. As part of the BLA, a four-party contract was established between the employee, the employer, and the two countries. This contract prohibits salary deductions and upholds the terms and conditions of employment contracts, serving as a means of coordinating the sector through communication between various government ministries. Another measure implemented through the BLA is the mandatory pre-departure orientation for all migrant domestic workers (Namaganda & Laiboni, 2019). These initiatives aim to protect the rights and wellbeing of Ugandan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and improve labour relations. However, despite these efforts, Ugandan domestic migrant workers in Saudi Arabia continue to face challenges, including severe exploitation characterised by restricted movement and socially acceptable discrimination. This discrimination takes various forms, such as excessive working hours without days off, non-payment of wages, physical abuse, prejudice, lack of food, and sexual harassment (Nampewo, 2021). Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the lived experiences and exploitation of Ugandan domestic workers who have returned from Saudi Arabia.

2. Theoretical Review

The study on the experiences and exploitation of Ugandan migrant domestic workers who have returned from Saudi Arabia is grounded in the Theory of Change (TOC). This theory examines the underlying causes of exploitation, forced labour, and vulnerabilities among migrant workers and identifies the roles of relevant stakeholders in addressing these issues (Women, U.N. 2017). The TOC was developed through extensive consultations with representatives from civil society, business, and

government, as it recognises that no single actor can bring about change on their own (Sullivan & Stewart, 2006).

According to the TOC, migrant workers around the world are vulnerable to exploitation throughout the entire migration process - from recruitment in their home countries to employment in another country, and even upon their return home (Paoletti et al., 2014). The TOC aims to ensure that migrant workers have access to ethical recruitment methods and can benefit from decent employment (Andrees et al., 2015). This means that at every stage of the migration process - from pre-migration and recruitment, to employment, repatriation, and reintegration - workers should enjoy safe and ethical conditions (Ndreka, 2019). To achieve this, the TOC identifies six key issues that contribute to vulnerabilities and further exploitation, including dehumanisation, ineffective grievance procedures, recruitment costs, lack of transparency, and inadequate governance (Muigua, 2020).

These underlying causes are interconnected. For example, workers continue to be charged fees by fraudulent entities due to a lack of transparency regarding recruitment fees, related expenses, and who is responsible for paying them. Weak governance and inadequate enforcement against exploitative recruiters also contribute to this problem. Additionally, the lack of understanding among all stakeholder groups on how to transition to best practices perpetuates the status quo. Recognising the connections between these root causes is essential for developing a comprehensive action plan that effectively addresses the TOC. Therefore, the TOC's main objective is to ensure that all migrant workers have access to and can enjoy decent employment through ethical channels. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goals 10.7, which promotes orderly, safe, and responsible migration and mobility, and 8.7, which aims to eradicate forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking (Klein Solomon & Sheldon, 2018).

The TOC argues that governments in both the country of origin and the country of destination have a role to play in adequately protecting migrant workers from abuse throughout the entire migration process - from recruitment to travel, work, and repatriation (Paoletti et al., 2014). The study emphasises the need for various stakeholders to collaborate in addressing the labour rights and human rights issues faced by migrant workers in global supply chains. It is crucial for different stakeholders to work together to address exploitation before it further damages Uganda's labour export sector, as suggested by the TOC, given the distressing experiences that indicate widespread exploitation.

3. Methodology

The study employed the social constructivism framework, which is an interpretive paradigm that focuses on individuals' efforts to comprehend and construct their own meanings based on their personal experiences (Phillips, 2023). Social constructivists argue that individuals actively engage in seeking an understanding of the world they live and work in (Boyland, 2019). This study utilised a phenomenological case study research design to investigate the lived experiences and exploitation of Ugandan migrant domestic workers who had returned from Saudi Arabia. This design was chosen to allow for a comprehensive exploration of the research problem. The data collected for this study were qualitative in nature, aiming to achieve a deep understanding through a small sample size (Boddy, 2016). The choice of a qualitative research approach was based on the goal of comprehending how individuals interpret their social reality, recognising that participants' experiences and perspectives shape the meaning-making process (Phillips, 2023). Overall, this research design facilitated a thorough examination of the research problem.

3.1 Population and sample

The study sample was purposefully selected, and the final sample size was determined after data saturation. It consisted of twenty-eight (28) respondents, all of whom were female migrant domestic workers from the Central, Eastern, and Western regions of Uganda. The key informants were selected

from the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MoGLSD), the Uganda Association Employment Recruitment Agency (UAERA), and the next of kin. The Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development is responsible for regulating the labour export sector in Uganda. The UAERA is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the activities of recruitment companies, directors, and employees involved in hiring domestic workers for Saudi Arabia, as well as the next of kin of the migrant domestic workers. The returnees were selected using snowball sampling, while the key informants were chosen through purposive sampling.

3.2 Data collection instrument

Data was collected through the utilisation of an unstructured interview guide. A standardised set of open-ended questions was posed to the study participants in order to gather relevant data. The flexibility in the line of questioning greatly facilitated the acquisition of comprehensive information. The participants were queried about the lived experiences and exploitation encountered by Ugandan Migrant Domestic Workers upon their return from Saudi Arabia. Each interview session lasted for a duration of 50-60 minutes. The collected data underwent a rigorous process of quality control utilising the truth value approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) to ensure that the obtained results accurately represented the valid information provided by the participants, with a specific focus on their lived experiences within their unique circumstances. Furthermore, the analysis conducted within the study guaranteed that the interpretations derived from the data obtained from the respondents were firmly grounded.

3.3 Data analysis

The data collected was transcribed, and the quotes were coded based on emerging themes. The process of creating themes involved grouping responses under the same topic and assigning relevant codes. Impactful statements were identified to aid in deriving meaning from the interviews. Inductive thematic analysis was conducted through constant review of the data, comparison of information against the codes, and recoding. The themes that emerged from the data were rooted in the data itself, and overarching patterns were observed. The data was condensed and described in order to identify concepts that explained the lived experiences and exploitation of Ugandan migrant domestic workers who had returned from Saudi Arabia. The emerging patterns and themes played a crucial role in presenting and interpreting the findings. The findings were visualised in a concept map created using Nvivo version 10.0.

3.4 Ethical consideration

The study adhered strictly to the ethical guidelines outlined in the research conduct policy of the Uganda National Council for Higher Education. The researcher was approved by the Uganda Christianity University Research Ethics Board for data collection. Clearance was also obtained from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). Each respondent was informed about the purpose and nature of the study in order to obtain their consent. Informed consent was provided verbally for participants who were unable to read and understand English. Prior to each interview, the researcher asked for permission to record the session. The collected data was stored securely with password protection to ensure confidentiality. Respondents were advised not to use real names, and if names were mentioned, the researcher replaced them with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality while upholding ethical standards.

4. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The key foundational aspects that underpinned this study revolved around the lived experiences and exploitation faced by Ugandan migrant domestic workers upon their return from Saudi Arabia.

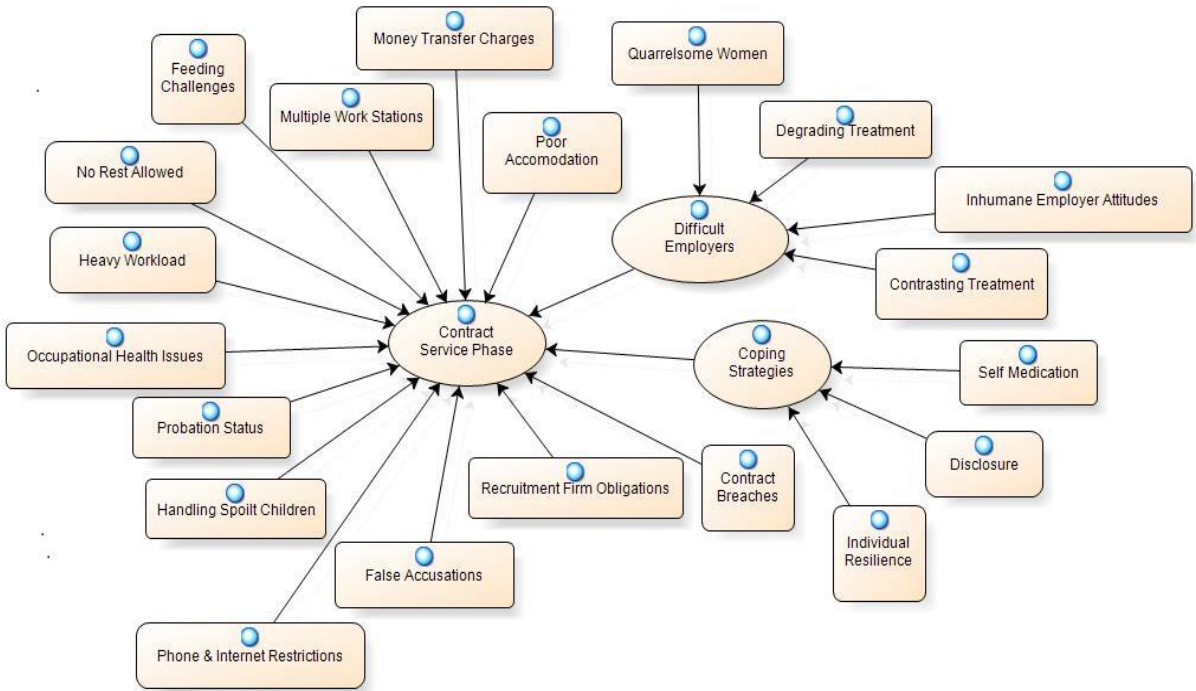


Figure 1: Lived experiences of returnee Ugandan migrant domestic workers

The experiences of Ugandan migrant domestic workers who have returned to their home country, as depicted in the figure above, encompass a range of challenges. These challenges include difficulties in handling unfriendly children and other family members, inadequate housing, feeding challenges, false accusations, deprivation of rest, restrictions on phone and internet use, physical abuse, heavy workloads, occupational medical conditions, having to work at multiple locations, dealing with difficult employers (particularly quarrelsome women), experiencing dehumanising treatment and inhumane employer attitudes, and encountering breaches of contract. These experiences will be discussed in detail.

4.1 Theme 1: Handling inconsiderate children and family members

It was revealed that the relatives and children of the wealthy in some Arab families are raised and treated in a way that always allows them to have their way. They were very difficult to deal with and made the work extremely frustrating. Sullivan noted during the interview:

The children in my employer’s home made my life at home very difficult. They would make the place I had just cleaned dirty, and I would have to clean it again all the time. Their parents would never reprimand them, and I was not permitted to beat or advise them in any way. Sometimes these kids would pour oil on the floor and call me in the sitting room to serve them juice, only for me to fall down, and they would begin laughing at me and teasing me in a weird way.

The nature of inconsiderate children in Saudi Arabia was confirmed by Rinah:

The children were not helping with chores in any manner, yet they were mature but very disrespectful; I would clean the utensils for the entire family, prepare clothes for the parents, arrange clothes for their grown-up children, iron clothes and choose panties and knickers.

A similar harrowing experience was narrated by Prissy:

My madam would send children to beat me for no reason or to purposefully dirty up the spot that I had just cleaned so that I could clean again. At first, I would warn them until I was totally beaten by madam, never to yell at her children; and she would punish me for reporting her children to their father. Trying to make them my friends so they would stop torturing me aborted. The kids used to beat me beyond human understanding without a justified reason.

Assia, who worked in Saudi Arabia from 2016 to 2017, could not forget the experience with the children:

The kids in the house were very bad-mannered and inconsiderate and no one was allowed to discipline them. My Sri Lankan colleague told me that their kids were treated like gold and that there was no way one could touch their children; otherwise, one would invite hefty punishment.

Dina noted that children are another challenge that a migrant domestic worker must contend with:

Immediately after I reached the home where I was going to work, the children began disturbing me. They were aged between 10 and 25, and there were seven in total. They would call me names like monkey and would intentionally dirty the places I had cleaned and call me to clean again, and one time I disciplined one of them, they almost killed me.

It is clear from the above findings that most of the returnees worked with tough and problematic families, which made their work extremely difficult, especially when dealing with unruly children. Their bosses treated them without care for their wellbeing and dignity. From the secondary data, it is also evident that many Filipino domestic workers and Sri Lankan domestic employees faced similar experiences, working in slave-like conditions for aggressive employers in the Middle East (Sinha 2021). Moors & De Regt (2008) reported that migrant domestic workers worked long hours, did not receive full compensation (or any money at all), and did not have a place to rest, yet family members would disturb them. Furthermore, numerous cases of abuse have been documented in Middle Eastern countries throughout the years of migrant domestic service (Kavurmaci, 2022).

4.2 Theme 2: Poor accommodation

Poor accommodation was another unpleasant experience that domestic workers faced. This was noted by Flower:

I was working for an old woman, but I decided not to renew the contract with her as much as she begged me because she made me sleep on the ground in the sitting room with the AC on for three months where I would just cover myself with a carpet.

Similarly, Dina lamented:

I was sharing a room with a 16-year-old mentally ill boy, and they would ensure to lock the room every night. I started fearing that the boy would one day rape me. I prayed to God to protect me because the boy looked deadly.

Plinnery had her experiences too and it was very strange to her:

My boss did not have a house, and we would keep sleeping in people's homes where I never had a room to call mine. She bought me a small travelling mattress, which I would fold and move with every time we were moving to her relatives and friends, and I would unfold it from the sitting room or any place the hosts provided me so that I could sleep. In the second home where I worked, they offered me a small room that did not have a window, and there were no ventilators I almost died of suffocation.

Amil did not enjoy the sleeping quarters and bedding materials for once but she did not have a choice:

On arrival, Hajati showed me an empty small room as my bedroom, but it was very tiny and empty. So, my male boss took me to the shop to buy a mattress and blanket. He bought for me the smallest mattress, which I brought and put down in a very tiny room. They never provided me with bed sheets. I slept like that for two years.

However, some few returnees' domestic workers had good accommodation experiences. Nasumba noted:

My sleeping quarters and the bed were very fine and comfortable. I would wake up at 8:00 a.m. and go back to bed at 10:00 a.m. I could have had a lot of chores to do, but my sleeping place was better than what I had in Uganda, and I would have had a good rest at night.

Poor accommodation, including the lack of bedding, sleeping in unsuitable living conditions, and sharing rooms with young men, is a distressing ordeal experienced by domestic workers upon their return. In some cases, the bedsheets, mattresses, and beds provided were insufficient, leaving several workers with no choice but to sleep in living rooms without any covering. Some resorted to using carpets as makeshift blankets or even slept on the floor, exposing themselves to dangers such as rape or suffocation at the hands of male employers. Recognising the significance of suitable sleeping arrangements, Pandey et al. (2021) emphasised that migrant domestic workers must have adequate rest, a comfortable mattress, and appropriate covering based on the prevailing weather conditions in a particular country in order to perform their duties effectively. However, earlier reports from Human Rights Watch and the Joint International Law Program (2006) highlight similar experiences in Singapore, where some migrant domestic workers were compelled to sleep in storage rooms, laundry areas, closets, or common living spaces like the living room, kitchen, or hallway. Bal (2017) also documented cases in Malaysia, where Indonesian domestic workers slept in kitchens, bathrooms, and even on staircases. Many migrant domestic workers were provided with substandard, unhygienic, and insecure sleeping arrangements, disregarding their dignity, privacy, and personal safety (Menegatti, 2016). Furthermore, they often lacked proper bedding or covering (Arcury et al., 2004). In some instances, employers would lock the workers' rooms until the next morning. Consequently, certain migrant domestic workers were confined to hazardous sleeping quarters overnight, putting their personal safety at risk (Buller et al., 2015). Similar to the experiences shared by returning migrant workers, Human Rights Watch (2017) observed that if rooms were not secured, female workers were vulnerable to harassment, while sharing rooms with adult males exposed them to sexual exploitation. Meanwhile, migrant domestic workers forced to sleep in shared spaces faced the risk of harassment and assault from male colleagues, supervisors, or even their own sons (Papadakaki et al., 2021). Unsafe sleeping arrangements can have severe consequences for the lives of migrant domestic workers, as female workers may be exploited by male employers and sons, potentially resulting in pregnancy (Chan et al., 2023).

4.3 Theme 3: Feeding challenges

Adjusting to the feeding patterns and diets of Saudi Arabia is a challenge for migrant domestic workers. This was noted by some returnee migrant domestic workers during in-depth interviews, like Sullivan, who said:

The food Hajati used to serve was always strange to me. They used to serve Arab bread and rice, which were always pepperish, and I was not used to taking that dish. It was hard to finally adapt to their food.

Nasumba revealed that she was troubled by the food, which all looked like nothing she was used to:

Their food was strange to me nothing like the matooke and cassava that I was used to enjoying in my homeland. Apart from that, the tradition of the home where I was employed was that food would be served on a round

plate (Lusitania), and my bosses would eat first and would give the children to eat, and finally, they would give me to eat too, but I used not to feel comfortable eating that food. It would look like I am eating leftovers; therefore, I spent about two months without eating that food until I told Hajati to keep serving me separately, which she complied with after a long period of convincing her.

Flower had a different experience where the employer totally denied her the pepperish food and bread served in Saudi Arabia:

The worst experience I encountered with my second employer who happened to be female is that she denied me food; she would lock the fridge and when she cooked, she would leave her kitchen locked and I use to survive on the remnants stuck at the bottom of the saucepan then after that I would drink water from the tap.

Amil had a similar story to tell about being denied food by the employers even when she was there working for them:

They denied me food all the time. They would cook when they were around, and they would give me little and lock their kitchen and fridge whenever they were going out. I would remain home without food, and Madame would check her food every time she returned to see if I had touched it. To avoid starving so much, I would eat fruits from the tree in the compound and drink water from the tap.

However, a senior officer from UAERA explained the feeding processes and how food is served in Saudi Arabian homes, which is cultural rather than intentional:

Arabs use lusaniyas (round, big serving plates) while eating, where all people in the home must eat from that plate according to the position they occupy in the home. The man (Haji) eats first, followed by the wife, children, and maids later. This could be the reason why Ugandan migrant domestic workers think they are given leftovers since they eat last due to the position they occupy in a family, but it is not intentional; it is cultural.

The cultural aspect discussed by the UAERA official provides informative insights, albeit it can be quite shocking for individuals outside of that particular culture. Previous studies have also indicated that migrant domestic workers face genuine hardships, including starvation, which compels them to resort to stealing food. If caught, they often face harsh punishments, or they must rely on the compassion of their neighbours and other individuals (Kaufmann et al., 2010). Pisillo Mazzeschi (2021) rightly emphasises that food and water are basic human needs that should be accessible to all individuals, regardless of their financial background, social class, or race. However, the literature consistently confirms that food insecurity is a significant challenge faced by migrant domestic workers worldwide. Begum (2016) asserts that these workers are often denied or deprived of adequate nourishment and are provided with insufficient or spoiled food. Menengatti (2016) agrees that food scarcity is one of the most pressing issues experienced by domestic migrant workers, further highlighting their marginalised position within households.

4.4 Theme 4: False accusations

Some returnees affirmed to have faced the challenge of false accusations. Plinnery narrated:

The unfortunate thing happened when I decided to buy a phone using the money I had made from the previous house. When my new boss lady took me to the shop, she realised I had bought a phone worth one million Uganda shillings (300 dollars), and from that time on, she got annoyed, claiming I had stolen her money, yet I did not and she hated me with passion.

Prissy was always mistreated by Hajjati based on false accusations:

One day Hajjati was busy beating me without a justified reason, and when the man reprimanded her, that how could she commit a heinous crime during Ramadan? The woman concluded that her husband was having sex with me, and from that time on, the woman made life hell for me. Yet it was not true at all, and this made her to make my life a living hell.

The remarks from the UAERA Chairperson clarified some of the accusations that are always raised against domestic workers:

In some cases, workers may be accused of stealing or assaulting mama (mother) and children. When the employer reports the worker to the police, the worker is immediately arrested, and cameras are retrieved from the house to determine the truth. If there is evidence, the worker is charged in accordance with the laws of the land. When a Ugandan worker is arrested, the embassy employee in Riyadh is facilitated to find out the crimes committed. If it is theft, one will spend five years in prison; one must serve the whole sentence unless or if the employer accepts to be compensated. If she beats Hajati and is willing to forgive, all is well. No sharia law cases have been identified among Ugandan migrant domestic workers, for example, killing someone because of a crime committed. Long-term cases can be dealt with by two countries, and then initiatives will be made to forgive.

It is evident that while some girls could be falsely accused, others would actually commit the said offences. As such, some domestic workers bore some nasty experiences resulting from false accusations, while others bore the experiences of knowing the truth.

4.5 Theme 5: No rest allowed

Even with all the hard work done within the families, employers did not accord their workers time to rest. Assia noted:

Apart from the usual chores, I would wash cars, and these people never wanted me to rest. Whenever I would finish my work early, they would tell me to go and work at their father's home. The Filipino workers there would want me to rest, but after a few minutes, they would call me back to continue working like a robot.

Sullivan also supported the view that some employers in Saudi Arabia hardly allowed rest for their employees:

In spite of all the work that I was doing, there was no time for rest or a day off given to me to relax; I would work, and it seemed like I was a machine. When it comes to resting, Kadama resting was like a dream to my boss, especially the woman.

Rinah indicated that she too would hardly be given any rest when she was still working in Saudi Arabia:

I had to start work by 5:00 a.m. and work till it was almost midnight. However, I would only be allowed three minutes of rest, and then I would be quickly summoned to work again. It was a very cruel and heartless situation.

Dina was shocked to discover that in Saudi Arabia, rest was on paper and never in reality. She explained:

I used to wake up at 5:00 a.m. and then clean the house, prepare breakfast and clothes for Haji and the children, and wipe the cars clean. When I tried to refer to the contract about rest days, Hajati laughed at me and said, Kadama can never rest, rest. The only resting time was sleeping time, which was like 4 hours, and eating time, which took 10 minutes. Know that migrant domestic workers do not rest.

Prissy had the worst experience during her term of work in Saudi Arabia:

I worked amidst bad treatment and became numb. I would stand from 5:00 a.m. to past midnight working. My feet swelled, and I could not manage to stand on the sink clean the compound, but Hajati said I had to continue working whether I was sick or not. I suffered from COVID-19 four times, but I would still work. God is good to see that I came from that house alive. There was no rest at all.

Amil shared her sad story:

I was working for a family that had a four-storied house. So, I would spend the whole day moving between the homes from the first-level house to the fourth-floor house, working for these people. I do not remember resting apart from when I was going to sleep. Even on Friday, which was supposed to be Juma prayers, I would still work the whole day and night.

Confinement at work was a disturbing experience shared by returnee migrant workers, who indicated that they would sometimes attempt perilous escapes to avoid dangerous employers. Escapes were unsuccessful in some cases, but returnees indicated that it is preferable to remain confined in an employer's home rather than flee on the streets of Saudi Arabia, where one's life is in peril. According to Ho et al. (2022), migrant domestic workers are exposed to forced confinement, prevented from outside contact, and have few, if any, options to seek assistance. Because of these conditions, some employees try risky escapes, leaving many with serious bodily injuries, death, or even mental challenges and being trapped on the streets of host countries. Martin (2021) added that working as a migrant domestic worker is one of the most dreaded and troubling concerns of the twenty-first century, yet little is known about the extent to which they experience abuse and exploitation.

4.6 Theme 6: Phone and internet restrictions

Phone and internet restrictions are another experience that returnee domestic workers had to contend with in Saudi Arabia. These restrictions disabled them from having any contact with their loved ones at home. Flower decried the hazards of not having a phone in a Saudi home:

It is advisable not to agree to work for a family in Saudi Arabia that does not allow you to use a phone. They may want to harm you, and no one will ever know, yet you have no way of telling your people about the danger you are facing.

Additionally, Assia also shared her experience about how careful the employers in Saudi Arabia are about their domestic workers using phones:

The family I worked for was staying in a three-storied house with relatives. We discussed a few things with Madam, who was a teacher, and we agreed on how I would work. She asked me whether I had a phone, and I said yes, but she told me to use the phone only when I was not working; otherwise, she threatened me that she would not hesitate to confiscate it if I were on it all the time.

While Assia was allowed to use her phone when not working, Plinnery and Dina, shared more restrictive experiences:

My boss's mother was so bad that she wanted to withhold my phone, and then we fought over it, I called the agency that had recruited me, they told me to go to the Saudi office and report her so that they could get me another job.

For Dina she had this to say:

One time, madam crushed my phone in protest that I should not be getting a phone when the husband said Kadama (a migrant domestic worker) should be given a right to communicate with her people. Madam thought it was a trick that the husband wanted to use it to communicate with me so that he would cheat on her with me, which was not true.

Phone and internet restrictions not only violated the right to communicate with family members back in Uganda but also significantly opened the door to other forms of exploitation, as there was no means of communication available. Confirming the restrictions, Nasumba noted:

When my employer took me home, she asked whether I had a phone, and I told her I had one. She immediately told me to hand it over to her, which I did. Actually, I did not communicate with my people for close to a year because I did not have a phone, and they never even gave me theirs to talk to my people. However, as much as I begged, I wanted to find out how my children were doing back home. I was given my phone after a year, and that is when I communicated with my people.

However, Shephard said that she was given the opportunity to remain with her phone and use it every time she was not busy:

Actually, I belonged to Kadama's WhatsApp group, where they would share experiences and compare notes on what was happening in their lives as Ugandan migrant domestic workers in the Middle East. Therefore, I used to hear stories of phone confiscation from friends. My employers allowed me to use Wi-Fi all the time I was free.

Most of the returnee migrant domestic workers had their cell phones confiscated by their employers, and those who were spared were denied access to home Wi-Fi, which served as their internet connection. This denied them communication with their families and friends back home. Those whose cell phones were not confiscated initially were ordered to use their phones only when they were free, but since freedom was not granted, they literally did not use their phones. This meant that they were cut off from their friends, family, and the rest of the world. The ILO (2016) report confirms this, stating that some employers severely restrict domestic workers' ability to contact the outside world. Additional experiences from secondary data in support of field findings were shared by Sluspka et al. (2022), who noted that migrant domestic workers are frequently forbidden from using the house phone or receiving and sending letters. Others are discouraged or threatened with physical or other forms of punishment if they are caught talking to neighbours, other domestic workers, or shops. As a result, domestic migrant workers are denied basic rights and are unlikely to function properly (Sonmez et al., 2011). They are unable to interact with their relatives and friends while abroad, which raises a number of concerns (Leghtas, 2014). On the other hand, migrant domestic workers who attempt to break their employers' rules about connecting with people outside the family face serious consequences (Moyce and Schenker 2018). Threats and intimidation are regularly used and often kept behind closed doors to maintain secrecy within the household (Parry-Davies, 2020). Many employers confiscate the passports of domestic workers as soon as they agree to hire them (Parrenas, 2021).

4.7 Theme 7: Heavy workload

The heavy workload emerged as a prominent theme that pervaded the narratives of all the young women who participated in the interviews. Sullivan, for instance, shared her personal account of the overwhelming volume of tasks she was required to undertake while employed under her superiors in Saudi Arabia:

When my boss took me to his house, my madam began giving me instructions and told me about the chores I would be doing at her house. The work was a lot. I even wanted to go back home, but in vain. The only job I was not assigned was cooking, but my daily chores included washing, mopping houses, laying beds for everyone, and doing everything else in the house.

Sharing a similar experience, Rinah revealed:

I would wake up at 4:30 a.m. and begin cleaning the whole house. They had four dining rooms, TV rooms, children's rooms, and a praying room, and all of them were to be cleaned every morning. That aside, those people eat most of the time because I used to wash utensils until I would feel dizzy from the kitchen sink. I washed clothes and towels and developed wounds as a result of my hands being in water all the time. Because of the hot weather, their water was always hot, so the hands would even get burnt since the water would be hot. After washing utensils and preparing lunch, Hajati would wake up at midday to eat and begin watching TV

or be on her phone. Meanwhile, I would go up to clean all the bedrooms, all the toilets which would very dirty, and from there I would start ironing and arranging the clothes in order.

The experience of Rinah was daunting, and is consistent with that of Gift who vowed never to return to Saudi Arabia:

There was too much work, and as if that were not enough, every Thursday, visitors would arrive from different areas of Saudi Arabia to this home. I would work like a donkey since they had to eat, party all night, and sleep. Even after words, there would be a lot of cleaning to do since they never bothered to clean up the place.

The experience of heavy workload in homes was also noted in the interview of Amil:

I was trained by Hajati on how to cook with gadgets, how to wash with machines, and how to cook their foods. After two weeks of training, the real work started. I found the place very dirty, and I started cleaning it; all the carpets were washed by me. All the chores were on my head. I would start with washing girls' knickers and their mother's and they never cared whether they were stained with menstrual blood.

The aforementioned experiences provide strong evidence that many migrant domestic workers silently endure hardships within the confines of Saudi Arabian households, shouldering responsibilities that would overwhelm even a few individuals. The burden of heavy workloads, extensive cleaning in large homes, managing multiple households, and countless domestic chores were shared experiences among all domestic workers. These findings align with existing secondary data. Studies conducted by D'Souza (2010), Spitzer et al. (2023), and Tayah (2016) shed light on concerns regarding the arduous workloads and long hours endured by migrant domestic workers, corroborating the experiences observed in this study. According to Tayah (2016), migrant domestic workers in Africa, America, the Middle East, and Asia often work extended and unpredictable hours, engaging in physically demanding tasks such as fetching water, handwashing clothes, ironing, dishwashing, floor scrubbing and mopping, dusting, grocery shopping, cooking, bed-making, window washing, dog walking, and caring for children and the elderly, among various others. Boris and Fish (2014) examined how the majority of migrant domestic workers toil for fourteen to eighteen hours a day with only a few stolen moments of rest, while Truluck (2023) argued that the workers' descriptions of their typical workday indicate their exhaustion. Compensating for these long hours and heavy workloads should involve adequate remuneration and rest days, yet such compensation is often denied. Begum (2016) pointed out that domestic service is the only occupation in which employees are not granted a day off. According to common misconceptions, granting foreign female domestic workers a day off implies relinquishing control to the employers or allowing them to pursue personal lives, such as dating (Dill, 2015). It is evident that the majority of migrant domestic workers are left physically and emotionally drained as a result of their demanding work (Parrenas, 2021). They perceive their role in Saudi Arabia as solely for work, but are frustrated by the extreme tasks of car washing, cleaning filthy toilets, and laundering undergarments (Brewis & Wutich, 2019).

4.8 Theme 8: Occupational health issues

Many returnees migrant domestic workers faced challenges with their health, as some employers in Saudi Arabia were not mindful of their welfare. Domestic workers suffered without care. One such sad experience was that of Prissy, who suffered during the lockdown and was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, while her employers showed no concern for her wellbeing:

When my contract ended, I was relieved that I was coming back home, but then COVID-19 came, and Uganda was put under lockdown, so the only option I had was to renew my contract. That was the worst of moments for me, and I did not want to go to a new house because my body was emaciated and very weak. As I was still struggling with general weaknesses, I contracted COVID-19 not once but four times, and contracting it from my bosses. They could not take me to the hospital. I would depend on ginger and lemon, and my mental capacities started dwindling. I became a "Zorro" (insane).

Recounting similar experiences, Rinah, who left Saudi Arabia in 2019, having worked for almost three years noted:

I would walk down stairs to clean and wash the lunch utensils, and because of the extreme temperatures in Saudi Arabia, the water from the tank would be extremely hot and boiling, and by the time I finished washing the dishes, the hot water and the detergent would severely burn my hands. I developed wounds, and no one would take me to the hospital or even care, and I still have scars on my hands (the scars were observed), and my grasp is a little shaky. If Hajati detected dust anywhere after I had completed all of the chores properly, she would abuse me, and I would be ordered to go and clean that particular spot immediately, I reached a point where I considered suicide.

In the course of working hard at their jobs, all returnees confirmed that they had faced health-related challenges. Some Arab bosses, who are not so mindful of the welfare of these people, tended to let migrant domestic workers suffer in their homes, which led to serious occupational safety and health issues. As noted by Menegatti (2016) and Moyce & Schenker (2018), occupational health and safety are vital and must be guaranteed to promote and maintain the highest level of physical, mental, and social wellbeing among workers in all occupations. It is essential to protect workers in their employment from hazards that endanger their health, as well as to provide them with occupational environments that are suited to their physiological and psychological capabilities (WHO, 2022).

While the contract signed by domestic workers includes health insurance coverage while at the place of work, findings indicated that a considerable percentage of domestic workers did not have access to health insurance or social security. These insurances would protect them from social risks such as joblessness, pregnancy, working accidents, and occupational diseases (Menagatti, 2016). It is not surprising that migrant domestic workers are among the most vulnerable members of society because they are frequently engaged in what is known as 3-D jobs, which are dirty, dangerous, and demanding (sometimes degrading or demeaning). These workers are often hidden from or invisible to the public eye and public policy (Moyce & Schenker, 2018). They often face human rights violations, abuse, trafficking, and violence while working for less pay, longer hours, and in poorer conditions than non-migrants (Fleury, 2016).

4.9 Theme 9: Multiple work stations

Besides the heavy workload in a single homestead, employers of the returnee migrant domestic workers often moved or even sent them to work for their relatives as well. Assia narrates the ordeal she faced while still in Saudi Arabia:

The family I worked for would sometimes go to visit their relatives, and then they would take me along to work for those families. Sometimes we would go to their village to visit their parents; who had a farm, and whenever we would go there, I would work and even tend to the sheep while there. For this extra work there was no extra money paid.

Assia's experience is also shared by Plinnery, who also clearly recalled having worked in different places for the same employer:

In the first house, the problem was that we did not have a single home; we moved from one place to another, and along the way, I would work for many families that were either related to or friendly to my employer. Some were her sister's and brother's home. But I noticed that one person applied for me as a worker but at the end of the month they would all contribute to raising my salary.

A sad tale was told by Amil, who worked for four different groups of people but was only paid once:

When I arrived, I discovered that the people I was going to work for lived in a four-storied house. The first level housed my employer's parents; the second occupied my boss; the third housed their firstborn, a girl; and the fourth accommodated their son, who was also married and had children. The house was enormous, and I could clean their rooms, make their beds, and assist in the preparation of their meals.

Instructively, Nasumba shared a positive experience about multiple workstations. Although she became very tired of the whole arrangement, she was happy she could make extra cash:

If there were no visitors coming to our home, we would be the ones visiting other homes. Every weekend, we would go see my boss's parents. I would go as a worker rather than a visitor. Perhaps they were aware of what they were doing, but I was not. Though it was exhausting, when I was taken to work at their parent's home, they would sometimes offer me some additional cash, which was incredibly motivating.

The issue of multiple workstations is clearly a challenge for migrant domestic workers, and what makes it a complex situation is that sometimes when the employer is travelling to relatives and friends, the worker may be called upon to go along just for the purpose of making her work at each stopover (Parreñas, 2015).

4.10 Theme 10: Difficult employers

Some domestic workers have recounted harrowing experiences with difficult and complex employers. These experiences can be classified as encounters with contentious women, instances of dehumanising treatment, and encounters with employers exhibiting aggressive attitudes. Domestic workers have vehemently denounced instances of exploitation, particularly when perpetrated by quarrelsome women. Rinah, with a heavy heart, attested to this distressing reality:

My boss was very quarrelsome. I did my job well, but the woman, my God, she was always quarrelling. It was too much. I felt like escaping to a place I did not know. The husband would even ask her why she would even quarrel during Ramadan season and would wonder what type of Muslim she was.

Prissy had the worst experience with a quarrelling madam:

Madam was a bully; she would abuse me throughout the day in her language, and when she saw, I was not bothered because I could not understand well what she was screaming about; she would come and knock me on the head to listen to her abuses. She would sometimes abuse me in broken English so that I could clearly understand the abuses she was hurling at me. Madam had a degree in abusing and fighting. She abused me, and I became immune to the abuse as a result of overdoing it.

Amil also shared the experience of a boss who treated her with scorn;

Madam was hard on me to the extent that one day she told me that "she was not Ugandan, she will never be a Ugandan, she will never admire being a Ugandan, and she will never visit Uganda, so she threatened me that she could do anything to me and no one would ever know. She even threatened to throw me on the streets and abandon me in the desert, and nothing would be done to her. She even reminded me that even though she killed me, nothing would be done to her since my country never cared about silly Kadama (migrant domestic workers).

Experiences of degrading treatment were also shared. For instance, Prissy shared her personal testimony:

They undermined me, and I felt like committing suicide. Hajati was the worst; she could go to the toilet and call me to flush after her; she would send children to beat me or mess up the place I had just cleaned deliberately so that I cleaned again, and at first, I would reprimand them until I was thoroughly beaten up by madam.

A similar horrible experience was shared by Dina, mentioning:

I received all types of abuse while working in that house. It was really painful. The kids would spit in my food and abuse me at every slight chance; the man in that home would quarrel and sometimes would want to molest

me. Madam, know that I was abused in all forms while in Saudi Arabia. Besides, If Madam smoked shisha, the situation would become worse; she would abuse and humiliate me when all family members were present, and they would all laugh.

Explaining such experiences, the UAERA Senior Officer noted:

There are some genuine cases in which domestic workers have been subjected to the most heinous forms of exploitation. This is due to the madam's badness, but not the system; the bad Hajati can deny the workers' basic needs of life, such as food, water, and rest. In most cases, Hajati's attitude towards the girl can change when she suspects that the worker is trying to seduce Hajji and especially when the maid is more beautiful than her. She becomes enraged and wants to protect her man. She will resent the girl until her contract expires, especially if the girl starts passing where Hajji sits to read his paper or drink tea in a towel or a short dress. Therefore, the female employee is expected to dress decently all the time to avoid enraging Hajati, and a young girl should never gaze Hajji or any male child in the home direct in the eyes. That is a sign that she will be seducing them.

Some workers have reported experiencing assaults, including being smacked and hit with objects such as cooking spoons and saucepans. This has resulted in bruises and significant injuries that have gone untreated due to the denial of health insurance, as stated in their contracts. Physical abuse by employers is used both as a form of punishment for errors and as a means of discipline, regardless of the workers' behaviour. According to Pande (2013), incidents of physical violence tend to escalate when workers demand their salaries, request to return to their home countries or assert other rights. In some cases, the severity of the physical abuse is such that migrant domestic workers require hospitalisation or, in the worst-case scenario, succumb to their injuries (Anjara et al., 2017). Since these workers were engaged by authorised registered companies and cleared by the Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development (MoGLSD), it was expected that they would be treated favourably by their employers. However, the secondary findings align with this, indicating that while migrant domestic workers are indispensable and many families cannot function without them, they are often overworked, underpaid, and lack protection (Blackett, 2011).

4.11 Theme 11: Contract breaches

Domestic workers from Uganda are required to sign contracts prior to their departure, outlining the terms of their employment, including their wages, the number of individuals they will be working for, and the specific scope of their responsibilities. Unfortunately, upon their arrival in Saudi Arabia, it was discovered that these contracts were flagrantly violated, with some even being torn up and discarded. As a result, this created an opportunity for exploitation. Dina, when recounting her personal experience, emphasised this distressing reality:

Although I had signed a contract before leaving Uganda, when I reached Saudi Arabia, things were different. The family I was going to work for had many more people than were indicated in the contract, and when I tried to argue, I was told that Kadamas (migrant domestic workers) come to Saudi Arabia to work, not for a holiday, and when I called the company, I was told to sit and work.

Nasumba, who was working as a nursery teacher before she left Uganda, commented that the breach of contracts stood out clearly and plainly when she fell sick, and her employers ignored what the contract dictated:

I used to fall sick, and they would not take me to the hospital, yet it was in the contract. Unfortunately, when I informed my husband to inform the company that the contract was being breached by the employers, they informed him that Arabs have a problem with not respecting the contracts of African workers.

The Director of the recruitment company A confirmed experiences of contract breaches and explained their response and limitations faced in addressing such complaints:

It is true we get complaints of contracts being breached, but it is not really our intention that employers treat workers like that. But, Madam, not all of them are so unfortunate; some land on very good families that are so respectful. If our recruits were near, we would bring them back, but remember, they are many miles away. For the ones whose journey is really bad, we reach out to our company in Saudi Arabia to immediately get in touch with the embassy, and then help is offered, and they get other employers.

The MoGLSD officer also explained the government's response in addressing contract breaches:

As a Ministry, we reach out to cases that have been badly exploited as a result of contract breaches. For example, as a Ministry, we work with the embassy to repatriate girls whose lives are in danger. If a contract stated that a girl was to work and instead, she is turned into a sex slave and the evidence is there, we would work with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Kingdom and bring her back. We even bring back the girls who have been trafficked to other GCC countries like Oman, Jordan, UAE and Dubai.

The findings above suggest that while contract breaches are common in the domestic labour sector in Saudi Arabia, the efforts made by recruiting companies and the government to address these breaches remain limited, despite the labour agreements between the two countries. According to Sarkar (2020), every migrant domestic worker is entitled to a legally binding and enforceable written employment contract in the destination country. Domestic workers are considered employees and therefore have the same rights and labour standards as all other workers (D'Souza, 2010). The relationship between a migrant domestic worker and the employer is often seen as informal, with the employer having more power (Santos et al., 2019). This creates a situation where labour and human rights violations, such as nonpayment or underpayment of wages, excessive work hours without overtime pay, forced confinement, food deprivation, denial of medical care, and physical, sexual, and verbal abuse, can occur (Murphy et al., 2020). A standardised contract questions this notion by clearly defining the domestic worker's status as an employee and specifying the labour standards that must be followed (Varia, 2011). The standardised contract clearly outlines the responsibilities of both the domestic worker (employee) and the employer, which are sometimes omitted in contracts for migrant domestic workers (Khan & Harroff-Tavel, 2011). Recruiters and employers are jointly responsible for any violations of the contract's terms and conditions (Farbenblum, 2017).

Migrant employees often face exploitative working conditions due to frequent violations of labour laws by their employers (Wright & Clibborn, 2019). Many low-skilled laborers are forced to work in hazardous conditions for longer hours than permitted by law, without receiving overtime pay (Cedillo et al., 2019). They may also be denied rest days, annual leave, or return tickets to their home countries. This type of exploitation is sometimes compared to forced labour and human trafficking (Ricard-Guay & Hanley, 2020). For instance, one domestic worker had her contract terminated after six months due to undisclosed health issues, leading to her indefinite deportation. Some workers were sent back to Riyadh offices, while others had to find alternative jobs where they were at risk of further exploitation.

Contract termination occurs when one or both parties have fulfilled their agreed-upon obligations (Choudhary, 2022) and can only be terminated by the signing parties. Often, contracts are terminated without a thorough review of the agreed terms, leaving many migrant domestic workers stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chhour, 2020). Consequently, recruitment agencies must make an effort to communicate the reasons for contract termination to migrant domestic workers (Parrenas, 2021). However, issues surrounding termination, such as termination for just cause by the employer (Epstein, 2013) and the procedural method for termination by the employer (Freed & Polsby, 1989), should be addressed at the beginning of the employment and during contract signing. There also needs to be a provision for employee contract termination for valid reasons (Dela Cruz, 2023).

Despite the unfortunate experiences, some returnees were able to share positive aspects of their time abroad. Some acquired new skills and competencies, and others, working as freelance migrant domestic workers, received additional income or higher wages. These findings support Tayah's (2016) assertion that migrant domestic workers learn new skills and competencies while abroad, including language proficiency, workplace skills, and even entrepreneurial abilities. It is crucial to integrate returning migrants and acknowledge their work experience to enhance their employment opportunities while avoiding deskilling or entering the national domestic work sector, which often lacks fair wages and labour and social protection (ILO, 2016). Support services are also necessary to assist migrants in their job search upon returning to their home countries (Arowolo, 2021). Nevertheless, all returnees emphasised that their salaries were paid on time and deductions were minimal.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The lived experiences of Ugandan migrant domestic workers primarily reflect the reality of exploitation despite the presence of the Kafala sponsorship system, bilateral labour agreements between Uganda and Saudi Arabia, and Uganda's regulatory frameworks. Nonetheless, some minimal instances of responsibility and care from employers were also reported. Within employers' homes, workers often face various challenges, including sexual harassment, multiple workstations, physical abuse, heavy workloads, inadequate accommodation, and denial of basic needs such as healthcare and food. The contracts themselves put migrant domestic workers in a vulnerable position, leaving them with little choice but to accept the imposed limitations, thereby endangering their lives.

Furthermore, public awareness campaigns are considered effective in establishing new social standards regarding acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in relation to working hours, salaries, workplace safety and health, and aggression and harassment. Another recommendation is to evaluate and revise traditional employment contracts, which should clearly outline the rights and obligations of domestic workers in accordance with international labour standards, particularly Convention No. 189. Moving forward, it is crucial to incorporate domestic workers into Kafala reforms, such as the elimination of the "no objection certificate." This certificate obliges workers to obtain their employer's permission to terminate the contract or change employers, even without evidence of abuse or noncompliance with the contract, which is often challenging to prove in practice.

6. Declarations

Funding: The study received funding from the Directorate of Research and Graduate Training (DRGT) at Kyambogo University, Uganda.

Acknowledgements: The completion of this article was made possible thanks to the support of various individuals and institutions. We extend our sincere gratitude to them. Special recognition is given to the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development, the Uganda Association of External Recruitment Agencies, the returnee Ugandan migrant domestic workers, and Kyambogo University.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data availability: The data for the study can be found in the body of the work. However, more information is available from the corresponding author on request.

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