

Respondent-Driven Sampling Study of Ugandan Labor Migrants in the Middle East

Context

This briefing note presents a summary of methods, findings, and conclusions from a study conducted by ICF in collaboration with Makerere University in Uganda. This respondent-driven sampling (RDS) study, involving in-person and remote interviews, took place in September through October 2021 to measure the prevalence of human trafficking among all Ugandans who had worked in the Middle East in the past three years, including current workers.

The purpose of this study is to inform Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS)-funded programming intended to combat exploitation of overseas labor migrants. To our knowledge, this study is the first to explore the characteristics of working and living conditions among Ugandans working in the Middle East using a representative sample, as well as the first to offer a prevalence estimate of human trafficking for Ugandans in the Middle East.

Key Findings

Human trafficking

- The majority (89%) of migrants reported experiences consistent with human trafficking and more than one-fourth (27%) of migrants experienced severe exploitation, defined as threats of or actual violence or psychological abuse.
- Both the prevalence of human trafficking (Figure 1) and severe exploitation were lower among migrants who experienced fewer instances of unethical recruitment. Furthermore, regression analysis indicates that with each additional unethical recruitment practice experienced, the odds of both human trafficking and severe exploitation nearly triple.

Recruitment

- Nearly one-third (29%) experienced recruitment linked to debt, and nearly half (47%) paid recruitment fees.
- Migrants who started their jobs in the last year experienced fewer unethical recruitment practices compared to migrants starting more than one year ago.

Working conditions

- More than one-fourth of migrants (28%) lacked a written contract.
- Migrants worked an average of 99 hours per week, and nearly one-third (30%) worked more than 120 hours per week on average.
- Nearly one-third (30%) were exposed to hazardous work without protective gear.

Living conditions

- About one-fourth of migrants (24%) experienced degrading living conditions in mandatory employer-provided housing.

Personal life and liberties

- Most migrants (90%) had had their identification documents held, and 74% of these migrants could not access their documents upon request.
- More than half of all migrants were under constant surveillance at work (58%) and at home (55%).
- More than two-thirds of migrants (69%) lacked either freedom of movement or freedom of communication due to employer restrictions.

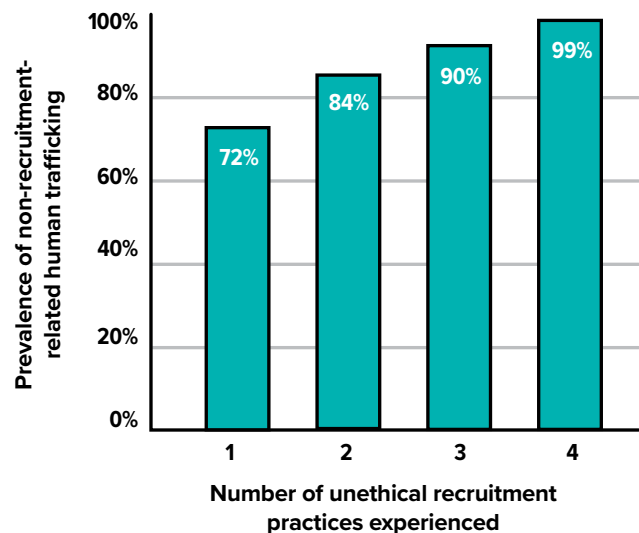
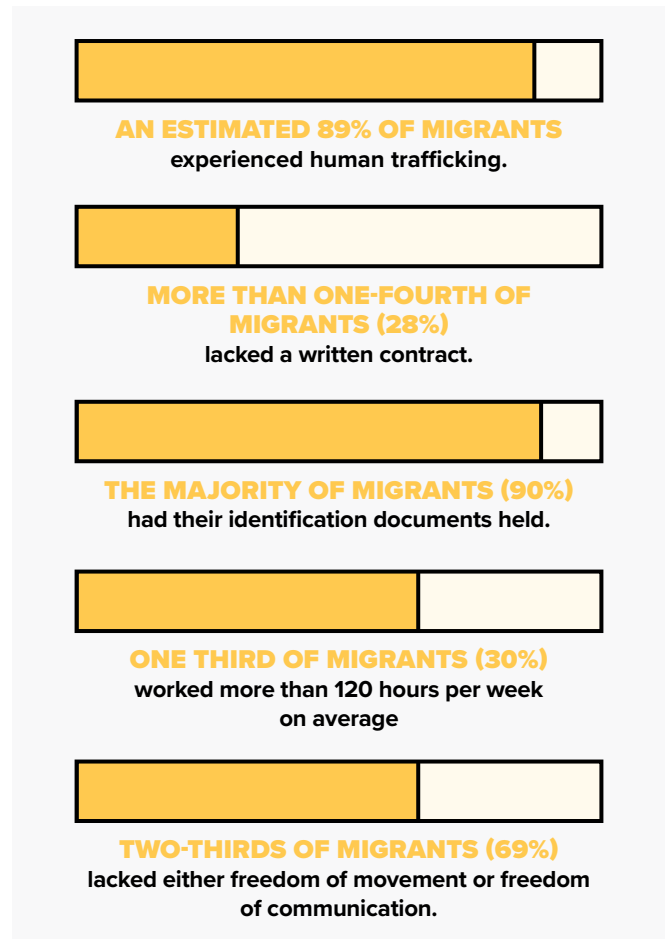


Figure 1. Prevalence of non-recruitment-related human trafficking by number of unethical recruitment practices experienced (weighted)

Methodological Approach

The sample was recruited using RDS, a network-based sampling method that overcomes the traditional biases associated with similar approaches (e.g., chain-referral and snowball sampling) by approximating probability sampling methods and allowing for the calculation of selection probabilities and survey weights. The RDS weights reflect the varying sizes of respondents' social networks as established in RDS theory, which adjusts for recruitment biases. Initial respondents in an RDS study (i.e., seeds) are recruited through convenience sampling methods. Each of these seeds recruits peers by referral, allowing researchers to access members of typically hard-to-reach populations who may not otherwise be accessible.

In this study, a total of 29 seeds were enlisted with the aid of government databases, non-governmental organizations, recruitment agency associations, and the personal contacts of the research team. Seeds and other respondents could refer up to four migrants to the study. Respondents were offered a monetary token of appreciation for completion of an interview and for referring other respondents who successfully completed an interview. The final sample includes 408 Ugandans ages 18 or older who were currently working in the Middle East or had worked in the Middle East in the past 3 years. Figure 2 shows the structure of recruitment for this study. The shading indicates the depth of recruitment (waves). The maximum chain length was nine waves.

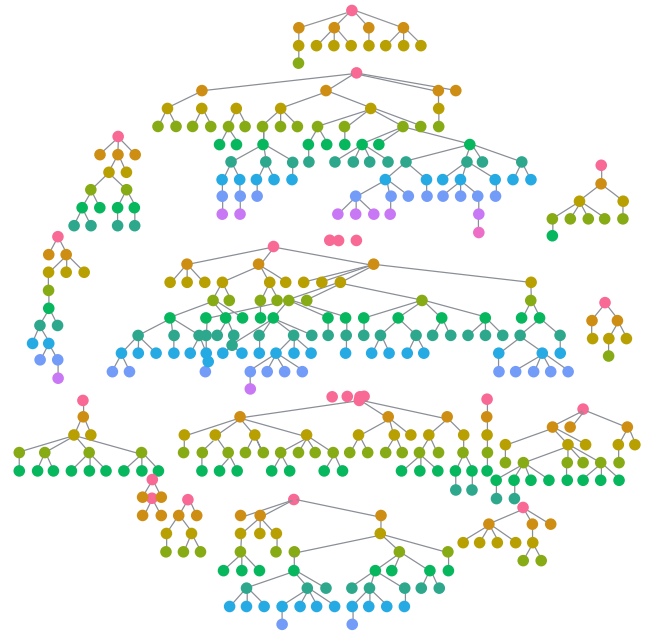


Figure 2. Recruitment Trees Plot

Limitations and Considerations

Data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and changes related to the pandemic may have affected our results. A similar study undertaken before or after the pandemic may yield different findings.

A general limitation of RDS methods is that although weighting compensates for the reduced probability of capturing eligible individuals who are not well connected, the approach cannot cover persons who are not connected at all. In this study, the group of those who are not connected likely includes migrants who are still working abroad who are not allowed to communicate freely. It is likely that our sample of current migrants is skewed toward those with more freedom of communication. Those with more freedom of communication may be treated better overall, which means

that the sample of current migrants may be skewed towards those with better treatment.

Due to logistical constraints, this study had a relatively large number of seeds, and therefore relatively short referral chains. The predominance of females and domestic workers as seeds may have led to an overrepresentation of females and domestic workers in our sample.

Weights and estimates based on RDS are premised on a semi-probability sampling method (at best). Therefore, it is difficult to compute the variance of the RDS sample estimates, including the estimated prevalence. Estimated standard errors involve approximations related to the RDS assumptions.

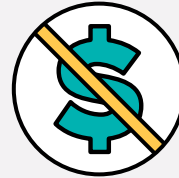
Conclusions and Recommendations

To our knowledge, this study is the first to explore the characteristics of working and living conditions among Ugandans working in the Middle East using a representative sample and the first to offer a prevalence estimate of human trafficking for Ugandans in the Middle East. Likewise, it is one of the first studies globally to include current labor migrants in a study using probability methods to determine prevalence of human trafficking.

Our findings demonstrate that, despite efforts by the government and others to improve recruitment practices and working conditions, many Ugandan migrants to the Middle East continue to experience unethical recruitment and harsh conditions, including abuse, lack of free movement, constant surveillance, and monitored or curtailed communication. However, migrants who started their job within the last year experienced lower rates of unethical recruitment compared to migrants who started more than one year ago. This indicates that overseas recruitment practices in Uganda may be improving; it remains to be seen whether these improvements can be sustained over the long term and whether improvements in recruitment translate into ultimate improvement of welfare for all labor migrants.

This study offers several recommendations for the improvement of recruitment and labor conditions for Ugandan labor migrants to the Middle East:

- The Government of Uganda: Continue efforts to **strengthen the content and application of bilateral agreements** with Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and UAE and to continue to work to establish agreements with other common destination countries. We encourage the government to empower Ugandan Labour Attachés in Middle Eastern countries to provide meaningful and timely assistance to migrants experiencing exploitation. We recommend more stringent enforcement of The Employment (Recruitment of Uganda Migrant Workers Abroad) Regulations, 2005. These regulations make clear that recruitment agencies have an obligation to ensure



**OVERSEAS LABOR
RECRUITMENT AGENCIES**
to abolish recruitment fees



**STRENGTHEN THE CONTENT
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the welfare of their placements after their departure from Uganda, and it is equally clear from the findings presented in this report that recruitment agencies are routinely failing to meet this obligation. We urge the government to consistently suspend or revoke the license of agencies that fail to meet these obligations.

- Overseas labor recruitment agencies: **Abolish recruitment fees**, ensure all migrants have written contracts, and meet legal obligations for the welfare of migrants once placed in a position overseas.
- Civil society organizations: **Apply pressure on overseas labor recruitment agencies** to meet their mandate and on the Government of Uganda to enforce regulations related to these agencies and to improve its on-the-ground support to workers in the Middle East.
- Governments of countries in the Middle East: **Reform the sponsorship system** to improve the rights of labor migrants. Our respondents described limitations on freedom of movement indicating the sponsorship system continues in the region.



This research was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author[s] and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.

1. For this study, human trafficking is defined by the Palermo Protocol using the guidelines set forth by the African Programming and Research Initiative to End Slavery in Human Trafficking Statistical Definitions: Prevalence Reduction Innovation Forum, July 2020