

# The Impact of International Migration on sub-Saharan African Women to the Middle East

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**ABSTRACT:** Recently, there has been a surge in female immigration from Africa to the Middle East, joining the global movement of migrants, while, constituting the dangers and feminist dilemmas posed by the rise in African women's migration. Sub-Saharan African women face challenges as labor migrants in the process of leaving their home countries to the Middle East in search for job opportunities and to better their lives and families. At the center of these challenges have involved extreme dehumanization through slave labor, human trafficking, sexual exploitation while impacting their psychological and mental well being. This study analyzes the various factors that affect the migration and employment of sub-Saharan African women domestic workers in the Middle East, based on both pull and push factors. The work further examines and shows how gender inequalities play a role in shaping women's experiences in migration, and how States/governments in both the Middle East and Africa remain complicit in worsening women's migratory experiences through laws that are being established. This empirical based and theoretical discussion exposes the experiences of sub-Saharan African women through a transnational feminist lens and analysis. Also, it leads to a larger based discussion on transnational feminism and how we can construct a transnational platform that draws attention to the relationship between globalization and the international division of gendered labor. My overarching goal through this study is to draw attention to pursuing and expanding our discussions on feminist migration studies through diverse perspectives that are directed towards the empowerment of women in Africa in particular, and around the world in general.

**KEYWORDS:** Domestic labor, Gender, International Migration, Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, Women

## Introduction

Very few people have known about the movement of African women working as domestics in the Middle East as most of the discourse on migration to this part of the world has often focused on Asian women. In recent years, countries like Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates and the Gulf States have not only witnessed, but have become common destinations for women and girls from Africa, in search of a better life. The United Arab Emirates and the Gulf States have attracted a number of African females to take up paid domestic work with a huge number coming from East Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya) and recently Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe have joined the moving trend. While many migrant women continue to look to the Middle East as an emerging destination of opportunity, more and specifically sub-Saharan African women have been put at the center of the horrific phenomenon of trafficking as they transition borders. Within the context of sub-Sahara Africa, slave labor is increasingly on the rise for women in the last few years. In addition, the conditions that affect women's mobility in sub-Sahara Africa are myriad and have consisted of push and pull factors determined by forces of globalization. Women in Africa, despite their education, continue to suffer poor living standards and unemployment as compared to their male folks whether in the urban or rural areas. African women in particular, are profoundly affected by the Continent's deteriorating macro economic situation and deepening poverty. Women's difficulties range from poor working conditions and wages to discrimination and sexual violence. Most of the problems faced by the mass of poor working women on account of sexual discrimination tend to be hidden because of the disabilities

arising from poverty, lack of productive assets, ownership, and lack of credit. Gender-based violence remains pervasive, increasingly intertwined with situations of conflict and the precarious economic situation that includes new forms of exploitation, such as trafficking of women and girls (UNIFEM 2002).

According to the International Labor Organization general statistics, “40 million people remain trapped in modern slavery — either forced into labor or marriage, with women and girls accounting for 71% of these victims.” Poverty and unemployment which are the primary aspects of women’s migration from African countries expose the challenges they face within Sovereign economies. In most cases, victims of trafficking are a nearly indistinguishable part of these flows, typically displaced from their communities or motivated by dreams of stability and prosperity abroad.

Mobility remains a central element in discussions on women’s migration and employment as domestic workers. On the one hand, the “feminization of migration”, in which women cross international borders to take up paid work as domestics, indicates an increased mobility of women. However, this mobility is not always voluntarily but can also be forced. On the other hand, the employment of migrant women as domestic workers and the particular ways in which they are employed, often implies severe restrictions in women’s mobility, both in the houses they are employed in as in the countries they work and live in (see Moors 2003, 387-388). While women move, and are moved, for a variety of reasons – political, socio-economic, and environmental, among others – traditional gender inequalities have a great influence over when, where, and how women migrate. A woman may move from her home country partly because she believes that a better life awaits her elsewhere, but also upon request, because of her conditioned cultural subordination to male authority. Not to over emphasize, for women who migrate from sub-Saharan Africa is due to economic lack and the gender division of labor. While in destination countries, their strength is limited as they find themselves wanting, placed in vulnerable positions, with their bodies being taken advantage of.

The objective of this study is to explore and investigate the impact of international migration on sub-Saharan African women experiences to the Middle East. By situating the African woman within the context of international migration, the focus is to elucidate the driving factors that expose women and young girls to be victims of slave labor, human trafficking, poverty, sexual abuse, exploitation, and gender inequalities in both their home country and country of destination. Furthermore, this study highlights the significant role of other agents of power such as recruitment agents, the state and the government through their rules and regulations. And how migrant workers’ mobility is in several ways affected by state policies and practices. The overarching goal of the study is to raise awareness that domestic and international issues affecting women are interdependent. And to increase understanding that those issues often defined as “women’s issues” are, in fact, “human issues” of equal importance to men and women.

## **Methodology**

In this study, I observe and use the interview of a female migrant, and an expert on human trafficking in Cameroon, of the Central African region. The victim exposes her challenges which begins right from recruitment in the process of migrating to the Middle East. The interview provides the foundation to determine and confirm the obstacles that affect women’s well-being. Also, the interview is used in course of the analyses to show the extent to which policy has benefitted women, if at all, and what issues still persist. Themes evident in the female migrant experiences will be discussed in line with relevant literature which will be conducted in light with a transnational feminist framework. The study will show lack of job opportunities for women,

limited income and false promises made by brokers as the major factors drawing women into human trafficking. The findings apply to the fact that even after return, the victims experience further difficulties due to post-traumatic psychological factors. The significance of the research outcome will be gleaned information that could be of value for organizations working on migration and countering human trafficking.

### **Theorizing within Transnational Feminism**

This study applies transnational feminism as a model for feminist theory and practice in the discourse of globalization as ingrained in the process of female migrant labor. Transnational feminism has made significance achievements as a social movement, however, I will demonstrate the ways in which transnational feminism as theory—advanced in particular. (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 16-17), whose work has been considered “canonical” by some feminist scholars’ asserts that transnational feminism’s utmost importance is to “address the concerns of women around the world in the historicized particularity of their relationship to multiple patriarchies as well as to international economic hegemonies”. Transnational feminism, then, embraces the constitutive ideas of Third World feminism: It not only emphasizes careful and historically situated analyses of Third World women’s oppression and resistance, but also recognizes the importance of being attentive to “viewpoints of feminists from various locations around the globe” (3). Given the urgency to form “global alliances” in order to counteract “global capitalist processes, (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xxix) have argued for “a comparative, relational feminist praxis that is transnational in its response to and engagement with global processes of colonization. They recognize that “a focus on the state seems . . . crucial” especially in Third World contexts, given the entanglements among Third World women, global capitalism, and Third World nation-states (xxiii). Yet, in short, they are pointing toward “transnational feminism” (xxix). Mohanty’s shift to transnational feminism has crucially to do with her acknowledgment that “the politics and economics of capitalism [is] a far more urgent locus of struggle,” given “that global economic and political processes have become more brutal, exacerbating economic, racial, and gender inequalities.” Therefore, Mohanty’s “focus now” is on “anticapitalist transnational feminist practice” that concentrates on the “critique of global capitalism (on anti-globalization)” (Mohanty 2002, 509). Transnationalism is both a category that captures particular kinds of processes and a perspective on the world that is embedded within relationships of power. It allows us to form new conversations to address women’s needs, in which I locate African women within this discourse of “Third World Women” through a transnational perspective, that supports and encourages women at the margins of society by amplifying their voices. I limit the analyses to African women in this context specifically rather than Third World women in order not to generalize struggles as the experiences of all women and even Third World women around the globe may differ in one way or the other. But, while still focusing on their struggles, oppression and resistance which intertwine with “disciplinary power” in the global world.

The concept of “disciplinary power” is what (Foucault 1980, 201) has come to describe as the study of migrant women workers vis-à-vis the “other” – employers, state agents, friends and others – that migrant workers interact with. This includes foregrounding of class, race-ethnicity and nationality in understanding the extent to which discipline and the application of power impact on the kinds of resistance strategies used. Transnational feminism here helps us to mirror the realities of the African woman’s struggle in an in-between world that portray the other side of migration and its consequences. Through migration, the African woman has to deal with human trafficking, oppression, sexual abuse, exploitation, unpaid forms of labor/slavery which are all themes that will be analyzed in the study. These issues help to engage urgency and advocacy on how we can transform women’s

lives and build better African societies. It exposes the barriers limiting women's progress and their everyday social struggles which forces them to emigrate in the first place. These struggles for women arise in the growing inequality and the feminization of poverty which remains the central challenge of the contemporary African society, today. Boyce (1994, 16) and Filomina (1981, 28), from an African Feminist standpoint assert that the African woman's narrative and viewpoints are routes to understanding her experiences. It sought to bring understanding and recognition to the African woman's place in globalization, as it seeks to place her at the center of global discourse, whether as an actor or a non-participant. African feminism aligns with transnational Third World feminist concepts to explore the inscription of the African woman on the continent and abroad.

Furthermore, feminism which embodies of other forms of feminisms such as transnational feminism and African feminism have engaged with major cultural, political, economic trends associated with recent processes of globalization, and its weaknesses. Globalization which has come to represent the interests of corporations and the free market rather than those of individuals' self-determination, has created new political, cultural, and economic domination for the world's disenfranchised peoples. The project of Empire building, along with the growing dominance of corporate capitalism, disenfranchises and impoverishes women, and leads to various kinds of border crossings (Marciniak, Imre, & O'Healy 2007, 14, 22). Many feminist scholars have agreed that there is a global culture of domination that works at the expense of women. In Gamble's words, "the state of economic, political and technological flux which characterize modernity presents opportunities and dangers for [Africa] women" (Gamble 2002, 54). Women resist interlocking systems of oppression based on gender, race, class, nationality and sexuality, or what scholar Patricia Hill Collins has referred to as the 'matrix of domination' and employ different strategies to do so. Within such a framework any resistance that only targets one of those systems of oppression, such as gender, leaves in place the other systems of oppression (Pratt 2012, 18-23). Scholars of migration and globalization studies have argued that states promote transnational capital accumulation through the active promotion of migration between nations with surplus labor and those facing labor shortages. The wealthy nations seek workers while the immigrants from poor nations get the jobs for little or no pay. This is because the poor are taken advantage of while the rich thrive. The analysis of how states are implicated in the production of particular gendered migration and labor processes enriches our understanding of international migration that previously, for the most part, has tended to conceptualize the state in "gender neutral," implicitly masculinist terms. Transnational feminism in particular continues to shape the emerging paradigms of global and migration discourses for women. By understanding the situation of such women (emigrants) is key strategic move in grasping the dynamics of capitalism in a global context Transnational feminist approach gives a relational understanding of global capitalist processes through an analysis that starts from the lives of those marginalized (Hartsock 1985, 12).

Theorizing women's lives and experiences of emigrant economic/slave labor and oppression helps us see some of the most abusive fundamental dynamics that support global capitalism. It helps to locate those at the margins of society within the intellectual sites in the academy, and draws attention to the relationships between power, knowledge and production on these issues. Theorizing within transnational feminism helps to transcend the in-between world and builds on the intersections of imaginaries and beyond, of borders, identity, race, class and disparities of the marginalized and the privileged. As globalization remains a central challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It exposes the many reasons for migration and exploitation. I consider this study a work of transnational feminism, overlapping the foreign and the domestic, as it interrogates the rhetoric's of global equality and progress.

## Migration and the Middle East

One of the ways societies influence each other economically, politically, and culturally is through international labor migration, which also has distinct gender-specific effects. In the Middle East and North Africa, oil-fueled development encouraged labor migration from labor-surplus and capital-poor economies to capital-rich and labor-deficit oil economies. For example, there was substantial Tunisian migrant labor in Libya, Egyptian and Palestinian migrant labor in the Gulf emirates, and Yemeni labor in Saudi Arabia. This migration affected, among other things, the structure of populations, the composition of the households, and the economies of both sending and receiving countries. Many of the oil-rich Gulf states came to have large populations of noncitizens, and female-headed households proliferated in the labor-sending countries. During the years of the oil boom, roughly until the mid-1980s, workers' remittances were an important factor in not only the welfare of families and households but also in the fortunes of economies such as Jordan's and Egypt's. Labor migration may be functional for the economies of the host country (in that it receives cheap labor) and the sending country (in that unemployment is reduced and capital inflows through workers' remittances are increased); emigration, especially of professionals (the so-called brain drain) also may be advantageous to receiving countries. Like exile, however, labor migration and emigration have other consequences, including social-psychological, cultural, and political effects.

### Recruitment/The '*Kafala*' System

Most sub-Saharan Africa women who left their home country for the Middle-East went through a visa-sponsorship program established by particularly the Gulf States known as '*Kafala*'. The *kafala* or sponsorship system consists of the laws governing migrant workers' immigration to and legal residence in countries in the Middle East—primarily Gulf countries (Migrant-rights.org). *Kafala* is a system of control. In the migration context, it is a way for governments to delegate oversight and responsibility for migrants to private citizens or companies. The system gives sponsors a set of legal abilities to control workers: without the employer's permission, workers cannot change jobs, quit jobs, or leave the country. If a worker leaves a job without permission, the employer has the power to cancel his or her residence visa, automatically turning the worker into an illegal resident in the country. Workers whose employers cancel their residency visas often have to leave the country through deportation proceedings, and many have to spend time behind bars (Migrant-rights.org). Also, the *kafala* system has been more complex for Third World immigrant workers from Africa, as most seeking visas to the Gulf states indirectly deal with some kind of recruitment agent who claims to be connected with companies in the receiving country, and seeking for employees from the third World. Most of these agents are frauds and human traffickers who are very dishonest but succeed into convincing and encouraging most women to travel to the Middle East. With the need to transform their lives, many are bought and sold as recounted by a victim;

“Susan left the country for wealthy Kuwait. A recruiter told her she would have a well-paying job upon arrival. Susan's family agreed to go into debt with the recruiter to pay for airfare and other associated expenses. Once in Kuwait, a member of the recruiter's network confiscated her passport, mobile phone and other personal documents and took her to the home of a wealthy family where Susan had to work long hours with little food. “I wake up at 5 a.m. and go to bed at 1 a.m., at times no food”. “I told them I don't want to work again and want to return to my country. This woman said I am going nowhere, I have come to work I must work.”

Beatrice Titanji, Vice President of Cameroon's Trauma Centre for Victims of Human Trafficking, says modern-day slave markets can be found throughout the Gulf states. “They

actually have booths as you would have in the market, and they are sold and bought for domestic service,” says Titanji. “So, they move them to their various owners as negotiated before, because there are linesmen here in Cameroon who actually negotiate, get money, sell them at higher prices, sell them depending on the outlook of the victim as it happened 200 years ago during slave trade. Our children are sold and bought today in the Middle East.” This shows that for most women migrants, the struggle doesn’t just begin in Kuwait but from their countries of origin and governments that stay complicit in the exploitation of their women. De Regt (2007, 10) further highlights in her work that, women who migrate via (illegal) recruitment agencies as contract workers are generally seen as the most unfavorable, both in Kuwait as all over the world. Their mobility is often severely restricted because they are not allowed to leave the house of their employers unaccompanied and they may be locked inside the house in order to prevent them from running away or meeting compatriots. In addition, they may be denied basic human rights such as a good place to sleep and good food, and they may work under exploitative conditions with hardly any time off and be confronted with physical, mental or sexual abuse. Bales (2004, 20), has coined the term “contract slavery”. He portrays that contracts are offered that guarantee employment but when the workers are taken to their place of work, they find themselves enslaved, threatened by violence, lacking any freedom of movement and paid nothing. “The contract is used as an enticement to trick an individual into slavery, as well as a way of making the slavery look legitimate” (ibid). Without denying the extent to which contract workers are vulnerable to human rights violations, it is important to pay attention to the differences between women and to their agency before using the term contract slavery. “contemporary domestic workers’ experiences vary widely, even within the same state, so while some might seem to be formally enslaved, others quite clearly are not” (Anderson 2000, 128). The fact that contract workers and deceived women do have agency come.

Human rights groups have also argued for the ‘*kafala*’ system in Middle Eastern countries to be dissolved as the migration management system enables exploitation and forced labor—labor extracted by under the threat of penalty, and not offered voluntarily by the worker. The media have likened employment conditions under *kafala* to modern-day slavery. The International based Human Rights Advocacy Organization-Stop Violence Against Women says that; women and girls are typically trafficked into the commercial sex industry, i.e. prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation. Not all slaves are trafficked, but all trafficking victims are victims of slavery.

According to IOM (2003, 61), the trafficking of women and children has developed into one of the most disastrous features of contemporary global migration in which as many as two million people are estimated to be trafficked every year, lured by promises of well-paying jobs. Many victims, willingly, but unknowingly, accept the services offered by traffickers without realizing the full implications of future employment or the conditions under which they will work. According to Human Right Watch (2010, 11), Lebanese families employ an estimated 200,000 migrant domestic workers primarily from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Nepal, who are not protected by law. In addition, Human Right Watch report (2007, 9-20) labor laws of Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) give minimal legal protection to migrant domestic workers. The report further indicated that women domestic workers in an unregulated and undervalued job sector are at high risk and face abuse and various forms of exploitation. As Tekle and Belyneh points out, the travels of female migrants are often arranged in such a way that it exposes them to challenging situations at the different stages of their journey, as well as to risks of becoming victims of human trafficking, which may well lead to permanent psychological damage (Tekle & Belayneh 2000, 1-5).

The “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children,” is the first international consensus definition of the problem. The Protocol gives a holistic definition of "trafficking in persons" as: the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. In response, governments in the region have repeatedly promised to abolish or reform the *kafala* system. Despite these promises, meaningful change in the system always remains just over the horizon, with only slight and halting reforms in a few of the Gulf countries (Migrant-rights.org).

### **Domestic Labor and Social conditions of foreign domestic workers**

Foreign domestics are on the lowest rung in the hierarchy of unskilled workers in the Middle-East. They work in the individual homes of their employers away from the prying eyes of the public. Documented domestics go through a very stiff hiring procedure from the very beginning. Their employment visa stipulates a 1-2years contract; they are employed under the name of the employer that appears on their passport and must reside at the same address. Visas and work permits are tied to specific employers, as in the Middle East, and the fees for them are paid by the domestics through monthly salary deductions. This situates the sub-Saharan African woman as a paid worker within the context of an employer/employee relationship and the broader relationships affecting agents of power. It focuses on what is happening within the domestic sphere of the household, the unequal relations taking place outside the homes, and how workers respond to subordination and domination. In her article (Lumayag 2018, 162-166) argues that migrants are active participants in the changing structure of power because they may be conscious or unconscious players in their subordination and subjugation, as well as in their “liberation” from those with power. Within the context of women’s paid domestic work, power relations are obviously at play. Not only is this a relationship between unequal parties, it is also located in a different social milieu of women workers. The multifarious ways in which women workers respond to disciplinary power constitute an important aspect of power relations; however, it is not enough to simply state that women migrants suffer unequal relations vis-à-vis their employers.

### **Exploitation**

For many sub-Saharan African women migrating to the Middle East, they have shared bitter experiences of torture, exploitation, rape, abuse and forced and free labor. Many turn to understand the reality of their situation once they get to the foreign land, while living with host families including; Confiscation of passport, not allowed to leave the premises, long working hours, payment less than half that was promised, if any, no sick leave, forced to do all household tasks as well as au pair, experience verbal and derogatory abuse and sex trade. A few have managed to escape back to their home country and have shared very disturbing experiences of inhumane treatments filled with regret. International migration has only limited their strength, and has placed them in a more vulnerable and constrained state with their bodies being taken advantage of. The exploitation of Third World women in hard labor has been referred to as ‘disposable bodies’ (Wright, n.d). Third World women could be described as being manufactured during the labor process. The disposable bodies of Third

World women are not the same as the one brought by other women, probably women in the formal sector. They are referred to as “a representation of an array of body parts, like unattached limbs and free-floating heads, that are discursively reassembled into the bodies that meet corporate specification. The truth is most women who migrate, have the intention to get better jobs and be afforded better working conditions to help their family back home, which however turns out to be the contrary. Theorizing for women’s lives and experiences of work and oppression helps us see some fundamental dynamics that support global capitalism.

## Conclusion

While the study exposes us to the impact and constraints in the process of international migration on sub-Saharan African women to the Middle East, the focus is not only to limit us to them, but to put at the center of transnational issues the power and structural dynamics that we must respond to in order to bridge gender inequalities and improve on women’s lives and conditions in Africa. The work on immigration and the state is needed to show gender dimensions of interactions between states and international immigrants. And while at the center of these debates are questions about specific ways that international migrants figure in the particular transformations of states that have arisen in conjunction with processes of global political and economic restructuring, and at the same time revealing through this transformation shifts in globalization ways in which international migration is intimately tied to gendered systems of oppression. It is important that the problematics of migration begin from the standpoints of marginalized people and economic spheres by theorizing from women’s lives and what contributions can be made to them.

Nonetheless, the role of the State in both regions (sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle-East) is crucial in this discourse in raising the issues that impact women’s lives, as I focus on sub-Saharan female migrant workers as subjects of this experience. In view of the above background, the present study is expected to have the following contributions:

1. This study reveals critical ways in which women are affected by migration, with a focus on international migration out of developing (African) countries.
2. This study emphasizes an urgent transformation for women in general and in Africa in particular, while enabling scholars to be agents of change by redefining women’s role as subjects in a changing world.
3. This study contributes to feminist and interdisciplinary perspectives, in an effort to inform, understand, reflect and deconstruct important issues of African woman’s experience in the global world. It is also important to inspire African scholars to be able to redefine new identities for the African continent through contemporary discourses. My perspective pioneers’ new understanding in the fields of gender studies in Africa and the Diaspora, and transnational issue, bringing together the significant threads of a growing body of knowledge in global feminist scholarship.
4. This study may provide valuable information for concerned governmental and nongovernmental bodies, as well as service providers, about the seriousness of the problems faced by female migrant workers.
5. It may contribute to creating awareness and shed more light on the social and psychological challenges female victims are facing. Stakeholders might also be encouraged to develop intervention programs to address victims’ needs;
6. It may serve as an initial reference for scholars, researchers, and stakeholders who might be interested in conducting research at a larger scale on women’s issues in transnational spaces.

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