



Female Domestic work in Ethiopia: Current realities, Perspectives, and Policy Directions

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Executive Summary

Female domestic workers (FDWs) in Ethiopia remain among the most marginalized segments of the labor force. Despite employing thousands women, the sector has long been excluded from national labour proclamations. This policy brief, based on qualitative and quantitative research, highlights the drivers of entry into domestic work, working and living conditions, and patterns of abuse, while assessing institutional and policy gaps. It calls for urgent action, particularly the enactment of the long-delayed regulation under Labour Proclamation 1156/2019.

Introduction

Domestic work is one of the most common forms of paid work for girls and young women in Ethiopia. Despite their significant numbers, female domestic workers remain invisible in public

discourse and policy, as their work takes place within private households and outside formal labor protections. The sector is highly gendered, with women primarily working as live-in cleaners, cooks, and childcare providers. The majority come from rural areas with limited education, further narrowing their opportunities and reinforcing their vulnerability. Against this backdrop, the study aims to generate evidence on the realities and evolving dynamics of FDWs to inform urgently needed policy and legal reforms.

The research employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative tools. Surveys of FDWs were conducted in Addis Ababa and Hawassa with sub-cities selected to represent diverse socio-economic groups. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews with domestic workers, employers, brokers, government officials, NGOs, and rights advocates were conduct-

ed capture the perspectives of FDWs, employers, and other stakeholders.

Key Findings

Entry into Domestic Work: Many FDWs begin employment as early as their teens, with the findings showing an average of 4 years of work experience among respondents. Their entry into domestic work is largely influenced by entrenched poverty, particularly in rural areas, where job opportunities are scarce. Domestic work becomes one of the few available paths to support themselves or their families, often in response to debt, food insecurity, or the death or absence of a breadwinner.

Additionally, many women enter the sector to escape harmful traditional practices such as child marriage, forced marriage, or abduction. In some cases, girls are brought to cities by relatives under the promise of education or better living conditions, only to be subjected to exploitation or forced into domestic work. Although some women report making the decision to enter domestic work on their own, this “choice” is often shaped by lack of viable alternatives, especially for those who are uneducated, orphaned, or from broken homes.

Recruitment and Contracts: The majority of FDWs secure employment through informal intermediaries including brokers, relatives, or friends, who connect them with employers. These facilitators often lack formal registration or training and operate outside any regulatory oversight. The domestic la-

bor market is highly informal, with no standard procedures, little transparency, and minimal protection for workers.

Efforts by Hawassa city authorities to regulate brokers by limiting their services to workers covered under the 2019 Labor Proclamation have unintentionally excluded FDWs, as domestic workers remain outside the scope of the law. As a result, most employment arrangements occur without written contracts. Where documents exist, they mainly serve to protect employers (e.g., against theft), rather than outline employment terms such as job responsibilities, working hours, wages, or leave entitlements. This leaves domestic workers exposed to exploitation, with no formal mechanisms for redress.

Working and Living Conditions: Working conditions are harsh, with FDWs averaging 11-hour days, often without rest, clear job descriptions, or regular leave. On average, live-in workers receive only one day off per month. Live-in workers are particularly disadvantaged, with restricted mobility, communication, and autonomy. While some domestic workers are treated respectfully and provided reasonable accommodations, others report being treated as “machines,” expected to work without breaks or personal time. Employers’ perceptions of their rights over the worker’s time and labor often blur the lines between work and rest, particularly in private homes where oversight is absent. Access to healthcare is limited, and illness often leads to dismissal or withheld wages. Live-out workers, by contrast, experience more defined duties and report fewer

complaints related to working conditions.

Abuse and Lack of Protection

Abuse is widespread—verbal, psychological, physical, and sometimes sexual. Despite the prevalence of mistreatment, few FDWs report abuse due to fear of retaliation, job loss, and lack of institutional support. Many workers remain silent because they fear being dismissed, stigmatized, or accused of wrongdoing themselves.

Recommendations

- **Enactment of regulation:** The exclusion of domestic workers from existing labor laws, coupled with the delay in adopting the promised regulation, has resulted in a significant gap and hindrance in safeguarding the rights of both domestic workers and their employers. Therefore, the Ethiopian government should urgently enact a specific regulation that governs the domestic work sector as stipulated in the labor proclamation 1156/Article 2/c. The prospective regulation should take into account the minimum standards outlined in the ILO Convention 189, while also considering the existing realities and socio-economic context of the country
- **Facilitate the establishment of employment agencies:** the government shall adopt laws and regulations to facilitate the establishment and promotion of formal employment agencies that recruit, train, engage and deploy domestic workers in much the same way as current agencies for security and cleaning services are doing.

The government should also establish and strengthen mechanisms to monitor and oversee these agencies.

- **Support Formalization:** The government should support informal brokers to transition into formal. This could include providing tax incentives and easing the registration and licensing procedures. In partnership with CSOs and development partners, the government should offer technical and financial assistance to informal brokers to register and establish formal employment agencies. Concurrently, efforts should be made to inform and encourage employers to employ domestic workers through these formal employment agencies and formalize their domestic work arrangements.
- **Awareness raising and Capacity Building:** CSOs and the government alike should implement comprehensive public awareness campaigns using various platforms to promote domestic work as a respected profession and foster positive attitudes toward domestic workers, challenging stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination and exploitation. Simultaneously, offer training and capacity-building activities for domestic workers.
- **Empowerment of Domestic Workers:** CSOs should provide capacity building and life skills trainings to domestic workers to empower them. These trainings should focus not only awareness of their rights but also on an understanding of their responsibilities and practical skills to improve job performance.
- **Support Domestic Workers Unions/Associations:** support the formation

of domestic workers associations and unions. Organizing collectively is essential for empowering domestic workers, amplifying their voices and advocating for policies that protect their rights. Also, due attention should be given to develop mechanisms to recruit and support live-in domestic workers to become members of these associations.

Conclusion

Extending labor protections to female domestic workers is not only a matter of social justice but also of national development. Recognizing and regulating domestic work directly supports Ethiopia's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particu-

larly those on gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and reducing inequalities (SDG 10). Protecting domestic workers strengthens social cohesion, enhances women's economic participation, and contributes to poverty reduction. Employers, too, stand to benefit: clear rules and protections foster trust, reduce turnover, and promote more stable and professional employment relationships. By moving quickly to finalize the pending regulation and fostering partnerships with civil society and workers' associations, Ethiopia can align its labor system with international standards while advancing its broader vision of inclusive and sustainable development.

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