

MOTIVES FOR IRREGULAR MIGRATION FROM FERTILE HOMELANDS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF YOUNG FEMALE MIGRANTS FROM GUANGUA WOREDA, NORTHWESTERN ETHIOPIA TO THE MIDDLE EAST

GIZACHEW EMBIALE TESFA & ABEJE BIRHANU TIRUNEH

Abstract

This study explores the primary motives driving females to leave their resource-rich homeland and undertake 'illegal' migration to the Middle East. Employing a qualitative, phenomenological research design, the study gathered data from participants selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Participants included female returnees, families of migrants, local elders, religious leaders, kebele administrators, and officials from relevant local and regional institutions. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, incorporating both primary and secondary sources. Despite being one of the most productive regions in the country, Guangua Woreda has seen a high rate of young female emigration, particularly among those aged 16 to 24 via irregular routes through Sudan, Djibouti, and Somaliland. Despite the painful truths we hear from origin to destination, the scale of illegal migration continues to rise. Findings indicate that insecurity, lack of employment opportunities, and the glamorization of life abroad through media are major push and pull factors. The development of a migration mindset among the youths can be taken as the root of all the factors. Migrants frequently face economic exploitation and sexual harassment both en route and at destinations. The effects of these challenges have been deeply felt, causing pervasive economic, social, and psychological trauma. The situation is further complicated upon forced return, often without any financial gains or support systems. Generally, the depth and severity of this migration pattern remain insufficiently explored, hence further researches are strongly recommended to inform interventions and policy responses.

Keywords: Females, Guangua, illicit migration, motives, Middle East

DOI: 10.7176/JCSD/77-01

Publication date: September 30th 2026

Introduction

As defined by the International Council on Human Rights Policy (2010), illegal (or irregular) migration refers to crossing borders and residing in another country without legal authorization. It occurs outside the regulatory norms of sending, transit, and receiving countries and is often rooted in deep socio-economic and political issues (Human Smuggling and Trafficking Centre, 2006; Ashenafi & Melese, 2020).

In recent times, international migration has become a key characteristic of globalization, affecting virtually every region around the world. As noted by the IOM (2020), the number of international migrants has risen steadily to an estimated 271.6 million people, representing 3.5% of the global population. Africa, a continent often marked by economic and political instability, is no exception to this trend. In fact, cross-border irregular migration has become a significant issue in many African countries (Flahaux and De Haas, 2016). Reports on international migration identify several driving forces behind this rise, including armed conflict, political unrest, environmental degradation, lack of human security, and limited employment opportunities. (Gashaw, 2021) Besides, the report of UNDESA (2020) unveiled that there are more than 281 million international migrants in the world. Among these, over 172 million are migrant workers and 76 million being female migrant workers. In 2020 ILO also estimated that there are around 169 million migrants of whom third are illegal or undocumented migrants (ILO, 2020). Only Sub-Saharan African countries account for most of the international migration with more than 9.1 million migrant workers.

Here in Ethiopia many youngsters have made transits 'illegally' via neighbouring countries to the Middle East every year to seek work in the Middle East (US Department of State, 2015). Though 'illegal' migration is a common phenomenon throughout Africa, investigations on irregular migration in 2011 revealed that Ethiopian irregular migrants represented over 75% of all maritime arrivals in Yemen in 2011. Over 75,000 Ethiopians

arrived at Yemen's coast in 2011 of which about 56,000 of them entered Yemen to get to Saudi Arabia. Findings also reported that, the cumulative number of new arrivals from Ethiopia was estimated to be at least 230,000 over the past six and half years (Danish Refugee Council and the Regional Qualitative Migration Secretariat, 2012). In Ethiopian, cross-border migration, especially irregular migration to the Middle East has become a common occurrence. According to the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat cited on Gashaw (2021), around 200,000 Ethiopian labor migrants legally reside in the Middle East, making up about 30 to 40% of the Ethiopian migrant population in the region. In contrast, an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 individuals, or 60 to 70%, are believed to have migrated illegally. The primary causes of this irregular migration include poverty, hunger, armed conflict, environmental decline, and the presence of smuggling networks.

A number of people leave their homes and families every year in search of economic opportunities. They often make the decision to emigrate based on false information provided by smugglers and brokers regarding the lucrative employment opportunities and better pay abroad or destination countries (Jayagupta, 2009). The migrant, their families and relatives spend considerable amounts of money on 'illegal' migration (ILO, 2011). They even emigrate either by selling their families' scarce resources or by borrowing money from relatives to pay the smugglers and 'illegal' brokers who promise to facilitate their exile until the destination and get decent employment with good pay.

Numerous reasons can be given as contributing factors or causes that lead to migration and 'illegal' migration specifically from Ethiopia. Economic, political, geographic (environmental), and social factors are variables as leading push factors of cross-border 'illegal' migration for most of the Ethiopians. (UNODC, 2008). Whatever the factor, migrants are exposed to a range of problems including torture, domestic violence, alcoholism, psychological problems, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases in transit as well as destination countries (Muco, 2013). Gungua Woreda which is found in Awi Zone, Amhara Region is one of the most fertile grounds for various economic activities like cash crop farming, animal husbandry, forestry, mining, commerce, timber production, agro-processing, manufacturing and the likes. Despite this fact, the area is known for extensive illegal exile of young women to the Middle East countries basically. Thus, this study has been attempted to investigate the major motives behind irregular migration of young females from fertile homeland, Guangua Woreda, Northwestern Ethiopia to the Middle East.

1. Problem Statement

Several studies have been conducted on causes of illegal migration in different parts of Ethiopia. One among these studies is done by Gashaw Araya in his study titled "Socio-Economic Aspects of Illegal Migration from Raya Kobo District of North Wollo to the Middle East." Accordingly, illegal migration is found to be a widely exhibited phenomenon having its own social and economic implications. This study identified family network, migration being taken as a common practice in the study area, unpaid local work, socio-economic imbalance between sending and receiving countries, personal motives to increase additional income, job opportunity in the host country, influence from parents and local brokers as the major causes for illegal migration.

Belayneh & Haileyes (2022) argued that the paradox, irregular migration from a fertile homeland raises critical questions about the actual motives and lived experiences behind such decisions. Why do young women choose to leave a land that is agriculturally productive and potentially self-sustaining? What push and pull factors compel them to embark on dangerous and unauthorized journeys to the Middle East? While much research has focused on irregular migration from drought-prone or economically marginal regions, there is a significant gap in understanding the drivers of irregular migration from areas with relatively favorable natural resources. Young women are increasingly abandoning agriculture and traditional roles to seek employment in countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, often through unauthorized channels. This trend not only raises concerns about labor exploitation, human trafficking, and mental health issues but also disrupts local social structures and development trajectories. Many of these young women fall prey to unlicensed brokers and traffickers who promise lucrative jobs but deliver harsh and exploitative conditions. The result is a cycle of unmet expectations, personal hardship, and broken family ties.

Furthermore, existing migration literature tends to focus on economic push-pull factors in general terms, overlooking the specific experiences and motivations of female migrants, especially from relatively productive rural areas. The unique gendered dimension of irregular migration, where young women may face both empowerment and victimization, remains underexplored, particularly in the Ethiopian context. Moreover, limited

qualitative research has been conducted to capture the voices, perceptions, and decision-making processes of these young women themselves.

The persistent trend of illegal female migration from fertile and potentially resource-rich areas like Guanguwa Woreda points to a deeper, more nuanced set of motivations that go beyond conventional economic reasoning. Without an in-depth understanding of these underlying motives, policy responses risk being ineffective or misdirected. Thus, there is an urgent need for qualitative, context-specific study that centers on the lived experiences and voices of young female migrants. This study will contribute to that understanding, offering insights into how migration decisions are made and what social, cultural, and psychological factors shape them.

Thus, this study aims to fill that gap by focusing specifically on the motives behind irregular migration among young women from Guanguwa *Woreda*. It seeks to understand not just the external push-pull dynamics, but also the internal, culturally shaped motivations that influence their decisions. These may include gender norms, family expectations, political factors, aspirations for modern lifestyles, peer influence, and the role of migration networks or brokers. Understanding these factors is essential for designing effective interventions, informing policy, and offering support systems that are both gender-sensitive and contextually appropriate. Finally, this study tried to answer the following research questions

1. What are the major drivers that motivate young females from Guanguwa Woreda to migrate irregularly to the Middle East?
2. How do local community mindsets, social norms, conflicts and migration narratives influence the migration aspirations of young women in Guanguwa Woreda?

2. Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to explore the underlying motives, community mindset, and decision-making processes that drive young female migrants from Guanguwa Woreda, a fertile region in Northwestern Ethiopia, to engage in irregular migration to the Middle East.

Specific objectives of this study are;

- Identifying the key factors that motivate young women from Guanguwa Woreda to migrate irregularly to the Middle East, despite living in agriculturally fertile areas.
- Exploring how local community mindsets, social norms, insecurity and migration narratives influence the migration aspirations of young women in Guanguwa Woreda.

3. Significance of the study

By deeply looking into what migration is and understanding its causes, this research will benefit migration prone areas and the society at large. This study could be beneficial to potential female ‘illegal’ migrants in particular and migrants in general around Guanguwa area in particular and all over Ethiopia in general by creating awareness so that people can make better and informed decisions before migrating. It also has importance in devising sustainable recommendations as alternate job opportunities. Besides, it will serve as an input for policy makers and diplomats in order to analyse and reconsider the diplomatic relation with the Middle East countries to find alternative ways of exporting labour from Ethiopia legally. Furthermore, this study could be useful in providing information for further research and training.

4. Study Area Description

According to the information obtained from Guanguwa Woreda Administrative Office report (2012) Guanguwa Woreda is located in Awi Zone of Amhara National Regional State. This town has a latitude and longitude of 11°16'N and 34° 47'E respectively with an elevation of 2137 meters above sea level. Chagni, the capital of Guanguwa Woreda is located around 68 km away from Awi Zone capital, Enjibara, 167 km from Amhara Regional State Capital, Bahir Dar and 492 km to the North West from national capital, Addis Ababa. Guanguwa

Woreda Administration has 25 rural and 5 urban kebele administrations. According to Gunagua *Woreda* Administration Office report (2023) based on the 2022 population projection, the estimated total population of the *woreda* is 300682. Among those 149957(49.87%) were predicted to be male and 157725(50.13%) to be female. Accordingly, 61.7 inhabitants of the area are Orthodox Christians, 37.3% are Muslims and the rest are followers of Full-Gospel and other beliefs. This implies the study area is largely composed of Orthodox Christians and Muslims, with a small number of followers of other faiths. The study area is characterized by ethnic diversity, including the Amhara, Agew, Oromo, Shinasha, Gumuz, and Kambata. Nevertheless, the Agew form the majority, constituting 62.02% of the total population, followed by the Amhara (31.93%). The Gumuz comprise 4.55%, while other ethnic groups account for 1.5%.

Topographically, most parts of Guangua *Woreda* is an extended table land and some parts of the *woreda* composes rugged topography with elevation varies from 1700 to 2370 meters above mean sea level and its slope varies between less than 1 to 50%. The area made from a basaltic rock origin. The mean annual temperature is 21°C and receives sufficient rain during summer which reaches up to 1688mm. This shows the general climate of the study area is classified under Woina-Dega and Qolla agro-climatic zones (Guangua *Woreda* Agriculture Office Annual Report, 2023).

The four soil types dominated the study area include, reddish soils (nitosols group) locally called forefor or borebor, black soils (vertisols group) locally called mezega, grey-brown (luvisols group) locally called bunama and dark-brown (cambisols group) locally called abolse. Generally, the soils have a basaltic rock origin, which are fertile in nature. However, in some areas there are rugged and stony terrain and the impact of heavy summer rain fall make soil conservation to be vital in the study area. The remnant of trees (scattered here and there) depict the area has once been covered by dense forest. However, the vegetation cover has been removed, and replaced by cultivation fields due to increase in population (*Ibid*).

Thus, like other highland parts of Ethiopia, the natural vegetation of the area has been influenced by human activities. As a result, severe soil erosion and declining soil fertility are major problems that require active community participation to implement sustainable soil conservation measures. Mixed crop-livestock subsistence farming is the main source of livelihood for the local community. The farming system of the study area mainly focuses on food crops such as finger millet, maize, *teff*, *dagussa*, and potato. Commercial crops like oilseeds and pulses are also among the crops grown in the area. (*Ibid*)

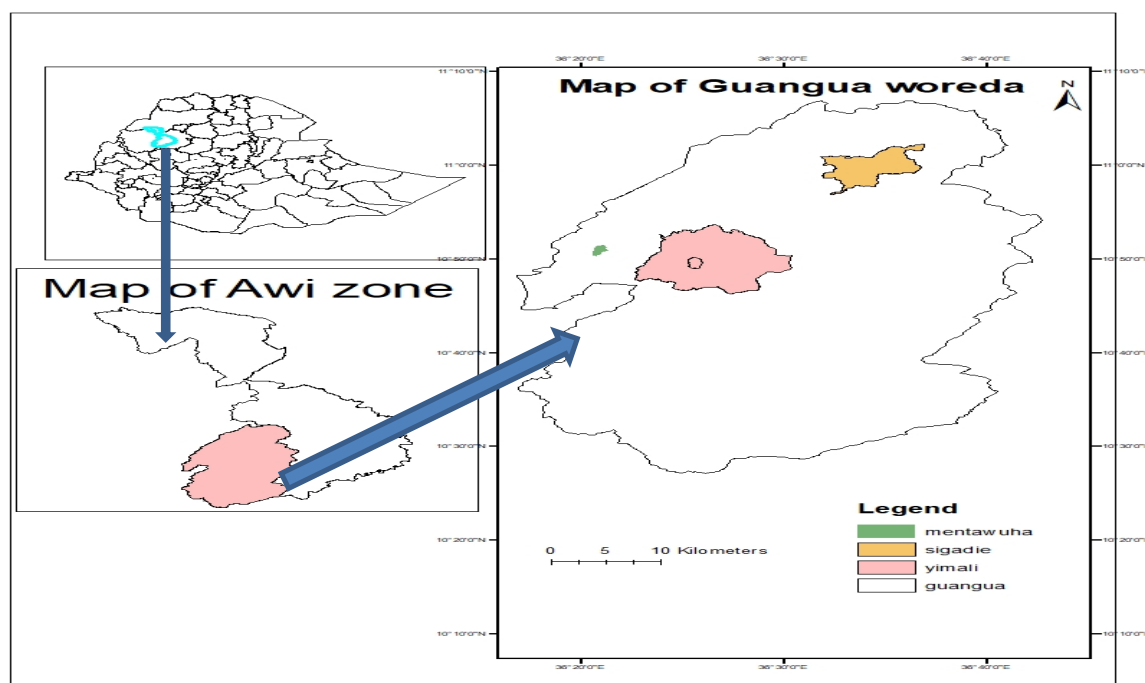


Figure Two: Map of the Study Area (Source: Nations online.org, 2022)

5. Research Method and Materials

This qualitative study used phenomenology research design that is preferable for such form of study. By using this research design, this study attempted to gather information that explains the triggering factors of illegal migration of young females in the study area. Besides, this design enabled the study to explore the realities of participants' experiences differently by denying the essence of single objective reality in relation to the experiences and challenges of female 'illegal' migrants to the Middle East countries. The outcomes of the data collected are described from the point of view of the participants. However, the researcher is still able to derive a set of findings that can be used to identify themes surrounding the phenomena under study.

The target population of this study included returnee females, families of 'illegally' migrated women local elders and returnees' families. Administrators from the three selected kebelles in Guangua Woreda such as Menta Wuha, Yimali, and Addis Alem also participated through in-depth interviews and FGD. Additionally, officers from Guangua Woreda Women, Children and Youth Office, Guangua Woreda Administrative Office, Guangua Woreda Small and Micro Enterprises Office, Guangua Woreda Police Office and Awi Zone Women, Children and Social Affairs Department were involved through key informant interview.

In line with qualitative research norms, participants were selected through a two-stage sampling process. Of the 32 kebelles in Guangua Woreda, three such as Menta Wuha, Yimali, and Addis Alem were chosen using purposive sampling due to their high numbers of female illegal migrants to the Middle East and a significant rate of returnees. Among the returnees, 18 females were identified using purposive sampling, based on baseline data from Guangua Woreda Women, Children and Social Affairs Office and the Small and Micro-Enterprise Office. Additional 13 participants were recruited through snowball sampling to identify further informants. Other participants included 3 local elders, 5 family members of returnee women, 3 kebele chairmen, an officer from the Women, Children and Social Affairs Office, an officer from the Small and Micro Enterprises Office, 2 police officers, and an expert from the Awi Zone Women, Children and Social Affairs Department.

The study used both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was collected by using in-depth interview, key informant interview and FGD and data that is useful to substantiate the primary data was collected by using document review. By using in-depth interview, the researcher scheduled interviews with 47 informants. The in-depth interview was carried out with 31 returnee 'illegal' migrant females, 5 families of 'illegally' migrated females, 3 local elders. By key informant interview, administrators of the three kebelles such as Menta Wuha, Yimali and Addis Alem and 1 officers at Guangua Women, Children and Social Affairs Office, an officer from Guangua Woreda Administrative Office, an officer from Guangua Woreda Small and Micro Enterprises Office, 2 officers from Guangua Woreda Police Office, and officer from Awi Zone Women, Children and Social Affairs Department were involved in replying the interviews. A total of 3 FGDs each 6 to 8 members were involved and 1 FGD group for each sample kebele. Each group was composed from participants among returnee females (who were voluntary to involve), families of returnees, local elders and kebele administrator. Moreover, both electronically and manually accessed researches, articles, books and other written materials like reports, minutes of meetings, bulletins and official letters were reviewed to substantiate and supplement the primary data. The researcher employed thematic analysis method to offer relevant meaning for the collected data.

6. Literature Review

6.1. Theoretical Framework

Although it may be difficult to identify theories specifically related to illegal migration, scholars have suggested three major theories, namely, the Push-Pull Theory, the Gendered Geographies of Power Framework, and the Social Network Theory of Migration, to understand the nature, extent, and motives of illegal migration worldwide. Their basic ideas are briefly explained below.

The first is Push-Pull Theory which was developed by Everett Lee in 1966. It provides a foundational understanding of the migration process by examining push factors and pull factors. In the context of Guangua Woreda, a region known for its agricultural fertility, this theory helps to explain why, despite available natural resources, females may still feel compelled to leave. Economic limitations, social expectations, lack of viable employment, insecurity and gender inequality act as push factors, while the perceived opportunities for financial success, freedom, and modern lifestyles in Middle Eastern countries serve as pull factors.

The second theory, Gendered Geographies of Power Framework developed in 2001 by Mahler and Pessar. It offers a feminist view on migration. This theory is particularly relevant in understanding how gender roles, societal norms, and power structures intersect to shape the migration of young females. It highlights that while female migrants may exercise agency in choosing to migrate, their decisions are often shaped and usually decided by masculine social structures, limited local opportunities, and expectations around womanhood and labor. This theory allows us to see the issue beyond economic factors and probe us to look gender dimensions of illegal migration.

The third one, Social Network Theory emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships in facilitating migration. In many Ethiopian communities, especially in rural areas like Guanguwa Woreda, migration decisions are heavily influenced by informal networks including brokers, family members, returnees, and peers. Accordingly, these actors often encourage irregular migration by providing both information and material and financial support. In this way, social networks become both enablers and risk factors in the migration process.

Therefore, it looks difficult to employ a single theory for this study. Noteworthy, a combination of the three theories provide a comprehensive lens to understand the multilayered motives for illegal young female migration from a fertile rural area to the Middle East. The three theories allow us to examine illegal migration not only as economic but also facilitated by social and cultural reasons.

6.2. Empirical Review

There are five ways a migrant can become irregular. These are entry through unauthorized border crossing, over stayers on temporary or tourist visas, entry through free visas, through irregular employment and at birth when a child is born to irregular migrants (Hollifield, 2000). The first way is the evident cause that is associated with almost all of irregular migrants of Ethiopian females in the Middle East. Thus, irregular physical border crossing via land and sea is one of the most prominent forms of illegal migration. Illegal migrants from Ethiopia and the Horn at large, who make border crossings, make their way in stages. Migrants often start on foot, and then travel in containers or cars, and vessels to cross the sea, avoiding main roads and staying in safe houses along the way to avoid detection (Addis, 2014; Collyer, 2015).

They travel over land to the Coast of Djibouti or Somalia, then cross the sea over to Yemen. Departures to Yemen used to be from Bossasso in Somaliland, but are now more frequently from Obock in Djibouti due to the shorter sea journey. Once they reach Yemen, migrants need to make their way over and to Haradhin, North Yemen (Cvajner and Sciortino, 2010).

Once they make it to Northern Yemen, many set out to cross the land border to Saudi Arabia to travel to other Gulf States. In 2012 alone, 107,532 crossed the Arabian and Red Sea to Yemen, of whom 78% were Ethiopians. The majority of these arrivals in Yemen do not intend to stay, but rather aim to cross the land border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia to travel to other Gulf countries where wages are much higher (Meaza Ayalew, et al, N.D; Fernandez, 2017). Hereupon, the following map shows the main routes of 'illegal' migrants from Ethiopia to the Middle East countries.

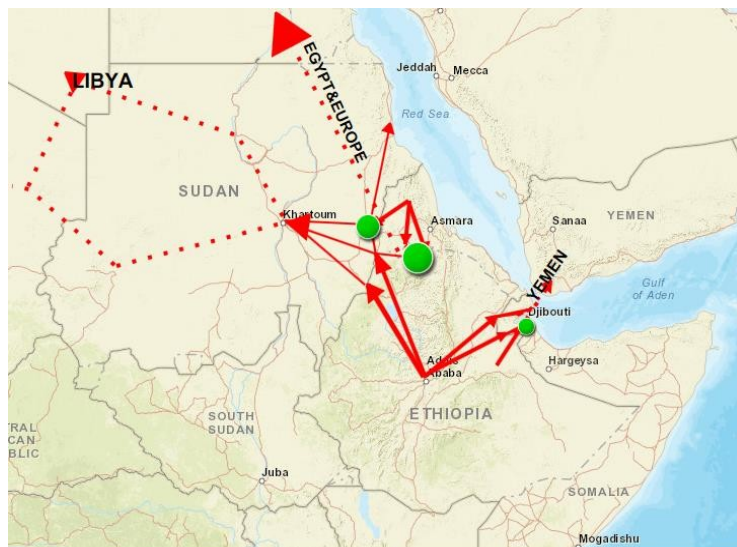


Figure One: A map that shows the major route of Ethiopian illegal migrants (Source: Adopted from Marchand, et al., 2016)

7. Major Findings and Discussions

7.1. Guangua Woreda and Female Migration

In order to make the study more comprehensive, the researcher tried to review different documents that can supply data on different issues related with causes, extent and impacts of ‘illegal’ migration in Guangua Woreda, Awi Nationality Administrative Zone, Amhara National Regional State. Thus, the basic findings in this regard are presented as follows

Table One: sex configuration of irregular migrants from Guangua Woreda in the last five years

Years	Males		Females		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No.	%
2019	18	1.18	1502	98.82	1520	100
2020	41	2.32	1723	97.68	1764	100
2021	24	2.59	902	97.41	926	100
2022	166	8.42	1806	91.58	1972	100
2023	151	7.47	1870	92.53	2021	100
Total	400	4.86	7803	95.14	8203	100

Source: Guangua Woreda Women, Children and Social Affairs Office, Five Year Report on Human Trafficking, 2024, pp.11-12.

As it is shown on table one, 8203 peoples are ‘illegally’ migrated from Guangua Woreda via different exit corridors in to the Middle East countries. Among these, only 400 (4.86%) are males, whereas the rest are females. Therefore, it is possible conclude that females too exposed for ‘illegal’ migration from Guangua Woreda in to different Middle East countries. As the data depicted, majority of irregular migrants are ambitious to reach Saudi Arabia and UAE. Among all, almost 78% of Guangua Woreda irregular migrants were reached as ‘illegal’ migrant entries in these two Middle East countries.

Table Two: Religious background of female irregular migrants from Guangua Woreda to the Middle East in the last five years

Years	Orthodox		Muslims		Others	
	No	%	No	%	No.	%
2019	6	0.4	1495	99.53	1	0.07
2020	11	0.64	1712	99.36	-	-
2021	17	1.88	882	97.78	3	0.33
2022	126	6.98	1679	92.68	1	0.06
2023	137	7.59	1668	92.39	1	0.05
Total	297	3.81	7500	96.11	6	0.08

Source: Guangua Woreda Women, Children and Social Affairs Office, Five Year Report on Human Trafficking, 2024, pp.12-13.

As it is disclosed on the above table, among 7803 female ‘illegal’ migrants from Guangua Woreda in the five successive years from 2019 to 2023, only six (0.08%) migrants are the followers of other religious beliefs such as Protestant Christians, Catholic Christians and Waqefenans. The other 297 (3.81%) female ‘illegal’ migrants are Orthodox Christians, whereas, the majority, 7500 (96.11%) female ‘illegal’ migrants to the Middle East are Muslims. Thus, though it might not be taken as the major pushing factor, the religious pattern of destination countries as dominantly Muslims can be taken as a basic justification as the pulling factor for majority of Muslims from Guangua Woreda.

Table Three: Age of female irregular migrants from Guangua Woreda to the Middle East in the last five years.

No.	Age Group of Female illegal Migrants	Female Irregular Migrants		Remark
		No.	%	
1	Up to 15 years old	7	0.09	
2	16-20 years old	1424	18.25	
3	20-24 years old	3563	45.66	
4	25-30 years old	1567	20.08	
5	Above 30 years old	1242	15.92	
Total		7803	100	

Source: Guangua Woreda Women, Children and Social Affairs Office, Five Year Report on Human Trafficking, 2024, pp.13-17.

As it is displayed on table three, when we see the age composition of ‘illegally’ migrated females to the Middle East countries, only 7 (0.09%) female migrants to the Middle East countries are 15 years old and below this age. The other 1424 (18.25%) female ‘illegal’ migrants are between 16 to 20 years old. The increase of female ‘illegal’ migrants in this age category is associated with the existence of growing exposure of females to leave their growing area since they have complete primary education, secondary education, TVET programs and even preparatory education in this age level. Thus, the exposure for ‘illegal’ migration to the Middle East countries began to show dramatic increase at the age of 16. Among all, the dominant numbers of ‘illegal’ migrant females to the Middle East countries are in the age between 20 to 24 years old. Out of 7803 ‘illegally’ migrated females to the Middle East countries, 3563 (45.66%) are between 20 to 24 years old. At this stage females who are failed to qualify for university entrance and those who failed to get job after they complete their college lessons are

victims of ‘illegal’ migration to the Middle East. The rest 36% ‘illegally’ migrated females are above 25 years old.

Table Four: Exit corridors for female irregular migrants from Guangua Woreda to the Middle East in the last five years

No.	Exit corridors	Female Irregular Migrants		Remark
		No.	%	
1	Sudan	347	4.45	
2	Kenya	52	0.67	
3	Djibouti	5862	75.12	
4	Somaliland	1542	19.76	
Total		7803	100	

Source: Guangua Woreda Women, Children and Social Affairs Office, Five Year Report on Human Trafficking, 2024, p.14-17.

As table four disclosed, among the four exit corridors of Guangua Woreda female irregular migrants, 5862 (75.12%) migrants are tried to reach the Middle East countries by using the smugglers that took them via Obock of Djibouti. The other 347 (4.45%) ‘illegally’ migrated females tried to reach the Middle East countries by using Sudan as a transit. The arrivals via Sudan used two outlets from Ethiopia, such as via Mankush of Benishangul Gumuz Regional State and Mettema of Amhara National Regional State. The other 1542 (19.76%) exits are through Somaliland and the insignificant number, 52 (0.67%) female migrants are hopelessly attempted to arrive to the Middle East countries via Moyale to use Kenya as a transit. But one thing that should be clear here is that the exit corridor and transit place is primarily designed and determined by the interest and favour the brokers and smuggler.

Generally, the main route of illegal migration of young females of Guangua Woreda stretches from Chagni, woreda capital to Saudi Arabia and other Middle East Countries. Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Djibouti and Yemen are the transit points of most of the illegally migrated youths from the study area

7.2. Major Causes for Female ‘Illegal’ Migration in Guangua Woreda

As studies reveal, illegal migration of Ethiopian females to the Middle East countries is the cumulative result of several pushing and pulling factors. Above all this study identified a mindset of migration as the root of all the desires of migration. This mindset is often symbolized by a strong, persistent belief that leaving Guangua Woreda basically for economic or social betterment can be a root cause that facilitates and fuels illegal migration. This mindset often involves idealized perceptions of life abroad, heavily influenced by selective success stories by denying risks. It does not arise in isolation which is shaped by various socio-economic and political conditions in the area. It is already rooted in the community and getting young females who have the vision to be successful in their resourceful homeland is very difficult. Almost all young voices speak about leaving the homeland for migration into various parts of the world. USA, Europe, Canada, Middle East and South Africa are some of frequently mentioned dreamlands for migration. The worst of this mindset is that it recognized the illegal route as the default or easiest option to achieve the desire of migration. Such mindset together with pushing and pulling factors increased the incidence of illegal migration in Guangua Woreda. Thus, these push and pull factors as major causes are discussed in brief one by one as follows.

i. Pushing and Pulling Economic Factors

A. Resourcefulness

One of the pushing factors of females for illegal migration in Guangua Woreda is resourcefulness. This area which was part of the former Matakala *Awraja* had broad land suitable for farming, cattle herding, forestry, timber production and mining (Getachew, 1989). Cash crop farming, animal husbandry, mining, timber

production, agro-processing and manufacturing are the most profitable economic activities in the area. Despite this fact, this woreda is one of the areas in Amhara Region known for large scale illegal migration of young females to the Middle East destinations. In fact, there is no direct study explicitly linking "resourcefulness" to illegal migration in Ethiopia, but several research findings suggest that individuals employ large amount of resource to facilitate their illegal migration. Henceforth, many girls in Guangua Woreda undertook illegal migration practices by using social networks, family connections, and migration facilitators to bypass bureaucratic hurdles when they attempt to use the legal structure. On the other hand, females use illegal brokers by investing large amount of money to facilitate their illegal migration. In doing so, migrants invest the resource belonged to their family to succeed their aspiration to migrate. Thus, the local economic potential is invested to enable the migrants to bypass systemic barriers, often resorting to irregular migration routes to achieve economic goals abroad. Most youth females from wealthy families did not want to settle and satisfied by the resource acquired from their family in their locality; rather they repeatedly attempted to use this resource to facilitate their illegal migration to the Middle East. This shows that resourcefulness drives many females to invest in irregular migration for perceived greater economic gains abroad.

B. Poverty and Unemployment

Contrary to the above motive, poverty and unemployment are also the main factors that trigger young females for illegal migration in Gungua Woreda. Households with fewer resources, such as smaller land holdings or limited livestock, are more likely to expose for illegal migration to the Middle East. This suggests that poverty as an economic deprivation drives individuals to seek alternative livelihoods through migration, often resorting to irregular channels due to limited legal options.

As it is identified by majority of the participants of this study, poverty and unemployment are mentioned at the top of all the motives for the migration of almost all illegally migrated females in Guangua Woreda. Victims of 'illegal' emigration interviewed for this study identified economic reasons such as poverty and unemployment as the number one pushing factors for their 'illegal' migration their area. The ultimate goal of the 'illegal' migration of females of Guangua Area in most cases is earning more money in the Middle East countries and sending remittances for their family to improve their life.

One of the informants, Kalkidan, 23 of Menta Wuha Town who is a returnee from Dubai identified the economic crisis in her family following the separation of her parents as the major reason that exposed her for a broker in the area and pushed her for illegal migration. Kalkidan who cursed the contact date with the broker as an event that let her in to the worst pattern of her life. Kalkidan's testimony on the cause and the subsequent process that led her in to a miserable life expressed as:

My family once had a good life. However, things changed drastically when my parents divorced due to ongoing disagreements. After their separation, we, the five children were left to live with our mother. Unfortunately, things went from bad to worse. My father, who had been the main provider for our family, stopped supporting us after he remarried. As a result, I was forced to drop out of college. All of us lost our sense of hope and happiness. We began to suffer greatly due to the lack of food and basic necessities. Being the eldest of the five children in our now-divorced family, I had to take on the responsibility of supporting them. I managed to get a job as a waiter in a restaurant, earning only 950 Ethiopian Birr per month. It was at this job that I met a co-worker who introduced me to a broker. This broker visited the restaurant frequently. He would speak with glowing words about the luxurious life in Dubai, telling stories of wealth and comfort. His descriptions were so persuasive that I began to believe I could earn a better life for myself and support my suffering family. I made the difficult decision to migrate. One year after my parents' divorce, I found myself in one of the most challenging moments of my life, stranded in Yemen. To fund my journey, my mother had no choice but to rent out the family's only property, about 0.5 hectare of land for just 17,000 Ethiopian Birr, locked into a 25-year lease. This desperate act reflected how far we were willing to go to find hope. (Kalkidan, Menta Wuha, Jan 18, 2024)

Indeed, significant number of young people including pupils are hopeless to get jobs in their homeland. Thus, fear of joblessness after graduation is one of the main pushing factor for younger generation became busy in search of options of illegal migration. The following case of Etenat justifies it as;

I was one of the clever students in the school until primary education leaving certificate. When I joined secondary school, my perception was completely changed and my all-time dream became illegal migration. I began to search options to migrate because I lost confidence in finding meaningful job opportunities in Ethiopia after graduation. Even those who complete university studies often struggle to find employment that matches their

qualifications. And for the few who do find work, the salary is typically low and not enough to sustain a decent standard of living. Our teachers were ideal examples of poor salary that made us hopeless for better life in Ethiopia.

Thus, according to Guangua Woreda Women, Children and Social Affairs Office (2021), poverty and unemployment are the main reasons for the 'illegal' exit of most of the female migrants of Guangua Area to the Middle East.

In addition, the widowed mother of one of the returnee migrant confirmed that low family income following the death of her husband and the lack of employment opportunities for her college-graduate daughter were the primary economic reasons behind her daughter's decision to migrate illegally. This is not an isolated case, it reflects the reality of many young women in the area. An elder informant emphasized the economic root causes of her own daughter's irregular migration via Djibouti to Yemen. She explained as "many people around here have heard about someone's daughter leaving to find a job and improve her family's life, like ours. So, our only role now is to pray for her, hoping that she achieves what she set out for." These accounts clearly illustrate how economic desperation, combined with limited local opportunities, drives young women into high-risk migration pathways in hopes of securing a better future for their families.

In relation with this, As Wakgari (2014), in Ethiopia households with minimal income initiate females into migration. Poverty forces young females into the worst migration conditions. Similarly, as Lemma, et al (2017), if the household wealth is better and sufficient, it reduces the risk of family members being 'illegal' migrants. Probably, better economic capacities might have enabled people to process legal requirements needed to go abroad legally and to take care of threats and possible exploitations. People from poor families usually wanted to be smuggled into the Middle East instead of going legally. The main reason for developing this belief was that when they went 'illegally', they wouldn't take any contractual agreement with any employer before they left their origins. This condition allowed some of them to select jobs with attractive wage rates when they reached safely but 'illegally' at their destinations. However, the problem is that when they go 'illegally', they could fall in the hands of traffickers; thus, all plans based on uncertain conditions may change their life into tragedy and throw them into continual exploitation.

C. Glamorization: Aspiration for Better Life

This economic factor initiates many of younger females for migration to the Middle East illegally. Stories of success of illegally migrated girls in the Middle East counties are the news reached to the community frequently. Young women hear about migrant women who return with savings, clothing, or constructed homes. This inspire others to follow, often downplaying the risks. In relation to this, Meskerem, one of the informants stated the desire for a luxurious life after migration as the major motive for her 'illegal' migration to Kuwait. Facebook was the major platform that exposed Meskerem for conviction of exit from Ethiopia by exhibiting the photos of luxury and profitable life of illegally migrated females from the area understudy. Meskerem shared her experience as;

My father is an old teacher in Mentawuha Town. I have two sisters and a brother. Throughout our childhood, he supported us with his monthly salary. We never faced a serious lack of basic provisions. I was able to attend college thanks to his steady support, and I am the eldest in the family. My father is a long-serving teacher in Mentawuha Town. With his modest salary, he supported me, my two sisters, and my brother. Thanks to his dedication, we never lacked basic needs, and I was able to complete my college education in 2010 E.C. I am the eldest in the family, and life was relatively stable. After graduation, I began to dream of earning money not only to improve my own life but also to give my family the comfort they deserved in return for their support. This ambition was heavily influenced by what I saw on social media. Many of my Facebook friends posted glamorous photos from Dubai and Kuwait, showing a life of apparent wealth and ease. These images along with widespread local rumors about the success of women who migrated 'illegally' shaped my belief that migration was the fastest path to a better life. I ignored the stories of danger and hardship, focusing only on the appealing parts. Despite my father's warnings, I insisted on going. Eventually, he gave in and provided the money. I left in 2010 E.C., full of hope. Now, I have returned with nothing emotionally and financially broken. What I believed would be a journey to success became a painful lesson. (Interviewed on Dec, 2, 2024)

The study by Perry and McEwing (2013) found that female illegal migrant returnees moderately exposed to seductive information about life in the Middle East were more likely to be trafficked than those with low exposure. Interestingly, those with high exposure did not show significantly different trafficking risk compared to low exposure. A related systematic review identified globalization and awareness of labor demand as key factors linked to trafficking. Additionally, the current study highlights that a strong personal desire for a successful life in the Middle East increases the likelihood of trafficking. This suggests that beyond the

information itself, the individual's aspiration for a better life abroad plays a crucial role in driving illegal migration, regardless of whether the information is accurate or misleading.

ii. Bureaucratic Failures as Political Factors

As stated above, in Guangua Woreda, the legal pass ways are almost locked and the public mindset already recognized the illegal means as the default option to achieve the desire of migration to the Middle East and other destinations. In this regard Bureaucratic failure is one of the political factors that pushing young females to choose illegal ways instead of legal mechanisms to find jobs in the middle East. Bogalech, one of the returnees replied that lack of access of legal means to reach the Middle East for job opportunity forced her to find the illegal means to reach Saudi. Another informant, Rekiya underscored that there is no institutional control from the government and brokers or agencies are act out as the only legal institutions and they never accused for illegal activities they are engaged in. As Rekiya;

The people at large perceived those brokers and agencies who recruit young females as legal and even the only means to get job in the destinations. They have also chain of interest with the concerned government institutions like police and others to undertake recruitments without and limitations. They requested the money they need, but they continue freely even if a girl faced difficulties up to death in en route or in her destination. They continue their business as usual and the community never asked for accountability.

Likewise, Wakgari G. (2014) acknowledges the failure of government institutions to handover the legal processes of female migration to the Middle East countries as key factor that paved ways for illegal processes of migration of young females of Guangua Woreda to the Middle East

iii. Education and Gender Related Factors

Lack of education is one of the factors that exposed young females of Guangua Woreda for illegal migration. In this woreda, rural girls are more exposed than the urban girls. In the context of Guangua Woreda, one of the religious leaders unveil that "rural girls are more exposed for 'illegal' migration than urban girls. Because sufficient information prevents urban residents from being deceived. As a result, brokers have focused on rural girls because rural girls are easily manipulated and deceived since they lacked the awareness." In substantiating the above data, Lemma et al. (2017) stated that urban girls faced relatively safer trip and jobs than the rural girls. Because urban girls easily get information about how and where to get safer jobs. Indeed, according to Lemma et al (2017), this did not found such a big difference between urban areas and rural areas in case of female 'illegal' migration. Females from both urban and rural areas of Guangua Woreda are rushing to refresh their economic life via 'illegal' migration to the Middle East countries and girls from both parts of the country suffered almost equally.

Besides, the data gathered from document review revealed that young but females have more chances to 'illegally' migrate than older people and males. In relation to this, an officer from Guangua Woreda Women, Children and Social Affairs Office stated that;

....the employers in the destination have strong desire for younger groups. Because younger persons might not have sufficient prior information about how they could fall in the hands of smugglers and exploiters that could deceive them more easily than older individuals. Nor do younger persons have the maturity to analyse the hidden aims of persons who approach them for the purpose of illegal migration. They could also be more easily sold by their 'care takers' than older ones.... (Interviewed on Jan 23, 2024)

Similarly, studies by Perry and Mac Ewing (2013) showed that one reason why young age female migrants frequently trapped by the wave of 'illegal' migration was the lack of awareness about trafficking channels which might be better in the case of mature female migrants. Likewise, Rodas (2021) contended that younger ages are suitable to facilitate 'illegal' migration. She also affirmed that females are more preferable than males in the Middle East countries and Middle Eastern employers are in dire hunger of younger Ethiopian females. Girls are also needed for sexual services. Thus, brokers targeted and intentionally recruited younger females for illegal migration than females. Because, the labor market in the destination countries decided the sex and age issues of the illegal migrants. It is to mean that females are more vulnerable to 'illegal' migration than males. Lack of attention given for girls at home also increased their vulnerability to exploitation or illegal migration. Females are demanded as housemaid which greatly limits their freedom of movement; as a result, they would not have the opportunity to communicate with others to get out of exploitation.

iv. Sense of Insecurity

The other major cause is insecurity. Though Guangua Woreda is one of the resourceful areas in Northwestern Ethiopia, it is also known by inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts. The area is the home of diverse ethnic groups such as Amhara, Agewu, Gumuz, Oromo, Shinasha and others. Periodic clashes are common in this region. Resource is the major cause for the conflicts in the area. Conflicts and instability in the region gave human traffickers and brokers a fertile ground to involve in recruiting young women for illegal migration.

Females living in Guangua Woreda and the neighboring areas are affected by periodic conflicts between various groups, mostly Amhara-Gumuz and Agew-Gumuz conflicts. This exposed many females for sexual violence, harassment and other gender-based threats. As a result, young women mostly choose illegal migration as a means of survival. Female insecurity is often exploited by human smugglers and traffickers who promise safety, jobs, or protection, while in reality exposing them to greater risk. The lack of trust in local systems can make these illegal offers more appealing. Women feel insecure beginning from the household due to the troubles with family members. For females, insecurity can be both a direct threat to their safety and well-being and an indirect factor that limits opportunities for a stable life at home.

Generally, poverty, the chronic unemployment, death in the family, divorce, aspiration for luxury life, political instability, gender based factors, lack of education and even the social media exposure are motivating factors for 'illegal' migration of considerable number females from Guangua Woreda.

Nevertheless, despite the false promises given by the brokers, almost all 'illegal' migrants found themselves under exploitation, both en route and in the place of destination, by having to pay extra expenses by the brokers and smugglers, having to work long hours without pay, deductions from their salaries, and in extreme cases, having their salaries withheld. The worst of all, they found themselves with empty pockets after they faced several threats against their life to get money. (Johnson 2012).

8. Conclusions

Guangua Woreda is one of the resourceful areas in North-western Ethiopia with high incidence of illegal migration. Young females are mostly exposed for illegal migrations facilitated by brokers or agencies. Most of the illegal migrations are carried out via Djibouti, exit corridor. The 'illegal' migration of young females from Guangua Woreda to the Middle East is driven by a combination of deep-rooted economic, political, educational, and gender-related factors. Poverty, unemployment, sense of insecurity, lack of access to legal migration pathways, low awareness particularly among rural and younger females and the desire of a luxurious life abroad are key factors for illegal migration to the Middle East countries. While many are motivated by hopes of financial success and improved family life, the harsh reality often includes exploitation, deception, and abuse both during the journey and at the destination. Above all, a migration mindset that is deep-rooted in the society played the key role for the community to give priority for illegal migration as the best and easiest way to achieve successful life. These findings highlight the urgent need for coordinated interventions, legal migration alternatives, and awareness programs to protect vulnerable young women from falling into dangerous migration paths.

9. Recommendations

Based on the major findings and conclusions drawn above, the researcher forwarded the following recommendations

- ❖ Indeed, this study could not generalize as lack of awareness as the only cause for the prevalence of high rate of irregular migration among females migrants to the Middle East in Guangua Woreda. Because of the number of females who migrated to the Middle East though know the challenges of 'illegal' migration via various channels. Surprisingly, there are some females who are eager to go back in to the Middle East after they returned to their home country after miserable conditions en route and the destination countries. But it is obvious that, most of the 'illegally' migrated females undertook their journey without any know-how about the en route and destination challenges. Besides, most families of 'illegal' migrant females are ignorant of en route and destination problems faced on their children. Therefore, awareness creation on the persecutions and the long lasting effects of 'illegal' migration should be undertaken by concerned bodies.
- ❖ Lack of job opportunity and other social service as well as harmful tradition practices like early marriage and gender bias against women in the society are among the major push factors for 'illegal' emigration of females. Thus, women associations and local government institutions should work to improve such push factors that make young females interested in to the Middle East countries illegally for miserable life.
- ❖ The culture of migration is deep-rooted among the community in the study area. Thus, community based religious institutions and schools should give emphasis to change the mind-set of the community that is eager to enrich themselves by the hardships and harassments of young illegal migrant females.

- ❖ The increment of brokers in the area played its critical role for the prevalence of high rate of ‘illegal’ migration of young females. The brokers in area are working to enrich themselves by sending young females in to the Middle East countries ‘illegally.’ In the area all records of ‘illegal’ migration are reinforced by brokers in one or the other way. Therefore, the local government and the community should work one hand to empower girls to deny the advert by brokers and on the other hand to prosecute illegal brokers legally.
- ❖ The policy-makers should devise short-term and long-term plans that can reduce ‘illegal’ migration of females basically by empowering them in using the natural gift and productivity of the area understudy.
- ❖ Government should work to assist returnees to endure the psychological and economic trauma after returning to home. Caring for returnees has its own implication on the return of many victims ‘illegal’ emigration and this in turn may reduce the newly recruited migrant females to the Middle East. Providing guidance and counseling housing and medical services, training and skill upgrading etc. are very important to rehabilitate victims of ‘illegal’ emigration.
- ❖ These days, the youth group is exposed to the medias in different ways. Thus, main medias and the social media platform should extensively work to manifest and address the ‘horrific’ parts of ‘illegal’ migration for the community at large. It has its own positive impact on the reduction of ‘illegally’ migrated females.
- ❖ The government should prioritize to improve the legal and bureaucratic procedures to get legal permission of exit to work abroad. Because it is essential to reduce the exposition of females for brokers. Besides, the governing body should work and negotiate with the governments of the destination countries in order to adjust employment opportunities for legally permitted entries from Ethiopia.
- ❖ The last but not the least, studies that have been conducted on the issue of female ‘illegal’ migration are too scarce. Therefore, further studies in Guangua Woreda, and other areas with similar circumstance are relevant and necessary to use as a baseline to effectively design intervention strategies, policies and to frame long term solutions for female ‘illegal’ migration.

References

- Ashenafi Woldemichael and Melese Getu (2020). “Predictors of Irregular International Migration among Youth in Jimma Zone, South West Ethiopia.” *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities (EJOSSAH): V. 16, No. 1*, pp.28-45.
- Asnake Kefale and Zerihun Mohammed (2015). “Ethiopian Labour Migration to the Gulf and South Africa.” Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Sciences, *Monograph No. 10*.
- Becky Cart and Brigitte Rohwerder (2016), “Rapid Fragility and Migration Assessment for Ethiopia.”
- Belayneh, L., & Haileyes, B. (2022). The causes of women migration from Ethiopia to the Gulf countries. *East African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(1), 1–12.
<https://doi.org/10.46404/eajsh.v4i1.695>
- Bina Fernandez (2017) “Irregular migration from Ethiopia to the Gulf States,” in Philippe Fargues and Nasra M. Shah, *Skilful Survivals: Irregular Migration to the Gulf*.
- Boswell, C. (2007). “Theorizing migration policy: Is there a third way?” *International Migration Review*, 41(1), 75-100.
- Cvajner, M., & Sciortino, G. (2010). “Theorizing irregular migration: The control of spatial mobility in differentiated societies.” *European Journal of Social Theory*, 13(3), 389–404.
- De Genova, N. (2002). “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and deportability in everyday life.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31(1), 419–447.
- Flahaux and De Haas. (2016). “African migration: trends, patterns, drivers.” *Springer Opens Journal*, 4 (1): 1-25
- Fransen, S. & Kuschminder, K. (2009). “Migration in Ethiopia: History, Current Trends and Future Prospects.” *Maastricht: Maastricht Graduate School of Governance*.
- Gashaw Araya. (2021). “Socio-Economic Aspects of Illegal Migration from Raya Kobo District of North Wollo to the Middle East.” MA Thesis in Sociology, Haramaya University.
- Getachew Walde-Maskal, “The consequence of Resettlement in Ethiopia,” *Africa Affairs*, 88(352), (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1989).
- Guangua Woreda Agriculture Office (2013). *Annual Report*.
- Guangua Woreda Women, Children and Youth Office (2012). “Five Year Report on Human Trafficking.”, pp.11-17.
- Hollifield, J. (2000). *The politics of international migration*. In C. Brettell & J. Hollifield (Eds.)

- Hollifield, J. (2004). "The emerging migration state." *International Migration Review*, 38(3), 885-912.
- Honig, B. (2009). *Democracy and the foreigner*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Human Smuggling and Trafficking Centre, (2006). *Report*
- ILO (2015). ILO global estimate on migrant workers: Results and methodology, Geneva; United Nations
- ILO (2019). *Support to the Reintegration of Returnees in Ethiopia*
- International Organization for Migration. (2020, May 22). *New study on Ethiopian migrants to the Gulf finds many unaware of dangers*. <https://www.iom.int/news/new-study-ethiopian-migrants-gulf-finds-many-unaware-dangers>
- International Organization for Migration (2020). *The desire to thrive regardless of risk: Ethiopian migrants on the Eastern Route to the Middle East*.
https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/press_release/file/ethiopian_migrants_eastern_route.pdf
- IMF (2013). *The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*. IMF Country Report No. 13/309. Washington D.C.: International Monetary Fund.
- International Organization for Migration. (2020). *New study on Ethiopian migrants to the Gulf finds many unaware of dangers*. <https://www.iom.int/news/new-study-ethiopian-migrants-gulf-f>
- Lee, Everett S. (1966). "A Theory of Migration." *Demography*, 3(1), 47-57. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2060063>
- Letsa Lela, (2017). "Youth Livelihood, Migration and Eco-Region Nexus in the Bale Eco-Region (BER), Oromia National Regional State, Ethiopia." MA Thesis in Social Anthropology, Arba Minch University.
- Marchand, Katrin(2016). "Irregular Migration from and in the East and Horn of Africa." *Report on Migration for EC*, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, Maastricht University, Melissa Siegel.
- Meaza Ayalew, et al (N.D). *Women's Labour Migration on the African-Middle East Corridor: Experiences of Migrant Domestic Workers from Ethiopia*. GAAT.
- Messay Mulugeta and Tefere Makonnen (2017). "Illicit Cross-border Migration in Ethiopia: Causes, Patterns and Policy Responses." *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities (EJOSSAH)*, Vol. XIII, No.2, pp.54-80
- Passel, J. S. (1986). "Undocumented immigration." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 487(1), 181-200.
- Portes, A. (1978). Introduction: Toward a structural analysis of illegal (undocumented) immigration. *International Migration Review*, 12, 469-484.
- UNDESA (2016). International migration report 2015. New York; United Nations
- UNDP (2015), Accelerating Inclusive Growth for Sustainable Human Development in Ethiopia (National Human Development Report of 2014 for Ethiopia). Addis Ababa.
- UN Women. (2016). Community conversations in Ethiopia prevent exploitative migration.
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/9/community-conversations-in-ethiopia-prevents-exploitative-migration>