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'They'd beat us with whatever is available to them': Exploitation and abuse of Ghanaian domestic workers in the Middle East

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Abstract

Generic accounts of pervasive cases of exploitation and abuse against migrant domestic workers in the Middle East exist in the extant literature. However, very little is known about the breadth, depth and gendered nature of abuses experienced by female migrants from especially the sub-Saharan African region. Abuses of the rights of sub-Saharan Africans are under-represented and under-theorised. This paper interrogates the question what is the nature, extent and severity of exploitation and abuse against female Ghanaian domestic workers in the Middle East? Using data from mixed-methods research, this paper adopts the framework of structural, symbolic and interpersonal violence to examine the range of abuses against domestic workers and the context within which these abuses take place.

INTRODUCTION

International migration continues to dominate global discourses on rights, responsibilities, belongingness and competition for and access to limited national resources, especially during economic downturns and global health emergencies (IOM, 2020a, 2020b). The current global pandemic, COVID-19, has further exposed vulnerabilities that non-nationals face when states are compelled to adopt inward looking policies in the name of self-preservation (Parrenas, 2021). Over time, international migration has been the focus of much attention not only in countries of destination but also countries of transit and of origin. The most obvious lens through which international migration is analysed is that of the potential socioeconomic benefits to countries of origin (IOM, 2020a, 2020b; Kandilige, 2017).

Correction added on January 18, 2023, after first online publication: The framework that this paper adopts has been updated in the last line of the abstract.

This is despite known challenges associated with international migration (IOM, 2020a, 2020b). The activities of illegitimate actors within the migration industry have imperilled the personal safety and livelihoods of a significant section of mostly low-skilled and irregular migrants (Agunias, 2013; Awumibila et al., 2019; Chan Unger, 2015; Chrouchi, 2002; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Nyberg Sørensen, 2013; Stivachtis, 2008). The increasing feminisation of international migration (Castles et al., 2014; Labadie-Jackson, 2008; UNDESA, 2014) and associated security implications resulting from trafficking, smuggling, exploitation and abuse of female migrants demand a closer examination.

As Awumbila (2015) posits, migration streams in Ghana are being feminised with growing numbers of Ghanaian females migrating through both regular and irregular channels in search of better work and life opportunities. The feminisation of international migration and the changing roles of intermediaries are, however, not unique to Ghana but shared across several developing countries (Spener, 2009; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Within the Ghanaian context, female domestic workers constitute the majority of persons recruited for employment in the Middle East (Labour Department, 2017). While there is a paucity of data on the migration patterns and conditions of these domestic workers, the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS) has reported that the number of migrants to the Gulf region has increased tremendously in recent years, with the main destination countries being Saudi Arabia, Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE). The latest report on the Migration Profile for Ghana also indicates the growing number of mostly female domestic workers from Ghana to the Gulf Region due to high demand for domestic labour (IOM, 2019). The growing feminisation of international migration is equally reflected within the West African region where Bisong (2019) notes that 46.7% of all migrants within the region are females. This is a slight increase in percentage from 45.3% in 2010 and 46% in 2015 (Setrana & Kleist, 2022:59). An exception is in countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso where female migrants surpass male migrants, representing 52% of the migrant stock (Bisong, 2019).

Graphic reports of generalised and widespread abuses against female Ghanaian migrants, like migrants of other nationalities, culminated in the imposition of a temporary visa ban for Ghanaian migrants recruited for domestic work in the region in June 2017. The Labour Department (2017) reported a total of 1755 migrants recruited by private recruitment agencies in 2015, 2372 in 2016 and 1589 by May 2017. According to IOM (2020a, 2020b) there is no official data on Ghanaian migrants in the Middle East post-2017. This data blackout complicates any credible trend analysis, but it has not marked an end to the reported incidents of abuse. The continuing incidents of victims to abuse from the country, after the imposition of the ban, however, suggests that this emigration control measure is ineffective (at best) and possibly counter-productive. The so-called temporary visa ban is still in place in 2022 and this has contributed to an increase in the number of aspiring migrants who use the services of unscrupulous informal/illegal recruiters and young females continuing to migrate to the Middle East as domestic workers but from the territories of neighbouring ECOWAS countries. The unintended beneficiaries of the policy measure are the informal/illegal recruiters while the victims are female migrants whose precarity has rather worsened. Other works on the migration of Ghanaian domestic workers superficially allude to cases of abuse. Awumibila et al. (2019), for instance, discussed the intricacies of the migration industry in Ghana, which facilitate the migration of Ghanaians through two main corridors towards Europe and the Gulf States. Relying on the risk theory, Awumbila et al. found that there is no strong correlation between migrants' awareness of potential risks and a reduction in migration flows. Their study alluded to generalised reported abuses and Ghana government's attempt to use banning of migration to the Middle East as a policy measure to curb incidents of abuse against migrants. As de Haas (2005) notes, policy actions by governments to ban, to minimise or to stop migration are part of the myths of migration.

Other studies have focussed on internal differences even in precarity. Fernandez (2011) identified a hierarchical ranking of female migrant domestic workers in the Middle East in relation to their race or country of origin. Filipina women are ranked at the top followed by Indonesian and Sri Lankan women, with African women at the lowermost part of the strata. For instance, households that employed Filipino, Indonesian and Ethiopian domestic workers are said to have accorded the Ethiopians the least recognition compared with the others. Disparities exist within pay scales depending on where one comes from. According to Fernandez (2011), Filipina women command the highest salaries because of their perceived high status whilst Ethiopian women domestic workers in the Middle East are paid a miserable sum of $100 to $150 per month, which is generally below the payment standards. Practices of

this nature are not novel as critical scholars have long acknowledged the fact that migrant workers have historically experienced discrimination, prejudices and unwelcoming gestures, which are confidentially tied to their class, gender, racial, ethnic and religious identities (Martin & Nakayama, 2018).

Governments of countries of origin periodically protest the ill-treatment of their nationals in the Middle East through the invitation of diplomats to explain abusive incidents and fact-finding missions by a cross-section of government officials. These protests have done little to alter the scope of reported cases of abuse neither have they shaped the international relations with destination countries in any significant manner. While state action in reaction to a collective sense of abuse is laudable, very little is known about the breadth, depth and gendered nature of abuses experienced by female migrants, especially from the sub-Saharan African context. In addition, the racialised structural, symbolic and interpersonal violence perpetuated against women domestic workers is under-appreciated (Hourani et al., 2021; Montesanti, 2015). Unlike the substantial volume of the extant literature on the Philippines (Naufal & Malit Jr, 2018; Wilcke, 2011), Bangladesh (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Kagan, 2017) and Ethiopia (Ayalew et al., 2018; Demissie, 2018), accounts of abuse of the rights of black sub-Saharan Africans are under-represented and under-theorised. Whereas domestic worker migration to the Middle East is an established industry in the Philippines, Bangladesh and Ethiopia, it is a relatively new, unstructured and poorly regulated industry in West Africa. The paper, therefore, seeks to answer the question what is the nature, extent and severity of exploitation and abuse against female Ghanaian domestic workers in the Middle East. This paper adopts the framework of structural, symbolic and interpersonal violence to assess the range of abuses against domestic workers as well as the context within which abuses take place.

This paper is based on a larger research work that sought to examine the flows of domestic labour from Ghana to the Middle East, to investigate the specific vulnerabilities of Ghanaian domestic workers in the region and to provide key stakeholders and the general public with fact-based information relating to migrants' profiles and recruitment processes.

After this background, we conceptualise the contextual issues around exploitation and abuse, we outline the methodology used to collect the data before discussing the diverse range of exploitations and abuses. We then draw conclusions based on our findings and finally provide some policy recommendations.

Conceptualising contextual issues about exploitation and abuse

Acts of abuse and exploitation manifest in a variety of ways and the structures that permit and encourage symbolic and interpersonal violence against migrant workers are deeply engrained in the labour market systems across the Middle Eastern countries. In this paper, we attempt to use the structural rigidities that prevent any migrant worker from participating in the labour market except through the sponsorship of a *kafeel* (an individual or a company that serves as a sponsor) as a lens through which racialised abuses are perpetuated against migrant domestic workers. As noted by Fernandez (2021: 4347), 'the state delegates responsibility to the *kafeel* (the sponsor–employer) for both the employment of the migrant and the acquisition of their residence permit (*iqama*) in the country'. The labour recruitment system (*kafala*), therefore, obligates employers to enforce immigration requirements on behalf of the state and this has permitted the wanton abuse of migrant workers' rights over several generations.

The structural framework enables an analysis of how the system of recruitment of domestic workers connotes a sense of *personal ownership* of an employee for the duration of their employment. The *kafala* system, which revolves around the employer sponsoring the entire cost of migration of an aspiring migrant worker and the legal liability to ensure the departure of the migrant at the end of their contract, cultivates the cognitive perception of the migrant being a piece of property. The lack of due process for protecting the rights of abused migrants within most Middle Eastern countries has inadvertently led to a culture of perpetuating abuse without any punitive actions. The plethora of unresolved incidents tends to model a negative behavioural propensity to abuse workers by perpetrators exploiting an ineffective regulatory system. A system that permits abusive relationships between migrant workers and their sponsors promotes structural violence. According to Montesanti (2015:2), structural violence refers to 'the social

arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way…the arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the social, political and economic organisation of our social world; they are violent because they cause injury to people (typically, not those responsible for perpetuating such inequalities)'. Furthermore, structural violence is defined as forms of violence that are built into the fabric of society and create and maintain inequalities within and between social groups, including on the basis of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, ability, socioeconomic position and immigration status (Montesanti & Thurston, 2015:3). The structural dimension thus allows us to unpack a critical question—how are labour exploitations and abuses manifested in the *kafala* system?

The racialised dimensions of the *kafala* system are central to exploitations and abuses that are experienced by domestic workers. This often takes the form of interpersonal violence. This refers to routine violence in the form of sexual and physical assault perpetrated by family members, people who are intimately related or mere acquaintances (Simon-butler & Mcsherry, 2018). It could also be symbolic violence—non-physical violence that is exhibited through power differentials between social groups such as men versus women (Hourani et al., 2021). Fernandez (2021: 4358) notes that violations and abuses of the rights of domestic workers are often explained 'psychologically as the pathologies of individual employers' (Malaeb, 2015) but such descriptions 'individualise and exceptionalise their occurrence, obscuring from view the institutional operation of the *kafala* that permits them (Pande, 2013), and the broader structures of racialised capitalism within which they occur'. A second guiding question, therefore, is what role does race play in the mediation of the types of abuses that are experienced by migrant domestic workers?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The research employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design comprised both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. This involved survey questionnaires administered to 113 respondents in the first phase and semi-structured interviews among four categories of interviewees (6 officials of Middle Eastern embassies in Ghana, 8 recruitment agents, 12 representatives of relevant government ministries, departments and agencies and 12 return migrants) in the second phase. Quantitative research techniques support the assessment of the prevalence, likelihood and scale of a given phenomenon (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative research techniques enable the exploration and gaining of an in-depth evaluation of the meanings and subjective views that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human phenomenon (Cresswell, 2006). This can be achieved through the adoption of a range of interconnected methods, such as desk-based research, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation (Akcam et al., 2019). Our justification for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods was to gauge some key variables including the proportion of migrants in each destination country, types and frequency of abuse and the association between one's sex and type of abuse. Also, we sought to gain an in-depth understanding of migrants' experiences of abuse, how they reacted to or coped with the abuse and the impact on victims.

Target population and sampling procedure

Data were collected from returned domestic workers residing in the Greater Accra, Brong Ahafo and Eastern regions. These regions were selected purposively to gain a representative understanding of the issue in Ghana because they are key source regions for domestic workers who migrate to the Middle East. First, a questionnaire survey was conducted on a sample of 113 Ghanaian returned domestic workers to the Middle East. The questionnaire provided quantifiable data on the profile of the migrants and their experiences. To arrive at this sample, a snowball sampling technique was used to list 144 returnee domestic workers (in the first instance), from which 120 were selected for this study. The inclusion criterion was that a migrant must have lived in the Middle East for at least one year. The

other 24 returnee domestic workers were excluded because they lived in the destination countries for less than a year. To minimise the likelihood of bias associated with sampling members of the same social network, the research team relied on different entry nodes during the listing process. In the end, a total of 113 (94%) of selected returned domestic workers participated in the study. The remaining 7 could not participate because of the lack of time and/or lack of interest. The distribution of the 113 respondents is as follows: Greater Accra (54 respondents), Brong Ahafo region (31 respondents) and Eastern region (28 respondents). In terms of gender distribution of respondents, 20 (18%) of the 113 respondents were males while the remaining 93 (82%) were females.

After analysing the questionnaires, in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve (12) purposively selected returnee domestic workers, comprising 10 women and 2 men, to further explain the patterns identified by the questionnaire survey. Participants were selected based on their appreciation of the phenomena under investigation, diversity of destination countries visited and gender. Interviews were conducted between February and April 2018. These allowed for a better understanding of migration trajectories and experiences in the Middle East.

Data analysis

The quantitative data generated by the questionnaire were analysed using STATA. In the quantitative analysis, we examined the relationship between certain background variables such as region of residence or country of destination with outcome variables such as type of recruitment agency used and nature of abuse. The chi-square test of independence was performed to establish the significance of relationships, for example, between the country of destination and reported abuse. The decision rule used is to conclude that the relationship between any two variables under consideration is statistically significant only and only if the P-value of the chi-square test is less than 0.05. Stated differently, we conclude that there are significant statistical variations in percentage distributions of cases only in situations where the P-value of the chi-square test is less than 0.05. This paper is focussed mainly on migrants' experiences of abuse. Other aspects of recruitment processes and the role of intermediaries will be captured in separate publications.

Ethical considerations

Although discussing migration experiences with migrants and returnees does not necessarily place them in a vulnerable position, the research team was aware that discussions related to past working conditions could generate discomfort. Established guidelines for dealing with various ethical issues, including informed consent and guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, were strictly observed to protect respondents.

The interviews with return domestic workers were held in locations where participants could speak freely without the risk of being overheard by others. Respondents were contacted and appointments were made with them prior to the interviews. During the initial contact, the purpose of the research was explained to them, and the consent was secured from them. The date and location for the interviews were also based on interviewee preference. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of respondents.

RESULTS

The nature of exploitation and abuses encountered in the Middle East

A significant percentage of return Ghanaian domestic workers surveyed reported that they suffered some form of abuse during their period of employment in the Middle East. As it is discussed below, these reported abuses took

various forms, with sexual abuses being carried out by perpetrators across at least two generations (i.e. fathers and sons). Across the countries surveyed, 71% of respondents judged their experiences in the Middle East as abusive (Table 1). The proportion of domestic workers who reported that they were abused was highest in Kuwait (83%), followed by Qatar (75%) and then Saudi Arabia (53%). The chi-square analysis, however, did not find any significant relationship between the destination country and reported cases of abuse.

The quantitative research recorded five main types of abuse at the destination countries in the Middle East (see Table 2). Multiple responses provided included: extra unpaid tasks (56%), threatening behaviour (39%), sexual assault (30%), denial of food (25%) and caning (4%). Beyond the main categories identified in the quantitative survey, a more nuanced analysis of the qualitative data resulted in the authors recategorising the specific types of abuse into five typologies: verbal abuse, physical abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, sexual harassment/abuse, discrimination and poor welfare conditions (i.e. food, health, restrictions and lack of rest). The recategorisation was necessary because the authors deemed it more reflective of the detailed narratives recounted by the victims of abuse during the qualitative interviews.

The research indicates that types of abuses meted out to domestic workers are gendered in nature (see Table 3). While extra unpaid tasks and threatening behaviour were the leading forms of abuse across gender (92% and 58% for males and 62% and 44% for females, respectively), other forms of abuse, such as sexual assault and caning, were unique to specific gender groups. While no males reported any sexual abuse or caning as a form of abuse suffered, over 43% of females reported suffering from sexual abuse, for instance.

The five main categories of abuse that emerged from the qualitative research were: verbal abuse, physical abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, sexual harassment/abuse, discrimination and poor welfare conditions. In this section, we deliberately rely heavily on first-hand accounts by return domestic migrants as a means of providing voice to

TABLE 1 Distribution of migrants who were abused

	Saudi Arabia		Kuwait		Qatar		Other[a]		Overall	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Not Abused	18	47.37	6	16.7	4	25	5	21.7	33	29.2
Reported cases of abuse	20	52.63	30.0	83.3	12.0	75	18.0	78.3	80	70.8
Total	38	100	36	100	16	100	23.0	100.0	113	100
Pearson chi-square = 9.5579										
Pr = 0.023										

Source: Fieldwork data, 2018.

[a]Oman, Jordan, United Arab Emirate (UAE).

TABLE 2 Type of abuse meted out to migrants

	Saudi Arabia		Kuwait		Qatar		Other[a]		Overall	
Type of abuse	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Caning	0	0.0	2	6.7	0	0.0	1	5.6	3	3.8
Denial of food	1	5.0	9.0	30.0	3	25.0	7.0	38.9	20	25.0
Extra unpaid tasks	9	45.0	14	46.7	9	75.0	13	72.2	45	56.3
Sexual assault	5	25.0	8	26.7	3	25.0	8	44.4	24	30.0
Threatening behaviour (e.g. threat of deportation)	6	30.0	12	40.0	8	66.7	5	27.8	31	38.8
Other	11	55	13	43.3	2	16.7	3	16.7	29	36.3

Source: Fieldwork data, 2018.

[a]Oman, Jordan, United Arab Emirate (UAE).

TABLE 3 Gender distribution of the kind of abuse experienced by migrants

Kind of abuse	Male %	Female %	Overall %
Caning	0.0 (0)	5.5 (3)	4.48 (3)
Denial of food	25.0 (3)	30.9 (17)	29.85 (20)
Extra unpaid tasks	91.7 (11)	61.8 (34)	67.16 (45)
Sexual assault	0.0 (0)	43.6 (24)	35.82 (24)
Threatening behaviour (e.g. threat of deportation)	58.3 (7)	43.64 (24)	46.27 (31)

Source: Fieldwork data, 2018.

the domestic workers rather than imposing our own subjective interpretations on their personal experiences. Such an approach strengthens migrants' agency in an era where there is increased objectivisation and marginalisation of the narratives by vulnerable categories of migrants. Awumbila et al. (2018:4), for instance, draw on other literature (Gardiner, 2008; Strauss, 2017) to demonstrate how the multiplicity of brokers in the migration industry tends to 'perpetuate the production of the 'ideal' migrant domestic worker with qualities of deferential femininity, docility and subservience, so that she fits into specific labour market niches at the destination'. Within this context of precarity, migrant domestic workers are stripped of their dignity and voice, and they are objectivised as malleable/exploitable labour.

Earlier literature by scholars such as Hernández-León (2008:154) argued that the migration industry comprises an 'ensemble of entrepreneurs, who, motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, provide a variety of services facilitating human mobility across international borders'. This for-profit space is inhabited by both 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' actors. The 'illegitimate' actors within the migration business are accused of objectifying migrants as 'commodities' that are transported to be traded (Salt & Stein, 1997:480). This label on brokers within the migration industry makes them more likely to align their sentiments with employers rather than workers to advance their profit motives. The Human Rights Watch (2021) documents the sale of women by recruitment agencies to employers in the Middle East, for instance, a Bangladeshi domestic worker, Asma K, was 'sold' by her recruitment agent for $4052 to a man in the UAE who then trafficked her to Oman and engaged her in long hours of work without rest, food or wages and sexually harassed her. In this tragic account, the victim is subjected to multiple typologies of abuse concurrently. This suggests that while typologies of abuse are useful for delineating categories, the experiences of victims mostly straddle these categories.

Verbal abuse as a form of intimidation

Non-physical violence can be insidious and debilitating to the emotional well-being of victims. Verbal abuse is a common form of symbolic violence that is usually combined with other means of dehumanising migrant domestic workers. The use of offensive words, behaviours and non-verbal communications to produce, reproduce and legitimise skewed power relations between an employer and a worker constitutes a typology of abuse (Hourani et al., 2021). Many Ghanaian domestic workers highlighted verbal abuse as a common form of intimidation and abuse. There are different scenarios where verbal abuse is meted out to domestic workers. It is, for instance, deployed when employers claim that they are dissatisfied with either the quality or pace of work done. Grace and Adjeiwaa's experiences from their migration to Kuwait exemplify these scenarios:

> …she used to shout at me … I will go to every single room and dress their beds properly and spray the room. When I forget to spray the room, they will come and call me at 1:00 am and ask me why I didn't

> spray the room after working. She will tell me that I am lazy, and I am not sane. She said I was a fool from wherever I come from …
>
> (Grace Adu, return domestic worker from Kuwait, 3rd February 2018)

> …anytime you wronged this woman [employer], she would refuse to talk to you for two weeks. She was unforgiving and when she spoke with you, she would insult you. She would inform everyone about one small mistake you made. …
>
> (Adjeiwaa, return domestic worker from Kuwait, 20th February 2018)

however, the complaints of verbal abuse are corroborated by some recruiters in Ghana. For instance, an informal recruiter acknowledges reports of verbal abuse against a domestic worker who migrated to the Middle East together with his own spouse:

> …There's a girl, in fact, she also travelled with my wife on the same day. She complained bitterly about her first employers. She complained of constant insults and too much workload even though she just spent two weeks with them. So, she called the agent and complained to him, and he changed the house for her…
>
> (John, Informal Recruiter, 2nd March 2018)

The discretionary powers vested in employers to arbitrarily determine wage levels and the frequency of payments have exposed migrant workers to symbolic violence. When workers complain about non-payment or delayed payment of wages, they routinely suffer verbal abuse. Nii Lantei recounts how his attempt to request for his two-month outstanding wages angered his employer. In addition, Adobea refers to a racist slur that is used on domestic workers to justify why they do not deserve any payment for their labour. This points to the centrality of race in shaping the abusive behaviour of employers of domestic workers in the Middle East. The refusal to address workers by their names and the use of derogatory racial slurs instead connote the dominance of the employer as part of the 'natural order', which underlines prejudicial behaviours and subjugation within the *kafala* system (Hourani et al., 2021):

> …when my salary wasn't paid for two months and at that time my people at home also needed money, I called the agent first. And when I realized nothing was done immediately, I approached the family head and he shouted at me saying that upon all they do for me I have the audacity to come and ask for my two months pay …
>
> (Nii Lantei, return domestic worker from Qatar, 20th February 2018)

> They have a word they say in their language which alerts you that they are calling you a slave. But I cannot remember…they don't call you by your real name…
>
> (Adobea, return domestic worker from Jordan, 3rd February 2018)

Physical abuse as a demonstration of unequal power dynamics

Although the literature portrays Filipino domestic workers in the Middle East as highly ranked and privileged over other nationals (Fernandez, 2011), reports of abuse are still common among Filipino domestic workers, most of whom are women. Organisations advocating for the human rights of international domestic workers have catalogued physical assaults and confinement inside houses to work for long hours without rest amid deprivation of food and medical care as some of the experiences of Filipino domestic workers in Jordan, for instance. In addition to incidents of physical abuse, there are widespread cases of labour exploitation such as deliberate non-payment of promised

wages, and confiscation of passports, residency and work permits, and these compromised trapped migrants' ability to escape from breaches of contract and/or the homes of abusive employers (Naufal & Malit Jr, 2018; Wilcke, 2011). In this regard, the experiences of Ghanaian domestic workers should not be exceptionalised but rather understood as part of a broader pattern of abuse in the *kafala* system, which comprises a racially stratified occupational hierarchy of migrant workers.

Physical abuse is partly a demonstration of the unequal power dynamics involved in worker-employer relations. The ability to inflict physical assault on a victim, without fear of retaliation or adverse consequences, seeks to re-enforce the vulnerability that is inherent in domestic work in the Middle East. As many employers perpetrate physical abuse against migrant domestic workers over time, these abuses are ultimately rationalised as normal. Children who observe their parents physically abuse their workers have a high propensity to emulate such adverse behaviours. Aisha, for instance, was physically abused based on unverified allegations by her employer's children. She was tied up and denied food for an extended period because she tried to escape, after nine months of not being paid her wages:

> … I was punished by pulling my ear with her [employer] hand…Oh yes, their kids also came and pinched me and run away laughing. They kept worrying me like an animal in their midst …
>
> (Aisha, return domestic worker from Oman, 3rd February 2018)

> …it was after I tried to escape that they chained me, and I nearly died. The police did this to me in the house, which was situated in the capital Muscat, the agency had other offices in Al-Kuwait. I was chained in the room, denied food for 21 days, when I asked for water, I heard them saying 'giver her henam', meaning give her urine….
>
> (Aisha, return domestic worker from Oman, 3rd February 2018)

Interpersonal violence is usually carried out by individuals against members of their own family, those closely related to them or distant acquaintances. Migrant domestic workers fall under the distant acquaintance category. Our research finds that interpersonal violence against migrant domestic workers is pervasive in the sense that it is not only employers who carry out physically abusive acts against migrants but also extended family members. The audacity of persons, who do not have any contractual relationship with migrant workers, to perpetuate physical abuse speaks of a culture of socialisation that births a negative pattern of behaviour within the broader society. This interpretation highlights a cultural tolerance of such abuse at both the familial and societal levels. Two cases in point are those of Asaana and Maame Serwaa who reported physical abuse not directly by their employers but rather by their employers' family members. Some of the abuse was reported to be based on hatred on racial grounds. This reinforces the position of previous scholars (Fernandez, 2021) on the intersectionality among gender, class, nationality and race:

> … initially I was physically abused and also maltreated by my madam's sister and it was clear from the way she used to speak that she hated blacks. I even reported her but nothing was done about it … At times my madam or even her sister who dislikes blacks will stretch out to hit me….
>
> (Asaana, return domestic worker from Saudi Arabia, 2nd March 2018)

> It's beating…Ah! They'd beat you with whatever is available to them. Sometimes they used the mob stick to beat us. I would say that the people from Bangladesh top the list of those who're beaten, because the ladies they brought from Bangladesh were usually very young. At times, some employers would maltreat them and burn some parts of their bodies with cigarette. I met one of them who'd really suffered beatings because her face and hands were all swollen…
>
> (Maame Serwaa, return domestic worker from Jordan, 4th April 2018)

In cases where domestic workers try to defend themselves from physical abuse, they risk imprisonment by employers reporting them to the police. Due to the lack of language proficiency, employers easily contradict accounts of abuse

by domestic workers and rather convince the police to detain migrant victims. Such violence is structural in nature because, as noted by Montesanti and Thurston (2015), it is built into the fabric of society in a way that highlights inequalities within and between social groups, in this case, based on migrant workers' gender, nationality, socioeconomic position and immigration status. These incidents perpetuate the cycle of violence against migrant domestic workers. The accounts of Maame Serwaa and Kwakyewaa are illustrative of such abuses.

> I also knew of a Ghanaian lady who had an issue with her madam. She did something and the madam had wanted to snatch her phone from her hands. But she was fast enough and drew the phone backwards. Having failed on her first plan, the madam slapped the Ghanaian lady who also replied her with a slap with equal weight. I think that lady was very lucky her madam's husband wasn't in the house. If the husband were to be in the house, they'd have arrested the poor girl and put her to prison…
>
> (Maame Serwaa, return domestic worker from Jordan, 4th April 2018)

> One of my friends even called and told me that her madam wanted to kill her, because the madam owed her and was refusing to pay her. According to my friend, she ran to the police station and informed them that her madam owed her but wanted to kill her because she didn't want to pay her. When the madam got to the police station and because the poor girl didn't understand the Arabic language, the madam was able to convince the police that it was rather my friend who'd stolen her money. So, the poor girl was put in jail
>
> (Kwakyewaa, return domestic worker from Kuwait, 20th February 2018)

Stories by return domestic workers are corroborated by recruiters in Ghana. Recruiters, both formal and informal, confirmed stories of physical abuse against some of their clients in the Middle East. They, however, recount instances of migrant agency where some domestic workers did not merely accept abuse as passive victims but rather defended themselves by either retaliating or threatening to fight back. Awumbila et al. (2016) examine how domestic workers sometimes exercise agency by using their body language to communicate their displeasure to their 'madams' who in turn reverse intended harsh treatment against their workers for fear of workers maltreating their children in their absence. In line with this defensive tactic, Maame Serwaa (return domestic worker from Jordan) recounts how she had to be a 'hard lady' to survive abuse: '*But I'm not just a person that you can easily push over. So, when I saw that my madam was angry with me, I would also frown my face and walk away. I had to be a 'hard lady', because if they see that you're a cool person, they can beat you mercilessly and go scot-free*'.

Psychological/emotional abuse as a statement of worthlessness

Some of the reported abuse suffered by migrant domestic workers was not physical but rather emotional, with returnees declaring that non-physical abuse affected their psychological and emotional well-being by making them feel worthless. Migrant domestic workers also declared being wrongly accused of theft and subjected to embarrassing searches, which undermined their self-confidence. The cycle of repeated reports of false accusations was used as a pretext for psychological and emotional abuse. For instance, Aisha was stripped naked and searched for alleged missing items. In addition, personal female health-related needs around menstruation are denied to domestic workers. Employers either fail to facilitate access to the needed sanitary accessories or they ignore female domestic workers' rights to a normal biological experience. Grace, for instance, was mocked as possibly being 'a man' when she complained to her female employer about an unusual menstrual cycle. The derogatory reference to a female as possibly being a male in disguise was specifically meant to attack her sensibilities and her sexuality. Interpersonal violence sometimes targets one's sexuality.

> …Once the woman of the house asked me to clean her room and right after I was done, she accused me of stealing her money. It even happened to me again. My employers did not lock their door, so I

> cleaned there and after they returned, they accused me of stealing their money. She ransacked my room, stripped me naked but didn't find it, she later found it and apologised…
>
> (Aisha, return domestic worker from Oman, 3rd February 2018)

In addition, emotional abuse takes the form of behaviour that makes one feel dehumanised (Ayalew et al., 2018). This manifests itself through acts of disrespect, discrimination and intimidation. For example, Nana Yaa and Asantewaa both felt disrespected by their employers due to the way they were spoken to and the chores they were required to complete:

> They are not nice people. They shout at you and mistreat you and that can affect you really bad. You are made to feel less important psychologically. When I arrived initially, I could not bear the mistreatment and I cried a lot because I had never experienced that before…
>
> (Nana Yaa, return domestic worker from Jordan, 19th February, 2018)

> …some were very disrespectful. They will make you feel like you are less of a human being. There were times they could behave as if you stink or something. It was very traumatizing to feel that way. They will call you at any short notice to come and clean dogs' vomit and faeces …
>
> (Asantewaa, return domestic worker from Kuwait, 2nd March 2018)

A particular concern was around discrimination, on grounds of their race, against domestic workers who shared the same religious faith (Islam) as their employers. Hendow (forthcoming), discuss how Tafira (2011, 115) draws linkages between 'biological' and 'cultural' racism. Hendow and Kandilige note, for instance, that Taguieff (1990, 117) argues that racism can be articulated in terms of either race or culture and argues that racism does not only 'biologise the cultural; it also acculturates the biological'. Biological racism, in this context, is perceived to be based on unequal treatment and exclusion of others due to phenotypical and other physical differences, while cultural racism builds on these to vilify and marginalise certain groups (Balibar, 1991). Hamamat (a Muslim migrant domestic worker) felt discriminated against because he was denied what he regarded as the basic dignity to be able to pray in an appropriate space. Race thus provides a critical lens through which discriminatory attitudes could be understood. Some scholars (Longva, 1997) choose to prioritise citizenship as the basis for abuse in the Middle East, which risks minimalising the centrality of race in shaping the experiences of black and brown-skinned migrants.

> …I was really facing problems because I was not even allowed to pray in any of the rooms, so I had to say my prayers in the kitchen and eat in the kitchen. You know, there is this feeling of being free when one travels, I was never free…they are not good at all. The way they treat you when you go there, is like the olden days the way they sold people. They don't see you as human. Apart from themselves, they never believe there are Muslims anywhere else …
>
> (Hamamat, return domestic worker from Saudi Arabia, 19th March 2018)

Furthermore, Nii Lantei (*return domestic worker from Qatar*) asserts that '*…if you are not a Muslim you are equal to a dead being. Like a dog before them …*'. Other forms of inflicting psychological and emotional trauma on domestic workers were achieved by threatening them with physical harm for asserting their rights. While no physical harm might ensue, the threat of harm is sufficient to trigger emotional distress in domestic workers. Cases in point include those of Maame Serwaa who was threatened, at gunpoint, because she requested for her unpaid wages, and Adobea who was fined a hefty amount for attempting to abrogate her contract and return to Ghana because she was abused:

> …She then threatened me that she would exchange her money with one of my kidneys…The agent didn't say anything. They acted together as a family, and I was the foreigner amongst them. I also noticed that they don't regard us as human beings but as slaves…
>
> (Adobea, return domestic worker from Jordan, 3rd February 2018)

The first dimension of migration infrastructures (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014) focuses on actors and agencies that engage in migration for profit, referred to as *commercial* intermediaries. These include recruitment agencies, brokers and human smugglers, border surveillance and security companies and anyone involved in facilitating or controlling migration. Recruiters from Ghana (commercial intermediaries) are not oblivious to the inherent risks their clients face at the destination countries in the Middle East. Recruiters sometimes help migrants to change employers when abuses are reported. However, this intermediation is only possible with licensed recruitment agencies that have contractual relations with *kafeels* in the destination countries. The ever-expanding tasks domestic workers are required to complete sometimes expose them to potential physical danger. An informal recruiter recounts how, for instance, a domestic worker was exposed to a mentally ill patient, without professional supervision:

> The lady in Saudi Arabia said that the cause of her troubles was that one of her madam's sons was mentally sick. At the climax of his sickness and if his parents were not in the house, he'd chase her with a cutlass and other dangerous things. But her major problem was that she was supposed to do household chores, but later they added the feeding of goats to her daily activities, which was not part of the contract. So, her workload became too much and she felt she could not continue to work in that house any longer…
>
> (Adda, Informal Recruiter, 7th March 2018)

Sexual harassment/abuse that worsens precarity of domestic workers

Sexual harassment and cases of rape are recurring themes among domestic workers from Bangladesh (Rahman, 2011), the Philippines (Naufal & Malit Jr, 2018) and Ethiopia (Demissie, 2018). However, these forms of abuse are equally prevalent among Ghanaian female migrant domestic workers to the Middle East. Limitations in terms of avenues for seeking redress mean that most of such abuses are unreported to the formal authorities. In cases where they are reported, affected domestic workers are rather discredited by their perpetrators and accused of seducing 'innocent' male spouses of their employers. In line with the intergenerational transmission of violence (Milaniak & Widom, 2015), Asaana was forced to perform oral sex and she was later raped by the husband of her employer and his son. The participation of sons alongside their fathers in sexual abuse incidents perpetuates such violence from one generation to another. Maame Serwaa's male employer groped her and repeatedly made sexualised comments about her dressing. The objectivisation of the bodies of black and brown female migrants as disposable property has emboldened male sexual predators to resort to rape and sexual assault as means of expressing their 'dominant' masculinity:

> …yes I faced so many challenges, one was sexual assault from my madam's husband and her oldest son. My madam's husband will come to my room when my madam was not around, and he will ask me to rub his penis for him. He sometimes forcibly inserted it in my mouth after which he will rape me. After he is done, he will warn me not to tell anyone as he will kill me or report me to my madam that I always seduce him when she is not around. …
>
> (Asaana, return domestic worker from Saudi Arabia, 2nd March 2018)

> …My employer, the man with an amputated leg, one day called me while I was working and took hold of my breast and squeezed it hard. That day I cried a lot, because I was afraid
>
> (Maame Serwaa, return domestic worker from Jordan, 4th April 2018)

The two accounts of sexual harassment and abuse were never reported to anyone during their migration. This was because of the precarity that characterises the nature of working in a private domestic space, lack of language proficiency, lack of formal processes for seeking redress and the cavalier attitude of unscrupulous actors who operate in

the migration industry. Some recruitment agents (especially informal or illicit recruiters) in Ghana are quite dismissive of claims of sexual harassment and abuse against migrant domestic workers. A representative of Mansee Travel and Tours agency, for instance, tried to rationalise sexual abuse as the fault of the victims because they apparently seek cheaper accommodation by agreeing to live with men in shared accommodation and thus, become vulnerable to rape. He also labelled workers who complain about sexual abuse as liars since they are not the only beautiful girls who go to the Middle East. This attitude exacerbates the propensity for employers to take advantage of domestic workers.

Discriminatory practices as a dehumanising tool

Working conditions of migrant domestic workers do not sometimes meet the minimum requirements of labour rights, especially the ILO Convention 189 on domestic worker rights. For instance, the humidity and high temperatures recorded in the Middle East necessitate the use of air-conditioning facilities. However, some domestic workers were excluded from this necessity because employers complained about the cost of electricity to them if domestic workers equally used air-conditioning facilities. Whereas the employers' family enjoy a controlled temperature in their rooms, workers' living quarters are exempted. In addition, some workers are not allocated rooms to sleep in but are rather compelled to lodge in living rooms, which were not insulated from mosquitoes:

> The worst thing was she told me she wouldn't offer me a room to sleep in and so I should sleep in the hall, and I told her that would not be possible because I had been bitten by mosquitoes since I arrived, and I hadn't received any treatment....
>
> (Adobea, return domestic worker from Jordan, 3rd February 2018)

The domestic work industry in Jordan relies quite heavily on peer-to-peer recommendation (Wilcke, 2011). Our study indicates that positive reviews from members of employers' social networks increase the likelihood of domestic workers from the same country being treated favourably. This system of generalising on workers' credibility based on previous experiences with others from the same country exposes workers to victimisation and biased treatment. This results in structural, symbolic and/or interpersonal violence against migrants who happen to be from the same country as a previous domestic worker who is deemed to have misbehaved. These are mainly derived from subjective assessments within patriarchal and racialised social norms and institutions, including the *kafala*.

Denial or retention of food from domestic workers as a means of punishment is commonly reported by return migrants (see Awumbila et al., 2016; Demissie, 2018; Naufal & Malit Jr, 2018; Rahman, 2011). In our study, while some domestic workers simply failed to adapt to their new realities in a foreign country, others desired the food but were denied, unless there was some leftover food after the employers had eaten. Aisha and Grace Adu relied on the leftover food, and they were compelled to fast for long periods at a time before being allowed to eat:

> ...I wasn't even given some of the food to eat, I sometimes ate raw rice, if there was leftover stew or soup that was when I got some ...
>
> (Aisha, return domestic worker from Oman, 3rd February 2018)

> ...I only ate their leftover food. I cooked for them and when they were done eating the leftover was what I ate....
>
> (Grace Adu, return domestic worker from Kuwait, 3rd February 2018)

Some formal Ghanaian recruiters such as Zachariah note the role of Ghanaian recruiters in intervening when reports of denial of food are made by domestic workers. Such negotiations are conducted through the local recruitment agents at the destination (*kafeels*), who in turn appeal to employers for clemency. This intermediary role of the

Ghanaian recruiter is, however, not uniform but varies according to the type of recruiter (see Awumbila et al., 2018). The research finds that informal recruiters are either in denial that challenges exist regarding feeding of domestic workers or they lack any leverage to intervene since they do not usually have any formal relations with recruitment agents at the destination.

Access to health is another area where domestic workers face significant challenges. Employers routinely attempt to maximise the labour derived from domestic workers by resorting to self-medication at home rather than accessing professional healthcare services. There are instances of domestic workers being prescribed painkillers for any type of health condition and being required to continue to work. Intimidating behaviour discourages domestic workers from reporting their illnesses to their employers. These situations are worsened by the fact that domestic workers are not entitled to sick leave. Hamamat and Asantewaa recount their personal experiences:

> …they don't send you to the hospital. The first place I stayed, I fell sick in the first, second, and third months but they never took me to the hospital. The only time they took me to a hospital during my stay there was to go and check whether I was pregnant or not… that was the only time they took me to the hospital…
>
> (Hamamat, return domestic worker from Saudi Arabia, 19th March 2018)

> …I was only given some painkillers. Fatima [employer] gave them to me when I told her about my sickness. After the painkillers that was all, nothing else. I had to go and work the following morning …
>
> (Asantewaa, return domestic worker from Kuwait, 2nd March 2018)

CONCLUSION

This paper acknowledges the growing phenomenon of the feminisation of international migration as a potentially good opportunity, especially for low-skilled female migrants who would otherwise be marginalised (IOM, 2020a, 2020b). However, the paper highlights the catalogue of abuses that are equally associated with the international migration of female domestic workers within the Middle Eastern context. The main channels of abuse identified include extra unpaid tasks, threatening behaviour, sexual harassment and assault, denial of food and caning. The paper further categorises the worse forms of abuse under five main typologies—verbal, physical, sexual, psychological/emotional and discrimination. Drawing on the conceptualisation of violence as structural, symbolic and/or interpersonal, the paper concludes that, the kafala system, which, according to Longva (1997), draws a historical lineage from indentured labour contracts especially among pearl divers in the Gulf States and was later transformed into a mechanism of labour control (Fernandez, 2021), serves as a petri dish for extensive exploitation and violent abuse of migrant workers based on parochial patriarchal and racialised social norms.

The paper also concludes that the range of abuses that have been unearthed are attributable to weaknesses in the system of recruitment and placement both in the country of origin and that of destination. The chain of intermediaries that facilitates the migration of domestic workers to the Middle East is not supervised by any formal or centralised agency in the destination countries. As a result, domestic workers' complaints are not necessarily addressed effectively since there is no sanctions regime for brokers or employers who abuse workers' rights. This suggests a system failure, and there is a need for a regulatory system to monitor the operations of recruitment agents (*kafeels*) and employers in destination countries. Immigration control measures imposed by the origin country have proven to be ineffective because they have failed to address the fundamental underlying systemic factors that permit abuses against female domestic workers. The formal ban on domestic worker migration to the Gulf States afforded officials at six embassies of the Middle Eastern countries (in Ghana) deniability of knowledge of or culpability of their governments in these abuses. The compendium of academic, advocacy and policy reports as well as media reportage on the pervasive accounts of abuses experienced by female domestic workers in the Middle East, and the concomitant lack of concrete action to address these abuses risk normalising these forms of behaviour by employers and recruiters.

In Ayalew et al. (2018) study, return migrant workers recounted common cases of forceful assimilation, forced labour, suppression of human rights, cultural isolation, undermining of cultural identity and ensuing enslavement of Ethiopian women for economic or sexual purposes in the Middle East. Migrant women under the *kafala system* are subjected to exploitative and abusive behaviours including withholding of their travel documents by their employers who sponsored their migration. There are also reported cases of confinement to the home and therefore limiting women's sense of agency (Fernandez, 2010 cited in Ketema, 2014). In addition, there are widespread reports of systematic abuse of violence, rape, beating, starvation and slavery-like practices, excessive domestic work, debt bondage, sexual slavery and servitude meted out by families and individual employers to Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East and the Gulf States (Demissie, 2018). We conclude that some of these forms of abuse from a relatively established source country in the East and Horn of Africa (Ethiopia), are equally reflective in the accounts from a neophyte source country such as Ghana, in West Africa. The pervasiveness and severity of reported abuses, therefore, require ethnographic research in the Middle Eastern destination countries to be able to fully appreciate the racialised incorporation of African and Asian migrant domestic workers in the *kafala* as a mechanism of labour control (Fernandez, 2021).

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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