Selam Medirashachin (Safe Arrival) Project: Addressing the risk of trafficking, violence, and sexual abuse among newly arriving migrant girls in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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BACKGROUND

Rates of urbanization in Ethiopia are significant and, increasingly, young females are chief among those who migrate from rural to urban areas (Masanja 2012; Bundervoet 2018; UN 2018). Previous research in Addis Ababa showed that, compared to boys and young men, young female migrants are more likely to migrate to cities without the accompaniment of immediate family members; many times, they move with people with whom they have only loose affiliation, such as neighbors, acquaintances or, at times, on their own (Erulkar and Mekbib 2007). This may be because migrant females in Ethiopia are frequently runaways from child marriage or move with the motivation of supporting very poor family members in their rural homes, often their single mothers and siblings.

Previous Population Council research on the experience of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) revealed that girls’ migration from rural to urban areas of the country may be perilous (Erulkar, Medhin, and Negeri 2017). This is particularly true at the point of arrival into cities, and when traveling on their own or with same-age peers, and with no immediate plans for where they will stay upon arrival:

In fact, it was really bad. It was rainy season. When it was raining, we used to spend the night [on the street] standing, and we used to sleep during the daytime... When we wanted to sleep at night, we wore plastic and slept on a sack. Also, there were boys who used to come drunk. It was horrible... You know like when they see new girls, they just see you differently. They just want you to sleep with them...
–Migrant young woman, age 18, migrated at age 14 (Erulkar, Medhin, and Negeri 2017)

Job-placement brokers, known as “delalas” in Amharic, are intermediaries or “go-betweens” who are active in job placement, connecting employers with employees, mainly in service sectors such as household domestics, waitresses, dishwashers, and barmaidds. Brokers, often stationed at bus stations to intercept newly arriving migrants, may pose an additional risk to them but may also provide much-needed support and guidance. The same research found that some unscrupulous brokers may take advantage of girls’ naivete and lack of support systems to sexually exploit them before finding them work:

Girls who migrate pique your interest. She may be a virgin. Something about her makes you interested. There is a saying that goes, “Brokers don’t let girls go without tasting them first.” It is true. You invite her for coffee or tea ... while you are having coffee or tea together, the time goes. You tell her that you are going to get a room for her and that she is going to sleep there. She will say “OK” because she has no other option... If she is unsure, you create some kind of strategy and you try to persuade her, you control her mind... (I have done this to 60 girls) ... I don’t know, it could be more than this. –Unlicensed Broker, Adama (Erulkar, Medhin, and Negeri 2017)
Formative research was conducted during the initial phases of the current project (Selam Medirashachin), which included in-depth interviews with migrant AGYW, market women, and petty traders who operate in and around bus stations, as well as job placement brokers. This research confirmed earlier Council findings that highlighted intensified risk to girls immediately upon arrival.

The Population Council’s 2013 monograph *Girls on the Move: Adolescent Girls & Migration in the Developing World* highlighted the unique vulnerabilities of migrant AGYW upon arrival into towns and cities, recommending that support programs take steps to “ensure a smooth landing” and facilitate social connections, accommodations, and linkage to services (Temin et al. 2013).

**SELAM MEDIRASHACHIN PROJECT**

The Selam Medirashachin (Safe Arrival, in Amharic) project was born out of the need to address safety and security issues that we observed in our research among migrant AGYWs during the narrow window of time immediately upon arrival. With most migrants arriving by means of public buses, the project was located in the two largest bus stations in Addis Ababa:

**Who are the brokers at bus stations?**

Brokers (known as “delalas” in Amharic) are intermediaries or “go-betweens” who are active in job placement, connecting employers with employees, and supplying households, restaurants, and bars with domestic workers, waitresses, bar staff, and, at times, commercial sex workers. Our project enumeration of 105 brokers in Autobus Terra and Lamberet found that:

- 90% are male and 10% are female
- Their average age is 31, ranging from 20 to 50 years of age
- They have an average of just under 10 years of education and have been brokering for just over 5 years
- 90% are migrants to Addis Ababa
- 70% have government-issued licenses and 30% are unlicensed

They [arriving migrant girls] face a lot of problems. They might get robbed by thieves pretending to be brokers, and they might lie and take them to a hotel and rape them. They face these problems because they do not know anything about the city, and they might get tricked as well... The major problem I see is not having a place to stay. When they have no place to stay, they are in trouble and forced to sleep with men when they don’t want to. They have no choice because they have no place to stay.

—Unlicensed broker (Erulkar and Hailu 2024)
Building the capacity of market women, brokers, and transport workers to support migrant girls and young women

“Arrival Allies” were trained over eight sessions to build an understanding of migrant girls and the capacity to support them. In all, 78 Allies were trained on the following topics:

- Session 1: Setting the stage. Project objectives, expected outcomes, and responsibilities.
- Session 2: Migration and gender. How gender impacts migration and specific risks faced by girls.
- Session 3: Data and ethics. Routine data on migrants we support, ethical issues, and confidentiality.
- Session 4: Circumstances of domestic workers. Information including long working hours, social isolation, and labor exploitation.
- Session 5: Child protection and safeguarding. Resources in the area to prevent and support victims, including the Office of Women and Social Affairs.
- Session 6: Human trafficking. Review of different forms of trafficking, how to identify trafficking, and where to report suspected cases.
- Session 7: Code of conduct. Reviewed, discussed, and signed code of conduct that confirmed commitment to protection and safeguarding principles.
- Session 8: Coming full circle. The final session brought together all trainees across the three groups to share experiences and strategize on collaboration and protection of girls.

In addition, two discussion panels were convened for trainees with local government officials from law enforcement, the transport authority, labor, and the Office of Women and Social Affairs. The panel included presentations on child labor, international labor conventions, and the Ethiopian laws on labor and trafficking.

girls, capitalizing on the available facilities and human resources at the point of arrival into cities. Based on our early research, both market women/petty traders and some brokers and transport workers demonstrated concern and care for migrant girls of their own volition, especially when girls found themselves in serious predicaments with no source of support or having been victimized, abused, or exploited.

The Population Council worked with the Organization for Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Integration of Female Street Children (OPRIFS) to implement a capacity-building program for brokers, market women, and transport authorities in each of the bus stations. We capitalized on the goodwill of market women, brokers, and transport workers to recruit a cadre of “Arrival Allies” and built their skills in supporting migrant AGYW and linking them with resources. Twenty-four market women/petty traders, 24 brokers, and 30 transport workers were recruited as Arrival Allies. Selected Allies had a diversity of language capabilities, were from various places of origin and ethnic backgrounds, and had years of experience at the bus stations. This was done to ensure that newly migrant girls had points of contact across different language groups and regions of the country.

Population Council and OPRIFS staff jointly developed a training program that included eight half-day sessions. Training sessions were held in local Woreda (District) administration halls on a monthly basis. Separate groups were held for each of the three categories of Arrival Allies (market women, brokers, and transport workers). Following the training, it was anticipated that Arrival Allies would become more proactive in offering support, protection, and referrals to newly arriving girls, and serve as a resource for them in settling into their new environment. In addition, they were asked to promote working conditions in line with the Ethiopian Labor Law
as well as boilerplate contracts of employment for girls they place in jobs.

Trainees recorded the support given to migrant AGYW following the training. Most support reported was facilitation of safe, temporary housing, followed by provision of food. Trainees reported increased sensitivity and understanding of the situations of migrant girls and the challenges they face. They affirmed the importance of additional attention to arriving migrants with a view to ensuring their safety and security, and supporting their transition into urban life:

I met a girl who escaped from her husband [in the rural area] and fled to the city. I asked her and she told me her story. She has no family or friends here in the city and she came with no clothes or money. So, I gave her some clothes and also became her guarantor [for work]. I can say that the training helped me really well when it comes to being considerate. –Broker

Many trainees mentioned that they take time to understand the girls’ circumstances and background before placing them into work, and some pay follow-up visits at their place of employment to check on their well-being.

[Checking on girls] is a new skill I developed after the training. Previously, we went straight to the main work discussion, but now we help her familiarize herself with the environment before we ask about work. –Broker

Some described facilitating girls’ access to services as well, including medical and legal services. In addition, during implementation we found that some of the well-established, licensed brokers maintain group accommodations for newly arriving girls who do not have alternative housing arrangements. These are simply one-room arrangements where groups of girls can spend the night until they are placed into jobs that provide accommodations, mainly domestic work.

The Selam Medirashachin project introduced a model contract that was pilot tested among selected brokers. Several brokers found the contract to be an impediment to job placement, mainly due to refusal from employers to have a contractual agreement with young workers. In particular, employers were resistant to having maximum working hours and leave days specified in the contract.

I once negotiated with a customer [employer] on the working hours of a girl, and she completely rejected the arrangement and walked away. I tried to explain how it was important to keep the rights of our workers, but she wasn’t open to discussing that. –Broker

Many trainees remarked that migrant AGYW need better awareness about the city: its risks, resources, and opportunities, both before migrating and upon arrival. They suggested that migrant girls need training early after their arrival on what to expect in city life and what their rights and responsibilities are as workers. Accommodations were also seen as a key need early on and critical to ensuring girls’ safety in their new surroundings.

NEXT STEPS

Based on experiences during the pilot phase of Selam Medirarashchin, the Population Council will continue to work with trained Arrival Allies and local government, especially the Office of Women and Social Affairs and local law enforcement. In this phase of the project, we will engage trained brokers who have government licenses and maintain all-female group accommodations for newly arriving girls. We will affiliate these group facilities with the local government office and provide modest upgrades, to ensure a minimum standard of cleanliness, security, and protection.
In effect, these all-female, temporary group accommodations represent a naturally occurring “safe space” through which we can help migrant girls build skills and assets. Trained female Arrival Allies will provide orientation and safety training to those recently arriving in these facilities. They will provide girls with training that is interactive and participatory and covers topics such as confidence-building and self-esteem, violence, safety planning, trafficking, occupational safety, and resources. Migrants will be exposed to available community resources such as the Office of Women and Social Affairs, available counselors, medical services, services related to gender-based violence (GBV), law enforcement, and legal services. The duration of girls’ temporary lodging may be short – one to two days before job placement. Therefore, while training may be brief, migrants will be provided with a brochure of local resources, as well as the contact information for female Arrival Allies and the Office of Women and Social Affairs.

REFERENCES


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