

Uncovering pain of labour migrants in Middle East



Yasin Kintu, lost his property to a fraudulent labour company.



Hadijah Namulindwa, was denied communication.



Nusra Namyalo's sister lost all her savings. PHOTOS/IBRAHIM KAVUMA



Richard Nakibinge's daughter grapples with trauma due to detention.

Many migrants are deceived into paying large sums of money for jobs that either do not exist or are secured through reliance on informal agents.

BY SYLVIA NAMAGEMBE

Many Ugandans seeking jobs in the Middle East still fall victim to fraudulent recruitment schemes, as illegal agents and companies exploit information gaps to extort money and traffic unsuspecting job seekers.

For many Ugandans, the dream of working abroad turns into a cycle of debt, exploitation and in some cases, violence, with little chance of getting justice.

Hadijah Namulindwa said her ordeal began the moment she arrived in Saudi Arabia. Her phone was confiscated, cutting off all communication with her family and any chance of seeking help.

"They took away my phone and cut off all means of communication six months to the expiry of my contract and sometimes delayed my wages. Then when I raised a complaint, the torture began yet I could not explain myself or ask for help," she shared.

Namulindwa's experience reflects a common pattern of workers being isolated and stripped of their basic freedoms.

Naseem Namubiru described how even basic health needs are disregarded, leaving the workers vulnerable in foreign lands.

"Even when one goes down with malaria, it's treated as if one is worth solitary confinement. Besides, I was subjected to work in more than three homes with no food, and when I tried to call the company that recruited us, I was ignored. Workers should be helped to understand and interpret contracts before leaving Uganda," she said.

In some cases, exploitation continues even after the contracts have ended.



Scam. My attempts to question the changes were met with threats and verbal intimidation of deporting me at my own cost hence giving in, - Umar Kyeyune

Nusrah Namyalo recounted how her sister was denied a cancellation letter, forcing her to continue working without pay for six months and out of the stipulated timeline. She said attempts to save money were also frustrated.

"Many girls, including my sister, were made to work for free for three months under the guise that they lacked money for the air ticket. However, the real issue was they didn't want to get another worker soon. She returned home with nothing because even the little she tried to save was taken by the bosses," she said.

Another victim, Umar Kyeyune, said the job he was promised was entirely different from what he found on arrival. He said he had signed for a factory job with a clear salary structure, only to be reassigned as a gardener under harsh conditions and lower pay.

"My attempts to question the changes were met with threats and verbal intimidation of deporting me on my own cost hence giving in," he said.

For Richard Nakibinge, his daughter's troubles escalated when she was arrested following a misunderstanding with her employer. He said after months of working under pressure, a disagreement led to accusations that resulted in her detention.

"We were told she had been arrested after a disagreement at the workplace but did not understand the real issue. We tried to ask the agents, but none gave us clear answers and had no guidance on how to handle the situation from Uganda," he said.

Nakibinge said to date, his daughter has not got over the detention trauma, with frequent appointments to psychologists to normalise her.

Yasin Kintu recalled how desperation

REFORMS

To address the persistent risks faced by migrant workers, the gender ministry is considering a raft of reforms, including extending the pre-departure training period for migrants to between one and two months.

Mr Hillary Talemwa, the head of the External Employment Unit at the ministry, said the current two-week orientation needs to be expanded to allow workers more time to prepare for the work and social realities abroad.

There are plans to extend the pre-departure training from two weeks to one or two months so workers are better prepared for the social and cultural realities, and mental challenges abroad. The recruitment agencies welcomed the proposed government reforms, saying they could help address long-standing gaps in the preparation of migrant workers. Mr Ian Kaijuka, managing partner at Optimal Manpower Placement and a board member of the Uganda Association of External Recruitment Agencies (UAERA), said extending the training period would better equip workers for the realities of employment abroad.

to secure a better future pushed him into a risky decision where he pledged his house and land to raise the required fees after being promised a lucrative job abroad.

"I thought I was securing a supermarket sales job that would change my life, but it was all a scam. I lost all the money I had borrowed from the bank only to realise later that the opportunity was a scam by a recruitment company in Muyenga (name withheld), and my property was taken," he said.

The Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development says by December 2024, at least 317,555 Ugandans have formally secured jobs in the Middle East. The majority are women, account-

ing for 84.45 percent (268,203), while men made up 15.5 percent (49,332).

Dr Aisha Nakiwala Ssembatya, a researcher and senior lecturer at the Makerere University's Department of Journalism and Communication, said misinformation is a key driver pushing young Ugandans into risky migration patterns through unsafe channels.

"Our survey shows that misinformation, especially on social media, is the main reason pushing job seekers into unsafe migration channels. The research also found that fraud is increasingly difficult to regulate due to digital platforms that are used for wider advertisement," she said.

Dr Nakiwala added: "These workers face cultural isolation, language barriers and separation from their families, which affects their ability to benefit from the labour they provide."

The research, which began in 2024 and was funded by the Science for Africa Foundation under the Possible Africa Initiative. It was implemented by the Journalism Department of Makerere University, focused on Butambala District, one of the areas with high numbers of girls travelling for domestic work.

The 2024 Ugandan Journal of Management and Public Policy Studies published by Uganda Management Institute shows that districts such as Butambala in Central Uganda and Bugweri in eastern Uganda have increasingly emerged as key source areas for migrant workers seeking employment in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman.

Dr Nakiwala also noted that in many trafficking cases, the recruiters are relatives or family members, which makes it difficult for the authorities to intervene.

How they are exploited

At a labour migration community engagement in Butambala District, Mr Hillary Talemwa, the head of the External Employment Unit at the ministry, highlighted how many migrants still fall into traps by bypassing formal procedures.

"Guidelines are available but people bypass them. They go through agents

instead of following formal recruitment procedures. Since the ministry is understaffed compared to the demand and cases, it becomes hard to follow up on most cases," he said.

He added that many migrants are deceived into paying large sums of money for jobs that either do not exist or are secured through reliance on informal agents.

"Many companies, especially in Kampala, have fake licences while others operate with expired ones but others keep relocating and opening up several branches. Some even have licences but do not have job orders from destination countries and the kind of jobs," Mr Talemwa said.

Despite this requirement, some companies reportedly keep job seekers waiting for months while they continue extorting money from them.

"The administrative fee for domestic workers should legally not exceed Shs50,000 while the employer is supposed to cater for the major costs for the rest of the jobs, there are stipulated costs that are reasonable," Mr Talemwa added.

There are also reports that some recruitment companies had confiscated the internal Affairs ministry reported more than 20,000 passports that belonged to maids being held illegally by the companies.

Reforms mooted

Mr Ian Kaijuka, managing partner at Optimal Manpower Placement said the current gaps disadvantage Ugandan workers compared to those from other labour-exporting countries.

"Workers from other countries like Ethiopia undergo months of training and this gap is partly driven by the labour export model, where employers are expected to meet most of the costs but are often unwilling to invest in extended training," he said.

Mr Kaijuka, who acknowledged cases of fraud in the sector, said these are often linked to misrepresentation by some actors rather than standard practice among licensed labour recruitment companies.

"It is unacceptable for a company to falsely claim to have a job order. The association does not condone the ill-treatment of migrant labourers and we have measures to ensure Ugandans are accorded decent and fair treatment abroad. More sensitisation is needed to help people verify licensed companies and genuine job opportunities before they are exposed to exploitation," he said.

Meanwhile, the government says it is strengthening protection to cushion migrant workers with plans to introduce mandatory insurance for migrant workers.

"This will cover emergencies such as sickness, death, or repatriation, reducing the financial strain on their families. They are covered even if a worker moves to the black market or faces problems abroad," Mr Talemwa said.

He said under existing arrangements, employers are required to meet the cost of repatriation or cater for workers in case of death while still under contract.

However, challenges arise when the workers abandon their contracts and enter the illegal labour market where they often lose access to such protections.

"When workers leave the formal system, they lose access to services such as healthcare and banking, where even recruitment companies are no longer responsible, leaving families to bear the burden," he said.