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Original Article

My Money is My Blood, Do Not Waste It: A Critical Analysis of the Return and Reintegration Experiences of Ugandan Migrant Domestic Workers from Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

The study analyzed the return and reintegration experiences of returnee Ugandan migrant domestic workers from Saudi Arabia. It was grounded in a social constructivism paradigm, an interpretive framework that emphasizes how individuals understand and assign meaning to their world. A qualitative approach was adopted, utilizing a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of returnees. Data was collected through unstructured interviews with 28 respondents, allowing for in-depth insights into their experiences. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, and concept maps created using NVivo version 10.0 were used to illustrate the findings. The study revealed that the return and reintegration journey for migrant domestic workers comprised three key phases: preparing to leave their employers' homes after the expiration of contracts, travelling back to Uganda, and reintegration into their communities. However, the research highlighted numerous challenges faced by returnees. Some employers forced workers to continue working under exploitative conditions, tantamount to slavery, by withholding their consent to leave. In other cases, employers failed to purchase the required return airline tickets, as stipulated by the bilateral labour agreement, in an effort to coerce workers into renewing their contracts against their will. Upon returning to Uganda, many returnees faced further hardships. They were often met with distressing revelations, such as discovering that the next of kin they had entrusted with their savings had misappropriated the funds. This financial exploitation, coupled with economic and social reintegration difficulties, led to significant psychosocial challenges for the returnees. To address these issues, the study recommends implementing measures to protect migrant domestic workers' finances. For example, every worker should open a personal bank account where their wages and salaries can be securely deposited and saved, ensuring access to their funds upon return to ease reintegration challenges. Families and next of kin must be educated about the risks and consequences of misusing workers' money, considering the harsh conditions under which these workers labour. Furthermore, local council members should enforce accountability by ensuring that family

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members who misuse returnees' funds reimburse the money, potentially with added interest, to deter financial exploitation.

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INTRODUCTION

Effective return means that the migrant workers arrive back in their country of origin in a safe and dignified manner after achieving their migration objectives overseas (Koch, 2017). Effective reintegration means that returned workers have successfully integrated back into their families, communities, the economy, and society following return. It also emphasizes that returned workers have achieved economic, social, and cultural reintegration in their home country (Wickramasekara (2019).

The Association of South Eastern Asian Nations (ASEAN) guidelines recognise different categories of returned workers and their needs as indicated;

Migrants return under different conditions and for various reasons, such as successful completion of their migration objectives or targets; retirement; lack of success and poor integration in destination countries; expiry of temporary work contracts; family reasons; conditions in the home country have improved since departure; and deportations, among others. In the temporary migration cycle predominant in Asian and Middle Eastern countries, migrant workers must return to their origin country when the contract ends. Some migrant workers are better prepared for reintegration with minimum state assistance, while others may return in distress situations requiring special attention. Thus, their different needs must be built into reintegration programs (ASEAN Guidelines on Effective Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers p. 14).

Tizazu et al. (2023) addressed three dimensions of reintegration: economic (asset ownership, employment, job search, and satisfaction with the economic situation), social (access to education and health, housing and safe drinking water, possession of identification documentation, and access to the justice system). While psychological elements such as a sense of belonging and security, support networks and participation in social activities, familial relationships, distress, and a source of desire to re-migrate are all essential, women, like men, migrate owing to familial pressure and make independent decisions to migrate, but rejection of their migration affects women (Phillimore et al., 2023).

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Return and reintegration cut across all levels: individual, family, community, economy, and society as a whole, and entails full enjoyment of political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights (Şahin-Mencütek, 2023). The minimum length of labour attachment overseas required for a person to be classified as a return international migrant worker is frequently six months (Dzięglewski, 2021). Given the difficult circumstances under which many migrants return, as well as the difficult labour market conditions, stigma, and often precarious conditions that await them in their origin countries, actors in the return process are increasingly looking for ways to support return migrants beyond their re-entry (Bisong, 2022). The first consideration is to improve the returning process and limit the likelihood of irregular remigration by returnees (Hagan & Thomas Wassink, 2020). All parties included such as destination countries, origin countries, and returning migrants, should work together to achieve inclusion, development, and a reduction in desperate migration (Newland, 2020).

Migrants frequently leave and return to their hometowns (Hagan & Thomas Wassink, 2020), and the reasons for returning include successful completion of their migration objectives or targets; retirement; lack of success and poor integration in destination countries; expiration of temporary work contracts; family reasons; conditions in the home country have improved since departure; and deportations (Gunda, 2024). Return and reintegration experiences for migrant domestic workers vary by country (Chy et al., 2023). Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries (Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore) provide assistance for their return and reintegration process (Thong, 2023) while some other countries do not have programs related to return and reintegration. Countries south of the Sahara, like Uganda, have not considered investing in return and reintegration programs, leaving returnee migrant domestic workers in a difficult situation, particularly when they return to communities and families who no longer value their existence. Some of the experiences encountered upon return include failure to fit in the community, financial squandering by next of kin, separation and divorce from the spouses, and stigmatization by the community and family members, making reintegration difficult. Although the return and reintegration of migrant workers into their home countries marks the conclusion of their movement cycle (Nisrane, 2020), little research has focused on migrant return and reintegration, especially in Uganda. This makes the whole process of return and reintegration challenging (Maksum, 2021). Therefore, it was necessary to carry out a study that critically analyzed the return and reintegration of Ugandan migrant domestic workers from Saudi Arabia.

Statement of the Problem and Research Question

Effective reintegration is the process of successfully reintegrating returned workers into their families, communities, the workforce, and society as a whole (Kuschminder, 2022). From the standpoint of their home country, an effective return occurs when migrant labourers return in a respectable and secure manner after achieving their international migration objectives (Bilecen, 2022). Every day, migrants depart from and return to their home countries however, the infrastructure, services, and resources necessary to help migrants upon their return are lacking in their home countries (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020). Programs for repatriated workers and the communities they return to must be orientated towards facilitating reintegration (Kuschminder, 2022). Views of preferential treatment may resurface or get worse if immigrants obtain assistance at the expense of locals (Akhtar, 2024). But still, the experiences of domestic workers upon their return and reintegration differ among themselves. It is unfathomed that the return and reintegration cycles are an unwritten chapter in the history of migration (Kuschminder, 2022). However, additional attention should be paid to this

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area. Since recruitment agencies and the Ugandan government do not keep track of how these workers have returned and ultimately reintegrated back into the community, the return and reintegration of migrant domestic workers from Saudi Arabia have been surrounded by a number of difficulties. After their contracts expire, Ugandan migrant domestic workers suffer a variety of difficulties, and when they get back home, additional catastrophic events happen. Family members squander their hard-earned money, leaving them in a difficult situation considering their precarious financial situation. Therefore, it was imperative that the researcher carry out a critical analysis of the return and reintegration of returnee Ugandan Migrant domestic workers from Saudi Arabia.

Research Question

a) What are the return and reintegration experiences of returnee Ugandan migrant domestic workers from Saudi Arabia?

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The study was underpinned by **Social Network Theory**, which posits that the understanding of return migration is enriched through the lens of migration dynamics (Cassarino, 2004). Developed by Jacob Moreno in the 1930s (Moreno, 2014), Social Network Theory is widely applied in the social sciences to examine relationships between individuals, groups, organizations, and even entire societies (Thompson, 2017). The theory underscores the strong material, personal, and emotional ties that migrants and returnees maintain with both their home and host communities. It also highlights the inclusion of these communities in the broader network of relationships (Dzięglewski, 2021). In the context of return migration, family and other social networks are critical as they often act as intermediaries in facilitating the decision to return, the logistics of the return journey, and the reintegration process (Cassarino, 2004). While concepts such as transnational social fields and transnational social spaces share similarities with social networks, the latter focuses more on the connections among specific groups of people bound by common characteristics—such as kinship, social capital, cultural and financial resources, and identity—necessary for membership in the network (Boccagni, 2012). Simply put, social networks are relational systems comprising social actors whose interactions shape the return migration experience. These networks influence relational dynamics that can contribute to the formation of a unique returnee identity (King & Kuschminder, 2022). For instance, families and social networks play a pivotal role in minimizing post-return obstacles by supporting returnees in securing employment and facilitating appropriate arrangements for their return and reintegration. According to Social Network Theory, linkages within families and communities are vital for the successful reintegration of returnees. Without adequate support, returnees may face significant challenges, leading to fractured families and, ultimately, a fragmented society. Thus, fostering robust family and community networks is essential to ensure a smooth and meaningful reintegration process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, reintegration experiences are categorized under economic, social and psycho-social reintegration to frame the experiences of returnee Ugandan domestic migrant workers.

Economic Reintegration

Successful return and reintegration may need the following: cooperation between countries of origin and destinations to enable the safe and dignified return of their nationals (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015). Labour attachés and consular missions in the destination country advise and facilitate migrant workers' safe and dignified repatriation (D'Souza, 2010). Whereas, economic reintegration aid helps returnees achieve self-sufficiency upon their return (Şahin-Mencütek, 2023). Many reintegration schemes involve economic reintegration assistance,

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as returnees frequently depart due to a lack of a suitable wage (Nimkar et al., 2020).

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration factors (Hall, 2023). Economic reintegration is required for returnees because they can sustain a livelihood and may not be economically vulnerable. Social and cultural reintegration is necessary since returnees will be actively incorporated into the receiving society, for example, at the local community level; and political-security reintegration, in which the returnee believes they will have access to safety and justice upon their return (Brunarska et al., 2013).

Employers must prepare migrant workers' return travels upon termination of employment in accordance with the employment contract and the destination country's laws and regulations (Anaf et al., 2022). Returning migrant workers should on the other hand be well received in their home countries and communities, register with central and local authorities to allow access to support services and to contribute their abilities and resources as needed by the community and society (Carr, 2014). However, with such an excellent proposed program, Uganda has not reached that level of arrangement to ensure that the economic proceeds from returnees are properly kept so that, in return, they do something tangible. Therefore, returnees in most cases require cash assistance to address immediate needs; psychosocial counselling; health care; physical rehabilitation; family tracing services; assistance to recover outstanding wages, assets, and property; compensation to address losses; and many more possible interventions to settle returnees (Foley & Piper, 2021). Efforts to re-establish income for migrants returning to their home countries may involve certification and acknowledgement of skills, education, and training obtained abroad, and sometimes they may need opportunities to learn new skills (Nonnenmacher & Naik, 2010).

Financial reintegration assistance can exacerbate tensions between local communities that have persevered in the face of poverty, violence, or crises and locals and returnees receiving financial reintegration assistance (Joireman, 2022). People in the local community frequently do not understand why those who, in their opinion, had opportunities to seek better opportunities and failed are given additional aid. This is especially important for public institutions and employment organizations in the origin country that provide reintegration assistance. This issue was encountered by the Tunisian job agency, the National Agency for Employment and Independent Work (ANETI), which chose not to publicize its aid (Angel-Urdinola et al., 2013).

Certain programs attempt to reduce tensions with local populations by incorporating structural aid for the local community into reintegration packages (Özerdem, 2012). Swiss authorities, for example, supplement the particular solution with a commercial venture, a housing solution, or medical assistance with structural assistance (Meier et al., 2023). The returned migrant receives their reintegration package while also bringing running water and other structural improvements to the community they returned to, benefiting the entire community (Nimkar et al., 2020). However, in Uganda, the financial proceeds of migrant domestic workers are occasionally received by their next of kin, who sometimes squander them, and when they return, battles break out, making a returnee's life more problematic than it was before they left.

Social Reintegration

Social reintegration and a supportive community network are critical for vulnerable migrants, particularly those who have experienced violence, such as victims of human trafficking (Hall, 2023). In these instances, reintegration programs must go beyond traditional economic aid and provide

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psychological support and job training tailored to individual vulnerabilities (Salgado et al., 2020). For example, civil society organizations in Germany focus on assisting women and victims of trafficking, offering specialized training and support that adapts to the unique needs of each returnee (Tanis & Richter, 2022). Victims of human trafficking, in particular, require additional assistance, with targeted programs designed to help them rebuild their lives (Rai, 2023). However, many returnees face challenges accessing support after their return, making the reintegration process more difficult (Scalettaris & Gubert, 2019). The goal of community-based social reintegration support is to enhance the availability and accessibility of social services in returnee communities (Zewude et al., 2023). This approach is particularly crucial when factors like language barriers or geographical constraints prevent returnees from accessing services in areas with high rates of return. When local services fail to meet the unique needs of returnees, community-based solutions can address these gaps (Kuschminder, 2014). Social stigma, often severe for women, can lead them to avoid returning to their communities of origin and seek refuge elsewhere (Brewis et al., 2020). Moreover, the lack of job opportunities and housing makes it challenging for returnees and their families to reintegrate successfully into society, further complicating their return process (Guzmán Elizalde, 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the vulnerability of migrant workers, forcing many to return home under difficult circumstances (Djafar, 2024). The global economic downturn triggered by the pandemic led to widespread job losses, and many migrants were stranded in foreign countries due to the lack of effective systems for safe repatriation amidst new travel restrictions, quarantine measures, and health checks (Flight et al., 2021). At its peak, the International Organization for Migration identified millions of stranded migrants, many of whom required assistance to return home safely (Foley & Piper, 2021). In response to these challenges, the European Union, in partnership with the OECD, has broadened the scope of reintegration support to include the re-establishment period in the origin country (Şahin-Mencütek, 2023). This approach recognizes that return cannot be sustained without effective reintegration, which is often complicated by returnees' psychological distress, accumulated debt, and long absences from their home country (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Kuschminder, 2017). The understanding that successful reintegration is critical for avoiding re-migration has led to a more holistic approach that includes both practical and emotional support for returnees (Cassarino, 2004).

In regions like Asia and the Middle East, where migration typically follows cyclical patterns, returnees may require specialized support, particularly if they return under distressing circumstances (Silvey & Parreñas, 2020). Some migrant workers are better equipped to reintegrate, but others need targeted assistance to cope with the challenges they face upon return (Wickramasekara, 2019). Victims of human trafficking and those subjected to sexual and gender-based violence often face additional hurdles during reintegration, highlighting the need for specialized social services (Kasper & Chiang, 2020). Furthermore, children born to migrant workers in host countries may also struggle with reintegration, as they lack familiarity with their parent's home culture (Cena & Heim, 2022). Given these complexities, returnee programs must offer tailored support that meets the diverse needs of migrant populations. However, in Uganda, the government has yet to invest adequately in social reintegration programs for returnee migrant domestic workers, leaving them to face difficult and unpleasant reintegration experiences without the necessary support systems. This gap in policy and practice highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to reintegration that addresses both the practical and psychological needs of returnees.

Psycho-Social Reintegration

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The decision to return after migration is complex and often emotionally charged, with profound psychological and social implications. Many migrants, especially those whose migration plans fail, experience a cascade of emotions and psychological challenges upon their return, such as shame, guilt, anxiety, and frustration (Da Silva Rebelo et al., 2021; Abashula, 2019). These emotions may stem from unmet expectations, a sense of failure, and the perception of being a burden to family or society (Duus-Otterström, 2017). Reintegration can be particularly difficult when compounded by socio-relational issues, including negative reactions from family or community members, who may view the return as a failure (McDowell et al., 2022; Harlan et al., 2020).

Returnees often face disorientation and isolation, exacerbated by societal changes that occurred during their absence, which may conflict with their memories of home (Pine, 2014; Juang & Schachner, 2020). These challenges are intensified when the community has high expectations of success and prosperity that the returnees cannot fulfil, leading to feelings of resentment and alienation (King, 2022; Hannum, 2021). Additionally, reintegration assistance provided to returnees is sometimes perceived by community members as an unfair advantage, further straining relations (Nimkar et al., 2020). The psychological toll of migration and return is heightened for those who experienced traumatic incidents, including physical and mental torture, sexual violence, forced labour, and exploitation while abroad (Gallagher & Skrivankova, 2015; Ottisova et al., 2016). These experiences can lead to severe mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal tendencies (Sayer et al., 2014; IOM, 2020). Yet, it is important to note that while distress is common among returnees, not all develop mental illnesses; reactions vary based on individual factors such as personality, gender, social support, and prior psychological conditions (Bhugra, 2004; Warfa et al., 2012).

The psychosocial well-being of returnees is closely linked to the availability of support systems. Various organizations in Uganda, such as the HTS Union and the Uganda Association of External Recruitment Agencies (UAERA), provide critical services, including counselling, legal aid, financial literacy training, and medical support for returnees (HTS-Union-UHFTAWU, 2016; Nampewo, 2021). Entebbe Rehabilitation Centre and Butabika Mental Medical Centre are notable institutions that assist distressed returnees with rehabilitation and mental health care. However, gaps remain in ensuring justice and financial restitution for returnees, many of whom struggle with unpaid wages or financial misappropriation by family members (Nampewo, 2021; Strand et al., 2008). Efforts to support returnees should adopt a holistic approach, addressing psychosocial, economic, and social dimensions of reintegration (Glorieux et al., 2023; Saguin, 2020). Programs must cater to both returnees and the communities they reintegrate into, promoting understanding, reducing stigma, and fostering inclusive development. Policies aligned with the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration emphasize the importance of integrating returnees' needs into national and local development plans, ensuring sustainable reintegration (Newland, 2018). Ultimately, addressing the challenges faced by returnee Ugandan migrant domestic workers requires collaborative efforts from governments, NGOs, and communities. Investments in psychological counselling, legal advocacy, and socio-economic programs are essential to mitigate the vulnerabilities of returnees, ensure justice, and foster successful reintegration.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized social constructivism, an interpretive paradigm where individuals seek to understand their surroundings and create meanings that align with their experiences (Phillips, 2023). Social constructivists emphasize that people strive to comprehend the environment in which they live

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and work (Boyland, 2019). To investigate the return and reintegration experiences of returnee Ugandan migrant domestic workers from Saudi Arabia, the study adopted a phenomenological research design, enabling a thorough examination of the research problem through the participants' lived experiences. A small, purposefully selected sample was employed to collect qualitative data, aiming to gain deep and nuanced insights into the participants' perspectives (Boddy, 2016). This qualitative methodology acknowledged the centrality of participants' experiences and viewpoints in the meaning-making process, focusing on how individuals interpret their social realities (Phillips, 2023).

Population and Sample

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants, with the final sample size determined by data saturation, consisting of twenty-eight (28) respondents. The returnee migrant domestic workers were drawn from Uganda's Central, Eastern, and Western regions. Key informants were selected from the Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development (MoGLSD), the Uganda Association of Employment Recruitment Agencies (UAERA), and the next of kin of returnee migrant domestic workers. The MoGLSD is mandated to regulate the labour export sector in Uganda, while UAERA oversees the monitoring and evaluation of recruitment companies, their directors, and employees engaged in hiring domestic workers for Saudi Arabia. The inclusion of next of kin provided additional perspectives on the reintegration challenges faced by returnees. Snowball sampling was used to identify and recruit returnee migrant domestic workers, leveraging existing networks to locate participants with relevant experiences. In contrast, purposive sampling was employed to select key informants based on their specialized knowledge of the return and reintegration processes for Ugandan migrant domestic workers. These methods ensured the collection of rich, targeted data from participants directly involved in or knowledgeable about the subject.

Data Collection Instrument

Data was collected using an unstructured interview guide, with participants responding to a standard set of open-ended questions designed to gather rich and detailed information. The flexibility of this approach allowed for a deeper exploration of participants' experiences during their return and reintegration into their communities and homes. Each interview lasted between 50 and 60 minutes. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the collected data underwent quality control using the truth value approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), which confirmed that the results accurately reflected the valid information shared by participants. This approach ensured that the study authentically captured the return and reintegration experiences of Ugandan migrant domestic workers from Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the analysis process emphasized grounding interpretations firmly in the data obtained from respondents, ensuring reliability and validity in the findings.

Data analysis

The collected data was transcribed, and responses were coded based on emerging themes. This process involved grouping related responses under common topics and assigning appropriate codes to each. Impactful statements were identified to extract meaningful insights from the interviews. An inductive thematic analysis approach was employed, which included continuous data review, comparing information against existing codes, and iterative recoding as new insights emerged. This method allowed themes to organically emerge from the data, uncovering overarching patterns. The data was then condensed and described to identify key concepts that explained the return and reintegration experiences of Ugandan migrant domestic workers returning from Saudi Arabia. These emerging patterns and themes provided a foundation for presenting and interpreting the findings.

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To enhance visualization and clarity, concept maps were created using Nvivo version 10.0, illustrating the relationships and insights surrounding the return and reintegration experiences of the workers.

Ethical consideration

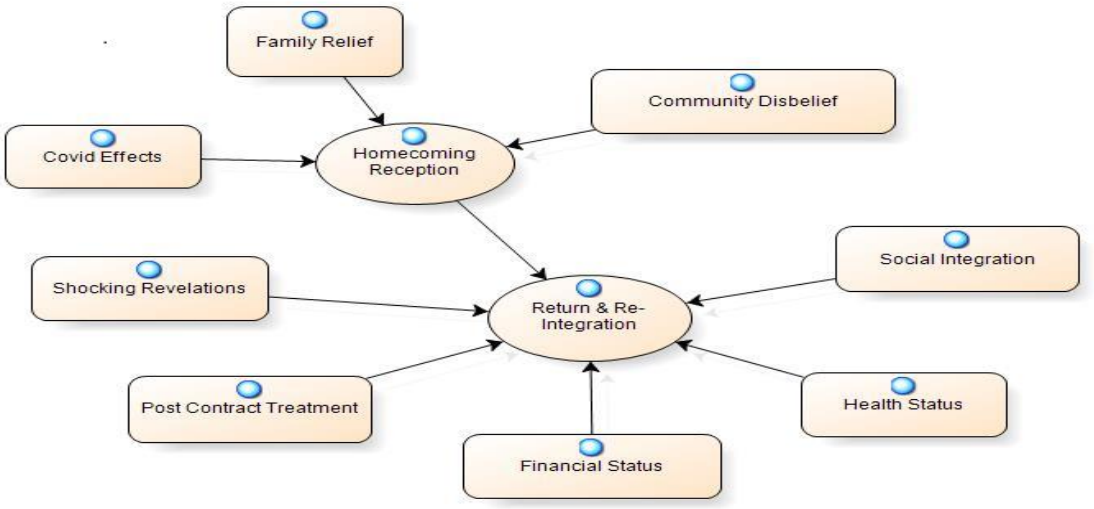
The study strictly adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the research conduct policy. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Uganda Christian University Research Ethics Board, which approved the researcher to proceed with data collection. Additionally, clearance was secured from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). The purpose and nature of the study were thoroughly explained to each respondent to obtain informed consent. For participants unable to read or understand English, consent was provided verbally to ensure inclusivity. Before each interview, permission was sought from participants to record the session. To maintain confidentiality, all collected data was securely stored with password protection. Participants were advised not to use their real names, and any names mentioned during interviews were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Return and Re-Integration Experiences of Ugandan Migrant Domestic Workers from Saudi Arabia

The return and reintegration phase captures the experiences of migrant domestic workers from the time they completed their contracts, their return and settlement back in Uganda. In line with the concept map below, the return and reintegration experiences included post-contract treatment, homecoming reception, shocking revelations, financial status, health status, and social integration.

Fig.1: Thematic Results for Return and Re-Integration Experiences



Pre-Return Experiences

All returnees indicated that as contracts approached their expiration date, the employers who had mistreated them abruptly changed their attitude. In some cases, the employers would urge their children to start treating these employees well in order to convince them to stay and renew their contracts. Some domestic workers renewed their contracts, due to COVID-19 restrictions that played a significant role since they could not return due lockdown, others did not since they were warned by recruitment companies back in Uganda never to renew their contracts with their employers since it

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was against bilateral labour agreement as noted by Sulivan;

> *When I was told that my contract had ended, they begged me to sign another contract, but I convinced them that I wanted some rest and would come back soon. That time I was treated like a queen, and even children's attitudes changed towards me. They gave me a tip of 300 dollars (1 million Uganda shillings), and on the day of departure, they bid me farewell, and my boss took me to the airport. He even bought me a ticket and handed over my travel documents with the hope that I would come back.*

When these workers realized that their treatment had changed solely because their employers wanted them to prolong their contracts, they did not indicate their intention not to renew their contracts, even if they did not mean to do so because they feared being harmed. Rinah had this to say on contract expiry;

> *After my contract ended, my employers and their children became so nice that even the child who used to bother me became friendly. This was a way of trying to lure me into coming back to their house after my rest. I kept lying and saying that I would come back because if I had said I was not coming back, they would have punished me or denied me my payment for the last month (Sometimes rumours say they can even kill you but I am not sure). On the day of my return to Uganda, I woke up early and did all the chores. All my money was already paid, apart from the 250 dollars (950.000 Ugx) which I was given as a gift. The woman gave me a suitcase full of new clothes for my child and a tablet for my son. All this was to entice me to go back. After one month in Uganda, the daughter of my bosses started sending me messages and calling me to go back, but I told her I could not. She recently texted me that she is now married and I should go and work for her, offering a very good salary, but I cannot go back to Saudi Arabia because those people can change anytime.*

A similar experience was noted from Nasumba's encounters;

> *When my first contract ended, Uganda was under lockdown, and I automatically renewed my second contract, but when it ended, my mind was made up to go back home. My employers begged me not to go back home so I could keep working for them. I was already advised never to show my employers that I was not going back because they would easily harm me, especially now that they knew I was very hard-working. I told Hajati that since I had stayed with them for four years; they should let me go and see my children and my people; and then I would automatically come back. I even told them that my country was now allowing people to go back home after the lockdown, so they should let me see my people, and from that story, they allowed me to return home, but reluctantly. I cleaned their rooms and washed all their clothes, and then the next day they went shopping and bought many clothes and gifts for my children, and they gave me a gift of 400 dollars (1,600,000 Ugx). I was really treated very well a few days before my return. They bought me an air ticket and took me to the airport and here I am.*

Similar stories were told by Amil whose experiences with treatment after her contract expired are detailed in the excerpts below;

> *When my contract ended, Madam became very good with her children, wanting me to renew. The man went and did all the shopping, but madam was a dictator, and when she knew, I did not want to remain, she became very harsh to me and locked me in the house. I started to do a lot of work, and now I knew Madam would have harmed me if I did not think very quickly, she was desperate to keep me in her house against my will. She hid my passport and grabbed my phone. When I saw that two weeks were ending with no hope of returning home, I got my bag and got out of the house at around 4 a.m. and*

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> *walked up to Madina, where the office was situated, because I knew all the roads. From there, the company office in Madina forced my bosses to bring my travel documents and they bought me an air ticket to return home.*

In her narration on return Rina concluded;

> *My male employer offered me 500 dollars to branch to the hotel and sleep with him, but I refused. The money was so tempting, but I feared contracting a disease, even becoming pregnant, and getting stuck with a child from an Arab country. He abused me terribly when I refused, but since he had a contractual obligation to fulfil, he had to drop me off at the airport. I even took myself through airport details; he never even said bye to me because of too much anger.*

Return and Reintegration Experiences

The respondents explicitly explained that, once their contracts expired, they were often treated very well to entice them into renewing their contracts. However, according to the bilateral labour agreements, a worker should be employed for a maximum of two years before returning home. It is clear that employers are capable of treating their employees with dignity and respect, but they typically choose not to do so when aware that the contract is still active. If only employers recognized the importance of treating workers well, both companies and governments could benefit from workers who renew their contracts periodically. Unfortunately, the mistreatment these workers face is largely tied to the Kafala sponsorship system, which gives excessive authority to employers over employees, a power that is often abused to exploit vulnerable domestic workers. Some of Uganda's labour export regulatory frameworks are not sufficiently robust to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for such exploitation.

Migrant domestic workers are expected to complete their contracts, return home, and reintegrate into their communities. While many Asian countries have implemented effective repatriation and reintegration schemes, making migration abroad more meaningful and rewarding, Uganda has yet to establish a comprehensive system that addresses these needs. Ugandan migrant domestic workers from Saudi Arabia typically return home when their contracts expire. The reasons for return may include the successful completion of their migration goals, retirement, failure to succeed or integrate into the destination country, family reasons, improved conditions in Uganda, or deportation (Nonchev & Hristova, 2021). However, returnee domestic workers in Uganda often have varied reintegration experiences. Some may be better equipped to reintegrate with minimal state assistance, while others return in distress and require more targeted support (Wickramasekara, 2019). Sending and receiving countries should encourage migrant workers to return voluntarily, as this facilitates better preparation for reintegration and grants them more autonomy in organizing their return efforts (Cassarino, 2004).

Migrant workers frequently leave and return to their places of origin, but these communities often lack the necessary resources, services, and infrastructure to effectively support them (Atak et al., 2018). Reintegration programs must address the needs of both the repatriated workers and the communities they return to (King, 2015). Without proper planning, reintegration programs may inadvertently foster resentment among local populations, especially if migrants are perceived to receive preferential treatment over residents. As the findings show, the return and reintegration experiences of migrant domestic workers vary significantly. Wickramasekara (2019) suggests that the return and reintegration of migrant workers signals the conclusion of their migration cycle, while King (2017) describes these cycles as an often-overlooked chapter in migration history.

Despite widespread support and agreements, the process of returning and reintegrating migrant workers is challenging (Maksum, 2021). To address

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these challenges, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Committee on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, in collaboration with the Government of Indonesia, developed the ASEAN Guidelines on Effective Return and Reintegration, as reported by the International Labor Organization (2018). These guidelines serve as a critical model for Uganda, where returnee domestic workers need clear support mechanisms to secure their earnings and invest in productive ventures upon their return. Such measures would mitigate the exploitation many migrant domestic workers face and promote successful reintegration into their communities.

Theme: Mixed Reactions

The reception that each of the returnee migrant domestic workers received back home differed from person to person, based on a variety of factors. If the returnee, for example, was in poor health, her family and loved ones would welcome her in a sombre manner thinking of how to provide them with proper health care. However, if the migrant worker returned in excellent health, she would be welcomed with excitement and gladness, among other things. Return and reintegration experiences were categorized under family relief and community disbelief. On family relief, it was a comfort for many family members and relatives to see their loved ones return after two years; having laboured for two and four years in Saudi Arabia. Describing the excitement of her family upon return, Nasumba noted;

> *Everyone was happy when they came to the airport to pick me up, but the disappointment was that I would not be taken home immediately because I had to go through COVID tests, which lasted for 12 hours. When I was released from isolation Ministry of Health vehicle transported me home and my husband and family threw me a welcome party.*

Nasumba's family was not the only one who was overjoyed to see the people from Saudi Arabia; Flower's family was also overcome with emotion at seeing their daughter return from Saudi Arabia alive;

> *….my family was happy because I came back alive, and since I used to talk to them on the phone every day, everything was fine. Their relief was that I was back and in good health; I could feel that, indeed, they were all happy to have seen me….*

With regard to community disbelief, some community members including family members and relatives expressed disbelief about how their daughters had managed to return home. This could be ascribed in part to media reports of migrant domestic workers being slain, having bodily parts like kidneys removed, or being thrown from buildings. Sullivan, who returned to Uganda in 2018, expressed her community's surprise at her return;

> *The community members who saw me on my return in 2018 could not believe that I came back alive when many of them were coming back in coffins. They were very surprised that someone could even go to Saudi Arabia, work in someone's house, and come back healthy after all they had seen on television and social media about the horrible employers in Saudi Arabia.*

Even the residents of Nakisunga, in 2020 could not believe that Nasumba was indeed back from Saudi Arabia yet she was not expected to come back alive and well especially with covid-19 related challenges from a strange land;

> *When my neighbours and relatives saw me, they were speechless that I had gone to Saudi Arabia and returned. The church members prayed for me with thanksgiving, and they were all overjoyed that I had returned. People in my church knew I was alive again because of the prayers offered to God and, in particular, the*

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fasting done by my husband who is the pastor of our church.

The same disbelief was expressed by the people from the community where Prissy was married before she left to work in Saudi Arabia when she returned alive;

Some community members sympathized with me when I returned and found that my husband had stolen my money. They even advised me to go away since my husband had married another wife, and others believed what they were told that I had run away with another man, abandoning my husband and child and started backbiting me but later most of them sided with me because it was my mother in law had squandered all the money I had worked for.

Theme 2: Shocking Revelations

Some of the returnee domestic workers shared experiences that shocked them upon return, like misuse of their finances, which they had been sending back home. Such sad instances were heard in the narration of Rinah who returned to Uganda in 2019 after having worked in Saudi Arabia for 2 years;

When I returned home, my sister and my mother were very happy that I was back, but my mother was scared because she knew I was going to ask about my money, which they had already misused with my cousin. As such, when my cousin heard that I had arrived, he escaped from home. Further, when I took my cousin to the police for stealing my money, all the people started judging me that I was bad-mannered and mean because I took my cousin to the police. Some wished I had died in Saudi Arabia rather than coming to disturb their peace. I was really shocked at how people would wish me death because I had just asked my cousin to pay my money. Finally, I withdrew the case for peace to reign.

A similar experience awaited Prissy who returned to Uganda in 2022. She least expected that the people she had trusted so much while busy working away in Saudi Arabia could at some point turn against her. In her case, it was not only the money theft but also the infidelity of her husband that caused her to regret ever coming back to Uganda;

If I had known what awaited me, I would have committed suicide in Saudi Arabia rather than come back to encounter the unfortunate experiences that I found in my former home. I was informed that my husband had married another woman, and they were trying to take my child to Dubai, where my husband had secured a job. When he knew I was coming, he hid everything to just welcome me. What pained me most was that even my mother-in-law, to whom I was sending my money too, was involved in the deal. Every coin I worked for four years was stolen. What I found at home was nerve-wracking. I almost run mad. Thanks to my sister who brought me to her home and consoled me.

Revealing more of her ordeal Prissy continued,

Some community members sympathized with me and told me to go away since my husband had married another wife; others believed what they were told by my husband and started back-biting me. So, my husband and his family called my relatives, and they started accusing me of having gotten married abroad and of being the reason why her son decided to get married too. They accused me of things I did not know, and I thought of committing suicide, but meanwhile, they started chasing me like a dog and they told me to leave their home immediately.

Amil too shared the experience of exploitation by her own husband who squandered all her earnings from Saudi Arabia, noting,

I was excited about my return to Uganda because I knew my husband had invested a lot since he used to tell me to send money to buy

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> *plots and other things. In the morning, when I tried to ask my husband where the things, he had bought with the money I sent since the house was empty, he started dodging me, and that is when I knew he had conned me. He just bought a truck for himself, and he was there riding it and making money from transporting sand in Lwera. When I tried to tell him that I needed my money and he should sell the car, he stared at me and threatened me with a divorce. He reminded me of how he never sent me to work in Saudi Arabia, and I knew the man would kill me. For the sake of peace, I decided to keep quiet and raise my kids.*

Likewise, Plinnery was not spared. She sent the money she earned during the period 2019–2022 to the people she trusted so that they could invest for her, and these were her relatives, but alas, the recipients cheated her;

> *When I returned to Uganda in 2022, I decided to go and check on my investments, which my people claimed to have initiated for me. However, I was saddened to learn that the plot of land they had bought for me was not there. There was nothing like a plot: ...madam...bangulira mpewo...! (They bought for me air). The only property I bought from the money I made when I worked as a freelance maid are motor cycle, music system, TV, chairs and a carpet to make my house look good as you can see*.

Mirroring on shared experiences, the woes of some migrant domestic workers, depended on who they were closely associated with back home and how they invested the financial resources sent. It was unfortunate that after working in very difficult conditions many found their hard-earned money squandered.

Theme 3: Financial Status

Domestic workers leave Uganda for Saudi Arabia through a recruitment agency while hard work is guaranteed in a Saudi Arabia family, a solid financial future is not always guaranteed as the experiences of returnee domestic workers indicated. For instance, Gift who returned to Uganda in 2023, spent the little money she had to buy a house, but still, she does not have a steady income;

> *The only thing I have to show from the money I made from Saudi Arabia is the house I bought for my mother, but I am looking for what to do though I am back to my old job here in Mbale. Uganda's life is not easy because I am very broke, and life here is not easy. I wanted to get my own house and business but money was not enough. I am trying to get money to begin a business but people refuse to give me loans thinking I am very rich.*

A similar scenario was shared by Plinnery, who returned to Uganda in 2022. Her main obstacle came when she returned and discovered that her money had been stolen, and she is currently struggling as a single mother.

> *After everything I went through in Saudi Arabia, I am one of those people who may be mistaken for someone who has never had any money. I am broke but cannot believe it, I just got some little money from my motor cycle but I am not fine, despite the fact that I am a single mother. Financially, life has proven to be extremely difficult. It appears that money from Arabs has no luck but may be other people have benefitted. Right now, I am looking for a company that will take me back.*

Instructively, some returnee domestic workers shared positive experiences of empowerment upon return, especially where they were not exploited by relatives. This was evident in an interview with Nasumba, who noted;

> *I feel it was worth going to Saudi Arabia to work because today I am working hard on my projects, I know if I mess up with the money I made, we shall go back to poverty. At least I*

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> *make sure I go to the farm every day. I have a fish pond, an acre of land a good house which we are seated in right now and my children are going to school. So, I am comfortable now better than when I was a nursery school teacher.*

Rinah revealed that the trip to Saudi Arabia was not so bad after all, especially seeing that she has a business to fall back on and show for her toils in Saudi Arabia regardless of her cousin squandering some of her money;

> *Since I returned to Uganda, I have been busy running my businesses, and I normally receive many calls from friends begging me for money. They always seem to think that, having been in Saudi Arabia, there is a lot of money I have with me that I can give away all the time. Yes, my cousin ate some of my money but from the little I saved I was able to start a bar, a shop and a mobile money. The mobile money kiosk is where you found me but the bar and shop are back home and my mother is the manager as I am here.*

For Dina, the era of poverty ended in her family.

> *At least by the time I returned my husband had invested in several projects which are doing well we have pigs, goats and two Friesian cows which are now giving us milk for home consumption and sale. I will take you to see our projects once we are through. We have almost four acres of land where we plan to construct our home and we have a banana plantation on that same land.*

On financial status, some of the key informants confirmed to have met some returnees whom they assisted to go to Saudi Arabia and some of them are doing well. The senior officer of UAERA had this to say;

> *These women's lives cannot be the same if their money was never squandered. There is one I recruited from my company and she doing very well, she recently bought an elegant shoe and watch for me as a sign of appreciation and indeed she is settled.*

Financial reintegration assistance can sometimes exacerbate tensions between returnees and local communities that have endured poverty, violence, or crises. Locals may fail to understand why those who had the opportunity to seek better prospects but did not succeed are now receiving additional aid. This dynamic can be particularly significant for public institutions and employment organizations in the home country that offer reintegration assistance. A notable example is Tunisia's National Agency for Employment and Independent Work (ANETI), which decided to keep its assistance programs private to avoid backlash (Angel-Urdinola et al., 2013). Some programs aim to mitigate these tensions by incorporating structural aid for local communities into reintegration packages. For instance, Swiss authorities supplement reintegration support by providing infrastructure improvements—such as running water or other vital services—to the entire village where the returned migrant settles. This approach benefits not only the returnee but also the broader community (Özerdem, 2012). However, in Uganda, the financial resources sent by migrant domestic workers are often managed by their next of kin, who sometimes misuse or squander the money. This misuse can create conflicts when the returnee returns home, making their reintegration more difficult than it would have been if they had never left. Despite these challenges, not all experiences are negative for female migrant workers returning from the Middle East. Some returnees have successfully invested their earnings and permanently improved their financial status. While some workers return with little to show for their sacrifices, others have turned their remittances into lasting assets.

The homecoming experiences of returnee domestic workers vary greatly, influenced by several factors. As reported in the Homecoming (2020) study, many returnees face difficult labour market conditions,

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stigma, and precarious circumstances upon re-entry. These challenges call for support beyond initial re-entry, ensuring that returnees have access to resources and opportunities for reintegration. In addition, the costs of reintegration must be carefully balanced against the financial benefits of repatriation programs. This is especially important because homecoming celebrations often mix family relief with community disbelief, complicating the returnee's reintegration if their resources are not wisely invested.

To achieve sustainable inclusion and development while reducing desperate migration, all stakeholders—destination countries, origin countries, and the migrants themselves—must collaborate (Newland, 2020). The International Organization for Migration (2018) identifies three dimensions of reintegration: economic (asset ownership, employment, and job satisfaction), social (access to education, health, housing, and justice), and political (access to the political system). For women, issues like familial pressure, stigma, and rejection of their migration choices are crucial factors to consider in reintegration efforts (Phillimore et al., 2023). Reintegration programs must account for both immediate and long-term needs, including psychosocial counselling, healthcare, legal assistance, and vocational training. Support to recover outstanding wages, property, and compensation for losses could also help mitigate the trauma of exploitation that many migrant workers face (Foley & Piper, 2021). Providing certification for the skills and training earned abroad could also support returnees in securing employment or starting businesses (Nonnenmacher & Naik, 2010).

As the findings indicate, while some returnees have successfully invested their earnings, many migrant domestic workers return to find their financial resources abused by their families. They often face immense challenges when trying to reclaim their funds. Similarly, Ethiopian women, like their Ugandan counterparts, migrate to the Middle East to improve their families' economic status, hoping to start businesses upon their return. However, many women are unable to save enough money due to the difficult conditions of domestic work (Schewel, 2022; Nisrane et al., 2017). In many cases, migrant workers' contributions to their families' household expenses lead to little savings for reinvestment upon return, making it harder for them to engage in entrepreneurial activities (Martin, 2004). While Ethiopia provides reintegration assistance, including medical care, counselling, job training, and credit facilities, these programs have not been transformative for most returnees (Mena, 2018). Similar to Uganda, the success of reintegration efforts depends on various factors, including the type of work migrants do, their personal traits, and their circumstances abroad (Hagan & Thomas, 2020).

Theme 4: Health Status

Health issues especially arising from too much work and the mistreatment at the workplace they faced are some of the challenging experiences that were shared. As noted by Amil;

> *I returned home very sick and frail and I wanted to first regain my strength. I was not only exhausted but also suffering from sickness that was not clear and up to now the hospitals have failed to ascertain what I am suffering from*.

The health challenges varied among these returnees. In the case of Assia, her physical case was indeed very touching;

> *Mentally, I was disturbed because I did not have any explanation for why my boss woke up and told me I had to go back home. Physically, I looked haggard, and all the people were wondering why I was back so quickly. But what pains is that I failed to know how I contracted this strange disease (cries)….*

On a related note, the physical state of Rinah was very appalling. In her narration;

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> *When I returned, people thought I was now loaded with cash, but most people wondered why I looked very pale and small. Because of the bad conditions and too much work I was doing back in Saudi Arabia I was looking hard. I had to hide at a friend's place to gain some kilos but still, I was looking bad and frail. Also due to the strong detergents I was using my hands got burnt and now I can no longer carry a polythene bag or a heavy bag in my hands. My grip is very weak.*

Social Re-integration

Social integration relates to the approaches to working, living, and cooperating with people that domestic workers adopt. On return, Sullivan narrated her experience;

> *I did not have any challenges fitting back into the community. This was very easy for me because my family members were my biggest supporters. You can now see I am working in my brother's shop selling shoes*.

Sullivan's integration process was quite the opposite of Amil's in 2019 when she returned to Uganda. What made Amil's integration back into the community and her family very hard was the fact that her own husband had stolen her money;

> *I took a long time to get used to people because they were backbiting me about how I was bewitched because all the time I travelled, other people benefited from my money. I had challenges regarding blending with the people again. I do not have money because all my money was squandered. Generally, I could not fit in the community well. My husband got my money bought a tipper and married a second wife and left me to look for menial jobs again. Madam, I am tired of working for others I am here to stay, I live on my own, I am isolated with my children and the only people I visit are my sisters. They are encouraging me to join women's groups and start afresh but I am tired*.

Dina reported further difficulties in assimilating into the community.

> *When I returned to Uganda, I did not immediately mingle with the people. I wanted to first rest, so I had to return to my village and had a very good rest with my mother and children. However I had some difficulties reintegrating into the society since I assumed everyone was gossiping about me, but I gradually adjusted. People who knew I worked as a Kadama (migrant domestic worker) would look at me with suspicion and disgust, but I managed and learnt to go around with time. But sometimes I would get nightmares and begin yelling in my room and my children would get scared until I sought counselling and now, I am very fine. Since I have a degree, I am planning to look for a job in the near future or even try to stand for a political office just to watch the space*.

On social reintegration, the next of kin of Nasumba had this to say;

> *The Government makes a lot of money in remittances from labour exports. What is wrong with making some projects for them, especially those who lose their money at the hands of relatives? Even getting them professional counsellors so that they all go through counselling on arrival at Entebbe airport because they deal with a lot out there*.

Prissy's next of kin asserted;

> *These people need justice so that they can re-integrate well back into the community. I saw my sister fighting her husband's mother to get her hard-earned money but everyone made it hard. We went from police to police but nothing. They would ask for evidence until I told her to leave everything to karma. Even she was denied visiting rights for her child. She gained everything and lost everything*.

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Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development official had this to say;

> *Efforts are already made to ensure social and economic reintegration are properly implemented. On board, we have an international organization for migration that provides a number of packages such as training them in different skills to settle our girls and boys that come back from Saudi Arabia. We intend to strengthen these initiatives further.*

Some returnees were fortunate enough to improve their financial circumstances through their work in Saudi Arabia, while others experienced betrayal upon their return, with their hard-earned money squandered by their next of kin. In response, some returnees have contemplated returning to Saudi Arabia to reclaim the financial losses. While such challenges persist, there are several interventions that could protect both the well-being of migrant domestic workers while they are in Saudi Arabia and their financial interests when interacting with their families upon returning to Uganda. Social integration is a complex aspect for returnees, particularly when family members have misused their money and community members harbour suspicions about their activities abroad. Social stigma, as noted by Piper (2009), can be especially severe for women, and it may lead them to relocate elsewhere rather than return to their community of origin. Migrants and their families who return home after spending time in a host country often face difficulties in finding work, housing, and reintegrating into society (Um, 2023). In particular, returnees who have experienced sexual or gender-based violence in the host country, children born to migrants who lack connection to their parents' home culture, or those who have spent prolonged periods abroad may face significant reintegration challenges (Mensah, 2016).

To mitigate these challenges, interventions such as cash assistance to meet immediate needs, psychosocial counselling, healthcare, physical rehabilitation, compensation for losses, and other forms of support are crucial (Foley & Piper, 2021). Additionally, efforts to re-establish income for returning migrants may include the recognition and certification of skills, education, and training gained while abroad. However, Uganda currently lacks a comprehensive program to reintegrate returnees. Recruitment firms, which are involved in the workers' departure, should establish stronger ties with the government to ensure support for workers upon their return. Currently, the relationship with recruitment firms often ends when the migrant workers board the plane from Entebbe to Saudi Arabia. Uganda should implement a process for reconnecting with these workers, providing support upon their return, and ensuring they are included in effective reintegration programs.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has developed guidelines for the recognition of returning migrants' skills, which can assist countries in making the most of the skills their returning migrants have acquired (Kaczmarczyk, 2013). These guidelines are designed for use by government agencies, national skill recognition agencies, local agencies, NGOs, employers' and workers' organizations, and private employment services (Tayah, 2016). By leveraging these guidelines, the domestic labour sector can improve the experiences of migrant workers and maximize the positive outcomes of their employment abroad. For many returnees, positive experiences abroad encouraged perseverance, enabling them to achieve their financial goals. On the other hand, negative experiences motivated others to continue working, with the hope of returning home with money rather than returning empty-handed. By improving reintegration programs and implementing these guidelines, Uganda can provide more comprehensive support to migrant workers, enhancing their reintegration prospects and ensuring they are able to contribute effectively to their communities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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It was revealed that immediate family members—such as fathers, siblings, wives, and sisters—often squander the hard-earned money of migrant domestic workers. Each returnee who participated in the study expressed deep frustration and sadness over the reckless spending of their earnings, likening it to shedding blood, as the money is earned through prolonged labour and extreme suffering. The only solace for these workers during their difficult time abroad is the belief that their hard-earned money will be properly saved or invested. However, many returnee domestic workers find reintegration challenging, with some even contemplating suicide, while a few consider returning to Saudi Arabia to work again in an attempt to recover the money their relatives have misused. Given these challenges, it is strongly recommended that migrant domestic workers establish a clear, detailed plan for saving money before departure. For instance, they should open a bank account in their own name to safeguard their earnings. Any remaining funds can be sent to the worker's next of kin, who would be responsible for managing family matters, particularly the care of children.

Furthermore, reintegration programs must be developed to ensure the safe and successful reintegration of these workers, who contribute significantly to the nation's remittances. These programs should include practical skills training and offer startup funding for returnees who wish to launch their own businesses, thereby enabling them to generate additional income. To further support the reintegration process, the Ministry of Gender and Social Development should establish rehabilitation centres in each region, dedicated to facilitating the psychosocial reintegration of returnee migrant domestic workers. Before reintegrating into their communities, all returnees should be required to undergo counselling and rehabilitation at these centres, ensuring that their emotional and psychological well-being is addressed.

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