



Exploring Drivers of Trafficking in Persons in the Horn of Africa with Emphasis on the Eastern Route to the Gulf States through Djibouti

Getye Abneh Tadesse*, Prof. Tesfaye Tafesse

Center for African Studies, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

*Corresponding author email: getye_abneh@dmu.edu.et or gech.ttc2@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to explore the drivers of trafficking in persons (TIP) in the Horn of Africa (HoA) region, particularly on the eastern route to the Gulf States through Djibouti. Data was obtained through interviews with 21 participants involving migrants, returnees, vulnerable individuals, parents of victims, and government and NGO officials from December 2022 to January 2024 voluntarily participating using a case study design. The data were analyzed utilizing a thematic analysis technique. Moreover, rational choice and demand and supply theories were used to examine the complexities of factors that are the backbone of TIP networks along this route. The data show that various push and pull factors including, family pressure, the perception of success through migration to the Gulf States, conflict, the lures about the opportunities, and the demand for low-cost labor in the Gulf States drive TIP in the region. The study indicates the only way to succeed in curbing TIP is for the concerned countries to bring a well-thought-out and all-embracing socio-economic and political drivers of trafficking method that will include the necessary measures. Furthermore, it recommends the adoption of stronger institutions, better cross-border relationships, and interventions that target the origin of the issue to create conditions where trafficking cannot arise. Finally, it discloses the need for a more investigation of various factors contributing to TIP in the region.

Keywords: drivers; trafficking in persons; Horn of Africa; eastern route; Gulf States; Djibouti.

1. Introduction

Trafficking in persons (TIP) is often depicted as a global issue, labeled as modern-day slavery (Winterdyk, 2020). TIP is often described as one of the fastest-growing criminal enterprises affecting many lives worldwide (Konneh, 2017), generating billions of dollars annually (Shelley, 2010). It is a multidimensional issue with various faces of exploitation, which covers everything from sex trafficking to labor

exploitation or even child soldiering (U.S. Department of State, 2021). It is reflected in the HoA region, marked by complex migration routes and an origin, transit, and destination hub for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (Marchand et al., 2017). More specifically, the Eastern route has turned out to be an essential route for migrants originating from Ethiopia, Somalia, and other countries in their hope for better economic opportunities in the Gulf States.

All along this perilous journey, the traffickers traffic people, taking advantage of their vulnerabilities among them (Ravenstone Consult, 2023).

Emerging as one of the most significant hotbeds of TIP, HoA largely emanates from the strategic geographical position that facilitates border movements in vulnerable persons (Marchand et al., 2017). The complexities of illegal migration, intensified by mixed migration patterns—including the movement of migrants, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees to various destination countries via different routes—further aggravate TIP in the region (Horwood, 2015). Central to this concern are numerous drivers that increase the vulnerability of individuals to TIP, with economic factors being particularly pronounced for both labor and sex trafficking (Animaw, 2011). Hundreds of thousands of persons have moved out of the HoA each year in pursuit of economic opportunities in the Gulf through the Eastern Route (Ravenstone Consult, 2023).

Studies detail the interconnectedness of drivers with TIP in HoA, underlining manifold ways traffickers take advantage of the vulnerability of people. For instance, Schroder (2015) studies migration patterns across the East and HoA, demonstrating that among the major drivers for migration were political instability, economic hardship, and environmental decay. The report, as produced by Ravenstone Consult (2023), focuses on the treacherous irregular migration of Ethiopian migrants to Yemen and Saudi Arabia, noting how poverty, unemployment, political instability, and misinformation spread by traffickers

contribute to this trend. Moreover, the work by Marchand et al. (2017) provides a broad analysis of migration flows from the East and HoA, focusing on dynamics, root causes, and impacts such kinds of migration patterns create. Their work, on the one hand, outlines the main routes passing through Sudan, Libya, and Egypt to Europe while showing that political instability, economic adversities, and environmental challenges have been one major contributory factor for migration.

Further discussing this topic, the International Organization for Migration [IOM, 2019) researches migration trends in the HoA and the Arabian Peninsula, emphasizing drivers such as economic situation, political turmoil, conflict, and environmental factors. Research by Salt and Stein (1997) explores that migration policy may be causing vulnerabilities and creating opportunities for traffickers, presenting TIP as a business enterprise that takes advantage of individuals' precarious situations.

Despite this, our understanding of TIP remains partial, particularly from the drivers' perspective. So much of the literature in the HoA continuously neglects the subtleties of the lived experiences of IDPs and refugees, while leaning toward observable drivers: poverty, unemployment, and political unrest. For instance, INTERNALLY TA.'s (2016) study on internal displacement in Kenya highlights how conflict and political turmoil increase the vulnerability of IDPs to trafficking. It points out that social disintegration, economic instability, and legal ambiguity elevate risks for at-risk groups, especially women and children, within displacement

camps. Similarly, Martin and Callaway (2011) explore internal trafficking in the context of internal displacement, highlighting vulnerabilities caused by conflict, disaster, or crises. Bigio and Vogelstein (2019) introduce a complex landscape of conflict areas where TIP has become manifest in various forms into which Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Nigeria are plunged. Indeed, their study shows that the long-running conflict creates an environment that *per se* fomenters TIP, influenced by displacement, economic instability, and the breakdown of legal order.

Valuable though this insight is, gaps remain in terms of the specific vulnerability of IDPs and refugees to TIP. Relatively less attention has been paid to the drivers linked with TIP along the eastern route to the Gulf States through Djibouti. Very few studies have investigated the specific enabling opportunities that guarantee the recruitment and trafficking of the most vulnerable in ways that perpetuate the TIP crisis within the region. This study addresses the complexity of drivers of TIP in HoA with a focus on the Eastern Route to the Gulf States through Djibouti. It investigates drivers of trafficking using rational choice and supply and demand theories. Key questions among others which the study shall attempt to answer are: 1. What are the most prevalent push factors that drive TIP along the Eastern Route in HoA through Djibouti? 2. At what level do demand-side factors explain the perpetuation of TIP networks in the HoA?

1.1. Overview of the HoA

While the region encompasses many countries, such as Ethiopia, Eritrea,

Djibouti, Sudan, and Somalia, all of them represent one of the most important areas in northeast Africa, inhabited by 282 million (Abebe, 2021). It is culturally, ecologically, and even geographically important, as it borders such important bodies of water as the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which is quite crucial for international trade (Telci, 2022). With its deserts, hills, plateaus, and beaches forming vital ecosystems, it is strategically placed at the juncture of several key waterways, such as the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean, crucial to world trade (Telci, 2022). Although there is vast market potential for the HoA, with its very important contribution to the African economy, a variety of issues have faced the region, including political instability, conflict, and humanitarian crises (Abebe, 2021). The people of the Horn have endured violence and misrule for nearly four decades; this fact was mirrored in their relations with neighbors and the global community as a whole (Ylonen & Zahorik, 2017).

Djibouti is a small country in the HoA, having one of the most important maritime trade routes that connect the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime [GI-TOC], 2020). Djibouti hosts less than one million citizens including Somalis, Arabs, and Afars. For the record, Djibouti has been considered since 1977 as a semi-authoritarian republic with a dominant party system led by the People's Rally for Progress or, in short, the RPP. Since 1999, President Ismail Omar Guelleh has retained the presidency. Djibouti is an economy based on privilege; that means the strategic

position it holds allows access to the Red Sea (Bereketeab, 2016).

1.2.Theoretical Framework

The issue in this study is carried out by using rational choice (RCT) and demand and supply (DST) theories. According to the RCT, individuals make decisions to increase their benefits while minimizing costs (Majeed & Malik, 2017). Criminals study various factors such as victim locations and conditions that can help them avoid law enforcement. Traffickers take advantage of situational drivers such as migration, repressive regimes, conflict, and drought, which give rise to migrant aspirations for a better life (Cornish & Klarke, 2014). TIP has been considered one of the lucrative industries, hence involving local and international criminals who will make sure to exploit willing victims (Shelley, 2010). Human trafficking, according to Bello and Olutola (2020), is a type of modern-day slavery wherein victims are reduced to market commodities for labor and sexual exploitation.

The demand side of the TIP is situated within global and local inequalities in which victimization of trafficking perpetuates abuses, violence, fraud, and threats of bodily harm (Vogel, 2017). Traffickers take into consideration push-pull drivers and recruit vulnerable persons to supplicate demands for paying clients both nationally and internationally. Traffickers control the lucrative marketing system to exploit and transfer victims to markets for income generation. Under the exploitative relationship that lies in the center, the pattern of human trafficking indicates the

DST outlined by Winterdyk (2020). Besides, individuals make a rational decision to migrate to escape various drivers such as poverty and conflict besides the deceptive role of traffickers.

2. Methodology

2.1.Research Design

The design used for this study is the case study approach. A case study approach is most appropriate for exploring the complex real-world context of trafficking since it provides for deep investigation of multiple perspectives situated in a limited geographical and social setting (Yin, 2012). The importance of this approach is that addressing complex social issues in this manner provides an in-depth and detailed analysis of the case (Leavy, 2017). This design offers the possibility of examining the complexity of the issue in its natural setting and how various factors might interrelate and influence each other (Creswell, 2014). It thus allows an in-depth investigation into the trafficking cases, thereby helping to build a complete understanding of the contributing factors related to TIP in the region.

2.2.Sampling and Participants

The process of purposive and snowball sampling involves selecting vulnerable or victim participants, and government and NGO officials who are relevant to the subject of TIP. This method ensures that different viewpoints from direct victims, their family members, and stakeholders involved in anti-trafficking activities are included. Using snowball sampling, additional participants were discovered

starting with two NGO-identified returnee migrants who referred trafficked others to the Gulf States revealing a hidden population to access hidden populations until data saturation was achieved (Leavy, 2017). The sample consisted of n=21 participants, including 3 migrants who migrated to the Gulf States successfully, 2 unsuccessful migrants who returned from Djibouti, 4 IDPS with a risk of trafficking, 3 returnees who have been trafficked and returned between 2020 and 2022, 2 refugees displaced by Ethiopian conflict, 2 parents of

victims of trafficking, 3 government officials from migration and anti-trafficking agencies, and 2 NGO officials although the numbers are significant, they represent only a fraction of the broader issue. This sample showcases a broad spectrum of trafficking encounters through Djibouti and includes an examination of the drivers of the TIP process. Furthermore, interviews were chosen by all participants and excluded any migrants or returnees subjected to modern-day slavery linked to legal migration.

Table 1. The demographic profile of participants and data collection tool

Code	Type	Sex	Age	Origin	Destination	Data Collection Tool
MT1	Migrant	M	40	Ethiopia	Saudi Arabia	Phone interview
MT2	Migrant	F	38	Ethiopia	Kuwait	Phone interview
MT3	Migrant	F	39	Ethiopia	Saudi Arabia	Phone interview
ID1	Internally displaced	F	33	Ethiopia	---	Face-to-face
ID2	Internally displaced	F	28	Ethiopia	---	Face-to-face
ID3	Internally displaced	M	30	Ethiopia	---	Face-to-face
ID4	Internally displaced	M	29	Ethiopia	---	Face-to-face
RT1	Returnee	F	37	Ethiopia	Yemen	Face-to-face
RT2	Returnee	F	38	Ethiopia	Saudi Arabia	Face-to-face
RT3	Returnee	F	42	Ethiopia	Saudi Arabia	Face-to-face
UM1	Unsuccessful migrant	M	40	Ethiopia	Djibouti	Face-to-face
UM2	Unsuccessful migrant	M	37	Ethiopia	Djibouti	Face-to-face
RG1	Refugee	M	36	Eritrea	Ethiopia	Face-to-face
RG2	Refugee	M	38	Eritrea	Ethiopia	Face-to-face
PT1	Mother of a victim	F	61	Ethiopia	---	Face-to-face
PT2	Mother of a victim	F	53	Ethiopia	---	Face-to-face

Table 2. Demographic profile of government and NGO officials

Code	Type	Sex	Age	Responsibility	Data Collection Tool
GO1	Government official	M	51	Law enforcement	Phone interview
GO2	Government official	F	45	Immigration officer	Phone interview
GO3	Government official	M	47	Labor and social affairs officer	Phone interview
NO1	NGO official	M	46	Support to trafficking victims	Face-to-face
NO2	NGO official	M	45	Monitoring returnees	Face-to-face

2.3.Data Collection

Data collection was through semi-structured interviews, which are quite appropriate for the themes being investigated. These allow spontaneity and freedom of discussion while ensuring that key themes are repeated across the interviews. In interviews with migrants, IDPs, refugees, and returnees, the push/pull factors that influence their decisions around trafficking were discussed. The parents were interviewed to show family and community factors associated with the emotional and social consequences of trafficking. Interviews with government officials and NGO experts with their perspective areas helped to understand the policies and legal framework on TIP drivers. Each interview of the respondents was 45 min to 1.5 hours long. The interviews have been conducted either personally or over the telephone depending on the availability of participants from December 2022 to January 2024 voluntarily participating.

2.4.Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify themes across interviews. The analysis relied on a structured process: first, transcripts from several interviews were thoroughly read to become familiar with the main themes and perspectives shared by participants. Using NVivo software, data coding was made according to recurring themes including poverty, economic hardship, unemployment, conflict, and lack of employment opportunities, lures and promises about the opportunities in the Gulf States, cheap labor, and the prevalence of illegal brokers working with traffickers. The coded information is then organized into

broad themes, including the economic, social, and political drivers of TIP. Afterward, the findings and the analysis were supported by engaging in data triangulation where additional information through interviews with independent participants such as officials were sourced. Data from different participant groups were compared to establish similarities and differences in experiences and perspectives that would give nuance to myriad factors contributing to TIP along this route. Finally, the findings were then presented in an orderly manner, into major thematic categories such as “push drivers of TIP” and “pull drivers of TIP”, which helped to explain the core factors contributing to TIP on the eastern route through Djibouti.

2.5.Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in line with many ethical considerations to secure the rights and well-being of participants, particularly TIP. Approval was obtained from the Center for African and Asian Studies at Addis Ababa University. Participants were given information about the objectives of the study, its voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participants' names were kept confidential through coding, and identifiers were removed while preparing reports. The research was carried out with cultural respect, due consideration to potential risks by minimizing them as much as possible through sensitive interviews and oral consent after reading an anonymized report (if requested) for publication.

3. Findings

The analysis reveals several recurring themes about the push factors and pull

factors of TIP. The analysis finds family pressure, community perception of success through migration, conflict, lures, and promises about the opportunities in the Gulf States, and the demand for low-cost labor to be the major factors in TIP. This study employs RCT and DST to analyze these drivers of trafficking in persons in the HoA with emphasis on the eastern route to the Gulf States through Djibouti.

Push Drivers

A key push factor is the widespread economic hardship that afflicts individuals and families in the HoA. Participants frequently cited family pressures and perceptions related to success through migration, which are due to poverty and unemployment as significant drivers pushing people to decide on migration often through dangerous eastern routes through Djibouti. For young men and women, the lack of otherwise accessible economic opportunities in their home countries has resulted in trafficking to the Gulf States being seen as the best available means for attaining financial stability.

Family Pressure

Economic hardship creates high family pressures to move and seek better opportunities in the Gulf States. The pressure is more intense for the elderly as they have been traditionally tasked with ensuring most livelihoods in various societies. Parents and family members encourage and even compel their children to migrate, hoping that the latter will send remittances which have become an integral income source for many families in the region. Parents also associated their children's migration decisions with expectations of improved financial

capabilities; they believed that migrating would provide their children with better access to a basic livelihood. A parent noted, "My son has gone so that he can have a job . . . he will be able to support his family" (PT1, 28 July 2023).

It was reported that returnees and unsuccessful migrants experienced a sense of duty, especially to their families who would push for migration because they believed that the struggles at home justified the attempts to leave. Thus, those people became susceptible to trafficking for forced labor due to parental influences. One participant emphasized it, "There is a pressure... If you do not go, you feel bad because someone sends money over. I did not want to let my parents down so I did go, but I went to work for traffickers" (UM1, 01 March 2023). This risk also persists in societies where individuals who are eager but highly susceptible to work and make-money-proposals cannot understand traffickers' intentions. So, family pressure in the HoA drives human trafficking. RCT suggests migration is a rational solution to meet obligations and economic expectations. Similarly, DST explains that family-driven vulnerabilities contribute to the supply of trafficked individuals. These theories demonstrate how economic desperation and societal pressure create a conducive environment for trafficking.

Community Perceptions of Success Through Migration

The participants focus on the expectations that are placed within the community reliable to success fostered by the outsiders especially, those concerning migration settlement in one of the Gulf States. Those

who migrate to the Gulf and manage to succeed in making financial earnings are viewed as successful regardless of the struggles faced during migration. This societal narration strengthens the understanding that people who migrate are wise, and thereby look down on those who decide to remain since they are considered failures in providing for their families. In the words of one participant, “It's no longer the same since I came back... People talk behind my back, even my relatives are not very kind to me... Sometimes they felt that I betrayed their hopes because I returned with empty hands” (UM2, 06 September 2023).

A returnee also observed the power of this community narrative “People are very encouraging and just openly say how lovely it is to leave and make money. Then you see people building, buying land, coming back and they make you feel if you're not going, it's shameful” (MT3, 05 September 2023). An NGO further elaborated on how this is in practice, “In such communities, it becomes more of a culture that people take trips overseas. Once they come back with cash, they are regarded as heroes. They believe that to get respect, people have to go and support their families” (NO1, 30 December 2023). More people therefore migrate to high-income Gulf countries, not caring that there are numerous risks since it is the remittances that enable them to be successful in this particular community.

In the case of this study, economic deprivation emerges as an eminent causing TIP in the HoA. This sort of economic deprivation creates a shortage for some members of the family that must migrate as the debt will be able to pull the family out of

poverty one day. Also, as being a successful influential individual is seen as a norm in the community, this creates more space for people who are willing to be exploited by traffickers. Community perceptions of migration success in the HoA drive human trafficking. RCT would suggest that the individual rationalizes migration in terms of financial and social success at great personal risk. Similarly, DST says that the social pressure results in an increased supply of vulnerable people who are then exploited to meet labor demand in countries of destination. These theories point out how community perceptions distort risk assessments and inflate vulnerabilities.

Conflict

Conflict is a major contributor to TIP in the HoA. Interviews reveal that chronic conflicts destroy social, economic, and governance structures, thereby making people vulnerable to perilous migration routes. Testimonies of participants underline the miserable situations due to which they were exploited by traffickers: “We lost everything because of the war in Tigray, no food, no safety. All that we wanted was to survive, and the traffickers came to provide a way out. It was a trap; they knew how desperate we were” (ID1, 12 December 2022). The feeling of vulnerability that comes with an absence of governance structure in the conflict areas was reiterated by displaced and refugee participants, who explained that the government of Ethiopia is busy fighting its war and therefore does not protect the people from exploitation. One of them reported, “We were displaced with no support, and no shelter. When you have nothing, the traffickers seem like the only option” (RG2, February 2023). This

supports RCT, which says that conflict-affected people rationalize migration for survival by weighing the immediate gains of fleeing against risks of exploitation, such as human trafficking, and uncertainty of safety and economic opportunity through migration, under the influence of desperation.

The problem has worsened in these places due to a lack of institutional presence and continuous conflict. One participant said, “We were not safe anywhere whether there was law or not. People came in all directions massing, while traffickers on the other hand deceived us, pretending to be family. Start in a trafficking case and goodbye” (ID3, 01 May, 2023). Another participant continued, “The traffickers came to the camps and got us out of there. We were hungry and unemployed, and we couldn’t make a living. They promised us jobs in Saudi Arabia, but we ended up as slaves” (RT1, 03 February 2023). Similarly, those who wanted to escape through conflict exacerbated the situation and became vulnerable to exploitation. A participant recounts, “I was promised a job in Yemen to save myself from the war but a trafficker deceived me. Knowing which one was a trafficker and which one was really honest became quite a task” (UM2, 06 September 2023). Conflict fuels the supply side of trafficking by creating a vulnerable population, thus making it easier for traffickers to exploit such vulnerability. DST explains how traffickers capitalize on this vulnerability: offering escape routes or opportunities for survival. Institutions and social structures break down and make traffickers' promises more appealing.

IDPs and Refugees pointed out the effect of conflict on their vulnerability to TIP, stating that they had to run from their village because of the fighting. Their running for life creates an environment for traffickers. A participant said, “Traffickers offered me a way out, but it led to more suffering” (ID4, 02 May 2023). These stories demonstrate how conflict and displacement create an environment in which traffickers can readily take advantage of those most at risk. IDPs, refugees, and migrants are usually confronted by life-threatening choices with few viable alternatives thus rendering them easier targets for traffickers. The lack of security and good governance existing in conflict-affected areas further compounds TIP. Therefore, the HoA conflict drives human trafficking by creating desperate conditions forcing people to migrate. In the RCT view, migration is a rational response to survival; to a DST, the conflict increases supply with the number of displaced individuals, making traffickers take advantage of insecurities and cater to the demand for cheap labor and exploitation in the country of destination.

Pull Factors

Lures and Promises about the Opportunities in the Gulf States

One of the important pull factors that is feeding into TIP through Djibouti is better opportunities. Traffickers prey on desperate migrants with false stories about life in the Gulf, promising good wages and a better standard of living. It is the perfect breeding ground for traffickers, who profit from these desperate circumstances. A returnee gave this account: “Traffickers told us we would make a lot of money, that we would work in

big houses, and send enough money home to support our families. They said it was an offer we couldn't refuse" (RT2, 12 February 2023). Another added, "Traffickers made me believe that Saudi is like a paradise" (UM1, 01 March 2023). Several participants reported that traffickers showed pictures of mansions and promised the streets would be paved with incredible stories as soon as they went to the Gulf States as they had been dreaming of a better life. Thus, despite the risks, participants engage with traffickers—demonstrating RCT. They weigh perceived benefits like higher wages against risks like exploitation and trafficking, driven by limited alternatives and dire economic conditions in their home countries.

Amidst the perpetuation of a dream, such promises are usually associated with claims that financial success stories and job placement instructions come in more or less safe ways; all portrayed as legal migration opportunities awaiting any willing soul eager to access what is seen by many as an economic promised land. A participant said "Traffickers said it is safe as many migrants reside in peace and no worry about it. They assured us that they would take care of the paperwork when they arrived. We believed them because it is our only hope" (RT1, 10 February 2023). Moreover, participants explained that traffickers use this knowledge of cultural and social pressure – where many people feel the need to send money home every month as a means of providing for their families — in manipulation. Traffickers exploit the economic vulnerability and aspirations of individuals in the HoA by portraying the Gulf States as lands of wealth and opportunity. This combination of

economic hardship and promises of success makes participants highly susceptible to trafficking, with deceptive narratives serving as a powerful pull factor from the region. However, while the RCT suggests that people act with agency, findings reveal misinformation by traffickers undermines informed decision-making, hence there is a need to account for deception in migration processes to heighten the risk of human trafficking.

Demand for Low-cost Labor in the Gulf States

The study points to the low-cost labor prevalent in the Gulf States as one of the prime causes of creating an environment conducive to TIP. The labor market, especially in the fields of domestic work and construction desires workers that are low-cost to hire alongside being inherently exploitable. This demand theoretically makes it possible for the urban elites to recruit vulnerable urban individuals from the HoA region, particularly those suffering from poverty. Government officials admit the power of the economies of the Gulf states: "The very economic gulf between the HoA and Gulf creates demand for labor. Regrettably, this need is frequently addressed in a harmful way" (GO1, 10 October 2023). The significance of the labor market conditions in the Gulf States is a contributing factor as these states demand labor force from poor countries such as Ethiopia and Eritrea, according to participants. Traffickers use this opportunity to recruit individuals who are facing socio-economic and political challenges. One participant stated, "Traffickers told us that there are increased job opportunities in

Saudi Arabia as Gulf countries are in search of low-paid workers” (RT3, 04 September 2023). The demand for low-cost labor drives trafficking networks to recruit vulnerable Ethiopian women, in line with the DST, which stipulates that the availability of low-cost labor in destination countries produces a trafficking market.

The demand for low-cost labor is made even worse by the constrictive nature of employment laws and sponsorship systems (kafala) in the Gulf States, which effectively deny rights to migrant workers encouraging exploitation. This was articulated by a participant: “Gulf firms and families circumvent visa costs as well as minimum pay, which they avoid paying to legal workers while the illegal workforce is found hard-pressed both for labor rights enforcement signatures and salary slips” (NO2, 15 December 2023). Another participant described, “Even though the traffickers told us we would have safe jobs, we were forced to work long hours and get very little pay. But because the traffickers know the frequent need for low-cost labor, they continue bringing us there” (RT2, 12 February 2023). According to the report, traffickers take advantage of the demand for low-cost labor — drawing in those who are looking for work under conditions that offer low pay but long hours and dangerous or physically demanding jobs. This leaves migrant workers in the Gulf largely unprotected by law and highly vulnerable to exploitation. Thus, human trafficking in the HoA is driven by the demand for low-cost labor in the Gulf States. The RCT assumes that trafficking happens in assuming better economic gain with more prospects despite

the vulnerability they will encounter. The DST shows how economic imbalances between the HoA and destination countries create conditions that encourage TIP. So, these theories highlight the importance of understanding the flow of money involved in trafficking.

4. Discussion

Our study underlines the myriad push and pull factors related to socio-economic and political contexts in the HoA, as well as demands for labor by Gulf economies. Family pressure and community expectations make people migrate away, according to participants. This is evidenced by a study conducted by Koser and Kuschminder (2015) which suggests that young people are encouraged to work overtime for them collectively to justify remittances. For instance, De Jong (2000) discussed how social and gender norms affect decisions to migrate while Zewdu (2018), explained the ways traffickers play on familial and community expectations or embarrassment when unknowingly tempting potential migrants. One returnee noted, “My family expected me to send money, and they saw migration as the only way for me to succeed” (UM2, September 2023). This finding can be understood from RCT, which shows that people decide to migrate based on perceived costs and benefits, such as expectations of the family and survival of the economic unit, even when risks of trafficking are known. DST illustrates that migration pressure is considered one of the driving variables in trafficking, supplying more and more vulnerable people to the labor demand in the receiving countries. Success stories of migrating neighbors or

community members give great impetus to individual decisions to leave their home countries.

The study establishes that the high incidence of TIP in HoA is driven to a large extent by conflict. The existing displacement triggered by the protracted regional conflicts in Ethiopia has made it easier for TIP networks to thrive. This finding is supported by previous research that political persecution and militarization make individuals more vulnerable to trafficking (Kidd, 2020; Lijnders & Robinson, 2013). Though consistent with existing research that the instability and conflict in the HoA make it a perfect breeding ground for TIP operations, participants identified this as an enabling environment of concern throughout. This study expands the scope of our understanding by highlighting the suffering of the IDPs and refugees who are unprotected, threatened by conflicts, and denied their rights to protection. The lack of government support in Ethiopia's Tigray, Oromia, and Amhara regions opens doors to traffickers, which is consistent with RCT and DST as the vulnerable decide on TIP and consider the demand for safe places in the Gulf States. As a result, a situation of state unprotection and absence of judicial protection engenders an exposure of individuals, especially IDPs to trafficking networks (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). This can be theoretically understood through RCT and DST because conflict drives trafficking due to violence, displacement, and livelihood destruction; RCT prioritizes short-term safety and economic opportunities, while DST highlights vulnerable populations.

The pull factors identified – lures and promises about the opportunities in the Gulf States and the demand for low-cost labor in the Gulf States – are in line with previous studies indicating that traffickers misrepresent destinations as wealthy countries only to hide their grave realities (Mahdavi, 2011). Zewdu (2018) also indicates that a lot of people are trafficked through false promises of having legal jobs and find themselves in horrible conditions. However, it is the lack of access to reliable information that amplifies false promises and facilitates aspirations in illegal migration, which indicates the role of RCT and DST. TIP is driven by the demand for low-cost labor, especially in domestic work and construction as one returnee said, "I was promised better money and safe living to flee the conflict in our area, working in Saudi Arabia, but I was a slave" (RT2, 12 February 2023). This finding complements Guerrero's (2023) finding on forced labor in Gulf countries, which demonstrates the same pattern of exploitation of migrant workers. Additionally, the construction boom in the gulf is leaving an evergreen demand for low-cost and unaccountable labor which traffickers take advantage of the opportunity (Buckley et al., 2016). This study extends previous studies, for it sheds new insight into the traffickers' cumulative misrepresentation of conflict, the opportunities and demand for low-cost labor in the Gulf States to lure individuals for their benefit. From a theoretical perspective, this can be understood through DST, which explains this dynamic, while RCT reveals that migrants perceive migration as a rational choice to improve their lives, despite potential exploitation risks.

Combining these theories reveals how structural economic demands and individual-level decision-making converge to sustain trafficking flows.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that in the HoA, particularly along the eastern route to the Gulf States through Djibouti, TIP is driven by a complex of push and pull factors. Some of the main push factors are family pressure, the community's perception of success through migration, and conflict that disrupts communities. On the other hand, pull factors have to do with the lures that promise opportunities in the Gulf States and the demand for low-cost labor. Guided by RCT and RCT, this analysis reveals how traffickers exploit the dreams and aspirations of individuals under various challenges, creating a bigger market for exploitable labor. Hence, countering TIP more effectively must deal with policies that lessen socio-economic and political vulnerabilities in countries of origin as well as policies that decrease demand for exploitative labor in the Gulf States. This study provides broad insight into TIP in the HoA, using theories. However, it identifies that gaps exist over the quantification of the scale of trafficking and the roles of local actors, which calls for further research to allow for targeted interventions. This research suggests that policies alone cannot mitigate trafficking or cure its root causes; these indeed require comprehensive development, economic stability, and protection measures for migrants.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study is the small sample size ($n=21$) of participants which potentially limits the generalizability of findings concerning TIP in the HoA. Self-reported data were used and this could introduce personal motivations' biases. In addition, by basing our analysis only on interview data we might have missed wider systemic factors triggering trafficking (such as economic and political determinants). Whilst the utilized theories help to interpret the problem in several respects, they can lack in their ability to consider all socio-cultural and psychological elements that may determine increased vulnerability towards trafficking. Future research should address this issue adopting a more integrated multi-disciplinary perspective.

Policy Implications

The results suggest several policy implications for combating TIP along the eastern route. Firstly, targeted awareness raising is needed to correct misperceptions about migration as a guaranteed pathway to success and inform families about risks associated with trafficking; source countries should improve economic support systems and social safety nets so as not to generate imperatives or incentives for emigration; Gulf States should cooperate in reducing the temporary low-wage labor demands that foster cases like TIP while also improving regulation concerning working condition for migrant laborers; finally, stopping traffickers requires regionally coordinated efforts aimed at surveillance and investigation as well as harmonized legislation accordingly. A multi-leveled approach addressing both supply-side issues as well as demand-side issues seems to call for effective mitigation

of TIP in the region. The rational choice perspective would argue that improving migrants' access to information and economic opportunities in their source countries can deter trafficking. Programs addressing these issues could help people make better-informed choices.

Acknowledgment

We extend our sincere gratitude to the research participants, including survivors, police officers, municipal authorities, civil society groups, and non-governmental organizations, for graciously sharing their experiences and ideas. Their courage and candor have been invaluable to our research, and their voices are indispensable to this publication.

6. References

- Abebe, Y. (2021). Contemporary geopolitical dynamics in the Horn of Africa: Challenge and prospects for Ethiopia. *International Relations*, 9(09), 361-371.
- Animaw, A. (2011). Trafficking in persons overseas for labor purposes: The case of Ethiopian domestic workers. *Addis Ababa: ILO Country Office*.
- Bello, P. O. & Olutola, A. A. (2020). The Conundrum of Human Trafficking in Africa. Modern slavery and human trafficking. 25:15-27.
- Bereketeab, R. (2016). Djibouti: strategic location, an asset or a curse? *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, 3(1), 5-18.
- Betts, A. (2013). *Survival migration: Failed governance and the crisis of displacement*. Cornell University Press.
- Bigio, J., & Vogelstein, R. (2019). Understanding TIP in conflict. *The Security Implications of TIP*, 3-9.
- Buckley, M., Zendel, A., Biggar, J., Frederiksen, L., & Wells, J. (2016). Migrant work & employment in the construction sector. *International Labour Organization*.
- Buzan, B., & Hansen, L. (2009). *The evolution of international security studies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cornish, D. B., & Clarke, R. V. (Eds.). (2014). *The reasoning criminal: Rational choice perspectives on offending*.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Study Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Sage Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
- De Jong, G. F. (2000). Expectations, gender, and norms in migration decision-making. *Population studies*, 54(3), 307-319.
- Fernandez, B. (2013). Traffickers, brokers, employment agents, and social networks: The regulation of intermediaries in the migration of Ethiopian domestic workers to the Middle East. *International Migration Review*, 47(4), 814-843.
- Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. (2020). *Trafficking and Smuggling in the Horn of Africa: Challenging Impunity, Enhancing Accountability*. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/global-initiative-human-smuggling-from-the-horn-of-africa-may-2017-web.pdf>

- Guerrero, A. (2023). TIP In the GCC: Contributing Factors to the Continuity of Forced Labor Trafficking.
- Horwood, C. (2015). Irregular Migration Flows in the Horn of Africa: Challenges and implications for source, transit and destination countries. *Occasional Paper Series*, (18).
- International Organization for Migration. (2019). *A Region on the Move: 2018 Mobility Overview in the Horn of Africa and the Arab Peninsula*. Regional Office for the East and HoA, Nairobi, Kenya. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/region-move>
- INTERNALLY TA. (2016). Displacement, violence and vulnerability: trafficking among internally displaced persons in kenya.
- Kidd, A. (2020). Unavoidable exploitation? Conflict, agency and TIP. *TIP in conflict: Context, causes and the military*, 43-60.
- Konneh, D. (2017). African Migration to Europe: Obscured Responsibilities and Common Misconceptions. *GIGA Study Programme: Transformation in the Process of Globalization*.
- Koser, K., & Kuschminder, K. (2015). Comparative research on the assisted voluntary return and reintegration of migrants. *International organization for migration*, 13.
- Leavy, P. (2017). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. Guilford Publications.
- Lijnders, L., & Robinson, S. (2013). From the Horn of Africa to the Middle East: TIP of Eritrean asylum seekers across borders. *Anti-Trafficking Review*, (2), 137-154.
- Mahdavi, P. (2011). "But we can always get more!" Deportability, the state and gendered migration in the United Arab Emirates. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 20(3-4), 413-431.
- Majeed, M. T. & Malik, A. (2017). Selling Souls: An Empirical Analysis of Human Trafficking and Globalization. *Munich Personal RePEc Archive*. <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/88850/>
- Marchand, K., Reinold, J., & Dias e Silva, R. (2017). Study on migration routes in the East and Horn of Africa. *Maastricht: Maastricht Graduate School of Governance*.
- Martin, S., & Callaway, A. (2011). Internal displacement and internal trafficking: developing a new framework for protection. *The migration-displacement nexus: patterns, processes, and policies*, 32, 216.
- Ravenstone Consult. (2023). *Captive Commodities "This Route is Like a Fire": Commodification, Exploitation and Missingness of Ethiopian Irregular Migrants on the Eastern Route to Yemen and Saudi Arabia*. A Study Report. <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/captive-commodities-this-route-is-like-a-fire/>

- Salt, J., & Stein, J. (1997). Migration as a business: the case of trafficking. *International migration*, 35(4), 467-494.
- Schroder, G. (2015). Migratory and refugee movements in and from the Horn of Africa. *Perspective*. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Shelley, L. (2010). *Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Telci, I. N. (2022). The Horn of Africa as venue for regional competition: Motivations, instruments and relationship patterns. *Insight on Africa*, 14(1), 73-87.
- U.S Department of State. (2021). 2021 trafficking in persons report.
- Vogel, D. (2017). The Concept of Demand in the Context of Trafficking in Human Psychosociological Issues in Human Resource Management.
- Winterdyk, J. (2020). Explaining TIP: Modern day-slavery. *The Palgrave international handbook of TIP*, 1257-1274.
- Yin, R. K. (2012). *Applications of case study research* (Vol. 34). sage.
- Ylonen, A., & Zahorik, J. (Eds.). (2017). *The Horn of Africa since the 1960s: local and international politics intertwined*. Taylor & Francis.
- Zewdu, G. A. (2018). Ethiopian female domestic labor migration to the Middle East: Patterns, trends, and drivers. *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 11(1), 6-19.