Ethiopia Striving to Stamp out Human Trafficking

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Part - I

One of the human trafficking ‘desert routes’ from Ethiopia to Sudan is Metema-Galabat, which is a place of suffering for many Ethiopian girls. Physical and emotional abuse, including rape, torture, starvation, imprisonment, threats, beatings, and even death are just some of the horrors the majority of trafficked girls face while passing through this route. This is why many compare the rout to that of the North Africa’s ‘deadly tunnel’—Sinai desert.

Solome Belete is one of many Ethiopian girls who have experienced such serious human right violations and suffering during a journey through this dodgy root to Khartoum, the capital of Sudan— the oil producing country. She was found unconscious on 25 September, 2013 by the Sudan border guards in the desert located in eastern part of the country, and fortunately escaped from death.

As it is known victims of human trafficking, particularly those who are raped and sexually assaulted are often unwilling to tell their horrific experience because of the shame. However, motivated by a courageous desire to expose the horrific feature of human trafficking, Solome said.

Solome Belete was a student when she was recruited and prepared for the journey. She was convinced by a local broker who promised her an employment and a better life in Sudan. She was trafficked together with her school friends by well organized traffickers who have a connection with Ethiopian local authorities.

“When I left my village, I was confident I would reach Khartoum safe and find a very good job”, Solome narrates her story. “I was thinking just how hard I would work and help my poor parents who were in problem to cover their basic expenses. I was dreaming about the successful and joyful life I expected in my new country.”

Solome says that her parents too were very happy when she left her village. She says that they were sure that she would reach Sudan, find a good job, and change their hand to mouth life. “No one expected something bad might happen”, she noted.

Solome says the trip was as peaceful as she had expected until they reached the Ethio-Sudan border. “When we arrived at the border— it was midnight”, Solome says. “There, we were taken by 5 Sudanese to an underground house far away from the main road. We walked for more than 30 minutes to reach there.”
By the next evening, the deadly journey, which crosses the burning Metema-Galabat desert, began on foot-using the moon light. “I was not ready for the trip” she says. “I was feeling pain all over my body. But, I had no choice but to accompany them.” Solome says that the desert was more than challenging. “It was a hell: besides its testing heat, it was covered with small shrubs which have nasty thorns. Except dangerous snacks- no life was there”, she explains.

On the second day of the trip, Solome took her second brutal beating for refusing to have sex. “Although I begged him not to do that—he didn’t accept me”, she says. “I tried to run away, but he easily cached me and beat me up and…”, she explains.

On the same day, four other girls were raped, and one girl [she was the very youngest in the group] was also brutally killed to have been stabbed with a knife for refusing what the traffickers asked her to do. “It is really unspeakable”, Solome explains. “They didn’t have the human sense like us”, she noted. Solome says that the girl was killed after being raped.

Desperate and frightened, Solome now decided to come back home. But, when she later thought how far away she came across the desert, she regretted and began to pray. “I was so late to take any action except to pray”, she says.

On the following day, all the girls were sick and weak; and their feet were seriously scratched and wounded. Despite the hunger, they were extremely dehydrated. It had been more than 24 hours since they saw water. But, even in this life threatening condition, they experienced the same problem they had experienced the day before. 3 girls were brutally raped.

The next day was the worst of the worst. Three girls [two of them were those who had been brutally raped a day before] left behind in the heart of the burning desert to have been unable to keep the journey. “I didn’t try to help them”, Solome says. “I was almost the same to them. I was very weak; I was walking wildly and desperately”, she explains.

Solome says that some of the girls, who had relatively better physical strength, were as to help the girls, but the traffickers prevented them from doing so claiming that such acts would slow the journey.

In this way, after 5 day’s deadly journey, the girls arrived at a place where one of the traffickers received a phone call. “I don’t know what the caller was telling to him, but he was so scared”, Solome explains.

After the conversation done in Arabic, the traffickers threatened the girls and begun to collect their pocket money, mobile phone, and other properties. “When he asked me: give me the money in your pocket? I said no.” Solome says. “So he beat me on my face with iron pipe and dragged me away. I don’t know what then happened. When I opened my eyes I found myself in a hospital taking a medical treatment. And the doctor told me that I was even stabbed with knife”, she explains.
Solome says that the traffickers had food and water. “In every stop, they would eat and drink, and then rap us”, Solome says. “Noon of them was voluntarily to give us water or food, even to those raped and seriously injured”, she explains.

According to Solome each night they travelled around 35 Km. She says that they had sometimes to run. According to her they used to travel only by night, using the moonlight, not to be seen by Sudan border guards. “We used to spend the day hiding in selected places-usually under caves and shrubs”, she says.

Human trafficking is the practice of people being tricked, lured, coerced or otherwise removed from their home or country, and then forced to work with no or low payment or on terms which are highly exploitative. The practice is considered to be the trade or commerce of people, which has many features of slavery, and which is illegal in most countries. The victims of human trafficking are used in a variety of situations, including prostitution, forced labor, and other forms of involuntary servitude. The sale of babies and children for adoption or other purposes is considered to be trafficking in those children.

The United Nation estimates that the number of persons living outside their country of origin has reached 175 million, more than twice the number a generation ago (UN, 2003). International labor migration whether it is voluntary or forced legal or illegal has become a major factor of social transformation in all regions of the world (Sowell, 1996).

Trafficking is one aspect of illegal labor migration. Trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (UN, 2000). A number of studies show that 600,000-800,000 human beings are trafficked internationally each year with 80% of this population as women and children (J. Davey, 2005).

It has been said that whatever makes a man a slave takes half his worth away. Indeed, human trafficking is modern day slavery where human beings are exploited by treating them like commodities for profit. It is contrary to the fundamental belief of all societies that people everywhere deserve to live in safety and dignity.
Victims of human trafficking who comprise of young children, teenagers, men and women are subjected to involuntary servitude and sexual slavery by force, fraud or coercion. Human smuggling, especially of women and children has become a matter of serious national and international concern. Sources confirm that nearly 800,000 victims are annually trafficked across international borders worldwide and 200000 of them within and around the borders of Sub-Saharan Africa alone. The fact is that after drug dealing and illicit arms smuggling, human trafficking is the world's third largest organized crime, and growing by leaps and bounds. Commercial exploitation of the vulnerable sections of the society has led to massive growth of modern “slave trade” into a multimillion dollar business. According to the FBI, this organized crime generates 9.5 billion USD in revenue each year.

The causes of trafficking in part are related to factors for migration like poverty, unemployment, and hope of securing better life in the prospective destination countries. In addition, lack of awareness on the legal migration process and preference to swifter migration ways were identified as causes of human trafficking. Consequences of trafficking include physical, psychological, social and economical turmoil.

The first and predominant cause identified by many researchers is poverty and lack of viable economic opportunity. Even though scholars on human trafficking argue that all criminal activities are not necessarily caused by poverty, but there is a general consensus on the fact that trafficking is closely related to developmental issues in which poverty is a major factor (UNIDOC, 2012).

Causes of trafficking are multifaceted and in most cases interlinked. Poverty plus lack of awareness on recruitment channels and preference for swifter channels is exposing women to worst condition of migration made through unreliable trafficking network.

Hence, after placing all of their hope on illegal agents and traffickers, victims totally withdrew themselves from the affair. In time of challenges and anxiety, victims cannot get anyone to help them and relieve them from their worry. Some individuals who knew the legal and dishonest
type of travel arrangements said that, they preferred the later one as it is the swifter way of migration. They consider migration being made using legal means and established systems is lengthy and tiresome.

**Who are Traffickers?**

Trafficking in persons is extremely lucrative in Ethiopia. As indicated by Africa Plus News (2011), traffickers who prey on girls in Ethiopia expect to earn around seven thousand Ethiopian Birr (More than US $800) for each person they send.

Trafficking is processed by dishonest agents who claim to have established contacts with employers oversees. These agents place victims in exploitative conditions. As majority of victims witnessed related to their recruitment, they did not know the difference between the honest and dishonest agents.

Many think that these traffickers are ordinary people or that they are doing the business because of poverty. The truth is, however, that these people are economically rich and are those who are not commonly expected to be trafficker. According to a research conducted by Bahir Dar University, most of them are known in the community positively, and do have their own legal business in big cities of the country. In addition, the study shows that most of them run the trafficking business together with border police, border guards, and other responsible government officials.

Human trafficking is an immense problem in Ethiopia. As a result of rampant poverty, large numbers of Ethiopian girls are voluntarily trafficked to Sudan, through illegal ‘desert routes. They are mainly trafficked for household labor purposes including cleaning rooms and compounds, washing, cooking, disposing waste, and looking after children and elders.

Trafficking in Ethiopia, mostly takes the form of transporting migrants by fraud, deception and different forms of coercion (UNCJIN, 2010). Even though, the problem is getting more and more grave, thoroughly academic investigations are unavailable, incomprehensive if present.

The challenge the girls face during the journey is not the end but the beginning of the trauma. Even in the case they succeed to reach Sudan and get a job, they are subjected to abuses such as long working hours, unbearable workload, restricted movement and isolation, inability to change employers, lack of leisure, denial of wages, and irregular payment of wages.

In addition, the worst problem aggravating the occurrence of human trafficking is the prevalence of traffickers throughout the country. Some scholars say this cause is assumed to be a major problem which is seemingly recognized by people and some government officials.
Traffickers have extended their network from the lower kebele level to the bigger cities through which they can track potential victims. Mainly, traffickers brainwash poor girls and women by professing promises of glorious life in the Middle East and Europe. Accordingly, prevalence of traffickers is one reason that aggravated human trafficking. Pressures from families, friends and neighbors are also known to be one factor of migration that influences individuals to decide to migrate.

**Consequences of Human Trafficking**

The consequences of human trafficking can be social, political and economical. Most of Ethiopian women become victims of human trafficking in their process of migration to earn a better livelihood. Earning a better livelihood is an overriding factor for women’s migration in general and trafficking in particular. The end result of trafficking is exploitation of victims for different purposes. Traffickers receive huge amount of money from potential victims and their families too.

In most cases this money comes from sale of movable and immovable properties, such as cattle and land. Also they receive loans from siblings and neighbors. As witnessed, women who get trafficked in most cases get back to their country empty handed, because they do not have legal permit of employment and their employers commit whatever crime and exploitation on them. In such a case, let alone improving their income and living condition, women even incur lasting trouble on themselves and families.

Therefore, the root cause of trafficking is search of money and better income in an illegal way, which also affects the migrant, who gets back empty handed, and his/her family and the country as a whole. Migration causes economic crisis on the family and the migrant becomes a heavy burden to the entire household.

Majority of women who try to migrate borrow money from other people claiming to return it when they get back. But what they could face in their destination is not as convenient as they imagined at the start of their journey. As a result, they may be exposed to mental and physical abused and sustain lasting health problems. The abuse is multifold and includes beating,
confinement, starvation, being thrown from building, rape and sleep deprivation, and in the worst form death. Hence, it is not difficult to imagine what women could face through illegal journey devised by traffickers.

Some of the women victims of human trafficking said that they even fall an easy prey to trafficking because of inappropriate information from peers and other nearby people. Families also expect a lot from migrating girls and women so that they encourage migration(some even lend money to be paid for the traffickers and send their daughters away.

Many women and girls in Ethiopia today have become easy prey to people involved in human trafficking as they are promised employment in the Arab countries only to find themselves in entertainment houses. Under the guises of legal employment contracts, thousands of girls and women have been helplessly exposed to forced labor and sexual exploitation in the Middle East.

Many of these workers have become victims of brutal exploitation as well as physical and sexual abuse by their ruthless employers in the destination countries. Other purposes for human smuggling include forced prostitution, forced labor, hiring wombs, domestic slavery, organ transplantation, among others.

The misery of women is indescribable and many hundreds of Ethiopian women who work as domestic servants in the Middle East have been ruthlessly beaten, and forced into excruciatingly unpaid labor.

Most spend their years in a house where they are not allowed to go out. They are literary slaves, working 18 hours a day and never have time of their own. They usually leave Ethiopia between the age of 16-20 which is invaluable age to go to high school and college. They stay in Arab countries from two to four years. But they come back for a while and usually go back again as their dream to be married, have children and start family and business vanishes in mid-air.
Psychological disorder resulting from this depression is one of the problems women returnees face. Some women got psychological treatment at Emmanuel Specialized Mental Hospital and still were suffering from abnormal health condition.

In addition to extreme abuse, women whose hope to change the life of their family was shattered and turned to tragedy meditating about the debt crises they incurred. The social consequence of trafficking not only affects the victims but also their family, other siblings and the country as a whole. Finally, trafficking has also a political consequence, in that countries are now being evaluated by the rate of human trafficking. As trafficking is a human rights violation at all its stage, international human rights instruments always dictate that human rights should not be violated. Hence, violation of human rights spoils the country’s good image and also strains the foreign relation between sending and receiving countries. Generally the consequence of human trafficking is one of the untold stories of many developing countries including Ethiopia.

**National Efforts to combat Human Trafficking**

Human trafficking has become a modern migration challenge, demanding a strong, comprehensive and coherent response from governments and the international community at large.

Recent developments reveal that trafficking in human beings constitute a major form of organized crime, while the total scale of incomes of trafficking can be compared with illegal incomes of drugs and weapons (UNOCD, 20012). Various countries and international organizations have started to respond to recent increases in the practice, particularly in the trafficking of women and children across national borders for the commercial sex industry, and forced labor by dedicating substantial resources to developing effective solutions.

Governments around the world are also attempting to implement stricter laws and far-reaching legal strategies designed to meet the challenges of this problem (US Department of States, 2010).
Also in Ethiopia trafficking is becoming a big issue after hundreds of Ethiopians lost their lives, got abused and exploited physically and mentally. Ethiopian women who are trafficked to the Middle East are the subjects of serious violence and human rights abuse.

The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in human beings calls for three interrelated interventions to combat human trafficking. i.e. prevention, protection, prosecution. As an effective prevention strategy, there is no comprehensive national policy on human trafficking in Ethiopia. Policy instruments in some other areas directly relevant to the problem such as labor migration policies are also lacking.

Though, there are different directives issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) eyed at preventing human trafficking. Poor implementation results from poor awareness of the laws itself, both from law enforcement organs and the public at large.

As far as national laws are concerned, certain provisions in the Constitution and the Criminal Code of Ethiopia are designed to prevent trafficking in person, but in both cases there is no complete and comprehensive definition of trafficking. In addition, bringing in to force of various domestic laws, Ethiopia has ratified a number of regional and global conventions that help prohibit human trafficking.

Among which, African Charters on human rights, convention on the elimination of all forms of discriminations against women (CEDAW) and ILO Conventions primarily state about human the rights of trafficking victims. Earlier, Ethiopia has been blamed for not ratifying the Palermo Protocol which was devised to tackle and punish trafficking in human beings, in particular women and children, is believed by international communities as the most important and decisive instrument to combat trafficking in women and children.

But most interestingly, Ethiopia has recently ratified this protocol as of March 2012. Dramatic change is expected to happen on the incidence of human trafficking in Ethiopia if this protocol is effectively implemented. In line with this, the FDRE constitution under article 9 states that all
International agreements ratified by Ethiopia are an integral part of the law of the land and should be implemented. Accordingly, this convention is firmly corroborated by the Constitution.

Secret in public, media is also a powerful intervention tool for the dissemination of information and raising awareness of the community with regard to the impacts of trafficking and down from family to the national level and the sufferings and maltreatment of migrated citizens and the nature of work in the overseas countries. In Ethiopia, the media have not given ample coverage to enhance the awareness of the greater public about trafficking. And involvement of media is limited to publishing and broadcasting human trafficking issues as a reactive measure following minor events and incidents.

Thus, there is a problem on warning potential migrants in advance concerning the living and working conditions including how to process their migration visas. When people are aware of what is legal and illegal and know how to protect themselves from traffickers, they would make an informed decision than blindly entering in to the net work of human trafficking.

Though there are some efforts and gains resulted from the interest and commitment of the government, the prevention of human trafficking in Ethiopia, due to the above stated gaps in policies, legislations and information disseminating campaigns, the prevention efforts have not resulted in fruition of the desired results, compared to the seriousness of the issue.

Hence, the prosecution and investigation of trafficking cases is minimal compared to high rate of traffickers. The first reason is low rate of cases reported to police from victims or their families. Besides, concerning the minimal number of cases reported to courts, the prosecutors said that most of the claimants withdrew from the issue, leaving the prosecution process incomplete.

It is thought that the low rate of prosecution is because of lack of awareness from the victims and their families, on who is to be considered as guilty. Sometimes trafficking victims feel guilty and ashamed to take their case to courts and sue traffickers.