MEKELLE UNIVERESITY

COLLEGE OF LAW AND GOVERNANCE

DEPARTMENT OF CIVIC AND ETHICAL STUDIES

Exploring Socio-Economic Reintegration of Female Returnees from Saudi Arabia in Wukro Town, Tigray, Ethiopia

A thesis submitted to the Department of Civic and Ethical Studies for the Partial Fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Civic and Ethical Studies.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my original work and has not been submitted for any degree or diploma in any other university and that all sources of material used for this thesis have been dully acknowledged.

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June 2025

The thesis has been presented for examination with my approval as a university advisor.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the multifaceted challenges and opportunities in the socio-economic reintegration of female returnees from Saudi Arabia into Wukro Town, Tigray. The mass deportation of migrant workers has created a crisis, returning thousands of women to a home region devastated by war, compounding the personal trauma of migration with the collective trauma of conflict. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research conducted in-depth interviews with 32 female returnees, 3 focus group discussions with 15 female returnees, and 10 key informant interviews with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. The findings reveal that reintegration is profoundly hindered by a confluence of systemic barriers. Economically, returnees face a collapsed local economy with non-existent job opportunities, inadequate start-up capital, and vocational training programs that are too superficial to provide marketable skills. Socially, they grapple with community misconceptions, stigma, and dwindling family support, leading to isolation and psychological distress. The research concludes that existing reintegration initiatives, while well-intentioned, are fundamentally ill-equipped for a post-conflict reality. They fail to address the dual trauma of exploitative migration under the Kafala system and returning to a war-torn society. Consequently, the vast majority of returnees remain unemployed and economically desperate, making re-migration appear to be a rational choice for survival. This study recommends a paradigm shift from isolated, short-term aid to integrating returnee support into broader, long-term post-conflict reconstruction plans, focusing on sustainable economic opportunities and trauma-informed psychosocial care for the entire community.

ACRONYMS

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

IDI: In-Depth Interview

IOM: International Organization for Migration

KII: Key Informant Interview

KSA: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

LSAO: Bureau of Labor and Social Affairs

MFI: Microfinance Institution

NPPO: Non-Participatory Observation

REST: Relief Society of Tigray

SME: Small and Micro Enterprises

TVET: Technical and Vocational Education and Training

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

WAO: Women's Affairs Office

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Migration, the movement of people across internal or international borders, is a profound force of social transformation globally for different reasons (IOM, 2015). While often driven by the pursuit of opportunity, migration can also be a desperate response to structural vulnerabilities, including poverty, political instability, and conflict (Bakewell, 2010). It encompasses any kind of movement of people such as that of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for different purposes including family reunification (IOM, 2015).

The African continent, in particular, is often characterized by significant migration flows stemming from these complex drivers (Flahaux & Haas, 2016). This region is often seen as a continent of mass displacement and migration caused by poverty and violent conflict. According to Flahaux and Haas (2016), refugees and people in refugee-like situations represented 2.4 million or 14 percent of international migrants in Africa.

Ethiopia has a long history of migration, shaped by a confluence of socio-economic and political factors. For decades, poverty, unemployment, and the search for a better life have pushed Ethiopians, particularly women, to seek domestic work in the Middle East (Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has been a primary destination. However, this migration corridor is fraught with peril. Many women travel through irregular channels, making them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, a situation often exacerbated by the restrictive kafala (sponsorship) system in the destination country (Abebaw & Weganesh, 2016).

In recent years, the situation has been compounded by mass deportations. The Saudi government's crackdowns on undocumented migrants have resulted in the forced return of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians, often under traumatic circumstances (Human Rights Watch, 2015). These returnees, overwhelmingly women, often arrive home destitute, physically and psychologically scarred, and face the monumental task of reintegrating into their communities (Mehari, 2017).

Reintegration is a complex, multi-dimensional process encompassing economic self-sufficiency, social inclusion, and psychosocial well-being (UNHCR, 2004). For forcibly returned migrants, this process is particularly challenging. They return without capital, often in debt, and may face

stigma and shame for failing to meet their families' expectations (Melaku, 2014). The government of Ethiopia, alongside international partners like the International Organization for Migration (IOM), has implemented programs to assist returnees. However, the sheer scale of the returns, coupled with financial and institutional constraints, poses a significant barrier to providing effective and sustainable support (Abreham, 2014).

This study focused on Wukro town in the Tigray region, an area profoundly affected by these dynamics. Tigray has not only been a significant source of migrants to the Middle East but was also the epicenter of a devastating war from late 2020. This post-conflict context adds a critical layer of complexity to the reintegration process, as returnees are coming back to a society grappling with its own collective trauma, economic collapse, and shattered social fabric. This research, therefore, seeks to explore the lived experiences of female returnees in Wukro, examining the opportunities and immense challenges they face in their journey towards socio-economic reintegration in a post-conflict environment.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The mass deportation of Ethiopian migrant workers from Saudi Arabia has created a humanitarian and developmental crisis. In 2018 alone, over 163,000 Ethiopians, the majority of whom were women, were forcibly returned (IOM, 2018). These women often return with nothing but the trauma of their experiences, including physical and psychological abuse, exploitation, and inhumane detention conditions. Successful reintegration, which requires acceptance and support from family, community, and the state, becomes an uphill battle (Adhikari, 2011).

The challenges are particularly acute for female returnees. They often face high levels of stigma and discrimination, fueled by community misconceptions about their time abroad and their failure to return with wealth (Zimmerman et al., 2003). This social exclusion is compounded by severe economic hardship. Without savings and facing limited local job opportunities, many become dependent on their families, leading to feelings of shame and frustration that can fuel a desire to re-migrate, often through the same dangerous, irregular channels (IOM, 2014).

Previous studies conducted about migration of Ethiopian citizens were investigated the root causes of psychosocial problems (Meskerem, 2011). Besides, a study conducted by Naami (2014), on female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers analyzed the migration, return-migration.

However, less emphasis was given for the reintegration experiences and didn't identified to which reintegration is challenging for the returnees. Furthermore, a thesis done by Michael, (2014), focused only on reintegration challenges of migrant men returnees. Thus, this research is concerned in the uncovered part of female returnees.

A research done on the assessment of the mass deportation and Reintegration Process by Hanna, (2014), stressed on the implication for intervention and social policy response to the irregular migrants. Further, a mini research focused on challenges of social reintegration of Saudi Arabian Returnees in Addis Ababa didn't address adequately the drawbacks on reintegration of returnees in Tigray reigns dealt (Desalegn and Betelihm, 2014). Thus, this did not cover the socio-economic reintegrating part of female returnees in Wukro Woreda.

While other previous research has explored the causes of migration (Gudetu, 2014), the experiences of trafficked women (Abebaw, 2013), and the challenges of male returnees (Michael, 2014), a significant gap remains. Specifically, there is a lack of in-depth, qualitative research on the socio-economic reintegration of female returnees in the unique and deeply challenging context of post-conflict Tigray. This study addressed a critical gap in the existing literature.

The situation in Wukro town is exemplary of crisis. The female returnees are struggling not only with the personal trauma of their migration and deportation but also with the collective trauma of returning to a community devastated by war. The conflict has destroyed local economies, erased job prospects, shattered infrastructure, and weakened the very governmental and non-governmental institutions meant to support them.

Therefore, this study is crucial. It explored the lived realities behind this phenomenon, investigating the systemic failures and potential pathways for sustainable reintegration in a context where individual, community, and state capacities have been severely compromised.

1.3. Objective of the Study

1.3.1. General Objective of the Study

To investigate the challenges and opportunities in the socio-economic reintegration of female returnees from Saudi Arabia in the post-conflict setting of Wukro Town

1.3.2. Specific Objectives of the study

- To appraise the effectiveness of existing reintegration programs and support services for female returnees.
- To identify potential sustainable interventions and strategies to enhance the economic and social reintegration of female returnees in the study area.
- To explore the specific socio-economic barriers affecting the reintegration of female returnees in Wukro town.
- To examine the perceptions and attitudes of the host community towards female returnees and how this impacts their social reintegration.

1.4. Research Questions

- How effective are the existing reintegration programs and support services in improving the socio-economic status of female returnees?
- What potential strategies could foster more sustainable socio-economic reintegration for female returnees in a post-conflict context?
- What are the specific socio-economic challenges faced by female returnees during their reintegration process in Wukro town?
- How do community perceptions and attitudes in Wukro affect their social reintegration of female returnees?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This research is significant for several reasons. The primary benefit of the study is for the requirement to fulfill the master degree program in Civics and Ethical Studies for the researcher.

Academically, it will contribute vital, context-specific knowledge to the fields of migration studies, gender studies, and post-conflict recovery. By focusing on the intersection of forced return and post-war reality, it addresses a critical gap in the literature.

1.6. Scope of the Study

This study is specifically focused on the socio-economic reintegration experiences of female migrants who have returned to Wukro Town, Tigray, after being deported from the Kingdom of

Saudi Arabia (KSA). The scope is temporally limited to those who returned post-2020 of the conflict in Tigray. Therefore, this study focused on illegal migrants return enforcedly from Saudi Arabia. The research participants are primarily female returnees and key informants from governmental and non-governmental organizations directly involved in the reintegration process in Wukro. The study does not seek to provide a quantitative overview but rather an in-depth qualitative exploration of the reintegration process in this specific, highly challenged geographical and social context.

1.7. Limitation of the Study

The primary limitation of this study is the use of non-probability sampling, which, while necessary, means the findings cannot be statistically generalized to the entire population of returnee. The sensitive nature of the topic may have led some participants to be reticent, despite assurances of confidentiality. Furthermore, due to resource and time constraints, the study could not be expanded to other woredas or towns in Tigray, which would have provided a comparative perspective. Finally, the study relies only on qualitative approach and phenomenological design in which mixed-methodology would have provided data triangulations. The use of different data collection tools was deliberately chosen to mitigate these limitations as much as possible.

1.8. Operational Definitions of Terms

- Returnee: an irregular migrant who had stayed in the KSA and came back to his/her country of origin (IOM, 2015).
- Reintegration: re-inclusion or re-incorporation of a person into a group or a process, e.g. of a migrant into the society of his or her country of origin or habitual residence (IOM, 2015). Alternatively, the process by which a returned migrant is reintroduced or reintegrated into the 'economic, social, culture and social structure of the country of origin and becomes self-sufficient and able to earn his/her own livelihood' (IOM, 2012).
- Economic Reintegration: the process by which a migrant is reinstated into the economic system of his or her country of origin, and able to earn his or her own living (IOM, 2015).
- Social Reintegration: the reinsertion of a migrant into the social structures of his or her country of origin (IOM, 2015).

- Socio-economic reintegration: the process by which a migrant is restored into both the social and economic system of his or her country of origin (IOM, 2015).

1.9. Organization of the Study

This thesis is organized into five chapters.

Chapter One provides the introduction, including the background, problem statement, objectives, research questions, significance, scope, limitations, and definitions.

Chapter Two presents a review of related literature, covering theoretical frameworks and empirical studies relevant to the drivers and consequences and socioeconomic challenges of irregular migration.

Chapter Three details the research methodologies, including the study area, research design, sampling techniques, data collection instruments, and methods of analysis.

Chapter Four is the core of the study, presenting the analysis and interpretation of the collected data in a thematic manner.

Chapter Five provides the final conclusion, synthesizing the key findings, and offers a set of actionable recommendations based on the research.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the existing body of knowledge pertinent to the reintegration of female migrant returnees. It begins by exploring the core concepts of reintegration, followed by an examination of the theoretical frameworks that underpin this study: the Ecological Systems Perspective and Symbolic Interactionism. The chapter then delves into the specifics of return migration, the multidimensional nature of reintegration, and the myriad challenges that returnees, particularly women, face. Finally, it assesses the international and national policy landscapes governing reintegration, concluding with a critical analysis of the unique and compounding challenges presented by post-conflict settings, which is the specific context of this research.

2.1. Concepts of Reintegration

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of the concept of reintegration. The Return Migration and Development Platform of the European University Institute define reintegration as "a process through which a return migrant participates in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country of origin" (Cassarino, 2014). This definition highlights the participatory nature of the process. It is a multidimensional concept that is not easily measurable, as it encompasses the individual, family, community, economy, and society as a whole.

Furthering this multidimensional view, UNHCR's (2004) Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities stated that "the 'end state' of reintegration is the universal enjoyment of full political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights." Meanwhile, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) frames reintegration as a process of integrating migrants back from their destination country to their country of origin (IOM, 2007).

For the purpose of this study, reintegration will be conceptualized as a holistic and dynamic process, not merely a single event of returning home. Synthesizing the definitions from Cassarino (2014), UNHCR (2004), and IOM (2007), this research views reintegration as the process by which female returnees re-establish themselves and actively participate in the economic, social, and psychosocial fabric of their home communities. This framework is particularly crucial as it moves beyond simple economic metrics to include measures of social

acceptance, psychological well-being, and the restoration of rights, all of which are vital to understanding the lived experiences of the women in this study.

2.2. Theoretical Framework of Returnee Reintegration

In a scientific study, theoretical perspectives serve as a lens through which to view the issue under investigation. Reintegration is a multifaceted issue, which needs multiple theoretical perspectives to explore its complex dimensions and the contextual factors that influence its success. To this end, this section discusses the key theoretical frameworks guiding this research.

Many factors influence the reintegration of female migrant returnees. These include the way in which families, communities, and government policies react towards their reintegration needs. The reintegration process, therefore, involves understanding the micro, meso, and macro-level contexts within which reintegration takes place, as these are crucial for successful outcomes. The ecosystem perspective is one of the primary lenses used to analyze the socio-economic, cultural, and political environment that contributed to the initial migration and the subsequent responses to reintegrate the returnees in the study area (Fojo, 2018).

The ecological systems approach offers a framework for assessment and intervention in a person's problems to effect positive change. Bronfenbrenner (1989) describes that the ecological systems perspective emphasizes the 'interrelationship' across levels of practice, which include the interrelationship between individuals and their environment. This environment includes a range of family, community, organizations, service systems, network linkages, and political, cultural, and social forces. According to Pardec (1996), the ecological systems perspective examines the interdependence between the physical, psychological, economic, social, and cultural factors that shape human behavior.

The perspective emphasizes the person-in-the-environment perspective. It assumes that there is an interconnection between people's behavior and their environment. Therefore, successful interventions such as reintegration must take into consideration these multiple, interacting factors. Muco (2013) observes that an ecological approach stresses that effective intervention occurs by working not only directly with clients (returnees) but also with the environmental factors familial, social, economic, political, and cultural that affect their situation. Families,

groups, peers, local facilities, and organizations such as religious institutions, schools, clubs, and informal support groups with which the person makes close contact are all part of the context affecting reintegration (Lakhan & Ekundayo, 2013).

The reintegration of a returnee tends to be more fruitful if favorable conditions exist within these social contexts and if there is coordination among them. In addition to the micro and meso-level contexts, there are also macro-level factors that constrain or promote reintegration (Fojo, 2018). In principle, successful reintegration involves the provision of assistance and support directed to meet the returnees' physical, psychological, economic, and social needs resulting from their migration experiences. In addition to the returnee's own motivation and efforts, the families, relatives, friends, peers, neighbors, organizations, and the community at large influence the reintegration of the returnee in numerous ways. Therefore, any attempt to understand reintegration must take the influence of all these contexts into account.

In applying this perspective to the current study, the micro-system refers to the individual female returnee, including her personal attributes, skills, migration-related trauma, and psychological resilience. The meso-system involves the direct interactions she has with her immediate environment, such as family acceptance or rejection, stigma from neighbors, and support from local community groups. The macro-system encompasses the broader societal and structural forces at play, including national policies on migration, the state of the post-conflict economy in the Wukro area, cultural norms regarding women's roles, and the availability (or lack thereof) of government and NGO support services. This theory is vital for this research as it allows for a multi-layered analysis, showing how a woman's individual struggle to reintegrate is inextricably linked to her family's reaction, community attitudes, and the overarching political and economic devastation of the post-conflict environment.

To fully capture the subjective experience of reintegration, this study also employs the symbolic interactionism perspective. This theory is essential for understanding the meanings that female returnees ascribe to their migration, their return, and their subsequent experiences. Charon (2001) explains that symbolic interactionism is a useful perspective for understanding how people perceive and interpret the situations they are in. It shifts attention from objective social structures to how individuals make sense of their world from their own unique perspective. It

argues that individuals are active agents, autonomous and integral in creating their social world (Carter & Fuller, 2015).

While the ecological perspective provides a structural map of the factors influencing reintegration, symbolic interactionism provides the necessary lens to understand the human experience within that structure. For this study, it is crucial for exploring questions such as: How do female returnees perceive themselves after their migration journey? How do they interpret the reactions of their families and communities as acceptance, pity, or judgment? How do they negotiate their identity as a "returnee," which may come with social labels of failure or, conversely, resilience? This perspective allows the research to move beyond a simple checklist of "successful" or "unsuccessful" reintegration to understand the deeply personal meanings of success, failure, shame, and belonging from the viewpoint of the women themselves. By combining these two theories, this study can analyze both the external environment constraining the returnees and the internal, subjective worlds they construct in response.

2.3. Return Migration

Return migration is often the least researched component of the migration cycle. A primary reason for this is the difficulty in obtaining adequate and reliable data on return migrants (McCormick and Wahba, 2004). Furthermore, as most migration research has centered on themes such as the initial decision to migrate, migrant adaptation, and the consequences of migration, there has been less academic space devoted to the complex topics of return and reintegration (Gmelch, 1980). In the Ethiopian context, very few studies have been conducted on return migration, and to the researcher's knowledge, almost none have focused on forced mass international return to a post-conflict zone.

Return migrants can be categorized in multiple ways. The most evident categorization is based on the distinction between voluntary and forced return. It is important to note that return can be further distinguished by whether the return is chosen on one’s own initiative or compelled by unfavorable circumstances that interrupt the migration cycle (Cassarino, 2008). This study focuses specifically on migrants who were returned, often forcibly, from countries like Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, many women who worked as domestic workers in the Middle East face great difficulties upon their return. Key among these are financial impediments, a lack of entrepreneurial skills, limited employment opportunities, a lack of support to engage in viable businesses, and psychiatric problems arising from traumatic migration experiences (Hanna, 2014). The consequences of these difficulties can be seen in the life situations of unsuccessful returnee women as they descend into economic vulnerability. Some women may even return before finishing their contracts due to mental health problems, which complicates their ability to pay back migration-related debts. For them, being indebted may be understood as a profound failure (Hanna, 2014). While this study focuses on women, it is acknowledged that many male returnees face similar problems.

In most cases, women returnees encounter more significant problems of reintegration than men, owing to socio-cultural factors. This gendered disparity is a central assumption of this research. Women often face a "double stigma": the perceived failure of not returning with wealth, compounded by societal suspicions about their moral conduct while abroad. Thus, a woman's decision for re-migration may result not only from economic hardship but also from poorly coordinated reintegration schemes that fail to address the unique social and psychological pressures they face (Mesfin, 2011).

A characteristic topic in the study of return migration is the question of motives, specifically whether returnees are those who succeeded abroad or those who failed and had to return with nothing (Plaza and Henry, 2006). While a large portion of global return migration is voluntary, many returning home have been forced out by removal orders for violating immigration or residency laws. In such cases, the return is not the wish of the migrants themselves but rather a decision made by the host government to repatriate them (Bovenkerk, 1974).

For voluntary returnees, migrants often assess conditions in their home country to decide whether to return. These may include employment opportunities, the strength of the currency, and adjustment with society, children's education, and the government's response in their country of origin (Seferagic, 1977, as cited in Adamnesh, 2006). The aims to return are often related to social, economic, family, and political reasons. Strong family ties and a wish to join friends are important motivating factors. In addition, unfavorable conditions in the host country and an

aspiration to enjoy a better social and economic status at home after accumulating capital are also key determinants (IOM, 2001).

It is critical to distinguish the motives described above, which largely apply to voluntary and planned return, from the reality facing the subjects of this study. The female returnees from Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia are often part of mass deportations. Their return is not motivated by accumulated capital or family ties but is an abrupt, involuntary, and often traumatic event. This lack of preparation profoundly shapes their subsequent reintegration challenges, as they return without financial safety nets, social preparation, or psychological readiness.

The impact of return migration on communities of origin is gaining increasing attention. The majority of illegal migrants, especially women and youth, suffer from different types of inhuman abuse and exploitation. For instance, sexual, reproductive, and mental health problems are common among Ethiopian female migrant returnees. As a result of such problems, returnees can be hindered from both individual development and successful reintegration into their communities. Furthermore, some may be forced into sex work, crime, or drug addiction as a means of survival upon their return (IOM, 2004).

2.4. Reintegration of Returnees

After the process of return, returnees begin the process of reintegration. Numerous factors impact their ability to reintegrate, including both structural and individual factors. Structural factors include the policies of the home government toward returnees, the receptiveness of the local government, the attitude of the local community, and the number of people returning simultaneously (Rogge, 1994). Although the national government may have an official welcoming policy, the implementation of reintegration assistance on the ground may be vastly different (Stefansson, 2004), which can lead to feelings of resentment from returnees.

Individual factors that can impact the reintegration experience include the duration of the migration, the conditions in the host country, age, gender, the social networks of the individual in the country of return, and the conditions of the return. This relates to the preparedness of the return migrant. A planned returnee who has prepared for their return—by connecting with social networks, securing finances, and planning for the future—will generally have a more successful

reintegration experience than forced returnees. According to Rodgers (1994), social contact with the homeland is important for all types of return, but it is a resource that forced returnees may not have had time to cultivate.

2.5. Dimensions of Reintegration

IOM (2015) outlined that reintegration strategies should represent a multidimensional approach. While these include physical, social, economic, and cultural dimensions, this study will focus primarily on the economic and social dimensions, as they are most central to the immediate challenges faced by the returnees.

According to the IOM's (2011) definition, economic reintegration is the process by which a migrant is reinstated into the economic system of his or her country of origin and is able to earn a living. Surtees (2012) noted that within the context of reintegration, economic empowerment involves returnees equipping themselves with the skills, resources, and confidence to economically support themselves and their families, and in the longer term, contributing to the economic well-being of their communities. Typical components of economic empowerment programs may include vocational training, job placement, micro-enterprise support, and business training (Surtees, 2012).

However, the existence of a stable political and socioeconomic environment is a critical factor contributing to sustainable reintegration. It is thus imperative for reintegration projects to address the root causes of irregular migration and to incorporate the development needs of communities of return (Fonseca, Hart & Klink, et al. 2015). Economic reintegration forms the basis for a returnee's self-sufficiency. Feelings of belonging and forging a new identity depend heavily on providing for oneself and one’s family, as well as on access to housing, healthcare, and other services.

The standard models of economic reintegration described above which often rely on vocational training or micro-enterprise startups face existential challenges in the context of this study. For female returnees in a post-conflict area like Wukro, the local economy may be shattered, with collapsed markets, destroyed infrastructure, and non-existent supply chains. This research critically examined the efficacy of such standard interventions in a context where the

fundamental economic stability they presuppose is absent. The provision of skills like sewing or animal rearing (Shakti, 2007; Ballard, 2003) is of limited use if there is no market in which to sell goods and no capital to acquire the necessary resources.

Social reintegration involves re-establishing relationships with family and community and finding a sense of belonging. Strategies such as group reintegration projects and building returnee networks can contribute to the social reintegration of returnees who have little to no social network upon their return. These projects not only contribute to the economic betterment of returnees but also provide a crucial social support structure.

Many programs fail to recognize that the returnee is being reintegrated into a web of wider social relationships, norms, and values. Most practitioners tend to focus on material assistance and procedural practices that are easier to monitor and evaluate, often neglecting the relational and social aspects of reintegration (Wedge, Krumholz & Jones, 2013). If families and the community welcome and accept the returnees, they are more likely to mobilize resources to support them. Social support engenders an atmosphere of safety and security, helping returnees feel accepted and secure.

The social dimension of reintegration is profoundly complicated by both gender and the post-conflict context. Female returnees may face stigma or suspicion from communities that have endured the hardships of war. They may be seen as outsiders or, worse, as having escaped the collective trauma, leading to resentment. Furthermore, the trauma of war within the community itself can erode social cohesion and the capacity for collective support. This study therefore investigate not only how the returnees attempt to socially reintegrate, but also how the host community, itself traumatized and fractured by conflict, is able to receive them.

2.6. Challenges of Reintegration

Not all returnee migrants are able to achieve their aims. A study by Mesfin (2011) indicated that only a minority of women succeeded in improving their living standards upon return. Unsuccessful returnees faced rejection by their families and community as they failed to meet the expectation of returning with material wealth. Moreover, these returnees experienced shame, felt

unproductive, and faced outright rejection. They often lacked access to the formal labor market due to low literacy levels or a lack of relevant skills.

Involuntary return can be detrimental for both the returnee and his or her family. Mass emergency returns or deportations may have wider implications for the local community, creating social unrest and increased competition for scarce employment (Kleist & Milliar, 2013). Deportees and emergency returnees often return empty-handed, having lost their savings or never having had the opportunity to save. The untimely return of a migrant may disrupt not only personal hopes but also those of their family, especially if the family has fallen into debt to finance the migration (Mesfin, 2011).

The challenges outlined above are magnified for the subjects of this study. They face a triple jeopardy: 1) the individual psychological and economic challenges of a failed migration; 2) the social stigma directed specifically at female returnees; and 3) the structural collapse of the economy and social fabric in their home region due to conflict. This research aims to understand the intersection of these compounding challenges.

Despite the resources devoted to facilitating economic reintegration, certain challenges recur. The skillset of the returning migrant may not be well-matched to the home economy. Moreover, depending on the time spent away, the local economy may have changed drastically. Creating a sustainable livelihood can be difficult due to structural challenges; labor markets may be underdeveloped, and economic opportunities may be low for the entire population, not just for returnees (Fonseca et al., 2015).

Returnees are not always perceived positively. Tension can develop between local populations who persevered through poverty or conflict and those who left. Competition for social roles and scarce resources can increase tensions, particularly if returnees receive financial assistance that locals do not. In addition, a returnee's family and social networks often change while he or she is abroad. Therefore, returnees often need to rebuild their networks, which are crucial for social capital, information, safety nets, and access to the job market. This is especially critical for vulnerable migrants or those who have survived violence, such as trafficking (Fonseca, Hart and Klink, 2015).

2.7. International and National Reintegration Support

Various rehabilitation and reintegration support schemes for returnees are implemented around the world. For example, the Vietnamese government provides support for essential needs, medical care, temporary shelter, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and vocational training for trafficking survivors (IOM, 2012). In the Philippines, the reintegration program includes psychosocial components like family counseling and economic elements like community-based income-generating projects and skills training (Go, 2012). Sri Lanka offers a migrant worker card for priority access to services, airport assistance, tax exemptions for small businesses, and educational benefits for migrants' children (Rambukwella, 2008).

While these international examples are instructive, their direct applicability to Ethiopia, and particularly to a post-conflict region, is questionable. These models largely presuppose a functioning state apparatus, stable markets, and existing social services. This study will therefore assess the gap between such international best practices and the harsh realities on the ground in the study area, where such foundational supports are likely absent or severely compromised.

Ethiopia does not have a single, comprehensive anti-trafficking law, but rules are found in different pieces of legislation.

- **The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1995)**: Article 18 prohibits inhuman treatment and trafficking in human beings. Article 32 guarantees freedom of movement, including the right to leave and return to the country. A key challenge is balancing this right to movement with the need to protect vulnerable citizens, particularly women and girls, from exploitation abroad.

- **The Criminal Code (2005)**: Articles 596, 597, and 598 address enslavement and trafficking of women and children with severe penalties. However, the code does not always clearly distinguish between smuggling and trafficking.

- **Employment Exchange Services Proclamation No. 632/2009**: This law was enacted to protect the rights, safety, and dignity of citizens sent abroad for work through Private

Employment Agencies (PEAs), setting a minimum age of eighteen and outlining responsibilities for worker protection.

A critical aspect to be explored in this research is the "implementation gap." While Ethiopia has a legal framework on paper, its enforcement and practical application, especially in a peripheral and conflict-affected region, may be extremely weak. The ability of the state to protect citizens, prosecute traffickers, and provide reintegration support is severely diminished in a post-conflict environment, leaving returnees in a legal and practical vacuum.

The government of Ethiopia cooperates with international agencies like the IOM and UNHCR. The IOM runs several projects related to migration management, regulation, and development (Solomon, 2012). The government also works with local NGOs in the reintegration of migrant women. However, the provision of services is often limited and fails to address the full scope of needs. As a result, most returnees are not self-sufficient (Mesfin, 2011). Critically, many Ethiopian returnees feel that their government has not accorded them enough protection compared to the governments of other countries (Emebet, 2002).

2.8. The Compounding Factor: Reintegration in Post-Conflict Settings

While the challenges of return and reintegration are significant under any circumstances, they are profoundly amplified in post-conflict environments. Standard models of reintegration assistance often assume a baseline of stability, functional markets, and state capacity, all of which are absent or severely compromised in a region recovering from war (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015).

War destroys infrastructure, disrupts supply chains, and decimates local markets. Livelihood opportunities, already scarce, may become non-existent. Reintegration programs offering micro-credit or small business start-up kits are likely to fail because there is no functioning economy for these enterprises to plug into (Koser, 2011).

Furthermore, conflict erodes social cohesion and trust. Communities grappling with their own losses and trauma may have limited capacity to support returning members. In some cases, returnees may be viewed with suspicion or as competitors for extremely scarce resources, leading to social friction rather than inclusion (Black & Gent, 2006). Government bodies and

local NGOs responsible for providing reintegration support are often themselves victims of the conflict, with depleted resources, damaged infrastructure, and traumatized staff. Their ability to deliver effective, coordinated, and sustained services is severely constrained (World Bank, 2011).

Finally, returnees in these settings face a "dual trauma." They are not only dealing with the personal trauma of their migration and deportation experiences but are returning to a community saturated with the collective trauma of war. This creates complex mental health needs that standard psychosocial support programs are often ill-equipped to address, as access to specialized mental health services in post-conflict zones is typically negligible (Tol et al., 2013).

This final section is the cornerstone of this study's conceptual framework. The reintegration of female returnees in Wukro cannot be understood through the lens of migration literature alone. It must be analyzed at the intersection of migration studies, gender studies, and post-conflict studies. This research posits that their struggle is not merely one of readjustment but one of survival in an environment where the very foundations of economic, social, and psychological life have been fractured. By examining their experiences through this intersectional lens, this study aims to contribute a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of reintegration in one of the most challenging environments imaginable.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the systematic methodology employed to conduct this research. It details the research approach and design, a description of the study area, the population and sampling strategies, the methods of data collection, the process of data analysis, and the ethical considerations that guided the study. The methodology was carefully constructed to align with the study's objective of exploring the lived socio-economic reintegration experiences of female returnees from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in a rigorous and scientific manner.

3.1. Description of the Study Area

This research was conducted in Wukro Town, located in the Eastern Zone of the Tigray Region in Northern Ethiopia. Understanding the context of the study area is crucial, particularly given its recent history of conflict, which profoundly impacts the social and economic landscape for reintegration.

According to 2018 data, the Town administration has a total population of 50,080 (22,249 male and 27,831 female). Before the war, the main economic activities of the town were crop production (70%), livestock (28%), and off-farm activities (2%). Local industry included the Sheba tannery, managed by the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), which was capable of processing 6,000 hides a day.

Small-scale Irrigation: The area has suitable land and water resources from the Genefle and Messano rivers. Two small-scale irrigation schemes were previously established, with the Genefle scheme covering 22 hectares and benefiting 112 households growing cereals and cash crops.

Off-farm Enterprises: The main off-farm income-generating activities were petty trading of cattle and salt, and wage labor. Women traditionally involved themselves in income-generating opportunities including backyard vegetable production, poultry, pottery, and selling fuel wood.

Trade Activities: The town serves as a market hub where urban and rural people exchange goods and services. With good road access, Wukro has marketing opportunities in nearby cities

like Mekelle and Adigrat. The market is modern, with separate centers for livestock, crops, and other goods.

Access to Credit: Prior to the conflict, two local microfinance institutions, the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and Dedebit Credit and Saving Institution (DECSI), provided rural credit. Loans were administered through the local agricultural office and farmer associations.

Crucially, for this study, official records indicate that 519 female returnees from KSA were registered across the three main kebeles (Agazi, Dedebit, and Hayelom) of Wukro town, forming the specific population for this research.

3.2. Research Approach

The researcher used a qualitative research approach. This approach was ideal for this study as it seeks to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of the complex, lived experiences of individuals (Kothari, 2004). Since the research intended to explore the process, challenges, and opportunities of socio-economic reintegration for female returnees, a qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth examination of their personal stories, perceptions, and the meanings they attached to their experiences (Creswell, 2009).

A qualitative approach is particularly useful for understanding issues involving people telling their own stories within the real context of their day-to-day lives (Creswell, 2002). It empowers participants by creating an opportunity for them to share their perceptions and experiences, thereby providing rich data that captures the real-world context of their post-return lives in Wukro (Neergaard & Parm, 2007). This approach is concerned with life as it is lived and situations as they are constructed, allowing the associations in people are thinking and the meanings they hold to be identified (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Woods, 2006).

3.3. Research Design

A case study research design was used for this study emanates from the necessity to achieve the main objective of the study exploring individual experiences of reintegration. This research design is helpful in the generation of an intensive, detailed examination (Bryman, 2012); and it‘s important to develop concepts that enhance the understanding of social phenomena in natural

settings, with due emphasis on the meanings, experiences and views of all participants (Neergaard & Parm, 2007). Hence, qualitative method in this study is used to look into details, personal realities of shared experiences, and subjective realities of migrant returnees in order to explore the socioeconomic reintegration of Female returnees from KSA to wukro town in particular cases. The case study design allowed associations that occur in people's thinking or acting and the meaning these have for people (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Thus, it is concerned with exploring and understanding the essence of a lived experience from the perspective of those who have lived it (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). This design enabled the researcher to delve deeply into the socio-economic reintegration experiences of female returnees, capturing the essence of their struggles, resilience, and aspirations in their own words.

3.4. Population, Sampling, and Sample Size

The target population for this study consisted of two groups. The primary group was the 519 female migrants who returned from Saudi Arabia and were officially registered as residing in the three kebeles of Wukro town (204 in Agazi, 171 in Dedebit, and 144 in Hayelom). The secondary group included officials from governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in their reintegration.

A sample can be defined as a group of relatively smaller number of people selected from a population for investigation purpose (Alvi, 2016). Sampling is a process of selecting the best fitting people to provide data for your study (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005). In qualitative research, only a sample that is a subset of a population is selected for any given study. The study‘s research objectives and the characteristics of the study population determine which and how many people to select (Krueger & Neuman, 2006).

To select participants who could provide rich and relevant information, the study employed non-probability sampling techniques, specifically purposive sampling and snowball sampling.

Purposive sampling was the primary strategy. This involved deliberately selecting participants who had direct experience with the phenomenon being studied and could offer deep insights (Alvi, 2016). Moreover, it is the most common sampling strategies to select participants who could give relevant information to research question and objectives stated before (Woods &

Namey, 2005. The researcher purposefully sought out female returnees from KSA residing in Wukro who were willing to share their reintegration stories. Key informants from relevant governmental and non-governmental organizations (e.g., Labor and Social Affairs Office (LSAO), Women's Affairs Office, Small and Micro Enterprises, Micro Finance Institutions) were also selected purposively based on their roles and knowledge of reintegration programs.

Snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral sampling, was used as a supplementary technique. The researcher started with a few known contacts among the returnees and asked them to refer other women who fit the study's criteria (Kothari, 2004; Elmusharaf, 2012). This technique was particularly useful for reaching individuals who might be isolated or not easily accessible through official channels, helping to build trust within a vulnerable community.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research prioritizes depth of data over statistical representation. The sample size was therefore determined by the principle of data saturation, which is the point at which new interviews or focus groups cease to generate new themes or insights (Creswell, 2009). Based on this principle, the total sample size for this study was 57 participants, comprised of:

- 32 female returnees for in-depth interviews.
- 15 female returnees for focus group discussions (organized into 3 groups of 5 members each).
- 10 key informants from relevant governmental and non-governmental organizations.

This sample size was deemed sufficient to gain a deep, comprehensive, and trustworthy understanding of the socio-economic reintegration process in Wukro town.

3.5. Source and Methods of Data Collection

The study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was collected directly from participants using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participatory observation. Secondary data was gathered from available published and unpublished documents from governmental and non-governmental organizations.

In-depth interviews were the principal method used to collect data in this study (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 female returnees and 10 key informants from Labor and Social Affairs Office (LSAO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Women and Children Affairs Office (WAO), and other relevant bodies.

This method is vital for exploring experiences, views, and attitudes in detail (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The semi-structured format, containing a series of open-ended questions, allowed respondents the freedom to discuss their views and personal experiences fully (Creswell, 2002). This flexibility also permitted the researcher to ask follow-up questions to probe deeper into emerging themes (Bryman, 2004). The interview guides were designed based on the study's research questions and objectives, starting with general questions about the status of reintegration in Wukro and moving to specific, personal experiences.

Three separate FGDs were conducted with a total of 15 female returnees who did not participate in the in-depth interviews. Each group consisted of five members to ensure that the discussion was manageable and allowed for active participation from everyone.

FGDs were employed to explore shared experiences and collective understandings of the reintegration process (Bryman, 2004). The group interaction allowed participants to discuss and build on each other's ideas, providing insights into community norms, shared challenges, and the strengths and limitations of service providers dynamics not as easily captured through individual interviews.

Non-participatory observation was used to supplement the data from interviews and FGDs. The researcher observed the general living conditions of the female returnees in their homes and, where applicable, their places of work. This method provided firsthand contextual information about their daily lives, physical well-being, and interactions within their environment (Degefa, 2005, cited by Jemal, 2015). Observation helps to verify and enrich the data collected through self-reporting, as it relates to what is currently happening and is not complicated by past behavior or future intentions (Kothari, 2004).

Secondary data was collected through the analysis of relevant documents. These materials included published and unpublished reports from local government offices and NGOs related to

the socio-economic reintegration of returnees in the study area. This analysis helped to triangulate information provided by participants and provided a broader understanding of the policies and programs in place.

3.6. Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

The data was analyzed using a qualitative, thematic approach. The researcher explored the feeling and experience of participants. This approach allowed the researcher to give new insights and open original ways of understanding the experiences reintegration of returned females in the town Abrham (2014; cited in Karval, 2012).

The data analysis for qualitative research generally categorized in to data collection, organizing and understanding, analyzing, interpreting and presenting data (Creswell, 2003). The general step incorporates prepare data for analysis; reading through all the data; organizing related segments of data into categories; generate a description of the context; identify key themes; create connection between different themes; and interpret the larger meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009). After description, the researcher focuses on key themes to understand the complexity of the case (Creswell, 2002). The next step is searching for common themes and interpretation the meaning of information (Yin, 2003).

The process followed the general steps outlined by Creswell (2009): preparing the data for analysis, reading through all data, organizing it into categories, generating descriptions, identifying key themes, connecting themes, and interpreting the larger meaning. The specific steps were as follows:

First, transcription and translation: All audio-recorded interviews and FGDs, conducted in Tigrigna, were carefully transcribed exact and then translated into English by the researcher. This hands-on process was crucial for deep immersion in the data (Bryman, 2012; Betelihem, 2017)).

Second, familiarization: The researcher repeatedly read the full transcripts and observation notes to gain a holistic understanding of the data before beginning formal coding.

Third, coding and thematic development: The researcher then began a process of open coding, identifying significant statements and organizing related segments of data into categories. These categories were then grouped to form broader, overarching themes that directly addressed the research questions.

Forth, narrative construction and interpretation: The identified themes were used to construct a coherent narrative. The analysis focused on presenting the stories, feelings, and experiences of the participants through their own words, using direct quotations. The findings from different data sources (IDIs, FGDs, KII, observation, documents) were integrated to provide a rich, multi-faceted interpretation of the reintegration experience in Wukro.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The researcher was committed to upholding the highest ethical standards throughout the research process (Marvasit, 2004). The following measures were strictly implemented:

Informed Consent: All participants were given a clear and adequate explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential benefits. Their voluntary and informed consent was secured in writing or verbally before any data collection began.

Voluntary Participation: Participants were informed of their right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: To protect the privacy of participants, all personal identifiers were removed from the data. Pseudonyms and code numbers were used in the transcripts and the final research report to ensure anonymity.

Data Protection: All recorded audio files and written notes were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher.

Integrity and Accuracy: The researcher respected professional integrity by ensuring that the views and experiences of the participants were represented accurately, without suppression or misinterpretation of data.

3.8. Ensuring Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the validity and reliability of this qualitative study, the criteria of trustworthiness as outlined by Morris (2006) credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability were addressed.

Credibility (Internal Validity): To ensure that the findings were a true reflection of the participants' experiences, the researcher used triangulation by combining multiple data collection methods (interviews, FGDs, observation). Persistent engagement and building rapport with the participants also enhanced the credibility of the data collected.

Dependability (Reliability): A detailed and transparent description of the research methodology was provided in this chapter, allowing for the possibility of an external audit. This clear methodological trail ensures the study is dependable.

Conformability (Objectivity): The researcher practiced bracketing by consciously setting aside personal biases and assumptions. Findings were grounded directly in the data collected from participants, with interpretations supported by direct quotes, ensuring that the results are a product of the research, not the researcher's preconceptions.

Transferability (External Validity): While qualitative findings are not generalizable in a statistical sense, the researcher provided a dense, rich description of the participants, the context of Wukro, and the research process. This allows readers to assess the extent to which the findings might be relevant or transferable to other similar contexts.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This chapter presents and analyzes the data gathered through in-depth interviews (IDI), Focus Group Discussions (FGD), Key Informant Interviews (KII), and non-participant observation (NPPO). The chapter begins by outlining the socio-demographic profile of the study participants to provide context. It then delves into the core thematic findings, exploring the reasons for migration, the returnees' experiences in Saudi Arabia, the deportation process, the nature of reintegration support received, and the multifaceted challenges hindering their successful socio-economic reintegration in Wukro Town. The analysis aims to connect the lived experiences of these female returnees to reintegration. This chapter argued that the reintegration process for female returnees in post-conflict Wukro is critically failing. This failure is rooted in a fundamental misalignment between shallow, pre-conflict support models and the deep-rooted, trauma-informed, structural needs of a population coping with the dual crises of exploitative migration and a collapsed local economy.

4.1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study involved 57 participants: 47 female returnees from KSA and 10 key informants from governmental and non-governmental organizations. The socio-demographic profile of the returnees (Table 4.1) paints a clear picture of pre-existing vulnerability that was profoundly amplified by the conflict.

The study involved two primary groups of participants. The main group consisted of 47 female returnees from KSA residing in Wukro Woreda for both IDI and FGDs. To triangulate this data and gain an institutional perspective, a second group of 10 key informants were interviewed.

NB. The n-value of following table 4.1 reflects the Female returnee participants only in order to show the connection between the socio-economic background of frmale returnees participants with their potential positive and negative impacts on their reintegration process while the total number of research participants were 57.

Table 4.1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Female Returnee Participants (n=47)

Characteristic	**Details**	**Number/Range**
Age (Current)	Range	19-42 years
Age at Migration	Range	14-31 years
Duration in KSA	Range	1 to 11 years
Current Occupation	Self-employed	13
	Unemployed	34
Education Level	Primary (Grades 1-8)	29
	Secondary (Grades 9-10)	10
	Grade 12 Completed	5
	University Degree	3
Marital Status	Single	30
	Married	11
	Divorced	6

(Survey, 2025)

The demographic profile in table 4.1 is a description of pre-existing vulnerability that shapes the entire reintegration experience. The participants' age at migration, ranging from 14 to 31, indicates that many were children or young adolescents when they first left for employment. This falls within the international definition of child labor and highlights their inherent vulnerability to exploitation from the outset.

The educational profile of the returnees is a significant factor. The vast majority had not completed secondary school. This low level of formal education functions as a structural barrier,

limiting their access to information and rights-based knowledge before departure that plays a role in hindering their ability to engage with text-based or complex reintegration programs upon return. Furthermore, significant returnees are unemployed (34 out of 47, or 72%) which is the most powerful indicator of systemic reintegration failure. This is not merely a collection of individual struggles but a systemic outcome, demonstrating that the local post-conflict economy cannot absorb them and that existing support programs have failed to create viable economic alternatives. The feature of being young, female, and having low educational attainment creates a vulnerability.

4.2. Appraising the Effectiveness of Existing Reintegration Programs

Upon arrival, returnees were met with services including psychosocial support, healthcare referrals, vocational training, and financial support initiatives. However, the data reveals these functions as short-term humanitarian relief, a temporary palliative, rather than as a foundation for long-term, sustainable reintegration. Their potential effectiveness is systematically crippled by the profound structural limitations discussed below.

4.2.1. The Structural Limitations of Service Provision

The intended positive impact of these initiatives was systematically undermined by critical failures in coordination, timing, and design. A female returnee in an IDI shared her experiences regarding the support she received as followed:

> *"I took training for one month in Wukro technical and vocational educational center about hair work and after I finished the training… I could not start the business and earn a living for the last one year and more months. Thus, life becomes difficult for me" (IDI FR-01).*

The massage from the research participant revealed that the vocational training programs, a cornerstone of the economic reintegration strategy, were consistently described as superficial. Lasting only one to two months, these courses operated on the flawed premise that a certificate equals competence. This certification without competence approach leaves returnees with a piece of paper but no tangible capacity to generate income. Likewise, other IDI participant elucidated:

> *"The rehabilitation and reintegration process would have been effective if it was provided timely... to get the shed/working place it took me more than one year.*

Within that period there was so many back and forth... I am dependent on my family" (IDI FR-31).

This sentiment explained the feature of the reintegration process was the crippling delay in service provision. For returnees arriving with trauma and a desperate need for a viable path forward, these delays are not mere administrative inconveniences; they represent a critical window of lost opportunity where initial motivation turns to despair. Compounding this was a bureaucratic apparatus completely misaligned with on-the-ground reality. This delay erodes the initial hope and momentum, forcing returnees into prolonged dependency and increasing the psychological burden of their return.

4.2.2. Lack of a Holistic Potential Interventions and Strategies for the Reintegration

KII, IDI and FGD in common noted that the lack of coordination among stakeholders, was leading to duplicated efforts and gaps in service delivery. One IDI returnee participant explained the failure of the support system:

"It felt like a game. The SME office tells you to get training first. The training center tells you to get a loan approval first. The loan office tells you to form a group and get a business license first. We spent months walking between these four offices. Each one asks for a paper from the other one. In the end, nothing happens. They don't talk to each other." (IDI FR-03)

A deeper systemic failure identified was the profound lack of integration between different service providers. Returnees described being sent from one office to another from Social Affairs for registration, to the TVET for training, to the SME office for business support, to the MFI for a loan with no single entity managing their case or ensuring a smooth transition. This uncoordinated approach places the burden of navigating a complex and uncoordinated bureaucracy onto the most vulnerable, who are least equipped to handle it. This programmatic fragmentation ensures that even well-designed individual components fail because they do not function as part of a coherent, holistic strategy. This finding was verified by a KII participant in the study:

"Our mandate is to provide business development services. The Women's Affairs Office handles the social aspects. The MFI handles the money. We all have our

own reporting lines and targets. Is there a formal mechanism for us to sit together and plan a comprehensive package for a single returnee? Honestly, no. It's a major gap" (KII-04).

Returnees were often asked to pay taxes and obtain business licenses immediately, without a grace period (FGD participants). This demonstrated disconnects between policy and the reality of their financial situation. As one participant noted, with an average salary of 1800 Ethiopian birr per month from their new business, they could not even cover daily living costs, let alone pay taxes.

4.2.3 The Psychological Gap and Superficial Trauma Support

While psychosocial support was officially offered, the data reveals a significant gap between the provision of awareness training and the deep, clinical need for trauma-informed care. This was proved significant problem identified by the female returnees in their FGD:

"They brought us into a hall and told us to 'be strong' and 'forget the past.' How can you forget being locked in a room for a year? How can you forget being beaten? It was not counseling. It was a one-hour lecture. It did not heal anything; it just made us feel like our pain was not understood" (FGD-03).

The sessions were often described as generic lectures on coping skills, wholly inadequate for addressing the profound trauma, PTSD, and depression resulting from experiences of abuse, exploitation, and inhumane detention. In addition to this a KII participant elucidated that,

"We can provide first aid, basic health screening, and refer them to the general hospital. But do we have dedicated clinical psychologists specializing in trauma for migrant returnees? No. The entire health system in the region is struggling for basic supplies. Long-term, specialized mental healthcare is a luxury we simply cannot provide at the scale that is needed" (KII-08).

This testimony shown the local healthcare system, overwhelmed by the post-conflict crisis, lacks the specialized personnel to provide the sustained psychological care these women require, leaving their deepest wounds unaddressed.

In general, the existed reintegration programs and support services for the returnees was not effectiveness. While stakeholders have initiated various support mechanisms, the findings

overwhelmingly indicate that these interventions are fundamentally ineffective. They provide an inefficient support that is tragically disconnected from the complex realities of the returnees' lives, damaging them the social and economic reintegration in the study area. This ineffectiveness is not a result of a single flaw, but a systemic failure across the entire support chain.

4.3. Socio-Economic Barriers to Reintegration of Female Returnees

The research sought to explore the specific socio-economic barriers affecting the reintegration of female returnees. The findings reveal a triad of interconnected barriers economic, social, and psychological that operates in concert to create a state of profound and sustained problems for the returnee's reintegration. The failure of the reintegration programs translated into deep and interconnected challenges that made sustainable reintegration nearly impossible.

4.3.1 Economic Barriers

According to the information collected from returned female research participants, the major economic challenges were provided as follows:

4.3.1.1. Economic Hardship and Lack of Local Job Opportunities

A foundational challenge impeding the socio-economic reintegration of all female returnees was the state of acute economic desperation, fueled by the collapse of the regional economy during and after the conflict. The research found that local pathways to self-reliance had been severely damaged or completely destroyed. In line with academic literature on post-conflict economies, which posits that the absence of a functioning market renders individual enterprise nearly impossible (Koser, 2011), the data from this study confirms this reality in Wukro. Participants across all interviews and discussions consistently cited inadequate family income, a stark lack of local job opportunities, and the immense pressure of supporting their families as factors that exacerbated their vulnerability.

As one IDI participant powerfully articulated, the hardship of her situation predated her migration and was only amplified upon her return:

> *"My families are poor and my father died when I was in grade 8th … my mother's health situation is also bad. I had four sisters... I had to help my family... I start*

selling tomatoes and onions in the street. But, I could not make enough money... I am now struggling from these economic hardships" (IDI FR-25).

This narrative is emblematic of the limited local economic alternatives that create an insurmountable barrier to successful reintegration. The failure to achieve even minimal financial stability through informal street vending demonstrates that meaningful economic reintegration is, for many, an unthinkable prospect. In the context of the post-war economy, this collapse of local options transformed the challenge of reintegration into a fundamental question of daily survival.

Further individual interviews provided a granular view of how the post-conflict economy systematically dismantled the human and financial capital that returnees brought back with them. The stories revealed that even personal preparedness in the form of savings and skills was insufficient to overcome the structural collapse. The following evidence provided a detailed account of economic failure.

"I managed to save some money in Saudi Arabia, not much, but enough to start something small. My dream was to open a small shop selling clothes for children... When I returned to Wukro, my savings were almost worthless because of inflation. I used most of it just to buy food for my parents for a few months. The hope I had died. Now there are no suppliers, the market is closed half the time, and no one has money to buy new clothes for their children. The war took my dream, not just the town's economy" (IDI FR-11).

This illustration of how post-conflict situation directly erodes financial capital, rendering personal savings and business planning fruitless. The destruction of supply chains and the evaporation of consumer demand created insurmountable market barriers, demonstrating that individual agency is powerless against systemic economic collapse. An IDI participant revealed the annihilation and mismatch of her hopes and skills:

"In the city where I worked in KSA, I learned how to be a hairdresser... I thought when I came home, I could work in a salon or open my own. But here in Wukro, who is going to pay for a haircut and style? People are struggling to buy teff and oil. My skills are useless here. It is a skill for a place where people have money, not for a place of survival" (IDI FR-21).

This experience highlights the critical issue of devalued human capital. The skills she acquired in Saudi Arabia, which were valuable in a stable, urban economy, became non-transferable and economically irrelevant in Wukro's post-conflict subsistence economy. This skill mismatch reveals a deeper layer of the reintegration challenge: the local environment is unable to absorb or provide value for the very competencies the returnees possess. Together, these accounts establish that the primary obstacle is not a lack of will or preparedness on the part of the returnees, but rather the existence of profound structural barriers that nullify their assets.

The FGD with returnees confirmed a collective portrait of a stagnant and exclusionary local economy. The participants' dialogue strengthened their shared sense of hopelessness and provided further insight into the social dynamics of post-conflict unemployment.

> *"We are all sitting at home. There is nothing. No factory to work in, no farms that are hiring,"* one participant began, a sentiment echoed by all. Another added, *"And if a small job does appear, for example, to help someone build a damaged wall, they give it to the young men. They see us as weak."* A third participant captured the essence of the economic paralysis: *"Even if we wanted to start a business together, what would we sell? We are all poor... who would buy things from the Wukro market. That is all gone. The market is just us, looking at each other."* The group agreed the local economy was highly collapsed (FGDs-01, 02 and 03).

The FGD data demonstrates that economic hardship is a shared, collective condition. The discussion reveals three critical dimensions of the challenge. First, it highlights the gendered nature of the post-conflict labor market, where scarce manual labor opportunities are preferentially allocated to men, further marginalizing female returnees. Second, it confirms the collapse of regional market linkages, which were vital for injecting capital into the local Wukro economy. The loss of external buyers led to a closed market with no aggregate demand, preventing any form of commercial activity. Finally, the participant-generated an analytical concept, that is a complete liquidity crisis and absence of economic opportunity that affects the entire community, leaving them unable to engage in meaningful economic exchange.

Interviews with key informants from local governance and support agencies validated the experiences reported by the returnees, providing an institutional explanation for the systemic economic failure. The KII from SME stated:

> *"Our role is to support business, but we cannot create an economy from nothing. The banking system is not fully functional, so there is no credit. The roads are damaged, so getting goods is expensive... The private sector is gone; big investors fled. The problem is macro-economic; it is beyond our local capacity to solve alone" (KII-09).*

A KII from Town Administrator added:

> *"The level of unemployment in Wukro is higher than I have ever seen. The female returnees are in a particularly difficult position because they often lack the local social networks that other residents use to find the few small opportunities that come up. They were gone for years and now they have returned to a situation that is worse than the one they left" (KII-01).*

The KII data triangulates the findings by confirming them from an official standpoint. The SME KII identified structural barriers like lack of credit, broken supply chains, and capital flight that paralyze the economy. Tis statement confirms that the problem is not one that can be solved by individual enterprise alone but requires macro-level intervention.

Significantly, the Town Administrator reveals that the returnees' time abroad has disconnected them from the formal and informal social networks that are essential for survival and for accessing scarce opportunities in a post-conflict setting. This social disconnection means they are not only facing a collapsed economy but are also doing so from a position of social isolation. This dual burden of economic and social disadvantage places them among the most vulnerable groups in the community and makes their socio-economic reintegration exceptionally challenging.

4.3.1.2. The Challenge of Generating Sustainable Income and Employment

A consensus emerged among all research participants that the failure to generate a sufficient and sustainable income was the most critical obstacle to their reintegration, with many asserting that most of their other problems stemmed directly from this economic paralysis. The majority of

returnees arrived in Wukro with no savings, often as a result of forced deportation or the withholding of wages by employers in Saudi Arabia. The subsequent conflict in Tigray catastrophically exacerbated this poverty by destroying family assets and community safety nets that might otherwise have provided a buffer or startup capital in peacetime.

The war's devastation of infrastructure, private enterprises, and public institutions resulted in mass unemployment across the region. This created a highly saturated and competitive job market where returnees found themselves at a distinct disadvantage. This reality was starkly articulated by participants in a FGD, who described a competitive hierarchy for scarce employment:

> *"Even if we always seek for jobs, there is almost nonexistent and / or even if few are available, the priority was given to war veterans. We returnees are not considered in the town" (FGD-02).*

This statement reveals more than a simple lack of jobs; it points to a social hierarchy in a resource-scarce environment where returnees possess low social and political standing. While the prioritization of war veterans is an understandable post-conflict phenomenon, it effectively renders the returnees an invisible and deprioritized group within the formal and informal labor markets. Their status as returnees acts as a marker that places them outside the circles of community preference, thus creating a significant barrier to formal employment.

Challenges in Self-Employment and Income Generation

Given the near impossibility of securing formal employment, many returnees attempted to engage in small-scale businesses. However, this pathway was also fraught with obstacles that prevented the generation of sustainable income.

One of the primary issues was the loan repayment period. Participants who managed to secure startup capital found that their earnings were consumed by debt obligations, leaving little for personal subsistence or business reinvestment. This predicament was confirmed by numerous individuals who testified that they were forced to live by depleting the meager savings they had brought from Saudi Arabia or by relying on inconsistent support from family and friends, rather than on the proceeds of their business. As an IDI participant noted, "the priority given to loan repayment" (IDI FR-29) meant their businesses failed to provide a livable income.

Furthermore, access to initial capital was systemically blocked (IDI FR-10). Microfinance institutions (MFIs), which are critical for funding small enterprises, were themselves weakened by the conflict and had adopted highly risk-averse policies. They uniformly required collateral that returnees, having lost family assets in the war, could not provide. This institutional barrier was confirmed by a KII from a local Savings and Credit Association (SCA):

> *"We operate at minimal capacity and take very few new clients. Returnees are the most vulnerable, yet the least served" (KII-05).*

This quote from a key financial stakeholder provides an institutional confirmation of the returnees' predicament. It highlights a vicious cycle: the female who are most in need of financial services are precisely the ones who are systematically excluded by institutional lending criteria. The MFIs, designed to support the poor, are unable to fulfill their mandate for the most vulnerable post-conflict populations. This creates a structural setup where the lack of assets prevents access to capital, and the lack of capital prevents the creation of assets, thereby reinforcing a state of poverty and dependence.

The Compounding Effects of Depleted Social and Physical Capital

The economic exclusion of returnees is compounded by a deficit in both social and physical capital, which was severely eroded by their time abroad and the subsequent war. In FGD, participants repeatedly noted how their status as returnees and their corresponding lack of local networks isolated them from the informal job opportunities that are often critical for survival. This was corroborated by a KII from the SME office, who confirmed that returnees are largely absent from official business support programs, likely due to this lack of connectivity (KII-09).

The war's destruction of physical assets represents the final layer of this challenge, erasing past efforts and destroying future safety nets. One IDI's evidence powerfully illustrates the long-term impact of this loss:

> *"I used to send money to build a small house. But after the war, it was looted and burned. Now I have forced to rent a small house which is hardly possible to even to sleep all of us with my four children's and my husband" (IDI FR-19).*

This emotional narrative encapsulates the multi-layered nature of the returnees' economic struggle. The destruction of the house represents more than a financial loss; it is the annihilation

of the primary tangible outcome of her labor migration. This loss of physical capital transforms her struggle from one of generating income to one of securing basic shelter, creating immense and ongoing financial pressure (the need to pay rent) and psychological distress. It demonstrates how the conflict retroactively destroyed the developmental progress she had made, forcing her and her family into a state of extreme poverty and making sustainable economic reintegration a distant and seemingly unattainable goal.

4.3.1.3. Difficulty in Accessing and Utilizing Start-up Loans

Across all participant groups, access to start-up capital was identified as a critical determinant for successful economic reintegration and independence. However, the research reveals that this access is severely impeded by a series of interconnected structural and practical barriers. Returnees reported profound challenges not only in securing micro-enterprise loans but also in utilizing them effectively when granted. The initiatives designed to support them were often undermined by the minimal income generated from nascent businesses, a problem compounded by inadequate infrastructure and untenable loan repayment terms. This situation trapped many returnees in a cycle of debt, where any meager income was immediately consumed by loan repayments, leading to negligible personal earnings and significant psychological distress.

The Experience of an Unworkable Loan

An IDI female returnee powerfully illustrates how a lack of essential infrastructure can render a loan completely ineffective, transforming a tool of empowerment into a source of anxiety.

> *"I was so happy when the MFI approved my loan. My plan was to start a tailoring business with another female who returned with me. We used the money to buy a second-hand electric sewing machine. But the small business shed they allocated for us in the market has no electricity connection. It has been three months. The machine just sits there, covered in plastic. But the loan officer has already come twice asking for the first payment. How can I pay? I have not earned a single Birr from the machine. It feels like they gave me a boat but put me in a desert. It is a loan for a business that is impossible to start" (IDI FR-7).*

This narrative provides an indicator of the policy-practice gap. The provision of a loan (the policy) is rendered useless by the failure to provide a viable working environment (the practice).

The core issue identified here is a lack of integrated planning, where financial support is not synchronized with infrastructural readiness. For this returnee, the loan is not an asset but a liability from its inception. The immediate demand for repayment on a non-performing asset creates a situation of guaranteed default and deepens her financial struggle, directly contradicting the loan's intended purpose.

A Collective Critique of Repayment Schedules

In the IDI, participants respectively identified the immediate and inflexible loan repayment schedules as a fundamental design flaw in the support system, a practice that ignores the realities of starting a business in a post-conflict economy.

"The biggest problem is that there is no grace period," (IDI FR-09) Other IDI participants stated, receiving nods of agreement from the group. Another added, *"Exactly. They give you the money on the first day of the month, and they expect the first payment on the first day of the next month. Does a business make a profit in 30 days? You need time to buy materials, find a good location, and attract customers. We are already failing before we even begin"* (IDI FR-25, 32, 10). Another participant summarized the collective feeling: *"It is not a business loan; it is a debt sentence. It is designed for their needs, to get their money back quickly, not for our needs, to build a life" (IDI FR-02).*

The IDI consensus highlights a critical misunderstanding on the part of the lending institutions regarding the micro-enterprise lifecycle. The absence of a grace period a standard feature in most sustainable business lending is identified as the primary reason for failure. This practice places untenable financial pressure on businesses that have not yet had the opportunity to become operational, let alone profitable. The participants' framing of the loan as a "debt sentence" rather than a tool of empowerment indicates a profound sense of alienation and injustice. Their analysis suggests that the loan programs are structured around the institution's need for rapid capital turnover rather than the client's need for sustainable business development, creating a system that is, in their view, "designed to fail."

The Institutional Perspective on Inflexible Lending

A Key Informant from a local MFI provided a vital perspective that explained the institutional rationale behind these rigid and ultimately counterproductive policies.

> *"We are aware that the immediate repayment requirement is difficult. However, our institution was severely impacted by the war. Our capital base is low, and we have very strict liquidity regulations imposed on us by the central bank. We are required to maintain a low-risk, high-performing loan portfolio. We simply lack the financial bolster to offer long grace periods or collateral-free loans, which are considered high-risk. Our policies are standardized for all small business clients and we do not have a special, more flexible program for returnees. We are caught between our social mandate to assist vulnerable groups and our institutional need to remain financially solvent" (KII-06).*

This KII data provides a vital structural explanation for the challenges described by the returnees. The MFI official reveals that the inflexible policies are not necessarily a result of ignorance, but rather a symptom of institutional fragility in a post-conflict environment. The institution's actions are dictated by its own survival needs maintaining liquidity and adhering to strict regulatory requirements. This creates a critical misalignment of needs: the returnees require flexible, patient capital, but the institutions are structured to provide only rigid, short-term debt. The statement "We are caught between our social mandate... and our institutional need" perfectly encapsulates the dilemma. This reveals a systemic failure where the very financial instruments intended to support the most vulnerable are, by their design and the constraints upon them, ill-suited for the task in a post-war context, thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty they are meant to break.

4.3.1.4. Inability to Secure Employment with Provided Skills Training

A recurring theme among participants was the inadequacy of the skills training programs designed to facilitate their entry into the labor market. A significant majority reported that the training provided was insufficient in both duration and content to equip them with the competitive edge needed to secure employment or successfully launch an enterprise. The standard training model, typically lasting only one month, culminated in a government-awarded certificate but failed to impart the expected level of knowledge, practical experience, or business acumen. This gap between certification and actual competency rendered the training largely ineffective as a tool for economic reintegration.

The experience of one female returnee during an IDI baldly illustrates the mismatch between skills training and the subsequent steps required for self-employment:

> *"I took training for one month in Wukro technical and vocational educational center about hair work and after I finished the training… I asked to get access to a start-up loan from SME but, they asked me to bring up a person or material which could be a guarantee. But, I could not find a person who could guarantee the loan. Hence, I could not start the business and earn a living for the last one year and more months. Thus, life becomes difficult for me" (IDI FR-12).*

This evidence reveals a critical failure in the reintegration support chain. The participant successfully completed the prescribed first step (skills training) but was immediately blocked at the second (access to finance). The narrative demonstrates that skill training, when delivered in isolation, is an insufficient intervention. The system operates under the flawed assumption that acquiring a skill automatically creates an economic opportunity. However, without a synchronized and accessible pathway to capital, the newly acquired skill remains a latent, non-performing asset. The one-month duration is likely inadequate to build the confidence and deep expertise needed, but the more significant failure is the lack of an integrated "training-to-finance" pipeline. The demand for collateral, a persistent barrier identified earlier, nullifies the value of the training certificate, leaving the returnee in a state of prolonged unemployment and deepening her economic hardship.

4.3.1.5. Market Problems and Infrastructural Deficiencies

Beyond the challenges of skills and finance, returnees who managed to be organized into SMEs faced critical market and infrastructural problems that denies their ventures from the outset. A primary complaint was that the physical locations allocated for their businesses were often unsuitable and lacked market viability. Furthermore, a consistent and forceful point raised in FGD was the failure of the Wukro town administration to provide the necessary infrastructure, such as electricity and water, to the allocated business sheds. This infrastructural deficit made it impossible to operate the very businesses for which they had been trained and funded.

During a FGD, the collective frustration regarding this issue was palpable:

> *"They gave five of us a space in the new market area behind the bus station. They said, 'This is your place to start your food business.' But this area is empty. There are no customers there. People do their shopping in the old central market. We are isolated. It is a place for businesses to die" (FGD-03).*

Other participants in FGD added:

> *"We were trained to use electric injera makers because they are faster and cleaner. We even took a loan to buy one. But our shed has no power line. It is just a metal box. So we cannot use the machine we were told to buy. How does this make sense?" (FGD - 01).*

These FGD excerpts highlight two distinct but related failures: poor market placement and critical infrastructural gaps. The first statement points to a lack of due diligence and market analysis in the allocation of business spaces. Placing new, fragile enterprises in locations with low foot traffic and far from established commercial hubs demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of basic market principles. The returnees are not being integrated into the existing local economy; they are being geographically and economically marginalized, set up in a location where failure is almost preordained.

The second statement powerfully illustrates the consequences of a non-integrated support system. The training program promoted modern, electricity-dependent technology, and the financial program funded its purchase, yet the administrative body responsible for infrastructure failed to provide the most basic utility required to operate it. This creates a logical absurdity where different components of the support system work in direct contradiction to one another. The result is stranded assets (the unused injera maker) and demoralized entrepreneurs. This infrastructural failure is not merely an inconvenience; it is a fundamental barrier that renders the entire sequence of training and financing completely redundant and wasteful, ensuring the economic failure of the enterprise.

4.3.2. Social Challenges of Reintegration

The process of reintegration is not only confined to economic dimensions; it is deeply embedded within the social fabric of the community. For the female returnees in Wukro, challenges emanating from this affairs involving family, friends, community, and their own sense of self

were profound. Participants in both IDIs and FGDs attributed their social reintegration difficulties to a complex interplay of factors, including the loss of social standing, shifting family dynamics, and a pervasive community misunderstanding of their lived experiences. The primary social challenges identified were the erosion of family support, debilitating community misconceptions and stigma, and a resultant self-imposed isolation.

4.3.2.1. The Erosion of Family Support

A significant social challenge highlighted by participants was the declining nature of family care and support. While many returnees were initially welcomed with warmth and celebration, they observed that this intensive support was often short-lived. As time passed without the returnee contributing economically, the family's attitude frequently shifted from compassionate to strain.

This dynamic was not necessarily born of cruelty, but was often a direct consequence of the family's own post-conflict economic struggle. With their own resources depleted, the presence of an additional non-earning family member transformed a welcome return into a sustained economic burden. Participants in an FGD confirmed this painful change:

> *"Even though we had a very nice social interaction with our local communities, peers, and parents before we went to KSA, after we returned back things become difficult to have that kind of relationship again" (FGD-02).*

An IDI with one returnee provided a touching and personal account of this shift, illustrating the transition from being a celebrated family member to an economic dependent:

> *"When I first arrived, my family killed a chicken for me. Everyone was happy and crying. They said, 'Thank God you are safe.' For one month, I was treated like an honored guest. Now, three months later, the mood has changed. My brother, who is also struggling to find work, asked me last week when I would stop being another mouth to feed. His words hurt more than anything I experienced abroad. I feel like a burden they wish would disappear" (IDI FR-23).*

This testimony vividly illustrates the concept of conditional acceptance. The initial welcome is predicated on the emotional relief of the returnee's safety, but its sustainability is contingent upon her ability to reintegrate economically. When this fails, her social status within the family unit shifts from that of a valued member to that of a dependent. This erosion of support is a critical

social challenge because the family is expected to be the primary safety net. When this core unit becomes a source of psychological distress and pressure, it severely undermines the returnee's confidence and sense of belonging, directly hampering her ability to engage with the wider community and pursue economic opportunities.

4.3.2.2. Self-Imposed Social Isolation

Faced with economic incapacity, family pressure, and community stigma, many returnees retreat into a state of self-imposed social isolation. This withdrawal is not a sign of anti-social behavior but rather a rational coping mechanism to manage shame and avoid the social expectations they cannot meet. Overwhelmed by a sense of failure, they withdraw from social life to avoid situations where reciprocity is expected, further deepening their marginalization. One participant articulated this painful calculation with striking clarity:

> *"I preferred to isolate from any kind of making friendship because of shortage of income. Because of the fear I have, what could I do if my friends invited me for coffee? In response, they would expect me to do the same for them. To avoid such kind of scruple, I decided to refrain from any kind of social interaction, sometimes even from my family members" (IDI FR-18).*

This statement reveals the profound impact of poverty on social capital. Socializing in any community involves a degree of reciprocity that requires at least minimal financial resources. By being unable to participate in this basic social economy, the returnee feels a deep sense of shame and inadequacy. Her decision to isolate is a pre-emptive measure to protect herself from this shame. However, this rational short-term strategy has devastating long-term consequences. It severs the social ties that are crucial for emotional well-being, information sharing, and accessing informal economic opportunities. This creates a vicious cycle: poverty leads to isolation, and isolation deepens poverty and prevents reintegration.

4.3.2.3. Family and Peer Pressure

The final layer of social challenge comes from the pervasive pressure to view re-migration as the only viable solution. This pressure emanates from two primary sources: peers who are still abroad and family members who have lost hope in local prospects. Participants reported receiving calls and messages from friends in the KSA, presenting an idealized image of life abroad that stood in stark contrast to their daily struggles in Wukro.

Even more powerful was the pressure from within the family. As returnees remained economically dependent, family members began to question the utility of their presence, subtly and sometimes overtly encouraging them to try migrating again. One IDI shared this deeply personal fight:

> *"Let alone other surrounding community members, even my mother has lost any hope on me... These days, my mom started to question the relevance of my stay in Wukro as I did not provide any support to my family. So, for me the social challenge is even worse than the economic one as a core challenge for reintegration" (IDI FR-04).*

A KII with a Town administrator contextualized this pressure within a broader societal trend:

> *"In this area, migration has become a cultural phenomenon. For many families, sending a child abroad is not a last resort; it is a primary household economic strategy. It is seen as a rite of passage. When a young person returns without 'success,' it is often viewed not as a reason to stop, but as a failed attempt that must be corrected by trying again. The social pressure to succeed through migration is immense" (KII-01).*

The mother's loss of hope represents the collapse of the returnee's last bastion of social support, making the home environment untenable. This finding suggests that for some, social pressure becomes a more potent push factor than economic hardship itself. The Town administrator's comment provides the crucial insight that this is not just individual family pressure, but a deeply embedded cultural script. Migration is normalized as the dominant pathway to social and economic mobility. This "migration culture" creates an environment where staying in Wukro is framed as failure, while re-migrating is framed as a logical and laudable pursuit of success. This social norm presents a formidable barrier to reintegration, as any program promoting local solutions is actively competing with a powerful, culturally endorsed alternative.

4.4. Community perceptions towards Female Returnees

Perhaps the most complex social barrier was the dual-faceted community perception of returnees, who were simultaneously misconstrued as wealthy and stigmatized as morally compromised. FGD participants consistently reported that community members could not

understand their dire financial reality, assuming that anyone returning from abroad must be affluent. This aligns with the work of Black & Gent (2006), who noted that competition for scarce resources in post-conflict zones can foster suspicion towards returnees. This misconception created immense social pressure and hindered their ability to be seen authentically.

This was often compounded by a negative stigma associating female who worked in the Middle East with bad character (IDI participants). The combination of these contradictory perceptions created an impossible social position. A KII with a local religious leader explained the origins of this flawed perception:

> *"The community does not see the ninety-nine girls who come back with nothing but pain. They see the one girl from five years ago who sent enough money to build a small house for her parents. That one success story becomes the expectation for everyone. It creates an impossible standard. So when a girl returns with empty hands, people don't think the system failed her; they think she failed" (KII - 07).*

An FGD captured the lived experience of this dual-stigma:

> *"It is a double-edged sword. If you ask for help, they look at you with suspicion and say, 'But you came from Saudi, you must have money hidden.' But behind your back, they whisper that you must have done shameful things to survive there and that is why you have nothing. You are either a liar about being poor, or you are a bad woman. There is no space to just be a person who suffered and needs help" (FGD- 01; FGD-03).*

This "dual-stigma" creates a powerful mechanism of social exclusion. The misconception of wealth invalidates the returnees' legitimate need for economic support, while the moral stigma invalidates their social standing and character. This leaves them in a deep problematic situation, blocking pathways to both economic aid and social acceptance. The religious leader's insight reveals that where the rare success stories form the dominant community narrative, erasing the far more common experiences of exploitation. This social environment is not merely unwelcoming; it is psychologically damaging and actively works against the goals of reintegration by isolating returnees and fostering a sense of profound injustice.

4.5. Current Situation and Future Aspirations of Female Returnees

The cumulative effect of the economic and social challenges detailed in the preceding sections is a state of profound despair and hopelessness among the majority of female returnees. The failure of existing reintegration mechanisms to provide a viable pathway to a stable life in Wukro has led to a near-universal conclusion among participants: their future does not lie in their homeland. Consequently, re-migration is not framed as one of several choices, but is rather perceived as a logical, rational, and, for many, inevitable necessity. This sentiment marks the ultimate failure of the current reintegration model, which has been unable to compete with the powerful lure of potential earnings abroad, however risky.

4.5.1. The Stark Calculus of Re-migration

Individual interviews revealed the clear, cold economic calculation that drives the decision to re-migrate. The vast disparity between potential local earnings and what can be earned abroad, even under exploitative conditions, makes the risks seem justifiable when compared to the certainty of poverty at home. One IDI female returnee directly articulated this stark choice:

> *"Here, if I am lucky, I make 1,500 Birr a month doing laundry for others. In Saudi, even with a bad employer, I made 16,000 Birr. I know the risk is high, I know what can happen. But staying here is a slow death for my family and me. It is a guarantee of suffering. Going back is a risk of suffering, but also a small chance of success. I have to try again" (IDI FR-20).*

Another IDI participant, who had been home for over a year, expressed a sense of resignation, stating she was actively planning her next journey:

> *"I have given up on starting a life here. My children ask me for things I cannot give them. My husband looks at me with disappointment. I have already contacted my friend in Riyadh. She will help me find a new family to work for. I am just waiting to borrow the money for the broker. There is no hope left for me in Wukro" (IDI FR-05).*

These testimonies starkly illustrate that for these women, the decision to re-migrate is not driven by ignorance or ambition, but by rational economic desperation. The first participant's comparison of a "slow death" (guaranteed poverty in Wukro) versus a "risk of suffering"

(potential exploitation in KSA) demonstrates a sophisticated risk-benefit analysis. When the local context offers no hope of upward mobility, the high-risk, high-reward option of migration becomes the most logical choice. The second participant's statement reveals that this is not a hypothetical consideration but an active plan. Her decision signifies a complete loss of faith in local solutions and a transfer of hope back to the very system that previously failed her. This indicates that the trauma of her past experience is outweighed by the immediate and ongoing trauma of poverty and social pressure at home.

4.5.2. A Collective Endorsement of Re-migration

The sentiment to re-migrate was not an isolated one but was echoed and amplified within the FGD. The shared nature of their failed reintegration experience has created a collective consensus that leaving is the only viable path forward.

> *"All of us in this room, if we had the chance, we would leave tomorrow,"* one participant declared to unanimous agreement. Another added, *"What is there to stay for? ... burden on our families… To be looked down upon by the community? At least in Saudi Arabia, you are working. You have a purpose, even if it is hard. Here, we have no purpose. We are just waiting."* A third participant connected this aspiration directly to the failure of the support systems: *"They give you training for one month and a loan you cannot repay and then they say, 'You are reintegrated.' It is a joke. They are not serious about helping us, so we have to be serious about helping ourselves. For us, that means leaving" (FGD-02).*

The FGD data demonstrates that the aspiration to re-migrate has become a shared social norm among the returnee community. The participants' discourse reveals that their desire to leave is not only about economics but also about reclaiming a sense of purpose and agency. The statement, "Here, we have no purpose," is incredibly telling. It suggests that their inability to contribute economically has stripped them of their social value and identity. Re-migration, therefore, is perceived as a way to escape this social invisibility and become productive agents once again, even within an exploitative labor system. The final comment represents a damning critique of the reintegration programs, which are perceived as simple and almost nonexistent. This perception of institutional failure serves as a justification for rejecting local options and pursuing re-migration as a form of self-reliance.

In general, the widespread and determined aspiration to re-migrate represents the definitive failure of the post-return support systems in Wukro. The current model, fragmented and inadequately resourced, has proven incapable of creating dignified and sustainable livelihoods that can withstand the economic pull of transnational labor. This research concludes that in a post-conflict environment, insufficient support does not stop migration. Instead, it tragically perpetuates a devastating cycle of migration, exploitation, deportation, and re-migration. This cycle is driven by a structural desperation that has been made even more acute by the realities of a war-torn home, leaving these women with little choice but to risk their lives once more in search of a future they cannot find at home.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This study explored the socio-economic reintegration of female returnees from Saudi Arabia in the post-conflict setting of Wukro, Tigray. The findings reveal that their journey is not simply one of reintegration but a struggle for survival at the intersection of multiple, compounding crises. These women, already vulnerable due to low educational and economic opportunities, endured systematic exploitation and trauma under the Kafala system in Saudi Arabia. They were then forcibly returned, destitute and scarred, to a home that had itself been devastated by war.

The research concludes that existing reintegration programs, while well-intentioned, are structurally flawed and fundamentally inadequate for a post-conflict environment. As the literature on post-conflict recovery suggests (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015), standard models fail when local markets have collapsed and state capacity is compromised. Economic support initiatives in Wukro failed because they were not adapted to a non-existent local market and provided insufficient capital and skills. Social reintegration was hindered by community stigma and the erosion of familial and social support systems, which were themselves fractured by the war.

The result is a profound and systemic failure. The majority of returnees remain unemployed, psychologically distressed, and socially isolated. For them, the overwhelming challenges in Wukro make the immense risks of re-migrating appear to be a rational choice. The current approach does not break the cycle of migration; it reinforces it. Without a drastic shift in policy and practice one that is conflict-sensitive, gender-responsive, and focused on long-term, sustainable development the cycle of desperation and re-migration will inevitably continue.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study proposes the following urgent and context-specific recommendations, targeted at governmental bodies, NGOs, and international partners.

1. Policy and Programmatic Recommendations: Integrate Reintegration Support into Broader Post-Conflict Recovery Plans

- Shift from isolated, returnee-only projects to integrating their support into the overall economic recovery and reconstruction strategy for Tigray. This will ensure initiatives are aligned with actual market realities and can prevent social friction by supporting the entire community, not just one group.

2. **Reform Economic Empowerment Programs for Sustainability**

- Significantly raise the amount of start-up capital provided through micro-credit to ensure it is sufficient to launch and sustain a business. Mandate a grace period of at least one year before loan repayments begin.
- Replace short, superficial TVET courses with longer-term (6-12 months) vocational training that is directly linked to the needs of the post-conflict market (e.g., construction trades, agricultural processing) and includes mandatory apprenticeships for real-world experience.
- Re-evaluate the mandatory cooperative model. Focus on supporting individual enterprises or small, self-organized groups (2-3 members) which are more agile and manageable.

3. Psychosocial and Community-Level Recommendations: Establish Long-Term, Trauma-Informed Psychosocial Support

- Fund and establish dedicated Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) centers in Wukro. These centers must be staffed by trained counselors equipped to handle the dual trauma of migration abuse and war exposure. Services must be long-term, confidential, and culturally sensitive.

4. **Launch Targeted Community Awareness and Sensitization Campaigns**

- Design and implement community-level campaigns in Wukro to:

✓ Educate the community about the harsh realities of migration and deportation to dispel the myth that returnees are wealthy.

✓ Work with community leaders, religious figures, and local media to combat the negative stigma associated with female returnees.

✓ Help families understand the challenges of reintegration and the importance of providing sustained emotional support.

5. Recommendations for Future Research

- Conduct longitudinal studies to track a cohort of returnees over several years. This will allow researchers to understand the long-term trajectory of reintegration, the sustainability of interventions, and the actual patterns of re-migration, providing invaluable data for future policy.

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MEKELLE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF LAW AND GOVERNANCE

DEPARTMENT OF CIVICS AND ETHICAL STUDIES

Appendixes Consent Form

Dear research participants:

First of all, thank you for your involvement in this research. My name is KIROS BIRHANE GEBREYOWHANNS. I am MA student in Civics and Ethical Studies department at Mekelle University. I am here to ask you some questions for my study that aims to investigate the "SOCIO-ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION OF FEMALE RETUREENS FROM SAUDI ARABIA TO ETHIOPIA IN WUKRO TOWN, TIGRAY". Your participation in this study shall be based completely on your willingness. Additionally, you are guaranteed to withdraw from the interview at any time or refuse to answer any question/s that might make you uncomfortable to respond. The study was be conducted for academic purpose and any information you share with the researcher was be kept confidential. The importance of the information that you give towards the achievement of the research objective is highly vital. Therefore, you are required to give genuine and honest information.

I thank you a lot for taking your time to participate in this research!

KIROS BIRHANE GEBREYOWHANNS

Appendixes

Part I. Personal Background of Research Participants

1. How old are you?
2. Your educational level?
3. Have you had a job before you engage in to military (fighting)?
4. Are you currently employed? If so what is your current occupation?
5. Your marital status now? With whom are you living with now?

Part II. Interview Guide for an In-depth Interview with Returned Females

1. What were the reasons for your migration to the KSA?
2. Which ways did you use to your migration? (Probe- Public employment services, legal/illegal private employment agencies, or other?)
3. Tell me about the general work condition (probe- kind of work, salary, working hours, freedom to move, food situation and permission to communicate with friends)
4. Can you in detail tell me all your experiences when you stayed in this country? Have you faced illness there? If so were you getting medical treatment? How did you get that?
5. How do you compare your living status before and after you left Ethiopia? (Probe-you may see it in terms of economic, social, and psychological satisfactions?
6. Have you faced any sexual, physical or emotional harassment or abuse? If so who are the perpetrators?
7. What does it mean to you to have all these experiences? How do you understand all that happened to you? How has that affected your life in general positively or negatively? How do you feel about all these experience?
8. How long did you work there?
9. What factors influenced your decision to return to your home country?
10. How has your experience abroad affected your view on socioeconomic reintegration?
11. What challenges did you face upon returning to your community?

12. How did your family and friends react to your return?
13. What support services were available to you upon your return?
14. Did you receive any training or education to help with reintegration? If so, what kind?
15. How do you perceive the economic opportunities available to you now?
16. What role did local organizations play in your reintegration process?
17. How has your mental health been affected by your return?
18. What are your current sources of income?
19. Have you encountered discrimination or stigma since your return? If so, how?
20. How do you feel about the social services available to returnees in your area?
21. What personal skills or experiences do you think are most valuable for reintegration?
22. How has your return impacted your relationships within your community?
23. How do you feel about the support from government initiatives for returnees?
24. What are your long-term goals now that you have returned?
25. Have you been able to access healthcare services since your return? How sufficient are they?
26. What advice would you give to other women considering returning home?
27. How do you envision your future in your home country?

Part III: Guide for In-depth Interview with key Informants

1. What is your role in supporting female returnees in your community?
2. How would you describe the current situation of female returnees in terms of socioeconomic reintegration?
3. What specific challenges do female returnees face compared to their male counterparts?
4. How do cultural and social attitudes in the community affect the reintegration of female returnees in Wukro town?
5. What types of support services are most effective for helping female returnees?
6. Can you describe any successful social and economic reintegration programs you have witnessed for female returnees in the Wukro town?
7. What types of vocational/educational/training courses are available to returnees by and/or through your organization?
8. If your organization provide financial assistance, for what length of time is financial assistance generally provided?
9. How do you assess the economic opportunities available to female returnees?
10. What barriers do female returnees encounter when seeking employment?
11. How important is community acceptance for the successful reintegration of returnees?
12. What role do NGOs or local organizations play in supporting female returnees?
13. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of government policies regarding returnees?
14. What psychological or emotional support is available for female returnees?
15. How do female returnees typically access information about available resources?
16. What impact do family dynamics have on the reintegration process for women?
17. How can local businesses be engaged to support the reintegration of female returnees?
18. What skills or training do you think are most beneficial for female returnees?
19. How do you measure the long-term success of reintegration for female returnees?
20. What recommendations would you make to improve reintegration strategies for female returnees?
21. How do economic conditions in the community affect the reintegration process?
22. In your opinion, what is the most critical factor for the successful reintegration of female returnees?

Part IV: Guide questions for FGDs with Female returnees in Wukro town

1. What supports have been delivered to bring socio-economic reintegration of returnees in the area?
2. What changes/progress has been registered in the family owing to programs implemented to address economic reintegration of returnees in the area?
3. What kind of services/projects (such as legal, socio-cultural activities and psychological support) has been employed by families, community, government and non-government organizations to contribute to social reintegration of returnees in the area?
4. What more could be done to address social reintegration of returnees in the area
5. What are the challenges faced by returnees and their families in addressing the socioeconomic reintegration of returnees in the area?
6. Were there any rehabilitation and reintegration support offered to you? If yes, how was the rehabilitation and reintegration process involved when you returned from KSA? Who has provided support?
7. What type of rehabilitation and reintegration activities (shelter, psychological, medical, social, training, technical, and financial support) were carried out? How long?
8. What specific skills did you have before you travel to KSA? What specific skills did you acquire the reintegration process?
9. Are you currently employed? If so, what is your current occupation? What is your reaction for your current job?
10. What is your view towards the overall process of reintegration?
11. What were the strengths and limitation of service providers in reintegrating the returnees?
12. What were your opportunities and challenges after you returned to Ethiopia?
13. How is the social support in regards to your reintegration to the community? How is your relationship with the community?
14. How is your economic status and social life now?
15. Can you describe the actual benefit you received from the process? What is the outcome of the reintegration process in your life?
16. Was there any activities promised by the different Government and Non-governmental organizations (actors) involved reintegration?

17. What are your suggestions to Social workers, governmental organization and other organizations to alleviate problem concerning repatriates and migration in general?
18. In your opinion, what measures should be taken to avoid problems faced by returnees and to effectively rehabilitate and reintegrate them to the community
19. Related to your experiences and the purpose of this study, is there any issue that you want to add? Do you think you have told me everything important?

Appendix IV: Observation Guide for the researcher

This observation guide is prepared to assist the researcher to provide better directions while carrying out the observation of the living and working environment of research participants.

1. Overall observation of existing institutions resources, capacities and coordination to manage the reintegration process.
2. Observation of housing, physical conditions of returnees and the surrounding environment they are living in.
3. Are the returnees engaged in income generating activities? If yes, observe what kind of business activity they do, their working condition, and financial capabilities. (With a purpose to understand if returnees are economically reintegrated)
4. Is there any evidence visible on healthy social relationship between returnees and communities? (With a purpose to understand the if returnees are socially reintegrated)
5. Identification of particular vulnerabilities and disabilities of returnees that may hinder reintegration.

Participant Profiles

Table 1: Profile of In-Depth Interview Participants (n=32)

The following table details the socio-demographic characteristics of the 32 female returnees who participated in in-depth interviews. These interviews were designed to gather rich, detailed individual narratives about their experiences.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of IDI Participants (Female Returnees)

Participant Code	Age (Current)	Age at Migration	Duration in KSA (Years)	Sex	Current Occupation	Education Level	Marital Status
IDI-FR-01	25	19	6	F	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Single
IDI-FR-02	31	20	11	F	Self-employed	Primary (1-8)	Married
IDI-FR-03	42	31	10	F	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Divorced
IDI-FR-04	19	16	2	F	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Single
IDI-FR-05	38	27	9	F	Self-employed	Grade 12 Completed	Married
IDI-FR-06	29	18	7	F	Unemployed	University Degree	Single
IDI-FR-07	22	17	5	F	Self-employed	Primary (1-8)	Single
IDI-FR-08	34	24	8	F	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Married
IDI-FR-09	40	30	9	F	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Divorced
IDI-FR-10	21	18	3	F	Unemployed	Grade 12 Completed	Single

IDI-FR-11	27	20	7	F	Self-employed	Secondary (9-10)	Married
IDI-FR-12	33	22	10	F	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Divorced
IDI-FR-13	24	19	4	F	Self-employed	University Degree	Single
IDI-FR-14	36	26	8	F	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Married
IDI-FR-15	28	21	6	F	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Single
IDI-FR-16	39	28	11	F	Self-employed	Primary (1-8)	Divorced
IDI-FR-17	23	18	5	F	Unemployed	Grade 12 Completed	Single
IDI-FR-18	32	23	9	F	Self-employed	Secondary (9-10)	Married
IDI-FR-19	26	20	6	F	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Single
IDI-FR-20	37	25	10	F	Unemployed	University Degree	Divorced
IDI-FR-21	20	17	3	F	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Single
IDI-FR-22	30	22	8	F	Self-employed	Primary (1-8)	Married
IDI-FR-23	41	29	11	F	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Married
IDI-FR-24	25	19	5	F	Unemployed	Grade 12 Completed	Single
IDI-FR-25	35	24	9	F	Self-employed	Secondary (9-10)	Divorced

IDI-FR-26	29	21	8	F	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Married
IDI-FR-27	22	18	4	F	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Single
IDI-FR-28	34	23	10	F	Self-employed	Primary (1-8)	Divorced
IDI-FR-29	27	20	7	F	Unemployed	Grade 12 Completed	Married
IDI-FR-30	24	19	5	F	Self-employed	Secondary (9-10)	Single
IDI-FR-31	38	26	11	F	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Married
IDI-FR-32	26	18	8	F	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Single

Source: Fieldwork Data, 2025.

Table 2: Profile of Focus Group Discussion Participants (n=15)

The study included 15 female returnees who participated in one of three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), with five members in each group. This method was used to explore shared experiences and group dynamics. The table below outlines the profile of each participant and their respective group.

Table 2: Socio-Demographic Profile of FGD Participants (Female Returnees)

Participant Code	Group No.	Age (current)	Age at Migration	Sex	Duration in KSA (Years)	Current Occupation	Education Level	Marital Status
FGD-FR-01	Group 1	19	16	F	2	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Single
FGD-FR-01	Group 1	22	18	F	4	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Single
FGD-FR-01	Group 1	28	21	F	7	Self-employed	University Degree	Married
FGD-FR-01	Group 1	35	25	F	10	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Divorced
FGD-FR-01	Group 1	26	20	F	6	Self-employed	Grade 12 Completed	Married
FGD-FR-02	Group 2	23	19	F	4	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Single
FGD-FR-02	Group 2	30	22	F	8	Self-employed	Primary (1-8)	Married
FGD-FR-02	Group 2	25	18	F	7	Unemployed	Grade 12 Completed	Single
FGD-FR-	Group	33	24	F	9	Unemploye	Secondar	Divorce

02	2					d	y (9-10)	d
FGD-FR-02	Group 2	29	21	F	8	Self-employed	Primary (1-8)	Married
FGD-FR-03	Group 3	21	17	F	4	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Single
FGD-FR-03	Group 3	27	20	F	7	Unemployed	Primary (1-8)	Single
FGD-FR-03	Group 3	36	26	F	10	Self-employed	Grade 12 Completed	Married
FGD-FR-03	Group 3	31	23	F	8	Unemployed	Secondary (9-10)	Divorced
FGD-FR-03	Group 3	24	19	F	5	Self-employed	University Degree	Single

Source: Fieldwork Data, 2025.

Table 3: Profile of Key Informant Interview Participants (n=10)

To triangulate the data from female returnees and gain an institutional perspective, 10 key informants from relevant governmental and non-governmental organizations were interviewed. Their profiles are detailed below.

Table 3: Profile of KII Participants

Participant Code	Sex	Age	sex	Position / Organization Type
KII-01	Male	45	M	Woreda Administration
KII-02	Female	38	M	International Organization for Migration
KII-03	Male	52	F	Labour and Social Affairs Office
KII-04	Female	41	M	Women's Affairs Office
KII-05	Male	35	F	Labour and Social Affairs Office
KII-06	Female	49	M	Microfinance Institution
KII-07	Male	43	M	Community Elder / Religious Leader
KII-08	Female	39	M	Mental Health & Psychosocial Support
KII-09	Male	55	F	Micro & Small Enterprise Office
KII-10	Female	46	F	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

Source: Fieldwork Data, 2025.