

Experiences of Ethiopian returnees in Saudi Arabia: Employment and unmet expectations

Saudi Arabia hosts about 750,000 Ethiopian migrants with about 60% (450,000) likely to have travelled to the country through irregular means.¹ On March 30th 2022, the Governments of Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia reached an agreement to repatriate more than 100,000 Ethiopians irregularly residing in the country, many of whom were detained in poor conditions rife with abuse.² This snapshot examines the profiles and experiences of Ethiopian returnees in Saudi Arabia, interviewed after their return to Ethiopia. This snapshot also reflects on the expectations of Ethiopian returnees of life in Saudi Arabia and their experiences of detention and explores how this shapes respondents' willingness to encourage migration.

Key findings

- Women respondents had spent longer periods of time in Saudi Arabia than men, with 53% having lived there for over five years, as compared to 16% of men.
- All women who had earned an income in Saudi Arabia reported earning it through domestic work and cleaning, while 80% of men had earned an income in the agriculture and pastoralism sector.
- A majority of respondents (54%) did not acquire skills that would help them improve their economic opportunities in Ethiopia.
- More than half of the respondents (51%) had lacked knowledge of what life would be like in Saudi Arabia before migrating.
- 74% of respondents said that their experience in Saudi Arabia had not met their expectations.
- 95% of respondents had been held in detention in Saudi Arabia relating to their migration status, with the majority (78%) for more than a month and up to one year.
- A majority of respondents (89%) are unlikely to encourage others to migrate.

1 IOM (2022). [“Funding Needed to Assist Over 100,000 Ethiopian Migrants Returning from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”](#).

2 Human Rights Watch (2021) [“Saudi Arabia repatriates hundreds of detained Ethiopians”](#).

Data and profiles

This snapshot draws on 356 4Mi Returns surveys conducted in January 2023 with Ethiopians who had returned from Saudi Arabia and been back in Ethiopia for between 6 months and 2 years prior to the date of interview. At the time of interview, the vast majority of respondents were in their regions of origin, with the exception of those from Tigray, whom were interviewed in Addis Ababa. 65% of respondents were men and 35% were women. Figure 1 provides a breakdown of the sample by age, region of origin and level of education. Interestingly, 21% reported they were of school age while in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the education profiles of respondents are consistent with those of migrants travelling along the Eastern Route.³

Figure 1. Overview of sample by age, region of origin and education level (n=356)

Age			Region of origin					
18-24	25-34	35+	Amhara	Oromia	SNNP	Tigray	Addis Ababa	Other ⁴
28%	58%	14%	66%	21%	6%	4%	2%	<2%

No schooling	Primary education	Secondary education	Vocational training or tertiary education
24%	56%	18%	2%

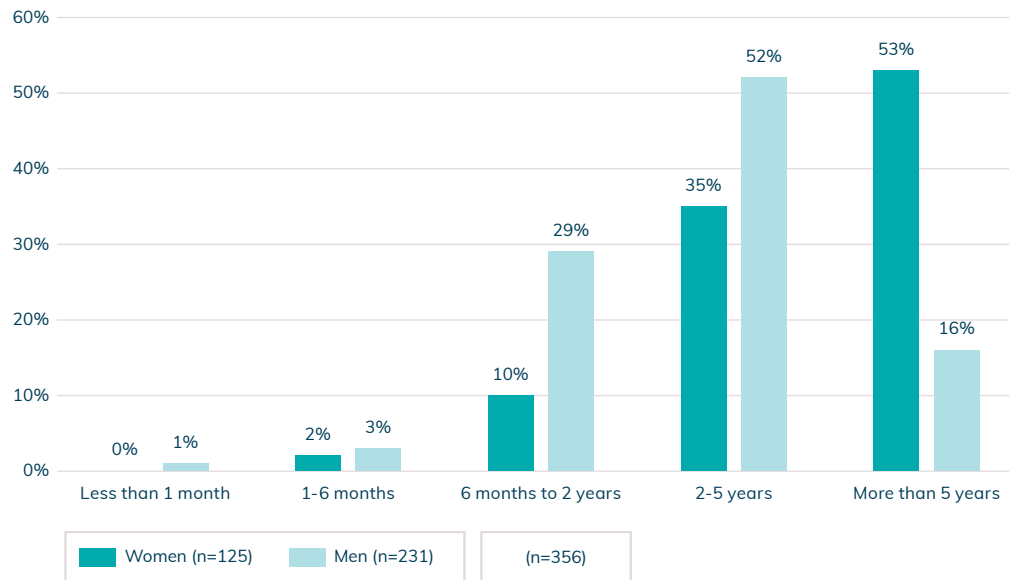
3 IOM (2022). [A region on the move 2021: East and Horn of Africa](#).

4 Benishangul Gumz, Harari, Afar and Dire Dawa.

Women had spent longer periods of time in Saudi Arabia than men

Overall, the largest share of respondents (46%) spent 2-5 years in Saudi Arabia. Women had experienced longer stays in Saudi Arabia, with 53% having spent more than 5 years in the country versus 16% of men. This may be linked to the nature of their work in Saudi Arabia, explored in a later section, suggesting that domestic work carried out by women promotes longer stays than agricultural or pastoral work, carried out by men, which is more likely to be short term. Indeed, men outranked women on stays of 2-5 years and stays of between 6 months to 2 years.

Figure 2. How long did you stay in Saudi Arabia?

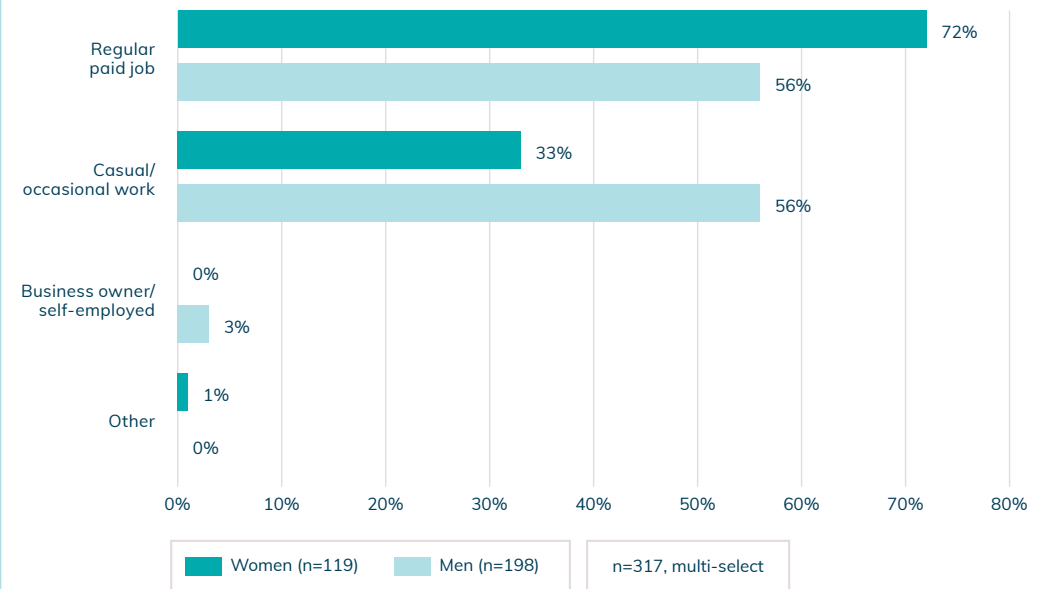


Most women were making money from regular paid jobs while most men were casual workers in Saudi Arabia

89% (317 out of 356) reported that they earned some form of income in Saudi Arabia. Women more often reported earning a salary from a regular paid job (72%) than from casual/occasional work (33%). On the other hand, 56% of men respondents earned from

casual work and 56% from a regular job. This may be linked to the way women travelled and entered Saudi Arabia: while 95% of men travelled in an irregular manner, 54% of women did. Ethiopian women often reach Saudi Arabia through the Kafala system which facilitates their travel and a regular income once in country, frequently as domestic workers, while also placing them in vulnerable situations.⁵

Figure 3. How were you making money while in Saudi Arabia?



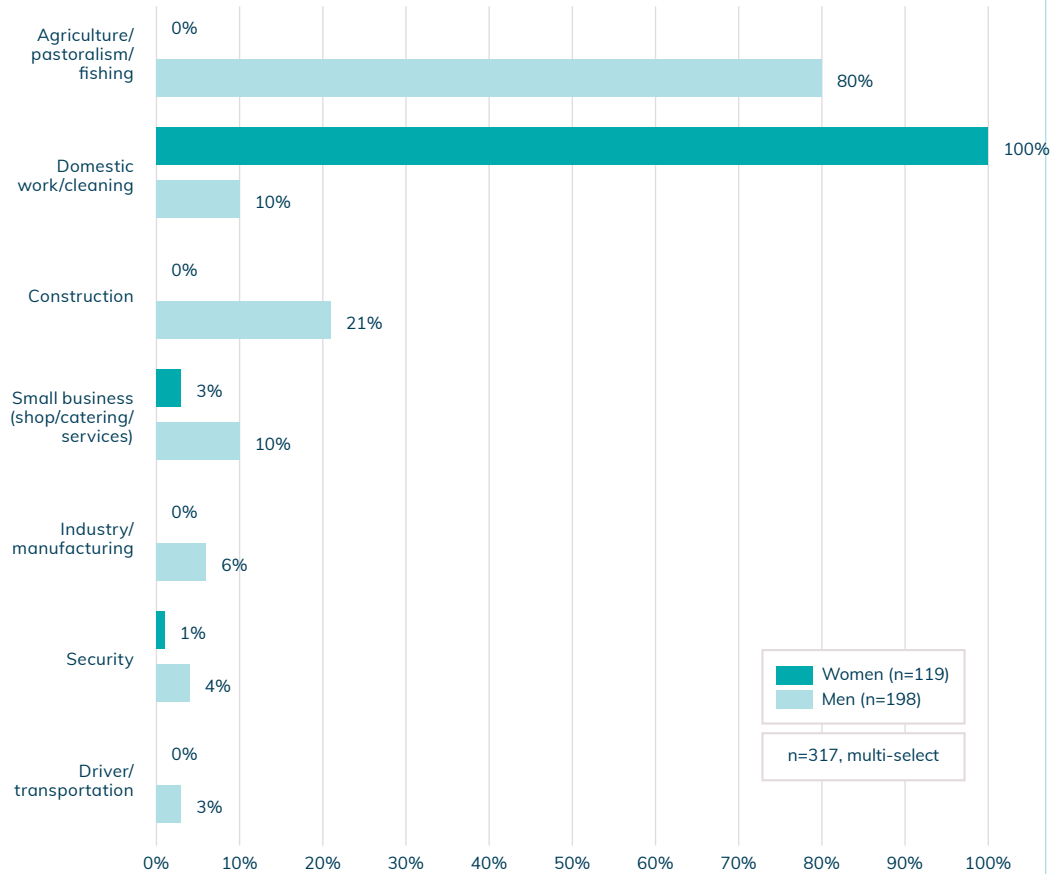
All women had engaged in domestic work while most men had worked in agriculture or herding

All of the women respondents who worked in Saudi Arabia worked in the domestic / cleaning sector. On the other hand, men had engaged in more varied types of work, although the majority (80%) reported making money in agriculture and herding (Figure 4). The range of sectors in which migrants reported working in Saudi Arabia is consistent with previous data collected with returnees along the Eastern Route⁶, indicating continued trends in the Saudi labor market. Interestingly, respondents' level of education did not appear to be linked to the sector of work in which they were engaged.

5 Bina Fernandez (2017): [Irregular Migration from Ethiopia to the Gulf States](#) in *Skilful Survivals: Irregular Migration to the Gulf*, Gulf Labour Markets and Migration Programme.

6 IOM (2020). [The desire to thrive despite the risk.](#)

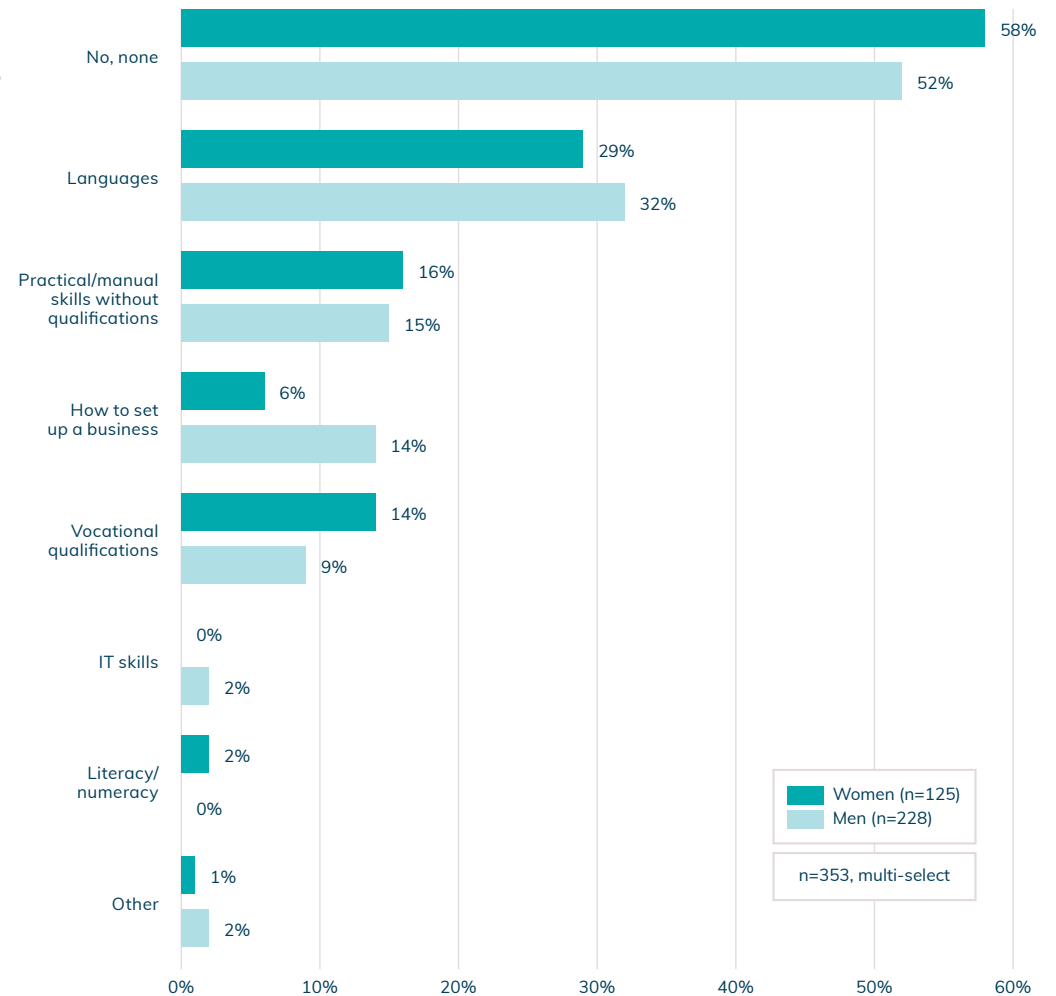
Figure 4. What kind of sector were you making money in?



Over half of respondents had not acquired skills in Saudi Arabia they think would improve their economic opportunities in Ethiopia

54% of the respondents reported they had not acquired skills that would help them improve their economic opportunities in Ethiopia. 31% of respondents had learned languages, 15% practical/manual skills, 11% how to set up a business and 10% vocational skills. More men than women reported acquiring business set-up skills (14% vs. 6%, respectively). Disaggregating the data by respondents' education level or time spent in Saudi Arabia revealed no notable findings.

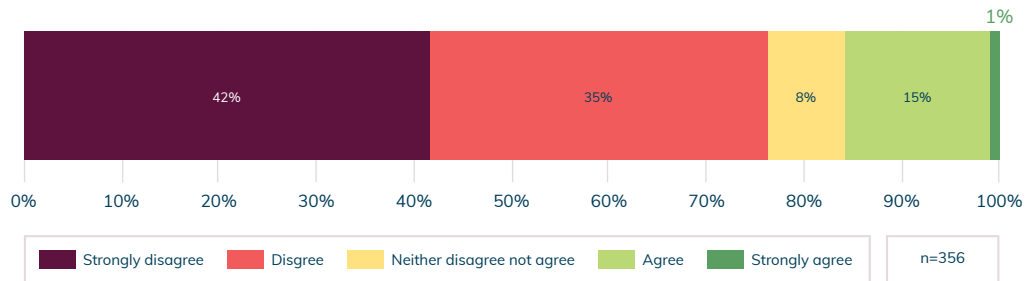
Figure 5. Did you acquire skills/qualifications while in Saudi Arabia, that you think will improve or are improving your economic opportunities in Ethiopia?



The majority of returnees had not felt safe in Saudi Arabia

77% of respondents described feeling unsafe or insecure during their time in Saudi Arabia, as compared to 16% who had felt safe and secure. Feelings of insecurity could be linked to respondents' experiences with detention in Saudi Arabia as highlighted below.

Figure 6. Overall, to what extent do you agree with this statement: I (and my family, if applicable) felt safe and secure while I was in Saudi Arabia.



Nearly all respondents had been held in detention in Saudi Arabia because of their migration status

95% of surveyed Ethiopians reported being detained in Saudi Arabia because of their migration status, prior to their return, which may explain why a large majority of respondents felt unsafe in the country. As mentioned in the introduction, starting from March 2022, 100,000 Ethiopians were to be returned from Saudi Arabia; all of these returnees were detained while awaiting deportation, pointing to the scale of detention in country.⁷ 78% of respondents were detained for more than a month up to a year, 19% were held for more than a year and 3% were held for more than a week up to a month. Men described longer periods of detention than women, with 28% of male respondents were detained for more than one year, as compared to 2% of women. Reports on the situation of Ethiopians in Saudi detention centers emphasize the prolonged and arbitrary

7 Deutsche Welle (2022). [Ethiopians tell of suffering in Saudi detention.](#)

processes, with detainees remaining an average of 11 months in detention.⁸ Furthermore, reports on the conditions in detention emphasize the many violations which take place and the lack of food, water and general hygiene in detention centres. Detainees report witnessing abuses and death, both at the hands of detention center officials and due to poor conditions, which enable the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis.⁹ In fact, some respondents reported to continue to suffer from tuberculosis after their return. A 25-year-old man explains: "I am currently on tuberculosis medication and if I recover from the disease, I will remigrate. Of course I witnessed death and I suffered a lot in my previous migration. But still I don't have other options other than migration."

Before migrating, half of the respondents were unaware of what their life would be like in Saudi Arabia

51% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they knew how life would be in Saudi Arabia before their migration. Disaggregating the data by gender, age, region of origin or education level did not reveal notable differences in the level of awareness of life in Saudi Arabia. Further, existing research from the North Wollo region of Ethiopia suggests that information on life and working conditions in Gulf States tends to be exaggerated, which may explain why many respondents felt ill-informed.¹⁰ Data from 4Mi surveys conducted with Ethiopians in Somalia indicate that the main influence before their journey towards the Gulf are returnees (32%, n=775) – stories of success may therefore be exaggerated upon return and unintentionally encourage migration aspirations.¹¹

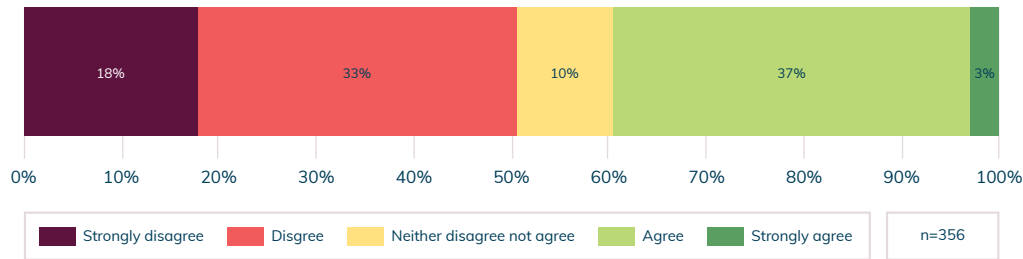
8 Amnesty International (2022). ["It's like we are not human" Forced returns, abhorrent detention conditions of Ethiopian migrants in Saudi Arabia.](#)

9 Ibid

10 Asfaw, M.B. (2018). [A Pre-Departure Vulnerability Context to Human Trafficking in North Wollo, Ethiopia.](#)

11 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [4Mi Interactive Dashboard : Before the journey](#)

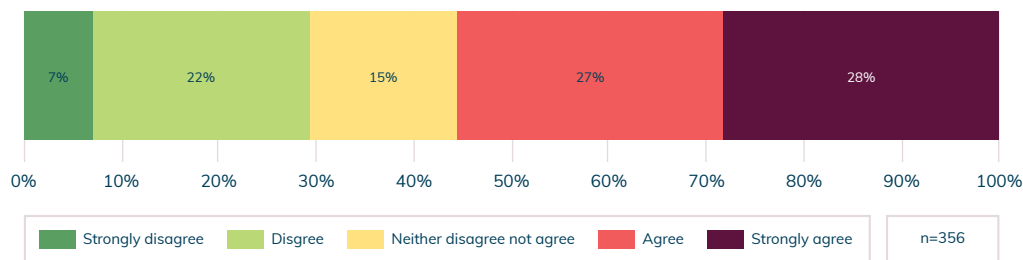
Figure 7. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Before I started my migration journey, I was aware of how life would be in Saudi Arabia?



Most respondents had experienced unmet expectations in Saudi Arabia and over half regretted migrating

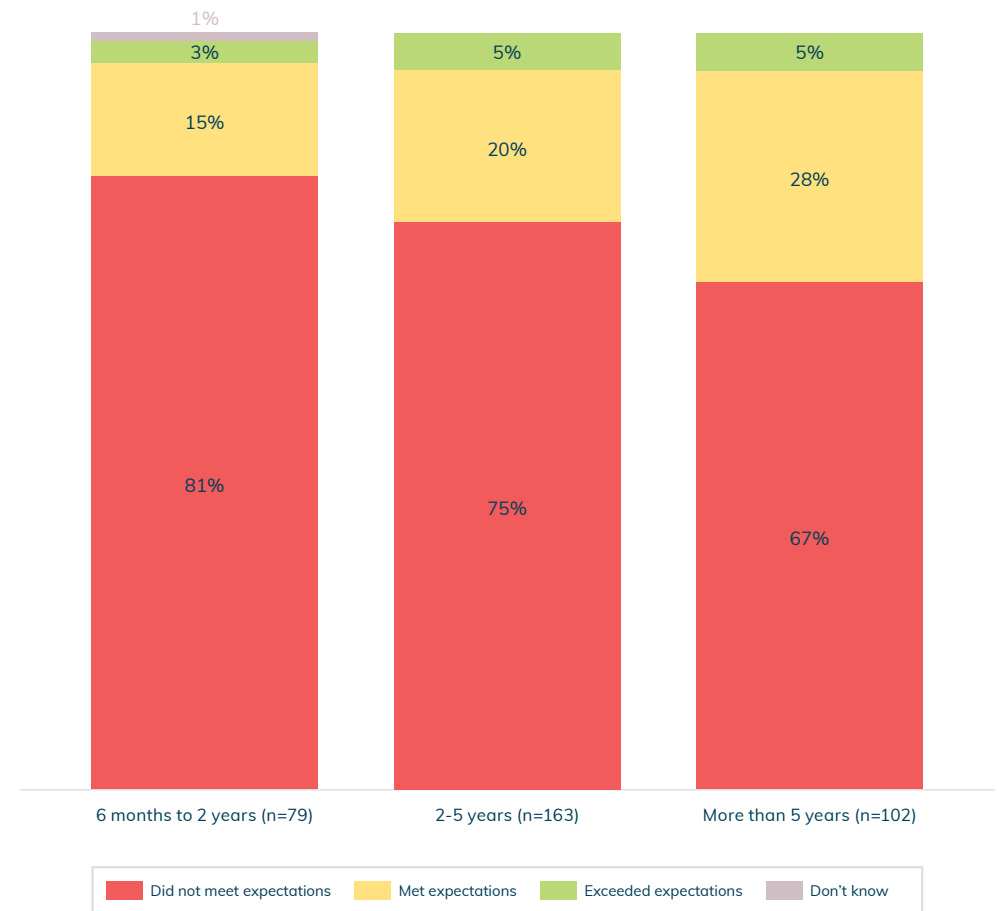
Most respondents were dissatisfied with their experience in Saudi Arabia as 74% reported that their experience in Saudi Arabia had not met their expectations, and 55% strongly agreed or agreed that they regretted having migrated to Saudi Arabia the way they did.

Figure 8. Overall, to what extent do you agree with this statement: I (and my family, if applicable) regret having migrated to Saudi Arabia in the way we did?



The longer respondents stayed in Saudi Arabia, however, the more their experience met their expectations. Among those who stayed more than 5 years, 28% stated their experience had met their expectation, compared to 20% of those who stayed between 2-5 years and 15% of those who stayed between 6 months and 2 years. This nuances existing research on Ethiopian returnees not achieving the goals and aspirations that triggered their initial migration and findings that just 1% of returnees from Saudi Arabia perceived they had "earned enough money".¹²

Figure 9. To what extent did your experience in Saudi Arabia meet your expectations? per length of stay in Saudi Arabia.



12 IOM (2021). [Return migration dynamics in five Ethiopian communities of high emigration.](#)

Nearly all respondents would not encourage others to migrate

When asked about their likelihood to encourage others to undertake a migration journey similar to their own, 88% of the respondents answered this was very unlikely or unlikely, while 11% expressed a neutral stance. Just 1% expressed their willingness to encourage others to migrate. This underscores the challenging experiences that respondents faced during their migration journey and while abroad.¹³ Respondents mainly reflected on the relief of living freely upon return, in contrast to the abuses and violations they experienced in detention, as this 38-year-old woman reflects: “*Though financially I am not stable and it's very difficult to find work in Ethiopia, I can breathe the air of freedom.*”



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4Mi data collection

[4Mi](#) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi

¹³ MMC (2023). Profiles and experiences of Ethiopians in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, before their return to Ethiopia.