



ETHIOPIA: SAFER MIGRATION

Annual report 2025-2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ethiopia Safer Migration hotspot program has undergone profound transformation since it was launched in 2015. The hotspot was initially characterised by a critical lack of community awareness, insufficient policy frameworks and an absence of standardised protection for returnees. The landscape ten years later has shifted toward a recognisable, rights-based system. Today, Addis Ababa hosts well-equipped shelters capable of ensuring successful reintegration, there is change in community awareness, there are more actors engaged in the area and prosecution for trafficking is a well-recognised legal priority.

Despite these systemic gains, 2025 presented formidable challenges. Irregular migration remains a pressing concern, exacerbated by security instability in Northern Ethiopia and persistent “push

factors” such as a lack of employment and poor education systems. Ethiopia’s informal migration is still driven by a combination of social, political and economic factors that forces about 250,000 Ethiopians to migrate annually. Human trafficking movements have increased by around one-fifth as compared to 2024.

The year was further defined by a major shift in the funding landscape, particularly regarding the U.S. government’s suspension of foreign aid programs early in the year and the subsequent dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The Freedom Fund used its own resources during the suspension period to help partners maintain essential services and retain key program staff.

In terms of legal frameworks, even though overseas employment has supported the Ethiopia’s management of migrants – and the country has made progress in modernising its Labour Market Information System (LMIS) – there are significant gaps that remain unaddressed. The country still lacks a migration policy, and the existing system exposes migrants to further risks both at home and abroad. Migrants remain unprotected from traffickers and brokers who lure them into taking irregular pathways of migration. Survivors and returnees, lacking the support they need when they return home, often feel that remigration is their only option.

Despite all this, the Safer Migration hotspot program has demonstrated remarkable resilience. The support from Walk Free has enabled the program to successfully transition toward survivor-led advocacy, establishing and supporting four survivor-led organisations (SLOs) that are now voicing the concerns of returnees and survivors with growing authority. Redefining successful reintegration, the program has also shifted towards enhancing the sustainability of job placement for economic resilience and leadership.

As this program moves forward, it remains committed to reducing the prevalence of domestic servitude of Ethiopian women and girls in the Middle East through empowerment and sustainable entrepreneurship, ensuring that the progress made over the last decade is institutionalised for long-term impact.



OPERATING CONTEXT

The operating environment for the Ethiopia hotspot programs in 2025 was dominated by a seismic shift in international funding. Immediately following the inauguration of the new presidential administration in January 2025, the U.S. government suspended nearly all foreign aid programs. This was soon followed by the elimination USAID and its programs.

For the Freedom Fund, this “policy shift” necessitated immediate and difficult strategic decisions in alignment with the Freedom Fund’s new strategy of shifting more resources towards funding for partner organisations and away from Freedom Fund implemented or directed initiatives. Thus it continued to operate survivor returnee shelters during the suspension by using diversified funding to comply with local labour laws and maintain essential safety for survivors. Once the suspension was lifted, the program received enough U.S. support to enable the hotspot partners to close out Phase 2 activities responsibly by September. Following this, the program received a 13-month costed extension from the U.S. State Department’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Office, enabling the partners to proceed with Phase 3 of the program through October 2026. This transition enabled the partners to avoid closing the hotspot, although at a reduced scope that will focus on monitoring and accountability of institutionalised mechanisms. This streamlined scope prioritizes government oversight and the integration of migrant domestic workers’ rights into the broader governance framework.

Socially and politically, the environment remained volatile throughout the year. While the Ethiopian government showed increased willingness to adopt protection mechanisms, regional insecurity – particularly in the northern part of the country – continued to push women toward irregular migration routes. Meanwhile, displacement caused by large-scale urban development projects, along with high turnover among law enforcement officials such as police and prosecutors, created structural barriers that impeded legal progress and survivor support.

Beyond the immediate pause in project activities, the suspension contributed to a broader sense of “political and funding” uncertainty within the operating environment. Partners expressed deep concerns that this instability could “threaten vital community engagement activities” and “erode years of work building community trust and awareness.” Further, there were fears that the upcoming national elections, in June 2026, might further divert the Ethiopian government’s attention away from the protection of vulnerable domestic workers and returnees. In response, the Freedom Fund continued to prioritise strengthening of civil society, specifically by granting funds to SLOs to build organisational infrastructure.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The Ethiopia Safer Migration hotspot implements programs aimed at reducing the risk of trafficking for Ethiopians migrating abroad. At the end of the year, the hotspot consisted of three partners, three service providers and four organisations led by survivors.

Two partners operate shelters to prevent re-traumatisation of returnees prior to community reintegration. The other partner engages the government in high-level policy discussions to improve migrant safety in both origin and destination countries. All three partners have also continued with their support to advancing survivor leadership, enabling the formation of two more survivor-led groups.

Several high-level achievements were registered during the reporting period toward the following organisational strategic goals:

Direct impact in communities affected by modern slavery

The Safer Migration program has moved beyond traditional awareness-raising to create a robust, community-led protection safety net. Central to this shift is the Ministry of Labor and Skills (MoLS), which successfully promoted a standard national contract for domestic workers across ten regions. This institutional progress is mirrored at the grassroots level by the establishment of nine returnee associations across eight regions, transforming former migrants into active advocates for safer migration.

A defining achievement of the year was the deep integration of anti-trafficking measures into traditional social structures. Through technical support from Freedom Fund partners, 50 *Iddirs* (community-based self-help groups) have now incorporated human trafficking prevention into their formal activities. This community-led oversight is yielding tangible



results. In the Amhara region alone, increased public vigilance led to 98 reports of irregular brokers in a single quarter, signalling that communities are now equipped to identify and report illegal recruitment practices.

The program's impact is further evidenced by its response to large-scale migration crises and interceptions. A collaborative task force initiated with the Kemissie Mayor's Office demonstrated the power of local enforcement by intercepting 980 migrants (333 young women and 647 young men) at checkpoints while they were attempting irregular travel through Djibouti to Saudi Arabia. In response to the wave of repatriations from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, partners provided emergency transit support to 350 returnees, providing cash and transport allowances for safe reunification. From this group, 32 highly vulnerable survivors were identified and admitted to specialised rehabilitation centres for intensive care. Cumulatively, our shelter partners provided a sanctuary for those fleeing domestic servitude abroad, with 728 returnees and children receiving comprehensive shelter care, psychiatric support and medical treatment. An additional 84 individuals were supported with services designed to ensure their emotional and physical stability.

The program provided vocational training to 219 returnees in the first half of the year, with an additional 64 individuals successfully reintegrated into their communities by year-end. Notably, 39.1% of survivors who received specialised psychosocial counselling achieved high scores across all reintegration indicators – including on family conflict resolution and on the launch of successful small businesses – proving that targeted support can effectively break the cycle of remigration.

Foster systems change to shift power

Another structural shift this year is the Ministry of Labor and Skills' (MoLS) commitment to forward to the Ethiopian Parliament the ratification of ILO Convention 189, which affirms the fundamental rights of domestic workers and sets minimum labour standards for them. This move, alongside the work to finalise regulations under Proclamation No. 1156/2019, which is the Ethiopian labour law that was enacted to

reformulate the country's labour law in line with international conventions and national economic goals, represents a fundamental shift toward formalising labour protections for a previously "invisible" workforce.

The regulatory environment was further revolutionised by the enactment of legislation that fundamentally reshaped the accountability of recruitment agencies by more than doubling the required financial collateral – increasing it from USD 100,000 to USD 250,000. This increase acts as a critical safeguard, ensuring that agencies have the financial wherewithal to guarantee the safety and fair treatment of Ethiopian migrants abroad. Complementing this legal framework is a new era of digital oversight: 100% of trained recruitment agencies have now adopted the Labour Market Information System (LMIS), allowing the government to replace paper-based monitoring with real-time, data-driven enforcement of migration flows and recruitment practices.

Following a decade of advocacy, the management of overseas employment in Addis Ababa was moved from local bureaus – which are often susceptible to influence from vested interests – to an independent structure under the National Partnership Coalition, which is overseen directly by the Office of the Mayor and the City Council. At the grassroots level, this institutional change was mirrored by the work of 50 *Iddirs*, which collectively authored 62 unique bylaws to regulate and prevent trafficking within their neighbourhoods. The success of this model led to its official adoption by the Addis Ababa *Iddir* Council city-wide, ensuring that anti-trafficking efforts are woven into the very fabric of Ethiopian social life.

The program's focus on justice has yielded significant results in the prosecution of traffickers. Despite the challenges of regional instability and restricted movement, the hotspot's specialised assessment and legal support tools empowered survivors to come forward. This surge in survivor-led evidence led to 259 enforcement actions in a single quarter, including 164 active prosecutions and 52 convictions for trafficking-related crimes. By integrating migration-related indicators into the monitoring checklist of the Addis Ababa City Administration Council's Peace, Justice, and Good Governance Standing Committee, the program has ensured that migration issues have been elevated to the forefront of public governance.

Invest in the strengthening of civil society organisations and movement

The hotspot has successfully fostered a shift toward survivor-led power by helping establish and technically supporting four survivor-led organisations (SLOs) in Kasma, Biruh Addis, Finot and Misale. These organisations are now “empowered for a more visible outcome,” providing a platform for potential migrants, migrant returnees and survivors to advocate for impact.

The SLOs have transitioned from localised support groups into a unified coalition that amplifies the voices of the marginalised in high-level policy spaces. Since their establishment, these organisations have collectively supported more than 5,000 returnees and have engaged 300 survivors in intensive peer-to-peer mentorship and “deeper conversations.” They collaborate with the hotspot’s partners and service providers to support survivors through art therapy and mentorship. This allows them to bring their lived experience and expertise to support women in similar situations and thereby implement meaningful interventions. Partners have observed that “institutionalising survivor participation in training and advocacy” enhances the relevance of program messages. This support has not only provided these groups with “visibility and impact” but has also transformed the strategic direction of established NGOs.

While the SLO coalition for advocacy is still in its early stage, it is gaining momentum toward leading a highly impactful movement that successfully advances an agenda for genuine change.

During 2025, the hotspot also supported the formation of three more unregistered returnees’ associations in Amhara region formed by returnees and survivors and one registered civil society organisation in Addis Ababa. This move has transformed the women from vulnerable individuals into organised, empowered advocates for safer migration.

Parallel to the growth of survivor-led power, the hotspot has fostered a more aligned and resilient civil society through regular Community of Practice (CoP) meetings. These forums have evolved from simple information-sharing sessions into strategic engines for collective advocacy. The CoPs have enabled partners to organise joint forums, ensuring that civil society speaks with one voice when engaging the government. This alignment was critical during the enactment of the Overseas Employment Proclamation No. 1389/2025, where partners used the CoP to refine their approach to common challenges and present a unified front during stakeholder consultations. Through these meetings, partners have developed harmonised monitoring tools and safety protocols for returnees. This collaboration has not only improved individual project outcomes but has also built a “collective resilience” within the sector, allowing partners to navigate the funding suspension faced during the year without losing the trust of the communities they serve.





STRATEGIC AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

Looking ahead to future years, the Safer Migration program is evolving from a primary focus on migration safety toward a broader emphasis on decent work and sustainable employment. This approach recognises that migration is often a response to limited economic opportunities, and that longterm impact depends on supporting stable jobs and livelihoods within countries of origin.

Reflections on the Safer Migration program emphasised the need for “inclusive scale-up” of proven interventions. Partners recommended expanding investment in models like community coalitions and “survivor economic empowerment.” This means the adoption of the Thrive model, which shifts the focus from “survival” to “sustainability.” Originally piloted to support 240 women, the Thrive program demonstrated that survivors of domestic servitude achieve better long-term outcomes when placed in formal employment (such as the hospitality or food industries) rather than just receiving one-off grants. A key strategic shift is moving economic empowerment beyond individual returnees to include families and individuals at high risk of migrating. By addressing the root cause – poverty within the household – the program strengthens the preventative shield before the decision to migrate is even made.

The hotspot expanded its work to countries of destination to ensure the safety of migrants while abroad. However, security issues, government restrictions and lack of embassy support have hindered the success of collaborative efforts in destination countries. During the year, the umbrella organisation that most associations were functioning under was closed, official registration of associations and organisations was ceased, and migrant-focused meetings and formal activities were forbidden – all of which exposed migrants for further harm.

Research conducted with New York University aimed to identify gaps in bilateral labour agreements that are obstacles to improving protection. However, the lack of immediate interest from Ethiopian embassies in destination countries has delayed the translation of data from this research into policy change. This highlights a strategic need to build stronger diplomatic advocacy as a core component of the next phase.

Further, as SLOs (Kasma, Biruh Addis, Finot and Misale) gain technical skill and government recognition, they are positioned to lead protection efforts. The program is now investing in “Transformative Leadership” modules to equip these organisations to manage their own advocacy agendas independently.

CASE STUDY

“M.” is an Ethiopian woman who returned home after experiencing domestic servitude during labour migration to the Middle East.

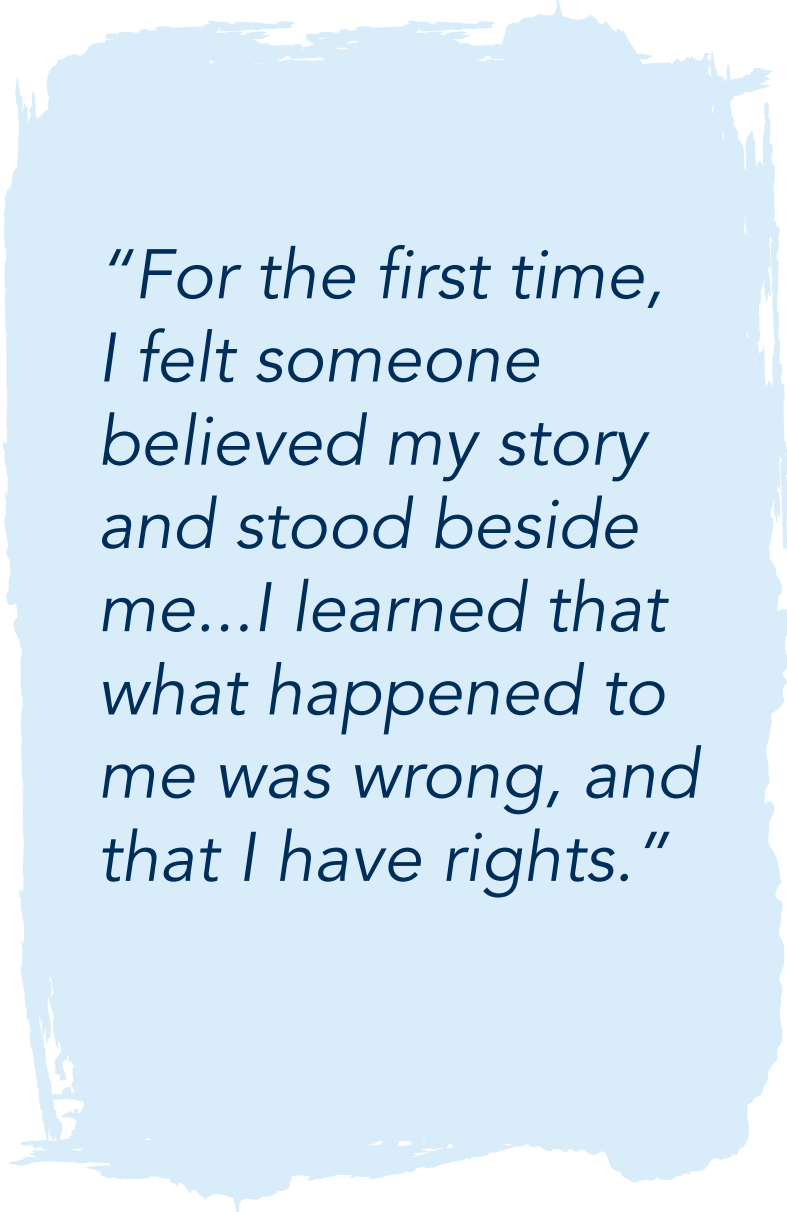
M. migrated through informal channels after being promised decent work and fair wages. Upon arrival, she was subjected to exploitative working conditions, including excessive working hours, restriction of movement and non-payment of wages. With limited access to support and information, she remained trapped in domestic servitude until she was eventually able to return to Ethiopia.

Following her return, M. was identified and referred and admitted to a rehabilitation centre operated by Agar Ethiopia, a Freedom Fund partner. She received immediate shelter, medical care and psychosocial support. Through individualised counselling and legal guidance, M. was screened and formally identified as a survivor of trafficking. Agar Ethiopia then supported her to pursue an administrative claim with the Ministry of Labor and Skills to recover her unpaid wages. She also received legal counselling, protection support and comprehensive rehabilitation services.

“For the first time, I felt someone believed my story and stood beside me,” M. shared during a counselling session. “I learned that what happened to me was wrong, and that I have rights.”

As a result of Agar Ethiopia’s intervention, M.’s safety and well-being significantly improved. She regained stability through shelter-based services, developed coping skills through psychosocial support and gained confidence to engage with formal justice and administrative systems. Beyond her individual recovery, her case helped bring about stronger coordination between service providers and government institutions, reinforcing the practical use of the National Referral Mechanism and survivor-centred services.

M. has since begun rebuilding her life and actively shares her experience with other returnees during group sessions, helping to raise awareness about safer migration and the risks of irregular recruitment practices. Her story has encouraged other survivors to seek support and report abuse.



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VISION

Our vision is a world
free of slavery.

MISSION

We invest in frontline organisations
and movements to drive a measurable
reduction of modern slavery in high-
prevalence countries and industries.

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