

ESFNA 2014 Fan Scholarship- Emmet Shibre

The people of Ethiopia possess an undeniable beauty, a remarkable work ethic, and a powerful sense of community. In 2013, the Ethiopian diaspora was collectively distressed as they learned about the mistreatment of fellow Ethiopians in Saudi Arabia after the end of an amnesty period for undocumented workers. The Ethiopian people did not remain silent in light of the tragic and abhorrent events that took place in Saudi Arabia. Rather, Ethiopians throughout the world utilized their communities and began to actively seek to end the violence and torture of Ethiopian workers in Saudi Arabia. They led protests against Saudi Arabian embassies in various countries, donated money to help the return of Ethiopian workers to Ethiopia, and raised awareness about the plight of their fellow countrymen. The protests against Saudi Arabia took place primarily in November of 2013 and sent a wave of indignation throughout Ethiopian communities across the globe. From the United States to Sweden to Canada to Germany, a remarkable number of Ethiopians stood up for the rights of fellow Ethiopians. In doing so, the diaspora showed the tremendous amount of power that lies in rallying together for a cause. They effectively put pressure on the Ethiopian and Saudi governments to repatriate the Ethiopian workers, and, more importantly, they gave voice to the voiceless.

Although these demonstrations had wide-ranging effects, in order to avoid a situation like this in the future, it is critical that we as Ethiopians understand the cause of the recent abuse of our people.

One of the underlying causes of the situation is the economic trouble many Ethiopians face back home. About 27 percent of women and 13 percent of men in Ethiopia are unemployed, and hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians seek job opportunities in places like Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries (“Ethiopian Migrant Workers”). Although the journey to Saudi Arabia is

treacherous, according to the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social affairs, 200,000 women sought work in the Middle East in 2012 alone (“Ethiopian Migrant Workers”). The mistreatment of Ethiopian workers in Saudi Arabia was prevalent prior to the Saudi crackdown that triggered the November demonstrations, as the Saudi people took advantage of the Ethiopian need for jobs. Ethiopians went to Saudi Arabia in search of jobs as maids and domestic workers despite the fact Saudi Arabia’s labor system, according to the United Nations, leads to “rampant human rights abuses” (“Human Rights Watch”). Ethiopian workers who have returned to Ethiopia often recall the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse they received while working in Saudi Arabia. Many of them simply wanted to help provide for their families, as the average citizen of Ethiopia lives on less than \$2 a day (All Africa). These hard-working and diligent citizens were absolutely desperate to secure some sort of income, and they envisioned greener pastures in places like Saudi Arabia, making them readily available victims for cheap labor.

In addition to the poverty in Ethiopia, another cause of the situation was that the people of Saudi Arabia viewed Ethiopians as unprotected and weak, as “generations of Saudis have grown used to being served by a pliant underclass with few rights” (Economist). The Saudi people abused workers from the Philippines and Indonesia as well until the media and civil society in the Philippines and Indonesia put pressure on the Saudi government to get involved (“Ethiopian Women Risk Abuse”). With this in mind, Saudi labor recruiters focused more on places like Ethiopia where they believed the government was not as willing to speak for workers’ rights (“Ethiopian Women Risk Abuse”). According to a report by Freedom House, the response of the Ethiopian government was only “undertaken after accounts of the situation of Ethiopians in Saudi Arabia became public and created a huge outcry... among Ethiopian

diaspora” (1). It was the reaction of the Ethiopian diaspora that showed the Saudi government and people that the harm of fellow Ethiopians would not be ignored.

The November protests by the Ethiopian diaspora sent an important message that “diasporas can contribute to the development of their countries of origin and can provide vital financial support in times of crisis” (International Organization for Migration). Now that it is evident what Ethiopian people throughout the globe are capable of doing when they unite, it is important to address the root causes. Community leaders within the diaspora must bring to light the prevailing poverty in Ethiopia and defend the rights of Ethiopian citizens so that further abuse will be mitigated. The best way to achieve this is to create even stronger networks within the diaspora so that we can collectively work to improve economic conditions in Ethiopia and respond to similar crisis situations in a timely manner.

It is crucial that we as Ethiopians recognize that poverty in and of itself is a massive human rights violation. It was poverty that sent our fellow Ethiopians to places like Saudi Arabia in the first place, and it is poverty that will keep them returning to places where they may be abused if they believe cannot find jobs in Ethiopia. This is especially true of the young people of Ethiopia, as youth unemployment rates are estimated at more than 50% (“Youth Unemployment”).

The Ethiopian diaspora has the ability to aid Ethiopians in creating jobs back home in Ethiopia and give Ethiopians a sense of confidence in their capacity to make money in their own country. One of the primary ways this can be achieved is through increased efforts by the diaspora to improve education in Ethiopia, especially the education of women. Another way would be to create a global network of Ethiopian diaspora committed to providing micro loans to young Ethiopians who want to start their own businesses. In this manner, the diaspora can help

create an increased number of self-sufficient Ethiopian workers that do not have to seek employment in other countries.

Ethiopians have already demonstrated to the world that they will not sit silently as their fellow countrymen are abused, and it is important that the diaspora now focuses on strengthening its network. The more we network and communicate with one another, the more solutions we can find to help improve financial and social conditions in Ethiopia, thereby preventing similar situations from occurring in the future.

Although what happened to the Ethiopian workers in Saudi Arabia in 2013 and years prior is detestable and unfortunate, the effects of the protests against the situation were constructive. The protests have demonstrated that the Ethiopian diaspora has the ability to be organized, the ability to influence politics, and the ability to help other Ethiopians. We must use this ability to prevent any abuse from happening to our people again in the future, and, in order to do so, it is critical to address the issues that caused our fellow countrymen go to work in places like Saudi Arabia where the risk of degradable treatment runs amok.

The people of Ethiopia face many challenges today, but they are not without the strength and determination necessary to overcome these challenges. Strength, hard work and solidarity characterizes us, and will also allot us a better future. We as Ethiopians are a people who thrive in community, and if existing networks of Ethiopian diaspora grow and continue to connect with each other, there is no limit to what we can achieve.

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