

Migrating to Yemen- One Girl's Struggle

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Zahai (name changed for anonymity) was a teenage girl, living with her family of six in eastern Ethiopia. They were living a good life to some extent. Her father worked as a woodcutter and her mother worked in one of the coffee mills. Zahai was studying in high school, and she worked with her classmates as hairdressers in the afternoon. In 2016, the schools closed for a short period when there were some political unrest. During that time, Zahai dropped out of school and heard lots of arrest stories about students involved in the unrest. Fearing the arrests, Zahai and her classmates decided to get away from their community and search for a woman in Ethiopia who, it was said, could find them jobs. When they found her, the woman said there were no available jobs and offered to help them go to Djibouti and find work. The woman provided a name of a contact person in Djibouti. Zahai and her classmates paid 500 Ethiopian Birr (approximately USD 70.00) to the woman, who had a driver transport them to Djibouti.

Zahai and her friends arrived Djibouti but could not call the contact person because they did not have phones. While they were walking in the street, they overheard group of people speaking the Oromo language. Zahai and her friends asked this group if they had heard of the contact person. The group said they knew nothing about this contact. They said were heading to Saudi Arabia and asked Zahai and her friends to join them. Zahai said that they did not have money to pay a migrant smuggler. The group explained that the smuggler would take them for no fee now, but they would pay him later, after they got work in Saudi Arabia. Zahai and her friends agreed and moved with the group to the smuggler's house in Djibouti where they found a lot of people. The smuggler told them that the journey will be safe and they would find domestic work easily.

On the same day at midnight, they moved from the smuggler's house to the sea and took a boat with over 140 migrants, including 9 women, to the Yemeni coast. Some soldiers along the coast started to shoot at them as they neared the shore. Two men drowned when the smuggler forced all of the migrants to get out of the boat. Some fishermen tried to help rescue the migrants. As the migrants reached the shoreline, a car of smugglers came and forced them to get in. Zahai could not escape. The smugglers took them to a remote place and demanded ransom money from their families in Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia.

Zahai and her friends were beaten badly, but Zahai told the smugglers that they had no money and they did not even pay for the first smuggler who transported them from Djibouti to Yemen. Four migrant women payed for release, while Zahai and her friends were kept captive. As payment for release, the smuggler said they had to cook for the other migrants for six months. Zahai said they worked day and night, were forced to chew Qat (a leaf that is mildly narcotic), and were sexually assaulted. Zahai was raped by several men, worsening her situation with these acts of gender based violence. By the third month of captivity, she did not feel well. One of the smugglers took her to a hospital and the doctor determined she was pregnant. Zahai begged the doctor to help her not have the baby, but the doctor refused because of the negative affect on her health. The smuggler took her back to the remote place of captivity in Yemen, where she continued to be raped despite her pregnancy and sickness.

After six months, Zahai and her friends were taken to Rada'a, a district in central Yemen. The smugglers sold her three friends to another smuggler, but no one bought Zahai because she was pregnant. The smuggler left her on the street. Another migrant who spoke her language found her and took her to his house where he lived with his wife and child. Zahai stayed for almost three months, doing chores for the family. When the wife and husband separated, Zahai left the house and walked the streets aimlessly. One day, when she was sitting on a street corner crying, a group of Yemeni men approached and asked her if she needed help. Although she understood some Arabic, she could not speak it. They asked her if she was Somali and she shook her head, agreeing that she was. They took her to Sana'a, dropping her off in front of a restaurant and telling her that she could talk to the Somalis who cleaned cars in front of that restaurant.



She was left there, crying and not knowing where to go. Another migrant approached and asked her if she needed any help; she told him her story. He took her to his wife and, because they had only one room, in the morning she stayed with his wife and at night she stayed in a nearby store that was owned by Yemeni neighbors. A friend of the wife told Zahai about IOM, and the family took Zahai to the IOM medical clinic where she got medical care and psychological support. IOM also arranged temporary accommodation for her in a safe shelter, until she delivered

the baby in one of Sana'a's hospitals. Once discharged from the hospital, she returned to IOM's temporary shelter and continued to receive care.

Zahai's situation distressed her greatly and she considered abandoning the baby. Over time, her perspective changed and she started to accept her new role as a mother. As she grew stronger and emotionally stable, she decided that she could return to Ethiopia with her baby. In May 2017, IOM transported Zahai and her baby, and 20 other migrants from Sana'a to Al Hudaydah, from where they were evacuated by sea to Djibouti and then by air to Ethiopia.



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