

FEMALE ETHIOPIAN MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS: AN ANALYSIS
OF MIGRATION, RETURN-MIGRATION AND REINTEGRATION
EXPERIENCES

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Female Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers: An Analysis of Migration, Return-Migration and Reintegration Experiences

This study explores the different effects of gendered migration focusing on return migration and reintegration challenges and opportunities facing female Ethiopian migrant returnees from Middle East countries. It looks into the different stages of migration to understand some of the cultural, economic and social transformations women domestic workers experience as immigrants and laborers in the Gulf region and up on their return to Ethiopia. In doing so, the study examines the different ways women try to renegotiate and reintegrate with their families and communities.

In-depth interviews with eighteen women returnees reveal the uneven distribution of experiences and outcomes of gendered migration. However, there exists some consistency in the disruptive and disempowering effect of these experiences in the destination countries which usually extends after return. After return, the renegotiations of women returnees on issues of reception, economic betterment, relationship rebuilding and exercising agency with families and communities is often stressful, isolating and disempowering.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Personal Note: Why Female Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers?	4
Research Questions.....	7
Methodology	8
Limitations of the Study.....	13
Thesis Outline	15
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	17
The Feminization of Migration	17
Discourses on Empowerment of Women	21
Theories of Return Migration and Reintegration.....	24
The Acculturation Model.....	24
Cultural Identity Model (CIM)	28
III. CONTEXTUALIZING LABOR MIGRATION OF ETHIOPIAN WOMEN	
TO THE GULF REGION	31
Brief Migration History of Ethiopia	32
The Middle East: The New Destination for Ethiopian Labor Migrants	37
The <i>Kafala</i> (Sponsorship) System	42
Structural Dependency	43
Absence of Institutional Protection.....	45
Denial of Fundamental Freedom of Movement.....	47

Chapter	Page
IV. THE PRE-RETURN CONDITIONS OF FEMALE ETHIOPIAN MIGRANT	
DOMESTIC WORKERS.....	49
The Domestic Agents of Migration	49
Migrating to Aräb Agär: A Look into the Routes of Emigration	58
The Perils of Domestic Work in Aräb Agär	65
The Immigration System.....	65
Gender Relations.....	69
Race, Class, Religion and Nationality	71
Culture and Identity	74
Coping Mechanisms and Outcomes.....	76
Conclusion	82
V. AN ANALYSIS OF THE REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF FEMALE ETHIOPIAN MIGRANT	
DOMESTIC WORKERS.....	83
The Agonies of Reception	84
The Hope and Illusiveness of Economic Betterment.....	90
Changed Life Standard as a Challenge	96
Reestablishing Relations	98
Self-empowerment and Self-worth	103
Conclusion	106
VI. CONCLUSION.....	107

Chapter	Page
Summary of Major Findings	107
Recommendations.....	111
APPENDICES	116
A. MAPS OF ETHIOPIA AND MIDDLE EAST	116
B. INTERVIEW GUIDE IN AMHARIC	117
C. INTERVIEW GUIDE IN ENGLISH.....	118
REFERENCES CITED.....	119

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Domestic Push Factors of Migration of Ethiopian Women.....	56
2. The Process and Perils of Domestic Work in <i>Aräb Agär</i>	78
3. Return-migration, Reintegration and Empowerment.....	104

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Attributes of the Research Participants.....	10

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On February 24, 2012, outside the Ethiopian Consulate in Beirut, Lebanon, an anonymous bystander filmed a labor recruiter physically abusing Alem Dechasa-Desisa, an Ethiopian migrant domestic worker. This same video found its way to the global audience when the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI) got hold of the footage, and, on March 8, 2012, aired it. The video shows horrific scenes, where, despite Alem's protest, the labor recruiter and his associate dragging her into a car while beating her severely at the same time.¹

Later, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that the LBCI "identified the man beating Alem as Ali Mahfouz, the brother of the head of the recruiting agency that brought her to Lebanon" (HRW, 2012). According to the interview Mahfouz gave to the broadcasting agency, his brother's agency has been trying to return Alem to her home country as a result of alleged mental health problems. The same report records that, after the incident, police arrived at the scene and took Alem to a detention center "without arresting any of her tormentors." Alem was transferred to Deir al-Saleeb Psychiatric Hospital for medical care where she committed suicide early in the morning on March 14 (HRW, 2012).

Today, many young Ethiopian women like Alem leave their country to go to the Gulf region with a hope of bettering their lives through jobs that are usually limited to

¹ The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AqY1tjGIlk>. The video of LBCI reporting on the issue and interview with Ali Mahfouz can be accessed through <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PypSPWYfvYY>.

domestic labor work. While some find a reasonable amount of success, most migrant workers experience serious human rights abuses that are hardly accounted for. Yet, even in the midst of all this mayhem, young Ethiopian women continue flocking to this region. According to figures from Ethiopia's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (2012), around 200,000 Ethiopian women migrated to the Middle East seeking employment in the domestic work industry using legal routes. The number of women migrating using illegal routes is estimated to be double that figure. Top destination countries in the Middle East are Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Lebanon, and more recently Sudan, which is usually used as transit country (ILO, 2012). While some women are treated well, a significant number of Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East face undue hardships and abuse in the form of low or withheld wages, poor working and living conditions, virtual absence of social protection, denial of freedom of association and workers' rights, discrimination, xenophobia and social exclusion. Working conditions agreed to in contracts—if contracts exist at all—are often not kept, and working time as agreed to are not respected. Moreover, there are increasing reports of physical, sexual and psychological abuse and in some instances this has led to—as is the case of Alem Dechasa-Desisa—death. Despite the hardships recounted by returnees, many women still choose to migrate, driven by poverty and lack of employment opportunities at home.

The common denominator for most women's decision to migrate lies in both the growing demand of labor in international markets and the empowering aspiration cultivated in the minds of these women by such opportunity. The prospect of earning an income and exercising autonomy is attractive to these migrant women who, in their home countries, have predetermined gender roles with constricted opportunities. While the

promises of empowerment and autonomy are appealing propositions, the experiences of laborers, particularly women domestic workers, may take a grim path as well. Throughout the pre-migration and migration processes, a good number of women domestic workers go through various forms of human rights violations including “harassment, intimidation or threats to themselves and their families, economic and sexual exploitation, racial discrimination and xenophobia, poor working conditions, increased health risks and other forms of abuse, including trafficking into forced labour [sic.], debt bondage, involuntary servitude and situations of captivity” (D’Alconzo, La Rocca and Marioni, n.d., p.iii). Whereas some of these challenges may be equally prevalent in the migrant workers’ home countries, the nature of discrimination and abuse they face in the destination countries usually add multiple layers of isolation and segregation instigated not only by men but native women as well. Ultimately, these domestic workers find themselves pushed to the very bottom of the social ladder economically, socially, culturally and religiously.

An equally important but oftentimes neglected challenge faced by migrant women domestic workers is that of return migration and reintegration. The cultural, social, linguistic and religious transformations migrant women usually go through in the Gulf region—oftentimes forcefully—have a life-long impact that unravels in the reintegration process after returning home. It is in light of the absence of extensive study or literature in this area that I took up the challenge of researching the gendered effect of migration through the lived experiences of Ethiopian women returnees and their negotiations with changing and unstable power structures in their families and communities. In doing so, I show how Ethiopian women migrant returnees understand the status, gender roles and

empowerment perceptions afforded to them or undermined by their experiences in the Middle East as domestic workers.

Personal Note: Why Female Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers?

I grow up at *Sheromeda*, one of the poorest neighborhoods of the capital city of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa. I lived in a communal neighborhood where eight households shared a common gated space. We also shared kitchens and a single toilet. While it is obvious that this was a difficult mode of living for most of us in that community, it provided a unique opportunity for everyone to have an intimate closeness with each family, thereby creating a strong support system and a feeling of extended family. Children grew up together and share resources including clothing, school supplies and even toys.

When my sister and I went to college after our high school graduation, three of our neighbors similar to our age went to Syria and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). After about four years, while I was still in college, my sister told me that the other younger children, four girls aged 16 and 17 had migrated to Qatar, Dubai and Libya to work as domestic workers. By the time I graduated from college in July 2007, I returned home for vacation to find out that it was only my sister and I who were left in the compound. From the nine girls who grew up together in our tightly knit community, only my sister and I were left, whereas all the other girls, including some much younger, had left for one of the Middle East countries to work. I will not go on to elaborate in detail why my sister and I had a different path but suffice it to say that we were fortunate to be in a privileged position because of our literate father who emphasized the importance of education, and who had the ability to provide us with a good education. For me, the

exodus to the Middle East sought by many young Ethiopian women is not a news story I get from the media. It is the story of the community in which I grew up. It is the story of some of my best childhood friends.

After the outflow of the young women in my neighborhood, I witnessed the different changes that followed, latent and manifest, in the lives of the migrants themselves and their families as well. I came to know the detailed processes and experiences of these women, not as a researcher, but as a close friend to these young women and their families. Whenever these women returned home every two or three years, depending on their contract, I would see them and have coffee and talk about our lives. I must acknowledge that I did not use any of my friends' stories in my research. I felt it would not only be unethical but also unhealthy for my relationship with them. However, it is their story which is so close to my heart that inspired me to undertake this scholastic project with the hope that I would tell of their journeys and those of the many other wonderful women I came to know as part of this project.

The other important factor that inspired me to do this project was the changes I observed in the family dynamics of these migrant women, especially when the migrant returned home in between migrations or permanently. The women send all of their remittances back home, which in turn puts these women in the 'bread winner' position within the family, a position which is commonly held by men. This shift in the role of the migrant woman disrupts the decision-making process in the family, and is felt even while she is absent. I also witnessed the different challenges the women faced after returning- like processes of negotiation and renegotiation with family and community members; the implications of the end of earning remittances; the search for a new

development opportunity; the changing role that comes from not being the family's breadwinner anymore; and an array of other issues that make the returnee stressed and frustrated. I observed that the information gap with regard to the position and identities of the women in their family, before and after migration, is overwhelming. Most studies focus on women's experiences in the place of destination. The aftermath is hardly documented.

These personal experiences I had with women who migrated to the Middle East to work as domestic workers was before I even decided to join the department of International Studies at the University of Oregon. It was when the tragic story of Alem Dechasa-Desisa broke that I decided investigate this matter further through a researcher's lens. Alem's story was a shocking reality for me, reaffirming the unacknowledged and unseen lives of many women, some of whom I know personally. Though the women are holding the burden in providing for so many of their family and for the national economy at the cost of their freedom and their youth, I understand there is no one easy narrative that fits all. As a result, I took up the challenge of integrating the stories of these women into my academic research in gender and development as the basis of my thesis. It is my hope that I have done justice to the complexities and textures of the stories of these women in the following chapters.

Research Questions

The effects of migration on women has been articulated by the United Nations in relation to women immigrants and refugees. The United Nations International Research and Training Institute states:

Improving the status of women is increasingly recognized as fundamental to improving the basic human rights of over half of the population of the world and also contributing to social economic progress...Women's migration both internally within developing countries and internationally across borders...to developed countries, is inextricably linked to the status of women in society (United Nations, 1994, p.1).

With such understanding the following question was asked:

But what do we know about women's migration? ... For example, does migration lead to improvement in the status of women, breaking down patriarchal structures and enhancing women's autonomy or does it lead to perpetuate dependency? (UN, 1994, p.1)

In this research, I reflected on these questions by providing an analysis of the reintegration experiences of female Ethiopian domestic workers returning from Gulf nations. In doing so, I will challenge the easily taken-for-granted misconception that “the migration process and employment in a country of which they [migrant workers] are not nationals can enhance women’s earning opportunities, autonomy and empowerment, and thereby change gender roles and responsibilities and contribute to gender equality” (Lim in Kebede 2001, p.iii²). Evidence continues to show that domestic workers in the Middle East go through a destabilizing experience that shapes the outcome of their migration. While the physical and sexual abuses endured by these women have an adverse effect on feelings of autonomy and empowerment, the rather long-term predicament lies in their

² Lin Lean Lim, Manager, Gender Promotion Program, International Labor Organization.

inability to negotiate gender roles and responsibilities with their families and communities upon their return. The post-return challenge of the reintegration process is where I focused my inquiry on. Specifically, I address these research questions:

1. What are some of the cultural, economic and social transformations female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers believe they have experienced through in their Middle East working experiences?
2. After returning from the Middle East, how have female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers' role changed or been reinforced in the domain of their families, friends, and society in terms of decision-making powers, gender roles, and equality?
3. After returning from the Middle East, to what extent do female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers feel empowered by their experiences overseas?³
4. What are some of the major strategies, challenges, and opportunities employed by female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in their attempts to reintegrate with their families and communities in Ethiopia?

Methodology

Although migrant women workers came from different regions of Ethiopia, I focused on return migrants who reside in Addis Ababa. Being born and raised in Addis Ababa, I felt I had the necessary cultural familiarity and sensitivity to attempt to do a fieldwork with the women of my age about the gendered impact of migration. I got

³ "Empowerment" here is defined as having more self-confidence and dignity and what happens as a result of having self-confidence and dignity (Rowlands, 1997).

started by conducting the field research in the summer of 2012, from July 15 to September 11.

The task of reaching out to these women was challenging due to lack of any organized form of offices, foundations or non-governmental organizations working exclusively on the matter of migration. This is why I relied on friends, families and neighbors to connect me to my initial contacts who then led me to other subjects with shared experiences. This method is consistent with snowball sampling, also known as chain referral sampling or respondent-driven sampling. Berg (2007) argues that snowballing can sometimes be the best way to locate subjects with certain attributes or characteristics necessary in a study. He further argues that snowball samples are particularly popular among researchers interested in studying various classes of deviance, sensitive topics, or difficult-to-reach populations (Berg, 2007).

The basic strategy of snowballing involves first identifying several people with relevant characteristics and interviewing them. These subjects are then asked for the names (referrals) of other people who possess the same attributes they do. In my cases, my initial contacts came through friends and relatives of mine with the specific attribute of returning female domestic workers from the Middle East trying to renegotiate with their communities in Addis Ababa. The three initial contacts referred me to their friends who had migrated to one of the Middle East countries and returned for good, which created the snowball effect and led me to interview eighteen return migrant women. In determining how many participants I needed to interview, I continued to gather information until I reached the point of data saturation.

Table 1. Attributes of the research participants

Name	Age at migration	Education	Religion	Relationship status before return	Place and time of migration	Duration after return	Relationship status after return	Employment status
Meron	24	Completed high school	Christian Orthodox	Not in a relationship	Syria—4 years (2007-2011)	1 year	Not in a relationship	Got a cleaning job before a month
Alem	24	Completed vocational training in hair dressing	Christian Orthodox	Dating	UAE—10 month (2011-2012)	3 months	Not in a relationship	Will start hair dressing job after a week
Sara	16	Completed 10 th grade	Christian Orthodox	Not in a relationship	Saudi Arabia—7 months (2010-2011)	1 year	Not in a relationship	Thinking to go back
Beletu	17	Completed 10 th grade	Muslim	Not in a relationship	Lebanon—2 years (2007- 2009) Kuwait—2 years (2009-2011)	6 months	Not in a relationship	Thinking to go back
Gifty	19	Completed high school	Muslim	Not in a relationship	Lebanon—4 years (2004-2008)	3 years	Not in a relationship	Sales person in small printing shop
Abebech	21	Completed high school	Christian Orthodox	Dating	Lebanon—3 years (2007-2010)	2 years	Maintained relationship	Inherited grandmother's house and is landlady
Worknesh	15	Completed 9 th grade	Muslim	Dating	Lebanon—3 years (1994-1997) Saudi Arabia—4 years (1998-2002)	9 years	Married to the same person & with 3 children	Housewife
Hirut	16	Completed 10 th grade	Christian Orthodox	Not in a relationship	Syria—3 years (2003-2006) UAE—6 years (2006-2012)	3 months	In a relationship	Undecided
Senait	17	Completed 9 th grade	Christian Orthodox	Not in a relationship	Lebanon—6 years (2001-2008)	4 years	Not in a relationship	Started business and failed

Tsehay	19	Completed high school	Christian Orthodox	In a relationship	Lebanon—3 years (1998-2001) UAE—8 years (2002-2010)	2 years	Not in a relationship	Inherited parents' house and is landlady
Sayat	17	Completed 9 th grade	Christian Orthodox	Not in a relationship	Lebanon—1 year & 9 months (2004-2006) UAE—4 year & 4 months (2006-2011)	1 year	Not in a relationship	Stay home
Genet	20	Completed 10 th grade	Christian Orthodox	Not in a relationship	Syria—4 years (2003-2007) UAE—4 years (2008-2011)	7 months	Not in a relationship	Trying to open business
Lakech	22	Completed 11 th grade	Christian Orthodox	Not in a relationship	Bahrain—2 years (1997-1999) UAE—2 years (1999-2002)	10 years	Not in a relationship	Stay home
Elsa	21	Completed 10 th grade	Christian Orthodox	Not in a relationship	Syria—2 years (2003-2006) UAE—3 years (2006-2009)	3 years	Married	Housewife
Helina	23	Diploma in Accounting	Christian Orthodox	Not in a relationship	Lebanon—3 years (2002-2005) UAE—2 1/2 years (2007-2010)	18 months	Not in a relationship	Stay home
Hanna	24	Completed high school	Christian Orthodox	Not in a relationship	Lebanon—2 years (2007-2009)	3 years	Not in a relationship	Financial assistant
Almaz	21	Completed 10 th grade	Christian Orthodox	Married and with a son	Lebanon—4 years (2008-2012)	4 months	Divorced	Thinking to go back
Azeb	22	Completed training in Assistant Chef	Christian Orthodox	Engaged	UAE—2 years (2008-2010)	2 years	Married & with a daughter	Laundry woman in a hotel

This research is conducted based on the premises of qualitative research approaches. I had a set of eighteen semi-structured questions with the aim of having some kind of direction in interviewing the women, while at the same time learning room for unexpected findings (see Appendix B or C). In addition, I tried to follow the information rather than guiding or shaping the interview which allowed for a free-form style of discussion where the women were welcome to tell me other things they thought were important. This let participants take charge of the interview and research process to a certain extent. As expected, it also helped for unanticipated issues to be raised by my interviewees who actually contributed to the originality and relevance of the study. Since returnee women experiences are also shaped by their position in the society, I did try to incorporate women returnees from different social, class, ethnic and literacy groups.

The experience of the interview was a challenging process for my interviewees. The women had gone through a difficult and very personal experience as domestic workers in the Middle East. The experience of returning and reintegrating with their families and the community also had not been easy. As a result, I tried my very best to make the women as comfortable as possible. I encouraged them to take their time in responding to questions and not to disclose information they are not comfortable with. I made sure they choose the place to conduct the interview, which in most instances ended up being in their homes. In addition to the familiarity and the comfort it brought, being at home gave the women a sense of security. Using Amharic (the working language of Ethiopia which most people in Addis Ababa grow up speaking) also helped both my interviewees and myself to converse in a relaxed manner.

After I returned to the United States, one of the grueling processes I had to go through was transcribing and translating the interviews. In translating the transcribed interviews, I used both direct and conceptual meanings based on the context to make the message more meaningful in English. This was done with the utmost possible care.

Limitations of the Study

Ethiopia has more than 80 ethnic groups in the nine vast regional states in addition to two federal cities. One of the limitations in doing research in a country like Ethiopia is the intentional or unintentional exclusion of a group of participants from different regions or different ethnic groups. This research is investigating whether the migration process to Middle East countries produced any empowerment or disempowerment of these women and whether it enabled or disabled their ability to exercise agency and decision making within their family. Such empowerment of the women is studied from a particular form of power within. Each region and ethnic group of the Ethiopian community has its own distinctive culture and tradition that shaped and emulated a unique understanding of gender roles and power dynamics between family and community. As the women are part of the community before and after their migration experience, their reintegration experience and their empowerment or disempowerment can be distinctly different based on their community. As a result, I decided that participants should come from a geographic location where the construction of gender is similar in the studied families even though the family unit might have some different characteristics. Because of this and due to logistic problems, such as limited finance and time, I restricted myself to interviews with women returnees who lived in the city of Addis Ababa.

Though this thesis is concerned about, among other things, the empowerment of women, one of the major limitations of it comes from the pre-existing, deeply entrenched gender inequality that disempowers them. The Ethiopian society is highly patriarchal and women are subordinated and controlled by men in the household. Women grow up learning to be submissive, not outgoing, and they are thought not to advocate for themselves. Being silent and secretive about oneself is considered honorable for women—it is even romanticized as being mysterious. Addis Ababa, where the study was conducted, is relatively more progressive in gender equality and empowerment of women. Nevertheless, one of the difficulties I faced in doing the interview was that the women were very hesitant to talk about their experiences and very secretive about some of the issues surrounding their families. The problem with being secretive about some of the issues I asked was that it left me as a researcher to wonder how much information I may have missed and how much this missed information might have informed my findings. At the same time, I recognize the free choice the informants have in disclosing only the information they are comfortable with, and I believe I have been able to do a solid analysis with the information that they did share.

Throughout the interview process, my interviewees expressed their anger, cried out loud, minimized their difficult experience or rationalized the wrong doer and I found that at times I was emotionally involved. As a result, I cannot deny that as an Ethiopian woman, I am biased and there is a great deal of subjectivity in the interpretations of data and conclusion.

Thesis Outline

This thesis has six chapters. Chapter II provides some relevant literature pertinent to global migration involving women. It offers a discussion of the driving forces and rationales behind the “feminization” of migration. It also provides an analysis of the notion of empowerment before it finally discusses theories of return migration and reintegration with particular emphasis on the acculturation model and the Cultural Identity Model (CIM).

Chapter III lays out the social context of the research. It provides a background on the history of labor migration in Ethiopia and discusses the conditions, actors and motivations of the Gulf countries in hosting an increased influx of women domestic workers. It also explores the legal-rational bureaucracy pertinent to migration into the Gulf region with a particular emphasis on the *kafala* system.

Chapter IV addresses the pre-return conditions of Ethiopian migrant domestic workers. The chapter provides a description of the experiences of Ethiopian women migrant domestic worker returnees from the Middle East through an analysis based on their accounts. From domestic causes of migration to adaptation in the Middle East, this chapter provides an analysis of salient issues throughout the migration process.

Chapter V provides an analysis of reintegration challenges and opportunities of Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers. This chapter covers different thematic areas ranging from the challenges of migrant returnees in readapting to the lower living standard conditions of their home country to reestablishing relationships and negotiating with transformed societal values.

Chapter VI provides a summary of the key findings of the study and offers suggestion on how the Ethiopian government can change some policies and other wise help ameliorate the situation of female Ethiopian domestic workers.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The massive increase in female labor force throughout the world today is, to a large extent, the result of female migration. Long gone are the days when women moved merely to join their fathers or husbands (Mahler & Pessar, 2006). Women today are very important participants in the global migrating population accounting for nearly 50 percent of the cross-border movement and also contributing significantly to the labor force of the destination country. Nevertheless, the effect of women migration through the process of migration, cultural change and “a movement from a distinctive patriarchal system to another, bound by race and class, in transnational capitalism” is yet to be adequately understood (Parreñas, 2001, p. 78). The purpose of this chapter is to provide some salient theories and discourses that attempt to explain the causes, processes and consequences of global migration involving women. In so doing, I will explain the driving forces and rationales behind the feminization of migration. Then, I will deconstruct the notion of empowerment and how it applies to global migration involving women. Finally, I will discuss theories of return migration and reintegration with particular emphasis on the acculturation model and the Cultural Identity Model (CIM).

The Feminization of Migration

Although the second half of the 20th century witnessed an increasing number of human migrations, transnational movements involving women were largely based on the motivations of men, particularly those of “heads of household.” Since migration has historically been a human condition motivated and practiced by men, the role of women

in migration has traditionally been “to accompany or to reunite with their breadwinner migrant husband” (Mahler & Pessar, 2006, p. 28). Since the dawn of the 21st century, however, the migration of women has steadily increased. In fact, the influx of global migration involving women is such that, in 2013, women accounted for 48 percent of all international migrants worldwide.⁴ This feminization of migration can be associated with three important shifts in the global arena, namely, the increased number of women joining the working force, mostly in the developed world; the feminization of poverty in the developing world; and globalization as a catalyst for movement.

The past century saw an increasing number of women joining the formal labor sector. This change, Standing (1999) argues, largely represented a process in which the “changing character of labor markets around the world had been leading to a rise in female labor force participation and a relative if not absolute fall in men’s employment, as well as a ‘feminization’ of many jobs traditionally held by men” (p. 583). The notion of feminization, Standing remarks, embodies dualistic interpretations. On one hand, it signifies the integration of women into regular wage labor. On the other hand, it indicates a move toward the type of employment and labor force participation patterns associated with women. Such process in the labor market is particularly relevant for the developed world. For instance, more than 50% of working-age women participate in the labor force in United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Germany and Sweden (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

Though women increasingly entered into traditionally male-dominated job markets, they “did not abandon their socially prescribed roles as house workers, child

⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2013). International Migration Report 2013.

bearers and care takers” (Labadie-Jackson, 2008, p. 67). Despite the increasing number of women in the paid labor pool, a “corresponding shift that would have more men carry an equal share of household responsibility has not occurred” (UNFPA, 2006, p. 25). The result is that the professional careers of many women in the developed world leave a void in basic household work like cleaning, babysitting and care-giving, tasks Parreñas (2001) calls “reproductive labor.” Parreñas defines reproductive labor as “the labor needed to sustain the productive labor force. Such work includes household chores; the care of elders, adults and youth; the socialization of children; and the maintenance of social ties in the family” (p. 61). As Parreñas (2001) further notes, the financial and professional empowerment of these women in the developed world leads them to be employers themselves, as they now choose to buy household services that would have otherwise hindered their professional development. Both the increasing participation of women in the informal labor sector, and the resulting void created in household responsibilities require women in the developed world to look for replacement labor for household duties. The result is an increase in the demand for migrant women from developing countries “who serve as nannies, maids and sometimes sex workers” (Agustin, 2003; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003).

The other corroborative factor in the feminization of migration is the feminization of poverty that is particularly pervasive in the developing countries. According to Pearce (1978) the feminization of poverty is a phenomenon in which women account for an increasingly large proportion of the economically disadvantaged. Pearce’s theory has been substantiated in a report which indicates that women comprise 70% of the world’s

poor⁵. Thibos, Lavin-Loucks and Martin define poverty as “the inability to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, or shelter” and also “the absence of choice, the denial of opportunity, the inability to achieve life goals, and ultimately the loss of hope” (Thibos et. al., 2007, 1). Chant (2006) also argues that women represent a disproportionate percentage of the world’s poor, that this trend is deepening, and that “women’s increasing share of poverty is linked with a rising incidence of female household headship” (p. 2).

Chant (2003) lays out many factors that contribute to the disproportionate poverty of women, including “gender disparities in rights, entitlements, and capabilities, the gender-differentiated impact of neoliberal restructuring, the informalization and feminization of labor, the erosion of kin-based support networks through migration/conflict and mounting incidence of female household headship” (p. 1). Feminization of poverty is even worse in developing countries where there are limited opportunities to sustain oneself and one’s family members. The patriarchal structure of most societies in the developing world leads women to seek opportunities outside of their countries of origin and migrate to do “women’s work” in developed countries. This results in the feminization of survival wherein “households and the whole communities are increasingly dependent on women for their survival” (Sassen, 2000, p. 55).

Yet another important factor in the migration of labor is globalization, particularly economic globalization that involves transnational flows of goods and capital. Borders have never been as porous as they are today when it comes to trade and financial transactions. The same cannot be said when it comes to movement of people, however. Internal factors such as fear of losing jobs to expatriates and external factors such as security threats that got amplified after the September 11, 2001 attacks upon the United

⁵ Fourth United nation World Conference on Women in 1995.

States in New York City and the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area made movements of people across nations very difficult. It is when seen against this background that the increase of migration in the past few decades becomes a very interesting phenomenon. The World Bank (2012) reported that, despite the strict barriers against migration set forth by economically affluent countries, the number of people working and residing outside their countries of origin reached 215 million 2012, accounting from 3.05% of the entire global population. This is almost double to the 120 million 15 years ago.

It is important to recognize that the feminization of migration is not only about the alarming rate of women involved in cross-border movements; it is also “a movement from one distinct patriarchal system to another, bound by race and class, in transnational capitalism” (Parreñas, 2001, p. 78). In this sense, international migration involving women should be analyzed from a gendered perspective of the political economy. According to Parreñas (2001), “the hierarchy of womanhood—involved race, class and nation, as well as gender—establishes a work transfer system of reproductive labor among women, the international transfer of care taking (p. 78). This means that, in spite of their increased rate of labor market participation, women continue to be responsible for reproductive labor in both their sending and receiving countries.

Discourses on Empowerment of Women

‘Empowerment’ has become a buzzword in development and feminist discourse. Due to its widespread usage, ‘empowerment’ must be understood and defined within the context or situation of the group that is supposedly being empowered. Central to the concept of empowerment is an understanding of what constitutes power. (Rowlands, 1997; Oxaal, 1997, Moffat et. al. 1995). Williams et al. quoted in Oxaal (1997, p. iii)

provide a useful distinction between different forms of power. The first is what they call “power-over,” which is a kind of power that involves power imbalance. This kind of power is what the society commonly understand what power means which signifies “an either/or relationship of domination and subordination [that] requires constant vigilance to maintain, and invites active and passive resistance.” (Williams et al. quoted in Oxaal (1997, p. iii). According to Rowlands, this kind of power “may be responded to with compliance, resistance (which weakens processes of victimization) or manipulation” (Rowlands, 1997, 13). The second form, “power-to,” according to Williams is related to having decision-making authority and the power to solve problems using one’s ability and creativity (Williams et al. quoted in Oxaal (1997, p. iii). The third form of power is “power-with”, which involves active participation of a group of people with a common understanding and purpose to achieve collective goals. Finally, “power from within” refers to “self-confidence, self-awareness and assertiveness [and it] relates to how individuals can recognize how power operates in their lives by analyzing their experience, and thus gain the confidence to act to influence and change systems of power” (Williams et al. quoted in Oxaal (1997, p. iii). According to Rowlands, power from within represent “the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human [and] its basis is self-acceptance and self-respect.” (Rowlands, 1997, 13).

“Power-over” is the most widely practiced and dominant form of power. “Power-over” assumes a zero-sum concept where one group’s increase in power necessarily involves another’s loss of power. Such conceptualization of power, interpreted through a feminist lens, creates a patriarchal society in which men dominate women. When power

exists in a different form, however, it not only empowers women but also benefits men. As Oxaal (1997) notes, “Men also benefit from the results of women’s empowerment with the chance to live in a more equitable society and explore new roles” (p. iv). As a result feminists have been calling for the redistribution of power. In “Power-to” and “power-within” structures, for example, all individuals recognize their ability, interest and entitlement to make choices and participate in the decision making process. The feminist understanding of empowerment, according to Rowlands (1997), involves participation in decision-making and also inclusion in “the process that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions” (p. 14). Thus, the feminist idea of empowerment includes a combination of “power-within and power-to.” As gender inequalities and gender roles are socially constructed ideas based on power imbalance, feminist scholars conceptualize empowerment as a process of undoing such negative constructions, so that women “come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence decision” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 14). My research addresses empowerment in line with the notions of “power-within” and “power-to.” Even though empowerment as a group exercise is organized collectively with the aim of bringing about holistic gender justice, the argument in my study is consistent with the assumption that women are better off bringing change from within themselves and within society by participating in decision-making processes.

We can also view empowerment through the lens of personal experience. Rowlands (1995) identifies three distinct dimensions- personal relationships, close relationships, and collective relationships. In the “personal” dimension, empowerment is understood as developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and

undoing the effects of internalized oppression. Empowerment in “close relationships,” on the other hand, is about developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationship and decisions made within the different levels of relationships such as within family. In the “collective” dimension, individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone. This includes involvement in political structures, but might also cover collective action based on cooperation rather than competition. Collective action may be locally focused—for example, at a village or neighborhood level—or institutional, such as within national networks or the United Nations.

My research explores the different dimensions of empowerment migrant women experience though its main focus will be their personal and the close relationships. How do women feel about themselves after a particular experience and how do they navigate their established relationships? In this study, I focus on the “power-within” and “power-to” notions of empowerment as they manifest through personal and relational experiences of empowerment.

Theories of Return Migration and Reintegration

The Acculturation Model

Migration as a physical and cultural transition has two dimensions: emigration and immigration. Emigration or leaving one’s home of origin, can be conceptualized as a person’s loss of their people and culture, their internal sense of harmony and familiarity, and often the loss of their mother tongue (Tannenbaum, 2007). However, immigration, the process of entering to a host country, provides a feeling of connectedness to others through which individuals can explore and immerse themselves in another culture and

expand their sense of self through acculturation processes (Tannenbaum, 2007). There are multiple causes of acculturation and its effects are not only varied but also observed and measured over varying amounts of time:

[Acculturation is] culture change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems. Acculturative change may be the consequence of direct cultural transmission; it may be derived from non-cultural causes, such as ecological or demographic modification induced by an impinging culture; it may be delayed, as with internal adjustments following upon the acceptance of alien traits or patterns; or it may be a reactive adaptation of transitional modes of life (Social Science Research Council, 1954, p. 974 on Berry et al. 1992).

Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits (1936) define acculturation as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture’s patterns of either or both groups” (p. 149 on Berry et al. 1992). Under this definition, Berry et al. (1992) argue that acculturation “is to be distinguished from culture change, of which it is but one aspect, and assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation.” (p. 271).

According to Berry et al., acculturation is a process where an individual migrant undergoes in psychological change to engage with a new culture in everyday interaction. Though there is a pattern with different immigrant groups, acculturation involves a subjective negotiation in which an individual must decide how to adopt to a new place: retain or abandon one’s cultural identity? In addition to an individual immigrant’s character and decision, the course of change resulting from acculturation depends on cultural and psychological characteristics of the dominant group; the purpose, length, permanence of contact; and policies being pursued by the state (Berry et al, 1992). Another important factor influencing the extent and the outcome of acculturation is point of immersion. ‘Point of immersion’ is the extent to which an individual immigrant is

absorbed into the social, cultural and economic life of the destination community through “level of formal schooling; participation in wage employment; extent of urbanization, mass media use, and political participation; and change in religion, language, daily practices, and social relation” (Berry et al., 1992, p. 275).

The decisions on how and where to engage with the dominant culture that determine the extent of acculturation process lies with individuals, are called “acculturation strategies” (Barry et al., 1992). Based on the orientations to two basic issues—maintaining relationships with the dominant group and/or maintaining cultural identity and characteristics—acculturation strategies can be categorized as integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. Both integration and separation strategies of acculturation focus on maintaining country of origin cultural identity and character. Though separation entails avoiding interaction with the dominant host culture, integration is a strategy adopted to “make the best of both worlds,” as individuals try to maintain some degree of cultural integrity (Berry et al., 1992). On the other side, individuals adopting assimilation and marginalization strategies in their acculturation processes do not show any effort to maintain their original cultural identity. In the case of assimilation, individuals abandon their culture as a way to adopt and seek interaction with the dominant culture, claiming a new group identity. In the case of marginalization, however, individuals abandon their former culture without taking on the dominant culture. Marginalization is often enforced by the dominant culture; individuals who experience marginalization often reject the dominant culture out of distaste for the marginalization process. In different historical moments, migrants in a dominant host culture may create a minority group by adopting marginalization in which they experience exclusion and

discrimination.⁶ According to Berry et al., any kind of acculturation process involves a behavioral change resulting acculturative stress, feelings of marginality, alienation, and identity confusion in addition to mental health problems. Acculturative stress, according to their study, can be high for individuals who neither maintain their culture nor adopt the host culture—those, in other words, who experience marginalization. Individuals who choose to maintain their culture and adopt the host culture, therefore embracing integration, exhibit low acculturative stress.

The acculturation strategies adopted by an immigrant affect how the immigrant reintegrates with his/her home culture upon return. Adopted acculturation strategy, and the behavioral changes and stress that comes with it, affect not only the immigrant's interaction with their host country but their interaction with their home country. In temporary migration arrangements like “contract labor migration” specifically, understanding how individuals choose to interact and what strategy they adopt for their acculturation a crucial step in understanding the later challenge of reintegration. For women whose interaction with the host dominant culture takes place within a segmented labor incorporation (if, say, they are domestic workers in a household), their chosen acculturation strategy will be of particular importance in understanding their identification as women, their status and empowerment.

⁶ Black Africans' experience of forced migration and forced cultural loss in America and their acculturation as a minority group excluded from a white dominant culture can be an example of marginalization as acculturation strategy.

Cultural Identity Model (CIM)

While there are a number of scholarly investigations directed at aspects of migration, the notion of remigration is probably the least studied, as most migration studies examine permanent settlement. However, in recent years, trends show migration is becoming increasingly more temporary, making return to one's home country after living somewhere else a common pattern. Returnees, also referred to as *sojourners*, experience double-sided cultural transitions (Sussman, 2002). They go through the process of adjustment and the outcome of adaptation, culture shock and reverse shock. Cultural adjustment is a key concept that measures the degree to which an individual identifies with the home country and the host country throughout the process of migration and remigration—simply put, it is a sojourner's cultural identity (Sussman, 2002).

Cultural identity is also defined as the psychological counterpoint to national identity. Where national identity is defined as one's place of birth or country of origin, cultural identity is more aligned with who an individual perceives himself/herself to be, and takes into account the specific cultural influences in his/her life (Costa and Bamossy 1995; Hall 1992). Accordingly, the Cultural Identity Model (CIM) by Sussman (2000, 2002) explains remigration processes focusing on cultural identity of self and a shift in these identities as triggered by migration and remigration. Sussman (2002) provides four tenets of CIM:

(1) Cultural identity is a critical but latent aspect of self-concept; (2) salience of cultural identity is, to a large extent, a consequence of the commencement of a cultural transition; (3) cultural identity is dynamic and can shift as a consequence of overseas transition and self-concept disturbances and (4) shifts in cultural identity serve as a mediator between cultural adaptation and the repatriation experience (p. 394).

Return migration entails re-contact with original culture, which usually triggers a shift in cultural identity of self-established values through adaptation. According to CIM, there are four potential identity shifts: affirmative, subtractive, additive, and global (Sussman, 2002). Affirmative identity shift occurs when *sojourns* react positively to returning and affirm their home country identity. Sussman (2002) calls them “the grateful repatriates.” The model predicts that these individuals will experience low adaptation to their host country and will maintain home-culture identity throughout their cultural transitions. In contrast, both subtractive and additive identity shifts are by an initial sense of vague cultural identity and a strong sense of the disparities between home and host cultures in both the initial and later adjustment processes. Both shifts are exhibited by individuals who experience high adaptation in their host culture and subsequently experience high return distress, though for different reasons. Subtractive identifiers’ high return distress emanates from a feeling of culture loss and the resulting alienation and estrangement from a home country. This feeling may result in a search for a new group where members perceive each other as culturally dissimilar. Such estrangement, at its extreme, may lead to a “feeling that one lacks a cultural identity altogether” (Tannenbaum, 2007, p. 150). On the other hand, additive identifiers experience high stress as a consequence of embracing many aspects of the host culture—values, customs, social rituals, emotion and thought. Members of This group search for opportunities to interact with members of their former host culture and minimize interactions with their home culture. Sussman (2002) recognizes additive shift as an identity gain where cultural identity is enhanced through sufficient gain that a return is negatively experienced. The global identity shift “enables re-migrants to hold multiple cultural representations

simultaneously" (Tannenbaum, 2007, p. 150). This group may have multiple international experiences which enable them to move in and out of cultures allowing them a sense of belonging to a global community. Cultural adaptation to the host culture is often instrumental, which makes return a positive experience.

Gender as a learned social concept varies in different cultures. The construction and perception of gender in a particular culture may exist at different points along the spectrum between matriarchal and patriarchal. For migrants, adopting a host culture may also mean adopting new perceptions of gender, which require downward or upward mobility in terms of social status. For women, this adoption of new gender perceptions will affect their understanding of self, gender status and empowerment. However, return migration may disturb this reconstructed self-identity of women resulting in, among other things, identity shift. The type of identity shift that women returnees' experience, based on Sussman CIM, will determine the way they experience the home perception of gender.

CHAPTER III

CONTEXTUALIZING LABOR MIGRATION OF ETHIOPIAN WOMEN TO THE GULF REGION

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 105 million persons are presently working in a country other than their country of birth. As discussed in the previous chapter, global labor mobility today is a massive sector that generated US\$440 billion to migrant workers in 2011 alone. More than \$350 billion of that total earning in the same year was transferred to developing countries in the form of remittances (World Bank, 2012). When properly exercised, labor migration has far-reaching potential for the migrants, their communities, the countries of origin and destination, and for employers. Today, a growing number of both sending and receiving countries view international labor migration as an integral part of their national development and employment strategies. For countries of origin, labor migration eases unemployment pressures and contributes to development through remittances, knowledge transfer, and the creation of business and trade networks. For countries of destination that suffer from labor shortages, labor migration can alleviate labor scarcity and facilitate mobility.

Nevertheless, despite the efforts made to ensure the protection of migrant workers, many remain vulnerable and assume significant risks during the migration process. The aim of this chapter is to provide a background on the processes and risks of labor migration involving Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East. After providing a brief historical context of migration in Ethiopia, I discuss the conditions, actors and motivations of the Gulf countries in hosting an increased influx of women

domestic workers. I then look into the legal-rational bureaucracy pertinent to migration into the Gulf region with a particular emphasis on the *kafala* system. Finally, I will deliberate on different consequences of the *kafala* system for migrant workers including structural dependency, absence of institutional protection and denial of fundamental freedom of movement.

Brief Migration History of Ethiopia

Although international migration has a centuries old history that is motivated by, among other things, the slave trade, urbanization and industrialization, it is a relatively recent phenomenon in Ethiopia. Before the 1974 revolution that overthrew Haile Selassie I, the last of the Ethiopian monarchical rulers, very few Ethiopians migrated internationally. The only notable form of migration involved the limited number of people from the elite group who either did their studies abroad or served internationally as diplomats. For example, Levine (1965) estimates only 35 Ethiopians went to live in the West (USA and Europe) between 1876 and 1922. Between 1922 and 1935, the Ethiopian government attempted to modernize its administration and sent 144 individuals to study abroad in Western universities. Upon their return, these individuals occupied positions of high responsibility in the government. According to Levine (1965), migration trends accelerated between 1941 and 1974 when an estimated 20,000 Ethiopians from about a population of 22 million left to complete their higher educations and fulfill diplomatic missions. A vast majority returned not because the economic prospects in Ethiopia were so attractive, but because the Western-educated were so few that they were guaranteed positions of power and authority (Terrazas, 2007). In addition to formal education, military trainings were also part of Ethiopian nationals' migrations. According to Chacko

& Gebre (2013) some 2,500 Ethiopians received military training in the United States between 1953 and 1968 and then returned home.

The deposition of the monarchy and the introduction of a socialist regime in 1974 marked a shift in the pattern of migration. In addition to the political turmoil, parts of Ethiopia experienced a devastating famine between 1973 and 1974 that resulted in the displacement of an estimated 250,000 individuals internally. In the beginning years of the *Derg*,⁷ emigration involved people who were fleeing from the government as a result of their political ties with the monarch. These emigrants also had to change the rout of migration as a result of the migration policy of the *Derg*. Immediately after seizing power in 1974, the *Derg* made emigration illegal and closed Ethiopia's borders. Emigration from Ethiopia between 1974 and 1991 involved illegally crossing borders and getting into refugee camps in the neighboring countries to be eventually resettled in countries like the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Germany (Terrazas, 2007).

In spite of the ban on emigration, the flow of Ethiopian migrants kept rising during the *Derg*'s regime. The main cause of such increase of migration at the time was political instability and conflict. The political instability was related to the period of what came to be known as the "Red Terror," a violent political campaign of the *Derg* against oppositions between 1977 and 1979 (Fransen, & Kuschminder, 2009). The country also was involved in the ongoing independence struggle of Eritrea that led to violent clashes in the north, which mainly affected rural areas from the year 1961 until 1991, the year in which Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia (Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009). In

⁷ Haile Selassie's successor, the *Derg*, came to power on September 1974. *Derg*, which means "committee" or "council" in Amharic, is the short name of the *Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army*. It is a committee of military officers, who ruled the country from 1974 to 1987. The *Derg*'s government was formally known as the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia.

addition to the internal politics and conflict, the Ethio-Somalia war over the Ogaden region in Ethiopia in 1977 and 1978 created a security threat to citizens. According to Terrezas (2007), at the time international relief agencies estimated that more than 1,000 Ethiopian refugees were entering Somalia daily (Terrazas, 2007). Such internally and externally instigated political instabilities and conflicts generated massive refugee flows in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which at the time were the only route for emigration. Migration with such cause also changed the probability of return migration. After the 1970s and 1980s, many Ethiopians, including approximately “5,000 Ethiopian students, diplomats, tourists and businessmen residing in the United States decided to stay in their host countries” (Getahun 2007 quoted by Chacko & Gebre, 2013, p. 497). With the fall of the *Derg* regime in 1991, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of Ethnic based parties, has been in power for the past 23 years. Through this time, a relative peace was achieved with the exception of the two years’ war in 1998 with neighboring Eritrea. The war lasted for two years, resulting in, among other things, refugee influxes between the two countries (Terrazas, 2007).

In addition to the early push factors in the 1970s and 1980s including political instability and conflict, the past 20 years of Ethiopian migration were driven by concurrent famine and poverty (Chacko & Gebre, 2013; Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009). As a result, migration has been a way to diversify income in a household dependent on agriculture where “some household members migrate to areas with better opportunities while other household members stay at their original location and benefit from, for example, remittances” (Fransen, & Kuschminder, 2009, p. 11). Despite the end of authoritarianism and the refugee crises that plagued the country in the 1970s and 1980s,

emigration has persisted. As Abye (2007) observes, “In less than 30 years, Ethiopian immigration, born of a conjectural crisis situation, has become a structural immigration” (Abye, 2004 quoted in Terrazas, 2007).

Ethiopia is the second most populated country in Sub-Saharan Africa with 91.73 million people in the year 2012, next to Nigeria.⁸ The World Bank, to date, categorized the country as one of the poorest countries in the world where the poverty head count ratio at national poverty line is 29.6 percent of the population.⁹ As a result, in Ethiopia, migration has become “an important strategy to cope with the multiple crises of recurrent famines, conflicts with neighboring states, political repression, and high unemployment that many Ethiopians have experienced over the past few decades” (Fernandez, 2010, p. 11). While the Ethiopian populace in general has been going experiencing a series of economic adversities, the gendered landscape of poverty and lack of economic opportunity have exacerbated these problems for women. Given the historically deep-rooted unequal status and patriarchal structure of the Ethiopian society, women have been overwhelmingly susceptible to cheap and unprotected labor. The result is an unparalleled interest and practice of seeking jobs in nearby Middle East countries through both legal and illegal means. Migration has essentially become a strategy to cope with unemployment and poverty.

It is becoming increasing apparent that migration of women as domestic workers is not only the economic survival strategy sought by Ethiopian women and their families,

⁸ World Bank Country Data. Retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/country/ethiopia>

⁹ “National Poverty rate is the percentage of the population living below the national poverty line. National estimates are based on population-weighted subgroup estimates from house hold surveys.” Retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC/countries/ET?display=graph>

it is also a way of “easing” unemployment tensions within the country by the Ethiopian government. With 55 percent of the population between the ages of 14-60,¹⁰ the unemployment rate for youth is one of the highest in the world with 25 percent in 2012 and remains particularly high among young females (International Monetary Fund, 2013). To this effect, the government of Ethiopia has adopted different policies in order to maximize emigration (Baldwin-Edwards, 2005). Emigration has therefore become one way of managing the unemployment rate, acquiring hard currency through remittances, and raising skill levels through returning migrants (Baldwin-Edwards, 2005). In almost all cases, women domestic workers send all of their monthly remittances to their families in Ethiopia where they depend on this kind of money to withstand inflation rates that have reached unbearable levels in the past five years. More importantly, when we see the larger picture, the remittance from emigrants is growingly becoming the backbone of the national economy. According to the National Bank of Ethiopia, in 2008 the recorded inflow of remittances from migrants was worth over US\$800 million (National bank of Ethiopia, 2008 on Fernandez, 2010). This contributed between 10 and 20% of Ethiopia’s annual gross domestic product (GDP) (Fernandez, 2010). This figure does not account for unrecorded informal remittances, which are estimated to be even higher. The devaluation of currency in late 2008, in addition to other objectives, was aimed to ensure the continued flow of remittances by making it more attractive for migrants to send money (Fernandez, 2010).

¹⁰ UN Country Profile. Retrieved from <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=ethiopia#Summary>

The Middle East: The New Destination for Ethiopian Labor Migrants

The Middle East countries, especially those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) currently accommodate large numbers of foreign laborers. Such immigration is historically recent and unprecedented. It is principally a result of increased purchasing power by these countries, which are getting increased oil revenues and enjoying stable economic development (Beydoun, 2004). The importation of labor that came alongside the increased household income of the GCC countries at the beginning was focused on men-dominated work of construction. However, in the past two decades, there has been an overwhelming increase in inflow of women domestic workers. For example, women migrants in 2000 represented almost 30% of all laborer inflows in the GCC compared to 8 percent in the early 1980s (ILO, 2004).

Numerous interconnected factors can be accounted for in the high demand and the subsequent influx of domestic workers in the Gulf region. One of the major factors is related to the way in which economic development in the Middle East has changed family dynamics and gender roles. Such social change created an increased demand for labor work especially the gendered domestic and care work (ILO, 2004). The oil boom transformed these countries into some of the wealthiest nations in the world, bringing about higher standard of living and improved infrastructures of education and health services. Such development increases the involvement of women in the market creating a gap in the household work where local women are not willing to take up paid domestic work. In addition to this, the development and emergence of new cities change family structures. Previously, most young families stayed with their parents, who provide

traditional care system for the new born children. Currently, young couples tend to live far from their families, and thus hiring domestic workers and care givers for children and elders is becoming necessary.

Another important element in this issue is how hiring domestic workers has always been a symbol of status, prestige, and wealth in the community of the Arab world (Sabban, 2002). Now being the main exporters of oil, almost all households in the Middle East are able to hire one or more domestic workers. Such new potential has paved the way to redefine class in relation to having domestic workers in the Arab world. Currently, domestic workers are “ordered in a racialized hierarchy, with Filipina women at the top signaling the highest status and commanding the highest salaries, followed by Indonesian and Sri Lankan women, and African women at the bottom.” (Fernandez, 2010). Ethiopian women domestic workers in the Middle East are paid \$100 to \$150 per month—a dismal sum that is low by all standards. Given the salary and the expenses for a live-in domestic worker are so low, Middle East countries other than the oil rich countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Yemen are also becoming the major importers of Ethiopian women. It should also be recognized that the growing trend in these countries places household work within a so-called “culture of shame” whereby women nationals are not willing to perform it (ILO, 2004). Such phenomena increased the demand for foreign domestic workers and accelerates their importation. Following these many causes, the number of domestic workers has increased steeply each year since it started in the 1970s (ILO, 2004). On the report, ILO estimated 2.1 million workers were employed as domestic workers in 2010. In Lebanon alone, there are some 200,000 foreign domestic workers, hailing primarily from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Nepal (HRW, 2012). The

regional office of the International Labor Organization estimated, in 2009, Saudi Arabia to be the largest employer of domestic workers, with the approximate number of 784,500 persons engaged in domestic work, of whom two-thirds were women (ILO, 2004).

The source countries for the domestic workers in Middle East countries were mainly the Asian countries of Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Indonesia. However, in the past decade, African countries like Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, Egypt and Kenya are participating in such labor export. In fact, in 2008/2009, the top two destinations for Ethiopian domestic workers were Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Fernandez, 2010). The influx of Ethiopian women into the GCC specifically increased at an unprecedented rate, faster than the increase among domestic workers of other nationalities entering, including those of Sri Lankan, Filipino or Indonesian origins. This is attributed to the effort of the national governments of the latter groups of source countries in improving protection and monitoring, while the same cannot be said of Ethiopia whose legal-bureaucratic structure of labor migration is relatively in its embryonic stage (Jureidini, 2002). By the end of 2009, over 30,000 Ethiopian women were recorded as legal migrants to the Middle East, accounting for 96% of the total recorded labor migrants from the country. However, unofficial estimates claim that at least the same number of women migrate through illegal brokers (Fernandez, 2010). Currently, the government is facilitating legal migration of Ethiopian domestic workers to the Middle East. This trend is even more substantial today considering the state-sponsored immigration of tens of thousands of Ethiopian domestic workers to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) alone.¹¹ As a result, it has been reported

¹¹ On May 2012, *The Saudi Gazette* reported Ethiopia commenced the sending of 45,000 Ethiopian housemaids per month to KSA. This move by the Ethiopian government received widespread criticism as the controversial recruitment strategy will send 500,000 Ethiopian women annually to a country long known for abusing housemaids and foreign nationals. Many news and opinion websites that are critical of

that the Saudi Arabia Department of Economic Affairs and committees from the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor reached an agreement to facilitate the travel of 45,000 Ethiopian women housemaids per month to the KSA. When calculated yearly, this will be about half a million immigrants and accounts for 0.06% of the total Ethiopian population.

Whereas Saudi and Ethiopian officials laud the economic benefits of the aforementioned undertaking, there are mounting allegation of human rights violations that typically includes physical and sexual abuse against women domestic workers in the host countries. It is common to hear in both the source and destination countries about how Ethiopian women domestic workers in the Middle East are reportedly dehumanized, suppressed and subsequently enslaved for economic or sexual purposes. The women are vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and abuse in the different stages of the migration process (Anbesse et al., 2009; Baldwin-Edwards, 2005; Beydoun, 2006; Fernandez, 2010; Jureidini, 2002; ILO, 2004; Kebede, 2001; Regt, 2007; Sabban, 2002). D'Angelo and Marciacq describe the different challenges faced the women domestic workers in different stages of labor migration as:

Whether in the recruitment stage, the journey or living and working in another country, women migrant workers, especially those in irregular situations, are vulnerable to harassment, intimidation or threats to themselves and their families, economic and sexual exploitation, racial discrimination and xenophobia, poor working conditions, increased health risks and other forms of abuse, including trafficking into forced labor, debt bondage, involuntary servitude and situations of captivity (D'Angelo, & Marciacq, nd).

the Ethiopian government like Ethiopian Review (www.ethiopianreview.com) and ECAD Forum (www.ecadform.com) condemned the move strongly. Amid tougher restrictions for housemaids working in KSA by the Philippines, Indian, Sri Lankan, Indonesian and Kenyan governments out of concerns of human rights abuses, these voices question the decision made by the Ethiopian government to export young housemaids in astronomical figures.

In a 2008 report, Human Rights Watch documented that “there had been an average of one death per week from unnatural causes among domestic workers in Lebanon, including suicide and falls from tall buildings” (HRW, 2008). Beydoun identifies the situation endured by these women as modern day slavery. He argues women are being the victims of geographic and cultural transitions, physical and sexual abuse and a more patriarchal and oftentimes xenophobic society (Beydoun, 2004). He argues the definition of trafficking of a person, in the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, encompasses the situation of Ethiopian women in the Gulf region. He accuses the government of Ethiopia, the government of the destination countries, and human rights organizations for remaining silent about the suffering of these women (Beydoun, 2004).

In addition to abuse and exploitation, in many instances, young women seeking domestic work in the Middle East need to reinvent themselves culturally and religiously in order to easily assimilate into the host country employer’s rather conservative expectations.¹² While this cultural metamorphosis may be helpful in integrating better with the employer in the host country, it could be detrimental for many of the workers in their reintegration with the customs and traditions of their hometown after they return. According to Anbesse et al. (2009), cultural transformation, enforced cultural isolation, pervasive exploitative treatment, and disappointment in not achieving expectations were the prominent self-identified threats to mental health by Ethiopian women domestic workers returnees from the Middle Eastern countries (Anbesse et al, 2009).

¹² Most young women seeking domestic work in the Middle East transform themselves religiously and culturally, at least at a superficial level, to win the trust and confidence of their employers. This may include wearing veils, *burqa* or *hijab* to give the impression that they adhere to the same values as their employers.

The *Kafala* (Sponsorship) System

The *kafala* (sponsorship) system originated in the Bedouin principles of hospitality in the 1950s. Bedouins are Arab nomadic pastoralist groups well known for their hospitality and generosity towards their guests (Khan, & Harroff-Tavel, 2011). The *kafala* system requires the host or the *kafeel* to assume responsibility for the behavior and safety of his guests. Today, however, these principles do not any longer represent their original value and are unfortunately the main tools for the governments of the Middle East countries to monitor migrant labor, mostly in inhumane ways (Bajracharya & Sijapati, 2012).

In Middle East countries, sponsorship is the only means for workers to obtain an entry visa and residence permit (Murray, 2013). Such sponsorship-based relationships between the employer citizen and the immigrant are regulated by the transformed *kafala* system. The *kafala* system presently has two major features. The first feature involves the contract period of the employment. Domestic workers specifically, and labor migrants in general, are treated as “workers by contract” (Sanghadia, n.d.). Their stay in the country is always temporary based on the contract period, which is a minimum of 2 years with limited possibility of renewal. Unlike in other regions, labor migration to the Middle East rarely leads to permanent settlement or naturalization no matter how long a worker has been living and working in the host country (Longva, 1999). The second feature of the system is that the domestic workers’ visa and legal status are tied to the sponsor. In the *kafala* system employers assume the dual responsibility of being employer and sponsor. The sponsor is required to take full economic and legal responsibility of the domestic worker during the contract period. Such responsibility includes different expenses,

including workers' recruitment fee, employment visa, workers' airfare to and from country of origin, medical examination, issuance of national identity card or *iqama*, work permit, and wage. In return, the domestic workers are allowed to work only for the sponsor. If the domestic workers decide to leave their sponsors, in addition to stiff monetary penalty, they will be obligated to leave the country immediately at their own expense instead of having their employers cover their return airfare at the end of their contract (Murray, 2013).

The *kafala* system not only provides the legal basis for the residency and employment of migrant workers in Middle East countries, but it also affects the entire process of migration of women for domestics from Ethiopia and other poor countries. Starting from creating the possibility of migration, the *kafala* system shapes the entrance of these women to the Middle East, regulates their relation with the *kafeel* (the sponsor and the employer at the same time), and governs their stay in the country. It is also important to note that the domestic worker's visa and legal status is tied to the sponsor, enabling the governments of Middle East countries to administer and control millions of domestic workers through exclusion from permanent residency or citizenship that might emanate rights. I now turn to the different consequences of the *kafala* system, and how it reinforces such exclusion throughout the migration process.

Structural Dependency

The *kafala* system creates structural dependency between the domestic worker and the *kafeel*. As a result of lack of free labor market in Middle East countries, it is not possible for anyone to enter to the country and then search for a job. Rather, the search and recruitment will be in the home country. The relationship of the domestic worker and

the *kafeel* is unique in that one's existence is dependent on the goodwill of the other. It creates the realm where it objectifies domestic workers to the citizens of the country in a situation where power imbalance between citizens and immigrants already exist. Newcomb (2010), in explaining the relation between the domestic worker, the *kafeel* and the government through the *kafala* system highlights "the *kafala* contract remains strategically positioned as a barrier between the employee and the state vis-à-vis the employer. It as if the state delegates power to the employer, and the household trumps the social contract of the state" (p. 22). In addition to socio-economic discrimination through gender and race, the system creates structural dependence of these women as a result of the seclusion of the government in the relation. This seclusion of government is justified by the non-existence of established relations between the domestic worker and the government. The *kafala* system stipulates that the migrant labor contract is temporary and creates no possibility of future citizenship that might enable them to organize in a union. The exclusion of migrant domestic workers from citizenship limits their bargaining power through unions, resulting in the impossible task of exercising their rights and prohibition from claiming any redress from the government. Theoretically, the relation of the domestic worker and the employer is regulated by the contract of work that resulted in the purchasing of labor in exchange for wage and other expenses. In reality, however, the employer is not purchasing labor power but the power to command (Newcomb, 2010). The noninterference of government leaves the *kafala* system to be the sole regulating principle of the entire relation between the domestic worker and the *kafeel*.

The *kafala* system is an institution to control the ever increasing migrant population in the Middle East and reaffirms the dominance of citizens. Middle East

countries accommodate a large number of migrant labor. The largest from them are Kuwait, 61%; Qatar%, 75 %; UAE, 76 %, Bahrain, 32 %; Oman, 27 %; and Saudi Arabia, 27 % (Longva, 1999). As a result of such ever increasing migrant populations, the local people perceive themselves as being “under siege”. The *Kafala* system ultimately protects and secures the dominance of citizens. Accordingly, *Kafala* can be argued as a system set up to segregate or prevent migrant domestic workers, based on their temporary status, from integrating into local society by creating structural dependency (Newcomb, 2010). The system has been gaining momentum as an important institution cited in concerns over national sovereignty in relation to migration policy.

Absence of Institutional Protection

Historically, domestic work is considered beyond the legal reach of legislations. Both the Ethiopian legal system and the legal systems in Middle Eastern countries excludes domestic work from being regulated by the labor law.¹³ The exclusion of domestic work from the labor law limits the right to take action in case of mistreatment or violation of rights. The exclusion of domestic work from the labor law is attributed to the historic gender role assumption of “women’s work” and the ambiguity of private/public space of the work place. The labor regime and division of labor are constructed around men patriarchal trends within gender relations are perpetuated. As a result, from the beginning of the labor market, domestic work has been feminized and considered inherent to women. The capitalist system where productivity is related to the traditional form of market and profitability considers waged domestic labor as a non-productive form of labor and, therefore, results in a very low pay (Newcomb, 2010). The location of

¹³ With the exception of Jordan who has amended its labor laws in 2010 to incorporate domestic workers, most other countries in the region have relied on introducing standard employment contracts to regulate terms and conditions of employment without inclusion of domestic workers in their labor law

work and the capability of payment within private homes also contributes to the low payment. Domestic work falls low in the hierarchical capitalist system and is evolving from being women's work to migrant women's work.

The other reason why domestic and care work are not included as work governed by the labor laws of both source and destination countries is the private/public space ambiguity. In domestic work, "the private sphere of the employer is the public sphere of the employee" (Newcomb, 2010, p. 12). The workplace of domestic workers assumed to be public space and regulated by government is intertwined with the private sphere of family where governments are reluctant to intervene or regulate. The capitalist ideology's categorization of domestic work as "informal" impedes acknowledgment of the private sphere as a domain for government intervention, which, in turn, opens a space for vulnerability of domestic workers beyond the sight of the public and the state. At the same time, the presence of migrant workers in the most intimate private sphere of their lives also invokes the feeling of vulnerability among the citizen employers. To balance such competitive interests, domestic work is excluded from the labor law but regulated in the Alien Residence Law under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior. Consequently, conflicts and disagreements between domestic workers and employers are viewed not as labor conflicts to be solved in open courts of law, but as private family disputes at best, or as "law and order" problems requiring police intervention at worst. Without access to reparation mechanisms from the labor courts, the women domestic workers do not have many options for redress. Language barriers, cultural shocks, restrictions on their freedom of movement, and lack of information accompany lack of legal protection, thereby making the justice system inaccessible. Counter-accusations,

poorly conducted investigations, lengthy trials, and the weak enforcement of judgments make it risky for domestic workers to approach the criminal justice system as well (Varia, 2013). Human Rights Watch (2008) notes that migrant domestic workers suing their employers for abuse face legal obstacles, and risk imprisonment and deportation due to the restrictive visa system. In a system where the sponsor is at the same time the employer, staying in the host country depends on the same person, and the likelihood of domestic workers getting mistreatment and abuse is high. In the cases where domestic workers complain of abuse, the inefficient justice system leads many domestic workers to accept small financial settlements, a return ticket home, or nothing at all.

Denial of Fundamental Freedom of Movement

As stated earlier, the *kafala* system ties the visa and legal status of the domestic worker with the sponsor where the sponsor assumes the legal and economic responsibility to the domestic worker. Immediately after entrance, domestic workers are required to surrender all their documents including their passport. Even though such confiscation of documents is not required by law, it is accustomed throughout the region. The Minister of the Interior, which regulates matters of residency of migrant domestic workers, recommends the confiscation of such documents. The local authorities attempt to rationalize such violations on the basis of national security. In countries where the number of migrants is more than the citizens, holding the documents and passports of migrants is considered as a useful tool for controlling non-citizens even though it is not politically correct. On the other side, for the citizen employer, it is the best way to guarantee that their employees will not unexpectedly quit their jobs and leave the country before the end of the contract period. The combination of passport confiscation and the

obligation to work only for their *kafeel* restricts the domestic workers' fundamental rights of movement by confining them in their work place and even restricting them to return to their home country.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRE-RETURN CONDITIONS OF FEMALE ETHIOPIAN MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

Although the major objective of this study is to study the reintegration challenges of Ethiopian women migrant domestic workers returning from the Middle East to their homes, such an analysis would not be complete without a discussion of their experiences within the destination countries. The psychological, physical, and social setbacks these women encounter upon returning to their families and communities are the result of multilayered and intricate acculturation and cultural negotiation processes they had to go through in the countries to which they migrated. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a description of the migration experiences of Ethiopian women migrant domestic worker returnees from the Middle East through an analysis of their personal accounts. Firstly, I will discuss domestic causes of migration. Then, I will look into the actors and processes in the operation of migration. Next, I will provide an analysis of salient issues in the reception phase of migration where I explore migrants' setbacks and struggles of adaptation through such factors as the immigration system, gender relations, and identity issues. Finally, I will deliberate on major coping and resilience mechanisms migrants employ in order to withstand the various problems they face in their everyday lives as domestic workers.

The Domestic Agents of Migration

When I met Beletu, a 21-year-old Ethiopian return emigrant in the summer of 2012, she had already been to “*arāb agär*,” Lebanon and Kuwait to be precise, on two

different occasions.¹⁴ Beletu worked as a domestic worker in these countries for a total of four years. Like many of her young peers in her community, Beletu made the decision to migrate to *aräb agär* at the age of 17. Beletu was only a middle school student when her father became seriously ill. This unexpected setback impacted the household severely since Beletu’s mother was a housewife and her father was the sole generator of income for the family. Beletu recalls:

After my father was hospitalized for weeks, we had no savings to pay for the expensive medication needed to sustain his life while supporting the family at the same time. We thought the only viable options we had were selling some valuable property and borrowing money. Sadly, my father didn’t make it. By the time he died, we had run out any meaningful source of income and we were plunged into a lot of debt.

It should be noted that the cost of the hospitalization of Beletu’s father transcends medical charges. Social expectations on women of the household usually mean they have to be physically present at all times with the patient. What this means is that while the hospitalization of the head of the household discontinues the financial source of the household and drains all other savings and assets, it also makes other members of the household unable to generate income through employment. Although there is a strong traditional, community-based insurance system in Ethiopia called the “*eder*,” it is usually not designed to help community members during the time of sickness and other forms of hardship but rather during the time of death and mourning (Kebede & Butterfield, 2009; Mariam, 2003).¹⁵ By the time Beletu’s father died after six months of unsuccessful

¹⁴ In Ethiopia, it is common to hear people use the phrase “*aräb agär*” (an Amharic phrase that can be directly translated as Arab Countries) to aggregate refer to Middle Eastern Arabic speaking countries where Ethiopian women migrate to do domestic and caregiver work.

¹⁵ According to the World Bank (2002), *Eder* is “a form of traditional social institution that is established by the mutual agreement of community members in order to collaborate with each other whenever any member or their family members face adverse situations. The primary function of the *eder* is taking care of the burial and consolatory activities when death occurs within members. However, *eders* also provide

hospitalization, the family found itself acutely impoverished. Beletu's mother, who was not in an optimal health condition to work herself, struggled to sustain her family. Such was the enervation of the family that it was rare to find a meal in the household twice a day. In the midst of all this, Beletu, being the oldest of the six children, was burdened with the responsibility of taking care of her younger siblings at the young age of 17. With no skills nor any palpable vocational training, there were hardly any jobs for Beletu in the town. With hungry siblings to feed at home and desperate creditors loitering in the neighborhood, Beletu had to figure out an expedited, "band-aid" solution to "bail out" her family. That's when she started contemplating the idea of *aräb agar*.

Aräb agär was not a thought that was alien to Beletu. It actually was a kind of fetish in her community, the "thing" that families fantasized about. As Beletu describes it, fathers bragged about sending their children to *aräb agar* in the same way they would brag if their daughters had graduated from college. Everyone talked about it and Beletu heard it. She has seen young girls and women from her community flock to *aräb agär*, where, rumor had it, "their lives had changed instantaneously." For Beletu, however, *aräb agär* was always "someone else's plate," a path to be taken by others, not her. This was a short-lived thought, however, and only lasted until her father died and grim reality struck:

Beletu: I could not just watch my mother suffering to provide for the family alone. I watched girls in my neighborhood going to Arab countries, though I never thought I would even consider going there, let alone actually do it. The very thought of it used to make me feel as if I had committed some kind of crime. Both my mother and I detested the idea of me going to *aräb agär* and being employed

assistance to offset losses to a member (due to theft, etc.), during the weddings of members, etc. Besides these, *eders* are of paramount importance in other developmental activities within the surrounding community. *Eders* raise funds or coordinate the free labor of members in activities such as building roads, schools, health institutions and the like."

as a domestic worker but we didn't have any other choice. The choice we had was for the whole family to starve or for me to go and send money and take care of my younger sisters and brothers. My mother cried throughout the process.

Interviewer: Did you try to get a job in Ethiopia before you decided to migrate?

Beletu: I was 17 at that time and had only finished grade 10. I could not find a job other than being a domestic work which only paid between 200-300 Birr (\$20-\$30) per month. I did not know how to support a family of seven with that little money.

The story of Beletu reflects the motivation of many other young women in pursuing employment opportunities in *aräb agär*. Meron, 29, recounts the circumstances under which she decided to migrate to *aräb agär* by highlighting her family's struggles with poverty and lack of opportunity. When I interviewed Meron in Addis Ababa in the summer of 2012, it was only a few months after she returned from Syria, where she had stayed for four years as a domestic worker. Meron never was able to know her father, as he died when she was very young. Her recollection of him today is sustained only through old photographs. Meron's mother is illiterate and works as a laborer to provide for the family. With the recent death of her aunt, the number of dependents in the household has grown, as the daughter of the deceased and Meron's niece have now joined the family to seek sanctuary. With her mother's declining strength and the meager income for which the family toiled, Meron felt she had to start carrying a bigger portion of the family's burden in order to support her mother and the whole family. Even if she graduated from high school, her hopes of attending college fell short as she was not able to get the required passing grade in the national examination for state college admission. With the expensive cost of private colleges, Meron felt her chances of joining an institution of higher education were bleak. This is when she attempted to join the labor market to earn some quick money:

Meron: With the help of our neighbor, I got a job as a waiter. It only paid 50 Birr per month. I had no other option but to stay because there was no job for me elsewhere. I stayed there for four years with this measly salary. Then my employer and I could not agree anymore, and so I left.

Interviewer: When did you start contemplating about migrating to *aräb agär*?

Meron: Honestly speaking I never thought about it. Then one day, my neighbor talked to me about it. She told me it could be a good opportunity to make a decent amount of money quickly. I seriously did not want to leave my family but I could not support my mother working here in this country [sobbing]. It was obvious to me that my mother was getting old and tired. I was convinced I should provide for my family at any cost. I especially wanted to see my mother rest in her old age.

Interviewer: What was your mother's reaction when you told her about your decision to go to *aräb agär*?

Meron: My mother was totally against it. She didn't want me to go at all. But it was hard for me to see her struggle like she did. It was brutal. I couldn't bear it [with tears].

The stories of Beletu and Meron are both examples of the fragile family situation that structured gender roles create. In both instances, the traditional role of men as providers and women as caretakers of children and the family weakened the coping mechanisms of the households when the traditional breadwinner was no longer there. Such structure essentially makes the family vulnerable if and when the men fail to provide for the family. The death of Beletu's father put the whole family at risk of poverty; the role of the senior women in the house doubled in terms of intensity, and shifted within days to assume the role of providers. In Meron's case, the women of the house had been exclusively responsible for providing for the family from the beginning. This plunged members of the family into the cycle of poverty, as the concern of the household had essentially been reduced to one of subsistence and survival rather than that of long-term stability. This focus on short-term, rather than long-term survival became even more evident when Meron was denied the opportunity to attend college, thus

changing her and her family's life substantially. For households headed exclusively by women, the burden of poverty is significantly higher.

In this context, the increasing popularity of the “*aräb agar*” route amongst many young women in Ethiopia, like Beletu and Meron, doesn’t necessarily reflect a viable, premeditated choice, but rather offers a slightly less demeaning, objectifying, and dehumanizing alternative to the domestic marketplace of “jobs.” Various studies have identified poverty as one of the most common causes of commercial sex work, an informal and (loosely) illegal sector that puts girls and women into one of the most dangerous yet rampant practices in Ethiopia (Abdella, Hoot, & Tadesse, 2006; Ayalew & Berhane, 2000; Van Blerk, 2008). In addition to health problems that many of these women face due to a range of factors including unprotected sex and physical abuse, they are subject to chronic stigmatization and profound societal vilification (Pankhurst, 1974; Van Blerk, 2011). When seen from this perspective, the *aräb agär* alternative, by the mere fact that it puts the worker in a physically distant area, gives most of these young women a sense of “liberation” from the judgmental and disparaging voices of their immediate community members. In fact, the idea of viewing migration as emancipation is a common motivation for many women migrant workers who have an experience with some form of oppression domestically (Hollos, 1991; Kadioglu, 1994). Consequently, despite repeated reports of rape, physical abuse, and killings, the *aräb agär* pathway remains a strong alternative to patriarchal, political, economic, and social forms of oppression within Ethiopia.

While poverty-instigated illiteracy is a common cause for migration to *aräb agar*, limited employment opportunities even for college-educated women has proven to be a

powerful push factor as well. Helina is a return migrant who worked for three years in Lebanon and two and a half years in the UAE. She opted to migrate to *aräb agär* when she found it difficult to get a job in her home country, even though she thought she was a well-qualified job seeker. This is not surprising when considering the overall unemployment rate of Ethiopia, which stood at about 25% in 2012, and remains particularly high among young females; almost one third of this population is unable to find a job in the urban areas (International Monetary Fund, 2013). Helina explains:

Before I went to Beirut, I studied accounting for four years in a college. I spent a substantial amount of time looking for a job although I couldn't find one. I then thought about trying something different hoping it would bring me better luck. I got back to school and studied culinary arts for three years. Even then I couldn't find a job. Can you believe it? For more than a year I searched and searched but couldn't find a single job with my two degrees. By that time, my mother, who was the only breadwinner of the family, retired. That was when *aräb agär* became an option for me. As the oldest sister to my four brothers and four sisters, I felt responsible to take over and assist my family. In the midst of all this, the only plausible way out I could visualize was *aräb agär*.

Unlike Helina, there are some fortunate young women, such as Azeb, who were able to find a job without much difficulty. In some circumstances, finding a job may not be a problem, but retaining it is. Azeb, a returnee from UAE, used to work in one of the biggest hotels in the northern part of Addis Ababa as an assistant chef until she became a constant target of sexual abuse by her manager. She says, "the entire team of cooks are men and we had a good working relationship." However, it was different with the manager, whom she labels as "abusive and sexist":

Azeb: Whenever he found an excuse, he yelled at me and spoke to me derogatively in front of my colleagues; but whenever we were alone, he told me this [the verbal abuse] was because he liked me and he would stop if I went out with him. He then started touching me without my consent.

Interviewer: Did you try to report him? Or what did you do?

Azeb: I could not say he sexually abused me because I thought it would bring shame to me. Besides he is a man and nothing will happen to him. There will be no shame on him. As for me, I could easily be fired. I could not afford to leave my job at that time. It is difficult to find jobs, you know. However, after a year he gave me an ultimatum to be with him or to leave my job. That's when I resigned. I was deliberately pushed off the cliff. As I feared, there was no job and I had no savings. My only choice was to borrow some money and migrate to *arāb agär*.

Sexual and verbal abuse in work environments and schools are common incidents that are faced by Ethiopian women on a day-to-day basis (Bekele et al., 2011; Gelaye et al., 2009). Studies show that one out of every three female students in Ethiopian institutions of higher education experience sexual abuse within the college environment. Because of gender inequality and the normalization of subordination of women, most female victims of such abuse do not report abuse to the concerned body. Such discrimination and abuse drives women away from the already limited jobs in the country and leads them to seek other options outside of the country despite the miserable stories they hear.

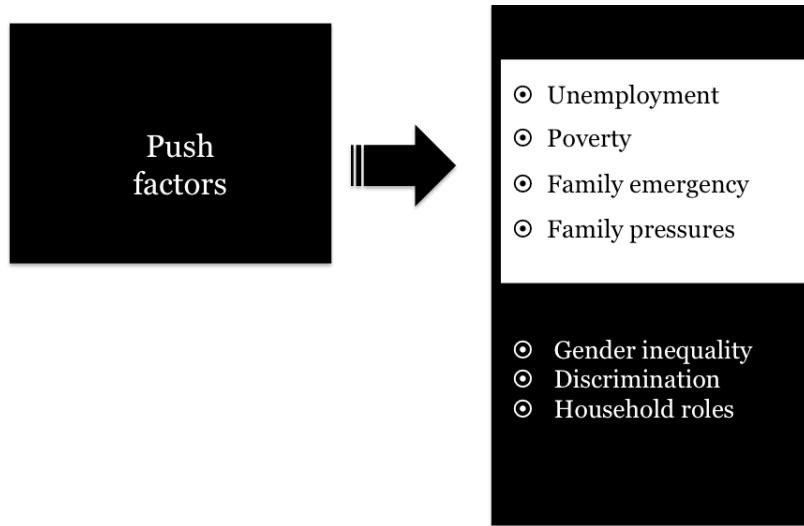


Figure 1. Domestic push factors of migration of Ethiopian women.

Other women, like Abebech and Worknesh, had yet different reasons to migrate. Both Abebech and Worknesh migrated to Arab countries not by their own choice but due

to the decisions made by their families. Abebech remembers how she was pushed by her grandmother to migrate in order to separate her and her boyfriend. Abebech was raised by her grandparents, and never knew her parents since they gave her up when they got divorced. Growing up, it had always been her and her grandmother, as her grandfather was almost always away at his job. She graduated from high school and had been working as a sales woman in a bakery for five years when she met a man with whom she started a romantic relationship. Abebech recounts how this didn't go over well with her grandmother:

I never thought of migrating to *arāb agär* before my grandmother started giving me a hard time about my romantic involvement with a man I met at my workplace. The fact that he was Muslim was very problematic for my grandmother, who was a conservative orthodox Christian. She also made a lot of fuss about his joblessness... She just didn't like him at all. Her nagging became an everyday affair that was extremely irritating to me. Finally, one random day, she gathered my aunts and uncles and told me that they had decided to send me to Beirut. I didn't have the courage to say no. I said yes to fulfill my grandmother's wishes.

Like Abebech, Worknesh was forced to migrate to Beirut, as a result of her family's intervention to break up the relationship between her and her boyfriend. She was in high school when she started dating without the approval of her family. When it was discovered that Worknesh was involved in a romantic relationship, her family members were furious and demanded she should break up with him immediately. However, when it became clear that Worknesh had decided to marry the man she was involved with romantically, her family arranged an emergency meeting with their relatives, who in turn advised them to send her to Beirut. Worknesh recounts:

Sometimes families have problems with accepting things. When they see a child grow and start their life, they view it as a rebellion and not a sign of adulthood and maturity. They condemn the same thing they did when they were growing up. I know my family does not have financial need. I know they do not expect me to

send them any money. They just sent me to *aräb agär* to separate my boyfriend and me. God, I didn't even finish my high school education when they threw me on to the plane!

Migrating to *Aräb Agär*: A Look into the Routes of Emigration

Once young Ethiopian women ‘decide’ to migrate to *aräb agär*, they will usually follow one of four available routes to take them to their destination. The first migration route is through legally authorized agencies facilitating labor migration. The second route is what is commonly known as “social capital of migration,” which is related to the use of social and familial relations as a resource for migration (Palloni et al., 2001; Perez & McDonough, 2008). The third route of migration is through illegal brokers. The last is through performing Hajj and Umrah, Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca, Saudi Arabia (Fernandez, 2008). Even though the specific route used by each woman does not change the overall dynamics of the migration pattern and their experiences as domestic workers, the route does have some impact on the way these women exercise agency and the extent to which they can resist unfair advantage by their employers. The major differences among these routes rest on the processes that are involved and the status of their legality. In order to better understand the different outcomes of these four paths, I will examine the experiences of four women who migrated to *aräb agär* through different routes.

Almaz was married and had a four year old boy when she decided to migrate to *aräb agär*. She was emphatic about the importance of arranging her travel through a legal agency: “If they [my family] do not hear my voice for a while, they will have a place to claim me.” Almaz was one of the few migrants who researched her travel extensively beforehand, and therefore was well informed about the conditions of migrant workers in *aräb agär*. Before she went to Lebanon, Almaz understood that the decision to migrate

presents “a delicate balance between death and better life. I travelled through a well-established and legally recognized agency” Almaz recalls. “I also registered with the Ministry of Labor and Foreign Affairs.”

The differences between those who opt to go through the official bureaucratic arrangement of the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and those who pursue other means are not always obvious. Beletu, who went to *arāb agär* without registering, experienced extensive deceit and abuse:

I had a disagreement with my employer. She was trying to make me work in two houses and she was paying me less than the amount we originally agreed upon. But my hands were tied and I could not do anything. I couldn’t complain to anyone because I was not registered with the Ministry [of Labor and Social Affairs]. I felt completely helpless. There was no one to advocate for me.

The experience of Azeb, who traveled with the help of a broker, but who also registered with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, suggests registration may help but does not always guarantee safety:

I used a known broker in our neighborhood to get started with my *arāb agär* plans. He was not legal, but he works with an agency in Dubai. My mother was worried about that and made me register with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. The Ministry documents who your sponsor and employer are, the whereabouts of your place of employment, your precise address, and so much more. The idea is if anything happens to you, they will directly contact your sponsor. But from what I saw, whether you register or not there is no difference. All your information will be just written and no one will look at it. There are so many Ethiopian women who are suffering in Dubai. In some cases, the physical beating is even more inhumane at the agencies when you return to them with the hope that they will help you with your abuse.

Worknesh, who migrated to two Arab countries in her youth, was 15 when she first left for Beirut, Lebanon. She finished her three-year contract and returned home. For her second migration, she traveled to Saudi Arabia through a visa issued to her for a religious pilgrimage trip. Worknesh worked as a “freelance” domestic worker, though it

was illegal to do so. It was also against the law to extend her stay with the type of visa she had. She was advised by her relatives in Saudi Arabia about the route she took:

Worknesh: I spent US\$600 to arrange my travel to Saudi Arabia. It was Ramadan¹⁶ and I used the opportunity to secure a visa as a Hajj and Umrah pilgrim¹⁷. Another woman and I paid a man to take us as his wives and it worked. When we reached the Saudi airport, I took a taxi and went to my relatives.

Interviewer: Why did you prefer to migrate this way? What is the difference?

Worknesh: I thought I would have freedom, and for sure I had some kind of freedom. For one, you can rent your own house. You can have a break, and if you get sick, you can rest. Second, if your employers pay you less than you deserve, you can change homes and work at another house. Third, you can have your weekly rest day. However, the problem is you are an illegal immigrant without a permit. You will be arrested if the police find you.

Worknesh's path to migration required two important elements: resources and a social network in the destination country. During our meeting, Worknesh said she paid the US\$600 she needed by spending all her savings. "It was the only money that I saved working in Dubai for three years," she said. She remarked that such an option is viable to a very limited number of people; it requires some initial capital and relationships with reliable people in the destination country who can provide guidance and sanctuary until the migrant finds some stability. Furthermore, if this act is discovered by local authorities in Saudi Arabia, it is considered as a serious offense misusing Islamic practices and could lead to imprisonment, punishment, and most certainly, deportation.

¹⁶ Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which Muslims worldwide observe as a month of fasting. This annual observance is regarded as one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

¹⁷ According to Fathi (2011), Umrah and Hajj are "two types of pilgrimages that Muslims undertake as a token of their faith. Both Umrah and Hajj consist of a journey to Makkah that involves certain rituals such as ihram, circumambulating the Ka'bah, walking between the hills of Safa and Marwah, and shaving or cutting the hair. The above are the basic rituals of Umrah while Hajj has these and additional rituals, including spending days and nights in Arafah, Mina, and Muzdalifah—areas neighboring the city of Makkah." Fathi further explains that Umrah is the smaller of the two pilgrimages. "It is a recommended pilgrimage and not mandated or compulsory in nature. Meanwhile, hajj is a major pilgrimage and is one of the pillars of Islam. It is an obligatory practice among Muslims. Muslim tradition dictates that a Muslim should at least perform the hajj once in their lifetime."

Registered travel agencies in Ethiopia are required to know the whereabouts and working conditions of the women they recruit and send to *aräb agär*. There is a legally binding requirement for agencies to register and follow up with every woman they send, and to report information to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Family members have the right to ask for contact information of the employer in the migrant's destination country or request intervention or revocation of contract should they provide reasonable evidence of exploitative working conditions. Such legally required responsibility for the women they send to Arab countries make agencies the most preferred routes for women migrants. However, the relatively expensive charge these agencies ask for the services they provide impedes the likelihood of many migrants choosing this option. Most of these agencies require an average of US\$400 for processing *aräb agär* migration, which is an amount many of their potential clients hardly make.

Agencies are also legally required to observe age requirements. They have the obligation not to facilitate a labor migration to underage women (women under the age of 18 years). The age requirement coupled with the unaffordability of the service excludes a sizable chunk of potential women labor migrants from this route, and forces them to resort to other less reliable options, like using social capital or brokers. It had been two years since Abebech, a 26-year-old former migrant domestic worker, returned from Lebanon at the time I met her for an interview. Abebech explains how her grandmother arranged her travel by asking a relative for a favor:

Abebech: I had a relative who already lived there [in Lebanon]. She [my grandmother] begged her to take me. I sent my passport and picture. After 9 months she sent me a ticket. That was it.

Interviewer: Who received you there? Did you find your relative?

Abebech: I talked to her on the phone later but it was an agency that received me at the airport. My understanding is she gave my passport and picture to an agency there in Beirut. It worked in such a way that the agency would show my picture to its clients and an interested client would pick me. They would then sponsor me so that I could be employed under their auspices. My relative didn't have any idea who took me. I never met her personally while I was there.

One of the benefits migrants see in using social capital as a means to migrate is that there is no required payment from the friend or relative who arranges the migration. In addition, there is a peace of mind that comes from confiding in someone they know and in the presence of a friend or a relative, rather than an unknown person like a broker or an agency. There are usually two potential outcomes when migration is arranged through this path. The first scenario involves individuals who have no legal authority to broker a labor contract or labor migration. In this case, there will be no one accountable in case of misconduct. In the second scenario, employers sign an agreement with the agency within their country and then bring a migrant worker through a broker, as was the case with Abebech. This is a more secure option for the migrant workers as it gives them some degree of legal protection. For example, Abebech remembers how her employer agreed to sign on a set of conditions set forth by her agency. At some point in her stay, she used this as bargaining power to demand to be returned to the agency when she did not like the working conditions.

Nevertheless, brokers are not always reliable. When they see an opportunity to cheat, they take advantage of unsuspecting or stranded clients. Meron's story is a testament to this:

Meron: After my neighbor talked to me about *aräb agär* as a viable option to look for a job, I applied for a passport and started negotiating with a well-known migration broker. He said he charges US\$300 for his services, and I told him if I had this amount of money I would not be thinking about migrating in the first place. I then gave up on the idea of going to *aräb agar*, until the same neighbor

who encouraged me to go to *arāb agär* before told me that I should bring my picture and passport to her and that she would take care of the process. It turned out that her son was a broker and she arranged for me to pay him later with my first three months' salary.

Interviewer: What happened next?

Meron: After I gave my neighbor my passport and picture, I was asked to get a health checkup. I think they wanted to make sure I was not pregnant. After a month, my ticket arrived. The thing is I did not know where I was going because I did not have the ticket until a few hours before I left for the airport. When I finally got the ticket a few hours before my departure, I was bewildered to see I actually was booked to go to Syria! I didn't even know at that time that a country called Syria existed. The broker originally told me I was going to Dubai [UAE] or Beirut [Lebanon]. It was too late by the time I realized I was cheated.

Interviewer: Why was it important for you to go to Dubai or Beirut?

Meron: The salary is different. My salary in Syria is US\$100 but in Dubai it is US\$150. In addition, the fact that there are many Ethiopians in Dubai and Beirut makes you feel good. I had never heard of Syria. It made me nervous.

It is important to differentiate between other kinds of brokers who work in the trafficking and smuggling of children, women and men through the Red Sea and Yemen, and these brokers who facilitate migration (Calandruccio, 2005). The women I interviewed explained to me the former are “clandestine brokers,” whereas the latter are simply “third-party brokers”. Clandestine brokers are illegal brokers who commit different levels of crimes through human trafficking, whereas third-party brokers are individuals who work with agencies in Arab countries to facilitate migration of domestic workers. Although it appeared that the women I interviewed made a distinction between these two types of brokers, the Ethiopian government does not. The government encourages every woman to arrange labor migration through legal agencies without the involvement of third-party brokers or middlemen.

Meron's experience with third-party brokers shows how access to resources and networks influences who gets to decide on the migration process especially within a poor community. At times, brokers are able to provide service to the poorest of the poor who previously could not pay to migrate. One of the reasons why women resort to using the help of relatives or friends who already live in the destination countries is to arrange the migration fee of agencies and brokers. Migrant women are asked between US\$300-500 in cash for the service, in addition to expenses related to application to get a passport, medical checkup and miscellaneous expenses of traveling. This creates a divide between the lower class who can afford to legally migrate to work as domestic workers and “the poorest of the poor” who cannot access the “infrastructure” of migration. However, it is important to note that, depending upon how well-networked clients are, brokers may allow migrant women to use a credit system through which they would agree to pay their first three months’ salary. In Meron’s case, for example, because the broker was her neighbor’s son, he was willing to make a credit arrangement that would be paid back as soon as Meron received her first three months’ salary.

A common drawback to using brokers is that they usually misinform migrant women about the working condition and the specific place of work. Technically they are salesmen, and as such are often mostly interested in selling their service to as many clients as possible. It is common to hear many first-time migrant women who go to *arāb agār* say they end up in Syria or Yemen although they were first promised they would be sent to better paying and “first-tier” destinations, like Lebanon and the UAE, where salaries are significantly better.

The Perils of Domestic Work in *Aräb Agär*

Once migrant workers reach their destination countries, their experiences vary not only from country to country but from one employer to another. Most of these migrant women work in private homes of individuals, which all have unique family dynamics and household customs. The location of the sponsor's private home is usually far from the sight of the government or the community that might have served as regulators if and when any misconduct happens. Thus, domestic workers and caregivers in many of the Middle East destination countries do not receive protection from the government. The different governments attempt to justify this neglect by claiming they cannot "intrude" in the private sphere of their citizens. Though the distinct nature of each employer and the unique dynamics of private households give each woman domestic worker her own experience, these women also are subject to some common treatments from their employers. Oftentimes the employers have preconceived perceptions and stereotypes about Ethiopian women that have been informed by immigration policy, gender, culture, and religion. Though each family and household where these women are employed are unique in their own right, they cannot entirely escape from the influence of the systems and institutions which usually define the relationship between the two parties not as employer-employee but rather as owner-property.

The Immigration System

The *kafala* (sponsorship) system (see Chapter III) requires employers (sponsors) to be responsible in all aspects of the lives of their expatriate employees. As a result, the *kafeel*, or the employer devises different mechanisms of exerting control over its employees. Although these controlling mechanisms differ from one *kafeel* to another,

some common characteristics are observed across most households. One of the most common controlling mechanisms exercised by *kafeels* is the holding of the employee's passport and foreign resident card (known as *bitaqa*). In almost all of the destination countries, it is not enough for migrant workers to have a passport and a valid visa; if they are caught alone by the police outside of their employer's private residence, they will most likely end up in prison. Instead, it is the *bitaqa*, which shows the name and address of the *kafeel* that is the most important document for the migrant worker to hold. The *kafala* system requires the *kafeel* to hold the passport and apply for the *bitaqa* with their name printed on it for their employee and the migrant workers are required to hold their *bitaqa* at all times, especially when they go out without their *kafeel*. Alem and Meron share their experiences with the *bitaqa*:

Alem: *Bitaqa* is a document like an identification card showing your legality to live in the country. When you enter the country, the employer will take your passport and will give you your *bitaqa*. If the police catch you outside, you have to show them your *bitaqa*. This card should be held by the domestic worker all the time. However, my madam took all of our [there were two other workers] *bitaqas*. Because of this we could not go out anywhere. We asked her to give us our cards but she refused. She explained that she didn't want to be held accountable if anything happens to us.

Meron: When I arrived there [Syria], the agency which processed my travel took my passport and processed a local identification card for me. After that they put me in the hands of my employer. During the four years of my stay there, I never got ahold of my passport. Although I often contemplated running away, I felt bad for my employer who probably paid a lot of money to bring me there. If I had decided to run away, I knew for sure that my employer would be in trouble. When the caseworker at the agency transferred me to my madam, he also gave her my documentation, including my passport. Because of this, it was not the agency that was accountable for me but rather the employer. It is because of this that the employers do whatever they can to prohibit us from going outside their house. In the rare instances I went outside despite the warning from my madam, I held my *bitaqa* in my hand the whole time. But this was not to defy her. She actually allowed my friend to come and spend time with me on Sundays. I usually wanted to join Ethiopians I knew who celebrated birthdays and religious celebrations

together, but I refrained from doing so in order not to complicate my relationship with my madam.

What is common in all cases is for *kafeels* to confiscate the passports of their employees at the first meeting. The confiscation of the passport is about more than a simple document; it is an act of exerting control and a manifestation of the power hierarchy, both symbolic and literal. The power imbalance between foreign domestic workers and citizens is a result of the immigration policy of most countries in the Middle East that adhere to the *kafala* system. Without a specific regulation that defines their duties and the rights, *kafeels* limit the movement of their employees by withholding their passports and/or *bitaqas*. In Alem's case, for example, the *kafeel* withheld her passport and her *bitaqa*, an act which strongly defies one of the basic human rights—freedom of movement. In contrast, Meron's *kafeel* withheld her passport but gave her the *bitaqa*, which enabled her to go outside of the house without fear of detention. However, the power imbalance between the *kafeel*—who is the sponsor and the employer—brings about a situation where the *kafeel* has near-absolute control and the employee is bound to “please” her *kafeel* in every possible way. Though Meron was granted the *bitaqa*, which gave her the right of movement, she chose to please her employer even if it meant staying inside the house for four years.

The existence of power imbalances and an atmosphere of control are manifested in the daily lives of women domestic workers in various ways. For instance, all the women I talked to said their employers lock all doors when they left the house with the domestic worker inside. Abebech recalls a specific time, which she describes as a wakeup call in what it meant to be a domestic worker in *aräb agär*. She remembers having an argument with her madam who demanded Abebech to remove her *mahteb*, a simple black

thread necklace that is common with Coptic Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia.¹⁸ Abebech refused her madam's demand by explaining that her *mahteb* is an important element of her religious identity and expression. When she argued that the cord on her neck had nothing to do with her job, the reply she got from her madam's oldest daughter revealed to Abebech the shocking reality she was in. "As long as you are here, you are bought," the daughter told Abebech pejoratively. "Whatever she [referring to her mother] asks you to be, you should be. There is no choice for you."

The excessive concentration of power bestowed upon the *kafeel* creates a strong sense of ownership of domestic workers by the sponsor. Such feelings of ownership of the domestic workers are visibly manifested in how the *kefeels* address the women domestic workers working for them. Abebech recalls how her *kafeel* never introduced her to visitors and neighbors by her name but rather through a generic, usually objectifying, reference of Abebech's origin or nationality. "I got a new *habeshey*," she would sometimes say.¹⁹ "My new *habeshey*," was usually the way the *kafeel* began Abebech's introduction. "Her other favorite way of addressing me was *ethiopiye*, Abebech says. "'*Ethiopiye* do this... *ethiopiye* do that,' she would say always. I don't think she knew my name."

¹⁸ In Ethiopia, the *mahteb* is a cord that is worn around the neck and is given during baptism in the Ethiopian Orthodox church. The person carries it all the time. It is a sign that he/she is a Christian. It is a sign that the person wearing it is a Christian, follows Christian rules, obeys the Church commandments like fasting, and so on and taking it out implies denying one's religion.

¹⁹ In its strictest sense, *habesha* is usually a reference made to various related ethnic groups in the Ethiopian Highlands and Eritrean Highlands who speak languages belonging to the South Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic family. In the broadest sense, the word *habesha* may refer to anyone from Ethiopia or Eritrea, although some do not identify with this association.

Similarly, Tsehay, a return migrant from Beirut in Lebanon, states that “they [employers and their family members] do not consider us as human beings. They do not even bother to learn our names. During my more than three years stay there, the whole family addressed me as *habesheyē*.” Such refusal to address a person by name is usually a sign of a subject-object and master-slave type of relationship, in which the person in the privileged position consciously, and at times unconsciously, degrades, violates and rejects the humanity of the “other” in an attempt to manifest his/her hierarchical “superiority” (Kaufmann, 2001). The *kafeels’* treatment of their employees as their personal property is consistent with this idea. However, such objectification should not only be understood simply as the individual *kefeel’s* behavior toward migrant domestic workers; rather, it is the systematic and institutionalized structure of the *kefala* system that, in turn, conditions, perpetuates and sponsors the *kefeel’s* actions. The *kefala* system gives the *kafeel* a sense of “untouchability” and shields him/her from outside scrutiny while it empowers the employer with complete control over the domestic worker.

Gender Relations

Gender dynamics in the workplace are an important aspect of domestic migrant workers’ reception and immersion in the family of the *kafeel*. Most of the destination countries in the Middle East are known for their patriarchal social structures, although the magnitude and intensity of this structure differs from one country to another. Most Ethiopian women domestic workers understand and experience the inequality and segregation of women in *aräb agär* much more than they do in Ethiopian society. Lakech, a returnee who spent two years in Bahrain and another two years in the UAE, compares her experience of gender relations in the two families she worked for:

Lakech: The first family I was with [in Bahrain] were a very nice couple. They had a new born child. My job was to take care of the baby and help the domestic worker, an Ethiopian who had been with them for two years. Both of them were university professors. They were so understanding and caring. They took time to teach me the Arabic language. They gave me paper and pencil to practice my writing. The husband had a slightly better grasp of English than his wife and helped a lot with interpretation when I wanted to communicate with his wife.

Interviewer: What about your job in Dubai?

Lakech: I worked for a couple in Dubai as well. She was pregnant when I first moved there. She looked older than her husband. It was on the second day of my work there that the husband started sexually harassing me. She was always at home and she could see some of the things he did. In *aräb agär*, the men are like Ethiopian men; they rule over their women. Because there is no equality, the men do whatever they want, even bringing other women in to the home. The women there live like prisoners. One time, he entered in the shower room while I was taking a bath. I yelled and his wife came. That's when I told her to return me to the agency.

The socially embedded gender inequality in most of these destination countries has an obvious spillover effect on the relationship between the employer and domestic worker. The domestic workers usually experience multiple layers of segregation in their relationships with the head of the household and all other family workers. In addition to being victims of the hierarchical harassment that is the outcome of the *kafala* system, as was discussed earlier, women domestic workers are subject to distinct types of abuse and harassment at the hands of different members of the household. On one hand, they are oftentimes victims of men in the family, who harass them sexually. On the other hand, they receive bad treatment from housewives who are angry about the behavior of their own husbands. Because the wives cannot do anything against their untouchable husbands, they project their frustration on the defenseless migrant women by attacking them in ways ranging from throwing verbal abuse to causing serious physical injury.

Azeb: The husband had always been nice. I thought he was a nice person and he always took pity on me. In fact, in one instance he gave me money and told me to

send it to my sister who at that time was in Beirut where there was a lot of unrest. I was so glad and thanked him. That same night, I heard a knock on the door of my bedroom and I was not sure who it could be because it was very late. When I opened the door, it was the husband naked and drunk. He had cash in his hands and he started pushing me inside. I was so confused and scared and started pushing him back yelling "I will tell madam" hoping he would be scared and leave me alone. Though he was huge and stronger than me, because he was so drunk I managed to push him and run to madam's room. When I reached the room, he was behind me begging me not to tell. To be honest, I knew I couldn't tell his wife because I was convinced she wouldn't believe her husband would do such thing. I knew it would somehow be my fault in the end.

Sexual abuse by male members of the *kafeel*'s family is a major predicament women domestic workers have to deal with. Though Azeb's story reflects an unsuccessful attempt, there are countless allegations of rape and sexual abuse from many returnee women. For example, Hanna, a returnee from Beirut, Lebanon, told me about how her sponsor had sexually abused her:

Hanna: It was horrible. He always had been abusive. His wife was much better. I never went outside of the house. When I asked to call my family, he would tell me to write a letter instead. He asked me for an address and every three months, he would send my salary together with the letter I wrote. Five months before my contract ended, he asked me if I wanted to renew my contract with the family. I told him that my wish was to return back home, to Ethiopia. From then on, it was hell. He sexually abused me. I cried and yelled but his wife did not care. They threatened me not to tell anyone. They told me if I go back and work for another family, they would kill me.

Race, Class, Religion and Nationality

Societal constructions of race, class, religion and identity are additional aspects of reception that expose migrant women domestic workers to other layers of discrimination and subordination. Although many of the domestic workers experienced different forms of class and gender discrimination in their home country, racial and religious segregation, and discrimination based on country of origin were new challenges for them. In many of the destination countries, the families the domestic workers serve reflect a privileged

position where race, class, religion and nationality are intertwined to form the “archetypal” citizen. Ethiopian domestic workers, most of whom are black, poor, Orthodox Christian, and women are the opposite of the “archetypal” citizen. The social construction of Ethiopian women domestic workers is such that they are perceived as the undesirable bottom, the antithesis of the “perfect” citizen. Abebech’s story provides a telling example:

Abebech: It is as if it is their duty to always remind me about my blackness and how much they are disgusted by my color. If kids touch your skin, you will hear someone yell “*sawdaa!*!” [Which means black in Arabic].

Interviewer: What about the adults?

Abebech: It’s worse. I remember one time her [employer’s] granddaughter refused to be without me. She [employer] convinced her granddaughter to change her mind by telling her I am dirty like a donkey and she would be too if she sleeps on my filthy bed. You have to convince yourself you are inferior in order to work in *arāb agär*. You shouldn’t be bothered much about it because your aim is to get paid. They do not think that your body is a human body. They show contempt and belittle us. You can feel that your very presence nauseates them as if you are a dog. They seriously do not think the food they eat also exists here [in Ethiopia]. They even ask you if you have ever had a banana. A banana! [Gasp and animated hand movements]...They work for eight hours and come back to their homes to rest. They never think for a second you need to rest as well...Obviously I cannot say the same for everyone but all her [her employer’s] friends and relatives are like this.

Recruiting domestic workers has been long been a tradition in many Middle East Arab countries. However, the recruitment was traditionally regional, “as workers came from poor families in Bahrain, Oman, and the Al-Hassa district of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia” (ILO, 2004). Following the oil boom and the increased purchasing power of the middle class, household works started to be perceived as a “culture of shame” where domestic workers were relegated to the lowest class within the social hierarchy. Now, domestic workers who have to live within this “culture of shame” can only be

recruited externally from countries like Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Philippines, Indonesia, and Eretrea.

Although all domestic migrant workers face blatant discrimination as a result of their racial “otherness” from the dominant Arab race, there is usually little to no mutual partnership or racial and class solidarity amongst migrant domestic workers from different parts of the world. This is partly because migrant workers from different countries experience different social statuses and levels of segregation. Preferential treatment of domestic workers from a certain country doesn’t necessarily reflect the *kafeel*’s personal sense of attachment or association to a certain race or ethnic group. It is rather a situation created by the nature of the diplomatic relations and agreements on labor migration between the sending and receiving countries. In other words, the level of commitment of the source country’s embassies and consulates to follow up and enforce the agreement with host countries is a key factor in the type of treatment migrant workers from different parts of the world receive. Azeb explains:

There are Filipino and Bangladeshi women working with us (Ethiopians). They are no different from us in terms of economic status or qualification. However, it is obvious that they are better respected than us. They have better rights and contracts compared to us. Their agency, embassy and consulate fight for their rights case-by-case. The weakest and the most unconcerned embassy in Arab countries is the Ethiopian Embassy, and the people and *kafeels* know it.

Interviewer: What do you mean by weak?

Azeb: When you call for help to the embassy in a time of need, they will say, “If it is for passport renewal purposes we will help you; otherwise you should have come prepared for the situation you are in.”

Religion is an important part of everyday life in many of the Middle East Arab countries. Islam is dominant in all aspects of life and naturally puts other believers in a minority position. Migrant non-believers are especially targeted and face blatant

discrimination. Muslim Ethiopian domestic workers are generally treated better than Christian Ethiopian domestic workers. Azeb, a Coptic Orthodox Christian believer, learned about this through her agency before meeting her employers:

Azeb: After we [she and other new recruits] got to the country, the agency took us to a resting place until our employers came and took us. The agent there was telling us how to act and do our job. He emphasized on the importance of respecting the dressing code of the country and particularly that of wearing hijab. He also remarked that we should agree to convert to Islam when we are asked. If you are willing to convert, it is usually credited as good behavior and you will be treated slightly better.

Interviewer: Did your employer ask you to convert?

Azeb: Yes, my madam asked me if I wanted to be a Muslim, and I said yes. She then named me Jamillah and took me to the migration office so that I could say the *shahādah*.²⁰ Once I did the *shahādah*, they gave me a certificate of conversion.

Interviewer: Was her treatment any different before and after you converted to Islam?

Azeb: Yes. Once I was converted, my madam sent me to the mosque every morning to learn the Quran. I found many Ethiopians there who came to study the Quran as well. Surprisingly I found out almost all of them were there because of the advice they got from the agency. No one converted for real. We like it there because our teacher is *habesha* and they give us food. It was quite a treat, actually. It also gave me a good break. At home, my employers gave us a tape player for listening to Islamic teachings. Secretly, we listen to *habesha* music instead.

Culture and Identity

Emigration, as leaving the home of origin, can be conceptualized as one's loss of significant people and culture, internal sense of harmony, familiarity, and often use of mother tongue (Tannenbaum, 2007; Akhtar 1999). Simultaneously, immigration provides

²⁰ *Shahādah* is an Islamic creed declaring belief in the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as God's prophet. It is a declaration on the acceptance of Islam as one's faith.

a feeling of connectedness to others where one can explore and immerse oneself into another culture, and expand one's self-identity through acculturation processes (Akhtar, 1999; Lijtmaer, 2001; Tannenbaum, 2007). As I discussed in the previous chapter, these descriptions of emigration and immigration are consistent with the experiences of Ethiopian women migrant domestic workers in the Middle East who have been immersed into a different culture and have been alienated from everything that represents the idea of "home" in Ethiopia. As explained by Senait, a returnee from Dubai in the UAE who had been working for six years as a domestic worker and caregiver for three children, acculturation is not exactly a choice when women are immersed in the private homes of employers with decision-making powers. Senait highlights the difficulty she had in getting used to a new language, religion and cuisine:

The place we work at is fundamentally different from home [in Ethiopia]. At home, there is no pressure to follow any particular religion or practice a certain dress code. The dress code in *arāb agār* is very conservative compared to what I used to wear in my home country. I didn't have a lot of difficulty getting used to this. What I had a great deal of trouble was with the food and religion. It took me a lot of time to get used to the food. Language was also a problem but I managed to communicate with broken English until I learned Arabic. The most challenging aspect to get used to was religion. I am Coptic Orthodox Christian, and I adhere to a particular teaching on fasting, for example. This was impossible to practice when I was with the family I worked for. I heard from some of my friends that their employers allow them to go to church a few times. I never had that chance and I only meditated about and grew in my faith internally.

The acculturation process of many of these women commonly takes place in the private homes of their employers. They stay with the family 24 hours a day, with limited access to the outside world and without the freedom to choose how they spend what little free time they have. They are expected to completely assimilate to the traditions of the family they work for. Acting otherwise is not a path they want to take because of the already established power imbalance that emanates from the *kafeel*-employee relationship

and the *kafala* system. Consequently, some of the domestic workers feel their cultural identity, which is strongly attached to home in Ethiopia, is undermined. Narrating the prejudicial perception of her employer about Ethiopia and Ethiopians, Abebech recalls how her madam thought of her place of origin as forsaken and destitute: “Her disgust and degrading of me was so obvious,” Abebech says. “It doesn’t cross into the head of my madam that the food she has is also the food we have in Ethiopia. She would throw a banana in my face and ask me if we have it in Ethiopia and whether I ever saw such a thing. It was so disparaging.”

What we can learn from the experiences of Abebech and other Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East is that the theorization of acculturation relies on the assumption that acculturation consists of a subjective negotiation process that involves a self-chosen decision on how to adopt, retain, or abandon one’s cultural identity. What the women go through in reality is a process in forceful assimilation. Assimilation as an acculturation strategy is “when an acculturating individual does not wish to maintain culture and identity and seeks daily interaction with the dominant society” (Berry et al., 1992, 278). This is the condition faced by the domestic workers, who are forced to abandon their original culture and identity, because their position as domestic worker requires them to assimilate.

Coping Mechanisms and Outcomes

The women domestic workers use different coping mechanisms to deal with exploitative working and living conditions they face every day. The most common coping mechanisms are prevarication and faking sickness. Most former domestic workers I interviewed confessed that they practiced these methods at least one time during their

stay in *aräb agär*. For instance, Abebach told me she had to tell lies all the time to survive and to “get what is rightfully hers.” Azeb also agrees with the motive of these methods saying, “You have to do these things to survive.” They explain further:

Abebech: She [my madam] always locked the doors. She thought I would run away although such a thing never crossed my mind. What happened was that I found an extra key to the backdoor which I kept for myself. I only used it to go to the neighbor’s apartment. There was an Ethiopian domestic worker next door. Sometimes we had coffee. My madam had no knowledge of this.

Azeb: my madam told me about learning and converting to Islam. I asked where I would be learning and she told me it would be someplace else. I did not want to convert, but I wanted to get out of the house. So long as I found a way to get out of the house, I did not mind telling a lie.

These women take the risk of lying in order to get some level of freedom or liberty from their routine life of exploitation. What seems the smallest freedom of association, like going to the neighbor’s house to drink coffee with a fellow Ethiopian domestic worker, might be the thing that kept Abebech sane. That was the only connection Abebech had with the world outside of her *Kafeel*’s apartment. That was the only conversation she had in Amharic, except for the phone call she made once every six months to her family, which her madam, in a rare generous gesture, allowed. For these reasons, many domestic workers justify deceit and pretense as survival mechanisms.

At times, the domestic workers tell lies to get paid as well. One of the things most interviewees agreed upon was about how their employees were reluctant to pay their salaries. With very few exceptions, most of the domestic workers I talked to stated their salary was not given to them, but was rather sent to their homes in Ethiopia directly. If a domestic worker asked for their salary, the employers would ask back why they needed the money.

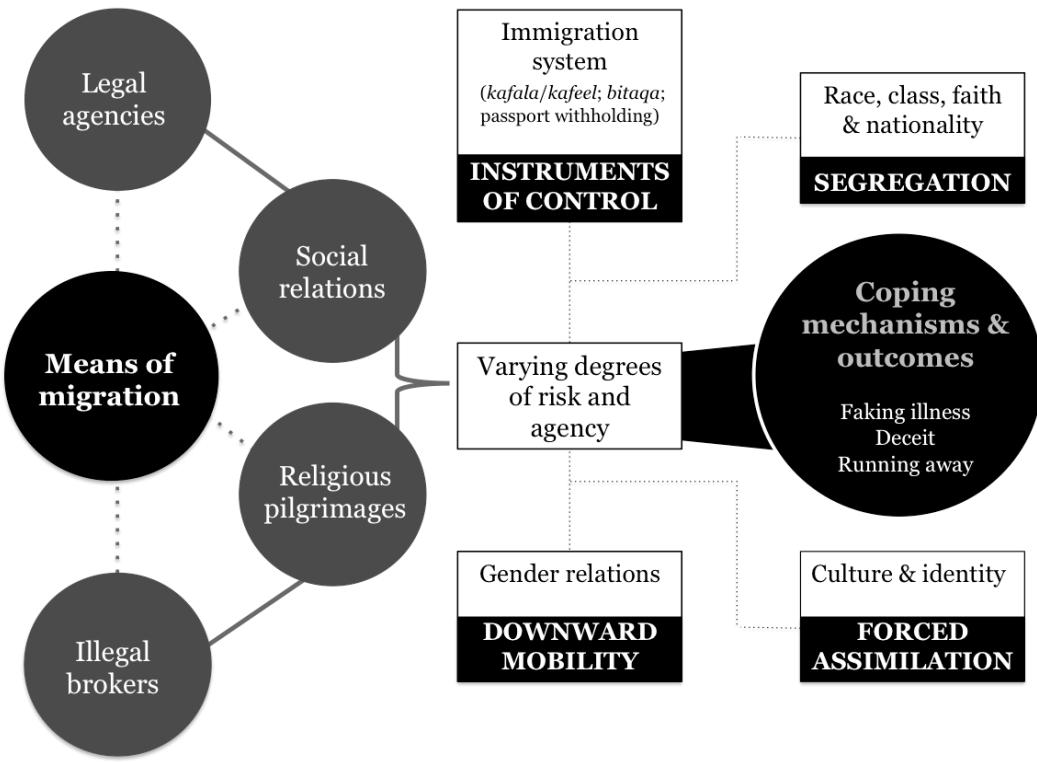


Figure 2. The process and perils of domestic work in *arāb agär*

In some cases, the employers do not even like to pay salaries at all, or only agree to pay at the end of the contract, which is two to three years. Abebech recalls how her salary was one of the issues that dragged her into some of the heated exchanges she had with her employer:

She [my madam] never gave me my salary on time. She thought if she gave me my salary, I would run away. I had to come up with new reasons every five or six months to get my money. I would say that my mother was sick or some kind of emergency had struck my family. That's when she usually sent money to my mother. She never gave me money personally. She oftentimes refused to talk to me for three to four days every time I asked about my salary.

The other common situation that forces many domestic workers to lie is when they finish their contract and the employer keeps postponing their return. When this

happens, the women domestic workers resort to deceiving their employers by promising to return or faking sickness:

Senait: my madam postponed my flight four times. I felt I could not do anything. She had my passport and she was responsible for arranging my airplane ticket back home. When I finally cried and begged her, she said she would get me a return ticket on the condition that I come back. I promised to return knowing that I wouldn't.

After trying to cope with the exploitation and abuse, some women may resort to leave their sponsors and work as freelancers, also known as “the runaways.” There are domestic workers who choose to stay and others who run away. Running away can lead to different consequences. First of all, runaways do not have their passport and their *bitaqa*. They are illegal immigrants, so police have the authority to detain them. If any immigrant domestic worker is found wandering around without her *bitaqa*, or without the accompaniment of their employers, she will be arrested. The only way a woman can get out of prison and return back to her home country is if she has money to get an airplane ticket to get back home. Abebech told me she had a chance to run away but chose not to.

Interviewer: Did you ever think to run away?

Abebech: The doorkeeper in our apartment was from Sudan. He usually asked me if I would be interested in running away. He has a key for the building and he helped a lot of domestic workers before me to run away. I always declined, however, as I wanted to return home safely. If I do not retrieve my passport, I will be forced to stay and suffer.

Though Abebech chose to stay and finish her contract, there are women who decide to run away. Azeb and Lakech were two examples of runaway cases who survived sexual abuse by their employers:

Azeb: After he [head of household] tried to rape me, he became a totally different person. If his wife was at home, he would be so rude and contemptuous toward me. If she was not there, he would come to where I was working and try to touch me inappropriately. I told my madam that I couldn't work like this and asked her

to take me to the agency. When we got to the agency, everything was blamed on me. I do not even know what happened. She convinced the people in the agency that I was seducing her husband. Three days later, I ran away.

Lakech: My madam knew what her husband tried to do to me. I asked her to return me to the agency but she kept quiet and did nothing as he continued to abuse me. That's when I ran away.

Although Azeb and Lakech both left their employers and broke their contracts, the outcomes they faced as a result were different. The interviewees highlight three options that runaway domestic workers have. The first is to work as a freelancer, which usually requires having a network of other runaways that provide connections to get jobs, safe transportation, and safe housing to live in. Azeb worked as a freelancer after she ran away from her *kafeel*. I asked her how she got connected with new employers and managed to work without getting arrested.

Interviewer: Where exactly did you go?

Azeb: When I was learning Quran, I met Ethiopians who knew a house where runaways lived in. I saved the address just in case I needed it at some time. I eventually was tempted by the idea. I took some money from my madam's bag and took a taxi to that address.

The second option is to get involved with a Sudanese man who owns a house. Sudanese men are known for cooperating with Ethiopian domestic workers. They have a reputation for helping Ethiopian women domestic workers to run away. Most Sudanese men are hired as building keepers and have keys for the apartments that the women work in. They meet the women while cleaning the stairs on a daily basis. If a woman runs away with the help of a Sudanese man, it is alleged that she usually repays the favor with sex. She also stays in his home and may work as a freelancer. It is common for the Sudanese men to have more than two women in their homes at a single time. In most cases the relationships are abusive and exploitative. The women I interviewed all knew about such

unconventional relationships between Ethiopian domestic workers and Sudanese building keepers, although they said none of them were personally involved. Almaz, a returnee from Beirut, explains her experiences talking with Ethiopian prisoners in Beirut. She is involved with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Beirut and one of their programs is that the church cooks food every Sunday to feed Ethiopians in prison.

Almaz: There are so many Ethiopians in the prisons of Beirut. Most of these prisoners are runaways. You will hear so many stories. There are women who have been there for up to four years. They will tell you they do not have money for airfare. There are women who have psychological problems. There was this woman I got to meet in prison who told me that she met a Sudanese man in the apartment where she was working and they liked each other. He helped her to run away and took her to his home. She said it was nice until he brought other women after three months. She told me that her judgment at the time was clouded by her anger; she stormed out of the house and got arrested. It has been more than a year since this happened and she was still in prison when I returned back to Ethiopia in 2012.

The third and the last option for runaways leads to prostitution. Lakech is one of the runaways who took this route when she did not feel safe in the house she was working. Although the husband of her employer sexually abused her explicitly, her employer did nothing about it. Because Lakech didn't have any connections with other women runaways, she decided to flee with the hope that the outside world would be better somehow only to end up trapped in prostitution:

Lakech: I took some important stuff in my bag and grabbed a taxi to the poorest neighborhood hoping to find Ethiopians. Luckily, I did find a woman and told her my situation. She took me to a house with lots of women and introduced me to them. They took care of me for two days and on the third day they told me to pay my share of rent and contribute to food. They all were working as prostitutes and offered to take me with them. I stayed home without food for two days. When it became clear to me on the third day that I had no other choice, I joined their business.

Interviewer: How long did you stay in that house?

Lakech: I never thought I would do such a thing. It was really hard. I was confused. My beliefs do not go well with that kind of life. The women in the house are into different drugs. For me it was always hide-and-seek with the police. I stayed there for thirteen months until I saved enough money to buy a return ticket to my home. That is when I gave myself up to the police.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to demonstrate the processes through which female Ethiopian domestic workers migrate to the Middle East. It also described salient actors, processes, and experiences of women migrants after their arrival in the Middle East. The pre-return analysis presented in this chapter provides the social context and background for the reintegration processes of migrants, which will be addressed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

AN ANALYSIS OF THE REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF FEMALE ETHIOPIAN MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

The processes of migration involving Ethiopian women domestic workers have extensive spillover effects that transcend the women's actual employment time with their *kafeels* or other informal superiors in *aräb agär*. In the previous chapter, through the personal accounts of Ethiopian returnee migrants, I demonstrated the different psychological, physical and social transformations domestic workers went through in *aräb agar*. In doing so, I explored some salient themes of the migration process, ranging from push factors toward migration in their home country domestic situation as well as learning to cope with exploitation and harassment that occurs in *aräb agar*. Building upon these observations, the aim of this chapter is to address the major research questions of this thesis: After returning from the Middle East, how have female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers' roles changed or been reinforced in the domain of their families, friends, and society in terms of decision-making power, gender roles, and equality? To what extent do female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers feel empowered based on their experiences overseas? What are some of the major strategies, challenges, and opportunities employed by female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in their attempts to reintegrate with their families and communities in Ethiopia? In addressing these research questions, this chapter also provides useful insights into salient themes in return migration, such as self-awareness, empowerment and self-worth.

The Agonies of Reception

Although family members, neighbors, relatives, friends and community members normally play a significant part in providing different forms of support for *aräb agär* returnees, they can also create conditions of alienation and estrangement. While the experiences of returnee women are not uniform and it manifests both the aforementioned situations of support and alienation, the women in this study all agree on the difficulty of meeting the lofty financial and social expectations set by their immediate families and their larger community. These expectations which at times also involve other aspects such as cultural and situational “correctness,” are unrealistic and become serious setbacks as the return migrants try to reintegrate with their community. Senait, a returnee from Dubai, UAE, explains that the difficulty of returning and reintegrating is at times as hard as the challenges of negotiating with *aräb agär* customs and traditions. “Everything is burdensome,” she says. “Oftentimes I think about what I am going through here [Ethiopia] and wonder if my life here is better off at all.”

The most demanding expectation from families, neighbors, extended families and the community is related to remittances. In fact, the expectation of remittances begins before migrants set foot outside Ethiopia. Influential family members arrange the migration process from the moment of the decision to go to financing the agency or broker costs. As a result the decision-makers feel they are “investing” in this “venture;” that is, the migrant woman is expected to return her investment handsomely in the long run. Investing in migrant women is in the way like buying a stock: it is a one-time investment by the sending father, husband or creditor, but the return could be lucrative. A migrant worker’s failure to send remittances before returning home is thus usually

considered shameful and a betrayal. Most importantly, however, it is the social stigma that is associated with returning early that troubles ex-migrants like Alem:

I was ready to go back home after three months of staying in *aräb agar*, until another fellow Ethiopian who worked with me warned me about the unrealistic expectations of family and friends. “If you go back after three months,” she said, “neighbors will think and gossip that you have some kind of disease which made your employers decide to deport you.” Such gossip would have made me crazy and I could not have handled it. My work mate told me this happened to her and she advised me stay for at least a year before deciding to go back, which would be more acceptable to the community.

Gossip in the community that leads to stigmatization has a tremendously negative impact on the women’s success in reintegrating into her community. Return migrant workers in such cases prefer to stay home to avoid community gossip. With limited opportunity for economic integration or movement to another place, the women are usually trapped by indecision. However, as seen in Alem’s case the difficulty is not only economic, but also community pressure and stigma. The advice Alem got from her workmate convinced her to stay for ten months before she returned to Ethiopia where she could be accepted as a “success” story.

Such expectations are contrary to the idea of empowerment. The women who return home had been resisting exploitative labor conditions and abuse when they were in the Middle East. On their return, they are “empowered enough” to say no to the abusive situation of labor migration. However, the community back home thinks they failed to reach their goal of sending remittance even if the money generating method involved physical and sexual exploitation. “Whatever it takes” is what many interviewees said when I asked them how family and community members expect them to make money in *aräb agär*. Community members push the women’s resistance with verbal abuse and

stigmatization that, in most instances, pushes the women back to exploitative labor migration.

The other commonly observed expectation of the community is pressure on the migrant returnees not to show any kind of behavioral, cultural, religious and ideological change. The women are told that change of any kind after their return is something for them to be ashamed of. Yet, as Tannenbaum suggests, upon migration, these women not only experience loss of people but also may lose their “inner compass” (2007, p. 148). Our inner compass is the primary place through which we explore the people, culture, and physical environment that make up our identity. Separation from such a familiar internal place elicits emptiness and an intense longing for contact with one’s own people that might even trigger anxiety and rage (Tannenbaum, 2007).

As I established in Chapter IV of this thesis, most migrant women are forcefully assimilated into new cultural norms of receiving countries, leaving no place to maintain their culture, speaking their language or exercise their religion. These women experienced a cultural transformation in their host countries, either harsh or benign, which they are often not even aware of until they come back to their home country and are informed verbally and non-verbally they are unpleasantly different or even insane. How does such experience of losing one’s “inner compass,” accompanied by forced assimilation, affect returning home and reintegrating with the “original” culture? Senait, who returned home after living six years in Dubai, the UAE, shares her story:

Senait: When I returned, the country where I spent my whole life was now new to me. Everything from getting together with people to starting basic conversations became arduous. I started doubting my words and actions and sometimes I find myself asking questions like “Was I like this always?” “Did I do this?” I am not talking about random people or acquaintances here. It is people around me including my family who misunderstood my estrangement.

Interviewer: How do you mean they “misunderstood” you?

Senait: They thought I was deliberately doing some things differently from them to make some sort of “I-am-better-than-you” statement. They thought I was showing off that I was modern and superior. One time, I remember I was helping my mother cook *dōrō wet*.²¹ I was preparing the chicken, and unconsciously, I was preparing it like I used to do in Dubai. My mother was so upset she yelled, “You think you are better than us?” I felt so sad and misunderstood.

It is important to note here that, while not as orthodox as most of the customs in the Middle East countries, Ethiopian society is largely conservative especially when it comes to religious issues. These values are particularly strict for women, who are expected to retain and uphold traditional notions of “dignity” and steadfastness. This expectation is embraced by the wider Ethiopian public, and does not take into consideration the lived experiences of migrant women while they were in *arāb agär*. Such lack of acknowledgment from the community, especially from close friends and family members, leads migrant women into a feeling of desperation and a heightened sense of irrelevance that negatively impacts their self-worth.

In addition to close friends and family members, extended relatives and community members levy their own form of expectations on migrant returnees. There is usually the misguided assumption that migrant workers in *arāb agär* are making a lot of money. It is actually very common for people related to a person coming from abroad to expect some kind of gift. The very fact that someone has been abroad is usually associated with him/her being “better off” economically and financially. This expectation is perpetuated particularly by family members who want to amplify their “worth” and

²¹ *Wet* is an Ethiopian stew traditionally eaten with *injera*, a spongy flat bread made from the millet-like grain known as teff. *Dōrō wet* is one such stew, made from chicken and hard-boiled eggs

“respectability” through the “generosity” of their daughter as a result of her “success” abroad. The position of family members here isn’t necessarily one of appreciation of the migrant returnee, but rather of sanctioning her “success” through transitivity, a “she-is-successful-because-I-raised-her-like that” kind of thinking. In discussing the expectation of neighbors and friends, Senait narrated how the community thinks of the outside world including *aräb agar*:

When people [in Ethiopia] think of a foreign country, they think that the individual who migrates there can just collect money from everywhere. It doesn’t appear to them we work for it to earn it. When I returned home, there was gossip that I didn’t bring anything for close neighbors and friends. Some people told me in person that I didn’t bring anything for them while others refused to greet me. Everyone...family, neighbors, and relatives...they expect a lot. I tried my best within my capacity. I did bring some gifts for some close friends and relatives. But if I tried to bring gifts for all, I would be left empty handed.

Like Senait, many of my interviewees said that they were aware of the expectation of gift giving ingrained in the society. Although they tried to bring gifts, they could do only so much with a salary of US\$100-150 per month. There is a consensus within my interviewees about the wide gap between the realities of their lived experienced in *aräb agär* and their community’s *perception* of *aräb agär*. This is bound to lead migrant returnees to feel stress, anxiety and isolation. For example, Lakech, a returnee who run away from the house she was working for and ended up in the prostitution trap to survive for thirteen months in Dubai, shares her story of how she lost all her friends, except one, when she returned. Although she did not understand why they rejected her friendship at the beginning, she was informed by an outsider that they were offended by her “neglect” of them as evidenced by, among other things, her “empty-handed return.” “I was informed that they were expecting me to buy them gifts while I

was there [in *aräb agär*]," Senait explains. "They thought I would bring them a lot of gifts. I was so sad and disappointed with them. If only they know what it is like there..."

Most migrant returnees associate the idea of returning home with liberation from the traumatic life they had in *aräb agär*. These migrant returnees feel, upon return, they need time to rest, reexamine their lives and make meaning out of their migration. For instance, Lakech emphasized how she had been struggling morally, ethically and spiritually after what she experienced in *aräb agär*. She has always been a devout follower of the Coptic Ethiopian Orthodox Church principles that strongly prohibit prostitution. For Lakech, the 13 months she spent as a prostitute in Dubai come back to haunt her everyday today. "I was struggling and I did not go out to sleep with a man unless it was really necessary, like when I needed food and had to pay rent," she says. Sobbing, she recounts the trauma, explaining, "That's why it took me thirteen months to come back home after I ran away from my abusive employer." Coming back to a highly judgmental and scrutinizing "home" for Lakech and other migrant workers therefore becomes a burden rather than liberation. Lakech never told anyone about the life she led after she ran away. She was hoping returning home would provide relief, although she now lives in fear. "Whenever I am outside of my house, I fear someone from that life will expose me," she responded when I asked her about her communal experiences. The troubling thing is, it has been ten years since Lakech returned to her community. Consequently, the support system from family, friends and the broader community that migrant returnees conceive of prior to coming back is often non-existent and therefore does not guarantee successful rehabilitation or effective reintegration into society.

Although the material and cultural expectations of the community undermine the natural support system, there are some cases where people came together to support ex-migrant workers. Alem's family and friends are good examples of such a support system. In my conversation with Alem, she singled out the important role her family and friends played in her decision to return home, rehabilitate and reintegrate:

Alem: In the beginning, I told my family about my dire situation in *aräb agär*. My mother told me that it would be nice if I could endure and use the opportunity to change myself economically and assist the family. But if my condition didn't change, she told me to leave it and come back home. She said, 'I will not expect anything from you and I will not be incapable of taking care of you.' Those words gave me comfort and I came back.

Interviewer: What about your friends?

Alem: My friends used to call me while I was there [in Dubai] and they knew about all the trouble I was going through. They encouraged me to come back and I did. They did not expect anything from me. Nowadays, some of them who have good jobs even give me money for my transportation needs. Most of my friends spend their time, after work and during weekends, with me. They helped me through a stressful time.

The Hope and Illusiveness of Economic Betterment

As discussed in the previous chapter, Ethiopian domestic workers primarily migrate to *aräb agär* in pursuit of economic betterment for themselves or their family members. Some activists refer to the way these women suffer at the hands of their *kafeels*, associates of their *kafeels* and the immigration system in general as "modern day slavery" (Beydoun, 2004). It is the "promise" of financial opportunity that keeps these women working in spite of the inhumane treatment. By the end of their stay, however, the expected economic betterment falls short in most instances. Oftentimes the women find that the remittances they sent to their families to have been spent and consumed without anything saved for them. Other times the money saved is not enough to provide for any

tangible change in their lives. It is also common for migrant returnees to find out that the person they entrusted to keep their remittances has betrayed them. All the women I talked to had experienced different levels of disappointment when it came to the chasm between expectations of financial betterment and the reality.

Nevertheless, these women also hear success stories of migrant returnees who own their own shops and change the lives of their families. In order for most of these success stories to happen, however, an array of factors need to occur in favor of the returnees. For example, financial success depends on the mechanisms and actors involved in the sending of remittances. Usually, authority and the exercise of agency is limited by how the employers want to pay the women, the acceptance of the family of the women's newly found agency and different situations in the families of the domestic workers like economic situation, power relation and decision-making processes within the family, particularly between men and women.

Two factors limiting the exercise of agency by the women with regard to send money is the situation of the family and the reason for migration. For instance, Beletu's reason for migration was poverty. As an older child in a family of six siblings with a jobless widowed mother, Beletu felt the obligation to provide for the family. The family's day-to-day survival was dependent on the remittance she sent. In the presence of many dependents back home, Beletu eventually understood that the economic betterment that she was looking forward wasn't going to come anytime soon. She felt no sense of agency about herself. I asked her what she thought about her future:

Honestly, I am thinking of going back. My mother thinks I should be here and that I should try to find job, only to send my younger sister to *aräb agär*. Obviously we need the remittance but I do not want any of my siblings to go to *aräb agär*. My mother worries about me. She thinks I am sacrificing my life for

them. I know I am sacrificing myself but I prefer to go myself than my sister. My life is already ruined. My siblings are on a better track. They will be in a good position for the future. I will raise them.

Similar to Beletu, Sayat's reason to migrate was to provide for her family. Her mother suffered a lot financially trying to raise her and her four siblings. Sayat is the oldest of the siblings and was in 9th grade when she decided to migrate. When I talked to her about managing her remittances, Sayat was indifferent. "The only thing in my mind at that time was my mother's struggle to provide the family with everyday meals," she recalls. "I did not think about my future or how I would be after I returned. I sent all the remittance without saving or asking them to save some for me." However, the three months she spent back home with her family changed her perspective:

Sayat: You would think there would be some money saved to sustain us for a while but there was not any. During the three months I stayed, there were a lot of disagreements. The only income for the family was the salary I was sending and without that there was nothing. As a result, I returned after three months.

Interviewer: What did you do differently your second time?

Sayat: When you go back for the second time, you start to think about yourself. I started holding back half of my salary instead of sending all of it. It is not because I was happy with my first migration that I decided to return, but because what I experienced at home disappointed me. What I learned is that I should not expect my family to think about me or for them to save money for my future. However, after saving for few months I noticed the money was not much. I talked with my sister and brought her to Dubai with me and we started saving her remittance while we sent mine. After saving for a while, we bought her a free visa. I bought my sister's freedom so that she can have a more respectable job. This is what we gained from migration as a family, but personally I do not have anything. It is sad now, as I am dependent on my sister.

The stories of the above two women reveal how much their family's survival depends on their sending a remittance. It makes each woman solely responsible for providing for her family. They do not have the luxury of thinking about their own future, at least in the short term. This does not mean, however, that the women do not worry

about their futures or will not try to manage their remittance in consideration of the future. The two women dealt with the worries they have in two different ways. Sayat changed the way she managed her remittance and brought her sister to assist her in providing for their family. Though she brought her sister to Dubai, Sayat made sure that her sister was in a safer situation than she herself was. Contrary to this, Beletu's decision was to go back and continue working to provide for her family. Both women assume the role of the head of the family, which is traditionally held by the man in the family or by the mother in the absence of a man. Such a shift in the head of the family and decision-maker is the result of a shift in the source of income.

In other families, particularly where there is a man in the house, the man assumes the role of provider and decision-maker. From the women I talked with, Almaz was the only one who was married. She was married at a very young age. "We were in high school when I got pregnant and I did not want to give birth in my family's house," so they got married. Her husband left school and started working in the construction industry as a foreman. They lived for five years before she thought of migration. "I aspired to a better life," Almaz says. "I did not want to wait for my husband's hand day in and day out." Almaz convinced her husband that she needed to go so she could assist him in providing a better life for their son. Her son was four when she left for Beirut. I asked her how she managed her remittance and she explained that trying to manage her own money ended up causing a divorce from her husband:

Almaz: I sent the first four months' salary to my husband so that he could sustain the family. He is my son's father; we spent good and bad times together and I trusted him. He also gave half of the money to my mother. After that, however, I did not want to send money for anyone. My husband would say, "Almaz, wouldn't you send some money even for New Year's celebration?" I would reply by saying, "You will not be fully happy without me" or I would say, "I will send

for the next holiday.” I heard so many unpleasant stories that made me not want to send the remittance. Also we talked about saving and opening some kind of business after I came back. Besides, he had his own income.

Interviewer: What about your mother and your son? Did you send them remittance money?

Almaz: My son was with my mother and she told me that she would provide for him in addition to the assistance he got from his father. My mother has always been understanding and supportive. My husband, on the other hand became very angry with me, and it led us to divorce.

Interviewer: Why do you think he was angry?

Almaz: Because I did not send money for him. Men will get angry when you have money and start doing things, even if it is for your home. I did not do anything. I was a housemaid, and the only thing I was doing was saving the money I earned for the good of my family in the future.

From all the women I interviewed, Almaz was the only woman who exercised autonomy in managing her remittance. She is also the only participant who was married before she went to Arab countries. Such a distinctive experience might indicate that families with men as the head of the household resist women’s exercising agency and decision-making. In other cases, the women are from female-headed households, and even if male siblings exist in their family, the women seem to take on the role of decision-maker in the house. In Almaz’s case, though, her decision about how to spend the remittance she earned disturbed her husband so much that it led to their divorce.

Another important aspect of economic betterment and economic reintegration of return migrants is how the money the women saved is spent upon their return. For some who managed to save their remittance, one of their challenges is rediscovering the economic atmosphere of the country and facing the reality that the amount of money they saved cannot do much. Some of the women repeated a saying that is common among Ethiopians: “*Aräb agär* remittance does not do any good beyond changing one’s couch

and door.” Although Senait thought she saved enough money in order to open her own small business when she returned, she was discouraged to find that her savings had a very limited impact on her life:

Before I went to Dubai, I opened a bank account. When I sent money, I told my family how much to take for themselves and how much to put in my bank account. When I returned back home, everything was expensive. The money saved was spent on in doing errands. I started my own small shop but it didn’t work out. I didn’t have the capital to compete.

When they realize upon return that the money they saved won’t significantly change their lives, many migrant returnees resort to one of two options, namely, going back to *arāb agar*, or reintegrate into the mainstream local economic system. Those who choose to stay and reintegrate into the local economy almost always end up in the labor sector. They usually start with a low paying labor job, with a few signing up for vocational training to upgrade their qualification:

Helina: When I first returned from Beirut, I searched for a job for two years with my accounting education. I could not find a job so I migrated to Abu Dhabi [UAE] and stayed there for two years. Once my contract expired I came back and I heard the food preparation and reception sector had a good job market. I went back to school for a year and got my diploma in food preparation and reception. I did volunteer work and internships in different hotels and applied for many positions. There was no reply. I am still waiting.

Interviewer: Do you think emigrating to *arāb agär* affected your opportunities for getting a job? How so?

Helina: I think so. I think going to *arāb agär* minimized my opportunities to get a job. My classmates that I did my accounting diploma with have a good paying jobs now. All are in good positions. If I did not think of my family and go to *arāb agär*, I would have the same life. Sometimes I think of what would have been, but then, I didn’t have any choice, as my family needed me to deliver.

Similarly, Meron has been on the job market for the past twelve months since she returned from Syria. I asked her how her family, her mother, her niece, and she have been living:

We have been using my remittance money since I was in *arāb agär* and we continue to use it now [after a year]. I started a cleaning job in a small private office three weeks ago. The monthly salary is 800 ETB (US\$50). It is not enough even for transport. I think the best option financially is going back, but my mother is getting old and weak, and I do not want to leave her. At the same time, I do not know how we are going to survive with this meager income.

Domestic work in *arāb agär* does provide temporary economic empowerment, enabling the women to provide for and assist their families. My interviewees recognize that migration to Arab countries offers a viable option when their family is in urgent need of finances, which is almost always the case for these migrant workers. Most migrant workers expressed a great sense of satisfaction in being able to provide for their families, and most importantly, their mothers, although they acknowledge the temporary nature of such economic empowerment. The remittance they send or save does not provide long-term economic stability for them or for their families. Such instability is acute at the time of their return, as both the household members and the returnees themselves struggle financially in the absence of an alternative breadwinner or source of income. The returnees, based on the “provider” role they assumed in the family, oftentimes suffer significant stress.

Meron: I am so glad that I can provide for my family. My mother spent her life suffering to provide for my niece and me. Now I am doing that. I do not want her to worry so I do not tell her how the money gets spent. It has been a long time since I slept properly. I am stressed all the time.

Changed Life Standard as a Challenge

As I discuss in the previous chapter, domestic workers in Middle East countries like the UAE, Syria, and Lebanon are the lowest rung on the ladder of social and economic hierarchy. This is typically true for an Ethiopian female migrant domestic worker who has no opportunity, by virtue of the *kafala* immigration system, to climb to a

higher position on the social ladder through education or by securing a better paying job.

It is important to note, however, that such segmentation of labor immerses migrant domestic workers in the private lives of affluent or at least middle class families.

Although these domestic workers live in stressful working conditions, they still live with and share the resources of host families such as meals and accommodation that would not generally be available to them as members of lower socio economic group. While their immersion and integration into the private homes of their *kafeel* is temporary, the effect it has on the women's long-term is nevertheless profound. For example, Worknesh says she finds it difficult to accept a lower standard of living after her experience of living with a well-to-do family. "Living there spoils you," she says. "It will make you not to be okay with the life you had and will most likely have back in your country." She explains further:

You will adopt the habit of living beyond your standard and that will make you unable to enjoy the life you can afford when you come back. The standard of living here in Ethiopia and in *aräb agär* are quite different. Though I grew up in poverty, my life in *aräb agär* made me forget all I have been through. When I returned, I was extremely miserable. I couldn't do any of the things I got used to doing while I was in *aräb agär*. It was so frustrating.

Sayat shares Worknesh's frustration:

Immediately after my return, one of the things that bothered me the most was the state of my family's house. It was so dirty. I got used to the cleanliness of the house of my rich employers in *aräb agär*, and my home where I grew up suddenly felt unlivable. In fact, when I started throwing old and dirty stuff out of the house, our neighbors thought I was losing my mind. It became stressful to look at dirty stuff in the house. It annoyed me all the time.

Though there are some women who emigrate for reasons other than poverty, most of them come from the lowest socio-economic class of Ethiopian society. Migration of the women and the remittance they send does not bring any significant change in the

standard of living for the family. As a result, the women return to the same level of poverty and class. An Ethiopian averages a GNI of US\$ 380 per year, which is barely above a dollar a day (World Bank, 2013). The living conditions of most of these women reflect this figure: they live in mud houses with shared bedrooms. There are only communal toilets and there are no private bathrooms. Meron's house, for example, is basically a studio with a curtain in the middle to separate the bedroom/kitchen from the living room. The house is shared by Meron, her mother and her niece.

Yet, in Syria, where Meron migrated and stayed for four years, she worked with a family who provided her with a luxurious apartment floor that accommodated only her and the father of her *kafeel*. Meron had her own bedroom with a full bathroom for herself. Her job was to take care of her sponsor's father, who broke his leg and could not move. Meron describes the old man and his daughter as nice people. The old man and she spent most of their time watching movies, and he also took the time to teach her the language. With the exception of missing her family, Meron, liked her stay there. "Sometimes I think that the decision should not be hard [to go back]," Meron says, "I know I am better off there and my family is also better off if I migrate and send the remittance rather than being another dependent in this tiny house. After all, living better is the point of it all, isn't it?"

Reestablishing Relations

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, family, friends and neighbors can create a challenge or a support to the social reintegration process for the migrant workers up on their return. In addition, the women's relationship with men is very important in evaluating their reintegration. It is important to note that most women migrants leave for

aräb agär in their prime ages. They watch their peers beginning new chapters in their lives, including starting a family of their own and having kids. This creates a sense of urgency among these migrant returnees who feel societal pressure for them to start their own family. In this sense, the manner in which migrant returnees try to establish (or reestablish) relationships particularly with men plays a significant role in the reintegration experience. Some of the women I interviewed had already established relationships through marriage, engagement or dating before they emigrated from Ethiopia. The only married woman, Almaz, separated from her husband while she was working in Beirut in Lebanon. Even though she tried to reestablish her relationship with her husband up on return, it was not successful:

Almaz: He has been telling our friends that I betrayed him. When I returned I tried to talk to him with the mediation of our friends. He told me I am ‘rich’ and that I do not need him since he does ‘not have my status.’ I told him that I did not betray him and that we can be together if he wants but he refused.

Interviewer: Do you regret your decision to migrate? If you do it again, do you think you would stay?

Almaz: No, I do not regret it. Yes, you will lose some things and in my case I lost my husband. We were very young and we have been through a lot in a short amount of time. Though I cannot say migration to *aräb agär* is nice, I cannot deny I gained some important things. I am so glad that I gave my mother a better life than what we had before. In fact, I would have regretted it if I didn’t do what I had to do to change life for my mother. I also know I can provide a better life for my son. You know, there are people who lose their money as well as their love life. I only lost my husband, and yet he might also come back.

The other women who had relationships with men prior to migrating were Worknesh and Abebech. In fact, in both instances, their relationship with a man was a key factor in their decision to migrate. Both these women were involved with men that their parents didn’t approve of. The women were “pushed” to *aräb agär* and their migration was set up by their families as a means to disrupt their respective relationships.

I asked Worknesh whether she maintained her relationship with her boyfriend while she was in Beirut, or reconnected after she returned. Worknesh told me she was not able to keep her relationship while she was in Beirut, but she and her lover got back together after she returned and now they have three children:

Worknesh: When I returned from Beirut after three years, he waited for me and we got back together. We only lived together for seven months , however, before I decided to return to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. We did not have anything to live off. He was an assistant in a small automobile maintenance business that paid very little.

Interviewer: What happened after Saudi Arabia?

Worknesh: I returned after four years. By that time he had become chief mechanic. We opened our own auto maintenance. We got married and I am now a housewife raising our three children.

Abebech, like Worknesh, got back together with her previous boyfriend who was the reason her grandmother sent her to Beirut, in the first place. I asked her what made her start seeing the very person her grandmother was trying to keep her away from before she left:

Abebech: My grandmother was not happy about him when I start dating him after I returned, but I don't feel I am obligated to do what she wants now.

Interviewer: Why do you think you do not feel obligated to do what she says now the way you did before?

Abebech: I do not know. I feel I know better now.

Both Worknesh and Abebech emigrated because of decisions made by their respective families, and they obeyed without any resistance. Yet upon their return, they took up again the very relationship that got them in trouble in the first place, although this did not disrupt the power structure within families. The main change resulting from their jobs as migrant domestic workers is that they learned to take care of themselves where

there was no one to care for them during their spell in *aräb agär*. Because of their experiences in *aräb agar*, these women learned to exercise agency and make independent decisions. For almost all the interviewees, migration brought their first separation from their families who had made all household decision on the women's behalf. The unforgiving environment in *aräb agär* forced the women to adapt to a situation where no one existed to make decisions for them. They had to learn to live independent of their families. Upon returning, it was almost impossible for these women to give up the newfound independence and agency they have discovered.

On the other hand, some women I interviewed had never established a romantic relationship with a man before their migration. It seems that these women were not interested in relationships with men to begin with. Different factors accounted for their disinterest in establishing romantic relationships. Alem and Azeb explain the challenges of establishing a new relationship or even maintaining an existing one:

Alem: For me it was not exactly about the men; I just don't like to be outside. I get insecure when outside. For ten months in Dubai, I never got out of my workplace to see the city. I was in the house all the time.

Azeb: Most of the women, including some of my friends, were unable to establish new relationships or maintain existing ones. The nature of our workplace has a serious isolating effect which in turn impacts your conversation skills and interpersonal communication skills. If you are with older people or with families without kids, like it was in my case, you will spend most of your time not talking to anyone. Until I ran away, I was with a newly married couple, and I spent all my days not saying a word. Most days the most I uttered was just "*na'am*," which means "yes" in Arabic. As a result, when I came back, I was anti-social because of my lack of companionship in *aräb agär*. You feel you do not know how to be around people and no one understands your situation. No one has the patience to empathize; rather, they choose to think you are intentionally avoiding companionship.

There are many intertwined situations with what Alem and Azeb tried to highlight. In addition to the expectation to adapt to a new culture and language, the long-

standing segregation toward immigrants that dehumanizes and exploits migrant workers' self-worth adds another layer of trauma. None of my interviewees were allowed to go out, have friends over, start a conversation, own a cellphone, listen to music or watch TV. These women are directed to work all the time when on the premises of their workplace. The psychological effect this has on the women returnees is enormous. According to Anbesse et al. (2009), enforced cultural isolation, undermining of cultural identity and exploitation are high risks for the mental health of migrant women returnees (Anbesse et al., 2009). Anbesse et al. (2009) report that most migrant women returnees have "undetected but important levels of mental morbidity" (p. 566). Accordingly, the women exhibit behaviors like anxiety and depression. They have a hard time going out and staying out for more than a limited amount of time, and that minimizes their opportunity to meet new people.

The other factor that affects the way these women react negatively toward men in particular is related to the abusive experiences they had with men in *arāb agär*. Hanna and Lakech, for example, had traumatic and abusive sexual experiences with their employers and other men in the society:

Hanna: I never had any relationship with a man before I migrated to Beirut. My first involvement with a man involved violent abuse and sexual assault in Beirut. After I returned, I stayed home for seven months. I do not like to see men. I do not feel safe around them. Even now after three years, I do not feel safe even talking to a man.

Lakech: It has been ten years and I still have nightmares of some of the things they [men in *arāb agär*] made me do. Currently, I do not like to go out with any man or even see them. I know Ethiopian men are different but still they are all men.

Self-empowerment and Self-worth

A recurring theme that emerged in my conversations with my interviewees was the notion of empowerment. Rowlands (1997) defines empowerment as a state of having more self-confidence and dignity, and the consequence of having self-confidence. In light of this, it is worth examining the question, “What are the changes within the women and how do they explain such changes in their lives in light of their migration?” Meron’s reflection on this issue provides a useful insight. “I used to be very shy and could not speak in public,” Meron says about her pre-migration self. “But now I am more confident. One thing *arāb agär* changed is the way I feel about my country. I feel confident in becoming successful in my country since I managed to live in a country where I did not know the language and had to learn almost everything.”

The feeling of being able to migrate to another country and have a job (even if it is low paying) has proved to be a source of pride for some of these women. Meron, Worknesh and Senait describe how empowering it was to earn money and send remittance to their families. Such a feeling of confidence is not the only common thing these three women share. Compared to other interviewees, this trio had an easier life – relatively speaking- in *arāb agär*. Meron and Senait both renewed their contract willingly before returning because they worked for good families. Worknesh was a freelancer in Riyadh for four years without any major risk of getting arrested, and so decided to return.

This, however, does not mean that the aforementioned migrant workers had good working or living conditions. What makes these women appreciative of their experience is rather the very fact that they were able to navigate an alien culture and emerge feeling successful. It is not necessarily in monetary terms that they measure their success here.

Rather, it is the feeling that they made the best of the opportunity they had in the worst of conditions. These women, who were used to being marginalized within their own communities, have developed a sense of accomplishment. It was an empowering experience that made them feel that if they could do it in *arāb agär*, they could be triumphant anywhere. Such newfound independence, as Meron highlights, brings about new opportunities of “rediscovering” the self. “I even negotiated for more salary when I renewed my contract in broken Arabic,” Meron says with a heightened tone of confidence. “If I can do that there, I can definitely advocate for myself here in my country in a much better way.”

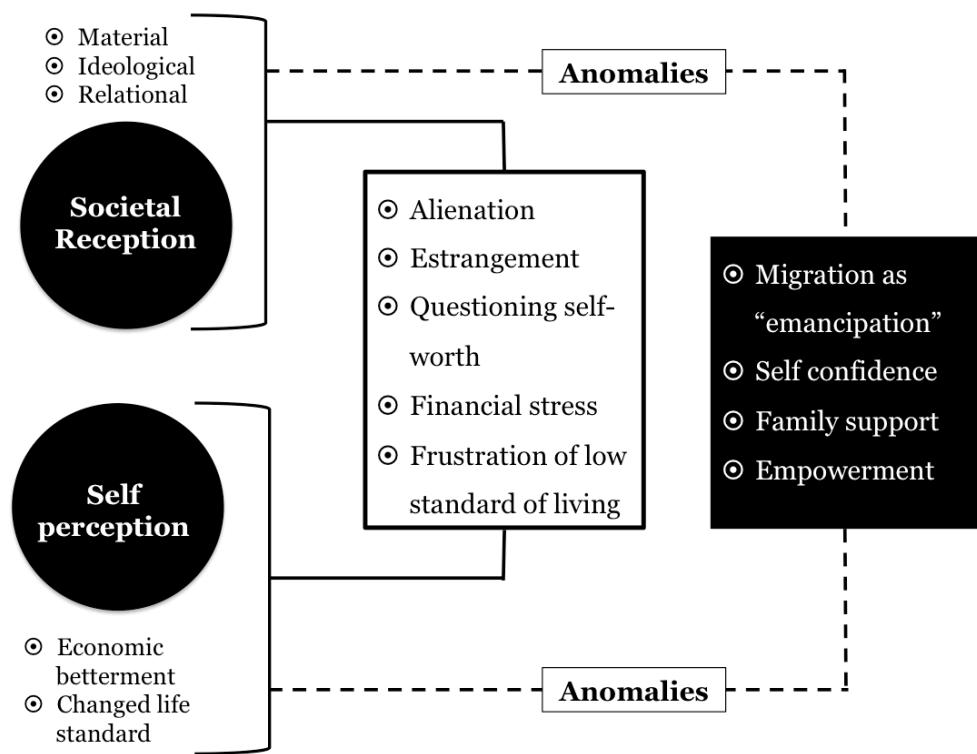


Figure 3. Return-migration, reintegration and empowerment.

As discussed in the previous chapter, there are other factors, in addition to having a job and earning remittance in a foreign country, that shape the lived experiences and attitudes of Ethiopian migrant women workers in *aräb agär*. There are institutionalized structures and social constructions of hierarchies that determine how the women are treated in addition to the individual-family dynamics of employers, all of which result in different outcomes and different levels of self-worth and confidence. Alem, who had been in Dubai for ten months in an exploitative working condition with limited access to food, explains how she has been feeling since she returned:

Alem: Even if I returned after just ten months, I feel nothing is the same for me anymore. It would have been better for me if I didn't go there [to *aräb agär*] in the first place. Everything is mixed up for me now. When I arrived here, I did not know what I was thinking. I decided to take my time to recover and went to *tsebel*.²² After three months, it became obvious to me that I couldn't change anything. Now I am thinking of starting as a hairdresser.

Interviewer: Is there anything positive you can think of that you gained from *aräb agär*?

Alem: When a person emigrates, he/she will benefit monetarily or with the acquiring of experience, or education of general knowledge. Unfortunately, I couldn't say I got any of these things from my migration to Dubai.

Interviewer: Was there any change at all you can think of that came as a result of your stay in Dubai?

Alem: There is nothing positive I could say. Rather, it dragged me backward. I feel so stupid. I always felt I had good general knowledge, but now I do not easily discern anything. My mind is blocked. I was always eager, alert and daring. I was excited about trying new things. Currently, I forget everything. The loss of sleep, the insecurity, the worry, the load of work...all changed me for worse.

Like Alem, Abebech, Lakech and Hanna all attested to the fact that they not only lost confidence but also doubted their self-worth as a result of their migration and the

²² In Ethiopia, Tsebel (translated as Holy Water), is the site where baptism or spiritual cleansing services are offered to orthodox Christians by priests.

experience they had there. Some of their tragic experiences including sexual and physical abuse, exploitative working conditions, and inhumane and degrading treatment, led them not only to question their self-worth but also their humanity, dignity and cultural identity. In the words of Abebech: “They [employers] do not consider you a human being. You are just a working machine incapable of feeling, an easily disposable sub-human. Now, I have to live with this trauma every minute of my life. Sometimes I succeed and sometimes I break down.”

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explore different salient themes pertinent to the challenges of the reintegration of Ethiopian women migrant domestic workers. I particularly emphasized how the experiences of migrant women in their host countries disrupted or reinforced their roles in their home countries. Through interviews, I looked into issues like reception, economic betterment (or lack there-of), personal relationships and empowerment. I investigated how migrant returnees negotiated in each of these areas when back in their own country. The results show an uneven distribution of outcomes where, for example, some migrant returnees discovered a sense of newfound empowerment and self-worth whereas most others felt such a deterioration in their confidence that they regret their decision to have migrated.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This thesis investigates female Ethiopian domestic workers' migration and return migration experiences in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. In doing so, it examines the effects of labor migration on women with special attention to empowerment and reintegration processes. The research explores different phases of migration starting from pre-migration decision-making processes to return migration and reintegration challenges. The findings of the research accentuates themes related to acculturation, the challenge of cultural belonging after migration, and empowerment and perceived resistance of gender roles.

Summary of Major Findings

This research was guided by four research questions that analyzed salient issues in migration and return migration processes involving Ethiopian female domestic workers. These include analyses of: i) cultural, economic and social transformations female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers went through in their Middle East working experiences; ii) changed or reinforced roles in the domain of female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers' families, friends, and society in terms of such aspects as decision-making powers, gender roles, and equality; iii) gain or loss of empowerment based on female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers' experiences overseas; and iv) strategies, challenges, and opportunities employed by female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in their attempt to reintegrate with their families and communities in Ethiopia. The following summary of findings is organized in a manner that addresses each of the research questions guiding this research.

Research question 1: What are some of the transformations female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers believe they have evolved through in their Middle East working experiences?

Ethiopian migrant domestic workers experience a great deal of forceful assimilation during the time of their contract in the Middle East. These women are expected to accept the stringent propositions of the *kafala* (sponsorship) system on one hand, and the exploitative and at times abusive behaviors of their *kafeel* (employer). Although controlling mechanisms differ from one *kafeel* to another, all *kafeels* hold the employee's passport and the foreign resident card, the *bitaqa*. The confiscation of passport represents an act of exerting control and a manifestation of establishing power hierarchy. This makes the domestic worker confined to the residence of the *kafeel*. Such confinement leads to lack of agency, and makes the domestic worker assimilate to the religious, cultural and social liking of the *kafeel*'s family. The sexual, physical and emotional abuse they suffer at the hands of their employers and their family members may have a disempowering effect when the women return to home country, where they continue to not go out of their houses as they have developed a sense of insecurity and mistrust.

Research question 2: After returning from the Middle East, how have female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers' role changed/reinforced in the domain of their families, friends, and society in terms of such aspects as decision-making powers, gender roles, and equality?

Most domestic migrant workers find themselves to be further drifted from their earlier positions within the power structure of their families upon returning. This is particularly a result of the transformation they had to go through in their Middle East experiences. Most of these women are not even aware of the changes they had gone through until they feel the stigma of and alienation from their own family members and

close friends. The lack of acknowledgment from the community, especially from close friends and family members, corners migrant women into desperation and a heightened sense of irrelevance in their self-worth.

Research question 3: After returning from the Middle East, to what extent do female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers feel empowered based on their experiences overseas?

A key finding of this research is on how the notion of empowerment is unevenly observed in migrant returnees upon reintegration processes. Some interviews revealed that there were a couple of important factors in the process of migration that contributed to the empowerment of these women. The women in this group acknowledge how migration opened-up space for the women to exercise agency and decision-making. Most of the women with the exception of the ones who experienced extreme abuse agree that migration by itself was empowering. The process, they explain, opens opportunities of awareness of self-confidence and the ability to live by oneself without any other decision maker in their lives, which was what they were used to within their own families in Ethiopia. The performance of male gender role that comes as a result of labor migration and earning remittance as well as being able to provide to the family is also considered as a positive outcome migration.

The other encouraging finding is that family, friends and neighbors serve as potential support system that can have empowering effects on the women after they return. Although, almost in all cases, these groups have put a high expectation on the women migrants, ideal and material, there were exceptional cases where families and friends were very supportive in the decision the women took to return and stay at home. There were cases where families encouraged the women to return even before the labor

contract was finished when the latter heard about the abusive working conditions suffered by the domestic worker. After return, some families support the decision of the returnees by morally supporting and encouraging them so that they can have a better reintegration to the society.

Research question 4: What are some of the major strategies, challenges, and opportunities employed by female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in their attempt to reintegrate with their families and communities in Ethiopia?

Most migrant workers emigrated in the first place in search of finding job and sending remittances. A significant number of them do not see labor work as a sustainable working condition for them. They save part or all of their income in order to start a new and long-term career back in their country have a long term. Some of them managed to save some of their remittances with the hope of starting a small business or getting back to school to be able to find a job in their home country. Though so many of the women failed to start their business for the lack of sufficient finance, few of them are successful in getting vocational training and finding jobs. Such integration to the mainstream job market enables the women to maintain the independence they gained through migration from the head of the family, mostly fathers or elder sons. Earning or having the financial independence enables these women to participate in the decision-making process in the family and have agency in her life.

In addition to addressing the specific research questions, the thesis explored the different stakeholders and processes involved in the labor migration of female Ethiopian domestic workers, namely, family members, brokers, agencies, individual employers, and both sending and receiving countries' governments. Every stakeholder brings about its own interest in the different levels of the migration process, which, in turn, creates

different layers of oppression and complex problems facing the migrant women. The family consider sending female family member as a profitable investment as remittances will be directly sent to. The government of Ethiopia adopts policies in favor of migration of its citizens as a source of much needed foreign exchange.

This study also explored the manner in which both the government and the individual employers in the destination countries do not want to give up maintaining “cheap and disposable” foreign labor for the lowest paid and segmented work of domestic work through the immigration system. In both source and destination countries, formal and informal profitable “migration industries” involving brokers and agencies are established surrounding the labor migration of the migrant women. All these stakeholders get benefits from the migration of the women while the women themselves get the bare minimum of said benefit or even lose more. The decision-making and agency of the women is stripped away from them in every level of their migration experiences. Their experience of migration is shaped by patriarchal ideologies of gender, subordination and inequalities that are juxtaposed with racial, economic, cultural and religious segregation. In joining a labor workforce in a country where they are not nationals, the very experience that these Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers hoped would be empowering ends up being exploitative and disenfranchising.

Recommendations

The conversations I had with most of my interviewees highlighted the immediate need of action to be taken by the Ethiopian government which so far has done little to address the needs of these women. The following are some of my recommendations to the Ethiopian government based on the findings of this research.

- My observation is consistent with existing literature that the issue of women migration is a forgotten agenda for the Ethiopian government amidst the continued risky exodus of young women to the Middle East. Any initiative that attempts to address the issues of female migration in Ethiopia needs to acknowledge and validate the existence of the intricate challenges faced by migrant domestic workers. The government needs to undertake a comprehensive study on the challenges of migration and return migration of migrant domestic workers in order to make informed decisions that would yield sustainable solutions. In addition, the government needs to look at the experiences of other countries like the Philippines that have developed a very efficient legal-bureaucratic system and bilateral agreements with host countries involving domestic workers and labor migrants.
- The government of Ethiopia has recently banned Ethiopian migrant domestic workers from travelling to the Middle East amidst continuous reports of abuse and serious crimes directed at its domestic workers. While this ban may be a ‘politically correct’ decision, it opens up another dangerous pattern of migration in the illegal routes where thousands of abuses and crimes go unaccounted every day. In addition, banning migration violates the universally recognized fundamental human right of movement. As a result, I recommend a strict regulation of labor migration of women and bilateral agreements with the host countries.
- The Ethiopian government has the obligation to protect its citizens not only within its borders but also outside of it. The government should provide policy assurance

and legal reforms domestically. In the meantime it needs to establish bilateral agreements with host countries in order to ensure the safety and well-being of citizens. With regard to female domestic workers in Middle East, the government needs to regulate and control factors of migration negatively affecting the experiences of these women. Within the borders of the country, the government needs to have a resolute policy and praxis toward achieving gender equality in order to ensure women have free and equal decision-making powers in every areas of their life. The government needs to regulate the different agencies of migration, agencies and brokers, who exploit these women with the aim of maximizing their profits. Most importantly, there should be a guideline for labor migration including legal frameworks that stipulate minimum requirements such as minimum age limit. The demography of the participants if this research (see Chapter I) shows a significant number of underage women who are migrating through legal routes that violate the Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC) which Ethiopia is a signatory.

- It is imperative that the government of Ethiopia needs to improve the working conditions of women migrant workers in the Middle East. Though the benefit of remittances as sources of foreign exchange is undeniable, such benefit should not come at the cost of women's dignity. The government should negotiate for improved labor contract of the women migrants and ensure the implementation thereof. The labor contract should guarantee, at least, the minimum standard of

working conditions adopted in the Domestic Workers Convention.²³ One of the important requirements that can be proposed is for the government to ensure the emigrants are “informed of their terms and conditions of employment in an appropriate, verifiable and easily understandable manner and preferably, where possible, through written contracts” (Domestic Workers Convention, 2011, Article 7). Accordingly, the contract should include, but shouldn’t be limited to, name and address of the employer and the work place; the duration of the work including specific starting and end date; the type of work to be performed; the normal hours of work; remuneration and provision of food and accommodation; paid annual leave and daily and weekly rest periods; the terms of repatriation; and terms and conditions relating to the termination of employment, including any period of notice by either the domestic worker or the employer (Domestic Workers Convention, 2011, Article 7). In addition to negotiating and including better working conditions in the contract, the government should enhance the capacity of its consulates and embassies in the host countries to effectively demand and enforce the labor contract of its citizens.

- In addition, the government of Ethiopia should work with the host countries to minimize the effects of the immigration system, *kafala*, on its citizens. The government should enable its citizens to return back to their country without any limitation, disregarding the immigration system of the host country. The domestic

²³ Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) Convention concerning decent work for domestic workers (Entry into force: 05 Sep 2013) Adoption: Geneva, 100th ILC Session (16 Jun 2011) - Status: Up-to-date instrument (Technical convention).

worker should be able to terminate her labor contract and return to her country without any restriction on her fundamental right of movement.

- The Ethiopian government should incentivize civic organizations and non-profits that can cater to the psychological and economic needs of most return migrants, most of whom suffered forced cultural assimilations in their working places, and who have returned to their home countries only to find out they are subject to stigma and alienation. To date the only non-profitable organization working with women returnees of domestic workers is Agar Ethiopia.²⁴

²⁴ *Agar* was established in 2005 by Nina Tesfamariam. The organization has two programs, namely, Elderly Support Program (ESP) and Trafficking Victims Reintegration Program (TVRP) (Ethiojobs.net, n.d.). According to the Facebook page of the organization, TVRP has “43 women in the shelter as of the end of November/2013 and eight are at Amanuel Psychiatric Hospital receiving emergency psychiatric care (the most we ever had at Amanuel before was two at any given time). Some of the women will be reunified with their family and those who want to stay at Agar’s shelter can receive training of their choice (hair care, food preparation, sewing, basic computer, etc.). When they finish training, they will receive job placement assistance.” (Agar Ethiopia, n.d.).

APPENDIX A
MAPS OF ETHIOPIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST



APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDE IN AMHARIC

የበታቸው የወጣው ስራውን አገልግሎት በቻ የስራውን ወደ የገዢ የመመለሰ እና የመቀበላል ልማድ ተንተነ

የጥናቱ በለቤትና ፍሰማ በልሆነ ካተማ

የቆለ መጠይቅ መምሪያ

1. አረብ የገዢ ለመሆኑ እንደሆነ ወሰንና? የግልሽ ወ-ሳኔ ነው? ወይስ የበተሰብ? የበተሰብ ወ-ሳኔ ክሆነ ምን ተስማሽ? የግል ወ-ሳኔና ክሆነ በተሰብና እንደሆነ ተቀብለው?
2. ገዢና በምን መንገዶች አስተካክለሽ? በዝር ወከል ወይስ በሆነ ወጥ ይለም? ወጪውን እንደሆነ ስራንና?
3. ክዝም በጃል በረዳናበት ሆኖ ማን ተቀብለሽ?
4. በአረብ የገዢ ቅዱታ እንደሆነ ነበር? የሰራ ሁኔታዎች? ክእስታዎች ጋር ያለሽ ገንዘኑ እንደሆነ ነበር?
5. ወርሃዊ ክፍያና ስንትነበር? ምን ያህልን ወደ በተሰብና ተልክ ነበር?
6. ምን ያህል ገዢ በአረብ የገዢ ቅዱት? እንደሆነ ልተመለስ ዝልሽ?
7. በግዢ ወ-ሳኔ የመቅረብ ወ-ሳኔ በግልሽ የወሰድናው ነው? ወይስ ያለለ ስው ተወስና አለበት? ወ-ሳኔው በግልሽ የወሰድናው ክሆነ በተሰብና ወ-ሳኔና እንደሆነ ተቀብለው?
8. ወደ አ-ተዋናና ካተማውን ስንት ገዢ ሆነ?
9. ወደ አረብ የገዢ ክመሆኑን በፊት የበተሰብና ሁኔታ እንደሆነ ነበር?
10. ወደ አረብ የገዢ ክመሆኑን ጋር ተያይዘ የመጣ ለውጥ አለ?
11. በአሁን ገዢ ስራ ቴስረያለሽ? ምንድን ነው የመተስረው? ምን ያህል ይከፈልሽ? በተሰብናን ትረፈለሽ?
12. ለለቤተሰብና ልተኞች ትቻያለሽ? በተሰብና ወይም የበተሰቡን አባላት በሚመለከት ወ-ሳኔ ስውን እንደሆነ ነው? እንደሆነ በሚመለከት ትኩረው ወ-ሳኔ ወ-ሳኔ ትካፈያለሽ?
13. በአረብ የገዢ ስሌጣን ቅዱት ለማጠራት ትፈረያለሽ?
14. የአረብ የገዢ ቅዱታ ለውጥና በላሽ ችሰቦያለሽ? ክልዕ዗ዎች በምን መልካ? በግንዘብ፣ በአስተካበብ፣ ወይም በለለ በምን?
15. ክቀድሞ ጉዳቶች ጋር ያለሽ ገንዘኑ እንደሆነ ነው? አሁን ባለሽ ገንዘኑዋቹ ይሰተኛ ነሽ? አረብ የገዢ በመሆኑ የገዢ ገንዘኑዋቹ ትወካቹ ባለሽ ችሰቦያለሽ?
16. አረብ የገዢ ክመሆኑን በፊት እና አሁን ክመጣን በጃል ክወንጀዎች ጋር ያለሽ ትርጉምና ገንዘኑ ምን ወመስላል?
17. አረብ የገዢ ክመሆኑን በፊት እና አሁን ክመጣን በጃል ክወተሰብና ጋር ያለሽ ትርጉምና ገንዘኑ እንደሆነ ነው?
18. የግል የሰራው ልተኞች ስራ ክመሆኑ ጋር የተያይዘ ነው ባለሽ ችሰቦያለሽ? ወንድ በሆነ ይህ ልማድ እያንተመሄም ወይም በተለያ መልካ ይሆን ነበር ባለሽ ችሰቦያለሽ?

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW GUIDE IN ENGLISH

1. Who decided for you to go to the Middle East? Your family or you? If it's your family how was your reaction and vice versa?
2. How did you arrange your travel? Agency or outside normal channels? How did you cover the cost of traveling?
3. Who received you after your travel?
4. How was your stay in the country you traveled? How was your working condition? How do you describe your relation with the family you were working for?
5. How much was your salary? Did you send all your salary back home to your family as remittance?
6. How long did you stay in the Middle East? Why did you come back?
7. How and why did you decide to stay back home? Is it your own decision or did your family influence you?
8. How long has it been since you returned to Ethiopia?
9. How was the economic condition of your family before you went to Middle East?
10. How do you describe your family's economic condition after your employment in the Middle East?
11. What is your status now? What do you do? [If you are working] how much salary do you get? Do you support your family?
12. Can you tell me about your family? To what extent do you participate in the decision making process of your family?
13. To what extent do you feel comfortable in talking about your experience in the Middle East?
14. If at all, how has your stay in the Middle East changed you? In what aspect? (Economical? Behavioral? Or in any other way)?
15. To what degree are you comfortable in your relationship with your friends? What about personal relationships?
16. How can you describe your relationship with men before and after your experience in the Middle East?
17. How is your relationship with your family before and after your experience in the Middle East?
18. Do you feel your particular migration experience is related to you being a woman? Why or why not? Conversely, do you feel your experience might be different if you were a man?

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