Ethiopian Domestic Workers and Exploitative Labour in the Middle East: The role of social networks and gender in migration decisions

Lauren N. Moton, Stephen Abeyta, Meredith Dank, and Tsigereda Tafesse Mulugeta

Abstract

Migrant domestic work in the Middle East is known for high rates of exploitative labour. Despite this fact, many women from Africa pursue this work as a gendered familial expectation or means of financial gain, among other motivations. In this article, we centralise how personal social networks—family, friends, peers, and communities—act as motivating factors for prospective migrant domestic workers in Ethiopia looking to travel for work in the Middle East. The analysis of 100 in-depth interviews with women migrant domestic workers seeking employment in the Middle East demonstrates that social networks and gender influence migration decisions in complicated, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory ways. Social networks also play an important role in facilitating entry into domestic work for Ethiopian women and in seeking help when they experience exploitative conditions in the Middle East.

Keywords: domestic work, Ethiopia, labour exploitation, Middle East, social networks

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Introduction

A simple news search of the words 'Ethiopia' and 'domestic work' uncovers a litany of headlines reporting exploitative working conditions for Ethiopian domestic workers who have travelled abroad to pursue job opportunities. The uniquely abusive context defining the labour conditions of Ethiopian domestic workers

is not a new or unknown phenomenon.[1] Research has sought to understand the mechanisms undergirding the domestic work industry's existence for decades, with organisations like UNICEF conducting global research on the domestic work of youth as early as the 1990s.[2] During each stage of their migration and work, Ethiopian domestic workers are placed in a position of heightened risk of experiencing physical and sexual violence, unsafe working conditions, and long working hours for low pay.[3] Working in such contexts is detrimental to physical and emotional health, which may include the contraction of chronic illnesses, increased cancer and Tuberculosis risks, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unwanted pregnancies.[4] In response to an increase in outward migration during 2011 and 2012, along with rising concerns about abuse, exploitation, and the trafficking of workers, the Ethiopian government enacted a temporary ban on all labour migration to the Middle East from October 2013 to October 2018 to enhance the protection of its citizens.[5] This ban was succeeded by 'safer migration' policies referred to as Overseas Employment Proclamations, which focus on the regulation of employment agencies outside of Ethiopia.[6] Despite these changes, exploitation and adverse work experiences persist for Ethiopian migrant domestic workers.

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1 R Begum, 'Domestic Workers in Middle East Risk Abuse amid COVID-19 Crisis', Human Rights Watch, 6 April 2020; J Busza, Z Shewamene, and C Zimmerman, *The Role of Agents and Brokers in Facilitating Ethiopian Women into Domestic Work in the Middle East: Findings from the Meneshachin ('Our Departure') Study on Responsible Recruitment Models*, Freedom Fund, London, 2022; M De Regt, 'Ethiopian Women Increasingly Trafficked to Yemen', *Forced Migration Review*, vol. 1, issue 25, 2006; R Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*, Stanford University Press, 2015.

2 M Black and J Blagbrough, *Child Domestic Work*, Innocenti Digest, vol. 5, UNICEF, Florence, 1999.

3 A Bisong, *Regulating Recruitment and Protection of African Migrant Workers in the Gulf and the Middle East*, ECDPM, 2021; P Kodoth, *In the Shadow of the State: Recruitment and Migration of South Indian Women as Domestic Workers to the Middle East*, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2020.

4 B Fernandez, 'Health Inequities Faced by Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon', *Health & Place*, vol. 50, 2018, pp. 154–161, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2018.01.008; L D Gezie *et al.*, 'Sexual Violence at Each Stage of Human Trafficking Cycle and Associated Factors: A Retrospective Cohort Study on Ethiopian Female Returnees via Three Major Trafficking Corridors', *BMJ Open*, vol. 9, issue 7, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-024515.

5 International Labour Office, *Policy Brief: Key Findings and Recommendations from Survey on Labour Migration from Ethiopia to Gulf Cooperation Council States and Lebanon*, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2019.

6 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), *Ethiopian's Overseas Employment (Amendment) Proclamation No. 1246/2021*, Federal Negarit Gazeta of FDRE, Addis Ababa, 2021.

A myriad of factors—including economic, conflict-based, gendered, social, and environmental motivations—contribute to Ethiopian domestic workers' decisions to find economic opportunities abroad. In this article, we explore the largely unexplored topic of how familial and community social ties impact Ethiopian women domestic workers' decisions to seek out notoriously exploitative work abroad. In the next section, we outline domestic work, its importance to Ethiopia, and its place within the broader literature on labour exploitation in the Middle East. We then frame the study through social networks and migration theory, and as well as through gender analyses, to unpack the processes by which social ties and gender affect domestic worker migration from Ethiopia to the Middle East. Then we present empirical data from interviews with 100 Ethiopian domestic workers. We explore how social networks offer guidance to working in destination countries, the role social networks play in facilitating employment, and how familial financial responsibilities influence the decision of Ethiopian workers to migrate. We conclude that changes to the recruitment and migration process as well as greater awareness of harms associated with migratory labour are crucial to minimising the prevalence of exploitative labour for migrants, as is greater availability of decent, living wage work options within Ethiopia.

Literature Review

Ethiopia is one of Africa's primary countries of origin for low-wage domestic workers for countries in the Middle East.[7] While it is unclear to what degree this employment industry is growing or shrinking, it is clear that a significant number of Ethiopian citizens—particularly women—pursue work in the Middle East that is characterised by employment in private residences for the purposes of cleaning, cooking, childcare, and caregiving for sick or old family members. This type of domestic work has minimal entry requirements and thus typically attracts women, particularly from communities that lack adequate employment and education opportunities.[8]

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7 A Moors *et al.*, 'Migrant Domestic Workers: A New Public Presence in the Middle East?', in S Shami, *Publics, Politics and Participation: Locating the Public Sphere in the Middle East and North Africa*, Social Science Research Council, New York, 2009, pp. 151–175; Z Shewamene *et al.*, 'Migrant Women's Health and Safety: Why Do Ethiopian Women Choose Irregular Migration to the Middle East for Domestic Work?', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 19, issue 20, 2022, p. 13085, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192013085.

8 B Fernandez, *Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers: Migrant Agency and Social Change*, 1st Ed., Springer, Cham, 2019.

There are many factors behind these migration trends. The impetus for seeking employment in domestic work often begins with familial livelihood. Poverty and a lack of access to consistent work in Ethiopia often drive individuals to seek stable employment by any means necessary.[9] Economic need creates pressure on those migrating to do so for the benefit of their entire family. For example, in one study, Ethiopian women expressed that they were pressured by their families to leave their households to pursue more immediate employment opportunities to contribute financially.[10] For others, domestic work is simply the best of very few options for economic advancement and stability.[11]

Researchers have noted that there is also a suite of nuanced factors aside from poverty and financial gain that contribute to migration motivations. A country's immigration policies can play a role in attracting foreign domestic workers. For example, countries with immigration policies that target specific geographical areas to attract workers often create a relatively stable flow of migrants from their target countries.[12] To this end, Ethiopian migrants may view domestic work abroad as an attractive option due to targeted marketing and the availability of roles and immigration pathways. Other structural mechanisms at both industrial and geopolitical levels can also encourage migration.[13] One example of this is the proliferation of industries created to aid unregulated migration, such as informal migration agencies helping to provide transport and other resources to migrants.[14] The relatively rapid modernisation of Ethiopia has also increased the ease of pursuing work abroad.

Factors within Ethiopia, such as a lack of education for women and girls, also encourages migration. Despite efforts to encourage primary education, child marriages for girls significantly limit their opportunities for pursuing higher education. The dropout rate among female students is considerably higher than that of males, and girls frequently bear the burden of household chores, which

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9 G A Zewdu, 'Ethiopian Female Domestic Labour Migration to the Middle East: Patterns, Trends, and Drivers', *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, vol. 11, issue 1, 2018, pp. 6–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2017.1342976.

10 K Schewel, 'Aspiring for Change: Ethiopian Women's Labor Migration to the Middle East', *Social Forces*, vol. 100, issue 4, 2022, pp. 1619–1641, https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soab051.

11 *Ibid.*; Fernandez, 2018.

12 G Hugo, 'Migration and Development in Low-Income Countries: A Role for Destination Country Policy?', *Migration and Development*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2012, pp. 24–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2012.709806.

13 G Adugna, 'Migration Patterns and Emigrants' Transnational Activities: Comparative Findings from Two Migrant Origin Areas in Ethiopia', *Comparative Migration Studies*, vol. 7, 2019, pp. 1–28, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-018-0107-1.

14 Zewdu.

can hinder their ability to attend school.[15] Because they have lower educational attainment than men, domestic work is one of the few options that women have to obtain paid work. It is also a highly gendered form of labour and relatively easy to obtain abroad, and therefore, it is a common route for Ethiopian women and girls to pursue.

Ethiopian domestic workers have noted challenges in differentiating between credible and fraudulent recruiters. Many believe that the dangers of both pathways are comparable but wish to bypass the lengthy bureaucratic processes linked to official migration procedures.[16] They have reported preferring irregular migration due to its fewer formalised barriers, which offers an increased perception of autonomy over the journey. It is important to note that both regular and irregular migration carry the risk of abusive and exploitative employment.[17]

There is a tendency to frame any component of legal migration or domestic work as 'safe' and illegal options as 'unsafe'. In reality, safety and legality act more as semi-disconnected spectrums. For example, migrants who use legal routes to the Middle East may still face exploitation due to the *kafala* system, which limits job mobility, permits employers to retain control of workers' passports, and can result in wage theft, forced labour, and physical abuse, especially among domestic workers. Victims often have little recourse due to the significant power imbalance with their employers.[18]

The *kafala* system is typically found in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar), and other countries like Lebanon and Jordan.[19] Bahrain and Qatar assert that they

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15 Women Watch, 'Ethiopia National Action Plan', United Nations, n.d., retrieved 11 February 2025, https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/country/national/ethiopia.htm.

16 Fernandez, 2019; Shewamene *et al.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 J Busza *et al.*, 'Accidental Traffickers: Qualitative Findings on Labour Recruitment in Ethiopia', *Globalization and Health*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2023, pp. 102-115, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-023-01005-9.

19 A Pande, '"The Paper That You Have in Your Hand Is My Freedom": Migrant Domestic Work and the Sponsorship (Kafala) System in Lebanon', *International Migration Review*, vol. 47, issue 2, 2013, pp. 414–441, https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12025; S Damir-Geilsdorf and M Pelican, 'Between Regular and Irregular Employment: Subverting the Kafala System in the GCC Countries', *Migration and Development*, vol. 8, issue 2, 2019, pp. 155–175, https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2018.1479215; H N Malaeb, 'The "Kafala" System and Human Rights: Time for a Decision', *Arab Law Quarterly*, vol. 29, issue 4, 2015, pp. 307–342, http://doi.org/10.1163/15730255-12341307.

have eliminated the system, but critics argue that the reforms lack effective enforcement and do not truly constitute abolition. The framework typically falls under the authority of interior ministries instead of labour ministries, which means workers often lack the protections afforded by the host nation's labour laws. This increases workers' susceptibility to exploitation and strips them of rights such as the ability to engage in labour disputes or join unions. Additionally, since workers' employment and residency visas are interconnected and can only be renewed or cancelled by their sponsors, this arrangement gives individual sponsors—not the government—control over workers' legal statuses, leading to a significant power imbalance that can be misused. In most cases, workers must obtain their sponsor's consent to change jobs, quit, or travel in and out of the host country. Departing from their job without this permission is considered an offense that can lead to the loss of their legal status and possibly imprisonment or deportation, even if they are escaping abusive circumstances. As a result, workers often have limited options when faced with exploitation, prompting many experts to suggest that this system contributes to human trafficking.[20]

Social Networks, Migration Theory, and Gender

Studies on transnational migration indicate that existing social networks in destination countries play a significant role in workers' decisions to migrate and in their overall migration experiences.[21] The concept of a migration network encompasses the complex web of personal connections through which migrants engage with their family, friends, and community members. These social networks serve as a basis for sharing information and offering support and assistance while navigating a new country.[22] Social networks usually include people from a migrant's country or hometown, or those who share similar cultural and language backgrounds. Having a strong and diverse social network offers many advantages, such as help with finding jobs, support during times of transition, emotional support, opportunities for social activities, and assistance during difficult times.

Our particular focus here is on the family and relationships with other community members (i.e. friends, acquaintances, etc.), as these connections act as a significant factor in migration. This is particularly clear when examining how an individual's

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20 K Robinson, 'What Is The Kafala System?', Council on Foreign Relations, 18 November 2022, retrieved 9 February 2025, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system; Pande.

21 H M Choldin, 'Kinship Networks in the Migration Process', *International Migration Review*, vol. 7, issue 2, 1973, pp. 163–176, https://doi.org/10.1177/019791837300700203.

22 S Haug, 'Migration Networks and Migration Decision-Making', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 34, issue 4, 2008, pp. 585–605, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830801961605.

position in the family, their upbringing, and the support of their family can impact their decision to migrate.[23] We draw on the work of several migration scholars—Choldin,[24] Ritchey,[25] Coombs,[26] and Hugo[27]—who have put forth a number of hypotheses that explain the intersection of social networks and migration decisions. Specifically, we use three of these hypotheses to analyse Ethiopian women's decisions to migrate for domestic work: the information hypothesis, encouraging hypothesis, and facilitating hypothesis.

The information hypothesis asserts that the likelihood of moving to a different location increases when an individual has social connections who already reside there.[28] The appeal of relocating to these areas is heightened due to their network's familiarity with living conditions and job prospects in the destination country. The decision to migrate is heavily influenced by the extent of social connections one has at the destination and the information available through these relationships.[29] The encouraging hypothesis states that families may motivate their members to move abroad for work, often as a tactic to secure the family's finances.[30] Finally, the facilitating hypothesis suggests that friends and family members who have already migrated aid in the migration of those in their home country by helping them adjust to the new area, such as by assisting with job searches, providing material support, offering encouragement, and introducing them to new social connections.[31]

An additional lens to help contextualise these migration hypotheses is examining how gender plays a role in migration decisions. Patterns of socialisation, norms, and roles associated with gender significantly shape who migrates, the reasons for migration, and the methods used. In a patriarchal society, dominant gender norms affect women's opportunities for education and employment, as well as

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23 *Ibid.*

24 Choldin.

25 P N Ritchey, 'Explanations of Migration', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 2, issue 1, 1976, pp. 363–404, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.02.080176.002051.

26 G Coombs, 'Opportunities, Information Networks and the Migration-Distance Relationship', *Social Networks*, vol. 1, issue 3, 1978, pp. 257–276.

27 G J Hugo, 'Village-Community Ties, Village Norms, and Ethnic and Social Networks: A Review of Evidence from the Third World', *Migration Decision Making*, 1981, pp. 186–224, http://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-026305-2.50013-9; O Stark, *The Migration of Labor*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1991; Choldin.

28 Ritchey.

29 Coombs.

30 Hugo.

31 Choldin; Ritchey.

their ability to make independent decisions regarding migration.[32] In addition to financial motivations, higher foreign demand for stereotypically gendered occupations as well as shifting gender norms in origin countries have shaped the conditions for migration. Together, social networks, migration theory hypotheses, and gender analyses help us think about the various familial and community-related factors that impact Ethiopian domestic workers' migration decisions for potentially exploitative work in Middle Eastern countries.

Methods

We draw our data from a broader study, titled 'Exploring Vulnerability and Resilience to Forced Labor among Ethiopian Domestic Workers in the Middle East: A Panel Design'. We used a social network framework to explore the experiences of Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East and determine how these experiences either made workers more vulnerable or helped them develop resilience in situations of exploitative labour. The current analysis seeks to specifically examine how the social networks of prospective Ethiopian domestic workers impact their migration decisions to seek potentially exploitative work in the Middle East.

Over the course of one year, from October 2022 to October 2023, interviews were conducted with 100 Ethiopian women prospectively seeking domestic work abroad (see Table 1 for demographics). Our recruitment procedures relied on a local consultant and co-author of this article, in partnership with a domestic worker-led non-governmental organisation. Using a non-probability snowball sampling method, the team developed initial contact with the target population by tapping the organisation's existing social networks. The authors acknowledge that the recruitment method through a partner organisation and a non-probability snowball sampling method may have caused bias in our participant sample. As the first group of participants were selected from one particular social network, the sample could have been significantly shaped by the connections of that network, possibly excluding individuals from different social groups. Additionally, homophily bias could occur where participants recommend others who have comparable traits or beliefs, resulting in a sample that lacks diversity and may disproportionately reflect specific perspectives.[33] However, given that the target population can be difficult to reach, the snowball sampling method proved most

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32 M Z Eresso, 'Sisters on the Move: Ethiopia's Gendered Labour Migration Milieu', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 53, issue 1, pp. 27–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2018.1519451.

33 D D Heckathorn and C J Cameron, 'Network Sampling: From Snowball and Multiplicity to Respondent-driven Sampling', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 43, 2017, pp. 101–119, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-060116-053556.

effective in recruiting the largest sample of participants to diversify perspectives. Table 1 demonstrates the key demographics of the interview participants. All interviewees are women and mostly young adults ranging from 18 to 30 years old. There is about an even split between participants who are married, divorced, and separated and those who are single. There is a similar split between those who have children and do not. Most commonly, participants reached primary or secondary education. The majority of women are from the Oromia region and mostly looking for domestic work in the United Arab Emirates and Jordan.

Table 1. Demographics of Ethiopian Interview Participants

Age	N=100
18–21	17
22–25	45
26–30	27
31–35	6
36-40	5
Marital Status	
Single	51
Married/Engaged	40
Divorced	9
Number of Children	
0	57
1	25
2	5
3	2
Have children but did not mention how many	11
Highest Level of Education Attained	
No formal education	3
Up to 8th year	49
9th to 12th year	40
Finished high school	4
College diploma	4
Region Where Respondents Grew Up	
Addis Ababa	11
Oromia	48
Amhara	20
SNNPR	21
Destination Country	
Bahrain	1
UAE	37
Jordan	49
Qatar	13

While all participants were prospectively seeking domestic work in the Middle East, some had prior experience working there and had since returned to Ethiopia but were now seeking to go back again. All participants had not yet departed and were interviewed while they searched for work or awaited to go abroad for employment they had already secured.

Data Analysis

All the qualitative interviews were either documented through notes or recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by transcribers proficient in multiple languages. The research team employed thematic analysis, an approach in qualitative research that involves identifying, organising, analysing, describing, and reporting patterns and themes found within a set of data.[34] After inputting the interview data into the dataset, the team identified recurring responses to establish themes in the data. During the coding process, the coders were guided by Ritchey's and Hugo's information, encouraging, and facilitating hypotheses and the findings are grouped by each of the hypotheses below.[35] In order to maintain the trustworthiness of our qualitative data analysis, a portion of the interviews coded by each analyst was reviewed by another member of the research team to ensure consistency in coding.[36]

Findings

Our analysis indicates that the Ethiopian women domestic workers in our sample were motivated to seek work abroad in ways that aligned with all three migration hypotheses: information hypothesis, encouraging hypothesis, and facilitating hypothesis. Our findings are delineated below.

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34 V Braun and V Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2006, pp. 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

35 Hugo, 1981; Ritchey.

36 P J Lavrakas, *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 2008; P Schwartz-Shea, 'Judging Quality: Evaluative Criteria and Epistemic Communities', in D Yanow and P Schwartz-Shea (eds.), *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, Routledge, New York, 2015, pp. 120–146.

Information Hypothesis

Social Networks as a Guide to Working in Destination Countries

Prospective Ethiopian domestic workers often select their destination country in ways that align with the information hypothesis whereby they select a particular country because they have social connections there. Over half (52%) reported that they already knew someone in the destination country in which they have obtained or were searching for employment. They often sought advice from a sibling, cousin, or friend to help them determine whether a destination country was safe, had similar language or religious beliefs, and had employers with a good reputation.

Additionally, prospective migrant domestic workers may not be familiar with the language, customs, or laws, or where to seek help if they are in danger or in need of resolving a dispute with an employer. Ethiopian women commonly support each other but often struggle to access essential information during emergencies. Where to seek help and obtain contact details for Ethiopian community support networks is typically shared informally through word of mouth.[37]

Participants expressed a range of groups to whom they would reach out if they were in need of help in relation to their job placement or employer, particularly in reference to exploitative or abusive work situations. Thirty-nine percent of the women said that they would reach out to the employment agency or broker that connected them to their job for help. One woman stated: 'I will contact the employment agency. That is what they told us at the [pre-departure] orientation'. Participants also commonly explained that they would contact their friends or family members to advocate on their behalf to the proper channels if they needed help. Women often expressed a lack of confidence in the partners of the employment agencies in the destination country or the Ethiopian embassies and consulates. Twenty-eight percent said they would seek help from their parents, siblings, spouses, aunts, in-laws, or other domestic workers with whom they had become friends in the destination country. For example, one woman stated: 'I will call my friend [redacted] and other Ethiopians nearby for help'. Another participant noted that family members with experience working abroad might know the process of getting help, stating: 'I'm not sure, maybe I could contact my brother-in-law even though he is working in another country'. Others noted they would rely on family members to get a message to the employment agency, saying, for example 'I will call my spouse so that he can contact the employment agency in Addis Ababa'.

[37] M Dank and S Zhang, *Between Hope and Hardship: Migration and Work Experiences of Ethiopian Domestic Workers in Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon*, Freedom Fund, London, 2024.

Some women expressed that they were familiar with multiple sources of assistance: 'I will contact my cousin, the employment agency, or the Ethiopian embassy'. In only 13% of responses, government agencies in the destination countries were places to go for help: 'I think I can reach out to government agencies such as police or social services if I need help'. Conversely, there were many participants who did not know where to seek help. Another 28% did not know one source to which they could reach out for assistance in risky or dangerous situations. These women often simply stated: 'I don't know where to go'. Two participants referred to their church community or 'God' as a source of refuge in case they needed assistance: 'I don't know anyone I can reach out to for help except God'. Despite the varied levels of knowledge concerning where to turn to for help in an abusive work situation, overall, participants mostly relied on their social networks for information regarding help-seeking and knew fewer direct or formal channels of assistance.

Encouraging Hypothesis

Familial Financial Responsibilities

Familial and community-related dynamics in Ethiopia served as motivating factors for prospective domestic workers seeking employment in the Middle East. All women and their families faced significant economic challenges due to lack of employment opportunities in Ethiopia. This deficit puts the women and their families in vulnerable positions by making them desperate for any available options to sustain their livelihoods. This situation can subsequently lead women to accept jobs that may end up being exploitative. However, intersecting with economic constraints, familial dynamics frame migration as a gendered phenomenon. There is a deeply rooted cultural investment into women and girls' migration as a way to contribute financially to support their families. These factors align with the encouraging hypothesis whereby social networks motivate their loved ones to move abroad for work to contribute to their household financially.

Several participants noted that their spouses had a significant influence on their decision to go abroad: 'There are better employment opportunities to support my family, but it was my husband's decision [for me to go abroad]'. And, 'I went to work abroad because my spouse decided that I should go and work there to support our family'.

As discussed, Ethiopian women commonly seek domestic labour abroad in order to supplement their household income. Nearly one-third of interviewees (32%) cited their need to financially support their own family as a central motivating factor to migrate: 'I just want to make more money to support my family and have a better life in the future'. Others specified their motivation to provide for their children: 'I want to make money to raise my children'. Similarly: 'I want to

get a better income and support my child. I want to give her a better life than what she has now'.

Five participants had other family-related motivations to seek work abroad that were not associated with supporting their families. For example, some described that this may provide a pathway to financial independence *from* their family: 'I decided to go find better employment to support myself. My family is pressuring me to marry and I am not ready for that before becoming financially independent'. Another participant noted: 'I am dependent on my uncle now. I want to become financially independent'. Regardless of the relational dynamic with their families and communities in Ethiopia, the prospective domestic workers were pushed to find work abroad in order to fulfil their financial needs, wants, or obligations. In a way, familial and gendered factors facilitating the pursuit of work abroad act as two sides of the same coin: on the one hand is the motivation to financially support one's family; on the other, make enough money to gain independence.

An overwhelming majority (82%) of the women reported that they plan to send all or a portion of their earnings back home to family members, specifically their parents, siblings, spouses, children, or extended family. Some noted that they would send their entire salary home: 'I will send all of my salary home'. This is often because the women expect that their family will save part of the money they are sending, since they do not feel they can store their money safely in the employer's home.

Others discussed their plan to send a portion of their salary home but save some to support themselves throughout the duration of their work placement or for personal reasons: 'I will send some of it [money earned] home for my parents and save the rest of my salary for myself'. Similarly, another participant remarked: 'I will send all of my salary to my children. If I can provide for all their needs and still have some money left, then I will save it'. Those who desired to save their earnings for their personal needs still kept the needs of their family in mind: 'I will save it for myself. If there is an emergency, I will of course send some money to my family'. Even the participants who did not plan to send money directly home noted their plan to save it to make purchases to sustain the livelihood of their family: 'I plan to save up my money and build a house for me and my children when I return home'.

In some cases, the families had squandered all of the money the women had sent back home or claimed the women's earnings as their own. One participant described:

> *My main reason is to make enough money to build a house. I had built a house with my ex-husband with the money I sent him. But when we got divorced, he claimed it as his house and took it from me.*

Many participants indicated that they needed to pay off the debt they owe to whoever financed their journey abroad. Seventeen percent of participants discussed their priority of first paying off their debts: 'After paying back my debt, I will send half of the money to my family and save the rest'. Another discussed the importance of sending a portion of her money home while simultaneously paying off her debt: 'In the first year I will send all my salary home to support my family and repay my debt. After that I will start saving for myself'. It is clear that the women felt a strong sense of responsibility to their familial social networks and debt repayment before using their earnings toward their own wants and needs.

Facilitating Hypothesis

Social Networks and the Facilitation of Employment

Outside of seeking the assistance of an employment agency, domestic workers frequently tapped into their social networks to help them informally find work. This aligns with the facilitating hypothesis because the domestic workers' social networks are assisting them with finding a job and adjusting to the new country. Twenty-one percent of participants described that one or more individuals in their social network—such as siblings, parents, extended family, friends, and other domestic workers—helped or were helping them gain employment in their chosen destination country.

When asked how they found, or are finding, work in the Middle East, many specifically noted their siblings, parents, and friends: '[I found work] through my brother who is also working in Dubai'. Or, 'My sister, who is working in Dubai, [helped me find a job]. My mother whom I am staying with now is also helping me'. Others drew on multiple resources to facilitate their employment abroad: 'I found work through an employment agency and my friend who already works there'. Having existing relationships in certain countries influences prospective workers to choose domestic work in a specific destination country in order to have a network when they arrive.

Additionally, it is common for prospective Ethiopian migrant domestic workers to use brokers and employment agencies to help speed up and ease the process.[38] Integrated with assistance from their social connections, almost all participants utilised services from formal or informal brokers and agencies to obtain and facilitate employment in the Middle East. When using the services of agents and brokers, prospective domestic workers are required to pay for various materials and documentation prior to migrating. These include documents like passports,

[38] L N Moton, M Dank, S Zhang, and T Tafesse, *'They Don't Give You Accurate Information About Anything'. Pre-migration Experiences of Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers*, Freedom Fund, London, 2024; Shewamene *et al.*

Certificate of Competency training, medical exams, and general broker fees.[39]

Prospective workers utilise different migration procedures depending on whether they migrate formally or informally, but many times, they are linked with employment agencies through brokers. These brokers can exploit women's lack of information by requiring a fee (a non-standardised amount the brokers determine) to assist with recruitment and travel arrangements. In our sample, some women paid as much as ETB 100,000 (approximately USD 1,800) for this service, with the average payment being ETB 25,000 (around USD 450). Commonly, our participants reported that they made the advance payment but did not know how much more they would be asked to pay by the brokers or employment agencies. They expressed that it is not clear how the brokers and employment agencies determine the amount of money prospective workers must pay for their journey.

To avoid being directly indebted to the agencies, domestic workers will sometimes borrow money from their relatives and friends, which aligns with the facilitating hypothesis. Their family members, whether those in the home country or those who have migrated to the destination country, provide material support to the migrant domestic worker to pay fees and debts associated with the migration process. While nearly half of the participants in our study noted borrowing funds for the employment process, 17% specifically identified individuals within their personal networks as providing financial assistance. Siblings and in-laws were particularly common as sources of financial support to pay for migration costs: 'My sister. She is the one paying for the process and my travel'. As noted above, family and friends who have experience working abroad were also keen to assist. When asked if they took on debt from the employment agency, a participant answered: 'No, my sister sent me the money I needed [from doing domestic work in Dubai]'. Similarly: 'My brother-in-law is paying for my journey. I borrowed 10,000 birr [USD 175] so far, and I don't know how much more I need to borrow from him'. In addition to providing financial assistance, some family members provide other sources of support while the women work abroad: 'My mother in-law is the one supporting me, lending me the money for the travel and taking care of my children in my absence… I borrowed 20,000 birr [USD 350] from [her]'. Generally, women in this study commonly relied on their family members as forms of financial and interpersonal support during the process of facilitating and migrating for employment overseas.

[39] L Olynyk, *Meneshachin Scoping Study: A Global Synthesis and Analysis of Responsible Recruitment Initiatives Targeting Low-wage, Migrant Workers*, Freedom Fund, London, 2020.

Discussion

Our findings illustrate that the social networks of prospective Ethiopian domestic workers have a large influence on their decisions to seek work in Middle Eastern countries. Particularly, women pursue this type of employment because there is a demand for domestic work in the Middle East, it is relatively easy to obtain, and provides a way for them to financially support their families in their home country. The structure and roles of a family can impact the decision-making process for migration, both directly and indirectly. Ethiopian women migrate to the Middle East for domestic work mainly because of the scarce economic opportunities in their home country and their limited access to education. This compels them to pursue higher wages and support their families by taking on labour like domestic work in the Middle East, even though these positions can involve the dangers of exploitation and harsh working environments.[40] These circumstances align with the broader international migration literature and the 'encouraging hypothesis' which emphasises that members of a family in an economic crisis—whether they are living in the home country or abroad—may motivate their loved one to migrate.[41] This encouragement is for the economic well-being of the family and is also contextualised by gendered notions of labour and family roles (e.g. women may be encouraged to pursue domestic work, while men may seek construction jobs).

The current study's findings demonstrate that many Ethiopian women are motivated to migrate for work to support their families in situations where they have few other choices for work outside the home. The findings also highlight that interdependent support and relationships are formed and sustained through the process of overseas employment. Domestic workers select certain destination countries because they can rely on their families and community members already living there to provide them with necessary information about the destination. This reflects both the 'information hypothesis' and Harbison's argument that the organisation and operation of families are not just extra factors for consideration but serve as central and strategic motivators in migratory decision-making processes.[42] Families pass on information and influence the motivations and values of individuals, ultimately shaping migration norms, and as a result, they directly and indirectly impact decisions about migration.

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40 Shewamene *et al.*

41 Hugo, 1981; Stark.

42 S F Harbison, 'Family Structure and Family Strategy in Migration Decision Making', *Migration Decision Making*, 1981, pp. 225–251, http://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-026305-2.50014-0.

Moreover, our participants' existing social ties in the destination country also help expedite their travel, secure their documents, and finance their journeys. This finding maps to Ritchey's 'facilitating hypothesis' where individuals who have access to valuable social connections are encouraged to move to new places because they can receive financial aid and practical assistance to support their journey and obtain employment.[43] Additionally, social networks supported the migrant domestic workers by helping them secure employment in the destination country and adjust to their new setting.

Our findings on familial financial responsibilities align strongly with the literature on gender and migration, which has shown that societal pressures on young girls and women often precipitate migration decisions. Scholars argue that in many circumstances where poverty is a driving factor for labour migration, women have limited influence in decision-making, with most choices being made to benefit their families.[44] Research in other African and Central American countries supports that women migrants are more likely to send remittances and provide financial support to their families compared to men. Additionally, scholars find that women tend to remit a larger portion of their earnings with greater consistency and frequency.[45] However, it is important to note that there were some cases in our sample where women migrated due to their personal ambitions and not because of their family responsibilities. This decision was often framed as gaining independence from the family, thereby further demonstrating the central role of family in an individual's decision to migrate for work.

The findings from this study broaden our understanding of the impact of social networks, particularly family and community relationships, and gender on migration. They also demonstrate how these relationships fill structural gaps, like the limited oversight of employment agencies and brokers and the lack of well-advertised and available help-seeking options, within the home and destination countries.

Policy Implications

The results of this study suggest several potential policy interventions to address the exploitative labour conditions experienced by Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East. While some policy attempts have been made to address the

43 Ritchey.

44 L A Oucho, *Migration Decision-making of Kenyan and Nigerian Women in London: The Role of Culture, Family and Networks*, PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2012, http://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.5007.2968.

45 C D Deere *et al.*, *Gender, Remittances and Asset Accumulation in Ecuador and Ghana*, UN Women, New York, 2015.

issue, exploitative work still remains. For example, in March 2023, the Ethiopian government launched an initiative to enlist 500,000 women for domestic work in Saudi Arabia, aligning with its commitment to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). As stated by the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Skills, this formalised process aims to safeguard the lives, earnings, and overall welfare of Ethiopians in Saudi Arabia, thereby reducing the risks associated with irregular migration. The Ethiopian and Saudi Arabian ministries of labour implemented several essential measures to ensure that domestic workers receive training to understand Saudi regulations, cultural practices, and the specifics of their employment contracts.[46] A key component of this effort is the establishment of the National Partnership Coalition (NPC), which has continued the efforts of the National Anti-Trafficking and Smuggling Taskforce. The NPC comprises a diverse group of members, including government bodies; civil society organisations; faith-based groups; international organisations dealing with labour, migration, and anti-trafficking; as well as associations representing returnees.[47] These types of changes made at the structural level may be crucial to promote the safety and livelihood of migrant workers abroad. These new measures need to be evaluated to understand if this approach is helping reduce the exploitation of migrant workers and determine whether they should be replicated in other contexts.

As researchers, it is easy to make policy suggestions of grandiose proportions, designating them as the 'right thing to do', but these are often not possible despite their clear benefits. For this reason, it is also necessary to unpack some potential policy reforms at a smaller level, with higher degrees of feasibility. Despite new legal protections to combat exploitative labour conditions in several Middle Eastern countries (e.g. the signing of bilateral labour agreements), many domestic workers rely on their networks, like familial and social relationships, to help them decide in which country to work, acquire employment, seek help, and manage their earnings. Local lawmakers should implement social and legal changes, small and large, which solely address domestic worker safety.[48] Some good practices to implement could include mandated pre-departure training for domestic workers on topics like their rights, duties, where to seek help, and how to identify human trafficking and gender-based violence, and ensuring that recruitment is done through formally vetted employment agencies and brokers.

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46 N.a., 'Saudi Minister of Labor and Social Development, His Ethiopian Counterpart Sign Bilateral Agreement to Recruit Well Trained and Medically Fit Domestic Workers', Saudi Arabian Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 21 September 2022, https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/en/media-center/news/72148.

47 Z Zelalem, 'Ethiopia Recruits 500,000 Women for Domestic Work in Saudi Arabia', *Al Jazeera,* 17 April 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/4/17/ethiopia-recruits-500000-women-for-domestic-work-in-saudi-arabia.

48 Busza *et al.*, 2023.

Additionally, it is crucial to allocate the necessary resources that enable women and girls to remain in school to attain an education. However, this would require a cultural shift in gender norms, a reduction in child marriage, more government spending on teacher training and school fees, and a commitment to building more schools in rural areas. Furthermore, resources are needed to allow for in-country access to more lucrative employment that enables individuals to provide for their families without the pressure to migrate abroad. This could potentially be remedied by increasing access to vocational training programmes that are tailored to the aspirations of women and girls by first conducting a labour market assessment to understand which industries within Ethiopia are lucrative enough to support families without the need to go abroad for work.

While several countries have started to implement changes to their migration systems, domestic workers are often unaware of these new protections that they have access to, leading to the perpetuation of relying on informal networks for safety and justice. Therefore, a micro-level step that could be taken to address this would be to organise awareness campaigns at the local level in order to provide important information to migrant workers and the general public about possible pathways to accessing help, support, and safety while abroad. Additionally, these campaigns could distribute booklets, leaflets, and posters and partner with community-based organisations to spread knowledge about the plight of migrant domestic workers in exploitative employment circumstances. These awareness campaigns with a focus on domestic worker safety would help to facilitate effective communication channels between domestic workers and their social networks and increase opportunities for help-seeking. Ongoing research funded by Freedom Fund is presently working to address these gaps.

Conclusion

This article adds new insights to the literature on drivers of migration for domestic work. It explored how social networks—specifically interpersonal dynamics between family, friends, peers, and community members—and gender shape or constrain the choices of Ethiopian women migrant domestic workers. Our findings contextualise our broader argument that familial and gender dynamics influence migration decisions to seek potentially exploitative employment abroad. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that Ethiopian women migrating for domestic work often have a reciprocal relationship with their social networks.

Due to the heavy interdependence between the women and their social connections as sources of support, our findings make apparent the need for clear policy and programming aimed at creating sustainable structural support systems to supplement the informal support Ethiopian domestic workers already provide and rely on with their families and communities. While it is clear that domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries experience abuse, much of the literature

mainly focuses on the characteristics and experiences of the individual workers. Future research should examine the other side of the equation and explore what constitutes a 'good' employer. And further, how do the 'good' employers create conditions that do not force domestic workers to seek out informal pathways for employment or help. Exploring these aspects may serve as a starting point to advocate for standardisation measures across employers within destination countries, which can contribute to strengthening structures that protect migrant workers against labour exploitation.

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Lauren N. Moton is a Senior Research Associate in the Human Exploitation and Resilience Program at the NYU Marron Institute for Urban Management. Informed by Black feminist and queer criminology, her scholarship examines the intersection of victimisation, marginalised identity, and criminal legal systems. She holds a PhD in Criminal Justice from John Jay College, CUNY. Email: laurenmoton@nyu.edu

Stephen Abeyta is a Postdoctoral Associate in the Human Exploitation and Resilience Program at the NYU Marron Institute for Urban Management. His scholarship primarily focuses on issues of work and labour. He received his PhD in Criminology and Justice Policy from Northeastern University. Email: sa5029@nyu.edu

Meredith Dank is a Clinical Associate Professor and directs the Human Exploitation and Resilience Program of the NYU Marron Institute of Urban Management. She is a nationally recognised expert on human trafficking. She holds a PhD in Criminal Justice from John Jay College, CUNY. Email: mdank@nyu.edu

Tsigereda Tafesse Mulugeta specialises in urbanisation and migration management, research, and policy advice and has over 18 years of experience in public sector capacity building. Tsigereda holds an MSc in Public Policy and Management from the University of London, Centre for Financial and Management Studies. Email: tsigereda3@yahoo.com