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“Young, Female and Looking for Change: Migrant Girls’ Narratives in Addis Ababa”

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Abstract

In the past decade an increasing number of adolescent girls in Ethiopia have moved from villages and rural towns to Addis Ababa to improve their own lives and those of their families. While girls' migration is in a way a 'normality', with historically girls migrating for domestic work, the dominant discourse in Ethiopia describes the migration of girls mainly in terms of trafficking and exploitation. In addition, migration is nowadays equated with international migration. Little is known about the experiences, life choices and aspirations of migrant girls who have migrated within the country. In this paper the migration narratives of adolescent girls in Addis Ababa are presented and analysed from a relational perspective (Huijsmans 2012; 2015) in order to counter the dominant discourse on migration in Ethiopia. This means that instead of categorising types of migration (internal versus international), motivations for migration (poverty, early marriage, abuse, etc.), classifications of migrants (gender, age, class, ethnicity, etc.), and type of work (such as domestic work and sex work), we take the lived experiences of migrant girls as the point of departure for our analysis of their agency and ways in which they tackle challenges they face. We analyse migrant girls' agency in three 'phases' of their migration process, namely in the decision to migrate, in their lives in the city, and in their future aspirations. In doing so we intend to show that agency is situated relationally and shaped by a multitude of factors, with clear temporal and spatial dimensions. The paper is based on a qualitative study conducted in Addis Ababa in 2014, and in particular on the life stories of migrant girls working as sex workers.

We argue that the poverty discourse which dominates the discussion about migration in Ethiopia is insufficient to explain the large number of girls that opt for migration, within the country and across borders. In addition to the desire to help their families, many girls migrate to escape oppressive gender regimes, such as early marriages and the limited freedom of movement. At the time of leaving, migrant girls' objectives, plans and motivations for migration were embedded in their childhood social relations and closely interlinked with their status as girls and their position in the household. Yet, over a period of time, the gender and age power relations shifted, as a result of the spatial shift linked to migration and their experiences at destination. This shift intersected with a process of personal growth and development of an adult identity with the capacity to decide about the direction one's life was going to take, even in contrast sometimes with norms. The narratives of migrant girls demonstrate agency and resilience in coping with situations of abuse, exploitation and violence. The narratives also show that the trafficking discourse falls short, especially when it concerns internal migration. Girls may migrate with the help of others but this does not mean that they are by definition deceived, and that those that facilitate their migration benefit financially. Thirdly, we have shown that there is a link between internal and international migration. Girls often find themselves in serial migration and succeed in migrating cross border. Yet, the challenges encountered are very similar, and many girls share the same experiences. They left the social control of their families, but were confronted with new forms of gender oppression in the place of destination.

Introduction

Migration is a hot topic in Ethiopia. Television series involve migration stories, billboards show Western Union advertisements, radio programmes try to warn against the risks of migration with a special emphasis on trafficking. Most families have at least one family member that lives abroad. While Ethiopia used to be one of the primary destinations for refugees and migrants in Africa¹, it is increasingly becoming a sending country of migrants. The main destinations are the Middle East, South Africa and North America and Europe, yet Ethiopians can be found in other parts of the world as well. The Ethiopian diaspora is one of the biggest in the world.² Local and international organizations in Ethiopia have carried out numerous studies about the increasing number of people that migrate, and many Ethiopians have graduated with theses about migration issues.³ The main focus of these studies has been the increasing number of women that migrate to the Middle East to become domestic workers. While reliable statistics are lacking, hundreds of thousands women have migrated in the past two decades, mainly to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States but also to Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar and Yemen.

The dominant narrative in Ethiopia about migration consists of two contradictory elements. First, migration is seen as the only way in which people can improve their livelihoods; and second, women who migrate are trafficked and exploited and gain very little from their migration.⁴ The narrative thus has a very clear gender aspect: while migration is seen as positive and the only way to improve one's livelihood for women as well as men, female migrants are stigmatized as victims of exploitation and sexual abuse. The negative impact of migration will follow them upon return home. Despite all the challenges that they have faced, and regardless of the financial success of their migration, they are seen as unclean and exploited. This applies in particular to young and under-aged women. In addition, the main discourse on migration in Ethiopia equates migration with international migration. Yet the number of people that migrate internally is still bigger than the number of international migrants.⁵ Among these internal migrants there are also many adolescent girls and young women, who leave their places of origin for a variety of reasons, ranging from poverty to escaping early marriages and abduction and from educational aspirations to a desire to break free from oppressive gender regimes. The girl's decision in migrating to the cities among many reasons is a way of asserting their agency in moving forward with life. However, in most cases they are faced with daily challenges of moving to the city to which they are new. This further escalates their challenges of adapting to the life and finding new ways of subverting the problems they face. In the process they make and remake decisions that determine their life.

In the dominant discourse in Ethiopia, internal migration is seen as a lesser choice than international migration; those who migrate internally would benefit less from their migration than those who migrate internationally. International migrants would be able to earn more money and thus be able to remit more money and help their families in a structural way. Internal migration would not lead to structural improvements because of the low salaries in Ethiopia. Internal migration is sometimes seen as a stepping stone for international migration. In this paper we will focus on the migration narratives of adolescent girls who migrated to Addis Ababa in order to counter the dominant discourse on migration in Ethiopia in three ways. First of all, following King and Skeldon⁶ we are of the opinion that internal and international migration are too often studied as two separate fields while they are often closely related. Second, we want to add gender and age, and in particular their intersection, as important axes of difference to the study of migration and mobility. Migration is predominantly a youthful activity. While there is an increasing body of literature about young people's migration aspirations and experiences, gender is often lacking as an analytical lens.⁷

Most studies focus on boys and young men, and in cases in which girls and young women are included, gender is not problematized. As mentioned above, girls' migration is very often framed in discourses around trafficking and (sexual) exploitation, which leaves little room for girls' agency. Third, we think that narratives, and in particular life stories, are a very useful method to study the intersection of gender and age. In addition, they allow for a life course perspective, showing the moments of agentic power girls can execute in different phases of their lives. The stories of the migrant girls show their agency and resilience in a context of structural inequalities.

The paper is based on a qualitative study about adolescent girls' migration in Ethiopia, which was part of a larger research project including Bangladesh and Sudan.⁸ The main research methods were a qualitative survey among migrant girls in Addis Ababa and returnees from the Middle East, life story interviews with migrant girls, interviews with parents and peers, focus group discussions, and expert interviews. In this paper we will mainly use the life story interviews collected with migrant girls working as sex workers in Addis Ababa in 2014. We will first describe our theoretical framework, and then discuss and analyze three "phases" in the lives of migrant girls, namely the decision to migrate, life in the city, and their future aspirations.

A relational approach to girls' migration

International migration is the main focus in contemporary migration studies. Castles, de Haas and Miller⁹ dub the end of the twentieth century "the age of migration," referring to the large number of people that cross borders for a multitude of reasons. Yet, internal migration is still very important in many places of the world, and in some countries even more significant than international migration.¹⁰ This is especially the case in developing countries, where migration is a complex phenomenon consisting of rural-urban, rural-rural, urban-rural and urban-urban migration, and various other forms.¹¹ Reliable statistics are often lacking because internal migrants are in many cases not registered. Aina¹² argues that the division between internal and international migration is rather problematic in the African context as national borders are of a relatively recent date, and Africans have always been migrating across "borders". While acknowledging the differences between internal and international migration, King and Skeldon¹³ argue that it may be very productive to study these two forms of migration in relation to each other. "(...) internal and international migrations are generated by similar forces and, despite the crossing of an international boundary as an important distinguishing feature, close linkages exist between them."¹⁴

In Ethiopia internal migration is also much bigger than international migration; historically people have been migrating internally for a large variety of reasons. Ethiopians have experienced large-scale internal migration and resettlements as the result of famine, poverty, environmental causes and government-related policies¹⁵, and as the result of rural-urban migration and trafficking¹⁶. The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia shows that rural-urban migration has contributed to population growth in urban areas ¹⁷ where people especially the youth are migrating to urban cities in search of economic opportunities. International migration is of a much more recent phenomenon; only after the downfall of Mengistu in 1991 freedom of movement became a constitutional right. While an increasing number of Ethiopians have migrated abroad, including many girls and young women, international migration is still relatively small in scale compared to internal migration. Most studies on contemporary migration in and from Ethiopia mention poverty as a major driving factor. Yet, under the layer of poverty and the need to assist families back home there are multiple other factors which have to be situated within the wider changes that have been taking place in Ethiopia in the past twenty years.¹⁸

The large scale migration of Ethiopian women to the Middle East is a good example of the “feminization of migration”. The increasing number of women who migrate independently, often crossing large geographical distances, for example, to become domestic workers in wealthier countries, has led to the recognition that gender matters in migration.¹⁹ In addition, scholars of gender and migration have pointed to the different framing of migration narratives of male and female migrants; despite the large number of studies that show that women often take the decision to migrate themselves, and also benefit from their migration, women’s migration continues to be framed in the context of trafficking and exploitation. This is particularly so when it concerns adolescent girls and young women. Girls’ migration is almost automatically equated with trafficking. This is despite the fact that an increasing number of scholars have pointed to the fact that child migrants also have agency and are not mere victims of brokers, smugglers and traffickers.²⁰ In addition, it is important to see child migrants as social actors and not as an essentialised and homogeneous category: “Children’s lived experiences of migration are multiple since their social position is, amongst other things, intersected by the form of migration the children engage in, contextual particularities and cross-cutting relations such as gender, generation and class”.²¹

In the past decade an increasing body of literature has appeared about independent child migration, yet relatively few studies have included the experiences of adolescent girls. Adolescence is a particular phase in the lives of children; a period of transition in which major changes take place, which may influence one’s life course. Bucholtz²² points out that age is not the only important factor that determines adolescence. Youth is a flexible and social category and is based on locality and context-specific practices and norms. This applies in particular to adolescent girls. They are increasingly being identified as a crucial segment of the population, whose successful transition into adulthood is of major importance for their own lives and those of the people around them.²³ The migration of adolescent girls can have major implications for their transition into adulthood.²⁴ Migration can be a response to the lack of opportunities at home, and for some it is a response to acute family needs, for others to their unmet aspirations. In discussing globalized identities, Paula Fass²⁵ sees adolescents as trying to improve themselves and pursue their identity by working, consuming, rejecting and rebelling against parental authority. She argues that it is not helpful to imagine adolescents either as helpless or passive in their quest for change and migration.

Many girls migrate for work but employment is not always the main factor behind girls’ decision to move.²⁶ Migration can also offer girls escape from difficult circumstances, and it can be a way to express agency, escape dominant gender regimes, and to build independent resources. It can be inspired by a desire to continue education, and related to decisions about marriage and reproduction. The decision to migrate intersects with other important decisions in the lives of adolescent girls, and affects girls’ transition into adulthood in various ways.

Inspired by Huijsmans²⁷, we will analyse the narratives of adolescent migrant girls in Addis Ababa from a relational perspective. This means that instead of categorising types of migration (internal versus international), motivations for migration (poverty, early marriage, abuse, etc.), classifications of migrants (gender, age, class, ethnicity, etc.), and type of work (such as domestic work and sex work), we will take the lived experiences of migrant girls as the point of departure for our analysis of their agency and ways in which they tackle challenges they face. While acknowledging that many adolescent girls migrate under circumstances of structural inequality and experience situations of abuse and exploitation, we argue that this does not mean that they cannot exert agency at all. Only an in-depth analysis of their migration narratives can show when and how migrant girls can exert agency, when they cannot. In addition, a relational approach means that we will take a number of other relational dimensions into consideration when analysing the narratives of migrant girls. As Huijsmans

states, it “includes highlighting age and space as important structuring relations, the role of networks in shaping young people’s migrations, the field of the household as a key relational space in which migration dynamics unfold and that itself is reworked through migration, and the connections between early involvement in migration and wider processes of social change and continuity”.²⁸

A note on methodology and methods

Studying adolescent migrant girls in a city where thousands of migrant girls are living is a challenge. In view of the limited size of the study and our interest in questions around the experiences, motivations and aspirations of migrant girls, we employed a qualitative methodology. We were therefore not seeking a representative sample of migrant girls, which is also impossible in view of the lack of statistical data about the number of adolescent girls in Addis Ababa.²⁹ It was more important for us to find girls that were representative for the large group of migrant girls in the city with regard to their living and working conditions. Based on the already available knowledge about adolescent migrant girls in Addis Ababa³⁰, we decided to study domestic workers and sex workers. In this paper we focus on sex workers, many of whom had also worked as domestics.

There are numerous adolescent sex workers in Addis Ababa, yet it is not easy to get access to them and build up close relationships by sharing their lives. They work in the evenings and at night and sleep during the day. During their working time they are interested in making money and not in spending time with researchers, while in their spare time they are tired of their nightly work and want to rest. We therefore had to think of creative ways to get in touch with them. Two local NGOs greatly facilitated our contacts with adolescent migrant girls working as sex workers.³¹ During a pilot focus group discussion at one of the NGOs, two girls were asked to assist the researchers with the questionnaires. These two girls were instrumental in accessing other sex workers. The researchers were able to build up a close relationship with them and through them met many other girls. In total 15 questionnaires were collected with sex workers who had come to Addis Ababa in the past five years, and 10 life stories, five of them with young women who had been living in the city longer than five years. The life stories were done in Amharic, recorded and translated and transcribed in English. In the following sections we will present some of the stories. Although we acknowledge that the stories are representations of reality, and sometimes may be partly reinvented by the girls as a way of reappropriating them, we use them to give insight into social relations. We have changed the names of the girls in order to conceal their identities.

The decision to migrate: countering the trafficking narrative

Getenesh was 25 years old and had been living in Addis Ababa for ten years when we interviewed her in the spring of 2014. She comes from a well-to-do family of farmers in the Semien Shewa Zone of Amhara Region and vividly told us her life story. “I was 15 when I left Menz. I was a playful child growing up with 15 siblings and being the 7th child to my parents. I often preferred to play outside, as my parents were quarrelling most of the time. I was also going to school. When you’re well off in life people in the community interfere in your marriage and interrupt a good home. That’s what happened to my parents and they split up. All of my siblings were older and some of them got married and some moved from the place where we all grew up. Our parents separated shortly after.” When asked what she wanted to do when she would be grown up she answered: “I used to love and was good at running. I was in fact one of the chosen runners and initially was supposed to go to Bahir Dar for this reason before I came to Addis. My father forbid it and actually got me out of the bus

that was going to take me to Bahir Dar. He thought that it was because he was incapable of taking care of me that I wanted to be a runner. But my teachers chose me out of other students to compete and encouraged me to be a runner. That was my excuse and my means of escape to come to Addis Ababa later on.” Asked about life in the village, she said: “Where I come from, there is the chance of early marriage. A girl can be wed as early as ten years old. I didn’t want this at all. I think I’m a little stubborn and don’t listen to what I’m told. I said that I would rather die than marry. I told my dad that he himself could kill me if he wants but that I wasn’t willing to be married. Whenever people from the community came to ask for my hand in marriage, I would run away to a relative’s home and come back sometimes a month or two months later. I told my parents that marriage wasn’t for me and that I just wanted to be a runner. My other sisters have been wed this way, but I said no.” When she was 15 years old Getenesh migrated to Addis Ababa with the help of a neighbour who had family in the capital.

The major reasons for Getenesh to migrate were the constant requests for marriage and her parents’ intention to force her into marriage.³² In addition, she wanted to become a professional runner in Addis Ababa by securing a spot with other athletes. However, her father expected her to get married rather than thinking about such a “dream.” At an early age her father showed her that he would not allow her to realise her dreams by preventing her from representing her school at an athletic competition. These situations made her angry. She also had various conversations about going to Addis Ababa with her friends; they all aspired to move to Addis Ababa as it was seen as the best decision one could take after finishing education. There is a strong belief and perception of a better life in the city, which is also shared by many adolescent girls interviewed during the study. The city is seen as a place where one can succeed and prosper; a place where one would be able to share “modern life”, reflected in the availability of electricity and transportation, access to money and to better clothing. As Fass³³ puts it, adolescents strive to create their own identities in the global world they live in, and migration may be one of the ways in which they hope to achieve these new identities.

Getenesh’s story goes against the dominant notion that migration in Ethiopia is mainly inspired by poverty and that most girls are trafficked. She comes from a well-to-do family of farmers, and her parents were not in need of her financial support. In the survey that we carried out as part of this research, only seven out of thirty girls mentioned poverty as the main reason for their migration. In most cases a myriad of reasons inspired the decision to migrate. One of the recurrent themes in the interviews was the restriction on girls’ mobility, in particular when they were growing up. Whereas boys are given responsibilities outside the house and have the freedom to go anywhere, restrictions on mobility further affect girls’ futures. In the interviews girls told us that they are not allowed to go to nearby cities to attend to their education once they pass 10th grade, as most secondary schools and higher education institutions are outside the rural villages. In addition, girls’ lives were to a large extent determined by their parents’ will, and there were clear gender differences with respect to their freedom of movement. In contrast with their male peers, they were not allowed to move around freely. Most their parents were afraid that they would start premarital relationships or get abducted. The sexuality of adolescent girls is strictly controlled in Ethiopia, and girls’ premarital relationships are judged very negatively.³⁴ Getenesh said that she liked to play with boys and girls but her parents would punish her when she would come home too late. “It’s considered bad to have boyfriends. You won’t have a good image in the community. It would also mean that you won’t be fit to be chosen to marry. It’s mostly a brotherly friendship and nothing more. If a family finds out that someone’s son touched their daughter, it can escalate to the level of killing people. It’s the same if you’re found drinking or going out at night.”

Stories about unwanted pregnancies are common and used as a warning against premarital relationships. Girls who get pregnant without being married are stigmatized and

marginalized in rural communities. In most cases their parents accept the child once it is born, but it is an economic and social burden for them, seen as disgrace brought by their child. The larger society does not accept children born out of wedlock. Illegal abortions are sometimes carried out in order to avoid having the baby. Girls who do have children without being married face difficulties finishing their education and often drop out of school. Most of the interviewed girls said that they did not have boyfriends prior to their migration. Yet, there were also some girls who openly told us about premarital relationships during and after their migration that led them to be pregnant and, at the time of the study, working hard to sustain their children. This was particularly so for girls who grew up in small towns.

Eden grew up with an abusive father who passed away when she was 13 years old. Eden was 18 when she was interviewed, and had come to Addis Ababa a year and half ago. She loved going to school but she started smoking and chewing chat (*Catha Edulis*) when she was in 7th grade. “I became friends with one of the owners of a chat shop. I shortly became addicted to chat and used to chew with him, skipping classes at school. He showed me how to chew and how to smoke cigarettes. At times, he would also make me smoke weed. He used to say that it would relax my mind, and at the time it did relax me. You get to forget your worries as you relax and laugh. He became my boyfriend. I started to spend more time with him than at school or with my mom. I was only around 14 or 15 years old. He was much older. I would say around 23 or 24. At school, we never talked about sex. The first time it happened to me with him was very scary to me. It happened right after I met him, which looking back was really young for me to have started sex and everything else that I did. I also had two pregnancy incidents as the result of unprotected sex with him; I had to go through an abortion in a nearby health post.” Eden became addicted to chat and drugs, and at a certain moment her boyfriend became tired of her, because of her addictions. She decided to go to Addis Ababa. Her ex-boyfriend helped her financially: “Surprisingly, he was the one that actually gave me the money to come to Addis Ababa.”

While many girls stressed that it was their own decision to go to Addis Ababa, relatives, (boy)friends and neighbours often played a role in encouraging them to migrate and in facilitating their migration. In contrast with the dominant discourse in Ethiopia, which emphasises the role of brokers who actively approach and convince girls to migrate, none of the girls in our study mentioned brokers. Feven was one of the few girls who came to Addis Ababa through a (female) broker. She was doing sex work in her place of origin and met a woman who persuaded her to go to Addis Ababa. “She said: You are beautiful, you will get a lot of money working in Addis Ababa. (...) She told me that it is rare to find young girls like you doing business, and she convinced me that being young and beautiful brings high amounts of money. When she told me such stories my heart started beating and my desire heightened. I decided overnight and she promised to take me and find me a house.” In the other cases the role of brokers was limited to finding employment for recently arrived girls in the city. We therefore need to be careful with the use of the term “broker.” Relatives and friends can facilitate the migration of girls, especially in cases where aunts will take responsibility to bring a girl to the city and get her better education possibilities; yet this does not mean that they have actively persuaded girls to migrate and benefit financially from their migration and employment in the city. The use of the term “trafficking,” in our view, is inadequate to describe the internal migration of girls in Ethiopia. Girls migrate with the help of others, but play an active role in their migration and are not mere victims of brokers and traffickers. In most cases the girls themselves have the intention of migrating to the city because of the perceived benefits of city life. In this case brokers and other people who assist them are mere facilitators of the process of migration.

Life in the city: agency in constrained circumstances

Getenesh came to Addis Ababa with high expectations but has not been able to achieve what she wanted. “Back home we used to think that Addis Ababa was everything and a source of making your dreams a reality. My dream was to make my running a reality, but this has not happened. I left the waitressing job because I didn’t like the work. I then got into somebody else’s home as a domestic worker for two years. (...) I got into another waitressing job after that. I also worked there for another two years and saved money. I was later able to go see my family. I then came back to the same place and worked for a little bit more, but we disagreed and so I left that job. The manager of the place wanted to beat me and so we fought most times. I said he can fire me if he wants but he can’t touch me. I left one day without telling the lady that hired me. She then asked me to come back but I said no. I left there and with the encouragement of one of the friends I made around my area, I got into sex work.”

The attraction of life in the city inspired the migration of many girls, yet only a few of them spoke about their first impressions of the city. In the interviews their positive impressions were overshadowed by disappointment and negative experiences as domestic workers and sex workers. Abuse, exploitation and unfulfilled expectations are abundant among adolescent migrant girls, yet this does not mean that they were not able to exert any agency. The girls kept making decisions while living in the city, whether it was changing work or continuing their migration onward. As the interview excerpt above shows, Getenesh took the decision to leave her first job as a domestic worker, moved to another job and later became a waitress. She also entered sex work out of her own will, just like Eden, who said: “I knew that as soon as I arrived here I would need to make money as I had nowhere to stay and no one to take care of me. In addition, during my time with my ex-boyfriend I used to see many sex workers who were always well dressed (nice clothes, shoes and cosmetics), looking beautiful, and they knew a lot of people I knew if I managed to go to Addis Ababa I would be like them and make a lot of money, but I didn’t know how. Even though I didn’t know how their daily life is, I knew I wanted their shining life. After I made it to Addis Ababa I was sitting on the curb around Piazza smoking a cigarette when one girl approached me. I think she could tell that I was new. We started talking and she asked me about myself. I told her that I left my hometown to become a sex worker. She didn’t know me and although she had just met me, felt really bad for me. She told me that a couple of the girls rent a room together close by. She took me there for the night.”

Getenesh’s and Eden’s stories show us that decisions are made inspired by many different factors. Often decisions are made without proper information, especially about life in the city, and the realities that they are facing are different from what they expected. Once in the city, life takes different directions. The migration they chose may offer them “hope or not”³⁵, but they keep going, changing or persisting in order to survive. The idea of agency of child migrants has been taken up theoretically by a number of authors.³⁶ In her research with child domestic workers in Tanzania who work long hours and face a range of abuse, Klocker offers the idea of thick and thin agency to understand the continuum of children and young people’s constrained agency in different contexts. She argues that, “thin” agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives. “Thick” agency is having the latitude to act within a broad range of options”.³⁷ Over time and through space, as well as across different relationships, a person’s agency can get “thicker” or “thinner.” Moreover, the relational nature of the agency of children and young people is an important element in understanding the interconnectedness of children and young people’s ability to act. Agency is “situated relationally and shaped by factors such as prior migration experiences, household migratory history, relations of age, and young migrants’ social position in networks of recruitment”.³⁸

At the time of leaving, migrant girls' objectives, plans and motivations for migration were embedded in their childhood social relations and closely interlinked with their status as girls and their position in the household. Yet, over a period of time, the gender and age power relations shifted, as a result of the spatial shift linked to migration and their experiences at destination. This shift intersected with a process of personal growth and development of an adult identity with the capacity to decide about the direction one's life was going to take, even in contrast sometimes with norms. The narratives of migrant girls demonstrate agency and resilience in coping with situations of abuse, exploitation and violence. In addition, vulnerability, exploitation and abuse are not objectively identifiable conditions but "notions that are negotiated, experienced and perceived in different ways by differently positioned young migrants".³⁹

Running away from abusive employment situations is one example of girls' ability to act. Hayat came to Addis Ababa when she was 15 years old, invited by her aunt. Her father had passed away and her mother had difficulties making ends meet. She neglected her children, which affected Hayat very much, and she was happy when she got the chance to improve her life. "As soon as I got here, I was amazed by the colourfulness of the city. My hopes and dreams of being educated and becoming a better person got brighter with the city lights and I was extremely happy with what was waiting for me. I saw myself finishing school, getting a well-paid job, and helping my mother out of the life that she led." But her aunt's promises were broken; Hayat had to do household chores instead of going to school, and when her aunt's husband started to rape her she decided to run away. She said: "I didn't tell my aunt, fearing that I would disrupt a marriage, but also fearing that she wouldn't believe me and it was not worth the risk of telling her. The fact that I kept quiet actually encouraged him to try and rape me again and again until I left. After seven months in that house, I told some girls that I met around the school what happened to me. They told me that it was OK for me to leave. They told me that I could stay with them and it seemed like a good alternative to me. I left the house without telling my aunt. At first I didn't know what my friends did, but I knew they were much better off than me." Such stories depict the reality of many girls who are domestic workers. Many Ethiopian families have a domestic worker or a relative who is brought from rural areas to be educated and who will end up becoming the one to serve in the household. Such relations have shifted from becoming a means of helping the child of a relative to unregulated employment and exploitation (Black 2005: 3), and in the case of Hayat this even led to rape.

In Addis Ababa, entering sex work can be perceived more of a choice for girls. A large number of girls in our study became sex workers after having worked as domestic workers or waitresses.⁴⁰ They had been disappointed by their lives as domestics, frustrated because their dreams of continuing their education were not fulfilled or harmed by the abuse and exploitation they encountered and the low payments they earned. Sometimes other girls convinced them to run away and to take up other work, first in waitressing and then as sex workers, as this pays better than domestic work. This was the case with Getenesh and Hayat. In some cases brokers play a role in finding new households for domestic workers who want to change place and they also arranged sex work for girls, but these girls worked mostly independently. They could work in hotels, bars or on the street. Street workers are more independent than sex workers who work in hotels and bars and are controlled by the hotel or bar owners. Entering and doing sex work therefore seems to allow more agency than entering domestic work. Yet, in many cases they are confronted with new threats after having left domestic work. In Ethiopia sex workers never work with a pimp, which is a great advantage in comparison to many other places in the world. Rather they will be working in privately owned bars, hotels or stand on the street in order to get customers. As a result they have more freedom of movement and can act more independently. The most important threats come from

clients, who force them to have sex without condoms, to have sex in ways they do not approve of, or who refuse to pay them. Feven said: “Many men beat us when the position and way they want (sex in) is difficult for us, and I don’t want people to beat me. Most of them want us when they get drunk and they don’t care about us. Life consists of ups and downs and people pass through it, but many men don’t understand this fact and see us like dolls. When I face such harassment, I can’t do anything; it is just my fate to accept the punch. I feel powerless and empty because I put myself there with my own consent.”

Many of the interviewed sex workers complained about the fact that they were unable to leave sex work because they had got used to earning much more money than they would get as domestic workers, in waitressing or in other jobs such as hairdressing. Their most common statement was: “It is easy to enter sex work but very difficult to get out.” They also say that they are used to the life of drinking, chewing *chat*, going out at night for work and sleeping during the day as a normal routine. This shows that entering sex work is often a personal choice, even though there are very limited alternatives in view of the restrained labour market, but also that leaving sex work is considered impossible and therefore not a choice. There are no other jobs available in which they can earn as much as they do with sex work. Reflecting on her life Fire said: “I always worry about my life, thinking about what I did yesterday, what I am doing and what I will be doing tomorrow. I feel more freedom now than before. Even though I am a sex worker I feel freer than before. My life depends on this work, even though I face the worst things in this work. Some people force me not to use condoms saying that they will give me more money. I face psychological problems as a result of what I face during the work. Wherever I go with a client, we are not treated equally. They call me names saying that I am a prostitute.” Fire regrets that she ran away from her parents because she thinks that she could have improved her life in other ways. Yet, it was the only option she saw at that time and therefore maybe less of a choice. Only now she is able to reflect on her decision and life in hindsight.

Broken dreams and future aspirations

Getenesh is able to make a living as a sex worker, and even sends money to her parents sometimes; but she is frustrated about her life: “It has gotten to the point that I get really angry when I hear about running athletes in any form on TV or on the radio. I know that if I had continued my education, I would have been able to continue my running also. So in essence, I lost both dreams. I have not fulfilled the dream of being a runner and the dream of finishing my education.” Getenesh’s narrative shows the constant shifts, regrets and contradictory feelings that she has experienced in her life. On the one hand, she feels that she achieved something by running away from being married at an early age, taking her life in her own hands, and striving for what she aspired to and struggling to make it happen. On the other hand, she is frustrated that she has not been able to achieve what she wanted. Once in the city, her life took a different direction. Her story, and those of many other girls we interviewed, shows how life choices are shaped and reshaped in the process of migration. The decisions made at an early age also have impact on the future aspirations of marriage and child bearing. The girls whose stories we have presented in this article and many of those interviewed in the study feel that their chances of marriage in the future have diminished, especially those who earn a living as sex workers. They believe that no man will accept them if they know what type of work they have done. Yet, Getenesh remained hopeful: “I aspire to be married one day, with a man who has a job and is able to take good care of me, and one who is trustworthy.”

Prior to becoming a sex worker Getenesh migrated to Lebanon as a domestic worker, but she returned home because she was unhappy with her living and working conditions:

“Life wasn’t great back there. It was an elderly woman that hired me. It was stressful because I wasn’t able to sleep day and night taking care of her. She just wouldn’t let me sleep. I stayed for one year and seven months in the same house. I was also deprived of food and so at the end asked the daughter of the elderly lady to send me back to my country. I told her the reality. She told me I couldn’t leave. I then talked to the office that brought me to help me get out and she was told to release me. I came back to Ethiopia shortly after.” As mentioned earlier, international migration is considered more beneficial than internal migration in Ethiopia, which is mainly attributed to the higher earnings and the possibilities to remit. Getenesh experienced life abroad but decided to give up her job. It shows again how strong she is and how much agency she is able to exert; she told her employer that she could not accept the way in which she was treated, contacted the agency and was able to return to Ethiopia. However, Getenesh was also lucky; many girls face problems when they want to leave their employers in the Middle East.⁴¹

Among the interviewed girls, only a few were interested in migrating to the Middle East. Tsion said: “I dreamt of going to the Middle East before coming here. I heard that it was a great place and you can get money over there, but after coming here I changed my mind and wanted to continue my education with support of my aunt. My aunt also supported my decision. When I first set foot in Addis Ababa I was happy and I was glad that I came here. Everything looked different but exciting.” Yet, others are frustrated with their lives in Addis Ababa and aspire to migrate abroad: “I want to stop this work. I want to borrow money and go to one of the Arab countries. Whatever abuse I have there I want to go and work there in order to change my life. If I stay in Addis I will not change my life. Life is very expensive here. I can’t afford to pay 2000 Birr for rent.” The fact that we carried out the fieldwork just after the deportation of 160,000 migrants from Saudi Arabia, and at the time that the Ethiopian government installed a ban on the migration of women to the Middle East, may have affected the answers of the girls. The dominant view on women’s migration to the Middle East is very negative in Ethiopia; almost everyone knows about the large-scale violations of human rights, such as abuse and exploitation.

Yet, there are still many girls and women who see migration to the Middle East as the only way to improve their lives. During a focus group discussion with eight adolescent girls in a slum area of Shashemene, seven out of eight said they intended to migrate to the Middle East despite the negative stories. They were convinced that migration to Addis Ababa would not help them to improve their lives, as the available jobs are limited to domestic work and sex work and the salaries are too low to change one’s life. “Parents are grateful to those who are living in Arab countries because they send them money. But those who are going to Addis Ababa, they may disappear and they may not be able to change themselves and their families. Parents also want to have a better house like neighbours whose lives have changed by going to the Middle East.” The girls referred to the fact that many people think that girls who migrated to Addis Ababa have become sex workers and that they therefore lack respect. “When a girl comes from an Arab country they respect her and when she passes by greet her, but if she comes from any place in Ethiopia, they don’t respect her and they shame her because they don’t think she worked hard to earn money. They think she was a sex worker.” However, this doesn’t prevent many girls from aspiring to migrate to Addis Ababa and trying their chances in the city. In one girl’s story, her younger sister always asks her to take her to the city and find her work. Neither the parents nor the sister knows what she does. This by itself is a challenge for her. While she is leading a life that is seen as shameful, her migration also serves as a magnet for her sister and others who want to migrate.

Migration abroad is seen as the only way to improve one’s living conditions. There is a strong idea that one’s experiences in the Middle East depend on “luck”. The emphasis given to financial security, a better life, and the trajectory trend of going through challenges of

domestic work, waitressing, and sex work have led to many girls' assumptions that life anywhere is worse and benefiting from migration depends on one's luck in life (*adl*), and seven of the eight girls were willing to try out their luck. "It's about chance, some of them will encounter bad things and some do not, so we say: 'Let's try our chance and go.'"⁴² International migration has become one of the main ways in which young people in Ethiopia think they can improve their lives and those of their families.

Conclusion

In this paper we have followed Huijsmans' (2015) plea for the use of a relational approach in the study of independent child migration. Huijsmans discusses a number of relational dimensions important in the study of independent child migration such as the role of networks, the household, and the link between early involvement in migration and wider processes of social change and continuity. We have used a relational approach to look at three phases in the migration process of adolescent girls. By focusing on the decision to migrate, living and working conditions in the city, and their future aspirations we have worked against a homogeneous categorization of adolescent migrant girls but instead shown their diversity and the various relational dimensions that play a role in their migration trajectories.

We have shown that the poverty discourse which dominates the discussion about migration in Ethiopia is insufficient to explain the large number of girls that opt for migration, within the country and across borders. In addition to the desire to help their families, many girls migrate to escape oppressive gender regimes, such as early marriages and the limited freedom of movement. While this has also been shown by other authors⁴³, the narratives presented here show the agency and resilience of girls and the ways in which gender and age intersect. The motivation and decision to migrate was embedded in the social relations in the place of origin and closely linked with their status as girls and their position in the household. Yet, over a period of time, the gender and age power relations shifted, because of their migration and their experiences in the city. This shift intersected with a process of personal growth and development of an adult identity with the capacity to decide about the direction one's life was going to take, even in contrast sometimes with norms. This shows that there are constant shifts and changes in the decision-making processes and aspirations of adolescent migrant girls.

The narratives also show that the trafficking discourse falls short, especially when it concerns internal migration. Girls may migrate with the help of others but this does not mean that they are by definition deceived, and that those that facilitate their migration benefit financially. Thirdly, we have shown that there is a link between internal and international migration. Girls often find themselves in serial migration, as their migration does not stop at one place. Some first migrate to Addis Ababa, and only migrate internationally after having obtained information about the advantages and the process. While the decision to migrate to Addis Ababa is often related to notions of modernity, such as the desire to enjoy an urban lifestyle and have access to education, international migration is more aimed at obtaining access to money and changing their lives by saving money and returning home to invest in shops and other businesses. Yet, the challenges encountered are very similar, and many girls share the same experiences. They left the social control of their families, but were confronted with new forms of gender oppression in the place of destination.

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Notes

- 1 Carter and Rohwerder, *Rapid Fragility and Migration*, 19.
- 2 See Fransen and Kuschminder, *Migration in Ethiopia*, 10-11; Carter and Rohwerder, *Rapid Fragility and Migration*, 12.
- 3 See for example Afework and Habte, *Labor Migration*, Minaye, “Trafficking to the Gulf States”, Jones et al, *Rethinking Girls on the Move*, Reda, *An Investigation into the Experiences of Female Victims*, Felegebirhan, “Migrants on the Move”, and Adinew Tsehai, “Trafficking of human beings”.
- 4 See for example Minaye, “Trafficked to the Gulf States”; Jones et al *Rethinking Girls on the Move*; Demissie “Living Across Worlds and Oceans”; Kubai “Trafficking of Ethiopian Women to Europe.”
- 5 Carter and Rohwerder, *Rapid Fragility and Migration*, 21.
- 6 King and Skeldon, “Mind the Gap!”.
- 7 Huijsmans, “Children and Young People”, 5-6.
- 8 The research project *Time to Look at Girls: Adolescent Girls Migration and Development* also included Bangladesh and Sudan. The research was funded by the Swiss Network of International Studies (SNIS) and carried out in collaboration with Terre des Hommes, Girl Effect Ethiopia, Refugee and Migration Studies Unit at the University of Dhaka, and the Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman, Sudan. See Grabska, Del Franco and de Regt, *Time to Look at Girls*.
- 9 Castles, De Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration*.
- 10 Deshingkar and Grimm, *Voluntary Internal Migration*, 7.
- 11 Aina, “Internal Non-Metropolitan Migration”, 43.
- 12 Aina, “Internal Non-Metropolitan Migration”, 43.
- 13 King and Skeldon, “Mind the Gap!”
- 14 King and Skeldon, “Mind the Gap!”, 1622.
- 15 Kloos and Adugna, “Settler Migration”; Hammond, *This Place Will Become Home*; Pankhurst and Piguet, *Moving People in Ethiopia*; Ezra and Kiros, “Rural Out-migration”.
- 16 Casacchia et al. “Internal Migration”; Mberu, “Internal Migration”; Abeje, ; Afework and Habte, *Labour Migration*.
- 17 Berhanu, *The Rural-Urban Nexus*.
- 18 Dom, “Labour Outmigration”.
- 19 See, for example, Mahler and Pessar, “Gender Matters”
- 20 See, for example, Bastia, “Child Trafficking”; Whitehead, Hashim and Iversen, *Child Migration*; Jacquemin, *Invisible Young Female Migrant Workers*; Dobson, “Unpacking Children”; Hashim and Thorsen, *Child Migration in Africa*; Huijsmans, “Child Migration”; Huijsmans and Baker, “Child Trafficking”; Huijsmans, “Children and Young People”; Grabska, Del Franco and de Regt, *Time to Look at Girls*.
- 21 Huijsmans, “Child Migration”, 1314.
- 22 Bucholtz, “Youth as Cultural Practice”.
- 23 Temin et al., *Girls on the Move*.
- 24 See Van Blerk, “Poverty, Migration and Sex Work”; Grabska, Del Franco and de Regt, *Time to Look at Girls*; and Grabska this volume.
- 25 Fass, “Children in Global Migrations”, 949.
- 26 See, for example, Jacquemin, *Invisible Young Female Migrant Workers*.
- 27 Huijsmans, “Children and Young People”
- 28 Huijsmans, “Children and Young People”, 8.
- 29 The methodological approach was designed in close cooperation with the two other principal researchers, studying adolescent girls’ migration in Bangladesh and Sudan. See Grabska, Del Franco and de Regt, *Time to Look at Girls*.
- 30 See Erulkar and Mekbib, “Invisible and Vulnerable”; Erulkar et al, “Migration and Vulnerability”; Van Blerk, “Poverty, Migration and Sex Work”.
- 31 NIKAT is a self-organization of sex workers in Addis Ababa. It was established in 2006 with the aim to improve the living conditions of sex workers in Ethiopia, and to fight against poverty and HIV/AIDS. NIKAT has a drop in center where sex workers can come to relax, rest, meet others and have access to information. The second NGO that facilitated access to girls was Timret Le Hiwot (TLH). The organization was established in 2004 with the aim to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. TLH also has programmes directed at sex workers and their clients.
- 32 Other studies have also mentioned early (and forced) marriage as an important reason for girls’ migration in Ethiopia, see for example Erulkar et al, “Migration and Vulnerability”.

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- ³³ Fass, “Children in Global Migrations”.
- ³⁴ See Tadele, *Bleak Prospects*; Kebede et al. “Negotiated Silence”; Both and Samuel, “Keeping Silent”.
- ³⁵ Fass, “Children in Global Migrations”.
- ³⁶ Klocker, “An Example of Thin Agency”; Huijsmans, “Child Migration”; Huijsmans and Baker, “Child Trafficking”; Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, “Agency as Vulnerability”.
- ³⁷ Klocker, “An Example of Thin Agency”, 85.
- ³⁸ Huijsmans, “Beyond Compartmentalization”, 43.
- ³⁹ Huijsmans, “Child Migration”, 1317.
- ⁴⁰ See also Erulkar and Mekbib, “Invisible and Vulnerable”, 254; Van Blerk, “Poverty, Migration and Sex Work”, 248.
- ⁴¹ See Minaye, “Trafficked to the Gulf States”.
- ⁴² See also Grabska, *Time to Look at Girls*, 34, and Grabska, this volume.
- ⁴³ See Van Blerk, “Poverty, Migration and Sex work” and Erulkar and Mekbib, “Invisible and Vulnerable”; Erulkar et al, “Migration and Vulnerability”.