

No. 55

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This publication has not been formally edited by IOM.

ISSN 1607-338X
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Introduction

In the southern regions of Oromia, it is commonly said that young women who aspire to leave their rural villages to work for a better life have two choices: “Ziway or Dubai”.¹ Ziway is the site of a large Dutch-owned flower-farm, Afriflora Sher, which exports some three to four million roses daily from Addis Ababa to Amsterdam. Dubai represents another alternative for low-skilled work: migration as a domestic worker to the Middle East. The purpose of this paper is to explore the rationale of young women choosing between “Ziway or Dubai” – or more generally, between work opportunities in Ethiopia and in the Middle East.

The migration of Ethiopian women as domestic workers to the Middle East is a serious concern of governments and international organizations alike. The dominant narrative about this migration corridor in both international media and research publications is overwhelmingly negative. It is often told that girls and women, uneducated and facing desperate economic circumstances, are deceived by the false promises of brokers into appalling work conditions, only to return to Ethiopia with broken spirits, perhaps broken bodies, and little to show for it (see Demissie, 2018; Jamie and Tsega, 2016; Beydoun, 2006; Reda, 2018; Minaye, 2012; Mandefro, 2012). Horrific stories of abuse and exploitation are disseminated through the media and education campaigns, yet adolescents and women continue to leave (Demissie, 2018). The decision-making of these young women remains nebulous; rather than the utility-maximizing agents assumed in most migration theories, they are more often portrayed as trafficked, deceived, or “blinded by hope” (Frouws, 2014; Kebede, 2002; Jamie and Tsega, 2016).

In 2013, the Ethiopian Government banned labour emigration to Middle Eastern countries.² As a Foreign Affairs spokesman explained at the time, “This exodus [...] has created immense problems for the people of the nation, for the image of the country. It is affecting a lot of youngsters who are pushed out, deceived by the human traffickers, that has created an immense socio-economic problem” (Al Jazeera, 2013). To address the problems associated with this migration, the Ethiopian Government has a two-fold strategy. First, it seeks to improve the working conditions of Ethiopian domestic workers through new regulations on employment agencies, the establishment of better training centres in Ethiopia, and stronger bilateral agreements with destination countries. Second, the Ethiopian Government aims to expand employment opportunities for young people within Ethiopia. It is a commonly held view that the lack of decent employment is one of the main driving forces of migration from Ethiopia; thus, generating employment should alleviate its ‘root causes’ (ILO, 2018; see Clemens and Postel, 2018). Towards this end, in addition to domestic strategies to develop Ethiopia’s manufacturing and service sectors, the Ethiopian Government encourages foreign investment into the country. Foreign companies are promised cheap labour, land and tax exemptions. Young Ethiopians are promised more jobs. But will work with foreign companies act as a substitute to international labour migration?

This research is an in-depth study of the decision-making of young women in one rural district of the Oromia region in the central Ethiopian Rift Valley. The paper proceeds in two parts. The first explores when and why young women aspire to migrate to the Middle East. I show how the desire to leave often arises when, as adolescents and young women transition into their adult lives, the pathways before them locally – whether marriage, education, or local work opportunities – are not perceived as promising avenues to achieve the aspirations they hold. The lives that many young women now value are urban lives with a greater degree of social and economic freedom than their mothers’ generation experienced (see Schewel and Fransen, 2018). Migration to the Middle East as a domestic worker – risky as they know it is – is seen by these young women as a temporary strategy to earn the capital they need to realize their aspirations at home. I argue that

¹ The two words rhyme.

² This ban was lifted in February 2018.

the relatively singular narrative of Ethiopian domestic workers being victims of deception and exploitation fails to capture the changing opportunities and constraints young women navigate in pursuit of a better future, and the real positive benefits some migrants experience. To use the language of Amartya Sen (1999), I show the ways in which this migration can be capability-enhancing for young women while at the same time, a response to the critical of the lack of capabilities in other domains of their lives.

Second, I examine how young women perceive work at one Dutch-owned flower farm in the same district, as well as the aspirations and experiences of young women already working there. Within a decade, Ethiopia has become the second largest producer of cut flowers in Africa after Kenya, and the fifth largest non-EU exporter of flowers to the EU flower market (Melese and Helmsing, 2010). I suggest that these relatively new employment opportunities for women, because of the low-wages and difficult conditions, often fail to meet their aspirations for social and economic change. While the opportunity to earn a steady income helps to delay early marriage and alleviate the pressures of economic scarcity and insecurity – a very real challenge for many smallholder farming households in the region – the income is insufficient to meaningfully invest in a better future. As a result, turn-over among greenhouse workers is high. Instead of stemming migration aspirations, work on the flower farms may stimulate young women’s aspirations and capabilities to migrate to the Middle East.

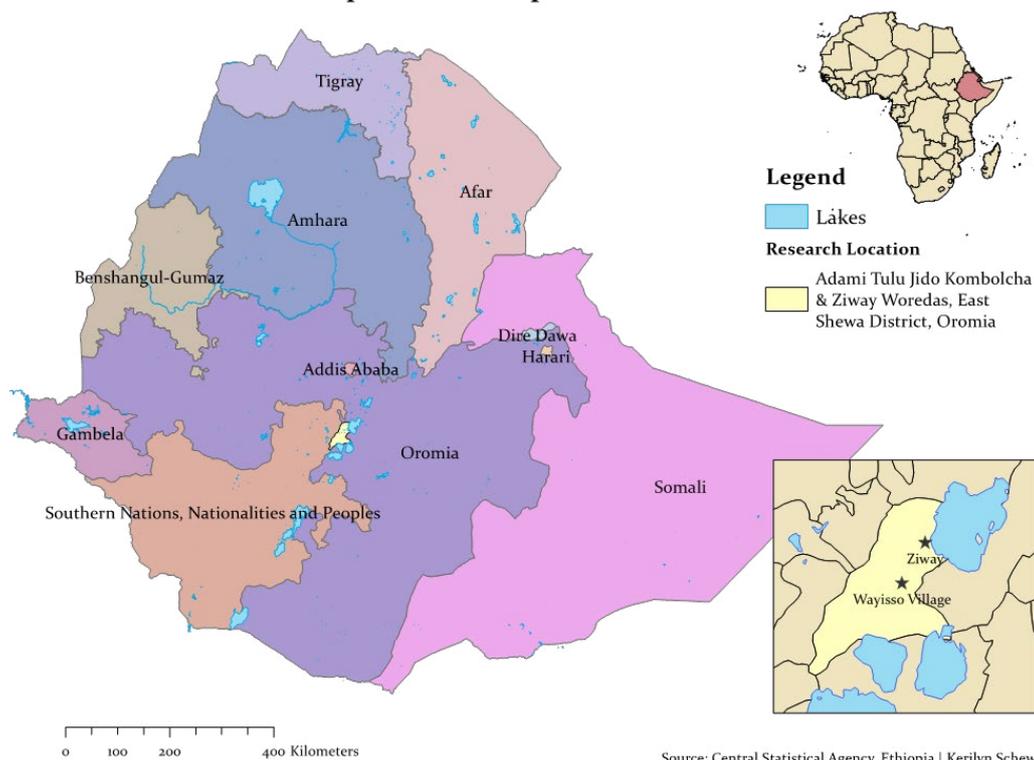
Methodology

I visited Ethiopia four times in the period of 2015–2018: in April 2015, from January through July 2016, November 2016 and October 2018. My research focused on one village in the Wayisso Qancara kebele (peasant association) in the Adami Tulu Jido Kombolcha woreda (district) of the Oromia state. Traditionally semi-nomadic pastoralists, the inhabitants of this kebele only settled into agricultural livelihoods in the 1970s and 1980s. I surveyed three family clusters, collecting demographic information and the mobility histories of all households who traced their lineage to the three patriarchs who first settled in (what was then called) the Wayisso village (totaling 72 households and 657 individuals). In addition, I had 53 in-depth interviews with a range of individuals who lived in or had left the Wayisso – balanced in terms of age, sex, and education – in order to understand how migration abroad relates to other (im)mobility trajectories from the kebele.

I also spent significant time in two neighbouring urban areas: Tulu, a small market town (pop. 10,000), and Ziway, a rapidly growing urban centre (pop. ~60,000). I interviewed 12 return migrants and three current migrants in Saudi Arabia and Beirut (phone interviews) from these areas. During my fieldwork, I also lived next to the Agriflora Sher flower farm in Ziway for six months, which allowed me to develop a rapport with the greenhouse workers, with whom I held dozens of informal conversations and fourteen formal interviews. Interviews were carried out in Afaan Oromo and Amharic with the assistance of an interpreter. Because my research focused on one district, with particular emphasis on one kebele within that district, the number of women with direct experience of migration to the Middle East was relatively small. However, this strategy allowed for a ‘thick description’ of the social, economic and cultural context in which migration decision-making takes place (see Geertz, 1973).

Figure 1: Research location

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia



Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

Migration to the Middle East

Although international migration from Ethiopia remains relatively low compared to other sub-Saharan countries, the emigration of low-skilled workers to the Middle East is now the largest migration corridor from Ethiopia (Kuschminder, 2014). In one study, Kuschminder and Siegel (2014) found that half of all emigrants from Ethiopia were in the Middle East, compared to 20 per cent in Africa and 22 per cent in North America or Europe. Sixty per cent of these migrants were women. Official data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) state that 460,000 Ethiopians emigrated legally to the Middle East between 2008 and 2013, the majority of whom went to Saudi Arabia (79%) and Kuwait (20%) (Carter and Rohweder, 2016). Many women also leave through irregular channels – MoLSA estimates that in 2012 as many as 60–70 per cent of those who migrated went irregularly (Carter and Rohweder, 2016). Ethiopian migrants in the Middle East are typically young, female, unmarried and better educated than non-migrants (see Kuschminder and Siegel, 2014; de Regt & Tafesse, 2016; Carter and Rohweder, 2016). While the mobility of Ethiopian women is not new, this particular form of long-distance migration is part of the “feminization” of Ethiopian labour migration abroad (Fernandez, 2011).

In June 2016, from the Wayisso village, seven women were working in the Middle East and three had returned. These ten women represent 8.4 per cent of the female population between the ages of 15 and 30 (N=119), a small but notable share. Relative to rural–rural or rural–urban migration, international migration remains a minor phenomenon, more comparable to migration to cities further afield within Ethiopia – to regional centres like Adama or the capital city, Addis Ababa. For women from rural areas, migrating to the Middle East as a domestic worker can require less resources than migrating within Ethiopia. Although migration abroad requires an up-front investment in a passport, health checks, and agency fees, this investment is usually

paid back in a few months, after which women earn a salary without the expenses of food and housing. Settling in a distant urban area without relatives, on the contrary, requires the means to continually rent housing and pay higher prices for food, goods, and services, all without the promise of significant profit. Thus, many women go straight from rural areas or neighbouring towns to the Middle East.

Table 1: The current residences of men and women Born in the Wayisso³

Current Residence	Women	Men	Total
Wayisso	21	104	125
Other rural <i>kebele</i>	39	4	43
Tulu	10	13	23
Ziway	37	46	83
Adama (regional centre)	0	4	4
Addis Ababa	0	3	3
Other urban <i>kebele</i>	14	10	24
Middle East	5	0	5
Europe	1	0	1
Total	127	184	311

Some young women have family members already working abroad, who facilitate their journey, visas and arrival, but most others leave with the assistance of agencies and have 2 to 3-year contracts with families at their destination. Contact with agencies, predominantly located in Addis Ababa, is facilitated through local or regional brokers. Contrary to the common perception of brokers luring young women into exploitative conditions with false promises of riches abroad, the brokers who operate in the area have a reputation to protect. “There are brokers everywhere”, one woman said. “They are well known.” If the broker breaks the trust of a family, word spreads and it hurts their future business prospects. “We don’t know the agencies. But because the broker wants to protect his name, he takes us to a good agency. We don’t trust the agencies. It first depends on the broker.”

Why Women Leave

Women leave to change their material and social circumstances. Women leave to, as they often put it, “do something” – as opposed to getting married and living what they see as a predictable and difficult rural life, a life most framed as not “doing something”. From this area in Ethiopia, the women who migrate abroad are most often young (in their teens or twenties), unmarried, and fail to finish their secondary education. Their decision to leave falls at an important moment of transition in their lives, as they navigate the path from childhood to adulthood. In some cases, the decision to leave is an active pursuit of capital, one worth leaving their education for. As one aspiring migrant put it, “Education is important, [but] migration is a quicker and more sure way to change your life.” In other cases, the decision to leave is taken when one pathway – education – closes, and the alternative – generally marriage – is undesirable. Migration becomes a way to avoid an early marriage and a rural future. Under a variety of circumstances, young women mentioned migration to the Middle East, and the capital it gives access to, as a way to not only improve their lives materially, but to gain “freedom,” to “do something with my life,” to “change my life and the life of my family”.

³ Current residences of those surveyed aged 15 or older, not including women who moved into the Wayisso (usually when married); “Other urban *kebele*” refers to towns or cities with 3 or less people currently residing there (they include Bulbula, Shashamene, Hawassa, Borana, and Abosa); based on 2016 household survey.

Access to Capital

The capital migrant domestic workers are able to access exceeds almost any other economic opportunity available to rural men and women with low levels of education in Ethiopia. For most households in the Wayisso village, their primary income comes from the harvest they glean from their land once a year and selling their livestock. Access to land within families varies greatly, from 1 plot (0.25 hectares) among a few young households to 20 plots (5 hectares) among a few older ones; the average is 1.5 to 2 hectares, or 6 to 8 plots. The crop best suited to the relatively dry lowlands is maize. Under good conditions, one plot produces some 8-12 quintals (100 kilos) of maize for the market, which is then bought for around 400 birr/quintal (roughly USD 19 in 2016),⁴ bringing a potential income gain of 3,200–4,800 birr (~USD 150–225) per plot. Of course, given farmers' dependence on rain, a year of drought – such as the year before this research study – means some farmers may fail to produce even one quintal for the market. Farming also requires investments: in seeds and potentially oxen, fertilizer and additional manpower. For one farmer in the Wayisso with one hectare (4 plots), his net profit in a good year is around 14,500 birr (USD 678). However, in 2016, he made only 1,320 birr (USD 62).

It is in this economic context that women and families consider migration to the Middle East, where the profit a woman can make is more reliable and substantive than rain-fed agriculture. One young woman, currently working in Dubai, sent some 50,000 birr (USD 2,336) to her family after her first 18 months. Another return migrant from Mecca made 800 riyal (USD 215) per month,⁵ later earning a raise to 1,200 riyal (USD 320) per month. Those currently working in Beirut earned less but a still substantial amount: between 2-3,000 birr (USD 93–140) per month. As one return migrant who opened a shop in Ziway put it: “Here it is too difficult. Even if you are working, it is too difficult to change your life. But there you are going to change your life in a short time.”

Thus, for a young person deciding to leave, migration to the Middle East is framed as an investment, for themselves and their families. As one migrant said, “First I want to do something for my family, and the rest I will use for myself.” Shiko took that approach. Born in the Wayisso, she left after finishing grade 7. The first time she worked abroad for two years, and with the money she remitted, her family built a new home in the Wayisso. Her father bought cattle. She paid the gabara (dowry) for her brother to get married, some 30,000 birr (~USD 1,400). Then she came home for several months. She left again, but this time, her father says, “we are only listening to her voice. Now she tries to live for herself.” Now age 24, Shiko has her own bank account in Ziway and the family hasn't seen any of it. “Maybe she has a boyfriend,” her brother speculated. Whatever the case, it was clear the family saw the money as hers.

For young women, the most common aspiration expressed was to save enough money to build a home in town and open their own business. Most return migrants open corner stores with basic goods: soap, bottled water, Coca-Cola, biscuits – not very lucrative enterprises but relative to other income-generating opportunities, a significant source of financial independence. In Ziway, on a new road recently built to accommodate the housing boom, a number of new shops are opening up: small restaurants, pool houses, mobile phone stores, corner shops and hair dressers. One woman worked in Saudi Arabia for two years and returned to Ziway to open her own restaurant. To purchase a space for her restaurant on this new road, it cost her 18,000 birr (~USD 840). “If I didn't go to Saudi Arabia, I could never have opened my own business,” she said.

In rural areas, the remittances sent home become visible to neighbours, fueling what the migration literature has called a feeling of “relative deprivation” (Stark and Taylor, 1989), a sense of material deprivation relative to others in one's social group. Often, young women who aspire to go to

⁴ In February 2016, the exchange rate was 21.4 ETB to 1 USD.

⁵ In February 2016, the exchange rate 3.75 riyal to 1 USD.

the Middle East would mention someone they knew whose migration “changed their life”, who inspired them to follow a similar route. Through the visible changes remittances bring to the lives of other young women and their families, international migration for domestic work enters into what geographers have referred to as the “mental maps” (Fuller and Chapman, 1974) of other young women, a possible pathway in their imagined futures.

Figures 2 and 3 show two houses in the Wayisso village. The first is a traditional home, with one interior room and a thatched roof. The second is a newly built home funded by remittances. It has multiple rooms, windows, an iron roof and bars on the window, and is painted – all conspicuous signs of discretionary income. Women are not necessarily deceived when they see the tangible results of others’ migration abroad.

Figure 2: A traditional home in the Wayisso Qancarra kebele



Figure 3: A new home in the Wayisso Qancarra kebele built with remittances from a domestic worker abroad



'After Education, It's Marriage or Migration'

Migration decision-making is not only an economic calculus, however. Social and cultural norms circumscribe the potential futures young women can pursue. One relatively new 'pathway' for young women is formal education. Girls in the ATJK woreda began to enter formal schooling in the 1990s, and since then, girls' enrollment has dramatically increased – from 1,286 girls enrolled in primary grades in 1990 to 16,089 in 2010. Nevertheless, enrollment sharply decreases at the secondary level, in part because many fail qualifying exams at Grade 8 or Grade 10, and alternatives to education are limited. As one mother from the Wayisso explained: "After the national exam at grade 10, if they pass, they proceed to the preparatory level. If they fail, they have two opportunities: to marry someone or to fly outside to [the] Arab [countries]."

The Government is aware of low pass rates, and students who fail are encouraged to pursue other educational opportunities, for example, with the Technical and Vocational School or the College of Teacher's Education in Ziway. There are also a growing number of private institutions that offer diplomas, certificates and degrees. But as one migrant explained, "My grades were not good enough to continue to the preparatory school. And to take the Technical and Vocational Classes, it needs income, money. And I didn't have anything in my hand. That's why I decided to leave." Even if the government courses do not charge tuition, living in an urban area (or commuting there regularly) costs money.

Mimi is another young woman who left for Beirut after she failed the national exam. She has worked for a nice family for the last three years, a family that "treats her as a family member". When asked why she left, she simply explained that she could not continue her education and this seemed to be the next best option: "Nobody pushed me to go. I had friends who had migrated. And it is better to do something. [...] If I did not migrate, I would have been married and then I would be dependent on my husband. I wouldn't have the capability to do anything without my husband's permission." Mimi is still abroad, but with the help of her family, she has already started building a house in Tulu and plans to open her own shop there when she returns.

While Mimi's story is an example of an alternative for girls and women when education is no longer a possibility, there are also examples of families who pull their daughters out of their education to assist with economic needs at home. A common way for girls and young women to help alleviate the poverty of their family is to marry.⁶ In the Oromo tradition, marriage requires the payment of a dowry (gabara) from the man's to the woman's family. Gabara used to be paid in cattle, but today, it is more common to give cash and other consumer goods. Migration to the Middle East is becoming an alternative for girls who wish to avoid an early marriage but still feel compelled to contribute to their family's income.

Damitu, for example, left home when she was 14. "My family was not able to send me to school. Not even a government school. They needed money to survive. We were in absolute poverty, so they needed me [...]. If I was in school, no one was there to help the family." Her father wanted Damitu to marry, but "I convinced my father that migration would be better than getting married now. I would be able to make some money to send home, then I could return and get married. My father agreed, and he arranged for me to go." For Damitu, migration to Saudi Arabia was the best option among a poor set, but one she negotiated with her family. Damitu has been working abroad for four years and is now eager to return. "To some extent it's nice here, but I am not interested in staying. Freedom is in Ethiopia." When asked what she will do when she returns, she wants "to return to a town like Ziway or Tulu" and marry. "After I am married, I will continue my education."

⁶ Early marriage rates vary across Ethiopia. The median age at which Ethiopian women marry is 16.5 years, and 16.9 years in Oromiya, according to 2011 Demographic and Health Survey Data (see Marshall et al., 2016).

Working on the Flower Farms

In Ziway, the presence of foreign investors is unavoidable. The Dutch-owned Agriflora Sher corporation opened in 2005, and now operates the largest rose farm in the world. Larger than the size of Ziway town itself, the Ziway greenhouses and the secondary sites at Adami Tulu and Koka use some 650 hectares, or the equivalent of 1,300 football fields. At the time of my research, Sher employed some 8,000 workers, many of whom migrate to Ziway from rural areas outside of the district, from other areas of Oromiya or the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region.

The migration decision-making of these internal migrants is strikingly similar to those who leave for the Middle East. Many young women came to work at Sher when education was no longer an option for them – either because they failed their exams or their family wanted them to marry. Social networks also played a role; most knew someone else who had worked at Sher. Because Sher is a foreign-owned company, they expected higher wages than an Ethiopian company. They came at a moment of transition in their life-course and shared the same hopes as those who go abroad: to earn enough capital to “change my life”.

However, many Sher workers doubted whether their income was enough to change their life. Living in town dramatically increased their costs of living and made saving and remitting a struggle. Most day workers worked between 8 and 12 hours in the greenhouses, cutting or packing flowers, six days per week. In 2016, they reported earning around 750 birr to 900 birr per month (USD 35–42). A typical rented room in Ziway is some 200 birr/month, with food costs alone approximately 400-500 birr/month. Another study of workers at Sher and another flower farm in Ethiopia found that workers spent 85 per cent of their wages on food and housing alone (Beyene, 2014).

In many ways, Sher is what the Ethiopian Government sees as a model foreign company. They employ thousands of people who might otherwise be unemployed or underemployed. They are actively engaged in providing social services; they built a hospital and provide free primary and secondary schooling for the children of their employees. Sher also pays above the minimum wage. However, that does not mean much; the minimum wage for governmental personnel in Ethiopia in 2016 was ETB 420 per month, less than USD 20. Melese (2017) estimated that a living wage would be 2.5 to 3 times higher than the prevailing wages for flower farm workers in Ziway.

Most workers in the greenhouses come from rural areas outside of the woreda. Rural and urban locals often disparage the work at Sher, citing concerns over the heat, the pesticides, and the low wages. Some expressed resentment towards Sher workers for coming and taking such low-paid jobs, arguing that if they would not, Sher would be forced to pay higher wages. Turn-over is high, however, even among existing workers.

In one focus group discussion, I asked whether the young women working at Sher would encourage others to do the same. Their responses were mixed. Some mentioned the benefit of doing something: “Don’t just sit there and bother your family. Come work and do something.” “Even if I can buy just one pair of shoes, it’s better than what I had before.” Others were more skeptical: “I’d tell them not to come. I’ve been working at Sher and there is no benefit. How can we change ourselves? If it’s possible, go abroad to the Arab countries.”

Many young women working on flower farms do eventually migrate to the Middle East – a point of frustration for the managers who invest in training their employees, only to see them leave shortly thereafter (Beyene, 2014). Fayine, from a rural area in Southern Oromia, is one such woman. She was working at Sher for only a few weeks but already had plans to leave. She said the greenhouses are sweltering and the thorns prick her hands. “Rather than burning here at Sher,

it is better for me to leave Ethiopia and work in an Arab country.” She knows one girl from her area who went to Kuwait and really “changed her and her family’s life”. She plans to do the same.

Young women’s experiences at Sher suggest that the Government’s plans to recruit foreign companies with the promise of cheap labour may not satisfy the rising aspirations of a young and increasingly educated generation. It is not simply “jobs” that young people want, but jobs that will enable them to change their socioeconomic circumstances. Young women’s dissatisfaction with the work and compensation at Sher – and their turning their gaze toward to the Middle East – suggests that these kinds of jobs will not necessarily act as a substitute for international labour migration. On the contrary, they may further the aspiration and capability to leave.

Conclusion

This research sheds light on the aspirations, opportunities and constraints young women navigate as they transition into adulthood, and why some decide to migrate to the Middle East as domestic workers. The relatively singular narrative of uneducated and misinformed young women lured by brokers into exploitation and abuse fails to capture the changing opportunities and constraints young women navigate in pursuit of a better future as well as the real positive benefits some migrants experience. Young women choose what they see as the best option among few alternatives; migration to the Middle East is one way to avoid an early marriage and to access capital otherwise unavailable to low-skilled women locally. While trafficking, deception and exploitation does occur across Ethiopia and demands intervention, it is important to bring alternative – and perhaps more mundane – experiences to light. Narratives shape how we understand the forces driving migration, and the migration policy devised in response to it. When we tell a one-sided story, we risk misrepresenting the motivations and circumstances of migrants. We easily fall into the trap of presenting migrants as passive victims, best protected by restricting their mobility. In this light, it is crucial to give attention to migrants’ agency and rationality as they navigate the opportunities and constraints before them (see de Regt, 2010).

By evaluating how young women perceive new work opportunities at the Agriflora Sher flower farms in Ethiopia, I suggest that generating employment opportunities through foreign investment in Ethiopia will not necessarily act as a substitute to this international migration. Both work on the flower farms and migration to the Middle East as a domestic worker are relatively new economic opportunities for low-skilled adolescents and women. Migration abroad is riskier but offers the promise of greater capital gain. Work at the flower farm relieves some of the pressures of economic insecurity but remains low-wage – some show not even a living wage (Melese, 2017) – and not enough to bring significant change to their socioeconomic circumstances. As a result, some women shift their aspirations away from “Ziway” to “Dubai”.

Of course, many return migrants from the Middle East do not realize all that they hoped. The social, economic, and cultural constraints women face in Ethiopia are still there when they return. Yet, even building a house in town or improving their house in the village, opening a small shop or delaying the age at which they get married – these represent, relative to their alternatives, significant change.

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