

## Ethiopian Women's Labor Migration to the Middle East

**Aspiring for Change: Ethiopian Women's Labor Migration to the Middle East**Kerilyn Schewel, *Duke University, USA*

**T**his paper examines why young women in rural Ethiopia decide to migrate as domestic workers to the Middle East. Based on survey data and 84 in-depth interviews, it explores the forces shaping young women's aspirations and capabilities to migrate, challenging the dominant narratives of trafficking, deception, and victimization that surround this migration corridor. It finds, first, that migration to the Middle East is one migration trajectory embedded within a broader urban transition occurring across Ethiopia. For rural women, labor emigration is often a long-distance, short-term strategy to access the capital needed to realize a long-term, short-distance move to town. Second, the aspiration to migrate emerges at a particular moment in the life course, as young women transition from adolescence into adulthood and when local opportunities do not provide promising pathways to achieve their life aspirations. This paper shows why labor emigration can simultaneously be a reasonable, capabilities-enhancing choice for young women and a response to a critical lack of capabilities in other domains of their lives. Finally, through applying an aspiration–capability framework, this paper advances a theoretical approach that avoids the common binary between “forced” and “voluntary” migration and thus contributes to advancing research on other forms of precarious migration occurring under highly constrained conditions.

**Introduction**

Labor migration from Ethiopia to the Middle East is a relatively new migration corridor, growing in number and consequence since the 1990s. Rising demand for domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries and the emergence of

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a migration industry to facilitate their movement has contributed to the “feminization” of Ethiopian labor migration (Fernandez 2011). The dominant narrative about this migration corridor in international media, academic publications, and gray literature is overwhelmingly negative—one of “young impressionable women” facing desperate economic circumstances, deceived by human traffickers into abusive working conditions, only to return to Ethiopia with broken spirits, perhaps broken bodies, and little to show for it (Mergo 2016, 71; Demissie 2018; Jamie and Tsega 2016; Kubai 2016; Beydoun 2006; Reda 2018; Minaye 2012). Unlike the utility-maximizing agents assumed in most migration theories, Ethiopian women are more often portrayed as trafficked, deceived, or “blinded by hope” (RMMS 2014; Kebede 2002; Jamie and Tsega 2016). In response, the Ethiopian government placed a formal ban on low-skilled migration to the Middle East from 2013 to 2018. As the Foreign Affairs spokesman explained at the time, “This exodus, being pushed by illegal human traffickers, has created immense problems for the people of the nation [...] 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; see also Kuschminder 2014).

This paper asks why, despite the widespread knowledge about the risks of (particularly irregular) labor migration to the Middle East (see RMMS 2014<sup>1</sup>), young Ethiopian women continue to leave. It examines how young women in one rural district of Oromia decide to migrate as domestic workers to the Middle East, uncovering the forces shaping their aspirations and capabilities to migrate and providing empirically grounded insights that challenge an overarching trafficking narrative. It finds that the aspiration to migrate to the Middle East arises at a particular moment in the life course, as adolescents transition into adulthood and when the pathways before them locally are not promising avenues to achieve the life aspirations they hold. Migration to the Middle East—facilitated by a migration industry that lowers the costs and constraints of leaving—offers the promise of significant capital and therefore a change in their socioeconomic circumstances. It shows that migration to the Middle East is embedded within a broader migration transition occurring across Ethiopia, particularly an urbanization of internal migration trajectories and an urbanization of the social imaginary. For rural women, the “good life” is no longer in the village, yet a move to the city requires significant resources. In this region of Ethiopia, migration to the Middle East is often a short-term, long-distance strategy to finance a long-term, short-distance move to town.

## Theoretical Framework

The migration of Ethiopian women to Middle Eastern countries is part of a global rise in the international labor migration of women for domestic work. Domestic workers and the global care chain receive significant attention within academic research, where scholars elucidate the structural drivers of this labor migration (Hochschild 2003; Sassen 2008; Anderson 2000; Parreñas 2001) and

the creative agency women utilize as they navigate this precarious migration corridor (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; de Regt 2010; Grabska, Regt, and Franco 2019). Yet, as Marina de Regt (2010) points out, these more nuanced perspectives are rarely applied to domestic workers in the Middle East, who are primarily cast as victims: victims of traffickers who lure them into “contract slavery” (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004) and victims of the *kafala* system, a migration system in many Gulf States that ties the legal and economic responsibility for contracted migrant workers to their host employers—creating conditions in which the domestic workers are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Pande 2013; Jureidini 2010; Fernandez 2020).

In research on Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East, the concept of “trafficking” is widely and loosely applied. Some studies make distinctions between regular migration, trafficking, and smuggling (Beydoun 2006). More often, however, trafficking becomes synonymous with irregular labor migration (e.g., Kebede 2002; Jamie and Tsega 2016) or is used to describe the experience of all domestic workers in the Middle East who face exploitation regardless of their legal status (e.g., Minaye 2012; Jones et al. 2018). Jones et al. (2014, 2018) make the most compelling case to describe this migration, particularly when it concerns adolescent girls, in terms of trafficking. They acknowledge that, even among minors, migration to the Middle East may be regarded as a means to improve their opportunities for school and work and to achieve more secure futures; they find many adolescents move voluntarily for economic reasons. Yet, Jones et al. (2014, 2) argue that family pressure, poverty, limited local employment opportunities, reliance on illegal brokers who provide limited information, combined with the exploitation girls face at destination, “means the line which separates Ethiopian girls’ voluntary migration from trafficking all but fades into invisibility.”

The persistent pull to frame migration as either “forced” or “voluntary” reflects the limitations of existing theories and frameworks to explain migration under highly constrained conditions. Migration research has long recognized that the common binary between “forced” and “voluntary” migration is an artificial one; in reality, almost all migration requires agency and takes place under some constraints (Van Hear 1998). It is more helpful to think of a spectrum with ideal types of “forced” and “voluntary” at each end and with most migration falling somewhere in between. Nevertheless, decision-making in this middle space remains difficult to conceptualize, because of the complex coexistence of agency and constraints, of volition and limited choice, across a wide variety of migration contexts (Erdal and Oeppen 2018; Carling, Gallagher, and Horwood 2015). Given this conceptual ambiguity, the reasonable desire to highlight the injustices faced by many migrants who navigate this middle space can incline scholars to concentrate on the dimensions of force and coercion. In the case of Ethiopian women migrating to the Middle East, the language of trafficking stresses the limited choices, exploitation, and abuse many face. Because human trafficking is unequivocally “bad,” it also implicitly serves as a call to political action on the migrants’ behalf. However, to achieve this emphasis, a trafficking narrative collapses the conceptual lens through which we evaluate

this migration into a flat, two-dimensional story of passive victims pushed and pulled into precarious conditions. It obscures the agency, rationality, and potentially positive experiences of many migrants (Boyden and Howard 2013; Fernandez and de Regt 2014; Grabska, Regt, and Franco 2019; Fernandez 2020).

To move beyond this theoretical impasse, this paper proposes the aspiration–capability framework as one analytical tool that is well suited to evaluate migration processes across the forced–voluntary spectrum (de Haas 2021; Schewel 2019a; Carling and Schewel 2018<sup>2</sup>). The aspiration–capability framework conceptualizes migration as a function of aspirations and capabilities to migrate within a given set of opportunity structures (de Haas 2021). This approach highlights that migration requires both an aspiration and the capability to migrate; the lack of either one results in voluntary or involuntary immobility (Carling 2002). Further, consideration of the “opportunity structures” within which individuals develop the aspiration and capability to migrate directs attention to the broader life aspirations of potential migrants and the real capabilities they have, or lack, to achieve them (Schewel 2019b).

The aspiration to migrate, in the simplest sense, refers to the conviction that migration is preferable to staying. The strength of migration aspirations and the balance between choice and coercion can vary (Carling and Schewel 2018, 946). The aspiration to migrate is one of many more specific aspirations (e.g., for education, marriage, or work), all of which emerge out of particular visions of the good life within an operating social imaginary (Schewel 2019b). Far more than the outcome of simple cost–benefit analyses, “aspirations” capture the subjective hopes and goals that guide decision-making processes, setting the horizons within which life choices are made (see Schewel and Fransen 2018; Carling and Collins 2018). Thus, although aspirations are often evaluated as something individuals have, they are shaped by greater sociocultural norms.

Because aspirations are “socially grounded” (Ray 2006; Appadurai 2004; Carling and Collins 2018), they illuminate the value-systems within which people make decisions, or exercise their reason. Giving attention to aspirations—and the social, economic, and cultural forces that shape them—can allow migration researchers to move beyond the limitations of prevalent income- and utility-maximizing models of decision-making. While there is nothing inherently wrong with the logic of a cost–benefit analysis in migration decision-making, problems arise when “costs” and “benefits” are defined within a narrow economic frame, or the social context within which migration decision-making occurs is ignored. A focus on aspirations in migration research reveals the values and desires that determine what factors are relevant to an individual cost–benefit analysis.

The concept of “capability” captures the resources, opportunities, and constraints that determine whether and how aspirations may be realized. The use of the term is informed by the Capability Approach, a normative, evaluative framework for human development (Sen 1999; see de Haas 2021). In contrast to the mainstream development approaches that focus on maximizing income, consumption, or even happiness, the Capability Approach focuses on what people are effectively able to do and to be—their “capabilities” to “lead the lives they have reason to value” (Sen 1999, 293; Robeyns 2005). Capabilities

vary from person to person, shaped by gender, education, social class, wealth, networks, and social norms. They also shift in relation to changing aspirations over time; aspirations determine what capabilities are relevant to an individual's well-being and the capabilities that individuals have, or lack, can lead them to adjust their aspirations accordingly.

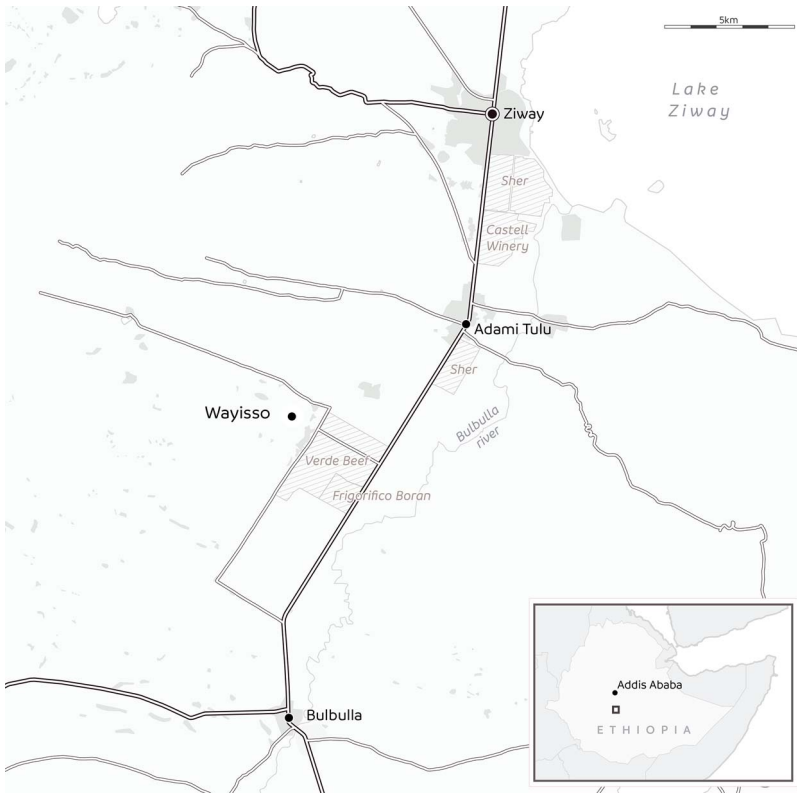
In this paper, I apply the aspiration–capability framework at two levels: first, the broader life aspirations of young women and the capabilities required to achieve them; and second, the more specific aspiration and capability to migrate. In other words, I explore the kinds of lives young, rural women now value, what they are effectively able to do and to be, and why migration to the Middle East is seen by some as the only viable way to realize a better life. In this way, “aspiration” and “capability” provide theoretically rich terms to explore what Bina Fernandez calls “the will to change” (Fernandez 2020, 2), the agency that migrant women exert as they navigate limited and gendered opportunities for their personal and familial betterment.

## Methodology

This research is an in-depth case study of one rural village and its neighboring towns in the central lowlands of the Ethiopian Rift Valley. The village, called Wayisso, lies in the Adami Tulu Jido Kombolcha (ATJK) *woreda* (district) of the Oromia state (Figure 1). This area experienced relatively rapid migration transitions over the last four generations from a long history of semi-nomadic pastoralism to more settled agrarian lifestyles in the 1970s and 1980s and to increasingly urban-centric livelihoods and new forms of international movement since the 1990s. Unlike many other areas of Ethiopia, international migration is not (yet) a strong aspiration of young men in the district. However, for women, one international migration trajectory is increasingly viable: labor migration to the Middle East for domestic work.

This research took place between January and July 2016 with two follow-up visits in November 2016 and October 2018. The overarching goal of this research was to understand how internal and international migration patterns changed over the last four generations and what social changes drove these shifts. My methodology was three-fold. First, I surveyed three family clusters<sup>3</sup> in Wayisso, totaling 73 households and 657 individuals, to map migration trajectories to and from the Wayisso village and to evaluate what demographic characteristics are associated with various forms of (im)mobility. In June 2016, seven women from this village were working in the Middle East and three had returned.

Second, I interviewed 53 individuals who were either born in, moved to, or had left the Wayisso, balanced in terms of age, gender, and migration experiences. I asked open questions about life histories and imagined futures—to see what forms of mobility characterized their pasts, presents, and imagined futures—before asking more direct questions about migration decision-making and experiences. This helped me understand how migration abroad related to

**Figure 1. Wayisso village and neighboring towns, Adami Tulu and Ziway**

other mobility trajectories in the area and to better understand how others—family members, siblings, husbands, women who had not left but wanted to, women who had not left and never wanted to—perceive migration to the Middle East. Because I visited the research area multiple times over 3 years, I was able to meet with some twenty informants several times.

I held in-depth interviews with six of the ten women from Wayisso who had migration experience in the Middle East. To gain further insight into this migration trajectory, I interviewed another nine return migrants in two neighboring urban areas: Adami Tulu, a small market town with a population of some 15,000, and Ziway, the local boomtown with a population of 60,000 and growing. In Adami Tulu and Ziway, I also interviewed community leaders, government workers, and women working on foreign-owned flower farms in Ziway.

In total, I interviewed 84 individuals, 49 of whom were women, and 15 had migration experience in the Middle East. Further details about these 15 women are provided in the Supplementary Appendix (see the online supplementary material), and all names in the text are pseudonyms (often chosen by the

interviewees). Interviews were carried out in Afaan Oromo and Amharic with the assistance of an interpreter, Tilah Alemayehu. Rather than aiming to maximize the number of interviews with women who had migration experience, this methodological approach generated a deeper understanding of the social forces shaping migration transitions in the area, the aspirations of adolescents, the opportunities and constraints women encounter across the life course, and why some migrate to the Middle East while many others do not.

## Findings

### *Putting International Migration in Context*

It is a counter-intuitive reality that “development” in low-income countries does not alleviate the need to migrate, but tends to stimulate it (de Haas 2007). As poorer countries experience the social transformations associated with development—economic growth and diversification, the expansion of formal education, improved infrastructure and connectivity, declining mortality rates and a rising young population, and changing norms toward greater gender equality (see de Haas et al. 2020)—more people begin to leave rural places. Existing research suggests that development in the modern period often entails a “migration transition” (cf. Zelinsky 1971). What researchers can confidently claim is two-fold: As low-income countries move toward middle- and upper-income status, the share of the national population living in urban areas grows and international migration increases (see Todaro 1969; Massey 1988; Skeldon 1997; de Haas 2010; Clemens 2014). Although there are variations in the timing, nature, and degree of movement within these overarching trends, this mobility transition appears to be a remarkably common experience in “developing” countries worldwide (Skeldon 2012; Clemens and Postel 2018; Dao et al. 2018).

Ethiopia is in the midst of a migration transition. Ethiopians have always been mobile, but their mobility was primarily rural–rural. In recent decades, however, rural–urban and urban–urban migration trajectories replaced rural–rural migration as the most common modes of movement within Ethiopia (Schewel and Fransen 2018). At the same time, although Ethiopia has a long history of regional cross-border mobility due to trade, religious ties, and political conflict (Pankhurst 1965, Pankhurst 2001; Terrazas 2007), more Ethiopians are now moving as labor migrants to an increasing number of international destinations (Fransen and Kuschminder 2009; Schewel and Legass 2019). Although data from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs are incomplete, the official number of female migrants leaving for the Middle East has grown exponentially in recent decades, from 1,202 in 1999 to 187,939 in 2011–12, and is likely many more today (Fernandez 2011; Kefale and Mohammed 2015). Irregular migration is estimated to be at least double that figure, making this “one of the largest female migrations in the country’s history” (Demissie 2018, 2).

Despite rising rates of urban-centric and international movement, most Ethiopians remain in rural areas, some 84 percent as of the last national census

(CSA 2010). Young generations overwhelmingly aspire to an urban future—a consequence of rising access to formal education, growing constraints on small-holder farming, the expansion of market forces, and development policies that concentrate economic and educational opportunity in urban areas (see Abebe 2008; Camfield 2011; Tadele and Gella 2012; Mains 2013; Maurus 2016; Schewel and Fransen 2018; Schewel 2019b). Yet, for many rural youth in Ethiopia, aspirations have shifted toward urban futures faster than the opportunities to realize them. Many young people remain in rural areas, “involuntarily immobile” (Carling 2002), aspiring to leave, but lacking the capability to do so.

Since the 1990s, the consolidation of a “migration system” (Mabogunje 1970) between Ethiopia and Middle Eastern countries—a system of brokers, agencies, and networks that lowers the costs and constraints of labor migration—introduced the capability to migrate internationally to rural women. In fact, for young women living in rural places like Wayisso, migrating to the Middle East as a domestic worker can require less resources than moving to a town just 10 km away. Although migration abroad generally requires an up-front investment in a passport, health checks, and agency fees, this investment is usually paid back with a few months of work after which women earn a salary without the expenses of food and housing. Settling in an urban area without relatives, on the other hand, requires the means to continually rent housing and pay higher prices for food, goods, and services, all without the promise of significant profit from local work. A good life in the city, many explained, is only possible if you have “money in your hand.”

In Wayisso, just three generations ago, the “good life” was a rural, pastoral one; towns were seen as places for the poor. Today, the opposite is true. Wayisso is often described as a place of poverty, stagnation, and struggle, while the city offers the promise of a social and economic betterment (Schewel 2019b). At the most fundamental level, younger generations have changing expectations for the quality of their material life. What are now seen as basic needs are only found in town. As one young woman put it, “What can my generation do in Wayisso? We cannot meet our basic needs there. We don’t have anything—no electricity, not enough clean water, no transport. [ . . . ] Young people who have left may go back to Wayisso for the day, but they won’t even stay one night there.” These changing expectations transcend material needs, however. The city also offers new goods and services, technology, knowledge and higher education, and perhaps most importantly, the potential for change. Change was perceived as impossible in the village. “The life of a farmer today, even if he works hard his whole life, will look the same in twenty years,” one young man explained. The most common reason people gave for wanting to leave was “*jiruu koo jijiruuf*” in Afaan Oromo: “to change my life.”

Migration from Wayisso to the neighboring towns and cities began in the 1990s among a generation of young people who are now in their twenties and thirties. Table 1 illustrates how the nature and degree of mobility experienced by different generations changed over time. Looking in particular at changes in residence, those above the age of forty are more likely to have settled in only one

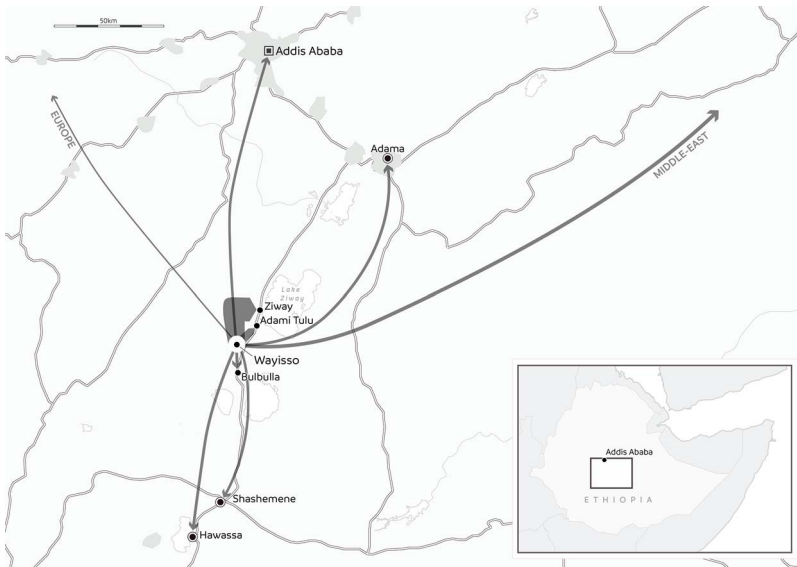
**Table 1. Number of Movements by Age Group (%)**

	Age	Number of places of residence (%)						Total	N
		1	2	3	4	5	6		
Women	0–19	72.1	20.6	6.1	0.6	0.6	0.0	100	165
	20–39	9.6	55.2	20.8	8.0	3.2	3.2	100	125
	40–59	6.5	87.0	6.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	100	46
	60+	14.3	85.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100	7
	Total	39.4	43.4	11.4	3.2	1.5	1.2	100	343
Men	0–19	75.8	21.0	3.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	100	157
	20–39	22.9	21.1	22.0	19.3	11.0	3.7	100	109
	40–59	62.5	25.0	3.1	6.3	0.0	3.1	100	32
	60+	80.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100	10
	Total	55.8	21.4	9.7	7.5	3.9	1.6	100	308
Total	0–19	73.9	20.8	4.7	0.3	0.3	0.0	100	322
	20–39	15.8	39.3	21.4	13.2	6.8	3.4	100	234
	40–59	29.5	61.5	5.1	2.6	0.0	1.3	100	78
	60+	52.9	47.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100	17
	Total	47.2	33.0	10.6	5.2	2.6	1.4	100	651

**Source:** Household survey 2016.

place (Wayisso), if male, or two places if female, due to the common practice of the woman moving to her husband's residence upon marriage. Only seven percent of individuals in that age cohort had lived in three or more places.<sup>4</sup> This reality changes dramatically for the following generation of young adults in their twenties and thirties. Forty-five percent of this cohort have resided in three or more places. Women are slightly less mobile, with thirty-five percent of women having lived in three or more places compared to fifty-six percent of men.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the patterns of out-migration from Wayisso to destinations within the district and outside of it. The majority of out-migration occurs within the district, from Wayisso to Adami Tulu or Ziway, confirming that the dominant mobility transition now taking place is the rural–urban movement of men and women to neighboring towns. Still, over half of the men born in Wayisso remain there, and although most women leave, the most common destination of women remains another rural area. Seventy-three percent of women over the age of forty, who were born in Wayisso, live in another rural area where they moved when they married, and today, the majority of women living in the Wayisso are those who moved there for marriage (83 percent). Nevertheless, alongside this long-standing practice of rural–rural marriage migration, the destinations women now pursue are expanding. More women are leaving the village for reasons other than marriage: to pursue higher levels of education and new forms of work in town, or labor migration abroad. Migration to the Middle

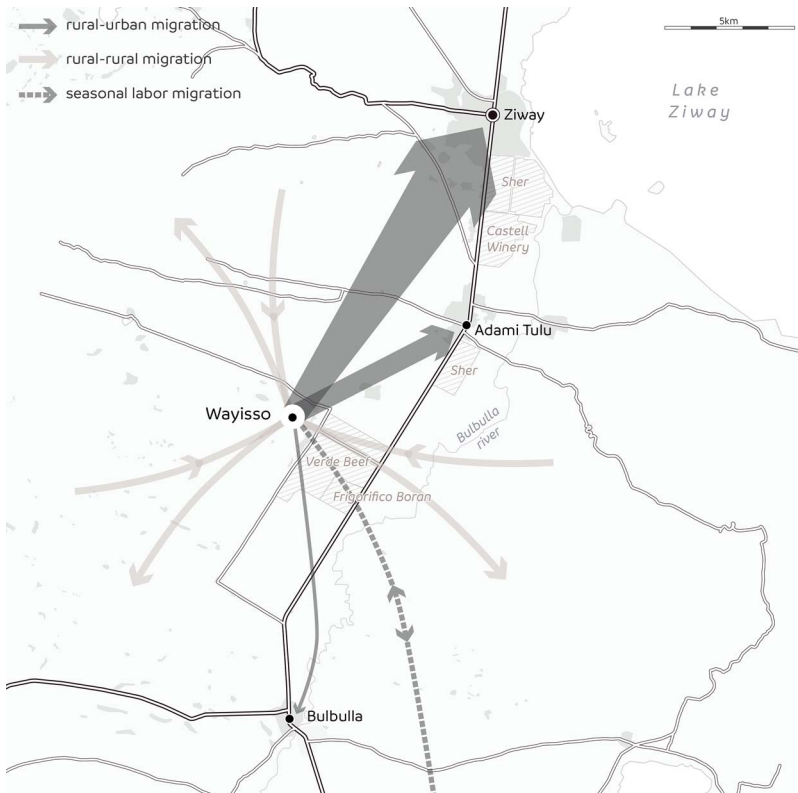
**Figure 2. Main regional and international destinations from Wayisso**

Source: Household survey 2016. Arrows show volumes of out-migration to key destinations from Wayisso.

East, then, is one migration trajectory among a diversifying set for younger generations of rural women.

### **Why Women Migrate**

Women leave to change their material and social circumstances, or as they often put it, “do something”—as opposed to getting married and living what they described as a predictable and difficult rural life, a life most framed as “not doing something.” In this district, the women who migrate to the Middle East are often in their teens or twenties with middling levels of education, usually failing to finish secondary schooling. The decision to leave falls at an important moment of transition in their life course 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 to pursue. 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 life trajectory, education, closes, and the alternative—generally marriage and early motherhood—is considered undesirable. Migration has become a way to disrupt an otherwise predictable future. Under various circumstances, young women mentioned migration to the Middle East 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.”

**Figure 3. Local patterns of migration to/from Wayisso**

Source: Household survey 2016.

### The aspiration for change

The income migrant domestic workers can earn trumps any other economic opportunity available locally to rural men and women with low levels of education. For most Wayisso households, their primary source of income comes from the harvest they glean from their land once a year. Land access ranges from one to twenty plots per households (0.25–5 ha); seventy-five percent of households have 2 ha or less. One farmer with 1 ha of land estimated that he makes a profit of some 675 USD in a good year. However, in 2016, after a period of drought, he made only 62 USD. It is in this economic context that young women and their families consider migration to the Middle East, where the profit a woman can make is more reliable and substantive than the profit to be made from rain-fed agriculture or even a small business. Women working in Beirut, for example, earn 100–150 USD per month. Another woman who returned from Dubai made over 2,300 USD in her first 18 months.

Women often framed the decision to migrate as a sacrifice and an investment for themselves and their families. As one woman put it, “First I want to do

something for my family, and the rest I will use for myself.” Shiko took that approach. Born in Wayisso, she left after finishing seventh grade. The first time she worked abroad for 2 years, and with the money she sent back, her family built a new home in Wayisso and bought cattle. She paid the 30,000 Ethiopian birr (1,400 USD) *gabara*, or dowry, for her brother to get married. After coming home and resting 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.” She has her own bank account in Ziway, and the family has not received any of her earnings. “Maybe she has a boyfriend,” her brother speculated. Whatever the case, it was clear the family saw the money as hers.

After helping their families, the most common aspiration young women expressed was to save enough money to move to town, build a home, and open their own business. Most return migrants open corner stores with basic goods: soap, water, coffee, soft drinks, biscuits, or khat, a popular stimulant—not very lucrative enterprises, but nevertheless a source of financial independence. In Ziway, new corner shops, restaurants, cafes, mobile phone stores, and hair dressers are popping up along new roads laid to accommodate the housing boom. Many of these shops have some connection to migration. One woman, who worked in Saudi Arabia for 2 years, paid some 840 USD in up-front costs to open her own restaurant. “If I didn’t go to Saudi Arabia, I could never have opened my own business,” she said.

Through the visible changes remittances bring to the lives of migrants and their families, labor migration to the Middle East enters into what geographers refer to as the “mental maps” (Fuller and Chapman 1974) of other young women, a possible pathway in their imagined futures. Often, young women who aspired to go to the Middle East would mention a neighbor, family member, or friend who was able to “change her life” and inspired them to follow a similar route. In Wayisso, one of the most obvious signs of change is the construction of new homes. In sharp contrast to the traditional one-room thatched huts, one such migrant-funded house has reflective windows, bright paint, multiple rooms and a corrugated iron roof—all conspicuous signs of discretionary income. On the inside, someone had painted “AMANEE BAATI BARAA 2010” across the wall. Amanee left for Beirut in 2015, and her family built this house with her remittances in 2017 (2010 in the Ethiopian calendar). Her mother was proud. “*Jabdu*,” she said. Her daughter is strong.

### **Constrained capabilities**

Migration abroad for domestic work is often not the first desired pathway to change. Most girls and young women would prefer to realize their aspirations through formal education and securing decent work in Ethiopia. In many ways, attending secondary and higher education is one way young women postpone the responsibilities of adulthood as they strive to develop the capabilities needed to realize the adult lives they desire. When education is no longer viable, however—whether because they fail the qualifying exams or their families no longer support

**Table 2. Educational Attainment by Age and Gender in Wayisso**

Education level	Educational attainment (%)							
	0–19 <sup>a</sup>		20–39		40–59		60+	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
None	2.0	3.1	41.6	5.5	100.0	19.4	100.0	70.0
Grades 1–4	36.6	56.3	4.0	7.3	0.0	32.3	0.0	10.0
Grades 5–8	45.5	26.0	24.0	16.5	0.0	38.7	0.0	20.0
Grades 9–10	13.9	11.5	13.6	31.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Grades 11–12	1.0	2.1	3.2	3.7	0.0	6.5	0.0	0.0
Diploma	1.0	1.0	12.0	22.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Degree	0.0	0.0	1.6	13.8	0.0	3.2	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	101	96	125	109	47	31	7	10

**Source:** Household survey 2016.

<sup>a</sup>Children 10 years and under, who have not yet begun schooling, are not included.

their schooling—adulthood is thrust upon them, often in the form of marriage or migration.

Girls in this district began to enter formal schooling in the 1990s, and since then, the rate at which girls access primary and secondary education dramatically increased. In the ATJK *woreda*, girls' school enrollment is now almost equal with that of young men, though enrollment sharply decreases for both sexes after the eighth and tenth grades, when a regional and then national examination determines whether the students can continue in the formal education track (see also table 2). If young women fail these exams—and most do, only 34 percent of pupils in the district pass the national exam according to one government official—their future options are limited. As one mother in Wayisso explained: “After the national exam at grade ten, 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 encourages those who fail the examinations to enroll in technical and vocational schooling, or further education through private institutions, but not everyone can afford to do so. “My grades were not good enough to continue to preparatory school. And to take the technical and vocational classes, it needs income, money,” one migrant explained. She left just 3 months after failing the national examination. “I didn't have anything in my hand. That's why I decided to leave.”

Mimi left after failing the national exam as a way to avoid an early marriage and the gendered restrictions that can come with it: “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.” With the help of her family, Mimi is building a house in Adami Tulu and plans to open a shop there after she finishes her contract in Beirut.

Not all young women have the chance to take the public examinations, however. Under pressure to help alleviate the poverty of their families, some drop their education to marry. In Oromo marriage tradition, the man pays a *gabara*, or dowry, to the woman’s family. *Gabara* used to be paid in cattle, but today, it is increasingly common to give cash and other consumer goods. *Gabara* can be a significant boon to households in difficult economic circumstances. This was the situation Damitu faced when she left for Saudi Arabia at the age of fourteen. “My family was not able to send me to school. Not even a government school. They needed money to survive.” Her three older brothers were in school, but as she expressed, “there is extra pressure for the girl to stop school.” Her father wanted her to marry, but Damitu knew of other girls who had gone abroad and had an idea. “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.

Few young women in Wayisso considered local work as a real alternative to marriage or migration—primarily because the kinds of work available to women with low levels of education do not promise significant change in their socioeconomic circumstances. For example, it is easy for young women to obtain salaried work on the flower farms of Agriflora Sher, a Dutch-owned company running a greenhouse complex as large as the city of Ziway. Agriflora Sher employed some eight thousand workers in 2016. However, greenhouse workers reported earning just 750–900 Ethiopian birr (35–42 USD) per month, which is barely enough to cover their living expenses in town. Melese (2017) estimates a living wage would be 2.5–3 times higher than the prevailing wages on the Ziway flower farms. As a result, locals often shun work at Sher, and the turnover among greenhouse workers is high, many of whom consider onward migration (Beyene 2014; Schewel 2018). One young woman, lamenting the low wages and sweltering heat of the greenhouses, was convinced after working just a few weeks, “Rather than burning here at Sher, it is better for me to leave Ethiopia and work in an Arab country.”

### **Why Women Stay**

The majority of young women in Wayisso and its surrounding towns, despite similar life circumstances, do not migrate to the Middle East. Understanding why so many do not can illuminate why some do. There are many different ways of “staying put” relative to labor emigration, a range of voluntary and involuntary immobility (Carling 2002; Mata-Codesal 2015). Among the voluntarily immobile, or those who do not aspire to migrate, are many girls and young women who harbor the hope that they can change their lives through achieving higher levels of education and securing decent salaried employment in Ethiopia. Women who go on to achieve tertiary levels of education rarely consider labor

emigration worth the risk or sacrifice. Yet, even among young women whose futures remain severely limited by educational or economic constraints, many still do not consider the risks worth taking. Specifically, the fear of “getting a bad family” abroad outweighed the potential income gains of a migration project.

As more women leave as labor migrants to the Middle East, stories of bad experiences make their way back. One woman from the *woreda* returned with a broken leg. Another never received her salary after working for a family for 2 years. Even if these experiences are fewer than those who remit or return with significant capital, these stories become known. Additionally, the government and international organizations have begun campaigns and community education endeavors to educate the Ethiopian population about the dangers of (particularly irregular) migration to the Middle East. Many women in town said they heard about the evils of “Arab migration” from watching television.

Women processed these risks differently. More highly educated women and those with few personal connections to labor emigration tended to magnify the risks. For example, one university graduate, who recently returned to Ziway to help with her family's business, expressed, “When women come back from the Arab countries, they are mentally disordered. Ok, for some people, maybe they were lucky and are able to improve their lives, but for the majority, it's not good.” However, those who aspired to leave and those who had migrants in their personal networks more often focused on what they saw with their own eyes: a neighbor or friend who had been able to materially improve her and her family's life, and indeed, such experiences were common. For those who aspired to leave or had left, these concrete results outweighed the negative narratives that are beginning to penetrate the imaginary about migration to the Middle East. As one aspiring migrant rationalized, “Most people find good families. Only a few end up with bad ones.”

Of course, there are also many young women who would like to migrate to the Middle East but lack the capability to do so. The poorest families in Wayisso do not have the means to work with a reliable agency, nor the social networks to help. Local and regional brokers, who facilitate contact with agencies in Addis Ababa, make different arrangements with potential migrants, depending on their desired destination and what they can afford. It is cheaper (and the earning potential lower) to go to Lebanon, for example, than to Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. In some instances, a migrant may cover all the costs required to go abroad and begin earning directly. More often, families cover the costs of the passport, health checks, and transportation to and from Addis Ababa, and the agency covers the rest: the costs of the flight and visa applications, as well as its own fee, which it then deducts from the worker's first few months' salary. In this area, families reported investing between 6,000 and 12,000 ETB (280–560 USD in 2016) in the up-front costs. There is also the option to pay nothing, but many say this is with less trustworthy agencies, and as one woman explained, “it takes a *long* time before you start earning money.”

In other cases, young women fail to secure the support of their families to leave. Many parents, aware of the risk and potential for abuse abroad, prefer that their daughters stay in Ethiopia. As one mother expressed, “Most of our

daughters would like to fly outside. I think the reason is to change their life quickly [...] But all the Arab households are not good. They may harm them. Rather than working for them, it is better if they stay here.” Husbands also discouraged migration, but for more nuanced reasons. One man in Wayisso explained that he refused to let his wife leave because he did not want her to become “abnormal” and dissatisfied with a rural life. He described how a woman from a neighboring village divorced her husband upon return and married another man in town. Another man explained that women might “get used to the lifestyle and facilities there, [and] may not like life in the rural areas.” “They may not like a rural husband,” his wife laughed.

## Discussion

Common depictions of the young Ethiopian migrant, driven to the Middle East by poverty, desperation, or ignorance, fail to capture the profound social, economic, and cultural transformations occurring across Ethiopia that are reshaping the aspirations and capabilities of young generations. The relatively recent urbanization of internal migration trajectories within Ethiopia coincides with an urbanization of imagined futures among young people—a shift in the social imaginary away from rural livelihoods toward urban, professional lifestyles. For young women, the “lives they have reason to value,” to use the language of the Capability Approach, are lives in town with a greater degree of social and economic freedom, education, and material consumption than their mothers’ generation experienced or expected.

Yet, aspirations have expanded faster than the capabilities required to realize them in Ethiopia. This is particularly problematic for a new generation with levels of education that are, as Bina Fernandez (2020, 46) put it, “‘enough’ to produce aspirations for a better life but ‘not enough’ to secure a job” (see also Mains 2013). Even among those who do find jobs in town—whether on foreign-owned flower farms (Melese 2017; Schewel 2018), in new industrial parks (Barrett and Baumann-Pauly 2019), or as domestic or sex workers in bigger cities (Grabska, Regt, and Franco 2019; de Regt and Mehrit 2020)—they quickly discover that incomes remain precariously low wage. These jobs may offer an alternative to early marriage, but they are difficult, sometimes dangerous, and rarely cover more than basic necessities. They do not promise significant *change* in one’s socioeconomic circumstances.

Labor migration to the Middle East offers the prospect of capital, that is, discretionary income that can be invested in a better future for themselves and their families. The fact that women can more easily access these opportunities abroad—due to a migration industry focused on fulfilling the demand for female domestic workers in the Middle East—disrupts a gendered hierarchy where men have always been the economic providers and power-holders. Men were the leaders of their pastoral herds; men were the first farmers; and men were the first to go to school and access new forms of salary-based work with the government or foreign companies. Throughout these livelihood transitions in

Wayisso, the realm of women remained primarily in the home. If women did work to supplement household incomes, their contributions were generally small through selling goods, like butter, at the Adami Tulu market. Migration to the Middle East, precisely because it gives access to unprecedented incomes to rural women, is challenging entrenched gendered norms and expected life course trajectories. Within just a single generation, young, often unmarried women are now providing for the education of their siblings, funding their brothers' dowries, building their families a new house in the village or constructing their own house in town. This is unprecedented change in such a short span of time.

And yet, the gendered social, cultural, and economic constraints women leave are still there when they return. Many do not realize all that they had hoped through their migration. One woman, for example, was frustrated to find that her family did not respect her wishes for how her remittances should be spent. Another return migrant discovered that the newfound respect she received from the community fizzled once her savings ran out. Many women feel compelled to leave again after failing to realize their aspirations for change after a single contract. Migration alone cannot alleviate the social ills women continue to confront. However, given these constraints, migration becomes one powerful social process, alongside others like expanding education, reconfiguring the place of women in Ethiopian society.

It is important to note that in this research area, much of this migration was technically illegal because it occurred during the 2013–18 ban on labor emigration to the Middle East. Many women left as minors, as young as fourteen. However, in practice, it had many aspects more often associated with formal channels: agencies, contracts, and passports. Further, contrary to the common perception of brokers luring young women into exploitative conditions with false promises of riches abroad, local brokers have an incentive to operate reputably. “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,” one woman explained. Other regions in Ethiopia may see even more precarious forms of irregular migration, particularly from large urban centers or in northern areas of Ethiopia where geographic proximity to countries across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden enables more dangerous smuggling routes. Because of the small geographic scope of this study, these findings do not represent the experiences of all Ethiopian women. Nevertheless, they bring to light alternative narratives and experiences that challenge a homogenizing and victimizing characterization of the young Ethiopian domestic worker in the Middle East (see also Boyden and Howard 2013; Grabska, Regt, and Franco 2019; Fernandez 2020).

From a macro-level perspective, the massive movement of labor migrants to the Middle East is one of the clearest lenses to analyze the structural injustices inherent in our globalizing world, where international labor markets are bifurcated between the transnational professional elite and the informal migrant workers that sustain it (Parreñas 2001; Sassen 2008). Yet, at the micro level, it is crucial to view the decision-making of migrant workers from the angle

of agency. Women will continue to leave Ethiopia because they are choosing what they see as the best path among a limited few to change their life circumstances. The aspiration to migrate arises in the context of a deeper transformation in the social imaginary, where young women and men alike are now looking toward the city rather than the village as the home of the good life. And a good life in the city requires capital.

## Conclusion

Existing migration frameworks often fail to capture the nature of migration in today's world, particularly precarious forms of migration where migrants knowingly subject themselves to great risk in pursuit of a better future. This is not unique to Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East. There are many other forms of precarious migration (cf. [de Haas 2021](#)) occurring around the world, as women, men, and children risk their lives to cross the Sahara, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Rio Grande. Many of these migrants defy categorization as simply “forced” or “economic”; they choose to leave while others choose to stay and yet opportunities at home are so constrained that they consider the significant risks entailed worth taking. Such forms of precarious migration are increasingly common in today's world, yet remain conceptually puzzling for migration studies and policy-making.

In the absence of conceptual tools to explain complex social phenomena, it is easier for simple narratives to structure understandings of them. In the case of migration to the Middle East, a particular narrative has taken root: of young women deceived by brokers into horrific working conditions and returning with nothing to show for it. While certainly such experiences exist and demand action, telling a one-sided story about this migration misrepresents the motivations and circumstances of many migrants. When narratives are only negative, we easily fall into the trap of presenting migrants as passive victims who will be best protected by restricting their mobility.

Applying an aspiration–capability lens to analyze the decision-making of young women reveals their agency and rationality as they navigate the significant capability constraints they face locally. Rather than helpless victims, many young women know the risks they are assuming. Some remit or return with significant assets, and their experiences expand the mental maps and migration imaginaries of other young women hoping to change their life circumstances. That recognized, to emphasize the agency and rationale of young women does not preclude an appreciation for the significant constraints under which they exercise their agency. Nor does it suggest that migration alone will alleviate the development constraints that women face more generally. It is difficult to separate the aspiration and capability to migrate from a broader set of what [Amartya Sen \(1999\)](#) calls “unfreedoms”: in the economic, educational, social and cultural realms. Girls and women often lack the capabilities required to achieve their aspirations for their educational and professional achievement in Ethiopia, to lead economically independent lives, and to choose who and when

they marry. Against the backdrop of these unfreedoms, the aspiration to migrate emerges.

## Notes

1. In one study of irregular migration from Ethiopia to the Middle East, conducted by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, they find that “a strikingly large proportion of migrants have knowledge about serious protection risks they may face, with over 80% of potential migrants (those hoping to or planning to migrate) reporting that they have heard about extortion and robbery, exhaustion, dehydration, starvation and deprivation of sleep, mild to moderate or extreme physical violence, criminal kidnapping for ransom and degrading treatment and verbal and sexual abuse.” Further, “80% of potential migrants interviewed believe that the risks have increased in prevalence and severity over the past few years.” (RMMS 2014, 5)
2. The aspiration–capability framework is similar yet distinct from the aspiration/ability model originally proposed by Carling (2002). See Carling and Schewel (2018) and Schewel (2019a) for a review.
3. The household survey was carried out with 73 households that lie within three family clusters within the Wayisso Qancerra *kebele*. A *kebele* refers to the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia, what is also known as a peasant association. The entire Wayisso Qancerra *kebele* has some 441 households (370 male households and 71 female households) according to the most recent administrative data (Source: ATJK Office of Agriculture 2010, received 11 February 2016). From the perspective of those who live in Wayisso, there are a number of *gandas* (roughly translated to village), within this *kebele*. The Wayisso *kebele* only came to be “settled” in the mid-twentieth century, and these *gandas* are named after the respective founding patriarch. Rather than designing measures to randomize the households surveyed in Wayisso, I decided to focus on all the households within three *gandas*. The main advantage of surveying all the households within these three *gandas* was that it allowed me to follow the mobility histories of larger family groups after the transition to settlement, rather than randomly selecting some households within the government-set boundaries.
4. The oldest generations were very mobile in the past, but this was a semi-nomadic movement with their herds rather than migration as a change in residence.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available at *Social Forces* online, <http://sf.oxfordjournals.org/>.

## About the Author

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