

‘The work itself has changed me’ – the experience of (rural) migrant women and girls in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Many teenage girls in Ethiopia flee the strict confines of their rural homes to seek independence and a fresh start in the big city. Life isn't easy in Addis Ababa, but they find community and resilience in one another.

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Published 25th November 2021



Internal migration has long been part of Ethiopia's history with many people, including children and adolescents, leaving their places of origin to take up seasonal work elsewhere within the country.

In the past decade, an increasing number of adolescent girls have migrated from rural areas to urban centres. This case study explores the experiences, life choices and aspirations of adolescent girls and young women who migrate internally in Ethiopia.

We focused on migrants who worked as domestic workers and sex workers in Addis Ababa, collecting data between March and September 2014. In addition to life story interviews, we held focus group discussions and did a survey of 60 migrant women and girls in the capital.

'Fed up with life at home'

The girls we interviewed had specific, frequently very personal, reasons for leaving their places of origin. Many were leaving extremely precarious economic or political situations, oppressive gender regimes, and difficult or abusive family circumstances.

Girls often felt trapped by a lack of viable economic options, dire educational prospects and constraining gender norms. There was a strong link between the decision to migrate and the negative role of step-parents, aunts and uncles, who abused the girls physically, sexually or psychologically. Rural girls who moved to Addis Ababa also described a situation where restrictive gender norms limited their mobility and their life choices.

'I was so fed up with life at home,' Elsa, 20, from the Amhara region told us.

The stories of abuse and mistreatment girls experienced in their families were shocking, especially among sex workers. This violence often took place in impoverished households, which had been marginalised due to a family crisis or economic circumstances.

A number of girls also left to avoid arranged marriages. Ethiopia has laws prohibiting

marriage under the age of 18 and social norms about marriage are changing slowly. Even so, especially in rural Ethiopia, girls as young as 12 still face the danger of forced marriage.

'I don't want people to beat me'

Most of the girls we spoke to had high expectations of their migration to Addis Ababa. They hoped to change their lives and those of their family members back home. Yet migrating also meant that they were on their own for the first time in their lives, without the protection of immediate relatives, which sometimes led to feelings of anxiety, despair and loneliness.

Today, their daily lives mainly revolve around work as they struggle to earn enough to provide for themselves and sometimes for those left behind. Employment is often exploitative and salaries too low to compensate for the high costs of living in a big city.

Most of the interviewees were disappointed about their new lives in Addis Ababa. Many women and girls found themselves in the unexpected situation of being abused and exploited as domestic workers by brokers, employers or their relatives who had promised to send them to school.

Domestic workers are frequently exposed to sexual harassment, because they work in the privacy of the home. Many domestic workers we spoke to experienced verbal and physical abuse by their employers. Meseret, 24, who migrated to Addis Ababa when she was 15, told us she was raped by her uncle, whose house she worked in. 'I was very sad and angry,' she said. 'I didn't tell my aunt, fearing that I would disrupt her marriage but also fearing that she would not believe me.' Meseret eventually decided to run away and became a sex worker.

Sex workers told us in detail about the dangers they faced at work. Those who worked out of hotels were better protected than those on the street, but the dependence on brokers and hotel owners and the harsh working environment were often a reason to shift to working on the street.



'I didn't tell my aunt, fearing that I would disrupt her marriage but also fearing that she would not believe me.'

Feven, who is 21 and came to Addis when she was 16, said: 'Many men beat us when the position and way they want 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.'

Interviewees told us the police do not support migrant girls when they are the victims crime. Sex workers in particular complained about the lack of respect, discrimination and stigma they face. When their clients are violent, the police often turn a blind eye.

'It makes you meet people and it makes you free'

One of the main sources of vulnerability of migrant girls and young women is their limited network, especially during the first years after arriving in the city.

Family relations are of utmost importance in Ethiopia and form the main source of an individual's support, both psychological and financial. Girls who have left, or lost, their parents in their places of origin are therefore extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Girls who do not have a father or brothers are more vulnerable than girls who have male relatives back home. In Ethiopia, the status and living conditions of women and girls largely depend on the presence of men. Those who have migrated to the city on their own are even more vulnerable, as the fact that they do not conform to the dominant gender order affects their social status.

The limited support from the government, community groups and international or national organisations further marginalises migrant women and girls. While they

are in dire need of support to build up a decent life in the city, most organisations focus on restricting the migration of young people and sending them back to their villages of origin.

When rural migrants can create a safe environment and build up social contacts, their vulnerabilities can be minimised. Mutual support in the form of shared resources, housing, money and food is very important, and connecting with their peers is therefore crucial. Many women and girls told us how important friendships were for them, but not all of them were equally able to build these relationships. Domestic workers were more isolated than sex workers and had fewer opportunities to build their social capital.

For some girls, migration opened the way to more defined and realistic aspirations and new life trajectories. Elsa told us: 'Before, I was not good at approaching people, but now the work itself has changed me, it forces me to communicate with people, it makes you meet people and it makes you free.'

Other girls also mentioned the importance of freedom – they valued their independence, the fact that they were economically self-reliant and could take life decisions regardless of their parents. Migrating to the city had given them maturity, and they were often proud of that.

This research was made possible with the financial support of the Swiss Network of International Studies (SNIS) and Girl Hub Ethiopia.



Visit <https://womenmigration.com/case-study/ethiopia/> for more images

Suggested further reading

de Regt, M. & Felegebirhan B. M. (2020). **Agency in constrained circumstances: Adolescent migrant girls in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.**² *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 14(3), 512-528.

Erulkar, A., Tekle-Ab M., Negussie S., & Tsehai G. (2006). **Migration and vulnerability among adolescents in slum areas of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.**³ *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(3), 361-374.

Grabska, K. de Regt, M. & Del Franco, N. (2019). **Adolescent girls' migration in the Global South: Transitions into adulthood.**⁴ New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Links

1. <https://womenmigration.com/case-study/ethiopia/>
2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2020.1768467>
3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260600805697>
4. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-00093-6>

A special thank you for making this project **possible.**

