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**Close and Yet Far; Lived Experiences of
Ethiopian Maids in Djibouti**

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Abstract

This paper explores experiences of Ethiopian female migrants working as maids in Djibouti, by considering their living and working conditions in Djiboutian households. It aims to understand their migration trajectories. Specific questions addressed in the paper include: What does living and working as a maid entail for young Ethiopian migrants in Djibouti? How do the migrants navigate around and muddle through different existing options and changing migration trajectories while trying to make sense of their new sets of social experiences? What are the major challenges they face and what strategies do they use to overcome the hitches? By moving beyond the dominant discourse stressing victimhood of migrants, this paper elicits the agency of the migrants; i.e., the creative strategies they employ while negotiating their precarious and vulnerable position.

Key Words; Ethiopian Maids, Domestic Labour, Female Migrants, Djibouti, [Ethiopia](#)

Introduction; Brief Overview of Gendered Labour Migration from Ethiopia

Over the past five decades, Ethiopia has witnessed various types of migration waves. For much of this time, political instability coupled with economic push factors have been the leading drivers of migration for hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians leaving the country.

During the imperial regime (1930-1974) migration was only possible for the few members of the privileged elites who got the opportunity to be sent overseas for further education (Bariagaber, 1997). Those who migrated during this period were mostly sponsored by the government with the hope that they would return and contribute to the modernization of the country. Significant levels of migration to countries beyond the Horn of Africa (HOA) only began after the 1974 Revolution (Getachew & Maigenet, 1991). The rule of the military regime from 1974-1991 was marked on the one hand by the growing number of migrants, mostly asylum seekers and refugees trying to escape from political instability, famine and state persecution; and, on the other, by tight restrictions on international labour migration. With the end of the regime, there was an easing of emigration regulations that stimulated a rapid growth of migration out of Ethiopia.

The FDRE (1995) Constitution in its Article 32(1) stated;

“Any Ethiopian or foreign national lawfully in Ethiopia has, within the national territory, the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his residence, as well as the freedom to leave the country at any time he wishes to.”

Hence, since the 1990s, there has been a growing exodus from the country, in particular with increasing numbers of young girls and women labour migrants flocking to the Middle East and Gulf countries where there was a rising demand for labour in low paid jobs. In 2006 there were around 800,000 to 1 million Ethiopians working abroad (Fernandez 2010). A Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs report states that during a nine month period in 2011-2012 a total of 139,120 migrants (132,176 of which or 95% females) were registered to migrate to the Middle East. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA) 187,931 migrants left the country between September 2011 and June 2013.

A report by MOLSA cited in Selamawit 2017 states that the number of labour migrants leaving Ethiopia increased six-fold over five years, from 17,393 between September 2008 and August 2009 to 104,190 between July 2012 and July 2013. According to the World Bank Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016, Ethiopia is one of Sub Saharan Africa’s top 10 remittance recipient countries with an average of 0.6 billion dollars remitted in 2015.

According to a UN DeSA 2013 report, female migrants comprise nearly half (47.8 %) of the migrants from Eastern Africa. The history of Ethiopian labour migration to the Middle East is dominated by the experience of a large number of female migrants due to the growing demand for maids in the Middle East and Gulf countries (Dessiye, 2011).

The discourse on gendered labour migration and the feminization of migration is a theme that has attracted attention of scholars from different parts of the world (E.g.

Mahler and Pessar 2006). Such notions as “care chain migration” and “mail-order brides” are concepts emphasizing the gendered trends of migration around the globe. As studies affirm, young girls and women are often considered as being appropriate for domestic care. The care chain is a concept in migration studies emphasizing the gender segmentation of the global labour market. According to this line of thought, in nations having a large ageing population and in nations with growing participation of women in the labour force, there is a growing demand for female domestic workers to be involved in the care business; this results in a phenomenon described as the “global care chain.” (Hochschild, 2000). This in most circumstances is leading to a rising demand for migrant women (Ghosh 2009). Hiring a maid in such circumstances gives local female employers the leverage to negotiate their familial and reproductive responsibilities (Yeoh and Huang 1999). Accordingly, women constitute the majority of domestic workers worldwide. According to the ILO, in 2011, there were approximately 43.6 million female domestic workers around the world (Simonovsky and Luebker 2011).

Prior studies on Ethiopian female labour migration have focused on documenting violations of rights of migrants and the trauma that migrant workers face in the Arab Gulf and Middle East countries (E.g., Beydoun 2006; RMMS 2012). Apart from numerous scholarly studies, media sources also stress the multifaceted violations of rights Ethiopian migrants face in different countries in the Middle East and Gulf states ranging from rape as a penalty for misconduct, physical violence, restriction of mobility, to homicide¹. Other studies conducted on Ethiopian migrants focus on addressing the reintegration of returnee migrants in the aftermath of the 2013 and 2016/2017 mass deportation from Saudi Arabia (E.g. Selamawit 2017; Nicolas et al 2014).

Intra-regional and intra-continental migration and the lived experiences of female migrants in neighbouring countries in the region and within the African continent has received less scholarly attention compared to the significant number of studies conducted on migrants destined for the Middle East and Gulf countries. By drawing on this discernible gap of research, this paper examines lived experiences of Ethiopian female migrants working as maids in Djibouti. The paper aims to unveil the complexities and the nuances of working as a maid in the context of transnational labour migration where by Ethiopian young girls and women are increasingly drawn into the global care labour market.

The mass deportation of thousands of Ethiopians from Saudi Arabia in 2013 resulted in the banning of labour migration to the Middle East and the Gulf states, a decision made with the intention of safeguarding the wellbeing of Ethiopian labour migrants. This official ban of legal migration, has forced Ethiopian migrants to resort to the “only alternative” way i.e., using irregular ways of migrating from Ethiopia. Djibouti

¹ For more on such violations of rights see; “Ethiopian domestic worker ‘disciplined’ by rape in Lebanon,” MigrantRights.org, April 5, 2014, available at <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2014/04/ethiopian-domestic-worker-disciplined-by-rape-in-lebanon/>. Aghaddir Ali, “Family of dead maid accepts blood money,” Gulf News, November 10, 2014.

is one of the major transit pathways used by a growing number of Ethiopian labour migrants destined for the Middle East. Djibouti's prominence as a transit pathway is noted by IRIN News (2016), which stated that of the more than 92,000 migrants, who crossed and arrived in Yemen's Red and Arabian Sea ports in 2015, 90% were Ethiopians.

Apart from its significance as a transit pathway, Djibouti city, the capital of the Republic of Djibouti, is one of the fastest growing cities in the Horn of Africa region and is sometimes labeled as the "Future Dubai of the Horn of Africa"². In this growing city, there is a thriving domestic labour market. Ethiopia's loss of access to the Red Sea upon the independence of Eritrea, and the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war has enhanced Djibouti's strategic and commercial significance for Ethiopia. The port of Djibouti handles over 95% of Ethiopia's international trade (Styan 2013). The mega infrastructural projects; growing trade and investment, export of energy and water, collaboration in regional peace and security are some aspects of the ever-deepening diplomatic ties between the two countries³.

Methodology

This paper is based on an empirical senior postdoctoral research project focusing on the migration trajectories of Ethiopian female migrants residing in Djibouti and transiting through the country. The empirical data used for this paper was collected through periodic ethnographic study conducted in Djibouti in March 2016, February-March 2017 and December 2017 using a subject-centered research approach. This paper draws on accounts of twenty-five Ethiopian maids interviewed in Djibouti Ville about their experiences, throughout the process of becoming a maid and what it is like to be a maid in Djibouti. The interviews were unstructured, open-ended questions leaving some room for the informants to contribute to the direction and flow of conversation. Furthermore, focus group discussion (FGD) was held with a group of 5 informants from different socio-economic backgrounds held. Ethical precaution was taken during the course of the fieldwork and the write up of this paper. This is mainly due to the nature of irregular migration, which tends to be sensitive theme making the research subjects vulnerable. The research was conducted and is being disseminated in a considerate way that does not disclose the identity of the informants and set of information that facilitates law enforcement agencies to plan operations. In order to protect informants, they are kept anonymous; pseudonyms are used throughout paper.

By addressing the lived experiences of Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti, this paper makes multiple contributions. First, it contributes to academic discussions on gendered labour migration and feminization of migration by adding the perspective of

² For more on this see; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3094767/Horn-Africas-Djibouti-dreams-new-Dubai.html>.

³ Political figures from both countries emphasize the growing diplomatic relationship between the two countries as it can be inferred from the statements of the Djiboutian Ambassador to Ethiopia, Mohamed Idris Farah; "the rail is like an umbilical cord; electricity, the heart; and water is blood." (Nurye Y. 2014). During a visit to Djibouti, the Ethiopian Prime Minister on his part made a related remark; "Any foreign aggression or assault aimed at undermining the basic national interest of Djibouti and its people would simply get on the nerves of Ethiopia." (Amen, T. 2015).

Ethiopian female migrants. Secondly, it is an empirical study contributing to the discussions on intra-regional migration, a theme neglected by most studies conducted on Ethiopian migrants. In addition to bridging the existing gap, the study suggests further research questions for future researchers. Furthermore, the findings of the research will be informative for state and non-state actors working on migration and hence contributes to policy frameworks in the long run.

Socio-Economic Profile of Informants and the Multifaceted Factors Informing their Decisions to Migrate

Although official statistics are not available, according to Ethiopian Community Association in Djibouti, thousands of Ethiopians reside in Djibouti of which the majority is thought to be female⁴. There are some neighbourhoods in Djibouti city well known for the settlement of significant number of Ethiopian migrants where there are businesses owned by Ethiopians; hotels, restaurants, bars and nightclubs. These neighbourhoods include; Arhiba, Djibouti Foq, Eron, place Menelike, Quartier1- 4, and Pk 12.

The study on Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti shows the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of migrants. According to the information collected during the fieldwork, most of the female migrants come from two areas in Ethiopia: Dire Dawa (in Eastern Ethiopia) and Wollo (in Northerneastern Ethiopia). These are two places in Ethiopia well known for their long history of out-migration (Baker 2001, Baker 2012, RMMS 2014). Dire Dawa and Bati, towns are the major transit points in Ethiopia for migrants destined to Djibouti starting their journey from Dire Dawa and Wollo areas respectively.

There are numerous smugglers and undocumented private agencies operating in both towns. Bati and Dire Dawa are well positioned on the way to two Djiboutian border towns of Guelilé and Galafi posts. Guelilé is a border post located 10 kilometers from Ali Sabieh city, the second largest Djiboutian city in terms of population. This post is geographically the closest border to Ethiopia through which the largest majority of Ethiopian migrants arrive. The Galafi post is located in Dihkil region at a distance of 197 km from Djibouti Ville. It is an administrative post located on the border between Djibouti and Ethiopia on the road that connects the two countries since 1991. This is described as the shortest path to get to Djibouti Ville, less expensive, and with lower risks to be incurred.

According to the findings of the author's ongoing senior postdoctoral research, The profile of migrants coming from the Bati area and Dire Dawa shows that the population are majority Muslims versus mixed religious background, majority rural migrants versus migrants originating from urban areas, and migrants with different linguistic competence.

The twenty-five informants interviewed during the fieldwork as presented in the following table come from different socio economic backgrounds;

⁴ Interview with Mr Ashanfi, the head of Ethiopian Community Association in Djibouti.

Socio-Economic Variables	Number of Informants	Percentage
Age		
15-20	3	12
20-25	11	44
26-30	7	28
31-35	3	12
31-40	1	4
Marital Status		
Single	7	28
Married	9	36
Widowed	3	12
Divorced	6	24
Education		
No education	8	32
Primary level	9	36
Secondary level	4	16
High school graduate	2	8
Vocational	2	8
Prior Occupation		
Never worked before	5	20
Maid	7	28
Janitor in government office	1	4
Hair Salon	1	4
Cleaning in private clinic	1	4
Farmer	10	40
Ethnic Background		
Amhara	9	36
Argoba	2	8
Gurage	1	4
Oromo	13	52
Places of origin		
Bati town	5	20
Kebles in Bati Woreda	9	36
Ataye	2	8
Kemisse	2	8
Dire Dawa	2	8
Rural villages surrounding Dire Dawa	5	20

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Informants

As can be seen from the table above, a majority of the respondents are in the prime of their reproductive lives. Some informants have left families including young children behind. For the majority of the informants, 23/25 (92%) moving to Djibouti is their first migration experience ever.

Even though few of the informants (2/25, 8%) as presented in the data above completed high school, (8, 32%) did not have any formal education. The informants, especially those coming from Dire Dawa and Bati areas, are in most circumstances linguistically adept, in most circumstances being bilingual; speaking Somali and Afar respectively. Migrants coming from the Dire Dawa area by and large speak two to three languages namely; Amharic (4 out of 7), Oromo (6 out of 7) and Somali (4 out of 7). For the 14 migrants coming from Bati town and its surrounding *kebele* 9 spoke Amharic, 13 spoke Oromo while 7 spoke Afar. Of the three coming from Kemisse (2

spoke Amharic while all 3 spoke Oromo. The 2 migrants from Ataye town spoke Amharic and Argobba languages.

A local Somali key informant who had experience in hiring Ethiopian maids for over two decades mentioned her experience and that of her friends as:

Language has never been a major issue for the maids coming from Ethiopia. Even in few circumstances when they fail to speak one of the local Djiboutian languages upon arrival [Somali or Afar], they tend to learn the languages fairly quickly (Nasiriya 12 Dec 2017).

Even though the study includes information on the long history of Ethiopians migration to Djibouti, this is a phenomenon described by local Djiboutian interviewed as being a phenomenon on the rise within the last decade. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of Djibouti's rising attraction both as a transit and destination country for Ethiopian female migrants, accounts of Ethiopian informants are juxtaposed with the account of local informants interviewed in the course of the study. As a way of getting an insight into this point, one of the questions raised to informants during interviews and FGDs was what factors they took into consideration to migrate to Djibouti.

The first factor raised by most informants (23, i.e., 92%) as being the leading force behind their migration plans was unemployment in Ethiopia. Being the second most populous nation in Sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia registers one of the highest birth and unemployment rates in the continent. The agrarian economy that supports over 85% of the overall population is threatened by massive growth of population. Furthermore, the country has a track record of very high levels of youth unemployment with young girls and women the least likely to be employed; "women make up approximately 52 percent of the youth labour force [...] whereby 67 percent of all unemployed youth were women" Broussard and Tekleselassie (2012; 25). Hence, in most circumstances, unemployed young boys and girls become inexhaustible pools of candidates for exile.

The second point raised by Ethiopian informants relates to the strategic location of Djibouti, which becomes a first destination for migrants who intend to move on to the Middle East and the Gulf States. Ten informants (40%) mentioned the fact that they considered this factor from the outset. For this group of informants, Djibouti is a jumping board to get to countries where working conditions are considered to be "better":

I have never thought of spending such a long time in Djibouti. My intention was traveling to Saudi Arabia via Yemen. I had to choose between Somaliland and Djibouti for my planned trip to Saudi Arabia. I heard several petrifying stories how deadly the route via Somaliland is. That was how I ended up choosing the route via Djibouti, which is relatively better. However, upon arriving here, the civil war in Yemen got worse making the travel to Saudi Arabia a deadly one. That is how, I am trapped in Djibouti (Ababa; Djibouti City; Dec 11, 2017).

The third thought-provoking point raised by informants relates to the intention of gaining basic cooking and cleaning skills and linguistic competences while working

in Djibouti. Three informants (12%) mentioned this being a key factor they took into consideration while travelling to Djibouti. These informants considered the time spent in Djibouti as “a time invested in acquiring skills that help for securing a better future”. In some cases, the migrants intentionally delayed their stay in Djibouti to gain basic cooking and cleaning skills required for getting better employment opportunities in Saudi Arabia.

I was born and raised in a rural village located 50 km from Bati town. We did not have access to electricity let alone sophisticated cooking appliances they have over here. People mention about abuses Ethiopian maids face in the Arab Gulf states for not knowing how to cook, clean and iron clothes. By coming to Djibouti, I thought that a one year stay in Djibouti would help me in two ways: 1) Saving the money to pay for travelling from Djibouti to Saudi Arabia, and furthermore 2) to acquire the basic and necessary skills to help me in having better opportunities in Saudi Arabia. I am staying here with the mission of familiarizing myself with the working environment, and to get some basic skills before moving to Saudi Arabia (Hayat; February 21,2017).

The fourth factor raised by thirteen informants (52%) relates to the better salaries to be earned in Djibouti than in Ethiopia. The average wage for a maid in Ethiopia in an upper-class household is a maximum of 2000 Ethiopian *birr* (circa 65 USD) per month. This is only just over half the minimum wage for a maid working in Djiboutian lower middle-class family, which is 17,000 DJF, circa 3150 Ethiopian *birr*, or 112 USD. However, the pay is still higher in Djiboutian upper-class households with an average of 25,000-30000 DJF circa 143-170 USD. This is described as being one of the major pull factors for Ethiopian maids who are looking at Djibouti as a potential destination country instead of the previous popular destinations in the Middle East and Gulf countries that are becoming more restricted.

The fifth factor that came out clearly during analysis of the data on the profile of migrants relates to the strong culture of migration existing at the migrants' places of origin. In Wollo and Dire Dawa, migration is associated with personal, social and material success; here, migration has become the norm rather than the exception. One of the main reasons for out-migration from Wollo is partly related to the long history of drought affecting the area leading to the departure of thousands (Baker 2001). Dire Dawa has a long history of contraband trade. It is one of the main/central stations of the Ethio-Djibouti railway which was constructed between 1897 and 1912 in a partnership between the colony of French Somaliland and the Ethiopian empire. The railway was a source of livelihood for hundreds of contraband traders who smuggled cheap goods by train. Long-standing cross border ties between the two countries was one of the leading factors that facilitated migration of people and goods.

In order to fully grasp the reasons accounting for out-migration of Ethiopian maids to Djibouti, it is important to comprehend the opinions and perceptions of the receiving community i.e., local Djiboutians. A local key informant who has done research on human trafficking in Djibouti explains the migration of Ethiopian maids to Djibouti and the rise in the number of this group of migrants as a phenomenon partly relating to the economic development of Djibouti and the resultant increase in demand for domestic maids:

The speedy urbanization of Djibouti and its population on the one hand has led to the rise in the number of female working forces. Since the end of the 1990s following the large-scale sedentarization of the nomadic population, there was a shift in lifestyle of Djiboutians, leading the Republic of Djibouti to face shortage of labour forces (Amina; Djibouti; 2.20.2017).

Prior to the massive sedentarization of Djiboutian households, families rarely relied on domestic workers as in most circumstances family co-residents tended to provide labour support. Until the end of the 1970s, Djiboutian households mostly relied on family labour and used a domestic support system based on younger sisters or nieces offering a pool of labour in a household. “But this has gradually changed with the growing sedentary life style which ultimately led to individualization” (Ibid; February 21,2017).

The second factor raised by local informants relates to the active engagement of Djiboutian women in the national labour force: an element that contributed to the growing need for foreign domestic workers to be engaged in the care business. According to the World Bank, about 42 per cent of Djiboutian women are participating in the labour force, which is a large proportion compared to its neighbouring countries in the Horn of Africa⁵. With such change in lifestyle, migrant women of Ethiopian and Somali origin became the ones often engaged in the domestic care business.

The third factor raised by the group of local informants relates to a cultural factors and the stereotype attached to working as a maid. When asked about the potential pull factors for Ethiopian maids to Djibouti, three local Djiboutian informants mentioned the deep-seated disregard of local Djiboutian women to engaging in domestic work specially being employed as a maid in another Djiboutian household. “Such jobs as cleaning cooking and caring for kids are considered by local Djiboutian women mostly as humiliating jobs Djiboutian women are thus reluctant to take up paid domestic labour ” (FGD; December 20,2017; Djibouti).

Last but not least, Djiboutian informants as well as Ethiopian informants stressed the stereotypes about Ethiopian maids. During the research, I was confronted with ambivalent perceptions about the Ethiopian migrant maids. On the one hand, they are perceived as outsiders, while on the other hand, they are considered to be familiar to the local life:

Girls from Ethiopia are perceived to be culturally kindred and there is a stereotype instilled that maids from Ethiopia are ‘docile,’ ‘obedient,’ ‘hard working’ and ‘easier to handle’ (Mohamed Nuri; December 20,2017).

As presented above, multifaceted factors ranging from the regional geopolitical context, socio-spatial networks, socio-cultural values, to economic factors account for the rise in the number of Ethiopian female migrants migrating to Djibouti. The interplay between different factors (e.g. structural and individual) affects the decision-making process of Ethiopian maids destined to Djibouti. However, one cannot make a

⁵ For more on this see; <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS> .

definitive ranking of these factors influencing the decision to move to Djibouti, as the factors tend to be very subjective.

Living and Working Conditions of Ethiopian Maids in Djibouti

Most of the Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti work as maids, nannies, janitors, and sex workers. Sex work is a lucrative business in Djibouti where there are significant number of foreign military personnel, port operators, heavy truck drivers and where there is high injection of global finance. The scope of this paper is however limited to migrants working as maids in Djiboutian households.

As a way of giving an insight into the everyday lives of the migrants in Djibouti, this section presents data on the different modalities of employment, the various types of work they engage in, their living arrangements, major challenges faced, different strategies used by migrants to overcome the challenges, and the different forms of networking existing among the migrant workers.

Different Modalities of Employment and Existing Job Opportunities

The major types of jobs available for irregular female Ethiopian migrants in Djiboutian households include: *Tsidat* (cleaning) *Migib sira* (cooking), *lij tibeka* (baby-sitting), and what is locally referred to as “complete” (where a maid has to do all the aforementioned tasks alone) (all of these terms are Amharic words). *Tsidat* is a generic term referring in most cases to cleaning a house, laundering and ironing.

Both local informants and Ethiopian migrants who have resided in Djibouti for decades mentioned that they thought working conditions for Ethiopian maids in Djibouti had improved over time. They all emphasized the change in working arrangements from a situation where most migrant workers were in charge of complete household duties to the improved situation today where the complete work arrangement has become an exception than the rule. There is at least one maid in an average middle class Djiboutian family. In upper class Djiboutian families, it is common to find two to three domestic helpers in charge of cooking, cleaning and childcare. During the fieldwork, I came across a number of Djiboutian middle-class households employing two maids who were in charge of cleaning and cooking.

Undocumented Ethiopian maids often get employment with local Djiboutian households. Expatriates, especially high-ranking diplomats and those working for international organizations, tend to employ local and migrant workers with valid residence and work permits. The two major types of employment arrangement for undocumented irregular migrants include either working as a live-out or live-in maid. The former, known as *Weraj* or *tememalsh* (based on the Amharic root term *memelas*, literally meaning to commute between places), is an arrangement in which the maids are employed on a live-out basis and are not expected to stay with their employers. The average working hours for this group of maids is from 7am until 6pm.

The second arrangement is a live-in work arrangement whereby maids are expected to stay with their employers. In the latter case, they are entitled to have a day off twice a month, which in most cases falls on Thursdays (*Khamis*). Working weekdays in

Djibouti are from Sunday- Thursday. Friday is the main weekly day off in the country but for maids, their day off runs from Thursday morning to Friday Morning. In a few cases, they might have each Thursday off. Most of the informants, 14 out of 25 (56%), were live-in maids while the remaining 44 % were live- out workers. As the live-in maids stayed with the family of their employers, their mobility was often restricted, apart from the weekly day off when they were allowed to leave the house of their employers.

During focus group discussions with the workers, one of the major points raised was the strong preference for the live-out working arrangements. The main reason given was the fact that such an arrangement often gives the maids the freedom to network and access information on a daily basis. During an in-depth interview with a key informant Kabira mentioned;

I have worked as a live- in maid for eighteen months. The problem with that arrangement was that I am almost by myself for the two weeks and the only time when I used to get the chance to meet friends was during the bimonthly *Khamis* (Thursday) offs. The bi-monthly break days are not enough to visit my friends, make a phone call to my family back home, buy some items I need like hair food, sanitary pads, soap etc. and get my hair done. At the end of the day that was supposed to be a resting day, I feel completely exhausted and my Thursdays did not sound as day offs at all (Kabira Feb 21, 2016).

Other informants framed their preference for the *temamalelsh* arrangement being due to the work burden as an account of Asima indicates;

Being around the house of an employer often tempts the employers to order their maids from dawn to dusk. In a household where they have cleaners, cleaners are not often expected to stay with a family and their employment is thus on *tememlalsh* bases. They are expected to spend few hours at their work place, usually between 6-7 hours a day. However, a cook who is a live-in maid will have to bear the burden of cooking meals, cleaning dishes and the house after serving dinner. In most circumstances, they are the ones to wake up first and to go to bed late in the evening at times after midnight.

Almost all informants (including the live-in maids) emphasized their strong preference for working as a live-out maid making the point that they have more agency over their lives and are less controlled by their employers⁶.

The size of the family is one essential point taken into consideration while looking for a job. It is further the key negotiation grounds for salary and living arrangements. Even though the working arrangements might involve being assigned to a specific job, the size of the family defines the nature and intensity of duties. Hence, the size of the family is one of the fundamental issues for the maids. As shown above, the salary that young girls and women earn working as a maid in Djibouti is much larger than what they earn in Ethiopia. There is a rise in the pay scale that has almost doubled in

⁶ This resonates to the findings of De Regt (2008) in her work on Filipino workers in Yemen.

the past five years. A maid working in Djiboutian lower middle-class family with an average 4 family members earns 112 USD. As the size of the family increases the salary rises as well.

The other point taken into consideration in negotiating salary is the previous work experience that one has, either in Ethiopia or Djibouti. The more experienced a maid is, the more power she has to negotiate the size of her salary and also the more chance she has to negotiate on the living arrangements.

Major Challenges

Despite the aforementioned point on the reputation of Djibouti in offering a relatively “decent” working environment for migrant domestic workers, the lives of migrant girls in Djibouti are not without risks.

The first point raised by all informants is the deep-seated fear of “rough” (random Police surveillance). Strict immigration policies and the related control of non-Djiboutian residents often force the migrants to look for clandestine ways of living in Djibouti city. As most informants mention, undocumented migrant girls who get arrested by the police are detained unless they pay the police either with money or sex. Police violence is described as being one of the leading factors for considering emigration further from Djibouti. Hasna shares her experience as;

Even though rough is more common for male Ethiopian migrants than females, there are many occasions when our girl friends have been detained by the police. I was detained once when I was going for my monthly off. Two policemen stopped me and started talking to me in French. When they realized that I was not speaking French, they switched to Somali. This is the major strategy local policemen use to find out if one is a migrant or a local. Finally, one of them informed me in a broken Amharic that I had only two options; either giving them money for *khat*, or being sent to Negadiras detention center. I had to give them all that I had in my hand, my two months salary. On that day I was going to the *hawala* [money transfer center] to send the money back home to pay for my children’s school tuition fees. That was one of the most terrible experiences I had in my entire life. This happens to a number of my friends. (Hasna Djibouti February 2017).

Ethiopian maids in Djibouti often live and work in individual households with informal off-the-record work arrangements. While they are visible to the community they tend to be invisible to the state. Most informants had similar stories of being stopped by the police and said that in most circumstances they get away by bribing the police. This challenge is said to be worse for live out migrants who are commuting on a daily basis whereby traveling back home at night and going to work early in the morning doubles the challenge.

The second major issue informants mentioned relates to the high cost of living in Djibouti. Djibouti is one of the most expensive countries in the Horn of Africa region, where the cost of accommodation and cost of living is described as rising steeply. This high cost of living often makes it impossible for migrants to save much, if any,

of their hard-earned money. Most informants mentioned that they borrowed money to pay for their travels to Djibouti and those expenses were quite hefty. Thus most of their wages in the first 2-4 months are spent on paying back their debts. The rest of the money they earn is often remitted back home to the family.

The work burden is the third point raised by maids, especially the live-in maids. Informants mentioned conditions that where they have to work for a large family even working on a specific task might not necessarily entail having fewer duties. Some informants (6 out of 25) raised the point of being over exploited, as they might have to work long hours without breaks. Most informants mentioned that their work starts very early in the morning: around 5 AM in households where there are young children going to school or in households where there are working couples that have to leave home early.

My day starts at 4:45am when I have to wake up wash myself and start preparing breakfast and snack box for the three kids going to school. Then I have to clean the house that is a two-story building. I have to make the beds, clean the rooms and the entire compound. I have to rush to make lunch ready before the couple comes back home around 1pm for lunch. The cleaning goes on after serving lunch. I will have to make dinner ready before 7.30pm. In case there are clothes to be washed, I have to find and make time between lunch and cooking dinner. After cooking and serving dinner, I will have to clean the dishes and the kitchen before going to bed. Usually my day ends almost by midnight (Freiha December 23,2017).

The fourth point is raised by a group of five informants who mentioned the cultural shock they encountered upon arrival. They pointed out how every aspect of their new lives appeared to be strange, ranging from the language, the household appliances, the religion, the culture and the overall working and living environment. They mentioned the language barrier they faced as making them feel distressed and causing some practical difficulties, especially when it comes to receiving instructions. For the large group of informants from rural parts of Ethiopia, Djibouti city is described as being a symbol of modernity. Some of the informants mentioned that in the first year of their stay in Djibouti they often suffered from emotional distress for missing home and the family they left behind.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, during my research in Djibouti, I have not come across an informant mentioning severe abuse in Djiboutian household unlike accounts of prior studies focusing on the Middle East and Gulf countries. During an FGD an informant discussed this point as;

The relatively decent treatment of Ethiopian maids in Djibouti compared to the slave-lord relationship we hear happening in the Middle East, is due to the exposure of Djiboutians to '*other types*' of Ethiopians beyond the likes of us, the maids. The Djiboutian are more exposed to wealthy Ethiopians who own big businesses in Djibouti (who are) employing local Djiboutian in their own country. An average Djiboutian passing by Djibouti port on a daily basis comes across dozens of trucks loaded with Ethiopian imported goods. Furthermore, most of the food they eat here comes from Ethiopia. They spend their summer holidays in Ethiopia running away from the severe heat in

Djibouti. So Ethiopia is heaven for them. I think knowing about the other side of the country and other types of Ethiopians shaped the way they deal with us (Tgisti, Dec 23,2017).

As Tigist was making the point other FGD participants were all nodding their heads as a way of affirming her points.

Responding to Multifaceted Challenges; Values of Network and Social Capital

This section discusses how networks offer some viable solutions to the aforementioned and more challenges migrant workers face. Migrant network theory stipulates that strong ties among migrants facilitates the very process of migration and provides support to migrants upon arrival in their respective places of destination (Massey et al., 1993). Anderson (2010) further elucidates this point by mentioning how a network of migrants is a key resource for gaining access to information, and it often helps them reduce their dependency on their employers. Apart from the exchange of information, the networks migrants have with each other build becomes a foundation for their social support system: a form of social capital that they often draw on (De Haas, 2007). As Putnam (2000), postulates social capital exists at a group and individual level and it is an entity that can be inspected through solidarity and reproduction of the group requiring density or closure of social networks.

Emigration to Djibouti is by and large a phenomenon impacted by networks affecting the different stages of the migration process. The impact identified in this study ranges from the flow of information, effects on decision-making to migrate, support received in the form of reception and offering accommodation, to job placement, and so forth. The value of the networks ranges from the support offered in sharing information about the working and living environment in Djibouti to information regarding various ways to get to Djibouti. 18 informants (72%) have mentioned that prior to their arrival they obtained information about Djibouti from their friends, and family members who were already living in Djibouti. Of this, 68% mentioned that they also got initial support upon arrival from their networks. The support provided relates to the reception of the migrants upon arrival and further help in finding jobs.

One of the major challenges pertaining to living in Djibouti as mentioned above is the high cost of accommodation. As a way of dealing with the high cost of living, migrant workers often resort to co-habitation, a tradition called *debal* in Amharic. As a way of managing the heavy rental expenses, the migrants cohabit in highly impoverished parts of the city such as Arhbia. Ahriba is the major slum in Djibouti city, a neighbourhood where migrants reside in tiny shacks made of cardboard, wood and metal junk. Ahriba hosts thousands of Ethiopian transit migrants, smugglers and brokers facilitating the employment of migrants in Djibouti city and further migration of Ethiopian migrants to the Middle East. This is a neighbourhood with huge problems of sanitation, feeble infrastructure and basic facilities such as electricity and water. Quartier 2 is a neighbourhood in Djibouti city where there are numerous small bars with large numbers of Ethiopian sex workers. An average rental for a room in Arhiba and Quartier 2 for a small room of 4 x 5 m² is on average 12,000 DJF a month, circa 68 Euros. Such a small room accommodates on average six migrant women who contribute between 2000- 3000 DJF a month to the Ethiopian host (*bale bet*). This fee covers the monthly rental for the host who in most circumstances makes

some profit beyond covering her basic monthly rental. Social networks play an important great role in locating a *debal* and a potential host. Hence, the social network is of great value in finding a place to stay in as much as it contributes to finding a job.

The *bale bets* are often Ethiopian women with legal residence permits in Djibouti who rent out a place that they sublet to the maids as a resting place on their day off. These are mostly women who have lived in Djibouti for a longer time (in some cases over two decades), many of whom are married to local Djiboutian men, mostly of Afar origin. The networks established by the migrants and friends they make often become major sources of information and support.

One of the other major challenges presented above is related to the illegal migration status of the migrant workers. The only way for a migrant worker to have legal protection from random police surveillance is by owning the *Carte de séjour temporaire*, the temporary residents' card that would allow them to stay in Djibouti. This is a card which is valid for a year and that can be renewed on an annual basis. According to the information gathered from informants, for those who see a long future for themselves in Djibouti or staying for a longer period of time, securing the residence permit card is essential. There are different strategies used by the migrants to secure the card. One of the various mechanisms employed includes using the Afar traditional indigenization practice of the *Fiqmatagle* and through marriage. *Fiqmatagle* is an Afar customary institution of assimilating foreigners. This is the type of adoption whereby a person requests the adopting family to accept them for lifelong fostering. It is practiced with the non-Afar ethnic groups. Through this tradition, a non-Afar is adopted by an Afar clan through helping him/her to fully integrate into Afar culture and to be identified as an Afar. This will allow the person to obtain a local residence card and Djiboutian citizenship upon confirmation of the local elders.

Securing a marriage certificate with a Djiboutian citizen is another mechanism of securing the residence card. For both arrangements the migrants pay the person facilitating the process of getting the card around 60000 DJF circa 340 Euro which is an average salary for 2.5 months of working as a maid in Djiboutian household.

The third challenge pertaining to the work burden is often solved through looking for better jobs and changing jobs for which having a social network is vital. For live-in domestic workers, networks with live-out migrants are quite essential in securing better jobs. Unlike the common practice of *kafala* sponsorship system practiced in the Middle East and Gulf region, there is no such system in place in Djibouti to tie migrants to their employers and prevent them from running away or seeking alternative employment. The weekly day off serves as an occasion for social interaction, and building up friendship. Furthermore, on their days off, they exchange information about the job market; the different ways of securing a valid residence permit or further mobility and support for each other.

There is vibrant customary self-help association of Ethiopian migrants in Djibouti. The *idir /kire* is one such network where migrants get basic information. *Idir/Kire* is a type of network that is different from informal networks often based on friendship and acquaintances. It is a traditional association whereby members meet on occasions

such as when members lose their loved ones or fall sick. The *Kire* is often formed among neighbourhoods where the migrants originally come from. Membership of a *kire* in Djibouti, unlike the case in Ethiopia, does not require a long-term residence in Djibouti.

For most migrant workers coming here Djibouti is not considered as a destination. They might stay here for a year or two. We also have members who have been in the *kire* for over 10 years. The structure of the *kire* here is quite flexible which allows membership for those who pay the monthly fee of 500 Djf (2.8 Euro) (Nigat 12 December 2017).

This is a customary institution, which offers migrants the chance and the platform to get together and exchange information. On such gatherings the migrants exchange information about accommodation, finding jobs and for those interested in further migration to Saudi Arabia via Yemen it can be a platform to meet smugglers and other transit migrants. Both the review of prior studies conducted on Ethiopian female migrants in the Middle East and Gulf states (E.g. Fernandez and Deregt 2014, De Beydounyn 2006) and the information gathered during my interview with returnee migrants in Addis Ababa clearly show, *kire/idir* is not popular among migrant workers in Saudi Arabia as it is in Djibouti. One potential factor might be the restricted freedom of mobility in the Middle East that apparently affects the level of interaction among migrant workers. There is a difference in degree of social networks that domestic workers build depending on the kind of work arrangements they have. Hence, they have different sources of social capital they draw on based on the contacts they make of co-residence, working in the same neighbourhood or informal association or networks of people from the same places of origin as presented above.

Conclusion

The growing labour market for foreign domestic care workers in Djibouti relates by and large to a social and gendered construction of historically dated domestic work in the country and in the Horn of Africa region at large. Moreover, the regional geopolitical context has also shaped the influx of labour migrants into Djibouti. With the loss of Ethiopian use of Eritrean ports upon the independence of Eritrea in 1993 and more so since the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Djibouti has come to handle more than ninety per cent of Ethiopia's international trade. Associated with these growing economic and diplomatic ties between Ethiopia and Djibouti are improved transport networks, further enhancing Djibouti's role as a transit center for further migration to the Gulf and beyond. The local context in Djibouti has also provided a fertile ground for meeting the supply and demand for domestic care service. Reflecting the wider Somali and Afar culture, paid domestic work is not an occupation that Djiboutian women consider. As such, a domestic worker is, by default, a foreigner. Economic growth in Djibouti is also marked by socio-economic mobility of Djiboutian women who are increasingly absorbed into the skilled labour market. Economic growth and social mobility has enabled Djiboutian women to hire domestic workers. The intersectional identity of Ethiopian maids - being an outsider and a woman - fits to the mainstream Djiboutian labour market precept and the local socio-cultural view of gendered care. The push for local women to join the labour force has created an influx of migrants - women to take over in the domestic realm. Hence, the structural inequality inherent in care work and the stereotypes attached to

it encourage the tradition of employing a maid that is from a different country.

Socio cultural proximity plays a significant role in migration decisions and in improving working and living conditions of migrant workers. Migrants' better language skill is intertwined with better social outcomes for migrants. The selection of culturally similar destination countries is a factor that boosts the returns to human capital and improves the chances of integration. Acquiring skills in the language of the destination country (i.e., Somali language) while growing up in Dire Dawa or Wolo areas is a human capital investment for migrants destined to Djibouti. Many Ethiopians from Dire Dawa are multilingual, with competency in the Somali language. Furthermore, the cultural proximity, historical and contemporary ties between Djibouti and Ethiopia, unlike the case of the Gulf countries lowers the potential migration costs.

Some first generation Ethiopian migrants in Djibouti have become so well established that they provide job opportunities for recent migrants. Well-established migrants also provide various social protections to migrants ranging from provision of basic information, hosting migrants, providing financial support, to facilitating their employment. There is a strong sense of "filial" responsibility that stresses that a well-established migrant is expected to support migrants who are in desperate situation seeking help.

The flexibility of transnational customary self-help institutions such as Idir/kire also facilitate the process of network formation and development, an element that has existed for generations within the Ethiopian migrant community in not so far off places such as Djibouti. It is not mere geographical proximity that enables institutional continuity. It is also related to the degree of freedom of movement and mobility a host country allows, which in turn determines the degree and quality of social interaction. There is a greater freedom of movement and lesser control over migrants than in the Gulf where similar social support institutions are rare.

To sum up, migrant women and girls in Djibouti have very limited sources of protection as there are no legal frameworks that protect the rights of foreign undocumented foreign domestic workers there. Most of the Ethiopian maids in Djibouti are undocumented migrants. Moreover, the national labour law does not protect domestic labour. The intricacies of the living and working conditions of these undocumented migrant workers are rarely documented. This is partly due to the fact that migration policies mainly focus on asylum seekers and refugees.

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