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**ETHIOPIAN FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES**

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Acronyms

ETB	Ethiopian Birr
ETV	Ethiopian Television
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MDGs	Millenium Development Goals
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
pera	Private Employment Agency
SNNP	Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Glossary

Burqa: A black full-length dress worn by Muslim women.

Gabi: A traditionally- woven, thick, cotton-made clothing worn by both men and women in Ethiopia.

Hajj and umra: Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

Netela: A light-weight, traditionally-woven, cotton made clothing worn by Ethiopian women.

Ramadan: In Islamic calendar, the holiest month of the year whereby Muslims fast from dawn till dusk.

Salat: Religious prostration, one of the five pillars of Islam.

Abstract

In the past two decades Ethiopian women have migrated to Middle Eastern Arab countries in large numbers. The vast majority of the women migrate for domestic employment purposes. The last fifteen years, in particular, have seen private employment agencies play a significant role in the migration of Ethiopian women. The women are mostly live-in domestic workers, that is, they live in the households in which they are employed. Such isolation, unless mitigated otherwise, leads the women to experience loneliness and anxiety. In addition, it makes the women vulnerable to potentially abusive circumstances. This thesis explores the overall situation of female migrants to the Middle East. It explores the roles played by individual brokers and private employment agencies in facilitating the women's migration. Based on ethnographic data, it depicts and analyzes migrant women's pre-migration expectations and experiences. It also presents the women's often-difficult migration experiences as told by them. Overall, the paper shows the difficult living and working conditions of Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Migration is a phenomenon that is as old as mankind. Though in earlier times the level of technological advancement highly restricted the degree of movement, humans have always moved away from their original locality either temporarily or permanently. However, with the advent of modernity and the occurrence of the industrial revolution in the West, sophisticated means of transport such as ships and the airplane were invented. Man's mobility could no longer be hindered due to geographical barriers. Parallely, the political and economic systems of societies became complex as various cultural groups joined to form or came under nation-states. With these developments, the issues that arise with human migration also became more complicated.

People migrate for a variety of reasons; the primary reason being looking to improve one's living conditions. Ethiopian domestic work migration to Middle Eastern countries is also mainly driven by economic considerations. Though historical records show that Ethiopians have for centuries travelled to the Middle East, these were mainly pilgrims to Jerusalem and Mecca. However, starting from two to three decades back, Ethiopian women have started to migrate to the Arab countries looking for domestic employment opportunities. The past couple of years in particular have seen the mass migration of Ethiopian women to the Middle East. A simple look at the number of young country girls queuing up for passport issuance from year to year is enough to tell the number is on the rise. A year back, it was even common to see the women and their family members spending the night on card board boxes outside MOLSA's compound.

As this study aims to have shown, the women go through a lot of trouble to find employment in a Middle Eastern household. They bear the financial cost and the emotional ups and downs of trying to secure domestic employment with the hopes of one day being able to ‘change’ their own and their families’ lives. Their ambitions as they start out are very simple: the very young and unmarried want to own and wear gold jewelry which they see on returnees and build their parents tin-roofed brick houses in place of the traditional mud and grass cottages, a trend that has become fashionable in rural areas. Mothers who leave children behind want to be able to educate and dress their children better.

My interest in researching this issue stems from a number of reasons. As does almost every Ethiopian, since childhood I have known a number of women who have gone to the Gulf countries for work. One of them who had previously worked as a domestic worker in Addis Ababa for years returned after almost two years of working in the Middle East cheated out of several months’ salary by her employers. The second young lady who had gone to Dubai immediately after completing 10th grade typically came back with luggage full of fancy clothes, shoes and hair extensions and started a small business selling fruits in her hometown, which she closed after a few months for lack of management skills. She has not engaged in gainful employment since and is currently considering trying her luck in the Middle East again; leaving behind a husband and a two-year-old son. Another one had worked in Bahrain for more than a decade, has built a house in Addis Ababa and currently lives in London as a refugee. At the age of fifty, she has not married and does not have children, a fact she always laments.

A second consideration is that the plight of Ethiopian women in the Middle East is currently of utmost public interest nationally. Despite the invisibility of these women in public space in the Middle East due to the nature of their employment, graphic videos of Ethiopian women suffering abuse in the hands of their Middle Eastern employers and its tragic consequences have surfaced in the past couple of years.¹ A number of popular tabloid magazines regularly carry stories of the abuses suffered by Ethiopian women. Government media, particularly ETV, has presented a number of documentary films that portray the plight of Ethiopians in the Middle East. As part of a national campaign to tackle human trafficking, government-run media focus on illegal migration and its dangers. In April 2013, ETV has carried a live half-day transmission of a conference organized by a national council that has come into existence to tackle problems Ethiopian migrants to the Middle East face.

On the other hand, though they do not voice out their opinions in the face of the official line of condemning domestic labour migration to the Middle East, there are interests within the country that have high stakes in its continuity. The government itself wants neither to lose the valuable remittances that are sent by migrant nationals, nor to be seen as imposing restrictions on citizens' right to travel abroad, a move it fears people would associate with the bygone era of socialism. In addition, the hundreds of financially powerful PrEAs² and individual brokers and traffickers are interested in making sure that the lucrative business of domestic work migration to the Middle East goes on. It is not on the Ethiopian side only,

¹ One particular story that had made headlines in major media outlets worldwide is that of Alemnesh Dechasa, a mother of two who was caught on camera while being dragged by her hair into a car by a male Arab as she was trying to reach the Ethiopian diplomatic mission's premises in Beirut. She was said to have been sick for months afterwards and died in hospital. Her body was brought home and buried in her hometown in 2011.

² PrEAs need to deposit 30,000 USD (or its equivalent in ETB) in a closed bank account to obtain a license that enables them to send workers to the Middle East 'legally'.

however, that conflicting interests that are pro- and against labour migration to the Middle East operate. Receiving countries want to continue importing ‘cheap’ labour from Ethiopia, but at the same time express discontent with Ethiopian women and at times issue bans prohibiting their migration. In the midst of such contradictory approaches by both the Ethiopian government and receiving countries, Ethiopian women continue to travel to the Middle East.

This paper explores the problematic circumstances surrounding Ethiopian domestic labour migration to the Middle East. While it focuses on women’s pre- and post-migration experiences, it also presents the pre-conditions women must meet in order to be able to migrate legally. It is divided into four chapters: the first chapter introduces the topic and presents the need for and importance of the research. It, then, identifies the main objectives of the research. After presenting research methods I employed for the research, it sets out the scope of the study. Next, I present the processes involved in informant selection and data documentation and analysis. In chapter two, I review scholarship on domestic labour migration in general and Ethiopian women migrants in particular. Chapter three deals with pre-migration requirements and the history of legal labour migration in Ethiopia. Chapter four consists of the bulk of my research and analysis: it depicts the pre-migration expectations and experiences of women; it also presents the post-migration experiences of women. Finally, I present concluding remarks on the issues covered in the research.

1.1.Statement of the Problem

This research explores the manifold problems experienced by Ethiopian women who migrate to Middle Eastern Arab countries seeking domestic employment opportunities.

Returnees often tell harrowing stories of work overload, abusive punishment, food deprivation, withholding of personal documents, sexual assault and restrictions on freedom of movement. Many migrants develop psychiatric illnesses as result of experiencing a combination of such abusive circumstances. The Ethiopian Airports Enterprise has medical personnel in its international flights terminal who look out for women boarding off planes from the Middle East who are so traumatized that they do not know where they are or where to go. If they have no one who comes to pick them up, the Enterprise contacts either Agar or Good Samaritans, local NGOs that provide shelter and medical and psychological care to such returnees. In the worst of cases, the Ethiopian government receives the bodies of young Ethiopian women who have died under suspicious circumstances in the countries where they went to work.³

Though problematic labour relations is the main difficulty encountered by Ethiopian female domestic employees in the Middle East, from my informants' narration, adjusting to the culture in general is a major challenge as well. As figures from MOLSA (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) show, most of these labour migrants come from Oromia, Amhara, Addis Ababa and SNNP (Southern Nations nationalities and Peoples) regions respectively. Women from these temperate regions find the arid climate of the Middle East very tough despite the use of air conditioning appliances in most homes. A related problem is that of food: Ethiopians generally distinguish between 'Christians' and Muslims' meat', which respectively refers to meat obtained from cattle slaughtered by Christians and Muslims. A follower of one religion is not supposed to eat 'the other's' meat, a distinction which is particularly pronounced for people from rural Ethiopia. Therefore, Christian

³ According to an informant who wants to remain unidentified, currently one or two bodies of migrant domestic workers are flown in daily from the Middle East.

women working and living in Muslim homes constantly worry that the prepared food may contain meat or other ingredients they are not familiar with.

For the women who surpass all these difficulties and somehow adjust to life in the Middle East, their problems do not end there. For women who are married or have fiances by the time they leave for the Middle East, mistrust due to suspected or actual disloyalty on either or both sides taints the relationship. This may lead to the breakdown of important relationships, further complicating their lives. Women who leave behind young children also have a hard time working with a collected mind since they may not be able to talk to them for lack of access to phones on either part. Women who work there for several years and achieve their initial dream of financial freedom may also pay in terms of a missed opportunity to start their own family.

Furthermore, it is widely believed in Ethiopia that a considerable number of female migrants, particularly those living in Dubai, make a living through prostitution. These women are said to pretend to be working as domestic workers to their families back home. A report by Ethiopian embassies in the Middle East estimates that as many as tens of thousands of Ethiopian women are engaged in prostitution in the Middle East; many of whom have fallen into the hands of men who profit from the women's sexual exploitation. All in all, Ethiopian women face multi-faceted hardship en route to the Middle East, while they live there and upon their return.

1.2. Significance of the Research

The situation of Ethiopian domestic migrants in the Middle East is an under-researched topic considering the number of women affected and the enormity of the problems they face. This study is, thus, highly important as it is primarily concerned with the well-being of hundreds of thousands of young women. As this and other studies show, a significant number of vulnerable girls who have not yet attained majority seek and succeed in getting domestic employment opportunities in Middle Eastern countries. The harsh conditions these women encounter in Middle Eastern countries has in the past been highlighted by national and international media.

The government has at different times responded through its various agencies to tackle the problem. It has issued laws enabling the establishment of legal employment agencies and attempts to regulate their operations. It has and is building the capacity of its executive bodies to ensure that the existing laws are properly implemented. It collaborates with international organizations on projects designed to create awareness in local communities with the purpose of encouraging legal migration but also reducing the number of potential migrants. However, as this research shows, domestic labour migration to the Middle East is still a very much desirable but at the same time risky endeavour for the majority of women.

The labour and human trafficking aspects of the topic have been tackled by a number of researchers from various disciplines such as sociology, law and political science and human rights and development practitioners. These findings are informative in varying degree. However, I only came upon two research outputs on Ethiopian domestic employment in the Middle East produced by anthropologists. The first is an article entitled

“Ways to Come, Ways to Leave: Gender, Mobility and Il/legality among Ethiopian Domestic Workers in Yemen” by Marina de Regt, based on fieldwork she conducted in 2004 and 2005 on female migrants in Yemen. The second is a PhD dissertation by Mesfin Dessiye, focusing on returnees in a rural town in northern Ethiopia. My research focuses on the diversity of women’s expectations and experiences and the roles of the various actors at the different stages of the pre-migration process. It thus builds upon and supplements existing anthropological research and hopefully adds to the unique contribution of the discipline to social science research.

1.3. Research Objectives

The purpose of this research is to analyze the situation of Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East from an anthropological perspective. It is more specifically aimed at:

- Finding out the reasons behind women’s decision to head for the Middle East (economic situation, recruiters’ influence, perceived failure at studies or in relationships, etc.)
- Finding out the process a woman undergoes from the day she decides to leave for the Middle East until she reaches a final destination (from being informed about the possibility of overseas employment to establishing contact with brokers or PrEAs, undergoing official steps until reaching an employer’s household or the agent overseas).

- Trying to understand how the women see life as domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries and gauge their analysis of their experiences vis-à-vis their expectations.

1.4. Research Methodology

As an anthropological inquiry, this research basically follows a qualitative approach. Since social anthropology famously studies human culture in a holistic manner, making use of qualitative research methods allows a researcher to gain insight into the personal hopes, thoughts and feelings of informants which cannot be understood otherwise. To achieve these goals, I have employed both primary and secondary data collection methods. Primary data collection involved research methods such as observation, structured and semi-structured interviews and informal conversations.

1.4.1. Observation

As irreplaceable as participant observation is to anthropologists, particularly in building rapport with informants, I would have liked to make use of it. Initially, I had hoped to make partial use of participant observation in trying to understand the pre-migration experiences of legally migrating women. My plan was to attend and observe every official step a woman has to undergo starting from the first stage of applying for a passport to the final moment of departure. However, the tight schedule prospective migrants kept did not allow me to accompany them to the various offices they needed to visit. In addition, prospective migrants are generally not keen on indulging a researcher when they have 'real life' issues to take care of. Of the four would-be migrants I interviewed in-depth, it was only with one informant that I was able to establish anything that resembled a rapport.

Once I had interviewed the other three, despite repeated efforts on my part, I could not contact them. Therefore, considering the nature of the topic to be investigated and the scale of the research, I found observation to be most appropriate for this investigation. I had to be content with observing the different stages of the pre-migration process with different women and by myself. However, through informant interviews I cross-checked the accuracy of my understanding of the pre-departure process.

1.4.2. In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews, particularly of primary informants, are an indispensable part of an anthropological inquiry since it allows the concerned individuals to speak for themselves. This research, therefore, significantly relies on informant interviews for its primary data. In-depth interviews were conducted with eleven women; four prospective migrants and seven returnees. The prospective migrants talked about their hopes and thoughts as they made this major decision in life, for better or for worse. Returnees recounted their pre- and post-migration thoughts, dreams and experiences as they remember it. Thankfully, the longest period that had passed between the time of return of an informant and the time at which the interview was conducted is two years. And the shortest lapse of time, which is the case with two returnee informants, was less than two weeks.

Some of the interviews, particularly with would-be migrants, were more or less structured; informants were content to answer my questions and nothing more. Returnee interviews lasted longer and were more emotional and expressive. The interviews with six of the seven returnees were more of dialogues. After asking a question, I gave the women the liberty to tell as much of their stories as they felt comfortable to and did not interrupt much.

At the end of our conversations, I checked the interview guideline I had prepared to see if there are issues that have not been covered. But mostly, I was glad to find that informants had given me richer data than ‘proper’ answers to my questions would have.

Some informants dwelled more on their pre-migration stories, whereas others told their migration stories in great detail. Two prospective migrants were interviewed in the premises of the Department of Immigration; I sat for coffee with the other two. I interviewed four returnees in the offices of the NGOs that gave them shelter. I sat with one in her home; another interview took place in a church compound near my informant’s neighbourhood. All four of the prospective migrants I interviewed were migrating for the first time; three of the seven returnees are second-time returnees.

1.4.3. Informal conversations

Despite the negative connotation the term ‘informal’ carries that makes such conversations sound trivial; these are inherent in primary data gathering and important at least for two reasons. First, they are crucial in building rapport between the researcher and a potential informant. Second, they help the researcher to ‘get the feel of’ the person he/ she is conversing with and thus enrich his/her knowledge and understanding of the issues. During the course of this research countless such conversations have taken place with informants, their family members, individuals who due to the nature of their work have first-hand knowledge of the ‘legal’ migration system and members of the public.

1.4.4. Structured interviews

These were conducted with a number of government officials from the different ministries that are stakeholders in Ethiopian domestic labour migration to the Middle East, with the owners and managers of three PrEAs (private employment agencies) and with the general manager of Ethiopian Overseas Employment Recruiters Association.

Secondary data was gathered through literature review, search of MOLSA, MoFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and other relevant archives and official websites of national and international organizations and review of the relevant proclamations and directives.

1.5. Scope and Limitation of the Research

This paper deals with domestic employment in the Middle East as experienced and perceived by Ethiopian women. Its scope is broad in the sense that it is concerned with the pre-departure processes and experiences of women, their stay in receiving countries and their lives after returning. However, despite the breadth of my interest and the vast nature of the issues to be investigated, this research must be completed in a relatively short period of time. Therefore, restrictions of time and resources limit the scope of my research.

The research focuses exclusively on females. Statistics shows that a growing number of Ethiopian men are also migrating to the Middle East for low-skill jobs. However, I decided to exclude males from this current research not due to any gender-bias but for the practical reason that the vast majority of Ethiopian labour migrants to the Middle East are women. Otherwise, it would have been interesting to conduct a comparative study of Middle Eastern domestic employment for males and females.

Another limitation of this research is that it addresses only domestic employment in the Middle East, particularly the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council). Again it is a widely known fact that a considerable number of Ethiopian women are engaged in domestic employment in African countries such as Sudan, Egypt and Libya. However, the government body directly responsible for labour migration, MOLSA, has no account of citizens who go to these latter countries. Therefore, investigating the conditions of women who go to such countries would be an uphill task and impossible to accomplish at this level.

This brings me to a third and related matter. For the same reason that MOLSA has at least preliminary data on the women who go to the Middle East ‘legally’ and the relative ease of accessing them, this research is limited to those women who go through the government-recognized system to reach a Middle Eastern country. Since MOLSA started registering PrEAs around 1998 until the present, it has at different times suspended and reinstated ‘legal’ labour migration to different Middle Eastern countries. My informants are, therefore, women who have been previously employed and are seeking employment in the above-mentioned territories.

Here, I cannot proceed without raising the issue of objectivity in social science research, at least. Most anthropologists now agree that in doing fieldwork and the presentation of one’s findings, the objectivity of the researcher is an ideal to be adhered to always but never completely attainable. As Kevin Dwyer in his ‘Moroccan Dialogues’ (1982) eloquently puts it, anthropological fieldwork is not a detached, neutral, indifferent undertaking but rather an interactive process between the anthropologist and informant which very much affects the research process and output. In other words, the ‘scholarly’ anthropologist and

the 'studied' informant are after all humans, each having agency, and thus wittingly or unwittingly bringing a measure of subjectivity to the research.

In conducting the research for this thesis, situations would occur that regularly reminded me to appreciate this concern. For instance, the simple fact of where and in what situation I was able to meet informants and interview them affected the quality of the interviews. Would-be migrants I approached while they waited for government offices to open tended to be very brief and matter-of-fact, if not altogether suspicious and dismissive. On the other hand, most returnees were liberal with their time and their narrative capacity. Informants in NGO shelters after a 'failed' Middle Eastern experience, tend to stress stories that confirm with their current status as victims.

Such shortcomings are, however, certainly not evident in informants alone. Official information can itself be highly selective depending on the position and day-to-day activity of the officer who provides it. A public relations head is sure to present and capitalize on aspects of the story that is in line with the mandate of the office, whereas officers who deal with the less polished aspects of the issue tend to have a darker outlook and therefore paint a grim picture. The researcher's bias was evident at least in the leading questions I posed to my informants that gave out my preconceptions of the issue. I also fell prey to the recognized danger of the anthropologist 'going emic' on more than one occasion.

1.6. Informant Selection

As I set out to undertake this research, I had planned to have in-depth interviews with at least sixteen primary informants. I had naively thought that locating and interviewing prospective migrants would be quite easy as hundreds or even thousands were found

lingering around Immigration every day. However, as described in chapter three, the women are very suspicious and fearful. Finding someone willing to hear me out as I explained the purpose of my query was in itself a challenge. Some would think I was a potential migrant when I sat next to them and start to provide me with information on what to do; as soon as I mentioned why I was there, they suddenly had to go. One young woman, probably in her twenties, agreed to be interviewed but as we were halfway into the interview, she stated that she just wanted to hold a passport and ‘did not have much willingness’ to migrate. I submitted the support letter I obtained from the University and asked Immigration officials for assistance in convincing the women of the harmlessness of my motives. However, after making me wait for more than a week until one official consulted with a higher official, I was told that ‘it was not allowed’. Therefore, I had to be content with the four recorded interviews I had managed to have.

Accessing returnees was also a difficult task as there are no migrant associations in Ethiopia as is the case with most labour sending Asian countries. Once the women board off planes and leave the airport, there is no official means of tracing them unless they go to MOLSA to seek redress from the PrEAs that sent them or they are sent to NGOs. Therefore, I had to rely on people I know who knew I was doing research on the topic to meet ‘normal’ returnees. I contacted three women in this manner but was able to interview only two of them, as the third was prevented by her ‘husband’ (the day we met, she had told me that he was in fact a boyfriend whom she had not sent one birr while she was in the Middle East) from meeting me. Four of the returnee informants were, thus, contacted through NGOs and the remaining one, I met at MOLSA. The outcome of the research may, therefore, be biased as five of the seven returnees were ‘victims’. However, as the stories

of the women show, receiving re-integration assistance is more or less a matter of chance; otherwise their experiences are not that different.

1.7.Data Documentation and Analysis

I recorded all interviews and kept a journal as well, on which I jotted my observations particularly of the pre-migration process. I had prepared two lists of interview guidelines; one for prospective migrants and the other for returnees. However, as mentioned above, more questions were asked where I felt that good rapport had been established with informants. I transcribed all interviews before I started to analyze the data. Based on my research objectives and literature review, I identified common themes that emerged from informants' life stories. Finally, I present the data and my analysis of the issues under these themes. Though this is not a typical ethnographic research, I have tried to give utmost space to my informants' voices in presenting the data. All interviews were conducted in Amharic; though not all my informants were native Amharic speakers, all spoke fluent Amharic.

1.8.Ethical Considerations

I have informed all informants that the research was primarily undertaken for academic purposes, with the hope of eventually bringing about the necessary changes to migrants' situation. I have also assured them that their identities will not be disclosed. In the case of informants who are receiving psychiatric care, all caution has been taken by the resident councilor and nurse of the respective NGOs that were in charge of them, to select those who could give their free and full consent. I have used pseudonyms to refer to my informants and also to maintain the confidentiality of persons mentioned by them.

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

2.1.Domestic Service

In Ethiopian labour law, domestic service is mentioned for the purpose of excluding it from this particular legislation's jurisdiction. Apart from this token recognition of its existence as a form of employment, the law does not regulate or define domestic service. However, Ethiopia's unregulated domestic service regime is not an exception to the general practice of states. De Regt (2010:254) notes that "[in] many countries in the South as well as in the North, domestic labor is not recognized as a site of employment and not covered by labor laws".

Scholarship on the subject discusses domestic work in terms of the 'job description' of domestic workers. Lutz (2002: 91f) observes the diversity of domestic workers' tasks "...which range from cleaning, washing and cooking through caring for children, the elderly and the infirm, to assisting at family celebrations and corporate events, [which] corresponds to the heterogeneity of their employment situations (from a 2-h a week cleaning job to the 24-h on-call service of the live-in maids)".

Domestic workers are also referred to as domestic servants, housemaids, maids, domestic helpers, domestic employees and domestics in academic literature. Some of these terms such as domestic servants and maids are historical remnants from earlier times that signified the huge class difference between the women and the households in which they served. While 'domestic employees and helpers' sound politically correct, categorizing the women as 'domestics' connotes a condescending attitude. It inadvertently gives the impression that women who are engaged in domestic work are in it for a life-time; a view

that is not supported by evidence. For these reasons, throughout this paper, I have chosen to employ the phrase ‘domestic workers’ to refer to women who are employed in households for the performance of chores for a pay.

Western scholars are puzzled by the presence of and increasing demand for domestic service in Europe. Lutz (2002:90) writes of “...the paradox of the informal, archaic labour market that has arisen amid today’s revolution of information technology”. This is mainly due to the fact that domestic service is associated with feudal times and was thought to be a thing of the past. The fact that the majority of domestic workers in European countries are non-Western women (ibid: 92), also adds to the discomfort of scholars since it represents the much-denounced unequal power relation between ‘the West and the rest’. Parrenas writes about how the presence of domestic workers in the West today creates a “postindustrial household structure with preindustrial values” (as cited in Lutz 2002)

The *raison d’être* of domestic service in the West has been a subject of interest for various disciplines for many years now. Sociologists in particular have dealt with the issues of the continuity or discontinuity of domestic labour in the West. In contrast, academic discussions of domestic work in the Middle East do not raise any such debates, probably because its continuity is a historically established fact. With regard to the West, explanations for the need for domestic service by households take a historical perspective. In earlier times, having domestic ‘servants’ was a class-marker, if it did not serve any other purpose; whereas currently it arises from the need for help around the house because married women are no longer simply housewives. On the supply side also, historical explanations can be given: earlier, domestic staffs were working class women or families,

whereas the new face of domestic work are migrant women from economically less developed countries. (Ibid; Jureidini: 2003)

Research shows that in most receiving countries, foreign domestic workers are treated differently from other foreign workers. The peculiar nature of their employment in households doing what has come to be labeled as ‘the dirty, dangerous and degrading’ jobs leads to their ‘othering’ by the hosting society. Cheng (2003: 171f) notes that the fact that domestic workers come from developing countries contributes to their social construction as undesirably different, unlike foreigners from “regions of high socioeconomic development”. Jureidini (2003: 1) makes a similar observation when he writes how in Middle Eastern countries certain nations have come to be associated with domestic work to the degree that professional workers from these nations get mistaken for “servants”.

Finally, Cheng (2003) observes that most studies on globalized domestic service fall under three major theoretical paradigms: 1) the international division of labour perspective whose main theme is the reproduction of gendered and racialized divisions of labour in global capitalism, 2) transnational female labour migration perspective that focuses on the interdependence of unequally positioned women in global capitalism and 3) a sobering perspective that stresses the importance of the state amid globalizing forces. In this chapter, I will discuss and analyze different studies from these related paradigms, albeit a little differently, to fit the specific context of my research.

2.2.The Globalization of Domestic Work

In the 21st century, the term globalization has come to represent the increased ‘villagization’ of the globe. Though globalization draws divergent views (from its ardent

supporters and detractors to those in-between), everyone would agree that it is a process characterized by revolutionary advancements in our access to information and communication and that it is a force to be reckoned with.

As such, it is a powerful tool in that it allows the spread of human rights principles and increasing the accountability of various actors nationally or internationally. We can, therefore, say that globalizing forces can be beneficial to those on the wrong side of the balance of power. However, various factors affect the potential benefits of globalization to less powerful individuals and nations. In fact, UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on trade and Development) in its eleventh conference has affirmed that "...especially the least developed countries, have remained marginalized in the globalizing world economy...the benefits and costs of globalization are very unevenly distributed". (As cited in Alston 2005:1) Moreover, the developing world is suffering from the effects of human trafficking, which has intensified as globalizing forces link more and more of the world. (Rijken as cited in Obokata 2006: 2)

Coming to our particular discussion, the globalization of domestic service is a theme that is well-noted by researchers. (See Lutz: 2002; Parrenas: 2000) Lutz notes how the migration of women from the developing world to Western countries to be employed as domestic workers reflects "...the international labour market's globalization [and] the shift of exploitation and dependence from a national to an international context. The maids issue has evolved from one of class to one of ethnicity and nationality."(2002: 91)

According to Lutz, domestic service was a form of occupation that had become almost extinct in Europe after the Second World War. However, globalization has renewed it to

the extent that domestic workers today have become migrant women. Though Lutz is careful about delineating between “pure ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalization” she clearly notes that migrant domestic workers stand to benefit least from the process. She realizes that there is a gap between the potential and the actual benefit the women reap from this globalized labour market. Lutz writes: “Within this connection of the global and the local, multiple identities emerge. It is questionable, however, if the women can really raise their status” in the countries in which they work. (2002: 101)

Lutz remarks with fitting sarcasm that in some sending countries domestic workers “...have been ‘promoted’ to be the main ‘export product’ [which] opens the door to modernized exploitation” (ibid). Such a mass provision of workers undoubtedly leads to ethnic comparisons and categorizations which are detrimental to the individual women’s status in the receiving countries. Again, Lutz observes that according to a report submitted to the European Commission, all European countries “...have ethnic hierarchies legitimised by racist stereotypes that determine remuneration” for domestic workers. (ibid: 92)

To conclude, it seems reasonable to state that the globalization of domestic service has presented previously unimagined opportunities to many women from developing countries an alternative to their predictable lives of gender subservience. On the other hand, the promises held out by their migration are met by unpleasantly sobering realities on the other side of migration due to various factors. Next, I will briefly discuss more recent approaches that question the role and degree of influence of globalizing forces on the women’s lives.

2.2.1. The State amid Globalization: Uneasy Relationships

Globalization poses both opportunities and challenges to the nation-state. When it comes to globalized domestic service, sending and receiving countries both have things to gain and lose from this process. Through their nationals' overseas work, sending countries reduce unemployment rates thus reducing dependence on national earnings and obtain highly-valued foreign currency through remittances. On the down side, in the receiving countries, their nationals may be subjected to prejudice, discrimination and abuse. Receiving countries, on the other hand, access the relatively cheap labour of foreign domestic workers through such transaction but 'lose' considerable amounts of their currency or national earnings and are faced with the multi-faceted challenges of managing the presence of foreigners in their territories.

Thinking purely in terms of economics, sending countries clearly stand to benefit most from globalized domestic service. Therefore, it is mostly receiving countries that come up with detailed regulations meant to minimize the number of foreign workers entering their territories. Cheng (2003) illustrates the important role the state plays in this process by taking the example of Taiwan as a foreign labour receiving country. The main focus of her article is showing how the interplay among state practices, popular discourse and household practices feed each other to reinforce the otherness of foreign domestic workers. Jureidini (2003) also presents how Middle Eastern labour receiving countries regularly issue regulations and pleas to their nationals with the aim of curbing the inflow of foreign workers and reducing the existing 'pool'.

Nonetheless, despite its advantages, sending countries also grapple with globalizing forces in their effort to reduce the number of potential migrant workers and manage the situation of workers who are already there. The number of foreign unskilled workers in the Middle East has not decreased even though almost all sending countries have policies meant to reduce their dependence on foreign labour. (Oxford Analytica 2001) Jureidini also notes that “[given] the numbers of migrant workers involved, diplomatic missions cannot keep track or monitor the many thousands of their nationals in the host countries”. (2003: 1)

2.2.2. National Identity

Another major concern, again particularly for labour receiving countries, is the issue of safeguarding national identity. In every country in the world, the presence of foreigners and its impact on the identity and way of life of the hosting people is no less a concern than economic interests. Cheng captures this unease when she comments on how the far-reaching state management of foreign domestic workers “...expresses the state’s anxiety over a changing demographic landscape [which is] ultimately integral to the state’s control over...the future contour of the nation”. (2003: 167)

This overriding desire by labour receiving countries to maintain the existing ethnic, racial or even religious composition of their population is reflected through their policies and practices. This position of labour receiving nations is manifested at international organizations, which, despite their promotion of international migration, still emphasize temporary contractual labour migration. (Essay for IOM annual report 2006) Jureidini makes similar observations about Middle Eastern countries: “Typically, temporary foreign

contract employees are the preferred migrant workers since there are no expectations of permanent settlement or citizenship rights”. (2003:3)

2.2.3. The State and its Development Agenda

Despite asserting itself in the face of increasing globalization, the state at the same time takes advantage of it. Backed by the MDGs (millennium development goals), developing nations have given utmost priority to their economic development. As already discussed, earnings from foreign labour has its place in national development projects. The link between migration and development is now widely recognized and the IOM (International Organization for Migration) is actively engaged in helping labour sending countries, among other things, to make efficient use of remittances in their development efforts.(IOM workshop discussion paper, 2005)

2.3.The ‘Agency’ Approach

Another approach that takes the focus away from the all-dictating power of globalization is one that brings the discussion to the level of the individual. This perspective that stresses the agency of domestic workers in dealing with their work situation is particularly employed by anthropologists. (See Constable 1997; de Regt 2010) These writers are critical of the conventional discourse on female domestic workers that presents them as “victims of globalization” (de Regt 2010: 237); as “...passive beings, victims or marionettes driven by circumstances...” (Lutz 2002: 99).

De Regt (2010) strongly argues in favour of moving beyond the classification of domestic workers based on their nationality and concentrating on the diversity of women’s

experiences to give more space to their agency. She along others reminds us that focusing on the inherent unequal power relation of domestic employment gives only half the picture; domestic workers maneuver even within such constraining circumstances to exercise control over their lives. Similarly, sociologists have noted that some domestic workers are even ‘madams’ or employers of other women in their home countries and put those who are still less-privileged, in the same position in which they find themselves. (Lutz 2002; Lan 2003)

2.4.Hand in Hand: The Feminization of Migration and the Feminization of Domestic Service

2.4.1. The Feminization of Migration

The feminization of migration is a theme that is widely recognized and written upon. It refers to the historical fact that previously, migration was a male domain and the insignificant number of women that travelled did so as ‘appendages’ to male companions. However, the past two decades have seen a huge number of women migrating on their own for work in wealthier countries. This otherwise unimaginable opportunity for international migration, gives these women who are mostly ‘unskilled’, the chance to experience a different lifestyle and become the primary breadwinners of their families back home. Researchers have noted that it is an empowering experience that shapes gender relations in that such migration enables women to make decisions regarding their own affairs and at least have some say in family matters. (Lan 2003; De Regt 2010; Mesfin 2011)

However, this seemingly liberating experience does not deliver that much freedom for women. The main reason for this failure is that the large majority of women migrant workers are engaged in domestic work. As Lutz (2002:99) remarks, “[The] feminization of migration exists mainly in the private service sector...” more particularly in domestic service. De Regt (2010:240) captures this paradox when she states that “[The] feminization of migration indicates increased mobility but the type of their employment implies severe restrictions in their mobility both in the houses where they are employed and in the countries in which they work and live”. Scholars now widely recognize that the feminization of migration is strongly linked with domestic service.

2.4.2. The Feminization of Domestic Service

Research on domestic service comes mainly from gender studies because, as discussed above, domestic workers are predominantly women. Previously in the West, domestic workers used to be women from low socioeconomic status such as African Americans in the U.S. and working class women in Europe. With the globalization of domestic service, Western scholars seem surprised to find out that it was still women, though of different nationalities from their employers, who came to fill these positions in the West. This trend has annoyed Western feminist writers because it seems to support earlier notions of the universal gender-based subordination of women.

With a familiar feminist angst Lutz (2002: 95) writes that for domestic service employment “...what is needed are capacities that women seem to possess everywhere and that are ascribed to either their nature or their gender-specific socialization: the skill of cleaning and caring, of dealing with the most intimate sphere discreetly, of making a home,

nourishing the children of their employers as well as their own, and of caring for old people patiently”. Puzzled, she then goes on to write “...further research has to reveal why women seem to be more inclined to join this trajectory than men” (2002:99). However, the answer lies in the fact that gendered division of labour is the reality in most parts of the world and is not just a Western phenomenon.

Lan (2003) accurately argues that women’s unpaid labour in their own households and paid domestic work are ‘structural continuities’. In other words, both in the Western and non-Western world, women perform household chores, from which fact extends the feminization of paid domestic service. Parrenas puts it aptly: “As women transfer their reproductive labor to less and less privileged women, we can see that the traditional division of labor in the patriarchal nuclear household has not been significantly renegotiated in various countries in the world”. (2000:578)

The devaluation of women’s ‘carework’ by the state and society at large is another concern expressed by gender scholars. (Parrenas 2000; Cheng 2003; Lan 2003) Parrenas makes an important observation that the commodification of reproductive labour leads to an even worse depreciation of its worth. However, scholars themselves fall prey to the dominant thought that household labour is a somewhat less important activity than activities performed outside the home. Parrenas, in her influential work, ‘Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers and the International Division of Reproductive Labor’, defines reproductive labour as “... the labor needed to sustain the productive labor force”. (2000: 561) Such definition is in line with ‘formalist’ economic formulations of productivity, otherwise, those who are sustained may no more be productive than the reproductive labourer.

Earlier scholarship on domestic work viewed it as an escape mechanism by class-privileged women from the gendered division of labour to which they were subjected. (Nakano Glenn 1992; Parrenas 2000) However, recent approaches emphasize the fact that despite the purchased services of another woman, employing women are not spared the gendered division of reproductive labour. That is, irrespective of whether domestic workers' employing women are professional working women or homemakers, women are still held responsible for the management of their households. As Cheng remarks, "[women] at both ends of the migration process bear the cost of social reproduction". (2003:168)

Coming back to foreign domestic workers, it is a commonly known fact that they face a number of problems that are specific to the nature of their employment. Though I will return to this issue in more depth in the next chapters, I want to raise a couple of issues here. First, as Lutz notes, in general, "[domestic] work is one of the most insecure forms of employment and is mainly performed by women". (2002:100) Domestic work, whether performed locally or across borders, is a risky type of employment because not only the living conditions, but also the duration of the worker's stay depends largely on the goodwill of the employer. Particularly for migrants, employer-initiated termination of a contract usually results in their deportation or return home empty-handed, which costs them a great deal considering the time, money and emotions they have invested in their migration. Second, I want to briefly touch upon the difficult circumstances of married foreign domestic workers. Studies reveal that men with migrant wives not only have access to the cash women earn abroad, but tend to waste the 'new money' on drinking and

gambling. (Lan 2003) In general, despite lower wages, "...women migrants tend to send a larger proportion of their income home, on a more regular basis". (UNDP 2009, p. 74)

Out of female migrant domestic workers as a group, the situation of mothers has in the past deservedly got the attention of scholars. Parrenas (2000) writes of 'diverted mothering' to describe the experiences of domestic workers who take care of their employers' children having left their own in the care of others. Lutz (2002) suggests that the children of migrant women's care cannot be analyzed through Western conceptions of motherhood. She writes "...the tie between mothers and children is mostly expressed through material goods, financial aid and the payment for a good education. The psychological results, for example personal alienation, are often underestimated by the mothers". (2002:99) However, Lan (2003) has shown that conceptions of motherhood in the West and non-West may not be that different after all.

2.5. Power Differentials between 'the Woman of the House' and the Domestic Worker: an Uncomfortable Reality

The relationship between the female domestic worker and 'the woman of the house' has been described as one of power differential between two women by gender scholars. The themes of most writers revolve around the unequal power relation that exists between these two women based on race, class or the level of economic development of their nations of origin. Globalization has also taken its fair share of the blame for creating "... a new category of difference between women". (Lutz 2002:90) The tendency in academics to dichotomize between the West and non-West runs so deep that the existence of difference among non-Western women seems to come as a surprise to some. De Regt writes "...

[Ethiopian domestic] workers' recruitment by middle and upper-class Yemeni women signifies the importance of power differentials based on class and ethnicity *between women in the South*" (italics mine). (2010:239)

Cheng observes that domestic service is an issue that sits uncomfortably with feminist scholars precisely because it "...challenges essentialist conceptions of gender and of universal womanhood" (2003:167) In other words, domestic service as practiced today reveals the fact that employing women take advantage of their 'privileged' positions to the disadvantage of the women they employ who happen to be not as lucky. Whether this difference between women is exhibited through the passing of devalued work to another woman or the aggression of female employers against domestic workers, the challenge to these essentialist conceptions that presume universal sisterhood or portray women as violence-free is clear. However, a more realistic take on the issue recognizes that "...women are linked by gender and differentiated by race and class" (Parrenas 2000:562) or even individual differences.

Moreover, looking at the issue only through the gender perspective narrows our appreciation of the challenges. The tendency to see the relationship between a domestic worker and the woman in the employing household only as a relationship between women is self-defeating. Cheng rightly reminds us that "...household dynamics are not solely shaped by unequal power relationships between two women. Embedded within the tension between the native employer and the alien domestic are also the politics of citizenship and of national identity". (2003:184) If we are to make meaningful contributions to alleviating migrant domestic workers' living and working conditions, we need to have a broader outlook on the issue.

2.6.Ethiopia and the Middle East as Linked through Domestic Work: Brief History

Middle Eastern Arab countries began attracting huge numbers of foreign workers following the 1973 oil price boom, which brought about an unprecedented level of wealth for these nations. As these nations' massive modernization projects required expert knowledge and labour that was not available locally, workers from developing nations streamed into Arab countries to share from the new-found wealth. Domestic workers, under the 'unskilled' category of workers, are part of this inflow of foreigners into the Middle East. Although these migrant women changed the face of domestic work in the Middle East, domestic labour itself is not a new phenomenon. Jureidini writes that prior to the entry of foreign domestic workers into Arab households, Arab women (mostly young girls) served in these positions.(2003:1)

Ethiopian labour migration to the Middle East for domestic work purposes dates farther than the start of the global feminization of migration discussed above. Though the first legislation aimed at regulating this process was not issued until 1998, Ethiopian women have been employed as domestic workers in Arab households as early as the 1980s. Even before its existence was recognized by public or private institutions either in Ethiopia or in the receiving Arab countries, this type of labour migration took place under the pretext of the Islamic pilgrimages of the *hajj* and *umra*⁴. Since then, hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian women have migrated to Middle Eastern Arab countries for domestic work. However, de Regt notes that despite this fact, Ethiopia is not recognized as a sending country in the international care chain. (2010:239)

⁴Interview with AtoZerihunYeshitla, PrEAs licensing desk coordinator at MOLSA.

As I have already discussed, temporary foreign workers are the preferred labour migrants internationally. The Middle East is not an exception; however, one thing that makes domestic employment in the Middle East different from the Western experience is, in Jureidini's words "... is that domestic employees are largely live-in workers for whom further limitations of freedom have become normative elements in the employer-employee relationship". (2003:3) De Regt affirms this point when she states that "...in most Middle eastern countries, the only way to enter legally is as a live-in contract worker, freelancing and working as a live-out worker are illegal". (2010:247) Being a live-in contract worker for the majority of women means that from the moment they set foot in their employers' households, they have almost no contact with the outside world until their contracts expire or are terminated. Due to these circumstances, particularly when they deem their living and working conditions to be intolerable, they attempt to escape, either successfully or unsuccessfully.

2.7.Domestic Work in the Middle East: A Case of "Contract Slavery"?

Researchers agree that in general, domestic workers who migrate on a contractual basis are most susceptible to potentially abusive living and working conditions. De Regt has observed that "[all] over the world, women who migrate via (illegal) recruitment agencies as contract workers are the most vulnerable". (2010:250) Jureidini also notes that "...temporary foreign workers are not formally "free" in receiving countries, because they cannot access the local labour markets." (2003:3) In fact, some have likened the working conditions of these workers to slavery. Bales, who propounded the idea, asserts that the presence of these three elements in an employment situation would qualify it to be

characterized as slavery: (a) violence or the threat of violence, (b) restriction of physical movement, and (c) economic exploitation. (As cited in Jureidini 2003)

De Regt, on the other hand, does not agree with this description which strips women of agency. Based on her fieldwork experience with Ethiopian female domestic workers in Yemen, she is of the opinion that the situation is not as bad as Bales and subsequent writers depict it to be. Though she recognizes that “women who follow the rules and regulations for employment often have to deal with heavy duties and limited rights” (2010:256), she sees that the legal-contractual workers have better advantage in terms of transnational mobility, but which for most people translates only into the ability to return home. On the divide between these two extreme perspectives that portray women domestic workers as victims and as ‘agents of change’, Lutz remarks “...gender studies researchers take contradictory approaches to the analysis of domestic workers. While some focus on the exploitation of domestics, others underline the agency of the women involved”. (2002:97)

De Regt, in fact positively argues for the application of the more ‘nuanced’ agency approach, to the situation of domestic workers in the Middle East because the “...focus remains largely on abuse”. (2010:238) However, the abusive situation under which migrant domestic workers in the Middle East live, has been the focus of academic research. (Eskedar 2007) In light of such findings, de Regt’s call for a nuanced discourse does not seem to hold water at least for two reasons: (1) as she states in her article, most of her informants are freelancers or former live-in domestic workers whose experiences are removed from the situation of the majority of workers in the Middle East today; (2) the evidence both from academic research and media reports suggest otherwise. Though it would be unwarranted to take a definitive stance and generalize that the situation of

domestic workers across the Middle East can be characterized as slavery, one can certainly argue that ascribing the kind of agency that Morokvasic (1993) and de Regt propose is unrealistic.

2.8. Xenophobia against Foreign Domestic Workers

Ethnocentrism has been defined as “[The] tendency to view one’s own culture as best and to judge the behavior and beliefs of culturally different people by one’s own standards”. (Kottak 2000:77) Banton describes racism as “any hostility based upon beliefs about inherited biological differences”, whereas xenophobia [refers to] hostility ‘that is based upon beliefs around cultural differences’. (As cited in Jureidini 2003) As such, we can say that ethnocentric beliefs can find expression through racist or xenophobic attitudes and practices. Ethnocentric attitudes of members of a certain cultural group against others get expressed in everyday language, popular discourse or written records. Racist or xenophobic practices may also take place or be exercised by various actors towards others protractedly or on a regular basis. As Cheng (2003) shows, such societal attitudes towards foreigners and domestic workers in particular take the form of ‘institutional and legal othering’, thus getting further entrenched, with practical consequences for migrant domestic workers.

Jureidini appropriately notes that “[various] forms of racism and xenophobia may be found in all societies”. (2003:1) However, he makes a number of important observations when he writes: “[it] seems ironic that, while anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism, vilification and stereotyping is widespread in many Western countries (and possibly elsewhere), there is also Arab racism and xenophobia against others in the Middle East. In this regard, even

victimized ethnic groups cannot automatically be assumed to be, by definition, morally “pure” and devoid of xenophobic elements”. (ibid) Jureidini makes his point very strongly about the existence of racist and xenophobic attitudes in particular towards African and Asian domestic workers in the Middle East.

He then gives three major reasons for the sad state-of-affairs these women find themselves in. Firstly, the fact that in the past two decades domestic workers have become predominantly Asian and African has led to the racialization of domestic work in the Middle East. Secondly, where Arab employers previously had shared culture and religion with local domestic workers, this is no more the case with migrant domestic workers. Thirdly, historically in Arab culture, the position of a domestic worker is in itself inherently servile. Jureidini goes on to highlight expressions from the Arabic language and everyday usages of employers to show how migrant domestic workers are routinely made to feel inferior from Arab society. Such xenophobic attitudes of Arab employers and the potentially devastating impact they have on Ethiopian domestic workers has also been noted by Ethiopian researchers. (Birke et. al. 2009:562)

Another idea from Jureidini’s statement which I want to dwell upon is that anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment is not just a Western manifestation. As I have remarked in the introductory section, starting from basic dietary practices, Christian northern Ethiopians have a strong taboo against eating ‘Muslims’ meat’. Within this tradition, historical anecdotes that disparage Muhammad and Islam in general are plentiful. In the recent past, the prevailing image of Arabs most Christian Ethiopians, at least, had was one of a

misguided, expansionist and war-like desert-dwelling people⁵. Thus, based on the premise that Ethiopians too harbour xenophobic attitudes towards Arabs, I want to extend Jureidini's argument about the moral im/purity of victimized groups to domestic workers. Despite a power relation that undeniably favours local employers to foreign domestic workers; Ethiopian domestic workers may intentionally or otherwise express prejudices towards their employers' culture.

2.9.Regulating Domestic Labour Migration

All states attempt to regulate labour migration to and from their territories. However, the degree of regulation and the capacity and commitment of law enforcement officials to implement what the law states differs widely from nation to nation. As I have already discussed, countries are keen to provide detailed rules when they are on the labour receiving end, due to the various interests which they want to safeguard. Therefore, labour receiving countries strictly regulate foreign workers' preconditions of entry, stay and exit from their territories with the purpose of controlling the numbers and type of workers they attract. Sending countries, on the other hand, do not have much interest in the process except to get as many workers as possible to migrate because of labour migration's benefit to their economies.

However, sending countries also issue regulations aimed at reducing the number of labour-migrant nationals, particularly when serious human rights concerns exist or political instability occurs in labour receiving countries. The Ethiopian constitution recognizes the right to freedom of movement (Article 32). However, some scholars believe that

⁵The history of mistrust and animosity between the Christian Northern kingdom of Ethiopia and neighbouring Arab or Islamic nations has been much written on by historians. See Zewde 1991; Husain 1984)

government control is too tight putting unnecessary restrictions on women's freedom of movement. (De Regt 2010) Without neglecting the government's responsibility to ensure the safety of its nationals' wellbeing, I agree with De Regt when she writes that "...particularly for women, policies that pretend to protect migrants may be patronizing and actually have reverse effects". (ibid: 254)

As de Regt aptly observes, Ethiopian female domestic workers deal with strict regulations at the pre-migration stage but are left much to their own devices after leaving. In other words, the government ensures that pre-migration requirements are well-observed but its enforcement capacity post-migration does not go a long way to ensure workers' safety or the respect of their rights. As I try to show in the next chapters, young Ethiopian women mostly from rural areas who do not have much exposure to the world outside their villages, go through a lot of trouble trying to secure 'legal' domestic employment in Middle Eastern Arab countries. However, after they board flights to their respective destination countries, what happens to them depends much on the good-heartedness of the overseas agents and their employers. This is one of the reasons that led de Regt to conclude that regulating labour migration is not automatically to the women's advantage.

2.10. 'Knowledge Based Legal Migration Only'

The above quotation is taken from posters hung around MOLSA and Immigration Authority in Addis Ababa. It targets potential migrant domestic workers who queue outside these office premises processing paper work for their intended journey. It is a manifestation of the counter human trafficking efforts by the Ethiopian government and international organizations. Media reports of the horrific abuse and torture Ethiopian women suffer in

the Middle East have in the past brought condemnation on the government. It now seems determined to deal with the issue seriously: a national council composed of thirteen governmental authorities headed by the vice prime minister of the nation now spearheads efforts to combat human trafficking to the Middle East.

The promotion of legal migration or migration through legally recognized channels has thus been employed as a major strategy to achieve this goal. One major aspect of legal migration is that employment contracts are entered, which need approval by the concerned government body. The use of such contracts is said to protect the worker from exploitation as it formalizes and limits the duration of employment. (ILO Addis Ababa 2011, p.66) On the surface, this sounds like a reasonable proposal. However, apart from the difficulties the government has when it comes to enforcing the stipulations of workers' contracts, as I have discussed above, it is precisely contractual employment that may force workers to stay in abusive circumstances.

The danger associated with contract-based domestic labour migration is not simply an academic concern. One of the points formulated by the Global Commission on International Migration is ensuring that temporary labour migrants are not tied to a particular employer. (As cited in an essay for IOM annual report 2006) De Regt (2010) again brings other important points to the discussion on legality. She has observed that legality is not as straightforward as it sounds because the relationship between method of entering a country, employment situation and mobility is, in reality, complex. She writes "...the boundary between legality and illegality [is] often indiscernible, with women moving in and out of legality and illegality following illegal practices". (ibid: 239) Women who have migrated legally are 'technically' illegal once they run away from their sponsor-

employers but a significant number of women do so despite the obvious risks associated with illegal residence status.

She stresses that women sometimes choose illegal ways to migrate and prefer undocumented status in the host countries for a number of reasons such as the freedom to choose who they work for, the chance to make more money by working for several households as freelancers and the psychological importance of freedom of movement within the country. The Ethiopian government, in its public awareness programs, correctly emphasizes the disadvantages of illegal migration in the dangers migrants face *during the journey*. In addition, illegal residents always run the risk of deportation in case of a police crackdown. Otherwise, as de Regt (ibid: 254) concludes, “[in] many cases, there is little difference between legality and illegality”. In fact, under some circumstances, illegality may be more advantageous. In light of these issues, the government’s current promotion of legal-contractual migration for domestic workers as the best deal can only be seen as lagging behind.

2.11. Common Problems Migrant Domestic Workers Face

At this juncture, it would be appropriate to briefly highlight problems that migrant domestic workers deal with in the Middle East. Ethiopian returnees complain of work overload, excessively long working hours, unwillingness of employers to let them contact their family back home, being forced to work for other households, denial or reduction of salaries, untimely payment of salaries, derogatory remarks and treatment, denial of food, being locked up when employers leave, beatings, threats of violence, sexual harassment and the like.(ILO Addis Ababa 2011) Where work-hour and salary related complaints and

social isolation are very common, physical and sexual aggression is also significantly reported. Increasing numbers of returnee domestic workers are also reported to be seeking psychiatric treatment for mental sickness. (Birke et.al. 2009) Repeatedly, media and human rights organizations have reported on the loss of life and limb as a result of either the women's attempt to escape abusive and life-threatening situations or acts perpetrated by employers.

Research and media reports show that, mostly, it is women employers who perpetrate such abusive acts on migrant domestic workers. As has been discussed earlier, this should not come as a surprise if not for the widely held essentialist conception of gender that fails to see women as capable of violence. In the first place, almost all of the domestic worker's contact takes place with the woman of the house. Jureidini, in seeking explanation for the widespread mistreatment of migrant domestic working women in the Middle East, writes "[Repressive] governments and religious regulations result in frustrations seeking release onto those who are most vulnerable. In addition, the culpability of female employers in the abuse of domestic maids can ostensibly be linked to their assumed second-class status in Arab families, among other possible explanations".

De Regt (2010:239) presents the fact that African female domestic workers are employed by Yemeni women as proof that, despite popular depictions, Arab women have some rights. However, without contesting the notion that Arab women exercise some rights, I agree with Jureidini's assertion that what comes out from the study of the situation of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East is rather the gender subservience of Arab women. Returnees' testimonies show that sexual advances toward domestic workers by the husband are cause for further abuse by the wife. (ILO Addis Ababa 2011, p. 51ff) This

shows that wives/female employers would rather take their vengeance on defenseless domestic workers than challenge the established norm and confront their unfaithful husbands. To conclude, Ethiopian domestic workers in Middle Eastern Arab countries face multiple challenges for being alien, women and ‘maids’.

Chapter Three: The Pre-Migration Process

3.1.. Brief History of Private Employment Agencies in Ethiopia⁶

Aside from individual search for overseas domestic work employment, employment agencies play a significant role in facilitating labour exchange globally. However, pursuant to a UN convention to which Ethiopia was a signatory that abolished PrEAs, these were not operational in Ethiopia until 1998. In 1998, the country enacted its first legislation which introduced PrEAs in the country after ILO convention 188 restored employment agencies. After the legislation was put in place, three years passed before the first PrEAs registered with MOLSA to obtain licenses and start operating officially. In 2001, two PrEAs obtained licenses from the Ministry to send Ethiopian nationals for work to Beirut, Lebanon. But out of the two, only one, known as Meskerem Agency, was actually operational.

In the relatively short period of time from 2001 up to now, however, the number of legally registered PrEAs has increased tremendously. To date, the Ministry has issued licenses to 406 PrEAs; out of these, a few have ceased to operate for various reasons. All operating PrEAs have their main office in Addis Ababa with some of them having opened branches in major cities such as Dessie, Mekelle, Bahir Dar and Hawassa. Currently, the Ministry has suspended the issuance of new licenses to PrEAs (with the exception of a few who are already in the pipe line) for an indefinite period starting from July 9, 2013. The reason given for this temporary suspension of license issuance is ‘the need to review our license

⁶ The data for this chapter is obtained from a number of interviews with Ato Zerihun Yeshitla, PrEAs Licensing Desk Coordinator at MOLSA; Ato Mesele Tesfa, Employment Service Research and Labour Market Information Expert at MOLSA; Ato Daniel Lema, Expatriate Work Permit Service Team Coordinator at MOLSA; Ato Yared Alemayehu, Training Expert at MOLSA; Ato Tafa Tullu, Consular Monitoring and Support Director at MoFA; Ato Solomon Melessie, General Manager of Association of Ethiopian Overseas Recruitment Agencies and employees of two PrEAs who wanted to remain anonymous.

issuance procedure and other related matters', according to a notice posted by the Ministry. Proc. No. 632/2009, the current legislation that governs the operations of PrEAs is again being amended.

In the past twelve years, MOLSA has issued licenses to PrEAs that send workers to Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Qatar, Dubai, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. However, at different times, PrEAs have ceased sending domestic workers to all the above countries except Saudi Arabia and Kuwait⁷. The reason behind such suspensions is generally unwillingness either by Ethiopia or labour receiving countries to continue sending or receiving Ethiopian domestic workers. In some cases, the Ministry imposes bans on PrEAs preventing them from sending workers to certain countries. But as MOLSA officials readily point out, the effect of such bans is the proliferation of human trafficking and smuggling activities by crossing borders illegally or via legal channels by transiting in a number of countries before they reach the destination country.

The situation of how PrEAs have been sending Ethiopian domestic workers to the above seven territories and the reasons behind the suspension of five of them is diverse, to say the least. Researchers have noted that state policies and practices with regard to foreign labour in general but unskilled and domestic workers in particular are affected by politics. Aside from economic or human rights concerns, the political climate between labour sending and receiving countries finds expression in their labour provision and reception, usually to the detriment of workers wellbeing. (Jureidini 2003; Lutz 2002) Below, I have tried to piece

⁷ Saudi Arabian PrEAs have recently stopped sending visas to their Ethiopian counterparts since two Ethiopian female domestic workers were reported to have killed their employers' children in June, 2013.

together information I collected from a number of government officials and PrEA personnel on the history of legal domestic labour migration by country.

Lebanon: I obtained widely discrepant data on when PrEAs started sending domestic workers to Beirut. A government official said that the first legally registered PrEA obtained its license three years after the promulgation of Proc. No. 104/1998, which brings the date to 2001. A source from PrEAs said that migration to Beirut started in 1996, which is even before the legislation was issued. Considering that legal migration cannot have taken place before the necessary legal instrument was put in place, the earlier date given by my source probably goes to show that most PrEAs do not see that much difference between legal and illegal migration. Legal migration to Lebanon was suspended in 2007 as the Ethiopian government came under pressure as a result of the deaths of a significant number of women. At the time, the Lebanese government's response to the situation is said to have been unsatisfactory. In addition, Ethiopia did not and still does not have an embassy in Lebanon to look after its nationals' interests. The suspension was to last until a labour exchange agreement was signed between the two countries, a move that has not materialized to this day.

Saudi Arabia: Legal domestic work migration to Saudi Arabia through PrEAs started in 2003 and continued up to a couple of months back when a number of Ethiopian domestic workers were reported to have killed their employers and employers' children. There is no bilateral labour exchange agreement between Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia as the Saudi government was not willing to meet the minimum the minimum pre-conditions proposed by Ethiopia. The negotiations stalled but the two governments agreed to keep working with a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the PrEAs associations of the two

countries. Saudi Arabia, thus, continued to benefit from Ethiopian women's labour without any obligation on its part to ensure their safety.

Dubai: PrEAs started sending domestic workers to Dubai legally in 2004. However, as few as the number of PrEAs engaged in legal migration to Dubai were, this was also suspended starting from July 2012. As mentioned before, Ethiopian women in Dubai are widely reported to be engaged in prostitution. As far as public opinion in Ethiopia goes, domestic labour migration to Dubai is quite literally believed to be a pretext behind which women engage in the highly denounced and illicit activity of sex trade. The Ethiopian government is said to have imposed the ban on Dubai to preserve the 'national image' of the country.

Syria: Legal migration to Syria started in 2005 and became suspended in 2007. The situation is said to be similar to that of Beirut: workers' abuses and not having an embassy to monitor the conditions of Ethiopian citizens. The suspensions for both countries took effect in the same year.

Bahrain: Legal migration to Bahrain started at the end of 2005; it was suspended in 2008. One source gave me the obvious reason for its suspension: because we did not have an embassy. Another one was more forthright and said that it was the Bahraini government that suspended visa issuance because Ethiopian women were said to be prostitutes who were ruining Bahraini culture.

Qatar: PrEAs started sending Ethiopian women to Qatar in 2006. It was suspended in 2008 due to the political falling out of the two nations as a result of the Qatari government's support for the regime in Eritrea. In particular, the Doha-based Al Jazeera news channel's reporting on Ethiopia's involvement in the Somali conflict is said to have solicited the

Ethiopian government's response of suspending domestic labour provision to Qatar. Negotiations had restarted and only last month, a bilateral treaty was signed between the two countries for the provision of labour. An agreement has also been concluded with Jordan after bargaining on the minimum wages of Ethiopian workers, which was finally set at 230 USD.

Kuwait: By far, Kuwait is the last country to have started receiving Ethiopian women domestic workers legally. A bilateral labour exchange agreement has been concluded between the two countries. PrEAs started sending workers to Kuwait in 2008 and continue to do so to date. However, in September 2013, the House of Peoples' Representatives has adopted a resolution to suspend all Middle Eastern labour migration for six months starting from November, with the intended purpose of strengthening the concerned bodies' capacity to train future migrants.

Unlike most Asian labour providing countries which train, monitor and provide much-needed assistance to re-integrate their migrant nationals, the Ethiopian government has had a very passive role in this phenomenon until recently. Even now, its active involvement is limited to the pre-migration process and particularly in regulating the operations of PrEAs. Otherwise, searching for potential market for Ethiopian domestic labour abroad is entirely left to the private sector. In addition, post-migration follow-up of domestic workers is totally absent. MoFA says that it sends to embassies in the Middle East lists of workers who migrate to the respective countries; however, embassies are not doing their jobs properly. Though Ethiopian embassies in Middle Eastern countries provide shelters for

troubled citizens⁸, none has assigned labour attachés responsible for the monitoring of migrant workers' situations. Follow-up is conducted only in specific cases when complaints are lodged by family members about the women's situation.

Even in the situation of the ones lucky enough to let their family know about the difficult situation they find themselves in, the government does not get directly involved. Instead, MOLSA pressures the PrEA responsible for the specific woman's labour migration to take action through its counterpart overseas. I was able to observe a number of meetings between returnees or family members of migrants and PrEA personnel at MOLSA. Heated and lengthy disagreements take place as the complaint lodgers feel that neither MOLSA officials nor the PrEA people appreciate the sense of urgency of the matter. As the routine death of Ethiopian domestic workers proves, this roundabout attempt at solving migrant workers' problems is absolutely inadequate in light of the grave risks to their health and life.

3.2.Official Steps Undertaken to Qualify for Legal Labour Migration to the Middle East

A) Obtaining a Passport

Like any other traveler, Ethiopian women seeking employment as domestic workers in Middle Eastern Arab countries need a passport to travel overseas. The government agency empowered to issue passports to Ethiopian citizens is the Main Department for Immigration and Nationality Affairs, or more commonly known as Immigration. However,

⁸ According to Ato Tafa, the way embassies run the shelters is itself contributing to the exploitation of Ethiopian women. For instance, the shelter in Kuwait houses up to 650 people, thus, attracting women to leave their jobs and fall into the hands of Ethiopian men who lure them into taking up prostitution.

the number of applicants far surpasses the Department's capacity to deliver that during the time of my observation, it took four months from date of application for an applicant to actually get a passport.

Until a few years back, the Department had no other branches outside of Addis Ababa forcing applicants from the remotest areas of the country to travel to the capital under great difficulty in order to obtain a passport. Currently, the Department has decentralized its services and has opened branches in some of the major regional cities such as Dessie and Dire Dawa. Though this has spared the head office in Addis Ababa from being completely overwhelmed, the current four-month processing period and the attitudes of officials at the Department clearly show that the sheer size of applications and the service rendering capacity of the Department are still highly disproportional. Another factor for the overcrowding at the Addis Ababa office, according to Department personnel is that, these mostly uneducated Middle Eastern migrants from rural areas are under the impression that the passports issued in the regional offices are somehow less valid than the ones issued in Addis Ababa. One prospective migrant stated that at the Dessie and Dire Dawa branches, it even takes six months to obtain a passport.

From several days of observation in and outside the Department's premises, I could see that most of these potential migrants are very young women; some who obviously have not attained majority. The vast majority are not keen on chatting with strangers: some do not speak Amharic, others pretend not to or they walk away without any response. First-time migrants from the countryside generally look suspicious and fearful whereas city girls and returnee migrants are quite at ease and more confident. The women are dressed diversely as they come from all corners of the country, however, long floor-sweeping skirts and head

scarves are very common. From their looks, one would assume that most of them are Muslim; but as I found out later, even those who are Christians and plan to travel as such⁹, dress that way as part of rural modesty but also in preparation for the expected required dressing style working in Arab households.

Coming to Addis Ababa to apply for a passport, most of these girls are leaving the rural villages where they were born and grew up in for the first time. Those who have been recruited by brokers to work as domestic workers in ‘Arab country’, as it is commonly referred to in Amharic, usually come in groups of four or five and stay together in places prepared for them by the brokers until their paperwork is processed. These places are usually small cramped rooms which the brokers rent for this purpose or some even make the girls stay in their own rented rooms, which leads to some of them being sexually taken advantage of.

Some brokers accompany the girls to the Department and other offices where their presence in person is required. In this case, the girls look a bit more confident because they do not have to worry about getting lost trying to get the right taxi to where they are staying or getting their belongings stolen. While the girls are queuing up outside the compound and waiting in line inside; brokers, family members, friends and service seekers who are waiting for their appointed time, wait looking from afar since guards do not allow anyone except the Department’s immediate service-seekers to stand near the compound. On one of

⁹ In the early days of Ethiopian women’s work migration to the Middle East, the common trend was for women to acquire a Muslim identity, that is, women changed their names into ‘Muslim names’ and changed their dressing style. Nowadays, Christian domestic workers can be employed anywhere in the Middle East without pretending to be otherwise, except in Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. However, some women still opt to acquire a Muslim identity because some employers and local PrEAs prefer to hire Muslims.

my visits, I met a relatively older woman who from her dressing style appears to be from Wollo in northern Ethiopia who asked me for directions but did not know the name of the area where she was staying. I have also noticed more than once that some taxi assistants tend to overcharge them recognizing that they are prospective Middle East migrants who are new to the city.

At the entrance gate, the Department plays a recorded message that informs its 'esteemed customers' to come only at the appointed time, which they can also gather from the colour of their passes that are different for mornings and afternoons. It also reminds listeners not to be fooled by people who claim that one needs educational qualification of a certain level to obtain a passport and that the service fee has gone up. The information desk is located at the center of the gate and other Ethiopian customers apart from passport applicants are handled through this window. Though it cannot be compared with the 'Arab' queue, there is a long line here too.

People in this line are dressed expensively and fashionably; some are Ethiopian born American citizens, whereas others are well-educated nationals who want to go abroad for conferences and trainings. Standing in the sun, people complain about the slow moving pace of the line and the overall unfriendly atmosphere at the Department's gate. Three or four policemen with sticks are always on duty outside the gates. Every now and then, along with civilian guards of the Department, they shove people away from the entrance, down the stairs and across the road. If the crowd is big or people do not move away quickly when they appear, they smack the ones in front with their sticks. City people do not take to this lightly and confront the person responsible though to no avail; whereas, the Middle East

migrants disperse with no reaction and slowly crowd the narrow entrance again within minutes.

Among this disorderly mass of people, thieves are known to exist targeting these young and unaware domestic labour migrants. It is said that theft is an everyday happening in this area; some women lose their hard-won passports before they even get back home. Once one has entered into the compound, the scene is more orderly. Here, the challenge for the women is a different, more official kind. Most cannot fill the application forms which are prepared in Amharic and English because they cannot read and write or they are afraid of doing it inappropriately. They ask for favours from fellow applicants who fill their own forms or from anyone who is willing to help. On one instance, I filled forms for four girls in a row; when I asked for their date of birth, they gave me their resident identification cards. This is not necessarily because they do not know their ages but since they are minors, they want to make sure that the carefully chosen dates recorded on their identification cards get transferred to their passports because their actual age may cost them the chance to travel.

B) Visiting Private Employment Agencies (PrEAs)

Once an Ethiopian woman seeking domestic employment in Arab countries obtains a passport, she needs to go to a PrEA of her choice to fulfill the necessary criteria in order to secure employment and get a visa. However, the women's choice is very much restricted for a number of reasons. Firstly, for the first five years since the first PrEAs legislation was issued, Lebanon was the only country that was receiving workers legally. Throughout the past fifteen years of legal migration through PrEAs, the number of countries that an

Ethiopian woman could access domestic employment opportunities at a time has been six at most, which lasted only for a year. As mentioned before, for the past year, a woman could only go to either Saudi Arabia or Kuwait legally. Secondly, out of the 406 legally registered PrEAs, only a handful are licensed to send workers to Kuwait; all the rest send domestic workers only to Saudi Arabia. These two factors force Ethiopian women to flock to Saudi Arabia by default.

In addition, most of these women do not have the knowledge or exposure that would allow them to choose which country to go to. For women from rural areas, it can be said that it is the brokers who recruit them that decide where they should go to and the brokers' choice is influenced by which PrEA offers them the highest commission. PrEA's capacity to offer commissions is in turn most influenced by their financial capacity. Though PrEAs are not keen to say how much money they earn from sending domestic workers to the Middle East, unofficial information I gathered shows that it pays better to send workers to Saudi Arabia than to Kuwait¹⁰. For the few women who are informed enough to distinguish between two Arab countries, the fact that it is cheaper to go to Saudi Arabia is also a consideration that affects potential migrants' decision. At the time of my fieldwork, domestic labour migrants were supposed to pay 2,587 ETB to PrEAs in order to go to Saudi Arabia and 3,597 ETB to go to Kuwait¹¹.

¹⁰ Local PrEAs receive 500 USD per person from Kuwaiti PrEAs, whereas Saudi PrEAs pay them 600-800 USD per person.

¹¹ Most women end up paying a lot more than this sum as brokers and PrEAs request for more money than what the law allows them to.

At the PrEA, if a woman is going to Saudi Arabia, they tell her to go to ‘gamca’. ‘Gamca’ is a company that was solely responsible for the medical examination and certification of Middle East migrant labourers until recently. ‘Gamca’s’ approval of medical results is said to have been a mandatory requirement by all Middle Eastern labour receiving countries. The company sent the women to a few selected private clinics, which undertook the medical examinations. It then collected the results of those who were diagnosed to be in good health and gave its approval. A few months back, the government revoked its business license claiming that it did not even have a proper business license and that it was unduly financially exploiting the women. If a woman ‘passes’ medical examinations, she needs to get a crime-free certificate from the Federal Police, which needs to be notarized. Women who are turned back by ‘gamca’ for unsatisfactory health conditions, lung scar and liver problems being common problems; sometimes seek the help of traditional medicine men.

Upon bringing her medical result and criminal record to the PrEA, the receptionist takes the job seeker’s passport , two 3” by 4” photographs, copies of her own and her contact person’s resident identification cards and registers her. The PrEA then processes the paperwork, which comprises of insurance policy, employment contract, employee information sheet, visa, power of attorney from the overseas agent and Amharic translation of the last two documents. Finally, the PrEA’s letter requesting the approval of the worker’s employment contract is attached and submitted to MOLSA. If the Overseas Employment Work Contract Inspection department finds the papers to be in order, the PrEA calls the woman to attend a pre-departure orientation session as per MOLSA’s schedule. After the orientation, MOLSA sends two copies of the employment contract to

the PrEA along with a letter which states that the named individual has attended orientation and that her employment has been approved by the Ministry. The PrEA then takes the papers of women whose contracts have been approved by MOLSA to the Saudi embassy for approval. The PrEA finally buys the women's plane tickets and gives it to them a few days before their flight.

Pre-migration requirements for Kuwait are more stringent, which makes the process a little longer. This is because bilateral labour exchange agreement has been signed by the two countries. A potential migrant first goes to a health center selected by the PrEA which she approaches. At the PrEA, she is told to bring two 3" by 4" photos and a full-length photo along with her medical result. For the photo, the women should be standing, put their hands on their laps and wear slippers. This is because their fingers and toes need to be visible for inspection by potential employers. One receptionist tells a young woman who came inquiring about criteria, that for the photos, if she is a Christian, she is not expected to wear a headscarf. The PrEA then sends these to the overseas agent. If the woman gets selected by an employer; visa, insurance and her employment contract are sent by the overseas PrEA to the local one after being notarized by the Ethiopian embassy in Kuwait. The PrEA then sends the woman to 'gamca' for a second medical examination and to get criminal record statement from the police just as for Saudi Arabia.

As things stand, officials at the Ministry try their best to ensure that all legal requirements are fulfilled by PrEAs before approving contracts. However, starting from the aggressive mass recruitment of young and unaware girls, the pre-departure process itself is full of loopholes. For instance, it is common for brokers to submit their own identification cards in place of the migrant's emergency contact person. Later, if the migrant returns in a fragile

mental state or dies, unless family members get informed otherwise, the Ministry has no way of contacting them. The fact that PrEAs translate Arabic documents using their own personnel also presents issues of credibility. From what I know, for all official purposes, documents must be translated by licensed translation offices and notarized before being submitted to government agencies. Apart from such minute-sounding details which, however, undoubtedly contribute to the dangers to which Ethiopian domestic workers are exposed to in the Middle East; I have noticed two major problems that have to do with visa issuance and employment contracts.

An essential element of legal labour migration to the Middle East is that employment contract is entered between the employee and the employer, or in the wording of the legislation, the ‘agency on behalf of the employer’. For this purpose, a standard contract has been prepared which is utilized for the two destination countries differently. The document is drafted in Amharic, English and Arabic. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the Ethiopian PrEA fills in the details of the employer and the domestic worker in this model agreement. The employer’s personal information is obtained from a ‘Worker Qualification Form’ sent by the overseas PrEA. Though PrEAs are secretive about the details of how they work, from what I could understand, they match employers and employees from the pool that is available. As one PrEA receptionist was brave enough to tell me, a liaison officer from the PrEA signs on behalf of the employer and they put the overseas agent’s stamp, which they have in their hands.

For Kuwait, the contract actually comes signed and stamped either by the employer or the agent. This will undoubtedly instill a certain sense of responsibility in these parties. For both countries, however, these contracts are signed by the women at the end of the

orientation session. They stand in long lines in front of officers at MOLSA who point to different spots on the paper as the women approach to sign. The presumption is that most of the women can barely read or write and even if they could, there is hardly enough time, with three officers handling thousands of women's documents at every session. Signing employment contracts is a hurried and intimidating process for the women. By the time I observed this procedure, the number of orientation attendants had dropped dramatically to three to four hundred migrants per session due to the closing of 'gamca' and the sudden fall of requests from Saudi Arabia. However, one officer in particular was very impatient with the women and made them even more jumpy by the demeaning remarks she threw if one of them did not approach her desk fast enough or was slow while signing.

Another troubling issue in the migration of Ethiopian women to the Middle East has to do with the issuance of visas. Again with regard to Kuwait, PrEAs have told me and I have confirmed that entry visas are issued in Kuwait and notarized by the Ethiopian embassy for each woman who has found an employer. On the other hand, obtaining a Saudi visa is as simple as visiting a PrEA in Addis Ababa. Up to a year back, PrEAs worked with copies of visa papers which they duplicated as many times as they had applicants. Starting from a couple of years back, MOLSA has prevented PrEAs from working with copied visa papers. Currently, PrEAs include original visa papers among the documents presented to MOLSA. However, it is obvious that the original is just as available¹², which shows the Saudi government's desire to import the 'cheap' labor of Ethiopian women without any commitment on its part to ensure their safety.

¹² An unpublished Amharic bulletin prepared by MOLSA states, some PrEAs, tour operators, travel agents and import-export companies are known to use their Middle Eastern connections to send Ethiopian women domestic workers on business and tourist visas. Nationals of Middle Eastern countries themselves rent homes and directly recruit women. Some embassy personnel are also implicated to take part in such activities (p. 32)

C) Attending Pre-Departure Orientation

According to Proc. 632/2009, Ethiopian labour migrants are presumed to have some basic skills before travelling abroad. However, domestic labour migrants, who comprise the vast majority of Ethiopian labour migrants, are said not to have the necessary skills for the job. As we have already discussed, most of these women come from rural parts of the country where access to running water or electric power is a luxury or a novelty. Thus, they do not know how to handle modern household appliances. In addition, as they do not have any exposure to the outside world, they are not familiar with what is expected of them living as domestic workers in Arab Muslim households. This is why since 2007 MOLSA started providing pre-departure orientation to domestic workers, which in Amharic is misleadingly referred to as ‘training’. Attending this free orientation session is a mandatory requirement by the Ministry for a Middle East labour migrant. Currently, the orientation is given by four full-time trainers, both on mornings and afternoons, Monday to Friday. A prospective migrant is required to attend one session.

Each session lasts three hours: during the first half the women watch a video; the second half is dedicated to briefings by a trainer. The major theme of the video which lasts 90 minutes is underlining the benefits of legal migration to the Middle East while at the same time showing that following the enticement of brokers to travel without the Ministry’s approval could be highly detrimental. It starts with excerpts from MOLSA officials’ and returnees’ interviews. These revolve around the hardships suffered by illegal migrants on the sea and desert routes to the Middle East. The video then proceeds to show and narrate the life stories of two young women, Tizita and Feven, who go to ‘Arab country’. Tizita is the wise, smart, disciplined one who sets out for domestic work in the Middle East out of

necessity: her parents' home is mortgaged and she decides to earn better than she is doing locally in order to pay the mortgage. Feven, on the other hand, is a spoiled girl who is drawn into migrating to the Middle East by a broker's false promises of a good life.

Throughout, Tizita makes the right choices: starting from deciding to travel via a PrEA, she tries to familiarize herself with the work and the culture before she leaves. Her diligence pays off later: she takes good care of her employer's children, she returns golden jewelry she finds while cleaning, she knows how to handle appliances and detergents, she is familiar with her employers' dietary habits and religious practices and is respectful of them and most of all she successfully averts sexual advances by an Arab male. Her goodness is rewarded with a timely payment of salaries and extra cash. In contrast, Feven is constantly found at fault by her 'madam' who is irritated by her repeated mistakes and picks on her and slaps her around. The 'madam's' brother tries to seduce her once and she gets hit by the madam for being found standing with and listening to him. She is not so lucky the next time he approaches while she is making a bed: she gets raped and becomes pregnant and complicates her life even further by the decisions she makes afterwards. The film ends with Tizita happy having achieved her dreams, whereas Feven returns an amputee with a broken spirit.

For the second part of the orientation, the trainers came in and started by asking what lessons the women have learned from the video they just watched. Having attended two sessions in May and August 2013, both with female trainers; I found their approach authoritarian and domineering but with disguised friendliness and concern about the migrants' future wellbeing and success. One trainer told her eager students that they should inform their family back home if they get into trouble but should never abscond,

‘otherwise, though you migrated legally, you become illegal’. After briefly describing to them what their rights and duties are, the trainers focused on the overall attitude and values the women should have while working as domestic workers in Arab households. They were encouraged to be diligent, decent and loyal to their employers.

The trainers took care to remind the women that in the employer-employee relationship, though they are at an obvious disadvantage, their employers have rights too. One trainer told them, ‘Just as you can return if you encounter problems, they have the right to say that they do not want you too, if you cannot manage the work or you do not conduct yourselves ethically’. Being overworked is one of the most common complaints by returnees from the Middle East. On this issue one trainer had the following to say: ‘You have to work eight hours, that is your obligation, you are the ones who shorten or lengthen your working hours; there are women who finish their chores in five, six hours and rest but if you take eight hours to make a bed and must work late into the night, you should not grumble’. Another one was less hard on the women but still encouraged them to face reality: ‘You will probably work twelve, thirteen hours and not eight hours as it says on paper but you should not tolerate it if they allow you to sleep only two, three hours’.

The maintenance of personal hygiene received intensive coverage by the trainers; a nail clipper, deodorant, shaving blade, tooth paste and brush and sanitary napkins were collected from the attendants and demonstrations were held by volunteers on how to use them. They were told to shower and brush their teeth three times daily, to wash hair twice a week, to clip nails short and to shave off all body hair. ‘Mostly, workers from Ethiopia have problems of body odour and bad breath. This is why it is said that we Ethiopians are not clean. However, we are not different from anyone, are we? It is just that you need to

know how to keep yourselves clean and smelling good. Arabs want cleanliness very much', both trainers stressed. The national image of the country got invoked repeatedly by the trainers in talking about cleanliness, work ethics and faithfulness with employers' property.

'Appropriate' gender relations with men while working and living in Arab households is another important lesson to be learned from the orientation. In one of the sessions the trainer warned, 'Tell me, why do we go? It is to work, right? Looking at the men is not permitted; if a man orders the performance of a chore, no laughing, smiling or talking; you bow your head, say yes and leave. If a man comes into a room while you are working, you leave and go back and finish after he has left. If a man asks you to hand him his clothes, do not ever do it. When you sleep, lock your bedroom and leave the key on the door so it cannot be unlocked from outside. Arab men do not do anything unless they sense that you are okay with it. Mostly, [women] get thrown off balconies when after they have shown a soft face to the man and reached an inappropriate stage, he goes and apologizes to his wife and you get hurt in the end. Arab men respect their wives; if he tries to seduce you saying "I will buy you a house or a car", do not fall for it; you are there to work, do not get involved in such things, if you work hard you will get it all through your own labour'.

From these admonitions by these seasoned trainers, one can see that the infidelity of husbands and their wives' anger and mistrust is behind most of the brutality of female employers towards female domestic workers. We can probably say that undoubtedly there have been Ethiopian domestic workers who have been guilty of 'trying to steal' their employers' husbands. On the other hand, there have also been those who have been treated cruelly by the women out of suspicion and jealousy based on unfounded fears.

However, irrespective of whether domestic workers ‘invite’ or allow the sexual exploitation that happens to them or not, the cultural labeling of Ethiopian women as wayward and licentious makes their lives even harder. The tendency to hold the domestic worker solely accountable for the improper conduct of Arab men is highly disturbing. The men are exonerated as if they cannot be responsible for their actions, whereas the domestic worker gets the blame even for being raped; the excuse being that she invited it or she was not careful enough. In a situation where this attitude of Arab society sadly gets reflected in the training given by the sending country itself, domestic workers can by no means expect to get justice for sexual crimes that are committed against them by their employers.

The women’s relation with the men in their lives also received ample attention from the trainers. Married women were encouraged to keep using contraceptives until the day of their departure. Trainers encouraged unmarried women to abstain from sexual relations until their departure and not to put too much trust in the men they leave behind in general. ‘It is better for single women to abstain from sexual relations until you leave. A woman has been sent back for being found pregnant not even a couple of months after her arrival. Farewells should not exceed having tea or coffee. He sees you off at the airport and goes to another woman. And once you start receiving your salaries, do not send money to boyfriends. I wish you would not do it. Many a woman has upon her return found him married and with kids and found herself at ‘tsebel’ and Amanuel¹³. Only one faithful man out of a hundred may be found; tell him to work for himself; if it is serious and he waits for you, you will get together upon your return. And do not take contraceptives of any sort;

¹³ ‘Tsebel’ refers to holy water administration sites within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition where people mostly go for treatment of anomalies that they believe have no human cure. ‘Amanuel’ is the only psychiatric hospital in Ethiopia, which is recently seeing an increase in the number patients who are domestic labour migrant returnees from the Middle East.

otherwise you will be accused of trying to seduce husbands and on a national level, spreading prostitution’.

It is often said in Ethiopia that female domestic workers who have been to the Middle East do not have much to show for their years of hard labour. This is due to the fact that they dedicate a large portion of their income to supporting their extended families back home. The trainers took up this issue also: ‘You have to start saving money. Those who do not have a bank account should open a savings account before you leave; copy a page for yourselves and leave the book with family. When your employers deposit money, your family can go and check that it is sent but no one can withdraw from your account until you return. Help only those who are needy and when you do decide to help, send money directly to the recipient of your assistance. There is no such thing as “Arab countries’ money does not last long”; if you save it, it will last.’ As one trainer spoke these last words, there was a knowing laughter in the hall. However, as I try to show in the next chapter, it is doubtful that these few moments of inspiration will alter the girls’ way of thinking because the desire to shoulder one’s parents’ responsibilities when one comes of age is so deeply ingrained in rural Ethiopian culture.

At the end of the session, the trainers reminded the women the total cost of migration to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as approved by MOLSA¹⁴. At this point, murmurings were heard from the audience as the women started talking in twos and threes because most of them had already paid two or three times more than the sums mentioned by the trainers to brokers and PrEAs. The trainers tried to quiet the room by saying, ‘we know that they

¹⁴ The Ministry has posted these figures along with a list of ‘legal’ PrEAs on a notice board outside its gates. However, this seems to serve a privileged few because, as discussed earlier, most women are recruited by brokers from their hometowns and do not have enough awareness to inquire about their affairs beforehand.

make you pay exaggerated sums; what you should do is go and talk to them about this and if they still do not budge, you can lodge a complaint with us'. One trainer added, 'If you took medical examinations twice due to delays on your part, then, it is your expense. In my opinion, if the difference is not that exaggerated and it is a matter of two hundred, three hundred birr; it is better to leave it'. However, even without such discouragement, from what they were discussing amongst themselves, the women were not going to take up this offer as they reasonably fear that PrEAs and brokers will spoil their chances if they do.

Trainers also informed migrants that their monthly salaries are 700 rials for Saudi Arabia and 52 Kuwaiti dollars per month, depending on which country they are migrating to. Both amounts are the equivalent of 180 USD, which is the minimum wage set by MOLSA for domestic labour migrants. Having looked at two employment contracts each for Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, I could see that though the job request form provides for a number of options that describe the worker's responsibility, none were marked. A general request for a 'house maid' and the amount of salaries is printed at the top of the page. The trainers then cautioned the women, 'Those of you who are migrating again and have agreed on a higher salary with the PrEA that is sending you because of the experience you have already gained, should make sure that the agreed upon figure is put on the contract you are about to sign'. However, as discussed above, the women have no opportunity to check their papers except to do as they are told by the officials who preside over the contract-signing procedure.

All in all, the three-hour pre-departure orientation provided by MOLSA is definitely an eye-opener for those who are migrating for the first time. I could not find anyone willing to sit and talk as they are in such a hurry to leave after sitting for three hours. However,

during the orientation, I have observed that they watch the video very attentively and some cursed out loud as the man who raped Feven approached her. Apart from the gender-bias discussed above, which however has a serious ramification for the women, the presentation is not buttered up to show an ideal working condition but instead covers a wide range of issues that domestic workers commonly face. As we left the hall, the girls are so engrossed by the stories and talk about the two characters as if they were real. In such a short period of time, the orientation exposes the women to a number of issues that are common challenges to Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East. It is organized to encourage young would-be migrants to prepare for the worst and to do the best they can under the circumstances. However, the fact that the orientation session is scheduled to take place only a few days before their departure diminishes the effectiveness of the Ministry's efforts. Particularly, the pleading calls for attendants not to migrate unless it is an absolute necessity are futile in light of the costly investments they have made by this time.

Chapter Four: Migrants' Expectations and Experiences

While making major decisions in life, humans have certain expectations whether these are rational and realistic or not. For Ethiopian women migrating to Middle Eastern Arab countries for domestic work, the decision to migrate is monumental one way or the other. Given the pervasive traditional gender roles where the primary responsibility of women revolves around taking care of family members' domestic needs, the possibility of going abroad on one's own to earn an income can be quite irresistible. For the majority of Ethiopian domestic labour migrants who come from rural areas, further adding to their eagerness to travel abroad are the independent-looking returnees who go back home with luggage full of clothes, soft blankets, perfumes and gold jewelry. Some even finance the rebuilding of their parents' house.

However, the situation of Ethiopian women domestic workers in Arab territories is not picture-perfect. In fact, research widely shows that, in the past two decades, women have suffered excessive work load, food and sleep deprivation, isolation, verbal and physical abuse, sexual harassment and abuse, and financial exploitation. These grim realities have come to dominate popular discourse and media outlets so much that not a single positive report can be heard or read. Songs and documentary films have come out that recount the tragic situation of Ethiopians in the Middle East, particularly female domestic workers. In these presentations, the women are referred to and depicted as exiles that are forced into migrating by predator traffickers or faulty ways of thinking. Government media, in particular, strongly denounce Middle Eastern domestic migration and plead with the public to explore local opportunities before considering migration. However, as the figures show, these efforts meant to dissuade potential migrants do not seem to have succeeded so far.

Table 1. Female domestic labour migrants that migrated through PrEAs.

Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013 until April
Saudi Arabia	9,399	2,396	13,446	158,959	125,345
Kuwait	6,976	10,837	25,457	28,476	16,061

Source: Public Relations Department of MOLSA

In the midst of so much negativity, what do the women expect when embarking on this journey? Are their expectations realistic? What factors shape their thoughts and decisions to migrate? How do they view their migration experiences? These are some of the issues I explore in this section.

4.1. Youthful Optimism

Nejat Batamo, 20, was born and grew up in Daleti, near Sebeta town. She is a 9th grader and lives with her parents who are now old and retired from agricultural work. She has four siblings and is the fourth child to her parents. One of her older sisters has been a domestic worker in Dubai for two years and has now been working in Saudi Arabia for a year and seven months. On the day we met, she had come to Addis Ababa to receive her passport at Immigration.

Lutz has observed how "...domestic servants have to repress the anticipation of dangers and problems in favour of the expected positive results [and] seem to trust their own problem-solving capacities". (2002:101) Nejat is a good case in point. She rationalized: "Since I am going through a returnee neighbour of mine who has sent many people to Arab countries, I do not think I will face bad circumstances. But if I do, I can only tolerate it.... A friend of mine who has gone through this woman has said to me, 'It is a good place, why don't you come?'; there are also many who have faced difficulties and who do not call." A

bit later she tells me: “I think it will be a good house, I think they will be nicer than my mother and father; that is how I think but I do not know...” Her statement clearly shows that she is well aware of the risks involved in her intended migration but prefers to downplay the negatives and imagine that her employers would be kind people.

Amele, 18, was born and grew up in Lalibela. Growing up, though she lived with her mother in Lalibela, she came to Addis Ababa every winter to stay with her father while school is closed. She has cousins who have migrated to Beirut, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. I met her at immigration while waiting to collect her passport. I asked her what her thoughts are on the kind of life she may encounter in ‘Arab country’. She answered: “I do not know what I will encounter... with God... in the household which I go to, at first I will tell them that I have relatives there so that we may see each other if I get sick or something. And if I find the place disagreeable, I will go to them.” Amele does not want to speculate about the unknown but has a plan to let her employers know that she is not a helpless alien right from the start. But if things go bad, she has an unrealistic expectation that she can simply pack up and go to her cousins. Another would-be migrant, Workalem Negede, 26, was born and grew up in a rural village on the outskirts of DebreBirhan town. At the time of our conversation, she has been married for three years and was living with her husband in DebreBirhan. She had postponed child birth so far because she intended to migrate to the Middle East. Asked whether she had any concerns about Middle Eastern work migration, she was brief and definitive: “I do not think that I will face a bad situation.”

Zinash Abdi was four months short of her 18th birthday when I interviewed her; she flew to Saudi Arabia a few days later. On her passport, she is 25 years old and has an Arabic name; she is travelling as a Muslim. Her parents are Muslim but for the past six years, she has lived in an Orthodox Christian home. She said, “I had been baptized

but now I am going to be a Muslim again”. She was born in Dessie and lived with her parents until she was 12 years old. She has seven siblings; her immediate older sister had migrated to Saudi Arabia three months back. For the past six years, Zinash has lived with her uncle’s family in Addis Ababa. Her uncle has five sons; one of her cousins had wanted to bring her to Addis in order to give her a good education since he did not have a sister. However, she only started to go to school two years after she came. She said her uncle’s wife had fired a domestic worker and a lady who used to wash clothes a week after Zinash came to their house. Since then, she has been taking care of household chores for the family. She went to a government school and stood 1st to 3rd from her class.

Zinash has given a great deal of thought to the kind of life she may face in the Middle East:

“I think it will be a good thing. If you ask why, it is from me. If I am good, it will be good. What I think is, even if the people are harsh, if I take care of my responsibility properly, they cannot do anything to me. Someone you may consider to be harsh, you can calm down and let it pass. I do not expect something bad to happen to me but good; my relatives who have come from Arab countries say it is good. Only one (woman) told me that they are harsh and sort of get jealous. The others say that they are good if you are clever. I have not met anyone to whom something bad had happened; it is only good.” She told me how her uncle’s wife brings home negative stories about Middle Eastern returnees “she collects from the village, trying to scare me because she wants my labour”.

Zinash later narrated to me the stories of the two women from MOLSA’s orientation video. She has taken the lessons well, along with what returnees have told her, and reached the simplistic conclusion: ‘if I am good, it will be good’. She plans to do her best and is convinced that she can weather much potential employer-related difficulties. However, as her statement a little later shows, she recognizes that despite her efforts, everything does not depend on her. She admitted: “The contract is for two years; if they are good, I will

work and shall not abscond; but if not, I will abscond. Passports are kept with them...” As a last resort, Zinash considers running away from her employers even without her passport. Zinash and Amele take comfort in the possibility of being able to run away from their sponsor-employers. This tendency of Ethiopian migrants to abscond has been noted by researchers; de Regt writes “In some cases, women are even informed before their arrival [] that they can run away and then take up work as freelancers for higher salaries and under better conditions. (2010:251)

According to AtoTaffa Tulu, Consular Monitoring and Support Director at MoFA, 90% of employers confiscate passports from the women as soon as they arrive and do not process residence and work permits for them, despite their legal obligations to do so. De Regt (2010) has found that agents also are weary of absconding women and warn employers not to let domestic workers out on their own, with the added justification of protecting them from the corrupting influence of other Ethiopians. By seizing domestic workers’ passports, employers undoubtedly intend to discourage them from running away. However, as Zinash’s statement shows, once a domestic worker decides to leave her place of employment, being without a passport is not going to deter her. Therefore, instead of having the intended effect, seizing personal documents as domestic workers arrive, only serves to scare them. In addition, as we have seen in chapter two, domestic workers in the Middle East are legally attached to their employers. Therefore, once they have run away, they are considered illegal irrespective of whether they are carrying their passports or not.

Hareg Wudneh, 20, had returned from the UAE only weeks before I met her in a shelter home of Good Samaritans, an NGO that provides shelter, medical treatment and family-reunification services to returnees found stranded at Bole International Airport upon

arrival. She had migrated to Dubai four years back and had worked in another Emirati city for the past two years. She remembers vividly her enthusiasm as she was processing her passport. “I came to Debre Sina on Saturday, a market day. My cousins were there, I asked them to take me to have my pictures taken and I did so. I came under the pretext of selling my chicken; I had one. Back home, when I went to fetch water, I told my friend ‘my aunt has come and she is going to take me to Addis Ababa.’ After I got my passport and went back home, I was suddenly told that my visa had come. It was a Saturday. I was herding cattle in the backyard. Then I quarreled with my sister; we quarreled much and I said to her ‘I will see what you will do now, I am going to leave you and go.’”

Hareg’s childish excitement at the prospect of going abroad, however, does not last long. Later, upon arriving at her employers’ house, she recounts her first dealing with her employer: “She told me to shower; I was hesitant because I had my hair done at the salon and I said so. When she became angry with me and told me to shower, I washed it out. After I washed at night, in the morning she told me to shower again. I did not take much clothing because I was told not to and when I said so, she was angry with me.”

Aynalem, a 19-year-old (‘passport age’ 25) returnee from Kuwait, was born and grew up in Addis Zemen town in Gondar. She was an 8th grade student when she migrated; she had worked in Kuwait for a year and two months and was sent back when she suffered a mental breakdown. When we met she had been back for seven months and had just started cooks’ training. She is staying in a shelter provided by Agar, the only other NGO that provides shelter, medical treatment, family-reunification and skills-training to returnees.

Aynalem also told me about her childish eagerness at the prospect of going abroad. “When my aunt suggested that I go to Arab country to work, it was a new thing to me and I said yes. Let alone Arab country, I did not even know Addis Ababa. The thought of coming

here was a delightful one... I could have obtained my passport at Bahir Dar, but I said no because I wanted to come here to see Addis Ababa. I arrived in Kuwait at 5:00 in the afternoon; the man came at 6:00 and took me home. The city is beautiful; it is even well-lighted than Addis Ababa. I liked it, I was not scared.” Both Hareg and Aynalem had very vague notions about domestic work in Middle East, if any. With their rural upbringing and tender ages, they were not only unskilled but unprepared.

Hareg’s first employer returned her to the agent after a week. She has been taken by so many employers that she could not keep count of them. “A woman took me in the morning and returned me at the end of the day having washed dishes only and gave me 10 birr. In another household, I was returned after two weeks for breaking a plate. They said they had given 200 birr to the agent for the two weeks I worked there and the agent said he has received, but he did not give it to me.” She told me that she had worried and cried a lot because employers had returned her several times. Aynalem grudgingly admits: “In general, it is not very agreeable. When I left here, I did not ever think that I would come back, but I got sick. I had thought that I would live there for many years. While I was here, I did not think that the work load would be this much.”

As the stories of my informants show, women’s conception of domestic work in Arab Middle East is shaped by a number of internal and external factors such as their ages, life experiences, returnees’ testimonies and lifestyles and brokers’ promises. It is a widely recognized fact that hundreds of underage girls from all over the country travel legally to the GCC for domestic work every day. They have their resident identification cards which claim they are five, six years older than they actually are. One owner of a PrEA has told me that they try to dissuade the very young from migrating and even turn them back advising

them to wait just a few years. Ato Solomon Melessie, General Manager of PrEAs Association agrees that the situation of underage girls is a major problem. He laments: “They are mere children but if you saw their parents, you would not think they are parents; the way they come and challenge us when their daughters have been refused service.” In the words of a senior official at MOLSA, “They are brokers’ prey, like sheep being led to the slaughter.”

4.2. The Role of Brokers

Desitu Dachew is a 35-year-old mother of two. I first met her at MOLSA while she was lodging a complaint against the PrEA that facilitated her migration. She had marks on her neck which appeared to have been caused from strangling. She was born and grew up in Enewa’re, an arid rural village around Jirru to the north east of Addis. In her early 20s, her family married her off but she left the man in less than a month because he was a lazy farmer and wanted them to live with her parents. She then ran away from her father’s house and stayed in Debre Birhan with her uncle for seven months. Finally, she came to Addis with a lady she did not know and who had pity on her. She estimates that she has lived in Addis Ababa for fourteen years before her domestic work migration to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The huge role played by brokers or recruiters in the migration of Ethiopian women to the Middle East has been noted by research in the area. (ILO Addis Ababa 2011, p. 24) Out of the eleven primary informants I interviewed, the active involvement of recruiters was present in at least five women’s migrations. Desitu tells how the broker urged her on as she was considering migration: “Initially, the lad was urging me on. I started passport processing because he made so many phone calls hurrying me on. I was actually worried thinking ‘I have no education, what would I do if I went?’ but he said, ‘What do you need an education for? They are coming from rural areas and travelling without wiping their eyes clean. Why do you need an education for domestic work?’” Desitu had lived around

Entoto, St. Mary's for the past thirteen years and says the broker used to live there as well but moved away when she threatened to sue him for taking exaggerated fees from her.

The brokers that facilitated Hareg and Aynalem's migrations are more well-established ones. Hareg had come to Addis to stay at the broker's with her aunt who was migrating for the second time. She says the broker's place is at Chew Berenda, a neighborhood in Mercato that has become the infamous hub of such brokers. She refers to the place as 'agency' but it is not clear whether it is a legally registered one or not. Hareg said she stayed there for two weeks until her passport was issued and did not go out anywhere because she did not know Addis and there was no one to take her out. She said other women who were going to the Middle East, including her aunt, were also housed there. When I asked if she knew the agency's name, she answered: "I know him, they call him Abdi over here. I think it is Abdi Endris; in our hometown he is known as Ziad, I know him by Ziad. When my visa came, I stayed there again for a week before my flight. I came only with my clothes; I did not have even 1 birr on me. They gave me food at the agency and my father would send the money." This suggests that brokers, in addition to the large fees they collect from migrants, also make them pay for their upkeep. In addition, using two names may be a way of avoiding being tracked by law enforcement officials.

Aynalem sought the assistance of a broker who lives in a different town from where she lives. She says he has a big hotel and his residence is like Addis Ababa town. He brought her to a PrEA in Addis, from where she received her ticket but her contract has not been approved by MOLSA. She asserts: "I have been to the hospital for medical examination and given fingerprints. I have heard about MOLSA, but I have not been there." Legally, PrEAs are required to obtain the Ministry's approval of workers' employment contracts

before they send workers abroad. However, as government officials at different levels admit, a number of PrEAs routinely violate this requirement.

Nejat and Workalem relied on returnees to facilitate their domestic work migration. Nejat had the following to say about the returnee-broker: “She has been a domestic worker in Saudi for seventeen years, and has now returned and gotten married; she has not given birth yet. She has no other job; she gets paid and this is what she does for a living. She will facilitate everything; my ticket will come in her name. I will not go to an agency at all and I do not know if she is working with an agency or not.” Nejat’s statement shows how the women put all their trust in their recruiters, believe everything they are told and do not look for alternative sources of information. Workalem’s recruiter is a returnee who herself is migrating again to a different Arab country. “She is the one who asked me if I wanted to go. Her sister went, and now I am going. She is the one who knows the agency; I communicate with them through her phone. We will talk about it more in DebreBirhan, she cannot always come with me to Addis Ababa because she has children.”

Typically, brokers make promises to first-time migrants about the good salaries that are paid in the Middle East. And lack of freedom of movement and excessive workloads are always stories from other Arab countries, not the ones to which they are sending them. Workalem states: “It is when you go that you will know how much your salary is, what I heard is that it does not amount to 3,000 birr, but it is being said that it will soon amount to 3,000; that is what she told me. She said to me ‘a country where the salary is lower but you live freely.’ ‘Freely’ means you will not have a heavy workload; she had told me the country but I forgot.” Aynalem remembers: “The broker said I should go to Kuwait

because their payment is good; there is freedom and rest. That is what he told me when he sent me. The payment is 3,500 as he promised but there was no rest.”

Nejat says: “The woman has told me that the salary is 4,000 birr. Kuwait and Dubai are now closed... because a lot of people are getting sick and dying but there are no such problems in Saudi. She has told me about the household which I will go to: it is an old woman who lives alone. She cooks her meals; I serve it to her, iron her clothes and clean her house. She has no children and the work will be easy. There will be no working for an additional household; she will pay me 4,000 birr. If something problematic happens to me, the broker has told me to call on her mobile. I will not give my passport to anyone; it is in Dubai that they take it away.” Zinash was processing her migration directly through a PrEA, but she told me how a broker from her hometown who sent her sister had turned off his phone when she tried to call him about her sister who was working for two households (a mother and daughter) for one salary.

Recruiting young girls from rural parts of the country for domestic work in the Middle East and neighboring countries such as Sudan has become a very lucrative business for brokers. Desitu paid the broker 4,000 birr for facilitating her migration, in addition to other expenses she incurred; Hareg thinks her father paid the broker around 7,000 birr; Aynalem paid 8,000 birr out of which he gave her 300 birr for passport and Nejat was going to pay 5,000 birr. AtoTaffa Tulu, from MoFA says that it is common for brokers to charge 3,000-12,000 birr and that they have information that some have paid up to 17,000 and 21,000 birr. However, it is not just shadowy brokers who extort cash from the women; ‘legal’ PrEAs also request for exaggerated fees from the women.

Whether they are exploited by individual brokers or directly by PrEAs (which are legally recognized brokers), the women mostly know that they are being taken advantage of. Women from rural areas do not have access to PrEAs as branch offices are just being opened in regional capitals. Plus, the network of brokers is already very well spread. Given the rural psyche where one is not supposed to trust strangers, people find it easy and comfortable to use the human chain of ‘known’ individuals irrespective of the cost. In addition, women’s socialization is still very much limited to the household, making their access to valuable information just as restricted.

4.3. The ‘Pull and Push Factors’ for Work Migration

In migration studies, migrant domestic workers would fall under the category of economic migrants. That is, the pull and push factors for their migration are more or less explained in terms of the poverty of their state of origin and the affluence of destination countries. As diverse as these women are, the dream of earning a good income in a relatively short period of time overseas is the unifying theme of their life stories.

When I asked Workalem why she wanted to go to ‘Arab country’, she explained: “I thought about going because there are people from my hometown who have gone and returned, but they are going back again. It is good; when I look at her (referring to her recruiter); she is in a good condition in that she is able to help her family. She is from a low-income family; she does not have anything for herself yet...rebuilding her mother’s house, educating her brothers and sisters... because her mother raised her on her own after her father died. I plan to work for myself and to help my family too. My husband fattens cattle; we work together. We earn well, but it is not that good. It is to improve. What you make in Ethiopia in ten

years, in Arab countries you will have a working capital in at least two, three years. This is what I hope for. You fatten cattle and labor and sell it for 200, 300 birr profit.”

Workalem does not consider herself to be low-income. She runs a profitable trade with her husband. She told me that they regularly hire laborers because the work is beyond the two of them. However, she calculates that her salary as a domestic worker in the Middle East would be three or four times more than what she makes from such a laborious task at home. She and her husband have agreed that she will return home at the end of the two years contractual period. She hopes to raise her standard of living and assist her family of origin also. She said that her husband’s sisters and cousins have migrated to the Middle East and that they call and are all doing well. Nejat’s motive for her intended migration is helping her elderly parents. She is tired of being dependent on her migrant sister and wants to help her out in sustaining the family. She says she will get to her own life later.

Merima Mubein, 25, was born and grew up in Jimma, in a rural village known as Gatra. She has been a domestic worker in Dubai for five years. Upon her return, she started a small shop in her hometown, then stayed in Addis Ababa for some time and migrated to Saudi Arabia in 2013. After working for four months, her employers gave her over to the police due to an incidence whereby Ethiopian domestic workers were alleged to have killed their employer’s children. I met her at Good Samaritan’s shelter where she has been receiving shelter and counseling. When we met, she had been back and staying in the shelter less than a couple of weeks. However, though she was not keen on contacting her family, she could not wait to go out and start working.

Merima, who must have been fifteen or younger when she left her hometown, remembers what motivated her want to migrate: “I ran away from home and came to Addis Ababa with only 7 birr. A girl named Zebiba had run away from home, lived in Addis Ababa and returned having bought gold and stuff, beautiful things. I asked her ‘what is it?’ and she told me, ‘I worked for 400 birr. At first I was employed for 50 birr, then, when they liked

me, they increased it to 400. Here, I have bought *gabi* for my father and textile for my mother.’ She had also brought *netela*. Then I thought and I thought, it is very much that I love daddy, ‘I will go to Addis Ababa and buy for Daddy¹⁵; no, I will not’. Then I asked Daddy: ‘let me go.’” Aberu, 35, is a mother of two who migrated to Sudan after her persistent attempt to migrate to Kuwait failed for medical reasons. Desitu and Aberu migrated to be able to give their children a better life. Both of their families lived only on the husbands’ incomes. Desitu’s family of four lives in a single room which they rent for 200 birr. Aberu, in addition to her own two children, has been raising her niece as her own; they live in government-owned, low-income housing units for which they only pay 4 birr.

Amele has a more individualistic approach: “I have cousins who have migrated to Arab countries. It is because of them that I got the desire to go. I will at least see how it goes; it is two years, right? I will work and buy something for myself without wasting the money, then return and work in Ethiopia. I would like to start a hair salon.” Aynalem had hoped to start a shop in her hometown. Hareg’s motivation was more childish: “The reason I wanted to go was because my family would not buy me clothes or anything; when I asked them to buy me clothes, they refused. When I said ‘I will go to Addis Ababa’, they said ‘no’. Later I said ‘all my friends have migrated. I will too.’ My father complied, ‘If she insists, then let her go’. As the above statements show, young women’s motivation to migrate emerged from the desire to be self-sufficient as much as the responsibility they felt to support their families.

¹⁵ In Ethiopia, particularly in rural areas, children do not address their parents as ‘daddy’ and ‘mommy’. Merima must have learned to refer to her father as ‘daddy’ from her five-year stay in Dubai.

Research depicts Ethiopian female domestic work migration to the Middle East as a family strategy of survival (ILO Addis Ababa 2011, p. 23). However, in this research, what I found out was that though financing migration is certainly a family affair; the decision to migrate mostly came from the women themselves. Of the eleven primary informants I interviewed, only two girls' families suggested that their daughters migrate to the Middle East. In fact, two of the four would-be migrants I interviewed were processing their migration despite the express disapproval of their families. Nejat says: "My sister gets paid 4,800 birr, she is paid regularly; she calls, but she does not want me to go at all. She says others' country work is difficult. My parents also tell me to keep studying. When I first told my sister, she rebuked me and said 'You are not coming through me; do not bring up about working in others' country with me'."

Merima remembers her father's reaction when she first mentioned Middle Eastern migration before she ran away to Addis Ababa: "My father said 'If you go, I will curse and destroy you. You are not going to Arab countries; a child of mine will not become Arabs' underwear-washer. I would rather see you beg for food on the streets.' When he said such things, I thought 'Does this man want to hold me back?' I said 'no' and ran to Addis Ababa." Hagerua, a returnee who had migrated twice, told me that the first time she migrated, her family (except a sister who helped financially) only knew about it a day before she left. She explained: "They did not want me to go because they thought I would get hurt." These stories corroborate Mesfin's findings that "The decision to opt for work migration thus seems to be somehow exempted from the ordinary gendered decision making structures". (2011: 1)

4.4. Non-Financial Motivations

Interestingly, women's consideration of domestic work migration does not always arise from financial motivations.

Alganesh Jemal, 27, was born in Wollo but grew up with her aunt in Addis Ababa. She has received formal education up to 8th grade. She migrated to Dubai in 2002 as a babysitter to a Sudanese family and stayed for more than a year. Out of this period, she had spent the last six months in hospital trying to recover from serious injuries she suffered as she jumped off the third floor balcony of the house she worked in. She had been raped by her employer's brother and her employer started to constantly lock her up and made sure she was never out of the house. She had also stopped paying Alganesh's salary. At her release from hospital, the Ethiopian community collected clothes and luggage and sent her home. Here, Italian doctors in Wolisso had to operate on her right leg twice before she could walk properly. In 2008, she got married but her marriage lasted only two years. At the end of 2010, she migrated to Kuwait and worked for seven months; she was sent back suddenly, having received two months' salary only. I met her at Good Samaritans' office, which had trained and facilitated the start of a cooperative business with other women after her return from Dubai. She had been engaged in a promising leather works business which, however, dissolved at the end of 2007. This time, she was given boarding and a 250 birr monthly stipend. She spent most of her nights taking care of new returnees at Amanuel hospital.

Alganesh told me why she decided to go to Kuwait after what she experienced in Dubai: "When my marriage was over, I was very upset and did not want to sit here. I was very heart-broken because it was him who initiated the divorce. We did not even argue a lot, but he was under pressure from his mother and family... he finally went their way. When I went for the second time, I thought 'Even if I die, it is better for me over there' because here, you were going to be hurt twice. First, I returned a lot of harm having happened to me; again, the guy who came in saying 'everything will be okay' had hurt me and left... So when I went, I thought 'even if I die, it is okay'." Research shows that when women

experience trauma as a result divorce, some choose to migrate as a way of cleaning the slate in order to start a new life. (ILO Addis Ababa 2011, p. 24)

Zinash also confided her reasons for wanting to migrate: “You know what my main reason is for wanting to go? I am tired of living in this (referring to her uncle’s) house. Life has tired me out, the work has harmed me. Obviously, I am the domestic worker; nobody else does any household chores. I work this much, but I cannot take the misbehavior of her (referring to her uncle’s wife) children anymore. She has three adult sons living at home. One has a wife and child in the U.S. but he lives with his mother. They say that he has started the process and will be leaving. I am the one who works, but the words that come out of their mouths, the insults... Earlier I did not mind the things they said because I was a child but now that I have started thinking things thoroughly, I feel bad about it. For instance, I spend the weekend washing clothes; I wash all their jeans. While I am doing this, if he comes and finds that I have not performed a certain chore, he throws insults like ‘you backward, donkey, stupid.’ I was very much hurt and said I will go. We are maternal cousins, but their relative is money.” In deciding to migrate to the Middle East, both Alganesh and Zinash had one overriding thought: avoiding the emotional trauma caused by others. Apart from escaping the desperation they were experiencing at home, they did not have much financial goals.

4.5. Financing Migration

The vast majority of Ethiopian domestic work migrants are young women who have not completed primary school or who have just completed 10th grade. (ILO Addis Ababa 2011, p. 27) Another research conducted on 443 Ethiopian women in Middle Eastern countries

showed that only 26.7% were engaged in paid work before their migration. (IOM Addis Ababa 2004 as cited in an unpublished bulletin prepared by MOLSA) Women, thus, rely on family to pay for their migration. Merima, after running away to Addis Ababa from her home, got employed as a domestic worker. However, since her earnings were very low, she needed her families' help to pay for migration. "I had 800birr that I earned and the lady added 200 birr to me. I took this home and asked my parents to give me the remaining amount. An ox was sold and all my family contributed and sent me. I do not remember how much, but my father had spent a lot of money. The first three years, I did not call. I kept to myself and worked. The last two years, I started calling and sending money. Then, they bought an ox again and a small shop was opened." She was able to finance her second migration again through domestic employment in Addis Ababa. This time, she covered her own expenses. Aynalem also said that her parents sold livestock to pay for her migration.

Amele intends to arrange her migration through a PrEA and says her parents can afford to pay for her no matter how much the cost. Zinash's migration was being paid for by her cousin in the U.S. Hagerua's migration to Syria through a PrEA was financed by her sister, whereas her migration to Qatar involved neither PrEAs nor brokers, thus requiring no mentionable expenses. Desitu covered her expenses from the family's small saving. Alganesh had borrowed 4,000birr from relatives; she repaid 3,000birr from her earnings in Dubai and had to wait seven years until her re-migration to Kuwait to pay the remaining sum. Though she had stayed in Dubai for more than a year, she could not completely repay her debt, let alone to save cash for herself. And as mentioned above, in the years that passed between her two migrations, her attempts to become financially self-sufficient had

not materialized. She sold property “left behind” by her ex-husband to pay the PrEA that facilitated her migration to Kuwait.

Finally, Nejat’s migration was being sponsored through remittances sent by her sister in Saudi Arabia. Her sister is in her fourth year as a domestic worker in the Gulf; their family of five now lives on her sister’s income. For Nejat’s parents, investing money obtained from one daughter’s migration, to finance another one’s migration is undoubtedly a good investment. Nejat holds her sister, who is six years older than her, in high esteem. She did not see herself or her other married sister as productive but wanted to be a proud family-supporter like her migrant sister. She is in grade 9 but plans to keep going to school only until the next remittance from her sister arrives. As the stories of my informants show, most families rely on their network of relatives for financial support to send their daughters for domestic work migration. It is also common for farming families to sell their oxen, which are their most valuable assets, to invest in the migration of their women. (ILO Addis Ababa 2011, p. 27)

4.6. Cultural Biases

People who work in this area often say that Ethiopian women migrating for domestic work are utterly unprepared for life in the Middle East. On top of lacking basic skills, they are said to be conservative about their culture and to have no familiarity with Arab culture. Some, particularly PrEA personnel, complain that they also have a low work ethic. A combination of these factors is, thus, blamed for their mistreatment by Arab employers. Returnee domestic workers, on the other hand, account all their negative experiences to the harshness of their Arab employers. Undoubtedly, both sides’ claims cannot be completely

refuted as they are based on experiential knowledge. However, the unspoken suggestion by some that ‘civilized’ Arab employers cannot be blamed for abusing or violating the rights of these ‘backward’ domestic workers is insupportable. In the same manner, holding ‘the Arabs’ responsible for all the mishaps that domestic workers experience is not helpful.

The content of MOLSA’s orientation module and conversations with PrEA personnel reveal that Middle Eastern employers have a negative perception of Ethiopian domestic workers. They are seen as crude, unhygienic, poor, dishonest, lethargic and sexually lewd. It is said that as domestic workers arrive at their employers’ homes, some employers throw away their traditionally prepared food, which takes their family considerable time to prepare. As some women from rural areas do not want to spend valuable cash on luggage, they carry their belongings in plastic shopping bags, which also get thrown into waste bins on arrival.¹⁶ Some of my returnee informants said that their employers not only did not give them enough food, but acted like they ate a lot when they did eat because they presume that where they came from, they definitely did not eat enough. (See also ILO Addis Ababa 2011, p. 51; Birke et.al.:562) Such prejudices are sure to tar employer-employee relations before they even start. The biases are, however, mutual: Ethiopians now see Arab employers in general as perpetrators of violence, abuse and exploitation against innocent Ethiopian women. One of my informants expressed her abhorrence: ‘Arab country is not paradise, but hell’. In this research, three of my informants also made interesting references to the practice of black magic by employers.

¹⁶ Interview with w/t Wegayehu Alemu, Training Expert at MOLSA.

4.7. Pre-Departure Experiences

In addition to any pre-conceived ideas Ethiopian women may have about domestic work migration; their pre-departure experiences also affect their work experiences. As I have already discussed, even prior to their migration, Ethiopian domestic work migrants face financial exploitation. Some brokers demand sexual favours in addition to or in place of cash payments. In addition, as they process their paperwork, they are made to incur unnecessary cost. Workalem told me how after the four-month appointment period, she came to be fingerprinted at Immigration and was told to come a week later because the machine did not detect her fingerprints immediately. She reasoned out: “My fingerprints were difficult to trace because my skin has roughened as I handle cow dung.” She stayed with her sister on the outskirts of Addis Ababa to avoid going home only to come back after a week.

I accompanied Zinash to the PrEA as she went to collect her plane tickets; on the phone, she was told that she would be flying the next day. After waiting for the boss for an hour and a half and paying 3,000birr, which she legally should not have, she was told that she was scheduled to fly after three days. She told me this was the second time they were re-scheduling her flight. Desitu told me how after waiting for hours for a Riyadh flight to take off, she and other fellow migrants were told that there were irregularities with their tickets, which should be corrected by their PrEAs. After staying overnight at the airport and catching cold, she had to stay with relatives for six days because she did not want to disturb her two-year old daughter who had already said her farewells.

Aberu's troubles were more costly and time-consuming. She had intended to work in Kuwait because a returnee relative had told her that the salary is good. She underwent a full medical examination and had a good result. She proceeded and paid 1,500 birr as down payment for visa; when she went for the second medical exam; she was told that there is a scar on her lungs and could not go. A third x-ray showed her lungs to be clean but 'gamca' insisted that she could not go. Having wasted 3,000birr and six months, she finally went to Sudan and worked for more than two years. Such irregularities could have a serious impact on the post-migration experiences of the women. Furthermore, given the media's campaign of denouncing domestic work migration to the Middle East, public disapproval of such migrants is getting worse.

4.8. First Impressions

Hagerua Melese was born and raised in Addis Ababa. Previously, she had migrated to Syria through a PrEA and returned in three weeks having stayed in the overseas PrEA's office for almost the whole time. In 2008, she migrated again to Qatar having found domestic employment through a friend of her sister's who was a domestic worker in a non-Arab household. She worked in Doha for four years, having returned home after the first two years for a one month vacation during which she got married. When her second term was about to end, she tried to get her husband to migrate. By then, legal migration to Qatar had already been suspended. Since illegal migration was very expensive and dangerous, they decided that Hagerua should return. When she finally returned, she was eager to have children and conceived immediately despite her husband's imploration for her to take some rest after her Middle Eastern stay. She had a healthy daughter but her daughter died in less than two months; though a postmortem had not been conducted, doctors who saw her just before she passed told her that she has not been fed enough. By the time I interviewed her a few months later; Hagerua was still broken and was looking for a job without much motivation. She said that brokers would tell her that they had found her a job but would want 'something else' in return.

Hagerua contrasts her two migration experiences as follows: “When I went to Syria, the PrEA people told me that my employers would pick me up at arrival but I stayed at the agency for twenty one days and returned. Other Ethiopians, Filipinos were also at the office. I did not see Ethiopians being punished but the others were made to crawl on their knees in the heat of the day and poured water on as they did. For food, they gave us rice mixed with I-know-not-what; we would not eat it. Somewhere in between, I had started work in a household for two, three days. The kids were nice, but the woman was insane. She used to make me work excessively; I would sleep only for two, three hours.”

“When I went to Qatar, I had told my sister’s friend that I would never work in an Arab household and she found me employment with a Jamaican man and an American lady. Before I left here, I was even asked if I liked dogs because they had a pet. My friend had told me ‘The man is a pilot and he looks Habesha, do not be scared, he will be picking you up’. It happened just as she said. That night, his wife told me to call my family and tell them that I have arrived safely and to rest. The next day, I started working.” Hagerua’s story shows that first impressions can have a lasting impact on the workers’ long term stay. The fulfillment of expectations or promises on arrival has a calming and reassuring effect on the women. On the other hand, staying at PrEA shelters for days and learning that they do not have employers yet can be highly unnerving.

4.9. Compatriots’ Influence

Starting life and work in the seclusion of a household, adjusting to a new culture and learning their employer’s language, these mostly young women seek out fellow Ethiopian domestic workers. They want the comfort of a shared identity, advice from seasoned

workers and someone to share their thoughts and anxieties with. Luckily, with the mass domestic employment of Ethiopian women in the past couple of years, new migrants do not have to look too far to meet other Ethiopian women. They would have been employed in neighbouring households or in their employer's relatives' houses. In such cases, they meet their compatriots while their employers visit each other or while running an errand. It is also not uncommon to find two Ethiopian women working for a single household.

In countries such as Kuwait and Qatar, Ethiopian women who have liberal employers are said to rent a room in which they spend their weekly or monthly rest days. About a dozen women would rent a place and contribute to its upkeep from their salaries; they gather as their schedules allow to prepare meals and chat. However, the number of women who enjoy such excursions cannot be considerable. None of my informants have ever taken part in such luxuries though they have heard about them. Hagerua regularly attended church with fellow Ethiopian Orthodox believer, in an Egyptian Coptic sanctuary in Doha. She also said that she used to go to Ethiopian holiday celebrations in one of her friend's employer's house. She remarked that though her friend's employers are conservative Muslims, Hagerua and friends would be served and entertained in the family living room.

In our conversations, informants frequently mentioned confiding in or exchanging advices with other Ethiopian domestic workers. In the Syrian house where Hagerua worked for three days at most, she remembers that an Ethiopian who worked for their relatives had told her 'Tolerate it, but it is a difficult house'. In Qatar, she said that the girl who had found her the job came over, looked at the place and said, 'It is a clean house; you will not find it difficult. Sometimes, they mess up their house and bring a new girl to clean it up.' In the first household that Hagerua started work in where she got into conflict with her employer

over frequent showering; she said that there was an Ethiopian woman who had worked over there for years. She remembers how the woman gave her a change of clothes and comforted and warned her saying ‘I have a six-year old myself, it is okay, it is okay, nothing will happen to you, but the woman is very mean.’

Desitu’s encounter with an Ethiopian was not a happy one. Her employers were expecting a child and Desitu said there was not much work there. But they would take her to her employer’s mother’s house most of the time. She recounts: “There was a lot of work there, cleaning the house, washing clothes, ironing...but I would have managed the work if it were not for the Ethiopian girl who worked there. She lives having resembled herself to them. She is Muslim; in addition, she has learned the language. When a new girl got employed for her, she started telling them many things with her language and made me quarrel with them. She does not work but makes the two of us work, the new ones; but when they come, she pretends. She had told them that I did not want to work and wanted to return. They asked me through another Ethiopian if I wanted to go back. I said, ‘I want to work. Why would I want to return having spent my children’s bread-buying inheritance to come?’.”

Desitu said that though the broker had told her she would be paid 800 rials monthly, this same girl told her that she will be paid 700 rials and that they start paying when she has worked for three months. Desitu then wanted to change employers if these would not pay her on time. She was then taken to the agency where the agent was even about to hit her when she insisted on a change of household or returning. Afterwards, they took her back to the house and restricted her access to people and phones. The Ethiopian girl had told her that the agent had told her employers to lock her up until fasting period was over. She told

me that she did not eat anything for fifteen days and was only crying. She said that she could not even make tea for herself because earlier, her employer turned the stove on herself for Desitu to cook and had not shown her how to do it. During this time she told me that the thought that dominated her mind was 'They are going to kill me when their fasting period is over, I would rather kill myself than for them to kill me'. She said she had drunk detergent and finally strangled herself on a window.

She vaguely remembers being cut off from the string, resuscitated and taken by ambulance. Later, from the agency she was taken to her employer's mother's house to spend the night until a morning flight could be scheduled for her. There, her employer's father, whom she described as a good-hearted man, was angry with her employer for bringing her back and insisted that she be put on a flight immediately so she can go to her children. He gave her 50 reals, the only payment she received after two months' stay in Saudi Arabia. Desitu said she only felt relieved when her employer mixed her with other Ethiopians at the airport. After coming home, she lodged a complaint against the local PrEA at MOLSA to claim her unpaid salary. The PrEA was made to pay her 5,000 birr: she gave 3,000 birr to three churches as a pledge and with the 2,000 birr, she 'enjoyed new year's day' with her family. Desitu positively asserts, "If the girl had not made the people hate me and disturbed me, I would not have left". Ironically, envy and slander among Ethiopians in the Middle East seem to be commonplace as MOLSA trainers also admonished migrants not to be jealous of each other but to love and help each other out.

4.10. Work Load...Sleep Deprivation

Excessive work load is one of the most common complaints of Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East. Two out of three domestic workers in the Middle East are engaged in forced labour. (Unpublished MOLSA bulletin, p.24) This takes the form of having to work for impossibly long hours or working for two or more households. Out of the seven returnees I interviewed in-depth, four stressed the excessive work load that was imposed on them by employers. Two of these worked for two households; Merima actually worked for three generations of women. The first household that Aynalem worked for was a family of five. Both parents worked and all three children went to school. Aynalem said the work was manageable but the lady of the house would come back from work and think that the house has not been cleaned just because she was not there to see it done. She would make Aynalem clean again. Otherwise, in the morning, Aynalem told me that she got up at 6:00 and went to bed around 9:00 or 10:00. The second family had seven children and the eldest son had his wife and seven children of his own living in the same house. Here, in Aynalem's words, "You just had no rest, no such thing as sleep".

Desitu worked mostly at her employer's mother's house. She described the situation as follows: "...cleaning the house, washing clothes with machine but ironing so much clothing is in itself difficult...even if you finish your chores, they would come up with a new one for you and do not want you to take a seat". Merima said that during her five-year employment in Dubai, her employers were sympathetic to her because she was a child and assisted her as she worked. The four months she worked in Saudi Arabia was a different story: "When they have seen me a month, they liked me a lot. In the second month, the woman started letting me cook. Then, she took me to her mother's. Her mother was very

harsh; she made me wash five carpets by hand. Then I started feeling some pain and was taken to hospital. The doctor said it was just my kidneys, prescribed medications and said I should take some rest until I finish my medication, but she gave me no rest.”

“I could not sleep in Ramadan. We would get up at 5:00, perform the *salat*, and then clean the house, the dishes, the walls, the windows, what not...there was no rest. When we tired, tears would come down, tears and sweat, that is it. The tears would burn my eyes and I would wipe it off...I had come to work, I would be brave...if my chores eased up a little, she would take me to her married daughter’s house. Her daughter made me clean the fridge, the house and her children’s clothes. When I am about to wash with machine, she says, ‘No, no, no, machine spoils them, wash by hand’. It is okay, I wash the clothes, but I would feel a burning sensation. I would be very upset and forget it.”

Hagerua was full of appreciation for her American employer: “The day after my arrival, she showed me the work and I started. She said ‘If she does not understand something, she can ask me a hundred times, I will not be weary, she should not be fearful’. We started getting along well and I worked. She cooked; my job was cleaning and ironing. The dishes she prepares are clean, whether it is chicken or beef, it is edible. When fasting period comes, she would ask me and we would go out and buy any Ethiopian food I wanted and I would cook for myself and eat. Friday was my day-off...they do not even check if you are in for the night, all that was expected of you was to start work on Saturday morning...She had told me to divide-up house-cleaning to my convenience and that is what I did. It is a one-story building. You can clean all the rooms everyday if you want but it is too hard.” Unfortunately, Hagerua’s experience does not reflect the majority of workers’ conditions in the Middle East. It is almost exclusively with ‘citizens’, as Hagerua refers to Westerners,

that a domestic worker can hope to find such flexible employers. Otherwise, the exploitation of migrant domestic workers' labour seems to be the norm in the GCC.

4.11. Salary Withholding and Abuse

For Ethiopian women who migrate to the Middle East 'legally', currently the minimum wage is set at 700 rials for Saudi Arabia and 52 dinars for Kuwait. However, Asian domestic workers are paid much higher salaries in the Middle East. According to Ato Solomon Melessie, general manager of PrEAs' Association, Filipino women are currently paid between 700 and 1,000 USD. This huge difference arises from the fact that Filipino domestic workers are reputed to be highly skilled. However, such generalizations with regard to workers' merits based on their nationality is unjust, to say the least. Nevertheless, such standardization of salaries based on 'national merit', as it is, is not unique to the Middle East. Lutz writes "All European countries have ethnic hierarchies legitimized by racist stereotypes that determine remuneration". (2002:92) Leaving the issue of minimum wage standardization for now, I want to dwell on a more common complaint of returnees: salary withholding. Returnees routinely claim being refused several months' salaries or not being paid by their employers at all.

In this research, non-payment of salaries is not an outstanding challenge as described by returnee informants. However, almost all women complained about irregular payment and deductions. Both Merima and Desitu said that their employers suggested that salary payment will start when they have worked for three months. Merima had to bargain hard to start receiving her salary monthly. In the second household where Hareg worked for two years, she said she had received her salary monthly but was not paid for the last five

months. She does not even know why but was waiting patiently because she thought her employer may be short of money as he was constructing a house. During this time, she said she has been given cash twice but it did not even amount to a month's salary. At her first job also, she said she was paid regularly but had been punished with a month's salary once for spoiling a *burqa* while ironing. Out of a seven-month employment in Kuwait, Alganesh said that five months' salary was used by her employer to buy her ticket back home. Moreover, migrants who return within weeks or a couple of months at most, as in the case of Hagerua's Syrian migration or Desitu's, receive no monetary compensation for what little time they work. And as officials at MOLSA, MoFA and PrEAs affirm, having such 'returnees' is becoming a common trend in the migration of Ethiopian women to the Middle East.

In varying degrees, Ethiopian domestic workers are also reported to experience verbal, physical and sexual abuse by their employers, other family members and overseas agents. (ILO Addis Ababa, 2011, p. 54) The stories my informants told me about their lives in various Middle Eastern countries confirm these reports. Aynalem said this about her female employer: "The woman, I think, is a little bit insane; sometimes she would scream at me. When some faults got committed, she got angry...she finds faults where there is none at all and goes 'Why did this happen?'"

Only two returnees talked in detail about their dealings with male employers. Merima tells how before her deportation, the lady went out and stayed overnight. She says she kept working though she felt bad and was shaky. Then, she described how policemen in cars with sirens came and filled the compound; they, along with her male employer, grabbed her and started pulling her out before she could unplug the iron she has been ironing with.

Once in an empty police station, she says that her employer tried to threaten her into signing a contract for six years claiming to take her back to Saudi after deportation if she complies. She claims he tried to intimidate her by saying that he will have injection administered to her and that he will spoil her passport, to which she answered in defiance. When she did not budge and they saw that intimidation was not working, she said they tried to woo her with tasty-looking dishes, gold, new clothes and a mobile phone, which she refused.

Hareg told me that the year and eight months she worked for her first employers, she had been sexually harassed and molested, hit and beaten by the man of the house. She said he had thrown a knife at her for washing the compound where he had ordered her not to. Hareg said her female employer had insisted that she wash it quickly. He, then, beat up his wife; Hareg said he used to hit his wife as well. Alganesh told me that she had been raped more than once by a younger brother of her Sudanese employer. She believes her female employer was complicit because she had started restricting her freedom of movement at the same time and was even arranging Alganesh a Sudanese passport so that her brother can take her to Sudan. Alganesh finally threw herself out of a third floor balcony because she felt it was better than 'being like this'. Merima asserted that while she and other Ethiopians were in police custody, the girls were called at night and raped which she avoided by claiming she had a husband and four children and pretending to have gone insane.

4.12. Re-Migration

Relatively financially well-off people in Ethiopia wonder out loud about the fact that young women still flock to the Middle East despite hearing about the horrible things that happen to Ethiopians over there. However, as the stories of my informants prove neither hearing about nor experiencing mistreatment is in itself a powerful enough deterrent against domestic work migration to the Middle East. Individual women with different personalities and stories find the power of ‘the pull and push factors’ too irresistible. Three out of the seven returnee informants I interviewed are second-time returnees. All three had re-migrated to different countries than they had been to before. Desitu, months after her return from Saudi Arabia, had started processing a visa for Sudan in order to transit to Beirut from there. After paying 2,000 birr to a returnee-broker, she declined due to family pressure. She regrets not trying Middle Eastern migration earlier and says will give it another try when her daughter has grown a little. Hagerua said that the moment she heard that her daughter had passed, the thought that came to her mind was ‘just to leave, to be exiled’. At the time of our interview, she would do anything to find a way to contact her employer in Qatar who had even offered to lend her 50,000 birr to pay for her husband’s migration to Qatar. Only Aberu sounded determined not to re-migrate because she felt like her earnings were not worth the hard work she did, but most of all, she wanted to be here for her children.

4.13. Local Domestic Employment

In this section, I want to briefly see the relationship between local and Middle Eastern domestic employment and what this means to Ethiopian women. In Ethiopia during feudal

times, the `privileged few households of feudal lords had enjoyed the services of a staff of servants in different parts of the country. Otherwise, in most other households, girls and adult women largely took care of domestic responsibilities. Even now, such a gendered division of labour among family members is the norm in rural Ethiopia where life is more or less unaffected by the modernizing influences of globalization. However, in the big cities of the country, particularly in the capital, paid domestic work has been a major form of employment for young women mostly from rural parts of the country for decades. The women seek domestic employment either through people they know or through brokers who operate in various neighbourhoods in the city.

In the past years, however, these domestic workers who practically had no other way of improving their lives locally have played a major part in establishing the `culture of migration´ to the Middle East. Two of my returnee informants, Desitu and Merima, had been domestic workers in Addis Ababa. Desitu had come to the capital more than fifteen years back and had experienced a number of difficulties while working in various households. She had been paid 40-50 birr, which she says was the average salary of domestic workers back then. Merima´s local domestic employment took place after Middle Eastern migration had become popular. She has engaged in domestic work twice to earn cash to pay for her migration to Dubai and Saudi Arabia. She is even now considering local domestic work hoping to be paid around 1,000 birr. Though she did not explicitly say it, she seems to have a third migration to the Middle East in mind.

The informal nature of domestic work makes it difficult to ascertain what the average salary of domestic workers is currently. Many young girls such as Zinash are known to engage in domestic work in their relatives´ homes without pay and without being

recognized as one. On the other hand, in affluent neighbourhoods in the city, some employers are said to pay up to 1,000 birr to domestic workers, which is more or less the equivalent of a junior university graduate's wages. If we take the average salary of local domestic workers to be 500 birr, a woman can earn at least seven times higher as a migrant domestic worker. In purely financial terms, an Ethiopian woman who does not have much education or skills is better-off as a domestic worker in the Middle East. However, as Alganesh cautions, "It is domestic work there and it is domestic work here, the difference is in money, but you have to consider what you lose to get that money".

CONCLUSION

The paper presents an in-depth look into the lives of Ethiopian female domestic workers to the Middle East. Though the main focus of the research is on the migration experiences of women, it deals extensively with their pre-migration expectations and experiences as well. The roles played by various actors such as the women's families, brokers, employment agencies, fellow migrants, NGOs and the concerned government agencies have also been touched upon. The attitudes, decisions and actions of these actors have a huge impact on the women.

Currently, the majority of domestic labour migrants are very young girls from rural areas of the country. As the paper aims to have shown, both male and female brokers/ recruiters are the driving force behind the mass migration of these girls. Brokers typically make promises that are far from reality; the fact that some of these recruiters are/ were themselves domestic migrants, also leads new migrants to fall prey to their enticing tales. Some returnee recruiters seem to have settled back, whereas others use the recruitment of new women as a temporary way of profiteering even as they re-migrate.

Aside from recruiters' influence, individual women have different reasons for wanting to migrate. Some are students who see no promising prospects for them to want to continue their studies, whereas others simply do not want to wait that long. Some complete 10th grade and decide to migrate when they have not scored enough points that allow them to pursue higher education. To many, becoming a migrant domestic worker is far more preferable than undergoing technical and vocational training. Still others, want to alleviate their families' difficult financial circumstances through migration to the Middle East. The

possibility of earning the equivalent of thousands of birr monthly is, therefore, the strongest pull factor for Ethiopian women's migration, despite the general public aversion towards migration to 'Arab countries'.

However, since domestic migrants mostly are from low-income families, paying for their migration is a daunting task. Their families either have to borrow money from relatively well-to-do relatives or sell their livestock to finance their daughters' migration. Migrants who are lucky enough to work longer than a few months and receive their salaries regularly repay the incurred debt and start sending money for their families' consumption. Some, particularly those whose families are not dependent on their remittances, even manage to save some cash for themselves. However, upon their return, they find out the cost of living at home has risen and they cannot maneuver much with what little cash they have. They re-migrate, thus perpetuating the cycle of migration without bringing considerable improvement in their lives.

As the stories of my informants show, suffering different kinds of abuses is also everyday reality for the majority of Ethiopian female domestic migrants. At the pre-migration stage, the women face unnecessary difficulties starting from the initial process of obtaining a passport until their departure. In receiving countries, migrants' fate is more or less in the hands of their employers and overseas agents. In situations where domestic migrants find their living conditions to be unbearable, they take drastic measures such as escaping from their employers and joining prostitution rings or even committing suicide.

As inadequate as they are, the Ethiopian government has so far taken a number of measures meant to alleviate the difficulties Ethiopian migrants face in the Middle East. Particularly,

in light of the recent human rights abuses and deportations of Ethiopian migrants in Saudi Arabia, the government has made the situation of returnee migrants its top priority. The fact that legal migration is suspended for a definite period has also helped the government to turn its attention to the situation of returnees. It is working to assist returnees to reintegrate and reestablish themselves at home. At such a crucial time when such major changes are taking place with regard to domestic labour migration to the Middle East, it is hoped that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of female domestic labour migrants.