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Why Ethiopian women go to the Middle East:

An aspiration–capability analysis of
migration decision–making

Kerilyn Schewel

MADE project paper 5

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The IMIⁿ working paper series presents current research in the field of international migration. The series was initiated by the International Migration Institute (IMI) since its foundation at the University in Oxford in 2006, and has been continued since 2017 by the International Migration Institute network (IMIⁿ). The papers in this series (1) analyse migration as part of broader global change, (2) contribute to new theoretical approaches, and (3) advance understanding of the multi-level forces driving migration and experiences of migration.

Abstract

This paper examines why young women in one rural region of Ethiopia make the decision to migrate as domestic workers to the Middle East. Based on survey data and in-depth interviews, it examines the forces shaping aspirations and capabilities to migrate. In particular, the paper shows this migration can be reasonable and capabilities-enhancing for young women, while at the same time, a response to a critical lack of capabilities in other domains of their lives. The paper highlights why migration aspirations arise at a particular moment in the life-course, as adolescents transition into adulthood, and how migration aspirations relate to a broader set of capabilities young women have (or lack) to realize the lives they value (Sen 1999). These insights challenge the dominant narrative of trafficking, deception and victimization around this type of migration, while highlighting the usefulness of the aspiration-capability framework to analyze precarious forms of migration.

Keywords: migration, aspirations, capability, Ethiopia, Middle East

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Contents

1	Introduction	4
2	A Conceptual Framework for Precarious Migration	5
3	Research Setting & Methodology.....	7
4	Putting international migration in context	9
5	Why Women Go	10
5.1	Capital.....	10
5.2	'Relative Deprivation'.....	11
5.3	After Education, It's Marriage or Migration.....	13
5.4	"To change my life".....	14
5.5	The Role of Brokers.....	15
5.6	Processing Risks.....	15
6	Why Women Stay	16
6.1	Families.....	17
7	Discussion.....	18
8	Conclusion	20
9	References	21

1 Introduction

The migration of Ethiopian women as domestic workers to the Middle East is a serious concern of government and international organizations alike. The dominant narrative about this migration corridor in international media, reports, and academic publications is overwhelmingly negative—one of exploitation and abuse, illegality and risk. It is often told that young women and girls, uneducated and facing desperate economic circumstances, are deceived by the false promises of brokers into appalling work conditions, only to return to Ethiopia with broken spirits, perhaps broken bodies, and nothing in their hand (see Demissie 2018; Kebede 2001; Jamie and Tsega 2015; Kubai 2016; Beydoun 2006; Reda 2018; Minaye 2012; Jones et al 2014; RMMS 2014).

And yet, despite these horrific conditions, of which prospective migrants are surprisingly awareⁱ, the migration of young female Ethiopian domestic workers to the Middle East continues. While the mobility of Ethiopian women is not new, migration abroad for domestic work is part of the “feminization” of Ethiopian labor migration (Fernandez 2011). In one study across five regions of Ethiopia, Kuschminder and Siegel (2014) found that half of all emigrants were in the Middle East, compared to 20 percent in Africa and 22 percent in North America or Europe. Sixty percent of these migrants were women. Initially celebrated by the Ethiopian government, it is now considered a social problem (de Regt 2007). In October 2013, in response to the forced deportation of 160,000 undocumented Ethiopian migrants from Saudi Arabia, and increasing reports of abuse, the Ethiopian government officially banned labor emigration to all Middle Eastern countries.ⁱⁱ As the Foreign Affairs spokesman at the time explained, “This exodus, being pushed by illegal human traffickers, has created immense problems for the people of the nation, for the image of the country. [...] It is affecting a lot of youngsters who are pushed out, deceived by the human traffickers, that has created an immense socio-economic problem” (Al Jazeera 2013).

This paper examines how young women in the Adami Tulu Jido Kombolcha *woreda* (district) in Oromia, Ethiopia make the decision to migrate as domestic workers to the Middle East. It examines the forces shaping their aspirations and capabilities to migrate, providing empirically grounded insights that challenge an overarching narrative of desperation, deception and exploitation. I argue that migration aspirations need to be situated within a life-course perspective and considered in relation to the broader life aspirations of young women. The aspiration to migrate to the Middle East arises when, as young women transition into their adult lives, the pathways before them locally – whether marriage, education, or low-skilled work opportunities – are not promising avenues to achieve the economic and social ambitions they hold. The ‘good life’ is now in the city, with greater social and economic freedom than their mothers’ generation experienced. Migration to the Middle East as a domestic worker – risky as they know it is – is seen by these young women as a reasonable strategy to earn the capital they need to realize their aspirations in Ethiopia. Faced with limited capabilities for upward socioeconomic mobility locally, the aspiration to earn an income and the social freedoms that income brings meets the capability to leave through an established system of brokers, agencies, and networks that lower the costs and constraints of migrating. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that not all women in similar conditions leave. Some lack the capability to migrate; others they prefer to stay. The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the forces shaping these different (im)mobility outcomes.

2 A Conceptual Framework for Precarious Migration

The labor migration of women to the Middle East is part of a global rise in the international labor migration of women for domestic work. Domestic workers and the global care chain have received significant attention within academic research, where scholars elucidate the structural drivers of this international labor migration (Hochschild 2003; Sassen 2008; Anderson 2000; Parreñas 2001) and the creative agency women utilize as they navigate this precarious migration corridor (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; de Regt 2010). Yet, as de Regt (2010) points out, these more nuanced perspectives have yet to be applied to domestic workers in the Middle East, who are primarily cast as victims: victims of traffickers who lure them into “contract slavery” (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004) and victims of the *kafala* system, a migration system in many Gulf States that ties legal and economic responsibility for contracted migrant workers to their host employers rather than the state—creating conditions in which domestic workers are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Pande 2013; Jureidini 2010).

In the case of Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East, the concept of “trafficking” is widely and loosely applied. Some studies make distinctions between regular migration, trafficking, and smuggling (Beydoun 2006; see Carling et al 2015). More often, however, “trafficking” becomes synonymous with irregular labor migration more generally (e.g. Kebede 2002; Jamie and Tsega 2015) or is used to describe the experience of all domestic workers in the Middle East who face exploitation, regardless of their legal status (e.g. Minaye 2012; Jones et al 2014). Jones *et al* (2014) make the most compelling case for using the concept of “trafficking” to describe the migration of Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East, particularly when it concerns adolescents. They acknowledge that, even among minors, migration may be regarded as a means to improve their opportunities for school and work and to achieve more secure futures; many adolescents move voluntarily for economic reasons. Yet because of “the tightly constrained environment in which this choice is made,” they reason that the “trafficking narrative may, in this case, represent the most appropriate lens through which to view girls’ choices and experiences.” Jones *et al* argue that family pressure, poverty, limited employment opportunities, reliance on illegal brokers who provide “at best partial information,” combined with the exploitation young girls face at destination, “means the line which separates Ethiopian girls’ voluntary migration from trafficking all but fades into invisibility” (2014: 2). However, by sliding back into the trafficking narrative, the agency and motivations for migration that Jones *et al* (2014) uncover is obscured. ‘Trafficking’ leaves little space for the different experiences of Ethiopian girls and women (de Regt 2010; Boyden and Howard 2013). In contrast, it collapses the conceptual frame through which we evaluate this migration into a flat, two-dimensional story of passive victims pushed and pulled into precarious conditions, best protected by restricting their mobility.

Existing migration terminologies and frameworks struggle to capture the nature and complexity of migration in today’s world (see Carling et al, 2015). Migration research has long recognized that the common binary between ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ migration is an artificial one; in reality, all migration requires agency and takes place under constraints (see Van Hear 1998). It is more helpful to think of a spectrum, with ideal types of ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ at each end, with most migration falling somewhere in the middle. Yet decision-making in this middle space remains difficult to conceptualize, signaling the need to develop new conceptual tools in migration research to understand the forces shaping migration under highly constrained conditions. This is relevant beyond the migration of low-skilled labor migrants to the Middle East. We also see African men and women risking passage on rickety boats to Europe’s shores, or young Central American migrants taking dangerous journeys through Mexico to seek better lives in the United States. Many of these migrants defy categorization as “forced” or “economic”—because they *choose* to leave, or they *could* have

stayed, but opportunities at home are so constrained that they consider the significant risks entailed in the journey and at destination worth taking. It is this kind of precarious migration (cf de Haas 2014) that this paper addresses, a phenomenon increasingly common in today's world, yet one that remains conceptually puzzling for migration studies and policy-making.

Building on the work of Jørgen Carling (2002; Carling and Schewel 2018), Hein de Haas (2007; 2014) and Amartya Sen (1999), I propose the aspiration-capability approach as an analytical tool well suited to evaluate migration processes across the forced-voluntary spectrum. The aspiration-capability approach distinguishes the migration process into two steps: the aspiration to migrate (or the conviction that migration is preferable to staying) and the capability to migrate (the real opportunities and resources people have to realize their migration aspirations). Migration requires both, and the lack of either one leads to immobility. This analytical distinction allows for more nuanced interrogation into the determinants of migration and staying behavior; avoiding overly structural or individualistic explanations, it gives attention to the forces shaping the desire to leave as well as the structural opportunities and constraints that determine whether these desires are realized (see Carling and Schewel 2018). Applying the term “capability” links this framework with Amartya Sen's *Capabilities Approach* to development, a normative framework that places the freedom to achieve well-being as the ultimate aim of development and suggests its evaluation in terms of people's capabilities – that is, the real opportunities people have to do and to be what they have reason to value (Sen 1999; see De Haas 2014).

In migration research, the aspiration-capability framework has been used to challenge the common assumption that development will solve the so-called migration problem in poorer countries. Hein de Haas (2007) argues that development—which tends to bring increases in income, access to education and media, improved infrastructure and security—often enhances people's aspirations and capabilities to leave. The aspiration-capability approach thus provides a micro-level analytical framework to explain the empirical finding that at a macro-level, growing economic development tends to be correlated with higher rates of internal and international migration from poorer countries (see Martin and Taylor 1996; Rotte et al. 1997; Hatton and Williamson 1998; Skeldon 1997). In his 2014 paper, de Haas suggests that we can even conceive of migration *as* development.ⁱⁱⁱ This emphasis flips the perspective on migration and development from one in which development will “solve” the problem of migration, to one in which there is a reciprocal relationship between the two (de Haas 2009). Migration from this perspective is an empowering act, a reflection of the enhanced capabilities development brings.

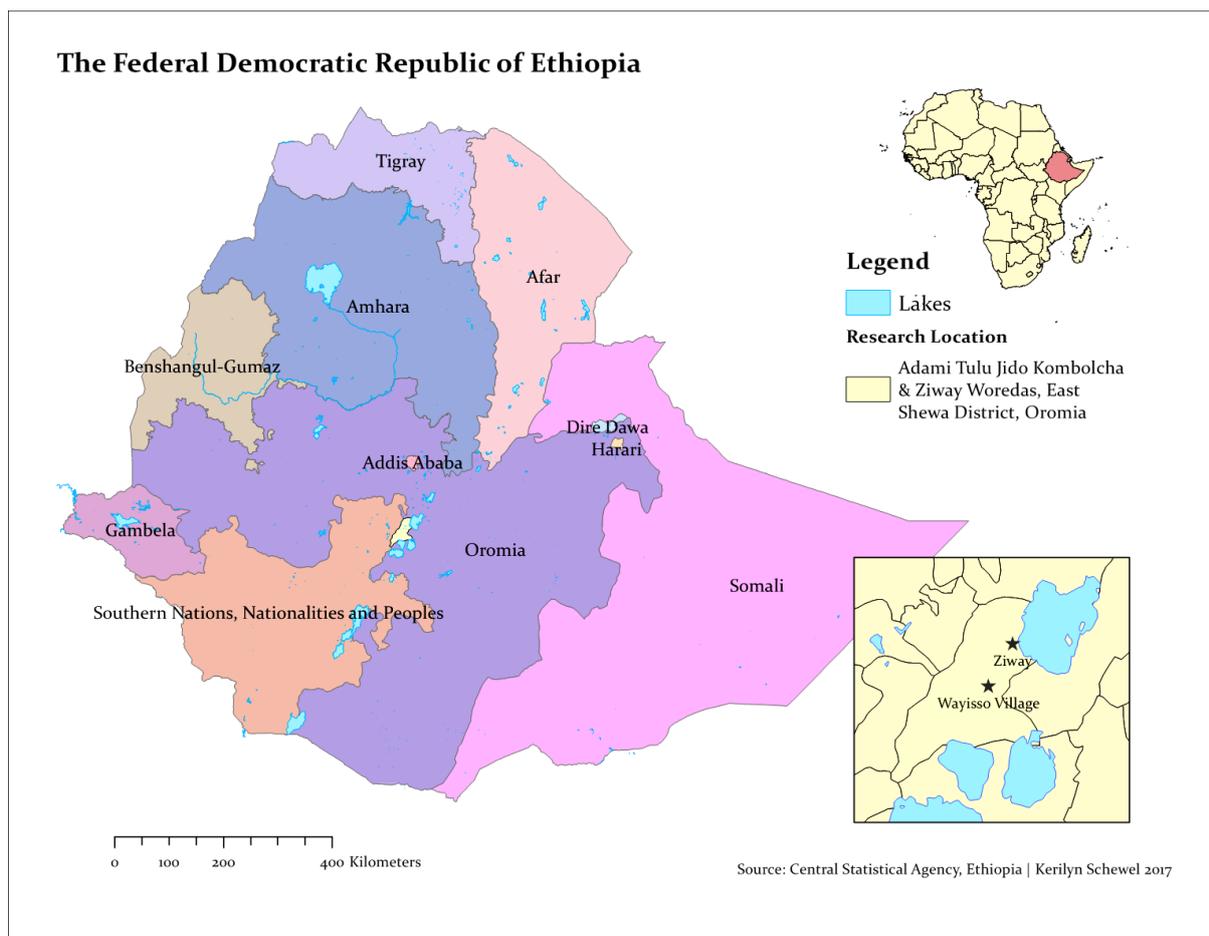
Yet, I would also argue that the aspiration-capability framework enables us to *question* whether migration is a manifestation of capabilities-enhancing development. Certainly, economic policies devised in the name of development have also resulted in capability deprivation that has also entailed greater mobility. Consider, for example, literature on development-induced displacement (e.g. de Wet 2006) or more general work on the disempowerment of local populations by top-down development agendas (e.g. Frank 1966; Ferguson 1999; Stiglitz 2002; Sassen 1999). Development is Janus-faced, and the mobility consequences it heralds can be a result of empowerment and disempowerment, of capabilities-enhancement and diminishment. After all, Amartya Sen (1999) introduced the capabilities approach as a new development paradigm, to illumine what development *should be*, responding to what it definitively was not in reality. To evaluate whether growing mobility reflects capabilities-enhancing development, or whether it is the reluctant response to capability deprivation in other domains, requires examining how the aspiration and capability to migrate (and to stay) relate to the other local opportunities people have to realize their broader life aspirations. In this way, the aspiration-capability framework provides an opportunity to critically evaluate migration

occurring under a variety of development contexts, including those that lead to more precarious forms of migration.

The following case study shows the fruitfulness of an aspiration-capability framework for the study of young Ethiopian women's migration to the Middle East. I explore why the aspiration to migrate emerges for young women, and consider how migration to the Middle East can be capabilities-enhancing for some, while at the same time, a response to a critical lack of capabilities in other domains of their lives.

3 Research Setting & Methodology

My motivation to write this paper arose because of the sharp contrast between the narratives I read about domestic work in the Middle East—narratives that structured my expectations for the stories I would find—and the actual stories I heard from the women themselves. I visited Ethiopia four times in the period of 2015-18: in April 2015, from January through July 2016, November 2016, and October 2018. The purpose of my research was to understand the changing mobility patterns within and from one rural village (the Wayisso) of the central Ethiopian lowlands, in the Adami Tulu Jido Kombolcha (ATJK) *woreda* (district) in the Oromia state. I wanted to understand how and why mobility patterns had changed so suddenly over the last three generations: from a long history of semi-nomadic pastoralism, to more settled agrarian lifestyles in the 1970s and 1980s, to increasingly urban-centric livelihoods since the 1990s. Although Ethiopia remains overwhelmingly rural (some 80 percent), young people with the capabilities to move are leaving their villages to pursue education and economic opportunities in towns and cities across their regions. Unlike many other areas of Ethiopia, international migration is not (yet) a strong aspiration of young men from the Adami Tulu district. However, for women, one international migration trajectory has emerged as a viable pursuit: migration to the Middle East as a domestic worker.



Map 1. Research Location

My methodology was three-fold. First, to map migration trajectories to and from the Wayisso village, I created my own survey. I wanted to know: 1) who leaves the Wayisso and where do they go? 2) who stays in the Wayisso? 3) who moves into the Wayisso? and 4) what demographic characteristics are associated with these various forms of (im)mobility? I surveyed every household within three family clusters^{iv} of the Wayisso, totaling 73 households and 657 individuals. My access to these households, and their trust in this survey, was greatly facilitated by my research assistant, Kedir Gemachu, who grew up there. In June 2016, when I completed the survey, seven women were working in the Middle East and three had returned. These ten women represent 6 percent of the female population between the ages of 15 and 40 (the age range within which women are most likely to leave).

The survey provided an opportunity to identify and develop a rapport with individuals to carry out more in-depth interviews. I interviewed 53 individuals who were either born in, moved to, or had left the Wayisso, balanced in terms of age, gender, and migration experiences. I asked open questions about life histories and imagined futures – to see what forms of mobility characterized their pasts, presents, and imagined futures – before asking more direct questions about migration decision-making and experiences^v. This helped me understand how migration abroad fit into other changing mobility trajectories in the area, and to better understand how others—family members, siblings, husbands, women who had not left but wanted to, women who had not left and never wanted to—perceive migration to the Middle East. Because I visited the research area multiple times over three years, I was able to meet with some twenty informants several times.

I held in-depth interviews with six of the ten women from the Wayisso who had migrated to the Middle East. To gain further insight into this migration trajectory, I expanded my spatial window to include two neighboring urban areas, Tulu and Ziway, where I interviewed another nine women with migration experience to the Middle East. Tulu is a small market town with a population of some 15,000, while Ziway is a rapidly growing urban area, with a population of over 60,000 and growing. In Tulu and Ziway, I also interviewed women working on flower farms, community leaders and government workers. In total, I interviewed 84 individuals, 49 of whom were women, and 15 had migration experience in the Middle East. Interviews were carried out in Afaan Oromo and Amharic with the assistance of an interpreter, Tilah Alemayehu.

4 Putting international migration in context

In the Adami Tulu *woreda*, migration abroad for domestic work is one potential migration trajectory embedded within a broader mobility transition taking place in the area. Historically, the Oromo peoples living here were semi-nomadic pastoralists, moving seasonally with their cattle towards the lakes in the dry season and away from malaria in the wet season. The transition to farming began among a few in the 1950s and 60s, but only became commonplace in the 1970s, when the communist revolution and resulting *Derg* government revised administrative boundaries and government policy around the mantra, “Land to the Tiller!” People began to claim and settle on land, and access to resources, schooling, and other services was tied to their residence within a *kebele*, or peasant association. After the fall of the *Derg* regime, and the rise of a more market-oriented developmental state in the 1990s, the towns of Tulu and Ziway began to grow. The dominant mobility transition now taking place is the steadily growing rural-urban movement of younger generations. This small-scale urbanization of people and livelihoods belies deeper transformations: rural population growth and constraints on access to farming land; the introduction of formal education, higher levels of which are only found in towns and cities; and changing aspirations for non-agrarian livelihoods and urban lifestyles (see Schewel and Fransen, 2018).

Table 1. Current residences of those born and/or living in the Wayisso

Current Residence	Women		Men	Total
	<i>Born in Wayisso</i>	<i>Total</i>		
Wayisso	21	100	104	204
Tulu	10	10	13	23
Ziway	37	39	46	85
Adama (regional center)	0	0	4	4
Addis Ababa	0	0	3	3
Middle East	5	7	0	7
Europe	1	1	0	1
Other: urban area	14	14	10	13
Other: rural area	39	40	4	44
Total	127	211	184	395

Notes: Current residences of those surveyed aged 15 or older; Women (total) refers includes those born in the Wayisso, and those who moved to the Wayisso (usually for marriage); “Other urban area” refers to towns or cities with 3 or less people currently residing there (they include Bulbula, Shashamene, Hawassa, Borana, and Aboisa); based on 2016 household survey

Table 1 shows the current residences of the individuals older than 15 from the Wayisso households surveyed in the spring of 2016. The majority of migration occurs within the *woreda*, from the rural village to the neighboring market town, Tulu, or the rapidly growing town, Ziway. Although over half of the men remain in the Wayisso, most women leave. Traditionally, the main movement of women was rural-rural, for marriage, and today, the majority of women living in the Wayisso are those who moved there for marriage (83 per cent). However, alongside this rural-rural movement, the migration trajectories women pursue are expanding.

Migration to the Middle East is one migration trajectory among a diversifying set for women. Relative to the process of micro-urbanization, it is a minor phenomenon, more comparable to migration to other cities further afield within Ethiopia – to regional centers like Adama or the capital city, Addis Ababa. While slightly more men have left for larger cities within Ethiopia, the only people who have left the Wayisso for international destinations are women. For women from rural areas like the Wayisso, migrating to the Middle East as a domestic worker can require less resources than migrating within Ethiopia. Although migration abroad for domestic work requires an up-front investment in a passport, health checks, and agency fees, this investment is usually paid back with a few months of work, after which women earn a salary without the expenses of food and housing. Settling in a distant urban area without relatives, on the other hand, requires the means to continually rent housing and pay higher prices for food, goods, and services, all without the promise of significant profit. Thus, many women go straight from rural areas or neighboring towns to the Middle East.

5 Why Women Go

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

5.1 Capital

The capital migrant domestic workers are able to access trumps any other economic opportunity available to rural men and women with low levels of education. The fact that women are the ones who are able to access these economic opportunities abroad disrupts a gendered hierarchy where men have always been the economic providers and power-holders. Men were the leaders of their pastoral herds; men were the first farmers; men were the first to go to school and thereby access new forms of salary-based work with government or foreign organizations. Throughout these livelihood transitions in the Wayisso village, the realm of the woman remained in the home. If women did work to supplement

household incomes, their contributions were generally small, primarily through selling goods (like butter) at a nearby local market.

For most households in the Wayisso, their primary source of income comes from the harvest they are able to glean from their land once a year. Access to land across families varies greatly, from 1 plot (0.25 hectares) among a few young households to 20 plots (5 hectares) among a few elders. The average is 1.5 to 2 hectares, or 6 or 8 plots. The crop best suited to the relatively dry lowlands is maize. Under good conditions, one plot produces some 8-12 quintiles (100 kilos) of maize for the market, which is then bought for around 400 birr/quintile^{vi} (roughly 19 USD in 2016), bringing a potential income gain of 3200-4800 birr (~150-225 USD) per plot. Of course, given farmers' dependence on rain, as irrigation is not yet possible in the area, a year of drought – such as in 2016 – means some farmers may fail to produce even one quintile for the market. After all, farming also requires investments: in seeds, oxen, and potentially fertilizer and additional manpower. For one farmer in the Wayisso with one hectare (4 plots), after subtracting his expenses, his overall profit in a good year is around 14,500 birr (678 USD). However, in 2016, he made only 1320 birr (62 USD).

Beyond farming, there are development initiatives for the economic empowerment of women in the area. In Ziway, growing micro-entrepreneurship can be seen in the proliferation of small coffee huts that branch out from the main road. The government gives the space for free for five to seven years, and young women sell coffee and tea, or open a small shop. However, in rural areas, the opportunities to make an income are more limited. Some women may, of their own initiative, continue to sell things at the local market in Tulu, or buy a few goods to bring back to the village and sell there. Development Agents working in the area have increasingly employed a strategy of encouraging women to raise chickens to sell their eggs. Two women in the Wayisso had made such an investment. It cost 3000 birr (140 USD) to build the chicken hut (*mana lukoo*) and they began with 15 chickens, selling each egg 3.50 birr (16¢) per piece at the local market in Tulu. It began well, but they encountered problems when one husband kept asking his wife for the money she made and was “just spending it on things in town.” They decided to put the business on hold.

It is in this economic context that women and families consider migration to the Middle East, where the profit a woman can make is more reliable and substantive than the profit to be made from rain-fed agriculture or a small business. One young woman, currently working in Dubai, sent some 50,000 birr (2336 USD) to her family after her first 18 months. Another returned from Mecca made 800 riyal (215 USD) per month^{vii}, later earning a raise to 1200 riyal (320 USD). Those currently working in Beirut earned less but a still substantial amount: between 2000-3500 birr (93-150 USD) per month. As one return migrant who opened a shop in Ziway put it: “Here it is too difficult. Even if you are working, it is too difficult to change your life. But there you are going to change your life in a short time.”

5.2 ‘Relative Deprivation’

In rural areas, the remittances sent home become visible to neighbors, fueling what the migration literature has called a sense of “relative deprivation” (Stark and Taylor 1991) – that is, a sense of material deprivation relative to others in one’s social group. Often, young women who aspired to go to the Middle East would mention someone they knew who was able to “change their life,” who inspired them to follow a similar route. Through the visible changes remittances bring to the lives of other young women and their families, international migration for domestic work enters into what geographers have referred to as the “mental maps” (Fuller and Chapman 1974) of other young women, a possible pathway in their imagined futures.

Figures 1 and 2 shows two houses in the Wayisso village. The first is a traditional home, built with one interior room and a thatched roof. The second is the home built by a family with the remittances sent from abroad. It has multiple rooms, windows, an iron roof and bars on the window, and is painted – all conspicuous signs of discretionary income. Women are not necessarily deceived when they see the tangible results of others' migration abroad.



Figure 1. A traditional home in the Wayisso



Figure 2. A new home built with money sent from a domestic worker in Beirut

5.3 After Education, It's Marriage or Migration

To reduce the desire to leave to economic considerations alone would be insufficient to explain migration aspirations. It is also important to see how the possibility of migrating to the Middle East as a domestic worker relates to other imagined futures locally. In this light, education is one pathway that young women increasingly pursue. Girls in this district began to enter formal schooling in the 1990s, and since then, the rate at which girls are accessing primary and secondary education has skyrocketed. In the Adami Tulu woreda, the enrollment of girls in school is almost equal with that of young men, though enrollment sharply decreases for both sexes at upper levels (see Figure 3).^{viii}

Many young women find themselves unable to continue their education for several reasons. First, they may fail the regional exam at Grade 8 or the national exam at Grade 10. If they do not pass the Grade 10 exams—and most don't; only 34 percent of pupils in the woreda pass the national exam, according to one education worker in the district—for many young women, their future options are limited. As one mother from the Wayisso explained: “After the national exam at grade 10, if [girls] pass, they proceed to the preparatory level. If they fail, they have two opportunities: to marry someone or to fly outside to the Arab [countries].”

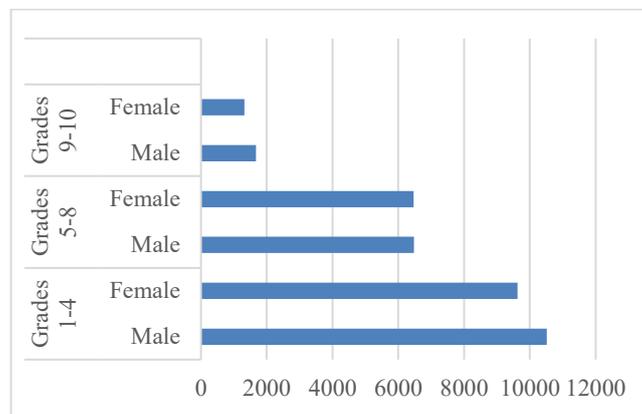


Figure 3. School Enrollments by Gender in ATJK (2010); Source: ATJK Woreda Education Office 24.2.16

The government is aware of low pass rates, and students who fail are encouraged to pursue technical and vocational schooling or certificate awarding courses like the Teacher Training Institute or College of Teacher's Education in Ziway. There are also opportunities for other educational certificates among a growing number of private institutions. But as one young woman put it, “My grades were not good enough to continue to the preparatory school. And to take the Technical and Vocational Classes, it needs income, money. And I didn't have anything in my hand. That's why I decided to leave.” Three months after failing her Grade 10 examination, she left.

Mimi is another young woman who left for Beirut after she failed the Grade 10 exam. She has worked for a nice family for the last three years, a family that “treats her as a family member.” When asked why she left, she simply explained that she failed her exam and this seemed the next best option: “Nobody pushed me to go. I had friends who had migrated. And it is better to do something. [...] If I did not migrate, I would have been married and then I would be dependent on my husband. I wouldn't have the capability to do anything without my husband's permission.” Mimi is still abroad but with the help of her family, she has already started building a house in Tulu and plans to open her own shop there when she returns.

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

Damitu, for example, left home when she was fourteen. "My family was not able to send me to school. Not even a government school. They needed money to survive. We were in absolute poverty, so they needed me to work. If I was in school, no one was there to help the family." Her three older brothers stayed in school, but as she expressed, "there is extra pressure for the girl to stop school." Damitu knew of other girls who had gone abroad and had an idea. "I convinced my father that migration would be better than getting married now. I would be able to make some money to send home, then I could return and get married. My father agreed and he arranged for me to go." For Damitu, migration to Saudi Arabia was the best option among a poor set, but one she negotiated with her family. Damitu has been working abroad for four years and is now eager to return. "To some extent it's nice here, but I am not interested in staying. Freedom is in Ethiopia." When asked what she will do when she returns, she wants "to return to a town like Ziway or Tulu, not a rural area, and I would like to get married. After I am married, I will continue my education." She is only nineteen after all.

5.4 "To change my life"

The aspiration for *change* is widespread among young people in the ATJK woreda. "To change my life" was frequently repeated as the reason to leave. Many young women could not envision significant change through the opportunities they had locally, especially once education was no longer an option for them. Migration to the Middle East was often framed as an investment, for themselves and their families. As one woman put it, "First I want to do something for my family, and the rest I will use for myself." Shiko took that approach. Born in the Wayisso, she left after finishing grade 7. The first time she worked abroad for two years, and with the money she sent back, her family built a new home in the Wayisso with an iron roof and painted walls. Her father bought cattle. She paid the *gabara* (dowry) for her brother to get married, some 30,000 birr (~1400 USD). Then she came home for several months. She left again, but this time, her father says, "we are only listening to her voice. Now she tries to live for herself." She has her own bank account in Ziway and the family hasn't seen any of it. "Maybe she has a boyfriend," her brother speculated. Whatever the case, it was clear the family saw the money as hers.

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

Many women preferred living in the city, not only because the lifestyle was considered better and potential incomes gained were greater, but also because of the social distance from rural areas. As one return migrant who owns a corner store in Ziway expressed, “I chose Ziway because it’s close enough to my family, but far enough away where they are not going to come and ask for things for free all the time.”

5.5 The Role of Brokers

Once girls or young women decide to leave, they find a broker. Some young women have family members already working abroad, who facilitate their journey, visas and arrival, but most others leave with the assistance of agencies and have contracts with the families for whom they work, usually for a period of 2-3 years, which may then be renewed. During the ban on labor migration to the Middle East imposed by the Ethiopian government from 2013 to 2018, much of this migration may have technically been ‘illegal,’ but in practice, it had many aspects more often associated with formal channels: agencies, contracts, passports and visas. This highlights the wide range of migration practices that constitute irregular migration.

Contact with agencies, predominantly located in Addis Ababa, is facilitated through local or regional brokers, unless one has a direct contact through a friend or family member. Contrary to the common perception of brokers luring young women into exploitative conditions with false promises of riches abroad, the brokers who operate in the area are from there. “There are brokers everywhere,” one woman said. “They are well known.” If the broker breaks the trust of any family, word spreads and it hurts their future business prospects. One woman shared her experience with the broker who arranged her sister’s migration abroad,

“The broker is from here. We trust him. We knew him from before and we are going to look in his bag: how many women he has sent to the Arab country, this kind of information. And because we know each other, we have good relations and don’t worry about that person. [...] We don’t know the agencies. But because the broker wants to protect his name, he takes us to a good agency. We don’t trust the agencies. It first depends on the broker.”

There are different arrangements that can be made with the agencies in Addis Ababa, depending on the investment the woman and/or her family is able to make before departure. In some instances, a family may cover all the costs required to go abroad and begin earning directly. More often, families cover the costs of the passport, health checks, and transportation to and from Addis Ababa, and the agency covers the rest: the costs of the flight and visa applications, as well as its own fee, which it then deducts from the worker’s first few months’ salary. Among people in the Wayisso, the general perception was that migrating through a trusted broker required around 10,000 birr (~467 USD), although some women I spoke to seemed to have paid less, around 3,000 to 5,000 birr, with 2 to 3 months initial wages being given to the agency. There is also the option to pay nothing, but the women with whom I spoke know this is with less trustworthy agencies, and “it takes a long time before you start earning money.”

5.6 Processing Risks

Information about the risks of migration has increased in recent years and introduced some trepidation among those considering migration. This information comes from two sides: from the experiences of women leaving the area, and from the government and television media. Regarding local experiences, as more women go abroad, stories of bad experiences make their way back. One woman was rumored to have returned with a broken leg. Another never received her salary after working for a family for

two years. Even if these experiences are fewer than those who remit or return with significant capital, these stories become known. At the same time, the government and international organizations have begun campaigns and community education endeavors to educate the Ethiopian population about the dangers of (particularly irregular) migration. Many women in town said they had primarily heard about the evils of “Arab migration” from watching television.

How women process these risks is not uniform. Many who still wished to leave focused on what they saw with their own eyes: a neighbor or friend who had been able to materially improve her and her family’s life, and indeed, such experiences were common. For those who aspired to leave or had left, these concrete results outweighed the negative narratives that are beginning to penetrate the imaginary about migration to the Middle East. As one woman put it, “most people find good families. Only a few end up with bad ones.”

To process these risks, many young women who were considering domestic work abroad told themselves that if they behaved well, all would be well. Jaa, a return migrant from Beirut who is considering leaving again for Dubai, explains her decision-making process: “I am starting to hear new things that I hadn’t heard before. Now I am hearing that they are killing women there, that they are hurting women... when I think about this, I feel that it may be bad to return. I may get a bad family.” Yet Jaa continues, “But when I think about it, it depends on personal behavior. If I behave well there, they are not going to hurt me. They are not going to hit me. They are not going to kill me. Because I will act in a good way.” Although women considering migration are increasingly aware of the potential dangers of working for a “bad family,” yet for those who aspire to leave, this manner of reasoning may enable them to exert a sense of control over the uncertainties in their futures.

Negative narratives about migration to the Middle East were strongest among young women who had completed tertiary education. For example, Mahlet, a university graduate who recently returned home to Ziway to help with her family business, expressed, “When women come back from the Arab countries, they are mentally disordered. Ok, for some people, maybe they were lucky and are able to improve their lives, but for the majority, it’s not good.” Likewise, Ademtu, the only migrant to have made it to Europe from the Wayisso, who also holds a university degree, shared, “Some lose their minds, they became crazy. A lot come back empty handed, empty pockets and they are mad. [...] One lady from Macafara (another rural kebele) came back and was really crazy.” The worst narratives about migration to the Middle East came from these more highly educated women. The negative information shared about this migration was processed in different ways by different social groups.

6 Why Women Stay

For women who have educational credentials that they foresee can translate into decent salaried employment, migration abroad for domestic work is generally not considered worth the risk and sacrifice. But even among women whose futures in Ethiopia seem more limited by educational or economic constraints, many consider the risks not worth taking. Alternative livelihood strategies – which may entail movement within Ethiopia rather than abroad – are considered preferable to international migration as a domestic worker.

When I first met Yomen, she was eighteen years old and living at home with her family. The youngest of eight children, with six sisters, she was the only girl in her family to go to school. “Earlier people thought that women shouldn’t go to school,” and her older sisters “just simply married according to the expectations of our family.” Because of her education, however, Yomen saw her future differently: “But in my case, I am educated. I went to school. And I know something. I have a

right and the opportunity to look at what is good and what is bad, and I want to choose the way that I like.”

Unfortunately, Yomen failed the national exam in Grade 10. Her initial plan was to take the year to help her mother at home while studying to retake the exam, then continue to preparatory school and university. She explained that for women who cannot continue their education, their options are limited. “The first option is to get married. The second is to migrate to the Arab countries. The third option is to sit with your families, like me,” she laughed. She wasn’t yet thinking about marriage – “I’m still thinking about improving my education level. I’m not thinking about marriage for myself” – but was also not eager to leave Ethiopia as a domestic worker. She was particularly influenced by what she had heard from her friends working overseas; they told Yomen that “the Arab people don’t respect Ethiopians.” Her neighbor went to Dubai, “but the work is difficult, they always nag her, they shout at her. That’s why I’m scared [to leave].”

When I met Yomen again some six months later, her future plans had changed. She hadn’t taken the exam, because she missed the first day due to unforeseen circumstances. Giving up the hope of continuing her education, she was now considering opening up a coffee hut in Qore, a city where her sister lives. She had in fact begun an application to go abroad but still had significant reservations. “I am afraid to go there. Maybe I won’t have a good family.” Her family also preferred for her to stay for the same reasons. So perhaps, she thought, a coffee or other small shop is a better choice. “It is better to try and compete than to sit around doing nothing here.”

When I returned to the Wayisso two years later, I went looking for Yomen to see what had happened. Had she left for the Middle East in the end? I first met her mother. “Yomen has married!” she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air and told me where I could find her. When I arrived at her new home in a neighboring *kebele*, her neighbors told me she had left for the hospital to give birth to her first child.

6.1 Families

Families are not only a source of pressure to migrate, as the literature suggests (e.g. Fernandez 2008) and the experiences of some girls like Damitu confirm, but also a potential source of constraints on migration. Many parents, aware of rumors of risk and abuse abroad, prefer their daughters to stay. As one mother from the Wayisso expressed, “Most of our daughters would like to fly outside. I think the reason is to change their life quickly [...] But all the Arab households are not good. They may harm them. Rather than working for them, it is better if they stay here.” Several women I spoke to had at one point or another considered leaving, but did not receive their support of their families, who were concerned about the risks involved and unwilling to contribute to the costs of leaving.

Husbands also discouraged migration, but for more nuanced reasons. Khadijah is a recently married woman, who had planned to continue her education after marriage but found it to be too difficult to balance her responsibilities as a wife in the Wayisso with her schooling in Tulu. After stopping school, she tried to convince her husband to let her migrate abroad, but he disagreed with her proposal. She remembers he said, “‘If you get used to the lifestyle and facilities there, you may not like life here in the rural areas. [...] And you may not want a rural husband. You want to live in an urban area, with a wealthy person, who protects himself, dresses well, has everything good.’ That’s why he was afraid to let me go.”

Another husband in the Wayisso, Felen, shared a similar sentiment when explaining why he didn’t want his wife Makita to leave to the Middle East when she tried to convince him some years ago:

“At that time, we didn’t have children, when she was eager to go to the Arab countries. But I told her, we will farm here, we will create work here, we will change our life here. [...] And those who came from Arab [countries] become abnormal when they come here. Abnormal meaning that when they come back, they really miss the Arab [country] again. Because the lifestyle and the living style there is different from here. So I think that [if that happened with her,] it would not comfortable for me. That’s why I didn’t let her go to the Arab countries.”

The concerns of husbands are not entirely unfounded. Khadijah shared that one return migrant from Doda, a neighboring village, “came back from United Arab [Emirates], and she didn’t like her husband anymore. They separated.” Another return migrant shared that indeed, her aspirations and expectations had been changed upon return. After returning home, “It was difficult to be back in Ethiopia. I hated it. The houses. The rural lifestyle. The food is always the same. My family would bring packed food back from the urban area for me.” As soon as she could, after paying back her family for the costs entailed in migrating abroad and a little extra, she moved to Ziway and opened her own shop there.

And so this gendered migration trajectory also has gendered restrictions. Women may not be satisfied with the rural lives and gendered norms expected of women there after they come back, and men may not want their dominant status within the household to be challenged.

7 Discussion

The aspiration to migrate arises for many young women when, as they transition into their adult lives, the pathways they find before them locally – whether marriage, education, or local low-skilled work opportunities – are not promising avenues to achieve the economic and social ambitions they hold. Faced with limited capabilities for upward socioeconomic mobility locally, the aspiration to earn an income and the social freedoms that income brings meets the capability to leave through an established system of brokers, agencies, and networks that lower the costs and constraints of migrating. Not all women want to leave, however. For some, the fear of “getting a bad family” outweighs the potential income gains. For others, they may wish to leave, but lack the capability to do so – whether financial resources or familial support. Interestingly, almost all women envisioned their long-term futures in Ethiopia. Migration abroad for domestic work was a temporary strategy to improve that imagined future.

These findings complicate the trafficking narrative that dominates perceptions about young women’s migration as domestic workers to the Middle East. Rather than helpless victims “blinded by hope” (RMMS 2014), many girls and women know what they are doing and that risks are entailed. Some return with significant capital, and their experiences expand the mental maps and migration imaginaries of other young women hoping to change their life circumstances. It is important to note that in my research area, the girls and women who left mostly did so with passports, visas, and contracts. Other communities may experience higher rates of trafficking – particularly in large urban centers or in northern areas of Ethiopia, where geographic proximity to countries across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden may mean more irregular forms of migration are common. Because of the small scope of this study, these findings do not represent the experiences of “Ethiopian women.” However, they bring to light alternative narratives and experiences that challenge a homogenizing (and victimizing) characterization of the Ethiopian domestic worker in the Middle East (see also Boyden and Howard 2013).

Nevertheless, to emphasize the agency and rationale of young women does not preclude an appreciation for the significant constraints they face. The experiences of girls and women described

here are not necessarily ones we might typically associate with the concept of “empowerment,” nor does it suggest that migration alone will alleviate the significant development constraints women face more generally. It is difficult to separate the aspiration and capability to leave from a broader set of what Sen (1999) calls “unfreedoms”: in the economic, educational, social and cultural realms. Girls and women often lack the social and economic capabilities required to achieve their aspirations for educational and professional achievement in Ethiopia, to lead economically independent lives and choose when they wish to marry. Against the backdrop of these unfreedoms, the aspiration to migrate emerges.

These findings have theoretical implications for the advancement of the aspiration-capability framework. In particular, future research that employs the aspirations-capability framework should resist any *a priori* presumption that migration is a manifestation of capabilities-enhancing development, as one might intuit from the application of the framework thus far (de Haas 2007). While migration (quite obviously) reveals the capability to migrate, it does not say how this migration relates to other important capabilities required to do and to be what one has reason to value. I would argue that even if migration reflects growing aspirations and capabilities to *move*, it is not always under socioeconomic conditions that Amartya Sen would call “development” in its truest sense. To evaluate whether growing mobility is a reflection of capabilities-enhancing development, or whether it is the reluctant response to capability deprivation in other domains, requires examining how the aspiration and capability to migrate (and to stay) relate to the other local opportunities people have to realize their broader life aspirations.

Relatedly, the aspiration-capability approach has thus far been applied to evaluate the aspiration and capability *to migrate*. However, the aspiration-capability approach can be applied to social phenomena beyond migration: education (aspired levels of education and the capabilities required to achieve it); work (the aspired jobs young people desire and the capabilities required to achieve it); or service (what role people want to play in society and what capabilities are required to achieve it). The aspiration and capability to migrate is inextricably entangled within a web of other aspirations and capabilities that together make up the lives people value and ultimately live. To evaluate whether migration is truly a reflection of capabilities-enhancing development requires asking how the aspiration to migrate relates to individuals’ broader life aspirations, and how the capability to migrate or to stay relates to other capabilities individuals’ have to realize the lives they value.

Finally, lest I be misunderstood, let me be clear about the normative thrust of this argument. At the macro level, there are gross injustices that shape our global political-economic landscape and the movements of people within it. The massive migration of low-skilled workers to the Middle East is perhaps one of the clearest lenses to analyze the structural injustices inherent in our globalizing world, where international labor markets are bifurcated between the transnational professional elite and the informal migrant workers that sustain it (Sassen 2008). But, at the micro level, it is important to view the decision to leave from the angle of agency. Women will continue to leave because they are choosing what they see as the best path among a limited few to change their life circumstances. This aspiration arises in the context of a broader transformation in the social imaginary, where young women and men alike are looking towards the city rather than the village as the home of the good life. And a good life in the city requires capital.

8 Conclusion

Existing migration frameworks struggle to capture the nature and complexity of migration in today's world, particularly those precarious forms of migration where migrants knowingly subject themselves to great risks in pursuit of a better future (see Carling et al 2015). When we lack the conceptual tools to explain complex social phenomena, it is easier for simple narratives to structure our understanding of them. In the case of migration to the Middle East, where Ethiopian adolescents and women subject themselves to high levels of risk and vulnerability to achieve a better future, a particular narrative has taken root: of young women deceived by brokers into horrific working conditions and returning with nothing to show for it. Rather than the utility-maximizing agents assumed in most migration theories, Ethiopian migrants are more often portrayed as trafficked, deceived, or “blinded by hope” (RMMS 2014; Kebede 2002; Jamie and Anwar 2016).

Yet, when we tell a one-sided story about this migration, we risk misunderstanding and misrepresenting the motivations and circumstances of migrants. When narratives are only negative, we easily fall into the trap of presenting migrants as passive victims, best protected by restricting their mobility. In this light, it is crucial to give attention to migrants' agency, however limited it may be, as they navigate the opportunities and constraints before them (see also de Regt 2010; Boyden and Howard 2013). The experiences and decision-making of young women in the Adami Tulu Jido Kombolcha *woreda* illustrates how migration can be a reasonable decision, even considering the risks entailed. Yet, as Jones et al (2018) caution, going beyond a singular lens of victimization does not mean we should go to other extreme and focus only on the economic and social advantages of migration. An appreciation for the real constraints young women face as they transition into adulthood remains essential to understand their migration decision-making.

In this paper, I propose the aspiration-capability framework as a conceptual tool to better evaluate the forces shaping this migration corridor. It is relevant to all forms of migration, but becomes particularly useful to understand the migration for people who face limited livelihood options in origin areas and whose mobility journey is characterized by relatively high levels of vulnerability and risk. By separating the migration process into two steps – the aspiration and the capability to migrate – the framework gives due attention to a variety of (im)mobility outcomes: why some aspire to migrate, why others prefer to stay, and the capabilities required to realize those aspirations. Further, by engaging Amartya Sen's *capabilities approach*, it connects an analysis of migration processes to broader development considerations. The aspiration and capability to migrate should be analyzed in relation to the broader set of capabilities people have (or lack) to realize the lives they value. In this research area, I show how migration to the Middle East can be a reasonable and capabilities-enhancing project at the same time that it is a response to a critical lack of capabilities in other aspects of their lives. It is possible to recognize the social and structural injustices that drive this form of low-skilled migration without casting migrants as ‘forced’ to leave.

An area for further research involves the social forces that shape the lives people value, that is, their notions of the ‘good life’ and what kinds of lives they see to be as ‘better.’ These ideals orient the direction of their aspirations and the capabilities that become relevant to their achievement. In my research area, the ‘urbanization’ of the good life is one of the most remarkable social transformations of recent decades, with significant implications for internal and international migration processes and for the experience of immobility. Only when we appreciate the aspirations people have for their lives, and the real opportunities and constraints placed on achieving those, can we begin to understand why people may subject themselves to greater risks to achieve them.

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ⁱ One study of the knowledge and attitudes of potential migrants from Ethiopia found that “A strikingly large proportion of migrants have knowledge about serious protection risks they may face, with over 80% of potential migrants (those hoping to or planning to migrate) reporting that they have heard about extortion and robbery, exhaustion, dehydration, starvation and deprivation of sleep, mild to moderate or extreme physical violence, criminal kidnapping for ransom and degrading treatment and verbal and sexual abuse. [...] Potential migrants interviewed showed a high awareness of the specific protection risks of seizure, detention and deportation

(92%). [...] In terms of perception of the escalation of risks, 80% of potential migrants interviewed believe that the risks have increased in prevalence and severity over the past few years.” (RMMS 2014: 5)

ⁱⁱ Framed as response to human trafficking, the ban also barred legal employment agencies from facilitating labor contracts abroad. Although the government intended to use this temporary lull to revise the migration system, increase protections for their foreign workers and establish stronger bilateral agreements with GCC countries, it also increased the number of prospective migrants using illegal routes once legal channels were closed (Danish Refugee Council 2016). New The ban was lifted in February 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ The concept of capability more explicitly links the capability to migrate (and the capability to stay) with the notion of ‘freedom,’ and thus to human rights (see also Preibisch, Dodd, and Su 2016). De Haas (2014) argues that people derive well-being from having the freedom to move (or to stay), regardless of whether one acts upon it or not.

^{iv} The household survey was carried out with 73 households that lie within three family clusters within the Wayisso Qancerra kebele. A kebele refers to the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia, what is also known as a peasant association. The entire Wayisso Qancerra kebele has some 441 households (370 male households and 71 female households) according to the most recent administrative data (Source: 2003 EC, Office of Agriculture, received 11.2.16). Rather than designing measures to randomize the households chosen to survey, I decided to focus on and survey all the households within one particular area of the kebele, where three family lineages are clustered into what I refer to as the Wayisso village. From the perspective of those who live in the Wayisso, there are a number of *ganda*’s (roughly translated to village), within this kebele. These *gandas* are named after its founding patriarch. The Wayisso kebele only came to be “settled” in the 1960s and I focused my survey within three *gandas*, originally founded, or settled, by three patriarchs. A man named Bedane was one of the first to settle and populate the area with his wives and children. This growing cluster of family compounds (*ke’ee*) was and still is referred to as *ganda Bedane*. Similarly, just half a kilometer away, another *ganda*, or family cluster, founded by a man named Dhakabo Bulu. Finally, a third family cluster founded by Dhakabo Uso. A fourth cluster of families fell within this relatively small geographic area, who together were part of the Qoma sub-tribe of the Arsi Oromo, but I did not include them in this survey because they arrived later and were settled by several different households at once. The main advantage of surveying all the households within these three *ganda*’s was that it allowed me to follow the mobility histories of larger family groups after the transition to settlement and to go more in-depth into the family histories — by surveying all the households of these three family groups — rather than randomly selecting some households within the government-set boundaries.

^v The in-depth interviews with individuals had roughly four components. The first took a *life history* approach, the purpose of which was to understand the major experiences, phases and turning points across an individual’s life course; while not asking about migration directly, these stories revealed the important moments of transition within their own lives and the degree to which (im)mobility experiences shaped their life trajectories and decision-making up until that point. The second component of the interview employed a *life futures* approach in order to understand each individual’s aspirations, for themselves and their families, and their “imagined futures.” Again, was particularly interested in understanding the place of (im)mobility in their imagined futures, without asking directly about it. If needed, the third stage of the interview asked more explicitly about migration aspirations, how they understand migration, why people migrate or stay, the factors and forces that give rise to migration aspirations, and some of its consequences on their lives and society. Finally, I might also ask more specific questions of interest related to the history, present, or future of the Wayisso, Tulu or Ziway. Formal interviews ranged widely in length: from 20 minutes with one impatient farmer to four meetings, each averaging two hours, with another key informant.

^{vi} In February 2016, the exchange rate was 21.4 ETB to 1 USD.

^{vii} In February 2016, the exchange rate 3.75 riyal to 1 USD.

viii After primary school (grade 8), students take a regional exam in their mother tongue. Those who pass may proceed to secondary school and continue in English. There are further national exams at grades 10 and 12, which also determine whether students may continue to higher levels within the traditional track.