

**Ethiopian Women in the Middle East:  
The Case of Migrant Domestic Workers in Yemen**

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## Introduction

While the migration of Asian women to rich countries in the Middle East and their employment as domestics is widely known<sup>1</sup>, very few people know about the large numbers of Ethiopian women working as domestics in Arab countries. In the past ten years Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States have become common destinations for Ethiopian women in search of a better future (see Kebede 2001; Adnew 2003; Beyene 2005), but even a poor country such as Yemen attracts many female Ethiopian migrants who take up paid domestic work. The economic situation in Yemen has only deteriorated in the past fifteen years, but the demand for domestic labour has increased.<sup>2</sup> Yemeni women are reluctant to take up paid work as domestics and mainly migrant and refugee women fill this demand. The large majority comes from Somalia and Ethiopia, countries that are known for their political instability and poverty but that are not recognized as sending countries in the international care chain.

The global rise of migrant and refugee domestic labour has received increasing attention of academic researchers in the past two decades (Romero 1992; Constable 1997; Chin 1998; Momsen 1999; Anderson 2000; Adams and Dickey 2000; Parreñas 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Lan 2003). One of the main contributions of recent studies is that they show that migrant domestic workers are not just “victims of globalization” but that the power dynamics involved in paid domestic labour are complex and multidimensional. Instead of only pointing to oppression and inequality, many studies underline that women working as domestics also have agency and may employ various strategies to deal with the power inequalities inherent to paid domestic labour (see for example Romero 1992; Constable 1997; Adams and Dickey 2000; Lan 2003). Unfortunately, a more nuanced perspective has not yet been employed to the study of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East (see Moors et al forthcoming). While the presence of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East has not gone unnoticed, the focus largely remains on abuse (see Humphrey

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Michael Humphrey, “Asian Women Workers in the Middle East: Domestic Servants in Lebanon”, *Asian Migrant* (April-June, 1991), Grete Brochmann, *Middle East Avenue: Female Migration from Sri Lanka to the Gulf*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), Reem Haddad, “A Modern-Day ‘Slave Trade’: Sri Lankan Workers in Lebanon”, *Middle East Report* (Summer 1999), Ray Jureidin and Nayla Moukarbel, “Female Sri Lankan Domestic Workers in Lebanon: A Case of ‘Contract Slavery’?” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4, July 2004, pp. 581-607. In 2004 the ILO office in Beirut published an extensive report about migrant domestic workers in the Middle East, which focuses on the cases of Lebanon, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (*Gender and Migration in Arab States: The case of Domestic Workers*, (Beirut: ILO, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See Blandine Destremau, “L’Émergence d’un Marché du travail domestique au Yemen: Une étude sur Sana’a”, *Revue Tiers Monde* 170 (Avril-Juin 2002), pp. 327-351

1991; Beasley et al 1992; Bou Habib 1998; Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004). Without denying the problematic position many migrant domestic workers in the Middle East find themselves in, I want to look at the diversity of women's experiences and listen to the testimonies of women themselves, instead of homogenizing and victimizing them beforehand. Whereas domestic workers are usually classified in terms of their nationality I argue that there are important differences between women of the same nationality. Simultaneously, it is important to give more space to women's agency, however circumscribed this may be, and look at the choices women make and the strategies they employ to improve their living and working conditions.

One aspect in which the diversity and agency of domestic workers clearly comes to the fore is in the multiple trajectories they follow to improve their lives. An analysis of these trajectories reveals, among other things, the different motivations of women to migrate, their choice for a particular country, the ways in which they organized their migration and the subsequent consequences for their mobility and their contacts with their families back home.

Mobility is a central element in discussions on women's migration and employment as domestic workers. On the one hand, the "feminization of migration", in which women cross international borders to take up paid work as domestics, indicates an increased mobility of women. However, this mobility is not always voluntarily but can also be forced. This is for example the case with refugee women. On the other hand, the employment of migrant women as domestic workers and the particular ways in which they are employed, often implies severe restrictions in women's mobility, both in the houses they are employed in as in the countries they work and live in (see Moors 2003, 387-388). In this paper I will analyze the various factors that affect the migration and employment of Ethiopian domestic workers in Yemen, based on the way in which they enter the country. Broadly speaking there are three ways in which Ethiopian women come to Yemen: via relatives or friends, via recruitment agents, and smuggled by boat (often as refugees). The relationship with women's employment situation, legal status and mobility is not fixed and there is a large diversity among domestic workers. The different experiences of Ethiopian women working in Yemen will be used to discuss questions of agency and mobility.

## Methods and Data

This paper is based on anthropological research carried out in Yemen in the period 2003-2005.<sup>3</sup> In total ten months fieldwork was done in the capital Sana'a and in the port town Hodeidah. The main data collection methods used were in-depth interviews, informal conversations and observations. I met a number of domestic workers via friends and former colleagues<sup>4</sup>, and via the Ethiopian Community Centre in Sana'a. Using a snowball-method I rapidly gathered new contacts. Most of the women I interviewed were freelancers, which means that they were not working on the basis of a contract. It was more difficult to meet contract workers because they are often not allowed to leave the house of their employers. Some of the freelancers had worked on a contract basis before, and told me about their previous experiences. I sometimes visited domestic workers at their workplace but I mainly met them at their homes during their days off, and sometimes joined them on visits to friends and relatives.

I carried out in-depth interviews with domestic workers, and in particular gathered life stories. Life stories leave space for agency: they show the choices women made, albeit under serious constraints, and the ways in which their migration and employment also may have offered new opportunities. In Sana'a I conducted 10 life story interviews with Ethiopian domestic workers (two of them were former domestics) and 32 informal interviews (three of them were former domestics). In Hodeidah I conducted 5 life story interviews with Ethiopian domestic workers (one of them was a former domestic) and 10 informal interviews (one of them a former domestic). The life story interviews were recorded and ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours in length. Almost all interviews were conducted in Arabic. One interviewee preferred to speak English, and in three cases I made use of an interpreter because the women preferred to speak Amharic. Before starting the interview I informed the women about my research, and almost all of them asked what the use of my research would be for them. While I emphasized that it was first and foremost an academic study, I also expressed my intention to develop initiatives to improve the rights of migrant domestics.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The research is part of the research programme entitled: "The Cultural Politics of Migrant Domestic Labour in the Middle East" at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in Leiden and the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research in Amsterdam.

<sup>4</sup> I worked for several Dutch funded development projects between 1991 and 1998.

<sup>5</sup> In December 2005 and January 2006 I carried out a mapping study on domestic workers in Yemen for the International Labour Organization, the results of which will be used for discussions with the Yemeni Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour about possible interventions to improve the situation of domestic workers in Yemen. In addition, in March 2005 I established a support group for domestic workers (see De Regt 2006).

In order to study the transnational aspects of Ethiopian women's migration as domestics, I visited Ethiopia twice, in 2003 and 2005. During the first visit, the focus was on national and international organizations concerned with Ethiopian women's out-migration. In October 2005, I studied the perspectives of relatives back home and visited eight families of women working as domestics in Yemen, in and around Addis Ababa. These visits gave me insight in the position and identities of the women in the family, before and after migration, and the way in which they maintain transnational family relations.<sup>6</sup>

## Ethiopian Women's Migration to the Middle East

Ethiopia is one of the largest and most populated countries in sub-Saharan Africa with 65 million inhabitants most of whom are living in rural areas. The dramatic events that characterize Ethiopia's modern history, with tremendous social and political turmoil, recurrent famines, economic crises, warfare and repression have had a large impact on people's migration movements. During the dictatorial regime of Mengistu, Ethiopian refugees were one of the largest numbers of African refugees in the world (Bariagaber 1995, 213).

Yet, the overthrow of Mengistu in 1991 has not brought more equality and less repression. A new system based on ethnic federalism has been introduced, and the subsequent inequality between regions has had a very strong impact on people's livelihoods. In addition, the ongoing war with Eritrea has resulted in numerous divided families and deportees from Eritrea for who migration is one of the few ways to survive. Moreover, the violent crackdowns of demonstrations and the persecution of opposition members, human rights activists and journalists in November 2005 have led to a new flow of migrants and refugees, as has the recent war with Somalia.

While international labour migration was restricted under the socialist regime of Mengistu, the government that came to power in 1991 made the right to free movement part of the constitution and everyone willing and able to go abroad is nowadays allowed to do so.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of suitable jobs at home, Ethiopian women are increasingly looking for job opportunities abroad. Lebanon is one of the most popular destinations but the growing number of human rights violations coupled with stricter migration policies of the Ethiopian government, and sometimes even bans (Beyene 2005, 61), affects the migration to Lebanon. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States (in particular Dubai and Bahrain) have become major

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately I was not able to finish my fieldwork in Ethiopia because of the riots that broke out in November 2005. I did not find it an appropriate period to continue my research.

<sup>7</sup> In June 2006 the Ethiopian government proudly announced that more than 13,000 Ethiopians migrated abroad via legal channels (The Ethiopian Herald, June 21, 2006).

destinations as well. Some women use the *umra*<sup>8</sup> and the *hajj* as a pretext to go to Saudi Arabia and move from there to other Arab countries, even when they are not Muslim (Kebede 2001, 4). Unfortunately, reliable statistics are lacking because many women migrate via illegal channels and are not registered. Police reports about the illegal migration of Ethiopians to the Middle East, reports of NGOs and newspaper articles suggest that the numbers are increasing (Kebede 2001, 4).

Yemen, geographically closer but financially less attractive, has also experienced an increase of Ethiopian migrants and refugees since 1991. Historically, there have always been close relations between Ethiopia and Yemen. Intensive trade relations, at times invasions by one or the other, and migration flows between the two countries have been of major importance for both countries (see Carmichael 2005). In the nineteenth and twentieth century many Yemenis migrated to Ethiopia to escape the poor economic situation during the Imamate. They often married African women and brought their families back to Yemen after the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic in 1970, and in particular after the nationalization of land and property during Mengistu in the second half of the 1970s. Yet, there still is a large Yemeni community in Ethiopia, and many Yemenis have relatives in Ethiopia.

Large migration of Ethiopians to Yemen started after 1991. Ethiopian Navy officers, who had been serving under Mengistu, were among the first Ethiopians who settled in Yemen in the late twentieth century. After the overthrow of Mengistu they were forced to seek refuge, and accepted on a *prima facie* basis in Yemen. They were later sometimes followed by their wives. The second major group of Ethiopians in Yemen consists of Ethiopian women who migrated to take up paid work as domestics. They are mostly young, single women who come to Yemen by plane via relatives or friends and via recruitment agencies. The Ethiopian embassy in Sana'a estimates the number of Ethiopian domestic workers in Yemen between 6,000 and 8,000. However, reliable statistics are lacking because many women are not registered.<sup>9</sup> The third major group of Ethiopians in Yemen are migrants and refugees that come to Yemen smuggled by boat, escaping famine or persecution. They travel over land to the coast of the Red Sea or of the Gulf of Aden and pay smugglers in Eritrea, Djibouti or Somaliland to take them by boat to Yemen. Depending on the distance, the trip can take as long as three days and stories of people who drowned appear regularly in the Yemeni newspapers. The political developments in Ethiopia

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<sup>8</sup> The *umra* is often referred to as the "little pilgrimage" to Mecca. While the *hajj* is obliged according to the Quran, the *umra* is not.

<sup>9</sup> According to the Labour Office in Sana'a, there were 900 Ethiopian women working as domestic workers in Sana'a in 2004.

since November 2005 have led to a growing number of migrants and refugees. Boats with Ethiopian refugees, in particular Oromo's and Afar, two ethnic groups that are confronted with repression and famine, arrive almost daily at the Yemeni coast.

The increased presence of Ethiopians in Yemen is clearly visible in public space. There are Ethiopian restaurants; Ethiopian hair saloons; Ethiopian music shops and a number of Ethiopian organizations in the main cities. In Sana'a there is an Ethiopian community centre where people can go to have a meal, drink coffee, play billiards and watch television. There is a strong community sense among Ethiopians in Yemen, with people helping each other and celebrating weddings, births, and national and religious feasts. Newcomers are quickly integrated in the community, and helped with housing and work. Most Ethiopians share apartments, and sometimes rooms, to divide the costs.<sup>10</sup> While most Ethiopian women to some extent dress like Yemeni women, in black garments with headscarves, they are still relatively recognizable as Ethiopian because their headscarves are colored and they do not wear face veils. Many Ethiopian women are employed as domestic workers but the ways in which they came to Yemen vary, as do the ways in which they are employed and their ties with their families back home. In the following sections I will first describe women who come to Yemen by plane via family and friends, then those who come by plane via recruitment agencies and finally those who come smuggled by boat. Why did they come to Yemen, why did they choose a particular route and how does that affect their experiences as domestics, their mobility and their ties with their families back home?

## The Risk of Getting Stuck: Migrating Via Relatives and Friends

Hemi is 27 years old and came to Yemen in 1999. She is born in a small town two hours south of Addis Ababa and finished secondary school. But while her father encouraged her to continue her studies, she was more interested in going to an Arab country. "I always saw girls coming back from Arab countries with gold and nice clothes and I wanted to be like them." Hemi asked a friend who was already working as a domestic worker in Yemen if she could find her a job, and her friend succeeded in doing so. She wrote her in detail about her future work, the living conditions and the salary. Her future employer sent her a contract and paid the costs of the air ticket while Hemi had to pay for a passport and the visa. When she arrived in Yemen she was surprised about the simple airport, and realized that Yemen was not a rich country: "I thought, what is this? It looked like I was somewhere in the countryside." Hemi was employed as a live-in

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<sup>10</sup> See for similar housing arrangements in Lebanon Al-Zougbi (2003) and Beyene (2005).

domestic by an older Yemeni couple in the city of Taiz. They treated her well: “My father and my Yemeni employer even wrote each other letters in English, and I always ate with the family.” She worked for two and a half years for the same family and then went home for a couple of months. Her employer paid her ticket and she promised him to come back after her leave.

But when she returned to Yemen she did not go back to Taiz: “When I went to Ethiopia my employers told me that they were going to pay me 10.000 Yemeni Rial (50 US\$) monthly upon my return and I said to myself that that was too little, and that I could better stay in Sana’a where I could work for 100 US\$.” And she continued: “I did not tell my previous employers that I returned to Yemen. I sent them the costs of the ticket and arranged a replacement for them. They were a bit angry but what could they do?” Hemi returned to Yemen on Thursday and started working as a cook on Sunday. “The salary is higher but the first family treated me better, I really felt part of the family. This family is a bit arrogant.” And while her first employer arranged her residence permit and work permit, the second family did not and Hemi became herself responsible for arranging her permits. She neglected doing so and has been undocumented for the last five years. Returning to Ethiopia has now become almost impossible as she will be forced to pay a high penalty for having been undocumented as soon as she wants to leave Yemen. “I thought that I could leave Yemen with an exit visa but now you need a residence permit. It was not like that before”. She is saving money for a residence permit and to pay off the penalty. She wants to go to Ethiopia to see her family but says that she will come back to Yemen. “In Ethiopia there is no work, so there is no reason for me to stay there.”

Hemi said that she came to Yemen because she longed for nice clothes and gold, commodities her peers who worked in Arab countries were wearing when they visited their home country. She came with a very clear project in mind, and even went against the ambitions of her father who wanted her to continue her studies. Although she did not migrate to Yemen out of poverty, after having worked for years in Yemen she does not want to go back to Ethiopia and sit idle at home without having a paid job. Hemi is a typical example of an Ethiopian live-in domestic worker, because she was relatively young when she came to Yemen and is not married and has no children. In addition, she is Christian, like the majority of Ethiopian live-in domestics in Yemen. Ethiopian Muslim women marry younger and migrate less abroad.

Hemi came to Yemen via a friend who was already working in Yemen. Networks of relatives and friends often play a role in determining migrant’s destinations, facilitating their migration, their arrival in the destination country and their access to housing and work (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Hagan 1998; Castles 2002; Beyene 2005). As mentioned before, the close historical



relationship with Ethiopia has resulted in a large community of Ethiopians and the presence of many people of mixed Ethiopian-Yemeni descent. Sometimes women ask relatives or friends in Yemen to find work for them and help organize their migration. In other cases Yemeni employers ask their domestic workers if they have relatives or friends who want to come and work in Yemen. Whereas Hemi came through a friend who was already working as a domestic in Yemen, Aida had a friend at school whose father was Yemeni and who had moved to Yemen after finishing school. Her friend had often asked her to come to Yemen and when Aida was looking for ways to earn more money she decided to accept the invitation.

Having relatives or friends is an important reason to come to Yemen and not to go to another country in the Middle East, where women may earn more money.<sup>11</sup> Some women told me that they had preferred to go to another country but that they did not know anyone who could arrange their migration and employment. Aida: “If I had known someone in Beirut, I would have gone there. Here in Yemen you cannot make money but those who work in Beirut can set up a business or build a house when they go home.” Almaz did know people in other countries but they could not help her: “I had a lot of friends who were working in Dubai and Beirut but they did not succeed in arranging work for me. My friend in Yemen did and that is why I came here.” Other women said that they preferred to go to Yemen because of the negative stories they had heard about other Arab countries. In the past five years many stories about human rights violations against Ethiopian women working as domestics in Lebanon and the Gulf States have appeared in the Ethiopian media. International organizations, such as the International Organization for Migration, try to warn and prepare women who want to migrate to the Middle East<sup>12</sup> and there have been a number of bans on migration to Lebanon. Meseret: “I wanted to go to Beirut but there were rumours that Ethiopian women were being pushed from balconies and other scary things so then I decided to go to Dubai, but my grandmother did not agree and advised me to go to Yemen”.

Hemi came to Yemen via a friend but was employed on a contract. One of the distinctions made in the literature on domestic workers is between contract workers and freelancers (see Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004). Contract workers are employed on a contract that is arranged before their arrival, whereas freelancers work without a written contract. In most Middle Eastern countries, it is not allowed to work as a freelancer: all foreign workers need a guarantee

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<sup>11</sup> Monthly salaries of Ethiopian domestic workers in Lebanon and the Gulf States are on average between 100 and 200 US\$.

<sup>12</sup> See for example the brochure “Let’s Know: Dedicated to Whoever wants to go abroad”, published by the Illegal Migration Prevention Programme of the International Organization for Migration in Addis Ababa, January 2003.

(*kafil*) to be able to get a work permit and subsequently a residence permit. In Yemen these rules are not strictly upheld to and the majority of freelancers work without a work permit. Whereas control of residence status is becoming stricter, control of work status is still very limited. In addition, in most other countries the only way to enter legally is as a contract worker employed as live-in and freelancing and working as live-out is illegal. In Yemen, however, there are more varieties. While it is true that contract workers always work as live-in, they do not only come through recruitment agents but can also work on contracts arranged by individual employers, who came in touch with them through other Ethiopian women. I met many women whose contracts had been arranged via individual employers, with the help of relatives or friends. In the past ten years Aida, who did not like Yemen in the beginning and wanted to return home after three months, has arranged work for three nieces and a friend. “It is much cheaper for the worker and the employer than to make use of an agent”, she explained. And Mulu in Hodeidah, who came to Yemen seven years ago via a recruitment agent, also brought her sister and four friends as domestics to Hodeidah. They all work as live-in domestic workers for the brothers of one family and their contracts are no longer organized by an agent but by their individual employers. “The agent stole 500 US\$ from me, and now all the brothers prefer to arrange their domestic workers through me.”

Migrating via relatives or friends has important advantages. Firstly, women might be better prepared for their work and life abroad. Hemi said that her friend told her everything about Yemen before she came: “She wrote me about the work, and the salary and the family. I knew what I had to expect”. Aida, however, was not well prepared: “I hated Yemen in the beginning because everything was dirty and unorganized. I wanted to leave after three months but my friend convinced me to stay and said that I could not return to Ethiopia with empty hands”. Although she knew beforehand that she was going to work as a domestic she was not prepared well. Secondly, the presence of relatives or friends facilitates women’s adjustment to a new living and working situation. Networks of relatives and friends are very important for migrants well-being in general (see Hagan 1998, Castles 2002), and for domestic workers in particular because they often work in isolated situations (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Beyene 2005). Relatives and friends can offer support and protection in times of trouble and assist with finding housing and employment. In addition, the fact that the families they are going to work for are often selected by their friends and relatives may increase the chance that they are treated well.

Moreover, the freedom of movement of women who came to Yemen via relatives or friends is greater than of women who come to Yemen via recruitment agencies. Women who are employed on contracts that are arranged via relatives

or friends often have a day off, or at least an afternoon, and have more room for maneuver. Mulu and her friends in Hodeidah, who work as live-in domestic workers for the brothers of the same family, meet each other every Friday afternoon in the room of one of them. They cook Ethiopian food and prepare Ethiopian coffee. And in the afternoons they sometimes go shopping on their own, albeit after having asked permission. Women who work as freelancers, and particularly those who are employed as live-out domestics, have even more freedom of movement. They often rent a room in a shared apartment (see Beyene 2005), and spend their leisure time at home, or visit friends, go shopping or go to church.<sup>13</sup>

One of the greatest risks of migrating via relatives or friends is that those who work as freelancers neglect to arrange their residence permits. In the past, the Yemeni state did little to control the residence status and work permits of foreigners and many foreigners reside and work in the country without being documented. While women in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Lebanon run the risk of being arrested and detained when they work as undocumented freelancers (see ILO 2004; Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004, 596), government control in Yemen is weaker. In order to prevent the presence of undocumented migrants, the Yemeni government regularly announces a stricter control of the residence status of foreigners. Migrants are informed that they have to obtain residence permits, otherwise they will be arrested and deported. The dominant government discourse is that the increasing flow of refugees and migrants is putting a heavy burden on the state because it is difficult and costly to provide housing, education, health care and employment. But these governmental measures must mainly be seen in relation to the fight against terror, in which the Yemeni government is heavily supported by the United States and some European countries.

Despite serious announcements, there have not yet been large-scale arrests and deportations of Ethiopian domestic workers. The relative invisibility of domestic workers, in particular of those who work as live-in domestics, makes it difficult to check their residence status. However, some Ethiopian women have started to wear face veils in order to be less recognizable as foreigners when they go outside. A more important consequence of the new migration policies of the Yemeni government is that it has resulted in a stricter control when foreigners want to leave the country. Undocumented migrants have to pay a penalty (0,85 US\$ per day) for the period they have resided in Yemen without a visa or

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<sup>13</sup> While churches are not officially recognized in Yemen, and spreading another religion than Islam is forbidden by law, non-Muslims are allowed to practice their religion, albeit under restricted circumstances. The important role of religion in the lives of domestic workers has been described extensively (see Constable 1997, 191-193; Parreñas 2001, 204; Rajjman, Schammah-Gesser and Kemp 2003, 744-745).

residence permit. The result is that many domestic workers cannot leave Yemen anymore because they do not earn enough to pay the penalties. Although freelancers earn more than contract workers, they have to pay the rent of their rooms and their own clothing and toiletries. Hemi has been undocumented for five years, which means that she has to pay more than 1500 US\$ to pay off the penalty. She tries to save money and prefers not to think about the difficult position she is in: “It is no problem, I already went home five years ago and my father is not at home anyways because he is studying in a different town.” For Hemi’s friend Genet the situation is different. She had not returned to Ethiopia since she arrived five years ago, and neglected to arrange a residence permit. Her family was begging her to come home, even for a short period of time: “I haven’t told them that I cannot leave Yemen because I don’t have a residence permit. My father would get really worried if he knew. I just told them that I haven’t saved enough money yet.” Genet was only able to visit her family after I had obtained a clearance of her penalty from a high official in the Minister of Interior, and additionally paid 400 US\$ to get her a residence permit. Bribery and connections (*wasta*) are the only way in which undocumented migrants can be legalized, but most women do not have money or the right contacts.

## Modern Slaves? Migrating via Recruitment Agents

Tigist is 27 years old and born in Addis Ababa. After completing secondary school she worked for three years in a hotel. Her salary was low but she never intended to migrate abroad and explicitly expressed a dislike of Arab countries: “A friend who worked abroad always tried to persuade me but I did not like Arab countries and I did not want to work as a domestic. Only when I saw no alternative to improve my living standard I decided to migrate.” Tigist saved money to pay a recruitment agent, and paid 400 US\$ to arrange her migration and employment. The amount of money determined her destination: “I did not have enough money to go to another country in the Middle East and that is why I came to Yemen”. She was told that she was going to earn 100 US\$ per month but when she arrived in Sana’a she found out that her salary would only be half of that. Her attempts to negotiate were to no avail and she was forced to work for a big family in Sana’a living in a three-story house. She was the only domestic, had a very heavy workload and was never allowed to leave the house. When the employer tried to seduce her, she refused, locked herself in her room and was dismissed. Her agent found her another job but the female employer did not like her and she was dismissed again. The third family that employed her treated her better but they left Yemen after four months. Tigist decided that she did not want to work as a domestic anymore and started to work as a cleaner in hotels but her

salary was very low. She is now assisting in a beauty saloon of an Ethiopian friend but is hardly able to make ends meet. She is depressed and regrets that she ever came to Yemen.

Tigist came to Yemen via a recruitment agent, which is the second way in which many Ethiopian women come to Yemen. Recruitment agencies in Yemen and their counterparts in Ethiopia arrange the migration and employment of Ethiopian domestic workers for the Yemeni domestic labour market. Women who come via recruitment agents always work as live-in domestic workers, and are employed for cleaning, cooking and care-taking tasks. In case the contract is arranged in a legal way, the employer is obliged to pay the plane ticket, the costs of the residence permit and work permit and the worker is responsible for the costs of the visa and health tests. The contract is for two years after which the employer has to pay a ticket home. However, the number of recruitment agents that work according to the rules and regulations of the Yemeni Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour is very small, and there are no agents with an official license of the Ministry. The requirement of having one million Yemeni Rials (more than 5000 US\$) in the bank, as a guarantee in case of conflict or financial problems, is the most important obstacle for obtaining a license.

Yet, there are also agencies that prefer not to be officially registered because this will increase the level of government control over their activities. Some agencies violate the rights of women migrants by deceiving them, withholding their passports, restricting their freedom of movement, and delaying the payment of salaries with the excuse that the workers have to pay off their debts. In 2003 an agent lost his license because of serious violations of women's rights, including withholding passports, delay of payment of salaries and physical abuse. Early 2006 the only other legal agent in Yemen lost his license as well after raping a young Ethiopian woman who came to Yemen through his office. He was arrested, brought to court and imprisoned but within a short period of time free again. Although both agents lost their licenses, they continue their activities without a license as do many other agents. The Yemeni Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour lacks the facilities, such as cars and petrol, to systematically control the activities of illegal recruitment agents. But the financial and political interests that accompany the illegal immigration and employment of young women workers also hamper attempts to regulate it.

The fact that none of the recruitment agencies in Yemen has a license increases the chances that women are deceived and that their rights are violated. Tigist's salary was much lower than she was told before, and she was not informed about the heavy workload and the family she had to work for.

According to the definition,<sup>14</sup> Tigist was trafficked because deceit is an important aspect of trafficking. Trafficking is one of the main themes in the literature on domestic workers in the Middle East (see Kebede 2001; Adnew 2003; Calandruccio 2005). Although it cannot be denied that many women who migrate to the Middle East as domestics are deceived and often trafficked, the dominant discourse on trafficking leaves very little space for the different experiences of women. In order to pay attention to diversity and agency, we need a close analysis of the concept of “force” and a perspective in which the differences between migrants who migrate via illegal channels are recognized (Agustín 2005, 104).

Areas in which “force” can be analyzed are the decision to migrate and the ways in which the migration is organized. Women who want to migrate abroad may contact an agent themselves but they can also be approached by brokers or agents or introduced to them by friends, neighbours and relatives. Agents often actively search for suitable women who can be employed as domestics abroad. Tigist approached a recruitment agent herself but Meseret was approached by a broker:

“I met someone in the street in Addis. He was driving a lorry (...) and he simply convinced me, telling me that if I went to work in Yemen, I would find a good job and a lot of money, much better than what I was earning then. He told me that he wanted to help me and thus changed my mind. I told my mother about this, and the boy, to whom I had given my mother’s phone number, also called her and tried to convince her. But my mother didn’t agree to let me go, especially when she saw that the whole process was unclear. But I told her that it was clear to me, I quarreled with her and forced her to let me go. So she accepted in the end.”

Both Tigist and Meseret knew that their migration was organized in an illegal way, but this was not a reason to withdraw. Meseret: “They told me that I had to say to the people in the Yemeni embassy in Addis that I was just going to visit my sister..., this was what worried my mother.”

In order to control the illegal migration of women to the Middle East the Ethiopian government introduced a new migration policy per July 2004. People who want to migrate to the Middle East can only do so when their migration and employment are organized via a legal agent, recognized by the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The agent has to make sure that the employer signs a contract, pays the ticket and health insurance for the domestic

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<sup>14</sup> The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking defines trafficking as: “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (UNODCCP, 2000).

worker, and pays her a monthly salary which is fixed at 100 US\$.<sup>15</sup> In case of problems the agent has to solve the conflict or find another employer for the worker. Women who want to migrate legally only have to pay the costs of a passport and medical tests, while those who migrate via traffickers have to pay large fees. Recently 24 Ethiopian recruitment agents obtained a license from the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. However, the bureaucratic procedures that are involved in legal migration take so much time that women sometimes still prefer to make use of traffickers, even though it costs them much more money.

Women who migrate via (illegal) recruitment agencies as contract workers are generally seen as the most unfavourable, both in Yemen as all over the world. Their mobility is often severely restricted because they are not allowed to leave the house of their employers unaccompanied and they may be locked inside the house in order to prevent them from running away or meeting compatriots. In addition, they may be denied basic human rights such as a good place to sleep and good food, and they may work under exploitative conditions with hardly any time off and be confronted with physical, mental or sexual abuse. In their paper on female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon, Jureidini and Moukarbel (2004) therefore speak of “contract slavery”, a term they borrowed from Bales (2004). According to Bales (*ibid.* 20), contracts are offered that guarantee employment but when the workers are taken to their place of work they find themselves enslaved, threatened by violence, lacking any freedom of movement and paid nothing. “The contract is used as an enticement to trick an individual into slavery, as well as a way of making the slavery look legitimate” (*ibid.*). Without denying the extent to which contract workers are vulnerable to human rights violations, I argue that it is important to pay attention to the differences between women and to their agency before using the term contract slavery. As Anderson (2000, 128) states, “contemporary domestic workers’ experiences vary widely, even within the same state, so while some might seem to be formally enslaved, others quite clearly are not.”

The fact that contract workers and deceived women do have agency comes clearly to the fore in the strategies they employ to improve their situation and in the worst case to find ways to leave. Tigist tried to negotiate her salary and refused to start working immediately after her arrival but to no avail. She was taken to the house of her employers and worked there for one and a half month. At a moment that the family was not at home she called the agent and told him that she was very unhappy with her job. Tigist:

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<sup>15</sup> The minimum salary was first fixed at 50 US\$ per month but the Ethiopian government has recently increased it to 100 US\$ per month.

“I told him that I did not want to run away but that if he wouldn’t help me I was going to run away. He said that he would try to help me and that he liked the fact that I was honest and did not run away and that I told him directly and straightforward about my problems. He advised me to do as if I was sick.”

After three employers she decided to leave domestic work, and her agent allowed her to. The fact that she had been able to pay the agent’s fee before coming to Yemen may have been a reason. In other cases women may have much more difficulties to leave their employers and their agents, and may sometimes be confronted with physical violence. Sometimes women have borrowed money from the agent to pay the fees and end up in “debt bondage”, in which they are completely dependent from him (see Anderson 2000, 32, 39; Bales 2004, 19-20; Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004, 584). Women with more financial resources have a stronger position to negotiate their rights.

When the mobility of women is severely restricted and they are treated badly, running away is one of the few possibilities open to escape the situation they are in. The number of women that approaches the Ethiopian embassy in Sana’a for help after having run away from their employers or their agents is increasing. Whereas running away may be the outcome of a situation of oppression, it also shows women’s agency and the clever ways in which they try to set the situation to their hand. In some cases women were even informed before their arrival in Yemen that they could run away and then take up work as freelancers, for a higher salary and under better conditions. Agents complain about the large numbers of domestic workers that run away and advise employers to forbid domestic workers to leave the house on their own. In addition, according to the agents this measure should also prevent them from meeting other Ethiopians who could influence their way of thinking and introduce them to “bad habits”, such as the practice of chewing *qat*<sup>16</sup> and illicit relationships. However, more important is the fact that women will become aware of their rights when they meet other Ethiopians and may not accept the way in which they are treated any longer.

## On Transit: Coming to Yemen Smuggled by Boat

Tsehai is 22 years old and born in a small Ethiopian town close to the Sudanese border. She is the youngest in a big family of Oromo’s, one of Ethiopia’s main ethnic groups. Tsehai went to school and even learned English. She was forced to leave her home town after having participated in student demonstrations against the government. Tsehai fled to Addis, where she was arrested and detained. During her imprisonment she was raped and when she was released she decided

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<sup>16</sup> *Qat* is shrub of which the leaves have a mildly stimulant effect when chewed, and which is widely used in the Horn of Africa. While in Ethiopia and Somalia mainly men chew *qat*, in Yemen it is also very common among women.



to flee. Together with her boyfriend she took the train to Djibouti, where Tsehai took up work as a domestic for a Somali family, and later became a cook for a Frenchman. Three years later they decided to move on to Yemen because they were afraid of being arrested again by the Ethiopian police. They were smuggled by boat from Djibouti to a small town on the Red Sea coast. “We did not have money to pay the smuggler and he suggested that I would work for a befriended family, so I started to work as a domestic again.” Her boyfriend was unable to find work. After three years they moved to Sana’a because they had heard that they might get refugee status from UNHCR. Both she and her boyfriend were accepted as refugees. Tsehai is now working for a European couple, who treat her well, but she would prefer to move on to Europe. “I want to study and improve myself. Here I can’t do anything but work.” Her ultimate dream would be to go back to Ethiopia and set up an orphanage, but in the current political situation that remains nothing but a dream.

Tsehai came to Yemen smuggled by boat, fleeing persecution and repression in Ethiopia.<sup>17</sup> In the past fifteen years the number of people that come to Yemen smuggled by boat has increased dramatically. Estimations of the Yemeni Ministry of Interior suggest that around 150 persons are smuggled by boat daily and enter Yemen undocumented. The majority are Somali refugees escaping the civil war that broke out after the fall of President Siad Barre in 1991. They travel overland to Bosasso in Puntland or Berbera in Somaliland and pay smugglers to arrange their trip by boat to Yemen. The boat trips can be very dangerous because the boats are small, not equipped for a large number of passengers, and people are sometimes forced to jump off the boat a couple of miles off the coast because the smugglers want to prevent being caught by the police. With clock-like regularity stories about refugees who have drowned appear in Yemeni newspapers. Although the smuggling of people by boat is prohibited, Somali refugees are immediately accepted as soon as they arrive in Yemen. Yemen is the only country on the Arabian Peninsula that has ratified the “1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees” and its “1967 Protocol” and Somali refugees can obtain refugee status by registering at one of the registration centers in the country. After their arrival in Yemen they can go to a refugee camp of UNHCR near Aden, where they receive basic shelter, food and health care. But because the camp is located in the desert, one and a half hour from Aden, and there is very little to do, many Somali refugees prefer to move on to the major cities to look for work. In addition, many of them intend to travel via Yemen to the richer

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<sup>17</sup> Since 1992 the Oromo population is increasingly subjected to repression and human rights violations by regional and local authorities, intending to consolidate their control over the population and suppress any form of political opposition. For more information on the situation of Oromo’s in Ethiopia see *Suppressing Dissent: Human Rights Abuses and Political Repression in Ethiopia’s Oromia Region*, Human Rights Watch, May 2005, vol. 17, no.7

countries on the Arabian Peninsula, such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, or to North America or Europe.

Whereas Somali refugees form the major part of people smuggled by boat to Yemen, the numbers of Ethiopians and Eritreans that take this route are increasing. In the beginning of the 1990s the majority of Ethiopian refugees in Yemen were ex-officers and cadets of the former Ethiopian Navy, who were unable to return home after the fall of Mengistu in 1991, and their families.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as a result of the deteriorating political and economic situation in Ethiopia and Eritrea, where repression, unemployment and famine are increasing, the numbers of refugees and undocumented migrants from these two countries is growing daily. In contrast with Somali refugees, they are not accepted on a *prima facie* basis but have to prove that they are politically prosecuted. If this is not the case, they are arrested and deported. In the past five years border controls along the Yemeni coastline, which is more than 2000 kilometers long, have intensified. As mentioned above, these governmental measures must be seen in relation to the fight against terrorism, in which the Yemeni government is supported by a number of Western countries, and in particular the United States of America.

Tsehai is an example of an Ethiopian refugee who fled persecution at home and who obtained refugee status in Yemen. Abyut also came to Yemen by boat but has a very different story. She comes from a poor family in Desse, a small town in the northeast of Ethiopia. After finishing school she decided to go to Saudi Arabia in the hope to find work and help her family. Abyut first went to Assab in Eritrea and from there on traveled by boat to Yemen. There were many young Ethiopian women on the boat who all wanted to go to Saudi Arabia and together they traveled to the Yemeni-Saudi border. But Abyut was exhausted and scared and people advised her not to continue the trip because it would be too demanding for her. Crossing the Yemeni-Saudi border illegally takes five days by foot through the desert, accompanied by smugglers. Many stories circulate about people who died during the trip or who were arrested immediately upon their arrival in Saudi Arabia. Abyut stayed in the port town Hodeidah and found work as a live-in domestic for a Yemeni family. For women who are smuggled to Yemen by boat, refugees and undocumented migrants alike, domestic labour is one of the few possibilities to earn a living. Most of them work as live-out domestics and have one or more cleaning jobs, but there are also women who find work as live-in domestic workers. It is much easier for refugee women to find work than for their male compatriots and Ethiopian men are often

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<sup>18</sup> Around 800 Ethiopian Navy officers and cadets took refuge in Yemen after 1991.

unemployed.<sup>19</sup> Tsehai has been the main breadwinner since she left Ethiopia, as her boyfriend was unable to find a job. Only recently he found work as a guard.

The mobility of women who were smuggled to Yemen by boat is not so much restricted to the way in which they are employed, as most of them work as freelancers and have a relatively large freedom of movement, but on their legal status. Whereas Tsehai is officially recognized as a refugee, Abyut has been undocumented since she arrived in Yemen. After having worked for four years, she married a Yemeni man in the hope that this would help her to obtain a residence permit. She stopped working and got a son but her husband never arranged her documents. He lost his job and she started working again, this time in the canteen of a company. A couple of years ago they separated and Abyut is still undocumented. She longs to visit her family in Ethiopia but is unable to do so without a residence permit due to the high penalty she has to pay upon leaving. Being an undocumented single mother has affected her contacts with her relatives:

“I don’t have the money to call home, but in addition, my family always asks me for money when I call and I can hardly keep myself and my son alive. They think that I am doing well because I am living abroad but they don’t know what I am going through.”

Whereas Abyut intentionally does not contact her family anymore, Tsehai has lost all contact because of the political risk involved. Since she left Ethiopia she never contacted her mother since, afraid that her letters and phone calls would be checked and her mother would be interrogated. When one of her brothers came to Yemen he told her that her mother had died a year after she had left. Her other brothers and sisters have left her home town as well and she does not know where they are.

Although Tsehai was lucky to find a relatively good job working for a European couple, she is still unhappy with her life in Yemen. Like the large majority of refugees in Yemen, she sees very little possibilities to improve her living standard in Yemen and wants to move on to another country, preferably in Europe. There are a number of ways in which migrants and refugees can move on to other countries. One of the most preferred ways is via the Green Card Lottery of the United States. Each year 50,000 visas are made available to people who come from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States, and many Somalis and Ethiopians in Yemen try their luck every year. It is, however, not easy to fulfill the requirements and many people failed to obtain their visa after having been selected. I often heard stories from women who said that they

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<sup>19</sup> See Ahmed (2003) for a similar situation in Cairo, where refugee women also more easily find work than their male compatriots.

were very close to getting their visa but eventually they were unable to pay the required amount of money or to fulfill the other requirements. A second way to leave Yemen is through a family reunion programme, whereby relatives abroad can apply for residence visa for family members. Desta said: "I have relatives living in Canada and they told me to go to any country outside Ethiopia and then they would help me to get to Canada." But when she arrived in Yemen and phoned them they told her that they could not help her. Desta has been in Yemen for eight years and works as a live-out domestic for expatriates. She tried to go to Italy but failed as well.

A third way to leave the country as a refugee is to be resettled via UNHCR. However, due to the more restricted immigration policies of many Western countries the number of resettled individuals has been low in the past years. UNHCR Yemen only resettles vulnerable cases, and in particular women with children without a male partner and women who are mentally, physically or sexually abused. Yet, in September 2005 around 1000 former Navy officers and their families were resettled in Western countries. They had expressed their discontent with living in Yemen for years and after a number of strikes in front of the UNHCR headquarters in Sana'a an agreement was reached. A number of planes full of Ethiopians left Yemen in the fall of 2005, among whom many former domestic workers married to Navy officers. Almaz was one of them. She was smuggled to Yemen by boat in 1994 in order to join her husband who had been working in the Navy under Mengistu. They lived for some time in Hodeidah where her husband worked as a mechanic but when he lost his job they moved to Sana'a and Almaz became the main breadwinner, doing live-out domestic work. Almaz was fortunate to leave Yemen with her husband and three children, but many other Ethiopian refugees and migrants stayed behind, envious of those who were accepted for resettlement.

## Conclusion

Ethiopian domestic workers in Yemen are not an undifferentiated category of migrant workers but there are important differences in their motivations to migrate to Yemen, in the ways in which they came to Yemen, in the ways in which they are employed and the possibilities to return home. Through an analysis of women's trajectories I showed the different degrees of mobility and agency, but also the importance of government policies that may pose structural constraints. In addition, the important role of information and of legal status has come to the fore. With regard to mobility a difference should be made between mobility within Yemen and outside of Yemen.

Women who come via relatives and friends often have a clear migration project in mind and take the decision to migrate themselves. They are in most cases informed about the fact that they are going to work as domestics and are often better prepared for their life and work in Yemen. In addition, they already have a network of people they can turn to in case of problems. As a result, their mobility inside Yemen is greater and they have more leverage to negotiate their living and working conditions. Women who come through recruitment agents are often convinced by brokers and are less prepared for their work abroad and sometimes deceived. Their mobility in Yemen is restricted because their passports are often withheld and they are not allowed to leave the house of their employers unaccompanied. Women who have more financial resources and paid the costs of their migration without making debts are often more in control of their situation and less dependent on others. Those who have borrowed money from their agents are the worst off, and subjected to forms of “debt bondage”. Women who come to Yemen smuggled by boat are almost always undocumented and take up paid domestic work because it is one of the few ways to earn a living. Political refugees may obtain refugee status in Yemen but the majority of women migrants that are smuggled to Yemen by boat do not have any documents. While the mobility of refugees and undocumented migrants inside Yemen may be greater than of contract workers, their transnational mobility is restricted because they are often unable to leave Yemen.

A number of other factors affect the migration and employment of Ethiopian domestic workers. An important factor is whether women are living with the families of their employers or not. Contract workers are always living with their employers but freelancers can be live-in domestics as well as live-out domestics. Freelancers are generally seen as having more freedom of movement because they can resign whenever they want to and are not dependent on an agent or employer. Women who first worked on a contract therefore often return to Yemen as freelancers. The fact that women take the decision to come back to Yemen shows their agency, but it also underlines the limited opportunities they have at home. And while the mobility of contract workers inside Yemen may be restricted because they are not allowed to leave their employer’s house unaccompanied, the mobility of freelancers is restricted because they are in most cases undocumented and therefore unable to leave Yemen. When they want to leave Yemen via an official route they have to pay a penalty for every day they were undocumented, and the result is that many of them get stuck in Yemen. A second important factor determining women’s mobility is their legal status. Contract workers who come through legal channels are often documented and so are refugees who have obtained refugee status. But the majority of women that come via illegal recruitment agents and women who came to Yemen on tourist

visa or smuggled by boat are undocumented. They have little possibilities to return home or move elsewhere. Their mobility outside Yemen is therefore restricted.

Migrant domestic workers' mobility is in several ways affected by state policies and practices. The Ethiopian state allows women to look for work abroad because of the bad economic situation but is confronted with the illegal migration of women and human rights violations. The government tries to control and regulate women's migration to the Middle East, but does not want to lose women's remittances and therefore turns a blind eye to trafficking and human rights violations. On the other hand, the Ethiopian state is itself responsible for human rights violations, which forces many people to seek refuge abroad. The Yemeni state has signed international conventions to accept and support refugees but does little to put these conventions into practice. Refugees in Yemen are therefore to a large extent left to themselves and lack support. The recent increase of border controls and control of residence status is meant to restrict the flow of refugees and migrants to Yemen, but the Yemeni state does very little against illegal agents and traffickers of Ethiopian women, mainly because political and financial interests are involved. The penalty migrants have to pay for having been undocumented keeps many women captive in Yemen, and shows that the Yemeni state is severely hampering women's agency. The state allows Ethiopian women to enter in multiple ways but restricts their ways to leave. This points to a clear need for Ethiopian women's labour.

Most migrant domestic workers came to Yemen with the idea to earn money and then return home, but the bad economic and political situation in Ethiopia makes them change their plans and, in case they are able to go home, they often return to Yemen after a short visit. Yet, their salaries in Yemen are also not sufficient to improve their lives and most of them hope to find a job in a richer country, preferably in the West. Refugees, who are unable to return home and often find themselves in an isolated situation because of their political or ethnic background, also share this dream. They hope to be resettled in the West, or in any other way leave Yemen where opportunities for self-development are limited. But while there are multiple ways to enter Yemen, the ways to leave are limited.

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