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Marina de Regt

## Ethiopian Women's Migration to Yemen Past and Present

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Marina de Regt

# Ethiopian Women's Migration to Yemen

Past and Present

## Introduction

- 1 Yemen is primarily known as a sending country in terms of migration; large numbers of Yemenis have migrated abroad at various periods in time. Hadramis played an important role in the incense trade and started migrating to the Indonesian Archipelago and East Africa from the thirteenth century onwards.<sup>1</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century many Yemenis migrated to Asia, Africa, Europe and the United States, escaping the harsh living conditions under the imamate. In the 1970s, attracted by growing employment opportunities after the oil boom, Yemenis went to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.<sup>2</sup> However, since the early 1990s Yemen has also turned into a receiving country; large numbers of migrants and refugees from the Horn of Africa have come into the country, fleeing war and conflict at home, in search of work opportunities, often using the country as a steppingstone to emigrate to other countries in the region, or to Europe and North America.
- 2 While Yemeni migration to Asia, particularly that of the Hadramis, has received ample scholarly attention, few studies have focused on Yemeni migration to and from the Horn of Africa. In addition, the gendered aspects of this migration have never been the focus of any publication. Out-migration was largely male-dominated; men migrated to work as traders and workers, leaving their female relatives and wives behind. Most migrants intended to return home after a few years, and many did. Those who settled down often married local women as first or second wives. Although many studies refer to these inter-cultural marriages<sup>3</sup> little or no empirical research has been conducted on the women who married Yemeni men. In the 1960s and 1970s many Yemeni migrants returned to Yemen. This was mostly due to the changing political climate in host countries, with nationalist governments coming to power and foreigners losing their preferential status, as well as the fall of the imamate in Northern Yemen. They often returned with their families, bringing their African wives and children of mixed descent along with them. Thus, Ethiopian women migrating to Yemen is not a completely new phenomenon. Although many Ethiopian men have also migrated to Yemen, particularly in the late 2000s, job opportunities for women are generally better as they can find employment as domestic workers.<sup>4</sup>
- 3 In the literature on migration, a distinction is often made between women who migrate “independently” as labor migrants and those who “only followed their husbands”<sup>5</sup>. It is sometimes assumed that women who migrate “independently” benefit more from their migration process than those “following” their husbands. In this paper I would like to compare the experiences of Ethiopian women who came to Yemen with their Yemeni husbands to those of Ethiopian women who migrated to Yemen as labor migrants. What were the conditions under which they migrated? Who made the decision to migrate? How did they experience their arrival in Yemen? To what extent was migration empowering or disabling? My main argument is that the distinction between “dependent” and “independent” migration is not very useful; regardless of the way they migrate, women exercise agency, before and after. This is particularly clear when the women's own narratives are analyzed.
- 4 I will first provide a short overview of the debate on women and migration. I will then give more background information about both kinds of migration processes and present two short life stories: the first one about a woman who came to Yemen with her husband and children, and the other about a woman who came alone to Yemen as a labor migrant. I will elaborate on the particular aspects of their migration, and compare their experiences focusing on how they express agency. I will then address this issue in the conclusion. The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews carried out in two Yemeni cities (Sana'a and al-Ḥudayda) between 2003 and 2006.

## Gender, Migration and Globalization

- 5 In the past two decades a burgeoning number of studies on gendered aspects of migration have appeared. Whereas migration scholars regarded migration for a long time as a primarily “man’s business”, with men migrating abroad to provide for their families back home, recent studies have shown that women do not always stay behind, “follow” their male relatives, or have no say in migration processes.<sup>6</sup> Women in the past also migrated without their male relatives, just as they were involved in the decision-making process on migration, yet this has “escaped accurate documentation”.<sup>7</sup>
- 6 Since the 1990s women’s migration has caught the attention of migration scholars, as large numbers of women nowadays migrate overseas, a process oftentimes called the “feminization of migration”.<sup>8</sup> Globalization, particularly the growth of global capitalism, has resulted in growing social and economic inequalities worldwide, forcing people from less economically developed countries to migrate to wealthier nations. Many of these migrants are women responding to a demand for nannies, domestic workers, nurses, waitresses, and sex workers.<sup>9</sup> However, while economic reasons are often mentioned as the main incentive to migrate, others may also play a role, such as escaping an oppressive gender regime at home.<sup>10</sup> Most of the literature on the “feminization of migration” focuses on women who migrate from economically less developed countries in the South to more developed countries in the North. However, South-South migration is equally significant; many women in developing countries migrate to neighboring countries in search of better lives. Ethiopian and Somali women’s migration to Yemen is a good example of this.
- 7 Whether an increase in women’s migration is a positive or a negative phenomenon is an issue of debate. Some scholars argue that the feminization of migration is a positive development: unlike women who merely “followed their husbands”, women who migrate “independently” can earn an independent income, become providers for their families back home and, in doing so, increase their decision-making power in family affairs.<sup>11</sup> They can also enjoy more freedom of movement in host countries enabling them to build a social network.<sup>12</sup> Yet, others have pointed to the structural inequalities resulting from globalization and the subsequent subordination of women.<sup>13</sup> In their view, women migrants are “victims of globalization”, as their labor is exploited for capitalist purposes. They are employed in low-skilled jobs, even though they may be highly educated, are exploited in factories, as domestic workers and as sex workers, and have little to no opportunity to improve their lives. The crux of this debate centers on issues of structure and agency: do women migrants have agency, and can they actually benefit from their migration, or are they passive victims of structural inequalities only to be reproduced in migration?
- 8 Phizacklea<sup>14</sup> makes an inspiring plea for a more historical analysis of migration processes; by doing so, the gendered demand for migrant labor can be studied over time. In addition, she emphasizes “the need to ditch the old theoretical divide between structure and agency, only then do gendered actors in the migratory process become active, resourceful agents, not simply victims of a very unequal globalizing world”. In this article I want to analyze the continuities and complexities of Ethiopian women’s migration to Yemen. My main argument is that the difference between Ethiopian women who made the journey to keep their family together and women who migrated to take up paid employment as domestics is not very useful as, in both cases, the women were confronted with structural inequalities, particularly in terms of gender and ethnicity, yet were able to have agentic power. In the following sections I will be presenting two life stories but first I will give more background information about the migration of Ethiopian women to Yemen in the 1960s and 1970s.

## Yemeni Migration to Ethiopia and Back

- 9 Historically, Yemen and the Horn of Africa have always had close ties. Intensive trade relations, invasions at different historical periods and mutual migration flows have affected populations on both shores of the Red Sea and both sides of the Gulf of Aden. Large out-migration from Yemen started halfway through the nineteenth century with the

British colonization of Aden (1839) and the French colonization of Djibouti (1884). Both these colonial enclaves created work opportunities and attracted many Yemenis from the surrounding areas as well as from the hinterland.<sup>15</sup> Yemenis could easily make their way to other countries in Africa via Djibouti, particularly after the railway to Addis Ababa was completed in 1989. There are Yemeni communities in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Zanzibar and Chad.

10 Ethiopia<sup>16</sup> was one of the main countries Yemenis migrated to; relations between Yemen and Ethiopia go back centuries.<sup>17</sup> Yemenis, Hadramis in particular, often integrated well into Ethiopian society, dominating trade and commerce. They owned businesses, houses and land and were granted protection by the various governments in return for access to imported goods.<sup>18</sup> From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards many Yemenis from Lower Yemen also migrated to Ethiopia, their native regions suffering from underdevelopment and poverty due to conservative policies discriminating against the Shafi'is and heavier taxation.<sup>19</sup> These migrants were from lower social backgrounds, were employed as day laborers, (porters, for instance), and sometimes succeeded in setting up small stores. The preferential status Yemenis enjoyed in Ethiopia changed in the 1960s with the rise of nationalist sentiments and anti-Arab demonstrations held in response to the Eritrean Liberation Front's activities.<sup>20</sup> When Haile Selassie was overthrown and the military regime of Mengistu came to power in 1974 the situation further deteriorated. In 1977 Mengistu started nationalizing the economy and foreigners lost their possessions. Many Yemenis suffered from this new policy and decided to return to their homeland, taking their wives and children with them. The political changes that had taken place in Yemen with the fall of the imamate in 1962 were an additional reason to return. Yemeni return migration thus peaked in the early 1960s and in the mid-1970s.<sup>21</sup>

11 The majority of Yemeni emigrants who returned from the Horn of Africa had lived overseas for decades. While many of them originally came from rural areas, few of them returned to their home villages. Instead, they preferred to settle in cities like the capital of Sana'a or the port town of al-Ḥudayda. One of the reasons for this was that they had become accustomed to an urban lifestyle and could make better use in the cities of the skills they had acquired abroad.<sup>22</sup> Another reason was they no longer had ties with their home villages. A third reason as to why few returnees went back to their original village was that their African wives simply did not want to live in a village. Indeed, fear of being marginalized in the village was one of the reasons for women preferring to live in a town.<sup>23</sup>

## Women Who “Followed Their Yemeni Husbands”

12 In 2005, I collected three life stories of Ethiopian/Eritrean women who had come to Yemen with their Yemeni husbands. It was not easy to find women willing and able to be interviewed as many of that generation had already died, and those still alive were often very old and not always able to tell their life stories due to health problems. One of the women I interviewed was Khāla<sup>24</sup> Ḥalīma. Khāla Ḥalīma lived in a small street in Zabāriya, a neighborhood in al-Ḥudayda known for its large number of returnees from Ethiopia. Khāla Ḥalīma was in her fifties when I interviewed her and was still working as an office cleaner. She told me that she came from a rural family in Eritrea. Her parents were farmers who died when she was still young. She did not go to school, and started working as a domestic worker from a very young age:

“I used to work in people's houses. I would sleep and eat there. I did that for about ten years. Then I went to work in another village where I met my husband, he was a Yemeni, originally from ‘Amrān”.

13 Her husband worked in agriculture and was slightly older than she was.

“He had been married three times before and had ended up divorcing all three women because they could not give him children. He wanted to have children and the women could not give him that. I gave birth to fourteen children, seven of whom have died. Five sons and two daughters are still alive.”

- 14 Khāla Ḥalīma did not say much about her previous life in Eritrea, except for the fact that she had converted to Islam:
- “I decided to become a Muslim for my children. It is not good when one of the parents is a Muslim and the other is not. I thought about it and said to myself it was better to convert so they would also be Muslims.”
- 15 The family came to Yemen thirty-five years ago:
- “We returned when Gamal Abdel Nasser died, at the time of al-Iryānī<sup>25</sup>. Life was very good in those days, we settled in al-Ḥudayda and it was paradise. Everything was cheap, sugar was only 25 Yemeni Riyal per kilogram, meat was cheap too. Nowadays life in Yemen is difficult. There is nothing available and everything is expensive. If you have money, you can find food, otherwise you won't get anything.”
- 16 Khāla Ḥalīma's husband started working at the port, one of the reasons as to why so many returnees decided to settle in al-Ḥudayda, rather than their home villages.
- “He went back to ‘Amrān, took the children with him, but he decided that it was better to live in al-Ḥudayda.”
- 17 Although Khāla Ḥalīma emphasized life in Yemen was good, she also took up paid employment.
- “I used to work as a cleaner in the Electricity Association, I was employed. I worked in the office and in the house of the director and his wife. They were very nice people. After a while I stopped working. I got tired. My husband told me to stay home and stop working. I had a child every year so I couldn't work. Then I started work at the office of Military Corporation, then with the Tihāma Development Authority.<sup>26</sup> I worked there for 23 years. I am lucky I always found work in offices. It is better than working in houses. There you have to iron clothes, cook and bake, and in the end they only give you 80 Yemeni Riyal. When I was working with the Association they would give me 150 Yemeni Riyal.”
- 18 Khāla Ḥalīma was still working when I interviewed her in 2005. Her children are grown up and married and have to look after their own families:
- “Some of them have a job but they work to support their children. I am old now but I have to work, if I don't work who is going to give me money? My children don't have well-paid jobs.”
- 19 Khāla Ḥalīma told me that she earned 8,000 Yemeni Riyal<sup>27</sup> per month but was not officially employed.
- “Yemenis see me as a foreigner because I don't have a national ID card, which is why I work for such a low salary. I will work until they tell me to stop. If they do, I'll have to stay at home, otherwise I won't have any money to live off of.”
- 20 Khāla Ḥalīma came from a poor rural family in present-day Eritrea. The other two women I interviewed, Khāla Basma and Khāla Fāṭima, came from the city of Massawa. They also got married young to a Yemeni, both of which they met through relatives. Khāla Basma told me the family had migrated to Yemen when the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea had started<sup>28</sup>, Massawa being one of the main battlegrounds:
- “We arrived in Yemen before most of the other returnees from Africa. It was in the early days of the republic, at the time of President al-Iryānī. Those Yemenis who owned land in Ethiopia put off leaving.”
- 21 Khāla Fāṭima left Massawa at the same time yet the family first migrated to Sudan, where they spent two years. But life there was not easy.
- “In Port Sudan the population was Sudanese and we were Arab. There was no work. In Massawa, I used to sew while young Ethiopian and Eritrean girls would work as domestics. They were between 12 and 15 years-old and came from poor families. One of them worked

seven years for me. But in Port Sudan there was nobody working for me, we were guests there, we had left our house, furniture, and possessions behind.”

- 22 Khāla Fāṭima’s daughter was married in Port Sudan at the age of 13 to a man who was also of Yemeni descent:

“Her father-in-law had sons in Sana’a and he wanted to raise his kids there. He was born in Saudi Arabia but wanted to go back to Yemen. At first, I wanted to stay in Port Sudan while they went to Yemen. But I thought, ‘Who will help my daughter with her children?’ So I too went with them to Yemen.”

- 23 Khāla Basma and Khāla Fāṭima also took up paid employment in Yemen as their husbands’ income was not enough for them to make ends meet. Ethiopian and Eritrean women often had income-generating activities. Some hawked food in the streets, others were employed as cleaners in offices and hospitals, and others yet became domestic workers. As non-Yemeni women it was easier for them to take up work considered inappropriate for Yemeni women, but their social status and those of their husbands was negatively affected. As a result, their husbands would sometimes ask them to quit domestic work. However, in some cases, domestic labor was preferable to other types of labor as the women were less visible when working in the private sphere of a household. In other cases though, domestic work was frowned upon because it put women of African origin in a hierarchical relationship with Yemeni women, their employers. Most women therefore preferred to work for expatriates, particularly Western, employers.

- 24 While all three women had spent most of their lives in Yemen, they still felt they were treated like second-class citizens. Khāla Ḥalīma concluded her story by saying Yemenis still considered her a foreigner and that she did not have a national ID card, while Khāla Basma said:

“This is not my country but I’m here for my children.”

- 25 Even though they were married to Yemenis, and their children had become Yemeni citizens, they never fully integrated into Yemeni society and their social status never improved.

### **Contemporary Migration of Ethiopian Women to Yemen**

- 26 In the past twenty years an increasing number of women from Ethiopia have come to Yemen to take up paid employment, such as domestic work for middle and upper class families in urban areas.<sup>29</sup> While international labor migration in Ethiopia was restricted under the dictatorial regime of Mengistu, the government which came to power in 1991 made freedom of movement a constitutional right; anyone willing and able to go abroad is nowadays allowed to do so. Young women in particular have migrated abroad because their access to employment is much more limited than that of the men.<sup>30</sup> One of the factors associated with women’s access to the labor market is the low school enrolment of Ethiopian girls, among the lowest in Africa. Even when women finish primary or secondary school, they still have fewer job opportunities than educated men do, especially in the public sector.

- 27 Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Gulf States have become common destinations for Ethiopian women migrants because of the demand for paid domestic labor. Yemen, geographically closer but financially less attractive, has witnessed an increase of Ethiopian women migrants since the mid-1990s. Yemenis of mixed Yemeni-Ethiopian descent started bringing Ethiopian women into Yemen as domestics when the demand for paid domestic labor increased in the 1990s.<sup>31</sup> Some of them are registered with official employment agencies with the Yemeni Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, while others do business without an official license. Ethiopian women also come to Yemen with the help of relatives or friends already residing in the country. Yemen once had an open-door policy towards foreigners, residence and work permit checks used to be relatively loose. Obtaining a tourist visa and overstaying, or getting a visa based on a fake work contract used to be easy. As a result there were numerous undocumented Ethiopian women in Yemen before 2011.<sup>32</sup>

28 The majority of Ethiopian domestics in Yemen are unmarried Christian women, most of them having completed at least a few years of secondary school. Those coming in via recruitment agents are always employed as live-in domestic workers, while those coming via relatives or friends have the possibility of being employed as live-out domestics. They work mainly as cleaners, cooks and nannies for middle class and upper class families and earn higher salaries than Somali women (the largest group of domestic workers in Yemen) do. Ethiopian women are perceived as “clean”, which can be explained by the fact that they are “close but distant”.<sup>33</sup> Many Yemenis are acquainted with Ethiopia through relatives, friends or through business and travel. They often point to the historic relationship between Ethiopia and Yemen to explain the preference for Ethiopian domestics.

### Women Who Migrate “On Their Own”

29 Between 2003 and 2006, I carried out fieldwork among migrant domestic workers in Sana’a and al-Ḥudayda.<sup>34</sup> One of the first Ethiopian women I interviewed was Meseret. Meseret told me her life story on a Thursday afternoon when her employers had gone off to a wedding. She was born in Debre Zeit, a small town south of Addis Ababa. She had not lived with her parents but had instead been brought up by her grandmother and an uncle, who took her to Addis Ababa. Her uncle encouraged her to go to school, just like his own children, and Meseret finished secondary school. She wanted to go to university but the family could not afford it and she took up work in a leather factory. When the economic situation in Ethiopia deteriorated in the early 1990s, after the overthrow of president Mengistu (1991), Meseret started thinking about migrating. A former schoolmate, of mixed Yemeni-Ethiopian descent, had already moved to Yemen. Meseret asked her whether there were work opportunities in Yemen. “I thought Yemen was better than Addis [Ababa]”, she said reflecting on her decision at the time. Her friend said there was and sent her an invitation, thanks to which Meseret applied for a three-month tourist visa. She bought a plane ticket with the money she had earned working in the factory and came to Yemen in 1993.

30 Arriving in Yemen was a shock; she did not know much about the country then, and imagined it was much richer than Ethiopia:

“I really disliked Yemen in the beginning. Everything was dirty, and the country was not as developed as it is now.”<sup>35</sup>

31 Her friend soon found her work as a live-in domestic in a Yemeni family, but Meseret quit after three months:

“The husband and wife were always shouting at each other, they quarreled all the time, and I did not speak a word of Arabic, it was terrible.”

32 The husband tried to convince her to stay, he even sorted out a work permit for her, but Meseret was fed up:

“I wanted to go home, I really hated being in Yemen.”

33 But her friend convinced her to stay and earn some money, to avoid going home empty-handed, and got her current job. Although Meseret had planned to stay only two years in Yemen she has now been living there for ten years. Every fortnight she has a weekend off, from Thursday afternoon to Saturday morning. She spends the weekend at her friend’s parents’, where she meets up with other Ethiopian friends. She has managed to find work for a number of Ethiopian friends and relatives, all of whom still work in Yemen. When I asked her what it was like to live in Yemen being an Ethiopian woman, she replied it was very hard at first but now she felt at home. The family she works for respect her, they eat together and make her feel like she is part of the family.

34 Three years ago Meseret went back to Ethiopia, intending to marry an old friend from school and settle in Addis Ababa but, before the wedding could take place, she lost faith in her future husband.



“He had changed”, she said, “I had prepared everything for the wedding but I ended up cancelling it, even though he still wanted to marry me.”

35 As she was unable to find work in Addis Ababa, she decided to go back to Yemen. But she plans to return to Ethiopia by the end of this year because she is tired of the hard work she has to do in Yemen. The family knows she will be leaving and although they are sad about it they will be paying for her return ticket. Meseret does not yet know what she will do back home, the economic situation is still bad and job opportunities are limited:

“Women who have worked as domestics in Beirut or Saudi Arabia are well-off when they come back home. They can open a hairdressing salon or something like that, and many people have houses built. But when you work in Yemen you can't put money aside. All you do is work hard and you don't have any anything to show for it.”

36 In contrast with the dominant discourse on migrant domestic workers in the Middle East, Meseret's story is not a story of abuse and exploitation. She came to Yemen via a friend who was already working there. Elsewhere, I have argued that the different ways in which migrant domestic workers enter a country has an impact on their living — and working — conditions.<sup>36</sup> There are obvious advantages to migrating via relatives or friends. Networks of relatives and friends often play a role in deciding on the migrant's destination, facilitating their migration, their arrival in the destination country and their access to housing and work.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, women who come to Yemen via relatives or friends have far greater freedom of movement than those who come to Yemen via recruitment agencies. Women who are employed on contracts sorted out by relatives or friends often have a day off, or at least an afternoon, and have more room for maneuver. Women who migrate via (illegal) recruitment agencies as contract workers are the most vulnerable. Their mobility is often severely restricted as they are not allowed to leave the house of their employers unaccompanied and may get locked inside the house to prevent them from running away or meeting up with other people. In addition, they may also be denied such basic human rights as a safe place to sleep and healthy food, work under exploitative conditions with hardly any time off and be confronted with physical, mental or sexual abuse.

## Historical Continuities between Ethiopian Women Migrating to Yemen

37 Stories of women migrating as “dependents” and those of women migrating “independently” show continuities and changes with regard to their migration and employment in Yemen. Khāla Ḥalīma came from a poor rural family and started working as a domestic at a young age without having attended school. Meseret was born in a small town, grew up in Addis Ababa and finished secondary school. In the past fifty years the educational system has improved in Ethiopia, although rural-urban discrepancies still exist. Young women from rural areas in particular tend to drop out of school early or do not attend school at all. Meseret was able to finish secondary school but could not continue her education because of her family's financial situation and took up work in a leather factory. Access to employment is highly gendered in Ethiopia with women having less access to formal employment.<sup>38</sup> Young women with secondary school certificates are therefore often forced to take up unskilled work. When the economic situation deteriorated in the early 1990s, Meseret decided to migrate to Yemen. In addition, getting a passport had become easier due to freedom of movement becoming a constitutional right. Young women in particular are making use of this right, which would explain the large-scale migration of women as domestic workers to the Middle East in general.

38 The stories previously mentioned demonstrate the impact political changes have had on the lives of ordinary women, and the need to refine the concept of “forced migration”. Political changes in Ethiopia, such as Mengistu coming to power with severe repercussions for Yemeni expatriates, and in Northern Yemen, with the revolution and ensuing fall of the imamate, definitely got people to move to Yemen. Although it is not always clear who made the decision to migrate, it is too easy to say women just “followed their husbands”. Important decisions

within families are often reached collectively, albeit after negotiations. Khāla Fāṭima makes that very clear when she states she decided to follow her daughter to Yemen rather than her husband, as she realized she would need her help.

39 Meseret felt forced to migrate because of her dire economic situation, as well as the limited employment opportunities, particularly for women. To what extent she made the decision alone is difficult to say. Meseret was not married and came to Yemen as a single woman. The average age of marriage has increased for both men and women, due to the deteriorating economic situation in Ethiopia. Young men find it hard to save up for dowries, which means putting off getting married. In addition, young women take up paid employment to support their families and also tend to delay their marriage. This is the case for example of migrant women working in the Middle East whose families have come to depend on their remittances. Being single may have some advantages, as unmarried women may be able to make more choices by themselves, but their families may rely on them for their remittances. In addition, single migrant women lack the protection of a family in the destination country, which can lead to isolation and exploitation.

40 Women who came to Yemen with their husbands had no intention to return home, but those who came as labor migrants saw their migration as a temporary situation. Their intentions and the reasons for their migration were very different, and so were their impressions upon arriving. Khāla Ḥalīma was quite positive about her first years in Yemen, while Meseret was shocked when she first arrived and realized that Yemen was not a rich country but poor and “underdeveloped”. She would have gone home after the first three months had it not been for a friend who convinced her to stay. The extent to which labor migrants are actually able to return varies, for some of them it is mostly “wishful thinking”. Meseret’s intention was to earn enough money to return to Ethiopia and start a family. She paid for her own wedding and bought everything she needed to set up a household. However, being financially independent also enabled her to cancel the wedding when she lost faith in her future husband. This highlights the fact that women who migrate independently sometimes gain more decision-making power. Yet, in other cases single migrant women may not benefit from migrating at all, but instead lose their independence when faced with exploitative circumstances at work, and lack the financial means to return home.

41 Both groups took up paid employment as domestics, an activity with a low status in Yemeni society. In the past, Yemeni women and men from low social status groups used to carry out domestic tasks for middle and upper class families.<sup>39</sup> Nowadays Yemeni families prefer to employ migrant women as domestics, a trend that started in the 1970s when Ethiopian and Eritrean women who came with their husbands to Yemen took up paid domestic work. In a sense, these were the predecessors to present-day migrant domestic workers, the difference being that they were employed as live-out domestics and office cleaners and could choose their employers. Women coming in as labor migrants are mainly employed as live-in domestics, have less freedom of movement and are more likely to suffer from abuse and exploitation. However, there are also differences among labor migrants: women who migrate through networks of family and friends are often freer to go about and enjoy better living and working conditions than women whose contracts are worked out prior to migration.

42 Ethiopian women, whether coming into the country as “dependent” or “independent” migrants, have a low status in Yemeni society because of their African descent and are sometimes discriminated against. In addition, they often do not have Yemeni citizenship status, thereby increasing their vulnerability. Ethiopian and Eritrean women who came to Yemen with their families find it easier to integrate into Yemeni society, are protected by their (Yemeni) families, while Ethiopian labor migrants often remain outsiders to Yemeni society and lack any form of protection. In some cases the families of their employers do protect them, but they can also exploit and abuse them. Women employed as live-in domestic workers run a greater risk of being isolated and exploited than do women working as live-out domestics, who have more access to the support networks of relatives and friends. Women employed as cleaners in offices and as live-out domestic workers are in that sense better off.

## Conclusion

- 43 The dominant discourse on migrant women in the Middle East, and particularly those performing domestic work, is that they are exploited and abused. Media reports and international organization reports focus on human right violations, the exploitation of women's labor and the absence of protection for domestic workers. Even though many migrant domestic workers in the Middle East might find themselves in a predicament, it is important to take into account women's agency, however circumscribed it may be, to look at the choices women make and the strategies they use to improve their living and working conditions. Preconceived ideas of oppression, without listening to the ways in which migrant women themselves speak about their lives, turn women into passive victims.<sup>40</sup> In addition, a historical perspective allows us to see the continuities and changes over time in migration processes, which is particularly important when studying the gendered aspects of migration. The two life stories presented in this article show that the distinction between "dependent" and "independent" migration is not very useful; Ethiopian women who came to Yemen with their Yemeni husbands were no more dependent than women who came to Yemen as labor migrants. Women in both groups were confronted with structural inequalities and dependencies, particularly in terms of gender and ethnicity, yet they were able to use their agentic power to change their lives to some extent.
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## Notes

- 1 See Freitag and Clarence-Smith, 1997; Boxberger, 2002; Bang, 2003; Ho, 2006; Manger 2010.
- 2 See Swanson, 1979; Meyer, 1986; Friedlander, 1988; Halliday, 2010 [1992].
- 3 See INGRAMS, 1937, p. 151; MARTIN, 1974, p. 369; ROUAUD, 1979, p. 182; LE GUENNEC-COPPENS, 1989, p. 190.
- 4 See de REGT, 2008.
- 5 See PHIZACKLEA, 2003, p. 26.
- 6 See PEDRAZA, 1991, p. 306; PHIZACKLEA, 2003, p. 27.
- 7 SKROBANEK *et al* in PHIZACKLEA, 2003, p. 26.
- 8 See for example Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1997; Parreñas, 2001; Boyle, 2002; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; George, 2005.
- 9 See EHRENREICH and HOCHSCHILD, 2002.
- 10 PHIZACKLEA, 2003, p. 28.
- 11 See George, 2005.
- 12 See Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Hagan, 1998.
- 13 MOHANTY, 1997; AGUILAR, 2000; MOGHADAM, 2005.
- 14 PHIZACKLEA, 2003.
- 15 SWANSON, 1979, p. 51.
- 16 Including Eritrea, which was not a separate state at that time.

17 See MARTIN, 1974; ABBINK, 1998; AHMED, 2000.

18 BEZABEH, 2008, p. 14.

19 HALLIDAY, 2010, p. 11.

20 From 1961 to 1991 Eritrea fought a war of independence against Ethiopia. Arab governments were known to support the Eritrean Liberation Front, and Arab migrants in Ethiopia were blamed for that support, particularly after the hijacking and bombing of an Ethiopian Airlines plane in Frankfurt in 1969 (Manger, 2010, p. 99).

21 An additional reason for returning to Yemen in 1977 was Yemeni president Al-Ḥamdī's policy to promote equality among Yemeni citizens and support the rights of returning migrants to Yemen. He initiated housing and employment projects for returning migrants.

22 MEYER, 1986, p. 2.

23 See DE REGT, 2007, p. 203.

24 The women were usually addressed as "*khāla*", which means "maternal aunt".

25 Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser died on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1970. 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Iryānī was the first president of the Yemen Arab Republic (1967–1974).

26 The Tihāma Development Authority is a governmental office in charge of rural development projects in the Tihāma, the coastal area bordering the Red Sea.

27 In 2005, 8000 Yemeni Riyal represented USD 40.

28 Eritrea fought a war of independence against Ethiopia between 1961 and 1991. In 1993 Eritrea became a separate state.

29 See DE REGT 2008; 2009; 2010.

30 FERNANDEZ 2010, p. 253.

31 Destremau, 2002.

32 This article is based on data gathered before the protests that started in 2011, which affected the employment of migrant domestic workers.

33 See de Regt, 2009.

34 While this paper focuses on Ethiopian women, the broader project includes women from Somalia, the Philippines, Indonesia and India. Additionally, I interviewed a number of Yemeni domestic workers.

35 The interview took place in August 2003.

36 DE REGT, 2010.

37 HONDAGNEU-SOTELO, 1994; HAGAN, 1998. In some cases migrant domestic workers have set up their own recruitment systems, facilitating (sometimes illegal) immigration and employment of other women from their country of origin. Former domestic workers may serve as brokers.

38 KEBEDE, 2001, p. 2; FERNANDEZ, 2010, p. 253.

39 DESTREMAU, 2002; DE REGT, 2008.

40 See MOHANTY, 1997; PHIZACKLEA, 2003, p. 35.

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### ***Droits d'auteur***

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### ***Résumés***

Cet article traite de la migration passée et actuelle de femmes éthiopiennes au Yémen. Si le Yémen est surtout considéré comme un pays d'émigration, de nombreuses Éthiopiennes y ont émigré, depuis les années 1990, pour obtenir des emplois salariés en tant que travailleuses domestiques. D'autres, avant elles — dans les années 1960 et 1970 —, avaient fait le même

chemin. Mais la plupart avaient émigré en suivant leur mari yéménite de retour dans son pays après un séjour en Éthiopie. Les chercheurs travaillant sur les migrations font parfois la distinction entre les femmes qui migrent en suivant leur mari, et celles qui le font de manière « indépendante ». Sur la base du récit de deux Éthiopiennes, cette distinction fait ici l'objet d'une analyse critique : si le contexte et les conditions de la migration diffèrent, le statut social et les emplois auxquels elles ont accès au Yémen montrent de grandes similitudes avec celles qui leur ont précédé. Cet article se fonde sur des recherches ethnographiques « sur le terrain » et sur des entretiens menés à Sanaa et Hodeïda en 2003–2006.

This paper focuses on past and present migration of Ethiopian women to Yemen. While Yemen is predominantly seen as a sending country in terms of migration, increasing numbers of Ethiopian women have migrated to Yemen in order to take up paid employment as domestic workers since the 1990s. Although Ethiopian women already came to Yemen in the 1960s and 1970s, most of them did so with Yemeni husbands who had settled in Ethiopia. Migration scholars sometimes make a distinction between women who migrate to “follow” their husbands, and women who migrate “independently”. Based on the life stories of two Ethiopian women this distinction will be critically analyzed. While the context and conditions in which they migrated differ, there are also some continuities, in particular with regard to their employment and social status in Yemen. This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews carried out in Sana'a and al-Ḥudayda in 2003–2006.

*Entrées d'index*

**Mots-clés** : migration, mondialisation, genre, libre arbitre, travail domestique

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