‘Not My Parents’ House’: the Disciplining of Ethiopian Women Migrant Domestic Workers in the Gulf States

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ABSTRACT

Based on the principles of discipline as developed by Michel Foucault, this article argues that Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries find that they have safer migration experiences if they submit to multiple forms of disciplining of their bodies and characters to fit the normative ideals of the compliant, obedient and unthreatening domestic worker (Foucault, 1977). Physical, sexual and emotional harms have been well documented where domestic workers are trapped within the homes of their employers with little recourse to external resources or assistance if required. Although exact figures are unknown, large numbers of Ethiopian women find themselves in such a position of vulnerability, particularly as they tend to travel to countries in the Gulf States and Middle East where legal frameworks for labour migrants remain weak (ILO, 2011). Discipline, in the Foucauldian sense, helps vulnerable Ethiopian women migrants negotiate the perils of domestic labour in the Middle East.

Introduction

The Foucauldian Theory of Discipline and Docile Bodies

In Foucauldian terms, discipline refers to the social control mechanisms of the state that women and men wilfully submit themselves to with little ability to resist. Foucault calls these ‘docile bodies’ - ideal for the political and socio-economic designations of the modern industrial era with ‘bodies that function in factories, ordered military regimens, and school classrooms’ (Foucault, 1977).

Foucault further argues that in the modern era, discipline has created a new form of individuality for human bodies to perform the newly differentiated tasks they have been assigned to in the context of the new economic, political and military organizations. Foucault asserts that discipline helps produce unequal power

relations, and emphasizes that discipline must be practiced by the individual who has internalized her or his place with minimum force applied to bring about compliance.

Careful observation by the disciplining institution observing and recording the bodies under control is a key component of the Foucauldian notion of discipline (Foucault, 1977). Explaining the role of constant surveillance in enforcing discipline, Foucault states: 'Disciplinary power is exercised through its invisibility, at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. It is the fact of being able to always be seen that maintains the disciplined individual in [his] subjection' (1984). Female migrant domestic workers can clearly be categorised as marginalised in their precarious positions as both irregular migrants with unclear legal status and low-wage workers in settings with limited labour rights or protections (ILO, 2011). Indeed, Foucault himself has characterized domestic service as a form of discipline, referring to it as a 'constant, total, massive, non-analytical, unlimited relation of domination, established in the form of the individual will of the master, [his] caprice' (1984).
In this article, we argue that the experiences of Ethiopian migrant workers in the Middle East offer an insight into the Foucauldian principle of discipline through their navigation of rigid gender-norms in their host countries, and through the regulation of their personal deportment and interactions with their female and male employers. Lastly, surveillance, in its literal sense of the extensive scrutiny that Ethiopian women undergo as migrant domestic workers, illustrates our argument that Ethiopian women working and living in the Middle East are disciplined in the Foucauldian sense of the term.

This article is based on a formative research commissioned by the Freedom Fund, a donor organisation working to reduce trafficking in labour migration, prior to introduction of their "Hotspot" intervention in Ethiopia. The Hotspot approach aims to increase local awareness and skills for safe migration in communities at high risk of trafficking. This study was designed to improve the Freedom Fund's understanding of existing migration preparedness in target communities and to contribute to the design of activities and awareness-raising messages.

Methods

The rapid assessment was qualitative and consisted of focus group discussions, semi-structured key informant interviews, and in-depth interviews. This research was conducted in four Kebeles (villages) and one Woreda (district) located on the outskirts of Hayk close to Dessie, in South Wello. We used qualitative data using in-depth and open-ended questions from a small sample of respondents. While not representing a large population in a statistically significant manner, our research offers an insight into a gendered norm of migration which was useful for designing context-specific interventions. The research that this article is drawn from was used to develop a Theory of Change to help guide interventions that are likely to be associated with safer migration outcomes.

Findings have been used to develop a draft programmatic Theory of Change to help guide selection of specific Hotspot activities in Amhara Region so that they increase the knowledge and skills identified as likely to be associated with safer migration outcomes.

The formative research was conducted in Amhara Region in Ethiopia, a known source location for young women's out-migration to countries in the Gulf States and Middle East, primarily for domestic labour. Data were collected in four kebeles (villages) in one woreda (district) located on the outskirts of Hayk Town. Data were collected during December 2015 and January 2016 by an Ethiopian woman independent research consultant and a female fieldwork assistant, both of whom are fluent in Amharic.

Qualitative methods were used and comprised of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Respondents were purposively selected to provide a diversity of perspectives, for instance, representing different age groups, religious backgrounds and education levels. Individuals were approached following discussion with woreda authorities, who were able to identify initial participants; "snowball sampling" was subsequently used to identify stakeholders with relevant information by word of mouth. Interviews took place at a time and location convenient to respondents. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection and recorded transcripts were translated into English by the fieldworker.

The majority of respondents were returned female migrants (35). They had worked in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Dubai, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait; some had multiple experiences of migration to one or more countries.

Other participants included fathers (4) and husbands (6) of current and former migrants, and 7 key informants (School Director, Muslim Leader, Police Officer, 2 mothers of migrants, 1 former Women's Affairs kebele representative, and 2 Women and Children's Affairs at the Woreda level).

Findings & Discussion

The focus of this paper is on how Ethiopian migrant domestic workers experienced social and personal disciplining as a means of controlling and sometimes exploiting them during their employment abroad. Three main thematic domains emerged from the data: (1) Communication – the control over how and to whom Ethiopian migrants could speak; (2) Movement – demands and restrictions on women's personal mobility; and (3) Personal deportment – expectations of personal behaviour.

The ways in which women navigated and resisted these three areas of discipline affected how they were treated, and were associated with both positive and negative repercussions. Returnee migrants described the nuances of these three areas, using them to interpret their migration experiences. Returnee migrants also referred to these themes when formulating advice for future migrants to assist them in mitigating potential challenges and threats.

1. Communication

Returnees' narratives emphasised constraints they faced on their ability to communicate easily and openly with others. These constraints had multiple manifestations. First, soon after arrival, many domestic workers struggled to understand their employers' Arabic and what was expected of them, leading to potential misunderstandings and conflict. Furthermore, women learned that communication with men in many of the destination countries was severely restricted. Finally, in many cases, women were also

prohibited from contacting other domestic workers or forging links with the Ethiopian community, and in many cases their access to phones (and thus the ability to call their families back in Ethiopia) was entirely controlled by the household in which they served.

1.1. Language Barriers

Many interviewed returnees recounted difficulties in communicating with their Arabic-speaking employers, particularly when they first arrived. The returnees we spoke to stressed the importance of learning Arabic quickly and several suggested that basic language lessons should be provided to prospective migrants before they leave Ethiopia. Without any knowledge of Arabic, domestic workers risk aggravating employers by not following instructions properly or making errors. This could lead to violence, as one respondent explained:

> 'Sometimes the migrant woman can't communicate with her employer in the [first] couple of months because of language barrier. Sometimes she can't explain herself to them and they also don't understand what she wants to say. It would be good if migrant women were given Arabic language lessons before migrating to the destination country.
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> Most of the time misunderstandings happen between employers and employees because of language barrier. The employee might not do what was ordered by her employer, and the employer could be angry and abuse the woman.' [IDI with returnee, 22]

Those returnees who had some formal education (eighth grade and beyond) reported that speaking a little English was helpful if the employer also spoke English. In addition, those migrants with formal education found it easier to learn Arabic, as they could write down new words they learned such as household objects or basic instructions phonetically in Amharic to help in memorizing them. They would also be able to read any rudimentary teaching materials available to them.

> 'Once I saw a booklet which has Arabic words with Amharic translation, I bought that and I studied until I depart to the destination country. I also used it as a reference whenever my

> employer orders me to do something.' [FGD with returnee migrants, 26].

According to our informants, language barriers could often be overcome. Respondents who had repeatedly migrated to Arabic-speaking countries understandably found their language improved, although differences in dialect could also pose difficulties. Furthermore, many employers made an effort to help new migrants learn Arabic and explained their expectations through miming.

> 'Our employers explained everything about the activities before we start working. They demonstrate to you how to operate every machine in the household until you fully understand how you operate it. They don't ask you to perform anything immediately after you arrive in the household, but you have learned step by step. They try their best to communicate you with sign language.' [In Depth Interview (IDI) with returnee, 24 years old]

1.2. Gender Norms

Many returnees highlighted that they encountered a major cultural difference between Ethiopia and the Arab countries to which most Ethiopian domestic workers travel for work related to communication between men and women. Depending on the country, migrants confronted varying degrees of disapproval or restriction on contact with adult and teenaged men in the household where they worked. Some returnees were not allowed to see any men in the household at all, while others felt there were complicated social norms and regulations by which they had to learn to abide.

> 'When I was in Saudi Arabia the husband was very shy, I have never seen his face. If he wants something, he just raised his voice to order me, I just saw his back. Even when we go out of the house, [the maid] should always sit behind them [the employers], so that he won't see her; you are also expected to cover your whole body except your eyes.' [IDI with returnee, 22]

> 'I prepared the dining table with the wife alone. After I left the room, she'd call her husband and her children, [then] after they finished eating she'd call me on a land line telephone in the kitchen to take the dishes and clean the room. By that time, they [men] already went to their room.' [FGD with returnees, 30]

In particular, a major risk appears to be inciting the jealousy of the woman of the house by communicating with her husband and being seen to be flirtatious or overly familiar. Some women reported being 'tested' by female employers who subjected the domestic worker to scrutiny.

For example, one returnee described how her female employer hid in the house to assess whether she was being overly friendly with the male employer, in a Foucauldian example of surveillance as a form of discipline.

> 'She...hid herself and watched me while I was talking with her husband. Sometimes he asked me to wash his car, he usually stood there …she hid herself in the window and watched me. If I laughed or flirted with him, she might think that I am interested in her husband, but what I did was show him a very heavy face because I want her to think that I hate men. I told her I hate men, I told her I don't want to get married, I told her I plan to get married when I am fifty years old. I intentionally did that so she would not suspect I was interested in her husband or her adolescent boy.' [IDI with returnee, 20]

The possibility of constant monitoring thus encouraged domestic workers to moderate their own behaviour and change how they communicated with others to avoid transgressing local gender norms.

1.3. Access To Communication Technology

The very means of communication were under the control of the employers, often leaving migrant workers feeling isolated and unable to contact others both back in Ethiopia and in the destination country. In some cases, employers feared that their domestic workers would use their mobile phones to communicate with illegal brokers who would help them leave their formal contracts and seek better paid work elsewhere, without repaying the costs of transport into the country including visa and travel

costs. Other times it seems employers simply liked to wield control over their workers.

> 'I didn't have a mobile phone, so there was no way that I could call other Ethiopians. … My employers permitted me to call my parents every month or every two months. They didn't allow me to call relatives or friends [locally], they only allowed calls to Ethiopia.' [IDI with returnee, 24]

> 'Most employers don't allow their employees to call even their families. There are women who were lost for six or eight months. One migrant woman in our neighbourhood disappeared for one year from her family, they even thought that she was dead. She called after one year, she told her family that her employer could not allow her to even to touch a phone.' [KII with Muslim religious leader, 42]

Access to mobile phones was considered indicative of how well a migrant worker was treated and able to protect herself. Almost all our respondents, both returnees and their family and community members, mentioned the importance of being able to have or use a phone and the frequency with which this proved impossible was often cited as a marker of powerlessness.

> 'It should be obligatory for employers to buy a mobile phone to the migrant woman. It would be very difficult for them to work without communicating their families. It is also good to chat with their relatives and friends who already migrated, so that they can share their experiences. They could encourage them and advise them until the new migrants are familiar with the environment.' [Mother of migrant, 45]

2. Restricted Movement

Another form of discipline experienced by interviewees is constrained personal mobility. Not unlike the ban on phone use, some employers prohibited domestic workers from leaving the house, socialising with others, or even accessing certain parts of the house in which they worked. Although in some destination countries there were laws against unaccompanied women traveling

alone; in other cases, employers themselves enforced extreme sanctions against personal freedom of movement.

2.1. Within the Home

Returnee migrants reported being watched by cameras placed to monitor their work, locked in the house to prevent their seeking other employment, and forced to sleep in the same room as their employer.

> 'My wife's relative told me that she doesn't even go out of the house for two years. She told me that they don't even allow her to be on the ground floor, she was always working and sleeping upstairs, because the Arabs are very tired of handling Ethiopian maids. They hire them legally but most of them run away from them.' [FGD with husbands of migrants, 39]

The threat of sexual harassment or assault also caused women to limit their own movements within the house. Already trying to remain vigilant to the norms around speaking to or mixing with men, in some cases, respondents described how they had to fend off sexual advances from male relatives of their employers:

> 'My employer was an old lady; she was good to me. After some time, her divorced children came to live with her. One of her sons was sleeping near my bedroom… one day he came to my room, and my room had no lock, I heard him opening my door, then he rushed to my bed, I struggled with him and ran out of the room, he followed me.… I told him to leave me alone, he insisted that it's okay to sleep with him, but I ran to his mother's room, then he was scared…. The next day I told my employer that I didn't want to sleep there since it has no lock.' [FGD with returnees, 25]

As a result of such risk, the women further limited their own personal space, locking themselves in their own room for protection. Another participant in the same FGD emphasised that a bedroom lock was crucial. Women thus self-discipline their movements as a means to avoid assault.

> 'The migrant woman shouldn't sleep in the room which doesn't have a lock. In my case I realized that my bed room doesn't have a lock the first day I arrived in the house. Then I told my

> employer [and] she really appreciated my asking her. She fixed the lock that same day.' [FGD with returnees, 26]

2.2. In the Public Sphere

Different countries have different regulations about women's presence in the public sphere, and respondents often made comparisons about relative freedoms. One returnee, for example, noted that when she worked in Dubai she was able to take the children in her care to ride their bicycles outside, which allowed her to interact with other Ethiopians working in the neighbourhood.

In contrast, her employer in Saudi Arabia used to lock her inside the house with the children. As she wasn't allowed a mobile phone, she said she was always worried about how she might contact the employer if something happened to one of the children. One of the concerns about migrant workers' mobility is related to the possibility of leaving an employment contract prematurely. This incurred costs and inconvenience for employers; at the same time, however, migrants who chose *to* "run away" from their contract also faced risks, particularly as they then became reliant on local and illegal employment brokers. They also are in constant fear of arrest and deportation.

> 'It is common [for a migrant] to run away from her employer… but running away could expose her to different problems. … Let me tell you what happened to my wife's niece. … After she arrived, she called and told me that she is not comfortable with her employers … She told me she couldn't tolerate the workload, she also told me that one of the boys threatened to [rape her]. Then she ran away from the house. …. She just went out on the street, and then she was caught by the police, they took her to a prison. Finally, they deported her.' [FGD with fathers of migrants, 55]

For many women, therefore, the potential risks of running away from legal employment, however exploitative, also served to discipline them by making it seem safer to persevere in their current situation.

> 'I never had any plan to run away since there could be other challenges after you run away from your employers. …If I work with my legal employers, there could be some challenges since I am not living in my parents' house, however I have to tolerate these until I finish my contract.' [IDI with returnee migrant, 25]

Another woman actually supported more severe legal restrictions on women's movement, perceiving it as a form of protection:

> 'Dubai gives too much freedom to maids. We can go out of the house whenever we want. I don't like the freedom. They don't ask you to cover your hair as well. On the contrary, we are not allowed to go out of the house alone and uncover our hair in Saudi Arabia. Too much freedom exposes the migrant to danger.' [IDI with returnee migrant, 24]

3. Personal Deportment

How a migrant woman behaved abroad also affected how they were treated, and thus a key skill was to rapidly identify local (and specifically employers') expectations of behaviour and adapt to these. How to dress, act, and relate to others thus became another site of personal discipline, enforced by both employers' reactions and women's own efforts.

3.1. Personal Dress and Hygiene

The most frequent issues raised in relation to personal hygiene was use of sanitary pads and the conflicts that could result from a new migrant's unfamiliarity with them.

> 'The Arabs are very sensitive about menstrual hygiene. If they see blood on your clothes, they will shout at you, rather than show you how to use a sanitary pad, so, it is important that migrant women learn how to manage their periods before they migrate. … The Arabs consider Ethiopians dirty. It is because some Ethiopian women, particularly those who migrated from rural areas, don't know how to use or dispose of sanitary pads. They don't know they should put it into the garbage after they use it. Some of them put it into the latrine and it blocks the sewage system.' [IDI with returnee migrant, 23]

Health and cleanliness in general emerged as important, and some women had to submit to regular health checks and had their eating crockery and cutlery separated from the rest of the household.

> 'Employers take you to the hospital immediately when they see some symptoms. They force you to go through general check-ups. They are very scared you could have communicable diseases. They separate your cups and other dishes until you recover from the disease. They take you to the hospital if you even have strong flu. They are serious on health issues.' [IDI with returnee migrant, 23]

This type of investment in the domestic worker is directly in line with Foucault's understanding of the body as a site of discipline in relation to its economic use. He states, 'The political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination...the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.' (1984)

As previously mentioned, modest dress was expected, particularly in stricter Muslim societies, and was also a strategy to prevent sexual advances. As 78% of our study respondents were Muslim, many reported they found it easy to adapt to covering their hair and praying at the requisite times each day. Christian women, on the other hand, might pretend to be Muslims (or recent converts) to avoid undue attention and suspicion.

> 'They like it when you are Muslim. They respect women who respect their religion. In Saudi Arabia they don't hire Christians. Most women who went to Saudi changed their names to get a job. They don't tell their employers that they are Christians.' [FGD with returnee migrants, 30]

> 'I have a cross tattoo on my forehead. She asked me why I have cross tattoo if I am Muslim, and I told her I am converted Muslim, she was very happy.' [FGD with returnee migrants, 25]

3.2. Balancing Obedience and Assertiveness

Certain personal attributes could further facilitate the migration experience. In a seeming contradiction, both obedience and assertiveness were considered desirable contradictions, and domestic workers needed to master the right balance between the two. On the one hand, the migrant needed to demonstrate humility and ability to follow instructions as given.

> 'The woman should have reserved behaviour …she should be obedient to what they told her to do even if she couldn't actually do the job at the time. If they asked her why she didn't perform it, she should politely explain the reason and promise them to perform it later.' [IDI with returnee migrant, 25]

> '… The woman should be humble and follow their orders. They [Arabs] are very noisy, they usually shout even when they are talking. The woman should be patient and tolerate their behavior. If she shows them good behavior in the first months of her contract period, they [employers] would definitely like her.' [KII with religious leader, male 42]

On the other hand, many respondents emphasised that employers respected women who spoke confidently and held up their dignity.

> 'Arabs abuse you if you panic, but they respect those who are very serious. They respect those who confidently answer their questions, and they fear those who answer with a louder voice. If you fear them, they want to abuse you in your every action. They don't usually treat shy women in a good way.' [IDI with returnee migrant, 24]

Several returnees emphasized that prospective migrants need to prepare themselves in order to be confident in the destination country. One gave the following advice to young women considering migrating:

> 'It is advisable to prepare yourself in order to be confident, not to get confused with what you see or hear. You have to convince yourself that you went there for work; you have to change your behaviour if it is necessary. If you are shy here, you should no longer be shy there. Confident and strong characteristics help you to be tolerant and successful.' [IDI with returnee migrant, 29]

Being consistent in one's demeanor and behavior was cited as another important personal trait to help domestic workers navigate their job.

> 'The behavior which you show your employers should be uniform. It is not good to be serious one day and laugh and joke with them the next day.'
>
> [IDI with returnee migrant, 22]

This returnee also went on to say that migrant domestic workers shouldn't tell their employers about their personal lives. In addition, migrants appeared to have spent considerable time studying the behaviour of others and scrutinising their own. As yet another form of self-discipline, returnee migrants sometimes blamed women who had poor experiences during migration for their misfortune. While 'fate' and 'luck' and 'God's will' were cited as contributing to whether or not migrants had positive or negative experiences, returnees also could assume that adherence to unspoken regulations or good behaviour similarly played a significant role. For example, one respondent insisted that she herself had never encountered any problems, and that the women who did must have done something to deserve it:

> 'Most Arabs are cruel to those who steal from them or who 'hustle' the [women employers'] husbands. Otherwise, they are good people.' [IDI with returnee migrant, 29]

Even respondents who themselves experienced difficulties looked to their own behaviour as a contributing factor and hoped to learn from the experience in future.

> 'But at that time, I didn't know how I went there, I just didn't also know what will happen to me. I said okay to everything to my employers because I didn't know my rights and duties, but now I am matured enough to know my duties and responsibilities, I would surely ask my rights now.' [IDI, 23]

3.3. Resistance

The fact that women submitted themselves to social control and self-disciplined behaviour does not mean that they did not also find

ways of resistance. Despite the heavy steps taken by employers to prevent 'their' house help from running away to more lucrative opportunities, and despite the peer censure of some house help who warn others of the dangers of running away, many women do run away and take control over their migration experience. Other women resist the constraints placed on them by forging links and social relationships even though these are forbidden.

> 'If they want, [migrant women] can call their parents here at the village, they can get the number from their families, and then communicate the people who can help them to run away. When they call each other, one of the women might suggest that her relatives or her husband or someone else can help her to run away from their employers. For instance, my sister went there legally, but now she has run away from her employers.' [KII with school director, 44]

3.4. Giving Subservice Advice to Prospective Migrants

Women find they are able to negotiate or to take back certain freedoms while still employed. While many women reported self-disciplining one's body according to the culture-specific mode of dress they were expected to adhere to, a few others found it important to insist on wearing specific outfits or articles of clothing.

> 'When I was in Dubai my employer ordered me not to wear one specific skirt, she doesn't like it when I wear that, but I told her I like the dress and there is no way that I was not going to wear it. From that moment onwards, she stopped complaining. I continue wearing it until I return back home. The migrant woman should be confident.' [FGD with returnees, 25]

> 'I heard her talking Amharic over the phone, she was on the veranda, then I approached the fence and talked to her, she told me she is from Kombolcha (25 KM from Dessie). Starting from that day we start talking to each other at every convenient hour. Later I found out that the kitchen which she is working is faced to our fence. While she was working in the kitchen, she would open the door, it became a sign for me that I can talk to her so I approached to the fence and I talk to her. On other

times, she stood on the veranda and I approached the fence and we talked. … I was just happy to talk to her in Amharic, I missed talking to someone in Amharic.' [IDI, 22]

> 'I advise them to take Saudi money with them while they migrate because they can buy a SIM card and a mobile phone. They can also take the mobile apparatus from Ethiopia and take 50 Saudi [Riyal] to buy the SIM card from the airport. It is good to hide the phone.' [IDI, 25]

Conclusion

One respondent neatly summarised the entire experience of self-discipline as a means of mitigating risks and increasing the likelihood of positive migration:

> 'If you perform your job properly, there is nothing that you and your employer argue about. You know what you are expected to do. For instance, you know that you shouldn't communicate with your employer's husband, so you will avoid communicating with her husband; you will [avoid] seeing him. You will dress the way they like if you know what that entails. The Arabs have no problem if you know your responsibility and perform the way they like it. They don't have a problem to eat the food you cook. You won't be stressed to do your job if you're well-informed beforehand'. [IDI with returnee migrant, 25]

Foucault agrees that efficiency is a form of discipline. He states, 'The human body has entered a 'mechanics of power' which defines how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but also so that the bodies may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines.' (1984)

The experiences of Ethiopian migrant women working as domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries overwhelmingly support the Foucauldian notion of discipline as effectively imposed on the self even in the absence of overt coercion. The women we spoke to are in a disadvantaged position within the unequal power relations created through domestic work where employees are almost completely at the mercy of employers' whims.

Constant surveillance is a frequent feature of the life of Ethiopian domestic workers in employment in the Gulf, and perceived or real danger plays a strong role in the self-discipline of domestic workers. However, despite the immense constraints placed on the 'docile bodies' of Ethiopian domestic workers in the Gulf, we also found instances of resistance which enable the women to retain a sense of self and dignity.

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