Social Inequality and Social Mobility: The Construed Diversity of Ethiopian Female Labor Migrants in Djibouti

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Abstract

Discussions about female labor migrants from the Horn of Africa are often loaded with accounts describing them as a homogenized group of destitute people on the move. Such trends of homogenization often hide the diverse social classes within these groups and the differential access co-nationals have across such social classes. Moreover, such discourses conceal the differences in migrants' migration trajectories and related variances in their overall integration processes. This paper accentuates the heterogeneity of the social classes of Ethiopian female migrants and argues that the term Ethiopian female migrant is a parasol that often obscures the diverse and highly stratified migrant group. By going beyond this dominant trend of homogenization, this study addresses how differential access to economic resources, different social characteristics of migrants, and migrants' settlement patterns impact migrants' networks and their status within the larger Ethiopian female migrant group. By building on lived experiences of Ethiopian female migrants, the project assesses how Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti describe their social class trajectories reflecting on how non/belonging to a specific class shaped the scale and nature of their social exclusion and inclusion by the Djiboutian host community, and their entire integration process. As an anthropological piece based on an ethnographic study, the paper shows how class and social inequality is subjectively construed.

Keywords: Djibouti, Ethiopia, female migrants, social class, social inequality.

Introduction: Setting the Scene

Ethiopia is one of the countries in the Horn of Africa region with a large track record of outmigration. A study by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) in 2014 noted that about 1 500 Ethiopian migrants legally depart

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from Ethiopia every day, of which the majority is recorded to be female. Studies conducted over the last decade indicate a rise in the number of migrants leaving the country. Woldemichael (2013) mentions that about 154 660 migrants left the country in the period between 2012 and 2013. Another study by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS, 2014) indicates the rise in migration stating that out of 107 532 Horn of Africa migrants crossing the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea to Yemen, 78% (84 446) were Ethiopians. The US State Department annual Trafficking in Person (TIP) Report of 2015 indicates that about 1 500 Ethiopian migrants legally depart from Ethiopia every day. Political instability, coupled with economic push factors, have been the leading drivers of migration for hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians leaving the country (RMMS, 2014).

The majority of labor migrants destined to the Middle East are young Ethiopian girls and women. The growing level of landlessness in the context of a massive agrarian economy, coupled with growing youth unemployment, are considered to be the leading factors significantly contributing to the mass exodus from Ethiopia (Carter and Rohwerder, 2016). Furthermore, gendered dynamics and sociocultural factors are among the contributing factors for the growing trend in the feminization of migration in Ethiopia (Meron, 2018a). Following the mass deportation of Ethiopian migrants, Ethiopia officially banned the legal migration to the Gulf States in 2013/2014, a phenomenon that led thousands of migrants to resort to irregular means of migration. Unlike legal migration routes, this involves several transit points and stopovers. For labor migrants destined to the Middle East, Djibouti is one of the key transit countries.

Prior research has documented the plight of the female labor migrants by drawing on the different socio-economic rights violations the migrants face in different contexts (Felegebirhan, 2013; Waganesh etal 2015; Zewdu and Suleyman, 2018). The conventional discussion on Ethiopian female labor migrants has portrayed women and young girls as a homogeneous group of passive agents whose migration trajectories are often narrated in reference to the diverse socio-economic violations of rights they face (Selamawit, 2017).

Most of these prior studies on Ethiopian female labor migrants failed to provide a detailed gendered analysis (For more on this see Meron, 2018b). These studies have the tendency to homogenize the socio-economic profile of

Ethiopian female migrants and essentialize the group of female migrants without discussing the diverse social class differences existing among the respective migrants, and the different factors accounting for such differences (RMMS, 2014). Furthermore, prior studies, which pay more attention to the victimhood narrative, tend to undermine the agency of the migrants. This paper argues against this point by emphasizing the agency of female migrants by drawing on aspects of social mobility. This paper addresses these two sets of gaps, i.e. the gap in understanding the heterogeneity of female labor migrants and the gap of research in addressing the agency of migrants by paying attention to aspects of social mobility.

The paper is structured in five sections. The following section, i.e., section II, presents a note on the research method. Section III provides a brief review of the literature on social inequality, class, and international migration as a way of giving a brief summary of the relevant literature and introducing the general analytical framework. Section IV presents the heterogeneous class of Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti. Section V explores the factors affecting the social mobility of migrants and section VI presents the concluding remarks.

Brief Note on Methodology

This paper addresses the perceived gap in research addressing the class positioning of migrants and the agency of female emigrants by drawing on the findings of an extended qualitative research conducted on Ethiopian female migrants residing in Djibouti. The empirical data presented in this article is based on a senior postdoctoral research project of the author, conducted for a period of three years on Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti. Djibouti's geographical proximity to Ethiopia gives it the significance of a preferred transit and destination country for many Ethiopian migrants. It draws on accounts of key Ethiopian female informants interviewed in Djibouti consisting of a purposively selected group of informants. The informants interviewed during the course of the study are from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Their socio-economic status, as discussing in section IV of this paper, is quite diverse. The study implemented various data collection tools such as in-depth interviews with key informants, collection of migrants' biographies and narratives (self-descriptions and definition of the situation), and focus group discussions. The study was conducted in both Djibouti city

and in the border town of Obock neighboring Yemen. Unstructured, open-ended questions were posed to key informants with the purpose of giving them more room to shape the flow of conversation. Furthermore, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with a group of 10 informants over the course of the study. The study pays attention to the subjective understanding of social class and class positioning and thus draws on individual stories as a tool in order to get the nuances of the dynamics of class positioning, and the factors that account for social mobility. The methodological departure point of the study is that the subject-centered approach in migration research helps to avoid biases by letting the subjects of the study speak for themselves (Triulzi and McKenzie, 2013). By going beyond the dominant trend that often treats migrants in general, and female migrants in particular, as a homogeneous entity, the paper shows the heterogeneity of Ethiopian female migrants revealing a complex social class positioning. As a way of protecting informants, pseudonyms are used in this paper.

By going beyond presenting trends of the feminization of labor migration in Ethiopia, this paper presents the heterogeneity of Ethiopian female migrants and their differences in their socio-economic status. Furthermore, it reviews how migrants make sense of such diversities and the factors contributing to it, and their subjective understandings of class and social mobility in such heterogeneous environments. Social class is conceptualized in this paper as a fluid, dynamic and flexible entity referring to the hierarchical distinctions between migrant individuals, where the factors that determine class varies widely, as illustrated below. This paper shows that Ethiopian female migrants have different ideas about what makes one 'higher' or 'lower' in the hierarchy with different defining characteristics. Social stratification among the migrant community under discussion represents the structured inequality between individuals and social groups, whereby the migrants find themselves in asymmetrical relations and possess statuses in a hierarchical structure that is prone to change rather than being a fixed entity.

Class, Social Mobility and Migration

Class is a theme that has attracted less scholarly attention in migration research than others. Van Hear (2014: 100) explains that, "while once a mainstay of social science, class has lately been eclipsed in much of migration studies by consideration of other forms of social difference, affinity, and

allegiance such as ethnicity, gender, generation, and lately religion".

Latest discussions of class and migration involve various sub-topics. Some studies focus on discussing class in relation to the socio-economic inequality happening after migration (Oliver and O'Reilly, 2010). Other studies discuss how class affects mobility/immobility either by providing or limiting access to migration and the way class shapes the migration trajectories of migrants' decision-making, the routes they take, and their respective destinations (Van Hear, 2004). Van Hear (2014) argues that the resources that would-be migrants could gather often shapes the form and outcome of migration. Furthermore, the discussion about class and mobility also relates to studies that address how migration policies are influenced by the educational and professional profile of prospective migrants (Kofman and Raghuram, 2015). How migration is perceived, as a means to realize some goals by groups belonging to a certain class of the society is another theme addressed within the overarching topic of the relationship between class and migration (Mapril, 2014).

A recent study by Cederberg (2017) accents the importance of understanding class from the individual subjects themselves. Accordingly, Cederberg (2017: 149) argues, "exploring subjective accounts of class provides useful insights into the complexity of how class is experienced in the context of international migration." Cederberg (2017) shows the different aspects in which migrants evaluate their class trajectories. Instead of looking at and defining their status quo at a given specific time, migrants tend to describe their long-term prospective class positioning. Others discuss their class trajectories in reference to the context of the family unit, by emphasizing different quality-of-life aspects existing across generations.

The other central theme in the discussion on class and migration involved discussions on social mobility attending to migration outcomes in host, destination or home countries. Likewise, studies by Parrenas (2015) and Kelly et al. (2012) present the intricacy of social class in migration by referring to points of social mobility. Parrenas (2000, 2015) highlights how such social mobility is defined in different ways in different contexts. Accordingly, she uses the term 'contradictory class mobility' to signify the trajectories of Filipina female migrants who managed to secure higher income through

domestic work in Western countries, but who at the same time are experiencing 'downward social mobility' by being involved in work that is believed to be a domain of those with low social status. Kelly's study emphasizes the need to pay attention to a subjective understanding of social mobility and discusses how, in a context that apparently seems to be 'deprofessionalisation and deskilling' (2012: 166) migrants might on the other hand tend to describe their situation of class positioning in more complex ways.

Thus, the main discourse in the studies of social mobility in the context of migration research accents the need to adopt a transnational perspective in an attempt to understand and study social class and social mobility within the framework of migrant communities. Likewise, Kelly (2014: 18) notes that, "class position that must be understood in a comparative or transnational frame concerns the extension of class identity from the individual to a wider familial network". Accordingly, these academic works argue that in discussions of class and social mobility, studies need to address the themes across national boundaries because migrants are often differently positioned in different contexts (Nowicka, 2013; Parrenas, 2015). Furthermore, Kelly et al. (2012: 17) state that, "discussions of social mobility in a transnational frame tend to go beyond the aspect of presenting one's position in one hierarchy and comparing it with a position in another, it is rather discussing the prospect for mobility within that hierarchy, either across a career or across generations, that is a major factor."

The other point in the discussion on social mobility in migration relates to the value of different forms of capital in shaping the social mobility process. As Van Hear (2014: 101) argues, "patterns and outcomes of migration are shaped by the resources migrants can mobilize." Economic capital is described as affecting the pattern of social mobility of migrants. While arguing along the same line, Sheller and Urry (2006) used the allegory of mobility in "fast and slow lanes" to discuss how the social mobility of migrants is shaped by access to resources and power (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 219)

Apart from economic capital, the gathering of non-economic resources is discussed as another factor impacting the longer-term class prospects and social mobility (Nowicka, 2013). The value of social capital in shaping the social mobility of migrants is quite significant. As Bourdieu (1986: 248-249)

mentions, the amount of social capital at the disposal of a given agent is shaped by the size of the network and connections that could be mobilized, and by the amount of capital held by the different networked agents. However, there are two competing accounts discussing the value of social networks. Some like Massey et al. (1994) accent the value of social networks arguing that social capital decreases the costs and the risks of migration by increasing the expected net returns. On the other hand, Mahuteau and Junankar (2008) highlight the negative effect of migrant networks, which they argue limit the integration of migrants to the local community and market and often restrict them to lower positions in the labor market.

Other studies have discussed the importance of taking a family-wide and inter-generational perspective on social mobility (Kelly et al., 2012; Nowicka, 2013). Studies on social mobility have accented the importance of time in the mobility process (Eade et al., 2007). Ryan (2015) shows that migrants who might have experienced deskilling earlier in their migration trajectories have experiences followed by upward mobility based on the friendship and social ties they form, emphasizing the value of time in the social mobility process.

As Arthur (2014) argues, contemporary migration dynamics in Africa exhibit class dynamics and inform the ever-widening inequality structures on the continent. Attending to the complexity of the interplay between factors accounting for migration, Van Hear (2014) notes that the nexus between social development and migration dynamics in contemporary Africa is quite a complex and multifaceted entity. Flahaux and De Haas (2016) argue that development and social transformation in contemporary Africa raised the capabilities and aspirations to migrate.

Prior research conducted on Ethiopian female labor migrants destined to the Middle East has discussed groups of migrants often facing different forms of rights violations and precarious working conditions in their respective destinations (Busza et al., 2017). Furthermore, the studies drew attention to the discourse about the homogeneous socio-economic profile of Ethiopian female labor migrants who in most circumstances are uneducated, young girls from an economically deprived family making the decision to migrate in search of a better future (RMMS, 2014; Woldemichael 2017). By drawing on the findings of the study on Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti, this article

shows the diverse socio-economic profile of migrants and the highly stratified migrant community residing in the republic and transiting through it.

In the following section, this paper argues against the dominant trend in the literature paying much attention to discussing class in reference to economic factors and rather argues for the subjective understanding of class and social mobility. By going beyond the homogenization trend dominant in studies on Ethiopian female migrants, this paper analyzes how the migrants speak about class in class-terms, and reviews the different features of their accounts that refer more broadly to their socio-economic positions. It further addresses the implications of migrants' social class positioning in defining their migration trajectories. This is an essential methodological and analytical shift from the dominant trend of migration studies on Ethiopia, which fail to address the account of migrants defining their social status and where migrants' subjective understanding of class is often muted. Furthermore, this paper argues that while addressing the factors contributing to the social mobility of migrants, studies need to pay attention to exploring the subjective accounts of social mobility in a specific context rather than pinpointing to specific factors, as such an approach helps to provide useful insights into the complexity of the social mobility process and factors accounting for it.

The Setting and Heterogeneity of Ethiopian Female Migrants

Djibouti has a coastline stretching from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, passing through the Bab el Mandeb Strait, granting it a strategic location enticing thousands of migrants from this troubled region of the Horn of Africa. Accordingly, thousands of Ethiopians, Somalis and Eritreans destined to the Gulf area and beyond transit through Djibouti.

Ethiopians are the majority of foreign communities in Djibouti followed by Somalis and Eritreans (Hawa, 2015). Following the deportation of about 160 000 undocumented Ethiopian migrants from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Ethiopian government announced a temporary ban on migration to the Middle East (Meron, 2018a). This ban on official labor migration led a number of migrants to resort to irregular ways of migrating. Djibouti appealed as one of the major transit pathways for thousands of Ethiopian migrants. In order to better comprehend the discussion on social class and status of migrants, this paper focuses on stationed Ethiopian female migrants who are residing in

Djibouti Ville excluding thousands of transit migrants. The analysis of the empirical data collected during the course of the study shows the heterogeneous social class of the group. The subjective definition of class by the migrant groups shows the insights into the complexity of experiencing and defining class. The three major variables said to mark the social class of the female migrants are the nature of job/income status of migrants, the migration status of the respective migrants, and their settlement patterns.

Income/Nature of Job and Social Class

Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti are highly stratified in terms of their economic status. Even though it is difficult to draw a clear line marking the hierarchy, the class difference among this migrant community can be inferred from the different nature of the jobs they engage in and the related economic capital they generate and have at their disposal. As an ethnographic study that paid much attention to the subject-centered approach, the hierarchies of the different types of jobs and the sub-categories and hierarchies of different businesswomen are drawn from accounts of the key informants of the study.

As most informants allude, *negade setoch* (businesswomen) are the ones regarded as being economically well-to-do and at the upper scale of the economic ladder. Even though the number of Ethiopian female business owners in Djibouti city is insignificant compared to their male counterparts, there are few women who run businesses in Djibouti Ville and on the outskirts of Djibouti town. There is no special immigration scheme in Djibouti that aims at facilitating the entry of highly skilled, well-educated and wealthy immigrants at the national and provincial levels. Hence, most Ethiopian business owners in Djibouti are those who entered the country either as undocumented migrants and have stayed in the country for a while and changed their status or those who have entered on a work permit. *Negade setoch* are heralded as providing economic benefits to the locals and as being better integrated into the local market. The *negade setoch* is a generic term used to describe those owning hotels, restaurants, bars and nightclubs. Owners of *sagur bet* (beauty salon) are the second in the social class of *negade setoch* following hotel owners. The third in the social class of migrant businesswomen are those selling vegetables, fruits and spices imported from Eastern Ethiopia. The justifications given for placing businesswomen on top

mainly relates to their higher income and earning capacity. The other factor raised by informants also relates to the immigration status of businesswomen who in most circumstances have a legal permanent/temporary resident status, which qualifies them to run businesses in Djibouti.

While describing the economic status of the migrants, informants tend to describe professional women as the ones who hold secondary status next to businesswomen. The number of professional Ethiopian women in Djibouti participating in the workforce requiring some type of specialization and higher education training is very insignificant. There are very few Ethiopian women working as sales agents in transit and freight companies, transnational corporations and in the financial services in Djibouti. There were about six young girls working for transit companies during the time of the fieldwork. The strict immigration policy, language requirement (proficiency in the official working language, French), the low pay scale and the harsh weather conditions are described by this group of skilled migrants as non-conducive factors restraining the number of skilled Ethiopian female migrants from joining different private firms in Djibouti. The other set of professional female immigrants consists of the few Ethiopian nationals working at different international and regional development organizations in Djibouti. Their number is also quite insignificant compared to the thousands of labor migrants residing in the capital and in the republic.

The groups holding the third status among Ethiopian female migrants are the Ethiopian sex workers involved in the lucrative sex work business. Sex work is a well-paid business in Djibouti due to the significant number of international military personnel, numerous port operators, and long-distance truck drivers. As an economic hub, Djibouti city is a place where there is a high injection of global finance. The sex workers are a highly stratified group ranging from the sex workers working as *kimit* (mistresses), strippers/dancers, those working at private residences, massage parlors, and those working at hotels and nightclubs. During the course of the fieldwork, the author interviewed a number of Ethiopian women who are serving as *kimit* of expatriates, mainly foreign military men, working as contractors and soldiers for the foreign military bases, mainly the Americans, French, Spanish, and Chinese. The majority of the informants involved in the sex work business mentioned their aspirations to be in such a relationship which is commonly

referred to as *kimit,* as the account of Elisabeth shows:

> *The dream of every sex worker is to change her status from being a bar girl to a kimit. This dream further entails the ultimate aim of every kimit which is to change her status from being a kimit to being a wife.*

Even though there are rare cases of young Ethiopian sex workers marrying expats, such precedents give the *kimits* the hope that most of them cling to, to becoming a wife.

Among the general categories of sex workers, those who are considered to be on the lowest strata are the ones working at small brothels in the neighborhood of Quartier 2, a neighborhood with numerous small bars with large numbers of Ethiopian sex workers. While sex work is officially outlawed, such 'complexes' like Quartier 2 are located at the heart of the old city. They usually consist of 30-50 brothels run by separate owners and each housing between 3-5 sex workers. Even though informants mentioned sex work as a better paying job than domestic work in Djibouti, most of the key informants, including the sex workers, mentioned the stereotype and stigma attached to it. This relates to the account by Sanders and Campbell (2007: 3) which relates to the historical and cultural endurance of intolerance and hostility towards sex workers.

The social class of specific migrants defined by the Ethiopian community in relation to the type of job places Ethiopian women working in the care sector on the lowest strata of the economic ladder. The care sector refers to transnational labor and care arrangements in domestic work migration. This group consists of the majority of the migrants who are over-represented in low-paid jobs. They are generally described as *shaqala or serataganas* (maids). The *shaqala* group, like the three general groups mentioned above, consists of further stratified migrant workers. The difference between classes among this group relates to the pay scale, the nature of jobs they engage in and the immigration status of the workers. The jobs these groups of female migrants often engage in are *tsidat* (cleaning), *migib sira* (cooking), and *lij tibeka* (baby-sitting). Key informants and focus group discussion participants emphasized the better pay that maids in Djiboutian households earn than the average payment a maid working in Ethiopian upper-class households earn. In Ethiopian upper-middle class households the maximum amount maids earn

on average is about 2 000 Ethiopian *birr* (circa 65 USD) per month. This amount is by far less than the minimum wage. A maid working in a Djiboutian lower-middle class household usually earns about 17 000 DJF (circa 3 150 Ethiopian *birr,* or 112 USD). The pay is by far higher in Djiboutian upper-class households where maids earn on average up to 25 000-30 000 DJF (circa 143-170 USD). Despite Djibouti's high cost of living, the expenses for the migrants in Djibouti are quite low due the fact that food and accommodation are provided by employers.

The construction of social hierarchies of class in the context of the female migrants shows a strong inclination towards defining class in relation to earning capacity. This needs to be situated and analyzed with reference to the key push factor accounting for the migration project of the migrants under discussion. As most migrants are labor migrants who left their country in search of green pastures, the relative success of a migration project in such circumstances tend to be framed and defined in reference to one's economic income. The analysis of such a reference to the pay scale in their home country, while discussing their income in Djibouti, shows the value of transnational understanding and the spatiality of class. This relates to Kelly's (2009) discussion on the point that class is constructed in important ways either in the context of comparisons between the host country and home, or in relation to transnational linkages between the two places.

Migration Status and Social Class

Although there are no official statistics available on the overall number of Ethiopian migrants in Djibouti, data collected by the Ethiopian community association shows that there are more than 60 000 Ethiopians residing in the republic. As shown in this section, the migration status is labeled by key informants as a crucial element shaping and defining the social hierarchy of respective migrants. Migration status is closely intertwined with the nature of the work the migrants engage in.

Drawing on her lived experience, Lydia mentions that employers place more value on legal status than they do on the skills of migrant workers:

> *I have friends who have less cooking and cleaning skills than myself and who didn't have any skills training back home, but who are earning double the amount of what I earn here. I have a cooking skills certificate, which I*

> *obtained from a public technical and vocational training school (TVET) back home. I am relatively better educated as I have completed high school and I have better command of English. The skills and the assets I have did not make any significant change on the nature of the job I am doing as a maid and the terms of my employment. All that counts is having the werket (the legal immigration documents) (Lydia, Djibouti).*

Lydia's story gives us an insight into how much the possession of a legal migration status shapes their everyday lived experience, defining the prospects for integration into the local job market and better living and working conditions. The majority of Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti are undocumented. These are groups who entered the country without authorization from Djiboutian immigration authorities or without an entry visa. Quite insignificant numbers of the undocumented migrants initially traveled with a valid visa and overstayed the period of time allowed to be in the country as a visitor. Undocumented immigrants are the precarious group holding uncertain migration status and are not eligible to get work permits that would allow them to engage in the Djiboutian labor market. Hence, undocumented Ethiopian female immigrants in most circumstances are employed in local Djiboutian households where they live and work as live-in maids with restricted mobility and lower wages. The official working days in Djibouti are from Sunday through Thursday and accordingly Fridays (*Juma'a*) and Saturdays are the main weekly off-days in the country.

The other groups of Ethiopian female migrants are documented migrants having the legal documents allowing them to reside in Djibouti. Such legal immigration status often entitles them to obtain work permits. The *Carte de séjour temporaire*, the temporary residents' card, valid for a year, allows the migrants to live and work in Djibouti. Owning such a legal residence permit offers the female migrants better working opportunities than undocumented ones. Furthermore, it offers them a better negotiating ground about the terms and the nature of their employment. Even though the nature of jobs that Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti engage in tends to be in the domestic care business, the documented immigrants get relatively better pay and decent working conditions as in some circumstances they are employed at households of expatriates working for international organizations, and high-ranking diplomats. Unlike the undocumented workers, they often work as

weraj or *temelalash*, an arrangement whereby the workers commute between the places of their work and their residences. The average working hours for documented migrants working as maids is often 8 hours a day, while the live-in migrant workers work on average between 12-14 hours a day.

Settlement Pattern and Social Status

The subjective accounts of social class as presented by Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti point to the third key element, which pertains to the social class of migrants. The settlement pattern of the migrants in Djibouti is described as a variable indicating the class of migrants, showing their status in the migrants' social class hierarchy.

PK 12 is a highway where hundreds of trucks pass through every day while travelling on the Ethio-Djiboutian corridor. After offloading the items imported from Ethiopia, truckers wait at PK 12 for their papers to be processed to enter Djibouti city before resuming the journey back to Ethiopia. PK 12 is home to some 35 000 people. This is a neighborhood where young female migrants crossing from eastern Ethiopia to Djibouti pass through. When walking on the streets of PK 12 it is quite common to come across a number of newly arriving migrants and accordingly PK 12 is a transit and resting place for these groups of migrants as much as it is for the truckers. The small restaurants and bars in the neighborhood have sheds built to host the drivers during their days in Djibouti. These resting places, referred to as *marafiya bets,* are usually owned and run by Ethiopian businesswomen. Amharic is the main *lingua franca* in the neighborhood and people use both the *birr* (the Ethiopian currency) and Djiboutian Franc for their everyday transactions. The *marafiya bets* are mini dining houses where drivers can get Ethiopian meals, Ethiopian coffee and where they can chew *qat* (*Catha edulis,* a stimulant growing in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East). The Ethiopian madams running the small restaurants often employ young newcomers who have crossed the border recently and those who do not have the resources (both financial resources and social networks) in Djibouti city, or to travel further. Hence, PK 12 serves as a transit point for a group of young newly arriving labor migrants and as a place where they get employed for a very small fee, an income that they use to pay for their further migration.

The madams owning the small restaurants are in most cases wives or partners

of truck drivers. Some of them are elderly women who have lived in Djibouti for decades and have secured work permits that allow them to run businesses. During a focus group discussion held with the girls employed in those restaurants, the most accented point about the transit nature of PK 12 relates to the fact that this is a place associated with transiting to Djibouti and further, and a place that serves the purpose of obtaining the necessary resources and information needed.

> *The city is like an ocean and we don't dare to take the risk of going to a place where we do not know anyone. If one has the money to buy the service of a local broker to find job in Djibouti city or to proceed further then it is less likely to find that person here in PK 12. This is the place for the destitute who lack the resources and information. (Nesra Nuri; Djibouti 12.01.2019).*

Arhiba is a major slum area in Djibouti city located at the center of the city. This is a neighborhood with tiny shacks made of cardboard, wood and metal junk. Arhiba is a part of Djibouti city where mainly members of the Afar-ethnic group, one of the two major ethnic groups of Djibouti, live. It is an old neighborhood, established in 1970, for Afar Dockers working at the port. It is a densely populated slum area hosting numerous Ethiopian migrants. These migrants include a group of transit migrants, migrant workers, and smugglers/brokers who facilitate the employment of migrants in Djibouti city and further migration. Given Djibouti city's high rental cost, Arhiba provides relatively low-budget housing in small rooms of $4m^2$ X $5m^2$. Ethiopian female migrants working in Djiboutian households come to their small rented shacks during their monthly days off. Furthermore, it is also a home for transit migrants who are transiting through Djibouti and waiting for the brokers and smugglers facilitating their travels. So, the two groups of Ethiopian female migrants residing in Arhiba are the transit migrants and undocumented migrants working in Djibouti city as domestic workers.

In most circumstances, Ethiopian *bale bet, or akeray* (landlords) married to local Djiboutian Afar men own the small shacks. Nafisa recounted:

> *Like hundreds of other Ethiopian girls, I rented a small room with 5 of my friends and I am usually coming to this place for my monthly days off. Arhiba is a sanctuary to higawet sidetegena (illegal migrants). A documented person wouldn't reside in this neighborhood unless he/she is the owner of*

the place i.e. the akeray (Nafisa, Arhiba).

Nafisa's statement frames Arhiba as the place for the destitute and undocumented migrants and best shows the consensus among the Ethiopian migrants emphasizing the relationship between social class and residential areas.

Likewise, Quartier 2 is a neighborhood in Djibouti city with a large number of Ethiopian migrants. It is a neighborhood with small bars and a large numbers of Ethiopian sex workers (see section III above). The two neighborhoods (Arhiba and Quartier 2) are considered neighborhoods where undocumented Ethiopian female migrants reside in large numbers. The reputation of Quartier 2 is as a complex where young migrant girls, mostly sex workers from Ethiopia, rent places in houses owned by older Ethiopian women who have lived in Djibouti for a long time and have mostly passed through the same life experience of working at brothels. This is a neighborhood in the city where police raids, locally referred to as 'roughs', take place frequently, undermining the safety of sex workers and forcing them often to work underground. Informants from this neighborhood emphasize the point that the criminalization of sex work puts migrant sex workers at the risk of abuse and exploitation by local customers.

Neighborhoods like Djibouti Foq, Eron and place Menelik are parts of the city where in most circumstances documented female migrants working in bigger bars, professional women and those running businesses, are residing. These are neighborhoods with high rentals and Ethiopian female migrants living in such neighborhoods are the ones who can afford to pay the high rental costs. Unlike the other neighborhoods the places are often apartments and relatively modern-style common residential flats. The settlement pattern of Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti is hence described as something exhibiting the high levels of income inequality at best. Thus, the differences are described as entities duplicated between occupation-defined classes within the neighborhoods.

Factors Affecting Social Mobility of Migrants

Gold (2001) argues that individual migrants and sub-groups experience social and economic mobility in host settings. Social mobility is "the movement or opportunities for movement between different social classes or occupational

groups" (Aldridge, 2003: 189). Such mobilities can either be upward or downward. Cederberg (2017) likewise accents the point that international migration may involve upward or downward social mobility. Furthermore, she mentions different factors affecting the positioning of migrants in social strata such points as education, linguistic competence, and social capital. The lived experiences of Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti show how a multitude of factors contribute to the upward social mobility of migrants and change of social status, as discussed in this section.

One of the key findings of the study is that the social positioning of Ethiopian female migrants in a specific class is a complex entity. This is mainly because migrants, who are believed to experience some downward social mobility in the Djiboutian context, maintain property or businesses back in Ethiopia, which are financed through remittances sent from Djibouti. This at best exhibits what Parrenas (2001:15) calls "contradictory class mobility" whereby while their economic situation back home improves, their social status in the receiving country decreases. Thus, while the female migrants are engaged in one set of class relationships in Djibouti, their experiences show that they are engaged in quite different ones in Ethiopia.

Muna's narrative about her lived experience explains this:

> *I am working in a hair salon here in Djibouti earning six to seven times more than what a person with the same skill and expertise makes back home. Of course, being employed at someone else's hair salon is not such a dignified job in Ethiopia even though it is considered as being better than to be employed as a maid. So, the fact that I am working as a hairdresser here might sound as if I am doing the low paying job in Ethiopia. But now I have bought and shipped back all the hair salon stuffs I need to start up my own business in Desse, my birth town. I have already built the house I will be running my business in and also managed to buy all the materials I need. So, inshallah in few months' time I will be a business owner in my own country which is going to be a real lewit (transformation).*

One of the key factors that informants mentioned during both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions was the value of social networks in shaping the social mobility of migrants. A social network is described as something that can deliver valuable resources such as access to information,

and a support base that often helps migrants to advance in their careers. The networks established by the migrants and the friends they make often become major sources of information and support. Hence, as Coleman (1988) argues, social capital is not embodied in the social agents themselves, or in the physical implements of production, like economic capital, but it is mainly embodied in the relations among persons (Coleman, 1988:98).

The co-residential arrangement, or the local *debal* living arrangement mentioned under section III above, is one of the key ways in which the female migrants build their social networks. The co-residence in the small shared rooms in Djibouti city is one of the ways in which the migrants get the opportunity to access information. In most circumstances, well-established migrants provide different social protections and support to migrants such as hosting migrants, providing financial support, and facilitating their employment. There is a strong sense of 'filial' responsibility from the *bale bêt*es (the landlords renting their places) emphasizing the point that those with legal migration status are expected to support the desperate ones seeking help.

The above discussion shows how social capital is often converted to a source of economic capital, a point that prior research highlights (Drever and Hoffmeister, 2008; Van Meeteren et al., 2009). As Van Hear (2014) asserts, migrants' endowments of economic and social capital, or the amount of economic, social and other capital, would affect their migration trajectories, as Ethiopian migrants in Djibouti emphasize their upward social mobility.

The second main factor mentioned by most informants as a key factor contributing to the upward social mobility of the female migrants is the change in immigration status. There are three main ways that immigrants use to obtain the *Carte de séjour temporaire* – the temporary residents' legal residence permit. The first way is through the Afar traditional indigenization practice of the *fiqmatagle*, which is an Afar customary institution of assimilating non-Afars born outside of Djibouti. According to this assimilation mechanism, the non-Afar person approaches and requests an Afar family to adopt him/her to their family for lifelong fostering. The adopting Afar family helps him/her to fully integrate into Afar culture. This traditional assimilation system also helps the non-Afar to be identified as a member of the Afar ethnic group allowing the person to obtain a local residence card and ultimately become a Djiboutian citizen. The second mechanism mentioned by informants

as a way of securing the legal residence permit is through marrying a local Djiboutian and having a marriage certificate proving the marriage of an Ethiopian woman to a Djiboutian citizen. The third mechanism is through paying for a one-year residency card, which costs 30 000 DJF (circa 169 USD). For the third mechanism a migrant worker is expected to be in possession of a legal travel document, i.e. a passport, which she or he has used when entering Djibouti. Furthermore, he/she is expected to provide evidence of employment showing he/she will be employed or starting his/her own business.

Informants mentioned how much social networks and economic capital shape gaining access to the aforementioned mechanisms that would allow a person to get a legal residency status in Djibouti, which ultimately is believed to contribute to the upward social mobility of the migrants.

The third crucial factor informants raised as a factor affecting the social mobility of the migrants, is time. Most informants, especially the businesswomen, emphasize the value of time in defining and shaping their achievements and gaining a better financial stance. This resonates with Wright's (2005) argument that class has a temporal dimension and current class positioning must be seen in this context. While describing the value of time, informants state that upon arrival most immigrants tend not to have basic information about the place, ways of finding jobs and they might not have networks with other co-nationals or the local community. '*Ya gize guday new*' (it is a matter of time) is a phrase that featured often in most of the discussions pertaining to social mobility. Time is described as an entity that affects the migration trajectories mainly affecting the integration process into the labor market and occupational mobility that in turn affects the social mobility of the female migrants. The value of time in the social mobility of the migrants can be inferred from the analysis of the data collected during the fieldwork. It shows that most of the female migrants, upon their arrival, experience occupational downgrading whereby high school graduates and migrants with some skills training certificates and diplomas work in domestic services in their first jobs. Through time, movement out of domestic services is possible, in situations where the migrants develop the necessary linguistic competence and networks.

The fourth factor the study found out, as an element impacting the social mobility of female migrants, is family. Informants explained this in three different ways. For the first set of informants, getting married to a local Djiboutian citizen and gaining a certain legal residence status uplifts their status from a certain social class group and entitles them to climb the social class ladder by integrating into the Djiboutian labor market. The second line of thought is for those groups of female migrants who emphasize the emotional satisfaction of becoming a mother. This second account, which offers great importance to establishing a family life relates to the point that Van den Berg (2011) makes when discussing how social mobility is described in multiple ways. He includes the way in which migrants seek alternative forms of success by having good friends and family, being healthy and striving for a better future for their children (Van den Berg, 2011). The third line of thought has a transnational frame whereby social mobility is addressed in reference to a wider familial network. Accordingly, many informants mentioned that despite the dissatisfaction they have with their living and working conditions in Djibouti, their success stories in relation to the support they extend to their families back home is what they duly consider as an aspect of their upward social mobility.

This paper accentuates the need to adopt a broader framework in analyzing the factors accounting for social mobility than a monocausal analysis, which often focuses on economic factors. The conceptual contribution to the discourse of migration research also relates to the argument for adopting a 'broader conceptualization of migration', as a phenomenon taking place within social fields extended beyond the actual migrants themselves to include those whom they have left behind and to whom they are connected through networks of social relations. This is a point that can be inferred from the fact that social class positioning and social mobility among the group of migrants under discussion is also framed with transnational reference.

The discussion on social mobility highlights the agency of the migrants. The discussions presented here challenged pre-existing discourses stressing the passive nature of female migrants often inscribed in the victimhood narrative. Instead, it has shown that migrants are indeed active agents with their own lived experiences, exhibiting aspects of change and dynamic class positioning. This paper contributes to the wider discussion of social class and mobility by

highlighting that, among migrants, a) social class systems tend to be quite fluid; b) class positions in the context of mobility are often achieved; and c) social class goes beyond being an economically-based category.

Conclusion

Migrants' class trajectories reveal a complex social class positioning of migrants. Despite the common social class they have, this paper revealed that Ethiopian female migrants in Djibouti are highly stratified groups with various social classes. As the data presented in the above sections clearly shows, social class is experienced and interpreted by female migrants in different ways, strengthening the argument for considering subjective understandings of class processes. One of the complexities of migrants' class trajectories relates to the experiences they have whereby they concurrently experience better economic positions and a decline in social status. This dual positioning of social class is a point that key informants reference while discussing their social class position in relation to the positions they hold in the host country while at the same time referring to their probable social positioning back home. This key argument of the paper therefore goes beyond a phenomenon called "methodological nationalism" (Glick Schiller, 2009: 4), an orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states and rather pays attention to the multiple, shifting nature of migration class positioning. This accentuates the importance of transnational linkages and comparisons in the subjective interpretation of class among migrants in general, and the female migrants in particular.

Based on the analysis of the data presented in the preceding sections, this paper emphasizes the importance of developing both a subjective framework and a transnational framework of understanding class processes in order to get a comprehensive understanding about the phenomenon of social class and social mobility of migrants. The comparison of their economic status with the community back home impacts on the way female migrants evaluate their social class trajectories, emphasizing the sense of positive distinction from those left behind. Transnational frames of reference vividly show the way migrants evaluate their migration trajectories, their class positioning and their prospects for social mobility as presented in the empirical data from Djibouti.

The subjective understanding of class among the Ethiopian female migrants shows how the variables setting classes apart might not necessarily or exclusively relate to the economic status or economic capital. Such variables as immigration status and settlement patterns are used as part of the criteria to measure a migrant's position in the socio-economic hierarchy. While outlining the elements defining the class of respective migrants, the three elements believed to set the migrants' social class apart were: differential access to economic resources, the migration status of respective migrants and their settlement patterns. This paper asserts that the positioning of migrants in a certain class, limits their full immersion into the receiving culture.

Even though immigrants themselves might have experienced a downward social mobility in positional class terms, their outlook towards upward social mobility is framed in reference to the result that their migration bears for those left behind in terms of raising their income and catering for their opportunities in life.

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