

# “I Should Get Married as Soon as Possible, but the Relationships I Start Do Not Work”: Marital Prospects of Ethiopian Female Return Migrants from the Arabian Gulf

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## Abstract

This study seeks to understand how the intersection of migration, gender, and age shapes the marital prospects of Ethiopian female domestic workers returning from the Arabian Gulf and the Middle East. The study found that gendered attitudes in Ethiopian society rooted in patriarchy interact with age and the migration experiences of returnees to create stigma and marginalization, excluding the returnees from the highly desired social institution of marriage. It was also found that returnees tended to dissociate themselves from other returnees or kept their experiences secret to cope with stigma and marginalization and increase their marital prospects. The study shows how the stigma and marginalization experienced by Ethiopian female returnees from the Arabian Gulf and Middle East countries affects their social reintegration in the home country and can trigger remigration intention.

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**Introduction**

The interest to understand the relationship between the migration of women and their family has increased significantly in the past few years. Accordingly, this article explores the impact of female migration on the migrant's family and marital relations from different perspectives. A number of studies show that the migration of women for labor purpose is an uplifting and empowering experience for the women, and their family, mainly because of the financial gains, and also because of the exposure of the migrant to a new culture, which can result in improvements in living status upon return (Asis, 2002). Particularly, married return migrants were able to provide better for their children and were psychologically empowered to challenge gendered roles and gender-based oppression (Bélangier & Rahman, 2013). On the other hand, negative impacts on children left behind were observed in migrant households where women migrated for labor purposes (Hugo & Ukwatta, 2010). Along with the challenges posed by the migration experience, female return migrants need to deal with any changes that have taken place in their absence. For example, attachments and ties with children, spouses, and other family members can change (Asis, 2002). A study on Eritrean female domestic migrants highlights the existence of more divorce in Eritrean households with migrant wives than in households with non-migrant wives (Kifleyesus, 2012). Negative attitudes towards migration and the violation of gender norms resulting from the migration experiences of women, which can threaten the masculinity of men, have been found to be some of the main reasons for marriage disruption and conflict (Kifleyesus, 2012). The long distance between couples in a relationship also creates conflict and men often marry other women in the absence of their wives (De Regt & Tafesse, 2016).

The migration experience particularly impacts the marital prospects of unmarried female migrants, which has received relatively scant attention. However, there are some studies that explore the lives of migrant girls and the relationship between female labor migration and the marital prospects of returnees. For example, Grabska et al. (2019b) extensively studied the life of migrant girls from Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Sudan. The study shows the complex issues that guide migration decisions, migration experiences, and post-return experiences. Ullah (2013) recounts the experience of female return migrants from four Asian countries, showing how staying abroad for a long period of time diminished the marital prospects and possibility of being

a mother for many of the returnees. The author highlights that the financial gains reaped by these women from migration did not compensate them for the intangible loss they experienced on account of not being married or becoming a mother.

Marriage, family, and motherhood are important parts of life for many women (Coontz, 2004; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). The importance of these aspects in women's life may be less in some societies and more in others. In patriarchal societies, like Ethiopia, being married and having children is an honor that makes womanhood complete (Muwonwa, 2017). For women, being unmarried and without children is socially undesirable and those who have passed the expected marital age without getting married are often stigmatized (Ntoimoa & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). As the number of women participating in labor migration is increasing (Afsar, 2011), and as marriage is still regarded as an important part of women's identity (Sharp & Ganong, 2011), exploring how migration impacts the lives of unmarried women upon their return in various sociocultural settings is valuable. The main research question we aim to answer in this article is how do migration experiences to the Arabian Gulf affect the marital prospects of Ethiopian women returnees and their social reintegration in the home country upon return? The question is approached using the concept of intersectionality, which helps to identify various interrelated and overlapping factors that may have an impact on the social reintegration of women returnees.

In this article, we focus on the lived experiences of African women migrants. African women are involved in labor migration to the Arabian Gulf and Middle Eastern countries extensively, however, their experiences are not as well documented as their Asian counterparts (De Regt, 2010). By taking Ethiopian female returnees from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Yemen, Kuwait, and Bahrain as a case study and drawing upon qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, we unfold how the marital prospects of returnees are shaped by the intersection of their migration experience, gender, and age. Ethiopia is a good case for this study because unlike Asian migrants who are usually married with children at the time of migration (Ukwatta, 2010), most Ethiopian women migrants who travel to the Arabian Gulf for domestic work are single (Fernandez, 2011; Jones et al., 2014; Kebede, 2002).

The article uses the concept of intersectionality to understand the experiences of returnees. Intersectionality is useful in identifying the sources of oppression and disadvantage faced by some groups as a result of the interaction of various social categories, such as race/ethnicity, age, disability/ability, gender, nationality, religion, and migration status (Hankivsky, 2014; Nash, 2008). Often, studies using intersectionality to examine women domestic

migrants' life focus on classical categories such as gender, class, and race, as well as the experiences of such women during their stay in the destination country. However, this article, also explores stigma and marginalization experiences that occur within the migrant's own country upon their return, which provides us with a new perspective on the experiences of female domestic workers post migration. Unraveling the intersection of migration, gender, and age also helps us to understand the reintegration challenges associated with the experiences of female migrants and highlights the opportunity cost of the economic gains associated with migration and the intangible social costs for the women themselves, which is often overlooked in literature. Beyond academic significance, this article sheds light on the post-migration experience of returnees, which requires policy attention to facilitate the successful reintegration of female returnees. In the next section, we briefly discuss the concept of intersectionality, followed by a description of the methods used in this study, the findings and analysis, and a short conclusion.

## **The Concept of Intersectionality**

In the last few decades, the concept of intersectionality has been used to dissect the various socially constructed, interrelated, and tacitly embedded factors oppressing women and other marginalized groups (Bastia, 2014; Knapp, 2005). Intersectionality is defined as "The interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Davis, 2008, p. 68). Hankivsky (2014) argues that these interactions are the result of the systems and structures of power, which are connected to one another, such as through laws, government policies, and religious or social organizations. Hence, systems and structures of power may both create, or be a result of the interaction of, various social categories. In this article, the concept of intersectionality is used to examine the intersectional impact of migration, gender, and age in shaping the marital prospects of female returnees from the Arabian Gulf and Middle East.

The use of the concept of intersectionality to understand a migrant's life and experiences is increasing (Bastia, 2014; Bürkner, 2012; Nash, 2008). Migration involves the interconnection of various social divisions and categories, which raises the need to explore these connections at the local, national, and global levels (Anthias, 2012). On the other hand, Näre (2013) argues that migration by itself has become a social category. Migration, together with other social categories, shapes the lives of those who are involved in it.

The concept of intersectionality is used to show how different social categories contribute to women migrants' precarious situation in destination

countries (see, for example, Stiehl & England, 1997; Beydoun, 2006; Liang, 2011; Anderson, 2007). Recruitment agencies and brokers play a large role in how the intersection of various social categories shapes the experiences of migrant domestic workers (Deshingkar, 2018). They use race to classify and characterize domestic migrants. Moreover, domestic workers are trained and guided by agents and brokers to modify their behavior and suppress their ethnic identity to impress employers in destination countries (Liang, 2011). Hence, through brokers, the process of marginalizing domestic workers before and after their migration is strengthened, rather than challenged (Liang, 2011).

Gender and racial ideologies that start at the time of recruitment of domestic workers continue throughout their employment. The power dynamics between the employer and migrant, and their relationship, are shaped by various interlocking factors (Stiehl & England, 1997). Differences in race and “foreignness” is a reason to employ migrants in the United Kingdom as a distinction in social class makes domestic worker–employer relations easier (Anderson, 2007). De Regt (2010) also notes that people from Yemen do not employ domestic workers from their own country and migrants from Asia or Africa are preferred to ensure control and authority. Often, a more subtle way is used to describe domestic migrants and preferences by employers, such as docility, language ability, loyalty, and social relationships (Anderson, 2006). In general, different social categories intersect in the employment of domestic workers as well as in their relationships with employers.

The intersection of migration and gender is visible in women return migrants’ lives, often putting them in a marginalized social position. This makes their reintegration in the home community difficult. For example, Bangladeshi return migrants (Afsar, 2009; Bélanger & Rahman, 2013; Dannecker, 2005) and Nepalese female return migrants (Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2012) are stigmatized and marginalized upon their return because of the gendered attitude that women’s place is in the home. In these contexts, migration is considered a threat to norms about femininity and women’s roles. Female migrants are perceived to have led a sexually loose lifestyle while abroad, which is a threat to their marriage or marital prospects upon their return (Afsar, 2009; Bélanger & Rahman, 2013; Dannecker, 2005; Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2012; Ullah, 2013). On the other hand, De Regt and Tafesse (2016) note that Ethiopian women returning from the Arabian Gulf are perceived to have been sexually abused, which makes them undesirable for marital relationships. The study by Yu (2015) also focused on the return context. The study exhibited how the migration experience changed the identity of the women positively and negatively, as well as their relationship with the local environment.

In sum, the concept of intersectionality is used in this study to identify how multiple social categories interact to create oppression and disadvantage for some groups in society. The intersection between gender, race, and class in shaping the experiences of domestic migrant workers and their subordinate status in destination countries has been well examined, particularly before and during their migration experience. However, the stigma and marginalization that female domestic returnees experience upon return is still in need of further research attention. This study attempts to contribute in this regard by examining how migration experience intersects with gender and age in shaping the marital prospects of Ethiopian female migrants returning from the Arabian Gulf and various Middle Eastern countries and how it affects their sociocultural reintegration in the home community.

## **Methods**

This study is based on qualitative data collected in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from January 2015 to March 2017. A total of 48 female returnees, who at the time of the data collection were living in the capital (Addis Ababa), participated in the study. The majority of Ethiopian women who migrate to the Arabian Gulf are between the ages of 20 and 46, less educated, single, or divorced with children (Demissie, 2018; Jones et al., 2014; Kebede, 2002; Tayah & Atnafu, 2016). Almost all of the participants in this study were single; only seven were married or had been married (three of them were divorced because of conflict related to their migration) and had children. Out of the returnees, 17 had children before their migration, most as a result of love affairs they had outside of marriage and had never been married. Half of the migrants were participants of vocational skill training organized by three local non-government organizations (NGOs) working in the area of reintegration of returnees in Addis Ababa: Agar Ethiopia, WISE, and Live Addis. With the help of these organization, voluntary participants were selected for the study; snowball sampling was then used to recruit women from the community, who were not part of any reintegration support programs by NGOs or the government. The participants were provided with information on the purpose of the study and gave their consent to participate in focus group discussions as well as individual interviews.

A semi-structured interview guideline, which was first prepared in English and then translated into Amharic (the local language), was used for both the focus group discussions and individual interviews. To identify general themes in the intersection of social categories, data collection started with 4 focus group discussions with 26 returnees, followed by in-depth interviews. A total of 42 individual interviews were held with 36 returnees (some of the

returnees were re-interviewed at different time intervals to capture changes in their social reintegration and marital status/relationships). All discussions and interviews were audio taped with the consent of the participants. The first author and a research assistant made a verbatim transcription of the audio-taped interviews. The transcribed documents were translated into English by a language translator and rechecked against the original transcripts for accuracy and consistency of meaning.

To analyze and interpret the data, a two-step hybrid approach was used (Bilge, 2009). This approach uses both inductive thematic analysis and a deductive template approach. As a first step, the focus group discussion and individual interview transcripts were coded to identify emergent themes, patterns, and connections regarding the marital prospects of the returnees. A consistent pattern was observed in relation to the stigma and marginalization that female returnees from the Arabian Gulf and Middle East experience when seeking to enter into a marital relationship. As a second step, an analytical template informed by intersectionality was used (see Annexure 1 for details) and the coded documents re-read to identify intersections between social categories. Three important intersections were observed as affecting the marital prospects of the returnees, and stigma and marginalization they were experiencing. These salient categories were migration, gender, and the age of migrants. In the next section, we discuss in detail how the intersection between these three social categories affects the marital prospects of the returnees and the stigma and marginalization they experience, along with the strategies used by the returnees to deal with stigma and marginalization and increase their marital prospects. Pseudonyms are used in all narrations to protect the anonymity of the participants.

## **Findings**

### *Marriage and Motherhood*

In Ethiopia, marriage as well as motherhood are important aspects of womanhood. Unmarried women and those without child are stigmatized and looked down upon. Our study found that, generally, women over the age of 30 desperately want to get married and have children. Many of the respondents stated that they are actively seeking a marital relationship. Surprisingly, for many of them, the driving force behind actively seeking a marital relationship is not the desire for a loving relationship, but their age: "I do not want to have a boyfriend, I want to get married. I don't want to go out with boys. I don't want to waste my time hanging with them. I want to settle down" (Interview 19). As exemplified in this quote, the returnee wants to avoid

wasting the time required for dating and is seeking a relationship that leads to marriage within a short period of time. As well as age, the returnees also mentioned pressure from their family and society. The returnees said that they are constantly reminded by close family members and the community that they need to get married.

It is really hard for a woman to start a family when it is too late, you know. After I came here I started a relationship with a guy. I really want to get married and have children. Everybody in the family, my mom and relatives are telling me that time is passing and getting late for me. They are really concerned that I may not have kids. I am not sure what the future holds for us, but I think he just needs me for a while. (Interview 2)

The returnees explained how difficult it is to deal with stigma and marginalization in an environment in which passing the traditional age of marriage is not the norm for a woman. To be a mother through a formal marital relationship is the norm and having children outside of marriage is not socially acceptable in Ethiopia. Those who have children outside of marriage are often stigmatized and called names that belittle their social status, such as *dikala*. Few returnees (particularly those who are in their late 30s) try to fulfill their desire to have children without getting married first. Pressure to conform to the society's expectation of womanhood by getting married and having children was exacerbated by the fact that the majority migrate in their early to mid-20s and return in their 30s. The following excerpt from an interview with a returnee who entered a relationship mainly to have a child exemplifies this situation:

I am getting older and decided to have a child before it is too late. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to have a child if you pass a certain age. . . You can get money any time you want to have it, but not a child. As I told you I got into this just to get a child, not a married life. He does not even have a stable income. I did not want to live with him. Whatever the case I believe a woman should have a child. The main thing is having a child. I know a lot of women coming from Arab countries, who find it difficult to have a child because they spent their young age trying to get money and help their parents, brothers and sisters. When they came back, they tried to start a family of their own, but it was impossible to get a child. A man won't stay in his married life if he doesn't get a child. As a result, these women travel back to the Arab country, because of the frustration of not having a child. I did not want that to happen to me. (Interview 3)

This is not, however, an easy road for many of the returnees. The women are not only challenged economically but also socially. The stigma and



marginalization of unmarried women with children is strong. On the other hand, it is difficult to live in a society that perceives marriage and motherhood as core to a woman's identity. Hence, having a child without necessarily getting married may reflect the returnee's desire to fulfill cultural expectations of womanhood, at least partially.

Surprisingly, the majority of the returnees were presented with a marriage proposal while they were in the host country; however, they said they refused to accept these proposals because their main objective was to achieve their migration goal, they were relatively young at the time, and marriages that take place while the migrant is in the host country are seen as more beneficiary to the man than the woman. There was a common consensus among the returnees that men who propose marriage to migrant women while they are in the destination countries often do so to financially and sexually exploit the women.

When I was there, there were a lot of proposals from people who wanted to marry me, but there was no interest from my side. It is not fair for a woman to get married while she is working there. The guys, they marry you, they don't work, but spend what you have earned; they don't allow you to spend your own money for even for a telephone card and you cannot help your family back home. But for them, they spend your money on whatever they want, they help their family, have affairs with a lot of women. . . how could I get married seeing all this. A lot of my friends regret marrying while they were there. One can't call this a marriage, rather it is slavery – being a slave to a man. I did not want to do that. Moreover you don't know who they are, where they are from in Ethiopia, who knows they might have a wife in Ethiopia. (Interview 3)

In summary, age is an important variable in the decision to marry for Ethiopian women return migrants. Marriage was highly desired among the returnees, mainly to conform to the societal norm of womanhood.

### *Stigma and Marginalization*

The intersection of migration, gender, and age was a dominant theme in the narrations of the returnees, affecting their marital prospects negatively. A consistent pattern was observed in the data, with returnees reporting that they were marginalized because they are perceived to have led a "loose" sexual life while abroad.

After finding out I had lived in an Arab country he told me he doesn't want to be with me anymore. He did not need any other reason. He said he would never

trust a woman coming from an Arab country telling him she only had a relationship with a single guy. (Interview 11)

In the aforementioned quote, it is implied that gendered ideologies, which require the reserved sexual identity of women as a prerequisite for entering into a marital relationship, is assumed to be violated by the freedom migration provides.

In analyzing the data, we found that gendered attitudes that require women's chastity are not the only problem associated with low marital prospects and the marginalization of female returnees from the Arabian Gulf and the Middle East. Women's marital age was also an issue. Most of the participants in our study migrated in their early or mid-20s, unmarried, and some (17 out of 48) were single mothers. They stayed abroad for an average of 8 years (maximum 22 years, minimum 6 months). For most of the respondents, by the time they returned they were over 30 years, even 40 years, which negatively affected their marital prospects. The returnees said they regretted wasting their youth abroad and the fact that their marital prospects had decreased. Tigist, a 35-year-old (at the time of the interview) returnee, who had recently started dating, fulfilled one desirable factor that may positively contribute to her marriage prospects—chastity; however, she expects that her age will pose a threat to her marital prospects:

He is three years younger than I am. He knows that I have had no sexual relations with guys [a virgin] before, but you know the age difference might cause a bit of a problem in our relationship. That's my fear. (Interview 2)

In the quote, we see the intersection of migration, gender (gendered attitudes), and age impacting the returnee's marital prospects.

## **Dealing with Stigma: Strategies for Coping**

In the previous section, we discussed how the intersection of migration, gender, and age places female migrant returnees in a marginalized social position, which affects their marital prospects differently from non-migrant women and their male counterparts. Stigma and marginalization, stemming from society's negative attitudes towards migrant women and assumptions about their migration experiences, is a major issue faced by returnees. The stigma of being single in a society where marriage and motherhood are core to womanhood is another. In this section, we show how the returnees try to cope with this stigma and marginalization in their effort to reintegrate back into the home community.

To deal with negative perceptions associated with promiscuity and leading a “loose” sexual lifestyle, many of the returnees disassociate themselves from other migrants as a strategy. Expressions such as: “Of course, there are women who work as a prostitute or go out with men for money” or “They don’t believe you when you tell them that you were working on a contract base” are used to differentiate themselves from other “bad” or “promiscuous” returnees. Staying as a live-in maid in an employer’s house signifies restricted sexual freedom and, hence, is often used as a strategy to make this distinction between “good” and “bad” returnees. Hence, separating oneself from the “others” is a common strategy used to avoid stigma and to increase marital prospects. This strategy was not only used in the narration of the returnees about their relationships with men but was also observed in the group discussions, in which the women were reluctant to mention if they worked as a “freelancer” (in different households, living independently from a sponsor, which is often associated with sex work and having multiple relationships to cover living costs and for entertainment purposes), for fear of judgment, even by women who had similar experiences. After a reasonable time had been spent with the first author of this article and trust developed, the returnees were more open about their experiences (such as prostitution or having multiple sexual partners) in the individual interviews, which they were not comfortable talking about in the group discussion.

The second common strategy used to avoid stigma and increase marital prospects was secrecy. For example, a returnee who was in a relationship narrated her experiences as follows:

Interviewee: [. . .] he broke up with me when he found out that I had been to an Arab country. He was very angry, because I didn’t tell him. . . .

Researcher: Why didn’t you tell him?

Interviewee: Because I was afraid that our relationship might end. Oh, it is really hard. When I think about it, I lose hope.

Researcher: Why do you lose hope?

Interviewee: I cannot change or hide that part of my life. My return from the Arabian Gulf has had a negative impact on me, let alone on men.

Even other women look down on us in this regard. I regret going there. (Interview 15)

Another returnee, Nesamet, who stayed abroad for eight years and desperately wants to get married and have children, mentioned that she has also repeatedly experienced rejection by men. Following her experiences of rejection, she tried to avoid stigma and marginalization by using secrecy: “Time is running very fast and it is not in my favor. Like I said, I don’t want to speak

about my experience in the Middle East; people only use it to say bad things about you" (Interview 7).

As indicated in the aforementioned two quotes and also shared by other participants in the study, returnees use secrecy as a strategy to avoid stigma and increase their marital prospects. However, this strategy often yields a short-lived relationship; as the experience of living in the Arabian Gulf or Middle East unfolds, the relationship often stops.

Finally, while migrants often experience marginalization in their desire to start a marital relationship, in some cases we also found that the returnees themselves avoid socializing with others for fear of possible negative treatment (self-stigmatization) or past sexual violence.

When I was a little girl I heard stories about women working in the Middle East becoming rich by working as a prostitute. I had no such experience and that is not the reason why I feel ashamed, but I have the feeling that the people around me, including my friends, don't like me at all. (Interview 3)

Women's negative experiences during migration can kill the desire to get married in returnees, instilling a hatred of men and fear of intimate relationships. For example, Hanna experienced sexual violence at the hands of her boyfriend before her migration and by employers and brokers while she was in the host country. The psychological trauma of being raped by her intimate partner and sexual violence during her migration abroad impacted her self-worth and she developed hatred and anger against men in general. She describes her feelings as follows:

Men want to use me. If I approach someone, does he love me, care for me? No. He just asks to take me to bed, straight away. I generally don't trust anyone. I believe they are phony. Even if I have interest, I am scared to get close to men. (Interview 23)

The aforementioned quote shows that the returnee thinks that she is perceived as a sexual object by men. It is evident that stigma and stereotypes associated with female returnees from the Arabian Gulf and Middle East affect the social reintegration of returnees. This makes female returnees from the Arabian Gulf and Middle East more marginalized than other non-migrant women or women who migrated to other foreign countries. Hence, gender on its own fails to capture the experience of the returnees or their migration experience and status in the host country. The negative perception of domestic worker migrants who return from the Arabian Gulf and Middle East leads to stigma and marginalization after they return, which makes social reintegration into the community in their home country difficult.

Next to negative perceptions about them due to their migration experience, the stigma of staying single beyond the usual marital age is another reason why women are stigmatized. The returnees in our study acknowledged the stress of dealing with their loved ones always reminding them that “time is ticking.” This finding revealed pressure from family and relatives, pushing women to enter into sometimes unfulfilling marital relationship or to re-migrate. One returnee explained:

I wanted to go back because I was not fitting in here. Compared to my friends who did not migrate, I was in a bad situation. Seeing all my friends live their own life, married with children, except me was frustrating. (Interview 7)

The stigma associated with being single and not conforming to the perceived societal ideal of womanhood seemed to decrease for those once married, but now divorced or separated. Never married women are often referred as *kumo ker* in the local language, which cannot be translated literally, but refers to how unmarried women are seen as below the standard required for womanhood. In the Ethiopian context, having children is desirable socially and women without children are stigmatized. When the possibility of marriage diminished, a few of the women who participated in this study opted to have a child out of wedlock. Paradoxically, having a child out of wedlock seems to be interpreted differently before migration and after return. Before migration, it entails breaking the norm about sex before marriage and enduring the stigma that follows, which some participants tried to escape through migration. After return, it is accepted by the returnees as a blessing.

## Discussion

Gender provides a lens through which experiences of women can be understood. However, there are also other social categories that intersect with gender to shape women’s experiences. This study found gender, migration, and age intersected to negatively affect female returnees’ marital prospects, as well as their social reintegration into their home country. The following three findings came out of the research clearly. First, the study found that the norm that ascribes reserved sexual behavior for Ethiopian women is perceived to be violated by the “freedom” that migration to the Arabian Gulf and Middle East provides. Ethiopia is a country with a traditional and patriarchal social structure (Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009). In patriarchal societies like Ethiopia, men often choose their marital partners (Kifetew, 2006). As in many patriarchal societies, they are also the breadwinners and decision-makers in the household. Women having multiple sexual partners, with or without

marriage, are denounced, while men's sexual freedom is tacitly accepted as the norm (Molla et al., 2008). This double standard regarding men's and women's sexuality was acknowledged by some of the participants in our study. Expressions such as "a man is a man" and "of course, he is a man" were used to describe men's infidelity in a marriage or intimate relationship as normal. Women's sexual experiences are scrutinized and often determine their marital prospects in the Ethiopian context. Confirming the chaste rule is a study by Molla et al. (2008), which notes that in rural villages in Ethiopia, virginity is still used to secure marriage. This highlights how migration can threaten the marital prospects of female returnees in Ethiopia.

This study also found that Ethiopian women who return from the Arabian Gulf and Middle East are typically seen as promiscuous. Other findings also show that migrant women who are involved in domestic work are often stereotyped. They are often viewed as promiscuous and easygoing women who sell their bodies in exchange for money (Dannecker, 2005; Hoang & Yeoh, 2015). These attitudes are carried over to their origin country upon their return and used as tools to stigmatize and marginalize these women (Dannecker, 2005; Grabska, 2013). Some returnees in our study reported having multiple sexual partners while they were abroad as a way to deal with the economic pressure in the host country, escape an exploitative employer, or better enjoy life and freedom. Similar findings were found among Asian migrants in the Arabian Gulf (Mahdavi, 2013) and Taiwan (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015).

Studies suggest that sexual violence is tacitly embodied within masculine cultures, reflecting men's dominance and power over women (Walby, 1989), which presents an intersection between gender and migration. We found that sexual violence had a significant impact on the returnees' marital prospects and their desire to involve in an intimate relationship. Similar findings show that the aftermath of the psychological trauma and sexual violence that female migrants often experience in destination countries greatly affects the relationships that migrants have after they return (Ketema, 2014).

The migration experience of domestic workers in the Arabian Gulf and Middle East often entails physical, psychological, and sexual abuse (Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2006). More than half of our participants experienced sexual violence in the destination countries, perpetrated either by their Arab employer or Ethiopian agent (see also, Nisrane et al., 2019). On the one hand, sexually abused Ethiopian women are typically pictured as exploited beings and sexual objects, who do not deserve love and care, and who are not a good prospect for marriage (see also De Regt & Tafesse, 2016). On the other hand,

the trauma that comes from experiencing sexual violence brings about feelings of shame, terror, and hatred of men in returnee women. As a result of both these factors, we found that the marital prospects of returnees were low. Migration can provide an opportunity for migrant women to explore their sexuality or can make them victims of sexual exploitation; both situations contradict society's perception of an ideal woman for marital relations. Our study found that some returnees involve in sex work to help their family in the home country or sustain themselves in destination countries. Many of the returnees regret that they spent their young age trying to get money to help their parents and siblings by compromising their own future life in both economic and social terms (see also Grabska et al., 2019a, 2019b; Nisrane et al., 2017, 2019). To this end, Grabska et al. (2019b) stress positive changes that occur through migration are often slow and negative impacts outweigh the positive ones in young girl migrant's life.

To cope with the stigma and stereotypes attached to their perceived sexual behavior or victimhood, the majority of the returnee women who we interviewed use secrecy or disassociate themselves from other returnees as a coping strategy. They acknowledged that some of the Ethiopian migrant women in the Arabian Gulf and Middle East are involved in prostitution or have multiple sexual partners, but not them. They externalize the issue of sexual experience as applying only to "others." A study by Timothy and Sasikumar (2012) also confirms that Nepalese women returnees from the Arabian Gulf refrain from sharing their experiences because of the negative attitudes of society and stigma involved, which is partly due to activists and the media in the Nepal raising awareness about the negative experiences of women migrating in the Arabian Gulf.

Another important finding was that the age of returnees had a compounding effect, together with gendered attitudes towards sexuality and migration, on the marital prospects of returnees. As with gendered norms about sexual behavior ascribed to men and women, there is also a double standard in relation to the ideal marital age for men and women. Women are expected to get married and have children at a younger age than their male counterparts. This relates to the fact that to have a normal marital life, women are expected to fulfill the role of motherhood (Mehari, 2013). According to the Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey 2011, the average age of marriage for women in urban areas is 21.4 years and in rural areas 18 years. In that survey, among the women studied in the age range 25–49, 63% were married by age 18 and 77% by age 20 (Central Statistical Agency (Ethiopia) & ICF International, 2012). Most of the participants in this study migrated in their

early to mid-20s, unmarried, and stayed abroad for more than a decade. Upon their return, they were in their 30s (some in their 40s) and found that their marital prospects had diminished. Younger girls are preferred for marriage in Ethiopia because of the tacitly embedded role of motherhood in the identity of womanhood; hence, passing the expected marital age for women is a threat to their marital prospects. In addition, childlessness is a major factor in divorce among married couples in Ethiopia (Tilson & Larsen, 2000), strengthening the vital role of motherhood in marital relationship. Coping with being single in a male-dominated society that believes womanhood is associated with marriage and motherhood appeared to be difficult for many of the returnees who participated in this study.

An interesting finding about the impact of the intersection of gender and migration on the marital prospects of the returnees that requires for further research was that returnees are also assumed to have financial resources. Paradoxically, the returnees claim that men approach them if they think they have resources. This contradicts the traditional assumption of masculinity, that is, that men are the breadwinners. Some studies in other traditional societies indicate that men are intimidated by women who have economic resources, are independent, well-educated, and earn more than them (see, for example, Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). In the current study, however, men reportedly looked for women with economic resources; however, this does not guarantee that the relationship will move on to marriage. Our participants did not display visible economic changes because of their migration experience (see also, Nisrane et al., 2017) and, hence, it was difficult to project what might have happened if they had been able to successfully accumulate economic resources from their migration. This requires further research, but it highlights the possibility that in order to overcome the stigma associated with their migration (such as violation of the chaste rule or passing the accepted marital age), women need to have good economic resources. This also implies that gender roles and relationships are not fixed and can change due to various social forces, such as migration, which might equip women with economic resources.

To sum up, Ethiopia is inherently a patriarchal society, which influences many social and gender role relations, and the norms about marital relationships are no exception. Gendered attitudes implicitly embedded in patriarchal cultures that ascribe norms about women's identity, such as the desired marital age and chastity before marriage, interact with the migration experience of women to decrease their prospects of marriage.



## Conclusion

This study sheds light on how the intersection of migration, gender, and age affects the marital prospects of Ethiopian female returnees from the Arabian Gulf and Middle East, how they cope with stigma and marginalization and, finally, the implications of such stigma and marginalization for their reintegration in their home country.

There are some points this article did not address and that call future research. First, a number of Ethiopian women migrate from rural parts of the country, however, this research is based on data collected from women returnees in Addis Ababa. There are differences about gender roles, gendered attitudes, and masculine dominance between the capital city and rural areas. Hence, a different result might be found based on where returnees are located. It is recommended that future research incorporate the experience of women returnees from different rural areas to strengthen the findings. Second, this study is based on returnees' perceptions and experiences; the findings could be strengthened by including the perception of men and society towards returnees. Finally, understanding the differences (or similarities) between the reintegration process for men and women will enhance our understanding the intersection of gender and migration. Hence, comparative research is recommended to understand the role of gender dynamics in return migration and reintegration.

The findings in this article have implications for the reintegration of returnees. Inability to conform to societal expectations about womanhood, the stigma and marginalization that female returnees experience because of their perceived or real sexual freedom, and the pressure of being unmarried beyond a certain age may hinder their social reintegration and trigger remigration intention. The marginalization that unskilled female return migrants experience in their home country, such as revealed in this study, or other marginalized identities created by the intersection of social categories need further attention by stakeholders to improve the social reintegration of female domestic migrants in their home country. Moreover, the counterbalancing effect of the economic gains and social losses that female migration brings for the women themselves, and their families, needs to be examined more closely in order to avoid overstating the benefits of female migration for women and their families.

**Annexure I.** A generic intersectionality template.

Social categories	Discrete consideration (1 <sup>st</sup> step)	Intersectional consideration (2 <sup>nd</sup> step)
Gender	How does gender inform this individual account?	How does gender interact/intersect with other social categories in this individual account? Or which dimensions of the experience are interacting with gender?
Class	How does class inform this individual account?	How does class interact/intersect with other social categories in this individual account? Or which dimensions of the experience are interacting with class?
Race	How does race inform this individual account?	How does race interact/intersect with other social categories in this individual account? Or which dimensions of the experience are interacting with race?
Ethnicity	How does ethnicity inform this individual account?	How does ethnicity interact/intersect with other social categories in this individual account?
Religion	How does religion inform this individual account?	How does religion interact/intersect with other social categories in this individual account?
Sexual orientation	How does sexual orientation inform this individual account?	How does sexual orientation interact/intersect with other social categories in this individual account?
Age	How does age inform this individual account?	How does age interact/intersect with other social categories in this individual account?
Handicap	How does being handicapped inform this individual account?	How does being handicapped interact/intersect with other social categories in this individual account?
Other relevant categories (immigration status, family status, language etc.)	How do other relevant categories inform this individual account?	How do other relevant categories interact/intersect with other social categories in this individual account?

Source: Bilge, 2009, p. 7

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