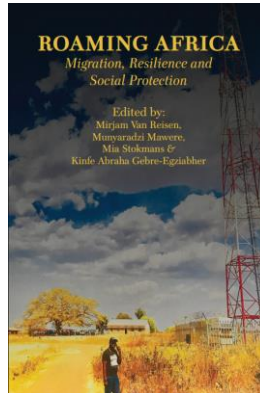# Home, but not Home: Reintegration of Ethiopian Women Returning from the Arabian Gulf

Beza L. Nisrane

**Chapter in: Roaming Africa:
Migration, Resilience and Social Protection**

**From the book Series:
Connected and Mobile: Migration and Human Trafficking in
Africa**

Table of Contents

Chapter 13

Home, but not Home: Reintegration of Ethiopian Women Returning from the Arabian Gulf

Beza L. Nisrane

Introduction

While the migration experiences of domestic workers in Arabian Gulf countries[1] and high-income Asian countries has received increased attention of late (Demissie, 2018; Gikuru, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2014), their reintegration in their home country upon return has not been well explored. In general, studies on female domestic workers and their reintegration have concentrated on their negative migration experiences (Anbesse, Hanlon, Alem, Packer, & Whitley, 2009; De Regt & Tafesse, 2015; Frantz, 2008; Gikuru, 2013; Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004; Ketema,

Ethiopian women returning from the Arabian Gulf face many challenges with reintegration. Often migration does not bring about the economic gains and improved social status expected. This study found that betrayal by close family members, social expectations about money and gifts upon their return, and negative social perceptions about returnees affects their sense of belonging, influencing the returnees' remigration intention. There is a need for more in-depth investigation of return policies and the social dynamics within families entangled in the costs and benefits of overseas labour migration.

2014; Wickramage, De Silva & Peiris, 2017). This chapter looks at the reintegration of Ethiopian female domestic migrants into their home country upon return from the Arabian Gulf, with a particular focus

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[1] The Arabian Gulf countries (also referred to as Gulf Cooperation Council countries) are Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain.

on the role of interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging. It also examines the effect of their post-migration experiences on their intention to re-migrate.

Migration to the Arabian Gulf

The migration of female domestic workers to the Arabian Gulf usually takes the form of temporary migration, whereby migrants are invited to the host country by a particular employer for a specific duration, in most cases two or three years. After arrival in the destination country, whether the migrant has positive or negative experiences depends on the subjective behaviour of the sponsor or employer. Even though some migrants have positive migration experiences, the majority have negative experiences (Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004; Ketema, 2014; Nisrane, Morissens, Need & Torenvlied, 2017).

The migration experiences of domestic workers in the Arabian Gulf have been equated with slavery by some scholars (Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004). African female migrants, mostly from Kenya, Ethiopia, or Uganda, are subjected to various forms of physical, sexual, verbal and financial abuse (Gikuru, 2013; Minaye, 2012). Excessive workload, constrained movement and isolation, starvation, forced servitude, rape, and denial or underpayment of wages are recurrent issues (Anbesse *et al.*, 2009; Gikuru, 2013; Minaye, 2012). Migration experiences such as these have a significant impact on the reintegration of return migrants (Cassarino, 2004; Ketema, 2014; Nisrane *et al.*, 2017; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008). Some point to the *kafala* labour sponsorship system,[2] which is found in most Arabian Gulf countries, as being linked to the exploitation and abuse of domestic migrant workers (Mahdavi, 2013; Murray, 2013; Pande, 2013). However, human trafficking activities also play a significant role in their vulnerability and suffering (Fernandez, 2013; Minaye & Zeleke, 2015).

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[2] A system that binds migrant workers to their employer or sponsor in Arabian Gulf countries (Bajracharya & Sijapati, 2012).

Coming home: The difficult task of reintegrating

Cassarino (2004) argues that the successful reintegration of returnees requires mobilising financial, social and human capital in the host countries. However, domestic migrants in the Arabian Gulf have limited options for accruing such capital. This directly affects their economic reintegration upon return. Structural barriers associated with the *kafala* system – such as inability to change employer, financial exploitation by employers, and inability to access financial institutions – constrain the economic reintegration of returnees (Nisrane *et al.*, 2017). In addition, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse and exploitation during migration affect the mental and physical health of returnees, playing an adverse role in their economic and social reintegration (Anbesse *et al.*, 2009; Habtamu, Minaye & Zeleke, 2017). However, despite the exploitative and abusive working conditions, women often re-migrate to Arabian Gulf countries (Gardner, 2012). This calls for an examination of the post-return conditions affecting reintegration and remigration intention.

This chapter looks at two main questions. First: *What new dynamics in interpersonal relationships unfold in female Ethiopian former domestic migrants' (hereinafter called returnees[3]) lives after returning from the Arabian Gulf?* And, second: *How do female Ethiopian returnees' interpersonal relationships affect their sense of belonging and, in turn, their reintegration into their home country and remigration intention?* The study builds on existing studies that aim to understand the reintegration of female return migrants from the Arabian Gulf by focusing on the changes that the migration experience brings to the social relationships of the returnees. It also pushes the discussion of their reintegration one step further by moving beyond migration experiences and identifying social factors embodied in the home country context that affect the successful reintegration of returnees and possible social issues that trigger remigration. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help to develop various social support programmes that facilitate the social

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[3] As all the returnees who participated in this study were former domestic workers, the terms former domestic migrants and returnees are used interchangeably in this chapter.

and economic reintegration of returnees from Arabian Gulf countries. The next sections present the conceptual framework for the study (sense of belonging theory), the method used to collect the data, followed by the findings, concluding remarks and policy recommendations.

Theory of Sense of Belonging

Relationships and interrelatedness with the environment are what makes life meaningful (Lambert *et al.*, 2013; Stillman & Baumeister, 2009); they are the essence of our day-to-day life. Relatedness to others in the environment, which is most often used to express interpersonal attachment, is a fundamental human need that helps individuals obtain social support and makes their life meaningful (Hagerty, Lynch- Sauer, Patusky, & Bouwsema, 1993). An individual's relatedness to others in the environment is best conceptualised using 'sense of belonging' theory. A sense of belonging is defined as the evaluative feeling or perception that people have of their acceptance in their environment by the people around them – or the degree to which they 'fit in' (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). Hagerty *et al.* (1992) state that for someone to belong the following antecedants must exist: energy and desire for meaningful involvment and shared characteristics with other people in the environment. The opposite of belonging and connectedness is social exclusion, which refers to a person's perception of being excluded and rejected from a desired relationship, which can be as painful as physical pain (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Relationships and positive interactions with others are vital for people to function well in their environment.

A number of empirical studies have shown that people who are more socially integrated and who have healthy relationships with others have better general wellbeing and adjust better (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Cohen, 2004; Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996). Positive interpersonal relationships with others are associated with a high level of cognitive and social achievement (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Conversely, negative

interactions have an adverse effect on health and wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The importance of having positive relationships with those around us is not limited to health and wellbeing, but extends to other facets of our life. Individuals become more productive through social interactions and by connecting to the environment (Kitchen, Williams & Chowhan, 2012; Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2008; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Pooley, Cohen & Pike, 2005; Prusak & Cohen, 2001). Hence, positive relationships are important in the reintegration of female returnees from the Arabian Gulf. In line with this, Cassarino (2004) asserts that having social networks and relationships is vital to the reintegration of return migrants, as they provide crucial emotional support, which facilitates the economic and social reintegration of return migrants.

However, there are factors that may inhibit people's desire to interact with their community and lead to a low sense of belonging, such as stigma and poverty (Stewart *et al.*, 2009; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Based on a comparative study of high income and low income people in Canada, Stewart *et al.* (2009) acknowledge that being poor, ashamed or stereotyped, limits people's ability to initiate and maintain social relationships. Stigma has been found to have a negative impact on the social relationships of Asian female domestic returnees from Arabian Gulf countries (Bélanger & Rahman, 2013; Dannecker, 2005). Past trauma also affects returnees' social interactions and sense of belonging to their home community. The findings of Ketema (2014) found that sexually-abused female returnees from the Arabian Gulf find it difficult to create healthy relationships with men in their home community after their return. Positive social relationships and a sense of belonging are important for the economic and social development of returnees, as well as their integration into the home community.

The theory of Sense of Belonging helps to evaluate social relationships and people's connection to their environment. It has two attributes: first, valued involvement, which is "the experience of feeling valued, needed and accepted" and, second, 'fit', which refers to a "person's perception that his or her characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment" (Hagerty *et al.*, 1992,

p. 173). Sense of belonging is a psychological state and social interactions, companionship, membership and networks are the means by which belongingness is observed physically (Hagerty *et al.*, 1992; Lee & Robbins, 1995). Return migrants' interactions with their family, friends and community indicate their sense of belonging to their community. It must be noted, however, that sense of belonging not only refers to positive interactions with others, but also to positive, meaningful, and long-term bonds with members of the community that bring about a feeling of being valued and fitting into the environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Based on the above conceptualisations, in this study, sense of belonging is defined as a returnee's feeling of being loved and accepted as a valued member of the community and of fitting into their environment, evidenced by positive social interactions and the reciprocity of love within the community. By analysing the lived experience of female Ethiopian returnees from domestic work in the Arabian Gulf, this study aims to examine the new dynamics that the migration experience brings to the interpersonal relationships of returnees and evaluates their sense of belonging to the home environment and how it affects their reintegration and remigration intention.

Methodology

This ethnographic study is based on field work conducted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia by the author from January 2015 to March 2017. The findings presented in this chapter are part of a larger study that focuses on the socio-economic reintegration of Ethiopian female return migrants (see Nisrane *et al.*, 2017). The data was collected through focus group discussions and in-depth individual interviews with 48 female Ethiopian former domestic workers who had returned from Arabian Gulf countries and where living in Addis Ababa. The returnees were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling methods (see Table 13.1). As reintegration is a matter that requires time, all selected participants had been residing in their home country

for at least a year and the majority for three years at the time of data collection.

Table 13.1. Sampling method used to select respondents for interviews and focus group discussions

Sampling method	Referred by	Respondents
Purposeful	AGAR Ethiopia	11
	LIVE-Addis	12
	WISE	8
Snowballing	Other respondents	17
Total		48

Data for this study was collected in two phases. In the first phase, from January to March 2015, 14 individual interviews were conducted. In the second phase, from January 2016 to March 2017, 22 individual interviews were conducted with new respondents and 6 follow-up interviews with interviewees from the first phase. Follow-up interviews helped to show changes in the social and economic reintegration of returnees after a year's interval. A total of 26 returnees participated in the focus group discussions (14 of these also participated in the individual interviews) in both phases.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion topics were prepared in English, translated to Amharic (local language) and then back to English for the analysis. The major discussion themes focused on economic and social reintegration, as well as migration experiences in the host country. Probing questions were used as needed. Individual interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in the local language (Amharic) at places chosen by the respondents, including their homes, cafeterias and parks, training centres and, in some cases, the interviewer's house or office. The returnees were fully informed of the research objectives and assured about the confidentially of the information provided. Written or oral consent was obtained. Focus group discussions lasted on average 1 hour and 40 minutes, whereas individual interviews lasted on average 1 hour.

Ethnographic studies also rely on informal data collected through informal interviews and field notes (Agar & Hobbs, 1982). Accordingly, the field data for this study is complemented by field notes taken at various personal and social events in the return migrant's community, including weddings, children's birthday parties, graduation ceremonies, and meetings/training events organised by local non-government organisations (NGOs). To give a new perspective on issues surrounding the social and economic reintegration of female returnees and to substantiate the data, interviews were also conducted with three coordinators and representatives of local NGOs (AGAR Ethiopia, LIVE-Addis, WISE) and one official from the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs using a semi-structured interview guideline. The interview questions asked of NGO coordinators focused on what major social and economic reintegration challenges returnees face and what social support is provided by NGOs and the government to ensure their successful reintegration.

All discussions and interviews were audio taped. A transcript was made from the audiotape in Amharic by the author and a research assistant. The transcribed documents were subsequently translated into English by a linguist and rechecked by the author for consistency of meaning with the original transcripts. The individual interviews provided detailed accounts of experiences, in contrast to the focus group discussions, which were more general. However, both forms of data collection yielded similar findings and the results complement each other. After re-reading the interviews and focus group discussion transcripts, relevant data (related to returnees' interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging to their community) were selected from the interview transcripts and focus group discussions.

In the first stage of analysis, themes that showed changes in the interpersonal relationships of returnees with people in their home community because of the migration experiences were identified and coded to identify shared experiences and differences. ATLAS.ti qualitative software was used to facilitate the coding process for the

data from both the focus group discussions and individual interviews. A comparison was made to delineate specific categories in the description of situations, interpersonal relationships, and migration and return settings. In the second stage, identified themes were further analysed to identify their relationship with home country socio-cultural settings and attitudes. The attributes of sense of belonging – such as feeling loved, fitting in, and being accepted – were often explicitly found in the narrations and sometimes implied, despite the fact that the questions focused on general migration and reintegration experiences and challenges. In the final stage, the relationship between sense of belonging and reintegration and remigration intention was analysed and is presented in the next section, with quotes that represent the most common experiences of returnees.

Findings: Interpersonal relationships, belonging and reintegration

The study found that the social relationships of female migrants change dramatically upon their return. Three major themes emerged as affecting the interpersonal relationships of returnees with members of their family and community: first, conflict between returnees and close family members related to betrayal; second, the expectation of members of their family and community that returnees had resources; and third, stigma and negative social perceptions of returnees held by members of their family and community. These factors intersect and overlap with each other, together creating a low sense of belonging among returnees to the home community. They are also linked to the poor reintegration of returnees into their home country and the emergence of remigration intention.

Conflict with family related to betrayal
The need to belong is characterised by stable, positive, and conflict-free social contact with individuals to whom a person feels connected (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this study, it was found that conflict

often arises between close family members[4] and the returnees from Arabian Gulf countries. The study also found that family was at the heart of the migration process, with economic deprivation of the family being mentioned as the main reason for the migration of female migrants in the first place. Forty per cent (40%) of the returnees measured their success by what they did for their family members, even if they had no income or savings for themselves upon return. Supporting parents in household consumption, sending siblings to a better school, supporting family members to obtain better health care, renovating the family house and buying household furniture were mentioned by returnees as some of the benefits of their migration. The vast majority (81%) of respondents reported not having their own income and being financially dependent on their families upon return. For some, receiving the blessing of their parents ('*mirkat*' in the local language) is the best reward for their toil in a foreign country. One participant, who stayed in Saudi Arabia for 22 years supporting her family, and had no savings or income at the time of data collection, reported being happy regardless of the fact that she was now dependent on her family for her financial needs.

> *I am happy I could make my family happy. Of course, they [her family] did not save any money for me, but I don't complain much because my family's happiness is my reward. That makes me a very happy woman. Happiness is not always measured in terms of money [...]. To tell the truth, I couldn't change anything for myself. I am not changed at all. I am 41 years old now and I live with my family.* (Focus group discussion 4, Addis Ababa, 2015)

The above quote illustrates the love and sacrifice of some returnees for their family. It also reveals a sense of loss and dissatisfaction on the part of the returnee for losing her youth in a foreign land and being financially dependent on her family in her 40s. This kind of narration was common among returnees. In most cases returnees used such a narration to accept the fact that their migration experience did not benefit them directly. Most returnees mentioned

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[4] 'Family' in this study refers to parents, siblings, spouse, children and, in some cases, close relatives such as uncles, aunts and cousins.

often that they regretted leaving their education to go to the Arabian Gulf in order to improve the living conditions of their family, although a few reported being happy about their decision. Many returnees are elementary or high-school dropouts, which makes it difficult for them to find even low-skilled jobs upon their return. High inflation and lack of savings and marketable skills makes it difficult for returnees to participate in income-generating activities in their home country. The average length of stay in the host country for the participants in this study was 8 years (minimum 6 months; maximum 22 years). Some returnees described how time flies and how their youthful beauty was lost in a foreign land striving to help their family and not themselves.

Paradoxically, despite their claim that their migration was for the sake of their family, almost all of the returnees expected their family to save money from the remittances they sent and reported feeling betrayed that they did not. In most cases, the family members of returnees spent the money without saving any for the returnees. Only three returnees who participated in this study reported that their family members saved some of the money they sent and that they were able to use it for their reintegration. The majority sent remittances to their parents and siblings, while a few sent it to their husband or fiancée. Some returnees who sent money to their partner later learnt that the money was wasted on alcohol and drugs, an affair or even marriage with another woman. Based on the narrations of the participants in the individual interviews, some returnees (40%) specifically told their family members how much to use and how much to save, others (44%) trusted family members to save as much as they could, and some (16%) either said nothing about saving or saved money in their own account. A few participants tried to understand the dire economic situation that their family was in and did not blame them for not saving money; however, about half of the participants reported feeling betrayed. One returnee shared the following: "I sent all the money I have worked for to them [her family]. When you find out that your own family do not keep their word, you feel betrayed. Thus, you want to go back" (Interview 23, Addis Ababa, 2015). As reflected in her narration, this returnee felt

betrayed because the action she is complaining about involved people she saw as close to her.

Besides violation of trust, there are other factors that are a source of conflict between returnees and their family members. For example, when the sacrifice made for the family and their response is not congruent it can negatively affect the interpersonal relationships between the returnee and their family members: "I quarrel with my family and tell them that I have suffered a lot for their sake. But when you are broke, nobody cares. This makes you sick. When you have money, they like you" (Interview 27, Addis Ababa, 2017). As live-in domestic workers often send their entire salary[5] to their family members, they are financially dependent on family members upon their return, which is another source of conflict between the returnees and their family members. The returnees claim they are regarded as a burden. Regret and disappointment is clear when they talk and when they reflect on what the future holds for them without any savings or marketable skills to enable them to successfully reintegrate into their home country. In both focus group discussions and individual interviews, not only negative interactions and lack of reciprocity were problems, the returnees' sense of being valued, loved, and accepted was also low.

The returnees seem to be trapped in a vicious cycle of going and coming. The majority of returnees who participated in this study had migrated more than twice to Arabian Gulf countries. As is reflected in the above quotes, betrayal, particularly by close members, not only results in a low sense of belonging, but also gives rise to an intention to re-migrate. The study found that, next to economic reasons, negative interactions and low sense of belonging in the family and community are the main reasons for female returnees from Arabian Gulf countries to re-migrate. Fifty per cent (50%) of the returnees said they may consider going back if the official route is opened (at the time of the field work it was closed by the Ethiopian government

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[5] Under the *kafala* system, migrant domestic workers are only allowed to work as a live-in maid for one sponsor and prevented from going out, hence, they often send their entire salary home as they do not have local expenses.

following the reported exploitation and abuse of Ethiopians in destination countries). By the end of data collection, 8% of the returnees who participated in the study had left through illegal means, 20% said that they did not want to go back, while the rest were undecided. One participant shared the following: "I get upset when I look at my life. I benefited neither here nor there. This always make me ask questions such as where will I end up and what is my destiny" (Interview 28, Addis Ababa, 2017).

In summary, 84% of the returnees expected their family members to save some of the money they sent home for their reintegration upon return. However, trust-based remittance management appeared to be counterproductive to the reintegration of the returnees for two reasons. First, the violation of trust and lack of reciprocity (not getting enough love or recognition for the sacrifice they made for their family) disrupted interpersonal relationships between family members. Second, migrants' families generally did not save any of the remittances, which meant that returnees did not have any financial capital to use for their reintegration. Negative interpersonal interactions meant that the returnees did not receive the emotional support required to successfully reintegrate back into the community. In addition to creating conflict and negative social interactions, betrayal by their close family members affected the returnees' perception of being loved and valued. When the expected reciprocal love was not received from family members, the returnees questioned whether the sacrifice they had made for their family by working in the Arabian Gulf countries was worth it. Feelings of regret, disappointment and hopelessness were reflected in the discussions with returnees. The sense of belonging to the family (being valued and needed and fitting in) was low for most returnees. In some cases, negative social interactions and low sense of belonging in the community were found to be a source of remigration intention.

Expectation of resources
As well as conflict with close family members, this study found that social expectations associated with working abroad also negatively affect the interpersonal relationships of returnees. There is a strong

conception in Ethiopian society that people who migrate abroad come back with a lot of money. Return migrants are confronted with this assumption and are expected to bring financial and material gifts, not only for nuclear family members, but also for members of their extended family, close neighbours and friends. In relation to this, three themes emerged: first, pressure to meet social expectations; second, the shame associated with not meeting social expectations; and third, being rejected for not meeting social expectations. These factors negatively affected the personal interactions of returnees and their sense of belonging to the community, creating a barrier to their successful reintegration.

Trying to bring various financial and material gifts for family members, relatives and others is a very stressful experience for returning migrants. The migration experience of female domestic migrants in the Arabian Gulf is characterised by inability to change employers and financial exploitation, including underpayment and denial of wages. In addition, the migrants send their money periodically to family members in the home country, making saving or buying gifts extremely difficult, if not impossible. The majority of returnees reported trying to meet this expectation, even if they did not agree with the norm or did not have the financial resources to do so. Returnees think about and prepare for this expectation before they return to their home. '*Ekub*', a traditional Ethiopian financial cooperative, is one form of social membership that is practised among freelance migrants[6] that enables returnees to buy gifts upon their return. This system is followed by close friends who trust each other and members contribute money periodically ahead of time for a specific purpose. Some are able to bring gifts for close as well as extended family members, neighbours and friends. However, family members and relatives sometimes do not find the quality or type of gift satisfactory.

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[6] Freelance migrants are those who work in the host country independently from a sponsor or for a fake sponsor, in other words, illegally.

Most returnees care about the social norm of gift giving, although it is described by many as '*yulignta*' (being too concerned about the opinion of others). Family members also want to show off the fact that they have sent a daughter abroad by giving gifts to relatives, neighbours and friends. Most of the returnees cannot meet this expectation, at least at the level that satisfies their relatives, neighbours and friends, for various reasons. This affects their interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging in the community, as they have to deal with the rejection that comes from not fulfilling the norm. For example, one returnee described the irony of the social norm and how it forced her to isolate herself:

> *I was frustrated and used to lock myself up in the house. All your relatives expect you to give them money or a gift. If you migrate to the Arabian Gulf for two months with a salary of 3,000 birr [USD 100] and one works within the country with a salary of 50,000 [USD 1,667], just because that individual went abroad people expect that person to come with a bag full of money. Most of my relatives were disappointed in me as they were expecting something from me… I was frustrated so much and regret coming back here. I had nothing, but my relatives did not understand, or did not want to understand, at all the situation I was in.* (Interview 1, Addis Ababa, 2015)

The rejection and shame this returnee experienced is well reflected in her narrative and was a common experience among the other returnees who participated in the study. As a result, the returnee's interpersonal relationships with significant others were affected and she had a low sense of belonging (feeling loved and valued and fitting into the environment) to the extent that she questioned whether returning was the right decision. The sense of shame associated with not being able to satisfy social expectations and coming home empty handed is strong. Some returnees explain how the shame of coming home empty handed prolonged their stay in the host country with a lot of suffering and isolated them after they returned home. Social expectations have a great impact on the social relationships of returnees and their sense of belonging. The social interactions and relationships of female return migrants are also affected by the shame associated with a failed migration experience and inability to continue

the role of bread winner for the family. The data also shows that the majority of returnees live with the guilt and shame associated with an unaccomplished migration goal, which the migrants generally respond to by isolating themselves:

> *If you don't have money, nobody loves you even your family, friends and your boyfriend. If you are broke nobody likes to be around you […]. You see, people need you when you have money. I don't have money so nobody wants me and I don't need them also. I really don't have social engagements.* (Interview 10, Addis Ababa, 2015)

Being valued and respected is one element of belonging. Most returnees believe that their family members love them and respect them only when they are a source of income. This creates uncertainty in terms of fitting in to the environment when they do not have financial resources.

Not being valued or respected is not the only issue for return migrants, they also experience rejection for coming home empty handed. For example, one returnee, who had a very bad migration experience with high isolation, heavy workload, denial of salary for one year, starvation, and psychological trauma (threat of being killed by her employer), was extremely happy to come back to her home country alive. However, her close family members did not accept her warmly, instead she experienced rejection and exclusion:

> *My relatives expected me to give them some money. When they realised that I had nothing, they started to keep away, hate me […]. I kept my distance from my relatives as they couldn't accept me with an empty hand […]. I don't understand why my relatives blame me for not giving them money. They expect a lot just because I went to the Arabian Gulf. Only God knows what I have been through. They think I have money and I don't want to share it with them. That is really very disappointing.* (Interview 9, Addis Ababa, 2015)

Such rejection plays an adverse role in the reintegration of returnees. As belonging focuses on the quality of relationships and the strength of the bonds in interpersonal relationships. The fact that conflict

arises mostly with close family members affects returnees' sense of belonging. The study found that returnees experienced various traumatic incidents at the hands of their employers and agents (both Ethiopian and Arab) while in the host country. Few migrants had a good migration experience. Most stated that they were subjected to sexual abuse, starvation, isolation, beating, overwork, forced servitude to other households, degrading verbal comments, psychological trauma such as death threats, and attempted killing. These factors by themselves have an impact on the interpersonal relationships of returnees and their connectedness to others in their community. For example, as documented in this study and a study by Ketema (2014), women who are sexually abused exhibit low or no interest in becoming involved in another intimate relationship upon return. In addition to traumatic experiences in the host countries, experiencing rejection from loved ones upon return may have undesirable consequences, affecting both the mental and physical health of returnees (MacDonald & Leary, 2005) and their social and economic reintegration.

The expectation that returnees have a significant amount of material and financial resources is not limited to family members and relatives of returnees. Returnees also reported that it was difficult to start or maintain spousal relationships because of this belief. In Ethiopian society, men are regarded as the provider for their family, however, changes in this gender role requirements were also evidenced by the data. In this study, the participants acknowledged that it was hard to trust men and that their romantic relationships often ended if the returnee did not accumulate financial or material resources from their migration. The majority of respondents claimed that men approached them thinking that they had money and, when they found out that they did not, no longer want to be with them. The following quote from one of the interviews exemplifies this:

> I had a boyfriend before traveling to the Arabian Gulf. But he married another woman while I was there [...]. He cheated on me. I worked hard to build our future. I used to send a lot of money to him, but he wasted it all on another woman. It was devastating. I don't trust men anymore [...]. Once my friend arranged a date for me.

She introduced me to a guy. On our second date, he asked me how much money I have. He said, "I bet you have a lot of money; I heard you returned from Arabian Gulf". (Interview 28, Addis Ababa, 2015)

Violation of trust, rejection and not being valued for who they are, but what they might have, were dominant themes in the narrations of returnees in relation to their post-return experiences. Repeated rejection and betrayal by men led the returnees to avoid social interactions: "I don't trust anyone. What I believe is that they will take advantage of me and leave me alone just as my family did. Therefore, I don't trust anyone" (Interview 23, Addis Ababa, 2017). This contradicts the strong desire of most returnees to start their own family. Inability to form a family and have children is considered to be one of the major costs of the migration experience by returnees. The returnees regret wasting their youth in a foreign country and feel that their marriage prospects have declined. They also acknowledge the pressure from parents and the community. Only 7 of the 48 returnees who participated in this study are married or have been married (three had divorced because of conflict related to the migration) and have children. The relationship between marital partners is also spoilt by lack of trust and perceived or real infidelity. However, 17 of the returnees had children, mainly out of wedlock and before their migration. Almost all of the returnees reported that they left their children in the care of their mothers when they migrated. The returnees also reported that their children sometimes rejected them due to the long separation, which resulted in low or no attachment.

I always have a fight with my daughter and have no peace at home […]. We have not been together for long and she doesn't like me at all. She doesn't have a tiny bit of love or respect for me. I worked so hard in a foreign land to change her future, but lost the love of my child. (Interview 10, Addis Ababa, 2015)

In summary, rejection by close family members or others because of expectations that the returnees have financial or material resources impacts on the various interpersonal relationships of the returnees and raises uncertainty about how they fit into the home environment.

The vast majority of returnees respond to this rejection by isolating themselves and avoiding social interactions. This finding is in line with other studies on relatedness, which found that people who are less connected feel distant and perceive themselves to be outsiders, often finding it difficult to interact with the social world (Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001). Inability to meet expectations was frustrating for most returnees. Having no or few financial resources was a shameful experience and often made returnees restrict their social engagements. This strengthens other findings that postulate that being poor restricts people's desire for relationships and sense of belonging (Stewart *et al.*, 2009). Being financially dependent on their families after return is common among the returnees. At the same time, stepping down from the expected status attached to working abroad was a shameful experience and a barrier to becoming involved in a low paying job for some of the returnees. In general, the above findings indicate that the social expectations on returnees create a low sense of belonging because of rejection, shame and doubts about fitting into the environment. Not meeting people's expectations results in rejection by society in the home country and self-isolation by the returnees. This may affect the social and economic reintegration of returnees and their remigration intention.

Negative perceptions and stigma

Negative perceptions and stigma can lead to poor interpersonal relationships and, hence, affect a person's relatedness to their environment and sense of belonging. Social perceptions of the migration experience of women to the Arabian Gulf are generally negative. The returnees described being stereotyped and stigmatised by people in their home community. Two dominant stereotypes were associated with female returnees from the Arabian Gulf. First, the returnees were identified as mentally unfit (weird or crazy) and, second, they were considered promiscuous and associated with sex work or prostitution. These stereotypes and stigma created a barrier to migrants interacting with people in the community. The migration experience puts a mark of disgrace on the female returnees for life. The returnees explained how difficult it is to deal with such negative perceptions given the fact that they cannot exclude the migration

experience from their life. For example, one returnee who was rejected by her own family, as they thought she was working as prostitute while she was in the host country and wrongly associated her weight loss with HIV infection, explained the feeling of isolation, betrayal and rejection she felt:

> *I hated going outside and meeting people. I didn't even agree with my family and I was crying all the time. I didn't go out and I stayed home for a long time […]. At the beginning, I even wanted to be a prostitute or go back there again. I tried to commit suicide once […]. When I came back here at first, I did not work and did not have any money. I guess my family expected a lot from me. I came here with empty pockets. […]. When my employers took me to the office and I knew they were going to send me back to my country, I was really disappointed and tried to kill myself.* (Interview 23, Addis Ababa, 2017)

This quote shows the stigma, rejection and isolation that the returnee experienced. This returnee migrated to the Arabian Gulf twice and how her family treated her after she returned the first time caused her to attempt suicide. There is evidence that suicidal ideation (Kissane & McLaren, 2006; Vanderhorst & McLaren, 2005) and the experience of stigma (Walton & Cohen, 2007) are associated with a low sense of belonging. The majority of returnees reported experiencing stigma and rejection from people with whom they had desired relationships. This shows that the 'home country' is not always an environment in which returnees feel at home – a home they aspire to return to and feel safe, loved, valued and accepted in. Negative interactions and conflict with family members was a trigger for some returnees to migrate again. Returnees reported travelling back to Arabian Gulf countries on multiple work contracts (see also Fernandez, 2010). Economic reasons were often mentioned as a cause, such as unemployment or low wages. However, negative social interactions with family members also contribute greatly.

The returnees admitted that the negative perceptions of returnees had some truth (some returnees had been engaged in sex work in the Arabian Gulf), but they are disappointed that all returnees are judged because of the activities of some women. There are female migrants

who are locked in the house and never see the sun until the end of their contract, others are sexually abused or raped. However, these returnees are also perceived as a 'bad' woman. Regarding being involved in prostitution, the returnees reported that many migrants escape from their sponsor because of exploitation and abuse or to earn a better income (as 'freelance migrants'). This act immediately changes the status of the migrants in the host country from legal to illegal. The runaways need to sustain themselves economically and often turn to, or are forced into, sex work. The returnees also admitted that many returnees from the Arabian Gulf suffer from mental health problems and attribute the cause to ill treatment, the poisoning of migrants by employers (to keep them for longer or to avoid paying their salary), isolation and other traumatic experiences in the host country (see Anbesse *et al.*, 2009 and Habtamu *et al.*, 2017).

Their migration experiences influenced the behaviour of some returnees. The returnees who participated in this study admitted that they are easily irritated, speak loudly, isolate themselves, wear a lot of makeup and jewellery, use strong perfume, dress in colourful or sparkly clothes, and wear a lot of accessories. The respondents provided an explanation for some of these behaviours; for example, speaking loudly is associated with the '*mukeyaf*' (air conditioner) in the houses in the Arabian Gulf – it makes noise, so every member of the house speaks loudly. Irritability is often associated with frustration and shame due to the failed migration and being financially dependent on their family instead of a provider. Dressing colourfully and using a lot of makeup relates to their identification with the host country culture.

Sense of belonging encompasses feeling valued and loved by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Most returnees stated that they are not taken seriously in most interactions with their family members and in the community and that they are not desired for marital relationships. Some returnees reported hiding their migration experience for fear of rejection and so as not to jeopardise their relationships, including intimate relationships. Stereotyping greatly damages their desire to form a family or maintain already established marital relationships.

This puts pressure on the returnees, as marriage is highly valued in Ethiopia and regarded as completing womanhood. Not fulfilling this desired relationship can cause alienation and detachment from society. The study found that stereotypes and shame are a cause of poor social interaction and low sense of belonging in returnees' lives. Some of the participants in this study are isolated and do not feel accepted in the community, as evidenced by the following quote:

> *[…] I did not experience anything bad, but working in the Arabian Gulf made me fearful. I felt ashamed. I could not go along with friends. I became sensitive to what people were saying and felt like they were trying to hurt my feelings. I didn't want to go out and meet friends, but rather chose to stay in the house.* (Interview 3, Addis Ababa, 2015)

Stereotypes associated with the migration experience bring about changes in the self-perception of returnees, their social interactions and sense of belonging. The perceptions of others affect their self-worth (Buckley, Winkel & Leary, 2004). It challenges their feeling of fitness for and acceptance in the social environment, which adversely affects their social and economic reintegration. Another indication that returnees suffer isolation, have poor social interaction and a low sense of belonging is that 80% reported staying home most of the time and only going out for weddings and funerals; the rest mentioned going to church or the mosque, in addition to mandatory social engagements such as funerals. This limited social interaction also relates to their limited economic resources (Nisrane *et al.*, 2017). However, shame associated with unachieved migration goals, stigma and negative social perceptions contributes to this behaviour.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study investigated the new dynamics that unfold in the interpersonal relationships of female Ethiopian domestic migrants upon their return from the Arabian Gulf. It also looked at how their interpersonal relationships affect the returnees' sense of belonging, reintegration and remigration intention. It found that negative social interactions resulting from betrayal by close family members, social

expectations about money and gifts, and negative social perceptions about returnees affected their sense of belonging to the home community. These factors impacted on the returnees' feeling of being loved and valued and raised uncertainty about them fitting into the home environment. In turn, these factors influenced the returnees' desire to stay in their home country and their remigration intention.

Negative interpersonal interactions mean that returnees do not receive the emotional support required to successfully reintegrate into the home community. Not being accepted, or even being rejected, by people in the community, including by close family members, and inability to bring about significant economic changes in their own life, apart from in their family's life, made the returnees question whether they fit into the home environment and whether migrating to the Arabian Gulf was worthwhile in the first place. About 50% of the returnees said that they may consider going back if the official route was reopened, 8% had already left through illegal means by the end of data collection, 20% said that they do not want to go back, while the rest were undecided. The study indicates that negative social interactions is among the factors influencing remigration intention, as is low sense of belonging. Low sense of belonging, next to economic reasons, explains why returnees are willing to return to the Arabian Gulf, despite the risk of exploitative and abusive working conditions. Hence, reintegrating into the home community is not only dependent on the migration experiences of the returnees in the host country, but intertwined with various social issues in the home country. Positive social interactions and a sense of belonging are important for return migrants to successfully reintegrate, socially and economically.

For the returnees who participated in the study, the migration experience did not bring about personal economic gains and improved social status, as expected. Instead they incurred social costs that cannot be measured in monetary terms. The study found that although the family of the migrants experienced some positive economic and social changes, the majority of returnees did not have any savings of their own from their migration, making them economically dependent on their family upon return. This study also

casts doubt on the claim by other studies that migration to the Arabian Gulf is an empowering experience for women and leads to upward movement on the social ladder (Kifleyesus, 2012), in line with Ketema (2014).

This study provides valuable insights into how home country social issues may impact on the reintegration of female domestic workers returning to Ethiopia from the Arabian Gulf and their intention to re-migrate. It serves as a starting point for the further analysis of experiences and issues facing returnees in their home country in relation to reintegration. It also provides a self-evaluation of the returnees' sense of belonging to their home community. However, it has some limitations related to its scope, which might guide future researchers. First, the participants in this study were all living in Addis Ababa, whereas a significant number of women migrate to the Arabian Gulf from rural parts of Ethiopia. Hence, the social perceptions and social interactions uncovered in this study may not represent the situation of returnees in rural areas. Second, this study used the personal stories of returnees to evaluate social perceptions. Triangulating the results by using various sources, such as family and community members, is suggested for future research. Third, this study found that female returnees are perceived as socially unfit because of stereotypes associated with their migration. Similar findings were made in other studies conducted in Asia (Bélanger & Rahman, 2013; Dannecker, 2005). This similarity may arise because of the existence of a patriarchal social structure in both places. However, our study did not analyse patriarchy or gender roles, which was the case in the other studies. Indeed the social perceptions, and the treatment, of male and female returnees are different. The majority of participants in this study acknowledged that Ethiopian men generally lead a loose lifestyle, having many intimate relationships with women, including exploiting vulnerable female migrants while in the host country.[7] However, the stereotype of

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[7] They persuade the migrants to escape from their sponsors; once the women leave their employers they become illegal, hence, the agents and brokers force the migrants into sexual relations in exchange for job placement and a house where they can stay.

promiscuity is mainly associated with female returnees. This study did not include the accounts of male returnees, so is unable to answer whether a difference exists in the treatment of female and male returnees. However, it is important to see if patriarchy plays a role and it is suggested that future researchers explore this issue.

The experience of belonging is not only beneficial to the returnees, it also impacts on the community and society at large. A sense of belonging is associated with a higher level of achievement and productivity, which impacts on the community and society over a period of time. Hence, it would be beneficial to society at large to implement policy interventions to improve the reintegration of Ethiopian female domestic migrants returning from the Arabian Gulf. Four policy recommendations can be drawn from this study.

- First, social support and counselling programmes that address problems with interpersonal relationships should be provided.
- Second, one reason why migrants send their entire salary to family members in their home country is because they do not have anywhere to save it while they are in the host country (Nisrane *et al.*, 2017). The option they have is to either keep it with them or save it with their employer, both of which are risky. Hence, creating a remittance system that cultivates the independence of migrants will help them to develop positive relationships upon their return, as well as facilitate better economic reintegration through savings.
- Third, depending on family members for financial needs is a cause of negative interactions and low sense of belonging. Hence, education programmes and vocational training should be provided to returnees to allow them to become financially independent, especially given that many of the migrants are elementary or high-school dropouts.
- Finally, to address the issues of unrealistic social expectations and negative social perceptions, media campaigns should be run to change society's attitude to returnees.

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