

# Gender and Migration in Africa: Female Ethiopian Migration in Post-2008 Sudan

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the relatively new phenomenon of female migration in Africa. Towards that end the paper examines contemporary trends of labor migration drawing examples from Asia and other parts of the world for the sake of comparison. The paper also reviews some theoretical and methodological aspects applied in current research on migration particularly in the endeavor to conceptualize female (labor) migration. To further understand the phenomenon the paper makes special focus on the current case of Ethiopian women (migrant) workers to Sudan especially after the recent oil exploration and the resulting attraction of major investment by international capital. The high demand on the part of the Sudanese society for domestic services jobs is efficiently met by Ethiopian women, with low level education; most often illegal migrants. The case involves both legal and illegal migration modes. Nonetheless much emphasis is made on the later, as vulnerability chances are much higher and more evident.

**Keywords:** international migration, irregular migration, labor, female, Sudan, Ethiopia

## 1. Introduction

The entire history of mankind is in fact a chronology of successive movements of tribes and nations, for countless reasons and motives; wars, conflicts and famines constituted the most important reasons for great movement experienced by man, however there are other types of movements based on the preference of migrants themselves. The history of civilization discloses the fact that they were built through dynamic processes of these movements. Overtime the concept of “movement” was developed into the new term “Migration”. This development is most probably attributable to the prevalence of the culture of “nation- states” in the socio-cultural development of humanity. The term “movement” implies an action- oriented meaning, where as the term “migration” carries (place) or (region) oriented meaning. International migration has come to be one of the central themes of debate and concern among different academic, political and economic domains. Like any other human activity, migration is a multi- dimensional phenomenon, having a lot to do with security, development, health, culture ...etc Migration is most often a consequence of environmental disaster, economic exploitation, political and ethnic tensions and generally other forms of violence. Migration could as well be seen as a cause of problems; like environmental depredation, health problems, brain drain, political and social instability, adverse impact on law and order, nonetheless the positive aspects of migration are as well numerous for the three parties involved; the migrant, country of origin, and receiving country; the least of which is the fact that migrants are in many cases; agents of change in the economic, technological but also social and political domains. There is no doubt that the current development in transport and communication systems, contributed to enhance migration rates within and between continents. In this context regular migration guarantees the most efficient flow of people (labor), money (remittances), skills and knowledge between supplying- areas and demanding- areas, whereas irregular migration has more or less the same impacts, the later is characterized by violation of laws governing migration in both sending and receiving countries.

## 2. Current Migration Theories

Before we engage further in the analysis of migration or female migration, it is necessary that we review some of the current theories that explain, rather interpret the dynamics of the process. This probably helps deepen our understanding on how different scholars approached the phenomenon, and sheds light on the principles from which they depart building and synthesizing empirical information. This is particularly necessary as the area of

study (migration) belongs to a relatively new discipline (population studies) where theoretical foundation should inform empirical research work. I presume a good part of this task is yet to be achieved.

### *2.1 Neo- Classical Economic Theory*

This theory relates causes of international migration to economic considerations; labor supply and demand, wage differentials ... etc. other factors are only secondary or subsidiary at best. This theory acquires authority from the influence of economic theorists whose scholarship tradition is by far longer than other social scientists; however with the emergence of other approaches in this area, notably: sociology, psychology and of late population, this classical approach experienced some challenges. Empirical evidence from Asia show that economic indices like G.D.P unemployment rates ...etc does not necessarily explain patterns of female migration. All the major “sending countries” of migrant women (Philippine, India, Sri Lanka) have higher G.D.P per capita than non-sending countries like; Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia (Note 1) (Oishi, 2002). In Africa, the Massai of Tanzania poor as they are do not emigrate like other groups. This substantiates the earlier point that economic indices fall short to explain what actually happens to individuals on the ground (Ahmed, 2003). These issues were thoroughly discussed as early as 1970s concurrently with analysis of rural- urban migration (Byrtee, 1974: 543) .

### *2.2 Structural Theory*

This theory rests on the socialist school of thought, explaining migration in the context of centre-periphery dialectical relationship. Emphasizing on the element of economic exploitation of the less developed countries (L.D.C. s), by the “core” nations in the international system. In the context of this theory workers from (L.D.C.s) attracted to industrial labor markets characterized by low wages, unfavorable conditions, lack of job security, exposing themselves to all types of exploitation. A good supporter of this school is Samir Amin, who views migration as part of the process of peripheralization of Africa in the global capitalist system. With reference to female migration, although in Africa data is scarce as most governments do not compile gender-related information, in Asia it was noticeable that multi- national corporations tend to recruit women because they are obedient, easy to fire depending on performance (Sassen, 1988).

### *2.3 Household Theory*

In the context of this school individual's decision to migrate is considered to be taken by the family, not by individual migrant. This is probably true in many developing countries, where members of family play complementary roles in securing living on household basis (Stark & Levhari, 1982), to reduce impacts of financial risks, and to diversify sources of income. In many or most developing societies household authority or power to decide rests with the father who has much influence on females rather other than (male) family members. That is why some researchers argue that, that could explain why Philippine generates the highest rate of female international migrants (McKenzie, 2008).

### *2.4 Network Theory*

According to this school, researchers tend to attribute causes of migration to personal, cultural and other social ties, where potential migrants benefit from experiences of their peers, who could possibly provide them with relevant information, and in some cases, help them adapt to the new environment in the receiving societies. Networks like these definitely encourage others from sending countries to follow suit and by so doing contribute to the emergence of “culture of migration” in a sending community, where migration could become a “rite of passage” from unfavorable conditions of local societies, to the presumed better conditions across borders or overseas. Women tend to rely more on personal contacts than men. Some people believe that such networks usually exist between countries that have prior historical, geographical and political ties. But general observation and empirical research both do not support this belief; as there is no link whatsoever between sending countries and receiving countries: for example between Saudi Arabia and Philippine or Kuwait and Sri Lanka.

### *2.5 The Integrative Approach*

In the light of the limitations of these theories to provide coherent explanation for female migration Nana Oishi (Note 2) proposed what she called “integrative approach” theory on female migration, in an attempt to formulate an inclusive framework to better understand dynamics of female migration. This approach comprises three elements:

2.5.1 Macro- level: referring to the role of state which could through emigration policies determine patterns of migration; whether female migration is discouraged or otherwise. This could easily be noticed in cases of major “sending countries” of migrant women, where open emigration policies were adopted.

2.5.2 Micro- level: reference here is made to the degree of autonomy individual women enjoy deciding on their affairs. In many cases in developing world degree of autonomy is very limited, considering socio- cultural variation between societies. Contrary to household theorists, recent surveys suggest that majority of migrant women from major sending countries made decisions by themselves (Note 3).

2.5.3 Meso-level: This includes societal response to female migration, and whether society recognizes or legitimizes female migration; (rural - urban or international migration), this perhaps determines ability of women to make such decision. Some societies or even countries discourage or ban female migration, while others are neutral or (open - minded) pragmatic towards the phenomena.

### 3. Female Migration in Africa

As more women become engaged in public life (outdoors) in the developing countries, it is commonsense to say that their representation in international labor migration keeps rising. Internationally there is an increasing demand for female labor, as certain jobs are categorized, or reserved for women; housemaids, entertainers, women factory workers etc. This demand faces an equal aptitude on the part of women, to benefit from opportunities to improve family sources of income and/ or achieve economic independence for unmarried single women and girls. As this trend is mounting, terms like feminization of international labor migration are gaining momentum in contemporary/ recent research on cross- border work dynamics.

Research on female migration is of special significance among other sub- fields for certain reason. As vast majority of migrant women work at the bottom of occupational hierarchy- unskilled labor, they are extremely vulnerable to so many abuses and violations of human rights; including sexual harassment, rape, non- payment or underpayment, and verbal or physical violence. The problem is that victims of such cases can hardly have the ability or liberty to voice their sufferings, to a third party; governmental or non- governmental, simply because their employers or perpetrators can fire them the next day. Legal migrant women can easily assess how hard it is to lose a job in a foreign country, let alone illegal migrants, bearing in mind that both legal and illegal migrants are predominately unskilled labor. Therefore their suffering persists despite the existence of multitude of national and international laws, treaties conventions and declarations.

The United Nations estimated total the figure of international migrants worldwide to be 191 m. in the year 2005, which is approximately 3% of the world’s population. However an earlier figure of international migrants in 1990 was given to be 158 m. Out of this latter figure more than 50 m. are estimated to be Africans. The feminization of labor migration seems least in Africa, although proportion of female migrants is also increasing- with sub-regional variations; Southern Africa has the lowest percentage of female migrants (Piper & Nicola, 2005).

African women are engaged in both national and international migration. National migration could mean rural-urban migration within an individual state, or else it could mean circular migration within the African continent. However both involve cross- border movement, but within Africa many factors combine to influence the process of movement. Of paramount importance in this context is the perception and reality associated with border issues. In many cases in Africa borders cut across cultural units, tribes, and ethnic groups. Apart from that, the very long borders between African countries are hard and costly to manage in terms of policing, as they lack permanent physical features. The Yoruba are found in Nigeria and Benin, the Ewe in Togo and Ghana, the Makonde in Mozambique and Tanzania. So movement of a single woman from one side of border to the other where her kinsmen live, raises the question of role of border in facilitating or complicating rural life.

Across the continent studies on female migration in Zimbabwe, Uganda, Nigerian and Mali indicated that single female migration is directed towards attaining economic independence through self- employment or wage income. (Adepoju, 1995). There is no doubt that education among African women is key factor in this affair, paving the way for them to enter organized labor market. In a globalized world it is quite legitimate that everybody's expectations rise as high as his knowledge (of available opportunities) permits, African women cannot be an exception. Several surveys indicate that more than half of female migrants have at least some primary level education; 57% in Juba city- Sudan, 54% in Monrovia, Liberia (Findley and Williams, 1990). Female migration could be seen to cause some changes on traditional sex roles in society, because migration or the absence of educated women could necessarily lead to a situation where men are left back at home to look after children. International migrants generally in Africa were estimated to be 16m (2000) among whom 47% are females. In that Africa has more women migrating than Asia whose figure revolves around 43% the same year

2000, whereas in all other major continents female migrants constitute 50% of international migrant population. (Zlotnik Hannia, 2004).

Despite the fact that patterns of migration underwent considerable changes over the last few decades, feminization of labor migration is but one, other elements of migration preserved continuity. Not only that, but that fact is applicable to both internal (rural - urban) and international migration. The indication here concerns the main characteristics of migrants. Age-wise the average African migrant is young 15 - 20 whereas returning migrants after 45 exceed those willing to migrate. However in rural- urban migration representation of men is dominant, recently women counted up to half of total migrants. Generally migrants belong to the middle class, above poverty level, because (men or women) they are mostly school drop-outs, farmers, self-employed and the like. Some researches even observed a positive co- relation between education and high prosperity to migrate, especially among international migrants.

#### 4. Ethiopian Migrating Population

Ethiopia is probably among the most populous countries in Africa approaching 80m persons. More or less double the total population of neighboring Sudan (with less than 40m persons) (Note 4). Like other developing nations, Ethiopia has one of the highest population growth rates in Africa, which is necessarily exceeding economic growth rate, the result of which is emergence of unemployment among economically- active age-group among Ethiopian citizens. As a vast country (Ethiopia) comprising more than 70 ethnic groups with complications degradation of land and scarcity of other resources (Note 5), quite a considerable number of Ethiopians were outside their home country in the last few decades voluntarily or otherwise. According to U.S. committee for refugees and immigrants; more than 20.000 Ethiopian citizens were refugees or asylum seekers in the year 2002. These include 10000 in Kenya, 2000 in Djibouti, 1000 in Yemen and an estimated 6000 in Europe or the U. S. A. In addition to more than 10000 Ethiopians who live in refugee -like situations in the Sudan. Most of the refugees left the country during the Derge regime, however after establishment of 1991- government many refugees were repatriated from Djibouti, Sudan, Kenya, Somali and other countries, (Tsega Anwar, 2010). Of course these are old figures and that they only reflect registered people who showed themselves to authorities concerned, but there are others who flee on their own and infiltrate within camps or get integrated in the local societies, therefore I would say that despite everything official figures are normally underestimating the actual reality. However the aim is to demonstrate that quite a sizeable number of Ethiopians move out of their country for countless reasons.

The major concern of this paper is labor- motivated migration which is more or less a voluntary type of movement. This necessarily involves both legal and illegal migration. However migration can hardly be classified as voluntary so long as it is associated with labor or livelihood. Ethiopian citizens who opt to migrate in search for work do that involuntarily, otherwise unemployment is the remaining option. It is therefore logical that they migrate in search for better employment opportunities, first in the neighboring countries and afterwards elsewhere around the world. So the closet country to the west is the Sudan, other neighbors to the South (Kenya) and the North (Eritrea) or even the East Somalia, share more or less the same situation. Apart from the fact that Sudan shares the largest international boundaries with Ethiopia more than 800 miles long, there is proof that reciprocal movements of population between the two sides of the border took place over different historical episodes (Note 6).

More important than anything, the Sudan after 1990s started to be attractive especially after introduction of petroleum as major investment in the country. workers from many nationalities headed for the Sudan, apart from Chinese and other Asian nationals who pioneered these investments, other expatriates in the Sudan came with U.N mission whose military and civilian personnel counted for more than 40000 persons (Note 7). The later include Africa nationals. But as our concern here is with Ethiopian labor migrants, our observation assure that presence of Ethiopian nationals in the Sudan is an old and familiar phenomenon motivated by political, economic and even social factors as inter- marriage between the two nationalities exists. The recent phenomenon of migration is in relation to labor, it has certain characteristics different from other earlier ones:-

**First:** This migration includes many young boys and girls below 16 years. Theirs could be classified as child labor.

**Second:** Illegal migrants out- number legal migrants.

**Third:** Most Ethiopian migrants are unskilled workers.

**Fourth:** Good representation of females among migrants.

**Fifth:** The most important feature is that domestic jobs suited them as the demand for these jobs rose steadily in the last few years in the Sudan.

### **5. Ethiopian Female Labor Migrants in the Sudan**

Movement of Ethiopians across the eastern border of the Sudan is most apparent in the Eastern states, Kassala, Al- Gadarif and Red sea. However of late, most genuine labor migrants headed for Khartoum and other states. As a capital city Khartoum remains the best destination for employment seeker. In Khartoum some few years back presence of Ethiopian migrants used to be in special places like Adoyoum, however of late they extended to other areas in Aljuraif, Bahri and Omdurman. Most of them work in boutiques, hair salons, restaurants, tea-sellers ... etc. but as earlier indicated, domestic services ranked high among most demanded jobs for female migrants. Apart from an old official Embassy to serve the affairs of Ethiopian nationals, they managed to establish “the Ethiopian Community Centre” to cater for their socio- cultural needs.

Regarding female migration to Sudan let us first review some of the reasons motivating Ethiopian women to leave their home country; apart from the common factor in relation to poverty, bearing in mind that most of these women come from rural areas (Oromia, Amhara and southern regions) many women consider their journey to Sudan as transit to a third country. Moreover there are professional brokers who launch a systematic propaganda portraying an imaginary image for Sudan as an oil- producing country in resemblance to Middle Eastern example. Particularly that Ethiopian government banned female migration to some Middle Eastern countries, which added another encouragement for Ethiopian women to move to the Sudan. Algardarif state as an Eastern border Sudanese state, concluded bilateral trade arrangements with Tigray and Amhara regions that also provided further stimuli for female migration.

A recent study (Tsega, 2010) on 130 Ethiopian women migrants in the Sudan disclosed that 58% of them are illegal migrants, 43% of them in the age group between 15- 18 when they left their home country, 45% completed 5 to 9 years of primary education. That explain why 62% of them can only occupy domestic works as they are young, unskilled, with low level education. These are definitely characters of illegal migrants. As indicated earlier Ethiopian women migrate to different parts of the world; to Saudai Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, Libya (in transit to Europe), Kenya transmit to South Africa etc. However in their journey to Sudan there are certain roads routes used for both legal and illegal migrants. Each route is used by the adjacent group, these roads include.

1. Matama – Galabat road used for both regular and irregular migrants, mostly by those who come from Addis Ababa, Oromia, Southern Nation Nationalities and Peoples (S. N. N. P)
2. Humera route used by those from Tigray and Amhara regions.
3. Damazin route; basically for Gumz, Banishangol regions and Oromia regions.

### **6. Dynamics of the Process**

There are always networks of brokers ready to make money out of the neediest people, exploiting their dreams based on false propaganda disseminated by those very brokers. In this case in Ethiopia brokers go around convincing potential migrants from rural areas mostly from Oromia, S.N.N.P up to Addis Ababa, those victims are sometimes handed over to other brokers who have migrants from Amhara and Tigray regions, all those are combined and directed to Matama. A hotel is to be rented where those women migrants are to wait until a deal is concluded between Ethiopia and Sudanese counterpart brokers. After that women are to be smuggled at night across the border from Gallabat on foot for 3-4 days, until they reach Doka (on Sudanese Soil) where Sudanese brokers take responsibility to arrange transport to Khartoum.

There is no doubt that these women during this dangerous journey expose themselves to all kinds of violations; rape, sexual abuse, torture, beating, shortage of food and water, health problems, theft and robbery. Not only that but the migrant- broker relationship depends on the mode of payment by the migrant, which in turn determines whether the case is human smuggling or human trafficking. If a woman migrant can afford to pay the broker before or after arrival to Sudan, the case is apparently smuggling, where a broker lets free the migrant to benefit from opportunities available, otherwise if a migrant cannot afford to pay a broker “the cost of smuggling”, the case automatically becomes “human trafficking”. Where a broker in co- operation with such networks- finds a job for the migrant and gets his amount out of the salary, by ways and means they very well know, not to forget that a woman migrant is necessarily under psychological pressure being an illegal migrant.

### **7. Theoretical Reflections**

In trying to explain or understand this phenomenon of female migration to the Sudan, on the basis of earlier reviewed migration theories, we can notice that components of neo-classical theory are applicable, because

salary or income differentials between both countries exist, in the favor of the Sudan. Household theory requirements are also apparent in the fact that decision to migrate is not solely taken by individual women; their families are involved, as we have seen brokers go around convincing families to send their daughters for better work conditions. However the best applicable approach, according to this paper, is the “integrative approach” where explanations for the phenomena are sought in a multitude of levels, most salient among which is the legislative or legal situation in both sending and receiving countries and whether female migration is socially acceptable or not. In this case Ethiopian legislation banned female migration to some Middle Eastern countries where human trafficking chances are high, this could be interpreted in favor of migration to Sudan, on the other hand the Sudanese authorities require only “work permit” from labor department, in the case of regular migrants, of course for irregular migrant the warrant is the social acceptance and demand for services best performed by Ethiopia women. On the other hand, we presume Ethiopian society accepts internal (rural - urban) female migration as well as international migration. Persistence of the phenomenon stands as a proof for the assumption.

## 8. Conclusions

This paper attempted to examine international female labor migration, as a new trend and pattern of migration, involving changes in sex roles among developing societies. African women are used to migrate as family members in the past, however rising education rates of late stimulated many independent women to migrate on their own, in search for better livelihood opportunities. As the discipline is emerging, few theories were so far developed to analyze the phenomena, this paper preferred an “integrative approach” involving different factors prompting women to migrate including individual, social and state- related elements as components determining pattern of migration.

Special reference here is made to migration of Ethiopian women to the Sudan who share the longest international border with Ethiopia, with almost half of the later total population. The Sudan entered petroleum production investment attracting a multitude of international labor migrants including Ethiopian men and women as neighboring country citizens. The high demand on the part of the Sudanese society for domestic services jobs is efficiently met by Ethiopian women, with low level education, most often illegal migrants. The dynamics of the process of human smuggling was analyzed, however little is known about the total volume of the phenomena in terms of figures; the number of female migrants relative to male migrants in the light of legal and illegal movements is high.

The phenomena up to the moment (2012) are still interacting as more Ethiopian women enter Sudan. The demand for their services is mounting as more Sudanese women are preoccupied with wage- jobs duties in government offices or elsewhere- leaving their homes to be taken care of by hired female workers. I presume Sudanese women are happy with Ethiopian ladies, we are left to know whether Ethiopian ladies are happy with their Sudanese employers.

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### Notes

- Note 1. Per capita G.D.P in Philippine 3600US, Sri-lanka 2600US, Indonesia 2800US, whereas G. D. P per capita in Bangladesh is 1470 US, India 1800US, Pakistan 2000US.
- Note 2. Visiting research fellow-Centre for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California.
- Note 3. For further theoretical analyses see: Boyd Monica and Greiw Elisabeth (2003) “*women and Migration; Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory*”, Migration Policy Institute. Available on line.
- Note 4. 2008 census in Sudan estimates total population as less than 40 m. (around 39m persons).
- Note 5. For detailed study on Ethiopian economy see: Salih, Kamal O. (2006), “*Ethiopia: political economy of post- Derge regime, an appraisal 1991- 2004*”, Dirast Afriquiya, International University of Africa, No 36. Dec. 2006, p. 7.
- Note 6. During the Turo- Egyptian rule in the Sudan 1821- onwards, the Mekk of the Jaalyean Sudanese tribe took voluntary refugee in Ethiopia establishing a settlement or city named after his home town Al- Mattama.
- Note 7. Abder Rahman Bakhiet “*future of U.N. Mission in the Sudan*” paper presented in the forum of Epistemological Enlightenment Centre, Khartoum. Feb. 2011.