

Exploring the dynamics of female rural-urban migration for secondary education in Ethiopia

Louise Yorke, Robbie Gilligan & Eyerusalem Alemu

To cite this article: Louise Yorke, Robbie Gilligan & Eyerusalem Alemu (2023) Exploring the dynamics of female rural-urban migration for secondary education in Ethiopia, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 53:4, 693-709, DOI: [10.1080/03057925.2021.1951665](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2021.1951665)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2021.1951665>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 15 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3226



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Exploring the dynamics of female rural-urban migration for secondary education in Ethiopia

Louise Yorke ^a, Robbie Gilligan ^b and Eyerusalem Alemu^c

^aREAL Centre, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, England, UK; ^bSchool of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; ^cCARE International, Hawassa, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT



Based on ethnographic fieldwork, we explore the rural-urban migration of 27 girls and young women who leave their rural communities and move to the city to pursue their secondary education, in the ethnically diverse Southern Region of Ethiopia. We consider the nature and extent of the inequalities that they face in rural areas which limit their education opportunities and outcomes and underpin their expected entry into marriage. We compare their experiences in their rural communities with their lives in the city, where they have greater access to resources and greater freedom and decision-making power and the opportunity to continue their secondary education, although their futures are still uncertain. Through our analysis we reveal some of the tensions between the promise of girls' secondary education promoted at the international and national level and the lived realities of rural girls and women, many of whom are unable to realise this promise.

KEYWORDS

Girls' secondary education; female rural-urban migration; marriage; empowerment; Ethiopia

Introduction

Across many countries in the Global South, including Ethiopia, attention is turning to girls' secondary education, which is positioned as a key policy tool for female empowerment and is linked with a number of the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g. SDG4, SDG5). Beyond the benefits of primary education alone, secondary education is associated with even greater advantages for girls, including increased earnings over the lifetime and improved health and social outcomes (Joshi and Verspoor 2012; Rihani 2006). Yet, despite the intended benefits of girls' secondary education, the vast majority of girls in Ethiopia do not reach secondary school, particularly those living in rural areas (CSA 2016; MoE 2019; Mulugeta 2004). In addition to the limited number of secondary schools and the poor quality of education available in rural areas, girls must also contend with discriminatory socio-cultural factors that underpin and perpetuate the inequalities that impact their opportunities and outcomes. In particular, the expected entry of girls and young women into marriage is understood as one of the biggest challenges to their education (Pankhurst, Tiumelissan, and Chuta 2016). Therefore, while the possibility of a different future for rural girls and women through secondary education is promoted at

CONTACT Louise Yorke  ly315@cam.ac.uk  REAL Centre, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

the international and national level, the reality of the significant challenges girls and young women face at the local level means that most rural girls and young women are unable to realise this promise.

Against this backdrop, female rural-urban migration for education has increased in Ethiopia in recent years (Bundervoet 2018; De Regt and Mihret 2020; Erulkar et al. 2006; Schewel and Fransen 2018). More generally, research has shown how increasing access to formal education across a range of countries in the Global South in recent decades, alongside growing rural-urban inequalities, is a significant factor attracting young people to the city in the hope of achieving better futures (Boyden 2013; Crivello 2011; Erulkar et al. 2006; Hashim 2007; Schewel and Fransen 2018). For rural girls and young women, rural-urban migration provides the possibility to escape the barriers they face in their sending communities that limit their opportunities and outcomes and to pursue their education in the city. However, while there is some evidence to suggest that the phenomenon of rural-urban migration for education is increasing, research in this area remains limited, especially in the context of Ethiopia (Schewel and Fransen 2018). Specifically, our understanding of the linkages between girls' secondary education and increasing female rural-urban migration to date is inadequate. Exploring the migration of girls and young women who move to the city to pursue their secondary education is, therefore, an important area of research. Understanding this phenomenon from the perspectives of female rural-urban migrants is particularly pertinent and can help to provide important insights into the nature and extent of inequalities they face in their rural communities, and how they navigate these constraints through rural-urban migration.

In this article, we explore the education and migration pathways of 27 girls from different rural communities in Southern Ethiopia, who were successful in delaying marriage, moving to a nearby city and pursuing formal secondary education. Drawing on Kabeer's (1999) framework of empowerment, we consider the nature and extent of the inequalities and constraints that girls and young women face in their rural communities and how these are underpinned by wider inequalities across the rural-urban divide. We explore how their unequal access to resources and their inability to exercise their agency limit their education and opportunities. We take into account how, in the context of the limited economic opportunities that are available for girls and young women in rural areas, expectations for girls' entry into marriage persist, despite girls' increasing educational access. We show how the ability of participants to challenge these inequalities is limited and, for the participants in this study, it is only through migration that they can escape these constraints and pursue their secondary education.

In summary, our article contributes to a richer understanding of the nature and extent of the inequalities that girls face in pursuing their secondary education in rural areas. Comparing the lives of rural girls and young women in their rural communities before they migrate with their lives in the city helps to reveal how these inequalities are underpinned by wider structural factors, which, we argue, are often overlooked when it comes to efforts to promote rural girls' secondary education. Our analysis therefore highlights the tensions between the promise of girls' secondary education promoted at the international and national level, and the reality of the difficulties that rural girls and young women face in realising this promise.

In the next section, we provide an overview of the context of girls' secondary education, including how it is positioned as a policy tool for gender equality and development at the national level. We discuss some of the main barriers that rural girls face in pursuing their education in their communities, including socio-cultural expectations for child marriage. We then provide an overview of existing evidence related to female rural-urban migration in Ethiopia. Throughout this article, we use the term 'secondary education' to refer to general secondary education in Ethiopia, which includes grade nine and grade ten. We use the term 'child marriage' to refer to marriage before the age of eighteen (UNICEF 2014). In our review of the literature, we made efforts to include as many authors as possible from Ethiopia in particular and also from the Global South and consulted databases including the African Education Research Database and the Addis Ababa University database.

The promise of girls' secondary education promoted by the government

In Ethiopia, as in many other developing countries, girls' education is positioned as a key policy tool for women's empowerment, reducing child marriage and improving gender equality more broadly (NPC 2016). While there have been significant gains in girls' access to primary education in Ethiopia in recent decades (MoE 2019), attention is now turning to girls' upper primary education and transition to secondary education (Joshi and Verspoor 2012; World Bank 2018). Increasing girls' access to secondary education is linked to Ethiopia's modernisation project and the ambitious development goals of achieving lower-middle-income status by 2025 (NPC 2016; Joshi and Verspoor 2012; Verspoor 2008; Wodon et al. 2017). According to the government's main development strategy, encouraging girls' participation in formal education and employment will enable girls and women to leave behind traditional roles characterised by marriage and motherhood, which are seen as incompatible with the government's vision for development and pursue modern pathways defined by paid employment and delayed marriage (Abebe 2008; Crivello, Boyden, and Pankhurst 2019). The government's approach to gender equality and women's empowerment is mainly focused on achieving equality in certain domains of society (e.g. education, employment) and providing women with freedom of choice (Crivello, Boyden, and Pankhurst 2019; Enyew and Mihrete 2018). Our contention, however, is that inadequate attention is given to the structural constraints that limit the experiences and outcomes of rural girls and women in particular.

Promoting girls' education and eliminating child marriage are often seen as complementary objectives, both within Ethiopia and in the wider international arena. Ethiopia continues to have one of the highest rates of child marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa with almost half of girls and young women married by the age of eighteen years old (CSA 2016). Substantial efforts have been made by the government towards eradicating child marriage by 2030, including the introduction of a law that prohibits marriage before the age of eighteen years, and various plans, which guide approaches to eliminating child marriage (e.g. MoWA 2006; MoWCYA 2013). However, the Ethiopian government primarily attributes the continued practice of child marriage to the '*low level of societal consciousness and awareness and deep rooted and imbalanced gender relations*' (MoWCYA 2013, 9). The government's understanding of the causes of child marriage in turn influences the strategies that are pursued. In addition to improving girls'

education, other strategies employed to address child marriage, generally focus on awareness-raising campaigns, the promotion of positive role models and encouraging girls' participation in girls' clubs to counter these socio-cultural factors (e.g. World Bank 2018). The structural inequalities that underpin girls' limited opportunities and outcomes are frequently overlooked. In this context, those who are *successful* are often conceived of as girls who challenge their family, community and traditions, and ultimately avoid marriage, while girls who fail to do so are often considered to be *unsuccessful* (Bessa 2019; Khoja-Moolji 2016). This narrative suggests that girls and their families are able to *choose* better futures rather than the fact that their choices represent a rational response to the very real constraints they face within rural communities and their *choices* may reflect the least worst or most strategic option in such circumstances (Abebe 2008; Archambault 2011; Boyden and Zharkevich 2018; Grieve 2016).

Barriers to girls' secondary education in rural areas

Due to the government's overemphasis on gender parity and freedom of choice, little has changed in terms of the daily lives of the vast majority of girls and women living in rural Ethiopia (Yorke, Rose, and Pankhurst 2021). Less than half of all girls in Ethiopia successfully complete basic primary education and enter into secondary schools, while rural girls are much less likely than urban girls to be enrolled in secondary school (CSA 2016; MoE 2019). In addition to a lack of secondary schools and a lower quality of education available in rural areas, girls must also contend with a range of socio-cultural factors, which limit their education experiences and outcomes (see Chuta 2013). For instance, even for girls who are enrolled in education, as they get older, they must balance an ever-increasing burden of domestic work responsibilities, which in turn, significantly limits their attendance and progression and subsequent achievement (Alemu et al. 2008). In particular, the pressure to enter into marriage is often cited as one of the biggest demand-side barriers to rural girls' education and, critically, the age of entry into secondary school coincides with their expected age of entry into marriage (Camfield and Tafere 2011; Wodon et al. 2017; World Bank 2018). In spite of the efforts made to eradicate child marriage, progress in this direction has been slow and uneven, especially in rural areas where girls often enter into marriage much earlier than their urban counterparts (CSA 2016).

Important empirical research has highlighted the complexity of child marriage and the range of economic, cultural and political factors that contribute to its continued practice (e.g. Alemu 2008; Chuta and Morrow 2015; Pankhurst, Tiemelissan, and Chuta 2016). Yet one of the factors often overlooked in efforts to promote girls' education and reduce child marriage is the fact that securing formal employment beyond secondary school in Ethiopia is increasingly difficult. In general, the lack of viable employment opportunities for young people, means that more and more educated youth are locked out of hopeful futures (Abebe 2008; Boyden 2013; Boyden and Zharkevich 2018; Mains 2011). Formal employment opportunities are even more limited for girls and young women, especially those living in rural areas, who are least likely to secure formal employment – regardless of their level of education – and are more likely to be concentrated in the informal economy (Broussard and Tekleselassie 2012; CSA 2016). Furthermore, if girls continue their education, it is believed that this will reduce their marriage options leaving girls and

their families open to ridicule within the community (Crivello, Boyden, and Pankhurst 2019). Given this predicament, marriage can act as a means of securing girls' economic futures especially in the absence of alternatives (Chuta and Morrow 2015; Mjaaland 2018; Pankhurst 2014; Pankhurst, Tiemelissan, and Chuta 2016). Yet these wider constraints are often overlooked in efforts to advance rural girls' secondary education and reduce child marriage.

Increasing female rural-urban migration for education

In the context of struggles between the traditional pathways set out for girls and young women in their rural communities, and the prospect of better and more modern futures through secondary education, mostly only available in urban areas, female rural-urban migration has increased in Ethiopia in recent years (Bundervoet 2018; De Regt and Mihret 2020; Erulkar et al. 2006; Schewel and Fransen 2018). While limited data on migration exists in Ethiopia, girls and young women make up the largest portion of young migrants (Bundervoet 2018; De Regt and Mihret 2020; Erulkar et al. 2006; Schewel and Fransen 2018). At the broadest level, rural-urban migration is a response to uneven patterns of development and unequal access to education and work opportunities, due to which, many children and young people no longer envision their futures in rural areas (Abebe 2008; De Regt and Mihret 2020; Tadele and Gella 2014; Schewel and Fransen 2018). For girls and young women in particular, rural-urban migration provides an added opportunity to escape the socio-cultural factors that constrain their experiences and opportunities in their home communities and pursue their secondary education in urban areas (Bundervoet 2018; Erulkar et al. 2006; De Regt and Mihret 2020). For instance, in a study of over 1,000 adolescents aged 10–19 in Addis Ababa, Erulkar et al. (2006) found that a substantial proportion of girls migrated to escape marriage, especially younger adolescents, while education was also one of the primary reasons that many girls migrated. Yet, beyond an awareness of the broader push and pull factors, the gender specific dynamics underpinning the migration of rural girls and young women to urban areas are insufficiently understood. In particular, the evidence on the role of girls' secondary education in influencing female rural-urban migration remains limited.

Rural-Urban migration as a process of empowerment

In this article we consider the education and migration pathways of 27 girls and young women from different rural communities in Southern Ethiopia, who leave behind their families and communities to move to the city to pursue their formal education. To guide our analysis, we draw on Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, which describes empowerment as '... a process whereby those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices develop such an ability' (p437). Rooted in this definition, we conceptualise the rural-urban migration of the participants as a process of empowerment that provides them with the opportunity to pursue their secondary education in the city, a prospect which generally is not possible for them in their rural communities. Conceptualising empowerment as a process rather than an outcome allows us to move beyond narrow understandings of empowerment as equality in certain domains and freedom of choice, both of which up until now have yielded little in terms of improving



Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of empowerment drawing on Kabeer (1999)*

the daily lives and opportunities of the majority of rural girls and women (Crivello, Boyden, and Pankhurst 2019; Enyew and Mihrete 2018; Yorke, Rose, and Pankhurst 2021). Rather we pay attention to the actual influences at play in the environment within which the girls are located and the structural factors that underpin the inequalities that they face (Choo and Ferree 2010). Guided by Kabeer's (1999) framework we focus on the lives of girls and young women in their rural communities before they migrate to the city and the range of inequalities that limit their educational opportunities and outcomes in the rural context. Specifically, we consider how the resources that girls have access to, their ability to exercise their agency and to fulfil their ambitions in terms of their education and outcomes are inextricably linked (Figure 1). In particular, we explore why the socio-cultural expectations that girls will leave their education and enter into marriage persist and how they are communicated. In doing so, we show how the ability of girls and young women to challenge these inequalities is limited, and how that it is only through migration that they have the opportunity to continue their education in the city.

Overall, through our analysis, we aim to provide a more in-depth understanding of the inequalities that rural girls and young women face in pursuing their secondary education in rural areas and how these are linked to the increasing phenomenon of female rural-urban migration for education. We highlight the need for greater attention to be given to the role of structural inequalities, both within rural communities and across the rural-urban divide, if the promise of girls' secondary education promoted by the government is to be realised for rural girls and women. It is likely the findings will have relevance for those interested in the issues of education, migration and gender equality in Ethiopia, and in other similar contexts. In the next section, we outline the method and approach of the study, while also providing an overview of the context of Southern Ethiopia where the study was located.

Method and data

The data presented in this article is based on ethnographic fieldwork that took place in 2015 (three months) and 2016 (six months), in Hawassa city and a number of surrounding rural communities. The study sought to explore the educational pathways of a group of 27 girls and young women from 14 different rural communities who moved independently to the city to pursue their education in urban secondary schools.

At the time of the research, Hawassa city was located within the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR), one of nine different regional states in Ethiopia. The SNNP region was further divided into a number of administrative zones, and Hawassa city was located with the Sidama Zone, which has since become its own regional state in 2019. The SNNP region is one of the most populous and diverse regions

in Ethiopia with an estimated population of 15 million people in 2007. It is home to over 56 different ethnic groups, many of whom have their own language, culture and traditions. During the course of the fieldwork, we watched the city develop and change rapidly, with an endlessly sprawling city boundary, new and improved roads, numerous new hotels, and the building of Ethiopia's largest industrial park, all of which were offering the promise of new employment opportunities and a better life. This rapid development stood at odds with the lack of progress we witnessed taking place in rural areas outside of the city. In these rural communities, people largely depend on subsistence agriculture, where access to basic infrastructure and facilities was limited and where communities were increasingly vulnerable to environmental shocks including intermittent drought and flooding. Hawassa city has one of the largest proportion of migrants in all of Ethiopia, the majority of whom come from surrounding areas (Sidama and Wolayta) (Bundervoet 2018), perhaps drawn by the rapid development of the city.

The rural girls and young women included in this study were recruited through two local government secondary schools in Hawassa city, many of which had a large portion of female migrants. A brief screening questionnaire was administered to all female students from rural areas enrolled in the selected secondary schools. Based on this information we purposively selected the participants to reflect the characteristics of the wider sample. Where more than one student matched the criteria, we used a lottery system to select who would be invited to take part in the study. Inevitably, the participants do not reflect the experiences of all female rural-urban migrants who come to the city for education, given that the evidence suggests that many of those who migrate for education fail to enter urban schools (Erulkar et al. 2006).

At the time of the research, all the participants were enrolled in grade nine (19 participants) and grade ten (8 participants) and were between 14 and 20 years old, although during the course of the fieldwork some of the participants revealed that they were either older or younger than they had originally told us. All the participants in this study had either reached or surpassed the expected age range for marriage in their rural communities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and guardian consent was obtained for all participants under the age of 18 years.

The participants were asked to self-identify the income status of their families within their rural communities. Five participants positioned their families as *low-medium* income level, eighteen participants identified their families as *medium* income level, while four of the participants said their families were *medium-high* income level. Given that migration involves an initial investment of resources, this perhaps suggests that those from *medium* or *medium-high* income level are more likely to migrate. Yet all the participants indicated that in relation to urban families, they were poor. For many of the girls in this study, agriculture was the main income-generating activity of their families, including growing *enset* and coffee for both subsistence and commercial farming. Four participants had fathers who had passed away, an experience that left the families both financially and socially vulnerable. The highest level of education achieved by any of the parents was grade ten, although the majority had not completed primary education.

The data presented in this paper primarily come from in-depth life-story interviews, augmented by insights garnered through other methods including focus group discussions, participatory video drama and information gathered from a number of visits to some of the sending communities of the rural girls. Other authors have successfully used

similar research approaches with children and young people in Ethiopia including in relation to education (e.g. Abebe 2020) and migration (e.g. De Regt and Mihret 2020). The in-depth nature of the study was crucial for building trust and confidence with the research participants and the combination of different qualitative methods helps to generate in-depth knowledge of the lived experiences of participants. This was particularly important given our different positionalities to the research participants and to each other, and potential power imbalances that could be present. We continually reflected upon these issues throughout the research and how this affected the data collection and analysis. For example, the fact that some of the participants told us that they were younger or older than their actual age may have been because they were not at the expected age for the grade in which they were enrolled. However, through our sustained engagement in the field, we were able to build a greater sense of trust with the participants.

As the participants had already left their rural communities and were living in the city, the life story interviews (Goodson 2001) provided the participants with the opportunity to reflect on their lives in their rural communities and their decision to come to the city and continue their education. This helped them to make connections across different aspects of their lives including across time (past, present, future), space (rural, urban) and different themes (education, migration and gender), and provided insight into the multitude of influences in their lives (Christensen and Jensen 2012; Goodson and Sikes 2011). This helped to elicit rich and nuanced understandings of the lives and experiences of the participants from their own perspectives. This is important given that evidence from the lived experience of rural girls and women is often missing from policy and practice in Ethiopia, which tends to prioritise quantitative data and evidence, which does not adequately capture their lives and experiences and in turn leads to ineffective policy and practice.

Ethical approval was obtained from the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin and the College of Medicine and Health Science, Hawassa University for this study. We also obtained local government approval from Hawassa City Administration Education Department. All the interviews were conducted in either Sidamigna or Amharic, depending on the preference of the participants and then translated into English. Compensation was provided for the participants to cover their travel and food expenses. The data was recorded and transcribed, and the coding process was assisted by Atlas.ti. The data was coded using emergent themes and subthemes. The names of the participants and all locations outside of Hawassa city have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

'In theory but not in practice'

'Gender equality exists in theory in the rural area, but no one practices it' explained many of the participants through various groups discussions and interviews. They reflected on how the pathway towards gender equality had been set in motion by the government over 25 years ago, when, on coming to power, it had introduced laws and policies that support gender equality. The participants suggested that these laws and policies had brought about some important changes especially in relation to access to education and employment, and this now meant that '... females were now starting to become more equal ...'

(Focus Group Discussion [FGD]). Yet, they also agreed that these expanded opportunities were not sufficient to bring about the transformative changes needed to achieve gender equality as still ‘... males are favoured’ (Beza). In elaborating upon this idea, Meron explains that ‘everywhere people talk about gender equality, but in reality, when you go to the rural area it is not practiced ...’. She further commented that ‘... the problem is within the community; men do not accept gender equality’. The efforts of the government to promote gender equality had not been transformative enough and, as a result, the lives of rural girls and women continued to be characterised by multiple, interlocking inequalities that impact every aspect of their daily lives and limit their experiences and opportunities.

Kidist was sixteen when she left her rural community and at the time of the research, she was enrolled in grade ten in a secondary school in Hawassa city, where she had been living for the past four years. Looking back at her life in her rural community she told us of how ‘women don’t have rights’ and girls and women are unequal in every aspect of their lives including the resources that they had access to. ‘We are not even equal in food’ she exclaimed, explaining how scarce resources were restricted to male family members and how if there is not enough food, it is given to their brothers and fathers while she and her sisters ‘don’t eat anything’. She also describes how in her rural community her mobility was heavily constrained, and she could not move around her community freely, while her brothers were free to do what they wanted. This was a common theme that emerged during our interviews, and many of the other participants frequently spoke of the restricted mobility of girls and women in their communities, which they described as very challenging (also De Regt and Mihret 2020). In contrast to the freedom of male community members, girls and women were expected to ‘... stay at home and do the home activities’ (Afewerk). The heavy work burden was often the first thing that the participants raised when speaking about their life in their rural communities, discussing at length the repetitive and burdensome tasks that they had to complete on a daily basis – including cleaning the house, collecting firewood, washing clothes and preparing food for the whole family. Girls and women had to compensate for the lack of infrastructure and facilities in their rural areas including a lack of running water and electricity by, for example, ‘... travelling a long distance to fetch water’ (Bereket). For many of the participants, their heavy work burden negatively impacted their education and meant that they were often late or absent from school. As they got older, and their domestic work burden increased, their academic performance deteriorated, which then limited their education and related outcomes. Although these activities were crucial to the functioning of the communities, girls and women received no reward or recognition for these essential but arduous tasks.

Through the stories of the participants, we came to understand how the ability of girls and women to challenge these inequalities in their rural communities was limited. Like Kidist, many of the participants spoke of how girls and women had no decision-making power in their rural communities, whether in the council of community elders who make decisions in the community where women are not allowed to participate, or in the family home. Kidist, succinctly captures the lack of decision-making power of women describing how ‘... we don’t have rights., we don’t speak, we don’t judge, we don’t give any decision’ (Kidist). The idea of not speaking or ‘keeping silent’ was commonly used by the participants, across a variety of situations and contexts, to capture how girls and women had limited

agency and instead were expected to accept the established hierarchy. As Samira explains ‘Even if [a woman] speaks out, she is told: ‘you are a female you have to keep silent . . . you have to accept what you are given [by males]’. Therefore, even if females did try to speak out against the injustices that they faced, their protests would be quickly disregarded.

Unequal economic opportunities

As the participants saw it, their lower status in their communities was primarily a result of their unequal access to economic opportunities, which in turn had implications for their education and social outcomes. In all of the communities, male community members were the sole income-generators, while there were ‘no activities available for women to earn money’ (Alem). Samira explains how ‘. . . regarding economic capacity, women are not equal’ and as result ‘. . . the community don’t see [males and females] equally’, while Afework reiterates this sentiment explaining that ‘. . . [the community] gives more priority for males because in our village males are the income generators’. Due to their economic power, men enjoyed greater independence and freedom, while in contrast, girls and women had to ‘. . . rely essentially on the income-generating capacity of male family members (fathers, brothers)’ (Amarech). Consequently, given their dependence on male community members, it was widely accepted that the only way for girls to secure their futures and transition into adulthood was through marriage (also Pankhurst 2014), which also had consequences for their education, as we will further explore.

Through the stories of the participants, we start to see the significant inequalities that rural girls face in their communities including their unequal access to resources, their heavy work burden and their limited agency and decision-making power (Kabeer 1999). These inequalities experienced by girls and women are underpinned by inequalities across the rural-urban divide including the limited infrastructure and facilities available and the lack of employment opportunities. From the perspectives of the participants, and in contrast to the dominant narrative at the national level, the economic inequalities that they face are the main driver of the unequal lives they live in the rural community, which in turn reinforces their unequal status. They are financially dependent on male community members which curtails their freedom, yet, at the same time, the privileges of male community members depend on the hard labour of girls and women, which is used to compensate for wider rural-urban inequalities. As a result, they have limited ability to challenge or change the established hierarchy and instead must ‘keep silent’ and accept their status within the community. As we will consider in more detail, it is through education and securing their own economic independence that the participants envisage a route to greater gender equality and empowerment and that migration provides girls with an opportunity to realise these aspirations.

‘No other options’

(Laughing) If I was still there, I would be the mother of kids. There is no other story. The only thing that you can do is to get married because when you are a child, they hire you like marriage recruitment, they recruit you and they can marry you (Hewan).

At the time of the data collection, Genet had been in Hawassa for two years and was enrolled in grade ten. Neither of her parents are educated and she describes her family as ‘medium’ income level. Genet tells us that her main reason for migrating was to ‘... escape the marriage questions there’ but she also wished to escape the heavy domestic work burden which meant that she did ‘not have any time for my studies’. Similar to many other participants, she describes how girls are expected to enter into marriage when they reach upper primary school, while those who remain unmarried by the end of secondary school face ridicule in the community. This ridicule and shame not only impacted rural girls and young women, but also extended to their families. Genet tells us that her father objected to her education and tried to stop her migration, warning her that ‘if you go [to the city], you will be a grade eight student and if you fail the community will laugh at me, they will say that no one will want you for marriage’. As Genet observes ‘... he was afraid of the community’s criticism’ (also Crivello, Boyden, and Pankhurst 2019).

While only a small number of participants said that they migrated to escape the direct threat of marriage, like Genet, all the participants without exception indicated that if they were still living in their rural community, they would have left education and entered marriage and motherhood. As Beza describes, ‘... last year I would have already gotten married and this year I would have a baby’. This was despite the fact that many participants had completed their primary education before they migrated. In explaining this phenomenon, they discussed how although community members were ‘... changing their attitudes towards girls’ education’ (Martha), this was mostly restricted to enrolling girls in primary school and once girls reached a certain point, it was widely agreed that they had received ‘enough education’ and they should now enter into marriage. Again, participants mainly viewed this as a result of the economic inequalities that they faced and the fact that beyond education there were ‘no other options’ (Hannah) for girls and young women other than marriage (also Pankhurst 2014). They discussed how, even for girls who completed secondary level, they would still be expected to enter into marriage directly afterwards. In this regard, continuing education was seen as having no benefits for girls, while marriage was viewed as a more secure option (also Archambault 2011). In fact, the decision to pursue education was associated with carrying the unnecessary risk that could limit girls’ opportunities for securing a good marriage partner (also Camfield and Tafere 2011).

‘Education? What does that bring?’

Participants spoke of how the wider community would try to coerce and shame girls to enter into marriage using ‘... insults, rumours, and bad examples ...’ (Kidist) with warnings such as ‘... you are now old enough ... , you have to marry someone ... up to grade eight is enough education for girls’ (Melal). Unlike Genet’s father, in most cases, the participants indicated that their parents supported their education and did not wish for them to be married. Yet participants still described being unable to withstand the significant pressure from the wider community, despite their parents’ support. Many participants told of how community members would use ‘bad examples’ of other girls who had continued their education beyond the expected age of marriage but had failed to benefit from education and were now ‘left in the house’. For example, Genet describes how members of her community would tell her things like: ‘Look at her she finished

grade ten but she's left in the house, even she doesn't have a husband'. Similarly, Hannah recalled how community members would declare: 'Education? What does that bring? It didn't bring her anything and now she is left in her parents' house'. If girls did not conform to the community's expectations, then they ran the risk of becoming a 'bad example', which would bring shame not only on the girls themselves but also on their families (also Mjaaland 2018). This shame then becomes a powerful tool of persuasion in convincing girls to marry.

At the same time, the participants, also agreed that to be 'left in the house' (Samira) would ultimately be the worst option. This meant that girls would continue to face substantial inequalities including limited access to even the most basic resources, a heavy work burden and little independence or decision-making power, and with their chances of finding a suitable marriage partner ever diminishing. Considering these limited options, the participants explained that there were many instances in their rural communities of girls who 'preferred' to enter marriage (also Pankhurst, Tiumelissan, and Chuta 2016). As explained by Genet many girls accepted that education would not bring them any benefits as they '... have seen other girls who completed grade ten and didn't benefit' and so rather than wasting their time with education they would enter marriage directly. Considering the lack of alternatives and the high risk that education entails, entry into marriage may provide a way of escaping current inequalities and uncertainty, even though they may be facing new forms of inequality by entering marriage early. Thus, whether pressured into early marriage by the community, or whether rural girls themselves *chose* to enter marriage, the lack of alternatives mean that for most, marriage is the only option. For many rural and girls and women, it is only by migrating out of their rural communities that they can escape this seemingly insurmountable pressure to enter marriage and thereby continue their secondary education

'Free from a life of dependence'

Rahel was 18 years old at the time of the data collection and was enrolled in grade nine. She tells us that she did not like living in her rural community because of the lack of resources and facilities such as electricity and a phone network; also, her community did not have a good attitude to girls' education. Rahel's mother, who was forced to marry her father when she was very young, suggested that Rahel move to Hawassa to have a better-quality education and to escape the threat of marriage. Rahel agreed with her mother and explained to us that it was important for her to pursue her education to get knowledge and to secure financial independence. Rahel herself was also attracted by the urban lifestyle and she talked about how her life has improved since coming to the city and how she has become 'more urban' and 'more beautiful'.

As illustrated through Rahel's account, in addition to the multiple and intersecting inequalities in their communities that had influenced girls' decision to migrate, many of the participants were also attracted by city life where they had greater access to resources and greater freedom. Like Rahel, others also spoke of 'becoming more beautiful' since moving to the city. Initially, this sounded a somewhat superficial claim, but we came to appreciate the significance of these declarations, which signalled the greater availability of resources and the new sense of agency they now had to determine their lives and everyday choices. In most cases, the participants could now freely access essential services

such as water and electricity and had greater freedom and decision-making power. This meant that they now had more time to devote to their education and focus on their futures, a point captured by Melal:

[In the city] we have changed - the way that we study, the way that we speak, how to keep our hygiene. We give priority to our education . . . and we know that if we perform well, it is good for our future life. We have become a good lesson for others.

Many of the constraints of rural life, such as the heavy work burden that they had faced, had either been significantly reduced or eliminated completely. In the city, the participants have greater access to resources, and greater scope to exercise their agency and decision-making power, which in turn means that they have more control over their lives and can pursue their education (Kabeer 1999).

Since coming to the city, many of the participants spoke of how their aspirations for their future had increased and they now spoke of becoming doctors, lawyers and engineers, career paths that were markedly different from those of their parents. In contrast to their lives in their rural communities characterised by their financial dependence on male family members, their desire to be financially independent and ‘. . . free from a life of dependence’ (Siyane) was central to their imagined future pathways. They believed that only by securing their own economic independence would they become equal with men and ensure that their future marriages would be fair and equal. Nevertheless, even though many facets of the lives of the participants had improved in the city – with greater access to resources and greater agency and decision-making power – it is perhaps more appropriate to see the empowerment of the girls and young women in this study as a process rather than an outcome (Kabeer 1999). It is still unclear as to whether the participants will be able to realise their aspirations for their futures, which also brings to the fore the question of what will happen if the participants are not successful, and what awaits them if they return to their rural communities where marriage is ‘the only option’ (Crivello, Boyden, and Pankhurst 2019).

Conclusion

This article has explored the rural-urban migration of 27 girls and young women who leave behind their rural communities and move to the city to pursue their secondary education in Southern Ethiopia. Drawing on the participants’ lived experiences and guided by Kabeer’s (1999) framework of empowerment, we have revealed the nature and extent of the inequalities that the participants face in their rural communities that limit their secondary education and outcomes – including their unequal access to resources and their limited agency and decision-making power – and how these are linked to their rural-urban migration for education. Our findings highlight the tension between the promise of girls’ secondary education, which is promoted, often uncritically, at both the international and national level and the reality of the lives of girls and young women living in rural areas, the majority of whom are unable to realise this promise.

The combination of different methods – including life story interviews, focus group discussion and participatory video drama – and the sustained engagement with the participants over time has been a particular strength of this study. Recognising that in many instances girls and young women have been taught to ‘keep silent’, providing

participants with time to reflect and communicate their experiences has proved essential during the research. As these are retrospective accounts of the participants' lives in rural communities and in some ways coloured by their experiences in urban areas, it could be argued that this does not provide a fully accurate portrayal of rural life as the girls are looking back. However, the corroboration of the accounts of rural life, including through our own visits to some of these rural locations, demonstrated the essential accuracy of these accounts. Further studies that explore the lives and pathways of rural girls in the city through and beyond secondary education could provide additional insights. In addition, generating quantitative evidence that provides a better understanding of the extent of female rural-urban migration for education is warranted.

In comparing the lives of the participants in this study across rural-urban location, we have shown how the inequalities that girls and women experience in their rural communities are underpinned by wider structural inequalities across the rural-urban divide (Abebe 2008, 2020; Boyden and Zharkevich 2018; Mains 2011). Failure to address these wider structural inequalities has meant that what has taken place is the impression of progress rather than real progress in their rural communities, where gender equality exists 'in theory but not in practice'. Inequalities across the rural-urban divide have a disproportional impact on the lives of rural girls and women who continue to compensate for the lack of basic resources and infrastructure in their rural communities (e.g. running water, electricity) through the heavy domestic labour that they carry out on a daily basis. Economic inequalities within communities and across the rural-urban divide and the subsequent financial dependence of rural girls and women on male community members means marriage is often the 'only option' for rural girls and women who wish to secure their futures (Crivello, Boyden, and Pankhurst 2019). In this context, we come to see their migration as a process of empowerment that enables them to pursue their education, which we learn, would not have been possible for them if they had stayed in their rural communities (Kabeer 1999). As presented visually in Figure 2, through their migration to the city, the participants have increased their access to the resources that they need, they have increased their agency and decision-making power and have the opportunity to access secondary education. At the same time, our

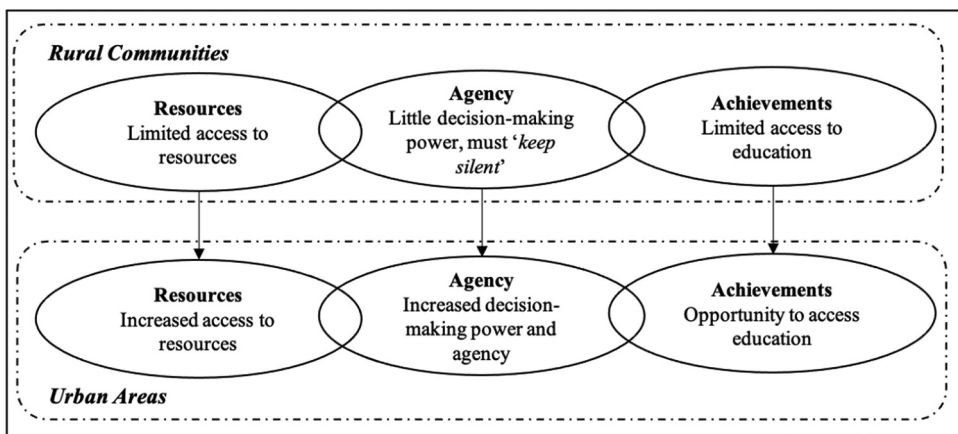


Figure 2. Migration as a process of empowerment, drawing on Kabeer (1999)

analysis underlines the importance of understanding empowerment as a process rather than an outcome, especially given the fact that the futures of the participants in this study are still uncertain.

Based on our analysis, a number of important considerations for policy and practice emerge. There is an urgent need for more transformative approaches to rural girls' education and gender equality, which move beyond simply seeking to increase female participation in education and instead take account of the environment within which rural girls and young women are located (Choo and Ferree 2010). Greater attention must be paid to the complexity of the decision-making process around education and marriage, acknowledging that resisting child marriage may not be possible for or even preferable to girls in specific contexts (Bessa 2019) and the potentially negative psychological and social impacts for girls who do try to resist this pressure. In particular, our findings point to the need to give greater attention to the economic rights and independence of girls and women and to ensure that viable opportunities are available for girls beyond success in secondary education before the potential of girls' education can be fully realised (Archambault 2011; Bessa 2019; Pankhurst 2014; Kabeer 1999; Khoja-Moolji 2016).

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to the twenty-seven research participants and their family members who took part in this study. We would also like to thank the Centre for Policy and Development Research at Hawassa University for facilitating this research. We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Funding was received from the Irish Research Council and the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

ORCID

Louise Yorke  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5028-0317>

Robbie Gilligan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4150-3523>

References

- Abebe, T. 2008. "Trapped between Disparate Worlds? the Livelihoods, Socialisation and School Contexts of Rural Children in Ethiopia." *Childhoods Today* 2 (1): 1–29.
- Abebe, T. 2020. "Lost Futures? Educated Youth Precarity and Protests in the Oromia Region, Ethiopia." *Children's Geographies* 18 (6): 584–600. doi:10.1080/14733285.2020.1789560.
- Alemu, B. 2008. "Early Marriage in Ethiopia Causes and Health Consequences." *Exchange on HIV and AIDS, Sexuality and Gender* 1: 4–6.

- Archambault, C. S. 2011. "Ethnographic Empathy and the Social Context of Rights: "Rescuing" Maasai Girls from Early Marriage." *American Anthropologist* 113 (4): 632–643. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1433.2011.01375.x.
- Bessa, T. 2019. "Informed Powerlessness: Child Marriage Interventions and Third World Girlhood Discourses." *Third World Quarterly* 40 (11): 1941–1956. doi:10.1080/01436597.2019.1626229.
- Boyden, J. 2013. "'We're Not Going to Suffer like This in the Mud': Educational Aspirations, Social Mobility and Independent Child Migration among Populations Living in Poverty." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 43 (5): 580–600. doi:10.1080/03057925.2013.821317.
- Boyden, J., and I. Zharkevich. 2018. "Children, Impacts of Development On." In *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by H. Callan, 1–8. John Wiley and Sons.
- Broussard, N., and T. G. Tekleselassie. 2012. "Youth Unemployment: Ethiopia Country Study." *International Growth Centre. Working Paper* 12 (592): 1–37.
- Bundervoet, T. 2018. *Internal Migration in Ethiopia: Evidence from a Quantitative and Qualitative Research Study*. Washington, D.C: World Bank.
- Camfield, L., and Y. Tafere. 2011. "Community Understandings of Childhood Transitions in Ethiopia: Different for Girls?" *Children's Geographies* 9 (2): 247–262. doi:10.1080/14733285.2011.562385.
- Central Statistical Agency [CSA]. 2016. *Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey 2016*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Rockville, Maryland, USA: Central Statistical Authority and ICF.
- Choo, H. Y., and M. M. Ferree. 2010. "Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities." *Sociological Theory* 28 (2): 129–149. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9558.2010.01370.x.
- Christensen, A.-D., and S. Q. Jensen. 2012. "Doing Intersectional Analysis: Methodological Implications for Qualitative Research." *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 20 (2): 109–125. doi:10.1080/08038740.2012.673505.
- Chuta, N. 2013. "Towards a 'Bright Future': Young People Overcoming Poverty and Risk in Two Ethiopian Communities." *Young Lives Working Paper* 107. Young Lives, Oxford.
- Chuta, N., and V. Morrow. (2015). "Youth Trajectories through Work and Marriage in Rural Ethiopia." *Young Lives Working Paper* 135. Young Lives, Oxford.
- Crivello, G. 2011. "'Becoming Somebody': Youth Transitions through Education and Migration in Peru." *Journal of Youth Studies* 14 (4): 395–411. doi:10.1080/13676261.2010.538043.
- Crivello, G., J. Boyden, and A. Pankhurst. 2019. "'Motherhood in Childhood': Generational Change in Ethiopia." *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* 3 (1–2): 1–6. doi:10.20897/femenc/5918.
- De Regt, M., and F. B. Mihret. 2020. "Agency in Constrained Circumstances: Adolescent Migrant Sex Workers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14 (3): 1–17.
- Enyew, B. E., and A. G. Mihrete. 2018. "Liberal Feminism: Assessing Its Compatibility and Applicability in Ethiopia Context." *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 10,(6): 59–64.
- Erulkar, A. S., T.-A. Mekbib, N. Simie, and T. Gulema. 2006. "Migration and Vulnerability among Adolescents in Slum Areas of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia." *Journal of Youth Studies* 9 (3): 361–374. doi:10.1080/13676260600805697.
- Goodson, I. 2001. "The Story of Life History: Origins of the Life History Method in Sociology." *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 1 (2): 129–142. doi:10.1207/S1532706XID0102_02.
- Goodson, I., and P. Sikes. 2011. *Life History in Educational Settings: Learning from Lives*. Buckingham: Open University.
- Grieve, T. 2016. "Seeing the Social: Understanding Why Children are Out of School in Rural Ethiopia." Doctoral dissertation, University of Bath.
- Hashim, I. 2007. "Independent Child Migration and Education in Ghana." *Development and Change* 38 (5): 911–931. doi:10.1111/j.1467-7660.2007.00439.x.
- Joshi, R., and A. Verspoor. 2012. *Secondary Education in Ethiopia: Supporting Growth and Transformation*. Washington, D.C: World Bank.

- Kabeer, N. 1999. "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment." *Development and Change* 30 (3): 435–464. doi:10.1111/1467-7660.00125.
- Khoja-Moolji, S. 2016. "Doing the 'Work of Hearing': Girls' Voices in Transnational Educational Development Campaigns." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 46 (5): 745–763. doi:10.1080/03057925.2015.1084582.
- Mains, D. 2011. *Hope Is Cut: Youth, Unemployment, and the Future in Urban Ethiopia*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ministry of Education [MoE]. 2019. *Education Statistics Annual Abstract 2011 E.C. (2018/19)*. Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia.
- Ministry of Women Children and Youth Affairs [MoWCYA]. 2013. *National Strategy and Action Plan on Harmful Traditional Practices (Htps) against Women and Children in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia.
- Ministry of Women's Affairs [MoWA]. 2006. *National Action Plan for Gender Equality (NAP-GE) 2006–2010*. Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia.
- Mjaaland, T. 2018. "Negotiating Gender Norms in the Context of Equal Access to Education in North-western Tigray, Ethiopia." *Gender and Education* 30 (2): 139–155. doi:10.1080/09540253.2016.1175550.
- Mulugeta, E. 2004. "Swimming against the Tide: Educational Problems and Coping Strategies of Rural Female Students in Ethiopia." *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review* 20 (2): 71–97. doi:10.1353/eas.2004.0008.
- National Planning Commission [NPC]. 2016. *Growth and Transformation Plan 2015/16 – 2019/20. Volume I: Main Text*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia.
- Pankhurst, A. 2014. *Child Marriage and Female Circumcision (FGM/C): Evidence from Ethiopia*. Oxford: Young Lives.
- Pankhurst, A., A. Tiumelissan, and N. Chuta. 2016. *The Interplay between Community, Household and Child Level Influences on Trajectories to Early Marriage in Ethiopia: Evidence from Young Lives*. Oxford: Young Lives.
- Rihani, M. A. 2006. *Keeping the Promise: Five Benefits of Girls' Secondary Education*. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development.
- Schewel, K., and S. Fransen. 2018. "Formal Education and Migration Aspirations in Ethiopia." *Population and Development Review* 44 (3): 555. doi:10.1111/padr.12159.
- Tadele, G., and A. A. Gella. 2014. "Becoming a Young Farmer in Ethiopia: Processes and Challenges." Future Agricultures Working Paper 83. Future Agricultures.
- United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF]. 2014. *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*. New York: United Nations.
- Verspoor, A. M. 2008. *At the Crossroads: Choices for Secondary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
- Wodon, Q., C. Male, A. Nayihouba, A. Onagoruwa, A. Savadogo, A. Yedan, J. Edmeades, et al. 2017. *Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
- World Bank [WB]. 2018. *General Education Quality Improvement Program for Equity (GEQIP-E)*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Yorke, L., P. Rose, and A. Pankhurst. 2021. "The Influence of Politics on Girls' Education in Ethiopia." In *Reforming Education and Challenging Inequalities in Southern Contexts*, edited by P. Rose, M. Arnot, R. Jeffery, and N. Singal, 98–119. London: Routledge.