

Developing support strategies Personal networks of female domestic workers in Ethiopia and Tanzania

Abstract

Based on ethnographic research in Ethiopia and Tanzania, this paper draws attention to the personal networks that female domestic workers employ and mobilize to achieve their goals and face challenges, focusing in particular on support strategies among women. Domestic work is often hidden and open to abuse. Women describe their lives as isolated and subject to the will of their employers. However, mobility is a central element in their lives. Despite all the limitations, they continuously find alternative ways to explore urban space, develop new relationships and activate strategies of mutual support. Network resources turn out to be both enabling and constraining; however they are always part of women's strategies for negotiating their own position and achieving their goals, which are the result of a dialectical relationship, within specific gendered contexts, between personal aspirations and social obligations, opportunities and constraints.

Keywords: domestic workers, gender, personal networks, Ethiopia, Tanzania

1. Introduction

Minew, a twenty-three-year-old Ethiopian woman, was working as a live-in domestic worker in the city of Debre Markos at the time of our encounter. She was between twelve and thirteen years of age when she left her village of origin and moved to town to avoid an arranged marriage. She started working for some distant relatives who offered her accommodation and education in exchange for household chores. After having completed her primary education, she found a paid job as a live-in domestic worker. She thought it would allow her to support her families and to pursue her education in the coming future. She worked within two different households that she left after having experienced several forms

of exploitation and abuse. She also worked as a day labourer at construction sites before moving back to live-in domestic work. When I met her, she had been working within the same household for three years. Her plan was to move to a bigger city and find a better paid job.

Neema, a nineteen-year-old Tanzanian woman, was born in the rural area of Dodoma region. At the age of thirteen she moved to the city of Morogoro to continue her primary education against the will of her father. She was told that her aunt and uncle in Morogoro were willing to host her and send her to school in exchange for domestic help, yet promises about school were broken. In her attempt to juggle family demands and individual aspirations, she started working for a married couple who agreed to cover her school expenses. She moved to another house when her male employer tried to coerce her into having sex. At the time of our encounter she had been working within the same household for three years. Like Minew, her plan was to move to a bigger city.

In this article, I will take the lived experiences of female domestic workers in Ethiopia and Tanzania as a point of departure to examine the ways in which they mobilise and utilise various forms of personal networks to achieve their goals and face challenges. In doing so, I will shed light on the gendered context in which their lives are embedded, and on the complex interweaving of personal strategies and social constraints regulating them. I listen to women's narratives to explore the reasons behind their movements, their life trajectories, their ambitions and expectations, the decisions that they take and the strategies they employ to carve out personal spaces of action (see Fernandez, de Regt, 2014).

I have carried out ethnographic research in Ethiopia and Tanzania as part of my ongoing PhD programme, in collaboration with an Italian non-governmental organization (NGO) that is working on projects to support female domestic workers in both countries¹. The choice of a two-country study allows me to contribute to the rather scant literature on the gender dynamics of internal migration – with a specific focus on domestic work – in a comparative manner. Significantly, it has also meant being able to confront different sets of labour legislation, which in the case of Ethiopia excludes domestic workers from its remit – as in the majority of other countries (ILO, 2013) – while in Tanzania includes them in umbrella legislation for all workers, but falls short of accounting for many of their needs.

The term «domestic worker» is a broad term, its use and meaning differ in space and time and between different disciplines (van Nederveen Meerkerk *et al.*, 2015). In this paper I mainly refer to young women and girls who move from rural and semi-urban areas to the major towns and cities to work within the households of others. Their main working activities vary from cleaning the house, washing clothes, cooking, running errands, taking care of kids and

¹ CVM (Comunità Volontari per il Mondo) is an NGO which supports, promotes and facilitates the creation of female Domestic Worker Associations in both countries, as well as the coordination between trade unions and different institutions to put into place actions and policies for the inclusion of domestic workers within a legal framework that guarantees their rights.

sick people. They are primarily live-in domestic workers, so they reside in the households where they work².

As many studies have indicated, domestic workers all over the world experience discrimination and marginalization with regard to pay, working conditions and legal rights, as well as verbal, physical and sexual abuse (Mulugeta, 2012; Olsson, 2016). Women employ various forms of agency and resilience to face challenges and improve their situations (Fernandez, de Regt, 2014; Marchetti, 2014; Parreñas Salazar, 2001; Ribeiro Corossacz, 2018). Among the challenges that domestic workers face, scholars have often mentioned the isolation of the workplace that leads to experiences of confinement in private homes and restrictions of movement. Given the isolated and privatized nature of domestic work, when it comes to women's personal relationships, scholars tend to explore the relationship between domestic workers and the people for whom they work (Rollins, 1985), as well as the relationships that domestic workers have with their parents and relatives back home, mainly focusing on the role of the birth family in decision-making processes (Camacho, 1999). Little attention has been given to other types of relationships that women establish in the locality of work, such as friends, peers, neighbours, various acquaintances and other contacts. One of the few exceptions is Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's (1994) study of Mexican undocumented migrant women in California. The author examines how female domestic workers informally collectivise their experiences and share information through extensive networks outside the workplace.

Regarding studies of domestic work in Africa³, Janet Bujra provided a detailed historical and contextual analysis of domestic service in Tanzania, and grasped the complexities of domestic workers' lives «to understand the terms and conditions of their employment, but also to hear how they survive in a world of hardship» (Bujira, 2000, p. ix). Despite their precarious lives, domestic workers continuously establish and reinforce social ties and interpersonal relationships which may play a pivotal role in times of trouble (Awumbila *et al.*, 2017; Klocker, 2007). Eleanor Preston-Whyte (1970) has illustrated how domestic workers' relationships in South Africa reveal relevant sources of mutual aid, as well as forms of labour solidarity.

Anthropologists have broadly adopted the concept of networks as an analytical tool for their studies of urban social relationships in Africa (Mitchell, 1969). For instance, Nici Nelson (1978) explored how women who produce and sell local beer in Nairobi utilise their personal networks to survive in an uncertain market. Network resources turn out to be both enabling and constraining (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994), but they always bring to light women's strategies to carve out personal and collective spaces of action. My intent is precisely to look at personal networks which are not readily apparent in women's lives, and

² I use the term «household» in a broad sense to mean the group of people related to the owner and for whom the labourer works, as well as the place where this group resides.

³ For a historical analysis of the changing nature of domestic labour in Africa, see Deborah Bryceson (2019)

which may emerge outside the employers' household and be strategically used in case of need⁴.

This paper focuses most of its attention on the ties that Ethiopian and Tanzanian domestic workers develop with other female domestic workers, and specifically on ties of mutual support⁵. Personal networks are here understood as complex, dynamic entities which undergo deep transformations over the life course, as relationships may form, weaken, strengthen, dissolve, form again and change in content (McCarty *et al.*, 2019). I analyse women's narratives in the present and past tense to explore the various ties which they have established in different circumstances during their life course, and especially before coming into contact with the NGO.

This article is structured as follows. In the first section, I present some figures on domestic work in Ethiopia and Tanzania and I contextualise both countries in terms of institutional channels of social protection. In the second section, I present my methodology which privileges a life-story approach. In the remainder of the article I illustrate the life stories of Minev (Ethiopia) and Neema (Tanzania) to explore personal networks of women in different stages of their life: from when they decided to leave their villages of origin to their life and work experience in their cities of current residence. In particular, I explore the reasons behind migration and the role of network resources in migration processes, with both their enabling and constraining effects. I explore relationships of mutual support established among female domestic workers. Finally, I briefly analyse the nature of the personal networks illustrated in the article and I offer my conclusions.

2. Some facts and figures

Both in Ethiopia and Tanzania – as well as in the majority of other countries – there is a lack of reliable data on domestic workers. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO)⁶, in 2005 at least 248,600 people were employed as domestic workers in private households in Addis Ababa, and 91% of them were women (Schwenken, Heimeshoff, 2011). Between 2015 and 2016, the Population Council undertook a study of 4,540 migrant, out-of-school girls in six Ethiopian regions. While 1,094 were in domestic work at the time of the survey, 67% of migrant girls entered domestic work as their first working experience (Erulkar *et al.*, 2017). In Ethiopia domestic workers are excluded from the application of the current Labour Proclamation No.1156/2019, and they do not have a specific trade union upholding their rights.

⁴ In exploring personal networks I employ various English terms which possess multiple nuances. For a detailed analysis of how terms such as «relation», «relationship», «contact» and many others have been used and can be differentiated by anthropologists in English, see Marilyn Strathern (2020).

⁵ This paper is part of a larger PhD project which explores the complex set of relationships that female domestic workers establish in urban settings.

⁶ The source in question is the ILO's LABORSTA statistical database, which publishes data on employment in private households: <http://laborsta.ilo.org/applv8/data/SSMe.html>

As for Tanzania, a situational analysis of domestic workers conducted by the ILO (2016) suggests that there are at least 883,779 domestic workers in mainland Tanzania, and 203,622 in Zanzibar. If we consider people performing domestic tasks, hidden in very informal arrangements without necessarily being recognized as workers, this number increases to at least 1,728,228 in Tanzania (75% percent of whom are women). Domestic workers, under Tanzanian laws, are considered alongside other employees, with their rights provided for under the Employment and Labour Relations Act 2004. However, there is no specific provision which strictly applies to domestic workers alone. The trade union called Conservation, Hotel, Domestic and Allied Workers Union (CHODAWU) represents, amongst others, domestic workers (ILO, 2016).

Many studies have shown that formal workers' organizations all over the world usually face many challenges for organizing domestic workers, and there is little awareness of their existence among domestic workers themselves (see Ford, 2004). As Sacha Hepburn (2019) illustrates in the case of Zambia, such situations are due to a number of factors, such as the limited financial and organizational capacity of formal workers' organizations, as well as the constant marginalization of domestic work as an area of concern by governments. These organizations often fail to tailor their interventions to various existing realities, such as the great number of people recruited through «informal» working arrangements, seemingly situated «in-between» strategies of fosterage and exploitative forms of domestic labour (Gankam Tambo, 2014). In the absence of institutional social protection, domestic workers create their own strategies of action outside formal channels, developing awareness of each other's personal challenges and establishing different networks of mutual support (Ally, 2010). These elements demand attention and may be relevant also to those labour organizations who want to recruit new members, strengthen their support networks and identify alternative strategies for improving domestic workers' rights.

3. Methodology

The research has been mainly conducted in two small cities where the Italian NGO has its premises: Debre Markos (Ethiopia) and Morogoro (Tanzania). The data has been collected through semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews and life stories, focus group discussions (FGDs), daily conversations, as well as participation and observation. Overall, I conducted seven months of fieldwork in Ethiopia and five months in Tanzania during two phases: June to December 2018 and August to December 2019. Domestic workers were not easily reachable: they had little time off and it was difficult to build a relationship of confidence with them. Translators played a pivotal role in facilitating my contacts, helping me build trust in the community and assisting with interviews in Amharic (in Ethiopia) and Swahili (in Tanzania).

The ages of the women interviewed ranged from seventeen to thirty years, and most were between twenty and twenty-five years of age. Their narratives largely refer to previous experiences of work in different households, including in other towns or cities (such as Bahir Dar and Addis Abeba in Ethiopia; Dar

es Salaam and Bagamoyo in Tanzania). The majority of the women were aged between twelve and seventeen when they left their villages and entered domestic work. Many had had other kinds of work experience during their life course, such as day labouring on construction sites or live-out domestic work.

Adopting a life-story approach, my analysis of women's narratives draws on thirty life-stories gathered in Ethiopia and twenty-five in Tanzania. All women were interviewed individually with a female interpreter. Tape-recorded life stories were subsequently transcribed from Amharic (Ethiopia) or Swahili (Tanzania) into English. I have changed names of women in order not to disclose their identities. Some women have been interviewed several times and additional information has been gathered through daily conversations, for example drinking a coffee together in a coffeehouse.

Further contextual information on women's lives was gathered while working with the NGO staff, especially during the meetings of the Domestic Workers Associations established by the NGO. The viewpoints of employers, recruiters, parents, relatives and friends of women, as well as other social actors, were also collected. Observation and participation in the daily life of the community, markets, community gatherings and ceremonies, as well as visits to women in their workplaces (the households) were opportunities of great value. In particular, the exploration of urban space was important for discovering the extent of women's personal networks. Further information was gleaned from representatives of various organizations, institutions, local and international NGOs working on internal migration-related issues and workers' rights in both countries. Finally, the exchange of ideas with translators regarding methodological approach and the analysis of the research results was vital throughout the entire research process.

4. Moving to town

The large majority of domestic workers interviewed in my study came from families economically dependent on agriculture. They generally moved to middle-class and upper-middle-class households in urban areas. Most of the Ethiopian women came from villages in the Amhara region, usually no more than a hundred kilometres from Debre Markos. In contrast, some of the Tanzanian domestic workers I interviewed in Morogoro originated from different regions of the country, such as Dodoma, Kigoma and Tanga. As other studies illustrate (Grabska *et al.*, 2019), a complex set of factors push women and girls to migrate. Women may move to escape restrictive and oppressive gender regimes at home, to fulfil family needs, to pursue their education, to improve their standards of living and those of other people, to cope with household crises of various kind, to explore new areas and experience a new lifestyle. For some women the arrangements in the city are made by adults, with or without their consent. For others, taking up domestic work seems to be a strategy to obtain support and protection that is lacking back home (Gankam Tambo, 2014). Domestic workers' situations differ considerably and their motives for migration can only be understood by analyzing the specific background of each individual.

One of the reasons why Minew left her village of origin (about eighty kilometres from Debre Markos) was to avoid an arranged marriage. In her narratives, she described her preparation for her future marriage which was arranged when she was about eight years old. She was engaged in household chores both at her parents' house and at her future husband's household. She was supposed to bring water and ran errands back and forth until she was mature enough to live with her future husband. Her decision to break away from the home area was a subversive act against specific patriarchal structures, which are the result of a complex interplay of sociocultural and economic variables (including marriage rules, moral values and the land holding system) (Shiferaw *et al.*, 2018). Examples of women who had fled arranged or abducted marriages recur in the accounts of the Ethiopian women, while the Tanzanian women briefly mentioned arranged marriages in a few cases, but mainly in reference to other women. Nevertheless, in both countries women shed light on strong gender norms and gender-based inequalities which affected their lives since childhood. Gender affected their responsibilities, the type of work they had to do in or outside the home, their relationships with relatives, friends and other members of the community, their opportunities to access education, as well as their ambitions and future plans (Creighton, Omari, 2018; Pankhurst, 1992).

Neema moved to Morogoro (about 300 kilometres from her village in the Dodoma region) to attend school against the will of her father. She reported that her older sister – who was in secondary school – had a premarital relationship and became pregnant, and so her father forbade other daughters to pursue their education as a strategy to secure their integrity and virginity. In her narratives, life back home was confined to specific working activities such as household chores, livestock and agricultural tasks, and unlike her brothers, adults prevented her free movement. Migrating to Morogoro was a subversive act against restrictions placed on her mobility back home, as well as a way to experience a new urban lifestyle. This is not to say that Minew and Neema, like other women interviewed, referred to their villages and families in exclusively negative terms, or that women's migration led to a rupture in family relationships. On the contrary, the ability to support family members who stayed behind was almost always part of the women's migratory projects. Moreover, once they arrived in the cities they were confronted with new forms of gender oppression and constraints on their mobility.

Descriptions of the new harsh working conditions were often combined with nostalgic memories of childhood. A combination of mixed feelings characterized women's narratives and their self-representation (Gardner, 2002). Thus, while Neema mentioned restrictions on mobility in her place of origin as one reason for migrating to Morogoro, she was also nostalgic for the times she was not under control of her current employers, when she used to play with her friends, help her father with the harvest and pick fresh fruit from a land that – in her words – was «blessed». Similarly, Minew sometimes seemed to regret not following the will of her parents who had wanted her to get married, have a family and live in the rural area where they owned land. On other occasions, she emphasized the advantages of «modern life» that had arisen out of her decision

to migrate, such as the possibility of better clothing, a richer diet and electricity. In order to underline her point, she showed me a mobile phone that she had bought a few months before our meeting.

Women's decisions were never taken individually and unilaterally (Huijsmans, 2012, quoted in Grabska *et al.*, 2019). In line with other case studies on internal migration (Whitehead, Hashim, 2005), my research demonstrates how neighbours, friends, relatives and other acquaintances – whether based in women's villages of origin or somewhere else in the country – play a pivotal role in facilitating women's migration and access to employment once they arrive at their destination. Minew followed the advice of Alementsey, an older woman and former neighbour who was working as a live-out domestic worker in Debre Markos. One day on a visit to their village, Alementsey suggested that Minew find an alternative to her marriage. She put her in contact with distant relatives in Debre Markos who could offer her education in exchange for domestic work. In Minew's account, she and Alementsey managed to convince her parents and other influential adults of the advantages of her choice. Neema left her village when her uncle told her that he was willing to send her to school. Having trusted contacts in the city increased the likelihood of being allowed to go. During a visit to her village, her uncle talked with her parents and then took her back to Morogoro. Unlike Minew, promises made to Neema about schooling were broken from the very beginning. She worked for two years within her uncle's household without any chance of continuing her education.

Examples of broken aspirations show how, in certain circumstances, network resources may have constraining effects. Studies in Tanzania indicate that female children are commonly recruited by kinship or other filial affinities which include not only blood relations, «but also those that share bonds of friendship, ethnicity and “tribal regions”» (Kiaga, 2012, p. 3)⁷. In several cases, the notion that a domestic worker is «one of the family» obscures legitimate employer-employee relationships, and the difference between employment and fostering becomes blurred (Bourdillon, 2007). In Neema's case the relationship between people for whom she worked and her families back home was not clear. Neema argued that her parents were not aware of the exploitative working conditions she endured in Morogoro, or the fact that she was not attending school. She explained that she was not given the chance to visit or communicate with them. Her uncle used to visit her village and informed her parents about her situation. Two years passed before Neema took the drastic decision to leave her uncle's house. She waited this long because her uncle had previously told her that he was covering part of her mother's medical treatment during a period of illness.

For many women, the ability to support family members, whether these were resident in villages of origin or in urban areas, was part of their migratory project. During her stay in Morogoro, Neema used her meagre salary to allow

⁷ As in many circumstances the use of the western concept of «family» risks obscuring a number of complex social interactions (Declich, 2020). In recent research scholars utilise local concepts of kinship networks to illustrate the ways in which mobile people manage different dynamics of relatedness (Bonfanti, 2020; Massa, 2020).

other relatives to buy better quality food and satisfy other needs. At the same time, she saved a small amount of money that she invested in more individual objectives. The combination of financial support for relatives and her personal savings was, in any case, very small. In a similar way, Minew's salary contributed to partly covering the school costs of her younger brothers. Nonetheless, Neema and Minew both hoped to find a better job with a better salary in the foreseeable future. As demonstrated in the following section, women continuously mobilised personal networks to achieve such goals.

5. Developing personal networks in town

This section explores the relationships that domestic workers developed after moving to urban areas. These personal networks are not readily apparent, they may emerge outside the employers' household and are strategically used in case of need. On arrival, these women had a few contacts that were largely based on kinship or linked to the village of origin. As noted above, Minew's childhood neighbour Alemtsehay had put her in contact with distant relatives in Debre Markos, while Neema only knew her uncle and the other members of the household. Women gradually developed new ties during their first year of work. Minew, who unlike Neema began attending school, made friends with her classmates. Classes provided important moments for social interaction, even if time available outside school hours was very limited. For Neema, the only opportunities to develop new contacts occurred when she met with her two female neighbours of her same age. Such occasions, albeit very limited, enabled her to share personal experiences and gain valuable information about challenges and opportunities in town.

Minew and Neema, like many other women interviewed, did not talk at length about their personal networks. They described their lives as very isolated and their freedom of movement as largely depended on the will of their employers. Neema reported that during her first two years in Morogoro she rarely left her relatives' house. Even when she went out to go to the market or to run errands she was usually accompanied by her aunt or other household members. This greatly limited the possibility of establishing external social ties. The restrictions on mobility that women had experienced in their villages of origin and tried to escape recurred in different forms in the urban context.⁸ The chances to explore the cities were rare also because of the heavy workload: Minew and Neema usually worked every day of the week from early morning until the evening. Minew stated that when she was going to school she also often had to work at night.

At the same time, mobility was a central element in their narratives. As we have seen, they both started working as domestic workers at a very young age, and during their life course, they passed through various households. Neema found another job as a live-in domestic worker through the support of her female

⁸ In women's accounts the concept of freedom, with its multiple nuances, may reveal various meanings and be used in different ways (see Mahmood, 2009).

neighbour – a fellow student (and part-time, live-out domestic worker) whose teacher was looking for a domestic worker. After Minew completed her primary education, she left her distant relatives, who could no longer cover additional school expenses, precisely thanks to the help of her female schoolmate, also a domestic worker, who put her in contact with a female broker who helped her find another household. Minew did not depend on Alemtsehay to find new work. Indeed, in both Ethiopia and Tanzania, even when women were first brought to the cities by relatives or other people from their villages of origin, they would later mainly use other personal networks developed *in situ* to obtain subsequent jobs. Nevertheless, as I show later, Alemtsehay remained an important reference point in Minew's life. Minew thus started working for a married couple with children, and although she had to abandon her studies, for the first time she received a monthly salary. Her plan was to save some money, which she also needed to invest in her brothers' education, and to start her secondary education at a later date. Meanwhile, Neema started working for a teacher who covered her school expenses (but did not provide her with a monthly salary), although the workload made it difficult for her to attend school every day. Since she also needed to financially support her families in the rural area, her plan was to alternate between school attendance and paid domestic work. She occasionally received pocket money from her female employer, because she assisted her in selling groceries.

Minew and Neema were confronted with new challenges and, in particular, new forms of gender oppression in the households where they moved into. Once again, they used personal networks to deal with the situation and to eventually change their workplace. Minew recounted that she had a heavy workload, but that, at least in the first six months, she had a good relationship with her employers. Her tasks consisted in doing household chores, taking care of children, running some errands that also enabled her to establish new contacts outside the house, for example when she went to the market. Moreover, she occasionally helped her female employer in her small clothing store. Sometimes she would ask for time off to go to church and pray. She strategically used these moments to meet with former schoolmates. The situation changed dramatically when her male employer, who was often out of town on business, returned to Debre Markos for an extended period. On a number of occasions when the wife was out, he sexually harassed Minew. The situation deteriorated when her female employer blamed Minew for provoking the man, and she eventually left the house without receiving her final month's pay. For a few days, Minew was offered free accommodation by Tigist, one of her former female schoolmates, who was working as a live-out domestic worker. Tigist helped her find another job in the neighbourhood. With her new live-in job, Minew's salary was higher than before, but she was mistreated by her employers and other members of the household who insulted her for every little mistake. However, she was happy to receive better pay and the fact that she was living close to Tigist gave her psychological support. As in her previous workplace, the situation deteriorated when her male employer started to harass her. Minew again turned to Tigist to help her find new accommodation.

Neema was confronted with a situation similar to that of Minew. She felt more satisfied in the new house compared to when she was working for her uncle. Although she complained that her female employer used to shout at her for any mistake, and often felt unrespected, she was happy to be given the possibility to go to school, if not regularly, at least three times a week. Yet the situation changed when her male employer repeatedly tried to coerce her into having sex while his wife was out. Neema found emotional support in female neighbours, in particular one woman called Zulfa, also a domestic worker, who encouraged her to leave her workplace without informing anyone. This sort of radical decision has been acknowledged by other studies on domestic work as a strategy of survival and a way to avenge mistreatment (Cock, 1980). When she left the house, Neema was offered free accommodation for a week by Zulfa's relatives who helped her find another job.

The issue of sexual harassment and assault has been investigated, among others, by Valeria Ribeiro Corossacz (2018) in her study of female domestic workers in Brazil. According to Ribeiro Corossacz, the veil of silence surrounding sexual violence reflects the difficulties women face in reporting such incidents, which are further compounded by the fact that this form of violence – closely linked to the country's slave-owning past – tends to be naturalized and incorporated into common knowledge, and by the fact that female domestic workers are often considered responsible for men's behavior. The author argues, however, that silence can sometimes be a strategic response of resilience, rather than a denial of violence. Both Minew and Neema told me that they had been partly briefed by other domestic workers about the advantages and disadvantages of working in particular households. For example, Minew explained that she had heard of a woman who had previously suffered sexual harassment in the same household. However, she badly needed money, and this household offered her a better wage and so she had no choice but to take the risk for a while. She was therefore able to save some money and then she changed her position relying on her personal networks. This is an example of how decisions arise out of a dialectic between opportunities and structural constraints (Grabska *et al.*, 2019). The actions taken by women to overcome challenges reveal what Natascha Klocker (2007) has defined a «thin» agency that is enacted within restrictive contexts where few other alternatives are available. The access to certain personal networks makes this agency «thicker» by broadening the range of opportunities.

Following the experience of sexual harassment, Minew temporarily abandoned domestic work and worked for about a year and a half as a day labourer on construction sites. Tigist put her into contact with two other girls working in this sector. Many Ethiopian women interviewed had also worked for short periods on construction sites, including the repaving of Debre Markos' main streets with cobblestones. Although Tanzanian women had not worked on construction sites, in both countries, women had alternated between domestic work and other forms of labour in shops, bars and markets. For instance, at the time of our encounter Neema sometimes worked as an assistant in a stationary shop alongside her normal duties as a live-in domestic worker. While working on

construction sites, Minew was living with two other female peers, with whom she shared a room and food. During periods of financial difficulty, when they were unable to pull resources to pay the rent, they jointly negotiated the terms with the owner by providing domestic services in other rooms of the compound. This is an example of how women establish support strategies on encountering new people and learn to create a safer environment (Turton, 2005). Minew told me that sometimes she regretted doing the domestic work and that the working conditions were very harsh, but that during this period she had been able to establish new relationships in town and to explore the city. She also started a relationship with a man who promised to help her save money to enroll on a TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) course, but later he left Debre Markos and disappeared. During that period Minew participated in different voluntary organizations and associations involved in self-help and other social activities, such as *iddir* (established to provide mutual aid in burial matters but also to address other community concerns), *mehaber* (social/religious associations) and *iqqub* (credit associations) (Pankhurst, Mariam, 2000). Given the limited free time available Minew participated in these organizations only sporadically, but they still provided potential points of contact.

Several Ethiopian live-in domestic workers complained that, unlike the people they worked for, they were not involved in these types of gatherings which were considered to be important practices of mutual support in their villages of origin. The situation tended to change when they moved from live-in to live-out domestic jobs or did other types of work (like in the case on Minew), because they had less restrictions on their mobility, at least outside work hours. This issue emerged less in the accounts of Tanzanian domestic workers, although here as well women who were able to participate in social activities were usually live-out domestic workers. For instance, Neema mentioned youth groups in church that she did not have time to attend, unlike her live-out peers.

Despite the limited participation of domestic workers in various community-based organizations, women mobilized alternative strategies to provide each other forms of emotional, practical and material support. Minew spent around a week within the family of Tigist, a live-out domestic worker, before working on construction sites, and the same happened to Neema after she left the household where she had suffered sexual harassment. Moreover, both Minew and Neema, as well as many other women interviewed, described how, during hard times, they would borrow small amounts of money from other domestic workers with sufficient financial means. In turn, and when able to do so, they were willing to lend small savings to needy workers. There was no explicit agreement that dictated timeframes and methods of repayment, but women's narratives revealed that moneylending occurred quite regularly. However, loans were very small, and usually used to cover small daily needs, as domestic workers very rarely had substantial savings. The loans were vital, for example, when women had to suddenly leave a house and they needed to pay a room for a night. In Tanzania, women tended to use an electronic money transfer system (namely M-PESA) for sending money, which was available on their mobile phones (see Maurer, 2015). This system allowed them to send money to each other even

when they moved apart and no longer worked in the same locality. For example, Neema had remained in contact with her domestic worker friend, Zulfa (who no longer lived in Morogoro at the time of my fieldwork) and sometimes they would send each other small loans. In Ethiopia, on the other hand, these kinds of systems were not used by domestic workers and loans between women usually occurred when they were able to meet each other or through the intermediation of other people. These kinds of relationships were based on trust, and those women who proved to be unreliable were gradually excluded from the networks of mutual support, while those who were considered trustworthy were gradually included.

When I met Minew and Neema, they had been working as live-in domestic workers in the same household for three years. According to their accounts, their living and working conditions had improved compared to the past, especially in relation to the way they were treated by their employers, as well as in terms of freedom of movement. Minew stopped working on construction sites when Alemtsehay – who had first facilitated her migration – left Debre Markos and proposed her as the replacement in the household where she had worked for five years and where she had established a good relationship with her employers. Something similar happened to Neema, who started working in the household where Zulfa had previously worked as a live-in domestic worker. The common act of passing jobs on is particularly important in enabling women to exercise a minimum degree of control over labour resources (Granovetter, 1995), as illustrated in Francesca Decimo's (1996) study of solidarity networks and economic strategies of Somali immigrant women in Naples. Notwithstanding the fact that most women's employment remains extremely precarious, their continual movement does not necessarily lead to a dispersion of the acquired resources.

During my fieldwork, Alemtsehay had a two-year-old son and was living in Bah Dar (the capital of the Amhara Region) where she alternated her time between part-time domestic work and other types of labour in shops. Minew's plan was to join Alemtsehay in the near future. Zulfa had moved to Dar es Salaam where she alternated between domestic work and work at her relatives' grocery store. Neema's ambition was to join Zulfa in Dar es Salaam and to find a better job there. Both Minew and Neema claimed that marriage was an important aspect of their future projects, but they tended to give more prominence to other personal ambitions, such as the desire to pursue their education and to find a more qualified job before marriage⁹. Although their living and working conditions had slightly improved compared to the previous years, when I met them they had not achieved many of their initial goals. They were reformulating personal plans and ambitions, such as valuing other kinds of training courses rather than formal schooling. Both had also been members of the Domestic Workers Associations for about a year. Despite their broken aspirations, they still valued the urban set-

⁹ As many scholars have indicated (Temin *et al.*, 2013), migrant girls may be exposed to new ways of thinking about marriage, and the increase in girls' migration in many African contexts may result in a delay in the age of marriage, as well as a reduction in the rate of early pregnancy.

ting for enabling them to improve their lives and those of their families. The use of personal networks played a pivotal role in their attempt to achieve these goals.

6. The nature of personal networks

As Minew and Neema's stories demonstrate, women's personal networks transformed as they changed household, job and locality. Having a mobile phone clearly helped them keep in touch with one another¹⁰. Yet in several cases domestic workers (especially in Ethiopia) recounted during interviews that they easily lost contact with women who no longer lived or worked nearby. At first glance, many of these contacts may appear weak in terms of intensity and durability. However, this is not always the case. It is true that while these ties can be easily interrupted, they can also be «intermittently activated» (Jacobson, 1971, p. 634) in times of need. For example, Neema found support in Zulfa when they were neighbours, but they drifted apart when Zulfa moved to Dar es Salaam, nevertheless Neema hoped to join her in Dar es Salaam in the coming future. This is an example of ties that are active when women live nearby and that become latent when they move apart (see Nelson, 1978), and remain on hold until the right time comes.

While in some cases women considered some people as «mere» acquaintances, in other cases they established deep bonds of friendship. For example, Neema considered Zulfa to be a good friend: their bond had strengthened after Zulfa's relatives hosted her for a week when she left her job. As many studies demonstrate (Mains, 2013), friendship relations may be supported by elements of reciprocity, where affection and calculation do not contradict each other. Among the people she considered to be good friends, Minew included her former schoolmate Tigist who offered her free accommodation, as well as two female peers who she lived with while working on construction sites. The latter had initially been acquaintances who Tigist had introduced to Minew, but they subsequently strengthened their relationship when they shared a room, food and money for more than one year. Neema and Minew both invested strategically in their relationship with other domestic workers to obtain short-term advantages. Sporadic ties also often played a significant role in facilitating access to alternative, more distant social circles and associated resources and information, such as news about job opportunities (Kuschminder, 2016). Overall, many of the relationships that women established with each other cannot be statically defined as strong or weak. Minew found a job in Debre Markos through the help of Alemtsehay, and later mobilized other contacts to find other jobs and overcome several challenges she faced in the city, but she relied again on Alemtsehay after her time spent on construction sites. When I met her, she referred to Alemtsehay (who was six years older) as a sort of role model, and the only person who could help her move to a bigger city.

¹⁰ Many women I interviewed were able to obtain a mobile phone within the first two years of living in the city, either because they were able to buy it or because it was given to them by their employers.

My research also found situations in which women's relationships were characterized by conflict. Space does not allow me to explore these aspects in any depth. However, it is worth noting that conflict could occur between women working in the same household, sometimes prompted by their different place of origin or religion. For example Burtuqal, an Ethiopian woman from the Amhara region who I met in Addis Ababa where she was working, told me that she lost her job because a female colleague from Bonga repeatedly tried to turn her against their employers. She recounted how this woman used to accuse her of breaking glasses and other goods in the house. In Burtuqal's words: «she was from Bonga and was very jealous because I was the one who was usually sent outside to the supermarket or to run errands. So she broke things and would blame me: she is the one who broke it!». Yet in the same relationship elements of mutual support, competition and conflict could coexist. Ultimately, personal networks are complex, dynamic entities which change over time, «as relationships form, strengthen, change in content, dissolve, water down, or are dormant, being partly coordinated with other ties and partly in isolation» (McCarty *et al.*, 2019, p. 29).

7. Conclusion

This article has discussed how domestic workers continuously establish and mobilise various kinds of personal networks to achieve their goals and overcome challenges that hinder their precarious lives. Many women in Ethiopia and Tanzania describe their lives as isolated and dependent on the will of their employers. At the same time, mobility is a central element in their lives. Domestic workers' situations differ considerably and are not easily captured in a single, dominant description. Through the stories of Minew in Ethiopia and Neema in Tanzania, I have shown that a complex set of reasons underlies women's migration. Personal decisions interweave with various social obligations and regulations that affect women's lives from the time they grow up. Once in the city, women are confronted with hard working conditions, forms of mistreatment and abuse, new forms of gender oppression and restrictions on their mobility, and many of their expectations are unfulfilled. In the absence of institutional social protection, domestic workers create their own strategies of survival outside formal channels. They change several households and alternate between domestic work and other forms of daily labour. Domestic workers provide each other with various forms of support and lend each other small amounts of money.

Most of the personal networks that women mobilise cannot be rigidly categorised as strong or weak. Women develop various ties which range from strong bonds of friendship to mere acquaintance relationships. Conflictual relationships also occur and, in the same relationship, elements of mutual support and competition can coexist. Links between women are frequently interrupted as domestic workers move between different households and cities, but they can also be reactivated in later circumstances. Finally, sporadic and apparently weak ties can have an important role in women's lives and, in particular, they are strategically used in times of need.

Personal networks are dynamic and change across life events, such as migration and unemployment (Lubbers *et al.*, 2010). By examining personal networks we can investigate how domestic workers manage their lives and interact in complex contexts and retrace their life paths and choices and the structural circumstances in which these unfold. At the same time, analysing personal networks allows us to consider the narratives that women produce, through which they give meaning to their lives and position and identify themselves among others.

At the time of our encounter, Mineu and Neema had not achieved many of their initial goals, but they still valued their stay in Debre Markos and Morogoro respectively as an opportunity to improve their lives and achieve their plans. The use of personal networks – with both enabling and constraining effects – played a pivotal role in women’s attempts to realise these plans.

References

- Ally, S.
2010 *From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press.
- Awumbila, M., J.K. Teye, J.A. Yaro
2017 «Social Networks, Migration Trajectories and Livelihood Strategies of Migrant Domestic and Construction Workers in Accra, Ghana», in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 52, 7, 982-996.
- Bonfanti, S.
2020 «Shifting Women Mobilizing Intimate Kinship in a Punjabi Diaspora Domestic Narrative», in *Anuac.*, 9, 1, 111-133.
- Bourdillon, M.
2007 *Child Domestic Workers in Zimbabwe*, Harare, African Books Collective.
- Bryceson, D.F.
2019 «Domestic Work», in S. Bellucci, A. Eckert (Eds.), *General Labour History of Africa: Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th-21st Centuries*, Rochester, James Currey, pp. 301-332.
- Bujra, J.
2000 *Serving Class: Masculinity and the Feminisation of Domestic Service in Tanzania*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
- Camacho, A.Z.
1999 «Family, Child Labour and Migration: Child Domestic Workers in Metro Manila», in *Childhood*, 6, 1, pp. 57-73.
- Cock, J.
1980 *Maids & Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press.
- Creighton, C., C.K. Omari
2018 *Gender, Family and Work in Tanzania*, New York, Routledge Revivals.

- Decimo, F.
1996 Reti di solidarietà e strategie economiche di donne somale immigrate a Napoli, in *Studi Emigrazione*, 123, pp. 473-495.
- Declich, F.
2020 Kinship Ties on the Move: An Introduction to the Migratory Journeys of Kindred, in *Anuac.*, 9, 1), pp. 87-109.
- Erulkar, A., G. Medhin, L. Negeri
2017 *The Journey of Out-of-School Girls in Ethiopia: Examining Migration, Livelihoods, and HIV*, Addis Abeba, Population Council.
- Fernandez, B., M. de Regt
2014 *Migrant Domestic Workers in the Middle East: The Home and the World*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ford, M.
2004 Organizing the Unorganizable: Unions, NGOs, and Indonesian Migrant Labour, in *International migration*, 42, 5, pp. 99-119.
- Gankam Tambo, I.
2014 *Child Domestic Work in Nigeria: Conditions of Socialisation and Measures of Intervention (Vol. 13)*, New York, Waxmann Verlag.
- Gardner, K.
2002 *Age, Narrative and Migration. The Life Course and Life Histories of Bengali Elders in London*, Oxford, Berg.
- Grabska, K., M. de Regt, N. Del Franco
2019 *Adolescent Girls' Migration in The Global South*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Granovetter, M.
1995 *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers*, Chichago-London, The University of Chicago Press.
- Hepburn, S.
2019 «Service and Solidarity: Domestic Workers, Informal Organising and the Limits of Unionisation in Zambia», in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 45, 1, pp. 31-47.
- Hondagneu-sotelo, P.
1994 Regulating the Unregulated?: Domestic Workers' Social Networks, in *Social Problems*, 41,1, pp. 50-64.
- Huijsmans, R.
2012 Beyond Compartmentalization: A relational Approach Towards Agency and Vulnerability of Young Migrants, in *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 136, pp. 29-45.
- ILO
2013 *Domestic Workers Across the World. Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protection*, Geneva, ILO Publications.
2016 *A Situational Analysis of Domestic Workers in the United Republic of Tanzania*, Dar es Salaam, ILO Country Office.

- Jacobson, D.
1971 Mobility, Continuity, and Urban Social Organisation, in *Man*, 6, 4, pp. 630-644.
- Kiaga, A.K.
2012 *The Undugu Conundrum: Can a Formal Employment Relationship Save Domestic Work in Tanzania?*, Dar es Salaam, ILO Country Office.
- Klocker, N.
2007 «An Example of “Thin” Agency: Child Domestic Workers in Tanzania», in R. Panelli, S. Punch, E. Robson (Eds.), *Global Perspectives on Rural Childhood and Youth: Young Rural Lives*, New York, Routledge, pp. 83-94.
- Kuschminder, K.
2016 «Strong Ties, Weak Ties: Exploring the Role of Networks in Domestic Worker Migration From Ethiopia to the Middle East», in *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 25, 4, pp. 401-421.
- Lubbers, M.J., J.L. Molina, J. Lerner, U. Brandes, J. Ávila, C. McCarty
2010 «Longitudinal Analysis of Personal Networks: The Case of Argentinean Migrants in Spain», in *Social Networks*, 32,1, pp. 91-104.
- Mahmood, S.
2009 «Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject», in L. Sjørup, H.R. Christensen (Eds.), *Pieties and Gender*, Leiden, Brill, pp. 11-45.
- Mains, D.
2013 «Friends and Money: Balancing Affection and Reciprocity Among Young Men in Urban Ethiopia, in *American Ethnologist*, 40, 2, pp. 335-346.
- Marchetti, S.
2014 *Black Girls: Migrant Domestic Workers and Colonial Legacies*, Leiden, Brill.
- Massa, A.
2020 Families at a Distance, Distances Within Families. Borders and Emotional Bonds Among Migrants from Eritrea, in *Anuac.*, 9, 1, pp. 135-157.
- Maurer, B.
2015 *How Would You Like to Pay?: How Technology is Changing the Future of Money*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- McCarty, C., M.J. Lubbers, R. Vacca, J.L. Molina
2019 *Conducting Personal Network Research: A Practical Guide*, New York-London, The Guilford Press.
- Mitchell, J.C.
1969 *Social Networks in Urban Situations: Analyses of Personal Relationships in Central African Towns*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Mulugeta, K.G.
2012 *Vulnerability, Legal Protection and Work Conditions of Domestic Workers in Addis Ababa*, The Hague, International Institute of Social Studies.

- Nelson, N.
1978 «Women Must Help Each Other: The Operation of Personal Networks Among Buzaa Beer Brewers in Mathare Valley, Kenya», in P. Caplan, J.M. Bujra (Eds.), *Women United, Women Divided: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Female Solidarity*, London, Tavistock Publications, pp. 77-98.
- Olsson, J.
2016 «Violence Against Children who Have Left Home, Lived on the Street and Been Domestic Workers: a Study of Reintegrated Children in Kagera Region, Tanzania», in *Children and Youth Services Review*, 69, pp. 233-240.
- Pankhurst, A., D.H. Mariam
2000 «The “Iddir” in Ethiopia: Historical Development, Social Function, and Potential Role in HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control», in *Northeast African Studies*, 7, 2, pp. 35-57.
- Pankhurst, H.
1992 *Gender, Development and Identity: An Ethiopian Study*, London, Zed Books.
- Parreñas Salazar, R.
2001 *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Preston-Whyte, E.M.
1970 «The Adaptation of Rural-Born Female Domestic Servants to Town Life», in H.L. Watts (Ed.), *Focus on Cities*, Durban, University of Natal, Institute for Social Research, pp. 271-281.
- Ribeiro Corossacz, V.
2018 «Sexual Harassment and Assault in Domestic Work: An Exploration of Domestic Workers and Union Organizers in Brazil, in *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 24, 2, pp. 388-405.
- Rollins, J.
1985 *Between Women. Domesticity and Their Employers*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.
- Schwenken, H., L.M. Heimeshoff (Eds.)
2011 *Domestic Workers Count: Global Data on an Often Invisible Sector*, Kassel, Kassel University Press.
- Shiferaw, A., D. Yosef, M. Mihret, V. Gottowik
2018 «Rural-to-Urban Migration as an Escape from “Harmful Traditional Practices”? A Study of the Life Stories of Female Household Servants in Addis Ababa», in *Northeast African Studies*, 17, 2, p. 131.
- Strathern, M.
2020 *Relations: An Anthropological Account*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Temin, M., M.R. Montgomery, S. Engebretsen, K.M. Barker
2013 *Girls on the Move: Adolescent Girls & Migration in the Developing World*, Addis Abeba, Population Council.

Turton, D.

2005 «The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement: Lessons from Long-Term Field Research in Southern Ethiopia, in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 18, 3, pp. 258-280.

van Nederveen Meerkerk, E., S. Neunsinger, D. Hoerder

2015 «Domestic Workers of the World: Histories of Domestic Work as Global Labor History», in *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*, Leiden, Brill, pp. 1-24.

Whitehead, A., I. Hashim

2005 «Children and Migration», *Background Paper for DFID Migration Team*, UK, Department for International Development.