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## International migration for Ethiopian women can mean more than seeking economic security

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With many Ethiopian women seeking labour opportunities in the Gulf States, international and humanitarian organisations often explain their motivations in terms of economic security and protection. New ethnographic research, however, shows that the reasons driving women's irregular migration are more complex. Effective policy responses should instead acknowledge domestic, political and structural violence in home countries.

Chaaltu, a willowy young mother, had been traveling for 25 days. Her feet, calloused and chafed, bore evidence of the 500 kilometres she had walked from her hometown in the verdant *khat*-covered hills of the Oromia region of Ethiopia. She had travelled eastwards through searing red desert expanses, across black volcanic fields and over jagged mountain ranges, all the way to the coastal town of Obock in northern Djibouti, where [our ethnographic and policy research](#) shows that, most nights, boats carry migrants like Chaaltu across the Red Sea to Yemen and destinations beyond.

According to the UN's **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** and **human rights organisations**, hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians like Chaaltu, without passports or visas, have **exited East Africa** in **search of work** in the Gulf States. A **majority** of these so-called "irregular" or extralegal migrants in recent years, like Chaaltu, are ethnic Oromos.

Women from the Oromia region of Ethiopia face disproportionate **medical insecurity, political repression, physical violence, domestic violence** and **sexual violence** compared to other Ethiopians. **Population displacement, human rights violations** and **repression of political dissent** throughout Ethiopia and the Oromia region also continue. Research by **Amina Chire** and **Meron Zeleke** demonstrate how inequities and forms of violence contribute both to these Ethiopian women's decisions to leave home, and to their relative lack of financial and social support en route.

## Chaaltu's story

Chaaltu left her infant son and husband one morning, secretly, without a word. When we spoke to her as part of our research, she said she left to seek a better life for herself. To work. To make some money. To be free. After pausing to collect her thoughts and wipe tears from her eyes, she continued her story.

When she arrived in the Ethiopian city of Dire Dawa, she joined a group of nearly 400 men and women, all dreaming of new lives and opportunities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. With her brother's logistical and financial help, she paid a local *delala* – a guide or smuggler – 10,000 Ethiopian birr (at the time about US\$345.00). Heading due east through the high desert plateau, the group walked all night, every night, far from any roads or towns.

During the journey, she and several other people in the group were sickened by diarrheal diseases. What few pills the *delala* provided did not end their misery. The daily rations of rice and water were inadequate. Sick and hungry and unable to imagine surviving a clandestine boat ride across the sea, Chaaltu instead left the group and walked to a small clinic on the edge of town, run by the IOM. The IOM's Migrant Resource Center provided her clean water, meals, medicine, new flip flops and a plane ticket back to Ethiopia.



*A borehole in Ali Addeh refugee camp, Djibouti, used by Ethiopian women (Credit: Lauren Carruth, 2016).*

But at the same time Chaaltu was resigning to return home, tragedy struck. That night, three boats capsized, drowning nearly everyone on board. Hundreds of Chaaltu's friends and compatriots disappeared into the sea. No one rescued them, and no one even counted their deaths.

One week after meeting Chaaltu, we spoke with three friends in western Djibouti, in a remote wadi along another clandestine migration route eastward towards the Red Sea. They expressed desires "to have a better life," one said, "to be independent" from their families, another exclaimed, and "to build my own house," said the third. All three women added, smiling at each other, "and yes, to make money!"

Like Chaaltu and almost every other woman we spoke to, each of the friends left home in secret, and each desired more than just financial gain. "I had to leave my husband," one said. It was "difficult." He had refused to give her any money or food for breakfast. She felt desperate.

## Opportunity and escape drive migration

It is challenging to account for the complexities of these migration stories within the legal and programmatic categories used by governments and humanitarian organisations seeking to regulate migration and assist migrants. In many ways, each of these women's migrations represent escapes from structural, political and even domestic forms of violence in their hometowns. They or their family members or neighbours may have, at some point, been forcibly displaced, and they may credibly fear violence and repression from governmental authorities.

Yet, many people from targeted ethnic and political minorities, including people like Chaaltu and the three friends walking along the wadi, remain unable either to qualify or thrive as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs), or to gain resettlement in host countries elsewhere. Additionally, their stories and others are not just about escape. These and other Oromo Ethiopian women we met also expressed desires for opportunity, autonomy and freedom. They journeyed to achieve a form of transnational, active and **meaningful citizenship** – not just jobs. They wanted the power and means to “build their own house.”

Chaaltu's and the three friends' irregular migrations are therefore neither simply “forced” nor the result of freely-made economic choices. These women are neither merely victims nor empowered by international job opportunities. And finally, in the end, their escapes gave them neither refuge nor emancipation. For the most part, asylum, protection and financial independence for most women exiting Africa extralegally **remain out of reach**. Current humanitarian, governmental and non-governmental systems mostly fail these and other women so desperately seeking escape and emancipation, and the few people and professional *delalas* offering women assistance and guidance are too often either criminalised or ignored altogether.

Conflicts and migration flows are interrelated and continue in Ethiopia and around the world. Ethnic and political minorities in Ethiopia and elsewhere continue to face violence and humanitarian catastrophe, year after year, and donors and politicians continue to largely ignore these related tragedies and the dangerous migrations they inspire. At the very least, these women's stories suggest a need for different approaches to migrant assistance and protection, as well as a more nuanced discourse about smuggling and migration regulation within governmental and aid agencies like the IOM.

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## About the author



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Lauren Carruth is an Associate Professor in the School of International Service at American University. She is a medical anthropologist interested in humanitarian response, global health science and policy, nutrition, migration and the Horn of Africa. She is the author of *Love and Liberation: Humanitarian Work in Ethiopia's Somali Region* (Cornell University Press, 2021), and her other publications have a focus on medical care in humanitarian emergencies, the relationship between food insecurity and diabetes and emerging infectious and zoonotic diseases among pastoralists.



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