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Moving towards empowerment? Rural female migrants negotiating domestic work and secondary education in urban Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of rural girls and young women in Ethiopia are migrating to urban towns and cities and taking up employment as domestic workers, some of whom continue their education by attending evening classes. For urban households, rural migrants help to fill the domestic work gaps created by the entry of urban women into employment. For rural young women, migrating as a domestic worker is an important strategy for achieving social mobility and empowerment. However, domestic workers are vulnerable and largely hidden in the city and we know little about their lived experiences. In this paper, we start to address this gap, drawing on interviews with eight rural female migrants who are working as domestic workers in the city and attending evening classes in urban secondary schools. Informed by a critical framing of empowerment, we explore the extent to which intersecting inequalities in rural areas disempower these young women, and how migration and education become important strategies for improving their lives. We show how the support of social network members is crucial in enabling participants' migration, yet how this also leads to power asymmetries and exploitation. We reflect on how the ability of rural young women to achieve better futures is limited due to their status as poor, rural, female migrants, yet how many wait in the city in the hope of a better future. Our analysis demonstrates the importance of critical approaches to female empowerment that includes a focus on structural inequalities and power imbalances.



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Introduction

Increasing numbers of rural girls and young women in Ethiopia are migrating to urban towns and cities seeking better futures (de Regt and Felegebirhan 2020; Schewel and Fransen 2018; Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022). A large proportion of rural female migrants take up employment as domestic workers, some of whom continue their education, often by attending evening classes (Gedefa 2013; Mohammed and Belay 2019). For urban families, rural female migrants are filling growing domestic and care work gaps, created by the increasing entry of educated women into formal employment (de Regt and Felegebirhan 2020; Gebremedhin 2016). For rural girls and young women, migrating as a domestic worker provides an opportunity to improve their lives through education and employment (Schewel 2022; Crivello, Boyden, and Pankhurst 2019; Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022). However, due to a number of factors, rural female migrants are often highly vulnerable yet largely invisible in the city (Erulkar and Mekbib 2007). While important research has focused on the international migration of domestic workers to the Middle East (e.g. Fernandez 2020; Nisrane, Ossewaarde, and Need 2020), insufficient research and policy attention has been directed towards the internal migration of domestic workers, especially those attending evening classes. Although quantitative evidence has shed some light on this issue (e.g. Erulkar and Mekbib 2007), we still know relatively little about the lived experiences of rural female migrants working as domestic workers, or the complicated dynamics underpinning this increasing phenomenon.

In this paper, we provide an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of eight rural female migrants working as domestic workers and continuing their secondary education as evening students in the city. Drawing on focus group discussions and life story interviews (Goodson 2001) with participants and guided by a critical framing of empowerment (e.g. Kabeer 1999, 2018), we explore the resources (material, social and human) and agency of participants and the choices that they make, within highly constrained contexts. Through a feminist intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1989), we explore the inequalities that participants experience as a result of their gender, socio-economic status and rural identity, across time and space (rural-urban, public-private). We consider their disempowerment within their rural communities due to inequalities both within communities and across the rural-urban divide. We then move to consider how taking up work as a domestic worker facilitates their migration but can also lead to substantial power imbalances between participants and their employers. We explore how the spaces that migrants occupy in the city are those that are usually reserved for rural female migrants and how their experiences are often exploitative rather than empowering. Finally, considering the multiple and cumulative inequalities they face, we show how their prospects of achieving

better futures are limited, yet how they remain waiting in the city in the hope that one day they will be able to realise their aspirations. Through our analysis we show the importance of moving beyond a narrow conception of empowerment - focused on achieving equality in certain domains of society (e.g. education, employment, political participation) - and considering the underlying structural inequalities that underpin the experiences and choices of rural girls and young women (Fraser 2000; Kabeer 1999).

To set the context for the research, in the next section we provide an overview of uneven patterns of progress in relation to gender equality and development in Ethiopia and the factors that limit meaningful and sustainable progress in achieving gender equality. We consider how migrating as a domestic worker provides an opportunity for social mobility and empowerment, but also means that rural girls and young women are particularly vulnerable in the city. We outline the research method and approach, before then moving to the discussion of the findings. Throughout this article, we use the term 'secondary education' to refer to general secondary education in Ethiopia, which includes grade nine and grade ten of secondary school. We use the terms 'evening' and 'night' classes/students interchangeably to refer to the evening shift of education, which is more commonly referred to as 'night school' by participants and others. We use the term 'domestic worker' to refer to the domestic work that the participants are involved in in the urban homes of both relatives and employers in the city, usually based on an informal arrangement (Domestic Workers Convention 2011, No. 189). As recognised by the ILO, domestic workers may be located in both the formal and informal economy, and may take on a range of domestic and care responsibilities.

Literature review

Uneven patterns of progress in gender equality

Empowerment is a contested term in development discourse; originally associated with grassroots social movements in the 1970s, since entering mainstream development discourse many argue that it has lost much its transformative potential (Batliwala 1994; Cornwall 2018). At the international and national level, empowerment is now largely linked with a liberal feminist agenda, focused on promoting women's individual self-actualisation and autonomy, with little attention given to the structural inequalities that constrain the lives of girls and women (Cornwall 2018; Fraser 2012). For instance, in Ethiopia, while gender equality has remained high on the agenda of the government for several decades, the focus has remained on increasing the participation of girls and women in education and employment, without addressing the structural inequalities that underpin and

perpetuate gender equality at multiple levels of society (Yorke, Rose, and Pankhurst 2021).

Remarkable progress has been made in expanding girls' access to primary education (MoE 2020), decreasing child marriage (CSA 2016), opening up formal employment opportunities for women (CSA 2016) and increasing women's political representation (Yorke, Rose, and Pankhurst 2021). Increasing girls' participation in secondary education is now an important priority, which is identified as a pathway for helping rural girls and women to leave behind their traditional roles and contribute to the government's broader modernisation strategy (NPC 2016). Despite this progress, very little has changed for many girls and women in rural communities who have benefitted least from the progress made. Many rural girls fail to complete a full cycle of primary education and transition into secondary education due to a number of interrelated challenges such as the limited availability of secondary schools, restrictive gender norms and limited employment opportunities beyond education (MoE 2020; Yorke, Rose, and Pankhurst 2021). Likewise, women's participation in formal employment, has mostly increased among urban women. Rural women remain concentrated in the agricultural sector (CSA 2016), while those who do enter formal employment, must often straddle a double work burden in the workplace and at home.

Ethiopia continues to be highly patriarchal society and gender norms, expectations and practice oppress and exploit many women at different levels of society, particularly in rural areas. While men dominate the public sphere, often women are consigned to the private sphere where they are expected to take on heavy work burdens. Girls and young women are frequently conditioned from a young age to be submissive, and they have limited decision-making power within the household, meaning their ability to challenge unequal gender norms is limited (Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022). Many Ethiopian girls and women are exposed to a high level of violence which is often tolerated by the wider society (Burgess 2012; Kedir and Admasachew 2010). Evidently, the changes that have taken place in relation to women's increased participation in education, work and the political sphere have been insufficient to address the deeply rooted and unequal power relations at the individual, interpersonal and collective levels that make freedom and empowerment impossible for the large majority of girls and women, especially those living in rural areas (Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Nazneen, Hossain, and Chopra 2019).

Filling the domestic and care work gap

While female participation in formal employment is rising, the same cannot be said for the equitable redistribution of care work. The burden of domestic and care work continues to fall on women (Evans 2016; Kabeer 2016). In

fact, in Ethiopia, men's involvement in domestic work has decreased over time while their participation in formal employment has also increased (CSA 2016). This reflects broader global dynamics, whereby governments place high value on the entry of women into the formal economy, yet the domestic and care work performed in the household, continues to be undervalued in both the public and private realm (Anderson 2000; Folbre 2006; Gebremedhin 2016; Young 2001; Waring 2003). In urban areas in Ethiopia, there is a growing demand by urban families for domestic workers, usually from rural areas (de Regt and Felegebirhan 2020; Gebremedhin 2016). For urban households, rural female migrants help to take over the household work and responsibilities previously performed by female household members who are increasingly entering into formal employment (de Regt and Felegebirhan 2020; Folbre 2006; Gebremedhin 2016). This leads to new patterns of inequalities between different groups of women as domestic workers have become crucial in permitting educated women to pursue their careers (Anderson 2000; Folbre 2006; Young 2001).

For rural young women, migration provides an opportunity to escape restrictive gender norms in their community and access education and employment opportunities in the city (Rao 2014; de Regt and Felegebirhan. 2020; Fernandez 2020; Schewel 2022; Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022). Taking up work as a domestic worker facilitates the migration of rural girls and young women to the city which may not otherwise have been possible (Erulkar 2018; Gebremedhin 2016). As noted by Schewel (2022), setting up in an urban area without relatives (or other connections) can be difficult as migrants need initial funds to secure and pay for rent and food. Often jobs as domestic workers are secured through relatives and others in social networks, who can help to reduce the risks of migration, sometimes based on an agreement that these families will support their education (de Regt and Felegebirhan 2020). Yet evidence suggests that these relationships are often highly asymmetrical and sometimes exploitative, as has been shown to be the case in other contexts (e.g. Pérez 2020 in Peru).

Due to a number of factors, rural migrants are often highly vulnerable yet largely invisible in the city (Erulkar and Mekbib 2007). Much of the work that is done by migrants takes places within the sphere of the home, which makes it difficult to regulate and control the sector. Domestic workers lack legal protection - they are not covered by the 2003 Labour Law and their working conditions generally depend on the employers' sense of fairness (Erulkar 2018; Gebremedhin 2016). Ethiopia has not ratified the ILO *Domestic Worker's Convention No. 189*, which sets out minimum labour protections for domestic workers including that they receive fair terms of employment and working conditions and that they are protected from all forms of abuse and violence. Furthermore, Gebremedhin (2016) found that the government has actively avoided implementing the required reforms, citing several reasons

for delaying the legal protection of domestic workers, including the need to safeguard the traditional family-like relationship that is believed to exist between the domestic worker and an employer. While the Labour Law was updated in 2019 with a number of important changes, this reform still did not recognise the rights of domestic workers (Dabala and Sefara 2020). Therefore, although the government promotes the empowerment of girls and women through education and employment, the domestic and care work performed in the household is undervalued, while the rural migrants who are filling this domestic work gap also lack adequate protection.

Empowerment or exploitation?

Due to a lack of protection, the working conditions experienced by domestic workers are usually poor, characterised by insecurity, low wages or no wages at all, heavy workloads, long hours (including nights and weekend), limited opportunities for rest, and constrained living situations (Erulkar 2018; Gebremedhin 2016; Gedefa 2013; Hailu 2017; Van Blerk 2008). Domestic workers often have limited social connections, including with their families back home and for some, evening school is thus often the only point of contact with peers for many domestic migrants (Erulkar and Mekbib 2007; Gebremedhin 2016). Domestic workers commonly report experiencing multiple forms of abuse including verbal, physical, psychological and sexual abuse (Erulkar 2018; Gebremedhin 2016; Hailu 2017). It has also been found that in many instances where relatives or other employers have promised to support the education of rural female migrants in return for their domestic labour, they renege on this promise once rural migrants arrive in the city (de Regt and Felegebirhan 2020).

For those who do attend school, this is usually through the evening classes that are held in many urban primary and secondary schools after the regular classes – they are mostly an urban phenomenon as they depend on the availability of electricity (typically only readily available in urban areas). Evening classes are provided in both government and private schools as a means for mostly disadvantaged students to combine education and work activities. Several studies have found evening classes to be mostly comprised of female rural-urban migrants, many of whom are employed as domestic workers (Gedefa 2013; Hailu 2017; Mohammed and Belay 2019). The quality of education that evening students receive is considered to be much lower than that of regular day shift classes. This deficit is linked to a range of factors including shorter contact periods, regular power cuts, the late arrival of both students and teachers, and the limited resources and materials that are available such as textbooks and access to the library (Gedefa 2013; Mohammed and Belay 2019). Teachers who teach the evening classes are under pressure to cover the course content quickly, usually after a full day

of work, and they receive little pay for their efforts (Gedefa 2013; Mohammed and Belay 2019). Unsurprisingly, the academic performance of female evening classes is found to be much lower than that of regular day students (Gedefa 2013; Mohammed and Belay 2019).

Ultimately, the ability of rural girls and women to benefit from migration and education is limited as they must contend with poor living and working conditions and the low quality of education that they receive at evening classes (Erulkar and Mekbib 2007; Erulkar 2018; Gebremedhin 2016; Gedefa 2013; Hailu 2017). Several studies have found a clear trajectory for the women from domestic work into sex work, which, some suggest, provides a route to escape the abusive situations that they faced as domestic workers (de Regt and Felegebirhan, 2020; Erulkar 2018; Van Blerk 2008). Yet, even where migration journeys are not successful, some rural migrants report how they are relatively better off in the city where they at least have the possibility of a better future (Conlon 2011; Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022).

Rethinking empowerment

In this article we explore the experiences and perspectives of eight rural female migrants working as domestic workers and attending evening classes in a government secondary school in the city. Our research is important in providing insight into the lived experiences of a sample from this vulnerable and hard-to-reach population who are often actively excluded from research. Our focus on this group of participants helps to provide insight into some of challenges and contradictions preventing meaningful and sustainable progress in gender equality. First it focuses our attention on the important domestic and care work carried out by women in both rural and urban areas, and the how the undervaluing of this work limits the opportunities of girls and women. Second, although girls' secondary education is identified as a key policy tool for female empowerment, since rural girls overall are least likely to benefit from secondary (Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022) education focusing on participants' experiences in urban secondary school is particularly pertinent. Third, while evening classes are designed to support students who are most disadvantaged and are largely comprised of rural female migrants working as domestic workers, they remain virtually absent from research and policy and in many ways reinforce rather than address inequalities.

Drawing on Kabeer (1999, 2018), we conceptualise empowerment as a series of processes through which those who have been denied the ability to exercise choice, voice and influence – in their personal lives and the wider community – gain the ability to do so. This involves access to the necessary resources (material, social, human) required, the ability to exercise agency and attain achievements and wellbeing. Through a feminist intersectional

lens (Crenshaw 1989), we explore the inequalities that participants experience as a result of their gender, socio-economic status and rural identity, in both their rural communities and in the city. While recognising the considerable agency of the participants, we reveal the underlying structural inequalities that operate on multiple levels including the gender norms and expectations that structure the lives of participants, inequalities in the access of girls and women to economic resources and opportunities and how different institutions reinforce and sustain power structures (family, education, state) (Kabeer 1999, 2018). Overall, our research contributes to the debate on the need to rethink conceptualisations of empowerment that are focused on increasing female participation in (secondary) education and employment and to return to a focus on understanding and addressing underlying structural inequalities that limit meaningful and sustainable progress in this area (Cornwall 2018; Fraser 2000). Having outlined the rationale for the study, we now turn to discuss the research methods and approach.

Method and data

This data presented in this study is part of a wider ethnographic study focused on the migration of twenty-seven rural young women who migrated to Hawassa city in Southern Ethiopia and were enrolled in government secondary schools. Here, we focus on a sub-sample of eight of the rural female migrants who were working as domestic workers during the day and attending evening classes in contrast to the wider sample who were enrolled in regular day classes (see also Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022).

All of the eight participants were living in Hawassa city, having previously migrated from six different sending communities in the Sidama and Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR) regions. At the time of the fieldwork, the Sidama region was part of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's (SNNPR) Region, which had an estimated population of 15 million people and was one of the most ethnically diverse regions in Ethiopia. The capital, Hawassa city, is a rapidly urbanising centre and hosts one of Ethiopia's largest proportion of migrants who come from surrounding rural communities (Bundervoet 2018).

The participants were recruited through one of five local government secondary schools. The selected school had one of the highest proportions of female migrants in the city identified through conversations with the local *woreda* (district) office and school principals. This pattern was believed to be linked to the geographical location of the school and the fact that the school provided a number of classes in the Sidama language for rural migrants. We purposively selected these eight participants based on their rural status, their enrolment in evening classes and their employment as domestic workers. As would be expected, the selected sample does not

Table 1. Selected background characteristics of participants.

	Grade	Age	Rural area	Income level	Mother Ed. level	Father Ed. level
Aida	G9	20	And	Low	–	–
Beimnet	G9	19	Hamsa	Medium	Grade 4	Grade 2
Hewan	G9	19	Hamsa	Low	Grade 1	Passed Away
Hiwot	G9	16	Sost	Medium	–	–
Meron	G10	19	Haya	Low	No Education	Passed Away
Rahel	G9	18	And	Medium	–	–
Samira	G9	18	Selasa	Low	No Education	No Education
Tsega	G9	21	Sabat	Medium	No Education	No Education

reflect the experiences of all rural female migrants, many of whom never manage to attend urban schools (de Regt and Felegebirhan 2020).

The participants were aged between 16–21 years of age (Table 1). One participant was enrolled in grade ten, while the remaining seven students were enrolled in grade nine. The participants had been living in the urban area for between two-four years at the time of data collection.

In contrast to the wider sample of participants, this sub-sample of participants were much more likely to identify their families as *low-medium* income level and all families depended on agriculture. The highest level of education obtained by any of their parents or caregivers in their rural household was grade four and the majority had no education, although most were supportive of their daughters' education.

The data collection was conducted by two of the authors [Eyerusalem and Louise] who each have considerable experience conducting research with vulnerable groups. Contact with these eight domestic workers was much more limited and sporadic than with other study participants given the nature of their working and living circumstances in the city. Although the relative inaccessibility of the participants posed certain challenges for the research, for example in conducting the interviews around the strict timetable of the participants, this also highlighted to us, the very limited freedom that domestic workers had and further illustrated the importance of including this relatively difficult to access group in the research.

Participants were first invited to take part in two focus group discussions (FGDs) where they discussed their experiences of education and gender equality across rural and urban locations. In addition to eliciting important information on their experiences and perspectives, the FGDs also helped to build rapport with the participants. Each participant was then invited to take part in a life story interview (Goodson 2001). The life story interviews were particularly valuable in exploring the education and migration pathways of the participants in this study and helping to make connections across themes (gender, education, migration), time (past, present and future) and location (rural-urban). They helped to place the perspective of the participants at the centre of the research, and to examine how inequalities both within rural and urban communities and across the rural-urban divide impact

their experiences and outcomes, all central to an intersectional approach (Christensen and Jensen 2012).

The data collection was undoubtedly influenced by each of our positionalities and the participants' self-representations were inevitably impacted by our respective identities. It is possible that the participants may have over-emphasised the value that they placed on education given that they were aware of our interest in this topic. Nevertheless, our engagement with the participants over time, albeit to a lesser degree than with the wider sample, helped to build a level of trust and rapport that was essential for conducting the interviews. Our analysis of the data generated was enriched by our discussions with key informants, including four of twenty legal brokers – those working in Hawassa city at the time of the fieldwork. Interestingly, in our discussions with different key informants, many did not regard students attending the evening classes as 'real' students.

Ethical approval was obtained for this study from the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin and the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hawassa University. 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. Data were recorded, transcribed into English and then coded using Atlas.ti software. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The names and rural sending locations of all participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Findings

In this section, we analyse the data emerging from the focus group discussions and life story interviews with eight rural female migrants working as domestic workers and attending evening class in urban secondary schools, while also drawing on relevant insights from discussions with brokers. First, we consider the lives and experiences of the participants in their rural sending communities before they migrate to the city to identify the factors contributing to their migration. We then explore how migrating as a domestic worker provides a pathway for participants to access education and employment opportunities. Finally we examine whether the pathways of rural female migrants in this study are likely to lead to their empowerment.

Inequalities and disempowerment in rural areas

For the participants in this study, poverty and hardship characterised their life in their rural communities. They explained how there were very few

opportunities to earn money. Access to even the most basic resources - such as food, running water and electricity - was extremely limited. One participant (Samira) told of how her family would often have to sell their possessions to be able to buy food. Life was especially hard for girls and women, who were disproportionately impacted by the effects of poverty. The intersection of economic inequalities and restrictive gender norms limited their access to resources, their agency and their achievements, leading to their disempowerment (Kabeer 1999). Restrictive gender norms meant that domestic work was viewed as the primary responsibility of girls and women, a responsibility which they assumed from an early age. Girls and women had to compensate for the limited access to basic resources and facilities in their respective rural communities, which made their domestic work even more onerous. The participants described their days as being filled with unremitting domestic chores, including cooking, cleaning, looking after animals and travelling '*long distances*' (Rahel) to fetch water. Although these activities were essential to the functioning of the local community they were overlooked and undervalued by the wider rural community. Furthermore, they served to limit girls' opportunities, for example by restricting the time and energy that they could devote to education (see also Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022).

From the perspectives of participants, unequal access to economic resources and employment opportunities was the key factor underpinning their unequal status in their community. Employment opportunities were limited in their rural communities and those that were available were reserved for male community members. Female community members then had to rely on the income generating capacity of their fathers and brothers, and in time their husbands, leaving them especially vulnerable to poverty and its impacts. In many of the stories of the participants, they spoke of how the death or illness of their father had left their family exposed to severe poverty, as this meant that they had no other way to earn money. Due to these economic inequalities, girls were expected to enter marriage as soon as they finished primary school to secure their futures (see also Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022). Overall, the intersection of economic inequalities and gender norms underpinned the lower status of female community members, leaving them with restricted access to resources, little decision-making power, and no opportunities to improve their lives.

In contrast to their lives in their respective sending communities where they saw no opportunities, the participants believed they could '*change their lives*' through education and employment in the city - a theme that emerged time and time again throughout the interviews with the participants (see also Fernandez 2020; Schewel 2022). The participants viewed education as a pathway to greater social and economic mobility (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). For example, during a focus group discussion, one participant

explained: *'[Education] is important for our future to help ourselves, our parents, and our county'*; while another participant suggested that *'education allows people to help themselves and also to help other people'*. Since participants viewed the economic inequalities that they had faced in their rural communities as the main factor underpinning their unequal status, becoming financially independent through education and employment was viewed as the key route to empowerment. Given the insurmountable challenges that they faced in rural areas, many participants spoke of how coming to the city was their only opportunity to change their lives. All agreed that if they were still living in their rural communities, they would have entered marriage by now since there were no other options for young women to secure their futures (see also Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022).

These stories demonstrate how economic inequalities and their intersection with restrictive gender norms and practices within rural communities negatively impact rural girls and women, leaving them even more vulnerable to the effects of poverty and contributing to their disempowerment (Crenshaw 1989; Kabeer 1999). There are limited to no employment opportunities available for female community members in rural areas and instead they must shoulder a heavy work burden and compensate for the limited access to basic resources, infrastructure, and facilities within their rural communities (see Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022). From the perspectives of the participants in this study, their disempowerment is primarily a result of these economic inequalities and therefore securing their economic independence through education and employment is central to their aspirations for a better future. Given that opportunities for social and economic mobility are limited in rural areas, migration provides the participants the opportunity to escape the pervasive inequalities that they face in the rural community and pursue better futures which they perceive as possible in the city (see also: de Regt and Felegebirhan, 2020; Schewel 2022; Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022).

Migration pathways: brokers, relatives and social networks

Our conversations with four legal brokers who had been working in the city for over ten years, helped to illuminate some of the wider dynamics underpinning the different migration pathways of rural girls and young women. They described how increasing numbers of migrants were coming to the city to escape the poverty of their rural communities and to access better opportunities. They estimated that up to two thirds of all rural migrants were female, many of whom were migrating to escape (early) marriage. Their role as brokers was to provide temporary accommodation for the migrants and to find them work in local restaurants and hotels for a fee. Female migrants who had contact with illegal brokers were described as much more vulnerable – illegal brokers often stole the money of migrants and left them

stranded in the city or else channelled them into sex work. Apart from these pathways, another common pathway for female rural migrants was to come to work as domestic workers in urban households. The brokers explained domestic workers were often taken advantage of and made to work for long hours and only a very small percentage of rural migrants who came to the city and became domestic workers ever managed to enter education. Overall, it seemed that rural female migrants face different vulnerabilities in the city depending on their migration pathways.

For the participants in this study, who faced significant poverty in their rural communities, taking up employment as a domestic worker in urban households, provides them with an opportunity to come to the city which may not otherwise have been possible due to the initial investment required (see also Schewel 2022). For most of the participants in this study, relatives and social network members played important roles in initiating and sometimes facilitating their migration. Aunts, cousins, siblings, and friends were often the first to present the idea of migrating to the city as a domestic worker to the participants. In most cases, relatives – including cousins and uncles – not only suggested the idea to participants but also offered them employment as domestic workers in their own homes, usually in exchange for supporting their education. For instance, Meron explains that she secured her job as a domestic worker through a friend in her rural community. Similarly, Samira tells us that she decided to migrate to the city after a visit from her aunt who offered her a job as a domestic worker. In return, her aunt promised her that she would support her secondary education. Samira explained: *'...because I had so many problems in the rural areas and my parents are poor, I accepted her offer.'*

We find that without connections with relatives and social networks some participants struggle when they arrive in the city. This is illustrated through the case of Aida who came to the city after hearing from others in her rural community how she could continue her secondary education and find work opportunities in the city. Unlike most of the other participants, Aida did not have any social support in the city when she arrived, and she struggled to find a job and failed to enrol in secondary education. She later ended up working as a daily labourer on a construction site, where she was earning very little money and was *'just working to survive'*. Eventually Aida encountered a relative in the city, who offered her work as a domestic worker and helped her enrol in the night classes. Aida's account highlights the vulnerabilities of rural female rural migrants when they arrive in the city, and the important role of social connections in the city.

Overall, while rural girls and women may follow different migration pathways, becoming a domestic worker provides the participants in this study with the opportunity to move to the city and possibly continue their education in the city, something which may not otherwise have been possible

(see also Rao 2014; Schewel 2022). This is ultimately a gendered phenomenon given that domestic work is almost exclusively performed by girls and women. The significant role played by relatives and social network members in the migration pathways of the participants is evident in this study. Relatives and social network members are key in initiating and facilitating their migration and without their support, rural female migrants may struggle in the city (see also de Regt and Felegebirhan 2020). Yet, as we will further explore in the following sections, this reliance on social network members often leads to highly asymmetrical and sometimes exploitative relationships (see also Pérez 2020).

Negotiating the night shift

While social network members have an important role in initiating and facilitating the migration of the participants, these seemingly mutually beneficial relationships are often characterised by power imbalances. Although many of the relatives and employers had made promises to support the education of the participants in return for their domestic labour, the reality when they arrived in the city was often much different. For instance, when Samira arrived in the city, her aunt demanded that she take on a heavy domestic work burden and forced her to attend evening classes (rather than the better quality day classes). As Samira explains '*...after I came [to the city], [my aunt] just ignored that idea [of supporting her education] ...she forgot everything that she had said*'. Like Samira, in Hiwot's case, while her uncle promised to support her education in return for her service as a domestic worker, he later forced her to attend the evening classes rather than the day classes which he had promised: '*My preference was to join the daytime school, but I just entered into the night shift...because I have no choice*'. The power asymmetries between rural female migrants and their employers mean that they often have little decision-making power in the city.

Even though the participants were happy to have the opportunity to continue their education in the city, they discussed how they were unlikely to benefit from education due to the poor quality of education that they received as evening students. For example, Hewan remarks that she is not getting a good education as a night shift student: '*You know it's difficult to say I'm getting a good education because it's the night shift...it's not good*'. Participants described the many problems they encountered as evening shift students, which day shift students did not experience. This includes no available textbooks, no access to the school library and the intermittent availability of electricity, without which the evening class could not continue. Furthermore, teachers teaching the night shift were described as having very low motivation, perhaps because they had already taught a full day of classes and received limited pay for their efforts (Gedefa 2013; Mohammed

and Belay 2019). Teachers would often come late to class and would cover the material quickly without having time to fully explain the material, meaning students often did not understand the lessons. As such, despite their high motivation for pursuing their education, many of the participants felt that they were wasting their time attending the evening shift classes and they would be unlikely to benefit from this form of education.

Although the government has promoted girls' secondary education as a key policy tool for empowerment, rural girls benefit least from secondary education (see also Yorke, Gilligan, and Alemu 2022). Furthermore, evening shift classes are put forward as a means for disadvantaged students to combine their education and work responsibilities and are largely made up of rural female migrants working as domestic workers. In the context of the current study, the participants have demonstrated great agency in leaving behind their rural communities, migrating to the city, and accessing secondary education. However, even though the participants could be considered 'successful' in continuing their secondary education, a closer look reveals that their decision-making power is limited and that they are unlikely to benefit from education given the poor quality of their evening shift classes. Thus, rather than empowering participants, the evening classes may end up reproducing inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Power imbalances and exploitation in urban households

Within urban households, the participants also faced considerable inequalities including limited access to resources and constrained agency, which negatively impacted their achievements and wellbeing (Kabeer 1999). In contrast to the supposed family-like relationship that exists between domestic workers and their employers put forth by the government (see Gebremedhin 2016), we find that in the case of the participants in this study they are treated neither as formal employees nor as family members. They have no formal contracts and do not receive payment for the arduous work they complete. In all cases, the participants reported having heavy work burdens, which they began early in the morning and continued until late at night, with their only respite being the few hours in the evening when they were allowed to go to evening classes. They usually shouldered the full domestic and care burden of the urban households. Despite the significant contribution that they made to the household, many of the participants described having limited access to basic resources in the homes of relatives and employers. For instance, Beimnet, who lives with her uncle explains that she is '*...the only one who does everything in their house!*' While she receives food and shelter for the work that she does, many of her other needs are not met and she told us how she must even share a pair of shoes with another domestic worker

to be able to attend school '*...I didn't have anything, I was just walking barefoot, I didn't have shoes.*'

In addition to the physically demanding nature of the work and their limited access to important resources, many participants discussed how the arrangements that they had with relatives and employers had negative emotional and psychological impacts. In most cases, participants discussed having difficult relationships with their relatives and employers and commonly experiencing verbal and emotional abuse (see also Gebremedhin 2016; Hailu 2017). This is captured by Hewan: '*You know when you work in [other] people's houses there is no freedom. You don't have the time; they want you to serve them for 24 hours and it's difficult. They are not [happy] whatever you do.*' Similar sentiments were shared by Aida who describes how she could not relax in the home of her relatives: '*My mind is not free...I have so many worries...I think about the [domestic] activities...I think about what activities are left. Even when I am in class, I only think about the tasks that I didn't accomplish, and what I have to finish when I get back.*' As this quote reflects, the mental burden of their domestic responsibilities even followed them into the classroom and negatively impacted their education.

Experiences of severe forms of physical abuse were also reported by two of the participants (Meron and Hewan) from male family members in the homes they worked. In Meron's case, the injuries that he inflicted upon her were so bad that she ended up in hospital for several days. Yet in both cases, participants decided to '*kept silent*' about the violence they experienced and continued in their roles as domestic workers, as they viewed themselves as having very few other options.

Not all participants described having difficult relationships with their relatives and employers. Rachel who worked as a domestic worker in her cousin's home describes having a good relationship with her cousin who works as a policewoman, and whom she viewed as a '*role model*' and having a life to which Rahel aspired. Rahel explains that she does not have an informal agreement with her cousin, but rather her cousin was supporting her education in return for their domestic labour. However, the heavy domestic work burden that Rahel had to complete meant that ultimately Rahel did not benefit from this arrangement, and she later ended up failing her examinations and dropping out of school due to not having sufficient time to spend on her education. Thus, even where a seemingly family-like relationship does exist, as in the case of Rahel and her cousin, the evident power imbalances mean that participants do not benefit from these relationships.

The lack of negotiating power that the participants had in urban households emerged across many of the stories of the participants. Samira tells us that when she tried to object to the poor working conditions she experienced, her aunt threatened to send her back to her rural community telling

her: *'...you can go [back to the rural area], you are only here for your purpose, you are not helping me'*. As Samira did not want to return home, she decided to *'keep silent'* and continue her education in the hope that she could one day achieve a better life for herself and her parents. Similar accounts were shared by many of the participants, and despite facing multiple and cumulative inequalities, they remained hopeful for a better future. In the eyes of the participants, education continues to be an important route for social mobility and empowerment. They were thus willing to commit to *'keeping silent'* and withstanding the difficult and challenging circumstances they faced while waiting for a better future – themes that emerged time and again in their stories. Beimet, tells us that her only option is to *'...keep silent and I'm living here now still until I finish my education'*, while Meron - who faced physical abuse at the hand of her employers - tells us that it is better for her to be in the city attending her education and *'...to be educated rather than being uneducated for all my life'*. Ultimately, the participants view themselves as better off in the city than returning to the rural areas where *'... there is no other option than getting married'*.

Together the stories of the participants reveal how, rather than providing a pathway to empowerment, their experiences in urban schools and households lead to their disempowerment and exploitation. We find that the spaces that migrants occupy in the city, in urban households and secondary schools, are those that are usually reserved for poor, rural, female migrants (Crenshaw 1989). In urban households, they are treated neither as formal employees nor as family members, while evening classes are usually reserved for rural female migrants, especially those employed as domestic workers, where they receive a poor quality of education and are often not regarded as real students (Gedefa 2013; Hailu 2017; Mohammed and Belay 2019). We come to realise the extent of their marginalisation and how, as a result, it is unlikely that they will be able to realise their aspirations of a better future through migration and education. Yet while the participants seem aware of this improbability, education continues to be an important pathway to empowerment in their eyes, and they are unanimous in the view that it makes more sense to remain waiting in the city for a better future than to return to the rural area where their only option is to enter an unequal marriage (Conlon 2011).

Conclusion

This article has explored the lives and experiences of eight rural girls and young women who migrated to the city, entered employment as domestic workers and continued their education in the evening shift in urban secondary schools. An important contribution of our study has been the inclusion of the lived experiences and perspectives of this relatively hidden group,

who remain neglected in research and policy, in terms of their status both as domestic workers and as night students. The research has highlighted the many different pathways and vulnerabilities that rural female migrants may be exposed to, and future research could help to further capture the diversity of their experiences and trajectories within and beyond education. Similarly, while we limited our focus to secondary education in government schools— as secondary education is promoted as a key policy tool for female empowerment by the government – future research could also consider the experiences of students attending evening classes at the primary school level, and in non-government schools.

Adopting an intersectional feminist approach (Crenshaw 1989) and guided by Kabeer's (1999) framework of empowerment, we have considered the range of inequalities that participants experience because of their gender, socio-economic status and rural identity across both time and space (rural-urban, public-private). Our analysis has revealed the considerable agency of the participants in this study and how they negotiate and navigate unequal power structures including the inequalities they face within their respective rural communities and in the urban spaces that they occupy. These findings highlight the need to rethink narrow conceptions of empowerment focused on participation in education and employment and to return to a focus on the power structures that limit the opportunities and outcomes of different groups of women including gender norms, unequal access to economic resources and discriminatory social institutions (family, education, state) (Cornwall 2018; Fraser 2000; Kabeer 1999, 2018).

Our findings have several important implications for policy and practice. Importantly, they challenge the supposed 'family-like relationship' between domestic workers and employers, which is put forward as a justification by the government for failing to introduce legislation that protects the rights and wellbeing of domestic workers (see Gebremedhin 2016). Rather, the undefined nature of these relationships contributes to the exploitation of domestic workers, underlining the urgent need for legislation to protect their rights, including fair working conditions and freedom from abuse and exploitation. Greater policy attention should also be given to the quality of education that students attending evening classes receive. This should include the gathering of data and evidence to better understand the status of this marginalised group and to support substantial improvements to the quality of education that evening students receive to ensure that they benefit from the education provided. Our findings also have implications for broader efforts to improve gender equality and to address the growing inequalities between groups of women. This includes the promotion of viable employment opportunities for different groups of women, the recognition of the value of domestic and care work to the economy and reinforcement of efforts to address the double-work burden faced by women.

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