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The exploitation narratives and coping strategies of Ethiopian women return migrants from the Arabian Gulf

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ABSTRACT

A large number of unskilled women from least developed countries engage in international migration as domestic workers. Although the transnational migration experiences of these women could potentially be empowering, women migrants are vulnerable to exploitation. This paper explores the migration experiences of Ethiopian women who migrate to Arabian Gulf countries as domestic workers under the kafala labor sponsorship system and how they cope with their traumatic experiences upon return to Ethiopia. Forty-eight women Ethiopian former domestic workers who had returned from Arabian Gulf countries participated in this study. The study found that both women migrants who live with their sponsor/employer and those who run away from their sponsor/employer are exposed to various forms of racialized, gendered and economic exploitation at different stages of the migration process. The study also found that upon returning to Ethiopia, these women use sense-making and benefit-finding strategies to cope with their multiple exploitation experiences.

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Introduction

Temporary contract migration is becoming increasingly common in many regions of the world, particularly given the growing number of workers in highly feminized sectors, such as domestic work (Piper 2004, 2008, 2010; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014). Such migration schemes have led to the increased participation of women in labor migration. Transnational migration can potentially be an empowering experience for women. Many women use

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temporary contract migration to escape from unwanted marriages, abusive relationships, poverty, and dependence on patriarchal structures in their home country. Temporary contract migration can also be a way for women to support their families, develop skills or uphold ideals of womanhood (Parreñas 2005). However, at the same time, foreign countries can leave migrant domestic workers vulnerable to multiple forms of exploitation because of their gender, class, race, religion and nationality (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004; Silvey 2009; Minaye 2012; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014; Yeoh et al. 2017). Such racialized, gendered and economic exploitation includes deprivation of rest and food, sexual assault including rape, and psychological abuse, such as being threatened (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004; Minaye 2012; Anbesse et al. 2009; Wickramage, De Silva and Peiris 2017).

Under existing institutional arrangements for temporary contract migration it is difficult to prevent such exploitation and protect the human rights, physical safety, and psychological health of migrant women. The vulnerability of migrant women is exacerbated by temporary migration schemes that tie migrants to specific sponsors/employers for a specific period of time (Mantouvalou 2015; Bosmans et al. 2016; Wickramage, De Silva and Peiris 2017). Under these schemes, the governments of supply countries provide unskilled migrant workers at a low cost, seeking to develop a comparative advantage over other states in relation to labor supply. Both supply countries and receiving countries benefit from this. Yeoh et al. (2017) explain how Singapore takes advantage of the supply of Indonesian women in this 'migration industry'. In Singapore, Indonesian workers use a work permit system, which enables the granting of short-term contracts and easy repatriation of migrant workers after their contract has finished. These migrant workers do not have the right to bring along dependents or marry Singaporean citizens and are repatriated if found to be pregnant. Such temporary migration schemes are described as 'technologies of servitude' (Yeoh et al. 2017: 424), and 'machinations of structural and institutionalized violence' (Fluri and Piedalue 2017: 537). Migrant workers are governed to accept their structurally-servile positions through transnational gendered processes that are marked by racialized, gendered and economic exploitation.

The kafala labor sponsorship system, a system that binds migrant workers to their employer or sponsor in Arabian Gulf countries, i.e. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, (Bajracharya and Sijapati 2012), is another example of a temporary migration scheme that makes women vulnerable to exploitation (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004; Pande 2013; Demissie 2018). Under the kafala system, migrant workers enter the destination country under the financial and legal responsibility of a specific employer, and stay with the same employer for the duration of the work contract (Pande 2013; Mahdavi 2013). The purpose

of tying migrant workers to one employer is twofold: to provide protection for the Arab employer, who bear the financial cost of bringing the migrant to the host country, and to prevent migrants from permanently settling in the Arabian Gulf destination countries (Frantz 2013). The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states host more than 15 million foreign workers (Frantz 2013). In countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, some ninety percent of all households employ migrant domestic workers. More than two million temporary domestic workers from countries like Ethiopia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Philippines and India make use of the kafala labor sponsorship system to enter the Arabian Gulf.

The kafala system is criticized by many for producing a readily exploitable workforce, as it creates an unbalanced power relationship between employers (*kafeel*) and migrants (Pande 2013; Mahdavi 2013). Numerous human rights groups have reported widespread human trafficking, violence, rape, beating, starvation, excessive domestic work, debt bondage, sexual slavery, and servitude to other households among migrant workers in the Arabian Gulf. Suicide rates are also high among migrant workers in the Arabian Gulf (Dervic et al. 2012). In 2013, in Saudi Arabia, thirty-seven percent of the documented suicides were of Ethiopian women domestic workers, and every week one domestic worker commits a suicide in Lebanon (The Guardian 2012). After returning to their home country, many women migrants suffer from mental disorders due to the trauma of having been exploited in multiple ways (Anbesse et al. 2009; Minaye 2012).

While the racialized, gendered and economic exploitation of women migrants, before and during their migration, including at their place of work, has been frequently narrated, especially in relation to Asian migrants, how women cope with their multiple exploitation experiences during their migration and after they return from abroad to their home country, especially in the African continent, is as an under-researched area (Anbesse et al. 2009; Kronfol, Saleh, and Al-Ghafry 2014; Minaye 2012; Pande 2012; Wickramage, De Silva and Peiris, 2017). More information is needed about the coping mechanisms used by women domestic returnees to deal with their traumatic past and make sense of their multiple exploitation experiences, as part of their efforts to reintegrate into their home community. The aim of this article is to explore how Ethiopian women return migrants from Arabian Gulf countries narrate and cope with their racialized, gendered and economic exploitation experiences in the process of resettling back into life in Addis Ababa. To our knowledge, this is the first study of its kind to explore the post-migration coping mechanisms of women domestic workers, and it is hoped that it will greatly add to our understanding of this group of migrants.

Forty-eight women Ethiopian return migrants who had served as domestic workers in the Arabian Gulf countries were interviewed for this study. These

women were asked, in individual interviews and focus group discussions, to describe their experiences pre-migration, during the migration journey to the Arabian Gulf countries, and pre- and post-resettlement in the host country. A thematic content analysis was used to find out how the returnees cope with their exploitation experiences in the process of resettlement in Addis Ababa. In the next sections we briefly discuss the coping strategies of Ethiopian women returnees from the Arabian Gulf, before presenting the methodological approach, followed by an analysis of the interviews and focus group discussions. Finally, we make some concluding remarks.

Coping strategies: sense-making and benefit-finding

The migration of Ethiopian women under the kafala system to places in the Arabian Gulf comes with a high risk of racialized, gendered and economic exploitation during the migration journey and while at work (De Regt 2010; Minaye 2012). Such women, particularly those who serve as domestic live-in maids, are typically subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse, which can be classified as trauma (Bhugra 2004; Ladegaard 2015; Wickramage, De Silva and Peiris 2017; Habtamu, Minaye and Zeleke 2017). When they return to their home country, these women must reintegrate and cope with the trauma caused by their multiple exploitation experiences abroad.

Coping with the trauma of exploitation during the migration experience is different from coping after returning to the home country. Coping with exploitation abroad as a woman migrant domestic worker in the house of the foreign employer is typically focused on changing the immediate situation. Such coping involves stress management strategies and immediate interactions with the exploiter, in direct, highly-stressful confrontations in a hostile, fundamentally unsafe environment (Pande 2013; Van der Ham et al. 2015). However, coping with past multiple exploitation experiences in a context of reintegration involves different coping strategies. Returnees no longer face immediate danger, but are haunted by their memories. In their struggle to reintegrate, returnees typically try to accept their 'fate' and move on with their lives in their home country, leaving their painful migration experiences behind them. In other words, the coping strategies of migrants while in the host country are distinct from those of returnees. Park and Folkman (1997) point out that victimized or violated people actively look for plausible reasons as to why traumatic incidents happen. Traumatized people attribute meaning to their adverse experiences in order to come to terms with them. Coping may also involve looking for perceived benefits. In their strategies, traumatized people make downward comparisons and positively re-interpret their adverse experiences (Park and Folkman 1997).

In the context of Ethiopian women return migrants from the Arabian Gulf, it is expected that their coping efforts revolve around a cognitive restructuring process to enable them to resettle into life in Addis Ababa. It is expected that returnees change their perspective and interpretation of the meaning of the racialized, gendered and economic exploitation they have experienced in the Arabian Gulf, rather than trying to solve the problem of their exploitation itself (problem-focused coping). It is also expected that they try to minimize the distress caused by their multiple exploitation (emotion-focused coping) (Wright, Crawford and Sebastian 2007; Lindio-McGovern and Wallimann 2009).

In the cognitive restructuring process that traumatized or exploited people go through, two types of coping strategies can be distinguished: sense-making and benefit-finding (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema and Larson 1998; Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema 2001; Currier, Holland and Neimeyer 2006; Wright, Crawford and Sebastian 2007). On the one hand, sense-making is where the victim looks for some kind of explanation for the traumatic exploitation experience in order to comprehend it (Park and Folkman 1997; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema and Larson 1998). While, on the other hand, benefit-finding is pursued in an attempt to get something positive (like personal growth and increased strength) out of the traumatic experience in order to be able to accept it (Wright, Crawford and Sebastian 2007; Holland, Currier and Neimeyer 2006). It is a strategy that involves looking for something good in a bad experience. In the context of our enquiry into the coping strategies used by Ethiopian women return migrants from the Arabian Gulf countries to reintegrate into life in Addis Ababa, it is expected that sense-making and benefit-finding strategies are used in their narrations of their life under the kafala labor sponsorship system.

Methodological approach

The data used in this study is based on fieldwork conducted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from January to March 2015 and January to March 2016. Returnees were recruited for participation in the study in collaboration with three local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on the return and reintegration of Ethiopian women migrants from countries in the Arabian Gulf. One of the NGOs (AGAR Ethiopia) focuses on programs related to the rehabilitation of traumatized returnees, mainly physically injured and mentally ill women returnees. Upon recovery, this NGO provides these women with vocational skills training that might enable them to generate income. The other two NGOs (Live Addis and WISE) mainly provide returnees with vocational skills training and start-up capital for businesses. The researchers participated in different workshops, reintegration assistance training, and

social gatherings organized by the three local NGOs, with the aim of creating trust-based relationships with the returnees.

A total of forty-eight Ethiopian women returnees who live in Addis Ababa participated in this study. The local NGOs selected the first few returnees for the interviews and focus group discussions, after which a snowball sampling method was used with participants referring other returnees, including those who had received support from the government and NGOs, and those who had not.

The first author of this article conducted the fieldwork. She speaks the same language as the returnees and is of a similar age. This helped the returnees to open up about very personal and sometimes difficult experiences they had in the Arabian Gulf countries. These interviews would not have been possible if the data collector had been foreign or a man (Minaye 2012).

The research objective, confidentiality of the discussions, and importance of audiotaping the interviews and group discussions were explained to the participants and their consent obtained. Data saturation – the redundancy of responses on major themes with limited new insights – was used as a guide to determine the appropriate number of participants for the study (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006). From the forty-eight participants, fifteen lived with their sponsors (legally) throughout their time as a domestic worker in the Arabian Gulf countries. Twenty-six of the participants first lived in the host country legally with their sponsor and then, because of the exploitation they experienced, ran away from their sponsor. These women then resided illegally in the host country, as the kafala system makes it illegal to stay in the host country without a sponsor. Seven participants did not have any sponsor throughout their migration experience. Twenty out of the forty-eight women returned involuntarily and twenty-eight returned voluntarily (see Appendix 1 for the profile of the returnees). Thirty of the participants received reintegration assistance from NGOs or the government (in the form of basic business and vocational skills training, assistance to open small shops, and health-related assistance), whereas eighteen did not receive any reintegration assistance. The reason for selecting the participants with diverse migration and reintegration experiences was to examine the role of kafala, voluntariness/involuntariness and reintegration support programs in the home country in order to evaluate the differences in the use of coping strategies by returnees.

Data collection was a two-stage process starting with the focus group discussions and followed by individual interviews. The group discussion topics and semi-structured interview guidelines were prepared in English. The topic themes included general background information on pre-migration, migration, and post-migration (return) experiences. The guidelines were translated from English to Amharic, which is the local language of both the participants and

the first author of this paper. To grasp the general migration process and possible exploitation experiences at each stage, data collection started with the focus group discussions. Four focus group discussions with six, four, eight and eight group members, respectively, were held with returnees with diverse migration and return experiences. The focus group discussions helped the researchers to identify the main exploitation experiences of the returnees at the different stages of the migration process.

Hesitation to discuss some traumatic experiences, such as rape and forced prostitution, in the focus group discussions was observed, possibly for fear of judgment by the group members, as these subjects are taboo in Ethiopian culture. To make sure all experiences were captured, including taboo subjects, and to triangulate the information obtained in the focus group discussions, in-depth personal interviews were held. Thirty-six returnees were interviewed to gather detailed information about their exploitation experiences and how they coped with them. The individual interviews provided participants with an opportunity to express their personal experiences, both of the migration and its aftermath, without fear of judgment by others. The returnees shared painful pre-migration, migration, and post-migration (return) experiences and how they coped with these experiences.

To make sure that every experience was captured and no experience lost, every new theme in the individual interviews was well explored until data saturation was reached. Both group discussions and individual interviews were audio-recorded. Focus group discussions lasted on average one hour and 40 minutes and individual interviews lasted on average an hour. A transcript was made from the audiotape in Amharic by the first author and a research assistant. The transcribed documents were subsequently translated into English by a linguist and rechecked by the first author for consistency.

In analyzing the data, we focused on how the Ethiopian women return migrants who participated in this study described their exploitation experiences and how they cope with these experiences in the aftermath of their migration to the Arabian Gulf countries. We analyzed the interview and focus group discussion transcripts to identify patterns in the returnees' narratives of exploitation at the different stages of the migration process. We focused on where, how, what and by whom their exploitation took place. Coping strategies were coded in detail (using Atlas ti) according to each exploitation experience.

Exploitation narratives and coping strategies while in the Arabian Gulf

The Ethiopian women return migrants we interviewed typically explained that extreme poverty and the desire to change the economic status of their

family motivated their migration journey to the Arabian Gulf countries. Almost all of the participants said that the dire economic situation they and their family were in was the main reason for migration. They reported using both legal and illegal agents/brokers to facilitate the migration process. Either way, legal or illegal, their migration process and exploitation experiences in the Arabian Gulf were similar. A great number of the Ethiopian women return migrants in our study reported that deception by both legal and illegal brokers regarding job description, amount of pay, and other issues is common.

Under the kafala system, migrants are bound by law to stay with their sponsor until the end of their contract period, which in most cases is two or three years (Pande 2013). Often their passport is confiscated by their employer and they are prohibited from going out of the house unless accompanied by their employer. The kafala system makes it difficult to change employer, even in the case of human rights violation. In our focus group discussions and interviews, respondents explained that the violation of basic human rights by their employer in their work place (employer's house) was commonplace. Most of the participants in our study mentioned exploitation experiences, such as deprivation of food and rest, overwork, confinement, servitude to other households, beating and sexual assault. They also stated that they did not receive any legal protection from the Ethiopian embassy, agents or any official legal body in the Arabian Gulf countries. We analyzed and compared the various coping strategies adopted based on migration experiences, such as residing legally/illegally in the host country, and return experiences, such as voluntary/involuntary repatriation and receiving/not receiving reintegration assistance from NGOs or the government.

Residing legally in the host country means abiding by the kafala labor system, which requires staying in the employer's house for the duration of the contract. In this way, temporary migration schemes, such as the kafala system, operate as 'technologies of servitude' (Yeoh et al. 2017). Ethiopian women domestic workers are systematically beaten and deprived of basic needs, so as to break their resistance and make them submit. They are violently governed through racial and gendered processes to make them accept their servile position. Employers are reported to frequently threaten domestic workers and Arab wives play a tyrannical role in the household in the sense that they tend to treat Ethiopian migrant women as their slaves and as potential mistresses.

Respondents who found themselves trapped in this situation of multiple exploitation described it as continuing until the end of the contract period. In this situation of fear and hopelessness, they mentioned feeling weak and ill at times, apathetic and unable to sleep properly, mainly out of fear of being assaulted at night. The thematic analysis of data revealed that migrants used emotion-focused coping strategies to deal with traumatic

events while staying in the employer's house. Prayer and crying were frequently mentioned as coping mechanisms. In some cases, tolerating the situation in the hope of a better future was mentioned as a coping strategy.

However, 26 out of the 48 participants reported trying to cope by escaping from the employer's house, despite the risk. Hence, their coping strategy revolved around actively changing the situation (problem-focused). The narrative of the following participant shows the kind of despair that migrants experience:

Her husband had a gun and I always felt like using it for killing her. I decided to kill her and kill myself too. You think that committing such a crime is a big thing but killing somebody when you lose hope is not difficult. I stayed three months in such a horrible condition. I could not eat and lost a lot of weight. One day I found the opportunity and I ran out of the house in the middle of the night with my night wear only. (Interview 2)

Most of our respondents narrated how they considered committing, or actually attempted to commit, suicide to escape from the unbearable situation they found themselves in. In our interviews with them, it appeared that the majority of migrant workers experienced extreme despair and a suicidal mental state during their time in the Arabian Gulf. This shows the unbearableness of the exploitation experiences, given that suicide is highly condemned in Ethiopia's religious traditions. In Ethiopia, those who commit suicide are widely regarded as 'condemned sinners' (Alem et al. 1999: 65).

Given that under the kafala system working without a designated sponsor makes the migrants illegal in the Arabian Gulf region, Ethiopian migrant domestic workers can be easily imprisoned and deported. In other words, escaping the household exposes Ethiopian migrant domestic workers to new traumatic experiences. After escaping from their abusive sponsors, migrants come to depend on illegal brokers and traffickers to find a job and shelter, and, in most cases, the interviewees said that these agents lured them into sexual enslavement.

In sum, in the work place (their employer's house), migrant domestic workers experience multiple exploitations – all of our interviewees reported being exploited to varying degrees – that often converge to create an unbearable situation. Escape from their employer's house, often with the help of an illegal agent, however, can make matters worse, as these agents often force women into prostitution. Regarding coping strategies, both problem-focused coping (escaping from the employer and trying to change the situation) and emotion-focused coping (crying and praying to deal with the distress caused by the migration process) were found to be used as coping mechanisms during migration.

Coping strategies upon returning to Addis Ababa

Once Ethiopian migrant workers return from the Arabian Gulf and resettle in Ethiopia, they are forced to cope with the exploitation they have

experienced abroad as migrant workers. From our interviews, it appears that the sense-making by returnees is typically racialized; i.e. returnees make sense of their exploitation experiences by attributing 'otherness' to Arabs, as an explanation for their wrongdoing.

This racialized sense-making is clearly illustrated by a returnee who escaped the house with the help of her agent, where she was employed due to lack of sleep and food deprivation. To her dismay, she found that she was to live in a house with four Ethiopian brokers (men), who all expected to have sexual relations with her. She survived an attempt of rape by one man and decided to escape from the brokers' house and move to another city, via a dangerous journey; on her way she was raped by two Saudi policemen. To make sense of what she went through in Saudi Arabia, she has constructed a racialized understanding of her experience in the following way:

I was brave enough to escape from the danger of rape while I was living with the Ethiopian guys, but I was raped by Arab policemen. Thank God there were only two of them. If there were more, they might have raped us in a group... I am glad I was not raped by the Ethiopian men, though, because I would not stop thinking about it, and I might have developed a lifelong hatred and rage towards every Ethiopian man. But with the Arabs, if you think they are people from another country, it is still hard, but it is easier to let go and forgive. I literally prefer to die than to be raped by an Ethiopian man. (Interview 1)

This returnee makes sense of being raped by Saudi Arabian policemen through a racialized explanation: rape fits with being Arab. In her sense-making, rape does not fit with being Ethiopian, which is strongly denounced. This is not a unique experience and narrative, but quite common among Ethiopian returnees. Despite the fact that Ethiopia is highly patriarchal, and domestic violence and masculine dominance is prevalent and implicitly accepted (Kedir and Admasachew 2010), our respondents particularly denounced the violence suffered at the hands of Ethiopians in the Arabian Gulf. From their narratives it was implied that they expect benevolence and Ethiopian solidarity while abroad in a hostile environment. Such violence grossly violates their (nationalistic) expectations. With Arabs, they have lower expectations. This racialization seems to facilitate sense-making, while at the same time marking its limits as a coping strategy; as returnees said that they could not cope with the experience of being raped by an Ethiopian in the Arabian Gulf. In other words, not all experiences of exploitation can be made sense of by the returnees. Our respondents said that they find it most difficult to make sense of the abusive conduct of Ethiopian agents, given the absence of a racial explanation. These women typically said that they could not understand why their fellow Ethiopians enslaved them, yet they do expect, and perhaps even accept as a sense-making strategy, the tyranny of Arab agents.

To come to terms with their experiences upon return to Addis Ababa, returnees typically need to use more than one coping strategy. In addition to sense-making, benefit-finding appears to be a common strategy used by returnees to come to terms with their experiences in the Arabian Gulf. Returnees typically look for something positive (like having survived) in their experiences and usually articulate this in religious language. They compare their own suffering to even less fortunate domestic workers (including those who did commit suicide), and they imagine the worst situation they could possibly, and plausibly, have been in. In other words, they emphasize that their experiences could have been worse, thereby minimizing their own negative experiences. For instance, those who have been raped or subjected to brutal physical or psychological exploitation, explain that they are thankful that they have been able to return to Addis Ababa safely. They compare themselves with those who lost their life in the Arabian Gulf or who were disabled or disfigured due to the physical violence of their Arab employers. As one returnee articulated:

Praise God, I didn't face other bad things ... I really regret very much [going to the Arabian Gulf]. I faced all these agonies and troubles ... I feel happy because I am alive. When I observe several disabled women returnees, I praise God for making me able. (Interview 9)

Benefit-finding appears to be a common coping strategy among returnees and a vast majority of participants used it. Some returnees try to cope with their experiences by making them a constitutive part of their new life in Addis Ababa; they developed new life principles in the aftermath of their migration experiences. Such benefit-finding is expressed in terms like:

Allah be praised! Unless you travel somewhere, you would not appreciate the good things in your country. (Interview 19)

And:

You will be stronger as a person because you pass through a difficult path there and ...you think you should work hard here also. (Focus group discussion 2)

The adoption of such attitudes and consideration of the exploitation experience as a learning experience that is vital to personal growth and has value in the post-migration phase is not uncommon. In other words, from our interviews and focus group discussions it appears that benefit-finding is used as a strategy to distinguish between the past and present, and to distinguish between places. There and then is constructed as a school for present success, which is realized via the capacity for suffering and hard work that has been learned in the Arabian Gulf.

Apart from benefit-finding in their own survival or their own personal development, returnees also find benefits for their family. Returnees typically do not generate the financial and material gains that they expected from

domestic work in the Arabian Gulf (Nisrane et al. 2017). The majority of respondents stressed that, as migrant workers, they sent their meager salary almost entirely home to family members in Ethiopia. Almost all of them said that they felt betrayed when they learned that their parents, husband or children had not saved anything for them. Some of the returnees believed that their family had saved enough money so that they would be able to start a small business, as they had dreamed about before migrating to the Arabian Gulf. Very few of the returnees recouped some of the remittances they had sent. The majority of the returnees said that they are financially dependent on their family now. Although returnees tend to be proud of the sacrifices they have made for their family, almost all of them emphasized that this sacrifice was too extreme. They try to cope with this bitter experience through benefit-seeking. They focus on the blessings that they have brought to their family, typically by comparing their family's condition before and after their migration. They emphasize that their earnings may not have financially benefited them personally, but have benefited their family, even if this is marked by betrayal. They emphasize the benefit for their family and de-emphasize the experience of being betrayed by their family and being left with nothing for themselves. The following quote illustrates how benefit is found in personal sacrifice for the family.

Even though I sacrificed a lot and passed through difficult paths, I changed a lot in my family life and I am glad I went... This house is rebuilt again and well-furnished compared to what it used to be. It was about to fall apart. My younger brother and sisters were able to go to a better school, were able to eat better, and were able to dress better. They were able to follow their education without the hassle of financially helping my mom. At least they did not pass through the difficult childhood I passed through. It was better for them. Of course, I did not achieve my ultimate goal, but it changed a lot of things for good in my family. (Interview 1)

This returnee uses benefit-seeking as a coping strategy by enacting a positive 'migration-development nexus' in her narrative of suffering (Piper 2008: 1290). In the story of this particular returnee, the migration-development nexus is part of a benefit-seeking strategy, marked by her painful migration experience and framed as sacrifice that benefits the whole family, ultimately giving her brother and sisters a future.

To sum up, returnees used sense-making and benefit-seeking, both for themselves and their families, as strategies for coping with their exploitation experiences. Racialized sense-making enable the returnees to find some kind of explanation to help them to come to terms with their past in the Arabian Gulf and to make sense of their experiences so that they can go on with their lives. Their sense-making strategies must be distinguished from their benefit-seeking strategies, yet the two strategies cannot be separated. While trying to make sense of their experiences, the majority of the returnees also

applied benefit-seeking strategies. These include making comparisons with less fortunate domestic workers in the Arabian Gulf, imagining worse scenarios retrospectively to enable them to claim that they could have been even worse off, making their experience a 'school' for personal development, and creating stories of personal sacrifice for the greater good of the family. In this way the returnees comfort themselves.

Finally, the researchers tried to determine if there were differences in coping strategies based on the return experience (voluntary/involuntary) of the returnees and whether they received reintegration assistance or not. However, coping strategies used to cope with past trauma were found to be similar for most of the returnees and no difference was seen in the strategies used by the returnees based on their migration or return experiences. The support programs provided by NGOs and the government focused on enabling the returnees to be self-sufficient financially and did not in any way affected their coping strategies in relation to their past traumatic experiences.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we reconstruct, on the basis of interviews and focus group discussions, returnee narratives of racialized, gendered and economic exploitation in Arabian Gulf countries and stories of coping with these experiences in the process of resettling in Addis Ababa, as articulated by Ethiopian women return migrants. Returnees who have lived under the kafala system tell of multiple exploitation experiences at different stages of the migration process and in different places (by agents and in their employer's house), which are marked by patriarchal constructions of gender, race, class and sexuality, which leave women Ethiopian domestic workers highly vulnerable to exploitation (Fluri and Piedalue 2017).

To deal with adverse conditions while abroad, migrants use problem-focused coping, escaping from their employer's house, for instance, and emotion-focused coping, such as, trying to reduce the distress caused by praying or crying. Upon their return to the home country, returnees use sense-making and benefit-seeking as coping strategies to come to terms with the aftermath of their traumatic experiences. In benefit-seeking, they try to cope with their migration-related trauma by making downward comparisons with worse-off migrants and by comparing their own situation with possible worse scenarios. They also find benefit in the sense that they consider their experiences as the price paid for the betterment of their families or as a way of 'learning the hard way' – a learning that they believe can be of benefit in their lives in Addis Ababa.

Their sense-making strategy is most striking. From our research it appears the racial difference between Arabs and Ethiopians helps Ethiopian returnees

to make sense of their traumatic experiences in the Arabian Gulf. Through racialized sense-making returnees manage to understand the exploitation – particularly sexual violence – that they have suffered, in the sense that they stereotype Arab men as rapists, whereas they do not see Ethiopian men in that way. As one implication of such racialized sense-making, returnees could not make sense of abuse and rape by Ethiopian agents who live in the Arabian Gulf countries.

In other words, while experiences of exploitation, such as being raped, may be similar, the way of coping can differ. In terms of coping, it makes a difference to the returnees whether they are raped by an Arab or Ethiopian man – and this difference has a major impact on their ability to come to terms with the experience of being raped. This raises the question of why returnees do not try to understand or accept rape and sex trafficking by their own compatriots. This is a puzzling question, especially if we consider that, in patriarchal Ethiopia, violence against Ethiopian women is ‘tolerated’ at an individual as well as a societal (rural and urban) level (Kedir and Admasachew 2010: 438). In a study by Kedir and Admasachew (2010), it appears that many Ethiopian women do not view sexual exploitation as a crime and do not report it to the authorities – the exploitation by perpetrators tends to be normalized and masculine domination is tacitly ‘accepted’ by women. Family pressure to uphold gender conventions, cultural pressure to meet moral standards of gender in patriarchal society, and the resistance of men may explain such ‘acceptance’ (Parreñas 2005). And yet, the Ethiopian women who participated in our study found it difficult to accept or tolerate the sexual exploitation of their compatriots, irrespective of gender, in the Arabian Gulf. It may well be that the places where the exploitation occurred have an impact on them accepting or denouncing the violence: the Ethiopian women migrants expected support from their compatriots in the Gulf region as a form of Ethiopian solidarity abroad, only to find out that they were deceived. Also, dealing with violence in strange places – outside one’s own known surroundings – has an impact on the identity of Ethiopian migrants, which is to say that identity is dynamic and shaped by temporal, power and spatial relations.

While this paper is one of the first to explore the coping strategies of women return migrants, it is not without limitations. This study was conducted after the migrants had returned and stayed in Addis Ababa for at least a year. Having returned for a year or more may have had an impact on migrants’ sense-making process. A different result may have been found if interviews and focus group discussions were organized with returnees immediately after their return from the Arabian Gulf, before they were confronted with the reality of resettlement in Addis Ababa. For future studies into returnees’ narratives of exploitation and coping strategies, considering various

timespans and their possible impact on sense-making strategies may also be important. Moreover, to better understand migration-related trauma and associated coping mechanisms, we suggest expanding the scope of respondents, for instance, to include other types of migrants and destinations, as migrant workers may experience different types of exploitation by smugglers and traffickers and Gulf state authorities (like police officers).

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Appendix 1

Code	Migration experience	Support from NGO or government	Marital status before	Marital status after	Children	School level	Age at departure	Length of stay abroad	Return type	Religion
p1	BOTH	YES	S	M	NO	High school	20	2 years and 3 months	Voluntary	Orthodox
p2	K	YES	S	S	NO	High school	20	10 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p3	NK	YES	S	M	YES	High school	18	12 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p4	BOTH	YES	S	S	NO	High school	20	11 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p5	BOTH	YES	S	S	NO	Diploma	23	1 year and 3 months	Voluntary	Orthodox
p6	BOTH	YES	S	S	NO	High school	21	9 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p7	K	YES	S	S	NO	High school	23	3 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p8	K	YES	S	S	NO	High school	16	6 months	Voluntary	Protestant
p9	K	YES	S	S	NO	High school	19	1 year	Involuntary	Orthodox
p10	K	YES	S	S	NO	High school	24	1 year and 2 months	Involuntary	Orthodox
p11	K	YES	S	S	NO	Elementary	20	1 year and 2 months	Involuntary	Muslim
p12	BOTH	NO	S	M	YES	Elementary	21	8 years and 2 months	Voluntary	Orthodox
p13	K	NO	S	S	NO	High school	20	8 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p14	BOTH	NO	S	S	YES	High school	25	11 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p15	BOTH	NO	S	S	NO	High school	19	7 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p16	BOTH	NO	M	D	YES	Elementary	27	2 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p17	K	NO	S	S	NO	Elementary	22	1 year and 6 months	Involuntary	Orthodox
p18	BOTH	NO	S	S	NO	High school	29	5 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p19	NK	YES	M	D	YES	Elementary	20	16 years	Voluntary	Muslim
p20	BOTH	YES	S	D	YES	High school	27	7 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p21	NK	NO	S	S	NO	None	14	10 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p22	BOTH	NO	S	S	NO	High school	24	3 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p23	BOTH	NO	S	S	NO	High school	25	6 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p24	BOTH	NO	S	S	YES	Elementary	27	3 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p25	BOTH	NO	M	S	YES	High school	25	2 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p26	NK	NO	S	D	NO	High school	18	10 years	Voluntary	Muslim
p27	NK	NO	S	S	NO	High school	19	9 years	Voluntary	Muslim
p28	NK	YES	S	S	NO	High school	-	10 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p29	BOTH	YES	S	S	NO	High school	-	15 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p30	BOTH	NO	S	D	YES	High school	16	22 years	Voluntary	Muslim
p31	BOTH	NO	D	D	YES	High school	-	21 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p32	BOTH	YES	S	S	NO	High school	-	11 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p33	BOTH	NO	S	S	NO	High school	19	5 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p34	BOTH	YES	S	S	NO	High school	20	10 years	Voluntary	Muslim
p35	NK	YES	S	S	NO	High school	17	8 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p36	K	YES	S	M	YES	None	20	6 years	Voluntary	Muslim
p37	K	YES	S	S	YES	High school	-	5 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p38	K	YES	S	S	NO	Elementary	-	7 years	Voluntary	Muslim
p39	K	YES	S	S	NO	Elementary	-	2 years	Involuntary	Muslim
p40	K	YES	S	M	YES	Elementary	-	6 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p41	BOTH	YES	S	S	YES	Elementary	-	3 years	Involuntary	Orthodox
p42	BOTH	YES	S	S	NO	High school	-	3 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p43	BOTH	YES	S	S	NO	High school	17	5 years and 3 months	Involuntary	Orthodox
p44	K	YES	S	S	NO	High school	18	3 years and 6 months	Involuntary	Muslim
p45	K	YES	S	M	YES	High school	-	2 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p46	BOTH	YES	S	M	YES	High school	-	5 years	Voluntary	Protestant
p47	BOTH	YES	M	D	YES	High school	-	3 years	Voluntary	Orthodox
p48	BOTH	YES	S	S	NO	Diploma	-	9 years and 6 months	Involuntary	Orthodox

Note: p, participant; K, stayed under the kafala system; NK, stayed out of the kafala system, such as on a tourist visa; M, married; S, single; D, divorced. Orthodox refers to follower of Ethiopian Orthodox religion, which is the major religion in Ethiopia.