

Proposal for a research project on

Rural to urban migration in Ethiopia. The case of female household servants in Addis Ababa. By Volker Gottowik, Goethe-University, Frankfurt/M.

“Domestic violence is notoriously under-reported,
under-recorded and under-researched.”
(Alemayehu et al. 2008:8)

General statement

There is great awareness in the Ethiopian society about female genital mutilation, forced and early marriage, abduction and rape. These practices became the topic of numerous anthropological studies and the target of countless NGOs. Even the Ethiopian Government banned them as “harmful traditional practices”. Despite the existing awareness about the miserable situation of the female population in many parts of the country, there is only little knowledge about those women and girls, who resist these practices and escape to urban centres. This research project deals with young women and girls who migrated to Addis Ababa to start a new life away from their parents, husband and sometimes even their children. The focus is on those women and girls who try to make a living by working as household servants in the Ethiopian capital. As a matter of fact, a considerable number of these women and girls escaped violence in their village only to become a victim of violence in town. Due to these problems, Addis Ababa for many of them is only a stop over on their way to Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Qatar and other countries in the Golf region.

Research guiding question

What are the reasons that cause young women and girls from rural areas in Ethiopia to migrate to Addis Ababa? What are the challenges they are confronted with in their new urban environment? How do they manage to survive in the city, and what are their perspectives in life?

Life stories

I became interested in migration patterns in Ethiopia when I was a DAAD-guest lecturer at Addis Ababa University during spring term 2010. With the assistance of three post graduate students (Abiot Shiferaw, Dawit Yosef and Melake Mihret), who joined my seminar on research methods in Social Anthropology, I started to do research on this topic. As a research team we did interviews with young female migrants, professional brokers, school teachers and local experts. We asked young women and girls, whom we met at the broker's office or in the evening school, to tell us their life stories. The following story of Tigest is quite characteristic for the accounts we were able to collect:

"My name is Tigest. I came from Attaye, a place in North Shoa. My age is seventeen. I came here four years ago. Before I came to Addis Ababa, I was a grade four student. One day on my way home from school, which was quite a long way, a group of men abducted me. Later I came to know that my parents had consented for marriage with a family and had signed a marriage contract.

I was lucky enough to escape the first night after my abduction from the room where I was confined. This night I went back to my parents' house. After this event, my parents promised the family of my future husband to undertake the marriage one year later. It was at this time that I escaped from home and went to my uncle. He brought me to Addis Ababa, because one of my aunts was here. I lived three months with her and later get employed as a household servant in another home. But the situation was not good for me. So I left this home and came to the broker's office. Now I am working on a shifting base and spend the night with my aunt. I am grade seven in the evening program now.

My older sister was also abducted; she left the area and lives now in Shewarobit. My younger sister was also abducted and raped at the age of 13. This practice is common in my area. I know why my father wanted us to get married through abduction. It was not because he hated us, but he wanted us to live close to him, to inherit his land and to build on it. (Interview with Tigest, March 8, 2010, at the broker's office; translated by Abiot Shiferaw).

The interviews, we were able to conduct, show the following patterns of rural to urban migration: The girls, confronted with arranged marriage or abduction and rape, escape – sometimes with the help of other family members or a close friend – to relatives in a nearby town. When after some time problems occur with these relatives, for example because access to education is not given, the girls proceed to Addis Ababa and contact a professional broker in search of a job. In many cases they end up working as female household servants, since this is one of the very few job opportunities they have in an urban environment like Addis Ababa (besides working as a construction worker, waitress or prostitute). Since most of the girls have no skills, no family networks, some of them not even friends in the urban environment, and because they are completely inexperienced and most therefore be called naïve in many

respects, they easily become the victim of exploitation including sexual abuse. Being confronted with these hardships, some of them see no other chance than migrating to so-called Arab countries. What is waiting for them there is widely known by public but completely neglected by them.

Expert interviews

The description of these migration patterns is the result of 18 interviews that we conducted in March 2010 with young women and girls at the broker's office and in the evening school. All interviews were tape recorded; twelve of them are already transcribed and translated.

When we decided to conduct interviews with these young women and girls, our intention was to give them a voice and to let them speak for themselves. Their stories provide the chance to learn about their lives, their motivation to abandon family and friends and to escape to Addis Ababa. From these interviews we learnt that the majority of young women and girls came from the Amhara region, a rural area which is located in the Northwest of the country. All of them are orthodox Christians and most of them escape from early marriage or abduction and rape.

Since I was surprised by these findings, I discussed them with my colleagues at Addis Ababa University and finally conducted two expert interviews: one with Dr. Guday Emirie, Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Anthropology (March 18, 2010), and another one with Dr. Hirut Terefe, Director of the Institute of Gender Studies (March 24, 2010), both of which I was able to tape record and to transcribe.

According to both experts, early marriage in the Amhara region is the result of a complex interplay of different variables like land holding system, kinship system, marriage rules and moral values. As a matter of fact, the age of marriage partners is actually going down. While the previous generation still used to get married, when the girls were between 13 and 15 years of age and the boys between 16 and 18 years, social and physical maturity of the bride are currently completely neglected. According to Guday Emirie the average age of a bride in the Amhara region is actually be-

tween eight and nine years. Since sexual intercourse is performed as soon as bride and groom share a common household, the girls become pregnant at a very early age. Early pregnancy indeed can lead to a variety of serious health problems, among them fistula, which is strongly stigmatized in the Ethiopian society. Many girls are neither physically nor mentally prepared to shoulder marriage and pregnancy. This is the reason, why they run away from home and escape to urban centres.

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, enacted in 1995, identifies in Article 35(4) early marriage as a “harmful traditional practice”. However, according to Hirut Terefe it is debatable if early marriage is really a cultural tradition or a strategy to cope with poverty. According to her opinion, girl marriage has nothing to do with culture or religion, but rather with education. Currently there is a public debate in Ethiopia on this issue, and in regard to the question, if girl marriage is a cultural tradition or an economic strategy even the two experts with whom I did these interviews hold different positions.

As a matter of fact, the Revised Family Code of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, passed in 2000, states in Article 215 that 18 years is the legal age for entry into marriage for both sexes (cf. Alemante 2004:37). This is the point of departure for many local Women’s Associations and international NGOs to take action against this practice. The Orthodox Church however still promotes marriage when the groom has reached an age of 15 years – a position that is justified as fight against promiscuity.

The findings of the different types of interviews that we conducted in March 2010 are all directing to the huge amount of violence the female part of the rural population in the Amhara region is exposed to. Even when poverty in this region is depressing, the main factors for girls and young women to migrate to urban centres like Addis Ababa are not economic reasons, but rather socio-cultural ones. Even when the two levels are difficult to separate, as the notion “culture of poverty” (Oscar Lewis) indicates, I have the strong impression that in the literature on migration in Ethiopia socio-cultural factors like girl marriage, abduction and rape are strongly underrated. Against this background, the intention of this research project is to highlight these reasons and to direct public attention towards them.

Methodology and research guiding questions

Herewith I apply for a grant from Goethe-University in order to complete the research project I tried to introduce on the previous pages. Due to teaching obligations at Addis Ababa University I was not able to visit the Amhara region and this implies that I am still not familiar with the living conditions of young women and girls in this region. Therefore this grant will be used first of all to travel to this part of Ethiopia and to do ethnographic research among the local rural population for about six to eight weeks. Since I feel the need not only to talk to young women and girls who migrated to Addis Ababa, but also to listen to the other side, i.e. their parents, brothers etc., interviews with mothers and fathers are projected, whose daughters migrated to Addis Ababa. I want to find out if they understand the reasons of their children for doing so and what prevents them to fetch them back home. Furthermore I want to learn about activities of international NGOs in this area and the support they receive from the local female population. And finally I want to find out, why the Orthodox Church is able to give its blessing to girl marriages when according to the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia this is an illegal act. – The research project intends to give answers to the following questions:

- What are the reasons for the migration of young women and girls from the Amhara region to Addis Ababa; are concerned groups (parents, politicians, priests etc.) aware of these reasons and do they undertake any efforts to eliminate them?
- Why is the average age of marriage partners in the Amhara region actually going down; are there any economic reasons to explain this phenomenon and which reasons are given by the local population?
- Are early marriages “harmful traditional practices”, as defined by the Ethiopian constitution, which will vanish – if at all – only in the long run or are they a strategy to cope with miserable living conditions, which will disappear as soon as these conditions improve?
- Do the activities of NGOs have any support from the local population or are they induced only from the outside; where are and who are possible partners in their fight against girl marriage, abduction and rape?
- What can be done to persuade the Orthodox Christian Church to adhere to the law?

Final remark: Target of the research project

This research project intends to contribute to the investigation of rural to urban migration in Ethiopia as far as female migrants from the Amhara region are concerned. In order to achieve this target, it aims to include different voices and perspectives: life stories of young women and girls, who migrated to Addis Ababa, statements of brokers, teachers and experts. While this part of the research project is almost completed, other voices and perspectives still have to be detected: the opinion of parents and siblings, whose daughters or sisters escaped from home, statements of experts from local NGOs, the opinion of officials from the Orthodox church etc. In order to complete the project as described above, I apply for a grant from Goethe-University. As a final result a publication in an international journal is intended that will elucidate the causes and consequences of female migration in Ethiopia.

Curriculum vitae

Volker Gottowik studied Anthropology, Sociology and Philosophy in Frankfurt/M., Houston/TX and Mainz; he received his PhD from the University in Mainz with a dissertation on Clifford Geertz, interpretive anthropology and the crisis of representation; his ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia (altogether 16 months) resulted in his habilitation at the University in Frankfurt/M., this "second book" was on rituals, masks and interethnic relations on Bali and received the "Nachwuchsförderpreis der Freunde und Förderer der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität"; he hold a professorship (temporary replacement) at Goethe-University for a total of four semesters before he went as a DAAD guest lecturer first to the College of New Jersey in Trenton, USA, and then to the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana in Legon/Accra. With a grant from the Goethe-University ("Förderung eines kleineren Projektes zur Frauen- und Genderforschung") he was able to return to Accra to conduct a research project on the social perception of black and white partnerships (*couple domino*) in Ghana. In 2008 he became a fellow at the "Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften/IFK" in Vienna, before he went as a DAAD guest lecturer two times to Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia: from November 2008 until February

2009 and from January 2010 until March 2010. Actually he is working as a professor (temporal replacement) at the University of Vienna and as adjunct at the University of Frankfurt/M.

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