genealogy

MDPI

Article

More than Maids: Social Mobility Experiences Among Ethiopian Women Migrating to the United Arab Emirates

Meron Zeleke Eresso [1] and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen [2,*]

[1] College of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa 1000, Ethiopia; meron.zeleke@aau.edu.et
[2] Migration and Global Order, the Danish Institute of International Studies, 2100 Copenhagen, Denmark
* Correspondence: nns@diis.dk

Abstract

The migration of Ethiopian women to the Middle East has primarily been studied in connection with domestic labour and the related vulnerabilities. Due to assumptions about the low educational levels of women entering this sector, as well as the precarity and temporality the sector entails, opportunities for social mobility have been largely overlooked. This article examines changes in Ethiopian women's labour market participation in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It demonstrates that, over time, women who enter the workforce as maids may transition into better-paid work or establish their own business ventures. It further depicts an evolving pattern of well-educated Ethiopian women entering the skilled labour market. Based on ethnographic findings from the UAE, the article offers a critical re-engagement with prevailing narratives of victimhood and severely restricted social mobility opportunities. Drawing on recent conceptualisations of mobilities, trajectories, and temporalities, the article critiques the tendency to portray Ethiopian female migrants as a homogeneous group with similar paths, thereby concealing the diversity of their experiences. Second, it questions the essentialization of women migrant workers as passive victims. By highlighting developments in women's aspirations and agency over time, the article contributes new knowledge on the potential for social mobility within transnational labour markets.

Keywords: Ethiopia; United Arab Emirates; agency; skilled migration; social mobility

check for updates

Received: 31 October 2025
Revised: 27 November 2025
Accepted: 28 November 2025
Published: 1 December 2025

Citation: Eresso, Meron Zeleke, and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen. 2025. More than Maids: Social Mobility Experiences Among Ethiopian Women Migrating to the United Arab Emirates. *Genealogy* 9: 142. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy9040142

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

Dubai, with one of the world's densest skylines, extravagant wealth, multicultural and high-flying lifestyle, is among the places in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to which migrants head in search of better futures, among them Ethiopian women. These women are believed to work mainly in the domestic sector, especially as maids, stuck in dead-end jobs, and particularly vulnerable to abuse and rights violations (Kubai 2015; Lecadet and Melkamu 2016; Gezie et al. 2021). By being confined in private homes, they are assumed to remain invisible to the public. Walking through the leisure district of Deira, one cannot help but notice the numerous Ethiopian coffee shops, where young Ethiopian women serve coffee and shisha and provide company at night, or the many Ethiopian restaurants and beauty salons found not only in Deira but throughout the city state, as well as in other Emirates such as Sharjah and Abu Dhabi. Less visible, but equally important, the economy based on trade, tourism, aviation, financial services, and real estate is becoming a niche for African professionals, including Ethiopian women.

The UAE has a total population of 11.3 million, of which 88.5 percent are foreigners, mostly migrant workers with almost non-existent pathways to permanent residence or citizenship. As such, the Emirates may at first sight appear devoid of opportunities for social mobility but may at the same time represent sites of 'transitional, reluctant, and uncertain becoming' (Landau et al. 2025, p. 2) for the migrants working and living there. While viewed as transitional and uncertain by both long-staying and recently arrived Ethiopian migrant workers we spoke with in late 2024, many women nevertheless expressed a willingness rather than reluctance when comparing their current lives in the UAE to economically challenging and conflict-ridden lives in Ethiopia. Interestingly, almost all of them mentioned opportunities, security, exposure to the world, and freedom when reflecting on what the UAE represents to them. "Dubai selam alew" (Dubai has peace), you are "free to dress as you please", can "walk around safely without being harassed on the streets" and will "never go to bed with an empty stomach". When asked about the downsides, long working hours, little time to socialise, being away from family and close social networks, obtaining and extending legal residency status, and remaining "temporary people" were common responses. Similar perceptions were found by Paul and Rabel (2024) among college-educated Indian women in the UAE, who seem to prefer 'comfortable transience' abroad to 'uncomfortable permanence' at home. Could it be that Ethiopian migrant women of different social class backgrounds prefer the extended transient condition to the insecurities a return to Ethiopia would entail, in social, economic and political terms?

This article explores the evolving dynamics of Ethiopian women's migration to the UAE, including recent changes in their demographic composition and labour-market incorporation, social mobility pathways, and the multiple factors that explain these shifts and account for the diversification of trajectories and mobility experiences of Ethiopian women currently working there. The remainder of the paper is divided into five sections. The next outlines the history of Ethiopian women's labour migration to the Middle East, highlighting the driving forces at both origin and destination as well as the regulatory frameworks in place. It is followed by a section discussing theoretical approaches to migration and social mobility, including under the kafala system. A methodological section then outlines the ethnographic approach, before introducing the exemplary case study that illustrates how mobility trajectories have evolved over time. The concluding section argues for increased attention to diversity of experience. By emphasising the diverse experiences and agency of these women, presented through exemplary personal narratives, the article contributes to a contextualised and nuanced understanding of Ethiopian women's migration to the Middle East. It simultaneously challenges prevalent discourses of migrant homogeneity, victimhood as the most probable outcome, and a lack of agency on the part of migrant women, without denying the high risks of abuse and suffering that migrating to the UAE may entail.

2. Ethiopian Labour Migration to the Middle East

The work and lives of Ethiopian migrant workers in the Middle East and Gulf states are often considered to have started with the first official bilateral labour migration scheme established with Lebanon in 1989. This scheme primarily targeted domestic workers and laid the groundwork for thousands of Ethiopian women leaving for Lebanon with work contracts confined to this sector (Beydoun 2006; Fernandez 2013). Following the political regime change, the 1990s marked a significant milestone in the history of Ethiopian labour migration to the Gulf and the Middle East, which rose significantly (Schewel 2022). Multiple factors contributed to this sudden rise, including increasing demand in destination countries, high unemployment rates in Ethiopia, and political instability, which together

acted as driving forces (Adugna 2021). Others associate the sudden rise in women's migration with rural and urban poverty, Ethiopia's rapid integration into the global economy, accompanied by the adoption of structural adjustment policies, and the overall effects of globalisation on migration dynamics (affecting the flow of information, goods, money, and people) (Demissie 2017).

2.1. Forms of Entry and the Migrant Landscape

Since the 1990s, Ethiopian labour migrants to the UAE have used one of three forms of entry: being registered with licenced Ethiopian Private Employment Agencies (PEA), securing a work contract through personal networks and then registering, until 2022 with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, since then with the Ministry of Labour and Skills, and through unlicensed brokers (Eresso 2019a).

The UAE has long attracted Ethiopian migrants. The largest and wealthiest emirate, Abu Dhabi, is the centre of the oil industry. Dubai, the port city, is the UAE's most vital commercial and financial hub, home to thousands of multinational corporations. Sharjah is the third most populous city, where many Ethiopians reside due to relatively affordable housing prices. All three cities attract millions of migrant workers, making the UAE the country with the highest ratio of migrants to native population in the world. Indians comprise the largest foreign community with an estimated 3.5 million migrant workers, followed by 1 million Bangladeshis, along with 950,000 Pakistanis, 710,000 Egyptians, and around 500,000 Filipinos, according to UAEHRR (2024). With an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 Ethiopian nationals, it is the third-largest destination for Ethiopians living abroad, after the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), with estimates ranging between 700,000 and 1 million Ethiopian migrants and the USA (estimated 1.4 million). According to the Ethiopian consulate in Dubai, most Ethiopians working in Dubai are young women aged 20 to 35 with "low educational backgrounds who come directly from rural areas". Over the past two years, the Ethiopian Embassy in Abu Dhabi and the consulate in Dubai have registered 64,000 Ethiopians, many of whom reportedly fit that description.

2.2. The Kafala System and Recent Reforms

Like other Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCCs, the GCC comprises Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the KSA and the UAE), the UAE uses a private sponsorship system called kafala to oversee migrant labour. The system gives employers control over migrants' ability to live, work, and leave the country, effectively determining the migrant worker's immigration status. The kafala system is generally understood to establish a social contract between the state and its citizens, benefiting the latter exclusively. Over the years, the kafala system has become increasingly controversial. Growing recognition that the lack of regulations and protections for migrant workers' rights often results in low wages, poor working conditions, and abuse of employees has, since the 1990s, led to significant reforms.

Today, the UAE is a party to the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), and the conventions on the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), the International Conventions on the Abolition of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It has also ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Recent reforms of labour laws include banning the charging of recruitment fees to migrant workers, removing the requirement for employer permission to change jobs or leave the country—often referred to as a Non-Objection Certificate (NOC)—and improving access to labour dispute resolution mechanisms. However, domestic workers, herders, and farm workers continue to be excluded from these improvements, a fact lamented by all the maids we met. Migrant workers remain ineligible for government housing allowances, subsidised healthcare, or other social services. While

the UAE's labour law and human rights framework prohibit and criminalise all forms of forced labour, as well as human rights and gender abuses, gaps in law enforcement and implementation leave migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation. However, an often overlooked yet important aspect is that foreign migrant business owners have the privilege of long-term residence permits and the right to sponsor other migrant workers. As we shall see, this grants them a significant position within the system.

2.3. Legal Status and Employment Opportunities

More than half of the Ethiopians migrating to GCCs, including the UAE, are believed to have irregular status. Approximately 95 per cent of Ethiopians migrating through regular channels are assumed to be relatively young women hired for domestic work (UN-Women 2024). Arrangements made through trusted irregular brokers sometimes offer a quicker and cheaper process, enabling migrant women to bypass the legal requirements of obtaining—and being bound to—employment contracts before migrating, as well as meeting the minimum age and educational standards. Working outside the official system is also found to generate higher earnings than being subject to a kafala contract (Busza et al. 2023).

Travelling by air is significantly safer than overland journeys, as the risk of falling prey to human smugglers, traffickers, or criminal gangs increases with the number of steps involved. However, we should not assume that air travel is only an option for regular migrants, since obtaining tourist visas for pilgrimage to Mecca or for leisure or commerce in Dubai is relatively straightforward. Most Ethiopians in the UAE have entered legally, many initially as domestic workers. Some have become irregular migrants along the way (mainly by overstaying tourist visas or work permits), and others have used a contract as a domestic worker as a springboard to better positions and legal residence.

The vibrant city of Dubai offers a range of employment opportunities beyond domestic work, including roles in shopping malls, cafeterias, and Ethiopian-owned businesses. It also attracts middle-class Ethiopians seeking career advancement. Both Abu Dhabi and Dubai host a significant number of Ethiopian students attending universities in the UAE, which serve the growing middle class in neighbouring countries, including Ethiopia. Among the smaller emirates, Sharjah has the largest Ethiopian population due to its relatively affordable housing and proximity to Dubai. The current unfolding of Ethiopian women's lives and possibilities of social mobility in these locations are the central focus of the article. Before examining these, the article first reviews the literature that has inspired our analytical approach, and then introduces the methodological approach applied.

3. Conceptual Frameworks of Migration and Social Mobility

Migration is often regarded as a strategy for social mobility, allowing individuals and families to improve their socioeconomic status by seeking opportunities elsewhere, whether abroad or, more commonly, upon return (Thomas and Mara 2024; Atterberry 2025). Therefore, to 'move up', one often needs to move elsewhere. However, such moves frequently involve initial downward mobility due to language barriers, unrecognised qualifications, or a lack of social networks (Cederberg 2017). Although migration can bring significant benefits, often analysed in relation to employment and higher earnings, access to migration remains unequal, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is captured by Philip Kelly's (2014) critical engagement with the concept of the 'Social Mobility Promise', in which she deconstructs linear models of class mobility through migration. Highlighting how structural coercion, restrictive labour systems, and racialised gender norms function to undermine migrant women's aspirations, Kelly argues that migration offers both hope and entrapment—providing income to the migrant and her household, while simultaneously leading to insecurity, loneliness, and limited long-term gains.

A similar conception is found in Rachel Parreñas' (2015) work on social mobility among migrant domestic workers. Far from automatically resulting in upward social mobility, the contradictory class status shaped by global care regimes and racial hierarchies limits the extent to which migrant domestic workers can move up socially. This is captured in her concepts of a 'mobility paradox' and 'contradictory class mobility', which refer to how domestic workers may experience economic gain, while simultaneously being socially rejected or losing their social status by engaging in low-ranking jobs.

In line with these insights, more recent scholarship has challenged the usefulness of linear conceptions and highlighted the need to consider the relational, spatial, temporal, and transnational dimensions of social mobility for grasping how migration facilitates both upward and downward social mobility processes, but also how migrants strategically negotiate social status across multiple contexts (Eresso 2019b; Boese et al. 2021; Stock and Fröhlich 2021). Thus, social mobility in migration contexts should be understood through the lens of social positioning within transnational social spaces.

The migration trajectory approach (Schapendonk et al. 2020) additionally introduces migration as a complex, multi-stage process throughout the life course, rather than a single event. Hereby, temporality becomes central. Focusing on migrants' movements, their interactions with mobility regimes, and how mobilised individuals shape their own trajectories through dynamic, nonlinear routes, this approach allows analysis beyond simple linear models to understand migrants' varied experiences, their agency, and the influence of factors such as social networks, policies, and personal circumstances during journeys, upon arrival, and, as noted by Schwarz (2020), upon eventual return. Such trajectories are often turbulent and may require continuous navigation and adjustments. Further drawing on transience as a conceptual and methodological lens enables examination of the complexities involved in migrants' social mobility, highlighting the "evolving and emerging migration patterns [and . . .] the unevenness of migrant journeys" (Gomes 2021, p. 649).

The recent 'temporal turn' in migration studies has prompted research examining time and temporality as essential for understanding not only mobility trajectories, but also governance, and migrants' subjective experiences. Placing multiple intersecting temporalities at the centre of their analysis, Landau et al. (2025) highlight how time influences the direction, restraint, and utilisation of migrants to serve state and capital interests. Nevertheless, those on the move may also resist, repurpose, or evade the temporal restrictions imposed on them.

Social Mobility Under Kafala

The kafala system has, for decades, defined the relationship between migrant workers and their employers in the Middle East, including the UAE. Many argue that the system has led to the creation of multi-tiered societies, with local nationals occupying the top tier and migrants at the bottom, resulting not only in human rights abuses but also in strictly stratified societies with limited opportunities for social mobility among migrant workers (see, e.g., Hamza 2015; Abdul Reda et al. 2023).

Others have questioned this assumption, for example, Khondker (2025), who argues that workers navigate a state of class ambiguity in which social status is always fluid and, dependent on context, influenced by both origin and destination class hierarchies. Such ambiguity affects identities, aspirations, and experiences of mobility, suggesting that social positioning is never fixed. Based on a similar idea, Malit (2025) challenges the typical portrayal of Gulf migrants as passive victims of structural exploitation. He identifies three ways in which migrants actively navigate and resist systemic inequality through what he calls 'strategic mobility': inter-regional transit, intra-regional mobility, and irregular migration, all of which potentially enable migrants to leverage their Gulf labour market experience, bypass restrictive policies, and pursue long-term goals. These concepts

help nuance the narrative of either victimhood or agency within the context of racialised capitalism and Gulf exceptionalism. It need not be either-or. Agency and victimhood may coexist and reflect shifting positionalities over time. Drawing on ethnographic research among Euro-Maghrebi professionals in Dubai, Alloul (2021) demonstrates that migration can cause significant shifts in individuals' class positions, often elevating their social status. Thus, global migration influences social mobility, not only economically but also culturally, as migrants gain new forms of capital and modify their behaviours, tastes, and self-perceptions to fit their new social environment.

Despite the precariousness associated with the kafala system and minimal options for acquiring permanent citizenship, middle-class migrants in the UAE may express a strong sense of belonging, often facilitated by socio-economic resources and social networks that enable them to navigate the challenges of temporality in a context characterised by transience and uncertainty (Errichiello and Nyhagen 2021). Based on a study of high-skilled Indian women in the UAE, Paul and Rabel (2024) further suggest distinguishing 'comfortable transience' (defined as the state of enjoying a materially secure life despite lacking legal pathways to permanent residence) from 'precarious transience' (understood to involve low wages and minimal labour protections). Paul and Rabel are cautious about romanticising the state of being transient. When transience is imposed (typically by the destination country's migration policy), it can be misleading to paint migrants as completely agentic. They further suggest that higher levels of racial discrimination may be experienced by black African migrant workers, who therefore may react differently.

Applying an intersectional framework, Ngeh and Pelican (2018) discuss how African migrants navigate the UAE's labour market. They find that migrants' experiences are shaped by the interplay of ethnicity, nationality, race, and gender, which, in turn, influences their access to employment opportunities and social mobility. Their study suggests that while African migrants often begin in low-paying, low-status jobs, many achieve upward social mobility within two to four years by leveraging their intersecting identities and adapting to local labour market dynamics. Their findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of migration in the Gulf region, emphasising migrants' agency in shaping their social and professional trajectories.

The review of the existing literature on social mobility in general, and in the UAE in particular, provides a powerful tool for rethinking the experiences of Ethiopian migrant women currently working there. This theoretical foundation, particularly the concepts of social positioning, trajectories, strategic mobility, repurposing and transience, provides the theoretical lens through which our exploration of the dominant discourses surrounding Ethiopian female migrants takes shape, moving beyond the stereotypical "maid" by accounting for diversity in experiences.

4. Brief Notes on Methodology

The empirical base of the article is an exploratory ethnographic fieldwork conducted jointly by the authors in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in December 2024, a step we found necessary, as most existing studies of Ethiopian migrant women are based on experiences collected among women who returned, often through deportation and rehabilitation facilities. Collecting data at the destination end enabled us to gain insights into the social mobility dynamics of Ethiopian female migrant workers while abroad, including both current and retrospective experiences. Divya Vaid (2021) highlights the distinct contributions of ethnographic methods in understanding social mobility, providing researchers with the opportunity to closely observe the lived experiences, aspirations, and everyday practices of individuals in the places where social mobility occurs. Additionally, Vaid argues that ethnographic research can reveal the connections between inequality and mobility, enabling

us to develop a nuanced understanding of when and how structural forces and individual agency interact within the mobility histories of specific individuals and groups. We follow Vaid in this endeavour.

We were also interested in whether and how migration has shaped family histories, national/regional/ethnic and gender identities, and collective perceptions of social mobility over time. In the UAE, we interviewed representatives from the Ethiopian Consulate, leaders of Ethiopian Community Organisations and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Dubai, as well as Ethiopian business owners in Dubai and Sharjah. These interviews provided important background information and different entry points into the 'Ethiopian migrant community' in the UAE. Additionally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 Ethiopian female migrant workers, half of whom were young and had arrived more recently. The rest had arrived as young women but had worked abroad for ten years or longer, some for over 30 years. This enabled us to observe both occupational change over time and generational differences in their socio-economic profiles. We also facilitated a focus group discussion with five 'runaway maids' in their twenties in an Ejaza house, an apartment rented by a migrant who then sublets it to fellow migrants working by the hour, are between jobs, or are employed as live-in domestic workers and reside there during their time off. Apart from formal interviews, we engaged in informal conversations with clandestine Ethiopian taxi drivers (referred to as car-lift services) and Ethiopians we encountered at restaurants and coffee shops. All respondents were provided with a study information sheet or received an oral explanation, were given the right to withhold information deemed too sensitive, could withdraw at any point during the interview, and were assured of anonymity in research outputs. To secure anonymity, participants provided verbal informed consent.

Interviews with migrants covered topics such as family background and life history, personal migration aspirations, the organisation and funding of travel arrangements, migration trajectories, working conditions and earnings, perceptions of social mobility prospects in Ethiopia and the UAE, and hopes for the future. Interviews with Ethiopian government, NGO, and Church representatives focused on their assessments of the migration situation, regulatory changes, and the overall prospects and challenges of migrant incorporation in the UAE. On average, interviews lasted about an hour, while FGDs lasted approximately two hours.

Most interviews were conducted jointly by the two authors, with about a third in English and the rest in Amharic or Afan Oromo, with one author serving a dual role as researcher and translator. Although all participants were willing to share their experiences, most were uncomfortable with audio recording. As a result, transcripts are based on detailed note-taking and cross-checking, including a few follow-up phone interviews conducted to ensure accuracy of the six exemplary migration histories presented in the following section.

Several limitations of the study must be recognised. We base our analysis on relatively few cases collected over a short period. Long-term fieldwork involving access to secluded spaces, such as private households hiring domestic workers or detention centres, would obviously have provided more nuanced insights. The same applies to research among returned women in Ethiopia. As we have previously conducted research among women returning from the Middle East in Ethiopia (see Eresso 2019a, 2019b; Sørensen 2025), we see this present analysis as a necessary supplement to the narratives of failed migration and victimhood.

5. The Pioneers, Those Who Followed, and the Newcomers: On Transience and Trajectories in the UAE

This section highlights the experiences of Ethiopian female migrants currently living and working in the UAE, many of whom initially entered as domestic or retail workers but eventually transitioned to better occupations, and some who joined the labour market as skilled migrants. We focus on six exemplary cases to illustrate the variety in experiences and use pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. The women originate from different regions of Ethiopia and vary in terms of their ethnic, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds. They also differ in marital statuses, migration trajectories, and lived experiences. Change in occupational status has been achieved either by becoming self-employed businesswomen (who can sponsor the arrival of other migrants) or by advancing in their careers by replacing low-skilled, low-paid jobs with skilled, higher-paid ones, sometimes by investing in courses at the destination to enhance their prospects. Finally, we consider the structural elements circumscribing social mobility options, such as labour policies, migration regulations, and cultural norms. As will be apparent, the experiences of Ethiopian migrant women resist generalisability by demonstrating resistance to exploitation and discrimination in various ways. As will be apparent, migrant women develop a range of strategies to assert their autonomy and achieve their long-term goals, strategies that the following exemplary cases nuance.

In conversations with consular, Church, and organised community representatives, we were many times offered a description of the typical Ethiopian female labour migrant as a domestic worker, generally with a low educational background, coming directly from remote rural areas with no prior knowledge of city life and modern amenities, no foreign language skills, a majority entering the UAE 'illegally' (often deceived by unscrupulous human traffickers), unaware of their rights but also easy to entice to run away due to a lack of understanding of contractual obligations and the eventual offer of a little higher pay. Such framings align well with the dominant victim-representation in public and media discourses. Several of these commentators equated ejaza houses with human trafficking networks exploiting ignorant domestic workers by charging high fees for lodging and alternative employment placements. At the same time, those living there emphasised the social networks and agency-enabling qualities embedded in being connected to such places.

5.1. The Pioneers

Many Ethiopian women have spent significant time in the UAE. For example, Nigat, a 64-year-old former businesswoman who was 23 years old when she arrived in the early 1990s on a business visa, initially worked as a *yashanta negade* (suitcase trader in Amharic), buying clothes for her shop in a larger town in eastern Ethiopia. Nigat completed high school in Addis Ababa, then returned to her hometown, where she found work as an assistant in the trade and customs office. Against her family's wishes, she married her childhood sweetheart. Low public wages prompted Nigat to start her own business. She travelled to Dubai three times to buy supplies, but the business never became as profitable as she had hoped. However, these business trips helped her establish contacts with a few Ethiopian entrepreneurs already in Dubai. One of the Ethiopian pioneers, partnering with a local Emirati, introduced her to a friend who offered her employment in his cargo and logistics bureau in Dubai. She accepted the offer, worked as an assistant for two years, and hoped her husband would join her abroad. He declined the offer and decided to end the marriage. "The main reason for my decision to migrate was the conflict I had with my family regarding my husband," Nigat told us. Working in logistics enabled her to build essential networks with wealthy Ethiopians, Sudanese, and Emirati nationals, which helped her open her first business in Dubai in 1997, a small traditional coffee shop and restaurant catering to Ethiopians. As there were not many Ethiopian customers at the time,

the business never became successful and closed after two years. Her next step was to think bigger, catering to an international crowd, which led to the establishment of a nightclub as a joint venture with an Indian investor from her logistics network. The nightclub became a financial success, allowing Nigat to return to Addis Ababa with considerable savings in 2004, destined to set up a restaurant. She returned to Dubai in 2007, where she expanded her activities over the following ten years. Throughout this time, Nigat has sponsored dozens of Ethiopian migrant workers. She recently retired in Dubai and makes a living by renting out the properties she has invested in over the past 25 years in Ethiopia.

"Even if we hear much about the challenges young Ethiopian women face in the UAE, in my opinion, they are heroines. They are the ones supporting the government by working here and sending money to the thousands of Ethiopian households that the government cannot provide for. Today, you see Ethiopian women taxi drivers at the airport, women who come here as sales agents, engineers. So, no, it is not all dark."

Nigat's trajectory provides evidence of well-developed skills for strategic spatial mobility leading to upward social mobility, considerably aided by transnational organisational engagement, including the establishment of social networks with both locals and other stronger migrant nationalities abroad. It demonstrates how exposure to foreign-owned businesses in migrants' destination countries can fuel aspirations, offer opportunities, and open new doors to economic and social mobility. Such networks can be formed in less obvious ways, as Trsit's narrative below demonstrates.

Trsit was 19 years old when she travelled irregularly from Addis Ababa to Abu Dhabi in 1996, assisted by a female broker she met by chance at a bus station. She worked for ten months as a maid and saved enough money to 'buy' a residence permit and pay a month's rent in an ejaza house. After three days, with no money left, a Sudanese man invited her to eat, drink, and clean his coffee shop while occasionally serving the customers. She saved the money earned in a rotating savings scheme (iqub). Unfortunately, the money was stolen from her in the ejaza when her savings cycle arrived. The experience made her move to Sharjah, find work in another coffee shop, and begin attending Church, "both for spiritual and practical reasons", as she hoped to gain information through socialising with Ethiopians attending mass. Through these networks, she found a job as a phone operator in an Indian-owned business. The pay was low, but she was allowed to sell wedding cards on the side, which helped her start training for a driver's licence. A European lover suggested opening her own business, but dreams were cut short when a jealous colleague informed her employer, implying that Trsit was trying to steal his clients. The employer sent her directly to the labour office, where her contract was cancelled. She avoided imprisonment and deportation thanks to the interference of the European boyfriend. Still, she was compelled to return to Ethiopia to apply for a business visa, which was granted relatively quickly. Back in the UAE, business was slow, and after five challenging years, she decided to close the shop. "I had to find an opportunity," Trsit told us, "and the opportunity turned out to be selling my 'shop key' to another business for taking over the locale." With that money, she opened the first of several restaurants in Sharjah and married an Ethiopian resident. "On opening day, I was the only one in a high position. All the others worked as maids; they came to me for help, telling me about bruises and burns." Having earned the trust of the maids, she received a call asking for assistance with a rape case. Trsit knew that although the UAE had a death penalty for rape, reporting such cases could lead to deportation. By a twist of fate, while attempting to negotiate the case, she herself became the victim of revenge by the rapist's family, who accused her of illegal brokerage. Trsit was sent to prison, had her visa cancelled, and was banned from re-entry for a year. Returning to Ethiopia was a disappointment: "I supported my family while abroad, but when I returned and needed help, no one supported me."

Trsit's migration trajectory is by no means linear but shaped by important ups, downs and periods of transience. In 2024, she had been back in the UAE for about 15 years, owned three successful businesses, and employed around 40 people. "Business is my veins," she said. "I have always aspired to own a big house, be wealthy, and become somebody. If you want that, you must go abroad." As a registered businesswoman, Trsit can sponsor up to 20 contract workers annually, which makes her a significant figure in the migrant community. A combination of hard work and excellent business and networking skills has enabled her to achieve the higher social status she desired, including the ability to send her daughter to university in the United States, while her sons study in the UAE. She has invested in two houses in Ethiopia and established a business in downtown Addis Ababa. Her experiences have shaped her view of Ethiopia. Reciprocal support cannot be expected, and "bureaucracy is not working". Her attempts to start an import-export business in Addis Ababa failed because "things are complicated, take forever, public servants are unprofessional, unlike in the UAE, where regulation is straightforward."

5.2. The Mid-Generation

Lulit, a 52-year-old woman from the western part of the Oromia region, was born in a large family with 12 children. To pay for her high school studies, she had to work. She completed 12th grade, married soon after, and had a son. Her husband died when their son was three, forcing Lulit to move in with her sister-in-law. At that time, several women had migrated to the KSA, including her sister-in-law's daughter, and they advised Lulit to do the same to support her son. She was 32 when she left in 2004, leaving her six-year-old son with the sister-in-law. A local broker made the arrangements, which she covered with a small inheritance. In KSA, Lulit worked for five years as an undocumented nanny for a "nice madam". Due to the unexpected death of her son's caretaker, she had to return. To save the travel cost, she turned herself in to the police and got deported. While abroad, she had sent back all her earnings, understanding that half was to be saved. Upon return, she found nothing left, leaving her with no choice but to remigrate, this time leaving her son with her sister. She ended up in Dubai with a two-year contract as a cleaner for a transport company, before moving on to another cleaning job at a school. This job came with a residence permit and a 3-year visa, which was subsequently extended for an additional two years. During weekends, she cleaned in hotels for the same company. After five years of constant cleaning alongside colleagues of various nationalities, Lulit decided to leave her job. "Now I know Dubai, too much work every day."

Having learned that Filipinos find professional jobs as teachers with better pay—not least since the Filipino state has negotiated higher minimum wage and pension savings—she prepared her CV, completed a week's training course, upon which she was offered employment as a preschool assistant teacher at a school with better working conditions, higher pay, health insurance, accommodation, and every weekend off. When we met, Lulit had been in this position for the past seven years. She was the only Ethiopian among 16 Filipinas at the school. "The parents think I am Filipina too and are surprised when they learn that I am Ethiopian, as they think all Ethiopians are maids." The experience of returning to no savings has made her cautious. She only remits money for her son's expenses and education. He, however, has suffered from illness, making it necessary to spend substantial sums on medical care and to occasionally travel back to take care of him. In Ethiopia, people blame Lulit for being a bad mother, leaving her son behind and not returning. They do not understand that she had to leave to give him a better education and pay for his treatments. In the UAE, she does not socialise much with Ethiopians. In 2025, she brought her son to the UAE with the sponsorship of a female Ethiopian business owner, which she considers her greatest accomplishment in life.

After spending 20 years abroad, five in the KSA and fifteen in the UAE, Lulit's social mobility in terms of savings and property may seem limited. She has, nevertheless, managed to slowly but steadily improve her socio-economic conditions. Due to patriarchal perceptions of responsible motherhood in Ethiopia, her mobility choices have not translated into class mobility back home. However, she has invested in her son's education, thereby extending social mobility to the second generation. In the UAE, Lulit shares a room with two colleagues and mainly socialises with fellow Filipina workers, a choice she has made to save on living costs and secure weekends off. The transition from domestic worker to preschool teacher marks a significant symbolic shift, as well as social mobility in terms of income, working conditions, social recognition and, not least, self-perception. Her ability to reposition herself outside the stereotypical role assigned to Ethiopian women, particularly through the influence of more institutionally supported migrant groups like Filipinas, demonstrates how migrant women can challenge structural limitations. Lulit's striking statement, that she is often mistaken for a Filipina, underlines this. Her lived experience illustrates that social mobility extends beyond economic advancement to a reorientation of self-identity and the way others perceive her.

Fikir was 28 years old when she arrived in the UAE in 2011. She was born in a rural village in the Arzi Zone of Oromia, where she grew up with her mother and brother. Her parents divorced, and her father moved to Addis Ababa, where she attended elementary school. She later moved to the regional capital, Adama, to attend high school closer to her mother, then returned to Addis Ababa to attend university and work as a teacher. Fikir had heard about better opportunities in 'Arab countries' and wanted to go and see for herself. An aunt and a cousin were already in Dubai and offered to find her a position. But Fikir was impatient and decided to go on her own, assisted by a neighbourhood broker whom she paid with money saved from her teaching job. She found employment as a maid in Abu Dhabi, but as the job was far from what she had expected, she lasted only a month. She went back to Ethiopia, awaiting her aunt's arrangements for a better offer, which a few months later materialised in a hotel receptionist position in Dubai. Fikir was once again on the move. She stayed in that job for three years, earning a monthly salary of around 1300 UAD, but as she was ambitious and sought a higher wage, she took a position as a sales assistant in a shopping mall, earning nearly 5000 AED a month, including commission and bonuses. She has worked there for the past ten years without promotion, but as a senior staff member, she has been given more responsibilities, a five-day working week, and 30 days of annual leave with full pay. She married a fellow Ethiopian migrant four years ago. They share a three-bedroom apartment with their two children and the Ethiopian nanny.

Fikir was recently visiting Ethiopia for the first time in five years. She went to attend an aunt's funeral but also to check on the current political situation, which opposes her and her husband's plan of a gradual return. "Whatever we make is spent here. If we went back, we could have a better life." They would have to return to Addis; "no other place is safe." Elaborating on safety, Fikir shares what she rarely mentions to anyone. Her mother was abducted two years ago by a rebel group that has been fighting the Ethiopian government since 2018. According to Fikir, the rebels target people with relatives abroad. Fikir has already paid a significant sum without her mother being released. Lately, they have lost contact. When she calls her mother's phone and asks to speak to her, the response is: "You are not her daughter. She lives in Dubai." Her younger brother, who was negotiating with the abductors, is terrified. She is in the process of getting him to Dubai. Fikir remains concerned that her children, even if born in the UAE, will not have, and never will acquire, citizenship. She believes it is better to grow up in a country that recognises you as belonging there.

Fikir's narrative is indicative of migration as a means to uphold a newly achieved middle-class status, partly through obtaining an education in Ethiopia, partly through advancing economically in the UAE, moving from a short-lived domestic position to more stable, better-paying jobs in the service and retail sectors, where she gradually gained seniority, responsibilities, and improved work–life balance. However, her mobility remains structurally limited by the lack of long-term security, including citizenship rights for her children and the continued vulnerability of her family back home, highlighting how migrant success abroad is often hindered by persistent precarity and transnational obligations. Plans to invest savings in a stepwise return of her nuclear family have been brutally altered by the political conflicts haunting several regions of Ethiopia, demonstrating the limits to transnational living arrangements when conflict enters the picture. While the current security situation in parts of Ethiopia is noted by many Ethiopian migrants in the UAE, not all recently arrived migrants relate their migration decision to ongoing conflicts.

Roman migrated to the UAE in 2005 when she was 22. Her parents, both well-educated professionals, decided to move from the Amharan region to Addis Ababa once their two children were born. Here, Roman attended school and later university, graduating with a degree in 2005. A few months later, she was recruited by a Jewish businessman operating in the UAE. Together with four other young women, Roman travelled on a visitor's visa, expecting to pursue a career in the marketing department, but ended up working as a sales assistant on commission once reaching Dubai's Gold Souk district. She remained undocumented in the job for a year, having to leave the UAE every two months to reapply for visitor's visas. "The UAE provides opportunities for the unskilled," Roman shared. "Finding work according to your skills is a challenge." In Roman's case, it took several steps. During her second year in Dubai, she found a better-paid position in a shopping centre, a move that led to a change in her migration status, as she upgraded to an employment visa. Wages remained modest, but it was a relief to be legal. Over the next four years, Roman held various retail jobs, until reaching a salary level of 7000 AED. Throughout this time, she slept in bunk beds in shared apartments with migrants of different nationalities. The final move 'up' of the occupational ladder occurred when she learned about an opportunity in the aviation sector. She applied online, attended an interview, and was offered a job. Her former employer refused to issue a release from her employment contract, the aforementioned NOC, but due to the airline being semi-governmental, she was accepted without it. The salary remains good, around 16,000 AED for senior staff, to which Roman was promoted three years ago. Along the way, she married and gave birth to three sons: two in her first marriage, which ended in divorce, and one in her second marriage, arranged through the Church to improve her respectability and social standing in Ethiopia, as well as within the Ethiopian migrant community abroad. Unfortunately, the arranged marriage was to an abusive man, which negatively affected her children. As a single mother, Roman finds that her only current option is to remain in the UAE. Some savings allow her to rent an apartment for herself and the children, along with the Ethiopian nanny she has hired to care for them, the fourth in less than six months, as "no one wants to take care of three kids and prefers to work for non-Ethiopians." The monthly rate for nannies ranges from 1200 to 2000 AED. She has offered 1500 "to keep her interested". The nanny is undocumented.

Roman's lived experience best shows a notable case of upward social mobility within the constraints of the Gulf migration system. Coming to the UAE as an undocumented, commission-based sales worker, she had to navigate her way into the formal labour market. Her educational background, linguistic competence and adaptability seem critical to enabling this trajectory. On the other hand, Roman's trajectory also demonstrates the fragility of such professional gains for single mothers in a context where social protections are non-existent. Despite professional advancement, Roman continues to face stigma based on

gendered stereotypes towards single mothers. She is also painfully aware of her transient status, as her work has an expiration date. Once eventually laid off, her only option is to return to Ethiopia, where she has invested in a coop. Recent political developments in the United States have closed the probability of being able to join her sister and parents, who moved there prior to the Trump administration.

5.3. The Newcomers

Belkis's experience illustrates the relatively recent trend of well-educated middle-class Ethiopians migrating to the UAE. She arrived in Dubai in early 2024 at the age of 28. Born and raised in Addis Ababa, her parents wanted her to stay in Ethiopia and marry there, just like her older sister. In contrast, Belkis is keen to gain international marketing experience. Holding a BA degree from Addis Ababa University, she worked for three years with a local NGO, helping young people in Addis Ababa succeed. Staff were employed on a project basis. The project Belkis was involved in targeted 'bar women' (sex workers), who were offered alternative livelihoods through skills training. However, it did not unfold as planned; "most just took the start-up money and disappeared." Belkis was very disappointed, not so much with the beneficiaries as with the project management's somewhat naïve objectives. The project she was working on was about to expire, which provided "a push to go." Additionally, pressure from her parents to get married—a step she does not feel ready for yet—provided another incentive.

Belkis explored opportunities across various online platforms and was eventually hired directly by her current employer in Dubai, a large corporation led by an innovative Ethiopian CEO active in real estate, tourism, and home nursing. The initial job interview took place at a hotel in Addis Ababa, while the subsequent hiring process was conducted via video calls with HR staff in Dubai. The employer arranged and covered the costs of her visa and work permit, while she paid her travel expenses and became a professional migrant. Upon arrival, Belkis stayed in a friend's flat for a couple of weeks, a temporary arrangement to help her settle in. She then found her 'own' place: a two-room flat shared with four Ethiopian workers. Belkis's share of the rent is 2500 AED, which constitutes a significant portion of her monthly salary. However, she brought some savings from Ethiopia and views her first time in Dubai as an investment in her future. She plans to progress professionally. She aims to earn at least double her current salary within the next 12 months and is actively working towards this goal through various social platforms.

Belkis's case is representative of the emerging group of educated Ethiopian women who resort to international labour migration not out of desperation, but rather as a strategic career move. Professional aspirations and employer-sponsored legal entry mark such journeys. One should not overlook, however, that pursuing professional ambitions may depend on resisting family pressure to marry, a strategy that may be easier to sustain abroad and away from social control mechanisms.

While the social mobility experiences in the examples above can largely be explained by the social and educational backgrounds of migrant women, as well as their time of arrival and length of stay, a visit to an ejaza house presented us with examples of how even younger, less educated, and more recently arrived Ethiopian domestic workers may see their current work as transitional, hoping that higher ambitions will eventually be fulfilled. In this ejaza, located in a high-rise building in Sharjah, an Ethiopian woman rented out rooms, beds, and shared kitchen facilities to around 15 fellow nationals. Ten women shared two bedrooms, while five men occupied the salon. Residents in each room split the monthly room rate, contributing between 200 UAE (for those arriving on weekends) and 300 UAE (for more permanent tenants) per month. In addition to rent, tenants contributed to the cost of food, water, and a little extra on 'injera nights' when Ethiopian food was shared. At the

beginning of our visit, a tenant explained: "Ejaza is like the red cross", indicating mutual solidarity within this living arrangement, where unemployed or financially struggling co-residents can eat and be temporarily exempted from making contributions.

Certainly, the ejaza house owner earns a profit from the arrangement, but she also takes risks as subletting is illegalised. As we have already discussed, such mutual help arrangements may be perceived as illegal brokerage or hotbeds for human trafficking. Without disregarding that deception may occur, the ejaza provides a space for migrant workers to rest on their days off or during illness, for runaway maids to network for new employment opportunities, and for everyone to find emotional and financial support during difficult times. Tenants with jobs help those without income through loans that are repaid when new jobs are secured. Even so, rooms can be crowded, and disputes occur. Currently, this ejaza accommodates three different religions and various regional and ethnic backgrounds, and tenants generally avoid sharing opinions on these topics.

A focus group discussion with five Ethiopian women tenants in their 20s revealed that women do not necessarily leave domestic work due to mistreatment or a lack of contractual obligations. They 'run away' to seek better and better-paid jobs, and thus leave in search of social mobility. They know that other sectors offer higher incomes and more freedom. The five women had 8–10 years of schooling. They migrated internationally for various reasons: to escape poverty or limited local opportunities, to flee conflict, or to escape forced, early, or arranged marriage that resulted in divorce in Ethiopia. They shared a common goal: to earn money and improve their future. Layla, who arrived in the UAE at 19 and worked as a live-in domestic helper for the same employer for five years, was taking driving lessons to establish herself as a woman car-lift driver, a business she believed to be in high demand. The young women lacked confidence in the Ethiopian government's willingness to protect migrant workers. "They are not standing up for us," they said. "Our problem is not a lack of skills; just watch the madam and in two days, you'll know what to do." "Our problem is that we receive the lowest salaries." Comparing their situation to that of the Filipinas, Layla stated, "Our government should be ashamed for having negotiated a lower minimum wage for Ethiopians to compete with other nationalities."

6. Conclusions

The analysis of Ethiopian women's migration to the UAE reveals complexity and increasing diversity in mobility processes and experiences. On the one hand, international migration offers opportunities for higher wages and social advancement, even within restrictive labour regimes such as the kafala system. It potentially enables young Ethiopian women to escape social expectations that limit their lives and, as they mature abroad, to redirect their aspirations towards social mobility. Such ambitions may be rooted in desire for gradual progress, hopes of professional advancement, or urgent family pressures or a need to escape political danger. On the other hand, these aspirations have an expiry date, which may profoundly change aspirations over time. Only one woman in our sample has achieved permanent residency in the UAE, a very rare achievement; the others are painfully aware of the passage of time and the eventual necessity of returning to Ethiopia or moving onwards.

While the dominant portrayal of Ethiopian female labour migrants as domestic workers with limited agency reflects an essential aspect of the migration landscape, we contend that such a depiction not only overshadows the diverse and dynamic experiences of a growing group of skilled migrants, but also the social mobility aspirations among the pioneers, who in the 1990s already succeeded in becoming 'more than maids.' The aspect of transience found in all three generations of Ethiopian female migrants—i.e., the pioneers, the mid-generation, and the latecomers—is shaped by temporal contexts and related migra-

tion regimes, as well as individual stamina and therefore manifests differently. Diversity in profiles and mobility experiences underscores the need to rethink static categories of migrant labour.

While research on Ethiopian domestic workers abounds, we argue that experiences of social mobility, both within and beyond the domestic sector, remain under-researched. By locating ethnographic data collection at the destination end, rather than among returned migrant women (as in most existing studies), and by applying an analytical framework sensitive to nonlinear trajectories, strategic repurposing, and transience, the article provides evidence of a range of outcomes related to women's agency.

The emerging trend of skilled, professionally ambitious young Ethiopian women helps challenge the assumption of migrant homogeneity. These newcomers not only navigate new pathways of employment and social mobility in the UAE but also, like their predecessors, exercise agency when strategically negotiating their positions across legal, occupational, and social boundaries. The transience of employment marks a liminal stage in their overall socio-economic positioning and integration within the UAE's highly competitive labour markets. The instances in which educated migrant women pursue transitory jobs highlight the nonlinear complexities of social mobility. To move up, one may have to move down temporarily. Temporary employment in the domestic sector is often a pathway to later integration into the broader job market. The changing nature of the UAE's labour demand—with increasing recruitment of African professionals—profoundly shapes this development.

At the same time, this changing trend should not make us overlook the precariousness of social mobility, which largely remains unsupported by formal systems or national protections, at both origin and destination. Under such circumstances, female migrant workers are deeply reliant on personal networks and informal social protection arrangements. Ethiopian community organisations, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, self-help arrangements and the existence of numerous ejaza houses offer various opportunities for social advancement, such as becoming leading figures within these institutions. In addition, spaces like the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the UAE have been repurposed from being solely sites for spiritual practices to also serving as community platforms for exchanging valuable information. The support provided may differ in terms of moral guidance, but generally, all offer assistance with alternative job placements and urgent emergencies. The precarious nature of some of these networks is best exemplified by Trsit's case, where money was stolen and fatal accusations by co-migrants led to deportation. Thus, serious backlash may occur at any given moment. Our findings show that social mobility trajectories are seldom linear. Instead, they involve repurposing networks and spaces strategically, as illustrated throughout the exemplary cases.

Migrant women's social positioning in the labour market, where certain types of jobs are assigned based on racial background criteria, highlights that social mobility is a complex phenomenon. It pressures migrants to perform in socially acceptable ways or even to pass as "a cultural other," like Lulit, who prefers to socialise with Filipina workers and be seen as one of them. The fact that almost all our interlocutors interacted with other migrant nationalities shows that migration trajectories not only reflect the evolving nature of Ethiopian female migration but also reveal the importance of cross-national or multicultural networks. Further research could delve not only into how gender, education, class, and transnational obligations intersect to shape social mobility experiences, but also how strategic mobility and transience extend beyond nationality and involve interactions across migrant groups.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.Z.E. and N.N.S.; methodology, M.Z.E. and N.N.S.; validation, M.Z.E. and N.N.S.; formal analysis, M.Z.E. and N.N.S.; investigation, M.Z.E. and N.N.S.;

resources, M.Z.E. and N.N.S.; data curation, M.Z.E. and N.N.S.; writing—original draft preparation, M.Z.E. and N.N.S.; writing—review and editing, M.Z.E. and N.N.S.; project administration, N.N.S.; funding acquisition, N.N.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by The Danish Foreign Ministry's Development Research Fund, grant numbers 23-02-DIIS and 18-10-DIIS.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and received ethical approval from the research committee of the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) during the pre-application phase and from the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers, and Anthropologists (ESSSWA) after the grant was obtained. The reference number for the latter is ESSSWA/L/AA/024/2024.

Informed Consent Statement: Research participants were informed about the focus of our research, promised anonymity, and given the option to withhold specific information or withdraw from the interview at any time. They provided informed oral consent.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding authors due to concerns about anonymity.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Abdul Reda, Amir, Nicholas A. R. Fraser, and Ahmed Khattab. 2023. Does Social Mobility Matter? The Kafala System and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment. *Political Studies Review* 21: 801–24. [CrossRef]

Adugna, Girmachew. 2021. *Understanding the Forced Repatriation of Ethiopian Migrant Workers from the Middle East*. Working Paper No. 2021/8. Toronto: Ryerson Center for Immigration and Settlement (RCIS) and the Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) in Migration and Integration.

Alloul, Jaafar. 2021. 'Traveling habitus' and the new anthropology of class: Proposing a transitive tool for analyzing social mobility in global migration. *Mobilities* 16: 178–93. [CrossRef]

Atterberry, Adrienne Lee. 2025. Migration as a social mobility project: The case of return migrant families in India. *Families, Relationships and Societies* 14: 59–74. [CrossRef]

Beydoun, Khalid Ali. 2006. The Trafficking of Ethiopian Domestic Workers into Lebanon: Navigating Through a Novel Passage of the International Maid Trade. *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 24: 1009.

Boese, Martina, Anthony Moran, and Mark Mallman. 2021. Re-examining Social Mobility: Migrants' Relationally, Temporally, and Spatially Embedded Mobility Trajectories. *Sociology* 56: 351–68. [CrossRef]

Busza, Joanna, Zewdneh Shewamene, Cathy Zimmerman, Annabel Erulkar, Eyasu Hailu, Lemi Negeri, Elizabeth Anderson, and Yuki Lo. 2023. Accidental traffickers: Qualitative findings on labour recruitment in Ethiopia. *Global Health* 19: 102. [CrossRef]

Cederberg, Maja. 2017. Social class and international migration: Female migrants' narratives of social mobility and social status. *Migration Studies* 5: 149–67. [CrossRef]

Demissie, Fassil. 2017. Ethiopian female domestic workers in the Middle East and Gulf States: An introduction. *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 11: 1–5. [CrossRef]

Eresso, Meron Zeleke. 2019a. Sisters on the move: Ethiopia's gendered labour migration milieu. *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 53: 27–46. [CrossRef]

Eresso, Meron Zeleke. 2019b. Social Inequality and Social Mobility: The Construed Diversity of Ethiopian Female Labor Migrants in Djibouti. *African Human Mobility Review (AHMR)* 5: 1749–73. [CrossRef]

Errichiello, Gennaro, and Line Nyhagen. 2021. "Dubai is a transit lounge": Migration, temporariness and belonging among Pakistani middle-class migrants. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 30: 119–42. [CrossRef]

Fernandez, Bina. 2013. Traffickers, Brokers, Employment Agents, and Social Networks: The Regulation of Intermediaries in the Migration of Ethiopian Domestic Workers to the Middle East. *International Migration Review* 47: 814–43. [CrossRef]

Gezie, Lemma D., Alemayehu W. Yalew, Yigsaw K. Gete, and Florence Samkange-Zeeb. 2021. Exploring factors that contribute to human trafficking in Ethiopia: A socio-ecological perspective. *Globalization and Health* 17: 76. [CrossRef]

Gomes, Catherine. 2021. Transience as method: A conceptual lens to understanding evolving trends in migration, mobility, and diversity in the transnational space. *Migration Studies* 9: 649–76. [CrossRef]

Hamza, Sara. 2015. Migrant Labor in the Arabian Gulf: A Case Study of Dubai, UAE. *Pursuit: The Journal of Undergraduate Research at the University of Tennessee* 6: 10. [CrossRef]

Kelly, Philip. 2014. *Understanding Intergenerational Social Mobility: Filipino Youth in Canada, IRRP Study No. 45*. Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy.

Khondker, Habibul Haque. 2025. Temporary Migrant Workers in Transnational Space: Understanding Class Ambiguity. *The Journal of Critical Global South Studies* 8: 28–52. [CrossRef]

Kubai, Anne. 2015. Trafficking of Ethiopian women to Europe–making choices, taking risks, and implications. *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 9: 166–183. [CrossRef]

Landau, Loren, Noora Lori, and Anne McNevin. 2025. Zombies, Miracles, and Memory: Towards a Research Agenda on Mobility, Temporality, and Political Possibility. *Geopolitics*, 1–24. [CrossRef]

Lecadet, Clara, and Medareshaw Tafesse Melkamu. 2016. The expulsion of Ethiopian workers from Saudi Arabia (2013–2014): The management of a humanitarian and political crisis. *Annales d'Ethiopie* 31: 225–43. [CrossRef]

Malit, Froilan T., Jr. 2025. Defying Social Inequality in the Gulf: Skilled Survivors' Coping Routes, Racialized Capitalism, and Temporary Filipino Migrants in the UAE. *Middle East Critique* 34: 307–27. [CrossRef]

Ngeh, Jonathan, and Michaela Pelican. 2018. Intersectionality and the Labour Market in the United Arab Emirates. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 143: 171–94.

Parreñas, Rachel. 2015. *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*, 2nd ed. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Paul, Anju Mary, and Githmi Rabel. 2024. When citizenship is off the table: The comfortable transience of high-skilled Indian women migrants in the UAE. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 48: 2900–17. [CrossRef]

Schapendonk, Joris, Lise van Liempt, Inga Schwarz, and Griet Steel. 2020. Re-routing migration geographies: Migrants, trajectories and mobility regimes. *Geoforum* 116: 211–16. [CrossRef]

Schewel, Kerilyn. 2022. Aspiring for Change: Ethiopian Women's Labor Migration to the Middle East. *Social Forces* 100: 1619–41. [CrossRef]

Schwarz, Inga. 2020. Migrants moving through mobility regimes: The trajectory approach as a tool to reveal migratory processes. *Geoforum* 116: 217–25. [CrossRef]

Sørensen, Ninna Nyberg. 2025. Trespassing Legal and Moral Boundaries: Ethiopian Domestic Workers Returned from the Middle East. In *Governing Climate Mobility in Africa: Explorations of Adaptation in Ethiopia and Ghana*. Edited by Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, Lily Salloum Lindegaard and Neil Webster. Bristol: Bristol University Press. [CrossRef]

Stock, Inka, and Joanna Jadwiga Fröhlich. 2021. Migrants' Social Positioning Strategies in Transnational Social Spaces. *Social Inclusion* 9: 91–103. [CrossRef]

Thomas, Kevin J. A., and Miracle Mara. 2024. African Migration at a Crossroads: The Social and Theoretical Implications of Emerging International Trends. *International Migration Review* 58: 1845–75. [CrossRef]

United Arab Emirates 2024 Human Rights Report. 2024. Available online: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/624521_UNITED-ARAB-EMIRATES-2024-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf (accessed on 1 November 2025).

UN-Women. 2024. *From Insights to Action: Advancing the Rights of Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers*. Policy Brief. New York: UN-Women.

Vaid, Divya. 2021. Ethnography and Social Mobility: A Review. In *Social Mobility in Developing Countries: Concepts, Methods, and Determinants*. Edited by Vegard Iversen, Anirudh Krishna and Kunal Sen. Oxford: Oxford Academic. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.