



# “I Have a Plan to Go”: Why Children and Young People in Ethiopia Move Away From Home

This policy brief draws on qualitative research relating to children and young people in ten communities (both rural and urban) across five regions who are part of the Young Lives longitudinal study of 3,000 children and young people in Ethiopia. The analysis reveals that young people leave the family home for many reasons, including education, work and marriage. These movements are often driven by poverty, land scarcity and unemployment, and there are major differences depending on location, age, and gender.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that none of the study sites are in conflict-affected areas with internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees.

## Key research findings

- Young people are **leaving home for education or work in greater numbers than their parents**, due to land shortages, decreasing livelihood opportunities in rural areas, urbanisation and aspirations to achieve secondary education and above.
- The policy focus is often on international migration, but **internal movement needs more attention from government** as it involves greater numbers of young people and they are critical for Ethiopia’s political and economic transformation.
- **Gender plays an influential role in young people’s decision to migrate.** Both girls and boys leave home for education, but it is mainly girls and women who move for family reasons, including marriage. Young men tend to migrate within the country for work while young women work abroad, particularly in the Middle East.
- Young people **moving for secondary or tertiary education** may find it challenging to adapt to their new environment and it is often difficult to find suitable work near home once they complete their education.
- Some girls are still married against their will or abducted, and some elope with boyfriends. Even those who marry as adults customarily move away from familiar environments to start a new life. **This brings difficulties and advantages:** they miss their families and friends and some find it hard to adjust, while others feel they have more freedom as a couple.
- **Increasing numbers of young people move to find work within the country, but this is not easy.** For women, there are concerns about sexual and physical violence and abuse. However, some young men in particular are successful in saving and learning skills which they are then able to use productively when returning to their communities.
- **International migration is less common.** The reality is often harsh, and migrants face many risks. But it gives some young women better choices in marriage and improving their livelihoods.

## Introduction

### The policy context

Ethiopia has a fast-growing population, and it is estimated that 70 per cent are young people under the age of 30 (Central Statistical Agency 2013). Three-quarters of the population live in rural areas, some of which are very remote. Land shortages, poverty, reduced livelihood opportunities in rural areas, and increasing urbanisation are driving internal migration among youth. More children, adolescents and young people leave their natal home today than when their parents were young, so this has become a common experience.

UNICEF research on migrant children and young people in Ethiopia (UNICEF 2020) highlighted three key issues. First, mobility is a core coping strategy for many children and young people. Second, many migrant children and young people are unable to access protection or basic services. Third, understanding needs to go beyond divisions between economic and refugee migration.

Migration policies and regulations in Ethiopia mainly focus on undocumented international migration. Independent child and youth migration is not well understood because literature on migration is mostly associated with adults' migration for employment. Studies on children usually focus on child trafficking and child labour, and children and young people who move for other reasons are often left off the policy agenda. As a result, little is done to tackle the hardships they face.

### Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India,<sup>2</sup> Peru and Vietnam) since 2001. It aims to provide high-quality and in-depth data to understand childhood poverty and inequalities and inform policy and programme design.

In Ethiopia, Young Lives follows 3,000 children from two cohorts (2,000 in the Younger Cohort, born in 2000/1, and another 1,000 in the Older Cohort, born in 1994/95). The study focuses on 20 communities in ten study sites from five regions: Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), and Tigray. The sites have distinct characteristics in terms of livelihoods, urbanisation, remoteness, resources and magnitude of migration. Young Lives gathers longitudinal survey data from these cohorts and, since 2007, there has also been a longitudinal qualitative study of 100 children and their caregivers from five communities, as well as numerous qualitative sub-studies. To date, Young Lives Ethiopia has carried out five rounds of surveys and five qualitative rounds.

This research is based mainly on the fifth wave of Young Lives qualitative research carried out in 2019 that included 122 young people, with the working paper considering 66 of these – 39 young women and 27 young men: 49 of whom were around 25 years old at the time of the interviews, and 17 were around 19. Of these, 54 were selected because they had moved away from the family home, while the remaining had tried or aspired to migrate or had relatives who had migrated. Six had moved to live with other family members, ten for marriage, 20 for education and 15 for work in another part of the country. Four had migrated abroad.

The names of the communities and the participants have been anonymised to protect their identity.

## Main findings

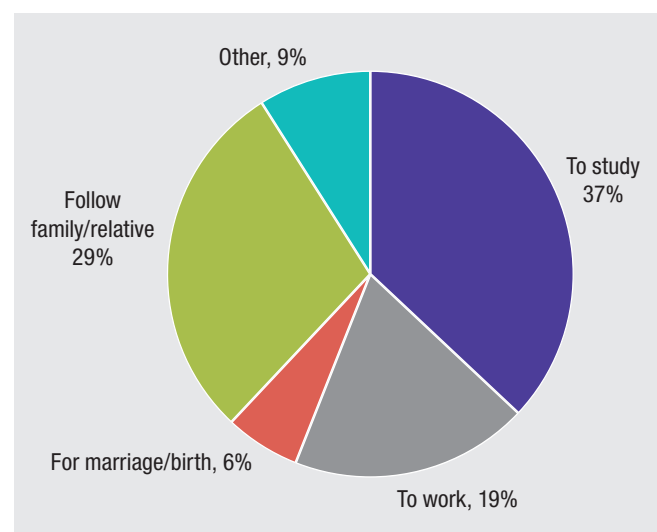
### *Aspirations: children and young people say they want to move for a variety of reasons*

“I want to get some employment with the education I studied ... I do not want to depend on my husband for the fulfilment of household needs.”

(Biritu, a young woman of 25 from Leki, Oromia)

An earlier Young Lives study (Gavonel 2017) of young people's movement found that many children and young people want to leave their home community, in particular to move to towns or cities from rural areas. Out of 905 Older Cohort young people aged between 15 and 19, one third had migrated. Of these, 37 per cent migrated to study, 19 per cent to work, 6 per cent for marriage or to have a baby, 29 per cent to follow family, and the remaining 9 per cent for other reasons.

**Figure 1:** Reasons for children's and young people's migration in Young Lives sites



<sup>2</sup> In the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.



Reasons for moving were also dictated by gender. More young women moved for study, and more young men moved for work, while moving for marriage was exclusively female.

Our more recent study in 2019 found that due to the persistence of the gendered division of unpaid care and domestic work, young women sometimes move for short periods to help relatives, mainly aunts and grandmothers who cannot manage in the home. They continue their education at the same time and return home when they are no longer needed.

### **Many young people move for education, which involves challenges as well as opportunities**

“Initially, it was difficult to adapt to urban life having moved from rural area for the first time. You will be a stranger in all places because you are a newcomer to the society ... But finally, it became easier for me.”

(Etsegenet, a young woman of 19, who moved to a local town from Zeytuni in Tigray at 16 for secondary education)

Children and young people attend primary school up to Grade 8, but if they live in rural areas they often have to move to towns in order to attend secondary school due to limited government investment in the secondary sector. They live there with friends or relatives, with their families covering the costs, and often come home at weekends. In some cases, even if schools are available in their community, they may move to towns for better quality education.

The government has invested in tertiary education in all regions in Ethiopia. For many young people, this means moving to cities because the Ministry of Education allocates where they are to go. Young Lives students went to universities in Amhara, Oromia, SNNPR and Tigray. Students can also go to private colleges if their families can afford the fees, but very few in the study were able to do so. Nigisti, age 25, from Gomen in Tigray is an exception. She was able to graduate in accounting at a private college in Mekelle because her elder sister sent money from Saudi Arabia.

Some young people say they find town life difficult and lonely. However, many believe they enjoy better opportunities. Once their studies are over it is often difficult to find work near home, especially in the office jobs that they now expect to do (Pankhurst and Tafere 2020). For instance, Seida, a 25-year-old young woman from Timatim in SNNPR, is a biology graduate from Dire Dawa University but has only been able to find work as a clerk in a private dental clinic. Young women who have been unable to continue with their studies, and even those who return after college or university education are often pressured to marry instead of finding paid work.

### **Young women move for marriage and this brings advantages as well as difficulties**

“There is a feeling of missing them [her family] but I went to visit them after a month or two weeks. I was confused at the beginning because I did not know the place, but later I adapted.”

(Haymanot, a young woman of 18 who was married at 15, from Zeytuni, Tigray)

In rural Ethiopia, girls and young women move to their husband’s village when they marry. Young women are more than four times more likely than young men to move for marriage (Bezu and Holden 2014).

The distances that young women travel for marriage are often not very great, and may have reduced due to land shortages and regulations which do not allow young people to own land outside their own communities. One young woman, Meselech, from Tach-Meret in Amhara who is now 25, refused a marriage proposal brought by her uncle from a man living in Gondar, a town several hours’ drive away. She preferred to marry a man who worked in the same local factory as she did.

Moving away from their families for marriage is not an easy experience for most girls and even young women, who may be marrying older men. They miss their parents, relatives and friends. Others mention the strain of living close to their mothers-in-law. However, there can also be more freedom to start their own life as a couple, and avoid community criticism and parental intervention.

#### **Box 1. Beletch’s story**

Beletch is 21 years old and from Leki, in Oromia. At 17, she eloped with her boyfriend due to arguments at home and moved more than 30 kilometres away: “It is good to go to marry in another community. If you are within your original community, you are exposed to all kinds of criticisms. This is not good for the future relationship of the wife and the husband. Now I am free from these kinds of things.”

### **Increasing numbers of young people move to find work within the country**

“In my opinion there is no good work in my area. Haricot bean picking in my community is a bad job because it is very dangerous for our health.”

(Bezach, a young woman of 25 from Tach-Meret, Amhara)

Increasingly, young people leave home to work in other parts of the country. Reasons include limited access to resources, increasing poverty and dwindling availability of land, along with few employment and livelihood opportunities in rural areas, and young people’s own aspirations after university. In Leki, in Oromia, older and younger women’s groups said that land shortage was a major driver of migration.

Most young people move either from rural areas to towns or to other rural areas. It is mainly boys and young men who move internally to find work, for example, on large irrigation farms. Young men also migrate to local towns for wage labour, often in the construction sector. Some young women move to towns to work in the service sector or in factories. For example, Etsegenet from Zeytuni, who is 19, completed Grade 10 but did not pass the national exam. She moved to a town in her region to work in a textile factory.

Young people face many challenges in leaving home, often on their own, to look for employment. They may arrive not knowing anyone or having nowhere to stay, and are then vulnerable to assault, theft or exploitation. For women, there are also concerns about sexual and physical violence and abuse. If they do find work, it may be irregular and uncertain, conditions may be difficult, and pay low or irregular.

### Box 2. Gemechu's story

Gemechu, a 25-year-old young man from Leki, recalled sleeping rough and being robbed at night when he first migrated. "I did not discuss it with my parents. I just ran away for job seeking ... The first time I slept on the street at night. Hooligans came and stole my clothes. At my destination, I came across a person who was in need of a labourer. We ploughed the farmland and prepared it in beds until the seeds grew."

However, some young people, particularly young men, were able to save money and invest in livestock. Worku, age 25, from Timatim, moved in 2011 to Addis Ababa where he worked in a bakery. He eventually started his own bakery in a local town near his community, employing 19 people in two branches.

### International migration is less common and very challenging

International migration is much less common than internal migration. Limited job opportunities locally and the attraction of much higher salaries overseas mean that many dream of going abroad. Few actually manage to do so. Some young women in the study migrated from rural areas to Arab countries, while young men aspired to go to Europe.

Remittances and the improvements that migrants can bring remain an important motivating factor for migration, as does the fact that young people have relatives or peers who have migrated. Fitsum, a 19-year-old man from Gomen, in Tigray has a brother and sister in Saudi Arabia: "Four years ago, one of my brothers migrated to Saudi Arabia. He bought a house two years ago. Then, after one year my sisters went to Saudi Arabia and budgeted around 300,000 birr [US\$7,500] to buy a house."

A few young people, mainly young men, were able to send money back to their families. A handful were able to accumulate some savings.

Young people face huge challenges when trying to migrate internationally. Most do not have the financial resources needed for the costs that brokers charge. Travel to the countries may mean hardship and danger, and some are deported before even starting work. Young women face additional gender-related risks of mistreatment, abuse and even rape (Demissie 2018).

Once in the new country, they face difficulties in finding work and getting permission to stay. Workloads are often heavy. Kasech, from Addis Ababa, had been to Beirut after completing Grade 10 when she was only 17, pretending to be older in order to get a passport. However, the salary was low and the work was hard: "There was a sick girl in the house who was paralysed and was not able to talk. She was 18; in addition, there were also other little children so the work was very hard for me but I had to complete my contract."

Despite all the risks, given the potential for earning far more than they can in their home communities, many young people are prepared to take their chances, as several studies show (Pankhurst and Dom 2019; Kefale and Mohammed 2015).

## Policy recommendations

Ethiopia's economy is changing, with greater industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation. In the coming decade, this is likely to lead to increased movement and migration, particularly from rural areas where more than two-thirds of the population still lives. It is clear from this study and others that policies need to be inclusive and take into account the differing needs of children and young people according to age and gender.

- 1. Support children's and young people's education,** including those who migrate for secondary and higher education. The study shows how children and young people can benefit from migrating for education, but it is also clear that **giving greater priority and resources to secondary schools** should be part of the government's plans to increase funding for education, and the allocation of funds within the education sector budget.
- 2. Support children, especially girls, who move for secondary school.** The study reveals that there is a need to **expand access and support**. The 2018 Gender Strategy for the Education and Training sector (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2018) includes 'the provision of stipends, scholarships, and low-cost hostels', all of which could support girls in these situations.
- 3. Protect migrant children and young people.** Children and young people who leave home must be protected from **potential abuse and exploitation**. The government needs to invest in a social welfare/protection system that includes a planned and

resourced **para-professional or professional social service workforce** empowered to address the protection issues facing all children, including migrant children and youth.<sup>3</sup> This workforce will support efforts towards early detection, prevention and response and ensuring child safeguarding, as well as guaranteeing that children have the information they need to protect themselves and know where to go for help. **Community members** and community institutions such as community care coalitions (CCCs) linked to the government’s social protection policy and strategy can also play an important protective role. Development of and investment in social and protection services at a local level should be a priority.

4. **Support efforts to prevent child marriage, as well as support to those who are married, build young people’s agency and invest in gender transformative efforts**, as outlined in the government’s National Costed Roadmap to End Child Marriage and FGM/C 2020-2024 (Ministry of Women, Children and Youth 2019). Current approaches to **prevent child marriage and abduction** should be given greater support at a local level, along with promoting greater agency of young women and men over **marriage decisions**, and their access to appropriate **information and peer** support. Young people, including young couples, should be able to obtain **land and access to resources and livelihoods**.
5. **Provide meaningful work for young people, both in their home areas and if they migrate**. There needs to be a focus both on the rural areas from which migrants come, and the urban areas to which they move, as well as learning from experiences of those who have already migrated. In rural areas, this means increasing **opportunities for youth employment and**

**investment**, especially non-farm livelihood options. In urban areas, it means ensuring that migrants have **better and safer access to housing and services, improved working conditions and better pay** – including in the informal sector.

6. **Improve training for aspiring young migrants and agreements with receiving countries** with further initiatives by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The current efforts by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs at promoting legal migration should be reinforced through **better training for aspiring young migrants** and further agreements with receiving countries to promote **better jobs, avoid deportations and enhance protection** in their work and life abroad in line with the United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.
7. **Recognise the important role of returnee migrants**, in line with the approaches developed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and with the support of the International Organisation for Migration. Improved **skills development, financial advice, access to credit**, as well as the **facilitation of legal remittances**, can enhance the livelihoods of returnee migrants and their role in stimulating development in their home communities. The investment of income generated through migration for **productive ventures** should be promoted, with a focus on empowering women returnees.
8. **Improve research with young and internal migrants**. Most policy focus has been on adult and international migration, so more emphasis on the experience and aspirations of migrant children and young men and women is needed to better inform policy and programmes.

<sup>3</sup> The ‘social service workforce’ refers to a broad range of governmental and non-governmental professionals and para-professionals who work with children, youth, adults, older persons, families and communities to ensure healthy development and well-being. See [www.socialserviceworkforce.org/defining-social-service-workforce](http://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/defining-social-service-workforce).





## References

Bezu, S., and S. Holden (2014) 'Rural-urban Youth Migration and Informal Self-Employment in Ethiopia', Centre for Land Tenure Studies Report, Ås: Norwegian University of Life Sciences.

Central Statistical Agency (2013) 'Population Projections for Ethiopia 2007-2037', Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Agency.

Demissie, F. (2018) 'Ethiopian Female Domestic Workers in the Middle East and Gulf States: An Introduction', *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 11.1: 1–5.

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (2018) 'Gender Strategy for the Education and Training Sector', Addis Ababa: Ministry of Education.

Gavonel, M. (2017) *Patterns and Drivers of Internal Migration Among Youth in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam*, Young Lives Working Paper 169, Oxford: Young Lives.

Kefale, A., and Z. Mohammed (2015) *Ethiopian Labour Migration to the Gulf and South Africa*, FSS Monograph No. 10. Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies (FSS).

Ministry of Women, Children and Youth (2019) 'National Costed Roadmap to End Child Marriage and FGM/C (2020-2024)', Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Pankhurst, A., and C. Dom (2019) 'Rural Ethiopia in Transition: An Overview' in A. Pankhurst and C. Dom (eds) *Rural Ethiopia in Transition: Selected Discussion Briefs 2018*, Addis Ababa: PDRC.

Pankhurst, A., and Y. Tafero (2020) *Jobs, Businesses and Cooperatives: Young Men and Women's Transitions to Employment and Income Generation in Ethiopia*, Young Lives Working Paper 191, Oxford: Young Lives.

UNICEF (2020) 'Focus on Ethiopia: Ending Violence, Abuse and Exploitation of Migrant Children and Young Children', Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

## Acknowledgements

This policy brief was written by Nikki van der Gaag, Alula Pankhurst and Karin Heissler. It is based on Birhanu et al. (2020) "A Stranger in All Places": *Patterns and Experiences of Mobility and Migration Among Adolescents and Young People in Ethiopia*, Young Lives Working Paper 194. This is one of a set of eight briefs summarising key findings and policy implications from eight working papers based on research for the Young Lives fifth wave qualitative survey in 2019. This research was funded by UNICEF Ethiopia, and the working paper and this brief were funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood, following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam). Young Lives is a collaborative research programme led by the University of Oxford and conducted in Ethiopia in partnership with the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) and Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting Plc (PDRC).



© Young Lives April 2021

Young Lives, Oxford Department of International Development (ODID)  
University of Oxford, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK

www.younglives.org.uk • www.younglives-ethiopia.org  
Tel: +44 (0)1865 281751 • Email: younglives@qeh.ox.ac.uk • Twitter: @yloxford