

Time to look at girls: adolescent girls' migration to Sudan

Summary Report



Background of the study

The Swiss Network of International Studies (SNIS)-funded research “**Time to Look at Girls: Adolescent Girls’ Migration**” explored experiences and trajectories of migration of adolescent girls in the Global South through a holistic approach that contextualises adolescents’ and young women’s agency, choices and migration experiences. This mixed-method and multi-sited research focused on adolescent girls who migrate internally and internationally from Bangladesh and Ethiopia and to Sudan. By considering different geographical realities, the research explored variations in the impact adolescent girls’ migration has on their own lives, on their families and communities, and the types of

vulnerabilities and opportunities that girl migrants experience. The research fills an existing gap in knowledge about the reasons adolescent girls migrate and their aspirations and experiences. It provides insights into their agency and capacity to choose, their future opportunities, as well as constraints and how these are shaped contextually. The project feeds into the global campaign “Destination Unknown” recently launched by Terre des Hommes (TDH) who is a project partner. The research contributes to global policy debates by producing policy relevant analysis, data and recommendations.

The project was initiated in January 2014 and



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terminated in June 2016. It included the following key partner institutions: the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva (IHEID), Terre des Hommes, International Organisation for Migration, VU University Amsterdam, University of Sussex, Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit, University of Dhaka, Girl Hub Ethiopia, Feminist Review Trust, and the Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman, Sudan.

The research focused on the experiences, life choices and aspirations of adolescent girls and young women who migrate internally and internationally. Although the research initially intended to look at the impact of migration on family members left behind (which was possible to

certain extent in Bangladesh and in Ethiopia), in Sudan, this aspect was examined to a limited extent. The research specifically looked at the life course and at how the decision to migrate intersects with other important choices which characterize adolescence: those related to education, marriage and having children. It aims to provide insights into young women and adolescent girls' aspirations and decision-making capacity, as well as into the changes in young women's self-perception and status resulting from migration. These interests in the longer-term impacts of adolescent girls' migration meant that, while all the research respondents had migrated as adolescents, only a minority were adolescents at the time they were interviewed.

Methodology

A common methodology was adopted across the different country case studies. Data was collected using mixed multi-methods approach and privileging a qualitative approach to ensure the participation and involvement of migrant girls.

The fieldwork in Sudan took place between March 2014 and September 2015. It was carried out by Dr. Katarzyna Grabska supported by a research team composed of four research assistants who were recruited among the Eritrean and Ethiopian migrant and refugee adolescent girls and young women. They were involved in administering the qualitative questionnaires, translating and transcribing interviews. In Sudan, forty-eight

survey questionnaires and twenty-five life stories with migrants and refugees, five focus group discussions (FGDs) with groups of refugees, fifteen expert interviews with representatives of local and international NGOs working on issues related to asylum and migration were conducted. The research focused on girls who had moved from Ethiopia and Eritrea when they were under 22 years of age (and mainly under 20). The principal researcher interviewed also family members of migrant girls who reside in Khartoum. We also gathered data among Eritrean refugee girls and young women who were born in Sudan and who have a different perspective on migration from those who came more recently.

Key findings

Reasons for migration

The gathered data reveals the extremely precarious situations in which the girls found themselves at home. The combination of economic pressures faced by the families, often households that

experienced crisis due to either death of one or both parents, separation, abuse experienced from relatives or step-parents, lack of educational and work opportunities, and in some cases religious and political pressures, were the background of girls' decision-making process with regards to



migration. As the results of the survey, life stories and focus group discussions revealed, each girl had specific, often very personal, reasons for leaving their places of origin. Yet, they all came in what could be described as a ‘search for a better life’, often escaping extreme difficulties experienced at home. Helen, from Karen in Eritrea, was 21 years old when she arrived in Sudan. “Everyone is coming to Sudan. I think of it as a transit country because I want to go farther. I don’t want to stay here. I want to go somewhere else. (...) My plan was to change the life of my family and mine. Life is changing. “

The desire to help families who had stayed behind, many of whom are in very dire economic or political circumstances, were expressed by both Eritrean and Ethiopian respondents. Also, gender and generational pressures from the family side played an important element in the decision-making processes. A number of girls in Eritrea and also in Ethiopia left in order to avoid arranged marriages. Despite the official laws in both countries prohibiting under-aged marriages (under 18 years old) and the changing social norms about marriage, girls as young as 12 still face the danger of arranged marriages often against their will.

Eritrean refugee girls and young women often referred to the pressure of national service, the lack of work opportunities, political and religious persecution, as well as the impossibility to achieve a life that one would like to have. Yet, their migration motives are more complex. The role of the Eritrean Diaspora’s images of the outside possibilities, and the visible impact of remittances in Eritrea, combined with a changing youth culture in Eritrea, contribute to the desires of the young to migrate abroad. Both girls and boys, take a decision to search for a ‘choice’ and ‘chance’ somewhere else. They make a deliberate choice to escape in search of a better future for themselves, and their families. As one of the research assistants, a refugee young woman, explained, “In fact, when I decided to leave Eritrea, I made a choice. I rejected the current situation in which I was living and lack of opportunities in Eritrea. So, you can say, that when people are leaving Eritrea they are making a choice. They usually say,

that they did not have a chance (*edil*) in Eritrea, that’s why they left.”

Other main factors behind the reasons to migrate among both Ethiopian and Eritrean adolescent girls and young women were linked to gender norms and order that operate in both societies. Moreover, family circumstances had a decisive impact on the decision of girls to migrate. In families that experienced some type of crisis, for example a death of both or one of the parents, divorce or separation, health problems of parents, or absence of parents due to political situation, adolescent girls were more likely to migrate.

Being an adolescent migrant-refugee girl in Khartoum

Arrival: Using either personal, family or friends networks, or at times, brokers, girls arrive in the city usually without proper documentation. Arriving in the dusty city of Khartoum is usually met with both excitement and relief from a long exhausting trip but also with a big surprise. “When I finally reached Khartoum, on the back of a pickup filled with other Eritreans, after weeks of travelling on foot, running and not eating, and being stressed, I felt relieved,” told me Bana, a 17-year old who came to join her sister who had been in Khartoum for 6 years. I saw Bana on the day when she reached her sister’s house. She was one of the lucky ones who had direct family connection in Khartoum and who had a place to stay, rest and get some food. Bana slept for three days because of her exhausting journey.

Others, who do not have connections in the city, find it an overwhelming and threatening experience. Kibra was 17 when she arrived from the Eritrean refugee camps in Ethiopia brought by a smuggler. As she did not have money to pay the smuggler for the journey, she was made to work for him. “I was locked in some house in Omdurman, had to cook for the smuggler and his family, and also for all the Eritreans who were passing through the house. These were the ones who were going to be smuggled to Libya and then



to Europe. The smuggler would gather them there, and then they would wait a few days before being transported on trucks through the desert to Libya. I was not allowed to go out, and only one day, when the smuggler did not show up, and there was no people in the house, I took the courage and escaped. I did not even know which part of the city I was in.”

Settling in: Settling in is a process that takes time, time to get to know the city, establish new contacts and relations, and gain some social and financial capital. The living conditions of migrant and refugee communities vary depending on their financial situation, social status, access to social capital and networks of support. The majority, however, usually live in miserable conditions. Most of the respondents lived in overcrowded accommodation, usually sharing either with some distant family members, other girls or women from their places of origin, or with close family members.

There is also a great solidarity among the Eritrean members of the Catholic Church who tend to help each other. The Ethiopian and Eritrean Pentecostal churches also have their strategies to support their members with accommodation. For example, some churches rent housing and provide accommodation to those of their members who are in difficult circumstances. This creates a space of safety and security for the migrants.

Work: Among the respondents interviewed for the research, the majority had some type of employment, at times doing two or three different types of work (for example, cleaning in two or more households, selling tea) at the same time. As the job market is also extremely volatile, most of the respondents, even those who arrived most recently within the past 2 years in Khartoum, held more than 4-5 jobs. All the girls and young women commented how hard it is to find a good job in Khartoum, and how exploitative most of the employment is. Those who have been in Sudan for a long time commented that in the past the labour market in Khartoum was better and more open.

The need for money and the lack of other

viable work opportunities makes girls accept harsh working conditions. As tea-sellers on the street or in the cafeterias the girls would earn about 2000-2500 SDG (220 to 240 USD) per month, working every day except one-day rest, from 9-10am till 9-10 pm. Girls also explained that they preferred working as tea-sellers despite the abuse and constant police harassment, because they felt they had more freedom and control over their own lives. “If you work in your own business, it is better. You can work when you need to, and when you are sick, you can just close down and go home. When you work for someone, you have no control over your live.”

Work as domestics in Sudanese families is subject to very low pay (between 250 and 800 SDG per month), often sexual advances and abuse from the male members of the family, and harassment and maltreatment from the women. Girls and young women often complained about long working hours, heavy work-load, and lack of adequate food and living conditions.

Vulnerabilities of young female migrants and refugees

The sources of vulnerabilities for Ethiopian and Eritrean adolescent girls and young women are multiple: their position as women, as girls, of a specific ethnic and national background, their legal situation as foreigners, absence of their parents, guardians or relatives who could provide support, nature of their work, and almost none existing support from international, national and community organisations. In this way, migrant girls were more vulnerable than their local (Sudanese, Ethiopians and Eritreans) peers, who were born and grew up in Khartoum.

Violence and death are omnipresent in the lives of migrants and refugees in Sudan. The walls in the homes of migrants are plastered with pictures of those who lost their lives or are missing during their journey to Sudan or further to Europe. The uncertainty about the lives of relatives, friends and neighbours was a source of a great stress for migrants and refugees.



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One type of violence experienced by girls once they reach Khartoum is their permanent impermanent status. While Sudan has been hosting refugees and migrants for decades, according to the official policies refugees are supposed to stay in refugee camps, not in cities. Those who move to Khartoum are often subjected to arbitrary arrests, harassment from the police, detention or even deportation. While most migrants and refugees are subject to such treatment, young girls and women are at a greater risk of sexual violence.

One of the other negative consequences of migration was the adverse impact on the girls' and young women health. The traumatic, often violent experiences during the journey to Sudan, combined with mental stress, hard physical work, hot and dusty climate, poor diet and bad living conditions resulted in girls and young women being ill.

Sudan is a patriarchal society where the status and living conditions of women and girls largely depend on men. In addition, Sharia' law that operates in the country further links the position

and rights of women and girls to men. Women and girls without male protection, in addition to being foreigners, experience greater vulnerability. They are often referred to by Sudanese as 'loose' or 'bad girls' because they transgress the moral codes of *adab* (morality and proper behaviour) by living independently.

The absence of their parents, or other close relatives, who can provide for adolescent girls is very deeply felt. Family relations are extremely important in Eritrean and Ethiopian societies and form the main source of support, emotionally, socially and financially. The absence of close relatives, and especially male relatives, exposes girls and young women to abuse and exploitation.

Another source of vulnerability is the national and ethnic origin of the girls. Ethiopians and Eritreans are generally stigmatised in Sudanese society, and referred to as *Habesha*. This is a derogative term is widely used by Sudanese to describe Ethiopians and Eritreans. They seem them as racially and ethnically subordinate. These discriminatory attitudes justify abuse and exploitation, as the *Habesha* are not perceived as equally human.

Key implications for policy and interventions

As now widely recognised, migration is 'not going away' (International Migration 2012), and on the contrary, it is increasing, including increasing numbers of adolescent girls on the move within and across borders (Temin et al, 2013). It has also been widely documented that migration can contribute to or undermine development, depending on migration experiences. Yet policies have regularly failed to enable migrants to make the most of these experiences, and changing this would require challenging entrenched power relationships at many levels, including within countries, and internationally.

The importance of looking specifically at adolescent girls has also been recognised by policy makers and global development strategies. For

example, the 2030 Millennium Development Agenda includes the unique needs and priorities of adolescent girls and examines the critical role girls have to play in the development of their communities worldwide. As narratives of the girls and young women presented suggest, adolescent girls' migration is an expression of agency and a complex choice, which may be motivated by a desire to improve one's or families' life and escape oppressive gender and political regimes.

The key question is how to ensure a safer and more positive migratory experience for adolescents and young women. This particular age group is of great importance in terms of when in the life course the spatial move takes place. In this context, the spatial move across border is closely



intertwined with other life transitions: into work, education, marriage and having children.

The existing policy interventions locate adolescent migrant and refugee girls as victims of trafficking, smuggling, abuse and exploitation. There is a need to recognise also the complexity of each girl's situation, her age, particular reasons for movement, her educational level, and the context of her host community. Policy makers must recognise the diverse potentials of migrating girls and young women, and move beyond the focus on their physical vulnerability and the need for reintegration and address directly their individual needs.

- **Addressing triggers of migration**

Reintegration programmes view child and adolescent migration as a problem that needs fixing, based on the assumption that moving away from the family puts girls in greater jeopardy and increases their vulnerability. Yet, such programming overlooks the best interests of the girls and their initial reasons for movement. Family circumstances, family abuse, as well as the toll on the girls of family poverty, poor services and the absence of opportunities to earn and learn, as well as discriminatory treatment of girls due to patriarchal gender norms have to be taken into account while designing new approaches to interventions.

First, *educational possibilities for girls* in each country and community, as well their links to job opportunities need to be examined closely. It is not enough to encourage girls into education if there are then no job or earning opportunities after they have qualified. Girls' educational opportunities have been widely addressed in Ethiopia, at least at the primary level, but there are few links to jobs or work for them.

The second issue that needs attention and intervention is the existing *violence against girls* at both the household and family level and within communities. Awareness raising campaigns and training is needed on violence in families, and on gender-based and sexual violence in schools and in

the community, which emphasises the specific social position of girls.

Third, *political situation* as a trigger for migration of adolescent girls affects their lives in particular ways. A concentrate action and a political engagement at the international level and pressure from the international community are necessary elements in stimulating change. Without political change and greater opening and democratisation in the country, and the limited life prospects for young people, the outflow of adolescent and young Eritreans will continue.

- **Protection and safer migration**

Numerous interventions and at different levels are needed given the international nature of migration for Ethiopians and Eritreans into Sudan.

First, at the national level in Sudan, specific interventions should be undertaken by the government. This includes *reviewing existing laws* that affect the status of migrant girls in the country, and *enacting laws and policies that are in accordance with the Convention of the Rights of the Child and the national Child Act* as well as gender-specific legislation regarding migrants and refugees.

Second, *specific trainings* are needed for police, border guards, and judges in order to reinforce their understanding and awareness of the specific challenges faced by girls and young women, with the emphasis on migrants, refugees and children's rights, or young people's circumstances.

Third, issues of *violence against girls and women should be raised at the national and migrant community levels* in Sudan. It is crucial to promote public discussion of rape as a crime and promoting procedures for prosecuting rapists. The public recognition of the criminal nature of forced sexual activity needs to be combined with working towards legal procedures that prosecute rapists and protect the survivors. Awareness raising among families, migrant and host communities, especially men and boys needs to emphasise rape as a shameful act. Campaigns against domestic



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violence should be organised with local organisations (such as SIHA and SEEMA) as well as migrant communities (through migrant groups, churches and other religious institutions). These campaigns should actively mobilize all men to act against sexual crimes. In addition to Khartoum based campaigns, such activities should especially be carried out in the peripheral areas of Sudan on the borders with Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Four, the governments of Ethiopia and Sudan need to ensure that *legal migration channels and access to visa and passports for those wishing to migrate legally to Sudan are available*. This should be combined with expediting migration processes in order to reduce the incentives for girls to use the faster, illegal migration channel. In Ethiopia, potential migrants and their families should have access to information how the legal migration channel operates.

Five, within the Khartoum Process that focuses on the combating of trafficking in the region, greater stress should be put by donors, international agencies involved in the process as well as national governments in *eliminating illegal migration and trafficking* by enforcing existing laws (including cracking down on false identification cards) and punishing brokers with imprisonment, and prosecuting traffickers, rather than punishing migrants for illegal entry. The existing anti-trafficking legislation in Sudan should be carefully reviewed in order to keep the best interests and protection of adolescent girls and young women migrants' at the centre.

- **Provision of information for potential migrants in Ethiopia (and Eritrea)**

Well-balanced and practical information campaigns and information points should also be available for potential migrants in their communities of origin. Information about the particularities of the experience in Khartoum and in Sudan are needed in order for the girls to prepare themselves for the eventual journey if they decide to go. Connecting with former women migrants who returned and sharing experiences

and providing potential contacts for prospective migrants might increase informed decision-making process.

- **Safer migration experience in Sudan**

First, *better information should be available* for adolescent girls and young women migrants upon their arrival in Sudan. Advantage should be taken of the newly created IOM Migrant Resource Centre to create better information on specific issues, including access to services, health, accommodation, jobs, legal assistance, and education.

Second, IOM and UNHCR should improve their *outreach services* among migrant and refugee communities, specifically identifying younger migrants. These organisations should work more actively with church leaders, migrant groups and associations, women leaders in the churches or in the mosques, with women leaders in the Ethiopian Association, female teachers in the schools, and female doctors.

Third, there is a need for local organisations, migrant and refugee community-organisations, churches, and international organisations to provide funding and facilities to increase adolescent girls and young women's *access to services and make them "migrant girl friendly"*. This includes shelter provision for girls and women who suffered sexual violence; safe spaces for socialising for girls and younger women; counselling services. Specific *education possibilities* for working girls and young women could be established through evening classes at the existing school facilities (Ethiopian and Eritrean) in Khartoum. Both general and targeted specialised education should be provided for those girls and young women who would like to continue their studies.

Four, there is a need to *strengthen the existing networks* of information and support in migrant and refugee communities. Both UNHCR and IOM together with their local partners and organisations that specifically focus on women's rights should train women's and girls' groups



about the existing services for migrants and refugees, but also about the legal remedies available. Neighbourhood groups, including women's groups and associations of the urban poor, can help migrant girls expand their social capital immediately on arrival before girls fall into harm's way. *Legal aid services* and referral points with specific information and awareness about circumstances and legal rights of adolescent girls and younger women should be available in churches, migrant organisations, IOM Migrant Centre, UNHCR office in Khartoum and in the camps.

Five, *access to health providers* should be improved through both outreach with existing health services as well as with improving access to local hospitals. The needs and particular circumstances of girls and young women, including their reproductive and sexual health should be stressed.

Six, there is an urgent need to create *safe spaces*: both in terms of time, and space, for migrant girls to meet friends and mentors. These spaces could be created in churches, schools, or attached to some of the local NGOs who work on women and girls' rights.

Seven, existing migrant groups, churches and associations should provide *information about accommodation in Khartoum* for newly arrived migrants. This would also involve prioritising adolescent girls and young women in difficult circumstances in accessing temporary accommodation already provided by some of the church organisations and migrant groups.

- **Raising the profile of young female migrants in Sudan**

There is an urgent need to increase the profile of young female migrants and refugees in Sudan. Close collaboration is needed between international organisations (IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP), donors, national government organisations (including the Council of Women, the Ministry of Social Development, COR), together with local organisations (Ahfad

University for women, SIHA, SEEMA, and Al Manar, the Institute of the Rights of the Child, and others) as well as migrant groups to ensure systematic and wide-spread intervention. Migrant girls will benefit from policy engagement and advocacy to promote girls' education and economic empowerment, strengthen child protection, and combat gender-based violence and child marriage—benefits that are rarely found in current programs for girls in general and for migrant girls more specifically. Local and international organisations advocating and working towards rights of children and adolescence should include migrant and refugee girls in their policies and interventions. In addition, policy reforms for international migrants as a group, such as reducing barriers to international migration into Sudan (from Ethiopia and Eritrea), improving living conditions in migrant arrival areas, can also help migrant girls. These efforts need to be sensitive to age, sex, and migration status to make a sustained difference for migrant and refugee girls.

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