Since the late 1990s, there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of Ethiopian women working on short-term contracts as domestic workers in Gulf countries. Drawing on primary research conducted in Ethiopia and in Kuwait, this paper analyzes the gendered production of the migration trajectory of Ethiopian women domestic workers to the Gulf countries. The paper maps the linkages between the gendered political economies and the policy choices of both sending and receiving countries to argue first, that there is evidence for the Ethiopian government’s role as a ‘labor brokerage state,’ although its regulatory capacity is weak. Second, the paper argues that the assumption that the demand for migrant domestic workers is driven by national women entering the workforce is not necessarily true in the Gulf countries, where the ‘social compact’ and the kafala or sponsorship system are primary institutional drivers of the demand for migrant domestic workers. The paper concludes with reflections on the consequences of Ethiopian women’s migration for social reproduction across national boundaries.

* The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewer and the APMJ editors for their useful comments and suggestions. Thanks also to colleagues at the University of Leeds – Ruth Pearson, Gabriel Lynch and Polly Wilding – for stimulating conversations on this paper. Valuable feedback was received from organizers Philippe Fargues and Nasra Shah, and other participants of the research workshop on ‘The Impact of Migration on Gulf Development and Stability,’ July 7-10, 2010, Cambridge, UK. Errors remain the author’s responsibility.
A sophisticated literature on the gender dimensions of migration in a globalized world has emerged in the past decade (Anderson, 2000; Chang, 2000; Parreñas, 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Jones, 2008; Lutz, 2011). Women’s migration for service sector work in the Middle East is recognized as a major global migration corridor, and the media, human rights organizations and some academics have paid attention to the abuses experienced by migrant domestic workers in the region (Chammartin, 2004; Jureidini and Moukarbel, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2010). This paper offers an analysis of the gendered political economies that have produced these migrant labor regimes in both the origin countries and the destination countries of the Middle East, using a case study of the migration of Ethiopian women as domestic workers to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with a focus on Kuwait. The paper discusses the gendered political economies and policy choices of both sending and receiving countries to analyze how the governance of this particular labor migration regime produces a cheap and compliant work force, and the consequences for social reproduction. Social reproduction here is used not only to refer to the reproduction of labor as a factor of production, but also to the social relations through which productive activities in society are regenerated (Mackintosh, 1981). The structure of the paper is as follows: the first section situates the analysis within the literature on the global political economy of care. It outlines Sassen’s (2008) analytical framework of the global restructuring of the care economy and suggests how this framework can be deepened by using Elson’s (1998) articulation of the gendered norms and values that inform the circuits connecting the household, private and public economies. The second section briefly describes the profile of Ethiopian domestic workers in the Gulf. The third section presents the institutional drivers – including the role of the Ethiopian state – that have produced a supply of migrant domestic workers and describes the norms and values underlying this particular migration trajectory. The fourth section discusses how the demand for migrant domestic workers is produced through the unique rentier migrant labor regime of the GCC countries, and the gendered, segmented structure of labor markets in the Gulf. The fifth section concludes with an analysis of the consequences of Ethiopian women’s migration for social reproduction across national boundaries.

The paper is based on field research in Addis Ababa in two phases (three weeks in 2009 and two weeks in 2010) and in Kuwait (three weeks in 2010).

1 The six Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar.
In Addis Ababa, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 returnee migrant women who had previously worked on domestic worker contracts in a Middle Eastern country, many of whom were en route to a contract in a new destination. Women interviewees were identified through personal networks and at the office of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) in Addis Ababa. In Kuwait, interviews were conducted with 19 current migrant women workers. The Ethiopian Embassy, beauty salons, churches and restaurants provided initial points of contact with potential women interviewees. All of the interviewees started out on domestic worker contracts, but at the time of interview, seven of them were working in hotels, restaurants or beauty salons, and one was working in a dormitory for women students of Kuwait University. Snowballing techniques were used with the women who agreed to be interviewed to identify other women. The total 25 interviews with women domestic workers in Ethiopia and Kuwait were conducted with the assistance of a translator, and were of varying length: 14 interviews were in-depth, lasting between 30-50 minutes, while the remaining were under 30 minutes in duration. When interviewees were introduced through personal contacts, the higher level of trust resulted in greater openness, and correspondingly longer, higher quality interviews. The multiple sources through which women were identified ensured there were a range of categories of women – i.e., Muslim and Christian, married and single, women who worked under contracts, as well as those who worked freelance. Limitations of the research methods are, first, that this small, non-random sample cannot be considered representative; and second, it is likely that some nuances of expression would have been lost in the translation process. In both Addis Ababa and Kuwait, key interviews were also conducted with seven owners or managers of employment agencies and with 12 government and non-government representatives. These interviews were supplemented by non-participant observation, official data and policy documents, newspaper reports and secondary research.

The Global Political Economy of Care

Processes of globalization have accelerated the pace of international migration, and arguably, produced a ‘feminization of migration,’2 with large

---

2 The phrase is contested, as historians note that women’s migration in the contemporary period of globalization is not unprecedented – women migrated in large numbers at the turn of the nineteenth century. Moreover, official figures show only a relatively small net increase in women migrants globally, from 46.6 percent in 1960 to nearly 50 percent in 2000 (United Nations, 2005).
numbers of women crossing national borders as economic migrants, refugees and victims of trafficking. The ‘feminization’ of economic migration is marked by increasing numbers of women migrating independently of men and the concentration of women in care work or in sex work. The diversity of migration trajectories and policy regimes regulating women’s legal status as migrants and as workers has produced a proliferation of scholarly work on women’s migration that recognizes gender inequalities as an organizing principle of (i.e., produced by, and in turn reproducing) the economic and social relations underlying migration flows (Lutz, 2007). Central to this theorization is the feminist recognition of the crucial input of household reproductive labor into capitalist production processes. Feminist studies of the employment of domestic workers have demonstrated how paid domestic work by local poor women (often migrants from rural areas) is a crucial, but invisible dimension of the economy and of the asymmetrical, gendered production of class, ethnic and racial inequalities (Ray and Qayum, 2009; Ozeygin, 2001; Cock, 1989). However, when domestic labor is provided by foreign migrant workers, the national frame is inadequate as the unit of analysis. It becomes necessary to analyze the production of these inequalities in a transnational context, as well as examine the important mediating role of social policy (Yeates, 2005: 228-9).

The extraction of care labor across national boundaries has been described by Hochschild (2001, 2003) as ‘global care chains.’ Typically, in a global care chain, the migrant domestic worker enables her female employer to enter and remain in the workforce and pursue a professional career, as she looks after the latter’s children and home. In turn, the children of the nanny or migrant domestic worker are often taken care of by another (non-migrant) woman, who may be a paid nanny from an even poorer family, or who may be an unpaid female relative of the migrant woman. Research in the Asia-Pacific context finds that the responsibility for care work in the migrant women workers’ families continues to be held by female relatives within the extended family rather than by paid nannies (Asis, Huang and Yeoh, 2004: 201).

Underlying the global care chain concept are feminist observations of how the construction of a racialized, global gender division of labor reflects first, the polarization of wage differentials between countries of the global North and South, and migration is viewed as means of ‘closing the gap’ (Hochschild 2003: 17-18). Second, and equally critical, global care chains reflect the centrality of female labor and the relative absence of male responsibility for domestic and care work in both the migrant sending and receiving countries. The continuing relative rigidity of this gender division of labor results in the vertical transfer downwards of this labor, across class and
national boundaries, rather than the horizontal sharing of labor across genders.

Sassen (2008) further delineates the conceptual linkage between global restructuring of the care economy and policy choices of both sending and receiving countries by drawing attention to two circuits of international labor migration—of transnational professional labor at the top, which is dependent on the informal, mostly service and care sector migrant workers at the bottom. She observes that the growing immiseration of economies in the global South has produced a convergence of three factors contributing to the export of women workers as an alternative survival strategy: the rise in male unemployment; the shrinking opportunities for traditional forms of profit-making and the fall in government revenues (Sassen, 2008:460). For governments, the export of workers is a means of coping with high unemployment, fall in revenues and high external debt induced by Structural Adjustment Programs. Labor migration takes the pressure off unemployment, and remittances make an increasingly significant contribution to the economy that is recognized and actively promoted by the states of developing countries. This active role of the state in promoting the export of labor is explored in the context of the Philippines by Rodriguez (2008) who describes the government’s labor brokerage functions in the production, distribution and regulation of the export of its nationals as care workers globally.

Employment regimes in the receiving country that generate the demand for low-wage workers are shaped by growing inequalities between different economic sectors and between the earning capacities of different types of workers and households (Sassen, 2008:461). Furthermore, a strong demand for female professional workers in the post-industrial economies of Europe and North America leads to what she describes as ‘professional households without a ‘wife’’ (Sassen, 2008:464) and consequently a demand for low-wage, migrant service sector workers to support these professional households, both within the home and outside it (in restaurants, dry-cleaning, entertainment venues etc.). She therefore views domestic workers as ‘strategic infrastructure maintenance workers,’ without whom these professional households and the globalized corporate economy cannot survive. Crucial to the mode of incorporation of these service sector workers into post-industrial economies is their migrant (and often irregular) status. This non-citizen status breaks the link with their ability to organize and become an empowered workforce, which has historically been the tactic of strategic sector workers (Sassen, 2008:464-465). Sassen’s framework has Europe and North America as its primary reference points. The subsequent sections of this paper analyzes the context of Ethiopian women’s migration to the Gulf using this framework, but suggests that in the Gulf countries, the hiring of foreign domestic workers
is not necessarily to allow local women to pursue professional careers. Furthermore, migrant domestic workers in these countries are employed not only by Gulf nationals, but also by professional expatriates.

This paper seeks to extend Sassen’s framework by drawing on Diane Elson’s (1998) articulation of the central role of households in social reproduction. Elson argues that the flows of resources (goods, services, labor and money) between the domestic, private (commercial) and public (state) sectors are mediated by three sets of gendered norms and values that regulate the sectors’ functions and their inter-relationships with other sectors. The first set are the values of trust and ethical behavior that go beyond the rules and regulations of state and are essential to the flows of resources in a well functioning market. The second set of values is that of citizenship entitlements and obligations implicit in the circuit of tax and benefits, and public goods provisioning by the state. These values support (or not) the social reproduction of the domestic sector. The third set of values connecting the sectors is of communication—through information, images, ideas and symbolic meanings:

Through the circuit of communication networks, each sector transmits a series of messages which are marked by the organizing dynamic of each sector. The private sector transmits commercial values; the public sector, regulatory values; and the domestic sector, provisioning values. There are negative and positive aspects to the values each transmits—commercial values may be crass and opportunistic—but they may also be thrifty and innovatory; regulatory values may be petty and bureaucratic—but they may also be orderly and democratic; provisioning values may be caring and giving—but they may also be patriarchal and small-minded. So, communication networks convey mixed messages. Moreover, the social norms that structure communication networks, and serve to stabilize and regularize them, are often based on principles of exclusion, as well as inclusion (Elson, 1998:197)

All three sets of values and norms are nurtured through socialization processes originating in households. Elson’s framework describes the circulation of resources and the values underpinning them within a national context; here, the analysis is across national boundaries, drawing on empirical evidence from the case study of Ethiopian domestic workers in the Gulf. The paper will argue that Ethiopian migrant women who work as contract domestic workers are not merely ‘household help,’ providing domestic and care labor to households in the Gulf. Drawing on Elson’s insights, the paper will demonstrate how the domestic sector plays a constitutive role in determining the functioning of both the market and state sectors, and will identify the gendered norms and values that mediate the flows of resources between the domestic, private and public sectors in both Ethiopia and the migrant destination countries.
Profile of Ethiopian Domestic Workers Migrating to the Gulf

The history of Ethiopian migrations to the Middle East is not new; it can be traced through several centuries of commerce between the two regions, including a long-established trade in slaves (Toledano, 1998). During the Derg regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974-1991), however, migration out of Ethiopia was restricted. The removal of this restriction by the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government after 1991 opened the doors to increased emigration to the US, Europe and the Middle East. By the turn of the 21st century, there was a dramatic feminization of the recorded flows of migration. Although official data from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs are patchy, available figures show rapid increases in the number of women migrant workers: 1,202 in 1999, 4,568 in 2000, and 7,629 in 2001. In 1998, the government introduced the Private Employment Agency Proclamation No. 104/1998 to regulate the recruitment of workers for employment abroad, creating two types of legal migration channels - ‘public’ and ‘private.’ The former refers to those who migrate independently through their personal contacts, while the latter refers to women recruited by one of the 110 licensed private employment agencies (PEAs). Both are registered with MoLSA.

Women who do not register with the MoLSA and leave the country through irregular channels exit the country through different routes. The most common is exiting through Addis Ababa airport using tourist visas, or pilgrimage visas particularly to Saudi Arabia for the haj and umrah pilgrimages. Both visitor’s and pilgrim’s visas are for a month, after which women overstay, either as irregular, undocumented workers or as documented workers after regularizing their status through a local broker or sponsor. The other route to the Middle East is overland, which is longer, arduous, and involves crossing several country borders without visas. This overland route is via Dire Dawa in Ethiopia across to Hargessa in Somalia and then on to Bossaso on the Somali coast, from where a dangerous boat journey is undertaken to the coast of Yemen (Reuters, 2009; Yitna, 2006). Although often women intend to use Yemen as a transit destination to Saudi Arabia or other GCC countries, many end up employed locally as domestic workers (de Regt, 2010). They become trapped, prohibited by the high cost of finding a way into...
GCC countries, and by Yemeni border legislation that requires them to pay to exit the country (de Regt, 2010).

The first wave of emigration of Ethiopian domestic workers was to Lebanon (Beydoun, 2006) and constituted nearly 100 percent of official migration through PEA’s between 1999 and 2002. By 2004-2006, while it was still the top destination, Lebanon constituted just under half the share of total Ethiopian women migrant workers; and by 2008-2009, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait emerged as the top destination countries, together accounting for 94 percent of the recorded migration, at 61 percent and 33 percent, respectively (MoLSA, 2009).

Data on the women who migrate via legal routes (public and private) are patchy, and were only systematically collected by MoLSA since 2008. Since 2008, an estimated 35,000 women have been annually migrating through officially documented (public and private) channels, and an equivalent number are estimated to migrate through irregular channels. Women constituted 82 percent of the officially documented migrants; 91 percent of these documented women were single, 83 percent were in the 20-30 age group and over 60 percent had achieved secondary education. Almost all these women were employed as domestic workers or nannies on short-term contracts, and over 90 percent of them earned US$100-150 per month (MoLSA, 2009). Although MoLSA data showed a high percentage of Muslim women (70 percent), large numbers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian women also migrate for work. Reliable estimates of their numbers is difficult, as many Christian women migrate through personal networks, and some take on Muslim names in order to secure employment in countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where employers have a strong preference for Muslim employees.

**Drivers of the Supply of Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers to the Gulf**

This section suggests an explanation why single, young women with secondary education emerged as the typical profile of migrant domestic workers to the Middle East. Sassen’s (2008) conceptual positioning of three contributory factors in sending countries: employment regimes, the growth of the trade in migrant domestic workers as a business opportunity, and the role of the state as labor broker to buffer its depleted revenues informed the analysis. It is also important to situate these three factors in relation to the social reproduction of households in Ethiopia, and, as Elson (1998) suggests, examine the mediating gendered norms and values.

Ethiopia has a high urban unemployment rate, with a pronounced gendering of employment patterns. Studies examining urban unemployment
in pre- and post-liberalization Ethiopia find a highly segmented labor market where employment in the public sector continues to be the ‘good job’ that unemployed young men queue for due to the wage differential between private and public employment (Krishnan et al., 1999; Serneels 2007, Bizuneh et al., 2001). Post-liberalization, the downsizing of public sector employment between 1991 and 1994 was not compensated by an increase in private sector wage employment. As post-secondary education was made a criteria for public sector employment, those with only secondary education are substantially more likely to be found in the ranks of the unemployed. Women with only secondary education have fewer prospects for formal sector employment (either public or private) and as they often bear the burden of provisioning for families; they enter the informal sector, primarily in household-based food processing (Krishnan et al., 1999:5; Bizuneh et al., 2001:78). The higher unemployment rates for both men and women in towns with higher percentages of Muslims, and a more marked division of gender roles in the labor force participation and unemployment of Muslims suggest the need to look into the links between culture and the labor market (Bizuneh et al., 2001:73, 78). Young Muslim women, in particular, may be constrained by the social practices around their religion from taking up paid work in the public domain, even if it were available. For such women, employment as domestic workers may be seen as more acceptable (particularly if it were a Muslim household), even though they come in contact with non-related men.

Given the limited employment options for young women with secondary education, for those who can raise recruitment fees through loans or savings, short-term contracts as migrant domestic workers constitute an important employment option. Working abroad is an opportunity for individuals and their families. For the latter, the employment of one member abroad could be considered part of a household livelihood diversification strategy, essential for survival and as a buffer against varied and multiple crises, such as rising food prices, drought and unemployment in Ethiopia. Studies of rural poverty suggest that seasonal internal migration for employment is a rural livelihood diversification strategy in Ethiopia (Mberu, 2006). Since the 1990s, increasing migration to the Middle East has been observed, which has the additional advantage of employment not contingent on rainfall (Devereaux, 2000:6-8). The migration of young, unmarried women as domestic workers to the Middle East is embedded in a strong cultural expectation that they will provide for their natal families. It is underwritten by the provisioning values of caring, responsibility and duty and sustained through women’s remittances, which can be significant contributions to households.

The majority of women interviewed (in Addis Ababa and Kuwait) reported remitting most, if not all, of their salaries to support their natal families.
A few women did not need to remit money to their natal families, or were supporting their own children in Ethiopia who were looked after by female relatives (a mother or sister). The remittances of those women who earn smaller amounts (US$100-150) are often only sufficient to cover or supplement basic living costs (rent, food, utilities, medical expenses) of their families. Higher earners (US$ 200-600) are able to support the education of their siblings, and sometimes help siblings set up businesses. Salome, for instance, was an unmarried, 42-year old woman who has been in Kuwait for 16 years. She was earning US$600 as a supervisor at a dormitory for women students. She has been supporting four siblings and her aged mother; she helped one brother set up a shoe shop in Addis Ababa, and paid for the education and marriage expenses of her other siblings (Interview, Kuwait, December 2010). Other investments of remittances were in the purchase of household goods, such as TVs and refrigerators, or building a house. Rashida was an unmarried young Muslim returnee migrant, who went to Saudi Arabia on an umrah visa when she was 26. She overstayed her visa and worked as a freelance domestic worker for five years. She saved enough money to build a small house in Wollo, which her family was renting out for ETB1,000 (Interview, Addis Ababa, July 2009). Similarly, Sara, was an unmarried 20-year old Christian woman who worked for an expatriate Egyptian family in Beirut for three years, and then moved with her employer’s daughter to Qatar for five years. She too earned enough money at the end of eight years to invest in building a house for her natal family. In July 2009, she had been back in Addis Ababa for two years, married and with a young daughter, and was planning on returning to work on a new contract, this time with the intention of saving for her own and her child’s future (Interview, Addis Ababa, July 2009). Ethiopian migrant women domestic workers’ remittances contribute to the social reproduction of households similar to that of other migrant women workers (Parreñas, 2001; Asis, Huang and Yeoh, 2004), but because they are unmarried, the focus is on their natal family, until, like Sara, they get married and have their own children.

Although the provisioning function may be similar to the remittances sent by male migrants, or by married women migrant workers, the gendered consequences for young and single women migrants may be different, and related to their weaker position within family hierarchies. This provisioning is sometimes at a high cost for the women, not only in terms of the arduous labor that many endure, but also in terms of the sacrifices they make in forgoing opportunities to save and invest in their own future, or even, as in Salome’s

---

4 The US$ equivalent is as of December 2010 unless otherwise noted.

5 The names of all interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.
case, the opportunity to marry and start her own family. It also bears the risk of non-reciprocal relationships with their families when they return. For instance, Mekdis, a 28-year old Christian woman who was a returnee from Bahrain, was hurt and embittered that her parents and siblings had no sympathy for the hard labor and emotional abuse she went through in order to send them her earnings. At the time of the interview, she had dissociated from her natal family and was working for an expatriate household in Addis Ababa (Interview, Addis Ababa, July 2010).

The migrant domestic worker recruitment regime that has mushroomed in Ethiopia is underwritten by commercial values of trust and opportunism, as well as by regulatory and communication values. Trust is crucial in the relationship between women and the recruiting agency or the illegal broker. Several women interviewed approached or were approached by brokers who operate in local neighborhoods. Information about the reliability of the broker is typically through word-of-mouth, and the women trust (sometimes wrongly) that the broker will deliver the promised jobs and working conditions in exchange for the fees paid. As agencies also charge more than they are legally supposed to, there is a degree of trust involved in this transaction too. The transaction through agencies is also supported by the state’s regulation of registered private employment agencies, which can then in principle hold the agency accountable for malpractices, though not always the case in practice. Communication values in the recruitment process include the transmission of images and ideas about work opportunities in the Gulf. The demonstration effect of the commodities (clothes, household goods) that returnee migrants possess plays an important role in the transmission of these images and ideas. As mentioned before, the symbolic value of Muslim identity is considered important for recruitment to the Gulf, and some Orthodox Christian women, like Salome, formally changed their names to Muslim names in order to secure employment.

The employment regime of migrant workers in Ethiopia (as elsewhere) has created lucrative new opportunities for high profits from the trade in recruitment of domestic workers. Although agencies complain that they are disadvantaged compared to illegal brokers who have comparatively low start-up and overhead costs, most agencies also conduct business illegally, charging women amounts similar to what brokers charge. Brokers and agents charge between US$300 and 1000 (as of July 2010) for their services, even though the cost of a return ticket, visa and insurance are supposed to be borne by the employer and women are legally only supposed to pay for their passports and medical examination. These unofficial fees generate sizable revenues for the brokers. A conservative estimate of the potential income from brokerage even if only 10 women’s migration was arranged per month would
be between US$2,500 and 3,000 (as of July 2010), which represents a sizable income in Ethiopia.

In addition to the commercial, profit-oriented values driving the trade in migrant domestic workers, values of ‘trust’ (though not necessarily norms of ‘ethical’ or legal behavior) are also crucial. Prior to the introduction of the Private Employment Agency Proclamation No.104/1998, the trade in migration (of both men and women) was unregulated, managed primarily by Muslim traders involved in the (legal and illegal) import and export of commodities, travel agencies and informal financial services (hawala). Many of these traders have well-established networks across several countries in the Middle East based on ‘trust’ and the ‘social capital’ of personal, kin and clan relationships (e.g., see Little, 2005:9-10). Within Ethiopia, many PEAs have links to such trading networks, which formed the basis for their expansion and specialization in the trade in migrant domestic workers. This was evident in several of the interviews I conducted. For instance, one of the older, established PEAs is a business run by a husband and wife team, who also own a company that exports cattle to the Middle East (Interview, Addis Ababa, July 2009). A Muslim identity can be important to enter into the networks formed around the trade in migrant domestic workers. An illegal broker I interviewed was Christian but went by the name Mohammed in his dealings with employment agencies in the Middle East, because, as he pointed out, it was a matter of establishing trust (Interview, Addis Ababa, July 2009). Another example shows the overlapping functions within these networks of trade, labor brokerage and financial services. Tigist had secured her contract for work in Saudi Arabia through the brokerage of a trading company that was not a registered PEA; she also used the hawala services of the same trading company to organize her remittances (Interview, Addis Ababa, July 2009).

Turning finally to the public sector, in Ethiopia, there is relatively low level of public goods provisioning and welfare entitlements (through social protection measures, including cash transfers, or social insurance measures, such as health and employment insurance). As this set of what Elson (1998) describes as the ‘tax and benefit’ circuit of values is weakly developed in Ethiopia, household provisioning has little or no fall-back on the state. However, migration presents two important opportunities for the Ethiopian government, which are directed through the invocation of both tacit and formal regulatory values. First, emigration presents an opportunity to reduce the political and economic pressures produced by the swelling of the ranks of the urban unemployed. Although nominally a democracy, disputes over the elections in 2005 and the government’s subsequent suppression of national and regional opposition groups created a large group of politically disaffected young people in the country. Some seek migration as an ‘exit’ option, and some
are forced to migrate as political refugees (Campbell, 2009; de Regt 2010). The Ethiopian government’s tacit encouragement of migration thus acts as a ‘safety valve’ on this simmering political discontent.

The second opportunity for the Ethiopian government is the significant contribution migrant remittances increasingly make to the economy. According to World Bank data, in 2007, the US$359 million official remittances to Ethiopia surpassed foreign direct investment which was US$223 million. Officials at the National Bank of Ethiopia estimate that the value of remittances would double if underground transfers were included. The government recently introduced new measures to ‘capture’ rents from these transfers by clamping down on illegal money exchangers and by reducing transaction costs through streamlining official transfer procedures (National Bank of Ethiopia, 2006). The government’s devaluation of the Birr in June 2009, and again in August 2010, could be viewed partially as a measure to increase the value of remittances, making it more attractive for migrants to send money.

The importance accorded by the Ethiopian government to the governance of the migrant labor regime is indicated by the initiation of pre-departure orientations for domestic workers. These are half-day sessions provided by MoLSA, with input from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Addis Ababa. These orientation sessions provide prospective migrants with practical information on how to open bank accounts and make remittances, and basic information about the destination countries. Importantly, these sessions also communicate values of obedience and subservience to employers. They instruct the domestic worker to obey her employers, maintain personal hygiene, perform her duties diligently, respect the religious observances of her employers, and caution her against stealing, lying or exposing her body to the view of male members of her employer’s family. Thus, these orientations function to discipline prospective domestic workers, by constructing and endorsing the prototype of an ‘ideal’ worker, who conforms to acceptable norms around work, gender, sexuality, religion and the ‘Arab culture.’

---

6 de Regt (2010:251-252) documents the story of Tsehai, an Ethiopian woman of Oromo ethnicity, who had been involved in student protests against the government and was now a political refugee engaged in domestic work in Yemen.

7 MoLSA organizes pre-departure orientation sessions daily. The one I attended in April 2009 lasted for three hours and was attended by over 150 women and men. The session began with a mini-lecture, followed by a 40-minute film produced by the International Organization for Migration, and finally, a question-and-answer session.
Drivers of the Demand for Migrant Domestic Workers: Focus on Kuwait

This section examines the drivers of migrant labor regimes in the Gulf countries, with a focus on a case study of Kuwait. It analyzes the provisioning, regulatory, commercial and communication values within the domestic, private and public sectors that underlie this migrant labor regime. Beginning with Sassen’s (2008) observation that the employment regimes in receiving countries are shaped by the growing inequalities between the earning capacities of those employed in different sectors, this section first analyzes the construction of two circuits of migrant labor: of skilled professionals at the top level, and of casualized, migrant workers in the construction and services sector, including domestic workers at the bottom level. Second, this section discusses the regulatory controls of the state over migrant workers through the rigid exclusion of migrant workers from the entitlements of citizenship and the construction of the kafala system in the Gulf. Finally, this section turns to the household sector, and examines Sassen’s assertion that the strong demand for migrant domestic workers in the global North exists due to the emergence of ‘professional households without a ‘wife” (2008:464).

All of the Gulf countries have depended on migrant labor for several decades and indeed, are the largest per capita recipients in the world of temporary labor immigration (Baldwin-Edwards, 2005:2). In 2005, migrant workers constituted 35.7 percent of the total GCC population of 35.8 million – ranging from 24 percent in Oman to 71 percent in the United Arab Emirates. In Kuwait, by 2009, non-nationals constituted 68 percent of the population and 83 percent of the labor force (Shah, 2010). In the 1970s, Arab migrant labor was recruited from the Maghreb\textsuperscript{8} and Mashreq\textsuperscript{9} countries primarily to meet the rapid, oil-fuelled expansion of the Gulf economies, as the small indigenous Gulf population did not have the relevant skills. From the mid-1980s, GCC countries replaced Arab workers with Asian workers from South Asia, as well as the Philippines and Indonesia.

The majority of migrants work in the private sector, and Gulf nationals are primarily absorbed in public sector employment, thus creating a highly segmented labor market. The oil-fuelled expansion of the public sector in most GCC countries virtually guaranteed jobs for nationals seeking employment. In Kuwait, for instance, the public sector employs 82 percent of Kuwaiti men.

\textsuperscript{8} Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Algeria.

\textsuperscript{9} Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.
and 79 percent of the women (Shah, 2010). Migrant labor flows to the private sector in the Gulf are demarcated into the two levels described above, the professional ‘expatriates’ at the top, and the less skilled workers in the construction and service sectors at the bottom.

The labor regime in the Gulf is not only segmented and polarized between nationals and non-nationals, it is also distinctly gendered. Gulf countries have very low levels of national women’s participation in the workforce of between 15 and 20 percent (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 1999 as cited in Jureidini, 2003:4). At the extreme end is Saudi Arabia, where conservative laws upholding the segregation of unrelated men from women permeate economic sphere, significantly constraining women’s economic participation (Dounato and Posusney, 2003:240-243). Kuwait is an exception to this trend in the Gulf, as women’s participation in the workforce increased from similar low levels to 41 percent in 2009, an increase that positions them at a higher percentage of participation in the total labor force at 28.8 percent, compared to 12.1 percent for Kuwaiti men (Shah, 2010).

The proportion of women migrant workers has been increasing in Gulf countries, from eight percent in the early 1980s to 30 percent of all inflows in 2000 (Chammartin, 2004:8-12). The majority of migrant women workers are employed in the service sector (primarily as domestic workers), and are from Asia (the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka). A growing number of migrant domestic workers are from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt (Sabbab, 2002:10). The numbers of migrant domestic workers in Kuwait have also increased, though there are significant differences in the official figures of an increase from 28,833 in 1980 to 299,747 in 2009 (Shah, 2010) and unofficial estimates of a six-fold increase from around 100,000 in 1989 to over 600,000 in 2009 (Human Rights Watch, 2010:21). The Ethiopian Embassy estimates that the number of Ethiopian women has increased rapidly from around 6,000 in 2006 to 40,000 in 2010 (Interview with the Ethiopian consul, Embassy of Ethiopia in Kuwait, December 2010).

This polarized, segmented and gendered structure of the labor market is increasingly coming under pressure with the liberalization and restructuring of the Gulf economies, as privatization is being promoted, and public expenditures are being curtailed by downsizing public sector employment and reducing welfare provisions (Pfeifer and Posusney, 2003:50-53). Simultaneously, there have been vigorous demands for the ‘nationalization’ of the workforce, which has led to policies to encourage the employment of nationals particularly in the private sector. However as Shah (2008:12-14) observes, these policies have had limited success, due to the inherent problem of the segmented structure of the labor market and continued reluctance of nationals to undertake service sector work and their preference for public sector jobs.
The pressures of restructuring may have negative consequences particularly for Gulf national women, not only because they may be more likely to lose public sector jobs during downsizing, but also because they will bear ultimate responsibility for the social reproduction functions that the state abdicates. An indicator of these negative consequences is provided by Tetreault (2003) in her insightful analysis of the gendered politics of differential accumulation wrought by restructuring in the Kuwaiti economy after the first Gulf war. As noted above, a significant number of Kuwaiti women are in the work force, and they fill 62 percent of the jobs requiring university or professional degrees (Tetreault, 2003:228-229). After the Gulf war, the pressures of the demographic bulge of unemployed youth alongside the rise of a nouveau riche ‘Arab’ class, contending with the privileged, ‘old-rich’ ‘Kuwaiti’ ruling class, has resulted in a public contest over the costs of restructuring the economy. Women are implicated in the realignment, because their “emancipation introduces a new class of contenders for political and economic positions” (Tetreault, 2003:236). Educated Kuwaiti women, employed predominantly in the public sector, have become the targets of radical Islamist propaganda to get them to quit work. Tetreault argues that gender is used as a weapon in intra-class competition as “new men seek to eliminate able women from every social class – including their own – from the competition” (2003:226). The effect of this gendered politics of re-structuring on the demand for domestic workers is a question I will address shortly, when I examine the household sector.

Turning now to the role of the state, the first point to be noted is that GCC states draw emphatic boundaries between national citizens and foreign workers: the latter have little or no prospects of acquiring citizenship through naturalization. This definitive exclusion is reflected even in the language. In interviews with Kuwaitis, both officials and non-officials, the terms ‘temporary contract worker’ or ‘expatriate’ (for professionals) are used rather than ‘migrant worker.’ The consolidation of Gulf national identity to the exclusion even of other Arabs began with the shift in alliances after the first Gulf war, when Arab migrant workers in many Gulf countries were considered a destabilizing threat to the ideas of ‘nation’ and ‘citizenship’ (Jureidini, 2003:2), and were expelled. Asian migrant workers who replaced them were made more compliant by firmly regulating their status as temporary workers, with little or no options of becoming permanent residents, thus precluding their potential claims on citizenship.

An estimated two million Arab workers were forced to return to their countries (Fergany, 2001 cited in Baldwin-Edwards, 2005:4).
The Gulf monarchies’ efforts to contain potential political dissent through the deployment and control of a migrant labor force are sustained through the kafala or sponsorship system of recruitment. The kafeel is the sponsor and employer of a migrant worker, and may be an individual or a company, but only Gulf citizens can legally obtain permission to sponsor migrant workers. A temporary residence permit or iqama is issued on the basis of the work visa, and consequently, the workers’ legal presence in the country is tied to the kafeel. The kafeel invariably confiscates the passports of the migrant workers in order to control them better. Although the Kuwait government issued a decree\(^1\) prohibiting the confiscation of passports in 2007, domestic workers were excluded from its purview, and in any case, the confiscation of passports continues to be widespread.

Longva’s (1997: 77-112) detailed study of the kafala system observes that it serves two critical functions. First, it decentralizes and privatizes its regulatory function by passing on to the kafeel or sponsor control over the unavoidably large and essential population of migrant workers. Second, the system offers a ‘buy-in’ to Gulf nationals, as citizenship itself becomes an opportunity to capitalize on the foreign demand for work visas. A widespread practice among Gulf nationals is visa trading—i.e., obtaining work visas for migrant workers they do not personally employ, in exchange for a fee (Sabban, 2002:35; Baldwin-Edwards, 2005:30). For instance, in Saudi Arabia, up to 70 percent of the visas issued by the government are traded in the black market (Shah, 2008:9). Migrant workers whose employers are not their sponsors are irregular, and vulnerable to labor malpractices by employers. The government of Kuwait has been considering abolishing the sponsorship system. However, the kafala system flourishes and acts as a strong institutional driver of the demand for labor because it is a lucrative business opportunity for ordinary Gulf citizens. Observers of Kuwaiti politics are therefore more skeptical of how soon legislative changes requiring a major institutional re-orientation might actually be implemented and enforced.\(^1\)

Migrant domestic workers are particularly vulnerable under the kafala system because they are isolated within the homes of their employers and they are excluded from the provisions of Kuwait’s Labor Law of 1964.\(^3\) Thus, they

\(^1\) Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, Ministerial Decree No.166 of 2007 Concerning the Prohibition on Confiscating Travel Documents of Workers in the Private Sector.

\(^2\) Interview, member of Kuwait Human Rights Society and member of Kuwait Trade Union Federation, December 2010.

\(^3\) Law No. 38 of 1964 Concerning Labor in Private Sector Employment, Chapter 1, Article 2(e) states that “domestic servants and those having their status [shall] not be subject to the application of this law’s provisions” (Human Rights Watch, 2010:37).
cannot make claims to the minimum wage, statutory hours of work, overtime, holidays, and other provisions of private sector labor law. This exclusion is also reflected in institutional arrangements: domestic workers’ affairs (permits, adjudication of disputes, etc.) are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior (which deals with immigration), not the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. Although the Domestic Worker’s Department (within the Ministry of the Interior) has evolved a standard labor contract (revised in 2006) for domestic workers that employers, agencies and domestic workers are legally required to sign, the contract is limited in its scope, and compliance is not monitored.

There are norms and values underlying the kafala system and the regulatory framework for domestic workers. First, citizenship not only gives Gulf nationals a normative entitlement to be a sponsor, it also offers them a business opportunity to engage in visa trading, which allows for an acceleration of rent-seeking values. Second, particularly in the employment of domestic workers, the cultural norm that protects the privacy of the home from intrusion by the state, makes inspection of paid domestic labor conditions difficult (Blackett, 1998). This norm has been observed to be pronounced in the context of gender segregation in the Middle East, and Kuwait in particular (Longva, 1997:91-92). Thus the resistance to the inclusion of domestic workers under Kuwaiti labor law is justified through reference to cultural norms: “Domestic workers cannot be brought under labor legislation because our traditional cultural values would not allow inspection of private homes by the government.” Third, and importantly, the Kuwaiti state’s production of a migrant domestic worker regime through policies that keep workers disempowered and wages artificially low is, in effect, a low-cost substitute for investment in public provisioning (such as, day care, or elder care). The migrant domestic worker regime is therefore not only of ‘help’ to individual households, it is vital for social reproduction.

Finally, turning to the domestic sector, we examine Sassen’s argument that the demand for migrant domestic workers arises from the demographic trends observed in countries of the North of large numbers of women entering the professional workforce and an aging population needing care. In contrast to these countries, despite high education levels for women, the Gulf countries have low levels of women’s participation in the workforce (as noted above). Also in contrast to the aging population of the North, there is a demographic bulge in the Gulf, with a large youth population that is educated but unem-

---

14 Interview, Manager, Foreign Relations Department, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, December 2010.
ployed. The demand for migrant service sector and domestic workers can be explained first, by the social compact between the Gulf monarchies and their populations, whereby the latter acquiesced in regime legitimacy as long as revenues from oil sales were used to subsidize state welfare systems since the 1970s (Baldwin-Edwards, 2005:27; Nonneman, 2008:6). In contrast to Marshall’s (1950) classic exposition of citizenship as an historical sequence from civil to political to social rights, in the model of citizenship implicit in the social compact of the Gulf countries, social and economic rights (guaranteed through state welfare provisioning) have, in effect, preceded the establishment of civil and political rights.

Within the social compact in the Gulf, migrant service sector and domestic workers were viewed as part of an “unspoken bargain” between the state and the emerging civil society, by which the state provides a leisured life in exchange for complete political control”(Sabban, 2002:11). The employment of foreign domestic workers signifies a status symbol of this life of luxury. The status values communicated through the employment of foreign domestic workers are further differentiated and ordered in a racialized hierarchy, with Filipina women at the top commanding the highest salaries and status, followed by Indonesian and South Asian women, with African women at the bottom. Some Ethiopian domestic workers who worked in households that employed Filipina or Indonesian women as nannies or cooks shared that their employers gave the latter workers more consideration and respect. In contrast to other Gulf countries, the demand for migrant domestic workers in Kuwait can be considered, to some extent, a response to the larger number of Kuwaiti women within the workforce. Nonetheless, the employment status of Kuwaiti women is not the defining factor for the employment of foreign domestic workers, since almost 90 percent of all Kuwaiti households employ a foreign domestic worker (Shah, 2008:14).

**Conclusion**

This case study illuminates and extends the global political economy of care framework in several ways. First, this case study supports Sassen’s (2008) argument that globalization has created two circuits of international labor. This is evident in the Gulf countries, where a segmented and unequal employment structure concentrates nationals in the public sector and non-nationals in the private sector, at both the higher levels of skilled professionals, and the lower levels of the construction and service sectors. In Ethiopia, the absence of employment prospects for young, educated Ethiopians has produced a gendered consequence where women bear the shortfall of the employment deficit by entering into the informal sector or migrating as contract domestic workers.
The case study suggests how the trade in migrant domestic workers presents new economic and political opportunities: it is a low-cost, high-profit business opportunity both in Ethiopia and in the Gulf countries. In Ethiopia, these lucrative prospects were mobilized through the relationships of trust and social capital of existing, predominantly Muslim trade networks. In the Gulf, the kafala system of labor recruitment provides Gulf citizens with privileged access to this lucrative business opportunity. Governments of these countries are unable and perhaps politically unwilling to regulate this trade, given that migrant workers provide the state with opportunities. In Ethiopia, migrant workers provide the state with a safety valve to contain political and economic pressures, and remittances to buffer its depleted revenues.

Third, in contrast to Sassen’s (2008) argument about the gendered re-structuring of countries in the North where migrant domestic workers are catering to ‘professional households without a ‘wife,’’ the demand for domestic workers in the Gulf countries is supported by the ‘social compact’ in which the Gulf states guarantee a leisured lifestyle to their citizens in exchange for continued political legitimacy. Migrant domestic workers perform the ‘3D’ work that national women do not want, but importantly, are a low-cost private mechanism of care provisioning.

This paper also suggests that the concept of a global care chain be extended beyond the focus on the cross-border extraction of care labor to consideration of cross-border implications of migration for social reproduction. That is, not only do the young women migrant domestic workers provide care labor in the destination country, they also make significant but unacknowledged contributions to social reproduction both in Ethiopia and the destination countries. Research on Asian women migrants has recognized the important contributions of migrant women workers to social reproduction (Asis, Huang and Yeoh, 2004). Social reproduction cannot be straightforwardly quantified or commodified, and requires analysis of the gendered norms, values, practices and networks that mediate the flows of resources as well as the relationships within and between the household, private and public sectors. This paper has demonstrated the ways in which women migrant workers help households in Ethiopia by providing a crucial buffer not only for family survival, but also for the future social reproduction of the households through the investments in the education of siblings, or in enterprises. This provisioning for Ethiopian households by migrant domestic workers compensates for the absence of the Ethiopian state’s social provisioning. Migrant domestic workers make an important contribution to social reproduction in the Gulf too, as they are a low-cost substitute for investment in public services in these countries.

The discussion in this paper has also demonstrated how underlying the circulation of labor and money in this migration trajectory are the circuits of
values and relationships vital to social reproduction: the strong cultural
expectation of women’s provisioning of the domestic sector; and the values
of trust and social capital on which the networks of brokers and agencies
operate. Also crucial are the regulatory values of the Ethiopian state which
inadequately provide citizens with entitlements to welfare provisioning, and
only weakly govern the trade in migrant domestic workers, but are active in
the production of exportable domestic workers and the regulation of revenue
from migrant remittances. While cultural norms that view the household as
exempt from inspection are not exceptional, in the Gulf countries, these values
are accentuated by practices of gender segregation. The symbolic value of
domestic workers to an employer’s class and social status were also noted.

Elson’s analysis of the centrality of the provisioning values of the domes-
tic sector to social reproduction observes that the former’s capacity to regen-
erate both itself and the private and the public sectors is not a ‘bottomless well’
(1998:203), and that it needs replenishing or it will be undermined by
insecurity, demoralization and the disintegration of intangible social assets.
While this may be true within the national frame, this paper observes how the
temporary, compliant and disempowered migrant domestic worker regime
constructed in the Gulf countries, does appear to create such a ‘bottomless
well’ for the destination countries, by the cross-border displacement of
potential negative consequences onto sending countries.

REFERENCES

Anderson, Bridget
2000 “Ethiopians Dominate Flood of Africans to Yemen,” Fortune, 10(504), Addis
Ababa.

Asis, M.M.B., S. Huang and B.S.A. Yeoh
2004 “When the Light of the Home is Abroad: Unskilled Female Migration and the Filipino

Baldwin-Edwards, M.
2005 “Migration in the Middle East and Mediterranean.” Global Commission on Inter-
national Migration, Geneva.

Beydoun, Khaled 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(3):1009-1045.
Bizuneh, Genene et al.

Blackett, A.

Campbell, John
2009 “Caught Between the Ideology and Realities of Development, Transiting from the Horn Of Africa to Europe,” London School of Economics Migration Studies Unit Working Papers No.2009/01.

Chammartin, Gloria Moreno-Fontes

Chang, Grace

Cock, Jacklyn

de Regt, Marina

Devereaux, Stephen
2000 “Food Insecurity in Ethiopia.” Discussion paper, Department for International Development, UK.

Doumato, Eleanor Abdella and Marsha Pripstein Posusney
2003 Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy and Society. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers,.

Ehrenreich, Barbara and Arlie Russell Hochschild

Elson, Diane

Fergany, Nader
Hochschild, Arlie


Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette

Human Rights Watch
2010 Walls at Every Turn: Abuse of Migrant Domestic Workers through Kuwait’s Sponsorship System. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Jones, A.

Jureidini, R.

Jureidini, R. and N. Moukarbel

Krishnan, P, Tesfaye Gebre Selassie and Stefan Dercon

Little, Peter

Longva, Anh Nga

Lutz, Helma

Mackintosh, Maureen  

Marshall, T. H.  

Mberu, Blessing Uchenna  

Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MÖLSA)  

National Bank of Ethiopia  

Nonneman, Gerd  

Ozeygin, Gul  

Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar  

Pfeifer, Karen and Marsha Pripstein Posusney  

Ray, Raka and Seemin Qayum  

Reuters  
2009 “Ethiopians Dominate Flood of Africans to Yemen,” Fortune, 10(504).

Rodriguez, R. M.  
ETHIOPIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN KUWAIT

Sabban, Rima

Sassen, Saskia

Serneels, P.

Shah, Nasra


Tetreault, Mary Ann

Toledano, Ehud R.

United Nations

Yeates, N.

Yitna, G.Y