CHAPTER 20

Informality, gender, and alternative citizenship

The lives and livelihoods of rural migrant youth in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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INTRODUCTION

Despite being the driving force of the continent's economic growth, for many young Africans, and particularly those from low-income backgrounds, cities have become synonymous with unemployment, underemployment, and precarity (Urdal and Hoelscher, 2009; Mbaya, 2013; Ebaidalla, 2016; Lynch et al., 2020). In Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, rural migrant youth from low-income backgrounds face an array of challenges in finding work, dealing with the high cost of urban living, and addressing their basic needs. There is an absence of state-led support and assistance, particularly for women and girls (Atnafu et al., 2014; Mulugeta and Eriksen, 2016; Dessie, 2021).

Studies on youth transitions and citizenship have highlighted the paradoxes that surround young people's status as 'citizens in becoming' (Wood, 2014), particularly across low-income geographies where adulthood does not always bring full citizenship rights (Fokwang, 2003; Millstein, 2017; Bergère, 2020). Moreover, conceptual explorations of citizenship have generally not

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paid due attention to the agency of young people in the Global South and the realities that shape the practice of citizenship through a gender-focused lens (Lister, 2012). In her seminal works exploring inclusive citizenship, Kabeer (2005, 2021) underscores its importance as a framework for understanding how disenfranchised citizens mobilise around shared identities and lived experiences of marginalisation to disrupt structures of gender inequality and exclusion. Concentrating on the 'ordinary' citizen, Kabeer (2021: 4) suggests a definition of citizenship that also considers 'the social practices through which members of a society interpret, enact and seek to expand legal definitions'.

From the perspective of marginalised youth in cities, expanding conceptualisations of citizenship calls for an acknowledgment of the practices that construct the everyday. It also requires dissecting the various social and economic strategies that youth devise to claim what their informal status has deprived them of. Van Blerk et al. (2020) speak directly to this void through the concept of 'street citizenship', which they use to describe the lived experiences of street youth in various African cities. Proposing a shift away from a dichotomous understanding of citizenship delineated around inclusion and exclusion, van Blerk et al. (2020: 334) suggest a focus an alternative citizenship 'as encompassing the socio-political aspects of daily life'. This acknowledges the ways in which marginalised young people navigate formal and informal spaces, how they form their civic and social identities, and how they exercise agency in precarious social and economic contexts.

Framing citizenship as a nuanced process that mirrors the spatiality and temporality of youth transitions in contexts of uncertainty, this chapter presents findings from a longitudinal study that explored the livelihood strategies of rural migrant youth living and working in Addis Ababa. Through a gender-focused exploration of migrants' 'alternative' citizenship, we highlight how young people's livelihood strategies are embedded in shared identity formation processes, subjective perceptions of belonging, and future-making practices that underscore the everyday geographies of inequality faced by young people in the city.

BACKGROUND

Ethiopia has a population constituted largely of young people, which the National Youth Policy defines as individuals aged 15–29 years (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), 2011). Although in recent decades the country has made considerable progress towards meeting many of its development objectives (World Bank, 2020), studies have highlighted the difficulties that young people face in transitioning from education to work. Most

find themselves unable to claim the social and economic benefits that adult status typically brings, despite moving out of the adolescent age bracket (Chuta and Tafere, 2021).

With one of the lowest urbanisation rates in sub-Saharan Africa, it is only in the past two decades that rural-urban migration has become a primary driver of population growth in Ethiopian cities (de Brauw et al., 2014; World Bank Group, 2015; UN-Habitat, 2017). Reasons for this have been attributed to rural household insecurity, a lack of employment opportunities outside of agricultural work, and disempowering gender norms that prevent young girls from accessing education in contexts of endemic poverty (Ezra, 2003; Atnafu et al., 2014; Bezu and Holden, 2014).

In Ethiopia's cities, young rural migrants generally earn a living from the informal economy, aided by family or other contacts. Although many resort to street vending and street hawking, work in industrial parks has become an agreeable alternative for some (Mains and Mulat, 2021; Tsegay, 2021). For female migrants, the urban labour market is dominated by domestic work, which leaves many vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in their employer's home (Erulkar et al., 2006). Domestic work and the destitution that often follows can lead rural female migrants into sex work, typically bar work or streetwalking (van Blerk, 2008; de Regt and Mihret, 2020; Dessie, 2021).

Lucrative works in more profitable parts of the informal economy are restricted to those with access, which is usually facilitated through social relations, thereby excluding those (particularly women and adolescent girls) who lack such contacts. Moreover, for low-income youth without formal identification documents, who have limited access to sanitation, housing, transport, and childcare, keeping work outside of the street economy can be out of reach for practical reasons (Dessie, 2021; Presler-Marshall et al., 2021). With national survey data pointing to increasing rates of rural-urban migration, while also underlining these trends as increasingly female (Central Statistical Agency (CSA), 2013, 2017), the persistent lack of employment opportunities for rural youth outside of farm work, alongside the social and economic effects of the crises currently engulfing Ethiopia, is expected to further exacerbate these trends, making Addis Ababa and other cities even more appealing to young people in search of a better life.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

This chapter presents qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with 12 adolescents (six female, six male) living and working in Addis Ababa, in 2018 and 2022.[1] When interviews were first conducted in 2018, respondents were aged 15–17, had been in the city for five years or less, and

were engaged in street vending, street hawking, coffee house work or street-walking. Respondents originated from rural households engaged in subsistence farming in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), Amhara and Oromia regions. On average, female respondents had completed four years of education, and males seven years, prior to migrating.

Respondents were identified through snowball sampling around gender, rural background and age-based criteria in two central neighbourhoods of the capital city, and were approached for follow-up interviews in 2022. Verbal consent was obtained from respondents and identified caregivers prior to the interviews. Interviews were structured around open-ended thematic questions covering migration, arrival in the city, transitions to street work, every day routines and challenges, and future plans. Interviews were conducted in Amharic, with the help of a research assistant. The data was transcribed, translated and coded using a thematic coding frame for analysis. Ethical approval was sought from Addis Ababa University, and clearance documents were received from Bole and Yeka sub-city administration offices, allowing for interviews to take place in respondents' place of work.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Gendering informality

The value attributed to formal citizenship differs by gender, resulting from the differing experiences of young women and young men in navigating the informal spaces within which migrants undertake income-generating activities. The exclusion of female migrants from the gender-exclusive sanctuaries created by the social networks that encompassed many migrant men – as a consequence of gender norms that prescribe being and belonging – means that informality as a form of citizenship can be a double-edged sword. Although a number of respondents reported that they had identity documents, none attested to holding the release documents from their rural neighbourhood administrations – *kebele*s – that are required in order to register as a formal resident in Addis Ababa. For male migrants who had previously described efforts to formalise their work by seeking a permit, becoming 'formal' citizens represented an unaffordable luxury, given the hefty fees associated with street vending permits as well as the taxes that formal workers must pay.

For migrant women with children, however, the status of formal invisibility was perceived and experienced as disadvantageous, given their distinct needs around accessing health, education, and other basic services. Their involvement in the informal economy caused them numerous problems. For example, migrant women with children were more likely to be

harassed by the authorities given that they were more likely to be engaged in begging as a means of earning a living (and less likely to be able to run to avoid harassment as they were carrying their children). The legal status that defined an individual's relationship to the state that migrant youth were not afforded, then, stretched beyond the symbolism of *being* urban and towards an acknowledgement of who qualified to claim urbanity as an identity and as a right.

Follow-up interviews conducted in 2022 found that all respondents interviewed in 2018 were still self-employed and working in the street economy. Although some were doing the same activities, others had moved on to other work or were doing multiple jobs to increase their earnings. For one young man, Eremias, aged 16 in 2018 and working as a street hawker, this included changing to selling smaller, lower value items, depending on what his friends (also street hawkers) could afford

> It is good to have more smaller things that are not so expensive. That way you increase your chances of selling something, even if there is no guarantee really… We buy what we can together and then we split the items between us.
>
> (Interview, 27 June 2022)

The strategy of sourcing goods through collective arrangements (around which much of street trade is structured) was mentioned by other respondents. Berhanu, who had arrived in Addis Ababa at the age of 13, described making the shift from selling second-hand clothes (back in 2018) to selling a handful of male undergarments with a friend in 2022:

> The prices increased suddenly and then the supply was cut. But that's life. Everything is expensive now so instead we buy things like this. It costs less and we have to increase the price a bit to make it worthwhile, so it is not much to rejoice about but better than nothing… Depending on how the prices change and what is available, we buy our stock as a group.
>
> (Interview, 4 July 2022)

For young male migrants, working with friends or peers formed the foundation of their livelihood strategies and represented a stepping stone for progressing in the street trade. By contrast, for migrant women, working with others followed a similar logic but yielded divergent relational and economic outcomes. Although most of the young women interviewed had previously been selling perishables (including potatoes, onions, limes, and roasted corn) as part of neighbourhood-based street vendor groups, interviews conducted in 2022 found that circumstances had forced many to resort to begging

as their primary income-generating activity. This was the case for Mimi, a young mother aged 17 in 2018, who vocalised her discontent with the expectations placed on her in recent years, despite being dependent on those very same relationships in times of need

> In the past it was different because those of us who are young would do what was beyond our capacity to care for others, for the children and mothers and fathers here. But it is too much now. Since I am begging I can barely take care of my children, why should I care for people I don't know?… I wish I could just care for my children. But… I cannot object because when my child is sick or when I need something, I am happy I am not alone.
>
> (Interview, 7 June 2022)

The contradictions described by Mimi resonate with literature on gender and social capital, wherein reciprocity can actually depreciate women's assets in exchange for support and acceptance (Curran et al., 2005; Woolcock and Narayan, 2006; Bawa, 2016; Solano and Rooks, 2018). While these findings suggest that collective organisation in informal spaces is vital for facilitating access to other resources (Mpanje et al., 2018), they also point to the collective as a site where extractive social norms are reproduced, raising questions about the relationality of young migrants' livelihood strategies and their gendered outcomes.

Resistance in future imaginaries

With studies on the exclusion of youth from citizenship emphasising the importance of identity formation and belonging, particularly for those from low-income backgrounds (Gibbs et al., 2010; Swartz et al., 2012), findings presented here point to ways in which aspirations constructed through gendered experiences of informality form part of identity formation and citizenship, claimed in spaces of exclusion where collective and individual agency intersect in the pursuit of similar dreams.

Shaped by their subjective experiences of urban life and informed by the livelihood trajectories that rural migrant youth have observed in their social networks, respondents described their hopes for the future in the 2022 interviews. These imaginaries echoed the responses young people gave in 2018, when asked if they were considering remaining in the city or returning to their rural homes. While all rejected the possibility of returning home, in 2022 as in 2018, some claimed the city as their long-term place of residence, while others wanted to move elsewhere. For Alemayehu, aged 17 when interviewed in 2018, and who was still working as a shoe-shiner four years on, his future aspirations were located in the city

> Right now, my plan is to save some money and extend this work I am doing by buying some more supplies and a new kit. That way I can build myself up and move onto other work when the time is right… We all know those who came here before us and made it, so we know it is possible… I believe my future is here, in the city.
>
> (Interview, 21 June 2022)

This was also the case for Eremias; the 20-year-old street hawker introduced earlier for whom settling in Addis Ababa permanently was the end-goal, with his mind set on being a construction worker

> Times are tough… But there is no discouraging me from what I can achieve in the future here [in Addis Ababa]. My plan is to become a business man in construction. From what I have seen and heard, that is where real money is made. Once I get a job at a site, I will work myself up from there.
>
> (Interview, 27 June 2022)

Among the migrant women interviewed, future imaginaries reflected the constraints they had experienced in Addis Ababa and what they saw as their limited prospects for improvement. For most, future-making revolved around plans to extend their migratory trajectories outside Ethiopia – a strategy they had seen other rural migrants use, as well as other women in their neighbourhoods and communities. Meron, a 21-year-old mother who was street vending in 2018 but resorted to begging by 2022, described leaving Ethiopia as the only way to improve her family's life:

> For me, the end of this suffering will come when I am able to leave this country. I don't think it is easier for us in the Middle East because we know this from the girls who returned [from doing domestic work there], but at least there is work there. I tell you, to leave would be the answer to my prayers.
>
> (Interview, 4 July 2022)

For women like Meron, hopes of migrating abroad, specifically to the Gulf States, had intensified due to the compounding pressures of parenthood, rising costs of food and rent, and the expectation to send remittances to family back home. For Alem, aged 15 years in 2018 and selling perishables in the street trade, hopes of leaving the country were also shaped by the long-term prospects of returning to school upon her return to Ethiopia:

> Everything is worse now, there is no denying that, and your plans change based on what you see and learn. When I arrived here I wanted to finish my education, but now I just want to make money and leave. I will get

> back to my studies once I am in a better situation, when I return from abroad. Then I will finish my classes and I will go to university… That is what I want in my future. To leave and to come back.
>
> (Interview, 16 June 2022)

These imaginaries, which differed by gender, mirrored how the social and economic spaces occupied by migrant young women and men in Addis Ababa constrained their capacity to thrive based on the gendered opportunities available to them. As the aspirations of young people in the Global South reflect the collective construction of future imaginaries through shared identities, norms, and lived experiences of place (Huijsmans et al., 2021), this social embeddedness echoes Appadurai's (2004) notion of aspirations as derivations of a particular social and economic context shaped by structural constraints that define the 'capacity to aspire' within which marginalised citizens define their desired futures.

Within these spaces of exclusion, young people's identities and lived experiences intersect to conceive shared perceptions of futures and possibilities. The practice of 'street citizenship' as an alternative for young people who are otherwise unable 'to access the state apparatus of citizenship as a consequence of their age and marginalisation' (van Blerk et al., 2020: 331) thus becomes a practice of future-making that redefines the city – as a place of transformation, for migrant men, and a place of transit, for migrant women. This act of aspiring, as a collective and individual strategy, can therefore be understood as a form of resistance against the structural constraints that define the opportunities available to migrant youth in the city.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has explored the gendered dimensions of young people's livelihood strategies. The findings of qualitative research illustrate how rural migrant youth claim, shape and embody citizenship in the informal social and economic practices that define their lives in the city. These strategies highlight how young people exercise agency in the face of structural exclusion without access to formal citizenship, and how citizenship is defined at the level of the neighbourhood, collective work group and the street in gendered ways.

Diversifying income-generating strategies through collective working practices was central to the street-based nature of young migrants' everyday lives; as such, they produced an informal, alternative 'street citizenship' through their everyday social and economic practices. Nevertheless, it was also within these informal spaces that gendered norms disenfranchised migrant women by preventing them from investing in their own lives, instead

prioritising their role in supporting or caring for others. This reflects how gendered experiences of informality and an 'alternative' citizenship can be a 'double-edged sword' of emancipation for some, but disenfranchisement for others, in a social context characterised by deeply rooted gender inequality.

Whereas young migrant males' future-making practices were embedded in the stories and experiences of their peers, who had shown what can be achieved in the city through hard work, patience, and perseverance, for young migrant women in the capital, their imagined futures tended to involve migration abroad, largely due to the limited options open to them for improving their lives in Addis Ababa. The ways in which migrants' aspirations as products of a particular type of exclusion relate to citizenship resonate with Kabeer's emphasis on placing 'agency at the heart of contestations around citizenship' in order to understand the intricacies of 'contestations over who is included as a citizen and on what terms' (2020: 4).

The practice of street citizenship as lived experience of informality and marginalisation thus becomes a place where young people adjust their agency in light of the uncertainty they face every day in the city, the resources they draw on to improve their circumstances, and the viability of plans to transform their lives within the social and economic geographies they operate in within the city.

These findings underpin the notion of an alternative 'street citizenship' (van Blerk et al., 2020) as a subjective component of young people's identity that is produced and reproduced through the layered nature of migrants' gendered livelihood strategies. Through the everyday practices that structure and prescribe their ability to live in the city, young women and men navigate their informality and precarity through resistance, acknowledging the absences of alternatives. These findings also underline the importance of critical engagement with citizenship as a nuanced, gendered concept. Finally, the findings highlight the need to critically examine how the agency of young people in the Global South is framed in policy discourses (Ansell, 2016), in order to generate more targeted and meaningful outcomes.

NOTE

1 The data presented here forms part of a larger study sample, comprising interviews and focus group discussions with 30 young people, conducted as part of a PhD funded by the University of Gothenburg, and a postdoctoral research project funded by the University of Manchester.

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