

Trapped bodies, moving minds: Uncertainty and migration among marginalised urban youth in Ethiopia

Vicky Johnson¹  | Melese Getu² | Milki Getachew³ | Amid Ahmed⁴ | Andy West⁵

¹Centre for Remote and Sustainable Communities, University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness, UK

²College of Social Sciences, School of Social Work, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

³Anthropology Department, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK

⁴Department of Sociology, Debre Markos University, Debre Marqos, Ethiopia

⁵University of Brighton, Brighton, UK

Correspondence

Vicky Johnson, Centre for Remote and Sustainable Communities, University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness College, Inverness, Highland IV2 5NA, UK.
Email: vicky.johnson.ic@uhi.ac.uk

Funding information

ESRC-DIFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research, Grant/Award Number: ES/N014391/1 and ES/N014391/2

Abstract

This paper from YOUR World Research highlights and explores the role of positive uncertainty in lives, strategies and transitions towards adulthood of marginalised children and youth in two urban locations in Ethiopia. Young men and women embraced notions of positive uncertainty, making journeys to street situations and internationally in search of more hopeful futures. While youth navigate uncertainty positively in the short term, the research suggests this is temporal and their agency relational and embedded. They seek support from peers but still want to belong and be accepted by their families and communities.

KEYWORDS

international childhoods, labour, migration, uncertainty, youth

INTRODUCTION

This paper from YOUR World Research highlights and explores the role of positive uncertainty in the lives, strategies and transitions towards adulthood of marginalised children and youth in two urban

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2021 The Authors. *Children & Society* published by National Children's Bureau and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

locations in Ethiopia. It looks at their family and economic circumstances and the significance of family and peer relationships in their choice of strategies, particularly migration to work in the urban informal sector and internationally. It explores how older children and youth are choosing positive uncertainty over what are seen as otherwise negative certainties of poverty and hopelessness.

Youth Uncertainty Rights (YOUR) World Research was a large-scale qualitative study conducted in fragile and conflict-affected urban and rural areas of Ethiopia and Nepal 2016–2019 with older children and young people aged 15–24 years (following the UN definition of youth). Working with the most-marginalised youth across eight purposively selected sites, this research sought to contribute knowledge about youth understandings of uncertainty, violence, poverty and rights in post-conflict and fragile environments.

The research was informed by Bauman's theories of community and insecurity (2001) and of wasted lives positioning some people as outcasts in society (2004). These theories were useful to research teams in not assuming uncertainty is always as negative for youth as it may be for adults. The methodology encouraged youth to describe feelings in the face of uncertainty and processes of marginalisation in different domains of their lives including transitions to adulthood, places, relationships and feelings about themselves and their futures. Researchers, prompted by Bauman's theories, were curious to examine whether youth necessarily thought of uncertainties associated with migration as negative or fearful and whether they felt discarded or accepted as young migrants in destination communities. Also analysed was the extent and temporality of youth breaking social bonds and ties with families and communities in search of freedom from traditional expectations to find new futures. Bauman's ideas of liquid modernity (2007) fitted with the rapidly changing political contexts of the research. Change of government in Ethiopia during the course of the research and increasingly fragile environments due to drought and landlessness in the rural sites set the scene for the ways in which youth engaged with their futures in a surprisingly positive and creative way and chose to migrate.

Mobility is a defining feature of young people's lives across Ethiopia: some migrating to find new ways to support their families and some to escape early marriage and abuse. Young people on the move can be portrayed as vulnerable victims or threats to government. This research instead follows studies in the global south that frame young migrants as active agents in constructing and reconstructing their lives, families and communities (Boyden, 2013; Boyden & Howard, 2013; Huijsmans, 2010; White et al., 2011). This research contributes youth perspectives on how young people are active in shaping their futures, negotiating intergenerational relationships and navigating various alternatives including internal and international migration. It explores motivations of the most marginal and their experiences of migration. This research on positive uncertainty illuminates the precarious situations in rural areas that drive young people to migrate and the impact it has on family and peer relationships. It contests normative descriptions of appropriate childhoods and youth being spatially fixed in the natal family setting. Despite migration temporality disrupting social ties with family and community, young migrants hope to support their family, attain better social status and re-establish relationships on their return. In addition, family and peers have been described as supporting youth in migration decisions and processes.

The research found that migration decisions emerged from youth experiencing and foreseeing a certainty of poverty through landlessness, unemployment or precarious labour in the informal sector, and they therefore embraced uncertainties of internal and international migration as positive, also offering potential for socio-economic status and success in supporting families (see also Atnafu et al., 2014; Boyden & Howard, 2013). In this 'positive uncertainty,' youth make use of peer support and challenges to traditional community bonds even while eventually seeking local acceptance and status. While their bodies may feel trapped by economic circumstance, their minds move creatively to find solutions. Though young migrants may be assumed to be 'trafficked' or allured by economic

opportunities in urban settings, the experiences of young people in urban setting of Addis Ketema and Woreta do not reflect such horrific stories. Against often negative global discourses of ever-increasing youth migrants, marginalised youth in this research depict migration as a source of hope and positive uncertainty and compare this with their certainties of poverty and hopelessness. This reflects other studies conducted in Ethiopia by Ayalew (2017), Atnafu et al., (2014) and Schewel (2018). For marginalised youth in urban settings of Addis Ketema and Woreta, 'staying was riskier than migrating.'

After providing background to the Ethiopian context of migration and marginalisation, this paper outlines the research and methodology. It goes on to present changes in transitions to adulthood, issues of unemployment and education, as background to internal migration and work in the informal economy, sometimes with consequences of a street-connected life. Concluding sections look at how peer influence and young people wanting to support their families lead to international migration with positive uncertainty.

ETHIOPIA CONTEXT: MIGRATION AND MARGINALISATION

Ethiopia remains one of the poorest and most populated countries in Africa. Historical mobility within rural communities, combined with population pressures on increasingly fragmented and environmentally fragile land, has brought uncertainty to agrarian communities about how to sustain livelihoods (Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009; Grabska et al., 2019; Kuschminder & Siegel, 2014). After the government changed in 2018, the Ethiopian government sought to improve accessibility of formal education for school-age children, redeveloping national youth policy to include the most-marginalised (Johnson et al., 2019). Poor households in rural areas struggle to send children to school, and the most-marginalised youth often have to drop out and work. This pressure to combine work and schooling intensifies as children grow up (Boyden et al., 2019).

Staying in their place of origin has become precarious for young people due to lack of employment and led to increased migration in search of work (Ayalew, 2017). Research highlights an unprecedented surge in young people wanting to migrate internationally to find work (for example, Asnake & Zerihun, 2015; Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009). Ethiopian government efforts to curb mass emigration of labour to Middle-East countries have led to young people taking illegal, risky and dangerous migration routes in desperation to provide for their families. Youth access to social media combined with peer and family relationships with current and former migrants has served to inspire migration processes (Addis, 2014; Ayalew, 2017). The majority of international migrants from Ethiopia are young, female and seek employment in Middle-East countries (Kuschminder & Siegel, 2014). But this study shows how marginalised young men are also migrating and taking increasingly risky decisions and routes.

In Ethiopia, marginalisation conventionally takes into account socio-economic conditions, ethnicity and location, specifying country peripheries and including pastoralists. According to Pankhurst (2001), those excluded from mainstream society include smiths, craft workers, hunters, weavers, hide-workers, artisans and tanner-potters, grave-diggers, while recognising not everyone in these groups is marginalised. They suggest marginalisation can be analysed considering interrelated dimensions: spatial, economic, political, social and cultural. These conceptualisations were considered throughout and utilised in initiating this study, but in keeping with participation processes, youth perspectives on marginalisation were seen as primary in analysing complexities of their lives and responses to uncertainty. In addition to location, ethnicity and poverty, youth suggested other experiences are relevant to marginalisation including living with disability; abusive relationships in family and/or community;

involvement in exploitative labour; and particularly for young women, fear of social norms such as early marriage, and these points were considered in the study.

This paper presents youth everyday realities in two urban sites in Ethiopia, including changes in gendered transitions to adulthoods, journeys to the street and whether they felt supported locally by peers, adults or services in places of origin and urban destinations. In the research, unexpected insights into how youth embrace and navigate uncertainty in their lives emerged from youth seeking their own futures and pathways out of poverty. These lay outside, and contested, traditional community expectations and social norms towards youth, encountered in their everyday lives in rural areas, in urban lives, and in street-connections. Enhancing youth opportunities in rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa requires understanding relationships of youth with broader society and the innovative role that young people can play in solutions (Sumberg et al., 2019). Narratives are presented to show how many young people still see their only hope lies in migration, and role models are often successful returnee migrants.

RESEARCH SITES

This paper focuses on two urban research sites, Addis Ketema (in Addis Ababa) and Woreta (in Amhara regional state). The population of Addis Ababa (1994 census) was 2.3 million, currently estimated at 3.238 million. The rapid natural population growth rate, coupled with high rural–urban migration (annual growth rate 3.8%, accounts for 40% of growth (CSA, 2010)), has pressured services (housing, transportation, water supply, solid waste disposal, etc.) and the physical environment (UN-Habitat, 2008, 2017). Addis Ketema-district 09 had an estimated population of 271,664 in 2011 (CSA, 2011). It has the largest bus station in Ethiopia and largest open market in Africa. It is an old quarter of the city where poverty is widespread (Endalkachew, 2008).

Woreta is located in northern Ethiopia, South Gondar Zone of Amhara Region. Woreta Town is the administrative centre of Fogera district, which has 28 rural and five urban kebeles (the smallest administrative units in Ethiopia). Woreta has an estimated population of 26,317 (13,044 male and 13,273 female) (CSA, 2008). Woreta is a transit place for thousands of youth moving to big cities like Gondar and Bahir Dar (CHADET, 2005).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND, YOUTH-CENTRED METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on engagement over 3 years with 100 urban youth, 80 of whom participated in detailed interviews. Creative qualitative methods (Johnson et al., 2016) were complemented by anthropological approaches (Getu et al., 2018; Katz, 2014). The project's partnership approach facilitated dissemination of evidence from marginalised youth into academic discourse, local and national policy and practice, informing non-governmental partners and government departments and services (Johnson et al., 2019).

The methodology was designed to put youth at the centre, regarded as active participants, and starting from their perspectives within rapidly changing institutional, environmental and political contexts (Johnson, 2017). An ethical framework included team and participant safety, informed consent, child protection and respect for all participants.¹ Local services and support structures were mapped for referral if necessary. Child and youth profiles, interview data and creative visuals were coded and anonymised. All youth names used here are pseudonyms; research sites, having large populations, are identified as critical to analysis.

Children and youth regarded as marginalised and/or vulnerable in their communities by peers and local organisations were initially selected with the help of local partner CHADET. Many case-study participants subsequently identified through a snowballing approach were unemployed youth who had dropped out of school. A participatory research phase using creative including visual methods helped elicit local youth understandings of marginalisation, insecurity and uncertainty. Principles of participatory research methods help challenge power dynamics between researcher and study participants (Johnson & West et al., 2021).

The detailed case-study phase involved interviewing 40 marginalised youth in each site (around half male, half female), over 16 months (2017–2018). In-depth interviews plumbed different domains of uncertainty in youth everyday lives: youth transitions growing up; places and spaces youth inhabit and interact in; mobility and migration; feelings about self, others and relationships; and responses to personal and crisis in broader socio-political and environmental contexts (Johnson & West, 2021). Youth evidence was analysed, building on Braun and Clarke's (2006) themed analysis, modified with the full team, and cross-checking with NVivo software for qualitative analysis. Through this analytic approach, themes emerged and were refined, and key cases related to particular issues. Subsequent individual/group interviews in a final phase checked main findings, enabling confirmation of themes and drawing out issues for policy and practice. These were disseminated and further validated through local and national workshops involving young people, academic and organisation personnel and senior government officers and members.

CHANGING TRANSITIONS GROWING UP—FINDINGS

Changes in circumstances experienced by young people compared with previous generations derive from landlessness, consequent economic problems reducing their independence, status and autonomy within conventional structures and their rejection of social norms such as earlier marriage. Shortage of agricultural land is perceived as a cause of migration and results in a growing number of rural youth becoming landless, so traditional transitions to adulthood are no longer possible, and other work must be found.

I have four siblings. My father was a farmer and we used to have enough land to support the family. However, following the death of my father our living situation deteriorated. His brothers claimed half our land. We were left with the other half which wasn't enough to feed six family members. My mother started working as a domestic worker for people in our neighbourhoods. My siblings also became domestic worker as we have a very small plot of land (Kaleb, male, age 15, Woreta).

Problems of local un- and underemployment have consequences for the family relationships. Youth and personal decision-making status influenced interviewed young people's attempts to achieve economic independence. If a young person is economically dependent on parents, then s/he will be deprived of decision-making autonomy. Under these circumstances, dictated by traditional norms, almost all decisions affecting young lives are decided by parents. Study participants maintained they are expected to abide by decisions of their parents while they live with them. Thus, living with family can remove agency to make decisions in their own lives.

Early marriage, a conventional social norm, was seen as a threat to youth futures and not accepted by many young women interviewed who had moved from rural to urban settings. In Woreta, youth from neighbouring rural areas in Fogera District said parental pressure to marry young changed their

lives and made them want to escape more traditional expectations and transitions to adulthood. Only some youth in the research felt they could withstand and refuse parental pressure; most either accepted the proposal of marriage or ran away from home.

I attended school up to grade 3. One day my cousin was approached by somebody with a marriage proposal. My cousin accepted the proposal and wanted to give me in marriage at the age of 12. I refused to accept the marriage. I went back to my parents who supported me to go to school at Woreta for a year. Then my parents also tried to marry me off. I rejected the idea and migrated to Bahir Dar (Bertukan, female, age 26, Woreta).

There are examples of young women interviewed who married early, who then divorced due to, abuse from older husbands and lack of interaction with people their age. Some described facing economic problems and living as single parents. Among young women in Woreta, many had dropped out of school, migrated to escape early marriage and then engaged in informal income-generating activities. Their explanation was the expectation placed on them by parents to marry young.

Access to technology enabled young people to develop styles of costume different to social conventions in their community:

The youth don't seem to follow the social norms of their own culture and community. As a result of frequent use and attachment with the Mass- and Social-Media people learn about Western social norms including dressing styles. The dressing styles of today are somehow different from those of the time of our parents. And I consider what we do as an act of opposing to our own norms and culture (Lidet, female, age 18, Woreta).

Such changes appear to be also associated with a perceived shift in values:

Young people are following their own new norms and culture in contrast to the traditional ones. These changes in the traditional norms made young people in the community to be self-centred unlike the old generation who believes in mutual support, care and respect (Lemlem, female, age 20, Woreta).

Marginalised young people in particular are faced with complicated and changed situations compared with those their parents experienced. Conventional mechanisms of gaining autonomy within the family have been diminished or eradicated, yet youth still need to find an income for themselves and because they generally adhere to norms of providing family support, often despite poverty. They need to develop their own strategies within the changing social framework.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES: UNEMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

While the recent financial and economic crisis led to soaring global youth unemployment, in Ethiopia, this was further pressured because the proportion of young people in the overall population increased over the last two decades. Significant national progress in terms of economic growth and educational attainment has not impacted youth employment (Berhanu et al., 2005). Numbers of young people joining the labour force are rising alongside lack of expansion of the labour market, so demands of

young job seekers cannot be accommodated (Grabska et al., 2019), and attempts to provide more employment opportunities are currently inadequate to address the scale of the problem.

High youth unemployment across Ethiopia includes these urban research sites, and the problem was summarised by young men in Woreta such as Ayalew (aged 19) who said that life without work is meaningless and Zeleke:

I think unemployment is the core problem for the youth. How can you decide about yourself when you are dependent on others for food? Youth can decide on issues that affect them when they are economically self-reliant (Zeleke, male, 19 years, Woreta).

Many young study participants experienced high unemployment or underemployment and discussed how they found it challenging to start their lives independently and attain what was expected of them in communities in making transitions to adulthood. Whether youth feel successful in transitions is influenced and shaped by intersecting and multiple socio-economic problems such as unemployment, experiences of early marriage, parental death/divorce, poverty, drought, school dropout and national exam failures. Youth described pressures they felt to provide for their families and to gain respect and recognition from within families and communities. This aligns with other research suggesting youth may be seen as a group in-between dependent childhood and independent adulthood and how the notion of adulthood is recursively mentioned as a destination of successful transition (Perovic, 2016). Focusing on African countries, Honwana suggests that youth are no longer children in need of care but are not yet adults. They therefore experience a state of 'waithood' which is not in any way a failure of youth themselves (2014, pp. 19–20). Rather this is caused by structural problems and policies enabling a high rate of unemployment in Africa, so youth often face challenges in finding a house to buy or rent, support relatives, establish families and gain recognition as adults. She discusses that in this state of 'waithood,' there is a suspension between childhood and adulthood where young people may seek freedom from fear and such expectations.

The most-marginal and vulnerable youth described how this high rate of unemployment affects their choices. They suggested that even those educated to university level struggle to find work.

Bekele explained how unemployment among graduates has become a source of frustration for children in school.

There are many unemployed youths in our area graduated from universities, while my friends who dropped-out of high school already have secured jobs and earn income. This by itself pushes me to stop learning and search for some other life paths (Bekele, male, age 19, Woreta).

Many young people regarded as marginalised or vulnerable by other youth in this research had dropped out of schooling could not find formal employment and were engaged in the informal economy. Their support or lack of support in the informal economy was affected by intersecting inequalities including gender, disability and ethnicity and by family dynamics particularly in situations where youth had suffered abuse and had to leave family homes.

Youth spoke about the difficulty in finding good role models in their communities who succeeded in education and then transitioned into successful careers. This situation created for them a lack of hope and a feeling that there is certainty of failure from formal schooling. Young men and women across all research sites felt there was little chance of formal education leading to employment, especially for the most marginal in society. Many youth interviewed had essentially lost confidence in formal education providing any solution for a positive future. Many, as soon as they felt able, had already found or were

seeking ways to enter the informal sector to try to make a living and provide for their families. This takes determination:

In our locality it's easy to lose your confidence as everything you experience is frustrating. You can easily lose confidence in learning when you see many unemployed graduates in the community. The basic thing is not learning, but having the mentality of working and changing your life (Metasebia, female, age 19, Addis Ketema).

Unemployment and lack of faith in formal schooling, alongside youth escaping abuse in families and/or social norms such as early marriage, led young people to seek new futures in the informal economy through migration to urban centres and internationally. Decisions were influenced by desires to find ways to support their families and by peer relationships.

PEERS, THE INFORMAL SECTOR AND BEING STREET-CONNECTED

The increase in population, growing youth landlessness and insignificant rural job creation contributed to the potential youth migration to urban areas (Guarcello & Rosati, 2007). Landlessness exacerbates poverty for youth and their families, while out-migration and family feuds were also found to be common in communities. These were some of the reasons for leaving their communities given by youth interviewed.

Unemployment and underemployment led to many youth being economically dependent on others, including seeking assistance from family and peers. Many youth interviewed felt they were losing their agency as time went on because their strategies for survival were not being supported, even when they found creative work in the informal sector. Reliance on peers was found particularly among young men who had migrated to towns and cities seeking work in the informal sector and who became 'street-connected,' living and working on the streets.

Harsh living and working conditions were depicted by street-connected marginalised young people in the study.

I live on the street with other youths of my age. We use the space under the train bridge to sleep as we don't have other places. People in the surrounding don't care about our health and everybody comes and urinates in our place. We prepared plastic bottles as a means of temporary urine storage [as temporary toilet] to protect our living area and collect some money from users (Abdi, male, age 19, Addis Ketema).

It is not only Abdi, but many other street-connected children and youth in his area earn income by this sort of work. During a youth-led walk, Abdi and friends talked about how they left family homes to come to the city and were living on the streets. They got involved in the informal sector, competing and striving for survival: a must, rather than a choice. They described working conditions, especially in the informal sector, as not easy, especially for females, because of abuse and often stealing. The extent of gendered violence on the streets was explored (following on Heinonen, 2011). Young men discussed violence from authorities when living on the streets. Many young women interviewed felt fearful and discussed gendered violence largely from employers, authorities and community members rather than from other youth, although young women try to stay with female peer groups where possible. Taitu described violence experienced in domestic work:

I was hired as a domestic worker by a man who was residing alone. Although he was an old man, he wanted to get married to me. I didn't accept the marriage proposal. However, as I was residing at his housing unit alone, one day I was raped by this man. I wanted to get paid and quit my job. However, the man refused to pay me my salary. In fact, he accused me of stealing his property and reported the case to the police. I stayed at the police station for a few days and released with the help of my parents (Taitu, female, age 26 years, Woreta).

From a psychological view, persistent youth unemployment can become entrenched and lead to recurrent depression, violence, low self-esteem and poor social adaptation (Kabaklarli et al., 2011). In Woreta, youth underscored psychological problems they face as a result of unemployment, for example frustration:

I have been looking for a job since last year. I am also a member of a group, organised for the purpose of establishing a small business enterprise... However, our business enterprise has not started operation, consequently we are not working. I am not sure what is going to happen, if I couldn't find a job soon (Selam, female, age 20, Woreta).

Living in a community with peer groups that have high substance use can make young people more vulnerable (Birhanu et al., 2014). In some areas, it is a social norm to chew *chat*, so peer groups follow this practice alongside adults. While some youth go along with it, others want to reduce their substance use but want support to do so. Habtamu, a 19-year-old unemployed youth from Woreta, studied up to grade four but dropped out of school when he lost motivation to learn. He then worked as a daily labourer. He explained how peer pressure led many to drop out from school and become addicted to *chat*. Habtamu's life story is shared by many others who feel their lives are going nowhere, and their poverty is persistent.

My friends spend most of their time watching movies at newly opened movie houses in the neighbourhood. Chewing chat and smoking cigarettes are common practices in the small movie houses. I wish I could go and watch movies, but I fear that I will be exposed to addiction (Habtamu, male, age 19, Woreta).

In Woreta and Addis Ketema, youth visit small video houses where they smoke, chew *chat* and watch movies, sometimes harmless, sometimes with explicit violence and sexual content that children also watch. Many youth felt they need places to connect together, but some blamed these places for negative peer influences. Mesfin aged 29 from Addis Ketema felt that there was a strong influence from peers and media to engage in self-destructive activities such as addictive drug use.

Jobs in the informal sector are rife with insecurity for youth, who earn incomes barely adequate to support everyday survival but often see this as their only way out of poverty. Young people interviewed found it hard to live independently. Some continued to get support from extended families but found it hard to establish their own families, meet adult expectations or achieve any status within their communities. They often took the decision to migrate and embrace further uncertainty in the hope of a better future and to gain respect elsewhere.

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AS POSITIVE UNCERTAINTY

In circumstances of poverty, unemployment/underemployment, environmental fragility, early marriage, household responsibility, abuse, school dropout and exam failure, many children and youth

work in informal income generating activities from an early age. But rather than passively waiting for circumstances to change, they are generally trying to renegotiate livelihoods through different strategies including migration. Internal migration, particularly for work, has been common practice in Ethiopia since the late 19th century. What has changed over decades is the pattern of rural–rural, rural–urban and urban–urban migration, the extent and profile of migrants, the drivers of internal migration and migrants' motives. For example, the last decade saw significant increase in rural–urban migration and decline in rural–rural migration (Pankhurst & Dom, 2019).

Many young participants moved away from home to escape drought, limited job and educational opportunities, academic failure, household chores and parental pressure to marry young. Many marginalised youth interviewed wanted to migrate internationally as a way of escaping poverty and insecurity, and their role models were returnee migrants who had succeeded in making a better life for themselves and their families. Migration studies in the global South indicate that young people migrate for varied reasons including a need for better living conditions, job opportunities, protection, and social position (Ayalew, 2017; Grabska et al., 2019; Thorsen, 2006).

In this study, young migrants concur they were certain about the situation in their place of origin before deciding to migrate: certain of persistent, unchanging prevailing poverty, un/underemployment, early marriage, illiteracy, tension with government and environmental fragility. For them, migration offers *positive uncertainty*, a feeling of excitement and hope they aspire to experience. Young returned migrants clearly associated their migration experiences and/or intention to re-migrate with positive feelings in the face of uncertainty. They knew what would happen if they stayed: they would remain in poverty. If they migrated, they didn't know what would happen, but they would have hope.

Young returnees who had migrated using both legal and illegal routes said their move was full of uncertainties: they didn't know what would happen on the journey, in transit or destination countries. They were uncertain whether migration would result in negative or positive outcomes. Becoming a migrant for most youth interviewed who had previous experience of migration in the family, whether positive or negative, created feelings of hope for a different future to their persistent poverty and marginalisation. Even those with previous negative migration experiences were willing to embrace uncertainty and felt more positive about futures elsewhere. For example, Abdi from Addis Ketema, who scrapes a living through setting up temporary toilets, had migrated before. He was willing to face risky journeys and hardships he knows accompany migration in order to avoid his life in the informal settlement under the railway bridge. He kept his passport in his pocket ready to take the chance. Research participants wanted support setting up businesses and living connected to the street; otherwise, they saw no option but to migrate.

Peer pressure was found important in relation to youth migration. Peer influence combined with personal quests for better futures was discussed as influencing youth migration decisions. Potential migrants benefit from the experience of peers who provide relevant information and help plan routes and destinations.

PEER SUPPORT, DECISION-MAKING AND BREAKING COMMUNITY BONDS

Community bonds were discussed by youth as being helpful in paving pathways out of poverty and supporting mechanisms for vulnerable youth to find employment in the informal economy or in finding safer routes or situations when they reach destinations. However, many young people suggested the influence of families was being replaced by youth taking responsibility for their futures supported by peers.

As children reach adolescence, the impact of peers in their life grows (Miller et al., 1974). Analysis of youth perspectives in Woreta and Addis Ketema confirmed youth look to peer groups for support and advice about education, employment and migration. This, in turn, had impact on their feelings about autonomy and breaking from family expectations, traditional transitions and social bonds in their communities. This fits with Bauman's (2001) theories about young people rejecting traditional bonds in families and communities and seeking new social bonds. Peer groups provided positive support mechanisms. Peer influence was found to be especially important among young men, compared with young women interviewed who mostly attach themselves to their family where possible. Young women are expected to be submissive and obedient within the family and described how they found it harder to break away even when they wanted to. But young men also reported parental pressures, for example, a migrant to Woreta:

I was new to the place and many young men from my village supported me. Especially those friends who moved to Woreta earlier helped me a lot. Actually I didn't have the courage to decide on my move to Woreta if my friends were not in the town. Adapting to the city life was not difficult. As there were many people who come from my natal rural village I have to hide to sustain the dignity of my parents in the rural area. My parents also gave me a hard time – they oppose my effort to settle down and live here (Yafet, male, aged 23 Woreta).

Youth in the urban sites felt they lived simultaneously in two cultures, one dominated by values of parents, the other, perhaps in opposition, dictated by peers. Even though their peer cultures did not completely replace values they had grown up with or their parent–youth relationships, youth suggested that peer values replaced specific elements of parents' value systems. This fits with the idea that youth become physically more self-reliant and autonomous from parents, with more reliance on, advice from and shared experiences with peers (Kimmel et al., 1995 cited in Mulumebet, 2006). In this study, peer support was often seen as positive, providing youth with important social bonds and support in hard lives connected to the street. Sometimes youth stories showed peer influence could also result in self-destructive activities associated with substance use or criminal activity.

Youth participants in Woreta suggested young people are not only breaking social bonds in communities, but they also see more individualistic behaviour in their communities generally. This supports Bauman's views of weaker notions of community in uncertain and insecure times of 'liquid modernity':

The community bond is getting weak. People become very selfish and individualistic. Selfishness is becoming intense in the community (Zewditu, female, age 18, Woreta).

Everybody is stressed. When an outsider comes and asks about it, everybody acts as if there is cooperation in our community. The truth is that no one helps anybody else as everybody is struggling with his/her own problem (Belay, male, age 18, Woreta).

The lives of youth at any particular period present a range of educational, family, employment and health experiences that depart from previous experiences of youth transitions over generations. Contemporary changed experiences can partly be attributed to living in an interconnected world, including effects of globalisation, technological advances and widespread economic development (Elizabeth, 2001). Media especially influences youth in modern society (Nugent, 2005). In this study, youth talked about how they witnessed and experienced media, including influence over peer groups, in turn, leading to changing

norms, values and culture. Both young and older people raised media and social media as contributing to changing cultural norms and role models.

There are parts of the traditional norms that youth change. Most of the youth don't use the indigenous typical slang and Amharic language that our parents use. There is also a problem of not having role model from the local area and most youth prefer following those celebrities and football stars in the Western world (Bekele, male, age 19, Woreta).

I observe that there are many festivities and celebrations which are not derived from our culture. Now the youth part of the society focus on imitating the Western culture rather than developing our own. But I don't mean that some of our cultural aspects are non-existent (Nebeyou, male, age 20, Woreta).

CONCLUSION

Interviews show disruptions to traditional transitions of youth from education to job market, gaining residential and financial independence and establishing families. Most young urban participants were unemployed/underemployed, lived on the street, with single parents or in reconstituted families, and/or had dropped out of school or failed national exams. Many had simply lost hope in formal education due to high rates of unemployment even among educated youth. As a result, youth participants felt they may never attain what was expected of them by adults, and this served as the starting point for many wanting to leave their communities and country. Some managed to do so and return, sometimes sent back as illegal migrants, although some who migrated internally or internationally found paid employment and were regarded as successful. They and other young people interviewed largely talked of migration as offering some hope for their futures. Many had successful migrants as role models.

A key finding from the perceptions, experiences and movements of marginalised youth is their strategies choosing positive uncertainty over what they see as otherwise negative certainties of poverty and hopelessness. This shifts on from Ayalew (2017) that uncertainty and hopelessness in their place of origin are prime reasons pushing many young people to migrate: this uncertainty concerns environment, landlessness, and is largely negative, provoking sense of hopelessness. In contrast, marginalised youth are taking up positive uncertainty, that is, the uncertainty of a chance of success, in their migration strategies.

The problem of child labour and early entry to the labour market was noted early in the 21st century: children working rather than attending school were seen as key problem in this country with the largest youth population in sub-Saharan Africa (Guarcello & Rosati, 2007). This paper shows, in rural and urban areas around Woreta and Addis Ketama, disillusion with education when there are no jobs. The lack of job creation and employment opportunities identified in 2012 (Broussard & Tekleselassie) is clearly still pertinent. It has been argued that a change in aspirations due to formal schooling and educational attainment has pushed international migration (Schewel & Fransen, 2018). This research shows how marginalised young people, dropped out of school, are also migrating. The influences of peers on marginalised young people's migration decisions, and their desire to support families and gain status, have also been a factor, along with perceptions of a positive uncertainty.

The findings also support indicative theorisation embedded in the methodology to challenge assumptions about what marginalised youth want and think about their everyday lives, relationships with their families and their futures. While young people surprised the research team with their creative

responses to uncertainty, in what we have now termed *Positive Uncertainty* (Johnson & West et al., 2021), this needs to be accompanied by other theories that assist and nuance understanding of youth strategies in the face of uncertainty. For example, there is often a temporality in their feelings as youth embrace uncertainty. Not in the sense of youth being in limbo, in a state of 'waithood' (Honwana, 2014), but in challenging adult expectations of their transitions to adulthood and being agents of change in determining alternative pathways out of poverty and in navigating uncertainty. But then, as time passes, and they return after migration or want to maintain contact with families from urban situations, they want acceptance by families and to feel a sense of belonging. They see their agency as embedded in families and relationships (as also found in Ethiopia by Abebe, 2013 and suggested in other global contexts by Oswell, 2013). In this study, while youth were creative in the face of uncertainty, their strategies relied on peers (especially for young men) and families (for both young men and women). Acceptance back into families, they suggested, was part of their desired futures, and where they had become involved in risky and sometimes illegal work, they tried to hide sources of income.

Research findings also suggest youth not only fit the frame of individual resilience but also strive to rework the system in terms of challenging expectations, while to some extent still working within social norms. In some circumstances, where they see traditional practices as harmful, they will refuse and resist, for example, in the case of early marriage. The framing and distinction between resilience, reworking and resistance is useful here (following Katz, 2004 in her ethnographic work with children growing up in a Sudanese village). Even where youth have escaped from abusive situations and hardships due to extreme poverty and marginalisation in communities, they navigate and negotiate social norms and embrace uncertainty creatively as they grow up in often rapidly changing institutional, political and environmental contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Professor Andrew Church and Dr Mark Erickson of the University of Brighton and Professors David Oswell and Mark Johnson of Goldsmiths, University of London, for their continued support. We are grateful to CHADET and ChildHope, our partners in Ethiopia, and Anannia Admassu, Director of CHADET and its staff. This research with the most-marginalised would not have been possible without them. We would like to thank the local facilitators from CHADET: in Addis Ketema, Ahmed Hassen; in Hetosa, Birukt Fikeru; and in Fogera and Woreta, Adem Desalegn and Aemero Tilahun. We are also very grateful to the Ethiopian National Reference Group for their advice during inception and analysis: Dr. Abebaw Minaye, Dr. Abeje Berhanu, Dr. Alula Pankhurst, Dr. Annabel Erulkar, Aynadis Yehuanes and Dr. Guday Emirie. Thank you to Matiyas Assefa Chefa, Director-General for Youth Participation in the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth (MOWCY) in Ethiopia, for help at transition times during the research and in impact activities. We deeply acknowledge the support of the ESRC/DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research (ES/NO14391/1 and ES/NO14391/2) that enabled the implementation of the research project. We would also like to thank Signe Gosmann for her organisation and coding. Last, but not least, we greatly thank all the young people across Ethiopia who participated in the research project.

ORCID

Vicky Johnson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2623-3377>

ENDNOTE

- ¹ Informed consent protocols were developed locally, following ethical requirements and clearance by the National Research Ethics Review Committee in Ethiopia and Universities of Brighton and Goldsmiths and University of London, and regularly revised during the research.

REFERENCES

- Abebe, T. (2013). Interdependent rights and agency: The role of children in collective livelihood strategies in rural Ethiopia. In K. Hanson, & O. Nieuwenhuys (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing children's rights in international development: Living rights, social justice and translations* (pp. 71-92). Cambridge University Press.
- Addis, E. (2014). International Migration in Ethiopia: Challenges and opportunities. In A. Bariagaber (Eds.), *International migration and development in Eastern and Southern Africa* (pp. 111-170). OSSREA.
- Asnake, K., & Zerihun, M. (2015). *Ethiopian labour migration to the Gulf and South Africa*. Forum for Social Studies, monograph 10.
- Atnafu, A., Oucho, L., & Zeitlyn, B. (2014). *Poverty, youth and rural-urban migration in Ethiopia* (Migrating Out of Poverty, Working Paper No. 17). University of Sussex.
- Ayalew, T. (2017). *Struggle for mobility: Risk, hope and community of Knowledge in Eritrean and Ethiopia migration pathways towards Sweden*. Academic dissertation for the degree of philosophy in social anthropology at Stockholm University.
- Bauman, Z. (2001). *Community; Seeking safety in an insecure world*. Polity.
- Bauman, Z. (2004). *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its outcasts*. Polity.
- Bauman, Z. (2007). *Liquid times: Living in an age of uncertainty*. Polity.
- Berhanu, D., Abraham, T., & Hannah, D. (2005). *Characteristics and determinants of youth unemployment, underemployment and inadequate employment in Ethiopia*. ILO.
- Birhanu, A. M., Bisetegn, T. A., & Woldeyohannes, S. M. (2014). High prevalence of substance use and associated factors among high school adolescents in Woreta Town, Northwest Ethiopia: multi-domain factor analysis. *BMC Public Health*, 14, 1186. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-14-1186>
- Boyden, J. (2013). 'We're not going to suffer like this in the mud': educational aspirations, social mobility and independent child migration among populations living in poverty. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 43(5), 580-600.
- Boyden, J., Dawes, A., Dornan, P., & Tredoux, C. (2019). *Tracing the consequences of poverty: Evidence from the Young Lives study in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam*. Bristol. Policy Press.
- Boyden, J., & Howard, N. (2013). Why does child trafficking policy need to be reformed? The moral economy of children's movement in Benin and Ethiopia. *Children's Geographies*, 11(3), 354-368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2013.817661>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Broussard, N. H., & Tekleselassie, T. G. (2012). *Youth unemployment: Ethiopia Country Study*: LSE.
- CHADET. (2005). *Migration patterns of children exposed to sexual exploitation*. Unpublished Research Report. CHADET.
- CSA. (2008). Summary and statistical report of the 2007 population and housing census, Addis Ababa.
- CSA. (2010). The 2007 population and housing census of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa.
- CSA. (2011). *Analytical report on the 2011 urban employment and unemployment survey*. Report.
- Elizabeth, P. (2001). *Media effects and society*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Endalkachew, M. (2008). *Underlining causes of micro and small business failures in Addis Ketema Sub-City* (Masters thesis). Addis Ababa University.
- Fransen, S., & Kuschminder, K. (2009). *Migration in Ethiopia: History, current trends and future prospects: Migration and Development Country Profiles series*. Graduate School of Governance.
- Getu, M., Guday, E., & Kassahun, H. (2018). *Prevalence, trends and drivers of early marriage in Alefa (Amhara), Diksis (Oromia), and Gorche (SNNP) Districts*, Draft Working Paper, person com Getu (2018).
- Grabska, K., de Regt, M., & Del Franco, N. (2019). *Adolescent girls' migration in the global South: Transitions into adulthood*. Palgrave.
- Guarcello, L., & Rosati, F. (2007). *Child labor and youth employment: Ethiopia Country Study*. World Bank.
- Heinonen, P. (2011). *Youth gangs and street children: Culture, nurture and masculinity in Ethiopia*. Berghahn.
- Howwana, A. (2014). 'Waitthood': Youth transitions and social change. In D. Foeken, T. Dietz, L. de Haan, & L. Johnson (Eds.), *Development and equity: An interdisciplinary explanation by ten scholars from Africa, Asia and Latin America* (pp. 28-40). Brill.

- Huijsmans, R. (2010). *Migrating children, households, and the post-socialist state: An ethnographic study of migration and non-migration by children and youth in an ethnic Lao village* (Thesis submitted for PhD degree). Department of Geography, Durham University.
- Johnson, V. (2017). Moving beyond voice in children and young people's participation. *Action Research, Special Issue: Development, Aid and Social Transformation*, 15(1), 104–124.
- Johnson, V., Admassu, A., Church, A., Healey, J., & Mathema, S. (2019). Layered and linking research partnerships: Learning from YOUR World Research in Ethiopia and Nepal. *IDS Bulletin*, 50(1), <https://doi.org/10.19088/1968-2019.107>
- Johnson, V., Johnson, L., Magati, B. O., & Walker, D. (2016). Breaking intergenerational transmissions of poverty: Perspectives of street-connected girls in Nairobi. In L. Murray & S. Robertson (Eds.), *Intergenerational Mobilities: Relationality, age and lifecourse*. Farnham.
- Johnson, V., & West, A. (2021). Youth perspectives on uncertainty in Addis Ababa and Kathmandu. In J. Horton, H. Pimlott-Wilson, & S. M. Hall (Eds.), *Growing up and getting by? Poverty, precarity and the changing nature of childhood and youth*. Bristol University Press, Policy Press.
- Johnson, V., West, A., with Church, A., Getu, M., Tuladhar, S., Getachew, M., Shrestha, S., Ahmed, A., Neupane, S. and Gossman, S. (forthcoming, 2021). *Youth and Positive Uncertainty: Negotiating life in post conflict and fragile environments*. Practical Action Publishing.
- Kabaklarli, E., Hazel, E. P., & Bulus, A. (2011). *Economic determinants of Turkish youth unemployment problem: Co integration analysis*. Presented at International Conference on Applied Economics, Dubai, 16–18 May.
- Katz, C. (2004). *Growing up global: Economic restructuring and children's everyday lives*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Katz, C. (2014). *Growing up Global: Economic reconstruction and children's everyday lives*. Minnesota University Press.
- Kuschminder, K., & Siegel, M. (2014). *Migration & development a world in Motion Ethiopia Country Report*. Maastricht University, IS Academy Migration and Development Study.
- Miller, A. (1974). The relationship between family interaction and sexual behavior in adolescence. University of Colorado. *Journal of community psychology*, 2, 285–288.
- Mulumebet, G. (2006). *A study on contributing factors to adolescents' reproductive behavior in slum areas of Addis Ababa: The case of Teklehaimanot area* (Unpublished master's thesis). Addis Ababa University.
- Nugent, R. (2005). *Youth in a global world*. Population Reference Bureau.
- Oswell, D. (2013). *Children's agency: From family to human rights*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pankhurst, A. (2001). Introduction: Dimensions and conceptions of marginalisation. In D. Freeman & A. Pankhurst (Eds.), *Living on the edge: Marginalised minorities of craft workers and hunters in Southern Ethiopia* (pp. 1–22). Addis Ababa University Press.
- Pankhurst, A., & Dom, C. (Eds.). (2019). *Rural Ethiopia in transition: Selected discussion briefs*. WIDE.
- Perovic, B. (2016). *Defining youth in contemporary national legal and policy frameworks across Europe*. Report for the European Commission and the Council of Europe.
- Schewel, K. (2018). *Working Papers Why Ethiopian women go to the Middle East: An aspiration-capability analysis of migration decision-making* (Paper 148). International Migration Institute Network (IMIn).
- Schewel, K., & Fransen, S. (2018). Formal education and migration aspirations in Ethiopia. *Population and Development Review*, 44(3), 555–587.
- Sumberg, J., Chamberlin, J., Flynn, J. G., Glover, D., & Johnson, V. (2019). 'Landscape of rural youth opportunity', background paper, 2019 rural development report 'creating opportunities for rural youth'. IFAD.
- Thorsen, D. (2006). Child migrants in transit. Strategies to become adult in rural Burkina Faso. In C. Christiansen, M. Utas, & H. Vigh (Eds.), *Navigating youth, generating adulthood: Social becoming in an African context* (pp. 88–114). Nordic Africa Institute.
- UN-Habitat. (2008). *Participatory slum upgrading program in the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries*. Ethiopia: Addis Ababa Urban Profile. United Nations Human Settlements Program. https://www.biovision.ch/fileadmin/pdf/e/services/Media_Visit/UNHabitat_2008.pdf
- UN-Habitat. (2017). *The state of Addis Ababa 2017: The Addis Ababa we want*. United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/State of Addis Ababa 2017 Report-web.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/State%20of%20Addis%20Ababa%202017%20Report-web.pdf)

White, A., Laoire, C. N., Tyrrell, N., & Carpena-Méndez, F. (2011). Children's roles in transnational migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(8), 1159–1170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2011.590635>

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Vicky Johnson is a Director at Centre for Remote and Sustainable Communities, University of the Highlands and Islands. Vicky led Youth Uncertainty Rights (YOUR) World Research in Ethiopia and Nepal. Her key focus of research and publication is in the field of children and young people's participation. Monographs and books include *Listening to Smaller Voices* (ActionAid 1995); *Stepping Forward* (IT Publications 1998) and with A. West, *Children's Participation in Global Contexts: Beyond Voice* (Routledge 2018). She also co-leads a project called Rejuvenate, housed at the Institute of Development Studies where she is an Honorary Associate.

Melese Getu is an Ethiopia Lead, YOUR World Research, College of Social Sciences, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. Melese is working for School of Social Work of Addis Ababa University where he also served as associate dean of the College of Social Sciences and associate dean and dean of the School of Social Work. He also worked for Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSSREA). His research interests include social protection, public health, harmful traditional practices, youth and adolescent issues.

Milki Getachew is a doctoral student at Goldsmiths, University of London and was research assistant for YOUR World Research in Ethiopia and Nepal funded by ESRC/DFID. She has received her master's degree in Social Work from Addis Ababa University. From August 2012 to January 2017, she has worked for Addis Ababa University in the School of Social Work. Her research interests include child and youth issues with particular emphasis on youth migration from rural environmentally fragile area of Ethiopia.

Amid Ahmed is a doctoral student at the Institute of African Studies at Addis Ababa University and was research assistant on the ESRC/DFID Youth Uncertainty Right (YOUR) World Research Project in Ethiopia. He is also at present working as a lecturer in Ethiopia: Debre Markos University, Department of Sociology. His research interests include youth issues with particular emphasis on youth migration, addiction and crime.

Andy West is an independent researcher and was Co-I for YOUR World Research. His work and publication with various organisations and universities is mainly concerned with issues, policy, practice and research with excluded and marginalised children and young people, especially protection and participation. He is also a Community Research Fellow, University of Brighton and Visiting Senior Fellow, University of Suffolk.

How to cite this article: Johnson, V., Getu, M., Getachew, M., Ahmed, A., & West, A. Trapped bodies, moving minds: Uncertainty and migration among marginalised urban youth in Ethiopia. *Child Soc.* 2021;35:944–959. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12476>