

Review

# A Critical Examination of Rural Out-Migration Studies in Ethiopia: Considering Impacts on Agriculture in the Sending Communities

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**Abstract:** Labor migration is a complex phenomenon, yet while much attention has been paid to understanding the drivers of migration, there is a huge knowledge and policy gap regarding the effects of migration on people and communities left behind. We sought to explore the impacts of rural outmigration on migrant-sending communities in Ethiopia. This remains an understudied topic when it comes to research on migration in Ethiopia. Our investigation is based on a critical review of the migration literature pertaining to Ethiopia and, more broadly. We pursued a holistic analysis of the multidimensional aspects of migration. There are indications that rural outmigration impacts involve issues related to remittances, household food security, agricultural labor use, farmland management, and rural infrastructure development. Our analysis revealed that there had been few systematic studies and limited analyses regarding the impacts of outmigration on agriculture and the livelihoods of rural people and households left behind. Instead, Ethiopia's migration literature largely deals with migration's causes, including environmental factors, climate variability, agricultural pressures, livelihood stresses, and changing aspirations.

**Keywords:** rural outmigration; labor migration; impacts; drivers; remittances; Ethiopia



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## 1. Introduction and Background

In Ethiopia, migration has become a rapidly growing phenomenon. This article analyzes the multidimensional aspects of migration in Ethiopia in the context of wider migration research trends. Labor migration is a complex phenomenon, yet migration researchers have been paying much attention to understanding the drivers of migration, while there is a huge knowledge gap regarding the effects of migration on people and communities left behind [1,2]. Migration studies, as well as policies, have been shaped by the political wish to deter migration from “poor” countries to “rich” countries [3,4].

Policymakers and officials, particularly in high-income, destination countries, have tended to see a lack of development in low-income, migrant-origin countries as one of the root causes of migration [5]. This is based on the assumption that if development opportunities in economically less developed countries are improved, outmigration will decrease. Such assumptions drive development policy responses aimed at deterring migration flows from poor countries. They have promoted the role of development aid in addressing the “root” causes of migration and reducing migration pressures [2–6].

Similarly, the concern regarding internal rural-to-urban migration also focuses on the causes of migration, particularly associating a lack of “development” with rural out-migration [7]. Governments and their development partners perceive outmigration as a result of poverty and consider that rural development interventions will reduce rural-urban migration, thereby keeping people in rural areas instead of out-migrating [7,8]. They

also tend to regard outmigration as a sign of failure and a negative consequence of rural development gaps.

While appreciating the scholarly and policy concerns underlying investigations that focus on the causes of migration, we argue for the importance of considering a holistic approach beyond migration causes. It is important to consider the multidimensional aspects of migration, including its effects on migrant-sending regions, communities, and households. There has been limited research on the impacts of rural outmigration on home communities in developing countries. Some studies highlighted the impacts of outmigration in terms of enhancing non-agricultural income sources of rural households [9], improving livelihoods [10], reducing the supply of agricultural labor [11], leading to the feminization of agriculture [12,13], and increasing inequality and differentiation [11]. Some studies in Africa also highlighted the role of outmigration in improving household food security [14,15], facilitating development projects [16], resulting in the loss of agricultural labor [17], and intensifying income inequality [18]. It is possible that rural outmigration can involve several other impacts on migrant-sending communities. The mention of migration as a development issue in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [19] is an encouraging remark to examine migration in a wider context of the development agenda.

In Ethiopia, agriculture is the mainstay of the economy. It is particularly characterized by small-scale, rainfed farming which is dependent on unreliable rainfall. It accounts for about 85% of employment and 42% of gross domestic product (GDP) and provides about 90% of export earnings [20]. Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa after Nigeria, with a population exceeding 100 million people [21].

Labor migration in Ethiopia has been increasing in recent decades, driven by structural factors in the country's economy and society. Rural-to-urban migration (rural outmigration to urban areas) increased from 24% to 33% from 2005 to 2013 [22]. A recent survey that does not include one of the federal government regions, namely Tigray, puts rural-to-urban migration at 29% [23]. It is estimated that about two million Ethiopians live and work abroad, but this could be a significant underestimation of the actual number, especially since outmigration has recently increased [24]. The international migrant stock of Ethiopians living abroad has increased over the years, from 662,444 people in 2000 to 1,072,949 in 2015 [24]. A national survey conducted in 2021 also indicated an increasing trend of international migration from 4.9% in 2010/2011 to 14.1% in 2018/2019 [23]. It is estimated that around 460,000 Ethiopians legally migrated to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Dubai between September 2008 and August 2013 [24]. However, the number of irregular migrants living and working in the Gulf states is assumed to be much higher than the number of officially registered migrants [25].

The increasing trend of labor migration in Ethiopia and the country's predominantly agrarian economy and population growth provide an important context for this study. The practices and incidences of migration can have crucial and interrelated impacts on diverse livelihood and development outcomes. Understanding and dealing with these issues will significantly contribute to development processes in Ethiopia, thereby involving wider global implications relating to other developing countries. We will conduct a holistic analysis of the multidimensional aspects of migration, including the drivers and impacts of migration. In particular, we seek to explore the impacts of rural outmigration on migrant-sending communities. This remains an understudied topic when it comes to research on migration in Ethiopia and other developing and agricultural communities. We will also identify linked research gaps in migration studies.

## 2. Methodology

This article presents a comprehensive review of the literature on migration in Ethiopia. We reviewed articles that discuss migration patterns and provide information on the link between migration and agricultural activities in the form of drivers and impacts. The relevant documents were identified through the Google and Google Scholar search engines using both keyword searching and the snowball method. Keywords used were: migration, Ethiopia, agriculture, rural migration, international migration, outmigration, labor migration, and rural-urban migration. Additionally, we reviewed papers that provide background information relevant to Ethiopia's labor migration context. We also reviewed broader theoretical perspectives related to labor migration. The discussions in this paper are grouped into four major topics. These include theoretical perspectives on labor migration, drivers of outmigration in the Ethiopian migration literature, migration impacts, and female migration to the Gulf countries. We summarize key findings, identify research gaps, and make recommendations for future research.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Theoretical Perspectives on Labour Migration

Different theoretical perspectives are used in explaining migration. One of the influential theoretical perspectives on labor migration relates to the Neoclassical economic approach. This approach conceives labor migration in terms of wage differentials between origin and destination areas, explaining that differences in the supply and demand for labor cause the migration of workers from low-wage, labor-surplus regions to high-wage regions facing labor shortage [1,2,26,27]. The Neoclassical economic approach considers labor migration a means of income maximization guided by individual decisions. According to this approach, when individuals decide to out-migrate, they are mainly influenced by the income they expect to gain. It ignores other potential factors that interact with and shape migrants' decision-making.

The historical-structural approach provides another important perspective to explain migration phenomena. As Wood [28] indicated, the historical-structural approach to the study of migration is found in a variety of models, including dependency theory and world systems theory. From the historical-structural point of view, migration is part and parcel of broader processes of structural transformations involving socio-economic and political changes [28,29]. Investigations along the lines of historical-structural analysis conceive rural-to-urban migration in terms of specific historical contexts and transformations in the economic structure of rural and urban areas [30]. Analyses based on the orientations of the historical-structural approach seek to explain migration as a structural outcome of market expansions within the global political hierarchy [30]. This perspective considers international migration an outcome of capitalist market formation and the penetration of the global economy into peripheral regions, along with ensuing disruptions and dislocations that occur in the processes of capitalist development [26,30]. Accordingly, migration is a product of a broader structural process rather than a mere individual decision-making process.

The new economics of labor migration provides a different perspective on migration. It considers that migration is practiced to maximize income and minimize risks [1,2,26]. It also maintains that migration decisions are not made by individuals but by family members collectively [1,2,26]. According to this approach, income maximization and risk spreading constitute the motivation behind migration. The household, rather than the individual, is the main decision-making unit.

The migration networks perspective highlights the role of social networks in facilitating migration processes. Migration networks constitute interpersonal linkages that interconnect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants across geographical boundaries through kinship, friendship, and community relations and make migration easier by reducing the costs and risks of movement [26,30]. They provide a foundation for the dissemination of information as well as for patronage and assistance [31]. Social net-

works have multiplier effects that could result in a migration chain, as when the size of network connections in sending areas reaches a critical threshold, migration becomes self-perpetuating [26,31]. Thus, they are an important determinant of migration plans and decisions [31].

The theoretical perspectives discussed above maintain different positions in explaining labor migration. However, they mostly deal with the motivations of labor migration and largely focus on the causes of migration. The causal focus underlying these migration theories has entailed significant implications for existing migration research, leading to a major focus on motivations that propel people's mobility. We consider that no single cause can wholly explain the motivations underlying labor migration. Instead, a combination of different factors may operate in tandem or at different levels to shape migration decisions and processes. Thus, it is likely that a mix of the different causal conditions associated with the theoretical perspectives discussed above can manifest in various ways and degrees in labor migration decisions, processes, and instances.

After reviewing the literature, we have categorized the possible impacts of migration as impacts on household food security [14,15], impacts on income, remittances, and differentiation [9,11,18,32], impacts on agricultural labor supply, the composition of the agricultural labor force and patterns of land uses [11,13,32], impacts on asset accumulation, business ownership and entrepreneurial/investment activities [32–34]. We consider that the impacts of outmigration on sending communities, regions, households, and left behind family members can be complex and involve a wider range of outcomes.

### 3.2. Drivers of Outmigration in the Ethiopian Migration Literature

In this section, we discuss factors that drive rural outmigration in Ethiopia. Based on a review and analysis of the migration literature, we have identified several factors that can be seen as drivers of outmigration in the Ethiopian context. These relate to agroecological, livelihood, socio-economic and social factors that can explain the processes of rural outmigration.

#### 3.2.1. Climate and Environmental Factors

In international migration research, there has been a growing interest in the effects of environmental factors on migration decisions and patterns [35–39]. Environmental problems such as droughts and soil degradation are mostly identified as important drivers of outmigration in sub-Saharan Africa [35,40].

The migration literature in Ethiopia also reveals that environmental shocks have significant consequences for population mobility in rural Ethiopia [41–45]. Rainfall and environmental factors vary over time and space and become unpredictable, often resulting in environmental shocks that undermine household well-being [41]. These studies emphasize that climate variability has long posed a major challenge to the Ethiopian agrarian economy and livelihoods. This is because most Ethiopians live in rural areas and heavily depend on small-scale rainfed agriculture for their livelihoods. However, drought, lack of rain, and erratic rainfall induced by climate variability have often threatened the viability of such small-scale rain-dependent subsistence farming. This situation drives rural outmigration processes.

Drought and related food security disasters have been common in Ethiopia [46,47], although the distribution of these occurrences varies by geographical zones. Climate shocks undermine the periods of short rains, referred to as the Belg season (February/March–April), and the periods of long rains, known as the Kiremt season (June–September). Rural people heavily rely on these rains for food production and keeping livestock. The problem of drought induced by climate and environmental crises is manifested in different ways. It may occur in the form of no rain, shortage of rain, or late rain. Besides, these manifestations of drought may occur in successive agricultural seasons, thereby resulting in massive crop failure, loss of valuable livestock, and major livelihood crises [47].

Some authors consider that in rural Ethiopia, migration serves as a strategy to secure alternative livelihoods in the face of climate shocks such as droughts [41,44,48]. Drought results in a decline in agricultural production, which can lead to food insecurity, loss of grazing land for livestock production, and loss of agricultural employment, thereby becoming a cause of migration in Ethiopia [43,44]. However, drought may not necessarily determine migration decisions. Even in adverse climatic conditions, outmigration depends on the degree of people's vulnerability and adaptation capacities [41,48]. It does not necessarily mean that all rural households will respond to drought and environmental shocks similarly and out-migrate uniformly. Gray and Mueller [41] indicated that drought increases men's labor migration particularly, and land-poor households are most vulnerable to the impacts of drought. They noted that men's labor movements and outmigration in rural highland Ethiopia increased twofold under severe drought conditions [41].

While environmental factors such as climate variability can affect people's migratory behavior, scholars tend to distinguish between short-distance and long-distance migration drivers. For example, Black et al. [43] associate short-distance and circulatory migration with a response to shocks while linking long-distance and more permanent migration with a planned household's investment strategy. This classification of migration can be useful in analyzing migration patterns, drivers, and responses. However, it leads to associating climate-induced migration with a short-term response to shocks in contrast to a more permanent migration and decision pattern. In the case of Ethiopia, where climate shocks have been recurrent phenomena, it can be difficult to clearly distinguish between shock responses and long-term planned mobility. This is because repeated shocks and related responses can end up driving permanent migration decisions and responses.

While our focus is mainly on labor migration, it is worth noting that recurrent droughts and related environmental crises provided an important impetus for government-imposed migration schemes. During the previous pre-1991 Derg regime of Ethiopia, the government carried out a massive resettlement program whereby peasant households from the highlands and northern part of the country were moved to the lowlands, western and southwestern parts of the country [49]. The state-imposed and sponsored migration in the form of resettlement was seen as a strategy for addressing the food security crisis in drought-prone, densely populated, and environmentally degraded areas by relocating people to other areas considered to be fertile, sparsely populated, and 'under-exploited.' The overall assessment of the Derg government resettlement program was largely recognized as a failure, disastrous, unpopular, and coercive [49].

Donor agencies and western development partners of the Ethiopian government have often been against state-imposed migration programs, i.e., resettlement. However, climate-induced droughts and ensuing food crises again provided a similar impetus for state-implemented resettlement during the post-1991 Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime of Ethiopia. With increasing numbers of people facing food insecurity in the early 2000s, the government took up resettlement as a crucial component of its food security strategy [49,50]. The EPRDF government considered the resettlement program a reliable and efficient way of achieving food security, arguing that resettling people from drought-prone and land-scarce areas to areas with reliable rainfall and fertile land facilitates household food security [51].

Climate variability can contribute to migration processes. However, we suggest that it alone may not necessarily induce outmigration. Its impact should be seen along with other contributing driving factors. We thus argue that the effects of climate and environmental stress on migration should be considered along with other political-ecological and socio-cultural processes affecting migration.

### 3.2.2. Agricultural and Livelihood Stresses

Ethiopia largely remains an agrarian country where most of the population lives in rural areas. Factors constraining agricultural activities and rural livelihoods can have significant implications for rural outmigration. The land is one of the major productive resources with a tremendous impact on agriculture and rural livelihoods. As pointed out next, access to land, including land availability and individual plot size, can significantly influence decisions related to migration.

Studies conducted in different districts in Northern Ethiopia revealed that farmland shortage, landlessness, and lack of sufficient means of subsistence are among the major driving factors of rural outmigration [52,53]. Another study conducted in several districts in southern Ethiopia also emphasized that limited access to agricultural land is a major factor forcing the rural youth away from agricultural livelihood [54]. Similarly, research in several rural areas in northwest Ethiopia pointed out that rural outmigration is predominantly driven by landlessness or small land endowment [55]. In some studies, however, the depiction of land shortage in terms of driving outmigration appears minimal. For example, a study that looked at the case of migrants from southern Ethiopia to South Africa documented that the lack of employment opportunities at home is the main reason for migration, while land shortage entails minimal influence [56]. Yet, even in this study, a closer look at respondents' responses indicates that land shortage remains an important factor for outmigration for young people between the ages of 15–25 [56]. The land shortage is a growing problem in Ethiopia. Over half of rural households in Ethiopia hold less than 1 hectare of land [57].

All rural land has been under government control following the 1975 land reform. In 1975, the socialist government of Ethiopia decreed a land reform that nationalized all rural lands and prohibited private ownership of land and the sale of land [58]. In effect, the government put rural land under its control while allowing peasants only usufruct access. Most importantly, the government became the only land source, and farmland access was available through land redistribution. The reform stipulated that any person, once they reached 18 years of age, would have the right to have access to farmland through redistributions [58]. Accordingly, periodic land redistributions had to be undertaken to fulfill the demands of land claimants. The EPRDF regime, which took over power in 1991, pursued political and economic reforms, departing from the previous socialist regime. However, it followed a similar land policy in many respects. The ownership of land has continued to be under government control while allowing rural people the right to use rural land and prohibiting the sale of land [59]. While, in principle, the government is still the only source for land provisions, there has been no new land allocation to youth for over two decades. The ensuing lack of land has posed a major livelihood stress for the youth. In the absence of other sources of land, the youth largely depend on inheritance from parents [60,61], thereby leading to progressive divisions of already smaller family landholdings as each generation passes.

Kosec et al. [62] pointed out that the amount of land the youth expect to inherit in rural Ethiopia affects their migration behavior—whether to out-migrate or remain in agriculture. Their analyses indicated that a 10% increase in the size of inherited land reduces rural-to-urban migration. By implication, the shortage of land experienced by rural youth drives outmigration. In the most densely populated areas of southern Ethiopia, for example, rural land available to the youth through inheritance is often too small to establish a meaningful livelihood, thereby leading to an increasing trend of youth outmigration [54]. The shortage of family land to address the land needs of aspiring children is a source of conflict and tension among family members. Sibling resource competition in a situation of increasing rural farmland scarcity is an important driver of outmigration [63].

The pursuit of education, which is often more expensive outside rural areas, also creates significant livelihood stress that drives outmigration. Young people, including adolescents, migrate from rural areas to big urban centers in pursuit of educational and work opportunities [64]. In this case, the desire to seek education and the need to cover the financial cost necessitates the search for work opportunities through outmigration. A study in a rural district in northern Ethiopia observed that owing to the prevailing poverty situation in rural households, accessing and completing education is highly difficult and involves a major investment cost [65]. A World Bank report also indicated that the search for educational opportunities and the related need for work are very significant reasons for many people out-migrating from rural areas to the capital city, Addis Ababa [66].

However, we would like to stress that the impacts of access to education on outmigration should be interpreted carefully. If the lack of access to education drives outmigration, as indicated above, this may imply that having access to education limits migration. However, there are other ways in which education plays a role in people's decisions on whether or not they migrate. For example, Schewel and Fransen [67] indicate that young people's changing aspirations and expectations resulting from the expansion of formal education in Ethiopia entail a significant force that drives outmigration to urban areas away from agriculture. Thus, education induced the changing aspirations among young people away from agriculture, which can lead to outmigration.

While the drivers of outmigration are diverse, migration studies in Ethiopia tend to categorize migrants and their households by social and economic groups. In identifying the characteristics of migrant households, some studies state that female-headed households are more prone to send migrants, as they often possess less productive assets than male-headed households [55]. Other studies suggest that wealthier households are less likely to send migrants, while poor households are more likely to have migrant family members [68]. Such studies, in both cases, emphasize the economically disadvantaged position of households who participate in migration practices. In fact, economic problems are only one of the many livelihood stresses that drive outmigration. However, people who opt for migration for economic gains do not necessarily represent a distinct lower-income household. For example, a study in southwest Ethiopia indicated that rural people practice outmigration as a livelihood strategy regardless of their households' economic status [61]. That means migrants come from different wealth and socio-economic groups. While families of any socio-economic background decide to migrate (or send one member as an outmigrant), the consequences and vulnerabilities for these families can be very different. Wealthier migrants are more resilient to sudden shocks.

### 3.2.3. Social Networks

Social networks, including ethnicity, kinship ties, 'community' links, and 'community' 'identity', play significant roles in facilitating migration processes by providing relevant information, creating awareness, and reducing the costs of migration. These networks significantly help to inform and facilitate migrants' international migration, particularly where to migrate and how to migrate. Migration aspirations and actual movements depend on potential migrants' awareness of already existing migration corridors, migration opportunities, and connections between would-be migrants and already-migrated friends and relatives [5]. Such aspects of social networks constitute an important driver of migration decisions along the different migration routes and destinations pursued by Ethiopian migrants.

Labor outmigration from Ethiopia has been practiced through three major routes and transits: the Eastern, Northern, and Southern routes [69]. The Eastern route transits through Djibouti, Somaliland, Puntland, and Yemen into Saudi Arabia, other Gulf countries, and the Middle East, while the Northern route transits through Sudan, Egypt, and Libya into Europe and the Southern route passes through Kenya, Tanzania, and other countries within that route to South Africa [69].

Migration networks, opportunities, and experiences developed over time along these migration routes have shaped the movement of Ethiopian migrants to different destination countries. For example, migration to South Africa has been predominantly practiced by people from certain areas of Southern Ethiopia [56,70]. The success of an initial group of youth who got the opportunity to migrate for work to South Africa—through contacts with compatriots based there—and who then invested their earnings back at home spurred the movement of other people to South Africa [56,70]. As these studies indicate, the subsequent migration of people from these areas to South Africa has been further facilitated by access to knowledge and information related to smuggling, traveling experiences, and job opportunities, which are more widely available in these areas than in other parts of Ethiopia.

Similarly, social networks and knowledge of migration opportunities along the northern route have facilitated the movement of migrants from northern Ethiopia to the West. Adugna [70] indicated that following the path of early migrants (who were largely political refugees) from parts of Northern Ethiopia to the USA, North America has become a popular destination for later migrants originating from these areas. Over the years, through migrant networks, including sponsorship systems, migrants from parts of Northern Ethiopia have continued to move to the USA. Labor migration to the Gulf and Arab countries through the Eastern migration route has also been intensified through social networks, connections with recruiting agents, and observed migration outflows from local communities [71]. Most of the migrants crossing the Eastern migration route come from three rural regions of Ethiopia: Oromia, Amhara, and Tigray [72].

Social linkages and networks also play a significant role in internal rural-to-urban migration processes. As Baker [73] noted about northeastern Ethiopia, migration does not involve a sudden movement to another location; instead, it involves acquiring thorough information about a particular location. Other studies looking at rural-urban migration in Ethiopia indicated that at the destination, the presence of people of similar kinship, ethnicity, community, and local background greatly facilitates rural-to-urban migration [53,61]. Would-be migrants acquire information about the destination area from distant and close kin relatives and friends who have already passed through a similar experience of migration. They also rely on such social ties for economic, social, and psychological support [61]. Thus, social networks, personal contacts, and information available through such contacts and relatives significantly influence the patterns of rural-urban migration and migrants' choices of preferred destinations [66].

### 3.3. Migration Impacts

In this section, we will discuss the impacts of migration on source communities, households, and families left behind. Our review of the migration literature in Ethiopia revealed that there had been little research on the impact of outmigration on communities and households left behind. Most of the literature presented here does not directly deal with the impact of migration on source communities. However, through a critical review and analysis of the available literature, we have drawn important insights signifying the impacts of migration. We will particularly discuss issues related to remittances, investments, household welfare, labor and land management, and inequalities.

#### 3.3.1. Remittances, Household Welfare and Investments

The impact of migration on sending regions is primarily conceived in remittances, which are considered the main link between migration and development [1]. In Ethiopia, remittances are a significant source of foreign exchange for the country, which is ranked one of the top ten remittance recipient countries in Africa [74,75]. Most of the data on remittance inflows to Ethiopia is based on information available through formal remittance channels such as banks. However, a large proportion of remittances are informal, with over 75% of remittances to the country sent through informal channels [76]. Official remittance transfers have steadily increased in recent years, from USD 53 million in 2000 to USD



1.796 billion in 2014 [77]. Irregular remittance inflows, however, are likely to be much higher than what is officially recorded [76]. Irregular remittance transfers made by migrants are a significant source of income for many families left behind. Migrants residing in South Africa, the Gulf States, and the Middle East largely rely on informal channels, including informal agents and interpersonal networks, to transfer remittances to family members in Ethiopia [70].

There are indications about the positive impacts of remittances for remittance-receiving households in Ethiopia. Some studies indicate that remittances and outmigration enhance household food security by reducing experiences of insufficient quantity of food intake, enabling access to adequate quality food, and reducing the food poverty gap [78,79]. Others suggest that remittances can improve the well-being of left-behind migrant households in that remittance-receiving households are better off in terms of well-being than households with no migrant family members [80]. Migration may also improve the living standard and welfare of family members who are left behind, as remittances sent by migrants help the left behind family members increase their consumer expenditure [81]. Similarly, remittances can increase households' income and thus enhance households' economic well-being and consumer asset accumulation [82].

Regarding the impact of rural outmigration and remittances on productive investments, however, there has been not only limited information, but the limited information also conveys mixed views. On the one hand, some assert that in rural Ethiopia, remittances have no effect on productive asset investments while strongly affecting consumer asset accumulation [82]. A few other studies note the role of outmigration and remittances for agricultural investments, but they differ in terms of the situations they focus on. One situation is that farmers seasonally out-migrate for wage-earning employment during the low agricultural season, return home during the peak agricultural season, and invest the income they have acquired on productive farm assets such as cattle, land, and water pumps [52]. Another situation is that rural households receive remittances from outmigrant family members and use remitted income for purchasing agricultural inputs such as fertilizer, seeds, pesticides, herbicides, agricultural tools, and livestock [79,83]. Remittance-receiving farm households are considered to have a better capacity to overcome their financial problems and engage in high-return production activities compared to households receiving no remittance [68]. Thus, remittances can play a significant role in alleviating financial constraints that discourage agricultural production.

In addition, remittances available through migration can indirectly contribute to agricultural investments. They help rural households maintain their valuable agricultural productive assets, which otherwise could be lost through distress sales in times of environmental crises and linked misfortunes. For example, Mohapatra et al. [84] indicated that Ethiopian rural households that receive remittances refrain from selling productive assets such as livestock to cope with drought and related food shortages, as they rely on cash reserves from remittances. Little et al. [47] observed that farmers in northern Ethiopia responded to drought shocks during drought events by selling their livestock at a very low price. The distress sale of livestock not only diminishes rural households' productive asset holdings but, most importantly, it results in the loss of oxen serving as the main farming implement in ox-plow-based agriculture. Thus, the role of remittances in furnishing income and preventing the loss of valuable livestock through desperate sales fulfills an indirect form of agricultural investment.

There are also some indications that migrant remittances help families in Ethiopia invest in other business activities such as hotels, public transport, and housing [56,70]. Upon returning home, migrants can contribute to the rural economy by investing in entrepreneurial activities depending on the financial and non-financial assets they have accumulated during their migration activities. For example, they may run economic activities through hotels, shops, transport vehicles, and grain mills [53,56]. The benefits of migration can also feed into rural development through community development activities. For example, the Gurage people in Ethiopia have long practiced rural-urban migration as a

livelihood strategy. The community members working in urban areas have developed self-help community development traditions by using their money, skills, social networks, and associations, significantly contributing to the development of missing rural infrastructure in home areas, such as roads, schools, and health and communication facilities [61,85,86].

### 3.3.2. Labor and Land Management

Rural outmigration entails diverse implications for land and labor management. An ethnographic study on natural resource management in southwest Ethiopia indicated that in rural societies where there is an acute land shortage and high population pressure, outmigration could reduce the pressure on scarce land resources [61]. On the other hand, outmigration can reduce household farm labor supply. Some suggest that the impact of outmigration on farm labor and farm outcome differs depending on the type of migration—permanent vs. temporary migration. Redehegn et al. [68], based on a study in Northern Ethiopia, view that permanent migration induces extended loss of labor and involves negative impacts on crop income, while temporary outmigration allows workers to return home regularly and mitigates the negative impact of labor losses on crop production.

For some researchers, the labor impact of rural outmigration can be insignificant depending on the magnitude of the prevailing population pressure and farmland scarcity. For example, a study conducted in two districts in northern and southern Ethiopia maintained that in a situation where there is an ever-growing population pressure and an increasing shortage of farmland, youth outmigration has little impact on labor shortage, as the youth are already underemployed at the family farm [83]. This view assumes that there is already excess labor on the farm, and youth migration will have little impact on labor availability. On the other hand, Dessalegn [60] observed in southwest Ethiopia that rural outmigration can lead to agricultural labor shortage even in a situation of high population pressure and shortage of land. However, despite the potential negative impact of outmigration on rural labor, labor problems are mitigated through rural labor institutions that facilitate mutual labor exchange groups; and through hired wage labor [60].

Mueller et al. [87] indicated that youth outmigration in Ethiopia imposes additional labor on other family members, forcing female heads and spouses to spend more time on the farm. Nevertheless, they state that the migration of youth will not compromise agricultural income; instead, it positively contributes to household income [87].

### 3.3.3. Changing Inequalities

Remitted income available through migrants entails differential impacts and intra-‘community’ inequalities. For example, in migrant-sending areas, remittance-receiving households enjoy higher purchasing power than others and often tend not to resist unfair prices of goods and services [70]. This situation contributes to rising costs of living, thereby putting non-migrant families at a disadvantage. Remitted income creates inequalities even between migrant households. This particularly relates to differences in the amount of remitted income available to migrant households. For example, households receiving more remittances or regular remittances have more access to agricultural wage labor than other households who receive remittances in small amounts or intermittently [61]. This is because better access to remittances enables rural households to rely on diversified income sources.

### 3.4. Female Migration to the Gulf Countries

While female labor migration to the Gulf countries generates remittances that support the welfare of families left behind in Ethiopia, it involves challenging circumstances. Understanding this situation helps us appreciate how migration’s benefits may come at the cost of individual suffering. This particularly relates to the case of young women migrating to the Middle East and the Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, and Lebanon. These women migrants are largely employed as domestic workers. Since the early 1990s, contract migration has increased steadily to meet the rising demand for domestic workers throughout the Middle East and

the Gulf States [71,88]. The Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, emerged as the top destination countries for Ethiopian women migrants [89].

Much of the research on this labor migration focuses on the difficult conditions in host countries, the often extremely damaging psychological consequences of abuse by employers, and on the struggle that some of the return migrants face upon return to Ethiopia [90–93]. However, despite the difficult conditions under which they operate and their limited income, they send remittances back home. Remittances are largely used for loan repayment, schooling of children, childcare provision, and household expenses [91,93].

There has been little information regarding the impact of this form of labor migration on productive investments. There is an indication that such labor migrants find it difficult to make savings because of their limited income and the responsibility of regularly sending remittances for several expenses [93]. However, there are successful women labor migrants who managed to make some productive investments in the form of owning small shops, restaurants, and taxis and who were able to purchase/build a house [91]. This may have been possible through very prudent savings and restrained allocation of remittances.

What makes “productive investment” of remittances can vary depending on labor migrants’ individual aspirations and family commitments. For example, for some female migrants, sending monetary remittances for paying a sibling’s university education at home is an important means of achieving betterment in that upon graduation and employment, this sibling can sponsor the education of other siblings [94]. The intent underlying such multiplying effects of remittance use could be more appreciated when considering the situation of many Ethiopian households who rely on family support. The success or failure of a family member entails significant implications for the rest of the family members. Upon return from labor migration, women often find it difficult to involve themselves in productive investments due to a lack of savings and capital, experience in business activities, and reintegration support [90,91].

The labor arrangement governing the employer and migrant domestic worker relations in the Gulf has its own adverse impacts on the success and freedom of women labor migrants. The migration of Ethiopian domestic workers to the Gulf states has been largely governed through the Kafala labor system, whereby the employee’s visa and residence permit are sponsored through the financial and legal responsibility of a specific employer who maintains control over the passport and movement of the domestic worker [95,96]. According to this sponsorship arrangement, the migrant worker cannot change jobs and leave the household without the consent of the employer. The arrangement increases the migrant’s vulnerability to economic and human rights violations, thereby leading to distress escapes often seen as ‘illegal’ by employers and authorities. Most Ethiopian migrant workers in the Gulf states face severe labor rights violations and abuses, including forced labor, working for long hours without rest and overtime pay, confiscation of passports, irregular salary payment, or no payment at all [24]. The vulnerability of Ethiopian migrant workers in the Gulf was harshly manifested in the mass deportation of migrants from Saudi Arabia. Around 165,000 Ethiopian migrants were expelled from Saudi Arabia between November 2013 and March 2014 alone [71,97].

#### **4. Conclusions, Gaps Identified and Research Recommendations**

This paper has reviewed rural outmigration studies in Ethiopia, with a particular focus on labor migration. We sought to examine the impact of migration patterns on agriculture and the livelihoods of rural people left behind. We pursued a holistic approach to analyze the multidimensional aspects of migration, including the drivers and impacts of migration. The migration literature in Ethiopia largely deals with the causes of migration. These include environmental factors, including climate variability, drought, and soil degradation; agricultural and livelihood stresses, including problems related to access to land; young people’s changing aspirations; and migration facilitating social networks. There is a tendency in the literature to focus on a single factor or individual factors as the driver of

outmigration. There is a lack of a systematic analysis regarding how a mix of different factors could interact and shape migration processes.

Our analysis revealed that there had been few systematic studies on the impacts of outmigration on agriculture and the livelihoods of rural people left behind. There are indications that migration-induced remittances enhance household food security and the welfare of left-behind family members. Rural outmigration facilitates the diversification of income sources. Rural households receiving remittances from outmigrant family members gain more purchasing power. They can use remitted income to purchase agricultural inputs essential for crop production. In agricultural communities where there is an acute land shortage and high population pressure, rural outmigration can alleviate the pressure on scarce land resources. On the other hand, outmigration can reduce household farm labor supply and impose additional labor on left-behind family members. The benefits of migration can feed into rural infrastructure development through self-help community development activities. However, most of the literature does not directly deal with the impact of migration on source communities and households left behind.

We suggest that future research should include an in-depth analysis of the impacts of outmigration on sending communities and households left behind. An in-depth analysis should be conducted on the diverse impacts of outmigration on agriculture, rural livelihoods, and rural transformations. Likewise, we suggest that future research should consider the multifaceted aspects of outmigration, its diverse drivers, and how multiple drivers of outmigration interact with each other to influence households' and individuals' decision-making processes of outmigration.

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