Negotiating spaces of marginality and independence: On women entrepreneurs within Ethiopian urbanization and water precarity

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the growth of Ethiopia's market economy the importance of women-owned enterprises is acknowledged, with barriers to economic success outlined in a limited number of studies. However, the daily struggles and embodied experiences of low-skilled women entrepreneurs in informal economies, as well as precarious and unequal intermittent water environments, have been insufficiently understood. We analyse how women strive for and negotiate their independence through spatiality and how services, specifically water, affect their ability to develop their business spaces. The evidence derives from five studies, using mixed methods, conducted in the small town of Wukro, Ethiopia. The methods used were household surveys, a water diary, and interviews with women entrepreneurs - owners of coffee, alcohol, and hair salons businesses. Our study finds that they develop their businesses through the simultaneous presence of various, multilevel spaces of marginality/paradoxical spaces and articulation of independence as control over one's business and body. Unlike the positive term 'empowerment', the lens of negotiating 'independence' integrates spaces of conflicting subjectivities, where marginality and resistance, suffering and claimed control, interpellation, and re-construction of own identities are simultaneously present. We suggest that water struggles are analysed not only through the evaluation of water shortages and unequal geographical sectorization but also through the perspective of 'water precarity' (Sultana, 2020) as in our study it was a water-induced lack of control over businesses and daily lives that caused the most suffering. We highlight that this multidimensional approach is pivotal in supporting women's entrepreneurship and gender equality.

1. Introduction

Urbanization, the growth of female small-scale entrepreneurship and improved access to piped water supply are processes filled with promise for national development, the improvement of livelihoods, and gender equality. People move to urban places aspiring for better lives (e.g. UNDP, 2017), and the provision of piped water on premises can improve livelihoods and alleviate the burden from women who are the main water collectors in patriarchal societies. Micro entrepreneurship is widespread in the Global South (e.g. Xiong, Ukanwa, & Anderson, 2018) and it can potentially fill the void of unemployment (e.g. Minniti & Naudé, 2010) and empower women (e.g. Kasseeah & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2016; Mutopo, 2010). The reality of these potential developmental improvements is complex and nuanced – entrepreneurship without access to opportunities is divisive and limited (Alvarez & Barney, 2014), the expanding informal economy is precarious and unequitable access to intermittent water supply can (re)produce socio-geographic inequalities (Grasham et al., 2022). We connect these processes through the critical feminist perspective of embodied women's experiences in developing their businesses and negotiating their social positions in a small town in Ethiopia.

In navigation of different spaces, people (re)negotiate their social lives, construct identities, and develop household economies. Women's informal entrepreneurship cannot be analysed separately from their living spaces as they "recursively shape each

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other" (see also Grant, 2013; Hanson, 2009, p. 247). Entrepreneurship is a "gendered geographic process" (Hanson, 2009, p. 251; Hovorka & Dietrich, 2011; see also Langevang, Gough, Yankson, Owusu, & Osei, 2015) as women inhabit specific spaces and occupations (which often rely on access to water), negotiate gender norms whilst being responsible for household services and childcare.

We analyze the controversy and complexity of urban places for gender equity with a focus on low-skilled women entrepreneurs in the informal economy of Wukro, a small town in the Tigray region. Ethiopia has a relatively low urban population (17.3 per cent compared to 36 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa) though it has been predicted to triple by 2037 (World Bank Group, 2015). Beyond the national perspective (Gebre-Egziabher, 2019; Hailemariam & Adugna, 2011; World Bank Group, 2015), the specifics of gendered perspectives of navigating urban places and particularly small towns have been overlooked. Small towns in Sub-Saharan Africa are estimated to include at least half of the urban population (Tuholske, Caylor, Evans, & Avery, 2019), but are largely ignored in the literature. They have particular characteristics, being an organic part (and not the outcome) of their rural surrounding regions (Agergaard, Tacoli, Steel, & Ørtenblad, 2019) and as our paper shows, female urban entrepreneurship is uniquely interlinked with gendered experiences of marriage and norms within the family in their rural settings. Compared to big cities, small-town spaces are more intimate, familiar, and accessible and in the Ethiopian case at least, class inequalities are less pronounced. The perspective of women entrepreneurs in Ethiopia is underexplored and has been studied predominantly through quantitative approaches (e.g. Abagissa, 2013; Kebede, 2020); often from the perspective of formal business owners in Addis Ababa (e.g. Markowska & Abebe, 2021). While the specific needs of women and barriers to entrepreneurship have been politically acknowledged (e.g. in the National Urban Development Policy, Family Code), initiatives miss structural changes, investments, and institutional reforms (Bandauko, Annan-Aggrey, & Arku, 2020; Semela, Bekele, & Abraham, 2019).

We analyse how female entrepreneurs strive for, and negotiate, independence through spatiality and how services, specifically water, affect their ability to develop their business spaces. We conclude that their businesses develop through the simultaneous presence of various, multilevel spaces of marginality/paradoxical spaces and articulation of independence as control over one's business and body. "Independence" characterizes the ability to secure one's income without relying on family or other social support.[1] Thus, 'negotiating independence' is a path towards financial self-sufficiency, control over the business and the ability to manage one's own household and life; it is often aspired to rather than achieved. We draw on discussions by feminist geographers on spaces to understand how women work through multiple socio-economic, gendered and water obstacles to develop their businesses that were demeaned in society, such as coffee shops (bunabéts) or traditional beer houses (inda siwa) that often combine making basic food (i.e. injera or grocery). These findings are complemented with the perspectives of hair salon owners, that were socially more respected.

2. Negotiating spaces, negotiating independence

'Here space is gender' – using the description of South Durban streets by Collins et al. (2014) – we can similarly denote Wukro. Most spaces in Wukro were demarked by gender exclusivity (with some exceptions). For example: men led the construction and hotel

industries; in times of crises, women searched for water; women operated bunabéts and inda siwa; men were customers. Nevertheless, many women respondents claimed that they lived at times of 'gender equality', 'women could do any job they liked' and 'there was no difficult job for women'. These statements are in line with a study by Leight (2021) who has argued that in just one generation some aspects of intrahousehold gender equity have improved dramatically in Ethiopia, such as father domination in decision making in the natal household. How they negotiated their pathways to independence through different spaces is of particular interest in this paper.

Space is mutually constitutive with gender and place and integral to time. It 'is by its very nature of power and symbolism, a complex web of the relation of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation' (Massey, 1994, p. 265). Space and place have been originally considered as arenas in which social life unfolds, later 'as a medium through which social life is produced and reproduced' and subjectivities are formed (Bondi & Davidson, 2005; Harris, 2006; see also: Nightingale, 2011; Rose, 1993). Moreover, embodied experiences of natural environments (such as materiality of water and infrastructure) influence the way people understand themselves in relation to society and the state (Sultana, 2009, 2011, 2020).

How relation between spaces and subjectivities reproduces, constitutes, and articulates intersectional marginalities is central to understanding embodied gendered daily life struggles and navigation. Rose (1993) has coined the term 'paradoxical space' in which women are simultaneously in the centre and at the periphery of patriarchal hegemony, both represented and unrepresented. Gendered marginalization occurs in multiple ways, e.g. in public spaces where women's bodies are not legitimate or their voices are not heard; or in a woman's sense of being trapped in domestic duties. Bell hooks (1989, 2000) has described spatial and social marginality from the perspective of a black woman and has argued that marginality is not only a space of oppression and misery but also resistance. The tension between gendered belonging to public and private spheres (Erman, Kalaycıoğlu, & Rittersberger-Tılıç, 2002; Fenster, 2005; Staeheli, 1996), performing one's gender in different spaces (Butler, 1997a; van Blerk, 2011) and redefining one's power in private domestic spaces (Meah, 2013) is acute in all patriarchal societies. Sultana (2009) has developed the discussion further through the analysis of how women's bodies become a centre of resource struggles and women traverse these spaces whilst moving between different subjectivities. We see these socio-physical spaces of marginalization being produced in the relationship between society, political and economic discourses and consequently constructing conflicting subjectivities (inspired by: Bhabha & Rutherford, 1990).

With the term "independence" we describe the emerging power that allows control over some specific situations and the ability of a woman to make their own choices. We understand power not as owned by individuals, but as relational and contingent, emerging in the interplay between human agency and constitutive power (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2018; Allen, 2021) in 'encounters between spaces, actors, discourses, institutions, knowledge and practices, across multiple levels' (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2018, p. 387). Thus, "power with us" develops in the dialogue with "power over" (Butler, 1997b) and the power is evident only in performative acts (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2018; Butler, [1990], 1999). The presence of constitutive power, continuous subjection and unavoidable interdependencies that enable socio-economic lives mean that complete and static independence is impossible.

Negotiation of independence is a complex and nuanced combination of different manifestations through, sometimes paradoxical, spaces/spaces of marginality and conflicting subjectivities. Bhabha (1990, p. 216) has argued that in any political struggle, new sites of

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[1] Heavy reliance on family and social support networks is typical in Ethiopia (see, e.g. Di Nunzio, 2017; Kebede, 2017).

negotiation are opened up that take various forms, such as subversion or transgression; moreover, 'negotiation is not just some kind of compromise of "selling out"'. This is the process when one 'should translate [one's own] principles, rethink them, extend them'. We see independence as an act of imagination, aim and negotiation of the smaller gains (similarly to the discussion of agency: Korzenevica, 2015). Independence can be crafted and (re)-worked, idealised and yearned for through certain spatial setups (like rural–urban mobility and expected independence from arranged marriage obligations). Thus, it can appear in the form of resistance, but also a reconfiguration of one's role and identity. Different facets of independence appeared in the data: the financial independence (even when married) of being able to support oneself and one's children with one's income, independence in terms of making one's own decisions as per relations with partners and marital status, as well as having control over essential resources, such as home, water and electricity.

'Independence' has been briefly mentioned in other studies on female entrepreneurship, typically about independence from a husband (Ojong, Simba, & Dana, 2021; Steel, 2017) and it has many parallels with 'empowerment' when used as a transfer of power through the recognition, and the accruing of rights, that a marginalized group has asked for (see discussion by: Batliwala, 2007). At the same time, empowerment as a term has been stretched in different directions, often becoming a neoliberal agenda to encourage individuals to accrue power and develop successful economic selves. Empowerment has intrinsically good connotations, following the definition of Kabeer (1999, 2012) who has argued that empowerment is a process by which disempowered people get sufficient power to make meaningful choices in their life, in which a combination of structure, agency and resources enable the process. However, we have seen that entrepreneurship does not necessarily lead to empowerment (Johnson, 2020) and in many cases women work both 'because of', but also 'in spite of' or 'for no other choice'. The recent innovative methodology developed by Dicking, Bisung, Nansi and Charles (2021) focuses on conceptualizing and measuring empowerment in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) through a set of indicators at individual, household and societal levels aimed to compare gender differences. Though this approach is useful and inspirational, in cases like ours, it is important to understand how migration, water, entrepreneurship, lifecourse and position within the society are entangled in gender struggles.

Informal female entrepreneurship is a space of dire circumstances but also of power, agency and active resistance (Sowatey et al., 2018). With the focus on 'independence' and not 'empowerment', we acknowledge the strong agency of women entrepreneurs in the tension with their structural arrangements and resources that they need to work through or negotiate daily. While "independence" is a strong and potentially controversial concept that may not be applicable in other contexts, it is also the term that respondents preferred to describe themselves with and it appeared in other studies on women entrepreneurs in Ethiopia (such as in: Abagissa, 2013).

3. Marginal spaces of women's informal entrepreneurship within the urbanization of Ethiopia and broader Sub-Saharan Africa

Various discourses (at times antagonistic) within configurations in history, political economy and society, produce embodied subjectivities in spaces of marginality/paradoxical spaces, impacting how women traverse spaces and socio-economic pathways, negotiate their complex visions and construct identities. Urban places often embed aspirations for women's 'emancipation' (Chant & McIlwaine, 2016) and indeed, our data indicate that many migrant respondents have managed to escape marriage-related gender norms by leaving their home villages. At the same time, in Wukro town they experience other types of marginality, such as the sole responsibility for care and time poverty in the form of many responsibilities (see also: Gammage, 2010; Tacoli, 2012), lack of kin support networks and a disproportionate burden of arranging access to services such as water.

The rise of female entrepreneurship followed as Ethiopia transitioned in 1991 from the Derg's military socialist regime to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPDRF) led 'vanguard capitalism' (Weis, 2015, p. 17), a system that combines 'the logic of capitalist markets with the centralising political logic of a party steeped in the Leninist tradition of vanguard thinking'. The EPDRF aimed to build a market economy and they succeeded in it promptly, getting the title of 'African lion' (Fantini, 2013) just a decade after, with acknowledgement to Ethiopia's growth and partial fulfilment of the Millenium Development Goals. Nevertheless, unemployment has been high, with a disproportionate number of women; for example, within the age bracket of 25–29, women unemployment is above 30 per cent compared to 12 per cent for men (Djamba & Teller, 2011). Accordingly, women and young people's entrepreneurships are a path to be a 'catalyst of change' (GoE, 2016 [2012], pp. 5, in relation to women's and youth Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs)). Indeed, women account for 74 per cent[2] of micro and small enterprises (MSEs), according to reports by the Ethiopian Central Statistics Agency (CSA) of 2003, 2006 and 2010 (in Kipnis, 2013) and their enterprises tend to grow faster than men's. At the same time, their share in MSEs is declining (Solomon, 2010), their businesses are less sustainable and women entrepreneurs are two and a half times as likely to fail in comparison to men (Bekele & Worku, 2008).

In response to this 'problem', a set of studies and reports have aimed to understand the reasons why women fall behind men. Several studies (predominantly quantitative) have listed indicators that affect the performance of female entrepreneurs, such as difficulty getting loans, training and education, financial resources, biases and culture (Alene, 2020; Beriso, 2021; Singh & Belwal, 2008; Solomon, 2010). While these studies have started shedding light on some of the essential issues of access, rights and gender biases, there is also a tendency to denote the "weak" points in women entrepreneurs' profiles, by describing how they are different from men, hence not reaching men's performance (Markowska & Abebe, 2021). Broader studies on Sub Saharan Africa show that women entrepreneurs are embedded in the political, social, and cultural contexts in their countries (Langevang et al., 2015; Ojong et al., 2021). The term 'institutional void' (developed by Mair and Marti (2009) in their study on Bangladesh) is equally applicable in Ethiopia, to describe a situation where institutional support to markets is weak, absent or malfunctioning. Di Nunzio (2017) argues that informal entrepreneurship in Ethiopia generally follows the pattern of the politics of limited entitlements that maintains social marginality and does not address the core issues of social differentiation and unequal distribution of resources. In relation to women entrepreneurship, Markowska & Abebe (2021) and Woldegies (2016) argue that supportive policies and good intentions have been lacking institutional capacity. Despite the centrality of water to the function of MSEs, their water demand has been insufficiently considered in Ethiopian water policy (Grasham et al., 2022). It should be acknowledged, though, that

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[2] It is important to acknowledge, though, that according to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (*GEM*) Female/Male TEA (Total Early-stage Entrepreneurship) was 0.78 (2012), which is the second lowest rate compared to other studied Sub Saharan countries (overall ten). (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (*GEM*), 2012).

the Family Code implemented in 2000 and the following implementation have been significant for gender equity in other ways such as increased tenure security among women and shift in perceptions towards equal division of land and livestock upon divorce (Kumar & Quisumbing, 2015).

Women's entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa is embedded in the ability to access and benefit from reciprocal social networks, as well as to navigate gender roles within households. The comprehensive literature review by Ojong et al. (2021) outlines that women have limited access to resources due to patriarchal norms defining women's roles primarily as wives/mothers to escape the weakening man's authority next to an earning wife. Multiple studies indicate the double burden that women have, by participating in the labour market and being solely responsible for household work, childcare and familial social obligations (Magidimisha & Gordon, 2015; Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019; Ojong et al., 2021), and in particular in Ethiopia (Gudeta & van Engen, 2018; Hailemariam, Kroon, & van Veldhoven, 2017; ILO & ECA, 2009). In Ethiopia's culture, women are portrayed and perceived as inferior to men, hence women's achievements are marginalized (Markowska & Abebe, 2021). However, it should be also noted that family is not exclusively a limiting factor, others have acknowledged the importance of social support in business (e.g. Sowatey et al., 2018 on Ghana). Xiong et al (2018) have argued that in the context of poverty, family and business should be viewed together as a social-economic entity. The perspective of our respondents, composed predominantly of single and/or divorced women, often with weak linkages to their families, continues this discussion from the perspective of a different social group (i.e. women that are relatively less dependent on their families). Their businesses, characterised by serving male customers (with the exception to hair salons), occupy a paradoxical space of being an object of aspiration (particularly by *bunabéts* owners) (see also: Johnson, 2020), achievement and independence by single women from social networks and family but also demeaned, disrespected and embedded in the negative perception of sexuality and inappropriateness for women.

The fluctuating socio-political subjectivity of women in Tigray has been affected by the vision of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF),[3] a leading party that was at the forefront of the fall of the Derg's military regime. Before TPLF began a reform in the 1980 s, gender inequality was profound: a daughter in the family was considered a burden due to heavy dowry obligations, women could not own land and were married as early as the age of five or six (Hendrie, 1999). TPLF saw these conceptions as an obstacle to socio-economic development and proclaimed equality, granting women land and establishing their property rights in marriage and divorce, involving women in public politics, building associations and improving girls' access to education (Hammond, 2001; Hendrie, 1999; Mjaaland, 2018). The ideology was that women must organise, struggle for their rights and even sacrifice for the improvement of the collective position (Hammond, 2001). TPLF managed to achieve the elimination of some practices, such as raising the minimum age of marriage for girls to 15, granting the right to choose their spouses and the prohibition of physical abuse within marriage (Hendrie, 1999). Despite the sustainability of some initiatives, others dissipated after 1991, such as women's political engagement, because 'the discourse of women's inferiority [...] is inscribed and normalised in the humble objects of daily life and accepted practice'. (Hammond, 2001). Similarly, our respondents claimed a lack of belonging to any associations or group, except the occasional *equb* (saving group) and due to the

potentially sensitive nature of political views and political belonging, we did not probe further.

4. Case of wukro

'Everything is nice in Wukro; its weather is good, it is green, a place of fortune. Everybody seeks to live in Wukro; Wukro is good.' Fig. 1.

As a small town of roughly 50 000 people (Central Statistical Agency, 2013), Wukro has been growing rapidly. Visually it can be characterised by one main road, few cars, yet many *bajaj* (three-wheeled auto-rickshaws) and hotels under construction. Hotels have been growing to serve conferences and to accommodate tourists departing to regional attractions. The town has been experiencing an inflow of capital from low-skilled labour migration; Tigray has experienced particularly high numbers of labour mobility (e.g. in one of the surveys by the IOM (2020) they found that 41 per cent of Ethiopian migrants in Obock, Djibouti, were from Tigray) and Ethiopia has one of the largest flows of low-skilled, female domestic labour migrants (International Labour Organization, 2017). Mobility has been a doubled-edged sword, boosting national and local economic progress due to the inflow of money (Andersson, 2012) while some are pushed to migrate illegally experiencing multiple health risks, physical safety and sexual exploitation (own data, but also see: Ratha et al., 2011; RMMS, 2014). Nevertheless, those who were financially successful have been able to build big houses, hotels and restaurants, making the favourable area close to the main road less affordable for others. Respondents saw the possibility to engage in larger business and construction only because of migration and not local entrepreneurship.

Water in Wukro has been a scarce resource due to urban population growth, construction, and the seasonality of water availability. To address the demand–supply gap, an integrated WASH investment programme was inaugurated in 2018 (funded by UK FCDO,[4] implemented by UNICEF). Three new boreholes were constructed in an artesian aquifer in the Abreha-we-Athsbeha neighbouring village. In our 2019 survey, one third of households reported improvements in household water availability as a result of the intervention and the concern about water as their highest priority fell from 76 per cent to 20 per cent of the population. At the time of the interviews, the new water system was in transition and was operating below capacity. According to the municipal water utility, the boreholes were only producing 1900 m^3 (with 19 per cent wastage) per day, below the minimum demand of 3141 m^3.

The difference in water supply between the 'haves' and 'have nots' was profound. Grasham's et al. (2022) analysis reveals that Wukro is characterised through spatial water security clusters with different indicators. For instance, in the central part of Wukro (Agazi) only 8 per cent of respondents reported stopping domestic or enterprise activities at home due to water scarcity experienced in the last year, compared to 66 per cent in the Northern part of the town (Dedebit), despite all the houses having their own taps. In Fig. 2 both water diary and interview results show a high degree of spatial heterogeneity in the reliability of piped water supply, ranging from supply of tap water six days a week (half of water diary participants), to a median of 1–3 days per week of piped water (one quarter of water diary households) to several interview respondents not having piped water for weeks or even months; others not even having piped water on their premises.

In this situation of (co–)produced unequal spaces of water precarity, lack of clarity, consistency and geographical fairness,

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[3] Since 2020 TPLF has been central in the Tigray war, having different, than stated here, aims and practices. This discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper and here we outline only the historical perspective.

[4] Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Fig. 1. The main road of Wukro.

people resorted to using different water sources. Water trucks were meant to be an official alternative water source, and some benefitted from regular water trucks (weekly), but most had never seen one in their area, despite water scarcity. The re-selling or buying of water, though frequent practice, was illegal. People knew where to go to 'beg' for water at times of water interruption, but they were not informed (apart from a few respondents) when and if their tap water would flow, or whether the person will be willing to share their water. Many supplemented their water needs by borrowing or purchasing from neighbours, or informal water vendors, at costs ranging from 2 to 10 birr[5] [0.07–0.34 EUR] per 20-litre jerrycan, much higher than 5 birr [0.17 EUR] per 1000-litres through the piped network. Among water diary households 27 per cent of water expenditures accounted for water bought from neighbours or vendors. People were lacking entitlements (Mehta, 2014) to share water, access information or have control over water access. Despite these difficulties, the dynamics of the small town caused women to describe their water access in relation to others: those getting water once every-seven days would frequently note that, for them, it is manageable in comparison to others.

5. Methodology

This paper combines multiple social studies conducted between 2018 and 2020 in cooperation between University of Oxford (UK) and University of Mekelle (Ethiopia) University researchers. Studies have not been designed cross-comparatively and had different aims and sampling strategies: 1) The study of water needs for women entrepreneurs was based on interviews (47 traditional beer makers, 12 coffee shop owners and nine hair salon owners) and supported by observation and interviews with water utility officers and local elders (Zerihun, Tafere, & Zegeye, 2020), 2) The study of young women entrepreneurs included 49 life herstories of predominantly women *bunabét* owners (Johnson, 2020), 3) A follow-up study including previous and new respondents (mainly women) was based on 50 semi structured interviews, primarily to explore changes in the perception of water access over time and within different water crises. These three studies comprise the core of the paper, but they were supported by: 4) The water diary (methodology: Hoque & Hope, 2018) that involved 104 households using pictorial charts to record their water use (sources and quantity) and expenditures every day for a 48-week period; and 5) a WASH survey of 701 households selected via random spatial sampling (84 per cent female respondents).

Various researchers conducted the core studies, mostly in one-on-one interviews in the business settings of respondents. There were times when other adult people (e.g. husbands or customers) stepped into the interview and it would change the dynamic instantly with women answering in a much less open way (and us adjusting the interview accordingly). Most of the interviews were recorded with informed consent, transcribed and translated from Tigrigna to English. Results of studies 1 and 3 were analysed using NVIVO, study 5 was analysed using SPSS.

Three social studies used a combination of random and purposeful sampling. For the studies 1 and 3 we aimed to get a perspective of areas of differentiated piped water provision (building our knowledge from the survey in 2016 and conversations with locals) in the first round, for the second round purposefully choosing spaces with problematic water access in order to understand marginal spaces. Specific *inda siwa* businesses were chosen randomly (asking locals to point at the nearest businesses within the chosen locality). *Bunabét* owners were selected following the dispersion of the businesses along the main road. In the 3rd study we also aimed to meet respondents from the 1st and 2nd studies, but practically it was difficult due to high levels of respondents' mobility. To understand the dynamics of urbanization, variation

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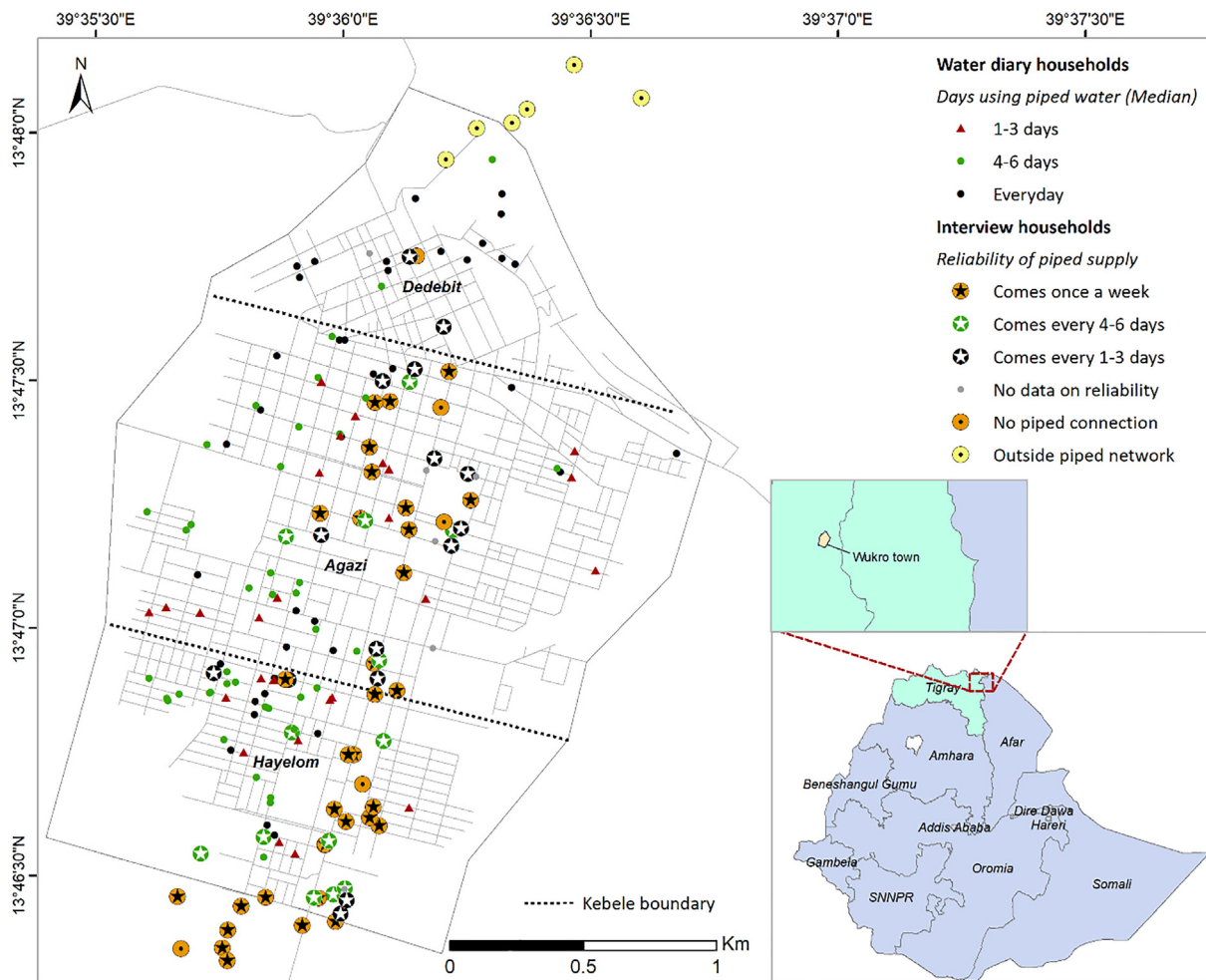[5] Financial Times exchange rate 24-8-2018.

Fig. 2. Map of Wukro showing the location of households (study 2, 3 and 4 only) and their water availability.

of socio-economic positioning and some additional gender per-spectives, additionally we spent a few days in the *peri*-urban loca-tion, conducted ten interviews with men who were somehow involved in the business (as leaders or helpers to their partners) and nine hair salon owners (chosen randomly). With this selection we are aware that the social studies are not representative of the whole Wukro; nevertheless, the support of other quantitative stud-ies have helped us to position findings within broader dataset.

Each respondent's story is unique and remarkable, though there were some patterns around age, presence of children, education, mobility and relation to nuclear and extended families including financial and social support. More than half of the core sample had migrated to Wukro, typically from neighbouring villages, in a few cases from Mekelle, Amhara or Eritrea. The impact of mobility on women's lives has been diverse, because some immigrated to Wukro some decades ago, others less than five, some being settled in their locality for a longer period, others moving within Wukro frequently and a few experiencing or aspiring for labour mobility. What mattered more for negotiating independence was the fluidity of social support. Mainly hair salon owners benefitted from the tra-ditional business networks (as in: Kebede, 2020), but for others it was the emotional support of siblings, sharing the house and resource struggles with some family members (in line with Xiong's (2018) argument on the blend between family and micro-enterprise), occasional financial help from relations or neighbours who could help with water and childcare. Access to them was dis-persed among different patterns of mobilities and situations - e.g.

some immigrants to Wukro enjoyed the presence of sisters and established connections with neighbours, while some women who had moved from a different locatlity within Wukro did not. Some women had several of these support mechanisms, others had none, and that had a significant emotional (e.g. feeling power-less in front of a landlord who regulates water) and practical influ-ence (e.g. when neighbours could notify about water fluctuations or help with childcare) in ability to negotiate marginality.

Women who were above their mid-thirties were usually poorly formally schooled, had migrated from the surrounding rural areas, and had encountered early arranged marriages. Many experienced multiple marriages (typically only the first marriage was arranged) and children born within or outside marital arrangements – all these practices being socially accepted. This correlates with the findings by Kuma and Quisumbing (2015) that in Tigray the proportion of women-headed households is close to 60 % while the average from the whole sample from other regions is only slightly above 30 % (their selection, though, is not representative of the whole population),. Most women in this age group were divorced, a few were widows. Most oper-ated *inda siwa,* where people (predominantly men) spent time enjoying *siwa* (some took it home). There were a few women who were married and whose husbands remained supportive of, or were a part of, the business as they saw its financial ben-efits, but these cases were in a minority.

Younger women (up to their mid-twenties) were formally bet-ter schooled, mainly single or divorced, only occasionally with the

pressure of arranged marriages and mostly childless. They typically had the experience of labour mobility to Saudi Arabia. Their main businesses were *bunabéts* in which they performed the traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony and offered coffee to customers. A few respondents were hair salon business owners who had benefitted from other female family members introducing the business and enabling the start-up, had hairdressing training, were socio-economically better off, more respected, and generally satisfied with their business and prospects. *Inda siwa* and *bunabéts* were fairly divided regarding age, reserved for older and younger women respectively; though both businesses had commonalities of being easy to start without initial capital, skillset or training.

There was a handful of women who came from Eritrea and for whom Wukro was a place of political freedom. People used to travel between Wukro and Eritrea for the purpose of work or occasional visits due to the geographical proximity, historical union between Ethiopia and Eritrea in the mid-20th century and the cultural and linguistic similarities. However, during the war[6] in 1998–2000, many civilians were deported, imprisoned, or fled to escape. For those women, who experienced deportation, Wukro became a safe haven.

6. Negotiating spaces of marginality and aspirations for independence

The process of becoming a businessperson is sometimes strategic but mostly spontaneous. In this section we describe and analyze how women navigate spaces of marginalities, aspirations and necessities, the process being contradictory and messy. Their complex experiences are supporting studies arguing that motivation is driven by the blend of opportunities and necessities (Magidimisha & Gordon, 2015; Xiong et al., 2018). Women took pride in being businesspeople and, with the exception of one, all claimed that the vocation was preferred over the role of housewife. Nevertheless, the informal, MSEs of *bunabéts* and *inda siwa* have been perceived as almost the only way to secure a living with low initial investment capital (with the exception of being a daily labourer, an occupation that every-one noted as extremely tiresome, socially low and poorly paid). Particularly in the case of *inda siwa*, women described it as 'the last option for the poor' (68 y, widow, *inda siwa*, five children, migrant) and 'just for survival'. It should be noted, though, that there were exceptions; women who managed to build a business strategically, with better capital, planning and training, had a more profitable business, faced fewer challenges, and were generally satisfied with their income.

Starting a business symbolized independence. For rural to urban migrants, Wukro offered self-sufficiency, a metropolitan lifestyle, a chance to escape family-imposed gender norms (predominantly for older women) and the realisation of dreams and aspirations (in the case of younger women). Most of the women were passionately in love with Wukro, a great town with good people, weather, location, urban expansion, and business opportunities. One woman said: 'When I came from the village I decided to work, it is better to live here in town with electricity than being rich in a village' (44 y, divorced, three children, one grandchild, *inda siwa*, migrant). Another woman commented, pointing at the freedom that Wukro gave to her intimate life: 'I like it [Wukro] very much! No matter whether you have something to eat or not, to feel comfortable and have a good sleep [meaning not having a person you do not like in your bed] is great' (20 y, hair salon, divorced, childless, migrant).

Embodied independence was found to be closely related to control over one's body – gained through the symbolic and physical traversing of spaces. Marginalization of women in the space of their parental families through pressure, mostly in the form of forced marriage, was a common reason for women's mobility. Some women were married as early as the age of 10[7] and, through consequent divorces, wanted a fresh start. Another woman (61 y, widow, five children, injera maker, migrant) was put in a '*tish*'[8] by parents but nevertheless managed to escape an arranged marriage and move to Wukro to 'make her own decisions'. Entrepreneurship for these women was an act of resistance. Engaging in *inda siwa* meant resisting marriages or family rules, often involving risks. For instance, one woman (25 y, migrant, married but husband lives in a different city, one child, *inda siwa*) moved from her village against her parents and sister's instructions: 'Parents have already messed with my life [...] I want to make my own decisions'. Her sister took all her clothes and belongings to stop her, but she moved anyway. 'So, having the six birr [0.2 EUR], I rented a house and started my own business.'.

Family-imposed restrictions were fluid through time, lifecourse and space. While some studies have indicated that a household (both between spouse partners, intergenerationally and intragen-erationally) tends to get maintained across spaces through the reproduction of social norms and obligations (Thao & Agergaard, 2012; Korzenevica & Agergaard, 2017), in Wukro, intergenerational gender norms have been transforming across space and time. Most families accepted divorces and new independent marriages, and only a few insisted on arranging a second marriage. The rate of divorce post-Derg generally increased (Hendrie, 1999) and mobility to Wukro has geographically, and symbolically, resulted in movement between spaces of different norms and gendered expectations.

Divorces of non-arranged marriages have created structural spaces of marginalization that positioned women with children without social support in a destitute situation. Whilst unemployment (particularly of the young) has been studied well in the Global South in general (Esson, 2013; Jeffrey, 2008; Langevang, 2008), and Ethiopia (Broussard & Tekleselassie, 2012; Mains, 2011; Mengisteab, 2019), the urgency of finding an immediate income for women, often with dependents, has not been picked up by scholars. Ethiopian law rules that a divorced couple divides common assets equally and a man is obliged to pay a certain amount to a woman who usually keeps the child(-ren). In the case of unmarried couples, proof of fatherhood is a lengthy process. In either case, an estimate suggests that only one third of women receive any financial support from their child(ren)'s fathers (or state) and women rarely go to court (Serkalem, 2006). Among the respondents, only a few received a payment that the court had agreed to; most of the women did not receive anything or only books or clothes periodically. This marginalization, created by the lack of financial support to single mothers without income, was internalized and many felt embarrassed to ask their husbands, the court, or the government. Women continuously emphasized their ability to make their own decisions and to rule their own lives without the expectation of support from any institution. One

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[6] Eritrean-Ethiopian peace was reached only in 2018. The war led to massive forcible expulsion from both countries of people of the opposite country's descent after detention in degrading conditions. It is estimated that around 40 000 people of Ethiopia descent were displaced from Eritrea. (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

[7] Older women experienced early marriages that were a strategy to increase a household's welfare and economic networks (Weis 2014, Fafchamps and Quisumbing 2005). Young brides moved to the house of their husbands only after reaching puberty, though. According to respondents, early marriages were problematic, but they ensured family support.

[8] A traditional beauty practice performed on unmarried women. A woman's body is covered with butter, and she sits in smoke and heat for several hours a day for weeks or months to make her skin smooth. 'They put you in the tish and people will look at you as if you have married a man and you just go out, take whichever man you want as if I was old, and they couldn't find a husband for me. After that you won't be like virgin'.

woman (36 y, divorced, four children, *inda siwa*, migrant) clearly explained the position that has been interweaving many other narratives: 'you shouldn't expect the government, or another body, to create a job for you; you should create for yourself. If the town is growing economically and expanding, it is creating an opportunity for you so you should find it.'.

Engagement with *bunabéts,* done mainly by younger women, was perceived as an undesirable, but necessary, steppingstone for socio-economic mobility and independence. It was typically a first business after labour mobility to Saudi Arabia, although perhaps more so for less financially successful returnees. *Bunabéts* was an easy temporary option as women aspired to own larger businesses like grocery stores, restaurants or boutiques. Meanwhile they were occupying, in line with Enria (2018, p. 15), 'sub-optimal forms of work while attempting to steer life towards a different future.' In general, *bunabét* businesses were perceived as incompatible with marriage, though others imagined the combination possible if they prioritized the (domestic) responsibilities of a married woman.

A lack of structural support positioned many low-skilled women within the precarity of informal business. Commonly, they complained about power outages and the inflation of expenses. Inflation in Ethiopia has been mostly modest, apart from during climate shocks and war. However, in 2004 and 2008, Tigray in particular experienced major inflation spikes of up to 58 per cent for cereals in 2008 (Admassie, 2014). One of the many state responses to cope with food price volatility was to create cooperative shops (Woldehanna & Tafere, 2015) in which food items such as sugar and oil were rationed. However, the specific needs of informal business owners have not been considered. According to respondents, cooperative shops were not sufficient for their businesses, especially given that some people hoarded goods and illegally resold them at a higher rate. As one woman said (55 y, married, injera, three children): 'You just live between death and life [...]. Because fuel is expensive, teff is expensive [...], but it helps me not to ask money from my husband'.

Overall, we discovered a combination of aspirations and multiple spaces of marginality in Wukro, such as the process of marriage arrangement, practices of divorce, rural–urban and labour mobility, reworking the lack of entitlements and structural support. All these spaces women (re)negotiated, re-worked and resisted.

7. Negotiating places, negotiating boundaries of spaces

The business place is more than just geographical location – it is a space of continuous negotiation of the tension between permeable private and public spaces, marginality and resistance, silenced vulnerability and the perception of control and independence (see also: Hanson, 2009).

Finding and negotiating a business place (that usually included a home) was among the central worries of the respondents as it exposed many vulnerabilities from poor rental regulations to business denial by landlords. Most women rented their business (and home) place – among the exceptions were a few house owners (usually older women, who benefitted from smaller competition and initially higher profit when they started their business), those renting rooms for a small fee or even free, and some others renting a business place that was different to their home. Many property owners did not allow businesspeople in their premises or were critical of them at a later stage. Switching rental places was very common; among the respondents only four women had not, at some stage, been given relatively short notice to leave.

Paradoxality of business places was articulated by women being physically central yet limited from complex individualities to the specific feminine dimension that pleased male preferences. This marginalization was not bounded by physical location and stretched into wider society. Both *inda siwa* and *bunabét* businesses were associated with sexuality, promiscuity, and sex work (in the case of *bunabéts*), living 'below human' and being 'not appropriate for [respectful] women' (about *inda siwa*). Women were vulnerable to harassment (*inda siwa*), and in the case of *bunabéts* - stigma, sexual advances, and other forms of violence from their male customers. Through all these difficulties, women argued that they must welcome each behaviour, otherwise they may lose customers. Silent acceptance, and an environment that enables and fosters it, has clear gendered normalization of vulnerability. This public space has been created and maintained by women, yet has empowered men to develop unequally valued and accepted permissive style of behaviour (see also: Fraser, 1990). The immoral image of women has been strong beyond the business place; as one *bunabét* owner described: *'If you open a bunabét, people think that you don't have any dreams. You were not respected. Every-one – both old and young, both those who were better than you and those who weren't – they look down on you.'* Some exceptions should be noted, though, experiences of hair salon/grocery/injera women were not the same and women running their businesses in the periphery of Wukro benefitted from more trustful and respectful customers.

Business has been conflating private and public spaces on multiple levels and the tension between the two has impacted women's negotiations of power, and performances of identity. For the majority, business was often inseparable from home, childcare and dignity of their own body, pushing women to negotiate their conflicting identities in a humiliating way (see also: van Blerk, 2011). Emotional juggling is what divorced and single mothers, particularly of small babies, were experiencing. They have been torn between a need to keep a place open for drinking until dawn, and a crying baby, responding to whom would mean losing customers, or customers leaving without paying. Some engaged their older children, particularly girls, in tasks. Others tried to shield their daughters from seeing the scenes of everyday business, but also to protect their business from more outspoken girls, a feature of the new generation, as many older women said. One woman felt a lot of shame about her daughter witnessing the type of 'flirting' she felt she had to take part in to succeed as a *bunabét* owner. *'[In this job] you have to be careful about how you look and present yourself. You can make a lot [of profit] by wearing short skirts, sitting with your [male] customers, drinking with them, letting them hug you, but the costs outweigh the benefits. Sometimes I do these things just to get money from people, but I don't want my daughter to see me do that... Once I heard her say to her friend "[My mother] is working until eleven at night sometimes, and there were all kinds of men coming, hugging, and kissing her. She only does it because she wants their money. I don't feel good about my mother's work. I wish she would just stay at home, prepare me food, and take care of me." That made me feel very ashamed.'.*

In these spaces of normalized, yet still painful, marginalization women were nevertheless trying to control their choices and demonstrate their agency in a myriad of ways. Seen through the conceptualization of agency (reworking, resilience, resistance) by Katz (2001, 2004), women were mostly reworking and occasionally resisting their conditions. Reworking was commonly done through imagination to counter the negative aspects of gendered business spaces and creative modifications and adaptations of their image (in line with other studies on the use of imagination in agency: Dyson, 2008; Jeffrey, 2012; Mahler & Pessar, 2001). In the case of *bunabéts*, women claimed that this type of business was only temporary until they managed to develop something better. *Inda siwa* owners, mostly with children and more limited in their options, tried to re-work negative connotations by taking pride in their ability to perform in a way that would maintain customers, swallow insults, and calm every conflict. Others resisted the most extreme aspects of their work, e.g. by managing conflicts by engaging the

police and negotiating retribution for property damage with rela-tives of wrongdoers. Women were succeeding, despite the highly inequitable gender relations, and narrating their experiences in a way that did not portray them as oppressed, but as liberated managers.

Finding, managing, and maintaining the physical place and space of a business bears strong social and gendered complexities, revealing the paradoxical position of women entrepreneurs. They were excluded from the formal support whilst marginalized by patriarchal principles; at the same time, they were active doers and negotiators of their business and the tensions between a busi-ness space's negative encroachment into family private space. Against the negative image they exercised resistance 'through advocating important self-identities' (Hitlin & Elder, 2007, p. 182)..

8. Negotiating precarious water spaces

Embodiment of water struggles (Sultana, 2009, 2020) mirrored women's experiences as businesspeople, taking shape of simulta-neous suffering and helplessness, as well as emerging power as control and independence. While between half and one third of the urban water systems in developing world operate intermit-tently (WHO/UNICEF, 2000) the social implications of intermit-tency have been rarely discussed (with exception to: L. Harris, Kleiber, Goldin, Darkwah, & Morinville, 2017; Truelove, 2011). Sultana (2020) has used the term 'water precarity' to denote pre-carities of life and water (separately and intertwined) with the lat-ter denoting a water system's unreliability, frequent poor quality and insufficiency, that exacerbates life's precarity and suffering. In our use, it similarly implies people's vulnerability to the physi-cal, social and political dimensions of water supply fluctuations. It encapsulates water-related emotional distress (eg. Sultana, 2011; Wutich & Ragsdale, 2008), as well as people's expectations, adaptation, and impact on the household and entrepreneurial activities.

Water was struggle. Unpredictable supply of water, typically at night, caused regular sleepless nights for women who were often the sole income earners and carers of children: 'We sit and wait and collect drops all night. We get tired and scared to fall asleep in case water comes, [we] turn on the light and sit like fools'. At times of water shortage, women entered Wukro's streets to 'wander around' with jerrycans, possibly for hours, to 'beg' for water. They were dependent on the mercy of neighbours who were illegally selling water and often denied it. The alternative was to use water delivery by *bajaj*, but this was costly, slow and risky – since there was no information about the source and quality of the water. Moreover, personal relations and the property owners' tempera-ment defined whether renters had piped water in the first place, when and how much they were allowed to access, these restric-tions being equalized with *'lost freedom'*.

Water precarity impacted women's ability to control develop-ment of their business as they were exposed to multiple entrepre-neurial risks such as losing business space, customers as well as precious time and energy to make products. Though intermittency was widely accepted as the norm, it was the lack of information on the water rationing schedule that mattered (see more: Grasham et al., 2022). Many had occasions when they could not mix injera/-make *siwa* and needed to leave their customers, shift their working day, close their business (for days and even weeks), to re-structure their businesses to less water dependent goods (e.g. replace injera with store bought produce or snacks). These adjustments were emotionally very consuming, as one woman (52 y, divorced, three children, migrant, *siwa*) put it:

'Look, during the times of water availability I bake bread to prepare siwa, I take shower then I take rest; how about now? I bake bread, I

have to search for water; the source might be very far and I spend the whole day collecting water and I'm dreaming about water the whole night; how could I sleep if I don't have water? There will be no rest or stability, then we become weak both mentally and physi-cally. Look, today I don't bake bread which I use to prepare siwa but I was asking every-one "Where did you get water?" "Have you seen water?" I was asking the whole day, finally I know where it is and I start to collect and store it, then I proceed to prepare siwa [...]. What is next, I will clean my house, wash dishes or any other materials and do chores till the night.'.

Moreover, the increased cost of water from sources other than the piped supply were significant, especially given that in some cases, the cost of water was higher than house rent and there were days when water expenditures exceeded profit. As one respondent has calculated, she paid 1500 birr [50 EUR] monthly for water (with transportation) compared to the 30 birr [1.01 EUR] that she would have paid if she lived in the localities of reliable and suffi-cient tap water.

Despite water-related suffering, and fully acknowledged water inequity, water struggles were nevertheless perceived relatively (36 y, divorced, four children, *siwa*, migrant): '*I am not worrying about the financial cost of water [her water cost is higher than house rent] but what I am going to lose because of [the absence of] water'.* Similarly, the household survey showed that reliability and suffi-ciency were people's biggest water related worries (35 per cent and 20 per cent respectively). Some emphasized that the lack of control over water in Wukro was worse than in the village as a child – collecting water from a source 20 min away, four times a day. Others emphasized that they still *could* manage water. More often, these contradicting statements were constructed in the same interview. They emphasized that they *could* figure out the solution (e.g. via *bajaj*, even if inconvenient) because in Wukro there is always an opportunity. One woman (52 y, divorced, three children, migrant, *inda siwa*), on a fairly poor scale of business, and struggling with high costs of alternative water, described:

'It is like a battle; if I stop doing business how can I support my family, if I continue there is a problem. I don't have words to explain how difficult it is. My life is unstable; I always worry about water, I'm not sure about tomorrow whether I can do the business or not.

I know myself; my life is at my hand (in Tigrigna 'ትንۇሰۼ ۇኩተۼ ስۼ ዝሓይር').

I: Is there any task you give up on because of water shortage?

No, I never ever give up on any task. I am a fighter; I do what I have to do by searching for water from everywhere. I may feel bad or get stressed, but I never give up.' (40 y, widow, five children, *inda siwa*, migrant).

This contrasts the study by O'Leary (2016) who argued that women, who spent considerable time waiting for water in Delhi, were also symbolically waiting for the governmental justice and incorporation into new India. In the case of Wukro, women were not waiting for anyone's support, they perceived their water pre-carity as a part of their struggle towards their independence.

9. Conclusion

We have analysed how women entrepreneurs have been devel-oping their small informal businesses (coffee, alcohol, grocery/injera and hair salon) in Wukro, a rapidly growing small town of failing water services. Though Ethiopia has been promoting women-led entrepreneurship, it has been lacking institutional support in urban-ization processes. Following feminist geographers (hooks, 1989; Rose, 1993; Sultana, 2009) we explored the embodied meaning of socio-physical spaces and the traversing between them for businesswomen. We have concluded that they develop their busi-nesses through simultaneity of multiple spaces of marginality/para-

doxical spaces and the articulation of independence as control over their businesses and bodies. In the spaces of these conflicting subjectivities (inspired by: Bhabha & Rutherford, 1990) women negotiated their independence through marginality and resistance, suffering and claimed control, interpellation and reworking and reconstructing own identities. Independence is thus not ultimate, but rather a performative power emerging in particular times, places and situations (seeing it through the lens of power conceptualizations by: Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2018; Butler, 1997b), often in spite of, or Because of, marginalization in the space of imagination and aspiration. Unlike the ultimately positive term of 'empowerment' (Kabeer, 1999), 'independence' has an eclectic nature that allows the integration of diverse experiences of everyday life and emphasizes work, struggles and process *towards* becoming economically self-sufficient and to not rely on anybody.

Movement between spaces symbolized passage between gender norms towards gaining claimed independence. Women resisted the familial pressure of imposed marriages by migrating physically and symbolically to Wukro, where they continued to re-work gender norms in their businesses. Despite both Wukro and their business places being imbued with qualities of independence, there were multiple negotiations that women juggled, of the sexualized nature of their businesses and the conflated boundaries between the public and private spaces. The sampling of two main age cohorts of women showed that women's experiences are temporally embodied in their lifecourse. Their business choice and mobility to/from Wukro dependent on their age, whether they had children and whether they saw any further business opportunities in life.

We argue that *precarious* intermittent water has a significant impact on women's ability to develop and maintain their independence. Suffering from 'water precarity' (inspired by: Sultana, 2020) has been caused by unpredictable and failing urban intermittent water for livelihoods with limited capacity to adapt. Despite suffering from severe shortages and extreme geographical water inequality, it was a water induced *lack of control* over their business and its development that was the most physically and emotionally wearing. We argued that *precarious* intermittent water has a significant impact on women's ability to develop and maintain their independence; therefore, water struggles should be evaluated beyond water access but also from the perspective of water uncertainty.

What does it mean for development? Limited though significant studies indicate the noticeable progress in advancing gender equity in Ethiopia (Kumar & Quisumbing, 2015; Leight, 2021). However, understanding the opportunities and restrictions for women entrepreneurs in small towns is a critical yet overlooked part of many development trajectories. Small towns in sub-Saharan Africa represent over half the urban population and offer an important space for women's empowerment and advancement in between the confines in rural life and the anonymity of migrating to large cities. Within this limited sampling of women entrepreneurs, we argue that the greatest benefits would be from support that enables women to get more *control* of their businesses. This includes rights for affordable access to primary commodities, the meaningful social and financial contribution of divorced fathers in childcare, an environment that encompasses a shift in social norms that would prevent the humiliation of women in their work, transparency in water supply and the availability of legal alternative water sources.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Marina Korzenevica: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration. **Catherine Fallon Grasham:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Zoé John-son:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Amleset Gebreegzabher:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Samrawit Mebrahtu:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Zenawi Zerihun:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Project administration. **Sonia Ferdous Hoque:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Katrina Jane Charles:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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