



# Gendered Pathways of Labour Integration: Migrant Workers in Urban Economic Zones in Ethiopia

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## Article History:

Submitted:  
2025-10-30

Accepted:  
2025-12-16

Published:  
2026-02-03

## Abstract

This study investigates the labour market integration of migrant workers in Ethiopia's urban economic zones, with a focus on how gender shapes employment outcomes, occupational mobility, and access to social protection. Drawing on neoclassical and structural migration theories, gendered migration frameworks, and labour market segmentation literature, the study examines the intersections of migration status, gender, and urban economic structures. Using evidence from industrial parks, special economic zones, and informal urban markets, the research highlights patterns of formal and informal employment, wage disparities, skill utilization, and occupational segregation. It further explores institutional, social, and structural barriers, including legal restrictions, discrimination, care responsibilities, housing precarity, and vulnerability to exploitation, demonstrating how these disproportionately affect women and other marginalized groups. The study concludes by proposing gender-responsive policies, inclusive urban planning, and skills recognition frameworks to enhance equitable labour integration.

**Keywords:** Migrant workers, Urban economic zones, Gendered labour, Employment integration, Industrial parks

## 1. Introduction

Migration from rural to urban areas has become a defining feature of socio-economic transformation in many developing countries, including Nigeria. Rapid urbanization, uneven regional development, and the concentration of economic opportunities in cities continue to drive large-scale internal migration, particularly among working-age populations. Classical migration scholarship emphasizes how population movements are closely linked to labour demand, structural economic change, and broader processes of globalization.<sup>1</sup> In Nigeria, expanding urban economic

<sup>1</sup> Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (1998). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (2nd ed.). Macmillan.

zones, ranging from manufacturing clusters to service-oriented city economies, have intensified rural–urban mobility, reshaping labour markets while simultaneously producing new forms of inequality and social differentiation.

Gender plays a critical yet uneven role in shaping migration experiences and labour integration outcomes. While both men and women migrate in search of livelihoods, their pathways into urban labour markets are structured by gendered norms, care responsibilities, and occupational segmentation. Studies of rural–urban transitions in Asia demonstrate that becoming “urban” is not merely a spatial shift but a socially mediated process influenced by gender, class, and migrant status.<sup>2</sup> Feminist labour research further shows that women migrants are often concentrated in low-wage, insecure, and informal employment, despite their growing numerical presence in urban economies.<sup>3</sup> These dynamics are increasingly evident in Nigerian cities, where migrant women’s labour sustains key sectors while remaining undervalued and precarious.

Labour integration, however, extends beyond employment access to include social incorporation, mobility, and long-term economic security. Assimilation and integration theories suggest that migrants’ outcomes depend on institutional openness, labour market structures, and social networks.<sup>4</sup> Spatial perspectives further highlight how urban labour integration is shaped by residential segregation and unequal access to urban resources, reinforcing stratified outcomes for migrant populations.<sup>5</sup> In the Nigerian context, migrants’ integration into urban economic zones is often mediated by informal recruitment channels, weak labour protections, and limited state oversight, producing differentiated outcomes across gender lines.

Understanding migration, gender, and labour integration also requires attention to broader structural forces linking investment, urban growth, and labour demand. Economic analyses underscore how capital inflows and urban-centered development strategies stimulate temporary and circular migration while generating segmented labour markets.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, sociological perspectives emphasize that labour integration is inseparable from social integration, well-being, and collective belonging within urban spaces.<sup>7</sup> Against this backdrop, this study examines how rural–urban migration in Nigeria’s urban economic zones is gendered in both process and outcome, contributing to debates on inclusive urbanization, decent work, and sustainable labour integration.

## 2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an integrated conceptual framework that draws on migration theory, gender analysis, and labour market scholarship to explain how rural–urban migrants are incorporated into urban economic zones and how such incorporation is gendered. Classical neoclassical theories of migration conceptualize rural–urban mobility as a rational response to spatial wage differentials

<sup>2</sup> Anh, N., Rigg, J., Huong, L., & Dieu, D. (2012). Becoming and being urban in Hanoi: Rural–urban migration and relations in Viet Nam. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(5), 1103–1131.

<sup>3</sup> Dutta, M. (2019). “Becoming” factory workers: Understanding women’s geographies of work through life stories in Tamil Nadu, India. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(6), 888–904.

<sup>4</sup> Alba, R., & Nee, V. (2018). *Assimilation theory for an era of unprecedented diversity*. In *Social stratification* (pp. 721–728). Routledge

<sup>5</sup> Massey, D., & Denton, N. (1985). Spatial assimilation as a socioeconomic outcome. *American Sociological Review*, 50, 94–106.

<sup>6</sup> Liang, Z. (1999). Foreign investment, economic growth, and temporary migration. *Development and Society*, 28(1), 115–137.

<sup>7</sup> Berkman, L., Glass, T., Brissette, I., & Seeman, T. (2000). From social integration to health: Durkheim in the new millennium. *Social Science & Medicine*, 51(6), 843–857. See also Durkheim, E. (2023). *The division of labour in society*. In *Social theory re-wired* (pp. 15–34). Routledge.

and employment opportunities created by uneven development.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, migrants are viewed as labour market actors responding to urban demand, particularly in zones characterized by industrial concentration and capital investment. However, structural approaches challenge this individualistic framing by emphasizing how state-led development strategies, global production networks, and spatially uneven accumulation actively produce migration flows while simultaneously constraining migrants' labour market options.<sup>9</sup> Urban economic zones, therefore, are not neutral sites of opportunity but socially produced spaces shaped by power relations, capital interests, and regulatory regimes.

To capture the differentiated experiences of migrants, this study incorporates gendered migration theory and feminist political economy. Gendered migration scholarship argues that migration decisions, trajectories, and outcomes are embedded in gender norms, household relations, and care responsibilities, rather than being gender-neutral processes.<sup>10</sup> Feminist political economy further highlights how capitalist labour markets systematically rely on gendered divisions of labour, positioning women disproportionately in low-paid, flexible, and precarious forms of work.<sup>11</sup> Within urban economic zones, these dynamics are intensified as women migrants are often recruited into labour-intensive sectors under conditions that valorize docility, flexibility, and disposability. Gender thus mediates access to employment, shapes wage outcomes, and constrains occupational mobility, producing distinct vulnerabilities for migrant women compared to their male counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

Labour market segmentation and informality theories provide further analytical leverage for understanding migrant incorporation into urban economies. Segmentation theory posits that labour markets are divided into primary and secondary segments, with migrants disproportionately concentrated in insecure, low-wage, and low-mobility occupations. Empirical studies of industrial parks and manufacturing zones demonstrate that migrant workers are often locked into high-turnover employment regimes characterized by weak bargaining power and limited institutional protection.<sup>13</sup> Informality theories extend this analysis by showing how formal economic spaces coexist with informal labour practices, including casualization, subcontracting, and off-the-books employment, which disproportionately affect migrants and women.<sup>14</sup> These conditions restrict skill accumulation and reinforce occupational immobility within urban economic zones.

The concept of *labour integration* in this study is understood as a multidimensional process encompassing access to employment, stability of work, income adequacy, occupational mobility, and

<sup>8</sup> Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (1998). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (2nd ed.). Macmillan. See also, Liang, Z. (1999). Foreign investment, economic growth, and temporary migration. *Development and Society*, 28(1), 115–137.

<sup>9</sup> Massey, D., & Denton, N. (1985). Spatial assimilation as a socioeconomic outcome. *American Sociological Review*, 50, 94–106. See also Lefebvre, H. (2014). The production of space. In *The people, place, and space reader* (pp. 289–293). Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> Anh, N., Rigg, J., Huong, L., & Dieu, D. (2012). Becoming and being urban in Hanoi: Rural–urban migration and relations in Viet Nam. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(5), 1103–1131. See also, Lefebvre, H. (2014). The production of space. In *The people, place, and space reader* (pp. 289–293). Routledge.

<sup>11</sup> Mains, D., & Mulat, R. (2021). The Ethiopian developmental state and migrant women's labor. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*. See also Mezzadri, A. (2017). *Sweatshop regimes in the Indian garment industry*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Tesema, Y. (2024a). Aspiring for a better future. *Anthropological Forum*, 34(4), 423–441. See also Tesema, Y. (2024b). Unjust manufacturing. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 80(1), 57–75. See also, Lwin, M. T. (2019). Labour market dynamics in Mae Sot. *Hue University Journal of Science*, 128(5B), 95–109.

<sup>13</sup> Michelsen Institute., See also Mulat, R., & Gezahagn, Y. (2024). Industrial promises and employment precarity. *Discover Sustainability*, 5, 368.

<sup>14</sup> Haque, S., Khan, M. S., Mawa, B., Hossain, M., Hoque, M., Misu, N., & Wahid, T. (2025). Ethnographic insights on the livability of migrant garment workers in peri-urban Bangladesh. *Cities*, 166, Article 106229. See also Oya, C., & Schaefer, F. (2021). The politics of labour relations in global production networks. *World Development*, 146, 105564.

the ability to claim labour rights and social protections.<sup>15</sup> Integration is thus not limited to labour market entry but includes longer-term trajectories of economic security and social incorporation. Drawing on assimilation and integration theories, labour integration is shaped by institutional openness, workplace relations, and access to social networks, all of which are unevenly distributed across gender and migrant status.<sup>16</sup> In urban economic zones, these processes are mediated by governance structures, employer practices, and the presence or absence of collective representation, such as unions and social dialogue mechanisms.<sup>17</sup>

Urban economic zones are conceptualized here as spatially bounded areas of concentrated economic activity, including industrial parks, manufacturing clusters, and service-oriented urban hubs, designed to attract investment and generate employment).<sup>18</sup> While these zones are promoted as engines of inclusive growth, critical scholarship shows that they often reproduce labour precarity, spatial exclusion, and social contestation, particularly for migrant populations<sup>19,20</sup>. Within these spaces, *gendered vulnerabilities* emerge from the intersection of migrant status, gender norms, and labour market structures, exposing women to wage discrimination, limited mobility, and heightened risks of exploitation.

By integrating neoclassical and structural migration theories with gendered political economy and labour segmentation frameworks, this study advances a holistic understanding of how rural–urban migrants are incorporated into Nigeria’s urban economic zones. It foregrounds gender as a central axis shaping labour integration outcomes and situates individual migrant experiences within broader spatial, institutional, and economic processes. This conceptual framework thus provides a foundation for empirically examining how migration, gender, and labour intersect to produce unequal yet patterned outcomes in urban labour markets.

### 3. Patterns of Migration and Gender Dynamics in Urban Economic Zones

Migration into urban economic zones is driven by a combination of rural–urban and international flows shaped by uneven development, labour demand, and state-led industrialization strategies. Rural–urban migration remains the dominant pattern in many developing contexts, as agricultural stagnation, land pressure, and limited rural employment opportunities push working-age populations toward cities.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, urban economic zones, such as industrial parks, special economic zones, and dense informal markets, function as key pull factors by concentrating

<sup>15</sup> Berkman, L., Glass, T., Brissette, I., & Seeman, T. (2000). From social integration to health: Durkheim in the new millennium. *Social Science & Medicine*, 51(6), 843–857.

<sup>16</sup> Alba, R., & Nee, V. (2018). Assimilation theory for an era of unprecedented diversity. In *Social stratification* (pp. 721–728). Routledge. See also Esser, H. (2010). Assimilation, ethnic stratification, or selective acculturation? *Sociologica*, 4(1), 1–34.

<sup>17</sup> Admasie, S. (2021). *Social dialogue in the 21st century: Mapping social dialogue in apparel—Ethiopia*. Cornell University. See also Ferede, A., Berega, Y., & Gurmessa, A. (2023). Unionization in industrial parks: The case of Hawassa Industrial Park. *Hawassa University Journal of Law*, 7, 29–45.

<sup>18</sup> Abagna, M. (2023). Special economic zones and local economic activities in Ethiopia. *Review of World Economics*, 161, 1–29. See also Eshatu, W., Eshetu, A., & Shemilis, M. (2021). *Evaluating economic impact of industrial parks development projects in Ethiopia*. KDI School of Public Policy & Management. See again World Bank. (2022). *On the path to industrialization: A review of industrial parks in Ethiopia*. World Bank.

<sup>19</sup> Barrett, P., & Baumann-Pauly, D. (2019). *Made in Ethiopia: Challenges in the garment industry’s new frontier*. NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights.

<sup>20</sup> Feng, L., Yang, W., Yun, J., & Zhang, Y. (2024). The path of social integration of migrants in poverty alleviation relocation. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 110, Article 103381.

<sup>21</sup> Anh, N., Rigg, J., Huong, L., & Dieu, D. (2012). Becoming and being urban in Hanoi: Rural–urban migration and relations in Viet Nam. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(5), 1103–1131.

investment, infrastructure, and employment opportunities. These zones attract not only internal migrants but also, in some contexts, cross-border and return migrants seeking integration into expanding urban labour markets.<sup>22</sup>

Gender differences strongly shape migration motives and trajectories into urban economic zones. Men's migration is often framed around employment in construction, manufacturing, transport, and other physically demanding sectors, reflecting both labour demand and prevailing gender norms around masculinity and breadwinning.<sup>23</sup> Women's migration, by contrast, is more frequently linked to a combination of paid employment, care responsibilities, and survival strategies, particularly in contexts of household poverty or social disruption.<sup>24</sup> Feminized labour demand in sectors such as garment manufacturing, food processing, and services further incentivizes women's migration, even as it channels them into lower-paid and more precarious forms of work.<sup>25</sup>

Urban economic zones thus play a central role in producing gender-differentiated migration patterns. Industrial clusters and special economic zones actively recruit young, unmarried women for labour-intensive production tasks, valuing perceived attributes such as dexterity, discipline, and flexibility.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, informal urban markets and peripheral service economies often absorb older migrants, married women, and men with limited formal education, offering entry-level opportunities but little employment security.<sup>27</sup> These differentiated pathways highlight how the spatial organization of urban economies structures who migrates, where they work, and under what conditions.

Demographic and skill profiles further reveal gendered asymmetries among migrant populations. Male migrants are more likely to report prior experience in manual trades, transport, or agriculture, while women migrants often possess skills derived from informal enterprises, domestic labour, or vocational training that remain undervalued in urban labour markets.<sup>28</sup> Younger migrants dominate industrial employment, reflecting employers' preferences for physically resilient and easily disciplined labour, whereas older migrants are disproportionately excluded or relegated to informal activities.<sup>29</sup> These patterns contribute to segmented labour markets in which gender, age, and migrant status interact to shape employment opportunities and longer-term integration outcomes.

Overall, migration into urban economic zones is neither random nor gender-neutral. Instead, it reflects structured flows shaped by labour demand, gender norms, and the spatial concentration of economic activity. Urban economic zones attract migrants with specific demographic and skill characteristics, while simultaneously reproducing gendered hierarchies in access to work and

<sup>22</sup> Lwin, M. T. (2019). Labour market dynamics in Mae Sot. *Hue University Journal of Science*, 128(5B), 95–109. See also World Bank. (2022). *On the path to industrialization: A review of industrial parks in Ethiopia*. World Bank.

<sup>23</sup> Mains, D., & Mulat, R. (2021). The Ethiopian developmental state and migrant women's labor. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*.

<sup>24</sup> Dutta, M. (2019). "Becoming" factory workers: Understanding women's geographies of work through life stories in Tamil Nadu, India. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(6), 888–904.

<sup>25</sup> Barrett, P., & Baumann-Pauly, D. (2019). *Made in Ethiopia: Challenges in the garment industry's new frontier*. NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights.

<sup>26</sup> Eshatu, W., Eshetu, A., & Shemelis, M. (2021). *Evaluating economic impact of industrial parks development projects in Ethiopia*. KDI School of Public Policy & Management. See also Fink, M., & Gronemeyer, R. (2023). The Ethiopian textile industry: A beacon of hope or a hotspot of crisis? In *Industrialization in Ethiopia* (pp. 1–13). Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden.

<sup>27</sup> Haque, S., Khan, M. S., Mawa, B., Hossain, M., Hoque, M., Misu, N., & Wahid, T. (2025). Ethnographic insights on the livability of migrant garment workers in peri-urban Bangladesh. *Cities*, 166, Article 106229.

<sup>28</sup> Hilton, T. (2019). *Skills for competitiveness: Hawassa Industrial Park sourcing and training employees*. Department for International Development.

<sup>29</sup> Halvorsen, K. (2021). *Labour turnover and workers' well-being in the Ethiopian manufacturing industry*. Christian Michelsen Institute.



opportunity. Understanding these patterned dynamics is essential for analyzing how migration contributes to both economic transformation and social inequality within urban contexts.

#### 4. Labour Market Integration and Employment Outcomes

Labour market integration in urban economic zones is a highly differentiated process, shaped by migrants' legal status, gender, skill profiles, and the institutional organization of work. While urban economic zones are promoted as engines of employment creation, evidence suggests that migrants' initial entry into these labour markets is predominantly through informal and semi-formal channels.<sup>30</sup> Migrants often rely on personal networks, labour brokers, or informal recruitment practices to secure work, limiting their access to formal contracts, social protection, and employment security. For many rural-urban migrants, especially recent arrivals, informal employment functions as both an entry point into urban labour markets and a structural trap that constrains upward mobility.<sup>31</sup>

Gender significantly mediates access to formal versus informal employment within urban economic zones. Men are more likely to be absorbed into physically demanding or technically oriented jobs that offer comparatively higher wages and greater employment continuity, whereas women migrants are disproportionately concentrated in low-skilled, labour-intensive, and highly flexible occupations.<sup>32</sup> Studies of industrial and manufacturing zones demonstrate that women are frequently channelled into assembly-line production, packaging, and service-related tasks, where informality, temporary contracts, and high labour turnover are common.<sup>33</sup> This occupational segregation reinforces gendered hierarchies within urban labour markets and limits women's access to stable employment trajectories.

Wage disparities, job security, and working conditions further illustrate how migrant status and gender intersect to shape employment outcomes. Migrant workers generally earn lower wages than non-migrant urban workers, reflecting their weaker bargaining power and limited access to labour representation.<sup>34</sup> Within this group, migrant women often experience compounded disadvantages, including lower pay for comparable work, longer working hours, and heightened exposure to workplace exploitation.<sup>35</sup> Job insecurity is reinforced by the prevalence of short-term contracts and probationary arrangements, which allow employers to maintain labour flexibility while transferring economic risk onto workers.<sup>36</sup>

Skill utilization and deskilling constitute another critical dimension of labour market integration for rural-urban migrants. Although many migrants possess prior skills acquired through education, agriculture, or informal enterprises, these competencies are frequently underutilized in urban economic zones. Migrants, particularly women, are often confined to repetitive, low-skilled tasks

<sup>30</sup> World Bank. (2022). *On the path to industrialization: A review of industrial parks in Ethiopia*. World Bank.

<sup>31</sup> Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (1998). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (2nd ed.). Macmillan.

<sup>32</sup> Dutta, M. (2019). "Becoming" factory workers: Understanding women's geographies of work through life stories in Tamil Nadu, India. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(6), 888–904. See also Mains, D., & Mulat, R. (2021). The Ethiopian developmental state and migrant women's labor. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*.

<sup>33</sup> Barrett, P., & Baumann-Pauly, D. (2019). *Made in Ethiopia: Challenges in the garment industry's new frontier*. NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights.

<sup>34</sup> Mulat, R., & Gezahagn, Y. (2024). Industrial promises and employment precarity. *Discover Sustainability*, 5, 368.

<sup>35</sup> Haque, S., Khan, M. S., Mawa, B., Hossain, M., Hoque, M., Misu, N., & Wahid, T. (2025). Ethnographic insights on the livability of migrant garment workers in peri-urban Bangladesh. *Cities*, 166, Article 106229. See also Tesema, Y. (2024a). Aspiring for a better future. *Anthropological Forum*, 34(4), 423–441.

<sup>36</sup> Fink, M., & Gronemeyer, R. (2023). The Ethiopian textile industry: A beacon of hope or a hotspot of crisis? In *Industrialization in Ethiopia* (pp. 1–13). Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden.

that offer limited opportunities for training or advancement, resulting in occupational downgrading and skill erosion over time.<sup>37</sup> This process of deskilling not only undermines individual livelihoods but also constrains the long-term productivity potential of urban labour markets.

Overall, labour market integration in urban economic zones reflects a stratified process in which migrant status and gender intersect to produce uneven employment outcomes. While urban economic zones generate employment opportunities, they also institutionalize patterns of informality, occupational segregation, and precarity that disproportionately affect migrant women. These dynamics highlight the need to move beyond aggregate employment figures and critically examine the quality, stability, and equity of work available to migrants within urban economies.

## 5. Institutional, Social, and Structural Barriers to Integration

Despite the employment opportunities generated by urban economic zones, migrant workers face a range of institutional and policy barriers that constrain their effective integration into urban labour markets. Legal and administrative frameworks governing residency, identification, and labour regulation often disadvantage migrants, particularly those arriving from rural areas with limited documentation or formal employment histories.<sup>38</sup> Weak enforcement of labour laws within industrial zones further exacerbates these challenges, allowing employers to rely on short-term contracts, informal hiring practices, and probationary arrangements that exclude migrants from social protection and legal recourse.<sup>39</sup> For migrant women, these institutional gaps intersect with gender biases in labour regulation, limiting access to maternity protection, grievance mechanisms, and union representation.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond formal institutions, social exclusion and discrimination play a significant role in shaping migrants' integration experiences. Migrants are frequently marked as outsiders in urban spaces, facing stigmatization based on origin, ethnicity, language, or perceived rural identity.<sup>41</sup> Such forms of exclusion are often intensified in rapidly expanding urban economic zones, where competition over jobs, housing, and services fuels social tension and resentment. While overt xenophobia is more commonly associated with international migration, internal migrants, especially women and young workers, also encounter everyday discrimination that limits workplace advancement and social belonging.<sup>42</sup> These dynamics undermine social integration and reinforce occupational marginalization.

Care responsibilities, housing insecurity, and mobility constraints further restrict migrants' capacity to fully participate in urban labour markets. Migrant women, in particular, bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, including childcare, eldercare, and domestic responsibilities, which limits their availability for stable or higher-paying employment. Housing precarity is widespread among migrant populations, as high urban rents and limited access to formal

<sup>37</sup> Hilton, T. (2019). *Skills for competitiveness: Hawassa Industrial Park sourcing and training employees*. Department for International Development.

<sup>38</sup> Abagna, M. (2023). Special economic zones and local economic activities in Ethiopia. *Review of World Economics*, 161, 1–29.

<sup>39</sup> Admasie, S. (2021). *Social dialogue in the 21st century: Mapping social dialogue in apparel—Ethiopia*. Cornell University.

<sup>40</sup> Ferede, A., Berega, Y., & Gurmessa, A. (2023). Unionization in industrial parks: The case of Hawassa Industrial Park. *Hawassa University Journal of Law*, 7, 29–45.

<sup>41</sup> Esser, H. (2010). Assimilation, ethnic stratification, or selective acculturation? *Sociologica*, 4(1), 1–34.

<sup>42</sup> Alba, R., & Nee, V. (2018). Assimilation theory for an era of unprecedented diversity. In *Social stratification* (pp. 721–728). Routledge.

housing push migrants into overcrowded or informal settlements located far from workplaces.<sup>43</sup> Long commuting times, unsafe transport, and spatial segregation reduce mobility and increase the physical and emotional costs of labour market participation, especially for women.

These structural vulnerabilities heighten migrants' exposure to exploitation and gender-based violence within urban economic zones. Research on labour-intensive industries highlights how power asymmetries between employers and migrant workers facilitate abusive working conditions, wage theft, and coercive labour practices.<sup>44</sup> Migrant women are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, intimidation, and violence in workplaces and residential areas, risks that are often normalized or rendered invisible due to fear of job loss and lack of institutional support. The absence of effective complaint mechanisms and social dialogue further entrenches these patterns, reinforcing silence and underreporting.

Overall, institutional, social, and structural barriers intersect to produce deeply gendered constraints on migrant labour integration. While urban economic zones are framed as spaces of opportunity and modernization, they frequently reproduce exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect migrant women and other vulnerable groups. Addressing these barriers requires not only labour market reforms but also broader interventions targeting social protection, housing, care infrastructure, and gender-based violence, without which inclusive urban integration remains elusive.

## 5. Policy Implications

The findings from the study highlight the urgent need for gender-responsive labour and migration policies that address the structural and institutional barriers facing migrant workers. Policymakers must recognize the differentiated experiences of men and women in urban economic zones and design regulations that ensure equal access to formal employment, social protection, and labour rights.<sup>45</sup> Gender-sensitive legislation could include enforceable maternity and childcare protections, mechanisms for reporting workplace harassment, and anti-discrimination measures within industrial parks and other urban economic clusters. Such policies should also account for informal workers who constitute a significant proportion of the migrant labour force, ensuring their inclusion in social insurance and labour inspection frameworks.<sup>46</sup>

Inclusive urban planning is equally crucial for promoting labour integration. Spatial segregation, housing precarity, and inadequate transport disproportionately affect migrants, particularly women, reducing their access to jobs and social services.<sup>47</sup> Urban development policies should prioritize affordable housing, safe transport corridors, and accessible childcare facilities near employment

<sup>43</sup> Lefebvre, H. (2014). The production of space. In *The people, place, and space reader* (pp. 289–293). Routledge. See also Haque, S., Khan, M. S., Mawa, B., Hossain, M., Hoque, M., Misu, N., & Wahid, T. (2025). Ethnographic insights on the livability of migrant garment workers in peri-urban Bangladesh. *Cities*, 166, Article 106229.

<sup>44</sup> Barrett, P., & Baumann-Pauly, D. (2019). *Made in Ethiopia: Challenges in the garment industry's new frontier*. NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights. See also Mezzadri, A. (2017). *Sweatshop regimes in the Indian garment industry*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>45</sup> Abagna, M. (2023). Special economic zones and local economic activities in Ethiopia. *Review of World Economics*, 161, 1–29. See also Mains, D., & Mulat, R. (2021). The Ethiopian developmental state and migrant women's labor. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*.

<sup>46</sup> Asnake, A. (2024). Informal savings and insurance associations advancing solidarity and key for a "good life." In *Saving and being safe away from home: Savings and insurance associations in Ethiopia and its diaspora* (p. 45).

<sup>47</sup> Balcha, E., & Mulat, R. (2025). *Dominant patterns and dynamics of urban contestations in Hawassa*. Peace Research Facility/Rift Valley Institute.



hubs to mitigate these structural constraints.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, integrating migrant voices in planning and decision-making processes strengthens social cohesion, reduces xenophobia, and fosters a more equitable urban environment.

Skills development and recognition frameworks are critical to enabling migrants to maximize their productivity and career progression within urban labour markets. Many migrants experience deskilling or underemployment despite possessing relevant qualifications, particularly in industrial zones dominated by low-skill labour.<sup>49</sup> Policymakers and employers should implement targeted vocational training, skills accreditation, and upskilling programs that are accessible to both men and women migrants, facilitating mobility within the labour market and increasing resilience to economic shocks.<sup>50</sup> Encouraging partnerships between government, industrial park authorities, and educational institutions can ensure that training programs align with labour market demands while addressing gender disparities in participation and outcomes.

Local governments, employers, and civil society play a central role in operationalizing these policy measures. Municipal authorities can coordinate social protection services, enforce labour standards, and support migrant-focused housing and health programs.<sup>51</sup> Employers in industrial zones can adopt corporate social responsibility initiatives that integrate gender equity into workplace policies, unionization practices, and grievance redress. Civil society organizations can complement these efforts by providing advocacy, legal support, and community-based programs that strengthen migrant resilience, particularly for women exposed to exploitation and care burdens.<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, inclusive urban labour integration requires coordinated, multi-level interventions that combine legal reform, urban planning, skills development, and stakeholder engagement. By explicitly incorporating gender into policy frameworks and operational practices, urban economic zones can evolve from spaces of precarious opportunity into arenas of equitable economic participation. This approach not only improves the livelihoods of migrant workers but also strengthens the social and economic sustainability of rapidly urbanizing cities in Ethiopia and comparable contexts.<sup>53</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex interplay of migration, gender, and urban labour markets within Ethiopia's rapidly expanding urban economic zones. Migrants, particularly women, encounter both opportunities and constraints as they navigate industrial clusters, special economic zones, and informal labour markets. While these urban hubs offer employment prospects and skills development pathways, they also reproduce patterns of occupational segregation, wage disparities, and precarious working conditions that disproportionately affect female migrants and other vulnerable groups. Gender emerges as a critical lens through which access to formal employment, upward mobility,

<sup>48</sup> Alba, R., & Nee, V. (2018). Assimilation theory for an era of unprecedented diversity. In *Social stratification* (pp. 721–728). Routledge.

<sup>49</sup> Fink, M., & Gronemeyer, R. (2023). The Ethiopian textile industry: A beacon of hope or a hotspot of crisis? In *Industrialization in Ethiopia* (pp. 1–13). Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. See also Hilton, T. (2019). Skills for competitiveness: Hawassa Industrial Park sourcing and training employees. Department for International Development.

<sup>50</sup> Dutta, M. (2019). "Becoming" factory workers: Understanding women's geographies of work through life stories in World Bank. (2022). *On the path to industrialization: A review of industrial parks in Ethiopia*. World Bank.

<sup>51</sup> Industrial Parks Development Corporation. (2025). *Overview: Industrial parks*.

<sup>52</sup> Haque, S., Khan, M. S., Mawa, B., Hossain, M., Hoque, M., Misu, N., & Wahid, T. (2025). Ethnographic insights on the livability of migrant garment workers in peri-urban Bangladesh. *Cities*, 166, Article 106229.

<sup>53</sup> Abagna, M. (2023). Special economic zones and local economic activities in Ethiopia. *Review of World Economics*, 161, 1–29.

and social protection can be understood, underscoring the persistent influence of social norms, care responsibilities, and structural inequalities on labour market integration.

The findings underscore the need for multi-level policy interventions that promote inclusive urban labour integration. Gender-responsive labour laws, enforceable social protection, and skills recognition frameworks are essential to empower migrants and reduce vulnerabilities. Equally, inclusive urban planning, encompassing affordable housing, safe transport, and accessible childcare, can mitigate spatial and social constraints that limit economic participation. Collaboration between governments, employers, and civil society is vital for operationalizing these strategies, ensuring that industrial expansion translates into equitable and sustainable urban development. Ultimately, World Bank notes that achieving meaningful labour integration for migrants requires policies and practices that explicitly address gendered vulnerabilities while harnessing the economic and social potential of urban economic zones.

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