> "high turnover rates were not uncommon in early stages of similar investments in other countries […] Some managers reported having faced comparable rates [to Ethiopia] in their operations in Southeast Asia, illustrating the frictions that accompany processes of transition to industrial work […]. The most experienced suppliers in GPNs [Global Production Networks] seemed the least concerned by the evidence of high turnover […]. Their expectation was that, after one or two years, worker turnover would stabilise and eventually decline as the firm was able to retain the best workers."

Referring to literature on classic low-wage labor regimes, the authors suggest that high turnover may be tolerable to a certain extent from a management perspective if it means that the most productive and qualified employees remain with the company. (Ibid.) The authors refer to Hardy and Hauge (2019), who suggest that this could be the reason why many companies in Ethiopia do not make any serious concessions to their employees. (Ibid.)

In order to understand the phenomenon of high employee turnover, various perspectives must be taken into account: economic, organizational, socio-cultural, and psychological. The employees surveyed as part of the JLU study mainly referred to economic (wage-related) and organizational (workplace-related) aspects in their explanations. Socio-cultural aspects, on the other hand, became more apparent in conversations with communities about work in the textile companies, but here too, economic arguments were at the forefront. The following sections discuss results of *1) focus group interviews with two communities, 2) interviews with relatives of textile workers, and 3) interviews with farmers*, and link these to theoretical approaches.

3.2 The textile work from a community perspective

Tula is a small village around twenty kilometres away from Hawassa, a regional centre south of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. The place is characterized by small farming households. The main crops are cereals, khat, enset and coffee. Khat is the Ethiopian drug of everyday life, while enset is a root (also known as a false banana) that is staple food for 20% of the Ethiopian population. Enset is an important plant: highly resistant to drought and available throughout the year. Five women and four men sit together in Tula to talk about how they see the work in the textile industry.[3] The religious diversity of the country is reflected in this group: Protestants, Orthodox and a Muslim. The community is an example of religious

3 The two focus group interviews were carried out (and later transcribed and translated) by Setisemhal Getachew Teshale and Gifawosen Markos Mitta as part of the JLU research project. The

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coexistence in Ethiopia, which is as impressive as it is fragile. And the group of textile workers, former workers and village observers of the textile industry argue intelligently, pragmatically and with a wealth of experience, clearly weighing up the pros and cons of working in the industrial park. "It's good to have a job and a better life. It's better to be independent than to sit at home and do nothing," says a women who is working in a textile company at the Hawassa Indusrial Park.

The HIP is a symbol of hope for the Ethiopian government: jobs are being created in the country. Foreign investors are attracted by low wages, cheap electricity and the park itself, which offers halls and infrastructure, including bus transport to the textile park for the workers. The industrial park in Hawassa is designed to create 65,000 jobs. So far, around 30,000 jobs have been realized.[4] Companies from China have built the industrial park. The government hopes to become competitive on the global textile market. The plan seems to be working out: more than 20 international companies – e.g. from China, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia – have settled in the park. But difficulties piled up. The coronavirus pandemic has hit the textile industry hard. The military conflicts (first in Tigray, later in the Amhara region), the cancellation of the duty-free agreement by the US government in 2022 as a result of the war[5], and the constantly high inflation are threatening the economy and the country's stability. And the industrial jobs created are characterized by tensions, which are reflected in the high labor turnover. The wages are low, which has attracted the textile industry. But what good is that if the workers do not stay and productivity levels are low?

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interview in Tula (the vicinity of Hawassa) took place on 12.06.2021 and the one in Tafo (Oromo Special Zone) on 08.08.2021.

4 "Before Covid-19 outbreak we had 35,000 workers. The number dropped to 26,000 after the outbreak and now we are building up our capacity and thankfully we reached 30,000." Analysis: Despite low income, Industrial parks workers remain hopeful; IPDC, EIC say conditions are improving, promise more reforms. Addis Standard, 12.07.2021, https://addisstandard.com/analysis-despite-low-income-industrial-parks-workers-remain-hopeful-ipdc-eic-say-conditions-are-improving-promise-more-reforms/.

5 Ethiopian textile industry at risk if U.S. suspends trade deal over Tigray war. In: Reuters, 28.10.2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopian-textile-industry-risk-if-us-suspends-trade-deal-over-tigray-war-2021-10-28. - The suspension of AGOA is still in place in 2024: "The continuation of these sanctions […] affect Ethiopia's trade privileges under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which once allowed the country to export goods to the U.S. duty-free, generating over $100 million annually. Although Ethiopia has been working to lift the AGOA ban and restore trade relations, the ongoing sanctions reflect Washington's stance that Ethiopia must address human rights violations and restore peace in the region before those privileges can be reinstated." U.S. Extends Sanctions on Ethiopia, Keeping AGOA Trade Privileges Suspended. Addis Insight, 7.9.2024, https://addisinsight.net/2024/09/u-s-extends-sanctions-on-ethiopia-keeping-agoa-trade-privileges-suspended.

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The textile industry in Ethiopia is the subject of controversial debate in Germany. Some see the textile industry as an important step for Ethiopia's development: it creates jobs, promotes industrialization and reduces extreme poverty. Others see wages below the minimum subsistence level, unacceptable working conditions, in short: exploitation. What some see as progress, others call modern slavery. The controversial debate of the villagers in Tula shows parallels to the debate in Germany: the proponents argue with the gain of jobs, with the financial independence of the women; the sceptics look at the poor wages and the difficult working conditions. A Muslim who runs a small shop in Tula, i.e. has no personal experience in the textile industry, summarizes his opinion as follows: the good thing, he says, is that anyone can get work there. However, he states, the salary should be appropriate and cover daily expenses.

Other problems the group discussed relate to night shifts and difficult housing situations: workers share rented rooms with four or more. A woman who belongs to the Sidama, a mother, housewife and a member of the Orthodox Ethiopian Church, talks about a friend who is employed at the industrial park: whe is not doing well there. Her salary is 2,000 Ethiopian birr (that is about 15 US-dollars; however inflation makes such comparative figures almost impossible). The friend says she's only staying there until she finds a better job. On the weekends, the two women study together at a college.

The conflict between the company management and the workers in the Ethiopian textile industry becomes visible in the village conversation: from the point of view of foreign companies, wages are so low that it is worthwhile for them to relocate production from Asia to Ethiopia. The employees complain about the workload: standing or sitting six days a week and for many the job means longer journeys on the company bus. If workers live close to the park, women usually share a small rented room. However, the rent still eats up a considerable part of their income, as accommodation in the city is expensive. In general, the monthly wage of 2,000 birr (sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on bonuses and incentives) is not enough to live on. This is reported by the group in Tula.

The other meeting place is called Tafo. Many textile workers live in this location at the outskirts of Addis Ababa. Tafo is a slum of the metropolis. In the past, the settlement used to be reached by crossing a large primeval forest-like area – a piece of wilderness that is rapidly disappearing. Mud huts have replaced the forest. In Tafo, a group of nine people, men and women, came together for the group interview. They all belong to the Orthodox Church and the Oromo ethnic group. Some members of the group are former textile workers. One man, whose wife works in the textile industry, complains:

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> "The textile factory around our living place is very exploitative. The girls are suffering a lot. Yet, the factories do not pay enough. Moreover, the factories do not respect the rights of the workers. At anytime and moment, they order them to do that and this as they wish. The workers do not have the right to say no and reject the orders being given by the bosses. If the workers reject any order, they immediately fire them. If you look at the job properly, it has features of slavery. […] In the past, people were farming the land for the landlords. The same is true in textile factories. The only change is the change in the type of the job. This way of management will not bring development to the country."

When women resign from the job, they are often denied a certificate of employment and experience, forcing them to stay on for two or three more months until a replacement has been implemented. (This was reported in the focus group interview as well as in interviews with textile workers and even one HR manager addressed the problem.)

A former textile worker from Tafo resumes:

> "I was looking for jobs and I finally ended up in the textile factory. I tried to work there for about two years, but I left it because the job is not very interesting, the salary is very low, and the employers were also very bad. The employers are arguing a lot and they force us to work more than the daily working time. We had to come to work before the actual starting time and go home beyond the time specified to end the job. On top of that what we were being paid does not match what we do."

When someone feels sick at the workplace, she contiues, the managers don't let her or him go home, "they wait until a worker faints before they let someone go."

At the same time, the group agrees that working in the textile industry is still better than just "sitting at home." However, they demand that wages should be commensurate with the workload and performance of employees. They also emphasize inflation, which exacerbates the situation. Sometimes, they say, monthly wages are barely enough to cover rent.

In this conversation on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, this is a recurring argument: the poor pay and the disregard for the rights of the female textile workers. And everyone agrees on the general trend: Life has become more difficult as everything has become more expensive. It's a hand-to-mouth existence. "We just work to survive." For example, onions used to cost 5 to 10 birr, now (at the time of the interview) it's 30 to 40 birr. The price for kilogramme of teff (the most important staple food in Ethiopia) has increased from 15 to 50 birr since 2012. The price of

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cooking oil has also risen sharply.[6] Again, the women who was previously working in the industrial park, comments:

> "Those people whose partners have a job can survive as they can help each other with the expenses needed. But, the last few years have made life very difficult for those who do not have partners who can share the burden of increasing living costs."

Life in the village community suffers under these conditions. It has become more difficult to support each other as neighbors, but to support each other is still the norm in the family. Many people hold on to the numerous holidays in Ethiopia – which employers experience as a problem. But the workers argue it is their only time to relax and socialize. "Even if the factories don't benefit from the public holidays, I benefit from them," says one 22-years-old textile worker in Tafo. "Companies are making good use of their time, and I must do the same. Because I do not have much rest on the days I have to work, I need to make the most of the holidays and get some rest."

Among the group in Tafo, there are three young women (all job seekers, college students and relatives of textile workers) who emphasize how essential the national holidays are for the community. One of the women emphasizes the great importance of holidays – she also mentions the conflict with the factory work:

> "The time around the national holidays are very exciting and beautiful. During holidays, the calendar is closed and holidays are strongly celebrated."

> "National holidays and religious holidays enable people to come together to see each other after a long period. They are very important."

> "To be honest, our country has a lot of holidays. Every single day of the month has a religious name, and this has had an impact on factory work. There are a lot of holidays. People celebrate holidays such as the epiphany a few days before the actual day of the holiday. I am not saying that holidays should not be celebrated, but the government should limit the number of holidays. People must work if there is

6 In 2024, the value of Ethiopia's currency has fallen by 30 % against the US dollar after the government relaxed currency restrictions. This has led to significant price hikes for basic commodities. The price per kg of teff for example increased to an amount of ETB 140/150. Ethiopian currency falls sharply after big policy change. In: BBC News, Addis Ababa, 29.7.2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cxr2k24z29xo.

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> work. I understand that holidays should be celebrated, but in a way that does not interfere with factory work."[7]

A 26-year-old young man, also Orthodox and Oromo, questions in this conversation in Tafo the advantages of life in the city:

> "Life in the countryside is better than life in the city. In the countryside, nobody pays rent and there is a rural way of life. There are sheep and cows. Everything is there in the countryside. In the city, we have to look for jobs… What's the advantage of city life other than having access to electricity? But everything is expensive in the city, so there's no advantage to living in the city."

The number of buses waiting outside the industrial park in Hawassa or Addis Ababa for the end of the shift is impressive. The women are picked up from their homes, but they have to get to the assembly point. Some take a taxi to make it to the assembly point on time. Whenever they are a few minutes late, the bus is gone and so is the attendance bonus. The life of female factory workers in a place like Tula and Tafo: the women walk, run, rush to the meeting point at dawn or try to get a taxi. If all goes well, they reach the bus and then sit and stand in the hall all day with 2,000 other women (and men). Many sew, others cut, iron or pack. And they are annoyed that the man who recruited them made false promises: they were promised – the women in Tula claim – accommodation, food and monthly wages of 3,000 Ethiopian birr. (Sometimes the women do not realize that the recruiter is talking about a gross salary, while they receive the lower net salary.) Instead, they are confronted with an unexpectedly high workload, low pay – and managers who often take a very harsh tone towards employees, say participants in the group interview in Tula. Whether they know about the textile industry from their own experience or from the stories of relatives or friends, they all agree on that: the pay is too low; the food, if there is any, is not good; the workload is immense. A 30-year-old woman in Tula, who is independent and lives on her own, says:

> "The women who work in the textile park complain that they have to stand all day in the factory and many complain of kidney pain. When they ask for a solution, the person in charge doesn't try to help. I have a friend who got sick and left."

7 At the end of the European middle ages, numerous religious (non-working) holidays were also celebrated in Germany throughout the year. Sources indicate that there were 250 working days and 110 public holidays. In the course of the reformation and counter-reformation, the number of public holidays underwent major changes. With industrialisation and secularisation at the latest, the number of public holidays in Germany was greatly reduced for economic reasons. Cf. Popelka (1931). – It will be interesting to see how the Ethiopian state is going to deal with the large number of public holidays in the future.

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What is life like in a location such as Tula? A man from the group (Sidama, Protestant, farmer and owner of a small business) says that the people in his community spend their time chewing khat. They lack money to buy food – and food is getting more expensive every day. They rely on enset, which is their staple food. "We struggle to survive every day. And this is a big challenge." Farming has become difficult since rain is not enough and the fields are too small nowadays. And there is not enough money to buy food every day, such as oil or bread, which they do not grow or produce themselves. This was different in the past, he tells. People were able to buy basic things and make a living. In both places, in Tafo and in Tula, a deterioration in living conditions can hardly be denied. However, the group agrees that no one goes hungry in Tula because they have enset.

At the time of the interview, the group in Tula reported that they were still suffering from the effects of the pandemic. Because Tula is close to the industrial park in Hawassa, many textile workers from other parts of Ethiopia were renting rooms in the village. However, as a result of the pandemic, these workers have returned to their places of origin. The community has thus lost the income it had from renting accommodation to workers from other regions. With renting out accommodation, people in Tula could get around ETB 400 to 500 from the women who ususally shared a room with four or five other women. During the pandemic the companies also stopped paying bonuses, they say. With the attendance bonus, the workers could earn more, "but because of the pandemic, there was no attendance bonus and no incentives, so everybody returned back home." Now the people in Tula no longer heard so much about the industrial park.

The social and cultural advantages of communal life are strongly emphasized in the conversation. Even those who no longer live in the village usually attend to funerals, weddings and visit their family when they are on holiday. Social ties and obligations are important to the villagers: "we are used to share everything." And festive events are still celebrated: Chamballala (the Sidama New Year), Christmas, Easter, the Muslims have other festivals (like Ramadan, Mawlid, Eid al-Fitr, or Eid al-Adha). The younger generation has an open ear for the life experiences of the older generation. Mutual respect between the generations still exists today, say the interview participants. "The good thing about this village is that the young and old generations respect and love each other," so the 30-year-old woman. The relationship between men and women is much better today than it was in the past "where women were not asked whom they wanted to marry, but now the interests of both partners count," says a 25-year-old man. And when it comes to school, boys and girls now have equal rights, he adds.

From the point of view of the inhabitants of Tula and Tafo, working in the textile industry is an ambivalent matter. Inflation and climate change have worsened living conditions in the village. Textile work at least offers the opportunity to earn

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some money. However, there should be a better pay, they say: workers should at least earn 2,000 to 2,500 birr (as a take home salary) to get by. But many get less.

The villagers in Tula know that their rural life world in which and from which they have lived is shattering. And the envoys from the industrial park, who recruit female workers, bring new values of the modern world into the village: individualization ("I have my own money, even as a woman"), mobilization (which opens up access to urban life and modern education), alienation from local food and subsistence, from the safety net of the community, also from the dominance of the family. For the individual worker, there is a shift from rural life cycles, necessities, ties and hierarchies to a rhythm determined by industrial clocking, technology and monetization. The urban world overturns village modesty and self-restraint and demands new modes of behavior. Old virtues become superfluous and new virtues become a prerequisite for survival.

The absences, the fluctuation in the companies make the areas of friction visible: the women have to choose between attending the factory or or attending their aunt's funeral in the village, which would cost them the attendance bonus. What is more important? The rift goes through the community and probably also through the individuals. What matters more? Integration into the community and mutual care, or the chance of a small career in the textile company, of job qualifications, of independence, of access to education in the city?

The managers say that the mentality (the 'mindset') of women workers is not adapted to industrial work. For the employees, it will probably be difficult to decide between two cultural alternatives: one that prioritises the values of the community and the other that focuses on the individual. At this stage, the workers are more likely to opt for the familiar and protective community for the time being, which can be vital in the event of a personal or economic shock, as has been shown during the coronavirus lockdowns. However, the villagers are realists: they see the future not in the hook plow, but in the urban workplace. They say: "living at an urban place like Hawassa will give us a better life." But none of them fall prey to illusions: "It's better to earn money in the city. However, you have to work a lot there and it's not easy."

A 48-old Sidama in Tula thinks he knows why the industrial park prefarably employs women: "I think they mainly employ women because they are not free enough to fight for their freedom." The recruiters lure the women, he says, with false promises. "I have seen many of the women and when they return home, they have lost their beauty."

Absence and fluctuation can be interpreted as an expression of the contradictions and pain of transition. In the course of industrialization, a similar development took place in Europe more than 100 years ago. Where will Ethiopia develop? Will the wages for factory workers be raised? Will most people prefer to live in the city? Will the women become the reliable work force with long-term employment prospects that the government and companies are hoping for?

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At present, the two worlds are still largely isolated from each other. Many employers see the 'mindset' of the workers as the main reason for high staff turnover and want to change the workers' attidute with incentives and special training programmes. The workers, on the other side, feel unfairly treated by superiors and complain about a lack of understanding for their situation and their needs. It could be an important step for employers and employees to start talking to each other. For the workers, the first priority is a better pay. A 26-year-old man from the group interviewed in Tafo, whose wife is a factory worker in a textile company, points out that textile work should be profitable for both sides:

> "The most important thing is improving the pay. The employers know what makes them profitable and the employees also know what they deserve for their labor. I believe that they can mutually benefit each other."

3.3 Interviews with relatives of textile workers

A series of interviews conducted with relatives[8] of textile workers express similar views like those of the communities. The relatives also weigh up the pros and cons of factory work. Overall, families support the women's decision to work in the textile industry. However, where drop-outs occur, this often has to do with disappointed expectations and in many cases it is the families who urge the women to quit their job.

When it comes to deciding how to spend their household income, couples usually make their decisions equally. From numerous interviews conducted with female textile workers (without the presence of family members), there was never any mention of a decision-making dominance of husbands or families.

Textile workers whose partners have their own income tend to be under less pressure than single workers with no family support. For the workers and their partners, the work in the textile factory is associated with the hope of modest prosperity and gradual social advancement. Despite dissatisfaction, many stay in their jobs because they hope for long-term improvements. This contrasts with the widespread view among managers that employees generally do not have long-term prospects in their jobs ("they live for the day").

8 The Interviews with relatives of textile workers where carried out in locations in Hawassa and Addis Ababa in 2020 and 2021 by Setisemhal Getashew Teshale and Gifawosen Markos Mitta as part of the JLU research.

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