

Women and Migration

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Summary and Keywords

African women's experiences of migration and transregional movements have long been eclipsed by men's histories of travel and journeying. However, this certainly does not mean that women have not historically participated in geographical movement, both with their families and independently. Reasons for women's migratory practices are divergent, and they are informed by a kaleidoscope of shifting historical internal and external sociopolitical forces. Some of these include escape from violent conflict and war, slavery, environmental and economic hardship, and oppressive family constraints. The colonial era marked a period of intense migration in which men were forcibly moved to labor within extractive economies. Women, for their part, sometimes migrated without the approval of their own families, and against the colonial administration's sanctions. Their experiences were shaped by struggles against all forms of patriarchal authority. As a result of changing demographics and social roles, the colonial city also assumed a reputation among colonials and Africans as a space of moral depravity motivated by consumer culture. Consequently, migrant women often faced stigma when they entered cities, and sometimes when they returned home.

Women were attracted to towns and cities and what they came to represent—spaces where new opportunities could be explored. Opportunity came in the form of economic independence, marriage, romantic liaisons, and education. Most migrant women were confronted with being marginalized to the domestic sphere and informal sector. However, many women also acquired and honed their market acumen, amassing wealth which they often reinvested in family networks back in their natal villages, thus revealing circular modes of migration associated with multilocal networks.

Keywords: women, migration, gender, mobility, urbanization, Africa

Preliminary Thoughts About Women and Migration

Though migration in the 21st century is experienced globally at an unprecedented scale, it is indeed not a new phenomenon. People throughout the ages worldwide have continuously been circulating, searching for new opportunities and better living conditions. This

is no less true for Africans, in particular African women. And while men are perhaps most closely associated with mobility, women for their part can be counted as intrepid travelers, embarking on solo treks to escape conflict, or simply to explore new opportunities. For men, migration is sometimes linked to a rite of passage, or a necessary life stage by which adulthood can potentially be attained, particularly through fulfilling bride price obligations. African women's movements on the other hand, have been neglected by earlier scholarship, and are not often conceived of as being part of the same masculine-oriented adventure narratives.

In one regard, some women have always been migrants—in patrilocal kinship arrangements a woman leaves her family to live in her husband's compound as a "stranger wife."¹ This then raises questions in regard to the spatial, temporal aspects of migration. What sorts of geographical distances constitute a migrant's status? Indeed, there are many examples of women both temporarily and permanently leaving their natal homes for seasonal employment. In this respect, "migration" is a vast term, connoting many things, and raises issues relating to temporality, which poses challenges to the definition itself, reinforcing a need for a circular model of movement. Migrant women vary in social status—young, unmarried women with little education, educated young women in search of employment, and divorced or widowed women can all be counted in the narratives of migration.

This article will explore some of the heterogeneous variables informing women's decisions to leave their natal contexts, including slavery, war, human trafficking, escaping social control, and environmental and economic causes, paying particular attention to the colonial period. Though women were not initially hired formally as wage laborers by colonial governments, records offer compelling evidence of the social roles that migrant women have played in emergent urban areas. Women initially arriving to urban colonial spaces were faced with the limitation of having to choose to work in domestic spheres, pushing them into invisible domains. However, they were certainly not invisible actors. Accounts of escape, survival, and social advancement, as well as social duty and obligation, animate women's migration experiences. Indeed, there are gendered differences with regard to transit trajectories, and to experiences as urban newcomers. Colonial records indicate that women were often officially discouraged from migrating into urban areas, in part by reinforcing existing traditional patriarchal controls. However, as many women refused to take heed of both parental and colonial decrees, instead choosing to become mobile subjects, moral panics were introduced into social landscapes. In addition, changing household structures, gender dynamics, and new conceptions of morality can be counted as some of the corollaries of women's migrations across borders and boundaries. In addition to illuminating the larger global forces that directly impact African women's lives, migration practices also reveal new social roles and gender relations.

This article will consider some of the literature presenting case studies of women's patterns of migration from different regional contexts. What follows is by no means an exhaustive review.

Pre-colonial Migrations

There are considerable challenges associated with the historical reconstructions of women's roles, let alone women's migration patterns within pre-colonial African kingdoms.² In addition to early European travel accounts, oral traditions, such as formal epics about kingdom formations, are passed on generationally by *jeliw* and *griots*, becoming important sources for pre-colonial research. Accounts indicate that since women were relied upon for the social reproduction necessary for kingdom formation, they were often integrated into the body politic by force as captives of indigenous slave systems. However, their children were not necessarily born into slavery, and women could earn their freedom over time, and consequently change their social status.³ For instance, in the Kongo Kingdom beginning in the 16th century there was, "a massive predominance of villagers of slave status in certain regions: this was the result of a gradual accumulation by an aristocracy which originally possessed only the advantage of freedom."⁴ Here, migration is considered to be one characterized by force, since women were captured and removed from their natal villages and kin groups. Scholars suspect that women might also have unilaterally made the decision to escape from their immediate social groups in order to seek a new life outside their natal homes. There are also records of foreign women in pre-colonial Nigerian cities, some of whom were merchants, living in designated areas referred to as *sabon garuruwa*, known to house foreigners.⁵ West African women actively participated in the trans-Saharan trading networks, traveling to towns selling and trading goods.

During the late 19th century, the Swahili Coast was an active node within the slave trade. Women captured from the interior of the continent were trafficked east in caravans led by Zanzibari traders, who often kept slaves as domestic workers and concubines.⁶ Displaced women during this period were susceptible to epidemics plaguing the crowded coastal towns, such as smallpox and cholera, which is partly what explained the reportedly low fertility rate among women there at the time.⁷ At the turn of the 20th century, women would arrive in greater numbers into Swahili towns occupied by the German colonial government. Anxieties around women's reproductive health would continue within different colonial governments—women's geographical movements were cited as one of the reasons for immoral activity in the colonies.

Women and the Rise of the Colonial City

With the accelerated entrenchment of colonial administrations all over Africa, the 20th century brought with it a period of intense migration. Indeed, the colonial experience was not homogeneous—divergent colonial policies had an impact on migration patterns across the continent. However, there are several overarching thematic similarities in migrant women's ranges of experiences. For instance, colonially constructed territorial boundaries that were created often aggravated, hindered, and obscured existing internal movements, and they imposed new models of household domesticity to suit colonial economic systems.⁸ Pre-colonial trade routes were replaced with colonial administrative centers sit-

uated on coasts and waterways to facilitate transport back to the European metropolises. Colonial extractive economies which forced African laborers into mines and industrial sectors resulted in new patterns of migration for both men and women. Migrant women, unlike men, were not wage-labor migrants within these extractive economies.⁹

While urbanism and the history of migration in Africa is a topic that has invited much research, women's roles within these new social and spatial configurations have often been considered only in passing. Claire Robertson highlights that up until the 1960s, African women were restricted to biological categories—they were analyzed in terms of their roles as mothers and wives.¹⁰ Feminist approaches to African studies took hold in the 1970s, with scholars like Ester Boserup at the helm who specifically looked at the ways in which colonialism negatively impacted women's lives.¹¹ However, in the 1990s there was an explosion of literature specifically focusing on women migrants as key actors in the development of African cities and urban economies. Scholars like Kathleen Sheldon, Gina Buijs, Julia Wells, and Luise White have contributed to placing women at the forefront of discussions about economic urban developments and migration.¹²

Migration within Southern African contexts is especially well researched, partly given the region's history of immigration policies connected to mining. The introduction of gold and diamond mining became a central factor of migration for both men and women especially among Basotho peoples.¹³ Across Africa, shantytowns often emerged initially as male-only labor camps, and regulated systems of mobility were established by the state and private company employers. It was only later that African women were officially incorporated into these encampments, once it became apparent that healthy labor pools were dependent on social reproduction. The effects of the South African apartheid regime remain visible—spatial distribution of populations are divided among different belts of industry.¹⁴ However, it should be mentioned that even prior to the colonial presence in the region, men and women migrated on a seasonal basis.¹⁵ In fact, as others have highlighted, Botswana has long been a country in which people have been regionally circulating.¹⁶

The introduction of infrastructure, such as railways, allowed for more women to circulate across vaster regions. In East Africa, the extension of the railway in 1914 enabled women from the interior of the continent to move into towns around Lake Tanganyika and the Swahili Coast. In the Belgian Congo, the railway from the interior to the coast facilitated the transport of laborers who were needed to work on plantation cash crops and in mines. Women followed later, circulating between villages and towns. In most colonial contexts, women's mobility produced a moral backlash among colonial authorities who blamed migrant women for the spread of venereal disease among laborers, which they saw as contributing to low fertility rates. In efforts to control women's movements, special permissions, identity cards, and roadblocks were imposed by colonial administrations, sometimes in coordination with rural patriarchs.

Similar to their male counterparts, women were driven into new forms of labor partly as a result of rural stagnation. However, contrary to male migrants who might have received support and encouragement from families to seek out new opportunities, it was probably

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rare to encounter a woman who received such a blessing from her family. This is apparent in research about Tswana migrations, in which women fled their natal homes without the authorization of their patriarchs.¹⁷

Women seeking escape from familial social bonds in hopes of establishing new ones elsewhere were labeled “wicked” by both their native sociocultural kin groups as well as by colonial administrations.¹⁸ Moral condemnation was rife, and unmarried women living in cities represented a threat to the new social fabric that was being woven. Their perceived waywardness was thought of as indecent, as their geographic circulations also transgressed ideological boundaries.

Choices

Women’s motivations for leaving their natal village homes were shaped by multifarious factors broadly linked to newly envisioned individual survival strategies. Broken families and troubled social relations related to witchcraft accusations and oppressive gossip contributed to their decisions to migrate. Women who could not fulfill traditional roles of wife and mother, perhaps due to an inability to conceive children, contributed to the desire for a new beginning elsewhere. Older women—particularly widowed women—were regarded as more susceptible to accusations and social stigmatization, especially those who were not fortunate to enjoy the protection of a husband, and were also inclined to migrate.¹⁹ Gunilla Bjerer shows that early city demographics in Ethiopia were composed of divorced women.²⁰ Urban life appeared a more appealing option to women who wished to earn a living. It must be mentioned that while the lure of a new independence offered through migration might have attracted women to cities, the fact that there were few opportunities in their rural communities for stable conjugal relations influenced women’s choices as they connected to survival strategies. As men left rural areas for cities, they left their wives behind, which exacerbated geographic divisions but also fueled people’s curiosities and desires to see the city. In other words, for some women, migrancy was linked to productive solution-making decisions rather than a reaction to breakdown.²¹ While migration to cities represented an uprooting of social structures, it also promised new beginnings and new spatial identities. Women indeed were intrepid adventurers, often risking their personal reputations in attempts to explore new ways of living. Later, as education was further extended to women, many benefited from vocational training, and went on to become nurses and educators.²² Here, urban migration came to represent social mobility through education, something that is still relevant long after the colonial period.

Migrants and Urban Culture Formation

The desire for autonomy and the promise of achieving a new “modern” urban way of life motivated many women to move to urban milieus independently; those urban environments emerged as spaces that engendered new, vibrant popular cultures created by Africans themselves. In the context of the Belgian colonial city of Léopoldville, newly arrived women were important in the nascent leisure time and nightlife activities of urban areas, providing companionship to men and becoming dance partners. Partner dancing

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such as the Congolese Rumba would not have flourished without the physical presence of women moving into the city.²³ As a result of their participation in new popular cultural forms, migrant women were simultaneously looked up to as trendsetters, especially for people in rural areas, as well as condemned for their perceived lasciviousness.

Women sometimes sought to escape the rural marginalization that often came with patriarchal social patterns. Consequently, women were faced with having to exchange one form of control for another, as colonial towns were highly patriarchal, combining older notions of traditional gender roles with new European ideals concerning womanhood and femininity. Women moving from rural areas were also attracted to the new consumer culture which offered the promise of wealth accumulation, as well as the opportunity to experiment with self-presentation. New consumer desires would eventually come to be blamed for women's so-called moral degeneration.²⁴ Newly arrived women in cities and towns were forced into roles of bearers of "tradition" and were often demonized for becoming too "modern." They were confronted with a "double patriarchy" constituted by both European and African men. For instance, in colonial Uganda, women's asserted freedom of movement was cited by Christian missionaries, Baganda men, and colonial officials as "the source of most of Buganda's troubles."²⁵ In Jean-Bernard Ouedraogo's account of women's migrations within Burkina Faso, he frames their movements as escapes from rural life, citing colonization, evangelization, and modernization as key factors. Migrant women here took up work in domestic spheres, or in nightlife activities—the latter was perceived of by a woman's family as a shameful source of revenue.²⁶

Informal Work

Operating outside the direct controls of authorities, activities carried out by women contributed to the economy not through wage labor but through other means such as petty trade. Though most women worked in what is referred to as the "informal sector," or the "invisible economy," they were indeed active participants in the formal economy. Scholarship has shown us the ways in which the dichotomy between the informal and formal economies in many countries in the global South exists on the discursive and symbolic levels.²⁷

Economic activities available to migrant women were confined to the domestic sphere—women took up jobs as cooks and maids for Europeans colonials, as well as providing what Luise White refers to as "the comforts of home" to African men.²⁸ As Emily Osborn has shown, there is a long history of women becoming "temporary wives" for European colonial officials.²⁹ Beer brewing, petty trade, and prostitution were also avenues through which women in various African contexts made substantial economic gains, though not without moral backlash.³⁰ Nici Nelson adds to discussions of women's urban survival strategies by describing women's contemporary survival strategies in Nairobi, citing the sexual economy as a primary source of revenue.³¹

Becoming a mistress or girlfriend also provided migrant women with protection, and some financial security, but it stoked married women's anxieties that their husbands were

dividing up the household finances among multiple women. Rather than direct cash-for-sex transactions, women set up long-term arrangements with men, in which they traded “the comforts of home” for a level of economic security and a roof over their heads. While these mutually beneficial arrangements might have suited migrant women in the short term, many yearned to find more stable romantic partners with whom they could build a family. As a result, single women were accused by colonial governments of prostitution which consequently led to institutionalized controls regarding civil status. Christine Obbo’s work both highlights the opportunities opened up to Ugandan migrant women and underlines the anxieties provoked by their circulations, citing prostitution as being a threat to authorities.³²

Urban, unmarried women were automatically considered to be prostitutes and thus harbingers of disease that contributed to population decline. This was not unique to the region; British, German, and Belgian colonial governments during Europe’s interwar years sought to control women’s sexuality by introducing certain policies to restrict their movements, as well as providing reproductive health sensitization campaigns.³³ Similarly, upon entering Léopoldville, women were made to declare whether they were married (*femme mariée*) or single (*femme libre*).³⁴ If designated single, there was an automatic assumption that women would be working as prostitutes and therefore would be taxed. In addition to the moral stigma associated with single women in the city, this levied tax was intended to discourage more migrant women from settling in cities.³⁵ Single women also bumped up against many challenges related to setting up their personal infrastructure—rental housing in many colonial cities was a difficult feat since permission from one’s husband was often required for any kind of formal contractual arrangement. There was a widespread vilification of single women in many African cities.³⁶ Consequently, migrant women were excluded from many official avenues of public life, which further pushed their activities into realms that required inventiveness and resourcefulness on a greater scale. Colonial administrations across Africa sought to curb unwanted errant women by imposing certain restrictions on their mobility. However, these efforts were far from effective, and women continued to flow into urban spaces.

In the 1950s, many rural girls migrated for short-term periods to work as domestics in Dakar.³⁷ African cinema also offers compelling accounts of women’s labor migrations. For instance, Ousmane Sembene’s classic 1966 film *La Noire de . . .* (translated in English as *Black Girl*), portrays a young Senegalese woman who becomes a domestic worker for a French family in the South of France. Exploitation and profound alienation thematically animate the film, calling attention to the vulnerable position in which migrant women found themselves. Similarly, young women in Mali and Nigeria migrated to cities to work in the domestic sphere, only later to return to their rural homes to help with farming and/or to get married.³⁸ However, in other cases, some women remained unmarried in cities, instead opting for occasional financial support from boyfriends.³⁹ Changing gender relations were also shaped by women’s deepening of their commerce activities. West African women have a long history of transregional trade within and among rural and urban areas.⁴⁰ Migrant women have been vital to marketplaces across the continent, their trading activities driving socioeconomic changes and distributing goods to consumers who might

not otherwise have had access. In Nigeria, Hausa commerce women were able to successfully leverage their migrant trading activities—some of which led them into patterns of temporary migration, away from their rural homes—into new investment schemes that further secured their financial standing.⁴¹ Women successfully establishing themselves in commerce became a source of anxiety for men who considered the city a morally corrupting site for women. Financially independent women were often labeled “wayward.”⁴²

Emergent urban spaces represented an escape from the social controls at home, as well as the opportunity for a new mode of financial independence. Women’s migrations produced a generative matrix for relating differently to the world. Gender relations and household structures were reconfigured during this colonial period, and while women often bore the burden and hardships of wage labor as well as moral stigma, they nonetheless represented and embodied new channels of agentive potential. Many, while confronted with urban stigma, enjoyed an increase in status and managed to amass enough money to send back home to their families, which garnered them prestige. Migrant women also strategically gathered enough resources, sometimes with the assistance of their all-female associational groups, to open small bars of their own, hiring other migrants as barmaids. These solidarity networks, and other new modes of solidarity, were propitious strategies through which women mutually benefited economically.⁴³ Deborah James found that South African migrant women’s home associations are important avenues of place-making.⁴⁴ Here, the intersection of music, migration, gender, and anthropology highlight the ways in which women foster connection with natal homes through associations and musical dance traditions. Rural networks can also be instrumental in providing assistance during periods of financial austerity.⁴⁵

Post-colonial Migration

Africa’s period of decolonization, beginning in the late 1950s, signaled a period in which new nation states exerted and performed their sovereignty. In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, wage employment was more plentiful in urban and peri-urban areas, partly due to uneven investments linked to colonial extractive economies, leading to acceleration of rural-urban migration. The prospect of leaving behind arduous agricultural labor in favor of new modes of work appealed to many women. For instance, women in East Africa, especially unmarried women, were denied land tenure, which contributed to rural-urban migrations, and by the 1970s, migrant women outnumbered men in Kenya and Tanzania.⁴⁶ While urban areas continued to represent opportunity for social and individual advancement, the structural adjustment period of the 1980s and 1990s rendered urban life strenuous, as more people had to compete for limited resources. Thus, return migration and reintegration into their natal communities was an important consideration in women’s experiences.⁴⁷ Notwithstanding, migrants, both men and women, continued to enter large, fragmented African megacities like Lagos, Nairobi, and Johannesburg, leading to what is referred to as a “feminization of migration,” in which men are outnum-

bered, and which has contributed to and been shaped by the increase in development programs geared toward “women empowerment.”⁴⁸

Certain nation-building projects introduced forced migration programs to rid particular regions of unwanted ethnic, national, or religious minorities. Women were invariably included in these expulsions. Similar to the moral turpitude that colonial governments foisted on unmarried women, migrant women who were unmarried and living outside their family structures, were also subject to moral suspicion, and were sometimes implored to “return home.”⁴⁹ Refugees fleeing from natural disasters like floods or droughts, and from political calamities such as civil war, continue to produce displaced peoples.⁵⁰ War plaguing the Central African region has been particularly brutal for women, who are often the targets of violent rebel incursions, giving rise to an internally displaced populace.⁵¹

The contours of who is a forced migrant and who is voluntary is sometimes nebulous, thus posing conceptual problems relating to terminology frequently employed by policymakers.⁵² To be sure, cases in which women are forced into movement, as in sex trafficking, can clearly be counted as scenarios in which individual agency is severely limited.⁵³ In particular, Nwando Achebe has highlighted the difference between empowered local sex workers in Nigeria between the late 1960s and 1970s and the deeply troubling contemporary cases of sex slaves trafficked to Italy.⁵⁴ Migrant women are often marginalized from formal labor markets, and are therefore vulnerable to precarious working conditions and sexual harassment.⁵⁵ There is a growing body of literature attending to some of the exploitative working conditions in which women find themselves. Emel Coşkun provides case studies of Ugandan women in Turkey who are forced into sex work due to oppressive structural factors and lack of choice.⁵⁶

Market trade has long been an important source of revenue, and in the years following independence, West African transnational trader women rose to prominent positions of financial power, especially in the case of West Africa’s *Nana Benz* traders, who dominated textile markets in Togo as Nina Sylvanus discusses.⁵⁷ Transnational trader women across Africa are traveling to locations as far as Dubai, Brazil, and China to import affordable goods for resale in their communities. Women are chastised in popular discourse for being absent from their homes for weeks or sometimes months at a time, “wandering” in search of increased profit margins.⁵⁸ The questioning of their morality is largely attributed to the perceived physical distance from the domestic sphere.⁵⁹ For many people, motherhood is seen as incompatible with transnational trade, unlike local market trading activities in which women combine their business activities with raising their children.⁶⁰ Further, it is not so much a woman’s financial independence that provokes moral anxiety; rather, it is her ability to be mobile, which is facilitated by her expanded social network, that invites criticism, gossip, and suspicion. Similar to during the colonial era when migrant women were scapegoated for spreading sexually transmitted diseases, women’s movements are frequently blamed for the spread of HIV/AIDS, especially in the context of South Africa. Indeed, moral anxieties regarding women’s movements have not dissipated;

rather, stigma continues to be directed at women whose economic activities are dependent upon migration.

Education, and the possibilities it offers for upward social mobility, is another motivating factor in women's migrations.⁶¹ Further, women elites are also migrants, something that Carmel Dinan takes up in her study about Ghanaian women.⁶² Internal and international migration has been continuously rising, and with economic stagnation plaguing many African nations, many educated women leave the continent altogether, creating brain drains.

As previously mentioned in the example of Sembene's film *Black Girl*, which chronicles the life of a Senegalese woman in France, there is a long history of transnational domestic workers coming from African countries and working in homes around the world. Ethiopian domestic servants going to the Middle East and the Gulf States are also counted in these labor migrations.⁶³ Here, remittances are a central feature in discussions regarding women and migration, in particular, international migration. It is common that extended family members financially depend on the migratory practices of an individual. Christian Groes-Green has explored the ways in which migration routes taken by Mozambican women have been partly informed by the sexual relationships forged with white men in Europe. The money they earn abroad through various means is then redistributed among their kinship networks at home.⁶⁴ Women are integral players in maintaining the nexus of connections across geographical spaces, often between urban and rural contexts.⁶⁵ In this way, they can increase their status within their family structures, and within local communities, which affords them an increase in prestige. Migrants not only send money to family members but must manage the affective dimensions of these long-distance relationships. Jennifer Cole writes about marriage migrants, particularly Malagasy women who, sometimes unwittingly, move to rural French villages.⁶⁶ In these cases, they must strategically manage impressions as well as finances in a multilocal manner—with their French husbands and their Malagasy families. While migrant women exhibit a proclivity to remit to their families, they nevertheless face financial constraints which render it difficult to contribute to and support their extended families. Here, they are negotiating not only cultures and geographic spaces but also family roles.

Discussion of the Literature

Social scientific research of the early 20th century relating to Africa was dominated by "primitivist" interpretations, shaped by dubious racial stereotypes that positioned Africans as deeply tribal and inherently rural peoples. Gender roles and sexuality were perceived of as unwavering, and women were considered only insofar as the organic social whole.

Subsequent models of analysis premised on industrialization and development emerged in tandem with the rise of colonial cities. Modernization theories of the 1940s and 1950s argued that socioeconomic disequilibrium could be explained through structural forces categorized by concepts such as "modernity" and "tradition," "urban" and "rural." In-

deed, there is much research about urbanization in Africa, and the ways in which systemic factors create push-pull models to explain social change; Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Akin Mabogunje are two notable scholars. However, in much of this work, women are considered an afterthought. Likewise, prominent in the 1970s, Marxist approaches focused on the internal dynamics of how African societies developed their relationship to global capitalism, to reveal how colonialism was driven by production, and profit achieved through exploitation. Scholars like Claude Meillassoux, Jean Copans, Jean-Loup Amselle, and Pierre-Philippe Rey examined the intersections of migrant labor and colonial and pre-colonial modes of production.⁶⁷ These approaches have been criticized for effacing individual agency and the particularities of geographic regions, instead proposing metanarratives of development. Contrary to what push-pull models suggest, migration is not always merely a reaction to civil conflict, poverty, or the environment. Further, economic factors are not the only “pull factors” associated with migration. Instead, people confront a whole host of obligations, as well as other historical forces, that extend beyond the individual as a rational actor model. Further, a noticeable lacuna appears in these models as African women are obscured from analyses. Women in these studies are often considered only in functionalist terms, focusing on biological reproduction, and their roles as wives and mothers in domestic spheres.

In the 1970s and 1980s, African women’s studies was inspired by feminist research, as well as by anthropological and Marxist research. This feminist turn in the scholarship attempted to counter androcentric narratives of women as passive actors who followed either their migrant husbands or other male family members.⁶⁸ Renee Pittin, Susan Watts, and Lillian Trager are part of this initial feminist turn, and they have considered the many ways in which status is intertwined with migration.⁶⁹ For instance, marriage migration in certain contexts opens up new opportunities for women in new economic spheres, while autonomous migration for other women can engender new avenues of revenue. This shift was partly motivated by the field of development studies in which women were regarded as key players in the economy, and by extension in development programs. Scholars like Gunilla Bjerén, Christine Obbo, Ann Schlyter, and Kathleen Sheldon can be counted as part of this early initiative to reinscribe women into the narrative of migration.⁷⁰ In particular, the edited work by Christine Oppong includes chapters focusing on women as migrants to the cities of West Africa.⁷¹ New methodological approaches to understanding women and migration were developed and culled from across the disciplines. Incorporating extensive interviews and oral histories from women from different social strata, studies assessing contemporary issues often include ethnographic dimensions, with women researchers leading projects, something that has been thought of as instrumental in offsetting male biases, especially during interviews.⁷²

Since the 1990s, there has been burgeoning literature on women’s contemporary experiences with migration, something that has become a pressing concern in terms of international humanitarian issues, and thus migration has become increasingly feminized. The edited volume by Tade Akin Aina and Jonathan Baker, *The Migration Experience in Africa*, features a section specifically devoted to gender issues.⁷³ Kathleen Sheldon’s seminal volume *Courtyards, Markets, City Streets*, is a good resource for articles specifically about

migration and urbanization.⁷⁴ Other scholars like Jeanne Marie Penvenne and Belinda Dodson make use of women's oral histories, in particular songs, to shed light on women, migration, and labor markets under colonialism, in Mozambique, and under apartheid in South Africa, respectively.

Refocusing the attention on gender and migration, deconstructing women's plights on an individual level, carries with it risks of its own. Namely, that attention to more microdynamics associated with migration might obscure the structural forces that contribute to the larger, global issues confronting women. Indeed, this dichotomy within theoretical models is reflective of the sometimes rote and unproductive discussions relating to the relationship between structure and agency or "Marxist and non-Marxist approaches." Emerging scholarship attempts to move away from this bind in part by approaching migration in a multiscale fashion, asking questions that include both micro- and macro-level analysis with regard to the power relations associated with migration.

Circular models of migration complicate dichotomous conceptions of the rural and the urban as they leave room for patterns of return and connection.⁷⁵ Women's strategies throughout the course of their lives emphasize the circularity and the linkages with home and other locales. Case studies regarding hometown associations and remittance practices reveal, for instance, women's multilocal lives, and the nexus of connection between their different social groups.⁷⁶ These models emphasize the bidirectional movements of migrant women. Jennifer Cole and Christian Groes's edited volume provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which the flows of people and resources move among a variety of locales, though sometimes not without disconnection.⁷⁷

Finally, fiction is also a propitious means through which to explore experiences of migration from a woman's perspective. Novels like *On Black Sisters Street* by Chika Unigwe, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and *Little Mother* by Cristina Ali Farah trace African women's movements across multiple temporalities and geographic spaces while maintaining the integrity of their lives as a whole, not merely as actors in separated realms of the economic, political, biological, religious, and cultural.⁷⁸ Fiction perhaps can best capture not only differences between men and women but also the divergent experience within women themselves.

Primary Sources

Early travel reports, photographs, ethnographic accounts of missionaries, and colonial documentation, such as legal proceedings in customary courts, offer perspectives of patterns in women's migrations. In particular, women's migration becomes particularly visible in colonial legal proceedings concerning divorce, desertion of the marital home, and bridewealth reimbursement. As such, national and regional archives located in African and European countries often serve as productive jumping-off points in any historical research project.

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In addition, oral histories, life histories, performance, and material culture are counted as important primary sources, and are often needed to complement archival evidence. In this regard, knowledge of African languages is an important means of accessing primary source material. Demographic and empirical data culled from ethnographic field notes of social scientists can also be counted as primary material for social historians. Like archival materials, they must be carefully interpreted in light of the methods and interests evident in recording them.

Links to Digital Materials

Women and Social Movements in Modern Empires since 1820.

Research Report about South African Migration.

Mixed Migration Centre is a source for independent data, information, research and analysis on mixed migration.

The Global Dimensions of Female Migration.

United Nations International Organization for Migration.

UN Women: gateway to United Nations resources on women.

World Bank data from 1960 to 2000.

Further Reading

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