

Editorial

Gender, Class, and Mobility from the 1980s

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How do gender and class intersect with the experience of mobility? While movement from one geographical location to another and the aspiration to move from one social position to the next are intrinsic to social life, state structures, the market, and related practices of assigning different values and opportunities to groups and individuals view the mobility of poor, ordinary Africans as a problem to be confronted and curbed. For ordinary Africans, the aspiration to move from one social position to the other is impeded by a lack of access to resources and the securitisation of mobility. Yet, these Africans are moving in significant numbers within and beyond the continent. They face difficult conditions both en route to their destinations and in their host societies. Their gender and sexuality as women, men, and sexual and gender minorities play a role in determining the opportunities open to migrants and would-be migrants, the conditions under which they move, the work that they do and the resources available to them to improve their lives. Being gendered as women, men, or LGBTQI+ persons not only affects one's ability to move from one social position to another, but perceptions about gender often (de)limit the aspirations of persons seeking social mobility.

Women have historically been mobile in Africa (Akurang-Parry 2002, 2010; Awumbila 2015; Darkwah 2021). Side by side with female mobility, patriarchal power structures impose expectations of what people gendered as men can do, shaping how certain men can move across places and vertically through the social hierarchy. In a more visceral manner, ongoing conservative mobilisations in some parts of Africa against non-heteronormative ways of life affect the physical movement and opportunities available for LGBTQI+ persons to improve their lives and livelihoods. In order to be safe, LGBTQI+

persons may have to move or restrict their movement. And when they move, access to resources such as healthcare can be daunting. In essence, people move, geographically and socially, and for varied reasons. Aspirations to be mobile and experiences of mobility are not the same for all: they differ significantly along the lines of gender and class.

The normative and hegemonic theorisation of African migration in general, and of the intersection of gender, class, and migration, in particular, in existing literature has proceeded largely along parallel tracks that rarely converge into an integrated analytical framework adequate to African realities. Historically, theories developed in the context of migration to the United States (US) from Mexico and other parts of the Americas were applied to the African experience with little, if any, regard for broader historical contexts or specific migration histories, and for how these shape and are shaped by notions of space, belonging, travel, and accomplishment. The attempt to productively engage with the marginalisation of gender (read women), class, and migration is deduced from the Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) frameworks, as they grappled with women's roles in development processes. Their engagement, however, produced a fundamental sedentarism that implies that women belong to fixed places, households, and communities, thus rendering their mobility exceptional, derivative or threatening to social order (Kanogo 2005). GAD, the most advanced of the three, shifted to gender as an analytical lens, yet treated migration as a welfare concern rather than as a site of class formation. As these frameworks operate through a Weberian stratification lens that privileges individual mobility through formal hierarchies, the complex sites of internal class stratification of the informal economy where most African women work, for example, are theoretically unmapped and invisible to policy. This results in a compounded erasure of African women's movement, which is constitutive of their economic agency and social formation.

Conversely, African feminist theoretical tradition treats African women's mobility as collective and relational rather than individual, as integral to African social life instead of a deviation from it, and as internally differentiated by class, as opposed to uniform across a homogenised category of women. It measures advancement not by formal, market-legible gains alone but also by consciousness, informal economic agency, and genuine transformation of

power relations, treating the criterion for what counts as advancement as itself a site of ongoing political contest and not a settled, technical question. *Feminist Africa* has taken this seriously over its more than two decades of scholarship, from *Intellectual Politics* (2002) to *Thinking Gender Differently, with Inspiration from Africa* (2025).

The tradition has developed through the continued critique of, and course correction to, mainstream development frameworks, predominantly from African feminist intellectual and political movements (Mama 2007; McFadden 1998; Tamale 2020; Tsikata 2016). Taken together, these movements converged on the argument that the institutional conditions of development programming are politically structured to produce and reward individual, measurable, formal-sector social mobility in ways that systematically discount the collective, transformative, and decolonial conceptions of social mobility that African feminist movements have long theorised as indispensable to any reckoning with African women's subordination. The gap between African feminist theoretical tradition and mainstream approaches to African women's advancement is not a gap in empirical knowledge or technical capacity but a political one.

This *Issue* is an intervention that focuses on deeper engagement with the interaction of gender, class, and experiences of mobility, as mediated by various social, economic, geographical, and political factors. Issa Shivji's (2017) conceptualisation of class as a relationship to life-sustaining goods through wage labour and/or survivalist activities among those in employment and the unemployed, who together constitute the working people, is worth considering here. This conception transcends the division of the working class and the lumpenproletariat, given the social interdependence of both groups and the ease with which people move between them. And by gender, we refer to the assignment of social roles, obligations, and expectations based on assumptions about biology with variations across contexts, communities, and social groups. Conceptually, by linking gender with social class in the process and experience of mobility, we foreground gender as mediating mobility (who can move, how they can move, and what their experiences of host societies are, including the opportunities and limitations they encounter) and, in turn, as (re)producing social class. These gendered experiences in host societies consequently determine the social position of migrants. Women relegated to domestic work

in, say, the Gulf have limited opportunities to move up the social ladder from their class position as working people. This does not suggest a linear relationship between the three concepts or their lived experiences; rather, they relate in ways in which one or more, in the context of other factors, may be amplified or hushed.

We draw on African feminisms and feminist decoloniality work to critically analyse concepts such as gender, patriarchy, and their implications, including knowledge production, which has featured strongly in the works of African feminists (Amadiume 1987; Oyěwùmí 1997, 2011). We also draw on the hetero-patriarchal discourse (Woodson and Pabon 2016) from Black feminist thought to further understand gender, patriarchy, migration, and class, and analyse the status of women and other genders. Contributions engage a textured and nuanced debate on the status of women and other genders on the move. The contributions in this volume anchor migration and mobility around gender and how gender intersects with notions and embodiment of social class, race, and other markers of social differentiation (Crenshaw 1991) from the 1980s until now. This *Issue*, therefore, focuses on these developments with a view to imagining possible liberatory and transformative politics around the mobility and (immobility) of working-class women and other social groups whose interests are served by fundamental social transformation.

We read gender, women, and minorities through the scholarship and the subsequent intellectual and activist shifts occasioned by African feminists in their engagements with the relationship between colonialism, accumulation, and patriarchy. The invention of the Victorian woman, who is supposedly docile, subservient, second class, under men's control, and limited to domestic spaces for reproduction and care roles, was not in keeping with the position of women in Africa before colonial contact. Colonisation superimposed Victorian ideals of womanhood in Africa through education and laws governing the ownership and acquisition of property, thereby entrenching this particular form of patriarchy in an otherwise malleable patriarchal African society (Amadiume 1987; Mama 2011; Oyèrónké 1997, 2011).

With accumulation being a primary driver of colonialism, women's economic exploitation went hand in hand with their oppression. This operated in several ways, key among which were the gendered structures of private

property ownership. This was especially so when colonies were incorporated into Western patriarchal economic systems linked to accumulation and the power of men. These systems brought together colonisers and their local enablers, and dispossessed and proletarianised men lured by the promise of some form of power over others, in this case, women (Rodney 1972), thus resulting in “double colonisation” (Petersen and Rutherford 1986).

African Migration Today: Between Western-Right Mobilisation and Afrophobia in Africa

The current political conditions within which this *Feminist Africa Issue* is being produced are not incidental to its arguments. McKittrick’s closing commentary, originally written in 2025, names them directly, such as deportation raids, the calcification of Canadian anti-immigration politics, the suspension of US refugee resettlement programmes, and the systematic dismantling of diversity and equity frameworks in American public institutions. Such developments are not confined to North America but are also present in Europe. Across the European Union, for example, restrictive border externalisation policies have been incorporated through bilateral agreements that transfer the burden of migration control to African states while exempting European governments from the protection obligations those migrants would trigger on European soil (Zanker 2019).

In South Africa, the Afrophobic violence that Burton documents in this *Issue* as a feature of post-apartheid citizenship has intensified amid economic contraction, state failure in service delivery, and the deliberate scapegoating of migrant communities. Neocosmos (2010) describes this as a structural function of neoliberal government and not a spontaneous expression of popular sentiment. Afrophobia in South Africa and other parts of the continent functions as political diversion. Instead of confronting the failures of the postcolonial and the post-apartheid state to transform property relations, create decent work, or provide social security, migrants become scapegoats for broader crises produced by capitalism and neoliberalism. In Canada, this is manifest in the multicultural framework that Thobani (2007) critiques as managing racial difference instead of addressing racism. Recent policies are

increasingly harming racialised migrants, particularly African women, who are already experiencing these effects.

A shared political economy ties together the geographically dispersed events and responses. In the same period that anti-immigration politics have intensified in the Global North, there has been an acceleration in the extraction of resources, land acquisition, and debt-driven structuring in Africa, which has produced conditions of economic displacement. These have resulted in increased migration from Africa while the destinations to which people move have been closed (Rodney 1972; Shivji 2017). While this is not new, it is a manifestation of the relationship between African underdevelopment and Global North accumulation. The first feature in this *Issue* written by Takyiakwaa and Garba traces this process from the colonial period through structural adjustment to the present. Restrictions on migration are presented as protecting the interests of ordinary people, yet the material conditions producing displacement are both unaddressed and reproduced through the trade, debt, and extraction that the anti-migration politicians endorse. For example, gender inclusion in African migration policy is performed at the level of rhetoric while the structural conditions producing women's precarity are preserved at the level of political economy.

Mobility and Africa's Transformation

Against the anti-immigration global political terrain, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) is both structurally ambitious and limited. Its unique design and promise of improved intra-African mobility and market integration position it to address the colonial fragmentation of Africa's political economy, which is foundational to contemporary migration dynamics. The full implementation of AfCFTA's protocols on the free movement of people would significantly reorder the citizenship apparatuses that are a primary mechanism through which migrant women's exclusion is produced and reproduced, as demonstrated by Burton (this *Issue*) in the case of South Africa. The gap between AfCFTA's liberalisation commitments and the lived experiences of women moving within Africa remains vast. Documentation requirements, border enforcement practices, and labour market restrictions, as well as the

absence of social protection, deepen the precarities of migrants despite trade agreements signed at the continental level.

The gap between policy and reality reflects structural tensions that African feminists have consistently identified. Continental and national governance frameworks incorporate the language of gender equality and mobility while leaving intact the political-economic arrangements that produce structural inequalities (Hassim 2006; Tamale 2020). The AfCFTA, just as WID, WAD, and GAD, approach women as beneficiaries who need assistance rather than political agents whose experiences of gendered, classed, and racialised exclusion should constitute the starting point of policy design. A feminist framing would require not asking how women can be included in existing frameworks but rather what a mobility framework designed from the standpoint of the most excluded women would look like, and whether the current governance, border management, and labour market infrastructure would survive that interrogation. The existing literature and evidence assembled in this *Issue* suggest that it would not survive. The work of African feminist scholarship is to precisely make the case with the theoretical rigour and empirical grounding that political rhetoric alone cannot deliver.

Also, overcoming Afrophobic tendencies requires, among other things, the need for cross-border organising across Africa. Capital already operates across borders, exploiting workers and resources throughout the continent. Communities resisting displacement, environmental destruction, and neoliberal restructuring must build transnational alliances. Pan-African solidarity cannot remain rhetorical; it must be grounded in shared political struggle. Such a struggle will have to confront the contradiction at the heart of African governments' approach to migration. While many states have signed the AfCFTA, very few have ratified protocols guaranteeing free movement for African people. Capital is allowed to move freely, but workers and poor people are criminalised for crossing borders. Challenging Afrophobia therefore also requires demanding freedom of movement and opposing the hardening of borders inherited from colonial rule.

Gender, Class, and Mobility: Looking Across the Decades and Forward

This *Issue* weaves together the state of and experiences at the intersection of gender, class, and mobility in and of Africa. The first contribution, also by the editors, sets up the *Issue* with a careful and critical engagement with the state of the literature, tracing the nature and depth of the theorisation of African mobility (physical and social) and its intersection with gender and class. It establishes the institutional argument for this *Issue* by identifying the problem that the rest of the volume addresses. Mainstream migration theories have failed African women because they were built without African historical formations, colonial political economies or gendered structures of mobility in their foundations. Similarly, WID, WAD, and GAD have failed African women not because they lacked feminist intent but because they inherited a sedentarist framing that treats women's fixity as the norm and their mobility as the deviation, and none could theorise class formation, sexual power, and colonial inheritance simultaneously. Structural adjustment programmes transformed these theoretical failures into material ones by reorganising African economies in ways that transferred the costs of fiscal austerity onto women's unpaid labour. This drove female migration into economies that were being dismantled. African feminists' theorisations have named these failures with precision. Sylvia Tamale, Amina Mama, Pumla Gqola, Shireen Hassim, Patricia McFadden, Molar Ogundipe-Leslie and others, alongside the African Feminist Forum, have collectively produced the decolonial counter-tradition that the field needs. The articles that follow take up the challenge those thinkers have laid. They do not apply migration theory to African women but rather theorise from African women's experiences. They do not treat gender, class, and migration as disaggregated variables but as axes of inequality that are co-produced through specific institutional mechanisms: how African mobility has been theorised, specifically for women; the citizenship apparatus in post-apartheid South Africa; the racialised labour market and childcare infrastructure in Canada; COVID-era disruptions to care and mobility of professional Ghanaian international migrants; and the policy architecture of the African Union, where women's exclusion is reproduced. The contributions in this *Issue* make visible our argument that African women's migration is not a welfare problem to be solved, a labour supply to be exploited, or an exception

to models elsewhere. It is a site of class formation, gendered power dynamics, and colonial continuities that demands theorisations adequate to its complexity.

Olivia Burton's *Coloniality of Citizenship* problematises and complicates the foundational assumption that gender, class, and race compound one another. The feature goes further by identifying the specific institutional architecture through which they are compounded and reproduced in the context of migration governance. Burton shows that South Africa's citizenship apparatus is historically constituted by colonial and apartheid hierarchies that operationalise racial, gendered, and class exclusions through the procedural language of documentation, eligibility, and administrative processes. The coloniality of citizenship, as Burton demonstrates, is not a historical residue visible only in dramatic moments of xenophobic violence; it is reproduced daily through procedural architecture such as documentation requirements at the relief grant office that exclude the undocumented, and queues at the Department of Home Affairs that migrants join knowing that institutional xenophobia makes success unlikely. Burton draws on qualitative interviews with migrant women in Cape Town during the height of South Africa's COVID-19 lockdown to show how the government's pandemic response made legible an already-existing system that had always constructed them as outside the circle of citizenship. The article's application of the coloniality of citizenship, read through Oyèrónké's critique of the colonial gender system, crystallises this *Issue's* argument that the intersection of gender, class, and migration inequality in the African context is not incidental to governance but is structurally produced by citizenship apparatuses constituted through colonial and apartheid hierarchies reproduced by democratic transformations. This opens the question: if citizenship itself is the mechanism of exclusion, what forms of belonging and solidarity emerge from those excluded?

Ola-Lawson and Akanle's feature article responds to this question by relocating the argument to a different migration corridor. Through qualitative interviews with Nigerian women in Canada, they build the empirical evidence and discussion needed to respond to the forms of belonging and solidarity among the excluded. The feature documents what they theorise as a collision of gender orders: the Nigerian patriarchal formation that women carry across the Atlantic and the Canadian liberal feminist institutional framework they encounter on arrival. Neither of the gender orders is adequate to the actual

situation of the migrant women and the cost of navigating both falls almost entirely on the women themselves. By shifting the analysis to intimate, personal experiences, Ola-Lawson and Akanle argue that the collision of gender orders is not incidental to Canadian multiculturalism but structurally produced by it. The migrant women therefore develop class strategies of belonging and solidarity, including transnational motherhood, which distributes the cost of migration transnationally, revealing how the reproductive labour of left-behind African women is foundational to migration. What Ola-Lawson and Akanle add to the collective argument is the demonstration that the coloniality Burton identifies in the South African citizenship apparatus operates with equal force in the Canadian household and labour market, using different mechanisms but producing the same structural outcome. This transnational motherhood is what Miraftab and Huq (2024) call global bantustanisation: production and social reproduction split across borders so left-behind women's unpaid care work subsidises migration elsewhere. This demonstrates the systematic reproduction of racialised, gendered, and class-based inequality through institutions and relationships that present themselves as neutral and progressive.

The cartographic conversation that follows does not offer an empirical case study but asks a prior and more unsettling question: from where do we know what the preceding feature articles have shown us, and how does the location shape what we can see? Christine Vogt-William and Stefan Ouma, in conversation with McKittrick, provide a methodological and epistemological anchoring and theorise a Black sense of place. This is not an identity category but a method of knowing from specific diasporic locations that are both inside and outside the national formations that seek to contain them. When read together with Ola-Lawson and Akanle's account of Nigerian women in Canada, McKittrick's concept elucidates what those women are already doing to refuse the national boundary: knowing from a position that carries both Nigeria and Canada, remaking place through negotiation and self-definition in ways that Canadian multiculturalism cannot theorise. McKittrick insists that the crossroads at which Black womanhood is simultaneously raced, gendered, and classed is a material geography and understanding this requires not the application of fixed frameworks, but the willingness to be open. The conversation also turns the gaze onto the academic space, as McKittrick observes that even within progressive institutions, some anti-racists have larger

offices and get more funding than others. This extends this *Issue's* critique of colonial knowledge hierarchies. The closing commentary highlights the anti-immigrant politics that make urgent what Takyiakwaa and Garba's feature argue historically: the cartographies of harm are not residues of the past but active in the present and require critical and reconstructive work.

The last feature by Madeleine Wong moves McKittrick's epistemological cartography to ground and documents the agentive remaking of place within the transnational lives of professional Ghanaian migrant women navigating the COVID-19 pandemic across the United Kingdom, the US, and Canada. Using Bourdieu's forms of capital and their feminist revisions, the paper shows that even highly skilled, well-remunerated professional migrant women remain bound by gender role expectations. This is evidence that class privilege mitigates but never fully insulates against structural vulnerability. Read alongside Ola-Lawson and Akanle's account of Nigerian women's migration to Canada, Wong's feature article offers a second diasporic vantage point on how gender persistently structures care and mobility, even where class promises the greatest protection.

The Standpoint by Setrana, Zanker, and Diakite is framed around one question: is a feminist migration agenda politically possible? With a mix of scepticism and vision, they argue that gender inclusion in African migration policy is deliberately designed within a neoliberal framework to require women's presence without their power. They propose policy transformation, an ethics of care that positions migrants as relational and interdependent, and the abolition of the colonality of borders.

In Conversation titled "*She Cannot Sit Idle*": *Kinship, Class and Gendered Politics of Women's Mobility*, Wong demonstrates what feminist migration research looks like when it is grounded in the specific epistemological formation of the researcher. She names how matrilineal systems were invisible to Western feminist reviewers, and the class dimensions of skilled African migration ignored by literature that expects Africans to be poor. Wong's conversation together with Setrana, Zanker, and Diakite's Standpoint moves from structural analysis to feminist praxis, from imagining what could be to modelling what is.

The *Issue* closes with three book reviews: Nyabola's *Travelling While Black* by Christian Bruku, Adichie's *Dream Count* by Malaika Patel, and Falola and Yacob-Haliso's *Women in Africa* by Afua Yeboah and Nana-Anna Abaka-Cann. Bruku's review shows that race, class and gender are equally potent axes of mobility and that surveillance begins at home in the bureaucracies of sending states. Yet, foreignness can also function as class privilege in ways that collapse Blackness into economic position. Patel's review of Adichie's *Dream Count* brings these intersectional concerns into fiction where the characters' varied experiences and collective care across class lines map the gendered and racialised costs of migration with intimacy that is often absent in scholarship. Finally, Yeboah and Abaka-Cann's review of Falola and Yacob-Haliso's *Women in Africa* commends the comprehensive continent-wide recovery project for its extraordinary range and decolonial commitment despite the identified gap between intersectionality named and practised. Together, the three reviews were selected to demonstrate that the questions this *Issue* asks of scholarly articles are equally relevant in travel writing, fiction, and textbooks, and to assert that feminist politics of gender, class, and migration is not contained in any single form of knowing.

In sum, through this collection of unique and rich research, we reflect on the intersections of gender, class, and migration, and theorise African women's migration from their own historical formations, epistemological traditions, and lived contradictions. We build on the body of work of *Feminist Africa* and intervene by bringing together African feminist scholarship tools for naming and contesting the ongoing crisis of anti-immigration politics across the world.

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Finally, we celebrate visible and invisible labour of African women, whose resistances and interventions continue to transform the continent.

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