

Theorising Gender, Class, and Mobility in Africa: Hegemony, Critiques, and Feminist Interventions

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Abstract

Dominant migration scholarship has framed African mobility as an empirical anomaly to be explained through theories developed elsewhere, rather than as a starting point for theorising migration itself. This article argues that feminist development frameworks, including Women in Development, Women and Development, and Gender and Development, reproduce the same error: each is sedentarist, treating stability as the normative condition of women's lives and mobility as a deviation, disruption or exception. More so, historical accounts subsume women's mobility within that of men, even though women have been central to long-distance mobility on the African continent and beyond. The feature article draws on the Guyanese historian and activist, Walter Rodney's critique of colonial political economy, on African feminist theorisations of gender, class, consciousness, and on the Tanzanian legal scholar Issa Shivji's concept of working people as a corrective to class-blind development feminism. The article proposes a decolonial approach that asks not why Africans move, but why their movement has been made to require explanation at all.

Keywords: African feminist theory, gender and mobility, class, decolonial migration theory, Women in Development, Women and Development, Gender and Development

Introduction

As with many aspects of African society, mobility in Africa is often treated as derivative of theories and ways of thinking from elsewhere. Thus, the study of mobility and migration in Africa has essentially followed thinking from locations outside the continent. This notwithstanding, rootedness and, in some cases, the “requirement of mobility” as a way of being, coming of age, and orientation to the world is pervasive in many African societies (Bredeloup 2013). Instead of forming the basis of theorisation that enables us to understand the African condition and the rest of the world, this reality is treated as empirical material to be processed through the mills of theory from elsewhere (Bakewell 2008; de Haas 2010). This reality is treated only as an empirical resource as opposed to the starting point of conceptualisation and theorisation.

Alongside this orientation, this feature centres a feminist critique of migration theory’s androcentrism by taking seriously what emerges from treating gender as a fundamental marker of mobility. We refer to migration as the movement across recognised political and administrative boundaries while mobility is the broader category that includes migration but also movement within a territory and across social position. We use both deliberately throughout this article, since separating physical and social mobility analytically obscures how the two are produced by the same structures.

This feature first examines dominant migration theoretical traditions and their disregard for African historical formations, then turns to African conceptions of territory and identity using Rodney’s work to theorise migration’s relationship to colonial political economy. We then lay out what a decolonial methodology for migration studies requires. This is followed by the gendered history of African women’s physical and social mobility, offering a critical genealogy of Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) frameworks, and centres structural adjustment as a case where these theoretical inadequacies had concrete consequences. It closes with African feminists’ own theorisations of social mobility. While we situate this *Feminist Africa* Issue’s working definition of class within Shivji’s (2017) conceptualisation of *working people*, a broad category encompassing those sustained through wage labour and survivalist

activity that cuts across the working class/lumpenproletariat divide, this feature explores what a parallel decolonial shift might mean for theorising gender and mobility.

Dominant Theory and African Migration: Some Historical Background

Ravenstein's (1885) "Laws of Migration" is touted as having inaugurated the systematic study of migration. His thesis that workers move from areas of low incentive to those of higher incentive formed the basis of classical and neoclassical theories of migration. Some of the earliest critiques of classical neoclassical migration theories emerged from structural approaches such as dependency theory. Structuralist theories have, in turn, been eclipsed by network- and actor-based approaches to migration. All these theories emerged as models within disciplines to explain labour movement as aspects of their disciplinary focus. The traction of the various theoretical attempts at explaining migration mirrors the ascendancy and decline of theoretical frameworks within the social sciences (de Haas 2010).

Neoclassical economic theory views migration as driven by the "hidden hand" of the market, directing labour from places of abundant supply and low wages to places of scarce supply and higher wages (Lewis 1954; Harris and Todaro 1970; Todaro and Maruszko 1987). Given that humans are assumed to be inherently motivated to maximise their gains, profit-maximising individuals migrate from low-wage, high-supply "Third World" economies to high-wage "First World" ones, weighing skill level, migration cost, and expected income differentials in the decision to move. The theory's weakness is the lack of clarity on what constitutes "pull factors" versus "push factors" (de Haas 2010). Dual Labour Market Theory shares neoclassical theory's assumption of a wage gap between First and Third World economies, without explaining its origins. However, rather than locating migration in individual calculations, it attributes migration primarily to labour demand in the First World. Industrialised economies divide into primary and secondary sectors. The primary sector offers higher wages, job security, and social status to highly skilled, predominantly national workers who are trained to maintain productivity (Berge and Piore 1980; Massey et al. 1993). The secondary sector offers little

skills requirement, lower pay, and no job security, and this is where migrants predominantly work, since they are more concerned with wages than status, as they see themselves as belonging to the places that they left (Berger and Piore 1980; Massey et al. 1993).

World-systems theory, drawing on Wallerstein, explains migration as another means by which the industrialised Global North extracts material and human resources from the Global South (de Haas 2010; Massey et al. 1993). Proponents of world-systems theory argue that global economic inequality, driven by capitalism's spread into the South in search of new markets, uproots peasants, directing them towards Southern cities and onward to Northern metropolises. People move from South to North as capital moves from North to South. Migration here is a decision constrained by an unequal global economic order. Determinism is the common charge against world-systems theory, and more substantively, it typically omits the everyday struggles, adjustments, and choices ordinary people make in the face of that order. People respond to the structural power, but also navigate and challenge it, covertly and overtly.

Those who decry what they call the overly deterministic character of the foregoing frameworks have advanced meso- and micro-level theories to account for the immediate forces driving migration and the factors that sustain it once initiated. Thus, meso- and micro-level theories of migration accorded considerable importance to social capital, social networks, and a person's subjective inclinations (de Haas 2010). Pioneer migrants are said to create the openings that enable subsequent migrants to move to new destinations. And once there, new migrants rely on the social infrastructures established by pioneer migrants to find accommodation, employment, and avenues for regularising their stay.

Cumulative Causation Theory attributes migration to perceived inequality within a society. People migrate when they see themselves as less economically endowed than those with whom they compare. Once enough people migrate, others follow, until migration begets more migration. These shifts focus away from the inequalities that initiate migration in the first place and arbitrarily treat localised inequality as separable from the national and global inequalities of which it is a specific manifestation (Massey et al. 1993). Closely linked to this is Migration Systems Theory, which holds that once

migration is underway, legal and extra-legal institutions, human smugglers, migrant-rights organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and remittance infrastructure emerge to sustain it (Mabogunje 1970). However, explaining how migration is sustained is not a substitute for why it began—a wholesome account must start from cause, not continuation.

Changing Territory and Identity as the Core of African Migration

Most of the theories (read models) were developed within the context of migration to the United States from Mexico and other parts of the Americas. These theories were applied to the African experience with little, if any, regard for broader histories or specific histories of migration or for how these shape and are shaped by notions of space, belonging, travel, and accomplishment. Data about migration in Africa are often inserted into “finished theories.” When the data do not fit, as happens often, an explanation is sought for Africa’s exceptionalism while the model remains intact. Writing about this practice in the discipline of economics from which many migration theories were developed, Mkandawire and Soludo (1998) argue that Africa is treated as an exception to established models. Africa’s exception is mentioned in footnotes while theory moves on. Many African researchers, aware of the limitations of applying the existing theories (that do not fit the reality they are studying), ritually complain of the problematic nature of deploying such theories, and then, rather curiously, proceed to use them anyway (de Haas 2010).

Obviously, both structuralist explanations and personal subjective frameworks offer useful insights in explaining why people migrate, how they go about migrating, and the ways in which individually experienced collective issues channel movements to certain parts of the world. While meso- and micro-level theories provide useful accounts of the immediate motivations for emigration—how people go about migrating and the micro-level structures that facilitate migration—they downplay the equally important broader political-economic arrangements within which these decisions are made and embedded. Viewing migration solely as a function of inequality within a society overlooks how economic arrangements in the global political economy shape and relate to localised inequalities.

In spite of their insights, all the existing theories that seek to explain human movement in and outside of Africa crucially miss the notions of territoriality held in African societies. They do not pay attention to how local power configurations, global political economy, and local and general histories of a connected world inform the existing patterns and practices of migration by Africans. In using the best of what each of the existing approaches offers, we also address their limitations, historicising the social meaning of territory and belonging decisively in theorising migration in Africa.

Historically, African societies have been a combination of centralised polities, stateless communities, and acephalous formations (Boahen 1966). Centralised polities like the Ashanti, Lemba, Mali, the Ethiopian dynastic states, the Hausa states, and the Zulu kingdom existed side by side with clan-based groups and acephalous institutions. Mali, for example, maintained tributary relations with smaller vassal territories. The vast wealth of the leaders of Mali (known as the Mansa) was made possible by the labour of local commoner classes and tributaries paid by smaller formations in their sphere of influence.

Their ability to exact tributes notwithstanding, the centralised pre-colonial African states had some control over mobility. The existence of other polities that were prepared to incorporate people rendered their hold over migration rather tenuous. The availability of land and the mobile livelihood organisation of many social groups meant that tyrannical rulers easily lost the populace (Herbst 2015). A legacy of this constant migration can be found by looking at the geographical spread of any ethnic group in Africa. There are few ethnic groups whose presence is restricted to any of the present day postcolonial states.

This is not just the legacy of the 1884 Berlin Conference, which carved up Africa among the imperial powers. Although the Conference shaped many of the modern state boundaries, African people's relationship to land and place were more strongly influenced by long histories of mobility and resistance to authoritarian rule. The notion that people naturally belong to a fixed, ancestral homeland was a colonial construct developed to facilitate social control and governance. The creation of so-called "tribes" necessitated tribal areas and the distribution of power organised around new vocabulary of indigeneity

(Mamdani 1998), reaching its extreme in apartheid South Africa's homelands and bantustans. This was central to the racialised control of labour and was successfully mobilised as a political identity in its own right (Mamdani 1998).

This colonial understanding of belonging is not supported by historical work that showed that ethnic origins were secondary to state formation and to economic, military and political relations (Ranger 1983; Vail 1989). Historical evidence shows competition and struggles occurred more within ethnic groups than across them (Lonsdale 1994). Ethnic solidarity and ethnic homelands as exclusive zones of timeless groups were products of colonial policies of control and postcolonial politicking. While ethnic antagonism retains a hold on Africa's popular classes, it is routinely set aside in the context of struggle against employers.

If the fixed territorial and ethnic antagonism dissolves so readily under the pressure of struggle, how has the idea endured? No postcolonial African state, not even the most securitised (such as Ethiopia and South Africa), maintain an impenetrable border. Every pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial hub of commerce and industry in Africa has drawn labour from neighbouring and distant polities (Adepoju 2005, 2008). By the 1700s, under Asante, Ghana's gold and salt mines were melting pots of West Africans. Similarly, the mines of Great Zimbabwe drew people from across Southern and East Africa and parts of North Africa (Boahen 1990). Despite contemporary passport and visa regimes, Africans cross borders without identity verification to go to their farms, workplaces, and homes. Borders remain, in the mental frame of such migrants, symbols of a distant institution (the state) rather than an organising principle of everyday life, and their routine subversion speaks to what passports and visas actually mean to most Africans. This same logic surfaces in African states' recurring complaints of cross-border "infiltration" at elections. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, the doctrine of *Ivoirité* denationalised an estimated 30% of the population and twice barred future president Alassane Ouattara, from candidacy over disputed claims about his origins (Freedom House 2024; Miran-Guyon 2012; Odinkalu 2024). When people classified by the state as "aliens" vote despite legal restriction, their actions demonstrate their conception of territory and belonging, evidence of an enduring historical form of social organisation where simultaneous belonging to a political community is not delimited by social origin. The persistence of this mode of belonging

despite attempts at criminalising it signals its deep rootedness in African society.

This stands in sharp contrast to Europe's *Lebensraum* model of belonging, which is a fusion of territory and blood. Where Africa's land was vast relative to population, Europe was geographically small, overpopulated, and land scarce. Competition over limited territory produced an exclusionary form of belonging, and wars of conquest aimed to expand the frontiers of available land and not to incorporate people. In Africa, the opposite held: wars of conquest primarily aimed to incorporate more people into vast areas of sparsely populated land.

A history that produced a world outlook premised on the normality of people migrating into a polity and *becoming* members of the political community means that migration has to be understood from the fluid nature of identity in Africa, in addition to economic, political, social, and cultural factors at any given point in time. The centrality of migration and mobility to life and livelihood arrangements in Africa is also linked to mode of production, class formation, and class relations across the continent. Walter Rodney's (1972) pathbreaking work, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, demonstrates the role of modes and relations of production in shaping polities, occupational groups, and social differentiation across different stages of Africa's socio-economic trajectory. An outcome of this history is a continuing mobile consciousness around trade, the search for knowledge, religious proselytisation, and lifestyle. This historical normalcy of migration is still present on the continent and evidenced by the fact that the bulk of African mobility happens within the continent. Nonetheless, migration research is predominantly driven by South–North movements. What then explains this dissonance between reality and research focus?

Rodney's work enables us to trace the source of this dissonance to the longue durée of European imperial expansion, whose associated exploitation and profit motive resulted in the subsumption of African economies and knowledge systems into the interests of imperial and colonial powers. To the extent that economic exploitation cuts across all spheres of social structure, imperial and colonial expansion undergirds a political economy of knowledge production and valorisation that reflects economic standing.

Accordingly, a global knowledge inequality emerged as part of European expansionism and is sustained by the contemporary structures of inequality inscribed by imperialism and colonialism. The economically powerful Global North dominates the system of producing and valorising knowledge. The policy imperatives of Northern states drive research agendas through a combination of funding and intellectual orientation. Scholars in the North and those working in the South are drawn to the powerful Northern sites of funding and, in the process, produce knowledge that often extroverts African realities, marginalises the concerns of everyday Africans, and solidifies global inequality by reifying categories, frames, and theories that are routinely applied to African cases.

It is, therefore, rare for migration studies to take inequality seriously, beginning from empire, the colonial moment, neo-colonial arrangements, the neoliberal turn, and the threads of class and racism that bind them. Immediate policy and “crises” undertones dominate instead, which leads to migration being framed through the language of securitisation, humanitarian emergency, or demographic threat, and African mobility is analysed primarily for what it portends for receiving states in the Global North, rather than for what it reveals about African economies, histories, or aspirations in their own right. This treatment reduces African migration to something that affects Europe, North America, or other countries, and worth studying insofar as it explains Northern anxieties about border control, labour markets, or cultural change, but rarely worth studying as a phenomenon meaningful on its own terms, shaped by African actors’ own histories, strategies, and futures. Migration studies largely omits capitalism or treats its global dimensions poorly, presenting it instead as an ahistorical given that forecloses any possibility of sublation. The result is the entrenchment of a path of historical dependency handed down from empire, colony, and neo-colony and the era of techno-capitalism.

What Is To Be Done?

While Rodney did not work on what is now termed migration studies, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* offers tools for the critical, intellectually grounded study of mobility. Rodney’s (1972) interrogation of the economic, academic, social, religious, cultural, and geopolitical structures of African societies, their

contradictions and possibilities, shows how Europe's exploitative engagement with Africa left legacies still evident in the continent's institutions and its subordinated place in the Northern-dominated global academy. His concept of "technological arrest," the abandonment of indigenous methodologies, which in turn "killed" innovation on the continent, helps explain the empiricist role allocated to African migration scholars in a division of labour where Northern scholars do the conceptual work while African scholars respond to funding calls and the latest moral panic about migrants. To overcome this requires migration studies to take context-based practices of mobility seriously as a starting point rather than an afterthought. For example, rather than accepting the state's arbitrary categorisation of mobile populations as refugees, migrants, or herders, scholarship could instead begin from the relationships among such peoples, and their tensions, solidarities, and shifting identities and then examine the role that state categories play in pre-defining them. The securitisation of migration and the funding attached to it has resulted in a saturation of studies framing West African and Sahelian farmer-herder encounters as "conflict." What scholarship might instead emerge from taking seriously the tenure arrangements, shifting belonging, and state instrumentalisation of identity that these encounters actually involve?

When we take the foregoing seriously, three commitments should follow. First, migration scholarship should begin from the categories mobile populations use to understand themselves, such as solidarity, tension, and shifting belonging, rather than from state-imposed classifications. The farmer-herder literature illustrates the analytical cost of the alternative, foreclosing attention to the tenure regimes and negotiated forms of belonging that a relational approach would reveal. Second, irregularity belongs to the classificatory logic of border regimes, not to the people so labelled. Rather than asking why migrants become irregular, we should ask how border regimes inherited from imperial and colonial territorial ordering produce irregularity as a category at all, turning an ordinary act of movement into a punishable violation. Third, the migration research agenda should treat colonial border-making and its afterlives in passport controls, visa requirements, and the racialised distribution of mobility rights, as analytical markers instead of an unexamined backdrop. None of these commitments requires migration studies to discard the empirical and methodological resources of existing theories;

rather, they require migration studies to stop treating African mobility as data awaiting a theory produced elsewhere.

Women's Physical and Social Mobility

Women have historically been mobile in Africa, with a *longue durée* of mobility extending into pre-colonial times (Akurang-Parry 2002, 2010; Awumbila 2015; Darkwah 2007, 2021; Desai 2009). Historical accounts of migration have tended to subsume women's mobility within, or make it dependent on, men's migration histories, yet accounts of long-distance trade cast women as central actors. In West Africa, for example, Gracia Clark (1994) and Kate Meagher (2010) show that women traders, before and through colonial rupture, operated across networks spanning hundreds of kilometres, controlling key commodities and accumulating capital that gave them social authority. On the Swahili coast in East Africa, women navigated restrictive mobility controls to build and maintain substantial economic and social agency through trading networks (Strobel 1979). Maasai women have likewise been active participants in pastoral mobility (Hodgson 2001, 2017).

Colonialism did not simply restrict and reorganise African women's mobility but also produced new gendered geographies of opportunity, constraint and survival. Labour migration schemes in particular were designed to mobilise men's labour while immobilising women. In the case of Southern Africa, migrant labour systems produced acute female poverty and household instability in South Africa, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe (Murray 1981; Bolt 2015). Despite this imposed immobility, Zimbabwean women developed increasingly active migration strategies of their own (Bolt 2015). Movement by women disrupted colonial spatial order and women who moved were theorised as aberrations and social problems. In Kenya, for example, Kikuyu women's physical mobility was consistently criminalised by colonial authorities, who saw it as a threat to agricultural productivity and the social order (Kanogo 2005). These accounts show that the regulation of women's movement is a primary mechanism of gender power.

Women's upward mobility within the social hierarchy has been, and continues to be, constrained by gender power dynamics through which social

markers are imposed and structurally made unattainable. Alcinda Honwana (2012) developed the concept of “waithood” to describe the extended liminal period in which young Africans, including women, are suspended between socially recognised markers of adulthood (such as employment, marriage, and establishing an independent household) and the structural conditions that make these markers unattainable. For young African women specifically, marriage remains a primary mechanism of social mobility, yet marriage markets have been restructured by labour migration and changing gender norms, making the timing of marriage increasingly uncertain. Research on young women’s livelihoods in Ghana shows how education, mobility, and entrepreneurship function as contingent and uneven strategies rather than guaranteed pathways to upward mobility, thereby challenging linear social mobility narratives (Anyidoho 2020; Anyidoho and Darkwah 2023).

The tensions between theoretical frameworks and lived experience are direct consequences of how social mobility is framed, measured, pursued, and evaluated. Development policies are consistently built on frameworks that are unable to capture how African women understand social mobility, what they aspire to and the trade-offs they make to achieve it. Three tensions arise in theorising African women’s social mobilities: agency and structure, collective and individual interests, and formality and informality. Agency–structure captures the tension between framing African women as agents of their own social mobility and framing them as subjects shaped by structural forces. Frameworks such as WAD, which privilege structure, produce “victimology” rendering women’s actual strategies invisible. Conversely, frameworks focused solely on individual agency tend towards individualistic methodologies that ignore the structural context of decision-making. Tamale (2020) addresses this with a dialectical framework that treats agency and structure as interdependent, that is, women’s agency is shaped by structure, and structure is reproduced and challenged through women’s everyday practices.

The collective–individual tension surfaces in how social mobility is measured. Mainstream theory, rooted in Weberian class analysis, frames mobility as an individual movement through social hierarchy. Kabeer’s (1999) “resources, agency, achievements” framework and others inspired by it, inherits this same approach, privileging individual rationality and agency to the exclusion of social norms and structural constraints. African feminist

scholarship has consistently challenged this, arguing that social mobility is relational and collective in African societies, where individual welfare is materially inseparable from collective welfare (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Nnaemeka 1998). Also, the rationalist actor model's assumptions about selfhood, interests, and social action are rooted in Western liberal and modernist thought that translate poorly into African contexts. Yet, no adequate theoretical framework exists to measure collective mobility, so development policy continues to target individuals while social relations that actually reproduce (im)mobility are unaddressed.

The third is the formality–informality tension: does mobility through the informal economy constitute meaningful social mobility, and how should we theorise such mobility? The majority of African women's economic activity is in the informal sector. It is here that women exercise their economic agency and also face the greatest vulnerability and exclusion from formal social protection (Anyidoho 2020; Darkwah 2007). Accumulation through commercial networks can transform women's social positioning while also reproducing inequalities within those same networks (Meagher 2019). Unequal stratification exists and sharply so within the informal sector. For instance, a market queen operating a large business and employing apprentices occupies a different social position from a street vendor, though both work within the same informal sector. However, Western frameworks, predominantly Weberian, are unable to theorise such internal stratification. These three tensions recur in different configurations within the frameworks discussed below, none of which was originally developed with African women's mobility as its foundational starting point.

Women in Development

WID theories emerged in the 1970s, influenced by Ester Boserup's *Women's Roles in Economic Development*, which argued that women's exclusion from modernisation and economic development required their integration into economic activity to improve productivity. This approach, adopted at the 1975 United Nations World Conference on Women in Mexico, enjoined governments to provide appropriate technology and capital for women's income-generating activities. Despite highlighting the connection between

women's status and livelihoods (Anyidoho 2020; Rai 2011), WID has been critiqued for homogenising women and invisibilising diversity across class, sexuality, education, and other social locations (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). Mohanty (1984) critiqued Western feminism for homogenising the "Third World woman" as a single, monolithic, and powerless object of intervention, rather than recognising her as a subject of her own social location, history, and agency. By positioning African women as objects of intervention, the very structural oppression unleashed by colonial capitalism, labour extraction, and dispossession become invisible (Win 2004).

This pattern persisted under postcolonial governments. Mama (2007, 151) notes that "anti-democratic African governments jumped on to the WID bandwagon in ways that in the end failed to advance more radical and liberatory feminist agendas." WID did not challenge patriarchal structures but just incorporated women into them, thereby increasing women's burdens instead of addressing the structures that produced them (Anyidoho 2020). Moser's (1993) triple gender role framework exemplifies how productivity-focused programmes routinely ignore women's "other labours" and rarely translate into increased autonomy within households or communities (Anyidoho 2020; Razavi and Miller 1995). WID was silent on how colonial labour migration reorganised gender relations. Male circular migration in Southern Africa's mining economies created de facto female-headed households burdened with productive and reproductive labour, yet counted as economically invisible, a legacy persisting into the present. WID's productivity focus could not grasp migration as itself a gendered structure and not just a backdrop.

Women and Development

WAD emerged in the late 1970s, in the dependency and social feminist traditions, as a response to the critiques of WID. WAD posits that the problem of development is not women's exclusion, but the nature of development itself, which is capitalist and exploits both women and men in the Global South (Johnson-Odim 1991; Steady 1981). WAD thus names the international economic order's complicity, linking subordination structurally to capitalism and imperialism (Anyidoho 2020). This was vividly manifested in structural adjustment's onslaught on the Global South.

While structurally focused, WAD's neglect of class dynamics, a pillar in social feminist traditions, was curious. It homogenises "Third World women" as uniformly subject to capitalism without theorising internal class stratification, even though African women's class positioning (urban middle class versus rural peasant women, for instance) reproduces its own structures of inequality (McFadden 1998; Mama 2007). By focusing on structure, WAD instrumentalises patriarchy as a mere function of capitalism, ignoring that patriarchy preceded capitalism in many African contexts and was later articulated through it, and thus an economic-structure-alone explanation is inaccurate.

WAD fared a little better on migration. It framed women's mobility as structurally determined, an effect only of capital extraction, dispossession, destruction of subsistence economy and wage dependency. WAD left women "housewifised" (Mies 1986), immobile, natural reproducers rather than mobile economic actors, women left behind by male migration and not migrants themselves. Yet, women have always migrated deliberately, for accumulation and household survival (Akurang-Parry 2002, 2010; Awumbila 2015; Darkwah 2007, 2021; Desai 2009), pursuing informal trade, domestic work, and marriage migration as economic strategies that WAD could not theorise. Social mobility is trivialised in both WID and WAD, even when women accumulate economic resources, invest them in rural properties and household formation, because such forms of mobility fall outside the productivity frameworks underpinning both perspectives.

Gender and Development

GAD was developed in the 1980s as a direct response to the limitations of WID and WAD, an effort by Global South women and feminists to define development agendas from their own standpoints. Its key contribution was shifting from women to gender as an analytical lens, examining how feminine and masculine roles, gender, and power relations are socially constructed, reproduced and transformed (Anyidoho 2021; Rathgeber 1990). It conceptualises and analyses gendered division of labour, notably reproductive and productive work. GAD aligned with gender mainstreaming, tasking institutions with integrating gender analysis across development structures and

policy to remove biases (Woodford-Berger 2004) and “improve the effectiveness of mainline policies” (Walby 2005, 321).

Yet GAD remains fundamentally challenged by postcolonial and African feminist scholars who question whether “gender” itself is a Eurocentric concept. For Oyěwùmí (1997), pre-colonial Yoruba society was ordered primarily by seniority rather than gender or the body, a framework she extends to other African societies. Thus, the imposition of a gender framework is itself a colonial epistemological act that produces the categories it claims to discover. Others similarly challenge GAD’s uncritical application of Western concepts of household, marriage, and kinship to African contexts (Nzegwu 2006).

Gender mainstreaming, as adopted by institutions like the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank, also depoliticises the class dimensions of gender inequality. Mama (2007) and Tsikata (2009) show how African states’ gender ministries and donor-funded gender projects absorb mainstreaming into state and donor structures without challenging the neoliberal frameworks producing gender inequality in the first place. The projectisation of women’s concerns transforms political struggle into bureaucratic categories that are no longer transformative (Ahikire 2014; Mama 2007; Tsikata 2009). Similarly, GAD’s institutional adoption avoids engaging sexuality as a dimension of gender power within customary laws, sexual rights, and bodily regulation (Tamale 2011). It challenges economic and legal inequalities but avoids confronting sexual power relations where patriarchy is often most entrenched, thereby avoiding the political risks (Mama et al. 2005). Since sexuality is a central mechanism of power in many African societies, this silence seriously weakens GAD’s capacity to challenge patriarchy (Tamale 2011).

GAD recognises migration as gendered, with women and men migrating for different reasons, through different networks, towards different vulnerabilities, but still frames migration as a welfare concern rather than as a site of political economy and class formation (Clark 1994; Razavi and Miller 1995). West African female cross-border traders (Clark 1994; Meagher 2010) and Zimbabwean women migrating informally to South Africa (Mutopo 2010) are read through a “vulnerable women” lens rather than as economic actors embedded in regional capitalist circuits and processes of class formation. GAD

focuses on migration's effects on households rather than on how migration produces class positions within global capitalism.

WID, WAD, and GAD are fundamentally constrained by their inherited development model in which the unit of analysis is treated as a settled, geographically located subject: the rural woman, the household, and the community. A "sedentarist metaphysics" is built into the social sciences and modern ways of thinking that assumes that people belong in fixed places and therefore stability and rootedness are treated as normal and healthy, while movement is treated as deviation, loss or crisis (Malkki 1992). Sedentarism is itself a gendered assumption where women are associated with place, home, and fixity while men are associated with migration, mobility, and exploration (Massey 1993). This sedentarism is reproduced across WID, WAD, and GAD, where women's mobility is always secondary, exceptional or threatening to the social order that development is meant to stabilise. This baseline assumption is historically and empirically wrong for much of Africa, where societies have long histories of mobility—pastoralism, trade diasporas, seasonal agricultural migration, circulation of scholars and artisans—that predate colonialism (Dodson 1998). Mobility is an integral feature of African social formation, and has been violently reorganised through forced labour, pass systems, and the creation of labour reserves, making migration central to the political economy in ways that have persisted into the present.

Also, the models operate within a rigid binary conception of gender that does not capture the complexity of gender in African societies (Oyèwùmí 1997¹; Amadiume 1987; Nzegwu 2006), instead pathologising women's experiences and failing to account for women's agency, migration, and mobility. Perhaps, the fundamental assumption that gender organises society and social life need to be reconsidered if we are to develop frameworks that treat African epistemologies as sources rather than simply as objects of analysis.

On class, these models are not specifically attuned to the particularities of African conditions. For example, the postcolonial state, the informal economy (where a very large share of African women's economic activity takes place), the role of ethnicity in shaping class formation, and the particular character of African peasantry do not receive adequate theorisation. As Clark

(1994) shows, class formation in Africa is a gendered and culturally embedded process that resists universalising models.

What is needed is not a better Western theory or framework applied to gender, class, and mobilities in Africa and its diaspora, but frameworks that take African historical social formations, social categories, and epistemic traditions as their starting points. Instead of layering gender onto theories generated elsewhere, gender must be theorised from within African political and economic conditions, such as colonial capitalism, ethnicity, race, the informal economy, and migration, as features of African political economy.

Women and Structural Adjustment

Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), rooted in neoliberal development frameworks, were initiated and imposed across sub-Saharan Africa from the 1980s through the 1990s by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank as conditions of debt restructuring and balance-of-payments support. Prioritising market-led growth, deregulation, and liberalisation, SAPs drove privatisation, the removal of agricultural subsidies, currency devaluation, fiscal austerity, and the imposition of user fees for social services. These actions decimated social services, worsened poverty, and derailed industrialisation while reinforcing the position of African states as primarily producers of raw materials. SAPs have been criticised as extractivist, neocolonial tools that prioritised resource extraction and perpetual debt repayment to Northern creditors. They were also theoretically flawed and empirically unsupported but imposed regardless to weaken the bargaining power of African nations (Tsikata 2009; Mkandawire and Soludo 1998).

Designed without gender analysis, SAPs treated the household as a unified economic unit and were evaluated through macroeconomic indicators (Manuh 1994; Sparr 1994). African feminist critiques centre on this male bias because the programmes ignored the gendered social reproduction that became households' survival strategy once state services were withdrawn. Costs fell disproportionately on women, while gains, where they existed, were disproportionately captured by men. Women absorbed the shocks through longer hours, additional income-generating work, more care labour, and

withdrawing girls from school (Assie-Lumumba 1997). The “fiscal savings” SAPs claimed were simply a transfer of cost from state expenditure to unpaid female labour (Mama 1995, 1996, 2004). In agriculture, Tsikata (2006, 2016) documents how SAPs restructured land and labour relations, deepening women’s tenure insecurity.

In urban areas, SAPs produced a paradox: women pushed out of formal employment turned to the informal sector for survival, even as trade liberalisation made these livelihoods more precarious. In Nigeria, Meagher (2010) shows how naira devaluation and retrenchment under Ibrahim Babangida expanded urban informality as the manufacturing sector collapsed, with women adapting to cheap imports. Robertson (1997) documents a similar deepening of inequality in Kenya. In Ghana, Manuh’s (1994) research traces how SAPs produced new migration patterns as women moved between cities, rural areas, and abroad in search of economic opportunities the restructured economy could not provide, thereby fashioning new forms of economic agency even as they responded to structural constraints (Tsikata 2008; Mkandawire and Soludo 1998).

African women did not simply absorb these costs but organised against them, even where conditions constrained such opposition. In Zimbabwe, McFadden’s (1998) analysis shows women navigating the contradictions of structural adjustment within a ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front) political environment that had co-opted women’s organisations into state structures, thereby inhibiting autonomous feminist opposition. Where state regulatory capacity eroded, feminist formal organising sometimes found new room. In Uganda, Tripp (2004) argues that the withdrawal of state regulatory capacity under SAPs opened political space for women’s organising around market rights and informal-economy livelihoods that had previously been suppressed. In South Africa, Hassim (2006) shows that feminist organisations secured major constitutional gains through the ANC’s (African National Congress) acceptance of neoliberal macroeconomic policy and its commitment to gender equality, even as most South African women remained subject to the effects of SAP restructuring that feminist organisations lacked the capacity to challenge.

Macroeconomists responded to the gender-blindness of SAPs with calls to disaggregate data by gender and sector and account for unpaid social reproduction (Elson and Cagatay 2000). But Tsikata and Kerr (2000) argue that such reforms remain within mainstream economics' own terms, unable to theorise the power relations between African state and international financial institutions, or class interests and the colonial debt inheritance underlying adjustment. Mainstream macroeconomics renders women's unpaid labour invisible in national accounting, meaning that SAPs' apparent neutrality masks a political choice about whose labour absorbs adjustment costs (Bakker 1994). Tamale (2020) captures this starkly: SAPs were not merely a misfired economic programme but a colonial project of capital accumulation that mobilised African women's labour to service international debt and Northern capital.

SAPs' successor frameworks, including poverty reduction strategy papers and the millennium development goals, left their core macroeconomic policies intact, underfunded social sector commitments and remained subject to the same donor conditionalities (Mama 2002). Thus, post-SAP conditionality has entrenched SAP conditions as naturalised, permanent features of African political economy, obscuring their origins in specific political choices. African feminist scholarship must therefore not only document these consequences but also insist on their political and historical character, and open both intellectual and political space for alternatives to be (re)imagined.

Feminist Movements in Africa and Social Mobility: Contributions and Tensions

Having traced how dominant migration theory and development feminist frameworks inadequately theorised African women's mobility, we turn now from critique to reconstruction. The central question is: how have African feminist movements theorised social mobility from their own histories, struggles, and intellectual traditions, rather than through inherited frameworks?

Theorising social mobility within African feminist movements carries tensions over its conceptualisation, who benefits, the mechanisms through which it occurs, its limits, and whether gains achieved within existing structures

constitute genuine feminist advances or forms of accommodation (McFadden 2005; Hassim 2006; Tripp 2015). Social mobility is not self-evidently desirable without specifying who moves, on whose terms, and towards what ends (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). McFadden (2005) argues that social mobility within patriarchal and capitalist structures is not advancement but efficient incorporation into exploitative systems, thus requiring the transformation of those structures rather than accommodation within them. Nnaemeka's (2004) negofeminism takes the counter view asserting that feminist politics works better through negotiation and incremental transformation rather than rupture. Radical transformation, while theoretically consistent, can produce political paralysis where conditions for it do not exist. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), through Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women), sits between these positions, insisting that transformation remains the necessary horizon of feminist politics while acknowledging that it is inseparable from the daily negotiations through which African women actually pursue mobility.

Another contribution of African feminist movements is the centring of consciousness in theorising social mobility, addressing the reduction of social mobility to economic or status advancement by pointing to women's understanding of their own social positions and possibilities (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Tamale 2020). For Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), naming patriarchy and colonialism is itself a political act of transformation and a precondition. Developing consciousness constitutes a subjective form of social mobility that cannot be captured by economic metrics but is inseparable from and necessary for broader social, political, and economic change. Sylvia Tamale (2020) advances this by asserting that feminist consciousness requires decolonising not only external social structures but internal knowledge systems through which African women understand themselves, their bodies, sexualities, and social possibilities, which extends an argument already made about gender categories (Amadiume 1987; Oyèwùmí 1997). This opens possibilities for knowledge production from African women's standpoints, while the circulation of that knowledge within feminist publics and beyond is a form of movement in social and epistemic space that is inseparable from the material and political dimensions of feminist organising. This has been the crux of Pumla Gqola's (2017) theorisation of Black South African feminist knowledge production and

movement-building, which challenges the separation between feminist theory and practice.

African feminist movements also grapple with the tension between formal political inclusion and genuine social mobility for African women more broadly (Ahikire 2014; Hassim 2006; Tripp 2010). Hassim (2006) distinguishes between presence (formal inclusion in political institutions), voice (capacity to influence political agenda), and agency (capacity to produce policy outcomes that transform the lives of women). These dimensions are neither automatic nor concurrent. High levels of presence can coexist with limited voice, and voice with limited agency; theorising mobility therefore requires attention to all three dimensions rather than treating representation as a proxy for advancement. Hassim illustrates this with the ANC Women's League's reabsorption into the ANC after exile, what she calls "autonomy abrogated" (Hassim 2006, 116), illustrating how it produced real gains for individual women and some policy wins, but constrained collective political autonomy as independent women's organisations dissolved into the League (118–120). In Uganda, Tripp (2010, 2015) finds that women's organisations leveraged the political openings created by conflict and reconstruction to secure political gains, yet these gains were achieved within political frameworks that constrained autonomous feminist politics. Ahikire (2008) extends this argument, showing how autonomous feminist politics were progressively weakened by NGO-isation, state co-optation, and professionalisation, a pattern McFadden (2005) identifies as typical of donor-funded feminist advocacy across the continent.

A further tension concerns class interests: do African feminist organisations advance elite and middle-class women's mobility while producing poor, lower income women's immobility? McFadden (2005) argues NGO-isation and donor dependency have made African feminist organisations class-specific, advancing professional feminists' mobility while claiming to represent African women broadly. This mirrors the broader depoliticisation of feminist theorising into "a means for individual academic merit and career" (Arnfred and Adomako Ampofo 2010, 11), producing scholarship legitimised through Western paradigms at a real cost to those who produce it and to African women broadly (Adomako Ampofo 2010, 30). Tsikata (2009), with institutional evidence from Ghana, documents how professionalised gender work created a

class of specialists whose own mobility was secured through development institutions, while their advocacy failed to generate structural changes for poor women. Institutionalisation is therefore simultaneously enabling and disabling (Lewis 2010). African feminists have responded by building their own intellectual venues, *Feminist Africa* among them (Mama 2002), though even these risk being pulled towards Northern-legible frameworks at the expense of those most responsive to African women's conditions (Tamale 2020).

African feminists have leaned towards collective action frameworks where social mobility is an outcome of organised collective power rather than individual accumulation, as a response to the individualist frameworks of mainstream development theory. The 2006 African Feminist Forum's (AFF) *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists* frames African feminist politics as a project of transforming unequal power relations rather than securing inclusion within existing structures (AFF 2007, 3–4). This is theorised via the concept of feminist solidarity where politically constructed solidarity requires actively working across class, ethnic, religious, and national differences to build the collective power for social transformation (Okech 2013). Translating the collective mobility rhetoric into practice, African feminist philanthropy (African-sourced funding for African feminist organising) is both a practical and a political statement (Adeleye-Fayemi 2013).

This collective orientation extends to decolonial feminist frameworks, which continue to shape African feminist theorising of social mobility. Tamale's (2020) *Decolonisation and Afro-Feminism* is a comprehensive work on this. Tamale (2020) argues that social mobility frameworks derived from liberal and capitalist modernity are not adequate for African feminist politics because they are products of colonial modernity that produced the conditions for African women's subordination. Genuine mobility for African women requires decolonial frameworks that challenge the superiority of formal over informal knowledge, market over subsistence production, individual over collective social organising, and Western over African epistemological traditions. This decolonial framework does not reject formal political or economic gains but rather insists that they are insufficient without the simultaneous transformation of knowledge systems and social ontologies through which African women understand their own lives. African women's mobility should not be measured against Western feminist frameworks but theorised through African social

epistemologies that may produce different conceptions of advancement, authority, and social value (Oyěwùmí 1997; Amadiume 1987). Together, these contributions constitute a significant counter-tradition. The gap between African feminists and mainstream theorising of African women's advancement is not one of empirical knowledge or technical capacity, but a political one. Development programming produces and rewards individual, measurable, formal-sector social mobility in ways that systematically discount the collective, transformative, and decolonial mobility African feminist movements have consistently theorised as necessary for addressing the conditions for African women's subordination.

Conclusions

In this feature article, we have made two related arguments. The first is that migration studies have treated African mobility as an empirical anomaly to be explained through theory developed elsewhere. Yet the historical normalcy of mobility in African societies, reflected in the porous regulation of movement in pre-colonial polities, the construction of fixed ethnic identities, and the persistence of intra-continental circulation despite these interventions, should instead serve as a starting point for theorisation. Second, development feminist frameworks reproduce a similar problem at a different scale. WID, WAD, and GAD each inherit what Malkki (1992) terms a "sedentarist metaphysics," which treats stability as the normative condition of women's lives and mobility as deviation, disruption, or exception. In this respect, the critique of migration theory in the first half of this piece and the critique of development feminism in the second are not separate interventions but two applications of the same primary argument.

A decolonial framework for theorising gender, class, and mobility in Africa therefore requires more than simply adding African cases to existing models. It requires treating mobility as integral to African social life rather than a departure from it, and African women as internally class-differentiated rather than a homogenous category that is subject to capitalism or patriarchy in the same ways. This means recognising social mobility as a collective as well as an individual process (Tamale 2020), a complexity that Weberian stratification

theory cannot adequately frame, and understanding gender, sexuality, and class as interdependent rather than as added analytical categories.

We anchor the usefulness of Shivji's (2017) concept of working people in this analysis and in the broader argument of this *Feminist Africa* Issue. WAD flattened "Third World women" into a single relationship with capitalism thereby concealing class interests that divide urban middle-class women from rural peasant women, or a market queen from a street vendor. Shivji's framework, which is anchored in the relationship to life-sustaining goods through wage labour and survivalist activity, offers a way to theorise class among African women that does not require choosing between structure and internal stratification, nor does it presuppose the rigid lower-income/lumpenproletariat divide that obscures how easily people move between these categories in practice. This framework offers a more productive alternative to Weberian stratification or an uncritical reliance on Bourdieusian notions of capital for theorising class among African women whose relationship to life-sustaining goods is precarious or proximate to subsistence. This does not mean that every contribution to this *Issue* requires or assumes this framework. Contributions working with other concepts of class remain valuable on their own terms, and the *Issue's* theoretical plurality is a strength rather than an inconsistency.

The contributions in this *Feminist Africa* Issue test and extend this framework. They range from the institutional production of citizenship hierarchies to the internal class differentiation among migrant women who appear, at first glance, to occupy a single social position. Considered collectively, they suggest that class privilege among African women may lessen but does not erase the structural vulnerabilities generated by both gendered power and colonial logics that continue to shape citizenship regimes.

Now we return to the question posed earlier: what would it take to think differently about migration, given its history of exploitation and inequality? Migration studies must stop asking why Africans move and start asking why their movement has been made to require explanation at all.

Notes:

1. This debate is not settled as Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's (1997) work has been critiqued as romanticising and essentialising gender relations in pre-colonial Africa (see Apusigah 2006; Bakare-Yusuf 2004).

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