

Possibilities of a Feminist Migration Future

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In this piece, we question whether the implementation of a feminist migration agenda in the political arena is at all possible. Although political inclusion and gender awareness in policymaking, including migration policy, can be counted as successes of feminist organising, this inclusion has largely been formulated and implemented superficially.

Increasing numbers of African governments are developing migration policies that, to some extent, address particular issues of gender. All 55 African Union member states have ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which entered into force on 25 November 2005. When it comes to migration, the African Union's 2024 Migration Policy Framework for Africa evaluation report indicates that 33 member states reported implementing national migration policies in line with the goals set out in the 2018 policy document, which is designed to improve migration across the continent. Out of these, however, only six have intentionally integrated gender perspectives in national and regional migration management policies, strategies, and programmes. Ghana, Nigeria, Lesotho, Malawi, Morocco, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, South Africa, and Zambia, among others, have included gender as a cross-cutting issue.

Such policies are unlikely to have a transformative or wide-reaching effect, as demonstrated in an interview with an expert from one of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) member states.

You see, the men should not gather to make policies and suddenly realise that there is a need for a woman, so they try to invite a few women to "add" and "stir" to address the gender problems. No, this is not what we want. We want to have a voice; we want to equally be represented to make suggestions as to what works best in the interest of both women and men.

In the process of depoliticising feminism, there has been a watering down of the social justice thoughts behind the broader feminist agenda (Ahikire 2014). International organisations, for example, differ in how they seek to respond to the “feminisation of migration,” from simply adopting a more gendered discourse to the promotion of more critical rights-centred alternatives to current migration practices (Mahon 2021). These varied responses underscore the importance of gender in migration debates, yet they also point to the need for more transformative visions.

If we took a feminist agenda seriously, migration could look very different. The very experience of migration can lead to changing gender norms and the questioning of (constructed) patriarchal structures (see also Madambi 2020). At its most basic, the return of migrant women can change the socioeconomic development of specific regions, as shown by Walter Nkwi in his historical account of migrant women returning to the Bamenda Grassfields in Cameroon (Nkwi 2018). Beyond that, sometimes migratory strategies can also lead to the renegotiation of traditional and patriarchal practices, as Pragna Rugunanan shows for Indian migrant women who follow their spouses to a foreign country—in this case, South Africa (Rugunanan 2020). Recent Ghanaian court judgments also show how gender norms have shifted due to migration:

In this [international migration] paradigm shift, the relationship between husband and wife is less one of hierarchical dependency and more of equal partnership (Mensa-Bonsu, JSC, Supreme Court Judgment of Ghana, Civil Appeal No. J4/22/2020, 2).

Beyond the individual level, broader changes are not visible. Symbolic gestures of “gender inclusion” within a neoliberal system will not and have not delivered freedom or gender justice (Tamale 2020, 6). In contrast, Lynn Ossome argues that women’s rights are more or less completely negated by the economic scarcity and dispossession produced in the neoliberal world order (Ossome 2015). This is, of course, an intersectional issue and does not have the same effect on migrant women working in well-paid, so-called “highly skilled” jobs compared to, for example, precarious domestic workers. But the reality is most migrant women are likely to be working under precarious working conditions. Moreover, migrant women are well regarded because of their reproductive roles; however, power and influence over migration decision-making and

policymaking do not lie within their domain. Indeed, according to Nothando Maphalala, “African feminists have always stressed that ‘smashing the patriarchy’ is only half the battle, with imperialism and capitalism being the other half” (Maphalala 2021; see also Barry 2023). Given the artificial nature of gender-aware policymaking and the pervasiveness of interlocking oppressive structures, is a feminist migration agenda even possible? How can the feminisation of migration move beyond the numbers of independently migrating women to affect the very way migration is imagined? What would this look like?

We see three avenues towards a feminist migration future:

Changes to migration policies

A core tenet of the feminist migration agenda is to change the conventionally discriminatory status quo. If we turn to African feminist scholarship, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí’s critique of mainstream western feminism, which ties women to the nuclear family, may explain the absence and silencing of women in much of migration policymaking. According to this logic, a woman does not transcend the private sphere of her subordination (Oyěwùmí 2002). Yet, the private is political, and, of course, women are very much part of the public sphere and affected by migration policies (for a critique of the division between the public and private realm, see Beoku-Betts and Adomako Ampofo 2021). In the face of structural inequalities and problematic migration policies that worsen the current precarious situation, the only choice for women migrants may be to try and practically avoid public spaces (McDowell and Wonders 2009). When avoidance is no longer possible, the structures and policies that force them out of society need to change. Changes to the status quo can come about through policy changes at the household, local, institutional, and national levels. These policy changes start with initiatives such as anti-corruption measures at especially high-traffic borders, gender-based violence training for border patrol officers, and increased numbers of female border patrol officers in immigration and customs enforcement institutions. Another example could be safe houses for migrant women. Finally, along with the inclusion of gender-specific experts in migration policymaking, women should be included in all policymaking with a real voice. Yet, this alone is not enough.

Towards an ethics of care

Fundamental to a feminist migration future is a reconceptualisation of the migrant category: instead of being stopped, securitised or negatively seen, migrants and the concept of migration should rather be seen as something shrouded in an ethics of care for all migrants. According to Victoria Held, care is both a practice and a value that is “trust and mutual concern and connectedness between persons” (quoted in Krystalli and Schulz 2022). Care ethics, therefore, look to take this definition of care and apply it to a larger framework of modality. In the context of migration, an ethics of care exists as an alternative to liberal individualism. As a framework, feminist care ethics sees “people as relational, connected, interdependent, and inherently vulnerable, recognizing the moral value and importance of relations and the inescapable reality that care is universally required for all human beings to survive” (Krystalli and Schulz 2022). Embedded in the neoliberal capitalist world order that dictates who can move and when, migration policy extends the apathetic hand of the “free” market to yet another vulnerable group. Compounding this vulnerability is a patriarchal framework under which migration policy is created. Thus, taking an ethics of care seriously would see migration policy move beyond liberal agendas and reposition migration outside its current spectre of violence. Such violence includes postcolonial borders, the violent regimes of control that currently enforce them, and the broader mechanisms that serve to legitimise the exploitation and subordination of migrants. Women migrants especially suffer from the tyranny of border policy, as they are forced to exist at the intersection of two discriminated against social categories: as a woman and a migrant. This takes us to our final point.

Placing human beings before borders

A feminist migration future would move beyond the state. This is because of the active role that the state often takes in perpetuating and ignoring the many insecurities faced by migrants in their quest to enforce their sovereignty (Stasiulis et al. 2020). Lyn Ossome notes feminists need to step back from valuing the state to critically confront the limitations that it poses in the face of global hegemonic powers (Ossome 2015). Her case for a reconceptualised Pan-Africanism (in contrast to the state) addresses neoliberal labour conditions

and the lack of emancipation for women in informal sectors; much the same argument can be extended to migration. Ossome asks, “What would it mean to place human beings before profits?” In the context of feminist-informed migration practices, we can ask: “What would it mean to place human beings before borders and citizenship?”

In a feminist reimagining of borders and the powers that enforce them, restrictions such as fees and requirements for formal migration (mobility with specific documentation) would be abolished to make way for care-informed mobility (see also Arhin-Sam et al. 2022). With care ethics at the helm, a feminist migration agenda can reimagine the state of contemporary border regions. In a feminist reimagining of borders, migratory zones could allow for informal border crossings and prioritise the health and security of migrants while doing so. By abolishing borders and negating the coloniality of power (that is, the imposition of artificial borders for a start) on the African continent, a feminist migration agenda does not seek to simply dismantle contemporary power regimes without offering any replacement in their stead. Leaning on the teachings of Martina Tazzioli and carceral abolitionist feminists such as Angela Davis, a feminist migration agenda asks us to construct equitable institutions while pursuing the possibility of a feminist mobile future in a humane way (Tazzioli 2019). Understanding the potentials of that future is something that researchers need to address first, as discussed next.

Going Forward in the Status Quo

The vibrant discussion of African feminist scholars acknowledges the intersectional lived experience of women, including migrant women, that interacts with race and postcolonial economic subjugation. There is also a strong feminist perspective to activism and calls for transformation of the status quo. This highlights the active role of women migrants (a topic still rarely researched) and their potential to help carve out a more caring migration policy for the future.

The very first step in securing this future is transforming the focus and conduct of migration research. Since migration research is instrumental to policymaking and the transformation of policy and its production is the

ultimate goal, a change in research practice is necessary. Keeping to our ivory towers of theoretical feminist critique will not suffice.

Daiva Stasiulis et al. call for the redressing of the epistemological and social erasure of demonised migrant groups, who declare—and here they cite the poet June Jordan, “I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name. My name is my own, my own” (emphasis in original Stasiulis et al. 2020). For Christina Kazan-Clarke, radical care re-centres human relationships to engage with all the ethical challenges that migration (research) brings with it, including the criminalisation of migration, extreme power asymmetries, precarities in migration status, and the politicisation of migration policies (Clark-Kazak 2023). Thus, women migrants need to be included in research, understood in knowledge-making processes, and made socially visible. At the very centre, there needs to be a relational connection to those we engage with in our research. Moreover, for the African context in particular, Josephine Ahikire makes a case for re-politicising and reclaiming feminist thought and language, to access an “ideological force that poses fundamental challenges to patriarchal orthodoxies of all kinds” (2014, 9). These are all the first steps to take while more work is needed on how to address the complexity of the paradox of a feminist migration future.

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