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Women and Migration in African Historiography: Notes for a Debate

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Abstract

Recent studies have established that women are invisible in African historiography due to patriarchal control mechanisms of African societies that circumscribed women to domestic activities. Women's mobility and agency were ignored by historians until the rise of the so-called 'gender lobby' during the early 1990s. Although contemporary research has shown that traditional patterns of migration within and from Africa, previously male-dominated, long-term and long-distance, are increasingly becoming feminized, it seems that there is a resistance to this paradigm shift in migration debate which continues to be male-centred, relegating women to the shadow of history. This paper is grounded within this problematic and examines issues behind the continuing marginalization of women agency in migration studies in African historiography, and attempts to pay particular attention to women agency through questioning the links between women migrancy and gender relations. It argues that, there is a need for better understanding of factors that influence the resistance of a shifting andocentric paradigm to a more balanced one that takes into account gender relations. These factors must be understood in accordance within the historical and cultural contexts, and also in relation to other structures of power. In terms of methodology, the paper draws on reviews of the existing literature, from primary to secondary sources.

Résumé

Les études récentes ont montré que les femmes étaient invisibles dans l'historiographie africaine en raison des systèmes d'autorité patriarcale des sociétés africaines qui ont réduit les femmes aux activités domestiques. La mobilité et l'action des femmes ont été ignorées par les historiens jusqu'à la montée du soi-disant « lobby genre » [groupes de pression travaillant sur les questions de genre] au début des années 90. Bien que les recherches contemporaines ont prouvé que les modes traditionnels de migration à l'intérieur et à partir de l'Afrique, auparavant

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longtemps dominés par les hommes, se féminisent de plus en plus, il semble y avoir une résistance à cette révolution conceptuelle dans les débats sur la migration qui continuent d'être centrés sur l'homme tout en reléguant les femmes dans l'ombre de l'histoire. Cet article se fonde sur cette problématique et examine les questions qui sont à l'origine de la marginalisation permanente de l'action des femmes dans les études sur la migration dans l'historiographie africaine et essaye de prêter une attention toute particulière à l'action des femmes à travers la remise en cause des liens entre la migration des femmes et les relations homme-femme. Il souligne qu'il est nécessaire d'avoir une meilleure compréhension des facteurs qui opposent une résistance au passage d'une révolution conceptuelle androcentrique à un changement plus équilibré qui prend en compte les relations homme-femme. S'appuyant sur une revue de la littérature existante allant des sources primaires aux secondaires, cet article défend le fait que ces facteurs doivent être compris selon les contextes historiques et culturels et, également, par rapport aux autres structures de pouvoirs.

Introduction

Recent studies have established that women are invisible in African historiography due to patriarchal control mechanisms of African societies that circumscribed women to domestic activities. In such societies, women's migrancy was portrayed as amoral, linking it to the decay of traditional structures of security and support, resulting in family breakdown.

Women's mobility and agency was ignored by historians until the rise of the so-called 'gender lobby' during the early 1990s. Although contemporary research has shown that traditional patterns of migration within and from Africa, previously male-dominated, long-term and long-distance, are increasingly becoming feminized, it seems that there is a resistance to this paradigm shift in migration debate which continues to be male-centred and relegating women to the shadow of history.

This relatively new phenomenon of female migration constitutes an important change in gender roles in Africa, and challenges historians who engage in migration research to look closely at women agency and gender role dynamics.

This paper is grounded within this problematic and examines issues behind the continuing marginalization of women agency in migration studies in African historiography, and attempts to pay particular attention to women agency through questioning the links between women migrancy and gender relations.

It argues that there is a need for better understanding of factors that influence the resistance of a shifting androcentric paradigm to a more balanced one that takes into account the gender relations. These factors must be understood in accordance with the historical and cultural contexts, and also in relation to other structures of power.

In terms of methodology, the paper draws on reviews of the existing literature, from primary to secondary sources.

Women's Invisibility in African Migration Historiography

Recently, historians and other social scientists have raised concerns about the 'invisibility' of women in African migration historiography. Women's role in migration did not gain prominence in scholarly discourse until feminist scholarship made women more visible. Women as migrants and immigrants are now being recognized for their motivation, risk taking, experiences, and contribution to societies in which they finally relocated.

As a starting point, I will go through the main debates on this topic. In this context, I argue that women were not as 'invisible' as feminist scholars have attempted to demonstrate. They participated and appear in African migration historiography, though were circumscribed at the margins of the mainstream pattern of migration that were male-dominated. In attempting to understand women's 'invisibility' in African migration historiography, it is fundamental to take into account the obstacles and facilitators linked to their position *vis-à-vis* men in their societies of origin and, importantly, the range of positions that their status allows.

Scholars have been wondering about the absence of concepts for mobility for African women. In fact, making a retrospective of the migration literature in various disciplines obscures women's participation in migration. In spite of all of the 'women on the move' throughout the twentieth century, with few exceptions, the research agenda in the same period has focused largely on men.

Along these lines, Barnes (2002:182) indicates that:

Central to the perpetuation of the stereotype of passive women is a twofold conceptual investment in immobility of African women. Women have been given no room in the labour migration paradigm, but they have been excluded from discourses and investigation of travel. The standard paradigm of regional labour migration in southern Africa mentions that capitalism was constructed by millions of African male international travelers and migrants in the twentieth-century. Recent scholarship has brought African women into this narrative to some extent, as people who stayed at home. Thus, the paradigm does not tell us about the mobility of African women in the colonial era, domestically or internationally. The construction of a gendered binary opposition in the physical and economic mobility of African people has been a founding and integral image in late twentieth century African historiography.

Further, Barnes (2002) contends that during the 1970s labour migration studies completely ignored the agency of women in the migration processes as these studies were written prior to gender sensitivity becoming a

widespread concern in scholarly writings; and despite the gender lobby in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the andocentric logic of the paradigm remained untouched.

Belinda Bozzoli (1983) noted that there was an intimate connection between male migration to the mines and female migration to other sectors, indicating that male migration had a profound impact on the status of rural women; and that at the mainstream of the migration, historiography was a set of subtle assumptions and misconceptions about the place and role of rural women.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the image of women being those left behind as producers and caring for children, was questioned with the rise of feminist approaches which led to a growing awareness that historiography devoid of women leads to distorted views of society. Further, Bozzoli (1983) notes that nevertheless these tendencies did little to challenge or undermine the male bias of previous research. In the literature, women are portrayed as passive victims – those *left behind* in rural areas, not as active participants in the migration process and social change, but as victims of the migrant labour system.

Women's migration in African historiography is typically understood as the fight from male control or patriarchal oppression, a function of male control, the male migrant's system, or men in general. However, currently some research challenges these assumptions. For instance, some studies indicate that women migrated to achieve their goals of power, wealth and status (Bozzoli 1983).

Little of the extensive literature on migration uses gender as a critical tool for untangling the migration process. Feminist scholars criticized the gender-blindness of the migrant labour literature and called for a new research agenda with women situated in the forefront of the analysis (Barnes 2002; Bozzoli 1983).

Recently, studies have argued that migration scholarship in history has tended to depict women migrants narrowly, as dependents of males, thus reducing their visibility and their importance. This view ignores female agency in the migration processes.

In South Africa, for instance, feminist historians particularly were highly critical of explanations that reduced migration patterns (explicitly or implicitly) to the workings of a unified household, arguing that these accounts ignored the ways in which the gender division of labour had been upheld by 'internal structures of control' in rural communities, including social pressure, gender ideology and women's economic dependence. Chiefs, fathers and husbands had the ability to restrict the mobility of women and thereby reinforce women's traditional roles in rural production (Bozzoli 1983).

According to Barnes (2002), studies that attempted to theorize the mobility of women migrant experience tend to look at from a male angle, making women's perspective in the paradigm impossible.

The above-mentioned arguments attempt to explain why women were invisible and when they started becoming visible in African migration historiography. I must make this point here: if we take, as an example, the southern Africa region, the international migration process until the early 1990s was dominated by the South African mines system which attracted the male labour force across the region. In the light of this very dominant pattern of migration, which goes back to the eighteenth century when diamonds were discovered in Kimberly and later gold in Witwatersrand, the research agenda was focused on the impact of male labour migration on health, social change/transformation, on their households (mainly in rural areas) and on the capitalist accumulation.

Taking Mozambique as an example, if we look at the events that marked the Portuguese colonial domination of the country, men were forced to flee to neighbouring colonies such as South Africa and Southern Rhodesia because of forced labour imposed by the Portuguese colonial administration and hut taxes, from which women were exempted. These events may have overshadowed the historical analysis of migration studies in this period. Thus, the andocentric nature of the paradigm can be explained.

Moreover, during this period, let us be honest, international female migration was insignificant, though women migrated internally, moving from rural areas to peripheral urban locations. In Mozambique, for instance, during the 1960s there are accounts that indicate that women migrated to join Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique – Mozambican Liberation Front) in Tanzania for the liberation struggle against the Portuguese colonialism.

It is also important to bear in mind that the production of knowledge is determined by the main social context that in its turn determines the main paradigm.

Nevertheless, it is important to make this point here: during the civil war in Mozambique and also the liberation waged by Renamo (Mozambique National Resistance) against the government of Frelimo, almost a million Mozambicans, most of whom were women and children, fled the country to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. This situation was aggravated by the implementation of FMI's Economic Readjustment Programme (Programa de Reajustamento Económico – PRE) in 1987, which increased the hardships of Mozambican households, not only in rural areas, but also in the major cities. This situation prompted women to assume new roles in the households, engaging in cross-border migration to earn their living and sustain

households. The main migration destinations were Swaziland, Zimbabwe and South Africa to buy commodities and sell back in Mozambique. Following the demise of the *apartheid* regime in South Africa in 1990, the region witnessed an increase in female migration for various purposes.

From the above statement, there are two characteristics that are important to note: women who were forced to migrate due to civil war cannot be attributed an agency or role in the process – it was a forced and involuntary situation. The second feature is related to those who engaged in cross-border migration as a survival strategy as a result of economic hardships. Independent female migration has become a major survival strategy in response to deepening poverty. As men increasingly lose their jobs and incomes become irregular, women, like men, are turning to migration to meet their economic obligations. This category of women can be attributed as the agency in the migration process and it is contributing to the gender role shift.

These events coincide with the emergence of the so-called gender lobby, which claimed the place of women in the migration analysis process. However, with few exceptions, most historians seem to have missed the opportunity to, in the face of the new dynamics and context, make a retrospective reflection and analysis in order to give a thorough, detailed explanation about the women agency throughout time. It seems to me that the feminist scholars who challenge the so-called andocentric paradigm are missing a crucial point: prior to the 1980s and early 1990s studies acknowledge that the patriarchal mechanism and gender roles prevented women from migrating, which means that women were confined to households.

Women became more visible in migration when they started migrating independently. Those women with migration experience tend to be married, older women rather than single, younger women, whereas male migrants come from a wider range of age groups and marital status categories. Female migrants tend to be better educated than their male counterparts; with a lack of education seeming to discourage female mobility while encouraging male mobility. The increasing proportion of educated females is also reflected in the accelerated migration of females.

Final Remarks

This paper has shown that women migration depended/depend on certain sets of circumstances: the macro-economic context, the socio-cultural context (the structure and function of the family) and females' own characteristics over their life cycle.

What made women more 'visible' in migration studies are wars, civil and political destabilization, which severely eroded the developmental progress of the post-independence decades. In spite of the crises, the family remains the primary socialising agent of the society; apart from its basic functions of biological reproduction and intergenerational solidarity, families are the main mechanism for social control and the focus of most activities that permeate all aspects of African life, including migration.

The emergence of migrant females as breadwinners puts pressure on traditional gender roles within the African family. This phenomenon constitutes an important change, and indeed a turn-around, in traditional gender roles, creating new challenges for historians and other social scientists and prompting the creation of a new research agenda with women 'on the top'.

Aside of other social science disciplines, history and historians seem to have become stuck in time and have not adapted themselves to the new research agenda.

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