

Empowerment or Reconstituted Subordination? Dynamics of Gender Identities in the Lives of Professional African Migrant Women in South Africa

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ABSTRACT This article examines the ways in which the migration of African professional women from Cameroon, Zambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Congo into South Africa in pursuit of empowerment opportunities is affecting power relations in the family and the implications of their new social and economic responsibilities on their gender identities. Using a qualitative approach, we examine the incongruities in these women's lives as they walk the tightrope of balancing between exercising their autonomy buttressed by their professional qualifications and economic independence, on the one hand, and the requirement to submit to traditional gender roles that are grounded in the ancient precedents of patriarchal domination and religion. This article argues for confronting ideological, socio-cultural as well as the material basis of African women's subordination to men and aspiring for their empowerment that encompasses both the economic as well as the socio-cultural realms.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the ways in which the migration of African professional women into South Africa in pursuit of empowerment opportunities is affecting power relations in the family and the implications of their new social and economic responsibilities on gender relations at the household level. This research is based on our ethnographic study of thirty professional African migrant women living and working in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa.

The research which was positioned in an interpretivist paradigm lent itself to a qualitative methodology. Within an interpretivist paradigm knowledge is not only constructed by observable phenomenon but by the description of people's intentions, values, beliefs and reasons. In the interpretivist paradigm, the researcher is not detached from the study any more than the respondents are. The researcher also contributes to the creation of meaning by bringing in her own values and beliefs. She shapes the project through her curiosities and world view. The researcher also creates meaning by analysing texts to look for the ways in which social meanings emerge in discourses. The interpretive paradigm denies the existence of an objective reality independent of the frame of reference of the observer. Our positioning in this research was therefore crucial because it was inherently structured by our subjectivity.

As professional African migrant women, we participate in a similar social world with our research participants and hence our choice of the research topic. Constructing and re-constructing the availability of our different positions as professional African migrant women, researchers, feminists and Christians was necessary in the research process. This multi-dimensional positionality intersected to produce the findings of this paper. An interpretive framework is therefore a communal process involving presenting the reality of the participants from their own views, the role of the researcher as a co-creator of meaning and the types of knowledge frameworks or discourses informing that particular society (see Henning et al. 2004). This communal process was in line with the focus of this study, which was to gain a deep level of understanding of professional African women migrants' lives.

This being a qualitative study we used a non probability sampling method in selecting our sample. Marshall (1996) asserts that a non probability sample is suitable for qualitative research because it is aimed at deeper understanding of complex human issues rather than generalisability of results. The non probability sampling method employed in this study was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of respondents whose qualities or experiences permit an understanding of the phenomena in question, and are therefore valuable (see Dane 1990).

The study also made use of ten key informants out of the total sample of thirty. These key informants had a close relationship with and a deep understanding of the professional African women migrant's lives which we were researching. The key informants also understood the kind of information that we needed and were amenable to providing us with that information (see Bernard 1994). They were also very helpful in making recommendations for potential informants for the study. This then led to the use of a snowball sampling method in some cases. Using the snowball sampling method we located four key women who then referred us to others who ended up participating in the research. In this study we used in-depth interviews in order to understand how our research participants viewed their worlds. These in-depth interviews led to a deeper understanding of how both we, and our research participants, constructed meaning (see Rossman and Rallis 1998). Such a technique, which is interactive, enabled us not only to listen and record our participants' views but also played an important role in the interpretation of the eventual data.

Amongst the women interviewed, there were six Cameroonians (all academics)¹, five Kenyans (all academics), seven Zambians (one teacher, five nurses and one academic), three Nigerians (one medical doctor, one nurse and one teacher), two Malawians (one nurse, one academic), one Tanzanian (academic), one Liberian (Psychiatric nurse), two Congolese (both academics) and three Ugandans (all academics). These educational qualifications are seen as tools of empowerment for women and more so in the migration context.

Education and Empowerment in the Migration Process

The concept of women's empowerment has been adopted by a number of African countries which are signatories to and have ratified the various international conventions that commit participating member countries to address the issues of gender equality. Longwe (1998) defines women's empowerment as collective action to overcome gender inequality. She believes that women's empowerment is the process by which women collectively come to recognise and address gender inequalities which stand in the way of their advancement in terms of equal access to resources and full participation in power structures and decision-making.

Education has been highlighted as one of the practical measures that can be taken to reduce inequalities based on gender in the third millennium development goal which aims at promoting gender equality and empowering women (see Gupta et al. 2005). Education is perceived as a cornerstone to women's empowerment because it enables them to respond to opportunities, challenge their traditional roles and change their lives. The pursuit of higher education has led to an increase in the number of women crossing national borders to pursue study and work opportunities abroad.

Women's involvement in the migratory process seems to have a generally empowering impact on them in terms of higher self esteem and increased economic independence-both as family members and as economic actors (Ojong 2002). For most African women who have been restricted to a limited area for most of their lives for social and economic reasons, the opportunity to travel out of the country may be an extremely empowering experience (Crush and McDonald 1999). Previous research by Ojong (2002) and Otu (2009) as well as noted findings in this paper indicate that women with a high level of education (for the purpose of this paper, a college diploma or a university degree) are most likely to be involved in the migratory process because of a perceived level of empowerment. Dodson (1998) attests to the fact that women who have migrated to South Africa tend to be those with at least a primary or some secondary education with education seeming to encourage cross border migration. There is a high co-relation between the level of educational qualifications and the extent to which migrant women can access skilled employment in their host country.

Since the opening up of South Africa to the outside world as a democratic country in 1994, a number of professional African women have made the difficult transition from their home countries to South Africa in pursuit of greater scope for educational and professional opportunities and the empowerment that such opportunities confer. Increased participation in the labour market for such women means increase in social mobility, economic independence and relative autonomy. Migration can change the way women think about work and how it affects their lives and social position. Buijs (1996) noted that in a new society women's social world is expanded, as they gain a broader repertoire of roles including a greater

participation in economic and public spheres. Employment for these women brings not only their own income and necessary contribution to the family economy but also an occupational identity, together with greater self reliance and confidence. Zentgraph (2002) in concurrence with this suggests that women report a sense of empowerment, newfound freedom, and self confidence as they negotiate traditional gender roles in a new social and cultural context.

These new social and economic responsibilities are expected to lead to change in power relations in the family and hence transform gender relations. However, the extent to which the migration of professional African migrant women may be changing gender roles and identities in the African context requires further interrogation.

Gender Identity Discourse in the African Context

The conceptualisation of gender in the African context is different from western conceptualisations of gender. Socialist feminist theory points out that the traditional notion that gender identity is “natural” and “obvious” is rooted in the sexual division of labour between the sexes into “public” and “private”. Conformity to this tradition decrees that women should confine their talents to the “private” sphere, which is devoted to childbearing and rearing and domestic chores, whereas the “public” sphere that is associated with men is a natural arena for the organisation of the professions, business, politics and sports. One of the corollaries of this system is that work performed by women in the “private” sphere is perceived as less valuable and less prestigious than work performed by men in the public sphere because the work of women is associated with the realms of material necessity and the demeaning responsibilities associated with child-rearing and home maintenance.

According to Ngaiza and Koda (1991), however, the tendency to dichotomise social space into public and private spheres and in terms of gender does not accurately reflect the historical and cultural realities of what actually happens in the lives of Africans. The biographical and oral histories of African women during the nationalist struggles for independence show that many women did not always confine themselves to the private sphere or gender orthodoxies, as colonial

gender ideologies assumed that they did. Because this distinction between public and private was permeable and porous, African women were enabled to operate in various spheres and perform multiple tasks. This assertion of a genderless African family system has however been countered by other scholars who argue that gender divisions were present in pre-colonial societies and they became confirmed, legitimated and entrenched by the colonial governments. During the colonial era women in most of Africa became increasingly marginalised as producers in a rural economy. The colonially imposed sexual division of labour pushed men into cash crop economy while women were relegated to subordinate subsistence activities (Maddox 1996).

Howard (1993) has argued that it may be possible for African women who have not been conditioned to accept the same degree of economic and ideological subordination to men as European women, to appropriate the empowerment concept that is embodied in the more egalitarian status that they once enjoyed in pre-colonial societies. Gordon (1996: 29) advances that in pre-colonial African societies “women often had enormous autonomy that helped to dilute tendencies towards male dominance”. Scholarship by African male intellectuals such as Isike and Uzodike (2008) calls for a reinvention of African patriarchies claiming that patriarchy in pre-colonial African societies was such that it respected women and retained significant socio-cultural and economic spaces for them. According to them, the current negative practice of patriarchy² in Africa has been brought about by the forces of imperialism, colonialism and foreign religions.

An examination of African women’s power would however be misleading in exaggerating African women’s egalitarian status in pre-colonial times. It would be more useful to examine women’s power in relative terms such as how much power they held and how much of it they lost as a result of the interruption by the colonial project. It would also be useful to explore the new avenues of power that were created in the post colonial period and which women were not totally left out but were denied equal access with men. Howard (1993) advances that the cultural inheritance of pre-colonial patterns of women’s authority and their economic independence in both subsistence agriculture and trade may assist women to gain equality. This heritage should however not be exaggerated.

Repositioning Professional African Migrant Women's Gender Identities

With the above mentioned historical and social milieu, one can begin to understand the onerous demands placed on professional African migrant women and the implicit demands made on them (and especially on those who have families) to be strong and willing to handle the various responsibilities that arise both at home and in the workplace. African women are sentimentally represented as "strong" because they have been able to weather the innumerable challenges that range from the consequences of war and famine to gender-based violence and keeping the family afloat on very limited economic resources, to name but a few. They are therefore depicted as resilient and resourceful because they manage to prevail and somehow survive in circumstances of utmost adversity.

At the workplace, professional African migrant women must be competent enough to negotiate the pressures and difficulties that usually characterise a male-dominated environment. These women are also expected to be sufficiently competitive and efficient as foreign nationals to justify their employment in lieu of a local South African citizen. At home, by contrast, professional African women migrants are expected to manifest the traditional gender roles of "good wife" and "good mother" in order to fulfil the expectations that most people unconsciously entertain about African women. Muthuki (2004) documents that cooking is one of the household tasks that is perceived to be an integral part of an African woman's gender identity. The migratory process has not changed this perception in that the professional African migrant woman still has to cook for her husband even after a hard day's work. This is compounded by the fact that their husbands expect them to prepare their traditional home-style food which is an intricate and time consuming process. In preparing these meals the women can neither obtain help from their husbands (because this is not their traditionally designated gender role) nor from their hired house help (who are mainly South Africans and do not know how to prepare these meals).

This is amplified by the case of Wanjiru, a fifty year old professor from Kenya who is married to a Kenyan professor-both of whom have a demanding work schedule. They drive home together after work and Wanjiru says,

"I have to pretend as if my day has just started, ignore both the bodily and mental fatigue accumulated in the course of the day and settle in the kitchen to prepare supper for the family while my husband either takes a nap while waiting for prime time news and supper. Because my hired help stops working the moment we come home at six, I have to thereafter clean the used utensils after supper. When I wake up the next morning, I feel like I have been beaten because my body aches. Sometimes I feel like emancipation has turned us professional women into slaves and places a double burden upon us. I still have to demonstrate equal levels of productivity at the university as my male counterparts and on the same token be a good wife and mother at home".

Taiwo a forty-nine year old Nigerian medical doctor with three children married to a medical doctor, reiterates Wanjiru's sentiments. The medical profession is a demanding one with doctors spending long hours attending to patients in the hospital. This means that both Taiwo and her husband are on call most of the time attending to medical emergencies. Taiwo remarked,

"It is complicated being a medical doctor and being an African woman at the same time because I still have to go home irrespective of whether I am tired and prepare 'fufu' and 'soup' (Nigerian foods) for my husband. I was very hurt when my husband decided to fire our house help without even consulting me. For three months last year (2009), I had to wake up at 4:00 a.m. everyday to clean the house, prepare the children for school and made lunch boxes for the entire family while my husband would wake up and have his breakfast which I prepared before we left for work at 7:00 a.m. I feel I have been served a raw deal. Men need to be educated about the predicament of women and see how they too can fit into the contemporary world. We women have adjusted to the workplace, why can't our men adjust and share roles at home?"

Even in situations where routine housework and childcare can be relegated to paid help, this is only possible for a certain number of hours in the South African context because it is expensive. African professional women migrants can also not rely on the support of their extended family and community members in raising their children in the way that they would have in their home country. The task of raising the children must then be undertaken by the women with limited assistance from the house help. The work entailed

in these responsibilities falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women who perform the dual role of maintaining their families and devoting themselves to their professional life.

It is instructive to note that the work and family balance is regarded as a challenge faced by women. These women experience what Smith (1990: 17) terms as "bifurcation of consciousness". This consciousness poses a conflict between the women's understanding of themselves as educated women and their lived experiences in the social spaces such as at home and in religious circles. At work, these women have to behave as if children are not waiting for them at home and they are expected to be as productive as their colleagues even though they still maintain a large responsibility for the domestic world and must negotiate the contradictory demands of the two worlds simultaneously.

It is therefore necessary to interrogate the professional African migrant women's experiences of empowerment in their daily lives and the continuities or changes that determine the lives of women in the host country. One can do this by interrogating the biographies of women so that one might arrive at an understanding of what would constitute ideal empowerment (in terms of decision making) and re-empowerment. There is a need in the lives of these women to examine how empowerment has been conceptualised, and whether such empowerment is static or shifting. Although the professional African migrant women by virtue of their education and various professional careers would be considered to be empowered, their everyday lived experiences portray various incongruities. These women have to walk the tightrope of balancing between exercising their autonomy buttressed by their professional qualifications and economic independence, on the one hand, and the requirement to submit to traditional gender roles that are grounded in the ancient precedents of patriarchy and religion.

The Impediments of Patriarchy and Religion to Empowerment in the Migration Process

Professional African migrant women engage in the migration process not only as migrants but also as African women charged with the responsibility of preserving and promoting traditional norms, cultural values and religious beliefs. Socialisation plays a huge part in what one becomes by helping one to adapt to the

environment and gives one a sense of community with their past. Socialisation also functions to control and limit individual behavior so that one conforms to the predominant values and norms such as traditional gender roles (De la Rey 1992). Daphne (1998) argues that customs, culture, tradition and religion are major impediments to the changing of gender relations between men and women.

Even when a woman is empowered through her level of education and the migration process, challenges still abound as a result of negotiating traditional gender roles. This is amplified in the case of Jessica a single thirty-four year old woman from the *Batanga* community in Cameroon. For Jessica coming to South Africa was empowering in that it had served to elevate her profile in the sight of the people back in her home country to the extent of being involved in decision-making. Jessica expressed that though she had not remitted much in terms of money, being in South Africa had enabled her to remit socially in terms of her ideas and opinions which were now much more valued in her family than when she was at home. She admitted that though her level of education played a major role in the elevation of her social status, she would not have received the same honour if she had studied in her home country. Further, she expressed that being in a new cultural context had given her room to construct herself as an assertive and independent minded woman. The same respondent however had to negotiate how and when to display this new found independence as shown below:

I can however be free and assertive in a population that will understand me. Going to a rural environment and showing that you are emancipated no one will understand you. They will find you culturally unclean. I am an African woman and I will always remain an African woman. I am an emancipated African woman who is very dynamic, who can change time and again depending on who she meets. The way I express my self is different depending on who I meet. Education has opened me up to have a critical outlook in life but as an African girl I still have cultural values. If it warrants me to stoop low, I will stoop low. If a situation warrants me to stand my grounds then I will stand my grounds. Normally a traditional African woman will be subordinate and a recipient of whatever comes her way. Sometimes, I will play that role of subservient women depending on the kind of audience. I am ready to

adapt, I will not go to a rural area and display this aura of an emancipated woman since I will find myself like a fish out of water.

Although asserting that coming to South Africa had made her more assertive and confident, Jessica expressed that it would be challenging to exercise her newfound freedom and independence in her rural setting back home. This is because it would be considered culturally unacceptable. She then constructed herself as an "emancipated African woman" meaning that she would hold onto her newfound independence and display it when the situation warranted it such as in political gatherings. However, while in her rural setting where her community subscribed to traditional gender roles she would adopt the role of a subservient woman.

Mariam a forty five year old married woman from Tanzania on negotiating between her educational achievements and traditional gender roles maintained she would still carry out her traditionally prescribed gender roles at home. Mariam maintained the following:

When I go home I do all the work for myself. My house is a five bed roomed flat. I have to clean, cook, wash clothes for my children and my husband. I do not have any assistant but when I start going to the university I think I will have to get one but otherwise I do everything. I normally mix with people very much because I am a researcher and I go to conduct interviews among them. I think my education has not caused me to change very much and people are still very confident of me. I normally commute with the low income people and I have not changed much although people were saying, "She will not even greet us".

Mariam, though believing that women should pursue education to the highest level also holds onto traditional gender roles so that she can fit into her community's expectations of a subservient woman.

While one may have expected that the professional African migrant women would invoke the notion of gender equality to gender stereotypes we were surprised to find that many of the women were quick to distance themselves from issues of gender and were willing to hold onto some of their cultural understanding of gender norms. For instance Norah a twenty-five year old single Cameroonian woman asserted that she is an African woman who could be empowered through her education without giving up

traditional gender roles such as being a home-maker and the caregiver to her children. She appeared to associate gender equality with giving up traditional gender roles, something she was not willing to do since it is an integral part of who she is.

I am not that gender type. I know that I am a woman, an African woman. To talk about gender equality I know that that thing is there and that there is nothing that I want to do that I will not do because I am a woman. If I want to change the tyre of my car, I can do it. If I want to do my PhD I will do. I cannot be restricted in my family if I want to go higher in my education because I am a woman. The woman is still the homemaker, taking care of the children and the home. You cannot get out of this. It depends on how you were brought up. I will want to do the things my mother did in my house. I will not become modernised and say that I will not cook and I will buy fast food. It is the way you are brought up.

Being social and cultural beings, these women find it difficult to distance themselves from beliefs they have been socialised with from childhood. They perceive culture as an integral part of who they are. Most African cultures however are largely patriarchal, positioning men as head and women as subordinate and this remains the case in varying degrees as women migrate from one place to another, especially within the African continent. Patriarchal ideologies and attitudes prescribe and govern relations between men and women. These power relations take many forms such as, the sexual division of labour. Power operating through institutions such as culture and religion is an important aspect of the structure of gender. The women's liberation movement recognised that patriarchal power was not just a matter of direct control of women by individual men but that it was through institutions as well (see Madan 1988).

Davies (1994) remarks that male domination in patrilineal societies is built into the very fabric of social and cultural systems, and that even though a married woman might be brave enough to challenge these traditional roles and try to step out of her traditional female role, her husband might still be able to exercise ultimate control through the systemic reinforcement of patriarchy and re-establish the status quo because he has the weight of cultural history, tradition and precedent on his side.

The subservience of women is also reinforced religion. The main religions in Africa namely

Christianity and Islam condone, in varying degrees, the subservient role and status of women and male headship in both the domestic context and in the community at large. The women in this study are adherents of the Christian religion and their beliefs exert a strong influence on their lives. They have therefore found themselves unable to distance themselves from a religion in which they have been intensively socialised since childhood. Consequently, professional African migrant women have found themselves continuing to participate in Christian religious practices which assign different tasks to men and women based on their biological difference.

Taiwo (mentioned above) and her husband first came to South Africa in 1995, immediately after the fall of apartheid, after the husband got employed at one of the referral hospitals. Upon arrival she was unemployed for two years and the husband was the sole bread winner. During this time her husband assumed total control of the management of the finances of their household. Taiwo said that during those two agonising years, the husband brought groceries which he thought were necessary such as chicken and beef and did not include the spices necessary for the preparation of these foods. He would later blame Taiwo for not preparing tasty food as is expected of a good wife and from time to time would compare her cooking unfavourably to that of his own mother back home in Nigeria. Apart from this Taiwo had no allowance for her personal needs such as body lotion and sanitary pads which she substituted with toilet paper.

When she eventually found employment at the same hospital two years later her husband extended his control over her even at the workplace. He did this by checking on the types of drugs she prescribed to patients and even criticised her in front of her patients and the medical interns who were under her mentorship. When she confronted him later on at home about his interference at her workplace saying, "At home I am Mrs Ayo, at the workplace, I am Dr Ayo (husband's surname), in an attempt to establish her empowerment at the workplace, he became incensed and beat her up exercising further control over her. In making the above statement, Taiwo was trying to make him understand that while she was willing to be subservient to his authority at home, she was not prepared to do the same at the work place. This is because at the workplace she was empowered to make decisions for her patients'

wellbeing as well provide professional mentorship for young medical doctors. Upon probing further as to why her empowerment as a medical doctor did not extend to her home she explained that as a Christian she is obligated to submit to her husband's authority.

Professional African migrant women, who might be expected to be leaders and innovators with regard to social change, cannot easily disregard or nullify the accumulated centuries of religious influence and dominance in Africa (Howard 1993).

CONCLUSION

Education which is deemed as a chief cornerstone of women's rights and empowerment has enabled professional African migrant women to access work and study opportunities in their host country in South Africa. The experience of studying and working in another country and constant negotiations in a different cultural context presents these women with an opportunity for changing their perspectives of gender and hence challenging unequal gender relations. As African women, these women are also expected to be guardians of the family and cultures.

In most of Africa a good woman or wife is defined by her level of submission and involvement in household chores. Christian and Islamic traditions which Africa has been subject to for various centuries also preach the subservient role of women and the domestic ideal of the dependent wife. Such an ideal woman should be subordinated to men (in cultural terminologies) and submitted to her husband (in religious terminologies). A professional woman can only be seen as successful if she is capable of balancing both the public and private aspects of her work.

African migrant women in the negotiation of their gender identities have to contend with various incongruities as they attempt to balance between exercising their autonomy buttressed by their professional qualifications and economic independence, on the one hand, and the requirement to submit to traditional gender roles that are grounded in the ancient precedents of patriarchal culture and religion.

Despite tremendous efforts and inroads made by liberal feminists from the late nineteenth century onwards in the fight for equal access for education and their high levels of education these professional African migrant women find

themselves unable to fully exercise the empowerment accorded to them by their level of education and economic advantage. Does this then mean that empowerment for the professional African migrant woman implies the adoption of western liberal feminism (which advocates formal equality) without actively challenging the patriarchal structures or the deeply embedded ideological causes of the subordination of women? Do these women want to be integrated in societal systems that overlook the underlying power relations and structures that create imbalances and inequities between African men and women?

The challenge before African women is to confront ideological, political as well as the material basis of their subordination to men. While economic empowerment is an important and necessary indicator of women's empowerment this article has argued that it is not sufficient. The establishment of women's rights requires socio-cultural empowerment as well. This kind of empowerment calls for a profound transformation of unjust societal systems including religious systems that socialise women into subservient roles. Howard (1993) suggests that for African women to attain their rights they must free themselves from Christian and Islamic socialisation patterns. The struggle for the emancipation of the African woman therefore is not a struggle against men per se but a struggle against ideologies that is not friendly to women.

NOTES

- i Academics in this study refers to people either seeking advanced knowledge and /or working as lecturers or researchers at a university.
- ii According to Walby (1990: 214) patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Patriarchal power rests on social meanings given to biological sexual difference. Weedon (1999) refers to patriarchy as the power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to those of men.

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