Chapter 6 - Migration and Gendered Dynamics in South Africa: A Brief Synthesis

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Abstract

Migration dynamics and pathways for men and women in South Africa are distinctive and layered with differing exposure to both opportunities and risk. Despite the dominant narrative that women migrate accompanying their partners rather than responding to perceived opportunities or risks in their home countries, women's migration pathways, migrant experiences, and reasons to migrate are unique from those of men and involve greater exposure to various risks, vulnerabilities, as well as capabilities, freedoms, and opportunities. Common to all forms of migration is that the economic, social, political, and cultural conditions in sending and destination countries motivate women to migrate. The 'feminization of migration' and the gendered migration experience often compel women to migrate for distinctive 'push' and 'pull' factors than men. Historically, women have had less autonomy over migration options than men, but recent evidence shows women migrants are increasingly exercising autonomy in making individual migration decisions for various reasons including economic, social, family, and career opportunities. African women are migrating more than ever to South Africa to fulfil their aspirations and to meet their own or their families' needs. This paper offers a brief literature on the gendered dynamics of migration in South Africa. The paper provides a brief review of the literature

on migration trends in South Africa, focusing on gender-specific aspects. The paper explores the literature on the demographic profiles of migrants, their motivations for migrating, and their unique challenges. By employing the intersectionality perspective, we aim to explain how overlapping factors influence the upturn of migration of African women to South Africa.

Keywords: Gender, feminization, intersectionality, migration, review, South Africa, women

Overview

South Africa has long been recognized as a migration-receiving country before the colonial period and a destination of opportunity within the Southern African region. Despite a comparatively limiting immigration policy and a strong emphasis on border control (Peberdy 2001; Crush & Dodson 2007), South Africa is currently home to a considerable number of newcomers (including economic migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers) and intra-regional migration is an important feature of South Africa's migration story. According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2017), South Africa hosts approximately four million migrants. The legacy of colonial conquest and apartheid dating back to the mid-19th century when extensive migration systems were created by the colonial and apartheid states to serve the mining and agricultural sectors (Neocosmos 2010; Segatti & Landau 2011; and Crush and Ramachandran 2010) cemented South Africa's position as an economic hub. Coupled with political stability and thriving settler communities, the colonial condition pulled international migrants from all over the globe seeking better lives and opportunities (Matsinhe, Khalema & Costumado 2018; and Makiwane & Khalema 2015). These systems began to slowdown in the 1980s as the racialized apartheid state itself began to fail. Following the democratic transition of 1994, new forms of migration to South Africa were observed whereby the recruitment of skilled laborers increased, and workers from neighboring countries such as Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and eSwatini as well as Central, East, and West Africa were recruited to work in various sectors and industries of the economy where scarce skills were lacking.

Cross-border labor migration became an ongoing feature and aspect of the nation's modernization and industrialization project, and as Segatti and

Landau (2011) assert, between 1990 and 2000, varied arrangements of cross-border and international mobility quickly developed and/or expanded (from asylum-seeking to cross-border trading and seasonal migration for comercial farming), drawing thousands of new immigrants from neigh-boring countries to as far as Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Eu-rope. The democratic administration post-1994 further mobilized migrant movements through work permits into the post-apartheid dispensation at legal entry points in the country (cited in Crush 2012:6 - 8), increasing the number of legal admittances in the decades following the democratic transition.

Paradoxically, the mobilization of migrants through work ushered a resistance within the local South African black majority, which remains impacted by colonial and apartheid exclusions in the economic and labor sectors, resulting in high unemployment and forced outmigration from traditional lands (Borner 2009). Thus, on the one hand, the colonial and apartheid governments constrained the movement of local black, indigenous peoples while encouraging their movements from rural to urban centers to work in extractive industries such as mines and factories for cheap wages, leaving them landlessness (Posel 2008). The apartheid-era movement of people across borders for the same reason (cheap labor) also became the norm in South Africa. Thousands of male workers from neighboring countries such as Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi, and Zimbabwe migrated in numbers to facilitate the colonial economic and social agenda. Thus, labor migration was marked by masculine supremacy rooted in a patriarchal society in which women were excluded and deprived of autonomy to seek opportunities (McLwaine 2013). Pedraza (1991) explains that the gendered nature of migration during the apartheid and colonial period was rooted in the tradition of an African family defined by the division of labor and gender roles. The family, as a unit in which society organizes itself, perpetuated the notion that supports mobility for men and domesticity for women (Deumert *et al.* 2005; Tiemoko 2004). To elaborate on the history of labor migration to South Africa, Tiemoko (2004) argues that the institution of the family with often patriarchal impositions played a big part in deciding who migrates and who did not. Thus, predominant gender roles were maintained through family systems to reinforce male mobility and as Chant (2013) reasons, not only favored male mobility but also discouraged female mobility and exposed women who chose to migrate to unfair conditions during their migration journeys.

Migration patterns to South Africa, therefore, saw a predominance of men moving to South Africa, primarily to work in sectors like mining and agriculture (Bonner 2009; Moya 2007). In recent years, however, there has been a significant increase in women migrating for different 'push' and 'pull' factors, and thus progressively exercising autonomy in making individual migration decisions for various reasons. Within the continent of Africa, African women are now moving to South Africa to seek economic opportunities, career opportunities, political instability, family reunification, and to escape violence and disasters of any kind including war, impacts of climate change, and gender-based violence (GBV) in their home countries. While the migration story of African women to South Africa has evolved and growing noticeably, it is unfortunately mirrored by risk and uncertainty. Women migrants face economic insecurity, social uncertainty, and violence in host countries such as South Africa (Mbiyozo 2018; Gumede & Moyo 2023; and Mengo *et al.* 2024). According to Mbiyozo (2018) and Gumede and Moyo (2023) women migrants are at a greater risk of exploitation and are more likely to work in less regulated and less visible sectors than men.

Additionally, undocumented women migrants and refugee women often suffer pervasive violations as they journey seeking opportunities. Often, migrant women are exposed and impacted severely by dominant attitudes and practices circulating both in their home and host countries such as sexism, racism, xenophobia, and patriarchy; exposing African women migrants to 'triple' discrimination (Vhumbunu 2024). Furthermore, migrant women also carry more family and reproductive burdens that their male counterparts are exempt from such as childbearing, rape, unintended/ unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and gender-based violence (Darebo *et al.* 2024; Chinyakata 2019; Hlatshwayo 2019; and Chirau, *et al.* 2024). Such precarious experiences challenge their full integration into host societies such as South Africa. The fundamental argument is that one cannot describe the gendered dynamics of migration without underlining the contextual/ social/ cultural aspects, normative perception of migration, and its gendered stratification (Moya 2007). This paper offers a brief overview of the literature on the gendered dynamics of migration in South Africa focusing on gender-specific features of the migration trends. The paper further explores the demographic literature on gender migration or what Pillinger (2007) frames the 'feminization of migration'; focusing chiefly on women's motivations for migrating, their unique challenges, and possible interventions in integrating African women

migrants to host societies such as South Africa. By employing the intersectionality lens in the literature synthesis, we aim to elucidate how overlapping factors that challenge the integration of migrant African women to South Africa could be mitigated as the democratic dispensation matures.

Migration and Mobility Trends in South Africa

South Africa's migration trends are shaped by a complex interaction of gender, race, and socio-economic factors, significantly influencing women's experiences and migration patterns to the country (Ncube & Mkwananzi 2020; Chikovore & Maharaj 2023). The migrant population in South Africa mainly comprises young adults aged 18 to 35 years (Gagnon 2018; Ikuteyijo 2020; UNESCO 2013). Aligning to the demographic trends in population forecasting (i.e. demographic dividend and youth bulge), newcomers to South Africa are young with children and older adults accounting a significant proportion (Gagnon 2018). Historically, migration to South Africa has been predominantly male (Estifanos & Freeman 2022), and earlier studies from the 1960s and 1970s primarily overlooked female migration (Saggar, Somerville, Ford & Sobolewska 2012). The literature also reports that South Africa has over the years attracted migrants from diverse backgrounds and regions within the African continent and abroad (Teye & Oucho 2023). The waves of migrants have come from places as far as Asia, Europe, Australia, and the Americas, as well as neighboring African countries such as Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, belonging to various ethnic, religious, and racialized groups (Matsinhe, Khalema & Costumado 2018; Moyo & Nshimbi 2020; Mutanda & Ndawana 2023). Conversely, African migrants constitute the largest proportion migrating to South Africa. Evidence from the National Immigration Information System reported that 71% of refugees and/or asylum seekers' applications received in 2015 were from individuals of African origin (DHA 2016: 15). Demographic studies have projected a tenfold increase in these migrants by 2050 (Brown 2008). For instance, African nations hosted 24.7 million migrants in 2017, up from 19.3 million in 1990, reflecting a 28% rise (Gagnon 2018). Contrary to common perceptions, over 80% of these migrants were born within the continent of Africa and do not migrate outside the continent (IOM 2020).

The conditions for migrating to South Africa are numerous, but most are attracted to the possibilities of better livelihoods and freedoms the South African context provides. Anchored through its legislative hardware, South

Africa has enacted legal frameworks to attract skilled migrants to fill areas with labor shortages. Parshotam and Ncube (2022) argue that approving the Immigration Act of 2002, which introduced the critical skills visa, increased the number of skilled professionals from other African countries and beyond holding higher education degrees and specialized scarce skills. The previous Refugee Act of 1998 also catalyzed the increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugee claimants in the country. Between 2006 and 2011, South Africa received the highest number of asylum seekers globally (Amit 2014). Moreover, United Nations data show that the number of asylum seekers in South Africa reached 62,000 in 2015, ranking it as the 10th largest recipient of asylum seekers worldwide (UNHCR 2015).

While South Africa has historically been a popular destination for African migrants, the country currently experiencing a net loss of legal migrants, with a significant influx of undocumented immigrants (Ikuteyijo 2020; Maphosa & Ntau 2021; Munyoka 2020). Zimbabwe remains the leading source of undocumented migrants entering South Africa (Crush *et al*. 2015). In addition to receiving skilled migrants and asylum seekers, South Africa's migration policies have also allowed the country to take in unskilled and semi-skilled workers from neighboring countries in search of job opportunities in labor-intensive fields such as agriculture, mining, construction, and domestic work (Adil Khan & Hossain 2017; Ness 2023). The Department of Home Affairs (DHA) indicate that Zimbabweans and Nigerians are among the top five largest continental African foreign communities living in South Africa (DHA 2016). Migrants entering South Africa also originate from East African countries like Somalia and Ethiopia and West African nations such as Ghana (Ikuteyijo 2020; Parshotam & Ncube 2022; Teye & Oucho 2023; Williams *et al*. 2022). Most Asian migrants come from countries such as India, Pakistan, and China (Rugunanan 2022).

Feminization of Migration in South Africa

Historically, African migration has predominantly been a male phenomenon. However, research has shown a substantial shift in this pattern in recent decades. African women are emigrating from their countries of origin to establish careers elsewhere (Hlatshwayo 2019). This was supported by the study conducted by Batisai (2022), revealing that migration patterns in South Africa are seeing a notable transformation, marked by an increasing influx of female migrants. Therefore, drivers of female migration include job

opportunities, poverty, gender-based disparities, and remittances to support their families (Pillinger 2007).

According to the World Health Organization (2022: 9), from 1990 to 2020, the global population increased from 5.3 billion to 7.8 billion. During those years, 'the total number of international migrants increased from 153 million (2.9% of the global population) to 281 million (3.6% of the global population)'. In addition, 48% of international migrants were women, and some 36 million children. This was supported by Diop and D'Aloisio (2010), suggesting that the global population of female migrants has signifycantly increased in recent years, accounting for about half of all migrants. Besides, it is commonly known as the feminization of migration.

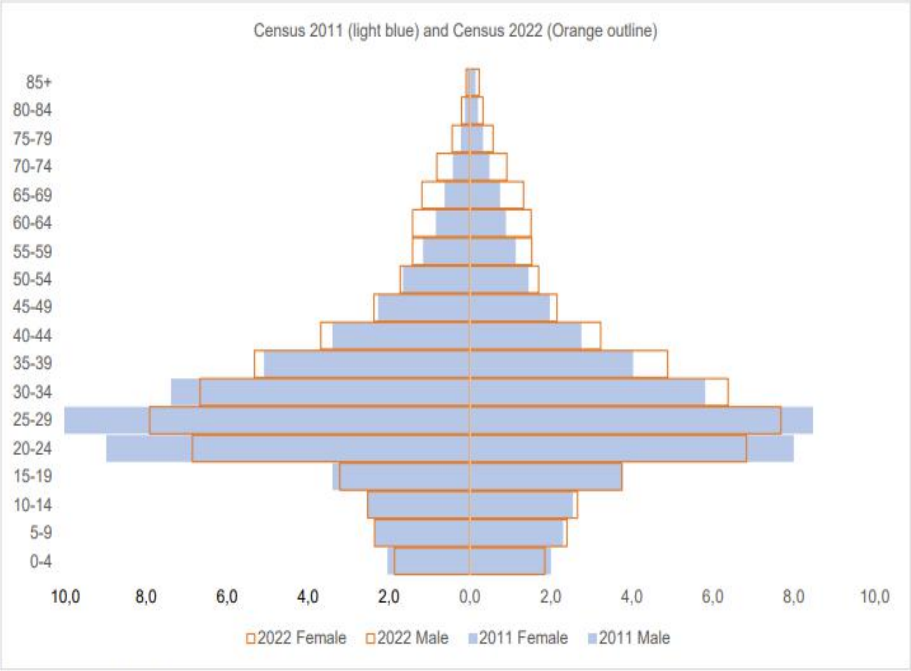
Recent trends have seen a significant increase in female migration to South Africa and other host countries in the global north (Gagnon 2018; Mbiyozo 2018; Ncube & Mkwananzi 2020). Sharp (2021) argued that 'the proportion of women in the overall migrant population has risen concurrently with the increase in female participation in the labor market'. A study in South Africa confirmed that the number of women migrants has quadrupled since 1990 (Crush & Dodson 2017). Specifically, mid-year data from UNDESA (2017) found that the proportion of female migrants in South Africa increased from 38.4% of total migrants in 1990 to 44.4% in 2017. Another study indicated that, increasingly, many migrant women travel alone, without spouses or partners (Mbiyozo 2018).

Figure 1 below suggests that the age and sex distribution of internal migrants between 2011 and 2022 was lower in 2022 than in 2011, which may have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic and its confinement regulations. In addition, it suggests that internal migration is generally low for young ages between 0 and 19 and at its highest for males and females aged 20 – 34.

From an intersectionality perspective (rooted in black feminist theory), multiple identities intersect to shape experiences of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw 1989; Verloo 2013; and Overstreet *et al.* 2020). Migratory patterns of African women in their diversity and the entanglement of various aspects that describe their privilege and vulnerabilities within a web of cultural, racial, gendered, social, geographic, and economic inequalities significantly influence the experiences of women (Nnawulez *et al.* 2022). In particular, migrant women may encounter sexism, racism, patriarchy, and xenophobia in an interconnected and overlapping manner (Mbiyozo 2018). These women face triple discrimination, enduring biases not only as black individuals but also as women and migrants. This intersectional oppression

necessitates a nuanced understanding of their migration experiences (Crawford *et al.* 2023; World Economic Forum 2020; Sagor & Aktar 2023).

Figure 1: Age and Sex distribution of Internal Migrants between 2011 and 2022



Source: Statistics South Africa 2022:12

A study by Zarar *et al.* (2017) revealed that undocumented female migrants face difficulties obtaining employment in the formal labor market and are more inclined to engage in informal trading within the secondary economy. In addition, these female migrants experience a significant amount of hardship due to triple forms of discrimination based on gender, color, and class. The discrimination they experience is exacerbated by their lack of legal documentation. Therefore, the migration of women to South Africa is a notable phenomenon, influenced by a combination of circumstances that push them away from their home countries and attract them to South Africa.

According to the South African Development Community (2008),

South Africa has frequently led the way in enacting progressive laws to promote gender equality and protect women's rights. Therefore, the constitution guarantees the right to equality, specifically tackling the various obstacles and prejudices women encounter, such as poverty and restrictions to economic inclusion. However, the migration system fails to consider gender-patterns, vulnerabilities, and advantages effectively. The Immigration Act of 2002 (modified in 2014) and the Refugees Act of 1998 lack gender-specific provisions and do not take gender into account (Farley 2019). In addition, Freedman *et al.* (2020) argue that women's migration decisions are significantly influenced by economic circumstances, gender-based violence (GBV), and the aspiration for independence and self-actualization. However, there is a significant number of women who have encountered incidents of rape and sexual assault in their home countries or during their travels to South Africa.

Reasons for Migration

Global migration trends reveal the complexities driven by push and pull factors affecting the countries of origin and the host nations. These factors significantly influence the decisions of many men and women to migrate. Studies indicate that among the key factors influencing migration to South Africa are the economic opportunities presented by the country, which is considered one of the most economically developed in Africa (Munyoka 2020; Parshotam & Ncube 2017). This perception of South Africa as a land of opportunity has motivated migrants from neighboring countries to seek employment in mining, agriculture, manufacturing, and services (Mogane & Zitha 2023; Morris 2023). Special dispensation programs for Zimbabweans and Basotho from Lesotho, introduced in 2009 and 2016, respectively, have significantly increased the number of nationals from these countries in South Africa (Parshotam & Ncube 2017). Consequently, exacerbated by rapid urbanization, South Africa's major cities, including Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town, experience a steady influx of internal and external migrants. For example, around 3.4 million Zimbabweans, approximately 25% of Zimbabwe's population, have migrated to South Africa to escape poverty (Meldrum 2011).

South Africa's international recognition as a democratic and politically stable country in the region, adherence to international human rights agreements, and national legislation, such as the Refugee Act of 1998,

obligate the country to protect the fundamental human rights of migrants (Vhumbunu 2024). This includes providing access to healthcare, sexual and reproductive health services, and education to new migrants, particularly women and children (Alfaro-Velcamp 2017). New migrants are also attracted to South Africa by the social networks provided by already-established migrants, which encourage family reunification. This is particularly true for women, who are more likely to migrate to join relatives already settled in South Africa (Mawire *et al.* 2020; Meyers & Rugunanan 2020).

Like their male counterparts, women are motivated by economic instability in their home countries to relocate to South Africa, seeking opportunities for personal and professional development (Mbiyozo 2018). This is particularly true for migrant women from underdeveloped countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Somalia (Mengo *et al.* 2024) moving to South Africa or elsewhere. Unfortunately, many of these women find themselves in low-paid jobs, such as domestic work, small businesses, and agriculture (Betts *et al.* 2024; Gumede & Moyo 2023), making them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Other significant factors driving migration to South Africa include war conflicts and political instability in some of the poorest African countries, forcing men, women, and children to seek safety and security in South Africa (Hiropoulos 2020; Lindert 2022; Munyoka 2020).

Economic and political instability have been identified as primary reasons for the increased influx of undocumented Zimbabwean nationals into South Africa (Munyoka 2020). Economic issues play a significant role in motivating women to migrate to South Africa. Many women migrate in search of improved career opportunities and greater remuneration compared to their countries of origin. South Africa has diversified and developed its economy in Africa, providing a wide range of employment prospects, particularly in urban hubs such as Johannesburg (Ncube & Mkwananzi 2020). Multiple studies have demonstrated that migration significantly impacts economic and social progress in countries of origin and destination worldwide (Bossavie *et al.* 2022). This assertion is further supported by research carried out by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which discovered that migrant workers make substantial contributions to the economy. These contributions include their direct impact on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and their indirect impact through the multiplier effect OECD (2018). Besides, women face restricted livelihood oppor-

tunities due to poverty, limited educational access, lack of formal employment, and gender-based discrimination in the labour market (Chinyakata *et al.* 2019). Therefore, comprehending the economic factors propelling this trend is essential for developing efficient migration policies and promoting the welfare of female migrants

Moreover, women migrate to remit funds to their home countries to financially support their families and contribute to knowledge transfer (Skeldon 2008). In addition, remittances substantially contribute to the income of households and enhance the welfare of families, especially children and elderly individuals who rely on others for support (Waidler 2018). Therefore, women, particularly those from single-parent households or families experiencing financial difficulties, can be highly motivated to migrate so that they can send remittances to support their families. In addition, migrant women face high risks of gender-based violence (GBV), and many are victims of GBV in the war zones they are fleeing (Desalegn *et al.* 2023; Mwenyango 2023), which further motivates their migration to South Africa for refuge and protection. Mbiyozo (2018) argued that some women also migrate to escape harmful practices such as forced marriage or genital mutilation. Mbiyozo (2018) further affirmed that women encounter numerous hardships during their journey to South Africa. This is worse, especially for those who are young and undocumented, who face significant risks of forced labor, sex trafficking, labour exploitation, and violence throughout their migration journey (Mbiyozo 2018).

Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief synthesis of gendered migration dynamics within the South African context. The review has revealed that due to the feminization of migration and the continuing flow of female migrants in South Africa due to a variety of factors, integration approaches that empower migrant and local women ought to be prioritized as a strategy to improve the socioeconomic status of women. Because migration in South Africa remains complex, contested, and complicated, South Africa's challenge is how, as a transforming agent of acute socio-political and economic uncertainty, to realize its obligations of creating a just, non-racial, and non-sexist society. The upturn of women's migration to South Africa reveals a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors. Mobility from and within situations of precocity can transform opportunity structures, redistribute resources across

time and space, and generate new meanings that are both intended and unforeseen. The consequences are often far-reaching, not only for migrant women but also for dependents women often care for and for those with whom they live near and interact where they settle. As outlined in the paper, motivations for and reasons for migrating to South Africa are diverse and often complex. These interconnected factors influence female migrants' decisions to relocate to new geographical spaces. As migrants, women may encounter unique challenges and opportunities, emphasizing the need for policies and interventions tailored to enhance their integration and well-being in South Africa. To effectively address the needs of female migrants, it is essential to:

1. *Strengthen Legal Protections:* Enforce and enhance international and national legal frameworks that safeguard the rights of migrant women, ensuring their access to quality healthcare, education, and legal services (Hongoro *et al.* 2023; Olivier & Tewolde 2023).
2. *Promote Economic Empowerment:* Develop targeted employment programs and support initiatives that help female migrants establish small businesses, thereby achieving financial independence and stability (Duan *et al.* 2023).
3. *Improve Access to Services:* Address barriers that hinder female migrants' access to quality health and education, ensuring these essential services are readily available and accessible (Chirau *et al.* 2024).
4. *Combat Gender-Based Violence:* Implement policies and programs specifically designed to protect female migrants from gender-based violence, including providing safe shelters and comprehensive support services for survivors (Mbiyozo 2018).
5. *Foster Social Inclusion:* Create and promote community programs and awareness campaigns to counter anti-foreigner sentiment and reduce xenophobic incidents, fostering social cohesion and inclusion (Rugunanan & Meyers 2023).
6. *Support Family Reunification:* Facilitate family reunification processes, recognizing the crucial role strong family networks play in successfully integrating female migrants (Mawire *et al.* 2020; Meyers & Rugunanan 2020).
7. *Conduct Further Research:* Invest in ongoing research to better understand the intersectional challenges female migrants face,

ensuring policies are informed by up-to-date and comprehensive data (Crawford *et al.* 2023; Sagor & Aktar 2023).

8. *Ensure Mental Health Support:* Provide mental health services tailored to address the unique psychological stressors faced by female migrants, including trauma from past experiences and the challenges of adjusting to a new environment (Al-Hamad *et al.* 2023; Jolof *et al.* 2024; Nyikavaranda *et al.* 2023).

By addressing these issues, South Africa can better meet the needs of African women migrants, enabling them to navigate the complexities of their migration experiences and thrive in their new environments. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledged migration as a fundamental aspect of development and a driving force for sustainable development that spans all areas of government policy (Abdirahman 2017). South Africa's rich international migration history, with nuanced gender dynamics influencing these movement patterns, has unearthed several policy implications regarding South Africa's migration policy directives. Due to South Africa's legislative hardware regarding migration, refugee protection, immigration, and citizenship (i.e., the Immigration Act, Act 13 of 2002, Citizenship Act, Act 88 of 1995, and Refugee Act 130 of 1998, amongst others) and the White Paper on International Migration (WPIM) that suggests incorporating factors related to gender to recognize various migration patterns based on gender, it is imperative that the contribution of female migrants to the economy be underscored.

Additionally, efforts should be made to explore and establish different safeguarding measures to address the challenges women migrants face, especially in the informal sector (Farley 2019). South Africa could update and enhance its migration framework to ensure it aligns with the current gender frameworks and commitments. More emphasis could be given to the socio-economic benefits of women's migration. This could involve formulating ways to optimize the influence of women's remittance practices. Further, migration policies and practices ought to be guided by a simultaneous emphasis on protection and empowerment. Besides, migration policy evaluations should also prioritize the areas where women are particularly susceptible to harm, such as crossings of borders and incarceration (Mbiyozo 2018). South Africa, therefore, could adopt comprehensive policies that offer economic opportunities, social services, legal protections, and community integration to support these women. Using an intersectional lens helps in

understanding the diverse interlinked experiences of migrant women and in crafting inclusive policies that cater to their specific needs.

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