

The Complexities of a Feminist-based Approach in Addressing Gender Inequality: African Professional Migrants in South Africa

Janet Muthoni Muthuki

Abstract

This article addresses the place of feminism/s today by highlighting the incongruities in the lives of both African professional women and men migrants in negotiating gender equality. The migration experience is made complex by the renegotiation of various gender identities as a result of migrants immersing themselves in a different socio-cultural context. The migration experience for women presents them with the challenge of balancing between exercising their autonomy occasioned by their educational attainments as espoused in liberal feminism on the one hand and the quite often religio- cultural requirement to submit to male domination on the other. Similarly migrant men are faced with the challenge of maintaining a hegemonic masculinity which accords them patriarchal privilege on the one hand while renegotiating their masculinities in a new gender context where women have been ‘empowered’ through the inroads made by liberal feminism on the other. By examining the appropriateness and/or inappropriateness of using a feminist-based approach in dealing with issues of gender inequality, this article argues that the feminist agenda should lead to a profound process of gender re-socialisation for both men and women.

Key words: Gender equality, feminism/s, patriarchy, autonomy, African professional migrants

Introduction

With the demise of apartheid in 1994 and the subsequent recognition of South Africa as a democratic state, South Africa has emerged as a major migration destination attracting migrants from other African countries such as asylum seekers, long distance traders, entrepreneurs, professionals and students (Crush & MacDonald 2002). This article critically examines the lives of African professional migrant men and women living in KwaZulu-Natal. While most studies have examined migration from an economic perspective this study focuses on the social lives of the migrants and in particular the gender relations aspect of their lives.

The article is based on an ethnographic research conducted amongst forty professional African migrants (thirty female and ten male). The study was premised on a qualitative research methodology which emphasises on peoples lived experience; the meaning they place on their lives, processes, events and structures, their perceptions, assumptions and ways in which they connect these meanings to the social world around them (see Rossman & Rallis 1998). This is as opposed to quantitative research methodologies which treat research respondents as scientific variables thereby limiting access to their meanings, understandings and interpretations. In depth interviews were used in order to understand how the research participants viewed their world and how they constructed meaning. A non-probability sampling method, namely purposive sampling, was employed in selecting the sample. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of respondents whose qualities or experiences permit an understanding of the phenomena in question and are therefore valuable (Dane 1990).

Drawing on the qualitative research paradigm, the study employed a feminist standpoint epistemology within which knowledge is constructed by privileging the experiences of women. Based on feminist theory, feminist standpoint epistemology as a starting point focuses on validating women's experiences and seeks to see the world from women's point of view as a means of eradicating gender inequalities. Edwards (1990: 489) attests to this by saying that using a feminist methodology gave her the flexibility to relate to women in subjective ways on their terms rather than in objective ways on the researcher's terms. While this epistemology validates women's experiences, Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2003) however ask what implications it has for men's experiences as a research agenda in terms of

challenging gender inequalities. Using a feminist research methodology therefore, I sought to privilege the subjectivities and experiences of the female participants which is a requirement for a feminist-based research but I also examined men's experiences which are salient in the feminist research agenda on eradicating gender inequalities. This is because the purpose of feminist research is to generate critical insights on gendered social existence and men are gendered beings as well as women.

Gender as a category of social organisation is embedded in migration but has received limited attention in migration studies. Initial studies on migration focused almost exclusively on male migrants while portraying women as passive companions migrating to accompany or to reunite with their breadwinner migrant husbands (see Crush 1991; Breytenbach 1979; Bohning 1981; Berger & Mohr 1975; Handlin 1951; Portes & Bach 1985). This male bias in migration studies was later countered in the 1970s and 1980s by feminist scholarship that sought to highlight the predominance of women in migration processes (see Donato 1992; Morokvasic 1984; Ong 1991; and Pedraza 1991). Feminist scholarship highlighted that women were increasingly migrating as the main economic providers, or 'breadwinners' for their households.

In the African context, the traditional pattern of migration within and from Africa, which has previously been male-dominated, is increasingly becoming feminised. Adepoju (2004) points out that in recent years, there has been a new phenomenon of women migrating and leaving their husbands to cater for their children. Dodson (1998) confirms this by highlighting that one of the trends in the new migration to South Africa has been the increase in the number of women for a broad range of social, productive and reproductive reasons. The 'feminisation of migration' has produced specifically female forms of migration such as the commercialised migration of domestic workers and caregivers, the migration and trafficking of women for the sex industry and the organised migration of women for marriage. Independent women migration has also produced a group of professional women migrating independently to fulfill their own economic needs as opposed to just joining a spouse or other family members (Adepoju 2004). The extent to which the migration of professional African migrant women may be changing gender relations in Africa requires further interrogation as in many cases migration is still largely determined by unequal gender relations.

Further, the process of migration produces gendered encounters for

both men and women because not only do they immerse themselves in a new cultural context but they also immerse themselves in new gender regimes¹ and have to renegotiate their gender relations. Most African cultures have a patriarchal system which governs gender relations between men and women with men having positions of authority over women and this remains the case in varying degrees as women migrate from one place to another especially within the African continent. Gender relations in South Africa are however more complex due to the tensions between South Africa's progressive constitution in terms of women's rights and a patriarchal culture. On paper, women in South Africa have some of the most progressive protections in the world enshrined in a constitution that is said to be one of the most progressive in the world.

The constant negotiations of such differing gender systems by migrants can serve to either change or reinforce their perspectives of gender. From the findings of this study, the migration experience presented women with the challenge of balancing between exercising their autonomy occasioned by their educational attainments as espoused in liberal feminism on the one hand and the religio- cultural requirement to submit to male domination on the other. In this same context, migrant men were faced with the challenge of maintaining a hegemonic masculinity which accorded them patriarchal privileges while renegotiating their masculinities in a new gender regime where women had been 'empowered' through the inroads made by liberal feminism.

Negotiating the Practice and Discourse of Gender in the Migration Context

Longwe (1998) defines women's empowerment as collective action to overcome gender inequality. She observes 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 equal access to resources and full

¹ A gender regime is a group of practices, ideological and material, which in a given social context acts to construct various images of masculinity and femininity. The state of operation in gender relations in a given institution is its gender regime (Connell, 1987)

participation in power structures and decision-making. Ojong (2010) in her examination of the experiences of independent African migrant women in South Africa advances the argument that the migratory process seems to have a generally empowering impact on women's self esteem and economic independence. Zentgraph (2002) in concurrence suggests that women report a sense of empowerment, new found freedom, and self confidence as they negotiate traditional gender roles in a new socio-cultural context.

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 their country may be extremely empowering (Crush & MacDonald 1999). This new found sense of empowerment and freedom is expected to lead to change in power relations in the family and hence transform unequal gender relations. This is in tandem with the aims of liberal feminism, which emerged in the nineteenth century in Europe and America and was aimed at achieving equality in all spheres of life such as education, women's right to property, the right to vote and freedom of individual choice. Liberal feminism has embraced empowerment (ideological, political and economic) as a means of transforming the lives of women. Increased participation in the labour market for educated women means increase in social mobility, economic independence and relative autonomy. It is therefore expected that with education women can respond to opportunities, challenge their traditional roles and change their lives.

While liberal feminism advances that restructuring unequal power relations would enable women to make choices and exercise control of their lives, institutions such as culture and religion limit individual expression, autonomy and choice. Daphne (1998) advances that customs, culture, tradition and religion are major impediments to the changing of gender roles. In concurrence, Ojong and Muthuki (2010) attest to the fact that while professional African migrant women may have high educational attainments and are economically empowered, they are unable to exercise the same empowerment in their homes due to socio-cultural and religious regulations.

This can be observed in the case of Jessica a Nigerian who is a part-time lecturer at UKZN who expresses that before she came to South Africa, she did not receive much recognition in the family. She expressed that though she had not remitted much in terms of money she had been able to remit socially in terms of her ideas and opinions which were now much more valued 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 the new space in South Africa had given her room to construct herself as an assertive and independent minded woman since she has broken loose from familial and cultural constraints. 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 myself is different depending on whom 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 a subservient woman 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 (Jessica, Nigeria).

Jessica though asserting that the migration experience had made her more assertive and confident, said 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. In her rural setting where her community subscribed to traditional gender roles² she would adopt the role of a subservient woman. She then constructed herself as an 'emancipated African woman' meaning that she would hold onto her

² Gender roles refer to behaviours, expectations and role sets defined by society as masculine or feminine. These behaviours consist of personality aspects such as aggressiveness and gentleness and social roles such as domestic roles, conjugal roles and parenting roles (Pleck 1981).

newfound independence and display it when the situation warranted it such as in political gatherings.

Mariam from Tanzania highlighted that her coming to South Africa had provided her with an opportunity to inspire other women to fund their own education as opposed to waiting for government support. She asserted that women should pursue tertiary education since they are capable of performing much better than men.

Most of the women in Zanzibar for a long time did not think that it is okay to pay for their own studies. They think the work of educating them belongs to the government but when they saw me going to pay for myself at the university level they asked themselves, 'Why not pay for myself?' They are confident of themselves now and I said before our island is very small and a lot of people know that I am paying for myself. I think for me I can say that women can do as much or much better than men. So women should continue with their studies. What can be helpful for a family woman it can help if they plan together and even apply to go and study together (Mariam, Tanzania).

On negotiating between her educational achievements and traditional gender roles, Mariam maintained that she would still carry out her traditionally prescribed gender roles while at home. Even though she had pursued the highest educational qualification and encouraged other women to do the same, she still carried out her traditionally prescribed gender roles such as cleaning her five-bedroomed flat, doing laundry and cooking for her children and husband as was expected of her.

Jessica and Mariam though exuding confidence concerning their educational qualifications maintained that education would not change them and that they would remain humble by upholding traditional gender roles. Women such as Jessica and Mariam seem unwilling to distance themselves from cultural beliefs that they have been socialised with since childhood despite their level of education. The desire to create the impression that one had not changed despite acquiring an education was held onto by various women migrants.

Ngcongco (1993) advances that African women experience a dilemma as a result of the cultural upbringing of an ideal of a 'good' African woman

who is subservient to male authority and a home maker versus being an ambitious, independent career woman as a result of western education. Muthuki (2004) in her examination of changing gender roles amongst Zulu-speaking academics at UKZN concurs by highlighting the dilemma faced by these academics in negotiating between modern gender roles occasioned by their western education and maintaining traditional gender roles as a result of their cultural background.

Does this then mean that the professional migrant women are adopting western liberal feminism which advocates for formal equality in the public space without challenging patriarchal structures or the causes of the deep ideological causes of gender inequalities? The situation faced by these women continues to uphold the dual work role for women which contributes to the promotion of gender inequalities. The challenge before African women therefore is to confront ideological, political as well as the material basis of their subordination to men. Ojong and Muthuki (2010) have advanced that the establishment of women's rights requires not only economic empowerment as advanced by liberal feminism but also socio-cultural empowerment. This kind of empowerment calls for profound transformation of unjust societal systems including religious systems that socialize women into subservient roles.

Further, while one may have expected that the professional African migrant women would invoke the notion of gender equality to give them access to participation and leadership opportunities, some were quick to distance themselves from the notion of gender equality and were willing to hold onto some of their cultural understanding of gender norms. A case in point is Norah a twenty five year old single woman from Cameroon who came to South Africa in pursuit of the empowerment and educational opportunities which she would not have had if she remained in her home county. She is currently a part time lecturer in the department of civil engineering at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN hereafter). Women such as Norah are well positioned to secure permanent employment at the university given the fact that the Employment Equity Act categorises skilled job allocations along racial and gender lines. Norah in an interview asserted that while she was comfortable with the empowerment accorded to her by her level of education and employment opportunities in the South African context, she would not give up traditional gender roles. She appears to associate gender equality with giving up traditional gender roles something

A Feminist-based Approach in Addressing Gender Inequality

she is not willing to do since it is an integral part of who she is. Her views are captured in the following excerpt:

I am not the gender type. I know that I am a woman, an African woman. Talking about gender equality, I know that it is a concern but there is nothing that I want to do that I will not be able to do because I am a woman. If I want to change the tyre of my car, I can do it. If I want to pursue my PhD I will do so. I cannot be restricted by my family if I want to go higher in my education because I am a woman. A 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 I was brought up (Norah, a Cameroon).

Angelina, a single woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) working at the department of Human Resource Management at UKZN, in resonance with Norah also distanced herself from the discourse of gender equality by asserting that gender equality should be focused in the areas of work and study opportunities and not at the transformation of gender roles. She expressed her views on gender equality in the following manner:

I have never believed in the gender equality debate as long as women are given the opportunity to work and to study. I think the fight for gender equality should focus on study and employment opportunities and not on matters to do with the kitchen and the bedroom. It should be about liberation in women's minds and not in the household. When people focus more on the housework they forget the essentials. Like me in my house, every time there is something that requires me to go up the house or lift heavy things I do not do it. Even after shopping, I jump out of the car and leave my brother to carry the heavy stuff. If we have to talk about sharing the work like my brother doing the cleaning then we will be missing the point. The point should be whether we have the same opportunities (Angelina, a migrant from the DRC).

Angelina made the assumption that in a family setting a man will

automatically want to share gender roles with his working wife. She seemed to ignore that fact that gender roles are inculcated through a process of socialisation and most African men will be hesitant to share in women's traditional gender roles as illustrated by Muthuki (2004).

Norah's and Angelina's engagement with the notion of gender inequality is illuminating in that it shows the extent to which African women may be willing to engage with this discourse. While ethnocentric perspectives on Black and Asian women give the impression that their cultural values are oppressive to them, these women perceive traditional gender roles as an integral part of their lives. This scenario raises issues on how knowledge is constituted and points towards gender being an epistemological category and not just a category of social organisation. This is because gender epistemologies emerge out of particular histories and social contexts.

On the part of the men professional migrants, they acknowledged women's empowerment while also construing it as disempowering to them. These men were faced with the challenge of maintaining a hegemonic masculinity which accords them patriarchal privilege on the one hand and renegotiating their masculinities in a new gender regime where women have been 'empowered' through the inroads made by liberal feminism.

Jasper a thirty nine year old academic at UKZN while acknowledging that women were as capable as men in terms of educational pursuits also revealed that this was very intimidating to men by saying the following:

You see when women get educated, they get good jobs and they buy big homes and good cars. This intimidates men who say, 'What can I tell the children? She will not listen to me'. You know currently in Botswana this educated women are now saying that they want to surrender so that they can get men to marry them (Jasper, a migrant man from Botswana).

In reflecting on gender relations in his home country, Jasper advanced that educated women posed a threat to men and added to their sense of loss of power by 'usurping' men's roles as providers. Men however reclaimed their power by refusing to marry such women. According to Jasper, the educated women in Botswana were considering capitulating in a bid to make themselves marriageable.

Zebedee a twenty five year old academic from Zimbabwe reiterated

A Feminist-based Approach in Addressing Gender Inequality

Jaspers sentiments by asserting that the notion of equal rights should apply in the area of education while in the home, traditional gender roles needed to be maintained. Zebedee expressed that rights had to do with availing opportunities to women and dealing with violence against women. According to him these rights should not interfere with traditionally prescribed gender roles in the home. Men should continue being the head and women should be the homemakers. In reference to the situation back home in Zimbabwe, Zebedee said that even though women had risen economically, social relations remained traditional and women are not decision-makers in the home. Zebedee advanced that women should remain nurturers and should respect their husbands even though they may be earning a higher income as highlighted below:

Back home in Zimbabwe, a woman still has to be subordinate to a man and fulfill traditional gender roles. Certain rights are necessary especially when it comes to extreme behaviors. Equal rights however have to be distinguished from traditional duties that have to be performed according to sex. A woman has a certain role to play in the family as a mother. Just because we have equal rights does not mean that my wife has to go and wash her own car. It does not mean that I have to have turns to cook. Rights have to be accompanied by education for women on their role in society. I am also thinking from a biblical perspective, the man has to be a provider. However in modern times, we find women earning more so the man has to treat the woman accordingly. The woman must however understand that she must not take undue advantage of the man (Zebedee, a migrant man from Zimbabwe).

Jasper and Zebedee are clearly opposed to the restructuring of gender roles which they construe as loss of power for men. Men such as Jasper and Zebedee are opposed to gender equality because for them it implies the loss of the patriarchal dividend which Connell (2002) defines as the benefit to men as a group from maintaining an unequal gender order. This benefit includes economic advantage, prestige authority and access to institutional power among others. The patriarchal dividend is universally distributed among men though this distribution is not uniform but is mediated by economic class, social status, race, ethnicity, sexuality and age.

The notion of the patriarchal dividend was clearly elucidated by Peter, a thirty three year old Kenyan programme coordinator with a community based organisation in KwaZulu-Natal. Peter voiced that being in South Africa where women were more empowered in terms of their constitutional rights had made him gain respect for women. He however observed that much as men may acknowledge women's empowerment, it was difficult for men to surrender patriarchal privilege as amplified below

I think that it is difficult for a man to undo a patriarchal mindset than for a woman because for them it is associated with loss of control, loss of power and loss of decision-making and loss of income. Different men would take this differently. I can only speak from a personal point of view (Peter, Kenya).

The notion of gender equality also faces challenges from politicians, cultural leaders, and mainstream scholars who argue against universal human rights by making a case for understanding different cultures and societies on their own terms and relative to their own values and beliefs. Such arguments are invoked to justify female subordination within the family institution. The false dichotomy created by the debate between universality of human rights and cultural diversity is particularly damaging to the rights of African women (see Africa Gender Institute, 2009). Respect for cultural differences should not obscure the fact that in most cultures women are subordinate to men.

Conclusion

The struggle for African women's human rights confronts resilient structures and institutions of patriarchy whose primary role is to maintain the status quo. As a result of inroads made by liberal feminism professional migrant women have experienced economic empowerment and a sense of autonomy in a new cultural context. The migration experience and constant negotiations in different cultural contexts is expected to present migrants with an opportunity for changing their perspectives of gender and hence challenging unequal gender relations. A number of women in this study were however unable to fully exercise the empowerment accorded to them by their level of education and economic advantage due to cultural and religious regulations to conform to traditional gender roles. Other women distanced themselves from

the notion of gender equality highlighting gender as a critical epistemology whose discourses need to be re-examined. This is because gender epistemologies emerge out of particular histories and social contexts.

Men in the same context also grappled with maintaining a hegemonic masculinity which accorded them patriarchal privilege on the one hand and renegotiating their masculinities in a new gender regime where women have been 'empowered' through the inroads made by liberal feminism. While liberal feminism advocates for gender equality without necessarily dismantling existing patriarchal structures, it is incontrovertible that the establishment of women's rights and their consequent empowerment requires transformation of unjust societal institutions. From the interviews with professional women migrants however, it appears that the struggle for the emancipation of the African woman is not a struggle against men per se but a struggle against ideologies that are not friendly to women. The challenge for feminism therefore is to distinguish between the structures of male domination on the one hand and individual men on the other in confronting ideological, political as well as the material basis of African women's subordination to men. The establishment of gender equality requires gender re-socialisation on the part of both men and women. This kind of re-socialisation calls for a profound transformation of unjust societal systems including religious systems that socialise women into subservient roles.

References

- Adepoju, A 2004. Trends in International Migration in and from Africa. In Massey DS & JE Taylor (eds): *International Migration Prospects and Policies in a Global Market*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Africa Gender Institute 2009. Gender and Law: Activism in the African context. Available at <http://www.gwsafrica.org/teaching-resources/gender-law/african-activism>. (Accessed on 29 October 2011.)
- Berger, J & J Mohr 1975. *A Seventh Man*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative.
- Bohning, WR 1981 Introduction. In Bohning, WR (ed): *Black Migration to South Africa*. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Breytenbach, WJ 1979. *Migratory Labour Arrangements in Southern Africa*. Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa.

- Bryson, V 2003. *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Connell, RW 1987. *Gender and Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Connell, RW 2002. *Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Crush, J, A Jeeves & D Yudelma 1991. *South Africa's Labour Empire: A History of Black Migrancy to the Goldmines*. Cape Town: David Phillip.
- Dodson, B 1998. *Women on the Move: Gender and Cross Border Migration to South Africa*. Cape Town: SAMP Migration policy series no, 9.
- Donato, K 1992. Understanding US Immigration: Why Some Countries Send Women and Others Send Men. In Gabbaccia, D (ed): *Seeking Common Ground: Multidisciplinary Studies of Immigrant Women in the United States*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Edwards, R 1990. Connecting Method and Epistemology: A White Woman Interviewing Black Women. *Women's Studies International Forum* 13,5: 477 - 490.
- Handlin, O 1951. *The Uprooted*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap.
- Haywood, C & M Mac an Ghaill 2003. *Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research and Social Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Howard, RE1993. Women's Rights and the Right to Development. In Cohen, R, G Hyden & WP Nagan (eds): *Human Rights and Governance in Africa*. Gainesville: Florida University Press.
- Morokvasic, M 1984. Birds of Passage are also Women. *International Migration Review* 18: 886 - 907.
- Muthuki, FW 2004. *Exploring Changing Gender Roles: A Case Study of Married Zulu Speaking Academic Staff of the University of KwaZulu-Natal*. Unpublished Masters Thesis. University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Ngcong, RP 1993. Power, Culture and the African Woman. *Agenda* 19:5 - 10.
- Ojong, VB 2010. *An Escape Route: Independent Female African Migrancy in South Africa: The Processes, Dynamics and Experiences of Independent Foreign African Migrant Women in South Africa*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Ong, A 1991. The Gender and Labor Politics of Postmodernity. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20: 279 - 309.
- Ojong, VB & JM Muthuki 2010. Empowerment or Reconstituted Subordination: Interrogating the Dynamics of Gender Identities in the

A Feminist-based Approach in Addressing Gender Inequality

- Lives of Professional African Migrant Women in South Africa. *Journal of Social Sciences* 25,1-2-3:169 - 176.
- Pedraza, S 1991. Women and Migration: The Social Consequences of Gender. *Annual Review of Sociology* 17: 303 - 325.
- Pleck, J 1981. *The Myth of Masculinity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Rossman, GB & SF Rallis 1998. *Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. U.K.: Sage Publications Inc.
- Smith, D 1990. *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Weedon, C 1999. *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zentgraph, KF 2002. Immigration and Women's Empowerment. *Gender and Society* 16,5: 625 - 646.

Janet Muthoni Muthuki
School of Social Sciences
University of KwaZulu-Natal
muthuki@ukzn.ac.za