

Women Taking Agency through Feminized Migration Patterns and Remittances: Socio-Economic Experiences of Migrant Street Vendors, Pietermaritzburg, Kwazulu-Natal-South Africa

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Abstract

Background: This anthropological paper contributes empirical findings which reveal that feminized migration patterns have allowed women to migrate from different parts of Southern Africa to trade as illegal street vendors in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where they have earned remittances “*their financial agency*”. This economic/financial agency has shaped their resilience and has lowered their dependency on their husbands.

Methodology: This study was guided by a qualitative phenomenological research design. **Sampling:** The study recruited twenty foreign women trading on the Pietermaritzburg through the purposive-snowballing sampling technique. **Study Findings:** This paper reveals that even though patriarchy and other structural issues have excluded African women, Pietermaritzburg streets have allowed foreign women to generate daily earnings which are between R1050 to R2500 per day through street vending amid many daily challenges. Earned remittances have changed their families’ socioeconomic statuses. Families have afforded basic survival needs such as food, school fees, medical care and clothing, which have been celebrated by their children and families. Through remittances, poverty no longer has the face of their families. **Study Conclusion:** This paper recognises that Pietermaritzburg streets as full of economic possibilities for foreign street vending women. **Study Contribution:** We contribute street vending as a new context to the feminized migration literature which African women have entered into to generate remittances in South Africa as means of escaping rife poverty. **Study Recommendation:** The paper further recommends that heads of state in Af-

rica and internationally should forge policies that maximize the safety of street vending women worldwide.

Keywords

Poverty, Feminizing, Migration, Remittances, Street Vending

1. Introduction

The socio-economic analysis of women in Africa has influenced feminized migration patterns. These females are moving on their own or as household maintainers to earn better to improve their or households' lives, have financial gain, and transfer remission into their families back home. Feminized migration was problematised within street vending simply because Pietermaritzburg streets have become an informal economic hub for foreign women selling fruits and domestic products to respond to the brutal and symbolic poverty in their families. [Masanja \(2010\)](#) historical analysis of feminized migration explains that female migration to South Africa, for instance, has increased significantly since the country's majority rule in 1994, which radically changed past stereotypes where male migration dominated. Women are beginning to comprise most of the flows to cities in Africa. Migrant women hold lower-status of jobs than migrant men and are mostly likely to work in the informal sector of the economy. Migration has become an important livelihood strategy for women and women-headed households. This is because, women take up the primary responsibility for feeding their families hence they have increasingly turned to migration to satisfy their cash needs. Furthermore, female migrants remit to their families with good intentions. They love their families such that remittances are considered as the psychosocial support that they inject towards the betterment of their families, particularly their children, and contribute towards the local economy of their villages and cities.

[Eversole and Johnson \(2014\)](#) assert that anthropologists have historically been interested in how immigrants generate remittances, studying the impact of remittances on households and remitting corridors. [Pernia \(2006: p. 1\)](#) asserts that the burden of poverty, gender inequality, women's unemployment, and socio-economic statuses of developing countries has propelled women to embark on international migration to generate formal or informal remittances to benefit their families and households. As discussed by [Ojong \(2016\)](#); [Klaa \(2020\)](#) and [Kaka \(2013\)](#) poverty has the face of women in most African countries; hence they embarked on feminized migration patterns. Women in Africa are financially excluded because of domestic chores and unplanned pregnancies. They are victims of non-paying home labour, poor wages and salaries in the economic sector. They are vulnerable to gender-based aggressions, which include culturally unconsented early marriages. Most women and young women are victims of

accumulated intersexual victimisation and intersexual aggression, including interacting sexual practice and ascending in accordant intersexual acts (Bruce, 2016).

This anthropology was undertaken after having identified a gap in the existing literature. Early scholars that wrote about feminized migration have reported that women find work as educators, house/hotel keepers and nannies in host countries. This paper contributes a new context to the feminized migration literature, which is street vending. This is a new economic corridor that African women have entered into to generate remittances. The work of Gamieldien & van Niekerk (2017); Recchi (2020) and Ullah (2021) explains that street vending is the same as street trading. A street vendor is a person who sells goods and services (fruits, chips, cell phone cables, cooked meals etc.) to the public under temporal structures and many other things. These people are either licensed by local municipalities or trading illegally. They sometimes migrate from one spot to another, conveying their merchandise on driven wagons, in containers, on top of their heads, or trade their goods on wheel motors. Street vendors target areas where pedestrians can access their trading stalls. Telila (2017) asserts that women in most of the world survive through street vending. In the same breath, Tittensor and Mansouri (2017) advance the discussion on feminized migration by titling it differently. They opine that feminized migration implies *migrating for survival*. This is the agency that women from as early as 1960 started to embark on. Women have intentionally become fenders for their own families as they want to escape domestic hardships and to earn their financial agency which is the power that many African women still don't have. A boom of feminized migration was seen when many women migrated for professional services in developed countries where they worked as nurses and educators. The current dimension is different, women of different socio-economic categories have identified economic opportunities in informal economic hubs, and street vending is one of those opportunities.

2. The Existing Literature

Current migration trends confirm that women have embarked on varying migration patterns because of many domestic socio-economic living conditions. Their migration patterns have been celebrated because they have proved that women are now part of a moving global village and yearn to earn their economic agency, which has been a historic or patriarchal benefit for men. International demographics on migration patterns prove that about 48% of migrants are women but the number could be more because of unregistered/illegal migration trends. Feminized migration implies that women have stepped outside of domestic cages which socially constructed gendered specific roles that are domestically limited. Feminized migration is a new phenomenon because migration patterns have been symbolic to African males (Masanja, 2010). Holst et al. (2012) defines remission as the amount of money earned by a migrant who

works and then sends it to their country of origin to fulfil their needs and wants. Correspondingly, Pophiwa (2014) and Flahaux, & De Haas (2016) aver that there has been a global increase in the feminization of movement in Africa in recent years. This notion emerges as many females become responsible for contributing financially to their nuclear and extended families while others hope to become financially independent. Also, Gouws (2007) explains that African women have faced many socio-economic challenges encouraging feminized migration patterns. Rife poverty, lack of job opportunities that recognise their skills, talents and poor remunerations (within the context of gender inequality at work) have subjected women to be on the move for better socio-economic opportunities. Women in Africa have felt the need, the desire to gain financial independence and to realize who they are outside the control of their nuclear, extended families, and other patriarchal systems. This self-realisation has encouraged women to look for socio-economic opportunities that prove their agency as mothers, wives, members of society, or individuals. Balderas & Blackburn (2013) agree that the feminized migration patterns have caught many scholars' attention simply because women are part of the fast-moving world and want to gain their financial independence while others migrate for unknown push and pull factors. Holst et al. (2012) states that females worldwide are observed and recorded to be moving on their own while others move with their counterparts, searching for work to provide for their families back home. These female migrants are now becoming significant contributors to remittances. They are actively contributing to their home countries' economic development (Balderas & Blackburn, 2013). Similarly, Mawuena and Okey (2021) agree that migrant remittances have a positive impact on the lives of many families. Remittances are sent for specific assignments which they realize. They contribute towards the relaxation of financial conditions and they holistically improve human capital and also contribute to good health. Remittances are thus a resource that families back home rely on. They give families the strength to face poverty and many other conditions which need money to be resolved. As indicated by Stephen (2021) remittances remain a tangible medium for many households in Africa because of varying economic conditions.

Daily Experiences of Women Immigrants in Host Countries

Studies confirm that feminized migration comes with many geographical challenges. While it is celebrated that these women have gained their financial liberation through earned remittances, it is important not to lose sight of their daily challenges as they try to negotiate themselves in host countries. They carry a burden of stress which includes being categorised as immigrants because they don't have valid visas and other documents (Pedraza, 1991; Pophiwa, 2014) and Ojong (2016). The dodging of law enforcers and the burden to conceal their identity as they do not want to be known becomes their daily plan. Zack (2015) agrees that trading on the street is not easy at all; street vendors are constant vic-

tims of “Operation Street Clean-up”; which is the slogan that law enforcers embark on in order forcefully evict those who are immigrant street vendors and it is important not to lose sight of their daily challenges as they try to negotiate they don’t want to be detained. They escape the use of tear gas and other violent means. This treatment is not gender exclusive; it affects both women and men trading on the street as street vendors. Foreign vendors are mostly accused of selling illegal items/goods on the streets; hence they experience unannounced raids. If their legal goods are confiscated, foreign vendors cannot claim, their goods/products back while local vendors/traders can make a court appearance before the court of law, receive their charge, and then claim their goods. These geographical experiences don’t make their lives easy at all; hence, studying these women was an anthropological interest. As African anthropologists, we argue that these daily experiences are harsh on women because they are powerless; hence there should be a better way to evict them from trading on the streets illegally.

Ojong (2016) agree that while remittances are celebrated, we should not lose sight of the plethora of hardships these women encounter in host countries. Foreign women find themselves trapped in spaces that subject them to various vulnerable contexts; it is not easy to find formal employment because they are illegal immigrants; they don’t have legal documents which they could pull to defend why they are in foreign countries; they don’t have work permits which confirm that have permanent employment and will be staying for a longer or shorter period; they are mostly alone with no family or network ties. They attract low-paying jobs and are not protected by policies and laws in foreign countries. Their cry goes unnoticed or relatively unrecognised because they are commonly known as illegal immigrants. Narratives attached to feminized migration show that women remit higher proportions of their income regularly and consistently, even though they generally earn less than men. Women provide money that is directed at poverty alleviation through the provision of funds for nutritional, educational, and healthcare needs, while men tend to buy consumer goods, such as television, cars, and undertake investments in property and livestock. Feminized migration patterns in Africa have helped many families to escape the rife of poverty.

3. Methodology and Data Analysis

This study employed a qualitative phenomenology research design. The rationale for employing qualitative/phenomenology research was that we were interested in collecting detailed experiences/narrative data from the studied population instead of numerical data. We clearly understood that qualitative research methods allow anthropologists to discover in-depth by asking the why, what, and how questions in their research. This research design allowed us to ask interactive face-to-face open-ended-semi structured questions. Ntinda (2020: p. 9) assert that the qualitative phenomenology research design allows researchers to record thick descriptions of “experienced narratives” in relation to the studied

phenomenon.

3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took us three months because the sample was relatively small, however, we were able to probe until the level of saturation was reached. The gathered data was solicited through interactive face-to-face open-ended-semi structured questions. Research participants were taken through ethical considerations of the study. They signed a voluntary consent form. The study employed interpretive phenomenological analysis as a method of data analysis. As discussed by [Smith and Osborn \(2015\)](#) the researcher is able to locate research participants at the centre of data production. [Smith and Fieldsend \(2021\)](#) posit that the interpretive phenomenological analysis is largely concerned with daily lived experiences that individuals through which meanings are socially constructed. During the study, research participants were approached where they are doing street vending. This method of data collection had an element of ethnography because we met research participants where they are vending in order to generate remittances that have benefited their families in their countries of origin. The rule of thumb in ethnographic research is that the subject should not be removed from their *natural in situ*, which is the place that they identify with. Through this method of data collection, we were able to draw inferences from their daily experiences as foreign women that are trading as street vendors on the streets in Pietermaritzburg.

3.2. Ethical Consideration

Data collection and analysis was strictly monitored by ethics in Social Sciences; hence we did not violate our participant's rights. We ensured that they were not maltreated to participate, their identities were also concealed, and we did not divulge any information to law enforcers. They were made to sign voluntary consents. In this manner, they were protected as foreign women that are illegally trading on the streets and as human beings who deserved to be treated with respect. We are happy that their rights were not compromised.

3.3. Sampling Technique

Twenty research participants were recruited through the purposive-snowballing sampling technique. Their age group was between 20 to 55 years. This sampling technique allowed us as researchers to capitalize on the chain referral method of reaching participants that were deemed relevant. It is through this sampling method that we were able to outline a specific inclusion criterion which was limited to foreign women who are trading on the street as street vendors.

4. Results

The study revealed that female migrants moved to South Africa because their country has extreme poverty due to poor economic policies, political instability,

and the desire to earn their income. This indicates that African heads of government have not created integrative economic opportunities that allow women to succeed economically in their own countries; hence they are now part of feminized migration, and their involvement seems to be outnumbering the statistics of men. Kaka (2013), Adjie (2015) and Wanjala (2021) are among scholars that have expressed that poverty is gendered and that women face the brunt of poverty. Adjie (2015) further asserts that while Africa proves to be progressing in many aspects, the economic situation of women is still dismal. Kaka (2013: p. 78) further states that women's unfair access to social, resources and opportunities arises from the demerit situation they found themselves in the form of class, race, gender and in any given society. We expand the scholar's argument by stating that structural poverty is also contributed by their own families who do not want to invest in women or distribute resources that would enhance their financial agency. Domestic chores also exploit women in such a way that they lose sight of their own financial empowerment even when opportunities are made available. Abdourahman (2010: p. 17) asserts that women also suffer from time poverty.

Women's time does not belong to them. The time that they have is conditioned by structural and never-ending chores. Women in many parts of Africa are daily reminded that they do not celebrate equal human rights with men. Their limited time reminds them that they are excluded from means of production; hence their financial agency is still not priorities even by political and economic decision-makers. The time that they have is an ongoing struggle. This is because patriarchal systems still prevail in many regions of the world, including Africa, and these have defined and perpetuated gender roles that allow men to control women's time and labour. In most African societies, women and girls are allocated critically important and time-consuming responsibilities, which overburden them with work in the reproduction, production, household and community spheres. We further argue that very few women have economically strived through agriculture while others are still part of economic emancipation. Kaka (2013: p. 79) opines that structural poverty also exists in the social, economic, and political sphere of the nation, and it is difficult to reduce the intensity of poverty no matter the general policy of economic stimulus or investment adopted. Women in the rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa are more prompt to structural poverty. Women are disproportionately infected with all kinds of poverty, making them the poorest in all continents of the world. Poor governance and corruption are other structural issues that have excluded women from the African economy. The given context depicts that women in Africa are miserable because their poverty is a man-made structural problem; hence embarking on feminized migration is their dream.

Data analysis further revealed that these women did not migrate to follow their husbands, but they migrated individually. We also discovered that feminized migration is linked to an established network. It became clear that most

foreign women chose Pietermaritzburg because they had relatives who migrated here to South Africa and were already in PMB. Familial ties, friendship ties and country ties were listed as an intersection of finding comfort in Pietermaritzburg. They came to know that South Africa is full of possibilities even though they knew that they had to dodge law enforcers. Still, they knew that street vending is an informal space to generate remittances that their families would celebrate. One participant said Pietermaritzburg is a relatively quiet town like Johannesburg and Durban, where it is difficult to find a trading spot. Pietermaritzburg has open street pavements and taxi ranks that allow us to display what we are selling. Instead of finding a new place which is hard to find, they decided to move in with them; besides, PMB is a busy city, and that is why they decided to sell at the market, they are a lot of people around here who buy fruits and vegetables from them.

Furthermore, data analysis further revealed that trading on the street has its own ups and down. Sometimes business is slow, participants attract customers by making specializes from the products that they sell. We also observed that these foreign women respect their workstations. They wake up early in the morning to clean the streets such that municipality officials are no longer cleaning those spaces. We were also saddened by some of their daily encounters. They were at times subjected to xenophobic attacks 1) they survived being harassed; 2) being stolen from by *amaphara* “known as drug addicts living and fending on the streets”; 3) they are accused of talking animal languages, but it was also interesting to note others had started speaking isiZulu which is a dominant language in Pietermaritzburg. Other than xenophobic attacks, they had to escape harsh 1) climate changes, 2) law enforcers because they are women illegal immigrants in Pietermaritzburg. They emphasised that law enforcers are harsh on them because they are women; when law enforcers confiscate their goods, foreign women are allowed to negotiate, which is not the case with male street vendors. This is an aspect of gender inequality which has been recorded by many scholars to be prevailing in Africa. Women are objectified and victimised harshly. These are patriarchal tendencies that inhibit women from accessing or celebrating equal privileges that men are claiming as their own. Data analysis also discovered that between 2019 and 2020 the Covid-19 hard lockdown and related ramifications compromised patterns of their street vending daily earnings; hence they infrequently sent remittances to their families. Data analysis also discovered that between 2019 and 2020 the Covid-19 hard lockdown and related ramifications compromised their patterns of their daily earnings; hence they infrequently sent remittances to their families. Data analysis also discovered that sending remittances is another challenge that they faced this is because 1) they don't have bank accounts in order to save their daily earnings because they are foreigners; 2) those that were able to bank their monies through their networks said they could not use the technology because of illiteracy levels.

This paper reveals that informal remitting corridors are means of sending

money home. Informal remitting corridors 1) sending money through a family relative or neighbour who will dodge border gates while advancing to their country of origin, but women expressed that this is risky mainly because if they get caught, police officers take the money. The second informal corridor is sending remittances through the post (as if you are writing a letter home, but this is risky too because sometimes envelopes don't reach their families). The third informal corridor of sending money is through a registered bus, but a fee is paid to the bus driver, but this is a safer way of sending money. Amid these challenges, this paper celebrates that generated remittances have played a meaningful role in responding to their family living standards and changing their families' socio-economic statuses. Remittances have afforded basic survival needs such as food, school fees, medical care and clothing, which have been celebrated by their children, nuclear and extended families. Many can now afford to buy sanitary towels for their girl children which means that the young girls no longer miss school because they now have their monthly supply of sanitary towels.

5. Discussions

Feminized migration patterns are becoming staple means of survival for women in Africa. It is proving to be a paradise dream for all women who want to escape the brutality of poverty which has their face in Africa. Street pavements are celebrated as informal trading corridors that have accepted and created economic resilience for women because that is where they can earn remittances. Remittances have improved the socioeconomic standards of their families. This migration pattern contributes to a state of financial contentment for most unemployed women in Africa. This means that African heads of state have not enacted inclusive economic policies that accommodate women in economic hubs as primary beneficiaries. While there are advancements that other developing countries have made, the number of economically struggling women proves that it is not yet the time to blow horns which will be celebrating the responsiveness of economic policies in Africa. *Al-Jundi et al. (2022)* state that street vending has become a common way of ensuring ends meet. This informal economic space has been a survival strategy for most men. This paper thus contributes that street vending should be listed as spaces of ensuring that no family goes to bed on an empty stomach and that it has created sustainable provision for children because, through remittances, their parents are able to meet their basic needs such as education, good health, warm clothes and food which continues to be a scarcity in Africa. Important to note that women are now trading with the hope of earning their own money.

This paper thus contributes the following:

Findings contribute street vending as a new dimension in feminized migration, which has not been the writing scope for many researchers in Africa. The paper illuminates the socio-economic agency that comes through street vending and remittances that have benefited foreign women. We thus opine that fem-

inized migration should be considered as a corridor that emancipates the economic agency of women in Africa through remittances. We further contribute by defining “feminized migration” as a mobility pattern which women in Africa rely on in order to escape all sorts of poverty. Secondly, we define remittances as financial earnings that help African female street vendors to have access to the economy, which is mostly in the hands of African men only. We assert that Feminized migration ignites the future of the voiceless and the less-resourced, which are women in Africa. It is through feminized migration and earned remittances that their financial agency is brightened. Feminized migration contributes towards their self-realization and self-actualization as women in Africa, as mothers, wives, members of society or as individuals. We also recognise that African women are capable to change the financial agony that limits their future aspirations through street vending and remittances. Their ability to trade as street vendors on the Pietermaritzburg and earn between R1050 and R2500 a day is an indication that they are informal business owners. We further celebrate that feminized migration eradicates poverty in most households through remittances. Remittances improve the socioeconomic index of most households in Africa and mostly put a smile on children who don’t deserve to suffer because of poverty. We also contribute that Pietermaritzburg streets, through street vending, should be recognized as an informal space that allows women to earn minimal income, gain economic agency, remit to their families in Africa, and improve the socio-economic index of their household. We recommend that heads of state in Africa and internationally should forge policies that maximize the safety of street vending women worldwide.

6. Conclusion

This paper concludes that while feminized migration is celebrated, African heads of state should be held accountable for (i) having caged only women in the cage of poverty and (ii) having conditioned women to seek economic agency on street corridors where they are targeted because they are migrants; they are women, they don’t have street vending licensing. We further conclude by stating that women understand the complexities of poverty more than men hence more anthropological research on remittances is still needed even during the era of pandemic times such Covid-19 where human mobility is regulated. Lastly, we urge African heads of state to do better because women should be placed at the centre of all economic policies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this pa-

per.

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