

United Nations  
Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)  
Consultative Meeting on  
“Migration and Mobility and how  
this movement affects Women”  
Malmö, Sweden  
2 to 4 December 2003

## **Mobility and Gender: Reflection on urban situation in East Africa**

### **Discussion Notes**

**Prepared by  
Winnie V. Mitullah\***

---

\* The views expressed in this paper, which has been reproduced as received, are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

**MOBILITY AND GENDER:  
REFLECTION ON URBAN SITUATION IN EAST AFRICA**

**Discussion Notes<sup>1</sup>**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Migration and mobility are important aspects of globalisation and have implication on local, regional and international development. Migration studies conducted during the 1960s and 1970s showed that men were likely to migrate compared to women. In some parts of Africa legislation made it difficult for women to migrate, and it was not until after independence that women began moving to towns. There are various reasons that contribute to women's movement from one location to the other. Traditionally, women moved to join family members, including relatives. This has since changed with a significant percentage of women moving on their own, either in search of economic opportunities or to take up economic opportunities. Todaro [1984] outlines four types of female migrants: married women migrating in search of employment; unmarried women migrating in search of employment; unmarried women migrating for marriage reasons, married women engaged in associational migration with no intention of employment.

All the above forms of migration are often not permanent for women and can be viewed either as migration or mobility depending on the period of stay. This puts women in a fluid situation that does not allow them to plan their life and exploit existing opportunities. The case is worse for women who join their families or relatives, at the families' determination. In most cases, decisions are made without consideration of woman's preference, and engagement. This type of movement largely contribute to women leaving school, training or economic engagement.

The inability to take into consideration women's preference is largely influenced by patriarchal perception of household and public domain. These perceptions are being eroded due to the changing social relations [Rapp 1987]. The application of gender analysis since the mid eighties has influenced patriarchal perception, especially within the urban areas. The rapid changes conditioned by the development of capitalism and related globalisation is transforming and re-structuring social life [Shivji 1986; Sanjek 1990]. The re-structuring is

---

<sup>1</sup> Discussion Notes by Winnie V. Mitullah, University of Nairobi, Institute for Development Studies, e-mail: [vymitullah@swiftkenya.com](mailto:vymitullah@swiftkenya.com). Notes Discussed at Expert Consultation on Migration and Mobility and How it Affects Women, Malmo, Sweden 2– 4 December 2003

captured in the multiple roles that women undertake irrespective of context. However, the global dynamics has not eliminated the stereo-type that women belong to the domestic domain. This perception contributes to women being overburdened especially during this era of HIV/AIDS, where patient care has become an added role for women.

Women have to be understood in the context of a changing environment. Women who move to urban areas face challenges of taking up new roles which are largely unfamiliar in rural context. In typical urban planning, the type of activities women engage in rural areas such as fetching water, food and fuel are assumed to be accessible. This is not true, many women migrants end up in informal settlements that lack basic services and opportunities. They struggle to purchase food and look for water and fuel. As opposed to rural areas where women are able to produce their own food, within the informal settlements they cannot even access pieces of land to undertake kitchen gardening [Mitullah 2002] in urban areas. Movement to urban areas changes the situation of women and the inherent gender relations, especially at the household level. There is need to understand this dynamic, although data on gender relations at the household level is scanty. The same applies to the linkages that women maintain beyond the household. This brief explores the situation of urban areas in East Africa highlighting the historical context, changes since independence, mobility of women, observance of human rights and makes proposals on areas research.

## **2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

East African countries share a colonial legacy that considered urban centres the domain of men, while women remained within the rural areas. This was based on colonial economy which made wage employment the preserve of men [Baker and Aina, 1995; Obbo 1980] and also restricted movement to the urban areas. The Vagrancy Act ensured that non employed individuals did not reside in urban areas. Colonial policy viewed African males as temporary urban dwellers, and did not allow them to move into the urban areas with their wives and families. Men were expected to visit their families in the rural areas. This stringent policy was also reflected in planning residential houses for African employees. The accommodation was a ten by ten feet room that was shared by two male workers. Little observes that in Zambia, women were kept in rural areas and their movement was controlled in order to bind them to the villages as hostages for the return of the absent men [Little 1993].

The colonial policies and nature of migration made women's migration be associated to that of their husbands, and hence the reference to them by some authors as 'associational migrants' [Olurode 1995]. However, irrespective of whether women's movement was accompanied by their partners or not, their presence in urban areas has largely been surrounded with controversy throughout Africa and in East Africa in particular [Obbo 1980].

Their migration was viewed by both urban authorities and migrant men as a problem. The colonial authorities viewed them as a nuisance to urban management [Mitullah 1997]; while the general attitude was that urban migration was bad for women because it corrupted their virtues, led to marital instability and eroded cultural norms. Related to this perception was the contention that prostitution was encouraged by women [Obbo 1980].

Associating women's migration with prostitution was not only a view held by African men in town and colonial authorities, but also ethnic based authorities. Some of these authorities had very retrogressive orders than the colonial governments. Little [1973] notes that in Zambia, the Cewa communities insisted that women passengers in lorries, unaccompanied by their husbands, should produce marriage certificates before getting out of the province. The mining companies also required documentary evidence of marriage before allocating housing to a man and a women in townships. In Nigeria, the Iwo chiefs opposed the move of a railway line passing through Iwo town because they feared that the train would take away their women [Olurode 1995].

The migration situation was worse for single women. The prevailing systems made it difficult for young women to move to and remain in towns. In the three East African states there were laws requiring the repatriation of all single women found 'loitering' in town. The inherent assumption was that women were prostitutes, an assumption that was not wholly representative. A significant percentage of women who moved to urban areas were involved in Micro and Small Enterprises that were not recognised by the colonial government. The lack of recognition of economic activities undertaken by women resulted in women being viewed as idlers and prostitutes. This perception began changing decades after independence, showing the societal reluctance to perceive women appropriately.

### **3. WOMEN IN URBAN AREAS**

Independence of respective East African states resulted in reduced enforcement of the Vagrancy Act. This in turn contributed to more women moving freely to towns to visit their spouses, relatives and to undertake various economic activities. This negates the linear contention of Little [1973] that 'men followed money and women followed men'. A number of women did not only follow men, but moved into urban areas to look for economic opportunities - relating with men, and eventual marriage in some cases was indeed secondary. Ouedraogo's [1995] work in Bukina Faso gives different categories of reasons for moving to urban areas. In the first category movement is determined by what the migrant heard about town life or what they see their friends from towns look like and what they bring home. Others move to towns to run away from problems at home, while others merely want privacy and freedom away from home.

Some homes or households are quite strict on women or girls, while others abuse women resulting in moving away. Cases are known where parents arrange to marry off their daughters to men who are much older and not of their choice. Other women move to break away from routine lifestyle, in order to come up with new strategies for survival; while others are under pressure from their families and relatives to move out and search for economic opportunities. Such women often end up as house-help [maids]. The unique aspect of women's movement from one location to another is the fact that where they are heading to can also immediately eject or abuse them. This is because women start from a disadvantage platform. Compared to men they have lower levels of education and are engaged in economic activities that generate minimal income.

Women's participation in labour force and economic activities has risen in many developing countries. This is largely driven by four factors: economic development and the ensuing shift of population from rural and agricultural sectors to urban activities, higher education levels expanding opportunities for women, and falling real incomes of households and rising poverty pushing women to labour force [Sethuraman 1998].

An examination of the East African region shows that there is significant movement of women. Apart from the women who join their spouses, the rest of the women are looking for economic opportunities, largely within the informal sector. Many of these women are engaged in street vending activities, a sector that lacks coverage in economic measurement in most countries and cities. Even the Local Authorities that collect revenue from the women street vendors do not maintain records of the numbers and contribution of the sector to the urban economy. This has contributed to inadequate planning of the sector due to lack of information [Mitullah 2003].

Vending has a special appeal for migrant women due to its flexibility. Women can combine street trade with other household duties, including taking care of children. Those that are not able to do this have to cope with separation from their families [Mitullah 2003]. A study conducted in South Africa revealed that 48 per cent of women traders in Johannesburg with children under six years do not live with their children. Other women trade with children, while others leave children with their siblings, neighbours and relatives. The South African study demonstrates the hardship women who move from their households to locations of economic activities face in taking care of children and engaging in economic activities [box 1].

Box 1: Emily Matole's working day in South Africa

'I live at Mitford, which is about 50 kilometres from Queenstown where I trade. I get up between four thirty and five in the morning. I warm water on the stove and wash three young ones. They are one, two and three years old. Once I have made and eaten breakfast and made up my bed I take them to a neighbour who looks after them. Then I go to the bus station at six forty. The bus to work takes over an hour and costs R.5.50 a day return or R 88 for two week ticket. I arrive in town at about eight o'clock and go straight to the Queenstown Fruiters. Buying my goods and going back to the stall takes an hour. I am at the trading site by about nine o'clock and I am trading by nine-thirty'.

Source: Lund, F. Nicholson, J. and Skinner, C. Street Trading, School of Development Studies, University of Natal

A Ugandan case notes that women have moved from being subsistence to commercial farmers to engaging in trade and informal employment. In most cases they vend when their husbands cannot sustain the family or supplement the husbands income; while for single mothers vending is the sole source of livelihood [Ahikire and Ampaire 2003].

#### **4. Women and Internal Mobility**

In indigenous African communities, women were engaged in household activities and other activities close to the household. This allowed women to take care of the household as men went hunting and linking the household with resources that could not be easily accessible. This resulted in a clear division of labour, which most members of the household could identify with. This situation has changed and the division of labour is blurred.

The prevailing economic situation coupled with movement away from local context has made the household an important production unit. For women productive activities are either in the factory, away from home, within the household or its neighbourhood. Irrespective of where the work place is located, members of households whether male or female have to take active role in the mobilisation and management of resources than they did before.

The dynamics of households requires an understanding of how households are constituted, the division of labour within them, decision making patterns and how gender impacts on these variables. In cases where women do not have their economic engagement within or around the home, the issue of mobility arises. Such women have to move on a daily basis

from their residential areas to places of economic engagement.

Taking into consideration women's multiple roles, mobility has an adverse effect on the household. Even though both women and men are involved in the procurement of food in urban areas, overall it is women who shoulder the greatest responsibility of providing food. Men's food purchases have been noted to have higher value but they are seldom involved in daily purchases. The greatest responsibility of men is to provide money whereas the burden of physical process of procurement fall more heavily on women [Mascarenhas 1999]. Thus women spend more time than men on obtaining food for the household.

Moving from residential area to place of work is more intense when women do not make enough income to cover transportation from home to place of work. This results in walking long distance, thereby spending useful time for handling household chores, including taking care of children in walking. Planning of most African cities does not integrate economic activities in residential areas. In isolated cases this is done for planned settlements, while it is totally not done for the informal settlements.

A large majority of women in East Africa work as house-help within the middle and high income areas of cities, or are engaged in Micro and Small Enterprises. Street vending contributes significantly to urban and national economy of African countries. Women dominate the sector. In Kenya, street vending falls within the Micro and Small Enterprises which provides employment and income to 70 per cent of Kenya's population, especially in urban areas. Estimates show that in the year 2002 alone, the Micro and Small Enterprises employed about 5,086,400 people from 4,624,400 in 2000. Those engaged in Micro and Small Enterprises, be they owners of business or employees have no social security and rely on social networks for any eventuality that they are not able to handle.

In the case of house-help most employers do not provide housing. In cases where housing is provided, there are restrictions on numbers within the household. It is often specified that no child, husband or any relations can be accommodated within the compound. This leaves the option of finding accommodation elsewhere, often far from the work place. Women who find themselves in such situation have to cope with a number of pressures. The main one being how to take care of the children, especially in the morning and at the same time get to work in time. Often the children are compromised, they are left to care for themselves as the mother goes to work for income that can hardly reproduce the family.

Most low income earners, including women live in informal settlements which do not have basic facilities. The situation of single women with children, grand children and daughter in law is worse. In a sample of 20 in-depth study of female headed households living within

informal settlements, eight were found taking care of second generation families. Those who did not have grand children had grown up children [young adults] who were living under their care because they were not independent. In the sample, six out of twenty had made alternative sleeping arrangements for their teenage and grown up children [Ngau and Mitullah 1997].

The situation of women migrants in urban areas shows that while traditional values on which gender roles were based are being eroded, the new economic conditions are marginalizing women even more. They are engaged in economic activities with least returns, and have to combine business with other household roles. They have to cope with urban strategies based on monetary economy of looking for food and accessing services. This is a challenging task for women who do not have secure sources of employment and income.

## **5. Mobility and Human Rights**

Women who are constantly on the move are likely to be abused, especially in urban areas. Poor urban women workers begin their day very early in the morning and finish work late in the night. For those whose activities are located outside the household and neighbourhood, this implies travelling in dark streets, highways and lanes. These areas expose women to potential indecent assault, sexual harassment and rape.

Women work without any social security because most of the economic activities they undertake fall within the informal sector. This sector is not protected. In cases where they are employed they are subjected to poor conditions of work and abuse. For example house-helpers who stay in have no freedom of association, and have limitless unspecified working hours. They have no leave and taking leave often means losing the employment. Some employers provide leave as a favour, especially in cases where the employee has worked well for several years. The situation is not different for those employed in other informal economic activities. Although the situation of women who work in the formal sector is better, they also experience different forms of gender violence, in particular sexual harassment.

## **6. RESEARCH AREAS**

Since the 1985 Women' conference in Nairobi there has been focus on gender issues, especially the situation of women in urban development. Prior to this, urban research had been biased in choice of research issues and formulation of research questions. Gender research on Urbanization, Planning, Housing and Everyday life is concerned with the conditions of women migrants in urban areas. As highlighted in this discussion movement from rural to urban, urban to urban or one location in an urban setting to the other exposes



women to a new environment with unique characteristics. In the new environment women do not only have to cope with establishing new social networks, but also finding appropriate housing, and related services. In cases where the movement is not directed by availability of employment opportunity, women have to rely on relatives and friends.

In the process of movement and temporary settlement it is relevant for policy makers, planners and administrators to understand the prevailing dynamics. This can be done through documentation and research, although the issue of mobility is not included in most census templates. Respective countries should include variables related to mobility in census data base. Some of the important issues worth investigating in the movement process include the status of children, marriage, effect of larger family, decision making patterns and factors influencing the patterns, accommodation, and access to land and services.

There is need to document issues that arise in the process of mobility. The key ones, for example the different points of movement in given specified period should be included in census data. Other relevant research issues include:

- Status of children
- Status of marriage
- Household[s] composition
- Effect on/of larger family
- Linkages maintained and their effect
- Decision making patterns at each point
- Factors influencing decision making patterns
- Access to land, housing and services
- Working conditions and terms of service
- Integration of mobility factors in urban policy making, planning and management

## REFERENCES

Ahikire J. and Ampaire, C. 2003. Vending in the City: A Gendered Perspective of Policy, Conditions, and Organisational Capacity of Vendors in Kampala, Uganda. Nairobi: Institute for Development Studies, WIEGO Output

Mitullah, W.V. 2002. 'Women and Urban Development: The Unrecognised Contribution' in Monograph of Papers Presented at a Strategic Planning Workshop on Women Basic Education, Community Health and Sustainable Development. Nairobi: University of Nairobi.

Mitullah, W.V. and Ngau, M. 1997. 'In-depth Studies of Female Headed Households in Nairobi, Kibera', a Contribution to UNIFEM/UNDP/UNCHS Programme to Improve the Livelihoods of Female Headed Households Living in Informal Settlements in Nairobi. Nairobi: UNIFEM

Mitullah, W.V. 2003. 'Street Vending in African Cities: A Synthesis of Empirical Findings from Kenya, Cote D'Ivoire, Ghana, Zimbabwe and South Africa'. Washington, the World Bank – Contribution to the Fourth-coming World Development Report on Investment Climate and Informal Enterprises

Obbo, C. 1976. 'Dominant Male Ideology and Female Options: Three East African Case Studies' in *Africa*, 46, 4: 317 – 388

Olurode, Lai. 'Women, Social Change and Perception of Gender Roles', in Olurode, L. [ed] *Women and Social Change in Nigeria*. Lagos: Unity Publishers

Sanjek, R. 1990. Urban Anthropology in the 1980s: 'A World View'. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19: 151 – 86

Sethuraman, S.V. 1998. 'Gender, Informality and Poverty: A Global Review'. Geneva: ILO

Shivji, I. 1986. *Law, State and Working class in Tanzania*. London: James Curry

Todaró, M.P and Thadani, Veena N. 1984. 'Female Migration: A Conceptual Framework' in Fawcett, J, Siew-Ean khoo and Smith Peter [eds] *Women in the Cities of Asia: Migration and Urban Adaptation*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.