

Afro-Feminism and 21st Century Migration Process: Enabling Women's Rights and Gender Equality Advancement in Kenya


Bisharo Ali Hussein*

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Introduction

According to UN Women (2020), women account for about 50 % of the world's migrants. Many relocate in search of better employment and educational opportunities for themselves and their families. Other push-pull variables include internal conflicts, natural catastrophes, gender-based violence, and family reunification. Over the last decade, there has been a “feminization of migration”, which has forced host countries and migration/development agencies to develop initiatives “focused on women's empowerment.”

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reports in *East Africa Gender Equality & Female Empowerment* (USAID, 2020) that despite substantial improvements in the economy and an increase in women's representation in leadership positions in the region, significant gender disparities persist. As a result, there are persistent structural, financial, legal, educational and cultural challenges for women, even as they gain leadership positions. As women migrate to different cultural spaces through forced or voluntary migration, they begin to disrupt prevalent cultural power dynamics, shift the representation of women, and encounter gender-inclusive policy development and implementation promoting equality and women's empowerment. However, migration is still a double-edged sword, as it can also reinforce gender inequality and discrimination due to the double prejudice women experience both as migrants and as women. For generations, women have consistently opposed patriarchal dominance, discriminatory, and exclusionary in pursuit of gender equality, advocating for equal participation in all spheres of social, economic, and political life in African societies throughout social and political movements (Heinrich-Boll-Stiftung, 2021). The genesis of Afro-feminism can be found in the grassroots, development-oriented postcolonial feminist movement in Africa and the female empowerment campaigns that arose after nation-states in Africa gained independence. In the 21st century, Afro-feminism has been popularized by African feminists, politicians, activists and artists, as well as through literature, such as Chimamanda Ngozi's *We Should All Be Feminists*.

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* International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Netherlands and Institute Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI), Spain. M.A Public Policy (Political Economy and Development). Nairobi, Kenya.

Scholars such as Amina Mama, Ayesha Imam, and Fatou Sow have contributed through gender studies and social sciences, while social media platforms has amplified its reach through hashtags, blogs, and podcasts focusing on women's empowerment. Their work also targeted the increased representation of women in leadership and decision-making spaces and focused on women's empowerment through mainstream and social media platforms. In Kenya, for example, the #WeAre52 social media campaign during the 2017 general elections period advocated for the implementation of the two-thirds gender rule in all governing bodies (Nyabola, 2018).

According to Adawo *et al.* (2011), Kenyan women were organized in *mumikanda* (work parties) and various social and welfare groups (*ngwatio*) among the Kikuyu-speaking communities (*mwethya*) and among the Kamba-speaking communities. The 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women was a turning point for the global agenda on equality and the growth of feminist organization movements, such as Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS) and the Coalition against Violence against Women-Kenya (COVAW-K) in the late 20th century, contributing to the spread of Afro-feminism in Kenya. Besides, the Green Belt Movement, founded by Professor Wangari Maathai, played an important role in improving women's livelihoods by expanding their access to cooking fuels and clean water, while also helping to establish a movement encouraging women to plant trees (Adawo *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, according to Oudenhuijsen (2021), there has been a rise in feminist scholarship, including gender studies and research, as well as feminist studies, in the 21st century. Afro-feminism serves as a lens that allows the researcher to determine whether such policies and initiatives empower or hinder women. Therefore, through a cross-disciplinary approach integrating Afro-Feminism, migration analysis, and a case study on economic and labour-related migration factors in Kenya, this study examines how the 21st-century migration in East Africa advances women's empowerment and gender equality.

Afro-Feminism, Migration and Gender Equality in Kenya

The migration patterns in Kenya and East Africa are constantly changing in line to shifting demands and underlying drivers of migration. According to the International Organization of Migration (IOM, 2022), Kenya had 1.1 million international migrants, indicating a high emigration rate. In addition, between 2010 and 2019, women and girls represented an average of 45.6 % of international migrants in the region (EAC Secretariat, 2022). In 2019, females represented 46.1 % of international migrants in the East African Community (EAC), a slight increase from around 44.5 % in 2017 and 2018. Economic factors pushing women to migrate include income inequality, lack of employment, and the differences in the cost of living between their home and host countries. The report *Female Face of Migration* by Caritas International (2012) notes that "widespread poverty... and high male unemployment pushes women to take on the responsibility of providing family income."

Additionally, gender inequality is both a push and pull factor for women's migration. Although domestic gender discrimination can discourage female emigration due to limited opportunities and weak decision-making abilities, making it more difficult for them to leave the country, women are drawn to countries with less gender bias. Recognizing these underlying factors is essential for understanding the possibilities and limitations women experience when they travel within and beyond Kenya. Migration is a gendered issue, affecting women and men differently. This emphasizes how Afro-feminism can advance gender equality caused by women's migration.

One of the main gendered aspects of migration under Afro-feminism is the widespread feminization of migration in recent years. According to Diop & D'Aloisio (2010), the increasing demand for services such as domestic work, child and elderly care, and other low-paying caregiving occupations that women typically dominate has contributed to this trend. According to the UN (n.d.), about 13 % of all migrant women end up as domestic workers. This demand for migrant women workers, particularly in service industries, is rooted in the globalized sexual division of labour. Although migrant women significantly increase economic diversity, boost labour productivity, and contribute to other positive development outcomes in their host countries, they continue to face persistent and overlapping forms of discrimination that negatively impact their safety and well-being. However, the feminization of migration is not entirely negative. According to Braun (2020), it has influenced the rise of development initiatives focused on “women’s empowerment.”

Moreover, young women and adolescent girls are Kenya’s most vulnerable populations (USAID, 2022). They are more susceptible to household and community destitution, exacerbated by harmful cultural beliefs and gender-based violence. The absence of ownership rights to land and other resources constrains women’s economic participation, specifically as market participants and producers (USAID, 2022). The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2023) indicates that only 5 % of women claim to be sole proprietors of a house, whereas 28 % own a residence with their spouse or another individual. About 73 % of women who own a home do not possess a title deed or any other government-recognized document bearing their name, and only 9 % of female homeowners have such documentation. The limited mobility and access to market resources by women migrants, in addition to their inability to profit from and contribute to productive activities, are consequences of their unpaid and unequal caregiving.

Notwithstanding the prospect of better economic opportunities, what happens in migrant countries and at each stage of the migration process is entirely different. This is especially true given the severe short- and long-term effects of the prevalent gap in safe and regular migration channels, as well as the lack of gender-sensitive migration policies and regulations. Restrictive administrative and regulatory policies in host nations, along with unfavourable border control measures, further exacerbate these challenges. The host country’s attitudes towards migrants, gender roles, and the legal status of women migrants influence their migration experiences. The IOM (2022a) revealed that in Kenya, migrant women face severe challenges, including “trafficking, (sexual, verbal, physical) abuse (and social isolation), inequality, and denial of their human, economic, labour and social rights”. Media investigations have continually highlighted the horrendous experiences of Kenyan women migrant workers who migrate to the Middle East to seek employment. Maraoun (2022) asserts that African migrant women are more likely to experience sexual violence, discrimination and human trafficking due to restrictive border control legislation, immigration and refugee regulations, patriarchal national and international laws, and a lack of secure shelter, sexual and reproductive health services, and job stability. The IOM report *A Region on the Move 2021: East and Horn of Africa* (IOM, 2022) shows that Kenya, alongside Uganda and Ethiopia, is among the countries with the highest number of trafficked individuals. The report further reveals that women and girls account for 78 % of all victims of human trafficking.

The report *Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment* by UN Women (n.d.) shows that although most migrant women are well-educated and skilled workers, they have difficulties navigating foreign employment markets. Their chances of finding

work may be adversely affected by employment limitations, the prevalent de-skilling in gender-based job markets, often leading to brain drain as highly educated and skilled women end up in low-skill caregiving jobs, and entrenched misconceptions about migrant women in the countries of destination. Migrant women often find employment in low-skilled, hazardous, informal, and unregulated professions that are characterized by low pay, unfavourable working conditions, and minimal social and labour benefits, such as domestic work, where they also face a risk of gender-based violence (both physical and sexual). However, labour migration, especially for high-skilled workers, contributes significantly to Kenya's economic development due to the significant contribution of remittances.

As a result of the gender inequalities in access to dignified work, there is a persistent gender wage gap and gender gap in social benefits obtained through formal employment, such as pensions, unemployment settlements, or maternity benefits. Moreover, the report *Women at Work: Trends 2016* (ILO, 2016) asserts that the demand for migrant women's labour has increased because of policies limiting the access of social protection in higher-income nations, especially in employment opportunities in the care industry that frequently lack access to social protection and labour rights. Such a lack of social protection impedes women's access to better and more lucrative employment opportunities, fuelling the gender-income inequality cycle.

Besides that, the ILO (2016) recommends that governments spend more on basic infrastructure, ensure that caregiving is valued with a gender-sensitive approach, and support the creation of respectable and well-paying jobs in the care sector. Kenya and other East African member states should also harmonize their labour migration laws. Standardized labour migration laws across the region would promote local migration, boosting economic development through to the exchange and export of skills within the region (IOM, 2022a). By aligning these laws, governments can safeguard migrant workers and stop unfair labour practices, such as long working hours, unlawful seizing of passports and other identification documents, imprisonment, withheld remunerations, and physical or sexual abuse more effectively.

Climate Change

A study conducted by Deane *et al.* (2022) predicts a substantial increase in the number of internally displaced individuals worldwide if emissions are not reduced quickly. Recent World Bank reports identify Sub-Saharan Africa as the most likely to be impacted of the six regions modelled with projections estimating between 29 and 86 million internal climate migrants by 2050. According to Deane *et al.* (2022), this totals 10.1 million. One in ten million of these migrants might be forced to relocate within East Africa. Migration to here is frequently prompted by drought in already fragile dryland regions. Such a region is Turkana, which is arid and remote, where approximately 60% of its inhabitants are pastoralists earning a living through livestock. Furthermore, in East Africa, women are disproportionately impacted by climate change-related issues such as flooding, further fuelling migration, as they are frequently burdened with additional responsibilities. Given how closely connected women are to the environment (for example, through the chores of fetching water, fetching firewood, and tilling land), compounding climate-related issues intensify underlying vulnerabilities, endangering their well-being and livelihood. Rural women are also involved in agriculture and are in charge of domestic duties. Rural East African women still find it difficult to acquire resources or participate in decision-making processes, notwithstanding women empowerment reforms across the region

(Abebe, 2014). The firmly entrenched patriarchal norms and beliefs prevent women and girls from having equal access to, utilization of, and control over essential resources. They are frequently excluded from crucial decision-making forums and institutions that govern these forums. Women in East Africa are susceptible to the effects of climate-related disasters due to unequal cultural and social standards, imbalanced power relations, and the feminization of poverty, all of which leads to even more hardships (Abebe, 2014).

According to Clark (2023), climate change effects such as drought, floods, and famine have been linked to increased, particularly among young and impoverished women. Drought and other disasters brought on by climate change could exacerbate gender inequalities in those who prevail, leaving them more susceptible to gender-based violence (GBV) (Soliman *et al.*, 2022; Desai & Mandal, 2021). As a result, this exacerbates gender inequalities making women more susceptible to sexual trafficking and GBV, including child marriage and female genital mutilation, among other forms of GBV and sexual gender-based violence (SGBV). Gender-based violence is a multi-dimensional issue, interacting with other types of inequalities and biases. For this reason, Afro-feminism opposes patriarchal systems and norms that perpetuate these inequalities and GBV while concurrently promoting cultural diversity in Africa.

Compared to men, women are less able to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change. This lessened capacity for adaptation influences migration patterns along gender lines. The current patriarchal structures and norms, particularly in rural and marginalized communities in the region, justify the marginalization and subjugation of women in all spheres of life. For instance, Leal Filho *et al.* (2022) found that the motivation of migrants to new locations could be attributed to the risks attached to their current environment. The most vulnerable groups to climate-induced migration include low-income (60%), ethnic minorities (48%), women (46%), the elderly (33%), and youth (10%).

New Opportunities for Migrant Women and Afro-Feminism

The green transition - Whilst climate change impacts have significantly contributed to women's migration, global responses to climate change have also presented opportunities for migrant women. For example, the transition to green energy and green jobs has increased the demand for new skills. Afro-feminism can play a role in promoting development initiatives focused on skills and technology transfer, enabling women to take up new jobs created in the "green" transition.

Climate Finance - Financial services are being structured to respond to climate change and to prepare communities for green jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities. In the context of Afro-feminism, this is an emerging opportunity for both migrant women and those who choose to remain in their communities.

Diaspora remittances - With the influence of Afro-feminism, the diaspora remittances of migrant women provide an opportunity to build resilience among those women who chose not to migrate. Empowering women with the ability to decide whether to stay or move plays a crucial role in shaping their futures. Some programs, such as the International matching grants program in Somalia, encourage diaspora contributions by multiplying their impact through additional funding.

Peace and security - Women are a core part of the progress of the peace and security agenda. As long as gendered power inequalities, patriarchal social structures, biases,

violence and discrimination hold back our societies, peace will remain elusive (UN, 2023). Women also bear the brunt of conflict; hence, it is vital for women to get a seat at the peacebuilding table. Afro-feminism can be linked to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) to address peace and security. SDG 5 identifies gender equality as “a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous world”.

Conclusion

The intricate socioeconomic and political issues that Kenya and East Africa are dealing have an impact in migration to and from the region. Economic challenges are among the main factor of women’s migration, whether emigrating from Kenya or immigrating into the country. Generally, migration is frequently viewed as a solution to local inequality and underdevelopment, as in the case of Ugandan women immigrating to Kenya. However, perspectives that exclusively equate development to economic improvement frequently overlook migrant workers’ human rights concerns, which are crucial in development processes. Migrant women who find employment as domestic workers are often abused and exploited by their employers and recruitment agencies. Despite the contributions of migrant women to their host countries, they lack appropriate protection, policies safeguarding them from unsafe migration channels, and gender-sensitive migration policies and regulations.

By examining such gender-specific migration trends, Afro-feminism contributes to knowledge expansion and public awareness of the unique needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities of migrant women. Additionally, Afro-feminism explores ways of addressing the gender-specific obstacles and opportunities women face while migrating, especially the feminization of migration, restrictive cross-border measures and policies limiting their access to social protection. Therefore, it provides essential data about how migration processes influence women’s lives in Kenya and East Africa. Furthermore, Afro-feminism underlines the agency of women (or the lack of it) in their decision to migrate, which is often driven by the desire of financial independence or to escape oppressive, violent gender norms. Furthermore, it enables scholars to understand how the experiences of migrant women affect local gender roles, interactions, power structure and dynamics. Therefore, to achieve gender equality in Kenya and East Africa, efforts to defend women’s rights during migration must consider the unique challenges caused by gender stereotypes, discrimination and traditional norms in the region.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that although the plurality of African women’s migration experiences and journeys share common gender struggles across the continent, the idea of a universal sisterhood is unrealistic.

The experiences of African women vary due to their cultural, economic, political and religious diversity. As a result, what feminism, equality, and freedom look like, also varies for different women, leading to different interpretations of feminism and equality. These factors shape how women view themselves in terms of power and strength.

The ideology of Afro-feminism can help in creating new opportunities for migrant women in an ever-changing global landscape (Mutiso, 2023). Some examples of such opportunities, are the changes in international business markets, including the emergence of new jobs in response to climate change. Climate finance and women’s diaspora remittances also present emerging opportunities for migrant women and

women who choose not to move. The connection between Afro-feminism and SDG 5 can be tapped to advance the role of women in the global peace and security agenda.

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Acronyms

COVAW-K - Coalition against Violence against Women-Kenya.

GBV - Gender-based violence.

GROOTS - Kenya: Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood.

ILO - International Labour Organization.

IOM - International Organization for Migration.

KNBS - Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.

SDG - Sustainable Development Goal.

SGBV - Sexual and gender-based violence.

UN - United Nations.

USAID - United States Agency for International Development.



Ilustração 01 - The author with migrant women from Kapenguria, West Pokot County- Kenya during Project Field Evaluation Assessment. Photo: Kjartan Due Nielsen. June 2021.

