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Gendered labour migration in South Africa: A capability approach lens

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Introduction

The progression and variety of current international migration streams reveal clearly that migration can no longer be divorced from population and development policy agendas (Hugo, 2005). Although migration has always been part of societies, globalisation has intensified this phenomenon particularly in the twenty-first century where there are instabilities in most countries, particularly in the global South. Together with globalisation, migration is shaping the pace of modern-day developmental issues. The movement of people across continental, regional and national boundaries is becoming a daily occurrence, and in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) especially the artificiality of the boundaries is being tested. Brown (2008) predicted a tenfold increase in the current number of international migrants and refugees by 2050. The Human Development Report (HDR, 2009) noted that the probability of migration increases for those with links to people already abroad was very high. Sometimes a culture of migration emerged in which international migration was associated with personal, social and material success, while staying home indicated failure. According to De Bruijn, Foeken and Van Dijk (2001), Africa has been a continent of people on the move with many individuals migrating within the continent for labour purposes.

In relation to women and migration, earlier literature on migration (for example, in the 1960s and 1970s) largely excluded the movement of women (Saggar, Somerville, Ford & Sobolewska, 2012). According to Boyd and Grieco
(2003), in the past migration generally referred to the migration of men, sometimes with “their families” referring to their wives and children, making the migration of women almost invisible. This assumption, of seeing the place of women to be the home, gradually changed as migration emancipated women from their gendered roles and responsibilities (Mkwananzi, 2019). It was only in the 1980s that the literature on migration became more visibly gendered (Stølen, 1991). For a long time, women have been migrating as single and married (Martin, 2004), uneducated and educated entities, dependently and independently, in search of better livelihoods in other countries. While female migration behaviour is no different from that of migrating men, it is influenced by the gendered nature of life. Some would even argue that coping and adaptation are dependent on the gender dynamics of the migration process (Piper, 2007). Boyd (2006) noted that migration is not gender-blind nor gender-neutral, but gender-sensitive. The socialisation and often patriarchal nature of migrants’ countries of origin often create challenges for them to cope and adapt in the host country. According to a United Nations (UN) survey in 2006, unjust legislation and beliefs made it difficult for women to migrate. These laws and especially beliefs included those that denied women rights to be accompanied by their spouses and children. Women were subjected to pregnancy tests before being permitted to move and also could not consent to anything without their guardians who, in some cases, were the husbands (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2006). Such patriarchal arrangements may also be a hindrance to women’s coping and adaptation, as men may not be willing to join their wives as dependents in host countries. According to Jolly, Reeves and Piper (2005), migration brings a window of opportunity for women to better their lives and break the glass ceiling imposed by the gendered nature of the society. Migration can also empower women economically and increase their independence, improve their self-esteem and their general well-being (Raimundo, 2009). The fact is that even specific forms of forced migration of women, for example, migration resulting from conflict, can lead to modifications in existing gender roles and duties to women’s benefit (Wells et al., 2013). Conversely, migration can also embed traditional roles and disparities and expose women to new vulnerabilities as the result of precarious legal status, exclusion and segregation (Adepoju, 2006).

In terms of regional migration, migration to South Africa from surrounding countries and other countries within sub-Saharan Africa has been steadily growing over the years. For example, the 2014 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) planning figures show that the total number of asylum-
seeker applications in South Africa was estimated to be 350,000 in December 2014 compared to 300,600 in December 2013. This may be attributed to South Africa’s economic stability and often flexible migrant and refugee self-settling policy, allowing migrants to participate in economic activities to sustain their livelihoods. Within this economic migration there has been limited research on its gendered nature and what this may mean for human development and the direction of gender discourse.

Levels of resilience in migration contexts vary from woman to woman due to their demographic, socio-economic characteristics, as well as their short- and long-term aspirations (Ncube, 2017; Mkwananzi, 2019). The adversity factors due to the gendered nature of migration can also be taken as a disempowering experience, which can result in a particular physical or social vulnerability for individual migrant women. For instance, factors such as educational level (Berry & Sam, 2006), language aptitude (Beiser & Hou, 2001) and host country residence status (Bollini & Siem, 1995) can be taken as significant contributing factors for women migrants’ positive adjustment, while the lack thereof is a characteristic of women who do not adapt well to the host environment. It is yet to be seen how these negative factors are converted into what is valued by women migrants in host communities to enhance their resilience and their ability to cope and adapt.

This chapter’s contribution is therefore grounded on the view that there is a significant number of women migrating globally; it is timely as discourses on gender equality are central to most development-focused debates and agenda. Grounded within the human development-informed capability approach (CA), we highlight how migration has allowed women to be agentic and interrupt ascribed traditional gendered roles and stereotypes. The CA allows us to understand how gender is reconstructing traditional structures that saw women as passive in development associated with labour migration. It does so by focusing on women’s agency in pursuing what they deem valuable in their lives and the lives of those around them. We return to this later in the chapter. We further argue that modern-day human and economic development encompasses both males and females and require unified efforts for individuals to live the lives they value. We conclude by providing an assessment of what gendered migration may mean, contribute and challenge in relation to gender, the labour market and the human-development agendas. We draw on capability aspects of opportunities, agency and conversion factors to make an analysis of how migrant women manoeuvre in a foreign land.
The landscape of gender and migration

Migration is not gender-neutral, and the experience of migration is unquestionably gendered (Caritas Internationalis, 2004; Piper, 2007). In the last century and currently, migration has manifested itself in the following engendered forms from sub-Saharan Africa to South Africa in particular:

- Men and women migrate independently
- Migrants can be family accompanied
- Migrants have become permanent residents thanks to the post-apartheid policies
- Migrants are offered permanent jobs because of their skills (Adepoju, 2006)

In the 1980s very little was done to raise the barometer on women’s migration except to emphasise the privileges women enjoyed as accompanying spouses; these allowed women to break away from the traditional gender roles in host countries (Ncube, 2017). This brings to the fore the misconception about the gender paradigm that highlights sexual differences and the societal expectations of men to be breadwinners (Haferkamp & Smelser, 1992). Women migrate for different economic reasons. Some women migrate as primary caregivers from single-parent homes, while other women migrate alone to gain personal autonomy and escape the traditional gender roles in their countries of origin. Other women follow their husbands to reunite as a family (Llácer, 2007; Di Belgiojoso & Terzera, 2018). Economic and social upheavals can drive women to migrate; for instance, educated women who experience discrimination in the home countries’ work environment migrate to find better jobs in line with their education and skills (Njogu & Orchardson-Mazrui, 2008). Scrutiny by communities and masculine traditions can, however, deny women opportunities and freedom in the home country. Hence, women may decide to migrate to claim their deserved opportunities in host countries where social systems are non-prescriptive (Eisenstadt, 2002). Some women will migrate to escape abusive marriages, domestic violence and desire for equal opportunities with men (Dako-Gyeke, 2013). Socio-economic inequalities in home countries, such as discernment against particular groups of women like single mothers, single women and widows, lead women to migrate to new locations to start a new life without the usual community judging them based on their gender identities (Caritas Internationalis, 2004; Ncube, 2017). The other notable dynamic that
has led women to migrate is the issue of genital mutilation that is still actively practised in some countries. For instance, according to the Refugee Studies Centre (2015), in the first nine months of 2014 more than 25,000 women and girls from female genital mutilation-practising countries sought asylum in the European Union, of whom an estimated 71 per cent had already undergone female genital mutilation.

The gender-segregated job markets in some host countries influence women migrants’ employment opportunities, earnings and threats of exploitation (Boyd, 2006). Gender is another aspect that enhances the integration of migrants in host countries. Migrant men and women integrate differently in host countries. While migration entails economic betterment for the individual concerned (both men and women), getting a job in the host country, earning a livelihood that can sustain one, may subject women to gender dynamics together with ethnic and racial discrimination in the host country; hence migrant women are triple-disadvantaged in the host country (Piper, 2006; Liebig & Tronstad, 2018). The triple disadvantages are being foreign, being a woman and (sometimes) being a woman of colour. It has been proved that women are more confident of their culture of origin and take more time to adjust to the host culture than men (Ting-Toomey, 1981; Ghaffarian, 1987; Harris & Verven, 1996).

In relation to South Africa there are vast amounts of literature documenting labour migration into the country (see Landau 2005; Trimikliniotis, Gordon & Zondo, 2009; De Haas, 2008). Various structural determinants of migration set the human mobility to South Africa in motion. For instance, the end of apartheid, the civil and ethnic wars, disasters and famines in Africa facilitated the migration of people to South Africa (Trimikliniotis et al., 2009). The historical bilateral relationships between South Africa and its neighbouring countries to share labour and provide employment to the populations had also become a window of opportunity for migrants to migrate to South Africa en masse and South Africa became a preferred destination (Crush & James, 1995). For example, since the late 1890s the mining industry had been recruiting heavily from countries within the region (Trimikliniotis et al., 2009; Wentzel & Tlabela, 2006) while, during the 1990s, some farmers relied on seasonal migrant labour (Ulicki & Crush, 2010). While the historical trends of migration were in male-dominated fields, there has been a significant increase in women’s migration, particularly owing to the bilateral agreements allowing many women to take on domestic work in the country. Yet, within this literature very little attention has been paid to how this gendered nature of labour migration impacts on human development.
Capability approach (CA) and migration

Over the years, the impact of migration has been measured based on remittances, implying that migration’s impact should be seen in economic terms. Arguably, a narrowed focus on migration has led some researchers to bemoan the absence of a comprehensive approach (for example, De Haas, 2008) that encompasses diverse aspects of development. While we do not disregard the impact of migration on the economy, our view is that the contribution of migration to development goes beyond economic measures, to focusing on individual wellbeing (see Mkwananzi, 2019). The human development-informed capability approach allows for addressing the complex and diverse nature of migration, cutting across political, economic, cultural and social spheres. Within these spheres, aspects such as capabilities and functionings, wellbeing, conversion factors, agency, as well as adaptive preferences become key assessment areas. Individual capabilities influence what each migrant may be capable of being and doing (Dubois & Trani, 2009) and these opportunities can be assessed by focusing on the functionings in existence. It is these individual functionings that provide a window into achieved wellbeing (Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015). Mkwananzi (2017) reiterates this notion by highlighting that, for assessment of the wellbeing of migrants, it would be important to look at the opportunities (capabilities) that migrants have to achieve what they value being and doing and the kind of life that they are living. However, before one can start assessing the wellbeing of migrants it is essential to consider the processes that influence the conversion of available opportunities, capabilities and resources into the desired functionings. These conversion factors may not be the same for all migrants as a result of personal and structural influences, one of these influences being gender. For example, gender socialisation may on its own be a hindrance to what women may or may not be able to do, whether they are able to migrate or not, and the role that they play within the family as a result of migration. Within asking questions of how migrants are faring in bringing about what they value, Sen (1999) highlights the importance of agency – the freedom to bring about one’s valued achievements. In situations where agency may be low, individuals may adapt their preferences which, according to Sen (1985), results from negative circumstances and hardships that limit individual freedom, leading to acceptance of one’s situation.
A capabilities viewpoint on gendered labour migration

A number of studies have used the CA to look at gender (see Unterhalter, 2007; Nussbaum, 2011; Loots & Walker, 2015; Cin, 2018) as well as migration (Gasper & Troung, 2010; Biggeri & Libanora, 2011; Mkwananzi, 2019). However, there have been very few studies that looked at gendered migration from the CA viewpoint. Using the CA to establish a basis for the assessment and analysis of migrant women, we advocate for the expansion of opportunities among women through education and economic empowerment, which may be instrumentally important for future prospects of countries (Loots & Walker, 2016). According to Sen (1999), the framework is concerned with the opportunities individuals have to be and do what they have reason to value. As Gasper & Troung, (2010) note, the significance of the CA in transnational accounts is that the approach emphasises multidimensional evaluation, taking into account the social (culture, norms, roles, expectations, customs) and political spaces (policies, markets) in which these women live and work. As a result, there is a link between women, labour migration and development, and this connection could offer a potential win-win scenario in which the sending country benefits from remittances that are repatriated, while the host country gains the skills and labour of these women.

We draw on three of the CA concepts; capabilities (opportunities), agency (for example, the action taken by women to survive in a foreign land) and conversion factors (personal, environmental and social conditions of each individual’s existence). While the framework provides a space to view women as more than child bearers and individuals whose place is in the kitchen, it also views them as more than economic producers. In migration contexts, the role of women goes beyond remittances back home, but is also concerned about their own wellbeing and their living the lives they have reason to value in South Africa; for instance. Loots and Walker (2016, p. 262) note that the CA:

[...] also includes possibilities for well-being, agency expansion and mobilization (enabling people to participate in their own development according to their own goals), and critically reflecting on one’s own values and well-being (through inclusion in the development and policy process).

Thus, in essence, we reject both extremes, the traditional view that sees women as homemakers and the other view that sees women as economic providers who are overtaking men. The latter claim, although emerging in recent discourses,
may, in comparison to historical labour segregation that saw men as sole providers, be a yardstick to women’s involvement in labour activities. Yet an assessment of women’s development or progressions should, in addition to being contextualised, take into account the opportunities that women have in making choices associated with these two views. We are careful not to be oblivious of the challenges that women are exposed to because of migration, and which in the process have a negative impact on their wellbeing.

Methods

An ethnographic case-study was used, focusing on sub-Saharan African migrant women in the South African metropolitan cities of Johannesburg, Pretoria, Ekurhuleni, Durban, Cape Town and Bloemfontein. The main focus was on the respondents’ positive capabilities in the form of socio-economic demographic characteristics and the livelihood capitals they possess and had acquired in the host country. The opportunities available in South Africa to the migrant women could possibly enhance their wellbeing so they may live the lives they desire. As part of the ethnography, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered face to face to collect data from 332 migrant women from 23 of the 54 sub-Saharan African countries; although the Zimbabwean migrants dominated the study, the dynamics of these migrants are similar. The respondents were from Angola, Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Data were collected over two months between March and April 2016, though the information-gathering and acquisition had always been ongoing. Data were collected on the socio-economic characteristics of the migrant women such as their ages, marital status, education levels, primary position in the household and their occupations. The sustainable livelihood capitals, namely, human, economic, social, physical, cultural and political, adapted from the sustainable livelihood framework (United Kingdom, Department for International Development (DFID), 1999; Ncube, 2017) were the basis of the opportunities, freedom and challenges of the capabilities of the migrants’ adaptation in South Africa. More than 80 per cent (268) of the respondents were in the 18 to 49 years age group. More than half of the respondents (193 out of 332) had a secondary education and 25 had certificates, 36 had diplomas, five had technikon qualifications, 18 had
Findings

In this chapter we report findings related to the labour- and job-market experiences of the women. Emerging from the data, in the midst of various challenges facing the heterogeneity group of women from different parts of sub-Saharan Africa, women possessed entrepreneurial skills that most of them were using to sustain their livelihoods. Migrant women from Mozambique, Angola and Lesotho were observed to be residing in the high-density suburbs in South Africa, usually termed black residential areas, where they had their own small businesses or were working in groups in hairdressing businesses (Ncube, 2017). Ethiopians, Somalis and Eritrean migrant women were observed to be mostly wives of wealthy businessmen from the same countries. Most of the women worked in their husbands’ shops, with some also running their own small businesses. Most of the women from the DRC and Congo-Brazzaville in the study had hairdressing businesses, with some of them engaging in selling beauty products, which are in great demand among women in South Africa. Other migrant women from the Ivory Coast, Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Mauritius, Uganda and Benin were also working and trading in their own businesses (such as salons, retail shops, hospitality outlets like guesthouses and lodges) and some were formally employed in South Africa. In this discussion, we present the key themes related to the opportunities, agency, as well as conversion factors as experienced by the women.

Opportunities (capabilities)

Access to employment opportunities
The migrant women were asked to evaluate how they perceived the job market in South Africa; by focusing on the job market, the highest ranked was job availability, followed by skills transfer in the workplace, then ethnic preferences in the workplace, policies on getting jobs, chances of getting a job and getting a specific job. These opportunities were also constrained as noted below:
It’s challenging for me because many South Africans are currently jobless, hence decreasing the possibility of me finding a job.

According to the women, while jobs were readily available in South Africa, the hindrances to getting a job were the skills necessary, the qualifications needed and the correct or legal documentation required by foreigners to be employed in a foreign country. As a result, while the opportunities to access employment may have been present, the women were at risk of being exploited, highlighting the number of vulnerabilities associated with gender and migration (e.g. Mbiyozo, 2018; Walker & Galvin, 2018).

There were some migrant women who indicated that they possessed the necessary qualifications and skills, but were struggling to get employment in South Africa; this emerged to be a result of challenges in proper documentation as noted below:

They only hire people with green identity document books and it is not fair.

If you have a permit, they will consider you as a third choice after they hire illiterate people with green books.

It is not easy for foreigners to get a job but there are jobs. The policies favour the locals. With the right papers, experience and skills you can get a job.

Despite these feelings of constraint some of the women had a positive experience:

Personally, I feel well accommodated at my work and it is very comfortable.

It’s better here than Cameroon. There is job in South Africa as opposed to my country.

Life is much better here than Mozambique. There are jobs here in S.A. It’s better than my home country.

I think the job environment is fair as long as you prove that you are able to do the job.
Since a work visa (in a few instances or an Asylum Seeker’s Permit) is required for one to be employed, most did not have visas and it meant that it was not possible for them to even apply for specific jobs that were commensurate with their qualifications. From a CA perspective, the opportunities to live the lives they had reason to value, although present, had significant constraining factors. Furthermore, structural factors emerged as women noted that the laws and policies were too strict; hence they struggled to get employment. However, for those with the necessary documentation the chances of getting jobs in South Africa were available, provided the individual met all the legal requirements. Without the necessary documentation it was difficult for them to get the type of job that they were trained to do, and as a result they were prone to underemployment. This was particularly true of those who indicated that they were trained nurses, accountants, biologists and business management professionals but noted that they were not doing the jobs that they were trained to do. Some who were already in employment reported other workplace challenges, as highlighted below:

The cleaners stopped cleaning my office and desk, the messengers never collected any mail from my office and when serving tea to personnel they skipped my office, just because I am a foreigner. Even cleaners and messengers think that they are better than foreigners.

Some of the women indicated that they had stopped looking for jobs because of the discriminatory job market. Experiences of discrimination were, however, not common, as most of the women were self-employed. Despite the challenges, the migrant women indicated that jobs were available in South Africa, unlike in their home countries, and that South Africa has a conducive atmosphere for entrepreneurship, so creating jobs for themselves and others.

**Entrepreneurial skills**

With most of the women falling between the ages of 18 and 49, and this being the economically-active age group, entrepreneurial skills become essential in a country that is already strained in relation to employment, as asserted by Bongaarts (2001). However, South Africa is perceived as a rich country and full of opportunities. According to Gebre, Maharaj and Pillay (2011), South Africa was filled with promises and was a successful country offering opportunities for advancement. South Africa still had the best economic prospects to offer to
migrant women in the African continent (Adepoju, 2007). Entrepreneurship opportunities are highlighted below:

We create jobs here for ourselves as foreigners. Most foreigners doing their own business. Most Ethiopians are into business. We are independent. We create jobs. I actually provide employment to my country’s ladies and also a South African.

Unemployment is a challenge in South Africa with the majority of the unemployed being the youth; in 2016 the unemployment rate was 26.5 per cent (STATS SA, 2016; Census, 2011). There was, however, a high human capital of migrant women with relevant skills and qualifications who were in, and continued to arrive in, South Africa during the period in which this study was conducted. As noted, most women brought with them various skills, capabilities and capacities from their home countries. One of the respondents from Ghana explained that in her country the education system is such that it allows for entrepreneurs’ skilling. According to Ashiboe-Mensah (2017), entrepreneurship education started at a Ghanaian college as far back as 1993. Through the informal interviews, women had informally to learn crafts such as hair plaiting, weaving and tailoring before they decided to migrate to South Africa. These created opportunities for them to survive in South Africa, a country perceived as full of hope but faced with socio-economic challenges such as unemployment and other governance issues. The entrepreneurial skills brought by women varied from woman to woman from hairdressing, weaving, knitting to general acumen for business such as general trading. Gries and Naude (2011), however, note that factors associated with entrepreneurship such as technological innovation, economic growth and improvements in productivity do not automatically translate into human development. Hence, entrepreneurship ought to be seen to expand one’s capabilities through being both a resource and a process. Thus, women in this case provide us with a basis of thinking about the impact of entrepreneurship on human development, looking beyond only the economically thinking entrepreneurship.

**Ability to adapt to new labour environment**

While migrant women possessed various skills, they had to work in any job that was available at the time. Unemployment is very high in South Africa, standing at 29.1 per cent (STATSA, 2020). The probability of the respondents getting
jobs that they were qualified to do was low, and hence they made themselves available to work in any job, adjust to any conditions such as selling in the streets or even working in a salon in order to survive. According to Meraj (2015), highly qualified and skilled professionals in developed countries are often obliged to accept jobs below their educational rank after they migrate to those countries and may experience a downhill shift both in their careers and in their quality of life. This also applies in South Africa. They have no choice but to deskill themselves as a coping and adaptation mechanism (Ncube, 2017). The difficulty of finding employment is highlighted in the extract below:

It’s challenging for me because many South Africans are currently jobless, hence decreasing the possibility of me finding a job.

Over and above the self-settling policy that required them to integrate into society, thereby leaving them with no option but to be economically active, some of the women had responsibilities at home. For example, 122 respondents indicated that they were the heads of their households and also the sole breadwinners. As a result, migration was one of the few ways to help in fending for the family. While, according to the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), this may lead to greater independence and autonomy (IOM, 2003), from a capability perspective it highlights constrained opportunities as there are no options to choose from. Thus, the experiences of migration become multidimensional opportunities, but also mean constraint. Thus, when making such assessment, Sen (2009) call us to be critical about the social arrangements – in this case it is the environment in which the women experience their daily lives – and thus not just to take adaptation as a positive or negative value without critically considering other factors.

Conversion Factors

**Gender**

Asked whether being women hindered their chances of getting jobs or coping and adapting in South Africa, 130 of the respondents indicated that they were being affected and 198 indicated that they were not. The marital status of an individual migrant and the gender aspect could also create limitations on the chances of women getting jobs or devising coping and adaptation mechanisms. Since the
majority of the respondents indicated that their marital status had nothing to do with their getting jobs in the country, this meant that marriage had no significant influence on the getting of jobs. Other factors such as educational level, skills and networks had more influence than marital status, as illustrated below:

I can’t say because I have low education, never looked for a job.

I never looked for a job, because I heard that even with a degree you cannot get a job as a foreigner. I didn’t go to school so I cannot complain.

This finding paralleled with Goodman (2004) who indicated that young Sudanese refugees in Kenya prioritised education above getting married and that that allowed them to cope and adapt better than others. The positive policies in South Africa that promote gender equality could be useful for migrant women who are in South Africa to gain economic independence and to break the “glass ceiling” usually associated with being a woman in the work situation. Besides, policymakers should further enforce policies in pursuance of an inclusive approach, to nurture equality of all migrants, regardless of their marital status. In addition to this, there are social and cultural factors that influence the migrant women’s faring in South Africa, as discussed in the next section.

Social factors
A number of social conversion factors influenced the women’s experiences in South Africa. These included religion, family, friends, ethnicity, colleagues and neighbours. For instance, close family members, as well as husbands of the migrant women who were already in South Africa, contributed to their coping and adaptation in South Africa.

The church is providing spiritual and emotional support. At times people from church give me food. They assist when I have problems. Some church members lend me money, and they help with referring me to places where I can get employment. I have managed to link up with a group from church to be able to buy goods in bulk so that we can sell at competitive prices. At times, when one moves to another town, church members connect you to the church members in a new town. There are always people ready to welcome you and make you feel at home.
My family is motivating me to work harder. My family from home sends me some money. Family – they keep me happy and motivate me to keep going. My family from home help me by sending money from home; my sister is always there providing me with food. My brother assisted when I came to South Africa, sent me to school and assisted me to start the salon business. My uncle assisted me with accommodation and basic things like food.

A number of salon owners indicated that they also employed local South Africans in their businesses and the professional relationship was based on trust and mutual support. A good rapport had been developed between migrants from various countries and with locals; this made coping and adaptation easier. However, there were some migrant women in Durban who said that they did not trust anyone and also felt alienated in South Africa. These same migrant women stated that they would be glad if they had the means to return to their home countries.

**Cultural factors**

The cultural factors included traditional beliefs, work ethics and respect for authority. Some of the migrant women had migrated to South Africa but maintained visible cultural markers such as their dress and their culinary habits, which made them acquire both positive and negative identities. The negative impact of the culture practised by the migrant women put them at risk of being the target of xenophobic attacks. On the other hand, as a conversion factor, the positive formation of identity led to a sense of belonging and easy integration into society. The freedom for migrants to maintain cultural practices highlights the importance of and relationship between culture and identity formation.

Although South Africa still experiences gender disparities in the workplace, some of the women applauded the initiatives and programmes that support women’s empowerment in the country, unlike in their countries of origin. Some of those initiatives include Affirmation Action (AA) and Employment Equity (EE) in employment procedures that ensure that historically disadvantaged individuals (HDIs), including women and people living with disabilities, are given fair employment opportunities to redress past inequalities. One of the women noted, “There are policies governing the job environment in South Africa and they are fair”.

The women stated that there was a lot of respect for women in South Africa compared to their countries of origin, especially by the South African
policymakers. South Africa was also commended for its positive and progressive laws about respect for variety in cultural practices, values and norms in the country. The migrant women stated that there was professionalism and respect for authority in the workplace, shown by both the employer and employee.

However, most migrant women indicated that, within these progressive policies, local citizens had adopted eurocentrism in their conduct, rather than being Afrocentric as they were Africans. The cultural capital factors that emerged as valued by the migrant women were: firstly, respect for authority; secondly, gender issues; thirdly, work ethics; and, fourthly, traditional beliefs.

Agency

In addition to the above factors, our data show that migrant women are resilient, independent and can resist and withstand the challenges of migration and integration into society. We understand resilience according to the Human Development Report (HDR) which sees resilience as addressing the deterioration in wellbeing which is determined by people’s ability to adjust and cope with these challenges (HDR, 2014). As migrant women experience various challenges in the endeavour to break into the market, through either employment or entrepreneurship, their choices and capabilities become limited. However, migrant women’s resilience can reduce vulnerability and marginalisation by eliminating barriers that restrict their choices and capabilities (HDR, 2014). Thus, using their agency, the women negotiate social, economic and political challenges.

Discussion

We now return to our earlier assertion that the CA allows us to understand the opportunities, agency and factors that have an impact on the lives migrant women experience in a foreign land. The findings demonstrate that the women possess certain capabilities that allow them to function in a foreign land. Firstly, the opportunity to migrate may be seen as a capability that is available to the migrant women who, in turn, exercise their agency by taking action to move to South Africa. Recognising the capabilities that migrant women possess, particularly in the labour market, and advancing such capabilities through
programmes that strengthen the skills that these women possess may result not only in an advanced labour market, but also in advancing the wellbeing of others. As studies show, women have also been found to be more willing to help family members, and their remittances are more consistent over time (Lopez-Ekra et al., 2011). These remittances, among other non-financial kinds of support, allow the migrant women to be active transnational actors – balancing their lives in both countries as they also take up responsibilities back home.

In Figure 1, capabilities such as opportunities for employment, possessed skills and the ability to adapt highlighted the capabilities environment for migrant women. Although these capabilities may have been present for them, there were factors that had a negative impact on those available capabilities and the factors include unemployment, lack of documentation, policies of the day, nationality and gender. As a result, the women in the study could not fully exercise their capabilities, making them prone to exploitation, underemployment and xenophobia.

We also take into account that each woman has a unique profile of conversion factors (Robeyns, 2011), for example, background, experiences, age and country of origin, making them both structural and personal. Personal conversion factors relate to language and level of education. Structural conversion factors relate to the current political situation, labour policies and unemployment. Some of the women were aware of the high unemployment rate in South Africa, which made it difficult for them to find employment. However, these opportunities were even more limited for migrant women, as most of them noted the lack of recognised documentation, which possibly limited job opportunities. Those limited opportunities could lead individuals to resort to low-paying jobs bearing the risk of labour exploitation in some cases.

Social relations were reported as having a positive impact on the women’s experiences as they largely comprised support networks of friends, family and religion. Despite the negative impact of most of the conversion factors, the women
exercised their agency, putting into use the entrepreneurial skills they possessed from home, thereby practising resilience, withstanding the negative impact of the challenges that came with being in foreign land, without appropriate work permits, among others. They ran small businesses like sewing, basketry, knitting, buying and selling, running vegetable stalls and opening street hair salons. All women valued the opportunity for income generation as they sent money back home with the hope that they would go back to their countries one day. The income also helped them to manage their day-to-day lives. The initiative taken by migrant women in starting their own businesses highlights levels of agency. This is in line with Ojong’s (2002) observation that some African migrant women in South Africa possessed several acquired coping mechanisms from their home countries such as handiwork, professional skills and entrepreneurial skills, which – because of agency – enabled them to integrate fairly into the economic sector.

Resilience therefore becomes a necessary capability for survival among these women. The capability for resilience can be built into the presence of one or more of the following conversion factors: motivation, policies or support systems (emotional and material). Other studies have also found resilience to be greater in the presence of strong structures (these could include policies of the day), social support and feelings of security (Waller, 2001; Ahmed et al., 2004). Resilience may also be viewed as a conversion factor influencing other factors. For instance, resilience can influence agency, the kinds of action that the women take to lead decent lives.

Resilience is also visible among those women who have hope that life will change for the better in future. For broader, deliberate human development intentions, resilience as a capability can be built by putting in place structures that support the strengthening of this capability, such as accessing resources and short-term micro loans for those aspiring to be entrepreneurs. With such strategies in place, opportunities for employment and contribution to the labour market may be expanded. As a result, migrants (in this case, women) may contribute to the various aspects of development in South Africa, including to their own personal progression.

From a human development viewpoint, we draw from the findings that the decision to migrate leads to an “expansion of migrant women’s opportunities to live their lives as they choose” (HDR, 2009). As all migrant women are economically active, it is safe to note that their migration addresses some key issues of concern to human development and, inter alia, eradicating poverty and hunger, and promoting gender equality and empowering women. According
to the International Organisation for Migration, such increased independent migration of female breadwinners leads to greater independence and autonomy (IOM, 2003). Furthermore, the availability of such opportunities (capabilities), together with the women's agency, contributes to improved self-esteem associated with skills and knowledge that can make women powerful in their countries of origin. These opportunities for migrant women are also in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

Goal 5: Gender Equality
Goal 6: Decent work and economic growth, and
Goal 8: Reduced inequalities

In addressing gender inequalities, women's migration has the potential to eliminate certain forms of discrimination and violence against women, and this is evidenced by their involvement in economic activities and opportunities for decision-making without patriarchal influence. Such freedom in decision-making and participation in the labour market disrupts the traditional gendered stereotypes that view men as the sole breadwinners and women as home keepers. The activity of women in the labour market also addresses the need to increase decent employment and economic growth. Such opportunities increase women's chances of actively participating in opportunities for decent work across all sectors, including in entrepreneurship. Capability expansion can ultimately address the intersectional discriminatory social norms based on age, gender, language, ethnicity, poverty and other social norms, thereby reducing inequalities. As a result, while migrant women represent a high number of remittance senders in some countries (United Nations, 2006), this change in women's development should be considered beyond their economic contribution, to include the altering of social and cultural development spheres. Such a broad contribution may be seen to expand the wellbeing and flourishing of the women beyond economic value.

While significant contributions are made by women's migration to the empowerment and development of women, we are cognisant that the migration of women may, for some, result in constrained family relationships as migration may interrupt traditional family relations. However, what remains critical is that migrant women pursue the lives they deem as valuable to their flourishing and their wellbeing.
Conclusion

It emerges from the narratives in the study that as women take up the role of provider in their families, there is a gradual shift from the traditional expectations. The various capabilities, in the form of skills that the women bring with them, and their ability to act on those skills (agency) enable them to assimilate into the host communities, successfully navigating some of the conversion factors with negative effects.

In conclusion, the chance of actively participating in employment and other innovative activities to earn a living is enhanced by most of the migrants falling within 18 to 49 year age bracket. The high ratio of working-age people compared to the total respondents clearly impacted positively on the labour market, as most of the migrants were economically active. This productive age could be useful to South Africa as it would assist in growing the economy. As such, it would also be a worthy consideration for policymakers to try to tap into such a productive capacity, especially if the migrant women might have skills that would be required for a developing economy like South Africa. Returning to the SDGs, we see that women’s labour migration has the potential to reduce poverty and improve wellbeing in both host and sending countries. It is within this understanding that the potential contribution of women to development ought to be recognised.

Note

1 Universities of Technology which offer vocational oriented diplomas and degrees.

References


