Chapter 9
Migrant Women's Experiences in the City: A Relational Comparison

Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama

9.1 Introduction and Background

> Something remains to be said about how African migrant women's experiences, […] have affected the system of migrant labour (Phillips & James, 2014: 411).

Scholars who write about migrant women, whether rural-urban or international migrants, have tended to always link women's migration processes to men's, thereby reducing women's agency and will power. It is in this regard that women's positionalities have continued to remain on the peripheries in literature (see Phillips & James, 2014), even if in reality they have become the main players in their own right. Kihato's (2013) work reiterates the importance of the role of migrant women in shaping the way the city's life is played out. Jayaram et al. (2019) posited that women are very mobile, frequently moving locally and internationally between their areas of origin and different urban work destinations. Xulu-Gama (2017), Kihato (2013) and Zulu (1993) prove that women do migrate on their own.

This chapter is a contribution to the emerging field of women's migration in the Global South literature. It uses feminist-standpoint epistemology as a way of embracing and acknowledging as valid the experiences and voices of women, especially in the field of migration, which was historically designed to be solely for men. The focus is on going beyond the differences and the complexities and embracing the undervalued similarities which exist between rural-urban and foreign-national migrant women. This chapter intends to make a relational comparison between African rural-urban and African foreign-national[1] migrant women in the South

[1] 'Foreign national' means an individual who is not a South African citizen or does not have a permanent residence permit issued in terms of the Immigration Act, according to the South African Immigration Amendment Act 13 of 2011.

N. Xulu-Gama (✉)
Department of Sociology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
e-mail: nomkhosi.gama@uct.ac.za

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African city of Durban. Foreign-national migrants are those women who come from outside the borders of South Africa.

There is insufficient research exploring the relations between internal and international migration (Lerch, 2016). Lerch argues that theories of migration have not explained whether international migration is a complement to or substitute for the rural-urban flows which characterise many developing countries (Lerch, 2016). Many scholars choose to focus on either rural-urban (see Xulu-Gama, 2017; Bhengu, 2014; Ajaero & Onokala, 2013; Bozzoli & Nkotsoe, 1991) or international migration (see Galvin, 2015; Kihato, 2013). This chapter does not argue for a comparison for the sake of pointing out similarities and outlining endless differences; rather, it seeks to look more into how they [should] relate to and through each other. A "relational comparison method is that which refuses to measure 'cases' against a universal yardstick. Instead of taking as given pre-existing objects, events, places and identities, I start with the question of how they are formed in relation to one another and a larger whole" (Hart, 2002: 13). A relational comparison is methodologically useful and a politically enabling concept and tool of analysis (Hart, 2016).

In this chapter, I have not made a distinction between the documented and the undocumented foreign-national migrant women. The reason is that the focus of the research was not on their "status" in South Africa but on their experiences of the city as migrant women. It is, however, undeniable that the "status" of foreign-national migrant women has the potential to play a big role in the experiences that women acquire in that particular space. For example, Galvin (2015) notes that being an undocumented Zimbabwean in Botswana is an experience of vulnerability that migrants live with daily.

Migration is mostly seen as something positive: it is a reflection of having faith in the "system". The idea of migration is on its own a promise for something better than what people have at that time, and sometimes who they are (Simone, 2003). Migration is seen as a key survival strategy, especially for rural-urban migrants (Xulu-Gama, 2020; Ajaero & Onokala, 2013) as well as for international migrants who are affected by disasters such as civil wars, economic meltdown and so on.

The hopes are always high, although migration mostly involves a sacrifice of some sort. One always has to leave that which is dear to her to advance her desires or hopes and dreams. Leaving family (which may involve parents, children, spouse or other relatives), leaving the hometown and all that is associated with it, such as culture, is what the migration process has to involve for most people. However, some women had to migrate because they felt there was nothing dear left for them in their areas of origin. Some women migrated to the city to escape patriarchal authority (Phillips & James, 2014). While for some, it would just be the land which they leave behind, for a few, even that land would have been dispossessed from them, or it is land that was never in their names. Dispossession of land does not, however, imply dispossession from their spiritual connections and ancestors, who are in most cases buried or embedded in that land which they leave behind. By this, I mean that this chapter recognises the different positions and contexts in which women find themselves when having to decide to migrate.

Women's experiences are the focus of this chapter because I believe that they have been, and continue to be, fundamental drivers of this migration, which is a defining aspect of contemporary South African society (Phillips & James, 2014). While looking at rural-urban migrant women together with foreign-national migrant women as a whole can be seen as a potential weakness – because it might be assumed that I see them as a homogenous group – I am quite conscious of the differences, divisions, tensions and sometimes contradictions that exist within these groups of women. Hence this chapter does not assume that the difference is only in the nationalities of these women. There is indeed a considerable degree of heterogeneity among the various levels of difference between and among these women who are loosely referred to as migrant women in this chapter.

So rural-urban migrant women would be women who have moved from rural areas into urban areas and continue to regard home as a place somewhere in the rural areas. Foreign-national migrant women are women who originate from outside the geographical boundaries of South Africa, coming from anywhere on the African continent. In addition to the few sources of difference and self-identification that this chapter focuses on, there are many other important sources of difference which these groups of women ascribe to themselves or sometimes have imposed on them, for example, sexual orientation, religion, marital status, political affiliation and so on.

Although all these migrant women do not originate from the same place, both groups of women have been brought to the city of Durban by a variety of circumstances. This is where they are all hustling, with their children and sometimes without their children. The other factor that is shared by these women is their social class, which is working class.

> The highly mobile middle to upper class migrants are usually exempt from exclusion [and vulnerability], as their class status and global social capital enable them to integrate into similar class positions in many different countries. Indeed, many immigration policies worldwide are geared towards attracting, rather than expelling, those migrants who already hold high net wealth and/or global skills in high demand. (Erwin & Grest, 2018:5)

The Employment Services Act No. 4 of 2014 says that foreign-national migrants should be employed on the basis that their employment promotes the training of South African citizens and permanent residents. This legislation immediately clarifies its unfriendly position towards working class migrant women who come as an unskilled pool of labour; this supports Erwin and Grest's argument above.

The contribution of this chapter, as part of the scholarship of the sociology of migration in the Global South, is to use existing data to provide a practical analysis of the relations between rural-urban and foreign-national migrant women. In doing that, it emphasises the importance of class in the analysis of gender, place, work and social relations.

9.2 Methodological and Theoretical Context

Hart (2002: 14) argues that the

> …concept and method of relational comparison are grounded in an understanding of place not as a bounded unit, but as always formed through relations and connections with dynamics at play in other places, and in wider regional, national, and transnational arenas.

In her later work, she adds, "Relational comparison focuses instead on spatio-historical specificities as well as interconnections and mutually constitutive processes" (Hart, 2016: 373). This chapter has been written using data from two sets of research done in the city of Durban. One set was gathered from women who came from the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal province to stay at KwaMashu[2] hostel and look for work. The second data set[3] is from a research project which collected data from both rural-urban women migrants living at the Thokoza hostel[4] and international women migrants coming from different parts of the African continent. That study wanted to find out about their experiences of the city of Durban. Foreign-national migrant women were found using a snowball sampling method, and they were scattered across the different parts of the city of Durban. Rural-urban migrant women were accessed at the hostel because this is where most local migrants reside.

Twenty foreign-national migrant women were interviewed and ten rural-urban migrant women were interviewed. All women were interviewed through life histories, which meant allowing them tell stories about their lives, at a time and in a place where they felt comfortable. The interviews asked when and how the migrant women arrived in Durban and what had been their experiences as foreign national migrants. They were all interviewed in their home languages. For the rural-urban migrants, *isi*Zulu was the predominant language used by the migrant women, with a limited number of *isi*Xhosa-speaking women. For the foreign-national migrant women participants, foreign-national migrant women fieldworkers who spoke the same home language as the research participants were employed and some of the languages the participants spoke were Thiluba, Swahili, Lingala and French. This meant that there had to be numerous fieldworkers, because each was employed based on the particular foreign language that was needed for interview purposes. The same fieldworkers were responsible for translating into English and transcribing, for easy access by the researcher. I was responsible for interviewing, translating and transcribing the transcripts into English for all the local languages. Some of the key themes that came out of the interviews were social network support, search for a better life, journey to destination, anxieties around children's well being, decision to migrate, and sexual economy.

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[2] KwaMashu is a township and it has a formerly single-sex workers' hostel, known as KwaMashu hostel and officially called KwaMashu Community Residential Units. Townships are areas which were formerly officially designated for black occupation under apartheid legislation.

[3] This research project was funded by the Cities Alliance.

[4] Thokoza hostel continues to be a single sex women's hostel based in the central business district in Durban.

My positionality as a researcher, a black South African woman, was advantageous, although it also has its limits when it comes to familiarity, which holds the risk of taking for granted many aspects that another researcher, differently positioned, would not.

Feminist-standpoint epistemology argues that this position provides the clearest vision of women's social relations because unbiased knowledge of the world is women's direct experience. Choosing this epistemology can be understood as part of women's resistance by embracing their "subjective" experience; in this way, they can resist men's objectification (Walby, 1990). Instead of starting with gender and then adding other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class and religion, black feminist thought sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination (Collins, 2000: 221). Walby (1990: 3) argues that the concept and theory of patriarchy are essential to capture the depth, pervasiveness and interconnectedness of different aspects of women's subordination, and can be developed in such a way as to take account of the different forms of gender inequality over time, class and ethnic group.

9.3 Women's Everyday Lived Experiences

This section is divided into two main subsections. The first discusses the underlying similarities, and the second the complexities in the differences, of rural-urban migrants and foreign national migrants. The first part documents social relations, reasons for migration, vulnerabilities and what I call a "double standard lifestyle". The second section opens with a quote from an interview transcript which confronts us with questions of difference and nationality. It depicts what possibly happens when a local meets with a foreigner and they have to negotiate issues of love, intimacy and family relations.

9.3.1 Undervalued Similarities

Social Network Support:

> For the South African women, these networks are made up of both kin and friends who live in the hostel, as well as kin and friendship networks linked to their rural homesteads outside of the city. For women coming from outside the country social networks consist mostly of other migrant families, who either work or worship in the same spaces, with some tenuous links accessing financial resources from networks in their home countries. In addition, the [Faith Based Organisations] FBOs and [non- Governmental Organisations] NGOs who assist in providing services and goods to migrant and refugee women serve as critical spaces for creating new social networks in the city, and as a safety net for children […] While there is some evidence from the oral histories that new friends have been made through attending church, there are also social divisions based on nationality between and within churches. (Erwin & Grest, 2018)

The quote above shows that women rely on social networks to help them with different things including finding accommodation, jobs, joint savings (*stokvels*[5] and rotating-credit societies) and burial societies (see Phillips & James, 2014). On the other hand, my earlier work (Xulu-Gama, 2017) on migrant women from the rural areas clearly demonstrated that women did not find it easy to form solidarities amongst themselves. Ramphele (1993) also found that, although there were numerous potential points of solidarity among migrant women in the hostel, they were able to find and hold on to the divisions that kept them apart.

In Search of a Better Life: One other profound similarity between these two types of migrant women is being in search of a better life. All these migrant women who have moved from one area to another have, in many more ways than one, expressed that they want to have a better life and this is the reason for their migration. For the majority of them who come to the city of Durban, they come to find job opportunities or even to start various livelihood procurement activities. The few who come following their partners, upon reaching the city of Durban, also take the opportunity and look for employment opportunities, participate in informal economic activities or further their education. Foreign-national migrant women, more than rural-urban migrant women, take up the option of furthering their education. They have even expressed a lack of understanding as to why South Africans do not use the opportunity of furthering their tertiary education because it is free in South Africa.[6]

Many Stops and Long Journey to Destination: There are many ways in which vulnerability is described and experienced by migrant women. For example, the interviews with some women, especially foreign-national women migrants, showed that these women have had many other stops in different cities before they reached South Africa. For example, Sarah[7] from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) went through Burundi, Tanzania and Mozambique before reaching South Africa. An interview with Rosa, also originally from DRC, showed that she first went to Zambia, then Zimbabwe, and then came to South Africa. Florence from Uganda went to Kenya, then to Tanzania and through Zimbabwe before coming to South Africa. This is an experience that most foreign national migrant women have to go through and hence bring with them to the destination city. By the time they reach their destination and experience different and mostly harsh receptions in Durban, they would have already been through a lot. Meanwhile, from the rural-urban migrant women's sample, both from Thokoza and KwaMashu hostel, the experiences of vulnerability are there but not in the same way as those described above. The migrant women in the hostel normally have one direction and a one-stop journey, where they leave the rural areas and reach the hostel on the same day and reside there for a very long period of their lives. Two main reasons for this are

[5] Stokvels are money-saving schemes, mainly based on women's informal networks.

[6] By this, they refer to full-time research Masters' and PhDs in most South African universities, as well as the availability of a National Financial Aid System.

[7] All names used are pseudonyms.

because KwaZulu-Natal province's rural areas are always closer to the city of Durban, compared to departing from a country out of South African boundaries. Secondly, rural-urban migrants use relations and connections which are normally socially closer to them.

Anxieties Around Children's Well Being/Safety: Erwin and Grest (2018: 39) argue that migrant and refugee mothers from outside of South Africa have many anxieties around discrimination against their children in the state schooling and healthcare system. Concerns around safety in schools loom large for many migrant mothers; these generally are around forms of xenophobia and language barriers. Xenophobia, Erwin and Grest (2018) argue, may indicate a misplaced fear and distrust of the state's ability to create a harmonious society. Onukogu's work in this book discusses the different ways children are affected by migration. She uses excerpts to demonstrate the various ways which the children use to protect themselves from the harsh experiences of foreign migration, including bullying at school. My earlier research (Xulu-Gama, 2017) shows that rural-urban migrant women also worry about their children growing up in these migrant city spaces. They worry about their safety since their places of origin are safer and more protected than the urban areas. They are concerned about their children growing up without proper cultural traits which are practised in the rural areas; they argue that the beliefs and values in the city are different to those held in the rural areas. Loss of respect is one of the main concerns, which mothers claim children growing up in the urban areas are susceptible to.

Difficult Decision Making Process/Indecisiveness: Phillips and James (2014) argue that being a migrant woman means that you also sometimes grapple with the question of whether to stay or to return home (see Hooks, 2009); this, they argue, is a state of vulnerability. Your feelings are compounded by experiences that challenge your resilience levels. Your identity is challenged in many ways and on many levels. Jayaram et al. (2019: 86) posit that "[w]omen migrants experience different forms of exclusion […], compounded by their gender-based experiences and patriarchal power relations in the city […]."

Unknown Journey: This research has established that migrant women, upon leaving their areas of origin, embark on an unknown journey, which they hear of from the experiences of their family members or friends. The people who they hear from sometimes become part of their social networks in the foreign city, as has been highlighted above. However, this departure allows migrant women to start a new life in the new city because it is not all the old life traits that are needed in the city. They learn new languages, cultures, lifestyles and even gain new friends; some start new families in the city. Among all that, what sometimes opens are possibilities for what I will call a "double standard lifestyle". Migrant women, in the process of navigating the city, forging life, negotiating access and identity, procuring livelihoods and seeking happiness, may find themselves in really difficult situations where compromising decisions have to be taken.

Embarrassing Status: The work of Machinya in this book gives the example of Zimbabwean migrant workers who find themselves forced to lie to their families and relatives in the areas of origin about the kinds of work that they do in the migrant

cities. He relates that, sometimes, when their social networks have arrived in the same migrant city, they have to make excuses not to meet them, or for them not to see what kind of work they do or even the kinds of places they live in. Migrants get embarrassed to tell true stories about their migrant status. My research at KwaMashu also shows that migrant women have to lie to their relatives about where they live because of the negative connotations which are associated with the former single-sex hostels, which are generally known as men's spaces (see Xulu-Gama, 2017). Migrants resort to lying, as they fear harsh judgment from their social networks. Research has shown that migrants, when in the city, tend to take up jobs that they would not normally take up in their areas of origin. These are jobs seen as menial jobs with low pay, such as being a cleaner, domestic worker or car guard. They sometimes leave respected qualified or professional positions attained through tertiary education in their society. They have qualifications that are downgraded or not recognised by the South African Qualifications Authority or they cannot use them because of their migrant status.

Sexual Economy: With limited formal and permanent employment opportunities and the survivalist economy not providing enough money, migrant women find themselves having to work in the sexual economy (see Xulu-Gama, 2017; Hunter, 2010). Connell (2009) makes an example of how women who are engaged in "sex work" always have to keep it from public knowledge because of fear of discrimination and stigmatisation. The experience of working in the informal sector presents migrant women both with dangers and opportunities to put down more permanent roots in the urban areas. Both the threats and the promises of such work are inseparable from those that come with living in informal settlements (Phillips & James, 2014: 415). The informal economy also allows women the freedom to develop relationships of a kind denied to those who ended up in formal employment.

9.3.2 Complexities of Difference

> Michelle: We fell in love and he told me that I could not live with him because his family did not understand this thing of foreigners. He told me that he loved me, and he would do everything for me. I wanted him to come to my home and I also wanted him to invite me to his home, but he didn't want to do that. That really hurt me, and I told my sisters about it. I have a sister who came here in 2010, before I had the child. When she came, I was pregnant, and she said it would be better if we looked for a place to stay together because my boyfriend was useless.

Above is an excerpt from an interview with Michelle, a 19-year-old Zimbabwean woman. She fell pregnant while in a relationship with a South African man but she eventually had to take her child back to her grandmother in Zimbabwe, who helped her look after the child while Michelle was finding her feet with job opportunities. Michelle had to be painfully reminded by her partner that she was indeed a foreigner, more an "unaccepted outsider", and her partner was not ready to explain her difference to his family.

The most notable difference between these two kinds of migrant women is that rural-urban migrants have the advantage of citizenship, which on its own comes with a whole lot of benefits: access to social grants and access to Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) housing. There are further advantages such as the proximity of extended family members, common language and culture. The issue of language can either make one's life easy or impossible in a foreign space. Although it would be impossible to generalise on the issue of language and assume that all foreign national migrants are unable or find it difficult to converse with locals in their local languages, this is mostly the case. Most foreign-national migrant women would even point out that not being able to communicate with locals is one of the biggest challenges in settling in the new city.

Rural-urban women migrants also suffer alienation in the city especially in looking for employment. Not having secondary school or tertiary education causes them to focus their attention on acquiring survival strategies, either in the informal economy or in the domestic arena, where they can survive with no or limited spoken English language.

Nomkhosi: Do you have a bank account?
Gogo S: Why would I put it [the money] in the bank?
Nomkhosi: How do you get your pension money?
Gogo S: I get paid[8] from *isikhungo*[9] [South African Security Agency (SASA)] by hand
Nomkhosi: at Ndwedwe?
Gogo S: Yes, I get paid at the farm.

The excerpt above is taken from an interview with an elderly woman who is a pensioner from Ndwedwe, which is in the northern KwaZulu-Natal province's rural areas. She has been living in Thokoza hostel for decades and she has never been formally employed in her life; she has always been in the survivalist economy and it has worked for her, in terms of being able to sustain and maintain herself and her family. She has been able to build a house in the rural area as well as educate her children from the money she makes from selling on the streets of Durban. Something she shares with all undocumented migrant women is not having a bank account. Looking at her life achievements, one can see that she does a good job of taking care of her money without having it go via the bank. As a result of never having been formally employed, she has never been forced to open a bank account. She complained about the charges one has to pay when depositing or withdrawing the money. Even her old age grant she collects from the SASA payment centres in Ndwedwe. That does not give her any practical problems because she anyway always has to go home at the end of the month to see her family, since she lives alone at the hostel.

Mama C: I came here [Thokoza Hostel in Durban] in 1953.
Nomkhosi: 1953, okay.

[8] In order to qualify for the old age social grant, you must be living in South Africa, you must not be receiving any other social grant for yourself, you must be 60 years of age or older; you must be a South African citizen, permanent resident or refugee, and you and your spouse must meet the requirements of the means test, according to the SASA website.

[9] Pay centre.

> Mama C: I continued staying here. What got me out of home was the fact that my husband left us [died] […]
> … yes. And then from that casual job that I had, I was able to build a house. I built a house and finished it. This is the house I am coming from as I am here and as I am also going back, I do go back to that house. Otherwise, I do not have any other home. […]
> God was faithful because when I no longer had the strength to work, I was able to get the old age grant. I was able to get something to strengthen my house. I am able to maintain that house. Whatever that I get satisfies me. I know that I would never get this from the road; even now I rely on the pension. I am not in need of anything. I am able to keep my house going because of this pension. Whatever that I need, I get it from my pension. There is nobody else that I can rely on. Because even when I am sick, I rely on it. […] When I am sick, I go to the clinic and it's free. They are able to help.

The passage above is yet another example of an elderly rural-urban migrant woman. She is telling her brief family background and how she had to leave the rural areas to eke out a living after her husband, who was a breadwinner for the household, passed away. She also speaks proudly of her achievement in the rural areas, which she was able to attain through her migrant status. She got a casual job which she used to support herself and her family. When she became too old and ill, she successfully applied for the old age grant. She is quite content, as she states above, with the grant, and she claims it allows her to cover all her basic needs. This passage starkly shows the difference which exists between foreign-national migrant women and rural-urban migrant women. When rural-urban South African migrant women get too old to work, they have the opportunity of applying for state support, the old age social grant which was R 1780 per month (approximately US$105) at the time of writing. She also mentioned that when she is not well, she does not worry too much because she can access the public health system for free.

These factors, as has been highlighted above, are really what makes a big difference between a local and a foreign woman migrant. Although foreign national women migrants are also entitled to use the health system, their experiences with the nursing staff are mostly unpleasant. Foreign-national migrant women only go to the public health system when they are forced to because, naturally, nobody wants to expose themselves to negativity or a harsh and discriminatory system or people.

From research undertaken with the rural-urban migrants, it was clear that social grants continue to play a prominent role in facilitating the migration processes of women. With a high unemployment rate in South Africa (29%), women's lives can be seen as hopeless but saved by the availability of the different kinds of social grants. The role played by the old age grant has been established and traced as impacting on many different members of the family, including the children and the grandchildren of the senior citizens, (see Mosoetsa, 2011). Rural-urban migrant women tend to use grants for survival in the city as well as to supplement the survivalist activities that they engage themselves in upon reaching the city (see Mokoena and Khunou's work (Chap. 10) in this volume). "There was little evidence in this study of women who come from other African countries successfully accessing government grants. Women who only have asylum seeker permits and are still waiting for refugee status are not able to access the child support grant from the state" (Erwin & Grest, 2018: 37).

Another factor we learn from the experiences of these two elderly ladies living at the Thokoza hostel is that, although they have reached their retirement age, there is nobody who is pushing them to leave the city and go back where they "belong".

9.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have shown that there are vast similarities between rural-urban and foreign-national women migrants' experiences. Some of those are challenges, such as the issues with language, vulnerability, and reasons for migration, although these are never experienced in the same manner. I have also shown that migrant women who are also mothers all have a certain degree of concern around the effects of migration on their children. The idea of crossing the border is one of the main differences among these women. It does not only become an issue of geography and distance. While that matters a lot, there are many other interrelated difficult experiences which compound the decision to migrate across the border.

I recommend that there should be associations created for women, by women, which are going to go beyond national, class and religious lines. Focusing on the associational life of women migrants. Phillips and James (2014) highlight how women make connections which either reaffirm their rural links or help them settle in the cities. Faith-based organisations have been noted as one such association, but perhaps because these organisations are faith based, their focus is never on trying to connect the pieces which seem disconnected in the social and economic aspects of migrant women's lives. The other weakness of faith-based organisations is that they tend to continue to divide women along national lines. For example, you would find a church dominated by Zimbabweans and another dominated by Nigerians, and so on. These divisions continue to leave gaps, which tend to highlight the differences and undervalue the similarities and the shared experiences of migrant women in the city of Durban. These are the gaps which should be cemented by the associations that need to be established, with a vision and a focus on making migrant women see that they all belong in this African city and they all have value to add.

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