

**African Women in the Nation's Capital: Race, Gender,
and Nation in the Making of Immigrant Labor**

Fumilayo Edna Showers

Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the labor force participation of West African women in the Washington D.C metropolitan area, and to track their presence in domestic and "carework". Interrogating structural causes such as immigration and labor policies in the receiving countries, neoliberal economic policies of global financial institutions, specifically the impact of structural adjustment programs on women and children in the global south, economic policies and political instability in sending countries, processes of globalization and the international division of labor, this paper seeks to demonstrate the structural linkages between changes in the global economy, gender and the incorporation of migrant women.

Introduction

The globalization of domestic service and the location of immigrant women in the provision of these services have drawn much scholarly attention in recent years. While, prior research regarding immigration and domestic work has looked at groups such as Asian Americans (Espiritu, 1997; Nakano Glenn, 1987, 1992; Parrenas, 2001; Das Gupta 2006) Latinas (Hondagneu Sotelo, 1994; Hondagneu Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Romero 1994) and Caribbean women (Foner, 1994, Carty, 2003), African immigrant women to the United States have not been featured significantly in the existing literature. The paucity of research on African immigrants both male and female compared to other groups is clear and in some ways understandable. Africans are a relatively small group and their voluntary history of migration to the United States has been an admittedly short one. Consequently they have often been ignored in the scholarship and literature about immigration in the United States, and African women have been studied even less. The few major works on African immigrants have focused on men and the experiences of men (Stoler, 1999; Arthur, 2000). When women are discussed they are often times discussed as accompanying their men or in their roles as wives and mothers who are left behind in the source country.

Given the dearth of existing scholarship of African immigrants to the United States, and the existing male-centeredness of existing studies, this paper aims to look at West African women that are involved in the reproductive sector of the economy, broadly defined as carework, in the home, and in facilities dealing with the sick, the aged and

children. According to Zimmerman, Litt and Bose (2006) carework "refers to the multifaceted labor that produced the daily living conditions that make basic human health and well-being possible. Carework includes home management, housekeeping and related domestic tasks such as laundry, clothing repair, and meal preparation. It also includes the care of others-that is, nursing the sick, looking after and nurturing children, and assisting the disabled and the elderly" (Zimmerman, Litt and Bose, 2006:4). This paper proposes that understanding these African women and their lives in the United States of America will not only enrich immigration/refugee scholarship in various disciplines, but will shed light on a part of United States society that has remained largely silenced and unacknowledged.

Methods

This paper draws from twenty four open ended interviews of English-speaking West African women in the Washington D.C area. The interviews utilized an active interview approach informed by feminist methodology. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The participants were recruited from a snow-ball sample utilizing personal networks in the area. Drawing from the interviews as well as participant observation accounts this paper draws out broad themes in relation to modes of entry and incorporation in the United States, educational attainment in home country prior to migration and the location in carework. This paper uses case studies from these interviews to form conceptual frameworks of immigrant women and work in the United States. Demographic statistics regarding the West African population in the DC metropolitan area are also presented to give a broad sense of the actual population in the area and to introduce some statistical data. Given the fact very little is known about the specific population, a broad overview of African presence and immigration to the Washington DC metropolitan area is especially important. D.C has only recently become a major destination for migrants from all across the world, especially for African immigrants. Its relative newness as a destination and the peculiarities of this space especially in comparison to other historical immigrant cities make the D.C area appealing. Focusing on this area therefore, points to new important trends and possible direction for immigration scholarship. The most compelling reason however for looking closely at the nation's capital is the significant presence of West Africans in this region compared to other major cities. The area has seen increasing percentages of Sub-Saharan Africans in general - 11% in 1980s, 30 percent in the 1990s and 67 percent between 2000 and 2004. The area has seen

increase in refugee movement between 1983 to 2004; more than 12,000 sub-Saharan African refugees were resettled in the area. Sizeable populations of West Africans (Nigerians, Sierra Leoneans, Ghanaians, Cameroonians, Liberians, and Guineans) as well as other Africans (Somalians and Sudanese) call the D.C. area home. (Singer, et al, 1998). Terry Repak (1994) writing on Central American immigrants to DC looked at the availability of jobs and the labor shortage in the area around the 1980s. She suggested that the region, added twice the number of jobs as it did people from 1970 to 1990 and it had the "tightest labor supply of 16 major metropolitan areas in 1989." (Repak, 1994:115). The movement of people to that region within a short period of time must be analyzed within the context of the labor shortage that Repak (1994) discusses. Another theorist whose work comes to bear is Sociologist Saskia Sassen (1988) and her conceptualization of the 'global city' becomes very important in looking at the D.C area. Although not a traditional global city, Sassen's analysis is relevant in interrogating the presence of African women in the area. As the seat of government and the capital of the United States, the presence of diplomats in the area as well as executives of non-profits, governments bureaucrats etc. attracts a feminine low-level work force and a burgeoning demand for domestic workers and childcare workers. In terms of the specifics of Black Africans and their history in the city, Jill Wilson of the Brookings institute traced their arrival to the later 1950s and early 1960s as diplomats of newly independent African countries and as students especially at the historically Black Howard University. In the 1980s, growing numbers of refugees, diversity visa holders, and other immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa joined earlier groups of immigrants from the 50s and the 60s. Refugee movements from 1983 to 2004 have accounted for the increasing and continuing presence of Africans in the region. (Wilson and Habecker, 2008).

Conditions That Compel Women to Move

After discussing the demographic characteristics of the African population in general and West Africans in particular it is important to look at the factors that allow for their entry into the United States. Any discussion of immigrant groups within the United States must include an analysis of US immigration policy, because it is against the backdrop of crafting of immigration policies and the historical transformation that has taken place that certain groups have been allowed to enter this country. An understanding of the major immigration laws and policies especially as it relates to African immigrants is vital to see not only who gets to enter, but under what conditions they are incorporated into the fabric of US society. The understanding of immigration policy and its regulatory impulses also plays

into labor force concerns as visa categories and immigration laws dictate not only the conditions under which immigrants enter but their workforce participation as well. So for example under certain visa categories such as students on F or J visas, or dependents of certain visa categories are not eligible for employment making their situation very precarious. Immigration policy and the modes of incorporation of immigrant women serve as "disciplining forces" that the State appropriates. The location of immigrant women within the service sector and predominantly in domestic/carework, becomes a product of the State (through immigration and labor policy), the global markets and policies of international financial organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank and the household and the individual. The case of Black immigrants to the United States is especially noteworthy, as scholars have pointed to the racist aspects of immigration policy as well as the racialization that non-White immigrants have undergone in the process of immigration.

The intersection of race, class, gender and sexual orientation are reflected in the immigration policies that allow for the entrance of these workers and place them into particular sectors of society. Indeed Eithne Lubheid (2001) theorizes immigration policies in receiving countries in the global north as sites of control as well as racial, social, sexual and class construction. To show a clear way in which immigration policy not only historically favored immigrants by racial characteristics but explicitly restricted the entry of others not representing the favored racial characteristics, consider the 1924 Immigration Act which "not only limited the number of immigration visas, but also based their issuance on national origin. This system favored granting visas to immigrants from northern Europe at the expense of people from Asia and eastern and Southern Europe" (Stoller, 1998:105). The 1924 Immigration Act here to shows that understanding immigration policy is important because it shapes how immigrants enter and also points to some of the exclusionary tendencies in immigration policy. Understanding immigration policy and welfare policy is important especially as it relates to the ways in which the labor of immigrants and people of color is usurped into a cheapened and exploitable reserve labor force. Grace Chang (2000) theorizes that immigration policies which allow for the recruitment or importation of foreign laborers are coupled with policies denying these laborers the rights of citizen workers, thus rendering them more exploitable" (Chang, 2000:102). Other scholars have pointed to the ways in which immigration policy reinforces the heterosexual and patriarchal underpinnings of US society and has excluded historically sexual minorities as well (Lubheid, 2001; Sommerville, 2006). Definitely for this group, given its recent history of voluntary migration, the

changes in immigration law such as the 1965 Immigration Act that completely overturned the national origins quota system and changed the preference system for European immigrants must be mentioned as paving the way for the “new immigration” of non-European groups. The 1980 Refugee Act that facilitated the resettlement of refugees also is important and has been used by scholars to explain the increasing presence of African immigrants in the past twenty years. Indeed, three respondents in this study had entered the country as refugees, while one entered on a fiancée or K visa but had moved from her native country of Sierra Leone to neighboring Gambia as a refugee prior to her move to the United States. In all, the so-called diversity visa program has been a major source used by African immigrants who previously had little ability to voluntarily immigrate to the United States, thus explaining their increasing presence in the past twenty years.

Situations in Western African countries

Obviously an analysis of immigration to the United States calls to question the conditions in the sending countries in West Africa and an analysis of the contributory factors arising from the countries themselves that propel people to move. Why do these people move and what conditions from within allow for them to do so? This study goes beyond the traditional push and pull factors that were prevalent in immigration scholarship. Instead this paper locates wider structural causes related to the global political economy and international division of labor. In trying to understand the forces that propel women to leave the continent it is important to look at the political and economic conditions in the countries themselves. A cursory look at the West African nations suggests some of the problems of the post-colonial African States. Authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships have plagued the people and often-times despotic regimes and military dictatorships that are characterized by endemic corruption, nepotism and human rights abuses have made life on the continent especially difficult (Takougang, 2003).

In addition to corruption and the general failure of the political systems in these nations, the problem of third world debt and the policies of structural adjustment enacted by the International Monetary Fund, IMF, and the World Bank must be looked at as a contributory factor to the migration. As faced with economic hardships engendered by the austerity measures imposed by SAPs Africans have moved from rural areas to urban areas, and sometimes across borders to look for work or in search of better economic conditions. A number of scholars have pointed to the gendered nature of the SAPs as women and children have been disproportionately affected. Grace Chang (2000)

writes,

“SAPs strike women in these nations the hardest, and render them most vulnerable to exploitation, both at home and in the global labor market....When wages and food subsidies are cut, women as wives and mothers adjust household budgets often at the expense of their own and their children’s nutrition. As public health care and education vanish, women suffer from a lack of prenatal care and become nurses to ill family members at home, while girls are the first to be kept from school to help at home, or join the labor force. When export-oriented agriculture is encouraged, indeed coerced, peasant families are evicted from their lands to make room for corporate families....(Chang, 2000:124).

Chang’s view here makes it possible to see how facing economic crises in their home countries women are called upon to sacrifice and to give up their labor often times at the expense of their children, they migrate as domestic workers, nannies, in-home care givers, nurses, and sex workers. At the same time, the demand for service workers and especially for private household caregivers and domestic workers is exploding in wealthy nations, making it possible for Third World women to migrate to fill this void. Rhacel Parrenas (2001) has conceptualized this phenomenon as an “international transfer of care-taking”, where sometimes middle-class and poor women from the global south migrate to the United States, Europe and other countries to care for children, while leasing their own child-care responsibilities to less class privileged women at home, or female kin. One of my participants, Yvette a Gambian national, who was in her mid thirties had left her two young children in the care of her mother and obtained a student visa. She was able to migrate because her aunt had “helped” her gain admission to a college in the area. Although a F1 student who is legally forbidden to work off-campus due to her status as a non-immigrant, Yvette juggles babysitting jobs and at the time of our interview was contemplating accepting a live-in position with a White middle class family. In contemplating the option, Yvette was strongly aware of her desires to bring her own children to the United States and was conflicted by the opportunity to make money to remit to her children at home by taking the live-in job, or bringing her children to live in the United States, but foregoing the live-in domestic opportunity which would be denied to her as a woman with a young family. Yvette’s place in the international transfer of caretaking is important as she takes over the care of others, but sacrifices the care of her own children to others in her home country.

The worsening financial situations in countries of Western Africa have led women to emigrate in order to seek better conditions elsewhere. To demonstrate how

these global forces influenced individual patterns, consider Abigail Doe¹, a Sierra Leonean woman in her mid-fifties who migrated to the United States fifteen years ago. After obtaining a tourist visa from the American embassy in Freetown, Sierra Leone, Abigail arrived in the United States in May 1992 shortly after the military coup that had toppled the democratically elected government, and the beginning of a series of currency devaluations that were to ensue in the years following years². Abigail, who was a business woman in her home country, owning a store where she sold "provisions" like bags of rice, onions and cooking oil, said that the devaluations had ruined her business. Faced with economic hardship, like a lot of people under the government, she liquidated her inventory, obtained a tourist visa and left for the United States. Leaving her three children with their father, she stated that the economic hardships brought about by the currency devaluation had forced her to make the choice to emigrate. Martha Donkor (2005) writes about Ghanaian women immigrants to Canada, "Africans have calculated the advantages of moving to areas where their labor would yield more returns to enable them to live more comfortable lives, calculated the advantages of staying home and enduring hardship and determined that migrating is the better of their options" (Donkor2005: 26). Even though Donkor's focus is on Ghanaian women, her analysis can be applied to most countries in West Africa. Indeed Abigail's experience exemplifies the heart-wrenching decision-making process that is part and parcel of every migrant's journey. For women, who are the focus of this study, the decisions and the choices that they face are even more arduous, as they are forced to leave their children and sometimes spouses behind. Abigail's story is definitely not a unique one and is similar to the numerous other women from the global south. In leaving her children home and migrating to the United States Abigail's narrative fit in with the narrative traced by Parrenas (2001) Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) Chang (2000) Ehrenreich and Hochschild(20003). Her labor force participation is also exemplary of immigrant women from the global south who are incorporated in service and care giving roles in the countries of the global south. Abigail currently works as a Front Desk Operator in one of the condominiums in the area. She also holds a second job as a residential counselor for a non-profit organization that provides health care and residential facilities for autistic individuals. Abigail's job entails serving as a live-in care giver. Prior to these two jobs that she now holds, Abigail had worked as a live-in health care worker and domestic, helping to care for the elderly in private homes. She stated that she had been employed in these service-oriented health care type jobs for ten years and she performed these duties after she overstayed her visitor's visa and therefore became undocumented. She

was willing to take these jobs which were relatively easy to obtain, and employers were understanding of her situation and paid in cash. Abigail had immigrated alone leaving her three children behind. Only one of her children has since migrated to the United States, the other two remain in her country with their father. It was not clear to me the extent of Abigail's role in facilitating the migration of her daughter.

While some of the participants were involved in the care of children as baby sitters. A few of the women interviewed, worked as home health aides and certified nursing assistants in nursing homes in the area. One of my participants stands out in this regard. In her mid forties, Diane moved to the United States to accompany her husband who was pursuing a PhD. An accountant in her country, Diane is now a certified nursing assistant. Interested in understanding the opinions of their work, I asked Diane what she thought about her job. She described the duties she performed in the nursing home and herself as a "professional bottom cleaner" indicating that when she called home to her native Ghana, she is careful to tell people she works at a "hospital" and not give them details of her life and work in the United States. Of all the women that I interviewed, Diane stood out in the sense that she expressed shame to be associated with carework. She spoke of the job, including her decision to enter the field of work, in candid pragmatic terms that were centered mainly on financial terms. The actions of Diane here indicate the need to understand carework, including elderly care, but also more broadly in terms of childcare and domestic, within the framework of globalization, in which third women or women of the global south are implicated, through immigration.

West African women are incorporated into global labor supply chains because of conflicts in their countries and movements as refugees. Three of the participants, two from Sierra Leone and one from Liberia had entered the United States as refugees; in fact one of them was resettled in the Maryland area by a refugee agency. The following excerpt reflects the journey that Mary underwent as a woman fleeing conflict from her native Liberia who subsequently finds her way into the United States:

FS: Before that what did you do in Liberia? What made you come to the United States? Can you talk about your journey...?

Mary: My journey in Liberia...I left Liberia because there was fighting there....civil war, make us to run from Liberia to Nigeria before we come in America, the civil war was so critical..we passed through many things. It made my daughter [indicates her daughter sitting by her side, who

is physically and mentally challenged] suffering from her brain, because the bomb. She suffering from her brain, she can't talk well. She disabled everywhere. Also my son, the rebel they cut off his ear. My husband they shoot him. My former husband they shoot him on his leg, but they did not kill him. One of my daughters died in the war.

FS: Sorry to hear that.

FS: So you went to Nigeria? How did you make your way there?

Mary: We walked for five days five nights from Lofa county to Monrovia. From Monrovia before the ECOMOG[West African Peace Keeping force] carry us in Nigeria. So we were in Nigeria for sixteen years.

FS: Yeah.

Mary: Yes, we were in Nigeria for sixteen years. Before, I used to be in the camp [refugee camp] doing little business in the camp.[inaudible] Because the camp was hard...

FS: So your daughters were in the camp too?

Mary: Yeah.

FS: You were resettled in...

Mary: Yeah, we were resettled in America, Maryland.

Asked about her work experience in the United States, the following conversation ensues:

Mary: The job...well I love the job. When I come here I love the job. I love my supervisors here. I love my boss in Central hospital...

FS: So you work at Central hospital?

Mary: Yes.

FS: What exactly do you do?

Mary: I am in the dietary. I work in the catering side... sometimes I work in the tray line, sometimes I doing nourishment.

FS: How long have you been working?

Mary: Going to three years now.

FS: Before that what other types of jobs have you done? Is this the first job that you have had since you came to America?

Mary: When I came first I used to work at the laundry, coin laundry, I used to clean the clothes. We hang the clothes. How many clothes you hang then you mark it, but the job not good for me because it was not my career, my career is kitchen job. So I thank God that I come see kitchen job, so I just take three months in coin laundry, but when I see my career in Central hospital I was so glad with my job.

FS: Have you done C.N.A. [Certified Nursing Assistant] job before?

Mary: No, never.

FS: Hesitates. Ummm...Kitchen work for you is better?

Mary: Yes, kitchen work is better for me. Some people say that C.N.A work is good, but I never do it before. But people doing it, like Jeneba [another African woman that I met in her home] her brother doing it., Baby, one other girl they call her Fatima she doing it, then....Who again?.. Mama she doing it. I've never do it because mostly I know about catering. I do work in kitchen. I have never do C.N.A work before. I am not able to do that. I don't have the patience. I can do day care because I am patient with kids but not old people.

Mary's words are indicative of the fact that African women are incorporated in other areas of the health care industry, and in other service-oriented jobs.

Discussion

This paper examined questions of labor force participation, race, class and gender in the lives of West African women immigrants in the Washington DC area. Some points that this paper has raised for further study are the need to understand migration within wider structural aspects of conflict and economic strife, the continued exploitation of women of color in the global south, via neo-liberal economic policies, and the structural inequalities between countries in the global north and south. The location of African women within the 'international transfer of caretaking' has been raised, and provides avenue for future research. This paper has sought to center women as independent migrants but also acknowledging that women in this group migrate with their men often times as dependents. In the cases where women migrate with their husbands, they play key roles in the labor force and sometimes become the primary breadwinner for their families. A

study that tries to understand further the role of the African women in the labor force and how they navigate these roles would provide ways in which African women might be different compared to other groups.

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Notes

¹This is not her real name. In order to protect the identities of the human subjects used in this study, I have given pseudonyms to all the women referenced in the paper. I conducted the interviews based on this condition of confidentiality.

² In April 1992, young soldiers led by Valentine Strasser ousted the then President of Sierra Leone Joseph Momoh, and took over the reins of government. At 25, Strasser became the worlds' youngest head of state. His government was marked by rampant violence, killing of political opponents and the devastation of the economy.

Fumilayo Showers is a third year PhD student in the Sociology Department at Syracuse University. She researches the incorporation of West African immigrant workers in the US labor market and also assesses the interconnections between U.S immigration and labor policies, globalization, race, gender and transnational migration.