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The Search for 'Her story': Women in the Narratives of African Migratory History

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Abstract

Gender has become a category of concern for many historians of labour migration in contemporary scholarships. This article notes some of the factors which made it possible for historians to turn to questions of gender. It is a modest attempt to survey the historiography of labour migration and gender as it developed in the late 20th Century and explore some current directions in this scholarship showing how African historians have gained a more understanding of African migration through the examination of women migration in particular. In short, the article examines the pace through which women have been integrated into the narratives of African migratory history. In this article I argue that although African women were for centuries viewed as non-labour migrants, the historiography of labour migration from the late twentieth century reveals women as both national and international labour migrants. This came as a challenge to the then dominant paradigms which were silent on women issues.

Keywords: Africa, women, labour, Migration

1: Introduction

Generally speaking, migration in its broadest meaning of spatial mobility can be regarded as part of human condition. As with other social processes, forms, scale and directions of migration are heavily influenced by the political, economic, and social-cultural context in which migration occurs (Biger and Klara 2005:5). Yet, not only are actual process of labour migration shaped by broader historical forces; also the way migration is perceived, represented, and thus, socially constructed and re-constructed is similarly subject to history, or more precisely, historically, geographically and culturally variable paradigms of thought as well as traditions of thought within particular societies or social formations. Often, however, discourses on labour migration are more than just about migration. They are employed as a factual reference to a particular more or less well defined social phenomenon. References to migration are also made to make sense of the world one lives in, to make political claims, claims over property, claims over one's social status, and to express one's own and others' identities. (Kraler 2005:4) Thus, neither 'mobility' nor 'migrations' are just empirical categories: they are always also part of wider processes of the production of meaning and thus have important imaginary and symbolical dimensions that neat sociological definitions may ignore, but never entirely dispose of. A. The current discourses over autochthony and citizenship in various African contexts are a powerful reminder of how narratives over migration and mobility have recently moved to the centre of political discourse and how claims over past or present migrations have turned into a pretext for exclusion.

2: Colonial Neglect of African Women

Contemporary African regional and international migrations have been largely analysed. On contrary, regional African female migration prior to independence remain understudied (Afolabi and Falola 2007:167). The factor behind this is in the main due to African historical scholarship being biased by colonial approach of African women and migration. One of the main reasons for the colonial neglect of African women and female migrations was the focus of the colonial administration on male labour migration.

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This led to colonial archive essentially produced by male colonial civil servants and politicians, who, in their project of domination, were ultimately rarely interested in African women's migrations or in African women in general. Thus, African women's tracks became generally hard to be found in the colonial archives. The question concerning African women to the French colonial administration for example was mainly that of legal aspects of women's status. As a result numerous reports were produced on this issue between 1920 and 1950 (Rodet 2008:165). However, this concern about African women's status gave little information about the life of these women and their participation in any migratory movements. The problem with such purely legal sources is that they tend to present women only and entirely within a legal framework, which would define the limits of their existence. Rodet reveals that the archives suggest that colonial authorities especially understood women through the legal framework of marriage. In her revisiting of scholarship on abolition of slave trade, she points out that most scholars portrayed that women remained with their former master, as there were few alternatives for female slaves; that the slave exodus would have been confined to male slaves (Rodet 2008).

The scarcity of colonial documents on African female migrations shows that the category of female migrants was considered irrelevant by the colonial administration. In the view of colonial scholars women could not be labour migrants since they were not supposed to supply any labour to the administration within the framework of forced labour. They were neither head of the family nor did they pay tax of their own. If they migrated to colonial cities, they were regarded as constituting an insufficient number to be taken into account. These assumptions were based on Eurocentric and andocentric binary oppositions between 'wage labour jobs' and 'female domestic duties.' (Rodet 2008:165). A great deal of African migration scholarship had taken the masculinity of the labour force for granted and tended to confine women to the subsistence economy. D. Bryceson, on *Proletarianization of Women in Tanzania* emphasizes that women's labour was thus structured to be immobile, in the home. (Bryceson 1980:8) Women's labour was channelled into domestic labour leading to their being primarily described as the 'left behind' in the rural areas, embedded in the domestic sphere. Arguing along this line, Simelane, for instance pointed that in the majority of studies, Swazi women were cited as victims of male absence and its impact on the rural economy (Simelane 2004:106). This cemented the claim of non-labour migrant African women. Some other scholars argued that in order for African women to participate in capitalist production as it was to men, the capitalist were to transform the African labour from serving subsistent needs to serving the capitalist needs as wage labourers (Berger 1991). Since this was done through the process of *proletarianization*, D. Bryceson and Iris Berger for instance argue that African women could not be proletarianized as they did not have ownership of the means of production though they could have access to it. Bryceson further argue that African women could only be semi proletarianized (Bryceson 1980:4). To these scholars, since African women could not be fully proletarianized, they could not necessarily provide their labour to colonialists. This had further stood as a justification for a claim on non-labour migrant women.

3: The Call for 'her Story'

The call for recognition of women agency in history originated in 18th Century with feminism as a social movement in England that promoted equality between the sexes and as a system of thought that challenged mainstream science (Harding 1991:27). Despite the tensions that occurred in its early days, it spread to other parts of the world. African historiography is unequivocal that the struggles against colonialism were not just for political independence but also to free the African mind from wrong notions of identity, and alter the main body of scientific knowledge. For instance, Nfah-Abbenyi was contended with viewing third World literary writings as necessarily national symbols. She argued that there is a risk that unified feminist theory and a totalizing discourse could privilege writers in the West. For this reason she concluded that: "There can be no one unified post-colonial literature or theory, just as there is no one feminist theory but rather feminist theories that offer diverse and differing voices within feminism (Abbenyi 2005:4). The idea here is to avoid homogenization that renders into other people being neglected, as for this case the women. Much of African gender research and literature drew extensively on the disciplines of anthropology, and the predominant emphasis in many gender initiatives on the continent remained technocratic and narrowly developmentalist (Kraler 2005:1). Alternatives to the traditional anthropological and technicist methods and ideas were developed by feminist scholars in a variety of fields. In historical scholarship, from the late 1980's for example, Desiree Lewis refers to scholars like Fatima Mernissi (1988) and Bonlanle Awe (1991) to have explored the need for "her-story" in African historiography, with their comprehensive accounts of women's agency and subordination transcending the limitation of narrow anthropology and developmentalism (Kraler 2005).

Developing these themes, Cheryl Jonson Odim and Nina Mba link the texture of historical process to Nigerian woman's narrative of her life to approach issues of gender and development from a holistic and humanist point of view (Odim and Mba 1997). Some studies of the state went especially far in extending theoretical explanations for understanding women and African politics. Scholars like Azza Karam, dealing with Egypt (1998), and Ailai Tripp (2000) focusing on Uganda, examined postcolonial states in terms of gendered institutional structures, relations and cultures. In so doing they questioned restrictive notions of development and solicit a much wider range of theories and subjects than those examined in traditional anthropological accounts. With regard to Africa, Rodet argues that the 1980s were actual 'decade in the re-discovery of female migration and in the recovery of female migration experiences' (Rodet 2008:165). This view is also expressed by Sotelo and Cranford in *Gender and Migration* as they argue that: Initial attempts to focus on women migration in 1970's were met at best with indifference, and at worst with vitriolic hostility. Hence women migrants began to receive more scholarly attention in the 1980's (Sotelo and *Cranford* 2006:105)

We can, therefore, argue that recognition of women's agency in history was not an overnight process, it came into being slowly. As time went on the existence of women migration could no longer be denied. The increase of women population in towns led to gradual acceptance of women as migrants. Nevertheless, such tendencies did not lead to total acceptance of women as independent labour migrants. When it became impossible to deny the importance of female migration, they were then analysed as the main consequences of male migration. Women were said to have began taking part in labour migration to alleviate the absence of the male workers who did not send remittances to their communities of origin. This approach subscribed once again to the underlying notion that men were the first migrants into the colonial cities and that women began migrating only in the last decade of colonialism when African colonies began to experience rapid urbanization. Women were still seen as 'passive migrants' who accompanied their husbands who had wage-labour jobs in urban centres. Studies were, therefore, still focused on male labour migration. This assumption that women migrate as dependents was strengthened by the often repeated assertion that man predominated the African urban population (Clark, Gugler and Weisner). For example, despite the clear participation of women in the slave exodus, former male slaves were still assumed to have been the first migrants in the colonial cities and women to have been the 'second sex in town (Gugler 1972). However, Gugler and G.L. Ene (1995) argues that most census data on urban sex ratios in Africa show such assertion to be ill founded since women were and still seen to predominate in the urban population in a number of African countries (Gugler ad Eve 1995:257). This huge number of women population in towns however, did not easily put down the understanding of passive women migration, portraying women migration as a result of being husbands followers.

As time went on a growing body of feminist scholarship within African studies, challenged this gender-biased approach to migration by showing that African women were not actually 'passive migrants', and by analyzing the degree of agency in decisions about migration. However, the problem of not accepting women independent migration still persisted. When scholars did note independent African female migrations, they were often describing them as marginal and deviant, also being linked to prostitution (Boyle and Halfacree 1992). The view of African female migrations seemed to be still embedded in colonial and masculinist approach. Most researchers and historians still continued to assume that before independence, African women were never really concerned by the social and economical changes experienced by their male counterparts. Examining the literature on labour migration, we can evidently note that the dominant paradigms of colonial, nationalist and Marxist histories that informed African histories until the 1970s were silent on women. The writings based on these paradigms had all neglected women's participation, not only in labour migration processes but also in other aspects. For example, colonial historiography took women in the eyes of men; nationalist historiography concentrated itself with heroic stories of which male dominated the narratives leaving women as not part of such struggles. On the other hand Marxist historiography concentrated on the analysis of capitalist exploitative relations. The silence of these dominant paradigms on women agency in history was not accidental but rather because of the blinders which were inherent in the theories used.

4: Women's Agency Recognized

The gradual acknowledgement of the importance of women's economic role in African societies from the 1970's allowed the questioning of this gender-blind approach to migration in the 1990's. However, African female migrations were solely taken into account from the moment they became visible to western eyes.

This period can be traced from the 1970's when the main African cities started experiencing what Rodet called 'population explosion' and when western countries were gradually facing the increasing participation of African female migrants in international labour migration networks (Rodet 2008:167). While African female migrations prior to the 1970's remain understudied, it would appear as though the new gender awareness would only be applied to the study of contemporary African migrations (Zeleza 1999:82). Nevertheless, it is asserted that the historical discourse about African migration during this period still appears to remain very much influenced by the old masculinist colonial discourse and was ultimately unable to break free from the gender bias of such categories as 'labour migration, which excludes the complexity and variety of female and male migration (Rodet 2008). The 1990s saw the development of important scholarship in women migration studies, which had questioned the common gender-blind approach towards African migration. However, even if feminist studies attempted to restore female migrants to history by fighting against the image of 'the passive accompanying female migrant,' these studies continued to use implicitly the same dichotomy of 'passive versus active migration. They tried to prove that female migrants were actually active migrants but without questioning the existence of this sexual dichotomy (Rodet 2008). [The dichotomy which allowed one to know whether a migratory movement had to be considered as passive or active was always the labour migration pattern]. Female migrations were taken into accounts only if they fit into the same criteria as patterns of male labour migration. Dirrit Posel portrays that in South Africa, feminist historians particularly were highly critical of explanations that reduced migration patterns (explicitly or implicitly) to the workings of a unified household. Such accounts ignored the ways in which the gender division of labour had been upheld by internal structures of control in rural communities, including social pressure, gender ideology and women's economic dependence (Posel 2003:2). He further revealed that chiefs, fathers and husbands had the ability to restrict the mobility of women and hereby reinforce women's traditional roles in rural production. The focus on labour migration and economic factors as well as the general invisibility of migration of African women in history led to the neglect of the diversity of migration experiences lived by both women and men. African migration history scholarship therefore, still provided an incomplete and inaccurate picture of African migrations. Their analysis remained therefore within the dualistic conceptual framework of 'active versus passive' migration.

Stichter also argues against the pre-dominated notion that when women migrated, they only did so to accompany their husbands. One among the many cases she provides to support this argument is a Lango woman whose several ex-husbands had sabotaged her gin-distilling business in the rural area. Stichter quotes her to have said she did not ever want to re-marry (Stichter 1985:152). Stichter further argues that studies of women with some education have shown that they too, in addition to women in trade, are among the most likely to migrate independently, largely for reasons of economic opportunities. According to Stichter, even those who came to town with their husbands must not be assumed that they were necessarily passive about the decision, or that they were completely economically dependent. In her study of women migrants, Stichter argue that sectors such as mining industry and transport were pre-dominated by men. However, some categories of industry such as agricultural processing, garment and textiles employed a good number of women (Stichter 1985).

Silvia Pedraza correctly pointed out that, bringing women into the humanities and the social sciences takes place in stages: first, by filling the gaps in knowledge resulting from their absence; and second, by transforming the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of their disciplines (Pedraza 1991:304). This has been true to African case as with paradigm shifts in historical scholarships, various writings concerning women actions and agency are being increasingly put in place. Gaitskell provides a comprehensive discussion of the ways in which women academicians in the field of anthropology initiated research on women in South African studies to pioneer academic attention to women's roles and life histories. She argues that this work was emphatically pre-feminist and that sexual division in a society was seen as relatively unproblematic. She further adds that scholars like Hansi Pollak, Monica Wilson and Hilda Kuper produced social records that although, largely rectificatory accounts of the diverse aspects of women lives, they provided a platform for women studies to be within the ambit of serious academic discussion in Southern African studies (www.gwsafrica.org). Their observation denoted the importance of anthropological studies in recognizing women's history. Stacey and Thorne emphasize that during this period, feminist historians shifted the focus of research by placing women at the centre and writing the history of the private sphere and of relationship between the public and the private (Stacey and Thome 1985:305).

Likewise, literature was transformed by the inclusion of women and ethnic writers, changing the canon that defined the field. Anthropology has been the most deeply transformed by feminist contributions because the analysis of kinship and sexual division of labour has always been its very core. Thus, scholarship thinking matured and went from male centred analyses to providing what Stacey and Thorne call a gendered understanding of all aspects of human life, one that traces the significance of gender organization and relations in all institutions and in shaping men's as well as women's lives. While few in number, some important studies of women in African migrations have increasingly come into existence as a result of efforts to make women's agency in history of labour migration realized. They attempt to disrupt the centrality of labour migration in discourses on African migration and decolonize the discourses on African women.[2] They question the scholarly focus on economics as the underlying cause for voluntary migration flows. They suggest that women migrated for a variety of complex reasons and as early as the beginning of colonial times not only as followers of their husbands but also as independent migrants. To verify that, some examples are provided bellow. With regard to slave exodus, Rodet argues that a closer examination of colonial archives actually shows that former female slaves, alone or with their families even if they were wives or the concubines of their masters, did participate to a greater extent in migratory movements. She further reveals that several archival documents even attest of the numerous attempts made by female captives to leave their masters each time they had the opportunity (Rodet 2008: 171). The argument made here is that women were far from only being the victims as they had always struggled for better life through various means including being involved in migration. A growing body of feminist scholarship within African studies has used case studies to show African female migrations. They demonstrated that this gender imbalance, even in South African towns, was not as marked as it was often being said (Wright 1995:771-80). This suggests that there was relatively equal number between male and female workers who migrated for working in towns.

A book edited by Jean Allman, G. N. Musisi and S. Geiger, titled *Women in African Histories* is one of the products of different African scholars to write on women history in gender perspectives. The essays assembled in this book consider the lives of African women migrants, married royals, midwives and nationalist as active agents in the making of the colonial world. The authors show how central the control over African women in southern, eastern and western Africa was to the economic and social objective of colonialism, and restricting women's freedom of movement as a key ingredient on its success. In this book Teresa Barnes uses various evidences available to refute the colonial mentality of non-migrant African women and use various case studies to show that African women were labour migrants as men were (J. Alman et.al (eds) 2002:167. Giga Buja discuses contemporary African women migrating from Pondoland in the Transkei to work in sugar fields of Natal. She notes that nothing imperative than the absolute threat of starvation could send women out from their rural homes to look for works. She further historically relates the phenomenon of women migration from colonial Basutoland and Bechuanaland to the impoverishment of rural economies caused by the imposition of colonial labour policies (Discussed in J. Alman et.al 2002). Buja's work is perhaps among the first works to deal with African women as migrants who found work in the interstices of the urban economy even though formal employment for variety of reasons largely closed to them. In the same line, the *South African Labour Bulletin*, a monthly labour journal, devoted articles to the exploitation of women's labour in South Africa (Gaitskell 1980). This denotes presence of women in colonial enterprises.

Sharon Stichter in *Women as Migrants and Workers* argued that African women had what she calls a 'defacto' access to means of production. Thus, less of that access by any means or decrease of productivity normally acted as a factor for women to seek wage labour as it was to men (Stichter 1985:146). This implies the recognition of African women in a history of labour migration in the historiography. Stichter's argument clearly stands as a critique to scholars like Bryceson and Berger who claimed of women non-participation on labour migration on grounds that they could not be proletarianized as they had no ownership of means of production (Bryceson 1980). However, this question of African women to have owned or not owned means of production is still debatable since one precise answer cannot be provided to suit the whole of Africa. According to Stichter, women started to involve themselves into wage labour following their migration from rural areas as a result of social and economic hardships.

[2] See among others: Sean Redding, "South African Women and Migration in Umtata, Transkei, 1880-1935" inKathleen Sheldon, ed. Courtyards, Markets, City Streets, Urban women in Africa, (Oxford: West View Press, 1996), pp. 31-46; Christiana E.E, Okojie, "Female migrants in Urban Labour Market: Benin City, Nigeria" Canadian Jounal of African Studies, Vol.18 No 3 (1984), pp. 547-562; Jean Alman and Nakanyike Musisi eds. Women in African Histories, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002.

Stichter mentions some economic hardships such as inability to feed families or obstacles to economic advances in the rural areas, crisis of family status such as divorce, desertion, widowhood and unhappy marriage being responsible, separately or in combination (Stichter 1985: 151). East Africa serves as an example where women workers were found in tobacco processing, coffee-bean sorting, milling and cleaning, sisal decotificating and brushing, sugar extracting and refining, tea sorting and cotton ginning. Stichter also points out that the figures show that about 50% of the employees in textile industry in Ethiopia were women (Ibid p160). George Chauncey writing about women's labour in Zambia Copper belt argues that although it was not intentional, the denial of women from getting employment in the mining sector, and letting them to establish themselves otherwise had credited women in various ways in the areas where they migrated to. Firstly, those who engaged in the production of vegetable and fruits in the compounds enabled to transform their traditional roles into means of earning cash. This made them to remain relatively independent from monopolistic employers. Secondly, it gave women a room to have sound economy that changed the social perception. He argues that in case of those who worked on garden plots they could even hire men to work for them. Using the case of Copper belt, Chauncey reveals that some migrant women could accumulate sufficient capital and expanded their business. He provides a good example that the first African to own a bus to transport persons between mining towns was a woman as was the first person to open a hotel in Ndola (Chauncey 1981: 152-3).

While abandoning Marxist paradigm, Patrick Haries in his study of migrants in Southern Mozambique to South Africa, he keeps workers struggles as central. He also mentions women migrants to the Rand who tended to congregate in Johannesburg itself and that there were about ninety women in 1896 rising to about 6500 by 1930's. (P. Harries in J. Allman et al 2002). Quoting from Haries, J. Allman et al says "women from Mozambique were initially the most prominent practioners of the brewing crafts on the rand and that a group of Mozambican men complained in 1921 of large scale movement of Mozambican women to the rand to an extent that they requested a repatriation of two thousands of those women (Ibid). Simelane, though reffering to Swazi affirms this argument by pointing out that in some industrial centres, Swazi women took advantage of the concentration of male workers to produce traditional beer for sale in the male compounds (Simelane 2004:107). This stands as a clear evidence of great number of women migrants that could no longer be denied of their participation in colonial economy. Iris Berger in her publication, *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry 1900-1980*, draws on comparative labour history and feminist theory to trace the history of black women as industrial workers and trade unionists in South Africa between 1900 and 1980. Her study attempts to re-unite the community among generations of working women and to restore some of the hidden connections between past and present struggles against racial, gender and class oppression. She also places this history within the wider perspective of working women in other parts of the world and other time periods (Berger 1990:398). Berger cites Helen Safa, who outlined three stages applied to the north-eastern states of the US, which are comparable to those in South Africa. The first phase relied on native labour, mainly single, unmarried daughters of farm families parallels the first quarter of the twentieth century in South Africa, when industries and factories emerged and absorbed daughters of rural Afrikaner families. The second stage incorporated immigrant women in the clothing industry, were similar in respect to black women who entered the factories after World War II. Lastly, the emergence of runaway shops, as the industry branched out into developing countries, is analogous to the development of rural clothing factories in South Africa, where low wages match those of other peripheral centres worldwide (Ibid p.4). According to Iris Berger, "working in factories had the potential to extend women's experience in a variety of ways, exposing them to new ideas and to people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds"(Berger 1991:5).

Another work which to its extent incorporates issues of women and gender into the discourses and paradigms of African labour migration is that of Fredrick Cooper in his resent magnum opus on debates and changes in colonial labour policy. African women move through Cooper's narratives of the ways in which French and British officials tried to comprehend, cope with, shape and answer to the labour question in colonial Africa (Cooper 1996:21). Although Cooper does not quantify female migrancy, he acknowledges the fact that it existed. More recently, Giblin in *a History of the Excluded* made a chapter discussing Colonial Njombe women as labour migrants. He argues that, although the roads, SILABU camps and plantation barracks were predominantly a world of men, women also made journeys as labourers to Tanga and other regions (Giblin 2005:138). He reveals that the number of women travelling to the sisal regions increased markedly after the Second World War as motor transport made travel safer.

It is further pointed out by Giblin that most of women seeking plantation employment travelled with husbands or male relatives. According to Giblin this was because unescorted women were denied entry to SILABU vehicles and rest camps (Ibid). Different stories of women who journeyed to the sisal regions are presented by Giblin. Such stories describe aspects of labour migration which, being so utterly commonplace among men of colonial generation, were usually omitted from their accounts. The accounts described show that, like men, women found, amid the hardship, toil and penury of labour migration, opportunities to educate themselves and to define self identity. They also reveal that women as well as men made travel as migrant labour and as part of a lifelong struggle for improvement, for, like the men, these women struggled in later life to benefit from the knowledge and experience gained in travel and plantation employment. In a generation of feminist scholarship, Christine Obbo, pointed out that African women used various strategies including migration to achieve their goals of power, wealth and status (Alman et al 2002). In this spirit, the view that women in Southern Africa simply could not and therefore did not migrate is challenged by a number of scholars through tightly focused case studies of women's mobility and migration inside and outside national boundaries. Julia Wells, in her examination of women pass resistance, logically includes the topic of mobility, pointing out that South African colonial towns were settled by both Africans, male and female workers (Wells 1993:56). She also mentions women who settled in the rand town who had run away from the patriarchal controls and of the reserves or had come to town with their families from white owned farms. Writing about the Swazi, Simelane argued that Swazi women participated in labour migration to South Africa as early as the second decade of the twentieth century (Simelane 2004). He further pointed that a large number constituted those who were migrating from rural areas to growing urban centres. For instance, he depicts that although the number of Swazi women who migrated to South Africa between 1960 and 1985 fluctuated, but not below 7,000. As far as cross-border migration is concerned, Simelane reveals that women migrated to the industrial centres of Witbank, Piet Retief, Nelspruit, Paul Pietersburg and the Witwatersrand. The majority were employed as domestic servants while others were employed in different factories in South Africa. From the late 1930s, others went to work in the sugar plantations of Pongola in South Africa (Ibid).

5: Conclusion

Generally, for so long, the historiography of African migration has stressed that the colonial towns were mainly shaped by male labour migrations. The analysis of the neglect of the prevalence of women in the colonial towns demonstrates how important it is to take into account every form of human mobility in order to have a more complete understanding of the history of African migratory movements and of colonial towns. It is actually the focus on male labour migration by both colonial administration and African historical scholarship that has excluded the diversity of the migratory movements experienced during colonial times. These assumptions resulted in complex migration patterns being assimilated into a simplified pattern of labour migrations, entailing a homogenization of views over both male and female African migrations. In order to make female migration visible again, it is important to interrogate the centrality of labour migration to this question and to abandon gender dichotomies, which fundamentally prevent an analysis of the mobility of African women. Though not so many, there has been an increasing literature by various scholars showing that because of various factors, women were labour migrants as men were.

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