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Silent, Invisible, Vulnerable: Female Migrants in Southern Africa

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Silent, Invisible, Vulnerable: Female Migrants in Southern Africa[1]

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Introduction

The following is a working paper/think piece on the intersections of women migrants, violence, and xenophobia in South Africa. It is based on some very preliminary desktop research on women migrants and their various vulnerabilities, in-depth research on Chinese migrants in South Africa, preliminary field research on Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants in Johannesburg, and some personal experiences as an immigrant woman of colour in the country.

I was invited to attend this conference because of my prior work on gender-based violence in South Africa and my current research on Chinese migration to the southern Africa region. This workshop (and this paper) presented me with an opportunity to start trying to think through some of the ways in which women migrants are often invisible in the recent surge of writing around xenophobia, in much the same way as Asian migrants are also invisible in research, writing and discussions of migration to South Africa. Much of this invisibility, I believe, is self-imposed: because of their high *visibility* and their extreme vulnerability, women migrants as well as all Asian migrants often attempt to make themselves both silent and invisible, to deflect unwanted and often unpleasant attention from themselves. This paper is an attempt to grapple with some of these complex and often contradictory issues.

Rampant xenophobia

Xenophobia is not a new phenomenon in South Africa, as some of the post-May 2008 writings on the violent outbursts might have one believe. Periodic episodes of xenophobic violence have taken place since the mid-1990s with such increasing frequency as to warrant the attention of both the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1998. A report based on a broad-based survey conducted by the South African Migration Project (SAMP) in 1997 revealed high levels of xenophobia across race and class divides: 25% of South Africans wanted a total prohibition of immigration, 22% wanted the South African government to return all foreigners in South Africa to their own countries, and 45% called for strict limits to be placed on migrants and immigrants (Williams 2009:3). In another similar survey conducted in 2006, xenophobic sentiments were confirmed. This time, two-thirds of the sample argued that foreigners used up resources and committed crimes, and close to half said that foreigners bring diseases such as HIV to South Africa.

[1] This paper was first presented at the Gender and Region Project – Mexico City Workshop, Universidad Iberoamericano, 11-13 November 2009.

For many years numerous government officials have downplayed violent attacks on foreigners, preferring to label them as opportunistic crimes or conflicts over resources; some have even made damning public statements about foreigners. Williams argues that rather than spontaneous, these attacks appear to be "part of a well-organised campaign that targets foreigners living in some of South Africa's poorest communities" where anti-foreigner sentiments are "whipped up" (Williams: 2009:4).

There is no room in this paper to regurgitate the various causal factors (isolation, relative deprivation, nationalism, racism) or hypothesize as to the incendiary sparks. Suffice it to say here that in May 2008 xenophobic violence erupted in townships around Johannesburg and spread across the country, eventually leaving a reported 62 dead, hundreds wounded, and over a hundred thousand people internally displaced.

And while the May 2008 episode was particularly insidious and widespread, the violence and general discrimination against foreigners has not ended. Despite constitutional and legal protections, most South Africans, including many of those in positions of power (border guards, Home Affairs officials, police officers, nurses and doctors) continue to discriminate against foreigners. A June 2009 report released by Medicins san Frontieres highlights the appalling conditions of Zimbabweans in South Africa, including their ongoing lack of access to adequate protection, shelter, and basic services, particularly health care.

Gendered xenophobia

A UN-INSTRAW/SAIIA report (2007) argues that the numbers of African women migrants were increasing, changing traditionally male-dominated patterns of migration. According to UN-INSTRAW data, women now encompass close to 40% of all regular migrants from the SADC region to South Africa. At the same time, Elizabeth Sidiropoulos points out: "Women migrants are more likely to be disadvantaged by the migration experience than their male counterparts. While South Africa is an increasingly popular destination for migrants in numeric terms, it is often an intimidating and unstable destination, where women migrants suffer violence, overt hostility, and social exclusion, as well as economic exploitation."

A more recent report released in December 2008 the CSVR goes a step further, arguing that migrant women in South face a double jeopardy – that their nationality and their gender makes them more susceptible to violence, particularly sexual violence. Given the extremely high levels of xenophobia in South Africa, high levels of violence against women, and the normalized ways in which violence is used in South Africa, migrant women, argue Sigsworth, Ngwane and Pino in this report, experience exploitation, abuse and violence on a daily basis. The xenophobic attacks of May 2008 were seen, by the women in their research sample, as simply an extreme version of what they experience every day in both subtle and insidious way.

Unequally vulnerable
The CSVR report argues that foreign women are often more visible; certain "markers of difference" set them apart from South Africans. These include language, accents, traditional clothing, and cultural practices. I would argue, however, that migrant women are unequally vulnerable. Some of us are offered a modicum of protection by virtue of our class and countries of origin. Others, because of their physical traits, distinctive traditional dress, lack of English language or local language abilities, accents, or religions, are more vulnerable than others who can blend more easily into existing South African communities.

Race, too, plays an important factor which is often ignored in some recent writings on xenophobia, but highlighted by others who have referred to the May 2008 wave of violence as "Afrophobia" or "Negrophobia", linked to forms of black South African self-hatred and lasting impacts of apartheid turned outwards (need refs). One Nigerian scholar, blogging on his latest experience in Johannesburg, went as far as to argue that black South Africans had "kaffirized" black African migrants, in their attempts to identify/create a group lower on the totem pole that is South African race politics (ref.)

Zimbabwean women – Particularly vulnerable
The case of Zimbabwe and Zimbabwean women deserves special attention, in part because of the sheer numbers and due to the nature of the Zimbabwean crisis and the ways in which this has spilled over into South Africa. According to MSF:

> "In the past several years, the crisis in Zimbabwe has given rise to food insecurity, and unprecedented cholera epidemic, political violence, rampant unemployment, and escalating HIV crisis and the near-total collapse of the health system. This breakdown in Zimbabwe has driven nearly one-quarter of the entire population into neighbouring countries, particularly South Africa." (MSF 2009:3).

As recently as June 2009, MSF reported that each day there are still thousands of Zimbabweans crossing the border into South Africa. An estimated 3 million Zimbabweans are living outside Zimbabwe, mostly in South Africa. A CSVR report indicates that as many as 40% of the Zimbabweans who have fled their homes for South Africa are women.

Many of these women have suffered political violence in Zimbabwe, only to suffer further violence at the border and more mis-treatment in South Africa. Of the women seen by the Zimbabwe Torture Victims/Survivors Project based at the CSVR, women made up 32% of all torture survivors seen between February 2005 and September 2006; 15 % of these women reported that they had been raped (ZTVP 2006:2). MSF reported that in April 2009 more than 75% of clients seen had been raped while crossing the border and nearly 60% had been raped by more than one perpetrator (MSF 2009:14).

Xenophobic attitudes and behavior experienced by women in South Africa compounds the trauma that many women experienced in their country of origin. Rape, during the border crossing and after arrival in South Africa, sometimes in the form of forced

transactional sex, continues to be a huge problem. Not only are armed gangs (amagamagama or guma-guma) involved in violence at the border crossing, but many of the groups working with migrant women have documented the involvement of corrupt police officers in the destruction of travel documents; the exclusion of women from legal assistance, protection and basic services; and soliciting bribes and sex from immigrant women (Fuller 2009: 9).

Language, Accent and Dress

Women from West Africa, as well as those from Somalia and Ethiopia have a distinct cultural style of dress. According to the CSVR study, women, as the traditional bearers of culture, face a distinctly gendered problem. While on the one hand there is a great need to preserve their cultural identity through cultural dress, food, music and rituals; on the other hand, holding on to these aspects of one's identity impedes integration and, perhaps more importantly, distinguishes the migrants from the rest of the population "thereby rendering them more vulnerable to xenophobic abuse" (Sigsworth, Ngwane, and Pino 2008: 16). They found that foreign women, often more visible because of their dress, language or accents, and therefore more vulnerable to exploitation and violence, made concerted efforts to become invisible and blend in with the general population (17).

The CSVR study found that many women "become silent as a measure of safety, choosing not to speak in public for fear of identification as foreign" (17). South Africans were also found to impose silence on foreigners "as a measure of power and containment" (18). The other strategy, of course, was to learn to speak some of the local African languages (typically Zulu or Xhosa) as a survival strategy.

Asian migrant women – Invisible in the research

Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian migrants to South Africa began arriving in small numbers in the late 1980s, increasing in the 1990s, with the largest numbers coming in in the past 6-8 years. However, these new migration trends were not immediately noticeable to the average South Africa because these new migrants were often confused with local populations of Indian South Africans. Because many of these new migrants are Muslim, they have tended to settle in areas historically occupied by Muslim Indian South Africans, causing a further "blending" of the old with the new migrant communities from South Asia.

Migration patterns of Pakistani and Bangladeshi, on initial examination, appear to be quite traditional insofar as single men arrive first, followed only much later by wives and children. While I would need to verify this with immigration figures, preliminary research indicates that the vast majority of Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants are male. Certainly, as we attempted to find potential research subjects in Fordsburg and Mayfair, it was evident that there were very few migrant women from these sending regions.

Cultural patterns, particularly traditional gender norms and the division of private/public spheres in traditional Muslim societies serve as another barrier between Pakistani and Bangladeshi women and the 'outside' world, including researchers. Language, too, also

served as another barrier. Many of the newest immigrants do not speak English, and, as researchers, we were limited to those research subjects who could speak English.

Within new Chinese migrant communities, migration patterns were also fairly traditional, but in terms of migration to South Africa, the history is longer such that we have been seeing the migration of many young couples. However, men still tend to dominate. In research carried out over the past 18 months, throughout Gauteng and Free State provinces, the vast majority of interviewees were men or couples, where the men did most of the talking.

Protected women: White/Black, Western, and/or professional

One of the curiosities as I began to think about the intersections of migration, gender, class and violence, was the extent to which my immigrant friends and I were sheltered from any targeted forms of discrimination or violence. Be they white, black or Asian, most of us had never experienced the horrors visited daily upon the vast majority of black African migrants.

While most South Africans will initially assume that I am Chinese, as soon as I speak, it becomes clear to them that I am American (or Canadian), and that becomes the most salient aspect of my identity. My Black American women colleagues, all professionals, and my Caribbean neighbor, have similarly *not* been targeted. In fact, in some ways, we have all thrived in a South Africa that lacks skills and experience in various professional sectors.

In post-apartheid South Africa, socio-economic and class divides have actually deepened, such that one might assume that it is our class position that protects us. Certainly none of us lives in the poorest communities and informal settlements. But even amongst those who have chosen to (continue to) live in areas of Yeoville or Hillbrow, their Americanness serves as a shield against violence. While it is clearly dangerous for women who are poor and black African, being well-off, professional, educated, black, and from a Western country can often be assets in the "new" South Africa.

Conclusion

Highly visible yet invisible.
Self-imposed silences.
Increasingly vulnerable.
But with high degrees of variation between groups, depending on country of origin, level of education, class position, and yes, race.

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