Migration, Gender, and Urban Sexual Economies in Nigeria

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As in much of sub-Saharan Africa, in Nigeria, a combination of increasing aspirations and opportunities, challenging economic circumstances, and sometimes burdensome kinship obligations compel large numbers of young single women to migrate from rural to urban areas. Many young female migrants adapt to the challenges of the city by engaging in sexual relationships with men who can provide resources for them, a strategy that can be experienced as both demeaning and empowering. This paper draws on an ethnographic study of young Igbo-speaking migrants in the northern Nigerian city of Kano. The scope and diversity of the local sexual economy, the spectrum of young women's experiences, and the moral discourses about migration, gender, and sexuality that are produced in response to this situation reveal the complexity and contradictions inherent in Nigeria's changing structure of gender inequality.

In recent decades, demographers and other social scientists have drawn attention to the growing proportion of rural-urban migrants in sub-Saharan Africa who are female, young, and unmarried (Gugler et al, 1995; Makinwa-Adebusoye, 1990). This trend represents a relatively new pattern, as previous rural-urban migration streams had been predominantly male, and women tended to move in more significant numbers as the married partners of male migrants than as single and independent agents in their own right. In Nigeria, as in much of the continent, the factors the propel

this migration are numerous, and reflect the multifaceted and tangled ways in which this pattern of mobility is indicative of both persistent gender inequality and significant transformations that can legitimately be seen as positive for women.

Young women in Nigeria typically leave their rural communities in search of opportunities, especially education or employment. The idea that socially acceptable trajectories for success for women include education, employment, and other means of income generation beyond farming and local rural trade has taken hold throughout much of the country. Indeed, these pathways are not only economically valued, they are seen as important for a woman's success in the marriage market, and as measures of her future competence at motherhood (more educated and economically successful women are viewed as able to impart these skills to their children). Even with young single women's growing participation in rural-urban migration, their greater access to education, and their entry and success in the labour and commercial marketplaces, marriage and parenthood remain paramount values and imperative lifecourse aims (Smith, 2001). The fact that young Nigerian women are, almost universally, still required to fulfil the domestic obligations that were expected of their mothers' and grandmothers' generations raises the question of whether these young female migrants are ultimately being asked to shoulder a double burden, an issue that has been examined in the literature (Hollos et al, 1992).

In Nigeria, questions about the consequences for women due to their increasing participation in rural-urban migration are further complicated by the varying ways in which young women are propelled to migrate. In most circumstances, the decision to migrate is viewed in economic terms (whether it is more immediate, as when looking for

a job, or longer term, as when seeking higher education as a gateway to future economic success). Further, more often than not, young women undertake migration with family and parental consultation and consent. While most young women make migration decisions in consultation with kin, the spectrum of experiences is broad. Regardless of the relative level and tenor of family support or coercion, nearly all young female migrants are expected to try to help parents and other kin at home through whatever success they achieve as migrants. Indeed, it is imperative not to exaggerate the differences between young men and young women in this regard. For the vast majority young rural-urban migrants in Nigeria the continued ties and obligations to parents, siblings, and wider networks of kin in their rural places of origin stand out as a paramount factor in how these young migrants experience and try to navigate the opportunities and challenges of city life (Chukwuezi, 2001).

This paper focuses on understanding how single young female migrants from southeastern Nigeria traverse and survive urban life in Kano, the largest city in northern Nigeria and a major destination for Igbo rural-urban migrants. Although the ways in which young female migrants participate in urban sexual economies are typically seen as evidence of gender unequal economic and cultural systems and processes, the ethnographic data presented below suggest that the situation is more nuanced. While many forms of young female migrants' participation in Kano's sexual economy can be viewed as exploitive, in a number of circumstances women utilise their sexuality and their sexual relationships with men productively, raising questions about the ultimate effects and meanings of these practices vis-à-vis issues of gender inequality. Further, it is difficult to disentangle the moral and material aspects of Kano's sexual economy.

The experiences of the young female migrants who were the subject of this study suggest that the moral dimensions of this sexual economy can have equal or greater consequences for the reproduction of gender inequality as do the more material aspects.

‘MY DAUGHTER IS WORKING IN KANO’: MIGRATION, ECONOMIC ASPIRATIONS, AND THE MORAL PARADOXES OF AN URBAN SEXUAL ECONOMY

The findings presented here are the result of a two-year study in 2001 and 2002 of unmarried Igbo rural-urban migrants from southeastern Nigeria between 15 and 24 years old who were residing in Kano (Smith, 2003). The study included a survey of 431 male and female migrants, intensive interviews with 20 people from the larger sample, and several months of participant observation. In analysing the strategies that enable young women to adapt to city life, it became clear that female migrants inevitably navigated the local sexual economy as they strived to survive and succeed in their new environment. For most young women, sexual relationships with men proved to be a major means for garnering economic support, albeit in ways that spanned a wide range of forms with regard to the explicitness of the economic basis for the relationship, the intimacy and duration of ties, and the moral valence for the women, their partners, and the larger community.

For analytical purposes, three positions in the spectrum of relationships in Kano’s migrant community’s sexual economy are identified and examined with regard to their relationship to and effects on gender inequality. The three forms of relationship

described are: 1) commercial sex work, mostly associated with brothels; 2) sexual relationships that originate from connections that are established in the plethora of local bars, taverns, and eateries that serve alcohol in Kano's migrant quarter; and 3) longer-term relationships that are less explicitly economic and often include a notion of romance and commitment. Of course, many kinds of relationships do not fit neatly in one category, some relationships evolve over time from one type to another, and many women experience more than one type of relationship, either over time or concurrently. The conventional view is that the more overtly economic a relationship is, the more likely a woman has been compelled to participate because of poverty, and the more pernicious it is for the perpetuation of gender inequality. The picture is somewhat more complicated when the social and moral aspects of gender inequality are figured in with the economic aspects. In-depth interviews and participant observation suggest that, in many ways, the most overtly economic relationships are morally less constraining for women. Understanding the relationship between rural-urban migration, gender, and the local sexual economy requires consideration not only of the economic underpinnings of gender inequality, but also its moral dimensions.

Commercial sex workers: economic dependence and moral independence

When the survey team, made up mostly of young Igbos from the major university in Kano, spanned out across the city to interview migrants, one of the supervisors, a middle-aged university lecturer from the Igbo Southeast, expressed considerable surprise at the number of young migrant women working as commercial sex workers in

brothels. He characterised his palpable dismay in a phrase that was repeated frequently by members of the research team over the study period. He lamented that he would never again react the same when, back home in the Southeast, the parent of a young female migrant announced proudly: 'My daughter is working in Kano.' Little did their parents suspect, he suggested, what sort of work their daughters were doing.

Interviews with young women working in brothels confirmed that most of them resorted to sex work in response to economic needs in circumstances where they felt they had few, if any, other viable options. Data from the larger survey sample indicated that women who were sex workers had few (and often no) kin in Kano who could help them. In the larger overall migrant population, more than half of the young female migrants had kin in the city, and many of them boarded with a relative. The lack of kinship ties increased young women's economic desperation, but it also freed them somewhat from the moral gaze of extended family who would have considered sex work extremely stigmatising.

Commercial sex work is viewed as morally unacceptable in the larger Igbo migrant community. Indeed, its unacceptability is exacerbated by the fact that many of the migrant sex workers' clients are local men, who differ from Igbo migrants in ethnicity and religion (Igbo migrants are predominantly Christian; the local population in Kano is most Hausa-speaking and Muslim). But, ironically, young Igbo migrant women who engaged in professional sex work seemed to escape many of the moral boundaries that constrain the behaviour of most Igbo women. Commercial sex workers in the study drank and smoked much more commonly and openly then other migrant women. More significantly, they talked to men with much greater liberty, arguing with them, laughing at

them, and cursing them in ways that most women would find difficult and even dangerous. Sex workers certainly engaged in their trade primarily out of economic desperation. Some of them faced exploitation and mistreatment from clients and from the men who owned and ran the hotels where they worked. But they also had considerable freedom with regard to their mobility when they were not working, and with regard to how to spend their savings. They had freedoms of certain kinds in arenas that were more constrained for women who were tightly bound to their kin and to particular men.

This does not mean to suggest that female sex work is a path to gender equality. But because sex work puts women 'beyond the pale' morally, their source of economic livelihood offers them considerable liberties that are unavailable to women who are more observant of social and moral norms. The point is not some misguided celebration of sex work, but rather to contrast it to other ways that young migrant women navigate Kano's urban sexual economy. This illuminates how the moral foundations of gender inequality can be as powerful – and sometimes as pernicious – as its economic foundations.

Bar girls. 'Is she or isn't she?'

While full-fledged commercial sex work is undertaken by a relatively small fraction of young unmarried Igbo migrants, many more young women work in jobs at bars, taverns, eateries, and a range of other entertainment establishments. At these venues, male clientele commonly banter playfully with female cooks, servers, and other employees.

In many cases (but certainly not most), these encounters evolve into sexual relationships. The spectrum of entertainment establishments, the intentions and behaviours of young women, and the kinds of relationships that unfold are highly diverse. In some cases, the line between sex work and tavern work is blurry; in others, young women only sleep with a man when the relationship could be understood as a romantically inclined or emotionally committed. But in almost all instances neither the man nor the woman views these relationships as commercial sex. It is equally the case that the man is always expected to provide some form of economic support to his sexual partner.

In these contexts, young women must be careful not to behave too much like sex workers, as their physical attraction, emotional appeal, and moral authenticity depends on obscuring or euphemising the economic aspect of a sexual relationship. In the evenings when the survey team sometimes assembled at a tavern for a meal or a drink, male members of the team openly speculated about whether some of the bar girls were 'really' commercial sex workers. Most illuminating was the fact that these male researchers – like many men – seemed to find most alluring those young women who appeared least obviously interested in their money. Yet in-depth interviews and informal discussions with many men and women revealed that the actual level of economic support that men provided in any sexual relationship was not smaller when the encounter was perceived in less overtly economic terms. Indeed, there was some evidence to suggest that young women accrued greater economic rewards the more able they were to shroud any economic motivations.

Perhaps not surprisingly, women who behaved more conservatively – exhibiting shyness, a degree of submissiveness to male authority, and a naïveté (whether genuine or feigned) about the sexual undertones of men's overtures – were both more likely not be judged as sex workers and more actively pursued by men who sought a less morally stigmatised sexual union than strictly commercial sex. In certain respects, the decorum entailed for a young female migrant to distinguish herself from a prostitute required behaviour that reinforced gendered stereotypes that kept women subservient to men. Perhaps the most significant and potentially deleterious example of this was with regard to the use of condoms. Many young women reported that it was difficult and awkward for them to suggest using condoms with their lovers, partly because such a suggestion made them appear, as several men and women put it, 'too professional'. This contrasted starkly with the reports of women working in the brothels, who reported the most regular use of condoms of any women in the sample, and who commonly asserted that they demanded their clients use them.

Good girls. 'No finance without romance'

The pressures that bar girls and others in the entertainment sector faced in concealing or obfuscating any economic motives they might have had for their sexual relationships were heightened for the majority of young female migrants who were neither commercial sex workers nor entertainment industry workers. While the survey data suggested that sex workers and entertainment industry service workers tended to be economically and socially more vulnerable than many other migrant women (they

generally had less income, poorer housing, and fewer Kano-based kin), many young migrants who fit neither category also had precarious livelihoods and depended on men with whom they had sexual relationships for economic support. For such women, the importance of assuring the perceived morality of the relationship was paramount, as men were much more likely to spend significantly on women who they believed were sexually exclusive and emotionally bound to them.

Throughout Nigeria, young women commonly express self-awareness about the economic motivations for sexual relationships with men (even as they are socially bound to minimise men's perception of these motives) with the phrase 'no romance without finance'. While this expression reveals women's strategically economic use of their sexuality, it is equally revealing to invert the phrase and note that for women to succeed in securing the most valuable male support – that which is not only the most financially lucrative, but also the most socially acceptable – they must behave in ways that privilege other aspects of the relationship above bald material exchange. In this sense, for women seeking to avoid the stigma of prostitution, 'there is no finance without romance.' Most young female migrants interviewed in the study wholeheartedly preferred relationships where they received financial support in the context of emotionally supportive and socially and morally sanctioned relationships. But it was clear that in this gender unequal society, in order to please men women had to behave in ways that reinforced aspects of gender inequality. Men expected significant degrees of acquiescence to male needs and priorities in order to reward women with both money and moral approval.

CONCLUSION

Young female migrants in Nigeria must steer their way through entrenched forms of gender inequality, navigating a complex sexual economy as they try to survive and succeed in urban environments. The findings from this study, which emphasise the moral as well as the material dimensions of gender unequal social systems, do not contradict the significance of the economic foundations and consequences of gender inequality. But by examining the complex terrain of the Kano migrant community's sexual economy, the intertwining of the material and the moral becomes apparent, producing circumstances, strategies, and consequences that are multifaceted and sometimes contradictory. While an ideal scenario would move women toward both economic and moral equality, a brief survey of the sexual economy in Kano suggests that young migrant women frequently must navigate uneven moral and material terrains, trading currencies across domains, risking failure in one realm for success in the other, trying to keep their reputations intact even as they secure their livelihoods, and reinforcing some aspects of gender inequality even as they challenge others.

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