

Abstract.

In the African context, cross-border mobility has been a livelihood strategy since the precolonial era and has provided individuals and communities with improved survival means, expanding their opportunities, and maintaining and building social relations across various contexts (Nyamnjoh, 2006: 2). The migration of women is increasingly becoming a normalised and essential livelihood strategy for African communities “amidst failing economies, a deterioration of quality of life, civil wars, and the absence of viable choice” (Kihato, 2013: 62). However, South African cities are shaped by contradictory practices of urban governance, development planning practices, as well as policies and attitudes towards cross-border mobility (Nyamnjoh, 2006 and Kihato, 2007). Practices of mobility destabilise the legitimacy and authority of the state (Kihato, 2007), as well as notions of how we understand space. This has direct implications on development planning thought and practice which, due to colonial legacies, often fails to accommodate the socio-spatial strategies of marginal actors in African cities (Harrison, 2006).

This study acknowledges the challenge that mobility poses for development planning in Johannesburg by exploring the diversity and hybridity of urban practices shaped by migration. Through a focus on the experiences of Somali women living in the Somali transnational social space of Mayfair, Johannesburg, the study seeks to uncover the interrelated relationship between gendered power relations, transnational mobility and the agency behind migrant women’s livelihood strategies. The study employs an analytical feminist framework of ‘gendered geographies of power’ (Mahler and Pessar, 2001) in order to explore the ways in which patriarchal, classist and nationalist practices shape processes of mobility and urbanisation. Ultimately, the study aims to question and confront the ways in which the intimate power dynamics within migrant groups in host cities, and across African borders, facilitate new ways of seeing and thinking about the African city.