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Book Review

Women and the Informal Economy in Urban Africa: From the Margins to the Centre

Mary Njeri Kinyanjui, 2014

London: Zed Books

xi + 140 pp., ISBN: 978-1-78032-630-6 [pbk]

Mary Njeri Kinyanjui provides a feminist, post-colonial and post-modern analysis of the informal economy of Nairobi, Kenya. Kinyanjui refreshingly brings to light a positive outlook of the contribution of women to Nairobi's informal economy that provides revenue, employment and a grass-roots strategy against poverty. The author makes a clear call for African cities to de-masculinize and to Africanize. Documenting a case study of women operating in Taveta Road, Kinyanjui discovers a change in the demographic of women that are involved in informal economies in Nairobi since earlier studies of the 1990s. Not only are the characteristics of these women changing, but also the spaces they now occupy. This is the crux of Kinyanjui's writing; that women who have been excluded by a modernist and predominantly male approach to urban planning have struggled from the periphery of the city to its core, and in doing so have made their presence in a masculine and elitist city centre.

Kinyanjui's work is timely as women's entrepreneurialism is now recognized as a catalyst for economic development in Africa, where its potential may be harnessed through the promotion of policies that equalize male and female entrepreneurialism (Adom, 2015). But meanwhile, informal entrepreneurs are neglected spatially and more so women, who have a lower level of representation in industrial clusters and are limited to the smallest business units available (Grant, 2013). The success of women's entrepreneurialism is dependent on the places in which it is embedded. Places that Kamete (2013) argues are limited by normalized technical solutions to the spatial 'deviance' of informality in a bid to attain urban 'modernity'.

The book is rich in detail of the historic background that has shaped African cities and the effect of colonialism on gender roles, the African economy and urban planning. For this reason the book's audience is wide and includes those interested in development, gender, informal economies, entrepreneurialism, African culture, urban planning, transport geography, and human geography. The book is highly accessible with an excellent introductory chapter that describes the relevance of the informal economy in Africa. In Chapter 2, Kinyanjui sets the scene and introduces the colonial origin of Nairobi city, an exploitative enterprise that served its relationship with Europe over its hinterland. Labour offered to male migrants on a temporary basis resulted in those people living on the periphery of the city in temporary accommodation. The central business district (CBD) was constructed by white and Asian immigrants and has historically been owned by the elite. Low wages created a pattern of consumption of small quantities of goods that gave rise to the informal

economy initiated by the city administration.

Chapter 3 documents the conflicting relationship between planning and economic informality between 1980 and 2010, a period in which the city administration attempted to banish street traders. Kinyanjui highlights the hawkers' heroic agency to resist their subordination by seeking access to the CBD for their livelihoods and spacial justice. Chapter 4's focus turns to women, who, with less formal employment opportunities than men, are more often involved in the informal economy and have been marginalized by policies that restrict them from working in the city centre. Planning policy failed to support the needs of women who were subordinated by male patriarchy and were not reached by elite African feminism of the 1960s onwards.

Chapter 5 describes the importance of mobility in women's access to the most desirable spaces of business activity. By surveying women, Kinyanjui finds that the majority use a matatu (a 14-seater Nissan van) or walk. I was fascinated by the author's account of how women have given meaning to this mode of transport. The matatu signifies hope and despair: 'the essence of any struggle, be it political or economic' (p. 72). It is a vehicle of empowerment for women because it is a forum where issues of the subaltern are discussed, videos screened, radio talks broadcast and slogans displayed that inform and energize. Kinyanjui describes the matatu ride as 'a springboard towards liberation, transformation and subaltern survival strategies' (p. 72). Whereas transport planning in Africa has usually been found to disadvantage women (Peters, 2001; Porter, 2008; Olvera et al., 2013), Kinyanjui describes a level of mobility that prevents women's isolation from the city's CBD and, by sharing transport costs, the women are able to purchase goods transnationally. Kinyanjui makes an appeal for enhancing women's mobility as key to achieving their empowerment and equity.

Chapter 6 details the characteristics and role of women in the informal economy in Nairobi. Young, educated and single women are now entering the informal economy with about half of women in marital relationships. Nairobi's informal economy is an agent for young women to gain income independently, defying male patriarchy. Another key argument made by the author is that women in Nairobi are moving into the CBD, where they are selling women's fashion accessories and children's clothing.

Chapter 7 accounts the solidarity entrepreneurialism exhibited by the women who share business space, knowledge, investment capital, customers and transport costs. Through unity and an African ubuntu spirit of 'I am because we are and since we are, I am' the women have translated the Western concept of microfinancing to suit their requirements with their own indigenized chama lending schemes. This has contributed significantly to the women's ability to successfully trade within the CBD and is a strategy against material poverty. The documentation of women who have sought to enhance their gender identity through unity, negotiation, knowledge sharing, and network building is valuable evidence of a change of identity for women through indigenous, grass-roots feminism. Kinyanjui calls for women of the informal economy to be more involved in urban planning.

Kinyanjui's case study provides a colourful and insightful account of an emerging African feminine identity that has risen from peripheral subordination to an interior foothold yielded by strength in unity, femininity and indigenous culture. Kinyanjui provides evidence of the empowering agency of the informal economy for women in urban Africa. It is a call for urban planners and city administration to respond to

the requirements of women, to de-masculinize the African city and to embrace the identity and culture of its people: to identify and work with its strengths. Central to the essence of the book is the tension that abounds between the ideologies of modernization and fixed, orderly, formal business verses culture, spirit and the temporal nature of informal business that has strengthened the African female identity and makes for a very interesting read.

If a weakness of this book must be identified, then it is a lack of detail about the methodology of the case study. The author clearly illustrates findings from a survey and interviews but does not detail the sampling method used. Women that have located businesses in the CBD amount to only 6.5% of women (21 of 323) surveyed, whereas the majority remain restricted to periphery areas outlined by the city administration. Kinyanjui writes with confident positivity, but for me, the study simultaneously and quietly outlines the discrimination against women that persists of the largely masculine planning ideology that neglects women as investors with rights to lucrative business spaces (p. 89). I question what is limiting other women from also taking their businesses to the CBD?

Whilst Kinyanjui's study may not represent the ability of all women to trade in Nairobi's city centre, it offers a rich encounter with the women of Taveta Road who have successfully made the move. Kinyanjui sets out to document the change in course of a number of women from the margins of Nairobi to its business centre – she certainly accomplishes this and inspires, with succinct implications for policy.

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