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African female immigration to the United States and its policy implications

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of female African immigration and settlement in the United States and discusses the research and policy implications for these processes. It highlights a significant surge in female immigration from African than non-African countries in recent years. This surge is driven by female immigration from Africa's countries most populous countries, from countries affected by civil conflicts, and from English-speaking countries in the region. African women are also more likely to arrive as unmarried single than other female immigrants. In addition, they had the highest prevalence of Bachelors, Masters, or Doctorate degrees among women in the US. African females were also about twice more likely to be enrolled in US Educational institutions compared to other women. Those in the labor force were more likely to work as nursing professionals than in technical occupational groups such as engineering and computing. The study concludes by discussing the research and policy implications of these findings for countries in the developing world.

Keywords

Migration; Women; Development; Africa

Introduction

Although African migration has arguably been male-dominated, females have a long history of participation in both its international and internal dimensions (Zlotnik 1995, Gulger and Ludwar-Ene 1995, Trager 1995, Ulicki and Crush 2000) dating back to the pre-colonial period (Nelson 1992). Female migration is also a constant feature of the dynamics of population mobility in post-colonial Africa. In the 1960s, African women accounted for about a third of all international migrants from the continent (Zlotnik, 2003). In the following decades, African international migration (AIM) experienced an even greater level of feminization especially with regard to migration flows originating from sub-Saharan African. Zlotnik (2003) notes that between 1960 and 2000 the percentage of sub-Saharan African women involved in AIM increased by about 7%. Although this increase is modest, it represents the largest relative growth in the feminization of migration stocks across all world regions during this 40-year period.

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In terms of destination choices, African females have traditionally migrated in greater numbers to other countries within the continent. Alexander (2000) traces the involvement of significant numbers of females in migration movements within Africa to the early 1900s. During the 1970s, Nigeria, Botswana, and Swaziland emerged as major destination countries for large flows of female migrants from Ghana who emigrated as a result of the country's economic crisis (Brydon 1992). By the end of the last century, female migration in Africa had become more directed towards South Africa, one of Africa's major countries of immigration (Ulicki and Crush 2000, Peberdy and Rogerson 2000).

Despite their importance in AIM, the literature on female migration remains sketchy. Much of what can be deduced about the dynamics of female participation in the process is either anecdotal or subsumed under generalized studies that focus on males. A few studies have, however, started to change this trend (see Findlay 1997, Adepoju 2000). This evolving discourse attributes increased female participation in all aspects of AIM to globalization. While globalization forces certainly affect both male and female migration patterns, in the past few decades they seem to have had a more profound impact on the feminization of AIM and especially on the mobility of female professionals. There are no existing detailed analyses to verify this, but generalized trends suggest that the current international labor market favors certain types of professions, example, nursing, medical technicians, and office and computer administrators, in which African females have competitive advantage over their male counterparts. The United Nations also estimates that the absolute number of female migrants from Africa to Europe, Canada, the US and Australia, more than double between 1960 and 2005 (UN 2006). Other estimates suggest that females, especially those in the younger ages, have become a significant component of the increasingly large African migrant population the US (Kent 2007).

The nascent scholarship on the feminization of AIM is salutary because of its departure from earlier, gender-neutral analyses (for good examples, Reynolds 2006). Yet, this emerging discourse has not succeeded in providing detailed analyses of female participation in AIM. While many studies have addressed the experiences of female immigrants from other world regions in the US (Sullivan 1984, Cobb-Clark 1993, Donato 1993, Cerrutti and Massey 2001), there are few systematic interrogations of female participation in AIM.

The present study is motivated by the need to expand scholarship on the role of women in several aspects surrounding AIM: general female participation; the participation of female professionals; and the socioeconomic status of African female immigrants and professionals in the developed world. We explore African migration to the US as a reasonable point of departure to illuminate these issues. Using US census data¹, we attempt to achieve our broad objective of establishing a comprehensive portrait of the female African population in the US. Specifically, the analysis will attempt to achieve the following four aims. First, we compare the recent immigration patterns of African female and male immigrants in order to examine gender differences in African immigration to the US. In the exposition our first objective, we also examine the question of how information on the marital status (i.e. single, divorced, married, etc) of arriving female immigrants shapes our understanding of the

¹In short, we use the African-born population in the census as a proxy indicator for African immigrants living in the US.

dynamics of their immigration patterns. Secondly, the study compares the educational attainment of African females with those of their non-African immigrant and US-born counterparts. In other words, we juxtapose the schooling attributes of African and non-African females to draw attention to important nativity differences in human capital endowments among females. Our third task is to describe the economic characteristics of African females. In the process, we pay particular attention to differences in occupational characteristics, employment, and income between African females and other females. We locate the first two objectives within the globalization-African brain drain-Diaspora rubric and we use objective three to glean some insights into the relative economic and professional accomplishments of African female immigrants in the US. Finally, we attempt to sketch out some research and policy recommendations surrounding the ramifications of female migration from Africa.

Conceptualizing Female Participation in AIM

Contemporary migration patterns among African females involve a growing number of destinations beyond the borders of the continent. Kofman (1999) underscores this point by arguing that female migration from North Africa to Europe plays a significant role in overall international migration movements between the two regions. These flows have their origins in the Algerian war of the 1950s during which large number of females emigrated from Algeria to other European countries. Recent estimates for the United Kingdom indicate that the number of female migrant workers arriving from Africa more than doubled between 1998 and 2002, in sharp contrast to the slower rates of immigration among African males (Robinson 2002). Andall (1999) highlights the fact that Cape Verdean women now migrate to Italy in significant numbers either in search of better employment opportunities or in order to use Italy as a transit point from which they move to other European countries such as the Netherlands. There is also evidence that migration from Equatorial Guinea and Cape Verde to Spain is now dominated by females (Ribas-Mateos 2000).

Labor market discourses provide a number of important contextual lenses for understanding the growth female participation in AIM. One view is that the dictates of economic globalization result in a positive relation between the volume of emigration of highly skilled migrants from a country and the level of poverty in that country (see, Kofman and Raghuram 2006). Locating our own analyses in this framework, we would expect that female migration from poorer African countries is likely to capture increasingly large numbers of skilled professionals and that their human capital characteristics, incomes, and employment rates are likely to be higher than those of females migrating from wealthier African countries.

Not surprisingly, declining economic performance in many African countries, combined with the attraction of better opportunities abroad, is a significant contributor to the increased participation of African females in AIM (Pedraza 1991; Peil 1995; Adepoju 2002). The growing involvement of African women in AIM, therefore, transcends traditional explanations that hinge on family reunification purposes. In fact, the conventional assumption that most female international migrants are trailing spouses is increasingly becoming untenable within the African context. Kofman (1999), for example, argues that in

the 1990s, African males who were dependent spouses outnumbered their female counterparts in the United Kingdom. These patterns reflect the fact that, at least in the context of the United Kingdom, African females had a higher likelihood of being employed in professional and managerial occupations.

The apparent economic nexus in the feminization of AIM is important. With increasing levels of education among African women in the past decades, they have become more qualified and willing to participate in the migration of skilled professionals (Peil 1995, Adepoju 2002). Adepoju (2002) argues, further, that African women are now increasingly involved in international migration movements as a part of an essential strategy of survival, reflected, for example, in the tendency for female African nurses and health professionals to migrate in search of better opportunities abroad (Pang, Lansang, and Haines 2002, Kline 2003).

There is little doubt that the high demand for specific skills in the global labor market has facilitated the migration of African professionals, irrespective of gender (King and Newbold, 2007; Khoo et al., 2007). We conceptualize female participation in AIM by extending these analyses to make a case that the same supply-demand imperatives that skew the process in favor of all professionals (males and females alike), seem to have had a greater positive impact on the mobility of female professionals (Cohen et al., 2008; Massey et al., 2006; Eisikovits 2007). For the African case, this gender orientation may be explained in terms of a linked chain of socio-cultural factors: (i) African cultures have often inhibited the migration of females, including professionals, except as accompanying spouses -> (ii) as a consequence, the supply of professionals from many African countries to the global labor market has been male-dominated -> (iii) male domination of the process has created a significant untapped pool of female African professionals -> (iv) additionally, African females have been encouraged traditionally to pursue non-academic (more so than academic specializations) which coincidentally and fortuitously, are now in heavy demand in the global labor market -> (v) African countries, therefore, often possess a large and variegated pool of female professionals, which is now being recruited by small and large enterprises stretching from Australia, through Europe to North America (see Khoo et al, 2007). These globalization dynamics have had gendered impacts on AIM, in general, and on the African brain drain, in particular.

Globalization has facilitated the feminization of AIM by making it easier for skilled migrants to use one country as a stepping stone to a preferred destination where they believe that career opportunities are more plentiful. Donor (2005) reports that during Ghana's economic crises in the 1980s, women with limited financial means preferred to migrate to Nigeria, where the prospects of employment were much better, in order to financially prepare for their eventual migration to countries Europe. In discussing Canada as a stepping stone, King and Newbold (2007:910) observe that '...there have been suggestions within the popular press and recognition within Canada's federal government that the failure of highly trained immigrants to find meaningful employment within Canada, given the reluctance of employers to recognize foreign credentials, has led to their departure to jurisdictions (primarily the United States) which may be more readily accepting of international credentials.' The implications of this process for the feminization of AIM may be explained

at least by two factors: female professionals are likely to be risk averse and so eschew illegal channels of immigration; and they are more likely to be accompanied by children. As a consequence of this combination, female professionals are also more likely than males to opt for 'soft spots' in the legal migration system over shadier, illegal options. This means that they also are likely to use as a country like Canada and some Scandinavian countries as entry points to the West and from which they can then eventually travel to a desired destination in the US, where their credentials can offer them more satisfactory career opportunities.

An important strand of international labor market discourse conceptualizes the impacts of globalization on the propensity of professionals to migrate in terms of the human capital attributes of the potential migrant (age, sex, educational attainment, marital status, etc.) e.g. in Feliciano (2005), Kanpur and Rapport (2005). In the past, these explanations have been directed primarily at male migrants but the increasing professionalization and economic empowerment of African females indicate that the same factors can be used to explain the increasing importance of females in AIM, with or without their accompanying spouses. For example, the human capital explanation often alludes to proficiency in the language of the host country as an indicator of the potential for a migrant to succeed professionally in that country (Fennelly and Palasz 2004). In the US case, it has often been assumed that this phenomenon favors male professionals from Anglophone Africa, who are supposed to be better qualified and to have a better command of English than female migrants. This assumption could now be questioned as females in professions like nursing show that proficiency in technical English may be a more germane indicator of professional and economic success because it facilitates job accreditation.

Even though there is no clear evidence to establish causal linkages between them, an intuitive case can also be made that an important element of the globalization of labor is the ability of migrants, especially professionals, to obtain dual citizenship. While this is relevant for both male and female professionals, Reynolds' study of Igbo professional women in Chicago (discussed in greater detail later) suggests that their decision to migrate is tied directly to the fact that they are able to maintain a dual status, which combines recognition at home of their economic and professional elitism with recognition abroad of their middle class, professional status. This dual socioeconomic status is facilitated and enhanced by a dual legal, citizenship status.

Sassen (2003) combines human capital and globalization explanations in her argument that while female emigration from Africa may be linked to their expertise, it has also been precipitated by other global factors such as IMF and World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs. Though designed to bolster African economies, these programs have had negative effects on employment, exacerbated poverty and contributed to the increased feminization of what Sassen refers to as *migration circuits of survival*. This phenomenon generally involves migration from low to high income countries and is important for understanding female participation in AIM because the timing of the economic downturn in African countries coincided with a rising demand for specific types of skilled labor in high income countries. The combination of declining economic performance in sub-Saharan countries, concomitant declines in real wages, and increasing demand for specific skills in the West, provided an

impetus for highly educated African females to become more actively involved in AIM (Kofman 2000; Mahler and Pessar 2006).

Sassen's migration circuits of survival could be extended to conceptualize strands of female participation in AIM as components of international involuntary migration movements that clearly have a survival nexus. For example, while refugee movements do not fully explain recent surges in total African immigration to the US, they shed some light on the female dimension of the process in two ways. First, refugees, a large number of them females, comprise a significant element of migrants from some African countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea (McSpadden and Moussa 1993). Second, females are over-represented in forced migration flows from African countries affected by wars (Pedraza 1991). Although, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify the contribution of female professionals to this process, the higher representation of females in many African forced-migrant populations is now well documented (Ager, Ager, and Long 1995, Kibreab 1996, Martin 2004). Lubkemann (2000), for instance, has described large female migration flows from Mozambique to Zimbabwe and South Africa during the Mozambican civil war. Mozambican female movements to South Africa are still important even after the end of the Mozambican war more than a decade ago. Some estimates indicate that females account for more than half of all cross-border traders moving from Mozambique into South Africa (Peberdy and Rogerson 2000). One aspect of forced migration, the sex industry, may be linked directly to the unsavory side of globalization. Jua (2003) attributes the over-representation of Cameroonian females in Switzerland to this factor. He also argues that many of these women are driven by the desire to earn enough money to finance their children's schooling at home. The association between female African migration and such irregular movements is not solely limited to immigration flows to Europe. Other studies, e.g. Peil (1995), have observed similar patterns in the international migration movements of females within the African continent. The evidence suggests also that female professionals from some countries, example Zimbabwe, have been forced by economic vicissitudes at home to emigrate and participate in the sex industry in neighboring countries.

Although the decision to migrate is often at the core of many brain drain studies (Logan, 1999), women's agency in decision-making has been minimized under the assumption that their migration is tied to the decisions made by their spouses. This interpretation often views female migrants as "trailing" or "tied" spouses (Mincer 1978, Breugel 1996). The importance of agency to our understanding of female migration flows is now being increasingly emphasized (Mahler and Pessar 2006, Pessar and Mahler 2003; Massey et al. 2006). Since economic globalization increases the migration of African women, in general, and female professionals, in particular, AIM is likely to be associated with greater levels of agency among female migrants. This argument has some important implications: African women are likely to arrive in the US as unmarried singles and not as married women for whom the initiative to migrate is linked to the decisions of their spouses; and, even if married, because many are likely to be highly educated professionals, African women are also likely to be the ones 'carrying' their male spouses along with them on their visas. It is possible, therefore, that despite high levels of agency among single African female migrants, some African women migrate, as married singles, and subsequently sponsor the migration of their spouses and children, after economically establishing themselves in the US.

The notion of female agency in AIM has been elaborated by Reynolds (2006) in her analysis of Igbo women in the Chicago area. She makes the case that educated Igbo women migrate in order to maintain their elite status back home, which emanates from their high levels of education. Her analysis suggests that the imperative to migrate is tied to an interlinked series of cultural considerations: educated Igbo women have financial obligations to their families and children; nevertheless, the cultural environment favors men in the job market even when they are less qualified than females; educated women find that their elite professional status is not consistent with their incomes and job positions at home; they decide to emigrate to countries where these conditions can be satisfied. The decision to emigrate, therefore, is based on an assessment of the actual financial and professional status of women at home versus the anticipated opportunities abroad and resonates with our earlier position that a 'linked chain of socio-cultural factors' define the increasing feminization of AIM. For African women with lower levels of schooling, however, migration is mainly motivated by the desire for higher incomes and not necessarily driven by the desire to increase social status. Osirim (2008) suggests that despite the low social status of these African women, their relatively high US incomes make it possible for them to send remittances back home and thus maintain a sense of connectedness with origin societies where they are more highly valued.

The adjustment and settlement of migrants, including professionals, in destination countries abroad, offer another important conceptual lens for understanding the feminization of AIM. In terms of labor market outcomes for example, Kofman argues that a conceptual dichotomy exists in the analysis of male immigrants, who are assumed to dominate the high-tech industrial sector, and their female counterparts, who are believed to be concentrated in menial, racialized, and intimate forms of employment (Kofman 2000, Kofman 2004, Kofman and Raghuram 2006). This explanation, which is often anecdotal in nature, will be interrogated with available data in a later section of this study.

In summary, the present phase of economic globalization has placed high demand on specific fields that are not necessarily in the academic specializations where African males tend to predominate. The present high international demand for professionals in nursing, business and office management have presented unique opportunities for African females, who have traditionally been routed to such areas as 'female' specializations (this is not to suggest that female professionals are only in these specializations).

African immigration to the United States

Like their male counterparts, African females have traditionally been invisible in the contemporary literature on immigration to the United States. This trend appears to be slowly changing as a number of new studies, have included African immigrants in the examination of selected outcomes among the immigrant population of the US (e.g. Butcher 1994, Dodoo 1997, Massey et. al. 2007). For almost two centuries prior to the end of the twentieth century, African immigration to the US was virtually nonexistent. In fact, during the 150 year period following the end of slavery in the 1860s, African immigration to the US was institutionally impeded by restrictive immigration laws that prohibited the immigration of non-White populations to the US (Konandu-Agyemang and Takyi 2006, Kent 2007).

Immigration reforms enshrined in the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, the end of national origin quotas, and the new Diversity Visa (Lottery) Program, have now combined to facilitate the resumption of large-scale immigration of African nationals to the US.

Contemporary African migration to the US has increased at an exceedingly rapid rate. Some estimates indicate that while about 46,000 Africans arrived in the US between 1861 and 1961, in the decade of the 1980s alone the number of African immigrant arrivals was about five-times this number (Konandu-Agyemang and Takyi 2006). The various explanations generally given to account for the increase in African arrivals in the US have been explored in several studies (e.g. Gordon 1998). As expected, the main impact of these trends is that they have contributed to the increased proportional contribution of Africans to the immigrant population living in the US (Hatton and Williamson, 2003).

The new interest in the outcomes of Africans in the US seems to have excited little scholarly interest in the gender dimensions of African immigrant experiences. Only a few studies exist, which address the characteristics and experiences of African women in the US (Reynolds, 2006). Agbajoh-Laoye (2006), for example, uses the experiences of Ghanaian market women in Harlem, to examine the extent to which female immigration to the US is associated with the mitigation of traditional norms and expectations. Among her main conclusions is that structural forces associated with ethnic and racial discrimination in the US, limit the extent to which African women can experience social mobility after their arrival, even if they have educational credentials from US and other western institutions (see also, Maundeni 1999). These studies also argue that post-immigration adjustment processes are much more difficult for African females than for their male counterparts. In general, however, the analysis of the outcomes of African women in the US available in previous studies is far from complete. This is partly due to the lack of information on Africans in almost all traditional datasets used in contemporary US immigration research, as well as a tendency for some studies to focus on selected African populations.

This study therefore attempts to bridge this gap by examining immigration experiences of African women from a broader perspective that is informed by empirical data. Traditional statistics on immigrants published elsewhere (e.g. US Department of Homeland Security, 2007) are however unsuitable for an extensive analysis of African female immigration patterns since they are rarely disaggregated by sex. In contrast, census data are a reliable source of representative information immigrants, i.e. the foreign-born population, as well as their social and economic characteristics. The 1% sample of the 2000 US census data is therefore used to glean important insights on African females in this study². However, for analytical simplicity, we focus only on African female adults, i.e. those above age 17, since women below these ages are less likely to contribute to the outcomes examined in this study.

The US immigration patterns of African women

According to the 2000 US census, there are about 325,000 adult African women living in the US. Considering the large size of the total US immigrant population, about 31 million

²The 1% sample is used because many more individual African countries of origin can be identified in this sample compared to the 5% census sample.

people (Malone et al 2003), this figure is relatively small. African women are distinguished from other immigrants in terms of the recency of their immigration patterns as well as their unique socioeconomic characteristics. Census data on the years of arrival of female adult immigrants currently living in the US are presented in Figure 1. To simplify the presentation of the data, the distributions are shown only for the 1985–99 period³. The percentage for each year represents the percentage of all migrants currently living in the US who arrived during that year.

The data presented in Figure 1 indicate that close to one third of all African women in the US during the last census immigrated to the country in the five-year period spanning 1995 and 1999. The data indicate, further that, when compared to all female immigrants to the US, a disproportionately high percentage of African women arrived in the last seven years of the previous decade. Before this period, there was apparently no meaningful difference in the arrival patterns of female Africans and all female immigrants. Between 1985 and 1993, for example, the percentages of both the overall population of immigrant women and their African counterparts who arrived in the US were generally the same. Thus, among the population of female immigrants in the US, the percentage of Africans who arrived in the years between 1985 and 1993 was closely similar to that for all female immigrants who also arrived during this period. Proportionally, however, the wave of African female arrivals in the 1990s exceeded normative patterns of female immigration to the US for the first time around 1993 and consistently increased in the final years of the last decade. In fact, according to the US 2000 census 7.5% of all African women in the US arrived in 1999 alone.

In comparative terms, the growth in the number of female Africans arriving in the US in the last two decades was much faster than that for African males. The 2000 census, for example, indicates that the number of African males who arrived in 1999 was about 200% higher than the number of males who arrived in 1985. In contrast, the number of African females who arrived in 1999 exceeded the corresponding number of females who arrived in 1985 by more than a factor of three.

Further attempts at capturing gender differences in the arrival patterns of African immigrants are presented in Figure 2, which uses weighted estimates of the size of the male and female African immigrant population who arrived in the intervening years between 1985 and 1999. Figure 2 indicates that only about 4,000 more African males arrived in 1989 than in 1985. Despite this increase, the number of African males who arrived in 1994 was lower than the respective number of male arrivals in 1990 by about 1,200 persons. Close to 60,000 more African males arrived in 1999 than in 1995. Although the male increase in the final five-year period is more dramatic, the number of new immigrant arrivals at the end of each five-year period was consistently higher than the number of females arriving at the start of the period. In addition, the magnitude of the female differences was generally higher than that for males except for the 1995–1999 period. There were about 20,000 more African

³The most recent year of arrival available in the US 2000 census data is 1999. This is a likely reflection of the fact that the US census was officially conducted in April 2000 (US Census Bureau 2005), and data on immigrants arriving in 2000 would give an incomplete picture of immigrants arriving in that year.

females arriving in 1989 than in 1985, compared to 4,000 more for African males who arrived during this same period. Similarly, although there were a thousand fewer African male arrivals in 1994 than in 1990, the number of African females who arrived in 1994 exceeded the number who arrived in 1990 by about 47,000.

Consistent with larger growth of the African female population relative to the male population is the increasing ratio of female to male immigrants in the US who arrived in each year during the last two decades. As Figure 3 illustrates, the trend in the ratio of females to males, in terms of years of arrival, is clearly distinct for African adults compared to the trend observed for all other immigrants. Among African immigrants who arrived before 1980, for example, there were about 75 females for every 100 males, while for all immigrants combined there were 109 females for every 100 males. Among immigrants who arrived in 1999, the corresponding ratios for Africans and all immigrants are essentially the same. In general, the differences in the respective trends are instructive because they point to gender differences between the normative patterns of the overall US immigration trends and the respective trend for African immigrants. In short, while among the total immigrant population the ratio of females to males who arrived each year in the last two decades is about the same for all years, the evidence suggests that the traditional predominance of males in the African immigrant population is slowly being reduced by recent increases in the immigration of African females.

Major countries of origin

Table 1 presents estimates of the characteristics of immigrants from the major countries of origin of African female immigrants in the US. For increased clarity, the table presents estimates for the top five countries of origin in selected regions within Africa. The distributions presented in Table 1 reveal several important findings. First, in terms of the absolute population sizes, the most important origin countries of African female immigrants are the countries with the largest populations in Africa. For example, in absolute terms, female immigrants were most likely to come from Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and South Africa, which according to UN estimates (UN 2007) are also four of the five countries with the largest populations in Africa. Second, the estimates indicate that close to between 20% and 50% of all female immigrants from the major African countries of origin arrived in the US in the five-year period preceding the end of the twentieth century. At the same time, the distribution of the ratios of females to males indicate that among the major countries of origin, female immigrants from the Arab countries of North Africa are generally more likely than other females to be under-represented among the immigrant population from their respective countries. In contrast, these ratios are considerably higher for immigrants from countries in Southern Africa, especially for immigrants from Swaziland, among whom the data indicate that there were at least 29 females for each male immigrant. In some cases, females also outnumber males among immigrants from selected countries, e.g. Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Ethiopia, that experienced civil conflicts in the 1990s. However, these patterns are not consistent in other countries in Table 1 that had civil conflicts. Nevertheless, the perception that higher female to male ratios are likely to be reflection of the effects of forced migration movements, is reinforced by the fact that according to Table 1 the largest wave of

female immigration from the African continent in the late 1990s i.e. between 1995 and 1999, was from Somalia (about 60%) and not from an African country unaffected by war.

Table 1 also shows that, with few exceptions, the most important countries of origin for female immigrants from Africa are also the continents' major English speaking countries. In absolute terms, female immigrants were more likely to come either from Africa's former British colonies such as Nigeria, Zambia, Sierra Leone, or from countries such as Liberia that have a strong historical relationship with the US. This apparent linguistic nexus is not new. As observed among migrants in other studies (Castles and Miller 2003), immigration to the US and other English speaking countries in the West is strongly associated with an ability to communicate in the language of the destination country even before migration occurs.

The social and economic characteristics of African females in the US

Traditionally, female migration patterns have consistently been conceptualized within the context of family migration. Although marital status information are needed to examine the prevalence of such patterns among immigrants data limitations on the marital status of females during the migration process usually constrain the ability of researchers to test the validity of the trailing spouse hypothesis. In this study, the marital status of females *during* the year of migration is inferred from the analysis of marital status information for females who immigrated to the US in the year preceding the census, i.e. the marital status of women who arrived in 1999 before the census in 2000, since transitions in marital statuses are less likely to occur within year after their arrival.

The examination of the marital statuses of the most recent African female arrivals in the 2000 US census, i.e. those arriving in the past year, shown in Table 2 suggests that not all African female immigrants can be classified as trailing spouses. In fact, more than one third (i.e. 36%) of all African females who arrived in the US in the year preceding the 2000 census had never been married before. For these women, therefore, individual agency seems to be the main determinant of their migration decisions and not spousal commitments as would be suggested by conventional approaches. In fact, adult African females are more likely to arrive in the US as singles (i.e. never married, divorced, separated) compared to all non-African female immigrants who arrived in the previous before the census. In fact, more than half of all African females who arrived in the previous year was either currently not married or did not have their husband present with them. As Table 2 demonstrates, this proportion is much higher than the corresponding proportion for the most recent female immigrant arrivals from non-African countries. On the whole, even though *all* African women (Column 2) were also generally less likely to be married as all non-African immigrant women, African women were on average more likely to be single than their non-African female counterparts.

Given the attention given the loss of African professionals in the 'brain drain' literature, we examine the educational characteristics of African women in the US in Table 3. Our focus is mainly on women with professional and university level credentials since the brain drain literature pays particular attention to highly skilled migrants. According to the results, African females are on average more likely to possess bachelors, masters, and doctorate

degrees as well as other professional qualifications, compared to non-African female immigrants or even US-born females. Juxtaposed with the limited studies on African immigrants in the US, these patterns are not necessarily surprising. Other previous studies, e.g. Kent (2007), and Mbaya, Mrina, and Levin (2007), have pointed to the higher educational credentials of African immigrants in the US although not within the exclusive context of the examination of the outcomes of female African immigrants.

Further analysis of the census data revealed that the most educated African females were generally from Africa's most populous nations, or from the southern, western, or northern African regions. Women from Egypt, for example, were the most likely to possess bachelor's degrees, followed by their counterparts from Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya respectively. With regard to master's degrees, the highest percentages were again observed among immigrants from the Nigeria, followed by their counterparts from Egypt, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Morocco. At the same time, females from Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, Tunisia and Kenya had the highest percentage of doctorate degrees. These were also generally the same origin countries of African females who had other professional qualifications.

In general, these patterns suggest that there may be considerable educational selectivity in the immigration of African females from many non-English speaking countries in Africa to the US. In other words, the inability to speak English may limit the ability of less educated women from these countries to immigrate to the US. As a result, only the most educated women from non-English speaking countries, or the women from these countries most able to obtain higher educational credentials, are likely to migrate to the US.

Another perspective on the human capital profiles of African females can be derived from the analysis of their occupational distributions. Since the census provides information on close to a thousand occupational categories, we simplify the analysis in Table 4 by focusing on individuals with post-secondary schooling who are employed selected occupation groups. Consistent with previous research on the migration of health workers from Africa, our results show that a larger percentage of African women, compared to non-African immigrant and US-born women, are employed as nurses, i.e. Registered Nurses (RNs), and Licensed Practical or Licensed Vocational Nurses (LPNs and LVNs). In fact, Table 4 further suggests that African women are more likely to be concentrated in the nursing profession in comparison to engineering/architectural (e.g. Architects, civil, biomedical, mechanical, and marine engineers), computing/mathematical (i.e. computer programmers, computer scientists, systems analysts, actuaries, mathematicians, and statisticians), or management-related occupations. Similarly, African women are slightly more likely to be employed as physicians, surgeons, or dentists compared to non-African immigrant and US-born women. However, with the exception of the nursing and legal occupations, African males have a greater proportional representation in the rest of the occupational groups presented in Table 4.

In general, estimates presented in Table 5 (top panel) show that African women have higher levels of participation in economic activity than other female immigrants, but not as much as their US-born counterparts. On average, the employment data indicates that the percentage

of all African women between ages 18 and 65, who were employed (61%), was slightly lower than that of US-born women in that age-group (67%), but generally higher than that for all non-African women (54%). Although levels of employment have a positive association with educational attainment in Table 3, differences in education appear to have a more limited impact on the likelihood of employment among African females. In other words, the differences in the employment rates of women with doctorates and those with bachelor's degrees are lower among African women than among other immigrant women and their US-born counterparts.

African women in the US, therefore, appear to have lower constraints to labor force participation at least when compared to other female immigrants. One logical explanation for this is that African women generally come from poorer countries compared to other female immigrants, and are thus likely to experience a greater need for sending remittances back home. This explanation is consistent with research showing that migrant women from poorer origins have a greater tendency for sending remittances and that female immigrants generally remit more consistently than their male counterparts (Osaki 2003, Vanwey, 2004). Also consistent with this notion is the fact that Table 5 (bottom panel) shows that African women work for slightly longer hours per the week than other immigrant women, although not as much as their US-born counterparts. The longer average hours of work among Africans relative to those of other immigrant women is driven by the longer working hours of African women with professional and doctoral degrees. In fact, even though African women with bachelors and masters degrees work for fewer hours on average compared to their US-born counterparts, among women with professional and doctoral degrees African and US-born women work for about the same number of hours per week.

In the context of the longer working hours and the higher educational characteristics of African women, their higher levels of average income relative to that for other immigrant women shown in Table 6 is not surprising. Two important income patterns in Table 6 are however essential to the broader understanding of the incomes earned by African women. First, African women with bachelors and masters degrees have the lowest mean income levels among women with similar educational credentials. In relative terms, it is also among women with master's degrees that African women experience the lowest mean income levels in comparison with their other immigrant and US-born counterparts with a similar level of qualification. A second important finding in Table 6 is that the overall income advantage of African women relative to non-African immigrant women is mostly driven by the incomes women with professional credentials and doctoral degrees especially with the regard to the incomes of the former. Indeed, the fact that professional degree holders have the highest incomes levels in the US is now very well established (Day and Newburger 2002). Professional degree holders, such as people with MBAs, as well as doctors, and nursing professionals, are generally more likely to be employed in sectors where earnings are higher (e.g. insurance, banking, and health sectors) compared to those with doctorate degrees who mostly work in universities. On the whole, these findings, in combination with those in Table 6, suggest that in comparison with other female immigrants, Africans have higher incomes because of their more favorable human capital characteristics and because they work for slightly longer hours.

Despite these apparent economic, African females generally have the least favorable outcomes among women in the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. On average, along with other female immigrants, African females experience higher levels of poverty compared to US-born women (Table 7). Similarly, a larger percentage of African than non-African females receives welfare payments from the government underscoring the fact that the economic assimilation processes of all African women are not necessarily the same. Disparities in the likelihood of receiving public assistance are even higher among women who are in the retirement ages. As Table 7 illustrates, African women above age 64 are the least likely to receive Social Security incomes in comparison to other women. Apparently, fewer African women are eligible to receive social security payments because most Africans in the US are recent immigrants who may not have lived in the US long enough to meet all the Social Security eligibility requirements.

Discussion and conclusions

Using the recent surge in African immigration to the US as a backdrop, this study has underscored the fact that the experiences of African women are essential to a comprehensive understanding of these trends. On the basis of our empirical results, the conceptual basis for analyzing female migration from Africa is clarified in several ways. For example, the study demonstrates that the recent immigration patterns of African women are inconsistent with traditional conceptualizations of female migrants as trailing spouses. Most newly arrived African females are independent unmarried women who travel to the US without spouses. Moreover, the arrival of a higher percentage of unmarried African females relative to their non-African counterparts suggests that contemporary female migrants from Africa exercise a greater level of agency in their migration decisions. More importantly, these perspectives underscore arguments made by scholars such as Okome (2005), who suggest that African women now exercise and deploy power in ways that are not always recognize in existing studies. At the same time, the weak association between marriage and African female immigration patterns suggests that the same migration-inducing factors that stimulate male migration from Africa are also critical to informing the migration decisions of African females.

Concurrent with the increased female African migration to the US are significant processes of educational selectivity. Two findings are used to validate this point. First, more African females have higher-education credentials compared to other female US residents. Second, African females in the US are also more likely pursue educational opportunities in US institutions. Given the fact that average levels of schooling in Africa are among the lowest in the world (UNESCO 2009) the exemplary human capital characteristics of African females are somewhat paradoxical but consistent with the dynamics of the brain-drain from Africa to the West. By accentuating the significance of African women in the migration of skilled Africans this study further illuminates the significance of female African professionals to the understanding of brain-drain processes.

Based on these findings several implications for research and policy development can be identified. In terms of future research, the following outstanding issues will need to be addressed. Further attempts need to be made at deconstructing African female migration

patterns to analyze factors such as their use of official and unofficial channels of immigration to the US and their intentions to stay or return home. The nexus between female migration within and out of Africa also needs to be defined at the empirical and conceptual levels. Studies on their family formation processes and their integration into the institutional structure of their host societies will also enhance our understanding of the dynamics of their assimilation into the US. In particular, the implications of female labor force participation for African traditional notions on household division of labor need to be addressed. Similarly, although African women experience significant levels of economic success in the US, their success needs to be matched by an equal representation of their economic contributions in research on migration and development.

At the policy level, a greater recognition of the role of women in the migration of African professionals is critical to the development of adequate policy responses. Our results suggest that although policy discussions on female migration that focus on African health professionals (e.g. Stilwell et. al. 2004) are a useful starting point, they are unlikely to address the needs of other female professionals likely to leave Africa for better opportunities elsewhere. Female professionals abroad can also play a significant role in translating migration into development. African females in the US do earn decent average incomes, and although their remittance patterns are unknown, their economic resources are clearly critical to the attempts of African governments to attract financial investment from their nationals abroad. Fundamental to the development of even more appropriate policies is the need for comprehensive data sources on female migration in Africa. These new data sources can be used to generate new insights into the causes and consequences of the female migration and make a significant contribution to enhancing the visibility of Africa women in international migration studies.

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Figure 1.
Percentage distribution of adult female Immigrants in the US by year of arrival

Figure 2.

Difference in the size of the African adult population arriving in the US, by selected years of arrival and gender

Figure 3.
The ratio of female to male adult immigrants living in the US, by year of arrival.

Table 1

Distribution of the major African female immigrant populations by the top five countries of origin of within selected African regions

	Females	Males	Fem. to Male Ratio	% of Females who arrived between 1995–1999
North Africa				
Egypt	40,509	58,348	0.69	22.28
Morocco	18,030	25,959	0.69	35.77
Sudan	5,989	9,090	0.66	41.91
Algeria	3,550	4,426	0.80	35.72
Tunisia	3,087	3,358	0.92	35.28
West Africa				
Nigeria	50,438	74,072	0.68	32.85
Ghana	26,504	32,316	0.82	40.36
Liberia	16,018	18,060	0.89	34.24
Cape Verde	10,382	10,198	1.02	13.67
Sierra Leone	10,096	9,065	1.11	32.32
East and Central Africa				
Ethiopia	31,791	30,356	1.05	38.40
Kenya	18,192	19,364	0.94	48.10
Somalia	14,201	13,510	1.05	59.70
Eritrea	8,422	10,187	0.83	18.27
Cameroon	4,937	6,840	0.72	48.19
Southern Africa				
South Africa	27,408	29,923	0.92	24.82
Zimbabwe	4,523	5,946	0.76	39.02
Zambia	3,262	2,292	1.42	16.00
Mauritius	1,363	478	2.85	44.09
Swaziland	1,352	46	29.39	4.81
All African adults	325,766	449,523	0.72	33.19
Non-African immigrant adults	14.36 Mil.	14.03 Mil.	1.02	17.02
US-born Adults	93.57 Mil.	86.47 Mil.	1.08	-

Table 2

The marital status distribution of female African immigrants in the US

	All female immigrants		All Females arriving in the previous year	
	Africans	Non-Africans	Africans	Non-Africans
Never married/single	24.1	18.0 [*]	35.8	31.6
Married, spouse present	53.6	57.13 [*]	44.25	50.2 [†]
Married, spouse absent	5.61	4.13 [*]	10.18	7.79
Separated	3.89	3.49	2.21	2.62
Divorced	7.29	7.85	2.65	3.7
Widowed	5.54	9.40 [*]	4.87	4.13

^{*}
p< 0.05,

[†]
p<0.10 for t-tests using African females as a reference group

Table 3

The educational characteristics of African and non-African female adults in the US

	African immigrants	Non-African immigrants	US-born
<i>Post-secondary degree (%)</i>			
Bachelors degree	19.59	13.04 [*]	13.5 [*]
Masters degree	6.85	4.51 [*]	5.02 [*]
Professional degree	2.99	1.85 [*]	1.15 [*]
Doctorate degree	1.11	0.82 [†]	0.44 [*]
<i>Enrolled in US. Educ. Institutions (%)</i>			
Females	20.54	11.06 [*]	9.77 [*]
Males	19.66	10.47 [*]	9.05 [*]

^{*}
p< 0.05,

[†]
p<0.10 for t-tests using African females as a reference group

Table 4

Gender and nativity composition of selected occupation groups for individuals between age 18–65 with post-secondary

	African males	African females	Other female immigrants	US-females
<i>Occupational groups (%)</i>				
Computing and mathematical occupations	5.8*	2.7	3.1	1.7*
Engineering and Architectural occupations	5.3*	0.8	1.2	0.7
Lawyers and Judges	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.6
Management Occupations	10.0*	5.4	6.6*	7.9*
Nurses	1.1*	7.9	5.3*	5.8*
Physicians, Surgeons, and Dentists	3.3*	1.8	1.3*	0.4*

Table 5

The employment and working hours distributions of African immigrant, other immigrant, and US-born females between ages 18 and 65

	<i>Percent Employed</i>		
	African	Non-Africans	US-born
Bachelors degree	70.83	66.40 [*]	78.00 [*]
Masters degree	75.00	71.50	82.80 [*]
Professional degree	75.60	65.70 [†]	82.70 [†]
Doctorate degree	77.10	80.50	85.80
All	61.11	53.60 [*]	66.50 [*]
	Mean hours worked per week		
	African	Non-Africans	US-born
Bachelors degree	28.63	29.00	32.57 [*]
Masters degree	33.09	30.38 [*]	35.30 [†]
Professional degree	35.70	31.51 [†]	36.74
Doctorate degree	39.50	36.84	38.70
All	25.60	24.30 [*]	28.20 [*]

^{*} p< 0.05,

[†] p<0.10 for t-tests using African females as a reference group

Table 6

The income distribution of African and non-Africans between age 18 and 65 in the US, by gender

<i>Females</i>			
	African	Non-Africans	US-born
Bachelors degree	\$24,487	\$28,154*	\$31,987*
Masters degree	\$31,432	\$35,896	\$42,817*
Professional degree	\$59,828	\$43,769*	\$56,200
Doctorate degree	\$48,459	\$45,588	\$56,892
All females	\$18,663	\$16,815*	\$21,055*

*
p< 0.05 for t-tests using African females as a reference group

Table 7

The distribution of African and non-African adults in poverty and receiving public assistance, by gender

<i>Females</i>			
	African	Non-Africans	US-born
% in poverty	17.9	18	14.2*
% Receiving welfare incomes	3.7	3	2.64*
% 65+ receiving Soc. Sec.	56.0	67.6*	85.9*
<i>Males</i>			
% in Poverty	16.62	16.45*	11.59*
% Receiving welfare incomes	1.62	1.45*	1.07*
% 65+ receiving Soc. Sec.	62.2	69.5*	88.0*

*
p< 0.05 for t-tests using African females as a reference group