

BOOK REVIEW

Women and the informal economy in urban Africa: from the margins to the centre

Mary N. Kinyanjui (2014). London: Zed Books, pp. 140.
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REVIEWED BY NANA AKUA ANYIDOHO

Mary Kinyanjui's book, "Women in the informal economy in urban Africa: from the margins to the centre", contributes to literature on the urban informal economy in Africa with the important reminder that, while much of economic policymaking on the continent assumes the formal economy as the norm, the reality is a 'hybrid economy' (Cities Alliance, 2016) within which formal and informal workers, activities, and institutions intersect (Chen, 2005; Meagher, 2013). Specifically, Kinyanjui adds to the relatively sparse set of empirical studies that examines the interaction of the informal economy with formal institutions, systems and processes around the planning and use of urban space in Africa and that, further, demonstrates the impact of these relationships on women's livelihoods (see Adaawen & Jørgensen, 2012; Anyidoho & Steel, 2016; Ojong, 2011; Roever, 2014).

In much of the larger literature on women's informal urban livelihoods, the city is only a backdrop to the examination of women's work. While the literature may acknowledge the effect of the activities municipal authorities on women's ability to make a living in urban areas, there is a lack of a sustained effort to analyse the interaction between women's economic activity and urban planning and regulation. Kinyanjui makes a strong case that understanding women's work requires attention to the policies that structure the physical space (and, by implication, the economic and social contexts) within which women operate. In this sense, the city is as much the object of interest as the women who work in it. As Kinyanjui shows, women shape the city as much as the city prescribes and circumscribes their lives and livelihoods.

The book is a relatively short read at 140 pages, divided into nine chapters. After the introduction, Kinyanjui provides a review of theorizing on economic

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informality in Africa; offers an overview of the history of planning of Nairobi and the evolution of urban informality in chapter three; discusses women's mobility and economic informality in Nairobi in the three chapters that follow; and, in the next two chapters, analyses women's struggles for space and voice in the city. The final chapter provides a conclusion.

The starting point of the book is 'the failure of African urbanization to resonate with the theories of urbanization' based on modernist notions of order. Kinyanjui suggests that the answer to this puzzle of African non-conformity lies in the pervasive informality of the African urban economy. Non-agricultural informal work employs about 83 percent of all women in sub-Saharan African countries (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018) and, in urban areas specifically, the informal economy is dominated by retail trading of goods and services, within which women are over-represented. That women have found a place in the urban economy is remarkable given the fact that urbanization on the continent has been characterised by the exclusion of women by policy design and by structural inequalities that result in women having less access to the social and financial capital required for successful negotiation of the urban economy (Akyeampong & Agyei-Mensah, 2006; Otiso, 2005). Indeed, city authorities have been known to show outright hostility towards traders, evicting them out of congested city spaces that are not built to accommodate informal trade (Steel *et. al*, 2014; Otiso, 2002). Thus, as Kinyanjui argues, women's struggle to make a living in urban spaces is in effect a struggle against exclusionary and oppositional urban planning and gender ideologies.

Against this backdrop, Kinyanjui examines the ways in which women seek to make literal and metaphorical space for themselves in Africa's urban centres. Specifically, she seeks to understand how women navigate access to the central business district (CBD) of Nairobi city, arguing that the physical move 'in pursuit of flows of power, capital, ideas and information' (p. 64) corresponds to their social and economic mobility. Using informal trade Nairobi as a case study, Kinyanjui grounds her analysis in a survey of women in informal trade from different neighbourhoods in Nairobi and semi-structured interviews with about 50 women in one particular part of the city.

In its investigation of women's physical and socio-economic translocation, the book must necessarily straddle different literatures: urbanization, urban planning, development studies, the informal economy, women's work and women's social networks and organizing. However, it is immediately clear that Kinyanjui's strength is in urban studies, given her training as an economic

geographer. She provides a detailed history of urban planning in Nairobi and discusses the ways in which race, ethnicity, and rural or urban origins factored in the post-independence organization and control of urban space. The book is strongest when it presents the strategies that women use to effect a physical move from the periphery into the city centre. This discussion of women's spatial negotiations makes Kinyanjui's book inherently important considering the extent to which the struggle for physical space marks women's informal work, whether in trade or in agriculture.

Kinyanjui is less adroit at weaving into her analysis the social relations of gender that feature strongly both in how urban spaces are organized and the ways that women adapt to them. For instance, Kinyanjui's descriptions of women's marginalization tend towards a caricature of the helpless, tradition-bound African woman. She claims, for instance, 'Women hardly ever appear in everyday print and electronic media... Their stories...are not part of mainstream knowledge' (p. 7). To further underscore the dire circumstances of 'subaltern' women in the informal economy, she contrasts them with so-called elite women: 'To the subaltern woman, the agenda is shared and expressed in small chats or in song and dance while the agenda of elite women is document and archived... The elite women enjoy modernity, power and control. They can negotiate with men in statutory boardrooms or in the media. The subaltern women's medium of communication is basically oral or the popular song' (p. 61). This characterisation of the original condition of her subaltern women is juxtaposed with a similarly overstated analysis of their empowerment through access to the CBD, which they achieve by operating 'small-scale businesses that operate under the African indigeneous market concept and that consist of a gathering of traders with strong social relations and associations based on friendship, kinship and ethnicity' (p. 15). The idea of tradition as a source of female community and solidarity is largely unproblematic, with Kinyanjui repeatedly quoting Mbiti's (1969) 'I am because we are and since we are, I am' (p. 108) as justification for what is certainly a reductive perspective on African cultures and the dynamics of women's social relationships.

The book would also have benefited from more information about its methodology, notably the research approach, sampling design and analysis of qualitative data, all of which would help the reader to understand the extent to which the study is representative of the informal economy in Africa, as the title claims. In other words, the book presents a case study of Nairobi but not enough information about the ways in which Nairobi is typical of other urban cities

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or otherwise. Similarly, it does not have an adequate discussion of the ways in which women's experience in Nairobi can be generalized to other cities in Kenya, much less the rest of the continent.

Overall, the book makes a worthy attempt to understand the constraints to women's economic and urban citizenship and the efforts that women make to overcome these obstacles. This book should be of interest and benefit to students of urban planning and gender studies, and especially those with a particular interest in Nairobi.

About the reviewer

Nana Akua Anyidoho is a researcher at the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER). Her recent research has focused on the employment aspirations, prospects and experiences of women and young people. She has a PhD in Social Policy and Human Development from Northwestern University. Dr. Anyidoho is on the editorial board of AREF.

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