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Migration
in Africa

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Has journalism failed labour migrants?

The perception the general public has of migrants is complex, changing with political, economic and cultural shifts. Government policies and positions, political rhetoric and public discourse all shape how society sees, and subsequently treats migrants. At the heart of this is the media. From traditional platforms such as print journalism and radio, to digital media in the form of social media, YouTube channels and podcasts, the different media that people consume can challenge or reinforce dominant views on labour migration.

The rise of nationalism across the globe has been accompanied by an increased anti-migrant rhetoric. However, this is not a recent phenomenon. Africa's history of labour migration was an integral component of economic and social relations, but labour migrants were not always well received. There have been instances of xenophobic attacks in South Africa dating back to the 1980s. Expulsion of migrants has taken place in West Africa since the 1950s. The most well-known case was in 1983, when an estimated two million people - mainly Ghanaians - were deported from Nigeria.

In Africa, South Africa is the most visible when it comes to anti-immigrant sentiment. The hashtag #PutSouthAfricaFirst was created to push African migrant workers out of South African jobs. The Gauteng Township Economic Development Draft Bill, drafted by the Gauteng provincial legislature, would bar foreign nationals from owning and managing businesses in townships.

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In Africa, South Africa is the most visible when it comes to anti-immigrant sentiment. The hashtag #PutSouthAfricaFirst was created to push African migrant workers out of perceived South African jobs. Currently, the Gauteng Township Economic Development Draft Bill, drafted by the Gauteng provincial legislature, would bar foreign nationals from owning and managing businesses in townships.

So what needs to change in terms of media coverage of labour migration? Should the media stay neutral or take a clear position on public attitudes towards labour migrants? Sumeya Gasa is a multi-award winning multimedia journalists and the Editor-in-chief of AWiM News. She is also the instructor for the AWiM course Ethics and coverage of Labour Migration in Africa. "The focus of this course was to look at the trends around labour migration reporting on the continent, which includes both reporting that is done by Africans and the West," says Gasa.

One of the main components of the course was addressing how long-standing tropes of migrant labour in the media affect the process of labour migration. Gasa had three goals for the course. The first was for participants to understand "the idea of ethics and the very basics of journalism and how we can actually expand on that into the field of constructive journalism," Gasa explains. An emerging field, constructive journalism focuses on the unique context that each story has. This aspect makes constructive journalism a strong counter to problematic coverage of labour migrants.

Language, representation and reporting:

The second goal of the course was highlighting the importance of language. "Language is a huge propellant for dehumanising biases that are very common in the discourse around labour migration," explains Gasa. The representation of labour migrants in the media is strongly connected to the language used to speak about them. It is this representation that can influence public perception. Language and representation aren't just limited to text. The imagery used in media coverage also conveys a particular message. The photograph of Ernesto Nhamuave, who was burned to death during the 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa shocked people across the world, and triggered an end to the anti-migrant violence for a few years.

That particular photo, and the media coverage that it spawned, directly challenged prevailing mentalities on African migrant workers in South Africa. However, negative stereotypes and tropes persist in the media. "Some of the problematic practices include the words that people use when describing others. So for instance, in South Africa where I'm from, in the media when we say the word foreigner it never refers to white people who are not from South Africa. It's always used to refer to Africans from other African countries," says Gasa.

The use of the word 'foreigner' has creates a distinction between people born and bred in that particularly country, and those that moved there for work.

This difference encourages an 'us vs them' mentality, which dehumanises migrant workers and can make them feel less than when compared to others.

Another word often used in association with migrant labour is 'exotic'. "In the past, people thought of the word as some sort of compliment, or it seemed innocent at the very least," explains Gasa. However, it's just another way to dehumanise and separate labour migrants from the rest of the population. As Gasa elaborates: "When you describe people as exotic, you are centering your identity and your lived experiences as a means to judge the other person's experience," Using 'exotic' to describe the experiences, cultures and identities of labour migrants removes the perspective of the migrants themselves.

The way media organisations choose to represent stories on labour migration is far from neutral. Journalists report from their own perspectives, ideological position and judgements towards labour migrants. Acknowledging this bias is the first step in correcting negative portrayals that feed stereotypes of labour migrants. Essentially, media coverage of labour migration comes down to awareness, respect and research. "It's a matter of getting journalists to think about how we write about people and how we tell these stories, telling the stories in a way that does not other them [labour migrants]," Gasa states.

Migration reporting: a snapshot



The International Organisation for Migration published the World Migration Report on an annual or bi-annual basis.



The African Union published the Africa Migration Report in October 2020. The organisation also publishes a quarterly newsletter on migration and mobility.



The Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development published the 2020 International Migration Outlook in October 2020.

Discrimination, disease, and migration

2020 has been a difficult year for migrants across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, deportations, nationalism and anti-migrant attitudes, coupled by increased economic hardship and climate breakdowns, have made for a grim beginning of the new decade. As the world starts to look ahead and plan for a post-COVID reality, the question of the future of marginalised and vulnerable groups looms. Ovea Olakpe is a Research Fellow at CERC migration based at Ryerson University. Her work focuses on South-South migration. "South-South migrations would refer specifically to migrations that are occurring between countries that are termed developing countries," Olakpe explains. World Bank data shows that South-South Migrations make up an estimated 34% of all global migrations. In Africa, over two-thirds of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa migrated to other African countries.

Not only have migrants faced legal hurdles and discrimination, they have also suffered from the racial stereotypes associated with cleanliness and disease. Countries from the Global South are stereotyped as disease-prone. This affects the ability of citizens from these countries being able to move to find work, and influences the treatment of migrants in host countries. This was evidenced during the 2013-2016 ebola epidemic. In the case of COVID-19, migrant workers have been treated as carriers and super spreaders of the virus. "In countries like Saudi Arabia for example, they have specifically targeted African migrants, especially a lot of Ethiopian migrants. They were put in detention for long periods of time and subjected to a lot of dehumanising conditions and tests," says Olakpe.

Unable to work, forced into unsanitary detention centres or confined to crowded housing, with limited access to healthcare and legal representation, it is hard to stay but hard to return to the country of origin. Outbreaks and fears of disease are an excuse for governments and organisations to legitimise discrimination against migrant labour. Although this has not necessarily been the case for inter-African migration, continental migrants have still been affected by lockdown and border restrictions. especially in the countries hardest hit by the pandemic (South Africa, Morocco, Egypt, Ethiopia, Tunisia and Libya). According to the World Bank, migration within West Africa dropped by up to 50%.

"It seems that whenever there is a pandemic, there is a racist undertone where people are afraid of foreigners. particularly people from certain regions of the world. There's a fear that 'these people are going to make us sick and we're going to die,'" Olakpe says. Although the current COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the role that migrants play in the economy and healthcare, this has not translated into special protections and provisions for migrant workers. As hope for an end to the pandemic with the development of a vaccine, the question remains whether the discriminatory association between migrants and disease will end too.

Using Wikipedia to promote visibility

In collaboration with the African Union (AU), the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), African Women in Media launched the Visibility Project. Partnering with Wikimedia affiliates across Nigeria, Algeria, Cameroon, and, Uganda, the Visibility Project aims to address the gap in coverage of African women by African women on Wikipedia. As Shola Olaniyan, president and co-founder of Wikimedia Nigeria Foundation explains: **"The Visibility Project was conceptualised between African Women in Media and Wikimedia Nigeria. It's a programme designed to identify women that are interested in content development, train them, mentor them. The goal basically is to increase the visibility of women on Wikipedia, and to also empower African women about how to contribute to digital content platforms with a Wikipedia focus."**

Wikimedia Nigeria designed the programme, working alongside Wikimedia Uganda. Working with a network of over 300 volunteers in Nigeria, Olaniyan's work with Wikimedia Nigeria focuses on creating awareness about Wikipedia and its affiliate projects, one of which is Wikimedia. Having worked on previous Wikipedia-related projects, such as Wiki Loves Africa and Wiki Loves Women, and hosting the regional Wiki Indaba, Wikimedia Nigeria has the experience to design the scope and timeline of the Visibility Project.



Dr. Yemisi Akinbobola, CEO and co-founder of African Women in Media, says that collaboration with Wikimedia Nigeria was vital in getting the Visibility Project off the ground. **"Through them [Wikimedia Nigeria] they've been able to bring on board other Wikimedia communities: Algeria, Tanzania, Cameroon, Uganda, in order for us to facilitate the training that we've had,"** Akinbobola explains. Consisting of a series of five webinars, a mentoring class and an edit-a-thon. The webinars will be held in three languages, English, Arabic and French. The mentoring sessions will also be conducted across the three languages. The edit-a-thon is a writing competition on labour migration in Africa, tying in the labour migrations training programme into the Visibility Project. Participants in the edit-a-thon will produce 50 Wikipedia articles on African women in the continent and the diaspora working in the field of labour migration. At least 30 of the participants in the edit-a-thon will become Wikipedia editors.

To hear more about the Visibility Project and AWiM's work in promoting African women in the space of labour migration, tune into Episode Two of the Labour Migrations Podcast, available on Google Podcasts.



African Women in the Media

African Women in Media is an International NGO with the vision that one-day African women will have equal access to representation and opportunities in media industries and media content.



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