

Research Project

The Travail and Travels of Congolese Transnational Trader Women

Third-party funded project

Project title The Travail and Travels of Congolese Transnational Trader Women

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While West African women maintain a long history of trading in the region and abroad, Central African women—specifically in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)— have only recently embedded themselves in international trade circuits. Congo's transnational trader women called femmes commercantes, embark on international buying expeditions to purchase wholesale goods for local resale. Currently, China is a common destination, as it offers affordable products which yield a good profit margin. Strengthened governmental relations between the DRC and China have also contributed to the increased mobility between the two countries. Congo's trader women are at the forefront of creating new social classes, as well as household structures, and are therefore an important social group through which to examine the dynamics and relationship between what is locally called "informal" and "formal" modes of employment. Approached through ethnographic fieldwork, this research proposes to examine how Congolese women navigate an economic landscape that is premised on social networks and transnational exchanges. More broadly, it seeks to explore how global economic change impacts gender dynamics in the DRC. Transnational trade as mode of labour is considered by the Congolese state to be part of the "informal economy". Women increasingly are urged by the state to "formalize" their work—a nebulous concept for both the state and its citizens. Despite this pressure, and because of little incentives, transnational trader women continue to operate informally, often selling their imported products within the private space of their homes. Successful women, just like men, must engage with a system of corruption. However, unlike their male counterparts, there are moral implications related to women's mobility. The central theme within this research investigates the relationship between women's work within a labour system defined by its internal corruption, mobility, and morality in an African context where women are participants in the transformation of social class structures. At an empirical level, the project aims to generate case studies of Congolese transnational trader women to address the following questions:

- To what extent do new trends of mobility and labor migration impact existing ideals of feminine virtue in the urban context of Kinshasa?
- What are the differences between operating within the formal and informal economies?
- What does women's involvement within the informal economy reveal about how they perceive the state?

The project will be relevant to social scientists, as well as academic partners in Europe and in the DRC and China, interested in the ways in which gender relations and household structures shape and shaped by global economic changes, as well as Congolese women's roles in the emergent mobilities between Africa and China. This project is also conceived of as a network of exchange and cooperation with African and Chinese institutions.

Keywords women, Africa, gender, morality, China, Corruption, trade, migration, work

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