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

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Women and the Informal Economy in Urban Africa: From the Margins to the Centre. By Mary Njeri Kinyanjui, 2014, Zed Books, London: vii + 140 pp, index included, \$36.95 (paperback), \$134.95 (hardcover)

By Lomarsh Roopnarine¹

The aforementioned slender book is about a journey of how displaced and deprived African women, mainly from Kenya, have used their unfortunate situations to navigate the ever insurmountable obstacles of urban life to create livelihood patterns for themselves by themselves. In the process, they have created a space and sanctuary against tremendous odds between themselves and urban planners in the urban Nairobi environment whereby the policies of urban planners and government have been geared largely to ignore, marginalize or even drive them out. Kinyanjui declares that her book “is about the struggle of women in economic informality to leave the city margins and access the city centre, the planning and gender insensitively of which largely excluded them.” (p, 2). She uses the example of business activity along Taveta Road to illustrate how restricted women have penetrated Nairobi’s central business district and introduced the “African indigenous market system through mobility, solidarity, entrepreneurialism and collective action.” (pp, 2-3). In doing so, Kinyanjui has shown a sound understanding of the theoretical and practical reasons as to why economic urban informality exists amongst women in Africa and the developing world (pp, 3-15). For example, she writes that “the failure of African planners to plan for economic informality means that they do not plan for women, who form the majority” (p, 5). She proves this argument by relying less on elite literature and desk analyses and uses instead African indigenous concepts and voices from women to understand the inner workings of economic informality. Through field research, she demonstrates how economic informality can be a supportive mechanism for disadvantaged individuals to survive in the face of adversity and opposition from city councilors and leaders who see their actives as a national eyesore.

Throughout the text one cannot miss the argument that economic informality is really a way of life of Africans, women included, and that government planners should seek ways to accommodate it. The thrust behind economic informality, the author argues, is that as long as a lack of education, inadequate socio-economic resources, patriarchy, jobs, exclusion, marginalization and the like exists in Kenya, there will be migration towards urban economic activity. Women, in particular, will use their indigenous cultural ways such as *Ubuntu* (I am because we are and since we are, I am) and *Chama* (social grouping) (p, 96) to find ways to support themselves and their families. So, instead of the government and city councilors initiating policies such as *turudi mashambani* (return to farms in rural areas) licensing and zoning to control and even to get rid of economic informality, they should seek more constructive ways to accommodate women in economic informality. One constructive way, the author argues, is the inclusion of women at all levels of decision making. So far, they have been excluded.

The strength of this book lies in how the author brings to the surface the invisible dynamics of African women in economic informality, namely their mobilization, collective and individual entrepreneurship, pooling of resources (start-up capital) trust and codes among themselves, self-

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empowerment, and the continuous quest for justice. “Participation in economic informality is not only about survival, bread and power; it is about knowledge, autonomy and power relationships in the house-power and in the city. When these issues are dealt with at the household level, they translate spatially to the ward level and eventually to the city” (p, 86). What is so remarkable is that given their unprivileged backgrounds, one would expect that they would have been broken by the challenges of the underbelly of urban life. In Taveta Road, women came from myriad backgrounds in which they “were victims of patriarchy,” or confined by “the masculine-oriented tenor of city planning ideologies. Some had been hawkers, some were housewives, while others had worked in office or had already been workers in the informal economy.” (p, 92). Kinyanjui informs us that the “space for women’s business activities in the centre of town was not handed over to the women on a silver platter.” (p, 90).

Kinyanjui concludes that economic informality in Nairobi is essentially two fold. On the one hand, it is resilient and vibrant and has provided opportunities for the displaced. On the other hand, it is guided by exclusionary planning ideologies, restricted and segregated to the worse urban sections, and regulated by city policies such as licensing and migration back to rural areas. This reviewer is not totally convinced that women have reached the center, however. Some may have. But fundamentally, it would take the recognition of the government that invisibility of economic informality is as important and productive as other forms of formal economic activity, and in so doing, implement policies in which both women and government are positioned in a win-win situation. This is where the book falls short of expectations. The solutions to economic informality is sketched on two pages at the end of the book. For example, the author offers a one paragraph solution for each of the following: (1) city planners should develop the infrastructure which economic informality occurs and keep it clean and safe; (2) women should unlearn the culture of poverty their *vyama* or social grouping; (3) researchers should not see economic informality as a wounded sector but one that is full of possibilities; and that (4) women should seek ways to release themselves from the jaws of patriarchy (pp, 120-122). What is also missing from the book is the role and consequence of children in economic informality. Some questions also worth asking since they are not addressed in the book? Did economic informality lead to classism or a social hierarchy among the women? Perhaps a few photographs would have sent or showed a more practical aspect of urban economic informality. Furthermore, this reviewer believes that a separate chapter should have been dedicated to the theories on economic informality. They are scattered all over the texts which makes reading cumbersome. In spite of these flaws, the book is well-researched and well-written and will be useful to policy-makers and researchers in understanding the underpinnings as well as positives of the invisibility of women in urban economic informality where the ultimate thrust is to simply demolish it. Urban planners in China may benefit specifically where the current policy is simply to demolish the underside of urban life. I recommend the book in any college course on urban planning and women and urban economic informality in the developing world since it has the potential to generate vibrant dialogues, discussions and discourses.