

## ***Models for Migrant Leadership: The Cape Town Women's Platform***

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### ***Abstract***

*Since 2011, South Africa has increasingly moved toward an immigration system of enforcement and exclusion, seeking to discourage immigration through punitive policies that make daily life for migrants difficult to bear. The closing of refugee reception offices in urban centers and restriction of job offers to South African ID holders have caused many asylum seekers to become undocumented migrants and prevented them from working in the formal economy. In this context, some services that refugee organisations traditionally offer, such as job training and placement, become less useful for migrants who are undocumented and/or unable to work. This paper explores a new initiative of a Cape Town refugee organisation designed to support grassroots organising and to foment new networks of support and entrepreneurship for migrant women. Members of eleven nationality groups currently participate in the Scalabrini Centre Women's Platform, coming together across differences in migration status, religion, socio-economic class and language to fight the isolation often caused by migration and to support business and personal development. Our research uses interviews and participant observation to explore the role of mediating institutions in facilitating migrant leadership and organising. We suggest that efforts such as The Women's Platform are setting the groundwork for long-term leadership development among migrants and refugees. Nonetheless, the restrictions of the political and economic climate of South Africa, as well as the professionalised expectations of mediating institutions, make this a slow process that may favor individual advancement over collective action for systemic change.*

**Keywords** Migration, development, gender, organising, solidarity.

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## ***Introduction***

This paper examines one approach to the challenge of migrant integration in the face of xenophobia and restrictive immigration policies and practices. Researchers have argued that migrant associations in South Africa are typically fragile and transient. The Women's Platform seeks to increase the longevity and efficacy of such associations by building a cross-nationality network supported by an established NGO that can provide access to resources. What is gained and what is lost through such an approach? This early assessment of The Women's Platform suggests that this structure is setting the groundwork for long-term leadership development among migrants and refugees. Nonetheless, the restrictions of the political and economic climate of South Africa, as well as the professionalised expectations of mediating institutions, make this a slow process that may favour individual advancement over systemic change.

## ***Background/Context***

In the context of the current, high-profile surge of North African and Middle Eastern migration to Europe, the fact that most African migration remains within the continent is relatively undiscussed (Shimeles 2010). After the 1994 transition to democracy, South Africa's relatively strong economy and liberal asylum policy made it a welcome destination for migrants from across the continent. From 2006-2012, it is estimated that South Africa received more applications for asylum than any other country in the world (Wellman & Landau 2015). Asylum applications have dropped in recent years, primarily because of a new, limited visa category for Zimbabweans fleeing the country's economic and political crisis, but also because new immigration policies and practices have made it so difficult for migrants to apply for asylum (Carciotto & Mavura 2016; Pugh 2014). Until 2011, those seeking refugee status could apply for asylum at a refugee reception center in any one of the major cities in the country and then, with their asylum-seeker documents, were entitled to (though not always granted) basic services. Soon after changing procedures to require asylum seekers to apply within five days of arriving in the country, the Department of Home Affairs closed their refugee reception offices in Johannesburg (closed in 2011), Port Elizabeth (closed in 2011) and Cape Town (closed in 2012). Now refugees must go to Pretoria, Durban or back to the Zimbabwean border at Musina to file and renew their paperwork every three to six months (Ngwato 2013). For migrants living in Cape Town, the time and expense of this long-distance travel precludes their maintaining asylum-

seeker paperwork, even for those who would likely eventually be granted refugee status (Johnson 2015).

As a result, more and more migrants are living in South Africa without valid immigration documents. At the same time, even those with valid asylum-seeker documents or even approved refugee status, report that basic eligibility requirements for most employers include a South African identification card. An asylum seeker from the DRC explained one way that employers screen out applicants without South African citizenship or permanent residency:

The hotel will tell you that they're not allowed to take CVs, that you must go to the agency. Then they send you to agencies and the agencies will ask you if you are South African [...] They will tell you, bring ID. Imagine, I am in South Africa for nine years, but I only have the paper [that requires] renewal every six months... You will see in that paper, it is written "work and study," but this [work and study] is for South Africans, this is not for foreigners (Interview 25 February, 2015).

Thus, while it is becoming increasingly difficult for migrants to obtain valid documents, those documents are worth less and less in terms of access to employment opportunities. Our research explores whether this reality is beginning to erode the strict boundaries among asylum seekers, refugees and migrants – and between those who are viewed as deserving or undeserving – that have been carefully maintained by the state and by the civil society institutions that support refugees and migrants (Newton 2008; Sales 2002). Does this context open up new opportunities for solidarity across these migration categories and is it spurring migrant support agencies to reconsider the services they provide?

The Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town is a refugee services organisation founded in 1994 "with the commitment to alleviating poverty and promoting development in the Western Cape while fostering integration between migrants, refugees and South Africans" (Internal document). Their mission also includes "promoting and protecting the human rights of highly vulnerable refugees, asylum seekers, displaced people and the poorest of the poor South Africans as well as fostering democracy, non-discrimination, equality, participation and inclusion" (Internal document). In recent years, their work has expanded to include an English school, a welfare desk to provide referrals for basic resources, an employment access program, school-based tolerance

education programs, an LGBTI rights and awareness program and an advocacy department providing individual legal counseling and policy-level advocacy.

The Scalabrini Centre is a professionally run organisation with both local and international staff members. The centre relies on the volunteer support of long-term interns, primarily from Europe and the United States. It receives funding from European and American foundations and government aid organisations, private donations and income from its on-site guest house. In general, its programming priorities are set by staff and approved by its volunteer board, with clear program objectives and measurable goals.

The Women's Platform was new for Scalabrini in several ways. The idea grew out of a proposal brought to the director by a Zimbabwean staff member who had helped to found a Zimbabwean women's support group and informal business incubator. The staff member hoped that Scalabrini might be willing to provide training and other capacity-building support to her group. In response, the director proposed that Scalabrini launch a new initiative that would build and expand upon the model of the Zimbabwean group to provide mutual support, training and networking opportunities. At the outset, the model for The Women's Platform was to support existing, self-organised, nationality-based groups as well as to incubate new groups of this type. The Women's Platform would then become a cross-national support network giving participants access to skills training, personal development workshops and small business development.

In the early conceptualisation of The Women's Platform, both the Scalabrini director and the program manager (Carone) expressed their excitement about the platform as a project designed and led by the participants themselves, unlike most other professionally-led Scalabrini services. A collaborating researcher (Mundell) worked with Scalabrini staff, using surveys, small group meetings and interviews, to assess needs and interests and to help identify indigenous leadership. The idea was not to replace the successful nationality-based groups but to give their members access to a wider network of both migrant and South African female leaders.

The early participants in the platform included groups representing the Rwandan, Congolese, Somali, Angolan, Zimbabwean, Malawian, Nigerian and South African communities. Demographically, the group was extraordinarily diverse. While some had not completed high school (less than 20%), others had professional training but had not been able to find jobs in their fields

because of their immigration status and/or lack of English language skills or South African certification. In terms of immigration status, 39% had been granted refugee status, 23% carried an asylum-seeker permit, and the remainder carried other work permits, were undocumented or declined to reveal their status. About a third of participants were working, either in the formal or informal sector, while two-thirds had been unsuccessful in finding work or were caring for their children<sup>i</sup>.

At first, The Women's Platform worked primarily to engage participants in services the Scalabrini Centre already offered, such as computer literacy classes, health education programs and immigrant rights workshops. But because of the increasing lack of access to documentation and restrictions on foreigners' rights to work, the centre's traditional employment access program was becoming less and less relevant for migrants who were excluded from traditional employment or financial structures. The Women's Platform staff considered how entrepreneurship training and micro-finance might provide alternate sources of income for participants.

Within the first six months, Scalabrini staff had applied for international foundation and government funding, receiving grant support from the U.S. Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. In their report on the first quarter of grant funding, Scalabrini staff explained that members of The Women's Platform are encouraged to participate in both the personal development and financial sustainability areas of the platform. Personal development includes leadership, health education and human rights workshops, as well as trainings on work-readiness skills needed in specific industry sectors. From The Women's Platform's inception, staff spoke about their desire to utilise a "multipliers model, with trainings aimed at developing women's leadership skills to enable them to bring this information back to their communities and become local resources themselves" (Internal document). Women's Platform participants are also beginning to lead workshops themselves, as part of the platform's Peer-to-Peer training initiative.

The financial sustainability component seeks to build on existing skills of women in the platform. Currently, the sectors identified are beauty, childcare, crafting and food, all traditionally feminine areas of experience that can be utilised outside of formal employment structures. Scalabrini staff have expressed their concern about gender niching, pushing women into marginalised skill areas, and so they have been careful to voice their support

for women who are seeking different areas of employment. However, the approach is also intensely practical. As Carone (Interview 10 May, 2016) explained in an interview,

Yes [it is gender niching], but it's also market niching. Those industries are available to women. These are industries that have a high turnover rate that women are able to find work in [...] If you want to learn how to be an accountant, we still want to work with you, but our sector development is peer-to-peer. If you want to be an accountant, I can work with you, but right now we're looking at what is the broad knowledge we all share.

The question is whether these marginalised economic niches will give women the financial stability they seek. Ideally, The Women's Platform will be able to give them the business savvy, workplace experience and start-up capital they need to make it in these familiar but difficult sectors.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

In the wake of South Africa's violent xenophobic attacks in 2008, social scientists searched for a cause. Explanations for the violence ranged from structural inequality (Worby et al. 2008; Gelb 2008; Pillay 2008) to negrophobia (Gqola 2008) to failures of local leadership (Misago et al. 2009) to inadequacy of immigration policy (Crush 2008) to a history of "violent entrepreneurship" in the townships (Charman & Piper 2012)<sup>ii</sup>.

Social scientists went on to critique the public outrage that followed the attacks, arguing that horrified liberal whites were really expressing their own worst fears that, in a context of lawlessness and wealth redistribution, they might be the next targets (Landau 2008). Similarly, the state's characterisation of the attacks as the work of common criminals masked the historical antecedents of the crisis, development policies that divide township residents into undeserving outsiders and insiders with access to services (Nieftagodien 2008). Bekker (2015) notes that a week after violence flared again in 2015, the state sought again to link immigrants with criminality by creating a new program initially carried out by the South African National Defence Force called Operation Fiela-Reclaim. The operation targeted illegal weapons, drugs, prostitution "and other illegal activities;" undocumented immigrants were also regularly caught up in its sweeps.

These social analyses are critical to understanding the context for migrant lives, but in few of these works are the voices of migrants themselves foregrounded (McDonald 2000b). In fact, migrant voices are missing not only from scholarship but also from public debate. Landau argues that this is strategic, a kind of “tactical cosmopolitanism” utilised by migrants who “organize themselves to avoid the ethics of obligation to other migrant groups and their home communities” (Landau & Freemantle 2010: 381; Landau 2006). Our research among Cape Town migrant women shows that while migrants are hesitant to engage in collective action for policy change, they are in fact becoming highly organised around exactly their ethics of obligation to their own and other migrant groups.

As evidence of this “tactical cosmopolitanism,” Landau cites the “fragility and fragmentation of migrant associations,” (Landau & Freemantle 2010: 376) among the Johannesburg groups he studied. Others have pointed to the ways that migrant civil society organisations have been ignored and excluded from more established civil society and non-governmental organisations (Everatt 2011; Polzer & Segatti 2011). Yet we have very little research that actually examines the activities of such migrant organisations, whether they are government-supported agencies, traditional NGOs or unions, church groups or mutual aid societies. This project seeks to examine the role such institutions play in mediating the experiences of migrants as they make their way in this often hostile environment.

South African migrants are often analysed in terms of their social and economic needs, as victims of violence (in their home countries and then again in South Africa), bigotry and poverty. In this way, despite research showing that migrants are critical to South Africa’s economic development, migrants are popularly understood as recipients of social welfare and in need of government response (Crush & Williams 2003; Crush & Williams 2010; Polzer 2008). This may be especially true for women migrants, who are often portrayed as victims in the migration process (Agustin 2005). As Kihato (2007) and others have pointed out, a focus on women migrants, not as merely victims of forced migration but also as agents in their own migration choices and experiences, may help to broaden often narrowly economic explanations for migration (Dodson 1998; Harzig 2001). Today, women represent almost half of all migrants worldwide and 45.9% of migrants in Africa (OECD-UNDISA 2013). This research makes an ethnographic intervention into questions of how women migrants themselves are

organising, with South African mediating institutions, for their right to live peacefully in their host country.

### ***Methodology***

Research for this project began soon after the first meetings of The Women's Platform in November 2014. As a visiting scholar at the University of Cape Town, Leah Mundell entered into a collaborative research agreement with the Scalabrini Centre to conduct ongoing qualitative research as a volunteer staff member of The Women's Platform. Emma Carone, program manager for The Women's Platform, collected demographic information, conducted informal observations and collaborated on data analysis.

We conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with participants and staff of The Women's Platform in 2015, focusing on their life experiences leading them to engage in the platform. Interviews were conducted in English, with only one participant requesting a translator, so it should be noted that participants may have felt somewhat limited in their self-expression. Additional qualitative research included focus group discussions with the original seven participating nationality groups to develop priorities for the platform. We have also undertaken ongoing participant observations of Women's Platform meetings, staff planning meetings and workshops as well as conducted observations at Women's Platform member project sites and group meetings.

Interview participants were selected based on their high level of participation in the Women's Platform and in their own nationality-based groups, primarily between January and June 2015. Many of these original Women's Platform leaders, as noted below, are no longer as active in the program, and leadership has begun to shift to a group of women who see the Women's Platform itself as their primary group affiliation. The initial 20 interviews cited here provided a well-rounded picture of the experiences and concerns of staff and participants during the formation of the Women's Platform.

A second round of interviews with newer, emerging leaders (planned for June-July of 2017) will help evaluate the platform's ongoing potential for leadership development, psycho-social support and economic stability.

We also collected basic demographic information for 111 participants in the Platform between November 2014 and June 2016 (data collection is ongoing), including age, nationality, educational attainment and employment status. Of

this participant sample, nine nationalities were represented, with 54% from Congo/DRC. Only five participants reported having less than a grade 10 education and 33 participants (30%) reported having at least some university or postsecondary education. At the time of data collection, 38% of participants reported being at least partially employed and 59% of participants reported not working at all. The participants were generally in their prime working and child-raising years; ages ranged from 16 to 56 years old, with 68% between the ages of 29 and 41 at the time of data collection.

As a collaborative research team, we regularly shared observations and key themes from interviews with one another, other Scalabrini staff and participant leaders of The Women's Platform. Our interview consent form included a checkbox asking whether information from the interview could be shared with Scalabrini staff in order to improve services. Mundell also reminded Women's Platform participants that, in addition to helping to facilitate the Platform, she was conducting ongoing research.

Engaged social science research seeks to address the power hierarchies that often characterise the relationship between researcher and research subjects, whether those subjects are individuals or organisations (Low & Merry 2010; Lassiter & Cook 2010). Through our collaborative research design, we developed a research project and process that can provide ongoing benefit to the research partners and participants. Regular discussion of the themes and concerns raised through this research have helped to shape the direction of The Women's Platform and to make it more inclusive and responsive to participants' needs. This paper provides an opportunity to share some of the tensions and considerations that have arisen in the context of this collaborative work.

### ***The Women's Platform: Lessons for Migrant Organising***

As The Women's Platform is still only in its second year of existence, it is too early to draw decisive conclusions about its effectiveness or the unintended side effects of this approach. Nonetheless, there are several important areas of tension The Women's Platform experiences that are productive for considering migrant organising models.

#### ***A. Possibilities for cross-national solidarity***

Because The Women's Platform was initiated as a way to build on the success of one nationality-based women's group, it was a logical approach to develop

nationality-based, locally led groups as the member units for the platform. Similar, institution-based approaches to building social capital have proved effective in a wide range of organising efforts (Stout 2010; Warren 2011; Wood 2002). Nonetheless, the approach had some clear disadvantages in this context.

Giulia Sinatti and Cindy Horst (2015), in their research on diaspora engagement discourse among European development agencies, highlight agencies' problematic assumptions about migrants' implicit connection to their territories of origin. Nina Glick Schiller (2009), meanwhile, has shown that a focus on the nation-state as the relevant geographic region of relationship for migrants conceals the ways that different localities benefit differently from remittances. Our own work developing The Women's Platform helped reveal our early assumptions about the coherence and importance of nationality-based groups. Several of the key leaders involved in the platform identified strongly as members of nationality-based groups, such as the Somali Association of South Africa and Kwesu, a Congolese women's group. But for others, nation-states were not relevant communities of origin. One participant had found The Women's Platform through her infrequent attendance at a church where several members were attempting to start a Rwandan women's group. But her family connections spanned Rwanda, Burundi and Congo, and she did not feel a connection with the Rwandan group. A leader of this fledgling Rwandan group spoke about the flagrant lack of trust that survivors of the Rwandan genocide felt in interacting with other Rwandan immigrants:

You see, our community has a big problem, a big problem. Sometimes you can come here all as refugees, but sometimes I can come here and find someone who killed my whole family. So, it is not easy to talk to that one and to give all my ideas, no. Your mind closed, and she, her mind is closed. Maybe she's not the one, but is the member of a family who killed my family. It is a big issue for us. Some of us are born in exile, too. They are born as a refugee. So, some are born in Kenya, in Burundi, in Tanzania, in the Congo, so our country has a big problem in how people must come and join as one community.

As The Women's Platform evolved, it was clear that this one-size-fits-all nationality group model was only really relevant for a few more established and coherent immigrant groups. What had once seemed a useful way to build

local capacity started to seem more like a gatekeeping mechanism that was preventing the participation of women who did not identify or affiliate with a nationality-based group. As women have begun joining the platform as individuals rather than institutional members, the group has diversified, including migrants from a broader range of countries of origin.

Changing the model in this way may also have opened up even greater opportunities for cross-national and cross-cultural education and solidarity. From the beginning of The Women's Platform, participants spoke of the powerful impact of learning about the successes of migrants from other parts of Africa. Educated Congolese Christians were excited to learn more about the experiences of Muslim Somali women who were seeking out educational opportunities they did not have in their home communities. During a recent videoconference with Women's Platform leaders, a Congolese participant firmly but politely corrected a Zimbabwean leader who had erroneously claimed that Somali immigrants receive financial support from the Somali government. The short interaction highlighted the important role that personal, cross-national interactions play in dispelling stereotypes within the migrant community.

Even those participants who are also members of active nationality-based groups see The Women's Platform as playing a vital role in cultivating cross-cultural interaction and innovation. As one platform leader explained,

Most of the people in Kwesu are from DRC, coming from the same background. When you come to Women's Platform, it's another thing. You're meeting with women from a different background, different religion, different culture, you know. So that ... changes our way of seeing things. So, it's very, very inspiring meeting other women. So for Kwesu to be in The Women's Platform, it's very, very, very significant for me.

In the early months of The Women's Platform, we also observed that participants rarely made distinctions among refugees, asylum-seekers and economic migrants. For example, at one Women's Platform meeting, a Malawian member pointed out that their group members were not able to take advantage of some of the opportunities being offered through the platform, because they did not have documents. The others responded sympathetically; no one attempted to assert that the Malawians were less deserving of opportunities because they are not officially refugees.

The question is whether the original intent of the institution-based structure of the platform, to cultivate and support local leadership, can be maintained through this new structure. In some ways, the individual membership-based model encourages a focus on individual uplift rather than systemic change. It also may be increasing dependence on Scalabrini as a mediator, placing more of the leadership onus on professional staff rather than migrant women themselves, an issue that will be discussed in more detail below.

### ***B. Micro-credit and expectations of sociality***

From the inception of The Women's Platform, the established groups involved were engaged in small business development, though the financial models varied substantially. The original Zimbabwean group used an accumulating savings and credit association (ASCA) model to incubate new businesses among its members<sup>iii</sup>. The Congolese group appeared to have relied primarily on financial support from its key leader, who had slowly accumulated sewing machines to start a sewing training center that generated a small income to help pay instructor salaries and rent. The Somali group was affiliated with an NGO, the Somali Association of South Africa that provided space and other in-kind support.

The possibility of raising and receiving financial support for small business development was a prospect that loomed over most early discussions of The Women's Platform, among both staff and participants. Many of the less developed groups' capital investment needs were small: a new oven for a baking business, an ice cream machine for a street vender. But Scalabrini staff were concerned that even with support for these investments, these businesses would fail because of the groups' lack of business experience and preparation.

Women's microfinance programs generally are designed to allow poor participants to substitute social collateral for the financial collateral they lack. Caroline Schuster, who has studied microfinance programs (including micro-credit) in Paraguay, usefully summarises anthropological critiques of microfinance programs, that they are "extractive, in that they commoditize women's social ties, and coercive, in that they fundamentally alter social relations in extracting financial value from them" (Schuster 2015b). Shuster herself points out that both proponents and critics of microfinance rely on a characterisation of women as hyper-social creatures. Her work encourages us

to explore how that sociality itself is constructed, that is, how women make themselves good microfinance participants.

Both staff and participants of The Women's Platform have raised concerns that echo these critiques of the extractive and coercive nature of microfinance. They see The Women's Platform as primarily a set of social supports based on relationships of trust and respect, with the possibility of business collaboration and funding growing out of those existing relationships. When new women arrive at the group with expectations of immediate financial assistance, both staff and longtime participants balk at what is seen as purely self-interested behavior. The ethos of The Women's Platform is to build a broader understanding of self-interest that includes community responsibility. A Women's Platform staff member who is also a member of the Congolese women's group, Kwesu, explained:

The big challenge for me, it's with my experience I have with Kwesu and The Women's Platform – it's like all the women when they are coming to the meeting, they are expecting something. Others are like, if I go there, maybe I will get money to start my business, which is not possible. And others are expecting if I'm there maybe I can just easily get the job I want, maybe in one month. They don't think about the future, what we are creating [with] each other. What you have you can also give to other women for them to benefit.

Initially, participants from established women's groups such as Kwesu seemed more socialised to these expectations than those who arrived at The Women's Platform without strong existing ties. As another Kwesu member reflected,

You see, it's just in our group, the ladies understand the meaning of 'group.' They know even when we don't get today, but tomorrow we'll get something. You understand? That's our vision. We are coming, we are coming [to the group], we don't know tomorrow. Maybe something good can come from here.

Several of the original members of The Women's Platform described the tangible and intangible benefits that they derived from participating in a group without clear expected outcomes. The Kwesu member quoted above had a particularly poignant story of coming to Cape Town as a widowed mother of four, knowing no one until she attended a Kwesu meeting and found that it

was being led by a dear childhood friend. Her long lost “sister” not only revived her spirits but also helped her find a stable job and assisted her financially.

What a blessing! That was a blessing I’m telling you, because since I found my sister, my life changed. I know today if I have a problem I know where I can go. If she needs me she comes to me, if I need her I go to her. She is my family now. She is my family here. Now I say, I’m not alone. I have a sister.

Yet Schuster’s caution about the way that microfinance programs help construct and propagate notions of women’s sociality is relevant here. Not all women migrants in Cape Town are looking for the type of relationships that The Women’s Platform seems to require. Perhaps those who are most resistant to this model are those who are most desperate for immediate financial support. For those who can manage the train fare and the time, The Women’s Platform can provide psycho-social relief from loneliness and the stress of managing life and family as an unwelcome immigrant. But for others, the social requirements of the group can feel like just one more bureaucratic hurdle to receiving the financial support they need to survive.

### ***C. Local leadership and measures of success***

Scalabrini’s funding from the U.S. Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration will support (among many other programs) small business development grants for five businesses initially. Unlike traditional micro-credit programs offering solidarity loans, the money will not need to be paid back and therefore does not require the social collateral that can be so disruptive of existing social relationships. But because of this arrangement, Scalabrini ultimately retains control over how the funds are spent. For example, an early experiment was to seed a catering business run by Women’s Platform members from Zimbabwe using the Scalabrini Centre’s kitchen. Despite the prime location in the central business district, the business was losing money and wasting food. Several participants in the business stopped showing up regularly for work, forcing the one most committed worker to seek out other Zimbabwean immigrants to help at the last minute.

Scalabrini Centre staff felt they had to intervene, and ended up restructuring the business with strict requirements that participants work at least three days a week, without children in tow. The staff selected new participants (Congolese and Zimbabwean women who sometimes have trouble reconciling their language and culinary differences) and set up new systems for managing

inventory and pricing. The system has become much more efficient, and the participants are seeing an immediate financial output, but it will be many months before the migrant leaders have completed the required financial and business management trainings to regain control of the business. Similarly, with other businesses that have received financial support from The Women's Platform, Scalabrini staff have stepped in to make management suggestions or advise on financial decisions. The project highlights the inherent tensions among the needs for immediate financial gains, long-term capacity building and ongoing leadership and agency of Women's Platform members.

One strategy that holds great promise for the development of participant leadership for The Women's Platform is the Peer-to-Peer mentoring program, through which platform members train other members in particular skills of personal or financial development. Importantly, mentors are paid for their services, though not as much as a professional facilitator would be paid<sup>iv</sup>. Women's Platform participants have expressed how impactful it is to learn from the successes of other migrants with whom they can relate and speak freely. Peer mentoring is also at the heart of a new internship program that places platform members in workplaces to gain resume-building experience, some in business run by members of the platform themselves. The Women's Platform supports these arrangements by providing transport costs for the intern and a placement fee to the mentor.

Many of the women who took initial leadership roles in The Women's Platform are no longer active on a regular basis. Some have been able to find full-time jobs, others are going to school or working on their own businesses, and a few have left the Cape Town area. These original leaders were identified as having strong networks of people they could connect to the platform, and many of them saw themselves not in need of support but rather as conduits for information and resources. Platform staff describe current participants as being more "in need" of the support of the network. But this also means that they may be less well-positioned to take on leadership roles and can easily come to be seen as recipients of Scalabrini's services rather than active collaborators in the development of The Women's Platform<sup>v</sup>.

Nonetheless, The Women's Platform is working on new leadership models that do not require the kinds of institutional or national group-based connections needed initially. The most active members of the platform have been invited to join a leadership group that plans and leads monthly platform meetings, receives ongoing leadership training and provides direction for the platform

as a whole. These leaders, like the initial nationality-group leaders of the platform, have been selected by The Women's Platform's paid staff team, which has grown to include a full-time project manager, an assistant manager, an intern and part-time support from another staff member. The tension between professionalisation and participant leadership is one that has been present since the inception of the platform. As an early leader explained,

When it's in the community, it's comfortable. It gives a sense of freedom and control. When we call a meeting here in Scalabrini, people feel they must be professional. They don't want to share their real problems. People don't open up. They wear one or two masks.

The mostly white professional staff for the platform often express their sense that their presence can inhibit free discussion and easy exchange of ideas. However they have not yet hired an African immigrant (or black South African) as a primary staff member for the platform. This will be a key transition moving forward, to ensure that the platform does not become yet another development project whose primary beneficiaries are white staff members (Ferguson 1994).

#### ***D. Individual leadership versus collective action***

The Women's Platform has developed social norms that reward model participants who see themselves as responsible to other women, both inside and outside the group. Within this strong commitment to community, the approach to advocacy and social change is individual rather than collective. While the members of the platform lament the policy changes that have made South Africa more restrictive in integrating migrants, they do not generally see themselves in a position to advocate collectively for policy change. Their tenuous position in South African society has left most women feeling too vulnerable to participate in social protest. And because many of them come from countries where political dissidence has resulted in violence, sometimes to their own families, they are highly aware of the risks of such activism.

Instead, both staff and participants see The Women's Platform as giving them access to information and resources that can arm them to fight for the rights to which they are entitled but which often are violated. When parents are turned away trying to register their children at a government school, for example, they may know that education is a universal right in South Africa, but they feel they have no recourse. The Women's Platform provides both the

knowledge of legal rights, the social support to advocate for oneself and, in some cases, legal resources to fight one's case.

South African scholars have pointed out that, in the wake of the violence of 2008, migrant organisations have not mobilised strategic claims to "minority" status or cultural citizenship as have such movements in other parts of the world, including movements for cultural citizenship in the United States. (Polzer & Segatti 2011; Galvez 2010; Rosaldo 1997; De Genova 2002; De Genova 2005). Yet South Africa's constitutional and discursive claims as a "rainbow nation," notwithstanding recent moves to restrict migration to the country, seem to invite the use of such strategies (Griffin 2011). As The Women's Platform moves forward, it remains to be seen whether the platform's focus on individual responsibility to the community presages eventual collective action for fundamental human rights.

### ***Conclusion***

The challenges and opportunities of migrant integration that South Africa is currently experiencing are not unique. However, the context of post-apartheid democratic transition, attempted transformation of racial hierarchies and ongoing economic struggles, creates particular pressure for the country to integrate migrants in a way that advances social goals. As South Africa wrestles with ongoing political and economic challenges, immigration may play a key role in shaping the broader politics of the nation (McDonald 2000a; Nyamnjoh 2006).

The Scalabrini Centre Women's Platform is a promising model for building multi-national migrant leadership not only for individual advancement but also potentially for systemic change. However, it will continue to require careful attention to the role of the mediating institution in constructing and maintaining gendered norms of sociality, racialised hierarchies of professional versus volunteer leadership, and expected outcomes of individual uplift and responsibility to community. There are inherent tensions in this work between migrants' immediate financial and social needs and the potential for long-term capacity building and leadership. If The Women's Platform can successfully manage these tensions, it may ultimately be a force in developing a powerful migrant constituency for human rights in South Africa.

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## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Scalabrini staff attempt to collect demographic information from all participants in Women's Platform meetings, trainings or events. As of June 2016, 111 individuals had shared this information. All data are self-reported, though staff assists participants in filling out the form when necessary.

<sup>2</sup> Bekker (2010) summarises these explanations differently, dividing them into the following categories: "(i) external structural causes, (ii) factors directly related to specific outbursts, (iii) factors relating to diffusion of outbursts, and (iv) perceptions concerning policing."

<sup>3</sup> The group used the general South African term "stokvel" to describe its financial approach. In this case, participants contributed regularly to a fund that was then distributed to members based on their business proposals to the group.

<sup>4</sup> Scalabrini staff negotiated the fee with members of The Women's Platform and agreed on an amount that is about 60% of what professional facilitators are paid. New facilitators will be paid less and work up to this amount. Again, this raises concerns about parity between the paid, full-time staff of the platform and the volunteer or part-time paid participants.

<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the staff feel that the current leaders may have more freedom to develop leadership across networks that transcend nationality. One staff member who is also a refugee herself commented, "When they meet together you can see that they're all leaders. The Women's Platform leaders are taking over the platform, because now they are suggesting what kind of workshops they want, and they always give feedback when we need their thoughts."

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