

Mobility, Gender, and Experiences of Familyhood among Migrant Families in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Migration has a long-standing history in Southern Africa. This paper aims to understand how ongoing contextual transformations due to migration actively shape narratives about families. Specifically, how families and familial relationships have been constructed through the everyday interactions and roles within the family. Through the family histories method, we generated novel data that shows how family accounts transcend normative boundaries of familyhood and how they change in time and across place, which, we argue, are required to understand migrant families. We adopt a multi-sited and gendered approach to gather data from left-behind women in Tsholotsho and migrant men in Johannesburg. The findings show that the meaning of family for left-behind women has remained confined to the normative parameters of kinship, biological, and marital ties. In the past, with husbands and fathers who migrated, families invoked substitute authority in decision-making, where power was conferred onto other men, perpetuating patriarchal dominance and gender inequality. Furthermore, the findings reveal that in the past, while away, migrant men's family-linking practices were very minimal, limited by distance. For migrant men, migration invoked a reconceptualization of family that differs from the normative assumptions of family composition. These assumptions notwithstanding, migrant men still thrived on maintaining links with their families to retain their dignity and legitimacy.

Keywords: families, migration, gender, Tsholotsho, Johannesburg

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INTRODUCTION

In Southern Africa, human mobility within and between countries has a long history (Yabiku et al., 2010; Posel and Marx, 2013). This mobility has been crucial in shaping the socioeconomic order of the region (Musoni, 2020). While governments in the region have attempted to control migration between countries, it continues to be a vicious cycle driven by deteriorating economic conditions in some countries leading to the search for better livelihoods by new generations of migrant families in relatively better-off countries in the region (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990; Ncube et al., 2014; Zack et al., 2019). Through family histories, this paper explores how mobility actively shapes familyhood in Zimbabwean migrant families as they construct familyhood between Johannesburg and Tsholotsho. We use gender, space, and time as parameters of analysis. By appealing to respondents' memory, this paper explores what evolving relationships have shaped their familyhood in three generations of migrants and whether new forms of familyhood emerge as members move. If so, we inquire whether new practices conflict with or replace forms of familyhood. Are these new “families” hidden from the more normative ones? Do they supplement or enrich the earlier structures? This paper shows how time, space, and gender in the context of mobility shape the experiences of familyhood for both left-behind women and migrant men. Through the current lens of transnationalism, this paper explores the different ways that migration has shaped families over time, revealing different nuances of relatedness and familyhood. The time approach through generations of migrants reveals the realities of the disconnect between families in the past and the connections in the current transnational social space of family life.

The next section presents background literature on experiences of familyhood and the conceptualization of familyhood in Southern Africa. The subsequent sections explain the methods used, provide a brief description of the respondents, and present and discuss the study's key results; this is followed by the conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiences of mobility and familyhood in Southern Africa

Throughout the history of migration in Southern Africa, mobility has actively shaped the experiences of familyhood. During the colonial era, men moved from their rural homes to urban areas searching for wage employment (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990). For example, in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), the colonial regime favored the contractual employment of single (male) migrants in cities, yet it prevented them from permanent settlement (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990). The colonial government promoted institutionalized division of families by restricting the mobility of other population groups, especially women and children, to protect settler minority interests (Mlambo, 2010). This labor system forcibly divided families through influx control (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990), leading to social strain on familial relationships.

The system of migrant labor in Southern Africa took many forms. These included the institutionalized and regulated contract labor system servicing the mines in the 1800s and the informal, clandestine – often undocumented – irregular migration between countries (Mlambo, 2010). As people moved within the region, the most popular destinations were South Africa and Zimbabwe. On the one hand, South Africa received migrants from neighboring countries like Malawi, Mozambique, and Lesotho, under the administrative arrangements between the then Rhodesian government and the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) of 1974. In this arrangement, younger men were preferred for contracts in the mining industry, while no contracts were available for women (Murray, 1981). On the other hand, Rhodesia's booming manufacturing and mining industry made the country a net importer of labor. The labor recruitment agency known as the Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) supplied approximately 13,000 workers a year to the different industries in the country (Wilson, 1976; Mlambo, 2010). The workers were recruited from Nyasaland (now Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and Mozambique (Scott, 1954). Just like in the case of the mining industry in South Africa, the labor system in Rhodesia also preferred men while women remained in the communal lands (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990).

During the post-independence era, most governments in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) inherited functional and booming economies within which migration continued. Despite the independence, the colonial migration systems in the region left indelible marks that continued to shape the form of mobility in the SADC (Delius, 2017), for example, uneven spatial development in rural and urban areas (Takyi, 2011). Resultantly, after independence, this spatial differentiation of development initiatives fueled rural-urban migration in most countries in the region (Munzwa and Wellington, 2010). In post-independence Zimbabwe, when mobility restrictions were lifted and the black majority gained the “right to the city,” rural-urban migration increased due to the shift toward family migration and independent migration of women in search of employment in the urban centers where economic activities were concentrated (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990; Potts, 2010). Although the internal migrant labor system became family-friendly, some women had to return to the communal areas during farming to till the family land. In this way, migrant families maximized economic security by protecting their rights to land while maintaining wage employment in the city (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990). Although there was a sense of family unification, families remained significantly divided as some men did not have enough accommodation for their families in the cities (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990).

Although countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Lesotho inherited prosperous economies after independence, a few years later, they experienced a long spiral of economic decline (Murray, 1981; Platteau, 2009; Mlambo, 2010; Kwenda and Ntuli, 2014; Adekoye and Kondlo, 2020). The deteriorating economic performance and the reduction in agricultural productivity in most countries perpetuated internal and

external mobility (Maviza, 2020). This resulted in changes in household livelihood strategies as families shifted from primary familial subsistence systems to capitalist production systems that reinforced a growing dependence on wage employment (Crush and Frayne, 2010). From Murray's (1981) work on the impacts of labor migration on families in Lesotho (and, by inference, on other marginal areas within Southern Africa) and other similar works in the region, for example, Zimbabwe (Crush and Tevera, 2010), Namibia (Hishongwa, 1992), and Mozambique (Yabiku et al., 2010), it is evident that migration typically divided families (Murray, 1981; Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990), yet is not clear how these movements have shaped familyhood in migrant families.

In the contemporary landscape, mobility continues to divide families. However, the effects are not as pronounced as in historical times due to improved technologies of connection that traverse geographic boundaries (Collyer and King, 2012). Technological developments have led to transnational migration, defined as "a process of movement and settlement across international borders in which individuals maintain or build multiple networks of connection to their country of origin while at the same time settling in a new country" (Fouron and Schiller, 2001: 60). This is unlike in the past, where migrants' contact with their families was very irregular and nominal because migrants were uprooted from their families and integrated into the host countries with limited means to facilitate links with families back home (Maviza, 2020). Although there was some form of bidirectional mobility then, it cannot compare to the contemporary simultaneous embeddedness of migrant members enabled by the modern-day structuring of the world economy and the technological advancements in transport and communication. These have allowed migrants to remain virtually present in their families despite physical absence (Helmsing, 2003). The transnational approach that focuses on the fluidity of social life and relationships facilitated by technology, has various strands of theorization. First used in the 1990s and pioneered by Schiller et al. (1992) and Basch et al. (1994), the latter define transnational migration as:

The processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement. Immigrants who build such social fields are designated ["transnational migrants"] ... [who] develop and maintain multiple relations—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political that span borders. [Transnational migrants] take actions, make decisions, feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously (Basch et al., 1994: 1–2).

Vertovec (1999: 447) defines transnational migration as the "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states." Thus, transnationalism creates notable degrees of interconnectedness between people,

communities, and societies straddling across borders and fostering changes in the socio-cultural, economic, and political landscapes of both migrant-sending and receiving societies (IOM, 2010). Within these linkages, transnational migrants can maintain, build, and reinforce relations with their families in their countries of origin (Schiller et al., 1992; Dunn, 2005). The simultaneous embeddedness of migrants allows them and their descendants to participate in familial, socioeconomic, religious, political, and cultural processes that transcend borders (Schiller et al., 1992; Basch et al., 1994; Portes et al., 1999; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). This simultaneous embeddedness affords transnational migrants novel ways of being and belonging to their families (Levitt and Schiller, 2004).

Family dimensions emerge as a critical component of the resultant relationships and practices of migrants as they maintain multiple attachments across nation-states. Within these transnational social spaces, families have transformed, and migrants have adapted to new forms of being family that include care arrangements (McGregor, 2010; Kufakurinani et al., 2014) that in migration scholarship are referred to as transnational parenting (Carling et al., 2012; Kufakurinani et al., 2014). Thus, transnational social spaces facilitate their virtual presence, allowing them to continue to participate in family activities and their parenting role (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). Transnational family life emerges as a form of transnational social space with continued participation in family life by family members who are situated remotely. This leads to new family formations known as transnational families (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 3), ones that render geographical distance less of a barrier to movement and involvement (Faist, 2006; Pries, 2006).

During both the historical migration and currently, the transnational migration era, family structures and experiences of familyhood changed due to mobility and social change processes, not only in terms of the way in which family life is sustained by its members but also in terms of its structure. In Lesotho and other countries of the region, Murray (1980) highlights a notable move toward the nucleation of families. Although family organization and structure were fundamentally altered by mobility and by the fact that males played minor social roles, the extended family remained a valued safety net, and familial reference remained patrilineal (Atmore, 1982). In South Africa, for example, studies sought to establish whether left-behind families viewed migrants as members of their families or not (Posel and Marx, 2013). For most of these, results show that absent members expressed their membership and belonging through continued contribution to the maintenance and well-being of the left-behind family (Murray, 1980). This is a common thread in most of the studies done in the region.

Adding to the existing knowledge on migration and families in the region, this paper focuses on practices of familyhood across three generations of migrants. It adopts a generational perspective within historical migrant families, and applies a gender perspective that combines the viewpoints of men as those who move and of women as those left behind. In most instances, women initially move when they leave

their natal families to join their marital families. They have recently become active players in cross-border migration (Thebe and Maviza, 2019). On the other hand, men have always been the ones moving across borders, making them more prominent as migrants. The following section offers a conceptualization of familyhood in Africa.

A conceptualization of family and familyhood in Africa

In Africa, a family normatively refers to a social organization where people are related by blood, marriage, or adoption (Haralambos and Holborn, 1995; Nyoni and Dodo, 2016). Conceptions of African families are expansive, flexible, and accommodative of the extended members (Nyoni and Dodo, 2016). Notwithstanding these conceptions, belonging to a family is affirmed by public endorsements through ritualistic practices such as marriage (Nyathi, 2005). Within families, familyhood is depicted, practiced, and experienced through cooperative unions, resource sharing and reciprocal exchanges of care and support. Familyhood is further denoted by unity, closeness, oneness, and morality among members, demonstrated by the closely knit relations where everyone is a sister, brother, father, or mother, among others (Nyoni and Dodo, 2016). Through care, new members begin to be integrated as part of families. Within these systems of organization, descent follows the patrilineal line, which emphasizes tracing relationships from the senior male's side (Gwakwa, 2014; Strassmann and Kurapati, 2016). As such, when a woman marries, she is subsumed into her husband's kin group (Lowe, 2020). There is also an emphasis on patrilocality, where women move to their husband's kin after marriage (Scelza, 2011; Ji et al., 2014; Hirschman, 2017). Familyhood is also shaped by polygyny, where a man is allowed to marry more than one wife (Gwirayi, 2017; Muchabaiwa, 2017). In Zimbabwe, although polygyny is common, it is prohibited under civil law and only allowed under customary law (Gwirayi, 2017). Among the Ndebele, although a man is customarily allowed to have multiple wives, he cannot do so without the permission of the first wife (Ndlovu et al., 1995; Nyathi, 2005).

Furthermore, familyhood in the region is shaped by kinship organization that emphasizes the ideals of reciprocity and collective effort among members. These can be through caregiving arrangements that bind family members in a web of reciprocal obligations, love, and trust, as well as tensions and relations of unequal power (Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Vanotti, 2014). These caregiving and kin-keeping practices demonstrate the diverse factors that shape familyhood – reciprocal, multidirectional, and asymmetrical care exchanges. This blurs the boundaries between nuclear and extended families, as the essence of who counts as family is shaped by various socioeconomic factors. For example, Murray (1980), writing on migrant labor in Lesotho, proffers that there is no point in emphasizing the nuclear delineation of the family as the basis of familial conceptualization in Southern Africa. He argues that many husbands and wives live apart due to mobility, and grandparents raise many children because their parents are migrants.

Reflections on family history as a method

Understanding the experiences of familyhood in the context of mobility needs suitable methodological approaches that address the spatial, time, generational, and gender dimensions, including those who have moved and those left behind. The family history method – a biographical research approach based on individuals' narratives – seems suitable to assess the changes and historical continuities in family structures, lives, and organizations due to migration and transnationalism. Therefore, what the respondents give in family histories is neither history nor biography but an account of many histories emanating from intersections of different families and experiences interlinked to form one family through the eyes of the history teller (Nelson and Fivush, 2020). Family histories reveal that family life is not a linear account of systematic lived realities but rather a complex web of social relations punctuated by transitions in time and space (Lazar, 2011).

The approach emphasizes the individual as a conduit and source of information in a complex network of familial associations that change over time (Miller, 1999). This approach reconstructs situational realities based on narratives whose standpoints or points of view are fluid and actively shaped by continuing contextual transformations and developments (Miller, 1999). Although this perspective has been criticized and questions raised on the adequacy, authenticity, and epistemological validity of the reality presented (Roberts, 2002), its usefulness has not been discredited.

As such, memories are constructed in hindsight and manifested as narrative accounts – a critical form of human consciousness – of both the current and past individual and collective family experiences and identities (Phoenix and Brannen, 2014; Nelson and Fivush, 2020). Family history addresses the paucity of methods that trace intergenerational processes within migrant families and simultaneously allows for the open concept of family. It enables researchers to explore the role of memory and narrative in understanding familyhood among migrant communities and how members appeal to their memories to create coherent narratives of self and their families (Lazar, 2011; Nelson and Fivush, 2020).

METHODS

This is a qualitative study³ that comprised multi-sited fieldwork to gain insights into transnational families' lived realities and to avoid methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller, 2003). This methodological design responds to the reality of the simultaneous embeddedness of family members in transnational settings. It adapts, in methodological terms, to the dynamics of migration and transnationalism. In the next subsection we present the study area, population, sampling, and data collection methods.

³ This paper is based on the first author's PhD study on transnational migration and families, that sought to understand the changes and continuities associated with transnational migration as experienced by families in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe.

Study area

The researchers conducted fieldwork in Tsholotsho (Zimbabwe) and Johannesburg (South Africa) over six months. Tsholotsho is a rural district in the Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe, characterized by poor rainfall patterns and adverse economic conditions (Maphosa, 2012; Maviza, 2020). In response to these challenges, the district has significant outbound migration, especially to South Africa, as a coping strategy to secure family livelihoods. Although current migration trends depict that women are now active players in migration, in Tsholotsho, most of the women aged 50 and above constitute a significant percentage of those left behind. At the same time, men have been migrants for years (Thebe and Maviza, 2019; Maviza, 2020). Johannesburg has become known as a gateway to South Africa and a transitional city (Moyo, 2017). This is mainly attributed to the fact that most migrants transit through Johannesburg to other South African provinces (Kihato, 2013). It has been the destination of choice for Zimbabwean migrants for a long time.

Study population and sampling

In Tsholotsho district, the researchers conducted the study in villages 2 and 5 of Ward 19. It targeted families with migrant members in Johannesburg who communicated and visited regularly. In Johannesburg, the study did not focus on any specific locations and it targeted only migrants who fulfilled the characteristics of transnational migrants. In Tsholotsho, the researcher selected migrant families using purposive snowball sampling. The village head made the initial referrals to some of the families who had emigrant members residing in South Africa. From the referrals, the researchers selected respondents through filter questions that defined the parameters of a transnational family, i.e., whether the emigrant members were in constant communication and visited them regularly. In the qualifying families, the researchers targeted household heads. In the absence of the head, the research team targeted members over 18 years of age who were willing to participate. Those interviewed referred the researchers to other migrant families. All the respondents in Tsholotsho were women. The process was repeated until thematic saturation was reached at respondent number 10.

In Johannesburg, the researchers similarly used purposive snowball sampling to identify migrants originally from Tsholotsho. The initial referrals were from burial society leaders who referred the researchers to some transnational migrants from Tsholotsho. The migrants also had to meet the qualifying criteria, viz., having families in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe, residing in Johannesburg, and being in constant communication with and regularly visiting their families in Tsholotsho. Only those who satisfied these criteria were selected to be part of the sample as they met the defining characteristics of a transnational migrant. Those interviewed referred the researchers to other migrants from Tsholotsho living in Johannesburg. The transnational migrants in Johannesburg were both men and women who grew up in

Tsholotsho in families with migrant fathers. Later, as adults, they became migrants and were in regular contact with their families back home. The process was repeated until respondent number 10.

Thus, the research team reached 20 respondents – 10 each in Tsholotsho and in Johannesburg. From the 20 families interviewed, the researchers selected 10 for further inquiry on the history of migration in their families (five from each site). In Johannesburg, family history respondents were men only, as they were available and ready to participate further in the research. While women were also part of the transnational migrants' group, those invited to continue into family histories excused themselves from sharing their family histories due to domestic and childcare-related chores they had to perform at home. On the contrary, men had wives or partners taking care of their homes and had more free time to participate in this study. Therefore, we could not gain insight into women's experiences as migrants. This aspect is worthy of further exploration.

The study did not aim for a representative sample or seek to generalize the findings to the rest of Matabeleland and Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg. Rather, it aimed for an in-depth understanding of the changes and continuities that had occurred within families in the context of long-standing migration.

Data collection methods

The research team conducted in-depth interviews with the 20 participating families, and further engaged 10 of the 20 families in gathering their family histories through in-depth interviews. The respondents did not belong to the same families. The researchers made this decision based on the need to maintain confidentiality within families. It aligns with the approach taken in this study, where family histories are gathered through the perspective of those who account for them. Although this affected what we could gather about the families and that we could not know the extent to which members' views in origin and destination countries differed, it did not interfere with gathering family histories based on individual accounts. Instead, our approach allowed for free discussion of sensitive issues that respondents may not have wished to expose to their families.

Researcher positionality

The first author comes from Tsholotsho and spent a significant part of her life living there and had also done some observations during fieldwork. She was able to deal with some idealized scenarios where respondents may have misrepresented the reality on the ground. Among transnational migrants in Johannesburg, the first author enjoyed the privilege of an insider, being a person from Tsholotsho and also a Zimbabwean immigrant researching other Zimbabwean immigrants in South Africa. However, the migrant community did not regard her as one of their own, as belonging and sharing in their struggles as migrants in South Africa. Rather, her professional position as a

researcher put her in the position of an outsider. To deal with this sensitized position, she depended on personal networks and connections to gain access to the migrant community in South Africa.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Family life and familyhood in the context of mobility

The family history offers rich insights into the dynamics of family life where migration has been normalized and embraced as the norm. These insights provide a privileged look at the experiences of familyhood within processes of social change. The personal reflections highlight the creative means and ways through which families deal with the negative legacy of the migrant labor system, which drove many African men and women to settle outside their communities and countries of origin.

The meaning of family

From the findings, it is evident that mobility has, over time, altered the organization, structure, and meaning of families in Tsholotsho. When the research team asked respondents what family meant to them, their responses highlighted a far-encompassing definition of family that embraced biological and social relations. Accounts from the left-behind women had overlaps of their maiden/natal families and the families they were married into. MaSiwela⁴ is a grandmother in her mid-50s and wife to a migrant. She is a subsistence farmer living with her grandchildren. She has five grown-up children, all girls. Very outspoken and confident, MaSiwela offered the following narration when responding to the question on what family meant to her, both as a child and in her current circumstances:

I remember ngikhula emzini kababamkhulu (growing up in my grandfather's homestead), a big homestead where all his children lived. Our grandmothers, our parents and us, the grandchildren, all lived there. We would always visit my mother's parents, and impilo yayimnandi (life was good); that was my family then; it was a big, big family. Looking at it now, my family has sort of shrunk, although similar to then, the intimacy and closeness of relationships are no longer there. It is more like the immediate family matters most; all our extended family members are there but somehow distant.

Similarly, MaNdebele, a 63-year-old grandmother currently living in Tsholotsho with her husband and hired helpers, has five highly accomplished children scattered worldwide – to use her own words. For her, her family is:

Mntanomntanami, kimi imuli nguye wonke umuntu olegazi lami, lawowonke umuntu oyisihlobo sikababa, ngitsho umkami (Everyone who shares the

⁴ The research team assigned pseudonyms to participants.

same blood as me and everyone related to my husband). *Yikho lokhu engakufundiswayo ngikhula, lanxa izinto sezatshintsha, mina ngilokhe ngibona imuli yami kuyibo laba* (This is what I was taught growing up; although things have changed a lot [...] I still view my family as all these).

MaSiwela's and MaNdebele's accounts were typical of the responses by other participants, who also defined family starting from their natal families and intricately transitioning into the families they married into. Although this hybridity could not be directly linked to migration, it adds a critical dimension to how these women actively shape the conceptualization of familyhood. It reveals untold frictions in constructing women's identity and belonging within complex social relations. Women maintain belonging to their natal families while embracing the new families created through marriage. They create familyhood in the face of their mobility based on the principles of patrilineal locality. As with women's making of familyhood across lineages and space, families are contextual, fluid, subjective, and imbued with symbolic meaning and lived realities of the individual involved (Trask, 2009; Gwenzi, 2020).

As for the migrant men, most gave a wide-reaching and all-encompassing definition. For example, Mr Nyathi, a 60-year-old migrant whose wife is in Tsholotsho, explained:

Imuli igoqela abazali bami, abafowethu, obafowabo babazali bami labobabamkhulu labogogo kunhlangothi zombili, kubaba lakumama kanye labazali labafowabo bakankosikazi (Family includes my biological parents, siblings, aunts, and uncles, grandparents from my father's and mother's sides and my wife's parents and siblings).

But again, when you travel too far from home, you meet new people, and they become friends that eventually become family. Sometimes we also cohabit with women to keep us company, and that person automatically becomes family. So, my small house and some friends become family because they are the people I live with and interact with daily while away from home. (Interview, Johannesburg, 2017).

The mention of "small houses" demonstrates the regular cohabitation or *masihlalisane* practices by migrant men who set up new romantic relationships away from home. These are semi-permanent sexual relationships usually formed among migrants or between migrants and locals (Maphosa, 2012). This led to "cross-border concurrent multiple sexual partnerships" for married men. For some, these relationships were eventually formalized into marriage through payment of lobola. Writing on a similar practice by Mozambican immigrant men in South Africa, Lubkemann (2002) uses the phrase 'transnationalised polygamy' to refer to these sexual relationships that the men develop in South Africa while their wives are back home. As a result,

the family back in Tsholotsho may be compromised, as the man's attention and resources are diverted to the new living arrangement sustained in Johannesburg. Transnationalism also enables other unsanctioned forms of families to coexist with conventional family formations.

Newman, a young transmigrant residing with his wife and children in Johannesburg while his mother was in Tsholotsho, put it this way:

I used to think that family was only about blood ties, about my people back home. *Kodwa ngemva kokubuya eGoli ngafunda ukuthi imuli iyahamba idlule kuzihlobo zegazi, abantu engikhonza labo labo bayimuli kimi* (But coming to South Africa has taught me that over and above my blood relatives, the people I go to church with are also my family). *Laba yibo abantu engilobudlelwano obuseduze kakhulu labo, kwesinye isikhathi ukwedlula abegazi* (These are the people I have close relations with, some of whom are even closer than some of my blood relatives). (Interview, Johannesburg, 2017).

Mr Ndiweni, a migrant in Johannesburg for over 30 years, narrated how he was lonely when he got to Johannesburg, which had very few people from Zimbabwe at the time. He recounted how he made friends with some migrant men from elsewhere and they became very close. To him, those men became his family because they were the ones who knew whether he slept warmly, had food to eat, or had medical care if he was sick. This demonstrates how, within these relationships, the care element is central to shaping familyhood. Mr Ndlela, one of the immigrants who had been in South Africa for over 40 years, expressed himself thus:

Ngemva kokusuka kwami etsholotsho ngisiya eGoli, ngananzelela ukuthi abakibo kamama bayingxeny eqakathekileyo kakhulu eyempilo yami. Lanxa silezibongo ezehlukeneyo, labo bayingxeny yempilo yami (After the experience of moving from Tsholotsho to Johannesburg, I realized that my maternal relatives were also a significant part of my life; they are my family. Although I may not have the same surname, they are also a part of my family).

In defining their families, migrants, like the left-behind women, emphasized relations on both their paternal and maternal sides. Their narrations depart from the normative conception of families that emphasizes blood and marital ties based on their experiences of the family as children living with their kin. Their accounts then transition into their adulthood, where the definition broadens to include people outside of their kinship system, for example, friends and neighbors in the host country. Notably, new practices of familyhood emerge as men move away from their homes. For both the migrant men and the left-behind women, their family accounts are influenced by experiences of mobility, being removed from familiar environments and people, and exposure to new places and people.

In the past, migrants were entirely removed from their families and could not participate in family life until they returned (Maviza, 2020). While away, their belonging to a family was maintained when other male family members became de facto heads. This practice ensured the reproduction and safeguarding of authority for the absent men. Although disguised as care for the left-behind women, it perpetuated patriarchal dominance and control over women and children through other men in the family. This is unlike transnationalism, where family life is transacted in transnational social spaces (Pries, 2001; Maviza, 2020). Within these transnational social spaces, care manifests through remittances, visits, and regular communication with the absent husband. Although this emancipates the woman from patriarchal dominance as she is now liberated from de facto headship by men other than her husband, the migrant man still has the final say as the woman makes decisions in consultation with the husband.

In the past, as migrants moved, their absence greatly affected family life, organization, family structures, and, importantly, their practices of relating to one another. In their narratives, migrants emphasized how they strive to keep in touch with those left behind, unlike their fathers, who could not link with their families due to several restrictions. This may signify a strong effect of their upbringing – their lived experiences with absent fathers, and hence the desire to right the wrongs they lived through while their fathers were migrants.

For left-behind women, family histories reveal the family-making processes through marriage. At the same time, the migrant men, on the other hand, demonstrate how mobility pushes those who move to forge new relationships. Njwambe et al. (2019) record similar findings, noting that migrants develop social networks made of new links and connections to cope with social isolation. Therefore, the care aspect of the new relationships transforms them into familial bonds. The new relationships fill the gap created by separation from their families left behind, while aiding integration into a new community, in the process reconfiguring familyhood and the meaning of family. These findings are in sync with Gwenzi's (2020) study, that proffers that significant scholarship now acknowledges non-biological conceptualizations of a family rooted in connectivity, co-residence, and affective practices, among others.

It is noteworthy, in the context of mobility, that space and frequency of contact, interaction, and care exchanges between family members have shaped gender relations and familyhood within the family. For left-behind women, mobility shapes their experiences of familyhood through sanctioned and normative ways of either biological affinities or marital ties legitimated through ritual performances. Yet, for migrant men, the notion of familyhood includes the normative forms of who belongs (biological and marital relations) and non-familial relationships that are neither sanctioned nor confirmed back home through blood or marital ties or ritual performances. Instead, migrant men created new and sometimes hidden families in South Africa. Beyond friends who became family, there were other hidden relationships where married migrant men cohabited with women in South Africa

and created families that conflicted with the normative and legitimized families back home. This is conflicted, in that there was no consent from the first wife back home as per customary expectations (Ndlovu et al., 1995; Nyathi, 2005). The new relationships, however, did not replace older familial links but supplemented them because migrant men still maintained relations with their family members back home.

i. Gender and decision-making power

Gender and space emerge as part of the major dimensions that shape familyhood in the context of mobility. From the narrations, when the respondents were still children and their fathers migrated, decisions on capital goods directly bearing authority, rights, and power were delegated to other male members of the extended family. MaNyathi's account evidences this dynamic. She is a widow and grandmother living with her grandchildren and hired workers. Her husband had been a migrant since they married over 50 years ago, and he died as a migrant. With a somber face, she recounted her life as a young married wife who only saw her husband after every three years. Her tales of a young life devoid of sexual pleasure and the beauty of companionship provoked sad memories. She had lived with her in-laws all her life. Now a widow, she recounted how, in the past, the extended family had so much control over the family's affairs, with paternal uncles and grandfathers wielding decision-making power over the left-behind wives and children in the absence of migrant husbands and fathers.

MaSibanda's case is similar. She is a 60-year-old widowed grandmother whose father was a migrant. She was also married to a migrant who visited every three to four years. Her husband returned home after retirement, and they lived together for 10 years before he died. She currently lives with her grandchildren, and all her children are now migrants. She recounts:

Ngathi ngisiyakwenda, ubabazala wami wayevele eseseGoli. Umama lomamazala babethembele kuboyisezala ekwenziweni kwezinqumo emzini yabo ngoba yibo ababelungelo lokwenza lokho njengamadoda. Omama babelandela lokho okunqunyiveyo kuthi obaba eGoli baziswe ngalesosinqumo mhlazana babuyayo ekhaya bezovakatsha (When I got married, my father-in-law was also a migrant. My mother and my mother-in-law depended on their fathers-in-law as they had the final say [on making decisions]. They both complied with what was decided, and the emigrants would be informed later when they eventually visited).

Mr Nyathi expressed similar sentiments, highlighting the role of patriarchy in families:

Our paternal uncles and grandfather helped when there were discipline challenges with the children or assisted in the fields during the plowing season and helped when there were major decisions to be made while our father was away. (Interview, Johannesburg, 2017).

Newman's narration demonstrates the gendered roles within families. It reflects the patriarchal nature of family organization where men make decisions:

Izinqumo eziphathelane lezomhlabathi lezifuyo zikhangelwa njengngomlandu wabobaba. Ngakho nxa ubaba wayengekho, umama wayethemba ubabamkhulu ukuthi amenzele izinqumo lezo (Decisions regarding land and livestock are always considered men's responsibility. So, when our father was away, our mother relied on our grandfather and uncles to make such decisions for her). (Interview, Tsholotsho, 2017).

Furthermore, Mr Ndlela explained:

You see, back then, things were different. The extended family had so much control over the affairs of the family. Unlike now, when these young wives stay in their homesteads and make decisions with their husbands over the phone. (Interview, Tsholotsho, 2017).

The preceding accounts show that historically, when husbands and fathers migrated, leaving their wives and children behind, a power vacuum was created. When this happened, families devised ways to fill it by activating the inherent provisions of kinship systems. According to Yabiku et al. (2010), the indefinite absence of the husband or the father was offset by the reorganization and reconfiguration of familial relations and power and authority, which resulted in the practice of substitute authority. This entailed other men or the mother-in-law exercising authority and decision-making power over the left-behind wife and children. Although some studies have indicated that the husband's migration resulted in autonomy for the left-behind wives (Abadan-Unat, 1977), findings from historical migration experiences in Tsholotsho indicate otherwise. Rather, they portray a reinforcement of patriarchal dominance where gender inequalities within families are deeply entrenched.

Moreover, historically, patriarchal dominance was compounded by residence patterns. Historically, in Tsholotsho, families lived in one big homestead; and usually, wives were left living with in-laws. This lack of residential independence meant the left-behind wives were assimilated into the patriarchal system of the bigger family (Abadan-Unat, 1977; Yabiku et al., 2010). It reinforced gender inequalities, as power remained with men and women remained perpetually subordinated. Although this was the case, the women then did not have any challenges with the arrangements as this was the norm they were socialized into.

ii. Migrants' linking practices

For most respondents, in the past, it was difficult for migrants to maintain regular contact with their families due to the challenges presented by distance. The findings show that most migrants made efforts to communicate with their families back in Tsholotsho, through letters. The letters took a long time to reach the intended recipients. Furthermore, it emerged that typically, migrants only visited their families after a minimum of two years' absence. These limitations had an impact on the migrants' ability to remit, visit, and communicate with their families. Reflecting on their childhood, most respondents recounted experiences of prolonged separation from their fathers, with minimal to no links during their absence. MaNdebele narrated it this way:

Ngesikhathi sikabab wami, kwakunzima ukuba ngumuntu wezizweni. Ephenduka okwakuqala, wasilandisela ngokubotshwa kwakhe lokuhlala kwakhe iminyaka emibili ejele. Esekhululiwe, wadinga umsebenzi ukuze laye abuye ekhaya ephethe okuncane. Wayesitshela ukuthi babehamba ngenyawo lesitimela besuka eGoli bezovakatsha ekhaya (During my father's time, it was challenging to be a migrant. When he returned, he narrated how he was arrested and spent two years in prison. After his release, he had to get a job to go home with something. He told us that they traveled on foot and by train when visiting). (Interview, Tsholotsho, 2017).

For MaNkiwane, she only got to know her father when she was five. She reminisced on how life was before, when she was a child and her father was a migrant:

When I was a child, my father left us with our mother and the extended family, and he used to communicate occasionally through letters sent via postal services. These took time to reach us. (Interview, Tsholotsho, 2017).

Similarly, Mr Ndiweni reflected on his childhood experiences when his father was a migrant and recalled his father's stories of his migration venture:

Our fathers sacrificed their families in trying to fend for their families. My father traveled on foot to South Africa, and when he got there, he would stay for a minimum of two years without visiting. If ever he communicated, it would be through a letter that would take more than two months to get to my mother. (Interview, Johannesburg, 2017).

Although left-behind members battled daily with anxiety that their family member could be dead, the hope for reunification someday kept the families going:

Engakabuyi ekhaya ukuzovakatsha, sasisizwa ngaboyise babanye ababevakatsha ukuthi uyaphila [...] sasihlalela ethembeni ukuthi ngelinye ilanga laye uzabuya njengaboyise babanye (Before he came back, we would only hear from other people's fathers who visited that he was fine [...] we just kept waiting in anticipation that one day, like others' fathers, he would also come [home]). (Interview, MaSiwela, Tsholotsho, 2017).

From the preceding accounts, it is evident that when fathers and husbands migrated in the past, they were totally uprooted from their families and only managed to link up occasionally through letters and when they eventually visited or returned. The linking mechanisms available to them were very slow and ineffective. This demonstrates the difficulties migrant men endured in trying to be part of the transactions that make up family life. Njwambe et al. (2019), writing on Mozambican migrant men and the autonomy of left-behind women, indicate that, in such scenarios, the drive to maintain links with home and attempts to maintain social relations with those left behind was a reflection of the desire to belong. Some scholars also indicate that keeping links with families was the only way a migrant man could evade social death (Kankonde, 2010), thereby retaining and asserting his dignity and authority (Njwambe et al., 2019). Moreover, enduring the challenges was evidence of the breadwinning burden that migrant men carried while away. They could not risk returning home empty-handed, as this would have been a sign of failure (Abadan-Unat, 1977; Donaldson and Howson, 2009). This emanates from the gendered divisions of labor within families where the masculine roles placed the burden of material provision on men, which motivated them to migrate (Abadan-Unat, 1977). Finally, their linking practices went beyond framing who is family to demonstrate how families are made by the everyday relationships that characterize a family.

Importantly, this is in direct contrast to the current transnational landscape where migrants' lives are characterized by embeddedness and simultaneity – migrants' acts of actively living their lives “here and there” in both the sending and host countries (Vertovec, 1999). They maintain strong socio-cultural, political, and economic ties or relationships with their homeland while physically away (Khagram and Levitt, 2008; Faist et al., 2013). Technological developments have allowed migrants to engage in transnational family life, maintain contact with their families through regular communication, visits, and remittances. Through simultaneity, migrants can also participate in family rituals, whether in person or virtually, as one of the ways to enact familyhood and affirm belonging. Thus, in transnational migration, familyhood is negotiated in transnational social spaces through several socio-cultural and economic activities facilitated by space-shrinking technologies, regardless of the separation of members by distance, dispersal, and translocality (Yeoh et al., 2005; Vanotti, 2014).

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that, during historical migration, gender, space, and time actively shaped familyhood in migrant families, which is our contribution to the study domain of families in the context of mobility. Through the current lens of transnationalism, this paper explored the different ways that migration has shaped families over time, revealing different nuances of relatedness and familyhood. The time approach through generations of migrants reveals the realities of the disconnect between families during the pre-transnationalism epoch. Historically, the migration of men, with minimal to no linking practices, dramatically changed the traditional family structures and organization leading to other men taking responsibility in place of those who migrated and migrant men setting up new relationships in the host country. This profoundly influenced the normative views on who and what is family, leading to the acceptance of new ways of doing and being family. It is evident that migration pushed male members' horizons and exposed them to new dimensions that provoked them to rethink the conceptualization of families outside the normative assumptions of what is already known and to enact these new formations through bonding and relating in familial terms outside of the traditional family formation. For the left-behind women, the definition of family remained confined to the normative boundaries framing families, which emphasize kinship, biological and marital relations.

Regarding gender and power dynamics within families, we conclude that although migration removed men from their families, gendered relations did not evolve toward gender equality. Instead, migration perpetuated patriarchal dominance by invoking substitute authority through the extended family system. Although faced with challenges, the desire to fulfill familial obligations and avoid being labeled a failure urged migrant men to endure hardships and excel in their breadwinning roles and the practice of familyhood. In the present time, transnationalism has helped migrant families deal with the disconnect that characterized historical migration. In the process, there has been a realization of gender equality, to some extent, as women have also found space to influence family decisions within the transnational social spaces.

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