Children, Youth and Migration in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Systems Perspective

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Abstract

Discourses on migration are plentiful and reflect different viewpoints. Migration is not a new 21st century phenomenon but has been in existence since the recording of history. Migration is occasioned by various reasons ranging from social, economic, political to religious ones. However, the challenges of the 21st century have ushered in new dimensions of migration and its impact on humanity in general. Globalisation and technology have made migration a lot easier and more frequent. While some scholars view migration from a Human Rights, ethical and gender perspective, this chapter discusses the impact of migration on the youth in general and the children in particular from an indigenous knowledge systems perspective. It answers the question: What role does indigenous knowledge systems play on children, youth and migration in Zimbabwe? Using observation, in-depth interviews and available literature, the chapter focuses on the impact of migration on children and youth who remain behind when their parents and guardians emigrate. It argues that the challenges faced by youth and children following the emigration of their parents and guardians could be minimised by tapping into *ruzivo rwevanhu* (people's indigenous knowledge systems).

Keywords: migration, emigration, youth, children, indigenous knowledge systems, postcolonial, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

This study, undertaken from an indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) point of view, is on the ramifications of migration, particularly for children who remain behind as their parents or guardians emigrate. There is a plethora of literature

on migration in Zimbabwe (Zanamwe & Devillard 2009; Mlambo 2010; Madebwe & Madebwe 2017; Muyambo & Ranga 2019) that focuses particularly on reasons for migration. This includes literature on the experiences of those who emigrate as either adults or youth (IOM 2009; World Bank 2008; Zinyama 1990). Very little research has been done on the impact of emigration on the children who remain behind. This is the lacuna this study intends to fill. It does so by collecting data via self-administered interviews and observations on the experiences of the children or youth who remain in their homeland as their parents or guardians emigrate. As the children or youth give their experiences, views and feelings on migration, the study uses IKS as a lens to analyse what factors have proven problematic in this century's migration as compared to migrations of the past. The IKS lens provides a platform upon which recommendations and conclusions of this study are anchored. The chapter sets off by way of an introduction that contextualises the study, a background that informs the study, a brief history of migration in Zimbabwe, followed by a discussion of a theoretical framework that underpins the study, description of the methodology behind the study, presentation of the study's findings and analysis, suggested recommendations and a conclusion by way of summarising the main argument of the chapter.

Background to the Study

In a study by Zanamwe and Devillard (2009), commissioned by ZimStat in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and funded by the European Union (EU), it was noted that economic reasons were the main factors driving emigration from Zimbabwe. Other factors which are social, political and religious in nature could also be players in the migration equation. The result has been the migration of skilled human resources which has created one of the largest challenges for Zimbabwe's economy since this began in the 1990s. Most emigrants are men who migrate to neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia or Namibia, just to mention a few. This kind of emigration by men had been the norm since the recording of history. As I was growing up in the late 1970s, I recall to mind scenes of men with huge metal boxes disembarking from buses, while family members waited to carry their luggage home. The returnees were locally known as *magaisa* (loosely translated to mean those who had emigrated to South Africa for work). This was very common in every household in my area.

Tevera and Zinyama (2002) stated that almost 25% of adult Zimbabwean parents or grandparents had worked in South Africa at some point in their lives. In those days, a man was considered to be ready to marry, if he had emigrated to South Africa. This emigration of men meant that women would remain at home tending to the children. This practice was very common among communities in Chipinge District of Zimbabwe.

With the worsening economic hardships and unprecedented levels of unemployment that Zimbabwe has been experiencing since the early 1990s, the emigration of people is no longer confined to males alone. Females have joined the bandwagon hoping to improve their livelihoods too. It is no longer a gender issue, for all and sundry emigrate. Madebwe and Madebwe (2017: 27) submit that ‘whereas in the past male migration was dominant, by 2000 women have migrated in almost equal numbers with men’. This scenario leaves children on their own in Zimbabwe. In some instances, the whole family, husband, wife and children emigrate for reasons that are either economic, educational, social, political or religious. It is against this backdrop that this chapter focuses on the experiences of the children who remain behind as parents or guardians emigrate. The article focuses on the children’s opinions, views, feelings and experiences of remaining behind under the above circumstances.

A Brief History of Migration in Zimbabwe

As alluded to earlier on, migration in Zimbabwe is not a 21st century phenomenon but one that dates back to the past. According to the World Bank (2008) Zimbabwe is one of the ten top emigrating countries in sub-Saharan Africa. This includes Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Eritrea, Nigeria, Mozambique, South Africa, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Put simply, migration is the geographical movement of people across a specified boundary for the purpose of establishing a new permanent or temporary/semi-permanent residence (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health 2006). This could be internal or international migration. Internal migration involves the movement within a country’s borders, a move from the rural to the urban centres, while international migration occurs between countries. The latter is the focus of this chapter, which is emigration. The definitions here deliberately exclude refugees, this area falls outside the purview of this study.

As alluded to above, emigration in Zimbabwe is not a new phenomenon. For example, according to Zinyama (1990) the migration of Zimbab-

weans to South Africa to work in the mining industry started as early as the beginning of the 20th century. But for Mlambo (2010: 1) migration in Zimbabwe ‘predates European conquest and the imposition of colonial boundaries’. For him even after conquest, migration continued since people of the same ethnic group, who could have been affected by the colonial boundaries, did not stop visiting their kith and kin on the other side of the boundary. For example, the Kalanga of south-western Zimbabwe continued crossing the boundaries into north-eastern Botswana; the Manyika and Ndaу people of eastern Zimbabwe crossed into central Mozambique where their relatives were and still are. The colonial boundaries were disregarded by many and even up until today, these back-and-forth migrations have continued unabated despite the restrictions imposed by law. Given this truism, migration in Zimbabwe can be traced through three epochs, the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial periods. However, this study focuses on the postcolonial epoch, with the intention of establishing the experiences of Zimbabwean children who are left behind as their parents and guardians emigrate.

Theoretical Framework

As the study is about children of the ‘formerly colonised, historically marginalized, and oppressed groups, which today are most often represented as Other ...’ (Chilisa 2012: 1), the postcolonial indigenous theory was the most appropriate lens for this study. The theory is informed by the resistance to Euro-Western thought and the further appropriation of their knowledge (Chilisa 2012). This involves the thinking that non-Western societies need to continue to resist suppression of their ways of knowing and the globalisation of knowledge, reaffirming that Western knowledge is the only legitimate knowledge (Chilisa 2012: 12). The theory includes a process of decolonising the way research is done, including the interviews. Using this theory, this study approaches the children’s experiences when their parents or guardians emigrate to other countries from an IKS perspective where the cardinal questions are: Where is our IKS when children who remain behind go through what they are going through when parents emigrate? What has gone wrong with our IKS set-up and institutions, such that children whose parents have emigrated experience all these challenges? Is it too late to harness our IKS into solutions to the emigration challenges that children, whose parents emigrate, encounter? These are the overarching questions of the study.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design. This study was conducted in a rural community in Chipinge District in Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe called Manzvire communal area (Ward 22). The data in this study was collected through self-administered interviews and observations of 15 households. The study's participants were the youth aged between 16–18 years who remained behind in Zimbabwe when their parents emigrated. These children agreed on their own to participate through providing informed consent. Since the Zimbabwean law offers national identity documents (IDs) from the age of 16, the study took this age to be mature enough to make an informed decision on whether to participate in the study or not, having been given explanations regarding the study and its purpose. At this age a person is allowed to stand on his/her own by law. At the age of 16, one can get a driving licence in Zimbabwe. With this in mind, the ages targeted were outside the red zone in terms of ethical considerations in social science research of this nature. Purposive and snowball (referral) sampling techniques were adopted to select the participants. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where existing study subjects recruit other subjects from among their acquaintances (Muyambo & Ranga 2019). In this study, I identified initial children (used interchangeably with youth) whose parents had emigrated. These children then referred me to other children whose parents had also emigrated. Purposive sampling, centred on my judgement, was used on key informants. In purposive sampling a researcher decides and sets out to find people who can provide appropriate information that provides answers to set research questions (Bernard 2009). The key informants included the ward councillor, village head, and two church pastors. In addition to the interviews, observations were used to collect supporting information from the communities under study. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. I employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This is a tool of analysis that is primarily concerned with analysing experiences people have in life (Biri 2012), in this case, the lived experiences of this group of children.

Results and Analysis

Child-headed Households

The study assessed the challenges that child-headed households encountered when parents or guardians emigrated in Manzvire village (Ward 22) of

Chipinge District. The key informants said when parents emigrate, households are led by children and this has presented multiple, serious challenges. One of them identified erosion of morals within the child-headed households. With parents away, the child-headed household no longer had the checks and balances that used to be enforced by the parents or guardians. There was no responsible person available to enforce the strict code of conduct, such as everyone must be at home by sunset. This was confirmed by the youth interviewed. Some of them stated that since their parents were in South Africa, there was a general decay in morals such as coming home drunk, bringing girlfriends/boyfriends home, absconding from lessons at school and in some instances, early and unplanned pregnancies. Haralambos and Holborn (2013: 512) emphasise the centrality of families as ‘factories’ which produce human personalities. In the absence of a family (father, mother and children) dysfunctions set in, as evidenced by the responses given by participants above.

One key informant, the village head, categorically stated that things had fallen apart, the centre could no longer hold (Achebe 1996). He cited a scenario where one household had totally ‘broken’ with male siblings becoming drunkards while the female siblings becoming prostitutes and engaged in associated unacceptable behaviour. In a study by Muyambo and Ranga (2019) similar results were obtained and they argue that adolescents left behind were likely to engage in risky behaviours such as prostitution, drug or alcohol abuse and crime. This may be disastrous in the context of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDS.

Asked what used to happen in the yester-years when parents used to emigrate, the village head bemoaned the breakaway of the concept of the extended family, where communality provided additional support to vulnerable members of the society. He narrated how he grew up. During his youth days, every elder in the community was a father or a mother. If one was caught misbehaving one was punished instantly by the elder near him/her. With the advent of individualism and other ‘isms’, communal responsibility waned. In the village head’s words: *Angova mazvake-mazvake* (it is now a do-as-you-like scenario). The pastor interviewees also confirmed this when they stated that the emigration of parents had resulted in unprecedented levels of misbehaviour among the children who remained behind. They cited children of their church members who emigrated as having stopped attending church despite efforts to make them attend church. Ruedi *et al.* (2019) also provide support for this observation and argue that children with a migration back-

ground are more likely to exhibit unfavourable behaviour patterns.

The scenario above spells disaster for children who remain behind when parents or guardians emigrate. If men, in the past, could emigrate and spend years in neighbouring countries, working in the mines and on farms, what used to hold the household intact? Was it the presence of the mother? Yes, the mother's presence was important but traditionally when a man emigrated his parents and siblings, that is the elder and younger brothers would take the responsibility of ensuring his wife and children had proper guidance. The children would know that their uncles had taken the place of their father. This concept of an extended family ensured tranquillity and orderliness in the emigrated man's household. Can we not tap into this indigenous knowledge of extended families in ensuring that children of parents who have emigrated still have the necessary checks and balances in place? Is it too late to harness this concept for the good of the children? The author is convinced that IKS can, should and must be embraced in addressing challenges that migration brings to children who remain behind when their parents or guardians emigrate.

Lack of Parental Love and Care

Children who remain behind when their parents or guardians emigrate face serious psychological problems. The study looked at the experiences of these children. One key informant (Ward councillor) had this to say:

Vana vanosara vabereki vachienda kune dzimwe nyika vanoita dambudziko rekushaya rudo rwevabereki uye chengetedzo yacho uye zvinovashungurudza pamakurire avo. (Children who remain behind as parents emigrate lack parental love and care and this has serious challenges on their growth).

He went on to mention that children in this situation grow up without having learnt the dynamics of how to give and receive love and care. This suggests that the children have not fully experienced love and care and it becomes difficult for them to give love and care in return. One can only give that which he/she has been given. These sentiments suggest that emigration has serious fundamental shortcomings for the children who remain behind. The key informants noted that the absence of love and care in the lives of some of these children in Ward 22 has resulted in an increase in crime, fighting and even

indecorous behaviour (use of vulgar language, even to elders). The children interviewed cited these problems as well. One of them stated that some of the children were a menace, especially during the night. They moved through the community making noise and shouting obscenities with no sense of responsibility. Muyambo and Ranga (2019) confirm the emotional loss the children left-behind feel. They argue that migrating to another country and being separated from one's immediate family takes place at a great emotional cost *especially for the left-behind children* (own emphasis). D'Emilio *et al.* (2007) concur when they submit that living in temporary separation due to labour migration increases the risk of family breakdown, disintegration of social networks and increased psychological stress. They further argue that the emotional impact is not just limited to migrants themselves, but also to the family left behind. As described by D'Emilio *et al.* (2007) the longer the separation between the migrating parents and their children, the more children lose parents' reverence the management of the household, their authority and their role as providers of love and care.

Apart from the loss of parental love and care, the children feel rejected and abandoned. The two key informant pastors categorically stated that the blame for the lack of morals in the left-behind children in Manzvire Ward 22, could not be left squarely on the shoulders of the children alone. Their behaviour appeared to be the result of a lack of options, coupled with the high levels of rejection and abandonment they felt. Although parents were sending remittances home, these remittances could not take the place of the parental love and care the children need. As if to confirm what the two pastors said in Manzvire Ward 22, Muyambo and Ranga (2017) also discovered in Bikita that feelings of rejection and abandonment could not be compensated by gifts and remittances from abroad. In other words, parental love and care have no substitutes.

Given this scenario, we suggest that indigenous knowledge still has a part to play in ensuring that such children are properly brought up. For example, the concept of *sara pavana*¹ (an elder who takes the place of the

¹ This is a term usually used when the father dies. A close relative who could be the deceased's brother takes over the care and welfare of the children and their mother. He acts as the father, ensuring he gives love, care, sends the children to school such that the children would not totally feel the absence of their father.

parents) can be employed here. S/he takes the place of the emigrated parents and nurtures the children as the parents would have done. Normally this is a close relative like the mother's sister or father's brother.

The above ensures that children continue to receive parental love, care and guidance. Children should not become, using an interviewee's term, *n'ombe dzemahlanga* in Nda language (stray cattle), meaning individuals who roam about aimlessly and without direction. Instead of being on their own, the children can be taken in by relatives, though this has an equal share of problems in the economic challenges which Zimbabwean communities are encountering. Haralambos and Holborn (2013) cannot be overemphasised. For him there is no other institution other than the family which can provide warmth, security and mutual support. Parents who emigrate deny their children these fundamental elements of human personality.

Loose Family and Social Fabric

The study also showed that children who remained behind when parents emigrated had loose relations with relatives. Observations made were that the children had difficulties tracing their family relations. When asked how he was related to his father's sister, one interviewee could not precisely explain the relationship. He asked another sibling to explain on his behalf. One key informant stated thus:

The issue is serious. Some of these children cannot explain family relations. They cannot explain how [they are] related to their parents' siblings, let alone [to] distant relations like cousins, nieces and uncles. They are used to the nuclear family.

This suggests fractured, disenfranchised family relations. By extension, once this happens, the social fabric that binds family members and community members weakens considerably.

Conversely, all the key informants admitted that it was not only in every household where parents emigrated that problems were encountered. They stated that even where parents had not emigrated, juvenile delinquency was rife among the youth but were quick to make comparisons. Juvenile delinquency was comparatively higher in child-headed households than in households with parents.

Economic Empowerment

Respondents also highlighted the benefits that the ‘left-behind’ households enjoyed. Notably some respondents were upbeat about migration. The children indicated that when their parents emigrated, they sent home remittances, thereby economically empowering them. One of the interviewees said:

We get food, clothes and school fees from our parents who are working in South Africa. We do not have the hassles of scavenging for food and at school we are safe. We are not always asked to go back home to collect fees as is the case with our peers whose parents are here in the village.

The key informants seemed to be in agreement as they unanimously admitted that children whose parents emigrated did not have problems in paying fees at school and sourcing stationery for their schoolwork. This concurs with a study carried out by Muyambo and Ranga (2019) in Bikita where the benefits of remittances experienced by people at home, was confirmed. Similarly, a survey by Block (2008) in both the United Kingdom and South Africa found that 80% of respondents sent remittances to their families. Households reported receiving an annual median amount of US\$109.30 in cash remittances and US\$54.90 in goods (IOM 2009).

However, respondents indicated that not all was rosy when parents emigrated; poor emigrants remitted insufficient amounts. It was noteworthy that there were some parents who emigrated but did not remit what was adequate for the needs of their children. Muyambo and Ranga (2019) indicated the inadequacies of the remittances for households needs. They state that not all emigrants remit regularly and this impacts negatively on the children. The children eat unbalanced diets, may fail to access health services when ill and may not have enough money to pay school fees on time. Furthermore, it was indicated that in some instances the remittances were abused by the youth in beer drinking. This implies that emigration does not easily or necessarily translate into quick gains as respondents indicated that it was a gamble in which the children were at the mercy of the outcome of that gamble.

What is the Role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems?

As alluded to earlier on, migration is not a new thing. It has been there before

colonisation (Mlambo 2010), and is likely to continue despite the new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this, we may need to understand how people have traditionally dealt with children who were left behind when their parents migrated. The village head made it clear that within their family set-up, they used to have mechanisms to ensure that children of parents who emigrated had guardians to take care of them. He cited the extended family concept where the emigrating mother would ask her younger sister or her brother's daughter, who was mature enough to do so, be the *sara pavana* as she and her husband emigrated. This ensured that the children were never on their own. This arrangement, according to the interviewed village head had since been abandoned with the advent of what he bemoaned as *mazvake-mazvake* (individualism) and the social breakdown of family ties. Families have become too nuclear, such that parents find it difficult to leave their children in the custody of distant family/clan members. According to the key informant, parents preferred to leave their children alone at their homestead. He also highlighted that the migrating parents did not want to have their remittances 'enjoyed' by other family members, one of the reasons for leaving their children on their own.

This mistrust was confirmed by some of the children interviewed, who stated that families were no longer as close as they used to be. The parents who migrated could not leave their children under the tutelage of relatives. Some of the reasons were that there were suspicions of witchcraft. The pastors confirmed this when they argued that some parents did not want to leave their children who were Christians in the custody of non-Christian relatives. They feared their children could be initiated into non-Christian practices. So, they preferred leaving them either alone at their household or in the custody of the pastors or church members, to whom they are not related. This arrangement has its share of problems that could provide further fertile ground for future research.

When asked what could then be done, it was apparent from the key informants that the practices of the past whereby, parents would leave children in the custody of relatives could be revisited. This is a return to the utilisation of IKS in communities where family ties are emphasised at the expense of individualism. The key informants also indicated that where the families could not trust each other, it was better for the migrating parents to leave the children in the custody of the pastors or church members. Others even suggested leaving the children in the hands of the village head who could look after the children

left behind using the *Zunde raMambo* (chief's granary) concept. This brings forth the notion of communal responsibility where a child is every community member's responsibility. Whether this arrangement could be a tenable arrangement in the hard-pressed economic situation in Zimbabwe remains unknown. Going by the research findings, the interviewees' views could contain the panacea for solving the challenges faced by children who are left behind when their parents migrate. A number of research studies prove that the utilisation of IKS is effective. For example, Muyambo (2016) showed the effectiveness of IKS, particularly folk-tales, in bringing awareness to people on the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The above submissions by the key informants are indicative that the local people still have faith and trust in their indigenous knowledge and if tapped into migration discourses, some of the challenges posed by migration can be minimised.

Recommendations

Having noted the experiences of children left behind as parents migrate, the study makes the following recommendations:

- Parents should leave their children in the hands of elders, if the children are to stay away from risky behaviour and such elders should be either close family members or church members, preferably known to the family.
- Communities should pool resources either through the *Zunde raMambo* concept to look after those children whose migrant parents may not be remitting adequate funds back home, as was the case when communities used to look after 'orphaned households' in the past.
- Government should put in place mechanisms that support the utilisation of IKS to alleviate challenges that communities face, such as the impact of parental emigration on the children left behind. While the Zimbabwe Constitution recognises indigenous knowledge, its usage should be scaled up at local community level.

Conclusion

The study showed that in Manzvire village, Ward 22 of Chipinge District, children whose parents emigrated had problems such as being child-headed

households, lack of parental love and care, and loose family and social fabric. The problems were largely due to the absence of a father/mother figure in the households who could guide the children in their everyday activities. The chapter suggested the employment of the people's IKS such as the concepts of extended families and the *sara pavana* in order to ensure that children are not left on their own. Juvenile delinquency was rife in child-headed families. African people's *ruzivo* (IKS) used to have in place, mechanisms to provide care and support to children when biological parents were absent. The chapter argues that our IKS still makes sense and must be embraced to deal with the challenges that confront children who remain behind when parents/guardians emigrate. The study further suggests that research be conducted on the impact of leaving children with relatives or church members and to understand the experiences of the emigrating parents when they leave their children behind.

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/019791839002400405>

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