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Migration of Men and Changing Household and Societal Roles for Women in Migrant Labour Societies

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Make today matter



Motivation



Environmental cleansing ritual: A demonstration against firewood vendors one winter morning by villagers on the southern fringes of the former Shangani Reserves in western Zimbabwe.



Demonstrating group composed of predominantly women, supported by youth and a few men.



The events of that winter day and the composition of the demonstrators led to a search for possible explanations.



While there were many possible explanation, I soon realized that the explanations lay in the complex dynamics of migrant labour societies and the women living in these societies.



Understanding women and their position in these societies often hampered by the dominance of a 'doomsday scenario' narrative on migrant labour systems:

1). The suffering of women left behind who had to live without their men; 2). destruction of families; 3). negative impact on agriculture.



This meant that any positive aspects of migration continued to be overshadowed by the negative history of the development of capitalism in the region.



This is despite literature that recognizes the development impact of migration to communities and migrant households.

- Post-independent studies in Zimbabwe portrayed migrant households as wealthier.
- Studies have also showed that migrant households have resources to invest in agric.

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My intention in this paper is to shed light on this position:

- I also want to emphasize the positive social impacts of the out-migration of men on the women housewives left behind in rural areas, often as custodians of households' assets including land.
- I draw particular attention to the migrant labour reserves' social context and the men within these societies, and attempt to situate the position of women within this broad framework.
- I examine the complex dynamics of migrant labour societies that unsettle traditional gender stereo-types, while also redefining women's roles at both the household and societal level.
- My focus is on how the absence of men through migration provided opportunities for women to be autonomous and take control of households and society decisions.

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- By focusing on the complexity of these societies and the position women occupy, I want to illuminate differences between rural societies and caution against the risk of looking at the relationship between women and migration with a uniform eye.
- An assumption crucial to my analysis is that men in these societies have guaranteed land rights (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990); that they safeguard land rights by leaving wives on the land while they seek livelihoods elsewhere; and that women as *de facto* heads of households have complete control of this land (Thebe, 2012).

Analytical starting point:

Bridget O’Laughlin’s analysis of feminist literature on migration

- She thus drew on other feminist writers’ emphasis that ‘women headed households are often a product of women’s own initiative’ and;
- Colson (1962)’s view that ‘women living in women-headed households may appreciate their degree of relative autonomy’ (O’Laughlin, 1998, p.7).
- Still citing Colson’s (1962) work in Zambia, she emphasized her observation that the periodic absence of migrant Tonga men ‘opened up new areas of autonomy and control for women both in their agricultural work and in their social lives’ (ibid, p. 5).

Methods

- I base my analysis on data from wide ranging studies conducted on communities on the southern fringes of the former Shangani Reserves between 2005 and 2016.
- These ethnographic studies focused broadly on worker-peasant dynamics and the changing gender roles in these societies.
- The ethnography focused on understanding the dynamics of a migrant labour society, and focused broadly on societal processes and transformation that has taken place overtime.
- I particularly became interested in women and their changing roles in society following a campaign by women and youth against male firewood vendors one winter morning in 2006.

The worker-peasantry of the ‘gusu’ frontier

The ‘dark forests’ so vividly captured in Alexander et al. (2000)’s *Violence and memory: One hundred years in the ‘dark forests’ of Matabeleland* .

Home to mainly victims of land evictions from ‘white’ land after the 1940s, although there were also a minority of forest tribes – the ‘sili’.

These groups were evicted from places where capitalism had already taken root – majority of men were already proletarianized.

There was a significant number of men who held jobs in Bulawayo, among those who took up land and established homes in these parts of the ‘gusu’ frontier.

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The origin of settlers and the patterns of life they had established prior to their eviction left these parts of the 'gusu' frontier dominated by a worker-peasantry, with interests both in rural land and the urban sector.

'Men who now went to work in Bulawayo could not be expected to cycle the 125-170 miles to and from the Shangani Reserve. Families would be divided' (Alexander et al. 2000).

The road networks and transport system allowed men to circulate between the world of work and the rural space and to send remittances to those remaining behind. .

Women spaces

The household space

Women were expected to fulfil household head duties by providing leadership and taking day-to-day decisions.

Women clearly recognized their household leadership roles in these communities, and executed them with authority.

As nearly all households were headed by women, either on a *de facto* or *de jure* basis, the leadership roles had become normal and they performed them naturally.

Women organized agriculture tasks, but rarely performed the masculine activities like preparing the fields – these were assigned to boys, or hired labour, or organized '*ilima*' (communal work).

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Men in transit – ‘they understood little about rural space’

All rural household tasks were considered the responsibility of the woman together with sons and hired helpers.

The man’s responsibility was to provide the financial resources, which the woman commanded.

In this society, like all migrant labour societies, men were not expected to be in the rural space, which was traditionally regarded as a terrain for women.

As Boehm (2003, p. 5) noted in Lesotho, ‘m]en were and are supposed to make money’, and any man found in this space was denigrated and called by the derogatory name, ‘*umahlalela*’.

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The community space

In these former labour reserves the responsibilities of women extended beyond the confines of their households and to the community level.

The high incidence of male migration meant that women had to represent their absent men at the community level, and were involved in community decisions through the village assembly.

In the absence of men, women's membership of the village assemblies were considered normal – women took decision that affected their community as evidenced by the 'environmental cleansing ceremony' of that winter morning.

In the post-2000 period, the important role of women in society was evidenced by seating acting village heads in at least three villages.

Conclusion

The results from the study have challenged the ‘doomsday’ narrative on the impact of migration on women, by focusing broadly on the complexity of a worker-peasant society, and the implications for women’ situation at the household and society levels.

By focusing on the complex dynamics of migrant labour reserves, the article attempted to present these societies as different kind of rural societies as highlighted by the feminization of everyday forms of decisions and activities.

It also tried to show how this setting imposed an extra burden on the women and how they in turned framed their responses to realities confronting their everyday lives, and turned them to their own advantage.

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- In former migrant labour reserves, where certain patriarchal principles have long been weakened by high rates of male migration, it is not so much a question of women assuming responsibilities previously handled by men, but rather, how such responsibilities played out at both the household and society level overtime.
- These societies are ostensibly female spaces where the absence of men have allowed women autonomy and authority as highlighted through women's membership of the village assembly and seating female village heads.
- The roles and responsibilities of women should be contextualised in terms of their sociological basis by analysing the social context that gave women legitimacy to decision making and power to mobilize against threats.





Thank You