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"The more things change the more they stay the same": Decision-making in Zimbabwean transnational families

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Abstract
Whereas studies have documented socio-cultural changes connected to migration dynamics, there is a dearth of knowledge about decision-making in transnational families. This article seeks to understand transformations in decision-making in six Zimbabwean transnational families. This is done by examining qualitative data generated through semi-structured interviews with members of the migrant families. While accentuating the need for more research on interpersonal processes in transnational families, the article illustrates that shifts in gender roles may occur alongside gender-normative behaviours that maintain women in subordinate decision-making roles.
Keywords: decision-making; gender; social transformation; transnationalism; transnational families.

Introduction

This article seeks to make a modest contribution to an already rich literature on transnational families (McKenzie and Menjívar, 2011; Landolt and Da, 2005) by examining evidence of decision-making processes in such families. Thus far, many of studies of transnational families have been conducted, especially in the context of South-North migration. They illuminate a number of themes that are relevant to this article. For example, the role of state policies, particularly admission rules of receiving countries, in shaping the scope and pattern of transnational family life has been the focus of much research recently (Boehm, 2008; Horton, 2008). However, fewer studies zero in on spousal decision-making processes in families that have experienced the migration of their male member. This observation is particularly relevant to South-South migration in Southern Africa where political economy approaches and nation-state frames of reference continue to influence theorization and interpretation of human migration (Dodson, 2000). Such approaches overprivilege the structural aspects of larger political and economic systems of

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relations at the expense of relations in micro-contexts. By exploring how couples in six Zimbabwean migrant families – including split-families where spouses lived apart and co-resident migrant families – reached decisions regarding allocation and use of material resources prior and after migration, the article illuminates some of the possible shifts in the role and relative influence of either spouse in decision-making. Relatedly, the article examines whether the execution of such decisions in a migration context might influence changes in the performance of gender roles in these families.

Data analysed in this article were gathered as part of the author's doctoral study which, among other objectives, explored the varied ways by which couples in six Zimbabwean transnational families negotiated normative expectations and roles within a transnational context. All spouses were members of a transnational Pentecostal Church known as Forward in Faith Mission International (FIFMI)[1]. Two of the six families included in this study were migrant families where spouses lived together in Johannesburg. The rest were split families where the wife and children remained in the country of origin. The bulk of the data analysed here was generated through semi-structured interviews which the author conducted with the six migrant men in Johannesburg between May 2009 and November 2009. These men had relocated to South Africa, the migration hub of Southern Africa, between 2000 and 2008 at the height of Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis (Raftopoulos, 2009). With respect to residence status, only two of the six men had entered and lived legally in South Africa throughout the period prior to fieldwork. The rest had switched in-between legal and irregular statuses before May 2009. This migrant behaviour is often a response to the exclusive nature of South Africa's immigration policy which discriminates against those migrants that do not possess desired skills (Palmary and Landau, 2011).

Evidence for the article was also collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with three spouses in Zimbabwe during December 2010. Thus, interviews were conducted with both the male and female spouses in three out of four split-families. Overall, the interviews conducted in Johannesburg and in Zimbabwe explored the role and relative influence of either spouse, both in making specific decisions and in executing them.

After the introduction, the article proceeds in three main sections. The following section reviews relevant literature on transnational migration, highlighting some of the social transformations within migrant families. Family decision-making is also reviewed in order to provide a sufficient conceptual background for subsequent analyses. In the third section, results are presented and discussed. The article ends with a conclusion which summarises the key insights from the analysis and reflects on limitations of the paper.

[1] Forward in Faith Mission International is a transnational Pentecostal movement founded in colonial Zimbabwe in the 1950s. In Zimbabwe it is known as Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA).

Literature review

Transnational migration, social transformation and decision-making

Socio-cultural changes connected to migration dynamics have been explored in literature on transnational migration (Vertovec, 2004). However, post-migration spousal decision-making processes connected to the negotiation and performance of familial roles in transnational families has not received sufficient attention of researchers. The few studies which exist on familial decision-making tend to over-emphasise economic-related outcomes at the expense of social and cultural decision-making processes (Zontini, 2010; Smith, 2004), since they focus largely on decisions regarding either to stay at home or go, and deliberations about whether to stay at destination or return home (Haug, 2008). Be that as it may, literature on transnational migration illustrates that the experience of living in more than one country leads to multiple non-economic transformations. To be sure, the migration experience transforms migrants' world views (Vertovec, 2004; Landolt, 2001; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc, 1994). Studies of transnational migration demonstrate that migrants tend to combine new life styles and practices with their old cultures and identities, almost always structuring aspects of their everyday lives in terms of "home" and "away" (Vertovec, 2004; Guarnizo, 1997). Consequently, this dual orientation or bifocality often affects a range of aspects in a migrant's life world, including his or her perception and performance of sex roles in the family (Madianou, 2012; Moorhouse and Cunningham 2012).

How does the experience of migration transform gender roles and practices? Considerable research on gender dynamics of transnational families exists (see Madianou, 2012; Moorhouse and Cunningham 2012; McKenzie and Menjívar, 2011; Lefko-Everett, 2010; Goulbourne, Reynolds, Solomos and Zontini, 2010; Zontini, 2010; Landolt and Da, 2005; Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Landolt, 2001). For example, studies demonstrate that the absence of men from home has gendered effects on non-migrant women, particularly when it comes to household management (McKenzie and Menjívar, 2011; Horton, 2008; Parreñas, 2005). Moreover, existing studies are consistent in demonstrating that state policies play a critical role in shaping transnational families (Landolt and Da, 2005. Receiving country policies generally perpetuate split-family arrangements since they provide few opportunities for spousal and family migration for low-skilled migrants (Boehm, 2008).

South Africa is a case in point. Recent studies have shown that its migration policies are "formulated in terms of atomistic and genderless" individuals without ties of blood and legal and social relationships (Dodson, 2000: 44). Consequently, opportunities for spousal and family migration are limited, particularly for low-skilled temporary migrants that are generally under-qualified to access work permits (Olivier, 2009). Often when legal channels for migration are closed, low-skilled migrants resort to irregular migration (Palmary and Landau, 2011). However, an irregular status tends to limit their chances of

living with family members at destination, or visiting them at home (Palmary and Landau, 2011). Despite an increase of female migration to South Africa in recent years, men are still more mobile than women (Dodson, 2008) and women, not men, often remain behind. In a region where a long-established system of labour migration of men exists, such policies perpetuate gender-selective migration (Dodson, 2000).

Gender-selective migration might have far-reaching but under-explored implications for spousal decision-making processes in the gendered context of Zimbabwe where intra-family gender relationships are characterised by male dominance (Montgomery, Chidanyika, Chipato and Van der Straten, 2012). In an HIV-prevention trial conducted in Zimbabwe, Montgomery et al., (2012) found that male dominance continue to restrict women's autonomous sexual decision-making, although male participants were sensitive to changes in the external environment. If, as suggested by De Jong (2000), men migrate to fulfil normative expectations of them as breadwinners, then one is made to postulate that migration of Zimbabwean men might preserve traditional gender roles while reinforcing asymmetries in female-male relationships, as well as in the access to migration-related resources. One is then made to ask: what is the relative influence of migrant men vis-à-vis their non-migrant spouses in deliberation and execution of decisions?

From a theoretical and methodological standpoint, analyses of spousal decision-making in contemporary migrant families can benefit from a number of studies on spousal decision-making which were conducted since the 1960s (Cooney, Rogler, Hurrell and Ortiz, 1982; Scanzoni and Scinovacz, 1980; Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiege and Hall, 1996). These studies amply demonstrate that gender is constituted and reconstituted through the decisions couples make in everyday life (Zvonkovic et al., 1996), suggesting that analyses of decision-making can reveal shifts in the construction of gender.

Research on male-female relationships in families also illuminates the effects of many other variables – in particular, those connected to the context and characteristics of spouses – on spousal decision-making processes. Zvonkovic et al., (1996) argue that spousal gender and decision-making roles are created and performed in a context of "situational constraints and opportunities" (Zvonkovic et al., 1996: 98). This point has also been made by Hollerbach (1980) who argues that time and communication constraints of each spouse, the frequency with which a certain issue is discussed and vested interests of either spouse may either limit or facilitate the role of either spouse in decision-making.

The next section presents an analysis of decision-making processes and outcomes in Zimbabwean migrant families.

Results

In order to make sense of decision-making in transnational families, this article focuses on both the process and outcome of decision-making. It dis-

tinguishes between decision making and execution of a decision. Decision making connotes the process of making conclusions about an issue and it includes consultation, deliberation and discussion. It can lead to agreement, disagreement or compromise. Decision making can lead to the decision being carried out, i.e., executed. Drawing on Hollerbach's (1980) review, decision making can lead to three outcomes namely, passive, unilateral and joint decision-making. Table 1 below provides a summary of the processes and outcomes of decision-making among Zimbabwean transnational families after one or both spouses migrated.

The transnational families included in the study are divided into two categories as follows: two co-resident families, that is, families where couples lived together in Johannesburg during the time of fieldwork and split-families where female spouses remained in Zimbabwe. Unlike the men in co-resident families, that is, Tembo (30) and Mashumba (34), all men in the split-family category had lived in South Africa illegally at some point, before securing asylum seeker permits. Matondi (38), Majuru (46) illegally entered South Africa in 2005 and lived the country irregularly until 2008 when they both secured asylum seeker permits. In contrast, Chizivi (50) and Siwela (38) entered South Africa legally, although the two became illegal migrants at some point. Unlike Tembo and Mashumba, none of the men in split families held tertiary qualifications. Matondi and Siwela as well as their spouses had no complete General Certificate of Education Ordinary level[2] (GCE Ordinary level). In contrast, Majuru and Chizivi had completed GCE Ordinary Level, but their spouses had not reached this level.

Of all the six migrant men, only Matondi had broken up with his wife prior to fieldwork. With the exception of Chizivi's wife, non-migrant women in split-families typically lived in rural and peri-urban areas in Zimbabwe. However, all the migrant men had lived and worked in one of Zimbabwe's cities prior to migration.

Family decision-making: a variable and context-dependent dynamic

Unlike women in co-resident families, wives in split-families were, to a larger extent, inactively involved in decision-making prior to the migration of their men. Furthermore, they practised limited autonomy in decisioning. Before they relocated to Johannesburg, absentee men generally included their wives in planning for needs and income at home, but they retained the final say in most plans. Matondi, a father of three, provided a typical account of this decision-making approach. He recounted that prior to migration, "I would give my wife a chance to contribute to our plans although… as the husband I always have the upper hand..." Matondi further indicated that involving his wife in planning became difficult after he relocated to South Africa.

[2] Zimbabwe's General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level is equal to four years of post-primary or secondary education. It is a lower qualification in comparison to the General Certificate of Education Advanced level.

Table 1: Summary of decision-making and execution in six Zimbabwean transnational families

Family	Family Type	Issue	Decision making	Execution	Outcomes
Matondi	Split-family	Remittance use	Husband plans budget without consulting wife | Husband consults wife on needs at home & decides how part of money should be spent | Wife decides how the remaining sum of money will be spent	Husband buys goods and sends to wife | Husband sends money to wife | Wife uses goods and part of the money as directed | Wife uses part of the money as she decides	A mixture of passive and unilateral decision-making | Limited communication and negotiation | Wife passively involved in decision making | Wife gives feedback on use of remittances
Siwela	Split-family	Remittance use	Husband & wife discuss needs at home | Wife decides on priorities	Husband sends goods and money to wife as agreed | Wife uses goods and money as she decides	Joint decision-making | Wife actively involved in decision making | Open communication and negotiation | Wife gives feedback on use of remittances
Chizivi	Split-family	Remittance use	Husband & wife discuss needs at home | Wife decides on priorities	Husband sends goods and money to wife as agreed | Wife uses goods and money as she decides	Joint decision-making | Wife actively involved in decision making | Open communication and negotiation | Wife gives feedback on use of remittances
Majuru	Split-family	Remittance use	Husband plans budget without consulting wife | Husbands sends goods and money	Wife uses the remittances as directed	Unilateral decision-making | Limited communication and negotiation | Wife passively involved in decision making | Limited feedback
Majuru	Split-family	Income generated by wife at home	Wife plans budget without consulting husband	Wife uses income generated at home as she decides	Unilateral decision-making | Limited communication and negotiation | Wife actively involved in decision making | No feedback
Mashumba	Co-resident	Income generated abroad	Husband & wife discuss needs and priorities	Either spouse uses money according to agreed priorities	Joint decision-making | Wife actively involved in decision making | Open communication and negotiation | Either spouse gives feedback
Tembo	Co-resident	Income generated abroad	Husband & wife discuss needs and priorities	Either spouse uses money according to agreed priorities	Joint decision-making | Wife actively involved in decision making | Open communication and negotiation | Either spouse gives feedback

He explained that, "When I came here [Johannesburg] … I had no stable job for a long time … I had to plan how money should be used on my own… Sometimes, I'd first phone my wife to hear … the kinds of problems at home". Matondi only secured a stable but lowly paid watchman's job at the FIFMI's premises in Hillbrow in 2008 after he successfully acquired an asylum seeker permit, renewable every three months.

The asylum seeker permit enabled Matondi to live and work in South Africa regularly, but it restricted legal travels to his home country. The asylum seeker permit also limited Matondi's participation in the labour market. Since Matondi's asylum seeker status was all but a provisional residence, migration authorities could, at any time, either grant him asylum after which he becomes a refugee with socio-economic rights comparable to citizens, or they could reject his application, effectively making him an illegal migrant. This ambivalence lowered Matondi's chances of getting a more secure job: migration studies in South Africa illustrate that prospective employers are often not keen to hire a migrant with an ambivalent residence status (Olivier, 2009). Given Matondi's economic situation, he either planned the budget without involving his wife at all, or he occasionally sought information about the needs at home before allocating available resources. Often Matondi indicated how all or part of remittances should be spent at home. In a few circumstances, however, his wife could decide how a small portion of the remittances was used.

Clearly, Matondi used his legitimate authority (Hollerbach, 1980) as the male head of the family to unilaterally make decisions about how income was used in the family. However, it is important to note that several contextual factors negatively impacted on his decision-making approach: a lack of secure residence in South Africa, economic vulnerability as well as a lack of opportunities for legal return after the first departure. Majuru, a father of three, who used a closely similar decision-making arrangement, also mentioned the same situational constraints.

Whereas all absentee men reported similar contextual constraints, it would appear that in two of the four split-families, joint decision-making outcomes persisted in the context of separation. For example, Siwela, a father of four children, informed me that, "Normally … we [Siwela and his wife] discuss first …. I always seek to hear what the situation is like… because already she is the one on the ground, she knows how best to use the money …" Similarly, Chizivi, an asylum seeker who had financial responsibility for his wife, three daughters and two grandchildren revealed that aside from reminding his wife to pay water and electricity bills, he had no influence over the use of remittances at home. He elaborated that, "I can't see what's on the ground … she is in a better position to make decisions based on the priorities there". Unlike Matondi and Majuru who planned household budgets from abroad, Siwela and Chizivi opted not to dictate priorities to their wives. Consequently, in these two families, absence of men at home enabled wives to gain considerable

autonomy, especially in the allocation and use of remittances during their absence. It could be argued that both Chizivi and Siwela recognised their wives' informational and expert power (Hollerbach, 1980), that is, they both perceived their spouses as better positioned to understand the needs and priorities at home, and to plan for them.

Siwela and Chizivi's families were comparable to the co-resident families with regard to decision-making processes and outcomes. Mashumba and Tembo, two migrant men who had relocated to South Africa in 2007 and 2008 respectively, reported that they jointly discussed budgets and other plans with their respective spouses. For instance, to the question of how his family often arrived at, and executed financial decisions, Tembo responded that, "In terms of budgeting and planning for financial matters…we talk about these things … and we come up with targets, deadlines … and priorities". Not unlike Tembo, Mashumba jointly deliberated plans and budgets with his wife before any expenditure was made. He stated that, "When I get money, it might be ZAR 100[3], she knows the expenditures we have planned … she will use the money accordingly". As in the two split-families where spouses jointly made decisions, communication was more open, and women were actively involved in both decision making and execution.

It is important to highlight that joint decision-making was associated with a strong awareness of the necessity for consensus on the part of the spouses. This insight was clearly illustrated in the manner in which Mai Siwela (37), Siwela's wife, represented decision-making processes in her family. She remarked that, "In our marriage, we discuss and agree how the money must be used…we talk and plan how to do this and that". This arrangement could be contrasted with the two families where decisions were reached in the context of limited or no communication.

Exceptions to joint decision-making

From the foregoing, it is evident that a considerable degree of negotiation and consensus existed between spouses, especially in those families which pursued joint decision-making. Nonetheless, there were exceptions to joint decision-making processes and outcomes. For instance, women who stayed behind reported that they deferred certain decisions until their spouses intervened. I asked Mai Majuru (38), Majuru's wife who lived in rural south western Zimbabwe to describe some of the decisions which she could not make in the absence of her husband. Mai Majuru laboriously narrated a dispute involving her family and a neighbour which occurred a few months before the interview. She explained that, "we found out that he [neighbour] had tilled our land to grow crops…he explained his actions…but I told him that I can't say much in the absence of my husband". It would seem that to Mai Majuru, decisions about land were the domain of men. Similarly, despite the fact that

[3] Equal to USD 12.

Chizivi's wife had gained considerable decision-making autonomy in the absence of her husband, she informed me that there were matters she could not finalise on her own. She noted that, "I would need to consult him about the car…someone wanted to use it…I said, "That's not my area…" Clearly, decisions regarding high value assets were the preserve of men. The manner in which non-migrant women shelved away certain decisions until men intervened resonates with Mckenzie and Menjívar's (2011) findings of a study of Honduran non-migrant women.

Exceptions to negotiation were also noted with regards to the norm of deliberation and agreement in families which pursued joint decision-making. Despite evidence of joint-decision making in co-resident families, migrant men retained the final say. This insight is lucidly represented in Tembo's account of his family's decision-making. He underscored that "there are certain times where, as a couple, you can't reach consensus. That's the time when, as a man you have to say, "Because I am the head of the household, we are going to do A, B, C". Tembo elaborated that as the head of the household, he could use resources to do certain things for his family. For example, Tembo informed me that he could arrange a weekend getaway or buy gifts for his family. He added that, in the same way, his wife had legitimate authority and decisional autonomy in certain areas which, according to him, were conventionally women's areas. These areas included buying kitchen utensils and bedroom linen. This decision-making arrangement suggests that traditional gender division of responsibility between men and women may continue to influence familial decision-making after migration of one or both spouses.

Discussion and conclusion

The foregoing discussion corroborates existing migration research that demonstrates the variable and dynamic nature of spousal decision-making in transnational families (McKenzie and Menjívar, 2011). The paper demonstrated that whether or not the experience of migration transforms decision-making processes in transnational families is certainly not a straight-forward issue. In recognition of the fact that women who stayed behind were better-placed to understand the needs and conditions at home, some migrant men actively involved their spouses both in decisioning and in execution. This behaviour would seem to suggest that it is not impossible for women who stay behind to increase autonomy and involvement in decision-making during the absence of men.

Yet, some migrant men continued to dictate how remittances were used at home after relocation, while women typically played the execution role. Furthermore, women failed to make decisions on matters which they perceived to be the traditional responsibility of the men, preferring to postpone decisioning until such time as migrant men intervened. As has been observed in other migration contexts, shifts in traditional gender roles occurred even as gender-normative perceptions and behaviour continued to frame inferior positions

for women in decision-making (Mckenzie and Menjívar, 2011; Parreñas, 2005; 2008). Whilst data from a small ethnographic sample included in this article are the least conclusive, perhaps, a popular idiom which reads "the more things change the more they stay the same", aptly sums up shifts in spousal decision-making in transnational families at present. Therefore, while the article draws on a small ethnographic sample, it engages larger debates in a very interesting manner.

Still, it is important to reiterate the difficulty of drawing firm conclusions and decision-making patterns from a qualitative sample of six couples. Even in one family, spousal decision-making may vary depending on the matter under deliberation (Zvonkovich et al., 1996). This article draws on qualitative analyses of decision-making regarding economic resources in the family. Insights discussed here may not be applicable to other decision-making aspects which confront spouses in transnational families. Nonetheless, the article illustrates the complex nature of understanding change in spousal decision-making. Possibly, its key contribution lies in demonstrating the need for more research on interpersonal processes in transnational families.

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