

‘Men on Transit’ and the Rural ‘Farmer Housewives’: Women in Decision-making Roles in Migrant Labour Societies in North-western Zimbabwe

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Biography

Vusilizwe Thebe has specialization in Development Studies. He teaches and coordinates the Development Studies programme at the University of Pretoria. His research interests include migrant labour societies and their transformation: the worker-peasantry, the context of its existence, its relationship to land and work, its transition overtime, and its interaction with state institutions and policy, gender dynamics with these societies and migration, and agrarian transformation. He has published several articles on migrant labour societies, gender and migration.

Abstract

Studies on migrant labour systems have focused on the negatives, particularly on women left behind as guardians of men’s interests, but with no real control. My extended research on former migrant labour societies in north-western Zimbabwe has challenged this ‘doomsday’ narrative. It did not only reveal the feminization of household and societal decisions, but also, how the migration of men has liberated women and allowed them to play crucial roles within the household and society systems. My study thus illuminates differences between rural societies and cautions against the risks of looking at the relationship between women and migration with a uniform eye. It stresses the importance of migration on development, and the empowerment potential on women who take up prominent position in the household and society decision making structures.

Keywords: female headed households, rural, migrant labour societies, proletarianization, Zimbabwe

Introduction

It was one Sunday morning in the summer of 2015, and the village had sprung to life as people went about their daily business. The village bell had sounded in the early hours, summoning villagers to an emergence meeting, and all in the village understood the message behind the sound of the bell. At the headman's compound, the residents of this peaceful village in south-western Lupane District, were beginning to gather under the huge *umdlandlovu* tree, which has been used as the village court since the village was established in 1948. Apparently, one of the villagers had approached the office of the headman with an intention to settle one of his relatives on his land, and the village assembly was convened to deliberate and make a decision on the request.¹ This session (village assembly) was one of many that I have attended throughout this valley society since I began my fieldwork in 2005, but this village assembly was different from similar events in other villages: this was mainly a gathering of women, with only a few men and youth, and while it was convened by a male, the substantive village head was a woman.

As the deliberations began, I also began to recall the events of that winter in 2006 when a demonstration of mainly women and a few men and youth resulted in the expulsion of firewood vendors from their points of sale along the A8 highway (Thebe, 2017). These two events also linked to a popular phrase, 'men on transit', which women used to refer to their men. The phenomenon of 'men on transit' has a long history in former migrant labour societies like this one, and over the years has become deeply embedded in social life. This particularly raises questions, which are pertinent to this paper: How has such a scenario affected women and their role in these societies? How should we read the position that women have assumed in these societies?

My intention in this paper, then, is to shed more light on the position of women in these societies, but I also want to emphasize the positive social impacts of the out-migration of men on the women 'farmer-housewives' left behind in rural areas, often as custodians of households' assets including land.² I draw particular attention to these societies' social context and the households within them, and attempt to understand their changed roles within this broad framework. I examine the complex dynamics within such societies, which tend to unsettle traditional gender stereo-types, while also redefining women's roles at both household and societal levels. My focus is on how the absence of men through migration provided opportunities for autonomy for women, and allowed them to take control of households and society decisions (see, Colson, 1962). By focusing on the complexity of migrant labour societies and the different positions that 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 (O'Laughlin, 1998)

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 and children on the land while they seek livelihoods elsewhere (Nyambara, 2001); and that women as *de facto* heads of households manage this land (Thebe, 2012). This practice, as Nyambara (2001: 776) showed in his Gokwe study, was a common procedure for "booking" land' in former reserves.

In the absence of men, women also had to assume responsibilities that were traditionally seen as men's at society level. In reflections on the context I emphasize in particular how 'women housewives' left behind to safeguard men's interests, manage to work around the enormous socio-economic costs associated with 'divided families' and 'absent men' to engage in short, medium and long-term decisions relating to the household, farm and society. I argue for the continued importance of circular migration as a strategy for poverty reduction, where remittances provide a cushion to agriculture failure and lead to the empowerment of women within the household and rural spaces.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section provides a brief context for changes in gender roles, and as a result the position of women in Zimbabwean rural society. The second section is an introduction of the case study. It takes the reader on a journey through the 'dark *gusu*' frontier of Matabeleland and its inhabitants, and focuses in particular on the semi-proletarian culture of the people. The sections thereafter aim to highlight the changing context for women in this reserve labour frontier, and how women came to play prominent roles at both the household and societal levels, and having done this, try to situate the events of that winter morning along the A8 Highway within this context – a society of 'men on transit').

Migration of men and the 'farmer housewives' in Southern Africa

My analytical starting point is Bridget O'Laughlin's argument that structuralist perspectives on migration, women and household organization have tended to be highly reductive – reducing gender to class – and totalizing by minimizing the importance and complexity of social differentiation, while also failing to accommodate regional differences (O'Laughlin, 1998). 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: 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: 5). This is an idea taken up here, with specific reference to the position of women in a former labour reserve in the Matabeleland region in north-western Zimbabwe.

Migrant labour societies

The majority of rural societies in Southern Africa – from Lesotho to Zimbabwe – were, and are still migrant labour societies. Over the years, these have gained a reputation as societies built on labour migration and remittances (Potts, 2000). Migrant labour societies were special designated areas for indigenous African people to 'provide for the reproduction of labour power, used elsewhere in the economy in capitalist production, on terms that make it available especially cheaply' (Bush and Cliffe, 1984: 77). After the fall of colonialism and emergence of democratic and transformative governments, first in crown colonies like Lesotho and then in settler states like Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, these societies were not completely transformed, and migration for labour remained central to livelihoods and household survival.

Understanding the true impact of labour migration in these societies has often been hampered by the dominance of (to use Emily Roe 1995: 1065's terminology), a 'doomsday scenario' structural Marxist narrative that focuses only on the negative aspects of migration: the suffering that it brought to the women left behind who had to live without their men; its destruction of families; and its negative impact on agriculture. This narrative was often deployed in analysis of migrant labour regimes, which have for long been associated with the exploitative nature of capitalism, and have often been characterized as imposing an enormous burden on the rural system that had to bear the costs of labour reproduction, and those who remained behind who often found themselves with the burden of maintaining former migrants after retirement, illness, disability or old age (Potts, 2000). This meant that any positive aspects of such systems 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 migrant sending communities and migrant households (Boehm, 2003; Cousins et al., 1992). The development impact of labour migration has been recognized in post-independence literature on Zimbabwe, which showed that labour migrant households were relatively wealthier than those without labour migrants (e.g., Coudere and Marijsse, 1988; Maphosa, 2010; Weiner and Harris, 1991). This can also be noted in literature on agriculture, which has highlighted the role of the wage in agricultural investment (Boehm, 2003; Weiner and Harris, 1991; Worby, 2001), and in particular the potential of migrant households to invest in livestock, farm equipment and inputs.

Women in Zimbabwe's rural areas

From the colonial era to the present a rich body of literature and empirical studies have emerged on rural women, patriarchy, land and agriculture in Zimbabwe. This literature is diverse and focuses on a wide range of aspects on the women question: some of this literature is rooted in the historiography of capitalism in Zimbabwe, particularly the position of women within settler-Rhodesia's young capitalism (e.g. Jacobs, 1983; Schmidt, 1991). Some of this literature has taken the women question further by focusing on contemporary issues including land, land reform and resettlement and poverty (e.g. Gaidzanwa, 1994; Goebel, 1999, 2005; Jacobs, 2002; Mutopo, 2011). If anything can be learnt from this diverse body of work, it is the general consensus that women dominate the rural space and subsistence agricultural production. As in the rest of patriarchal society, the majority of these women are portrayed as vulnerable and poor, with unequal access to land and other productive resources (Gaidzanwa, 1994; Jacobs, 2002).

As will be shown, women are presented as disadvantaged by 'a prevailing gender ideology that condones the supremacy of male authority even in the absence of men' (Goebel, 1999: 77-78). From this perspective even the colonial system, through laws, colluded with the traditional system to perpetuate the marginalization of women (Gaidzwana, 2011; Schmidt, 1991). Gaidzwana (2011) reminds us of colonial laws, which recognized land rights for men, while women had to prove that either the whereabouts of their husbands were unknown or they were domicile outside the country to access land. This resulted in the overdependence of women on husbands and male

relatives, and they were virtually stripped of any independent decision even in the absence of their husbands (Goebel, 1999).

The situation did not improve after independence as the postcolonial state enacted the Communal Lands Act of 1981, which transferred authority over rural land allocations to local authorities (GoL. 1982). As land was allocated to households, it was practically allocated to men since the customary law, which governs communal areas, only recognized the male head of household as the primary holder of land rights and not the woman (Jacobs, 2002). Insofar as women had access to land resources, therefore, their rights were secondary and even in the event of death of the male holder, they could not 'gain entitlement to the land..., but only [kept] it in trust for the male heir, usually the eldest son'(Goebel, 1999: 78).

Apart from the access issue, the position of woman in rural society is presented as that of a subordinate; with limited influence on decisions. As Goebel (1999: 77–78) argued:

African peasant women farmers, therefore, are often pictured as being in the contradictory position of autonomy by way of *de facto* female headship in the household, and dependency and vulnerability in regard to male earnings and a prevailing gender ideology that condones the supremacy of male authority even in the absence of men. Hence there are many stories of women being unable to take key decisions about farming without a husband's authorization and financial support, and wife-battering when the husband returns to find that his wife has taken decisions without his permission.

This is further highlighted in Donna Pankhurst and Susie Jacobs' case of Mai Makore who was frustrated because she could not influence her husband to allocate land to other crops (Pankhurst and Jacobs, 1988: 208).

More recent scholarship, inspired by the global focus on poverty and its reduction, has focused on household headship, and has identified poverty with women headed households. Indeed in rural Zimbabwe, female headed households have become 'common place' (Horrell and Krishnan, 2007: 1351). Women become heads of households if men work away (Horrell and Krishnan, 2007); after death of a male spouse and after divorce, separation and desertion. This literature has shown that 'divorce and desertion are endemic' in Zimbabwe and constitute a 'major source of gendered risk, particularly as disserted/divorced women frequently find themselves without means of support (Jacobs, 2002: 890).

Mandishona (1996) once estimated *de facto* female headed households in rural Zimbabwe at around 70 per cent. This can be attributed to the absence of men who migrate for formal work, mainly in urban centres. As in the rest of settler-Africa, 'labour migrancy, has for generations, been incorporated into the livelihoods' of rural households (Potts, 2000: 807).

While male labour migration has and still constitutes an integral part of households' livelihoods, the necessity of own farming to supplement the low wage and the importance

of the rural home as a retirement home for migrants meant that women had to remain in rural areas (see, Bourdillon, 1987; Davison, 1997; Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990). Insofar as these households have access to remittances, therefore, a contemporary female headed household would more likely own livestock resources, and be ‘smaller with younger heads’ (Horrell and Krishnan, 2007: 1355).

Evidence from rural Zimbabwe also indicates a dramatic increase in *de jure* female headed households as a result of death, divorce and abandonment (Moyo and Kawewe, 2009). The increase in the proportion of female headed households is often associated to ‘incidence of terminal diseases such as HIV/AIDS increases’ (Horrell and Krishnan, 2007: 1352). Female-headed households also increase in situations of armed conflict and in Zimbabwe the conflict in Matabeleland and the Midlands in the 1980s certainly claimed many men (see, Alexander et al., 2000).

The more important point I would like to make here is that women headship has been presented as a scourge and has commanded much policy focus. In this perspective, female headship is associated with lack of command of assets, decision and control. Such issues as land rights being held by the absent man even if it is worked by the woman who is also the guardian are seen as evidence of their subordinate position. Because *de facto* women heads of households are often surrounded by the absent husband’s kin, they are subjected to their husband’s kin, which compromises their power over decisions and control over resources even in the absence of the husbands (Horrell and Krishnan, 2007).

More recent scholarly work, however, has tended to portray rural areas as contested spaces where women constantly negotiate the constraints imposed by the patriarchal system. This literature also recognizes the changing roles and enhanced status of women when men are absent from the rural space, either through migration or death. This literature also challenges the general notion of women as being powerless and at the mercy of society and men, and has highlighted incidents of negotiation and bargaining by women to gain access to resources (e.g. Mutopo, 2011). Others have shown how women in resettlement schemes experience changed situations. Goebel (1999) for example, has alerted us to policy changes in resettlement areas that allow women to inherit permits after the death of the male permit holder, and how such arrangements have provided livelihood security for widows. These women have been presented as having control over their households and household affairs and male relatives of the husband cannot interfere (ibid). This literature sits alongside other studies on women and land reform that have shown how the movement to the resettlement areas have liberated women from the influence and control of the husbands’ kin.

Methods

To gain a micro level understanding, I base my analysis on data from wide-ranging studies conducted in south-western Lupane District, on the southern fringes of the former Shangani Reserves, north-western Zimbabwe, between 2005 and 2017. The studies were ethnographic in the sense that they were ‘grounded in long-term research that normally involves sustained engagement in the daily lives of those about whom they are writing, and in the effort to understand the latter on their own terms’ (Worby, 2001: 478– 479). These studies focused broadly on social change and worker-peasant dynamics, with a

view of understanding the dynamics of change and social transformation in former migrant labour societies, overtime.

These studies included a pioneering study between 2005 and 2005. This study focused broadly on the whole Gwayi River Valley area, and covered around 16 traditional villages, where I conducted extended visits to the villages, undertook transect walks and conducted extended visits to selected households where I conducted life histories and made observations. Thereafter, I conducted short periods of ethnographic research from 2009, on 2 of the villages that were predominantly involved in migrant labour, mostly to the City of Bulawayo and South Africa.

During these short visits, observations and life histories and community tours continued with the focus of the earlier study – they sought insight into dynamics of labour migration, roles of men, women and children, the position of women at the household levels, and changing household circumstances between time of settlement and 2017. Focusing on changes that took place over the years was important because they affect the role and position of women within the household and society settings. For example, the death of a *de jure* household head eventually elevated the widow to a *de jure* female head, while the retrenchment or retirement of a male labour migrant equally affects the position of a former *de facto* female head of household.

The ‘dark gusu’ frontier of Lupane District

In the interest of pursuing the analytical issues raised by the study focus on realities of women in migrant labour societies, I turn my attention to the ‘dark *gusu* forest’ frontier in south-western Lupane District, on the southern fringes of the former Shangani Reserves, north-western Zimbabwe (see, Alexander et al., 2000). Over most of the ‘*gusu*’ forest frontier female headed households are well represented, and being significantly intermingled with families of former employees who had accumulated enough capital to resume life as farmers in the reserves, and some indigenous *Sili* and Tonga tribes. This situation presents the ‘*gusu*’ forest frontier as an arena for women, and therefore it seems worthwhile to examine women and their position within the household and societal spaces.

This is part of the ‘dark forests’ so vividly captured in Alexander et al. (2000)’s ‘*Violence and memory: One hundred years in the ‘dark forests’ of Matabeleland*’, and now constitutes the Menyezwa Ward, under Chief Mabhikwa Khumalo.³ It is a strip of valley land between the Gwayi River and the A8 highway, 180km from the City of Bulawayo and around 150km from Hwange Colliery (to the north). Its location along the main road connecting these parts of the reserves to Bulawayo City was ideal for the movement of labour and remittances. Equally, its geographical position at the semi-arid belt together with the communal tenure system that governs land access and land rights makes it ideal for a worker-peasantry.

Commercial settler farming or ranching also took place in the Sotane Ranch south of the river Gwayi, and offered both permanent and seasonal employment opportunities. As the *gusu* forest spreads north-east across the road into the Gwayi/Shangani watershed, it descends onto the Shangani Valley a further 6km away. The Shangani Valley was settled

much earlier than the Gwayi River parts of the Shangani Reserves, and may be because of the quality of the soils, the residents had an agrarian orientation than their southern neighbours.

The worker-peasantry of the ‘gusu’ frontier

When this part of the Shangani Reserves was first settled by the Ndebele in the late 1940s there were remnants of forest people belonging to the *sili* lineages (Alexander et al., 2000). These Ndebele migrants were mostly employees and former employees in the capitalist sector in Bulawayo, who arrived in the *gusu* frontier from ‘white land’ – land expropriated for commercial agriculture and mining – in the late 1940s. Chief Menyezwa Gumede, for instance, arrived in the area from Figtree in 1948 and presided over migrant groups (that had arrived around the same time) and the *sili* groups. Some of these groups came from other contested areas like Bubi, Inyathi and Nyamandlovu. Other migrants were late arrivals who sought land in the reserves from the city and proximity areas, such as Mpopoma and Pumula Estates. Among these was a proletarian class that held jobs in the emerging industries in Bulawayo. In a sense, these had been proletarianized, and to quote Alexander et al. (2000: 50):

The men and women who were forcibly resettled in the Shangani had a clear self-image. They defined themselves as Ndebele but not as traditionalists. They were people of the school and of the store and of the market. They were ‘dressed’ people. They were plough using farmers....

Some men among the migrant group, however, did not hold any formal jobs when they arrived in the valley: some had retired from their jobs, while others were between jobs and took the opportunity in the reserves to build themselves homes before re-establishing themselves as urban workers again.

Of significance however, was the number of men who held jobs in the capitalist sector in Bulawayo City among the migrant groups. The fact that these men never gave up their jobs, and their families remained in the reserves suggests, as Nyambara (2001: 776) noted elsewhere, that their intention was merely to “‘book” land,...by leaving their wives at the new location, and then returning to work’. The main challenge in this arrangement was that the ‘[m]en who now went to work in Bulawayo could not be expected to cycle the 125-170 miles to and from the Shangani Reserves. Families would be divided’ (Alexander et al., 2000: 51).

The key point here is that the origin of settlers and the patterns of life they had established prior to their eviction left the majority of households headed *de facto* by women. Women were less involved in labour migration than men, and were left to oversee the farming enterprise, which ultimately supplemented the men’s wages. The implication of such a situation was that the area became dominated by a worker-peasantry with interests both in rural land and urban employment.

Thus, men circulated between the city and the rural home, and lived a worker-peasant life. But it does not imply – as some from a Marxist tradition have often portrayed the situation – that the women left behind bore the blunt of the absence of men and had to compensate for lost male labour. To the contrary, worker migrants, like in most migrant labour societies, often compensated for lost labour through resource-pooling arrangements, or hired labour. As noted elsewhere (Thebe, 2012), and whether for reasons associated with lack of resources or building social networks, resource-pooling arrangements were a common practice among all types of households. Nearly all households (those considered as farmers and worker-peasants) had engaged in these arrangements: while farming households were often large and extended and entered these arrangements with poor households that lacked resources, worker-peasants were forced into these arrangements to compensate for lost labour.⁴

In 2005 the context had changed marketable. The majority of the early generation of men who had led their households to the valley area had died, retired or retrenched from their jobs; and most households were either headed *de jure* by widows or by a younger generation of *de facto* females. The valley area has always been a zone for worker migrants, and in the 2000s both young men and women were attracted to long-term as well as short-term cross-border migration to Botswana and South Africa. It was therefore widows and young wives that in 2005 dominated the valley population.

In 2017 three distinct groups of women headed households could be distinguished. In all the villages the vast majority of *de jure* widows were either lonely, or they were living with grand children and were supported by daughters. Sons were more likely to marry and establish own families than unmarried daughters with children, who were often forced to seek work to fend for their children. A number of former worker migrant widows also lived with grandchildren, but they also had live-in male helpers who performed major household tasks. In general, young wives whose husbands spend most of their time either in the cities or outside the country, were the majority, and since they had young families they were more likely to also employ male helpers.

Abandoned wives? Women and the household space

In worker migrant households the household space was under the sole control of the wife who assumed the responsibility for day-to-day decisions in the absence of the worker migrant man. Hired labour, mostly in the form of herd boys, provided the necessary cover for absent men, but these had no power over household and farm decisions (Thebe, 2012). These findings correspond with some post-independence studies conducted in communal areas, which showed that labour migrant households employed additional labour that was critical in agriculture production (e.g. Weiner and Harris, 1991).

Women clearly recognized their leadership roles, and executed them without complaint. They made decisions that concerned their households, and executed short and medium term plans, with the assistance of older children and sometimes hired labour. The execution of these new roles is illustrated in the following excerpt:

My husband works for the local municipality in Bulawayo. I live here with the children and a man who assists with the cattle and... This home is mine and what needs to be done here I have to see. I cannot wait for him.....when is he going to come? (Interview, Menyezwa, August 2006).

As nearly all households were initially headed by women on a *de facto* basis, household leadership roles had become normal and they performed them naturally. Generally, women organized agriculture tasks, but as alluded to in the excerpt, they rarely performed masculine activities like preparing the fields, which were often assigned to hired labour, or alternatively they had the option to organize 'ilima' (communal work) for such tasks. Many labour migrant households, however, did not utilize the 'ilima' option, remaining content with their paid labour.

Tensions over decisions when men returned

In these societies the man's responsibility was to provide the financial resources, which were commanded by the woman; otherwise he was not expected to interfere in rural household affairs since his continuous absence made his grasp of realities relatively weaker compared to the wife. The man only had an extended period of stay in the rural home once in a year, when he would spend around a calendar month.⁵

However, both women and children loathed these long periods of stay by husbands and fathers. Wives often felt that men were hijacking their responsibilities, and sometimes making wrong decisions. The uneasiness of women with the presence of men in the rural space can be inferred from the following quotation from one of the women:

He is here for only a month, but it feels like eternity. *Angikwazi ukuthi abafazi abahlala lamadoda ekhaya bona baphila kanjani* (i do not know how women who have men at home live)? His hands are all over the place, and he wants to take over ...but he does not understand our environment and how we live here There is a reason why we do things the way we do them....I am ok with my boys. He comes..., he starts projects and expects us to manage them.... Sometimes, he makes decisions that cause conflict with neighbours. Remember, he will be gone...and we will remain living with these neighbours (Interview, Menyezwa, July 2017)

Aside from illustrating that women and children have come to 'appreciate their degree of relative autonomy' as Colson once argued (O'Laughlin, 1998: 7), the findings bring to light the tensions that exist once men re-enter the rural space. As heads of households, it is important for men to resume their household leadership roles, and the wives to retreat to a support role. In Ndebele culture, the man has the final voice, and assumes his role as head of household once he is at home, and the woman and children abide by his word.

For labour migrant men, the long absence from the rural space often meant that there was a lot that needed to be done within a short space of time. One of my informants explained the pressure that labour migrant men faced:

He is away for too long and when he is here, he wants to achieve so much within a very short space of time...You may even think he is here to correct mistakes that happened during his absence. Sometimes he comes here to implement decisions based on discussions he had with other men during beer drinking sessions in Bulawayo....these are mostly decisions taken at the beer garden (Interview, Menyezwa, September 2006).

The following case illustrates how men would take unpopular decisions that affect the household negatively because of their peripheral grasp of the rural environment. The Ngwenya household had produced traditional sorghum varieties locally known as '*itsheta*' and '*inqukumbane*' with some degree of success since the late 1950s. In 1988 following the introduction of a short maturing sorghum variety called the 'Red Swazi', Mr Ngwenya, who had heard about the variety from farmers from other regions, introduced the variety even though his wife was reluctant to grow an unfamiliar sorghum variety. In terms of yields, the experiment was a success as the family recorded a bumper harvest.

However, the family found the grain difficult to consume. As the woman recalls, 'it tasted terrible that we ended up reserving the grain for the production of traditional beer, and had to purchase our own food requirements for the year'. An implication of this misjudgement was more explicitly explained by this woman head of household:

It was a total loss. We do not sell grain here, but generally produce grain for our own consumption. We buy maize meal during bad harvests or when our grain runs out before the next harvest. Our traditional sorghum variety grew well on clay soils, and even during bad rainy seasons there was always something to harvest. But with the 'Red Swazi' fiasco, we started purchasing maize meal soon after harvest. If only he had listened to us rather than people he interacts with in Bulawayo....it affected him mostly because he was the one responsible for food purchases (Interview, Menyezwa, September 2006).⁶

The tendency of labour migrant men to take rural decisions was broadly condemned by wives, although none of these had stood up to their men. The wives recounted how some men would take decisions that affected relations with neighbours. One example was that of Ngwewu Ncube, who once fenced-off his family land with razor wire. While he had all the right to fence-off the land as his household held rights to the land in terms of tenure practice, this land had long been fallowed and had reverted to communal pastures.⁷ More importantly, the fence completely blocked livestock path to communal pastures and watering points in the Gwayi River. The fencing incident led to an outcry by neighbours. The headman, who was also affected by the new fence, tried to intervene with little success. While his actions were condemned by the whole society, he was rarely affected since he was always away. As his wife recounted, 'we were the people who felt the wrath of the community...we were completely ostracized'. The community pressure finally

paid-off and the fence was finally removed, but relations with neighbours were completely destroyed.

‘Men make money’ and do not stay home

In this society, like all migrant labour societies, men were not expected in the rural space, which was regarded as a terrain for women (*indawo yabafazi*). As Boehm (2003: 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*’ (a lazy man who does not want to work). Women married to non-labour migrant men often bore an added burden by performing additional jobs outside their households including vending and performing tasks for others. Most of these women relied on piece work labouring for labour migrant households, while others were involved in vegetable vending locally or along the highway.

By so doing, they were able to afford basics including tuition fees for children, who also assisted in these income generating activities. The men would perform menial tasks for other households, but these were not paying well and were generally highly contested, which meant that households headed by non-working men could hardly escape poverty.

Generally, no woman wanted a ‘*mahlalela*’ for a husband, and women went to great length to ensure that their men were out of the rural space. The woman would often finance the migration journey through income from additional activities. Another way women made sure the men were out of the rural space was through provocation, by referring to their men as ‘*omahlalela*’. I was informed:

... no man wants to be referred to as a ‘*mahlalela*’. It is degrading and implies that a man is so jealous that he cannot afford to be away from his wife. If you want to see how angry a man can be, just call him ‘*umahlalela*’ Women would sometimes call their husbands such names when they are angry, and that often did the trick.....they would be off in a flash ...to prove them otherwise (Interview, Menyezwa, July 2017).

Thus, women would use the societal stereotype of ‘*mahlalela*’ to simultaneously rid themselves of men and to try and improve the livelihood situation of their household. The out-migration of men came with a particular status to the household and a hope to achieve the basics of life including consumption.⁸

In these societies the migration of the men has always been associated with remittances that were often invested into the farm and other rural activities, and households that received remittances were associated with affluence. With the man gone and circulating between the rural and urban, the woman would assume control of everyday household decisions.

While it was important for the man to migrate for work, it was also important that he does not neglect the rural home. Women needed men in the households, but they did not want them as permanent rural farmers (*omahlalela*).⁹ He was expected to visit frequently,

weekly, fortnightly or monthly. One of the women explained the importance of the visibility of men in the home:

Kuhle ukuthi abantu bazi ukuthi angisiye umazakhela (It is important that people are reminded that I am not a lonely single woman). By coming here frequently, ...is a sign that there is a man in this home, and people respect the home and me...there is no one respects for '*umazakhela*' (Interview, Menyezwa, July 2017).¹⁰

Generally, some men were content with granting the women the space to run the rural affairs in their absence, and expressed confidence in decisions often taken. According to one of these migrant men:

...she knows better about things around here than I do. She experiences the challenges and makes decisions based on her analysis of the situation. I cannot control this place by remote control..., if I have to make decisions on her behalf, what will guide my decision? She makes the decisions, I support her.... I still play an active role here by providing her with the necessary support (Interview, Menyezwa, July 2017).

Labour migrant men were not, however, uniformly distributed among households in this part of the valley: while households that relocated from former 'white areas' and descendants of such households had at least a member in wage employment, only a minority of members of indigenous '*sili*' households were in the same situation. The livelihoods of Ndebele migrants were distinctly different from that of the indigenous *sili* – their livelihoods were centred on income and remittances from urban employment, partly because of their origin, but also, they had networks in Bulawayo. In contrast to their Ndebele counterparts, only in a small proportion of *sili* households were there individuals engaged in migrant labour: historically these were mostly employed local (in the Sotane Ranch or Forest Commission) and preferred to circulate between home and work on a daily basis.

By the late 1990s, out-migration for labour, particularly to Botswana and South Africa, was to a greater or lesser degree popular among men and women of all ages including in those households that had no previous history in migrant labour. As such, the proportion of households that were headed *de facto* by women increased, which also increased the power of women in households since cross-border migrants spent longer periods away from home.

For labour migrant households, there was no division of land into fields for men and other for the women, or men and women crops; land might have been allocated to the men, but it was treated as household land, worked and managed by the women. Women married to labour migrants had little incentive to produce cash crops, and as alluded to earlier, they were not allocated land to produce own crops; crops were produced at the household level. They were not expected to produce own crops since the husbands were

not physically involved in the production of crops, and had no need for land to be specially reserved for their own independent use. Married women in extended households worked separate plots, and while they had control of crop decisions, they had little control over household decisions, which were the preserve of the head of the entire household.

All women who were heads of households made crop decisions that allowed them to benefit from the farming enterprise. One of the ways women made sure they derived benefits from their farm work was to intercrop grain crops with a variety of vegetable and legume crops. The traditional intercropping technique continued to inform households' farming activities in this community despite the widespread adoption of maize and the accompanying requirements to mono-crop. This was dictated by the need to spread the risk associated with agriculture failure, but also, it was a strategy to accommodate a variety of crop species on the same land space.

Both *de jure* women heads of households and those in the other categories practiced intercropping. In reserve area agriculture, intercropping of crop species in different combinations has been a traditional practice associated with the seed scattering method. It has survived the changes associated with agricultural mechanization, and particularly the adoption of the cultivator as a strategy to ease the labour burden during the weeding season.

A community of women

In this former labour reserve, the responsibilities of women extended beyond the confines of their households and to the community level. The high incidence of male migration completely changed the traditional gender roles: women dominated the community space. In the absence of men, women became key community actors and were involved in decisions that affected the welfare of their villages, schools or any other community issue. In 2006, two of the villages were headed by acting female headmen after the death of their husbands and non-availability of male successors. Women also dominated membership of the village assemblies, and participated equally with men in major decisions as highlighted in the introduction.

Most women delegated men, elder sons or herd boys/men, to attend village assemblies. These thereby took their seats at the assemblies through the male delegates, who reported directly to them. If migrant men happened to be home during scheduled or extra-ordinary village assemblies, they would attend, although some still preferred to play peripheral roles. Exceptional cases were in situations where the men worked locally, or had no jobs.

The feminization of these societal spaces, which have long been regarded as male spaces, and the normalization of the situation can be inferred from the quotation by one women head of household:

We attend the village assembly, we also deliberate...*Sizokwenz' njani ngoba lana akula madoda* (what should we do since there are no men here)? The men you see

here are on transit (*bayedlula*) ... they know nothing about this place (Interview, Menyezwa, September 2006).

In 2005 there were quite a few *de jure* female heads of households who had been widowed including the two village headmen's widows, who had been part of the village assemblies both as *de facto* heads of households and village first ladies. These women's extensive experience and knowledge of their villages and village assemblies' practices were crucial reference points, and they were providing council and guidance to relatively youthful village assemblies. However, in one of the villages where single women were never considered for settlement, the proportion of *de jure* female headed households was a first, and was due probably, to the death of men who had initially settled in the area as both migrant workers and retired employees in the 1950s and 1960s.

The proportion of *de facto* female headed households in the 2000 had also increased with increases in the cross-border migration of young men mainly to South Africa. As was the case in other parts of Matabeleland, many young, single men together with women in these villages responded to the economic hardship brought by adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) and the economic downturn in the 2000s, by migrating to South Africa (Thebe, 2012).

In 2017, a large proportion of households (around 85% in the 2 villages) were female headed. In this way the women were at the forefront of societal decisions, and in this feminized spaces, which in the two villages was characterized by the seating of female village heads, and a woman as a head '*iwosana*' spirit (rain-making spirit) in 2006.

In general, there were differences in how involved women were at the society level among villages in the whole valley, depending on the extent of semi-proletarianization. There were two main categories of villages: villages that were highly semi-proletarianized and those where the proletarianization of men was relatively less. This had been the case since the 1950s when the Ndebele first settled in these parts of the '*gusu*'. This is further related to places of origin of certain lineage groups that comprised these villages: some lineage groups originated from areas where capitalism was fully established, and men were already fully proletarianized before eviction.

Women in villages where the proletarianization of men was not that high were not excluded from village assemblies, but their involvement was rather constrained by the availability of husbands at home. The situation of the former was distinctly different – the active participation of women in the village assemblies meant that they had a huge influence on societal processes. In general, women did not shy away from confronting challenges affecting the community, and played key roles in mobilizing youths and whatever remained of the male population. The following case illustrates the role of women in solving challenges that affected their communities, even in the absence of men:

One winter morning in 2006, a group of predominantly women... from villages on the southern fringes of the former Shangani Reserves – between the Gwayi River and the Gwayi/Shangani rivers watershed forest, under Chief Mabhikwa Khumalo of Lupane District, in western Zimbabwe – organi[z]ed and participated in what they

termed at the time, an ‘environmental cleansing ritual’. They marched along the A8 Highway and into the forest, confiscating firewood displayed for sale on the roadside and the stockpiles in the forest awaiting transportation to the markets in the city. Environmental cleansing, mostly related to rainmaking, is common practice in this region, and is often performed when dry spells persist for longer periods as an intervention to bring back the rains ... In this case cleansing is concomitant to rainmaking. The ritual is initiated by community elders and led by *amawosana* (spirit mediums) at the local *motolo* (rain shrine), and performed mostly by men through a ritual known as *ukwebul’ingxoza*... The actual cleansing is focused on specific elements, such as exposed animal bones, cobwebs, nests of certain species of birds, and trees that were struck down by lightning, which are gathered and destroyed by fire... But the environmental cleansing of that winter day was different in many respects from the customary rainmaking: no *iwosana* (spirit medium) was involved, no ritual was performed, and more importantly, it mostly involved women. Furthermore, the focus was on the people – the firewood vendors, mostly men, who harvested firewood from remnants left after the logging companies had extracted commercial timber, and who had operated from the roadside for nearly half a decade without incidents (Thebe, 2017: 1–2).

Conclusion

Whereas literature on migrant labour regimes have focused on the negatives, particularly on women left behind as guardians of men’s interests, but with no real control, this ‘doomsday’ narrative is challenged by my ethnographic studies conducted in a former migrant labour society in north-western Zimbabwe. By focusing broadly on women and their position in this society, my analysis revealed that the rural space was highly feminized, with women assuming prominent roles within the household and societal systems. A majority of women were *de facto* heads of households in charge of family estates, and in a context where only a minority of men could be found within the rural space, women also dominated the societal space.

The study particularly demonstrated how the absence of men from the rural space empowered women to assume leadership to make everyday forms of decisions in their households, and assume citizenship at societal level. The long history of male proletarianization together with their continued absence from the rural space meant that the feminization of everyday decisions and the prominent roles of women at the society level were normalized. My study also tried to demonstrate how this setting and the institutional framework generated new expectations on women, and how they in turn responded to these expectations and realities confronting their everyday lives, and turned them to their own advantage. Thus, over the years women managed to negotiate their position in society, and positioned themselves as major role players in decisions that affected the community as a whole. For a society of ‘absent men’, traditional gender roles could not be maintained.

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 full membership of the village assemblies and seating female village heads.

Lastly, the changed roles and responsibilities of women should not be viewed negatively; instead they should be contextualized in terms of their sociological basis by analysing the social context that gave women legitimacy to decisions and power to mobilize against threats. It may be therefore appropriate to draw on Colson's work in Zambia and conclude that despite the seemingly added burden on their shoulders, the absence of men 'opened up new areas of autonomy and control for women both in their [homes] and in their social lives' (O'Laughlin, 1998: 5). This has implications for policy on rural women: it illuminates differences between rural societies and cautions against the risks of looking at the relationship between women and migration with a uniform eye.

Notes

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- ¹. In these societies the existing land tenure system allows a landholder to settle people on his land, but the village assembly reserved the right not to sanction new settlements if they threaten village interests.
 - ². Potts (2000) uses the term in references to women who remain behind after the migration of men to urban cities.
 - ³. The area is named after Chief Menyezwa Gumede who was among the first to settle on the Gwayi River valley side of the forest before relocating to Dongamuzi (Tongamudzi in the Tonga local dialect) in the Zambezi escarpment, and leaving the area under the jurisdiction of Chief Mabhikwa Khumalo who had settled on the Shangani River valley side in 1947.
 - ⁴. Besides the absent men, the labour of school-going children was lost during school terms. In the majority of cases, older children attended school in the cities or boarding schools and their labour was lost for the bulk of the farming season.
 - ⁵. At the end of each year, or soon after harvest (depending on the sectors they were employed), men would take vacation leave to spend time with their families.
 - ⁶. At the time of research, Mr Ngwenya had died and the household was headed by Mrs Ngwenya who stayed with her three grandchildren.
 - ⁷. Although land rights are held under communal tenure and in principle, the rights are usufruct; in practice households behave as if it is private and exclusive.
 - ⁸. In these communities, tea is a luxury afforded only by those households that are considered affluent, and the migration of men for employment provided an avenue to such affluence.
 - ⁹. The term 'farmer' was rarely used when referring to rural men, even if they farmed, rather, all unemployed men within the rural space were derogatory referred to as '*omahlalela*'.
 - ¹⁰ The term '*umazakhela*' is Ndebele for a de jure female head of household, particularly if she established a home without a husband. However, in its derogatory application, it implies that the woman is immoral, and therefore there are always fears and belief that she will snatch other women's husbands.

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