

Transnational parenthood and forced migration: the case of asylum-seeking parents who are forcibly separated from their families by immigration laws

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Within transnational studies literature, there is a tendency to assume that migrant parents have ready access to paid work once they arrive in countries of destination, which subsequently enables them to maintain transnational ties with children and kin left behind. In this article I argue that more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which immigration regimes and policies construct certain groups of migrants, such as asylum-seekers, as underserving of the rights to sell their labour and the adverse consequences these often have on parents' identities and transnational capabilities. The argument builds on the case study of a group of Zimbabwean asylum-seeking parents. Like many asylum-seekers escaping politically repressive regimes, they had not managed to bring their children with them when they escaped to the UK, but had imagined that, once in a 'safe haven', they would be able to arrange for their children to join them. On arrival, they discovered that the UK immigration system treats parents as asylum-seekers first and parents later (if ever). This article furthers understanding of transnational parenting from the perspectives of a migrant group for whom labour market demand is not the sole objective for its mobility.

key words Zimbabwe • asylum-seeking parents • forced separation • children
• transnational parenthood

Introduction

In the transnational literature, there has been a seemingly overestimation of migrant fathers' ability to fulfil their traditional breadwinning role, and migrant mothers' exceptional capability to combine breadwinning and traditional caring roles in ways that enable them to stay close to their children from a distance. Most notably, the transnational parenthood literature has tended to treat migrant parents as a homogenised group of economically rational actors, depicting transitional family life as exclusively 'a consequence of structural forces of economic globalization' (Rask et al, 2014: 297). Few studies (for example, Kofman, 2004) have engaged with the situations of those migrants whose mobility is precipitated by imperatives that override the demand for their labour (Vickers, 2012), particularly asylum-seekers, or even the legal constraints imposed on them by immigration regimes in receiving societies. Where contributions have enquired into the issue of asylum, they have tended to

focus on those who have been granted refugee status in countries of immigration (see, for example, Heger Boyle and Ali, 2009). Research inquiries into the issue of immigration status in general have also tended to focus on undocumented migrants (see, for example, Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Menjívar, 2012). Although their experiences may parallel those of asylum-seekers, these two groups' circumstances also differ in many varied ways. Thus, to date, little is known about the extent to which immigration regimes increasingly curtail asylum-seeking parents' access to paid work and how this can render transnational family life dysfunctional. What are the impacts of asylum policies on parents' ability to sell their labour? And what are the consequences of asylum policies for families and relationships? It is these two key questions that this article seeks to address.

I begin by reviewing the literature on transnational parenthood. I then provide a brief discussion of Zimbabwean migration to the UK, setting it in the context of UK immigration/asylum policy. This is followed by a summary of the research on which this article is based. I then present my research data in relation to the two key questions raised above.

Transnational parenthood

Following a landmark publication by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997), the past two decades have seen a rapid expansion of the literature on transnational families mirroring the growth of the phenomenon. Transnational families denote 'families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely, "familyhood", even across national borders' (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 3). Seemingly, the first generation of research has primarily focused on the feminisation of migration, showing how the demand for care and domestic workers in the global North has seen a shift from a demand for male workers to a demand for female workers, a phenomenon that has subsequently prompted many mothers to leave their own children behind (see, for example, Parreñas, 2001; Baldassar et al, 2007).

This literature has been primarily insightful in showing how the identity of a migrant mother, in addition to incorporating a breadwinning role, also involves other multiple layers of meanings, including the ability to show emotional intimacy from a distance. This is expressed through gifts, regular communication and other luxuries that mothers send to their children during their time of separation (Millman, 2013: 75; see also Parreñas, 2008; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Horton, 2009; Boccagni, 2012). However, more recently Parreñas (2014: 425) has argued for the need to pay attention to the structural constraints that complicate transnational mothers' ability to be 'here and there', 'present' and 'absent', or to be always available from a distance. She demonstrates how the gendered cultural expectation of instantaneity can be impeded by structural factors such as poor communication, infrastructural development and unfriendly work conditions. What has not been fully explored, however, is the extent to which transnational gendered expectations may be thwarted by legal constraints, particularly with regards to asylum-seeking mothers fleeing to the increasingly restrictive asylum regimes of liberal democracies such as the UK (Madziva and Zontini, 2012).

Meanwhile, the second generation of transnational parenthood literature has generated significant interest in the broader question of the relationship between migration and gender. For example, Carling et al's (2012: 192) analysis has shown

that transnational parenthood affects migrants in gender-specific ways. Several other scholars have empirically noted a difference in how mothers and fathers manage the day-to-day life activities of their children from a distance (Dreby, 2006; Baldassar et al, 2007; Parreñas, 2008; Ryan et al, 2009; Pribilsky, 2012). However, as Kilkey et al (2014: 179) argue, transnational fatherhood ‘has been explained in terms of the assumed normativity of father-absence for breadwinning purposes.’ For example, Dreby’s (2006) work with Mexican fathers and mothers residing in New Jersey in the US has been insightful in showing that while migrant mothers’ relationships with their children left behind in Mexico are highly dependent on demonstrating emotional intimacy from a distance, in contrast, migrant fathers’ relationships with their children lie in their economic success as migrant workers. Thus she notes ‘a remarkable salience of the ideal of mothers as caregivers and fathers as providers’ (Dreby 2006: 35), a difference she attributes to be reflective of the deeply rooted Mexican gender ideologies. However, other studies carried out elsewhere (for example, Ryan et al, 2009, in their study of Polish migrant fathers in London, and Parreñas, 2008, in her study of Filipino migrant fathers) have also confirmed migrant men’s conformity to norms of breadwinning in comparison to their female counterparts in similar situations. Parreñas (2008: 1058) has therefore concluded that migration enables ‘men to better fulfil their traditional responsibility of breadwinning with their access to greater income earning potential abroad.’

There are strong parallels between the gender ideologies noted in the studies cited above and those ascribed to a traditional Zimbabwean family that is largely viewed as patriarchal, denoting that gendered role expectations are part and parcel of the daily expression of family life (Bourdillon, 1998). An interesting question is whether the universal picture of migrant fathers’ privileged position to better fulfil their traditional breadwinning role as painted by Parreñas (2008) also pertains to asylum-seeking fathers, especially those living in the UK context, where asylum policies increasingly prohibit claimants from selling their labour power.

Migration from Zimbabwe and the UK asylum policy context

Although Zimbabwe has always been a country of emigration, the outflow of its citizens increased remarkably from the end of the 1990s as a result of the interaction of political and economic factors. Indeed, migration from Zimbabwe has involved both involuntary and voluntary dispersion of citizens from their homeland into the region and abroad (McGregor, 2008).

The population of Zimbabwean nationals applying for asylum in the UK became significant in 2000, a period that coincided with the hardening of immigration controls in general, and asylum policies in particular. With regards to asylum, key policy interventions were adopted under the Labour government’s term in office between 1997 and 2010. For example, it was the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 whose provisions saw the total removal of asylum-seekers from the mainstream social security system and a reduction in asylum-seekers’ welfare entitlement to about 70% of National Income support. Concurrently, a voucher system was introduced under Section 4 of the same Act, commonly known as the ‘hard case support’, as a means to support destitute refused claimants with genuine reasons not to leave the country immediately, further stigmatising asylum populations by excluding them from the cash economy (see Clayton, 2010).

Asylum-seekers' rights to paid work were totally withdrawn under the terms of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, a decision made on the basis of the unsubstantiated claim that such a right encouraged 'bogus' asylum claims from so-called 'economic migrants' (Mulvey, 2010).

However, since 2005 successive UK governments have been intermittently suspending the forced return of refused asylum-seekers to Zimbabwe as an acknowledgement of the fact that deportees increasingly faced victimisation on return. Yet, as I seek to show in this article, to be afforded partial rights, that is, the right to continue to physically remain in the UK but not the right to work and/or to family life, has adverse effects on asylum parents' own lives and those of the children left behind.

The study and methodology

The data presented in this article is based on repeat interviews with 10 asylum-seeking parents (5 fathers and 5 mothers) who I interviewed between 2008 and 2010 as part of a larger qualitative project of 19 asylum-seeking parents from Zimbabwe who were living in the UK while separated from their children by immigration laws. This sub-sample of 10 is limited to participants who were still in touch with the asylum system at the time of interview, either as asylum-seekers who were waiting for their claims to be settled or refused asylum-seekers who were going through the appeal process and those who had launched a fresh claim (see Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of interviewees

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Status	Year of migration	No of children left behind	Carer
Chenai	F	45	Refused (made an appeal)	2001	5	Husband
Farai	M	37	Decision pending	1999	1	Wife
Jonasi	M	39	Refused (made a fresh claim)	2000	1	Ex-mother-in-law
Nyasha	M	46	Refused (made a fresh claim)	2004	2	wife (who subsequently divorced him)
Rudo	F	39	Refused (made an appeal)	2001	1	Husband (who subsequently died)
Simba	M	52	Decision pending	2004	2	Wife (who subsequently died)
Sukai	F	39	Refused (made a fresh claim)	2001	1 (subsequently died)	Friend
Tafara	M	45	Refused	2001	2	Grandparents
Tendai	F	45	Refused	2001	3	Husband (who subsequently died)
Voni	F	49	Refused (made an appeal)	2002	3	Grandparents

Research participants were accessed by employing snowballing techniques, using personal and professional contacts (Madziva, 2015). Research encounters were recorded and then transcribed. The research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the asylum parents' lived experiences of being separated from their children, and the impact of the asylum identity on parents' own lives and those of the children left behind. Thus the research involved asking migrants for retrospective accounts of their decision to leave Zimbabwe; childcare arrangements; experiences of seeking asylum; and leading a life in limbo. Participants' accounts were undoubtedly shaped by guilt and shame as they reflected back on the arrangements they had put in place for their children before they left, their understandings of how things had changed for their children since they left, and the contrast between what they had hoped their lives would become and what their lives had actually turned out to be in the UK.

The research design was influenced by the particular problems presented by working with this group of parents. Most of the interviews I conducted in the first round were extremely emotionally charged such that a conventional one-off interview would have been a 'hit and run' exercise and a method unlikely to allow me to penetrate the depth of my participants' experiences. Repeat interviewing became an important technique that allowed for emerging themes from initial encounters to be fully explored in subsequent interviews (Madziva, 2015). The study took a grounded approach, which privileges the fit between data and theory (Charmaz, 2006). Through an iterative process of data collection and analysis, codes were developed. The codes were then organised into thematic categories. Given the vulnerable nature of the population under study and the sensitivity of the topic of study, key ethical procedures including ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and avoiding harm were given high priority (see Madziva, 2015). All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

The impact of asylum policies on parents' ability to sell their labour in the UK

In the contemporary UK, asylum-seekers are a population that has been given attention in public and political discourses on unwanted migration in ways that reveal the tension between successive governments' desire to exercise sovereign rule and meeting their humanitarian obligation. As noted earlier, from the 1990s the political priority has been that of reducing the numbers of asylum-seekers arriving in the UK through policies and mechanisms designed to separate 'genuine' asylum-seekers from the so-called 'bogus' claimants or economic migrants. As Anderson (2013: 53) argues:

Immigration controls are structured in a way that imagines the economic and the political as fundamentally separate.... Accordingly, non-citizens are divided into three broad categories of entrant: workers and refugees/asylum seekers, and family members. Each type of entrant is differently imagined, and if an "asylum seeker" is seen as really a worker ... rather than an asylum seeker, for instance, this serves as grounds for refusal of entry or removal.

Thus asylum-seekers are a 'reserve army of labour', but one perceived to be partly 'out of place' because 'they reject labour market demand as the sole criteria for their mobility' (Vickers, 2012: 19). Such tough stands on asylum have been the subject of contention over the years, but what is all too easily overlooked is that asylum-seekers

are also sometimes parents, and by cracking down on all those that form the target group, family lives are put at stake. In this section, I focus on how, through being denied the right to work, my interviewees lost the sense of dignity and self-worth they had once derived from employment.

I start by considering the case of Nyasha, a 46-year-old man, and former prominent and successful business owner and father of two (girls) who claimed asylum in 2004 on arrival at the port of entry. By the time of interview in 2009, Nyasha was a refused asylum-seeker who had just submitted a fresh asylum claim. One of the things that Nyasha reflected on was how, on engaging with the asylum system, he was horrified to learn of the nature of the social contract he was entering into with his new government:

I claimed asylum on arrival ... what shocked me most was when they gave me a document written 'work prohibited'.... Isn't it surprising that the system is designed to force people to live on benefits and not to work for themselves? The system has no recognition of one's profession or social status.

Nyasha found the inability to legally pursue a career in the UK devastating:

Without a job or a career I have lost my self-worth.... I feel like my life has been put on hold ... all what I was has been lost. This is a death sentence....

This loss of 'self-worth' as derived from the lack of the right to work prompts a reflection on the UK successive governments' broader welfare reform agenda that positions paid work not only as the best form of welfare but also as the only route out of poverty. Within the broader argument on the need for welfare reform, in the current political environment, welfare dependency is considered a huge social problem and the major cause of poverty and social exclusion. Consequently paid employment is effectively promoted as the key to improved self-confidence, sense of self-worth, physical and mental wellbeing and the only route for the 'undeserving' to become 'deserving' (Patrick, 2011). This offers a striking illustration of the boundaries and contradictions between the rights afforded to citizens and those afforded to migrants. A marked difference is that while paid work reinforces citizens' responsibility and deservingness, asylum-seekers are not only deprived of the means to become deserving, but, more often than not, they are criticised for not being responsible (Mulvey, 2010).

My interviewees found it emotionally and physically challenging to live in a society that professes democracy and rationality but that ultimately excludes someone on the basis of being an asylum-seeker. Asylum-seeking fathers and mothers alike described their situations as a double tragedy, commenting on the fact that in Zimbabwe, the political and economic crisis had reduced them to non-persons who could not afford to meet their children's day-to-day needs. Moreover, escaping to the UK as asylum-seekers had not allowed individuals to regain their status/self-worth. One of the mothers, Voni (aged 49), elaborated on this using storytelling:

I am just like the prodigal son who left his country hoping to find a better life somewhere. He became destitute ... and settled to feed pigs, and to eat together with them but found out he had no right even to pigs' food. I ran away thinking Zimbabwe's situation was the worst, but like the prodigal son

I have been thrown into destitution. I long to do even the worst jobs in this country but I am deprived of this opportunity.... I thought the grass was greener on this side of the fence only to discover it's not green grass, but green carpet, which is not edible.

A major challenge for policies that seek to discourage economic migrants from exploiting the asylum system by withdrawing the right to work is that basic rights have been withdrawn from all those who form the asylum category. Arguably, such policies overlook the reality that asylum-seekers are also sometimes parents with a responsibility to meet the needs of their families, just like any other parent. In the absence of other choices, parents in my study reconciled their conflicting identities by sporadically working illegally, which enabled some to occasionally remit money home to support their children. Within the context of the ongoing UK immigration policy focus of containing 'illegal' migration, experiences of being raided and detained formed a recurring theme. One example is Tendai, a mother of three who came to the UK in 2001, and by the time of first interview in 2009, she had waited for almost five years for her asylum appeal to be determined. During this time of waiting, her husband died at home under mysterious conditions that left Tendai the sole breadwinner responsible for her three children. Left with no other option, she used a fake document to get employment as a carer, a job she undertook until the day she was raided by the UK Border Agency in 2010:

One morning when I was about to finish my night shift ... the bell went.... It was the Home Office.... It was planned with the manager of the home, I think, because that morning the senior carer on duty was following me everywhere to ensure I did not leave before the Home Office arrived.... I was detained for almost two months. On release I was given 60 hours of community service.... (Tendai, female, 45)

Writing on the impact of immigration status on transnational parenting in the case of Filipinas in France, Fresnoza-Flot (2009) notes how undocumented migrants had to work extremely hard in order to be able to remit large sums of money as compensation for their inability to accomplish family reunification. However, in my study, illegal working was invariably discussed as a risky option, with participants expressing great fear over the possibility of being raided and deported to a place where they would possibly face reprisal for seeking asylum in the UK. Thus, individuals were palpably conscious of the need to prove themselves to be 'genuine' claimants. Nyasha, who had just submitted a fresh asylum claim, as noted earlier, remarked that "my solicitor has warned me that illegal working has the potential to undermine the credibility of my fresh claim." For him and others, the only option left was to apply for Section 4 'hard case support' offered under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, a scheme that forces people to sign that they are willing to voluntarily return home. As Nyasha put it:

Applying for Section 4 is just like signing your own death sentence.... Before it is approved they expect you to sign that you will comply with removal orders whenever the Home Office felt it was time for you to go back.... I don't know what this will lead to ... but what I need for now is support for the immediate.... (Nyasha, male, 46)

In other words, asylum-seekers must exchange their right to escape persecution and their freedom to remain in the UK for the right to even the most minimal, bare subsistence. Even then, they receive vouchers, or what is now called the Azure card system, instead of cash, stigmatising them and marking them as different from and inferior to other people. In the words of Tafara:

... vouchers are one of the things I am not proud to carry on me ... the moment you hand them over to the till operator everyone gets to know who you are ... they are a form of identity card that stigmatises you and strips you of your dignity and self-esteem.... (Tafara, male, 45)

Both fathers and mothers expressed a deep dissatisfaction with the asylum identity as an aspect of oneself, stemming from a longing to gain an identity that could both make them socially acceptable to others and allow them to freely sell their labour and be able to support their own families, even from a distance. As the remainder of this article aims to show, without access to economic means participants experienced the gradual disintegration of their ties to the social fabric back home and to everything that had previously given them an identity among their own families.

The consequences of asylum policies for families and relationships

Parents' powerlessness to support and protect the children left behind

With regards to transnational parenthood, the literature has shown that for parents who are separated from children, the ability to provide and care for them within the constraints of physical separation is what defines their new roles as transnational parents (Parreñas, 2001). In my study, parents struggled to meet this expectation. However, parental experiences of separation from their children were gendered. In particular, mothers, in keeping with the general expectation of transnational motherhood (see, for example, Dreby, 2006; Abrego, 2009), routinely discussed that the ability to nurture and maintain close ties with their own children under any circumstance was the proper identity of an African mother, as in the following example:

In our African culture a mother can do anything to protect her children. You hear of women who endure abusive marriages because of children ... women who sacrifice their all so that their children can have a good future.... Women who undergo divorce always fight to have custody of their own children. That's the identity of an African woman. Children are a woman's crown. I have spent eight years away from my own children. In our culture it is a disgrace.... I can't solve their problems over the phone.... (Chenai, female, 45)

The above remarks confirm Parreñas' (2014: 426) argument that 'the urge to celebrate distance mothering notably emerges from the ideology of female domesticity, and the idea that women must nurture, retain proximity with, and be involved in the day-to-day lives of their children.' Such gendered cultural expectations proved an impossible obligation for the separated asylum mothers in the face of many challenges.

The literature on transnational motherhood has shown, for example, that gifts and other luxuries that mothers are able to send to their children during the period of separation from them serve as both 'the currency of transnational love' (Horton, 2009: 38) and affirmation of their continual presence in their children's lives from a distance (Parreñas, 2008). In my study, the theme of 'mothering through remittances' (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009) led many mothers into endless confessions of their powerlessness to affirm their continued existence in their children's lives from a distance, as exemplified below:

Though I live in the UK where everyone assumes there is everything ... without the right to work it is impossible for me to meet my children's expectations.... (Voni, mother, 45)

The mothers in my study had left their children under the care of different family members including spouses, grandparents, and in some cases, friends. Recent studies have raised concerns over the treatment of physical separation from one's children as a universal problem, with academics arguing for the need to situate studies of transnational families within cultural constructions of the norms that model family life (see, for example, Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Åkesson et al, 2012). As Mazzucato and Schans (2011: 706) argue:

Different cultural norms regarding the family exist in different places around the world. This means that the nuclear family cannot be assumed to be the best option for all families.

It has been shown that in places like Africa, where child fosterage is common practice, transnational family life may be the preferred option, in keeping with the traditional childrearing practices that involve extended family members (Bledsoe and Sow, 2011). While it is important to respect cultural norms, it is also necessary to take note of the changes in norms that may occur as a result of changes in the political and economic contexts, which in most cases are the principal migration drivers. Extended family members have always been relied on as an important part of family life in a Zimbabwean context (Bourdillon, 1998), yet the country's prolonged economic and political crisis, in addition to driving out migration, also seems to have generated an environment that allows for individualism and the survival of the fittest.

In their exploration of the situation of children left behind in Zimbabwe, Kufakurinani et al (2014) coined the phrase 'diaspora orphans' to capture the appalling situation of Zimbabwean children whose parents are living abroad. In this work they shed light on migrant children's vulnerability as well as the changing culture of parenting and extended family obligations as a consequence of mass exodus and the ongoing crisis. While we need to be cautious not to generalise about the impacts of separation on Zimbabwean migrant children in the sense that some families are still finding kin a useful resource (McGregor, 2008), the mothers in my study expressed great fear that in the prevailing situation, their children were often used as 'meal tickets' (Madziva and Zontini, 2012). Parents routinely reiterated how their children were being exploited by extended family members whose energies seem to have been redirected towards their immediate families.

One example is that of Rudo who left her then 10-year-old daughter under the care of her husband when she migrated to the UK in 2001. Rudo's husband subsequently

died at home. Following the death of her husband, her daughter became a shared responsibility between her mother and her sister-in-law (her late husband's sister). In the context of this caring arrangement, Rudo expressed concerns that her daughter's carers seemed not to sufficiently understand the extreme sacrifices she had to make for her to be able to remit money. She re-capped on how hard it was to earn money in the UK as an asylum-seeker, characterising her money as the 'wages of fear' (Burnett and Whyte, 2010), and was therefore upset that remitting money home was not to the direct benefit of her daughter:

As an asylum-seeker, I earn money under great pain and fear ... but the money I earn doesn't benefit my daughter. I hear that my mother favours my young brother over my daughter. In addition to being deprived of the money I send ... my daughter has never had a permanent home. If she is not at boarding school, she is either with my mother or her aunt ... if she is at my mother's her aunt complains that my mother exploits and mistreats her.... This pains me a lot.... (Rudo, female, 39)

The development in global communication technologies, it has been argued, has 'compressed time and space' (Parreñas, 2014: 425), allowing transnational migrants to remain in constant touch with their families (Madianou and Miller, 2011). Through regular communication (which is multidirectional) women are imagined to be empowered by communication technologies in the struggle to reconstitute their role as effective mothers (Madianou and Miller, 2011; Parreñas, 2014). However, access to communication technologies, as Rudo's case demonstrates, can also introduce new problems, especially where resources are scarce. As illustrated above, with easy communication such as texting (and more recently WhatsApp), close relatives often communicate suspicions of child neglect/exploitations under the guise of collective responsibility for the children, which, in turn, puts the parents in a position where they are torn apart. Parents often ask themselves "is the person who is telling me this also interested in remittance or is it that the person who is looking after the children is really neglecting them?" (Rudo). In order to get to the heart of the issue, Rudo had to sacrifice both time and money by investing in regular telephone calls and texting. She later came to be aware of the day-to-day problems affecting her daughter that at the same time made her believe that her mother could have been mistreating her daughter:

I feel it's true that my mother is not looking after her well ... I send money but my daughter doesn't get it.... She is now 19; she needs sanitary towels, pants and other things. I don't know whether... my daughter has matured or is now withdrawn, but ... she hardly say anything to me concerning the problems she faces ... by the time she tells something, the issue would have tormented her for a long time ... one time she said to me, 'Mummy don't you think it's a good idea for you to deposit money in the account that you opened for me before you left, sometimes grandma forgets to give me enough pocket money' She fears to tell me straight away that my mother does not give her money.... I always wonder what other things she doesn't say to me due to fear of reprisal.... (Rudo, female, 39)

Interviews with fathers were equally heavily characterised by expressions of failure, guilt and shame, yet male asylum-seekers' sentiments were mainly related to their inability as fathers to financially provide for the children left behind. In the context of economic migrants, remittances provide insights into the issue of power dynamics within transnational family relations whereby fathers may choose to withhold sending money to their children as a form of 'distant disciplining' (Kilkey et al, 2014). In contrast, asylum fathers communicated a genuine failure to satisfy their traditional breadwinning role that was routinely experienced as a loss of 'one's masculinity' (Rask et al, 2014). Many reported feeling worthless, both in the eyes of their children and their children's carers. Jonasi, whose son was being cared for by his ex-wife's mother, explains that:

I have not been in a position to send money because of my situation. One day when I called my son I tried to assure him that I was still there for him ... but he said 'You don't even do anything for me now; you don't buy clothes or food ... grandma told me that "perhaps your father is dead".' It is painful to know that adults can incite a child to think this way ... but in our culture a father who cannot provide for his children is equated to a dead person.... I cannot deny that my situation resembles that of a dead person.... (Jonasi, male, 39)

Asylum fathers' lived experiences, as can be seen from the above, are often not fully understood by the kin and carers at home. This reinforces the expectation of a good transnational father as one who stays engaged with the social practices of sending remittances, which underscores the father's commitment in the eyes of their children and carers (Dreby, 2006). On analysing my data, it was evident that asylum fathers' inability to satisfy their traditional provider role was often perceived as a great betrayal by those who remained at home, sometimes in ways that brought the negative impact of previous migration waves into the memories of kin. This is evident in the case of Farai, who had been separated from his son for almost 10 years, who said that "... my parents say I am like those men who went to South Africa in the 1970s and completely forgot about their children." In the context of labour migration, in the 1970s, men from Zimbabwe would go to South Africa to work in the mines. However, stories have continued to be told about men who remitted money and valuable goods to support their families, and others who went and never returned or sent any remittances, sentiments that allude to the current migration phenomenon. Farai felt helpless in the midst of the challenges that were beyond his control. Moreover, his situation also reinforces Kufakurinai et al's (2014) argument that imaginations of diaspora wealth have fostered a 'crisis of expectation' among those who have remained behind. As Farai continues:

My parents wonder why I don't be like the neighbours' sons who came here [the UK] first on their own but have long been reunited with their families ... they have also bought many properties in Zimbabwe.... (Farai, male, 37)

The literature on transnational fatherhood often portray fathers as generally reluctant with regards to maintaining regular communication with the children left behind, especially in comparison to mothers, whose relationships with their children are often

described in the language of emotional intimacy (Dreby, 2006) and self-sacrifice (Abrego, 2009). Zimbabwean fathers passively spoke about their communication patterns and routines with children. Notions of 'being split' (Mas Giralt and Bailey, 2010) were common within the fathers' narratives. However, sporadic communication with children in this instance was blamed on the asylum identity. Fathers expressed fear that maintaining regular communication with children could trigger expectations of remittances and reunification prospects, which they were not in a position to guarantee.

In addition, many described how they increasingly felt entirely helpless in the face of their children's desperate need for both financial and material assistance. Simba, a widower, said that "the last time I spoke to my two daughters they gave me a list of the things they urgently needed. One of the things on this list is a laptop which I know is vital for education purposes but which I unfortunately can't afford." For Tafara (also a widower), who had been separated from his two daughters for almost eight years, his inability to fulfil the promise of reunification had turned communication with his children into a huge burden:

... I dread phoning home – calling home has long ceased to be a joy to me.... I don't have anything to tell my children anymore, and equally they are no more interested.... Frequently I hear my young daughter's last words echoing in my ears 'Bye Dad, I know you are not coming back for us'. I don't know how she knew this would happen, but these words haunt me day and night.... My children think that I don't care.... If one day I were to see them, if ever such an opportunity is going to come my way.... I will sit down with them and explain how the system has prevented me from supporting them and being with them for all this time.... (Tafara, male, 45)

An important theme that threaded through the interviews is parents' sensitivity to children's life stages, which often triggered the sense of time passing away for their children. Most critically the participants were palpably aware of the impossibility to make up, at a later phase of the life cycle, for the needs not now met or time not now spent with their children. The absence of public recognition or acknowledgement of the losses that routinely occur in an asylum-seeking parent's life added to the participants' sense of powerlessness. This came through most strongly in my interviews with the mothers who, as they tried to describe their incapability to demonstrate their 'maternal love from a distance' (Horton, 2009), would cite other tragedies and vulnerabilities affecting children that were currently in the news, in order to contrast public reactions to the suffering of citizens and the suffering of migrants. In particular, mothers routinely referred to the case of Madeleine McCann, who disappeared while on holiday with her parents in Portugal in 2007. The huge international effort to find Madeleine and to reunite her with her parents, as well as the immense and mostly sympathetic media interest in the case, was contrasted against the situation of asylum-seeking parents whom immigration regimes treat as asylum-seekers first and parents later (if ever), and who are therefore forced to spend many years in the UK without their children or any means to support them. For example, Tendai referred to the McCann case as follows:

The day Madeleine disappeared ... it became an issue which attracted the whole world's attention.... Some offered to help her parents financially

... some helped physically ... words of hope were flying to them from all directions ... on the radio, the TV and news articles ... I cried because no one has ever thought about an asylum seeker's child. I haven't seen my children for almost eight years now ... they are vulnerable to all kinds of abuse and exploitation.... (Tendai, female, 45)

Unlike undocumented migrants (see, for example, Fresnoza-Flot, 2009), the asylum parents whose experiences are discussed in this article were legally allowed to physically remain in the UK while at the same time denied the right to work and to family life. In this legal limbo, their capacity to assert their will or even influence the most fundamental aspects of their children's experience was overwhelmingly restricted. Linked to this is participants' forced separation from spouses and the powerlessness this entails.

The disintegration of marriages and other aspects of family relationships

For most of my interviewees, home had meant relationships with spouses as well as with children. In all but one case, they had moved to the UK alone, but often, as with their children, they did not originally anticipate a lengthy separation from their spouses. As time went on, the separation became more and more difficult. Transnational studies (see, for example, Zontini, 2004) have shown that in countries such as the Philippines, where migration is encouraged as an essential economic tool, married couples can afford to live apart for as long as 20 years. The resourcefulness of migrant families has also been emphasised in relation to Salvadoran (Merla, 2015) and Eastern European families (Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck, 2012), such that in spite of a significant reversal in gender roles, that is, women assuming a breadwinning role and men undertaking caring duties, families could still remain close together from a distance. In sharp contrast, asylum parents, mainly due to the non-resourcefulness of their separation, spoke at length about their gradual loss of capacity to live up to the gender roles and cultural expectations associated with marriage, especially in regard to the performance of what qualifies one as an 'honourable' wife and/or husband in Zimbabwe. Women interviewees in particular expressed feelings of inadequacy and shame as a result of the many years of non-productive separation from spouses:

People always ask me if I still regard myself as a married woman. Often I find it hard to answer.... I am still married in the sense that my marriage is still registered, but in real terms, I have failed my husband because I am not performing my wifely roles and duties.... I left my husband with the children and he has managed to raise them single-handed. The first born is now married.... The last born was only 18 months old when I left, he is nine years now.... (Chenai, female, 45)

Although earlier research on transnational fatherhood has placed much emphasis on male migrants' ability to increase their earnings following migration (Parreñas, 2008), male asylum-seekers expressed grief over their inability to provide for their spouses. In retrospect, many fathers discussed how they could easily provide for their wives in Zimbabwe before the country's economic and political systems collapsed, and how this gave them a sense of honour and self-worth. In some cases, the breakdown of

marriages was attributed to be a direct consequence of the fathers' failure to provide for their spouses. Nyasha reported that his wife (whom he had left at home) had decided to divorce him and was now living with another man, who perhaps could provide for her:

We never had any serious marital problems which I can attribute to the breaking down of our marriage.... I definitely believe that it was because I could not provide for her since the time I came here. This made her to walk out of my life.... I feel disabled, detached and without control.... (Nyasha, male, 46)

The sense of helplessness, inadequacy and guilt was all the more terrible among interviewees whose spouses had died during the period of separation. Rudo and Tendai, whose husbands had died at home back in Zimbabwe, reflected that:

It is hard to come to terms with the truth that my husband is now dead.... I dream of him so often.... It seems I am living with him in my dreams.... I am failing to forgive myself.... (Rudo, female, 39)

In our culture ... a widow is expected to be the central attraction of her husband's funeral, with people coming to comfort her ... asking what really happened and how she feels.... In my case people were coming to comfort the kids as if I was dead.... It makes me feel unworthy.... (Tendai, female, 45)

Funerals and related cultural bereavement rituals are essentially designed to help the bereaved to be able to come to terms with the reality of their loss that subsequently helps them to work towards ongoing living. The women whose husbands died at home were not able to go back to bury them due to their asylum status. Thus, they continued to carry the dead with them and in ways that made them feel profoundly dishonoured.

Conclusion

The starting point for this article was to better understand the impact of asylum policies on parents' ability to work. To this end, I have shown that asylum-seekers are legally denied the right to work as a political strategy to distinguish between those who are genuinely seeking protection and those who are seeking employment, supposing that human needs can be easily separated, one from another. However, without the right to work, asylum parents are stripped of self-worth as they find themselves subjected to conditions of forced dependency, exclusion and increasingly criminality, when they are forced by their own circumstances to work illegally.

Second, I have looked at the consequences of asylum policies for families and relationships. It has been shown that asylum parents often spend many years struggling through the long and torturous process of asylum claims and appeals, making it almost impossible for them to provide for, visit, or get reunited with their children and spouses in the UK. However, experiences of separation were gendered. Without the right to work, asylum mothers struggled to fulfil the crucial elements of successful transnational mothering that involve providing for and maintaining emotional intimacy with

children from a distance, as is often associated with female labour migrants (Dreby, 2006). The experiences of asylum-seeking fathers also brings into question the taken-for-granted notion that migration enables men to achieve economic advancement (Parreñas, 2008). Without the right to lawfully work, fathers found it almost impossible to fulfil their traditional breadwinning responsibilities to both their children and spouses left behind. Thus focusing on asylum-seekers as a specific group of migrant parents helps us to understand why transnational family life may not always be easily or effectively mobilisable by some families in particular contexts.

Although all migrants have to struggle with ever more stringent immigration controls, the situation of asylum-seekers lends insights into the role that immigration regimes play in both protracting and complicating family separations, initially imagined as temporary, a phenomenon that has so far received remarkably little attention. Such findings are crucial to helping us move the debates on transnational families from normative notions of transnational fatherhood and motherhood to considering the impact of immigration laws in shaping individuals' experiences. I see this as an important contribution in the context of immigration policies that invariably curtail migrants' social, political and economic rights on the basis of their reasons for migration.

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