Transnational Families and Complex Gender Relations: A Case Study of Zimbabwean Migrant Women Living in the UK.

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Abstract: This chapter focuses on the complex dynamics of gender relations of black Zimbabwean migrant women resident in the UK and how they sustain and maintain family life transnationally through links with their homeland. We employ the Shona concept of *musha mukadzi*, translated 'women make the home', to examine how women's identities and decision-making are shaped by their cultures and social norms. We draw on two studies of black Zimbabwean migrant women in the UK written by the authors, to illustrate how the concept influenced the women's perception and performance of their roles as mothers, wives and daughters-in-law across transnational spaces. The first section confronts the issue of forced separation, exploring the lived experiences of migrant women who live apart from their families, subject to immigration laws that challenge their ability to effectively sustain transnational links with children, spouses and extended family members left behind. The second section turns to the situation of women living in the UK with their children and spouses, exploring the influence that extended family members (both those in the UK and those left behind) have on how they raise children, settle marital disputes and shape their positions in the family. By looking at transnational families from these two angles, we bring complexity of gender and gendered relationships to the fore within a Zimbabwean/British cultural context, demonstrating the extent to which women face multiple contradictions across transnational spaces.

4.1 Introduction

Transnational family studies, which emerged in the 1990s, have been useful in understanding the complex ways in which relationships are negotiated and sustained among individuals who live across national borders within the bounds of family life. Central

to the transnational family literature is the belief that in the age of globalisation, physical proximity is no longer necessary to sustain a sense of 'familyhood' (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002).

While there is abundant literature on the various aspects of transnational family life, one issue has been especially salient, namely migrant women who leave their children and spouses behind, and how such families are reconfigured and maintained consequently. Within the context of the feminisation of migration, women from developing countries, increasingly migrate to the developed countries as primary or lead migrants, leaving their husbands and children behind to be cared for by other family members (Horton 2009; Baldassar et al. 2014). Tracing the reconfiguration of gender relations and parenting roles, this literature has been particularly insightful in revealing the role of gender and gendered norms. Women are invariably positioned as primary caregivers, who in addition to having family breadwinning role in the country of immigration, are expected to exercise 'co-present mothering', by communicating emotional intimacy to their children from a distance (Boccagni 2017; Caarls, et al. 2018; Fresnoza-Flot 2009). Thus, as Parreñas (2014: 426) argues '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-today lives of their families'.

However, in the context of transnational mothering, some scholars (e.g. Madziva and Zontini 2012; Parreñas 2014; Brandhorst, Baldassar and Wilding 2020; Brandhorst 2020; Kilkey and Merla 2014) argue that such gendered cultural expectation can be impeded by structural factors such as poor communication, unfriendly work conditions, as well as legal constraints, particularly for asylum-seeking mothers who struggle to sustain transnational relationships and obligations due to their lack of the rights to be employed in many liberal democratic states, exemplified by the UK. In this regard, existing research has generally shown that separation between mothers and their children often results in both the children and their mothers becoming frustrated (Horton 2009).

There is a scarcity of literature on transnational families in the African region relative to Latin America, the Philippines and the US, albeit exceptions include Åkesson et al. 2012; Bledsoe and Sow 2011; Mazzucato and Schans 2011; Mazzucato et al. 2015; White et al. 2019. The available case studies usually focus on transnational families from North and West African countries. For example, Mazzucato et al. (2015) conducted a large-scale cross-

country comparative study with families from Ghana, Angola and Nigeria who had migrated to the UK leaving their children behind. They found that children had diverse experiences in how they responded to transnational family life.

Some of these studies have noted the need to situate studies of transnational families within the cultural constructs that model African family life. Existing empirical analyses are limited to cultural norms relating to childcare. For instance, it has been observed 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). Within the transnational mainstream literature, there are only a few studies (e.g. Brandhorst 2015; Cienfuegos 2017; Parrenas 2001) that explore the gender relations and cultural norms that position migrant women at the centre of extended family relationships and obligations, beyond caring for children. These studies have been insightful in showing how gender relations and power dynamics are socially constructed.

Our chapter aims to provide a historical perspective on gender norms that is instructive and in so doing, makes an important contribution to transnational family literature, that often lacks a historical perspective (for exceptions see e.g. Brandhorst 2015). As Konig and de Regt (2010) argue, the study of contemporary migration of African families to Europe must be framed within a historical perspective of the colonial relations that have shaped economic, social and cultural contexts in the realm of the family.

In this chapter, we use two case studies (Madziva and Zontini 2012, Madziva 2016 and Chikwira, 2020) focused on Zimbabwean migrant women with differing immigration statuses resident in the UK, to illustrate the dynamics of sustaining and maintaining family relationships and roles across transnational spaces. The chapter is structured as follows: We reflect on the concept of *musha mukadzi* to unpack the complexity of historically contextualized Zimbabwean gender role relationships and cultural norms. The next two sections then draw on the concept of *musha mukadzi* to show the methodological ways in which cultural norms and gender roles change and are negotiated by our participants in the diaspora context and how the women are positioned across transnational spaces as a result of the changes followed by the conclusion.

4.2 The concept of *musha mukadzi*

Western scholarship and theorisation of African families have mainly concentrated on women's subjugation to male domination, overlooking the reality that women in Zimbabwean families have considerable power and influence in certain sphere within the family. As described by Chinyowa (1998: 164) who notes how Zimbabwe's traditional Shona culture was based on a 'reciprocal sharing of power and authority between women and men'. The idiom, *musha mukadzi*'s translated meaning, 'a home is a home because of a woman' or 'a family cannot thrive without a mother' (Muwati et al. 2011: 5), embodies gendered cultural expectations that define women's identities and social roles within the family and the wider society. Problematising the concept of *musha* (home) relative to conceptualisations of home in the social sciences more generally (e.g., Mallet 2004), Muwati et al. (2011: 4) argue that *musha* embodies 'the family, the clan, the chiefdom or kingdom or an age-set system'. Thus, contrary to western notions of family restricted to the household setting, the African family is a social institution constituted by different kinship and social relationships (Oyewumi 1997; Oheneba-Sakyi and Takyi 2006), which includes the nuclear family, extended family and other kinship relationships (Leeder 2004; Chirozva, Mubaya, and Mukamuri 2014). The concept of *musha mukadzi* infers that a woman's role is not limited to her immediate family (husband and children) but is invariably accountable to all her extended family members, including in-laws.

The cultural identity and social roles of a Zimbabwean woman cannot be fully understood without reflecting on the impact of colonialism, especially within the context of the family. Historical analyses of the impact of colonialism on African cultural identities have tended to prioritise men's experiences, treating women as appendages to their various male relations (Mlambo 2014; Schmidt 1992). Yet it has been noted that before colonialism Zimbabwean women had more egalitarian relationships with men and could own land which was the factor of production, and this made a woman an important figure within the family eco-system (Chinyowa 1998). While there are debates on the extent to which women and men were equal pre-colonisation (Mlambo 2014), some scholars (e.g., Schmidt 1996; Thondhlana 2014) have insightfully remarked that colonial rule not only created a divide between the private and the public spaces for the colonised Africans but also led to the

redefinition of cultural and gendered norms and identities, which saw women's value becoming more identified with reproduction than production (Barnes 1997).

Apartheid-like pass laws became important in the construction of gender identities, as these were used to promote the rural-urban migration of men to work in industries. This promoted the notion of the male breadwinner model being equated with African culture (Barnes 1997). Concurrently, women were left to take care of children and extended family members, while pursuing rural subsistence farming without the right to land ownership. Mobile women were not required to carry passes as they were regarded as legal minors, who could not travel without male protection or access urban housing except through marriage (Mlambo 2014; Moyo and Kawewe 2002). Women who moved independently were stereotypically referred to as p*fambi* (prostitutes) and culturally stigmatised as unfit for marriage (Matshaka 2018). Often, women who were seen loitering in urban areas without 'babies on their backs' were rounded up by the police for deportation. Thus, as Barnes (1997:76) argues 'the gendered application of pass laws was an important factor contributing to new cultural understandings of the dichotomies: male/female, productive/unproductive, adult/child and significant/insignificant'.

Within religious settings, Christian missionaries and their wives created women's home craft groups, where women were taught to be good wives and mothers. The groups and activities reinforced the ideology of domesticity leading to the notion of a 'real/respectable woman' as someone 'who is heterosexual, married, bears children, and more-often-than-not, pleases her husband sexually' (Horn 2006:4). As Chitando and Mateveke (2012:44) argue 'Christianity has played a major role in promoting patriarchy and its attendant notions of women's domesticity and decency'. Consequently, public participation became predominantly for men and the private space for women. Restricted access to employment left women dependent on the men and undermined their contribution within the family. In her seminal work on the Shona women in Zimbabwe, Schmidt (1992:1-2) argues that Zimbabwean gendered relationships are complex in diverse ways resulting from 'indigenous and European structures of patriarchal control [which] reinforced and transformed one another, evolving into new structures and forms of domination.'

Marriage and motherhood are seen as the building blocks of African families, as marriage as an institution, endows respectability upon a woman; in turn married women are expected to do everything they can to maintain their marriages (Matshaka 2018). While marriage is what makes a woman respectable, motherhood is not only about reproduction, but also a way of realising one's full womanhood (Mazuru and Nyambi 2012). Indeed, motherhood endorses a married woman's acceptability in the family as a 'mother' and subsequently gives her the power to raise her children in a manner that is expected by the family and society. Meanwhile women who bear male children are often more highly regarded than those who bear female children, as they are considered carriers of family lineage (Chitando and Mateveke (2012). Here we can see a contradiction whereby women are positioned as central to the home (*musha mukadzi*) yet the girl child is constructed as a second-class citizen who is destined to be married, rendering her incapable of ensuring that the family lineage is carried forward. At the same time, the family centred values, *unhu* ('essence of dignity' within the context of *Ubuntu* philosophy) are attributed to the woman, who is often seen as the 'first teacher' and 'cultural bearer' (Mazuru and Nyambi 2012). As argued by Samanga and Matiza (2020:1) traditionally,

> The mother would be appraised by...how well behaved the children are, the quality of the cooking and the cleanliness and other things that exist in the house... the food she cooked and the children are her portfolio presented to the family for evaluation. The father was appraised by how good he was as a provider and as a backup system to discipline the children when the mother failed to get the desired behaviour.

This not only invariably puts women under pressure to be seen to be good wives, but often women endure abusive marriages and make every effort to raise well-mannered children — a pride to their family and especially the father. The roles of husband and wife are viewed as complementary. However, as Madziva, Siwale and Thondhlana (2018:18) have argued, 'in this complementarity, men could be seen as benefitting from patriarchal values that accord them public recognition of their contribution while the woman is supposed to receive her honour through her husband's honour'. Additionally, children rightfully belong to the man and if he dies, his family has the right to the deceased's children and to some extent, his widow. Thus, *musha mukadzi*, by extension, implies a woman's ability to integrate and

stabilise the immediate and extended family, with a man as the head of the household getting the recognition.

A critical look at these debates brings out two key points. First, the notion of *musha mukadzi* infers that women are recognised and respected as being pivotal to family survival and functioning (Muwati et al. 2011). Second, as a normative discourse, *musha mukadzi* enmeshes Zimbabwean gendered identities and relations deeply within cultural ideals which dictate how women ought to live and behave to be 'respectable'. In the empirical sections that follow, we engage with the notion of *musha mukadzi* as a lived experience, exploring how some of these ideas shape women's decision-making processes and practices and the extent to which ideas of *musha mukadzi* are also appropriated as a form of resistance.

4.3 Methodology

The women in both case studies were first generation black Zimbabwean migrant women, who left Zimbabwe as a result of the political and economic crisis, which started in the mid-1990s. Since then, women seeking refuge and employment in other countries has risen and Britain has been a preferred destination due to the historical colonial ties between the two countries.

The first case study draws on the narratives of three asylum-seeking women, based on the second author's interviews with 19 participants (5 men and 14 women aged 28-50) who were asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers living in the UK between 2008 and 2010. Research participants were accessed by employing snowballing techniques, using personal and professional contacts. The research deployed repeat interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the asylum parents' lived experiences of being separated from their Zimbabwe-based families, and the impact of the asylum identity on their own ability to lead transnational lives over time. Given participants' precarious situations, complex and painful lived experiences, it was considered that a conventional one-off interview would not allow enough time to develop trusting relationships with participants (see Madziva 2015).

The second case study utilises accounts from five focus groups, nine semi-structured interviews and participant observations, which were conducted by the first author with

Zimbabwean migrant women in Britain for her PhD study between 2014 and 2016. Similar to the first study, a snowball sampling method was utilised to recruit participants from Facebook groups and other social networks. The research design was informed by interpretive phenomenology to examine the women's experiences of life in Britain and its impact on their cultural identities. The women were between the ages of 25 – 65 years and had migrated to Britain through different routes.

The focus group interviews, and participant observations were conducted to contextualise the study (Letherby 2003). Semi-structured interviews were then used to enable the women to speak about their experiences from their standpoint and provide an insight into how their relationships and roles with family members were (re)negotiated within transnational spaces.

As insider researchers, we were acutely aware of the general sensitivities relating to the Zimbabwean diaspora in the UK. Establishing trust and building rapport based on shared experience was critical for research success. Both studies attuned to ethical matters. Participants were reminded, at the different stages of the research, of their rights to withdraw from the study at any point without having to give a reason and for those without legal status, it was made clear that their participation was not going to affect their immigration claims in any way.

Drafting of the chapter involved several meetings in which we exchanged insights about our data and with each one of us taking the lead at different points of the writing process. All names used are pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.

4.4 Forced separation case study

In this section, the impact of forced separation and the lived experiences of women who were separated from their children and spouses by immigration laws are explored alongside their ability to effectively sustain transnational links with children, spouses and extended family members left behind**.**

4.4.1 Decision to migrate and the role of extended family members

When talking about their migration journey, women situated their decision-making processes within the context of extended family arrangements. In some cases, deep notions of gender relations were evident as mothers had to firstly get approval from extended family members before they could take the initiative to migrate.

This was exemplified by Anesu (aged 45) who claimed that her husband was a CEO of one of the biggest corporate companies in Zimbabwe. Although Anesu was an entrepreneurial and self-employed interior designer, because of her husband's position, the family did not think she was making any financial contribution. Both her husband and his family saw Anesu's role as that of taking care of the family, including caring for her elderly mother-in-law, who lived in a rural area. As Anesu explained:

> From the time I got married my mother-in-law told me that 'you're now the mother of the home because your husband is the first born'. As my mother-in-law was getting older everyone looked up to me to ensure she was well taken care of... Sometimes my mother-in-law would send a message to say she was unwell, and my husband would expect me to leave whatever I was doing and go to the rural areas to ensure she was ok.

Within the context of Zimbabwe's controversial land reform programme (between 2000 and 2004), Anesu found herself implicated, when she visited one of her clients (a white family) and subsequently became a victim of the country's political situation. Following advice from a relative who had just been granted asylum in the UK, Anesu informed her husband of her

plans to leave for the UK to seek asylum. Her husband subsequently sought advice from his family. Unfortunately, the extended family members objected to Anesu's proposal:

> My husband's family found this at odds with the culture, as women are not expected to behave in this way. They could not understand why I wanted to go to such a faraway country, leaving my husband and children behind... my mother-in-law said... 'who would take care of the family if she goes'. ... but I decided to go ahead... I also felt I needed a break from the family... I was hoping that once I arrived in the UK, I would be able to invite my husband and children to join me in the UK... for us to start a new life... away from extended family members... I wanted to prove to the family that I also could make a financial contribution.

While circumstances in which a Zimbabwean woman's migration is contested at family levels are not unique (Cheater and Gaidzanwa 1996), this situation clearly positioned Anesu in the role of 'mother' in the context of *musha mukadzi*, a role that society expected her to play. A 'real Zimbabwean woman' is portrayed as someone without agency who should not challenge the cultural expectations imposed on her as her focus is that of serving her family. This signifies a culture that only respects a woman if she fulfils the expected role. Anesu exercised her agency in ways that challenged the extended family's expectations and the cultural norms of a respectable Zimbabwean woman.

However, not all the women had families rejecting their will to migrate. Misodzi, a 49-year-old teacher, reported that her husband was very supportive of her migration. However, such support was closely attached to the important role that Misodzi played 'as the pillar of the family':

> This was a time when teachers were undergoing a very difficult time, as the government accused us of supporting the opposition party... people were being victimised and we were paid very little... I was very entrepreneurial, selling all sorts of things....to help meet the needs of the family. Because I was the pillar of the family, we agreed with my husband that moving to the UK was going to benefit the family...

When Misodzi's extended family members were subsequently told about what the couple had planned, 'they agreed'. The phrase 'a pillar of the family' resonates well with the notion of *musha mukadzi*, acknowledging a woman's financial contribution to the family, but that role is not strictly in keeping with Zimbabwean cultural norms. This illustrates that *musha*

mukadzi can also be appropriated to challenge the culture understanding of men as the only economic contributors within families.

While single women could migrate without having to seek permission, some struggled in the process of making childcare arrangements as they had to negotiate complex patriarchal relations and expectations. Shupikai (aged 39), who was a widowed teacher, explained that:

> When my husband died, his brother wanted to inherit me, but I refused... he wanted to have my son's custody to which I also refused... Before leaving for the UK, I had to inform him about the childcare arrangements I had made with my friend... He wasn't happy at all as culturally, he was as good as father to my son. So, culturally he had the right to take him in... but I wasn't comfortable with it. Because I didn't respect his wishes...he told me he wasn't going to have anything to do with my son again...

By going against the cultural expectations associated with widows, Shupikai was taken to be a disrespectable woman, which subsequently saw her son being disowned by his late father's family.

In all cases, the women had high hopes that the United Kingdom was going to afford them the opportunity to undertake paid work, invite their children (and spouses) to join them, and start a new life in a safe, democratic environment.

4.5 Challenges imposed by the UK immigration laws and the impact on women's ability to maintain gendered roles and expectations

The women discussed in this section migrated to the UK during a period UK immigration laws were increasingly adopting a restrictive asylum approach with the stated aim of preventing abuse of the asylum system by the so-called 'bogus' claimants or economic migrants (Anderson 2013). As a result, all participants found themselves caught up in a cumbersome, inhospitable immigration system for many years. Moreover, as asylum seekers, they had no rights to undertake paid work and/or be reunited with their families in the UK (Madziva 2016). According to Dreby 2006, the ability to work and provide for children and family members left behind, within the constraints of physical separation is

what defines one as a transnational mother. However, without the rights to have paid work, the women struggled to meet this expectation. Furthermore, the prolonged periods of separation away from their families in Zimbabwe led to their gradual loss of capacity to live up to the gender roles and cultural expectations associated with motherhood, marriage and 'respectability' in line with *musha mukadzi*.

Anesu had migrated against the will of her husband's family, leaving 5 children behind, the last born, only 18 months old. Anesu lodged her asylum claim on arrival in the UK in 2001. At the time of interview in 2009 she was still in the asylum system. As noted by Bonizzoni and Belloni (this volume) family reunification rights in Europe are 'increasingly accessed and bestowed on an uneven ground', privileging those with legal/secure immigration state. Despite the length of time that Anesu had lived in the UK, she had no rights to family reunification in the UK.

Anesu explained that a few months after her arrival in the UK, her husband informed her over the phone that he was facing pressure from his family to marry another wife who would take care of the children and assume responsibility over the broader family issues including care of her mother-in-law. Anesu's husband told her: 'the home needed to have a mother'. My husband continuously reminded me. … also I had left an 18 months baby.'

While transnational mothers are often imagined to be empowered by communication technologies in the struggle to reconstitute their role as effective mothers (Madianou and Miller, 2011), mothers like Anesu found regular communication with those left behind increasingly disempowering. For example, through regular telephone communication with her children, Anesu came to know that her husband was now in a relationship with another woman, but when she asked her husband, he denied it. Anesu felt guilty that she had failed to live up to the expectations of motherhood and had let her children down:

> In our African culture a mother is meant to be there for her 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.… to have another woman look after your own children when you are still alive…People always ask me if I still regard myself as a married woman ... I find it hard to answer this question... I have failed my husband because I am not performing my wifely roles and duties ... I haven't been sleeping with my husband for almost 9 years now ... So where is my womanhood here? If I look at it this way ... I worry about my identity in society ... I cannot claim that he is cheating on me because I am the one who left him for all these years ...

For Misodzi, having arrived in the UK in 2001, it took several years for her asylum application to be determined. Without the right to work, she struggled to financially support her husband and 3 children left behind, which subsequently saw her losing the long-earned title of being the 'pillar of the family'. Meanwhile, the non-resourcefulness of Anesu's migration was taken as a betrayal by those left at home, especially her husband's family:

> Everyone at home thinks that once you arrive in the UK you can start to pick up pounds from the streets... so they could not understand why I was not able to remit money when other women were sending money...

> While Misodzi was waiting for her asylum application to be determined, her husband got involved in a serious accident which subsequently led to his death. Both Misodzi's family and her husband's family could not understand why she could not go back to care for her husband: When my husband was battling for life ... he was in intensive care ... I got the opportunity to talk to my mother over the phone ... she told me that 'you are a failure ... you have failed your husband ... you have failed to honour your marriage vows ... you have set a bad standard for your children ... by not being here to nurse your husband ... I often replay these words in my mind ... I feel guilt... It troubles me psychologically …

Misodzi's asylum claim was rejected at almost the same time as she received the news of her husband's death which forced her to quickly lodge an appeal against the Home Office's refusal decision. As part of the application, Misodzi included evidence of her husband's death in order to demonstrate that her children were now extremely vulnerable, hence there was urgent need for them to join her (as she was now the only surviving parent) in the UK. However, the response that Misodzi got from the Home Office is confirmation of a system that defines asylum seeking parents as asylum seekers *first*, and parents *second* (if ever):

> The official who attended my court hearing (as the defendant, on behalf of the Home Office) told me point-blank that 'you left your children willingly and as a consequence the Home Office has no obligation whatsoever, as far as your children are concerned'

Without the right to be reunited with their mother in the UK, the lives of Misodzi's children deteriorated significantly to resemble what has come to be known as 'diaspora orphans'

(Kufakunesi, Pasura and McGregor 2014). This development not only left Misodzi helpless but also, culturally, positioned her as an unrespectable Zimbabwean woman and reinforces the cultural understandings that 'a family cannot thrive without a mother' (Muwati et al. (2011: 5):

> Once I moved to here (the UK) the home collapsed... my children are as good as orphans... my husband has died... It makes me feel unworthy… I am a bad example in the society (Misodzi)

The cases discussed in this section reveal the interaction of immigration policies and gender-biased cultural expectations embodied in *musha mukadzi*. We now turn to our second case study.

4.6 Maintaining gender cultural norms in the family case study

In this section we focus on the experiences of Zimbabwean women who lived in the UK with their spouses and children, exploring how gender roles were being renegotiated and the influence that extended family members both in the UK and in Zimbabwe had in important family matters including settling family disputes.

4.6.1. Women's experiences in the diaspora and the challenges of negotiating gender roles

The women in the second study migrated to Britain through various routes, with some migrating as primary migrants, students and dependents of their husbands, and other family members who were already in the UK. It is interesting that these women also dwelt on the cultural scripts of the 'real respectable Zimbabwean woman', when comparing their families' expectations, both in Zimbabwe and the UK, and how they defined themselves in Britain.

Many of the women's jobs were characterised by shift work and long working hours, hence the women spent less time at home with their children and spouses. The work

demands and the need to balance work and family was a source of tension and contention in their relationships. Dadisai migrated to the UK as a dependent of her husband, in early 2000 and worked in the care sector. Her key concerns were about her family relationships and work:

> The difficulty of life in the adopted country is trying to adjust to the ways of life, balancing work and family life including our own African values. Most women have failed to cope, and this has caused marriages to break down.

McGregor's (2008) research study explored the strategies that Zimbabwean professionals in Britain deployed to reconfigure their family life. She found that Zimbabwean migrant parents differentiated their African values, identities and family structures from those of the UK. Similarly, the participants used Zimbabwean cultural values of *musha mukadzi* as their reference point to define and maintain their family relationships. Indeed, the African values that Dadisai alluded to in the quote presented earlier, are those that are connected to *musha mukadzi* in terms of the gendered cultural expectations that supersede individual pursuits within the family. Dadisai viewed marriage breakdown as a failure to maintain these African values.

Some of the tensions are captured by Tinotenda, a stay-at-home mother of five, who migrated to Britain with her husband, in the late 1990s for a better life. At the time of migration, they only had one child and subsequently had four more children in the UK. They struggled to settle in the country as initially, her husband could not secure a job in his profession. Subsequently, he retrained as a nurse after advice from a friend who had lived in Britain for a few years (Thondhlana, Madziva and McGrath 2016). Tinotenda shared her frustration of being a mother caring for five children on her own, stating that when she had her first child in Zimbabwe her family was involved in the raising of her child. Tinotenda then compares her life in Zimbabwe to her current situation in the UK:

> It took some time for me to adjust, I think. In Zimbabwe, you had house help. You didn't do everything…. We were both working nine to five and I had a maid. My hubby didn't like the maid to cook for him. So, the first thing I would do is to cook our meal, and then the domestic worker would do the washing up, but that was the only thing, and he didn't want his clothes to be washed by the maid. I did the washing myself and then she would do the laundry for the child.

Some interesting gender dynamics, were in evidenced in Tinotenda's case study. In addition to being a full-time worker, she was responsible for cooking and washing for her husband. This confirms Madziva, Siwale and Thondhlana's (2018:221) argument that:

> In Africa, men as heads of homes are traditionally seen as providers, although in most households, men get financial help from their wives especially where a woman is employed. Even where a woman is not officially employed, women often run income projects. So, in African terms, a woman's contribution to the family home is often underplayed, with the man getting all the credit and recognition.

A power hierarchy in domestic work emanates from gender norms, where the domestic worker is positioned as a direct helper to Tinotenda and not her husband, sending a clear message that Tinotenda was the one who was responsible for running the home and not the maid. Research on domestic workers in Southern Africa has shown that the relationship between the female employer and the domestic worker is more nuanced than just employment, as it is governed by power hierarchies and other gendered cultural factors (Tsikita 2015). In this case there are clearly set boundaries, where the maid's role is limited to cleaning the house and taking care of the child, with Tinotenda's husband demanding his wife cook and do his laundry, as a way of asserting his role as the head of the home.

However, when the couple migrated and settled in Britain, they struggled to balance work and family life, without the support of extended family and a domestic worker. In UK, Tinotenda's husband still expected his wife to undertake domestic work and child caring roles:

> I found that there was a big strain with our relationship because the baby wasn't sleeping, he [husband] wanted to go to work and I was home all day, because I had just given birth. He thought because I was home, …he didn't realise that I was taking the kids to school, picking them up, cleaning and other stuff all day. Zimbabwean men normally don't understand what we do at home, because they don't do domestic work, …so at that time, we didn't click, because his main focus was just, he has to provide for us, as long as the bills were paid, and we had a home and I took care of the rest.

In order, to preserve their marriage, the couple agreed that Tinotenda would stay at home and care for the children while her husband worked full-time. Tinotenda quit her job and

saw her identity becoming more bound up in family reproduction rather than production. As a strategy to cope with the demands of caring for five children, Tinotenda decided to make regular visits to Zimbabwe where she received support from the extended family. By the time she had three children, Tinotenda returned to Zimbabwe for three months or more at a time, leaving her husband behind:

> So, 3 weeks after giving birth [to her fourth child], I went back to Zimbabwe because I had no one to help me here. I took the 2 younger ones to Zimbabwe and left the older one, who was in school. I had a six -year-old, a one -year-old and a new-born, so that was hard! So, my husband stayed with the older one. We couldn't take him out of school.

The ability to visit her family in Zimbabwe attests to the transnationality of the diaspora and the role of kinship relationships in the family. Unlike the situation of the women in the first case study, Tinotenda visited Zimbabwe as often as she did because she had British citizenship and the financial means to travel. However, visiting Zimbabwe also meant that culturally, Tinotenda was expected to go and stay with her husband's family, where she would be perceived as the 'mother' not only to her own children but to the rest of the family. Tinotenda recalled how she struggled with conforming to cultural expectations associated with being a daughter-in-law:

> When we get home to Zimbabwe, I feel uncomfortable when I go to my in-laws' house, because they expect me to follow tradition, …they expect me to wake up at 5am [in order to undertake domestic work] …which is 4am London time and that's not gonna happen. When we get home, I come from a very close-knit family… so, when they see the kids, it's the joy of having them around all spoiling them…

Tinotenda visited Zimbabwe with the aim to get help and support with the children, yet on arrival in-laws would expect her to take charge of their home. To avoid this, Tinotenda spent most of her time in Zimbabwe with her own family and occasionally visited her in-laws. While this did not go well with the in-laws, she had to re-negotiate some of these gender expectations with her husband and later came to an understanding that this was the best arrangement for her, although this did not position her well within the traditional hierarchies of how a respectable daughter-in-law should behave. On a more positive note, Tinotenda felt that visiting Zimbabwe was good for her children as this helped them

preserve their cultural identities and heritage. At the same time, Tinotenda left their first-born son with her husband in the UK every time she visited Zimbabwe, which to some extent demonstrates that diaspora men are sometimes forced by their family situations to take on roles traditionally allocated to women.

More generally, among the participants, slightly older women increasingly blamed the break down in marriages in the diaspora on the women, especially the younger women, whom they said were privileging their careers and financial independence over their cultural gender roles. Patricia, a wife and mother in her late forties, who had been married for more than twenty-five years passionately notes:

> Women from Zimbabwe, when they come to England, their behaviour gets worse, …they think they have more money and abuse their independence. Just because we are now in England, you are refusing to do your wifely duties. You must clean and cook for your family, even when you come back from work, and you are tired. In Zimbabwe you did it, so why is it when you come to England, you now want your husband to cook. You will find that with time, your husband will want to help. Don't ask your husband why he is not doing house chores, because then he will refuse and will think you are challenging him.

The above extract demonstrates that African migrant women are not only under pressure from men to conform to cultural expectations, but these cultural norms and expectations are also reinforced by older women from the homeland. These results are echoed in other studies with African families. For example, Abdi's (2014) qualitative study of Somali families in Minnesota (USA) showed that employment opportunities and immigration status affected renegotiation of gender relations with older women reinforcing traditional gendered roles, particularly the role of men as breadwinners within the families. In contrast, younger women tended to be more amenable to gender equality and subversion of traditional gendered roles.

It is however important to note that in the study, not all Zimbabwean women participants struggled with renegotiating gender roles. Some claimed that their spouses treated them as equals and shared the domestic workload. However, it was clear that the women did most of the domestic work with the men helping where they could.

4.7 The role of transnational family members in settling disputes

One of the significant ways that gendered, cultural expectations are reinforced is through influences of extended family, not only in raising children but also in mediating marital disputes, notably between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships in the diaspora. A good example is that of Zanele, an accountant in her mid-thirties, who migrated as a dependent of her husband in the mid-1990s. Her narrative below illustrates the complex relation she had with her husband's family who lived in the UK:

> Because his family also lives in the UK…mother-in-law and sisters-in-law would come to my house and wreak havoc… they didn't seem to like me… sometimes my mother-in-law would ring me and shout at me. …that's the thing about African culture, it's ingrained in you that, you don't question what they do, no matter it's not right, you don't. It didn't end there …. She took it to Zimbabwe, went to my aunties [her father's sisters] …I don't know what she said, but she went there and cried, and said, I insulted her.

While conflicts and power struggles between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law frequently happen, there are certain traditional processes that extended families are expected to follow to resolve such issues. It is a taboo for a daughter-in-law to insult her mother-in-law it is taken very seriously when it happens. Often the daughter-in-law's family is expected to give the mother-in-law a cow, as a way of apology. By making the trip to Zimbabwe to complain about Zanele's transgression of the cultural boundaries of respect and honour to Zanele's aunties, Zanele's mother in-law utilised the traditional power hierarchies. Zanele felt that her mother-in-law's claims were unjustified, and instead of communicating this to the aunties, she talked to her own father directly over the phone, to gave her own version of what had transpired:

> I told my dad that my mother-in-law had called me a '*mhunza musha*' (a woman who destroys the home) and he was livid, and he was saying; you can't let somebody use a word like that.....we should be the ones to complain and get payment for their disrespect.

In contrast to *musha mukadzi* where a woman is positioned as central to family success, *mhunza musha* is an idiom which describes a woman who destroys the family she is married

into. Given the seriousness of the matter, Zanele's father had to intervene which subsequently saw the two families meeting in Zimbabwe to resolve the issue. By the time her mother-in-law returned to the UK, the matter had been resolved. Zanele and her husband agreed to create new boundaries for their family as a measure to preserve their marriage. These narratives demonstrate the complexity of navigating gender roles within the family defined by diverse power relationships within the transnational family

4.8 Conclusion

The starting point for this chapter was to engage with the concept of *musha mukadzi*, exploring the complex ways in which women are positioned within Zimbabwean gender norms and cultural contexts. To this end, we have noted two contradictory positions. On the one hand *musha mukadzi* provides the sense that women are recognised and acknowledged as being pivotal to family survival and functioning (Muwati et al. 2011). Yet, on the other hand, *musha mukadzi* reveals the complex gender roles and expectations that dictate how women ought to live and is consequently employed to make judgements about 'respectable' and 'unrespectable' Zimbabwean women.

We have moved on to look at *musha mukadzi* as a lived experience, drawing on two case studies conducted with Zimbabwean migrant women in the UK. In our first case study, we demonstrated how women's migration decision-making processes were narrated within the context of extended family arrangements. In one example, the wife's migration was contested by extended family members who saw her primary roles as that of wife and mother, in keeping with the notions of *musha mukadzi*. Yet in another example, we witnessed a woman's migration being supported by both her husband and extended family members as she was viewed as 'a pillar of the family', resonant with the ideas of *musha mukadzi*, yet challenge the cultural assumption that only men play a significant economic role in the family. Overall, in all the cited cases, women exercised their agency to migrate, regardless of whether they had family support or not.

We have gone further to explore the women's experiences in the UK where they had sought asylum. As asylum seekers, the women had no rights to paid work or family

reunification in the UK, which placed a huge limitation on their ability to lead transnational lives and support their families back in Zimbabwe.

Through our second case study, we have shown how women with legal immigration status in the UK were able to undertake paid work at par with men as well as visiting extended family members in Zimbabwe. However, the women deployed cultural scripts of the respectable/unrespectable Zimbabwean woman when discussing the challenges of balancing work and family life. We have gone further to provide two examples which demonstrate the complex ways in which women navigated their gender roles, as wives, mothers and daughters-in-law.

This chapter's contribution has been threefold. First, its theoretical underpinnings provide the framework for exploring the cultural and gendered norms, that shape understandings of Zimbabwean family life, and gendered relationships and how these are transposed across transnational spaces. The case studies presented and analysed through our analytical framework add an important dimension to the few existing studies (e.g., Brandhorst 2015; Cienfuegos 2017; Parrenas 2001), which seek to shed light on specific groups' cultural and gendered norms and how these shape women's transnational family experiences. Second, our theoretical framework has enabled the exploration of Zimbabwean cultural and gender norms from a historical perspective. The historical perspective on changing cultural gender roles and their origin, starting from pre-colonial, to colonial rules until the contemporary times, provide a valuable contribution to transnational family literature, that often lacks a historical perspective and does not sufficiently analyse cultural traditions.

Third, our first case study provides deep insight into the impact of immigration laws on the restricted agency of asylum-seeking transnational migrant women. This contributes the current scholarship on transnational families (e.g. Brandhorst, Baldassar and Wilding 2020; Brandhorst 2020; Kilkey and Merla 2014).

As some of these studies have shown, for women to successfully lead transnational lives they require the resources to help them stay engaged with the social practices that define transnational family life, including sending remittances and visiting their families. It is such practices that underscore their commitment in the eyes of children and substitute

carers. The case study revealed migrant women's constrained agency as asylum seekers, rendered them powerless to fulfill their Zimbabwean extended families' expectations for material and emotional support.

The issue of agency is often debated, with many commentators criticising asylum-seeking migrants as powerless, lacking in agency (Lee and Brotman 2011), but agency is not the same thing as autonomy. Agents' capacity to assert their will depends on the structural constraints operating on them. Indeed, as our first case study has shown the asylum-seeking women were still agents in the sense of being conscious, living, purposive actors, but their inability to support families and live up to the cultural expectations of *musha mukadzi* calls into question their respectability in the Zimbabwean cultural context.

During interviews, the women routinely reflected back on the decisions they had made, and in retrospect regretted them. Overall, they were worried that family members and society at large perceived them as autonomous agents who could or should have acted differently. Hence the women regarded themselves as unrespectable women who had contributed to the destruction of their homes, and transgress the principles of *musha mukadzi*. The combined pincer effect of British immigration laws and Zimbabwean extended families doomed them to ignominy.

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Zimbabwe, musha mukadzi, immigration, transnational families, gender norms