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Transnational Parenting and the Emergence of ‘Diaspora Orphans’ in Zimbabwe*

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Abstract

This article explores the emergence of ‘diaspora orphans’ over the course of Zimbabwe’s crisis. The debates over this phenomenon reflect a range of real emotional and practical problems encountered by children and youth with parents abroad. But they also highlight the ambiguity of moral judgments of emigration and émigrés, and the crisis of expectation that assumptions of diaspora wealth have fostered within families and among those remaining behind. The negative stereotyping of ‘diaspora orphans’ reflects the moral discourse circulating within families, schools and society more broadly, which is revealing for the light it sheds on unfolding debates over changing parenting, gender, and extended family obligations as these have been challenged by crisis and mass exodus. The article furthers understanding of transnational parenting, particularly the perspectives of those who fulfil substitute parental caring roles for children left behind, and of the moral dimensions of debates over the role of money and material goods in intimate relationships of care for children. It adds a new strand to debates over African youths by focusing not on the problems created through entrap-

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ment by poverty, but on the emotional consequences of parents' spatial mobility in middle class families where material resources may be ample. The article is based on interviews with adults looking after children and youths left behind (maids, siblings, grandparents and single parents), and the reflections of teachers and 'diaspora orphans' themselves.

Keywords

diaspora orphans – transnational families – transnational parenting – left-behind children

Résumé

Cet article explore l'émergence des orphelins de la diaspora au cours de la crise qu'a traversée le Zimbabwe. Les débats qui entourent ce phénomène sont le reflet d'une gamme de problèmes émotionnels et pratiques bien réels qu'ont pu connaître les enfants et les jeunes dont les parents sont en exil. Mais ils éclairent également l'ambiguïté qui entoure les jugements moraux portés sur l'immigration et des immigrants, et les espoirs – souvent déçus – suscités dans les familles et parmi ceux qui restent par la richesse que l'on attribue à la diaspora. Les stéréotypes négatifs autour des « orphelins de la diaspora » sont le reflet des discours moralisateurs en vigueur au sein des familles, des écoles et plus largement de la société et éclairent les débats actuels sur l'évolution des modèles de parentalité, de genre, des obligations familiales qui ont été remis en cause par la crise économique et l'émigration de masse. Cet article expose les enjeux de la parentalité transnationale, en particulier les perspectives de ceux qui remplissent le rôle de substitut parental auprès des enfants restés au pays, et les dimensions morales des débats autour du rôle de l'argent et des biens matériels dans les relations intimes de l'éducation des enfants. Il ajoute une nouvelle dimension aux débats portant sur la jeunesse africaine en se concentrant non pas sur les problèmes liés à la pauvreté, mais sur les conséquences émotionnelles de la mobilité géographique au sein des familles de la classe moyenne, où les ressources matérielles ne manquent pas. Cet article repose sur des entretiens réalisés avec des adultes s'occupant d'enfants et de jeunes restés au pays (jeunes filles, frères et sœurs, grands-parents et parents seuls), les réflexions des enseignants et des orphelins de la diaspora eux-mêmes.

Mots-clés

orphelins de la diaspora – familles transnationales – parentalité transnationale – mineurs restés au pays

Introduction¹

Over the course of Zimbabwe's crisis decade, the term 'diaspora orphans' became commonplace in public debates over the circumstances and behaviour of children and youths who had one or both parents living abroad.² 'Diaspora orphans' were associated with various negative characteristics: they were labelled as delinquent and reckless with life, snobbish and profligate, disrespectful and lacking in good manners, as well as abused, emotionally deprived, and neglected. These traits were often attributed to their lack of role models and effective disciplinarians, or to being spoiled by excessive provisions.

The term 'orphan' is of course, commonplace, and usually conjures up images of poverty and vulnerability. It has gained particularly widespread use in southern Africa in relation to the plight of children who have lost parents through the combination of HIV/Aids and the multiple strains of the crisis of the last decade (see for example, Parsons 2010). But 'diaspora orphans' are different, not least because their parents are alive and often trying to care for them at a distance. Some live with one parent, so are not 'orphans' at all in the usual sense of the term. Migrants working abroad, particularly those in the West, are generally assumed to be wealthy, so the idea of the 'diaspora orphan' creates a disjuncture with mainstream ideas about orphans being poor. Neither emigration nor transnational families are new phenomena in Zimbabwe, but the term 'diaspora orphan' is peculiar to the crisis period that unfolded from the late 1990s. Understanding the meanings associated with this term is important, we argue, not only for the light they shed on the real emotional and practical problems faced by children and youths when their parents work abroad, but also for the insight they provide into moral debates over cultures of parenting and broader social change provoked through emigration in the context of Zimbabwe's politico-economic crisis, characterised by a combination of political violence, extraordinary hyperinflation and a collapse of for-

1 All names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

2 *Sunday Mail* 25 February 2012.

mal employment (McGregor 2010). As Turner (2008: 1052) points out, mobility can trigger such moral debate as it can produce 'liminality' and 'a space of indeterminacy' where social "institutions – such as the family – are put under pressure and forced to change". The idea of 'diaspora orphans' is also particularly interesting in relation to African studies debates over youths. An emerging body of scholarship on transnational families (discussed below) can help shed light on the problems and explanations offered for the difficulties that Zimbabwean parents have faced in managing care across borders. But these debates have been elaborated primarily in relation to Latin American and Filipino contexts, with relatively few studies devoted to African families and the transnationalism of the continent's middle classes (exceptions are Mazzucato et al. 2013 and Coe 2013). In African contexts, authors have suggested that the persistent strength of the extended family and the normality of contingent, fostering arrangements are reasons for caution in assuming that physical separation from parents is *per se* disruptive, as this can hinge on Western assumptions of attachments in nuclear families (Åkesson et al. 2012). At the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, recent literature on African youth has perpetuated longstanding crisis discourses over supposed social breakdown, including of traditional family forms. These discourses often hinge on entrapment by poverty: how social horizons for youths are eclipsed by the lack of opportunities for stable work, blocking routes to social adulthood, particularly male 'provider' roles, leading to violence and criminality (O'Brien 1996; Honwana and de Boeck 2005). Yet Jones (2009) has pointed out that the narrative of African youth as a threat to social order through their inability to progress to social adulthood is longstanding and ideological, with colonial precursors in the moral panic and supposed social breakdown that colonial officers associated with African urbanisation (Jones 2009; Ferguson 1999).

In practice, the purportedly fixed, stable ideological components of either 'traditional' or 'Western' marriage, household and family have never mapped neatly onto more dynamic and varied realities (Jones 2009). Moreover, for this discussion of Zimbabwe's urbanised middle classes, it is important to acknowledge the historical rise of the nuclear family ideal (as documented by West (2002:61–62) and Maxwell (2006)), and the interplay with ongoing extended family obligations. Maxwell explores the theological justification for this ideal within Zimbabwe's rapidly growing Pentecostal movement, in which "the church becomes the believer's extended family and ties with kin diminish as energies are refocused on the nuclear family" (Maxwell 2006: 201). By examining debates over 'diaspora orphans' more closely, this article can help to reveal some of this complexity and dynamism.

The study is based on interviews in urban contexts with guardians responsible for 'diaspora orphans', with teachers in schools who interacted with them daily, and with spouses, siblings and other relatives, both male and female, looking after children whose partners had emigrated. Some interviews were also conducted with children themselves.³ The 'diaspora orphans' we discuss are diverse: although some had access to the abundant material possessions conveyed through stereotypes of diaspora wealth, others did not enjoy financial benefits from parents abroad. Arguably, both were potentially vulnerable, due to a sense of abandonment that money could not fully offset. The discussion focuses on children of a range of ages, from pre-school to teenage. The families involved in the study were mostly in the high density suburbs, though the majority owned property themselves and were not in the poorest social strata. Schools included in the study catered for children in high density suburbs, with the exception of one boarding school that had a mixed predominantly middle class intake. However, this discussion of 'diaspora orphans' highlights not only the difficulties faced by middle class families managing care across borders and maintaining socio-economic status in turbulent times, but also reveals the inadequacies of 'class' as a descriptor or analytic category, as it does not capture the inequalities within families in terms of access to and distribution of wealth.

This article begins by situating the idea of 'diaspora orphans' within a body of scholarship on transnational care and children left behind, before turning to tease out more finely the content of the stereotypes linked to 'diaspora orphans' and explanations for the practical and emotional problems they face. It explores the narratives of teachers, in-situ substitute parental caregivers and diaspora orphans themselves, illustrating the diverse circumstances of young people left behind. We argue two main points. First, that the views of substitute parental caregivers and other adults in positions of authority over children left behind deserve more attention in broader literature over transnational parenting, as they shed revealing light on the moral judgments that circulate and which young people left behind have to navigate. Second, that notwithstanding longstanding traditions of mobility and the normality of episodes of separation of parents from children in many Zimbabwean families – in the context of

3 In total, 22 interviews were conducted: three members of the extended family caring for children with parents in the diaspora (usually grandparents); three fathers caring for children whose wives were in the diaspora; three wives with husbands based outside Zimbabwe; five teachers (two primary level and three secondary level) and four community leaders; five 'diaspora orphans' – one caring for a sibling, and four school-going children between 12 and 18. Interviews with children 12–18 years were conducted with the informed consent of their care takers. All names of individuals interviewed are pseudonyms.

rural/urban circulation, regional labour migration or long-distance education and boarding school – the pressures on and within families during Zimbabwe's crisis invoked by the term 'diaspora orphan' provide moral commentary on a new context and social change. Particularly, this new phrase captures the dynamics and tensions of new middle class long-distance mobilities, in which the ideals of the nuclear family are upheld and co-exist with older discourses of the value of extended kin.

Transnational Families and Long-Distance Parenting

The initial literature on transnational families stressed the strength and resilience of family through the strain of separation provoked by migration. Bryceson and Vuorela (2002: 3) define transnational families as "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".⁴ These transnational extensions to family networks have been studied most closely through the perspective and strategic intent of the emigrant, "to accomplish specific projects intended to enhance the overall well-being or status of the family in response to the changing social, economic and political conditions of a globalizing world" (Huang and Yeoh 2005: 380; for a recent review, see Carling et al. 2012).

This migrant-focused literature includes studies of long-distance parenting, which have become increasingly nuanced and differentiated, to reflect the influence of legal regimes and technological change, as well as class, gender, generation, and other sources of variation (Carling et al. 2012; Baldassar 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2001; Parreñas 2005b; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012: 346). Parreñas and others emphasise how 'mothering at a distance' (Parreñas 2001; Boccagni 2012) today is characteristically dependent on, and shaped through the possibilities and constraints of new communication technologies, to the point that Madianou and Miller (2011) refer to 'mobile phone parenting'. While care giving clearly involves a mix of financial, practical, personal and emotional or moral support (Baldassar 2007a, 2007b, 2008), for Parreñas (2005a, 2001), it is the quest to maintain intimacy that is the core of transnational family life and most challenging to maintain (Baldassar 2008; Ryan 2008). Madianou and Miller (2011: 467) examine the restructuring capac-

4 The literature on transnational families is now vast: here we focus on particularly relevant bodies of work on African families and transnational parenting and the children left behind.

ity of technology: how “mothers use the phone to ... micro-manag[e] their children’s meals, homework and disciplinary issues”. They view this performance of mothering as ‘empowering’ and as evidence of the phone’s ability to ‘reconstitute their role as effective parents’. But dependence on technology can also limit communication: Schmalzbauer (2008: 334) argues that parents’ strategy of ‘choosing what and who to tell about the reality of their lives’, intended as a ‘means of protecting children’ is ‘intensifying misunderstandings and imbalances within Honduran transnational families’. Phone communication can also build up expectations of visits or gifts, which it may or may not be possible to meet (Wilding 2006; Baldassar 2007b: 401). In the Zimbabwean case discussed here, not all families depended on phones, especially those who moved across regional borders during the crisis period, many of whom were not able to afford the charges.

But it is the smaller body of research focused on the children left behind that is particularly relevant to the notion of ‘diaspora orphans’. This literature shows that the children of migrant parents may reap the economic benefits of their parents’ work overseas in terms of their families’ overall material resources, access to health care and “the social capital that migration confers” in the form of contacts overseas (Dreby 2007: 1051). But it also shows that children left behind “pay the emotional price of separation from parents over the long run”, with particular problems faced by adolescents (Levitt 2001; Parreñas 2005b; Dreby 2007: 1051; Biao 2007; Gardner 2012). Research in schools in Mexico’s Mixteca region shows that youths left behind had high levels of depression and resentment towards parents who had left, and that “although children in migrant families may do better in school than their counterparts, those with migrant parents do worse academically than children living with both their parents, have fewer educational aspirations and are more likely to drop out of school” (Dreby 2007: 1052; see also Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012; Parreñas 2005). The sense of powerlessness and abandonment that these teenagers experience can result in a prevalence of ‘deviant or anti-social behaviour’, including “at worst, school drop-out, rebellion against adult authority, high-risk behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse, precocious sexual relationships and teen motherhood; at best, depression, anxiety, loneliness and low self-esteem, creating “generations in crisis” (Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012: 347). Dreby (2007:1063) stresses the importance of sensitivity to children’s age, and provides a more variegated picture, arguing that “children may experience power, albeit in different ways at different ages, while simultaneously being disadvantaged as dependents”. Parreñas (2005b) is also cautious not to generalise about the impacts of separation on migrant children, instead emphasising the disjuncture between strong perceptions of socially deviant behaviour and more complex, differentiated realities.

Indeed, as Suarez-Orozco et al. argue, the “seemingly universal agreement that the migrant parent-child separation is traumatic and has long-lasting effects is based on some unquestioned Western cultural biases and assumptions, particularly about the nature of ‘attachment’ and ‘parent-child bonding’ (cited by Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012: 348). Mazzucato and Schans (2011: 707) also question the inevitability of adverse psychological impacts, arguing that studies “assume a Western nuclear family model without explaining the culturally relevant notions of family that influence family relationships in the particular case under study”.

Although migrants themselves and their distant children have thus become subjects of research, there has been remarkably little attention to the co-present carer(s). Notable exceptions include Olwig’s (1999) study of the children left behind in globalised Caribbean families and Hoang et al.’s (2012) work on substitute parental carers (mostly family members), in Southeast Asia. While the idea of the ‘global care chain’ (Hochschild 2000; Lutz 2004; Westwood and Phizacklea 2000; Yeates 2004) highlighted the ‘care deficits’ in migrant care workers’ own families and places of emigration more generally, it too focused primarily on the perspective of migrant women and their attempts “to bring a better life to themselves and their families in face of prodigious external constraint” (Westwood and Phizacklea 2000: 145). Most of this work said little about how kin and others at home manage care for children left behind (Hoang et al. 2012: 733). Although existing studies make clear the importance of female relatives and grandparents in providing care during mothers’ absence, Kofman and Raghuram (2012) emphasise the diversity and dynamism of care arrangements in the global South, arguing that studies should explore not only intra-family relationships, but the interplay of households, communities, markets and states. Within the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa, the phenomenon of child-headed households is well established and children are increasingly seen as care providers rather than just care recipients (Robson, 2004). Graham et al. (2012) find it useful to think of the web of relationships in transnational families as a ‘care triangle’ – with the three nodes representing the left behind child, migrant parent(s) and co-present carer(s). As Graham et al., explain: “Each side of the triangle represents a discursive space, as well as a (continuous or transitory) material space”, and it is important to understand “the interrelatedness of the three subject groups as they negotiate the local and transnational exchanges that inform children’s experiences of parenting and care” (Graham et al. 2012: 796). Åkesson et al.’s study of biological and foster mothers of Cape Verdean children left behind casts the ‘transnational fostering triangle’ as ‘contingent’ and ‘pragmatic’: judged within the norms of flexible care arrangements for children, migrant mothers who

leave offspring behind are cast not as deviant or selfish, but as 'agile problem solvers' and 'good mothers' looking after their children's best interests (Åkesson et al. 2010). This emphasis on pragmatism is particularly relevant for the Zimbabwean case, elaborated below, which pays particular attention to the view of the substitute parental caregivers, and the agility required for surviving an episode of crisis.

Leaving Children behind in Zimbabwe

There are, of course, many reasons why parents leave their children behind when they migrate. In contexts of crisis, such as that which Zimbabwe has experienced since 2000, the force of circumstances often dictated this 'choice'. The rapid collapse in formal employment opportunities combined with political violence was such that many parents felt that they had no option but to seek better opportunities abroad for their family's and particularly their children's well-being. The scale of the departure itself contributed to restrictionist trends in the key destination countries both within the region (South Africa, Botswana as well as in Europe and particularly Britain), such that migrants frequently lacked not only the resources but also the legal rights to take their children with them (McGregor 2010). Prolonged enforced separation from children has been a major cause of distress for those caught for long periods in irregular status, or in dysfunctional asylum systems. But broad political-economic pressures interacted in complicated ways with family circumstances and personal relationships, such that, notwithstanding a widespread sense of enforced displacement, individual narratives of migration can often revolve less around political violence or economic plunge than around the quest for adventure, the desire to study, build a house or leave a bad marriage. Initially, however, the overwhelming majority of emigrants assumed that they were embarking on simply a short sojourn abroad, which also shaped decisions about their children's care.

Despite the widespread sentiment that emigration itself was enforced and the fact that financial and legal environments for moving with children were unpropitious, many migrants made positive decisions to leave their children behind. This was because many destination countries are considered not only impractically expensive for raising a child, but also unsuitable for doing so. In Britain and other Western locations, cultures of parenting, gender equality and child rights legislation are often singled out as running contrary to 'African values' and ideas about parenting that emphasise the importance of disciplining children, and cultivating respect for parental authority, construed in patriar-

chal terms (McGregor 2008). Some families preferred to leave their children behind to complete their schooling in Zimbabwe, and it is not uncommon to send children home to be disciplined: in this study, for example, one of the teachers spoke of a pupil nicknamed 'London' by his peers, who had been sent back from Britain to do his schooling in Zimbabwe because his parents thought it would stop him 'going wild'⁵ (on West African children, see Bledsoe and Sow 2011).

Indeed, as the broader literature cited above also makes clear, calculations of 'what is best for children' can be central to decisions about how to manage families. The interviewees argued repeatedly that one of the most compelling factors for single mothers who migrated was to improve the welfare of their children. With insufficient financial support from the fathers of their children these women saw mobility as the panacea to their plight as well as that of their children. Those caring for others' children or grandchildren were often sympathetic to the rationales for leaving, even if they also complained both about the behaviour of the children left behind and the inadequacy of the care arrangements and resources subsequently put in place. Mai Mapfumo, a 57 year old widow, grandmother and home-owner, is in many ways a classic example of how extended families have been relied upon to provide care and stability, in this instance for three grandchildren of sons who left for South Africa. She also sometimes accommodates the mother of two of these grandchildren, who is her son's estranged second wife. Mai Mapfumo explained the migration to South Africa of her three sons, a stepson and divorced daughter-in-law in sympathetic terms, akin to Åkesson et al.'s (2010) view of migrant mothers as pragmatic 'problem solvers', even though (as we shall see below) she was critical of her sons' failure to provide for their dependants and her own capacity to look after her grandchildren on the resources she received: "As a mother I understand the choice she made to go to South Africa and look for a job. She could not just sit back and watch her child die of hunger. She made a hard, but good decision ..."⁶ Similarly, Mai Ruth (aged 35 years), who looked after the child who her younger sister left behind was understanding of the pragmatism and contingency of her sister's decision to go, as the husband, who had gone to South Africa, had "stopped sending anything ... He always had a statement and an excuse for not having money".⁷

5 Ms. Badza, interview Harare, 31 May 2011. Mai Ruth was also taking care of another child, aged seven, from her brother also in South Africa.

6 Mai Mapfumo, interview, Chitungwiza, 27 May 2011.

7 Mai Ruth, interview, Chitungwiza, 27 May 2011.

Such sympathy towards the difficult circumstances in which migrant mothers make choices was nonetheless frequently combined with a critical view of the impact on the children themselves, and the stereotype of the ‘diaspora orphan’ circulating in Zimbabwe is largely negative (cf Parreñas 2005b). Normative moral discourse on these ‘orphans’ among the substitute parental caregivers criticises the children’s emotional and social development and points out the inadequacies of the care arrangement provided by the distant parent(s). There is a constant slippage between understanding difficult decisions about what is best for children and condemnation of the ensuing problems and of the migrants themselves. We will treat this slippage as evidence of real problems experienced by children as a result of the departure of their parent(s), but also as reflecting and contributing to critical popular commentary on emigration on the part of those at home produced partly by a ‘crisis of expectation’ produced by assumptions of diaspora wealth. Although the idea of diaspora orphans is flexible enough to capture the problems created by inadequate or non-existent remittances, abandonment and poverty, it is perhaps more commonly used to capture cases where resources were adequate or more than adequate, and children who were privileged in financial terms. As Mrs. Chinda – a nurse aide at Gweru General Hospital who had witnessed the departure of so many professional healthcare colleagues – expressed, “when parents, especially mothers, go to the diaspora, their main goal is to elevate the standard of living of their families; however, in trying to do that they end up spoiling their children”.⁸ Only when pressed, and in relation to specific children known to the speaker were people prepared to go beyond dominant negative stereotypes to reveal more differentiated circumstances and effects. Before examining in greater depth the explanations offered for the dominant stereotype, however, it is necessary first to flesh out the meanings and associations of ‘diaspora orphan’.

Indiscipline and Deviance

The negative stereotype of the diaspora orphan, revolving around indiscipline and deviant behaviour, emerged repeatedly in the interviews conducted for this study, and was also repeated in the press. This stereotype mixes critical comments on disrupted power relations within families due to absent authority figures, the distorting effects of money and the notion of superiority it could foster with critical observations of teenage children’s behaviour. Interviews with

8 Mr. and Mrs. Chinda, interview, Gweru, 25 April 2011.

teachers, extended family and members of the community responsible for children left behind painted a generally gloomy picture of the behaviour of 'diaspora orphans'. The nurse aide Mrs. Chinda and her husband (a Marketing Manager), who are both prominent community figures in their suburb, elaborated on the components of the stereotype that echo Zengraf and Chinchilla's picture of problems experienced by teenagers of absent Latin American parents (2012: 347):⁹ not taking education seriously, getting drunk, wanton expenditure on fashion clothing, lack of discipline, arrogance and promiscuous behaviour.

Mrs. Chinda: The kids with both or one parent overseas do not take their education seriously.

Mr Chinda: They start drinking alcohol and buying expensive clothes.

Mrs. Chinda: Yes they have lots of money at their disposal, and they are rude. At school if a teacher tries to discipline them they will point out that they have enough money to even pay the teacher's salary. They think they are well off because they have money, a beautiful house that is well furnished and all that money can buy.

Mr. Chinda: The girls get pregnant at a young age and boys get girls pregnant.

Mrs. Chinda: They totally lose control.

Judith, a 50 year old nurse and counsellor (who cares for two grandchildren, including one 'diaspora orphan') echoed: "children from these homes ... have no direction in their lives. Most of them do not complete their secondary school education. This is largely because they have a lot of freedom ... These children think that they are independent; they misuse money buying alcohol. If they are girls, they start seeing boys at a very early stage".¹⁰ This range of criticisms also emerges clearly through the press in Zimbabwe, and in popular music. A song by a female Zimbabwean gospel-music singer, Muchaneta Chavarika (45), entitled *Nhiyo* (meaning 'chick', which revolves around the metaphor of a mother hen protecting her chicks) emphasises how migration abroad creates disrespect for authority among children left behind, "where the kids become unruly boasting of their parents in the diaspora".¹¹ The main state-funded daily paper, *The Herald*, frequently reports on the misdoings of diaspora children,

9 Mr. and Mrs. Chinda, interview, Gweru 25 April 2011.

10 Judith, interview, Gweru, 25 April 2011.

11 Tatenda Chipungudzanye, 'Zim nurse makes it big in UK gospel circles', <http://www.hmetrozim.com/index.php/entertainment-2/268-zim-nurse-makes-it-big-in-uk-gospel-circles.html>, 9 June 2012.

showing a penchant for stories of delinquency, neglect or abuse. One such story concerned a teenager turned street kid, disowned by close relatives, whose ‘deviant character’ was blamed on the father’s departure for London and divorce of the mother left in Lower Gweru.¹²

Cases involving diaspora orphans have also reached the family courts. A solicitor practising in Harare narrated a case where a teenage boy had been left in charge of the family home by his parents and siblings who had all left the country. The boy had been “selling things from the house to support his drug addiction and had a series of warrant arrests”. Again, the absence of close family who would have monitored his behaviour and tried to influence him was upheld as a key cause of the problem.¹³

Below we tease out the explanations given for such cases in more detail, focusing on absent authority figures, the inadequacy of money as a substitute for parents’ presence and cases of outright abandonment and neglect.

Explanations – Absent Authority Figures

An important strand of explanation for the problems ‘diaspora orphans’ displayed – particularly their unruliness – was narrated as emanating from absent authority figures, particularly fathers, where children had been left with strangers and maids in paid employment, or with extended family, or siblings (often themselves still children) in charge.

These problems were generally cast as self-evident where it was maids who were responsible – “A mere maid cannot correct a child because the child will retaliate with such hurtful words”,¹⁴ Mai Mapfumo asserted. But interviewees also frequently argued that mothers left behind could not fulfil male authority roles adequately. One emphasised how children, “... especially those left behind with their mothers become wild and spoilt brats because there is no authoritative figure to instil discipline in them”.¹⁵ Tinei (aged 15), who lived with extended family echoed this sentiment, saying he missed his father’s encouragement, felt demoralised and had not put in as much effort or done as well at school as he would otherwise, and explained that the key was “... to have someone who can enforce discipline” and it was only his absent father who could play this role. A teacher, Jestina, described the case of one 16 year old teenage

12 *The Herald* 21 February 2004.

13 Dveteres, interview, 11 May 2011.

14 Mai Mapfumo, interview, Chitungwiza, 27 May 2011.

15 Mary, interview, Gweru, 25 April 2011.

pupil, whose father is in the diaspora, but who lived with his mother. The child was given money for his 'O' level exams but did not pay the fees. Instead, "... he used the money for other things ... Now he has numerous girlfriends and tells them his dad sends him money so he can afford to marry them".¹⁶ Jestina attributed the behaviour of the child to the fact that the father sent money directly to the boy rather than through the mother.

When teenage girls were put in a position of parental responsibility for younger siblings, they also described problems in asserting authority, particularly over other teenagers in the family. Susan was 19 when she was left in charge and "had to take on the role of mother" for her two younger siblings, one was a teenage boy, then supposed to be preparing for his 'O' levels, and a toddler.¹⁷ Her father had moved to South Africa, and her mother was frequently away either visiting the husband or buying commodities for resale in Zimbabwe. Susan described how her teenage brother dropped out of school without taking his 'O' levels. She recounted: "I could not tell him to do anything ... When he was in form two he would only go to school when mum was around and then in form three he stopped altogether". She elaborated:

I think my father's going away has greatly affected [him] ... because dad went away at a time when my little brother really needed a father figure. He started to experiment with drugs, alcohol, girls, you name it. I am sure that none of it would have happened had dad been around ... He lost interest in education and stopped going to school. My mother cannot force him to go for he thinks he has grown enough to do as he pleases.¹⁸

The circulation of money undermined authority in families in various ways, as children used this as a reason not to accept the authority of foster parents who depended on remittances, and because such dependence made it difficult for caregivers to exercise control, for fear of children complaining to remitters who would cut funds. Outsiders criticised the caregivers for caring more about the money than the children. Ms. Badza, a secondary school teacher, expressed this succinctly:

Indiscipline is a common problem with children whose parents are in the diaspora. If the children know that the relatives taking care of them are

16 Jestina, interview, Harare, 2 May 2011.

17 Susan, interview, 2 May 2011.

18 Ibid.

living on the children's parents' money, they will do all sorts of things and misbehave believing that their relatives have no say over their lives since they also live off their parents' remittances from the diaspora. The relatives, in turn, will let them do as they please because they want to remain in favour with the children and their parents so that they continue to receive money. These relatives do not care about what happens to the children as long as they receive money.¹⁹

Nor was the father's presence a guarantee of appropriate discipline, either because single fathers tended not to dedicate their time to care for their children, or because they were seen as emasculated by so doing.

The emphasis on absent (patriarchal) authority as an explanation for children's problems thus intersected closely with debates over what constitutes appropriate gender roles and how these are changing. Some of the men in this study described feeling emasculated and ashamed by taking on female roles, and had to rely on eldest daughters. Chitanda, whose wife joined her two sisters in the UK leaving him with the two children (aged 8 and 3) narrated: "I take care of my children without any assistance. I pay their school fees, I feed them and I clothe them. In all honesty her leaving affected me."²⁰ He felt particularly shamed about having to deal with matters relating to his growing daughters' sexuality, such as providing sanitary pads. In Chitanda's case, his wife had left secretly without his blessing or farewell and he has refused to talk to her since, such that her contact with the children has been minimal. He felt his wife's departure had made his daughters more responsible, particularly the eldest: "if you compare them with other children in their age groups you will see that their behaviour is totally different. They now know how to be responsible. My daughter (aged 13) has taken up her mother's role and now helps me with housekeeping."

Frequently fathers left behind have called on female extended family members to care for children rather than taking on new gender roles themselves, such as Jabulani, who "immediately sent for my young sister to stay with me to help with the [2 year old] child" when his wife left for New Zealand.²¹ As the years dragged on with little contact from the absent mother, Jabulani's brother's wife became the mother to the child (indeed, in Shona kinship terminology, the brother's wife is also called the child's 'mother', as there is an insistence on not

19 Ms. Badza, interview, 31 May 2011.

20 Chitanda, interview, 28 September 2011.

21 Jabulani, interview, 28 December 2012.

drawing lines between the aunt and biological mother). Jabulani went on to explain:

My child calls his aunt “mama” and takes her as his real mother and my brother’s wife also treats him like her own child ... my son barely notices the absence of his biological mum. As I speak my son and my brother’s wife are together in Durban where they are joining my brother for the holidays; all of my son’s immediate welfare is taken care of by her ... The departure of his mother took place while he was still young ... he came from a normal family, at least in his own eyes. He has someone he calls mama and someone to call daddy ... even a sister ... they stay together in an eight-roomed house, so it is a normal family setup.

The strands of explanation that account for the problems of ‘diaspora orphans’ through an emphasis on absent authority figures and related re-orientation of gender norms thus also highlight how, in some families, it had been possible to avoid such reorientation and/or mitigate any adverse effects on the children through extended family (cf Parreñas 2005b). These accounts have also begun to touch on the moral debates over the role of money within intimate relationships, and how the control and distribution of remittances within families was central to the problems faced by, and negative stereotype of ‘diaspora orphans’.

Money vs. Intimacy?

A teacher at a secondary boarding school for middle class children – Mr. Jones – observed that school children with parents or one parent in the diaspora received “all sorts of material things like iPods and play stations which these kids use in classes”.²² For Mr. Jones, the material things and the money these kids received were some kind of inadequate compensatory love, which did more harm than good. Ms. Badza, a teacher at the same school, also saw the material gifts from diasporan parents as detrimental, noting that “these kids hardly use these presents except at school during classes”.²³ These observations resonate with Parreñas’ criticism of Filipino transnational mothers who: “reconstitute mothering by providing acts of care from afar, but also often do

²² Jones, interview, 31 May 2011.

²³ Ms. Badza, interview, Harare, 31 May 2011.

so by overcompensating for their physical absence and performing a transnational version of what Sharon Hays (1996) identifies as “intensive mothering” (Parreñas 2008: 323).

Remittances clearly are a means through which parents try not only to maintain intimacy but also retain control and influence over the lives of their children, particularly through the threat of withdrawing funds. Interviewees recounted some instances of remittances being used to discipline in this way after children had been disobedient. Judith, for example, a nurse and counsellor, cited a case in which one girl, aged 19, was said to have abused funds from her mother, spending them with her boyfriend for purposes other than those that her mother had instructed. When the mother found out, she withdrew remittances to the girl.²⁴

The diaspora orphans who had access to foreign currency and material goods experienced moments of what we shall call financial grandeur, i.e. elevated status achieved through money. Remitters, substitute parental caregivers and teachers tended to cast this in a negative light, often seeing it as abuse of funds and trust. Ms. Badza observed, “what we see happening in these child-headed families, where parents are in the diaspora, is abuse of money. Parents send money directly to the children and because these children have too much money at their disposal they misuse it”.²⁵ Mr. Itai, headmaster of the boarding school referred to above, echoed this view:

Abuse of money by children with parents in the diaspora is a constant problem. You are out there and your child is here and you send money but there is no elder to control the funds. We have had so many cases where children have held parties and invited other students because they had too much money and did not know what to do with it and because there was no one at home to stop them. We only hear of the parties when other parents come to complain that their child came home drunk from school and when we ask where they got the alcohol we trace it back to the child-headed family with the parents who are in the diaspora.²⁶

One high school student, Jimmy (aged 15), was in a privileged position in financial terms because of remittances from his two parents working in the USA. Jimmy acknowledged this material improvement brought about by his parents

24 Judith, interview, Gweru, 25 April 2011.

25 Ms. Badza, interview, Harare, 31 May 2011.

26 Mr. Itai, interview, Harare, 31 May 2011.

being overseas: “materially, there are a lot of changes. We used to live in a tiny house, but now we live in a spacious house with numerous cars”.²⁷ He was able to show off with his possessions and the things his parents remitted, but his account also demonstrated the emotional difficulties he experienced as a result of his parents’ absence, his sense of powerlessness, as well as his own difficult behaviour in relation to the maid left to look after him. He had been left staying in a large house with “a house maid who came initially in 2006 to watch over the house” plus four security guards. But he did not have a good relationship with the maid and complained that “she would just refuse to cook saying she was tired”, which Jimmy blamed on his parents’ absence. Jimmy felt impotent over the running of the house, but also frequently disobeyed the maid. He noted with exasperation:

I do not have a say on how things should be run. She was told by my parents how things should go and I hear most of the things from her when she tells me ‘this is what your mother and father said’. I listen to some things and I just ignore some things. For instance, when the maid says I should switch off the television and go to bed when I am waiting for a movie or watching one, I ignore her.

Jimmy went on to express that the housemaid was only 23 years old and thus for him she was very young and would not do anything to him if he did not obey her instructions. Although the parents still gave orders on how things should be organised, this was inadequate in the sense that they could not fully control or monitor either him or the maid, particularly with regard to things such as the time he went to bed or came home. His sense of abandonment was conveyed clearly when, although he acknowledged that he loved the gadgets and clothes he received, he described the difficulty of having “no one to call mother and when there is a visiting day at school I see other kids with their parents and I know no one will come to see me”.

Tinei, another middle class school child (aged 14), who attended the same boarding school as Jimmy echoed these sentiments, even though he lived with extended family rather than servants. He noted his frustration and pain of not having someone cheering him when he played his favourite sport, rugby, complaining “when I play sports, I am a rugby player. I will tell my aunt and she will promise to come but she hardly ever comes and when I look around I see other kids being cheered on by their parents and there is no one to cheer me

27 Jimmy, interview, 30 May 2011.

on; it hurts".²⁸ Of course, such emotional difficulties and sense of abandonment can be exacerbated when the financial resources received from family overseas are insufficient.

Neglect

Neglect is a leitmotiv in the narratives concerning diasporan orphans, and explanations for the problems they face. Indeed this has already been mentioned in the interviews cited above. The main state-funded newspaper is fond of such stories: one told of a 60 year old grandmother, Mbuya Muringani, struggling to "look after seven orphans left by her children and one child whose parents are in the Diaspora ... without the necessary resources to do so".²⁹ *Parade*, a periodical magazine, produced a sad tale in January 2002, reporting on the abuse of a six year old pupil whose father had left for America seven years earlier.³⁰ The girl was allegedly raped by her uncle, who had offered the mother a break and hosted the child during holidays.

The interviewees in this study reflected on cases where parents left and forgot about their children or, for some reason, simply neglected the responsibilities they had back home. Judith bemoaned the existence of men 'who forget their responsibility once they arrived in the diaspora'.³¹ Mary cited a typical case in which her friend's husband left "probably 10 years ago and went to the UK and in all these years never communicated".³² No one knew if he was still alive or had died. In another case, Mai Ruth narrated her brothers' neglect of their families:³³

My brothers left the country in search of jobs because they could not get better paying jobs here ... but once they got there and settled down they forgot about their wives and the situation they had left back home. They would come maybe after six months or so and while they were there they did not send anything. When the wives wanted to go and join them they would not let them. When the wives made phone calls to the husbands

28 Tinei, interview, Harare, 31 May 2011.

29 *The Herald*, 15 March 2011.

30 *Parade*, 27 January 2002.

31 Judith, interview, Gweru, 25 April 2011. For a discussion of the uptake and usage of the term 'diaspora' in Zimbabwean popular discourse, see McGregor (2010).

32 Ibid.

33 Mai Ruth, interview, 27 May 2011.

to ask what was going on it was like starting a war. When they did send something it would be things such as sweets and other goodies for the kids, nothing that can sustain a family ...

She detailed how one of the children – her nephew – was particularly affected (aged 7), and was constantly being expelled from school for failing to pay fees:

My brother, the father of a young boy I live with, is ... so negligent. Right now the child's school fee is being paid by social welfare. From the time he started school I was the one paying and buying uniforms and stationery but there was a time when I was struggling to raise enough money and he was always being sent back home. I went to the school and explained the situation to the teacher and that is how he was placed under social welfare.³⁴

Social welfare, however, only paid the child's tuition and did not take care of any other needs of this child, and Mai Ruth's view was that the boy's poor performance resulted from neglect.

Mai Mapfumo's account of the well-being of the grandchildren she tried to care for also emphasised her son's inadequate remittances, and her own incapacity to care properly for the children through ill-health and lack of resources. With regard to the three years she stayed with the grandchildren, whose divorced parents were both in South Africa, she narrated:

I am forced to get up to prepare meals for my grandchildren even though I have difficulties in walking. I just lean against the walls for support. My granddaughter does not understand why I do that. She imitates me as I drag myself around. Right now I am trying to find a maid to help me with the granddaughter but I do not even know if her father will be sending the maid's wages ... As you can see she still wears nappies and they are expensive too. At first I used cotton washable nappies but after two days of washing I was in so much pain I decided to switch to disposable ones.³⁵

Teachers felt that material and emotional care was particularly inadequate where more distant relatives were involved as substitute parents:³⁶

34 Ibid.

35 Mai Mapfumo, interview, 27 May 2011.

36 Mr. Itai, interview, Harare, 31 May 2011.

Children left with relatives do not feel as secure as they would feel with their parents. They are easily agitated and are withdrawn. They no longer have that sense of security that they would get in a normal family setup. If they want something they have to go through an uncle, an aunt or some other relative. It is not easy. These kids do not get it easy. Imagine a child taking a report home at the end of the term having worked hard to get good results but is not acknowledged. That kills the spirit and the following term they would not bother to study. Children are motivated by good remarks, especially the younger ones. Once they realise the only thing the relatives care about is the money coming from the diaspora and not them, they think that they have nothing to work hard for.

Although, as we have seen, care within the extended family remains central to the well-being of many of the diaspora orphans discussed in the interviews, Christianised middle class/elite sensibilities to the ideal of the nuclear family clearly also shape debate over what is best for children. This is articulated both through a narrative of extended family obligations being in decline, as well as reflecting church teaching (on the promotion of the nuclear family by Zimbabwe's largest Pentecostal church, ZAOGA, see Maxwell 2006: 201). The teacher, Mr. Itai, for example, felt:

No relative can ever replace a parent, no matter how much they try to meet the needs of the child. The values that used to hold together extended families are still there but not as strong ... A relative would not take care of another relative's child like they would take care of their own and the child does not relate with the relative as they would with their parent.³⁷

Conclusion

The emergence of 'diaspora orphans' during Zimbabwe's crisis thus provide a revealing lens not only for examining the difficulties of managing care for children within transnational families, but also broader debates about emigration, cultures of parenting, patriarchal authority, gender roles and extended family. The circulation of negative stereotypes about the behaviour of 'diaspora orphans', we argued, is about more than simply a reflection of the practical and

37 Ibid.

emotional difficulties children left behind can face but also acts as moral commentary on emigration, the role of money in intimate relationships and the crisis within families produced by expectations of wealth through migration to the West. We argued that a focus on the nodes of the 'care triangle' that are often overlooked in studies of transnational parenting can be particularly revealing – i.e. the views of the foster parental caregivers and those in positions of authority over such children within schools and communities, as well as the children themselves.

While the study reinforced prior understanding about the extended family's capacity to provide flexible and contingent foster arrangements that were not evaluated as 'deviant' (Åkesson et al. 2012), it also showed the influence and circulation of idealistic views about the superiority of nuclear family parent/child relationships among the middle and aspirant middle classes in Zimbabwe (West 2002; Maxwell 2006). This appears clearly in the views of school teachers, as well as in diaspora orphans' own reflections on their sense of abandonment, lack of support and encouragement in relation to schoolwork and other achievements. Moral debates in the Zimbabwean context thus echo and overlap with Western anxieties over delinquency in adolescence and dysfunctional teenage behaviour that have emerged alongside the sentimentalisation of childhood and emphasis on protection, notwithstanding the ongoing importance of extended kin networks of support (cf. Cole and Durham 2008).

The ambivalent attitudes towards money and status, and the agency of the teenagers themselves emerge clearly through the negative connotations of 'diaspora orphans' and associations with financial grandeur, snobbery, disrespect or promiscuity. The mixture of sympathy and contempt the category encapsulates reflects the love/hate relationship with diaspora and home communities, as well as the combination of desire and resentment towards those with wealth and access to money in a period of extreme socio-economic decline. Above all it shows the need for a more nuanced, complex and differentiated discussion of African societies and African youth than that emerging through an emphasis on monolithic 'crisis' and poverty.

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