

Keeping a foot in the village: Masvingo urban women

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ABSTRACT

A complex give-and-take relationship characterizes the way female heads of household in Masvingo balanced their relationships in town and countryside. My respondents employed a double-rooted strategy that entailed the use of urban kin to gain a foothold in town and at the same time the use of rural kin to help maintain the family, children and the elderly in the village. The women's strategy was also characterized by less instrumental considerations such as supporting rural kin and maintaining ties of affect and culture. However, because survival in town is difficult, the women expected to return to the village when their working lives were over and they therefore made strategic moves that ensured easy entry into the village when the time finally arrived. In view of the choices made by the women heads of households in this study, it is imperative for policy makers to arrive at policies that take into account double-rooted strategies.

Introduction

A COMPLEX GIVE-AND-TAKE relationship between town and country characterized the form of urban-rural linkages that formed an important ongoing survival strategy of Masvingo female heads of household. This article shows that, despite the women's desire to stay and source a living in town, they kept one foot in town and the other in the village.

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This article focuses on a few case histories, showing how the women activated and used rural-urban linkages as survival and coping mechanisms. A major argument in this article is that the move to town in most cases had not led to the total rupture with rural kin and the village.

The results reported in this article are based on 14 months of fieldwork, extending from early November 1994 to the end of December 1995, in the provincial town of Masvingo in southern Zimbabwe. The study focused on how female heads of households dealt with urban poverty. The research sample was selected using the snowball sampling technique. The four cases discussed in this article are a part of a larger sample of some 50 female heads of households.

Urban-rural linkages constituted, for 72% of the research participants in the main study, an important ongoing survival strategy. Without a foot in the countryside most women would not have been in a position to stay in town. Many in the larger sample continued to utilize kin networks in ways that maximized their chances of survival in the city. At the same time there was a minority of respondents (particularly the upwardly mobile and those born in town who had no rural connections) who opted for urban permanency. This article seeks to explore the ways in which the four respondents turned to rural-urban linkages as a survival strategy that enabled them to cope with town life.

Migration case histories

THIS SECTION EXAMINES the migration history of four respondents. They all maintained some form of link with their villages.

Coping

Respondent QB¹, a 20-year-old, childless woman, the only child of her late mother, had never married and had left school at 14 due to lack of financial and material support (her father being a polygamist with two wives). QB worked as a full-time sex worker and a part-time food vendor. Her business boomed during the November–December festive season

¹ to maintain the anonymity of my respondents letter symbols are used instead of real names

and the May to August winter months. She made savings that enabled her to cope during the lean months when sex work did not pay much. QB belonged to the coping group (those able to balance the household budget but making no long term savings). She was also a one-room lodger in Mucheke's *maR*² two-roomed houses.

QB first came to settle in Masvingo in 1993. She stayed with her maternal uncle in Mucheke's Pangolin area for a period of four months. By the time she moved to Masvingo she had for two years operated covertly as a part-time sex worker at Ngundu Business Service Centre, some four kilometres from her village and approximately 100 km from Masvingo. After four months of residence with her uncle, she became a one-room lodger in the *MaRs* area in Mucheke. A friend belonging to a prostitute network that she had joined assisted her in finding and moving into this accommodation. She had been introduced to this prostitute network by a female maternal cousin. After a year she moved from this residence to where she was residing at the time of initial interviews during fieldwork. QB observed that town life was difficult and she had no intention in view of her circumstances of taking up urban residence permanently. She hoped to marry an urban man within the next ten years, failing which she would return to the countryside.

QB remitted money and material goods on a regular basis to her father in Chivi rural district. She sent her father \$300 in August 1995 but her average monthly remittances were far below this figure. She was the breadwinner for her father's family of 20. She bought her father a 50 kg bag of standard maize seed during the 1994–1995 agricultural season. QB made four short visits to her village during the year preceding the initial interview. Her main reason for visiting her village was to see her father and other members of the family.

Hanging on (I)

Respondent YM, a 34-year-old mother of four, lived in a *mapoto* – an informal conjugal relationship. Her informal partner was a polygamist

² Masvingo's former rondavels area, which had been destroyed to make way for the two-roomed housing units

with two other wives apart from her. No *lobola* (bride wealth) had been paid for her, hence her relationship to this man had never been formalized as marriage (in both the traditional and legal sense of the term). She was a highly frequent visitor to the village and hoped to retire there in old age. She had built a three-roomed rural homestead for herself and her children. She made monthly visits to the village. The main reason for these visits was to see her two children aged eleven and nine who lived with their maternal grandparents. During most of her visits to the village she bought her parents groceries like sugar and cooking oil.

Although YM was born and had grown up in Harare her parents maintained their rural connections and had retired to their home village in the Nyanyadzi area of Manicaland Province some 200 km to the east of Masvingo and approximately 350 km from Harare. YM was solely responsible for the upkeep of her children. Her informal partner, the father of her children, made very little contribution towards the children's upkeep. YM was a lodger in one-room in Rujeko high density suburb, where she lived with her other two children, a 15-year-old daughter in Form III and a 13-year-old son in Grade 7. Even though she had no land or other assets, she planned to acquire a plot at Nyanyadzi irrigation scheme in order to secure her old age. Despite YM's view that town life was better than a rural existence, she still felt that she could not cut ties with the village as she would retire there in her old age.

In 1991 she was retrenched from her clerical job in Harare but managed, through the aid of friends, to get a clerical job which she was still doing at the time of my fieldwork in 1992 in a shop in town. She had moved from Harare to Masvingo leaving her *mapoto* husband, the father of both her children, behind in Harare. YM's informal marital union dated back to the late 1980s. Although formally employed, she belonged to those in the hanging on in poverty category (those who were finding it hard to balance their household budget). She supplemented her formal income by doing part-time informal sector work. She sourced *mupedzanhamo* (second hand clothes) for resale by her mother in the village and she also sewed and knitted clothing for resale in town and countryside.

When she first came to Masvingo in April 1992 she stayed with a maternal aunt for at least two weeks, after which she secured her own accommodation as a lodger. She stayed at this residence in Rujeko until October 1994, when she moved to the two-roomed residence where she was staying in at the time of my fieldwork. Although she would have preferred at least two rooms for her own use, she could not afford to pay for more than one room. YM felt very insecure in her formal sector job; hence her desire to invest in a Nyanyadzi irrigation scheme and rural residence.

Hanging on (2)

Respondent Q had never married. She was 40 years old, single and a mother of four and had lived in Masvingo for 23 years since 1972. Her elder sister facilitated her initial arrival to Masvingo. For the first four years there she worked as a domestic worker, but had been operating as a full-time food vendor since the late 1970s. Her sister taught her the skills required to succeed as a food vendor. Q lived at her sister's residence from 1972 to 1980, then became a one-room lodger. Since then she had changed lodgings several times. Q had a split family. Her two eldest sons lived in the village with their maternal uncle and his wife and she stayed in town with two daughters. Q belonged to the hanging on in poverty category.

Q used to make frequent visits to her village, but by 1995 had cut them down to two or three trips per year, only visiting the village on important occasions such as weddings, funerals and celebrations. However, she continued to remit to the village on a bi-monthly basis. While Q had no intention of moving back to the village in the immediate future, she saw herself retiring to the village in old age. Her desire for town life did not weaken her village connections. She referred to the rural village as "home".

Although Q had no land in the village she bought seed, particularly maize, cotton and groundnuts, for her brother and sister-in-law. They in turn sent her groundnuts and maize after harvesting. She took the maize

to town hammer mills. Q had established a connection with one of the crew of a long-distance bus. She had this to say "I give them parcels to take to my people at home and in turn my sister-in-law sends me ground-nuts on a regular basis". It seemed the transport was a favour: if ever she paid for it was not in monetary terms.

Climbing out

Respondent C, a 41-year-old widow with a 13-year-old son had become, after the death of her husband, the legal owner of a four-roomed house in Masvingo's Rujeko high-density suburb. C looked after and lived with two of her late sister's sons, a nine-year-old and a 13-year-old. She first came to Masvingo in 1982 when her husband was transferred from Harare. They had bought the house using a loan from CABS Building Society and the mortgage insurance company, following the death of her husband, paid the outstanding mortgage debt in full.

C had no other assets in Masvingo or anywhere else. She belonged to the climbing out of poverty group (those who were making investments and saving for the future). Her main source of income was derived from cross-border trade. She intended to stay permanently in Masvingo. C had no contact of significance outside Masvingo town. She did not remit anything to her pensioner parents. Her father used to work for Mashaba Mine, 40 km. from Masvingo and her parents now lived in Chivi communal area. However, she made her once-yearly trip to the village only at Christmas. She did not take part in village affairs. C relied on her non-kin urban network – mostly friends – for moral and economic support. Her late husband, a Coloured, had had no rural roots. For C, with her weakly developed village ties, the rural strategy was not an option. C represented a minority of respondents who maintained weak ties with the countryside, either because they were born in town and had no rural roots or because they had made a choice to stay in town permanently and were making investments towards that goal.

Three of the four cases presented above maintained strong rural-urban linkages as a survival technique. Recognizing the importance of kin, particularly on first entry into the city, and keeping close ties with their rural areas were part of the strategies these urban women migrants

used in order to survive. For many in my sample, as the above cases confirm, keeping one foot in the village and the other in town enabled them to eke out an existence in town without necessarily abandoning the village. The prospect of eventual return to the village, especially in old age or when things went wrong in town, loomed high in the minds of my respondents. B, Q and YM were able to pursue an urban career partly because they did have a foot in the village.

Rural-urban ties

THE FOUR WOMEN discussed above maintained some form of contact with the countryside. Only respondent C had limited contacts with her village, having opted for urban permanency. Her investment in urban housing – something most people did not have – seemed critical to her decision to stay in town permanently. However, respondents QB, Q and YM retained strong country links. The three women also participated in village activities like funerals, weddings and ceremonial activities, though they invested little materially in these activities. At the same time they advanced those relationships they prized most in town, especially friendship. Most of QB's friends were of her prostitute network. Q's friends were fellow food vendors and for YM friends were drawn from her workmates and church. Respondents had met most of their friends in the course of pursuing their livelihoods. Only one had friends from her local church, outside her work-related activities. All four women had parents or children residing in the village. They all referred to their villages as "home" even though in C's case she had no intention of ever going to settle in the village.

B, Q and YM had activated kin ties at the point of entry into Masvingo. Their case confirmed Vaa's (1990) point on the relationship between gender and migration in the context of Bamako, with regard to the importance of kin networks for new town arrivals. This tallies with the point made by Winter (1991) that reciprocal kin networks are important in aiding new town migrants in finding accommodation on arrival. Logan (1981) also observes, and this is confirmed in the cases above, that once people decide to go and live in town they usually live with urban kin until they find a job or their own home. It is clear that, even under

rapidly changing economic circumstances, kin social networks have not been completely undermined. What could change may be the length of time that it is possible to stay with kin on arrival in town. B, Q and YM showed that new town arrivals were still allowed to lay claim to the urban resources of their kinsmen.

New migrants to the city stayed more often with maternal relations than paternal relations. It could be that in a patriarchal society you are more likely to compete for status, economic advantage and group leadership with your paternal relations than your maternal relations. Family jealousies and competition over access to resources are likely to generate hostilities that undermine the possibility of co-residential options with paternal relatives. This could explain why it is usually one's maternal relatives who are supportive in a non-antagonistic manner. Another possible explanation for the women's behaviour is the likelihood that women feel closer to their mothers than their fathers, hence the resulting close maternal kin links.

Interestingly, all the four respondents, irrespective of housing status, had sheltered rural kin during their overnight visits to town. Rural kin often came to town to conduct business as well as shopping for their household requirements. While these visits were of short duration, it is clear that both urban migrants and rural kin benefited from rural-urban linkages. At the same time it was these demands by rural kin on urban dwellers' scarce resources that made the upwardly mobile women like C resent and minimize rural-urban kin connections.

For my respondents B, Q and YM, migration ensured that rural connections were maintained through remittances and other forms of exchanges of goods and services. However, for C, these exchanges were weakly articulated. All my respondents showed that, despite maintaining rural connections, they were not prepared to elaborate their instrumental goals in order to support kin beyond the immediate nuclear family household. Such linkages as ties of affect and cultural ties were not accompanied by investments in terms of material resources. This could be part of the respondents' strategic attempts not to dissipate their meagre resources, despite efforts at maintaining and servicing

rural connections. Investments in rural relationships, as my respondents showed, were weak. They appeared more inclined to invest more time and energy in servicing their urban friendship networks or immediate family needs.

The frequency of remittances reflected the degree of respondents' commitment to the village. B, Q and YM remitted money or material goods to their villages. They also took part or full responsibility for parents as dependents. Although there were no data to indicate what percentage of urban income was remitted, it was clear that remittances constituted a significant proportion of these respondents' total income. The importance of remittances in the articulation of rural-urban ties is stressed by Bigstein and Kayizzi-Mugerwa (1992) who found that, in Kampala and Nairobi, remittances constituted between 9% and 20% of people's total income. However investments in the village targeted members of the immediate family and not many other rural relatives. The weak investments in rural relatives could be due to increasing poverty and people's inability to generate a surplus that could be shared.

Female migrants to town continued to maintain and nurture ties with the village. B, Q and YM made several trips to the village each year. These trips were opportunities to activate and maintain old social alliances as well as to continue and establish important economic linkages. Respondents B, Q and YM were double-rooted. This finding is contrary to Schlyter's (1990) argument that female migrants were more urban than their male counterparts. Only a minority like C had opted for urban permanency. The above cases show that urban female heads of households had just as strong rural attachments as their male counterparts, as was observed in the 1970s by researchers like Stopforth (1973) and Bourdillon (1977).

As double-rooted individuals, these women took advantage of the relative freedom of town life. As Little (1973:20) stresses, if you are an independent woman in town "you are free to do as you please. There are no homestead people watching you". Most likely, persons like YM would not have been able to enter a *mapoto* relationship with a man who had not paid *lobola* (bride wealth) if they had been residing in the

village. At least in town, money could be earned, lodgings hired and property acquired regardless of sex, seniority or marital status, though gender disadvantages still affected women's life chances.

Accessing resources

THE UTILIZATION OF rural resources allowed urban residents to improve or maintain their standard of living outside the formal economic sector of salaried jobs or informal earnings. Generally my respondents drew on the resources of their rural communities. My examples confirmed Logan's (1981:238) observation that migration was "not a one-step, final process which forever separates them from their rural homeland, but rather a continual exchange between city and country".

I found that, just as in Holm's (1992) study, my Masvingo respondents at times used their rural networks to source food for their own consumption and their households in town. For instance, B depended on maize and groundnuts sourced directly from the village. The flow of food resources from rural households to urban ones is contrary to the common assumption that rural kin act only as recipients of goods and services originating from towns. Even for those respondents who did not receive food from their villages, rural networks functioned in ways that enabled them to continue to stay in town.

The four women, even the double-rooted ones discussed in this article, had no land rights in rural areas. This is different from the situation noted by Kemper (1981) where migrants had little or no land in town but had a claim to some land in the village. Masvingo female heads of household were landless. Under customary law, in force during my fieldwork and still in force today, land rights were vested in men and women accessed land through their men folk.

My respondents felt that it was essential to maintain rural links as a form of economic security for the eventualities of old age and unemployment when urban expenses could no longer be met. B, Q and YM realized that they could not survive permanently in town. For Mutambirwa and Potts (1990:695), "perhaps the most significant evidence of migrants' perceptions of their insecurity in the urban milieu is the fact that the majority of respondents reported that they expected to

return to the rural areas at some time in the future". For B, Q and YM continued residence in town depended on maintaining rural ties and splitting the household into urban and rural components. Household splitting lowers the costs of reproduction for the urban household.

B, Q and YM were lodgers: only C was a house-owner. House-ownership status influenced household patterns for my respondents. Split-household residential affected two of my respondents. One or more children resided in the village with their maternal grandparents, grandmother or some other maternal relation. Children lived in the village as a cost-cutting measure for the urban household. It was also convenient to practice split-household residential patterns as a form of mobilizing both rural and urban resources.

Attitude toward urban permanency

MY STUDY SHOWED that, for my women respondents, their livelihood in the town was the main source of their survival. The four women regarded the urban context as offering better opportunities than the rural one for earning an income. For B, Q and YM the successful pursuit of urban opportunities depended on the strategy of split-residence and being double-rooted. While they preferred to work in town, however, this did not result in a complete break with the village. The four women maintained both real and symbolic links with their villages of origin. Even in situations where they did not visit their villages frequently, they still continued to call their village their "home".

There was a general tendency to look at urban opportunities in favourable terms. The town offered many opportunities to enterprising individuals. Yet my respondents realized that their future did not lie in the town but in activating and maintaining rural connections. But they also took advantage of their stay in town to expand mostly their urban networks and to a limited extent rural networks thereby enabling them to stay in town on an extended basis.

Masvingo research participants at times used their rural networks to provide food for their own consumption and their households in town, as noted above. At times rural-urban interactions were mutually beneficial. Through kin networks in urban areas, some villagers managed to

gain access to urban resources, like housing or an urban job. At the point of entry into the city urban kin had accommodated many of my study respondents until they found a job or their own home. However, those respondents who opted for urban permanency, like C, viewed kin negatively, seeing them as potential claimants to their resources.

Policy recommendations

IT IS MY ARGUMENT that a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy should reject the popular notions advanced by people like Gilbert and Gugler (1992) that a more rural-based and focused policy is needed to successfully tackle poverty in Africa. Policies that seek to distinguish rural from urban poverty may distort rather than clarify the issue of poverty. With 72% of respondents in my sample in the double-rooted category, policies targeted at both are more likely to be effective in reducing poverty.

An area that needs urgent attention is the need to make land and housing accessible to women heads of household both in town and rural areas. Access to urban land, for instance, is critical to a person's decision to stay in town and being able to fend for the household. There is a need, therefore, for local authorities to formulate gender-neutral policies in such areas as housing and employment and to abandon gender-selective ones that continue to assume that heads of households are male. An anti-poverty strategy means women must have independent access to both rural and urban land. Gender discrimination in terms of access to land, whether urban or rural, should be outlawed.

Although it is still worth referring to some of the recommendations made by the Rukuni Commission of Inquiry into Appropriate Agricultural Land Tenure Systems (1994) it should be borne in mind that Zimbabwe's experiences in the run-up to the June 2000 elections and immediately thereafter, characterized by a breakdown in the rule of law, together with a government-orchestrated land grab policy, have meant the sidelining of the Commission's recommendations. The Rukuni Commission simply noted that the communal tenure system in Zimbabwe needed to be maintained and strengthened and that surviving widows should retain land rights held while their husbands were alive. Inad-

vertently, the Commission appears to have argued for the strengthening of patriarchal relations regarding property rights, relations that have proved to be an obstacle to women's access to property including land and housing. The Commission's recommendations are likely to result in women's exclusion as far as access to land and housing access is concerned. The Commission's recommendations are indicative of certain official ways of thinking which if pursued, can only lead to problems as far as access to land and housing is concerned.

Conclusion

UNLIKE MOST PRE-1990 studies of the flight of women to town that stressed escape from kinship ties, the cases reviewed in this article point to a different picture. These women interacted with the village and town in ways that enhanced their survival chances. Kin provided the first port of call upon a women's arrival as a migrant in town. Although most women further entrenched themselves in town through deliberately cultivating links with friends and, to a lesser extent, with neighbours, they generally sustained double-rootedness. The women did their best to foster and invest in their rural relationships while advancing those relations they prize most in town. While I concede that this observation is not in itself new in labour migration studies, my work provides fresh evidence that, in the 1980s after independence in Zimbabwe, and even more so in the 1990s after structural adjustment policies, double-rootedness has come to be even more important in women's struggles and strategies to deal with conditions of impoverishment. Even though survival in town is difficult and requires a solid financial resource base, the village, in some instance, provides a necessary backup that enabled many in my sample to cope or hang on in town for as long as possible before eventually retiring to the village.

Through the use of case examples I have tried to show that the lived experiences of female heads of household show a deliberate effort to make adjustments to their lives in such a way as to allow them to continue to utilize the village as part of survival strategies open to them. The women had learnt how to cope and survive against odds such the very high costs of housing, low incomes, childcare demands and re-

sponsibilities towards their children, parents and kin. Very often the adjustments took the form of maintaining rural-urban ties. It would appear, however, that some, especially the economically better off, opted for urban permanency rather than double-rootedness. The double-rooted strategy pursued by my respondents involved the exchange of goods and services and reciprocal flow of resources from both rural and urban directions. Double-rootedness was a poverty-coping strategy adopted by many female heads of households in my sample.

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