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Mothering from across the Limpopo: experiences of Zimbabwean mothers living in Johannesburg

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Abstract

Migration patterns in Zimbabwe and the Southern African region have historically been male led and dominated. Recently, however, there has been an increase in the participation of women in migration in search of improved work and education opportunities. This feminisation of migration has implications on normative understandings of motherhood, family and gender roles. In particular, it may necessitate renegotiation of family roles: fathers and other relatives may be tasked to take care of and nurture the children, whilst mothers find alternative ways to mother from afar, suggesting changes in mothers' productive and reproductive roles. Against this backdrop, the study explores mothering experiences of Zimbabwean women living in Johannesburg who left their children in Zimbabwe, or who have had children in Johannesburg and then moved them to Zimbabwe. Participants' perceptions about motherhood, the challenges they face and the ways they try to overcome them are examined. Special focus is on single mothers who are employed in the low skills labour market for two reasons: first their mothering role gains particular importance in light of the absence of the father to help with parenting. Second, given the nature of their employment, they tend to face resource constraints which do not permit full-time mothering. The study draws from literature on transnational motherhood and transnational families and in-depth semi structured interviews with eleven Zimbabwean mothers living and working in Johannesburg. Constructivist grounded theory was used to analyse the data. As a mother who travelled alone to study in Johannesburg and who has a child in Zimbabwe, I am reflective of my position throughout the research process. Findings indicate that while mothers displayed agency in their conceptualisations of motherhood in the context of migration, they nonetheless viewed the ideology of intensive motherhood, which portrays mothers as selfless and fully dedicating their time to taking care of children at home, as an ideal form of mothering. This created challenges for them as they viewed themselves as not adequately exercising their mothering role and subsequently falling short of being 'good mothers' despite the important role they play as significant contributors to the household income in Zimbabwe.

Key words: Grounded theory, intensive mothering, migration, transnational motherhood, transnational families