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# **Gendering the diaspora: Zimbabwean migrants in Britain**

## **Abstract**

This article analyses the performative and lived realities of the Zimbabwean diaspora in Britain. The author explores the way in which both public and private spaces of the diaspora are important arenas in the construction and reconstruction of gendered identities. It is based on multi-sited ethnography, comprising 33 in-depth interviews and participant observation in four research sites, and draws upon concepts of diaspora and transnationalism as theoretical and analytical frameworks. The findings suggest that the challenges to patriarchal traditions in the hostland in terms of women's primary migrant status and financial autonomy, the different labour market experiences of men and women and egalitarian laws have caused tensions and conflict within diaspora households. The article examines how men use religious and social spaces, which provide for the affirmation of more traditional roles and relations, as a form of public resistance to changes happening within the domestic sphere.

**Keywords:** gender relations; marriage; transnationalism; diaspora; Zimbabweans in Britain

## **The invisibility of gender in diaspora and transnational studies**

Diaspora and transnationalism provide tools that transcend national boundaries; thus, they are deployed to explore the multi-dimensional aspects of cross-border mobility and its impact on individuals, groups, communities and societies in both the hostland and the homeland (Castles 2007). From the early 1990s, there has been a remarkable intellectual, political, economic, cultural and social interest in diasporas and transnational networks and their impact on both hostlands and homelands (Safran 1991; Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994).

Diaspora is perhaps one of the most over-theorised, yet elusive terms in both academic and social usages. A review of the term diaspora, as formulated and popularised by classical diaspora theorists (Cohen 1997; Safran 1991; Sheffer 2003), reveals the three major building blocks or core features of the term which differentiate it from similar phenomena: history of dispersal; connections with the original or imagined homeland (in term of myths, memories, desire for eventual return); and a collective identity or boundary-maintenance (Brubaker 2005).

The emergence of the concept of transnationalism has been an attempt to explore migrants' simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society (Levitt 2001). Basch, Schiller, and Blanc (1994, 7) define transnationalism 'as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.' How, then, do we differentiate between diaspora and transnationalism? Several scholars describe diasporas as a distinct form of transnational communities (Vertovec 1999). Levitt (2001, 202-203) asserts that 'transnational communities are building blocks of potential diasporas that may or may not take shape.' Whereas transmigrants are predominantly first generation migrants with strong attachment to their countries of origin, diasporas constitute the most enduring outcomes of both voluntary and involuntary migration and permanent settlement in hostlands (Sheffer 2003).

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Zimbabweans in Britain display most of the features commonly ascribed to a diaspora such as involuntary and voluntary dispersion of the population from the homeland; settlement in foreign territories and uneasy relationship with the hostland; strong attachment and connection to the original homeland; and the maintenance of distinct diasporic identities.<sup>1</sup>

Diaspora and transnationalism are both gendered. However, little attention has been paid to the gendering of diaspora and transnational studies. As Clifford (1994, 313) argues, 'diasporic experiences are always gendered [...] but there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas and diaspora cultures to hide this fact, to talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalizing male experiences.' One of the reasons why classical diaspora theorists paid less attention to the workings of gender in their studies relates to their conception of diaspora as an ideal type, a static and fixed notion upon which diasporic communities may be judged by how far they deviate from the typology. In contrast, feminist ethnographers conceptualise gender as a process, wherein gender identities, relations and ideologies are fluid and not fixed (Mahler 1999).

Gold (2001) carried out a comparative study of transnational Israeli migrants in the USA and Britain and returnees in Israel, considering how social characteristics and settlement contexts shape access to the networks through

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<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion on this see Pasura, D. 2008. *A Fractured Diaspora: Strategies and Identities among Zimbabweans in Britain*. PhD Thesis, University of Warwick.

which migrants acquire resources and information. The majority of the Israeli women had migrated as dependent spouses. As Gold (2001) argues, migration had a clearly distinct effect upon family and gender relations, with married Israeli women being much more interested in the country of origin than their partners or offspring. By contrast, Al-Ali's (2007, 57) study of Bosnian and Iraqi refugee families in Britain and the Netherlands shows that 'gender relations and family dynamics have shifted in various directions, accounting for empowerment and increased opportunities as well as impediment and loss among migrant and refugee women.'

This research represents a pioneering contribution to the literature on gender and migration in two respects. First, it attempts to 'bring gender in' to diaspora studies. Second, the gendering of the Zimbabwean diaspora offers a lens through which to analyse men and women's experience of the diaspora in both the private and public sphere. Taking gender as a process rather than state, this research explores the conflicts and contestations as men and women respond to life in Britain. To what extent, and in what ways, does migration shape gender relations and gender roles in both private and public spheres of the diaspora? How do men and women respond to new gendered identities in the diaspora? To what extent do public spaces influence the negotiation of gender relations and gender roles within and outside diaspora households?

In the next section, the article delineates Zimbabwe's historical context, which underpins the migration of its population abroad. The article then briefly examines gender relations and gender roles in contemporary Zimbabwe, based on academic literature and narrative accounts from research respondents. Drawing on the stories of respondents, the article explores the factors that contribute to the reconstruction of gender relations and gender roles within diaspora households. The next section explores the conflicts and contestations as men and women respond to life in Britain. The last section analyses how public spaces are used by men to resist changes that are happening within diaspora households.

## **Diaspora formation and migration to Britain**

Out of a country of thirteen million people, it is estimated that between three to four million Zimbabweans across all racial, ethnic, political and gendered

boundaries have embarked on phases of voluntary and involuntary migration to South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia, Namibia, Britain, Australia, the US, New Zealand and Canada. The migration of Zimbabweans to these countries can be attributed to several factors and in some cases dates back to the 1960s. However, a considerable movement of the population happened after the formation of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999 and the launch of the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme II (LRRP II).

In the face of a strong political challenge from the newly formed MDC, the Zimbabwean government launched the LRRP II, resulting in the transfer of land from large-scale commercial white farmers to black peasant farmers. The process was characterised by violence against farm owners, commercial farm workers and supporters of the opposition MDC (McGregor 2002). It is within this context of high political tension and deepening economic crisis that we have witnessed the large-scale arrival of Zimbabwean asylum seekers, refugees, economic migrants and students in Britain. Although there are no precise figures for the number of Zimbabweans in Britain, estimates suggest that there are more than 200,000 Zimbabweans in the country.<sup>2</sup>

There is an emerging literature about the migration of Zimbabweans to Britain. Drawing on data from a survey of 1000 Zimbabweans in the UK and South Africa, Bloch (2006) provides a comparative overview of the impact of structural barriers in both the UK and South Africa on the economic experiences of Zimbabwean migrants. Her work demonstrates evidence of deskilling among the majority of Zimbabwean migrants and its negative impact on remittances and other forms of transnational activities. In another empirical study, Mbiba (2005) highlights the structural barriers faced by Zimbabwe's 'global citizens' in Britain in their efforts to resolve the social, political and economic crisis in their homeland. More recently, McGregor (2007) uses the interrelated themes of inclusion and exclusion to explore the narratives of highly skilled Zimbabwean men and women working as care-givers in Britain, and how these professionals negotiate work and family. Apart from these notable studies, the study of the Zimbabwean diaspora in Britain is still in its early stages.

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<sup>2</sup> See Pasura, D. 2008. *A Fractured Diaspora: Strategies and Identities among Zimbabweans in Britain*. PhD Thesis, University of Warwick.

## Methodology

This article builds upon the author's yearlong multi-sited fieldwork among Zimbabweans in Britain that made use of ethnographic methods of in-depth interviews and participant observation to generate data. The author conducted 33 in-depth interviews<sup>3</sup> over a period of 12 months from July 2005 to June 2006. In devising the research design, the author paid particular attention to the varied geographical contexts of Zimbabwean migrants in Britain; thus, selecting four locations namely Coventry, Birmingham, London and Wigan.

First, a Zimbabwean pub in Coventry and *gochi-gochi*<sup>4</sup> in Birmingham, both public-private spaces for leisure and socialising. These are spaces where cultural identities are expressed and performed through food, language, music and a sense of belonging. Second, two diaspora congregations,<sup>5</sup> Forward in Faith Mission International (FIFMI) in Coventry and the Zimbabwean Catholic Church in Birmingham, which are public spaces for the performance of cultural and religious identities. Diaspora congregations, dominated by women, are platforms for expressing diasporic identities and enhancing social networks.

Third, the Zimbabwe Vigil's street demonstrations outside the Zimbabwean Embassy in central London. The Vigil is a space where Zimbabweans from different racial, ethnic and gendered boundaries hold public demonstrations against human rights abuses in the homeland. Lastly, people's homes in Wigan provided an opportunity to experience diasporic life in private spaces. Wigan provided access to asylum seekers and refugees, dispersed as part of the UK government's dispersal policy.

## Gender relations in Zimbabwe

The development of gender relations in Zimbabwe is complex. The status of men and women in Zimbabwe today reflects the cumulative experiences of men and women, based on a history of the pre-colonisation, colonisation and post-independence periods (Hindin 2002). It is generally argued that prior to the

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<sup>3</sup> All names in this study have been changed to protect respondents.

<sup>4</sup> '*Gochi-gochi*' is a Shona word for barbecue, an event where people gather and spend cash with friends roasting meat and drinking beer.

<sup>5</sup> Diaspora congregations are extensions of Christian churches in Zimbabwe. Church services are conducted mainly in traditional languages, that is, Shona or Ndebele.

impact of colonial capitalism, Shona women had access to a socially defined minimum amount of land from their husbands' holdings and some kind of autonomy (Pankhurst and Jacobs 1988). In colonial times, this autonomy was taken away as white settlers, complicit with some Zimbabwean men, tried to restrict women's mobility and keep them in the domestic sphere (Schmidt 1990). The 'gendered application of pass laws' (Barnes 1997, 76) regulated African women's mobility. Hence, a gendered pattern of male mobility contrasts sharply with the female immobility that characterises the colonial period. However, Schmidt (1990) documents incidents in which women resisted customary law and efforts to control their movements.

In post-independence Zimbabwe, the government made 'some efforts to change the gender norms for the public sphere through legislative actions to empower women, [but] the changes do not seem to have taken effect in the private or household sphere' (Hindin 2002, 170). The Government passed the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982, which gave women of all races full contractual rights by the age of 18. The Act was intended partially intended to acknowledge women's role in the liberation struggle and as a way to prove ZANU-PF's socialist credentials. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1985 granted women rights to part of the marital property, notwithstanding bride wealth payments, in the event of a divorce (Hindin 2002). In spite of these changes, Made and Mpofu (2005, 3) recently described the position of men and women in Zimbabwe in terms of 'unequal power relations that are still underpinned by a deeply rooted system of patriarchal beliefs, norms and structures.' Thus, the history of Zimbabwean women points to the legacy of male dominance and power as an important aspect of gender relations in households. The husband exercises control over property, money and decision making processes within the household (Hindin 2002; Pankhurst and Jacobs 1988).

Life in Britain has forced most of the respondents to re-think their social and gendered positions within society, making diaspora a site of cultural conflicts. The conflicts are manifest at many levels, but they are most visible within diaspora households and at religious and social gatherings. The following paragraphs explore the construction and reconstruction of gender relations between men and women in different social, cultural and religious contexts within the diaspora. Walby's (1990) distinction between private and public

patriarchy is useful in teasing out the different sites and arenas in which gender relations are made and re-made in the diaspora. Walby (1990, 24) defines private patriarchy as 'based upon household production as the main site of women's oppression. Public patriarchy is based principally in public sites such as employment and the state.' In this study, private patriarchy is used to analyse diaspora households, while public patriarchy is employed to analyse political, social and religious spaces in the diaspora.

### **Redefining gender relations in the diaspora**

Evidence from this study, supported by other scholars (Bloch 2006; Mbiba 2005; McGregor 2007), suggests that the majority of Zimbabweans in Britain are highly educated professionals and belong to middle and upper class families in the homeland. All of the respondents in this study come from a country with a different set of gender relations, when compared with that of the country of settlement. However, this is not to suggest that marriage practices and gender relations and roles in Zimbabwe are uncontested or uniform. The following description by Sihle illustrates the point that in Zimbabwe gender defines roles for men and women. Sihle is a divorced mother of two children:

The Zimbabwean man is an African man, he is used to be the one who brings more money in the house and the woman does all the cooking. The husband is a husband, there aren't equal partners. Once they were brought here, this equality whereby the woman comes from the job where she has been working 12 hours, probably she has been working from 8am to 8pm. By the time she arrives home, she is tired and wants to relax. In Zimbabwe we don't do that. In Zimbabwe we both go to work, we come back and the husband picks the newspaper and read it and the woman might go and cook the meal. There are no problems whatsoever but here it suddenly becomes a big, big problem.

From Sihle's quotation, it can be noted that in the homeland, although some women are in paid work, they are still expected to carry out all household duties. It is also common for middle class families to rely on maids and extended family labour to do household chores. More importantly, Sihle underlines how the re-negotiation of gender relations and roles in the diaspora has become a contested area. Tendai, an undocumented migrant who got married in the UK and has no



children, explains the parallel roles of men and women thus: 'Most women in Zimbabwe are housewives and if they work they may be running a shop [...] their role is to look after the husbands. A man is a provider; he is a breadwinner in the home.' Almost without exception, the respondents described the position of women in the family and society as inferior, as compared to the superior position of men. However, these traditional customs are being contested in the diaspora, and some have undergone transformation. What factors influence these variations and how have they contributed to the reconstruction of gender relations?

### **Women as the main breadwinners**

One of the findings of this study relates to the economic and social upward mobility of women in contrast with men. The majority of respondents in this study acknowledge that some women 'are now the main breadwinners for their families.' Steven is married and has three children. He explains:

We have situations where women are breadwinners because probably the wife has got the visa that allows her to work. If you come here and you are a teacher and a nurse, then automatically you are the breadwinner because you have the work permit. But if you come here and you were the Chief Immigration Officer no one can give you that job here, regardless of how powerful you were and how you used to boss your wife, here you have to baby-sit because nobody is going to give you a job.

Fidelis, who is married with two children, provides another example: 'You see women being the breadwinners; they are supporting their husbands and telling them they earn the money. They have changed from being housekeepers to being economic players. We have seen women owning houses now.' Therefore, some women are the principal and sole breadwinner and this has brought tensions within some households, prompting the re-evaluation of both marriage and migration by men.

Traditionally, the male partner is expected to be the breadwinner. Although some women in Zimbabwe are in paid work and make financial contribution to their households, this is done without challenging prevailing gender norms. Furthermore, the current economic and political crises in Zimbabwe might have eroded the male breadwinner role as families seek to survive in harsh economic conditions. Within the diaspora context, most men are

playing the supporting role because they do jobs that pay less or because employers shun their skills. Hence, the re-negotiation of gender relations and roles in the diaspora cannot be simply attributed to women's contribution to the family income.

There is no evidence in this study which suggests men were satisfied with the loss of their pre-migration breadwinner status and the authority it entails. On the contrary, most of the male respondents had more than one job at a time so that they could earn a salary to warrant their position as provider for the family. The majority of Zimbabwean women in the diaspora are in paid work. In most cases, these women are working as nurses, care-givers, social workers and teachers.

### **Financial autonomy**

Somewhat related to the above point of women as the main breadwinners for their families, is the evidence that most of the women in the study claim to have control over how they use their salaries. Florence points out that between herself and her husband, 'each person decides how to use his or her own money.' This is something that was inconceivable in the country of origin, where her husband would not have allowed her to own a bank account. Similarly, Bernard explains, 'here women have their own bank accounts and decide what to do with their money.' Bernard was a lawyer in Zimbabwe and he followed his wife to the UK, who is in the nursing profession. Bernard blamed institutional discrimination for his inability to practice law in the UK. Thus, men's hegemonic masculinity is threatened as more and more women assume financial control of their money.

Because of financial autonomy, some women are investing in the destination country through taking out mortgages. Sihle explains:

In some cases, it is husbands that followed and when the husband followed here, they were staying in the house bought by the woman because she owns the mortgage, and this husband also in terms of immigration he is a dependent on the woman. That caused a lot of marriages to break.

What is significant about Sihle's quotation is that in instances where women have been the primary migrants and initiated family reunion, this has increased their

decision-making within their households, to the extent of buying a house on their own in the diaspora. By contrast, concern with property in Zimbabwe is a common trend among the majority of male black Zimbabweans. Mthokhozisi regards it as 'infectious' the extent to which diasporans are 'buying houses, housing stands, *kombis*,<sup>6</sup> lorries and buses in the UK and Japan' and shipping them to Zimbabwe. The *kombis*, lorries and buses are the diasporic equivalent of cattle.

If the Zimbabwean crisis is resolved, will the right to return be claimed by both men and women? While being aware that migrants' intentions and their behaviour may diverge, when one takes into account property investments in the country of origin one can argue that the majority of men characterise their diaspora as a temporary condition, while the majority of women regard their diaspora as a permanent condition.

### **Men and the bureaucratic category 'dependent'**

Within the Zimbabwean context, the ability to get a visa or work permit contributes significantly to the distribution of power within households. Whereas in the past men dominated migration patterns to urban centres, South African goldmines, mining towns etc, women are at the centre of the recent migration to Britain (Mbiba 2005). The 'feminisation of migration', accelerated due to the growing global demand of cheap and flexible labour force, is redefining the gender status of men and women in the diaspora. As Mthokhozisi explains, 'women were the first to come and it was only late that men followed. If a man was a manager in Zim Sun<sup>7</sup> when he arrives, he has to work in the care-giving sector. During the early days, the husband will be left at home with kids while the woman goes for work, clubs and disco.' The trailing husband's dependent label creates an indelible inferiority within men. Bernard provides an example of this as he followed his wife who was working as a nurse. Hence, changing gender relations cannot be wholly attributed to the fact that more women are working outside the home; other factors such as who was the primary migrant are also

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<sup>6</sup> *Kombi* is a word used to refer to a commuter minibus in Zimbabwe.

<sup>7</sup> Zim Sun is an abbreviation for Zimbabwe Sun Hotel.

important. In cases where women were the primary migrant, it empowers them to take decisions that they would not have made in the country of origin.

Mahler examines how transnational practices and discourses affect existing social identities and power relationships in a north-eastern section of El Salvador. The study 'identifies various practices, discourses, processes influencing gender relations and argues that transnational factors are a significant but not singular agent for change' (1999, 690). Migrants' gendered identities are not just the merging of gender practices and relations from the country of origin and the country of destination as there are other non-material factors that come into play which are absent from the literature (Mahler 1999).

### **Consequences of changing gender relations**

The changing of gender relations and roles have resulted in marriage breakdowns, men losing their role as head of the family, men returning to the homeland, double-shifts for low earning husbands and for some the re-adjustment of gender relations and roles. As Boehm's (2008, 20) ethnographic field research among Mexicans in San Luis Potosi and New Mexico in the US shows, 'gendered moves are characterized by the many negotiations, controls, conflicts, alliances, strategies, and maneuvers that coincide to construct gender subjectivities in a transnational space.'

### **Marriage breakdown**

Although no divorce statistics are available in the diaspora, most respondents generally concurred that marriages were facing severe strain and some were collapsing. Hence, a constant theme during fieldwork was how many diasporic marriages are failing to adjust in the hostland, and are thus breaking up. Rudo, who is divorced, describes why Zimbabwean marriages are failing: 'men have had to knuckle down and help out. Where this has not been the case in marriages then divorces have resulted. Marriages are under so much pressure in this country.' The restructuring of gender relations and gender roles in diaspora households is by no means automatic and is often the source of significant conflict.

Extended families and kinship ties are central to the production and reproduction of gendered ideologies in the homeland. Hence, the absence of the extended family and the lack of proximate kinship ties in the diaspora, a feature previously enjoyed in the homeland, contribute to the high divorce rate. For the majority of women, the transnational context helps them to question basic assumptions about traditional gender roles and relations and consequently carve out new gendered identities without negotiating with extended families.

I have chosen the interview with Fidelis to illustrate this tension, which is acknowledged by the majority of male respondents. He explains:

The divorce rate of Zimbabweans in the UK has increased, you bring in your wife today and she starts working and earning and there is problem in the house. The balance of power is shifting [...] many people came with strong marriages but when they are in the UK it's hard to sustain them [...] Migration has destroyed the institution of marriage.

What Fidelis meant by 'strong marriages' reflects the traditional marriage of male power and female subordination. Although Fidelis talks of bringing in his wife, the reverse is equally common wherein the wife brings in the husband as a 'trailing spouse'. Evidently, most of the male respondents refer to the shift in the balance of power in households when women enter into paid work. Women's access to an independent income, which in most cases is more than that of their husband, threatens men's hegemonic masculinity centred on being the main provider and decision maker in the family.

The waning of male authority in some diaspora households raises major doubts about the future of traditional Zimbabwean marriages. As Tonderai puts it,

There is no future for a Zimbabwean marriage in the UK. Not at all. You can't stand a marriage in the UK when you are under your wife. If you shout at her she dials 999 and the police will come and tell you that 'you are committing an assault' you can be arrested for it. So you have no chance, you aren't the head of the house. You are only the head of the house when it comes to paying the bills, because the bills come in your name and that is the end of the story.

Equally, Bernard regards the conflict in marriages and the high divorce rate as due to the fact that 'women are asserting their rights, having separate budgets, or the women saying you are the men of the house so meet all the bills and the

woman enjoying [on] her money.’ As Kandiyoti (1988, 274) argues, ‘different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct “rules of the game” and call for different strategies to maximise security and optimise life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression.’ Some women in the diaspora may be playing the ‘rules of the game’ by insisting on men paying all bills since they are the ‘head of the household.’

Although not all the marriages of the respondents in Wigan<sup>8</sup> have been immune to changes, some think the hostile environment has made their marriages stronger. Rutendo explains:

In terms of those who came here, some of their marriages are even stronger than they used to be back home mainly because you are in the midst of a community which doesn’t like you, the only social life I have is that with my wife, thus we tend to bond. Just like if you go into prison when you are two you end up having a stronger bond.

The lack of familial space and network ties with other Zimbabweans creates a deep feeling of uprootedness and isolation. The experience of racism and exclusion by Zimbabweans in Wigan contributes to the maintenance of homeland cultural tradition. Thus, it can be argued that communities that do not feel accepted in places of settlement are more likely to experience a more gradual transformation of gender relations and gender roles in households.

### **Men lose their role as head of the family**

As the evidence of this research suggests, a ‘dependent’ husband lacks the authority to make major decisions within the family. Migration to Britain has catapulted some women from the confines of the domestic sphere into the public sphere of work. The point here is that while women have moved significantly into the public sphere, men have moved to a much lesser degree into the private sphere and this has shaken up men’s authority in the household.

The following experience by Tonderai illustrates the conflict that happens in households: ‘now she is going to work and she is getting £5 an hour and I am getting £5 an hour and now there is nothing I can tell her.’ In this case,

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<sup>8</sup> Zimbabweans in Wigan, just like other refugees from the Congo, have been victims of racial violence in this largely white community.

Tonderai's breadwinner role is becoming less relevant and he is no longer an acknowledged authority, hence his position within the marriage is becoming increasingly insecure. Moreover, Tonderai thinks the hostland government has usurped his powers to maintain and control his children and family by giving them state benefits, which are directly paid to his wife. 'So the government is the hero of my family. What would I say, that's the end of the story.' Hence, men's authority and power as head of the family, previously derived from having access to economic resources and through kinship relations, has been contested and to some extent weakened.

### **Men returning to the homeland**

In some situations migrant men who felt threatened, particularly when they were unable to fulfil their expected roles as breadwinners, have returned to the homeland. Farai explains some men's predicament: 'we have a number of men who have left because their wives were nurses and they were managers of progressive companies back home [...] He would rather remain as a manager there than having woman managing the house as a breadwinner.' Sihle shares a similar story.

I heard a funny case from Luton where the wife sent the husband home when they were having some problems. When he was there she told the Home Office she doesn't need him anymore and the Home Office took advantage and said, 'we are just interested in you the nurse and not your husband' so they blocked him from coming back. He is still struggling to come back because he can't cope in Zimbabwe.

Although there are few cases of this nature, in some ways they demonstrate the struggle within the traditional male-breadwinner household. Perhaps they provide an answer to the question of what happens when patriarchal traditions are preserved.

### **Double-shifts for low-earning husbands**

Most Zimbabwean men view female employment as a temporary adjustment to low male incomes, rather than a permanent realignment of family roles after

migration. Hence, the majority of Zimbabwean men work double shifts in order to compensate for the low wages they get from unskilled jobs. Tapfumane explains:

Imagine a lawyer back in Zimbabwe who was married to a nurse. The nurse today earns more than the husband and sometimes he is not yet working as a lawyer. He is going for the industrial shifts in the manufacturing industry, he is not getting as much as he would have wanted to warrant him as the head of the family. This is destructive if the wife does not consider it properly.

‘Proper consideration’ consists of the wife accepting her subordinate role in spite of being the main breadwinner. The quotation highlights how reversing the breadwinner roles re-configure power relations within the household and may even result in marriage breakdown. However, working double shifts can also be seen as a financial strategy to accumulate money as quickly as possible for those with precarious immigration status.

### **Re-adjustment of gender roles**

There is certainly evidence that migration has provided greater success for women in involving men in household chores. Patricia is a married woman, and this is what she thinks in terms of the gender difference in the UK:

The main difference is that my husband helps me to cook and does most of the shopping. I do not think if we were in Zimbabwe he would do the same for two reasons. Firstly, it is most likely that we would have a housemaid. Secondly, peer pressure would dissuade him from doing housework. This has not affected our family negatively because we both work and there is no way I can be expected to do everything without his assistance, therefore it is [...] positive for our family.

Patricia’s quotation illustrates that Zimbabwean traditional narratives construct housework as a female sphere whereby she describes the husband’s household chores as ‘help’. Moreover, her admission that the changing gender roles have not affected her family negatively implies that this is a contested terrain in many migrants’ households. Tendai provides further interesting remarks:



Men here have to adapt to a certain way of life in which they have to learn to do some things they wouldn't have done in Zimbabwe like learning how to cook, wash their own clothes, clean up the house. Whereas in Zimbabwe it's very rare to find a man doing these household chores. Here it's part of our lives; it's something that you have to do.

Tendai, like some male respondents, accepts that the economic demands of life in the UK are sufficient conditions for some sharing of gender roles. What is interesting is to see how men describe adjusting to this challenging situation of sharing household chores.

Similarly, Florence describes the experience of sharing housework with her husband as 'liberating [...] to be honest, life in the UK is better for me because my husband sometimes help[s] me with house work when there is too much work for me. He normally cleans the house with a Hoover machine and also does the ironing more than in Zimbabwe. He wouldn't do this in Zimbabwe.' Hence, the reconstruction of gender relations and roles within the family in Britain has been welcomed by women. This has seen a marked shift in domestic responsibilities in the house and movement towards a more egalitarian situation where the 'one at home' does the housework.

For trailing spouses, migration has constituted a significant rupture in their lives. As Bernard puts it, 'in Zimbabwe you knew that there is a woman who changes nappies and diapers, who cooks and when you come here it changes and this may affect [marriage].... It's almost normal that when my wife is seating I just take my son upstairs and change his nappies and diapers.' I asked Bernard how he has managed to adjust to shifting gender roles, such that he regards it as 'normal' to do roles that were socially constructed as women's roles pre-migration. Bernard remarked: 'What we just did in Zimbabwe was the marriage thing. So from its infancy, apart from the courtship, the marriage after wedding was only in UK. So it really didn't affect me in anything'. Bernard's explanation makes a distinction between marriages undertaken in Zimbabwe from those fulfilled in Britain. What is implicit in his argument is that marriages entered into Zimbabwe are likely to experience a far greater rupture than those carried out in this country. There is a qualitative difference between the two types of marriage, but what remains important is that the institution of marriage is going through radical transformation in terms of gender roles and relations.

So far, I have been exploring what happens within the private sphere; the next section analyses how public spaces are used by men to resist changes that are happening within diaspora households.

### **Public spaces as a form of men's resistance**

While there are many factors affecting the formation of Zimbabwean gender roles and relations in the diaspora, one such fundamental dimension is the role played by public spaces such as the diaspora congregations, the pub and *gochi-gochi*. To apply Walby's (1990) concept of public patriarchy, public spaces in the diaspora are a conduit for re-affirming traditional Zimbabwean narratives.

Diaspora congregations are an example of public spaces that resist changes to gender relations. Close to the Coventry pub is the Zimbabwean Pentecostal church, FIFMI. The women-dominated congregation number between 60 and 70 people. Most of the women are married and in their early thirties. Although women dominate in terms of numbers, they only have a supporting role in the running of the church service. They support their husbands when they go to the front, stand beside them when they preach and occasionally they are asked to complement what their husband has already said. During the sermon on one of my visits, the pastor quoted from Ephesians 5:22-24:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of his wife, as Christ is the head of the church, His Body, and is himself its saviour. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.

This became a major theme during my subsequent visits. Another diaspora congregation is the Catholic Shona mass in Birmingham. People come from as far as Walsall and Wolverhampton for the church service. Again the women dominate the congregation of between 70 and 90 people attending the mass. Fewer than 25 men were present at each of my visits. Some women, in their late thirties and early forties, wore *Mbuya Anna* and *Mai Maria* uniforms.<sup>9</sup> They were also selling Shona Bibles and Shona hymnbooks. On one of my visits, a woman

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<sup>9</sup> *Mbuya Anna* and *Mai Maria* are Catholic women associations preserved for married women.

in her 50s, dressed in *Mai Maria* uniform, stood up and started reminding the congregations that they should follow the rules and sanctions of the church, as they know them from Zimbabwe. Women were not allowed to receive Holy Communion without wearing a scarf on their heads. They were discouraged from wearing skin-tight clothes or mini skirts when coming to church. 'We should do things the way we were doing in Zimbabwe, as genuine Catholics,' the woman said.

Given the predominance of women at the church services, some of them are at the forefront of constructing this 'return to the traditional gender roles and relations.' As the example of the Catholic woman shows, women may reinforce these gender roles themselves not just men. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the age of the Catholic woman cited, in her 50s, explains her commitment to preserving traditional norms. Some argue that women maintain previous gender relations because they have a vested interest and stand to benefit somehow. Women may remain attached to the old male-dominant family if it gives them economic protection and allows them to sanction authority over the younger generation (Kibria 1990). However, the majority of women who attend diaspora congregations are in their 30s and early 40s, arguably with no such vested interest in retaining the patriarchal family.

The use of Zimbabwean languages creates a group boundary in that only those who can converse in Shona or Ndebele are able to participate fully. However, men are at the centre of the churches' hierarchy and organisation. These congregations act as cultural reservoirs, not only in terms of religious beliefs and language, but also in terms of gender roles and relations. It can be inferred that men, consciously or unconsciously, use diaspora churches as a means of social control over women as the churches emphasise the importance of 'doing things the way they are done back home.' After realising the empowering status women now have through paid work, financial autonomy and the fragmentation of marriages, diaspora churches extol Christian values and Zimbabwean traditional customs that put the husband as the head of the family and the wife as a subordinate.

What is it in the hostland or among Zimbabweans, which brings them together in religious worship? The conditions of racial discrimination in the labour market, everyday racism, being defined as 'other' in the hostland's media

are some of the factors that push the migrant group together. It is a desire to create some form of identity in a multi-cultural society. The speaking of the Shona language, reading of the Scripture in the Shona Bible, the preaching in Shona, the singing in Shona accompanied by the *hosho*<sup>10</sup> and the African drums gives diaspora congregations space for the creation of community cohesion that privileges pre-migration gender relations and roles. Thus, diaspora congregations provide Zimbabwean women with spiritual and emotional support and a sense of belonging necessary in a multicultural society.

The pub is a public gendered space, a distinctly male space. The owner of the pub said she has invested a lot of money in trying to make the pub family-friendly and attract Zimbabwean women but has failed. Some of the products in the pub, such as cigarettes and packets of nuts, had the label, 'proudly Zimbabwean.' Here we see a nation dislocated, simultaneously and unconsciously embarking on a project of re-inventing home. If women and men have the same interests and preferences, in terms of longing for homeland products such as music and Zimbabwean beer, then why are they underrepresented in the pub?

Most of the male respondents invoked their culture to explain why the pub had remained a male space. Tendai explains, 'I don't like to bring my wife to the pub or club for that matter. What happens when I am not around? What will prevent her from coming to the pub and have fun? I am not saying she mustn't have fun but it is just against our culture.' By referring to cultural or historically produced norms that define some public spaces as male or female, Tendai used his 'culture' to regain some form of authority which is being challenged in the household. Only occasionally, some women visit the pub in the company of male friends or husbands. Women are therefore considered as the bearers and preservers of culture because they conform to the 'cultural norm' of not going to pubs. However, men reinforce the 'cultural norm' by preventing their wives from coming to the pub. So it can be argued that both men and women are responsible for maintaining 'culture', men by dictating and women by conforming.

The *gochi-gochi* owner, Ndunduzo, occasionally asks women rather than men to cook *sadza* for him. This is significant because it is an extension of the

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<sup>10</sup> *Hosho* is a kind of a rattle.

domestic role of women in the public space. Ndunduzo's actions are predicated on beliefs that women are appropriate for certain kinds of work, such as cooking *sadza*. From this it follows that what used to be women's work in the home is now women's work at the *gochi-gochi*. However, unlike the pub, many women make frequent visits to the *gochi-gochi*. The main reason why Zimbabweans across all ethnic and gender boundaries frequent the *gochi-gochi* and the pub (mainly men) is a desire for food, music and social interaction reminiscent of the homeland. For men, *gochi-gochi* and the pub are places where their lost manhood is regained and re-imagined. These spaces give them an opportunity to position themselves and reconstruct their identity in the diaspora by discussing life beyond the diaspora.

Kibria's (1990) ethnographic study of women's social groups and networks in a Vietnamese community in the United States explored the effects of migration on gender roles and power. Kibria argues that women's community networks provided an important source of informal power for women, enabling them to cope effectively with male authority in the family. In contrast, this study has shown how diaspora congregations and social gatherings provide spaces that connect migrants with their homeland identities. It provides men with spaces to resist changing gender relations and gender roles happening within the household.

## **New forms of marriage in the diaspora**

A significant phenomenon emerging in the diaspora is the 'move in'<sup>11</sup> household, a kind of cohabitation. In this case, a man and a woman live together without going through traditional Shona or Ndebele marriage customs. For the move-in households, marriage is a contract between two individuals. Although the institution of marriage in contemporary Zimbabwe has a variety of forms in Shona and Ndebele society, one can discern some commonalities. For the Ndebele and Shona people, the concept of marriage, whether civil or Christian, is very much influenced by traditional concepts and is primarily a contract between

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<sup>11</sup> 'Move in' is an expression that has been adopted by Zimbabweans to describe a situation where partners move in and stay together without following any traditional or civil marriage procedures.

two families rather than individuals (Bourdillon 1976; Stoneman and Cliffe 1989).

Contrary to traditional marriage, in which the main purpose is the continuation and growth of the family tree, move-in households are formed for a number of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons that have nothing to do with the extended family. Margaret explains, 'what I know is that men who are here don't marry they just do move-in. They stay together for four or five years and perhaps have a kid without marrying each other.' According to Gelfand (1973, 175), 'among the Shona a childless marriage is almost always a bitter disappointment.' Yet within move-in households, the main purpose is not to have children but rather to increase the economic and social well-being of the individuals concerned.

One of the reasons why people 'move in' is to regularise their status if the other person has a legal status to stay in the country. Sihle attributes this new phenomenon to people's 'immigration status and loneliness'. Bernard, who himself followed his wife, refers to the practice as 'very rare in Zimbabwe but common in this country' but thinks some 'move-in to share expenses.'

The introduction of visas by the UK government in November 2002 hindered the reunification of some families. Forced to live apart, some people in the diaspora have resorted to move-in marriages. Fidelis explains, 'I have also seen another phenomenon in which Zimbabweans are living double lives. Some women have the economic means; one has a family here and another husband in Zimbabwe, though both husbands are not aware of this.' In this sense, the marriage in the UK becomes the move-in one, emphasising its ephemeral character. Ndunduzo describes another scenario that results in move-in households, 'others have married here even though they have wives back home. Yet other women came to work and failed to bring in their husbands, they have also got married in here.'

Gender roles and relations among 'move in' couples are more egalitarian as compared to those married according to traditional customs. Godfrey, an example of a move-in household, explains:

Both of us go to work and the differences are on what you get and what she gets and how you share your earnings. In Zimbabwe, we would put

our resources together but here each does what is good to him or her. No one controls or is head of family anymore as we are all equal.

From this quote, it is clear that patriarchal norms no longer shape men and women's understandings of their own position within the move-in households. Migration has resulted in the re-negotiation of gender relations and roles and the reordering of the institution of traditional marriage itself.

However, flexible forms of marriages are not novel phenomena in Africa. As Meekers (1993, 35) explains, 'the gradual erosion of traditional marriage customs in favor of more informal types of unions has been observed in many African societies, especially among the better educated and urban segments of the population.' What is distinctive about the move-in marriage is that it provides an example of the reconstruction of gendered identities in transnational spaces through migrants' simultaneous embeddedness in two social worlds. This suggests what Vertovec (1999, 451) called transnationalism as a mode of cultural reproduction, that is, the fluidity of social institutions and everyday practices 'often described in terms of syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation and hybridity.' By contrast, earlier forms of flexible marriages in Africa occurred within specific cultural contexts.

Investigating the negotiation of marriage among the Ghanaian Pentecostal diaspora in the Netherlands, Van Dijk (2004, 451) describes how Ghanaians entered into contract marriages with Dutch nationals, particularly persons of Surinamese origin, in order to gain entry into the country. As the study shows, the term 'marriage' evoked multiple meanings and interpretations among the respondents. Consequently, Pentecostal leaders in the diaspora created 'a status model for the arrangement of marriages within the community which, though not being *civic* in nature, has in fact helped to rebuild elements of dignity and self-esteem for those involved' (Van Dijk 2004, 456). While the Pentecostal marriage gave primacy to the nuclear family, it also provided a 'cultural critique' on the Ghanaian marriage, which emphasises the extended family, as well as to the host society's cultural practices and styles.

The diaspora has also seen a rise in the number of lone parent households, which have tended to result from two situations. Lone parent households are an epiphenomenon of the increasing divorce rate in the diaspora due to conflicts and

tensions within households. For example, Sihle, Phumuzile and Rudo are among the divorced respondents. As Farai puts it, ‘what I have also seen changing is the strong development of the single parent phenomenon, it is so rampant now.’ There are many couples living in ‘separate worlds’ when the primary migrant was denied a visa or the couple voluntarily decided to live apart. Mthokozisi is a perfect example of a lone parent household. He came to the UK in the 1960s and ever since his wife has been living in Zimbabwe.

## **Conclusion**

The article has shown how both public and private spaces of the diaspora are important arenas in the construction and reconstruction of gendered identities. The public/private divide traditionally occupied by men and women in Zimbabwe has collapsed as both men and women are in paid work. More importantly, most of the women have financial autonomy in terms of how they want to use their money. Women’s possession and control of their income becomes an agent for the transformation of gender relations. Some of the women are taking out mortgages in the country of destination while most of the male respondents envisage this as a passing phase believing they will eventually return home and rediscover hegemonic masculinity.

The theme that has run throughout this article is how migration has caused radical changes in the gender relations and roles between men and women in the diaspora. Men are forced through circumstance to do household work and care for children, a thing they would not have imagined doing in Zimbabwe. For women, migration has narrowed their housework responsibilities and opened up opportunities in the public spheres of work, but they work long hours for low pay. The absence of extended families and proximate kinship ties in the diaspora provides a space for the articulation and shedding of cultural identities.

This article has endeavoured to show that it is not only the two sets of gender relations, those from the country of origin and those of the country of destination, upon which migrants reconstruct gender relations in the diaspora, but also other factors. Some of the factors that influence the changing of gender roles and relations are egalitarian values, norms and laws in the destination country, women’s participation in the labour market, immigration status, that is, in cases



where women were the primary migrants and men had a 'dependent label', as well as women's financial autonomy over their wages. All these factors challenge patriarchal traditions regarding gender roles and relations.

This research has shown that women have gained much more in the private domain than in the public sphere, where they experience public patriarchy generally in Zimbabwean spaces. Diaspora congregations, the pub and gochi-gochi are some of the public spaces where both men and women resist changes that are happening within diaspora households. It can be argued that public spaces created in the diaspora are a form of resistance by men to regain male authority in households. The diaspora has seen new forms of marriage in terms of the egalitarian move-in household and the lone parent household; suggesting the re-evaluation of the traditional marriage contract.

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