Counting the Costs
Reflections on Personal Vulnerability in Debates on the Migration-Development Nexus

By Admire Chereni

The notion that migrants transmit wealth to their country of origin which ignores the cost to their families permeates the debates about migration-development links. However this is simply erroneous. The author argues that in transnational split families with absentee fathers, non-migrant women and children pay a high price as they disproportionately shoulder the emotional loses which are part of the high and often hidden costs of migration. Some of the costs which families endure are more tangible and straight forward in nature. For example, the negative returns and shortfalls in household labour. Other costs are, however, less tangible and largely indirect but having more far-reaching impacts. These include emotional stress, pain and suffering which members of migrant families experience.

These largely intangible costs are the focus of this article since they readily defy existing valuation efforts, even as they inflict damage on personal wellbeing and family life and women are often the worst affected by these dynamics. This is illustrated through the narratives of two non-migrant women with whom the author interacted during a qualitative study of Zimbabwean transnational families. The study employed a dual-sited fieldwork approach in South Africa and Zimbabwe (for a detailed account of the methodology used, see Chereni, 2014). Through the narratives of the two women who remain in Zimbabwe to take care of their children while their spouses relocated to South Africa to seek employment, this article reflects on what their stories might imply for how we think about the costs of migration. The author begins by providing background to the context of these women’s experiences.

The Migration-Development Nexus

Academic writing and policy debates about the economic role of international migration in the development of global Southern economies often argue that, through financial remittances, international migrants can boost economic growth in sending countries and ignore the costs to their families. Faist (2009) reviewed the recent interest in remittances and noted that more often than not, policy discourses about the links between migration and development represent migrants as smooth transmitters of wealth from resource-rich Western countries to the least developed sending countries in the global South.

Indeed, overwhelming emphasis is placed on the gains from migration including remittances and their investment potential in the national economy at the expense of the financial, social and personal costs associated with the migrant way of life (De Haas, 2010). If costs are mentioned in the current debates about the migration-development nexus at all, they are merely viewed as a loss to the national economy. That is to say, the costs of international migration are understood in very narrow terms as ‘brain drain’ – a depletion of human capital in the national economy. In public policy discourse on migration, there exists a belief that financial remittances can effectively turn brain drain into ‘brain gain’, thereby catalysing economic growth in sending countries. Corroborating evidence is often cited from crude comparisons between financial remittances and annual ‘official development assistance’ from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). According to Faist (2009), financial remittances to development countries now double (even treble) the annual official development assistance of the OECD.

The estimations of what potential remittances indicate for economic growth in sending countries exclude the various costs of migration, including the seemingly non-economic costs that families incur as a result of migration.
Regional Migration to South Africa

Migration to South Africa, the main destination for migrants from other Southern African countries, remains a male-led and male-dominated phenomenon, although more women are migrating on their own right (Dodson, 2000). South Africa’s criteria for admission place an emphasis on certain high-level skills, thereby restricting legal migration to a few educated elite migrants, mostly men, given the historical realities of limited access to education by women in the region.

Nonetheless, this fails to deter thousands of migrants who seek to escape the economic, social and political insecurity of their home countries. A significant number of migrants use undesignated ports of entry to ‘border-jump’ into South African territory and then seek asylum as a way to legalise residence. Most asylum-seeker applications are not resolved for several years during which time the applicants are placed on a renewable asylum-seeking permit (Palmary & Landau, 2011). This permit regularises their residence, albeit for a short period, but they may not return home legally.

As in other migration contexts, researchers observe that South Africa’s migration policy is oriented toward restriction, stymies spousal migration and sustains transnational separations (Dodson, 2000; Chereni, 2014). As a result, a significant number of migrant families have family members in two or more countries (Boehm, 2011; Horton, 2008). Combined, restriction-oriented migration policies and prevailing gender-normative forms of paternal involvement are known to limit migrant men’s participation in the family after departure (Parreñas, 2008). As evidenced by the case studies discussed below, this situation has far-reaching negative consequences for family life, especially for the women and children who are left behind to deal with the impacts of the migration.

Case Studies

Two case studies of non-migrant women, Chipo (38) and Nyasha (37), who remain in Zimbabwe while their spouses migrated to South Africa to seek employment, are illuminating in this regard. The inclusion of the two migrant women in the purposively constructed sample comprising members of Zimbabwean transnational families was motivated by the author’s interest in finding out how the departure of their spouses has changed family life at home. Their stories illuminate in great detail the grief they experience every day. This challenges how we ought to think about the costs and gains of migration at the family level.

Chipo

Chipo is a rural resident and subsistence farmer in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe and a mother of three children. Consider how she relates her memories of family life before Majuru (48), her teenage boyfriend and later husband and father of her children, border-jumped into South Africa in 2005: ‘Since my husband and I got married, I did not long for his company as much as I do now… We were living together as a family; we used to go to church together … as a family.’ Chipo then lunged toward the fireplace around which we sat and blew life into the dying fire which helped to warm the hut. If her non-verbal actions said anything about her longings, it must have been that she missed the joys of married life. She continued, this time recounting the post-migration situation: ‘Now that Mr Majuru has not visited us in the past two years, my desire is becoming more and more overwhelming… If he fails to visit this December, I will only farm this season only, then I leave this home with my children.’ The separation is contrary to Chipo’s expectations of family life and has become a source of multiple apprehensions, including marital infidelity. Consider how she pines: ‘In the past, however little he gets in South Africa, he still managed to share with us and he would come home regularly. But now he spends this long [more than two years] before he visits again… I now suspect he has another woman there.’

The minimal involvement Chipo’s husband has had in the family since his departure, including his infrequent visits, living incomunicado and poor remitting behaviour, have stirred up apprehensions. She interprets her husband’s marginal parental participation as a sign of a sour marital relationship and that her husband has turned his back on the family, something that gives rise to severe distress.

Chipo yearns for the erstwhile family life before Majuru’s departure; she misses the quotidian communal activities of attending church and sharing meals. She is anxious of the imminent disintegration of family ties as she is considering leaving the family home, taking the children with
her. This means that she will have to abandon her communal farm and she may need to explore a new form of livelihood.

At the same time, however, Chipo is willing to give her marriage a chance and she will stay for another season. As in Boehm’s (2011) study of Mexican transnational families, the ambivalence of Chipo’s feelings is notable here too. She yearns for another home, a different family in a place unknown to her, even as she wishes for an emotionally intact family with her current husband. So, as the author concluded the interview later, Chipo began to question her husband’s private life in Johannesburg. She said that she wants to find out if he is attending church regularly. Her intention is to gauge her husband’s inclination towards infidelity by speculating on his devotion to God (and therefore to her and the family).

Chipo also indicated that she was considering going to South Africa to see for herself what her husband is doing. There was an unmistakable tone of agony in Chipo’s voice as she described her multiple anxieties, including the possibility that Majuru had another family in Johannesburg and the possibility of him contracting HIV and other infections.

Nyasha
Nyasha, a 37-year-old mother of three and a resident of a peri-urban settlement in Harare, Zimbabwe, shared similar experiences of living apart from her husband. Nyasha’s husband, Siwela (38), relocated to South Africa to seek political and economic refuge in 2005, leaving her with full parental responsibility at home. When responding to the question on how she copes with living apart from her husband, she became very emotional. She recounted how her husband betrayed her: ‘My husband was seeing another woman in South Africa... He was staying with this woman... That’s where we started to disagree about living separately.’ She further stated: ‘I was hurt. After going through this ordeal, it is hard for me to understand that he actually did not have money to send home… it really hurt me and my blood pressure went up. I feel the pain the even now.’ Nyasha’s observations are far from speculation. During a separate interview in Johannesburg, Siwela conceded that he broke his marriage vows. He cited a lack of material resources and social support structures as factors that led him to compromise on fidelity. From his point of view, moving in with another woman made the difference between returning to Zimbabwe and staying on in Johannesburg. As with Chipo’s story, Nyasha’s narrative illustrates that transnational separation has far-reaching impacts on ‘the way male and female fidelity is defined and policed by the family’ (Landolt & Da, 2005: 628).

Summary of the Case Studies
Unlike Nyasha, who found out about her husband’s infidelity, Chipo strongly suspects that her husband has established another family in South Africa. Nonetheless, both Chipo and Nyasha deal with more or less similar threats to marital fidelity and family life. Such threats are expected in the context of prolonged transnational separation (Landolt & Da, 2005). For both women, it appears that the disintegration of affective family ties is imminent, as long as they continue to live apart from migrant men. Based on hindsight and suspicion, Chipo and Nyasha similarly interpret their husband’s marginal involvement in the family as an indication of a weakening commitment to the marriage and family life. This limited familial involvement generates unpleasant apprehensions for both Chipo and Nyasha: it threatens marital fidelity and challenges their beliefs and expectations of family life. Due largely to her suspicions and feelings of abandonment, Chipo experiences unbearable pain and anxiety. Unlike Nyasha, who has decided to stay, she is considering dissolving the marriage altogether as a way to achieve some relief. Nyasha describes enduring mental and physical suffering connected with her husband’s infidelity. Her narrative corroborates existing accounts of suffering which demonstrate that mental distress eventually translates into physical pain (Priya, 2012).

Consequences for Advocacy and Policy
The view that discourses of migration and development seem to emphasise is that international migrants can increase economic development in sending countries of the global South and ignore the costs to their families (Faist, 2009). This view is challenged by these two case studies. The narratives of these non-migrant women who remain behind to provide parental guidance and care in the family while their spouses seek employment in South Africa may indicate the need to reconsider the way we think about the gains and losses of migration.

What is striking about the stories shared by the two non-migrant women is that transnational separations give rise to undesirable relational circumstances which threaten and damage the very core of the family. Absentee men’s marginal involvement in the family is influenced by structural limitations associated with migration management and their gender-normative masculinities. Their lack of involvement may threaten and damage the ideological infrastructure of the family with great emotional and even physical strain for women.

From the foregoing, it appears that non-migrant women’s beliefs about what constitutes family and the kinds of obligations that should be honoured in marriage are severely troubled. These two women experience enduring longing and estrangement at once, they are apprehensive of the security of emotional and affective ties in the family, even as they contend with severe distress, grief, pain and physical ill-health. Therefore, as Horton (2008) argues, transnational family members live in an intersubjective space of grief and sorrow.

The assumption that migrants transmit wealth smoothly from receiving countries to sending countries is untenable. In order to debunk this assumption further, it is appropriate to consider why the migration-related vulnerabilities of migrants are largely overlooked in public policy debates.
According to Faist (2009), academic and policy about migration erroneously treat international migrants as a homogenous group of well-to-do economic agents. Furthermore, public policy discourses on the migration-development nexus almost exclusively draw on inferences on South-North migration, which may vary markedly from South-South migration in terms of returns.

This discussion indicates that embarking on migration is more costly for some groups of South-South migrants, especially low- or unskilled immigrants with perhaps only a few years of education and training. Another reason why family members’ migration-related vulnerabilities are not counted as costs is that migrant families, especially women, tend to internalise the damage from migration. Therefore, it is not surprising that governments seek to cash in on remittances while casting a blind eye to the damage and loss separated families must contend with.

However, one might argue that, in a context of male-dominated mobility, the damage which families experience as a result of migration constitutes a driver in gender inequalities. As migrant families disintegrate and women are made to endure more and more distress, economic livelihoods (including subsistence from farm activities which sustain families) are likely to be disrupted as well. For example, due to severe distress, Chipo has found her marriage home unbearable and considers abandoning the farm, taking the children with her as she searches for a new home. Should Chipo do so, she might relieve her suffering but she would continue to carry the burden of full parental responsibility over her children.

**Conclusion**

Economic perspectives dominate policy discourses of migration and development. As a result, certain kinds of migration-related costs which migrant families endure are omitted from policy discourses on migration and development. The seemingly non-economic costs, including migration-related vulnerabilities, are either omitted on the pretext that they defy valuation or because an effort is not made to take them into account. However, as noted above, migration-related vulnerabilities in transnational families need to be conceptualised as costs to be reckoned against the gains from migration, that is, remittances. In order to work towards a genuine recognition of the full extent of migration-related costs for families, there is a need for interdisciplinary work suited to the documentation of the gendered nature of migration-related vulnerabilities as well as attempts at quantifying them. Whereas significant migration research exists on vulnerabilities in transnational families, it hardly engages with the dominant economic perspectives. More focused efforts are needed to inform appropriate interventions and policy on migration and its real impacts on human development.

**Admire Chereni** is a Fellow at the Centre for Anthropological Research at the University of Johannesburg.

**References**