

# How motherhood has been redefined through migration and maternal motion

July 25 2019, by Refilwe Mabula

---



Credit: Wits University

Historically, men dominated migration patterns as they moved in search of employment opportunities to provide for their families. Patriarchal societies expected men to be the sole provider while women looked after homes and families. The feminization of migration shows that women are migrating increasingly and providing as heads of households. This changing family dynamic has implications for ways of understanding motherhood and gender roles.

## Working women on the move

"Migration challenges normative ways of understanding parenting," says Thulisile Zikhali, a Ph.D. candidate in migration and displacement. Zikhali's Master's in the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) at Wits explored the mothering experiences of Zimbabwean women living in Johannesburg who had to leave their [children](#) at home in Zimbabwe.

Titled, *Mothering from across the Limpopo: Experiences of Zimbabwean mothers living in Johannesburg*, Zikhali's study focused on migrant Zimbabwean [single mothers](#) in the informal labor sector in South Africa. These mothers endured various challenges but they all had a common goal—to invest in their children's future and provide a decent life for their children.

Zikhali found that the women were proud of their roles as mothers who could provide, but they had to deal with the emotional turmoil of separation from their children. Yet, despite the separation anxiety, self-blame for their absence, and feelings of estrangement from their children, being away from home was for the greater good.

Dr. Katherine Bain, Senior Lecturer in the Wits Psychology Department, says that regular telephonic contact and reassurance are the foundation of a good mother-child relationship.

"As long as the children have a sense that their mother loves them and that she is available for them when they need her, a good relationship can be built. Regular telephone contact, even from age one, can help children feel held in mind by their mother. It allows children to remember their mother's voice and feel that their mother is interested and available, which is the basis for a nurturing, loving relationship," says Bain.

## When moms sell sex

The emotional hardships of the migrant mothers is exemplified in the Setswana idiom, *Mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng*—the mother of a child holds the dagger on the sharper edge—describing the lengths to which mothers go for the wellbeing and protection of their children. For some migrant mothers working as sex workers, this means enduring victimization, criminalization, and dangerous working conditions. Dr. Rebecca Walker, a postdoctoral fellow at ACMS, researched migrant mothers who sell sex in South Africa.

"Many [sex workers](#) are the sole bread-winners for their families and criminalization makes providing that much harder while doing nothing to combat exploitation in the industry. Sex workers are often labeled as 'bad mothers,' yet the high levels of abuse and violence they face in order to provide, means that they are actually doing an incredible job as mothers in very difficult and often dangerous circumstances," she says.

## Redefining motherhood

Zikhali found that the migration of women and mothers has redefined the concept of motherhood—providing for children is more important than being physically present. Yet, despite the financial contribution migrant [mothers](#) make to their households back in Zimbabwe, their ideal form of mothering was being personally present with their children back home.

Thembi, a migrant mother from Zimbabwe, is not able to invest in her child's future. She is unemployed and unable to provide for her child back home. She takes comfort in knowing that, despite her absence, her parents are providing a loving home for her daughter.

Bain says that for children to develop along a healthy trajectory they need to feel safe, loved and reliably cared for—and this caregiver does not have to be the child's mother.

Provided by Wits University

Citation: How motherhood has been redefined through migration and maternal motion (2019, July 25) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-07-motherhood-redefined-migration-maternal-motion.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.