

The Effects of Mother's Migration on Family Dynamics and Child Residence: Experiences from the Informal Settlements of Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract:

Research emphasizing effects of migration on sub-Saharan African families has focused on implications of absent fathers, particularly in areas with historic male migration. Yet, the number of women migrating throughout Africa is likely to have more profound effects on family stability and child well-being. When women move, they face difficult decisions of migrating with children, potentially exposing them to risky environments, or leaving them with others. Little is known about how women make these choices or of implications for children's well-being whether they co-migrate or are 'mothered from a distance.' This research will shed light on decision-making processes of migrant mothers, and the implications of mother's migration on children's residence using longitudinal quantitative data and interviews with migrants in Nairobi's informal settlements. As African women continue to migrate to cities, this research points to important implications with regard to how women manage family life when migrating to impoverished urban communities.

Introduction

Research emphasizing the effects of migration on families in sub-Saharan Africa has primarily focused on the implications of absent fathers, particularly in parts of southern Africa with historically-entrenched male migration systems. Yet, the rapidly increasing number of women on the move throughout sub-Saharan Africa is likely to have an even more profound effect on family stability and child well-being. When women move, they face the difficult decision of whether to bring their children with them, potentially exposing them to risky and impoverished slum environments, or to leave them in the care of others. Little is known about how women make these difficult choices or of the implications for children's health, education, and overall well-being whether they accompany their migrant mothers to urban areas or are fostered and are 'mothered from a distance' (Parrenas 2001). This research will shed new light on the decision-making processes migrant women undergo, and the implications of mother's migration on children's health and educational outcomes by bringing together longitudinal quantitative data and collecting new qualitative data in the form of in-depth interviews and focus groups with migrant women in the informal settlements in Nairobi, Kenya. As the number of African women moving in and out of urban formal and informal settlements continues to increase, this research points to important policy implications with regard to how women manage the configuration and well-being of their families in the face of migration to communities facing sustained urban poverty.

Background

Research emphasizing the effects of migration on families in sub-Saharan Africa has primarily focused on the implications of absent fathers, particularly in parts of southern Africa with historically-entrenched male migration systems. Early research in southern Africa found significant effects of migration on family structures and stability of familial relationships (Izzard 1985; Gordon 1981 & 1978; Murray 1981; Brown 1980). The wives of migrant men find themselves with substantial responsibility and significant insecurity, both emotionally and economically; while migration is used as a survival strategy for families, its stresses also lead to breakdown of family ties. The loss of intimacy and family life was felt as a significant stress both for women and their children, and severely strained and weakened the ties between migrant men and their wives and children at home, leaving women and their families increasingly insecure and isolated while men are away.

Much of the earlier literature on migration and family dynamics emphasized the commonality of families 'left behind' by male migrants, with married women acting as *de facto* heads of household with their children, or living with either maternal relatives or their husbands' families in their husbands' absence (Archambault 2010; Morrison *et al.* 2007; Posel 2001; Schafer 2000; Nelson 1992; Gordon 1981 & 1978). Studies rarely or ever presented migrants as anything but men migrating for labour. As noted by Gugler and Ludwar-Ene (1995) and Olurode (1995), early research that discuss women migrants tended to label women and children as 'tied' or 'associational' migrants, accompanying husbands and fathers to urban centres only as dependents, never as independent migrants of their own right.

With increasing focus on the 'feminization of migration' in recent years (Curran *et al.* 2006;

Pedraza 1991), research has acknowledged that women can and do migrate independently or with partners in order to pursue livelihood strategies, and they frequently do so in young adulthood at their peak childbearing and marriageable years (Clark & Cotton 2012; Beguy *et al.* 2010; Reed *et al.* 2010; Posel & Casale 2003; Dodson 1998; Gugler 1989). Research in developing countries suggests that women's migration often occurs as part of a household livelihood strategy aimed at improving the social and economic status of the family, but this may come with trade-offs for women's ties with spouses and children who may or may not accompany female migrants on their journeys (Locke *et al.* 2012; Lefko-Everett 2007; Posel & Casale 2003). As noted by Young (2004), children and their needs are likely to influence the migration decisions of their parents, especially their mothers, although migration strategies may differ dependent on needs of the family as a unit and the household members as individuals. Despite awareness of the centrality of children to women's migration choices, we still know relatively little about the movements of these women's children – what proportion of children migrate with their mothers at the time of migration, what proportion delay migration until mothers have settled in the destination, and what proportion maintain a permanent residence with someone other than their mothers.

While research specifically focusing on migrant mothers in sub-Saharan Africa is scarce, there is a wealth of literature on children's living arrangements and child-fostering on the continent, some of which discusses the role of migration in both child mobility and in alternative living arrangements for children (Kautzky 2009; Madhavan 2004; McDaniel & Zulu 1996; Lloyd & Desai 1992; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). Many African ethnic groups have historically promoted strong ties among family members, emphasizing the importance of kinship links and the support net provided by extended family. These links were often regarded as being no less important when they served to connect urban migrants to rural homesteads. In areas with strong migration systems in place, a variety of 'atypical' family structures might occur as families and households reconfigure due to one or more absent members. Child fostering throughout sub-Saharan Africa is not uncommon, likely as a result of these strong kinship networks which allow for children to be cared for when the need for 'crisis' or 'purposive' fostering arises (Madhavan 2004; Goody 1976). Fostering in the case of parental migration has been documented as a strategy relied upon across sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere to support labour migration systems and to provide stable care for children and youth, resulting in family structures such as skip-generation households or households with multiple children who are not biological children of the household head (Kautzky 2009; Lloyd & Desai 1992; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). Substantial research has demonstrated the vulnerabilities of orphaned children in sub-Saharan Africa (Atwine *et al.* 2005; Case *et al.* 2004; Urassa *et al.* 1997), but the effects of parental separation resulting from migration are likely to be quite different than the effects of single or double orphanhood as research suggests the trauma of losing a parent is obviously extensive for children.

As of now, there has been little research specifically on the concept of 'mothering from a distance' (Parrenas 2001) in a sub-Saharan African setting, but interest in the area is growing as the number of female migrants in many African countries rises. This area of research is certain to be important when considering the decisions migrant women make about the care of their children. Hall (2010), reviewing literature and data sources in South Africa, notes that families separated by migration have a long history due to the apartheid labour system. With rising rates

of migration for women, children's living arrangements have become more diverse with greater number of children living separately from one or both parents. Hall suggests that increased women's migration is leading not only to maternal separation but to increasing rates of child mobility as some women choose to bring their children with them or send them to another area for care. Migration of parents, especially mothers, can lead to changes in the form of the household, fragmentation of the family, temporary or long-term separation from parents, or being exposed to a potentially risky urban environment, all of which can in turn have significant effects on children's emotional and physical well-being.

Molyneux and colleagues (2002), using both qualitative and quantitative data from coastal Kenya, examine maternal mobility among both rural and urban mothers in and near Mombasa and the differences in perceptions of migration and mothering. They find that rural to urban migrant mothers maintain strong linkages between their rural and urban homes, and identify the importance of 'linked households' (Molyneux *et al* 2002) in allowing women to support their children materially and emotionally while living apart. Migration to urban centres is used by rural women as a livelihood strategy to improve socioeconomic status and family well-being, even when mobility leads to separation from spouses and children. Women's perceptions of urban living conditions suggested that many feel that leaving children in the rural areas, where providing necessities may be less expensive and less reliant on women's employment opportunities, is preferable when rural families allow for it. In my research, I intend to determine how migrant women weigh out care options for their children in light of what they know of their place of origin and of destination. I am interested in establishing what factors might influence migrant women to choose to 'mother at a distance' while children remain in the care of others, or to co-migrate with children, regardless of perceptions of risk and uncertainty after migration.

Data & Methods

The African Population & Health Research Center (APHRC) has been conducting data collection through the Nairobi Urban Health & Demographic Surveillance System (NUHDSS) since July-August of 2002 in two of Nairobi's informal urban settlements, Korogocho and Viwandani. The NUHDSS collects information from all area households on key demographic events including births, deaths, marriages, and in- and out-migration episodes as well as a range of other health and education-related information. Data is collected at four month intervals. Over the period of 2003 to 2009, the NUHDSS followed an average of approximately 71,000 individuals in 28,500 households in both Korogocho and Viwandani (Emina *et al.* 2011). For my research, I will be using a sample of all in-migrant women ages 15 to 49 who have ever given birth to one or more living children.

The key dependent and independent variables of interest to me are found in forms used in each wave of data collection: the in-migration form, and the birth history and birth registration form. The birth history form, asked of all women ages 12-49, includes information on each child of the respondent and specifically asks if each child lives with his/her mother and if not, who the child resides with. The in-migration and out-migration forms, using the NUHDSS definition of migration (residing in the DSS for 120 days), collect full information on both push and pull factors chosen from a list of approximately 15 possibilities, date of entry into the DSS, date of exit from the DSS if applicable, and other socio-economic information about the migrant and her

household. Using the variables from these forms, it is possible to determine how many and which children reside in the DSS with the mother, in the DSS with someone else, or outside the DSS. The quantitative data will largely be in the form of descriptive statistics, looking at the proportions of co-migrating and fostered children, and at similarities and differences in types of women migrants and their child-care decisions. Using Stata 10, logistic regression will be used to analyze what factors seem to most influence the residence of migrant women's children, with child co-residence or fosterage as the dependent variable and controlling for a number of characteristics of mothers, children, and migration experiences.

For the qualitative portion of my research, I will use the results of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with migrant women aged 15 to 49 at the Nairobi DSS site. Forty interviews were conducted in July of 2011 with both migrant and non-migrant women living in the Nairobi DSS sites of Korogocho and Viwandani. Respondents were originally sampled from the DSS data for certain characteristics (women between the ages of 15 and 49). The aim of the qualitative work is to both better understand the answers found in data collected from the DSS site in reference to women's migration motivations (the push and pull factors resulting in their decision to migrate) and family maintenance (the residence and whereabouts of all children and women's current marital/union status), as well as to hear, in women's own words, how they make the decisions behind family organization and children's living arrangements and what effect, if any, they believe their migration may have had on their children's health, education, and well-being. The interviews obtained information on women's motivations and decision-making processes in choosing to migrate, the consequences of migration, their marriage and family aspirations, and how they balance potential expectations and pressures of marriage and motherhood with a desire or need to explore migration opportunities. The interviews were conducted largely in Swahili by community-based fieldworkers, and were transcribed and translated by native Swahili speakers to ensure accuracy. Analysis of the transcriptions was conducted through MaxQDA10.

Research Questions

My research question, using quantitative and qualitative methods, focuses on the effect of mother's migration on child residence and migration. Specifically, I aim to look at what percentage of children of migrant women to Korogocho and Viwandani migrate with their mothers, and what percentage of children of migrant women are fostered (and with whom). I plan to investigate trends and potential differences in women's decisions to co-migrate or to foster based on their migration experiences and personal characteristics, specifically looking at comparisons between temporary vs. permanent migrants, partnered vs. single migrants, and associational/tied migrants vs. independent migrants. The qualitative component will outline women's decision-making and factors that influences women's choices to co-migrate or to foster their children.

Preliminary Results

My own preliminary research in the form of in-depth interviews with women in the DSS sites in Nairobi suggests that women are carefully taking their children and their needs into consideration when making the decision to migrate to informal settlements in the capital city. Several of the women interviewed had migrated either together with a spouse or in order to join a

spouse who had already migrated to Nairobi, and a variety of childcare strategies were discussed among these women. One married woman noted that her biological child and one step-child lived with her only, as her husband migrated, while her remaining four step-children resided in 'the village' with their grandmother; she emphasized that she "wouldn't want to bring him [her son] up here [in Nairobi]" and appeared to have plans to have him live elsewhere. Another married woman noted that her "older child is at home in the village... We [she and her husband] preferred that he live at home with my mother." Other women specified that only the biological children she shared with her husband lived in their Nairobi home, while children she had from prior relationships were fostered to their maternal relatives elsewhere, as were some of the children who her husband had from previous marriages.

Interestingly, the desires of the mother for her child's living arrangements were not always most important. One young married mother noted that while "[i]t will be good to bring her up in Nairobi... I don't think she will stay here—she will go back to my husband's home... husband has already decided that she will eventually be sent back home. He said that it was his mother who advised him to send the child back to his home." Despite her husband's steady employment and her feeling that life in Nairobi has been positive for herself and her young baby, family pressures and desires for children to return to rural homes are strong. Many of the currently married women had very young children, the majority of whom lived with them in Nairobi as the women themselves were planning to live permanently in the city with their husbands and families. This was not, however, taken as a given, as some respondents noted family migration occurred in steps with some children having waited in the rural areas prior to joining their parents in the city. These 'multi-spatial households' (Owuor 2010) have been reported elsewhere in Kenya as a result of parental migration. Married women whose children lived elsewhere reported that the separation from some of their children was immensely difficult to bear, noting "[a]s a mother, they are constantly on my mind... I am worried about my children back home. If I was to get help I would like to live with all my children."

Several of the unmarried women – a group made up of divorced, widowed, and never married women – reported that their children resided elsewhere, often in rural areas with either the maternal or paternal grandparents depending on the relationship between the mother and the extended family. One woman noted that she had attempted to live in Nairobi with her young son, but "due to economic hardship [she] took him back home;" this child was at the time of interview living with the paternal family despite his father's death. A number of migrant women noted that educational reasons pushed them to move children back to rural homes or to have them remain there in the first place, as the mothers could not afford to send their children to Nairobi schools. Still other women had split their children into multiple residences, with young (presumably still breastfeeding) children remaining in Nairobi with the mother while older, school-age children had been returned to maternal relatives; several women planned to send their youngest children back to rural homes when they were old enough to be separated. Several women intimated that these arrangements were their last resort and only choice for the well-being of their children, as the mother's ability to provide fully for their children appeared to be called into question both by themselves and by their extended family. One widow with two children living in different households noted "[a]fter the burial of my husband, I stayed home for two months but nobody was helping me and my children were crying for food and other basic things. So I decided to back to Nairobi since I could sell fish... And they [the family upcountry]

wanted the first born to go back home and school there and I agreed... I am not happy but I have no otherwise.” This suggests that many believe the rural environment is optimal for children for a variety of reasons, even if it results in long-term and regular separation from the mother. My research intends to get at how women arrive at their care decisions, choosing between an environment that might be perceived as preferable to hazardous conditions in urban centers or continuous interaction with their children, between mothering from a distance at considerable emotional cost or migrating towards an uncertain future in a slum settlement.

That migrant women often make difficult decisions in reference to the care of their children is clear from these preliminary interviews, and these early findings suggest that there are a number of factors at play when women engage in decision-making concerning their children's residence or mobility. Urban environments are often not considered ideal for raising young children, particularly in informal slum settlements, and indeed research has suggested that there are clear negative effects of slum conditions for children's health and well-being (Bocquier *et al.* 2010; Konseiga 2008; Konseiga *et al.* 2006; Garenne 2003). On the other hand, some research points to parental absence – and particularly the absence of a mother – as resulting in negative impacts on health and educational outcomes for children (Owusu 2011; Hall 2010; Gumbo 2008). As migrant women navigate the configurations of their households and families, it must be asked what influences their decisions, and, if all is held equal, what choices migrant women would make for themselves and their families to promote well-being and to satisfy needs as a family.

Expected Results & Future Directions

I expect that this research will provide results that are both informative and useful for those concerned with children's living arrangements and children's well-being, as there are undoubtedly profound effects of women's migration on the lives of their children. The research will first identify from the data what percentage of children migrate with mothers and what percentage are left behind (and with whom) for migrants to Korogocho and Viwandani. Second, it will identify, through in-depth interviews, what women perceive to be the best decision for the care of children when mothers migrate, and which person women are most comfortable having care for their children. Third, through both the qualitative and quantitative data, it will demonstrate which characteristics and patterns of migration may influence where and with whom children reside when mothers migrate. Fourth, through the qualitative data, it will shine light on how migrant women make difficult decisions about whether their children migrate with them or are left behind, and will identify the key coping strategies women use to ensure the well-being of their children when they migrate.

Moving forward with this paper, I will be using the longitudinal data to do quantitative analysis on percentages of co-migrant and fostered children of migrant women to the DSS sites in Nairobi, and will be using logistic regression to determine different factors affecting migrant mother's decisions about the configurations of their families.

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