AN UBUNTU DEFINITION OF THE FAMILY IN MIGRATION AND CHILDCARE ISSUES: THE CASE OF ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

That family (nuclear and/or extended) play a fundamental role in defending cultural practices in many societies is not far-fetched. In fact, the family unit has continuously and fervidly contributed towards the embedment of social norms and cultural values among many African communities especially in the midst of profound socio-demographic transitions such as inter-country migration. This treatise examines the critical role that the family plays in migration issues such as caring for the children of family members who have migrated to other countries for different reasons. This is done within the Zimbabwean context given the fact that many Zimbabweans have migrated to several countries especially in the past two decades mainly due to the socio-political and economic conditions currently prevailing in the country. The author challenges the use of the term 'extended family' as unfitting and un-African and concludes that the important role played by the family in migration matters especially regarding childcare in the absence of migrant parents needs to be further explored through more empirical research.

KEY TERMS: Ubuntu; family; migration; childcare; Zimbabwe

This article appeared in a special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) titled Ubuntu Social Work. The special issue focused on short articles that advanced the theory and practice of ubuntu in social work. In the special issue, these definitions were used:

- *Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.*
- *Ubuntu social work refers to social work that is theoretically, pedagogically and practically grounded in ubuntu.*
- *The term ubuntu is expressed differently is several African communities and languages but all referring to the same thing. In Angola, it is known as gimuntu, Botswana (muthu), Burkina Faso (maaya), Burundi (ubuntu), Cameroon (bato), Congo (bantu), Congo Democratic Republic (bomoto/bantu), Cote d'Ivoire (maaya), Equatorial Guinea (maaya), Guinea (maaya), Gambia (maaya), Ghana (biako ye), Kenya (utu/munto/mondo), Liberia (maaya), Malawi (umunthu), Mali (maaya/hadama de ya), Mozambique (vumuntu), Namibia (omundu), Nigeria (mutunchi/iwa/agwa), Rwanda (bantu), Sierra Leonne (maaya), South Africa (ubuntu/botho), Tanzania (utu/obuntu/bumuntu), Uganda (obuntu), Zambia (umunthu/ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu). It is also found in other Bantu countries not mentioned here.*

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INTRODUCTION

In this brief, the author traverses the cardinal role played by the family in matters regarding migration, particularly the care of children of migrant family members. The author further argues that this important role has not been fully expounded and appreciated. This paper is based on both observation and lived experience and gives an important insight into African and Zimbabwean communalism particularly on the concept and value of family. It should be emphasised that the family, be it nuclear or 'extended', has always been influential even in individual and household choices and decision-making (Malde, 2014) in matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, among other issues. The family, including or to a large extent, the 'extended family' has in countless junctures intervened in taking care of orphans, during vulnerability or impairment and even migration (Mushunje, 2014). The old axiom "Blood is thicker than water" has been widely accepted and applied in African tradition. Many African communities realise the importance of taking care and supporting their own relatives and kinsmen. Zimbabwe has witnessed unprecedented levels of migration in the past two decades especially due to socio-economic and political upheavals. This has resultantly forced the extended family to chip-in specifically in caring for the children of the migrant parents since not all parents decide to migrate with their children due to several factors.

ZIMBABWEANS AND INTER-COUNTRY MIGRATION

The phenomenon of human migration including inter-country migration is not new and "has maintained a close relation with mankind from its earliest stage" (Gutkar, 2014 p. 113). For example, the Bible narrates how Jacob and his family migrated from Canaan to Egypt due to famine (Genesis Chapter 46). During the slave trade, for instance, several Africans were taken from their motherland to America, West Indies, among other places. The migration of Europeans to Africa during the colonial period is also well-documented. The Ndebele and other tribes in Zimbabwe are said to have migrated from present day KwaZulu Natal in South Africa during the *Mfecane* era. Several men from mainly Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique and Lesotho are believed to have moved from their respective countries to South Africa to work in mines and ended up having intimate relationships with women in the host country. These few examples testify to the notion that inter-country migration, whether forced or voluntary, has been part of human development.

Nonetheless, as already alluded to above, migration by Zimbabwean citizens to other countries has been far conspicuous in recent years than before. Both push and pull factors have played a role in this recent development with push factors such as socio-economic and political instability playing a significant role. A considerable population of Zimbabweans mainly within the working age has migrated to other African countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique and Zambia. Others are strewn in different parts of the world in countries like England, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA and China. Whilst some families migrate with their children, others leave them behind with the extended family. This is done with the plan of either taking the children along to the host country at a later stage and when one has stabilised, or with the hope that one will permanently return to Zimbabwe when conditions in that country have improved. Whatever the long-term plan might be, the extended family plays a crucial role in taking care of the children left behind by the migrant family members. Although the majority of those who migrate maintain regular contact with their children through visits, telephone communication as well as sending of remittances, it is not always the case with others. The extended family, therefore, in some instances, take full responsibilities of the children left behind without expecting or receiving any financial or material support.

FAMILY AND THE CONCEPT OF UBUNTU

A concise definition of extended family is provided by Haralambos and Holborn (2004, p. 24) as that which "combines different generations and different branches of the family" which include but not limited to grandparents, uncles and aunts (Malde, 2014). This author, however, argues that the term extended family is Western and divisive. The term carries overtones of separatism (not interdependency) and caricature on the institution of family by subcategorising it into nuclear and extended. African society, Zimbabwean to be specific, has always regarded close relatives as family, whether it is an aunt, uncle, cousin or grandparent. Traditionally, people sharing the same totem are regarded as close relatives and part of the family to the extent that marriage between such people was prohibited. Although it can be conceded that traditions and customs are never static in any society (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013), the family is designed to uphold, protect and transmit the progressive cultural norms of that family and community, and thus act as a protective mechanism against external influences viewed as inappropriate and detrimental to the family and community (Mushunje, 2014).The World Bank (2009), for example, concedes that the extended family plays a fundamental role in supporting one another with cash, food, housing, labour and emotional as well as moral support during times of bereavement and destitution.

In issues of migration, for example, the decision to migrate is usually reached in consultation with family members who also proffer advice and spiritual guidance in the form of prayers. Involvement of family in decision-making is regarded as a source of good luck and avoidance of misfortune. This also helps in cases of getting assistance and support from relatives who might have already migrated to the host country. African tradition always regards helping each other as a sign of the connectedness and communalism of humanity. Accordingly, migrants are reminded to keep in contact with other relatives in the host country to ensure support during both good times and times of need. Close ties are established and maintained even with others who are not very close relatives due to the importance of family. The presence of the family particularly during difficult times or times of need is closely linked to the African concept of *Ubuntu*. Regarding *Ubuntu*, Thompsell (2019) notes that the word emanates from Nguni languages (a group of related languages spoken in Southern Africa, mostly in South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe). Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) adds that although this Zulu term is widely used, other nouns with the same meaning are used in different African societies that are south of the Sahara (Figure 1). At the heart of the definition is the connectedness that exists or should exist between people. It is a philosophical term that represents African conception of humanity, life, individuality and community (Makiwane & Kaunda, 2018). As Tutu (2004 p. 25) connotes:

> A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human.

In this context, the family becomes pivotal in ensuring that individuals exist, realise their goals and reach self-efficacy. Mushunje (2014) gives an apt observation about the centrality of the Zimbabwean extended family in the upkeep of children particularly vulnerable children. She notes that the extended family acts as a significant social safety net for vulnerable children by providing for informal adoptions and foster care. This is done within the *Ubuntu* principle, without expecting any financial rewards. These children are raised as part of the family. Recently, with an upsurge in inter-country migration, the Zimbabwean extended family has maintained this cultural practice.

Figure 1: Ubuntu in different African societies

Source: Mugumbate, J., 2019

CONCLUSION

The *Ubuntu* concept is not alien to African society. The concept accentuates and reaffirms the recognition of the family institution as a foundation of society (Makiwane & Kaunda, 2018). In view of this, this brief advocates for the respect and strengthening of the institution of family and its positive principles such as *Ubuntu*. In this regard, social workers have a prime role to play in ensuring that the family is capacitated through the application of an empowerment approach in issues such as the caring of children of migrant parents as well as children in general. This can be done by assisting the family in acquainting with the statutory frameworks that guide child protection and child rights. This should, nevertheless, be done within the context of cultural values and principles that are

designed to maintain togetherness and tranquility in society. In fact, social work and child protection in Africa should claim autonomy from purely Western ideology that might not be very relevant to the African society. It becomes paramount therefore that further research should be conducted in areas that promote *Ubuntu*, areas such as the role of the 'extended family' in the care of children whose parents are in the diaspora.

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