

## **Navigating the Turbulent Adolescence Stage: The Role of Parental Presence and Absence in Bulilima and Mangwe Districts, Zimbabwe**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to examine the psychological effects of parental labour migration on adolescent children left behind in the Bulilima and Mangwe districts of Zimbabwe. A multi-dimensional theoretical framework encompassing bio-ecological, socio-cultural, and pathway model perspectives is utilized to explore the topic. The study reveals that the most significant psychological effects of parental migration on adolescents left behind are negative, including depression, aggressiveness, sadness, stress, loneliness, rebellion, and abuse. Data are collected from 18 adolescents and 16 stakeholders, including teachers, nurses, and caregivers, who provided rich data to authenticate contributions from adolescents. The study proposes practical recommendations to different players directly and indirectly involved in child care practices to minimize the negative psychological effects associated with parental migration. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is used to explore how adolescence is a stage epitomized by turbulence, and systems like meso, exo, and macro systems are involved in actors' roles in the children's well-being. Furthermore, the chrono system dimension considers changes over time, and how they promote breakups among married couples can have potential negative effects on children left behind's psychological well-being.

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**Keywords:** parental migration, psychological well-being, adolescent, Bulilima district, Mangwe district, Zimbabwe, multi-dimensional theoretical framework, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, negative effects, practical recommendations.

### **Introduction**

The effects of labour migration on the children left behind have caused serious concern all over the world. This concern is sensible seeing that labour migration often implies the splitting up of families consequently producing several negative outcomes on the psychological well-being of households left behind. Several scenarios where parental separation occurs have been identified by psychological health research as having negative effects on the psychological wellbeing of children left behind (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Huurre, Junkkari, & Aro, 2006). Psychologists also agree that adolescence is a developmental stage marked by significant physical, emotional, psychological, and social transformations (Marcell & Halpern-Felsher, 2007). As a result, the parental absence could become particularly traumatic. In light of this psychological effects of migration on children left behind have become a topical subject for numerous studies. For instance, Graham & Jordan (2011) conducted a comparative study of Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam to determine the effects of parental migration on the psychological well-being of children left behind. The study produced some intriguing findings. According to the study, children abandoned in Indonesia had a higher likelihood of experiencing emotional discomfort than children raised by both parents (Graham et al, 2011). However, neither did it appear in Thailand nor Vietnam that there were meaningful disparities between children who lived with both parents and children who were raised in left-behind households. Results for the Philippines suggested that some children's psychological wellbeing was less negatively impacted by migration

(Graham et al, 2011). Other researchers, however found that parental relocation had detrimental effects on the mental health of the children left behind (Gao et al., 2010). According to a study by Filippa (2011), the experiences of teenage children left behind in Zimbabwe were comparable to those discovered in studies conducted in other continents like Asia. Filippa (2011) found out in her research that in response to the negative effects of migration, children who were left behind developed defence mechanisms. The rationale for conducting this research was the surprising lack of meaningful similar research in the Bulilima-Mangwe districts, which have arguably one of the long histories of labour migration in the country. This research examined how labour migration affects the psychological health of adolescents who are left behind and attend secondary schools in the Bulilima and Mangwe districts.

### Research question

- What are the effects of parental migration on the psychological well-being of adolescent children left behind?

### Objective of the study

- To ascertain how parental migration affects the psychological well-being of adolescent children left behind?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological Perspectives

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was the primary informant of this research. This theory avows that adolescents experience interactions similar to Bandura's reciprocal determinism. Bandura (2001 as cited in Kosslyn & Rosenburg, 2008, p.21) avers that there exists in human behaviour an interaction process involving both psychological and social forces that affect the environment and behaviour. In turn behaviour affects the environment and personal factors. This implies that the psychological well-being of adolescents left behind is influenced by their developmental stage as well as the environment they grow in such as that of migrant households. Indeed, this theory sees development of adolescent children left behind, as being influenced by five subsystems namely; micro, meso, exo and macro systems. By *micro system* Bronfenbrenner referred to adolescent children left behind's proximate relationships or systems they interact with, such as their immediate family, school, peers, neighbours, and caregivers. Within the microsystems of the home, adolescent children left behind may find themselves in child headed like family situations where they are forced to take up parenting roles in the absence of migrant parents thereby incurring heightened psychological strain (de la Garza, 2010).

Swartz et al., (2011) assert that in almost all cultures adolescence is a stage epitomised by turbulence. Similarly, Erickson (1993, as cited in Sun & Sun, 2021, p. 268) describes this stage as one in which adolescents experience identity crisis. This crisis can better be managed by healthy micro relations likely to be fostered by a "complete available family", failure to which many adolescents become predisposed to heightened levels of stress and emotional turmoil with potential to degenerate into undesirable and destructive behaviours such as drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections inter alia (Chingwe, 2022). Moreover, stressful life events caused by absence of a partner and shouldering double parenting duties by the remaining parent may erode the remaining parent's coping behaviour, creating emotional distress and marital disharmony. Such a development may equally promote parenting practices that are uninvolved and harsh which may potentially negatively affect the psychological well-being of adolescents left behind (Chingwe, 2022).

The *mesosystem* which Bronfenbrenner (2008) defined as an assortment of linkages between two or more systems in which adolescent children left behind actively participate is where we find systems like the local community, religious organisations and friends. This implies that neighbours, friends or teachers may offer adolescent children left behind emotional care and guidance as they undergo 'storms and stresses' of adolescence thereby mitigating the effects of both adolescence and parental migration. Inversely, actors in the mesosystem may take advantage of the vulnerability of budding adolescent girls left behind by sexually abusing them hence worsening the turbulences of both adolescence and parental absence.

*Exo systems* denote the presence of one or more settings in which adolescents left behind do not necessarily actively participant but still influence their psychological well-being (Donald et al., 2010). Examples of such alike systems include migrant parent's workplaces and foreign communities in which they live. Although migrant parents' workplaces and foreign communities in which they live are remote, occurrences in these settings significantly affect the psychological well-being of adolescents left behind. For example, the outbreak

of COVID-19 and xenophobic attacks on Zimbabweans in South Africa left some migrants jobless and others dead creating psychological strain on families left behind in Zimbabwe. In one highly publicised incident in April 2022, a 43-year-old Zimbabwean, a father of four children was burnt alive in *Diepsloot* South Africa by a group of people ordering foreigners to produce valid visas (OHCHR, 2022). One can only wonder the psychological strain suffered by the bereaved back home. Incidents like these equally have potential to negatively affect the psychological well-being of children left behind who are not in any way directly or indirectly related to the bereaved as they send waves of fear for the security and safety of migrant parents living in the same communities or country where such incidents are occurring.

*Macro-systems* signify the wider community comprised of the economy, culture, laws, beliefs, expectations, and lifestyles (Oswalt, 2008). For example, cultural values that consider every adult to be a parent of all children in the community may promote care and nurturance of children left behind thereby helping to lessen the negative psychological effects of being left behind. Community aunts may for example offer guidance to budding girls hence limiting the effects of storms and stresses of adolescence as well as of parental absence. At the end of the *ecological system* is the *chrono system*, referring to the role played by the time dimension in human development. Here emphasis is put on changes or consistencies in relationships overtime. Such alike changes maybe parental divorce, historical events, or social condition as well as changes, like life transitions within the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 2008). For example, it has been observed that migration tends to promote breakups among married couples which in themselves have potential to negatively affect the psychological well-being of children left behind (Zhao et al., 2018; Crush et al., 2010). In addition, parents who spend longer periods of time abroad and visit their children less tend to worsen the psychological well-being of children left behind than those who occasionally visit their families back home. Equally important in this theory is the role played by gender and age (Ettetal & Mahoney, 2017). Some studies have shown that girls appear to be more emotionally affected by parental migration than boys (Botezat, 2018).

### **Erikson's Psychosocial Perspectives**

Related to the ecological systems theory is the psycho-social analytic theory by Erick Erickson who fused together psychoanalytic concepts with social perspectives. Like Bronfenbrenner Erickson regards adolescents as active participants in their own development (Snowman and Biehler, 2012). Erickson asserted that human beings developed in social stages rather than sexual stages as was asserted by Sigmund Freud. These stages include; trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus identity confusion, intimacy versus isolation, creativity versus stagnation, ego integrity versus despair (Lahey, 2009). Of greater relevance to this study is the fifth stage, *identity versus role confusion*

because it coincides with the developmental stage of the majority of research participants. Erickson averred that adolescents encounter a crisis where they must develop an identity, meaning determining who they really are and where they are going. Successful realisation of an identity leads to identity accomplishment whereas failure to achieve an identity will lead to identity confusion (Donald et al., 2010).

It is generally agreed that the period called adolescence is usually eventful and associated with great turbulence. One scholar has suggested that this period is characterised by storms and stresses of life, which if not properly managed, may lead to challenges for the individual, the family, schools and society at large (Swartz, et al., 2011). Parents, teachers, caregivers are therefore crucial at this stage for the provision of guidance and control in the lives of the growing children. Human development as illustrated by this psychosocial theory is characterised by a series of crises linked to emotional needs and nested social relations (Berk, 2007). Adolescent children left behind also face these crises but how they resolve them may undoubtedly be influenced by this situation of being left behind which they find themselves in.

### **Rutter's pathway model perspectives**

To augment the two theories above the researcher considered views of Rutter who suggests that some people are naturally resilient. Resilience here is taken to mean an individual's ability to manage stress and adversity (Unger, 2008). Some authorities have suggested that resilience may be an outcome of a person's capability to interrelate with their settings and this nurtures their psychological well-being against the crushing effects of parental migration (Rutter, 2005; Ward & Eyber, 2009). It follows therefore that some adolescent children left behind may thrive under the negative effects of parental absence while others may develop psychological imbalance leading to behaviours such as drug abuse, emotional distress and such alike. As with the ecological

and psycho-social theories above where significant others such as teachers, neighbours, members of the extended family and faith leaders may help to mediate the effects of parental migration lessening anxiety, stress, depression and trauma associated with being left behind Rutter avers that given support, children experiencing strenuous situations such as those posed by being left behind may develop healthy psychological outcomes even with parents away (Rutter, 2008). It is imperative to note that some adolescents may naturally be psychologically, emotionally or mentally resilient than others hence parental migration may produce varying psychological outcomes. It is equally important to note that significant others can offer a life-line to adolescents left behind so as to promote their psychological well-being and protect them from the negative effects of being left behind.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The key intention of this study was to ascertain effects of parental migration on adolescent children left behind in Bulilima and Mangwe districts, Zimbabwe. The researcher adopted the phenomenological research methodology cast in a descriptive case study design. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach focusing on exploring, understanding, bringing to the surface deep subjective issues, and making voices heard (Greening, 2019). The researcher endeavoured to gain access into adolescent's world of being left behind. As such therefore using this design entailed providing a descriptive account of adolescent children left behind's lived experiences within left behind households. Phenomenology enabled the researcher to gain access into adolescents' lived experiences while shutting out taken-for-granted assumptions and common ways of perceiving (Tufford, et al., 2010). This case study entailed exploring a bounded system, either by time, context, single or multiple cases spanning over a period of time (Coombs, 2022). The psychological well-being of children left behind was one such case that was seen to be bound by time and context where time here referred to a period when parental migration has been on the rise, where COVID-19 was ravaging the world, when xenophobic attacks were on the rise in neighbouring countries, while context referred to the developmental stage of main participants characterised by '*storms and stresses*' of life (Swartz, et al., 2011). The case study design was preferred for this study because of its inherent flexibility to adapt to various approaches such as phenomenology, in which it strives to describe, analyse and interpret the psychological effects of parental migration on adolescents left behind. In this case study, the researcher undertook to explore a variety of left behind cases spanning over varying time periods by way of comprehensive data collection using various informants, two data collection tools and a sample made up of 18 adolescents left behind and 16 stakeholders.

### Sampling of participants

Three High schools were purposefully selected since it had been observed that a sizeable number of students enrolled there lived in migrant households. From each of the 3 High schools (2 urban and 1 rural, 2 boarding and 1 day and all mixed schools) 6 students (giving a total of 18 students, 9 males and 9 females), 2 caregivers (giving a total of 6 caregivers, 4 females and 2 males) and 2 teachers (giving a total of 6 teachers, 3 males and 3 females) were purposefully selected. In addition, 4 nurses (3 females and 1 male) from clinics within the vicinity of the schools (rural and urban) were selected to participate in the study giving a total of 34 participants. Since all the 3 schools had more than one class with prospective participant's simple random selection was done to come up with a single class from which the 6 adolescents left behind were purposefully sampled. Expert sampling a form of purposive sampling was used in selecting teachers and nurses who had experience and expertise in dealing with adolescents.

The researcher tried to make the sample as small as could be possible in order to create sufficient room for participants to narrate their life experiences. Sample size is an integral aspect of the sampling process. While quantitative researchers calculate the sample size before the start of the study and maintain it throughout the study, (Creswell, 2014) qualitative sampling involves a series of decisions throughout the study aimed at reaching saturation (Emmel, 2013 cited in Guetterman, 2015). In other words, there is no prescriptive sample size in a qualitative study since saturation guides both data collection and analysis hence sample size is decided on throughout the process (Saunders et al., 2018). Despite this a qualitative researcher is recommended to come up with an approximate sample sufficient to allow for collection of rich descriptive data (Merriam, 2009 cited in Guetterman, 2015). Simple random sampling methods were used in this study in order make certain that the sample was representative enough and reduce bias whereas purposive sampling was done to ensure

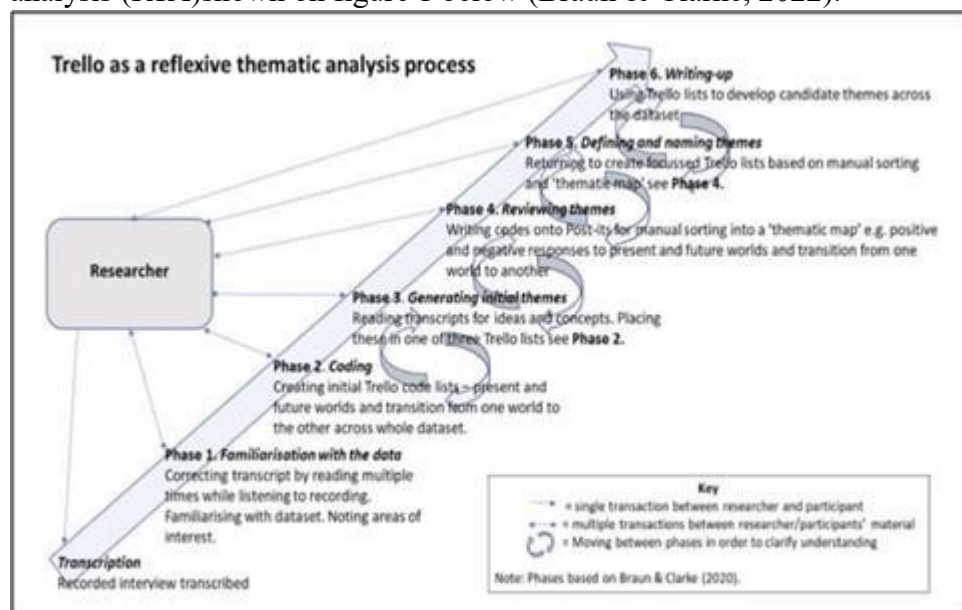
that participants matched the attributes desired for achieving the objective of the study (Noor et al., 2022). Using purposive sampling allowed for the inclusion of various migrant household characteristics such as; those with both parents abroad, with either only father or mother away, those left in the care of hired personnel or members of the extended family and those left alone.

### 3.3 Data collection

Before visiting the 3 schools, 2 clinics and 6 households, the researcher sought permission to carry out the study in Bulilima and Mangwe districts. Using a letter providing permission and introducing the researcher from Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), the researcher sought further permission which was granted without difficulty from the two District Administrators (DA's), the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE) and Ministry of Health and Child care. Having obtained permission, the researcher visited the schools, homes and clinics where with the help of teachers 3 separate focus group discussion interviews were conducted with adolescents while interviews were convened with teachers, nurses and caregivers.

### Data analysis

In order to make sense of data collected the researchers made use of Braun & Clarke's reflective thematic analysis (RTA) shown on figure 1 below (Braun & Clarke, 2022).



**Figure 1: Reflexive thematic analysis process (adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2020)**

Reflective thematic analysis has been defined as an adaptable interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that enables the detection and scrutiny of patterns in a data set (Braun & Clarke 2013). RTA emphasises a researcher's active role in the generation of knowledge (Braun & Clarke 2019). Here codes are taken to epitomise a researcher's analyses of patterns of meaning within the dataset. Put differently, RTA is seen as a mirror of a researcher's interpretive analysis of data, made within the framework of a dataset; theoretical assumptions of the analysis, and researcher's investigative skills (Braun & Clarke 2019). As such it may not be expected for two different researchers to produce similar codes or themes even when using the same dataset. RTA follows 6 stages namely; data acquaintance with data; preliminary generation of codes; preliminary generation of themes; appraisal of themes; definition and naming of themes and consequently report production (Campbell, 2021). These stages are however not necessarily linear and are illustrated on figure 1 below. As such in line with RTA before the researchers attempted to acquaint themselves with the dataset, they were involved an iterative process of reflexivity with an objective of comprehending prior individual biases which could affect the research process (Berger, 2015).

The researchers engaged in numerous discussions throughout the research process where they tried to bring out their own biases to the fore before familiarising with the dataset. Eventually it was agreed that data analysis will be based on both data and theoretical frameworks explained above. This was followed by familiarisation of data in a bid to examining data for any possible patterns leading to preliminary stages of data coding. Using a diagram where codes were initially formulated researchers then came up with initial themes. Using the coded data, the two researchers tried to describe each theme together.

For instance, describing the effects of parental migration on the mental state of adolescents connected well with the psychological well-being of adolescents and it was concurred that issues such as loneliness, depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, sadness and having suicidal thoughts were commonly raised in the interviews and focus group discussions and hence to capture all these under one name the theme was named emotional effects. Secondly it was observed that there were behaviours which could be direct offshoots of the psychological state of adolescents and some of these like rebelliousness, petty crime, smoking appeared in the interviews carried out. In order to capture all these together a theme social effects was coined. It was indeed imperative for the researchers to continuously review both the codes and themes so as to ensure that emerging themes mirrored exactly what was in the dataset. Satisfied with the work done so far it became necessary for generated themes to be named in a most descriptive and representative manner reflecting contents of the themes. As outlined on figure 1 the final stage involved writing of the report.

### **Ethical considerations**

Conscious of the need for adherence to research ethics the researchers had to consider several ethical issues such as voluntary participation, informed consent, seeking permission, confidentiality, anonymity, inclusive language and privacy all in the bid to safeguard participants especially that most of them were children (Ketefian, 2015). Participants were provided sufficient information about the study and thereafter were requested to volunteer taking part in the study by signing assent and consent forms (Manandhar & Joshi, 2020). Furthermore, recognising that this study entailed reliving social realities with potential to raise sensitive and emotional experiences basic counselling services were given to participants before, during and after the study with the help of Guidance and Counselling teachers and nurses who had earlier on been appraised on some of these ethical considerations. In respect of principles of anonymity, confidentiality and privacy pseudonyms and codes were used to conceal the identities of participants. The researchers were always cognisant of the need to use inclusive language throughout the study and during the writing of the final report.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This study endeavoured to establish effects of parental migration on the psychological well-being of adolescents left behind. Using RTA researchers distilled data into three main themes namely; emotional effects, social effects and resilience. The study established that the most noticeable psychological effects of migration were negative than positive. Indeed, data overwhelmingly revealed that parental migration exposed adolescents left behind to heightened levels of; depression, hopelessness, sadness, suicidal thoughts, anger and anxiety. Such mental conditions were found to easily degenerate into undesirable behaviour such as smoking, drinking, violence and petty crime. Interestingly, irrespective of the confirmed negative effects of parental migration other adolescents appeared to thrive under such adverse conditions.

### **Emotional effects**

Here emotional well-being was taken to mean adolescents feelings and thoughts. It was uncovered that quite a huge number of left behind adolescents reported often feeling lonely, unloved and unhappy. Similarly, it was revealed that left behind adolescents showed signs of depression as evidenced by feelings of hopelessness, sadness and having suicidal thoughts. Indeed, slightly over 80% of adolescents reported having felt lonely on several occasions while lightly over 60% reported having felt that nobody loved them in a period of 3 months before the study. In addition, about 50% of adolescents confirmed having been unhappy on several occasions in the past 3 months before the study. Only about 30% confirmed having felt that nobody understood them on several occasions in the past 3 months whereas times about 80% recounted having once considered committing suicide. All adolescent participants reported having felt sad and hopeless on several occasions in the past 3 months. Interestingly, about 90% of adolescents reported having experienced some form of abuse. The following excerpts from two adolescents left behind confirm these findings;

*“Living without your parents is painful and sad. You have no one to tell your needs and fears. Even if you live with relatives still you need your parents who can love you and understand you unconditionally”.* **(Participant FGDZ5; an adolescent)**

### **FGDZ5; an adolescent)**

*“There is usually no one to stand up for you. Even if you are living with relatives at times they consider their own children first. That’s why sometimes you end up thinking that it’s better to die because you won’t have someone to look out for you”.* **(Participant FGDX1; an adolescent)**

*“Being left behind does increase adolescent children’s chances of being bullied, teased or stigmatised. This is most common where it is the father who migrated unless maybe there is an adult male who happens to live in the family”.* **(Participant FGDY6; an adolescent)**

These results confirmed observations by Zhou et al., (2019) that being left behind increased the risk of suicide among left behind children due to heightened stress, depressive symptoms, mental disorder and decreasing social support. The findings were equally consistent with Erickson’s psycho-social analytic theory whose fifth stage avers that adolescents may experience heightened stress which may lead to suicidal thoughts (Swartz et al, 2011). This human developmental stress is worsened by separation anxiety and diminishing social support related to parental migration. In studies carried out in Ecuador, Mexico, Moldova and the Philippines it was shown that migrant children are usually negatively judged, or even stigmatized in some communities thereby worsening their psychological well-being (Cortes, 2007).

In conversations of a large number of adolescents left behind with their parents abroad adolescents reported often telling migrant parents that they missed them and wanted them to come back home. This was a clear reflection of the negative emotional effects of parental absence. This situation may also have been worsened by strained parental relations. The current study revealed that relations between migrant parents were not always good and thus had potential to negatively affect the psychological well-being of the left behind children. Zhao et al., (2018) observed that the negative effects of parental migration may be worsened by other dilemmas such as parents’ misunderstanding which could in some cases lead to divorce. A study carried among Zimbabwean migrants by Pasura (2008) uncovered that many diasporic marriages were failing and breaking up. It was observed that emotional and psychological migration induced strain did not only affect adolescent children but also left behind carers most of whom were mothers who had to carry a double burden of raising children almost alone. Stakeholders revealed that it was common for migrant husbands to start new families abroad and these strained relationships with wives left behind. Strained relationships between parents created situations where left behind parents vented their anger, frustrations and stress on adolescent children whom they expected to fully assist them in shouldering extended household responsibilities. Such a development occurred in the context of turbulence associated with adolescence.

In terms of gender, left behind female adolescents appeared to be most emotionally affected by parental absence especially where it was the mother who migrated. Studying the effects of parental migration on children left behind in Tajikistan Catrinescu et al., (2011) also uncovered that female respondents aged between 15 and 18 were the most affected by sadness and depression and this manifested as aloofness, rebelliousness, aggressiveness and other anti-social behaviours. Girls in left behind situations reported experiencing increased household workload as they took over some of the responsibilities left by the migrant parent. In worst cases adolescent girls in such households had little time to sleep doing household chores and preparing siblings for school before they could do the same for themselves while others had to take care of sick siblings or left behind parent. Prolonged nursing of the sick has often resulted in burnout for family caregivers (Lindgren, 1990; Angermeyer et al., 2006). Both adolescent girl children left behind and mothers left behind proved to be more susceptible to burnout in cases where they took care of the sick, elderly parents or handicapped children left behind. One left behind adolescent girl shared her experiences below;

*“I often cry when I think about my mother who works in South Africa. It’s ok for her to work for us there but I miss her often especially when I see what others do with their mothers”.* **(Participant FGDX3; an adolescent)**

It is interesting to note that exposure to bullying, abuse and stigmatisation had the effects of producing negative mental and emotional outcomes for those affected. Indeed, some studies also have revealed that left behind children are indeed prone to all forms of abuse. A study in the Philippines by Scalabrini Migration Centre (2004) concluded that left behind children suffered more physical abuse than their counterparts in non-migrant households. Similarly, Salah (2008) explored the effects of migration in Moldova and concluded that children left behind were at risk of abuse, violence and trafficking. However, these findings are in conflict with a study carried out in Romania which concluded that differences in the level of exposure to verbal abuse, humiliation, threats, physical abuse and neglect between left behind children and children from non-migrant households was negligible (Toth, 2007). All the same it can be concluded that being exposed to abuse does indeed negatively affect the mental and emotional state of those affected.

### Social effects

In coming up with this theme the researchers considered the behaviour adolescents exhibited which were seen to be closely linked with their emotional and mental states. The researchers observed that the negative psychological outcomes of parental migration usually degenerated into undesirable behaviour patterns such as petty crime and violence. About 30% of adolescents reported having been involved in disciplinary cases at school which necessitated the summoning of caregivers to school while about 5% reported usually staying beyond 2100hrs without the knowledge of caregivers. Additionally, only about 10% of adolescents reported being regular smokers of tobacco whereas only about 5% confirmed being regular takers of drugs. Finally, about 15% of adolescents reported having attended wild parties ever since their parent(s) migrated while about 20% reported having once been in conflict with the law. These occurrences were portrayed by two stakeholders below;

*“Ukugcina abantwana babazali abasemazweni kunzima bavame ukungahloniphi, ukulwa, ukungathumeke lokwenza njee okungamacala okuncane ikakhuklu nxa kungabafana abalobaba ongekho”*. Taking care of children whose parents work outside the country is difficult, they are usually disrespectful, violent; refuse to be sent, rebellious and prone to doing petty crimes especially boys whose father is away. **(Participant ZCM; a caregiver)**

*“As I have said before adolescent children in migrant households are likely to be more depressed and this manifests as anti-social and violent behaviour especially among boys”*. **(ParticipantXUT1; a teacher)**

The findings above are similar to those by Rudatsikira et al., (2009) and Mabharani, (2014) as cited in Tawodzera & Themane, (2019) which observed that some adolescents left behind resorted to petty crimes under the influence of illicit drugs such as marijuana, while others drowned their sorrows in smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol as a way of dealing with stress induced by parental absence. It is interesting to note that resorting to illicit drugs, unbecoming and risky behaviours was discerned among adolescents left behind in the current study. However, adolescents in some studies have lamented the way caregivers and some teachers falsely accuse them of drinking beer, smoking, stealing and intending to impregnate other people’s children. Such adolescents have even suggested that these false accusations tormented them so much that to the extent of being on the edge of engaging in the very vices for which they were regularly accused of planning to engage in (Kufakunesu, et al., 2013). Unger (2008) alleges that none of such stereotypes are accurate when objectively scrutinized among today’s adolescents. It is however interesting to note that in the current findings both adolescents and caregivers appear to agree that left behind children are more prone to exhibiting violent behaviour and be in conflict with the law while others confirmed being involved in drinking and smoking practices.

Findings above are equally consistent with Erickson’s theory of development which avers that adolescents may generally experience turbulences during this phase. Concurring with Erickson, Meyers (2018) asserted that adolescence was characterised by storms and stresses of life, which if not properly managed, may lead to challenges for the individual, the family, schools and society at large. A good example of an adolescent bound crisis is puberty. Girls and boys undergoing puberty suffer unpredictable mood swings as a result of hormonal changes. It is these hormonal changes which may prompt adolescents to rebel and disobey household authority systems especially in the case of boys (Leong, 2015). Studies in Moldova and Ecuador revealed that children left behind were generally regarded as ‘arrogant, aggressive and rude’ (UNICEF, 2006). Indeed, during interviews, caregivers re-counted how adolescent children mostly boys became disrespectful and rebellious as narrated by one caregiver below;

*“Ukugcina abantwana babazali abasemazweni kunzima bavame ukungahloniphi, ukulwa, ukungathumeke lokwenza njee okungamacala okuncane ikakhuklu nxa kungabafana abalobaba ongekho”*. Taking care of children whose parents work outside the country is difficult, they are usually disrespectful, violent; refuse to be sent, rebellious and prone to doing petty crimes especially boys whose father is away. **(Participant ZCM; a caregiver)**

It is sad that most people in the two districts appear to prefer leaving their children alone or with hired personnel than with members of the extended family. Such a tendency could also help account for the higher levels of emotional distress and vulnerability among adolescents left behind. Leaving children in extended families could indeed help lessen the emotional distress of parental absence as was uncovered by Coe (2011).



Similarly, findings from a recent comparative study of Georgia and Moldova by Cebotari et al., (2018) revealed the utility of members of the extended family in mitigating negative effects of being left behind.

### **Resilience**

Interestingly, findings above do not imply that all adolescent children left behind suffered the same emotional strain and exhibited similar undesirable behaviours, motivated by this strain. Indeed a few other lefts behind children remained thrived in the face of migration related challenges. Of interest is an example given by one adolescent of a female student who grew up in a migrant family but has done well to the extent of enrolling for a degree in medicine at a local University. Academic success was seen as evidence of healthier psychological outcomes. Adolescents concurred that such an achievement could only have been made possible by a healthier mind. This is explained in an excerpt below.

*“Kayisiwo wonke umntwana othwalanzima njengabanye. Ukhona engimaziyo ngithemba lani liyamazi usewaphumelela ezifundweni zakhe waze waya fundela ubudhokotela. Ngibona lokho kutshengisa ukuthi abanye akubahluphi kangako ukusala bodwa. Uyasikhuthaza kakhulu”*. It is not everyone child left behind you may suffer the negative psychological effects of parental migration. Others do well in such situations. Am sure you know one such girl who has done well in her studies and has even enrolled for medicine. She is our role model. **(Participant FGDY2; an adolescent)**

Such adolescents could be said to be endowed with what Bronfenbrenner referred to as *competencies*, which mediated interactions within their proximal ecologies (Ettetal & Mahoney, 2017). Findings from a study by Rutter et al., (2008) reveal that resilient children are predisposed to doing better in some risky contexts in contrast with children with all parental support. This shows that not all left behind adolescent children will be emotionally unstable. Perhaps this could be the reason why some studies carried out in the Philippines implied that migration was less detrimental to the psychological wellbeing of some children (Graham et al., 2011). However, this is not an excuse to deliberately expose children to risks because all children deserve to live in a safe, supportive environment.

Indeed, while results above may look hopeless it is interesting to note that there is a window of hope brought in by regular communication between adolescents left behind and their migrant parents. Such communication could also help build resilience among children left behind. This uncovered that communication with migrant parents was largely through WhatsApp for most of participants. If it were possible intensification of communication could perhaps lessen the negative emotional effects of parent absence. Frequent communication with parents has been confirmed by several studies such as by Parennas (2002) who observed that constant communication between migrant parents and left behind children in Philippines helped to ease the negative effects of parental separation. Similarly, Maruja (2006) uncovered that regular communication between migrant parents and children left behind lessened the intensity of anxieties and loneliness. Modern technology has been acknowledged by Lin & Wen (2012) for positively contributing to the emotional well-being of children left behind. Indeed, Graham & Jordan aver that novel communication systems play a crucial task of keeping the absent parent ‘virtually present’. Improvement in telecommunications has improved the regularity of contact between left-behind children and their parents. However, some researchers observe that the quality of such communication is seldom high as some parents narrowed their communication to just instructions on how remittances sent should be used (Carrillo, 2006). The existence of at least one parent left behind in most migrant households could also greatly also mediate in the emotional well-being of adolescents and help make the children more resilient. It is unfortunate that some left behind households were left in the care of hired personnel and other children whose capacity to nurture and guide adolescents undergoing storms and stresses of life is questionable. Such situations created conducive ecologies for child abuse as perpetrators took advantage of the vulnerable children.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In light of observations made above and in the pursuit of improved child care practices it is recommended that all stakeholders come aboard where;

- Government reviews social protection services and migration policies so as to broaden it and expressly include protection of vulnerable people, inclusive of children left behind.
- Key community stakeholders should work together and revive the traditional role played by extended families in the care and protection of children.
- Schools reinvigorate and realign curriculums to foster teaching of parenting skills to children left behind and offer tailor-made guidance and counselling services.
- Health institutions extend their loco-parentis duties to afford vulnerable left behind adolescent children care and support such as through domiciliary visits, continuously reinvent the concept of adolescent friendly clinics to meet novel developments with regards adolescent child care.
- Future studies consider focusing on localised ways of building resilience among children in undesirable circumstances such as those faced by some left behind adolescents and country specific migration management policies can be reviewed with an objective to promote best care of left behind families.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that effects of labour migration on adolescent children's psychological well-being are complex and varied depending on factors, such as gender, societal values and individual competencies to manage turbulences associated with adolescence as well as parental absence. Additionally, psychological effects of migration on adolescents left behind equally depend on migration features such as who migrates, whether the migrant parent is legally or illegally resident in the host country, whether parental migration is seasonal or long term as well as family dynamics such as the size of family and existence of the extended family. This empirical study revealed that adolescents left-behind are exposed to adverse psychological and developmental experiences. Some measures can be taken to mitigate these adverse effects through resilience building, intensification of communication through the use of modern technologies and cost effective social media platforms and widespread use of members of the extended family in the care and protection of children left behind.

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