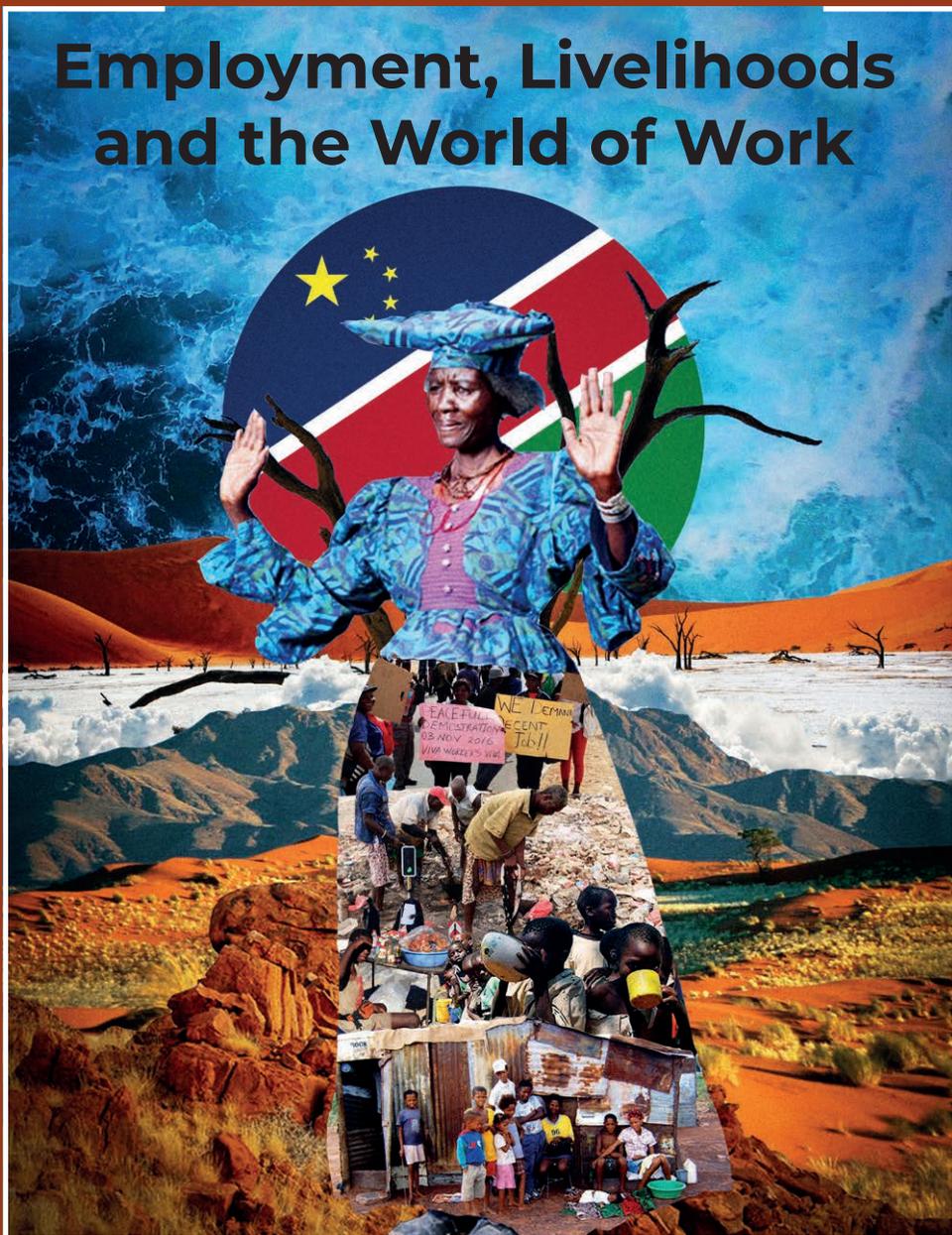


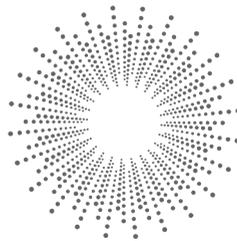
# Employment, Livelihoods and the World of Work



# **Employment, Livelihoods and the World of Work**

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# Keeping the Fire Burning: How Migrants Rejuvenate Relations with Spouses at Home: The Case of Gwanda District, Matebeleland South Province, Zimbabwe

*Emelder M. Tagutanazvo and Vupenyu Dzingirai*

## **Abstract:**

*The way diasporans practise conviviality and have continued to work and energise their stays abroad has been noted. What has less been observed in the literature is how these diasporans manage to maintain ties with spouses left behind. Using the case study of Guyu-Chelesa, a small irrigation community in south-eastern Zimbabwe, this paper examines how migrant husbands maintain connections with spouses who are struggling to survive in their absence. To investigate strategies used by migrant spouses to sustain their relationships, data was collected using key informant interviews. A light touch survey was also used to identify the range of information communication technologies used in maintaining spousal bonds. This paper observes that migrants and their spouses employ different platforms of information and communication technology in situations of prolonged separation. These platforms were critical in rejuvenating spousal relationships. The paper recommends a recognition of information and communication technology as key in retaining spousal bonds when separation becomes prolonged due to migration.*

**Key terms:** information and communication technology (ICT); migration; strategies; remittances; spouses

## **Introduction and Background**

Migration has always been an historical element that shaped population dynamics in different geographical spaces (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018). Currently, migration has become a major driving force in the globalised society (Crush et al., 2012). Typically, migration in Africa takes two forms, namely short-term and long-term migration (Dzingirai et al., 2015). In the former, migrants practise short-term-circular migration, frequently linked to seasonal labour (Rahim et al., 2021). In this situation, family structures of such migrants remain largely untransformed (Zimmermann, 2014). In the latter, migrants become permanent settlers in the host communities. They are almost always unable to return to their families for long periods of time because of what Francisco (2015) termed 'legal consequences' deterring

family reunification. Today there is an increasing number of people in the diaspora who fit into this latter category, unable to return home at least as often as they would wish. This is the group that this paper is concerned with.

The way these diasporans have continued to work and stay in the diaspora has of course been observed in the literature (Sevoyan & Agadjanian, 2015; Tong et al., 2019). It is generally agreed that these migrants experience disruptions in their lives. The major problem relates to social life: how to live amidst strangers (Mushonga & Dzingirai, 2020). Scholars are now in agreement that migrants who are scattered from loved ones at home attempt a range of convivial activities – ranging from urban to religious associations – as a means of adaption in a new place (Hyman et al., 2008; Sevoyan & Agadjanian, 2015; Tong et al., 2019). There is no longer any dispute among scholars that these activities make a great deal of difference in assisting the migrants to survive what Dzingirai & Nyamwanza (2020) term ‘rough neighbourhoods’.

This research sought to understand how migrants employ technology to overcome the effects of distance in their relationships. The preliminary finding of this paper is that migrants remain proactive and innovative in these disorienting and unfamiliar places.

They increasingly utilise information communication technologies, particularly social media platforms, to assist them to remain in the memory of spouses. These migrants are very much alive, and work for relevance and presence in the lives of those they left behind.

Key themes that emerged from the findings emphasised the role of information and communication technology (ICT) as a mode of dynamising family life and a means of maintaining family ties. This ICT has also been successful as a mode of communicating affection, connecting spouses and keeping the ‘flame ablaze’ (Hillyer, 2021). ‘Transformed intimacies’ was also a phenomenon that emerged from the use of ICT by migrant spouses, who also demonstrated how their spouses could practically become ‘virtual’ (Li, 2021). The conclusions are built from Zimbabwe’s Gwanda District, where amidst other drivers of migration, husbands migrate as of ‘rite’ (Tagutanazvo & Dzingirai, 2022) to neighbouring countries such as Botswana and South Africa, where they work in mines and other difficult places to underline their identity and transition in life. Their migrant work helps them to accrue assets and to improve their living standards. In the process, these migrant husbands effectively leave their assets, farmlands and homes in the custody of their wives.

ICT has been successful in emancipating women in decision making as one of the positive consequences of the feminisation of migration. Tagutanazvo and Dzingirai (2022) provides that due to consistent sharing of remittances with the migrant's maternal parents, women now own homesteads at the migrant's natal homes, a practice which is not embraced in the mainstream African culture. In addition, spouses of migrants get consulted for their opinions on critical issues at family and community levels because of their ability to contribute meaningfully towards development. In the process, women attain vertical-upward social mobility.

This technology has also been able to build stable networks and affirm connectedness between migrant spouses. This study contributes to a topic that is in the limelight of scholarly work, namely how migrants maintain relationships with their own through the use of ICT. Going forward, there is a need for reforms that allow people to move freely across borders, playing out their roles in-person without the need to have 'virtual partners'. In the section below we describe the study area, with its rich history of migration that continues to this day (Zimmermann, 2014).

## **History of Migration in Gwanda**

Located in Zimbabwe, Gwanda is a semi-arid district in the south-western part of the country. In this province, migration is not a new phenomenon. During colonial times, migrants trickled to South Africa, attracted by the highlife of gold and diamond mining towns (Maphosa, 2004). The movement of labourers to South Africa was initially temporal and short-term (Rahim et al., 2021). Then, the purpose of migration was to raise money needed to acquire a wife, as well as to build a home (Collins, 2017). Migration increased after independence in 1980 as Gwanda District faced high levels of unemployment due to the economic meltdown that was exacerbated by the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (Peberdy, 2007). This first wave of migration was supported by the immigration policies that allowed flexible movements of migrants back to their countries of origin. Those migrating did so to acquire money for food as well as the technologies of luxury: radios, TVs and toys. The rate of migration increased sharply after 2000, and immigration laws were tightened to control mass movements. Furthermore, alarmed by migration and crime in the country, South Africa has recently banned such illicit movements, so that entry into the diaspora is through 'border jumping', or illegal migration. This criminalisation of migration has

unintentionally stabilized mobility so that migrants stay for long periods in the diaspora, perhaps going home only during the Christmas season (Rahim et al., 2021).

Before 2000, only men in Gwanda had migrated (Maphosa, 2004). Women did not migrate, their role being to look after homes and relatives. Nyikahadzoi et al. (2019) note that men physically brought money home from the diaspora, at least during the early migration when policies were flexible enough to allow for circular migration, and this would constantly rejuvenate spousal relationships. In the current decade, because of economic and political changes in southern Africa, these men no longer have the freedom to come back home and physically connect with their spouses. Quite how these spouses in Gwanda, separated as they are by migration, maintain or rejuvenate relationships is an intriguing matter that this paper deals with. But before this, we sketch the theoretical framework of the paper.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study utilised the transactional theory founded by Malinowski (Firth, 1951) and perfected by Bailey (1969) as the framework that guided the analysis process throughout the research. This theory has proved useful in handling

micro-level and subtle processes in human relationships.

According to Bailey (1969), actors will seek to use institutions to advance their individual interests. For instance, regarding moments of resource scarcity, Bailey states: “Reasoned self-interest is the prime human motivation: interests are rationally pursued by rational dealers in the pursuit of rewards” (Bailey, 1986, p. 436).

This paper views the ‘spousal unit’ as an existing institution, and ICT as a means used by spouses that have been coercively separated for too long, to fulfil their individual interests. Furthermore, Bailey shows that in institutional or societal contexts, the individual shamelessly puts pressure to advance his or her individual interests by any means: “The individuals put pressure on the resource provider to give them their due share even if this means that fellow members will go short within the team to increase their own share in the distribution of scarce spoils” (Bailey, 1977, p. 61).

Thus, spouses can use any means to access and remind their migrant significant other to express their passion when they are distant and also to remind them to provide for their household needs (Dzingirai & Mangwanya, 2015). Transactionalists

such as Hammarstrom (2010) maintain that individuals have interests, and that as part of realising their interests, these individuals make use of normative strategies such as the use of passionate words using ICT. These individuals also use pragmatic strategies which might include the manipulation of means and ICT platforms to express romantic feelings and as a means of surveillance (Phillips, 1967). In short, Cheater (1999) stresses that people have agency. However, this theory has its own weakness. For instance, deceit is unrealistically emphasised when in some cases it is quite limited and controllable.

Data collection methods used to harness the strategies that are used by migrant spouses to keep the fire burning are presented below.

## Methodology

The research adopted a mixed methods approach. A questionnaire was used in a light survey to capture quantitative data on the range of ICT and platforms used by the spouses, as well as strategies used by migrants to maintain marital bonds. The tool was brief, taking 30 minutes to administer. Also, the tool was translated into the local language so that respondents knew what they were responding to. The questionnaire was administered to 100 women who were irrigation plot holders in villages under Chief

Nhlamba in Gwanda District. The women were purposively selected from the following six villages: Sengezani, Paye, Sezhubane, Bethel, Ntanye and Nhlamba. This number comprises half of the plot holders in the study area. The number of participants from each village was guided by the principle of proportionality. Tools such as Google Forms were used in the analysis of the data since they have the capacity to analyse mixed methods data.

Interviews were also used as a complementary method to harness data on the effect of technology on the quality of relations. Altogether 49 interviews were conducted with purposively



*Photo: Emelda Tagutanazvo*

selected women who owned plots in the selected villages under Chief Nhlamba. A total of 45 interviews were targeted in accordance with the watering register for the week. An additional four interviews came as a result of late comers who did not arrive at their appointed times, but who came later when their time slots had already been occupied by four newly selected participants. The late comers were eventually also incorporated in the interviewing process. This led to the number of participant interviews increasing to 49. The interviews, which lasted approximately 15 minutes each, included interviews with migrants' wives. Through the perceptions of the migrants' wives, it was possible to capture how both spouses used ICT to maintain and enhance their relationships. Although data analysis was a continuous process from the start, the data from interviews were transcribed and translated for them to have meaning that can be universally understood. This qualitative data were analysed in-situ; content analysis of the data was also performed, even after being entering on the Google Form for the purpose of systematic ordering of themes.

During analysis, word categories were used to guide the theme identification process. The following key themes were identified: affection communication; communication tool; communication strategy; modes of

keeping relations intact; and transformed intimacies. To maintain anonymity, the names that appear in this paper are pseudonyms.

In the following section, the paper examines how migrant men use different technologies and arts to retain intimate ties with their wives at home.

## Findings

### *The technologies to maintain ties*

The observation that migrants maintained contact with their loved ones is largely demonstrated in this study. This is evidenced by the overwhelming response from the wives confirming that these migrants did communicate. While 4% of these rural women reported that their migrant spouses were not communicating, 17% of these women confirmed that their migrant spouses communicated monthly, 31% daily, and 48% weekly. Migrants are thus clearly connected with their spouses back at home. The summary of frequencies of the measured parameters is indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1** Summary of Information Technologies Used and their Impact on Intimacy

Communication parameter	Percentage
<b>Frequency of communication</b>	
No communication at all	4
Communicated often	17
Communicated daily	31
Communicated weekly	48
<b>Types of ICT used</b>	
Kambudzi <sup>29</sup>	58
Smart phone	36
Computer tablet	2
None	4
<b>Platforms of communication used</b>	
Texts	42
Voice calls	28
Voice messages	20
Videos	10
<b>Purpose of using ICT</b>	
Sending gifts	81
Communication	19
<b>Relationship status</b>	
Happy	69
Not happy at all	31
<b>Level of intimacy when using ICT</b>	
No Improvement	6
Improved	94

<sup>29</sup> A non-smart phone, so cheap and common that it is compared to goats (*mbudzi*) in the area

The dominant pattern is that communication is linked to remittances. Each time migrant men send remittances, they used this opportunity to talk to their loved one, as reported by one migrant wife:

*Often times when my husband sends remittances through mukuru.com [an online payment app], he would make sure that the message has been delivered. At the same time, we take that opportunity to share our*

*deepest desires for each other as well as reminding each other of other family needs that would require our attention in the near future.*

The migrant men often talked to their spouses to find out whether the remittances had indeed reached them in good order. The process works both ways, with wives often communicating with their migrant husbands when they needed support from them. But how did these spouses connect?

The migrant men used different modes of ICT, inclusive of phones, which most participants referred to as the basic communication medium. The more popular phone which everyone in the study desired to have is *kambudzi* (see footnote above). Over 58% of women in the study area have this basic technology.

The reasons spouses value *kambudzi* as a communication tool are diverse. An informant put this thus:

*My kambudzi phone does not have other applications. These types of phones are the ones mostly available, they are the familiar ones, cheap to use and the most affordable and accessible phones. So, I have no option.*

The informant above perceives the *kambudzi* as a necessity and a basic

communication tool. Some other people value this rather primitive phone for its reliability. Where smart phones are not affordable, the *kambudzi* is always in action, according to one informant:

*I do not have a smart phone. The ordinary phone that I have does not have other applications but it is reliable, efficient and convenient.*

Not every spouse has the *kambudzi* – some rural women use smart phones. Owners of these smart phones tended to be spouses of well-to-do migrants who had a reputation for remitting substantial amounts.

Roughly 36% of women use smart phones, praising them for creating different interfaces with spouses. These types of phones are said to have a wide range of applications, ranging from voice calls and text messages to WhatsApp texts, voice calls and video calls, and the ability to generate animations:

*The smart phones allow us to talk to our beloved in different ways. We talk through video calls, we Whatsapp, we text, we send pictures. We even make voice calls. These phones help us to access our migrant spouses through different ways which brings excitement and exciting dynamics to our relationships.*

Computers and tablets are rare technology types in the rural context, being owned by roughly 2% of respondents. It is reasonable to assume that they are owned by women whose spouses have formal, lucrative jobs in their destinations, as narrated:

*Smart phones are very few in this area. Any woman who has a smart phone has a spouse working abroad, and not just working away from home but must have a good source of income.*

The modes of ICT discussed above have their shortcomings. Often these shortcomings are beyond the control of the villagers. Indeed, in many ways the shortcomings are national in character. One woman whose husband has been in the diaspora for six years narrated:

*We sometimes have challenges when using these phones due to electrical power cuts which are driven by load-shedding and natural disasters. Some of us do not have alternative charging facilities.*

In the same vein, the wife of a migrant commented:

*ZESA [the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority] is a problem here. Sometimes the power utility can leave us days on end without electricity and that affects our phones.*

Electric power is an issue that has both domestic and private impacts, leaving women suddenly cut off from husbands. As a strategy to ensure continued communication, these participants resorted to battery banks to give them power till the grid was restored. Participants also made use of solar energy. In the section below we describe how spouses use these mobile technologies to keep their relationships alive.

### **Modes of communicating affection**

#### *a) Using text messages to keep relationships alive*

The majority of spouses (42%) send text messages. According to one woman:

*I make sure I have text bundles so that we can plan over the phone. I make sure I update my husband on all home activities so that he feels to be part of the home even when he is away.*

Another respondent added:

*Most of my conversations with my spouse is done through text. I use text message more often than voice calls.*

This method is preferred because it allows longer, uninterrupted and private conversations with migrant

spouses, as narrated by another participant:

*Text messages can be received and replies can be sent back even when one is in a public environment. It does not require one to be secluded from people to get the message or to respond back.*

Text messages are also preferred because of their affordability, as indicated by one participant:

*Text messages are very cheap when converted to bundles. This allows for lengthy conversations.*

The above remarks reflect the convenience that is brought about by using text messages even when one requires privacy in a public setting. However, the ongoing use of the text messages become controversial, especially when it is done by wives. One woman who has suffered such prejudice had this to say:

*Continuous texting give rise to suspicion among the in-laws. They suspect that the woman will be talking to other men suggesting an extra-marital affair.*

Instead of gluing the relationship between spouses, texting then carries the risk of engendering suspicion in certain contexts, especially where those who witness the texting do not

have the background of the call. On the whole, though, texting is effective in energising relationships.

#### *b) Calling as a mode of keeping the flame alive*

Some spouses use phones to call rather than to text. In the short survey, voice calls were used by 28% of those who owned cell phones. This strategy is selected for its ability to draw the other person closer, regardless of distance. This technique allows direct conversation and natural expressions of intimacy. The use of voice calls was supported by the narration below:

*The voice call is better; you feel like you are interacting directly with the person. Voice calls easily replace the absent spouses, brings our spouses closer and their presence becomes a bit more real.*

Another respondent alluded to the usefulness of using voice calls in spousal relationships:

*For the uneducated and the aged, voice calls are the commonly used method of communication. This is because it does not require much dexterity in using a phone. It is simple and straight forward.*

The above narrations indicate the popularity of this mode of communication, especially amongst

elderly women. But even this mode of use is not without its own problems: in-laws almost always suspect that when excusing themselves to a private space to receive an intimate call, daughters-in-law are gossiping about them. Indeed, one concerned participant put it thus:

*After my calls my in-laws would be keen to hear what I said. They think I would be gossiping about them with their son. They show it by their facial expressions and in some cases, they ask follow-up questions to the conversations.*

Those not using voice calls as their basic strategic platform for enhancing their marital relationships have their own reasons for their choice. The majority of those not resorting to calls cite network problems. This is clear from a young wife's remark:

*I do not use voice calls frequently because there is poor network ... and it takes time to understand each other anyway. Sometimes the conversation is cut short due to the high cost of voice calls. Mobile phone calls are also very expensive.*

The wives face these network challenges passively and accept whatever comes their way. They investigate alternatives, with some buying additional sources of mobile connectivity and switching channels

as necessary. Their doing so shows the extent to which they value voice-based communication.

### *c) Using voice notes to keep connected*

Spouses who send voice notes make up 20% of those with cell phones. One of the participants specified voice message as one of her strategies as follows:

*I sometimes use informal voice notes or audios where I record myself talking so that he hears my voice. I record the children playing. I also add some non-verbal cues in our conversations such as voice intonations.*

This method is preferred because it is a less artificial and distant way of communicating one's presence in a relationship:

*Men use voice notes to maintain a homely and more realistic conversation. I also do the same, keeping my spouse interested in talking to me. In some cases, I use exaggerations to increase anxiety on the migrant so that they keep sending more notes to me.*

To emphasise the use of voice notes, Guyu's women reported that sometimes the spouses send them up to three voice notes a day as a way of showing

interest. These women indicate that they respond to all these voice notes without delay to remove all possibility of mistrust developing. Nevertheless, this method of communication is only feasible for wives with secluded spaces (their own rooms) where they can afford to record even intimate words without intrusion. One respondent expressed this point well:

*This method becomes a challenge where bedrooms are shared with children or when the rooms are adjacent to those of the in-laws. It becomes difficult to record sexually suggestive messages with the fear of being heard by children.*

Clearly, not every voice note is effective, nor is every situation ideal.

#### *d) Using video calls to remain connected*

Some spouses (10%) make video calls. Migrants and their spouses chose to do so because of a video call's personal and sensational impact on the receiver:

*I prefer using visuals such as night video calls because it is romantic. Doing so fills up our senses.*

Some of the participants referred to the impression that could be made in such a video call. For instance, one participant noted:

*I would make sure that I wear my best dress to make sure the video comes out well and also as a thankful gesture to my husband who would have bought the nice clothes for me.*

Another participant added:

*I would wear suggestive clothing that shows my intimacy to my husband. This clothing is inclusive of miniskirts, tightfitting and body-exposing clothes. This would keep my spouse excited. I believe that these visuals add some excitement to the men and they enjoy the visual [aspects] as spices to conversations.*

Some of these videos would be recorded, with restless gestures being projected as a sign of lovesickness, as reported by the woman below:

*In some of the videos a lot of gestures are expressed to show intimacy. In some cases, I throw a kiss, hug the pillow, and express suggestive moves. I show myself to be full of interest and passion.*

The potential social risk associated with videos of this nature is that they can come into the wrong hands. One woman provided an indication of how this could happen:

*Often times I feared that children or my in-laws might mistakenly stumble on the videos since phones can be*

*shared at home, and this might result in a lot of embarrassment on my side. My father in-law broke his phone and requested to use mine to call, but just that one call changed our respect for each other [because] he mistakenly opened the video which was sent by my husband assuming there was important information to be relayed. He stumbled on the nudeness of my husband and suddenly he returned my phone showing displeasure and anger.*

#### e) Sending gifts

Rather than call, some spouses believe in sending gifts. One of the most prominent gifts is remittances. The majority of the participants indicated that they receive remittances. These are received through e-money platforms such as Mukuru and EcoCash, which are phone-based remittance platforms, as reported:

*I receive remittances through the phone. A message pops into the phone as a sign that some money has been sent.*

Another informant narrated:

*Even during droughts and famine we can survive here in Chivi, we do receive remittances through Mukuru or EcoCash frequently. We use this income to provide [for] the needs of the household and this cushions poverty.*

To complement this strategy, the wives, on the other hand, use ICT to remind the migrants to remit. Those sending technology-based gifts do so at different times. Some send around Christmas, others around Easter, and others, on birthdays. In any case, the timing is made to underline the sender's commitment.

It would be incorrect to limit remittances/gifts to cash. Some of the enticing gifts are virtual, as indicated by this participant:

*We sent each other pictures, stickers, jokes, emojis, project developments. In times of hardships, he sends bible messages, words of wisdom and calming messages.*

Another participant indicated:

*At first, I was worried because now my spouse's usual visits were prohibited by COVID-19. I thought we were not going to enjoy Valentine's day, but now because these smart phones are so artistic, I celebrated Valentine's in style ... receiving flowers from my spouse through the phone that were so beautiful that even if he was around, he would not have been able to buy such beautiful ones for me. Phones actually add more romance to our relationship by creating exciting and beautiful gifts for our loved ones.*

Both material and virtual gifts are used as a strategy because they present tangible hope for the wives left behind. It is the hope created by this strategy that keeps the relationship's fire ablaze.

The next section highlights the effects of this communication on the quality of relationships.

### **Technology and Transformed Intimacies**

This section attempts to answer the question of what the ICT-based connection does to the quality of the relationship. In a few of the cases, the use of ICT proved not to be helpful. For example, one woman reported the extent to which she had been abandoned by her husband for six years without any form of response to her continuous attempts to call. She said:

*Phones are not the ones that glue relationships, it is the condition of the heart of the person towards their spouse that determines the quality of the relationship. In my case I used to call my husband on a weekly basis, the weeks turned into months and now it has been six years without hearing his voice, but I do have a phone. He prefers sending relatives only to deliver the requirements of the household or [to attend] to the needs of the children, not to me anymore.*

For the most part, however, the connection through mobile ICT

keeps the relationships alive. Roughly 69% of the sample investigated rural women alluded to the fact that their relationships with their migrant spouses had changed, but in a more positive way. Only 31% of the women were not happy with their transnational spousal relationships. This stability suggests that ICT tools used to communicate make spouses less lonely, as reported:

*I keep myself entertained by the pictures, videos and audios that he sends. I am not lonely, though I miss the physical touch.*

Another woman expressed herself well in showing the marital empowerment that is brought about by ICT:

*My husband has an update always of what is happening back home. This makes it easier for him to make critical decisions regarding our home.*

The above narration expresses how phones give spouses a voice in marital affairs and how the partners are able to keep track of issues at home and make decisions even while absent.

It was also reported that ICT gives partners a sense of belonging to each other, as expressed by one woman:

*I don't feel his absence that much, he is always there in the phone. I talk to him whenever I feel like it.*

Ninety-four percent of the participants indicated that they were experiencing improved levels of intimacy with their migrant spouses as a result of their use of ICT. In support of this, one woman remarked:

*I can now present myself in ways that he accepts. I can talk to my spouse without fear. It is easy for him to accept my ideas on media. Media hides emotions, moods and offers plenty of privacy. We talk without fighting. We used expressions and romantic words without being shy. We express our feelings openly compared to when we see each other face to face. We rebuke each other even when we are apart. Things can be done without constant and unnecessary consent. Technology has created a digital husband who can't physically beat me up. I can now express my sentiments to him without fear. He in turn uses appealing words to me that he cannot use when facing me directly. When he is at home, he wakes up and goes to the beer hall. I am left alone at home with no one to talk to, but technology has erased the carefree man and erected a caring husband who monitors my whereabouts often in a loving way, and I feel loved.*

Most women felt that ICT creates a lovable husband, a more intimate and caring partner, a harmless friend and a present companion who could talk to his wife at any time of the day.

## Conclusion

There is a tendency among scholars to present migrants as socially connected in the diaspora where they are located, as supported by Mushonga and Dzingirai (2020). These scholars also suggest that the same migrants are distinctly cut off from their homes, as argued by Dzingirai and Nyamwanza (2020). The data from this study suggest that migrants are indeed linked in the diaspora, being members of neighbourhood or religious associations. The study shows migrants to be strongly connected to the people they left behind (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018). They are in constant touch with their spouses. Consistently with the literature from outside the African continent, the data show this connectivity to be driven by technology, in particular mobile ICT. Through these media, migrants are able to do two things: firstly, they are able to send gifts to their loved ones, underscoring their commitment to people they left behind – a point now illustrated in Asian studies on migration (Li, 2021). Secondly, male migrants in the diaspora are also able to communicate their loyalty and commitment to the spouses they left behind by sending Whatsapp messages and, in some cases, recorded videos to their loved ones. Wives do the same, often sending audio notes at night. Through these media, the migrants are able to be 'virtual spouses'. They become present in the marriage, even though they

are absent. They make daily transactions and share family secrets, as if neither party is absent. Such virtual presence is obviously not ideal. Indeed, there is evidence that media remain inadequate in transactional relationships. From the data presented above, however, there are more pointers to suggest that ICT is a good substitute for the absent spouse. Across time and distance, promises are renewed, and relations are kept aflame. This is consistent with observations in other continents, where wives and migrant spouses are able to survive the stress caused by necessary separation (Hillyer, 2021).

While evidence from this paper supported the view that ICT has been used to improve intimacy, this is contrary to the views expressed by Phillips (1967), Ducey (2010) and Horst (2006), who argue that the technology itself has been used as a tool of surveillance by spouses, and that they have undermined intimacies in the process. Moreover, ICT has put a spotlight on existing inequalities in society, as different spouses experienced different levels of intimacy depending on the type of ICT that they had access to. This has created conditions conducive to further discrimination (Yeoh et al., 2005; Nusarath, 2021).

The findings presented in this paper are subject to the limitation that the research only delved into spousal relationships, and not into broader

familial or parental relationships. In concluding that technology facilitates connectivity in necessary separations, the recommendation is not that the present world order is good, simply because spouses have some sort of interface between themselves. Ultimately, people in relationships need to meet face to face to avoid the development of 'stranger relationships', where those involved no longer fully understand and empathise with each other. However, ICT, though imperfect, provides vehicles through which relationships can survive, and even thrive.

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