Disappointing modernisation: The peri-urban life of old women citizens.²²

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Modernização decepcionante: A vida das mulheres idosas em áreas peri-urbanas

Resumo

Este artigo resulta da análise de histórias de vida de Jane Mwanza uma idosa habitante numa área peri-urbana pobre em Lusaka e de outras mulheres e homens idosos em Lusaka e em outras cidades da Zâmbia.

Após um breve roteiro sobre a situação dos idosos na Zâmbia, a nível nacional, o artigo focar nos desafios enfrentados por Jane Mwanza e outras mulheres mais velhas que vivem em cidades zambianas, o texto discute os desafios com que lidam os idosos em suas casas, em função de diferentes condições domésticas. Pertencer a uma família significa, muitas vezes, beneficiar-se de apoio e amor, mas também a existência de tensões graves em famílias alargadas. Os resultados das análises revelam que as contribuições de mulheres idosas nas suas famílias são significativas: elas aparecem como chefes de família e prestadoras de diversos cuidados.

O artigo continua apresentando um perfil das diferenças entre mulheres e homens, tanto como destinatários e como provadores de ajuda. Finalmente, discute-se como as mulheres que estão comprometidas com a vida urbana moderna também são ameaçadas por acusações de feitiçaria. Identifica-se as formas de cidadania que as mulheres constroem através do seu trabalho na comunidade local.

²² This paper is an updated and revised version of a paper published in Mapetla, Schlyter and Bless (Schlyter, 2007).
Introduction

During my visits in Lusaka, Zambia, I have often been told that African families, in contrast to Western ones, take care of and respect their elderly; old people has the right to “sit and eat” in the midst of their families. But in George compound, a poor peri-urban area, I also heard about neglect of elderly persons, and I met some of them living in appalling conditions. Like other observers I found that these discourses and observations were made compatible by putting blame on modernisation, urbanisation, and Westernisation, and by glorifying the golden old age when elderly people were respected (Bourdillon, 1994; Apt, 2002).

While young people always depicted old relatives as dependents in need, I observed that support often was in the other direction - from the elderly to the younger generation, many of them adult and able bodied men. I also observed that daughters often cared for their mothers, while the elderly insisted that “sons should provide”. The contradictory discourses and observations, both about how well or badly the elderly were cared for and about who were cared for and who were the care givers, were my points of departure in my studies of aging, gender and generational support in Zambian cities.

Jane Mwanza - citizen in George compound

This paper refers frequently to the experiences of Jane Mwanza, whose urban life started just after independence, when she like many other women took her children, left the village, and joined her husband who was working in Lusaka.
They built a small mud brick house in George compound, a squatter area northwest of the city close to the heavy industrial area.

When her seventh child was born, her husband left her and settled with a second wife in a nearby compound. At that time the George compound was legalized and in the process of being upgraded. Roads and water were provided and the residents were given occupancy licences. Jane Mwanza’s house came close to one of the larger access roads into the area, this and the bar opposite the road provided good opportunities for front door vending.

George compound was originally dominated by the UNIP party. The local leaders distributed land and solved conflicts. They had struggled for legal recognition of the settlement and participated as the residents’ representatives in the process of the upgrading. Jane Mwanza attended the meetings in the party section, and when her husband had left her she accepted a post a chairlady. As such she engaged in a variety of social activities.

When Jane Mwanza’s only son married he supported the rebuilding of the house into a concrete with two separate dwellings. In the mid eighties the son was retrenched, money was not enough and the house was never properly finished. The electricity, which Jane Mwanza had pointed at as a proof of her step into a modern world, was disconnected.

In the nineties, after the election victory of the Movement for Multi Party Democracy, MMD, George compound became disorganized as the one-party organisation was dissolved and no alternative organization was built. Non-governmental organisations and churches were many but the impact of their support to settlement improvement was limited. A Residential Development Committee was eventually put in place by the local government to coordinate the efforts.

The economic decline was manifested by non-working water taps and street lighting, washed away roads, and slow progress in the residents’ always ongoing work to maintain their shelters. With international development support water was again provided in public standpipes. A majority of the residents could be
classified as living in extreme poverty and a famine the years before had made things worse. A positive tendency for the national economic situation was not reflected in the peri-urban areas.

Five of Jane Mwanza's daughters married and moved out, but one by one they returned home with their children, either separated or widowed. They shared a room with their mother. For a long period all Jane Mwanza's energy and income have gone to nursing and medicine for her terminal ill daughters. Time got worse, the son fell ill and also he passed away. In 2006 she was sharing the house with six orphaned grandchildren and the daughter-in-law who was also weak from the decease. Jane was still conducting her business of selling food stuff outside her front door.

In 2010 two of the grandchildren were the main supporters of the household now extended with a wife to a grandson and three great grandchildren. A proper shop was established in the front room and a bedroom was added at the side of the house. Jane continued to work, and offered me one of her delicious fat balls, which she still fried and sold at the road side. She did not complain but her grand daughter-in-law told me that she was not strong. They had been to the clinic but got no help. Still, her life was better than it had been for many years.

In spite of this she was deeply concerned about the development of the neighbourhood and the country. She had nothing good to say about the government and the ruling party as they brought nothing she could see to the neighbourhood.

Sources and methods

The paper draws from life histories which have been offered to me in George compound by Jane Mwanza and other elderly women and men, and to Zambian students in Lusaka and other Zambian towns. For more than forty years I have regularly paid visits to a number of households in George compound and analysed various aspects of development, such as housing, upgrading and living
conditions of women and youth. Three of several reports are in the reference list (Schlyrer, 1988, 1999, 2002). During five fieldwork periods between the years of 2003 and 2010 I visited between six and twelve elderly residents and talked specifically about their life as citizens in the community and about generational support. Their narratives are all used to inform this paper, but only Jane Mwanza is mentioned by (a fictitious) name.

In 2004, as part of a course in qualitative methodology, I asked students at the Copperbelt University to interview two elderly urban residents, one woman and one man, and in essays present their urban life histories with focus on housing, care and livelihoods in the light of generational cooperation or conflict. Most of the students found their informants in the Copperbelt towns, but some made their interviews in Lusaka.

It is a widely accepted view that the interviewer is part of the creation process of narratives (Makoni and Stoeken, 2002). In the first place the interviewers may affect the histories the elderly have told them. My own position, as an alien in George compound hanging around for some weeks and posing questions every or every second year, obviously affects the histories I am told. From another study it is reported that the Zambian researchers met numerous older people, in urban townships in particular, who begged them for relief food (HelpAge International 2006). As I was well known by my informants I was not subjected to begging. It could be assumed that they exaggerated their suffering in hope of getting a gift, but by observing their home conditions and talking to several household members, I saw suffering enough - exaggerations were not needed. Still, I benefitted from being an ignorant outsider which made it possible for me pose stupid and intimate questions without insulting the informants. On the other hand, being an outsider carries a risk of distortion of the narratives due to language translation, cultural differences. Long discussions with my translator, a former nurse aid at the local clinic living in the area, helped in my interpretation of interviews and construction of narratives.
With sixty-nine student interviewers individual biases may be diffused, while their common position as students, many of them from better-off homes, was reflected in commonly appearing moral comments in their conclusions. Nevertheless, the narratives in the students’ essays provide an insight into how one-hundred-and-thirty-six elderly people lived and experienced generational support. Most of them were poor, but of different positions in regarding education, income and home ownership. The huge number makes it likely that the main variations in living conditions and forms of generational support have been identified. Thus, the essays provide a basis for making a well informed strategic selection of narratives for deeper analyses.

This paper

After a short outline of the situation for elderly people in Zambia at a national level, this paper focus on how Jane Mwanza and other old women cope. If they are presented as inhabitants in George compound, they have been my informants; otherwise they are quoted from the narratives recorded by the students. When I dare suggest quantitative interpretation in terms of “many” or “few”, it is on basis of almost one hundred and fifty narratives.

The paper discusses the elderly cope in their homes depending on different household arrangements. To belong to a family is often to benefit from support and love, but there can also be severe tensions in enlarged households. The next section reveals that the elderly women’s contributions to their families are significant. They are both breadwinners and providers of care.

The paper continues with an outline of the differences between women and men both as recipients and providers of support. Finally it discusses how also women who are committed to modern urban life are threatened by accusations of witchcraft. It also identifies the form of citizenship they have crafted by their work in the local community. In summary, the paper aims at adding to a conversation about ageing, peri-urban life, and gendered generational support systems and the agency of old women.
Age and gendered conditions in Zambian cities

Zambia was early urbanised and in the sixties, when I made my first study in George compound, a quarter of its population lived in urban areas. For long it was generally believed that half of its populations should live in urban areas when entering the new Millennium. However, in the nineties the urban growth rate halted, and between 1998 and 2000 the statistics even points at a decline on one per cent - from thirty-seven to thirty-six (CSO, 1998, 2003). Potts (2006) points at the Zambian case as a telling illustration of the profound impact of economic decline on migration and urban growth.

Zambia, like many other African countries, is deviating from the global trend of an ageing population. Only three per cent of the Zambian population has reached the age of sixty-five, and this percentage is not expected to increase much during the next decade. Life expectancy at birth was more than fifty years in the seventies but dropped to thirty-seven years, less than one baby of five can be expected to reach the age of sixty-five (UNDP, 2006). These figures reflect the impact of HIV/AIDS as well as of poverty. In 1998, two thirds of urban households lived in extreme poverty and with an HIV prevalence of twenty-eight per cent among fifteen to forty-nine years old (Zambia 2002, Table 2.3 and p.110).

In spite of these figures the number of elderly in towns is going to increase (UNDP 2001, calculated from tables 2, 5 and 8). Since colonial time it has been assumed that elderly people should retire “to their village”, but this has never been entirely true, and it will be less so for the generation born in cities.

A comparative study in African cities in several countries addressed the saying that “modernisation” deprived the elderly of their family support. Peil (1995) argued on the basis of the findings that the changes following modernisation were not too dramatic as the support to elderly had always been limited. Still she found that many elderly did receive support, albeit limited and insecure. However, in a recent study in Zambia less than forty per cent of the older persons with adult
children said that they received help from them (HelpAge International, 2006).

Another of the few studies that have been done of generational support in urban Africa have made the observation that elderly people often contribute to the household income by working or by sharing their pension among household members. Nevertheless, older people are often considered a burden (Dvereux, 2001; Beall and Kanji, 1999). In Zambia, as in many African countries, the support to elderly largely remains a family business as there is no state universal flat pension, and retirement benefits are tied to formal employment (Kamwengo, 2004).

Ageing has only recently been identified as a development issue and is severely under-researched (Risseeuw, 2001; A&D, 2002; INSTRAW, 1999; Makoni and Stroeken, 2002). Although overrepresented among the poor, the elderly are usually not included among the target groups in development cooperation and consequently not prioritised for research funding by international agencies.

The conditions of elderly are highly gendered, as Zambian women's historic exclusion from wage work and weak property rights continues to affect their life at old age. On average Zambian women are not getting older than men, but due to age difference at marriage, there are many more widowed women than men. Widowed men also tend to remarry more often than women, resulting in a situation where sixteen per cent of Zambian households are headed by widows, while only two per cent are headed by widowers (SPRG, 1993).

**Various living arrangements**

Jane Mwanza was the lucky owner of a house, and she was ageing in the midst of her grandchildren. The impact of HIV/AIDS and poverty on family formation is great. It exhausts the capacity of the extended family and generates new household types, composed by the survivors of the extended family who join as a strategy to maintain a home and take care of orphans. In the narratives there are several grandmothers who had to take the full responsibility for grandchildren.
Ideal household formations looked different. While close interaction in extended families created many conflicts, the situation of living alone was neither desirable.

**Ideal living arrangement: close but separate**

Elderly people in George wanted their children to provide shelter, but preferably not in the same house as a married son or the daughter. Rather the ideal was to live separately but close to their offspring. Munalula (2005) found the same in Livingstone, and several of the students' informants said the same. One old woman was brought to town by her married daughter when her health was no longer so good. With the son-in-law's blessing she moved into their three-roomed house, but soon the old woman built herself a simple outbuilding of mud bricks. She moved out in order to avoid conflicts. She appreciated having a place of her own, albeit of poor quality and still been able to be close to her daughter and her grandchildren.

The Mwanza family divided the house and made separate entrances. To live too close to in-laws was never appreciated. The concepts of household and family easily create some confusion. A comprehensive study aiming at defining the Zambian family concluded that family did not mean the same thing to all Zambians (WLSA, 1997). A married couple is by elderly people in George compound not seen as a family, but as two individual forming a union between two families. Among the youth in George compound, however, I found a strong dominance for a view which was very close to the “Western” concept of a nuclear family. Living in the same household as the elderly generation were by them not seen as a “normal” state of affairs (Schlyter, 1999).

Nevertheless, the elderly informants lived in a range of different types of household, with one, two or three, even four generations. Munalula (2005) observed in Livingstone that widow headed household tended to include more relatives. Multi-generational living seemed to be common in its all female form. Many old women joined an unmarried daughter's household when they became
widowed. Multi-generational households consisting of mother, daughter(s) and grandchildren, and as long as no in-laws were present in the household conflicts seemed to be rare.

On the basis of the feelings expressed by the elderly informants, there is reason to differentiate between households headed by a member of a younger generation, which takes in an elderly person, and households headed by an elderly person, which is joined by a member of a younger generation. Nonetheless, men regularly presented themselves as heads of households, even if they were the ones who joined it. So did, for example, the late son of Jane Mwanza, even when he was retrenched and economically dependent on his mother. Nevertheless, there is a difference. The headship of Jane Mwanza’s son was, at the most, accepted as a public front; within the household it was contested. The official definition of headship on basis of sex was in practice modified depending on age, ownership of the home and on who was the main provider.

Tensions in enlarged households

Already in the fifties, in the Copperbelt towns, Epstein (1981) found that generations seldom lived together. He reported that spatial constraints in urban housing made a desirable separation between the elderly people and their in-laws difficult, and that this caused conflicts. Fifty years later this need for separation remains a major reason for conflicts in multi-generational households. The narratives of this study reflect similar difficulties in handling urban spatial arrangements.

One old man complained over the spatial proximity between their and the son’s bedroom, and especially over the sharing of the toilet. The issue of toilets and privacy was often emerges as a problem also in studies from other African countries (van der Sjak, 2002).

As long as the stay of the elderly was regarded to be temporary they could cope, but tension increased with their prolonged stay. One elderly couple admitted
that their son’s marriage almost ended in divorce as a result of the tensions, in principle, they saw no problem in the fact that their children had to support them. They considered it a sons’ duty to provide for their parents, and to do so with full respect. As another informant posed it: “I would like my children to look after me, but not to treat me as a charity case.”

Another elderly woman moved to her daughter in George compound. The daughter already supported a sickly husband, five children aged between twenty-five and eleven, four small grandchildren, and a younger sister. The old woman was healthy and strong and managed much of the work in the household as her daughter was working long hours. The family of thirteen lived in three small rooms, rented in a tenement house. This old woman did not experience the sharing of space as negative. She was just happy to have the children around. She did not like to sleep alone. She never entered the daughters and son-in-law’s bedroom and sharing of toilet was a nuisance but mostly because they shared with five other households in the tenement.

Hansen (1997) in her study in Mtendere in Lusaka pointed at the different expectations that women and men, young and old, had about appropriate behaviour as causes to tension. Young people in George compound had little tolerance for member of the elderly generation who joined their nucleus family and intruded on both physical and economical space. The elderly, on their side were appalled by the lack of respect they met from the teenagers. A study in Malawi points at conflicts between grandparents and grandchildren, and presents a case where the grandparents occupy what used to be the boys bedroom (Chipeta, 2007).

The elderly rarely complained about sleeping space or shortage of space in general. The problems of sharing domestic space had more to do with power and respect than with actual physical space. Elderly men demanded service from the younger generation; elderly women caused conflicts by intervening in decisions on how the home should be run.
In extreme cases, there was fear and hate between family members affected by premature death and the sharing of tiny space and scarce resources. In one household in George compound a daughter-in-law accused her father-in-law for having killed her children - his grandchildren. In another it was the grandmother who was blamed for using witchcraft in order to get a larger share of the scarce food. Several other narratives include stories of elderly moving out of households due to similar reasons. Although tensions generally were much less serious, the consciousness about difficulties in multi-generational living under the same roof was widely expressed.

A way to minimise tension within the households the elderly joined was to make the stay temporary. The sheltering of elderly parents was sometimes shared between many daughter and sons. They were “guests” in their adult children’s houses, staying a month or two with each of them. Positive result of this commuting life was, according to one woman informant, that she learned to know all her grandchildren; the negative aspect was that she had no place of their own. She experienced a feeling of homelessness.

Charity or no support

Some elderly persons liked to live alone as long as they were reasonably healthy and had relatives who paid them regular visits and supported them in case of need. However, at a distance from their children the elderly were easily “forgotten”. There were many of the elderly respondents who did not get the support they needed and considered they were entitled to according to custom.

A common explanation to loneliness and lack of support was the early death of the children and grandchildren. Another explanation, common not only among people originating from neighbouring countries, was that they had lost contact not only with relatives but also with their own children and grandchildren. Among the poor distance often meant a complete break in contacts. Poor people’s children
often "disappeared" if they moved to another town, while wealthy parents with
children working abroad had no difficulties in keeping contact. Sometimes the
contact with children was broken due to conflicts with in-laws over resources
which occasionally surfaced in accusations of witchcraft.

For many of the elderly charity from churches has been their last resort. In
George compound, an old woman with a severely retarded son had for many
years been dependent on the church to pay her rent. However, the church had
announced that due to the increased number of needy people the rent could no
longer be paid. When she was evicted from her rented room a church mate, who
spent most time with her orphaned grandchildren in another neighbourhood,
had offered her temporary accommodation. She did not know for how long she
would be allowed to stay.

Some elderly were in desperate need of shelter but got no support for that. A
seventy-five year old man cared for his wife who had been blind for about five
years. Their small one roomed mud house had a leaking roof; a door that could
not be shut, and walls that had party collapsed. Until he died he did the cooking
and all other domestic chores. Water was drawn from a shallow well just close to
the house. The couple sometimes got a little help from a son, who was a drunkard,
or from a very poor daughter with a large family of her own. Another daughter
was married in the Copperbelt, but they had not heard from her in years.

As the wife was blind they were on the charity list of their church. Just old
age was not enough to qualify for this charity, there were too many in need. The
Church provided them with a bag of mealie-meal on average every third month,
but sometimes it took longer. At the time of one of the interviews, the mealie-
meal had been finished for more than two weeks and they were hungry. The man
offered to work for the neighbours as a way of begging without losing his dignity.

An almost eighty year old woman in George compound had lost all her seven
children. Her only relative was an orphaned ten years old great grandson who
stayed with friends to his late mother in another compound. He walked for one
hour twice a week after school to visit her. He helped her with small things and
he got a meal.
The woman cultivated a rented plot outside town and grew beans and pumpkin leaves around her house. One day I met she had carried fifteen kilograms of maize on public transport to the mill, and back to the house. She did not expect any charity; when asked what she would do when she was no longer strong enough to work so hard, she said: “I will lie down and stop eating, and then death will come to me.”

The elderly as providing citizens

Many children wanted to support their parents, and the narratives bear witness of many cases of loving and relationships, but poverty and AIDS put them under strain. In contrast to the ideal notion of old people having the right to “sit and eat”, elderly people worked as long as they had the strength and possibilities. Generational reciprocity often seemed unbalanced with elderly people acting as providers as long as they have any strength. Only when ill and weak they became needy and dependent.

The narratives clearly bear witness of the existence of a working elderly population. Elderly women often had an advantage before men retired from formal wage work, in that they already were established in the informal sector. They had been working since they were young, at least part time, in petty trading or some other small business which they could continue or expand as long as they were healthy enough. Jane Mwanza continued to sell cooked food outside her front door also when her son was employed and when her widowed daughter supported the family with money generated from the house she had shared with her late husband. So even if Jane Mwanza’s contribution to the household not always had been the largest, it was the most permanent and reliable.

The elderly contributed to the households both with material support and, especially women, by doing housework, nursing and providing care. Almost all elderly persons living in the household of a son or a daughter tried to contribute to the household subsistence with their own income generation activities. For
example, elderly women sold small portions of items like salt by the roadside, or they cultivated the plot or even fields outside the residential area. The students’ essays reveal that surprisingly many elderly were the main or even the only supporters of large households. Adult children joined their parents households when unemployed and in need, and ageing parents continued to support them. This situation is also found in the Zimbabwe context (Nyanguru et al., 1994).

Ferguson (1999) avowed a more involuntarily form of elderly providing; Some widows of mine workers received pensions, but monthly abuse by relatives of their late husband who came to collect what they regarded as their money.

**Grandmothers and orphans**

Elderly women were the main providers of care in case of illness. Reports from many countries on the effects of HIV/AIDS have confirmed the crucial role of elderly women in the care of the sick (Baylies, 2002; Makina, 2009; Nyanzi 2009). Wives nursed their husbands, but it was seldom the other way round, although there were exceptions among the informants. Women suffering from AIDS moved to, or called for, their mothers for help during the last and most difficult periods of their lives. For example, Jane Mwanza’s daughters moved back home to be nursed before they passed away, while the mother of her daughter-in-law came to help out during what was believed to be her daughter’s last months of life.

Fifty years ago urban residents on the Copperbelt told Epstein (1981) how they moved to their grandparents at the age of five or six years. It still happens in some poor families that a child, most often a girl-child, is sent to live with the grandmother in order to help her, but in George compound most of the many grandmother-headed households have been formed because the children have been orphaned. A study in Lesotho reveals that two thirds of all orphans live in households headed by women (Chaka, 2007).

In another study, also from Lesotho, Kimane and Mohale (2007) note that there were two types of grandmothers heading households with orphans. The
ones they call the “younger generation grandmothers” are in another terminology maternal aunts. Still there are many of the “older generation” that takes care of orphans and provide homes and try to socialise them to full citizens in spite of poor health and scarce resources. Like Jane Mwanza they have to take children out of school and put them to work in income-generating petty activities.

A neighbour of Jane Mwanza managed to raise three granddaughters before she passed away. She and the girls developed a small home-based business of making floor-polish. But all business ventures were not as successful, for example, Jane Mwanza and her daughter-in-law complained over losses in their petty trading business, since they had taken a loan from a non-governmental organisation and built a proper stall.

Grandmothers often have difficulties in asserting the rights of the children. For example, when a daughter of Jane Mwanza was widowed and moved back home she was granted half the income generated by the rent of the house she had shared with her husband. When she passed away and left the children with Jane Mwanza, the relatives of her husband sold the house and kept the money. Jane Mwanza tried to claim a part of the money for the children but failed.

**Gendered support**

Cliggett (2005) reports from rural Zambia that old men maintained control over resources including the labour of their offspring, while old women had to develop strategies to encourage their children to support them. One such strategy was to present oneself as old and weak and remind the children of the sacrifices made for them. In urban Zambia old women rather presented themselves as strong and able to help with child care, nursing or home work. Women in George compound used to say: “You cannot trust those modern sons”. They foresaw the need to have something to offer in negotiations about support. Home ownership was an important strategy of women to secure support. If at old age a woman could offer free shelter her chances of being supported increased.
In town old men had no control over the labour of his offspring, and no strategy to compensate for this can be identified in the narratives. While women often developed close and loving relationships, notably to their daughters, men were more often detached from their children and therefore in lack of support. Some old men were lonely and complained bitterly about sons not respecting their traditional duties.

Other men did not expect anything from their children as they knew that they had not contributed to the children's upbringing or education. For example, the old drunkard who had many children by four different wives, said that he envied his friends who had educated their children and were now well looked after. Sometimes the children visited him where he lived with his sister, but they gave none or little support. Women have often been the only care-takers of children as men have moved, started new families, and ceased to support the children from the previous marriage(s). These children are more likely to take care of their ageing mother than of their father.

Among the informants there were many old women but no old men living alone. This gender difference can only partly be explained by the fact that in Zambia there are many more widows than widowers. Most widowers did not see them selves able to manage a home and solved the problem by remarrying a younger woman. If he could find no woman to marry, there may be women relatives to rely on. This was the case of one man who had been a drunkard and married four times. After a severe quarrel he divorced his last wife, he built a house in a compound and requested his sister to come and stay with him, which she did. She generated the income by selling vegetables; she brought the food, cooked and did all other work around the house. The old man became totally dependent on her. At least he said he was grateful to God for the gift of his sister, who looked after him.

A woman in George compound supported her mother who had raised her, but when her father approached her for help, she told him that she could not afford helping him. The saying that "you reap what you sow", was certainly not always
true, but as Varley and Blasco (2003) noted in Mexico it was part of popular thinking. However, all men left without support, did not see it this way, but blamed the mother for turning their children against them. Such cases are also reviewed by Kamwengo (2007).

Even in the most loving families resources were scarce. Many of the elderly saw the poverty and the needs in their children’s and grandchildren’s households and did not want to be a burden. Thus, they did not ask for the support they needed. There were also parents who saw their children living in relative wealth, and did not get the share they expected. They had no means of forcing the children to support them.

Too many narratives bear testimony of sons or grandsons who do not contribute to the welfare of the elderly. One old woman lived in the same house as a grandson, his wife and children. She, the wife and the children were totally dependent on a daughter living elsewhere for food and other expenditures. The grandson was working but did not even contribute to the meals he ate. He spent his wages “on beer and who knows what else”. Kamwengo (2007) in his study in Livingstone also found that daughters were more helpful than sons.

The support provided by the elderly to the younger generation was also highly gendered. Many working elderly men helped their grandchildren with school fees and other expenditures. Like Jane Mwanza, many grandmothers took care of orphaned and provided homes for them regardless of how difficult the situation was. Elderly women living as “dependents” within a sons or a daughter’s household often contributed to expenditures and always, as long as they could for health reasons they helped with work in the household, they nursed the ill and cared for the children. If elderly men took care of grandchildren’s everyday practical needs it was invariably a temporary solution to an emergency situation.
Commitment to modern urban life

Most of the elderly women were strongly committed to urban life, but they felt they had to explain why they not retired in the rural area, as was what elderly were supposed to do since colonial times. Lack of contact with their village of origin was a common reason for remaining in town, especially among the elderly who were born in neighbouring countries, but certainly not restricted to them. Jane Mwanza had not been to her villages of origin since her mother died many years ago. Many elderly claimed that everyone they once had known in the village had died.

How could elderly people be expected to start farming when there were no young people to help them? Lack of rural development left villages without service; even villages that once had school, post office, and a bus line were now depopulated. Old people used to the city were not willing to move away from the little service they got, most important the health service.

Witchcraft accusations

Witchcraft was another reason to avoid the village and stay in town. A sixty-year old woman was afraid that she would be bewitched in the village if she brought her modern furniture and other “nice household goods”. A man of the same age did not expect witchcraft to be employed due to his richness, but because he was poor and had no gifts to bring to the villagers. However, the greatest fear was not of being bewitched, but of being accused of witchcraft. Several informants, women and men, stated that just by being old you are suspected to be a witch. The fact that “everyone in town minds his or her own business” lessened the risk of such accusations, and was a frequent argument for remaining in the urban area.

However, in times with so many young people passing away no elderly person could be safe from accusations. In George compound there were individuals who tried to get an income as a “traditional” doctor, and people looking for
explanations to their losses turned to these, and were told that it was an old relative or a neighbour who were to blame. Families were torn apart in fear and hatred. In one of the families I knew quite well a young woman actually believed that her father-in-law had killed her children in order to have a larger share of the food. Jane Mwanza had never been accused, but she told me that the mother of her daughter-in-law had suffered severely. Sichingabula (2000) concluded that also in Lusaka it was a common belief that old people are witches; otherwise they would not have been old.

On the Copperbelt in the fifties, Epstein (1981) found a belief in the capacity of a senior kinsman to bring affliction on neglectful younger relatives. This can be interpreted as a means of power used by the elderly in order to be supported. The narratives of this study do not give evidence of any efforts by the elderly to use this kind of power. On the contrary, accusations of witchcraft were occasionally used by the young generation as a reason to withdraw support for the elderly.

_Urban citizenship_

Munalula (2005) also noted that the elderly saw a clearly defined customary law duty of their children to provide shelter, the younger urban generation saw it more as a moral obligation attributed to religious principles or reciprocating what their parents had done for them. It is a clear tendency that in urban areas generational support and support within generations built more on individual friendship or love than on traditional obligations. This was one of the reasons why elderly build their own safety net. They were aware that expected support may fail to come when needed. The elderly women in George who had lived there in decades had built their own strong networks of friends among the neighbours. Neighbours were for Jane Mwanza and many other elderly women more important than relatives.

The one-party system of chairladies in every section of twenty-five houses provided a space for women like Jane Mwanza to act in the public, although
they were hardly empowered in decision-making beyond the social sphere, they worked as a kind of unpaid social workers. The restrictions to women's public participation were primarily imposed by the husbands. This was reflected in the fact that women heads of households were over-represented as chairladies although they already had the double burden of breadwinning ad caring for their families. With the introduction of the multi-party system in the 1990s this space for agency was lost. Although women were well represented in the Residential Development Committee, for the many women in George there was no political space offered, so they turned to the churches.

Not even Jane Mwanza, who had been a chairlady and maintained over the years her interest in politics, had heard about the Residential Development Committee of George compound. She had not heard about any public meetings and she could see no improvements in the area. She voted in every election hoping that UNIP would restore the situation as it was with a fixed price on millie meal and free schools for everyone. But it was the participation, the feeling that the community together worked for its improvement that she missed at most. She and her friends had developed a strong sense of citizenship which was not built on putting claims to the state but on working together for the common good (Schlyter, 2009).

Jane Mwanza was fully committed to urban life and embraced the prospects of modernity, and although modernity had not brought the expected prosperity, she proudly declared: “This is my place”.

**Conclusion**

In Zambia life expectancy has been lowered and urban growth reversed due to deepening poverty and the AIDS pandemic. Still this study indicates an increased presence of elderly in town as less urban employees retire to rural areas, while old parents leave the villages to join their urban children. This paper has argued
that poverty and effects of the AIDS are also factors that impose new roles and responsibilities for elderly women's and men's living in the cities, thus changing the gender and generational support systems.

The reality behind the saying that old people have the right to “sit and eat” supported by their sons, is certainly changing. Both elderly women and men work to earn an income for as long as they can to support themselves and make substantial contributions to their households. Many children give support to their parents, but elderly parents are also supporting the younger generations. Still living sons and daughters are often poor, and among the elderly there is a widespread understanding of the inability of the middle generation to support both their children and their parents.

The elderly often idealised the time when families were united and lived in a communal kind of setting where the former were looked after, not only by close relatives but by all people in the village. In this perspective they saw individualism and small or nuclear families as a negative trend: “Now people just concentrate on their own children”. With a nuclear family the risk of being alone at old age increases.

There is a gender bias in the generational support system: Daughters and granddaughters are seen as more reliable and as contributing more to the livelihoods of the elderly than sons and grandsons. Unmarried (divorced or widowed) daughters are often cooperating very closely with their mothers. Many elderly women rely on daughters also when there are sons alive. Affectionate and loving relationships between individuals within the family are more often the basis for support than are “traditional duties”.

The situation of women and men in old age was found to be highly dependent on their gendered position in earlier life. The narratives show that years of exclusion from wage work and from ownership of property have a negative bearing on women’s life at old age. There are some tendencies of change of the gender division of labour, but care taking and nursing remain in the female domain. The elderly women engage in domestic work, child-care and nursing of the ill.
Exceptional men can demonstrate that reality is more varied than the stereotypes, but usually when men engage in what is regarded as female tasks it is seen as a temporary solution brought on by necessity. Individualised support, poverty and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS have turned elderly people into providing resource persons.

In line with the Millennium Development Goals, development cooperation worldwide is focussed on poverty alleviation. In spite of this, poverty alleviation is not targeting elderly; their poverty status seems to be taken as a norm. This paper provides a basis for the argument that it is time to change the view of the elderly as non-productive, to highlight the burdens on elderly women, and to include them in poverty reduction schemes and in development policy.

References


