

Absent Fathers, Absent Husbands and the Plight of families left behind

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Abstract

The Zimbabwean family structure has undergone immense demographic changes owing to the sharp and debilitating effects of the downward spiralling economy that has increasingly kept family members apart since 2008. Many Zimbabwean men have been kept away from their families for very long periods of time as they seek to provide for their families. This research investigated absent fathers and or absent husbands and the challenges faced by families of these migrant workers who spend a lot of time away from home in Mberengwa District of the Midlands Province, Zimbabwe. The research employed in-depth interviews and questionnaires to gather information from members of the families left behind, the migrant absentee fathers and or husbands as well as from key informants. A sample of eight-nine families whose husbands and or fathers had been away for prolonged periods of more than three months was reached out to establish the challenges that they faced in the absence of the father and or husband figure. Twelve fathers and or husbands who have been away for prolonged periods of more than three months were also interviewed. Nine key informant interviews were held with knowledgeable individuals. This research established that men are seen in the African families as economic providers, disciplinarians and protectors of the families. The absence of fathers and or husbands for prolonged periods, therefore, had profound effects on the well-being of the family. Respondents cited general moral decadence among family members as a result of the absence of the father. They also noted that in such families, youth delinquency was very rife with such vices as abuse of drugs and alcohol being high. Wild partying which is coupled with a lack of focus on life was also highlighted by respondents. Furthermore, it was established that in some instances, young wives left behind by migrants engaged in extra marital affairs as they could not stand the long period of their partners' absence. Respondents also highlighted that the children became sexually active and got married early as a result of their carefree behaviour because the children lacked strict disciplinarians in the mould of the father. This research recommends that where possible, families should stay and live together to ensure that the father constantly plays his role in the care and upbringing of children. Furthermore the research recommends that mothers in the home be empowered to act like the "father" when it comes to decision making and meting out punishments. The research further recommends that the extended family that was synonymous with African culture be rekindled to ensure every child is every individual parent's responsibility.

Key Words

Absent fathers, absent husbands, extended family, moral decadence, child marriages, prostitution, divorce.