

Staying in the Village

Immobility, Future-Making and Womanhood in Rural Eastern Zambia¹

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The futures people imagine and how they assess places' abilities to act as conduits to such futures can give a powerful hint as to why they decide to migrate, or stay. This chapter interrogates how considerations of the future influence the aspirations and decisions to remain in a rural area of a diverse set of women in Zambia's Eastern Province. While migration has been extensively studied in Zambian historiography and social science literature, immobility, and in particular the choice to stay in rural areas, has rarely received attention in its own right. Rural dwelling has mostly been treated as a default strategy or a symptom of lacking the resources to migrate to urban centres (Peša 2013; Hepburn 2016). In addition, although some research has been done on individual actors' aspirations (Peša 2019, 2020), neither immobility nor migration have been explicitly examined with an eye towards people's gendered constructions of the future and future-related attitudes.

This research therefore explores connections between rural immobility aspirations, future orientations and ideals of womanhood in the life histories of 62 women from three rural locations in Eastern Province. It does so by asking the research participants about their im/mobility aspirations and decisions, imaginaries of home and elsewhere, and visions of the future. How do the research participants relate to the future, what kinds of futures do they imagine and what place does spatial im/mobility have in their aspirations? Additionally, in what ways are aspirations gendered and what does this tell us about

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local ideals of womanhood? The answers to those questions illuminate some of the nuances of decision-making around immobility in this rural setting.

I. Literature, Concepts and Methods

Immobility is understood here as “continuity in one’s center of gravity, or place of residence, relative to spatial and temporal frames” (Schewel 2019, 329). The spatial frame is a rural-urban one, so immobility is defined as such in contrast to migrating to an urban area. The temporal frame is one of continued rural dwelling over a number of years, making it possible to account for the experiences of women who may have previously spent, or may yet do so, periods of residence in town. Immobility is thus not “merely the absence of mobility”, but “is formed relationally with and through the potential for and practice of mobility” (Salazar 2021, 1). Immobility can be motivated by a variety of reasons and manifest in as many different ways as migration, and is essential to understanding the complex dynamics of moving and staying (Schewel 2019; Zickgraf 2018).

Mobilities research has noted the gendered nature of im/mobilities (e.g., Clarsen 2014; Cattán 2008). Many cultures mark geographical mobility as a masculine value, assigning women a less valued sedentary connection to the home and the private sphere (Sheller 2008; Ahmed et al. 2003). Studies of immobility have similarly documented a tendency, in various contexts, for women to be “left behind” while men move away (Chatterji 2017; Zickgraf 2018). However, focusing on women’s actual practices of im/mobility destabilizes such dichotomies (Jónsson 2011). For a long time in colonial Zambia, women were officially excluded from labour migration flows to urban centres, but they found their way to towns nevertheless (Chauncey 1981; Parpart 1994). Nowadays, adult women still migrate somewhat less often than men,² and differences in women’s and men’s im/mobility strategies at certain points in the life course have been identified (Ashbaugh 1996; Hansen 1997; Cliggett 2005).

2 The 2010 Census of Population and Housing (CSO 2013) indicates that in the 0–24 age bracket, women migrants are more numerous, with the lowest sex ratio of males to females at 81.9 for the 15–24 age group. The opposite is true for the age bracket 25–60+, where more men migrate, the highest male-to-female ratio being 107.9 for the 25–44 age group.

But other dividing lines in addition to gender exist as well. Rather than viewing women as universally more likely to be immobile, the focus should be on how their social positionings along dimensions such as age, class and education “affect their possibilities and experiences of migration” and immobility (Jónsson 2011, 12). Accordingly, this chapter traces how gender articulates with other categories of difference to shape women’s future orientations, im/mobility aspirations and heterogeneous experiences of rural immobility in Zambia’s Eastern Province. It thereby aligns with an African feminist (or Afro-feminist) perspective which takes intersectionality as its guiding principle (Tamale 2020; Chipuriro 2021), recognizing that people’s complex identities are steeped in multiple, context-specific and historical “interlocking systems of oppression” (Collins 2015, 8).

In recent migration scholarship, aspirations have been described as emotionally coloured “purposeful constructions of the future which evolve over time” (Boccagni 2017, 1) and their relational, temporally distributed and non-linear nature recognized (Wang and Collins 2020). Inspired by this literature, aspirations and im/mobility decisions are analysed here not only as a form of reaching towards (or away from) imagined futures, but as entanglements of past, present and future temporalities. Aspirations can reflect a person’s experiences (Wang and Collins 2020) and the limitations of their structural position (the past lingering in the present), and at the same time can motivate action now, as people engage in Future-Making, or as the future is made present (Anderson and Adey 2012).

While the future is elusive and ultimately indeterminate (Goldstone and Obarrio 2016), often characterized in spatial terms as a “site” not yet there, but capable of taking “shape within a mental space” (Sarr 2020, 99; see also Koselleck 1985), not all possibilities can be actualized or even imagined, or affectively experienced, by everyone in the same way. At an individual level, this manifests in different future orientations, i.e., different ways of relating to the future in the present (Anderson and Adey 2012). In this chapter, future orientations refer to beliefs people hold about whether, to what extent and in what manner they can shape their futures. As such they are related to Arjun Appadurai’s “capacity to aspire”, a navigational capacity to negotiate social norms and “explore the future”, which is unequally distributed among the rich and the poor (2004, 69). Two narrated future orientations identified in the empirical material are considered: *postponed futures* and *active future-making*.

The aspirations/capabilities model developed by scholars of international migration (De Haas 2014; Carling and Schewel 2018) is also relevant to the

discussion in as far as it sheds light on the research participants' im/mobility decisions. These, according to this model, arise from the interaction between aspirations and the capability to move or stay.³ However, other factors also affect im/mobility aspirations and decisions. Among them are socio-cultural norms and values (Frye 2012; Mata-Codesal 2015), such as those pertaining to gender relations. In addition, "imaginaries" of town and village figured prominently in the life histories. Noel Salazar defines imaginaries as "socially shared and transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices" (2018, 11). Geographical imaginaries help visualize potential futures in a given place and thus inform im/mobility aspirations and decisions.

This chapter introduces evidence from life and family history interviews with 62 women from three rural locations in Petauke, Chipata and Chadiza Districts, conducted during two research stays in 2021 and 2022. It also incorporates evidence from two group discussions held in 2021, as well as from informal conversations and my observations. The study locations were selected with the help of informants from the cities of Lusaka and Chipata who had relatives in rural Eastern Province and were willing to either accompany me to their "home villages" or arrange for family members to host me. The research participants in the study locations were identified through a combination of theoretical and snowball sampling, with the aid of local hosts and informants. The goal was to include a broad range of im/mobility experiences. The interviews ranged from semi-structured to unstructured, and the interview partners were encouraged to narrate⁴ their life and family histories and reflect on their im/mobility experiences.

Since most of the interviews took place in the related languages of Chichewa/Chinyanja and Nsenga, research assistants who acted as interpreters, or later transcribed and translated the interviews, played a key role in creating the source material.⁵ Co-leading the interviews, they provided

3 The capability to move stands for "a fundamental human freedom" to choose where to live (De Haas 2014, 26). While less dynamic than aspirations, it connects past, present and future in comparable ways (Wang and Collins 2020).

4 Thenceforth the research participants will be referred to as "narrators".

5 By interpreting and translating, the research assistants also created the first textual interpretations of the spoken interviews. The interpreters I worked with across the three research locations were Maliya Mzyece Sililo, Taonga Sibuta, Malisela Zulu and Tinenenji Phiri. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and translated by Twasy Mu-

valuable information on the local context and assisted with recruiting participants, arranging interviews and explaining my presence to anyone who asked.⁶ For the thematic analysis, I chiefly worked with the English transcripts of the interviews, coding them with the help of the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. Some nuances of meaning may have been lost in the process of translation.⁷

II. Research Context and the Research Participants

In Zambia, rural-urban migration has long been a prominent social practice and livelihood strategy (Peša 2013). Bolstered by enduring colonial legacies of rural-urban inequality, it has fluctuated over the postcolonial period, partly in response to economic “booms and busts” in urban areas (Fraser 2010; Potts 2011). In recent years, state support for agriculture and service provision in the countryside have improved, but most employment and superior infrastructure, educational and health services are still found in urban centres. A far larger share of the population living below the national poverty line resides in rural areas, 76.6 percent in 2015 (CSO 2016). Therefore, at least theoretically, rural dwellers could stand to gain from moving to urban areas. However, some of the differences between rural and urban areas have shifted over time. Living standards experienced by the urban poor have deteriorated, and examples of rural prosperity and larger-scale farming have multiplied, albeit mostly funded by the off-farm incomes of urban-rural migrants (Üllenberg et al. 2017,

taka, Natasha Chibuye, Charles Simwanza, Mofya Chibuye, Taonga Sibuta and Ellah Jere. Some of the interviews I conducted in English without assistance.

- 6 On the complex, often under-acknowledged role of research assistants in knowledge production on Africa, see Schumaker (2001) and Bank (2008). On issues of translation and working with interpreters in qualitative research, see Temple and Edwards (2002), Temple and Young (2004) and Turner (2010).
- 7 To ensure some translation quality control, each interview was interpreted and translated by different research assistants. When analysing the transcripts, I compared the transcribed interpretation provided on site with the usually more thorough translation of the narrators' statements done afterwards. In the course of the field research, I acquired an intermediate knowledge of Chichewa/Chinyanja and a Nsenga-influenced dialect spoken in Petauke and Chipata Districts, so occasionally I was able to personally verify the translations by listening to the recordings.

38; Sitko and Jayne 2014). Nowadays, as cities become increasingly unwelcoming to those with seemingly little to offer their unequal economies, some aspiring rural movers redirect their routes towards mid-size and smaller towns or other rural areas (Üllenberg et al. 2017; Chamberlin, Sitko, and Jayne 2018).

The Eastern Province of Zambia is the site of a historical culture of migration (Peša 2019) dating back to the colonial era. As most other rural regions of Zambia, it supplied labour migrants to colonial Zimbabwe, South Africa, and later the Zambian Copperbelt and Lusaka (Zgambo 1992). Besides reflecting economic, political and personal impulses, migration formed part of the region's "sociocultural outlook" (Peša 2019, 168; see also Cohen and Sirkeci 2011), generating cultural beliefs and representations which changed over time and affected the localities and people involved, the migrants as well as the stayers (Hahn and Klute 2007). In postcolonial times, a large share of migrant flows from the Province were directed towards the capital city Lusaka. Women have been distinct agents of this history,⁸ often utilizing different pathways of migration than men owing to formal employment being less open to women for the most part of the 20th century. Besides education and marriage, family connections, domestic service and informal trade are channels through which women and girls have been migrating to Lusaka and other Zambian towns (Ashbaugh 1996; Hepburn 2022). Over the period 2000–2010, 11.6 percent of the Eastern Province's population were outmigrants (CSO 2013), pointing to a large percentage of stayers, who are the focus of this study.

The research was conducted in three rural locations in the Province: the neighbouring Nsenga villages of Felesiano and Jackson in Petauke District (25 research participants), located at about 30 km from Petauke town; the adjacent Ngoni villages of Lulaka and Wemba in Chipata District (17 participants), located at 18 km from the city of Chipata; and the predominantly Chichewa villages Kalolo Mwangazi and Chinyama, and some surrounding farms, in Chadiza District (20 participants).⁹ These districts have been prominent migrant-sending regions ever since the colonial period, but are also among the

8 In the period 2000–2010, the percentage of women among out-migrants from the Eastern Province was 49.1, almost equal to that of men (CSO 2013). The age distribution in the two groups was different, however, with women dominating in the younger age brackets from 10 to 29 years old, and men in the older age groups.

9 The number of households in the villages in 2022, as per information from the village headmen (population estimates were unavailable or vague), was as follows: Felesiano, about 450 households; Jackson, 37 households; Lulaka, 75 households; Wemba, 62 households; Kalolo Mwangazi, 31 households; Chinyama, 400 households.

agriculturally most productive ones in the Province.¹⁰ Apart from the small, relatively remote off-road village Kalolo Mwangazi, the remaining villages have good road and market access, schools, marketplaces, and shops in the immediate vicinity, as well as access to electricity. Owing also to the villages' proximity to the district capitals Petauke and Chipata, the study's findings may not necessarily reflect the immobility experience in more remote, sparsely populated rural regions in Zambia.

The group of narrators is diverse in terms of age, place in the life course, class, marital status, number of dependents, mobility/migration experience, level of education and occupation. The oldest narrator was 91 years old at the time of interview, whereas the youngest was 23 years old, with the majority relatively evenly distributed as per year of birth across the 1950s–1990s range. All but one narrator had at least one child of their own, having passed a culturally defined threshold into adult womanhood, hinging foremost on becoming a mother and on getting married and living apart from one's parents, as many participants explained. The levels of formal education of the narrators mirror the overall lower levels of educational attainment in rural areas in Zambia (Burger 2011). 62.9% had from zero to seven years of schooling (primary education level), 19.35% had continued into secondary education without completing it, 6.45% had a full secondary education (Grade 12), and only 11.3% had any post-secondary training or higher education.

Besides two nurses and two teachers, only seven other women held or had at one time held wage jobs. Most of them were concentrated in the study location in Petauke District, where the schools, missionary societies and hospital at Minga Catholic Mission provide some wage employment. A handful of women had also worked as domestic workers, in Chipata, Lusaka, or in neighbouring rural areas. Otherwise, virtually all of the research participants are small-scale farmers, growing maize, groundnuts and soya beans as the most common crops. For most, this is a main occupation and source of income, which they sometimes combine with various kinds of casual work (like fetching water,

10 The Eastern Province itself has the highest proportion of households engaging in agriculture of all other Zambian provinces, 89.9 percent in the 2013/14 farming season, with more than half of all households owning some type of livestock (CSO 2016).

doing laundry or working in other people's fields),¹¹ informal trade¹² or home-based crafts.

III. Understanding Decisions and Aspirations to Stay – Imaginaries of Town and Village¹³

For the majority of women interviewed, im/mobility decisions seemed to be a thing of the past, as they had for some time already committed to rural dwelling. However, only about a fifth of them had always lived in the same village. The rest shared shorter or longer, simpler or circuitous histories of migration, often echoing historical patterns of mobility. For instance, some narrators had initially moved to rural Eastern Province as children when their labour migrant parents returned from the Copperbelt or Lusaka, or from more distant labour centres in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Some had migrated to urban areas with husbands who worked there, and then came back following the husband's retirement, death or divorce. Others had moved across rural areas upon marriage. This testifies to the fluidity of mobility and immobility in this rural context (Stockdale and Haartsen 2018).

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- 11 Men engage, additionally to farm work, in other kinds of casual work and income-generating activities, such as bricklaying, carpentry, cattle herding, and motorcycle taxi services.
 - 12 Many narrators occasionally sell vegetables, homemade pastries, basic groceries and other goods from their homes or by walking around the villages. The more ambitious traders in the Petauke and Chipata Districts locations have stalls at the local markets, whereas the most successful run small shops, bars or restaurants. The brewing of local alcoholic beverages popularly referred to as "beer", such as *chibuku* and *kachasu*, traditionally a women's activity, is among the most lucrative businesses.
 - 13 According to an official definition by the Central Statistical Office of Zambia (now Zambia Statistics Agency), "an urban place is a locality with at least 5,000 people, half of whom are not engaged in agriculture. Such a locality should have urban attributes such as electricity, piped water, schools and hospitals" (CSO 2013, 24). No official definition of village exists. In the interviews, the narrators used the term "village" to refer chiefly to their own places of residence, ranging from small, remote settlements and larger, more "urbanised" ones forming part of growing rural agglomerations. The term "town" was reserved for district centres like Petauke, mid-size urban centres like some of the Copperbelt towns, and most frequently referred to cities like Chipata and Lusaka.

Narrators explained past and ongoing decisions¹⁴ to stay in (or return to) a rural area and their general lack of aspirations to move to urban centres by drawing on distinct imaginaries of the urban chiefly focusing on the cost of living and economic opportunities in towns, as illustrated below. They seemed to possess quite detailed knowledge of living conditions in Lusaka and other Zambian towns, acquired through their own visits, past migration experiences or contacts with migrant relatives and neighbours.

Here in the village things are good. I do anything for myself. In town before I build I need to buy, before doing anything I have to buy, but here I don't have to buy anything. (Translated.)

Fostina¹⁵, 61, Chipata District

Town life is good but also it's not good because in town, there's no farming, you can only eat what you buy. In a village I can go farm instead of buying food. (Translated.)

Memory, 26, Petauke District

Even in town, life is not as good. Even in town you need money, you can't go and look for firewood anywhere, you have to buy, charcoal you have to buy, anything to eat you have to buy. So even in town, it's problems, so we women will be suffering in town unless you have a head on how to make money, otherwise you'd suffer the same way in town as you'd suffer in a village. (Translated)

Miriam, 29, Chipata District

As the quotes reveal, the narrators' main perception of life in an urban area involved being deprived of their main source of livelihood – farming – and depending fully on an income for survival. They expected to reside in the densely populated, poorest urban neighbourhoods called “compounds”¹⁶ in Zambia, where land for farming or gardening is seldom available, and housing has to be rented. Since an income is hard to come by in a job-strapped, crisis-ridden economy in urban and rural areas alike, for those unemployed or precari-

14 Rather than representing a distinct moment in time and space, decisions can be thought of as “an ongoing response” to changing life circumstances (McCormack and Schwanen 2011, 25).

15 Only the first names of the narrators are given to protect their privacy.

16 *Komboni* in Nyanja and Bemba; the more common term for this type of urban settlements elsewhere in Africa is townships.

ously employed, life in the compounds becomes a struggle to meet basic needs – food being the most basic one.¹⁷ Similar to Salazar's findings on migration imaginaries in Tanzania, the narrators were aware that by moving to town they would be joining populous "spaces of marginality" replicating, or possibly exacerbating, their rural conditions of hardship (Salazar 2011, 680).

In contrast to such an unappealing urban reality, in rural Eastern Province most villagers have access to land through inherited use rights under customary tenure, even if on a small scale. This despite the fact that such access is being slowly encroached upon by land markets and an increase in middle-scale farms (Sitko and Jayne 2014; Honig and Mulenga 2015), as well as land fragmentation resulting from decades of population growth, especially in areas in proximity to markets (Sitko and Chamberlin 2016). Some narrators, facing insecurity of land tenure in their village, along with unfavourable climatic conditions, were saving up to purchase a farm elsewhere and harboured rural-rural migration aspirations. Still, most villagers I spoke to had access to land sufficient to meet their own food needs, and to produce some surplus for sale. In the study locations women too could control land, on their own or jointly with husbands when married, either inherited from parents or from a husband's family.¹⁸ Access to land and housing¹⁹ along with agricultural skills acquired already in childhood represent assets rural dwellers can mobilize to ensure survival. In a widespread imaginary of "the village", rural farming provides a measure of basic security and self-sufficiency not found in the city.

Some narrators even construed it as a path to prosperity, with a vocal minority subverting binary discourses of rurality and urbanity to (re)define rural-

17 Being able to engage in food production is particularly critical to women for in most cultures of Zambia women are the designated food providers and play a bigger role in agriculture (Himonga and Munachonga 1991). Men are supposed to be the money providers and overall breadwinners, a role they can rarely fulfil owing to limited job opportunities. My observation in the study locations was that women do more of the daily provision for their households, including sourcing food, fetching water and firewood, cooking and cleaning, while agricultural work is often done jointly with men.

18 This seemed to be the case both in the traditionally matrilineal Nsenga and Chichewa villages (Petauke and Chadiza Districts, respectively), and the patrilineal Ngoni villages in Chipata District. However, I did not examine the question of land in detail; a substantial body of literature on women's access to land in Zambia has documented women's discrimination in customary and state systems of land control and ownership (see Himonga and Munachonga 1991; Kajoba 2002; Veit 2012).

19 In the rural areas, it is relatively easy to obtain a housing plot for free, and building materials and labour are cheaper.

ity as a condition of possibility and modernity, as in the following statement by Agnes P., a 56-year-old laboratory assistant and farmer from Petauke District: “[...]back then we had houses with grass, built with clay, but now we have houses with blocks and iron sheets, solar panels and electricity, it’s just like living in town.” It was a handful of wealthier rural women who voiced this perspective. For them, staying in the village was not only a matter of ensuring survival and avoiding suffering and potential downward social mobility in town, but of enjoying a standard of living that comes close to an urban ideal, in a less stressful and competitive environment.

Yet, an awareness of some advantages of town life, most of the time unnamed or vaguely implied (and often expressed as consumption aspirations – there is “nice food” in town, one drinks tea there), did sometimes seep through the women’s narratives. They were conscious of affluent settings and social mobility opportunities in urban areas offering standards of living superior to their own. Nonetheless, pragmatic considerations usually erased any (at least verbalised) morsels of fantasy about urban living.

Besides unfavourable structural conditions, many narrators were acutely aware of personal circumstances they believed disqualified them from pursuing a future in town. Two of these – the lack of formal educational qualifications and employment – were repeatedly emphasised and revealed another imaginary of the urban, connecting urban residence with wage jobs and formal education:

If I’m to leave this place I would want to move to a farm, not to town. I think that for me to live a good life and have wealth I can only farm because I have not been educated, that is what I have found out. If I go to town, I will suffer even more than here. [...] Yes, if I had the job I wanted, I would have wanted to be in town, because I wanted to get educated. But life would be hard if I went to town without an education. (Translated.)

Brenda, 32, Chadiza District

Interpreter: Have you ever thought of moving from here to town?

No, I don’t think about it. We in this family we are not educated, why should we go to town to do what. So, with us staying here we go to the field to cultivate, so that our children can eat. So that’s why we say we would keep the family here. Maybe these children after they follow our advice

they will get educated. Maybe they might one day come get us and take us to town to drink tea. (Translated.)

Juliana, 44, Petauke District

An influential discourse linking jobs to schooling, along with limited resources and not envisioning a possibility to resume educational trajectories interrupted long ago, serves to immobilize Brenda and Juliana (and their families) in a rural area, even though they may still cultivate urban-directed mobility aspirations for the next generation. The quotes convey a poignant 'sense of one's place' (Goffman 1956; Bourdieu 1997), not only in geographical space, but in the social hierarchies inscribed in it.

These include not only hierarchies of formal education, but intersecting ones of class, gender and generation as well. Having stopped school in Grade 8 and Grade 5, respectively, Brenda and Juliana are among the majority of narrators with an incomplete primary or secondary education. Most of these women cited their parents' inability to financially support them through school as the reason for their unfinished education. Juliana remembered feeling "lazy" or rather discouraged by the fact that she could not have the things her friends had "in abundance", such as school supplies and uniforms. Resonating with Bajaj's findings among secondary school students in the Copperbelt town Ndola (2010), others painted dropping out as a personal failure even though they had been facing overwhelming odds, given their parents' modest means and the under-resourced nature of rural schools. Next, in a few cases, particularly among the older research participants, parents had prioritized the education of sons to that of daughters. Some schooling paths had been cut short by early pregnancies and marriages, testifying to the strength of cultural discourses placing a high value on marriage as a path to social adulthood and status and as an economic strategy, especially for girls²⁰ from poorer households (Blystad et al. 2020). The lack of formal education, which narrators frequently framed as a matter of individual responsibility, is thus revealed as the outcome of multiple intersecting disadvantages with complex structural roots, such as socially constructed gender ideals and state educational and economic policies (Bajaj 2010).

20 Girls in Zambia still have higher school dropout rates than boys, and women lower levels of education overall (CSO 2018). Eastern Province has one of the highest incidences of early pregnancies of all ten provinces (Menon et al. 2018).

For another dimension of gender ideals, women frequently assume the role of caregivers to children and other family members, more so at certain ages and junctures of their life course, which can come in the way of their mobility aspirations. Consider the example of 42-year-old farmer Christine, who lives in Petauke District with her husband and eight children:

I wanted to [move to town] but I saw that my children are too many it's better I farm here, if I was to go to town I would have to start renting, I don't know how much money I would get as a maid and how I would split that for rent and food. But I want to go there, however my children are just too many. (Translated.)

In fact, all narrators' im/mobility decisions regularly took into consideration the needs and views of the other members of their families and immediate households and were thus situated in relational contexts blurring the line between voluntary and involuntary im/mobility. However, since Christine voiced a clear aspiration to move to town, according to the aspiration/capability model she could be described as "involuntarily immobile". Brenda and Juliana, in turn, could be considered examples of "acquiescent immobility", where both the aspiration and capability to move are lacking (Schewel 2019). Yet, their statements also illustrate the limits of theoretical models and the elusive nature of aspirations. Should Brenda's declaration that she would have chosen to live in town had her life path been different be interpreted as a present but frustrated aspiration to move to an urban area? Or should it be read as an absence of such aspirations, following the suppression or transformation of past unfulfilled ones? How can we understand this pragmatic "levelling" of aspirations (Boccagni 2017, 11)?

First, the majority of narrators referenced unfulfilled childhood aspirations, chiefly articulated in the idiom of occupational dreams, the pursuit of which would have meant departure from rural areas of origin.²¹ Judging from these, it is not a want of broader life aspirations that explains the narrators' rural immobility, but rather an insufficient capacity to pursue them. In Apadurai's (2004) terms, these women lack the capacity to aspire, denoting the tools and knowledge needed to navigate structural obstacles and translate desired futures into concrete achievements. This would imply that there may

21 Most women had wanted to become nurses and teachers, some secretaries and police officers (note the gendered content of such dreams).

be social mobility pathways in Zambian cities that poorly resourced rural dwellers are unable to identify and access, which could be hindering their ability to form aspirations to move. Schewel (2019) warns that focusing on the capacity to aspire carries the danger of prioritizing certain kinds of aspirations (economic or profit-maximizing ones) while neglecting others that people may find equally meaningful. For instance, as mentioned, a number of narrators cited care responsibilities towards family members as reasons for not considering moving. These could be seen as constraints on their capacity to form migration aspirations or their capability to move, or both. At the same time, they could be interpreted as part of more general aspirations to cultivate a form of socially valued personhood or womanhood. However, valuing other aspirations besides economic ones does not have to deny a person's low capacity to aspire; both interpretations can be true simultaneously.

Second, the narrators' assessments of their prospects in town compared to their villages, with their levels of education, type of skills and other resources, could be fairly realistic. In an economy that fails to provide sufficient formal sector employment for educated youth, unschooled rural migrants to cities usually end up in precarious, informal and marginal employment (Üllenberg et al. 2017). Domestic service is one of the most common avenues for rural-urban women migrants, especially young girls (Hepburn 2022), but low pay, exploitative conditions and own care obligations make this option unattractive to many older women. It is no surprise then that aspirational horizons adapt to the current structure of opportunities and its geographical expression, framing the future not as "an open-ended 'place' where all that is not available or achievable now can be projected", but a narrowing field (Boccagni 2017, 13). Of course, this leaves open the possibility that if external conditions were to change, new aspirations could develop (or old ones resurface) and a repressed curiosity about town life given free rein, hinted at by younger narrators in particular. Aspirations are dynamic and "decision-making [...] often opportunistic rather than planned" (Griffiths, Ali, and Anderson 2013, 16).

In their imaginaries of town and village, the narrators consistently referenced structural conditions and personal circumstances affecting their capabilities and aspirations to move (De Haas 2014). The women's positioning in hierarchies of gender, class, formal education and age/generation and their perceptions thereof influenced how they assessed their capacities to pursue desired futures in urban areas, in view of the resources at their command and their relational obligations. In prevailing imaginaries of the urban, migrating to an urban area holds possibilities for upward social mobility only for those

with resources, schooling being the most highly prized asset. For everyone else, as the next section will show, rural dwelling supplies its own horizons of striving. These are motivated by similar aspirations for social and what Ghassan Hage calls existential mobility – the feeling that one is “going somewhere”, moving towards a place from which it would be possible to improve one’s circumstances and launch an imagined future self (Hage 2009, 97).

IV. The Village as a Future Space (?) – Future Orientations and Self-Realisation

The narrators’ im/mobility decisions and aspirations can be illuminated further by examining their attitudes towards the future, or future orientations, as narrated in the life history interviews. While migration can be understood as a fundamentally future-oriented act, albeit one that can introduce a high degree of uncertainty (Griffiths, Ali, and Anderson 2013), in this section I wish to demonstrate that rural immobility can equally be a future-affirming experience, a plausible choice in the service of smaller or more capacious future visions. These visions are intimately connected with prevailing (and contested) ideas of the good life, notions of womanhood and other cultural norms and values that influence individuals towards the making of a particular kind of self.

One such cultural notion that emerged from the life histories and observations in the study locations could be termed “self-realisation”. Akin to the concept of personhood, this refers to the unfolding and achievement over time of a person’s singular identity, which takes place within certain social parameters and derives value via recognition from others in the same community (Peša 2013, 2019; Guyer 1993; De Boeck 1998). Self-realisation can be accomplished through any number of culturally sanctioned avenues, such as acquiring skills, performing valued work and services, and accumulating and sharing wealth (Peša 2019). I trace some of the contemporary meanings it has acquired for women in the study locations as a way of elucidating key differences between the future orientations analysed. Some of these meanings are unequivocally gendered and shed light on local ideals of womanhood.

Two kinds of future orientation are discussed – *postponed futures* and *active future-making*. They differ in the time horizons they address (present/near, mid-term or long-term future) and in the scope of self-orientation or *personal* aspirations they afford to the narrators embodying them. At the same time, they share a core relational component, expressed in intergenerational aspi-

rations for protection and social mobility of children (one's own and any one decides to adopt/support), which many women placed at the centre of their understandings of self-realisation and womanhood.

The first orientation, that of *postponed futures*, is exemplified in the life narrative of Juliana, a 44-year-old farmer and mother of nine, who was introduced in section 3. Her first quote is worth reiterating here:

Interpreter: Have you ever thought of moving from here to town?

Juliana: No, I don't think about it. We in this family we are not educated, why should we go to town to do what. So, with us staying here we go to the field to cultivate, so that our children can eat. So that's why we say we would keep the family here. Maybe these children after they follow our advice they will get educated. Maybe they might one day come get us and take us to town to drink tea. (Translated.)

This kind of narrated future orientation was expressed by women with low levels of formal educational capital and marketable skills, and a sense of few alternative options. Juliana and her husband rely on subsistence farming and occasional casual work to feed their family and meet their children's school expenses. She was one of few narrators who declared that they barely produced enough food for their own consumption and sometimes went hungry as a result. Marital troubles further undermine the frail livelihood base. According to Juliana, her husband does not always contribute his income to the family budget and sometimes uses joint earnings for his own needs rather than those of the children.

In such a situation, and with many young children to support, Juliana found it difficult to imagine that life could be different elsewhere. It was difficult to contemplate the future at all, shrouded as it was in doubts and fears about her ability to provide for her children.

My wishes for the..., for..., for you to think that this wish I will find it. It's just the same as when you reach a certain stage where you begin to say that there is two years more coming ahead and you say I can do something big. But now with the way we are staying, we are just seated and knowing that God is the one keeping us. So with that in mind we wouldn't wish for the future, we don't have any wishes, let me not lie those thoughts are not there. (Translated.)

The first two sentences of this excerpt are worded somewhat cryptically because they have been rather literally translated from spoken Nsenga into English. The interpreter I was working with for this interview, Taonga Sibuta, explained the meaning: it is only when you have made some progress that you can start planning for the future. Otherwise, one has to take existence one day at a time and be grateful to God for the gift of life. Besides revealing a deep spiritual attitude, which can engender its own kind, or layers, of future orientations, which I will not explore here but were meaningful to most narrators, this quote exemplifies a future orientation characterised by little faith in one's ability to change one's circumstances. With the personal future indefinitely deferred and surrendered in the hands of a higher force, the focus is on the present and immediate time ahead in which children have to be fed, clothed and sent to school. One's effort at self-realisation is confined to fulfilling the relational obligations arising from the social identities of mother and adult woman. As shown in Juliana's first quote above, children carry the hope for potential spatial and upward social mobility in the long term; the future is passed on to them. Raising children is a Future-Making activity par excellence, representing a form of investment in old-age security, particularly in settings like Zambia where formalized social welfare systems are underdeveloped (Asenso-Agyemang 2023). It is also a selfless act on the part of parents, whose efforts to carve out a better life for their offspring is a bid to protect them from suffering and ensure that the family's transgenerational arc reaches forward in time into continuity and thriving.

Although representing the personal future as a retreating horizon, dampened by the weight of the past, the responsibilities of the present, and by past, present and future contingencies, the postponed futures orientation is not a completely futureless vision. The aspiration that one's children could be educated and live better lives speaks to an interpretation of rural immobility as a coherent choice of an environment more likely to support a person's efforts to ensure positive future outcomes for their children, however distant that prospect may appear. By making it easier to live in one's own house, which many women pointed out as a hallmark of social adulthood in Zambia, and to enjoy basic independence by having some control over food provision for one's family, rural areas facilitate a degree of self-realisation – as the fulfilment of

local ideals of womanhood – that would likely not be possible in town with the same level of resources.²²

Crucially, ideals of womanhood and motherhood and the associated self-realisation have come to include providing children not only with physical and emotional care, instruction in practical life skills and indigenous knowledge (farming, domestic chores, healing) and in the moral and social norms of the rural community, but also with formal schooling (Serpell 1993). In fact, schooling was the main medium through which parents envisaged their children could bid for a better future. It was a key reason why underage children were sometimes “sent” to live with relatives in town for years on end. But it could equally be a motivation for staying in a rural area. Once again illustrated by Juliana, when asked what life lessons she wanted to teach her children:

What I want to teach my children about life, I want to tell them about a good life, and good behaviour, how they can live here on the face of the earth. I want to say when you look at me, I didn't finish school, so while you are at school and while I am alive even with the challenges and difficult experiences take this opportunity to get educated so that you have a future. So that you have a future... (Translated.)

As this quote shows, some rural women constructed formal education not just as *the* gateway to a better future, but to “having a future” at all, and virtually all expressed a commitment, discursive at least, to supporting their children's schooling.²³ The latter was presented as one of the main markers of success for women and a core component of their dominant ideal of self-realisation as mothers and *as women*, regardless of the kind of future orientation they managed to perform. For example, Agnes P., a 56-year-old laboratory assistant, shop owner and farmer from Petauke District, identified having put her children through school as her life's achievement, which led her to declare: “I am in my future now.”

22 This is supported by Hansen's findings on blocked social adulthood and socio-economic mobility of youth in Lusaka's compounds (2005).

23 Like in Mazanderani's study on rural youth's aspirations in South Africa (2020), the regular emphasis on the importance of schooling by the research participants may have had something to do with my positionality as a white scholar and outsider. Informal conversations testified to the existence of other discourses questioning the payoffs of schooling, especially secondary-level schooling, which in many cases did not seem to make a difference in finding employment.

From some conversations and interviews with men in the study locations, it was possible to glean that “educating” and providing for children formed part of ideals of masculinity as well, and for some women it was a joint project with their husbands. However, the following statement by 50-year-old Suzeni from Petauke District exemplifies a dominant discourse among the narrators, partly normative, partly observation-based, that concern for children’s well-being was primarily a woman’s job:

Women face a lot of challenges, because in the morning when I wake up, I have to think about what the children will eat together with their father. Men can just wake up and go, but with a woman she has to leave home knowing that I have left relish for the children to eat. So, the challenges we face as women they are a lot because men don’t offer support so us we have to find a way, even piecework so that the children at home can eat. For the children to wash and go to school, what will I do. So, for us women, the challenges we face are a lot. (Translated.)

Most narrators defined womanhood in terms of the work culturally assigned to women, and care for children and their future fell into this category. In some cases, it was even essentialised as an inborn affinity or characteristic of women. There were exceptions, however. Forty-year-old Precious L. from Petauke District, who is a mother of four, claimed that a gender division of work within households no longer existed, and that men could cook and take care of children as well as women. Precious’ perception likely reflects her own experience – her husband had nursed their last-born child while she was at work, sometimes cooked for the family and contributed towards school expenses. She herself is formally employed, owns property and manages several income-generating activities. Her eldest children carry out most of the domestic chores in her household, pointing to a work division by age besides gender. This example could be an outlier, but it also suggests that some flexibility is always there in practice, amid multiple co-existing and ever-changing systems of gender relations, regardless of the ideal norms a community subscribes to, which are themselves subject to change and contestation (Sanders 2000).

Precious exemplifies the second type of future orientation, *active future-making*, aptly illustrated by a quote which once again demonstrates that looking out for children’s and the family’s future was central to the narrators’ definitions of womanhood:

Researcher: What does being a woman mean to you?

Precious: You're supposed to be a good woman. You should know about your future and your children's future and the family's future. One who can stand on her own and be independent! (Chuckles). (Translated.)

However, by simultaneously emphasising the value of independence, Precious' brief definition makes space for a broader range of ways to perform womanhood and more diverse aspirations. Moreover, her future orientation is marked by a belief that present actions can contribute to achieving aspirations not only on a more distant time scale and relationally, through one's children, but for one's personal benefit as well. This orientation, as Juliana perspicaciously observed, is associated with a higher level of resources, which are crucial to enabling greater scope for aspiring. Precious grew up in a better resourced household than Juliana and was supported by an uncle who worked in a neighbouring town. Despite an early pregnancy in Grade 12, she finished her secondary education and found a job at Minga hospital as a cleaner. This and a flourishing small business brewing alcohol, along with the carpentry work of her husband and their farming, have helped her accumulate assets she is proud of (she owns a five-roomed house and some cattle, unambiguous markers of wealth in the rural context). Although her long-term plans are to stay in the village, she intends to enrol in a nursing course once all her children have completed their schooling, which may result in a temporary spell of mobility. Class and the related factors of schooling and wage employment can thus be important markers of difference between the two future orientations and the narrators embodying them.

The more expansive future visions accompanying active future-making are not just about ensuring longer-term continuity – physical, intergenerational, cultural and communal – but also about attaining a measure of upward social mobility in the near future. Naomi Haynes (2017) identified the religiously inflected value of “moving” on the Zambian Copperbelt as capturing this striving for social mobility. In the villages I visited in Eastern Province, people spoke about “improving” (often using the English word itself), referring to income-generating activities and material acquisitions harnessed in a project of raising one's standard of living and setting one's family, variously defined, on a forward socio-economic trajectory. Such a project is imbued with moral value (vying or existing next to other positively valued moral “projects”, such as sharing with an “extended” family and neighbours, participating in religious and

communal activities, living in harmony with others) and is at the bottom of efforts at active future-making. However, advancing one's personal "career" and accumulating material wealth increases the circle of people one may wish or feel obligated to help – first and foremost parents, and then siblings, the children of siblings and other relatives and neighbours. In fact, one component of self-realisation for both women and men in this context involved helping as many people as possible. Success meant being on the giving side of frequently unequal relationships of sociality, in return for recognition and status (Haynes 2017; Peša 2019).²⁴

Yet, with active future-making, some scope for women's personal, self-oriented aspirations could be there as well. Precious L. had thus prioritised her children's schooling during their formative years but was planning on continuing her own educational path as soon as resources became available. Miriam, a 29-year-old mother of three from Chipata District, while farming and running a small village restaurant to provide for her children, was hoping that a night school would start in her area where she could obtain her Grade Nine certificate and improve her English skills. Most other women, especially older ones, had given up on their own schooling trajectories, but were still busy acting upon their immediate and longer-term futures in other ways – prominently by making plans for material improvements and pursuing consumption aspirations.²⁵ The content of such plans and aspirations was determined intersubjectively, within a relational social setting where the visible achievements of neighbours set the yardstick for one's own ambitions.

Thus, common aspirations and Future-Making actions included building and improving houses, in some cases to create a future income stream from rent; buying cattle as a way of storing wealth, marking social status *and* acquiring a productive resource; and purchasing bicycles, motorcycles and cars (the latter two possible in rare cases, and usually as a household achievement,

24 Which is not to say that these relationships are purely transactional and devoid of affective bonds.

25 In addition, among narrators with active Future-Making orientations, the goal of educating children is approached more intentionally. It no longer suffices to send children to the nearest local school, supply the minimum necessities and hope that regular attendance will take care of the rest. A promising trader, Lea from Petauke District, who has three young children, declared: "I don't want my children to get educated the same way I did." Instead, she would like them to attend superior schools and hopes to finance their education beyond secondary schooling, something her parents were not able to do for her.

not an individual one for women²⁶) for the same dual purpose. In narrators' accounts, owning a motor vehicle carried the highest amount of symbolic capital, but installing electricity, buying a TV set, a fridge, or simpler items like a dining table, set of dishes or windowpanes after many years of living in a house with tiny holes for windows could also represent aspirational acts. In Haynes' analysis of similar acquisitions by township residents on the *Zambian Copperbelt*, these acts represent an effort to slow down the vagaries of economic time by "transforming liquid assets into something more enduring, a tangible marker of progress" (2017, 40). They further serve to create a feeling of "moving" or "improving" (reminiscent of Hage's existential mobility [2009], see above), which nourishes the onward effort of aspiring.

Next, the two future orientations explored are differentially and ambivalently linked to a woman's age and place in the life course. Girls and young women are the most likely to engage in out-migration as a Future-Making strategy. In fact, through its focus on adult women, the sample excludes the most migratory group of females in the *Zambian countryside*. Rural out-migration rates for women in Zambia peak in the mid-twenties and then gradually decrease until the age of 50 when they stabilize (Chamberlin, Ramos, and Abay 2021, 959).²⁷ As far as the urban direction is concerned, this mobile group includes young women and girls who migrate to cities for educational purposes, those who become domestic workers, oftentimes residing with relatives and nourishing hopes of earning an education in town (Chamberlain, Ramos, and Abay 2021; Hepburn 2022), and young women who move to urban areas in search of employment and business opportunities, in some cases upon marriage or together with husbands. Who can be part of this group and in which modality depends, of course, on intersecting factors such as class, level of education, urban social networks, access to capital and wage employment, in some cases a cooperative marriage partner and care obligations. All of these categories of difference, in varying combinations, likewise distinguish the two future orientations discussed and account for the uneven distribution of the capacity to aspire among the women who stay, of which Precious L. and Juliana are emblematic examples.

26 Men are also, most often, the drivers, with only the rare woman possessing the skills to drive a motor vehicle.

27 This aligns with evidence from the immobility literature that continued residence in a given location decreases the likelihood of leaving (Schewel 2019).

Future orientations can also manifest ambivalently with advancing age. The sense of hopelessness Juliana felt was eclipsed in the lives of other narrators who were past the stage of bringing up underage children. In general, lower-income women in Zambia are most likely to postpone their futures during their reproductive age and the time before their children have reached social adulthood (Hansen 1997; Ashbaugh 1996). Afterwards, they are entitled to expect some livelihood support from children and there should be more room for productive activities to ensure their own economic security (Hansen 1997; Ashbaugh 1996). However, Zambian women are commonly entrusted with the care of grandchildren or other parentless children from their families, so they can end up supporting children and “passing on the future” far into their old age. Sometimes this is caused by the premature death of family members or by the fact that the self-realisation paths of offspring are blocked due to lack of employment and other productive opportunities. Socially prescribed ideal stages of life and successful transitions between them cannot always constellate in practice because of contingent circumstances and a lack of supportive structural conditions (Johnson-Hanks 2002). In other cases, the care work performed by older women enables their adult children to migrate. For instance, the second year I visited the study location in Chipata District, 33-year-old informal trader Precious M. was no longer there; she had married and moved to rural Petauke District, leaving her two young children behind in the care of her widowed mother.

In a final example, elderly women can often feel that they “have no future” (interview with 80-year-old Agnes M., Petauke District) or that their earthly horizon is emphatically short and unpredictable. At the same time, they can still harbour aspirations for material improvements, accumulate savings and make concrete plans (such as to “paint the house from the inside”) to ensure greater material comforts, but also advance a little more along socially recognized metrics of success. The pursuit of self-realisation and “improving” is never finished.

Although different in the perceived degree of agency over the future animating them, the two future orientations discussed in this chapter, postponed futures and active future-making, share an understanding of the future as progress, or “departure of some form from the here and now” (Anderson and Adey 2012, 1531). “To have a future” for narrators with either orientation meant not only continuity of embodied experience, or a progression of life stages, but essentially socio-economic mobility – securing a marked and ideally lasting improvement in the material conditions of life. In the best-case scenario, this

would take the form of a continuous unfolding over a lifetime and across generations. Of course, this is hardly ever the case – accounts of setbacks, stasis and hiatuses abound in the narrators' biographies.²⁸ Temporalities are messy and entangled; a biographical and historical past sedimented in material and psychological resources and in current structural conditions, along with past and present contingencies, limits the extent to which narrators (feel they) can act on the future at any given moment.

For some narrators, the future felt indefinitely deferred and inaccessible, others worked towards small milestones foreshadowing growing aspirations, adjusting, stepping back and redirecting as necessary, and yet others (a precious few) had arrived at their destinations, but usually continued their efforts at Future-Making on behalf of the next generation(s). Much like in the chapter by Donat and Dannecker in this volume, these differences expose the unequal distribution of the capacity to aspire and shed light on some of the intersecting categories producing it in this rural setting. As sketched above, class, formal education, age and place in the life course, along with number of dependents, degree of cooperation in marriage and other characteristics, all interact with context-specific gender ideals and economic conditions to result in uneven access to the future among women in the study locations.

V. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the multi-layered nature of im/mobility decision-making among women in rural Eastern Zambia. Future visions and orientations have been shown to interact with ideals of womanhood, imaginaries of town and village and with the narrators' positioning in social hierarchies to mould their decisions and aspirations to stay. Attention to narrators' considerations of the future has revealed that for many rural women staying in the village is not only a default option when town prospects disappoint, but a way of making possible minimal or larger Future-Making visions, even when the future is difficult to imagine. However, future orientations, imaginaries and

28 Drought and a bad harvest can delay plans for material acquisitions, immobilising physical accidents can suspend trading, cattle can fall prey to disease, hard-earned new agricultural implements can be stolen. But perhaps nothing epitomises better this loss of connection to wider aspirations and dreams of existential mobility than children straying from schooling trajectories in spite of their parents' best efforts.

the capacity to aspire are all shaped by multiple intersecting inequalities resulting in uneven experiences of gendered rural immobility. Not only could the narrators better endowed with valued resources relate to the personal future in more agentic ways, but they also had a wider array of options for performing womanhood and for fulfilling the intergenerational aspirations and relational obligations central to local understandings of womanhood and personhood.

One dominant view of the future emerged from the narrators' life histories – the future as progress. But while aspirations for socio-economic advancement united all narrators, few achieved them fully, and seldom via a linear route. Most narrators were already living alternative futures, constructed after a normative path to social mobility from schooling (via migration) to formal employment had been frustrated and abandoned. At the same time, a discourse of national and global proportions touting the promise of formal education to lead to employment and an exit from poverty (Bajaj 2010; Mazanderani 2020) has if anything become even more persuasive. Despite the consistent failure of an economy in permanent crisis to deliver jobs, the dream of schooling has captured the imaginations of these Zambian women. Yet, it is uncertain to what extent widespread educational aspirations can be realized and if this would result in new waves of rural-urban migration. Ultimately, the directions future im/mobilities take will depend on the condition of urban and rural economies, the Zambian state's efforts to remedy the gaps between the two, and people's abilities to mobilize rural and urban resources in a bid to achieve aspirations.

Finally, some of the life histories offered glimpses into other kinds of futures envisioned by the research participants, beyond the progressive ones captured in active future-making. Further research is needed to uncover some of these potentially spiritual, non-hierarchical futures and investigate how they may challenge or collude with the image of the future as striving (Davis 2022). In addition, what non-migratory spatial mobilities do women practice in rural Eastern Zambia? In what ways are these entangled with migration and staying, how are they implicated in active future-making and what other purposes and futures do they serve? These are all questions for future study.

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