



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, February 2021

Gendered experiences of educational migrant returnees during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

After the African Leadership University closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and classes resumed online, students reported gendered differences in the family expectations and assignation of domestic duties that disproportionately affected female students.

Keywords

Gender, online teaching, house chores, international students, Africa, COVID-19

To be quoted as:

Skyum, Chiedza Mutsaka. 2021. Gendered experiences of educational migrant returnees during the COVID-19 pandemic. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Doi: 10.48509/MoLab.6670

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When a significant share of the world's population is working or studying in their bedrooms, living rooms and family homes, the once-clear lines between private/personal and public/professional become blurred. What was once perceived as an anomaly – for instance, in 2017, when a BBC interviewee's children ran into his video-call background² – is now becoming the norm. Those who can work remotely is navigating the balance between work-from-home and family demands. This consideration should not only be limited to professionals in the working world, but needs to be extended to students, who are facing similar demands. The shift from being on a university campus, where their focus was largely on studies, to being back home with family adds factors of stress or pressure that can potentially hinder educational journeys and success. This article explores several of these factors and how students from the African Leadership University in Rwanda have learned to navigate and negotiate their way to balancing studies and family obligations.

The African Leadership University (ALU) is a higher-education institution in Kigali, Rwanda, where students hail from over 40 countries around the African continent. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, ALU had no choice but to encourage students to return to their home countries. This was speedily facilitated by multiple departments working together at the university under the fear that students would get 'stuck' in lockdown in Rwanda, far away from their families. Flights were scheduled and students flew home. There would be no interruption to the students' learning as classes would continue online. Or at least it was declared.

However, in addition to issues with internet connection, bandwidth, access to tech, and the remoteness of some of the students' homes, further societal barriers hindered some students from continuing with their classes. Gender inequality in education is already a chronic and persistent issue in many African states, and even though much progress is being made in providing access and reducing drop-out rates of girls,³ the COVID-19 pandemic that sent students back home appears to have taken some of them a few steps backwards.

In many societies, girls and women are responsible for doing the majority of childcare tasks and domestic work in a household. Early on, teachers like myself began to receive emails from students who could not dedicate the needed time for their classes. One female student from Kenya had multiple siblings whose schools were closed and needed home-schooling and care. Another female student's father was forced out of his job, so her mother became a vendor and she, in turn, did the cooking and cleaning for the entire household. Then there was the female student caring for her ill grandmother who needed palliative care. These inquiries led me to write this article. Would these students be experiencing the same if they were of another gender? To what extent is the education of a male child prioritised over the education of a female child today? To answer these questions, we conducted a survey of forty second-year students from ALU in mid-September 2020. What we found was a clear division.

It showed that 92% of the students claim to have family obligations and roles/tasks that they are required to do, giving them less time to focus on their studies than if they were on campus in Kigali. 70% of surveyed students listed 'gendered' domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning and laundry as the majority of the work they were required to do. Childcare and/or home-schooling of younger

² BBC News. 2017. Children interrupt BBC News interview. *BBC*. 10 March 2017. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mh4f9AYRCZY>. Last accessed on 21 January 2021.

³ Akala, Beatrice. 2019. Gender inequality in education is still an issue in Kenya and South Africa. *The Conversation*. 3 November 2019. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/gender-inequality-in-education-is-still-an-issue-in-kenya-and-south-africa-125747>. Last accessed 21 January 2021.

siblings or relatives came in as the second time-consuming task, while working in a family business/shop came in as the third. One student from Rwanda who returned home to another province said, ‘as it is locally believed that women are the ones responsible for home chores, hence this is why most of the house chores like cooking and laundry end up to be done by women’. A student from Côte d’Ivoire commented, ‘in my tradition, women have to cook and do all the work at home while men do nothing because they are men and they are not allowed to do anything at home apart from study and pray’. A male Nigerian student said, ‘I am aware that more is required of my sisters at home, but I have to work with my dad – the hours are the same but the tasks are different’.

The family expectations and the de-prioritisation of young women’s education by their families have affected their educational journeys. Without COVID-19, they would have continued as resident students whose time was committed fully to their studies. It became evident in the survey that male students without female siblings did not experience the same as those who had sisters, as they were then expected to complete the needed household tasks. It was female students with male siblings who had the most to say in the comment sections, as they compared what their brothers in the house were asked to do. For example: ‘I cannot sit down expecting my brothers to do the cooking or other housework.’ Another Rwandan student said, ‘I live in a family of a lot of boys so I’m expected to do the housework because apparently boys in my house can’t cook or do stuff if there’s a girl around.’

Others reported different experiences involving gender and house chores. A Ghanaian student did not see a gendered element in her household tasks: ‘There is nothing to do with my gender in regards to the obligations. My brother also works as much.’ One student from Sierra Leone highlighted another cultural aspect – age. ‘My chores are tied to the fact that I am the youngest in the family. It is like a norm to say when you are the youngest, you get to do the chores and it is affecting me so much.’

When asked how they are adjusting themselves to their new normal, the majority of survey respondents said that communicating their schedules to their families and including family tasks on the schedules have aided in easing the pressure. Many said that they just work many more hours in the day and hope to ‘survive’ this trying time.

No matter where the school is, lecturers who are facilitating online classes have learned this year that personalised empathetic approaches to student concerns and struggles are best for their learning journeys and most effective for their success. In these tough times, easing the pressure on deadlines, allowing for more flexibility and providing multiple pathways for students to engage with class content have helped students—both at ALU, and beyond—to feel seen, heard and understood. Will we forget this when the pandemic ends?