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*Keywords:* *ICTs, mobile phones, mothering, whatsapp, women informal cross-border traders.*

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# The Temporality of Mothering through the use of ICTs by Zimbabwean Women Informal Cross-Border Traders

Jean Mandewo [α], Pragna Rugunanan [σ] & Kezia Batisai [ρ]

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## I. Introduction

In Africa, the development and flourishing of informal cross-border trading were precipitated by the economic crises that engulfed the different countries in the 1980s and 1990s (Yusuff 2014; Golub 2015; Kurebwa 2015; Osrim 2018). Of interest are the debates around the health risks and vulnerabilities of women informal cross-border traders who navigate several borders in search of livelihoods. These women informal cross-borders are referred to as temporary and circular migrants (Kiwanuka and Monson 2009; Nunez 2009; IOM 2020) due to the short periods they stay in the host countries – ranging from one to four days and one to two months (Peberdy 2002) before travelling back to their home countries. Gender relations that are characterised by power dynamics between women and men seem to permeate and play a big part in the lived realities of the women informal cross-border traders. We argue that the health risks and vulnerabilities encountered by the women are unique to them because of their gender and the patriarchal structures that tend to confront them. In this article we explore the nexus of migration, informal cross-border trade and information communication technology (ICTS), particularly the mobile phone in the context of the health risks and vulnerabilities of Zimbabwean women informal cross-border traders traversing the borders to Kariakoo Market, Tanzania.

A family is an important unit in the study of migration. It is within the family context that patriarchal tendencies are strong and gender roles are defined and assigned. The mobility of women for work or trade purposes has impacted families. Migrant mothers who leave their families behind have been vilified in the media and have been labelled bad mothers (Parreñas 2003; Huynh 2015; Meyers 2019). Muzvidziwa (2005) and Njikam and Tchouassi (2011) found out that constant travel by most women informal cross-border traders resulted in them having insufficient time with their families, especially their children. The qualitative research by Njikam and Tchouassi (2011) conducted in the Central African region and that of Huynh (2015) of African female traders in Guangzhou, China, revealed that women informal cross-border traders relied on family, friends, domestic workers or neighbours for childcare while they were away. The women informal cross-border traders in the Central African region who traded in agricultural products noticed some positive and negative impacts of informal cross-border trading (Njikam and Tchouassi 2011). Some of the positive aspects were food security, employment and income opportunities, which led to a better standard of living. The negative effects centred on conflict and violence, poor childcare and poor schooling for the children (Njikam and Tchouassi 2011). According to Huynh (2015), African women full-time traders in Guangzhou spent half of their time away from home. Both married women and single mothers tended to rely on family and friends or domestic workers for childcare when away from home (Njikam and Tchouassi 2011; Huynh 2015). Huynh (2015) says that full-time men traders who also spent much time away from home relied on their wives for childcare. Muzvidziwa (2005) points out that stigmatising women cross-border traders as bad mothers is must be treated with caution and emphasises the need for further research in this area. In

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addition, the women traders are working to provide decent lives for their children, including good education where they are sometimes enrolled in good boarding schools where children are monitored. While these studies show the negative impact of women's mobility on children, labelling the women negatively must be considered with caution. These studies were conducted at different time periods, and the use of ICTs by women informal cross-border traders was almost non-existent. The advent of ICTs makes it easier for migrant mothers to keep up with their familial duties while away from home. In this article we examine how women informal cross-border traders' use ICTs as a strategic resource to keep in touch with their families particularly the children.

As a way of countering the effect of this absence, this study examined the use of ICTs and the role (if any) it played in alleviating stress in the lives of women informal cross-border traders. This study contributes to understanding how ICTs played a role assisting in the mothering role of the women informal cross-border traders. Vickers and Pena-Mendez (2015) posit that ICTs offer potential solutions to the challenges encountered by women cross-border traders. ICTs enable women to remain in regular contact with their families since their frequent absence from home may negatively influence their children (Fechter 2007; Uy-Tioco 2007; Chib et al. 2014; Anwar and Johanson 2015). According to Anwar and Johanson (2015), ICTs, particularly mobile phones, maintain communication with family and friends. Against this background, one may conclude that ICT is a means of communication that women cross-border traders use to keep in touch with family and friends.

In addition, the literature revealed few studies which have focussed on the use of ICTs by informal cross-border traders. Kwami (2016), in her study of Ghanaian women transnational traders, showed how the mobile phone helped them cope with their domestic and business affairs. To examine whether ICTs, particularly mobile phones, are a source of empowerment or not for women cross-border traders, this study probed how the mobile phones aided the temporality of mothering. A family is an important unit when studying female migration. This is because it is within the family context that patriarchal tendencies are strong. It is also within the family that gender roles are defined and assigned. The family unit also controls the access to resources that can support, discourage or prevent migration (Boyd and Grieco 2003). In terms of female migration or mobility, it was only possible under certain circumstances where the women migrated as dependents.

## II. Use of ICTs in Mothering

Mobile women have found different ways of coping with their absence from home and communicating with family members. Traditional families normally have discussions at a kitchen table eating while transnational families have discussions in real-time across oceans (Vertovec 2004). Besides using ICTs as a tool to keep in touch with family and friends, migrant women also find ICTs a useful way of fulfilling their motherhood. The women maintained an absent presence as they lived their responsibilities and roles as daughters, mothers and wives through ICT use (Gregen 2002). The advent of technology has also minimised the distance between female migrants and their families. Several studies on the use of ICTs by female migrants who sought to keep in touch with family members and children have been conducted (Lindio-McGovern 2004; Wilding 2006; Uy-Tioco 2007; Madianou 2012; Chib et al. 2014; Batisai 2017; Meyers 2019).

Lindio-McGovern (2004), in a qualitative study of 30 Filipina female domestic workers in Rome, shows how migrant mothers cope with not having their own children around them. These migrant mothers tend to treat their employers' children as if they were their own in an attempt to replace the emotional bond. They put much effort into maintaining regular contact with their families in the Philippines (Lindio-McGovern 2004). They also purchase mobile phones, which enable them to maintain regular contact. When the women phone home, they do this without their employers' knowledge as some owners do not like those owning phones. The women also write letters to their families and communicate on social media networks (Lindio-McGovern 2004). In a mixed-methods study of 42 Filipina female domestic workers in Singapore, Chib et al. (2014) showed how they mothered their children using text messages, mobile calls and Facebook. Because the women were far from their children, they constantly worried about their health and studies if they were young, and where they were teenagers, they worried about bad friends, drugs, alcohol and smoking. The better-educated migrants often assisted their children in their studies by helping them do homework using online chat and video (Chib et al. 2014). However, when dealing with negative emotions, voice calls were preferred to text messages for dealing with the negative issues faced by the children (Chib et a.l 2014).

Nedelcu (2012) discusses some practical aspects of parenting in a geographically separated family where a father babysits his children via webcam while his wife prepares food. This reflects how ICTs may promote effectiveness and closeness in families that are physically apart. Similarly, Pearce (2013), in a study of migrant family members, shows how they were able to participate in the family's daily activities using ICTs. ICTs created a virtual presence and what Pearce (2013) call physical integration of absent family members. Similarly, Meyers (2019) showed how Somali migrant mothers in South Africa used Skype, IMO, WhatsApp and Viber to



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maintain contact with their children in Somalia. According to Meyers (2019), the Somali migrant mothers found this an empowering process as the technology reconstituted their roles as effective mothers.

These studies show the importance of ICTs in assisting migrant mothers to carry out their mothering roles from a distance. ICT use by transnational families create a feeling of permanent connection and maintains ongoing conversations in the family (Pearce 2013). The studies focus on the migrant mothers who invested in ICT to maintain communication with their families back home. The exception was Pearce (2013), whose focus was on the household that integrated the migrant family member into the daily activities through ICTs. However, Kwami (2016) echoes that mobile phones could not substitute personal parenting where the mother was physically present as spouses and caregivers could easily lie about what could be happening at home. Kwami (2016) ignored the importance of mobile phones' video functionality where mothers can see the children eat and dress (Nedelcu 2012; Meyers 2019). It is possible and common for people communicating online to have intimate, emotionally rich conversations. These studies show that migrant mothers continue to take their mothering roles seriously as they continue to monitor and attend to their children using ICT while in another country. In addition, communicating online using mobile phones and social media has been made easier and instantaneous as migrant mothers seek to stay in touch with their children and caregivers in their home countries. Doing so ensures that migrant mothers remain connected and present in their children's lives as they will be aware of what happens at home.

## III. Theoretical and Methodological Approach

This article is based on a study conducted between February 2018 and January 2019 with women informal cross-border traders and retired women traders in Harare, Chitungwiza, Gweru and Kadoma. The study focused on African feminisms to theorise the diverse ways in which women informal cross-border traders encountered risks and vulnerabilities as they navigated the borders. Motivated by African feminisms as a framework that was relevant in understanding the health risks and vulnerabilities of women informal cross-border traders, the study employed a qualitative research approach based on the stories and experiences of women informal cross-border traders travelling to Tanzania. Furthermore, this study contended that to mitigate the health risks and vulnerabilities faced by women informal cross-border traders, a Marxist feminist analysis is important in understanding the stories of the women informal cross-border traders. These women have been forced to undertake the twin roles of productive work, earning a living through informal cross-border trading and reproductive labour as they performed their mothering role from a distance using the mobile phone. Women informal cross-border traders use ICTs, particularly mobile phones, to bridge the distance between countries.

Patriarchy and gender are central to the construction of power dynamics between the sexes, and these explain the lives and experiences of women informal-cross borders. The determinants of the relations between men and women are religion, culture and socially accepted ways of thinking (Connell 1987; 2000; Butler 2004; Howson 2006). Connell (1987) suggested that theorising masculinities and femininities in their different forms is shaped by men's structural influences dominating women. The four structures that contribute to the construction of gender relations: division of labour, power relations, emotional relations and symbolic representation of gender in society (Connell, 2000), are present in the lives of women informal cross-border traders. The sexual division of labour is evident in the triple roles of women informal cross-border traders. Mobile phones have made it possible for them to perform their reproductive role from afar, where this division of labour clearly emphasises a woman's role. This study also shows how the women informal cross-border traders took various steps in their preparations to care for their children before travelling.

A common thread that runs through this study is the risks and vulnerabilities the women informal cross-border traders were exposed to, but key in all that was the agency and resilience they displayed. The theoretical, contextual and analytic focus was rooted in the experiences and lived realities of the health risks and vulnerabilities of the women informal cross-border traders travelling to Tanzania. The micro and macro conditions in the country were the contributory factors that forced them to enter informal cross-border trading with its risky operating environment. The failing socio-economic conditions resulted in the women engaging in risky businesses that resulted in their emotional, physical, economic and social vulnerabilities. This also adds light to the failure of the state to officially recognise informal cross-border trade and the important role it plays in the economy. This research study partially agrees with a renowned West Africa economist, Bauer, who argued in 1963 that trade is not regarded as an occupation in Africa when dependents carry it out. By dependents, Bauer meant wives involved in trading activities as an extension of their domestic reproductive role.

However, this research study sees women informal cross-border traders displaying agency and resilience as they are willing to take risks associated with harsh operating environments in informal cross-border trading. They are taking risks to provide for their families. The agency of the women traders illustrates them as powerful and strong women who will ensure that their families' needs are provided for. As in Muzvidwia's



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words, "*varume pachavo*", meaning they are like men. Although feminists might read the statement as sexist, we read it positively because it illuminates the women's contributions who are increasingly taking on the breadwinning role in a way that challenges the perception that only men can provide for their families. As Cruz (2015) suggested, an African feminist position brings nuance to a simplistic reading of women's empowerment. We see the women informal cross-border traders being in a position where they could either sit and moan or stand up and act in the best interest of their families no matter the odds.

Twenty one participants were selected for the study – 12 women informal cross-border traders and 9 retired women informal cross-borders who were the key informants and were aged between 24 and 63 years). For the article I excluded the findings from the retired women informal cross-border traders as almost none them made use of ICTs as they had other means of mothering that excluded the use of ICTs which was a relatively unknown phenomenon during the time they crossed the borders. While the research participants were a very small sample, this study was more interested in understanding how ICTs particularly the mobile phone aided in the temporality of mothering and is less concerned with generalising the findings to the wider population of women informal cross-border traders in Zimbabwe. This study focused on women informal cross-border traders who navigated the borders to Kariakoo Market in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The table below provides a profile of the twenty one women informal cross-border traders and retired women informal cross-border traders.

*a) A profile of the participants*

| Women informal cross-border traders | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pseudonym | Age | Marital status | Education | Occupation | Dependents |
| Mai Terrance | 46 | Married | High school | Businesswoman | 2 |
| Rachel | 38 | Married | Bachelors degree | Cross-border trader | 3 |
| Shalom | 50 | Married | High school | Secretary | 4 |
| Tecla | 50 | Married | High school | Tailor | 4 |
| Nicole | 47 | Married | High school | Self-employed as a tailor | 3 |
| Linda | 37 | Married | Degree | Administrator | 3 |
| Fiona | --- | Married | Degree | Assistant Accountant | 5 |
| Gertrude | --- | Married | High School | Cross-border trader | 4 |
| Tendai | 53 | Single | Certificate | Clerk | 2 |
| Sandra | 30 | Married | Diploma | Businesswoman | 1 |
| Tinotenda | 24 | Single | High School | ---- | ---- |
| Vongai | 48 | Widow | High school | Cross-border trader | 5 |
| Retired women informal cross-border traders | | | | | |
| Fungai | 59 | Married | Diploma in Education, Degree | Teacher/Cross-border trader | 6 |
| Ruramai | 44 | Married | High school | Self-employed | 3 |
| Mary | 52 | Married | Diploma in Education | Teacher | 2 |
| Constance | 63 | Married | High school | Housewife | 5 |
| Mercy | 43 | Married | Secretarial Certificate | Businesswoman | 3 |
| Nancy | 51 | Married | High school | Housewife | 2 |
| Helen | 59 | Married | High school | Housewife | 4 |
| Pauline | --- | Married | Primary school | ----- | 5 |
| Jessica | 39 | Divorced | High school | Babysitter | 1 |

The study was guided by the qualitative approach and data were collected between February 2018 and January 2019. Six of the women informal cross-border traders were professional women. The study was informed by the interpretive perspective which sought to understand the world from a subjective view and looks for an explanation within the participant's frame of reference rather than the objective observer of action (Ponelis 2015). In this study the interpretive approach helped us to understand social world of the Zimbabwean women informal cross-border trader's lived experiences.

This study focused on Zimbabwean women cross-border traders who travelled to Kariakoo Market in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania by road and air. Kariakoo Market, located in the Kariakoo neighbourhood in central Dar es Salaam, has been the largest market in the country for one hundred years (Bruhwiler 2014). Kariakoo Market is a busy commercial area with over 3 000 shops, thousands of street peddlers and hundreds of market stall vendors (Bruhwiler 2014) where electronic gadgets, clothes, furniture, handbags, jewellery, shoes, crops, fresh and dried fish, vegetables, and other items are sold (Yikoniko 2015). Traders from Southern African countries such as Zimbabwe and Zambia flock to Kariakoo Market (Yikoniko 2015). In Zimbabwe, participants were drawn from three different provinces of Mashonaland West, Harare, and Midlands. However, the



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study was limited to these three provinces from where the sample was selected because of financial and time constraints. Studies by Chikanda and Tawodzera (2017) and Muzvidziwa (1998) were conducted in one province, while the quantitative study by Kachere (2011) covered seven provinces. These provinces were chosen to select a diverse sample in terms of age, marital status, religion and geographical setting.

The study adopted a non-probability sampling strategy. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, enabling us to deliberately choose the participants against identified criteria or traits (Gray 2009). In addition, research participants also had information that would assist in achieving the study's objectives. The purposive sampling procedure was employed in selecting nine key informant female participants from Harare and Kadoma. They had retired from cross-border trading and were in the age range of 39 to 63 years at the time of the interviews. These key informants had specialised knowledge that assisted in answering the research questions (Mason 2002; van Manen 2014). Yin (2009) asserts that key informants are often critical to the success of a case study as they provide insights into a matter and could also initiate access to corroboratory or contrary sources of evidence. Purposive sampling has been used in studies by Muzvidziwa (2005) and UNIFEM (2009). The rationale for selecting purposive sampling for this research study was that knowledge was sought about the health risks and vulnerabilities the key informants may have encountered and their use of ICT in managing their vulnerabilities and familial roles.

Snowball sampling is a method for reaching populations that are difficult to access. We identified participants who fit the study's criteria, and they, in turn, recommended other participants to take part in the study (Tracy 2013). In obtaining access to women informal cross-border traders, the snowballing technique was used for this study (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault 2016). The sample consisted of 21 Zimbabwean women informal cross-border traders from Harare and Gweru aged 24 to 63 years and key informants. The initial criteria for selecting participants were: women who travelled by road or air to Tanzania and were in the age range of 25 to 50 years. In addition, all the women traders had dependent children of school-going age. The nine key informants provided referrals of women, informal cross-border traders, navigating the borders to Tanzania. As a method, snowball sampling was a useful technique for this study where the health risks and vulnerabilities proved to be a sensitive issue and required the knowledge of insiders to locate participants for the study. Unfortunately, two of the participants were evasive, and one was not open about her activities in Tanzania, which resulted in her no longer going there. She would, however, travel to Zambia.

The data were collected using audiotaped in-depth interviews and key informant interviews. Triangulation was used to address the issue of reliability (Gray 2009). There are different types of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, multiple triangulation and methodological triangulation (Patton 2002; Gray 2009). For this study, methodological triangulation consisted of in-depth interviews with Zimbabwean women informal cross-border traders, key informant interviews with retired women informal cross-border traders, informal conversations and a reflective diary where my reflections became part of the data worked with (Matthews and Ross 2010). Yin (2009) considers data triangulation as information collected from multiple sources but aims to corroborate the same fact. In this study, the data sources were Zimbabwean women informal cross-border traders and retired Zimbabwean women informal cross-border traders. When the data are triangulated, the facts are supported by more than a single source of evidence (Yin 2009). Drawing from Matthews and Ross (2010), a reflective diary was kept where reflections became part of the data that were worked with.

## IV. Stories of Women Informal Cross-Border Traders

### a) *Conditions that Forced Zimbabwean Women Informal Cross-Border Traders to Navigate Borders*

The uncertainty of hope forced the women informal cross-border traders to navigate the borders searching for livelihoods in other countries. In their desire to provide for their families, particularly the children, and earn some income, the women engaged in the precarious venture of informal cross-border trade with some travelling further afield to Kariakoo Market, Tanzania, rather than going to the surrounding SADC countries of South Africa, Botswana, Zambia and Mozambique. The failure to secure formal employment forced some of the women in the study to consider informal cross-border trading as an alternative way of generating income. It is not just unemployment that compelled the participants into informal cross-border trade as a livelihood, but professional women viewed this sector as a source of extra income amid the deteriorating living standards due to hyperinflation leading to increasing costs. The income earned from their professional jobs was inadequate to meet the household expenses and informal cross-border trading became a second source of income for the professional women. The frequent travelling to Tanzania meant the participants were away from their families and at the same time they had to fulfil their familial roles. The women cross-border traders were the breadwinners even though their husbands were present. Tecla's youngest son, who was asthmatic, commented, "Huh, you are going again?" and she responded, saying,



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"What do we eat if I stay at home? I will come back tomorrow"

*b) Frequent Absence from Home*

Constance was a transnational informal cross-border trader who exported wooden carvings and crafts to countries like Australia, Mauritius, and Brazil and imported clothing and handbags. Constance's frequent travelling and regular absence from home forced her to enrol her children in boarding schools in Grade 3. She earned good money from her cross-border activities to pay for her children's education in good schools as she aptly put it, "*I paid for their education… My children went to school through the work of my hands"* (Constance, interview July 2018).

While she travelled, Constance found it hard to leave her children at home with a caregiver. She preferred enrolling them in the former group A[1] boarding schools. Similarly, Fungai took her children to Cambridge, an upmarket crèche in Avondale, Harare, from the time they were three months up to five years. The issue shapes the subsequent narratives of women 'mothering from afar or from a distance' (Meyers 2019; Meyers and Rugunanan 2020) and those of mothering 'outside or beyond their national borders' (Batisai 2017). The participants in this study used ICTs to fulfil their mothering roles.

*c) Virtual Mothering Using WhatsApp*

Tecla, a 50 year old mother of four used the mobile phone to keep in touch with her family. Upon arrival at the Chirundu border post, she switched to the MTN network, which she also used in Tanzania.

> The reason I stay on the phone is that when I hear that he is having an attack I tell the people at home what to do…I tell the people at home where the medical aid card is and tell them to call an ambulance to take him to Westend immediately.

She sends messages to her children using WhatsApp, calling home twice or three times while in transit. She would only stop communicating when she was in the shops buying. For Tecla, keeping in touch was important because she had an asthmatic son and a husband who had to be on a dialysis machine because of renal failure. While using ICTs to maintain contact with their families has been documented in the literature (Madianou 2012; Chib et al. 2014; Meyers 2020), the women in this study particularly used mobile phones and the WhatsApp application to keep in touch with their families at home.

Rachel made use of WhatsApp to keep in touch with her children. She explained how her day started each morning:

> In the morning I have to check on them especially in the morning whether they are early for school. I have to wake them up myself. Tanzania is an hour later than us so I have to wake them myself by a WhatsApp call.

Even when she was thousands of kilometres away from home, Rachel felt it was her responsibility to wake up her children and prepare them for school. Mothering did not stop because Rachel was away from home. She spoke to them three times a day: in the morning, afternoon, and evening. She was emotionally vulnerable when she was away from the baby and other children of school-going age who needed attention from their mother. Being away from her baby, whom she left behind, exposed Rachel to emotional vulnerability as she worried about her and other children.

Linda used the mobile phone to assist her children with their homework while in Dar es Salaam. Each day in Tanzania, she would supervise her children's homework using the WhatsApp video call in the evening. She pointed out "we partially do some of the homework over the phone, so I still remain responsible for the homework even when I am away". In addition, she has face-to-face conversations using the WhatsApp video with the children, assisting them with their homework.

This finding is consistent with that of Madianou (2012), where one of the participants from Cambridge video called her family at 6.00 am while they were preparing for school in the Philippines. She used that time to ask the children about school and give advice on their homework. Both Linda and Rachel, while they were physically absent, were virtually present to direct their children. This reflects the findings of Nedelcu (2012), Batisai (2017) and Meyers and Rugunanan (2020). While Meyers and Rugunanan (2020) and Batisai (2017) discuss mothering from afar among transnational migrants, virtual mothering through mobile phones reveals the temporality of mothering from afar in cross-border trading. These women informal cross-border traders must have told themselves to travel and endure the temporary separation from their children, which was in the best interest of their children. They exercised agency to put food on the table, raise money for school fees, and improve their standard of living.

Agency and resilience are also pronounced clearly by the double-gendered pressure of fulfilling their mothering role and sustaining their families. The nature of their business meant that women informal cross-border traders were frequently absent from home. For instance, the women informal cross-border traders chose to temporarily travel to other countries, leaving behind their children, including babies they breastfed. Their absence often resulted in emotional and psychological vulnerability as they constantly thought of their children. To cope with their temporary absence from home, the women used mobile phones to monitor their children. The use of mobile phones and ICTs by migrant mothers to mother their children from afar has been documented in previous studies (Madianou 2012;

[1] Former group A schools were all white government schools (Nyagura 1991).



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Chib et al. 2014; Meyer 2020). While studies by Batisai (2017) and Meyers and Rugunanan (2020) talk of migrant mothers' mothering from afar due to living in destination countries, this thesis has a new dimension. The use of ICTs, particularly the mobile phone, brings in the temporality of mothering from afar for women informal cross-border traders. Being mothers, the women informal cross-border traders felt stressed leaving the children behind, but as we could see within this research study, ICTs were useful in mitigating some of the stress.

## V. Conclusion

This paper has argued that there is a new dimension that stands out is that the women informal cross-border traders not located in the host countries use ICTs, particularly mobile phones, to mother from afar. The ICTs bring out the temporality of mothering as the women informal cross-border traders took this role with seriousness. This is in line with early African feminist thinkers such as Mikell (1997) whom Steady (2010) stated sought to maintain and defend the importance of their roles as mothers. African feminism was said to be family-oriented. However, Ahikire (2014) contends that such views on African feminism are conservative and do a disservice to the generations of women dedicated to pursuing more audacious and radical agendas in areas like sexuality, culture and religion.

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