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Challenging the odds of vulnerability and resilience in lone migration: coping strategies of Zimbabwean unaccompanied minors in South Africa

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Abstract

Childhood vulnerability attracts more societal and scholarly attention than child resilience. This article presents experiences of some Zimbabwean Unaccompanied Minors (ZUMs) in South Africa as an example of children who adapt to living as migrant minors separated from their parents. Using life history and aspiration interviews with eighteen ZUMs, we explore their coping strategies to test theoretical perceptions about childhood vulnerability and expand knowledge of how they are being affirmed and/or challenged. With research conducted in Makhado (Louis Trichardt), a non-border town in South Africa, the article highlights the nuances of ZUMs living in-shelter with catered needs versus ZUMs living out-of-shelter and fending for themselves. The interconnected effects of this on the children's agency, vulnerability and resilience, now and potentially in future are also explored. In engaging the philosophy that some childhoods are inherently difficult, the study confirms that some ZUMs cope successfully despite being caught-up in tensions between structure-agency and vulnerability-resilience. The coping strategies of ZUMs reinforced some forms of vulnerability, while they camouflaged or silenced others. This cautions against the adoption of uncritical, or generic views about children's agency and capabilities. The study concludes that individual and societal context matter greatly in discourses about child agency, vulnerability and resilience.

Keywords: agency; resilience; vulnerability; migration; unaccompanied minors;

South Africa

1. Introduction: the significance of child agency, vulnerability and resilience in child migration

Children are often constructed and perceived as needing special protection and guidance in both formal and informal spaces (Wyness 1996, 433; Vandebroek and Bouverne-De-Bie 2006, 130; Dudley-Marling, Jackson, and Stevens 2006, 748). Indeed, due to their physique, evolving mental capability and limited life experiences relative to adults, children are often deemed less competent and more vulnerable than adults (Alanen 1988, 54; James and James 2001, 29; Wihstutz 2011, 448). This outlook stems mainly from emphasising children's potential in adulthood rather than seeing them as current social agents who contribute to shaping society by their actions and inactions (see James, Jenks and Prout 1998; Qvortrup 1994; Uprichard 2008).

Protecting children because of their vulnerability remains a valid global priority, as vulnerability is applicable in many children's situations. This has been a major motivation behind the nearly universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which since October 2015 binds all states in the world except the USA (Arts 2014; UN 2017). However, vulnerability also remains problematic as the prevalent picture of children's realities, as a common notion in society and an idea portrayed by many child welfare organisations.

A vulnerability approach silences some children's laudable efforts at living and even thriving in especially difficult circumstances including natural disasters, armed conflicts, and exploitation. Unaccompanied minors¹ or lone child migrants often make such efforts. Over the past decade, increased internal conflict and economic recession in various countries, acts/threats of terrorism and global tensions arising from ideological differences between/among countries have spurred migration. Lone child migrants from unsettled countries are increasingly being included in the numbers of refugees seeking

asylum abroad (UNICEF 2017). Yet, many studies focus on children that migrate with or are 'left behind' by their parents (Bhabha 2009, 414; Huijsmans 2011, 1307), usually assessing the economic or psychological effects of migration on these children and/or their families. However, lone child migration has also stimulated research interest over time mainly because, besides these children being minors, they are separated from their parents and vulnerable to the typical adaptation challenges experienced by refugees, asylum seekers (Wernesjo 2011, 495) or displaced persons. Moreover, their situation conflicts with society's visions of ideal childhood, often conceived as belonging in sheltered family settings.

We perceive agency as a central theme in lone child migration especially when the child made, or was involved in, a decision to move (Hashim and Thorsen 2011, 63). Children have always been involved in migration and play an active role in shaping the global process of migration, especially in the Global South which has a relatively high incidence of lone child migrants (Huijsmans 2011, 1308-1309). Perceiving children as developmentally immature and socially naïve may however obscure children's agency because resilient behaviour by highly vulnerable children may not be socially acceptable (Grover 2005, 534).

This article aims to contribute to increasing efforts to bring more balance to discourses on childhood agency, vulnerability and resilience in relation to unaccompanied migrant children (see e.g. Ensor and Goździak 2010; Orgocka and Clark-Kazak 2012). It presents an analytical reflection on Zimbabwean Unaccompanied Minors (ZUMs)ⁱⁱ in South Africa, highlighting how their actions and inactions (first as individuals and then as a distinct group of children) affirm, disprove or extend notions of childhood vulnerability and resilience. By deciding/consenting to migrate, unaccompanied minors

typify Berman's argument (2011, 275) that children are active agents and not simply socialised individuals.

In research on Ghana's street children, Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2013, 363) contended that children made individual choices to move to the streets; decisions that signify considerable capacity for action. We recognize this self-determination, and use it to situate and analyse the experiences of ZUMs in the childhood vulnerability and resilience discourse. Huijismans (2011, 1308-1310) identified this approach to studying migrant children (from the perspective of children's agency) as an attempt to redress research tendencies to regard children as passive objects. Like Huijismans, Mahati (2012b) also cautioned his readers to be wary of evaluating children's agency in an uncritical and non-reflective manner. This article heeds these warnings by providing a comprehensive perspective that considers both sides of the unaccompanied minors' agency-outcome coin: vulnerability and resilience. It presents evidence from the experiences of ZUMs' to challenge the notion of childhood vulnerability as ZUMs demonstrate laudable survival instincts despite the structural odds against them.

So, a major objective of this article is to use the situation of ZUMs in South Africa to illustrate the especially difficult circumstances that some children face, and their resilience and agency in coping with these circumstances. The essence is to contribute to attempts to correct an overt focus on notions of extreme vulnerability which obscure children's agency and resilience – a tendency which has grown to especially define children of the Global South, given the influence and interventionist efforts of aid agencies.

1.1 Research site and methods

Zimbabwe is a resource-rich country that has been plagued by 'severe socio-economic

difficulties including hyper-inflation, negative real interest rates, and a chronic shortage of foreign exchange' (SADC 2018). Zimbabwe has been confronted with prolonged societal disorder and political captivity by the former Mugabe-led administration (Games 2002, 1). These difficulties triggered mass migration by Zimbabweans, old and young alike, in search of greener pastures. Interestingly, Grier (2006, 84-90 and 100-105) showed that in fact there is a long history of independent migration of children and adolescents in Zimbabwe.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2013, 1) confirmed that, since 2009 South Africa has received a massive number of asylum-seekers, the majority being Zimbabweans, and that the increasing number of unaccompanied minors among them is a major challenge. Mugabe's resignation and the appointment of President Mnangagwa in November 2017 did not trigger instant changes in the situation. Many Zimbabweans are still seeking respite elsewhere while awaiting economic revival and further political change.

Many ZUMs arriving in South Africa reside in the border town of Musina because costs and logistical constraints often interfere with traveling (immediately) to their intended destinations (Hillier 2007; Palmayr 2009; CoRMSA 2009; Fritsch, Johnson and Juska 2010; Mahati 2012b). However, this article is based on research conducted in Makhado town (now known as Louis Trichardt) located about ninety kilometres further into South Africa. As an officer of an NGO supporting ZUMs in Makhado relayed to us, ZUMs were gradually moving to Makhado to avoid difficulties in Musina, especially lack of food in shelters. Makhado was selected as the study site because, unlike Musina, it appears less like an in-transit town. Beyond the shared drive to survive, compared to ZUMs in Musina, ZUMs in Makhado appear to have made stronger decisions to blend

into South African society. This exudes more agency and resilience, focus themes of this article.

Life history and aspiration interviewsⁱⁱⁱ were conducted with eighteen ZUMs in Makhado: (i) fifteen in an all-boys shelter (with live-in shelter parents - father and mother) funded and managed by a non-profit organization and (ii) three living out-of-shelter (two boys and one girl). All potential in-shelter study participants were briefed about the study's objectives, and those who agreed to participate were interviewed. Consent to conduct the study in-shelter was also obtained from the shelter parents. The selection of the in-shelter ZUMs was therefore purposive but limited by the shelter size. Nevertheless, data saturation was reached at the sample size of fifteen. Out-of-shelter ZUMs were accessed through snowballing techniques leveraging on community networks. Accessing out-of-shelter and/or female ZUMs was a challenge, primarily because they are commonly employed in private/discreet forms of work including domestic work and sex work (FMSP 2009, 8; Palmary 2009, 21). This was limiting for the size and diversity of the study sample. The gender imbalance in the study also limits the extent to which inferences about female ZUMs can be made.

Nevertheless, both groups of ZUMs (in-shelter and out-of-shelter) were chosen to serve two seemingly divergent but reinforcing purposes: (i) to highlight the shared characteristics amongst ZUMs and (ii) to reveal the different and individual peculiarities among them, especially per social space. Mahati (2012a & 2012b) respectively, explored care workers' representations of working Zimbabwean migrant boys and their learning of life skills through work. This study extends the discourse on the situation of ZUMs, from a life skills/labour perspective to linking their life decisions to the connected theoretical lenses of childhood agency, vulnerability and resilience.

Moreover, the experiences of ZUMs in Musina (the border town where Mahati's study was conducted), certainly differ from the experiences of ZUMs in a non-border town like Makhado. The reasons for this are that the physical contexts, legal ambience, power rules and social dynamics of daily existence/livelihood in both locations though connected, are unidentical. Also, assessing the experiences of ZUMs' 'living-in shelter' versus those of ZUMs 'living-out of shelter' helped us assume a reflexive and circumspect stance about varied realities, for instance, why out-of-shelter ZUMs chose to subsist independently despite provisions in-shelter.

Given that ZUMs also share similar contexts (e.g. origin/background, reasons for migration, migration journey and current situation), in this article, select biographical narratives of four ZUMs are first presented for detailed reflection, and then supplemented with references to other ZUMs. We use excerpts and typological narratives to present and analyse the findings. The identities of the ZUMs are kept confidential by using their self-chosen pseudonyms.

2. Setting the scene: summary profiles and select biographies

The table below summarizes the profiles of the interviewed ZUMs (17 boys and 1 girl), as a preview to teasing out the central themes of agency, vulnerability and resilience.

[Insert Table 1 here] – provided at the end of the manuscript

With ages at migration spanning eight to sixteen, at the time of the interviews, the ZUMs had spent between two months and five years away from home. Four selected biographies (two in-shelter and two out-of-shelter) now showcase similar narratives and histories of ZUMs.

In-shelter ZUMs:

Matthew, a 17-year-old single orphan (mother alive) is the first of 6 children and was in Grade 9 at the time of the interaction. He had no relatives in South Africa but sometimes contacted his family in Zimbabwe by telephone. Matthew was not attending school in Zimbabwe. He decided to migrate, in his words to 'look for a better beginning' by working. He arrived in Musina in January 2010, after having been attacked and robbed by *Magumagumas* (scavengers/bandits who abuse and exploit along the border) while traveling. At the time of the interview he had not been to Zimbabwe since. Matthew lived on the streets in Musina before coming to the Makhado shelter. He was quite happy with the treatment at the shelter, although he disliked not being allowed to play football freely. He intended to finish schooling, and become a pilot or mechanical engineer at the Air Force Base. Matthew desired clothing, accommodation, education and better food from the South African government. He prioritised the right to choose his religion, have freedom and the right to play. He advised other Zimbabwean children to migrate to avoid hunger and attend school, which he preferred to work, because in the end he desired to return to Zimbabwe to support his family.

Tinashe at the time was an 11-year-old single orphan (mother alive). He is the first-born and was in Grade 5 at the time of the research. He had relatives in South Africa and sometimes contacted his mother in Zimbabwe by phone. He was attending school in Zimbabwe but left home because there was no food. His mother decided that he should migrate, and she brought him straight to the Makhado shelter in December 2010. His migration journey was incident-free. He was unhappy about leaving home but had to because of hunger. He had since been to Zimbabwe once to visit, in December 2012. Tinashe advised other Zimbabwean children not to waste food. He also expressed that he wanted to send food home to his family and was keen on getting educated because he

wanted to become a medical doctor. He felt that children's rights were being 'badly provided' and advised government not to ban child work.

Out-of-shelter ZUMs:

At the time, Nomsa was a 16-year-old female double orphan and the first of 3 children. In June 2010, she dropped out of school in Zimbabwe (Grade 5) after losing her parents who died of HIV/AIDS. She came to South Africa in December 2010, lived in Musina until May 2012 and then came to Makhado. While in Musina, she survived by doing piece jobs (domestic work, running errands, helping in a *Spaza* or neighbourhood convenience store, and begging). Nomsa left home because she had to fend for her siblings and learnt that work opportunities were better across the border. In Makhado she sometimes helped in a hairdressing salon, did domestic work or babysat for some salon customers. When she did not sleep at the salon, she paid (daily) to 'squat' in a backyard shack behind a family's house. She earned on average 200 South African Rand (commonly referred to as ZAR) per week, which covered her basic needs and sending food stipends to her siblings through a woman who regularly visited Zimbabwe. She wished to continue her education, but had to continue to fend for her siblings because extended family members deserted them when their parents died. Nomsa planned to work and save enough money to start her own *Spaza*. She wished her siblings could join her and hoped to bring them soon. She believed she had the right and duty to work because there was no one to support her and her siblings.

Tapiwa, a 17-year-old single orphan (mother alive) is an only child. He completed Grade 4 in Zimbabwe but dropped out when his father died. He decided to come to South Africa in 2008 with some money his mother saved for him. *Magumagumas* robbed him while he was crossing the border with other travellers. He did piece jobs in Musina including gardening, washing cars and polishing shoes. He stayed at a shelter in Musina

but left for Makhado in 2009 because he was arrested in Musina and detained for one week. He noted that ZUMs helped each other by sharing food and shelter, caring for the sick and indirectly forming social networks to protect each other against attack or exploitation such as being beaten or cheated by adults who refused to pay for their services. In Makhado he had lived on the street, slept in run down cars and in a family's car garage. At the time of the interview he lived in a shack, which he shared with some adult day labourers. He made money from pushing trolleys at the grocery store and working at construction sites, earning between ZAR150 and ZAR200 weekly to meet basic food needs. He kept his money in a purse sewn to his trousers as he felt he could not entrust it to anybody.

3. Presentation and Analysis of some Key Findings

Excerpts and typologies are adopted, not with reductionist intentions but to highlight the similarities and differences among ZUMs as a heterogeneous category of children with a shared context. According to Kluckhohn (1997, 459), a typology is 'a classification that is explicitly theoretical in intent as opposed to one intended purely as a descriptive categorization'. The use of excerpts and typologies is thus intended to preserve the voices of ZUMs and help establish theoretical linkages. A simultaneous aim is to identify and accentuate the semblances and nuances of identity and difference under themes related to our focus on child agency, vulnerability and resilience.

We describe our central terms as follows. Agency is the capacity, choice and action to execute one's own (or assisted) decisions (see Morrow 2008, 304; Comim et al. 2011, 7). Vulnerability is potentially being unable to resist, respond to and/or recover from difficulties, due to existing or past conditions (see Sen 1992, 1999 cited in Trani, Bakhshi and Biggeri 2011, 246; Andresen 2014). Resilience is the ability to survive

especially difficult situations with little or no negative unforeseen consequences (see Fraser 1997 cited in McAdam-Crisp 2006, 461; Masten and Powell 2003, 4).

3.1 Motivations for migration (and the roles of parents)

The reasons for migration were varied for both in and out-of-shelter ZUMs, but had related consequences and were mostly caused by unpleasant household/family situations including lack of care/protection and difficulties of accessing education and meeting basic needs. For most ZUMs, extreme household poverty stemmed from loss of one or both parent(s) and/or inability of their parent(s) to cater for them due to sickness or unemployment. These incidents exposed ZUMs to vulnerabilities as expressed by ‘Shady the rock’ (in-shelter boy, 17 years): ‘My parents were not alive to support me to go to school. No money for school fees and no jobs’. Interestingly, while most interviewed ZUMs were double orphans, Ovias (in-shelter boy, 15 years) and Tinashe (in-shelter boy, 11 years) had living biological mothers but also migrated because of financial difficulties. The low-income earning potential of female-headed households may account for these difficulties.

Tapiwa’s (out-of-shelter boy, 17 years) and Tinashe’s cases are noteworthy for another reason. Tapiwa’s mother bore the financial costs of his migrant journey after his father died. Tinashe’s mother brought him to the shelter by herself because of the starvation at home, even though Tinashe was not happy to leave home. These widowed mothers’ (implicit) approval of their children’s migration appears like a pre-emptive effort to improve their children’s access to better opportunities, considering the dire situations at home. The fact that some parents took their children to their destinations also alludes to the existence and nature of protective measures for child migrants identified by Hashim and Thorsen (2011, 78). This highlights the validity of separation by decision as a common occurrence, as the separation of some children from their parents/homes was

intentional, aided and survivalist in nature. It also broaches the subject of how children and/or their parents could play the child vulnerability card to access benefits. The immediate and eventual implications of this are discussed briefly later.

A few ZUMs gave ambiguous reasons for leaving Zimbabwe. For instance, ‘vibrant Ashley’ (in-shelter boy, 14 years), claimed: ‘I ran away from home because I love South Africa’ – an adventurous motive. However, his response to why he preferred South Africa to Zimbabwe revealed deeper reasons: free food and the opportunity to attend school at the shelter. Letmese (in-shelter boy, 17 years) stated that he migrated because he was ‘doing nothing in Zimbabwe’; his tacit way of saying he was not attending school.

The migration motives of ZUMs’ are all household related, including that of Moses (in-shelter boy, 17 years) who left home to escape his stepmother’s cruelty. Overall, the ZUMs migrated to manage or alleviate their exposure to various vulnerabilities including starvation, lack of/threatened education, financial difficulties, abuse/victimization and lack of adult protection. This lends credence to Whitehead, Hashim, and Iversen’s (2007, 12) inference that family breakdown (neglect, conflict with parents/guardians, maltreatment, and poverty) is a factor in children’s migration. These accounts also corroborate Mahati’s (2012a, 70) reports that the Zimbabwean migrant children in his study migrated for various reasons including poverty, hunger, lack of education, domestic abuse, scarce jobs, family reunion, and some simply for adventure.

3.2 Migration trajectories and incentives

Before settling in Makhado the ZUMs had walked varied migration paths. Some had lived in Musina before relocating to Makhado for reasons like availability of shelter (sometimes translated as a desire to leave the streets), schooling, job prospects, lack of documentation and fear of arrest as well as actual arrest/detention by the police. Anderson et al. (2017,

373-379) reported that Musina shelters experienced various difficulties, mainly related to insufficient funding and consequently inability to cater for unaccompanied minors' needs. These constraints encouraged the children to leave the shelters. Two ZUMs had first lived in locations in Zimbabwe (besides their villages) before moving to Makhado. The remaining seven ZUMs headed straight to the Makhado shelter because of the availability of food, shelter and education opportunities there and the 'easier life' compared to Musina. The following selected recounts illustrate some of these different paths:

'When I got to Musina, I stayed in the streets and then moved to Musina Shelter of Dutch. I came to Makhado because I want to go to school. I like Makhado because it is safer than Musina' – Molta (in-shelter boy, 17 years).

'I came straight to Makhado because I heard that if you can work, life is easier here than in Musina' – Sam (out-of-shelter boy, 16 years).

For ZUMs who moved from Musina to Makhado, the decision to venture further into South Africa to seek opportunities mostly relayed by hearsay appears naïve but also indicates resilience and a non-defeatist attitude. ZUMs who headed straight to Makhado also relied on hearsay about the basic vulnerabilities to hunger and lack of shelter/safety in Musina and the harsher survival climate there. Knowing that the shelter automatically admitted all male ZUMs (as confirmed during conversations with the housefather^{iv}) may have aided their decision.

These actions signify resilience in the face of potential vulnerability as ZUMs recognised their need for provision of basic needs and adult protection to increase their chances of survival in South Africa. It appears that ZUMs engaged in a survival and social navigation tactic tagged 'victimcy' [sic]. Utas (2005, 408) proposed and defined this term as: '... a form of self-representation by which agency may be effectively exercised under trying, uncertain, and disempowering circumstances'. Some ZUMs described how they

intended to survive in South Africa: ‘by living in the shelter’ (Cuthbert, in-shelter boy, 15 years) and ‘by the grace of God’ (Molta, in-shelter boy, 17 years). These descriptions lend credence to the concept of victimcy as ZUMs relied solely on pre-information about guaranteed access to shelter provisions. Exemplifying Connell’s (1997, 121) criticism of the general misconceptualization of agency and victimization as mutually exclusive, ZUMs inventively used childhood vulnerability (which is often perceived only as a disadvantage), to simultaneously exploit available opportunities to solve their problems.

3.3 Migration ambitions (work, school or both) vs. current pre-occupation

Eight of the in-shelter ZUMs migrated to South Africa intending to attend school. Four of these eight expressly stated that they had planned to stay in the shelter. They therefore based their survival in South Africa on their foreknowledge of shelter provisions including the opportunity to attend school. This corroborates Hashim’s (2008, 8 cited in Hashim and Thorsen 2011, 43) conclusion that children sometimes absconded from home because they had information about places to survive and existing possibilities there. On the other hand, Moses (in-shelter boy, 17 years), a victim of exploitation and domestic violence by his stepmother, appeared not to have clear migration intentions but decided to leave home anyway. In his case, it appeared that the tense household situation exerted more influence as a migration push factor than the pull factors of availability of food, shelter, education opportunities and piece/menial jobs.

An interesting contrast also exists between the in-shelter and out-of-shelter ZUMs. Although some in-shelter ZUMs intended to work in South Africa, they ended up staying in-shelter where food, accommodation and education were guaranteed. As Molta (in-shelter boy, 17 years) explained: ‘I was not disappointed when I got to South Africa, but my expectation was to get a job. But I am happy because I was not going to school but now I am going’. However, the three out-of-shelter ZUMs stuck to their original

intention for migrating: work. This highlights how individual agency and willpower impact the personal choices of ZUMs in handling vulnerability. However, it is important to note that the burden of personal obligations may inspire and sustain this willpower as well. This was the case for Nomsa (out-of-shelter girl, 16 years), a double orphan responsible for the welfare of her younger siblings. Nomsa's case exemplifies why Mahati (2012a, 67 citing Bourdillon 2008) suggested that the importance of work for ZUMs should be evaluated considering their impoverished backgrounds and the inability or unwillingness of adults to provide for them.

Findings from this study clearly add that the notion that all in-shelter ZUMs were education-inclined should be treated cautiously because guaranteed access to food and shelter could be their primary motivations for remaining in-shelter, while schooling was just a compulsory fringe benefit of the shelter package. For out-of-shelter ZUMs however, the obvious priority was their piece jobs.

3.4 Gender dynamics and birth order: effects on tendency to migrate and familial responsibility

Nomsa (out-of-shelter girl, 16 years), who migrated in search of work to fend for her younger siblings, displayed the greatest sense of responsibility toward her family. While a review of birth positions of the ZUMs suggests that first and last-born ZUMs are more likely to migrate than children in middle positions and only children, the relatively high tendency of first-born ZUMs to migrate may arise from the inherent responsibility that often accompanies their birth position, especially in Africa. However, individual decisions and dispositions impact on the amount of familial-responsibility assumed by first-borns. In Nomsa's case, her position as the first born female child of deceased parents may have stimulated her high sense of responsibility for her siblings. This aligns with Lampi and Nordblom's (2011, 29-30) empirical findings that: 'females who grew

up without siblings are ... more risk averse and birth order and number of siblings matter more often among females than among males when it comes to real-life decision-making’.

Nomsa’s migration to South Africa to fend for herself and her siblings, her actions of sending money to her siblings, and her intentions to own her own Spaza support the notion that individuality and intersectionality (including social classifications of age and gender) greatly influence how ZUMs exercise agency, exhibit resilience and manage vulnerability.

3.5 Return home or remain in South Africa: decisions and reasons, trade-offs, and expectations

Most ZUMs, especially double orphans, did not envisage a permanent return to Zimbabwe anytime soon. They only intended to visit relatives during holidays (as some had done before) or to retrieve important documents like birth certificates. The return of others was conditional on the completion of their schooling in South Africa. Only Matthew (in-shelter boy, 17 years) suggested the possibility of returning somewhat permanently to support his family.

Some ZUMs who had relatives (mostly siblings) in South Africa contacted them sometimes via telephone. Others were not in contact at all because they did not have their relatives’ contact information. Overall, they neither expressed immediate intentions to locate/reunite with their relatives in South Africa nor planned to return to Zimbabwe as the following statements illustrate:

‘I am not leaving Makhado because I am staying at the shelter and I am going to school. I have got people to look after me now. The South African government should allow us stay until we finish going to school’ – Tafardzwar (in-shelter boy, 15 years).

‘I don’t plan to return to Zimbabwe because I don’t want to stay there again. I prefer to go to school now than to work because I need a better job after my education. I have a sister here in South Africa. I plan to find her but I don’t have her details’ – Molta (in-shelter boy, 17 years).

The ZUMs had individual reasons for deciding to remain in the Makhado shelter (a decision that signifies inaction) or live out-of-shelter, with many of them making compromises:

‘I want to attend school and work at the same time. But I can’t work while in the shelter’ – Bij (in-shelter boy, 15 years).

‘I prefer to work now than go to school because schooling may bring a better future, but I need to survive now. And I am working hard so I can send some money to my mother’ – Tapiwa (out-of-shelter boy, 17 years).

The ZUMs also nursed hopes about the possible benefits they could get by remaining in South Africa as well as expectations from their home country, respectively as follows:

‘I want South African identity, food, clothes and putting us in a better school’ – Innocent (in-shelter boy, 17 years).

‘I want to have an ID from the South African government and money from Mugabe’ – Lamec (in-shelter boy, 14 years).

3.6 Coping strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused

We endorse Almqvist and Hwang’s (1999, 168-170) definition of ‘coping’ as: ‘a complicated concept entailing ways of reasoning and acting under unfavourable conditions’, and their categorization of coping strategies as being ‘problem-focused’ or ‘emotion-focused’. The former refers to coping strategies directed at managing or solving a problem, while the latter refers to coping strategies fashioned to manage/reduce emotional distress or maintain internal stability (ibid). We also draw on Ansell and van

Blerk's (2004, 674) caveat that 'the term "coping" does not imply that such actions are invariably successful or carry no costs; the term "strategy" does not imply the implementation of a carefully prepared plan'.

Essentially, coping strategies should not be taken as best-response decisions and/or efficient solutions, but be regarded as crises-response efforts by the affected individuals. In adopting Almqvist and Hwang's (1999) categorization of coping strategies explained earlier, we would add that the two coping strategies – problem-focused and emotion-focused – are not mutually exclusive but usually co-exist. Their features are essentially identical, their processes jointly reinforcing, and their aims share mutual outcomes.

In this regard, the decision of in-shelter ZUMs to remain in-shelter, enjoying free schooling, housing and feeding signifies both a problem-focused and an emotion-focused coping strategy because, in addition to their basic needs being met, they enjoyed the benefit of being raised in a quasi-family. Out-of-shelter ZUMs on the other hand decided to sacrifice shelter provisions to work at piece jobs and fulfil their responsibilities to their families and themselves. Their decisions therefore leaned more towards being problem-focused as they assessed the opportunity cost of being in-shelter as higher than that of working/living out-of-shelter. Still, both categories of ZUMs made trade-offs, with their individual expressions of agency portraying vulnerability and resilience singly or in some combination.

4. ZUMs and the social (re)production of childhood vulnerability

Evaluating the objectivity of decisions (action and inaction) taken by ZUMs vis-à-vis managing their vulnerability corroborates Boyden's (2003:17-18) assertion that children use their agency in resourceful ways to exploit survival opportunities. However, especially during conversations with the housefather, it emerged that the vulnerability of

ZUMs was being socially (re)produced and sustained by the following factors.

4.1 Differentiation ceilings and barriers – age and gender

Age restrictions ensured that only ZUMs aged below eighteen qualified for shelter provisions. ZUMs were therefore ineligible to continue enjoying shelter provisions upon turning eighteen, even though they were accustomed to living in-shelter and were probably not equipped to survive outside the shelter. This situation highlights how rigid applications of guiding laws and policies (in this case, the law defining a child as any individual aged under eighteen and the policy not to provide for a transition regime once a child turns eighteen), influence everyday decisions.

A gender bias was reflected in the fact that shelters were not accessible to female ZUMs, allegedly because they were prone to falling pregnant. This bias contributed to the invisibility of female ZUMs and inadvertently increased their vulnerability.

4.2 Practices and institutions

Both categories of ZUMs had to choose between incompatible options: (i) staying in-shelter and schooling or (ii) staying out-of-shelter and working. Regardless of the choice made, ZUMs were likely to experience some form of vulnerability at some point. For out-of-shelter ZUMs, the absence of adult care and protection exposed them to the possibility of their basic needs (like food and shelter) not being met but also fostered their early independence. For in-shelter ZUMs, it appeared they could be vulnerable in future as their access to shelter provisions was guaranteed only until the age of eighteen.

Also, the near-border locations of Musina and Makhado appeared to restrict the movement of ZUMs because there were few or no neighbouring towns where social or community support was specifically provided for them.

By restricting their options, socio-economically and physically, the above factors mutually worked to sustain ZUMs' vulnerability to different risks and challenges.

5. A theoretical proposition: The child agency framework

Based on the experiences and decisions of ZUMs presented above, we propose a theoretical approach to reflect on, and analyse children's agency in the light of vulnerability and resilience. The child agency framework illustrated in the diagram below highlights the connectivity between the central concepts of this study:

[Insert Figure 1 here] – provided at the end of the manuscript

With lone migration as the central theme, we posit that children express agency mainly in two modes: 'action' and 'inaction'. While action is readily acknowledged as agency, inaction is likely to be ignored as a valid form of agency on its own. This is mainly because inaction typically suggests dormancy, thus conflicting with the impression of potent effort often associated with agency. It should however be recognised that inaction could also entail conscious choice and may not necessarily be the direct opposite of action as semantics would have one believe, or an indecisive act as it has been socially constructed to seem. Essentially, action and inaction are both valid options for expressing agency since inaction involves decision-making too and is an action in itself.

Vulnerability and resilience are both theoretical constructs and independent yet possibly coexistent outcomes of children's choices (action and inaction) in agency. The processes informing ZUMs' migration decisions confirm that children do not express agency in isolation, and every child exists as part of a society with norms that (s)he is expected to accept and conform to. For instance, in-shelter ZUMs had to abide by schedules defining when and for how long they could play soccer – although most of them were not pleased with the restrictions. However, children like out-of-shelter ZUMs

who chose to fend for themselves, also challenge and deviate from these norms. Agency is therefore simultaneously inspired, enabled and constrained by children's worlds. The notion that children's agency is bound is expressed in Figure 1 above via an adapted incorporation of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecology of human development model. The overall framework is presented in circular form to: (i) display vulnerability and resilience as causes and consequences of action and inaction, (ii) show the interconnectedness of vulnerability and resilience as sometimes-reinforcing rather than always-conflicting concepts, (iii) denote that child agency is induced and influenced by the child's environment, and (iv) show that the child also shapes and influences the environment through agency.

6. Closing thoughts: linkages among child agency, vulnerability and resilience

As indicated earlier, during the research it emerged that parents sometimes endorsed their children's lone migration or escorted them to their destinations. This differs from the intent underlying both the literal and official definitions of 'unaccompanied minor' for which 'separation' – from parents or (legal) caregivers/guardians is key (Derluyn and Broekaert 2008, 320-321). When this separation is premeditated and aided, it widens the epistemological discourse on unaccompanied minors because the category becomes quite assorted. This is a potential subject for further research, alongside the invisibility of female ZUMs.

The narratives discussed above also indicate that, exhibiting agency, ZUMs sometimes used childhood vulnerability to avoid hardship and cleverly exploit available opportunities in a manner that signifies resilience. This was especially relevant for them because they had to balance the need for self-reliance with societal expectations to be vulnerable yet socially responsible in a foreign country that neglects them as much as their home country has forgotten them. Thus, as Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2013, 363-365)

noted, contrary to the norm, vulnerability, not rational choice may be a basis for children to exercise agency. We would add that a dense cause-effect relationship exists among vulnerability, agency and resilience. For instance, it may be difficult to ascertain whether vulnerability triggered agency, or the lack of agency resulted in vulnerability, or resilience possibly increased vulnerability. Moreover, vulnerability and resilience are not mutually exclusive concepts (Hoffman 2011, 160) but also existed as simultaneous outcomes of agency for both categories of ZUMs. For out-of-shelter ZUMs, agency put them on an early start in self-sufficiency but potentially exposed them to societal evils like exploitation. For in-shelter ZUMs, agency could make them resilient (given their access to food, shelter and education) but prospectively vulnerable after the age of eighteen when ineligible for shelter provisions. So, for both groups of ZUMs, vulnerability and resilience are as mutually reinforcing as they are conflicting, finding expression in different places, at different times and for different situations.

Furthermore, although the interviewed ZUMs experienced vulnerabilities, presenting vulnerability as the sole or dominant reality of their childhoods deserves more reflection as it detracts from their resourceful efforts to manage vulnerability. Indeed, all humanity is vulnerable (to varying risks at different levels and various times) and it seems imprudent not to define children as needing protection. Still, it is even more injudicious to define them only in terms of an inability/inadequacy to exhibit objective agency. Thus, we support the statement by Henderson (2012, 11) that ‘... flattering notions of vulnerability obscure the ‘strength and dexterity’ children bring to bear on their experience of adversity’.

Notwithstanding, the interviewed ZUMs neither expressed agency or resilience alone nor navigated vulnerability in isolation. They did so with support structures (such as family, society, NGOs, national policies, notions of children’s rights) before, during

and after their migration journeys. This was illustrated in the child agency framework depicted above. We therefore posit that child agency is embedded within, expressed through and influenced by societal provisions, processes and institutions. For instance, while in-shelter ZUMs expressed agency by their inaction (choosing to remain in-shelter and deciding not to pursue opportunities to work), out-of-shelter ZUMs expressed agency by their action (actively working and remaining unsheltered though reliant on interactions with their community for survival).

The interviewed ZUMs appeared to be defining their priorities and taking decisions to negotiate life according to their individual circumstances. And, they were clearly not a homogenous category of vulnerable children, as differences existed in their experiences of, views about and strategies for handling vulnerability. Still, a common factor was that they all reinforced beliefs about childhood vulnerability in some circumstances but disproved it in others. In addition, their coping strategies were individual, premeditated and appeared neither contradictory in outcomes nor indecisive in planning. This provides strong grounds to question the social construct of childhood vulnerability.

Still, we note that generalizations of any findings from this study are as stretched as they are problematic because the aim of this study is neither to create nor justify uncritical generalizations, but to contribute to efforts to increasingly balance discourses on childhood agency, vulnerability and resilience via empirical evidence from South Africa.

Overall, this study highlights the fact that neither all children nor all childhoods are congruent. Societal misconceptions and approaches of welfare interventions that have matured to influence, dominate and regulate norms about African children, especially the notion of vulnerability, need to be continually addressed and adjusted. This is especially

important because childhood is not a static category or a rigid phase. By exercising agency through their actions and/or inactions, ZUMs challenge(d) partial notions about childhood vulnerability and resilience. It is now left to society and stakeholders of development or humanitarian interventions to respond, by their own actions and/or inactions.

ⁱ Unaccompanied minors are ‘children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so’ (ICRC 2004).

ⁱⁱ ZUMs is a term of writing convenience and does not seek to imply homogeneity.

ⁱⁱⁱ In-shelter ZUMs opted to write their responses rather than engage in a traditional verbal interview. Answers that warranted clarification or follow-up were discussed further. Out-of-shelter ZUMs participated in standard interviews.

^{iv} Conversations with the house father occurred on 16th August 2013.

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Table 1. Biographical and migration information of the ZUMs

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Figure 1. The child agency framework (authors’ adaptation of Bronfenbrenner 1977 original)

Table 1

Nick Name	Parental Status	Age		Birth Order Position	Period Absent From Home	Reason for Migration	Decision to migrate taken by	Return to Zimbabwe?
		At time of interview	At Migration					
IN-SHELTER ZUMs								
Tafardzwar	Double Orphan	15	15	Last child	2 months	No parental care	Self	Probably after completing school
Matthew	Single Orphan (Mother alive)	17	13	First child (of 6)	4 years	Not attending school	Self	Yes, to support family
Molta	Double Orphan	17	16	Last child (of 8)	18 months	Not attending school	Self	Never
Ovias	Single Orphan (Mother alive)	15	15	Third child	5 months	Not attending school	Self	Holiday visit, sometime
Lamec	Non Orphan	14	11	First child	3 years	Not attending school	Self	To visit his family
Bij	Non Orphan	15	12	Sixth child	3 years	Bad household situation. Not attending school	Self	To visit
Tinashe	Single Orphan (Mother alive)	11	8	First child	3 years	No food at home	Mother	Yes, to see his mother whom he visited last year
Cuthbert	Double Orphan	15	15	Fourth child	3 months	No parents	Self	Never
Langton	Double Orphan	17	13	Last child (of 5)	4 years	Not attending school	Self	Yes, to visit his grandmother
Innocent	Double Orphan	17	14	Last child	3 years	Hunger and poor education	Self	Holiday visit, sometime
Bernard	Double Orphan	17	14	First child	3 years	No parents, no food and no money	Self	Not likely
Shady the rock	Double Orphan	17	15	Last child (of 2)	2 years	No parents	Self	Yes, to take birth certificate

Table 1 (continued)

Ashley	Double Orphan	14	9	First child	5 years	No parents and not attending school	Self	Yes, visited 3 years ago
Moses	Single Orphan (Father alive)	17	15	First child	2 years	Abuse by step-mother	Self	Not likely
Letmesee	Non Orphan	17	13	First child	4 years	Not attending school	Self	Yes, to visit family
OUT-OF-SHELTER ZUMs								
Nomsa*	Double Orphan	16	13	First child (of 3)	3 years	No parents. Had to fend for siblings	Self	Yes, to see siblings and possibly bring them to South Africa
Tapiwa	Single Orphan (Mother alive)	17	12	Only child	5 years	Not attending school. No money	Self and Mother	Yes, to see his mother
Sam	Non Orphan - as at migration	16	14	Only child	2 years	No food. Not attending school	Self	Yes, to know if his mother survived her illness
* Nomsa was the female ZUM interviewed								

Figure 1

