Modern family on the Zambian Copperbelt

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The family model promoted amongst Zambian mineworkers since the colonial period was based on a male breadwinner and a female housewife. This article examines the family dynamics in a context in contemporary Zambia of growing employment precariousness, declining incomes for men and increased labour market participation for women. It shows that, though wives still publicly present their husbands as breadwinners and family heads, their role in family decision-making has increased whilst their performance of household chores has decreased, and spousal relations have improved. In a context in which men’s jobs are uncertain and incomes inadequate, men have had to sacrifice their gender stereotypes to be more supportive of and cooperate with women, for their own economic security. It draws on interviews with 50 couples, a simple survey and participant observation conducted in the towns of Mufulira and Kitwe on the Zambian Copperbelt.

Introduction

In June 2009, Alex, an underground mineworker, was retrenched. As the bank appropriated his entire retrenchment package as loan repayment, Alex went into unemployment with nothing to live on. He could no longer afford to pay dowry, and his planned wedding to Marjory, an electrical mining engineer, was threatened. Marjory stepped in, gave him the money for the dowry and sponsored the wedding. In Zambian society, this is considered taboo, and so they agreed to keep it secret. After their wedding, Marjory paid for Alex’s university studies in mechanical engineering and took care of all living expenses. But when they went out in public, Marjory presented Alex as the main breadwinner and household head, in keeping with the widely accepted cultural norms on the Copperbelt. She gave him the bank card so that he would be the one paying the bill at the restaurant and observed all traditional rules of umuchinshi [respect] towards him. What does this story tell us about gender transformation on the Copperbelt? What does it hide?

Studies that examine spousal relations are dominated by two approaches. One emphasises husbands’ (men’s) continued dominance over financial and other household decisions and wives’ (women’s) responsibility for domestic chores, despite women’s increased economic contribution.
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These studies stress adherence to normative gender expectations for wives and husbands (Bittman et al. 2003); women income earners’ increased vulnerability to abuse by their husbands in contrast to stay-at-home wives (Atkinson and Boles 1984); the devaluing of women’s income relative to that of the husbands (Zelizer 1989); and the presence of conflict and violence in couples with wives as breadwinners and stay-at-home fathers (Ningrum and Mas’udah 2021). The other approach gives more power to wives in financial decisions, with the performance of less domestic work (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Pahl 1989; Meisenbach 2010; Coltrane 2000; Presser 1994; Medved 2009) or even egalitarian relationships (Coltrane 2000; Deutsch 1999; Risman 1998; Schwartz 1994). Moreover, some studies focus on the stigmatisation suffered by unemployed husbands with working wives, for failing to act as responsible breadwinners (Dunn, Rochlen and O’Brien 2013; Chesley 2011; Glick, Wilkerson and Cuffe 2015; Cole 2007; Rochlen, McKelley and Whittaker 2010).

This article contributes to these discussions by focusing on the mismatch between public and private gender performances and adds to current understandings of Zambian mineworker families. Existing research highlights women’s important contribution to the family budget (Parpart 1986; Chauncey 1981; Peša 2020; Ferguson 1999; Evans 2015; Mususa 2010). But, with the notable exception of Evans (2016) (and Rubbers [2015] for the DRC), they rarely explore how women’s increased incomes affect power dynamics, the performance of domestic chores and spousal relations more generally. This article addresses this gap in the research.

I draw on more than 24 months of field research amongst mineworker families in Kitwe and Mufuliria on the Zambian Copperbelt between 2016 and 2018 in this article. I conducted interviews, held countless conversations and engaged in participant observation with 50 couples from Kitwe and Mufuliria who worked for Mopani Copper Mines (MCM). The sample included both couples in which one partner earned more than the other and such where both partners earned more or less the same. I collected the income data in 2018 by using a simple survey that required couples to state how much they earned and contributed to the family budget. Of the 150 questionnaires administered, 100 were returned. The respondents were purposely selected after interviewing them to ensure that they were married and that they had the necessary attributes to provide the kind of information I needed. This approach was useful for triangulation (to check the validity of the data derived from one method against that established by another method) and for enabling an in-depth understanding of my informants’ everyday life, challenges, triumphs, silences and the often taken-for-granted yet important experiences, all of which played a critical role in gaining an understanding of family relations. This approach goes beyond existing methodological approaches that focus on housewives (for example, Parpart 1986; Chauncey 1981; Ferguson 1999) as it also includes women wage earners who make a significant contribution to the family budget.

This article draws on Francine Deutsch’s (2007) conceptualisation of “undoing” gender, which focuses on social interactions that reduce gender difference and not on continuity. This approach challenges us to examine the extent to which gender inequalities persist or decrease, and how the perception of difference between men and women is affected when one of them enters into a non-traditional job or occupation. It also focuses on how gender inequality differs over time. The aim is to capture “when and how social interactions become less gendered, not just differently gendered” (Deutsch 2007, 114). Instead of taking gender as the “primary frame” of gender interactions (for example, Ridgeway and Correll 2004), Deutsch (2007, 114) encourages us to look at situations when gender is “irrelevant in social interactions.” We should not assume that cognitive biases at the interactional level will undermine and reverse structural change but engage how these interactions “might work together to produce change” (Deutsch 2007, 114). Deutsch’s approach emphasises how interactions serve not only as sites of continuity but also of change. I use her concept to understand how shared breadwinning is experienced and how power relations, the performance of domestic chores and spousal relations play out amongst families on the Copperbelt.
The rise of the male breadwinner on the Copperbelt

In precolonial Zambia, marital relations were defined by economic interdependence, requiring the cooperation of husband and wife in growing sufficient food to sustain their family. This interdependence gave women economic and decision-making power within the family (see Evans 2015). This changed during the colonial period. The government, mining companies and religious and traditional leaders all cooperated in ways that promoted women of the Copperbelt as housewives and men as breadwinners. In the early years, especially after the Great Depression, the government feared the cost of having Africans live in towns and the threat that the stabilisation of African families — thus the settling of miners’ wives and families in town — might pose to their rule. Mining companies, on the other hand, from early on supported this stabilisation as an incentive to attract labour, yet until the 1940s were reluctant to accept this settling as permanent. The restrictions of women to rural villages coincided with the desire by traditional leaders to preserve their control over women and the labour of the men these were linked to. During that period, the husband would move to his wife’s home at marriage where he performed bride service (mainly farm labour) until the in-laws approved of him and allowed him to take his wife to his place. Traditional leaders feared that the migration of women to towns would deprive them of the bride service that marriage brought to their communities. Religious leaders, in turn, believed that a woman’s position was in the family, as housewife, with the man as provider, and promoted this type of family in their teachings (Epstein 1981; Parpart 1986; Powdermaker 1962).

Women’s education was generally tailored to turn them into submissive wives and not to equip them for wage labour. They were prevented from accepting formal work, banned from working in the mines (Longwe 1985) and refused from engaging in domestic employment. More informal economic activities that could have enabled women to gain independence, such as beer brewing and prostitution, were also banned. The only economic activities allowed to women were gardening and selling agricultural produce at the market (Chauncey 1981). Consequently, women played only a negligible role in the labour market. As accommodation in town was tied to employment, in which men dominated, women became dependent on husbands to stay in town (Epstein 1981).

Despite many challenges faced by men, the “male breadwinner” became the most dominant stereotype for understanding the ideal family on the Copperbelt. Men went to work to earn wages as their wives took care of the domestic chores and the family. In the 1950s and 1960s, the lives of most women on the Copperbelt revolved around the husband and his working hours, in recognition of his “new status as breadwinner and master of the household” (Epstein 1981, 70; Chauncey 1981; Powdermaker 1962; Evans 2015). Men gained more decision-making power within their families. As Epstein (1981, 75) observed in the 1950s, men controlled almost every aspect of their wives’ lives and made most of the family decisions: “a woman’s status in town, and more particularly a wife’s, rarely rested on what she had achieved through her efforts but was in most cases refracted through her husband.” Women would put up with a lot to preserve their marriages. As “master of the house,” a man could lay claim to power and authority over the affairs of the household that were not part of his customary role, and the wife was obliged to defer to him in all things (Epstein 1981, 67). Some husbands would even tell their wives “what to do and forbid … certain actions, constantly reminding them of their economic dependence and derivative status” (Epstein 1981, 339). According to traditional teaching, a married woman was expected to address her husband with umuchinshi — practices which included kneeling when serving his meals. The wife was expected to avoid confrontation in public and show politeness, lessons taught a woman before her marriage (Richards 1940, 1995). Wives who failed to conform to these social expectations suffered violence at the hands of their husbands and risked public shaming. Women’s positions in the 1950s and 1960s, and still in the 1970s, was valued in accordance with their reputations as “housekeepers and household managers” (Gier and Mercier 2006, 93) and not as family providers (Evans 2015). Whilst the idea of a subservient African wife was evident during the precolonial era, it was now conflated with the image of the Christian housewife with traditional values. This correlation had
more traction in urban areas, where the wife was deprived of her economic power, than in rural areas where relatively egalitarian gendered relations of production applied.

The nationalisation of the mines in the late 1960s and formation of the Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines (ZCCM) in the 1980s sustained this family model because the ZCCM continued to believe that a stable workforce rested on male-breadwinner families with a dependent housewife to look after the working husband (Parpart 1986). Legal bans against women employment in the mines persisted (Longwe 1985), alongside limitations to women’s labour market participation and education.

Even though women in mining towns were prevented from contributing to the economy of the family, the wages and conditions offered to African mineworkers throughout the colonial period did not enable men to provide adequately. The survival of a mineworker family thus rested on the wife’s economic activities at home, such as gardening, beer brewing and selling produce at the market (Chauncey 1981; Peša 2020; Larmer 2017). The progressive economic decline that began in the mid-1970s, resulting from a sustained fall in the copper price, further undermined men’s ability to fulfil the role of the responsible breadwinner, making women’s economic activities even more critical (Ferguson 1999). Nonetheless, women continued to be stereotyped as housewives and men as masters of their households, largely because women’s incomes were insufficient to enable them to live alone with their children (Hansen 1984, 1989, 1997). Because men dominated wage employment, most struggles at family level were around access to income (Ferguson 1999; Parpart 1986).

After almost thirty years of economic decline, rising external debt and underperformance of the ZCCM, Zambia conceded to pressure from international financial institutions to break up and privatise the ZCCM (Fraser and Lungu 2007). With it came the dismantling of “state paternalism,” from the early 2000s onwards (Rubbers and Lochery 2021), especially the discontinuation of free housing, education, water and electricity (Fraser and Lungu 2007; Mususa 2012, 2021). The withdrawal of paternalism compounded mineworkers’ economic situation as prices for basic commodities rose faster than wages, forcing many miners into debt (Musonda 2021a, 2021b). The abnormally high interest rates charged by banks further eroded mineworkers’ net pay. Mining companies used retrenchment as their first response to global commodity market fluctuations, leading to a reduction of direct employees by over 60% (Musonda 2021b) and their replacement by low-paid contract workers. This situation significantly undermined men’s ability to act as responsible breadwinners for their families. Miners’ wives entered the labour market in numbers to secure the survival of their families (Evans 2016; Mususa 2010; Evans 2015; Musonda 2020).

Reconstruction of the male breadwinner

In a small random survey I conducted amongst 100 mineworkers in 2018, 35 reported that the husband earned more than the wife, 45 that they earned more or less the same income, and 20 that the woman earned more (Musonda 2020). These statistics show that a shift has taken place amongst mineworker families on the Copperbelt towards more egalitarian relations in terms of the family breadwinner between husbands and wives.

Despite the fact that women’s incomes are now higher, women continue to present their husbands as family breadwinner and household head when in public, in keeping with societal expectations — as we saw Marjory doing above. Thus, men would be the ones to negotiate deals when it came to buying a car or paying bills. The wife would present her husband as breadwinner to her relatives. When these relatives asked for money, she would defer to her husband: “Let me first ask my husband for some money.” And similarly, when asked for money by her children, she would answer: “Let me first ask your father.” When it came to make financial contributions at funerals, wives often gave their husbands the money beforehand for them to hand over in public on behalf of the family at the ceremony. Wives still adhered to forms of address based on umuchinshi, including kneeling when serving a meal to the husband, avoiding confrontation in public and being polite.
Women wage earners in this study justified the (re)construction of the male breadwinner by referring to the biblical roles for wives and husbands in marriages. “The Bible says a man is the head and provider for the family, if I don’t follow this rule, then I am disobeying God,” Grace Mwanza, an electrician, wife and mother of two, told me. “I have been brought up in a society where a man is a breadwinner, and so it just makes sense,” added Mary, a boilermaker and mother of three. For Precious, a mechanic, wife and mother of three, “it just feels nice for a man to pay the bills. People will say you are loved.” Juliet, a welder and wife, said: “Sustaining the image of the male breadwinner helps to make our boys and some irresponsible men to become responsible.” Juliet thus uses the (re)construction of the male breadwinner as model for boys who should strive towards income-earning careers by first understanding that the man is the main breadwinner and the wife his “supporter.” According to her, “a man must know that he is family breadwinner.” Moreover, Juliet believed that when men act as breadwinners, they help teach “irresponsible” men, that is, men who do not look after their families, to become responsible.

On the face, these practices reinforce the idea that families work hard to rebuild a man’s image as breadwinner, even when the wife and children are technically the true breadwinners (see, for example, Buzzanell and Turner 2003). This reconstruction of the male breadwinner fits with and reflects the fourth element of Tracey Warren’s (2007) definition of a breadwinner: breadwinning as a standard for male identity. However, these public performances, or “gender displays” (Brines 1994), did not always correspond with the reality when it came to family decision-making, the performance of domestic chores and spousal relations. In contrast to studies that emphasise public shaming and stigmatisation for husbands who earn less than wives (Dunn, Rochlen and O’Brien 2011; Chesley 2011; Glick, Wilkerson and Cuffe 2015; Cole 2007; Rochlen, McKelley and Whittaker 2010), on the Copperbelt husbands are protected by their wives’ efforts at reconstructing their breadwinner status.

**Control of income and decision-making**

In cases where a woman’s income was only supplementary but the husband’s income was also inadequate, men did not generally claim more power. Instead, men generally took steps to further the income capacity of their wives, for example by paying for the wife’s education or by coming up with the capital for the wife to start her own business. One miner got a loan from the bank to send his wife to nursing school. At the time of his retrenchment, she had completed her training and had started work. “If I had not sent my wife to training, I would be suffering today,” he said. This case shows that gender does not always lead to inequality. At times it disappears or becomes irrelevant.

When the wife earned more or less the same income, all my male survey participants claimed that they managed the incomes together with their wives. This form of economic cooperation between husband and wife took various forms. Stephen and Jane, both machine operators, put their respective revenues into a joint account, which they used in a concerted manner. Francis and Nancy, also both machine operators, each used their respective salaries for specific expenses: Francis paid the house rent, utility bills, school fees and transport, and Nancy paid for food, children’s clothes and the maid’s salary. Finally, Mwamba, a winding engine driver, gave all his salary to his wife, who earned roughly the same amount through trade. In such a case, it is women’s ability to stretch the low wages that justifies their access to her husband’s salary: “My salary is minimal, so I give it to her to budget so we can survive up to month end,” Mwamba explained. This budgeting role of women was considered all the more critical in a context of growing job insecurity. Women who are unable to use their husband’s salary for the household are likely to separate when the men lose their jobs.

The sharing of responsibilities puts women in a position of strength. Women raised their voices on economic matters and in decision-making, sometimes even challenging their husbands’ authority. As Harriet explained: “When there is no food, my husband would ask, ‘What is
happening?’ Similarly, I ask if the children are not going to school because he has not paid.” In such a situation Harriet would question her husband based on the agreement they made about sharing the family responsibilities. Generally, in situations where both partners earned about the same, wives enjoyed significant economic independence. As Mercy said, echoed by many other women in this study: “I choose how to spend, and my husband does not ask how I spend, as long as I fulfil my responsibilities and he is doing the same.” When extended family members needed help, spouses also cooperate. Thus Mutale, an artisan electrician and mother of two, explained: “If I do not have money to give my family, I ask from my husband and vice versa.”

Although Marjory frequently presented Alex in public as the breadwinner and the person responsible for their family business, behind the scenes the reality was different. Whenever she gave him the bank card to pay the bills, she checked the payments through the banking app on her phone. “If he withdraws cash, without my knowledge, he has to explain, or I withdraw this privilege,” she said. When the drivers of their taxi businesses hand over their cash income to Alex, he always passed it on to her. When she suspected that something was wrong, she even reprimanded him. Grace said: “Even if I give him the money to pay bills, he must account for every penny.” Precious argued similarly: “The money I give him should always be used for the benefit of the family and not anything else.” Mary was comfortable with giving her husband money to maintain his respect, “but he had to avoid misusing the money. And ... it should not be forever; he has to fight and become a breadwinner again.” Juliet, in turn, said: “I give him my money not for him to use on other women. That is why we agree on how to spend it beforehand.”

Whilst wives still kneel when serving food to their husbands, this generally happens when there are visitors, especially elders. Otherwise they do not. Yet kneeling is rarely framed as expressing or even reproducing gender inequality. As one banachimbusa [traditional teacher] explained: “Kneeling shows respect and politeness to the elderly. It is not only women and girls who kneel. Men also kneel before older people, irrespective of their sex category. Boys also kneel when serving meals to their mothers.” Further, in public couples will address each as the mother or father of their firstborn child, but in private use their first names or endearments that signify their romantic closeness. And where in the past males and females ate separately, and the kitchen was a no-go area for males, today they share the meal at the same table and men do work in the kitchen just as the women.

Women’s decisions over other aspects of their family relations also increased. For example, when Marvel’s husband refused her sister to live with them, Marvel prevailed: “I just said, my sister will come because she has nowhere else to go.” This autonomy also extends to decisions about pregnancy. When Grace’s husband asked her to stop taking contraception so that they could have a third child, Grace refused: “I said my previous pregnancy was complicated, I am not having another child. I told him if you want a baby, find another woman.” Prudence, in turn, managed to convince her husband to have a vasectomy as a means of contraception. This is rare in the Zambian context where contraception is widely understood as solely the woman’s responsibility.

Given existing employment patterns and wage insufficiency, it is risky for men to mistreat their wives. Kennedy, a forty-year-old husband and father of four, is a good example. When he worked for MCM, he neglected his family. Whenever he received his salary at the end of the month, he would not return home until he had spent everything on alcohol and women. His wife, a teacher by profession but unemployed at the time, was struggling to provide for the family by selling vegetables at the market, hoping a better job opportunity would arise. In 2014 she found a job in the mines. Kennedy took this as chance to abandon his family completely and move in with his young girlfriend. In 2015, he got a bank loan but spent it recklessly. When he was retrenched shortly afterwards, the bank took his entire retrenchment package as loan repayment, leaving him with nothing. His girlfriend left him and married another man. His wife refused to take him back and proceeded to divorce him. By 2017, Kennedy lived in a friend’s unfinished house, as caretaker, as he had no capacity to rent a place for himself. Looking back, Kennedy regretted his
behaviour: “If I treated my wife well and supported my family, I would not be suffering like this.” To avoid such regrets many men now consider their wives as important family providers deserving of respect.

The above cases demonstrate women’s rejection of the expected gender norms. Many women expressed satisfaction with their increased power in decision-making when they compare their experiences with those of their mothers in the past. Harriet, a miner’s wife who worked as loader driver, said, for example:

In the past our parents believed that the man was the breadwinner and that he had powers to do whatever he liked. I cannot tolerate that. When my husband tries to be violent, I just tell him, I am going. This was not possible with our mothers because they had no sources of income to allow them to live independently, and men took advantage of that. Today, things have changed.

According to Harriet, today women’s increased access to income has forced men to abandon their normative gender beliefs. This has been empowering, as reflected in her comment that “I can leave him and live independently.”

Domestic chores
Certainly, women still dominate housework. However, its distribution has changed when compared to earlier accounts. In a context where both spouses have to work, the main change I observed is the growing contribution of children, including boys. Take the case of Mulenga, an electrician, whose wife worked as boilermaker and daughter as nurse. All three left home early in the morning to go to work and came back only in the evening. It was the 18-year-old son Lameck, who had recently completed secondary school and was waiting to go to university, who took on the tasks of bathing his younger brother, preparing his meals, pressing his uniform, taking him to school and picking him up at the end of class. During the day, Lameck cleaned the house, washed the dishes and did the laundry for all family members. In the evening, before his parents and sister returned, he prepared dinner. When I asked Lameck why he was doing what was traditionally regarded as women’s work, he responded: “That is an old-fashioned way of thinking. Sweeping the house in which I live does not make me less of a man, it just makes me more human.” Like many of his colleagues, Lameck did not think of housework in terms of gender but in terms of responsibility. As Abraham, one of Lameck’s friends, explained: “You cannot say, no, I am a man, so I won’t cook, just because I am a man. That is irresponsible.”

Men’s participation in domestic affairs did not stop with the boys. A stronger cooperation also existed amongst couples. The partners helped each other in preparing meals and washing clothes according to their working hours. If both worked during the day, it was usually the woman who got up early to prepare the clothes and the food. But if the husband worked in the afternoon or was on night shift, he prepared his own food and clothes. If the wife was on night duty (as a nurse, for example), some husbands prepared the meals for their wives and ironed their uniforms. Most men justified this performance of domestic duties in terms of their love and care for their spouses. As Josaphat, an underground miner, explained: “If you love your wife, you cannot subject her to more punishment for doing housework after she knocks [off] from night duty just because you are a man. You need to help and allow her to rest.” He added: “Doing housework does not turn a man into a woman.” Although men’s performance of domestic chores differed from one family to the next, the majority of respondents shared Josaphat’s views. Others drew on the discourse of gender equality to justify their performance of domestic work. As one miner stated: “Men and boys have to perform housework to give girls and their wives a chance to develop their education and careers, just like men.”

In general, women employed in the mining sector do not perform housework on a daily basis. Often household chores are performed by the children, extended family members or domestic workers. This domestic work is mostly still gendered, as the children, parents or domestic workers
involved are generally female. But men and boys are increasingly helping out with different tasks, especially if they find themselves out of work. Given the increasing job insecurity, the probability of men finding themselves in this situation is more common. In this case, they have no option but to take up household chores. For example, when Justin worked at the mine, most of the household chores were carried out by his wife and children. He only took care of drawing water for the house and maintaining the outside yard. When he lost his job, however, he started cleaning the house and preparing the meals — that is, doing the tasks that were previously done by his wife and daughters. Such practices suggest that, even though the traditional division of labour between men and women remains dominant in mineworkers’ households, things are changing. It is this recognition of the reduction in gender inequality that the “undoing” gender approach emphasises.

On the surface, the family model — with the man as breadwinner and the woman as housewife — remains prevalent. The media, religious teachings and public discourse are geared towards reproducing this model as moral standard for men and women (Rubbers 2015). However, men’s dominance as providers is long gone. Today, many women have jobs or are engaged in some economic activities, and contribute significantly to the household budget. In contrast to several studies, the survey that I conducted with mineworkers and my intimate knowledge of family life on the Copperbelt suggest that the growing economic role of women in a context marked by precarious employment and rising cost of living has led to a redistribution of domestic tasks. Whilst this varies according to the employment status of the spouses, men today generally contribute more to domestic work than in the past. Mwangala, a female engineer and wife to Mwansa, a miner, explained, for example, that “it is practically impossible to prepare and serve my husband his meals because there is no time for me.” This is because she had to wake up early and often knocked off late in the evening, by which time she would be too tired to do anything.

Women like Mwangala resolved the tension between “intensive mothering” and “ideal worker” norms (Buzzanell et al. 2005; Johnston and Swanson 2007) by emphasising the significance of their income to the survival of the family: “If I spend more time doing housework, I will always be fatigued. In that case both work and family will suffer.” She thus tried her best to be a good mother within the limited time at her disposal. “I try to chat with my children as much as I can, and on weekends I give them all the attention they need from me.” Under these circumstances women often delegated these tasks to their children, extended family members or domestic workers. Much of the other work, such as cleaning the bedroom and making the bed, was carried out by the husband. In certain cases, couples decided the distribution of domestic work on the basis of “logic.” One male respondent stated: “It is illogical to wait for my wife, from work already tired, to come and cook for me, whilst sitting all day in a house that is not cleaned. I do this work.” Where the husband earned more than the wife, it was often the case that the wife spent most of her time at home and performed the bulk of the domestic chores. Although this illustrates the continuation of normative gender relations in which male incomes were traded for the performance of domestic work by their wives, men do not regard domestic tasks as purely female. Rather it is seen as a shared responsibility. Women and girls cleaned the house, whilst boys cleaned the outside yard. Girls cleaned the plates, and boys drew water. Girls cooked, and boys made the gardens, planted the vegetables and watered them. Girls cleaned the house but not the boys’ bedroom. In some houses, boys cleaned the plates, prepared meals and swept the house, even when girls were available, because they considered this part of their preparation to become responsible men. As one miner’s wife told me: “Men can only appreciate a woman if they understand the difficult tasks women perform.”

These case studies support Alice Evans’ (2016, 11) recent findings that men contribute more to domestic chores than is usually acknowledged, but that this work happens outside of public view. She argues that “even if care work is redistributed, it is often unseen and so does not undermine other people’s norm perceptions or enable a positive feedback loop” (Evans 2016, 1143). This does not, however, imply a lack of change in gender divisions of labour, especially on the Copperbelt.
where domestic work has almost exclusively been a woman’s job. The findings also suggest that a significant proportion of domestic work was done by men/boys in the past but went unseen for exactly this reason. In my own family, for example, I cooked, cleaned the house and washed the clothes for myself and my siblings. Studies must, therefore, highlight these partial changes, as focusing only on gender inequality misses the subtle shifts in the distribution of domestic work. As James Scott (1990) notes, if such daily infra-political practices remain silent, they are not trivial but have the potential to produce change in the power balance between men and women in the long term. From a more theoretical point of view, the above cases reinforce Deutsch’s (2007) urging that social scientists should pay attention to the extent to which gender inequality reduces over time (see also Deutsch 1999).

**Spousal relations**

On the Copperbelt, conflict between spouses from the 1950s to the 1980s often arose when men considered their wages to be their own and saw their wives as merely interested in their money (Epstein 1981; Ferguson 1999; Parpart 1986). This could even result in men showing physical violence towards their wives. But this violence has come to be decried in recent times. Crispin, a male underground miner, reflected on this by highlighting the negative consequences the violence would have: “It is important for us men to cooperate and support our wives. Otherwise, these women can abandon you when you lose your job.” Mabvuto, a drill operator, husband and father of two, referenced the widespread campaign against gender-based violence by various non-governmental organisations (see Evans 2015) as follows: “Women know their rights. If you just slap her, and she reports to the police, you go straight to prison. I cannot stand the public shame.” Further, a recent strengthening of the law against gender-based violence discourages men from being abusive towards their wives. Social media has increased the speed at which perpetrators of gender-based violence are exposed. Crucially, today there are many more educated women in the labour market who earn enough income to support themselves independently of their husbands (Evans 2014, 2016).

All these factors position wives as deserving of better treatment. Most miners said: “Wife battering belongs to the past. Today a wife is a partner.” This view of women as partners is evident in how Francis and Nancy built their family house. Nancy explained: “In 2014, I got a bank loan and bought a plot and built the house up to slab level. During the loan repayment period, we depended on Francis’ salary. Having repaid the loan in 2018, Francis also got a loan, which we used to finish the house.” These kinds of relationships could only exist in couples that suspended their beliefs about the ideal breadwinner. Nancy explained, “I do not consider the salary my own. The salary is ours,” a view that Francis supported.

Early anthropologists described spousal relations as characterised by mistrust and conflict. This study has found many cooperative couples. Magdalene and Chipasha had been married for twenty years, half of which they lived apart when they had jobs in different towns. Magdalene explains: “My husband has been working in North-Western province. We have had no problems. I love him, and he loves me, so I know I cannot cheat on him, and he cannot. So, we are happy.” Chipasha, in turn, said: “I love my wife and even when I am out of town, I am not worried that she would do anything I wouldn’t do.”

As Evans (2016, 1140) recently observed, the hardship that people of the Copperbelt have experienced in recent years have fostered a shift in perceived interests: “Families increasingly forfeited the social respect accrued by complying with norm perceptions (of male breadwinner) in exchange for the financial benefits of female labour-force participation. This shift in perceived interests catalysed growing flexibility in gender divisions of labor.” As the case of husbands in this article shows, it is no longer in their interest to deny their wives the right to earn an income or to be violent against them, knowing full well that if they lose their jobs, they will depend on their wives for their survival.
This is not to say that all families in my study were harmonious. As other studies also note, some couples experienced conflict as women’s incomes and contributions to the family budgets increased (see, for example, Sari 2015; Ningrum and Mas’udah 2021). Charity and Benson are a good example. Before their marriage, Charity was unemployed. During the marriage, Charity attended college and, subsequently, found a job. Benson, however, was retrenched. In Charity’s words:

In 2000, I got married to Benson as a full-time housewife. In 2015, after we had three children, Benson insisted that I go to university to do nursing and also paid for my studies. Upon completion, I immediately joined the mines. In 2018, Benson was dismissed without benefits for breaching safety. That is when problems started. He always felt that I was disrespecting and not consulting, and whenever I was reprimanding my children for being wasteful, he would say, “You are now talking too much” and “It is a big problem when a woman gets more money than the husband.”

Their case shows that although men in general support their wives’ income-earning capacity as a form of economic security (Musonda 2021b), some men do feel threatened by this. Foster, for example, explains that “whenever I come back from work late, my husband thinks that I was with a man. He also feels uncomfortable when I receive calls from my male colleagues.” Rachel, too, had a similar experience: “One day I was late and got a lift from a male colleague. We fought all night with my husband.” Similarly Magdalene: “When I bought a phone, my husband was very upset as he suspected that some man bought [it] for me. When I told him that I used the loan, he was upset that I didn’t consult him.” And in Christine’s case, “trouble started when I refused to give him business capital. He accused me of enjoying his joblessness and disempowerment.”

Ningrum and Mas’udah (2021, 83) argue for Indonesia that conflict in couples with unemployed husbands is “related to the socialisation of children, the family economy, the division of domestic labour, differences of opinion on various matters, conflicts with the extended family, and various trivial cases,” and that such conflicts also have, in some cases, “an element of violence.” They conclude that “violence is a form of male power over women” and that “the patriarchal ideology remains firmly rooted in the family, even though the husbands do not work. They bully, dominate and exploit their wives.” On the Copperbelt, however, the fear of abandonment by their wives, public shaming and jail sentences have meant that men rarely consider violence as the means of disciplining their wives.

**Conclusion**

Over the last two decades, the male breadwinner–female housewife model that mining companies imposed on their workers since the colonial period has collapsed. Mass retrenchments of predominantly male labour, the rise in precarious low-paid subcontracting, the withdrawal of social welfare, the rising cost of living and debt obligations have undermined men’s ability to sustain their breadwinner status. Meanwhile, partly out of necessity to save their families from falling into poverty and partly due to increased female education, women’s participation in the labour market and, hence, their contribution to the family budget has increased.

This article shows that although men are still generally presented as breadwinners and household heads, their power and control over their wives has been undermined. They can no longer provide for their families single-handedly. Most men recognise the importance of women’s income to secure their future. This recognition has increased women’s decision-making power and control within the family and led to a reduction of their load of household chores, as wage-earning women have much less time for domestic work. Men and boys have increasingly taken up domestic tasks. Certainly women still dominate in the performance of domestic work (Evans 2016; Rubbers 2015), but there has been a significant shift since the 1950s. For the same reason, spousal relations are no longer characterised by conflict, suspicion and mistrust (see Ferguson 1999; Powndermaker 1962; Parpart 1986; Epstein 1981) and marked by more trusting, cooperative and supportive relations. It is tempting to argue that what we see on the Copperbelt today may be a continuation of what was before but had been disguised with the changing expectations of
modernity. Although changes may be slow, they are nonetheless happening. If we take the longer perspective, these changes can still, in the end, effect a radical transformation. Instead of focusing on a dramatic shift in gender roles, it is fruitful to focus on the less dramatic but equally meaningful steps of change that go largely unrecorded and yet transform gender relations in significant ways in people’s everyday lives.

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Notes
1. The names of the company and the research participants have been anonymised.
2. The Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children Act, No. 14 of 1989, Cap. 505 of the Laws of Zambia, was amended by Act No. 4 of 1991. The amendment allows women unrestricted choice of profession and unrestricted access to employment on the mines.

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