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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Ethnic identity, resilience, and well-being: a study of female Maasai migrants

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Abstract

Objectives Migration is an increasingly prevalent worldwide phenomenon. In recent years, Maasai men and women have migrated from their traditional rural villages to cities in Tanzania in growing numbers. This study explores the experience of rural-to-urban migration among female Maasai migrants and how this experience affects ethnic identity, resilience, and well-being.

Methods Thirty-one female Maasai migrants were interviewed in Swahili, Maa, or English. Researchers used a rigorous multi-pass, qualitative coding process to analyze interview transcripts.

Results Migration-driving factors, specifically a desire for education (leading to permanent migrants) and a need to support one's family (resulting in circular migrants), influence how Maasai women adapt and respond to challenges in the city. Circular migrants hold closely to their traditional ethnic identity and remain isolated from city life, while permanent migrants modulate their ethnic identity and integrate into urban society.

Conclusions Increasing connections among female Maasai migrants might create a more resilient community leading to improved health. Pilot workshops with this aim are being implemented.

Keywords Rural-to-urban migration · Ethnic identity · Resilience · Maasai · Climate change · Education

Introduction

Global migration patterns

Migration is an increasingly prevalent worldwide phenomenon, resulting in millions of people leaving their homes and traditional lifestyles. The United Nations estimates that there are currently 244 million international migrants (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2016) and 740 million internal migrants (United Nations Development Programs 2009) across the world. People are driven to migrate for many reasons, including economic, political, social, and environmental factors (Black et al. 2011).

Migration is often categorized as "voluntary" or "forced" (UN-Habitat 2010); voluntary causes of migration include seeking educational opportunities or improved economic prosperity, while climate change, political instability, starvation, and war are examples of forced or involuntary causes of migration. Distinguishing between these two types of migration is complex, as human

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migration often results from a number of different voluntary and involuntary factors interacting with one another (UN-Habitat 2010). How a community responds to migration drivers is dependent upon the community's socioeconomic status as well as the specific vulnerabilities and motivations of community members (Black et al. 2011).

Indigenous people and migration

Indigenous people, loosely defined by the UN as "peoples and nations …which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories" (United Nations 2013, pp 6), across the globe are particularly vulnerable to migration, as they are often both heavily reliant upon rapidly degrading natural environments and live in underdeveloped and low-resource settings without educational or economic opportunities. In recent years, the number of indigenous peoples who have migrated from their traditional rural homes to urban centers has been increasing (UN-Habitat 2010). Migration to urban areas provides indigenous people with opportunities including educational attainment and alternative employment, but also entails challenges such as experiencing discrimination, social isolation, and sexual violence (May and Ikayo 2007; UN-Habitat 2010). These new challenges are likely to increase migrants' stress levels, thus placing much importance on a person's resilience in the face of stressful events and conditions. Resilience is typically defined as a person's ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, change, or stress (Masten 2001).

When traditionally rural indigenous people migrate to urban centers, they are exposed to new societal structures and cultural practices. Having long lived only among others who shared their traditional culture, these new experiences are likely to influence the migrants' views of the world and of themselves. Ethnic identity has been defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from knowledge of membership in a social group with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1981, pp 225). Indigenous communities, with a robust sense of community and traditional cultural practices, are likely to have a strong ethnic identity. This study will examine how migrants' ethnic identities change (if at all) as they carve out a life in the city.

Transformations in the nature of ethnic identity are important because they may be tied to health, where health is viewed as a comprehensive state of physical, mental, and social well-being (WHO 2006). A strong ethnic identity has been shown to promote health and well-being (Smith and Silva 2011; Phinney et al. 2001), particularly among marginalized ethnic groups. A recent meta-analysis of ethnic identity among people of color in North America found that a robust ethnic identity was more often and more strongly related to positive well-being than to compromised well-being (Smith and Silva 2011). However, there are examples in the literature of a strong ethnic identity exacerbating the emotional distress experienced in response to perceived prejudice against one's ethnic group (Smith and Silva 2011; McCoy and Major 2003). Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework for better understanding how migration of indigenous people may affect ethnic identity, resilience, and health.

The Maasai in Tanzania: an example of indigenous migration

This study focuses on rural-to-urban migration of the Maasai people in Tanzania. Maasai is the term used to refer to a traditionally pastoralist, indigenous people who live in Maasailand, an approximately 150,000 km^2 area in the Tanzanian/Kenyan border region of the Great African Rift Valley. As pastoralists, the Maasai people are rural herders who care for and have a strong reverence for cattle. The Maasai are famous for many cultural practices, including coming-of-age ceremonies that involve circumcision and males killing a lion to become "warriors" (Spear and Waller 1993; Coast 2002).

Maasai society is patriarchal and polygamist; males are the heads of the family and live with their wives in a series of huts made of cow dung and mud called *bomas* (Spear and Waller 1993). Men are in charge of caring for the cattle and protecting villages from foreign invaders. Women are responsible for milking the cows, collecting firewood, preparing food, looking after children, fetching water, and taking care of the home (Getu and Mulinge 2013). In comparison with the rest of the Tanzanian population, the rural, traditionally geographically isolated, Maasai are an undereducated ethnic group (Homewood et al. 2009). Low educational attainment is particularly prevalent among Maasai females (Coast 2002).

In recent years, the Maasai have been migrating to urban centers in search of ways to support themselves. While males tend to migrate due to drought and loss of cattle, females migrate to support their families when their husbands are not able to do so (Heaney and Winter 2016). Previous research on Maasai urbanization has found that Maasai migrants struggle with mental health problems, isolation, unreliable working conditions, and discrimination (Heaney and Winter 2016; May and Ikayo 2007). This research has largely focused on *male* migrants, resulting in a lack of knowledge about *female* Maasai migrants in Arusha. Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature about

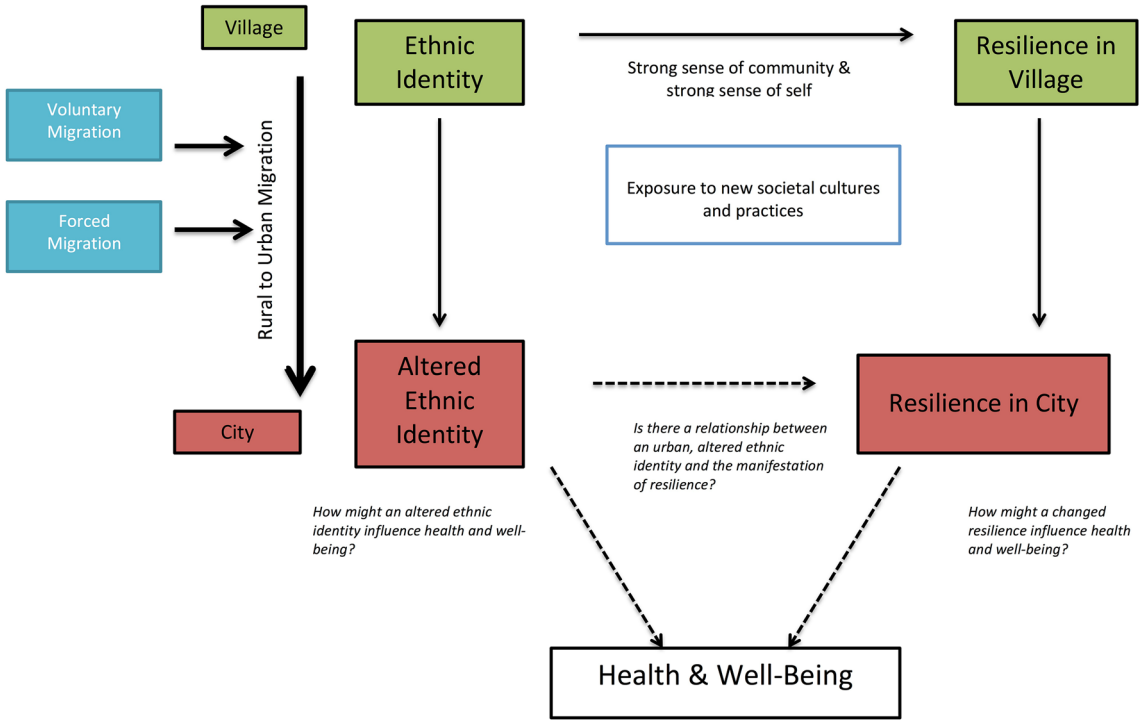

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework—the influence of rural-to-urban migration on ethnic identity, resilience, health, and well-being (Tanzania, 2016)

the relationships between ethnic identity, resilience, and health in Maasai migrant communities.

Research questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions about female Maasai rural-to-urban migrants: (1) How does Maasai ethnic identity change, if at all, when women migrate? (2) What new challenges do Maasai female migrants face in their new urban environments and what factors affect their responses to these challenges? (3) How does female Maasai resilience influence health in this new urban context? (4) How are the answers to the previous questions influenced, if at all, by a woman's rationale for migrating?

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative research design and was conducted in collaboration with the Future Warriors Project (FWP), a Tanzanian-based Maasai NGO. FWP was in charge of recruiting participants and was involved in coordinating the logistics of all interviews.

Study sample and recruitment

Study participants were Maasai women who had migrated from their home villages to Arusha, a city in northeastern Tanzania and the capital of Arusha Region. Two distinct groups of migrant women were targeted for the study: (1) those who migrated for predominantly financial reasons and (2) those who migrated primarily to pursue education. Eighteen participants comprising the first group were recruited at a beading workplace in the Mako Mapya district of Arusha, and thirteen participants comprising the second group were recruited through a "snowball sampling" method (Noy 2008).

These two groups of women had strong demographic differences. Women who had migrated for educational opportunities were all unmarried, had received a secondary education, and were roughly 20–35 years old. On the other hand, seventeen out of the eighteen women who had migrated for financial purposes were married or widowed, and the majority of these women had received no education. Only one woman in this group had received a secondary education, and three women had received a primary education. These financially driven migrants also had a larger age range: Five were classified as 20–35 years old, four were classified as 36–60 years old, and nine did not know their ages. Both groups of women had migrated from villages all across the Arusha and Manyara Regions of Tanzania. The migration distance could range from 25 to 400 km.

Data collection

Data collection occurred during July and August 2016 in Arusha. Thirty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted either in Swahili, Maa, or English. The FWP liaisons reviewed all English interview questions to ensure they were culturally appropriate and then translated them into Swahili or Maa. Both translators had previous experience with qualitative research and semi-structured interviews and were trained to ensure that their understanding of the project was compatible with that of the researchers. Table 1 shows sample interview questions.

Data organization and analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim into NVIVO Qualitative Research Software. Data analysis was guided by deductive and inductive thematic approaches. A deductive approach used some codes derived from the literature, while an inductive approach was grounded in the data and the researchers' experiences in the field (Miles et al. 2013).

The data were analyzed using a multi-pass coding technique. First-pass codes were descriptive, external codes that structured the data into "city" and "village." Second-pass codes served to organize and classify the data into different descriptive groupings. Third-pass codes were comprised of interpretive codes derived from the more descriptive second-pass codes, and fourth-pass codes were created to draw larger themes back together (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Post-coding analysis involved the creation of variable-by-variable matrices and cross-table queries in NVIVO in order to develop and test propositions (Miles et al. 2013). Throughout the iterative process of coding and categorizing data, analytic memos were used to reflect upon the data, reduce assumptions, and begin preliminary analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Results

Life in the village

Ethnic identity

All of the participants described a strong sense of ethnic identity in the village. Women wore traditional Maasai garb, spoke the Maa language, and lived in a boma alongside their families. Women gave rich explanations of Maasai village traditions, including coming-of-age rituals and customs related to pastoral livestock care. These robust and well-established ethnic practices gave village women a strong sense of community and a strong sense of self:

> As a Maasai, back home, I am so comfortable. I am so happy, it is so good, our culture – we love each other, we share with each other, we are together. We can live in a boma, twenty people, ten people, and then we can exchange information. The women build the houses. The boys that are not yet circumcised to be warriors, they go look after the cattle…

Implicit with this strong ethnic identity was a Maasai social support network that emphasized two tenets: *enganyit* and *osotwa*. *Enganyit* is a traditional Maasai term which translates into English as "respect." One woman stated:

> *Enganyit* is the discipline that will rule you to follow a moral life… The way a person speaks, how calm and nice he or she can be, that's the respect. It's respecting the elder, the younger, knowing how to live with people, that's *enganyit*.

Table 1 Sample interview questions (Tanzania, 2016)

Interview section	Example questions
Demographics and background	When did you first arrive in Arusha?
	Who do you live with currently?
	How many wives does your husband have?
Perceived health	Think about how you felt when you were living in the village and how you feel now living in the city. Do you feel the same, more healthy or less healthy in Arusha than you did in the village? Tell me about why you answered that way
	Think about a time since you came to Arusha when you were not feeling well. What was happening?
Ethnic identity	What would you teach your children about being Maasai?
	What languages do you speak; when and with whom do you speak these languages?
Challenges and resilience	Please tell me about some of the most challenging things you faced when you lived in your village? What helped you cope with these challenges?
	Imagine someone from your village were to arrive in Arusha. What advice would you give her?

Osotwa was another traditional Maasai term referring to a "good heart." One woman described how the Maasai "have a difficulty to be mean to anyone." *Osotwa* in turn embodies the love, generosity, and kindness in Maasai communities and contributes to the ability to respond to challenges with resilience. For instance, in the words of one migrant:

> The Maasai are a very kind people. For example if someone wants to get married but they don't have cows, then everyone will help and give them cows. Also if you have something, like some little problem, you can just talk to another Maasai and they want to help you. They just have a heart that is sharing.

Village challenges

The study participants described how life in the village was not easy: It was physically demanding, many families lived in poverty, and there were few opportunities for girls in terms of education. Often, the Maasai female gender role was a stressful role. Many of the women cited fetching water and firewood as sources as exhaustion: "there are days when women work a lot, and have a lot of activities. Women go fetch firewood, go get water, and it's far away. Sometimes, you just wake up really feeling weak, or sick, or with a back-ache."

Women responded to times of stress in the village with resilience. They described how their children might receive food and water from a neighbor, and how people would always share with one another: "we are very compassionate, very happy people…we love each other. I also love the sharing; for example, if someone does not have water at home, you can easily help your neighbor". Another woman described how "At home, if I don't have food, my kids can just run to a neighbor's house and they can eat", thus exemplifying how Maasai acted with *osotwa* to avoid hunger in the village. This Maasai tenet supported the exchange of social support among the women and helped them be resilient in difficult times.

However, sometimes this social support system in the village was simply not enough; some women had to migrate to the city in order to obtain resources to support themselves and their children. The driving factors for migration included alcoholism and neglect from their husbands, as well as general poverty and hunger in the village. This is illustrated by the words of one Maasai migrant:

> The reason why I moved to Arusha is I got married to an old person… And he is poor so we have really few livestock. So there is not enough to provide for my kids and family…my husband agreed for me to come to Arusha, and so here I am doing beading.

This responsibility was often exacerbated by a pervasive male-dominated, patriarchal society that left women without agency. One woman illuminated:

> In the village, women do a lot of work. They are the ones that cook, collect firewood, fetch water, and do the milking. And even after, you are still responsible for the grazing – all these different hard jobs. But the men …, they don't have a job, and your husband is not buying clothing for your kids. …They don't allow you to go to the market and maybe meet your brothers and talk about your problems.

This male–female inequality in decision-making power in the village was a theme described throughout the interviews.

Patterns of migration

This study was designed to interview two distinct groups of women: (1) women who migrated in order to support their families and (2) women who migrated to further their education. These two subsets of women displayed distinctive patterns of migration. The women who had migrated for financial reasons exhibited a circular pattern of migration, returning to their villages on a regular basis. While the frequency with which women returned home varied by participant, it generally ranged from every 2 weeks to every couple of months. On the other hand, women who had migrated for educational opportunities exhibited a more "permanent" pattern of migration, remaining in Arusha for longer periods of time without returning back to the village. While they would visit their traditional villages for holidays and special occasions, they had a clear sense of their homes being in the city. These two groups of women are referred to as circular and permanent migrants, respectively, for the remainder of this study, as they had very different experiences within Arusha.

Circular migrants

Ethnic identity

Upon moving to Arusha, circular migrants held deeply to their Maasai ethnic identity in an unaltered fashion. They continued to speak in glowing positive terms when describing traditional Maasai cultural practices and values, such as *enganyit* and *osotwa,* and shared a pride in Maasai dress, the Maa language, traditional ceremonies, and care for cattle. Furthermore, while in the city, these women

made their livelihood by selling traditional Maasai crafts and medicine. They dressed in only traditional Maasai garb and spoke only the Maa language.

Financial insecurity and workplace challenges

Circular migrants' inability to speak Swahili or English created a language barrier that isolated them from the rest of urban society. These women were unable to communicate with clients to sell jewelry, and as they did not have a formal education nor stable platform from which to sell their goods, they lacked the resources they needed to succeed in Arusha. The women who beaded frequently mentioned selling their goods through a labor middleman, which seemed to diminish their financial compensation. Circular migrants further described how working long hours beading in confined spaces strained their physical health and left them fatigued. Along with exhaustion, these women cited a lack of exercise within Arusha as a health challenge they encountered, as they were no longer traveling many miles to collect firewood.

Financial insecurity exacerbated challenges in these women's physical surroundings. Circular migrants described conditions of overcrowding and poor hygiene. These women focused heavily on sanitation challenges in the city including the risk of contracting a urinary tract infection from the toilet, smelly guest houses, and unclean water. Circular migrants emphasized that the only places they could afford to live in Arusha were unsanitary.

A longing for home

Along with this struggle for financial security, circular migrants had an intense longing for their homes and life in the village. One woman described her sadness: "I miss home all the time and I remember my children. I am not satisfied because I want the closeness of being with them." Particularly significant feelings of longing were for family, children, and cattle.

Responding to challenges

Circular migrants frequently emphasized actions characteristic of *enganyit* and *osotwa* when they described responding to challenges in Arusha. One woman described how she formed a collaborative working group with other migrants to share work and financial rewards. Many circular migrants noted living with other women within Mako Mapya, especially women originating from the same village district. As one circular migrant illustrated:

> Where I stay in Arusha, there are people on the floor, and we have this small mattress – so that today if you sleep on the floor, tomorrow you sleep on the mattress, and then the next day it is your turn to sleep on the floor. That is how we are coping.

Another circular migrant explained to researchers: "let's say you get in trouble here in town, our fellow Maasai will say 'ok, let's collect the money' to help you – the love unites us." This deep connection to their Maasai ethnic identity empowered many women to respond to challenges in Arusha, illuminating a relationship between ethnic identity and enhanced well-being through a robust social network.

Nevertheless, some circular migrants noted how the traditional social support system was not able to fully function in Arusha. Often, women in Arusha lacked the assets to provide support to one another as they might have back in the village:

> Here, people come and they don't have money, basically if they try to ask people to help them, it's hard because these people are already working hard to try and pay their rent. So when people come here to Arusha, we can sometimes help them by hosting them in the house. But we do not really define ourselves as a community once we are in the city. It is basically living individuals.

Therefore, some circular migrants noted that the values of *osotwa* and *enganyit* were more successful in uniting Maasai village communities than in uniting migrants in the city.

Permanent migrants

Ethnic identity

Permanent migrants exhibited a more assimilated form of Maasai ethnic identity. Although they too expressed a pride in traditional Maasai practices and values, these women dressed in urban Tanzanian garb and spoke English or Swahili during the interviews. Education and language skills empowered these women to work in a variety of jobs alongside other urban Arushans, including teachers, safari organizers, or nurses. These women therefore earned resources that allowed them to live a more financially secure life in Arusha.

Some of these permanent migrants expressed disapproval of Maasai cultural practices highlighting male–female inequity. One such practice is female genital mutilation (FGM), a traditional Maasai custom that continues to occur in some villages. For instance, a permanent migrant described her efforts to educate villagers: "I teach villagers that FGM, female genital mutilation, must be stopped. Many women are suffering. In the process of

FGM, they lose a lot of blood and some of them lose their life." A lack of support for such cultural practices deleterious to well-being supports a connection between changes in ethnic identity and health improvements of Maasai women. Although permanent migrants expressed this disapproval of FGM, circular migrants did not discuss the practice with a negative light.

Challenges in Arusha

While permanent migrants' financial difficulties were notably less salient and severe than circular migrants' fiscal insecurities, some permanent migrants indeed faced financial challenges and difficulties obtaining employment, finding accommodation, and paying for food. Some of these women described stressors and stigmas associated with unemployment leading to negative health outcomes: "I started feeling sick last year in April and I think it's because I have been waiting for so long for my teaching examination results to come out. People back home keep asking why I have studied but am unable to find work. I am so stressed about it." While the expressed emotion was not as intense as that of the circular migrants, some of these women did mention a longing for their village, often referred to as "home," while they were living in Arusha.

Responding to challenges

Permanent migrants were not as connected to the Maasai tenets of *enganyit* and *osotwa*. Therefore, while they were more assimilated into urban society, they lacked the social support system characteristic of Maasai village life. Although permanent migrants mentioned how they would extend a positive greeting to fellow Maasai upon seeing them, they had very few tangible examples of acting in this kind, unifying manner in Arusha.

Discussion

A diversity of migration experiences

Even though these two groups of women hark from similar village backgrounds, their migration experiences are extremely different. This is indicated by different patterns of ethnic identity, as well as by the wide range of challenges and responses to these challenges in Arusha.

Education appears to be the catalyst that helps build the skill sets of the permanent migrants so that they are better able to adapt to city life. These women learned to speak Swahili and English; literacy and other skills allowed them to access more job opportunities than could circular migrants. While it is important to note that some permanent migrants did struggle to find employment, this difficulty was not as pervasive as it was among the circular migrants who all described how they struggled to find enough work to support themselves and their families. Nevertheless, the negative health outcomes permanent migrants faced as a result of unemployment could be mitigated by improved job opportunities as well as instrumental support from other migrants for finding work in Arusha to build upon their education.

Although the permanent migrants were better equipped to respond to financial and logistical challenges, they did not interact with other Maasai as often in the city. On the other hand, circular migrants, who lived and worked alongside other Maasai women, had a stronger social support network. Circular migrants therefore offered many more concrete examples of *osotwa* and *enganyit* within the city than did permanent migrants; thus, although these beading women faced structural barriers to financial stability and well-being, they still responded to challenges in Arusha with a form of social support and resilience. Given the literature associating strong social support networks with good health, such resilient interactions are likely to lead to improved well-being (Heaney and Israel 2008).

Connecting permanent and circular migrants

None of the participants described interactions between permanent and circular migrants. The findings of this study suggest that if these two groups of women provided each other with emotional, informational, and instrumental social support, they could all perhaps experience improved resilience and well-being in Arusha (Heaney and Israel 2008). Figure 2 illustrates a framework for improved resilience among female Maasai migrants. Permanent migrants could provide circular migrants with instrumental and informational support that they lack. Examples of this support might include advice on starting a business, tips for applying to jobs, or providing language assistance in the search for affordable and clean housing. Through this exchange of support, circular migrants would gain skills and resources to identify and profit from opportunities in Arusha. On the other hand, circular migrants could provide permanent migrants with a deeper connection to their Maasai heritage. Since these circular migrants more closely followed Maasai traditions and values, they could offer emotional support to permanent migrants, rooted in the tenets of *osotwa* and *enganyit*. Increased interactions among Maasai women might minimize isolation and loneliness and therefore, ultimately improve health and well-being among both groups of migrants (Heaney and Israel 2008). Finally, there have been cases of migration where host communities have benefited through the development of more robust social support networks,

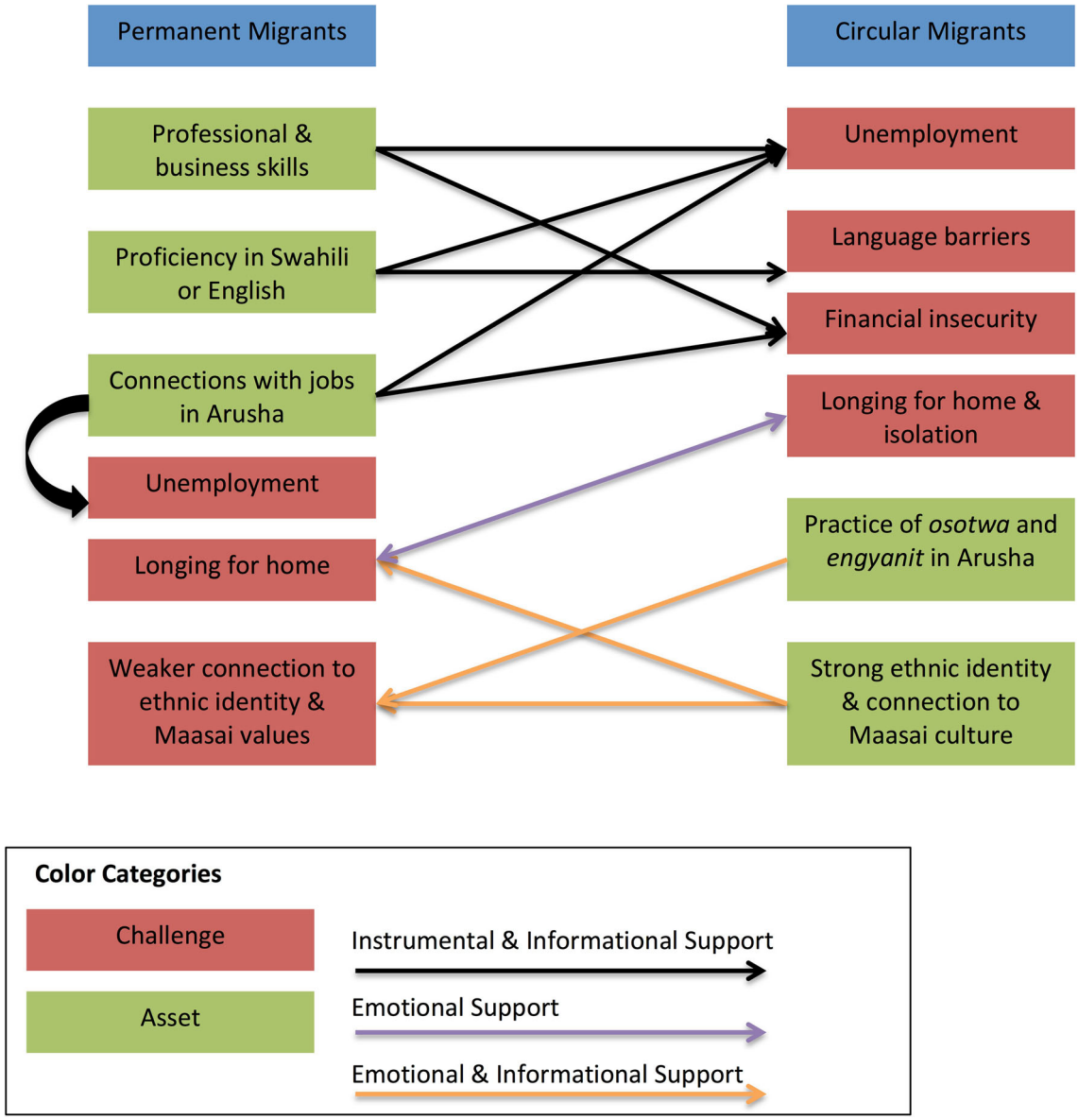

Fig. 2 A framework for improved resilience in Arusha (Tanzania, 2016)

enrichment of ideas, and political action for social change (Cervan-Gil 2016).

Capacity-building workshops in action

Since completion of this research and partially based on its findings, FWP has formed the Maasai Women's Networking Group, which aims to connect permanent and circular migrants, emphasizing the Maasai tenets of *osotwa* and *enganyit.* The groups aspire to empower migrants to run successful small businesses, find employment, and locate stable housing, while also providing one another with care, love, and community. Future work and funding is needed in order to sustain and evaluate the projects of this networking group. As rural-to-urban migration of indigenous people continues to increase, policy-makers, non-government organizations, and scholars need to continue to investigate the impacts of migration on people's lives and the best methods for building resilience and improving health and well-being.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Stanford University Research Committee and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study. The Stanford Institutional Review Board gave human subjects approval in April 2016.

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