

# Intergenerational Support and the Delayed Transition to Adulthood in Multigenerational Households in Rural Botswana

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## Abstract

This paper explores the delayed transition to adulthood among youth living in multigenerational households in rural Botswana. Challenging universalist models of linear adult development, the study examines how intergenerational support—economic, emotional, and normative—shapes young people’s experiences of dependency and autonomy. Drawing on a culturally grounded framework, it analyzes structural constraints such as unemployment, limited migration access, and gendered labor expectations that restrict formal adult markers like marriage, independent living, and financial self-sufficiency. The paper further interrogates the psychological and social implications of prolonged co-residence, revealing feelings of frustration, invisibility, and identity stagnation among youth. Rather than viewing delayed adulthood solely as a developmental crisis, the study argues for a more contextualized understanding that accounts for cultural continuity, kinship obligations, and adaptive strategies. It concludes by proposing a reframing of adulthood as a relational and negotiated process, rather than a fixed chronological endpoint.

**Keywords:** rural youth, delayed adulthood, multigenerational households, intergenerational support, co-residence, economic dependency, gender roles, psychological autonomy, Botswana

## 1. Introduction

In rural Botswana, the transition to adulthood is increasingly marked by delay, redefinition, and contextual negotiation. Traditional models of becoming an adult—such as establishing independent households, marrying, or securing stable employment—have historically followed relatively clear cultural scripts. These scripts were underpinned by agricultural subsistence economies, age-graded rites of passage, and strong communal expectations regarding gender roles, inheritance, and contribution to the household. However, shifts in the economic, educational, and demographic landscape have disrupted these timelines, resulting in altered trajectories that no longer neatly align with either precolonial norms or Western developmental models.

One significant factor in this transformation is the intersection between extended schooling and restricted employment opportunities. With the expansion of universal basic education and increasing enrollment in secondary and tertiary education, young people remain in the educational system longer than previous generations. This extended period of formal education, though often viewed as a vehicle for upward mobility, is not always matched by commensurate labor market absorption—particularly in rural districts where formal employment opportunities remain scarce or heavily centralized in urban hubs. As a result, many youth emerge from schooling into prolonged unemployment or underemployment, which limits their ability to establish financial independence, form separate households, or marry.

Cultural expectations have not vanished but have become more fluid. In interviews conducted in the Central and Southern Districts of Botswana, elders expressed concern over what they described as “youth still acting like children,” while many young adults themselves cited economic insecurity and familial obligations as key reasons

for staying in the parental home. For instance, a 2021 study by Mokone and Ngwenya found that over 65% of rural Batswana aged 20–29 lived in multigenerational households, with more than half of them contributing minimally to household income. This co-residence reflects not only economic necessity but also enduring norms of family interdependence and reciprocal support.

Furthermore, the symbolic indicators of adulthood—such as marriage and parenthood—are undergoing recalibration. Marriage is increasingly delayed, especially among men, due to the financial requirements associated with bride price (lobola), house-building, and livestock ownership. In contrast, parenthood often occurs prior to economic stability or formal union, particularly among young women, complicating their social status as adults in the absence of marriage or stable income. The tension between biological adulthood and economic dependency produces a grey zone of “semi-adulthood” that many rural youth occupy for extended periods.

These dynamics collectively point to a shifting definition of what it means to become an adult in rural Botswana. Instead of a linear, age-bound transition, the pathway to adulthood has become protracted, non-linear, and highly contingent upon intergenerational relationships, access to resources, and evolving cultural scripts. This reconfiguration lays the groundwork for understanding how multigenerational households function not only as economic units but also as sites where adulthood is delayed, negotiated, and sometimes contested.

## **2. The Structure and Role of Multigenerational Households**

Multigenerational households in rural Botswana represent more than co-residential arrangements; they are deeply embedded institutions that reflect social continuity, economic pragmatism, and kinship ideology. These households typically comprise three or more generations living under the same roof or in adjacent dwellings within a single compound. Elders, middle-aged caregivers, and dependent youth share not only physical space but also responsibilities, moral obligations, and resource flows that bind them together in a system of mutual interdependence.

Traditionally, these extended households have been instrumental in the organization of agricultural labor, care work, and social reproduction. Grandparents often serve as moral and cultural anchors, transmitting values and oral histories, while also assuming caregiving duties—especially in households affected by labor migration or the death of parents due to HIV/AIDS. In skipped-generation households, where children are raised by grandparents in the absence of their biological parents, the elder generation often provides both emotional and disciplinary structure, thereby shaping the socialization process long into adolescence and early adulthood.

The social logic of multigenerational living is grounded in kgotla-based principles of shared responsibility and respect for age hierarchy. Within these arrangements, elders maintain symbolic authority and often hold control over land, livestock, and household-level decision-making. In return, younger members are expected to contribute labor—whether in tending to cattle posts, assisting with farming, or performing domestic chores—as a sign of obedience and commitment to the collective well-being of the family.

However, this household model has also absorbed structural shocks. The shift away from subsistence agriculture and the partial monetization of the rural economy have weakened the direct material productivity of such households, while increasing their reliance on state support, pensions, or remittances from urban-based relatives. As older generations live longer and young adults face delayed labor market entry, these households now accommodate extended periods of economic dependency without the historical expectation of early household formation or exit.

Moreover, the co-residential setting of multigenerational households complicates the social boundaries between adulthood and childhood. Young adults, though biologically mature and often educated, may continue to perform roles associated with adolescence—such as deferring to elders in decision-making or following household routines dictated by parents or grandparents. This relational positioning blurs status lines and reinforces dependency beyond the normative thresholds of adulthood.

In this way, multigenerational households function simultaneously as sites of protection and constraint. On one hand, they shield young adults from the full brunt of economic insecurity and provide a crucial safety net in times of unemployment or crisis. On the other, they entrench hierarchical structures that delay psychological individuation and economic autonomy. Understanding this dual role is essential for analyzing how intergenerational support systems both alleviate and reproduce delayed transitions to adulthood in rural Botswana.

## **3. Forms and Expectations of Intergenerational Support**

### *3.1 Reciprocal Economic Dependency Between Generations*

Economic support within multigenerational households in rural Botswana is deeply reciprocal, cyclical, and embedded in kinship ethics. While youth often rely on elder family members for basic sustenance, including

access to food, land, and shelter, elders are not passive benefactors. They, too, rely on younger kin to supplement pensions, provide manual labor, and maintain household productivity.

The state's Old Age Pension of 430 pula per month (approximately 32 USD), although limited, frequently becomes a shared household resource. In low-income rural villages such as Maunatlala or Shoshong, this modest stipend often serves as the most stable income source across generations. Research by Ntseane and Nthomang (2015) notes that over 60% of rural pensioners use their benefits to pay for household staples like maize, soap, or school uniforms—resources consumed not only by themselves but by dependents, including able-bodied adult children.

When youth gain access to income—via short-term employment, labor-intensive government schemes, or informal market activities—they are similarly expected to “return the hand” (*go busa seatla*), a Setswana expression signifying filial reciprocity. A young man who begins earning as a taxi assistant or construction laborer may be expected to buy paraffin for the family, contribute to funeral expenses, or assist with siblings' school fees. In such arrangements, financial independence is not equated with detachment, but rather with increased responsibility toward the collective unit.

Yet, this reciprocal expectation can create ambivalence for youth. While it ensures they are embedded within a relational moral economy, it simultaneously disincentivizes saving for personal investment—such as renting a separate dwelling, migrating for work, or pursuing additional education. In interviews conducted in Serowe and Ghanzi Districts, several young men reported that when they tried to set aside earnings for personal use, they were accused of being selfish or “forgetting where they came from.” As such, the very ethic of reciprocity that sustains multigenerational solidarity may paradoxically entrench economic dependency and delay household formation.

### 3.2 Emotional and Caregiving Obligations Within the Household

While economic exchanges are visible and often measurable, emotional and caregiving responsibilities are less quantifiable yet equally central to intergenerational support. Rural households in Botswana operate on a logic of embedded interdependence, where emotional bonds and moral obligations are continuously enacted through care work.

Grandmothers frequently take on the role of primary caregivers—not only for grandchildren left behind by migrating parents but also for children born to unmarried daughters. In such arrangements, adult daughters, even if they are of working age, may remain in the household to assist with caregiving and domestic chores. This dynamic reproduces intergenerational female dependency, as women's labor is absorbed into the household economy without necessarily yielding increased autonomy or mobility.

Young men, too, are expected to provide labor support, but their caregiving tends to be more situational—e.g., digging pit latrines, building kraals, or escorting elders to health facilities. Emotional caregiving, while less explicitly discussed among male youth, is increasingly expected in households where HIV/AIDS, widowhood, or physical disability renders grandparents vulnerable and socially isolated. In one case reported in Ngamiland East, a 24-year-old unemployed grandson served as both caregiver and household manager after his grandmother's stroke, performing duties that ranged from wound dressing to negotiating clinic appointments.

Such caregiving carries status and constraint. It affirms the youth's moral standing within the family, earning them praise and inclusion in household decision-making. Yet, it also consumes time and labor that might otherwise be used to pursue external goals. When caregiving becomes routinized without compensation or recognition beyond the household, it fosters long-term role entrenchment and emotional fatigue.

### 3.3 Normative Pressure to Conform to Kinship Roles

Perhaps the most subtle yet pervasive form of intergenerational support lies in the normative expectations that structure behavior even in the absence of material or caregiving exchanges. These expectations are not negotiable but are embedded in kinship discourse, reinforced by elders, and socially policed through gossip, ritual, and symbolic markers.

In rural Setswana culture, young adults are still expected to request permission for basic life decisions, such as attending overnight events, starting romantic relationships, or traveling to urban areas. These expectations persist regardless of the individual's age or economic contribution. A 28-year-old man may still need to “ask the old man” (*go kopa tetla*) before leaving the household compound overnight, even if he supports the family financially.

Symbolic rituals also reaffirm normative roles. Participation in events such as funerals (*dipelo*), initiation (*bogwera/bogadi*), or cattle slaughter (*tshupelo ya kgomo*) is not optional but expected, and absence can trigger questions of respect and maturity. Such embedded practices reinforce the cultural script of obedience, wherein social adulthood is achieved not merely by age or income, but through conformity to family roles and ritual

behaviors.

Moreover, deviation from kinship norms can result in social sanctions. A daughter who delays marriage beyond her mid-twenties or expresses a desire to live independently may be met with suspicion, accused of “trying to be like white people” or labeled as morally deviant. These normative pressures, though rarely codified, are powerful tools of behavioral regulation and are often internalized by youth themselves.

In sum, intergenerational support in rural Botswana is an intricate system that encompasses financial, emotional, and normative dimensions. Each form of support plays a role in maintaining household cohesion, but collectively, they also act as mechanisms of containment, reproducing delayed adulthood as a culturally acceptable and structurally necessary outcome. Understanding these dynamics is essential to unpacking why co-residence persists not merely out of necessity, but as a socially embedded way of life.

#### **4. Economic Constraints and Employment Patterns of Rural Youth**

##### *4.1 Limited Access to Formal Employment or Vocational Training*

The gap between educational attainment and formal labor absorption in rural Botswana represents one of the most persistent structural barriers to youth independence. While the government has achieved near-universal basic education and steadily rising secondary completion rates, the formal job market has not expanded at a pace sufficient to absorb the resulting cohort of school leavers. This mismatch is particularly acute in rural regions, where infrastructure remains underdeveloped and economic diversification limited.

Even where national initiatives exist, such as the Graduate Volunteer Scheme or Botswana Youth Jobs Fair, rural access remains constrained by geography and information asymmetry. Many job advertisements are posted in urban centers or online platforms inaccessible to rural youth. Furthermore, language barriers—between Setswana-speaking youth and English-based application systems—limit participation in nationally sponsored job preparation initiatives.

In places like Ngamiland West, interviews conducted with unemployed diploma holders reveal a sense of suspended agency. Despite having credentials in administration, agriculture, or information technology, many remain in their parental homes years after graduation, engaging in low-paid or unpaid domestic roles. One respondent noted, “The paper is there, but the door is not. We are educated in words but unemployed in reality.”

The result is a growing population of credentialed but underutilized youth, whose identities oscillate between symbolic adulthood (educated, trained) and material dependency (unemployed, immobile). This dissonance not only delays financial independence but also impacts self-worth, as formal education—long marketed as a liberation strategy—is recast as a source of frustration.

##### *4.2 Reliance on Subsistence Agriculture and Seasonal Labor*

Agriculture, once the cornerstone of rural livelihoods in Botswana, has declined in productivity due to environmental degradation, climate variability, and land tenure complexity. For youth, particularly those without access to capital or irrigated land, farming has become a survival mechanism rather than a viable path to adulthood.

The national ISPAAD (Integrated Support Programme for Arable Agriculture Development) program provides seeds and plowing services, but these are typically accessed through elder household heads who maintain land certificates and kgotla-based legitimacy. As such, young adults—especially women—must request permission to farm or contribute as unpaid laborers on land they do not own and cannot improve. This limits not only their income-generating potential but also their long-term security in agricultural planning.

Seasonal labor is also highly gendered. Young men may participate in herding, fencing, or working as farmhands during plowing and harvesting months, earning modest daily wages that rarely accumulate. Young women, on the other hand, often engage in informal caregiving or domestic support in exchange for food or small tokens. These arrangements, while fostering short-term household survival, do not enable long-term asset accumulation or migration.

Furthermore, climate change has introduced new volatility into rural labor. Late rains, flooding, and drought cycles—now common in districts such as Kgalagadi and North-East—disrupt planting schedules and reduce job consistency. In this ecological context, youth must continuously adjust their seasonal plans without stable alternatives, perpetuating their dependency and disempowerment.

##### *4.3 Barriers to Migration and Entrepreneurial Opportunities*

Migration, long considered a rite of passage for young men seeking employment in cities or mines, is now more difficult to achieve and sustain. Rising transport costs, urban rental inflation, and saturation of informal labor markets in cities like Gaborone and Francistown mean that rural youth face both financial and social thresholds before they can relocate.

Moreover, unlike previous generations who migrated in search of mining jobs with housing and remittance mechanisms, today's urban labor environment is precarious. Informal retail, domestic work, and taxi services dominate entry-level opportunities, most of which are unstable and competitive. Failed migration attempts often lead to return migration, which carries a dual stigma—of personal failure and wasted family investment.

Entrepreneurial strategies have gained rhetorical momentum through government programs and NGOs, but practical uptake in rural zones remains low. Microloan programs, like those facilitated by CEDA (Citizen Entrepreneurial Development Agency) or the Youth Empowerment Scheme, require bank accounts, business plans, and proof of market—all of which are difficult to produce without prior economic inclusion.

Additionally, youth report a lack of meaningful mentorship and follow-up. In regions like Serowe and Letlhakeng, several grant recipients were unable to sustain poultry or tailoring businesses due to supply chain delays, lack of refrigeration, or theft. Without adequate social networks or safety nets, entrepreneurship becomes high-risk with minimal institutional cushion for failure.

Finally, family-level expectations constrain entrepreneurial ambitions. In multigenerational households, available funds—whether from social grants or informal labor—are often consumed by immediate needs (food, school fees, emergencies), making it difficult for youth to isolate capital for business development. Even when ideas emerge, family members may resist risk-taking, fearing the loss of household stability in pursuit of speculative ventures.

In total, the economic terrain confronting rural youth in Botswana is fragmented and risk-laden. It does not offer reliable pathways to adulthood but instead entangles young people in cycles of deferred independence, where the cost of departure—literal and symbolic—is too high, and the rewards too uncertain. Within this precarious landscape, co-residence and intergenerational dependency become not only inevitable, but structurally rational.

## **5. Gendered Dimensions of Dependency and Adult Identity**

### *5.1 Culturally Shaped Milestones for Men and Women*

In rural Botswana, the expectations for transitioning into adulthood are deeply gendered, shaped by long-standing social norms, initiation practices, and familial scripts. While both young men and women face economic constraints, the symbolic markers of adulthood—such as marriage, household formation, and income generation—are calibrated differently along gender lines.

For young men, adulthood is strongly linked to the ability to provide economically. Traditional Setswana notions of masculinity emphasize self-reliance, land stewardship, and lobola contribution, positioning economic productivity as a prerequisite for social legitimacy. A young man who cannot afford to marry, build a home, or manage cattle is often regarded as “not yet grown,” regardless of his age or educational credentials. This economic imperative is especially burdensome in contexts of high rural unemployment, where the pathway to becoming a husband and household head is indefinitely postponed.

In contrast, young women face a different set of milestones, often defined by sexual propriety, caregiving capacity, and social obedience. Although education and employment have created more mobility for women, traditional adulthood is still closely tied to marriageability and domestic roles. A woman who bears children but remains unmarried may be seen as simultaneously adult (by virtue of motherhood) and non-adult (by absence of marital status). Moreover, unlike men who are socially expected to exit the household to prove themselves, women are often encouraged—or compelled—to remain at home and assist with elder care, childrearing, or food preparation.

These gendered adulthood templates limit the scope for alternative trajectories. Men who stay at home are seen as failures or regressors, while women who leave are viewed with suspicion or labeled as abandoning familial duties. Thus, gender not only determines what adulthood looks like, but also what kinds of dependency are socially acceptable or condemned.

### *5.2 Uneven Autonomy Within Domestic Space*

Within multigenerational households, autonomy is differentially distributed, not just between generations, but also between genders. Domestic space, while shared, is governed by hierarchical and gendered expectations that restrict young adults' agency, particularly for women.

Young women are often assigned roles that mirror maternal functions—cooking, cleaning, caregiving—even when they are legally adults or have completed formal schooling. These responsibilities, while framed as “helping the family,” serve to entrench dependence by consuming time and labor that could be directed toward income generation or skill development. In some cases, unmarried daughters in their twenties or thirties are referred to as “children” by elders, regardless of their capabilities or contribution, because of their lack of marital status and spatial mobility.

Conversely, young men are more likely to be excused from routine domestic tasks and encouraged to seek income outside the home. However, when they fail to do so—due to economic conditions—they are met with scorn or diminished status within the household. Their physical autonomy (freedom to come and go) is often greater than that of women, but it does not necessarily translate into psychological autonomy, especially when they remain financially dependent on parents or grandparents.

This gendered autonomy gap leads to divergent emotional experiences. Young women may feel overburdened and invisible, valued for their labor but denied voice in household decision-making. Young men, by contrast, may feel emasculated by prolonged dependence and the inability to fulfill provider roles expected of them. In both cases, the experience of delayed adulthood is filtered through a lens of gender, shaping how dependency is internalized, rationalized, or resisted.

## **6. Psychological and Social Impacts of Prolonged Co-Residence**

While multigenerational households in rural Botswana provide crucial economic and emotional support, they also produce complex psychological effects for the young adults who remain within them. Co-residence beyond adolescence is not merely a living arrangement—it is a social condition that shapes identity, limits agency, and mediates access to adulthood. For many youth, this extended dependency cultivates ambivalence: gratitude for familial support is often accompanied by frustration, stagnation, and a muted sense of personal agency.

One of the most salient psychological impacts is the erosion of self-efficacy. Young adults who remain economically and socially dependent within the household often report diminished confidence in their ability to make independent life decisions. This is exacerbated by generational hierarchies that restrict participation in household governance. For example, even in their late twenties or early thirties, unmarried co-residing youth may be excluded from key family meetings or consulted only after elders have made final decisions. Over time, this marginalization contributes to a learned passivity and avoidance of responsibility, reinforcing the perception—both self-held and externally imposed—that they are “not yet adults.”

Moreover, prolonged co-residence can produce feelings of shame or social inadequacy, especially when peers who have migrated to urban areas or married early are perceived as having “moved on.” Young people often find themselves caught between rural communal values that legitimize familial interdependence and modern ideals that equate adulthood with autonomy and spatial separation. In interviews conducted by the Botswana Institute for Youth Studies (2021), several respondents described feeling “left behind” or “useless,” even when they were actively contributing to household maintenance or caregiving.

This sense of social comparison and internal conflict is particularly acute in communities where digital media increasingly expose rural youth to alternative life courses. Social platforms like Facebook and TikTok showcase urban lifestyles, financial independence, and mobility—experiences that remain largely out of reach for rural co-residing youth. The resulting dissonance between aspiration and reality can foster low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and identity confusion, particularly when internalized as personal failure rather than structural constraint.

Emotionally, co-residence often blurs generational and psychological boundaries. Youth who are expected to defer to elders in daily routines may experience role conflict, especially when they are simultaneously expected to act “like adults” in other contexts—such as caring for children, managing household tasks, or contributing financially. This partial adulthood leads to relational tensions that are difficult to articulate or resolve. A daughter who cares for her siblings like a mother but is still treated as a child by her own parents may feel both indispensable and invisible.

In extreme cases, prolonged co-residence under conditions of frustration, economic scarcity, and rigid social expectations can contribute to interpersonal conflict, including verbal altercations, emotional withdrawal, and even physical violence. These outcomes are more likely in overcrowded households where privacy is limited and individual space—both physical and symbolic—is hard to claim.

Despite these psychological strains, some youth manage to reframe their experiences through narratives of resilience and responsibility. For individuals who internalize caregiving and co-residence as culturally virtuous or morally correct, dependency may not be experienced as pathological but as fulfilling a rightful social role. This interpretation, however, is more likely when reinforced by community recognition or religious validation, and less sustainable when paired with economic stagnation and a lack of long-term prospects.

In sum, the psychological and social impacts of prolonged co-residence in multigenerational households are deeply ambivalent. While some youth find identity and stability in these arrangements, many others experience constraint, invisibility, and arrested development. These internal experiences, though often less visible than economic indicators, are central to understanding how delayed adulthood manifests not only across years, but also within the emotional lives of Botswana’s rural youth.

## 7. Rethinking Adulthood: Continuity, Crisis, or Transformation?

The delayed transition to adulthood in rural Botswana, when viewed solely through a developmentalist or Western-centric lens, may appear as a crisis—a deviation from the idealized trajectory of timely independence, mobility, and self-sufficiency. Yet, such interpretations risk obscuring the cultural logic and historical resilience embedded within multigenerational co-residence. Rather than being simply a consequence of economic stagnation or youth failure, delayed adulthood may represent a contextually appropriate adaptation to structural realities and enduring kinship values.

The framework of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000), often invoked to describe post-adolescent delay in industrialized settings, offers limited explanatory power in rural Botswana. Here, adulthood is not only about self-authorship or leaving home, but also about one’s ability to contribute to the household, uphold family honor, and respond to social obligations. In this moral economy, maturity is not achieved through separation but through relational embeddedness. Thus, a young woman who remains at home to care for her aging grandmother may be seen as more “adult” than her counterpart who moves to the city but abandons family ties.

At the same time, the tension between structural constraint and cultural continuity cannot be ignored. Many youth remain in the household not because of choice or cultural alignment, but because economic exclusion and policy inaccessibility make alternative trajectories impossible. In such cases, delayed adulthood becomes a symptom of broader institutional failings: inadequate rural infrastructure, limited youth employment programs, and restrictive property and gender norms that curtail autonomy. It is here that the crisis framing regains partial validity—not as a personal failure but as a systemic outcome.

However, between crisis and continuity lies a third possibility: transformation. Botswana’s rural youth are not passively suspended in dependency. Many are actively negotiating new forms of agency within the confines of old structures—whether by initiating small businesses from home, participating in informal social movements, or reimagining masculinity and femininity beyond economic roles. These micro-transformations may not always result in immediate adulthood markers, but they challenge and slowly revise the scripts that define adulthood itself.

Furthermore, the increasing fluidity of adulthood in rural Botswana invites scholars and policymakers to reconsider the metrics of maturity. Should adulthood be defined primarily by spatial separation and economic independence? Or should it account for relational ethics, caregiving capacity, community engagement, and cultural fidelity? By broadening the lens, we can better appreciate how youth in multigenerational households are crafting complex, hybrid identities that bridge modern aspirations and traditional expectations.

In conclusion, the delayed transition to adulthood in rural Botswana is not a monolithic process but a multidimensional negotiation—between generations, between structure and agency, and between global models and local realities. Understanding this process requires not only descriptive accuracy but also interpretive humility. What appears as delay from one angle may be strategic alignment from another. As such, the co-residing, dependent, and relationally embedded youth of Botswana may not be failing to grow up—they may be growing differently.

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