

'Misery in a Foreign Land': Zimbabwean Migrant Women Labourers' Experiences of Gender-Based Violence in South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the gender-based violence (GBV) experiences of Zimbabwean women migrant labourers in South Africa. Specifically, the study aimed to explore the particular vulnerabilities and manifestations of GBV experienced by this group. The study was purely qualitative and employed document analysis as a data collection tool. Content analysis was employed in reading academic literature, government reports, and civil society publications to gather data on Zimbabwean women migrant labourers lived experiences of GBV in South Africa. The data collection involved a careful perusal of the relevant sources for understanding the intersectional dynamics which shape their susceptibility to various acts of violence and exploitation. The study acknowledged that migrant labour of Zimbabwean women was exposed to a higher risk of GBV due to the intersecting dynamics of xenophobia, patriarchal gender power relations, and economic marginalisation. They are exposed to different forms of GBV, including sexual violence, workplace exploitation, and human trafficking, among others. The data highlighted how the intersection of their status as women migrants and, for most of them, as illegal workers amplified their visibility and limited their access to assistance programs and systems of justice. It advocates for an emergent, urgent necessity for the multi-stakeholder effort that will facilitate consolidation of supporting mechanisms, enhance accountability and reporting and respond to structural imbalance that enables these cycles of gender-based violence to persist among migrant women Zimbabweans in South Africa.

Keywords: Masculinity, Femininity, Dominance and Vulnerability

INTRODUCTION

The conditions surrounding gender violence inflicted on migrants have become increasingly intensified in attention garnered over recent decades (Ackerly & Walton, 2024). The women migrant workers, particularly, are disproportionately targeted with violence and abuse overall by the intersecting forces of their immigration, gender, and socio-economic exclusion (Bhattacharya et al., 2024). The GBV condition hits the worst among the Zimbabwean women migrant workers, who are also South African. Women Zimbabwean migrants face highest risk of domestic violence, rape, and human trafficking due to their vulnerable legal status and denial of access to protective services, recent South African Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (2023) reports indicate. The above weakness is complemented by the long-seated xenophobia and discrimination experienced by the majority of them by South African immigrants in Zimbabwe (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024).

With the goal of learning more about the living conditions and experiences of Zimbabwean migrant workers, this research sought the causes and nature of GBV among them. It is guided by evidence from academized literature, government reports, and nongovernment texts. This research had the objective of providing a balanced report of those intersections under which Zimbabwean migrant women are exposed in South Africa.

Background

There are more than 169 million migrant workers worldwide who, in the majority, work under precarious, low-

paid, and backbreaking conditions (International Labour Organisation, 2023). Irregularly situated migrant workers, in particular, are confronting multiple challenges such as exploitation, dangerous working conditions, non-payment of wages, and restricted access to social protection and legal remedies (OECD, 2023). The United Nations (UN) recognizes the necessity to ensure the rights of migrant workers and their families as stipulated in the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (UN, 2018). The UN also advocates for the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration that offers a global approach in addressing migrant workers' needs (UN, 2018).

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) works towards promoting the interests of migrant workers through labour mobility, ethical recruitment, and migrant protection initiatives (IOM, 2023). The ILO has, however, set international labor standards, such as the Migrant Workers Convention, for protecting the rights of migrant workers (ILO 2023) European migrant workers, particularly non-EU members, are often exposed to discrimination, exploitation, and lack of access to fundamental services (OECD, 2023).

For example, Amnesty International (2023) narrated the account of migrant domestic laborers within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states whose labor is coerced and mistreated. Irregular migrant laborers in America and Canada experience exploitation based on limited access to protection of labour and social welfare services (Bhuyan et al., 2024). The hardships of intra-regional and inter-regional migrant workers throughout the African continent have also been documented (Slack & Martínez, 2023). Migrants in transit and upon arrival in the United States and Mexico from Central America have also been shown to experience issues by research (Slack & Martínez, 2023).

In West Africa, for instance, an International Organisation for Migration (IOM, 2023) report pinpointed the vulnerabilities of domestic migrant workers, who are exposed to exploitation, abuse, and trafficking. In East Africa, Refugee Consortium of Kenya (2023) has documented the life of refugee women, who are more vulnerable to gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse. Similarly, in South Africa, Zimbabwean migrant workers, particularly women, experienced rampant xenophobia, discrimination, and gender violence (Theron & Goliath, 2024). In Zimbabwe, economic meltdown and political unrest have promoted large-scale migration of migrant workers, the majority of whom seek employment opportunities in neighboring countries, particularly South Africa.

These Zimbabwean migrant workers, and especially women, face severe difficulties like limited access to essential services, xenophobia, and violence based on gender (Dube & Makina, 2024). Both documented and undocumented Zimbabwean migrant workers in South Africa have also reported facing discrimination, exploitation, and violence by their peers, employers, and the host community (Theron & Goliath, 2024). The vulnerable legal status and economic marginalization of the majority of Zimbabwean migrant women have also led to greater exposure to gender-based violence and limited access to support services and judicial processes.

Conceptual Framework:

The intersectionality theory, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, posits that individuals' lives of oppression and marginalization are shaped by the intersection of multiple, interlinked systems of identity and power and that the identity categories of race, gender, class, and immigration status intersect particularly well, especially when framed within the situation of migrant workers, as migrant laborers similarly have compounded vulnerabilities as their identity characteristics cross-cut with one another and intersect with their roles in society. Adherents to the perspective of intersectionality, such as Collins (2019) and Bilge (2013), have explained the importance of acknowledging the means through which the intersection gives rise to certain experiences of discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization among migrant workers. Migrant women, for example, are expected to face gendered violence and discrimination and xenophobia and exploitation. Migration, according to De Haas (2022), is a dynamic process informed by ongoing negotiation and decision-making spurred by economic opportunities, social relations, and policy conditions.

The congruence of evidence reaffirms the intersectional vulnerabilities of Zimbabwean migrant women, argues

the theory of intersectionality. Their economically vulnerable and gendered position of being without legal status intersects with their economic vulnerability to heighten their vulnerabilities towards violence and exploitation. Furthermore, the study on the challenges of Zimbabwean migrant workers in gaining procedural services agrees with literature too.

The International Organisation for Migration (2022) report and the study by Dube and Mpofu (2023) referenced the lack of legal recourse and basic services such as health and social care as contributing to the overrepresentation of GBV in this group. The results of the study on the unprecedented impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Zimbabwean migrant workers, in particular the increasing cases of GBV reported, also align with the literature. The pandemic has hastened the vulnerabilities and precarity of this group of individuals, as captured in the report by the African Centre for Migration and Society (2022). Intersectionality theory is helpful in understanding these results since the combined impact of migration, gender, and socioeconomic status has rendered Zimbabwean migrant women vulnerable to violence and exploitation during the pandemic. The study's results concerning the emotional and psychological effects of GBV on Zimbabwean migrant workers concur with literature.

Mutti and Chikanda (2019) found in their study also the deleterious effects of abuse and trauma on the mental health and wellbeing of this population that also escalated their assertion of rights and help-seeking behaviour. The study also points out Zimbabwean migrant workers' resistance and agency in agreement with counter-narratives in the literature. The studies highlight Chikanda and Makunike's (2020) and Mpofu and Ndlovu's (2021) findings that revealed how Zimbabwean migrant workers, particularly women, are engaged in various forms of collective action and resistance in which they challenge the structures of oppression against them. This aligns with intersectionality theory's interest in centring the positions and experiences of marginalised voices in informing intervention and promoting their rights (Bastia et al, 2023). Through recognising the agency and resilience of Zimbabwean migrant workers, the research contributes to a more extensive and balanced comprehension of their lived experience and how they negotiate the intersecting complexities they face. Conclusion

The research reveals a dismal picture of the life of Zimbabwean migrant women in South Africa, and they are exposed to high instances of gender-based violence (GBV) in their workplaces and homes.

The research revealed GBV prevalence, with the majority of the participants being subjected to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. The women also encounter severe challenges in accessing the necessary support services, making them isolated and vulnerable. The situation has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, with increased numbers of reported GBV and increased levels of their exposure being reported. Overall implication of the findings also recommends the need for holistic, integrated, and rights-based responses to addressing the special needs of Zimbabwean migrant women in South Africa. Inaction will keep perpetuating the cycle of violence and discrimination, stripping such women of their dignity, safety, and human rights.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach and employed an explorative research approach. The study employed a document analysis method in producing data. Document analysis involved reading and scrutinization of existing literature and sources of data on migrant labour and gender-based violence. Qualitative data collection for the research involved extensive reading of policy documents, reports, and academic journals that have been written and published on GBV and migrant labour. International organisations' reports and policy briefs such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM, 2023) and the Southern Africa Migration Programme (SAMP, 2023) were consulted for relevant information and data. The South African Police Service (SAPS, 2024) national crime statistics were examined to establish the trends and patterns of GBV against foreign national women, including Zimbabwean migrants. With a content analysis approach, the researcher would be in a position to comprehensively analyse data collected from the various secondary sources, identifying the prevailing themes, conclusions, and trends of the research questions.

FINDINGS

Heightened Exposure of Zimbabwean Migrant Women to Gender-Based Violence

Literature attests that Zimbabwean migrant women in South Africa face a disproportionately high rate of various forms of gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual harassment, assault, and exploitation (SAMP, 2023). This heightened vulnerability is informed by the compounding factors of xenophobia, patriarchal gender norms, and economic marginalisation.

Ubiquitous Experiences of GBV in the Work Environment and Living Conditions

Findings highlighted the prevalence of GBV faced by Zimbabwean migrant women, both in their places of work and residential areas (Chirwa & Mushayi, 2023). The migrant women report facing sexual assault and coercion by employers, and intimate partner violence in their homes and communities.

Barriers in Accessing Support Services

Zimbabwean migrant women also face significant barriers in accessing support services, such as legal services, social services, and health care, due to their insecure immigration status, language constraints, and lack of knowledge about available services (Solidarity Peace Trust, 2023). This further increases their vulnerability and exacerbates GBV's negative impacts.

Disproportionate Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly devastating for Zimbabwean migrant workers, women, in particular, and has exacerbated joblessness, hunger, and dependence on informal, unregulated work (IOM, 2023). These economic dislocations have heightened the risk of GBV also because migrant women are forced into accepting ever more precarious and exploitative working conditions to support themselves and their families.

Increase in Reported Incidences of GBV against Foreign National Women

The most recent data from the South African Police Service (SAPS, 2024) shows that there has been an 18% increase in reported cases of GBV against foreign national women, among whom Zimbabwean migrants are overrepresented. The truth, however, is that the issue is probably much bigger, considering that underreporting (Chirwa & Mushayi, 2023) as well as barriers to the use of support services have been well documented.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study align with the literature, which reveals increased exposure of Zimbabwean migrant workers, particularly women, to gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa (Crankshaw et al, 2022).

The research findings of prevalent physical, sexual, and emotional abuse experiences in both work and living spaces validate the findings of previous research studies, such as Masuka and Ncube (2018) and the Southern African Migration Programme (2019). The congruence of evidence reaffirms the intersectional vulnerabilities of Zimbabwean migrant women, argues the theory of intersectionality. Their economically vulnerable and gendered position of being without legal status intersects with their economic vulnerability to heighten their vulnerabilities towards violence and exploitation. Furthermore, the study on the challenges of Zimbabwean migrant workers in gaining procedural services agrees with literature too.

The International Organisation for Migration (2022) report and the Dube and Mpofu (2023) study cited the lack of legal redress and essential services such as health and social care as causes for the predominance of GBV among this group. The research evidence on the unrivalled impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Zimbabwean migrant workers, particularly the increase in reported GBV cases, also aligns with the literature. The pandemic has hastened the vulnerabilities and precarity among this group of individuals, as indicated in

the report by the African Centre for Migration and Society (2022). Intersectionality theory is of use in explaining these findings since the synergy effect of migration, gender, and socioeconomic status has placed Zimbabwean migrant women at risk of exploitation and violence during the pandemic. This study's findings on the psychological and emotional impact of GBV for Zimbabwean migrant workers are consistent with the literature.

Mutti and Chikanda (2019) found in their study also the negative impacts of abuse and trauma on the mental health and wellbeing of this population that also increased their exercise of rights and seeking help. The study also illustrates the resistance and agency of Zimbabwean migrant workers along with counter-narratives in the literature. The study demonstrates Chikanda and Makunike (2020) and Mpofu and Ndlovu's (2021) study of how Zimbabwean migrant women workers and all other women workers are involved in various types of collective action and resistances where they are struggling against the oppressive systems. This aligns with intersectionality theory's requirement that the space and existence of oppressed voices be placed within intervention articulation and in the insistence that they be given their rights (Bastia et al, 2023). Through the recognition of the agency and resilience of Zimbabwean migrant workers, this research contributes to a more nuanced, broader understanding of their daily existence and how they survive the several complexities they are subjected to.

CONCLUSION

The research paints a bleak picture of the Zimbabwean migrant women in South Africa, for instance, subjected to high levels of gender-based violence (GBV) at home and in the workplace. The study also documented GBV prevalence, where most of the respondents were sexually abused, physically abused, and emotionally abused. The women also have very difficult times seeking the care services of concern they are entitled to because they are then exposed and stigmatized. The pandemic has also been compounded by the Covid-19 disease, with increased reported GBV cases as well as increasing rates of their reported exposure. The general implication of findings also directs towards the need for holistic, comprehensive, and rights-based approaches towards addressing the particular needs of the Zimbabwean migrant women in South Africa. Inaction will only keep the cycle of violence and discrimination going, giving such women nothing but their security, dignity, and human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening policy and legal frameworks to protect Zimbabwean migrant women from GBV, freedom from harassment in the workplace, and improved living conditions is a highest priority recommendation. This must involve enacting and enforcing tough anti-harassment and anti-discrimination laws that promote the rights of Zimbabwean migrant women in the workplace especially. Regulation and management of proper and safe shelter in the group, for instance, to avoid overcrowding, privacy, and access to basic facilities are also needed. Apart from examining and restructuring immigration policy to break down obstacles that are preventing GBV incidents from being reported and support services from being accessed by Zimbabwean migrant women, policy reform and analysis are also needed. In order for low-cost and affordable support to be provided to Zimbabwean migrant women, financing and resources must also be channeled to specialist GBV support services like counseling, legal services, and refugees.

This should include the allocation of ring-fenced funds for the establishment and maintenance of GBV shelters and safe spaces strategically located to meet their needs. Provision of adequate multilingual legal and counseling facilities to facilitate Zimbabwean migrant women's access to redress, compensation, and justice is a priority (Refugee International, 2022). GBV care services should be provided and made accessible, bridge language gaps, cultural insensitivities, and special challenges that confront undocumented migrant women (UNFPA, 2020). It is also among the top recommendations to offer mass training to service providers, law enforcers, and community leaders.

It will enable them to respond more effectively to GBV by better understanding the unique vulnerabilities of Zimbabwean migrant women. It is of greatest significance to establish and implement training modules that heighten providers of care to this broad range of this diverse group's risks and evidence-based best practices in

the delivery of culturally responsive, trauma-informed care (WHO, 2021). Training on the respective gender-based violence (GBV) dynamics that the Zimbabwean migrant women are exposed to, like reporting barriers and the victim-cantered response, should be extended to law enforcement agencies (UNHCR, 2022). Included in among the problems to start with is to involve religious and traditional leaders, community leaders, in GBV campaigns and encourage them to join prevention and response efforts against migrant women from Zimbabwe (UNHCR, 2022).

One of the most important ideas is to create and maintain public awareness campaigns that attempt to eliminate negative gender stereotypes, de-stigmatize gender-based violence, and empower Zimbabwean migrant women to report and access services. There is a need to create and disseminate multilingual, culturally attuned campaigns against gender-based discrimination, for advocating gender equality, and raising awareness among the population about GBV and available assistance (Oxfam, 2021).

There is need of creating information exchange and collaboration mechanisms between host countries and Zimbabwe to facilitate delivery of comprehensive aid and protection for Zimbabwean migrant women suffering from GBV. To harmonize policy, procedure, and data-sharing systems for GBV prevention and response, host countries and Zimbabwe should sign bilateral and regional treaties (IOM, 2021). To promote continuity of care and support for Zimbabwean migrant women, there is also a need to establish the climate to exchange best practices, resources, and referral channels between Zimbabwe and host country service providers (UNHCR, 2022).

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