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Jawahir Adam-Hopkins

The Brave Women of Zimbabwe



A Zimbabwean woman crossing an electrified fence near Beitbridge, South Africa

This article is about the plight of Zimbabwean migrant women who flee to neighbouring countries in pursuit of food, work, security and better living conditions for themselves and their families. It is based on a journey I undertook in March 2008 to assess the impact of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa, Mozambique, Malawi, Botswana and Zambia, all of whom are hosting migrants from Zimbabwe. It is a depressing story. The journey started at the Methodist Church thrown open by Bishop Paul Verryn to shelter, protect and feed thousands of Zimbabweans, in the ravaged centre of Johannesburg and led me through the markets, jails and holding camps of towns in those countries bordering Zimbabwe. A Zimbabwean passport requires the down payment of US\$250 with no guarantee that it will be delivered – it is hardly surprising that the desperate migrants are illegal. The stories I heard through my interviews were heartrending - here are a few.

Market, Musina, South Africa – 7 March 2008

I met nine women between the ages of 18-35 years old in a market at the centre of Musina. It is not easy to approach Zimbabwean women on the street because they are mainly there illegally and thus do not trust strangers for fear of police harassment and deportation, or the xenophobic violence which is happening in many South African cities

as I write this paper. I did not ask for their names nor did I take pictures as this might have jeopardized their lives and those of their families back in Zimbabwe.

They told me they travel in groups and are often escorted by transporters who are paid about 500 Rand (\$60-70) to get the women over the border of South Africa. If they are lucky to reach near the border the transporters demand more money. Those who cannot afford to pay more are first stripped of their clothes, raped and then forced to walk naked. The only body cover they find are plastic bags and sheets which they use to cover themselves until they see people who provide them with some sort of clothing. Once they cross the border they can be caught and detained before they are violently repatriated or deported. As the picture below shows, many of them carry babies and crawl under a three layered electrified wire on the South African border. Some go via remoter regions: for instance, many travel through the Kruger National Park which is naturally full of wild animals and has rivers teeming with crocodiles.

When I asked if anyone of them had been raped they all looked at each other as if I was asking a stupid question. Of course they had been raped, they replied, and each one of them had been raped at least four times! When I asked them why did they still come to South Africa knowing the terrible ordeal they would experience each time – their responses were that they would rather go through that ordeal than starve slowly to death – “we have nothing in Zimbabwe, no money, no food and our families have nothing so we come here despite the terrible things we face”. Each night about 500 Zimbabweans - mainly women - sleep in this market by the railway station - exposed to police harassment and the ever present threat A Zimbabwean woman crossing an electrified fence near Beitbrige, South Africa of rape.

Access to health services is hard for the undocumented Zimbabweans. Their illegal status means they avoid going to the hospitals even when they are very sick. Those who are infected with HIV as a result of rape may not even know that they are HIV victims. In Musina, once the women are caught by the Police, they are put in a detention centre known as SMG (Soutpansberg Military Gebied) which is a holding station for Zimbabweans before they are deported. Conditions in this detention centre are appalling. It is so crowded and toilet facilities so scarce that many migrants sleep anywhere they can even in areas detainees use as toilets. The occupants of this hell hole include grandmothers, mothers, sisters and daughters of Zimbabwe.

Another sad story we were told in Musina by an NGO, involved five young Zimbabwean girls who, after their horrific journey looked for somewhere to stay. When they finally found a shack owned by two old drunk men, the men demanded sex in return for offering the girls a place to sleep. Since the girls had no money and a place to go, they had to accept were thus subjected to this undignified and inhumane treatment until they found other arrangements some weeks later.

Problems in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, the crisis also has a serious impact on families and married couples according to two women interviewed. In addition to their pursuit of jobs, money and a better life abroad there are other reasons why Zimbabwean women are fleeing to neighbouring countries where they face uncertain prospects and gross human rights violations. These include:

- A sharp rise in violence against women linked with the political and social crisis.
- Divorce which is on the rise and mainly blamed on husband's loss of jobs and economic hardship.
- Husbands, traditionally the breadwinner of the family becomes despondent, and often disappears to abandon the family. • Gender based violence (SGBV) is horrifyingly common in Zimbabwe and is one of the leading causes for the family break-up.
- Many women are becoming the breadwinners of the family as a result of the severe economic downturn and lack of employment opportunities for men. Men, therefore, remain at home. This reversal of gender roles which is common in fragile States and conflict ridden countries leads to some men venting their frustrations on women and results in a rising rate of family breakups.

Police station, Bobonong, Botswana 14 March

One migrant girl caught that morning, was in a Police cells awaiting deportation. I was allowed to interview her, as long as the station Police Chief sat in on my interview. She was a beautiful 16 year old girl from Harare who begged me not to reveal her name. She burst into tears because she was terrified.

Her story, like so many of her Zimbabwean compatriots, started because all she wanted was to earn some money so that she could study 'A' levels in Economics. She was bright, interested to talk about her desire to finish her schooling and become an economist. She discussed economics and the books of famous economists. Her father died when she was only five years old so her single mother took care of her and their two siblings and paid for her school fees until the mother got sick and could not support them anymore.

She was the sole breadwinner of her family which is why she decided to cross the border like many of her friends. Together with three other young girls they decided on Botswana: two did not even make it through the first stage as they were swept away in the flooded and unpredictable Limpopo River. She survived, easily jumped the fence into in Botswana, but was immediately caught by the Police waiting to catch Zimbabwean migrants. She told me that she came to Botswana to work for only 15 Pulas a day (equivalent to US\$2.36) so that she could get enough money before she goes back to pay for her school.

She was enthusiastic and had dreams of her future and of her education, but she was also very young and vulnerable. I gave her my contact details but I do wonder if the police officer who was present during the interview will let her keep the address. He promised me she would be safe and protected – but how could I be sure considering what happens to other Zimbabwean women in what has become a normal quest for food and money?

A Guest House, in Soweto Market Lusaka, Zambia – 18 March 2008

In Zambia, most Zimbabweans who are detained and deported are women. They are engaged in the sex trade out of desperation. Many women go there for work but since jobs are extremely difficult to find the Zimbabwean women resort to prostitution. The Makupa Guest House, in Soweto Market has become a permanent home for many

Zimbabwean women in Lusaka. The girls who sell products such as cigarettes, candies and cookies on the streets during the day, turn to the commercial sex trade at night. Once they are in this compound, the women have no freedom as they are controlled by pimps and the Manager of the compound. When I tried to interview one of the prostitutes, I was refused. She politely told me she has to get permission from the Manager. She feared losing her room which she shares with other women, also from Zimbabwe. Women in this compound are exploited and their human rights violated. It is their destitute and desperate situation that forces them to stay in there.

Final Remarks

Abuse, exploitation, detention and rape have all become a normal part of the lives of female Zimbabwean migrants. They have learned to live with it and, depressingly, they do not see an end to their tragedy. Until now, the neighbouring countries have ignored the problem – only capturing and deporting those they find and blaming the Zimbabwean women for prostitution and the increase of HIV infection in their countries. They obviously ignore the tragic experience of the women of Zimbabwe and the factors that had led these women to prostitution in the first place.

There are no guarantees that the political situation in Zimbabwe will change. Therefore, the following policy options are suggested to the host governments to protect and alleviate the suffering of the unfortunate migrant women of Zimbabwe:

- Protect the human rights of the women that are enshrined in the UN Conventions such as the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many African countries have ratified these human rights conventions.
- Create temporary permits and protection centres as a matter of urgency, because of the enormous difficulty undocumented migrants including women from Zimbabwe have in obtaining, or retaining, any form of identification document.
- Insist on humanitarian treatment by the police, army, border guards etc. to women caught in their net and vigorously fight corruption.
- Bring justice to those responsible for committing crimes against women and young girls – the perpetrators include Police and the border guards.
- Stop putting migrant women and hard core criminals in the same cells. They must be separated.
- Provide free access to health care for the migrant women.

I am an African woman working as an author and humanitarian consultant – moved by the tragic stories I heard. I hope that this article awakens others to the plight of my sisters, the “Brave Women of Zimbabwe”.