

From home to the border: A critical analysis of Zimbabwean migrant women's migration strategies

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Abstract. Zimbabwean migrant women encounter numerous challenges from their homes to the borders of Zimbabwe and South Africa, as well as upon arrival in Johannesburg, and during their stay there. In addition to the decision to move to South Africa, particularly Johannesburg, these migrant women from Zimbabwe plan their journeys from their homes to the border and carry them out with many considerations that they made while planning the journey at home, a process that is not extensively covered in the literature. Based on in-depth interviews with some Zimbabwean women migrants, the article reveals that these women plan their journeys by incorporating religious and cultural practices and using road transport to move from their homes to places near the borders. Upon reaching the borders, some cross the Limpopo river on foot, while others enter South Africa via Botswana. Relatively few women follow the normal, formal border route to enter South Africa. Many either bribe border authorities, while others take the risky route of traveling on foot and crossing the dangerous Limpopo river.

Key words: Migrant women, gender, Johannesburg, Zimbabwe, migration

Introduction

Studies indicate a growth in the numbers of Zimbabwean women migrating to South Africa (Sibanda 2011; Hlatshwayo 2018, 2019; Batisai and Manjowo 2020; Ncube and Bahta 2021; Mutambara and Naidu 2023; Sibanda 2022, Sibanda and Hlatshwayo 2024). The research links this to economic factors, the need for autonomy and a relatively stable political climate which makes South Africa an attractive destination for Zimbabwean migrants. Perceptions of economic and livelihood opportunities being primarily available in South Africa makes it an attractive destination for Zimbabwean migrants. However, a combination of an exclusionary migration framework, strict labour policies and xenophobia force many women into precarious sectors such as the restaurant sector. While opportunities are relatively easier to find in the restaurant sector, it is characterized by a violation of labour laws, abuse, and sexual harassment (Sibanda 2022).

The economic decline in Zimbabwe has two major consequences, it has led to a change in migration patterns and a reversal of gender roles, subsequently impacting the family structure. Young women are increasingly migrating to South Africa in search of better economic and livelihood opportunities for themselves and their families, in the process assuming the breadwinner role. Previously the role of breadwinner was held by men, and labour migration was dominated by young, single men. (Maphosa 2010; McDuff 2015, Hlatshwayo 2018: 2019; Sibanda 2022; Sibanda and Hlatshwayo 2024).

The passage of Zimbabwean migrants to South Africa is often filled with many challenges, anxieties, tensions, and strategies that characterize irregular movements. This makes the passage of migrants an issue that needs attention and a nuanced analysis from home to the border. Notwithstanding these observations, apart from Sibanda (2022), existing studies do not

systematically investigate how the journey from home to the border is made. The scholarship tends to focus on migrant women's experiences mid-way journey, often depicting them as victims of *omagumagama* (criminal gangs who operate along the border). The problem with such a framing is that it only tells a partial experience of migration. Presenting a later experience of their journeys at the expense of their experiences at the start of their journeys presents a disjointed narrative. Further, such a framing ignores the interplay of vulnerability, resistance and agency that underpins the journeys of Zimbabwean women right from their homes to the border.

The article begins with an overview of the literature on migration between Zimbabwe and South Africa. The literature points to a gap in scholarship examining women's movements from their homes to the border. This derives from a common misconception that migration that does not view the home as the first point of migration. The paper then presents the research design. In the discussion segment, the paper identifies themes, concerns, and strategies of Zimbabwean migrant women during transit.

Absence of the journey from home to the border

The literature on Zimbabwean migrants has extensively reviewed causes of migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa, which includes political and economic factors (Maphosa 2010; 2012; Mlambo 2010; Hungwe 2013; 2017; Hlatshwayo 2019; Ndlovu and Landau 2020; Matose, Maviza and Nunu 2022; Sibanda 2022). Migration as a process of moving with various related stages is understudied. The journey of a migrant women worker from Zimbabwe begins from homes in Zimbabwe, goes to the border, and continues in South Africa. Apart from Sibanda (2022) the literature lacks an analysis of the actual execution of the journey from the migrant's home to the border with South Africa. This creates an assumption that irregular migration is a linear process despite the intricate maze that exists within. Missing this critical step of an irregular migrant's journey overlooks crucial aspects of migrant women's forms of resistance. It misses the interplay of vulnerability, resistance, and agency of migrant women, depicting them as victims without self-agency. Further, except for (Hlatshwayo 2019; Matose, Maviza and Nunu 2022; Sibanda 2022) the literature is not gendered.

Mlambo's (2010) account presents an insightful evolution of migration between present day Zimbabwe and South Africa. According to Mlambo (2010), in the 1970s, young men left Zimbabwe for South Africa to either work as migrant labourers in South African mines or they left due to political reasons. The 1970s saw a peak of Zimbabwe's struggle for independence. Mlambo (2010) also highlights that it was fashionable for young men in the southern parts of Zimbabwe to migrate to South Africa as a rite of passage. This view, however, needs further questioning as it tends to ignore the politics of marginalization in Zimbabwe which forced young people in the southern parts of the country to migrate due to limited access to state resources. Mlambo (2010) also gives a statistical evolution of the migration, highlighting a progression in numbers and patterns, from a largely male and youthful traveller where the primary destination was largely South Africa, to more mixed travellers with destinations as far afield as the United Kingdom (UK). The body of work locates contemporary migration in its proper context. Further, it gives reliable figures on Zimbabwe's outmigration. However, the work is not gendered, moreover, it does not explore the actual execution of the journeys. This ignores the different dynamics embedded in the migration process and the gendered agency within.

The exact number of Zimbabwean migrant women in South Africa is unknown because most migration data is not separated by gender and undocumented migrant figures are not available. However, recent research studies indicate that a significant number of Zimbabwean

women have been migrating to South Africa, spanning all age groups with no evidence of child migration. Between 1997 and 2010, 44% of Zimbabwean migrants were female and they were the primary breadwinners in their households. This suggests that the feminization of migration among Zimbabweans was more advanced compared to other countries in the Southern region (Mutambara et al. 2023).

Ndlovu and Landau (2020), explore how the Zimbabwe–South Africa border is configured between the states and its citizens. The literature traces the migration route between Zimbabwe and South Africa right back to the importation of labour during apartheid (1948–91). The literature cites the economic crisis in Zimbabwe and the disparities of wealth within and between the two countries as some of the driving factors. Further, the literature attributes movement between Zimbabwe's Matabeleland region, or the southern part of Zimbabwe, and South Africa to spatial proximity and ethnic affinity. Apart from a few exceptions (Maphosa 2010; Siziba 2013; Sibanda 2022) this area that has received limited attention in migration literature, despite the role it plays in shaping present day socio economic and socio-political relations between the two counties. The literature, however, lacks focus on the execution of the journey from the migrant's homes to the border. This misses the different dimensions of an irregular migrants' journey. It also creates a false impression that irregular migration is a linear, seamless process.

Likewise, Maphosa's (2010) study of Ward Seven of Mangwe District in the Matabeleland South Province of Zimbabwe, 'a high migrant-sending area in rural Zimbabwe', Maphosa (2010: 346) attributes the movements between Zimbabweans and South Africans to geographical proximity and shared cultural ties. Maphosa (2010) brings valuable insights into how migration impacts the culture and values of sending communities, an area that has received limited attention in migration studies. Migration studies tend to centre on the impact of migration on destination areas and not so much on the effects of migration in places of origin (Schapendonk 2007). Maphosa (2010) argues that the introduction of cultural symbols and practices brought into community by *injiva* or *indazula*, (returnees) often causes conflict with elders who decry the loss of local cultural values. The body of literature provides an understanding of the impact of migration on sending countries. This focus misses the actual processes of moving. This derives from the conventional understanding of migration being an unproblematic transition from a place of origin to a certain destination.

Failure to investigate migration experiences of Zimbabwean women from their homes to the border obscures the various complexities embedded in an irregular migrant's journey. The limited focus also conceals their avoidance, circumvention and evasion strategies during transit. Extensive literature has focused on the challenges faced by Zimbabwean migrants (Hungwe 2013; Hungwe 2017; Maphosa 2012; Hlatshwayo 2019), however, the literature does not follow migrants from the start of their journeys, nor does it highlight their agency during transit. Where the agency is highlighted (Hungwe 2013), the work is not gendered and neither does the literature follow the journey from their homes to the border. Hungwe (2013) confines the agency of migrants to the crossing point. This falls short in giving a holistic overview of transit experiences of irregular migrants from their homes to the border.

Hungwe (2017) focuses on the challenges faced by irregular Zimbabwean migrants travelling between Zimbabwe and South Africa. The study examined the role played by social networks play in migrants' response to social exclusion. However, the literature is silent on the actual journeys of migrants, in the process missing out on the self-agency enacted during transit. Neither is the literature gendered.

Maphosa (2012) discusses an important and yet less studied topic between the linkages of irregular migration and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, despite studies by the International Labour Organisation (ILO 2002) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM undated) that show that migrants face disproportionate exposure to HIV/AIDS than their non-migrant counterparts. Further, Maphosa (2012) establishes a link between feminisation of migration and the situational vulnerabilities of irregular migrant women. According to Maphosa (2012: 123),

'Many young women fall into the traffickers' trap on the way to their destination... during the migration process, migrant women, especially irregular migrant women, risk physical and sexual abuse and suffer human rights abuses and violations.'

While the scholarship contributes towards an understanding of the gendered challenges facing migrant women, the literature fails to trace the gendered journeys of migrant women from their homes to the border.

Hlatshwayo's (2019) gendered account brings to the core the challenges faced by Zimbabwean migrant women enroute to South Africa. The literature contributes to the growing body on the precarious conditions of migrant women during transit. Hlatshwayo (2019) draws attention to the situational vulnerability of migrant women due to a combination of their irregular migration status and their gender as women. This sentiment is echoed by (Maphosa 2012; Sibanda 2022; Matose, Maviza and Nunu 2022). According to Matose, Maviza and Nunu (2022: 2),

... [Women's] vulnerability is situational in that they are irregular and personal because of their gender. In the case of irregular female migrants, the intersection of their irregular status with their gender makes them more susceptible to abuse and violation than men. This further worsens their vulnerability and exposure to risk during the migration journey and at detention.

And yet, apart from Sibanda (2022) the literature does not view Zimbabwean migrant women as social agents capable of shaping their conditions during transit, despite highlighting the disproportionate vulnerabilities of women to rape and natural occurrences such as menstruation. The literature is silent on migrant women's strategies to ward off rape and does not deal with menstruation among other challenges encountered on the way. Furthermore, apart from Sibanda (2022), the literature does not follow the journeys from the start of the trip through to the border. Due to its limited focus, the literature ignores the tactics employed by Zimbabwean women such as the performance of spiritual and religious practices to smoothen the journey and avoid detection.

While this paper affirms the argument on the situational vulnerability of irregular Zimbabwean migrant women, the article goes beyond (Maphosa 2012; Hlatshwayo 2019; Matose, Maviza and Nunu 2022) who largely portray Zimbabwean migrant as vulnerable. It situates Zimbabwean migrant women as genetic beings who exercise their agency, through a myriad of strategies to cope with, circumvent, escape, and evade the system from home until the South African border.

Research design

The article is based on the findings of a qualitative study carried out with 29 Zimbabwean migrant women living in Johannesburg. Participants ranged from 20 to 40 years old, and they had been in Johannesburg for a period ranging between less than two years to twelve years. Concerns might be raised about the sample size. However, in qualitative research, there are no rules guiding sample size, neither does quantification capture the true nature of a problem Maphosa (2012). Determining adequate sample size in qualitative research is ultimately a matter of judgment and experience in evaluating the quality of the information collected against the uses to which it will be put (Sandelowski 1995).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews using a questionnaire. The questionnaire only acted as a guide and it was not in any way meant to limit the respondents. The in-depth interviews elicited information on experiences encountered while migrating to Johannesburg. The research sought to understand migrant women's experiences during transit with a view to understanding challenges and how they overcame them. Central to this was understanding factors informing migrant women's response. The use of in-depth interviews provided a platform to validate women's subjective experiences, elevate their voices and narrate their subjective interpretations of their journeys (Kihato 2007: 94).

The research deployed qualitative methods due to their grounding in participants' realities and lived experiences. Further, qualitative methods have a capacity to generate self-critical and unrestricted perceptions on a given subject matter (Gaskell 2000). Furthermore, qualitative research allows researchers to obtain in-depth insights into actions attitudes, beliefs, motives, and behaviours of the target populations to gain an overall better understanding of the underlying processes. Losifides (2011) argues that qualitative research aligns with social reality, making it the most suitable data collection method for a study on lived experiences.

The researchers' previous work with migrant communities facilitated access. The researchers drew on their previous experience working with Zimbabwean migrant women in precarious work in Johannesburg. Through the work, the researchers forged relationships with some of the women who later took part and acted as referrals in this research. The familiarity made the interaction easier due to the trust that now existed between the parties. Further, access was facilitated through the Migrant Workers Union of South Africa (MIWUSA), a trade union formed by migrant workers in South Africa. Additionally, the identity of one of the researchers played a big role in accessing the field. The researcher, a Zimbabwean migrant woman herself, is part of a network of Zimbabwean migrant women in Johannesburg. This allowed the researcher to establish rapport with the participants and to explore sensitive topics, an important consideration in view of the subject. Furthermore, this hybrid insider–outsider status facilitated the gathering of background information, which was useful in filling up some of the gaps emanating from memory lapses.

The research also deployed purposive and snowballing selection techniques for locating participants. Snowballing proved to be very effective as a referral method and in generating trust among 'hidden' populations. The term 'hidden' when used in the context of migrant populations is used to refer to vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups of people (Melrose 2022; Kalsbeek 2000; Maphosa 2012; Miriyoga 2019). Due to the clandestine nature of their activities, undocumented migrants may deliberately want to stay off the radar, as such, they may be reluctant to partake in academic research activities. Finding this hidden group of people was important for the direction of this research as existing literature remains silent on the gendered journeys of Zimbabwean migrant women from their homes to the border.

All interviews were conducted in *isiNdebele*, the participants' mother tongue, and a common language with one of the researchers. Only one interview was conducted in English as preferred by the participant. Using the participants' home language minimised the loss of meaning associated with translation. A common language also accommodated expression of colloquial language for sensitive or culturally nuanced topics, which is usually magnified by language barriers. Furthermore, the common language established the researcher as one with the group – an insider, alleviating some of the fears, anxieties, suspicions, and class differences that often exist between researchers and research participants. However, despite this shared background with the research participants, the researcher was still cognizant of her positionality and how this shaped the research.

Given the sensitivity of the subject and the vulnerability of the participants, the research prioritised ethical considerations, including privacy, anonymity, and participant protection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and their privacy and anonymity were protected using pseudonyms. The research was also conducted in line with COVID 19 guidelines and protocols. Participants gave control over the location of interviews, time and language to ensure their comfort and safety. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes in line with qualitative research methodologies (Creswell, 2012).

From home to the border: An overview

To contextualize migration from home to the border, the first set of findings discusses Zimbabwean migrants' strategies performed while still at home, establishing the women's agency of the migration process from the beginning. The findings point to migration being a planned process, but also to migrant women being aware of the challenges likely to befall them along the way and taking proactive steps to mitigate these challenges. Migrant women perform both observable and non-observable strategies in anticipation of these challenges. Non-observable strategies include discreet forms of spirituality. Migration also means decisions over timing of travel and choices over routes. Considerations around natural occurrences such as menstruation, weather elements, and celestial bodies are taken into account when planning migration. Considerations over the best routes are also made. The best routes are not always linear; they may be long and winding. The paper discusses the complex web of routes and its role as a form of agency. More specifically, it uncovers the various types of routes as they play out in gendered irregular migration settings: the informal, informal within the formal, informal assisted crossing, and the informal unassisted individual crossing. Mid-journey presents its own set of challenges, such as threats of rape and robbery. As they inch closer to the border, threats of detection and challenges on how to navigate the Limpopo River become even more real necessitating a variety of strategies.

Spirituality

Zimbabwean migrant women and their families are aware of the challenges associated with travelling via irregular challenges. Threat of rape, robbery, attacks by wild animals, and drowning in the Limpopo River is ever present (Maphosa 2012; Hungwe 2017, Hlatshwayo 2019). Irregular migrants also face the threat of detection by border patrol officers. Leaving home often means calling on sought intercession, guidance, and protection from the spiritual helm. This locates spirituality as a coping mechanism in a migrants' journey. Some would be migrants perform a ceremony called *ukuthethela (amadlozi)* – appeasing the spirits', a practise in Ndebele traditional belief systems. The ceremony is performed to bring into convergence the spiritual and

the physical realms (Ndlovu and Ndlovu 2012; Sibanda 2018, Moyo 2021 Sibanda 2022). It seeks intercession and guidance from the ancestors and cleanses bad luck. While the ceremony itself is usually performed pre-migration, there are certain rituals that one needs to observe upon leaving home such as bathing in *intelezi* (water with medicine), or the *ukuchela* sprinkling charm to ward off evil, or smearing of snuff (a grounded indigenous African plant that is smeared on the nostrils to communicate with one's ancestors). For migrants rooted in Christian beliefs spirituality was expressed through practices such as prayer and drinking of holy water.

Apart from Hungwe (2017), existing literature remains thin on spirituality as a form of resistance during travel. This is because literature tends to ignore transit experiences of Zimbabwean migrant women from home to the border (Maphosa 2010; 2012 Hlatshwayo 2019; Madambi 2020; Ndlovu and Landau 2020). Hlatshwayo (2019) investigates transit experiences of Zimbabwean migrant women from a gendered lens, however, this body of work ignores their forms of agency. Madambi (2020) focuses on the agency of Zimbabwean migrant women in Mthatha Town, however, the literature is silent on their journey from home to the border. Similarly, (Maphosa 2010; 2012; Ndlovu and Landau 2020) is silent on the journey from home to the border and neither is the work gendered. Hungwe (2017) makes an important finding about the enactment of rituals involved in crossing of the Limpopo River such as crossing stark naked to ward evil spirits, however, the literature is not gendered. Further, the literature employs a limited focus to irregular migration. The body of work positions agency and resistance only at the crossing point. This implies that migrants only exercise agency at points of crossing.

Thenjiwe Dlamini shares:

Before I left, I got holy water from my church. Some of the water was to bath in and some to drink. I had to splash myself with some of the water upon leaving home. I believe all 12 of us had sought some spiritual intervention or practised a rite of sorts. Some would consult their ancestors; some would use snuff; and some had *intelezi* [traditional bangles or string worn on the waist] on them. (Thenjiwe Dlamini, Interview 25 June 2021).

Contrary to Hungwe (2017), the research found that the practise of spirituality was a continuous process and not a performance limited to one part of the journey. The spiritual practices, due to their varying nature, were performed at various points of the journey. Some were performed leading up to travel, while the nature of others demanded that they were performed upon leaving home. Some practices, such as “drinking holy water” or using snuff, needed to be observed throughout the journey. It is apparent that in their exercise of precarious resistance, Zimbabwean migrant women practice non-observable human conduct, and spirituality is one such strategy, which was an ever-present element from home to the border.

Timing of travel – weather elements

Timing of travel is another key consideration in migration planning especially for migrants travelling through informal assisted crossing and informal unassisted travel. This form of travel mainly involves travelling through the bush and/or river crossing and as such their successful execution is mainly dependent on natural elements such as the weather. The dry season and the presence of a full moon were the preferred time of travel. While migration patterns have evolved to include migrants travelling throughout the year, this finding is still important because it locates natural weather elements as a site in irregular cross border migration.

Despite a huge proliferation on irregular migration (Maphosa 2010; Bimha and Bimha (2018) Sibanda and Hlatshwayo 2024) the scholarship is silent on the impact of weather on migrant women's migration decisions and remains limited. Maphosa (2010) investigates a less

studied phenomenon of how migration impacts receiving countries. Bimha and Bimha (2018) argue that migration between Zimbabwe and Johannesburg is at its highest in the festive season.

You prepare accordingly... you dress up warmly and make sure you wear comfortable tennis shoes for the long trek and take warm jackets as you do not know how the weather will be where you are going so you prepare for every eventuality. You do not even know how many nights you will spend in the bush. (Thandiwe Mthimkhulu Interview, 13 March 2021).

Another migrant woman shares:

The presence of a full moon [or not] does not play any role in influencing travel anymore. It all depends on the presence of *impisi* because of their inherent knowledge of the bush. Their strongest skill is knowledge of the terrain. (Sibongile Khumalo Interview 4 February 2012).

Timing of travel - Menstruation

Menstruation impacted the transit experiences of Zimbabwean migrant women in two ways - either as a burden or a strategy. The research found that timing of travel was deliberately set to either coincide with menstruation or travelling when one is not menstruating, depending on where one's strategy lay, locating women's bodies as a site of resistance.

Literature pointing to growing numbers of women migrants is growing (Dodson 2000; Mbiyozo 2018; Gerard and Pickering 2013), and yet scholarship on menstruation and migration remains limited. Even more limited is literature that portrays menstruation as a form of resistance during transit. Existing literature positions menstruation in negative constructions. Hlatshwayo (2019) and Kemigisha et al. (2020) associate menstruation with vulnerability and mental strain, positioning it as shameful. However, this research found that Zimbabwean migrant women often use menstruation as a tactic to deter rape. Travel is deliberately planned to coincide with menstruation. While none of the women in the study had used this strategy themselves, they spoke to its wide use; 'I did not use the strategy myself, but I know of women who deliberately travel during their period to deter rape' (Makhosazana Dube Interview 11 May 2021).

Thandiwe Ngcobo, on the other hand, had deliberately timed her travel for the days that she was not menstruating, however, her journey ended up taking longer than expected, as it often happens in irregular migration settings. During that time, she got her period. Instead of viewing this as adversity, Ngcobo and her fellow women travellers turned it into a form of solidarity and camaraderie:

Our journey took 20 days and by that time there were many factors that brought us together as women, we shared the little that we had even though we did not know for how long we were going to be stuck. Sanitary pads and tampons were given to those that did not have. (Thandiwe Ngcobo Interview 21 February 2021).

While the women in the study dealt with menstruation in ways that are empowering, the reality for most women in irregular migrant settings menstruation can be challenging 'I think it is harder for women who cross when they are menstruating because there is no time to change a pad. Even before we get into the car, there is no time to stop and change a pad' (Nokuthula Sibanda, Interview 13 May 2020).

Early migration studies tended to downplay the impact of menstruation in irregular migration travels because they only focused on male migrants. The few that focused on women, the framing was negative and portrayed them as vulnerable victims. This paper applies a wider interpretation to menstruation. It not only positions menstruation as fundamental reproductive function for women, but it positions the female body as a site of resistance. The paper argues that the use of the female body in resisting rape is a subversive act which disrupts staunchly

entrenched gender norms that associate menstruation with shame and vulnerability. This strategy also impedes gender norms that associate the female body with weakness and sexual pleasure. This view is shared by Tamale [2017] (cited in Sibanda 2022: 164) who argues that the [female] body is 'both a material and a political entity, with multiple and contested inscriptions that have been historically and socially produced by institutions such as law, culture, and religion'

Lisale kuhle - 'Goodbye'

For many a migrant, leaving home is not simply a matter of walking out the door and waving loved one's 'goodbye'. The act of leaving home is characterized by performances of acts of resistance and agency, challenging stereotypes that migration is a straightforward, painless process. Some would be migrants choose to keep their travel plans to themselves for fear of jealous friends and neighbours jinxing their plans. Others fear having their plans thwarted by concerned family members who worry about their safety in transit. Families are aware of the dangers that lurk on the way to Johannesburg. However, there remains limited literature on those leaving unannounced as a strategy despite its prevalence among migrants. This is due to the literature's limited focus on how migrants make the journey from their homes to the border.

I left without telling my grandmother of my plans to leave. I thought that she will forbid me if I tell her that I am planning to go to Johannesburg, ... the road to Johannesburg is filled with many challenges... I planned everything and never told her. I quietly left. (Thandekile Ndlovu, Interview 14 April 2021).

Other migrant women however left without announcing their plans to conceal contentious actions. Thandiwe Mahlangu was forced into leaving unannounced after stealing and selling her mother's cell phone to raise money for her trip to Johannesburg 'I stole my mother's cell phone and sold it at the flea market...I pretended to be going for a sleep over at friend's house. That is how I left' (Thandiwe Mahlangu Interview 9 October 2021).

Leaving in secrecy is not a decision taken lightly as it is not always ideal for those left behind and the migrant alike. Travelling outside the knowledge of family and friends exposes women to greater risk during transit (Sibanda 2022). Second parties play a critical role in checking in on migrants and offering emotional support during travel. For Mahlangu and Ndlovu, leaving for long journeys without bidding farewell to their families was not easy as it goes against African belief systems, as it believed to attract bad luck and misfortune. The role of religion in the migration is further detailed below.

Use of road transport and the official border channels

Some migrants use road transport, such as cars, minibuses, and *omalayitsha* (private transport operators transporting and facilitating the entry of mostly undocumented migrants and goods, and money) to travel to the border gates. Some irregular migrant women from Zimbabwe cross the border at designated crossing points without the required documentation, pointing to their agency and the advancements in the *malayitsha* network. This strategy requires the involvement of state actors namely security and customs officials. This effectively situates the breadth of the *malayitsha* network to include state officials, an indictment of the policies of border practices.

These developments are however hidden by a lack of focus on how migrants travel from their homes to the border. While Hungwe's (2017) analysis highlights the various actors in the *malayitsha* network, the literature is not gendered, and neither does it highlight the role of state actors as agents facilitating irregular travel. Similarly, Maphosa (2012) highlights the role of the

different actors in the *malayitsha* network, but the body of work does not focus on how migrants travel from home to the border, undermining the gendered agency within.

I was given a passport cover to pretend that I had an actual passport. I was told that I will meet a lot of police patrols on the way, and that I must just flash the passport cover to make them think it was an actual passport. I crossed all the gates at the border... I think I looked like I had all the necessary documents in the eyes of the police. I managed to get to the last gate unstopped. (Simangaliso Moyo, Interview 21 February 2021)

For Moyo's strategy to work state officials in cahoots with *omalayitsha* facilitated Moyo's efforts to dupe and elude the system. State agents are known to accept bribes and other incentives from undocumented migrants in exchange for the right of passage (Moyo 2010; Tshabalala 2017; and Matose, Maviza and Nunu 2022).

Zimbabwe side - formal route

Formal crossing for passport holders is simple, smooth, and straightforward, although the process can be quite bureaucratic, lengthy, and securitised. The smooth journeys for the travellers on passports are confirmed by this testimony:

My travelling, my transit was smooth. I did not experience hectic moments on the border post or anything. (Immaculate Moyo, Interview 16 September 2021)

The process starts with travellers individually presenting passports to immigration officers at the stamping hall where they are duly stamped. From there they complete the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) processes, which includes luggage checks, before proceeding to the exit where they show their stamped passports to the joint team of Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) officers and Zimbabwe immigration officers. They then either walk across the Limpopo River Bridge, a distance of less than a kilometre, or are driven across. That distance is technically known as 'no man's land' between Zimbabwe and South Africa.

At the southern end of the bridge is a team of South African immigration officials, consisting of members of the South African Police Service (SAPS) and Home Affairs officials. This team checks for the departure stamp endorsed by the Zimbabwean immigration department on the traveller's passport. Upon satisfying themselves of an authorised departure from Zimbabwe, the officers then permit the passport holder to proceed to the South African immigration stamping halls for the entry stamp, which duly authorises arrival into South Africa. Equipped with that entry stamp, the traveller then proceeds to the gate, which finally serves as an entry point into the Republic of South Africa. The gate is staffed by members of the SAPS and officials from the Department of Home Affairs, although sometimes only members of SAPS oversee entry by just checking the stamped page on the passport.

By road transport and feet

Zimbabwe adopted the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) between 1991 and 1996, a Bretton Woods prescribed neo-liberal policy that included the dismantling of price and exchange-rate controls, privatization of public enterprises and trade liberalization, among other policies. The reform programme was detrimental to the Zimbabwean economy: among its effects was high inflation, job losses, and unemployment. The privatization of public enterprise led to, among other effects, insufficient infrastructural support resulting in bad management, corruption, poor maintenance, and eventually the collapse of parastatals, among them the National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ), the country's rail transport service provider. Trains were an affordable and safe mode of transport, largely used by male migrant workers. However,

the decline of the rail network coincided with the increase in feminization of migration, leading to more women using *omalayitsha* as a means of transport (Mlambo 2010).

The crumbling infrastructure and failure of these key institutions to perform their duties not only undermined the economy, but also gains made in the empowerment of women and gender equality. The NRZ is a case in point. The train was relied upon as a safe and secure mode of transport for women engaged in cross-border trading, particularly between South Africa and Johannesburg, where they would take the overnight train.

The country's once well-maintained transport system had become seriously inadequate by the second decade of the new millennium, with the national railway system having, virtually, collapsed. One of the effects of this was a deterioration of the road network, as goods that used to be carried by train were now ferried by road (Sibanda 2022).

Stepwise migration

Zimbabwean migrant women do not always take direct routes, the travel from home to the border may involve meandering and winding routes and transiting through different countries. This concept is known as stepwise migration. The long routes are carefully crafted plans to evade the system. This finding is important because it carries important connotations to the concepts of divergence and convergence. It locates stepwise migration as a form of agency. This pathway however has received limited attention in migration literature. A focus on stepwise migration contributes to existing literature on women's strategies and irregular migration pathways.

The gendered scholarship on Zimbabwean migrant women is growing (Madambi 2020; Ncube and Bahta 2021; Mutambara and Naidu 2023), however, the literature still ignores the journey from home to the border and in doing so fails to appreciate meandering routes as a strategy underpinning irregular migration. This creates an assumption that migration is a straightforward process.

Nokuthula Sibanda transited through Botswana on her way to Johannesburg:

Travelling from Mbimba¹ meant I went through Botswana, although longer and it involves a lot of hitchhiking, it is less risky in terms of being detected by the border patrol agents... From home I walked until eMkhomeni [the local main road], then I hiked to Francistown. From there I hitchhiked to Gaborone. I then took another taxi to Ramotswa, then I hitchhiked to Zeerust... six or seven taxis because there is one from Sinyawo to Francistown, then one from Francistown to Gaborone, one from Gaborone to Ramotswa, one Ramotswa to Mushiyangeng, one from Mushiyangeng to [Zeerust, one from Zeerust to Johannesburg]. (Nokuthula Sibanda, Interview 13 May 2020).

Sibanda engaged in stepwise migration. According to (Schapendonk (2007:115) 'stepwise migration is generally understood as migration to one country in order to reach another country'. This is in line with Collyer (2007) who argues that stepwise migration contains periods of temporary settlement and subsequent movements. An understanding of stepwise migration contributes to an understating of how migrants adapt to and use enroute places as a strategy to reach their destinations. To an outsider, Sibanda's path might be easily dismissed as lengthy and cumbersome, yet there are benefits embedded within. Transiting through Botswana presented her with better chances of evading authorities. Zimbabwean women's migration is primarily analyzed in terms of vulnerability and victimhood which overlooks their agency. Her experience shows that the journey from home to the border is not a linear process.

¹ Village in Plumtree, Zimbabwe

Unassisted without intermediaries

Although traditionally *dabulaphu* entailed crossing at undesignated points and walking most or all the way to the destination the use of the term has gradually widened to include all manner of irregular migration, including the informal within the formal, informal assisted crossings, and informal unassisted individual crossings without intermediaries. Further, the term *dabulaphu* has evolved with the evolution of irregular cross border travelling. Traditionally it is used synonymous with men, as only adult men migrated this way due to the risk involved (Maphosa (2009). Existing literature (Hlatshwayo 2019; Maphosa 2010; 2012; Madambi 2020) has tended to miss this development due to its limited focus on the journey from home to the border.

An undocumented migrant woman shares how she negotiated her way at the border:

When he was finally alone, I seized the chance. I had been observing him [the migration authority] throughout the day and I thought he looked softer and easily approachable. One stands a better chance negotiating one-on-one. Never approach them [migration authorities] as a group. I observed this during the half a day I spent milling around the border. I declared my situation upfront [undocumented status]. My ploy was to appeal to play to the officer's sympathy. (Thembinkosi Mathibela, Interview 28 June 2021)

While a typical informal within the formal strategy involves bribery and exchange of money, as noted by respondents in previous studies, a bit of friendly banter secured the same outcomes for Mathibela.

Crossing the river

Hlatshwayo (2019)'s body of work is useful in highlighting the challenges that Zimbabwean migrant women face on the way to Johannesburg. The literature contributes to knowledge on feminization of migration and feminization of work. However, the literature lacks an appreciation of the various migration pathways as they play out in *dabulaphu* settings.

Sibongile Khumalo, describes how informal assisted crossings play out.

You are rummaging through thick bushes and foliage. The risk of getting bitten by snakes or robbed by *omagumaguma* is very high. You walk through the bush but there is always uncertainty of whether you will arrive at your destination or not ... the *impisi* hyena – [the person who leads the group in the bush and in the actual crossing] checks out the area first. We found the river quite full. The *impisi* said everyone must undress down to their underwear². We were scared to do that since we are women. The *impisi*, however, said in the river we are all the same, gender does not exist in that situation. We all undressed, and we were told that we should carry our clothes on our heads and hold hands and cross in a single file. (Sibongile Khumalo, Interview 4 February 2021).

Khumalo's experiences speak to 'typical' irregular crossing, and the role of the various actors involved. *Impisi* are agents of *omalayitsha* who are responsible for leading migrants through the bush and helping them at the point of crossing (Hungwe 2017, Tshabalala 2017; Sibanda 2022). *Omagumaguma* are criminal elements that operate along the border known to rape and rob unsuspecting travellers and *impisi* alike (Hungwe 2017; Sibanda 2022). Maphosa (2010) seems to conflate the two definitions of *omagumaguma* by stating that they mainly operate in two

² While from an *impisi* perspective asking migrants to take off wet clothing when crossing the Limpopo river might stem from the fact that wet clothing increases density, for women, this is not always easy due to the need for modest.

ways: (a) aiding potential migrants in crossing the border unofficially and later robbing the same individuals, or (b) waylaying the potential migrants in order to steal, rape, or kill them.

Conclusion

The journey taken by women migrant workers from Zimbabwe to the border gates of South Africa is not well documented. This paper has uncovered details about the journey, which involves thorough preparations, including performing religious and cultural rituals just before setting out. Due to the collapse of the railway lines in Zimbabwe and South Africa, these women rely on road transport to reach the border. A network of smugglers and men dominate the routes used by irregular migrants. The journey involves women crossing rivers, which is fraught with danger and violence. The relatively safer women are those who use the regular, formal routes, but they are a minority. Some women using road transport to reach the borders are able to enter South Africa by paying bribes. Future studies may have to focus on the specific dynamics between the Zimbabwean and the South African side of the borders.

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Interviews

- Interview with Makhosazana Dube, Zimbabwean migrant woman, 11. 05. 2021, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Interview with Thandiwe Ngcobo, Zimbabwean migrant woman, 21.02.2021, Johannesburg, South Africa.



Interview with Simangaliso Moyo, Zimbabwean migrant woman, 21.02.2021, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Interview with Thandekile Ndlovu, Zimbabwean migrant woman, 1104.2020, Johannesburg, South Africa.

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Interview with Faith Dlamini, Zimbabwean migrant woman, 25. 06.2021, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Interview with Nokuthula Sibanda, Zimbabwean migrant woman, 13.05. 2020, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Interview with Thembinkosi Mathibela, Zimbabwean migrant woman, 28.06. 2021, Johannesburg, South Africa.

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