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The Trials and Tribulations of Zimbabwean Precarious Women Workers in Johannesburg: A Cry for Help?

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Abstract There is a growing literature on the conditions of Zimbabwean women working as migrant workers in South Africa, specifically in cities like Johannesburg. Based on in-depth interviews and documentary analysis, this empirical research paper contributes to scholarship examining the conditions of migrant women workers from Zimbabwe employed as precarious workers in Johannesburg by zooming in on specific causes of migration to Johannesburg, the journey undertaken by the migrant women to Johannesburg, challenges of documentation, use of networks to survive in Johannesburg, employment of the women in precarious work, and challenges in the workplace. Rape and sexual violence are threats that face the women interviewed during migration to Johannesburg and even when in Johannesburg. The police who are supposed to uphold and protect the law are often found to be perpetrators involved in various forms of violence against women. In the workplace, the women earn starvation wages and work under poor working conditions. Human rights organizations and trade unions are unable to reach the many migrant women because of the sheer volume of violations against workers' rights and human rights.

Keywords Migrant Women Workers; Xenophobia; Trade Unions; Feminization; Johannesburg; Zimbabwe

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There is a growing literature on the working conditions of Zimbabwean migrant women workers in South Africa and other countries. In the context of declining industries which used to employ men who provided financial support to their families, one of the issues revealed by studies on Zimbabwean women workers is that *they* are now the breadwinners, employed in what can be regarded as precarious work or work that is characterized by low wages and poor working conditions. Gender

relations have been transformed, with women becoming heads of households (Chireshe 2010; Dzingirai et al. 2015; Batisai 2016).

In clarifying the meaning of “precarious work” in the context of the developing world, Kalleberg (2009:15) argues, “In transitional and less developed countries (including many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America), precarious work is often the norm and is linked more to the informal than the formal economy and to whether jobs pay above poverty wages.” This paper shows that precarious work is carried out by Zimbabwean migrant women who tend to be employed largely in what can be regarded as the “informal sector” as discussed by Kalleberg (2009), which is characterized by lack of legal protection, poor working conditions, and low wages. In this article, precariousness of the workers is not only confined to the workplace but is also found to be a condition of their existence and survival, affecting them even outside of the workplace.

The constant difficulties and visible and invisible struggles that are waged by the women interviewed for this study can be conceptualized as being part of “precarity”—a living condition and human life defined by “instability, vulnerability, insecurity, uncertainty and unpredictability” (Ettlinger 2007:320; Waite 2009:426; Masenya, de Wet, Coetzee 2017:194).

Unemployment and poverty have propelled a section of the poor and women in particular to leave their homes to work in other countries where they have far fewer or no rights and no social protection in the form of housing, social grants, and other forms of state support, further deepening insecurity

among these precarious workers. For Standing (2011), “precarity” is not just defined by job insecurity, poor working conditions, and low wages, but also by a lack of social and economic protection (especially for migrant workers) that would normally be provided by a welfare state which ordinarily includes social grants, education, and other social services. Standing (2011:103) locates migrant workers at the lowest level of “precarity,” as, unlike citizens who are also precarious workers, migrant workers tend to have minimum or no legal and social protection. Migrant workers living and working in South Africa who were interviewed for purposes of this research can be viewed as what Standing (2011:105) calls “the permanent denizens” or people with no citizenship or no rights, despite the fact that they are supposed to have some minimum protection from labor law and the bill of rights in South Africa (Hlatshwayo 2016).

Consistent with the work of Masenya and colleagues (2017), which views the “precarity” as defined by anxiety and insecurity, travelling from Zimbabwe to Johannesburg is risky for the women as they face threats of arrests by authorities as migrants crossing the border with no legal documentation. Another possibility is that as they travel through the bushes, they can get attacked by criminals looking for money and other possessions. In addition to that, and what exacerbates precariousness, is that, unlike men, these women are likely to be sexually attacked by men on their way to Johannesburg or whilst in Johannesburg.

Guided by concepts of “precarity” and “precarious work,” this empirical paper based on in-depth in-

interviews and documentary evidence contributes to the scholarship on the conditions of Zimbabwean migrant women employed as precarious workers in Johannesburg, the biggest economic hub in South Africa. It specifically focuses on the working lives of precarious migrant women workers from Zimbabwe who undertake long and unsafe journeys from Zimbabwe to Johannesburg before finally gaining employment as precarious workers earning low wages and working long hours. The article reveals that women undertake long journeys that are characterized by threats of rape and other forms of sexual violence, and face further problems specific to migrant women, including having no proper washing facilities (which makes contending with menstruation a particular burden). On arrival and living in South Africa, women have to contend with xenophobia, documentation, harassment by the police, and poor working conditions.

The women interviewed strongly feel that state institutions that are supposed to help improve their living and working conditions are toothless, as they are not able to hold employers accountable. In addition, the migrant women workers are also unable to approach state institutions as they fear being deported, since they are undocumented migrants. The migrant workers are crying out for help and want to be part of some collective solution to their problems and challenges. The paper shows that some human rights organizations and trade unions do seek to help and support migrant workers, and migrant women workers from Zimbabwe in particular. However, limited resources and the widespread nature of violations of migrant women workers' rights mean that, in many cases, trade unions have not been able to organize

them. On the other hand, the article acknowledges the establishment of organizations of migrant workers, advice offices, and task teams that seek to do so.

The paper frames the discussion on Zimbabwean migrant women workers by reviewing the literature on Zimbabwean women, migration, and precarious work in South Africa. One of the main points raised by the literature review is that the economic challenges facing Zimbabwe compelled women to leave in search of work in places like Johannesburg. Another issue that emerges is that these women should be conceptualized as workers working and living within the South African borders as they have established their lives in South Africa. Based on the interviews, this paper will also suggest possibilities of collaborations between migrant women and various human rights NGOs seeking to work to advance the rights and interests of migrant workers building their lives in South Africa.

The main argument of the findings section is that leaving Zimbabwe to live and work in Johannesburg is riddled with difficulties which take the form of threats like sexual violence, attacks by criminal elements, xenophobia, and despotic workplaces. That women are looking for work so that they can support their families in Zimbabwe is the drive that makes them endure all this, in spite of all the trials and tribulations. Being undocumented migrant workers means that the women are also victimized by the police in the form of rape and sexual harassment. Towards the end of the article, there is a critical discussion on human rights organizations and trade unions that are meant to help deal with difficulties faced by the migrant women workers.

Literature Review

According to Nechama of *Africa Check* (2016), an organization which verifies statistics in the African context,

The 2011 census reported that more than 75% of foreign-born (international) migrants living in South Africa came from the African continent. African migrants from SADC [South African Development Community] countries contributed the vast majority of this, making up 68% of total international migrants.

In 2016, the South African state agency handling statistics reported that most migrants were from Zimbabwe—one of South Africa's neighbors. It has to be noted that it is difficult to have reliable statistics because undocumented migrants are very unlikely to participate in surveys when they fear victimization in the form of deportation. Undocumented migrants could be between 1 to 2 million people of which large portions are most likely to be Zimbabweans. In line with the focus of this research on migrant women workers in Johannesburg, migrants tend to go to Johannesburg as it is the economic epicenter of South Africa with possible jobs and economic opportunities for migrants. Nechama (2016) writes,

The population of foreign-born migrants in Gauteng is slightly higher than the population of foreign born migrants *in all other provinces combined*. The 2011 census calculated that 9.5% of the population in Gauteng was foreign born, while the 2016 survey puts this at a much lower 6%.

Zimbabwean migration to South Africa and to Gauteng and Johannesburg in particular seems to

be driven largely by the economic decline and the inability of its political leadership to deal with the economic crisis in a manner that advances social and economic justice. According to Kuljian (2011:166),

In 2008 unemployment in Zimbabwe went up over 90 per cent, and the country was hit with rampant inflation, food insecurity, political violence, a cholera epidemic, and a near collapse of the education and health systems. The crisis hit its peak in that year after failed elections. These conditions in Zimbabwe have forced nearly one quarter of the population into a diaspora, much of which has travelled to South Africa.

Crush, Chikanda, and Tawodzera (2015:363) make an important point regarding Zimbabwean migration to South Africa, and this has implications for conceptualizing women migrants not just as temporary residents of South Africa, but as part of the South African workforce that is here to stay: "Zimbabwean migrants no longer see South Africa as a place of temporary economic opportunity for survival, but rather as a place to stay and build a future for themselves and their families.

Historically migration tended to be dominated by males who left rural areas in search of jobs in towns and cities in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Over the past decades, migrant patterns have changed due to changes in the structures of the economy. Men were the face of migration, because industries in the form of mines and factories tended to attract men who became migrant workers. The decline of these industries has led to men becoming unemployed and going back to rural and other residential areas. According to Pophiwa (2014:1), "African women are

leaving their countries of birth to create new lives elsewhere. Economic opportunities are primarily available in childcare, domestic and sex work.”

Migration of women, and women from Zimbabwe in particular, has radically transformed gender roles, with women becoming breadwinners and heads of households. Pophiwa (2014:1) elaborates:

Economic pressures on the one hand, and demand factors, on the other, changed the migration opportunities of women and men, and in the process, also changed age-old norms about the spaces allowed to women and men. In Africa, for example, the traditional pattern of migration within and from the continent was “male-dominated, long distance and long term,” leaving women behind to assume family responsibilities and agricultural work. Shrinking job opportunities for men, however, has recently prompted increasing female migration both within and beyond national borders.

In confirming the increase of female migrants of Zimbabwean origins, McDuff (2015:3) argues, “However, in the last two decades, Zimbabwean women have been taking on a breadwinner role and leaving extended family and even their children behind as they travel outside of Zimbabwe in search of income sufficient for family survival, often staying away for long periods of time.”

To respond to declining industries and unemployment amongst males, women had to leave their homes and start occupying low-paying jobs such as domestic work, cleaning, waitressing, and the service sector. This process which also affected Zim-

babwean women is often regarded as the “feminization of work.” The second process is called the “feminization of migration” and entails women leaving their country of origin in search of jobs in places like Johannesburg, bringing gender dynamics into sharper focus as women tend to be subjected to sexual harassment and rape as they migrate to South Africa (Sibanda 2011; Batisai 2016). On the question of feminization of migration in the context of Zimbabwe, McDuff (2015:2) had this to say,

The increasing feminization of Zimbabwean migration is part of an overall increase in migration from Zimbabwe since 1990—primarily to destinations in South Africa and the UK, though Zimbabweans now live in countries throughout the world. There are currently three to four million Zimbabwean cross-border migrants, or about 25 percent of Zimbabwe’s total population of twelve million. Most Zimbabweans leaving the country in the last two decades have been forced to do so because of economic and political instability, and it is women who have experienced the most dramatic changes in patterns of migration.

With the increasing feminization of both work and migration among Zimbabwean migrant workers, there is a growing literature which focuses on the conditions of these women as precarious workers or as workers with no benefits, earning low wages, working under very poor working conditions, and having no job security in South Africa. They work as informal traders, sex workers, cleaners, domestic workers, waitresses, cashiers, and shop assistants, and as a result they contribute through their labor to the South Africa economy (Mutopo 2010; Smit and Rugunanan 2014; Hlatshwayo 2016; Batisai 2016).

While these jobs occupied by women from Zimbabwe are characterized by low wages, poor working conditions, and insecurity, they help sustain the women and their families back in Zimbabwe. Scholarship on Zimbabwean women working in South Africa has shown that women migrants leave Zimbabwe and undertake a risky journey to South Africa. Bolt (2016:1) elaborates,

Many new arrivals do indeed live a fugitive existence. The Limpopo River presents risks: from drowning or crocodile attacks when it is in flood, to abuse, assault, or rape by *magumaguma*—gangs that operate along the border—or by South African soldiers. Some arrivals on the farms lack basic resources for immediate survival, robbed of money, mobile phones, and even South African contact numbers. On the farms themselves, aggressive border policing leaves recruits vulnerable to deportation raids.

Leaving Zimbabwe in search of precarious work in South Africa exposes women to violence, and literature in this regard reveals the various coping mechanism adopted by them. Bribery, travelling in groups, and evading/running from soldiers and police are some of the strategies used by those who do not use legal and formal routes when coming to South Africa. On arrival in Johannesburg, these women rely on Zimbabwean networks of families and friends for accommodation and finding precarious employment (Hlatshwayo 2016).

Based on interviews, this paper discusses the reasons for the journey, the journey itself, and the significance of networks and the precarious conditions of work the women are subjected to in Johan-

nesburg. However, the article seeks also to identify issues from their testimonies that can form part of collective and organizational responses to their conditions. One of the weaknesses of the literature on Zimbabwean workers employed as precarious workers is that it does not move beyond stating the conditions under which they work (Smit and Rugunanan 2014; Batisai 2016). On the other hand, this paper summarizes the key elements defining the precarious nature of existence of the women, but also shows possibilities of finding organizational and collective solutions to some of the challenges faced by the women interviewed by using a documentary approach to list organizations that handle concerns raised by the interviewees.

The paper recognizes the significance of individual responses to conditions of precariousness, and, in fact, individual resilience lays the foundation for collective responses to common individual problems. It was a realization of the need to move beyond individual responses to conditions of migrants in France which led to the formation of the *Sans-Papiers* (people without papers) which continues to champion migrants in France. McNevin (2006:135) argues,

On 18 March 1996, 324 irregular migrants occupied a church in Paris, calling themselves the *Sans-Papiers* (literally “without papers”). Some of the *Sans-Papiers* were asylum seekers and some were long-term working residents of France whose status had been made irregular as a result of legislative changes. This initial action prompted collectives of *Sans-Papiers* to organize across the country and was followed by further church occupations, hunger strikes, demonstrations, and petitions.

Research Methodology

The research adopted two data collection methods, namely, in-depth interviews and documentary approaches. Thirty-five women who are migrant women from Zimbabwe working in Johannesburg were interviewed between December 2016 and January 2017. The women are single-parents, some living with their children in Johannesburg and many of them having left their children in Zimbabwe. All the women interviewed have matriculation as a qualification, and some even have a university entry qualification. The age of the women ranges from twenty to forty-five years.

According to Guion and colleagues (2001:1),

In-depth interviews are most appropriate for situations in which you want to ask open-ended questions that elicit depth of information from relatively few people (as opposed to surveys, which tend to be more quantitative and are conducted with larger numbers of people).

The basic aim of the research was to let Zimbabwean migrant women working in Johannesburg speak about their precarious conditions of existence which really began in Zimbabwe where economic opportunities were extremely scarce. The questions posed by the interviewer were open-ended, enabling the women to tell their stories freely and from their own perspective. For example, typical questions would be: Why did you decide to come to South Africa? How would you describe your working and living conditions? The narratives start with the journey from Zimbabwe to Johannesburg and end by re-

vealing that the women have never had organizational contact with trade unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or associations that seek to advance their rights and interests within South African borders.

Identity as a researcher matters as it can enhance or undermine the aims of a research project. Being a South African male may have made it uncomfortable for the women to speak about sexual violence and xenophobia. In the context where migrants have been victimized and even murdered by South Africans, women migrants from Zimbabwe may have not been keen on talking about discrimination based on their nationality to a South African, let alone to a male. I also did not want to intrude into very tight networks of Zimbabwean women. Williams and Heikes (1993) advise that gender dynamics can enhance or undermine the quality of an in-depth interview. Based on these concerns, I decided to hire a Zimbabwean migrant woman who has worked with me on a number of research projects on migrants and xenophobia. My research assistant was able to solicit high quality information which included the challenges posed by menstruation during a journey to South Africa, something which would never have been mentioned to a South African male interviewer! The women were able to speak openly about xenophobia and other forms of discrimination in the workplace. As part of good ethical behavior, interviewees were informed about my role; the fact that the research questions and project was managed by me. In addition, it was agreed that their names would not be used in the research report as that might expose them to victimization by their employers and the state authorities.

I therefore used pseudonyms to identify women in this research report.

The second aspect of data collection is linked to the first one in the sense that interviewees were asked if they belonged to any organization or collective that sought to change their conditions for the better. The interviewees were keen on knowing more about any organizations or collectives that could help ameliorate their precarious conditions of existence and work. Documentary research using the Internet to identify trade unions, advice offices, and organizations of immigrants that dealt with issues and concerns raised by migrants was conducted (see: McCulloch 2004 on documentary research). However, this part of the paper is not just about listing organizations, but it also mentions the experiences of these organizations in interacting with some migrant workers.

A thematic approach as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze data from the in-depth interviews and documents. The first step was to familiarize myself with the data by reading documents and transcripts of interviews several times, enabling me to identify emerging key issues and patterns—the reasons for leaving Zimbabwe, for example.

The second step is articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006:18), “Phase 2 begins when you have read and familiarized yourself with the data, and have generated an initial list of ideas about what is in the data and what is interesting about them. This phase then involves the production of initial codes from the data.” Identifying codes here was about looking

for words and phrases that had a direct relationship with the aims of the study. For example, the intention was to understand the conditions of Zimbabwean women who emigrated to Johannesburg in search of work, codes like “I came to Johannesburg, because I needed a job” and “my wages [are] very low.” As part of the next step, these codes were then grouped into themes which informed the writing of the paper. For example, codes were grouped into themes like “reasons for leaving Zimbabwe” and “conditions of work.” The last step entailed reviewing and fine-tuning themes. To illustrate, initially wages and working conditions were two separate themes, but as I was going through the themes, I realized that the two were directly connected: workers talking about long hours of work would also link that to the low wages they were earning.

Findings and Discussion

Looking for Work in Johannesburg

Zanele Mhlongo is a 33-year-old woman who lives in a working-class area called Cosmo City in Johannesburg and works in a fast food shop called “Chesa Nyama” (a barbeque fast food shop). She went to school until matriculation and has three children who are based in Zimbabwe. When asked why she left Zimbabwe, Mhlongo responded, “I arrived in South Africa in 2014. Jobs are scarce in Zimbabwe...I came to Johannesburg because I have relatives in the area” (Mhlongo, interview, 6 December 2016, Johannesburg).

Pretty Ndovu, a 22-year-old woman who works as a domestic worker in Johannesburg, relayed her

reasons for coming to Johannesburg, “What made me come to South Africa is because jobs are scarce back at home. The father of my child and I are estranged and I’m looking after the child’s needs by myself hence I had to get a job” (Ndovu, interview, 22 January 2017, Johannesburg). Like Mhlongo, Ndovu came to Johannesburg because she had to look for a job to support her children.

Yolanda Quphe is a 31-year-old woman who has worked in restaurants and lives in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. She came to South Africa when she was 19 years old, meaning that she has been in Johannesburg for more than ten years. She completed her post-matriculation qualification in Zimbabwe, making it possible for her to be admitted to any university. She came to South Africa because her mother was already based in Johannesburg. Quphe said, “My mother was already in South Africa. So, I wanted to be with my mother. I wanted to build my life and start working here” (Quphe, interview, 14 December 2016, Johannesburg). The testimony of Quphe confirms some migrants from Zimbabwe are second-generation migrants who came to South Africa with the intention of settling down, proving that migrants should be conceptualized as workers within South Africa borders rather than as visitors who are likely to go back to Zimbabwe in the near future.

The findings are in line with Lehlere’s argument (2008) that Zimbabwean and other African migrants come to South Africa in search of jobs, and that largely has to do with South Africa being a dominant economy in the southern African region. As wealth and economic activities are concentrated

in major cities like Johannesburg, people are more likely to gravitate here in search of jobs. The collapse of the Zimbabwean economy which began in the 1990s, accompanied by austerity measures and the decline of industries in Zimbabwe, compelled Zimbabwean women to move to South Africa. In line with the feminizations of work and migration, these women look for jobs so that they can have an income which can support their children and families in Zimbabwe, proving that the women interviewed have become breadwinners or even heads of households.

A Difficult Journey

In general, migration from Zimbabwe is not easy because most migrants use “illegal” means to access South Africa, and the journey is riddled with many difficulties. Some of the challenges include going through border fencing, navigating terrain dominated by thugs, crossing the crocodile infested river, and escaping the South African border authorities, police, and soldiers. All these risks are extremely high for women, as they contend with a patriarchal mindset which expresses itself in rape and sexual harassment. As it will be revealed in a testimony mentioned in this research paper, the long journey also has health implications such as challenges of dealing with menstruation.

Quphe’s journey to Johannesburg was difficult. She narrated her story about the journey by saying,

It was hard for me to come because at that time I didn’t have a passport. I didn’t have anything...I didn’t even have a birth certificate because my mother and my fa-

ther had differences. So it was difficult for me. I came to Johannesburg with *abomalayitsha* [smugglers]...It was difficult because it took us three days [to travel to Johannesburg]. We had to run away; we were running away from soldiers; we had to sleep in the bush, but I'm grateful that I arrived safely, and nothing happened to me. I was not harmed. [Quphe, interview, 14 December 2016, Johannesburg]

The feminization of migration has created new gender roles for men and women. Women have become the center and the core of migration, with men playing a supportive and a facilitating role. In the case narrated by Quphe, men as transporters of women are involved in what the cross-border authorities regard as "illegal" activities of smuggling women into South Africa (Dastile 2013). In the context of feminization of labor and migrant work—a trend characterized by employment of women as precarious workers—it can be argued that men are accepting and operating within this new reality of feminization of work and migration. In other words, men are coming to terms with the fact that they are no longer the epicenter of migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa.

Pretty Mayo, a 26-year-old woman who worked as a shop assistant in Johannesburg, had this to say about challenges facing women when travelling from Zimbabwe to South Africa:

There was no food. There were five males and six females. Having males in our group must have helped us. Crossing the Limpopo River was not easy. Besides the water, the river has crocodiles. Traveling through bushes for women is tough. Another difficulty, especially for women, is menstruation. You have no space

for washing yourself and there is no privacy for women. Some women get raped. [Mayo, interview, 11 December 2016]

Mayo's testimony raises some crucial issues related to the role played by men in the context of migration by women: men's new roles include that of being "helpers" in the migration process of women. Men in the group provided women with security against possible robbery by thugs and sexual attacks by police and those involved in criminal activities along the way. In the past, women would stay behind at home, looking after families whilst men travel to Johannesburg to look for work. However, under the current conditions women, are migrating to Johannesburg to look for work and are receiving protection from men also going to Johannesburg in search of jobs or who are smugglers.

Dealing with menstruation is, according to Mayo's narrative, seldom mentioned when discussing problems faced by women when migrating to South Africa. Lack of washing facilities and privacy would undermine the dignity of migrant women, and this issue can only be dealt with by an approach that promotes the broader rights of migrant women. Traveling to South Africa is scary for women and can be very traumatic. The long-term effects of these experiences will need to be investigated. Thandi Maqubela, a 35-year-old who came to Johannesburg in 2007 and works as a domestic worker, said,

My journey was not easy because at the time getting a passport was difficult. As a result of that I did not travel on a passport at the time. I only got my passport in 2010 which I applied for from here [South Af-

rica]...I was assisted by smugglers...It was a very long journey. I don't even want to get into it. It was a long walk in the bush. It wasn't easy, but we made it in the end. I did not come across anything particularly bad. Being a woman and walking in bush traumatized me, but I was not hurt. [Maqubela, interview, 17 January 2017, Johannesburg]

Bribing authorities is another tactic used by migrants to get to South Africa. Sibongi Xulu, who is in her 40s and works as a cook and a waitress in a restaurant in Johannesburg, recalled:

I did not use an official route to get to South Africa. It was not easy for me to get a passport in Zimbabwe. It took me about three weeks to get to South Africa. I came to South Africa to look for my freedom and a job, because there are no jobs in Zimbabwe. I had to work for my two children in Zimbabwe. I had to bribe the police in South Africa and [that] is how I came to Johannesburg. I was also helped by smugglers who also did negotiations on my behalf. [Xulu, interview, 28 January 2018, Johannesburg]

Some journeys were relatively pleasant. Mhlongo's journey to Johannesburg to look for work seems to have been without incident. Mhlongo elaborates: "It was a nice journey because I traveled on a passport. There is nothing bad I could have encountered. I traveled smoothly" (Mhlongo, interview, 6 December 2016, Johannesburg).

The findings are consistent with the research conducted by Lefko-Everett (2010) which, among other things, mentions the use of smugglers to get to South Africa, encounters with thugs, use of bribes

at the border posts to get into South Africa, and the long journey which may take up to a week. However, Lefko-Everett (2010) did not mention health issues among the key challenges facing women during the journey, which is one of the discoveries of this research.

The Significance of Networks

As part of challenging the notion of Zimbabwean women as "naive" victims with no social agency, Kihato (2007) mentions that women rely on various forms of network to travel from Zimbabwe to South Africa (and Johannesburg in particular). Networks include fellow Zimbabweans who are also traveling to South Africa, relatives who have already established themselves in South Africa, and churches.

Mhlongo's relatives, especially her sister, served as part of her crucial network by providing her with accommodation in Johannesburg. Mhlongo said,

I have a sister here in Johannesburg. She is one who accommodated me on arrival in Johannesburg...I had people who could give me food. I could get everything I needed because I stayed with family. [Mhlongo, interview, 6 December 2016, Johannesburg]

For Zimbabwean migrant female workers, networks are a crucial tool for navigating the terrain from Zimbabwe to Johannesburg. Mhlongo indicated that she lives in a working-class area with Zimbabweans only, and this gives her a sense of security and helps build bonds of solidarity and mutual assistance as they all understand the predicaments of being a migrant in South Africa. Mhlongo explained,

Living in the same house as Zimbabweans is very helpful as we understand each other's problem and we are able to chip in to assist a fellow Zimbabwean. It's like we are a family—even when I need...something I could easily ask others to help me. For example, if I do not have money for transport, I can easily ask from others around...For me, it felt like I was still at home because even when I went out in the streets, I was always with people I knew, people from home, so I never had any problems in the streets. [Mhlongo, interview, 6 December 2016, Johannesburg]

The church's role goes beyond being a place of worship and prayer. It acts as a site of networks for solidarity and support. Some migrants find jobs via networks in the church. Problems at work are also discussed at church and workers get advice and counseling from fellow church members.

Ndovu spoke about the role of the church, "We give one another advice about challenges we face at work. Others hear about work opportunities from other church members" (Ndovu, interview, 22 January 2017, Johannesburg).

Documentation

Quphe spoke about how being young helped her to avoid being harassed by the police as she had no proper documentation legally allowing her to be in Johannesburg. Quphe relayed, "At that time I was young. Yes. There were problems because the police were arresting people [undocumented migrants], but at that age that time I was unlikely to be stopped because the police mistook me for a student" (Quphe, interview, 14 December 2016, Johannesburg).

Documentation was one of the sources of anxiety among women migrants interviewed. Mhlongo elaborated, "I do not have proper papers. I normally use my passport, but I do not have a [work] permit. This means I cannot move and find another job because I do not have proper documentation. I have not had time to go and sort out my documentation, because I am scared to ask my employer to grant me time off to solve this problem" (Mhlongo, interview, 6 December 2016, Johannesburg).

In 2010, about 200,000 Zimbabweans applied and received a special dispensation permit visa enabling them to work and stay in South Africa for six years. These visas are called "Zimbabwe exemption permits." Only those who received visas in 2010 were eligible to receive new visas in 2017. This dispensation only covered those with valid Zimbabwean passports, letters confirming employment were sometimes needed, proof of having a business in those cases where one was applying for business rights, and an admission letter for those who wanted to study in South Africa. The new visa cost R1,090 (US\$90,80). Visas issued in 2018 would expire in 2021 (Child 2017). While the special dispensation has helped to ameliorate the pressure on 200,000 Zimbabweans who are covered by it, the overwhelming majority of Zimbabweans who are not part of the process remain excluded for the foreseeable future. This includes those who were unable to take time off to renew their permits, those who do not have passports, and those who could not afford to pay processing fees. Those who are not part of the system are most likely to be harassed by the police, and some face real threats of deportation.

Rape and Impunity

Sexual harassment and rape accompany challenges of documentation. Xulu recounted her ordeal:

It was on the 14th December 2016. Police who are based at Jeppe Police Station arrested me. We filled up a van and we were taken to Jeppe Police Station [in Johannesburg]. When we got to the station, the police would ask the girls to go to a room one at a time. I thought maybe they were soliciting...bribes. When my turn came, I was shocked by being called into the toilet. He said he wanted to help me urinate. I thought maybe he wanted me to urinate in the toilet as in the true sense of the word. It only occurred to me later that he wanted to rape me. I refused and said if it was money that he wanted, then I would contact people to bring it to him. He told me that I was crazy. What he wanted was to sleep with me there and then. He told me he wanted me to bend and hold on to the toilet seat. I completely refused and he got mad and wasted no time in taking a copy of my fingerprints down and entering my name in a thick book of people to be deported. I was the only one arrested and taken to the cells. The rest of the girls were let go. I was the only one who stayed behind. I presume they may have been raped.

Rape does not only occur during the journey from Zimbabwe to South Africa but right inside a police station—a place that is supposed to be a safe space. Xulu was deported because she refused to be violated, but she returned again to Johannesburg. The rape incident as reported by Xulu raises many questions about the position and conditions of women. Some of the risks involve HIV infections amongst

women raped by the police, as they are not able to negotiate sex and condom use.

This confirms some of the concerns raised by Munyewende (2008) who also discovered that migrant women are exposed to risks such as rape which leads to increased risks of contracting HIV. In 2008, the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA), an NGO advocating for the rights of migrants living in South Africa, also argued that the police who are supposed to defend and advance the rights of all who are living in South Africa, regardless of their nationality as per the country's constitution and the bill of rights, were part of those who violated the most basic rights of migrant women. Zimbabwean women were not only raped by gangs who smuggle them into South Africa but also by the police who are supposed to protect them. The case narrated by Xulu and CoRMSA show that extortion of bribes and rape could be a widespread behavior and the police act with impunity.

Working Conditions and Wages

The lowering of labor standards or what others call the “race to the bottom” does not only affect migrant workers and women migrants from Zimbabwe. South African workers who belong to trade unions have often complained about the weaknesses of the unions and their inability to defend and advance their rights as workers. Workers who are regarded as South African citizens are also victims of poor working conditions and low wages. However, the situation is worse for migrant workers, especially women, as they are likely to be deported or further

victimized as soon as they start demanding better working conditions and wage increases. In some instances, they do join strikes and participate in collective action, but management tends to use their not having documents as a threat to deport them (Hlatshwayo 2016).

Given a generalized lack of active unionization, migrant workers tend not to benefit from legal protection provided for in South Africa by laws governing industrial relations. Mhlongo spoke about her ordeal and said, "Yes I work at a Chesa Nyama [a barbeque fast food restaurant]. I start work at 8 in the morning and knock off at 9pm. There is transport. We use taxis" (Mhlongo, interview, 6 December 2016, Johannesburg).

Mhlongo mentioned further workplace challenges:

We work long hours and we don't have time to rest. We don't even have time to eat. We only take turns when it comes to time to eat. As soon as you are finished, you get back to work and another person sits down to eat, that's how it goes. [Mhlongo, interview, 6 December 2016, Johannesburg]

According to her testimony, Mhlongo's leaving work at night poses serious risks for her as South Africa and Johannesburg have very high incidents of violence against women, and rape in particular (Phipps et al. 2018). Working for more than 12 hours per day is also a violation of South African laws and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997 which stipulates that ordinarily a worker may work for nine hours a day if he/she works for five days in a week; or 8 hours a day if he/she works more than

five days a week (Department of Labour 1997 [section 9 b and c]).

Maqubela commented, "I worked as a domestic worker. There were no off days. I only had one Sunday per fortnight off" (Maqubela, interview, 17 January 2017, Johannesburg). Quphe also testified that she worked for very long hours, posing safety challenges, especially for women workers. When asked if she had ever discussed long working hours with her employer, Mhlongo replied, "No, we have never discussed it because that's what the employer wants us to do. At times one is scared to talk about such things, because the employer would feel that you are being smart" (Mhlongo, interview, 6 December 2016, Johannesburg).

Fear of confronting employers about poor working conditions and long hours of work is common among migrants, especially among those with no documentation like Mhlongo. Employers tend to blackmail migrant workers as soon as they start challenging their authority. For example, migrants are told that if they continue demanding their rights, police and state authorities are going to be called to arrest and deport them back to Zimbabwe. This tactic is used by employers to silence migrant workers in the workplace (Hlatshwayo 2016).

Long work shifts do not automatically translate into higher wages. In fact, all women migrants interviewed for these studies earn low wages and work long hours. Tee Maye is a 30-year-old woman who arrived in South Africa in 2014 with a matric certificate obtained in Zimbabwe. Among many other precarious jobs she had in Johannesburg, she worked

as shop assistant in one of the clothing shops owned by an Ethiopian migrant. Maye is a single parent whose child is being looked after by her mother in Zimbabwe. Long working hours and very low wages were Maye's major concerns. She elaborated,

I worked in a shop owned by an Ethiopian guy. It was tough. I was earning R200 per week and my rent was R600 per month. This meant I was only left with R200. I would start working at 7 in the morning and finish at 6 or 7 at night. There were no lunch or tea breaks. I packed clothes and served customers. [Maye, interview, 5 December 2016, Johannesburg]

In responding to the recently proposed labor law amendments in South Africa, the Casual Workers Advice Office [CWAO]—an NGO which supports precarious workers within South African borders—argues that the South Africa labor market is characterized by low wages and this is despite the fact that, as shown in the above-stated testimonies by Zimbabwean workers, employees work hard and for long hours. CWAO further contends that the proposed minimum wage of R20 (US\$ 1,6) per hour assumes that workers will work for 40 hours per week, but the reality is that many precarious workers work far fewer hours per week. Workers will not earn the very low R3,500 (US\$291,7) per month initially proposed, said CWAO.

South Africa is regarded as one of the most unequal societies in the world. One of the indicators of inequality is the wage gap between lowest paid workers and executive directors of companies. According to Labour Research Service, an NGO which supports trade unions, it would have taken 40 years for an av-

erage worker to earn what an average executive director of a big company in South Africa earned in a year. That was in the 1990s during the dawn of the country's democracy. In 2013, some twenty years later, it would take close to 100 years for such a worker to earn what an executive director earns in a year. The study also revealed that profits of top companies declined by an average of 55% between 2012 and 2013, but the average executive director's pay increased by 14%. Many of the Zimbabwean workers, and women in particular, are employed as precarious workers by some of these big companies in the retail, wholesale, and hospitality sectors (Dasnois 2014).

Makoro (2016) conducted a study on undocumented domestic workers, and discovered that they worked long hours and earned low wages. They could not approach the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation, and Arbitration (CCMA) and the Department of Labour—the two state bodies that are supposed to help resolve labor relations disputes—because they were considered to be “illegal migrants,” which would lead to their being deported. As part of the proposed labor law changes, government and representatives of labor are proposing a R20 (US\$1,6) minimum wage and the scrapping of sectoral determination which sought to protect vulnerable and less organized workers employed as domestic workers, security guards, cleaners, and other workers.

According to CWAO, the minimum wage with no stipulated minimum monthly income may result in employers reducing hours of work to continue paying low wages. For example, workers may be asked to work for 20 hours per week and the income would be lower. The problem would be further compounded

by that fact that the Department of Labour has generally not been able to enforce the existing rights as per sectoral determinations which protect domestic workers, for instance. The impunity among employers is implicitly promoted by the fact that there is an acute shortage of labor inspectors who are supposed to make sure that employers adhere to stipulations of labor law and sectoral determination.

Indebtedness

Maqubela also spoke about indebtedness amongst women migrants from Zimbabwe, caused by the low pay they receive and the ever-increasing cost of living. Maqubela relayed,

There was transport, but because we earned so little, we had to borrow from people to pay for transport to work. At the end of the month one took all their pay to service the debt leaving us with only enough for rent forcing us to borrow again. All that one worked for basically was to service the transport debt. [Maqubela, interview, 17 January 2017, Johannesburg]

Writing about indebtedness among Dalit migrant workers in the south of India, Picherit (2018) argues that debt bondage to unscrupulous moneylenders (who also use various forms of violence to intimidate migrants to pay back loans) saps the very will to carry on. The indebtedness and low wages earned by migrants enable them to barely survive, and this reduces the purpose of work to survival and servicing of debts with very limited prospects of living a decent life.

The indebtedness, the need to continuously borrow money from “loan sharks,” informal lenders who

charge astronomically high interest, and the forever rising cost of living in Johannesburg undermine the primary mission of these women, and that is to support their families in Zimbabwe. Ndovu was asked if she sends remittances to Zimbabwe regularly. She reluctantly replied,

Yes. People do send money to Zimbabwe to support families and their children. Yes. I also send money home...I only send when I have something to spare. I send to my aunt because she is the only one left, since my child is here now. Yes. Whatever I can spare just to help her out. [Ndovu, interview, 22 January 2017, Johannesburg]

It also appears as if living with a child or children in Johannesburg is one of the tactics adopted by some migrant women interviewed as it enables them to share whatever food and money they have with their children.

Discrimination in the Workplace

Literature confirming the prevalence of xenophobia and its impact on migrants within South Africa is extensive and it tends to focus on xenophobia in places of residence where migrants from other African countries interact with South Africans on a daily basis (Harris 2002; Hassim et al. 2008; Amisi et al. 2011; Moyo, Nshimbi, and Gumbo 2018). Xenophobia in the workplace has not been explored extensively and that may be explained by the fact that labor scholars rarely examine the conditions of migrant workers from other African countries (Hlatshwayo 2016). Many migrants, especially those from Zimbabwe, have a job in the context of generalized

unemployment. This can be a source of xenophobic sentiments as expressed by some (usually unemployed) South African workers towards migrants.

Rudy Sibandi arrived in Johannesburg in 2011, a 26-year-old with school matriculation as a qualification. Sibandi worked as a general worker cleaning and packaging vegetables for one of the biggest supermarket chain stores in South Africa. She talked about how some South Africans view them as Zimbabwean migrants. Sibandi said,

Ya [Yes]. In Krugersdorp [a town near Johannesburg] there were those Tswanas [a group of people who speak an African language called Tswana] who used call us names like *Matebele* [a derogatory name referring to people from Zimbabwe who speak an African language called Nbebele]. Blah. Blah. They would say we are stealing their jobs. [Sibandi, interview, 4 January 2017, Johannesburg]

Discrimination is one of the problems faced by many migrants in the workplace. However, in Mhlongo's case, the fact that most employees are Zimbabweans provides some comfort in as far as discrimination and xenophobia in the workplace are concerned. Mhlongo explained, "Where I work, we are all Zimbabweans, so we are all the same" (Mhlongo, interview, 6 December 2016, Johannesburg). There is no singling out of individuals for harassment.

Trade Unions and Other Avenues for Dealing with Workers' Problems

All workers that were interviewed for this research were not aware of the fact that they could approach

the Department of Labour, trade unions, NGOs, human rights organizations of migrants from Zimbabwe, and other human rights formations working in South Africa. The workers can see that they have been unfairly treated by their employers as they work very long hours, have no overtime pay, earn low wages, and are often treated badly by their employers, and, in many cases, are dismissed fraudulently.

When asked if she was part of a union, Maqubela said, "I knew nothing about them [the unions]. I left the job after being accused of stealing the flower pot. They took advantage of the fact that I did not know my rights as a worker. I was in the job for a year. I left with no benefits" (Maqubela, interview, 17 January 2017, Johannesburg).

Senzani Ngcube, a 29-year-old, is married and has a two-year-old daughter. She came to Johannesburg in 2000 and started working as a telemarketing consultant with a post-matriculation qualification. When asked about channels that migrants from Zimbabwe can use to deal with their problems in the workplace, Ngcube responded,

Foreigners do want to approach the CCMA and the Department of Labour, but the problem is that most of them have no documentation and are considered as being "illegal." Approaching these institutions may lead to them being deported. I am also not aware of human rights organizations that can help migrants. [Ngcube, interview, 1 December 2016, Johannesburg]

Further confirming lack of unionization among migrant workers and workers in general, Quphe said,

“My workplace has no unions. We do discuss our problems, but we have no understanding of how to deal with all these issues” (Quphe, interview, 14 December 2016, Johannesburg). Almost all workers interviewed realized the limitations of individual responses like job-hopping, ignoring their problems in the workplace, and just carrying on with work as usual. The need to collectively approach government, trade unions, or human rights organizations to help them deal with their problems as female migrant workers had also become apparent to them.

The low level of organization among workers in general and migrant workers in particular has led to declining labor standards. In other words, the weaknesses of the South African trade unions also mean that even South African workers are unable to defend and advance their rights and interests. The situation is worse for migrant workers and female migrant workers who have no citizenship and continually face threats of deportation. Tackling xenophobia among South African workers and using concrete struggles like wages and working conditions can help build solidarity between South African workers and migrant workers from other African countries (Lehulere 2008).

The findings in this regard confirm concerns raised by the Migrant Workers Association of South Africa (MWASA), an organization of migrant workers in South Africa, who in a seminar organized by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the biggest trade union federation in South Africa, argued that migrant workers were not joining unions largely because they were scared. The perception is that unions only protect South Afri-

can workers. This does not mean that they do not want to be part of trade unions or other organizations that can defend their rights as workers. Xenophobia and other problems like opening bank accounts were noted as issues that needed resolution by the state, unions, and civil society. MWASA also noted that many migrant workers do not want to participate in amnesty processing which seeks to document them because they fear that if their applications are rejected, they may face deportation. MWASA argued that some unions have been trying to help migrant women workers from Zimbabwe. For example, the South African Commercial, Catering, and Allied Workers’ Union (SACCAWU), which organizes workers in the retail, catering, hospitality, and commercial sectors, tried to help with documentation, but it did not have skilled personnel to handle complicated legal processes. The Food and Allied Workers’ Union (FAWU), a food union, has a specific campaign which seeks to organize Zimbabwean and Mozambican migrant workers employed as farm workers in the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces (Ncube 2014).

According to Hlatshwayo (2016), South African trade unions have tended to adopt national chauvinism or a stance which views migrant workers from other countries as a source of a low wage labor regime in South Africa as opposed to seeing migrant workers as victims of oppression that have to be organized to build solidarity within South African borders. Pedrina (2015) advises that innovative approaches to organizing migrants adopted by UNIA, the biggest union in Switzerland, may have to be explored by other unions in the context of increased migration. UNIA has pre-migration programs and

links with other unions in Poland. The union also employs Polish organizers who are based in Switzerland, breaking the language barrier between the union and migrant workers. Fliers and other forms of communication for migrant workers are in Polish, making it possible for migrant workers to understand their rights and channels for accessing their workers' rights. This strategy has helped the union to adjust to the changing nature of the labor market and has caused the union to grow and be relevant to all workers within Swiss borders regardless of their nationality (Pedrina 2015).

One of the obstacles that stands on the way of trade union federations like COSATU, its organizers, and staff members is that despite legal cases showing that the labor laws trump migration laws, people continue to believe that organizing undocumented migrants amounts to breaking the laws of South Africa. A bigger challenge is that unlike UNIA, which views migrants as part of the oppressed and workers requiring organizing, in general COSATU and its unions still view migrant workers from other African countries as people who are stealing the jobs of South Africans (Lehulere 2008; Fine 2014; Hlatshwayo 2016). Perhaps a much more fundamental limitation in the union's failure to organize migrants has to do with the fact that there is no understanding and appreciation among the leaders of trade unions and shop stewards that migrant work and migrant workers from other African countries have become one of the permanent features of the South African economy. In other words, migrant workers from other African countries are part of the South African workforce, and this is not going to change in the foreseeable future. Like the United States of

America in the Americas, South Africa is an economic center which attracts migrant workers from neighboring countries. Despite some recent political changes in Zimbabwe, migrants from Zimbabwe have established themselves in South Africa, in some cases together with their children, as shown in this research (Crush et al. 2015; Hlatshwayo 2016).

According to Fine (2014), a 2012 survey of COSATU showed that advocating for the rights of migrants was only done by the federation's international department; the union did not have specific strategies and plans for organizing migrant workers. There were some isolated cases involving the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) which has always had a history of organizing migrant workers largely because mining and construction tend to have high proportions of migrant workers from other African countries.

In 2013, COSATU and its partners established a Vulnerable Workers Task Team which seeks to organize precarious workers, including migrant workers from other countries. The task team meets monthly and has trade union representatives from economic sectors such as contract cleaning, paper printing and woodworking, catering, and domestic work (Fine 2014). The South African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU), which organizes domestic workers including those from other African countries, and MWASA, an organization referred to earlier that supports migrant workers, are also part of the task team (COSATU 2016).

It is too early to assess the impact of the task team as organizational initiatives require time and space.

However, one of the criticisms leveled against the task team is that it has not developed a specific strategy for organizing migrant workers and women migrants in particular (Fine 2014). It has to be noted that SADSAWU has adopted a strategy which seeks to invite all domestic workers, regardless of their country of origin, to join the union. As part of a global campaign to recruit migrant workers, the union's stated intentions include designing a plan for recruiting migrant workers from other African countries like Zimbabwe and educating workers about the conditions in South Africa before they leave countries like Zimbabwe.

Migrant workers from other African countries have formed their own small organizations to challenge the violations of workers' rights of migrants. The Migrant Workers' Union of South Africa (MWUSA), for example, works closely with local trade unions like FAWU and the Solidarity Center, an organization seeking to build solidarity in South Africa, to advance the rights of workers, leading to some legal gains and the advancement of the rights of farm workers. In many cases, these workers work for long hours and earn wages that are way below what is legally stipulated by the sectoral determination of government. These types of collaborations led by organizations of migrant workers are succeeding because they are founded on principles of defending the rights of the most vulnerable sections of workers—namely, migrant workers and women migrant workers in particular (Connel 2016).

Founded in 2011, the Casual Workers' Advice Office (CWAO) advises and supports precarious workers and migrant workers from other African countries

mainly in the Gauteng province. The advice office's work is underpinned by an understanding that precarious work has high proportions of women earning low wages and working long hours. The CWAO also employs women organizers, who are most likely to have a deeper understanding of challenges facing women workers. To advance the rights of precarious workers, the CWAO works with other advice offices and human rights organizations like Lawyers for Human Rights. In addition, the advice office uses avenues like the CCMA and the Department of Labour to help vulnerable workers access their rights (CWAO 2017).

In 2013, the CWAO organized precarious workers and migrant workers who were working for a supermarket which was part of a national chain store. About 30 migrant workers in that store, located in the eastern part of Johannesburg, were not getting payslips; there were no deductions for the unemployment insurance fund, and workers were not getting benefits like sick leave and annual leave as stipulated by the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA). Initially, there was very strong solidarity between migrant and South African workers. In fact, migrant workers gained confidence and saw themselves as workers rather than as workers from Zimbabwe or other African countries. But, as soon as there was a suggestion that the Department of Labour could be approached to deal with the dispute, workers from Zimbabwe and Mozambique stopped participating in the strike. In assessing the situation, workers were convinced that being identified as undocumented migrant workers by the Department of Labour posed a serious threat of deportation to them. One of the lessons from the strike is that documentation remains

a critical issue that has to be resolved by collectives of migrant workers, NGOs, trade unions, and the South Africa state (Hlatshwayo 2016).

Conclusion

Thomas-Brown and Campos (2016:115) argue, "Globalization has rendered geo-political borders fluid and penetrable. International migration for the purposes of economic opportunity and talent transfer is not new and has been cited as a major propellant for global expansionism ranging from imperialism to neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism." Consistent with the work of the abovementioned authors who examined the conditions of Filipino workers who are economic migrants in the United States of America, this research paper zoomed in on the working lives of women migrants from Zimbabwe who also migrated for economic reasons.

Based largely on in-depth interviews, and, to some extent, documentary evidence, the paper highlighted the trials and tribulations of Zimbabwean migrant workers who came to South Africa to work under precarious conditions. From their departure up to finding employment as precarious workers in Johannesburg, the lives of these women are characterized by various forms of harassment, poor working conditions, low wages, and xenophobic assaults meted out by some South Africans and the police. Traveling from Zimbabwe to South Africa is extremely dangerous for undocumented migrants, but for women it is worse as they face sexual harassment, rape, and various forms of physical attacks that women generally face. Menstruation and not having access to water and washing facilities make women bear a bigger

brunt in as far as migration is concerned. On the other hand, the women interviewed showed some resilience in the sense that they used various networks to help them travel from Zimbabwe and survive in Johannesburg. Getting a job is usually accompanied by further difficulties such as low wages and poor working conditions. When asked whether they have been able to solve their problems institutionally or organizationally, it was found that the women did not belong to trade unions or formal organizations of migrant workers. It was also discovered that the women migrant workers *do* want to be part of organizational or collective responses to their issues and challenges. Based on documentary sources, this research discovered a number of human rights organizations and organizations of migrants that seek to support migrants and migrant workers. The biggest challenge is that the reach of the human rights organizations is very small, and that is partly shown by the fact that all the workers that were interviewed for the study were not aware of the various organizational initiatives. Perhaps another research project can examine strategies and tactics that could be employed to increase linkages between Zimbabwean migrant women workers and other migrants living within the South African borders.

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