

Chapter Eleven

The Voices of Migrant Zimbabwean Women in South Africa

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In 2005, the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) conducted a qualitative research project with women migrants living temporarily or permanently in South Africa (the Migrant Voices Project or MVP). Through in-depth interviews and focus groups with women migrants, MVP gathered data on various issues including migration decision-making, travel preparations, experiences while migrating, household and livelihood change, experiences of living in a foreign country, and treatment from families and communities when returning home to countries of origin. Interviews and focus groups also explored participants' perceptions of the importance of migration for women in Southern Africa, gender-specific challenges, awareness of laws and policy, and recommendations for change.

In total, 54 women migrants in the Johannesburg area participated in in-depth interviews. More than half of the women were Zimbabwean. Similarly, Zimbabwean women constituted a majority of participants in the six focus groups held in Johannesburg and Makhado, located close to the border between Zimbabwe and Limpopo Province. The in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted through MVP uncovered the stories and experiences of a group of migrant women who are far from passive victims of broader social and economic forces. Most of the Zimbabwean women participating in the study made the difficult decision to leave home in response to poverty, unemployment,

inflation, and food insecurity. A deeply gendered dimension of the relationship between poverty and migration emerged, in which women were caregivers, households heads, and main breadwinners for their families. Women's migration decisions were, therefore, often tinged by a profound sense of both obligation and urgency. This raises questions about gendered productive roles within families in the SADC region, and specifically within migrant-sending households. This chapter presents the results of the MVP and attempts to convey something of the lived experience of female migrants. The identity of the migrants is not revealed.

DECIDING TO MIGRATE

Poverty, unemployment and economic hardship are the main migration "push factors" or female Zimbabwean migrants. They describe how bad the situation has become in Zimbabwe and cite factors such as a lack of jobs, inflation, devalued currency and the high cost of living as the main reasons behind the decision to migrate:

You know, in Zimbabwe, things are very tough there due to our poor economy...in our country we've got lack of employment, that is what I can say, in Zimbabwe there are few jobs rather than in South Africa (Interview 25).

Life at Zimbabwe is poor and jobs are scarce, and once you get that job money is scarce too. Even if you got that money, you will buy nothing with that money. So when I moved from there to South Africa, money here has value (Interview 45).

In Zimbabwe it's difficult, that's the poorest country in the whole world. It's difficult living in Zimbabwe because you can't get a job nor even sell something, but you just sit there and starve to death If life was fine we would not be here (Focus Group 3 Participant).

The situation in Zimbabwe is very bad – there are no jobs, no food, no fuel and everything like that (Interview 34).

I was just there, life is hard, things have changed... Home sweet home is always the best way, but lack of basic things – that is the main problem in Zimbabwe (Interview 19).

It was starting to be bad. There was a shortage of maize meal, sugar, and there was no rain...There is nothing you can buy in Zimbabwe, since the situation is bad (Interview 29).

Many said they were optimistic about what they would find in South Africa after migrating:

Of course they said in South Africa it is better and the food is cheap and it is easy to find food (Interview 29).

I wanted to go and look for money. I first of all saw people from South Africa – they were having a lot of money and they were eating nice food, and clothes, and everything was looking so nice, that is why I decided to come to this country (Interview 34).

Most migrant women also expected that they would be able to find work, or opportunities for business or trade in South Africa. One Zimbabwean woman had heard from other migrants in South Africa that, “you can find a job, work for yourself, manage to bring up your family, you can do everything that you want” (Interview 26).

Migration was therefore viewed as a strategy for women to “stand up and do things for themselves”:

Yes, [it is important for women to migrate] because they are the ones who are responsible at home. They are the ones who support the family. [Men] do, but women are the ones that work harder (Interview 24).

A woman has more brains than man. A man can just leave his wife home and come this side and sit and just forget. Maybe you will be sitting at home and the next thing your husband has another wife in Johannesburg, but a woman will come to Johannesburg and still think of going back home to her children...A man can stay here for ten years without returning home. We just wait for him, what will we do? He would say, “Can’t you hear when I say where I work there are no phones?” And when you are just a woman and maybe you are in the rural area there is nothing like phones. He will tell you that you don’t have to write him a letter ‘cause once you do that he’ll be arrested. So you just stay at home and wait. Women are the ones who take care of their families most of the time. Because women know

that my family has to bathe, eat and get some clothing, but men don't care for a family. It is important for women to stand and do things for themselves (Interview 28).

Beyond the obvious economic benefits, the experience of migration is considered important for women for a range of other reasons, including the value of travel itself, particularly from a "closed country" such as Zimbabwe:

Yes, [migration] is important. Do you think it is nice to be a lazy mother and never know other countries because you will find yourself in a difficult situation when a person asks you to come to South Africa, Botswana or UK? You wouldn't know what to do. You wouldn't know what to do at the border or which forms you have to fill or what (Interview 23).

It is very important because if you migrate you get exposure to new ideas. You know if you stay in Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe is a closed country to you, things like internet and the latest technology, in Zimbabwe they come very late. So if you migrate you become open-minded (Interview 69).

It's important to me because now I've experienced a lot in travelling from one country to another, I know so many things, I've experienced so many things and the good thing is that I now know different cultures, we are just a little bit different, but otherwise we Africans are just the same... if I weren't enjoying it, I wouldn't be here now. I'm okay, and if I skip a month without coming here, I feel like there is something incomplete in me (Interview 46).

Decisions to migrate are not always welcomed by family and community members. While some said their family supported their decision to migrate, particularly given unemployment and poverty in Zimbabwe, others faced more negative responses. These reactions were most often linked to the perceived risks of travelling and living in South Africa:

At first it wasn't easy for [my family] to accept [my decision to migrate] because they were worried that I might be killed in South Africa (Interview 46).

Many of my family was discouraging me – they told me many things about South Africa. They said I could lose my belongings, I can get shot or what,

so I was discouraged. The first time it was difficult for me, but at the end they supported me (Interview 18).

The prospect of leaving family members, including young children, behind is one of the most difficult aspects of deciding to migrate:

As a woman I don't think it is easy to leave home, especially for those who got kids at home. I think it is so difficult leaving the kids behind, but then again the situation forces you because you can't be with your kids every night and day and seeing them go hungry (Interview 19).

For a woman it is difficult. From her country to another country she leaves because she can't take it anymore. So she will be in need of money but as she needs money she will think that she has to go back to look for her children (Interview 28).

It was difficult. I wished to stay in my house... I didn't like coming here because my children are not yet grown up, they are still small... They stay by themselves, what can I do? My sister is taking care of them, she also gives them food. And when I get money here I send it for them even though the money I get here is little, because when they buy mealie-meal it is finished (Interview 23).

Other migrants describe the difficulty of leaving behind siblings, extended family members, and elderly and dependant parents.

Preparations for departure are generally limited, and few women make specific arrangements for transportation or accommodation far in advance of leaving home. They often purchase goods before travelling to South Africa. In some cases, this is based on a preference for specific products from home: one woman explained that she preferred Zimbabwean rice, and would purchase enough to bring to South Africa before leaving home. Women conducting cross-border trade purchase stock for resale in South Africa, which includes curios and traditional clothing, as well as more conventional stock such as garlic crushers, doilies and covers.

The women spend considerable time and resources obtaining visas to travel to South Africa. Many described the difficulties of obtaining a visa which included application costs, requisite proof of sufficient funds and administrative delays:

It was difficult because South Africa wants a visa when you come from Zimbabwe. So to have a visa, you need to have money. So I couldn't because I didn't have money...I think the last time it was R1,000... It is difficult because women can't follow it. So you find they risk their lives because they want to cross and come this side...So I think it is difficult, at least if there were no visas it was going to be easy. Visas make people suffer (Interview 28).

I can't say for other people's countries, but for my country it is difficult because we're not given visas, you have to have a visa to come here. So if you don't have it, you can't come... They want money and it costs a lot to have a visa (Interview 50).

They need you to have a passport and the visa so that you can come here but it's so difficult to get a visa (Interview 26).

In spite of the high costs, many women make sure that they have legal travel documents before migrating. However, a number of women choose (or are forced) to travel through irregular means. Women who take this route often cannot afford the cost of a visa or viewed the process of obtaining a passport as virtually impossible. Rather than restricting their movement, visa requirements push them into irregular channels, at major risk to their personal safety.

CROSSING INTO SOUTH AFRICA

After leaving home in Zimbabwe, most women travel to formal border posts and cross into South Africa. Aside from complaints about long queues, discomfort due to heat, and a lack of toilets and other facilities, most described their experiences of crossing the border as relatively easy, and said they were treated well by immigration officials.

Although some women described problems in transporting goods and complained of high customs duties, those travelling on commercial buses mentioned that bus drivers are often willing to assist in talking to immigration officials, in paying required customs duties and with any other problems they encounter. They generally prefer to travel through legal border posts than risk irregular migration.

Some women cross the border on foot, while others arrange private cars to transport them across the border:

I won't say they treated us badly because I didn't see harassment or anything like that, because whatever they want they talk to the driver and that is all. They don't talk to us because already I would have spoken to the driver that I don't have the passport and the papers. So when the driver arrives there he talks to them and I just sit ... I did not come the legal way. I just came the illegal way. I did not get the passport. I just carried my ID in case and my baby's things. I used a private car. When I arrived at the border I just sat in the car and the person that I was with went in and produced his passport and also produced car papers and I just passed, and when I arrived at the gate, when they wanted my passport, he gave them money (Interview 28).

Women at Makhado said that it is preferable to bribe immigration officials at a border post than risk "jumping the fence":

Coming from home up to here is not easy. We will be shivering. There is a code at the border post we call it diarrhoea in our country, we call it a running stomach. You don't know what the officers are going to say to you... if you don't want any problem, put money inside the passport and give it to the immigration officer then the immigration officer will ask you how many days you want (Laughter). And when you say two months he'll say yes 'mam (Focus Group 6 Participant).

[Bribery] is working cause if you don't have money you'll get two days or you'll never get to enter South Africa at that border post, at that Beitbridge border post. Even if your passport has expired you put money and you give it to an officer, and you will get a pass to South Africa (Focus Group 6 Participant).

Some avoid legal border posts altogether, particularly if they have no papers or sufficient funds to bribe their way across. They travel to a more remote and unguarded part of the border, where they pay people who guide irregular crossers (known as *malaisha* or those who carry). The women described the trauma of irregular entry, including crossing rivers and difficult terrain, the constant fear of being caught, attacks by wild animals and abuse and victimisation by armed gangs:

When you apply for a visa they ask you a lot of questions and it's expensive. I realised that it would be difficult for me to get it, and I talked to people who usually go to Johannesburg and they told me that I only need to have R500. They took me and left me at Beitbridge, and from there it was bad and it was difficult for me to pass through there...I don't have travelling documents and I'm relying on these people and they left me there all alone by myself and they went through, crossing the border. And when I was left there alone I met two ladies who joined me, and we slept there trying to find a way to get through to South Africa. We just slept in the fields around there and late at night we crossed the border because people were not many. We spent three days there wondering what we would do. I was thinking about my children back at home because I told my children that I was going to work at Johannesburg. After those three days we met truck drivers and we talked to them. They took us and dropped us off at Musina because that's where they were going, and we took off from there (Focus Group 3 Participant).

I didn't prepare anything, I just came with the malaisha...They carry across borders. We pass by the forest...You can get hurt, you can die there since they say there are wild animals. It might happen that I could die, and you go with the fear (Interview 31).

There are taxis, which you have to hire, and at the border you have to jump because we are illegal. At the fence there are boys who live in the bush who help us to cross the border. When we reach Beitbridge Border we have to go to the bush at night, not during the day, at night. Then we have to go under the fence or over the fence. Then we have to look for transport when we reach the Messina border. There are guys there who can take you and show you the way, and sometimes they can rape you or take all your belongings. They are very cruel because they don't listen to you when you are talking. They just want you to listen to all their instructions. When they want to rape you they can kill you. There are shortest ways and longest ways. Some can take two hours, some you can take more than that (Interview 34).

Irregular female migrants are in constant danger of sexual exploitation, abuse and rape. They told of being assaulted by the *malaisha* and of trading sex with immigration and police officials to avoid arrest and deportation:

The police will arrest you, but if you sleep with him they won't. I'll tell them I'm from Zimbabwe. If they see that you're beautiful, they then propose to you and you'll leave with them. If you sleep with them, they'll tell you go... They check you as you approach. Even inside and taxis from across the border they take beautiful ladies and you'll meet up with them at the police station. They would have had sex with the girls as a form of payment for being illegal. They would have finished with the beautiful ones... You see, if a person wants to sleep with you they don't propose to you, they won't tell you that they love you, and you'll also not tell him that you love him. He will tell you to give him money, and if you don't have, he'll pull you to the side and the next thing he'll touch you. He tells you that if you don't have any money, let's do this and that. He'll tell you to sleep with him and do all those things. You see, even with you and I, I can see what is happening, like whatever happens at the border gates I can see. The one thing that I see is that the police will sleep with the girl at the border gates. They'll even make a girl cross to Pietersburg, so that they can have sex with her in their van (Focus Group 4 Participant).

My husband left me with two kids, he decided to go on with his programme, so I decided to come to South Africa. I went to Beitbridge on foot up to the river. I didn't have any money, any passport. It was through the rural areas that I walked from there to the river and it was at night, at the river we found soldiers who wanted money. If we did not have money they demanded sex. I slept with the soldiers because I didn't even have a single cent. Then I crossed to the farms next to the Limpopo to work there (Focus Group 5 Participant).

Women in a Johannesburg Focus group suggested that even if "we don't agree with our heart," women submit to forced and coercive sex "because it's compulsory."

MIGRATION, CHANGE AND EXCLUSION

Many women felt their lives had improved significantly as a result of migration to South Africa. Virtually all said that their economic circumstances improved significantly after migration:

The only problem is of not finding a job, but the food is better because I can afford to buy...I won't say I have money like that, but the conditions are better here than back home because I do get food and clothing and I am able to buy them (Interview 29).

When I am here I am able to make money. And the money that I'm making is able to make me live. It's not like Zimbabwe, like when my husband was getting paid month-end - after three days, I don't see the money any more. So when I am in Johannesburg it's better because things here are cheap. Even though the money is little we try to live (Interview 28).

It's not the same, as I was at home doing nothing. It's not the same since I'm here. Here I know I can get the bread and send money home (Interview 32).

Through remittances, migration impacts positively on the children and families of women migrants too. As one explained, "If my children need something I am able to do it for them one by one, every month." A second stated, "I send money every month – at least they are buying something." Others commented:

Now I send money to home, and the business is better because I send money. Sometimes I buy something like Vaseline and send it to home (Interview 30).

I can say my lifestyle changed – it has gone better, a little bit better. I am able to have my own money and I am able to support my own kids. I am able to go back to Zimbabwe and come back...I can send [my family] everything they need, all kinds of groceries that I buy in South Africa, I send them to Zimbabwe (Interview 34).

Here things are cheap, at home it is not easy to get cheap things like this... I see I changed a lot, because I know how to support my mother and my

younger sisters and brothers. They can go to school now because I send the money there, you see (Interview 30).

I can say there are a lot of changes in my family... economically and financially. 'Cause most of my family – especially most of my sisters and brothers, they have changed schools and the household, we have better things like theatre systems. Everything is okay because I don't buy groceries that side. I bring it with me because this side, it is cheaper than that side (Interview 43).

Although many women feel their lives improved economically after migrating, their social experience of living in South Africa is not as positive. Three years before the widespread xenophobic violence of May of 2008, most recounted daily experiences of harassment, abuse and exclusion by citizens, government officials and police officers. Most common is the relentless name-calling and blame for South Africa's social ills:

People here treat us bad. They call us names like makwerekwere and everything (Interview 24).

These ones, they are worst to be honest with you, South Africans, they don't really like foreigners and they call us by names such as kwerekwere, which we don't like (Interview 25).

The treatment is not the same like other South African citizens. When I walk out in the street, I look out for police cars. If I can see it when I get back, they just see you walking and they will say to you, "Hey you, khalanga, come this side!" So, I don't know how they see you, but the truth is that they do see you, that you are a khalanga and you are from Zimbabwe (Interview 28).

You can say there is harassment by officials because today we've got names. It's not nice, those makwerekweres, it's not a nice word, it's an insulting word. So, when they use those words to us it means they don't like us (Focus Group 5 Participant).

Like where we stay, they said they want to remove us – they want to go house-to-house looking, and if there's a Zimbabwean they must deport because they don't want foreigners...Some say that we women take their

husbands and we also take jobs...but it's not true. If they don't take care of their husbands, what must we do (Focus Group 5 Participant)?

They say the Zimbabweans steal our things. They break our property at night, they take bribes. Right they are going to deport us. Before we came here to South Africa were there no robbers and thieves, here in South Africa, were there no thieves before Zimbabweans came? (Focus Group 5 Participant)

Name-calling, stereotypes and social exclusion are insulting to hard-working migrant women, who expressed surprise at such open hostility in South Africa. With few prospects for social integration, they develop coping mechanisms and survival strategies for living in South Africa. Some try to assimilate. One migrant described changing her dress style to avoid being noticed. She explained that the police "know how we walk and how we dress: South Africans put on trousers and Zimbabweans put on dresses." Another added that before migrating, she asked her brothers to teach her how to "walk" like a South African. Women also tend to live and work in communities where there are other migrants from Zimbabwe and elsewhere.

In addition to poor treatment from citizens, many migrant women experience routine harassment from police and government officials, as well as exclusion from basic services such as healthcare and education. They recounted how they are often "chased" by police, and under threat of arrest and deportation, forced to pay bribes of cash, food or drinks, or goods and stock. Rather than risk arrest, many women agree to these criminal demands by agents of the state:

[Bribing] is not nice because even now we do it; if you don't have money you'll be arrested and if you have it you survive through bribe. You see that. These police, when they are sent to catch criminals, they don't do that instead they arrest us. They don't arrest criminals, but they are busy walking down the streets looking for IDs and passports... When they make us pay, money does not go to the government but to their pockets. Now they don't want R50 anymore, but now if you give them R100 they tell you to go to hell, the money is just peanuts... if you have money you are fine because you know that if you are caught you'll bribe them (Focus Group 3 Participant).

The cops arrest us and the citizens and the community, they call us names. Like kwerekwere. Sometimes the cops take you to the police stations and they make you pay some money which makes it difficult because sometimes you don't have the money...That money would be a bribe for a policeman not to take you or make you stay in the cell for a night...We are afraid of staying in the cell so we do the payment out of the police station, or maybe somewhere outside of the police station, because if they take you to the police station they will deport. They want R300 per person (Participant 43).

Migrant women said that bribing police officers is necessary to avoid being taken to the notorious Lindela Repatriation Centre, which came under scrutiny in 2005 following the deaths of 27 inmates over an eight-month period. A Ministerial Committee of Enquiry investigating conditions at Lindela found overcrowded sleeping quarters with "sometimes 50 inmates per room," that "bedding and food supply (are) not optimal" and that there is "a communication problem, in particular language barriers."¹ Detained migrants were "concerned about deaths at the facility [and the] lack of transparency on the part of Lindela and Consulates that represent the interests of the ruling party in Zimbabwe." The Committee also noted that medical care for detainees was inadequate.

Women with experience of Lindela recounted experiences of neglect, poor treatment, and solicitation of bribes and sex in exchange for release from the Centre. One Zimbabwean woman described being denied food and physically abused by Lindela officials:

While I was staying [in Alexandra] I was always a victim for the police arrests and raids every time... At times I would bribe them but at other times they turned down a bribe... But what used to amaze me was that this was done by the same people every time and they knew us. They would make us pay. One day they found me alone and my friend was not there. They took me to Lindela where they kept me for two weeks and from there they took me home. I went back home and then I returned back here... It depends on how you talk. Sometimes [the police] can allow you not to go to Lindela or sometimes they refuse to take money from us and take us to Lindela. It's hard there, the securities beat us, and life there is just not good. We are sometimes denied food and sometimes we get it late and they give

us little food and we're hungry. According to me it's not right because every time I return from Lindela I will be very sick. We eat porridge. They give tea with milk already and you can't see if they have put something inside your tea, and a single slice of bread. And at three in the afternoon, they give us a little pap. That's all we eat. We do bathe [and] sleep but we have to share blankets yet we're sleeping on single separated beds. They have bedbugs (Focus Group 3 Participant).

Another described how, despite having legal travel documents and paying a bribe to police officers in Beitbridge, she was arrested and taken to Lindela:

[The police] came while we were sleeping and they asked for the passport and we showed them and everything we had and they said that we are going to our offices. We went to their offices, and when we got there they said that each of us must pay R300 and we paid it and we stayed for five days and they took us to Lindela on the sixth day and we stayed at Lindela for seven days and they didn't mention what was the R300 for and we paid out of our own pockets. We had declared our goods and we had passports. We paid even if I had to go home. If you said that you did not have any money you just got here today, they would send a lady to search us and it was irritating and she wore gloves. Simply because we are hiding the money, we hide it in our private parts. Yes, they got that R300 and there were about eleven of us and they didn't assist us with anything. They left us to starve. They left us with out food. We spent the whole six days without food, but they gave us a little bit of porridge in the morning and a bit of pap and some vegetables. That's when they started to assess us according to our age. How old we were, so that they can transport us. The old would go with the old and the youth with the youth because they were using a small van. From Lindela we used a small van to Beitbridge. At Beitbridge, some of the things were missing and some people lost their passports because they were holding our passports. When we told them that our things were missing they said that it's not their fault (Focus Group 5 Participant).

In addition to harassment, bribery and abuse from police officers and Lindela staff, migrant women encounter significant barriers in accessing basic services, health-

care in particular. At public clinics and hospitals, they experience xenophobic language, substandard treatment, and are overcharged for services or simply refused care. Two women said they were told to “go back to Zimbabwe” at medical clinics:

I went to the clinic and I had a headache, and when I got there the nurse asked me what was my problem and I told her that my head is aching and she said why can't you go to Zimbabwe? Because I was sick I went there to seek help, but she told me to go to seek help in Zimbabwe, and I told her that I'm not here for holiday but I'm here because I'm sick. I told her that I did not come for politics. She just gave me some tablets and I left. She didn't even check my temperature or anything (Focus Group 5).

I remember the last time I went to clinic and the person said this one is from Zimbabwe she must go back to Zimbabwe you won't get any medicine. We give the South Africans only this medicine is for South Africans only. They only gave me Panado (paracetamol) even in the hospitals (Focus Group 6 Participant).

Experiences of neglect and poor treatment are distressingly common amongst pregnant women admitted to hospitals and clinics. Migrant women who do not have documentation, or are unable to provide proof of residence or income in South Africa, are sometimes unable to qualify for low-cost medical treatment or face prohibitive costs at private clinics, and therefore go without basic health care.

Migrant women also experience gender-based discrimination and violence in South Africa:

I think the government doesn't [have] any issues with anybody who's got their papers. If you're a man the people are always scared of you. So I think if you are a man your life is much easier because if you walk in the street you're not scared of anybody. But when I walk around Hillbrow I always think, what if somebody grabs me and shoves me into a dark place and rapes me and things like that...what if these men – coming towards me. What if he takes my phone or rapes me or kills me for no reason, and I am always scared of those. In Zimbabwe rape cases are there but they're not much, they are not that high. It's three times rare to hear somebody has been raped but here you always hear rape times four, you see, and people shooting, they are always scared of those things (Interview 19).

Most are cautious about relationships with South African men, fearing a potential loss of independence and negative impacts on family and children at home:

It depends what type of guy is he, some of these guys take chances – they say the women from that side are soft. If you stay with him after 2 months he will start getting funny. When you ask, they will fight you. They are all not trustworthy. South African guys know how to abuse women (Focus Group 2 Participant).

[My boyfriend] is from that other side. I've got kids in Zimbabwe, so if I get a boyfriend here in South Africa, he'll force me to go and stay at his home and my kids will starve, from how I view it (Focus Group 5 Participant).

It's hard to get married here. We are scared to get married to South Africans. Let me say that, I'm scared of getting married to a South African, because I think that once you're married to him he might turn and say you're not from here, you're a kwerekwere from Zimbabwe (Focus Group 4 Participant).

Maybe when we're married and have bought [property] – he'll tell you to leave and go back to Zimbabwe and not take anything. Or that you're using his name to stay here permanently and get married. Suppose, maybe you're working. You sell, even if it's at the streets. That money will help you buy food in the house. You buy things for the house with that money. And when he doesn't want you anymore, he'll chase you out and tell you that you're a kwerekwere. So, you'll never get your things. Yes, you're a kwerekwere, right? So, you'll get nothing (Focus Group 4 Participant).

POLICY PERCEPTIONS

The women migrants were asked about how their negative experiences of migration could be improved. The cost and difficulty of obtaining visas was viewed as the main challenge:

It is not easy for women because migrating from region to region it is difficult. You have to have a certain amount of money, and that amount of money, they want to see it in the bank. They are specific. Like when I

came from Zimbabwe, I want to come this side, you have to have at least R1,000, which they want to see. If you don't have that money they can turn you back (Interview 43).

Yes, they say you must have money to enter and pay hotels. We can't afford it because we are poor. I can't get that money, that's why I sell doilies. Yes, it's difficult – sometimes they want R2,000 for you to enter this side. I can't afford to pay a hotel, I can't pay that money. It will be too much if they make that law (Interview 29).

To get a passport it's easy but to get a visa is too difficult... You have to have money, much money, you know like maybe R1,000 so it's too difficult for that...[Women] face problems of money like if there's no one helping them it's too difficult to raise that money to come here. It's so difficult (Interview 26).

Those unable to meet high visa costs feel they have no alternative but to cross clandestinely:

South Africa wants a visa from when you come from Zimbabwe. So to have a visa, you need to have money. So I couldn't because I didn't have money. I think the last time it was R1,000...It is difficult because women can't follow it. So you find that they risk their lives because they want to cross and come this side. You find that some even swim through the Limpopo River and get eaten by crocodiles when they come. Some of them die in the river because they want to come to this side. So I think it is difficult. At least if there were no visas it was going to be easy. Visa makes people suffer (Interview 28).

These laws make it too difficult for us to come this side. That is why we are using the border jumping method. It is the best method because with a visa, there are too many rules (Interview 34).

Many women felt that migrants would benefit from reduced restrictions on travel between South Africa and Zimbabwe. A large number suggested that visas should be scrapped altogether, and that migrants should be permitted to travel between countries using only a passport:

If they can cancel the visa so that all of us who come from outside the country can use passports only, not visas, because it is hard to get a visa... [The governments] can talk man-to-man and end what needs to be ended like in Botswana, we go there without visas...They can talk about visas, and each one of us must have a straight passport, because the passport is needed (Interview 23).

I think they should discontinue the use of visas so that a person who has only a passport should be allowed in to buy things because she is doing business...Because when I'm at home poor, not having anything and the children are crying, I would also wish to go where women go. I have to have a passport and a visa to cross the border gate (Interview 32).

I think if they can come here without using a visa it can be easier for them. They can manage to come here without a visa, using their own passport... If they can allow people to come here without visas, I think that is the best because most of the women, they come here for business. They go back to their country to sell their goods and everything so it's so difficult for someone with out a visa to come here. (Interview 26).

As an alternative to eliminating visas, migrants suggested that they be allowed to stay in South Africa for longer periods of time:

For now it is hard because I have to go in and out. This doesn't excite me because the laws of migration say we have to enter this country with a visa. If it could be like in Botswana where we don't use the visa but now the visa in Zimbabwe is too expensive. And after we enter with the visa and we are given short days to stay here, so we are not able to do things because our days are short here and we have to go back home...They should increase the number of days. At least if they can give us three months in South Africa it would be better because within three months you can be able to come up with something. Then you can go back home (Interview 29).

Women said that if visa requirements were removed, they would likely travel home to Zimbabwe more regularly:

It is important for women to migrate easily because it's easy to move from one place to another after you have to stay here maybe for like a year,

before you go home to see the kids, if there wasn't the issue of visas. I think people would visit their families almost every day. Make it for people not to use a visa, just to use a passport. I believe many people here don't come and stay, they make business and go back. So for them to have visas every time, they don't come (Interview 50).

CONCLUSION

Relatively little qualitative contemporary research has been conducted on the experiences of migrant women in Southern Africa despite evidence that female migration is increasing dramatically.² Women in Southern Africa have often been portrayed as those "left behind," and as "passive rural widows who stayed put somewhere, practicing subsistence, and later, cash crop agricultural production while their men departed, perhaps never to return."³

The MVP confirmed that migration can be "an empowering experience for women."⁴ Women felt that they had benefitted from exposure to different languages and cultures, greater access to consumer goods, and a sense of independence and freedom. The families and households of women migrants also benefitted significantly, particularly through remittances which were largely used for basic necessities, including food, clothing and school fees.

At the same time, the interviews underscored a number of extremely negative aspects of migration for women. While those who travelled legally through established border posts described relatively few problems, those who "jumped the fence" faced a barrage of risks and rights abuses, including at the hands of paid guides, as well as police and security officials. However, faced with extreme poverty at home, travel documentation was viewed as prohibitively expensive, and irregular migration the only option.

Whatever their legal status, most migrant women in South Africa experience exclusion, harassment and verbal and physical abuse on a daily basis. They are also excluded from services such as healthcare, in spite of their constitutional right of access. In spite of the hardships they experience, most feel that migration is extremely important for women from Zimbabwe, and want fewer restrictions on travel. Given that women migrants want to travel through regular and legal means, and are willing to travel with passports,

adapting or eliminating visitor visa requirements for citizens of Zimbabwe would likely lead to more regularised travel overall.

NOTES

- 1 Department of Home Affairs, "Ministerial Committee of Enquiry into Recent Deaths at Lindela Holding Facility," Pretoria, 2005, p 7.
- 2 B. Dodson with H. Simelane, D. Tevera, T. Green, A. Chikanda and F. de Vletter, *Gender, Migration and Remittances in Southern Africa*, SAMP Migration Policy Paper No. 49, Cape Town, 2008.
- 3 C. Murray, *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.
- 4 Global Commission on International Migration, *Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action* (Geneva, 2005), p. 49.