

Irregular Female Migrants and COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Deportees from South Africa to Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: What happens if your female relative who had embarked on an irregular migration journey across Limpopo from Zimbabwe is *suddenly* back and they are grinning at you by the doorstep, expecting your warm embrace, whereas you suspect they may be loaded with the lethal COVID-19 virus? Do you slam the door right in their face? This study examined the experiences of irregular female migrant deportees from Zimbabwe to South Africa during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic using a qualitative approach built on a sample of 20 deportees. Respondents were identified using an exponential, non-discriminatory snowballing technique. Findings indicate that the average age of the deportees was 31.35 years and also that their migration journeys are largely motivated by socio-economic factors. The deportees indicated stigma and alienation, high transport costs, and risk of exposure to COVID-19 infections as some of the challenges they experienced. The study proposes a number of measures informed by the findings, resonating with other studies elsewhere. These include psycho-social support, empowerment of women, awareness, and others. We also recommend that the targeted measures to be prioritized should be those which discourage irregular migration.

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, economies across the globe are still counting the losses. South Africa is one country that was battling with the highest infection rates in the continent, threatening to choke its health delivery system. Some of the measures countries embarked upon so as to deal with COVID-19 were closing borders and national lockdowns. Actually, lockdowns were the second most used measure by administrations the world over among a cocktail of other measures prescribed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Cheng et al. 2020). Over 144 countries, for example, closed their physical borders completely or

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partly (UNHCR 2021). Bird (2021) shows that South Africa, on top of closing its borders, also deployed the military to patrol its borders. Bird also shows that during the pandemic's peak, South American countries such as Peru and Ecuador deployed military at clandestine entry points to clamp down on irregular migrations. So in essence, the idea of all these was to enforce social and physical distancing through reducing human contact and restricting mobility deemed unessential. In turn, this would help manage infections as well.

However, during the peak of the pandemic, South Africa decided to deport undocumented migrants who were housed at the Lindela Repatriation Centre. In May 2021, they deported 94 Lesotho nationals, followed by 527 Zimbabweans (Global Migration Project 2021). Mozambique shows that at approximately the same time, 439 Mozambicans were also deported.³ On the other hand, to the north, South Africa's neighbors were also busy trying to manage COVID-19 through a cocktail of measures. Among the measures Zimbabwe embarked on was the promulgation of Statutory Instrument (SI) 110/2020, which gazetted lockdown measures.

Due to its sound economy, South Africa has been a melting pot of migrants from all corners of the globe, both regular and irregular. Countries such as Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique, and Zambia have substantial figures of their nationals in South Africa largely for economic survival. Specifically, Zimbabwean women are also increasingly becoming active in migration journeys to South Africa, whether through regular or irregular means, though data remains scanty. Crush and Peberdy (2006) highlight the following:

Women have always been part of migration streams to South Africa whether traveling with papers or without or from neighboring countries or from overseas.

Dobson (2000) also corroborates the above by noting the following with respect to feminization of migration:

...the migration of women in the past and in the present remains largely undocumented and is still little understood, as women have largely been seen as little more than luggage carried by male spouses.

Dobson further submits that women are replacing men in sectors such as those that pay low income, a view also shared by Crush and McDonald (2000). The International Organisation for Migration (2010) observed that the number of migrants fleeing economic challenges from Zimbabwe and other places into South Africa escalated from the 2000s onwards. It further observed that between 2000 and 2006, the number of females flocking to South Africa also grew. The number of females migrating into South Africa has been rising with female low-skilled workers between the 2000s and 2006, accounting for 30% of Basotho origin (IOM 2017).

The plight of migrants has always been widely researched as an academic

³ Club of Mozambique. Available at: [South Africa's mass deportations in full pandemic, to Mozambique, Zimbabwe – Watch | Club of Mozambique](#)

discourse. The entertainment industry has capitalized on this through film production, raking in millions in revenue. Notable film productions that have showcased the plight of migrants include *America 2002*, *A Better Life 2011*, and *Namesake 2006*⁴. Over the years, film productions specifically on female migrants have also hit the big screen. These include; *Chez Jolie Coiffure 2019*, *Joy 2018*.⁵ *Under the Same Moon*⁶ is also movie film based on the struggles a woman has to face working illegally in the USA. The prominent theme in these films is irregular female migrants. This underscores women's significant role in migration dynamics more still when their narratives are depicted through film, given the impact entertainment has in our day-to-day survival.

Noteworthy, however, is the fact that the mobility of humans, particularly irregular migration, has not stopped due to the imposition of physical restrictions on mobility. For instance, a survey in Niger showed that 91 % of the people vowed to continue with migration despite COVID-19 having made it difficult to be mobile (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2021). Instead, it has changed its dynamics, making it more difficult and dangerous as an adventure as COVID-19 further worsens (European University Institute 2020).

Studies on migration and COVID-19 are coming up (European University Institute, 2020). Further, the institute shows that most of these studies have focused on themes such as issues of migrants' earnings, visas, and remittances, mainly for regular migration. Most studies on irregular migration phenomena and COVID-19 have focused on Western countries (Shah et al. 2022). Most existing studies to date focus on the survival and coping strategies of irregular migrants in the hosting (destination) countries at the height of Covid 19 responses. Post-deportation studies focusing on developing countries from regions such as Africa are still scanty, creating a research gap. Moreover, little has been said in literature about the lived experiences of deportees as they are deported back to their country of origin (source) during the Covid 19 emergency, with a number of studies focusing on the lives of migrants in the destination country. The peak of Covid 19 pandemic created completely difficult circumstances affecting not only the mobility of irregular female migrants with the tag '*deportee*' on their backs as they tried to *weave* their way back to their respective homes but also their eventual reintegration into their respective communities.

Against this background, this paper, therefore, is an attempt to bring to the fore experiences of Zimbabwe's irregular female migrant deportees from South Africa during the peak of COVID-19 response measures as they tried to cope and survive in Masvingo Province. Understanding the experiences of this already vulnerable target population helps to tailor requisite response efforts that ensure their safety protection and promote a more welcoming environment in the home country, which, if not guaranteed, will promote recidivism of irregular migration despite its attendant risks.

⁴ Forbes. Available at : [10 Most Interesting Immigration Movies Of All Time \(forbes.com\)](https://www.forbes.com)

⁵ Migrant Women Press. Available at : [5 Movies about migrant women's experiences by migrant women directors you must watch – Migrant Women Press](https://migrantwomenpress.com)

⁶ [Under the Same Moon \(2007\) - IMDb](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0770707)

The overarching objective of the study is, thus, to explore the survival strategies and coping mechanisms used by Zimbabwe's female irregular migrant deportees from South Africa during the peak of COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, the study also seeks to (a) investigate the socio-economic impact of deportations of irregular Zimbabwean female migrants from South Africa during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic; and (b) examine actionable policies that can be used to alleviate the plight of Zimbabwe's irregular female migrants from the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 post-deportation.

1. Literature Review

Briefly, we examine various literature examining COVID-19 and migration from different contexts. These studies are important because they also help us identify major themes and policies that have been a focus point in studying the subject under examination. Shah et al. (2022) studied COVID-19 threats to irregular migrants in Kuwait to explore the survival strategies the migrants used to cope with changed settings induced by COVID-19. Out of approximately 40 million foreigners, 20-40% are believed to be irregular migrants, according to the authors. In the study, the authors highlight the importance of social networking in enabling the continued stay of migrants in irregular status. However, when the pandemic set in, the network was weakened. This led to the vulnerability of the migrants to deportations. The authors studied 26 migrants in Kuwait from April to June 2020. Despite changing circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most irregular migrants rather chose to stay behind instead of going back to their countries. Network of friends and relatives helped to sustain their irregularity. The study concludes that underlying structural issues actually exacerbated irregular migration rather than curtail it.

European University Institute (2020) examines the impact of COVID-19 response, enforcement, and border restrictions on migration journeys globally. The study aimed to look at how various actors in the irregular migration network were affected by various restrictions. Actors identified included people smugglers and facilitators of the clandestine journeys. The study used available empirical data as well as journalistic coverage. The study notes that one impact caused manufacturing uncertainty, just like irregular migration, which is an uncertain escape given the vagaries ahead. Also, the other finding is that COVID-19 responses will not halt irregular migration or smuggling of people. Victimization, violence, and the strengthening of criminality associated with the smuggling of migrants have also been found to be accelerated. Lastly, the institute shows the increase in incidences of deaths and disappearances among major migration corridors due to some of the clandestine means to smuggle people. For instance, substandard boats and overcrowded vehicular transport, among other modes, have increased disasters at sea or on the roads. The institute highlights that the Canary Islands' Mediterranean Sea is one of the spaces where some of the deaths and disappearances have taken place.

UNODC (2021) report titled *COVID-19 and the Smuggling of Migrants* highlights an overview of numerous vulnerabilities faced by migrants who resort to smugglers during the pandemic. The focus of the report has been mainly on challenges faced by unaccompanied children migrants as well as women and

children with a view to ensuring how their rights can be protected. The report shows that COVID-19 responses impact smuggling, for example, the methods used and profit margins from the illicit trade. Also, popular routes for smuggling are covered in the route covering regions such as Asia, the Horn of Africa, and others. In the study, the modal age range for migrants was also 18-30 years. Hazards encountered included robberies, sexual violence, and extortion by smuggling gangs. In the destination country, the study highlights the importance of understanding the needs of the concerned migrants as this better informs solutions.

İçduygu (2020) examines the issue of 'stranded' irregular migrants and the crisis brought about by COVID-19, especially how the pandemic has impacted on migrant workers socially as well as politically. The author also looks at the experiences of these workers, the uncertainties and insecurities brought about by the pandemic to their lives, and how they try to cope with repatriation. In addition, the researchers also look at how the migration process can be improved. İçduygu (2020) shows that irregular workers usually find themselves working in sectors that are often unregulated and pay poorly.

In addition to the above, the study also shows that COVID-19's impact is disproportionately higher for regular and irregular migrants, with the latter bearing the greatest burden of the pandemic. In the study, the author covers three case studies highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on irregular migrants in what is termed 'locked in and locked out'. These include migrants from Venezuela, Armenia, and numerous others operating between the Horn of African countries and the Arab Peninsula. For example, the author highlights how thousands of Venezuelan migrants opted to return home due to pressing COVID-19 conditions. However, due to the cancellation of international flights, several thousand had to connect to the exit points on foot.

On the other hand, the author presents what is termed in the study as an exemplary case of managing repatriation. Despite the absence of ties between Armenians and Turkish people, mediation by Georgia helped to facilitate the repatriation of Armenians back to Armenia. Despite the absence of international flights due to Covid 19, Armenians could connect via Georgia by bus.

2. Research Design

For this study, we adopted a qualitative approach involving exploring the subjects using structured and semi-structured questions. This was done to gather primary data from irregular female deportees who were deported from South Africa during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic as they made their way to their respective places of jurisdiction in Masvingo Province. This approach was fitting for this particular study since most data on irregular migration is difficult to access, as noted by Dumba and Chirisa (2010); hence, the qualitative approach is preferred by researchers.

A total of 20 respondents were interviewed during the survey, as shown in Table 1. Data for the study was gathered from August 2021 to September 30 2021. Locating respondents was not an easy exercise due to existing COVID-19 restrictions. They made it challenging to make face-to-face interactions. Moreover, irregular migrants are a mobile and hard-to-get population. Despite this, the researchers managed to

reach out to 20 women willing to share their experiences.

Table 1. Distribution of Interviewees

District	Number interviewed
Masvingo	10
Gutu	6
Zaka	4
Total	20

Source: Authors' Compilation

Given that COVID-19 restrictions were tight during the survey, the researchers decided to employ the snowballing research technique. This technique involves identifying primary sources of data that, in turn, help in locating others. The initial subjects were residents of Masvingo town. These were instrumental in helping the researchers find other respondents situated in Gutu and Zaka. Snowballing technique was justified for this study because Business Research Methodology recommends this method when subjects to be studied are 'rare and difficult to find'. Dumba and Chirisa (2010) also employed the snowballing technique in a study of irregular migrants in Soshanguve in South Africa since the illegal migrants are difficult to locate where they stay. Irregular female migrant deportees were not so easy to identify during the peak of COVID-19. Specifically, the study used an exponential non-discriminatory snowballing technique shown in Figure 1.

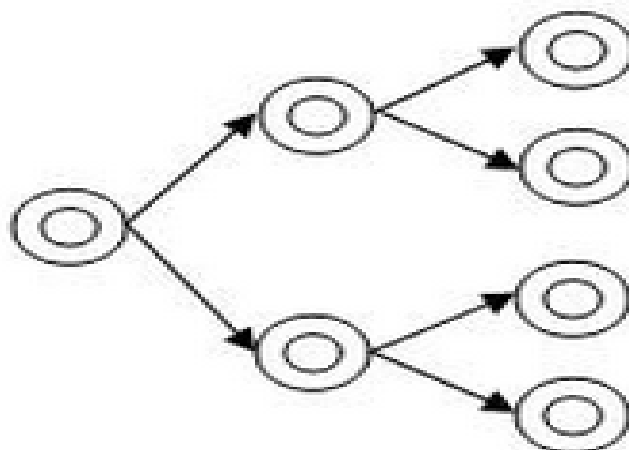


Figure 1. Exponential Non Discriminatory Snowballing Technique

Source: Business Research Methodology

Subjects in Masvingo were not difficult to locate. These, in turn, helped in locating others who were in Gutu and Zaka districts until the desired sample was

realized. About 80 percent of the respondents indicated that they had worked together in South Africa or had at least met before looking for work. This was vital in maintaining social networks which existed even after arrival at home following deportations.

Figure 2 is a field site map for the study. It shows the location of Masvingo Province and its various districts. The province is located in the southern part of Zimbabwe, as shown on the map. Masvingo province's location is a critical gateway to Beitbridge, a border town between Zimbabwe and South Africa. International Organisation of Migration (IOM, 2020) notes that most of the Zimbabwean deportees from South Africa originate from Masvingo province (27.9 percent), followed by Manicaland (19.4 percent) and Matabeleland South Province (13.2 percent). This makes Masvingo province a strategic player in the value chain for human traffic movement motivated by migration in general.



Figure 2. Field Site Map -Masvingo Province Main Boundaries

Source: Adapted from ReliefWeb

Having access to irregular migrant deportees, as well as reaching out to them, was not an easy task. Firstly, clearance was obtained from Home Affairs to allow us to reach respondents. Making use of a female field assistant for data gathering exercises to make the female respondents more comfortable sharing their experiences. The field assistant was responsible for taking notes during the interviews. Making them cooperate took a lot of persuasion and engagement before the interviews would commence. In some instances, we would be viewed with suspicion as to the purpose of the survey. At times, respondents would think that we were up to a mission of selling them out to law enforcement authorities. On other occasions, some respondents would simply walk out of the interview mid-way. The researchers maintained a high level of professionalism in the conduct of the survey.

The purpose of the study as well as expectations from respondents, were well articulated to respondents before the interviews took place. Consent was sought before the respondents could respond, and clearance from the government had also been sought so as to conduct the study. This was done as a quality control measure to ensure that data was collected, upholding ethics. Respondents were assured that the data to be gathered was purely for academic research and was not going to be shared with any other parties.

3. Discussion of Key Findings from the Study

In this section, we briefly discuss the study's main findings as we examine the experiences of Zimbabwe's irregular female migrant deportees from South Africa during the peak of COVID-19 response measures. Understanding these helps inform policy on better measures to integrate this target population to ensure safety, protection, and creation of an environment sensitive to their unique circumstances.

Profile of Migrant Deportees Gathered

A total of 20 migrants were interviewed during the study. Respondents were not comfortable sharing their actual identities. As a result, the researchers came up with the codes to identify respondents. M1-M10 represents respondents from Masvingo district from the first to the tenth. G11-G16 are respondent number 11 to 16 who are drawn from Gutu. Z17-Z20 represents the four respondents drawn from the Zaka district. We present the various characteristics of the migrants in Appendix A1.

Synopsis of the profile of the interviewees studied

There are several highlights to note as part of the findings of the study. According to the study, the average age for irregular migrants is 31.35 years. Migration Data Portal (2021) shows that, in general, from Southern Africa average ages of migrants tend to range from 30-40 years. Southern Africa is where Zimbabwe and South Africa are situated. On the other hand, the average stay of the irregular migrants in South Africa was 4.775 years. This tells us that, on average, from the deportees surveyed, we can posit that they started staying in South Africa as irregular migrants approximately five years ago. This gives the period stretching from the year 2015-2016, considering months spent as well. This is a period that coincides with the precipitous contraction of the country's GDP, as shown by the trend line from Trading Economics below up to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. During this phase, the country recorded the lowest GDP, as shown in Figure 3; Figure 3 is helpful in providing a better context or background under which migration from Zimbabwe is taking place. The figure is not to draw simple causal relationships between the phenomena under study and the GDP path shown above but to help us appreciate the state of the economy as an argument motivating migration journeys from Zimbabwe, whether regular or irregular.

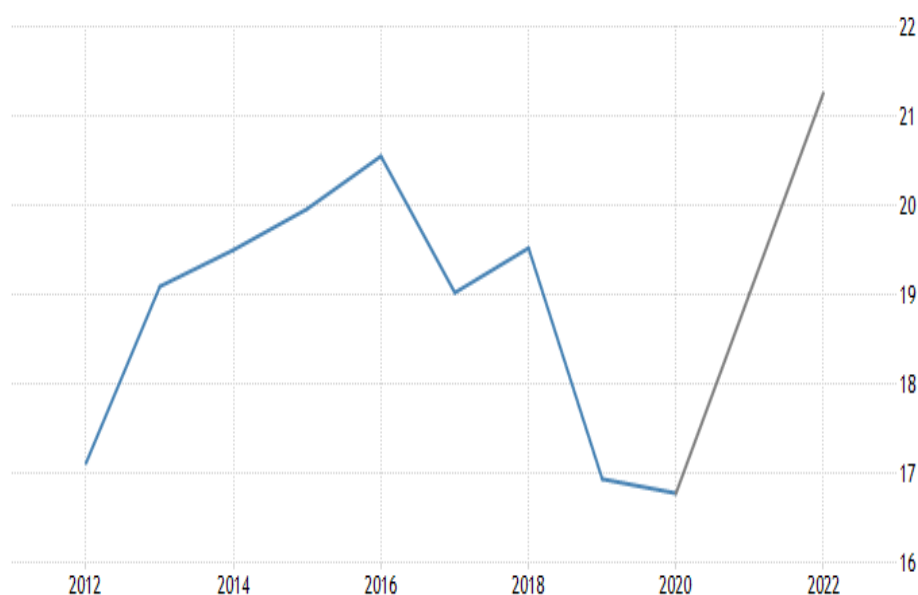


Figure 3. GDP of Zimbabwe, 2012-2022

Source: Trading Economics

Employment at the destination country is not instantaneous

The survey findings indicate that 15 percent of the respondents highlighted being unemployed in South Africa at some point. This was common for age groups 17-23 years. Further analysis of this group also shows that the probability of being unemployed was very high the shorter the stay in South Africa, the destination country. Respondents who were interviewed and were unemployed were those who had less than three years of stay:

Getting work is now becoming difficult in South Africa. I was only lucky in that my elder sibling who came earlier was already working, so I joined her at the restaurant she had been working. (G11, 02/08/2021)

Experiences on employment, as reiterated earlier on, have never been the same. Older interviewees had better chances of getting jobs due to a number of dynamics. These included social networks with both locals as well as fellow kith and kin from Zimbabwe. One respondent had this to say;

Since I was deported, I am always in touch with my employers at my workplace. My job was at a nursery where I worked as an assistant. I have known my bosses for a long time, and we are now like a family. Madam always assures me that once I come back again, she will take me back and give me my job back. (Z20, 04/08/2021)

‘COVID-19 stigma and discrimination’ in local communities

Other respondents highlighted facing stigma and discrimination in their respective communities upon arrival. About 65 percent of the respondents pointed out that there was a lot of fear not only from their close relatives but also from general members of society in accepting the deportees. This was experienced by respondents who had a brief stay in Masvingo town. A possible explanation, according to the researchers, was mostly because the news of alarming deaths related to COVID-19 in South Africa had filtered in; hence, it could be the effects of this *shocking news* that made people in more enlightened environments to fear the incoming deportees in advance:

COVID-19 brought much more trouble to us who had been deported. At the time of my arrival in Masvingo, there had been two quarantine centers, I remember. One was Rujeko Clinic, and the other was Mushagashe. So those people who knew that you are normally in South Africa and suddenly they see you back who think you had illegally escaped from the quarantine centers. (M4, 15/08/2021).

About 35 percent of the respondents expressed support from their communities, mostly of a rural setup. This was for those in the Gutu and Zaka districts with substantial rural sides. According to some respondents, a possible explanation was that the ‘shocking news’ had not done much of the damage in rural setups. Moreover, some indicated that the pandemic then was mostly associated with urbanites.

It took me four weeks since my deportation to really integrate well into my neighborhood. You could feel that even if you are interacting in communities, people feel uneasy with your presence due to negative perception attached to Covid 19 and deportation. (M10, 25/08/2021)

Transport and mobility issues during the peak of Covid 19

Mobility proved to be one of the most difficult tasks during the height of lockdown. News had filtered in Zimbabwe that the pandemic had hit South Africa hard. Motorists were reluctant to offer transportation to hitchhikers. Respondents indicated that the pandemic had resulted in the unavailability of city-to-city travel of safe and reliable public transport as it remained banned. One deportee who was going to Gutu had this to say:

A journey to Masvingo city where I normally get buses to Gutu my rural home normally cost Rand 100.00-R150.00 from Beitbridge. However, when I came, there was no transport at the usual hiking place, Total Service Station Beitbridge. Instead, there were long distance trucks called ‘magonyeti’. At the time touts were also very marauding since they were playing hide and seek with law enforcement. It was not easy to secure a seat on these trucks. The only way was to pay a tout some money. I paid Rand 50 to the young man who helped me get into the truck and for the journey I paid R 300.00 (G16, 02/09/2021)

Police are one arm that has a mandate to grant permits to the public for inter-city

travel. The outcomes for travel were two. It would either be granted or denied. Private vehicle owners also feared transporting hikers because of the fear of numerous police roadblocks mounted along the Beitbridge Masvingo highway. The only remaining options feasible at the time were haulage and commercial trucks, as they were allowed to connect to other cities. Eighty percent of the respondents indicated that they used haulage trucks to get to Masvingo, after which those proceeding to Gutu and Zaka had to hike for small private vehicles. Twenty percent of the respondents indicated that they contacted their relatives to come and collect them in private vehicles, but they could not immediately get assistance. They got delayed at the border and had to proceed after a few days. Fifty percent of the respondents indicated that they had barely enough financial resources left after arriving at the border. The other 50 percent highlighted either having not received payment from previous employers. Others indicated that they had sent money earlier on to their families.

Irregular migration, irregular mobility, tight Covid 19 restrictions, and exposure to the pandemic

In line with the aforementioned point, the study also revealed that the more one is a deportee when COVID-19 restrictions are too tight, the higher the probability of them using irregular transport. In this study, irregular transport is used as a proxy for all other transportation modes that are not designated as safe public transport. During that time, haulage trucks made up the bulk of transport since they were able to move from one city to another. About 80 percent of the respondents who used haulage trucks to connect to their home areas highlighted the risk of exposure to the pandemic by being overcrowded in haulage trucks. Thirty percent of these respondents who used trucks indicated that they were crammed in trucks at some point, amounting to 7 people. This meant that there was no physical and social distancing in the haulage trucks used for mobility. The study shows that irregular migration begets irregular mobility, increasing exposure to Covid 19.

Law enforcement and Covid 19

Respondents who used haulage trucks indicated that most drivers for these trucks seemed not to have problems passing through manned roadblocks. Despite the law making clear the need for people to adhere to social distancing protocols, the law seemed not to apply to trucks. Some respondents indicated the possibility of collusion between law enforcers manning roadblocks and truck drivers. Despite numerous roadblocks and non-compliance with health protocols, most trucks safely passed. Several respondents suspected that truck drivers were negotiating their way through the roadblocks.

G16 also recounted one of her experiences along the way:

On approaching Ngundu Business Centre, traffic cops ahead of us flagged our driver to stop. The trucker pulled off the road behind other trucks.

Before he disembarked from the truck, he took with him a USD 5⁷ bill from the dashboard and banged the door, closing it and heading to the cops. What happened we did not see with other truck occupants since the truck parked far away from where the cops gathered. In no time, he came back but with one police officer. The young cop opened the door and simply encouraged us to wear face masks and wished us a safe journey. Off we left, leaving the other trucks just queuing. (G16, 02/09/2021)

Transport costs and COVID-19

Ninety percent of the respondents highlighted that fares for most places had doubled during mobility to their homes. This is because demand for transportation was very high, whereas supply was constrained. This had the effect of bidding up transport fares. A journey from Beitbridge to Masvingo town was now being charged at United States Dollars 20 or South African Rands 250. This only made it difficult for most deportees given limited support for safe return.

Revolving door syndrome, female irregular deportees, and Covid 19

When used in relation to migration, Revolving door syndrome can be defined as repeat migration, Jackson and Hoque (2022). It is thus a situation that happens when deportees return to their country of destination once they are deported. About 75 percent of the respondents indicated their willingness to retrace their way back to South Africa despite having been deported earlier in spite of the uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. Reasons they gave for returning included collecting payments from clients, having no work to do at home, collecting outstanding salaries from employees, and feeling 'unwanted' in local communities.

To sum up, the tightening of COVID-19 measures is less likely to tame irregular migration for irregular female migrants in Zimbabwe. This finding has some similarity to that of a survey in Niger which showed that 91 percent of the people were willing to migrate despite COVID-19's impact on mobility (UNODC 2021). Thus, irregular migration under study also conforms to revolving migration syndrome.

4. Discussions and Policy Recommendations

The future of the pandemic remains a big unknown. Should it re-escalate, economies are left with no option but to re-introduce hard lockdowns with all their attendant risks as well as seal their physical borders. For an economy such as Zimbabwe, given the already debilitating socio-economic challenges, it will mean more trouble. In all these dynamics, the plight of women who are caught in the wave of irregular migration becomes exacerbated. What, then, should be done to help alleviate their circumstances? The study enlightened some of the harrowing narratives of what

⁷ Since 2009, Zimbabwe has been using a basket of currencies. Popular foreign currencies in use include the Rand, USD, Pula among others.

some of these had to endure. Informed by the findings in the study and literature elsewhere, we recommend actionable policies to help irregular female migrants. We opine that the majority of the policies must be aimed at discouraging irregular migration from the onset, either directly or indirectly.

Psycho-Social Support

The study showed that there is a need for support of migrants in general and female irregular migrants in particular. Besides financial and material support, psycho-social support of the female deportees is important to enable them to cope with the dilemma Covid 19 induced in societies. There are certain dynamics caused directly or indirectly by the pandemic to societies. For instance, during the time, quite a number of returnees from South Africa found it difficult to be easily accepted by friends as well as relatives due to the fear that they were coming from South Africa, the hot spot of the pandemic. Psycho-social support ensures that the deportees can easily gel well with their respective families and society in general. Support of this nature targeted to the deportees themselves, especially during arrival, will help to prepare them as they make their way to communities already burdened by the marauding effects of the pandemic. The findings of this study concur with that of Matose et al. (2022) on the need for support of Zimbabwean women who migrate to Botswana clandestinely, especially during Covid 19.

Empowerment of Women in Development Agendas of their Local Communities

This is an indirect, long-term, but effective strategy to discourage women from rightly partaking in irregular migration journeys. It is vital to foster women's participation of women in development projects of their communities. This helps to empower them through the creation of streams of income and fostering a sense of belongingness in communities. It is key to highlight that the program's target population should range from 30-40 years. We posit that this cohort is likely to have the highest impact in communities. The study found the average age of the deportees is around 31.35 years; hence, taking the range of 30-40 years can have a better impact as chances for migration are very high. Once they are empowered around this age, the probability of discouraging their migration is higher also.

The study showed that the tendency for repeat migration is high among irregular female migrants. Seventy-five percent of the respondents highlighted that they are likely to retrace their steps back to South Africa despite the dangers associated with these dangers. Developmental programs that empower women in their communities can actually be of importance in helping out. Self Help Groups (SHGs) targeting women in impoverished communities have worked elsewhere. Countries such as India and Bangladesh have helped communities. In Zimbabwe, institutions targeting women empowerment, for instance, the Women Empower Bank, can be modeled to enhance accessibility by more women. Women tend to be much more honest about paying back debts than their male counterparts. On top of this, empowered women tend to spend more towards the betterment of their families than males.

Institutional Capacity Development and Collaboration of Key Institutions

The study indicated the challenges in mobility by the deportees trapped in the COVID-19 pandemic as they make their way to their places of origin. The respondents highlighted the risks of being exposed to infection by the pandemic and increased mobility costs as realities they face. There is a need for departments such as Home Affairs, Social Welfare, Red Cross, IOM, and other departments seized with affairs of migrants in one way or another. If they get adequate resources and foster working together, they are instrumental in ensuring safe deportee migration to their final places. Despite having the status of being irregular and the stigma attached to it, this target population requires dignity and has rights that should be considered as well. Besides this, the women, in their capacities, have also been useful in supporting families back home through remittances in various forms.

Attitude of Society- The Need for Education and Awareness

During the study, we found out that there is often a ‘stigma’ associated with returning residents, especially if they came back through the ‘deportation’ route. In the interviews, one of the respondents highlighted that she was often a subject of scorn and ridicule and a subject of fun among her peers. One of the interviews indicated that some of her peers would often laugh at her, calling her denigrating statements such ‘*Veku diasporer tipei zvamakauya nazvo*’. Translated into English, this statement means, ‘Those from the diaspora give us what you brought’ despite fully knowing that the mission has been difficult. This is especially true among young deportees. On the other hand, most mature deportees did not encounter the problem of being laughed at. Instead, the challenge is mostly being looked at with self-pity among community peers who are equally struggling. This caused problems such as low esteem among the deportees.

Covid 19 created a lot of uncertainty, hostilities, and frustrations among communities, especially when Covid 19 was highly contagious. As highlighted in most parts of this study, coming from South Africa was not very welcome, given how the country was experiencing infections en masse. The government, through agencies such as the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Information, was supposed to be key in ensuring that they increased awareness to general society about COVID-19 best practices and the need to manage deportees’ arrivals.

Continuous Bilateral Engagements between Governments – Case of Good Migration Governance

In the study, we highlighted how close cooperation between the governments of Armenia, Turkey, and Georgia helped facilitate the smooth passage of migrants in what the author calls a case of good migration governance. Zimbabwe and South Africa can also take a leaf from this. Proper communication and engagement at the bilateral level are important to ensure that the deportees were not ‘offloaded or dumped’ at the port exit without a plan to ensure safe passage to final destinations. While South Africa has no jurisdiction over what may happen in the territory of its

neighbor, the fact that migrants from neighboring states are playing a significant role in propping its economy should invoke a sense of responsibility to also assist deportees, at least in a way that is characterized by close cooperation with receiving country.

Political Will and Commitment by Own Government towards Deportees

Whilst other deportees may have flown out of the country due to issues such as political persecution at their respective places in the country of origin, the government needs to ensure the safety of its citizens. Often, some respondents raised their concern about fear of political retribution. If they do not get enough support and integration, they opt for irregular migration as an escape route from persecution. The government should be sprung to action to ensure it also plays a key mediation role to ensure no escalation of politically related tensions. Engagement and conscientization of local leadership to allow these processes is crucial.

Importance of Law Enforcement During Covid 19

COVID-19 response measures the world over saw the use of security personnel by governments to help enforce proclaimed measures. City-to-city travel was prohibited during the peak of COVID-19 with the exception of commercial as well as haulage trucks; manned roadblocks ensured that this measure was enforced. Respondents who used mostly haulage trucks for transport indicated how they easily passed roadblocks, besides which they suspected connivance between truck drivers and security personnel at the checkpoints. With lax enforcement of response measures, the study posits that this will increase the vulnerability of the mobile deportees as well as exposure of those they may encounter should they carry the virus. Enforcement agents should, therefore, adhere to enforcement measures.

Long-Lasting Solution to the Zimbabwe Economic Crisis

The crisis of migration by Zimbabweans is now well documented. Therefore, we submit the need for a lasting solution to the crisis as the major drivers of the migrations, either regular or irregular, have been motivated primarily by economic factors. Figure 3 has shown the quick contraction of GDP around 2016 until the pandemic year of 2020; in part, it could explain migration flows, though not the primary focus of this study. Moreover, it has been established that employment in South Africa by irregular female migrants is not instantaneous. Migrants, mostly with less than three years of stay, were likely to experience some unemployment. This implies that Zimbabwe should make efforts to revive the economy towards a sustained trajectory. This goes a long way in discouraging migration flows, as people will have confidence in their economy. Even deportees considering repeat migration may be discouraged if they see hope in the local economy. They do see the costs and benefits of migration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study examined the experiences of Zimbabwean women on irregular migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic worsened their already precarious conditions, including further exposure to infections, increased traveling costs as well as alienation at home on arrival. The study has shown the need for holistic solutions addressing the needs of this population engaged in risky irregular migration. A long-lasting solution to the crisis in Zimbabwe will also go a long way in helping reduce irregular migrations. For women, irregular migration tends to be the last resort. The study's main limitation is that dealing with irregular migrants is not easy. They are a mobile population who are not easy to locate. Moreover, getting them to cooperate fully was not easy as they may see no direct incentive to be obtained.

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Appendix

Appendix A1. Profile of Migrants Interviewed

Name	Age	Marital Status	Education Level	District of origin	Length of stay in South Africa	Type of Occupation in South Africa
M1	17	No	Secondary	Masvingo	1 year	Unemployed
M2	25	Yes	Secondary	Masvingo	3 years	Domestic worker
M3	34	Yes	Secondary	Masvingo	5 years	Vendor
M4	40	No	Primary	Masvingo	8 years	Domestic worker
M5	17	No	Primary	Masvingo	10 months	Domestic worker
M6	23	No	Secondary	Masvingo	1.5 years	Restaurant helper
M7	29	Yes	Tertiary	Masvingo	3 years	Restaurant helper
M8	37	Yes	Tertiary	Masvingo	5 years	Farm laborer
M9	48	Yes	Secondary	Masvingo	13 years	Farm laborer
M10	43	No	Secondary	Masvingo	9 years	Shop assistant
G11	19	Yes	Secondary	Gutu	3 years	Unemployed
G12	25	Yes	Secondary	Gutu	4 years	Vendor
G13	43	No	Tertiary	Gutu	8 years	Farm laborer
G14	35	Yes	Primary	Gutu	5 years	Vendor
G15	23	No	Secondary	Gutu	2 years	Unemployed
G16	25	Yes	Secondary	Gutu	4.5 years	Domestic worker
Z17	37	Yes	Secondary	Zaka	11 years	Farm laborer
Z18	40	No	Primary	Zaka	3 years	Restaurant helper
Z19	34	No	Tertiary	Zaka	7 years	Shop assistant
Z20	33	Yes	Tertiary	Zaka	5 years	Nursery assistant

Source: Fieldwork (2021)