

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ZIMBABWEAN IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

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Abstract:

COVID-19's outbreak in China at the end of 2019 and its expansion to South Africa have had a detrimental socioeconomic impact on Zimbabwean migrants and refugees in South Africa, and immigrants and refugees are the hardest hit during the pandemic. The South African government's lockdown measures shut down non-essential industries such as travel and tourism, construction, and e-hailing services, where most Zimbabwean migrants and refugees work as frontline workers. Some individuals are employed by shady businesses that cannot afford to pay them during downtime. Others ran unregistered enterprises that were denied access to business relief packages due to technicalities. Furthermore, only a small percentage of the estimated 2 million Zimbabwean immigrants and refugees are documented to meet the access requirements for the aid packages. The government's ostensibly all-encompassing COVID-19 relief package requirements were as disparate as they were on paper. Negative nationalism, which sparked xenophobic attacks in 2008, 2015, and 2019, appears to underpin the government's foreign policy framework and attitude. According to the findings, the lockdown resulted in the loss of work, abject poverty, and broken marriages among Zimbabwean immigrants. To live, many turned to prostitution, drug dealing, and rampant opportunism.

Keywords: Xenophobic, immigrants, refugees, stimulus, discrimination.

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INTRODUCTION

Marginalization and discrimination against migrants and refugees during a global pandemic are not new (Nendirmwa, 2020). The situation worsens for undocumented people who get excluded from government relief and health services through political, social-economic, and legal glass ceilings. Migrants and refugees are often accused of exerting additional pressure on the host country's resources which are already meager in the case of developing economies. In situations culminating in extreme marginalization and discrimination, they are accused of being carriers of viruses that cause global pandemics. Carter (2020) indicates that in the 1890s, in the USA, Eastern Europe Jews were victimized as carriers of typhus and cholera, Chinese were suspected to be carriers of Smallpox and Bubonic plague, while in the 1980s, the Haitians were labeled high-risk for HIV transmission. The same can be said for global migrants and refugees during the outbreak of COVID-19 in Huwan in, China, in the last quarter of 2020. After the outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019, Portugal was one of the countries that granted all migrants and refugees temporary residence permits to access social and health benefits, banking accounts, and work and accommodation contracts (UNAIDS, 2020).

Contrary to suggestions by Brandenberger, Baauw & Ritz (2020) that governments must make the welfare of migrants and refugees part of the global response to COVID-19, there is evidence of

them being excluded from relief packages in some countries. Wilson and Stimpson (2020) show that migrants in the USA, especially those without legal resident papers, faced challenges in accessing health and that the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act does not include any options for illegal migrants to get access to government insurance. The situation for Zimbabwean migrants and refugees in South Africa is not different; in this chapter, we discuss the impact COVID-19 has had on Zimbabwean migrants and refugees in the country. The discussions will unpack the socioeconomic challenges and opportunities. A qualitative approach will be used for data collection and analysis. The chapter will also recommend dealing with migrants and refugees during the pandemic.

The deterioration and subsequent collapse of the Zimbabwean economy in the 1990s and a tense political environment witnessed a great exodus of Zimbabweans seeking employment and asylum in different countries worldwide. Chikanda and Crush (2018) believe that most Zimbabweans prefer settling in neighboring countries, especially South Africa. The robust transport network that links South Africa and Zimbabwe makes it possible for the movement of people en masse between the two countries. As quoted in Africa Check (2019), Moultrie argues that despite limited data on the number of Zimbabweans in South Africa, they are at least two million. The country's vast and vibrant economy makes it a hub for the region's economic activity attracting many migrants from countries experiencing economic and political problems from the SADC region, especially from Zimbabwe (Loreta, 2020). The influx of Zimbabwean migrants and refugees into South Africa at a high magnitude has both negative and positive impacts on South Africa. Shellito (2016) argues that while migrants and refugees can stimulate long-term economic investment, bring scarce skills, and integrate into the country's production and consumption, they can also be a burden to the country's ability to offer services to its citizens; they catalyze the scramble for resources and promote economic over-crowding. The negative impact of migrants and refugees on host countries is echoed by Baloch, Shah, Noor & Lacheheb (2017) that Afghan refugees impact the economic growth of Pakistan negatively both in the short term and long term. They reiterate that the influx of refugees results in sluggish economic activity.

According to Crush, Chikanda, and Tawodzera (2016), migration into South Africa happens at semi-permanent and permanent levels. This argument is consistent with Ekanade and Molapo (2017)'s view that Zimbabweans arrive in South Africa as circular migrants and then as permanent residents. South Africa does not put refugees in designated camps but allows them to integrate into the community and compete with citizens on resources, including employment. Their economic status dictates that they settle mostly in informal settlements with inherent anti-foreign sentiments.

The influx of migrants and refugees into South Africa occurs when the South African economy collapses. The Mail and Guardian (2020a, March 4) report that the country is in recession for the third time since 1994 and that there has been a GDP negative growth of 1.4%. The economic decline is causing abject poverty among citizens and high levels of unemployment, triggering protests and rebellion. Lack of service delivery and corruption has been the cause of rebellion from people with low incomes since 2004 (Alexander, 2010). Research and available literature suggest that most Zimbabweans who relocate to South Africa normally settle in informal settlements, exacerbating resource competition between foreign nationals and South Africans. Since less threatening stimuli displace a more threatening stimulus, the citizen's anger which should be directed at the government for failing to provide service delivery has been directed to foreigners. As a result, South Africa experienced Xenophobic attacks in 2008, 2015 (Ekanade & Molapo, 2017), and 2019. The Authors indicated that 40 foreigners were killed in 2008 in these incidents of Xenophobic attacks. These conflicts prompted the Zimbabwean and South African governments to enter into bilateral talks to

formalize the stay of illegal migrants and refugees by issuing them special work permits in the Zimbabwe Documentation Project (ZDP).

While South Africa was busy with the resuscitation of the economy and challenges associated with high unemployment rates, a COVID-19 outbreak in China was announced in the last quarter of 2019, spreading globally without control (Sun et al. (2020)). This means that the country started fighting three wars on three fronts: The economy, social and political unrest resulting from lack of service delivery, and dealing with the overwhelming influx of migrants and refugees, mainly Zimbabweans. South Africa was one of the first African countries to be affected due to the high volume of tourists. As was expected, and just like all the Sub-Saharan countries, the immediate reaction was to lock down the country (Nyarko et al., (2020)), so on March 26, 2020, the government, through President Cyril Ramaphosa, announced a lockdown for 21 days in which all companies offering non-essential services were shut down. According to Ozili and Arun (2020), most industries shut down, including hospitality, entertainment, travel, and tourism. The Mail and Guardian (2020a, June 1) report that sectors most of the Zimbabweans migrants and refugees, whether documented or not, were employed in the frontline industries enumerated by Ozili and Arun (2020) but including restaurants, hotels, e-hailing transport services, farmworkers, and domestic workers.

The South African government introduced social relief and economic stimulus packages to deal with the lockdown's consequences. The social relief package was introduced at the back of already existing social grants by the government, through which 17 million people were receiving living aid (SaMRC, 2020). The table below shows Corona's social relief packages and economic status introduced by the government and their requirement:

Table 1. Abridged social relief, economic stimulus, and requirements. Source: Western Cape gvt (2020) and Zembe-Mkabile (2020)

Relief or Stimulus package	Some of the conditions	Some of the requirement
Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grants	South African Citizens, Permanent Residents, or Refugees registered with Home Affairs.	Identity Number
Food parcels	South African Citizens, Permanent Residents, or Refugees registered with Home Affairs.	Identity Number
Economic stimulus in various sectors, including UIF for employers not able to pay staff	Registered entity Tax compliant BEE compliant	Registration documents Tax clearance BEE certificate

Table 1 shows that for individuals or businesses to access relief from the government, they needed to have some form of identification, or as a business, they needed to be registered, tax compliant, and with a BEE certificate. A report by INTEGRATE IMMIGRATION (2014) shows that an estimated 245,000 Zimbabweans have special permits under the ZDP. Although other Zimbabweans are on critical skills work permits which cannot be quantified due to lack of data, the criteria in Table 1 for accessing the relief packages suggests that a huge percentage of them might have been excluded from accessing the packages by the government. Malobola (2020) argues that the Zimbabweans migrants and refugees were not able to work during the lockdown since most of the companies which employed them offered non-essential services and could not get food parcels from the government or stimulus packages for their informal business because either they were not documented or their companies could not meet the criteria. The approach by the government was that whoever was a documented migrant or refugee or registered company with tax clearance and a BEE certificate would get assistance. The challenge is that documented Zimbabwean migrants and

refugees are a small fraction of the estimated two million Zimbabweans living in South Africa. News24 Wire (2020, May 13) reports that the Zimbabwean Embassy was inundated with calls by Zimbabweans in distress and looking for assistance during the lockdown, especially from those who wanted to be repatriated. This chapter is, therefore, motivated by the need to answer the following research question: What was the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on Zimbabweans living in South Africa?

METHODS

Data collection for this chapter is based on an interpretive philosophy to establish the impact of COVID-19 on Zimbabwean migrants and refugees living in South Africa. The study only focused on Western Cape, Gauteng, and Kwa-Zulu-Natal. The three provinces were chosen because of their contribution to the economy of South Africa. They would naturally attract scores of Zimbabwean migrants and refugees for employment and other economic activities, assuming the impact in these areas is replicated in other provinces. Other factors pertinent to the interviewees show the following:

1. Some were documented and employed before the lockdown
2. Some were undocumented and employed before the lockdown
3. Some, documented and undocumented, worked during the lockdown
4. Some own formal and informal businesses shut down during the lockdown

These profiles of the interviewees make the data balanced and more credible. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews to allow respondents to explain their responses freely without restriction and give them the freedom to explain themselves. Bryman (2008) points out that following a rudimentary script potentially prohibits participants from expressing themselves freely.

The study participants were interviewed during level two of the COVID-19 lockdown period in South Africa. Interviews were conducted while the respondents were in the comfort of their homes through a Zoom meeting application, each lasting approximately thirty minutes. Twelve participants of Zimbabwean origin were selected, with four from each of the three provinces. The participants were selected based on their availability for the session. Sometimes criticized for not being a reliable representative of the sample, Leedy and Ormrod (2010) suggest the suitability of convenience sampling in terms of accessibility.

Interview recordings were conducted with the participant's permission and transcribed into a word processor. The study followed the thematic framework approach, which involves diving deeper into the data iteratively to identify themes from the respondents' text. Identified themes from each respondent are accorded a column and presented in a matrix-like form (Ritchie et al., 2003) with themes on the horizontal axis and respondents on the vertical axis. For anonymity (Saunders et al., 2015), the study uses pseudonyms to protect respondents' privacy.

As in Ryan and Bernard (2003), theme development was two-fold: inductively and a priori themes based on personal in-depth experiences of foreign nationals. In addition, two interviewers took turns to ask the respondents using simple English registers consistent with respondents at all levels of academic qualification. The study used member checking with researchers going back to participants to verify what they meant from the identified constructs recorded within the matrices. Hussey and Hussey (1997) outline the importance of respondent checking to reach saturation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section reports on findings from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the refugees and immigrants of Zimbabwean origin. Following the Framework thematic analysis, we tabulate the themes from the different respondents. Of the 12 participants, all claimed they had legal papers



to be in South Africa. The researcher should have taken the initiative to verify the validity of the documents as it was outside the scope of the research. Table 3 presents a summary of common categories identified by the respondents.

Table 2. Summary of responses

	Loss of income	Loss of social status	Prostitution	Failure to fulfill cultural responsibility	Unfair treatment at schools or hospitals	Unfair distribution or services
Respondent 1	X	x		x		
Respondent 2	X	x	x	x		x
Respondent 3	X			x		x
Respondent 4	X			x		x
Respondent 5	X	x				x
Respondent 6	X			x		x
Respondent 7	X	x				x
Respondent 8	X		x	x		
Respondent 9	X	x				x
Respondent 10	X	x		x		
Respondent 11	X			x		x
Respondent 12	X	x				x

The study used constant occurrences of the categories to come up with key themes discussed below:

1. Socioeconomic challenges
2. cultural challenges

All the 12 respondents echoed the same sentiments that they were impacted economically in one way or another as some businesses faced challenges. Respondent 1, who operated a small business providing people with food takeaways, when asked whether she lost some income, said:

"I kept open, but the sales were meager. ... My sales revenue used to range from R1500 to R2000 a day before lockdown, but during the lockdown, it plummeted to R100 a day."

Respondent 2, a driver by profession, said they were put on unpaid leave to cater to the longest-serving members. However, he mentioned they were promised to be called back when business resumed. He mentioned that "the shift from a full salary to nothing is an experience never to be repeated."

Despite the South African government making initiatives to assist all those affected, most foreign nationals seemingly still need to receive the TERS fund and UIF assistance, much to the

disappointment of many who claim that they contribute monthly. He said, "Then I only saw the food parcels on tv. I do not know who got it. I am not sure whether it is because I am a foreign national. Maybe there were given to local people or....."

Respondent 8 mentioned that most Zimbabweans in the tourism and hospitality industry lost their jobs and income. There was some feeling that foreign nationals were unfairly treated. Respondent 8 also said they went to the bank to borrow money for a small startup, and their application was declined for no clear reason. They suspected that it was based on their nationality. He said, "I went to a bank with my friend to apply for a loan to start a business, but the bank just declined us without any valid response. Maybe because we are foreigners."

The data shows that there was no evidence of their children being discriminated against by schools nor of them as parents failing to fulfill their obligations as parents due to policies from schools excluding children from foreign nationals. The indication was that since the children were part of collective decision-making and were put in WhatsApp groups to access their homework, it was tough to show dislike for foreigners by school administration or teachers. None of the respondents experienced hostile treatment from hospitals, as the indication was that few who visited hospitals for reasons unrelated to COVID-19 got fair treatment.

Socioeconomic challenges. The respondents indicated that they worked in services considered risky to spread COVID-19; these industries include travel, tourism, construction, truck-driving, construction, e-hailing, and restaurants. The closure of these industries during the lockdown period resulted in the loss of jobs, which led to the loss of income. Coupled with the loss of income is social status. Half of the respondents felt they had lost their social status and confidence. One of the respondents (Respondent 8) mentioned that people had resorted to different things to survive. She said some have gone to the "extent of selling their bodies" just to survive. She also mentioned that some people had resorted to staying with family members and friends since they could not afford the rent. Responding to how they managed after failing to pay rent, Respondent 10 mentioned, "Some ended up to squeezing up for the meantime, and others relocated to the locations where rentals are cheaper." It will be recalled that some of the people even moved to informal settlements well known for crime and drugs. Despite these places being predominantly unsafe, people had no choice. This was supported by Respondent 5, who said, "If I were in Zimbabwe, I would not have to pay rent, but because I am in a foreign land, some of the landlords do not care about the effects of COVID-19". Nonetheless, Respondent 1 commended her landlord as she accommodated her by meeting halfway for the rentals.

The adjustment required to deal with the devastating effects of COVID-19, particularly the economic ones, caused much Psychological distress. The respondents indicated they failed to pay their debts incurred through hire purchases. Some of the documented Zimbabweans have taken loans from financial institutions, where there was no arrangement, and had to continue paying without a stable source of income. Some interviewees who relied on informal businesses suffered the distress of both loss of income and the prospect of them reopening the same business.

There was also the issue of rules enforced during a lockdown, which made it impossible for foreign nationals to visit friends and families. Respondent 11 mentioned that "being far from home and unable to visit friends put us in a very stressful state." The statement was supported by Respondent 2, who echoed that while rules were implemented to ensure health and safety precautions were always observed, it was tough for people to stay indoors, especially with kids. So, the findings reflect how the COVID-19 pandemic affected people, local nationals included.

Cultural challenges. Most foreign nationals, particularly Zimbabweans, have strong cultural beliefs which they follow irrespective of their being in a foreign land. For instance, when one dies, he/she has to be buried in the ancestral land. The surviving relatives consider it an obligation to

participate in the burial ceremony. This is done as a sign of belonging. Failure is often suspected to bring bad luck to those who do not attend. When asked if they managed to support families back home [Zimbabwe] during the COVID-19 pandemic, Respondent 10 said:

No. I couldn't because at least they are home. From a cultural perspective, I could not bury my cousin, who died during the pandemic. Moreover, you know how significant in my culture if I go [not] participate in the burial, but I could not do it because the border closed. Most respondents indicated they wanted to visit families and friends and attend cultural events back home [Zimbabwe] but needed help due to lockdown rules.

The study's findings support the idea that immigrants and refugees of Zimbabwean origin were greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. While none of the respondents indicated having been infected by the disease, they were somehow affected. Initially, we thought learners were affected by discrimination, but the results confirmed otherwise. Our initial belief was that when resources are constricted, preferences will be affected. All the respondents with school-going kids mentioned that they never experienced preferential treatment for kids at school. In addition, those who visited social facilities such as hospitals were full of appraisal to the staff members of these institutions they visited. However, these results need to be treated cautiously as most of the samples were people who would not be expected to compete for free services.

Nonetheless, it is a positive experience that needs to be commended. Another positive to emerge from the study was online technologies for learning and religious gatherings. However, we did not find the extensive use of social platforms to communicate with families at home or attend cultural gatherings such as funerals online.

Unlike social services such as hospitals and schools, most respondents felt that the distribution of the Unemployment Insurance Fund, TERS (COVID-19 relief fund), and food parcels was unevenly and fairly. Although most respondents indicated that they contributed to UIF, they have yet to report receiving the payment or the food parcels. The evidence from this study confirms that immigrants and refugees are impacted the most in cases of such pandemics as COVID-19 since they do not have proper support structures in foreign nations or come from their home countries. Home countries offer transportation at most, but the support seems to seize once they reach their home countries, leaving them always at the border of support structures.

CONCLUSION

The study used constant occurrences of the categories to come up with key themes discussed below:

Respondent 2, a driver by profession, said they were put on unpaid leave to cater to the longest-serving members. Despite the South African government making initiatives to assist all those affected, most foreign nationals seemingly still need to receive the TERS fund and UIF assistance, much to the disappointment of many who claim that they contribute monthly. « I am not sure whether it is because I am a foreign national. » Respondent 8 mentioned that most Zimbabweans in the tourism and hospitality industry lost their jobs and income.

There was some feeling that foreign nationals were unfairly treated. Respondent 8 also said they went to the bank to borrow money for a small startup, and their application was declined for no clear reason. The data shows that there was no evidence of their children being discriminated against by schools nor of them as parents failing to fulfill their obligations as parents due to policies from schools excluding children from foreign nationals. None of the respondents experienced hostile treatment from hospitals, as the indication was that few who visited hospitals for reasons unrelated to COVID-19 got fair treatment.

Half of the respondents felt they had lost their social status and confidence. One of the respondents mentioned that people had resorted to different things to survive. Responding to how they managed after failing to pay rent, Respondent 10 mentioned, «Some ended up to squeezing up for the meantime, and others relocated to the locations where rentals are cheaper.» It will be recalled that some of the people even moved to informal settlements well known for crime and drugs. The adjustment required to deal with the devastating effects of COVID-19, particularly the economic ones, caused much Psychological distress.

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Most foreign nationals, particularly Zimbabweans, have strong cultural beliefs which they follow irrespective of their being in a foreign land. I couldn't because at least they are home. From a cultural perspective, I could not bury my cousin, who died during the pandemic. Most respondents indicated they wanted to visit families and friends and attend cultural events back home but needed help due to lockdown rules.

The study's findings support the idea that immigrants and refugees of Zimbabwean origin were greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. While none of the respondents indicated having been infected by the disease, they were somehow affected. All the respondents with school-going kids mentioned that they never experienced preferential treatment for kids at school. Unlike social services such as hospitals and schools, most respondents felt that the distribution of the Unemployment Insurance Fund, TERS, and food parcels was unevenly and fairly.

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