

## **SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL FEMALE MIGRANT YOUTH IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE CASE OF FEMALE REFUGEES IN A SELECTED CHURCH IN MUSINA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative research sought to explore sustainable livelihoods for the international female migrant youth in South Africa by using a narrative theory. South Africa has a number of the international female migrant youth coming from countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) who migrated to the country for better standards of living and sustainable livelihoods. Studies reveal that during their quest to seek a better life, female migrants face various challenges which impede their successful adaptation in South African communities. There are no studies specifically conducted in Musina to allow female migrant youth to narrate strategies for their sustainable livelihoods given the challenges they face. Thus, nine female refugees in a selected church in Musina were conveniently and purposefully selected as a case study to pursue the aim of the current research. Data was collected through semi-structured face to face interviews and were analysed thematically with the assistance of the Nvivo software. Findings reveal that female migrants find it difficult to secure jobs in South Africa because of their undocumented status. For their sustainable livelihoods, female migrant youth employ different strategies to mitigate hunger and unemployment which include street vending, setting up hair salons and doing menial jobs such as cleaning, washing for South African households. The study has also found that female migrant youth have an entrepreneurial mind as they have established certain strategies to survive under extreme hardships. It can thus be concluded from this study that female migrant youth in South Africa are faced with unpleasant challenges upon their arrival leading them to making tough decisions on how they are going to survive, hence their involvement in the informal sector. Skills based programmes to empower immigrants should be established in order to assist those who cannot find employment.

**Keywords:** Coping strategy, International female migrant youth, Survival strategy, Sustainable livelihood, South Africa.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The history of migration to South Africa is lengthy and spans several centuries (Dinbabo & Nyasulu, 2015). Migration increased in South Africa when the country was at the height of economic growth, where South Africa's indigenous labour was not sufficient to meet the growing demand for cheap labour, resulting in the recruitment of labour from neighbouring countries. Currently, South Africa has an entry of both international and cross-border immigrants who migrated to the country for better employment opportunities and education, and in some cases to offer cheap labour (Bisrat, 2014). It should be noted that people migrate to other countries with the expectation of better living conditions, access to employment and economic opportunities. Moreover, some others, after migrating, realize that they had

overestimated their destination country, not taking into consideration negative elements that they could encounter (Kanayo & Anjofui, 2020). The international female migrant youth, upon their arrival in South Africa are faced with various challenges such as unemployment and poverty which makes it hard for them to successfully adapt in their new environments as they had anticipated that the country would open for them many doors of opportunities. Through these experiences, such immigrants develop coping strategies to become resilient in their host communities. Conradie and Robeyns (2013) assert that contrary circumstances in host nations can cause migrants to adapt their aspirations as well as develop new ones to align with their current circumstances, thereby acquiring capabilities for survival. Nevertheless, to a certain extent migration makes significant contributions to social change and cultural interaction in the countries concerned, leading to different kinds of development both in the home and receiving countries. It specifically presents immigrants with important opportunities to make progress in recognizing their identity in the diaspora and a mechanism to empower them in the host country (Abella, 2013; Alonso, 2011; Gsir, 2014). When immigrants accept their new realities in host nations, they then come up with alternative ways of survival, thereby employing various coping strategies that would earn them money to buy necessities and send home.

Kanayo and Anjofui (2020) postulate that in order to deal with the reality of unemployment, most immigrants resort to looking for other survival alternatives, for instance self-employment or picking up casual jobs such as cleaning, working in restaurants, security, working as domestic servants, or setting up businesses for themselves. In the same breath, De Haas (2014) denotes that capabilities are the real freedoms that shape people's destinies and that when capabilities are expanded the freedoms are positive and when people are open to opportunities it will help them have control over their own lives, hence expanding their human capabilities and increasing the quality of their lives. Given that female migrant youth face challenges in South Africa, this research sought to explore their sustainable livelihoods in the country.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

South Africa has a long history of cross-border migration from surrounding countries and is the main migrant-receiving country in the region. Migration to South Africa is often a household 'poverty reduction strategy' (Black, Crush, Peberdy, Ammassari, Hilker, Mouillesseaux, Pooley & Rajkotia, 2006) and therefore forms part of a survival strategy for some households who depend on the remittances sent by those who have migrated. Some immigrants cross illegally into South Africa to meet the demand for cheap and seasonal non-contractual labour that undocumented migrants can offer in certain sectors of the economy (Global Commission for International Migrants [GCIM], 2005). However, upon their arrival in South Africa, migrants often find themselves under very challenging circumstances such as unemployment, lack of decent housing, social exclusion with no access to social services. Zimbabwean undocumented migrants, for example are shown to be marginalized and vulnerable with limited transnational capabilities, which in turn limits remittance activities and therefore negatively impacts on families in Zimbabwe who are dependent on the remittances of those living in South Africa, as well as elsewhere in the diaspora. Crush, McDonald, Williams, Lefko-Everett, Dorey, Taylor & la Sablonniere (2008) assert that immigrants in South Africa can experience xenophobia and violence regardless of their immigration status, with some arguing that this is a consequence of the isolation caused by apartheid. This study

involved the international female migrant youth in South Africa after the researchers observed that there is no research which specifically and rigorously offered female immigrants the opportunity to narrate their experiences towards their sustainable livelihoods.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was guided by the narrative theory which was developed by Michael White and David Epston in the 1970's. This theory is primarily about how accounts of what happened to particular people in particular circumstances can be so common and so powerful at once with particular consequences. Narrative theory is also about how stories help people make sense of the world, and also how people make sense of the stories. According to Bal (2004), narrative theory is adopted when one puts forward information about occurrences that have occurred, may or may not occur. This theory was useful in discovering various strategies employed by female migrants in Musina towards their sustainable livelihoods.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study followed a qualitative research which according to Hammarberg, Kirkman and de Lacey (2016) helps researchers to understand people's behaviours and perceptions. This research approach allowed the researchers to obtain detailed information on the strategies female migrant youth employ for their sustainable livelihoods and also presented an opportunity for them to give in-depth information on how they have managed to come up with such strategies to mitigate their experiences. To pursue the aim of the study, the researchers followed an exploratory case study design to explore the strategies employed by migrant female youth in Musina for their sustainable livelihoods. This research design allowed the researchers to engage in the female migrants' daily activities and experiences in the host nation to gain an intimate understanding of their social worlds and to examine the meanings they give to such experiences. Nine female migrant youth were conveniently and purposefully selected to participate in this study. Data was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews guided by an interview schedule with open ended questions. Through the semi-structured interviews, the opportunity to have a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences through probing and asking follow-up questions was easier. Data was analysed thematically in this study through the help of the Nvivo Software. To ensure the quality of the findings, credibility, conformability, transferability and dependability were followed. Credibility through prolonged engagement, member checking and peer examination was ensured, and field notes were written directly after each interview with each female migrant for auditing purposes in order to ensure the conformability of the findings. Data was correctly coded for dependability purposes. Data was gathered from a small number of respondents until saturation (n = 09).

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

An ethical clearance was obtained from Turfloop Research and Ethics Committee (TREC) of the University of Limpopo with project number TREC/155/2020: PG; permission to conduct the research was granted by Musina Local Municipality in the Limpopo Province, and also by

churches that manage shelters for refugees in Musina. The aim of this study as well as the voluntary nature of participants' participation were clearly explained to the participants and after they verbally agreed to participate in the study, they as well signed consent forms. Confidentiality in the study was ensured by keeping the names and identities of the participants private.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Before findings are discussed below, a profile of participants is presented.

### Profile of Participants

**Table 1: Profile of participants**

Name of participant	Age	Employment status	Country of Origin
Participant A	30	Self-employed	Zimbabwe
Participant B	30	Self employed	Zimbabwe
Participant C	25	Unemployed	Zimbabwe
Participant D	29	Unemployed	Zimbabwe
Participant E	35	Self employed	Zimbabwe
Participant F	34	Self employed	Zimbabwe
Participant G	18	Unemployed	Zimbabwe
Participant H	33	Unemployed	Zimbabwe
Participant I	35	Unemployed	Zimbabwe

The table above shows that all participants were youth according to the South African definition of youth (18-35) and originate from Zimbabwe. However, this does not mean that only Zimbabwean female migrant youth encounter challenges in South Africa in their daily lives as opposed to those from other countries. A possible reason to only end with female migrant youth from Zimbabwe who participated in this study is that they were the only available female migrants from the shelter where this study was conducted. The table above further shows that four participants are unemployed whereas five do self-employment. This suggests that many female migrant youth migrating to South Africa often find it difficult to secure employment to support themselves and their families back home. However, it cannot be concluded that all females who migrate to South Africa face similar challenges with regard to finding employment upon their arrival. The following are themes that emerged after the interviews with the migrant female youth:

### Theme 1: Street Vending

A number of participants have indicated that, because of their poor circumstances and difficulties in finding employment in South Africa due to their lack of immigration permits, they were forced to come up with their own ways of surviving because nobody wants to stay on the streets or turn to drugs, or prostitution. During the interviews, the researchers have noted that many participants are involved in the enterpreneurial activities for their sustainable livelihoods. The participants highlighted that they have turned to selling various food items

such as fruits and vegetable on the streets as a means of survival. In support of this, South African Institute of International Affairs [SAIIA] (2008), Northcote 2015 and Hiralal (2015) assert that the informal sector has been an important source of livelihood for many women immigrants wherein many are likely to work as hawkers, street traders and vendors. Participant B echoed that:

*“Me I’m self-employed. Selling fruits and vegetables in town, me now I am selling, you see just now I’m from town now, so I sell fruits, vegetables, eggs and snacks.”*

In the same wavelength, participant A said:

*“...I’m also selling in town. I managed to stock something like Yogi Mageu, Limpopo yoghurt, ice cream. like I have two people they go and sell for me in town, end of the month I pay them, so you see some of the things like that they make me have some money.”*

These findings are not different from several studies conducted in South Africa where it was found that upon their arrival in the country, most international women resort to entrepreneurship as a means of making money and supporting their families (SAIIA, 2008; Maqanda, 2011; Northcote, 2015; Hiralal, 2015; Crush, Tawodzera, Chikanda, Ramachandran & Tevera, 2018) . Female migrant youth in the study have displayed a high sense of entrepreneurship in order to cope with unemployment. Additionally, Kalitanyi and Visser (2010) contend that because of unemployment, immigrants go into entrepreneurship in order to establish a way of living in South Africa and are visible in a narrow band of activities, mostly in the selling of fruits and vegetables towns, retailing ethnic clothes and foods and sometimes operating hairdressing salons.

## **Theme 2: Setting Up Hair Salons**

The participants indicated how difficult it is for them to have money in their pockets to buy basic necessities that they had to use their skills such as to set up hair salons and braid people’s hair for a fee. However, one participant mentioned that she often accepts anything the customer pays, even if it’s just R10 so they can be able to buy something. Participants indicated that their continued desperation makes them prone to customers who take advantage of them and not accept the prices set, but they are however grateful that hair braiding brings in a little something at the end of the day. The researchers have noted how this strategy is beneficial to female migrant youth who are able to provide for themselves if and when they are lucky enough to get customers. Since most migrants in South Africa are unable to access employment in the formal sector, many resorts to the informal sector for their sustainable livelihood (Northcote, 2015). The difficulty of finding formal employment for most female migrants is linked to challenges in accessing proper documentation. Thus, migrants who are largely excluded from the formal sector, display high levels of creativity and enterprise in the informal market (Crush et al., 2015). Below is what one participant E stated:

*“I’m trying to work hard to take care of my children. I’m the mother and I’m the father because the father passed away so eish it’s hard for me to pay rent, buy electricity, to buy food for myself. The only thing I can do is to work, that little thing I find, I send it home to my children. Now I am a hairdresser. That’s how I make extra money besides selling fruits and vegetables in town.”*



In the same wavelength, participant F stated that:

*“I’m just working plaiting hair, I am self-employed. When I’m talking about me, I plait hair. When a plait hair, I will charge money. What I want is money, if she says I have R50 or R20 I do it because what I want is money”*

Participant I added that:

*“Ahh sometimes I just plait people’s hair here in the shelter, like today I have two girls I’m going to plait their hair and they will give me R10 or, R20.”*

It can therefore be deduced from the study findings that hair braiding amongst female migrant youth has proved to be an effective means for their sustainable livelihoods in South Africa to fight poverty and unemployment. Female migrant youth in this study have shown a great desire to work hard and do well for themselves and their children, despite the circumstances they find themselves in. The researchers have noted that because of their desperation for survival, migrant women work really hard to feed their families. Northcote (2015) found that most migrants, whether forced or legally recognised, have trouble in finding employment in the formal economy of South Africa. This is identified as one of the most anxiety-provoking challenges for refugees and asylum seekers (Smit & Rugunanana 2014). It is for this reason that female migrant youth in this study resorted to making money through hairdressing for their sustainable livelihoods.

### **Theme 3: Doing Menial Jobs**

Female migrant youth in this study indicated that it is difficult to secure a permanent job, let alone a temporary one in South Africa, particularly that they do not have documents such as immigration permits. During the interviews, the researchers have noted that poverty pushes female migrant youth into doing menial jobs for a survival. Most of them highlighted the involvement into household duties for South African citizens such as cleaning, washing clothes and looking after children. Cheng (2014) supports this in that, a number of migrant women serve as cheap labourers through their involvement in household and domestic work for their survival. Although they are paid less when they are working for long hours, the menial jobs are helpful and a good source of income, if one is lucky enough to be hired by a few people to work in their homes. Participant H echoed that:

*“when I do piece jobs, maybe I wash and clean the house, and sweeping the yard sometimes paying me R150, and maybe R300 if I also clean the yard. But they don’t give me less than hundred rand, all the time they give me more than R100.”*

In the same breath, participant G stated that:

*“Ahh it’s tough. Is so tough to survive because here I’m doing piece jobs, some days they don’t have piece jobs some people say we don’t have money so its hard. I wash clothes, cleaning the house. Besides piece jobs I don’t have any plan, all I want is a permanent job.”*

Participant C responded as follows:

*“Now I do plaiting hair and do washing for people and cleaning houses, taking care of babies”*

It can be noted from the study findings that doing menial jobs such as household duties for South Africans has helped put food on the table for so female migrant youth who find it difficult to get jobs while in South Africa. Because of their undocumented status, they are unable to secure jobs which require certain document which they don't have, hence they resort to those that do not require much from them. According to the Global Commission for International Migration [GCIM] (2005), migrants cross illegally into South Africa to meet the demand for cheap and seasonal non-contractual labour that undocumented migrants can offer in certain sectors of the economy such as house hold and domestic work.

#### **Theme 4: Residing at Church-Based Shelters**

Participants in the study highlighted that it was difficult for them to find a place to lodge in upon their arrival in South Africa as they could not afford to pay a rent. Participants have also shared that they had to seek for help from strangers who ultimately directed them to a women's shelter that accommodates female migrants. One other participant indicated that because she had nowhere to sleep on her first day in South Africa, she was given money by a stranger to come to the shelter. Participants in the study have also highlighted that living in the shelter has been helpful to them since it is better than spending nights in the streets without protection. The participants have also stated that living in the shelter is better since they don't have to pay rent and that enables them to save some money to take care of themselves and their children. Some indicated that they get necessary support for the shelter as they also provide them with food and other basic necessities. Greenburg and Polzer (2008) in their study found the same in that churches are one of the most significant means through which migrants are gaining access to accommodation upon their stay in the host countries. Several churches had also converted storerooms into temporary lodging spaces for immigrants and contribute directly to migrants' monthly rent or to rented rooms specifically marked for the lodging of church members (Greenburg & Polzer, 2008). Participant D stated that:

*“The shelter here sometimes is nice, because that sister give us something, so buy food for us or soap or washing powder or everything and so sometimes is better because you don't have money to buy that things that will help us”*

In the same wavelength, participant H said:

*“Here we are living nicely. Because you see they give us shelter, they give us food, we bath we do everything, some people can't do such things like that, they can't help you with anything, so here they help us with that.”*

Participant A stated that:

*“Right now in this shelter I think it's now easy. Because there is no money for rent here, we are given food and the security is tight here.”*

The study findings reveal that upon arrival in South Africa, female migrants are faced with a challenge of finding a place to live, particularly those without social networks and money to live on their own. As a result, they have resorted to living in shelters provided by churches which accommodates migrants without homes. This has allowed them to be able to live and eat despite not having money and jobs to provide for themselves since the churches provide food and a place to sleep. This strategy has proven to work for female migrant youth since it provides some sense of safety unlike living in the streets with their lives at risk. It can therefore be concluded that churches provide a safety net for migrants arriving in South Africa without any friends and relatives, and in that way, immigrants can have a place to live until they feel ready to be on their own and leave the shelter.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The most challenge that female migrant you battle with is lack of immigration permits wherein for them to sustain themselves despite the difficult circumstances in South Africa they have to find alternative ways for their better livelihoods. Since the immigrants live in poor conditions unlike the local citizens, the researcher recommend that immigration laws in South Africa be tightened to emphasize deportations of illegal migrants in the country, thereby minimizing the huge number of undocumented immigrants in the country. The border post separating South Africa and Zimbabwe should also be tightly secured to limit the influx of these migrants into the country who cross illegally. South African citizens should as well be educated on how to treat and live with migrants in their respective communities. The government should come up with initiatives to educate its officials on how to work around issues pertaining to illegal migrants in the country and follow correct procedures for their deportations, and not violate their rights and victimise them in the process. A further research should be conducted in other provinces in South Africa to investigate the lived experiences of female migrant youth on their sustainable livelihoods.

### **Declaration of a conflict of interest**

There is no conflict of interest in this article paper. All sources have been acknowledged.

### **Funding source**

This study was funded by the National Research Foundation in South Africa with a Grant No: 116810.

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