



Eroding the Gains of Mobility:

COVID-19 and Impact on Low-income Migrant Zimbabwean Women

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Introduction

Zimbabwe's protracted economic crisis and high unemployment rate have left many Zimbabweans living in conditions of extreme material deprivation and marginalization. For women, this is coupled with caregiving roles with children, the elderly and the incapacitated. Some women lack professional skills, while those who possess such skills find themselves unemployed or working in jobs where they are over-qualified and underpaid.

All this translates into a lack of or limited opportunities to earn regular, stable, adequate incomes. For many Zimbabwean women who are low-income earners, migration has become in the last two decades a potential way out of precarious economic circumstances. Migration provides low-income earners with the opportunity to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of both macro and micro

factors in Zimbabwe, and to fulfill social obligations that come with motherhood and caregiving roles. Literature on migrant women around the world shows that — notwithstanding the logistical and physical challenges migration entails, especially for low-skilled migrants and those moving without the requisite documents — many women in difficult economic circumstances count migration as one of the most viable options, if not the only remaining option.

Against the background of Zimbabwe's protracted economic and humanitarian crisis, amid a lethal cocktail of macroeconomic instability, climate shocks and policy missteps, many Zimbabwean women have migrated to neighboring countries in Southern Africa and beyond. This article addresses the impact of Covid-19 on low-income migrant Zimbabwean women. It discusses how Covid-19 has eroded and even reversed the gains of migration among low-income migrant Zimbabwean women, especially in terms of their capacity to meet basic needs, while raising their families both in Zimbabwe and in their receiving countries. Covid-19 has negatively impacted these women's socioeconomic status.

This article draws attention to low-income migrant women's pre-Covid-19 socioeconomic circumstances. It juxtaposes these circumstances with the women's current situation in environments where the pandemic and accompanying restrictions and lockdowns have curtailed opportunities for employment and exacerbated an already difficult situation for many low-income migrant women. Covid-19 presents the women with untenable choices as they ponder the short- and long-term costs and benefits of returning to Zimbabwe or remaining in their receiving country without stable incomes, if any. Similar trends of return migration due to declining opportunities in the receiving countries and the negative impacts of Covid-19 are growing and have been noted elsewhere (Rajan, 2020).

The class dimension of migration

In writing about the circumstances of migrant women, it is important to acknowledge the class dimension as it regards migration. Class mediates migrant women's experiences and produces differential circumstances for them in both Zimbabwe and receiving countries. In a broader context, the circumstances of migrant women who have traveled from the Global North (where countries are technically and socially better developed) to live in the Global South (these are the

lower-income countries on one side of the Global North–South divide) are different from those of the majority of migrant women, who are moving in the opposite direction (Jaji, 2020). Thus, different trajectories in the North–South dichotomy have varied racial and class outcomes for migrants (Alloul, 2021).

This class dimension intersects with legal status and lack of labor rights, both of which have a bearing on the kinds of jobs low-income migrant women have access to and the incomes they are able to earn.

The class dimension is also explored in studies on migrant women from less-privileged economic backgrounds who mostly have little to no skills (Tigno, 2014), and also in research on highly skilled migrant women (Khattab et al, 2020). These circumstances and the lack of resources to undertake the journey influence the outcomes of migration (van Hear, 2014). While there are migrant women who experience upward social mobility, there are many others who fail to translate social, economic and educational resources into upward social mobility in the receiving country (Cederberg, 2017). Class determines both mobility and immobility, and forces these travelers of different socioeconomic statuses into different migration and professional routes (Bonjour and Chauvin, 2018). This class

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Contexts characterized by stringent border policing and immigration laws render “illegality” visible (de Genova, 2013), and this has become a critical consideration for many low-income migrant women. Class intersects with race in shaping immigration policies and migrants’ experiences (Bonjour and Duyvendak, 2018; Bulmer and Solomos, 2018; de Genova, 2018). It is in consideration of the class dimension that this article unbundles the descriptor “Zimbabwean migrant women” and specifically addresses the circumstances of women who are in low-income occupations susceptible to sudden and unforeseen events such as the outbreak of Covid-19.

Low-income migrant women and pre-Covid-19 circumstances

Migration entails numerous challenges. Included during the physical journey from one location to another are such challenges and dangers as lack of proper travel documents, falling victim to human trafficking syndicates, and the very real possibilities of sexual and gender-based violence. Migration also creates situations in which women have to juggle work with parenting and other traditional gender roles, similar to what has been noted among Filipino migrant women (Mohyuddin, 2017; Parreñas, 2005).

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However, it should be noted here that migration can also have a positive impact on migrant women's social status inside their family circle; the self-confidence that matures with assuming the role of breadwinner and acquiring decision-making power is one of those impacts (Jaji, 2016; Shakya and Yang, 2019). The challenges and opportunities that migration presents create situations in which it is also possible for migrant women to find new chances for life improvement and liberation at the same time they experience gender inequalities and constraints (Danaj, 2019). Migration, in some cases, enables women to improve their families' economic circumstances and at the same time make a contribution to national gross domestic product (GDP). In the Philippines, for instance, overseas migration contributes 10 percent of the GDP, and half of these migrants are women (Mohyuddin, 2017; Tigno, 2014).

For unmarried women, improved economic circumstances are accompanied by acquisition of decision-making power, especially on how

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their remittances are to be used by their families. Prior to Covid-19, some migrant Zimbabwean women used their incomes to assume more decision-making roles in their marriages and families, which enabled them to enjoy an improved socioeconomic status deriving from being a breadwinner and the power that this entails (Jaji, 2016). Against the backdrop of the economic crisis in Zimbabwe, many migrant women explained that their migration greatly improved their economic circumstances, as they could now afford basic necessities and pay for their children's education, which they had struggled to do before they left Zimbabwe.

The opportunities that migration presented to these women enabled them to subvert the patriarchal ideology, especially in cases where men were unable to fulfill traditional cultural obligations that legitimized their assumption of male privileges, including exercising power over the women in their lives. When migrant women “encroach” into spaces designated as male, this inevitably leads to a relaxation of the patriarchal grip. This “loosening” is facilitated by the migration — mobility itself takes the women out of the national space, which is the Zimbabwean patriarchy's physical domain. Even in instances in which migrant women were in low-income jobs that came with little if any job security, the fact they could sustain themselves and their children without having to depend on men enabled them to exercise a considerable degree of independence, which they had not experienced prior to migration.

The outbreak of Covid-19, and the fact that its precautionary measures have differential and unequal impacts on people working in various sectors, necessitates inquiry into how low-income migrant women — in this case, low-income migrant Zimbabwean women — have fared under the intermittent lockdowns implemented in many countries around the world.

Low-income migrant women and Covid-19 restrictions

As countries increasingly become inward-looking, particularly in response to Covid-19, migrants, in this case low-income migrant women, find themselves in a transformational state in which they are both part of and not part of the sending and receiving countries.

In a global context where Covid-19 has affected everyone — even those who have not contracted the virus — poor people are easily forgotten or ignored, and yet they are the least capable of coping with the socioeconomic effects of something as unanticipated as the pandemic. The socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19 follow the contours of past medical, economic and political calamities. As countries increasingly become inward-looking, particularly in response to Covid-19, migrants, in this case low-income migrant women, find themselves in a transformational state in which they are both part of and not part of the sending and receiving countries. Low-income migrant women are not only among the poor but are also among a group of people whose already-limited rights have been constrained and contested even further by the pandemic due to growing inclination to erect physical and legal barriers around the nation-state.

This inclination to exclude migrants and limit their movement — whether intentional or systemic or for lack of resources — has grown with Covid-19 (Ikotun et al, 2021; Opiłowska, 2021; Radil et al, 2021). Coping with the pandemic within the context of proper legal/travel documentation places low-income migrant women in a particularly difficult situation because of the lack of access to such validation, the inability to secure the same, and even the awareness of what is required. In a global and in a regional context, where the poor are disproportionately affected in emergency and crisis situations such as those generated by disease outbreaks, natural disasters and violent political conflict, the logistics become even greater and more inaccessible. And, even in rich countries, the poor and the migrants, especially women, tend to be the most affected, for example, by economic crisis (see León-Ross et al, 2013).

Economically stable people around the world have focused on how not to get infected by the coronavirus. They have moved their work activities to online platforms and taken other technological and logistical measures. However, the poor in general, and low-income migrant women in particular, have had to make tough choices. Staying at home in compliance with the lockdowns means losing incomes or risking starvation. In many instances, the closure of workplaces under the lockdowns — intended to curb the spread of the virus — has resulted in loss of incomes and, by extension, loss of accommodation due to non-payment of rent (IOM, 2021). Whereas more-prosperous countries have provided greater



funding and instituted charitable programs to address joblessness and homelessness during the pandemic (Parsell et al, 2020), many less-prosperous or under-developed countries have not been able to respond in a similar manner, leaving vulnerable populations such as low-income migrant women in especially difficult circumstances. Evictions lead to vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence, as low-income migrant women are forced to live in even more insecure physical environments. Although low-income migrant women may have been able to meet basic needs and even provide for other family members in Zimbabwe, the fact they work in insecure and low-paying jobs means that most of them do not have savings to mitigate the impact of unforeseen crises such as Covid-19.

The Covid-19 outbreak has exacerbated and brought into sharp focus various issues that affect low-income migrants. Many low-income migrant women are undocumented. As such, they most often work at jobs that come with little if any labor rights or job security; many face abuse, irregular pay at the whim of dishonest employers, unrealistic work hours and appalling work environments. Covid-19 has exaggerated and solidified the exclusionary nature of the nation-state. Categorization of populations within national boundaries into “insiders” and “outsiders” is an inherent part of the nation-state framework of governing people and establishing decrees and procedures surrounding mobility. However, Covid-19 has resulted in the population of those identified as “not belonging” to the nation-state becoming even more prone to discrimination and exclusion; in some instances, this leads to xenophobic attitudes and physical attacks (Elias et al, 2020).

Specifically, the pandemic has had adverse effects on migrants facing legal challenges due to their undocumented status (IOM, 2021). Lack of proper documents, combined with Covid-19 restrictions on mobility, has resulted

in increased exposure to law enforcement. The pandemic has thus added an extra layer of surveillance and subject visibility through stringent policing and curtailment of mobility, which is particularly detrimental to undocumented migrants, who are already wary of law enforcement because of their immigration status. Moving around at a time when cities and towns are emptier than before leads to more encounters with law enforcement, which undocumented migrants may have previously been able to avoid by blending into crowded spaces. Yet, the hand-to-mouth existence compels low-income and undocumented migrants to leave their homes in order to earn incomes for daily subsistence at a time when mobility can result in deportation for lack of proper immigration documents.

When Covid-19 became a global pandemic and countries instituted travel restrictions, many migrant women working in the hospitality industry and its related sectors were laid off, as hotels, restaurants, events and other tourism-related businesses were among the first to close their doors (Gursoy and Chi, 2020; Rukasha et al, 2021). It can be argued here that low-income migrant women are mostly in occupations in sectors that are designated as “non-essential” under Covid-19 restrictions. For example, Covid-19 safety measures have had an adverse impact on the hotel, catering, recreation and travel industries that rely on global tourism. This has had reverberations in other sectors that similarly employ migrant women; for example, the fresh produce sector, which is in the supply chain of the hospitality industry, has suffered as a result. Employers in these sectors have limited options but to lay off workers whose services have been rendered redundant or unnecessary by pandemic-related disruptions. And, the lack of or limited labor rights means that the women are laid off with no legal recourse. In migrant-receiving countries such as South Africa, migrants provide cheap labor, not only in the sense of low wages and salaries but also in terms of the absence of vibrant labor unions, which leaves these economically strapped sojourners vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Rutherford and Addison, 2007). They have become even more vulnerable in the context of Covid-19.

The lockdowns under Covid-19 are particularly disruptive to livelihood strategies that rely on mobility. Covid-19 has negatively affected low-income migrant women in jobs that have greatly been affected by the safety precautions instituted to curb the spread of the pandemic. Apart from the hospitality industry, other

sectors affected by the pandemic are the beauty and cosmetic sectors and informal trading ventures that employ low-income women.

Many low-income migrant women work in sectors where mobility is an integral part of earning an income. For instance, care and domestic services and the hospitality and vending industries require physical presence. Unlike the formal sector where employers can arrange for employees to work online from home, people in the informal sector are required to be physically present at the workplace. The lockdowns also affect migrant women who earn incomes through informal trading, for example, vending. Like the hospitality industry, the informal trading sector where the majority of poor people work, including low-income migrant women, has been identified as “non-essential” around the world, closed down as one of the precautionary measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The overall outcome of these pandemic actions has been the loss of incomes in sectors hardest hit by Covid-19 travel restrictions and lockdowns (Fletcher et al, 2021).



While many governments provided Covid-19 cash payouts to cushion low-income earners from the impact of the lockdowns and subsequent loss of wages, these relief packages did not include provisions for undocumented migrants and low-income migrants in general. The latter are also excluded from social services such as healthcare, and this has been a challenge even before the pandemic, as illustrated by Crush and Tawodzera (2014). In fact, Crush and Tawodzera argue that migrants in South Africa experience “medical xenophobia.” This is salient because many low-income migrant women live in crowded residential areas where self-isolation and social distancing measures are difficult to implement or practice, which translates into a high risk of infection. In addition, the individual battle against contracting the virus necessitates access to healthcare services and

facilities with maximum care capabilities for Covid-19 patients. To complicate matters, undocumented migrant women may avoid seeking healthcare in the event of infection for fear of being reported to the authorities (Kvamme and Ytrehus, 2015). Finally, there are varied positions among countries in the global South on whether visitors and undocumented migrants should have access to free vaccination. Where free vaccinations are withheld from undocumented and low-income migrants, this creates a situation in which people who can least afford the vaccines are the ones who are excluded from access to free vaccination.

Covid-19 and implications for socioeconomic status

Where low-income migrant Zimbabwean women once sent remittances to family members remaining behind in Zimbabwe, the subsequent loss of regular incomes through pandemic lockdowns has resulted in a quick slide into insecurity and uncertainty for these stay-behind family members.

Covid-19 has a negative economic impact not only on low-income migrant women's capacity to meet basic needs but also on their social status. Where low-income migrant Zimbabwean women once sent remittances to family members remaining behind in Zimbabwe, the subsequent loss of regular incomes through pandemic lockdowns has resulted in a quick slide into insecurity and uncertainty for these stay-behind family members. This, then, results in a corresponding erosion of social status, as these low-income migrant women fail to respond to the needs of family members who depended on them prior to the pandemic and depend on them now as well. The gains in socioeconomic status these women had made before the global spread of Covid-19 have since been reversed, scuttling hopes for a greater investment in life following their return to Zimbabwe.

Among the low-income migrant women are single mothers who have to pay school fees for their children. In this respect, loss of personal income has also led to failure to pay for children's online school classes and the disruption of their education. If this situation continues, it may lead to the children working in low-income occupations just like their mothers thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty and generational insecurity.

Overall, Covid-19 has placed low-income migrant Zimbabwean women in an untenable situation as illustrated by cases of those who were laid off in countries such as South Africa (IOM, 2021). The high level of desperation this has created has compelled some of the women to return to Zimbabwe without savings. This basically means a return to uncertainty without coping strategies; Zimbabwe is affected not only by its long, drawn-out economic crisis, but also by the same safety measures that are forcing the migrant women to leave the receiving countries and return home. Undocumented migrant women who return to Zimbabwe after losing their jobs in their receiving countries have no guarantee they can leave Zimbabwe again, and their economic future is uncertain. Many of these find themselves in situations that require them to make difficult choices under difficult circumstances.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has adversely affected low-income migrant women in legal and socioeconomic terms and exacerbated an already difficult situation for them. Restricted mobility and lockdowns occur within the context of exclusionary migration regimes that associate unlimited mobility with the spread of Covid-19, hence the closure of borders around the world. This does not spare migrants who are already in the receiving country, as they must contend with layoffs and precarity. Low-income migrant women who are undocumented experience an added layer of surveillance and undesired encounters with law enforcement. The pandemic has brought about multifaceted forms of exclusion and uncertainty within the context of the growing association of unfettered mobility with the spread of the disease and hierarchical access to global healthcare, which is manifest in the prioritization of citizens.

Many low-income migrant Zimbabwean women live in neighboring countries where they had already grappled with xenophobic sentiments, and the pandemic has only fed into this hostility. The many challenges emanating from Covid-19 are illustrated by low-income migrant women's return to Zimbabwe notwithstanding the fact that the country is still mired in an intractable economic crisis.

Abut the author

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