

ZIMBABWEAN MIGRANTS IN BRITAIN: AN OVERVIEW

DR. DOMINIC PASURA

In this “age of migration” (Castles and Miller 2003), there is growing interest among academics and policy-makers in the impact of diasporas and transnational communities on both the country of origin and the country of settlement. Over the last decade, Zimbabwe, in Southern Africa, has witnessed the large-scale dislocation of its population to neighbouring countries and beyond. In a country of thirteen million people, estimates suggest that between three to four million Zimbabweans live in the diaspora (Pasura 2008).

Although there are five main distinctive phases of migration and displacement from Zimbabwe from the 1960s to the present, three phases are at the core of phenomenal population movement to Britain (Pasura forthcoming-a). When Zimbabwe attained its independence, in 1980, many white Zimbabweans left the country and some of them migrated to Britain. As Tevera and Crush (2003: 6) explain, “between 1980 and 1984, 50,000 to 60,000 whites left the country because they could not adjust to the changed political circumstances and the net migration loss was over 10,000 per year.” The country’s economic reforms in the 1990s brought untold suffering onto the population, inducing many professionals such as teachers, nurses and doctors to adopt migration as a strategy for survival (Gaidzwana 1999, Chetsanga and Muchenje 2003). However, the mass exodus of Zimbabweans to Britain happened after the formation of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999 and the launch of the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme II (LRRP II). The movement also intensified after the defeat of the ruling ZANU-PF government, a nationalist party, in a constitutional referendum in 2000. The country descended into political and economic crisis sparked by violence against supporters of the opposition party, farm owners and commercial farm workers (Pasura forthcoming-a, McGregor 2009).

OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES AND SETTLEMENT OUTCOMES IN BRITAIN

The Zimbabwean population in Britain increased from 47,158 in 2001, according to census statistics, to an estimated 200,000 in 2008 (Pasura 2008). A mapping exercise of the geographical spread of Zimbabweans in Britain has shown that they are dispersed across Britain, notably in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Luton, Slough, Coventry, Edinburgh, Leicester, Sheffield, Doncaster, Bournemouth, Oxford and Bristol (Pasura 2006). The dispersal of asylum seekers to areas outside London and the South East as part of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act may have contributed to the dispersion. However, people

also moved out of London to smaller cities in search of work and following social and family networks.

The successful settlement of migrants in destination countries depends, among other things, on how they integrate into the labour market. The majority of Zimbabweans in the UK are highly educated professionals, belonging to middle and upper class families in the homeland (Pasura 2008, Bloch 2005, Mbiba 2005, McGregor 2007). McGregor (2008) described Zimbabweans in the country as living and working in sharply polarised circumstances. "On the one hand, there are those who have secured professional work or set up their own businesses, as well as those who have secured refugee status [...] they have a degree of basic stability derived from their rights to residence/work and their incomes, and are in a position to plan careers, mortgages, [...]. At the other extreme, there are those trapped in unskilled jobs with insecure legal status, many of whom struggle to meet their own basic needs and family obligations and live in fear of deportation" (McGregor 2008: 466).

Examining the problems confronted by Zimbabwe's "global citizens" in Britain, Mbiba (2005) points to the concentration of the recent Zimbabwean migrants to Britain in the health and care industries. The study also demonstrates how some Zimbabwean migrants engage in entrepreneurship in London and in the South East of the country. However, as McGregor (2007: 820) argues, while working in the care industry expose Zimbabweans to exploitation, it provides them with opportunities "to meet their transnational obligations and ambitions." In spite of their human capital, the majority of Zimbabweans in Britain do not utilise the skills they acquired in the country of origin but work in unskilled service industries. Bloch's (2005, 2008) work demonstrates evidence of deskilling among the Zimbabwean migrants and its negative impact on remittances and other forms of transnational activities. As Bloch (2005: 15) explains, "in the UK the asylum system also results in deskilling among professionals who are unable to work legally while waiting for their case to be determined, and are often unable to practice their chosen profession as qualifications obtained overseas are often not recognized at the equivalent level."

The visible presence of a large population of Zimbabweans in Britain generated political and intellectual interest. Home Office (2008, 2009) statistics show that between 1998 and 2009 a total of 25,045 Zimbabweans applied for asylum in Britain. As opportunities for migrants in Britain have become differentiated by hardened legal barriers and restricted access to the asylum system, Zimbabwean asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants face structural barriers in their efforts to participate in paid work (McGregor 2008) and some have become destitute and homeless (see, for example, Brown 2008). The plight of Zimbabweans asylum seekers in Britain is summed up by the title of a study conducted by the Zimbabwe Association and Refugee Council: "I hate being idle": wasted skills and enforced dependence among Zimbabwean asylum seekers in the UK' (Doyle 2009).

In spite of such structural barriers in the hostland, Zimbabweans in Britain diaspora are not a disempowered group but rather, one that individually and collectively combining and embracing different strategies in response to challenges in the hostland. Over the last decade, there has been a phenomenal growth of diaspora associations and most of them use the homeland as a frame of reference (McGregor 2009). There are asylum and community support groups, Zimbabwean diaspora congregations, women associations and development-oriented organisations. In various ways, these organisations demonstrate the ability of social actors to resist institutional structures in their everyday lives in the hostland

The recent migration of Zimbabweans to Britain has also caused radical changes to gender relations and roles between men and women in the diaspora (Pasura 2008). The economic and social upward mobility of women in the diaspora in contrast with men has resulted in the re-adjustment of gender roles but in most cases marriage breakdown. Hence, the diaspora has been a space in which women renegotiate their gendered identities. However, men are using public spaces such as diaspora congregations to resist changes that are happening within diaspora households (Pasura 2008).

TRANSNATIONAL TIES

Zimbabweans in Britain maintain regular and sustained social, economic, political and cultural transnational ties with those in the homeland and in the wider diaspora (Bloch 2008). For example, they participate actively in transnational diaspora politics. Transnational diaspora politics are activities pertaining to the domestic or foreign policy of the homeland and activities that advance migrants' rights in the country of settlement. Zimbabweans in Britain define transnational diaspora politics variously "as giving financial support to the MDC; as an alternative democratic space from the shrinking and repressive conditions in the homeland; as internationalising the Zimbabwean crisis and as an avenue for permanent settlement"(Pasura forthcoming-b). Similarly, McGregor (2009: 202) explains how "diaspora political engagement has contributed to the mounting international pressure on ZANU- PF as well as to a groundswell of activism to extend the boundaries of citizenship in Britain."

In addition to transnational diaspora politics, strong connections linking diasporans with their homeland are articulated primarily through remittances, and real or symbolic attachments are expressed through music, language and food at social and religious gatherings in the hostland. As Bloch's (2008: 302) study shows, "Zimbabweans have strong social and economic ties to Zimbabwe and the inter-connectedness of these ties is evidenced by regular contact with family members in Zimbabwe and the sending of regular monetary remittances." The research indicates that eighty per cent of the respondents send economic remittances to the homeland, supporting family members and relatives.

Although settlement and the idea of return provide both purpose and contradiction in people's lives, Zimbabweans in Britain are eager to participate in the country's reconstruction. As Bloch's (2008) survey indicates, 79 per cent of respondents in her study would like to contribute to the country's development, that is, if the following changes are made: political changes; voting rights in Zimbabwean elections; economic opportunities; and dual nationality. Hence, the full potential of the diaspora can only be realised if a mutual and trusting relationship exists between the diaspora and the homeland government. If diaspora capital is to be tapped, then it is important for inclusive government to engage the diaspora in productive ways designed to rebuild the country.

The migration of Zimbabweans to Britain has witnessed a proliferation of diasporic media. As Mano and Willems (2008) point out, the emerging media provided the space for interaction between the diaspora and the homeland, it became the conduit to express social-cultural, economic and political transnational ties between the diaspora and the homeland and those in the wider diaspora. The diasporic media surfaced to challenge the community's representation in Britain's mainstream media as well as providing news for Zimbabweans abroad and those in the homeland.

CONCLUSION

For Zimbabweans in Britain immigration status can be understood as a creating class divides, as it shapes the opportunity structures for migrants as well determining their everyday lives. The majority of Zimbabweans in the country maintain regular and sustained transnational ties with the homeland by engaging in diaspora politics, keeping kinship ties, sending remittances and in their nature of diaspora associations. Although the classical conception of diaspora underscores homogeneity, the Zimbabwean diaspora in Britain is fractured and fragmented.

REFERENCES

- Bloch, A. (2005), *The Development Potential of Zimbabweans in the Diaspora: A Survey of Zimbabweans in the UK and South Africa*, Geneva: International Organisation for Migration.
- (2008), Zimbabweans in Britain: Transnational Activities and Capabilities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34, 2: 287–305.
- Brown, D. (2008), The More Destitution in Leeds Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust report. Available at: www.jrct.org.uk/core/documents/download.asp?id=330
- Castles, S. and Miller, M. (2003), *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chetsanga, C. J. and Muchenje, T. B. (2003), *An Analysis of the Cause and Effect of the Brain Drain in Zimbabwe*. Available at: http://www.sarpn.org.za/documents/d0000422/Zimbabwe_Brain_Drain.pdf
- Doyle, L. (2009), "I Hate Being Idle": Wasted Skills and Enforced Dependence among Zimbabwean Asylum Seekers in the UK. Zimbabwe Association and Refugee Council. Available at: <http://www.zimbabweassociation.org.uk/docs/I%20hate%20being%20idle.pdf>

- Gaidzwana, R. (1999), Voting with Their Feet: Migrant Zimbabwean Nurses and Doctors in the Era of Structural Adjustment. In: A. O. Olukoshi, *The Political and Social Context of Social Adjustment in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. pp. 5–83.
- Home Office (2008), *Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 2007*. Available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs08/hosb1008.pdf>
- (2009), Immigration and Asylum Statistics. In: H. Office, London. Available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration-asylum-stats.html>
- Mano, W. and Willems, W. (2008), Emerging Communities, Emerging Media: The Case of a Zimbabwean Nurse in the British Big Brother Show. *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies*, 22, 1: 101-128.
- Mbiba, B. (2005), Zimbabwe's Global Citizens in "Harare North": Some Observations. In: M. Palmberg and R. Primorac (eds), *Skinning the Skunk— Facing Zimbabwean Futures*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. pp. 26–38.
- McGregor, J. (2007), "Joining the BBC (British Bottom Cleaners)": Zimbabwean Migrants and the Uk Care Industry. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 33, 5: 801–824.
- (2008), Abject Spaces, Transnational Calculations: Zimbabweans in Britain Navigating Work, Class and the Law. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33, 4: 466-482.
- (2009), Associational Links with Home among Zimbabweans in the Uk: Reflections on Long-Distance Nationalisms. *Global Networks*, 9, 2: 185-208.
- Pasura, D. (2006), *Mapping Exercise: Zimbabwe*. Available at: <http://www.iomlondon.org/doc/mapping/Zimbabwe%20Mapping%20Exercise%20Final%20Report.pdf>
- (2008), Gendering the Diaspora: Zimbabwean Migrants in Britain. *African Diaspora*, 1-2: 86-109.
- (forthcoming-a), A Fractured Transnational Diaspora: The Case of Zimbabweans in Britain. *International Migration*.
- (forthcoming-b), Zimbabwean Transnational Diaspora Politics in Britain. In: J. McGregor and R. Primorac (eds), *Zimbabwe's New Diaspora: Displacement and the Cultural Politics of Survival*, New York: Berghahn Books.
- Tevera, D. and Crush, J. (2003), *The New Brain Drain from Zimbabwe*. Available at: <http://www.queensu.ca/samp/sampresources/samppublications/policyseries/Acrobat29.pdf>