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The Hidden Face of Discrimination in the Global Labour Market: The Case of Zimbabwean Highly Skilled Migrants in the United Kingdom

By Dr Roda Madziva, Dr Simon McGrath and Dr Juliet Thondhlana

Introduction

Although labour migration is an increasingly important topic for both policy and research internationally, relatively little attention has been paid to the historical contexts of certain labour mobilities and movements particularly those from commonwealth countries to the United Kingdom (UK) or former colonies. Instead, labour migration movements have increasingly been debated within the framework of globalisation and focused on how governments of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are wrestling with tensions between their desire to use skilled migration to be on the winning side in the ‘global war for talent’ and attempts to outflank rising xenophobia.

This paper is based on a preliminary study of Zimbabwean highly skilled migrants in the UK which explores the employability challenges that they face in the British labour market. Drawing from interviews with 20 participants, from a wide variety of academic and professional backgrounds (e.g. engineering, IT, education), we highlight the consequent obstacles they face, despite their high levels of human and linguistic capital in the UK context; competences that are historically produced and narrativised in the backdrop of colonialism. We explore how their experiences and struggles are produced in a notion of broken post-colonial relationships and responsibilities. In this case we consider the consequent direct and indirect discrimination they encounter which manifests itself in, for example, discriminatory immigration rules and procedures, employer bias, and non-recognition of qualifications and skills.

Zimbabwean Migration: The Context

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in southern Africa, which shares its borders with Botswana on the west, Zambia on the north, Mozambique on the east, and South Africa on the south. Formerly Rhodesia, Zimbabwe was a British colony, which attained its independence in 1980 after almost a century of repressive and racial rule. Particularly since 2000, there has been a mass exodus of the Zimbabwean population, which has generated complex debates and mixed feelings in relation to both the causes and effects of such unprecedented magnitudes of emigration. In particular, the migration of Zimbabweans to the UK has not only renewed debates around issues of broken post-colonial relationships and responsibilities, as demonstrated by the strained relationships between the two countries, but has also generated new questions with regards to the legacy of colonialism in the context of both the treatment of citizens in post-colonial Zimbabwe and the experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in the former colonial ‘mother country’ (Ranger, 2005). In post-colonial Zimbabwe, the controversial land seizures and forcible land occupation in the early 2000s have seen a decline in the rule of law and saw many people, including White farmers, maimed and murdered. This attracted widespread condemnation of the Mugabe government by the international community, particularly Britain, and saw Zimbabwe earn itself a reputation as a pariah state. The resultant economic and political crises led to a mass exodus of Zimbabwean citizens of diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds to regional and international destinations, with South Africa and the UK attracting the largest numbers (Makina, 2007). In particular, the move to Britain in search of protection and new livelihoods was not only undertaken in the context of shared political sentiments but more so as driven by other factors including the notion of a shared culture given the colonial ties, the perceptions of Britain as a democratic country and assumed post-colonial responsibilities (Ranger 2005). Increasingly however, Britain has been accused of retracting the welcome mat, as demonstrated through both its restrictionist immigration regime

and the covert racial and discriminatory aspects of its labour market (Doyle, 2009; Mbiba, 2011).

In this chapter, we examine these complex issues through an exploration of the lived experiences of Zimbabwean highly-skilled migrants in the UK whose education and employability is entangled within the complex web of colonial, post-colonial and diasporic narratives. We start by exploring the UK context of migration questioning the political notions of it being a post-racial and dehistoricised immigration regime. Then, using the migrants' employability narratives, we illustrate the complex ways in which ideologies of racism, xenophobia and discrimination are played out in the UK labour market.

Given that racial discrimination and xenophobia are both much debated and contested terms, we provide working definitions for the purpose of this chapter. We take racial discrimination to denote the exclusion based on race, colour, nationality or ethnic origin directed with the purpose of constraining someone from exercising on an equal footing the rights to a job, promotion or any other related benefits. By xenophobia we refer to any attitude, prejudice and behaviour that reject, exclude or undermine someone on the perception of their being a foreigner (ILO et al, 2001).

The UK Immigration Context: A Post-racial and Dehistoricised Immigration Regime?

The British immigration system has evolved significantly over the years from a more liberal to a more restrictionist regime as characterised by the intensification of both border and internal mechanisms of control. While “the original notion of citizenship in Britain as outlined in the 1948 Act was one that provided citizens of the UK and its colonies with a common citizenship”, such an inclusive citizenship conception was slowly abandoned over the decades through subsequent legislation until it was finally “discredited and dismantled by the British Nationality Act of 1981” (McLaren and

Johnson, 2007: 711). Meanwhile, the practices of racism and ethnic discrimination towards immigrants have been a part of both the British immigration control and public debate and perception. Thus the progression in the British immigration system towards a more restrictionist approach has concurrently been complemented by a progression in the legislation that focuses on addressing racial discrimination (Cohen, 2002; Anderson, 2013). As Anderson (2013: 36) has argued, “colonialism was central to the creation of racial categories as whiteness ‘at home’ was intimately and inextricably related to blackness ‘abroad’ thereby deeply engraving the notion of whiteness as a national identity”.

Yet, “having created and codified race, modern liberal democracies now claim to have moved beyond it” (Anderson, 2013: 42; Lentin, 2011). In migration terms, especially under the current Coalition government, it is increasingly claimed that it is not racist to talk about immigration control and that people can now have a sensible debate about immigration, where sensible involves making use of statistical evidence (Collier, 2013; Anderson, 2013: 42). Thus in public and political debates, ‘the horrors of colonialism’ are now invariably frowned upon but as a past with which modern liberal democracies have no association (Anderson, 2013).

The symbolic high (or low) point of this ‘moving beyond race’ was New Labour’s rejection of continued British responsibility for meeting the Lancaster House commitments to Zimbabwe. As Mamdani (2008: 16) notes:

When New Labour took over in 1997, Clare Short, the minister for international development, claimed that since neither she nor her colleagues came from the landed class in Britain – “my own origins are Irish and as you know we were colonised not colonisers”, she wrote to the Zimbabwean minister of agriculture and land – they could not be held responsible for what Britain had done in colonial Rhodesia.

It is therefore within the context of both the imagined racelessness of the contemporary immigration regime and the assumed “erasure of colonial history” that Britain is portrayed as a “highly desirable place to be” with the migration of people from former colonies such as Zimbabwe subtly taken to “reflect the UK’s de-historicised present rather than post-colonial legacies” (Anderson, 2013: 42). This state of affairs has seen a striking contradiction between the British foreign policy with regard to Zimbabwe and the British government’s actual practices in relation to the treatment of Zimbabwean migrants in the UK. While the UK Foreign Office publicly condemns Zimbabwe as an exceptionally unsafe country, the UK Border Agency increasingly treats Zimbabweans, especially those seeking asylum, as if they were voluntary or economic migrants who could be easily returned home (Madziva, 2010). However, neither of these realities captures the view of many Zimbabwean migrants who retain a perception of the UK as their ‘mother country’, and who experience Britain through the lens of broken post-colonial relationships and responsibilities (Ranger, 2005; McGregor, 2008).

It is within the context of such contradictions that Cole (2011) maintains the viewpoint that the horrors of European colonialism cannot easily be erased in the face of the living realities that the victims of this ugly past invariably continue to be victims of its consequences. Moreover, Anderson has argued that Britain’s “claim to racelessness is not paralleled by a claim that immigration policies are not designed to keep out certain nationalities” (Anderson, 2013: 42). Indeed, the operation of immigration controls in contemporary Britain reflects discrimination against certain individuals on the basis of their nationality (Cohen, 2002; Anderson, 2013).

Moreover, contemporary immigration laws that govern the labour market participation of migrants increasingly oblige employers to regulate, monitor and police migrant workers, which all has the

potential to promote institutionalised racism. As argued by Lentin (2011), the assumption that liberal democratic societies are post-race is effectively a denial of the lived experience of racism. Thus, according to Anderson (2013: 29) a more nuanced account of racial discrimination that considers the ways in which immigrants are at best contingently tolerated, and often (c)overly excluded is inevitably needed. This chapter engages with the hidden aspect of racial discrimination in contemporary Britain, drawing on the examples of the lived experiences of the highly skilled Zimbabwean population we interviewed in the UK.

The Profile of a Highly Skilled Zimbabwean Migrant

We define a highly skilled migrant as one possessing at least a university degree. The Zimbabwean highly skilled migrants in our sample have received a British-based education in the sense that Zimbabwe inherited an examination model heavily dependent on English-based examination boards both for schools and university. Thus, on migration to the UK skilled migrants expected to be able to sustain their acquired status and lifestyle as seemingly implied by labour migrant schemes such as the UK Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP) designed to attract the “Brightest and the Best”.

In our study, one IT engineer aptly captured the essence of the highly regarded Zimbabwean education:

I think the landmark lies down on the Zimbabwean education system layout, which aligns to the Oxford or the Cambridge system. That's why henceforth in this country they say those two are redbrick universities. The advantage that some of us had is the (private) schools we went to back home... going to a good day school where you see White pupils and you know that we are all normal, we are all equal and there is nothing special about anybody, where nobody used to override you; he parks his car, you park your car. So that alone gives you that confidence when you come here.

The IT engineer further spoke about how in Zimbabwe the IT field for example, involved engaging and connecting with the world's IT leaders, portraying Zimbabwe as a world IT landmark:

And just for your own information the most interesting thing that people have to take to heart, myself being Microsoft certified I will tell you that Bill Gates and his team before they go anywhere for a system trial, whatever version of Windows or Microsoft, they had to come to Zimbabwe first. That's where we would do the project tests and we would come up with the right solution before they sent it to the rest of the world. So we're used as a landmark.

Another recurrent theme related to the graduates' high level of linguistic competences that are historically produced and narrativised in the backdrop of colonialism:

We know how to communicate better in English, although to be honest you find that when you come here you can't really understand what they're saying. It's probably because of the accent. ... You find that in Zimbabwe English is more advanced if we speak ... I think we are taught the Queen's English which is really very high ... there is a high standard of English in Zimbabwe than there is here. (Environmentalist)

This background highlights the gap between their expectations and the harsh reality of the UK labour market, which never gave them a fair chance to showcase their competences. The following sections illustrate the intricacies of their lived experiences.

Discrimination in the Labour Market: Perceived Racial Segregation

We begin by reflecting on real or perceived racial discriminatory practices in the workplace. During interview discussions with the Zimbabwean highly skilled migrants, interviewees felt that it was more their skin colour than their Zimbabwean qualifications which were the source of their failure to access the UK labour market:

I mean there is a problem that obviously we might want to sweep under the carpet but in this country there's a problem that there is some sort of discrimination that happens in the employment industry especially for a person like me who is coming from Africa. I'm not of the fair skin so people the moment they look at you they say, 'This African what can he bring into my company?' So already they judge you in terms of the way you appear and you present yourself but they never really test you to see whether you can do the job...
(Civil Engineer)

This is confirmed by cases where interviewees acquired UK-based university degrees but still struggled to get employment. One lawyer aptly explained the racism in this situation:

... this opportunity came up and I was on the short list in the end inviting me for an interview but how I didn't get that job I don't get it. They gave the job to a law graduate from a local university, she had never worked in the UK before, she had never done any proxy law work whatsoever but she got the job and they didn't even consider me. So it's not wrong asking yourself what sort of criteria is used to offer people opportunities, is it because I'm Black against White or is it because I studied in Zimbabwe and not in the UK but I studied in the UK as well. I do have a degree in Zimbabwe and in the UK. But still they don't give you the job.

A civil engineer also reflected on how, because of his colour, he was taken to be a general hand in his first employment in the UK. Having been offered a job the previous day at the office, the following day he went straight to the site where the team supervisor on seeing him readily supposed him to be a general hand:

I went to the site. ...it so happens that the manager didn't come early enough and in between I had experiences because then the team supervisor said to me, "Come, go and, go and scrub there, there, there". They were demolishing a school and refurbishing. He said "go and

do this (demonstrating) to the floor and clean it". I said, (sighs) "I'll go and do it" because I didn't want to cause problems. He continued "Do this, do this, do this, do this!" And I said, "Okay, fine". And then the manager came and saw me cleaning then came to me and said "you are not a cleaner but an engineer... you are the only Black guy here. Um, so, don't allow these guys to look down upon you".

Then there is the case of the IT engineer we discussed earlier, who felt that his qualifications and skills entitled him to a highly paying position but he was not getting such jobs because of the colour of his skin:

... if I am to put together all my skills and my qualifications in London there is no way I'm taking the pay which is less than £75,000 per annum. In London they're not giving us that opportunity. And you can't continue knocking on that door as if there's nothing else to do. ...I know it's sensitive but it's a colour issue.

This failure to get the right position he felt he deserved was not only described as demoralising but also as something that eventually pushed him into unskilled and demeaning jobs for both the welfare of his family and in order to maintain his immigration status and avoid deportation given that he was still on a work permit:

I had to like demean myself to get a job that can keep my family going so I tended to become a bus driver in order to maintain my visa. I also do businesses; I do butcheries, and I also do shipping for people, as well as rental payments for people here who have got projects back home. It doesn't give me a lot of money... This is what happens when people are discriminated upon and are not being given the platform to actually stand and prove themselves.

The above narratives are indications of the breadth and depth of manifestations of racism in the workplace in Europe.

Discrimination through Immigration Control: Asylum as a Deskilling Project

We further consider the experiences of the highly skilled migrants who engaged with the UK asylum system either on arrival or at some point during their stay or simply in country switchers. A recurring theme of the interviews related to the complexities of and the insecurity wrought by the asylum process which often involves lodging the claim, subjection to compulsory dispersal and waiting indefinitely without the right to work, which some have argued to be a deskilling process (Doyle, 2009). Thus although it is widely believed that Britain has a proven track record of providing sanctuary to the persecuted (see Bloch, 2000; Clayton, 2010), in our study, perceptions of the UK as a more tolerant and democratic country were increasingly contested and often contrasted with individuals' lived experiences of dealing with the actual asylum process. A former education officer's narrative not only reveals the complex journey travelled by those seeking asylum but also the system's exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human:

I applied for asylum and the Home Office chose to study my case in detail; they took all my travel documents and replaced them with a card with my photo and black letters in capital – EMPLOYMENT PROHIBITED – on both sides. It was a document I was not proud to carry on me but I had to carry it for the next four years. The Home Office refused my application for asylum and withdrew all their support. So I found myself a destitute living illegally. At one time I stayed for four months in someone's flat without paying rent but refusing to move out. For the first time I lived the life of a criminal.

The long-term impact of that experience is expressed in his narrative of life after receiving status as follows:

I now have a status. Although allowed to work, I cannot work because I lost the best part of my working life struggling for status. My (colonial) Arts degrees are not suitable to the UK environment. I am

now too old to go through retraining as a nurse, security person or carer – the areas which are likely to accept me... I am now a pensioner, receiving £24 a week... I now work as a cleaner. (Education Officer)

The downward social mobility of highly skilled refugees is further illustrated by the case of a sociologist who at some point during his stay in the UK had to switch from the student category to the asylum category, which brought him into the refugee space and this subsequently played a major part in undermining his immediate professional employment opportunities:

What was happening then is it's like without the right to work there was so much insecurity. So the thrust then was to take any job in the warehouse even illegally. The mentality was "Let's accumulate as much as we can and when we are pushed out, at least we have something". ...when you came over here you discover my life is very insecure. Any time I can just be deported. (Sociologist)

Clearly then, asylum seekers are a "reserve army of labour" (Vickers, 2012) that is unfortunately prohibited from lawfully selling their labour power, yet more often than not, they find themselves under pressure to work illegally as the only option for survival which invariably leaves them open to exploitation by unscrupulous employers. It is arguable that asylum policies are seemingly designed to indirectly profit the capitalist class by providing employers with easy access to cheap labour, though such employers are occasionally heavily penalised for hiring migrants without legal rights to work (Vickers, 2012). The asylum route therefore exposes individuals to particular discriminatory treatment. Questions always arise whether a different route would have made a difference. The following section which explores the labour market experiences of those who came through less crippling routes however reveals other patterns of discriminatory practices.

Discrimination in the Labour Market: Non-Recognition of Qualifications and Skills

The International Labour Office (ILO) writing together with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and in consultation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2001: 9) has listed “discrimination against foreigners in employment” as one of the key forms of discriminatory practices and anti-foreigner hostility faced by migrants. These practices are not always overt as this would conflict with official discourses and ideologies about liberal democracies. Rather, failure of migrants to penetrate the labour market is often blamed on them rather than on issues of exclusion. The ILO et al report notes the paucity of studies around this issue due to the absence of conclusive data in this sensitive field. They highlight that the little available strongly points to discriminatory activities in relation to employability and a range of other manifestations.

As noted before, our Zimbabwean subjects are highly skilled migrants who come with a strong British-styled education coupled with internationally accredited qualifications as well as many years of appropriate work experience. The first case to highlight here is that of an IT engineer who came on a highly skilled visa. Although he managed to get a job in his area of specialisation when he moved to the UK, he was not only surprised to discover that the position he was given was not commensurate with his qualifications and experience but also that he was barely noticed, which he attributed to his African background. He emphasised the fact that he possesses a range of skills that are found valuable but not rewarded:

The work culture is very interesting. I remember when I came straight from Africa coming over here they don't actually believe that somebody from Africa can lead them. After they failed to do something I would simply go there, demonstrate, get it right. They

were just calling me an IT systems engineer. That was just a general title they were giving me but I was more of a project manager.

Our study has shown that there are other ranges of qualifications that in many cases are not always recognised as is the experience of one highly experienced teacher.

It is frustrating because of the system, really it's quite discriminatory. Zimbabwe is a former British colony, education is still good. I sent my certificate to be compared through that comparability of what do they call it...? I mean the one which compares qualifications. Then you ask yourself why are they not giving the job as I possess the right qualifications?

Although she felt that her qualifications were equivalent to those obtained in the UK, she was still required to get a UK-based upgrading. Paradoxically, even after upgrading, no school was prepared to accept her other than in the capacity of a supply teacher.

I've been in schools most of my time in the UK. I've been in schools for more than ten years in supply teaching. ... they are saying you are a good teacher. One school has been saying we want (her name) to come and teach at this school all the time. But the school cannot take me because I've got to be upgraded by the Ministry. I had to get the qualification and ...learn the education policy as it relates here... But now the issue has changed. The Ministry said it's up to schools to take me, but no school is committed to employ me as a teacher, but only as a supply teacher...

Having been a supply teacher for many years without being given a permanent position, she confirmed the exploitative practice this embodies:

I find it very discriminating to say sometimes they say they want me to come back to use me because I am cheap labour to them, they

don't pay me holiday pay, they don't pay me when I don't work. So it's easier for them to request for my services.

Similar sentiments were shared by an environmentalist who apparently was working in a call centre:

When I arrived here I had a degree, which I thought, "okay fine, I'll use this" – thinking that at least this would take me to another level to or to work within the sector. I applied for a job once in this organisation that does some environmental activities. I was called for an interview, which was fine, but found that people who have got qualifications from here stand a better chance from those who have got qualifications from Zimbabwe. That's what I saw from that particular post. I now work at a call centre. In my present job I find that I'm not going anywhere. I'm quite stagnant even within, because at times, you know, um, some opportunities can arise but it also depends on who you know.

They migrated to the UK, many of them through prestigious skills-based schemes such as the UK Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP), strongly believing that they could easily transfer their 'British-based' human capital to the UK context. The reality has been shocking to most of them. It is therefore disappointing to note that although Zimbabweans may be highly skilled they are increasingly relegated to semi-skilled, unskilled and low status jobs where they are recognised as being hard-working but with jobs that are not commensurate with their expertise and experience. They find themselves in the '3 D' (dirty, dangerous and difficult) types of jobs as captured by one teacher:

Employability in this part of the world is very difficult especially for immigrants the reason being you come here you are downgraded, you're not the best you're meant to be. ... Even if we look at the UK system there's some kind of limitation again you come here with all those skills and you can't use them anyway. I think in terms of, what

am I trying to say, how can you capture that when you really feel like you are so experienced and yet your skills are not being put to full use?

In some cases their skills are recognised and they may even be asked to do work at a higher level but in a temporary position and still at a low salary as is the case of the following teacher who was employed in the care industry:

I am a carer but sometimes they do give me some admin work to do. Like yesterday, I spent the whole day in the office, at the head office, yeah. Once in a while, they do comment that your admin is good, or they invite you over, for setting admin things, which they feel could be demanding for them, but they don't pay you a high salary or let you do that job permanently.

The above examples show that there is more than meets the eye to what appears to be non-transferability of highly skilled migrants' high human capital whose qualifications and experience, in the absence of ideologies of racism and xenophobia, should make them highly competitive in the global market and specifically the UK workplace. Perhaps because of their complex pasts they are very quick to realise their losing battle in the face of an enduring racism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have tried to highlight some of the dynamics, struggles and dilemmas encountered by the Zimbabwean highly skilled migrants in their endeavour to secure a place and register their presence in the UK labour market. While their decision to migrate to the UK was undertaken in the context of their British-styled education and the notion of a shared culture in the context of colonial ties, on arrival migrants are met with ever stricter and exclusionary immigration and asylum policies. Some have found themselves caught up in the limbo of illegality, insecure status, segregation and destitution and often for many years subsequently resulting in their deskilling. While prestigious skills-based schemes such as the previous UK Highly Skilled

Migrant Programme (HSMP) have allowed some highly skilled migrants easy entry into the UK and, sometimes, easy insertion into the labour market, the aspirations of securing jobs in their areas of specialisation or at levels commensurate with their expertise, experience and skills are often thwarted by complex factors often manifested and increasingly narrativised in racial discrimination and xenophobic terms. While there is increased recognition of migrants' contributions to the British economy, this study not only raises questions about the democratic nature of the British labour market but also seeks to generate new debates about the need to design inclusive labour policies to allow the benefits of global employability to be fully realised.

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