Pervasive irregular migration and the vulnerabilities of irregular female migrants at Plumtree border post in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Background: Migration is a common and visible feature of global mobility where the driving factors would be the search for better livelihood opportunities. Due to economic hardships in Zimbabwe, women have also been noted to migrate to neighbouring countries in search of opportunities to look after their left-behind families. However, the COVID-19 restrictions and other state regulations have become facilitators of illicit migration as irregular migrants (including women) devise more complex means to traverse borders and gain access. This paper assesses the vulnerabilities and the lived realities of female irregular migrants between Zimbabwe and Botswana during the clandestine migration journeys.

Methods: A qualitative descriptive survey that targeted nineteen (19) participants was conducted using semi-structured and unstructured interviews. The participants included fifteen (15) female irregular migrants and four (4) Key Informants who worked at Plumtree Border Post. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded and thematically analysed.

Results: Four vulnerabilities were reported/experienced by the participants: violence and robbery, rape and sexual harassment, psycho-emotional harassment, and health vulnerabilities in detention. The participants reported that these vulnerabilities are experienced at different levels of the migration process and deportation.

Conclusions: Female migrants are generally at risk as they are bound to take advantage of at different levels during migration and deportation. Therefore, there is a need to relook at the policies implemented at the ports and ensure women are subjected to humane treatment even during the deportation process.

1. Background

Irregular migration is a common and visible feature of global mobility (Bloch and Chimienti, 2011). It has become an issue of concern for different actors within the migration value chain: governments, human rights organisations, transporters, and the irregular migrants themselves, amongst others (Bloch and Chimienti, 2011; Takaindisa, 2020). Structural factors mainly drive this illicit mobility in sending and receiving countries. For example, in receiving countries, irregular migration is fuelled by the need for low-cost and flexible labour, while precarious livelihoods created by political unrests and socioeconomic uncertainties that fuel underemployment drive illicit mobility in sending countries (Bloch and Chimienti, 2011; Echeverría, 2020; Moyo, 2020; Sigona et al., 2021; Van Meeteren, 2012). Considering this pervasive nature of irregular migration, governments of sovereign states have made intensified attempts to manage this mobility with limited success (Castles et al., 2012; Machinya, 2020; Nunu et al., 2021). There has been significant scholarship on illicit mobilities in the recent past, with large numbers of irregular migrants from North Africa moving to Europe by boats through the Mediterranean Sea (Kovras and Robins, 2016; Perkowski and Squire, 2019; Sanchez, 2020). For a long time, similar trends have also been observed between the USA and Mexico (C Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016; Maviza, 2020), with governments making frantic efforts to contain it.

In Southern Africa, irregular migration to neighbouring countries is also fairly widespread. Affluent economies like South Africa, Namibia and Botswana draw migrants from the region through perceived better economic prospects (Machinya, 2020; Ndlouv and Landau, 2020). One of the longstanding irregular mobilities has been in the Zimbabwe – South Africa migration corridors. Zimbabwean men from the Matabeleland region primarily moved to South Africa to work in the gold and diamond mines (Moyo, 2020; Maviza, 2020; Maviza et al., 2019). Although
there were formal bi-lateral arrangements in the management of labour movement between the then Rhodesia and South Africa through the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) of 1974, popularly known as WENELA in isNdebele (Mlambo, 2016; Wentzel, 2003) and The Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA) (Ndlovu and Landau, 2020), a significant number of men from Matabeleland travelled independently and irregularly outside of the state arrangements (Maviza, 2020). The mobility was also driven by familial ties and cultural affinities between communities on either side of the borders. This was due to the arbitrary nature of state formation during the colonial period when the colonial powers agreed to partition Africa into countries (Moyo, 2020). In the process, communities and families were divided by these boundaries to belong to two different countries (Moyo, 2020; Ndlovu and Landau, 2020). As such, communities in borderlands continued to traverse national borders to visit relatives across borders.

Zimbabwe has experienced a severe economic downturn and political unrests laced with human rights abuses (Maviza et al., 2019; Mabhena, 2010; Ncube, 2010). As this happened, Zimbabweans moved en masse to neighbouring countries. This mobility was driven by unemployment and underemployment emanating from the economic marginalisation of the Matabeleland region in national development plans (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009); poverty, political unrests and climate change which led to precarious livelihoods across the country (Takaindisa, 2020). Although historical mobilities were male-dominated, women have become active players in migration in the current landscape due to significant improvements in the transport infrastructure (Pillinger, 2007; Thebe and Maviza, 2019), leading to the emergence of the concept of feminisation of migration. Their mobility has been primarily driven by the precariousness of livelihoods in the country and the need to provide for their families (Takaindisa, 2020). Moreover, it has been propelled by the care industry’s growth in receiving countries, which has led to the emergence of the concept of global care chains (Kofman and Raghu Ram, 2012). Notably, much of their mobility has also been irregular due to the challenges of getting formal travel documents in Zimbabwe and the limited number of days given to Zimbabwes entering South Africa (Maviza et al., 2019; Mawazda, 2008; Maphosa, 2012).

As the women travel irregularly, they are exposed to several risks and vulnerabilities while in transit (López-Domene et al., 2019). Significant scholarship has revealed that irregular female migrants face violence, physical exploitation, sexual assault, and emotional abuse (Maphosa, 2012; Andall, 2018). Furthermore, some studies have also revealed that irregular female migrants face some health-related challenges while in deportation camps, including overcrowding, poor sanitation, and hygiene facilities (López-Domene et al., 2019). In the current landscape, the COVID-19 mobility restrictions, combined with migration management protocols/ regulations, have compounded the challenges faced by irregular migrants (Sanchez, 2020; Ola, 2021), and women are often disproportionately affected. This, however, does not mean the compounding factors have successfully ended illicit mobility. Instead, for Sanchez and Achilli (2020), the COVID-19 restrictions and other state regulations have only temporarily suspended or reduced the incidences of irregular mobility without eliminating it (Sanchez, 2020). In essence, the inequitable access to the legal/ regular mobility pathways worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed both the facilitators of illicit migration and irregular migrants to devise more complex means to traverse borders and gain access (Takaindisa, 2020; Sanchez, 2020).

Women are disproportionately at risk during these voyages because of the challenges associated with the irregular/ clandestine journeys. Several studies and the media have revealed that women and girls face high risks of sexual and physical abuse and robbery from armed robbers and rapists known as amagumaguma (Ncube, 2010; McGregor and Primorac, 2010; Ncube et al., 2014). For example, The Zimbabwean online newspaper published in February 2010 flighted a headline that read ‘Women targeted en-route to City of Gold’. In that article, there is a statement that reads:

From the frying pan into the fire – that best describes the predicament faced by Zimbabwean girl children and women who think South Africa offers a better life. On the road to the City of Gold, they face physical and sexual abuse.

Irregular mobility demonstrates migrant agency in response to conditions of precariousness in their home countries (Nyumunda, 2014; Tshabalala, 2017). It is driven by the stringent mobility control measures restricting free movement between countries (Ndlovu and Landau, 2020; Collyer, 2020; Č Mainwaring and Bridgen, 2016). Such conditions as demands for passports and visa policies push many to the irregular migrant status, denying them access through official migration routes (Campbell, 2006). Furthermore, states create vulnerability as they enact policies that regulate against informal mobility and safeguard territorial sovereignty through stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria for the formal migration (Moyo, 2020; Nshimbi and Moyo, 2017). This orchestration of vulnerability is further demonstrated when state authorities such as the police, soldiers and immigration officials become active actors in and perpetrators of corruption, violence and abuse against irregular migrants (Maphosa, 2012).

The precariousness of their situations due to economic insecurity renders them vulnerable and pushes them to migrate (Crush and Tevera, 2010). The precariousness results from multiple and intersecting socioeconomic inequalities embedded in structural and societal dynamics leading to heightened levels of poverty and vulnerability to livelihood risks and shocks (Atak et al., 2018). Given the precariousness of circumstances leading to migration and the challenges associated with formal mobility, much of the migration has been irregular through clandestine routes (Č Mainwaring and Bridgen, 2016; Zack et al., 2019). While on the move, migrants are exposed to risks, violence and abuse and such factors like gender, age and ethnicity may further worsen the vulnerability (Atak et al., 2018). Notably, their vulnerability is situational in that they are irregular and personal because of their gender.

In the case of irregular female migrants, the intersection of their irregular status with their gender makes them more susceptible to abuse and violation than men (Maphosa, 2012; Atak et al., 2018). This further worsens their vulnerability and exposure to risk during the migration journey and at detention. Considering the foreground, through the concept of vulnerability, we can understand how states are obligated to ensure respect, protection and fulfilment of women’s rights as human rights. State agents should be instrumental as arms of the government to serve justice and not perpetuate violence and abuse.

It, therefore, emerges that amagumaguma ambush irregular migrants crossing through unconventional routes in the bushes to rob them and often rape the women (McGregor and Primorac, 2010; Tshabalala, 2017). This paper assesses the vulnerabilities and the lived realities of irregular female migrants between Zimbabwe and Botswana during the clandestine migration journeys. It unearths the impacts of COVID-19 and how the restrictions to contain the virus have shaped the migration experiences of irregular migrants both during their migration journeys and during deportation.

2. Methods

2.1. Study area

Plumtree Boarder Post is one of the three Border Post between Zimbabw and Botswana around Plumtree area. The Boarder is the busiest of the three borders into Botswana around Plumtree. The boarder POST is approximately 10 km after with Plumtree town which is the nearest urban settlement (Sithele, 2016) and falls under Natural Region (NR)
IV, which is characterised by poor agricultural soils, low rainfall totals, high crop production failure and endemic droughts (Maphosa, 2007; Maphosa, 2010). As such, there is not much success in agricultural activities, which are the mainstay of the communities in the district. From historical times to date, people from the district have been migrating to urban centers like Bulawayo or neighbouring countries in the region, such as South Africa and Botswana (Maphosa, 2005). This has mainly been driven by the proximity of these countries to the districts, the porosity of the shared borders as well as shared historical, kinship and linguistic ties with some communities in South Africa and Botswana (Maviza, 2020; Ncube et al., 2014; Maphosa, 2010). As a result, there has been pronounced parental migration from the district and a high incidence of left-behind children. The study area is shown in Fig 1.

2.2. Study design

A qualitative descriptive survey design was used to generate data on the vulnerabilities and the lived realities of irregular female migrants between Zimbabwe and Botswana during the clandestine migration journeys. This design enabled the generation of rich data that answered the research questions through in-depth explorations and narratives on the experiences of irregular female migrants from Zimbabwe to Botswana during the COVID (Tong et al., 2007; Edwards, 2020).

2.3. Study population and participants

The targeted population for this study is the Zimbabwean female irregular migrants (FIMs) deported from Botswana between May and July 2021 and key informants (KIs) from relevant organisations at Plumtree Border Post. These participants were purposively selected as their experiences could help answer this study’s objectives. The researchers had no prior knowledge of the FIMs’ numbers. Given that this was a qualitative study that sought an in-depth exploration of the vulnerabilities and lived realities of irregular female migrants, respondents were purposively selected. The selection was based on availability and willingness to participate.

2.4. Data collection and tools

In-depth interviews were conducted with FIMs guided by a key Informant interview guide that had questions on migration, the lived experiences of migrants, including their opportunities and vulnerabilities and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their lives, including their livelihoods. The interviews were conducted either in English or isiNdebele languages, spoken by many in this region. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants at the Plumtree Border Post. These helped gather expert opinions on migration as far as females are concerned. These included port health officials, International Organisation of Migration officials and the police. The interview guide had questions on the migration of females, their vulnerabilities and how the COVID-19 has heightened or reduced these vulnerabilities. The interviews took between 25 and 45 min to administer, and these interviews were recorded using a tape recorder. For the FIMs, thematic saturation was reached after the 10th interview as further observations did not reveal new themes. The interviewing process was continued up to 15 to allow for any eventualities and then was stopped.

2.5. Data management and analysis

The recordings were transcribed verbatim in preparation for coding and thematic analysis on MAXQDA Version 20 Pro. All the authors did coding independently, and finalisation was done in round table discussions. Differences in the emerging themes were discussed and ironed out between the authors. The emerging themes were then presented as findings of this study.
2.6. Researcher positionality

In framing this study, the first author had some preconceptions on the subject matter that had a bearing on how she conceptualised, gathered and eventually analysed data. The first author is an employee with the immigration department and had generally observed irregular migrants being deported at the border post. That position of privilege and authority inevitably influenced her perceptions of what irregular mobility entailed. Being an officer in the department that oversees entry and exit into the country made her approach the research from a judgemental position that sought justice, making her already view subjects as perpetrators and not mere research participants. Moreover, the supervisors also had pre- and misconceptions about irregular mobility in general. However, during interactions with the respondents for the first author and with the data for the supervisors, the positions constantly shifted and emerged from the analysis with the appreciation that experiences of irregular migrants are not fixed. Instead, they are mediated by different experiences depending on gender, class, social positioning, and the broader socioeconomic context in which it all happens.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Nineteen respondents were interviewed at the Plumtree Border Post (i.e. 15 irregular female migrants deported from Botswana and 4 KIs). The demographic profile of all the participants is presented in Table 1.

3.2. Vulnerabilities of irregular female migrants on the move

Findings revealed several risks and vulnerabilities that irregular female migrants encounter during migration. These include violence and robbery, different forms of gender-based violence, such as rape and sexual harassment, and psycho-emotional harassment, as presented in the subsequent subsections. The summary of the themes that emerged is shown in Table 2.

3.2.1. Violence and robbery

Violence and robbery emerged as the most common risks that irregular female migrants are vulnerable to while moving. Respondents indicated that they experienced this violence from robbers known as *amagumaguna,* who waylay irregular migrants along the clandestine routes they use and rob them of their valuables. The use of violence is widespread during these attacks, with some respondents indicating that they survived knife stabs while others were hit with logs when the robbers perceived some form of resistance. Some of the irregular female migrants offered the following narrations:

- You see, those people are monsters; they do not have any mercy if they sense any resistance, they do not hesitate to unleash violence. I once witnessed them stabbing one of the women we were travelling with because she refused to give them her money. They do not care that you are a woman; they only want money and valuables (FIM-3).
- It is tough, my sister out there. I have encountered *amagumaguma* twice, and it is always a horrible experience. In my second encounter, they hit me with a log on my right arm because I had refused to give them my phone. They eventually took my phone and left me with a fractured arm (FIM-1).
- As women, we are easy targets because we cannot fight back. I was robbed once, and they took my cellphone and money. One of them was carrying a gun, and I just could not refuse. But we cannot stop moving; our children should eat (FIM-10).

Furthermore, irregular female migrants indicated they were more vulnerable to violence and robbery if they travelled alone, unlike smugglers known as *izimpisi.* Although there are instances of violence and robbery even when accompanied by the smugglers, the magnitude is

| Table 1. Demographic details of the respondents. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Respondent # | Gender | Age | Status | Travelling to BW with… |
|----------------|-------------|------|--------|------------------------|
| Female irregular migrants (FIM) | | | | |
| FIM-1 | Female | 18 | Irregular migrant | Sister |
| FIM-2 | Female | 23 | Irregular migrant | Sister |
| FIM-3 | Female | 32 | Irregular migrant | Alone |
| FIM-4 | Female | 21 | Irregular migrant | Alone |
| FIM-5 | Female | 34 | Irregular migrant | Husband |
| FIM-6 | Female | 39 | Irregular migrant | Alone |
| FIM-7 | Female | 44 | Irregular migrant | Alone |
| FIM-8 | Female | 18 | Irregular migrant | Mother |
| FIM-9 | Female | 26 | Irregular migrant | Boyfriend |
| FIM-10 | Female | 46 | Irregular migrant | Alone |
| FIM-11 | Female | 50 | Irregular migrant | Alone |
| FIM-12 | Female | 24 | Irregular migrant | Brother |
| FIM-13 | Female | 35 | Irregular migrant | Alone |
| FIM-14 | Female | 17 | Irregular migrant | Aunt |
| FIM-15 | Female | 31 | Irregular migrant | Alone |

| Key informants | | | |
|-----------------|------------------|
| Ki-1 | Male | 41 | ZRP Officer-in-charge |
| Ki-2 | Female | 32 | Nurse |
| Ki-3 | Female | 36 | ZRP Officer |
| Ki-4 | Female | 42 | IOM Officer |

(FIM = Female irregular migrant; Ki = Key informant).

| Table 2. Summary of Emerging themes. |
|--------------------------------------|
| | Superordinate theme | Subordinate themes |
|---------------------------------------|
| Vulnerabilities of irregular female migrants on the move | Violence and robbery | Rape and sexual harassment |
| | Psycho-emotional harassment | Health vulnerabilities in detention |

2 *Amagumaguma* is a word used to refer to gangs of criminals who prey on irregular migrants from Zimbabwe crossing boundaries through undesignated points to South Africa or Botswana.
3 *Izimpisi* refer to informal self-organised groups who are paid by *transporters* to make sure that irregular migrants cross safely to South Africa or Botswana.
often lesser. The issue is usually solved by paying a fee to facilitate passage and protect the irregular migrants from being attacked by amagumaguma. Two of the respondents who travel this way regularly and have experienced travelling alone and travelling with the aid of smugglers put it this way:

- This journey is not for the faint-hearted. Izimpisi is a good shield in the bush, but one cannot always afford them. I remember travelling without the smugglers; I was stabbed on the upper arm while defending my belongings from these robbers. It is just survival of the fittest out there. I eventually lost everything (FIM-2).
- It is better when you travel with smugglers because you do not face amagumaguma directly, the smugglers do the negotiations, and we pass unharmed. However, when travelling alone, it is terrible. They do as they please (amagumaguma), and they often take everything you have, and you remain stranded along the way (FIM-6).

3.2.2. Rape and sexual harassment

Narrations from both the irregular female migrants and key informants interviewed indicated that rape and sexual harassment cases are prevalent during the irregular female migrants’ migration process. The study findings revealed the perpetrators include soldiers who reportedly rape the female migrants in exchange for an entry into the host country, amagumaguma and other local Botswana men who also ambush the women along the busy paths they use to enter the country. An official from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) narrated it this way:

- We have had cases of women who have been raped by men who pretended to assist them in crossing over into the receiving country. Some rape survivors report being raped by security personnel (soldiers and the police) who man the boundary between the two countries. Most of these cases go unreported because the migrants are undocumented and fear going to the police will result in their deportation (KI-2)

Some of the irregular female migrants also put it this way:

- Travelling through the bush is a gamble. When you leave home, you are almost sure to encounter robbers and rapists, but they need at home to push us to brave it all (FIM-4).
- I experienced this firsthand in 2020, just after the lockdowns were put to effect and borders were closed. We were travelling as a group of men and women and came across a group of soldiers. They made us sit down and threatened to arrest and deport us. They started looking amongst us and picked the younger women, and raped them not so far from where the group was sitting. It was so painful, and there was nothing we could do. We just sat there and waited for our fate (FIM-5).
- Every time I think of that experience, I cry. I was once raped by amagumaguma while travelling to Botswana with a few other colleagues. They made fun of it, two guys took turns to rape us while everyone was watching, and they took videos of that. It was humiliating and left a permanent dent in me, but I cannot stop trying because my children need food, clothes, and school fees. Life is tough (FIM-7).
- The sad part is that we cannot report these incidences anywhere because they are illegal. You just swallow it and try to forge forward, but you are never the same (FIM-12).

Furthermore, some respondents also indicated that they got unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases as the perpetrators did not use any protection.

- After reaching Botswana, I noticed some pain and a funny discharge with a foul odour on my underwear. I had to borrow a friend’s documents to access health services, and I was told I had a sexually transmitted disease. I was devastated; I just had to take the medication given. Those monsters do not use protection; they do not care whatsoever (FIM-8).
- I have a friend that was raped while on the move and got pregnant, and she had to terminate the pregnancy (FIM-4).

3.2.3. Psycho-emotional harassment

The findings show that irregular female migrants are subjected to various forms of GBV by different perpetrators. One of the vulnerabilities linked to GBV that emerged was susceptibility to psycho-emotional harassment while on the move. Respondents indicated that, while on the move, they encountered psycho-emotional harassment in the hands of the smugglers, amagumaguma and the security details they met along the way. They were called names, labelled with derogatory terms that reduced them to prostitutes and bad mothers. Some of the respondents offered the following narrations:

- Those soldiers are rough, and they called us prostitutes and loose women. They would shout at us like we were little children who could not think (FIM-9).
- Even the smugglers assisting us to cross would insult us if they felt we were not moving fast enough. I remember one time one of the young men scolded me and shouted: ‘where are you going when other old grandmothers like you are busy being witches in the rural areas (FIM-15).

3.2.4. Health vulnerabilities in detention

The study findings further revealed that when irregular female migrants were caught and deported, they faced further vulnerabilities in detention camps. Most of them indicated that while in transit and upon arrival in the detention camps at the border, they lacked access to SRH services. Some women stated that they did not have access to sanitary wear and bathing facilities, with some spending the whole detention period without bathing. It also emerged that some inmates with minors also struggled to get baby care supplies like diapers. All these challenges exposed the women to several public health challenges, which increased their vulnerability to infectious diseases, as detailed in the following narrations:

- I started my period two days after detention, and on the first day, I always had severe period pains, of which I was given pain killers. When I was apprehended, I did not have anything on me as I visited a neighbourhood friend. I was assisted by fellow inmates who had money and asked the officers to buy sanitary wear for me. The whole period I was detained, I did not bath as there were no bathing facilities (FIM-1).
- The bathing facilities in some of the detention holding cells are in a terrible state, and you cannot use them. You just end up opting to stay without bathing and just wipe yourself with a cloth or something like that (FIM-11).
- It is even worse for women with small children. We had one woman with a less than a year old child, and she did not have enough diapers. To make matters worse, she could not produce enough milk to satisfy the baby as she did not get enough food herself, and the baby would cry a lot (FIM-10).

Similarly, some women indicated that they could not access their medication for chronic conditions like BP and diabetes and other ailments like HIV and AIDS and TB. In detention, medical services are only for minor ailments; those who need medication for chronic illnesses are not catered for. As a result, some ended up defaulting on their medication, leading to complications in their conditions. Some of the respondents narrated it this way:

- I am on ART, and I was caught and deported while going to the shops to buy food. I did not have any medication on me, I could not get medication for my condition, and I have defaulted. I am hoping that my situation will be redeemable (FIM-14).
- The situation is terrible here in detention cells. There are no supplies for critical medicines for chronic conditions, and we only have painkillers and nothing else (KI-2).
Furthermore, some key informants also indicated that there are instances where female migrants were deported after 24 h of delivery while the woman was still in pain and in need of specialised care and health services. For example, a health official at the border post put it this way:

- It gets overwhelming at times. We have had post-delivery mothers deported soon after delivery, still in pain and needing health care. You wonder how a person in such a condition can be discharged from the hospital. (K-I-2).

Over and above the preceding, the migrants also indicated that they were at risk of being infected with COVID-19 as new inmates were brought in without requisite covid tests. As such, irregular female migrants in deportation camps were highly susceptible to contracting COVID-19. Respondents indicated that as part of the Covid-19 pandemic containment measures, a 10-day mandatory quarantine was imposed for all deportees during the first lockdown. Currently, deportees come with covid test certificates from Botswana, valid for 48 h. Deportees without COVID-19 test results are tested at the border, and if there is a positive case amongst them, they are all sent for a 10-day mandatory quarantine. Respondents complained about the conditions in the quarantine facilities, which included overcrowding, lack of access to medical facilities, and these promoted the spread of the coronavirus.

- The risk of Covid-19 starts along the way as the transporters (Gumagumas) do not ask for Covid-19 results certificate, no wearing masks, and adhering to social distancing you cannot tell them to do so because all they are after is money (FIM-10).
- In detention, you get tested when you get in and must wait for the results to get deported. We are sometimes told there are no test kits available, so we stay longer in detention, ranging from two weeks to a month. As new inmates come in, there is added risk of getting Covid-19 because of lack of ventilation and social distancing in detention. There is overcrowding, and you can hardly turn throughout the night (FIM-6).
- When you finally get the results, you are then transported to the border, and at times we pick other deportees along the way from other stations. Some of them will not be having covid-19 results, which becomes a risk to infection in the trucks if any of them may be positive. At Plumtree border post, if the results are more than 72 h, we get tested again, and if one tests positive, we are all sent to a 14-day quarantine (FIM-15).

Furthermore, some respondents indicated that deportees could spend between 8 and 10 h waiting for transport to the quarantine centre. They are not given food while waiting for transportation, and they cannot access any since ZRP officers guard them. They will only be allowed to use toilets. Moreover, no one would want to contact them since they will contact a Covid-19 positive case(s).

- The situation is horrible for these deportees because once one of them is found positive, they have to go for quarantine, and the conditions in these places are not good. We have witnessed situations where deportees have had to wait for long hours to be taken to the quarantine facilities and are given no food. (FIM-11).
- When we got to the border, we were informed that those we picked from the two stations had no COVID-19 results, so we were tested again. One guy from Molepole station tested positive, and all of us were supposed to go for quarantine for ten days since we had been in contact with someone positive. We had to wait for 8 h for the ZUPCO bus to take us to Eskoveni for quarantine (FIM-3).
- No one wants to come close to you once you are set to go on quarantine. We had to spend the whole day hungry, without food, and we were not allowed to go anywhere to look for food. We were under police guard, who also treated us with caution. It was a hectic experience (FIM-7).

4. Discussion

This study aimed to understand FIMs’ lived experiences during their migration journeys between Zimbabwe and Botswana. The findings show that, although mobile populations are generally at risk, FIMs’ vulnerabilities are even more pronounced because of their gender. Their vulnerabilities include violence and robbery, rape and sexual harassment and psycho-emotional abuse while on the move. Similarly, they further face health-related vulnerabilities in the holding cells when caught and deported. These findings are in sync with those of Maphosa (2012) study, which indicated that FIMs are highly vulnerable both in transit and at the destination (Maphosa, 2012). FIMs risk physical and sexual abuse in transit, leaving indelible emotional and psychological scars (Gueye and Priya, 2020). Amagumaguma and state actors, such as police and soldiers, guarding boundaries are the biggest offenders (Andall, 2018). The findings indicate that the FIMs are more vulnerable because they do not have the physical strength to fight back and protect their belongings or defend themselves from sexual violation.

In the study by Maphosa (2012), the prevalence of rape and sexual harassment of women while in transit by the perpetrators demonstrates their powerlessness when controlling their sexuality (Maphosa, 2012). The findings show their vulnerability to gender-based violence and exploitation because they are women and are perceived as weak. Over and above rape, some respondents indicated that they were subjected to humiliating searches in the hands of amagumaguma, which equalled sexual harassment. In Maphosa’s study, one of the respondents described amagumaguma as “… animals, dogs who rape women and kill for money” (2012, p. 127), which resonates with this study’s findings. Similar findings emerged in Nanquette (2020)’s study on the irregular migration and vulnerability of Ivorian women returnees, indicating that FIMs’ experiences in transit leave deep psycho-emotional/social scars that victims find difficult to share with their families upon return (Nanquette, 2020).

The preceding demonstrates the vulnerabilities of FIMs while in transit, which predisposes them to a myriad of health risks and challenges. The sexual violence comes with a range of health challenges for the victim that ideally should be addressed through comprehensive care services that address “physical injuries; pregnancy; STIs, HIV and hepatitis B; counselling and social support; and follow-up consultations”. However, there is no access to these services for the FIMs who are victims of rape and sexual assault as they cannot access health care services in the destination areas for fear of arrest and deportation. When FIMs are caught and deported, they experience several health challenges due to the living conditions in the deportation centres. Similarly, a study by López-Domene (2019) indicated that deported irregular migrants face significant health risks in deportation camps due to overcrowding and unpalatable living conditions in the shelters where they are accommodated. In the current context of COVID-19, this exposes deported FIMs to higher risks of infection (López-Domene et al., 2019).

5. Strengths and weaknesses of the study

This study used an in-depth interpretive and descriptive qualitative survey to explore the vulnerabilities of FIMs and provides in-depth findings that are useful to programmers who are keen to come up with interventions that would possibly reduce these vulnerabilities. One of the weaknesses of this study was the sensitivity around the subject matter, which could have led to discomforts in disclosure by the participants in fear of victimisation as one of the authors was an employee with the Immigration Department. However, efforts were made to ensure that the ethical issues around privacy, anonymity and protection of the participants were upheld. The study further did not purposively

4 https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/resources/publications/en/guidelines_chap6.pdf
ensure a variety of lived experiences and socio-demographic features of the interviewees. The available participants during the data collection period were recruited if they met the inclusion criteria regardless of the nature of their lived experiences or socio-demographic characteristics. This could have led to limitations on the variety of vulnerabilities that were explored.

6. Conclusion

FIMs are generally at risk as they are bound to be taken advantage of at different levels during migration and deportation. Most are subjected to inhumane and degrading treatment that violates their human rights and potentially worsens their health even during detention. Therefore, there is a need to look at these policies implemented at the ports and ensure women are treated humanely even during the deportation process. There is also a need to improve the livelihoods of communities by implementing sustainable community projects that would minimise the number of women who have to migrate in search of better livelihood prospects.

7. Policy Reflections

Findings from this study highlight significant challenges and glaring policy gaps that need to be tackled to ensure the human rights for all are upheld in the region. There is a need for the SADC member states to actively address the root causes of illicit mobility in the region. This may entail a more intentional tackle of regional integration matters to reduce the severity of precarity amongst different population groups as they move within the region. In so doing, member states may generally develop more friendly and inclusive border governance systems in the region and Africa, ensuring a move towards regional integration and inclusivity. Furthermore, member states need a concerted effort to uphold women’s rights as human rights while in detention camps/holding cells. To further strengthen the policy positions, there is also a need to explore the resilience of these women to endure such risks and not give up building on their strengths to come up with acceptable livelihood strategies.

8. Declarations

8.1. Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

Permission to carry out the study was sought from relevant authorities: the Department of Immigration, Department of Social Welfare, the International Organisation for Migration at the Plumtree Border Post, and the National University of Science Technology, notably the Institute of Development Studies. Moreover, the research abides by the Nuremberg code and principles stated in the Helsinki Declaration for the safety of participants involved in the study.

8.2. Consent for Publication

Not Applicable

8.3. Availability of Data and Material

Not Applicable

8.4. Funding

The research was not funded.

8.5. Authors Contributions

TM conceptualised the research idea as an MSc dissertation topic. The author designed the methodology and data collection tools and collected and conducted the initial analysis of the data. GM and WNN were supervisors who played a significant role in refining, guiding the student, and drafting the actual manuscript. GM coordinated the manuscript writing process. WNN performed data analysis on MAXQDA Pro-Version 20. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

8.6. Authors Information

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Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

Acknowledgements

Not Applicable

Supplementary Materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.jmh.2022.100091.

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