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A Human Rights-Based Perspective on the Integration Experiences and Vulnerabilities of Zimbabwean Migrants Living in Johannesburg, South Africa

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Abstract

The integration experiences and vulnerabilities of migrants in host states are a critical area of study. This qualitative research, grounded in a human rights and social justice framework, investigates the systemic injustices and integration challenges faced by Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg, South Africa. Through in-depth interviews with 16 participants and six key informants, the study employs thematic analysis to uncover the socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers that impede successful integration. The findings reveal pervasive issues such as prejudice, discrimination, xenophobia, and language barriers, which exacerbate the migrants' vulnerabilities and make it difficult to support their families. They, at times, fail to buy food and pay school fees for their children. Despite these challenges, the resilience and creativity of Zimbabwean migrants are evident. The study's unique contribution lies in its widening of the genealogy of theories of migration by incorporating African-centred migration perspectives, which are grounded in social justice perspectives. This critiques the Global North-dominated narratives that have historically sidelined the lived experiences of migrants from the Global South. The study offers a comprehensive examination of the interplay between systemic barriers and migrant resilience, offering new insights into how migration involves and affects families. This research calls for the development and implementation of rights-based integration frameworks to address systemic issues and enhance the well-being of migrants so that they can better support their families and kinsmen.

Keywords: forced migrants; human rights-based perspective; vulnerabilities; South Africa; xenophobia; Zimbabwe



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1. Introduction

International migration is a significant global phenomenon, with an estimated 281 million international migrants worldwide in 2020, constituting approximately 3.6% of the global population ([International Organisation for Migration \[IOM\]](https://www.iom.int/) 2022). The [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \[UNHCR\]](https://www.unhcr.org/) (2025) reported that about 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced in 2024 due to conflict, human rights violations, violence, and persecution. This study examines the integration experiences and vulnerabilities of Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg, South Africa, within a human rights and social justice framework.

The contemporary nature of international migration is prominent in humanitarian, economic, and political discourse (Trummer et al. 2023). While some countries are relatively easy to migrate to, factors such as distance, financial expenses, and legal restrictions make migration to other countries more challenging (Murenje 2020). This paper addresses the migration problem in Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting research gaps and the socio-legal context of South Africa. It explores the lived realities of Zimbabwean migrants, focusing on the challenges they face in integrating and the systemic injustices they encounter. The study employed a human rights-based approach to understand the experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. This approach recognises the unequal power relations and social exclusion that deny people their rights and keep them impoverished (Mwapaura et al. 2022). Social justice, a core principle of the social work profession, is also integral to this study. Social workers are obligated to advance social justice and advocate for marginalised and vulnerable migrant populations (Mwenyango 2022).

This study advances the genealogy of migration theories by extending an emerging African-centred, rights-based tradition within the field. Dominant theories of migration, largely shaped by Global North perspectives, have historically marginalised African migrants' experiences, particularly South–South mobility. By highlighting the lived experiences of Zimbabwean migrants living in Johannesburg, and how migration involves and affects families, this research challenges these dominant narratives and contributes a context-specific perspective centred on human rights and social justice. Migrants encounter challenges in providing basic necessities for their families, such as education, food, shelter, and healthcare. Furthermore, the study contributes to the evolving field of social work in migration theories, policies, and practices both within South Africa and globally.

This paper examines the current landscape of experiences and vulnerabilities among Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. The literature review and background information of the paper describe the migration problem in Sub-Saharan Africa and highlight research gaps. It also briefly describes the human rights-based approach, which formed a theoretical lens through which the participants' lived realities were explored. Furthermore, the paper examines migration within the South African socio-legal context, including the experiences of forced migrants in the country. Thereafter, the methodology used to conduct the study is presented, followed by the presentation and discussion of research findings. The paper concludes by highlighting the theoretical contribution of the study, and by proposing potential solutions to enhance the lives of migrants, so that their capabilities to support their kindred are enhanced.

1.1. The Sub-Saharan Africa Migration Problem

International migration is driven by multiple factors, including family reunification, employment opportunities, and economic prosperity (Amnesty International 2025). In Africa, migration is often a necessity for individuals in poverty-stricken countries (Crush 2017; McAuliffe and Klein Solomon 2017). An estimated 25% of Zimbabwe's population has migrated due to political and economic instability, settling in neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia, as well as in distant countries like Australia, Canada, and the United States (Mdlongwa 2017). South Africa, in particular, has become a primary destination for these migrants.

The migration crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa is exacerbated by conflict, persecution, and environmental disasters (Trummer et al. 2023). For instance, approximately 400,000 people fled Burundi since April 2015 due to political turmoil (United Nations [UN] 2018). Human trafficking also contributes to involuntary migration (Sambo and Sibanda 2025; Sibanda et al. 2025). Environmental factors, such as climate change, have forcibly displaced millions, with 569.4 million people uprooted in 2016 alone (Guha-Sapir et al. 2017). Climate change

has severely impacted livelihoods in Africa, particularly for those dependent on agriculture and livestock (World Bank 2018; Trummer et al. 2023).

Zimbabwe's reliance on rain-fed agriculture has made it vulnerable to droughts, leading to food insecurity and malnutrition (Hollingsworth 2016; Al Jazeera 2019). Cyclone Idai, for example, displaced 232,480 people and caused significant destruction in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mozambique (Murenje 2020; Trummer et al. 2023; World Vision Australia 2019). The cyclone's impact on infrastructure and livelihoods led to a mass exodus from affected regions (Chapungu 2020).

South-South migration has grown significantly due to these factors, making African migration a complex and critical area of study. Despite the topical nature of migration experiences, there is a notable gap in the literature on the human rights experiences of Global South migrants. Migrant integration in the Global South faces significant challenges, including rising anti-immigrant sentiments in South Africa (Gordon 2017). While some migrants achieve their goals, South Africa remains far from the idealised destination they hoped for (Madue 2015).

This study focuses on Zimbabwean migrants who left their country due to political and economic crises between 2000 and 2016. Zimbabweans represent the largest group of immigrants in South Africa, with estimates of over one million residing in the country (Mutanda 2017). Due to their large numbers, Zimbabwean migrants are often scapegoated and targeted by xenophobic groups and political parties, such as Operation Dudula and the Patriotic Alliance, which call for their deportation and restrict their access to basic services (Dratwa 2024; Democratic Alliance 2025; The Star 2025).

1.2. South African Socio-Legal Context

South Africa shares borders with Botswana, Eswatini, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, and surrounds Lesotho. The country has an estimated population of 63 million people, with black Africans comprising approximately 81.7% of the population (South Africa Gateway 2025). South Africa is a popular destination for African migrants, particularly those from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe and Mozambique, although others come from countries further afield (Integral Human Development 2021; Moyo 2021; Mukumbang et al. 2020; Murenje 2020; Sibanda et al. 2025). Migrants are drawn to South Africa's advanced economy, democratic institutions, and relative political stability, compared to countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, where citizens face numerous socioeconomic and political challenges. Despite South Africa's securitised borders, cross-border migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa persists. The securitisation of South Africa's borders has fuelled migrant smuggling, placing migrants in a state of liminality and marginality, which militates against the goal of free human mobility within the SADC region (Moyo 2019).

International migration remains politically and economically strategic to South Africa (Murenje 2020). The country attracts various migrants, including asylum seekers, refugees, finance, information, and technology experts, as well as social workers (Integral Human Development 2021; Murenje 2020). However, the categorisation of migrants in international migration governance has often neglected the scale and intricacy of migration. Distinguishing between different migrant groups is increasingly difficult, as evidenced by the inherent tendency of ill-informed migration policies to contain and exclude certain migrant categories. As Carling (2018, p. 2) observed, "the force-choice dichotomy is a simplification that obscures more than it clarifies, and which is retained for reasons other than its analytical potential".

South Africa manages asylum seekers and refugees through the Refugees Act (Act 130 of 1998), which protects refugees and allows asylum seekers to move freely, study, and

work in South Africa ([Sambo and Sibanda 2025](#)). However, the 2017 Refugees Amendment Act introduced restrictive measures, denying refugee status (misrecognition according to Fraser's theory of social justice) to asylum seekers who fail to report to a refugee reception office within five days of entering South Africa. The amendment also restricts the right to work (maldistribution or economic injustice) for asylum seekers who cannot support themselves and their families after four months in South Africa and are not receiving any form of support from the UNHCR or any non-governmental organisation ([Integral Human Development 2021](#)). Asylum seekers who secure employment must inform the authorities within six months. Previously, refugees were eligible for permanent residence after five years of residing in South Africa, but the new legislation extends this period to ten years. Those with expired asylum seeker permits risk fines, imprisonment for up to five years, and deregistration (misrecognition or sociocultural injustice) from refugee status determination altogether. However, this provision is being challenged in South African courts. South African authorities appear to be making the country unattractive to prospective refugees and migrants.

International migrants, distinguished from asylum seekers and refugees, are managed through the Immigration Act No. 13 of 2002, which facilitates the movement of visitors, students, investors, and skilled migrants ([Republic of South Africa 2002](#)). Using different permit regimes, South African employers attract global talent to work in South Africa, albeit temporarily. The Act, however, reinforces control and deterrence of migration, as well as the securitisation and militarisation of ports of entry and exit. The Immigration Act deliberately excludes low-skilled migrants (misrecognition), who have a very low chance of migrating to South Africa. As a result, irregular migrants often resort to seeking asylum as a means of obtaining documentation ([Moyo 2021](#)). Despite these legislative measures, migrants still face serious challenges in realising their rights. The challenges faced by forced migrants are often linked to high levels of unemployment, poverty, and inequality (maldistribution) in South Africa ([Murenje 2020](#); [Sibanda et al. 2025](#)).

1.3. Zimbabwean Political and Socio-Economic Context

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in Southern Africa, bordered by Zambia, South Africa, Mozambique, and Botswana. Its population is estimated to be between 13 and 16 million people ([Murenje 2020](#)). As a former British colony, Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, with the late Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) leader, Robert Gabriel Mugabe, coming to power. ZANU-PF continues to rule Zimbabwe and is notorious for its dictatorial governance and violence against political opponents ([Murenje 2020](#)). Following the electoral loss in the 2008 elections, Robert Mugabe refused to leave office, resulting in police and military violence against Zimbabwean citizens suspected of voting for opposition parties ([Makumbe 2009](#)). This violence displaced an estimated 50,000 people, with a further 100 people losing their lives in brutal circumstances ([Murenje 2020](#)). The government was accused of establishing militia bases throughout Zimbabwe ([BTI 2018b](#)), leading to serious human rights violations, including food deprivation, torture, and the destruction of homes for an estimated 300,000 citizens ([Crush et al. 2015](#)). Emmerson Mnangagwa removed Mugabe from power in a military coup in November 2017. However, the economic and political situation has worsened since Mnangagwa replaced Mugabe ([Al Jazeera 2019](#)).

The Zimbabwean economy has significantly declined since independence, largely due to hyperinflation, huge budget deficits, widespread corruption, contempt for the rule of law, government ineffectiveness, and an uncontrolled money supply ([BTI 2018a](#)). Political instability has hindered economic development, created an unfavourable investment climate, and led to the collapse of local businesses ([BTI 2018a](#)). Economic growth declined from 2.3%

in 2015 to 0.5% in 2016, and by June 2019, inflation was estimated to have reached 175%, affecting citizens already struggling with severe shortages of basic foodstuffs, medicine, and fuel (BTI 2018b). Infrastructural decay has weakened Zimbabwe's competitiveness and investment (BTI 2018a, 2018b). Inadequate water supplies have led to outbreaks of diseases like cholera and typhoid, while the health sector grapples with the loss of critical health personnel, shortages of drugs and medical equipment, declining infrastructure, financial deficits, and poorly remunerated health personnel (Murenje 2020). Under these extremely difficult conditions, many Zimbabweans have struggled to make a living and have been forced to migrate to nearby countries, especially South Africa, in search of sustainable livelihoods, making their migration "survival migration" (Crush et al. 2012, p. 5). The migration of Zimbabweans to South Africa is extraordinary, given that Zimbabwe is not experiencing armed conflict (Murenje 2020). It is estimated that approximately 25% of Zimbabwe's population has migrated to neighbouring countries such as Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, and South Africa, and further afield to countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States since 2000 (BusinessTech 2019). Given the complex emigration patterns from Zimbabwe, consisting of undocumented, skilled, and economic migrants, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between voluntary and forced migrants (Crush et al. 2015).

Estimates vary, but South Africa has the largest proportion of Zimbabwean migrants in the SADC region. Makumbe (2009) claimed that five million Zimbabweans live in South Africa, while Pasura (2008) estimated three to four million Zimbabweans. These views are consistent with reports by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] (2025) suggesting that Zimbabweans in South Africa constitute the highest number of asylum seeker applications.

1.4. Theoretical Framework: Human Rights-Based Approach and Social Justice Framework

The study was guided by the human rights-based approach and the social justice framework. Human rights are fundamental to the lives of migrants in host societies (Mwenyango 2022). Both forced migrants and voluntary migrants possess human rights that must be protected under international and domestic laws (Amnesty International 2025). International human rights instruments and customary international law are universally applicable, ensuring protection for every individual regardless of race, nationality, age, culture, or immigration status (Mwenyango 2022; Sibanda 2025a). According to Mwenyango (2022), a rights-based approach should be employed when working with refugees and migrants. This approach views immigrants as rights holders whose rights must be safeguarded, while states are seen as duty bearers with the responsibility and obligation to protect these rights. A rights-based approach emphasises that migrant rights are derived from human rights law and treaties linked to international public law, including refugee law, humanitarian law, law of the sea, labour law, and transnational criminal law (Migration Data Portal 2023). Thus, a human rights perspective is pertinent for this article as it recognises the unequal power relations and social exclusion that deny individuals their rights and perpetuate poverty (Mwapaura et al. 2022). Essentially, a human rights perspective underscores the development of appropriate strategies to build capacities (Mwenyango 2022; Sambo and Sibanda 2025).

Similarly, social justice is central to the social work profession and is highly relevant to the experiences of Zimbabwean involuntary migrants living in Johannesburg. Social workers are mandated to advance social justice and influence both legislation and public discourse (Mwenyango 2022). Therefore, advocating for marginalised and vulnerable migrant populations in South Africa is a core responsibility of the social work profession (Mwenyango 2022; Sibanda et al. 2025). This study is informed by Fraser's (2009) theory of

social justice, which emphasises the parity of participation and focuses on three forms of social justice: redistribution, recognition, and representation. These forms of social justice aim to address three forms of injustice: maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation.

Maldistribution manifests in the lives of Zimbabwean migrants through economic injustices such as limited access to employment opportunities, inadequate housing, and restricted access to essential services. Many migrants are confined to low-paying, unstable jobs in the informal sector, which exacerbates their economic vulnerability and limits their ability to achieve financial stability (Masinga et al. 2025). Misrecognition occurs through social and cultural injustices, where Zimbabwean migrants face discrimination, xenophobia, and social exclusion. They are often scapegoated for broader societal issues and subjected to negative stereotypes, which undermine their sense of belonging and dignity (Murenje 2020). Misrepresentation involves political injustices, where migrants are denied a voice in decision-making processes that affect their lives. This lack of representation perpetuates their marginalisation and hinders their ability to advocate for their rights and interests (Murenje 2020). This focus is legitimate and justifiable as migrant rights are flagrantly violated worldwide (Popescu and Libal 2018).

1.5. Study's Aim and Main Research Question

The study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the integration experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg, examining the socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers they face. The study concludes by indicating the genealogical implications of their experiences and by proposing rights-based integration frameworks to address these systemic issues and enhance the well-being of migrants. The main research question that guided the study was: What are the integration experiences and vulnerabilities of Zimbabwean migrants living in Johannesburg, South Africa? The materials and methods used in the study are presented below.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design, deemed appropriate due to the limited existing knowledge surrounding the phenomenon under investigation (Rubin and Babbie 2024; Creswell and Poth 2018). The research was conducted in Johannesburg, South Africa's largest urban centre and its primary economic, mining, and industrial hub (Nations Online 2019; Statistics South Africa 2018). Johannesburg was selected as the study site given its significance as a major destination for international migrants (Sibanda et al. 2025). Notably, 50% of South Africa's international migrant population resides in Gauteng Province, where Johannesburg is located (BusinessTech 2019), making it a contextually relevant setting for exploring the lived experiences of Zimbabwean migrants.

The study employed purposive sampling to identify two distinct participant groups within the broader study population (Maree 2019; Palinkas et al. 2015). The primary group comprised sixteen Zimbabwean migrants (eight men and eight women) residing in various regions of the Johannesburg Metropolitan area. In line with the inclusion criteria set out by Patino and Ferreira (2018), the eligibility criteria included being conversant in English, being over the age of 18, and being a current resident of Johannesburg at the time of data collection. Being conversant in English was part of the requirement because the PI is not conversant in all Zimbabwean official languages, and it was not ideal to use an interpreter for such a sensitive topic. This group formed the core sample, whose lived experiences the study aimed to explore in depth. The second group consisted of six key informants—professionals engaged in migration-related work in Johannesburg—who provided contextual and expert insights to complement the primary data.

Participant recruitment was initiated by the principal investigator (PI), who contacted potential participants via email. These emails were directed to key personnel within international organisations, community-based agencies, and government departments that provide services to migrants. A recruitment flyer outlining the study's purpose and participation details was attached, along with a request for assistance in identifying suitable participants. Contact information was obtained through publicly available sources, professional networks, and word-of-mouth referrals. This process yielded nine responses, and the PI conducted face-to-face meetings with eleven individuals who expressed interest in participating. From these interactions, six key informants and five Zimbabwean migrants were selected. An additional eleven Zimbabwean participants were recruited through snowball sampling, based on referrals from initial participants.

Snowball sampling, while effective in reaching hidden populations, has inherent limitations, including the risk of creating a homogenous sample due to the reliance on participant referrals within their social networks (Bagheri and Saadati 2015). This method can lead to biases and limit the diversity of the sample. To mitigate this, the PI actively sought to diversify the sample by reaching out to a wide range of organisations and community groups, ensuring a broader representation of the Zimbabwean migrant population in Johannesburg. This approach helped to overcome the potential homogeneity and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the varied experiences of the participants.

Data collection was conducted between March and July 2017, utilising semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 60 minutes each. The relevance of data collected in 2017 extends beyond 2022 and 2025 due to the persistent and evolving nature of the socio-economic and political conditions that drive migration from Zimbabwe to Johannesburg. Despite the passage of time, recent studies indicate that migrants continue to face vulnerabilities in South Africa, with socio-economic and political conditions in Zimbabwe worsening, leading to ongoing migration (Mbeve et al. 2020; Hungwe 2020). The experiences and challenges faced by Zimbabwean migrants in 2017 remain pertinent as they reflect enduring issues such as precarious employment, socio-economic instability, and the struggle for integration within host communities. These persistent conditions underscore the continued relevance of the data, providing valuable insights into the long-term impacts of migration and the systemic issues that affect migrant populations over time. Therefore, the data collected in 2017 offer a critical foundation for understanding the ongoing dynamics of migration and the lived experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg, making them highly relevant for contemporary analysis and policy development.

The interviews were designed to foster meaningful engagement through techniques such as active listening, probing, clarification, and creating a safe and comfortable environment (Jamshed 2014). Interviews took place in settings familiar to participants (including their homes and places of business) to enhance comfort and openness. With participants' informed written consent, interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder, allowing the principal investigator (PI) to focus on the content and verbal cues during the sessions (Jamshed 2014).

Data analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Initially, the principal investigator (PI) personally transcribed all interviews to ensure immersion in the data. This phase involved repeated readings of the transcripts to deepen familiarity (Barrow 2017). The PI coded the data, incorporating reflexive journalling, peer debriefing, and member checking to enhance credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell 2014). These steps align with established qualitative research standards and help mitigate potential bias.

In the second phase, initial codes were generated manually through open coding, using highlighters to label segments of data with concise phrases that captured their meaning

(Braun and Clarke 2013). The third phase involved identifying patterns and collating codes into potential themes, such as migrant integration, which grouped data related to participants' engagement with host communities.

In the fourth phase, themes were reviewed and refined. The PI organised data under each theme using Microsoft Word's cut-and-paste function and colour-coding, ensuring alignment between the data and emerging themes (Bryman 2015). The fifth phase involved defining and naming themes, with further analysis to clarify their scope and interrelationships. Finally, in the sixth phase, the PI synthesised the findings into a coherent narrative (Creswell 2014). To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, the study adhered to principles of validity and reliability, specifically attending to credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Creswell 2014).

The data analysis process aligns with Nancy Fraser's theoretical framework by emphasising the importance of participatory parity and the need to address systemic injustices through inclusive and reflexive research practices. Fraser's framework advocates for the recognition of marginalised voices and the redistribution of resources to achieve social justice. The data analysis process described incorporates reflexive journalling, peer debriefing, and member checking to enhance credibility and trustworthiness, which aligns with Fraser's emphasis on participatory parity. By ensuring that the voices of Zimbabwean migrants are accurately represented and validated through these rigorous qualitative research standards, the study addresses issues of misrecognition and maldistribution that Fraser identifies as barriers to social justice. Furthermore, the use of thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to migrant integration reflects Fraser's call for a critical examination of social structures and power dynamics that impact marginalised groups. This approach not only highlights the lived experiences of the participants but also contributes to a broader understanding of the systemic issues that affect their lives, thereby aligning with Fraser's theoretical framework of social justice.

Before commencing the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Newcastle, Australia (Reference number: H-2016-0443). The research design was guided by ethical principles set out in Strydom (2011) that recognised the vulnerability of migrant participants and prioritised issues of privacy, voluntary participation, minimisation of harm, and researcher transparency and competence. Given the sensitive nature of the study, which involved personal disclosures related to migration experiences, the PI employed empathetic interviewing techniques to foster rapport and create a safe, respectful environment for participants.

To mitigate potential harm, the PI ensured that participants were not exposed to undue stress, manipulation, or personal risk. All participants received comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, and intended use of findings, and provided both written and verbal informed consent (Strydom 2011). Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants to ensure comfort and psychological safety. In cases where participants experienced distress, access to counselling services was facilitated through the inclusion of contact details for relevant support organisations in the participant information sheet.

Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time, in accordance with the principles of informed consent and voluntary participation (Strydom 2011). The PI upheld strict confidentiality and anonymity protocols by de-identifying all data, using pseudonyms and composite cases in reporting, and securely storing consent forms, transcripts, and participant information in a locked cabinet and password-protected computer (Strydom 2011). Audio recordings were destroyed following transcription to further protect participant privacy.

The PI’s positionality of being a social worker and a Zimbabwean man could have influenced the research process and data interpretation. His outsider status to the Zimbabwean migrant community introduced potential power dynamics and cultural differences. To address this, he engaged in reflexive journaling to examine his biases and assumptions. He built trust with participants through empathetic interviewing and ensured their voices were accurately represented. Peer debriefing and member checking were incorporated to enhance credibility and trustworthiness, grounding the findings in the participants’ lived experiences rather than their interpretations alone. This reflexive approach aimed to mitigate the impact of his positionality and ensure a respectful representation of the Zimbabwean migrants’ experiences.

3. Findings

This section presents the biographical information of participants and the perspectives of Zimbabwean migrants and key informants, highlighting both convergences and divergences in their experiences. Upon arrival in Johannesburg, migrants faced the complex task of settling and adapting to a new urban environment. The findings explore the extent to which participants felt integrated into their host society and the challenges they encountered. Specifically, the data reveal significant sociocultural and economic barriers to integration, including a lack of legal documentation, fear of immigration enforcement, abuse, exploitation, and xenophobia. Additional challenges included corruption, limited employment opportunities, discrimination, crime, language and cultural differences, and insecure housing. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of migrant integration and the obstacles that hinder well-being and inclusion.

3.1. Biographical Information of Participants

3.1.1. Biographical Information of Zimbabwean Migrants

Table 1 below shows the demographic characteristics of the Zimbabwean migrants ($n = 16$), including their names (pseudonyms), gender, age, last place lived or place of origin, educational level, marital status, legal status, and employment status, and year of arrival in South Africa. They comprised eight females and eight males, ranging in age from 20 to 50 years. Most ($n = 12$) were aged between 20 and 40 years, while four were aged between 41 and 50 years. Eight were undocumented migrants who had Zimbabwe passports but had overstayed their visas or had entered without one. The remaining eight were documented migrants: five had work permits, while Walter had a study permit, Shingai a business permit, and Marble had an asylum-seeker permit. As shown below, most Zimbabwean migrants residing in Johannesburg are forced migrants. They left Zimbabwe due to an untenable socio-economic and political climate.

Table 1. Description of Zimbabwean Migrants.

Participant	Description
Kudzai	A 34-year-old married man from Harare Metropolitan Province, who previously worked as a social worker in the Government of Zimbabwe. He held a Bachelor of Social Work Degree, entered South Africa legally by road in 2014, and had overstayed his visitor’s visa. Even though he did not have a work permit, he had been employed by a non-governmental organisation since 2014.
Tapiwa	A 36-year-old married man from the Midlands Province, who previously worked as a mine worker in Zimbabwe. He completed secondary education in Zimbabwe, entered South Africa legally by road in 2007, and overstayed his six-month visa. Since then, he had been living and working without any legal authorisation. He managed a lodge in Johannesburg.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Participant	Description
Prosper	A 28-year-old married man from Manicaland Province, who had previously been self-employed (doing upholstery work) in Harare. He held a secondary school certificate and had entered South Africa irregularly by road in 2008. He once held an asylum permit for six months, and upon its expiration, he became an irregular migrant, as he had no official permission to live and work in South Africa. He worked as a general worker for a motoring company.
April	A 27-year-old married woman from Mashonaland East Province, who had undertaken agricultural activities (farming) in Zimbabwe before she decided to leave. She had 4 secondary school subjects and entered South Africa legally by road in 2015. She overstayed her visitor's visa and had been working casually as a domestic worker since 2015. She also engaged in informal trading, selling clothes and meat.
Hope	A 26-year-old married woman from Manicaland Province, who previously worked as a domestic worker in Zimbabwe. She had only one secondary school subject and had entered South Africa legally by road in 2014. She overstayed her visitor's visa and worked casually (mostly once a week) as a domestic worker.
Austin	A 47-year-old married man from Manicaland Province, who previously worked as a private guard and laminator in Harare. He held a secondary school certificate and had entered South Africa legally by road in 2014. He became an irregular migrant when he overstayed his visa. Unemployed, he relied on piece jobs (panel beating) whenever they were available.
Tracy	A 20-year-old undocumented single mother from Harare Metropolitan Province, who entered South Africa irregularly by road as a Grade 6 pupil in the company of her family, with the help of transport smugglers who paid corrupt government officials in 2010 to facilitate her passage. She attended school from Grade 6 in Johannesburg, dropping out in Grade 9. She previously worked as a domestic worker, losing her job when she became pregnant, and was unemployed when interviewed.
Talent	A 30-year-old, undocumented and married woman from Manicaland Province, who was a housewife in Zimbabwe before she joined her husband in Johannesburg in 2015. Her highest level of education was Form 2, or Grade 9 in other contexts. She previously worked as a domestic worker in Johannesburg, leaving her job due to the abusive and exploitative conditions she experienced, such as not being paid. She was effectively unemployed when interviewed. Her entry into South Africa was by road and facilitated by smugglers and corrupt officials.
Chenai	A 34-year-old single woman from Mashonaland West Province, who entered South Africa by road in 2004 as a student. She worked as a social worker for a nongovernment organisation, and a master's degree in rural development was her highest qualification. She had a South African work permit, issued during the regularisation process introduced by the South African government in 2009/2010 to issue permits to undocumented Zimbabweans.
Walter	A 27-year-old single man from Harare Metropolitan Province, who migrated to South Africa, together with his family, due to the economic meltdown and political turmoil of the year 2008. Having entered South Africa regularly by road, he held a student visa and was employed as a social worker by a non-government organisation.
Marble	A 48-year-old married woman from Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, and a holder of a Diploma in Education who previously worked in Zimbabwe as a teacher. She entered South Africa legally by road in 2002 and successfully applied for an asylum-seeker permit in 2008. She has worked for a non-governmental organisation as a coordinator since 2002.
Nyarai	A 35-year-old married man from Manicaland Province with an engineering certificate, who previously sold fuel in Zimbabwe's informal sector. He entered South Africa irregularly, initially in 2004 and later in 2005, and was apprehended and deported four times between 2004 and 2005. His fifth and successful illegal entry into South Africa was in 2005. He successfully applied for a work permit during the regularisation process introduced by the South African government in 2009/2010 and was employed by an engineering company at the time he participated in this study.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Participant	Description
Tendai	A 44-year-old separated woman from Mashonaland Central Province who qualified as a primary school teacher in Zimbabwe, where she taught on completion of her studies. She also holds a degree in Psychology from one of the universities in Zimbabwe. She entered South Africa legally in 2007, overstayed her visa, and successfully applied for an asylum-seeker permit in 2008, from which she switched to the newly introduced permit regime in 2009/2010.
Elijah	A 39-year-old married man from Manicaland Province, who previously worked in a plastic company in Harare. He held a secondary school certificate and had irregularly entered South Africa in 2006. He was issued an asylum-seeker permit in 2008. Following the introduction of the new permit regime for Zimbabweans by the South African government in 2009/2010, he opted for the new permit, thereby forfeiting his asylum-seeker permit. He had worked as a gardener since 2008, when he obtained his asylum-seeker permit.
Shingai	A 49-year-old married man from Manicaland Province, who entered South Africa legally by road in 2007. He kept renewing his visitor's visa between 2007 and 2010 when the South African government introduced a documentation exercise (2009/2010) for undocumented Zimbabweans. He had a business permit as he ran an engineering, fabrication, and construction company in Johannesburg.
Gift	A 36-year-old cohabiting woman from the Midlands Province who once worked for the government as a social worker in Zimbabwe. She overstayed her visitor's visa, worked without a permit from 2008 till the 2009/2010 permit dispensation introduced by the South African government. She was employed by a non-profit organisation as a social worker.

3.1.2. Biographical Information of Key Informants

Table 2 below shows the demographic characteristics of key informants. The six key informants (two women and four men) were professionals between the ages of 26 and 60 years.

Table 2. Key Informants' demographic characteristics.

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Years of Experience
Judy	Female	49	Certificate in Occupational Therapy	27
Tom	Male	56	Diploma in Health Promotion	13
Don	Male	34	Bachelor of Social Work (Hons), Master of Social Work	4
Beauty	Female	27	Bachelor of Social Work	4
Keith	Male	34	Bachelor of Laws, Master of Laws	8
Dave	Male	34	Certificate in Contact Centre Management, plus short courses on migration	11

3.2. Documentation Challenges

Documentation emerged as a central factor undermining the integration of Zimbabwean migrants, affecting both documented and undocumented individuals. As a Key Informant (KI), Dave observed, "documentation is the most pressing challenge for the migrants", a sentiment echoed by KI Don, who stated, "the greatest challenge is perhaps that of legalising their papers". At the time of data collection, seven of the eight documented participants held permits set to expire on 31 December 2017. When the permits expired in 2017, they were extended for a further period of four years to 31 December 2021. Upon the expiry of the permits on 31 December 2021, participants had to apply for a further extension to 31 December 2025. However, the outcome of most of these applications was still outstanding during the writing of this article. While these permits granted the right to

work, they did not confer eligibility for permanent residence, regardless of the duration of stay in South Africa. Furthermore, the permits were non-renewable, non-extendable, and their conditions were fixed.

Participants reported that the South African government had made public statements indicating that Zimbabwean migrants would be required to renew their permits in Zimbabwe. However, the absence of follow-up communication created significant uncertainty and anxiety among documented migrants, who expressed concern over their legal status and the perceived indifference of the authorities. Participants articulated their frustration with the restrictive nature of the Zimbabwean Special Permit (ZSP), as follows:

You won't be able to do everything [...] As you can see, this means you cannot apply for permanent residence or anything. We are just waiting for them. The last time they spoke about these permits, they indicated we would have to go back to Zimbabwe to apply for fresh permits (Nyarai).

I don't know what the South African government is going to decide for us ... that pains us so much because we don't know our fate [...] At one time, some banks closed our bank accounts on the very day our permits expired. So, it's so hard to plan in such a scenario when your permit is not defined as to when you are here and when it will end. It's like being hanged and left in suspense. We are just praying for the best (Tendai).

Equally concerned about the situation and the possible barriers confronting documented Zimbabwean migrants was KI Keith, who worked as an attorney for a private law firm. He explained:

As it stands, those people have been told that they will have to go back to Zimbabwe and apply for new documents when the current dispensation expires [...] Some of these people have been here for very long times. Some have been here for close to 13 or 14 years. And now to be told to go back and apply from Zimbabwe, that's displacement as it stands. When you go back to Zimbabwe, it would have to be the mainstream Immigration Act, not the Refugees Act, and most people would never qualify for documents or permits under it. So, that's quite difficult, and you have people living in limbo without knowing what's going to happen to them. Living in a period of uncertainty ... even if they go back to Zimbabwe and apply, I don't know if they would get the visas and come back to the economic situation that they have been in, that is, in jobs, because the requirements to get work visas are quite stringent in terms of the Immigration Act (KI Keith).

He added:

The same applies to requirements to get study visas. They are quite stringent, and they must show that they can afford to pay school fees. In general, that's the problem that we have: migrants living in a period of uncertainty and not knowing what is going to happen to them. And some are losing money being promised by immigration practitioners that they will secure documents for them [...]. People are going to lose their jobs because once this dispensation comes to an end (KI Keith).

The acquisition of legal documentation was instrumental to the participants' integration and adaptation, which, in turn, hinged on their income-earning ability and economic security, as well as their eligibility for services. As participants explained, their asylum-seeker permits allowed them:

To work and go to school, wherever I want. I am a registered employee, and I am on the payroll . . . I have gone through the education system, registered, and got certified. I even did a course in child protection, and so the organisation uses me as their child protector, working with the social worker. Health-wise, I go to any hospital. I registered with my asylum papers, and I don't have a problem. and I renew my asylum papers every year. So, wherever I go, I produce my asylum papers (Marble).

Elijah, too, had asylum-seeker status before procuring a work permit. As he explained:

It was in January 2008 that I went to Pretoria to apply for an asylum-seeker permit. Fortunately, I got it. Things changed when I got my asylum-seeker permit. I could move freely, visiting friends and relatives, even looking for a job. In 2010, the South African government introduced DZP permits, which I applied for. The permits were valid for four years. When the four years expired, we applied for new permits valid for three years (Elijah).

3.3. *Fear of Immigration Authorities*

Undocumented status posed even greater challenges for Zimbabwean migrants in this study compared to their documented counterparts. The absence of legal documentation resulted in enforced social and spatial confinement, significantly limiting visibility and mobility, and impeding access to adequate living standards and sustainable livelihoods. As Prosper described, migrants were forced to “play hide and seek with the police”. All undocumented participants expressed fear of apprehension by law enforcement or immigration officials, with many reporting experiences of harassment and extortion. Tracy shared that she was “afraid of the police when walking”, while Austin lamented, “We're just hanging. We don't have any documents, and once we meet the police, we will really struggle”. Talent, Tracy, and Austin all disclosed having paid bribes to avoid deportation. Austin further illustrated the normalisation of corruption, stating, “If I meet the police, I can talk to them. They are human beings, and we can understand each other”.

Key informants corroborated these accounts, emphasising that the lack of documentation severely restricted migrants' freedom of movement and increased their vulnerability to police harassment and exploitation. Key Informants noted:

Migrants are not moving well. They have got barriers because they don't have valid or legal documents . . . they will be harassed by the police, and they should always carry their legal documents along with them (KI Judy)

Authorities or the police pounce on these poor and vulnerable people. Migrants are targeted. I think the police know they go to work through this street, and every day they extort money from them (KI Keith).

Even if your papers are okay, and once the police suspect that you are a foreign national, the way they treat you when asking about your legal status, you will find out that there is some discrimination because you are a non-local . . . whether your papers are okay or not, there is this insecurity or fear (KI Don).

In addition to their fear of immigration authorities and law enforcement, Zimbabwean migrants in this study were further marginalised by pervasive community perceptions linking migrants to rising crime. This association contributed to restricted mobility and heightened feelings of insecurity among participants (misrecognition). As KI Keith explained, “You have communities limiting their movements because they think that they are criminals. They don't want them to live in certain areas, or they don't want them to be in certain places at certain times”. Such stigmatisation reinforced social exclusion and contributed to the migrants' sense of being unwelcome and unsafe. Marble reflected on

this dynamic, stating that she and other Zimbabwean migrants were often scapegoated for broader societal problems in Johannesburg:

It's tough because everything that goes wrong, the fingers point at us. If there is a cash-in-transit robbery, it's Zimbabweans. If somebody gets shot, it's Zimbabweans. People who are doing prostitution are Zimbabweans. So, everything that goes wrong it's Zimbabweans. In the news, if I say there are three people, one being a Zimbabwean and two South Africans, if there is a robbery, then they will say there were two people and a Zimbabwean. Why should we be labelled? So, we are followed by labels, bad labels, everywhere we go (Marble).

This sentiment was widely shared by key informants, with KI Don stating:

Local communities believe that Zimbabweans or other foreigners are here to compete in terms of social facilities, such as hospitals, and in economic issues, in terms of jobs, they feel that Zimbabweans are stealing their jobs. Others even go to the extent of stating that Zimbabweans are stealing their women here in South Africa. So that also causes some sort of conflict. So, the conflict makes migrants feel insecure in South Africa (KI Don).

3.4. *Abusive and Exploitative Conditions*

Experiences of abuse and exploitation were common among participants, with undocumented and unskilled migrants facing heightened vulnerability. Due to their irregular legal status, undocumented migrants were unable to access formal employment and were often confined to informal sectors, particularly domestic work, where they were exposed to exploitative labour practices. These included non-payment for services rendered and the absence of legal recourse. In contrast, documented migrants reported feeling a degree of protection under South African law. As Walter noted, they felt “protected by the Constitution of South Africa . . . treated as a normal human being . . . not exploited in any way”. However, undocumented migrants lacked such protections. April, who had overstayed her visa and worked casually as a domestic worker, stated:

The main challenge is that I don't have a work permit. So, the people we are working for sometimes refuse to pay us. They know we can't report them to the police, and we can't even go to Home Affairs because we don't have work permits. So, it's very difficult for us (April).

Talent, who found herself in a similar situation, had decided to leave her exploitative job:

I only started working in November 2016, and I left the job end of May 2017. I worked as a domestic worker, and my employer didn't always pay me on time. Sometimes I would not get paid, and at other times I would get half of what I was entitled to. I continued suffering even though I was working. I didn't see any point in living that kind of life (Talent).

Tracy had lost her job due to pregnancy and had not been able to secure work. She stated:

I have not been able to get my job back, and there was nothing I could do about that . . . There are lots of risks because you take a job, and you are not registered. If you have a problem, you cannot go to [the] CCMA [Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration], you cannot go to the labour department [. . .] So, it is quite a big problem, and some people will say, okay, I will do anything. What is anything? So, you end up getting involved in crime, prostitution, and shoplifting,

which it's not what people migrate for, but the challenge of saying I need to eat, I need to pay rent (Tracy).

The key informants believed that irregular Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg were abused and exploited by "being underpaid because they are taken for granted, and some of them are employed as cheap labour. In short, they are not taken as a priority but as an option" (KI Judy). Other key informants shared similar sentiments:

If you don't have legal documents, it's difficult for you to get a job. If you get that job and your employers are aware that you don't have the necessary papers, your remuneration may be affected by that. Employers will make sure that there is some sort of exploitation because they know that you will not report them anywhere (KI Don).

Migrants share stories of gross violations against them, and because they don't have documents, they find it difficult to report such cases . . . They remain quiet even though they are being violated. Their cases are unknown because they are never reported (KI Beauty).

3.5. Ongoing Unemployment Challenges

Undocumented migrants like Tracy, Talent, and Austin faced significant barriers to employment, compounded by South Africa's high unemployment rate and ongoing economic challenges. Without legal documentation, individuals like Austin were restricted to informal, low-paying, and unstable work, which severely limited their ability to secure a sustainable livelihood. This precarious situation contributed to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Austin expressed his struggle to make ends meet and his sense of despair in navigating daily life without formal employment opportunities or legal protection. He stated:

I don't work daily, and I don't earn much from my piece jobs. I am still struggling financially; I am having challenges. I am not managing to pay school fees for my children; I don't have sufficient money to feed my family . . . Employment is my greatest challenge. Without proper documentation [a work permit], it's a challenge to secure a job. You can't get a job, a good one for that matter, without a work permit. [. . .] whenever you look for employment, they always want you to produce a work permit if you are a foreigner. So, if you don't have one, it means you won't get a job, and it will be hard for you to put food on the table and even to support those family members left in Zimbabwe. So, struggling never ends (Austin).

KI Dave observed that the rising levels of unemployment and the scarcity of jobs were phenomena that not only affect Zimbabwean migrants, but also South Africans are unemployed, he stated:

South Africa, as a country, is also struggling in terms of employment. That is very challenging, and as migrants are coming to Johannesburg, they cannot be employed because we have an employment crisis as South Africans. As a country, we prioritise South Africans (KI Dave).

3.6. Discriminatory Practices

All migrant participants in this study reported experiencing unfair and unequal treatment based on their foreign status. The discrimination they encountered ranged from being marginalised by employers and colleagues to facing overtly negative and prejudicial attitudes from public officials. These experiences reflect broader patterns of social exclusion

and xenophobia that undermine migrants' sense of belonging and access to equitable opportunities. As Gift expressed:

It is difficult to delegate duties; sometimes you are faced with some kind of resistance, and you will feel that people are resisting just because you are a foreigner . . . We face a lot of challenges. . . . recently, I went to the hospital to deliver my baby, and I was delivering at a public hospital. The treatment I received was different from that given to locals. They told me that I had to pay since we were leaving our countries to come here and give birth. They said we were expecting to get everything for free . . . And the nurses were even shouting, saying they were tired of Zimbabweans [. . .] life is not easy because we always face some kind of discrimination (Gift).

Walter perceived differential treatment for foreign nationals by health services, and April felt completely disregarded:

Although I have access to health services, it's not always easy. The staff are very slow. I sometimes go to the clinic as early as 4 am, and I usually spend the whole day before I can be served. They will help you at 3 o'clock or 4 o'clock (April).

Nyarai had encountered differential treatment in the workplace:

Our wages differ from those earned by those with South African citizenship. When you hold a Zimbabwean passport, you don't have the same rights as someone who is a citizen of this country. You don't get to eat from the same plate; it's different. Although you can get a driver's license using your Zimbabwean passport, they won't let you drive their cars at work if you don't have a South African ID. You can do all the courses as required using your passport, you may have a work permit or asylum seeker permit, but you are limited if you don't have a South African ID (Nyarai).

Key informants in this study concurred that the migrant population in general, and Zimbabwean migrants in particular, were confronted with serious discrimination issues, although local South Africans were not immune to ill-treatment, especially in health facilities. KI Keith blamed this situation on what he believed to be "the arrogance and ignorance of the officials". He explained:

I think it becomes difficult because half the time it looks like someone is doing you a favour, even though you have the right. It's almost as if it's a favour that the authorities or the government is doing to them to the extent that, I have had firsthand experience, you see this person is poor but when they are sick they don't even waste time to go to a public hospital but they would rather go to a private hospital because they are a paying customer and they need the service. In public hospitals, the citizens themselves are treated badly, and if you are a foreigner, then it's even worse (KI Keith).

3.7. Xenophobia

Participants in this study broadly acknowledged the prevalence of xenophobia (misrecognition), defined as intense hostility and intolerance toward migrants, as a persistent and deeply rooted issue in Johannesburg. This hostile environment contributed to ongoing feelings of insecurity and fear for personal safety among Zimbabwean migrants. The sociopolitical climate was described as volatile, with xenophobic violence becoming a recurring feature of host-migrant relations. Migrants reported being subjected to verbal abuse, targeted harassment, and the destruction or looting of their businesses and personal property. Tracy reflected on these experiences as follows:

South Africans have been calling us names, some of them derogatory . . . They call us names like *kwerekwere* [derogatory term]. They tell us that we are foreigners, we mustn't be here since we are taking away their jobs. They say things that make us angry, and we end up thinking that perhaps we shouldn't be here. Sometimes we feel it's better to be home (Zimbabwe) (Tracy).

Xenophobia affected all Zimbabwean migrants irrespective of immigration status. As Shingai observed: "Nobody cares if you have any permit or valid document [. . .] They steal our stuff, looting our properties and everything. We aren't safe here". Tapiwa stated that xenophobia drove migrants to hide their identity "for fear of victimisation". Kudzai said:

Because there are people who don't like you simply because you are a foreigner, xenophobia is a major issue. South Africans seem like they are naturally xenophobic, and you must teach them not to be xenophobic. That's how they are (Kudzai).

All the key informants identified xenophobia as a serious challenge. KI Judy attributed it to the labelling of migrants and viewing them as bad; she stated, "People display xenophobic attitudes [. . .] They ask why these people are coming to our country [. . .] It's happening, they are xenophobic, and they just decide to be xenophobic". KI Keith believed Zimbabwean migrants had integrated into South African communities before the surge of xenophobic violence experienced in 2008, 2015, and 2017. He noted, "It was almost impossible to distinguish between foreigners and local persons. People moved freely and shared accommodation with local South Africans. However, xenophobic violence now makes people constantly watch their backs" (KI Keith).

3.8. Rising Criminality

Beyond the pervasive threat of xenophobia, the high incidence of violent crime in Johannesburg further contributed to a climate of insecurity for migrant participants in this study. This environment significantly curtailed their social participation and freedom of movement (misrepresentation or political injustice). Many migrants reported feeling physically unsafe, choosing to remain inconspicuous and limiting their mobility to avoid potential harm. Shingai and Kudzai noted,

Crime caused a lot of fear and a lot of threats in South Africa. We don't have peace. South Africa is a hiding ground for criminals . . . At times, they kill someone for a cigarette. They can ask you to give them your cigarette, bread, or relish. They demand that you give them. If you say no to them, they will kill you. You can give them, but they can still kill you. They grab people's phones (Shingai).

You can't even use your own gadget because of crime . . . The issue of crime is a big challenge. You must safeguard your property all the time, ensure your children are safe every day, and every second. When they are awake, you must make sure they are safe. I just hope I don't sound like someone too afraid or unreasonably afraid, but the fact of the matter is, things have happened outside, and you must be safe (Kudzai).

Insecurity was heightened by gun violence and the ease of access to guns in South Africa. Austin stated, "I am particularly afraid of guns in South Africa, [as] these people want to kill whenever conflict arises. It's not a pleasant experience for me. So, I am always afraid of that". Prosper echoed similar sentiments:

Crime is quite high in South Africa. You can be stabbed or killed anytime when a person is after your money. I don't feel secure around here. My movement is also limited. I can't go to all the places I want to; I fear for my safety. I have learnt to let the criminals take whatever they want instead of losing my life (Prosper).

3.9. Language and Cultural Experiences

Language and cultural differences posed significant barriers to the full sociocultural integration of some migrants within their host communities. These challenges often prolonged their transition from being perceived as outsiders to becoming accepted members of society, thereby reinforcing their marginalisation. For instance, April and Shingai, both native Shona speakers, encountered linguistic difficulties that hindered their social inclusion. April noted that her inability to speak Zulu limited her interactions, stating that attempts to communicate in English were sometimes met with resistance. She stated, “If you try to speak with [South Africans] using English, they will tell you that they are not white people” (April). Shingai highlighted the complexity of navigating a multilingual society, remarking, “South Africa has many tribes, so you get to meet different people . . . It’s a challenge” (Shingai). KI Keith observed that Zimbabwean migrants had generally integrated more successfully in Johannesburg compared to other nationalities, although this integration varied depending on their region of origin within Zimbabwe:

It’s quite easier for people from Matabeleland to integrate quickly because they speak Ndebele, and Ndebele is quite like some of the local languages. So, they can easily communicate, and they don’t have to endure the irritation of locals when you speak to them in English and think you are trying to be better and all that. So, they quickly learn the local languages. Then you have those from Mashonaland or non-Ndebele-speaking areas. It’s a bit difficult and depends on the person, but then you must first learn the local languages, the ones that are closer to Ndebele, which is a common language like IsiZulu or Xhosa. And once that happens, then it sort of helps them, because they now understand what the locals are talking about, and there won’t be any gossiping going on whilst they are there (KI Keith).

3.10. Insecure Housing

Undocumented participants frequently encountered significant challenges in securing adequate and affordable housing (maldistribution) in Johannesburg. Their irregular legal status served as a major barrier to accessing safe and stable accommodation, rendering them ineligible for formal housing support. As a result, many were compelled to reside in informal settlements characterised by substandard living conditions, insecurity, and overcrowding. These environments, while offering lower rental costs, often fell far below acceptable standards of habitability. Before regularising her immigration status in 2010, Nyarai lived with a fellow Zimbabwean in Johannesburg under conditions she described as far from ideal:

It was a small room which we shared, three of us, and we slept on a three-quarter bed, not a double bed. A small room, a small stove, and yeah, you cook and sleep right there. You didn’t have sufficient space to move around (Nyarai).

Talent shared her frustrations with ever-increasing rentals, stating, “My rent is ever increasing because I am a foreigner; I was paying R300 [USD21] each month . . . this was increased to R400 [USD28], and now we are paying R450 [USD32]. In addition to that, we still must buy water and electricity”. Chenai found life costly in Johannesburg. She explained that without documentation and income, migrants’ options were strictly limited:

Yeah, it’s kind of hectic because everything requires money, and everything requires you to have legal documents. So, life is a bit difficult for Zimbabweans because if you don’t have legal documents, you won’t be able to get a job, and you won’t be able to get good accommodation. So, it can be hectic. You end up going for cheaper accommodation, which is not safe (Chenai).

April, Austin, Hope, and Prosper resided in informal settlements, which had become concentrated hubs for Zimbabwean migrants. Their choice to settle in these areas was both strategic and pragmatic, driven by the affordability and accessibility of such housing options. Compared to formal housing, life in these settlements was less costly, albeit at the expense of safety, infrastructure, and basic services. As KI Judy observed, “Most migrants join people in informal settlements so that they can stay there cheaply and have a place to sleep”. Similarly, KI Don noted that “Most migrants prefer to integrate in poor communities where accommodation and other things of daily necessity are still affordable, as opposed to the CBD, where accommodation might be expensive”. These decisions reflect the structural constraints faced by migrants and how they navigate limited housing opportunities in urban South Africa.

4. Discussion

Using a rights-based approach and Nancy Fraser’s theory of social justice, this study reveals that Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg face interconnected economic, cultural, and political injustices, including maldistribution, misrecognition, misframing, and misrepresentation. These injustices hinder full migrant participation in these domains. Although undocumented migrants are the most affected, some injustices impact all migrants, regardless of their status. Fraser’s framework of social justice also enables the proposal of realistic remedies, including those relating to future social work research and practice, to improve migrant lives in Johannesburg.

The lived experiences of migrants in South Africa are often marked by significant adversity. Many are exposed to heightened vulnerabilities, including xenophobic violence, lack of legal documentation, systemic discrimination (misrecognition), and exposure to rising levels of crime. These intersecting risks contribute to their social exclusion and undermine their overall well-being, security, and ability to support their families and kinship networks. Migrants often struggle to provide their families with food, education, and healthcare.

The recurrence of xenophobic violence in South Africa is well-documented in existing literature. According to [Masinga et al. \(2025\)](#) the xenophobic attacks of 2011 to 2013 resulted in the deaths of over 120 individuals and the internal displacement of numerous international migrants, which prompted both governmental and non-governmental actors to implement preventative measures. Despite these efforts, a subsequent wave of violence occurred in April 2015, marking a continued deterioration in relations between South African citizens and migrant communities ([Misago et al. 2015](#)). According to [Xenowatch \(2025\)](#), the xenophobic attacks in South Africa have led to about 669 deaths, an estimated 5310 looted shops, and 127,572 displacements between 1994 and March 2024. Migrants have since faced persistent hostility, including inhumane treatment, violent attacks (misrecognition), and the looting of their businesses (maldistribution). [Caprari \(2019, p. 6\)](#) characterises these acts of xenophobia as manifestations of “barbaric old ways of lynching accompanied by looting, vandalism, intimidation and harassment, assault, and murder”, underscoring the severity of the crisis. A particularly tragic example is the brutal killing of Zimbabwean migrant Elvis Mbodazwe Nyathi by a vigilante mob on 6 April 2022, an incident widely attributed to rising anti-immigrant sentiment (misrecognition) and populist rhetoric (misrepresentation) ([ZimLive 2022](#)). Such acts of violence fundamentally undermine the spirit of Ubuntu—a core South African value rooted in the belief that one’s humanity is affirmed through the humanity of others. As [Sibanda \(2025b\)](#) explains, Ubuntu reflects the principle that every individual is part of a shared human community and should be treated with dignity and respect.

The persistence of xenophobic violence and escalating discriminatory practices against migrants in South Africa has become a deeply entrenched and urgent concern ([Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2025](#)). Relations between migrants and South African citizens remain fragile, often marked by mutual distrust, insecurity, and dissatisfaction ([Dratwa 2024](#)). African migrants continue to experience heightened vulnerability within this socio-political climate (misrepresentation) ([Xenowatch 2025](#)). The proliferation of anti-immigrant sentiment has contributed to the emergence of nationalist movements such as Operation Dudula, which propagate the narrative that migrants are responsible for economic strain and assert exclusionary slogans such as ‘South Africa for South Africans’ (misrepresentation) ([Amnesty International 2023](#); [Dratwa 2024](#)). Within this hostile environment, migrants face significant barriers to the realisation of their fundamental rights ([Democratic Alliance 2025](#)). Many live in conditions of extreme poverty and social exclusion, lacking access to basic services, legal protection, and social safety nets, particularly during periods of economic instability (maldistribution) ([Mukumbang et al. 2020](#)). The lack of employment, unstable and unfavourable employment, arrests the capability of migrants to look after their families; they at times struggle to provide them with food and to send their children to school. Furthermore, they are constrained from supporting their kinsmen left in Zimbabwe. The finding that migrants and refugees are subjected to several barriers to access, which in turn violate their human rights, is supported in the literature by [Novak-Zezula et al. \(2005\)](#) and [Mwenyango \(2022\)](#), who state that refugees often encounter communication problems that result from language barriers and a lack of information.

The challenges associated with the lack of legal documentation (misrecognition) among migrants are well substantiated in the literature. [Hovhannisyan et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Madue \(2015\)](#) paint a picture of a burdensome, cumbersome, and painful process of navigating access to immigration documents by migrants and asylum seekers, often characterised by travelling for long distances, spending days in long queues, and falling victim to the corrupt tendencies of immigration officials. This study’s participants reported that a lack of documentation made them play hide-and-seek with the police or immigration officials, as they sought to avoid apprehension, detection, and deportation. Constant vigilance kept them invisible from the intrusive eyes of immigration and police authorities, and perhaps local citizens, who might report them to the authorities. Migrants’ invisibility was not unique to participants in this study. A study in Sweden, for instance, showed that it was not unusual for migrants to hide ‘their own and the family’s whereabouts and migration status’ ([Smith 2018](#), p. 588).

Undocumented migrants often face precarious and uncertain living conditions, navigating daily life in the margins of society ([Mwenyango 2022](#); [Trummer et al. 2024](#)). Without valid visas or permanent residence status, many are forced to live in the shadows, where they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and systemic exclusion ([Ames News 2023](#); [Trummer et al. 2024](#)). The absence of legal documentation significantly restricts access to formal employment, financial services, and other essential resources ([Mwenyango 2022](#)). Moreover, the stringent requirements for obtaining work permits, compounded by instances of bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption, have led many migrants to resort to irregular migration channels, including reliance on human smugglers and traffickers, thereby exposing them to further harm and human rights violations ([International Organisation for Migration \[IOM\] 2022](#)).

The findings indicate that Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg face barriers in accessing healthcare services. Globally, challenges faced by migrants and refugees in accessing healthcare services are well documented in the literature (see [Mwenyango 2022](#); [Trummer et al. 2023](#)), which eloquently articulates the institutional and socio-cultural barriers faced by refugees in accessing and utilising health services in host countries,

including absence of healthcare resources, the inconsiderate attitude of healthcare providers and lack of adequate coordination. These are against the principles and key features of a rights-based approach, which advocates for universal accessibility of services (Sibanda 2025b; Trummer and Krasnik 2017).

The challenges migrants face in accessing healthcare services in South Africa have been confirmed in literature by the Democratic Alliance (2025); Masinga et al. (2025); Sibanda et al. (2025); and The Star (2025) as stemming from a lack of documentation, xenophobic attitudes of some healthcare practitioners, language barriers and the extremist establishments that block access to health services accusing migrants and refugees of exploiting the fragile South African healthcare system. Despite the country's reputation for having some of the most advanced healthcare infrastructure in the Southern African region, the public health system is frequently criticised for being under-resourced, poorly managed, and overwhelmed by demand (maldistribution) (The Conversation 2022). In principle, healthcare in South Africa is universally accessible, regardless of an individual's migration status (Sibanda et al. 2025). However, in practice, numerous barriers persist. One such barrier is the phenomenon of "medical xenophobia", a term used to describe discriminatory attitudes and behaviours exhibited by frontline healthcare workers, including doctors, nurses, and security personnel, towards non-nationals (Mwenyango 2022; The Conversation 2022). This form of institutional discrimination often results in the exclusion of migrants from essential health services, as they are perceived as undeserving of care and blamed for straining an already burdened system (Democratic Alliance 2025). Internationally, migrants frequently report delays in treatment or outright denial of services, often based on language barriers, irregular immigration status, or the absence of referral documentation (Mwenyango 2022; Novak-Zezula et al. 2005; Sambo and Sibanda 2025).

In addition to healthcare-related challenges, migrants in South Africa also contend with high levels of violent crime, including rape, murder, carjackings, and armed robberies (Government of South Africa 2023). These threats, much like xenophobia, significantly hinder migrants' ability to exercise their rights and participate fully in society (misrepresentation). The pervasive sense of physical and psychological insecurity has led many migrants to adopt strategies of invisibility, limiting their mobility and engagement with public life to avoid harm (Murenje 2020).

5. Conclusions

Zimbabwe's failure to meet its socioeconomic, civil, and political rights obligations was a major factor in Zimbabwe–South Africa migration. The rapid economic deterioration of the Zimbabwean economy compromised citizens' rights to work and earn their livelihoods in Zimbabwe, while the oppressive political regime stifled fundamental freedoms of expression and association. Zimbabwean migrants residing in South Africa face a complex array of vulnerabilities that significantly hinder their integration and access to fundamental human rights, which affect their capacity to adequately look after their kindred. They struggle to provide them with basic necessities such as food, housing, education, and healthcare. A key challenge is the lack of legal documentation (misrecognition), which restricts their ability to regularise their stay. Even those in possession of valid visas often encounter difficulties in securing extensions or permanent residency due to rigid and opaque immigration policies. This policy inflexibility fosters anxiety and uncertainty, exacerbated by the limited availability of clear and accessible information regarding legal procedures. As a result, many migrants experience constrained mobility and are compelled to remain invisible for fear of arrest and deportation. Undocumented migrants are particularly susceptible to exploitation, including abusive labour practices, unfair dismissals, and limited recourse to justice (maldistribution and misrepresentation). The broader socio-economic context,

marked by a struggling economy and high unemployment (maldistribution), has intensified competition for scarce resources such as housing, employment, and public services. Although many Zimbabwean migrants initially viewed South Africa as a land of opportunity, their lived experiences have often been shaped by systemic discrimination, exposure to crime, and widespread xenophobia (misrecognition), irrespective of their legal status.

5.1. Significance of the Study

This study offers a unique contribution by widening the understanding of the genealogy of theories of migration by using a human rights lens in its exploration of the migration experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg. Moreover, the study considers how migration involves and affects families. The study complements research by Mwenyango on “The place of social work in improving access to health services among refugees [---]”, which recommended the use of “A rights-based social work approach to addressing impediments at micro, meso, and macro levels” (Mwenyango 2022, p. 883). While migration research is growing, few studies adopt a rights-based approach, and the voices of migrants—particularly in Africa and other parts of the Global South—remain underrepresented. This research addresses a critical gap in the literature by generating context-specific knowledge that advances social work scholarship and practice. Most existing studies on migration and human rights are situated in the Global North, even though most migration in Africa occurs between neighbouring countries. As such, there is an urgent need to focus on migrant-receiving contexts within the continent, such as South Africa, which continues to experience significant inflows of undocumented migrants. This study contributes to the limited body of literature on migration and human rights in South Africa, particularly considering the country’s ongoing struggles with xenophobia and its commitment to the National Development Plan Vision 2030, which promotes safe, orderly, and dignified migration. It states, “If properly managed, migration can fill gaps in the labour market and contribute positively to South Africa’s development.” (National Planning Commission 2011, p. 105). The steps required to better facilitate migration, as outlined in the National Development Plan Vision 2030, by the National Planning Commission (2011, p. 107), are as follows.

- Improving data collection, coordination and analysis as a matter of urgency.
- Easing the entry of skilled migrants.
- Countering xenophobia by conducting sustained campaigns.
- Effectively addressing the rights and vulnerabilities of migrants.
- Introducing support programmes to regularise migrant residence.
- Ensuring better and more consistent law enforcement (by protecting victims and prosecuting perpetrators).
- Strengthening transnational infrastructure (transport, electronic communications, banking services).
- Addressing the specific needs of migrants in South Africa.

By foregrounding the lived experiences of migrants, the study advocates for the protection of their safety, dignity, and rights, regardless of legal status. The study highlights the complex challenges faced by migrants and affirms the recommendation by Trummer et al. (2023) that such challenges can be addressed by cross-sectional, multi-sectoral, and inter-disciplinary approaches, which involve different stakeholders from various policy and practice levels and from different fields that intersect in the issues of migration, health, policy, climate, and development. Globally, the study contributes to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal Number 3, which is geared towards ensuring health and well-being for everyone.

In addition to its scholarly contributions, the study has important implications for policy and practice. Many countries lack innovative and responsive strategies to both harness the benefits and mitigate the risks associated with international migration. A limited understanding of the challenges faced by migrants in host countries often results in ineffective policy responses. By providing detailed, grounded insights into the experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg, this study can inform the development of more inclusive and responsive migration policies. Drawing inspiration from [Mwenyango \(2022\)](#), [Sibanda et al. \(2025\)](#), and [Trummer et al. \(2023\)](#), the study offers practical guidance for social work practitioners, particularly in recognising the role of social networks in migrant integration. Social workers can play a critical role in advocating for family-strengthening interventions and community-based support systems that promote migrant well-being and social inclusion. According to [Mwenyango \(2022\)](#), when working with refugees, social workers should draw on the principles of a rights-based approach, which include participation, empowerment, accessibility, accountability, and sustainability. [Whilst Sibanda and Sambo \(2025\)](#) qualify social workers to establish multi-sectoral forums due to their training in the key themes of a rights-based approach, which include collaborative partnerships, bridging the micro-micro divide, and welfare pluralism.

This study contributes to the genealogy of migration, human rights, and social work scholarship by extending an emerging African-centred, rights-based tradition within the field. The research strengthens a scholarly lineage that approaches migration through human rights, multi-level analysis, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Historically, migration research has been shaped by Global North perspectives, resulting in the underrepresentation of African migrants' experiences and limited attention to South–South mobility. By foregrounding the voices of Zimbabwean migrants living in Johannesburg, this study disrupts these dominant genealogies and contributes a new, context-specific branch that prioritises human rights and social justice. Moreover, by demonstrating how social workers can operationalise rights-based principles in practice through advocacy, community engagement, and multi-sectoral coordination, the study helps shape the evolving genealogy of social work in migration contexts in South Africa and beyond.

5.2. Limitations of the Study

This study is distinctive in its explicit focus on the centrality of human rights in examining the migration experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg. While every effort was made to minimise limitations, certain constraints must be acknowledged. As is typical of qualitative research, the study employed a small sample size, which limits the generalisability of its findings. Also, the study was conducted only in Johannesburg; there is a possibility that the socio-economic and political conditions of Johannesburg, being the economic hub of South Africa, is different from other provinces. Moreover, the voices of Zimbabwean migrants who have settled in the rural areas of South Africa are not represented; there is a possibility that their experiences are different from those of migrants in a city like Johannesburg. Further, the research was conducted in English, and although participants were selected based on their proficiency in the language, the majority were native Shona speakers. Participants would have expressed themselves more fully and with greater nuance in their mother tongue. This language dynamic may have introduced subtle limitations in meaning, interpretation, and depth of insight, despite efforts to ensure clarity and mutual understanding.

5.3. Recommendations

A range of strategic interventions can be implemented to enhance the realisation of migrants' rights in South Africa. First, expanding safe, legal, and accessible pathways

for migration, including entry, residence, and employment, could significantly reduce the prevalence of irregular migration and the associated risks of exploitation. Regional efforts in East and West Africa, such as the removal of visa requirements and the introduction of regional passports, offer promising models for promoting greater mobility and integration (McAuliffe and Kitimbo 2018).

Second, given the international orientation of the social work profession and the growing emphasis on regional integration in sub-Saharan African social policy, future research should critically examine the potential of global citizenship as a framework for challenging restrictive notions of national sovereignty and identity. This includes interrogating how citizenship is constructed, whether through ethnic or civic lenses, and the implications for migrants' inclusion and rights.

Third, considering social work's foundational commitment to human rights and social justice, there is a pressing need to assess the effectiveness of universal human rights instruments in safeguarding the rights of migrant populations (Mwenyango 2022). This includes exploring the feasibility of extending social welfare and labour protections, typically reserved for citizens, to non-citizens, thereby promoting equity and dignity for all individuals, regardless of legal status.

Fourth, social work programmes and interventions for supporting migrants and refugees should be designed using a combination of ecological systems approaches, rights-based approaches, social development approaches, and sustainable livelihood approaches so that they are holistic in nature and provide clear directions of the role of a social worker at micro, meso, macro, exo, and chrono levels of intervention (Mwenyango 2022).

Fifth, since social work places a huge focus on full involvement and participation of marginalised groups in decisions that affect them, future social work research could consider the strategies for maximising the representation of migrants in politics and strengthening migrant associations in both sending and receiving nations. This could be performed in the context of evaluating the effectiveness of bilateral agreements between the nations concerned.

Future research should include national coverage to obtain a national perspective of challenges faced by all migrants and refugees in South Africa, and not limit the study population only to Zimbabwean migrants. This could provide an opportunity to include the perspectives of migrants and refugees that settled in the rural and farming areas of South Africa. In addition, future studies could make use of mixed-methods research designs to counteract weaknesses associated with using either a qualitative or a quantitative research methodology. Moreover, future studies could explore the social and kinship networks of Zimbabwean migrants, including transnationalism and their connections with their relatives still residing in Zimbabwe.

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