

Living death: separation in the UK

Roda Madziva

Research with Zimbabwean migrants in the UK highlights the suffering caused by an immigration regime that prioritises immigration control over its humanitarian obligations.

With unprecedented levels of political repression and the meltdown of their country's economy, many Zimbabwean women and men have come to view migration as the only way to ensure family survival and to escape persecution and torture. Opportunities for legal, speedy, safe and affordable migration are limited, so many parents make the difficult decision to migrate alone in the first instance, with the intention of arranging for their children to join them as soon afterwards as possible. However, immigration policies in the countries they escape to usually mean that the period of separation from their children is far, far longer than they initially imagined, and sometimes even permanent.

Living in limbo

Interviews with 18 Zimbabwean parents forced to live apart from their children reflect the reasons

for flight and the pain caused by separation. In some cases, the asylum seekers had received death threats and/or suffered serious violence, and their first priority was to save their own lives by getting to the UK and claiming asylum. In other cases, they either did not think it would be safe to travel with their children, or they could not afford to bring their children with them in the first instance.

Once in the UK, however, they all found themselves caught in a cumbersome and inhospitable asylum and immigration system, and their hopes of being quickly reunited with their children slipped away. Only those who win refugee status are granted the right to family reunion – but winning asylum on human rights grounds is an extremely long and difficult process.

“My asylum claim was turned down – it lacked credibility, they told me. I appealed and ... was turned down again. [I] have just made a fresh application. This is now my eighth year in the UK. Here I am, still a refused asylum seeker who cannot go to Zimbabwe to visit my children or bring them over,” said one widower who had left his two daughters behind.

A mother of three children explained, “My first application for asylum was refused... the reasons were that I should have applied for asylum on arrival, yet I did not know about this... Also, I did not attach enough evidence that I supported the opposition party... I was not a member of the opposition party but my being a teacher in Zimbabwe made me to suffer intimidations and threats of abuse... I made my second application immediately after my husband was killed by a petrol bomb in Zimbabwe. I thought they were going to treat this with all urgency as I had indicated that

there is now no one to look after my children... but was told 'You left your children willingly' and was asked to produce more evidence regarding my husband's death. Up to now I am still waiting for a decision to be made."

Rudo, a 37-year-old woman who had been a teacher at a rural school in Zimbabwe and had frequently been harassed and intimidated by war veterans, as well as witnessing other women being raped by them, said that despite all the evidence she had to support her asylum claim it was turned down. "I have recently re-submitted another claim", she continued, "but my lawyer told me that such applications can take three to four years to be assessed because the Home Office has a huge backlog. This situation has ruined my daughter's life... Since my husband died ... I have never been able to go to be with my daughter ... [my husband] is no more and my daughter is struggling alone."

Things fall apart

When they moved from Zimbabwe, the migrants left their children in the care of family members and friends in keeping with the traditional African practice of child fostering. And yet in the current economic climate of Zimbabwe, such arrangements are often unstable or unsatisfactory. A recurring theme in the interviews is the breakdown of trust between the parent and the substitute care-givers as the period of separation gets prolonged. This often leads to children being moved from one carer to another, sometimes without the consent of the absent parent(s).

One interviewee described how she originally left her daughter with her sister but after two years the arrangement broke down and "my mother had to take her... Then my ex-husband phoned me one day ...He said my mother was not looking after the child well... He said he was taking the child away. What can you do when you are far away? How can you stop him when you cannot look after the child yourself?"

In other cases, it is the death of the substitute care-giver that triggers children's movement. Tendai described an agonising chain of bereavements over the seven years

of her separation from her children: "My husband died a year after I had left... My children stayed in the family house with a maid who was a close relative [but] she also died six months later. My children then moved to my mother's place... but my mother died after only six months. They continued to live with my father... but he also died a year later. One of my sisters took them... after four months she died. My relatives decided to stay away from my children... my two boys, 15 and 17 by then, started living on their own."

The interviewees were powerless to intervene, even when they believed that their children were suffering serious neglect or abuse at the hands of their carers. Mary, a 37-year-old single mother who fears that her daughter may have been raped and may be involved in prostitution, says: "What I definitely know is that my daughter has no one to love her. I got so scared when she said to me three months ago 'Mama, I am thinking of killing myself'... She is not getting the support she needs as a teenager. She is not getting emotional support at all ... she needs a hug, she is not getting it. Instead, people who live with her are always calling her names."

Forced migrants who are separated from their children live daily with fears for their children's physical safety and well-being in a context where food and medicine are scarce and disease and political violence are rife. For one interviewee, what all of them most dread became a reality: "My son passed away in 2007... I received a message that my son was vomiting and few hours later I got the message that he was dead. The world just crumbled on me..." (Sukai, a female failed asylum seeker, aged 39)

The parents suffer greatly from guilt and anguish: "I feel so crushed – I feel so sorry for my daughter. If I were to see her one day, I don't even know what I will say to her but what I know is that I owe her a big apology. I cry my heart out after calling home most of the times. I don't know what to do." (Rudo, whose husband died while she was in the UK trying to get her asylum claim settled)

"My children have had these eight years of loneliness... Frequently I hear my young daughter's last words

echoing in my ears: 'Bye dad, I know you are not coming back for us'. I don't know how she knew this would happen but these words haunt me day and night. Forced migratory separation is a mental torture ... your mind is always contemplating: what do my children think about me? what is going on in their lives?" (Tafara)

If children reach the age of 18 while their parents wait for their asylum claim to be settled, they lose the right to reunion.

Faceless system

The UK Foreign Office publicly condemns Zimbabwe as an exceptionally unsafe country, and the UK government has ruled that failed asylum seekers cannot be deported to face potential victimisation and torture. And yet the Home Office expects failed asylum seekers to prove that they would face reprisals and torture if they returned (which is, of course, difficult to do) and in practice it treats Zimbabwean failed asylum seekers as though they were 'voluntary' migrants who could safely return home, and refuses them even the meagre support that is offered to other failed asylum seekers who cannot return to their country of origin. Forced migrants from Zimbabwe are living in poverty in the UK, some in a condition of complete destitution, and are helpless in the face of the knowledge that their children are suffering and at risk of grave harm at home.

"If the Home Office were a person, I could have demanded to see him or her. I would have wanted to go to where he lives and cry out all my anger. Unfortunately, they always say the Home Office is a system... You cannot get to sit down with this thing called the system and have a one-on-one talk explaining exactly what you are going through, asking him or her 'Can you please do something about it?'... From the outside the system appears democratic and caring, yet it is cruel, oppressive and discriminatory from inside... It leaves you dead from the inside." (Sukai)

Roda Madziva (lqxm7@nottingham.ac.uk) is currently studying for a PhD at the University of Nottingham, studying Zimbabwean migrants in the UK who have been forced to live apart from their children.