

Chipo Katsande with
her daughter at a
refugee center in
South Africa

The Nowhere People

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The displaced and their search for identity and belonging; the migrant mother and the forgotten daughters who take the brunt of it all.



The Nowhere People

Refugees: the worst humanitarian crisis of our lifetime.

There are 65.3 million displaced people worldwide. Of those people, 21.3 million are refugees, the people who belong to – Nowhere. No one knows where they come from, no one knows where they’re going. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, has highlighted that: “We are facing the biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time.” He has called it a crisis of solidarity.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) Global Trends report shows that since 2003, the number of newly-displaced people per minute has increased from just fewer than 10 to 24 persons in 2015. In 2014, the number was at its highest – 30. The reasons for displacement differ. Increasingly, the main reason is fleeing the source of political or economic conflict. It then becomes difficult to imagine the uncertain reality the many have run to or are left to live through. In theory, international law defines and protects refugees, encouraging the initiation of asylum procedures once they enter a new environment. In reality, the many who have migrated become nomads, often pursuing what becomes a hollow quest for a better life.

Women and girls form around 50% of refugees or displaced people around the world, according to UNHCR. In Africa, the number of women uprooted by war and unrest is significantly higher. A study published by Hivos International recorded 80% of refugees in Lebanon were women and children.

Along the inner streets of Johannesburg are ‘foreigners’, women selling fruit, vegetables and sundry items to feed their hungry children and themselves. Whilst walking up to the Department of Social Development, two young female hawkers run past me, clutching towels in one hand and tacky sunglasses and cellphone pouches on the other, fleeing cops. As is the case with hundreds of immigrants, they have no papers.

Another, a lady, sits rubbing her pregnant belly beside a small stall on Eloff Street. She sells hats, wallets, purses and scarves. She is reluctant to talk and asks not to be named. She came to South Africa following her husband, escaping the political turmoil in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

“I came after he had made his way to what we were calling the land of milk and honey... [but] when I arrived in South Africa, it was made known to me that he had left for Canada. I’d come for nothing.”

Abandoned, she was forced to join the informal trading business.

“Life is hard here. We as foreigners are just not free. People don’t respect us and just steal our stock,” she says with little emotion.

After matriculation, she had gone on to acquire a degree in management in the DRC. But today, she is battered and broke.

Often, along their treacherous journeys, the women are abused and mishandled by gangs, truck-drivers and cops. This is only the beginning of their travails. The constitutional guarantees cannot protect them from the injustices they face. The UNHCR has highlighted that life for a woman, beyond her country of origin, becomes a constant battle and one of constant fear and uncertainty.

One of the many dangers is the xenophobic attacks, as has happened in recent times, with South Africans accusing foreign nationals of taking their jobs and over-populating their areas.

The informal trading sector is the main space in which the hateful disputes unravel. But for foreign nationals who have no other hope, informal trading becomes the only option.

Vanya Gastrow, a PhD candidate currently doing research for the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS), says one of the biggest challenges faced by foreign traders who come to South Africa is the crime targeted at them.

Women and girls form around 50% of refugees or displaced people around the world.

Other challenges include lack of access to reliable documentation, says Gastrow. “Asylum seekers and refugee permits often don’t meet documentation requirements for banks, visa offices, and landlords,” she says, as such foreigners cannot open bank accounts or access loans.

“These permits also require frequent renewals and so many make the decision to just live without them.”

For women though, it is even worse. “It’s the sexual violence... and extortion, specific dangers that authorities fail to understand,” according to Penny Foley, a volunteer from Australia currently living in South Africa. She highlights that the objectification of female refugees is one of the many symptoms of what has become the de-humanizing of forced migration.

“The global community needs to change the 20th century understanding of a nation-state and move away from the notion of isolated nationalities,” she says.

“Interestingly though, the problem is not just about changing the perception of what nationals think of foreign nationals, relations amongst refugees need to be established. The fight becomes harder if unity lacks amongst them.”

In the pages that follow, FORBES WOMAN AFRICA speaks to three women from Zimbabwe; what displacement has done to them. **FW**

Tafadzwa Shumba

“I just stood at the border in my pink shirt and panties after I had crossed over. I had nothing and I was scared.”

*Tafadzwa Shumba is 42 and came to South Africa in 2008. She was forced to leave her country, Zimbabwe, because of the political instability that made life for her and her family unbearable.

“I was seen to be too neutral so they threatened my parents and tried to kill me for not engaging in their dirty politics.”

The choice to leave was not an easy one to make but as she recalls, “I literally had to take that leap of faith”.

On July 27, 2008, as the world slumped to a financial crisis, Shumba packed a portable bag. She had R300 (\$21) that would pay the ‘Guma-Gumas’, a group of men said to assist escapees across the woods to the border.

“I had a passport but those days we were using visas and they were expensive so my only choice was to cross over illegally.” She was the only woman amongst seven guys.

The group began the three-day trek through the forests, the Limpopo River, eventually reaching the border.

Few survive the trek but Shumba’s determination carried her. “I don’t forget, as we walked through the forest we saw dead bodies. There was a human head lying on the ground with dreadlocks like mine,” says Shumba, running her fingers through her own.

“The Guma-Gumas picked it up and pointed it at us and said if you don’t give us your money you will end up like this head.”

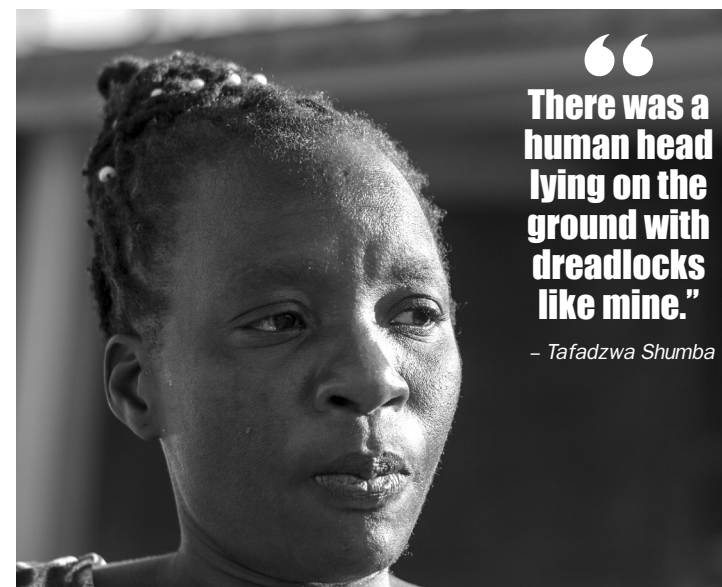
“They took everything, even my pants and left me with there in my pink shirt, panties and shoes.” There was no time to process the betrayal. The trek had to continue.

“Look at me,” she says, as she gestures to her body. “I am nothing. I was a nurse, we would wear crisp white uniforms and after work, I had a home to go to.”

Last year, she was involved in a road accident in South Africa that left her crippled.

“I could not even get compensation from the Road Accident Fund because I am a foreigner.”

Now, because of her disability, she cannot work so she takes care of children and sells fruit and vegetables when desperate for money. The future is uncertain but she takes “each day as it comes”.



Refugees Seen As ‘The Other’

The travails of a Vietnamese immigrant

Lisa Phung, her mother and older sister hid in a mosquito and disease-infested swamp during the day and in the night were led on to a small vessel that took them to a main fishing boat which would eventually transport them to their new lives.

Earlier, Phung’s mother had received instruction from her father to leave Vietnam as their freedom was under threat. He was a pilot who had just been captured by communist soldiers in the Vietnam War. Her mother who was not educated enough for a stable job heeded her husband’s advice and managed to secure the money to get her and her girls out of war-torn South Vietnam.

“People smugglers” were paid to get them out. “The first two times, we got caught and were jailed,” says Phung. The third time, they got lucky. “En route to the fishing boat, we got robbed by the people smugglers and everything was taken except for a few pieces of food.”

But at least they got on to the big boat. “We were crammed up like anything and I was one of the youngest at age four.” Shortly after they started, the boat’s engine died. “They thought it was a petrol problem but the people smugglers had taken the petrol and replaced the tank with water.”

The group of people floated for 10 days with nothing more than a packet of rice to sustain them. “My mother remembers that I was starting to die... everyone was getting ready for death.”

Shortly before a storm, a British cargo ship sailed past and for a few moments, there was a ray of hope.

“It didn’t stop to save us and that was heart-breaking because we lost hope.”

It was as though their fate was sealed but then, in a surprise move, the ship turned around and carried the refugees, Phung and her family amongst them, to Singapore.

“After the ordeal, my mum told me she lost hope in a lot of human beings because everyone just looked out for themselves.”

Because Phung’s mother had children, she was the last to be rescued.

“She was the last person off that boat; it must have been horrifying for her.”

The ship docked in Singapore. From there, the refugees were taken to a detention center in Hong Kong where they stayed for three years.

“My mum wanted to go to the USA but they were no longer taking refugees.”

Sometime later, Australia was accepting refugees. Phung was seven years old and finally a life of stability awaited her.

Years have passed. She now lives in Australia with a family of her own and uses her experience to give hope to others who have walked her path.

“I’ve seen how refugees are seen as ‘the other’ in different parts of the world, coming to take their jobs or their land and they really just want a safe place to live and everyone should have that right.”



Tapiwa Moyo
with her child
at a neighbor's
home

Tapiwa Moyo

“Coming to South Africa was supposed to be like going to heaven,” says *Tapiwa Moyo, who is 22 years old and from Zimbabwe. When her mother, her only caregiver, left her and her younger sister to find work in Johannesburg, she did not anticipate the hardship.

“At one stage we went without food for almost a week and we had to start selling my mother’s belongings to get some money to buy some maize meal.”

Moyo’s mother saw South Africa as the place where she could try and build a better life for her children.

“The deal was that she would work for a few months, save the money and get us passports and visas to move to South Africa,” says Moyo.

Months passed and then they turned into years. When their supply of cash and food ran dry, Moyo, as the older sister, still in her early teens, was forced to work menial jobs washing clothes, selling nuts and chips and eventually having to part with all their worldly possessions to survive.

“I would see other children playing with teddy bears and Barbie dolls or walking in the streets with their mothers and I would just cry because that’s all I wanted to do,” she weeps.

She was 15 when she received word that her mother had finally made enough money to bring her and her sister to South Africa.

They had waited seven years.

“When I finally got my passport, it was like my prayers were finally answered.”

The bus ride was one filled with excitement.

“It was a 12-hour ride but I couldn’t even sleep. My life was about to change.”

She recalls the moment she arrived.

“Everything I thought was a lie, South Africa was supposed to be my heaven but it was not.”

She wipes her tears with anger, not allowing herself to be weak.

“I’ve cried about it all for so long you know and nobody cares... the tears don’t mean anything.

“My name meant nothing to the border police and some of the citizens. I was just another ‘kwere-kwere’.”



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**I LEFT ONE HELL FOR
ANOTHER.”**

Since then, that’s all she’s known apart from poverty. Just as she did in Zimbabwe, Moyo finds and sells what she can to ensure she and her daughter do not go to bed hungry each day.

“I left one hell for another. Would I like to be back home with my family? Sure, but that’s no longer an option for me. I’m here now.”

Moyo arrived in
South Africa at
the age of 15

Emily Shamu

*Emily Shamu came to South Africa when her daughter, Lisa, was a toddler.

“She was too heavy for me to carry along with our luggage and a gentleman offered to carry her when we crossed the Limpopo River,” says Shamu.

She would normally not have trusted a stranger, but for Shamu, the focus was survival.

Shamu and the others walked 12 hours to Musina, the northernmost town in South Africa’s Limpopo province.

“I did not know we were going to walk for so long. At some point, I fell to the ground and started to scream ‘I am tired’.”

She describes her knees colliding with the gravel road. Her daughter watched as she cried inconsolably. “My child remembers. We rested for some time and I used this time to remind myself (sic) why I was going through this.”

Now, living in South Africa for eight years as a refugee, her life is defined by a cycle of begging – not for food or spare change – but, each quarter of the school year, to plead with the headmaster to allow her daughter to sit her exams with her peers.

“Every term, my heart sinks... I don’t know if he will say yes. We are just controlled by circumstances.”

In South Africa, students are required to produce a form of identification before they are allowed to partake in written assessments. Because Shamu has no asylum papers, she is unable to apply for an ID document for her daughter.

“If I’m honest, I have not tried to get my papers,” she says. “I tried in 2010 and the back and forth is just so demoralizing.” Shamu and her daughter live stateless with nothing to ensure them stability.

“I want to go home, if the situation can just change...” **FW**

“**Interestingly though, the problem is not just about changing the perception of what nationals think of foreign nationals, relations amongst refugees need to be established. The fight becomes harder if unity lacks amongst them.**”

Looking back: Chipso Katsande and her daughter by the vegetable patch at the refugee center