

Negotiating “Layered” Belonging: Identities of Itinerant Zimbabwean Migrant Women in the UK

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Abstract

Since 2000, Zimbabwe has experienced sustained political and economic crises, prompting significant outward migration (Chikanda, 2019). While many Zimbabweans initially migrated to South Africa, escalating xenophobia, economic precarity, and social insecurity have driven onward migration to the United Kingdom (UK). This paper examines this underexplored phenomenon of “onward-itinerant” migration through a gendered lens, focusing on Zimbabwean women who migrate from Zimbabwe to South Africa and subsequently to the UK. Drawing on my positionality as an onward-itinerant migrant, I conceptualise this trajectory as *layered migrancy*—a non-linear process of movement characterised by multiple, overlapping journeys and experiences across distinct national and socio-political contexts.

Foregrounding gender as a central analytic category, the study interrogates how Zimbabwean migrant women experience and navigate intersecting forms of structural inequality, labour exploitation, and precarity across these migratory “layers.” Women’s migration is not only shaped by economic imperatives but also by gendered expectations, care responsibilities, and vulnerabilities that are reconfigured across different national settings. In both South Africa and the UK, these women are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, feminised sectors such as care work, where their labour is simultaneously essential and undervalued.

The study employs the emerging Apartheid Studies (AS) framework (Mboti, 2023), particularly its concepts of demotion, persistence of harm, and Rate of Oppression (ROp), to theorise these women’s experiences as forms of “living in harm’s way.” This framework enables an analysis of how structural inequalities are reproduced and intensified across borders, rather than left behind. I further introduce the concept of a *triangle of belonging*—Zimbabweanness, South Africanness, and Britishness—to explore how identity and belonging are continuously negotiated within shifting regimes of inclusion and exclusion. These negotiations are deeply gendered, shaped by racialised labour markets, immigration regimes, and socio-cultural expectations.

Methodologically, the research draws on qualitative data from in-depth interviews and focus groups with Zimbabwean women working predominantly in the UK care sector. Their narratives illuminate how layered migrancy produces enduring forms of insecurity while also generating strategies of resilience, adaptation, and agency. Particular attention is paid to how recent UK immigration policy developments, including the 2025 Immigration White Paper, are experienced by participants as extensions of structural constraint, further embedding conditions of uncertainty and marginality. By centring Zimbabwean women’s lived experiences, this paper contributes to feminist migration scholarship, African diaspora studies, and gender history by advancing a nuanced understanding of multi-sited, gendered migration. It argues that layered migrancy is not merely a sequence of movements but a cumulative process through which inequalities are reproduced, reconfigured, and resisted. In doing so, the study offers new conceptual and empirical insights into the intersections of gender, migration, labour, and belonging in contemporary transnational contexts.

Keywords: Gendered Precarity; Onward-Itinerant Migration; Layered Belonging