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Illegal Migrant Youth' engagement into risky behaviours for their sustainable livelihoods: The Case of Musina town in the Limpopo Province of South Africa

Ramoshaba Dillo Justin, Rapholo Selelo Frank and Mamadi Khutso

University of Limpopo, Department of Social Work, Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa

Frank.Rapholo@ul.ac.za

Abstract. Several studies show that immigration is a global challenge. Some studies in South Africa where this study was conducted reveal youth as making an increased number of international migrant population. Upon their arrival in the country, migrant youth face a vast number of challenges such as extreme poverty and the exclusion from the welfare services. As a result of these, migrant youth resort to risky behaviours for their survival and sustainable livelihoods during their stay in the country. It is from this background that the study sought to scientifically explore the risky behaviours that migrant youth' engage into for their sustainability. The study used a qualitative approach wherein Musina was used as a case study. Ten migrant youths were purposively and conveniently selected to participate in this study. Data was collected through face to face semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically through the assistance of the Nvivo software. Resilience theory was used to guide this study. Findings reveal that migrant youths in Musina town engage into risky behaviours such as crime, sex work, cheap and exploitative labours for their sustainable livelihoods. It is recommended that to mitigate these risky behaviours perpetuated by illegal migrant youth, the security, screening and vetting should be tightened at the border posts.

Keywords. Illegal migrant youth, Poverty, Risky behaviours, Sustainable livelihood, South Africa

Introduction

People across the globe migrate for a plethora of reasons such as searching for better opportunities to sustain their livelihood (Browne, 2017). Southern Africa has been found by several studies to be facing an increased number of population movements (Rapholo, 2020; Browne, 2017; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2016). However, young people are found to be migrating more than other population groups (Martiny, Froehlich, Soltanpanah & Haugen, 2020; Rapholo, 2020; UNDESA, 2016; McKenzie, 2008). Landau, Ramjathan-keogh and Singh (2005) postulates that some migrant youths from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, after having identified opportunities in South Africa arrive to many difficulties in accessing their identified opportunities. Rapholo (2020) also found out that migrant youth face challenges in accessing government services in South Africa. This

is in line with a study undertaken by the Commission of the European Communities (2008) where it was discovered that immigrants' access to health and basic services, housing, electricity, sanitary living conditions and banking services is heavily constrained. The researchers observed that due to such challenges, some migrant youths resort to various risky behaviours as an attempt to sustain their livelihoods in South Africa. It is from this background that this study sought to scientifically explore the risky behaviours that migrant youths engage into for that sustainable livelihoods in Musina town which is in the Limpopo province of South Africa.

Research problem

South Africa just like other countries encounters an increased number of illegal international migrant population movements. An illegal entry into host countries itself is a criminal offence (Mathebula, 2015). Socio-economic difficulties from countries of origins have been identified by several studies as push factors for most of migrant youths in South Africa (Rapholo, 2020; UNDESA, 2020; Browne, 2017; Ditswanelo 2007). Whilst migrant youth come to South Africa for better livelihoods (Devictor, 2016; Browne, 2017; Rapholo, 2020), it is crucial to note that they face extreme poverty and exclusion from welfare service in the country due to problems around immigration permits (Heckmann, 2008; Nusche, 2009; Buckland, 2011; Crush & Tawodzera, 2011; Mathebula, 2015, Greenberg, Adams, & Michie, 2016). To mitigate such challenges some migrant youths resort to risky behaviours for their sustainable livelihoods. There is no scientific study that has been conducted in Musina town to explore risky behaviours that migrant youth engage into for their sustainable livelihoods. In light of the above background, this study sought to close this gap in order to develop recommendations to mitigate such social ills.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to explore the risky behaviours that migrant youth engage into for their sustainable livelihoods.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the resilience theory. This theory emerged from studies of vulnerability (Van Breda, 2001; Sekudu, 2019). Van Breda (2001) and Theron (2016) argued that the important part of resilience is the mediating processes also referred to as resilience processes which enable people to achieve better-than-expected outcomes in the face of adversity. Resilience as a process includes the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful (Walsh, 2006). Masten (2015) sees resilience from the perspective of a system and holds that it is the potential of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the survival or development of the system. Resilience theory was used as a lens to explore the strategies used by migrant youths to bounce back from the challenges that they face in South Africa which are presented in this paper.

Methodology

The study followed the qualitative approach, which enabled the researchers to get more in-depth understanding of risky behaviours that migrant youth engage into for their sustainable livelihoods. A qualitative approach is focused at understanding the social life as well as the meaning that people attach to everyday life (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delport, 2011). Following exploratory research, Musina town was used as a case study to explore migrant

youths' risky behaviours that they engage into for their sustainable livelihoods. A case study research design is the enquiry of one or more specific 'occasions' (Yin, 2009). The case study design enabled the researchers to closely examine the data within a specific context. Ten migrant youth from some African countries such as Zimbabwe and Democratic Republic of Congo who were available were purposively and conveniently selected to participate in this study. To include the respondents in this study, the fluency of English speaking by migrant youthS was considered. De Vos et al. (2011) state that, in purposive sampling a case is chosen because it demonstrates some features that are of some interest for a particular study. In addition, Greeff (2011) holds that respondents in purposive sampling are selected based on their relevance to the topic under study which was also the case in this study. Data in this study was collected through semi-structured interviews. This was done through having direct contact with migrant youths and arrangements were made for a suitable venue for the interview with the intention of maintaining confidentiality and privacy. Data was analysed thematically through the help of the Nvivo Software. To ensure the quality of the findings, credibility, conformability, transferability and dependability were followed. Credibility through prolonged engagement, member checking and peer examination was ensured, and field notes were written directly after each interview with each migrant youth for auditing purposes in order to endure the conformability of the findings. Data was correctly coded for dependability purposes.

Ethical issues

An ethical clearance was obtained from Turfloop Research and Ethics Committee (TREC) of the University of Limpopo with project number TREC/74/2019: IR. A permission to conduct the research was also granted by the organisations in Musina where the respondents were accommodated. The aim of this study as well as the voluntary nature of respondent's participation was clearly explained to the respondents and consent was obtained from them. After the respondents verbally agreed to participate in the study, they were presented with a consent form to attach their signatures. Confidentiality in the study was assured by keeping private the names and identities of the respondents. The respondents were also protected from any kind of harm.

Discussion of findings

Before discussion findings of the study, the following section presents a profile of respondents.

Profile of respondents

Ten (10) black African migrant youth (those between the ages of 25 to 30) participated in this study. Out of these respondents, five (5) were males and another five (5) were females. Of these respondents, one (1) Congolese and nine (9) Zimbabweans participated in this study. The following themes emerged from the study:

Theme 1: Criminal acts

A number of respondents highlighted criminal acts as a strategies for their sustainable livelihoods in South Africa. It is of paramount importance to note that most immigrants were pushed by economic hardships from their countries of origin to other countries such as South Africa for better livelihoods. Upon a follow up question on criminal acts perpetuated by migrant youths, stealing and robbery and fraud and illegal cross-bordering were reported as the most prevalent strategies employed by most migrant youths for their survival.

Subtheme 1: Stealing and robbery

Stealing and robbery were reported as some of the strategies that migrant youths in Musina town engage into for their survival. The findings are in line with the findings of Crush and Williams (2003) who postulate that in South Africa, there is a general believe by local citizens particularly those in the Gauteng province that immigrants are a threat to the stability and safety of the country as they are likely to engage in criminal acts such as theft and robbery. Jacobsen (2004) also found that some respondents in his study at Johannesburg believed that crime continues to grow in the city because of the arrival of foreign nationals in the city. Upon a follow up question to assess if respondents are aware that such criminal acts are punishable before the court of law in South Africa, it was established that they know and that they just taking risks because of starvation they are going through. Some of the respondents said:

“My brother, we are living under difficult conditions that force us to do anything either wrong or right to help us put food on the table. It is wrong to steal or rob people but some of us survive from such particularly we as male migrants.”

“It is tough to live in poverty just imagine as a man going to bed without food for days, my brother it is very painful and difficult, I know it is wrong to steal for a living but I do not blame those who are stealing because it is tough”

Findings reveal stealing and robbery as criminal acts that are mostly committed by male migrant youths in Musina for their sustainable livelihoods., however, it cannot be concluded that female immigrants do not commit crime for their sustainable livelihoods. In support these claims, Messerschmidt (2000) highlighted that males have long dominated crime scenes as opposed to females. Furthermore, Mafukata (2015) found that at Attredgeville in Gauteng province of South Africa, there are elements of uncontrolled and unmanageable criminal acts such as housebreaking and robberies by foreign nationals that were reported by local citizens.

Subtheme 2: Fraud and illegal cross-border

Some respondents reported that they came to South Africa by the use of some illegal strategies which are in contravention with the law. A number of respondents have reported bribery and illegal entry into South Africa as their strategy to survive poverty from their countries of origin. This includes entering the country without proper documentation or the requisite permission. This is supported by Maalouf and Campello (2014) who found that some immigrants cross the border illegally by using fake documents and others without any documents which is a criminal offence. Mathebula (2015) purports, that some migrants' entry into South Africa is a criminal offence on its own as they cross the border illegally without proper documents. One respondent stated that:

“The only risky thing that I have engaged in was to come to South Africa illegally because I do not have a passport; I came using the border after having bribed the officials at the border gate”

In the same breath, the other respondent echoed that:

“I will never do anything that is illegal but I know people who come from other countries who are using fake identity documents of South Africans, some of them have bought them while some have stolen them, they do this to get jobs so that they can sustain themselves and their families”

This study reveal corruption at border gates as contributing to an increase in the number of illegal immigrants in South Africa who have entered the country without permits and immigration documents. However, some migrant youths in this study have indicated that such

corruption helps them and their families to survive as they are able to secure jobs in South Africa. The findings are supported by Muanamoha, Maharaj and Whyte (2010) who postulate that some immigrants without proper documentation use fake South African identity books as a strategy to find jobs in South Africa. These authors further state that the identity books are falsified, stolen from or lost by South African citizens.

Theme 2: Sex work

Sex work was reported as another risky behaviour for some female migrant youth. The researchers are of the view that the living conditions in which migrant youths find themselves in influences them to engage into risky behaviours for their survival. This view is supported by Hosegood, Preston-Whyte, Busza, Moitse and Timaues (2007) who postulates that poverty influences the decision of immigrants to expose themselves to the risks of infections through sex work as an attempt to sustain their livelihood. In the same breath, the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS [UNAIDS] (2003) reveals that, slum life is influential on the engagement of females into sex work for a living. This is what one of the respondents echoed:

“You see my brother when a woman faces difficult circumstances, she must devise means of pulling through those difficulties. We all know that it is risky to do sex work but is an option that some women must consider because they have families to feed and lifestyles to maintain”.

Upon a follow up question on migrant youth awareness of the risks of sex work, most of them have indicated that they are aware that sex work is risky but they are pushed by their living circumstances in South Africa to do so. This is what one respondent said:

“Mhhhhmmmm, yes I know it is possible to catch diseases such as HIV through sex work but my brother, at least one will have a plate on the table unlike going out to steal or rob people”

It can be deduced that regardless of being aware of the risk(s) of sex work, some female immigrants do it to sustain their livelihoods. It is quite disturbing to note that some circumstances press some immigrants to engage into risky behaviours for their survival. This is also supported by Ondimu (2010) who believes that some immigrants engage in sex work and disregard the risks associated with it such as contracting the HIV infection and many other diseases because they are preoccupied with making a living or sustaining their livelihoods. In support United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2002) reported that, some migrants voluntarily and willingly engage in sex-work because of poverty, hunger, economic crisis, family pressure and illness.

Theme 3: Exploitative labour

Some respondents reported exploitative cheap labour as their survival strategies in South Africa. The respondents have indicated that they settle for any work conditions; whether good, bad, safe or unsafe just to survive. The respondents indicated that they often willingly settle for almost any wage to be able to sustain their livelihoods. The respondents have also highlighted that they sometimes take temporary and casual jobs even if the jobs are exploitative in nature. This is what one respondent stated:

“Making a living has never been easy but I am making a living by taking piece jobs such as working in the farm under difficult conditions for the whole day, I sometimes go and wash people’s clothes which at times the people ask me for sexual favours”

In the same wavelength, another respondent echoed that:

“Some employers make us work long hours for less money but that is not important because the money is needed for survival”

The findings above indicate that migrant youths take even jobs that are exploitative and risky to their well-beings because they are preoccupied with sustaining their livelihoods. The findings are in line with Misago (2010) and Crush (2011a) who postulate that migrants are likely to accept any job even when they know that the job is exploitative, some because they lack experience and qualifications for better Jobs. The researchers are of the view that local employers take an advantage of the immigration status of young people and give them cheap and exploitative labours and sometimes abuse them. This is supported by Blaauw, Pretorius, Schoeman, and Schenck, (2012) who postulates that local citizens for informal work that is generally tenuous and insecure they hire immigrants who are in desperation because they know that they will do anything to get something for their sustainable livelihoods. All these things normally happen to migrants who do not have legal documents, permanent residence status or refugee status (Jinnah & Cazarin, 2015).

Conclusion and recommendations

There is an increased number of illegal migrant youths in South Africa wherein some came through corruption by officials at border posts who were bribed. When most illegal migrant youths enter into the country, they resort to behaviours that are a threat to themselves and citizens of the country for their sustainable livelihoods. Thus the government of South Africa should to address the issue of the porousness of a border post where some immigrants cross without permits to get into the country. Security at the border posts should be tightened and strictly monitored to fight corruption by security officials. The South African government should develop deportation programmes to assist in deporting immigrants who are in the country without permits so as to minimise social ills that the country battles with. The employment of immigrants in South Africa should be regulated by labour relations laws to avoid providing them exploitative labours

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