

Civil Registration and Social Inclusion: Challenges Faced by SADC Migrants in The Host Country of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the challenges faced by immigrants in accessing civil registration documents in the host country and how these challenges negatively affect their well-being, such as by excluding them from essential necessities of life. The focus on civil documentation access was chosen because obtaining these documents opens access to many other rights vital for migrants' well-being in the host country. Civil documentation promotes migrants' social inclusion. The study used a qualitative approach; data were collected from Zimbabwe's Midlands Province, Kwekwe District, focusing on migrants from SADC states. Key informants were purposively selected, and data were analysed through content analysis. The study identified major challenges, including failure to provide required documentation, rising intermarriages, attitudes of civil registry officers, lack of decentralized birth registration systems, and language barriers. It also highlighted exclusion from economic and political rights, social protection, education, and health as significant consequences of civil documentation-related statelessness. The study, therefore, recommends that policymakers address this issue urgently, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the country's development aims.

Keywords: Civil documentation, social inclusion, migrants, host country, citizenship, birth certificate, exclusion.

Introduction

Humans around the world are constantly relocating for various reasons, such as increasing social and economic inequalities, which often motivate the migration plans of millions of people (Czaika and Reinprecht, 2022). According to Esipova et al. (2018) in Czaika and Reinprecht (2022), globally, one in eight adults wants to migrate. The history of human migration goes back to as early as 30,000 years ago when Homo sapiens moved across Africa, to 500 BCE when the Silk Road started connecting Southern Europe and East Asia, to the slave

trade from 1547 to 1860, and to the present, when migration has grown due to cheaper and faster travel (Schrover, 2022). Migration can be either across borders or within regions (rural to urban) and can be official or informal. Czaika and Reinprecht (2022) also point out that public policies, environmental shifts, international links, and conflict and security are some of the main reasons behind migration. According to UNHCR (2016), about 300,000 people in Zimbabwe are at risk of statelessness, although there is no official data on the total number affected. Amnesty International (2021) notes that many migrant workers from neighbouring countries—brought by colonial authorities to work on farms and mines in Zimbabwe—including those from Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia, and their descendants born or settled there before independence in 1980, face difficulties in obtaining citizenship and have effectively become stateless.

A significant number of residents in Midlands, Kwekwe district townships such as Amaveni, Redcliff, and Empress are of foreign origin (non-Zimbabwean). Similar demographic patterns are also evident in Matebeleland North province in Hwange district and Mashonaland Central in Bindura district. Some of these residents migrated to Zimbabwe as laborers or as spouses and children of laborers during the colonial labour migration era, commonly referred to as Chibharo/Mthandizi (Daimon, Anusa, 2015). Migration and the unknown whereabouts of parents have become key challenges hindering people's access to civil documentation in Zimbabwe, according to a report from a National Inquiry on Access to Documentation in Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission 2020). Failure by migrants in host countries to access civil documents conflicts with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16.9, which advocates for providing legal identity for all, including free birth certificates by 2030. In Zimbabwe, it also contradicts the Constitution, Sections 81 (1) (b) and (c), which guarantee a child's right to a name and the prompt issuance of a birth certificate. This background underscores the importance of this study's focus on unregistered migrants.

Before 2013, Zimbabwe's constitution did not recognize Zimbabwean-born children of parents who migrated from their countries during the labour migration era. However, the new constitution grants citizenship to all Zimbabweans born in the country if one or both parents are citizens of any SADC country by birth. This means they can access documentation, although they still face barriers to obtaining vital documents such as birth certificates (Amnesty International, 2021; ZHRC, 2020).

In post-independence Zimbabwe, residents of foreign origin born outside Zimbabwe are not recognized as citizens. Zimbabwean law allows them to access civil documents such as national identity cards, citizenship certificates, marriage certificates, and travel documents once they meet all initial requirements. However, part of the “alien” community, especially from SADC countries like Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique, continues to face difficulties in obtaining these civil documents. In the 1980s, after the country gained independence, they were called Mabhurandaya, Manyasarandi, or Mosken (depending on their country of origin) by Zimbabwean natives (Daimon & Anusa, 2015). Most of these individuals were confined to mining towns, farming areas, or specific residential neighbourhoods in urban areas, as they lacked the rural settlements found among native Zimbabweans. The challenges faced by this ‘alien’ community in acquiring civil documents have attracted criticism from various groups both within Zimbabwe and internationally. The study, therefore, was guided by the following objectives:

- To establish the nature of exclusion that undocumented migrants are exposed to.
- To interrogate the barriers and enablers to registration that are faced by migrants in their pursuit of civil documentation.
- Suggest strategies to enhance social inclusion of migrants and their families in Zimbabwe.

This study focuses on transnational migration, with an emphasis on irregular migration, and its impact on the identity and sense of belonging among undocumented migrants in Zimbabwe. It is not intended to validate or verify claims of statelessness but to examine the barriers to registration faced by both migrants and children born to migrants in the host country, particularly concerning the fundamental rights from which they are excluded. Thus, this study aims to assess the nature and extent of these barriers and to explore the type of exclusion they experience.

Contextual Issues around Migration and Civil Registration

The issue of documentation among migrants impacts children who travel with parents away from their original communities, those born to migrant mothers, and those who remain in migrant parents’ home communities (Ball et al., 2017). Limited access to birth registration, social protection, education, and a good quality of life has been identified as a significant consequence of unsafe migration, often passed on to children (Allerton, 2014; Bryant, 2005; and Lynch, 2010 in Ball et al., 2017). Migrants face challenges obtaining civil documents

because they need to prove their nationality, especially when seeking birth certificates or national identity cards after official registration periods (Gronlund & Alstad, 2016). In such cases, confirming nationality or civil status may require witness testimony from the community of origin or birthplace. Such testimony can be challenging to obtain due to lost ties or communication barriers (Mehta, 2020; Althaus & Parker, 2019).

International Context

Existing literature reveals that challenges in accessing civil documents by migrants are a global issue that, according to Goodburn (2016), affects not only transnational migrants but also rural-urban migrants in China, where parents often take their children to cities without first obtaining official registration documents. In Russian societies, according to Nikiforova and Brednikova (2018), migrants are primarily seen as “homo laborans,” meaning working subjects. This view influences policies that deny family life to certain migrants, leading their children to be often undocumented and excluded from access to state support and protection. Most babies born to migrant parents face a significant risk of statelessness, as observed in places like Texas, Tel Aviv, and Santo Domingo, where policymakers allegedly alter administrative requirements to restrict access to birth certificates for children born to migrant women as a deterrent to discourage their permanent settlement (Petrozziello, 2019).

In America, as Marietta (2006) alludes to, undocumented migrants are viewed by American citizens as illegal residents and a burden on government services and the economy. In this context, children who are citizens but are born to migrant parents face limited access to social protections. Data shows that 91% of children in migrant families are American citizens, but 72% live in mixed families and are excluded from safety nets due to their family situation (Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2021). Petrozziello (2019) points out that children’s rights to nationality and identity are often violated in the case of migrant children, as seen in the Dominican Republic, where people of Haitian descent are denied access to birth certificates. Undocumented migrants and unaccompanied migrant children are at greater risk of lacking access to social protection than other migrants, making statelessness and belongingness issues more common among undocumented migrants (UNICEF, 2021). The problem of documentation directly results in the social exclusion of undocumented migrants.

According to Preston (2016) and Dreby (2015), as cited in Petrozziello (2019), leaders in Texas developed ways to ‘stem a surge in illegal border crossings by families from Central America’ by requiring additional legal documents for unauthorized migrant parents to obtain civil papers.

These measures were put into place even though the United States recognizes birthright citizenship for all babies born within its borders, regardless of their parents' legal status (Petrozziello 2019). Similarly, Israel announced in 2013 that it would stop issuing birth certificates to babies born to foreigners (Sherwood 2013), as noted in Petrozziello (2019). The same source also states that the Dominican government has been accused of stripping citizenship from Dominican-born descendants of Haitian migrants. As a result, host governments often enforce strict measures that make it hard for migrants' children to secure a legal identity in the host country, leading to statelessness and issues related to belonging.

Regional Context

Refugees frequently encounter different forms of exclusion due to immigration laws that discriminate against them in obtaining legal status in the host country, as seen with Congolese nationals in Johannesburg, South Africa (Lakika, 2023). Lakika (2023) also notes that these Congolese migrants, despite possessing valuable skills, are often barred from formal employment due to their lack of proper documentation. Consequently, they turn to casual jobs such as security work and the sale of goods imported from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Although laws permit access to social grants for refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa—such as an amendment to Section 5 (2) of the Social Assistance Act No. 13 of 2004 (Brockerhoff, 2013), along with the War Veterans Grant and the rights-based South African constitution—reports from South African Statistics show that only 1% of foreigners access social grants (STATS SA, 2020 and World Bank, 2018) in Nzabamwita (2022). This exclusion from social grants mainly occurs because qualifying criteria often require citizenship (Nzabamwita, 2022). UNHCR (2019) notes that the Shona community living in Kenya, originating from Zambia and Zimbabwe, has a 24% higher risk of poverty than the urban Kenyan population.

According to Fourcahard (2021), Nigeria has divided its citizens into two categories: 'indigenes and non-indigenes, granting all local governments the authority to issue certificates of indigenes—which grant access to the job market and universities—to citizens who can trace their genealogical roots back to a specific locality. If someone is not recognized as an indigene in a particular area, they do not receive the identification certificate. This policy has led to the marginalization and exclusion of 'non-indigenes' from employment, basic services, and political participation, relegating them to the status of second-class citizens (Fourcahard, 2021). As a result, access to documentation remains a significant issue in the Southern African region, as discussed above.

National Context

According to the Zimbabwe Statistics Agency (Zimstats), birth registration rates in Zimbabwe show significant fluctuations, with 74% recorded in the Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey (ZDHS) 2005-2006, declining to 49% in 2010-2011, dropping to 44% in 2015, and then steadily increasing to 57% in the 2023-2024 ZHDS (Zimstats, 2025). The table below displays the percentage of children under 5 whose births are registered with civil authorities.

Table 1: The Percentage of Children Under Five Whose Births Are Registered/Not Registered with Civil Authorities

| | PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WHOSE BIRTHS ARE REGISTERED AND WHO: | | | |
|----------------------------|---|----------------------------------|--|--------------------|
| BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS | HAD A BIRTH CERTIFICATE | DID NOT HAVE A BIRTH CERTIFICATE | PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WHOSE BIRTHS ARE REGISTERED | NUMBER OF CHILDREN |
| AGE | | | | |
| <1 | 14.7 | 18.9 | 33.6 | 1.034 |
| 1-4 | 49.0 | 12.6 | 61.6 | 4.729 |
| SEX | | | | |
| Male | 42.5 | 13.2 | 55.7 | 2.832 |
| Female | 43.1 | 14.3 | 57.4 | 2.931 |
| RESIDENCE | | | | |
| Urban | 49.8 | 15.0 | 64.8 | 2.010 |
| Rural | 39.1 | 13.1 | 52.2 | 3.753 |
| PROVINCE | | | | |
| Bulawayo | 62.5 | 19.4 | 81.9 | 193 |
| Manicaland | 36.9 | 12.0 | 48.9 | 833 |
| Mashonaland Central | 44.0 | 14.6 | 58.5 | 566 |
| Mashonaland East | 42.4 | 10.5 | 52.9 | 669 |
| Mashonaland West | 38.5 | 19.7 | 58.2 | 833 |
| Matebeleleland North | 59.1 | 6.4 | 65.5 | 299 |
| Matebeleleland South | 53.0 | 22.0 | 75.0 | 278 |
| Midlands | 38.5 | 14.3 | 52.8 | 756 |
| Masvingo | 39.0 | 10.6 | 49.7 | 566 |
| Harare | 45.7 | 11.5 | 57.2 | 770 |
| WEALTH QUINTILE | | | | |

| | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Lowest | 34.8 | 13.2 | 48.0 | 1.439 |
| Second | 37.2 | 14.4 | 51.6 | 1.196 |
| Middle | 41.9 | 11.6 | 53.5 | 1.116 |
| Fourth | 42.9 | 15.2 | 58.1 | 1.117 |
| Highest | 64.5 | 14.5 | 79.0 | 894 |
| TOTAL | 42.8 | 13.7 | 56.6 | 5.763 |

SOURCE: Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey 2024-2024 (June 2025)

The information above shows a registration rate of 57.6%, which falls short of the global SDG target 16.9, which aims to provide legal identity for all by 2030. A national inquiry by the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission revealed that SADC foreign nationals are unaware that they qualify for citizenship by birth if they were born before 2013 to SADC citizens. As a result, they keep their alien status. Refugees at Tongogara refugee camp, whose refugee applications were denied, remain undocumented in the camp, and the children born there also fail to access birth certificates (ZHRC, 2020). ZHRC (2020) also highlights the challenges faced by border communities, who often struggle to establish their actual nationality due to the lack of clear border demarcations, particularly in Mashonaland Central, where areas bordering Zambia and Mozambique (Mbire, Muzarabani, Mt Darwin, and Rushinga) face this challenge. Some of these individuals give birth in hospitals across neighbouring countries, making it difficult to obtain birth certification records. Amnesty International (2021) cites migration as one of the leading causes of statelessness in Zimbabwe, alongside colonial history, displacement, and political conflicts. Before independence in 1980, Zimbabwe, then known as Southern Rhodesia, dominated the Central Africa Federation both economically and militarily, attracting foreign workers from neighbouring countries such as Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Nyasaland (Malawi), and Mozambique (Scott, 1954, in Amnesty International, 2021). These workers received identity documents indicating an ‘alien’ citizenship status, which deprived and excluded them from citizenship rights in Zimbabwe (Amnesty International, 2021).

Methodology

Description of the Study Area

The study was conducted in Zimbabwe’s Midlands Province, Kwekwe District. Kwekwe was chosen because, as a mining town, it attracted many people employed by the mines that once operated there. According to Zimstats (2022), Kwekwe has three local authorities: Kwekwe Rural, with 33 rural wards and a population of 197,062; Kwekwe Urban, with 14 wards and a population of 119; and Redcliff, with 9 wards and a population of 41,526. These add up to 56 wards and a combined population of 358,451.

Below is a map showing the precise location of the Kwekwe district.

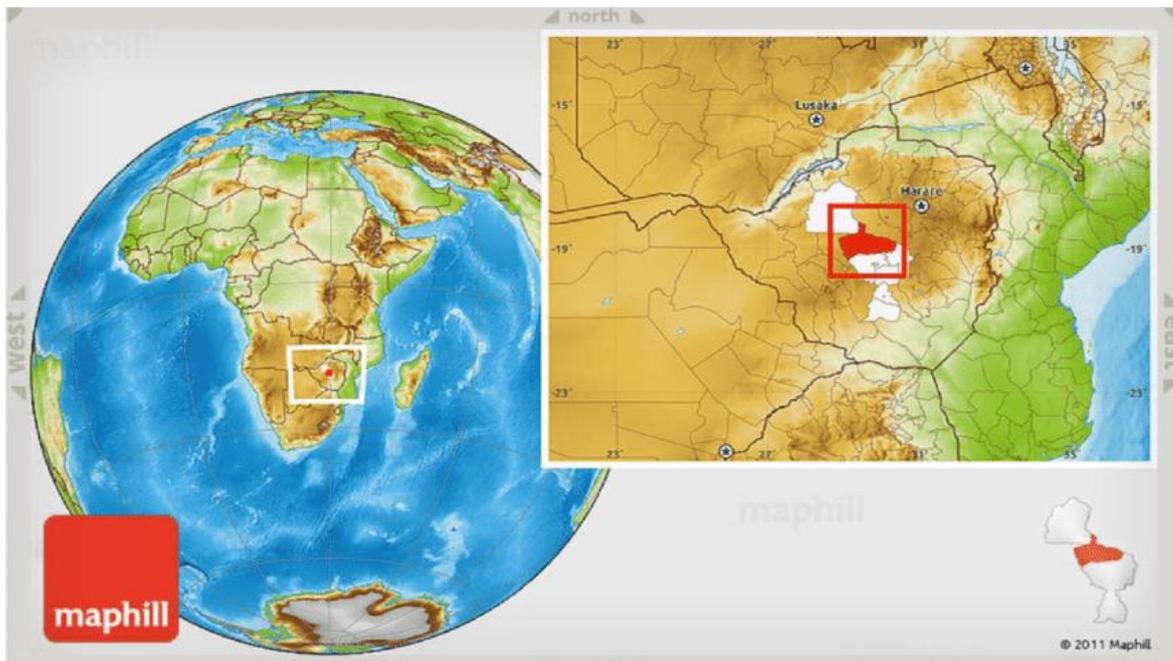


Figure 1: Kwekwe District, Midlands Province, Zimbabwe

SOURCE: <http://www.maphill.com/zimbabwe/midlands/kwekwe-rural/location-maps/physical-map/highlighted-parent-region/entire-country/>

Delimitations of the Study

The study focused solely on migrants or their descendants whose parents or grandparents migrated to Zimbabwe during the colonial era. It was limited to SADC states such as Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique. The colonial period ended in 1979. The study employed a qualitative approach to gain a contextual understanding of undocumented migrants' situations. Information was collected through a case study design, which Creswell (2013:97) describes as a “method that explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information.”

Sampling

The study employed non-probability sampling methods. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants who were interviewed about the challenges undocumented migrants face in accessing civil documents and to identify the demographic features of these migrants. According to Whittaker (2012), purposive sampling, also called judgmental sampling, involves selecting participants based on their relevance to the study. The chosen key informants came

from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare (Department of Social Development), UNICEF, and the Ministry of Home Affairs (Civil Registry Department and Zimbabwe Republic Police Victim Friendly Unit). The sample size was determined by the concept of data saturation, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which refers to "the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical construct reveals no new properties, nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory" (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007:611, in Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). According to O'Reilly and Parker (2013), as cited in Hennink (2021), "reaching saturation has become a critical component of qualitative research that helps make data collection robust and valid.

Methods of Data Collection

A variety of methods were used to gather data, including face-to-face interviews, questionnaires, focus group discussions, and observation for primary data, as well as document analysis for secondary data. Multiple data collection methods were employed to enrich the information obtained (Donkoh and Mensah, 2023).

Key Informant Interviews

The study conducted key informant interviews with experts in social inclusion, civil registration, and migration. Key informant interviews are considered the most appropriate method for qualitative research, particularly for policy-related studies such as this one aimed at improving Civil Registration policies in Zimbabwe (Lokot, 2021). To ensure effectiveness, which requires carefully chosen, skilled, and current interviewers (Mazhar et al., 2021), the researcher personally interviewed 14 District Registrars from the Civil Registry department, the resident magistrate for Kwekwe district, a probation officer from the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, a District Victim Friendly Officer from the Zimbabwe Republic Police, and six NGO members. All key informants in the Kwekwe district were interviewed face-to-face to discuss sensitive topics and gather detailed, high-level information (Frechtling, 2002, in Kabir, 2016).

Household Questionnaire Survey

Questionnaires were used to collect primary data from community members across the three local authorities, as they are recommended for measuring specific variables such as behaviours, preferences, and facts (Kabir, 2016; Taherdoost, 2021; Carletto et al., 2022). A hybrid approach was employed to distribute the questionnaires, combining face-to-face and online methods.

During the administration, ethical considerations, such as maintaining participant confidentiality, were upheld, and participants were encouraged to answer questions politely and clearly (Kabir, 2016, in Taherdoost, 2021). In line with the principle of data saturation, 128 questionnaires were completed online. The study also used face-to-face questionnaires to facilitate the oral presentation of the questions (Kabir, 2016).

Focus Group Discussion

To deepen understanding of individuals' perceptions, the study examined how social behaviours relate to people's observations of migrants' access to civil documentation in the host country (Akyidiz & Ahmed, 2021). The researcher held three focus group discussions, each with ten village heads from different chieftainships in Kwekwe Rural District, as well as three additional groups—one per local authority—comprising ten community members from migrant families, randomly selected through convenience and snowball sampling. These focus groups brought together participants with shared experiences to explore issues related to access to civil documentation for migrant families (Lune & Berg, 2017, in Akyidiz & Ahmed, 2021). Focus Group Discussions were chosen because they create genuine environments where participants influence each other and are influenced in return (Casey & Cruger, 2000 in Akyidiz & Ahmed, 2021), encouraging group interaction that fosters synergy among participants (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014 in Akyidiz & Ahmed, 2021).

Observation

To gather data on the behaviour of both civil registry officials and migrant families needing civil documents from the registry offices, the observation method was also chosen because it offers unique insights into human behaviour related to healthcare processes, events, norms, and social context (Gemmae et al., 2022). The researcher hired a research assistant to help conduct observations at Kwekwe district registry offices and the three rural sub-offices (Zhombe, Empress, and Silobela) for three weeks. The observation method enabled the researcher to understand what happens at registry offices regarding migrant families' access to civil documentation (Kabir, 2016).

Document Analysis

Document analysis is considered a valuable research method that involves examining various kinds of documents, including books, newspaper articles, academic journals, and institutional reports (Morgan, 2022). Patton (2015), in Morgan (2022), notes that any document containing text can serve as a source for qualitative analysis. For this study, the researcher analysed official

documents, including statistics from the Civil Registry Department and reports from the Zimbabwe Statistics Agency (Zimstats), as well as reports from the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), the African Union (AU), and the United Nations on access to civil documentation.

Results and Discussion

Nature of exclusion/ Implications of non-documentation

Exclusion from economic activities

In Kwekwe, artisanal gold miners, or makorokoza, must produce identity cards to prove their district of origin, which grants them the right to work in mines within that district. This rule prevents ‘aliens’ and undocumented migrants from accessing these community resources. Kachena and Spiegel (2019:1029) also emphasize that citizenship is used to exclude undocumented migrants from community resources, noting that “The notion of citizenship is also used to deny migrants access to community resources and opportunities. A group of migrants revealed that they are destitute, and artisanal mining is their only alternative because state and non-state actors (Chimanimani National Reserve and MICAIA Foundation) excluded them from seasonal jobs offered to other local community members—since they do not possess Mozambican identity cards.” Peter, an undocumented Rwandan national running a tuck shop in Harare’s CBD, said that certain areas are reserved for ‘locals,’ making it illegal for non-Zimbabwean nationals to operate in sectors such as retail. He referred to the joint operation, “Operation Comply or Leave,” conducted by the Zimbabwe government, which aimed to arrest all foreigners trading in sectors reserved for locals. As a result, undocumented migrants experience significant social exclusion due to a lack of documentation, among other reasons. Consequently, “informal migrant workers like waste pickers, domestic workers, and street vendors experience serious barriers to doing business in most cities” (Das and Espinoza, 2020:10). Overall, undocumented migrants face much greater exclusion from participating in economic activities compared to registered migrants or even unregistered locals.

Exclusion from Safety Nets

Access to social protection benefits remains a distant goal for unregistered individuals, including migrants. A researcher interviewed an officer from the Department of Social Welfare, who explained that some people are excluded from social protection due to a lack of documentation. The officer mentioned cash transfers provided by the Ministry of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare, distributed through mobile money platforms like One Money, and requiring an ID to register. Without a national ID, individuals cannot access these

benefits. Similarly, for drought relief programs such as the Food Deficit Mitigation Strategy, a national ID is required under policy. As a result, people are excluded from government social protection programs if they lack civil documentation, even if they meet other criteria, such as age, disability, or low income.

Exclusion from Accessing Healthcare.

Adlung (2015), cited by Das and Espinoza (2020), found that exclusion from health services in rural areas is more severe for women, the elderly, certain ethnic groups, and migrants. The case of South Africa shows that non-white women in rural areas are less likely to receive antenatal care than white women in urban areas (Burgard, 2004; Say and Raine, 2007; Silal et al., 2012, cited in World Bank, 2013; Das and Espinoza, 2020). In Zimbabwe, children under five receive free healthcare at public health facilities; however, this becomes a challenge when they cannot prove their age, which exposes children of migrants to exclusion from accessing basic healthcare.

Exclusion from Accessing Employment

Undocumented migrants often face difficulties in finding employment, whether formal or informal. This is mainly because no one is willing to hire someone without proof of identity, as an interview with a man who obtained a national identity document at age 43 highlighted. He previously struggled to find work, but once he acquired the documents, his life changed drastically. He now runs his small business, can travel to South Africa to buy goods for his shop, and has a passport. These cases are also observed in other countries. Hungwe (2020) notes that employers in the South African job market exploit migrant status, especially the lack of necessary documents to work and reside in South Africa. Consequently, employers often use these migrants as cheap labour. Therefore, the absence of documentation excludes migrants from the labour market by limiting their employment opportunities based on their civil documentation status. According to Hungwe (2020), participation in the labour market is also vital for the economic well-being of individuals and their families. Social exclusion in the labour market is described by Hungwe (2020) through the concept of precarious work, a term derived from the French word ‘precarite,’ which signifies vulnerability, instability, and insecurity. This idea is also referred to as a “feeling of being devalued by business and powerlessness due to the assault on unions dealing with a shrinking welfare system” (Kalleberg 2009 in Hungwe; 2020: 58-59). The ILO (2011:5), cited in Hungwe (2020), defines precarious work as “work performed in the formal and informal economy and is characterized by variable levels and degrees of objective (legal status) and subjective (feeling) characteristics of

uncertainty and insecurity. Lack of civil documentation limits people's access to the labour market; in cases where migrants do access it, they are often subjected to gross exploitation due to the lack of documents that establish their belongingness.

Challenges Faced by Undocumented Migrants

Failure to Provide Required Documentation

The research revealed that the biggest challenge facing undocumented migrants is the lack of proper documentation. Three-quarters of the sample population either did not have civil documents, such as a birth certificate or a national identity (ID) card, or obtained them later in life, after the minimum required age. The main obstacle to obtaining these documents was their parents' failure to provide proof of parentage through birth records or by having witnesses who shared the same surname as the parents. The district registrars for Kwekwe, Hwange, and Bindura all agreed that most migrant parents fail to provide proper documentation proving their entry into Zimbabwe. This, they said,

makes it difficult for them to issue a birth certificate without appropriate records of the individual's origins due to security reasons, especially with the rising cases of global terrorism," Registrar Moyo (not real name).

Similarly, in Malaysia, non-citizens are often at a significant disadvantage, as their parents must meet several documentation requirements, such as passports and entry permits (Cheong & Balatazar, 2021).

Some individuals do not obtain birth certificates because they fail to present their parents' death certificates, especially when the parents returned to their home country (leaving Zimbabwean-born children behind) and died there. When such individuals visit the Registrar General's offices, they are required to submit their parents' death certificates and the surviving relatives of both parents as a prerequisite for obtaining a birth certificate. Similar cases were also cited by Amnesty International (2021:20) regarding Alex Zengeni.

A 31-year-old man living in the impoverished suburb of Epworth, about 20 km from Harare: he was born in Zimbabwe and has no birth certificate or ID. His Zimbabwean mother died in 1999, and his Zambian father died in 1994. He does not have their death certificates. He does not know his father's relatives and cannot apply for any form of identity in Zimbabwe. This has prevented him from advancing beyond Grade 7 in school. Alex has two children, neither of whom has a birth certificate because he has no ID. He went to the registry offices in Harare in 2005 to try to obtain identity

documents. Still, officials demanded his parents' death certificates and two relatives with the same surname as his father.

Therefore, migrant families in Zimbabwe struggle to access civil documents because they fail to provide the necessary documents required by the Civil Registry department.

Rise in Intermarriages

The study found that, as Kwekwe is a mining town, there has been an increase in intermarriages between Zimbabweans, Malawians, and Mozambicans. The number of these marriages is growing rapidly in Zimbabwe. It also noted that some witnesses of migrants needing birth certificates were in their countries of origin and had lost contact with them over time. Yet, these certificates are required for birth certificate applications at the Civil Registry offices. The case of Alex Zengeni, recorded by Amnesty International (2021), is mentioned, where he is quoted as saying,

“I have no idea how I can locate my parents' relatives as I have never been to Zambia.”

This is one example. The researcher interviewed Kenneth Muchechwa Phiri at Joel Growth Point in Kwekwe District. He was born in Zimbabwe to a Zambian father and a Zimbabwean mother, and he did not obtain a birth certificate until age 43. This was because his father moved to Zambia shortly after his birth, but Zambian authorities refused to issue him a birth certificate since he was not born there. He was able to obtain the document only after returning to Zimbabwe, but he said it was not easy. It was also noted that in some cases, the parents had died, and their deaths were not registered. The study concluded that undocumented migrants in Zimbabwe started as a minority group, which has continued to grow over the years. Due to the lack of identity documents, they are stateless and lack protection under any legal system.

Attitude of Civil Registry Officers

The officers from the Department of Civil Registry were seen as barriers to migrants seeking legal documents. One key informant said that some undocumented migrants visiting civil registry offices were turned away because of the unfriendly attitude of the officers. One respondent noted, “The unpleasant reception from the officers can easily turn away citizens approaching the registrar's office.” A report by the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission on the National Inquiry on Access to Documentation in Zimbabwe (2020) highlighted that negative behaviours by Civil Registry officers—such as mistreatment, humiliation, and disrespect—include “tearing documents because the papers are not in order, name calling, shouting, mocking, and rudeness,” which discourage clients, especially foreigners, from

seeking civil documents. These feelings were also shared during this study, with some respondents noting that officers would call clients derogatory names such as ‘Manyasarandi,’ ‘Mabhurandaya,’ or ‘Mosken,’ which refer to people of Malawian, Zambian, and Mozambican origin. From this, it can be seen that migrants looking for civil documentation are often turned away because of the officers’ unfriendly attitude.

Lack of Decentralised Birth Registration System

The research also highlighted that the absence of a decentralized registration system significantly obstructs birth registration in Zimbabwe. With fifty-six wards in the Kwekwe district, it can be tough for some migrants to register their own and their children’s births. In districts like Shamva in Mashonaland Central and Binga in Matabeleland North, the distance from their homes to the registration offices can be as much as 100 kilometres. Consequently, the frequent trips to these offices can discourage migrants from seeking documentation. One key informant remarked, “The offices are not decentralised and are out of reach for many, a reason why children and many adults do not have birth documentation.” Based on this evidence, the number of undocumented migrants is likely to continue increasing.

Language Barriers

The study also found that communication posed a challenge for some immigrants. When trying to interact with civil registry officers, witnesses, and individuals seeking birth certificates, the interactions often became frustrating because they could not speak the local language. One key informant noted that, “Communication is a challenge for most Mozambicans as they speak Portuguese whilst the official language in Zimbabwe is English.” Based on this quote, communication problems play a significant role in the lack of documentation for immigrants in the Kwekwe District.

Enablers to Registration

Mobile Registration

In January 2019, the Kenyan government launched a ‘National Integrated Identity Management System’ to register all residents in the country, commonly known as the ‘huduma namba’. This effort aimed to register individuals at risk of statelessness, particularly migrant groups living in Kenya (Abuya, 2021). Similarly, Mozambique conducted a mobile registration exercise in Zimbabwe, targeting Mozambican citizens residing there to enable their participation in Mozambique's general elections. According to registrars from the Civil Registry department, it has become a tradition for the Zimbabwean government to conduct mobile ID and birth

registration exercises every five years before general elections. During these exercises, teams are deployed across all districts, including the most remote areas. Additionally, Zimbabwe's Civil Registry department partners with UNICEF to conduct targeted mobile registrations. In 2025, these exercises covered areas such as Methodist Village in Bulawayo district, Binga, Mangwe, and Bulilima districts, registering a total of 1750 birth certificates and 1,365 National Identity documents. SOURCE: Civil Registry files. These mobile registration efforts, both general and targeted, have been praised by most respondents as a vital enabler of civil registration. Three middle-aged men who obtained birth certificates after age 16, and one man at age 45, lauded mobile registration initiatives for providing access to civil documents for people in rural areas who cannot afford to travel to static registration offices, especially since these services are offered free of charge.

Naturalisation (Zimbabwe 2013 Constitution)

Zimbabwean naturalized aliens are those born in the country to migrant parents. According to the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013 Section 43, "every person who was born in Zimbabwe before the publication day of the Constitution is a Zimbabwean by birth if one or both of his or her parents was a citizen of the country that became a member of SADC (Southern Africa Development Community) in 1992 and is resident in Zimbabwe". An interview with the Registrar General revealed that Kenya's naturalized migrant populations, including the Shona community of Zimbabwean origin, thereby promote social inclusion of migrant communities through the provision of civil documentation.

United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) Initiatives

UNHCR, in partnership with the Government of Kenya, launched the Global Action to End Statelessness: 2014-2024 and initiated the #IBelong Campaign, which helped 166,000 stateless individuals gain and confirm their nationality (UNHCR, 2020). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, working with the government of Zimbabwe, has been a leading advocate in promoting access to documentation for refugees living at Zimbabwe's Tongogara refugee camp in Chipinge district [Kwekwe District Registrar].

Strategies To Promote Social Inclusion Through Civil Registry

Training of Civil Registry Officials on Customer Care

Most respondents complained about the unruly behaviour of many officers staffing the civil registry offices, citing it as one of the factors hindering people's access to documentation.

According to a study by Amnesty International (2021), Ever Ndebele from Maphisa in Matabeleland South Province told Amnesty International that,

“The problem is the attitude of the Registrar General’s officers who seem not to care about people, and at times they just ignore you without providing the needed services.”

The District Registrars indicated that the Civil Registry department has been training staff in customer care; however, most respondents felt that the training coverage remains minimal, resulting in poor treatment of clients when they visit Registry Offices.

Train Civil Registry Officials on Foreign Languages

The language barrier also emerged as one of the factors limiting access to documentation, especially for members of foreign origin. To address this, most respondents suggested training registry officers in foreign languages like French, Portuguese, and Swahili to facilitate communication. Proficiency in foreign languages is one of the most essential tools that influence the effectiveness of public servants, particularly due to increased mobility and migration flows (Udina, 2018). Therefore, training Civil Registry staff in foreign languages will go a long way in encouraging the use of civil documentation by migrant communities.

Interoperability of Government Departments

The District Victim-Friendly Officer from the Zimbabwe Republic Police in Kwekwe district recommended interoperability among government Ministries, Departments, and Agencies involved in Civil Registration matters. She suggested integrating the Ministries of Health, Education, and the Civil Registry department to increase the issuance of civil registration documents. A similar approach was adopted in Kirundo province, Burundi, where UNICEF supported the Ministry of Interior, Community Development, and Public Security, along with the Ministry of Public Health and AIDS Control, in implementing interoperability between civil registry and health services (Gateka, 2025). Regarding migrants, the officer from the District Social Welfare Office emphasized the importance of involving the Civil Registry department from the moment a refugee status is granted, to ensure seamless procurement of civil documents for refugees. Interoperability between key government departments, such as health, education, and the Civil Registration department, has also been successful in Pakistan, where the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) partners with the Ministry of Health to collect birth and death records (Alvi et al. 2025).

Community Initiatives

Community initiatives are also recognized as a strategy to increase Civil Registration among migrant communities. The Director of Gender for the Ministry of Home Affairs emphasized the significance of sports as a community initiative that could help promote Civil Registration. This approach is practical for fostering inclusion within communities, as demonstrated by Ekholm et al. (2019) in Sweden. Female asylum seekers can also gain from this initiative (Sharzad, 2019). The concept of utilizing community leaders and other influential figures in society as change agents was also identified as a strategy to encourage the adoption of civil registration.

Further Decentralisation of Registry Services

Respondents interviewed in this study praised the government's plan to open sub-offices, especially in hard-to-reach areas. They also suggested further decentralization of registry services, specifically targeting migrant communities to increase access for migrant families. Decentralizing civil registration services combined with digitization and inter-agency collaboration enhances civil registration and vital statistics functions (UN ECA, 2019). Evidence of decentralization's effectiveness as a strategy to promote Civil Registration is seen in Tanzania, where birth registration in 2017 reached 60% in Iringa and 52% in Mbozi districts—areas where birth registration was decentralized—compared to 36% in Kibaha and 20% in Dodoma districts, where the system remained centralized (Sanga et al, 2020). Interviews with registrars from the civil registry department and NGOs indicated that services in Kwekwe district have been decentralized with the opening of five sub-offices, two of which are located at the district's major hospitals. However, the services provided remain limited, prompting proposals to decentralize services further to improve Civil Registration completeness. Although this strategy does not directly address migrants, improved geographic access will likely enhance the inclusion of migrant families facing barriers due to distance from registry offices.

Conclusion

Based on the findings highlighted in the current study, it can be concluded that most transnational migrants lack civil identification documents from both their country of origin and Zimbabwe. This situation has affected their children as well. In some cases, their children have had to be registered by relatives or associates who possess the relevant identity documents. Although this is a case of false registration, it also leads to a loss of identity and a sense of belonging to the family for the child. These issues are relatively minor within a cultural context.

Due to the absence of civil documentation, some children born to transnational migrants are unable to enrol in educational institutions, which negatively impacts the country's economic development. Some end up working as illegal gold miners (makorokoza), while their female counterparts might engage in early marriages or commercial sex work. By continuously denying parents access to civil documents, they risk becoming stateless. The study thus recommends that unregistered documents be registered urgently, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in support of the country's development.

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