

Exploring the Migration Experiences of Black Zimbabwean Women in the Greater Cincinnati Area

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Abstract

This article explores the migration experiences of Zimbabwean immigrant women living in the Greater Cincinnati, Ohio area. It argues that despite the increased population of women migrating, sometimes alone, in search of a better lifestyle, their unique experiences have remained invisible in studies on migration. The study followed a participatory research approach and used a photovoice method for data collection. Over a period of seven months, participants took photographs that vividly captured their experiences. Implications from the findings and the nature of the photovoice as a participatory approach for future research with Zimbabwean immigrant women are presented.

Keywords: Migration, Zimbabwean women, photovoice, participatory research

Introduction

The influx of Zimbabwean immigrants is contributing to the growing cultural mosaic of the United States. In 2008, the total population of Zimbabweans living in the United States was estimated to be somewhere between fifty thousand to two hundred thousand (Firger 2008). These figures, although not conclusive, included both immigrant and non-immigrant visa holders. Like other immigrant groups, Zimbabweans are exploring diverse ways to settle permanently in the United States. Reliable data compiled by the United States Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of Immigration Statistics indicates that a total of more than ten thousand Zimbabweans had obtained lawful permanent resident status between the periods of 2006-15 (United States Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics 2015 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics). These statistics include those granted political asylum and green cards through employment and marriages to American-born citizens. DHS also revealed that a sizeable number of Zimbabweans have their asylum statuses still pending, and the number of asylum applications increased since 2000, when compared to previous years. This coincided with the period when Zimbabwe's economic and political turmoil was tumultuous. Based on these figures it is evident that the United States is increasingly becoming a safe international

destination for many Zimbabweans in pursuit of better economic opportunities and human security.

It was difficult to determine the accurate total figures of Zimbabwean women living in the United States from the data provided by DHS. However, anecdotal observations indicate that there is a considerable population of Zimbabwean immigrant women in the United States, particularly in Greater Cincinnati, Ohio where this study took place. Physical evidence, which includes the expanding Zimbabwean religious congregations around the city, such as: The Seventh Day Adventist Church located in Clifton, and Forward in Faith (FIF) located on Queen City Avenue in Cincinnati presented a large population of women attending church services every week. These churches have congregations that are predominantly Zimbabwean and prayer services are even conducted in Shona and Ndebele. Furthermore, gatherings at weddings, funeral services, and other social functions reveal a substantial growth in the population of Zimbabwean women in the Greater Cincinnati area (Nyemba 2014).

This article is based on the author's doctoral thesis (Nyemba 2014). The study sought to understand the migration experiences of Zimbabwean women using photovoice methodology. The study specifically explored the reasons why Zimbabwean women took the initiative to migrate, often leaving their families behind, and the challenges they encounter whilst living in the United States. It seeks to contribute to literature on African immigrant women's post-migratory experiences and how photovoice as a method can provide them a medium to examine and share their own experiences.

The article is organized in the following sections: first, a background on the reasons why Zimbabwean women left their homes; followed by the research methods, findings and discussions; and finally, limitations of the study and conclusions.

Reasons for leaving Zimbabwe

For the thirty-four women who participated in this study, migrating to the United States was a decision that was largely influenced by the country's declining economic and political environment, which started around the late 1990s. An overview of the country's economic decline indicates that its gross domestic product (GDP) declined by 46 percent between 2000-08. This was attributed to three things: (1) poor rainfalls; (2) the Fast Track Land Reform in 2000 which reallocated land from the White minority to Black populations with limited resources for large scale food production; and (3) political violence, which prevented people from working (Mudzonga and Chigwada 2009, Orner and Holmes 2010); all of which resulted in severe shortages of basic necessities such as food, medicine, water and transportation. Politically, the contestation for power between President Robert Mugabe's current ruling political party, Zimbabwe African Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by Morgan Tsvangirai, resulted in chaos. There were several reports of executions and disappearances of people, mostly members of the opposition party, along with several cases of torture or serious assaults. Therefore, migration to regional and international destinations became a strategy for both men and women to escape Zimbabwe's challenging economic conditions and political persecution (Madziva and Zontini 2012).

This economic and political challenge affecting the general population greatly shifted the gendered migratory patterns in Zimbabwe. Women's migration out of the country was very limited during British colonial rule (1880-1980) to the late 1990s. Historically, only men migrated in large numbers to neighboring countries such as South Africa and Botswana to seek

employment opportunities (Pasura 2008, 2010a; Orner and Holmes 2010). Zimbabwean women, on the other hand, were socialized to perform domestic chores such as cooking, growing vegetables and nurturing children (Madziva and Zontini 2012).

These traditional roles began to transform starting around the late 1990s when the country's economic and political stability began to collapse. Faced with poverty and hardships, women began to join their male counterparts in pursuit of better lifestyles in neighboring countries and abroad. Previous studies indicate that by the year 2000, the number of Zimbabwean women migrating was equal to and in some cases surpassing that of men (Madziva and Zontini 2012). A 2001 survey conducted by Southern Africa Migration Project (SAMP) indicated that 62 percent of Zimbabwean women versus 54 percent of men had given a great deal of thought to emigrating (Tevera and Crush 2003). This indicated that the traditional barriers that previously prevented women from migrating were becoming less significant, as women were beginning to act independently in order to fulfill their economic needs rather than simply depending on their spouses (Crush and Tevera 2010; Pasura 2010b, 2008; Adepoju 2010; Arthur 2000). It is therefore, against this background, that women's immigration experiences should be understood through their own interpretations.

Methods

Participants

Thirty-four Zimbabwean immigrant women living in the Greater Cincinnati area were recruited to participate in this study. Participants were formally recruited using Facebook and

phone contacts. A message describing the study was distributed to participants' email accounts including the researcher's contact details for responding. Informal recruitment included the use of a snowball sampling technique. In snowball sampling, participants contacted first are asked to use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who may be interested in participating in the study (Lucas 2014). In addition, women were recruited verbally at social gatherings such as baby showers and graduation parties. The eligibility criteria included being above eighteen years of age and had migrated from Zimbabwe. All participants recruited for this study were fluent in the English language. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Cincinnati approved this study.

Data collection

Photovoice methodology, supplemented with semi-structured individual interviews, was used to collect data. Photovoice is defined as a participatory process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique (Wang 1999). Photovoice puts cameras in the hands of those individuals that are directly affected and often excluded from decision-making processes. This provides individuals with the opportunity to use digital cameras to capture realities about their life experiences (Wang 1999). Photovoice engages people to tell their own stories through photographs, to call for community engagement, and to bring about change (Wang and Buris 1997). Therefore, over a period of seven months, the women engaged in photograph assignments to take photos that vividly captured their migration experiences. The photos were then shared during organized photo group discussions to identify common experiences among the women.

Semi-structured individual interviews were used to supplement data collected through photographs. This allowed further analysis of the photos with the women on an individual basis. Fifteen women participated in the individual interviews. The interviews used the same probing questions that were used during photo discussions. Six of the interviews were conducted telephonically due to scheduling conflicts. The remaining nine interviews were conducted face-to-face at participants' homes. The interview durations ranged from 20 to 90 minutes depending on the amount of information each participant shared.

Data Analysis

Both photograph group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews were audio-recorded and the responses were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Pseudonyms were used for participants that were quoted verbatim in the report to protect their identities (Table 1).

Table 1. Pseudonyms for Participants

| Pseudonyms | Age | College /University | Married | Single | Divorced | Widowed | Employed |
|------------|--------------|------------------------|---------|--------|----------|---------|----------|
| | <u>18-28</u> | | | | | | |
| Tairo | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Tendai | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| | <u>29-38</u> | | | | | | |

| | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|---|---|---|
| Nyemwererai | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Mazvita | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Sharai | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Nyaradzo | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Tsitsi | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Tarisai | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Ratidzo | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| <hr/> | | | | |
| | <u>39-48</u> | | | |
| Kundai | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Farirai | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Miro | ✓ | | | |
| <hr/> | | | | |
| Chido | <u>49-58</u> | | | ✓ |
| <hr/> | | | | |
| | <u>59-65</u> | | | |
| Marwei | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Paidamoyo | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |

Note: Check mark indicates a yes

Photo analysis

The photographs were analyzed based on three techniques suggested by Wang and Burris (1997). First, participants engaged in photograph selection. Each participant presented their own photographs and described where the pictures were taken and what they represented. The group then collectively chose the photos they felt were most significant from each participant's pile. This was followed by the second technique which involved contextualization of the photographs.

Participants interpreted and told stories to describe the photographs they had taken. They discussed what the photographs meant to them as they shared their life experiences. This process involved using the **SHOWeD** approach to critically analyze the content of the photographs.

SHOWeD stands for;

S- “What do we **See** here?”

H-What is really **H**appening here?

O-How does this relate to **O**ur lives?

W-Why does this situation, concern or strength exist?

D-What can we **Do** about it?”

(Wang 1999: 188)

Finally, the photos were codified to identify emerging themes. Photos were identified and sorted into categories by participants in order to identify emerging themes and issues (Palibroda et al. 2009; Wang and Buris 1997). Each theme was then attached to selected photos that vividly mirrored common experiences among the women.

Interview analysis

Semi-structured individual interviews were analyzed using Grounded Theory. This type of analysis helps researchers understand people’s behaviors in different social settings such as groups, organizations, and communities. It focuses on the meanings of events and other often overlooked things in people’s everyday lives (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Therefore, Grounded Theory was appropriate for this exploratory study which aimed to generate precise themes that

reflected the lived experiences of Black Zimbabwean immigrant women. To begin the analysis, the recorded interviews were first transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. Once transcriptions were completed, the textual material was read several times, utilizing constant comparison throughout the analysis process to identify emerging themes. The themes were then grouped together based on how they were related, and were compared to those identified during the photo group discussions. This resulted in the identification of seven dominant themes that described the experiences of Zimbabwean immigrant women living in the United States.

Findings

The following seven key themes were identified from both the photographs and interview analysis; (a) Economic emancipation; (b) Access to education; (c) A life of freedom; (d) Unfulfilled dreams; (e) Stress; (f) Cultural shock; and (g) Discrimination. Pseudonyms were used to represent participants' identities.

Economic Emancipation

The women in this study all stated that migrating to the United States was a crucial step towards achieving a better lifestyle for their families. Tsitsi studied Fashion and Design but could not find a job in the fashion industry in Zimbabwe. After migrating to the United States with her husband, she secured a job in a nursing home. She saved enough money to start a fashion business specializing in African clothing designs. She stated, "America is a well-established country with abundant resources and it has a lot of things, there are so many opportunities here that we didn't have back home." Participants also explained that the economic

situation in Zimbabwe deteriorated to the extent that even those individuals who once lived luxurious lifestyles by operating businesses and those with high-paying salaries were affected. They witnessed major companies closing, consequently contributing to high unemployment rates. Even the very educated individuals could not get jobs. Chido stated, “Lack of stability of our country you know, that you can’t find a job, especially the economy, you know, the corruption that you can’t succeed even with education.” Chido and her late husband were both educated and worked as registered nurses at the same hospital in Zimbabwe. The hospital later closed leaving many without jobs which ultimately forced them to migrate to the United States. Chido continued with her nursing career whilst her husband operated a taxi business until his untimely death. Therefore, participants agreed that there are a variety of employment opportunities available in the United States. In Zimbabwe, some women said that unemployment forced them to survive on domestic related activities such as growing and selling vegetables on roadsides.

Marwei was a school teacher in Zimbabwe but could not find a teaching position when she migrated to the United States. She concluded that the curriculum differences between Zimbabwe and the United States may have been the reason she was never invited for interviews. However, she did not stay unemployed for a long period when a friend advised her to apply in

nursing homes where she currently works. Marwei, took the picture in Figure 1



Figure 1. Home care facility

to explain that finding a job in nursing home care facilities is not difficult at all, “As long as you have the GED and able to do the job, they take you because it’s general labor. They don’t care in the health as long as you qualify.” Participants indicated that whilst the Licensed Practitioner Nurse (LPN) certificate cannot land them to better paying positions in hospitals, nursing homes employ them more. However, an education upgrade to become Registered Nurses coupled with time and experience increases their chances to acquire more rewarding positions in well-established health facilities. It took several years for one of the participants to accomplish her dream of becoming a Registered Nurse (RN). Now that she holds a Registered Nursing

Diploma, she is looking forward to furthering her career in nursing; from working in a nursing home to pursuing a position in a hospital.

Overall, the women indicated that being able to acquire jobs improved their economic situation compared to the daily lives they left in Zimbabwe. Women like Tsitsi, could finance their own small businesses without relying on capital from their husbands. Some are even thankful that they can now open bank accounts to get loans when needed; they can now afford to buy cars and not rely on public transportation, further expanding on their independence.

Access to Education

Nyemwererai explained that furthering their education is yet another important opportunity available in the United States. With her uncle's help, Nyemwererai migrated to the United States after graduating from high school. She found a job and worked for a few years before deciding to pursue a college degree in Communications. Her dream had always been to graduate from college as represented by a photo she took (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A college graduation cap

She explained that the graduation cap is a representation of her endless educational possibilities. Other women in the study also supported that they had always wanted college education but the cultural society coupled with the economic situation in Zimbabwe had limited their educational dreams. Some women stated that their parents could only afford paying school fees for girls up to Ordinary Level thereby limiting their opportunities to proceed to Advanced Level, which prepares students for University enrollment. Therefore, the women were happy with the opportunity to migrate to a country where they could find jobs to fund their studies.

Ratidzo holds a Doctorate degree in nursing and works in a hospital as a neuroscience researcher. She also commented that without a stable job it is difficult for women to enroll for Master's and Doctoral programs at universities in Zimbabwe without scholarships. She stated

that the absence of financial sponsorship limits the number of women enrolling in graduate school. On the other hand, she explained that colleges and universities in the United States offer scholarships to prospective international students, paving a way for them to pursue their studies. Ratidzo received a full scholarship towards her graduate studies; an opportunity she said was not available when she completed her bachelor's degree in Zimbabwe.

A Life of Freedom

The women were grateful to live free from some oppressive cultural traditions they experienced in Zimbabwe. Tarisai migrated to the United States at the same time with her husband and is happy that she was not left behind staying with her mother-in-law. She frequently visited her in the rural areas and as the only daughter-in-law in her husband's family, she felt like everyone expected too much from her. She stated,

There is a little bit of freedom from our rigid culture because back home you worry about what you wear. You say; what would people think if I dress like this? But when you come here you will have freedom from people. Back home we live for the society where you are worried about what your husband's relatives will say about you.

Participants also added that in Zimbabwe, there are certain gender specific expectations for women whether married or single. Particularly among married women, not delivering those expectations would sometimes result in domestic violence. When Sharai migrated to the United States, she was young and single. She later met and married her husband, also from Zimbabwe. She commented that their relationship as husband and wife is different from what she grew up

witnessing. For example, she explained that her husband helps with cooking whereas back home married women are expected to perform all household chores for their husbands. If the husband believes that his wife fails to deliver those expectations, this could result in domestic violence. Relatives do not usually intervene in marriage matters with the belief that couples should solve their own problems. Sharai further stated that even the law enforcement in Zimbabwe does not take domestic violence seriously and sometimes reporting incidents does not necessarily result in any action.

On the other hand, the women reported that the law in the United States offers better protection for women against domestic violence. If husbands become violent, they can report them to the police. As a result, husbands avoid breaking the law as this may negatively impact their immigration status. Therefore, if they remain in the United States, participants explained that they are less likely to be exposed to domestic violence.

Referring to the relationship between her daughter and son-in-law as an example, Paidamoyo really appreciates that husbands spend more time with their families and help with

food preparation as indicated by a photo of a cooking pot she took (Figure 3).



Figure 3. A saucepan on the stove

Paidamoyo migrated alone leaving her husband in Zimbabwe. Her eldest daughter who had migrated earlier to the United States sponsored the migration process and let her stay in their household until she found a job in a nursing home. During that short period of time, Paidamoyo observed that her son-in-law was always at home when not working. She commented that, in Zimbabwe, men usually spend their free time with friends in bars and clubs as opposed to helping with cooking; a behavior which is not common here. Participants agreed with Paidamoyo that couples' alternate schedules to balance their time between work and family. For example, the husband works during the day whilst the wife takes care of children, and then the wife works

at night. Participants appreciate this balance of responsibilities, which enables them to work outside the home.

Unfulfilled Dreams

Participants explained how they always dreamt of a sweet life in America before they migrated. Nyaradzo is a divorced mother raising two children. Her initial plan when she migrated was to get a job and further her studies. Things did not go according to plan when she quickly met and married her American husband. The marriage did not last long forcing her to work more than two jobs to raise her children. She commented that when she is with friends the question they constantly ask themselves is, “Where is the sweet life I dreamt of?” She further explained that she spends a lot of time debating with other immigrants at her work place about what it means to be American and what the American dream means to them. The consensus in those debates is that the immigration dream is centered on a lifestyle of endless opportunities, which is not always true. Nyaradzo stated, “One thing no one tells you when you are coming to America is how much you are going to work.” She further commented that, upon arrival is when they realized that jobs are available but not the kind of jobs that can make them rich like they had imagined.



Figure 4. An expensive vehicle

Sharai took a photo of an expensive vehicle (Figure 4), to explain how she too realized that life is not at all what she had imagined. The photo indicates the type of car she envisioned driving which is the opposite of the battered car she currently drives. Sharai used to admire the beautiful houses and cars she saw on television shows and magazines. Those beautiful images intensified the dream to improve her life. “It seemed like everyone had money. The African Americans we saw on television were very rich. To be honest, I was really shocked because the America I had in my mind was the movie life,” said Sharai. She and other participants came to the realization that the beautiful life portrayed on television was unreachable to immigrants and

even to ordinary African Americans. Farirai, a mother of two who is studying for a certificate in licensed practitioner nursing followed her husband two years after he migrated to the United States. She too was shocked to find him living in a small apartment not ample enough to accommodate a family of five people (Figure 5)

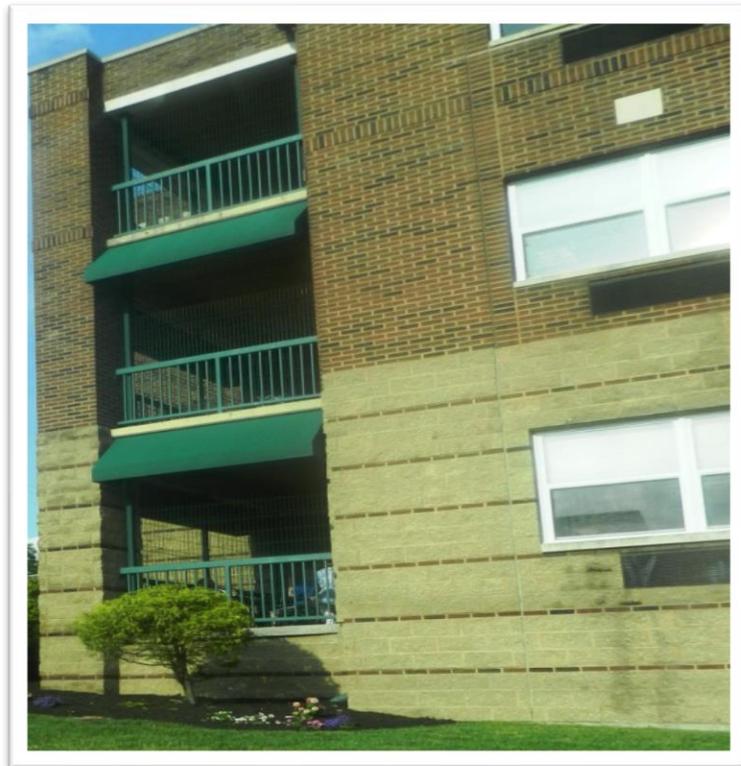


Figure 5. Single family apartments

Farirai had dreamt that she was going to live in a much bigger house than the one she had in Zimbabwe.

The women discussed that as soon as they arrived, there were a lot of obstacles they were not aware of before they left Zimbabwe. Nyaradzo explained that unless one migrates with a company-sponsored visa, the process to acquire a work authorization permit is long and expensive. It takes at least ninety days for the permit to be processed after approval from the Department of Homeland Security. For those women migrating as students, even with a full scholarship, their lives did not change overnight. It takes a considerable amount of time to finish school and then look for employment.

Stress

Most participants revealed that they were stressed during at least one point upon arrival to the United States. The struggle to balance work, school and family activities, cultural shock, fear, loneliness and anxiety of deportation were all cited as major sources of stress. Miriro, lives alone and sometimes works part-time jobs to pay for her studies. She left all her children in Zimbabwe because she could not obtain visas for them when she migrated. She explained that when she is

stressed, she feels empty like an old chair (Figure 6), that everyone avoids sitting on. The option to go back to live a life without employment was out of the question.

Figure 6. Empty wooden chair



Mazvita works in a nursing home and at the same time pursues a college degree. She is also a mother and lives with her husband and children. She took a photo of a clock

(Figure 7), to explain how time management also contributes to stress.



Figure 7. A clock

Like some of the participants, she works at most twelve-hour shifts each day. “I never expected to work like crazy. I am a mother of two kids, a seven-year-old son and a five-month-old daughter,” stated Mazvita. The women’s obligations to support families back home through remittances also force them to work long hours. Tarisai stated, “Some of us have responsibilities back home compared to people here who don’t take care of their parents and siblings. We come from Africa where the whole family depends on us.” This responsibility is stressful when not making enough money.

The women also complained about the challenges in providing for their children, especially childcare provision, which is very expensive. Kundai migrated together with her

husband and two sons. She works in a warehouse and her husband is a teacher in a correctional facility. She stated that finding affordable daycare for her children was quite a challenge. “I can work as many hours as I would want, but I need to take care of my adult children so it is a challenge,” she said. She further expressed that she cannot leave her children at home alone for fear of prosecution for child endangerment. Whilst bringing a relative from Zimbabwe could be a viable solution to childcare pressures, the women stated that securing a temporary visa and buying tickets to sponsor a relative is expensive. Moreover, individuals with pending green cards and asylum applications are not eligible to invite relatives to join them. As a result, participants sometimes rely on each other for childcare. Living in the same neighborhoods sometimes enables them to trade work schedules. The individual free during the day babysits for others including picking up children from daycare and school. In extreme cases, some women are left with no choice but to quit their jobs and postpone their educational enrollment until their children are ready for kindergarten at affordable public schools.

Cultural shock

The women in the study commented that they are sometimes challenged by conflicting cultural expectations. For example, they had imagined that it would be easy to identify themselves with African Americans since they share the same skin color but soon realized that they have conflicting cultural values. Sharai said,

I have got a few friends you know, I have trouble with making friends with African Americans because I don't understand them, who they are. With

African Americans, we only share skin color but that's where it stops. This is where I realized that I relate better with White people than African Americans.

The other challenge for the women is the unsuccessful efforts to raise their children the way they were raised themselves. Participants want their children to embrace the Zimbabwean culture, which is not provided by the society they are born and growing up in. This has resulted in a cultural clash between parents and children. Parents struggle to keep what is really valued to them and to their cultural community, whilst at the same time trying to facilitate their children's integration into the American society. They observed that children acculturate effortlessly into the American society as they spend more time in school with other children.

Fear of deportation also contributes to stress. Tariro migrated to the United States on a non-immigrant visa which had several restrictions. She later married a Zimbabwean man with a permanent resident status who then helped her apply for a green card. Based on her previous experiences, she commented that even with a green card, one could be deported if you violate visa restrictions. She shared, "There was a time when I had messed up my papers. It was difficult because you want to work, at work you are afraid to apply for certain promotions." Tariro could not complain about any abuse at work fearing that further investigations would reveal her ineligibility to work in the United States. The other women also stated that deportation procedures are harsh and one could be taken to the airport straight from jail without being given enough time to gather their belongings and say good-bye to family and friends. Therefore, the women are aware of certain boundaries they cannot overstep. One woman explained that there are certain violations that immigrants are severely punished for, compared to native born Americans. Therefore, each time they want to do something different, they must stop and think

about the consequences associated with taking such risks. “So, I feel like there is a speed bump to whatever you do,” commented Tariro. The women articulated that this constant stopping and evaluation of decisions and actions interfere with their progress. As a result, participants agreed that American women progress economically and socially more rapidly because they do not suffer those additional obstructions encountered by immigrants.

Discrimination

Participants also stated that racial discrimination contributes to their stress levels. Nyemwererai took a photo (Figure 8) to demonstrate how she feels about the discrimination she faces as a black immigrant woman.



Figure 8. White blossoms

She said, “There is discrimination that you are black and then discrimination that you are African because they do not think we know anything.” She explained that the white flower is very clean, and represents the majority white population, which is considered intelligent. The white flower is very visible among flowers of other colors. Participants agreed that since their skin color is not visible like the white flower, they are the minority that is always oppressed. Participants stated that they were not affected by racial discrimination in Zimbabwe since black people are the majority. Unfortunately, when they migrated to the United States, they become part of the minority black population, as they are automatically associated with African Americans regardless of the cultural differences between the two groups. Paidamoyo commented,

“You know, I think it is kind of hard you know, because unfortunately especially in this country, as much as we don’t like it we are automatically classified as African Americans. African Americans have already set precedents where they are already discriminated [sic] in any way.”

Participants also explained that black people are forced to work harder to prove their competence to be accepted by the majority white Americans. Tendai is pursuing a college degree and regularly takes a summer job in a small hotel as a waitress. She stated that her supervisor was reluctant to let her serve customers. Even though she was hired as a waitress, she soon found herself working in the backroom, cleaning dishes and scrubbing floors. “When they hired me, they told me I was going to be a waitress, yet they were putting me in the kitchen.” At first, she thought her situation had to do with experience even though she worked hard just like the other two white girls that got hired at the same time with her. However, she later observed that the other three African American men that worked the same shift with her were also not allowed to wait on customers. It became clear to her that they were being discriminated against. “They put me behind and put the white employees upfront. It was the three of us blacks and we were put behind. If it was just me maybe I wouldn’t have realized that it was racial discrimination,” commented Tendai.

Speaking with an accent is a language issue the women believed is another reason they are discriminated against by Americans. Paidamoyo does not regard herself as failing to speak English because she understands the language well. However, her challenge together with other participants is that they speak English with an African accent, which is difficult for Americans to understand. Participants complained that it is rare to be invited back to a second interview or offered a job easily. When offered a job, participants complained that they are considered dull

and Americans feel that it is their responsibility to explain everything to them including simple things like distinguishing between shampoo and conditioner. Paidamoyo's supervisor could not understand that she was fluent in the English language and took it upon herself to explain everything to her including how to shampoo patients' hair, the amount of shampoo to use and that she had to shampoo the hair first before she can apply conditioner. "The way we pronounce words they think we don't know so they always want to correct us," stated Paidamoyo. She further explained that she feels degraded each time her boss repeats the same words she had said to teach her to pronounce it with an American accent. The women noted that the reaction to other accents was different.

Tsitsi also shared the same sentiment that in the fashion industry where she is currently a fashion designer; other designers and sponsors avoid talking to her because of her African accent. She said that when she attends fashion shows, usually fashion designers interact with potential donors and fashion editors attending the show. Each time she is approached to explain her designs, the donors quickly move on to the next fashion designer upon realizing that she speaks with an accent. She said that upon discerning her accent they would ask questions like, "So where are you from?" I say, 'I'm from Zimbabwe,' and they say, 'Oh, okay,' and they move on to the next person." As a result, Tsitsi always finds herself standing alone whilst American designers get more attention from potential fashion sponsors. People usually start giving her respect after they have seen her designs on the runway and would become more interested in interviewing her. "It's always after our showcase that I start getting attention. They start wanting to know. 'Oh, where did you learn this?' I'm like, 'I went to fashion school in Africa.' And they are like, 'Oh they have this in Africa?'" She feels that as an African immigrant fashion designer, she must work extra hard to prove that she is good at what she does.

Discussion

This photovoice project provided Zimbabwean immigrant women with the opportunity to collect and interpret their immigration experiences through the lenses of cameras. During the interpretation of the photos as a group and as individuals, several observations were made. The first observation is that using the methodology of photovoice supplemented with individual interviews was very powerful to this study for two reasons. First, photovoice gave the women the opportunity to capture their experiences through photographs and interpret them using their own voices. It was evident that through the process of selecting photographs and describing the meanings behind them, the women found the means to reveal their own feelings. Even in situations where they could not describe the feelings verbally, the photos provided a voice for them because the women took photos that best represented their experiences.

The ability for photovoice to empower the marginalized by giving them a voice and visibility is very important to the literature on migration. From time immemorial, women's immigration experiences were narrated through their male counterparts. Previous studies indicated that interviews, surveys, and other data collection procedures have been conducted with immigrant men even on situations that concern women. The general belief was that women were not independent immigrants as they migrated with their husbands and parents who would provide for them in the host country. This created a situation where women became invisible in the migration process. Furthermore, it created a sense of bias in the literature on migration

because there was no evidence that the men were reporting the actual experiences of women or their own (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Kihato 2007).

In this study, there is evidence of women who migrated on their own. Even in situations where they migrated with their husbands, the decisions were made collectively. Therefore, giving the women a platform to speak up for themselves removed biases as they shared their actual experiences, and not that of others. It was noticeable during the photo group discussions that the women were very excited to share their photos and talked about their experiences with confidence. This self-confidence and the ability for women to examine their own situations and suggest solutions could not have been captured if men were speaking for them. Therefore, this study revealed that understanding immigrant women's interpretations of their experiences is integral in developing policies and programs that specifically address their needs.

Second, the group discussions through which the women were sharing their photos and explaining the meanings behind them created a sense of unity and sisterhood among them. It was observed that after the women had warmed up to each other throughout the photovoice process, they began to realize that they shared similar experiences regardless of their differing age groups. This observation was very important because usually immigrants tend to remain isolated, fearing to put themselves at risk by sharing sensitive information with individuals they do not trust. In this study, photovoice allowed the women to share some insightful information due to the trust that was established among them. These findings were also observed in similar studies where photovoice projects created a sense of ownership; it fostered trust and community partnership among minority populations (Castleden and Garvin 2008). Being able to trust and rely upon each other is very important for immigrants as it helps address some of the obstacles they face. Therefore, the creation of a social networking group was the first step towards addressing some

immigration challenges such as loneliness and stress the women complained about. The final agreement among the women was to meet regularly going forward to discuss, share and help each other in times of need.

Another very important observation made from the study was that the women shared a strong belief that their lives had changed positively due to migration. This positive change is mostly in relation to the ability to find jobs to economically provide for their families and further their studies. It was clear from the nursing home and graduation regalia photos the women shared that they mainly compared the economic situation in Zimbabwe where they could not find jobs versus here in the United States where employment opportunities in nursing homes are easily available for immigrants. The nursing home photo is very significant because it also reflects that despite being grateful for finding jobs, the women are conscious to the fact that competing for well-paying jobs with native-born Americans is a challenge. Therefore, they look for employment opportunities where there is less competition. These findings are consistent with other studies, which reported that most immigrants migrate for economic reasons and would take any available jobs because of the desperate need to economically provide for their families (Arthur 2009).

What was most interesting in this study was the women's emphasis on the ability to earn an income. Some women shared that they received their first paycheck in the United States. The economic turmoil in Zimbabwe had made it difficult for them to get jobs and those with less educational qualifications had no chance of employment. Most of the women economically sustained themselves through selling vegetables, fruits, and self-tailored clothes on roadsides.

Self-employment is very common among Zimbabwean women, but still their challenges remain because not every woman had the opportunity to sustain their small businesses. Loans are

difficult to acquire from banks and some women rely on their husbands for capital, which is still a challenge if he does not make enough himself or if he is not willing to help. The result is that most of the women end up living in poverty. This provides justification for why participants like Tsitsi were very grateful for the opportunity to migrate and find a job working in a nursing home. Although the job does not pay very well, at least she was able to finance her African clothing business without solely relying on her husband for financial support. Similar studies have also shown that the majority of now successful immigrant businesswomen started off by working in low wage jobs. Eventually, the hard work paid off and these women are currently operating their own businesses independently and no longer work for low wages (Pearce, Clifford, and Tando 2011).

The issue of domestic violence was another important topic discussed that requires further interpretation. This study did not go in detail to examine if the women were directly affected by domestic violence. However, the fact that the women mentioned it meant the topic was very important to them. Interestingly, the women were positive that migrating to the United States was yet another opportunity to free them from domestic violence. They strongly believe that to a degree, their culture and social norms support domestic violence. For example, the women commented that domestic violence issues among diverse cultural groups in Zimbabwe are regarded to be private matters and intervention into domestic matters is not always encouraged. If the woman decides to report to relatives, she is sometimes blamed for inciting the violence by failing to be submissive to her husband and perfectly perform her wifely duties. As a result, this traditional belief that a man can physically discipline his wife with the support of his family members and society is of great concern. Previous studies on domestic violence issues in

Zimbabwe also profoundly blame cultural norms and religious beliefs for inciting violence against women (Chireshe 2012).

In support of these findings, proponents of African Feminism also attribute cultural issues as contributing to the depressing experiences of women from different cultures in Africa (Mikell 1997; Nkealah 2016). Therefore, the women in this study believed that by staying away from the husband's relatives or extended family members, they were less likely to be abused. While this may hold some truth, the women overlooked the family's role in sponsoring relatives, including parents, to migrate, adding difficulty to the notion of distancing oneself. There is evidence of extended families living in the same household among Zimbabwean immigrants. It would be interesting to examine domestic violence issues among these households. Immigrants bring with them their cultural norms and traditional beliefs. Therefore, there could be a possibility that some Zimbabwean women are still facing domestic abuse with the husband's relatives scrutinizing the wife's behavior and encouraging the husband to discipline her.

Furthermore, the women also talked about domestic violence with reference to how the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in the United States sometimes successfully alleviates women's abuse by arresting violent men. On the other hand, the women argued that the Zimbabwean government failed dismally in making its law more practical to assuage domestic violence issues. For example, the Domestic Violence Act (Chapter 5:16), which was enacted on February 26, 2007 had not really made a significant impact on the lives of battered Zimbabwean women. There is evidence that women are abused in large numbers daily and literature also indicates that some women no longer see the benefits in reporting such cases due to lack of action by law enforcement. This lack of action is sometimes attributed to both cultural and traditional beliefs which disrupts the police from performing their duties (Chireshe 2012; Hindin

2003). Whereas some women may view this as justification for not approaching the law, the inability of women to report domestic violence issues is quite worrisome.

This study advocates educating all Zimbabwean immigrant women in the importance of reporting instances of domestic violence even when the law sometimes fails to take immediate action. The fact that some women in the current study indicated that they could report when husbands became abusive with the expectation of the American law enforcement to act, does not assure that every woman would do the same for assorted reasons. For example, there was not enough evidence in the study to guarantee that all women had enough knowledge about the Violence Against Women Act, which also protects battered immigrant women (Sacco 2014; Laney 2010). Similar to these findings, studies on domestic violence among immigrant populations indicated that many battered foreign women are not familiar with the social services available to them in the United States, hence the need to educate them more about such (Levine and Peffer 2012; Orloff and Garcia 2013).

Another important observation made from the data was that the women were all realistic about the challenges they face as immigrants, which contradicts their positive feelings for migrating. It was clear from the women's discussions that their lives had improved by getting jobs and providing for their families. However, they admitted that living as immigrants comes with its own challenges. Similar studies also revealed that most immigrant groups encounter various obstacles and live a lifestyle completely different from what they had imagined (Lueck and Wilson 2010; Nawyn 2000; Padilla and Perez 2003; Pettys and Balgopal 1998; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller 2005). Therefore, challenges such as discrimination based on race and identity, which mostly confine women to low paying jobs, are not different from other immigrant populations. Also, relative to other immigrant groups were the women's indication

that the decision to go back home is not in question. Considering the soaring unemployment rate they left in Zimbabwe, the women would rather work long hour shift jobs than not have a job at all. They were very aware that the country is still struggling to recover from its economic deflation. Reports on the current situation in Zimbabwe also indicate that large numbers of people are still struggling to acquire basic commodities due to unemployment and cash shortages (Hungwe 2014).

Finally, the photo of an empty chair shared by Miriro needs further interpretation because it represents stress as a major health-related issue affecting the women. Similar studies on migration indicate that the unpleasant experiences immigrants encounter in the host country are associated with elevated levels of psychological stress (Lueck and Wilson 2010). If left untreated, stress makes life more unbearable for immigrants as it may result in health consequences such as high blood pressure, obesity, and sometimes suicide (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013). Therefore, stress among immigrant populations is very common and it is important to explore what other groups do to alleviate it. In the current study, the women could identify the stressors but the major concern was that it was not clear from their discussions if they were getting help or aware of any stress relief services available for immigrants.

Limitations and need for future research

Future research is needed to examine how the women deal with stress. It is important to understand how Zimbabwean women deal with stress as individuals as well as a community. In addition to seeking medical help, other immigrant populations managed stress by creating strong

social networks to mitigate stress by helping each other with shelter, childcare, and information regarding how and where to obtain important resources (Berzborn 1998; Cattan et al. 2003; Da 2010; Yeboah 2008). Until this photovoice project, which resulted in the formation of a social network group, the women had no existing strong social support systems to assist each other except for those with close relatives living in the same neighborhoods. Therefore, this strengthens the rationale for using a participatory photovoice method, which involves bringing individuals with similar experiences to work together and to find solutions to shared challenges.

There are some limitations that should be addressed. First, the sample for this study was small and only concentrated in the Greater Cincinnati area leaving out Zimbabwean immigrant women living in other cities. Therefore, future research is needed to investigate the migration challenges of Zimbabwean women living in larger cities to examine if their experiences are comparable to those living in smaller cities such as Cincinnati. There is a possibility that larger cities may offer more opportunities than smaller cities.

Second, the study was narrowly focused on one group of African immigrant women, yet there is evidence of a larger population of women from different African regions currently living in Cincinnati. Future research would entail enlarging the sample size by including immigrant women from other parts of Africa to compare their immigration experiences with Zimbabweans. For example, women from South Africa, which have a better economic and political environment, may adapt positively as they are not forced to work long hours to support families back home. Also, African women from war-torn areas such as The Horn of Africa may experience fewer challenges since they migrate as protected refugees and receive economic and social support from the U.S. government.

Conclusion

This study has shown that using a photovoice method provides an alternative way of seeing and understanding the lived experiences of Zimbabwean immigrant women. It proved that women can examine their own experiences, thereby, challenging existing immigration literature for treating women as invisible factors in the migration process. Results of the study revealed an increased population of Zimbabwean women migrating alone, and even in cases where they migrated with their spouses, they contributed to the decisions to migrate. The women's photos indicated that, while migration offers opportunities that were no longer available in Zimbabwe, it is also a challenging process. Therefore, to alleviate some of the challenges they encounter, the women agreed amongst themselves that it was necessary to create a strong social networking system to support each other. The study also recommends that some complex issues affecting immigrant women, such as domestic violence requires further investigation to raise awareness and prepare women to act in cases of abuse.

Biographical Sketch

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Florence Nyemba holds a Ph.D. in Educational Studies from the University of Cincinnati (2014). Her current research focus is in the field of gender and African migration, African politics, global education and educational inequalities among minority populations in the United States. She broadly focuses on the experiences of immigrant women, poverty, inequality, access

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