

Navigating Borders and Drones: A Case of Zimbabwean Migrant Women Entrepreneurs in Botswana

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Abstract

Border regimes in Southern Africa are increasingly characterised by the deployment of physical and digital surveillance infrastructure. The exclusionary logic echoes colonial-era exclusionary practices where Africans faced strict border controls, while individuals of European and North American descent received preferential visa entry as investors, experts and tourists. The Southern African borders replicate Europe in design and similarly restrict poor African immigrants while facilitating the movement of citizens from the Global North. This article focuses on Zimbabwean migrant women, who are overlooked in migration studies, despite being victims of a long history of mobility restrictions. Using a thematic analysis of social media discussions and in-depth interviews, the study explores how these women navigate bordering in the era of drones and biometric surveillance systems. Drawing on Sharchar's concept of the shifting border and Martina Tazzioli's concept of 'choking without killing', the analysis examines the explicit and covert strategies of the state that undermine the mobility and entrepreneurial activities of migrant women. Paradoxically, the digital tools in the form of social media communication enable the migrant women entrepreneurs to evade state surveillance. While the digital technology is deployed to exclude, it is simultaneously appropriated by the migrant to evade the surveillance systems.

Keywords

Ethnicity, race, women, women studies

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Introduction

the drones become a very critical tool in as far as the work of border management is concerned and that is primarily because over and above the work that we do within the port of entry itself there is a lot of activity that also takes place outside the port in what we describe as the vulnerable segments on the borderline, so on that particular basis, it becomes very critical to have some view from the sky in terms of what is happening in those particular areas. (Masiapito, 2025)

The recent deployment of drones to intercept illegal immigrants at the South African border post is a vivid testimony that the Southern African borders are emulating the European models in deploying physical and digital technology to barricade the fellow African immigrants in their borders (Landau, 2019). The containment of Africans from the Southern African borders dates back to the colonial times when these borders were created by the colonial powers (Galvin, 2017; Moyo, 2020b; Moyo & Laine, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Oloruntoba, 2018). Moyo (2020b) argues that Africans were targeted by the border surveillance during the colonial times, while whites could move freely between the colonies of South Africa, Botswana and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe).

The deployment of soldiers and high-technology equipment at the Southern African borders means that the border continues to be a buffer rather than a facilitator of interregional mobility in Africa. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) asserts that Africans are criminalised at the African borders, while Europeans are welcomed as 'tourists, experts and investors'. The African immigrants from neighbouring countries experience extreme surveillance from the ports of entry in the form of security personnel, biometric checks and tests for diseases in some instances (Galvin, 2015; Matose et al., 2022; Moyo, 2020a,b; Moyo & Nshimbi, 2020). Deportation at the border or detention at different centres across the country is the order of the day for undocumented immigrants in Botswana and South Africa (Galvin, 2015; Moyo, 2020a,b; Moyo & Nshimbi, 2020).

This study examines Botswana, the second-largest recipient of Zimbabwean immigrants in Southern Africa, ranking second to South Africa. The experiences of Zimbabwean migrant women at the borders and with the bordering infrastructure of Botswana have received less attention. Galvin (2015) made a significant contribution, highlighting the technology of bordering and containment of Zimbabwean immigrants in different parts of Botswana. The study pointed out the different infrastructures of surveillance, such as border security, electrified fence, police raids, helicopters and the demand for passports and deportation practices. However, the investigation did not specifically address the experiences of women. While Matose et al. (2022) focused on the experiences of Zimbabwean migrant women at the borders and their specific gendered vulnerabilities, their study was confined to the COVID-19 pandemic era. Moreover, the geographical focus of the study was limited to the port of entry and departure of the Plumtree Border Post. While men are also victims of the restrictive border technology, the migrant women are in a worse position as they are exposed to sexual exploitation, violence and health vulnerabilities as they cross borders, and the conditions at the deportation centres compromise the health and dignity of undocumented women (Matose et al., 2022).

Drawing upon theoretical contributions from critical border studies, this article seeks to explore how border surveillance technology, such as biometric identification tools, border militarisation and know your customer (KYC) restrictions for access to services deployed at the borders and in towns and villages of Botswana, impact the lived experiences of Zimbabwean migrant women entrepreneurs in the informal sector. The women play a significant role in intraregional trade through the informal cross-border trade in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region (Oloruntoba, 2018). It is necessary to explore how the bordering technology impacts the economic activities of migrant women entrepreneurs. The investigation examines how the migrant women navigate border surveillance in the host country. The article further analyses how women deploy the digital communication tools to circumvent the containment strategies of the state.

Following the introduction, the article will establish the historical context of border surveillance in Botswana from its colonial foundations to the present epoch. Building upon this historical foundation, the article will introduce the theoretical framework primarily drawn from Shachar's (2022) concept of gated citizenship and the shifting border. To further illuminate the subtle and covert but debilitating aspect of border containment technology, Martina Tazzioli's (2021) concept of 'choking without killing' is deployed to demonstrate how the technology restricts the agency of the migrants without inflicting direct violence. Successively, the article presents and justifies the methodological tools of data collection and analysis employed by the study.

Following this, the article will detail the study's findings and proffer a critical appraisal of the results based on the theoretical framework and extant literature. This will be followed by the presentation of findings and discussions. Lastly, the article concludes by summarising the key findings and presenting recommendations on policy and future research.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs Shachar's concept of shifting border to analyse Botswana's surveillance against unwanted Zimbabwean immigrants. Shachar (2022) posits that the shifting border may deter unwanted immigrants from their country of origin. In essence, the shifting border extends beyond the physical port of entry. Shachar (2022, pp. 268–269) avers that 'The shifting border moves the surveillance technology closer to the immigrants within the interior of the country'. In the context of Botswana, the internal border is actively maintained through the actions of various state agents, including police, military personnel and immigration officers operating within the towns and villages of Botswana. This border work is reinforced by institutions such as banks, hospitals, schools and other service providers who demand legal documentation as a prerequisite for service provision (Galvin, 2015, 2017). In recent years, KYCs have been institutionalised at banks and mobile money transfer services. This development effectively introduces border controls into everyday financial transactions.

The extension of border control mechanisms into the daily life of the migrants impedes their 'infrastructures of liveability' (Tazzioli, 2021). Tazzioli's concept of

‘choking without killing’ effectively captures the lived experiences of migrants under the border surveillance regime of Botswana. While not necessarily subjected to overt physical violence, restricted access to essential services such as employment, health facilities and education of their children is detrimental to their well-being. Maphosa and Ntau’s (2021) application of Agamben’s (1998) concept of *Homo sacar*, where the lives of undocumented immigrants exist outside the confines of legal and economic protection, further elucidates the precarious lived experiences of Zimbabwean immigrants in Botswana.

The restricted access to services is not only experienced by undocumented immigrants but may also extend to individuals holding legal permits, who are labelled foreigners. Nyakabawu (2022) asserts that Zimbabweans with legal permits do not fully enjoy the economic and political rights like indigenous South Africans. They may have difficulties accessing bank loans because of the nature of their permits. Nyakabawu’s (2022) concept of civic marginality is used to depict the vulnerability of documented Zimbabweans in South Africa. The concept resonates with Tazzioli’s concept by illuminating the precarious condition in the experiences of migrants, irrespective of their documentation status. The present investigation builds on this insight to analyse the impact of Botswana’s border policy on both documented and undocumented migrant women entrepreneurs.

Studies of bordering in the Global South should critically examine the intersection of migration, gender and border surveillance. The concept of intersectionality is crucial for analysing the process of inclusion and exclusion of migrants based on predetermined criteria (Grosfoguel et al., 2015). Within migration management and policy, it is argued that ‘the migrant is herself an intersectional entity, and not merely in terms of being gendered, racialized, classed (and so on) body, but also by virtue of the spatial and temporal power geometries within which she is located’ (Bastia et al., 2023, p. 462). This implies that the very status of being a migrant constitutes an intersectional identity irrespective of the context. Consequently, an African migrant woman in the Global South may be subjected to confounding vulnerabilities, arising from her gender, racial identity as an African and status as an outsider (Grosfoguel et al., 2015). The study investigated the experiences of Zimbabwean migrant women, recognising that their identities are potentially shaped by the intersection of their nationality, gender, race and documentation status.

In conclusion, the study employs the concepts of the shifting border, ‘choking without killing’, and intersectionality to analyse the lived experiences of Zimbabwean migrant women entrepreneurs within Botswana’s border surveillance architecture. This analysis is not meant to depict the victimhood of these women. Rather, it aims to illuminate their agency, which is evidenced through the magnitude of the obstacles that they navigate in their entrepreneurial endeavours.

Border Surveillance in Botswana: A Historical Context

Botswana is a Southern African country located in the south-western part of the continent. The country was declared a British protectorate and governed through

a system of indirect rule. Echoing the historical trajectory of other Southern African states, Botswana's territorial boundaries were a direct consequence of the Berlin Conference, representing a cartographic product of the European powers using the Westphalian model (Moyo & Laine, 2021). As aptly argued by Oloruntoba (2018), these borders were deliberately designed and continue to serve the interests of the European architects.

During the colonial encounter, the mobility of the white settlers across the borders of South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe was unfettered (Moyo, 2018; Moyo & Laine, 2021). Conversely, the mobility of Africans across the same borders was controlled through a restrictive pass system, despite pre-existing socio-economic and kinship ties between communities across these border lines (Moyo, 2020b; Moyo & Laine, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Consequently, Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Moyo (2022) argue that Africans never crossed borders, but the borders crossed them. The presence of Tswana and Kalanga communities on both sides of the contemporary border fence between Zimbabwe and Botswana illustrates the disruptive nature of colonial cartography on community cohesion.

The post-colonial migration management of Southern Africa exhibits a continuity with the colonial era's racialised bordering practices. This is evidenced by the preferential treatment extended to European 'investors, tourists and experts' through facilitated entry while simultaneously creating hurdles for Africans from the neighbouring countries (Landau, 2019; Maphosa & Ntau, 2021; Muzondidya, 2010; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Landau (2019) posits that South Africa's border management mimics the European model in its border management. Europe imposes a restrictive border control through visa requirements and securitised external borders through African countries bordering the Mediterranean (Landau, 2019; Savio Vammen & Kohl, 2023; Shachar, 2022). This strategy of border externalisation and intensification of internal control against African immigrants is replicated by countries of Southern Africa, such as Botswana and South Africa. These countries similarly create a fortress border regime against African immigrants from neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe (Galvin, 2015; Hungwe, 2014; Landau, 2019; Maphosa & Ntau, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The colonial migration governance architecture, therefore, continues to shape contemporary bordering practices in the region.

Since the onset of the socio-economic and political crisis at the turn of the twenty-first century, Zimbabwe has constituted a significant net-emigration state in the SADC region. This exodus of Zimbabweans has been met with exclusionary responses, particularly from Botswana and South Africa, the major receiving countries. In the case of Botswana, the state increased border security and internal surveillance. This included militarisation of the border, and at one point, the electrification of the border fence was under consideration (Galvin, 2015; Matose et al., 2022; Moyo & Laine, 2021). The border electrification project was discontinued after a diplomatic tension between Zimbabwe and Botswana.

Consistent with other Southern African countries, Botswana continued to enforce strict border regulations, mandatory use of passports and biometric verification systems at the ports of entry. While the Botswana government has relaxed the border regulations through a bilateral arrangement with Namibia, where

citizens of the two countries could use national identity documents, a similar arrangement with Zimbabwe was rejected by the parliament of Botswana. This selective application of border regulation and technology is consistent with the European bordering practice where nationality and geographical consideration are deployed to filter the immigrants.

The police raids and deployment of the military and helicopters in operations targeting undocumented immigrants have been documented (Galvin, 2015, 2017). The police and paramilitary groups raided some workplaces and residences. The roadblocks were mounted where passports and identity documents would be demanded. To prove the authenticity of the documents, the immigration officials would be present in those stop-and-search operations (Galvin, 2015, 2017; Maphosa & Ntau, 2021). Galvin (2015) argues that the surveillance infrastructure impedes immigrants' access to work opportunities and healthcare facilities. While overt violence targeting Zimbabwean migrants in Botswana may be limited, they are nonetheless subjected to covert violence of 'choking without killing' (Tazzioli, 2021).

Methods and Materials

This qualitative investigation employed an ethnographic approach, complemented by semi-structured interviews with 15 participants in Botswana. The research utilised material from data initially collected for a master's dissertation, conducted in Gaborone and adjacent villages. The prior study was upgraded and refined between March and April 2025. Ethnography was the ideal method as the researcher is based in Botswana with access to data through sustained observation and interaction with the research subjects. In the words of Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 3),

Ethnography usually involves the ethnographer participating overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts, in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of inquiry.

The researcher, who is a Zimbabwean migrant doctoral candidate, implemented the ethnographic method through active interaction and systematic observation of the activities of Zimbabwean migrant entrepreneurs within the study context. Whereas the positionality of the researcher as an insider, being a Zimbabwean migrant, might compromise objectivity according to the positivist worldview, the inclusion of different participants, including male participants and a female naturalised Botswana citizen, ensured that data were drawn from different perspectives. Furthermore, the male researcher, socialised in androcentric ways of knowing, becomes an outsider among female participants (Dahinden & Pott, 2025). There was, therefore, a need for reflexivity on the part of the researcher to democratise knowledge production

in this study. Member check was used to verify the information collected from the participants to mitigate personal biases in data collection. Peer debriefing with the fellow PhD candidate under the International Migration and Social Cohesion (IMISCOE) Standing Committee Race, Racism and Discrimination (SC RACED) further militated against national bias.

Employing in-depth interviews and key informant interviews from participants drawn from a wide spectrum of community members ensured reflexivity on the part of the researcher, as the investigation was a platform for multiple viewpoints. Living among the subjects further ensured an understanding of the context of the lived experiences of the participants.

Fifteen participants were interviewed, comprising 11 migrant women entrepreneurs engaged in both formal and informal economic activities, 3 male key informants operating within the informal sector and 1 naturalised female Botswana citizen managing a formal business. The recruitment process involved engagement with key stakeholders in the Embassy of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean community in Botswana. These gatekeepers provided the starting point by referring women participants and a male key informant. These participants made onward referrals in what is called a snowball sampling. One participant, who is a preschool operator, met the researcher at the immigration office while applying for work and residence permits. Arrangements for interviews were then finalised after initial introductions and informal conversations. The majority of the participants are female migrants operating within the informal sector. This composition strategically foregrounds the voices of the vulnerable individuals, who have lived experiences of the impact of the bordering technology.

In-depth interviews and key-informant interviews were conducted face to face using the first languages of the participants, which are Chishona, IsiNdebele and English. The conversations were recorded and then transcribed. Questions included biodata details such as age, occupation, length of stay in Botswana and documentation status. This was followed by questions about lived experiences in relation to bordering technology and how the participants navigated the migration management context. The participants were given the freedom to tell their own stories without interruption. Follow-up questions ensured that more details were added to the stories.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis. The initial phase involved systematic coding of data. The data were coded *in vivo*, based on the words of the participants. The coded data were then collated into themes at the second level, based on relatedness. Finally, the themes were refined and named as advised by Braun and Clarke (2006). In line with the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms are used in this article.

Table 1 presents the data analysis structure from the first level *in vivo* data to the sub-themes at the second level, up to the main themes for the study.

As demonstrated in Table 1, the data were systematically coded from direct quotations to preserve the authentic voices of the participants. The coded data were subsequently organised into sub-themes at the second level. The sub-themes were then clustered to generate the overarching themes.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis.

Level 3 Theme (Overarching)	Level 2 Sub-themes (Clustered Categories)	Level 1 In Vivo Data (Direct Quotation)
Bordering as economic restriction and a choking mechanism	Precarious economic participation	Phathi: 'I was forced to stop my poultry business ... police stop-and-search operations ... not safe to travel to Gaborone'.
Bordering as gendered and intersectional vulnerability	Gendered and social vulnerabilities	Lungile: 'Life in Molepolole was a challenge ... neighbourhood committees raided my residence ... They take advantage of women because they are defenceless'.
	Exclusion of migrant children	Phathi: 'We have to take our children to expensive private schools ... Only those who have permits can register in public schools'.
	Structural and institutional bordering	Mavis: 'I have to partner with a Motswana ... forced divestment from the enterprise'.
	Bureaucratic hurdles	Mavis: 'The process is cumbersome ... delays of 3 months or more in teaching permit applications'.
Border surveillance as economic suppression	Media and technology hostility	Lungile: 'Accused of snatching husbands of Batswana women, leading to raids'.
	Surveillance and mobility restrictions	Tapiwa: 'Many Zimbabwean women ... detained by the police through raiding operations or stop and search points'.
Border surveillance as structural exclusion	Regulatory exclusions	Trade Act No. 25 of 2019: Hair salon license is reserved for citizens
Navigating border surveillance	Social media as counter-surveillance	Phathi: 'Information is quickly disseminated ... through WhatsApp groups'.
	Strategic alliances	Keitumetse: sold vegetables using a Motswana friend as a front.

Findings and Discussion

Table 2 provides a detailed description of participants' demographics. The pseudonyms used do not correspond to the ethnic background of the participants.

Table 2 indicates that migrant women are involved in self-employment across diverse economic sectors. This concretises Nyakabawu's (2022) argument that migrants are not mere competitors with citizens in the job market, as alluded to in

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Participant	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Documentation Status	Occupation
1. Phathi	36	Female	Married	Undocumented	Hair dresser/ farmer
2. Mavis	51	Female	Divorced	Documented	Preschool operator
3. Thando	43	Female	Married	Undocumented	Tailor
4. Runesu	32	Female	Single	Undocumented	Hair dresser
5. Lungile	56	Female	Widow	Undocumented	Tailor/casual labourer
6.Mandlovu	52	Female	Married	Documented	Food outlet operator
7. Mercy	38	Female	Married	Documented	Boutique operator
8. Tariro	46	Female	Divorced	Undocumented	Selling vegetables
9. Loraine	41	Female	Single	Undocumented	Graphic designer and projects consultant
10. Keitumetse	50	Female	Divorced	Undocumented	Mixed farming
11. Tamirepi	56	Female	Widow	Undocumented	Mobile kitchen
12. Madumba	61	Male	Married	Undocumented	Street vending
13. Mike	60	Male	Married	Undocumented	Landscaping
14. Tapiwa	47	Male	Married	Undocumented	Construction
15. Sphiwe	65	Female	Widow	Naturalised citizen	Boutique and photocopying

the discourse on African migrants in South Africa. Furthermore, the findings align with Muzondidya's (2010) assertion that migrant women have fewer job opportunities compared to their male counterparts. The domestic sector, where women tend to have opportunities for employment, offers less protection, rendering domestic workers' lives as 'homo sachars' (Maphosa & Ntau, 2021). Therefore, self-employment may be viewed as a strategic response to circumvent an exploitative labour environment.

Bordering as Economic Restriction and Choking Mechanism

The lack of documentation among most of the participants involved in self-employment means that their mobility for business purposes is severely restricted. Participants Mandlovu and Mercy, among the married and documented Zimbabweans, indicated that they acquired their documents as dependents of their husbands, who had business permits. Those without documents risked deportation and living in fear of police raids. Phathi averred that 'I was forced to stop my poultry business because it demanded frequent mobility to Gaborone, to supply chickens to the market. These days, there are police stop-and-search operations, so it's not safe to travel to Gaborone'. Lack of documentation among the migrant women impacts their capacity to travel for business purposes.

Bordering as Gendered and Intersectional Vulnerability

Social Vulnerability and Gendered Experiences

While the police raids and checkpoints affect all immigrants, the investigation reveals that women experience heightened vulnerability. Lungile's testimony illustrates this precarious existence.

Life in Molepolole was a challenge because the neighbourhood committees frequently raided my residence, leading to detention at Molepolole police station. This was not the case when I was cohabiting with my undocumented boyfriend, the tailor. They (the neighbourhood police) take advantage of women because they are defenceless.

Similar sentiments were echoed by Madumba, an undocumented male migrant who sold different wares ranging from jewellery to vegetable products in Mogoditshane. 'Selling in the street is not safe for women. It's survival of the fittest here. I have never been arrested since before the COVID lockdown period'. This proves that migrant women are more vulnerable than their male counterparts in certain spaces. While Maphosa and Ntau (2021) claimed a cross-cutting precarious condition for all undocumented migrants, the interview with Madumba and Lungile indicates severe vulnerability on the part of women. This confirms Grosfoguel et al.'s (2015) argument that migrant women in the Global South experience double or triple vulnerability owing to their intersecting identities.

Bordering as Institutionalised and Discursive Control Policy Regime and Exclusion from Business Ownership

Border surveillance and regulatory constraints are not exclusive to undocumented women. The documented migrant women also encounter vulnerabilities stemming from the policy regime that does not recognise or support some of the female business sectors. For example, Mavis, who is documented and manages a pre-school, surmised,

This business is regarded as a small business which legally should be owned by Batswana. I must partner with a Motswana, then apply for permits as a Principal for my own business. The first business partners took advantage of my position as an immigrant and a woman, resulting in my forced divestment from the enterprise. I had to restart the business on new premises with a more understanding nominal partner.

Similarly, Phathi observed, 'My friend is highly skilled in braiding and dreadlocks. She sells braids and is financially capable of renting her own business space. She is restricted because hair salon business permits are reserved exclusively for Botswana citizens'.

The case of Mavis aligns with Nyakabawu's (2022) assertion that the possession of documents does not guarantee the full enjoyment of rights for non-citizens. The concept of civic stratification, where indigenous citizens are entitled to more rights than documented immigrants, is demonstrated in the case of Mavis

(Nyakabawu, 2022). Being a female immigrant further confounds the intersectional context of Mavis as she can be a victim of bordering by business partners. This constitutes a lack of legal protection, which aligns with Agamben's concept of a *Homo sacer*.

Permit Rejections

Furthermore, applications for permits are subject to rejection. The researcher interacted with some teachers whose applications for permits were denied by the labour department. In December 2024, the minister of labour announced that permits would no longer be issued to expatriate teachers unless they possessed scarce skills. In this case, Mavis's application for the position of a principal may also be rejected. In her capacity as a principal and pre-school operator, Mavis exclaimed, 'The major challenge is that they can reject the permits of your expatriate employees so that you employ locals. The locals generally have poor work ethics in comparison to expatriates'. The denial of work permits impacts the viability of licensed businesses in the formal sector; hence, the operator is 'choked' without being eliminated from the enterprise.

Bureaucratic Hurdles in Licensing and Issuing of Permits

Delays in the processing of permits in the post-COVID era constitute a structural manifestation of slow violence in migration management. This results in prolonged and unproductive engagement with the immigration offices, diverting individuals from their economic activities. During fieldwork at the immigration office, the researcher encountered Mercy, who reported that it was her third consecutive day checking the residence permit application outcome. 'The first day, I was informed that there was no network. I came back yesterday and I was told that the office had registered the maximum number of people who could be attended'.

The delay in issuing residence permits incapacitates the migrants in updating their KYC documents and conducting their routine business activities. In the case of Mavis, the process is cumbersome as it starts with an application for the permission to teach, which experiences a delay of about 3 months or more. This bureaucratic red tape can be viewed through the lens of Tazzioli's notion of 'choking without killing', a management tool that undermines the capacity of immigrants to function adequately within the host society. This can be equated to the Zimbabwe exemption permits (ZEP) of South Africa, which had a limitation because their renewal was not guaranteed (Nyakabawu, 2022). Institutions like banks would not give loans to holders of such permits, which lack predictability. While there is no outright denial of legality, the delay in processing of resident permits, just like ZEP, is a structural restriction of essential functions, equivalent to 'choking without killing'.

Exclusion of Migrant Children in the Education Sector

The Zimbabwean immigrants do not just experience the border and its surveillance technology at the port of entry or the checkpoints that proliferate the highways, such as the Gaborone–Francistown road. As alluded to by the concept of the shifting border, the border is experienced in schools, banks, clinics, shops and

individuals (Shachar, 2022). While women often exhibit a strong commitment to the education of their children, the demand for legal documents in enrolling their children in Botswana government schools is an impediment to the realisation of their aspirations. Phathi, who is married and stays with her husband and daughter, had to withdraw her daughter from the government primary school because of the demand for documents by educational authorities. 'We have to take our children to expensive private schools or tuition centres because we do not have permits. Only those who have permits can register in public schools'. This can be equated to a choking mechanism where the education of children of migrants is suffocated.

Financial Institutions and KYC Restrictions

The banking sector and money transfer services, which are essential for migrant women entrepreneurs, have been turned into bordering tools through demands for KYCs. Migrants in Botswana have experienced suspension of their banking services due to the demand for KYCs by the banks. Delays in the processing of permits have also contributed to these disruptions. This situation mirrors the challenges faced by Zimbabwean migrants in accessing financial services in South Africa (Nyakabawu, 2022). Therefore, institutions such as schools, banks, clinics and other service providers have become conduits of the shifting border in Botswana.

Media and Technology Hostility

The media and technology that have revolutionised communication have escalated border work. Newspapers and social media outlets like Facebook have nourished hatred of Zimbabwean immigrants in Botswana and South Africa. For example, when the newly elected president, Duma Boko, announced that Zimbabweans need to be given special permits in Botswana, there was a hostile reaction to his statement, with some asserting that he was not elected for the benefit of Zimbabwean nationals. The media propagates a discourse that makes non-citizens convenient scapegoats for all the social ills in the communities (Muzondidya, 2010). In the case of Lungile, she was accused of snatching husbands of Botswana women, leading to frequent raids on her house by the neighbourhood authorities.

Border Surveillance as Economic Suppression

Raids and Detentions

Frequent raids have reduced the number of businesses owned by women in Gaborone. Tapiwa, a key informant working in the construction industry, informed the researcher that many Zimbabwean women who were selling food and some wares in the streets of Mogoditshane were detained by the police through raiding operations or stop-and-search points. This has been escalated by the newly elected Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) government, according to the testimonies of participants and key informants. This situation replicates previous raids and deportations during the Ian Khama-led government (Galvin, 2015).

Lack of mobility because of checkpoints and raids has a restrictive impact on the businesses of migrant women. Phathi noted that her chicken farming business was more profitable in Gaborone, where she went to deliver the chickens to restaurants and mobile kitchens. This demands frequent mobility passing a permanent checkpoint along the Gaborone–Molepolole road. The prevailing containment strategies and the resultant limitations on mobility partly contributed to the cessation of her business. The rising cost of stock feeds was the other factor leading to the cessation of her business.

Border Surveillance as Structural Exclusion

Regulatory Exclusion

The regulatory framework presents impediments to the operational efficacy of informal or small-scale businesses where most of the Zimbabwean migrant women are involved. While Zimbabwean women such as Phathi and Runesu are skilled hairdressers, they cannot manage their own salons because such businesses preserve the indigeneness of Botswana. According to the Trade Act No. 25 of 2019, a hair salon licence is reserved for citizens. Mavis has to partner with a Botswana national and operate covertly as a principal of her own preschool. This is consistent with the findings of Moyo and Nshimbi (2020) and Oloruntoba (2018), and the SADC region and the continent prioritise the big businesses of European nationals who are viewed as key investors in the continent. While migrant women have the potential to create employment and provide culturally relevant resources to the communities, their entrepreneurial efforts are constrained by the prevailing bordering regime.

Navigating Bordering Surveillance

Social Media as Counter-surveillance

While it is acknowledged in academia that border surveillance is a threat to the livelihood strategies of migrant women entrepreneurs, empirical studies detailing the strategies devised by women to circumvent this bordering architecture are scanty. Migrant women experience the border and the shifting border in Botswana in a debilitating way in comparison with their male counterparts (Matose et al., 2022). From the interviews and observations, it can be noted that women do not just accept victimhood but seek ways of evading the border. In these days of social media, women appropriate the communication tools for networking and collaboration in business. Phathi exclaimed, ‘They are different police operations targeting the migrants, but information is quickly disseminated to the community through WhatsApp groups’. In one of the WhatsApp groups for teachers, where the researcher is a member, the information about police road blocks and raids on schools by the labour department was frequently communicated in the post-COVID period. Mutsindikwa and Gelderblom (2014) similarly noted that undocumented migrants in Botswana utilised the social network as a survival strategy. In this era of the fourth Industrial Revolution, Zimbabwean migrants utilise social media as a counter-technology to the shifting border.

Social media is also utilised as a business resource where the regulatory strategies inhibit the activities of migrants. Zimbabwean migrant women have established virtual communities on Facebook, such as ‘Empowered Women in Botswana’ and ‘Zimbabwean Women in Botswana’. Women utilise these groups to advertise their merchandise and services such as hairdressing, beauty provisions and a range of items for sale. WhatsApp groups and status updates are employed as business advertising tools. Runesu noted that during the lockdown, she had many customers who were essential workers coming to her house for hair-dressing services. Her online advertising circumvented the mobility restrictions imposed by the pandemic moratorium.

Strategic Collaborations

Furthermore, Zimbabwean women collaborate with the local citizens or documented individuals strategically to mitigate business challenges, such as the case of Mavis partnering with a Botswana national friend to circumvent the regulatory environment where preschool businesses are reserved for citizens. One of the participants, Keitumetse, practices horticulture in a house owned by a Botswana national serving in the army. As a caretaker of the house belonging to a service man, Keitumetse is immune from raids by members of the neighbourhood. Additionally, she sells vegetables using a Botswana friend as a front. This pattern of leveraging local connections is noted in the findings of Muchineripi et al. (2022), where Zimbabwean entrepreneurs collaborated with South Africans in order to secure their business ventures. Zimbabwean migrant women in both formal and informal businesses utilise the social capital of indigenous people to navigate and evade some of the restrictive policies.

Conclusion

This study has examined the instruments of border surveillance deployed by the Botswana state against Zimbabwean migrants, foregrounding the gendered vulnerabilities of women in informal and small-scale enterprises. By situating Botswana within the broader theorisation of the ‘shifting border’, the article demonstrates that bordering practices commonly associated with Europe are reproduced in Southern Africa, thereby extending the conceptual geography of border studies into postcolonial African contexts. Containment of migrants is not just limited to the international borderlines but also extends to the interior of Botswana, through physical barriers such as checkpoints and soft borders such as KYCs. The concept of shifting borders and border internalisation is often associated with Europe, which is presented as the major destination of African migrants. By extending the shifting border to the Southern African contexts, the investigation demonstrates the inherent and universal characteristics of the border as a malleable tool in the service of global coloniality. The findings reveal that surveillance infrastructures—police roadblocks, military operations and KYC protocols—operate not only as mechanisms of exclusion but also as technologies that constrain the infrastructures of liveability for migrant women. Theoretically, the study advances Tazzioli’s notion of ‘choking without killing’ and Agamben’s

'*Homo sacer*' by showing how these frameworks illuminate the everyday precarity of undocumented African migrants in intra-regional contexts. The absence of overt violence in Botswana does not imply that migrants are welcome in the country. There are subtle forms of violence, such as restrictions from operating businesses, which militate the economic integration of African women. This choking mechanism may be structural and embedded within the societal fabric of Botswana. There is a need to investigate the lived experiences of women from other minority groups within Botswana society since such subtle forms of exclusion may target other citizens, thereby instituting a hierarchy of citizenship. Technology may still be deployed to disadvantage other citizens in the labour market and the issuing of business permits, since the national registration system captures information of districts and villages of origin.

The female naturalised citizens of Botswana may also be affected by the discriminatory application of the digital tools of discrimination. While citizenship may exempt them from detention, arrest, deportation and exclusion of children's education, equal opportunities in employment and business tenders may not be guaranteed. They might be victims of 'civic marginality' experienced by the permit holders in South Africa. This is comparable to Moslem women in European countries such as the Netherlands, who face exclusion on grounds of ethnicity and religion, despite being European citizens.

At the same time, the analysis underscores migrant women's agency, particularly their strategic use of digital platforms and local alliances to contest containment and sustain livelihoods. The media plays a significant role in shaping hostile policies against migrants by amplifying public opinion that portrays them as competitors for local resources and business spaces. Political decisions in turn pander to the dominant voices that seek protection from the perceived influx of immigrants. Political rhetoric further exacerbates the migration crisis, which serves as a convenient scapegoat for poor service delivery and nationalist sentiments of protecting the citizens, similar to Donald Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric. The police checkpoints, KYCs and permit rejections enforce the surveillance against immigrants, especially during the post-COVID era. The migrant woman, on the other hand, devised survival strategies by forging alliances among themselves and with local Botswana networks. Technology is central to these dynamics. While it functions as a mechanism for state surveillance, it is simultaneously appropriated by migrant women for virtual business dealings and for alerting one another about the surveillance points, such as road blocks and police raids. This duality highlights the ambivalence of technology as both a tool of state surveillance and a resource for migrant resistance. The contribution of this article lies in reframing African borders as dynamic sites where colonial logics of racialised exclusion intersect with contemporary regimes of migration management while also foregrounding the entrepreneurial agency of women migrants. Raised in an androcentric world where sciences and engineering are largely the preserve of males, Zimbabwean migrant women predominantly occupy the informal sector, which remains undocumented and unprotected. Navigating the entrepreneurial spaces despite their intersectional positionalities as Africans, women and migrants demonstrates both resilience and innovation in challenging the exclusionary structures. The study challenges the literature on migration and entrepreneurship

by foregrounding migrant women, who are often associated with victimhood, thereby exposing and destabilising the ‘white male’ construct of an entrepreneur. Policy implications are clear and require migration governance in Southern Africa to move beyond inherited colonial biases and incorporate gender-sensitive frameworks that recognise migrants not merely as subjects of control but also as economic actors and rights-bearing individuals. Future research should deepen comparative analyses of shifting borders across African regions, thereby decentering Eurocentric scholarship and advancing a more global theorisation of bordering practices.

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