

The Difficulties and Experiences of Young People in the Zimbabwean Community of South East London

by Beverley H Kadyamadare

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(i) Introduction

The purpose of this report was to find out what issues were causing the hardships and struggles of young people in the Zimbabwean community living in London. It will also focus on the implications of these difficulties in their daily lives.

Research for this report included focus groups with young people, a questionnaire, and interviews with individuals that had experience in the subject matter. I also used past and current literature reviews with relevance to this report.

The findings indicated that unresolved immigration status was the dominating factor that surmounted to the difficulties experienced by the young people. Most of the young people were not in employment; and barriers in accessing services, information and opportunities were rife. Stress, the Dispersion Programme (NASS) and unstable family relationships were a major concern for the young people. Youth crime instilled fear among some of the young people in the Zimbabwean community; however a diminutive number was actually involved in committing the crimes.

The government must not ignore the issues raised in the findings of this report. Most of the young people are at risk of becoming destitute if the government does not intervene. Whilst the government is still introducing spending cuts, it is vital that organisations that cater for migrants including asylum seekers and refugees are spared. The government must also give the young people the right to work and to enrol in higher education whilst their cases are being processed.

(ii) Methodology

In exploring the issues affecting Zimbabwean young people I used three research methods, a focus group, semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. I figured that I needed to go in-depth and seek an interpreted understanding of the information given by the participants during the research, and also going through past and current literature relevant to the report.

I set the criteria; the first focus group of participants had to be Zimbabwean aged between 16 and 25 years. They had to have a refugee background or seeking asylum in the UK and willing to share their experiences. I recruited the participants through churches, the youth organisation that I volunteer for and through my social network.

I handed out consent forms for all the participants and also to the parents or guardians of those below 18 years old with regards to their partaking in this research. I did this to warrant the permission of the parents and notify them on the details of the project so that they could make an informed decision. I sent out memorandums so that those interested would contact me. As a way of encouraging people to come forward I offered incentives such as travel cost and provided refreshments. The venue was to be central and easy to locate, either a community centre or a church hall would suite and ensured that the place was secure and that participants felt safe. I made it clear to all the participants that they could stop the interviews and discussions at any time if they wished to do so for this research because personal stories can or tend to stir up emotions at times.

Data Protection Act (1998) Due to the sensitivity of the research I considered anonymity and privacy to protect the rights of the participants in respect of personal data and identity; not only as matter of ethics but also the legal implications. I erased the recorded interview files on my phone as soon as I finished with the transcriptions and for those participants that completed the questionnaire survey, they did not have

to print their names on the forms. All the participants decided to have their identities concealed or disguised in this research.

Focus Group

I chose to use the focus group as one of main research tools, key features like organised discussion (Kitzinger 1994), collective activity (Powell et al 1996), social events (Goss & Leinbach 1996) and interaction (Kitzinger 1995) identify the contribution that focus groups make to social research. It was the best way to get more information and more so to capture any emotions, ironies and contradictions. The focus group was an open discussion to give participants flexibility in the way they responded to the questions. For one thing, an individual may listen to one's answers, he or she may want to qualify or modify their view; or may voice their agreement to something he or she would not have thought of without hearing the view of others. Participants are able to bring to the fore issues relating to the topic that they deem to be important and significant. I was the moderator and had an assistant who helped me during the two focus groups I conducted for this research i.e. ensuring that consent forms were signed correctly. At the beginning of the focus group, everyone including myself agreed on the ground rules e.g. not talking over someone; and gave clear explanations of the purpose of the focus group. To ensure that participants felt at ease I was non-judgemental, made eye contact with all the participants and nodded as each one gave expressed their views. I also let them decide on the times they wanted to take their half hour break. I controlled the discussion in terms of staying in line with the topic that was being discussed as well as time keeping. During the discussions I recorded the participant's views using my phone and in addition my assistant was writing down all that was discussed using 'short hand' which was quicker and also served as a backup in case of any technological mishaps.

Semi-structured interviews

I used the semi-structured interviews on the one to one basis and I had a list of key themes, issues, and questions to be covered. During the interview I could change the order of the questions depending on the direction of the interview and asked additional questions that I might not have anticipated at the beginning of the interview. The semi structured interview enabled me to prompt and probe into the given situation; and could explain or rephrase the questions if respondents were unclear about the questions. I got detailed information because the candidate felt free to talk about personal issues which they would not do if there were other people around. The questions were open-minded and this made the candidate to give the answers in their own framework. I used my phone to record the interview as well as writing some of the important views.

Questionnaires

I decided to draw up fifteen questions from some of the findings of the focus group investigations. The questions comprised of ten tick boxes and fives which could be filled in with short sentences. I sent out the forms via email to individuals, youth church members and social networking groups that were relevant to the research. After sending out about seventy-five forms, fifty young people responded even though it took them a while.

Strength and Limitations of design methods and procedures

The focus groups progressed efficiently; I believe my assistant worked very hard to ensure that I had everything needed to facilitate the event. My assistant also translated the short hand (Pittman 2000) into simple English which I then used in conjunctions with the voice recordings on my phone. Participants took a very long

time to respond to the Questionnaires survey which meant I was behind with the research project.

Due to the time constraints of many of the participants and on my part, I experienced difficulties in beating deadlines. I had to cancel a couple of appointments to give more allowance to the participants. The funds and resources allocated for this research were insufficient to cover most of the cost hence it was on a very small scale.

Seeking for more funding next time will enable me to organise more focus groups and have a budget that spreads evenly in proportion to the size of area being covered by the research. The amount of time taken out in collecting data for the questionnaire was immense and at times the answers were unclear due to grammatical errors. Next time I will either consider extra support from tutors or I will only use two research methods. Doing more interviews with professional relevant to the research would have given more diverse information regarding young people in the Zimbabwean community e.g. government officials from the Ministry of Home Office.

For future projects I will consider letting my tutors know about any problems that I encounter as soon as possible in order to eliminate any hindrances that may affect my research programme.

(iii) Findings and Discussion

The issues listed below were the main issues that reverberated during the course of the investigations

- Unresolved Immigration Status
- Family relationships
- The Dispersion Programme (The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act)
- Employment
- Stress
- Youth Crime

Unresolved Immigration Status

During the focus group discussion the older participants expressed the difficulties they were experiencing in the effort to regularise their stay here in the UK. These young people were in these situations because different reasons. Some of them were still under the care of their parents (dependents), meaning that if their parents had not regularised their stay they were also affected. Most of the young people talked about the lengthy time taken by the home office to determine their cases.

Accessing Services, Information and Opportunities

There are not enough services that cater for young people of Zimbabwean community e.g. youth clubs. Some of the young people over 18 years of age could not access provisions on housing or welfare benefits (funds); not having a national

insurance number (NI) meant that they were not eligible for most benefits. There are very few and far apart charity organisations or state agencies to help them integrate and not miss out on opportunities while they were waiting on the home office to make decisions on their case.

The young people in full time secondary school stated that they were not getting any support with homework outside of the school in order to maximise their potentials. They felt that their parents did not always understand the education system here and found it hard to assist them.

Family relationships

Bowlby Attachment Theory (1969) stated that there is a critical period for developing an attachment (about 0 -5 years). If an attachment has not developed during this period then the child will suffer from irreversible developmental consequences, such as reduced intelligence and increased aggression.

The young people that had come here to join their parents of families particularly on the basis of family reunion strongly uttered the challenges of trying to bond with their parents or siblings after being separated for a long time. One participant clearly stated that she did not blame her mother for the situation. She indeed held the government responsible for not processing her mother's asylum case within reasonable time; instead they were reunited after ten years. It was also a concern that the integration service provided by the Refugee Council did not have a great impact with respect to an efficient transition and adjustment into the society.

The Dispersion Programme (The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act)

Other participants explained that the friends and relatives they were living with could no longer assist them. They feared either being destitute or being relocated in the northern region of the country by The National Asylum Support Service (NASS).

They felt safer in London having familiarised themselves with other Africans and indeed other members of the Zimbabwean community. They dreaded the thought of going to a place where other people did not approve of asylum seekers or their race or culture. London had become their home, they had even established friendships and they did not want to lose that.

Employment

The subject of employment was very common throughout the interviews and deliberations

Candidates articulated that coming to this country to seek protection had been a disaster after discovering that they were not allowed to work to support themselves or their families. Some had been fortunate to have relatives who were looking after them and were grateful but then strongly resented being a dependent and a burden to their relatives and friends. The young people retorted that being this reliant takes away that sense of pride that is in a person.

Some of the young people have resorted to voluntary work even though they thought they were not fitting in with the rest of the society in terms of earning a wage. The temptation to work without the permission from the Home Office was immense for most of the young people. Half of the young people said they were suffering alone because they felt uncomfortable to discuss their situation to other people in their community. They thought people would not understand their situation or worse still could make crude remarks about them being asylum seekers.

The young people also raised the issue of nationality and race with regards to job opportunities. They felt that sometimes they were denied the chance to work because of their nationality or colour, regardless of their competence or meeting the criteria.

Reuters (2009) Zimbabweans seeking asylum in Britain handed in their resumes at Prime Minister Gordon Brown's office on 13 January in a protest against a ban on them working.

Stress

A high number of young people laid emphasis on the mental and physical stress taking charge in their lives due to the vast problems they were facing. They feared resorting to illegal substances as a way of suppressing constant worries and anxieties. According to the results of the Questionnaire filled out by 100 young people from the Zimbabwean community, 8 had used drugs or alcohol as a way of coping with their life frustrations.

Two male young people were diagnosed with mental health disorders and are continuing to receive psychiatric therapy to alleviate the conditions and symptoms. They all said the difficulties they encountered since arriving in UK were so immense to the extent that it affected their mental capacity as well as their physical wellbeing. One of the young male explained that his situation was worsened because he had no close family members around him for support. His parents had been denied visa to enter the UK twice, he also explained that he had no idea of where to get legal advice for his situation.

Youth Crime

About a quarter of young people spoke of the fear that they have walking around in the streets of London. They talked of the gang culture and violence that surrounded them in schools and communities they lived in. One out of all the young people who took part in the research admitted to have joined in a gang in north London but had since disassociated himself and moved to another part of London.

During the focus group the young people reiterated the story of a Zimbabwean teenager from Belvedere (London Borough of Bexley), who had been killed in a gang related attack in Welling. The youth talked of the loss and how they had all been affected by the tragedy. BBC News (2011); the teenager had come to the UK as a toddler and had become a keen footballer, but his life had been cut short in a merciless attack.

The Telegraph (10/2011) Young people from Zimbabwe were involved in looting during the London riots in the summer of 2011. Other young people wrote on website forums that it was poverty that had driven them to commit these offences. Other young people argued that it was due to the demands of peer pressure.

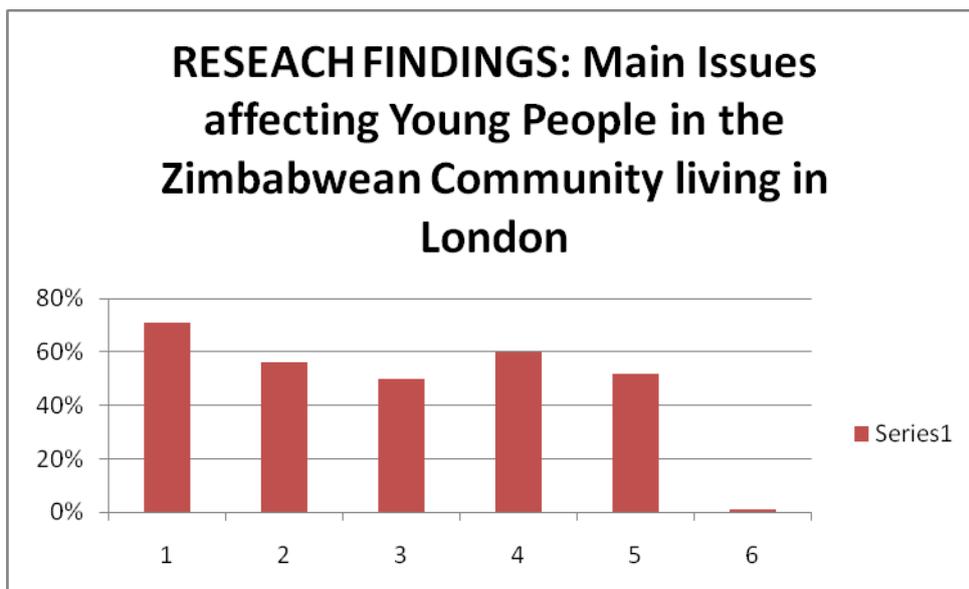
Discussions: professional and legal representative for asylum seekers and refugees.

Ms Y, a lawyer who has expertise in the area of asylum and immigration shed light on how the government processes asylum and immigration cases. She stressed that the Home Office does not publicly send out information that might benefit those concerned with immigration matters. The reason for this is to try and keep the numbers of people at a minimum and not exhaust the services. She opposed the way in which the government dispatched asylum seekers to the northern region of the country using the NASS programme. (Government Spending Cuts 2010) The limited services within the legal aid due to the government cuts have exacerbated the difficult situations of many immigrants here in the UK.

Case Study: Miss H M, 29 years old, arrived in UK in her late teens.

The agony of having to wait ten years to be granted the leave to remain in the UK has left me feeling incensed. The recollection of the interview for my asylum claim application at Heathrow airport was her first awful experience on arrival in the UK.

was terrified by the immigration officer because he acted callously throughout the interview. After my asylum case failed in 2001, I suffered at the hands of rogue solicitors. I was not given any advice or where to go for help, but just to go 'behind the bush'. I became very worried and fearful that if I were to be found by the authorities they would definitely arrest and deport me back to Zimbabwe. Close relatives could not assist as they didn't want to get into trouble with the police or Home Office. The torture I went through was the worst in my life as I had left my six month old son back home. I started volunteering at the Methodist church where I attended services every Sunday. The church became my refuge. The Reverend at the church offered to assist me with getting in touch with a legal aid solicitor who put in a fresh claim for my asylum application. It took two more years to finalise my case and was allowed to stay in the country permanently. I did not enjoy the moment and was weary because of all the suffering I had experienced as an asylum seeker. I was "robbed and disabled" by the host country- UK, my life was dormant for ten years and it felt like a life sentence. I was hurt because I could not go into college, training or employment. I am now with my son and happy to be together yet very bitter about the length of time I had to wait for this special moment. I also fear the repercussions of being separated with my son might affect him. It is very unfair that he had to grow up without a mother because the Home Office was incompetent in their job.



Unresolved Immigration Status	71%
Family relationships	56%
The Dispersion Programme (Immigration and Asylum Act 1999)	50%
Employment	60%
Stress	52%
Youth Crime (Committed by Zimbabwean Young People)	0.98% (Outlier)

(iv) Conclusions

The findings have revealed four very significant issues that must not be ignored by the government if the young Zimbabweans in London are to overcome these challenges and reduce destruction to their lives and those around them.

The first issue is the lengthy time that the Home office is taking to process the asylum applications causing a lot of hardships along with long term effects for the applicants. As a result young people are subjected to poverty as they are not allowed to take employment and the support from the government is not sufficient. The other major disappointment is that they cannot enrol in higher education or training during the time that their immigration status is being considered even if it has been more than a year. It also means that capable and enthusiastic young are left behind without opportunities in this fast ever growing world in respect to career development.

Secondly, stress is a common factor in the daily lives of these young people. The stress can become too much to bear for others, causing them to have nervous breakdown and marking the onset of mental health illness.

Thirdly, there are not enough organisations that can assist young people in the Zimbabwean community. The government's spending cuts have also caused many organisations to slash or scrap their services including those associated with the welfare of refugees and asylum seekers. For instance, the Refugee Council has had to reduce services and moved into smaller facilities causing a colossal damage to those that rely on their assistance. Young people in the Zimbabwean community are at risk of destitution because of economic, social and psychological difficulties they experience living in London

Lastly, there is a significantly low number (less than 1%) of young people in the Zimbabwean community that are involved in crime. This indication denotes the fact that most of these young people are decent, hardworking and responsible citizens eager to contribute to the British society.

(v) Recommendations

- ✓ The government should allow the young people in the Zimbabwean community to get employment, to be in training and get the opportunities to progress into higher education. It is not right that they left idol for many years before the decision on their asylum cases is reached by the Home Office.
- ✓ It is the responsibility of the government and their agencies to protect and safeguard the mental and physical wellbeing of young Zimbabweans living in
- ✓ London. Young migrants should be provide with necessary assistance in order to lead normal lives in London as humanely as possible
- ✓ The organisations that assist young people are pivotal to the nation and their existence should not be put in danger by the budget cuts.
- ✓ The Zimbabwean community should also work together in finding solutions to the difficulties that the young people are experiencing, as well as advocating for them.
- ✓ The National Asylum Support Services should consider of the all the needs of an individual during assessments for housing and offer alternatives in terms of relocation.

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