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Migration

Sr. Marizate Gabin engages with migrant and refugee women at the Office for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa, on Oct. 13, 2024. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

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In the story below, one photo contains partial nudity and graphic content.

At 9 a.m. in the pulse of this city, Annie Mpofu weaves through throngs of people, as police sirens cut through the morning air. With her head bowed and her breath held, she prays to remain undetected by the officers who are actively hunting refugees and migrants like her.

"I fear being seen; they might arrest me," Mpofu confided to Global Sisters Report, fearing the targeting of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees.

The 43-year-old mother of four from Zimbabwe first moved to South Africa in March 2015 to seek employment. However, later that year, she was arrested for lacking proper documentation and was deported back to Zimbabwe.

After spending three months in Zimbabwe, she said, "I returned to South Africa and found another job in the mines to support my family back home."

But conditions for refugees and asylum-seekers had remained unchanged, she said. "Our peace and safety in this country are not guaranteed. Whenever you leave your house, you have to look left and right. … You could get arrested at any time."

Migrant women and victims of gender-based violence seek support at Mercy House, a transitional shelter for women in distress in Pretoria, South Africa, on Oct. 11, 2024. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Like thousands of other asylum-seekers, migrants and refugees in South Africa, Mpofu wakes up in the abandoned buildings, makeshift shelters, and streets that serve as their homes. Driven by their urgent circumstances, they seek help from religious leaders and well-wishers, including sisters, who provide essential support such as food, temporary shelter, and resources to rebuild their lives.

Religious leaders also assist them with documentation and offer psychosocial support to nurture personal growth. Their commitment extends to facilitating education, fostering integration, enhancing skills development, and assisting in job searching.

South Africa, a nation of 60 million people, hosts about 250,250 forcibly displaced individuals, including more than 75,000 recognized refugees and 165,100 asylum-

seekers. According to refugee protection organization HIAS, they come from Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Zimbabwe and South Sudan.

"Many people come to South Africa believing there is gold and that their lives will improve," said Sr. Marizate Gabin, a member of the Scalabrinian Sisters.

With a large, developed economy, South Africa attracts displaced people not only from neighboring countries but also from distant regions; they flee ongoing conflicts, persecution, and severe natural disasters.

Sr. Marizate Gabin carries a child of a migrant woman at the Office for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Still, in South Africa, many migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers face growing social inequalities, high rates of gender-based violence, and frequent xenophobic attacks.

Bishop Joseph Kizito of the Aliwal North Diocese said the local church is making a positive impact on the lives of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants by addressing the challenges these groups face in their host countries and ensuring their rights are protected.

"As someone responsible for the care of migrants, refugees, and victims of human trafficking, I believe it is my duty to stand alongside those who are most vulnerable," said Kizito, who serves as the liaison bishop for migrants and refugees at the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference. "Just as God walks with his people, Pope Francis encourages us to support those in need."

Gabin, who has been working in pastoral care for refugees throughout Africa since 2002, noted that the country lacks a formal refugee camp policy. As a result, most refugees live in urban areas such as Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town, and Durban, leading to refugees coexisting with members of the host community rather than being isolated in camps.

A sister interacts with a migrant woman at the Mercy House, a transitional shelter for women in distress located in Pretoria, South Africa. The sisters provide essential

support, including food, temporary shelter, and resources, to help migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees survive and rebuild their lives. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

A fraught journey

On the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe, a region spanning over 145 miles, Global Sisters Report observed groups of soldiers armed with rifles, patrolling and monitoring for smugglers and individuals crossing illegally.

The perilous journey to South Africa is done primarily through two main routes: the most traveled starts in Zimbabwe's southern Matabeleland region and leads to the Beitbridge border crossing, the busiest entry point into South Africa, before continuing into Limpopo province.

Alternatively, some begin their journey in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, or Chiredzi, also heading to Beitbridge. For those unable to cross legally, dangerous alternatives include attempts to navigate the treacherous Limpopo River, risking drowning, wildlife encounters and criminal gangs.

GSR encountered Sarah, 37, (name changed) while she was crossing into South Africa via the Limpopo River. The mother of two had endured a grueling monthlong journey from Goma, a city in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, fleeing the deadly conflict between the M23 armed group and the Congolese army, which has killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands of people.

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"The rebels attacked my village, killed my family and raped me in turns," Sarah tearfully told GSR while crossing the border, praying not to be seen. "I walked for several miles before a good Samaritan offered me a ride on a lorry transporting goods."

"This took me to Zambia, then to Zimbabwe, and now I'm here. I want to enter South Africa and try my luck there, as I've heard there are job opportunities."

At every step of the journey, she's paid a heavy price.

"I had to have sex with different drivers just for them to transport me from one place to another," she said tearfully. "My journey was horrific; I had no identification

documents, no clothes, and no money even to feed myself, so I had to resort to desperate measures. I cried constantly, but what else could I do?"

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GSR followed Sarah at dusk as she navigated a dangerous border along with dozens of other migrants. They had to hide from the army, as they couldn't afford the high fees charged by smugglers — ranging from $100 to $300 — for an illegal crossing at the Beitbridge border.

After crossing into South Africa's Limpopo province, Sarah and other migrants concealed their identities and blended in with the locals to avoid detection by police before boarding a bus to Johannesburg.

"I am happy to finally be in South Africa, and I hope my life will change for the better. I thank God," she said while on the bus heading to Johannesburg, which is 192 miles from Limpopo.

"The church aims to accompany them on this journey to first restore the dignity that has been damaged by their experiences," said Jesuit Fr. Rampeoane Hlobo, a priest in Soweto, South Africa, and the director of the Justice and Ecology Office. "We also help them find self-sustaining livelihood opportunities, encouraging them to start small businesses and sell goods to lead dignified lives."

Fr. Rampeoane Hlobo, a Jesuit priest in Soweto, South Africa, shares the struggles that migrants and refugees face on their journeys from their home countries to South Africa in search of a better future or to escape war. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Once in South Africa, challenges persist

For many migrants, the journey often ends in Johannesburg or Pretoria, cities that offer job opportunities but that are also rife with exploitation, xenophobic violence, police raids, and predatory employers.

However, Sarah is fortunate among the newly arrived migrants because, after spending a few days on the streets of Johannesburg, religious sisters come to her aid.

"Now that she is here," Gabin said, referring to their temporary shelter, "we will provide her with counseling and accommodate her for three to six months, or even

up to two years, depending on her needs. During this time, we will assist her with documentation and help her find a suitable place to stay, or facilitate her reintegration."

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa has experienced violent xenophobic conflicts between local communities and foreign nationals, resulting in deaths and destruction of homes and businesses.

From 1994 to today, South Africa has experienced a significant increase in xenophobic violence, leading to 686 deaths, the looting of 5,645 shops, and 128,458 people displaced from their homes, according to Xenowatch at Witwatersrand University. This violence has taken the form of both widespread riots and targeted assaults, with incidents as horrific as a gang burning a Zimbabwean national man to death in 2022.

Kizito told GSR that xenophobic violence is often driven by various factors, including the belief that migrants contribute to high unemployment and crime rates in the country.

"South Africa is a violent country in nature," Kizito said. "Individuals in this country don't want foreigners, let alone refugees."

A migrant woman displays the scars from injuries she sustained during an attack by locals who targeted her for being a foreigner in South Africa. The country has witnessed incidents of xenophobic harassment and violence against foreign nationals, including refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Legal protections

South Africa has a robust legal framework protecting the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers. According to HIAS, asylum-seekers are entitled to receive a six-month identification document, empowering them with the same rights as South African citizens to access essential services like healthcare, employment and education.

This document also serves as a shield against forced return to their home country and ensures their right to reenter South Africa should they temporarily leave.

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>
> —Bishop Joseph Kizito
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However, Sr. St. John Enright said due to inefficient bureaucracy, asylum-seekers can wait up to a decade for case resolutions, which results in the need for multiple document renewals. During this lengthy process, she said, many remain vulnerable and unprotected.

Enright, a member of the Sisters of Mercy, explained that once an individual is granted refugee status, they receive essential permanent rights that can significantly improve their lives. However, in South Africa, a staggering 96% of asylum-seeker applicants are denied this crucial recognition, she stated.

Enright, who is the director of the Immaculata Shelter, one of the few dedicated shelters for the homeless in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, added that because the majority of those living on the streets are foreigners, homelessness as an issue often goes unmentioned.

Sr. St. John Enright, a member of the Sisters of Mercy, serves as the director of the Immaculata Shelter, one of the few shelters dedicated to the homeless in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, South Africa. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Church intervention

The challenges migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees face have led religious leaders, including sisters, to support their rights.

Kizito said that his office is dedicated to welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating people on the move into local communities by providing various services.

"When we identify individuals in need, we welcome them by offering temporary shelter, food, and protection," said the bishop. "Once we establish a connection with them, we follow up on their migration status and can write recommendation letters to assist them in obtaining asylum or refugee status."

Kizito said that in their promotion efforts, they educate migrants and refugees about their rights and advocate for human dignity. They also work to empower these individuals by helping them become self-reliant through income-generating activities, such as small businesses and vocational training in areas like tailoring, catering, welding, and carpentry.

"We are promoting togetherness by emphasizing the importance of humanity, love for one another, and tolerance," he said, noting that they have reintegrated thousands of migrants and refugees since they began their work nearly a decade ago. "We also encourage them to learn the local languages so they can appreciate the culture and integrate well into society."

Women who are refugees, migrants, and asylum-seekers showcase their handmade products for sale at the Office for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees in Pretoria, South Africa. The office, run by the sisters, provides skills training in areas such as sewing and catering to help these women become self-reliant. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Gabin explained that, in addition to providing essential services they also work diligently to secure legal protection for these individuals. They have established a network of legal professionals and volunteers to assist them.

She said sisters, along with other church leaders and in partnership with NGOs, have set up legal clinics in cities like Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town. These clinics offer migrants help in navigating the complex South African immigration system.

"Many of these individuals arrive with no legal knowledge and are immediately vulnerable to exploitation, arrest, and deportation," she said. "We provide them with legal representation to fight for their right to remain in South Africa and ensure that their basic human rights are upheld."

Sisters are also leading weekly awareness campaigns in parishes nationwide to promote social cohesion in communities with high migrant populations. These areas, often hotspots for violence and discrimination, are targeted in their efforts to combat racism and foster understanding and unity.

Meanwhile, they are providing essential mental health services to refugees and migrants, empowering them to process their experiences and tap into their resilience to rebuild their lives.

"Our current plan is to work hard to ensure that refugees and migrants are accepted by residents here," Gabin said. "Once they are accepted, it will be easier for them to establish their lives."