

WOMEN ASYLUM SEEKERS AND INTERMEDIARIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: Intermediaries play dual roles as both facilitators and meddlers of migration for migrant women seeking asylum in South Africa. South Africa's non-encampment policy makes it an attractive destination for migrant women seeking jobs. Drawing on exploratory qualitative research, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with twelve women asylum seekers, the study found that they encounter structural, legal, and administrative barriers that shape their migration trajectories and expose them to exploitation by intermediaries. They depend on intermediaries, also referred to as "agents," because of urgent immigration needs, desperation, and the complexity of the South African asylum and permit renewal process. Intermediaries exploited women by portraying asylum as the only option, even in cases where they do not qualify for such protection. The article underscores the need to regulate intermediaries to address vulnerability and exploitation.

Keywords: agents, intermediaries, asylum seekers, migrant women, refugees

Introduction

The proportion of migrant women seeking asylum is increasing, and migration intermediaries play a paramount role in their migration path. The number of migrant women increased from 79.6 million in 1995 to 130.2 million in 2019, propelled by several factors, such as gender-based and sexual violence (Migration Data 2019). In 2018, South Africa hosted 211,000 refugees, 273,000 asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants in 2019 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR 2019). They are from African countries. Although precise data on the gender of asylum seekers is limited, within this migration trend, migration intermediaries play a critical role in their migration trajectory. Although intermediaries play a critical role in the migration trajectory of women asylum seekers,

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there are limited studies on why they depend on them, a gap this study seeks to fill. Insights into intermediaries along the migration trajectory provide a nuanced understanding of the complexity of the South African migration landscape and of how migrant women navigate it through intermediaries.

The literature notes that intermediaries play a significant role (Dağdelen 2025; Sha and Khor 2024; Van Eerbeek and Hedberg 2021; Cranston et al. 2018; Deshingkar 2017; Alpes 2017; De Gruchy 2015; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Wimmer 1997). Intermediaries influence migrants from Ethiopia to South Africa, as migrants are “active constituents of these assemblages” because they desire to migrate and actively participate in selecting and paying intermediaries. Intermediaries have long been embedded in the African migration system. For instance, intermediaries facilitated migrant domestic work in Ghana (Deshingkar 2019). In the context of South Africa’s immigration industry, intermediaries, referred to as “agents,” have historically facilitated labour migration in Southern Africa (De Gruchy 2015; Åkesson and Alpes 2019; Alpes 2013). Intermediaries have been critical in labour migration in Southern Africa since the late 19th century, recruiting farm labourers from Transkei, Ciskei, Mozambique, and Namibia (Wilson 1976). However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, agencies such as The Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA) were established throughout Southern Africa to recruit workers for South African mines and farms (De Gruchy 2015; Wilson 1976). Governments could, directly or indirectly, organise migration through intermediaries for recruitment or emigration programmes, as they have financial or regulatory relationships with these organisations.

The need for intermediaries and the complexity of immigration policy in South Africa contribute to challenges during the asylum application process (Ramoroka 2014; Kock 2018; Zoutman 2018; Alabi 2021; Botha 2024). Ramoroka (2014) analysed the complexities of asylum applications at South Africa’s Refugee Reception Offices, arguing that asylum seekers who enter South Africa through a port of entry or illegally face numerous challenges before reaching a refugee reception office. Due to a lack of documentation, those who enter through a port of entry risk being turned away by Immigration Officers.

Asylum seekers are frequently unable to reach refugee reception offices due to a lack of cooperation between Immigration Officers, the South African Police Service, and functionaries in refugee reception offices (Ramoroka 2014; Boynton 2015; Carling and Haugen 2020; Bernard 2021). Immigration

officials cannot distinguish between asylum seekers and economic migrants, complicating the determination of refugee status (Masuku and Rama 2020; Dawson and Ekambaram 2019; Zoutman 2018; Suleman, Garber and Rutkow 2018). Rather than protecting asylum seekers, it is used for immigration control and to turn people away (Zoutman 2018; Oxford Dictionaries 2014). The literature suggests that migration intermediaries are characterised by fraud, corruption, credibility issues, and criminal activities, which aggravate the precariousness of migrant women in the Global South (Deshingkar 2019; Alpes 2017; De Gruchy 2015). In recognition, African governments are regulating and strengthening broker regulatory processes, such as the Ethiopian 1998 Overseas Employment Proclamation, which establishes a system of 400 private employment agencies in Ethiopia, restricted to brokers facilitating migration to the Middle East (Alpes 2017). Also, in the South African context, the 2002 South Africa Immigration Act, Section 46, followed a global pattern of regulating the immigration sector and the activities of intermediaries (Department of Home Affairs 2016; De Gruchy 2015).

Despite the roles of intermediaries in the migration aspirations of women asylum seekers in South Africa, relatively little is known about why women migrants are seeking asylum in South Africa. In South Africa, people use intermediaries for their migration and asylum applications/renewals. The study's objectives are: (1) to explore the underlying motivations and reasons women asylum seekers utilise the services of intermediaries and (2) to understand how the intermediaries enable or hinder the migration aspiration of women asylum seekers. Insights into immigration intermediaries, their roles, and the services they offer women asylum seekers provide a more nuanced understanding of migrating to South Africa and the vulnerability of women asylum seekers. Importantly, there is a notable scarcity of studies that centre the direct perspective and lived experiences of women. This paper addresses this gap by focusing on the experiences and voices of women asylum seekers themselves.

Conceptual Clarifications: Migrants, Refugees, Asylum seekers, and Intermediaries

Migrants migrate from their home countries for various reasons, including economic, educational, and employment opportunities (Statistics South Africa 2020). While asylum seekers are awaiting their refugee status determination claims seeking protection from persecution in another country (Zoutman 2018; Kock

2018; UNHCR 2019; IOM 2019). In contrast, refugees are people whose asylum has been approved and who have been granted recognised refugee status (Kock 2018; Mbanza 2017; Department of Home Affairs 2016). Intermediaries facilitate both regular and irregular migration through various strategies (Axelsson et al. 2022; Cranston et al. 2018). The migration industry comprises a wide range of actors and institutions that facilitate international mobility, settlement, information flows, communication, and resource flows, whose operations are influenced by entrepreneurial motives (Hernández-Leon 2013; De Gruchy 2015; Mail and Guardian 2015). Intermediaries include a broad spectrum such as “money lenders,” “recruitment agencies,” “individual brokers,” “transportation providers,” “travel agents,” “coyotes,” “lawyers,” and “courier service owners” (Axelsson et al. 2022; Alpes 2017; De Gruchy 2015; Spener 2009; Salt and Stein 1997). Intermediaries are also associated with terminologies such as “agents,” “dalals,” “taikongs,” “recruiters,” “placement agencies,” “smugglers,” “human traffickers,” “dokimen,” “facilitators,” “coyotes,” “feymen,” “migration brokers,” “big men” and “immigration consultants” (Axelsson et al. 2022; Alpes 2017; Deshingkar 2017; De Gruchy 2015).

Maybritt Alpes (2017) distinguished between three types of migration intermediaries: “dokimen,” “feymen,” and “big men.” *Dokimen* are artisans who forge or imitate documents. *Dokimen* are craftsmen who imitate, forge documents, and offer support. *Dokimen* does not have offices but advertises its services on posters, flyers, or in cybercafés. They sell travel documents that facilitate obtaining a visa or a residence permit, including birth certificates, marriage certificates, school-leaving certificates, bank statements, or entry or exit stamps in passports. *Feymen* exploit the limited legal options for international travel, deceiving clients and disappearing either after a failed attempt or even before the departure process begins (Alpes 2017: 10). In contrast, *big men* are prominent and well-connected individuals who use their networks and social standing to promote migration, often portraying their activities as benefiting others rather than solely profiting from them (Alpes 2017). Importantly, Alpes noted an ambiguous distinction between “formal or legal” intermediaries and “informal or illegal” intermediaries, as the two are mutually beneficial and form a continuum (De Gruchy 2015: 17; Baey and Brenda 2018; Erulkar 2020; Blumenstock et al. 2021). De Gruchy (2015: 17) argued that formal intermediaries employ informal intermediaries with stronger social ties to a specific community to locate migrants, thereby circumventing labour legislation that formal agencies are required to follow.

Registered immigration practitioners in South Africa were 20,000 in 2014 (De Gruchy 2015: 7). The relevance of intermediaries in South Africa testifies to South Africa’s migration landscape, characterised by restrictive immigration

laws, the less efficient Department of Home Affairs, and arbitrary deportations (Oyewo 2022; Mbanza 2017; De Gruchy 2015; Ramoroka 2014).

South Africa Migration Policies and Asylum System

South Africa became a signatory to the UN Convention in 1993 after its democratic transition in 1992, when it joined the UN and the Organization of African Unity Conventions [OAU] on refugees. This commitment is reflected in the Refugee Act No. 130 of 1998, which stipulated institutions and procedures to safeguard asylum seekers and refugees fleeing their home countries. Key actors in South Africa's migration landscape include the Department of Home Affairs, government officials, immigration practitioners, and specialised lawyers, and attorneys (De Gruchy 2015: 7; Crush and Skinner 2017; Kavuro 2022). Migration intermediaries, in contrast, are individuals with a limited legal background in migration and individuals without training (De Gruchy 2015: 7). The Department of Home Affairs (DHA) oversees migration, citizenship, and asylum seekers in South Africa (Department of Home Affairs 2016).

Successful first asylum seekers are issued an asylum permit that is renewed every 6 months. They have the right to study, work, trade, and start businesses while their application is being processed, and they cannot be deported (Pikoli 2020; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020; Ncube 2021). In recent years, amendments to South African immigration policies and the Refugee Act have resulted in various regulations affecting women asylum seekers, notably the Refugees Amendment Act of 2015. This act reduced the 14-day asylum application period to 5 days and increased the number of years a refugee could wait before applying for permanent residence from 5 to 10. This implies that the Refugee Amendment Act would increase the time a refugee must stay in the country before applying for permanent residency to twice that amount. This also entails requesting recognition as an indefinite refugee, which is available only to those granted refugee status for 10 years, twice the 5-year requirement (Department of Home Affairs 2018). Due to amendments in immigration policies, it has become increasingly complex to claim asylum. Thus, intermediaries act as the go-between for women asylum seekers and the state.

Methods

The study is exploratory qualitative research because of limited knowledge about a phenomenon or problem (Creswell 2018; Theron 2015; Nowell et al.

2017; Elliott 2018). In this context, relatively little is known about why women asylum seekers in South Africa depend on the services of intermediaries and how the intermediaries facilitate or hinder the migration aspirations of women asylum seekers. Data were generated through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with twelve women asylum seekers. Interviews facilitated the use of open-ended questions and rich, detailed narratives from participants (Creswell 2018). The interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone, lasting twenty to ninety minutes. The participants were selected by purposive and snowball sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) over 18 years old and (2) a woman migrant with an asylum permit. Purposive sampling was a suitable choice for this study because it helped determine participants who were considered ideal sources for the research due to their knowledge of the topic (Creswell and Poth 2018). Participants were recruited through referrals, the Refugee Social Services Centres, and the Refugee Reception Centres. The small number of participants reflects the sensitivity of the topic, as qualitative research emphasises the extraction of rich, in-depth information (Creswell 2018).

The interviews were complemented by participant observation of the asylum application process at the Marabastad Refugee Reception Centre (RRC). Data were collected by two researchers who visited the Refugee Reception Office (RRO). Observation allowed to observe the asylum procedure at RRO and interactions between RRO officials and asylum seekers, and waiting in the queue for asylum seekers. Data saturation was achieved when subsequent interviews yielded no new themes. Ethical standards were ensured through the anonymity and confidentiality of participants' data. The data analysis also involved constructing relationships and links among the codes to establish overarching themes and categories that aligned with the interview schedule questions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, paraphrased, or summarised, based on the nature of the interview guide questions (Bans-Akutey and Tiimub 2021; Guest et al. 2020; Creswell and Poth 2018).

Findings

The twelve women are from four African countries: Ghana, the Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, and Zimbabwe, representing diverse nationalities and regional migration patterns in South Africa. Data analysis generated five major themes aligned with the study's objectives. The findings revealed five central themes, including: (1) Misguided information from "Agents" and Transition from Legal to Illegal Migrant Status, (2) Becoming Asylum Seekers by Default, (3) Financial Exploitation by agents and administrative entrapment, (4)

Participant and nationality	Permit Duration	Education / Skill	Employment Aspiration	Intermediary Promise	Key Barrier Encountered	Work Sector	Impacts	Coping Strategy	Outcome
W1 (Zimbabwe)	6 months	Secondary	Formal employment	Work permit processing	Short permit validity	Informal	No bank account	Informal work	Economic precarity
W2 (Nigeria)	6 months	Master's Degree	Teaching	Appeal reversal	Bureaucracy (SACE)	Informal	Deskilling	Petty trading	Underemployment
W3 (Nigeria)	3 months	Medical training	Health sector	Job + visa	Detention, bribery	Informal	Trauma, pregnancy risk	Informal survival	Legal insecurity
W4 (Ghana)	6 months	Secondary	Formal job	Employment access	Misinformation	Informal	Repeated rejection	Street vending	Marginalization
W5 (DRC)	6 months	Limited literacy	Any formal job	Permit processing	Language barriers	Informal	Financial exploitation	intermittent street vending	Continued dependency
W6 (Nigeria)	6 months	Teaching qualification	Teaching	Quota permit	Fake SAQA certificate	Informal	Appeal delays	Petty trading /schooling	Professional stagnation
W7 (Nigeria)	6 months	Bachelor's Degree	Teaching	Credential recognition	SACE bureaucracy	Informal	Education disruption	Food vending	Deskilling
W8 (Ghana)	6 months	Secondary	Stable work	Documentation	Birth registration	Informal	Child documentation	Hair making	Social exclusion
W9 (Nigeria)	6 months	Secondary	Formal employment	Permit conversion	Lengthy appeals	Informal	Financial loss	Asylum claim	Legal limbo
W10 (DRC)	6 months	Secondary	Formal job	Visa checklist	Language barriers	Informal	High costs	Reapplication	Exploitation
W11 (Fhana)	6 months	Secondary	Stable income	Queue access	Xenophobia	Informal	Police extortion	Street trade	Insecurity
W12 (Nigeria)	3-6 months	Secondary	Formal employment	DHA contacts	Bank access	Informal	Frozen bank account	Cash economy	Financial exclusion

Table 1. Reasons and effects of the use of intermediaries by migrants

Passing through Needle's Eyes to apply and renew the asylum permit, and (5) Structural constraint of no license–no work. Table 1 summarises these themes.

(1) Misguided Information from “Agents” and Transition from Legal to Illegal Migrant Status

Participants mentioned that their migration journeys to South Africa were influenced by intermediaries, commonly referred to as “agents.” Agents provided misleading and inaccurate information, especially on asylum applications, visa conversions, and document requirements, despite presenting themselves as “expert.” According to the participants, the agents sold the idea of applying for asylum by claiming they had a connection (a link) “inside the Refugee Reception Offices (RROs).” They could therefore “assist with the processing and documentation.” Two types of intermediaries emerged from the data: (i) informal, individual intermediaries, operating independently and often unregistered, and (ii) licensed formal agents registered with the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) as immigration consultants.

Findings reveal that misleading information from “agents” led to the illegal activity. Several women described how “agents” had provided misleading information. W3, for example, travelled from Nigeria through Mozambique in desperation to see her husband after several failed attempts to secure a spousal visa in her home country, and enlisted the help of an intermediary. Intermediaries provide little or erroneous information to migrant women during the migration process in their home country, resulting in them seeking asylum in South Africa. Intermediaries play a critical role in women asylum seekers' aspirations and amplify their challenges in South Africa because of incorrect information. Participants refer to intermediaries as “agents,” who describe their roles in the migration process as providing information on how to claim asylum in South Africa. Local clichés such as “agents” convey connections of confidence between intermediaries and women asylum seekers.

This study's findings also indicate that most participants entered South Africa legally with visitor's visas but became undocumented because their visas could not be renewed due to fraudulent documents, such as bank statements, arranged by agents. One woman recounted how she followed her husband on a visitor permit to South Africa in 2013, hoping to convert it to a study visa, only to find herself “stuck in the application process because of fraudulent documents packaged by the agent.” The participants cited diverse reasons for migrating to South Africa and for seeking asylum. They entered South Africa between 2013 and 2017. In 2013, visas were issued for three-month multiple entries; however, amendments to the 2014 immigration law

changed the dynamics of changing a visitor's visa status within South Africa. Some participants entered South Africa with visitor's visas to visit their husbands, who also had pending permits due to backlogs at the Department of Home Affairs. Some participants had attempted to convert their visitor visas to other visas, like study or work visas, but in several cases, agents had submitted fraudulent supporting documents, especially bank statements and foreign educational qualifications like the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), resulting in visa conversion, rejection, and the loss of legal status. In some cases, they had to appeal the rejection within ten days.

(2) Becoming Asylum Seekers by Default

Several participants recounted how agents forced them to seek asylum as a last resort, frequently after giving them false information and advice during previous visa applications. A woman described what happened to her:

“I paid enormous amounts of money to change my status from a visitor's visa to a quota work permit. My husband's friend in South Africa mentioned that teaching jobs are available. I gave him money to apply for work. He told me to contact the intermediary. The South African Council for Educators [SACE] document was fake. I waited several years for a permit because I was unfamiliar with the process. Once your permit is rejected, you must appeal within ten days and provide the document for which the application was denied. After years of waiting, I applied for an asylum permit and pursued postgraduate studies. Before then, I visited the Home Affairs Branch office of the Department of Home Affairs to check on my appeal. The system indicates that the appeal is pending, which implies it has not been processed for seven years” (W9).

Claiming asylum is a strategy participants adopt to become legally settled in South Africa after exhausting all other options. As the findings reveal, intermediaries and brokers, in the context of the present article, are informal or illicit actors. They inspire migrant women to turn to fraudulent techniques in order to get documentation, particularly when legitimate channels are unavailable, unduly difficult, or non-existent. Some participants describe agents as facilitators who help them connect with “oga” (boss), enter the “RRO building,” and obtain the “pali” (a Yoruba slang term for a document).

Observations reveal that asylum seekers from Francophone countries, such as the DRC, have access to interpreters and coordinated services more than migrant groups from West African countries. This suggests that not all intermediaries are entirely informal or illicit because some operate in ways that complement official processes. Thus, agents explain the asylum application procedure to applicants, fill out the asylum application form for those who cannot read or speak English, or, in some cases, “fabricated reasons” for asylum (motivation for applying for asylum). Language barriers affect applicants from non-English-speaking countries because of the limited number of professional interpreters in the RRO, often requiring asylum seekers to provide their own interpreters. Ever since the closure of several RROs, applying for and renewing asylum documents has become increasingly complex. Recounting her experience applying for and renewing asylum since 2016, the participants captured their experiences in the quotes below. One participant recounted her experience:

“You would be marched from the queue from the field to the refugee reception office [RRO] compound. If you are lucky and rugged, you can even enter the compound. When you enter the refugee compound, the officials will collect your passport and make a photocopy of the data page to attach to your asylum application. Your passport will show how you entered South Africa. After that, you are called and given a B1-1590 form to collect your data. From there, you proceed to where your fingerprint and image are captured in the refugee system. Afterwards, a Refugee Reception Officer (RRO) conducts an interview, and the B1-1590 forms are duly completed. I was issued a one-month asylum permit after going to the RRO countless times. The way we are treated like animals, pushed here and there, talked to anyhow, female security officers will slap you. They do not consider whether you are pregnant. Detained me and said my asylum is fake” (W5).

Another participant echoed the complexity and risk of inconsistencies in the asylum process:

“You may be unaware of which official has your asylum application file... If you do not conduct your interview on the same day you apply, you may be unable to complete the process because the file may become stuck in a system. You may have to return several times or apply again” (W10).

The study found that asylum permits are short-term, ranging from 1 to 6 months, while claims (asylum stories) are verified. Women seeking asylum face rejection if their statements are inconsistent, particularly when details provided during the first interview contradict those given in subsequent interviews. A participant described that some asylum applicants, during their initial interview with the RRO official, mentioned that they arrived in South Africa through the bush. In contrast, their international passports indicate they flew on a visitor visa. These discrepancies weaken the validity of their asylum claims and the possibility of rejection. Participants echoed the importance of accuracy when filling out an asylum application:

“Asylum seekers should be extra wary when describing their justification for claiming asylum during interviews with the Home Affairs official, because any irregularity may be used to verify that they are telling lies. However, this could be complicated when the applicant [asylum seeker] is not the person who filled in the asylum application form” (W7).

Another participant noted:

“In the subsequent interview, you stated that you fled your home country because of terrorism, and in another interview with the Home Affairs official, you stated something different” (W2).

The findings indicate that restrictive legal immigration routes limit access to legal pathways, prompting asylum seekers to rely on intermediaries and, in turn, to experience financial strain, stress, long-distance travel, and ambiguous asylum procedures. These challenges make agents a solution for navigating the asylum bureaucracy, who exploit them by prompting women to apply for asylum as a survival tactic. Findings also indicated that immigration policy changes aggravated migrants, being illegal, confusing, and requiring the services of agents to navigate the “migration policy complexity.”

Before the 2014 South African immigration changes, migrants entering with a three-month multiple-entry visitor visa could apply to change or convert their immigration status in South Africa. However, after the amendments, the word “visa” was replaced with “permit,” and those who had been issued a visitor visa could no longer convert their status, leaving many uncertain about the correct procedure. One participant explained:

“When the 2014 immigration law was amended, the problem started. I have been in this country since 2014. I applied for

a quota worker permit. The amended 2014 migration law scrapped some permit categories and did not state which permits foreigners should apply for. I have been waiting for my appeal to be finalised and approved. The Department of Home Affairs rejected my work permit on the grounds of a fake South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA] qualification evaluation certificate. As a teacher with a Master's degree in my home country, I am qualified for the quota permit; however, my agent submitted a fake document because I was unfamiliar with the visa application process. He travelled home, and I kept asking him about my permit. He said the intermediary would contact me. I am still waiting for the appeal to be approved and engaged in petty trading [selling women's clothes]" (W6).

The findings indicate that restrictive permit conditions and persistent bureaucratic delays intensify women's dependence on intermediaries to manoeuvre the application process.

(3) Financial Exploitation by Agents and Administrative Entrapment

Financial exploitation by agents and administrative entrapment were also recurring themes among the participants. In one instance, a woman described paying an agent 2,000 rand (approximately US\$130) in 2017 to apply for an asylum permit. As one participant noted, "they are profit-maximizing actors with little attention to our welfare" (W3). Participants mentioned that the lack of permits created additional legal barriers for their children, especially obtaining birth certificates for those born in South Africa. In many cases, agents offered to produce these documents, usually for a fee, placing additional financial and emotional burden on women. One participant recounted her struggle:

"When I put to bed, it was a tug of war getting a birth permit for my child. My husband and I thought we could claim a South African man as the father of my child in desperation. I need the birth certificate to register my child in school. I need a permit to have a birth certificate. I am tired of this country. I called my friend in my home country. She said my job is still available" (W8).

Participants' narratives also highlighted the financial costs of relying on agents. Some individuals paid exorbitant fees for services, including

fraudulent supporting documents, without their knowledge, only to have their permits denied or their immigration status remain unsettled for an extended period. Women who first entered South Africa lawfully on visitor visas were frequently turned into irregular migrants by the intermediaries' false information, making it more difficult for them to navigate the asylum system, obtain social services, and obtain basic documentation for themselves and their children.

(4) Passing through Needle's Eyes to Apply and Renew the Asylum Permit

Findings reveal the relevance of intermediaries during the asylum application process. Our study identified such intermediaries as "informal and illicit," who sometimes lack documents themselves but offer their services as a means of survival. Services offered include assisting immigrants with appointments or paperwork (sometimes illegally) and granting access to fake or fabricated documents. This involves editing someone else's asylum document by inserting other people's records and names, and charging for services that are promised or accelerated.

Participants stated that the asylum application and renewal (extension) process is nerve-wracking. They likened it to "passing through the needle's eyes to apply and renew an asylum permit" because they must arrive early at the Refugee Reception centres in the queue by 4 a.m. Closing some Refugee Reception Offices in Johannesburg and Cape Town has had several impacts on them and exacerbated the challenges of applying for and renewing (extending) their asylum permits. The closure of three Refugee Reception Offices also led participants to enlist the assistance of agents to navigate the asylum application process. Although after a lengthy legal battle by non-governmental organisations and civil society, some RROs reopened with limited functions, such as being closed to new asylum applications, but remaining open to current asylum seekers and refugees. Although the closure of RROs has been the subject of legal battle by the Legal Resources Centre (LRC), which filed a case against the government over the closure of Cape Town RROs in 2012, the Supreme Court of Appeal ruled in 2017 that the closure was illegal.

The study further found that, due to the short 6-month duration of the asylum permit, companies refuse to employ asylum seekers because of uncertainty about continuous renewal and the risk of breaching the law by recruiting unauthorised workers. Hence, some participants work in the

informal economy because of difficulties gaining employment in the formal sector. A participant described her experience:

“DHA purposefully keeps you in asylum status; you cannot progress to refugee status because you will be paid a stipend for Refugee status if granted” (W11).

Another participant emphasised the difficulty of accessing RRO facilities:

“It is difficult to enter the RRO centre because you must queue from the field into the refugee centre” (W12).

Many asylum seekers travel long distances, ranging from 7 hours to 28 hours, from provinces such as Durban, Cape Town, and the Eastern Cape to apply or renew [extend] their asylum permits in RRO Pretoria, on allocated days for different nationalities. First-time asylum seekers in particular find the process challenging. Unlike other African countries such as Kenya and Rwanda, with encampment policies where asylum seekers are confined to asylum camps, South Africa does not confine asylum seekers to camps. Due to the non-encampment of asylum seekers, South Africa is a sought-after destination for asylum seekers. Asylum seekers’ fundamental rights to access social services, such as education, work, and health care, are restricted when they have no legal documentation. As a participant noted, before the Department of Home Affairs introduced a paperless asylum renewal process in 2016, you would have to queue from 3 a.m. to enter the refugee centre. In response to the queue during asylum application and renewal processes, the Home Affairs Minister introduced a paperless system in some RROs in order to reduce waiting times and corruption. Although South Africa’s laws and policies governing asylum seekers and refugees have been regarded as progressive, asylum seekers increasingly need help to exercise their rights due to policies and practices preventing them from regularising their stays.

(5) Structural Constraint of No Permit–No Work

Participants’ responses indicate a desperation for employment in the formal sector, which in turn heightens their reliance on agents. Some participants were unaware that they had been issued a fake work permit, while others claimed ignorance of the work visa process. This involves an intermediary approaching them and promising to overturn the pending appeal decision with their “contacts” (link, connection) in the Department of Home Affairs. However, “when the money has been paid to the intermediaries, they fail to

deliver the permits” (W5). Participants mentioned that they employ agents because they seem to have much experience with migration. As a participant echoed, “I trust him when he showed me photos and images of ostensibly government officials whose contact appeared genuine” (W5).

Many participants also expressed concern about the negative aspects of being issued a 3-month or 6-month asylum permit, particularly the difficulty of finding permanent jobs in the formal sector. Difficulty finding jobs in the formal sector means they work in the informal sector. Participants with teaching qualifications who hope to enter the South African teacher labour market mentioned that one significant barrier to entering the labour market is bureaucracy and discrimination by the South African Council for Educators (SACE) in registering migrant teachers. To work as a teacher in South Africa, you must register with SACE. Some participants had Bachelor’s degrees and some also had Master’s Degrees. Findings demonstrate the difficulties skilled women asylum seekers encounter in converting their credentials into official employment. The experience of W7 illustrates how institutional rigidity, competing requirements, and bureaucratic obstacles impede professional integration. She attempted to have the South African Council for Educators (SACE) review her teaching degree. However, she encountered a vicious cycle in which companies required certification, while SACE required employment documentation:

“I tried to evaluate my degree at SACE to enable me to teach different hurdles, nevertheless. The school employer says I should bring my SACE certificate. When I arrive at SACE, I will be told to bring an employment letter, and the school will request that I bring my SACE certificate. How will I get this? I eventually resorted to selling food. Although I still want to further my education” (W7).

The findings indicate that legal precarity and exclusionary labour practices significantly constrain asylum-seeking women’s access to formal employment in South Africa. The W3 account illustrates bureaucracy in the asylum management system:

“I was working as medical personnel in my home country [Nigeria]; coming to South Africa with a visitor’s visa was not the best. I needed the necessary papers to get a job in the formal sector. When I visited the RRO office, the official told me not to come again, or I would be deported. The last time I went to RRO, I was detained in the RRO cell despite being pregnant.

The other ladies in the cell settled [bribed] and were released. The official told me to call someone to send money. I have no money, and I was released in the evening. On my way home (10 hours), I fell asleep and alighted at the wrong place.”

Overall, the findings demonstrate that attending a job interview does not guarantee employment. “Upon attending an interview, you know you performed very well, but the interviewer would say the position is for South Africans” (W4).

Nine participants work in the informal economy as street vendors, selling food, or as nail technicians. They expressed experiencing xenophobia while working in the informal sector. The participants explained:

“Locals claim that foreigners are taking jobs. Foreigners should not work in the formal sector; we should not work in the informal sector [such as nail technicians, hairdressers, spaza shops, or selling ladies’ clothes] because foreigners often sell at lower prices. The locals protested and chased us from the road, where we used to sell, because we did not have a license to trade. However, we go to shops and rent, yet the metro police come daily to extort us” (W11).

Being issued a 3-month or 6-month asylum permit also affected women asylum seekers’ access to social services and their ability to open a bank account. Few South African banks open bank accounts for asylum seekers, and these accounts are typically linked to the duration of their permits. Bank accounts could be frozen because of an expired asylum permit.

Discussion and Way Forward

This study has examined the motivations behind women asylum seekers’ reliance on intermediaries and how these intermediaries enable or hinder their migration trajectories. The findings revealed five central themes. This includes misguided information from “agents” and transition from Legal to Illegal Migrant Status, becoming asylum seekers by default, financial exploitation by agents and administrative entrapment, passing through needle’s eyes to apply and renew the asylum permit, and structural constraint of no permit–no work.

Across the themes, findings reveal that intermediaries play dual roles, as both facilitators and complicators of migration. While some women asylum seekers were initially legal, misinformation by “agents” and fraudulent

supporting documents led them to be classified as illegal migrants. The structural vulnerabilities that women asylum seekers experience were reflected in the recurring patterns of financial exploitation, administrative entrapment, and reliance on intermediaries to navigate complicated asylum processes.

Intermediaries operate at several migration stages before the arrival of migrant women seeking asylum, during their arrival, and throughout settlement in South Africa. The intermediaries in this study exhibit the characteristics of “*Feymen*” and “*Dokimen*” described by Alpes (2017: 10) by “fabricating and falsifying supporting documents” for women asylum seekers. Their prominence reflects South Africa’s restrictive immigration laws and visa regime, which have increased demand for intermediaries who position themselves as experts to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles.

In line with this, legislative reforms have sought to regulate the immigration industry and curb intermediaries’ fraudulent activities. South Africa’s immigration amendment requires individuals who intend to operate as immigration practitioners to pass an examination administered by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA). Successful candidates are then authorised to provide immigration advice and represent migrants in dealings with the DHA. Section 46 of the 2002 Immigration Act further stipulates that only attorneys, advocates, or registered immigration practitioners may represent another person in immigration matters, proceedings or procedures. Although the legislative framework attempts to curb fraudulent activities by intermediaries, this study’s findings indicate that intermediaries continue to operate in parallel to the official system, filling gaps created by bureaucratic inefficiencies and migrants’ urgent need for documents.

Despite these regulations, women asylum seekers employ the services of intermediaries because they create pathways for women asylum seekers’ migration into South Africa and during the asylum application process in South Africa. Agents’ strategies include manipulating regulatory loopholes or circumventing migration regulations entirely. Intermediaries can sometimes restrict access to information and resources, disadvantaging migrant women by being supportive or exploitative, such as providing wrong or misleading information. The study reveals that the structural constraint of “no permit, no work” also reflects the direct limitation on women’s livelihoods imposed by their inability to secure or renew documentation.

In addition, the study indicates that frequent immigration amendments further amplify women asylum seekers’ challenges and migration requirements.

A previous study by Harvey et al. (2018) found that migration is a process influenced by diverse actors embedded in migration sectors, rather than by individual choice or macro-level policy. As this study revealed, the challenges of the asylum application process, gathering supporting documents (e.g., bank statements, SAQA, SACE), and navigating the asylum system leave them heavily dependent on intermediaries.

However, as the study shows, such claims often serve as deceptive tactics used to exploit vulnerable women. South Africa's non-encampment policy makes it an attractive destination, and the assumption that intermediaries have "connections" capable of altering the outcome of an immigration application or appeal process further enhances its appeal. Still, the urgency to legalise their stay in a frantic move has led many to fall prey to intermediaries who either support or exploit them. Also, as the study shows, agents' claims of a connection to RRO officials are deceptive strategies to exploit their ignorance and vulnerability. The legal environment further complicates women's experiences. Many women rely on agents due to linguistic barriers, unfamiliarity with South African immigration laws, or the complexity of visa requirements. Before these immigration amendments, those who overstayed were classified as "undesirable," a term previously used for individuals with criminal records. Maple (2005) argued that refugee reception is a process influenced by institutional, political, and legal factors, rather than a single point of entry. Systematic flaws in South Africa's migration governance are also reflected in the tendency for individuals to become asylum seekers by default.

Conclusion

This study indicates that intermediaries exploited women by portraying asylum as the only option, even in cases when individuals do not qualify to meet the requirements for refugee protection when their permit is rejected. This situation also makes women categorised as asylum seekers, which was not their original plan and intention, adversely affecting their integration and access to social services in South Africa. In the end, women who are economic migrants applying for asylum face the same scrutiny as those who need actual protection. Studies found that the "migration industry" encompasses recruitment firms, brokers, and transportation companies that generate revenue by facilitating international migration from both the migrant's home and host countries. The findings of this study align with those of Riva and Hoffstaedter, Aduana et al., and Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen. They

found that restrictive visa regimes and immigration regulations often increase reliance on brokers, as migration brokerage functions at the intersection of labour demand, migration policies, and business motives.

More importantly, in order to overcome complicated legal and administrative obstacles, migrants paid exorbitant fees, were misinformed, or given false papers, which opens the door for exploitative acts. This study provides insight into the scant research on intermediaries embedded in global migration infrastructure, who influence migrants' migration and vulnerability. The findings revealed five central themes, including: (1) Misguided Information from "Agents" and Transition from Legal to Illegal Migrant Status, (2) Becoming Asylum Seekers by Default, (3) Financial Exploitation by agents and administrative entrapment, (4) Passing through Needle's Eyes to apply and renew the asylum permit, and (5) Structural constraint of no license–no work.

Drawing on exploratory qualitative research, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with twelve women asylum seekers, the study concludes that asylum seekers encounter structural, legal, and administrative barriers that shape their migration trajectories and expose them to exploitation by intermediaries. They depend on intermediaries, also referred to as "agents," because of urgent immigration needs, desperation, and the complexity of the South African asylum and permit renewal process. Intermediaries exploited women by portraying asylum as the only option, even in cases where they do not qualify for such protection. Therefore, there is an urgent need to regulate intermediaries' interactions with 'women' asylum seekers in order to reduce their vulnerability and address their exploitation in the process.

The study is limited in size. Yet, notwithstanding these limitations, the study provides valuable data on the gendered dynamics of asylum processes and the roles of intermediaries, laying the groundwork for further research and policy engagement. The article underscores the need for a transparent and consistent asylum system that mitigates the vulnerabilities of women asylum seekers. Regulation of intermediaries to address vulnerability and exploitation will go a long way toward safeguarding their human rights and the human asylum system.

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Statement of Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics to ensure the protection, dignity, and well-being of all participants. The research followed the principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities, and all identifying information was removed from the data. We upheld confidentiality to safeguard participants’ privacy and protect them from harm. All procedures were guided by the principles of minimising risk and of respecting participants’ constitutional rights, dignity, and emotional well-being, in line with recognised ethical standards for social research.

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