

Zim: Informal sector lures university graduates

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BULAWAYO: From the rickety old buses that miraculously make long cross-border journeys to the frustrating red tape at the border post, from fending off sexual advances from bus crews and customs officials to losing goods worth thousands of dollars, 28-year-old Irene Moyo has seen it all.

"This is not for the faint hearted," she says of her work and the many dangerous routes she has to navigate as a small-scale businesswoman in Bulawayo.

"I have given my life to spending nights in the middle of nowhere after the bus broke down, and you can expect anything in those circumstances. I sometimes think it is better if you are a man because they are not as vulnerable as us," she told IPS. Sex is always high on the agenda among bus crews who expect it as currency in exchange for their knowledge of the ins and outs of how to get goods across the border without making hefty duty payments.

"In the middle of nowhere and in the dead of night, you ready yourself for the bus crew to ask for sex. Some of them seem to think it's quite normal to do this," says Moyo who has been making frequent trips across the Botswana and South Africa borders for five years now.

As a regular cross border trader moving large volumes of goods for her flea market business, Moyo says the bus crew is practically on her payroll. She pays them about 130 dollars per trip for her goods to come through without the frustration of paying high duty charges.

She pays because she can afford it, she says, but not all the women traders have that option. The choices are to accept the advances, decline and end up with your goods left behind at the border or negotiate a fee, part of which the bus crews use to bribe customs officials.

What makes Moyo's case rather extraordinary is that she is a university graduate. Like thousands of other graduates, Moyo has never worked in formal employment since leaving university several years ago with a journalism degree. She is from that generation of young Zimbabweans who headed for university at a time when the country's economy was spiraling out of control amid world record inflation, with companies either downsizing or closing down altogether.

However, she says she has few regrets in a business that has seen her purchase a house and a van - assets that many of her journalist colleagues and other professionals in the country can only dream of.

Her colleague Sarudzai Washaya, also a university graduate, runs a small beauty boutique in Bulawayo's central business

district and buys her stock in South Africa and Botswana.

"There are times when I feel so exhausted I want to give up altogether, but the money I get is the kind I would never get in formal employment so I soldier on," she told IPS.

These brave women have become "the new middle class" in a country where formal employment is increasingly being shunned and derided because of poor salaries. Early February this year, thousands of civil servants went on strike protesting against poor salaries. State workers reportedly earn between 120 - 200 dollars (US) per month, and have been pressing government for a five-fold increase to an average of 630 dollars (US) per month.

Moyo credits her university education with making it easier for her to negotiate the cross border business and keep herself safe.

"There are still patriarchal stereotypes here that have made life difficult for women cross border traders. But university education is something that still intimidates some men," she says.

But having a university education does not make it any easier to maintain healthy family relationships when you are constantly on the road. For married women who make numerous trips across the border to buy stock, Moyo says many have abandoned the business, as husbands tend to question where their wives spend the night.

These realities have raised concerns among some NGOs, such as the International Organisation for Immigration's Partnership on HIV and Mobility in Southern Africa (PHAMSA), which notes that female traders are exposed to HIV as they negotiate their way with transporters, customs officials and risk rape and other forms of gender-based violence in unknown and dangerous environments.

Despite these and other challenges, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) notes that informal cross border traders contribute an average of 18 billion dollars (US) each year to trade within the Southern African Development Community.

Moyo believes women cross border traders' mobility has created stereotypes in their communities where the only jobs 'good' women are expected to have are the "visible" type where everyone knows where she works.

"If you are away from the matrimonial bed just for one night, neighbours start talking and that puts pressure on your husband," Moyo says.

"No one will believe you when you say the bus broke down. It sounds like a convenient explanation. So for me, being single means I can concentrate on this without explaining anything to anyone. But I will be the first to admit it is a lonely life," says Washaya.

While some of the better off female traders like Washaya and Moyo can afford to drive cars of their own, the toil of making it, as Moyo put it, is surely not for the faint hearted, especially with little formal support from government, and other potential stakeholders.

"Financial backing has been the most difficult part. We cannot access bank loans as banks say our operations offer high financial risks with some saying they do not offer loans altogether in an economy like ours," says Washaya.

While the Ministry of Small to Medium Enterprises continues organising training workshops for young women in business, Moyo says they are not getting anything from these in terms of loans that she says she badly needs to expand.

"We are capable of running bigger things and my ability to run my flea market is testimony to that," Moyo told IPS.

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