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“How far I go is not my choice”. Immobility, administrative violence and ontological insecurity amongst young people in situations of forced migration in South Africa

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Abstract

Whilst migration has been characterised as a quest for mobility, our research in South Africa has shown how young people in situations of forced migration experience multiple forms of immobility both physical and social as different legal, political, economic and social barriers restrict both their ability to be mobile within physical urban spaces and their social mobility within South African society. This article, based on focus group discussions with young people aged 15–25 in the city of eThekweni-Durban, analyses these multiple forms of immobility which create situations of ontological insecurity whereby these young people cannot project themselves into a stable or positive future adult life. Using Ahmed's notion of “being stopped”, we show how this “stoppedness” leads to fundamental ontological insecurities amongst these young people as they are unable to develop their life plans in the same way as their South African peers. We also examine their strategies for coping with and resisting this ontological insecurity and stoppedness.

Introduction

Much research on forced migration¹ has focused on questions of mobility: on how people cross both geographical and social borders and boundaries (Moyo, 2020; Chekero, 2023; Ndegwa, 2023) to seek protection and security in a new country. As such migration is frequently imagined as a way out for those who feel they would have no future if they remained (Griffiths et al., 2013) or a way of “creating futures” (Cole, 2010). However,

¹We are aware of the ongoing debates over the use of the category of “forced migration” and other related categories and of a move to dispense with “categorical fetishism” (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018) in migration research. Research in the South African context has pointed to the “problematic dichotomy” between forced and voluntary migration (Morreira, 2010). It is also clear that distinctions between “forced” and “voluntary” migrants are made by governments as a function of political expediency (Vanyoro, 2023). Here we define people in situations of forced migration as those who feel they have no other choice but to leave their country of origin, and who as a consequence have sought asylum seeker and/or refugee status in South Africa. Owing to the current restrictive policies, some of those we interviewed had failed to obtain this status or had lost their status and become undocumented.

moving to a new country of destination can produce new forms of immobility, or “a second state of immobility” (Haugen, 2012, p. 65). This forced immobility is particularly important for young people at a supposedly transitional stage in their life course, where they are expected to move from “childhood” to “adulthood”. But our research in South Africa has shown how young people in situations of forced migration experience multiple forms of immobility (Chekero, 2023) spatial, physical and social as different legal, political, economic and social barriers restrict both their ability to be mobile geographically and physically within and around the city, and their social mobility within South African society. These various forms of immobility lead to a feeling of having “no way out” or no future. Living as an asylum seeker, refugee or migrant leads to experiences of insecure or even absent futures. This article, based on focus group discussions with young people aged 15–25 in the city of eThekweni-Durban seeks to analyse these multiple forms of immobility. It argues that experiencing different forms of immobility or immobilisation during a period of key life course transitions during late adolescence and early adulthood, creates situations of “stoppedness” (Ahmed, 2007) or “stuckness” (Jefferson et al., 2019) and ontological insecurity (Laing, 2010; Chase, 2013; Hughes, 2022) where young people in situations of forced migration have constrained agency to choose their own futures and cannot project themselves into a stable or positive future adult life. This “stoppedness” or “stuckness” refers not only to a physical confinement and lack of geographic mobility (Jefferson et al., 2019), but to a reality of not being able to be mobile through time and space in the same ways as other individuals in a society (Ahmed, 2007). As Herz and Johansson (2012, p. 159) argue “A phenomenology of ‘being stopped’ helps us get closer to young people’s feelings and experiences of discrimination and social exclusion”. Accompanying this stoppedness we can talk about a lack of ontological security, a concept described by Laing (2010) as a psychological state of coherent identity developed within a stable environment, has been adapted for use in migration research to describe the insecurities of those living with precarious migration status (Nyamnjoh, 2017; Vaquera et al., 2017; Botterill et al., 2023). O’Reilly (2018, p. 835) describes a situation of ontological insecurity or liminality ‘where people have ‘no sense of security or control over the future, and no active role in society in the present’. This ontological insecurity is a key issue for the well-being of these young forced migrants we met during our research.

Research on forced migration in South Africa has shown the barriers that exist for those seeking asylum and refugee protection in the country, but so far little attention has been paid to issues of age and generation, and the particular experiences of young people. Previous research focused largely on adults and neglected age as a social category of analysis (Crankshaw et al., 2023; Kaneva et al., 2024). Indeed, there is a general lack of attention in research on forced displacement to the question of age as a social category (Clark-Kazak, 2013), and both age and generation are generally neglected elements in most intersectional analyses of the experiences of forced migration (Hart, 2014). Harris et al. (2020) have argued that contemporary practices of youth transnational mobility challenge standard life course conventions about “settling into” adult life, and that changing spatial and temporal conditions create challenges for building of intimate relationships and aspirations about where to “settle”. Their study focuses on more privileged and largely middle-class young people who do not face the same barriers and restrictions as those in situations of forced migration, so as we show in this article, these challenges

are even more pronounced for these young forced migrants faced with increasingly restrictive asylum and refugee regimes. Research on youth migration and on the important life course transitions which take place in situations of (im)mobility across borders, is enriched by the introduction of a focus on time and temporalities (Vanyoro, 2019). Seeing migration as a major biographical event which causes “disorder” in a person’s “timeline” (Cojocaru, 2016) emphasises the need to consider the differential impacts of migration at varying points in a person’s life course. And in an intersectional perspective we can see the differential impacts not only according to age, but also to gender, race, national origin, migration status etc. For young people in situations of migration, the consideration of “suspended time” (Griffiths et al., 2013) and the ways that chronic uncertainty and waiting transforms into this feeling of time being suspended and being in “temporal disjuncture” (Griffiths, 2021) with other members of society is highly relevant.

Our research included both young people who had moved to South Africa before the age of 18 (many at a very young age), and children who were in fact born in South Africa to asylum seeking or refugee parents. Following Rumbaut (1976, 1997) we could refer to these groups as 1.5 and second generation. However, as we will argue while a potentially useful categorisation, questions persist around these uses of the categories of generation, as administrative restriction means that being born in South Africa, or even having arrived at an early age, does not mean that a young person will face less marginalisation or exclusion than someone who has arrived more recently. We argue for the importance of including social age as a category of analysis and of focusing on young people in forced migration. The structural and administrative forms of violence that they face block many forms of mobility and leads to situations of “stoppedness” (Ahmed, 2007; Herz & Johansson, 2012) and insecurity for these young people, with this being exacerbated in many cases by complicated intergenerational and community relationships, often in the context of deep economic insecurity. Our paper thus aims to contribute to existing literature on youth migration, life course and temporalities through an approach which moves beyond a focus merely on the way in which formal laws, policies and regulations create situations of immobility, but which encompasses the multiple structures and processes which contribute to intersectional situations of “stoppedness” for young people in situations of forced migration. Further, we seek to understand their own strategies for overcoming the ontological insecurity they face.

The South African context

Whilst South Africa is generally understood to have a progressive refugee law on paper (Landau & Amit, 2014), research has demonstrated the extent to which increasingly restrictive application of law and policy, together with a rise in xenophobia/afrophobia (Waiganjo, 2018; Cross & Cross, 2020; Ochon, 2020; Kavuro, 2022), and anti-migrant/anti-foreigner sentiment, has made life difficult for those in situations of forced migration (Mutanda, 2022; Tawodzera & Crush, 2023). Moyo and Zanker (2022) point to the way in which there has been a deliberate move to dismantle the distinction between “refugees” and other migrants in order to better exclude all. Closures of Refugee Reception Offices and barriers to accessing the online asylum system (Khan & Lee, 2018) have made it increasingly difficult to gain an asylum seeker permit, and once obtained this has to be renewed every six months (or more or less frequently depending on the

discretionary power of the Home Affairs official dealing with the file). The reinforcement of a “good cause” requirement under recent amendments to Refugee and Immigration law, means that asylum seekers must demonstrate a “good cause” for their “illegal” entry or delayed asylum claim.² If they fail to do so they may be detained and deported. This means that many people on the move who have entered the country without seeking a Section 23 asylum transit permit³ at a border post or being denied such a permit by immigration officers at the border⁴, are vulnerable to detention and deportation when and if they do try to claim asylum. There are reports of many potential asylum seekers being turned away when they try to make an asylum claim and living in fear of being arrested.⁵

The delays in the refugee status determination procedure together with low acceptance rates mean that even for those who do manage to make an asylum claim, many remain asylum seekers for years and never obtain a refugee permit. As an illustration of these delays in the asylum system, it was estimated that in 2019 there was a backlog of around 150,000 asylum appeal cases which will take the appeals board approximately 68 years to clear (Cele, 2024).

For children and young people there are additional challenges with respect to documentation. Children are initially registered on their parents’ (and often their father’s) asylum application which may pose problems if the father/their parents become absent for any reason (Crankshaw et al., 2023). While Section 33 of South Africa’s Refugees Act allows dependent children to derive legal residence status from their caregivers, this status is not automatically carried over into adulthood (Willie & Mfubu, 2016). When children reach the age of 18, they are no longer allowed to remain on their parents’ asylum file but have to make their own asylum application which due to the administrative delays and hurdles described above may prove very difficult and take a long time. The procedure for making their own asylum claim involves an interview where they have to prove why they cannot return to their country of origin, which is clearly challenging, particularly for young people who have come to South Africa at a very young age and have no memories or little knowledge of their country of birth, or for those who were born in South Africa and have never been to the country of origin of their parents.

In the case of unaccompanied minors, children may be placed in foster care⁶ under the oversight of social workers who are tasked with initiating their cases in the Children’s Court. However, these social workers often lack training in refugee and asylum law, resulting in inconsistent case handling, documentation gaps, or failure to secure legal status (Chiweshe, 2022; Sloth-Nielsen & Ackermann, 2016). Once these youth reach the age of 18, their temporary documentation typically expires, leaving them without documents if they are not able to obtain their own asylum permit or refugee status.

² <https://www.derebus.org.za/understanding-south-africas-immigration-and-refugee-policies-key-laws-and-recent-court-rulings/>

³ This document is issued at the border post. The permit is valid for 14 days and requires the holder to report to the nearest Refugee Reception Office to submit an asylum application.

⁴ One key informant told us that fewer than one hundred such permits were issued at the Musina border crossing (the busiest in South Africa) in 2024. Key informant interview, 20 September 2025.

⁵ <https://groundup.org.za/article/asylum-seekers-face-arrest-while-battling-broken-system/>

⁶ The placement of unaccompanied minors in foster care is more frequent in certain South African provinces (eg Western Cape) than others where they may remain in informal care with adults from their own community of national origin.

An asylum seeker or refugee permit should by law give the holder the right to work and to access education, but in practice these rights are compromised by administrative blockages and discriminatory practices by education providers and employers, as well as by (theoretically illegal) police control (Kaziboni *et al.*, 2022). Rising anti-migrant sentiment is often expressed in the dominant discourse that migrants are “stealing” South African jobs (Tawodzera & Crush, 2023; Mutanda, 2022), and thus migrants are increasingly excluded from the labour market and pushed into informal work such as working in hair salons or as street vendors. And even this informal work is threatened by growing competition, with harassment by police being a frequent occurrence. Similarly, and linked to this, barriers exist to access to education opportunities, as we discuss further below.

Methodology

The article is based on focus group discussions carried out with young people in situations of forced migration in eThekweni-Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. Working with Refugee Social Services (RSS), a civil society organisation which supports people in situations of forced migration, we organised six focus groups each with between 6 and 8 participants. Potential participants were contacted through RSS on the basis of being between 15 and 25 years of age and of being in the process of applying for, having or having had at some point, asylum seeker or refugee status. In total 42 young people aged between 15 and 25 participated in the group discussions. They or their families originated from the Democratic Republic of Congo (n33), Burundi (n5), Somalia (n3) and Uganda (n1). Discussions were conducted in English, with some additional French translation provided by the researchers (three of whom are fluent French speakers) for young people from the DRC in one of the groups. The groups were split according to gender and also according to whether the young people were currently in school or out of school. One group was made up of young women who were already mothers. Questions that were asked during the focus group discussions centred on issues of self-identification and belonging, on the challenges the young people experienced in their daily lives and their strategies for dealing with these, their relationships with friends, family and community, and their hopes and aspirations for the future. All discussions were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed for analysis. In addition, we carried out two focus group discussions - one with social workers at RSS, and one with community leaders - and 7 key informant interviews either in person or online with individuals working in civil society organisations supporting forced migrants, and refugee led organisations in South Africa. All interviews were transcribed, and an inductive thematic analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was carried out by all research team members.

We were highly aware of the ethical issues involved while working with potentially vulnerable young people (Hopkins, 2008) and ensured that we adhered to the strictest ethical standards, also creating a comfortable and safe space for the young participants. We avoided asking questions about the events which might have forced them or their families to leave their countries of origin, or about their journeys to South Africa as we wished to avoid any risk of re-traumatisation. However, some participants did spontaneously wish to share details about these life stories which they found important. All participants gave written consent to their participation (with specific project information and forms for those under the age of 18) and to the recording of the focus groups.

For participants under the age of eighteen, we also gained parental consent for their participation. Parents were contacted through RSS, and we provided them with specific project information and a consent form relating to the participation of their children. Throughout the discussions we paused regularly to ensure that participants were still happy to continue and to ensure ongoing consent for their participation. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Université Paris 8 and from the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The authors are differently positioned in terms of their own nationality, migration status and professional situation. We are four women and two men. Two of us have permanent academic positions, whilst three are younger post-docs and one works for a civil society organisation. Our origins are African, European and Latin American, and one of us has direct experience of forced migration, currently holding a refugee permit in South Africa which meant that the young people we talked to could identify more closely with his situation as an “insider” (Tesfai, [forthcoming](#)). We were aware of the asymmetries that our different privileges in being internationally mobile and enjoying citizenship status, and our different economic situations created not only between us and the young people we talked to, but also between different members of the research team. We discussed this collectively and reflected on our differing positionality and privilege during the research. As part of our commitment to avoiding extractivist research (Gorman, [2024](#)), these focus groups were conceived as part of the initial stages of a wider project within which the young participants will have the opportunity to engage in participatory research workshops, analysis and publications, building skills and acquiring qualifications which we hope will be of benefit to them in the longer term (Santana de Andrade et al., [2026](#)).

In the rest of the article, we return to the different forms and causes of immobility and immobilisation experienced by the young people and explore the impacts that this has on their well-being and security.

Administrative violence and immobility: the problems of documentation

One of the major issues raised by all young people, and key informants, and underpinning the various forms of immobility that they faced, was that of the difficulties of acquiring legal documentation, and of the refusal by various authorities in many cases to recognise the forms of documentation which they possess, in what can be described as a form of administrative or bureaucratic violence (Bhatia, [2020](#)) whereby the young people were not able to access rights or status because of the blockages inherent in the various administrative structures which might grant them this status. Most had experienced difficulties in applying for asylum seeker permits, and very few had refugee status. As one young woman explained:

I've been here for eleven years now. I came here when I was ten, and now I'm twenty-one and my sister's the one who brought me here. After my sister left, I stayed, suffering to get documents. Even after explaining the problem, how it is to Home Affairs, this thing gave me a problem for more than six years. (Young woman, DRC, 21 years old)

Another young woman originally from the DRC explained that she had become undocumented when her mother's asylum permit was rescinded, after she was told that it would be safe for her to go back to her country of origin:

I think I was, like six or seven years old when I came, and I'm now turning 26 any-time soon, so it means I've been here long enough to feel like I am part of the South Africans, yes, but unfortunately, in 2016 I became undocumented. I became an illegal immigrant It's a high risk for me to be walking around and being at work. I could be arrested at work. I could be arrested on the streets. (Young woman, 25 years old, DRC)

Becoming "illegal" in this way, illustrates the ways in which administrative systems enact structural violence through a de-legitimisation of their identity and status (Moyo & Zanker, 2022), pushing young people into situations of precarity and vulnerability. Challenges with documentation affected not only those who had arrived as children or young people, but even those who had been born in South Africa. Most of these children do not receive an official South African birth certificate, but rather a temporary hand-written one. But in one extreme example, one of the young women who had had a South African birth certificate had it confiscated when she showed it in school to take her final (matric) exams.

I had a South African birth certificate. So, like, my dad wasn't really around, wasn't following up on documents and stuff like that. So like, when I went to take matric I was using my South African birth certificate as a form of ID. They told me since my dad is from DRC, he's a refugee, right? He's also using refugee status. I have to be under his file. So they took away my South African birth certificate, and then they told us I had to go and apply for the refugee birth certificate, which is just in writing. And for me to get that, I had to first go for DNA testing with my dad (Young woman, DRC, 20 years old)

As a key informant for this research confirmed, increasing suspicion towards forced migrants and increasing restrictiveness in granting asylum seeker or refugee permits, has led to these demands for DNA testing to prove family ties becoming frequent⁷. Another young man from the DRC, who had come to join his father who was already in South Africa explained, for example the Home Affairs officials refused to believe that he was in fact his father's son and demanded a DNA test to prove paternity. He told us that even when they did the DNA test the process was not simple. All of this took place whilst he was in his final year of school, trying to take the final (matric) exams, and with the threat of not being able to graduate without his legal documents hanging over him, which he explained was extremely stressful. Waiting for a resolution and decision on a young person's legal status 'can be debilitating and suspends people in a limbo' (Hughes, 2022, p. 194) reinforcing their feelings of temporal disjuncture.

These long waits for documents, and obstacles to being registered and receiving their papers were experienced as a form of administrative violence (Bhatia, 2020; Skota, 2024) by the young people. They also experienced these bureaucratic delays as imposed immobility (Fili, 2018; Chekero, 2023) or temporal dispossession (Philipson Isaac, 2022). This imposed immobility was experienced at a life stage where "timing matters"

⁷ Interview 5 May 2025.

(Hughes, 2022) in terms of young people's (in)ability to move forward with their education, achieve qualifications or access employment opportunities. Trapped in a 'temporal straightjacket' (Back & Sinha, 2018) and forced to wait for their papers, they felt that they could not move forward with their lives.

And yet, even when they get asylum seeker or even refugee documents, the young people explained that they were still "blocked" as the documents are increasingly worthless in terms of accessing rights, as forms of discrimination against asylum seekers and refugees increase:

These documentations just allow us to do the bare minimum. So even after you finish matric, these documentations can only take you up to a certain point. (Young man, DRC, 19 years old)

The struggle to obtain documentation, thus seems in some ways to be futile, as even once they obtain these documents, their paths seem continually blocked by multiple other structural factors both material and immaterial and at different levels micro and macro, in an interwoven system of structural violence, as we explore in more detail below.

Insecurity, afrophobia and exclusion from public space

Growing xenophobia/afrophobia⁸ (Moyo et al., 2017; Dahlberg & Thapar-Björkert, 2023; Santana de Andrade et al., forthcoming) has also led to increasing incidences of physical violence against foreigners (and specifically those from other African countries) in South Africa, and for many of the young people we spoke to there was an ever-present fear of being visible in public spaces and of the violence they might encounter, thus limiting their mobility within public space and in some cases restricting them to their home.

Those in school spoke about bullying and scapegoating that they had experienced both inside and out of the school premises. They talked about being bullied for not speaking the local language (isiZulu), or for being "too black" (Letsatsi, 2025). Others noted that they had been physically attacked when they got good marks or praise from teachers, attributing this to the South Africans being "jealous" of any success that may have. Such bullying comes not only from other children at school but also on some occasions from teachers. One young woman spoke about being insulted and called a "kwere-kwere" (a derogatory term for foreign nationals) by teachers in her school. She went to talk to the head of the school about this, but her complaints were dismissed: "What are they going to do to support a foreigner like me?", she explained.

Bullying can also result in physical violence. The boys in particular talked about being scared when leaving school and going home:

As soon as school finishes, we just go home straight. We don't wait for anything, because sometimes, there are people outside waiting to fight. So it's not safe at all. Anything can happen. Sometimes we just mostly stay in the house. (Young man, DRC, 17 years old)

And another added:

⁸The anti-migrant sentiment, discrimination and violence which is increasingly present in South Africa is frequently referred to as xenophobia, but as various researchers have argued this could more properly be named as Afrophobia as it is targeted not at all foreigners, but particularly those from other African countries.

It's not safe. There's a lot of things that happen in school and out of school. So fights, people bringing weapons in school. People in this country, if any foreign national, has a problem with the South African ... if you piss off someone, they just tell you we'll come and get you after school". (Young man, Burundi, 16 years old)

Feelings of insecurity in public space were exacerbated by the actions of the police who would not protect the young people, but on the contrary posed a threat to them. Fear of arrest was shared amongst all the young people. As one young man explained:

Many foreigners are being arrested every day because of not having documents, even though the police or the government is the one not giving them a document in the first place. (Young man, DRC, 18 years old)

Arrests are not limited to those who do not have documentation. One young woman recounted her arrest despite having an asylum seeker permit:

They arrested me for nothing. They don't let you explain. They didn't let me go and look for my papers. They never let me explain. They just took me, put me in a van and took me to the police station. I literally had to start making phone calls to people to bring my papers, but they didn't let me. They don't give you time. It's like you're living in insecurity. You can't even walk around and feel free in the streets, because you know anytime they might just come and bully you and arrest you, and the fact that they are also xenophobic and always calling you names like you're not even human. (Young woman, DRC, 18 years old)

Another young man shared how the police commonly used these opportunities to financially exploit foreign nationals:

I was going to church and then just a few minutes before I reached the church I saw a police van. They stopped me and asked me where I was going? I said I was going to church. They asked me for my papers. I had a picture of them on my phone. But they wouldn't let me show it. They just put me inside the van. They said they would take me to prison if I didn't give them the money in my wallet. But it wasn't my money, it was money for the rent. But I had to give it, so they would let me go and not take me to prison. (Young man, DRC, 19 years old)

The xenophobia/afrophobia they experience, together with a constant fear of harassment or arrest by police, limits these young people's physical mobility with many of them explaining to us how they prefer to stay at home when it is not absolutely necessary to go out into public spaces, and how they rush to get home quickly from school or work to avoid danger. Thus their physical mobility within the geographical space of the city is severely limited, revealing the spatial implications of the continuing securitisation of migration policies and police controls, in what Castañeda & Melo have termed the "geography of confinement" (Castañeda & Melo, 2019).

Family and community policing of mobility

In addition to experiencing restricted mobility in public spaces, young people also expressed constraints on their mobility coming from their own families and communities, at another level of control. Young people talked about a "black tax" (Mathebula & Walker, 2025): the fact of their parents investing in them and their education which

created huge perceived responsibilities and expectations on them in return. Amid increasingly restrictive migration regimes with durable effects on (im)mobility, and under families' heightened expectations of 'success' in light of the sacrifices they feel they have undertaken for their children, young people frequently experience guilt and restrictive obligations (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2021). When they are unable to meet their parents' expectations, because of the various barriers they encounter, such as lack of documentation or inability to progress to higher education, they feel the weight of family disapproval and disappointment as holding them back.

In foreigner households that is perpetuated on a level that you cannot understand, your parents grind it into you: "I did this for you. I did this for you. I did this. What do you have to show for it?" (Young man, DRC, 19 years old)

Thus families, whilst often imagined as a source of support (Crankshaw et al., 2023), can also be felt as a constraint by young people who struggle to live up to their parents' ideals whilst also progressing in their lives in their host country. Similarly, communities from the same national origin, which could also be assumed to be a source of support (Dinbabo et al., 2021; Koskimaki & Mazani, 2025), were described by many of the young people as attempting to control and restrict them and not offering any support. As one young man explained:

If one person is succeeding, there is jealousy and hate, so they don't want to see each other progress. So it's very hard. Even when you're going through hard times, you can't go to this person, we're from the same country, but I can't go to ask for help. They won't help me because they want to see us suffer. So, it's very hard. Even in our communities, we feel outcasted and unwanted. (Young man, DRC, 17 years old)

The excerpts show how community "support" can also operate as a stopping device (Ahmed, 2007). Favours often entail debt and surveillance, producing shame and obligation that mark these young people as "out of place"—both physically and symbolically. This dynamic exemplifies Ahmed's stoppedness: the felt experience of being halted by others' expectations and by atmospheres that accumulate around certain bodies, rendering movement risky and constricting orientations to the future (Ahmed, 2007). Thus, the community appears simultaneously as vital infrastructure and a site of immobilisation.

Impossibility of social mobility

One of the issues which was raised regularly by all the young people was that of the various barriers in their access to education (especially tertiary education) and thus to hopes of upward social mobility. All children in South Africa, whatever their status, have the right to access basic education and this right has been re-asserted in a recent circular from the Department of Basic Education in 2020 which re-iterated that all children, even those who are undocumented, have the right to access school and to sit all relevant national examinations (Munyoka, 2023; Machaka, 2025). However, in practice, many schools fail to respect this, and children and youth can be denied admission or excluded from a school for failing to provide a birth certificate, valid passport or permit (van Schalkwyk & Maistry, 2022).

Economic precarity which is in itself linked to migration status (or lack of status) plays an important role in limiting educational opportunities. For many young people, school

fees and other related costs were also an important barrier to their educational trajectory. They spoke about having to stay at home because their parents could not afford to pay for fees, transport, uniform or schoolbooks:

In my household, we have about nine kids, so it's very hard for my father to like, and my father is the only person who's mostly working. So, it's challenging for him to work and pay school fees for all nine children, including my cousin, whose mother is not working, she is a single mother, so he's also paying school fees for him. So it's very tough and difficult. Sometimes we don't even go to school, because we don't have money for the transport. So, yeah, even me, right now, I'm in Matric (final year of high school - grade 12), and my school fees from grade eight are not even paid. Up to today, he's still paying them. So it's very hard for us. (Young man, DRC, 16 years old)

And another young man explained:

I stay with my aunt and uncle. They focus on their children, I am not their responsibility. Transport is like 65 Rand a day, plus the school fees as well. I don't want to put pressure on them, I understand, so sometimes I don't go to school because of that. If they don't have the money, I'll just stay home. (Young man, DRC, 17 years old)

And added to this economic precarity is the administrative precarity of not having legal documents. For those who do manage to reach their final year of school, problems arise when they sit their final matric exams. While all schools require documentation for a student to sit their final exams, the inability to provide this documentation should not prevent a child from taking the exam. However, several young people told us they had been barred from sitting the exams by their school administration:

I could not even write my matric because of my documents (Young man, DRC, 18 years old)

Here in South Africa, to write your matric you need your documents. But I didn't have my documents with me. Seeing others, your friends, who are writing the exam and you are not, it was very painful, very painful. It disturbed me a lot. (Young man, DRC, 20 years old)

And another young woman explained her traumatic experience of sexual harassment when trying to sit her exam:

When I was planning to do my exams at school, my first paper, the inspector came to me and he asked me, 'Do you have your passport?' I said no. He told me to get out. So I went out. But then he told me, 'the only way for me to help you, you're gonna be my wife.' So he told me, 'are you gonna be my wife so I can let you take that exam?' (Young woman, DRC, 18 years old)

Without a matric qualification, there is no hope of them going on to further education, and this significantly restricts their possibilities of getting a job. But even if they do manage to pass the exam and get the matric qualification, the possibilities of higher education are severely limited, leading to feelings of frustration and despair, as one young man in his final year of school told us:

I'm wasting my time, although I'm doing well at school, But I feel like it's worthless because I know I won't be able to continue. (Young man, DRC, 17years old)

Many of the young people we spoke to had hopes of going on to tertiary education/university and of studying to qualify for better employment. They mentioned wishing to be doctors, nurses, engineers, lawyers or architects for example. But their lack of documentation, or having the wrong documentation, meant that they were refused entry to university. As one young woman explained:

I wanted to study dentistry, and then I found out that you need the right ID papers for that (Young woman, DRC, 20years old)

Young people explained that the university online application sites required a national ID number, and that their asylum seeker or refugee documents were not recognised in this system, so they frequently had no way even to submit an application for a place at a public university. Others had managed to enter the application system but then had experienced numerous other obstacles, which in the end meant that they were not given a university place:

I applied for engineering and I started doing the follow up. They started telling me, "No, your results need to go for verification. You need to send them to this place. They need to stamp it in this place. You need to go there and certify your documents. You need to do this." I went and I did all of that, and I sent them the documents but they were just buying time, so that by the time I finished and managed to send the documents, they told me the course was full (Young woman, DRC, 18years old)

The young people explained that it might be easier to obtain a place in a private higher education institution, as these are less strict in their requirements regarding identity documents. However, these institutions are very expensive, and in general they or their families could not afford the fees. As one young woman told us:

I can't get into college because of money, because of the money, because they're asking you to pay so much. Yes, and also my mom, she's not working. (Young woman, DRC, 17years old)

Economic precarity thus combines again with administrative precarity to exclude these young people. And this exclusion is compared with the experience of South African young people who have the required identity documents to register at public universities and who qualify for government financial support. Many young people referred to the fact that South African citizens can access government bursaries through the National Student Financial Aids Scheme. This is not open to non-South African citizens:

It's very expensive, and our parents do not have the money, and it's not easy for a foreigner to get a scholarship. But if you're a South African, you're more privileged. It's easy for them. They get as far as they like (...) So you feel there's a really big difference between what you can get and what they can get. (Young woman, Burundi, 16years old)

For those who did manage to find and pay for a place in a private higher education institution, they often found that they faced continuing xenophobia/afrophobia ([Santana de Andrade et al., forthcoming](#)) with tutors treating them differently and giving them

lower marks than their South African peers, making the completion of a degree almost impossible.

Even if you can study in South Africa, it's useless. I was doing electrical engineering. I was doing that. Yeah. So, even the lectures, they can tell you, since you have an asylum seeker permit, no one will employ you. You're starting this course, and they'll be just like: "Yeah, your mom is wasting her money just like that." And then how do you feel when you get home? I always cry. It's painful. (Young woman, DRC, 19 years old)

Others explained the overt discrimination they had encountered, with lecturers failing them so that they had to pay to re-take and pass their final exams. Or being forced to write papers and take exams for other South African students who were failing so that these South African students could pass their course. If they did not agree to do this, they would also be failed.

Not being able to obtain a matric certificate or to access university or complete a higher education qualification impacts on young peoples' opportunities for social mobility through employment. Certain jobs and professions are also closed off to them due to regulations regarding the need for South African citizenship for government or public service jobs. One young woman, who had managed to enrol to study law in a private college, told us that she had been discouraged when one of her lecturers had told her that "you will never be able to work as a lawyer in this country". She expressed her frustration with this system:

You can study law for four years, do your articles for two years, whatever. But in the end you can't work as a lawyer in South Africa. You have to be a South African to work as a lawyer. And you can't go to another country and become a lawyer. So you just stay home with your expensive degree and do nothing, and then you become something like doing, like manual work. (Young woman, DRC, 20 years old)

And another young woman explained:

There are people like us who have a bachelors (degree), they are qualified to have important jobs. But they don't get those jobs. They end up going on the streets or in the salon, doing jobs where you get paid nothing. (Young woman, DRC, 21 years old)

Nearly all of the young people we spoke to talked about discrimination in employment and the fact that employers did not want to employ those without South African citizenship (even though those with asylum seeker and refugee permits have a legal right to work). This restricted them to part-time, informal and badly paid jobs in shops, call centres or beauty salons. As one young woman said:

Even if you have a school certificate, you still can't get a job, because you're a refugee or you're from another country. So even though things are tough for South Africans, it cannot be as tough as it is for us, right?. (Young woman, DRC, 20 years old)

Thus, the various forms of violence and constraint exercised by a variety of different actors and at different levels, contribute towards a general immobility and immobilisation, where young people feel "stuck" or "stopped" and unable to project themselves into a stable adult future as we discuss further in the next section.

On being stopped: thwarted dreams and ontological insecurity

In Sara Ahmed's work on the phenomenology of whiteness (Ahmed, 2007) she asks the question of 'how it feels to be stopped?'. This notion of being "stopped" which Ahmed associates with non-whiteness could also be applied here to non-South Africanness, and particularly the non-South Africanness of these young people in situations of forced migration⁹. As Ahmed writes, "stopping is both a political economy, which is distributed unevenly between others, and an affective economy, which leaves its impressions, affecting those bodies that are subject to its address" (2007, p.161). Herz and Johansson (2012) use this notion of being stopped to discuss the experience of young asylum seekers in Sweden. They argue that in this context Ahmed's concept of being stopped captures both the physical and emotional experiences of not being allowed to pass, of being directed towards something else or of having to "choose" another way (Herz and Johansson 2012, p. 159). Whilst previous studies have demonstrated the ways in which forms of conviviality and mutuality rooted in Southern African concepts have allowed the creation of bonds between South African citizens and migrants (Chekero & Morreira, 2020), such forms of conviviality were not noted by any of our participants, who felt rather excluded from South African society.

These physical and emotional feelings of being "stopped" have clear echoes in the words of these young people we spoke to. The impacts of the various forms of imposed immobility which we have analysed here lead to feelings of being "stuck" or "stopped", prevented from pursuing the paths of their choice, which in turn produce feelings of hopelessness about their future lives. Many of the young men and women expressed clear dreams and aspirations for their future eg to become an engineer, a lawyer or a basketball player, but were highly pessimistic about the realisation of these, not because of their own incapacities, but because of the system of administrative and structural violence which would block them. The "stoppedness" thus often forced them into choices that did not align with their original hopes or strategies, working for example, in call centres or hair salons as this was the only employment open to them, taking informal and precarious jobs just to survive.

This resulted in what might be labelled a deep ontological insecurity in the sense of not being able to plan or project their future lives. Laing (2010, p. 43) describes ontological insecurity as feeling 'precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question' (Laing, 2010, p. 42), and this "precarious differentiation" from young South Africans of the same age was clear amongst those young people we spoke to. This "precarious differentiation" occurs in the period of youth where under the dominant understandings of social age, people should be at a key moment of their life course making a transition to adulthood and planning for stable adult lives. As Chase (2013, p. 860) argues, ontological security goes beyond physical well-being or protection and involves 'a sense of security stemming from being able to carve out a life plan and envisaging a trajectory into the future', something which these young people were unable to do. In this they felt very different from their South African

⁹We do not wish to suggest here that this feeling of "stoppedness" is unique to young people in situation of migration. Indeed the context of poverty and inequality of South Africa means that many young South Africans may also experience similar feelings of being "stuck" or "stopped" (Masha & Mdeni, 2025). However, young people who also have a precarious migration status experience particular structural barriers which makes their situation different from those of their South African peers, for example, in relation to lack of safety nets, access to social security benefits, experience of afrophobic/xenophobic or police violence.

peers, who they felt had a “safety net” which allowed them more freedom, including a freedom to fail or to fall and have a back-up. As one young man told us:

When I look at South Africans as a whole, kids have the leeway to make their own decisions, to make mistakes and whatnot. And, yeah, they can mess up, but they have a system that backs them up. Us, it's not like that. (Young man, DRC, 19years old)

Others also spoke about how their lives were different from those of their South African peers, and evaluated their lives and their childhoods/youth in relation to those of these South Africans.

It hurts a lot that at my age, I have to do things that other children don't do. South Africans our age, they don't work. They're always sitting at home, you see. But for us as foreigners, we have to work hard. We need to help our parents to pay money for rent. If you don't help, it's a problem sometimes or there's no food. (Young woman, DRC, 17years old)

Many of the young people expressed feelings of sadness, depression and despair at this forced immobility and the inability to realise their dreams. One young man told us:

You know, it's painful as a young man. As a youth you study from primary to high school, at the end of the day you study. You finish your studies. You have your dreams that if I finish, maybe to go to university, either to go to college, or to work. Then at the end of the day, you find yourself with nothing. (Young man, DRC, 20years old)

And a young woman expressed similar feelings of hopelessness:

As much as you may have so much ambition and passion to do something, but if you don't have the things available and everything's blocked, there's nothing you can do. (Young woman, Burundi, 20years old)

Another young man explained that he and many of his peers were depressed at the situation they find themselves in:

A lot of people are depressed now that they have finished school and they're sitting at home. And we're getting older to be honest. We also, we also have our own, like, I would say, anxiety, because now we're thinking, now I'm nearly 20 and what am I doing. (Young man, DRC, 19years old)

Their situation leads many of the young people, to feel that they have no future in South Africa, as one young woman explained:

There's no better future in South Africa. There's no better future for us foreigners, less chance even to get to work. (Young woman, Burundi, 17years old)

Strategies for coping with “stoppedness”

We have described the various ways in which young people in situations of forced migration experience imposed immobility due to a range of forms of structural and administrative violence. But having explored this enforced immobility, it is important also to underline that despite their feelings of depression and anger at their situation, they also have strategies for coping and trying to move forward. Strategies that the young people

described for coping with these experiences and feelings were gendered with young women talking more about staying at home and how they found comfort in listening to music, watching videos, or creative pursuits such as dress-making or crochet - pursuits which they were also sometimes able to turn into their own business ventures through selling their products online via social media. Young men said that they spent more time outside, playing sports for example, which can be a reminder that they are “good at something” and can help them overcome feelings of despair or futility:

Some things I do to get my mind off it is, I play sports. So sports sometimes gives me something like a motivation to look forward to. It's like, at least I'm good at something else, you know, then, so I tend to look at that (Young man, DRC, 17 years old)

They also talked about pursuing networks and contacts to try and advance in their lives outside of the more “usual” channels. One young man talked about his dream of becoming an entrepreneur. He said that although his dream had been to study engineering, he realised that he could never do this and so would find a way to be successful without “traditional” qualifications. He said that to succeed in this way would require just “discipline and determination” (Young man, DRC, 17 years old).

For nearly all of the young people we spoke to, religion (whether christianity or islam) was a source of comfort and inspiration. Many talked about how they believed that what they were experiencing was determined by god, and that god would help them to find a solution and a way out of their difficulties.

But finally, for many the only real way they could dream of moving past their stoppedness and enforced immobility was to leave the country. This in itself being a probably unrealisable dream due to the impossibilities of returning to countries of origin still in conflict, and where for many of them there were no longer any family or community ties, and the even more unlikely prospect of third-country mobility, available only to a very select few through international resettlement (Khan & Rayner, 2020).

Limitations

We acknowledge the limitations in our study particularly regarding the fact that the young people who participated originated in the large majority from the DRC, and thus the geographical diversity of migrant origins in South Africa was not represented. Further we did not carry out any focus group discussions with young South Africans, and so whilst we acknowledge that these young people may also face ontological insecurities due to precarious economic and social situations, we do not have any data to analyse this or to establish any comparison between young people with South African citizenship and those without.

Conclusion

For young people in situations of forced migration, the habitual schemas and ideas of life course for childhood and young adulthood are impacted by structural violence, administrative barriers and social exclusion. On the one hand young people in situations of forced migration may experience growing up “too soon”, being obliged to take on roles and responsibilities normally attributed to adults, such as negotiating with immigration authorities, working to support the family or care for younger siblings (or even their parents). At the same time, however, they experience a feeling of stuckness and of being

unable to progress along the expected and desired steps towards a fulfilled adulthood - passing their final school exams, moving on to higher education, gaining a good job in line with their qualifications and talents. For the young people we met during our research this feeling of being stopped was a central theme in their lives, with blocked aspirations and hopes for the future, and little possibility of projecting themselves into the future adult lives which they might have hoped for. Whilst various forms of structural violence and exclusion impact on all those in situations of forced migration, for these young people the barriers can be seen to have particularly harsh impacts creating forms of temporal immobility, blocking their passage to adulthood. They clearly expressed the impacts of this immobility and stoppedness on their mental health and wellbeing, expressing feelings of pain and hopelessness. The immobility was also inter-generational as parents' statuses both impacted on their children's ability to move forward with their lives, and to improve their social condition, creating a kind of inherited immobility. Young people did talk about their strategies for bypassing the many obstacles in their paths and for creating new and alternative forms of social mobility and life course progress. However, for some, the only way that they could see a future for themselves was outside of South Africa. In their study on young forced migrants in Sweden, Herz and Johansson (2012) argue that 'being stopped' can lead to what they describe as turning points "where young people use their resources in order to break the chain of social exclusion" (2012, p. 173). In the case of South Africa, the space for creating these "turning points" seems to have all but disappeared. Given the increasingly restrictive and exclusionary policies being applied to forced migrants, and the growing xenophobia/afrophobia that they experience, many feel that they are so "stopped" within South Africa, that they have no future in the country.

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Author contributions

All authors contributed to the research design and methodology, and to data collection and analysis. JF and GsA wrote the main manuscript text, and TC, AT and YR contributed to revising and finalising the manuscript.

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Data availability

Data supporting this research is not publicly available for reasons of confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Fully anonymised data may be available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Human ethics and consent to participate

Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the Université Paris 8 and University KwaZulu-Natal, and all participants gave written informed consent to participation.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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