

The Health Worker

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Grace Chouriri cares for fellow exiles because she says it makes her feel that she's doing something good for her community.

Grace Chouriri, not her real name, laughs bitterly when asked whether she will ever return to her native home.

"How can I go back and crucify myself?" she asked, shaking her head.

She will talk at length about her objections to the current regime. But she grows quiet when asked personal details about herself and her former life as a healthcare worker in Harare.

Eventually, she divulges rapid-fire details, a bullet-point list of her life so far: she is the youngest of seven children. Two brothers died of AIDS when she was younger. She left her family's rural home for an urban life where she met and married her husband, who she said also died of AIDS a few years after they were married.

"I became angry at the lack of options for people who are sick and I started to associate with people who were also angry," she says matter-of-factly.

The "people" she refers to were members of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

She refuses to go into what kinds of activities she participated in while she was an activist in Harare, but she offers that "one morning I was told I had to leave for my safety. So I left".

Nearly eight years have passed and she has created a life of stability for herself as a soft-spoken but committed member of the MDC community in London. Through her work with the group, she met her partner, a man who she will describe only as "kind and hard-working".

He works two full-time jobs, she said. They had lived with friends for several years but last fall they moved into their own studio near West Ham in east London.

While she said she does not personally plan to return home, she is committed to helping those who she had to leave behind.

"I do not wish to go back," she said. "They have ruined my country for me. I would not be safe. But I want more for my people. [Morgan] Tsvangirai would have made things better. He was our hope."

Tsvangirai, the MDC opposition leader who beat Mugabe in a March election, pulled out of a June run-off because of escalating violence.

Chouriri said many of her friends in London's Zimbabwe activist community have stopped speaking out in recent weeks because of concern for their own safety.

"We are definitely being watched by Mugabe's security forces," she said. "We are being careful. But we left our country so we wouldn't have to hide and we do not want to hide here."

She begins to open up when asked about her plans for the future.

"I have my refugee status. I want to get back to my health field," she said. "AIDS does not kill people so quickly in this country like it does in mine. There is hope in this country when you are sick."

At the moment, she is not working. She said she has tried different odd jobs over the years but ends up losing them when she takes off too much work to care for ill neighbours and friends.

"People know about my background," she said. "They will come to me. They will want me to look after their children. And I do it. It makes me feel that I am doing something good for my community here."

She said she is not in regular contact with her family back home but tries to send money to her parents as often as she is able.

"They have nothing," she said. "I heard that after the March election, two of my brothers were badly beaten. They had broken bones. And we were grateful. Broken bones are not so bad."

She said one of her parents' neighbours had been killed in April by a mob of men belonging to the ruling Zanu-PF party.

"He was older than my father and they dragged him from his home and killed him," she said.

When asked whether she thinks her family will flee the violence, she shakes her head.

"They were born there, and they will never leave," she said. "They did not understand when I went to [Harare] and they did not understand when I came to London. It is there life there. This is now my life here."

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