



**Interview with:** Sena (04)  
**Interviewed by:** Ruth  
**Date of interview:** 5 February 2017  
**Travel:** Zambia – Congo – South Africa

**Ruth:** Today I will be speaking to Mrs Sena from Zambia. Good morning Mrs Sena. Thanks for giving me your time and telling me about your life.

**Sena:** A very good morning, my sister.

**Ruth:** What language do you want us to use?

**Sena:** I want us to talk in Kiswahili so that we can speak freely and well.

**Ruth:** Sena, please tell us how you left Zambia, how come you have a refugee document yet you are Zambian? Please tell us your story.

**Sena:** I was born and bred in Zambia but I am married to a Congolese man. We left Congo and fled to this country. We fled Kabila’s war, particularly when they started beating and killing people—that is when we decided to leave the country, not knowing where to go. That is when we met this guy who was coming to South Africa with his car and we asked him for a lift. We really begged him and explained to him that we were running away from war in Congo and have already suffered a lot.

My husband has a relative who used to work with Mobutu but who was living in South Africa. We asked the driver to take us to his place. So finally he agreed to take us, but when we arrived, like, half-way, he started asking us for money saying that if there is no money he will rape me. And yet I was heavily pregnant. Then we started praying to God and asking God not to allow this man to rape me in front of my husband and children.

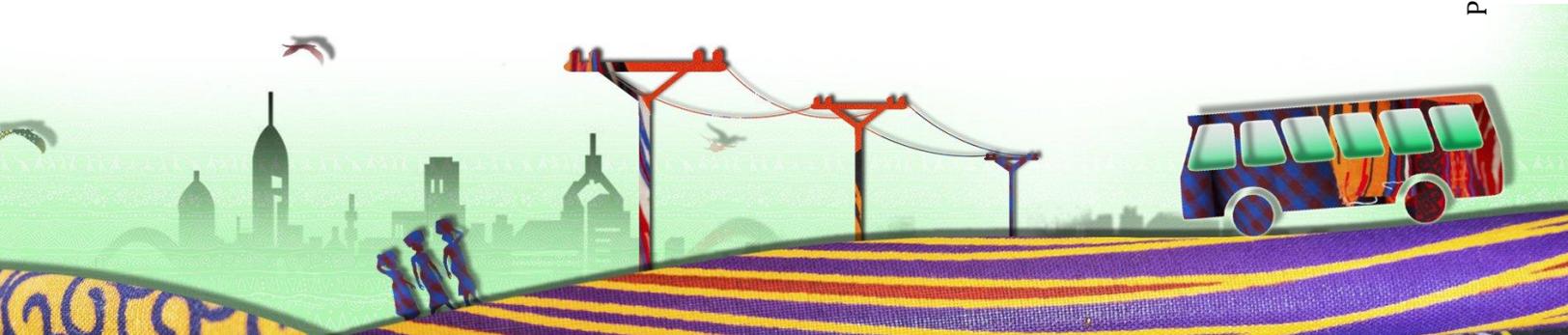
When we arrived at the border with South Africa, that driver said he will leave us there at the border. It was only when we gave him \$50 that he agreed to bring us to South Africa. My husband was praying all the time and when people saw him praying to God, they got scared and thought he was a pastor.

We arrived in South Africa in 1998. I was pregnant with my fourth child. We rested a bit because at that time there were very few refugees in South Africa. Then I gave birth to my fourth child, a baby girl. Today she is 17 years old.

**Ruth:** How did you survive in South Africa? With four children in a country where you know nobody, how did you make it?

**Sena:** I was selling clothes for R1 each in the market. I would also go to Indians’ houses and sell so that we can survive. Children were going to a school in Sydenham. We were assisted at the Cathedral (Emmanuel Cathedral). They gave us food for few months. That is how we survived. School fees were R100 and again it was the Cathedral that paid that money for our children.

My husband did find a job at Spar but then Zulu ladies started making advances on him. When he persistently refused, they fired him from work. Nevertheless, my children did continue with their studies and some of them have even completed their degrees here. All my three children have finished their studies here in South Africa, but they can’t find jobs. One of my children, who is living with disability, graduated from the University of KwaZulu-Natal with a degree in media studies. After completing his studies, he found a job and signed a contract. So far, all went well. Then they asked him for ID document. When they found that he was a refugee, they cancelled the contract. He lost the job because he is a refugee. The boy cried like a small baby.





My husband is a teacher and has been a teacher since we were in the Congo. When he arrived here in South Africa, people advised him to study teaching again here, which he did. Then he found a job that only lasted for a year because he is a refugee. Now my husband is not working, and my children have completed their studies but they are also not working because they are refugees. We are suffering a lot in this country: our husbands can't find jobs and even our children can't find jobs either, even when they have studied here.

Where will we go now? Only God can help us because now it becomes very difficult to even buy food. Life is getting more and more difficult every day. Water and electricity bills are reaching R2000 per month, an amount that we cannot afford, so the electricity was disconnected and we stay in darkness with our children.

The government is doing nothing for us. Where we stay sometimes there is water; at other times there is no water. We are appealing for help, please. We are suffering here. If we could afford it, we could leave this place. My children are extremely traumatised because they have South African qualifications but they can't find jobs. This is stressing us as well. We don't know what we are going to do. There is no water in our building.

**Ruth:** So, how do you pay your rent? How do you live in this building? Are you discriminated against or not? What are the requirements of staying in that building? How is it to live in a building that does not have electricity?

**Sena:** Living conditions are not good in this building. Our children are constantly called 'amakwerekwere'. Even where we go to collect water, Zulus are pushing our children around and beating them. So those are not good conditions to live in. There are stringent conditions for water collection downstairs. Our children are terrified. They are not happy to live here at all. Locals are making our life miserable. They swear at our children and keep on asking them when they will go back to their country. They tell them: "It is now Christmas: you must go back home". We are allowed to collect water from Monday to Thursday afternoon; on other days we have to stay without water and electricity.

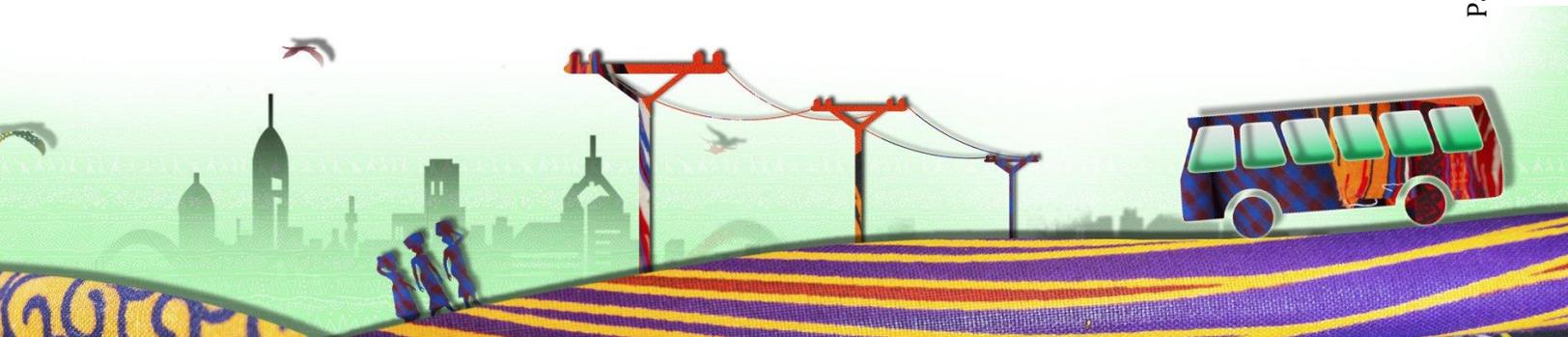
**Ruth:** I want to know what happened to you during xenophobia. Were you directly affected?

**Sena:** During xenophobia we suffered a lot. We went to seek asylum at the American Consulate. Then they put us in a truck and took us to the Methodist Church where the living conditions were appalling—the quality of food and accommodation were very bad. The children started getting sick. My son's mouth was badly affected because of the terrible living conditions at the church. After two months, we went back to our building because life became unbearable there at the Methodist Church for the two months that we stayed there.

The situation was very bad. When you are in a bus and someone calls you on your phone, if you speak in a foreign language, these Zulu boys start beating you, so we suffered a lot during xenophobia. At that time I had a small baby of eight months. Eish .... The time will come when we will tell our story. It is not safe to live in South Africa: you can't walk freely; it is not safe.

**Ruth:** You said that children are traumatised. How are they managing to study at schools under those conditions?

**Sena:** Even at school our children are suffering very much. They are constantly called names such as 'amakwerekwere'. Even teachers are swearing at our children at school, and our young girls are getting pregnant at a very young age. Now even our young boys are smoking whoonga at school. We have completely lost them. They now swear at us their parents and adults just like Zulu boys. They do not listen to us anymore. It is like they are learning these terrible habits from school. Now we don't know what to do.





**Ruth:** Now, you said that you are suffering and children are suffering ... how about your treatment at hospitals?

**Sena:** At hospital it is fine. If you are going to give birth just don't cry: if you make a lot of noises they will be cross with you. If you meet a white or Indian doctor, they will look after you, but if you find a Zulu doctor, s/he will be communicating with nurses in isiZulu and you won't know what they are saying.

**Ruth:** Your story is very sad. Now, what about Home Affairs? Do you have a problem with them?

**Sena:** We need jobs and even training so that we can find jobs. Our husbands are very stressed because of hardships. Life is difficult here. Currently all my children have completed their studies. We don't have problems with our documents because we all have refugee status but we all can't find jobs. Oh, also at hospital, they do take blood sample for HIV testing without the consent of the person concerned.

Here to find a flat for rental is very difficult. Please help us, we are suffering.

**Ruth:** How many years are you in this country?

**Sena:** We have been living here in South Africa for the past 18 years but still we have no jobs. We are asking you to help us find employment, if not for us but at least for our children because we can't go back to our country. There is war and instability there. Here in South Africa, locals don't like us and also there are no jobs. There is no peace. If xenophobia comes back again, how am I going to flee with a disabled child? Please help us refugees. We are not safe in this country. We are suffering. We need jobs or money to start our own businesses.

**Ruth:** Do you plan to go back to where you came from or you want to continue living here?

**Sena:** I would love to go back home because I am suffering here, but it is not safe there and all my children are now speaking English. If they go back to Congo, they will not adapt to the language there and that is the problem, so we are forced to stay here.

