



Interview with: Dina (14)
Interviewed by: Joelle
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Travel: DCR – South Africa

Dina: The reason I came here, or let me say that the reason I left my country was because of problems that I had with my children's father. He sent me back to my parents without giving me any reason ... [he just said] "You are going back to your parents because you did this and that." So I left Kinshasa and went back to Lubumbashi where my parents lived. I informed my father that I was chased out of wedlock and sent back home without knowing the reason. Then my mother said: "Okay, as they sent you back without a reason, [just] accept it." We then sat as a family, reasoned together and the decision was taken that I should go to South Africa (clapping her hands). We started applying for a passport and everything, and then I came to South Africa.

When I arrived in South Africa, I was welcomed by my aunties. My father and mother were also there, so I was welcomed. But my father was sick, very sick.

After a while, they gave us addresses of schools, saying [I should] go to these places with my mother, that there were schools and training colleges where I could register. I wanted to become a flight attendant. My father said: "Go and look, then decide whether you will start here in Pretoria or you will go to where Irene is and study there." I said: "Okay, Dad, it doesn't matter—let me go." (clapping her hands).

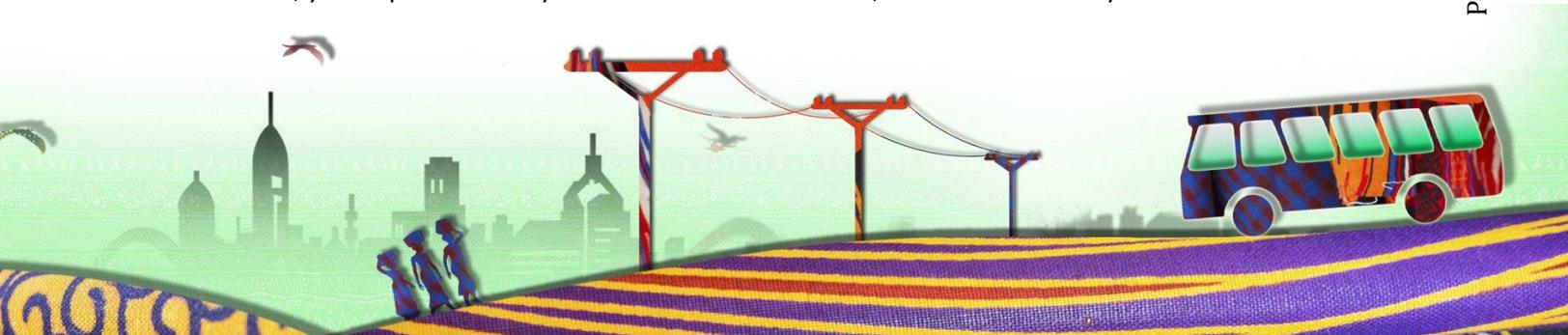
I left and went to look for schools with my mother—just to look around. When we arrived [at one place] we found that there were no places available. They said they are halfway through the school programme and we should wait until next year. They said we could do a preliminary registration and that they would call me. After that I left with my mother.

Then our father became very sick. I'm telling you, he almost passed away with that illness. That situation shocked my mother and me. We started worrying, asking ourselves what we were going to do. Must we take the money and register at school when my Dad was so sick? [He had been over-medicated at the hospital.] At that time, he started consulting a Congolese doctor who said: "No, you have been taking these drugs for a long time and now they have dominated your body. You must stop taking them. You must start drinking a lot of water with these drugs that I have selected for you, among the ones that you were given."

For that reason, we could not go back to school. When the school phoned us we told them we were not in Pretoria but in Durban. That is how we lied to them.

We waited, waited, waited until it was time for my Dad to go back to our country, but his health continued to deteriorate. When we went to book a flight, they gave us complications. They said: "Oh no, your father is very sick. There is no way that we can take him on our plane. You must send him by road. But others said that a road journey would be too long. There were a lot of complications! (gestures with her hands) I'm telling you, we didn't know what to do. After a week we went back and re-started the process of booking a flight. He looked a bit better then and the airline accepted him. That's how he took his flight and went back to our country.

Now this situation caused a huge handicap for my studies, especially when I realised that I also had children who needed to go to school. My father, who was my hope, was no longer working due to ill health, yet I expected money from him. At the same time, I needed to send my own children to school





which was unaffordable for me. To find food was easy, but it became very costly for me and my children to study (clapping hands in disappointment). I didn't know what to do.

People were saying to me that I should first go and get an [asylum permit]. That's how I came to Durban. I applied for asylum for the three of us and got the papers for all of us.

Then when we completed that process, people said to me: "No, your children cannot just stay like you. You are a grown-up person. At least you went to school back home. Your children have a problem. They must go to school before it's too late for them. Whether they can speak English or not, they have to go to school."

When I arrived here, I had little bit of money, and I used it to register them at school. I looked for whatever I could find [in the way of] uniforms and all other things that I could give them. Then they started going to school.

Tih, tih, tih (means as time went pass). I started living a life of promises—you will further your studies ... oh, look for a job ... oh, let's go ... do this, do that. In any case, I realised that first I had to forget about studying. Maybe I would find a job that would allow me to further my studies, something like you are getting paid a salary and at the same time you are studying. That's how I understood it, but it didn't work.

The kinds of jobs that you are getting are the ones that pay you meagre salary. When you go to look for a job, you are told you need to have an ID. You go to look for a job, but, oh, you are not a citizen and "Here we don't hire foreigners without ID—you need to have an ID." Eh ... big story.

I didn't know what to do. I went back to Johannesburg to my aunt's place. My aunt said: "Now what do we do? If you go to school, you will be stuck because of your children. We can take care of you. You belong with us, but what about your children?" (Clapping her hands).

This is what brought me to South Africa. If you want to stop now ... I don't know.

Joelle: So what brought you to South Africa is your separation from your husband? Is that what motivated you to take the decision to come to South Africa?

Dina: Mmmm ... (yes)

Joelle: Does that means that you were never interested in coming to South Africa before that?

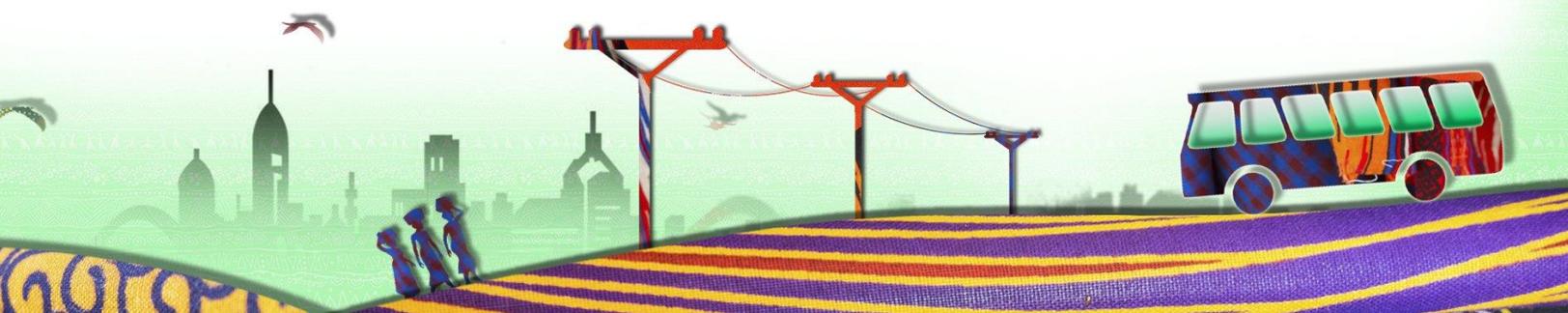
Dina: Yes, the interest was there, but not really. How can I put it? I have never given it serious consideration like others who say they must go no matter what. No, no, no. For me it was a matter of coming to visit my father and then going back home. To come here was never an issue that preoccupied my mind.

Joelle: Why didn't you prefer to go back to your country with your father?

Dina: Well, I preferred to stay because I saw that the separation between me and the father of my kids was helping me. In Congo we were often fighting, checking each other's cellphones, and so it was a problem. He was the one who decided to send me back to my parents without any problem. I wanted him also to look for me one day. That is why I said ... um ... let's leave each other like that. Let me live on my own.

Joelle: Do you feel comfortable living in South Africa right now?

Dina: Umm ... not at all because I am working very hard but my income is little. Yeah, I'm doing catering, but I am earning very little. I cook food for everybody ... like I can say all nations, but people choose what they eat within their culture. Do you know tribes? It is ... their culture—they are choosing based on that. "Oh, I am from this culture like ..." For instance, Zulu people don't like some things, but some of them do, and then they tell others to sometimes test the food. Because we are all Africans, we need to [try] their food, the way they cook ... (clapping her hands).





Joelle: Talk to me about your work experience in South Africa.

Dina: My first job here was as a security guard at New Germany. I worked for three months but they didn't pay me. Three months of work, no payment! They paid us one month, then they started telling us that, no, they had to deduct for our uniform, or our shoes, this and this and that. They first told us that they will be paying us R2,500. Then they changed and started paying us R1,500. This was a disservice to us. I worked for three months then I stopped.

After that I started selling clothes. I was going to Johannesburg, selling clothes up and down. I spent about one year selling clothes. But too many people were selling clothes on credit and all that, so my business started going down, and then I stopped.

So I went again to somewhere where they were hiring people. It was a freight agency called Prunel Freight Logistics. They took me as a receptionist. We were sending these Japanese cars to Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and so on. I worked there for two years. But the business went bankrupt, so I decided to start my own job, my own business.

So I tried this thing of selling clothes again—like bras, underwear and so on, but it didn't work. People are taking clothes on credit—they are not paying. I said to myself if I sell food again, they are not going to do that nonsense of not paying me. That is when I realised that I just had to start cooking food with the hope that by doing that maybe I will be getting paid cash—even if it's small, but it is cash rather than having a lot in credit. It is like that.

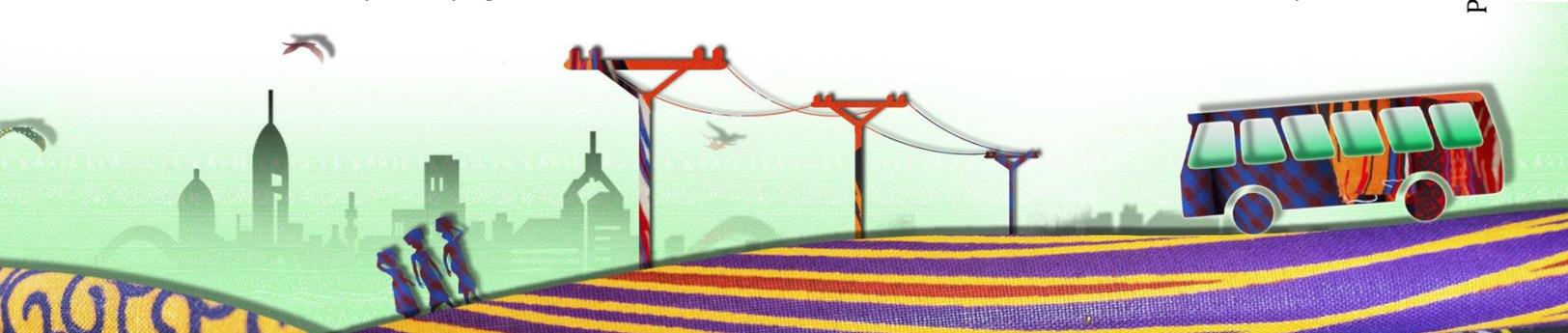
Joelle: How is the progress of your current work/business?

Dina: No, this business will grow. There is no doubt about that. But the problem that I have is the issue of what to do with leftovers. The issue of taking home leftovers is very tiring for me and discourages me. I would need to open my business in a place like a house or a shop—in a shop-like place—and this could give me some rest. If people are coming by themselves to eat at your restaurant, then you are not moving and you can have some rest. Moving around to deliver to customers, doing free delivery and so on, is making me tired, you see? But if I could find a place and if I had support with rent, I could make progress. There I will have my stock and there will be no need for me to walk around. Then there would be a sharp decrease in the ups and downs of going to deliver to customers. One can get a bit of time to sit down and rest—the body relaxes. Otherwise, I am walking a lot and that is making me very tired and sometimes it makes me think that I should just give up.

But people like to eat! (clapping her hands) Umm ... you walk, you deliver there, you cross to the other side, you go. But having said that, the payment system in the cooked food business is much better than in clothes. In the food business everybody knows that if s/he does not pay, s/he will not get food from you the following day. So s/he will prefer to pay you because s/he will need to come back the following day. Sometimes people tell you, maybe twice a week, that they don't have money, but on the third day, they pay. But in the clothing business, once a customer has used the clothes, s/he becomes insolent in a way that you can't imagine. Everything is progressing well, but there is a need for a shop and support.

Joelle: Talk to me about your children's progress.

Dina: Well, when I brought my boys here they were small. When a person is still small, it is difficult to know his exact character—how he will be when he grows up. It is only when he grows up that you know his character. Like now, my first born is turning 19 this year; the second one will be 15 years old this year. When I brought them here, they were three and seven years old, you see? I didn't know how they would behave later as they grew up. But so far they are progressing well at school. But now I can see that they are trying to imitate other children's behaviour. At school, I'm not there, but you will





hear: “Oh, Dina, they did this and they were sent out” or “Oh, they were fighting and so they were sent out.” So as they grow up, it is only God’s grace that sustains us until now. If it wasn’t for God’s grace, eishhh ... some of us would even be locked up by the police, as we speak (clapping her hands).

There are always problems at school. When I’m with them, I don’t see anything, but when they are at school ... he did this, he did that. He was in a group. They went to beat others. Eeh ... they are imitating the other children here. Indians like smoking. Coloureds also like to smoke. Now the Zulus and the Congolese are getting in that smoking mood. I don’t know when they smoke at school. The teacher doesn’t tell you. I have left my phone number, but he doesn’t say anything. Now I leave everything in God’s hands.

Joelle: How were you able to take care of your children without a salary?

Dina: Umm ... you can just imagine. There was a time when their father was sending money, in the initial years of our life here. For four or five years he was sending money from Congo to South Africa and I would buy food for them. I would buy them clothes. When you sell a few things, you get little bit of money and you are able to work out a programme (budget). But you are living on a day-to-day basis, following an agreed (budget). If they send money this time we will buy this, this and that—also with the little money I was getting from selling. I did not stop selling even though the income was not good. I continued selling until I become busy with this catering thing. That’s when I stopped selling clothes. I told myself that I would not be able to hunt two hares at the same time. I must stop one thing—selling cooked food or selling clothes. So, I decided to stop selling clothes completely. I am now focused on one thing, which is catering, and that is what I have been doing up until now.

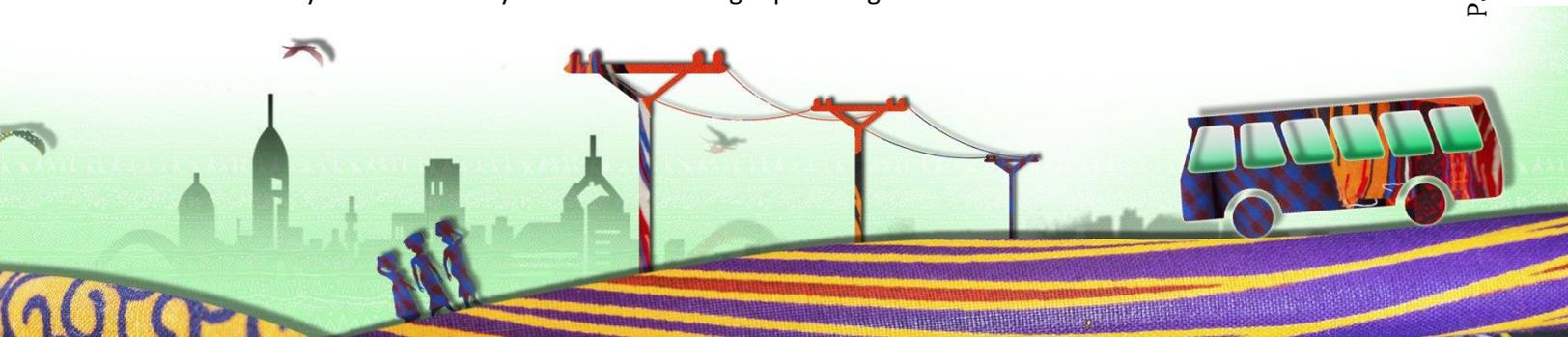
Joelle: Are you able to provide for the needs of your children?

Dina: Not at all. It’s not like a hundred percent. You see, a child is a child. When he needs something, you must promise to provide for him. If you don’t fulfill your promise, you will have disturbed his mind, you see? I’m living just by God’s grace and with all my prayers. That’s how I am living. When I manage to get money, I buy; when I don’t have money, I promise to buy in future, because I don’t have a choice. I can’t steal so that I can please a child. We are living just like that. If we get what we want, we enjoy; if we don’t get, we don’t enjoy—we wait by God’s grace. Therefore when grace smiles on us, we get what we manage to secure on the day and we smile. I can buy [one item of clothes] for each one of them. Even for myself, I often go and give a layby at a shop, just so we have something to cover the body. We are moving forward by the grace of God.

Joelle: How do your children behave considering your economic situation?

Dina: Eh ... my dear, I’m telling, you my children are not comfortable. They often cry. They complain a lot. I just have to assure them that one day everything will be alright, one day everything will change. So we say that to one another and that gives them hope and trust in me because they know that I am their leader. They say ‘one day’ because their mother was the first one to say so (clapping her hands). They cannot abandon me just because I don’t have money. They respect me the way I want them too. They understand my ways and behave accordingly. So we carry on like that because they don’t have any other choice. Their father doesn’t send anything anymore. And I have just this small job that makes it possible for us to live the way we live, other than sleeping at my sister’s place. Yoh! I often have this strong headache ... (she keeps quiet for a while, holding her head). I feel like someone is hitting a nail on my head. So here, it’s like they are comfortable—they just accept the way we live. They are not comfortable but they don’t have a choice. [Even if they refuse to accept their circumstances], what will they do? Do you see?

Joelle: Why is the father of your children no longer providing for them like before?





Dina: I don't know. Maybe he stopped because some people were deceiving him. Maybe that's why he changed. Right now, I am not in contact with him and neither are the children. I don't talk to him at all because that can give me unnecessary stress. Just to talk to him on the telephone gives me stress. You will say this, he will say that, then you will argue ... eish ... it just creates problems.

Joelle: What is your perception about South Africa, considering the image that you had when you were in your country?

Dina: Hmmm ... South Africa used to be a good country for me, but now life has become very hard. On top of that, when I arrived here with the equivalent of a matric certificate, I thought it would be easy for me to find a job. But now we are told that ... oh, there is no place for matriculants, or, you need this, or, you need that. This has really disappointed me. I am not lying to you. I struggled a lot to find a job. Thank God my father was around and it took some months for him to leave. Otherwise ... with the money that he had in his account, he was swiping [his card] for me (paying). He was in Pretoria but he would swipe his card for me here in Durban, and then I would go and collect the parcels.

In Pretoria you find that they (family/parents) have bought you everything, like a child going to get married. They still consider you as a child and buy you everything. This makes me cry at times. They would buy for me; they would buy for my children—for all of us in the queue. Before it was fine, but these days life in South Africa has become very difficult. But we are trying to be strong and carry on.

You find that children misbehave—they smoke cigarettes, weed (dagga) and so on. All these things were not there before. Nowadays children are publicly involved in immoral activities and are negatively influencing other children. It is a big problem for some of us who don't have cars and don't have fenced houses. How are we going to look after our children? As a mother, it is not like you have money to buy all the groceries you need. You will often need to send your children downstairs to buy some peanuts, or tomatoes because you did not necessarily buy everything. But children are learning foreign behaviours from outside and bringing them in the house.

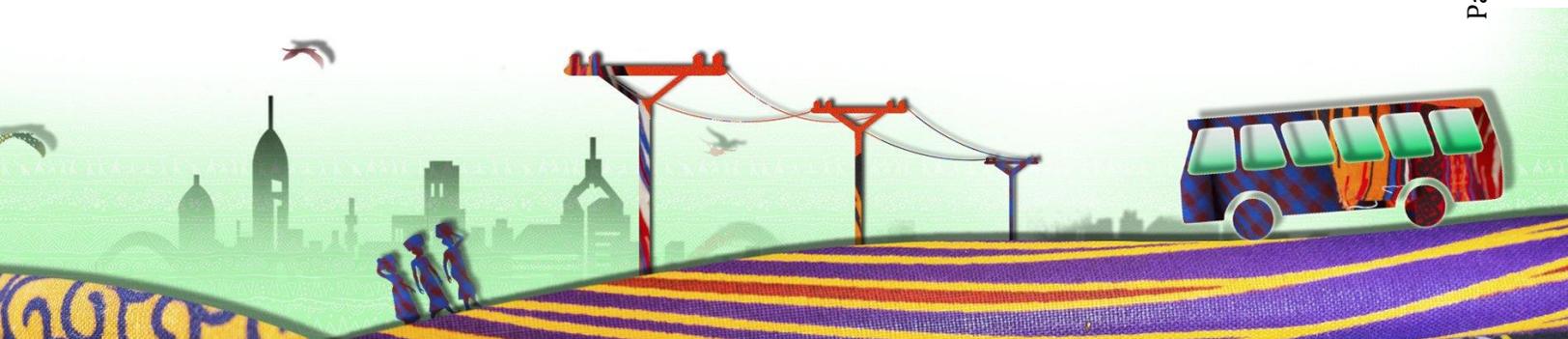
South Africa has that spirit of destroying other people's children, especially in areas where we are living and at schools. I don't know what is happening at white schools but there are always a lot of histories and geographies coming from these schools where we send our children, and you can be disappointed. Do you understand?

Joelle: Why do you say that your children are being influenced by other children?

Dina: Sometimes I look at their attitude. Sometimes I receive reports from other people—"Oh, we saw your child. He was smoking." But when you ask him face-to-face, he denies it. I'm not with him all the time to know whether it is true or not. But I can sit with him the whole day and he will not do anything. But at school ... this is where my fear is. So I often ask him if he is intoxicated. It's simply not right. And I don't know if the people who report on him have really seen him. There is a question mark that is disturbing me in my heart.

If you keep on shouting at children, it is like you are making them more stubborn than before, so eish ... it is a problem. So there must be a certain balance in the way that you discipline them. The schools have to put in place disciplinary measures to scare the children at school. Children from this country are not afraid of anything. Now my child will look at them and see they are smoking and think he can do the same and that his mother will not know. They influence him and he thinks it is normal—there is nothing wrong with this behaviour. Do you see that now? Eish, this situation disturbs me a lot.

Joelle: What do you think is needed to help you improve the behaviour of your children, because it looks like their attitude is disturbing you?





Dina: [I know that my children don't have everything] because no one can have everything. But if 80 per cent of their needs are covered they will not do all these other things. I know my children really like to be spoiled. For example, they always ask for things ... please buy a laptop for us. We want our own place, our own house. They like it when they open their fridge and find it full of things that please them. You will see them watching their preferred DSTV channels without any problem. When they have all of this I always see them calm. But we do not have the possibility of staying in our own place. We are staying at my young sister's place. And there people talk. This one says this about my child; that one says that. Everybody wants to order him around and this is making him rebellious. I know my children. It is difficult for us because we don't have enough means for us to rent our own flat. That's why we are staying there. But my children refuse to be treated like that ... that is why they are becoming [a bit rebellious] now.

Joelle: What gives you the assurance that if they have the means, as you say, they will change?

Dina: If he sees his friend with a cell phone or a play station, he wants to leave the house and go and play games. If he had this at home, he would not go out. It would keep him busy and stop him from going out. Do you see that? Maybe he has homework. He has to focus on his school work. But if he had his own laptop then he will see he doesn't need to go out. Otherwise, he will tell you, for example, that he is going out to make copies for research. Obviously one needs to go out to do research, isn't it? But now ... *hein* ... do you see him going downstairs and going to meet people with bad habits. Maybe that child also left their house to go and loiter around. Then when they meet, they say ... what's up! And the relationship starts right there. That's what is giving our children problems.

I know the ups and downs and the environment. He looks outside and he wants to go. But he could have downloaded games on his computer if he had one and he would then play them alone in the house. Or else, if he has a cellphone, he can also download and play them on his phone. He doesn't have a cellphone but his friend does. So you try to make it better, little by little—you buy him a cellphone, and then he asks for airtime, you see? When I see that I don't have airtime, I ask myself why I should buy it for him. But with the computer, they can install the programs and you can get WiFi with monthly payments. That's the problem with children's issues.

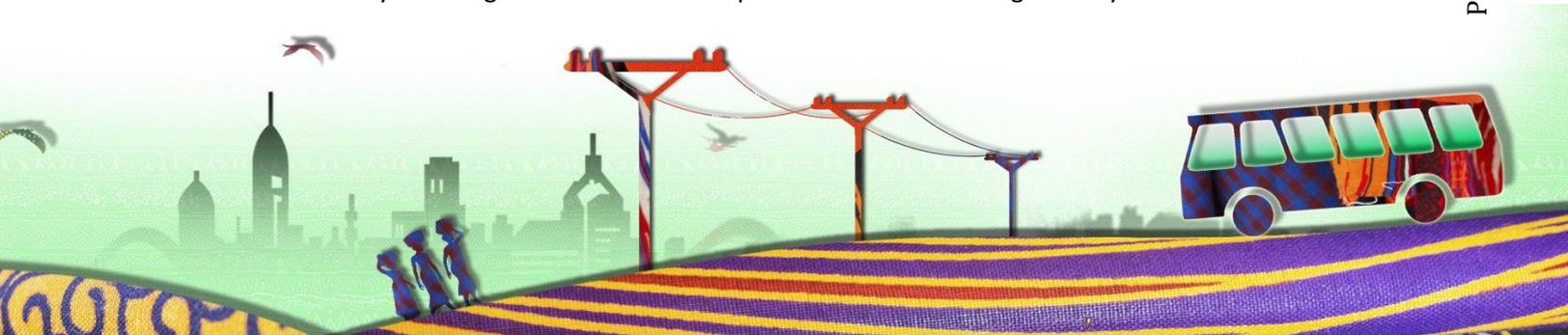
In general, what is worrying me in South Africa is the problem of my children. My heart is always in pain because of my children, I'm telling you. I always think that at least I can listen. So I do not rely on what other people say. Just take it one step at a time.

I have already given a cellphone to the younger one. I say he has to have a phone, so that it can keep him busy in the house. As for the older one, he seldom listens. He listens when he is here, but what about when he goes outside? You ask him not to come back late and he comes back late. You say you don't want to see him with that so-called friend of his, and you see him with that same friend. When problems arise, then he comes back. I don't know what is needed now, but we are just living by the grace of God. We keep going.

I am tired now (she yawns)...

I always think that at the end I will send one of them back to Congo and I will stay with the other one here ... (talks to a customer) ... That's what will happen at the end of it all. One will go and I will stay with the other one. Together, they don't go along well. That's the problem. When one goes back he will say: "I'm here because I did this. Let me behave. Maybe one day mummy may call me back." Do you see? He will go stay with my parents. As for their father, we don't even have his phone number. We don't know where to look for him.

Joelle: What are your living conditions here compared with those in Congo? Can you do better here?





Dina: I must tell you that in Congo I was better than here (clapping her hands). I was not working (clapping her hands). I was driving (clapping her hands). I had ... a small business, just in Lubumbashi and in Kinshasa, and I was making money. I was not moving from one place to another by foot. [I wore expensive clothes] not like this and that. Would you see me in that kind of dress? Never. I had artificial nails on my fingers and toes. My hair was done every weekend and after two weeks they would change my extensions ... after two weeks! *Hein!* I was not walking. I was driving with the father of my kids, so we were living like that. Even when I was at my parents' place I always used to drive.

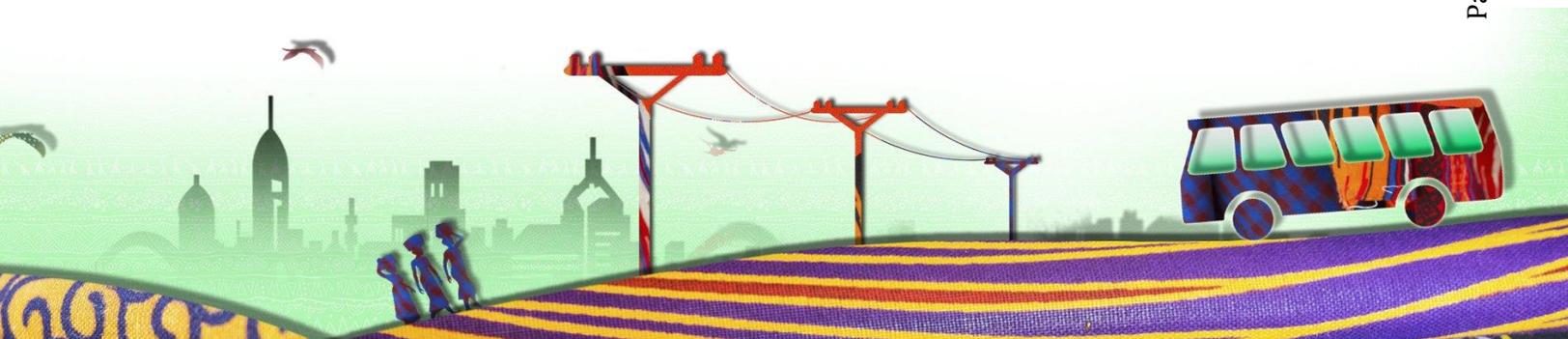
On the contrary, here in South Africa, I am suffering because I walk long distances, with heavy plastic bags—from here to go to church and from there to go home. It is a long distance and I am suffering (claps her hands twice). But in Congo what will I carry? You buy, you put things in the car. You have a merciful somebody who puts airtime in your phone. I am talking about the father of my children. *Hein!* He always ensured that we didn't lack anything.

In Kinshasa I was not going to the market every day. I had a generator, big like this (she shows the size with her hands). It was like a freezer and supplied electricity to the whole house, including the freezer. I was living in a house that was the same size as some of the big houses here. There was no load shedding. If there was a suspension of electricity supply, for whatever reason, the generator would take over automatically. Therefore I was not struggling with life there like I am here. Even at my mother's place I was living a good life—I was not suffering. We had a domestic worker who was washing our clothes. But look at me now: I even have problems with my nails. You can see I have a wound and my fingers are now dark (showing her fingers). I always say that washing clothes makes my fingers like this. Every time that I do washing, it leaves me with wounds. Here, I can say that I'm suffering. In Congo my children were going to private schools. But here I am suffering.

In Congo some people take their children to crèche when they are four years old, but mine started going to crèche at the age of two years. I would pick him up at 12h00, which means that from 8h00 to 12h00 he was at the crèche, just so that I could have some peace. Their father would say: "Stay and have rest. Take care of things in the business." We were selling cars in Kinshasa on a certain roadside. Have you ever been to Kinshasa? You've probably heard people talking about a street in Limete called Seventh Avenue. All car traders used to display their cars there. I was in charge of the business while my husband was working. He was a soldier, you see? Now if there was a deal that required his presence, we would call each other and meet there. We would discuss and finalise the deal. Then he would go back to work or sometimes that would be it for the day—you know how public service works in Congo. It was dependent on what you want to do, especially as he was a full colonel. So [taking time off] was never a serious problem.

Therefore I see myself as someone who is suffering here. Even those who know me say that I am suffering. I was not like this before. I have really lost a lot of weight—a lot of weight, *hein!* Here in South Africa, I know that I am suffering. Sometimes people tell me that I should try to relocate to another place. Maybe I am not supposed to live here and it will be different elsewhere. But we have now lived here for a long time. That is why we are facing all these challenges, you see?

I always dream of going back to Congo one day, but I need at least one qualification for a skill that I study for here. I don't want to be seen as someone who wasted time here, you see? You go back and command respect when you say you came from or studied in South Africa. If you have to work, you will have a certain qualification for that. But up to now, I have not achieved that goal of studying as yet. Nevertheless, I always have that desire. I want to study.





In Congo I didn't obtain a degree. I only have a matric. That's why I want to study here. At least I would have a paper from another country. After all, I have lived here for 10 years now—it can't just be for nothing. You have to produce a qualification to show that you did study, you did work, you have a specialisation in a field, you have ideas that you can share with people. You see? I don't want to stop just here. I want to study more.

So if I find somebody who can sponsor my studies, I will study. I will leave whatever I am doing and go back to school. My children will wait. They will study even on loan but I will have to study first. I will squeeze them just like that. We will even look for a credit business where you invest and then get paid after a while. That is when you start enjoying things.

I always wanted to do a nursing job, like carrying hospital stuff, provide dressings, working in the operating theatre—do you know that kind of work? To prepare the operating theatre, you put your scissors out; you do this; you do that; you prepare everything in the theatre before the doctor comes in to conduct surgery. If not that ... I thought I could study pharmacy. That's the job where you sell people drugs. If not that, then I could work in a hospice for old people ... something like that.

If, for example, somebody just comes and says they want to support me, and my children can go to school and their transport, clothing and pocket money will be guaranteed—not at a hundred percent but maybe at 50 percent—yes, I will go back to school because I know that by studying I will not have a lot of worries. I will get something that will give me courage. Everywhere I go, I will present my qualification and get a nice job, which I think will probably be easy for me, you see?

In today's world, you must find a job that will make you happy. You know you are working. I can leave my catering business in the hands of other people, but first I will move it from the roadside to a shop. Do you understand? The person who works in the shop will be serious about the work because it is someone else's business. He will work with a full conscience and all his heart. He will work and when you come back in the evening you collect something, you can buy some airtime, you can buy slippers and you can pay for the children's transport.

If some person says that they can organise for me a shop and tells me to find a way of running it, I will agree and go back to school.

That's what is always on my mind. Oh God!

