

‘We sleep without eating anything’ – the precarious lives of women labour migrants in South Africa

More and more women are leaving southern African countries like Zimbabwe and Malawi to seek greener pastures in South Africa. But when they arrive, they are faced with xenophobia, violence and a daily struggle to make enough money to live.

Written by Floretta Boonzaier & Ivan Katsere, University of Cape Town

Published 25th November 2021



Migration patterns in Africa have changed dramatically over the past decade. Migrants today tend to be younger people who travel within the continent, and are also more likely to be women¹.

In recent years, South Africa has become home to increasing numbers of labour migrants² from other countries in the region, including Zimbabwe and Malawi. Extreme conditions of poverty in a number of African countries combined with war, political instability, and the continued impacts of colonialism have been some of the conditions that have driven many Africans to seek refuge and economic opportunities in other countries.

For this case study, we spoke to 31 migrant women in Cape Town about their journey to South Africa, and what it is like to live there as a refugee or asylum-seeker. Our aim was to explore the gendered dynamics of the migration journey to South Africa.



**'I got my passport stamped
and I paid them money.'**

Dee, 30, from Malawi

This is how a migration journey might typically play out for a woman who migrates to Cape Town from a nearby country. She is struggling financially in her home country and having difficulty providing for her family. A friend or family member who is already in South Africa offers her hope by saying that there is an abundance of well-paying jobs there. Trusting this information, she leaves her family, and often young children, to make the long, uncomfortable journey alone to Cape Town through either regular or irregular routes.

With dreams of being able to send money home to her family, she starts looking for work almost immediately upon arrival. Almost just as quickly, she realises how tough it is to find a well-paying, stable job as a refugee or asylum-seeker. Many months, even a year could go by before she finds employment.

At this point in the narrative, her dreams of greener pastures start to shift to feelings of disappointment, disillusionment, frustration and desperation, and the narrative changes from aspiration to daily survival in a life defined by uncertainty and violence. The daily struggle of surviving in Cape Town makes her want to return home, where at least she knew she had guaranteed food and shelter. But without enough money to get there, she remains in Cape Town, caught in the same cycle she has been stuck in for the past few years.

'You are here to make money'

Experiences of employment and unemployment were central to women's narratives of their lives in Cape Town. Finding work is usually the sole reason they have made the journey in the first place, and all the women we spoke to told us they left their home countries to seek better opportunities in South Africa. As Irene, one of our interviewees from Zimbabwe, put it: 'You are here to work, you are here to make money.'

But the available work in South Africa is so transitory and precarious that they will often go from full-time employment on one day to unemployment the next – a situation that is amplified by their status as 'illegal' migrants.

And yet, the greener pastures narrative is perpetuated by migrants already in South Africa, who re-circulate stories of better opportunities there, despite the fact that most women labour migrants seem to be disappointed and frustrated with their lives. They experience their new environment as anything but 'green'.

'We don't have any money to pay rent, we don't have any money to buy food,' 22-year-old Machinga from Zimbabwe told us. 'On other days we sleep without eating anything.'



'We found some people they took us. Instead of to give us the job, they started telling us they want sex.'

Donna, 29, from Malawi

Most women looked for work by standing on a corner with other migrant women and men, waiting for people to collect them for casual jobs such as cleaning and childcare. Common places for such gatherings are the market, shopping centre, petrol station, and McDonald's in Parklands, a suburb in Cape Town's west.

This method of job seeking is fraught with anxieties, risks and vulnerabilities. Women do not know the people who pick them up, where they are going, what work they will have to do or whether they will be paid at the end of the day. This set-up leaves the women vulnerable to exploitation, mistreatment and abuse.

Many women we spoke to had been solicited for sex while waiting to find work, in the car on the way to the home, or after they had completed the work. To escape these threatening situations, women explained that they often had to leave work without payment and with no transport back home or to the site where they had been collected.

Despite these risks and uncertainties, many women continue the same job-seeking routine in the hope that, one day, things would be different but also out of the need to survive.



'If you have money, you just take the money and give it to them.'

Sekai, 43, from Zimbabwe

The women we interviewed experienced various forms of violence on a daily basis. Many attributed this to the fact that they are not South African, even if xenophobic intent was not always explicit. South Africa has a shameful recent history of **xenophobic violence**³, specifically against migrants from other African countries.

Encounters with 'skollies' were recurrent in the women's stories of living in the informal settlement of Dunoon. 'Skollies' is a word the women used to refer to thieves in the community who mug people walking to and from the bus or taxi rank for their cellphones and money. These experiences of constant theft and threat contributed to a general sense of fear and lack of safety within their community.

'If they see that you are a foreigner, they can just bring a knife they can point a knife to you and then they say ... "Money, we want money",' Sekai told us of her experience with skollies.

During the muggings, women also experienced verbal threats, assault and sexual abuse.

'We need our people from here in South Africa'

The women we spoke to also experienced multiple forms of xenophobic violence. Some mentioned instances where they had been verbally harassed while looking for work – being asked by South Africans why they were here 'stealing' jobs. Others experienced discrimination when Black South Africans realised they could not speak the local language, as illustrated by 26-year old Memory from Malawi.

'You see some people, like South African women, when they came to market, they say, "We don't need amakwere-kwere, like foreigners. We need our people from here in South Africa."'

Approximately a third of the women we interviewed told stories of mistreatment by their employers in South Africa. This included being exploited by being paid below minimum wage for a full day's work; being solicited for sex work; poor working conditions and being unfairly dismissed. This was the case for both women with casual work and those in more permanent forms of employment.

The mistreatment and exploitation of **domestic workers**⁴ has a long history in South Africa stemming from colonisation, slavery and apartheid. In the current context, we see the same patterns of exploitation recur in the labour undertaken by labour migrants from other African countries in the homes of middle-class and upper-class South Africans.

The unemployment situation in South Africa has significantly deteriorated over the past year, with the COVID-19 pandemic making the already precarious position of African **migrant women**⁵ even more vulnerable.

The research on which this article is based was partially funded by the National Research Foundation of South Africa and the University of Cape Town.



Suggested further reading

Dodson, B. (1998). **Women on the move: Gender and cross-border migration to South Africa.**⁶ Cape Town: Southern African Migration Programme.

Flahaux, ML. and De Haas, H. (2016). **African migration: trends, patterns, drivers.**⁷ CMS 4(1).

Links

1. <http://www.njas.helsinki.fi/pdf-files/vol26num2/hiralal.pdf>
2. <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/southern-africa>
3. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/collections/99292>
4. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/overcoming-adversity-all-angles-struggle-domestic-worker-during-apartheid-bennett-gwynn>
5. <https://ww1.issa.int/analysis/migrant-workers-and-covid-19>
6. <https://samponline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Acrobat9.pdf>
7. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-015-0015-6>

A special thank you for making this project **possible.**

