

Workplace Experiences of Infrastructure Sector Participants in South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme

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Abstract

The dominant narrative of Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) beneficiaries in South Africa has been largely documented through government communication channels under the titles of *Beneficiary Stories* and *EPWP Changing Lives Testimonials*. These stories indicate that Public Works Programme (PWP) beneficiaries are able to save or invest towards the realisation of short-term goals including education and the purchase of household equipment. The South African government narrative is enormously triumphant in creating a powerful single story of the EPWP beneficiary, which focuses on the positive impact(s) of this temporary income transfer. However, thus far, scant research has been conducted on the work experiences of women participating in these projects. The focal point of this research was to understand the work experiences of women beneficiaries participating in the Zuvuseni Reloaded and National Youth Services EPWP projects. This article hones in on the experiences of nine black South African women participants utilising the life history narrative technique coupled with an African feminist lens. The article finds that although participants value the financial reprieve provided by the EPWP stipend, as documented in government narratives, and are proud of their newly acquired skill set, they face institutionalised prejudice within the workplace.

Keywords: income transfers, South Africa, institutionalised prejudice, life history

Introduction

Public Works Programmes (PWP), also known as Cash for Work (CfW), Employment Guarantee Programmes (EPGs), Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs), or Employment Intensive Investment Programmes (EIIPs), have been harnessed and implemented in varying degrees around the globe. In the main, PWPs target vulnerable populations and provide employment by creating labour-intensive work related to the creation of infrastructure assets in exchange for a cash or in-kind transfer. McCord (2009) affirms that the allure of PWPs to governments, policymakers, and donors is its appeal as a win-win policy option; through this provision of social protection, the beneficiary can gain a measure of fiscal relief obtained through employment whilst simultaneously creating tangible assets. The wages offered by PWPs are set at or below the minimum wage. According to Ravallion (1990), the wage is set below the market rate to discourage programme uptake from those who already have work and to attract the poor. Mackintosh and Blomquist (2003) contend that PWP wage must be set with the intention to distribute social protection to a maximum number of beneficiaries but caution that although lower wages enhance the probability of self-targeting, it also has the outcome of lowering the benefit to the individual beneficiary.

A large number of publications focusing on PWPs have been commissioned on behalf of governments and international donor organisations. Publications include the World Bank's (2013) *Public Works as a Safety Net: Design, Evidence and Implementation*, which focused on the design, evidence, and implementation of PWPs. The International Labour Organization's *Public Works Programmes: A strategy for poverty alleviation: The Gender Dimension* written by Dejardin (1996), investigated women's access to employment in PWPs and how they benefitted from the assets generated. The South African Cities Network's *The State of Expanded Public Works in South African Cities* (2014), provided an evaluation of the programme based on the person days of employment created, job opportunities, project wage, training days, project budget, actual expenditure, and the demographic characteristics of workers. The focus in these documents is largely on the evaluation or review of PWP performance indicators such as the number of work opportunities created, training days, gender, age, targeted groups, the value of the assets generated, and the number of days beneficiaries worked.

The South African government's *EPWP Changing Lives Testimonials* focuses on the programme's positive impact but fails to meaningfully engage with the holistic experience of beneficiaries. A typical extract from the *EPWP Changing Lives Testimonials* published by the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS), *Vuk'uzenzele* publication (2012: ¶2-5) reads as follows:

Josephine Sondlana is a widowed mother of four. She matriculated in 1995, in the small village of Elim, near Giyani outside Polokwane. Little did she know that she would be unemployed for most of her life. One of her four children is currently studying at the Tshwane North College in Pretoria. This, she says, couldn't have happened if it wasn't for an EPWP project she joined in 2009. "The Tivoneleni Bakery Project changed a lot of things in my life." Sondlana says while other beneficiaries were buying new television sets and fridges, she was saving up for her daughter's education. "I saved almost all my stipend money for her registration fees."

The narrative above indicates that PWP workers are able to save or invest towards the realisation of predetermined goals i.e., education and household equipment over this short-term work opportunity. There is no mention of Sondlana's workplace experience nor any indication of how she would pay for her daughter's fees post-registration or upon exiting the programme. The government testimonial falls silent here.

Rarely does the body of knowledge meaningfully engage the beneficiaries whom PWPs aim to assist. This view is supported by McCord, who problematised "the lack of voice of PWP beneficiaries, for whose benefit PWPs have been repeatedly selected" (2012: XVIII). Devereux and Solomon (2006: 37) highlighted "an exhaustive literature search revealed a surprising dearth of detailed and credible evidence on the impacts of employment creation across the world."

When the gendered implications of PWPs are researched, these also remain within the rigid parameters of programmatic inquiry. Dejardin (1996: 19) asks: "Are 'special' efforts necessary to get women on board in infrastructure programmes and to make sure that they do not fall through the cracks?" I believe that these enterprises should not be considered "special" but rather normalised interventions to include a largely marginalised and vulnerable population.

Reporting on gendered implications is indeed a step in the right direction, but most knowledge created within this space fails to consider in sufficient detail the impact of PWP labour on the body and the life history of beneficiaries. Even less is known about the impact that participation in these programmes has had on the lives of beneficiaries. The existing body of knowledge makes confident assertions about the complexities of lived realities without being audacious enough to purposely consult them. In the main, the body of knowledge about PWPs is useful in providing calculations and macro-economic generalisations but seldom moves beyond these parameters to wilfully develop an unabbreviated and unabridged body of knowledge.

This article seeks to redress this gap in the literature on PWPs. It explores the experiences of women participants within their work environment to provide a more nuanced accounting of the impact of PWPs on beneficiaries, and specifically documents a range of workplace experiences moving beyond the well-documented narrative focused on the benefits of income transfer to the hitherto undocumented experiences of workplace discrimination, prejudice, and institutional hierarchy. The article draws on the narratives of nine black South African women participants in the EPWP. The upcoming Context provides a history of PWPs in South Africa, which is followed by a discussion of the research site and a methodology section, and then the findings.

Context

Poverty in South Africa is gendered. She takes the guise of a poorly educated, young, black African woman. According to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) (2021: 2 & 14), the country has a population of 60.4 million, and unemployment is at 7.8 million. Youth unemployment represents a staggering 46.3% and is on the rise. Young women between the ages of 15 and 24 years are significantly more prone to unemployment, with 48.1% of women, as opposed to 40.5% of males, comprising the total unemployed youth rate. Approximately 31% of South Africans are social grant recipients with 45.5% of households receiving a social grant. The 2003 Growth and Development Summit (GDS) activated the EPWP into the South African labour landscape. The EPWP encompassed four sectors: infrastructure, environment and culture, social, and non-State. This

nationwide PWP intended to improve social infrastructure through the provision of short-term socially useful work opportunities.

The EPWP provides a temporary income transfer to unemployed able-bodied women, youth, and the broader unemployed population aged between 19 and 59 years. These workers are placed in four sectors: infrastructure, environment and culture, social, and non-State. The EPWP is coordinated at the level of macro government by the national Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI). At a meso level, the programme is devolved to each of South Africa's nine provinces under the coordination of the provincial department mandated to perform the public works functions. Local government implements the EPWP at a micro level. According to the DPWI (2019: 22), the intent of this nationwide PWP is: "To provide WOs (work opportunities) and income support to poor and unemployed people through the labour-intensive delivery of public and community assets and services, thereby contributing to development." The country's National Development Plan (NDP), a key policy instrument, intends to create 24 million jobs by 2030. This entails the massification of the EPWP to create work opportunities for the unemployed. According to the NDP, the EPWP is expected to include larger numbers of low-skilled, unemployed adults as a form of unemployment relief (2012: 61 & 382). The EPWP is enshrined in the NDP and is largely concerned with decreasing unemployment and increasing job creation.

The EPWP offering is part of the South African government's arsenal to push back chronic unemployment via the creation of decent work through sustainable job creation. According to Henderson (2018), the EPWP is a flagship PWP which has created almost 10 million work opportunities since its inception. The programme is intent on alleviating poverty and complements other government offerings in response to structural unemployment. The EPWP leverages government budgets and offers project-based training for beneficiaries. It has created and maintained social assets and provides a service offering inclusive of health care and early childhood development. The programme disbursed R93 billion on income transfers with 219,947 work opportunities created in the infrastructure sector alone during the 2020/21 cycle (South African Government, 2021). The infrastructure sector, which is the largest sector in the EPWP, provides social infrastructure through construction and maintenance projects throughout

the country in exchange for a minimum wage to beneficiaries. The participants in this study were all black South African women who took part in the infrastructure sector of the EPWP in Gauteng province.

Research Site

This paper is concerned with the infrastructure sector of the EPWP at the level of provincial government. The EPWP in Gauteng province is coordinated by the Gauteng Department of Infrastructure Development (DID) which implements two EPWP offerings, the Zivuseni Reloaded, and the National Youth Service (NYS) projects. The research site is located at a Facility Maintenance Hub on the premises of a hospital. This Facility Maintenance Hub services a regional hospital located in the Western part of Gauteng province on the outskirts of Kagiso in the West Rand region in South Africa.

This government or public hospital which is run by the Gauteng Department of Health (GDH) is the sole regional hospital and the largest health facility in the West Rand region. The Facility Maintenance Hub is a DID institution. The purpose of this facility is to implement day-to-day maintenance services, conduct routine and preventative maintenance services, and conduct emergency maintenance services for the hospital. At the Facility Maintenance Hub, EPWP beneficiaries are identified by bright orange uniforms and permanent employees are identified by navy blue uniforms. EPWP beneficiaries earned a stipend of R120 per day which is on average R3 500 per month. Permanent employees earn at least R10 000 monthly and qualify for pension, leave, and medical benefits. EPWP employment is positioned as a short-term employment intervention by government: participants sign employment contracts for 12 months; however, the bulk of participants in the project have had over six contract renewals spanning six years.

The DID (2014: 2-3) views the NYS as a stepping stone to the enhancement of the youth's activity in economic and personal development. The NYS selection criteria are different from the Zivuseni Reloaded project in two areas: participants must fall between the ages of 18 and 35 years old and have a minimum education of grade ten or equivalent. Five of the six female NYS beneficiaries ranging between the ages of 27 and 34 volunteered to participate in this study.

The Zivuseni Reloaded project was designed to provide an income transfer to poor households in exchange for a work requirement. The criteria for beneficiaries were not limited by age or qualifications. No beneficiaries were subjected to any form of testing, and recruitment in the main was conducted via the municipal government. This paper incorporates four Zivuseni Reloaded participants from a possible 17 women beneficiaries. The ages of participants ranged between 28 and 39.

Methodology

This paper utilised the life history method of recounting the narrative. As Watson and Watson-Franke (1985: 2) put it, “Life history is any retrospective account by the individual of his/her life in whole or in part, in written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person.” Aside from the obvious allure of the potential of the life history narrative method, a strong deciding factor was the potential illumination of the EPWP beneficiaries, which I believe is largely undocumented save for largely disembodied quantitative studies and snippets of beneficiary experiences documented by the government. In this way, this paper works to actively fill silences in history and bring a range of previously unheard, silenced, or unacknowledged voices to this discussion. This work positions women as protagonists in their own lives. They strategise around their challenges and leverage their various resources, including the EPWP, to effect change and gain relief. Their agency, no matter how constrained it may be, is enacted. The individual stories contained in this paper demonstrate the many ways in which change, agency, and life are enacted. These stories challenge what is legitimate knowledge and evidence.

For this article, I utilised both structured and semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection. The data collected allowed me to gain insight into the demographic, ethnographic, and specific family structure of each participant before the administration of a more flexible semi-structured course of inquiry. All nine participants spoke and understood English. The interviews were held in a private location at the hospital workshop; they were conducted in English, which all nine participants spoke and understood. The interviews lasted at least three hours and each participant was interviewed over three sessions, totalling

a minimum of nine hours per participant. The fieldwork for this study occurred between 2nd December 2019 and 5th March 2020. All participants signed letters of informed consent before data collection at each engagement.

I made use of pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. I asked each participant to invent their own pseudonym, stressing that it should not be an easily identifiable second name or the name of other study participants. The rationale for self-selected pseudonyms was to create a platform for participants to enact their identities and locate themselves easily within the discourse. Of the nine participants only one participant, Lethabo Khumalo, opted to choose both a first name and surname as a pseudonym. I went further to try to protect the identities of those mentioned in this paper. I have applied de-identification, and the ages of participants have been changed to further protect their identities. Where geographic locations have been used, I have noted the general vicinity rather than provide exact locations. When references are made to the family/friends or persons of interest mentioned by participants, names and specific job titles are not recorded. Finally, it must be noted that all participants included in this study are no longer part of the EPWP due to the termination of their contracts in 2021. Both the NYS and Zivuseni Reloaded cohorts form part of this research. Below, all nine study participants are listed in the order in which they volunteered to participate in this study.

Lucky, a 32-year-old BaTswana woman, is an NYS project participant receiving work experience as an electrical assistant. Hailing from North West province, she moved to Gauteng after completing her matric. Describing herself as a "mother of two, but only one is living," her surviving son resides with her. She is in a committed relationship with the father of her second child. The most important aspects of her identity include her Batswana ethnicity; this keeps her rooted in her culture – a culture that she does not risk offending. Lucky was abandoned by the father of her firstborn because their ethnicity differed. Her birth home is in North West province; this is the place she feels safe and content.

Tsakani is a 34-year-old VaTsonga woman from Limpopo province. She obtained work with the NYS project and is training as a plumbing assistant. She has a 13-year-old son who lives with her parents in Limpopo to whom she remits R300 monthly. This single woman resides in the vicinity of Doornkop, in a home owned by her father. Tsakani's key intersecting identity markers include

ORDER	PSEUDONYM	PROGRAMME	VOCATION	AGE	ETHNICITY	PROVINCE OF BIRTH	STATUS POST CONTRACT
1	Lucky	NYS	Electrical Assistant	32	BaTswana	North West	Employed
2	Tsakani	NYS	Plumber Assistant	34	VaTsonga	Limpo-po	Employed
3	Precious	NYS	Painter Assistant	29	BaTswana	Gauteng	Left project prior to contract end.
4	Makhadzi	NYS	Plumber Assistant	34	VhaVenda	Limpo-po	Employed
5	Mpho	NYS	Administrative Assistant	27	VhaVenda	Limpo-po	Employed
6	Lethabo Khumalo	Zivuseni Reloaded	Administrative Assistant	38	BaPedi	Limpo-po	Unemployed
7	Snow White	Zivuseni Reloaded	Administrative Assistant	28	BaTswana	Gauteng	Unemployed
8	Sylvia	Zivuseni Reloaded	Electrical Assistant	39	BaPedi	Limpo-po	Unemployed
9	Wadibona	Zivuseni Reloaded	Electrical Assistant	28	BaTswana	North West	Unemployed

her education, having obtained a matric with a bachelor's pass (also known as an Exemption), and certificates in hospitality and fashion design. She has made many personal sacrifices to attain these qualifications. Her vocation as a plumbing assistant is a badge of honour and is significant of her level of skill. She regards working for the government as a privilege. Her efforts to attain a permanent job are linked to her role as a mother.

Precious is a 29-year-old mother of two who was gaining work experience as an assistant painter in the NYS project. Born in Gauteng province, she lives in her natal home in the vicinity of Dobsonville with her two children, parents, and two younger siblings. Both her parents are employed. Precious's identity markers are motherhood, gender, and ethnicity. Her racial identification as black African, and education – having a matric diploma and studying towards a diploma in credit management – are also defining markers of her identity. She is unconcerned with her marital status and geographic location.

Makhadzi is a 34-year-old VhaVenda woman hailing from Limpopo. She is an NYS participant gaining experience as a plumbing assistant. Makhadzi is married with two young children and resides in Dobsonville with her husband who is in the public service. They have their own home and benefits such as medical insurance and their children were born at private hospitals. Her educational history includes completing her matric with a diploma pass and certificates in pre-nursing and paramedics. She has a driving license. Makhadzi's definitive identity markers include gender, motherhood, vocation, education, and marital status.

Mpho is a 27-year-old VhaVenda woman born in Limpopo but relocated to Gauteng in search of work. Mpho is the youngest participant in this study. She is part of the NYS project and is interning as an administrative assistant. She has no children and is in a long-term relationship. Mpho's educational history includes matric with a Higher Certificate. She has a National Qualification Framework (NQF)¹, level five in business management, and was registered for an NQF six programme of study. Her key identity markers are religion – she identifies as a Christian belonging to End Time Message Church; education – she was enrolled for N6; vocation – she is as an administrative assistant; gender – she identifies as female, and her ethnicity as VhaVenda. She views her VhaVenda ethnicity as more important than her racial identity as a black African. Mpho is unconcerned with politics.

Lethabo Khumalo is a 38-year-old BaPedi mother of four from Limpopo. Lethabo Khumalo was the longest-serving EPWP participant in this study with six years in the programme. Lethabo Khumalo's dominant identity marker is

1 South African body to register learner achievement to enable the national recognition of acquired skills and knowledge.

womanhood. This she believes is indicative of both her power and her weakness. Her life strategy has been to utilise a sugar daddy or *makhwapheni* as a means of economic relief. Womanhood is also indicative of her vulnerabilities most associated with her economic problems. She views her BaPedi ethnicity as more significant than her black African identity.

Snow White is a 28-year-old Zivuseni Reloaded urban participant from Gauteng. She is BaTswana and resides in Kagiso. Snow White was raised by her single mother and did not know the identity of her father. Snow White was orphaned at the age of 17. She is gaining work experience as an administrative assistant. Snow White's overwhelming identity marker is motherhood. Her identity as a heterosexual female is important to her in the pursuit of a lasting romantic relationship signified by marriage. She is distinguished by her status as employed. Snow White's gender is important to her struggles and her position as a caregiver to her younger siblings and her position as a single parent. Her identity as a youth is an important marker – it shows that she is youthful and that she still has time to reach her goals.

Sylvia is a 39-year-old Zivuseni Reloaded participant, from Limpopo. Sylvia initially joined the DID under a graduate internship programme for 24 months and was subsequently afforded the opportunity, albeit with a lesser stipend, to join the Zivuseni Reloaded project. Sylvia resides in a two-bedroom rental home in the vicinity of Krugersdorp with her husband. Sylvia is the mother of three children, and this is her defining identity marker. She has made many educational and career sacrifices to attain what she believes is the coveted title of mother. Sylvia believes that her age shows her maturity and commands respect. This, coupled with her wife or married position, gives her respectability.

Wadibona is a 28-year-old Zivuseni Reloaded project participant as an electrical assistant. She was born in North West province and is the mother of two. Wadibona's dominant identity marker is that of motherhood. Whilst she is determined to be a more successful parent than her own, she frequently falls into learned behaviour patterns, which she then desperately tries to overcome. She is a woman – this is particularly important for Wadibona. She believes that if she was born a man, she would not experience the struggles indicated in her life herstory, including rape and GBV. Wadibona's age and youthfulness are important to her – she is youthful but keenly aware that the clock is ticking. She is

proud of being employed and of her unique skill set inclusive of higher education and on-the-job experience. Her ethnicity as BaTswana is more powerful than her identity as a black African or even her home language.

Participants' Experiences of Working on the Project

The infrastructure sector of EPWP is distinctive from the other sectors which mainly focus on cleaning and care activities, the sanctioned domain of women. Participants working in the infrastructure sector are exposed to various technical skills which were traditionally male-dominated and are often physically demanding.

Mentors and supervisors within this sector were predominantly male. Some participants including Lucky, Precious, Tsakani, and Makhadzi expressed great pride in their new skills and believe they have made inroads into a traditionally male sphere of work. Others like Snow White, Mpho, Lethabo Khumalo, Makhadzi, Wadibona, and Sylvia are confronted with patriarchal mechanics daily and struggle to gain equal access to the skills and opportunities which are institutionalised as male privilege. All these factors have a noted impact on the experiences of women in the EPWP workplace.

Lucky, in describing the benefits of the programme said:

We are learning too many things; I did not know one day I will work at the workshop. I know electricity – you are curious about what you are learning. Even at home when my stove is not working, I just took the screwdriver, I just fix it and connect it, and put it on again. I can fix my kettle when it is not working, I put the light and I can fix the plug. You see. I am enjoying it because I am learning. Even if I don't get the work as an electrician but I can do something for myself. I go home and open a business, bring a kettle and I will fix it for R50. I know something I can survive from that experience. I am feeling proud because whenever someone is asking me what you are doing, I say electrician and they say, "*Haai*, a woman electrician!" I say, "*Ja* (yes) that's me." I am a woman who is doing electric, I am proud of myself. I am getting brave now. I am a woman. What are you waiting for? You are waiting for a man to do? You must not do this; you must not do this – you can do it! So I am proud, you see.

Precious embraced her new level of skill as well. “Now I can put a handle in the doors because of carpentry. I have skill, painting, perfect skill. They can give me a brush (paint brush) now, I can do my job. I love this job.” Precious was determined to achieve gender equity and break stereotypes within the infrastructure sector:

I think it is a privilege to be a woman in infrastructure. Like people are always asking, “You know how to paint?” It’s like it was for men. I can do it. It makes me proud. I have power like I am a hard worker. I can do what a man can do. That makes me proud.

Tsakani also embraced being a woman in infrastructure:

For me, it’s a good experience because we’re living in a country whereby we believe we are equal. So, if I wanna (want to) fix the door, I might as well. I know some women wouldn’t want to try but for me I’m okay. I felt I was useful. They are just shocked that a woman can do electric. I will not ask for help. I will make sure that I can do it, so they are surprised. When we are on the stepladder, they say “*Haai*, no, the woman must not go up, you the man must.” It’s 50/50 now; if he can, I can, so just like that they get surprised. You know plumbing is very challenging, like as a woman, because before, I did not know how to handle the spanner but now I do. Sometimes we have to dig with a pick, it’s heavy. Sometimes, you know, like drains blocks – we have to unblock it. I feel good working here. I love it because I want to be first when the supervisor told us that there is a toilet that needed to be installed. We have to do it ourselves without anybody. We install it until it flush(es). I feel like I am in the high class.

Makhadzi had a good relationship with her mentor and was pleased with the skills she learned in the workplace:

Like for even me, I can prove them (men) that those things I can do that. The men are fine, they are supportive, and they are not like difficult. They teach us very well; they show us the job. They say that one you must be careful when you do this. Sometimes they don’t want to show us, they say you want to work at the workshop, you must prove yourself.

Snow White, Lethabo Khumalo, and Mpho spoke of the gendered limitations that women in EPWP who worked in the infrastructure sector faced. According to Snow White:

It's hard if you are a woman working with men, they look down on you. Everything, even if you are sitting and the man is standing, they will ask you to move. In everything like when they do something here, if you are a woman, they will start with a man. It's like those people who work in electricity, the women, they only change lights, they do not do plugs, they do not fix fans, just because they are women. It's kind of an imbalance here (workshop) because there's some work that you cannot do as a woman. Well, the senior official will not allow you to climb on the roof to maybe fix a leak. You know you can do that, but you are not allowed to do that. If there's a leakage, it's only allocated for them (men). Oh, maybe the window glasses, only them. The way I see it, I think it's the senior official protecting him from too many enquiries, "You are a woman, you are up there, you didn't notice you were pregnant, you fall, then I (official) am blamed."

Sylvia touched on the lack of patience she experienced with male professional staff:

Men just say you are slow, when you open the plug, the power is not the same, if you open the plug, they just say, "You see you're taking a long time, let me do it." Because of this problem now men go with men and women go with women.

However, not all of the women worked in the male-dominated sections of the infrastructure and therefore had the opportunity to learn new skills, albeit with some intimidation from the men. Others were given jobs in female-dominated sectors, such as secretaryship, and thus did not learn anything new on the job even though they were earning income they very much appreciated. According to Snow White:

I want to tell you, the main reason I am here is that I want the R120. But I can say that I am not gaining anything. We answer the phones, you know. Write work orders, write minutes only. There is no challenge here!

While Precious indicated that the stipend was a relief, she was dissatisfied with the continued lack of accredited training:

But so far, like I cannot complain because the money in itself makes a difference. But life – I mean the time is going. So, you just sit; okay I have R2 500 it makes a difference but in paper (formal accredited qualifications) nothing, what do we have? Nothing. I cannot say I am happy; I still want more that they promised but they are still not delivering on what they

promised (formal accredited training). They think that “Okay maybe because we are giving them money, they will just keep quiet,” but it’s not always about money, it’s what you have, what I can produce.

Mpho expressed a similar disenchantment with the quality of the on-the-job training she received in her job as an administrator:

For me, this is not a stressful or challenging job. If you are an artisan, you just have to know your job and work according to the works orders. At first, I was happy that I got a job. I was excited and eager to learn, I thought I was going to have theory classes on the job and then practical but that didn’t happen. As time went by, I kind of lost interest because for me, it’s not challenging. Like for me this (EPWP) is just for poverty. It’s fine working here, but we are not getting anything here. I am doing admin but there is no computer. If there is training, it is only for one day and they will say we only want people who did electric or people doing plumbing.

Lethabo Khumalo expressed a similar sentiment, “It’s nice and we also have challenges, like now I’m working as an admin, we don’t have computers, we don’t have photocopy machine you see.” While some participants felt positive, five of the nine participants were dissatisfied with the lack of formal accredited training and the quality of on-the-job training. Their most critical requirement of the NYS project was the fulfilment of the experiential training component for them to receive their formal NQF certificate. They were frustrated that their contracts had rolled on for six years without them being able to gain accredited work experience that would fulfil the practical requirement to gain their formal qualifications. Participants’ experiences within the workplace are clearly articulated herein. Through these experiences, we can discern that although there is great pride in the skills and work that participants undertake, there are still patriarchal boundaries and preconceptions which are firmly institutionalised within the infrastructure sector at the workshop. Most often this masqueraded as care and consideration, sometimes irritation, all of which served to limit learning opportunities, stifle growth and reinforce gendered stereotypes. Allowing women access to the infrastructure sector was not enough; a more concerted intervention to empower women in infrastructure is required.

Beneficiaries' Experiences of Internal Hierarchy

All nine participants in this study felt maligned about the difference in the treatment of EPWP beneficiaries and permanent DID employees. Participants were fully aware that they were short-term contract workers who were not entitled to the same benefits as permanent employees or remuneration. However, they recognised that their basic needs were systematically violated due to their temporary employment status.

Wadibona weighed in on the inequitable distribution of work resources:

I have found somebody who help(s) me every day to clean the bathroom but before they were not cleaned. They were dirty but now they (DID) are sacrificing to bring the cleaning material so that we can clean. There is no soap to wash our hands. We wash our hands with water only. We don't get enough toilet paper – we EPWP we only get one a month – one only for all of us! The permanents get. Like in our workshop, we are about ten EPWP, so they give us one. But each permanent they give them two each. To them the permanents it is fair but it's not fair at all because I remember I was the one that was complaining about it before when they were not giving anything to us. But at least now they are giving us at least one. I complained to the senior official. So, I was like we are also people though we don't have benefits. We are here. We work in the same area. We work at the same job. Why am I earning less than you but you are getting more? Why can't you give us tissues (toilet paper) when we go to the toilet? We are also people. Our senior official discussed it somewhere and said, "nah that girl somewhere somehow, she is right!" Toilet paper – it's a benefit for permanent staff. We (EPWP) don't benefit. It is their benefit that's what they say. Yes, everything is benefits, benefits, benefits! So, until we get permanent, we (EPWP) must also talk about benefits!

Snow White was similarly concerned about the supply of soap and toilet paper:

We, (EPWP participants) share the job (cleaning) every time. We (EPWP) do the orders (procurement requests) for toilet paper and soap for permanent staff from the senior official but when we do that, permanent staff gets to be served first. For permanent staff it is like, here's your toilet paper, here's your bar of Sunlight (soap). Each permanent person gets. Then afterwards, if there are some left, there'll be two toilet papers per workshop, that's how it's been done monthly actually. If you are in the

workshop (EPWP) if you have your periods (menstruate) you need to make your own plan.

Sylvia said she was forced to supply her own toilet paper and soap as these were only allocated to permanent employees. She asserted that the senior official was aware of this discrimination but did nothing to remedy the situation.

I don't have toilet paper. Permanent staff get toilet paper but now I think they're trying to give one roll for three EPWP for the whole month. I bring my own (toilet paper), we don't have toilet paper, we don't have something to clean the toilet. I don't have soap when I come to work, if you don't have soap, everything you touch you get germs. The senior official knows everything, and it still doesn't change!

EPWP beneficiaries earn below the minimum wage. They were forced to spend some of their stipend to bring toilet paper to work so that they could safely relieve themselves without infringing on the benefits of permanent employees. According to Makhadzi:

You have to provide yourself because you are the one who need(s) toilet paper so you have to buy yours. If they (permanent employees) don't want to give you (EPWP) because you are not permanent, there is nothing you can do. They (permanent employees) don't want to. They say it (toilet paper) is part of their benefits (laughs). They say, "It's our (permanent employees) benefits." So, we (EPWP) can't argue with them.

Through this reflection, we discern that EPWP beneficiaries were not accorded the rights to human dignity and the right to a healthy environment – this demonstrates inequity within the work environment. Permanent employees withheld this necessary resource therein exhibiting unhealthy and prejudicial power over the bodies of a subaltern group of beneficiaries. The Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) was flagrantly disregarded. These unimpeachable rights were superseded by the privilege of permanent employees. Permanent employees were the guardians of petty but significant resources which caused unnecessary discomfort to EPWP beneficiaries and impinged on their rights to human dignity and a healthy environment. In the hierarchy of needs and or benefits at the workshop, the permanent employees were at the apex whilst the EPWP beneficiaries were at the base.

Yet, Wadibona asserted that EPWP beneficiaries were doing the work of permanent staff. This, Wadibona believes, freed up the permanent staff to undertake paid work outside the Department during working hours:

They (permanent staff) don't know even if we (EPWP) had the qualification or started the trade test. We (EPWP) don't get that equal money like the same as artisans. But there are even people (permanent staff) who don't have qualifications or training but still, they are here but they are permanent. We are testing the generator because we the EPWP are the ones that test the generator. The permanents don't do that. We are doing permanent jobs here! They (permanent staff) are doing other jobs (private work for additional remuneration) or they come late, or I mean they're not committed; they are permanent! Yes, they are working privately. EPWP has no supervision (hopeless sigh). We work ourselves. We know, right? We know, we are even better than them (permanent staff)! *Ja* (yes) some of them that are permanent they cannot even test the generators.

Makhadzi believed that permanent employees and EPWP beneficiaries undertook the same labour. She was unmotivated to perform her work functions due to the difference in contract status, employment benefits, and remuneration:

NYS, sometimes you know them it's that thing – it's difficult. I don't want to work today, I'm tired, we are not permanent, we don't have, we not earning more money like permanent, tell permanent you know those kinds of stuff *ja* (yes). The EPWP contract – they must change to make us permanent – we are tired of contracts. We (EPWP) do the same thing (same work as permanent staff) but the money is different (permanent staff earn more).

According to Tsakani, the permanent employees created and upheld a hierarchy within the workplace that privileged permanent employees and prejudiced the EPWP beneficiaries:

The permanent staff are okay although sometimes they sideline us. You know sometimes we would talk about issues in the kitchen all of us, Zivuseni, NYS, and permanent staff. But some of the staff they would say, "Permanent staff must come to this small office, we need to discuss these things" like this. So, we'd be like "What are they talking about?" "What have we done?" Things like that and they would always remind you they are permanent staff. Permanent staff is needed at Head Office, you Zivuseni and NYS we were told you shouldn't come, stuff like that. There

is some stuff only for the permanents. They say, “You wanna have it but it’s for the permanents, it’s for us you guys are not permanent.” If you go to the microwave and there is a permanent there – they say, “I warm my food first; this is my microwave.”

Precious experienced workplace bullying and was often ridiculed by permanent employees:

The permanent ... are bully ones. Who (They) say, “I am permanent, what can you do to me? I don’t want you to use my microwave, go to the other workshop” and in the other workshop there is no microwave, you see.

This finding provides evidence that EPWP beneficiaries were subject to differential treatment by permanent employees of the DID which is largely based on their temporary employment status. The inequality of power relations between these workers is clearly manifested. Within the workshop, there was inequitable access to communal resources, as the permanent staff often claimed access as part of the benefits of being permanently appointed by DID. The EPWP participants were consistently made aware of their precarious contracts and the transient nature of this work opportunity. All study participants have relayed how they were discriminated against by permanent staff members for their most basic of needs – access to hygiene, toilet paper, and soap – which were considered the benefits of permanent employees. The EPWP beneficiaries were expected to clean the workshop bathrooms and no permanent staff member was allocated to provide cleaning services. The Minister of Labour, under section 43 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), 1993 (Act No. 85 of 1993), legislates that the employer shall provide sanitary facilities at the workplace: “Toilet paper must be available free of charge to employees. A towel for every employee for his or her sole use or disposable paper towels or hot air blowers or clean portions of continuous cloth towels. The employer must provide toilet soap or a similar cleansing agent free of charge to employees” (Department of Labour, 1993: 1). The OHSA is applied in a discriminatory manner at the workshop, and this deepens workplace inequality, separating permanent employees and EPWP beneficiaries and, in addition, negatively impacting on the bodies of EPWP women at work.

Beneficiaries' Experience of External Hierarchy

EPWP participants often experience inhumane treatment at the hands of medical professionals employed by the GDH whilst conducting maintenance work at the hospital. Their right to dignity was subject to ridicule through the public undermining of their skills and vocation. The staff at the GDH wielded an unhealthy level of prejudicial power over the subaltern EPWP beneficiaries. Some participants believe this was due to the stigma of being part of the EPWP or the absence of professional qualifications. Medical professionals at the hospital were not welcoming of EPWP beneficiaries and demanded to work with permanent artisans from DID. The senior official at the workshop was made aware of this hostile occupational prejudice but the matter seemed to be both pervasive and acceptable within the hospital and the employees of the Department of Health (DoH).

According to Tsakani, both the nurses and patients were scornful of EPWP beneficiaries and treated them with unbridled hostility and prejudice:

They (patients) undermine us. Like I will show you these people from Ward 13 (Psychiatric Ward); when we enter there, they will laugh at us (meaning mentally ill patients mocking EPWP beneficiaries). Just imagine! The nurses, even them, they laugh. Sometimes when we enter, they say, "What do you want?" "Do you think you can unblock this?" The nurses will say they studied in Australia – "so don't tell me anything!" They (health staff) undermine us. But like the permanent staff, they respect them but Zivuseni and NYS, they don't respect us at all because of the uniform. They undermine us because of the orange!

Sylvia echoed this sentiment and indicated that, despite bringing the matter to the attention of the senior official, this behaviour was habitual:

I think with the sisters (nursing staff) it's not easy, when you go to Health, they just say you do not have qualifications. "Who's teaching you?" "You must bring a qualification before you work here!" I complained about them to our senior official and the hospital maintenance office.

Snow White said that the GDH staff were dismissive of EPWP beneficiaries and preferred to work with permanent employees from the DID:

The sisters in charge of the wards, don't kind of like, if you don't put your name tag on, they don't need you (EPWP) in their ward. But you are there to fix something important. They will be like, "No, you (EPWP) are not from workshop (artisans)," or they lay a complaint that, "Some people from the workshop have stolen something." Which nobody did that. You know.

Wadibona highlighted that EPWP beneficiaries experienced the most discrimination from the GDH employees at the hospital. The GDH employees expected EPWP beneficiaries to repair their personal appliances:

It's obvious that the people inside the hospital from Health treat us (EPWP beneficiaries) the worst. The nurses – but not all of them. Some, they know that we know what we are doing. Because they even come with their appliances from home.

Discrimination and prejudice were rife at the hospital. The right to dignity was permanently suspended for EPWP beneficiaries. The health professionals employed by the DoH had institutionalised open hostility and aggression toward beneficiaries of the EPWP. This unsanctioned and unethical treatment of beneficiaries requires an intervention from both the DID and the GDH to put an end to this flourishing unprofessional, unethical, and inhumane behaviour within the workplace.

Conclusion

This article has shared the experiences of participants in the EPWP project at a Regional Hospital in Gauteng, South Africa. This paper documents the workplace experiences of project participants inclusive of pride in being women with infrastructure experience and skills and participants' appreciation of the financial reprieve provided through the EPWP stipend. However, it is here that this paper departs from the government discourse through the documentation of participants' experience of workplace discrimination and prejudice, internally through employees of the DID and externally through the employees of the GDH, which they believe is linked to their precarious EPWP employment status and institutionalised gender inequity within the workplace.

Basically, EPWP participants are the outsiders within. They were employed inside of government and the DID yet remained outside formal employment. They receive remuneration in the form of a stipend but remained outside the

official payroll. They were inside the workshop and performed the same work activities as permanent employees but remained outside the benefits and rights accorded to permanent employees. They worked inside the hospital but fell outside the hierarchy of respect. They had an inside track to learn unique skills but remained outside formally recognised qualifications. Their orange uniforms placed them inside employment but outside a profession. They both belonged and were unwanted concurrently.

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