The Effects of the Government's COVID-19 Response on Migrant Women Living in Cape Town: Assessing the *Coloniality of Citizenship*[1]

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Abstract

In South Africa, the existing system continues to preserve unequal gendered citizenship rights based on colonial and apartheid hierarchies. Despite a rights-based legal platform, the state reproduces racism, xenophobia, and patriarchy, creating a multitude of vulnerabilities for Black migrant women. The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions have deepened global inequality, heightening the vulnerabilities experienced by the most marginalised people in society. This has been seen in governments' pandemic responses around the world, which prioritised exclusion over solidarity—South Africa being a prime example. Through qualitative interviews with migrant women living in Cape Town and using an intersectional and feminist approach, this research evaluates the effects of the South African government's response to COVID-19, uncovering how it has exacerbated pre-existing structural inequality and violence. Despite pronounced precarity wrought by the response, the findings reveal that experiences of vulnerability were nothing new to the participants. Rather, their experiences of exclusion constitute continuity of the existing system, which systematically (re)produces racialised and gendered access to citizenship. Through this investigation, I reveal how the experiences of migrant women are symptomatic of the enduring coloniality of citizenship in South Africa, which has institutionalised their exclusion from citizenship.

Keywords: post-apartheid coloniality, gender inequality, structural xenophobia, migration discourse and practice, intersectionality, feminist research

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions have deepened global inequality and illuminated hierarchies that continue to plague society (Ryan and El Ayadi 2020). In South Africa, these hierarchies were made clear through the government's response, which failed to consider the most vulnerable in society, prioritising exclusion and the interests of the elite minority (Garba and Willie 2020). The Bill of Rights, chapter 2, sections 7–39 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, entrenches the rights to freedom of movement, dignity, security of the person, and access to housing, healthcare, and education for all people in South Africa, regardless of legal status. However, for migrant women living in South Africa, these legal provisions are meaningless, as they face a multitude of barriers that prevent them from accessing and actualising these rights (Amnesty International 2019).

By applying an intersectional lens, primarily in relation to poverty, gender, and citizenship (Yuval-Davis 2007), this research aims to evaluate the effects of the South African government's response to COVID-19 and the ways in which it has increased the vulnerabilities faced by migrant women living in Cape Town. Additionally, by examining the gendered effects of the response, as well as the marginalisation of those constructed as non-citizens, this research intends to understand whether the government policies can be seen as reinforcing an unequal and gendered citizenship paradigm in South Africa—the coloniality of citizenship. The temporality of migrant women's access to citizenship will also be examined to determine whether the government's response represents a divergence or merely mirrors the established citizenship discourse and practice in South Africa.

Pandemics, while causing immense devastation, also create the potential for rupture, exposing the unsustainability of the existing order and providing an opportunity to challenge unequal structures (Roy 2020). The last section of this research aims to evaluate moments of dissent, whereby the *coloniality of citizenship* is challenged through assertions of agency by migrant women and instances of solidarity and community between them and South Africans. This may provide inspiration and guidance, paving the way for a new citizenship paradigm in South Africa.

The History and Context of Migration and Xenophobia in South Africa

South Africa has a long history of migration, as contract workers from the Southern African region have been crucial for servicing colonial and apartheid South Africa's mining and agricultural sectors, contributing significantly to the country's economy (Everatt 2011). Migrancy in the region ties directly to colonial rule, whereby cheap Black labour guaranteed the profitability of European private enterprise (Nshimbi 2022).[2] This system was reinforced and institutionalised by the divide-and-rule policies of the apartheid state through a capitalist economic system (Ekambaram 2019). As an antidote to colonial racialised exploitation, South Africa's transformative constitutional design offered an opportunity for a different society (Moseneke 2014). The post-apartheid state, however, continued to pursue migration governance that closely resembles that of the 1913 Immigration Regulation Act (Klotz 2000). The Immigration Act of 2002, for example, failed to overturn apartheid legacies (Klotz 2000), retaining part of what has been called the "two-gate" system (Crush and McDonald 2001). This act continued to protect white labour and control Black mobility by prioritising "skilled" migration and implementing a securitised migration agenda (Kanics and Raghuram 2018).

In the decade following the 1994 election, the volume of migrants from neighbouring African countries increased significantly (Mbiyozo 2018).[3] While migration has typically been understood as a male phenomenon, the number of migrant women has steadily increased in South Africa with the rising autonomy of women's migration decision-making power (Mbiyozo 2018). South Africa's progressive constitution and economic strength within Africa seemingly offer hope for a better future—quickly flattened by high rates of exclusion and violence (Zanker and Moyo 2020).

Xenophobic violence in South Africa has become both "familiar and well documented" (Mosselson 2010, 642). Between 2015 and 2016, it is estimated that 70 people died, over 100 were assaulted and more than 10,000 people were displaced due to xenophobic incidents (Hiropoulos 2019). These acts of xenophobia result in few arrests or criminal prosecutions and have largely been met with silence and inaction by state officials (Hiropoulos 2019),

which has been read as "tacit approval that migrants should leave the country" (Chiumbu and Moyo 2018, 139). South African politicians have also repeatedly reinforced xenophobic sentiment to gain public support and accumulate political capital, while scapegoating Black migrants for domestic ills to avoid accountability (Hiropoulos 2019; Zanker and Moyo 2020).

In June 2015, after an outbreak of xenophobic attacks, the government initiated Operation Fiela ("sweep clean" in Sesotho), implicitly promising "to rid neighbourhoods of unclean foreign criminals" (Gastrow 2022, 90). Instead of providing safety and justice to migrants in the face of heightened vulnerability and victimisation, the government's response attributed blame to those being persecuted. Operation Fiela "lit up the public imagination" by affirming and widening racialised perceptions of migrants as "polluting and pestilential" (Gastrow 2022, 90–91), thus confirming the validity of fears about the harms migrants bring. This narrative reaffirms language that has been used across post-1994 migration discourse, which refers to migrants as "illegal aliens," "aliens," and "illegal immigrants," implying both otherness and criminality (Peberdy 2001, 23).

Over the years, amendments to migration policy continue to be characterised by "temporality, control and deterrence" (Van Lennep 2018) and do not fulfil constitutional obligations (Hobden 2020). Most recently, the 2017 White Paper on International Migration demonstrates the state's securitised migration agenda and its consistent project of rolling back rights. Of major concern is its plan to set up "Asylum Processing Centres," moving towards an encampment system that withdraws asylum seekers' rights to work, study, and move freely. The paper also expands the basis upon which refugees can be excluded, rejecting all those who failed to apply for status in safe countries en route to South Africa (Scalabrini 2019).

These examples demonstrate some of the ways in which the current migration discourse and practices of the South African government have shifted away from the empathetic, rights-based transformation prioritised in the Constitution and towards exclusion, encampment, and scapegoating rooted in continuing racialised exploitation in support of the neoliberal capitalist market (Ekambaram 2019).

For migrant women living in South Africa, this racialised exclusion is compounded by patriarchal violence (Mbiyozo 2018) in a context where gender inequality remains inscribed in the social and political fabric of the country (Gouws 2005). Subjected to xenophobia, racism, and patriarchy, migrant women face distinct forms of exclusion and oppression, differentiated from the experiences of male migrants and/or other South African women (Mbiyozo 2018). Migrant women, for example, have more difficulty in securing formal employment than male migrants due to gender discrimination and work predominantly in the informal sector where they are vulnerable to economic exploitation and abuse. They also live largely in poor, overcrowded living conditions and are frequently subjected to sexual and gender-based violence (Hiralal 2017). In such cases, they have limited recourse to justice, fearing deportation or further xenophobic and gender-based persecution by authorities (Mbiyozo 2019; Chapman and Jensen 2025). Despite migrant women's extreme vulnerability, their specific experiences and needs have largely been overlooked in the government's migration responses (Farley 2019) and there remains a complete absence of gendered considerations in existing domestic immigration policy (Mbiyozo 2018).

Conceptualising the *Coloniality of Citizenship* and its Relevance in Post-Apartheid South Africa

To understand the significance of citizenship as a determinant of inequality and exclusion, it must be understood from a global historical perspective. Citizenship has historically been acquired at the expense of racialised, gendered, and classed Others (Dobrowolsky and Tastsoglou 2006; Boatcă and Roth 2016). As a formal institution, citizenship can be traced back to the French Revolution, where it granted supposedly egalitarian citizenship rights in the West (Boatcă and Roth 2016). These, however, were legislated around Western, white, propertied men and engendered along colonial lines, excluding all those constructed as inferior and therefore not worthy of legal rights (Benson and Boatcă 2023). The emergence of citizenship was thus dependent on the invention of the Other, whereby definitions of "citizens" were juxtaposed against the construction of those "who, while part of the nation, [are] a 'lesser' part" (Benson and Boatcă 2023, 152).

These hierarchical categories are rooted in socially constructed racial and gender differences fabricated out of colonial binaries (Stephens and Boonzaier 2020), which have historically been used to justify white male supremacy and as a strategy of indirect colonial rule. Through this strategy, Mamdani (1996, 18) argues, tribalism was instrumentally reinforced—if not created, to facilitate the management and control of colonial subjects, dividing "native" populations according to ordered categories of identity, maintained through "a [colonial] state-enforced customary order."[4] These identity categories were enforced with the imposition of colonial borders during the 1884/5 Berlin Conference (Aniche and Moyo 2022) and later naturalised in post-colonial nation states (Mamdani 2020; Hammer 2021; Aniche and Moyo 2022). This arbitrary division of populations nurtured and promoted xenophobic consciousness (Aniche and Mlambo 2022) and has resulted in the casting out of othered targets from the political community (Hammer 2021).

The modern notion of citizenship in South Africa is deeply entangled in its specific colonial and apartheid history, whereby white settlers worked to create "white only citizenship," disqualifying the indigenous Black population (Sibanda 2022), which was formalised under apartheid (Neocosmos 2010). Under this system, Black women were further excluded and deemed minors by the law (Andrews 1986), reproducing colonial gender relations of male guardianship (Lugones 2007). The embeddedness of the divisive and exploitative colonial and apartheid systems endures in the current democratic context (Stephens and Boonzaier 2020), reiterated by the exclusionary demarcation of "foreigners" in South Africa's nation-state formation, whereby indigeneity was made the exclusive basis for citizenship (Neocosmos 2010). This state discourse denies the historicity of economic labour migration from neighbouring countries and the role of "foreigners" in the country's liberation, producing an essentialist and ahistorical conception of the political community (Neocosmos 2010).

This construction of insiders and outsiders is central to the functioning of a neoliberal economy, whereby hierarchical social differences are created to justify the exploitation of certain bodies for labour (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). According to Neocosmos (2010), the political economy of neoliberalism is a central point of departure, providing the conditions for these social cleavages that are sanctioned by the post-apartheid state to serve the

interests of the new Black elite. These cleavages demarcate who should be included or excluded in the political community and become important markers of otherness, used to differentiate between "us" and "them" (Adjai and Lazaridis 2013; Batisai 2016; Nyamnjoh, Hall and Cirolia 2022).

Also fundamental to nation-state formation was a liberal democratic conception of citizenship, centred on rights-claiming individuals. This framing fails to account for relations and structures of power that prevent the realisation of formal equality enshrined in the Constitution (Gouws 2005), concealing how the state continues to manage differences in a way that reinforces hierarchical gendered, classed, and racialised systems of power, entitling some to more rights and freedoms than others (Ellapen 2015). These markers of social differentiation intersect with one another and create a range of inequalities and oppressions for poor Black women (Crenshaw 1991), further intensified for those labelled as "foreigners" (Batisai 2016).

The term *coloniality of citizenship* captures how existing citizenship inclusions or exclusions "hark back to very entrenched colonial [raced and gendered] structures activated or revived when such exclusions are required by the colonizer, oppressor, or dominant group" (Benson and Boatcă 2023, 152). Coined by Boatcă and Roth (2016), it draws on approaches to coloniality that address the endurance of colonial hierarchies, power structures and relations (Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000; Lugones 2007), arguing that citizenship is inextricably linked to historical gendered and raced inequalities and exclusions (Roth 2020).

Lugones (2007), building on Quijano's (2002) term "coloniality of power," maintains that gender and race co-constitute one another in the performance of coloniality. She uses the term "modern colonial gender system" to describe the enduring ways in which racialised and gendered hierarchies continue to distinguish between bodies as more or less human (Lugones 2008). This distinction, maintained through mechanisms of othering, situates certain bodies outside civilisation where they are unable to participate as citizens (Lugones 2007). The creation and justification of a system in which certain bodies are protected citizens while others are not, at the intersection of multiple oppressions, is intrinsic to the ways colonial systems

of power are maintained through citizenship in the modern world (Boatcă and Roth 2016).

I will use the term *coloniality of citizenship* to examine the ways in which racialised and gendered exclusions from citizenship are mirrored in migrant women's experiences of the government's COVID-19 response, which reinforced their intersecting vulnerabilities and failed to adhere to constitutional obligations.

I use Yuval-Davis (2007) to define citizenship as an embodied and lived experience of subjectivity, arising from the complex intersections of diverse identities, feelings of belonging, and structural and discursive configurations of knowledge and power. This definition moves beyond traditional conceptions of citizenship centred around legal status, accounting for intersecting systems of power and oppression that shape how it feels to be a citizen (Gouws 2005).

The South African Government's COVID-19 Response: Exclusionary Protection and Support

Garba and Willie (2020) maintain that the South African government's response to the pandemic prioritised exclusion over solidarity, ignoring the full range and dynamics of vulnerability. The March 2020 lockdown, starting with Level 5 regulations, had severe socioeconomic consequences for working-class South Africans, deepening existing crises of poverty, unemployment, and hunger (De Groot and Lemanski 2020). These lockdown measures restricted people's freedom of movement—requiring them to stay in their homes and to socially isolate, as well as their freedom of trade, which brought the economy (outside essential services) to a standstill (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021). These socioeconomic insecurities were especially severe for marginalised groups (De Groot and Lemanski 2020). Migrants—with already limited social support structures, socioeconomic prospects, access to healthcare, social services, employment, and housing—were especially impacted, deepening structural inequalities (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020).

For migrant women, these challenges were compounded by the gendered impacts of the government's pandemic response, which intensified

the vulnerabilities faced by all women in South Africa (Ryan and El Ayadi 2020). These impacts included increased incidents of gender-based violence, women's disproportionate loss of income compared to that of men, and the additional burden of care women were forced to carry both physically and financially under the lockdown (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021). Despite migrant women's pronounced precarity as a result of the lockdown, they were excluded from the benefits of the government's socioeconomic support plan (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021).

In an attempt to alleviate some of the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, the South African government introduced a number of support measures for individuals and businesses (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021). ZAR50 billion was set aside for social assistance, which was provided through a temporary six-month increase in existing unemployment and child support grants, coupled with a new COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant (De Groot and Lemanski 2020). This assistance, however, was only available to those with a South African national identity document (ID), permanent residence permit or refugee status (Ellis 2020). On 18 June 2020, the Pretoria High Court ordered that the SRD be extended to asylum seekers and special permit holders, ruling the existing grant directives unconstitutional (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021). Despite this ruling, research found that very few individuals with refugee status, asylum-seeker documentation or special permits were able to access the grant and, in some cases, were refused by officials on the basis of citizenship (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021). These eligibility criteria for accessing SRD grants overlooked the vulnerabilities of undocumented persons in South Africa, as well as those whose documentation expired during the lockdown period and who were unable to renew it due to the closure of the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020).

The South African government also provided a Business Relief Fund of ZAR500 million for 100% South African-owned businesses affected by the pandemic, excluding migrant-owned businesses (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020). Additionally, Unemployment Insurance Fund payments offered during the lockdown were conditional on having a South African ID, rendering asylum seekers and special permit holders unable to access these payments despite their compliance with the fund's requirements

(Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020). Finally, to combat food insecurity, the government provided food parcels to food-scarce communities. Like many other relief measures, food parcels were only offered to those with a South African ID or special permit holders, excluding the vast majority of migrants (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020). State prejudice was also displayed when the ban on informal food providers was lifted, allowing only South African-owned and operated spaza shops to function (Zanker and Moyo 2020). Thus, migrants were not only prohibited from working and earning an income to survive, but were also excluded from many of the relief measures provided to South African citizens.

Moreover, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and a failure to regularise the asylum system have resulted in "a backlog in the processing and adjudication of documents" (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020, 2). This, coupled with institutionalised xenophobia and a 96% rejection rate of asylum claims by DHA (Amnesty International 2019), has resulted in many refugees and asylum seekers being unable to claim their rights or access required documents (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020). These challenges were compounded by the closure of the DHA during the pandemic (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020). By failing to take the realities of obtaining documentation in South Africa into consideration, and by requiring specific documentation to access COVID-19-related support and relief measures, the government's response heightened the precarity and violence experienced by already vulnerable migrants. These exclusionary policies and the absence of a gendered response left migrant women extremely exposed to violence and vulnerability.

Method of Gathering Data

By investigating the ways in which the government's COVID-19 response affected the vulnerabilities[5] faced by Black migrant women living in Cape Town, I hope to reveal the extent to which these experiences are rooted in colonial hierarchies of protection and inclusion. Through this investigation, I aim to understand whether the government's response can be seen as entrenching the *coloniality of citizenship* in South Africa.

I used qualitative research methods from a constructivist perspective to capture migrant women's subjective experiences. Through this approach, I wanted to understand the meaning that participants created in relation to their social conditions and the structures surrounding them. Fourteen in-person qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Nine participants were recruited via snowball sampling methods, having been introduced to me by a research informant, and were interviewed in a Cape Town township called Langa. Another five participants were recruited through the Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa via random sampling methods based on a list of names provided by the organisation. The combination of these two different sampling methods was adopted as a pragmatic strategy to address recruitment challenges and enhance the diversity of experiences captured. The interviews were conducted in various places around Cape Town city centre. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes, providing detailed and descriptive data that could convey a holistic picture of the participants' experiences and perceptions (Bryman 1988).

I followed the analytical procedures of Miles and Haberman described in De Wet and Erasmus (2005). This involved a process of first-level coding, whereby the data was grouped into 17 thematic codes, forming the broad structure of analysis. Through the process of second-level coding, the complex connections between these codes were identified, explaining their linkages in the data. This resulted in six second-level codes: heightened vulnerability by lockdown; unfreedom and entrapment; experience of violence (structural and direct); longing and lack of belonging; hope versus hopelessness; and agency and alternatives. These codes capture participants' shared experiences of vulnerability and violence before, during, and after the lockdown, as well as their complex emotional responses to life in Cape Town, including feelings of being trapped and longing for family and friends back home. They also capture practices and beliefs highlighted by participants that challenge their exclusion and work to build alternative forms of citizenship.

As an exploratory, reflexive exercise, I examined and pulled out as many themes as possible, not limiting these to the research questions. The above analytical procedure allowed for this process, helping to gather a full picture of participants' realities while still being structured and methodical.

Ethical considerations

Conducting research with vulnerable groups requires special attention to how power relations inform the process (Stephens and Boonzaier 2020). My position of privilege and associated experiences are inseparable from my ways of knowing, which inform tacit assumptions that risk subjugating other realities. To ensure I did not reproduce singular perspectives informed by my positionality or dominant knowledge conventions produced by the historic privileging of Eurocentric intellectual traditions in the social sciences (Lipscombe et al. 2021), an incremental research approach was taken. I applied a feminist research approach by constantly reflecting on my position of privilege as a white woman from a high-income-earning household and the ways in which this may affect reactivity and reflexivity in my research process. This approach also sought to draw out and convey a holistic picture of women's realities, ensuring that their complex and sometimes contradictory experiences were represented as accurately as possible in the findings.

By creating space for participants to guide the interview process based on what they understood to be important, I aimed to recognise their power and agency as experts in the knowledge I seek to attain, establishing my role as learner and theirs as teacher. In doing so, I tried to destabilise the relationship of power in the research space. Informed consent was given prior to the interviews, and the identity of each participant has been anonymised under a pseudonym and their privacy protected throughout the research process.

Vulnerability, Violence, and Exclusion: Change Versus Continuity?

The women interviewed were between the ages of 22 and 47 and came from numerous African countries, including Malawi, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This demographic diversity aimed to capture the heterogeneity of African migrant women's experiences. Before the start of the lockdown, one woman was working in the formal economy as a

waitress and seven were working in the informal economy—two self-employed, two working for their husbands, and three working for other migrants. Six of the women had received temporary asylum-seeker permits in the first few years of their arrival, but at the time of the interview, only one participant held an asylum-seeker permit.

The findings from the interviews revealed the complicated relationship between change and continuity in participants' perceptions of their exposure to vulnerability.[4] Common themes identified in the findings revealed both how the government's COVID-19 response increased participants' exposure to vulnerability, and how experiences of vulnerability pre-dated the pandemic, impelled through institutionalised xenophobia and exposure to structural and direct gendered and racialised violence.

Participants highlighted the ways in which, prior to COVID-19, their existing intersecting vulnerabilities as Black migrant women made them and others susceptible to exploitation and abuse. One participant spoke of how she was sexually harassed by friends of her sister, while they were living in the same house, forcing her to find alternative accommodation:

> … The men that she [her sister] had in the home wanted to rape me … I didn't have someone to stand up for me so everything they were doing, I was like what can I do? And without papers, you cannot even go and accuse them. And if I was not a woman, I could live in this house, and they couldn't come to try and rape me. They know that I'm vulnerable so they can do anything they want. And I'm also a foreigner so I didn't know the language, and they just took advantage of me. Pricilla (DRC)

Here Pricilla alludes to her inability to access justice as a migrant. This was corroborated by the majority of participants who stated that they did not trust the South African police. Nine participants highlighted experiences of discrimination by police officers, where they perceived the police to be unresponsive or apathetic due to their migrant identity. These experiences, as well as the fear of deportation by the police and other officials, were expressed as preventing participants from reporting crimes and seeking justice, thus denying migrant women channels of defending themselves against abuse.

Participants also discussed multiple experiences of structural violence propelled through what they perceived as unfair exclusionary state discourse

and practice. Substantiating what is argued in the literature (Hiropoulos 2019; Zanker and Moyo 2020), participants lamented the government's continued scapegoating of migrants for the country's problems, as well as its inaction in response to instances of xenophobia. They highlighted how the government's migrant discourse emphasises difference between "foreigners" and South Africans, reinforcing ideas of "insiders" and "outsiders." Such divisive rhetoric fuels xenophobic sentiment in South Africa and dehumanises migrants in the public imagination. As Wendy (Zimbabwe) explained, the government is "making people think that foreigners are non-humans." This sentiment was echoed in the following statements:

> There are ugly things that happen to foreigners and the government is just standing there saying nothing. Especially this thing of xenophobia … I think the government really needs to implement laws that are not marginalising … to allow people to feel like they are human beings. Alison (DRC)

> They [South Africans], themselves, are struggling so they blame it on the migrants. They think that things are like this because the government says there are a lot of migrants. To change that, the government must take care of their people. Thandi (DRC)

Health xenophobia was another example of structural violence cited by participants. The majority said they had experienced name-calling or negligent care when seeking healthcare from clinics and hospitals due to their migrant identity. Some were also unconstitutionally denied treatment because they could not produce certain documentation. This was cited as especially problematic when it came to reproductive care, resulting in many participants having severely limited access to their sexual and reproductive health rights:

> Even at the hospital … when they know you are a foreigner, like when you are going to give birth, they treat you very badly. They were shouting at you like, "Why are you guys giving birth here in South Africa?" and calling us names. Sometimes even you are calling the nurses like, "The baby is here," and the nurse is saying, "Just wait," until the baby just comes by itself. Diana (DRC)

Participants also highlighted multiple challenges in attempting to access documentation, such as having to travel long distances to government offices, spend money on transport, wait in queues for hours, and experience harassment and discrimination, often only to be unsuccessful and have to return to the DHA repeatedly. One participant had been waiting for as long as

15 years to have her asylum case heard, having first applied in 2009. These experiences confirmed Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi's (2020) argument that corruption, mismanagement, and xenophobia by DHA officials make the process of becoming documented nearly impossible. This inability to access documentation was also seen as a major contributor to participants' vulnerability, preventing them from accessing healthcare, safety, justice, legal aid, and finding employment, or making them defenceless against exploitation and abuse in the workplace. As Diana (DRC) put it: "If I don't have papers … I don't have any access to anything." This is epitomised by the government's requirements for accessing COVID-19-related support and relief measures, which served to reinforce exclusion. In addition to experiences of institutional xenophobia, participants voiced experiences of xenophobia and ostracism by surrounding community members. All participants reported experiencing hostility from South Africans, and the majority described verbal and/or psychological abuse.

Language was also cited by participants as contributing to feelings of isolation and exclusion by creating communication barriers and marking them as outsiders, echoing the literature (Mosselson 2010; Batisai 2016). Such experiences continually reinforced their non-belonging in South Africa and often created a longing to return home. Thus, feelings of belonging were largely absent throughout participants' time in South Africa.

When asked about their experiences during the lockdown, participants perceived it as having exacerbated their existing experiences of vulnerability, often with lasting consequences. One of the most pressing consequences of the government's response was their further impoverishment. All participants experienced a significant or total loss of household income during the lockdown period and were all excluded from government support, such as COVID-19-related relief grants. With little to no savings to fall back on, this severely impacted their ability to meet their needs and, in some cases, the needs of their children:

> And you don't even have the money to go buy food … There is no way we can work to feed the kids. We survived by the grace of God … We have lost so much. I started a business selling lightly salted Zim peanut butter, but now I lost contact with a lot of those customers. I lost my business along the way. So, it hasn't got back to where it was. We are still healing. Wendy (Zimbabwe)

This material financial impact was also highlighted by participants as having a severe impact on their mental health. Participants spoke of increased feelings of hopelessness due to their loss of income, greater impoverishment, and social isolation. They also expressed uncertainty and fear around their ability to provide for themselves. Some participants felt demoralised and degraded as the livelihoods they had worked hard to establish were crushed under the lockdown measures. This left many feeling trapped and desperate:

> Mentally, we were so disturbed. Sometimes we would feel like, "Are we still in our right senses?" … Sometimes, I felt like I was being squashed. Wendy (Zimbabwe)

> I spent days without eating and after three days … you know you have some pride and you don't want to go around to ask people, but after three days you didn't eat, look, you ask around. This was something I have never done. It's humiliating. Alison (DRC)

Here, participants describe how the government's response reduced their feeling of dignity, as they were plunged into desperation and abject poverty, reliant on others for sustenance and struggling daily to survive.

Participants also highlighted how their existing vulnerability to racialised and gendered violence was exacerbated by the social isolation measures. These measures alienated migrant women, cutting them off from crucial networks that could offer guidance and safety in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment, while giving sexual predators greater opportunity:

> The networks were disturbed because of COVID-19. Women migrants all depend on other women to ask which clinic they can go to, which hospital they can go to, to get maybe family planning pills, sanitary pads, you know those things. But now, because of lockdown, we are all in our houses and so many migrant women are now getting unwanted, unplanned babies, because they didn't know where to go. Wendy (Zimbabwe)

> Then I discovered, because of the curfew, it paved the way for some abuses for some women … Those perpetrators took advantage, because there is no one seeing them. They rape the kids. They raped the mothers. So, it affected a lot of women. Maria (Ghana)

The absence of a gendered response to COVID-19 that could account for women's distinct vulnerabilities failed to address the increased levels of gender-based violence under the lockdown and exposed women to greater instances of

exploitation and abuse. Participants also described how isolation measures intensified their care responsibilities—a challenge that was sharpened by their exclusion from child support grants, which could have alleviated some of their stress in supporting their families.

The participants interviewed form part of a broader spectrum of women and other vulnerable groups whose precarity was intensified by the government's COVID-19 response. What distinguishes the participants' experiences are the additional and intersecting vulnerabilities associated with their migrant status. These included discrimination in accessing COVID-19-related relief that could have offered participants some reprieve from their crippling impoverishment.

Racialised and Gendered Protection and Support: Assessing the Coloniality of Citizenship in South Africa

The findings demonstrate how the government's COVID-19 response reasserted migrant women's exclusion by reproducing gendered and racialised barriers to protection and support. This pushed participants further into poverty, exposed them to increased instances of gendered abuse and diminished their sense of dignity. By reinforcing barriers to accessing rights enshrined in the Constitution and degrading migrant women's sense of freedom and dignity, the government's response relegated them to the very periphery of citizenship.

The lockdown, however, merely "illuminated hidden things" (Roy 2020, 209). The findings revealed an already established exclusionary discourse and practice towards migrants in South Africa, which prevents migrant women from accessing their rights and reinforces their position as outsiders. Thus, the government's response did not bring about a substantial shift in access to citizenship but rather worsened it by reinforcing barriers to accessing rights and reasserting participants' non-belonging. I argue that this response is indicative of an already established racialised and gendered citizenship institution in South Africa that classifies people into insiders and outsiders, and into categories of the deserving and undeserving.

According to Gqola (2021), our hegemonic system of valuation has historically relied on binary thinking to position certain individuals as desirable or undesirable—a distinction through which ideological categories are made. Gqola (2021, 19) conveys how women and other sexually minoritised people "are rendered as socially female, and therefore safe to violate." Similarly, violent masculinity, dressed as nationalist narratives, is used both to mark and to produce the "foreigner" through the drawing of boundaries (Gqola 2021). These boundaries are themselves unstable, because, as Hall (1996, cited in Gqola 2021, 165) notes, "as a process, [identity] operates across difference, it entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries." Thus, the boundary between foreigner and local, insider and outsider requires discursive work that both maintains difference and produces the "foreigner" as undesirable, Other and less than human. Through the process of boundary creation and maintenance, migrant women have been rendered as both "female" and as "foreigner;" that is, as "safe to brutalise" (Gqola 2021). I argue that the government's COVID-19 response represents a discursive tactic of boundary maintenance that designates certain groups as open to brutalisation, as evidenced by the exclusion of particular racialised and gendered bodies from protection and support.

These findings also corroborate Nshimbi's (2022) argument that COVID-19 merely amplified the historically embedded hierarchisation of human beings, which differentiates between those who live in the "zone of being" and those relegated to the "zone of non-being." Migrant women's exclusion from citizenship rights and the persistent humiliation and indignity they suffer in grappling for inclusion, demonstrate how they have been relegated to the "zone of non-being," a zone into which those constructed as both "female" and "foreigner" have been compelled to fit comfortably. Thus, despite democratic promises enshrined in the Constitution, migrant women have been systematically excluded from citizenship. This demonstrates the hierarchical and exclusionary functioning of citizenship in South Africa, operating along intersecting axes of oppression—the *coloniality of citizenship*—which has been maintained and reasserted by the government's COVID-19 response.

Solidarity, Agency and Alternatives: Rupturing the Coloniality of Citizenship

According to Roy (2020, 214), pandemics have historically

> … forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcases of our prejudice and hatred… Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

The pandemic revealed the structural inequality existent globally, which is preserved by the hierarchical functioning of citizenship. However, if we take seriously Roy's argument that COVID-19 can present an opportunity to imagine a better future, it means we are at a crossroads. What remains is no small task, but it is one taken up every day from the margins as vulnerable groups struggle for access, challenging the *coloniality of citizenship* in their fight to forge a new inclusive citizenship paradigm.

Migrant women are not just passive victims, merely acted upon and dominated. They attempt to navigate and challenge their vulnerability through different strategies in their daily fight for access and recognition (Nyamnjoh, Hall and Cirolia 2022). In the face of exclusion and unrelenting barriers to citizenship, the research also revealed moments of dissent that challenged the *coloniality of citizenship*. This was seen in participants' determination and profound optimism, which enabled them to remain hopeful and find new ways of overcoming challenges. During the lockdown, participants utilised innovative methods of survival to navigate their challenges, whether through wilful rationing tactics or entrepreneurial spirit, refusing to succumb to the multiple barriers they faced. One participant, for example, used the only savings she had to start selling chips and burgers on the street:

> I only had R700 and I had to go buy a chip fryer for 600 and then with the R100 I bought a kg of potatoes and fish oil. The following day, I wrote a note on the gate saying, 'Chips for sale.' I started selling those chips, and burgers. Wendy (Zimbabwe)

Religion also played a role in the lives of participants, offering "both a network of support and a practice of agency" (Nyamnjoh, Hall and Cirolia 2022, 37). The majority of participants emphasised the role of their churches and

mosques in providing support during the lockdown, materially, spiritually and emotionally. Religious practices helped women to remain hopeful, and many participants found comfort and support in their religious communities. These examples of agencies, among realities of deprivation, demonstrate the ways in which migrant women navigate their exclusion in an attempt to access elements of citizenship beyond what they are given.

Seeking solidarity and community was another way participants tried to cope with their exclusion throughout their time in South Africa. Some participants shared how instances of support and inclusion helped them gain a sense of community:

> They are also amazing people here [in Cape Town]. They are South Africans, Black people, white people, wonderful people. And maybe it's that once you know each other and can appreciate each other, it changes … I mean the first couple of years, and even after, you don't feel this sense of belonging, but after a few years, you get used to it and you understand people's different backgrounds and stuff. Then, we can belong. Alison (DRC)

Another participant shared experiences of South Africans protecting her and other migrants when crime and violence erupted in the community, especially in the case of looting businesses:

> We are good with the community. No one ever abuses us or makes us feel uncomfortable … I'm not scared because they [South African community members] protect us. Like during the lockdown, some people came and broke the shops and stole stuff, but our community didn't want them to touch our shops and helped us pack them away before they came to make them safe. Maria (Ghana)

Examples of community support and solidarity from different people across nationalities, races and genders confront the dominant migrant discourse of difference and exclusion that aims to preserve the *coloniality of citizenship*. This was supported by participants who emphasised their commonality with poor Black South Africans arguing for the need to treat one another as equals and with compassion:

> We are all one African country ... So, we should all be united as one. Maria (Ghana)

> We just want to be equal. We are all human beings. There is nothing that changes: South African, Congolese, Zimbabwean. Pricilla (DRC)

Such narratives recognising a common humanity begin to offer an alternative citizenship discourse based on inclusion, compassion, equality, and cooperation among differences. This conceptualisation of citizenship offers a way forward towards "planetary humanism"—a concept based on complete inclusivity, where the nation is seen "as imaginary and humanity as real" (Majumdar 2022, 251).

These examples of solidarity among differences convey what Diagne and Amselle (2020) call "the universal," which, according to Walsh (2002), enables the recognition of interconnectedness among particularised interests, helping to overcome divisive politics. This site of solidarity across nationalities, races, and genders offers a collective space where shared experiences of marginalisation can transcend constructed colonial differences and where categories of insiders and outsiders can be contested, forging new collective identities out of common subjectivities and shared aims of emancipation. Although these examples of agency and dissent cannot overcome migrant women's exclusion in South Africa, they provide a glimmer of hope in an unjust system, paving the way towards the creation of a new paradigm of citizenship in South Africa.

Conclusion

By examining the effects of the South African government's COVID-19 response on the experiences of migrant women living in Cape Town, this study demonstrates how these measures exposed migrant women to heightened vulnerability at a time of pronounced precarity. Through racialised and gendered barriers to support and protection, it curtailed participants' ability to access their rights and reasserted their position as "outsiders." However, while the government's response can be seen as structurally distributing unequal and gendered citizenship, the findings suggest that this practice was nothing new. Rather, the marginalisation of those constructed as non-citizens by the government, and thus undeserving of its support and protection during the pandemic, is indicative of the already existing *coloniality of citizenship* in South Africa. COVID-19 merely amplified the pre-existing hierarchisation of human beings, established with the advent of colonialism and reinforced through coloniality (Nshimbi 2022).

By exposing the exclusionary and violent functioning of citizenship in South Africa, this research aims to shed light on the insidious character of citizenship as a marker of difference and ascription of belonging according to racialised and gendered criteria, which relegates certain bodies to the margins and normalises systemic violence. This is an important step towards recreating an alternative citizenship paradigm based on the ideals of planetary humanism, a task already being undertaken by those who know this hidden character of citizenship all too well. In the face of unrelenting exclusion and barriers to citizenship rights, migrant women displayed immense strength and agency in their struggle for access and efforts to forge solidarity and community. These examples of dissent contest constructed categories of insiders and outsiders and offer a site of struggle whereby new collective identities can be forged out of common experiences of exclusion, giving rise to an alternative paradigm of citizenship in South Africa.

Notes:

1. This article draws on research conducted for my master's thesis completed at the University of Cape Town in 2023.
2. I have chosen to capitalise the terms "Black" to acknowledge race as socially constructed while also recognising the ways in which racialisation, as a social process, has material effects (Haney Lopez 2004).
3. Migration discourse in South Africa has a distinct racial basis, centring on the homogenous portrayal of Black Africans overburdening the country by the state and the media. This, as well as the government's administrative response, has resulted in the public's conflation of different migration categories and framing of all Black foreign nationals as "illegals" (Zanker and Moyo 2020). In this research, I use the term "migrant" to refer to all African foreign nationals relocating to South Africa, regardless of their legal or documentation status, emphasising their common humanity and deservingness of compassion regardless of legal classifications.
4. The term "native" is a colonial term with negative connotations, which I use in quotation marks to indicate its problematic nature.

5. I use the term "vulnerability" to refer to structural inequalities and experiences of exclusion resulting from discrimination according to intersecting identities that affect one's physical and emotional well-being.

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