

10-2023

## Adults' Subjective Experiences of Exploitation in South Africa

**Fatiema Benjamin***Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Children, Families and Society, Community and Health Science Faculty, University of the Western Cape, 3333237@myuwc.ac.za***Rachel Chinyakata Dr***Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Children, Families and Society, Community and Health Science Faculty, University of the Western Cape, chin.rachie@gmail.com***Edna Grace Rich Professor***Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Children, Families and Society, Community and Health Science Faculty, University of the Western Cape, rich.edna2@gmail.com***Erica Koegler Professor***School of Social Work, University of Missouri-St. Louis, koeglere@umsl.edu***Nicolette Vanessa Roman Professor***Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Children, Families and Society, Community and Health Sciences Faculty, University of the Western Cape, nroman@uwc.ac.za*Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity>Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Psychology Commons](#), [Social Justice Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Benjamin, Fatiema; Chinyakata, Rachel Dr; Rich, Edna Grace Professor; Koegler, Erica Professor; and Roman, Nicolette Vanessa Professor (2023) "Adults' Subjective Experiences of Exploitation in South Africa," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2023.08.02.05>

This Research and Scholarly Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons-group@uri.edu](mailto:digitalcommons-group@uri.edu).

---

# Adults' Subjective Experiences of Exploitation in South Africa

## Abstract

The exploitation of people in the environments in which they live and work continues to be a challenge globally despite efforts by stakeholders at national and international levels to bring this to a halt. Exploitation has both short-term and long-term impacts on the lives of the survivors. Attention should be given to preventing new incidents and addressing ongoing exploitation. However, there is a lack of research that focuses on the subjective experiences of different forms of exploitation within the Western Cape, South Africa. Therefore, this paper explores individuals' experiences of being exploited, focusing on the types of exploitative situations participants are exposed to. This study sample consists of 417 adults residing in Cape Town and surrounding areas, of which 84% were South African, and 16% were from other African countries. Data were collected using a structured survey with additional semi-structured interview questions. This report used only responses to specific semi-structured questions, which were analysed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that study participants often experience situations that leave them vulnerable to multiple forms of exploitation. This includes experiences of abuse and economic vulnerability; specifically, participants reported working in abusive environments and their economic vulnerabilities being exploited. It was also found that the type of employment could create vulnerability, which left participants at an increased risk for exploitation. Considering this, the study calls for the collaboration of different stakeholders, including but not limited to the families, community, leaders, scholars, and governmental and non-governmental sectors, in developing and prioritising strategies to prevent exploitation. This is essential in protecting and safeguarding the rights of individuals and building a just South Africa where everyone can thrive free from exploitation by others.

## Keywords

South Africa, abuse, sexual abuse, exploitation, vulnerability, economic exploitation, revictimization

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to extend their gratitude to all individuals who participated in the study for the invaluable information they shared regarding their subjective experiences. The authors would also like to thank all organisations and stakeholders who provided researchers access to their organisations. Dignity thanks Joan A. Reid, Associate Professor of Criminology and Director of the University of South Florida Trafficking in Persons Risk to Resilience Research Lab for her time and expertise to review this article.

## ADULTS' SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF EXPLOITATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

**Fatiema Benjamin**

*University of the Western  
Cape, South Africa*

 [0000-0003-1247-648X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1247-648X)


**Rachel Chinyakata**

*University of the Western Cape,  
South Africa*

 [0000-0001-5346-2434](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5346-2434)

**Edna Grace Rich**

*University of the West-  
ern Cape, South Africa*

 [0000-0002-7938-0557](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7938-0557)

**Erica Koegler**

*University of Missouri-  
St. Louis, USA*

 [0000-0003-3685-0835](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3685-0835)

**Nicolette Vanessa Roman**

*University of the Western Cape,  
South Africa*

 [0000-0002-4506-437X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4506-437X)

### ABSTRACT

The exploitation of people in the environments in which they live and work continues to be a challenge globally despite efforts by stakeholders at national and international levels to bring this to a halt. Exploitation has both short-term and long-term impacts on the lives of the survivors. Attention should be given to preventing new incidents and addressing ongoing exploitation. However, there is a lack of research that focuses on the subjective experiences of different forms of exploitation within the Western Cape, South Africa. Therefore, this paper explores individuals' experiences of being exploited, focusing on the types of exploitative situations participants are exposed to. This study sample consists of 417 adults residing in Cape Town and surrounding areas, of which 84% were South African, and 16% were from other African countries. Data were collected using a structured survey with additional semi-structured interview questions. This report used only responses to specific semi-structured questions, which were analysed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that study participants often experience situations that leave them vulnerable to multiple forms of exploitation. This includes experiences of abuse and economic vulnerability; specifically, participants reported working in abusive environments and their economic vulnerabilities being exploited. It was also found that the type of employment could create vulnerability, which left participants at an increased risk for exploitation. Considering this, the study calls for the collaboration of different stakeholders, including but not limited to the families, community, leaders, scholars, and governmental and non-governmental sectors, in developing and prioritising strategies to prevent exploitation. This is essential in protecting and safeguarding the rights of individuals and building a just South Africa where everyone can thrive free from exploitation by others.

### KEYWORDS

South Africa, abuse, exploitation, vulnerability, economic exploitation, revictimization

**E**XPLOITATION IS UNDERSTOOD as the act of using people's vulnerability to take advantage of or unfairly treat them as a means of directly profiting or benefiting from them (Batsyukova, 2007; Republic of South Africa, 2013). It is a complex activity, and people are often exploited based on their vulnerabilities, which include but are not limited to being a

migrant or immigrant who has entered the country illegally or without the proper documentation; pregnancy; any disability of the person; addiction to the use of any dependency-producing substance; being a child; social circumstances; or economic circumstances (Republic of South Africa, 2013, p. 10).

For example, Acharya (2021) highlights that approximately 21 million migrants are forced into human trafficking or exploited, often through forced labour, including working for less than the state-identified minimum wage. Homelessness has also been identified as a vulnerability to exploitation. This is supported by a study conducted in the U.S. by Chisolm-Straker et al. (2019), who found that 48.3% of their study sample of homeless youth experienced labour exploitation, with 17.2% experiencing both labour and sexual exploitation. This has been associated with the increased risk of homeless persons trading sexual favours for necessities such as food, money, or shelter. As Murphy (2016) suggests, homeless youth are particularly vulnerable to exploitation since scam artists, abusers, and traffickers recognize their vulnerability and target them.

South Africa has been identified as a source, transit, and destination country for exploiting children, women, and men (United States Department of State, 2020, 2021; Van der Watt, 2018). The 2021 Trafficking in Persons report published by the United States Department of State reported that foreign nationals are fraudulently recruited and charged excessive fees by labour brokers to work in South African mines, often resulting in forced labour (United States Department of State, 2021).

This is also found in the domestic workspace, as domestic workers in South Africa are among the most exploited groups, often being paid less than the minimum wage (Du Preez et al., 2010). There is a paucity of research on the exploitation of people in South Africa and statistics on the different forms of exploitation in the country. However, a briefing paper on the sexual exploitation of children in South Africa (End Child Prostitution and Trafficking International, 2019) indicates that poverty strongly contributes to people being exploited. This is due to their economic vulnerability and desperation for employment. Furthermore, a prevalence study conducted on modern-day slavery across South Africa estimated the absolute number of victims to be 155,000 people (Global Slavery Index, 2018). Recent estimates demonstrate that 17% of a vulnerable sample in Cape Town experienced probable lifetime trafficking, and 2.9% experienced likely trafficking in the past year (Price et al., 2022).

There are various consequences associated with exploitation that survivors or victims often experience. These include, but are not limited to, physical symptoms such as headaches, gynaecological infections (due to sexual exploitation), and body pains (Zimmerman et al., 2008). Other consequences include mental health issues; for instance, the victim/survivor may suffer from single or multiple mental disorders, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and substance use disorders, because of the exploitation they experience. (Gerassi, 2015; Ottisova et al., 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2008). Additionally, experiences of abuse across the different stages of life have also been associated with exploitation. For example, childhood emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and physical abuse (De Vries & Goggin, 2020; Gerassi, 2015; Roe-

Sepowitz, 2012) are significantly connected with commercial sexual exploitation, resulting in a younger age of entry into the prostitution industry. There may be a connection between such experiences and the transmission of negative self-beliefs, low self-worth, and even impairment of abilities.

It is apparent that vulnerability considerably increases the risk of exploitation. According to the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act (PACOTIP) (Republic of South Africa, 2013), abuse of vulnerability is the act of any abuse that leads a person to believe that he or she has no reasonable alternative but to submit to exploitation. This results in exploitation primarily occurring because of someone's vulnerability being taken advantage of and the abuse associated with it. Therefore, the risks that come with being vulnerable are important to consider as they significantly affect an individual's experiences during exploitation and their help-seeking behaviour about any assistance they may need.

South African law explicitly prohibits the exploitation of any person within the country, including migrants and immigrants. For instance, The Bill of Rights (1996) explicitly forbids any person is subjected to slavery, servitude, or forced labour and states that all persons have the right to fair labour practices. This shows that South Africa has laws preventing the exploitation of people; however, it continues to be a prominent issue within the country. In South Africa, limited scientific literature examines individual experiences of vulnerability and the contributing factors to exploitation. Thus, exploring and understanding people's experiences of exploitative environments and situations is of substantial importance, as this could improve policies concerning exploitation. This study aimed to explore vulnerable individuals' experiences of exploitation by identifying the types of exploitation they are exposed to based on their subjective experiences.

## METHODS

### STUDY DESIGN AND SETTING

This paper draws on data gathered in a more extensive research study that focused on the nature and scope of Trafficking in Persons (TIP) within the Western Cape (hereafter referred to as the primary study). The primary study included a cross-sectional structured survey design to estimate the prevalence and identify indicators of trafficking in persons conducted in 2021. The data for this sub-study were collected in the City of Cape Town and surrounding areas in the Western Cape, South Africa. Although the primary study focused on trafficking in persons, the current study aimed to explore the subjective experiences of at-risk people who have experienced life events that are often associated with vulnerability to exploitation (Chisolm-Straker et al., 2019; Republic of South Africa, 2013). This includes persons who experienced homelessness, substance addiction, living in low socio-economic status (SES) communities with high unemployment rates, sex workers, and migrants. Qualitative data collected from the semi-structured questions in the structured survey were extracted and used for analysis. The following semi-structured questions were asked: (1) Do you think you have been used, abused, or exploited? (2) Why do you think this happened? (3) How would you characterize the experience? (4) Is there anything else you would like to say before you/I leave? The main findings from the data analysis pertained to participants responding to the above questions.

## **SAMPLING SIZE AND SAMPLING PROCEDURE**

Participants were recruited by gaining access to organisations and rehabilitation facilities that identified persons who may have experienced vulnerable situations, including but not limited to substance abuse, homelessness, and survivors of domestic violence. Additionally, individuals who participated in the study were also asked to refer anyone they know who meets the study criteria and may be willing to participate. The inclusion criteria for this study consisted of adults aged 18 or older who are refugees, migrant workers, people in the sex industry and people in recovery from drug or alcohol addiction, domestic workers, or those who experienced any form of abuse, including physical, emotional, verbal, or psychological abuse, experienced other exploitive situations or experienced a partner or someone close to them being threatened or hurt. In addition, social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok, were used as an additional source of participant recruitment. The inclusion criteria for the current study were explained to potential participants, and if they met the criteria, they were invited to participate. A total of 417 participants participated in the study when the qualitative data were extracted. The primary study had a final sample of 665 participants. The sample for the findings presented in the current paper consists of males (39.7%), females (57.7%), transgender (2.4%), and non-binary (.2%) with a mean age of 34.05 years old.

Furthermore, data were collected by six research assistants and six community workers (hereafter called field workers). Before participant recruitment and data collection, fieldworkers received intensive training on administering the survey and ethics. A hybrid sampling approach suitable for hard-to-reach populations was used to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sampling strategies included purposive sampling and snowball sampling, and by adapting Flynn et al.'s (2013) door-to-door recruitment process, a systematic 'door-to-door' sampling method was also adopted. Following strict COVID-19 protocols and restrictions, the fieldworkers recruited residents in every third dwelling unit in areas with high concentrations of high-risk residents (e.g., informal settlements and many backyard dwellers).

## **DATA COLLECTION TOOLS AND PROCEDURES**

Throughout the survey, participants discussed potential experiences of exploitation. At the end of the survey, based on their personal experiences and perspectives, participants were asked what they believe led to this. The survey was translated into Afrikaans and isiXhosa and back-translated into English for further revision and finalisation. Fieldworkers administered the survey in person to participants using KoboToolbox from tablets provided to them, where the fieldworkers entered the responses manually. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, surveys were also administered telephonically with participants using paper-and-pencil administration. All survey participants received a R50 grocery voucher as a token of appreciation for their time and effort.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

For the current study, the qualitative data extracted from the structured survey were analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Native-speaking fieldworkers translated Afrikaans and/or IsiXhosa qualitative responses into English before analysis. The analysis process started with two researchers familiarising themselves with the extracted qualitative information. This was done by splitting the available data and reading and re-reading participant responses. Each researcher then generated initial codes and reorganised and rearranged them to refine the initial

codes. After coding was completed, researchers shared their refined codes to identify any sub-themes that may have emerged. By clustering similar codes, the sub-themes were created. After that, similar concepts were grouped to form the final themes identified.

## ETHICS

The primary study received ethics clearance to conduct the research study granted by the Biomedical Science Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape (BM20/8/13). All participants were informed of the study's aim and their right to participate and/or withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. Participants were also informed of their role during the survey administration and the field worker's role. Participant consent was obtained verbally and from all individuals involved in the study. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all information obtained from participants was stored on KoboToolbox, which was only accessible to the primary researchers, and no names or personal identifiers were used.

## RESULTS

More than half of the participants (56.2%) thought they had been used, abused, and/or exploited. Based on the thematic analysis, the identified themes are significantly interrelated. However, this paper's themes were kept separately for clarity and flow. Three themes were identified, namely (1) abuse, (2) economic vulnerability, and (3) type of employment that creates vulnerability, each with its sub-themes presented below.

### ABUSE

It was common for participants to describe abuse as a form of vulnerability they experienced. Among the types of abuse participants reported were sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, and psychological abuse. Generally, participants in this study reported experiencing and/or witnessing at least one form of abuse during childhood, adulthood, or both. This indicates the presence of revictimization in participants' lives. This theme emerged based on participant responses of experiencing abuse often perpetrated by someone in their personal lives, such as close family members, intimate partners, or someone they knew. This is illustrated below.

Participant 17 reported revictimization as she experienced and witnessed abuse in the home as a child, and later, as an adult, she experienced abuse within her marriage. She said: "Growing up, I witnessed and experienced a lot of violence in [the] home. When I got married, I was also abused" (Female, 65 years old). A similar experience was reported by participant 10 when she indicated that she was abused as a child and met abusive partners later in life (Female, 53 years old). In addition to witnessing and/or being physically abused, participants reported being sexually abused, explicitly raped, and/or used for sexual acts or favours. One specific participant indicated that she was "raped. Used for sex. I am seen as a sex worker" (Participant 116, Female, 37 years old). In addition, participant 296 reported being threatened and physically abused by her partner if she did not do what he told her. She said: "My ex-boyfriend used to hit me if I did not steal for him, he will kill me. He stabbed me twice" (Participant 296, Female, 31 years old).

This study brought to light the occurrence of psychological abuse from the intimate partners of participants. Participants shared similar experiences of being



abused by their partners as a means of control over them and their activities. For instance, participant 19 indicated that her husband had power over her and was a drug addict. She also revealed that his family abused her; they called her a factory “*meit*” (Female, 53 years old). Similarly, participant 90 recalled abusive experiences from past relationships:

I’ve been mentally abused by my first husband. He told me that I’m fat and ugly and that something is mentally wrong with me because I couldn’t communicate on his level. He also cheated. The second marriage was lies about money, [he was] embarrassed because I didn’t have a good job, and I had to lie about my job. (Participant 90, Female, 39 years old).

## ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY

This theme attends to participants’ subjective experiences of their working environment and interactions with their workplace superiors. The results revealed that participants perceived their employers as often being disrespectful towards them and taking advantage of them for the employers’ gain. This theme consists of two sub-themes that were identified, namely, (1) abusive working environment and (2) forced labour. These are described below, followed by participant quotations as illustrations.

### Abusive Working Environment

This sub-theme emerged as participants reported feeling disrespected and abused by their employers. Based on the provided extracts, it is evident that employers would exert abusive behaviour over their employees. However, participants felt that staying in an abusive working environment was better than being unemployed, highlighting that participants within this study were likely to remain in an unhealthy working environment as opposed to being unemployed. Participant 194 stated

I think it was because the person [employer] was so abusive, they would just treat you as a worker and as you are not human... I was not even allowed to go out for off [break]; they would tell you that you do not take-offs, nor do you go out. (Female, 28 years old)

Another participant shared a similar experience:

The people we worked for were just abusive, and because we had no other option we just had to play according to [their] tune. It was better than to get fired. (Participant 197, Female, 36 years old)

### Exploiting the Economic Vulnerabilities of Workers

Numerous participants indicated that their employers often required them to work extra hours or give them additional responsibilities that were not part of their job description. Participants also reported being forced to do certain activities even when they did not want to. Although participants were required to work more and do hard labour, they were not compensated for their time or activities completed. Furthermore, this theme revealed that although the participants work in exploitative conditions, they are reluctant to leave their jobs as finding alternative employment in South Africa is very difficult. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

---

<sup>1</sup> A derogatory term used when referring to someone as “less than” specifically for females.



There are some types of work where we are told to work overtime, but we are not paid for that overtime. Also, some types of work, we are supposed to use machinery, but we are told to do it using our own hands (Participant 148, Male, 31 years old).

Where I work, at the restaurant, they do not pay us at all. You only get money from tips. Meaning that our labour doesn't cost them anything (Participant 393, Male, 28 years old).

## TYPE OF ACTIVITY THAT CREATES VULNERABILITY

Another theme that emerged based on the analysis was the type of employment. Specifically, participants indicated that the type of work they do often puts them in vulnerable situations. As such, two sub-themes were identified: (1) the sex industry and (2) working abroad.

### The Sex Industry

Some participants reported that they were vulnerable in the sex industry, which led to the development of this sub-theme. Participants reported that, in the sex industry, they often find themselves in dangerous situations; however, there is very little they can do about it. Furthermore, they reported being abused mainly by clients who sometimes refused to pay them for their services. This further exacerbated the fact that they have limited avenues of protection by the law. For instance, participant 109 stated:

People use their powers that they are paying you, so they do what they want because they are paying their money. You cannot report anywhere because no one gives attention to sex workers... because people judge sex workers so they take advantage that you cannot report anywhere so they abuse you" (Female, 28 years old).

Another participant reported, "...as a sexual worker, some clients refuse to pay, and some can beat you up if you refuse to do what they want" (participant 12, Female, 27 years old). This indicates that being in the sex industry often feels like they have no social support and are faced with abusive situations due to their profession and nowhere to report it.

### Working Abroad

This theme emerged as participants reported having found themselves in a vulnerable situation when they left South Africa to work abroad. These include being told to do different activities from those agreed upon, and sadly, they cannot escape these working conditions, or they end up trapped because they could not afford to pay for their travel. This is illustrated in the following quotations:

In London, I went overseas to work as a driver, and when I got there, I was told to wash cars (Participant 13, Male 44 years old).

I was an au pair overseas, and once I got there, the job I had to do was different from what had been described. They always expect more output from you than what was expected, and the salary does not reflect it. I couldn't leave overseas as I couldn't afford a ticket back to Cape Town (Participant 175, Female, 31 years old).

## DISCUSSION

This study explored the subjective experiences of people who are vulnerable to exploitation. Understanding the experiences of individuals who have been or are still vulnerable to exploitation is essential for developing and implementing strategies to safeguard their rights, health, and well-being. This study's findings revealed that individuals face multiple forms of exploitation in work and home environments. These include experiences of abuse by intimate partners, the exploitation of their economic vulnerability, and the types of employment that often leave people vulnerable to exploitation.

Psychological abuse can be either explicit, such as threats, name-calling, harassment, or intimidation, or subtle, such as isolating the victim, controlling their finances, and coercing them. Nevertheless, it impacts one's psychological and physical health, including an increase in depression, humiliation, loss of self-esteem, distress, sleep disturbance, headaches, and gastrointestinal problems (Birks et al., 2018; del Carmen Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2020; Jaradat et al., 2016; Mordukhovich et al., 2019). Additionally, studies from diverse contexts revealed that victimisation in childhood is strongly associated with revictimization in adulthood (Scoglio et al., 2001; Walker et al., 2019; Widom et al., 2008). The current study revealed that participants who experienced intimate partner violence also experienced violence during their childhood. This is supported by a study by Zamir et al. (2018), who found that physical and sexual abuse in childhood was associated with increased intimate partner violence in adulthood among their 80 female participants.

Researchers identified stress, depression, and loneliness resulting from abuse as contributing factors to exploitation, as well as attachment anxiety, dissociation, and feelings of guilt and shame. All of these factors have been attributed to the reoccurrence of abuse and exploitation over victims' lifetimes (Bockers et al., 2014; Classen et al., 2005; Storey, 2020; Zamir et al., 2018). South Africa continues to struggle with ever-increasing rates of gender-based violence in the country.

In November 2022, it was reported that between July 2022 and September 2022, over 13 000 women were victims of assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm, 1277 women were victims of attempted murder, and 989 women were murdered (Pi-joo, 2022). Furthermore, from April to September 2022, 558 children were killed in South Africa, and 1,895 child assault cases were opened with the police during this time (South African Government, 2022). This significantly hinders progress towards achieving the goals set out in the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 and the National Development Plan 2030, as South Africa is considered to have the highest rates of intimate partner or domestic violence in the world (Frade & De Wet-Billings, 2019).

In addition, results from this study also revealed participants' economic desperation and willingness to accept any form of treatment in the workplace to sustain their economic income. People in different industries or trades experience exploitation in multiple ways that could be similar or different in their degree and form. Supporting one's family is believed to contribute to individuals remaining in abusive workplaces (Tariq & Ding, 2018), which is a potential reason this study chose to stay in abusive workplaces instead of being unemployed.

An earlier study conducted by Cunniff and Mostert (2012) on the prevalence of workplace bullying of South African employees among 13,911 participants found that 30.5% of participants reported workplace bullying by their supervisors. It is also

evident that participants' fear of unemployment is justified, given the growing unemployment rate in South Africa, which currently stands at 34.5% (Stats S.A., 2022). More specifically, the first quarter of 2022 revealed 63.9% and 42.1% unemployment rates among 15-24-year-olds and 25-34-year-olds, respectively (Stats S.A., 2022).

The poverty gap continues to grow, even though the National Development Plan outlines the changes that should be made to tackle injustice and inequality in the country. However, the continued inequality within South Africa further contributes to economic exploitation and increased stress, crime, and violence (Makgetla, 2020). Thus, a significant percentage of South African citizens are at risk for exploitation, mental health issues, and exposure to interpersonal violence and/or gender-based violence.

In addition, this study also found that certain types of work and specific working environments expose people to exploitation more than others. As in this study, previous research has shown that women working in the sex industry are vulnerable to being abused by their clients and other people who see them as deviants; raping and beating them was used as a way of punishing them for doing work that is considered immoral (Chinyakata et al., 2019). The criminalised nature of working in the sex industry and the failure of African states to protect their rights emboldens state and non-state actors to commit human rights abuses (Bindman, 2018; Mgbako, 2019; Walker & Oliveira, 2015). These include police and client abuse, lack of justice, labour exploitation and health care, and discrimination, all increasing sex workers' vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

Due to the globalisation of markets, the mobility of people to work abroad or in countries that are not their own continues to increase (Simkhada et al., 2018). Some South Africans are attracted to foreign employment due to their opportunity for financial independence (Labonté et al., 2015). While financial independence is possible for others, working abroad subjects some individuals to exploitative work situations. Based on participant reports, participants in the current study found themselves in exploitative conditions as the job they applied for abroad was either different or had more responsibilities than initially agreed upon. These left participants feeling vulnerable and unable to leave the country due to financial constraints. Similar studies demonstrate evidence of the exploitation of migrant workers. For example, workers from Sri Lanka working in the Middle East encountered challenges, including limited freedom of movement, lack of social protection, poor living conditions, harassment, and violence (Arachchi, 2013). In another study, about 30% of Nepal immigrants reported workplace torture or maltreatment, including physical and sexual abuse, not being paid, and torture (Simkhada et al., 2018). In addition, people living abroad experiencing exploitative work situations frequently become victims of recurring abuse because of loss of financial and interpersonal resources during their previous experience of exploitation or lack of support in reintegrating into their countries (Healy, 2019).

South Africa has a long history of economic exploitation dating back to the apartheid era, whereby exploitation was based on race (Mhlauli & Mokotedi, 2015). Even after two decades into democracy, economic exploitation in the country persists, including the workplace mistreatment and abuse of employees for the employer's benefit. Sustainable Development Goal 8 aims to eliminate forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking and to protect and promote work rights for all workers, including those in precarious positions and migrant workers. In addition, various laws in South Africa safeguard the rights of workers, including Bill of Rights Chapter 2 Sections 13 (1996) which states that no one may be subjected to slavery, servitude, and

forced labour, and Section 23 which stipulates that every person has a right to fair labour practices (The Government of South Africa, 1996). Although these are prevalent in the SDGs and the South African Constitution, the study revealed that exploitation in the workplace continues to persist as the participants reported abuse and ill-treatment from their employers, including being denied breaks, sick leave, going out from work, and being overworked without any compensation. This might be because most of the participants were employed in the informal sector, where activities are mostly unregulated and undocumented by state institutions, limiting their protection (Potts, 2008).

This is especially true in South Africa because the country has a dual economy - a formal sector that is well-developed, structured, and internationally competitive, and an informal sector that is largely hidden and unstructured (King & Shackelton, 2022). Furthermore, certain groups of people, most notably migrants working illegally in the country and who do not have any documentation or those working in illicit activities, are most likely to be exploited by being given low wages, being subjected to difficult work conditions, limited job security and no paid leave (Awumbila et al., 2017; Suleman & Fuguredo, 2018). Other studies in South Africa showed that most people employed in the gardening and domestic sector are paid below the minimum wage (King & Shackelton, 2022).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this study provides a snapshot view of people's subjective experiences of exploitation within South Africa, more research is required to understand the complexities of people being at risk of or experiencing exploitation because of the vulnerable situations they find themselves in.

Further research should focus on gaining in-depth knowledge of people's experiences and perceptions to inform scientific literature, policies, and legislation. Of particular concern is exploitation that occurs in the employment environment, although policies were implemented to eradicate labour exploitation. Therefore, it is of substantial importance for a more in-depth exploration of victims'/survivors' experiences with exploitation, including the perceptions and understandings of stakeholders who provide services to exploited people. This could assist in highlighting the problems and barriers experienced in "the field," which should then be used to better inform the Government on where to improve services, policies, and legislation practically.

There is a need for protection and continuous support for people who have been in certain exploitative situations at all levels of society, as well as survivors of adverse childhood experiences. This helps to ensure the protection of their rights as well as safeguarding them from being victims again. Thus, providing the necessary support to children (0-17 years old) and adults who experienced traumatic events during childhood can buffer against the future victimisation of people at risk of being exploited based on their vulnerability. Support programmes, for example victim empowerment programmes, economic sustainability initiatives, continuous counselling, and support groups could be implemented in different locations to support both victims and non-victims to be empowered and resilient.

Education and awareness are also important in helping people to be able to identify indicators of exploitation and what to do when they are in exploitative situations.

## CONCLUSION

The exploitation of people remains a global health concern affecting millions, including South Africans. Using data collected in the Western Cape Province, the paper gives an account of the experiences of people who are in exploitative situations or have encountered exploitation at some point in their lives, specifically the type of vulnerable situations they experienced. The study indicated that at-risk people in the Western Cape Province are vulnerable to multiple forms of exploitation, including sexual, psychological, and physical abuse, intimate partner abuse, forced labour, and lack of respect from employers. This calls for collaboration from various parties or stakeholders in developing and implementing strategies to prevent exploitation and empower survivors to be resilient. This is essential in ensuring the well-being of all people in society.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to extend their gratitude to all individuals who participated in the study for the invaluable information they shared regarding their subjective experiences. The authors would also like to thank all organisations and stakeholders who provided researchers access to their organisations. *Dignity* thanks Joan A. Reid, Associate Professor of Criminology and Director of the University of South Florida Trafficking in Persons Risk to Resilience Research Lab for her time and expertise to review this article.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Fatiema Benjamin**, MA, is a PhD candidate in the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Children, Families and Society at the University of the Western Cape. Her research interests include early childhood development, mental health in children, socio-emotional development, parenting, and social issues such as exploitation and human trafficking. She has published locally and internationally.

**Rachel Chinyakata**, PhD, is the Head of Research at Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa (SIHMA) working on human mobility, migration policies, migration and health, gender, migration and climate and vulnerable minors research. She is passionate about conducting research that contributes knowledge development, informed policies and programmes and promotes the rights and well-being of individuals and vulnerable groups.

**Edna Grace Rich**, PhD, is an associate professor at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Children, Families and Society at the University of the Western Cape. Her areas of research interest are: Parenting research; Early Childhood Development; Family well-being; and areas of risks such as Substance abuse, and Human trafficking. She has published/co-published both locally and internationally.

**Erica Kogler** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, School of Social Work. Her research examines human trafficking in the American Midwest and South Africa. Her PhD is in Public Health and her master's in social work.

**Nicolette Vanessa Roman**, PhD, is a Senior Professor, South African Research Chair (SARChI) in the study of families, the P.I. in ECD, founding member of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Children, Families and Society, at the University of the Western Cape and Visiting Professor at Huddersfield University (U.K.). Her research focuses on family life, strengthening families across the lifespan towards family and social cohesion.

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

Benjamin, Fatiema; Chinyakata, Rachel; Rich, Edna Grace; Koegler, Erica; & Roman, Nicolette Vanessa. (2023). Adults' subjective experiences of exploitation in South Africa. *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 8, Issue 2, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2023.08.02.05>

## REFERENCES

- Acharya, A. K. (2021). Caste-based migration and exposure to abuse and exploitation: Dadan labour migration in India. *Contemporary Social Science*, 16(3), 371-383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2020.1855467>
- Arachchi, S. H. (2013). Violation of migrant women worker's rights in middle-east. *Int J Arts Commerce*, 2(2), 332-47.
- Awumbila, M., Teye, J. K., & Yaro, J. A. (2017). Of silent maids, skilled gardeners and careful madams: gendered dynamics and strategies of migrant domestic workers in Accra, Ghana. *GeoJournal*, 82(5), 957-970. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-016-9711-5>
- Batsyukova, S. (2007). Prostitution and human trafficking for sexual exploitation. *Gender Issues*, 24(2), 46-50. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-007-9001-0>
- Bindman, J. (2018). An international perspective on slavery in the sex industry. In K. Kempadoo & J. Doezema (Eds.) *Global Sex Workers*. (pp. 65-68). Routledge.
- Birks, M., Budden, L. M., Biedermann, N., Park, T., & Chapman, Y. (2018). A 'rite of passage?': Bullying experiences of nursing students in Australia. *Collegian*, 25(1), 45-50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.colegn.2017.03.005>
- Bockers, E., Roepke, S., Michael, L., Renneberg, B., & Knaevelsrud, C. (2014). Risk recognition, attachment anxiety, self-efficacy, and state dissociation predict revictimization. *PLoS One*, 9(9), e108206. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0108206>
- Chinyakata, R., Raselekoane, N. R., Mudau, T. J., & Mapaya, M. G. (2019). The vulnerability of young Zimbabwean female immigrants in Johannesburg, South Africa. *African Journal of Gender, Society & Development*, (3), 251-272. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2050-4284/2019/8n3a12>
- Chisolm-Straker, M., Sze, J., Einbond, J., White, J., & Stoklosa, H. (2019). Screening for human trafficking among homeless young adults. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 98, 72-79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.12.014>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The psychologist*, 26(2), 120-123.
- Classen, C. C., Palesh, O. G., & Aggarwal, R. (2005). Sexual revictimization: A review of the empirical literature. *Trauma, violence, & abuse*, 6(2), 103-129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838005275087>
- Cunniff, L., & Mostert, K. (2012). Prevalence of workplace bullying of South African employees. *S.A. Journal of Human Resource Management*, 10(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v10i1.450>
- De Vries, I., & Goggin, K. E. (2020). The impact of childhood abuse on the commercial sexual exploitation of youth: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 21(5), 886-903. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018801332>
- Du Preez, J., Beswick, C., Whittaker, L., & Dickinson, D. (2010). The employment relationship in the domestic workspace in South Africa: beyond the apartheid legacy. *Social Dynamics*, 36(2), 395-409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2010.483826>
- del Carmen Pérez-Fuentes, M., Jurado, M. D. M. M., Martínez, Á. M., Márquez, M. D. M. S., Ruiz, N. F. O., & Linares, J. J. G. (2020). Cross-sectional study of aggression against Spanish nursing personnel and effects on somatisation of physical symptoms. *BMJ Open*, 10(3), e034143. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2019-034143>



- End Child Prostitution and Trafficking International (2019). *Sexual exploitation of children in South Africa*. <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/South-Africa-Briefing-Paper-Sexual-Exploitation-of-Children-October-2019.pdf>
- Flynn, A., Tremblay, P. F., Rehm, J., & Wells, S. (2013). A modified random walk door-to-door recruitment strategy for collecting social and biological data relating to mental health, substance use, addiction, and violence problems in a Canadian community. *The international journal of alcohol and drug research*, 2(2), 7-16. <https://doi.org/10.7895/ijadr.v2i2.143>
- Frade, S., & De Wet-Billings, N. (2019). The relationship between women's experience of intimate partner violence and other socio-demographic factors, and under-5 children's health in South Africa. *PLoS one*, 14(11), e0225412. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0225412>
- Gerassi, L. (2015). From exploitation to industry: Definitions, risks, and consequences of domestic sexual exploitation and sex work among women and girls. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 25(6), 591-605. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2014.991055>
- Global Slavery Index (2018). Prevalence. <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/methodology/prevalence/>
- Healy, C. (2019). *The Strength to Carry On: Resilience and Vulnerability to Trafficking and Other Abuses among People Travelling along Migration Routes to Europe*. Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).
- Jaradat, Y., Nielsen, M. B., Kristensen, P., Nijem, K., Bjertness, E., Stigum, H., & Bast-Pettersen, R. (2016). Workplace aggression, psychological distress, and job satisfaction among Palestinian nurses: A cross-sectional study. *Applied nursing research*, 32, 190-198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2016.07.014>
- King, A., & Shackleton, C. M. (2022). Working in poverty: Informal employment of household gardeners in Eastern Cape towns, South Africa. *Development Southern Africa*, 39(6), 1007-1020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2021.1940867>
- Labonté, R., Sanders, D., Mathole, T., Crush, J., Chikanda, A., Dambisya, Y., Runnels, V., Packer, C., MacKenzie, A., Murphy, G.T. & Bourgeault, I.L. (2015). Health worker migration from South Africa: causes, consequences and policy responses. *Human resources for health*, 13(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-015-0093-4>
- Makgetla, N. (2020). Inequality in South Africa: An overview. [https://www.tips.org.za/images/TIPS Working Paper Inequality in South Africa A n Overview September 2020.pdf](https://www.tips.org.za/images/TIPS_Working_Paper_Inequality_in_South_Africa_A_n_Overview_September_2020.pdf)
- Mgbako, C. A. (2019). Sex Work/Prostitution in Africa. *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of African History*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.562>
- Mhlauli, M. B., & Mokotedi, R. (2015). Understanding apartheid in South Africa through the racial contract. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 5(4), 203-219. <https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.1/2015.5.4/1.4.203.219>
- Mordukhovich, I., Gale, S., Newlan, S., & McNeely, E. (2019). The impact of workplace harassment on health in a working cohort. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1181. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01181>
- Murphy, L. T. (2016). *Labor and sex trafficking among homeless youth: A ten-city study*. <https://oag.ca.gov/sites/all/files/agweb/pdfs/ht/murphy-labor-sex-trafficking-homeless-youth.pdf>
- Pijoo, I. (2022, November 23). *Crime stats: High levels of women abuse and murders are worrying – Police Minister Bheki Cele*. News24. <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/crime-stats-high-levels-of-women-abuse-and-murders-are-worrying-police-minister-bheki-cele-20221123>



- Ottisova, L., Hemmings, S., Howard, L. M., Zimmerman, C., & Oram, S. (2016). Prevalence and risk of violence and the mental, physical and sexual health problems associated with human trafficking: an updated systematic review. *Epidemiology and psychiatric sciences*, 25(4), 317-341. <http://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796016000135>
- Potts, D. (2008). The urban informal sector in sub-Saharan Africa: from bad to good (and back again?). *Development Southern Africa*, 25(2), 151-167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03768350802090527>
- Republic of South Africa. (2013). Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act (PACOTIP), Act 7 of 2013. Pretoria: Government of South Africa.
- Roe-Sepowitz, D. E. (2012). Juvenile entry into prostitution: The role of emotional abuse. *Violence against women*, 18(5), 562-579. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801212453140>
- Price, R. K., Bender, A. K., Milazzo, F. H., Rich, E. G., Roman, N. V., Zhang, S. X., & Koegler, E. L. (2022). Prevalence estimates of trafficking in persons using statistical definitions: a cross-sectional high-risk community survey in Cape Town, South Africa. *BMJ Open*, 12(12), e063617. <https://doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2022-063617>
- Scoglio, A. A., Kraus, S. W., Saczynski, J., Jooma, S., & Molnar, B. E. (2021). Systematic review of risk and protective factors for revictimization after child sexual abuse. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 22(1), 41-53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018823274>
- Simkhada, P., Van Teijlingen, E., Gurung, M., & Wasti, S. P. (2018). A survey of health problems of Nepalese female migrants workers in the Middle-East and Malaysia. *BMC international health and human rights*, 18(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-018-0145-7>
- Statistics South Africa (2021) Quarterly labour force survey (QLFS) – Q1:2022. Pretoria: Stats SA. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02111stQuarter2022.pdf>
- Storey, J. E. (2020). Risk factors for elder abuse and neglect: A review of the literature. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 50, 101339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2019.101339>
- Suleman, F., & Figueiredo, M. D. C. (2018). Wage differentials within a female-dominated occupation: Domestic workers in informal and flexible jobs in Portugal. *International Labour Review*, 157(1), 129-152. <https://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-bheki-cele-quarter-one-crime-statistics-20222023-19-aug-2022-0000>
- Tariq, H., & Ding, D. (2018). Why am I still doing this job? The examination of family motivation on employees' work behaviors under abusive supervision. *Personnel Review*, 47(2), 378-402. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-07-2016-0162>
- The Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) *Government Gazette* (No. 17678). The Government of South Africa, (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa No. 108 of 1996*. <https://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/images/a108-96.pdf>
- United States Department of State. (2020). *2020 Trafficking in persons report: South Africa*. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/south-africa/>
- United States Department of State. (2021). *Trafficking in persons report*. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TIPR-GPA-upload-07222021.pdf>
- Van der Watt, M. (2018). Investigating human trafficking for sexual exploitation: From 'lived experiences' towards a complex systems understanding (Doctoral dissertation). [https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/24803/thesis\\_VanderWatt\\_M.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/24803/thesis_VanderWatt_M.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

- Walker, H. E., Freud, J. S., Ellis, R. A., Fraine, S. M., & Wilson, L. C. (2019). The prevalence of sexual revictimization: A meta-analytic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 20*(1), 67-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838017692364>
- Walker, R., & Oliveira, E. (2015). Contested spaces: Exploring the intersections of migration, sex work and trafficking in South Africa. *Graduate Journal of Social Science, 11*(2), 129-153.
- Widom, C. S., Czaja, S. J., & Dutton, M. A. (2008). Childhood victimization and lifetime revictimization. *Child abuse & neglect, 32*(8), 785-796. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2007.12.006>
- Zamir, O., Szepeswol, O., Englund, M. M., & Simpson, J. A. (2018). The role of dissociation in revictimization across the lifespan: A 32-year prospective study. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 79*, 144-153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.001>
- Zimmerman, C., Hossain, M., Yun, K., Gajdadziev, V., Guzun, N., Tchomarova, M., ... & Watts, C. (2008). The health of trafficked women: a survey of women entering posttrafficking services in Europe. *American journal of public health, 98*(1), 55-59. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2006.108357>