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'We endure because we need money': everyday violence, COVID-19 and domestic workers in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has made the lives of domestic workers, who are mostly women, more difficult. Building on the testimonies of domestic workers in South Africa collected between January and August 2021, this article examines the everyday violence they face during the pandemic. It argues that everyday violence is greatly amplified during the pandemic, because the virus not only affects domestic workers' livelihoods, but generates new forms of discrimination at work. The article calls for expanded worker alliances to be built in the informal sector to push back against everyday violence and reduce workers' vulnerabilities.

RÉSUMÉ

L'arrivée de la pandémie de COVID-19 a rendu plus difficile la vie des travailleurs domestiques, qui sont principalement des femmes. Cet article base son étude sur les témoignages de travailleurs domestiques sud-africains recueillis entre janvier et août 2021. Nous examinons la violence quotidienne à laquelle ils font face pendant la pandémie, et nous postulons que cette violence quotidienne a considérablement augmenté pendant la pandémie car le virus n'affecte pas que les moyens de subsistance des travailleurs domestiques, mais génère également de nouvelles formes de discrimination sur leurs lieux de travail. Nous appelons à la création d'alliances de travailleurs du secteur informel plus inclusives, afin de mieux lutter contre la violence quotidienne à laquelle ils font face et de réduire leur vulnérabilité.

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Introduction

Ole is a domestic worker from Mfuleni, a predominantly Black township in Cape Town, South Africa. She is 30 years old, and a single mother with two children. She started working as a domestic worker after her parents passed away in 2016. She used to work for an employer in Somerset West, Cape Town for three days a week at ZAR 250 per day. On 26 March 2020, when the national lockdown was implemented in South

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Africa because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ole's employer told her not to come back to work. Describing her experience of the pandemic, she further added:

> Being a domestic worker is not good. I look like an old woman. My body is sore. It is bent because of the work I do. My heart is so sore. My health is deteriorating. I have a younger brother and two children to take care of. This lockdown has messed up my life. I do need a job. We do not have food. My children are suffering. (Interview, Cape Town, February 2021)

Since the start of the lockdown in early 2020 in South Africa, life has become difficult for the majority of South Africa's one million domestic workers like Ole. They often work and live in their employers' houses, providing a wide range of household chores such as cleaning, cooking, doing laundry, care work, baby-sitting and other tasks as required by the client. As a result, they remain vulnerable to various forms of violence and discrimination along gender, racial and ethnic lines (Gaitskell et al. 1983; Ally 2009; Archer 2011). Domestic work is heavily feminised and a vast majority of these workers are Black South Africans, while employers are mostly White (Cock 2001; Fish 2006).[1] Undocumented migrants are also in the sector (for example, from Zimbabwe, Malawi, Lesotho) (Dinat and Peberdy 2007; Griffin 2011; Statistics South Africa 2020a). For many of these workers who subsist on daily incomes and cannot work from home, the pandemic left them with an unimaginable choice between hunger and death. Yet very little is known about their experiences during the pandemic and its implications on their lives. This article is an attempt to fill this gap.

By drawing on the notion of everyday violence as a lens, the article examines South African domestic workers' experience of the pandemic. Everyday violence, here, is understood as practices that occur in a variety of spaces such as homes, workplaces and various social relations (for example, gender relations), along with state repression which lead to both physical and psychological harm to individuals or certain social groups. For example, in workplaces, refusal to pay wages can be described as a practice of everyday violence. Put simply, everyday violence embodies routinised practices in various socio-political and economic relations which remain hidden (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004).

In the South African case, violence has long been part of the everyday lived experience of workers vis-à-vis the Apartheid and Colonial regimes. The current racial disparities in the labour markets have origins in the racially motivated policies of the Apartheid regime. The impacts of those continue to define the South African political economy today (Bond 2014). Unemployment rates continue to be higher among Black South Africans, and they continue to occupy the lowest rung of the labour markets (low-paid tasks) in comparison with other social groups such as White South Africans (Statistics South Africa 2020b).

This article argues the COVID-19 pandemic has added a new vector of violence among workers: the virus. It conceptualises workers' experience of the pandemic as 'everyday violence' because the virus not only disproportionally affects the poor working class and their livelihoods but also brings in new forms of discriminations at work (see ILO 2020d; Anwar, Otieno, and Stein 2022a; Anwar, Odeo, and Otieno 2022b). In doing so, it contributes to the emerging literature on the developmental impacts of COVID-19, particularly on vulnerable workers (for example, domestic workers) in the Global South, which has recently been the focus in this journal (see Kesar et al. 2021; also Ossome 2021). The article demonstrates how the intersection

of existing social relations (gender and racial divides) and the pandemic has amplified the already existing precarity of South African domestic workers.

The article is based on in-depth testimonies of domestic workers in South Africa. It outlines their lived experiences of the pandemic and its impacts on their lives and livelihoods. The article also discusses mitigation strategies of domestic workers to survive the pandemic and offers a resilience narrative. It concludes that while emergency measures by governments to support informal workers are much needed, there is also an urgent need to strengthen worker alliances and solidarity networks in order to push back against 'everyday violence'.

Violence and domestic work

The threat of violence in contemporary societies pervades almost every aspect of daily human life. It can be an intentional use of physical force against any individual or a group 'resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation' (Krug et al. 2002, 5). A wide range of violent actions (such as intimidation, surveillance, discrimination and socio-economic exclusion) can adversely impact individuals' physical and/or psychological well-being (Besteman 2002). Physical forms of violence (such as injury to individuals) can be easily identified and achieve greater legal sanctions by state institutions. However, the varied nature of unequal power relations in most societal interactions makes certain forms of violence pervasive, though they may remain hidden, and social and economic controls are not easily condemned or identified (for example, a husband restricting his wife's access to financial resources) (Vyas and Watts 2009). Bourdieu recognised gendered oppression as symbolic violence (resulting from power differential and complicity and tacit acceptance between two groups) (Bourdieu 1977).

In essence, violence is systemic, or what Johan Galtung referred as structural violence, that is, 'deliberate impairment of fundamental human need by actors of power' (Galtung 1969 cited in Lee 2019, 124). It can be found both in individual and social relationships and plays out in a variety of socio-political spaces such as neighbourhoods, schools, government offices and workplaces (Walby 2013). It is here we think that the concept of everyday violence is useful vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic and workers.

Following Scheper-Hughes (1996), we understand everyday violence as small and ordinary daily acts and events that plague the socially vulnerable to an extent that it becomes normal and accepted because of its sheer brutality. An important element of such violence is its invisibility – not necessarily due to it being hidden away, but because of its continued presence in open socio-political spaces (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). In employment relationships, threats of wage refusal, firing of workers and bullying are arguably common forms of everyday violence against workers perpetrated by employers or managers (ILO 2019). Similarly, workplace abuse and sexual harassment of domestic workers at the hands of employers have been documented to exert physical and psychological stress and harm (by way of example, see Parreñas 2008).

Indeed, practices of everyday violence remain closely tied to the social landscape of oppression (Farmer 2004) and the process of economic transformation that shapes suffering on a daily basis (True 2012). For example, domestic workers, who are primarily women, remain part of the servitude that characterises the 'global care chain' (Anderson 2000; Hochschild and Ehrenreich 2003). The kafala system (sponsorship of workers via

employers) in countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates creates conditions for the systemic exploitation of female migrant domestic workers, primarily from South or South-East Asian countries (such as the Philippines and India) (Kodoth 2016; also Robinson 2022).[2]

More concretely, domestic workers are often based in their employers' homes, which are the sites of physical and psychological violence but away from the eyes of the public (Mkandawire-Valhmu et al. 2009). In the domestic workers' case, it can also take the form of 'soft violence' through the cultivation of a relationship of 'personalism' that not only recognises workers as humans but also amplifies control and servitude (Parreñas 2008), maintains the existing hierarchies (based on gender, race and class) and keeps workers silenced (Murray and Durrheim 2019). Put simply, everyday violence should be viewed as ongoing socio-political and economic processes and beyond just workplaces.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a good example here. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), an estimated 1.6 billion workers' livelihoods have been put at risk because of the pandemic, the majority of them in informal sectors (such as waste collectors, traders, artisans, ride-hailing drivers and daily wage labourers) (ILO 2020a) and who live in poor countries. In the South African case, where work has been already fractured along racial and gender lines (see Ally 2009; Archer 2011, more on this in the next section), people most affected by the pandemic are Black South Africans, the poorest social group in the country (Oxfam International 2021). In other words, for the poor in the country, violence is part and parcel of everyday lived experiences of socio-political processes.

The abuse and discrimination of domestic workers come both from their work and from the socio-political relations in which they exist (Parreñas 2008) as well as from the COVID-19 pandemic that has inflicted long-lasting damage to their lives and livelihoods (ILO 2020b). The main perpetrators of such everyday violence are often employers whose ill-treatment of domestic workers can be a source of violence. At the same time, the state as an actor also fails domestic workers in terms of not adequately protecting workers from workplace violence and also because of its lack of effort to support the most vulnerable at times of crisis. This understanding of violence opens up possibilities to study it as everyday lived experiences that silently permeate various social and political spaces (Henriksen and Bengtsson 2018). Therefore, for a better understanding of the South African domestic workers' experience of the pandemic, we need to examine the socio-political and economic landscape in which these workers are embedded.

Informality and domestic work in South Africa

Domestic workers in South Africa constitute almost one third of the country's informal workforce (ILO n.d.).[3] However, the situation of domestic workers in South Africa is quite unique in the sense that they are protected by several national labour laws in comparison to other informal workers (such as waste collectors, street traders), yet they often fall through the regulatory cracks (Fish 2006). For example, the Basic Conditions of the Employment Act protect domestic workers from doing more than 45 hours of work a week. Employers are also required by law to give advance notice for the termination of employment. The Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act provides

compensation for domestic workers in the event of injuries at work. While there is a National Minimum Wage Act for domestic workers, it has proven hard to enforce (Devereux 2011).[4] They also qualify both for the Unemployment Insurance Fund and the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act, 1993, the act intended to protect workers against injury at work. But employers rarely register them (Venter 2020). Having said that, it is important to note that domestic workers are employed in various ways, such as those who work directly for employers on a live-in basis and others who are employed via agencies or subcontractors. The point is that domestic workers often fall somewhere between the formal and informal sectors. Nonetheless, their location in private spaces means they can be invisible, isolated, and hence vulnerable to violence and oppression (Ally 2009; Archer 2011).

The racial and gender compositions of domestic work in the country are such that it is heavily feminised, especially Black women working for their employers (primarily White South Africans) (Orr and van Meelis 2014).[5] Here, we also acknowledge that, despite the overwhelmingly gendered and racialised nature of labour relations in domestic work in South Africa, there is increased evidence of non-Whites (including Blacks) hiring Black domestic workers (which also includes migrants from other African countries) (Bayane 2021). Three out of four domestic workers in South Africa are women (ILO 2021). There is also a large segment of undocumented migrant domestic workers in the country (Raniga 2019). This gendered and ethnic composition of domestic work is also highlighted in a 2021 survey (Sweep South 2021).

Referring to the situation of women domestic workers in South Africa, Gaitskell et al. (1983) called it the nexus of triple oppression. They are oppressed because of their gender, racial identity and class. Cock's (2001, 6) seminal study on domestic workers described their 'ultra-exploitation' structured by the Apartheid state. Perhaps one of the important insights in Cock's account was the entrapment of domestic workers and their dependence on employers, which makes them vulnerable and powerless. Their 'ultra-exploitation' takes place within the confines of the homes of their employers, primarily White South Africans (Ginsburg 2011). Highlighting the important role of domestic workers in South African history (in serving the masters of the Apartheid and Colonial regimes), Jansen (2019) calls them 'outsiders within' who remain a prominent socio-economic institution in the country today. While the Apartheid policies pushed Black South Africans to the peripheral areas of urban spaces, they were close enough to perform menial labour for White employers (Jansen 2019).

Building upon the vulnerability and exploitation of domestic workers, Ally (2009, 15) shows that domestic labour exists not only within the logics of the Apartheid servitude but is also structured by the democratic state and its modernising missions. While the political set-up has transformed since the end of Apartheid in 1994, the socio-economic conditions have not changed much for domestic workers. Describing the conditions for domestic workers in South Africa, Cock (2001, 1) argues that domestic work is 'the crudest expression of inequality in society'.

The socio-economic divide in South Africa is still dominated along racial lines and continues to be a critical development challenge for the country. The economic conditions of Black South Africans have not improved substantially since 1994. They are still the poorest and the most economically marginalised segment in the country (Bond 2014). Of all the racial groups in the country, unemployment is also the highest

among Black South Africans (Statistics South Africa 2020b). The segmentation of the local labour markets in the post-1994 period has generated a growing casualised working class in the country (Wood and Brewster 2008). Most Black South Africans still earn their livelihoods in the informal sector, where jobs are insecure, low paid, and lack social protection (such as domestic work, waste collection and street trading).

For domestic workers in South Africa, who are mostly women and Black, violence shapes their everyday experiences. But a 2020 report by Hlanganisa and Izwi noted domestic workers ignore workplace violence, seeing it as part of their daily routine, and do not report such practices for the fear of losing their jobs and because of a lack of alternatives (Hlanganisa and Izwi 2021). In this sense, violence remains hidden from the public view, yet pervasive. The pandemic has put further constraints on local labour markets. Data from Statistics South Africa show that domestic workers suffered the worst rates of job losses than any other sector/occupation in the country between the first and the second quarters of 2020 (Statistics South Africa 2020b). Though their numbers increased during the last quarter of 2020, this increase was marginal and did not offset the job losses earlier in the year (Statistics South Africa 2020b). In fact, the 2022 Quarterly Labour Force Survey further confirms this trend with only two occupations (managerial and domestic workers) suffering job losses year-on-year between April 2021 and 2022 (Statistics South Africa 2022). Another survey by the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) (2021a) noted that a majority of domestic workers lost their jobs, working hours and salary during the pandemic, and this trend is consistent both within the country and across the wider continent. The survey also found that in South Africa, the continent's second biggest economy, the majority of domestic workers received no income support as they are either ineligible to apply or because the applications process is too complicated (IDWF 2021a). Also, domestic workers cannot work remotely. As a result, they face an unimaginable choice between infection and hunger. We, therefore, refer to this as 'everyday violence', whereby the oppression or abuse comes not only from the socio-political and economic system in which domestic workers are embedded but is also due to external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In the remainder of the paper, based on in-depth interviews with domestic workers in South Africa, we show that everyday violence has increased during the pandemic.

Methodology

We conducted in-depth interviews with 15 domestic workers in South Africa between January and August 2021. Contacting participants during the pandemic was particularly challenging owing to the risk of the virus and apprehension among participants to speak to us. Several participants declined to be interviewed. Initial contacts were made with domestic workers who operated in Cape Town in the area where one of the authors lives. We then snowballed our sample and asked participants to help us connect with more workers in their networks. Some workers were in residential settings at employers' homes (often as live-in help), and others worked in commercial spaces (such as guest houses and bed and breakfasts). Workers knew each other in their networks, and some of these extended to other cities (such as Johannesburg) where their friends and family members would be working. These networks were facilitated by the new digital communication channels such as WhatsApp which help them keep in touch. As a

result, our participants were based in Cape Town and Johannesburg, two of the biggest cities in the country. Most domestic workers we interviewed were primary breadwinners in their family and were single mothers, a trend also confirmed by the Sweep South (2021) survey of 4000 domestic workers in South Africa. Table 1 provides participant characteristics. All participants were compensated for their time with ZAR 250 (US $16.82). Participants were offered the choice to speak to us in their mother tongue or in English. Twelve participants spoke to us in their local languages (isiXhosa and isiZulu) and three in English.

All interviews were conducted over the telephone because of social distancing measures. Interviewing on the telephone is a known research method with various opportunities (flexibility and access) and challenges (quality of the voice call and not being able to understand nuances and emotions) (Block and Erskine 2012). Therefore, we would first initiate contact with participants via text messages and get to know them. This allows participants to reply at their own convenience and at a time they feel comfortable – a practice already well established (see Anwar and Graham 2020a, 2020b). An initial phone call for a few minutes in some cases also helped us develop a better rapport with them. Some respondents were interviewed several times. In one instance, Ole, the domestic worker whose story we described at the beginning of this article, broke down in tears. So, we had to stop the interview and asked her to text us when she was feeling OK. We interviewed her a few days later.

Participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form. The content of these forms was verbally explained to them in their local language and in English prior to the interview. Their consent was audio-recorded.

A total of 21 in-depth interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted between 50 and 65 minutes. All interviews were recorded, then translated and transcribed. They were then coded on NVivo for key themes such as the loss of livelihoods, food poverty, treatment of

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Names	Location	No. of interviews	Date of interview	Place of birth	Age	Marital status	No. of children
Phiwe	Cape Town	1	20/01/21	South Africa	N/A	Single	4
Phila	Cape Town	2	20/01/21 23/01/21	South Africa	51	Widow	2
Zona	Cape Town	2	26/01/21 02/02/21	South Africa	N/A	Single	4
Salome	Johannesburg	1	27/01/21	South Africa	34	Single	2
Sandiwe	Johannesburg	3	27/01/21 31/01/21 03/02/21	South Africa	N/A	Single	2
Yoli	Cape Town	1	27/01/21	South Africa	46	Single	3
Gula	Johannesburg	2	03/02/21 06/02/21	Lesotho	34	Widow	2
Ole	Cape Town	2	03/02/21 04/02/21	South Africa	30	Single	2
Sisanda	Johannesburg	1	05/02/21	South Africa	N/A	Single	0
Sikhona	Johannesburg	1	05/02/21	Zimbabwe	40	Single	2
Siyanda	Cape Town	1	05/02/21	Zimbabwe	29	Married	2
Lethu	Cape Town	1	05/02/21	South Africa	N/A	Single	3
Lebo	Johanneburg	1	11/08/21	South Africa	42	Single	4
Mimi	Johannesburg	1	12/08/21	South Africa	25	Single	0
Adele	Johannesburg	1	18/08/21	Malawi	46	Single	0

employers, workplace discrimination, social relations (gender and racial issues), discontent towards the state and employers, and their mitigation strategies. The results presented here are not representative but indicative of the experiences of domestic workers in South Africa during the pandemic. The names of the workers are anonymised.

Everyday violence for domestic workers

Abuse at the workplace

The invisibility of domestic workers is a central feature of abuse (Ally 2009). Domestic work is often regarded as not 'real' work and even trivialised and dismissed as women's work (Ally 2009). It is unique in a sense that the employment relationship develops in an intimate space of employers' homes, which blurs the line between work and leisure. This leads to all kinds of prejudice and bigotry against them, though the work itself is physically very demanding with long working hours that may contravene labour laws in many countries. Indeed, working hours among domestic workers are the longest in the world, a common trend for live-in workers (ILO 2013a). By way of example, one participant was working from 6 am till 10 pm at a client's guest house in Cape Town, while for some, working at their employer's home meant there were no defined working hours.

For domestic workers, their places of work have been one of the main sources of everyday violence (WHO 2020).[6] These practices can be both physical and psychological, which affects workers' health and well-being. Sikhona is a 40-year-old migrant and single mother of two daughters who came to South Africa from Zimbabwe to seek paid work. She did not finish her O-levels. One of the easy options available to her was domestic work. She told us that one of her male employers and his friends once came to the bathroom while she was cleaning. She feared that they would rape her (Interview, Cape Town, February 2021). Similarly, Gula, who is from Lesotho and a domestic worker in Johannesburg, told us that one of her male employers would walk naked in the house during her presence. When she told the client to put some clothes on, he threatened to fire her (Interview, Johannesburg, February 2021). This type of behaviour of male employers was reported to us by almost all of our participants and can be labelled sexual harassment.

We would also like to note that abusive behaviour in this line of work is not just from male employers, but also from women, colloquially known as 'madams' in the South African context (Cock 2001).[7] The daily abuses workers receive from employers violate the very basic principles of human rights and dignity, particularly around the issues of food. Food is considered a critical domain for social hierarchies (Douglas 1980). By tightly controlling food provisions, employers exert their power over workers (Archer 2011). This is illustrated by the story of Phila, a 51-year-old single mother of two children and the main breadwinner in the family. She was working for one of her female employers for the last seven years in Cape Town. She told us:

> There are some White people who treat you like a slave. One White female employer I used to work for kept my dishes in the same cupboard where she kept dog food. She did not treat me as a human being. I could not bring my own food. On one Friday, they had a family meal. They wrapped the leftover food in a plastic bag and gave it to me. When I opened the food, I found that it had chewed bones in it. I did not want to quit because I knew that she would not give my full wage. (Interview, Cape Town, January 2021)

While these types of inhumane treatments had racial undertones and were narrated to us by all the workers we interviewed, the onset of the pandemic meant racial discrimination increased. Domestic workers in South Africa are already allegedly seen as the 'carriers' of several deadly pathogens such as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Dinat and Peberdy 2007). Now employers were treating them with suspicion as they might be carrying SARS-CoV-2 (the virus responsible for COVID-19). Workers told us that they were 'forced' to remove their shoes and clothes, wear lab coats and change into clothes given by employers before they could enter their houses. Sandiwe from Johannesburg told us, 'I do not understand what my shoes have got to do with Covid-19 because I still need to enter the house with my body which could bring the disease into the house' (interview, Johannesburg, February 2021). Another worker, Yoli, a 46-year-old single mother of three children and a domestic worker for nine years for the same family, told us that during the pandemic she was asked to take off all her clothes and wear the new ones given by the client. She said:

> The client did not feel comfortable with me entering her house when I am coming from Khayelitsha. I could not even cough without her bringing the sanitizer spray. It was not nice. She made me feel like I had COVID-19 and I was there to give them corona, though they also needed me for work. (Interview, Cape Town, January 2021)[8]

When we asked our respondents how they feel about employers' treatment towards them, they shared a feeling of helplessness and inability to raise their voices against such behaviours. Employers' tight control over the labour and body of domestic workers (Ginsburg 2011) meant they rarely speak out against abuses. In fact, recent studies have confirmed that, owing to the lack of alternative paid work available locally, African workers continue to stay in their jobs despite precarious working conditions attached to such work (Anwar and Graham 2020a, 2020b, 2022).

Similarly, our respondents told us that they could not afford to lose whatever paid work they had. Gula told us, 'You know the jobs are very scarce now. You just ignore them [employers] even though you are hurt and do what you are here to do' (interview, Cape Town, February 2021). Another worker, Phiwe, described to us why she tolerates regular abuse from her employers. She said, 'we are forced to endure however they [client] treat us because we are living in poverty' (interview, Cape Town, January 2021). Phila perfectly summed up why domestic workers rarely speak up. She said, 'There is a lot that we go through in these houses but *siyanyamezela* [we endure] because *siyayidinga imali* [we need the money]' (interview, Cape Town, January 2021). These are illustrative of domestic workers' experiences of everyday violence which is the result of not just the socio-political relations but also their lack of voice. However, the pandemic has reduced the demand for their work, which might bring respite from the workplace violence, but a lack of paid work also means domestic workers face other socio-economic challenges.

Loss of livelihoods and food poverty

Not surprisingly, domestic workers' livelihoods are precarious: domestic work is already one of the lowest-paid jobs around the world (ILO 2020b). According to the ILO estimates, globally domestic workers on average receive 40 per cent of the average wages

globally, though this varies from country to country (ILO 2013b). Gama and Willemse (2015), in their study of domestic workers in South Africa, found that wages among domestic workers are the lowest of all the occupation classes in the country, and domestic workers have the lowest access to employment benefits (Gama and Willemse 2015). In February 2021, the Department of Employment and Labour in South Africa announced that the national minimum wage is to be increased from ZAR 20.76 per hour to ZAR 21.69 per hour. But the wages for domestic workers only increased from ZAR 15.57 to ZAR 19.09 per hour, which is still less than the national minimum wage.

The minimum wage has proven hard to implement since contracts are rarely formalised and workers seldom negotiate their wages. Wages also vary from client to client and between rural and urban areas. Phiwe told us that she would often get different wages from employers. She said, 'they pay you based on how they feel and because you are starving you accept and do not complain'. Though Phiwe also added that one particular client would always pay her higher than the minimum wage (interview, Cape Town, 20 January 2021).

The pandemic made their economic situation worse. By September 2021, South Africa had the highest number of COVID-19 cases and the highest number of deaths in Africa, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. The pandemic has had a negative impact on most economic activities in South Africa, which has resulted in large-scale job losses across the country (ILO 2020c). According to the results of the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM), about three million people lost their jobs between February 2020 and April 2020 in South Africa (Spaull et al. 2021). The loss was particularly high for the poorest segments of the population (such as Blacks) and the female workforce. Although there was some recovery in June 2020, this remains highly uneven among different socio-economic groups. Jobs which recovered the sharpest were those done by White workers, while Black South Africans and those with only the matric qualification (equivalent to the UK's GCSEs) experienced the lowest recovery rates. This is a testament to the structural inequalities in the local labour markets that adversely affect certain social groups.

All the domestic workers we interviewed told us that they have not been working regularly since March 2020, despite some relaxation on the movement of people in 2021. Some workers who used to work three times a week were only getting work for one day a week. Others saw their daily hours reduced. They noted that their employers have either cancelled the contracts or asked them to not come to work for the foreseeable future, some because of the fear of getting infected. Domestic workers provide crucial services to the hospitality industry in a range of places such as hotels, guest houses, game resorts and so on. The demand for such services declined rapidly in the aftermath of the pandemic. To put this into context, the loss of livelihoods during the pandemic is also reported from various other sectors in Africa, especially where work cannot be done from home (such as street traders, taxis, ride hailing) (Otieno, Stein, and Anwar 2020). Every domestic worker we interviewed noted that they are earning less income than they were before the lockdown. The Sweep South (2021) survey also confirms that domestic workers' income has not returned to 2019 levels.

Besides income, domestic workers sometimes receive various forms of material gifts such as used clothing, transportation costs, medicines and children's school fees (Griffin 2011). During the pandemic, several employers stopped providing these

benefits. In one particular case, the client was paying the school fees for the respondent's two children. But when the pandemic started, the client stopped paying the fees (interview, Cape Town, 20 January 2021).

One of the immediate outcomes of the pandemic-induced loss of livelihoods was the struggle of domestic workers to put food on the table. One migrant domestic worker, Siyanda, told us, 'We are eating twice a day. And mind you it is just "pap" that we are eating' (interview, Cape Town, February 2021).[9] Similar findings were reported among Kenyan and South African ride-hailing drivers (most of whom are migrants), who resorted to eating maize-meal and bread during the lockdown and were skipping a meal during the day because they could not afford it (Otieno, Stein, and Anwar 2020).

Food insecurity has been a major concern for a significant proportion of the population in South Africa, despite it being one of the major producers of agricultural commodities such as fruit and vegetables and a net exporter of agricultural products. A survey conducted by Statistics South Africa (2020c) between April and May 2020 found that the proportion of people experiencing hunger increased after the lockdown began in March 2020. Similar results of lockdown-induced food insecurity are also reported from India (Kesar et al. 2021). Some projections even suggest the number of food-insecure people in South Africa will increase further in 2021 (Relief Web 2021). Consequently, many resort to various forms of mitigation strategies during the pandemic to meet their daily material needs.

Mitigation strategies

Social grants

In the context of widespread poverty (28% living below extreme poverty), high inequality (GINI index of 63) and unemployment (30%), social grants play a crucial role for development in South Africa (Satumba, Bayat, and Mohamed 2017). The number of people dependent on various forms of social grants has steadily increased since 2003, and an estimated 18 million people depend on them (Statistics South Africa 2018). Figures from 2020 suggest that an estimated 12 million children in the country get ZAR 440 (US$25.40) per month under the child support grant, though this is not sufficient to meet their nutritional needs (Webb and Vally 2020). The child support grant increased to ZAR 480 per month (US$27.70) in 2022. Social grants also constitute the main source of income for about a fifth of the households in the country, followed by remittances (16%) (Webb and Vally 2020). South Africa's social grants programme has grown since the end of Apartheid to become one of the biggest in the world, and the government expenditure is about ZAR 335 billion annually (US$23 billion) in the 2021 budget, which is lower than the 2020 expenditure. The contribution of these programmes towards poverty reduction and children's welfare is well acknowledged (see Bhorat and Cassim 2014; Granlund and Hochfeld 2020) and remains important during the pandemic.

The Government of South Africa (2020) introduced new COVID-19 emergency measures in the form of a social relief and economic support package of ZAR 500 billion (approx. 10% of gross domestic product [GDP]) with about ZAR 50 billion (US $ 3.4 billion) set aside for social grants.[10] Child grants were topped up by ZAR 300 for May 2020. Between the months of June 2020 and October 2020, each caregiver received

an additional ZAR 500 per month. Civil society organisations have criticised the new measures as being inadequate (see C19 People's Coalition 2020).

Child support grants have proven particularly helpful during the pandemic for poor families. Gula, for example, told us that she is using her children's grant money to buy food for her family to survive. However, the grants they receive from the government are not enough, especially for households with large families. Phiwe lost her job and has eight family members to feed. She said, 'We have been surviving on children's grant to buy food, but the food is never enough because of the big family' (interview, Cape Town, January 2021).

Furthermore, domestic workers are generally unaware of their labour rights and social protection they can get. They are eligible for the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). However, since the COVID-19 outbreak, the Izwi Domestic Workers' Alliance (network of domestic workers in Johannesburg providing legal advice on employment issues) has reported that domestic workers have been unable to access the UIF, as less than 20 per cent of domestic workers are registered by their employers (Venter 2020). When we asked our participants about the UIF, several of them said they do not know whether they are registered for it. Lethu told us, 'I never received UIF. They [employers] never make you sign a paper that says you are employed.' However, there are some examples of employers who had workers registered on UIF and those who continue to pay and support domestic workers during the lockdown. Nonetheless, the vast majority of workers (such as those who are informally employed) utilise various other mitigation strategies.

Finding new work

In the informal sector, while wages continue to be an important source of income, workers depend on multiple sources for their livelihoods. Hart (1973), in his seminal work on Accra's urban poor, found that they often generated their livelihoods from multiple activities (street trading, gardening, gambling, theft and political corruption) with generally low returns. Similarly, Callebert (2017), in his study on Durban dock workers, found that they supplement their wages through pastoralism, agriculture and small trade. Put it simply, workers often rely on various sources of income to survive (see Cooper 1987; Kinyanjui 2014).

From the South African domestic workers' point of view vis-à-vis the pandemic, there is some evidence that they are engaging in various forms of self-employment activities to generate an income such as buying and reselling daily consumables, selling facemasks and small-scale trading activities such as fast-food joints (IDWF 2021b).

The domestic workers we interviewed were attempting to find employers through the Internet as well. The use of Facebook and Gumtree (a popular e-commerce website) to advertise oneself for work was quite popular.[11] However, one worker, Phila, suggested that employers do not trust these adverts as they may expose them to unkind and dangerous people. Hence, personal referrals from former domestic workers are still considered to be more reliable for finding work. However, finding new employers during the lockdown has been a challenge for all the workers. As Phila explained,

> The employers are scared to hire since this lockdown started because they do not trust us. It is not easy to work now. You cannot even cough and already the client is telling you to go home. They do cough as well but because they are White people with money it is okay when they do it.

Reliance on local community networks

When paid work is hard to come by, informal workers depend on interpersonal networks in local communities in which they live. These networks can be described as what Cindy Katz called 'webs of care' (Katz 2004). Reliance on local communities has been particularly important for informal workers during the lockdown.

Among the domestic workers we spoke to, religious institutions such as churches were an important source of help during these distressing times. Some domestic workers borrowed money from family members who were working in other regular jobs. Similarly, a study of ride-hailing drivers in South Africa and Kenya by Otieno, Stein, and Anwar (2020) found that people helped each other in their respective locality with food and other daily necessities such as medicines. Shop owners provided food on credit, local community networks also set up food distribution stalls, and informal lending and borrowing within the family and friends network became critical for the survival of the poor during the pandemic.

Conclusions: the need for worker alliances to overcome everyday violence

The lived experiences of South African domestic workers suggest that, in addition to the already existing vulnerabilities and occupational hazards they faced in their daily lives, the pandemic has exacerbated and created new risks. In other words, everyday violence has a new vector: the virus, which disproportionately affects women. Recent surveys have already confirmed that the pandemic has increased violence among women globally (see UN Women 2020, 2021; Neetu et al. 2021). Women face a greater degree of job and income loss than men (ILO 2020d). Here, we would like to argue that the existing socio-political landscapes in which workers are embedded also influence their experiences of everyday violence.

In the South African context, historically domestic workers have been subjected to racial and gender discriminations for a long time. The current pandemic has greatly exposed the continued racial schism in the country. Now employers are leveraging the current pandemic to subject domestic workers to further racial discrimination, abuse, bullying and harassment. Our argument is that for domestic workers who were already poor, the current pandemic has made them poorer and exacerbated their exposure to everyday violence.

Numerous calls have been made by civil society groups to overhaul the working conditions and employment relations of domestic workers in the post-pandemic world.[12] We would like to add two main points to this debate, from the South African context. One is that while the emergency grants introduced by the government during the pandemic is a welcome move, it should not be a temporary measure. Instead, these should be expanded to include those who are left out and aligned with the increasing cost of financing individuals' daily food requirements. Such measures would significantly improve the ability of the poor and the vulnerable sections of society to cope with events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, the Government of South Africa should strengthen monitoring of and compliance with labour laws, workers' rights and minimum wages, to be more effective. There is an urgent need to transform the employment relations in the sector which make domestic workers particularly vulnerable to everyday violence. To address this, domestic workers need collective organisation and mobilisation to build ground-level movements calling for upholding their rights. Collective action is one of the important routes to reducing workplace violence, improving wage negotiations and reducing vulnerabilities among the working class (Webster, Joynt, and Sefalafala 2016). An organised workforce is likely to influence the accountability of both the state and employers (Webster, Joynt, and Sefalafala 2016). However, the vast majority of the domestic workers in South Africa (and also globally) are not organised. One of the main trade unions in the country, the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union, has only about 30,000 members, which is a tiny fraction of the total domestic workers in the country (ITUC 2012). Organising domestic workers would require extensive efforts by the existing trade unions as well.

Unions could actively leverage new communication technologies to mobilise and reach a wider pool of workers (Schradie 2015). The use of such social networking sites has been noted to play a role in political participation and unionism (Anwar and Graham, 2022, 2020b; Anwar et al. 2022a, 2022b; Schradie 2015). Despite domestic workers being located in employers' homes, which makes them hidden and fragmented, they remain connected to fellow workers via digital communication channels such as WhatsApp. Trade unions and civil society organisations (both in Africa and beyond) should leverage these networks to build alliances that connect local networks and campaigns with global movements. The IDWF has 80 affiliates from 63 countries, representing over 590,000 domestic/household workers. Expanding networks such as these will be crucial in the post-pandemic era to overcome the everyday violence that defines domestic workers' lives.[13]

Notes

1. Our use of the labels 'Black' and 'White' in this paper is to highlight the social construct of race as a category and does not ascribe to the politically motivated categorisations that have been used historically to create a social divide in South Africa. Statistics South Africa still uses four racial categories in their surveys: Black, White, Coloured and Indian/Asian.
2. The ILO has recently warned that the situation of domestic workers in the global economy amounts to serious discrimination, which can constitute forced labour in many cases. Only 49 countries have ratified the ILO's forced labour convention. South Africa is not one of them. See https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:3174672:NO
3. Boundaries between formal and informal intersect and in many cases remain blurred (see Meagher 2016). This is nowhere better demonstrated than in domestic work. There are an estimated 67 million domestic workers worldwide, according to the ILO (n.d.), which is roughly 4 per cent of the total workforce.
4. There are 266 million workers around the world who earn less than the existing minimum wage. Regionally, Africa has the highest proportion (21%) of the people earning less than the minimum wage, which is above the global average of 15 per cent, according to the ILO (2020c).
5. The racialised labour relations are not unique to South Africa and can also be found in domestic work elsewhere, for example, Ethiopians working in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, and

Filipino workers in the United Kingdom. See https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/9/8/the-domestic-workers-fleeing-modern-slavery-in-the-uk

6. This is not to undermine other forms of gender-based violence against women: domestic violence or sexual harassment. Studies have shown that epidemics can lead to increased different forms of gender-based violence (intimate partner violence, unintended pregnancies, sexual exploitation) among women (Onyango et al. 2019).
7. 'Madam' is famously immortalised in a South African cartoon strip by Stephen Francis and Rico Schacherl called Madam and Eve, which depicts the daily encounters between domestic workers and female employers in South Africa.
8. Khayelitsha is a neighbourhood in the eastern parts of Cape Town. It is populated primarily by Black South Africans, working in low-income jobs including domestic work and other service work. It was also one of the hotspots for COVID-19 infections in the country.
9. Pap is maize porridge, a staple food for many South Africans.
10. A global overview of governments' emergency measure programmes is given in KPMG (2020).
11. On Gumtree, domestic workers advertise their services. But they rarely put their daily or hourly rates. For example, https://www.gumtree.co.za/s-cape-town/domestic+chars/v1l3100006q0p1, accessed 21 March 2021.
12. See 'A feminist response to Covid-19': www.feministcovidresponse.com/static/media/principles- en.a6f9f4a2.pdf (last checked 16 October 2021). And IDWF: https://idwfed.org/en/covid-19/the-idwf/advocacy/ idwf-recommendations.pdf (last checked 28 September 2021).
13. See https://idwfed.org/en/about-us-1.

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