



Women in Informal Employment:
Globalizing and Organizing

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Hopes Go Up in Smoke

A Migrant Street Trader in Durban, South Africa

by Sarah Heneck

For an immigrant street trader in Durban, life was hard and lean before the lockdown. But the response to the COVID-19 crisis lowered Nokwanda's earnings while costs soared, making life even after lockdown harder than ever.





Position is crucial to street vendors, who often set up shop near transport hubs to attract passing trade. Photos: (above and cover) Jonathan Torgovnik, (opposite) Jeeva Rajgopaul



Nokwanda's¹ trading space stands out amongst the brightly coloured second-hand clothing stalls that dominate the bustling street where she works in inner-city Durban. Her approximately 2x1-metre stall is a flash of white in this sea of colour and noise. It is filled mainly with boxes of cigarettes, supplemented with lighters, matches and an assortment of sweets. The business is not her own, but she has been running it for the past three years for her employer.

It's clear the business is doing very well. There is an almost constant stream of customers coming to buy loose cigarettes, single boxes or, on the odd occasion, a ten-pack. Nokwanda seamlessly flows from our conversation to interacting with her customers and back again. Sometimes she enlists the help of her neighbour when she has more than one customer at a time. They have a close relationship, and he is very willing to offer his assistance. Nokwanda is soft spoken and serious and initially seems nervous to share any personal information, but she visibly warms up and relaxes as the conversation goes on.

She is paid R550² per week and she works from 7:30 in the morning until 5:30 in the evening, Monday to Saturday. It's a long week, and the pay is well below the minimum wage of R20 an hour she would receive if she were able to access labour rights. Nokwanda, as an immigrant, is particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

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¹ This story uses a pseudonym because of the particular vulnerability of immigrant informal workers in South Africa.

² USD33, based on the average currency equivalent rate of 16.6 Rand to USD1 in October 2020.

Street vendors in South Africa often sell airtime and fix broken phones from makeshift stalls like this one on a bridge near Durban's main railway and bus station.
Photo: Jane Barrett



Leaving home to survive

Nokwanda arrived in South Africa from Malawi in 2016, when she was 26 years old. She joined the other approximately 100,000 Malawian immigrants who have come to South Africa in search of work. Malawi is ranked as the fourth poorest country (by GDP) in the world; economic opportunities are scarce (Masina 2019).

Unable to find work at home, Nokwanda was forced to make the incredibly difficult decision to leave her family behind so that she could make a living and support herself and her young children.

She imagined a better life in South Africa, but her hopes have been dashed. "It is just a hustle," she said.

After she arrived, it took Nokwanda almost a year to find this job at the trading stand. Fortunately, she was able to rely on her two sisters who had previously come to Cape Town and work now as domestic workers.

Nokwanda's three children, aged 11, 8 and 6, have remained behind with Nokwanda's sister in Balaka (a town in the southern region). She is devastated to be separated from them but does not believe she would be able to financially support them if she had stayed in Malawi. Nokwanda tries to send R800 back to her family in Malawi every month. This required sacrifice before the pandemic—but since COVID hit, it has been a bigger struggle.

A complete loss of income

From March 27th when South Africa went into strict lock down, until the beginning of July, Nokwanda received no salary at all. When she asked her employer for a loan, he said that he was unable to help her as he was struggling financially himself. It was the only time they communicated during the lockdown period. Her neighbour occasionally gave her food, which was donated by the mosque he attends, and her landlord allowed her to defer her rent, but she received no other form of relief.

She had been saving money in preparation for a trip home this year to see her children. She had accrued almost R3,000, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced to use her savings in order to survive. She had to borrow R1,000 from a friend—a debt that she is in the process of paying back, with interest.

Like the majority of women informal workers, Nokwanda's household and care duties increased during the lockdown. One of her sisters has a 4-year-old child who lives with them. During lockdown, the creche (day-care centre) that the child usually attends was closed. Nokwanda's sisters were also not working during the lockdown, so they were all at home together and were able to share responsibilities for the child as well as cooking and cleaning the house.

No official support

Nokwanda explained that she was afraid to apply for any government relief funds because she is an economic immigrant without a work permit. She has never felt supported by the South African government.

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Colourful fruit – organized by street vendors into affordable quantities – is a hallmark of inner-city Durban.
Photo: Martha Chen

After it was announced that South Africa would be going into lockdown, only South Africans, permanent residents and refugees were eligible for the R350 COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant.

For the first two and a half months after it was announced that South Africa would be going into lockdown, only South Africans, permanent residents and refugees were eligible for the R350 COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant. In June, the Scalabrini Centre applied to the Gauteng High Court in Pretoria to **open the SRD Grant to asylum-seekers** and special permit holders “as it is irrational and unreasonable to exclude such persons from being able to apply for the grant solely on the bases of their nationality or immigration status.” On June 19th the **court order was won** and asylum-seekers and special permit holders from certain countries were granted permission to apply. However, this still excludes many migrants living in South Africa, including Nokwanda. Nokwanda is not from any of the designated countries and she does not currently have a refugee permit. Due to border closures, however, she was not able to go home.

The findings from the *WIEGO Crisis and Informal Economy Study*, conducted with informal workers in inner-city Durban, show that out of the 49 per cent of street vendors who did not receive cash assistance from the government, 17 cent did not receive cash assistance due to their citizenship/migration status. The process of distribution of the grants has been unwieldy and millions of applications have been rejected.

With no income, she was unable to send money to her family back home. Even when the lockdown eased and she returned to work in July, Nokwanda could not sell the trading stand’s most popular item—cigarettes—so for almost two months she was only paid R250 a month.

The cigarette industry has been hit hard in South Africa due to a total tobacco ban, which came into effect on the first day of the nationwide lockdown and was only lifted in late August 2020. The ban was extremely contentious. It was imposed, according to the national government, to limit the number of people suffering from respiratory problems to reduce serious cases of COVID-19. However, the ban did little to deter smokers from lighting up—it just added fuel to the fire of the illicit cigarette industry, which already made up **35 per cent of cigarette sales in the country pre-lockdown**. Because cigarettes are heavily taxed, this resulted in a massive loss in revenue for the government.

Prices were also driven up extortionately. Prior to the lockdown, Nokwanda sold a box of cigarettes for R16 on average. Post-lockdown, the average price for a box of cigarettes is R25. Nokwanda’s employer is keeping his prices high, even though the ban has been lifted, because his suppliers have done the same. But that is hurting sales. There is a fear among legal tobacco companies that **the illicit cigarette trade will continue to boom** in South Africa.



Herbs used for medicinal purposes are popular among goods sold by Durban street vendors. Photo: Martha Chen

Vendor Mabel Ntuli has sold second-hand clothing in Durban for decades. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik



Nokwanda's salary returned to its previous level—R550/week—in August, but she is using all the money she doesn't spend on necessities to pay back the debts she accrued over the past few months. She is still unable to send money home, or to save anything so she can plan a trip home. This has left her family in a precarious position, as the remittances she has been sending home for the past few years have been vital to their wellbeing. It is heart breaking for Nokwanda to know that she cannot do anything more for her children.

Legal standing and public sentiment

Nokwanda fights a constant battle with law enforcement officials because the permit for the space where she trades is under her employer's name. She hopes to be able to acquire her own permit and set up her own trading stall once she receives her refugee permit, but she is worried that her migrant status will still work against her.

Public sentiment is already turning against her. Over the post-apartheid period, there have been widespread incidents of xenophobic violence. A **misconception that immigrants take jobs away from South Africans** fuels these attacks. Research, however, repeatedly shows the many benefits immigrant-owned businesses bring—they pay rent to South African landlords, often employ South Africans, contribute to the tax base and suppliers (Crush, et al 2015). Key beneficiaries of their activities are low-income consumers who can access cheap and accessible goods and services.

Under the South African Constitution, foreign nationals are entitled to engage in informal work and earn an income from

it. However, there are countless cases of migrant informal workers being denied this Constitutional right. For example, **Operation Hardstick in Limpopo** saw the South African Police Service shut down more than 600 informal businesses run by refugees, even though many of them had valid trading permits. And those who didn't have permits claimed that their applications were denied due to their migrant status. Informal workers are already a vulnerable population group and migrant informal workers even more so.

The cost of getting to work

Nokwanda, along with her sisters and niece, live in a suburb west of central Durban, approximately 6 kilometres from her place of work. The distance adds to her living expenses. Nokwanda travels to and from work in a minibus taxi, as do most people in South Africa. The minibus taxi industry came into being during the apartheid era, and although public transport is the responsibility of the government, **75 per cent of daily trips occur via informal minibus taxis** because they offer the most efficient service (Fobosi 2020).

Transport prices rose dramatically during the lockdown because there were far less people travelling and vehicles were only allowed to operate at 70 per cent capacity. Following major protests near the end of June, the government removed by restrictions for short distance travel, but prices are yet to return to normal (Fobosi 2020). Nokwanda's journey to and from work cost her R20 per day before the lockdown; now, she pays R24 per day.

Despite the cost and distance, there are benefits to living where she does—a large number of immigrants also live in the area.

She said when she first arrived, the local people helped her to learn the language and she felt welcome. However, since the lockdown, she has felt a change in the attitude of the local people and she no longer feels safe. She is thankful for the strong connections she has formed with her neighbours at home and at work who are also immigrants, but she thinks their situation is going to get worse because of the impacts of the pandemic.

Nokwanda wonders whether she has any hope of finding stability or success in South Africa. And this leaves her feeling very uncertain about what the future holds for her and her family.

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Durban's street vendors weave baskets to sell as these are popular with tourists. Traders in the coastal city have felt a sharp drop in income with COVID-19 restrictions severely hampering tourism. Photo: Jeeva Rajgopaul



Plenty to catch the customer's eye in this Durban vendor's stall. Photo: WIEGO



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