

# Precarity, Permits, and Prayers: “Working Practices” of Congolese Asylum-Seeking Women in Cape Town

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## Abstract

This paper provides an ethnographic reading of how Congolese women, in particular asylum seekers with temporary permits, navigate Cape Town’s informal urban economy. We argue that the intersections of temporary permit status and gender, as well as the particularities of diaspora flows and settlements, compound the precarity of everyday life. We engage with how precarity shapes and is shaped by what we define as “working practices.” These practices include the everyday livelihood tactics sustained on shoestring budgets and transnational networks. We also show how, in moments of compounded crises – including the COVID-19 pandemic – marginal gains and transnational networks are rendered more fragile. In these traumatic moments, working practices extend to include the practices of hope and reliance on prayer as social ways of contending with exacerbated precarity.

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## Keywords

South Africa, precarity, working practices, marginal gains, trans-spatial networks, congolese women, prayer

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## Introduction: Situating Precarity

We met Mary at the station deck in Cape Town's city centre, where she was sitting at a strategic corner waiting for clients she could attract to a hair salon. For every client she cajoles from the train station into the salon, she receives ten per cent commission. This is her only source of personal income. As an asylum seeker, she fled the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2009 in her last year of high school and came to South Africa. While her temporary Asylum Seeker Permit provides permission to work, in reality, the temporary nature of the permit significantly reduces employment opportunities. Mary highlights her plight:

I work for a Cameroonian lady on commission for three days a week. The rest of the days I look after my two children, and I look for a job. I don't have nice papers. If you have asylum no one will accept you for a job. My asylum is for six months ... It is very difficult to renew because everyone is standing outside [the Department of Home Affairs] in the rain or sun.<sup>1</sup>

Mary's story is not unique and underscores how precarity operates through the erratic nature of bureaucratic inconveniences sustained by the need for ongoing renewals of asylum permits. Her story provides a lens through which to explore three interlinked areas which this paper addresses: the precariousness of migrant life in South Africa; the gendered nature of this precarity; and practices – both economic and social – deployed to survive both everyday and acute moments of stress. The violence of precarity is simultaneously produced through the political construction of outsiders, evident in slogans like “South Africans First” (Akinola, 2021) and sustained by xenophobic violence, bouts of police and civilian harassment, and the ceaseless bureaucratic hurdles faced to secure the right to live and work in South Africa, all of which affect the everyday lives of asylum seekers.

We engage with this precarity as a structurally induced and material condition as well as an affective and embodied experience, “creating conditions in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to uncertainty” (Butler, 2009: ii). Induced precarity exposes asylum seekers to “maximized vulnerability, arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection” (2009: ii). Consequently, pragmatic and social practices of coping and affirmation are honed by our research participants to retrieve a sense of self and purpose within this uncertainty (Hall *et al.*, 2017; Han, 2018; Rosario and Rigg, 2019).

The explicit targeting of migrants and asylum seekers working in the informal retail sector (Landau, 2006: 317) compounds their precarity, with the violence they encounter limiting where they trade, and forcing them to live in perceptibly “safer” areas for which they must pay a premium. Engagement in the informal economy is additionally gendered for these women: hinged on juggling family life and business, often without significant local structures of collective support. The women from the DRC with whom we interacted do not belong to the sorts of Home Town Associations (HTAs) common in

migrant communities, raising questions about how gendered survival is in fact sought and at what cost.

Against this backdrop of exclusionary policies and the COVID-19 lockdown (covered in part 3 of this paper), we draw on the “working practices” of asylum-seeker women from the DRC who work in or build small businesses in Cape Town, to understand the everyday practices of work, care, exchange and hope (part 4). We show how a varied group of asylum-seeking women try to adapt their routinised domestic, social, spiritual, and religious practices to maintain their marginal gains, as a way of giving not only income but structure and hope to their everyday lives. These practices include the following:

- the piecemeal nature of business on a shoestring, involving frugal income-maximising and expenditure-minimising mechanisms (Datta et al., 2006), which highlights the stringent practices required to secure marginal gains and speaks to the micro-management of income-generating activities;
- the transnational livelihoods and networks of cross-border trade, which show how home, community, and friendship relationships in and across space are fundamental to sustaining transnational arrangements;
- the spiritual dimensions of contending with uncertainty, particularly in acute moments such as that of COVID-19.

Our work advocates for an understanding of precarity through recognition of the multiple fragilities that inhibit the everyday lives and livelihoods of asylum seekers, foregrounding the working practices of women as neither confined to the space of work nor to the pragmatics of marginal gains. We show how work and prayers are simultaneously deployed, highlighting how stringent and creative budgeting, sustaining networks across borders, and social engagement in spirituality are all inextricably linked to the management of precarious livelihoods.

Within the prevailing national context of uncertainty for the majority of asylum seekers, there is the more specific condition of francophone African asylum seekers in South Africa and specifically in Cape Town (Lekogo, 2008). Unlike long-established cross-border movements of labour migrants to South Africa from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Malawi, asylum seekers arriving in South Africa from the DRC are more notable from 1994, when periods of violent conflict unfolding in the DRC intersected with South Africa’s transition to democracy. The Congolese diaspora now comprises the third-largest diasporic group in Cape Town, one largely under-studied.

While asylum seekers continue to be marginalised in public discourse and policy and are therefore not accommodated within the formal labour market or society on equal terms with South African citizens, engagement in the informal economy for these women hinges on juggling family life and business, often without significant local structures of collective support. Importantly, their situation is mitigated by the fact that they operate more as individuals than as collectives. This means that

“I” takes precedence over “we” (Butler, 2009). This individualistic tendency negates the effect of diasporic community formations such as HTAs that presuppose the existence of interdependence/solidarity in South Africa and have acted as shock absorbers for their members in times of crises. The women from the DRC with whom we interacted do not belong to an HTA that could provide assistance in times of such crisis. This is in stark contrast to the Cameroonian community in Cape Town (Nyamnjoh, 2017), for instance, where interdependency is the norm and has become instrumental in providing support for members whose businesses have been seriously affected by the pandemic.

### **A Note on Methods in a Shifting Context of Precarity**

Our research draws on ethnographic methods including interviews, conversations, and observations involving seven women over a nine-month period during 2020. We also engaged with People Against Suffering, Oppression and Poverty (PASSOP), an NGO that caters for access to refugee documentation, and conducted a day-long workshop with immigrants and activist groups on the migrant’s right to work in early 2020, where we explored the realities and limitations of work despite legal recognition of the right to work. This study started in February 2020, just before COVID-19 ramped up in South Africa. As South Africa went into official “hard” lockdown on 26 March 2020, we reviewed our project and considered how to proceed with fieldwork, given the ethics and practical limitations imposed by the lockdown measures.

Instead of expanding our network of informants, we relied on the women with whom we had previously held face-to-face conversations, because of the sense of established familiarity. Our interviews and conversations shifted to telephonic form, and WhatsApp became the primary platform for our fieldwork engagements used by both research participants and researchers. Although visual observation was not possible, ways of listening were, and for both research participants and researchers, the emotional nature of these conversations increased as the effects of the pandemic intensified. This enhanced our considerations of and regular reflections on positionality, support, and care in a complex and rapidly evolving research context. Going into “hard” lockdown triggered further precarious living conditions for the asylum seekers because of their inability to generate income, and the small amounts of savings they had accumulated were spent on food. Consequently, the interviews we conducted after February revealed the presence of elements of religion among the women as a way of finding hope. Religion emerged as a strong cultural practice, one that we could not ignore. We drew on existing support networks, and outside of the project, a member of our research team became involved in establishing a support scheme initiated by migrants for migrant and asylum-seeking women who were struggling to access basic resources.

Of the seven women initially interviewed, six were engaged with on a number of occasions between February and September 2020. Joyce worked at a laundry until she was

laid off due to the pandemic. Mary had an informal arrangement with a salon owner to bring in clients at a commission. Tété, Blessing, and Mawit were involved in petty trade that yielded diminutive profits. In this paper, we focus on these five women who contend with multi-dimensional precarity, to present the workings of the South African asylum-seeker experience.

## **Precarity Underpinned by Structural Processes of Exclusion**

In this section and the one that follows, we unpack the interlinked structural processes of exclusion that keep asylum seekers in a position of “permanent” temporariness impacting on their working practices (Bailey et al., 2002). Permanent temporariness creates conditions in which the “legal status both animates and, simultaneously immobilizes daily life, yet itself becomes a force for action, reaction, and movement” (Bailey et al., 2002: 141), leaving the asylum seekers “suspended in South African society” and compelled to operate in a marginal informal economy (Kihato, 2013: 35). We use the concept of permanent temporariness to highlight the “temporal stagnation” and ways in which asylum seekers negotiate their environment and everyday realities (Tize, 2020: 2); in doing so, we engage with both the systemic and cultural construction of asylum seekers, with a particular emphasis on the problematisation of their economic activities. We show that survival – material, psychological, and emotional – is not simply based on how to keep working, but also on an embodied and social incorporation of faith as a way of building new networks to make sense of heightened challenges.

### ***Exclusion of the “Foreign Invader Trader”***

Studies of South Africa’s informal sector document how migrants, broadly conceived of as those without legal status, face deep socio-economic divisions (Hall et al., forthcoming; Skinner, 2008, 2014). These divisions are particularly acute for the asylum seeker, defined in South Africa as a “person who is seeking recognition as a refugee in the Republic.”<sup>2</sup> The temporal rights of belonging underscored by the asylum permit, which is subject to regular renewal and immense hurdles, create painful intersections between the right to work and belonging in South Africa (Crush et al., 2015; Segatti, 2011). In the messiness of the renewals process, asylum seekers adapt their working practices to accommodate the precarities of self-employment, generally in the informal sector.

Rogerson (2015) catalogues how, from 1995, policies developed by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) have framed migrants in the informal economy as part of a “foreign trader invasion” (DTI, 2013b, cited in Rogerson, 2015: 239). This framing shapes systemic policies of economic exclusion (Rogerson, 2015). Not only are migrants widely portrayed in political rhetoric and across the media as taking jobs which could be awarded to South Africans, but they are pejoratively represented in governmental discourses as a potential threat to national stability (Neocosmos, 2010). Additional formal policies inhibiting contractual arrangements, from bank

accounts to property tenure, limit migrants' ability to access the economy (Crush et al., 2015; Hickey and Du Toit, 2007; Skinner, 2014). These exclusions underscore the inextricable link between policies that limit migrants' access to the economy and policies governing refugees' and asylum seekers' rights of belonging (Landau and Segatti, 2009; Vigneswaran, 2011).

These anti-migrant policies around the right to work are inspired by increasing xenophobia in South Africa and globally and have real implications for everyday life in South African cities (Hall, 2021; Segatti, 2011). In the context of South Africa, the highest levels of sustained xenophobic violence are concentrated in the urban areas of the Western Cape, Gauteng, and KwaZulu-Natal and are often directed at informal traders. A wide circuit of everyday bordering extends to a "collective violence" – deployed by law enforcement, individual forms of policing and community-based pressures – that inhibits where and how perceived outsiders are permitted to work (Crush et al., 2015), or how groups outside the state's policing bodies assume a policing role. Everyday state and collective violence against migrant businesses reinforces the divide between outsiders and insiders. This, has resulted, for instance, in uMkhonto we Sizwe military veterans<sup>3</sup> using xenophobia as a way to generate a sense of crude nationalism in order to remove foreign-owned businesses operating in and around a Durban shopping centre, The Workshop, in November 2020 and March 2021, arguing that "only South Africans should trade there" (Matiwane, 2020).

Living in South Africa with an Asylum Seeker Permit produces a condition of constant uncertainty (Crush et al., 2015) that further impedes the possibility of opening a bank account or securing a loan or lease. Women are especially marginalised in this regard (Kihato, 2013). Living with and working within this multi-dimensional precarity is materially and psychologically taxing (Nyamnjoh, 2017), at times compounded by some of the women's difficulties communicating in English and their lack of formal qualifications, which also result in occupational inequality. By focusing on the everyday experiences and practices of making work on the part of asylum-seeking women from the DRC in a context of such exclusions, we argue for the need to understand wider working practices that speak to multiple forms of coping which invariably connect life and livelihood.

### *The Everyday Workings of Exclusionary Policies*

The asylum-seeking women who formed part of this research express how their precarity is deeply tied to the extended circuit of bureaucratic processes. The procedures for obtaining asylum permit renewals as well as refugee status applications are limited to particular offices of the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) and often require travel over great distances.<sup>4</sup> In our interview with Vince at the NGO PASSOP, he confirmed that

Women's challenges are manifold during refugee permit application and renewal processes – there is risk of assault, and they are an easy target to request bribery from, and they are equally willing to pay fast because they want to leave quickly.<sup>5</sup>

This is a costly process, and one in which the permit renewal period is reduced due to bribery. Since the start of the lockdown, the process has been in further turmoil with the closure of DHA offices and the issuance of a blanket extension that has since expired (Moyo and Zanker, 2020). Although the DHA is open for business, its services are limited and focused on online renewals, leaving asylum seekers in limbo, especially those who lack basic computer skills and access to the Internet. With expired permits, these individuals are unemployable, “resulting in people being unable to have access [to] banking, education, health care, services renewals, lease agreements, losing jobs and ... new arrivals [being put] at risk of deportation and detention because their permits do not reflect that they have been extended” (Washinyira, 2021). Such temporary permits are structurally linked with systemic harm and the production of stateless persons, and they shape the everyday lives of asylum seekers in South Africa in more challenging ways as well (Uwimpuhwe and Ruiters, 2018: 1132), with only five per cent of registered applications for asylum being successful (Mpeiwa, 2018). The process of renewal is labourious and challenging, as Vince of PASSOP elaborates:

Following the closure of the Cape Town office in 2012, those who came to Cape Town after 2012 had to go to Johannesburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth to start the process. Renewing the permit is generally another nightmare. It’s never a one-day thing. It also depends on where you renew your papers, since you must return to where they were first issued ... This cost[s] money and time which few people have ... While those with refugee permits cannot travel to their home country or to any other country, Section 24 of the refugee status permits them to travel within the country.<sup>6</sup>

Rejection or short-term refugee permits exacerbated by long periods of waiting result in asylum seekers living in a suspended present. Procupez (2015: 62) usefully describes this as “the intersection of heterogeneous temporal vectors: the urgency of needs, the delays in administrative incongruences, the provisional solutions, the hopeful expectations, and the seemingly unending wait.” This waiting and deferral deny asylum seekers access to a structural permanency in their everyday lives, and instead produce heightened anxiety and the uncertainty of impermanence. Waiting further denotes different gendered aspects, including queuing with children, or being subject to sexual inferences or violation, where some refugee reception officers demand sexual favours in exchange for extended asylum permits. Experiences of asylum-seeking women thus provide a crucial window into the gendered and bordered politics and institutionalisation of precarity and exclusion, within a wider context of pronounced inequality (Kihato, 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the precarious livelihoods of the women we engaged with, characterised by job and/or income losses resulting from the lockdown. Notably, the COVID-19 hard lockdown that occurred in South Africa extending from 26 March to 31 May 2020 exacerbated asylum seekers’ precarity and uncertainty, because street-based trade, a major form of earning, was severely limited. In many cases, asylum seekers employed in the formal sector were excluded from receiving the government subsidies that were implemented to reduce the shock of income loss

experienced by many across the country, because of the temporality of their documentation. Moreover, the period of blanket extension of asylum permits has expired. With expired permits, asylum seekers are not only rendered unemployable, but their access to state services and to urban space is compromised (Washinyira, 2021). The absence of state and societal support in asylum seekers' lives produces a suspended existence and compounded precarity that encompasses

Living in liminal zones, waiting for borders to open, food to arrive, and the prospect of living with documentation; those who mark the condition of being part of a dispensable or expendable workforce for whom the prospect of a stable livelihood seems increasingly remote, and who live in a daily way within a collapsed temporal horizon, suffering a sense of a damaged future in the stomach and in the bones, trying to feel but fearing more what might be felt. (Butler, 2012: 12).

Following Butler, we are eager to understand what it means for the asylum-seeking women in this study to endure and work around a precarious reality. And a crucial extension of this question is how a sense of meaning-making and connectedness is nurtured to provide support and purpose in an otherwise violent and uncertain world.

### *Hope and Prayer as Repositories of Agency*

In the course of our research project, the role of religion, especially prayer, was a recurring theme and integral to a social practice of faith in the everyday lives of the participants. Here, we reflect more broadly on the pragmatic, spiritual, and psychological strategies that are deployed to minimise the adverse effects of multi-dimensional precarity. We also engage with religious or spiritual practice as a way of routinely addressing everyday concerns through practical guidelines and a solidarity of hope (Nyamnjoh, 2019). Whereas asylum seekers' spiritual and social practices of respite and faith have been under-explored as part of the working practices of sustaining life within the ambit of making work, our research shows how these dimensions are interlinked and complement the modes of surviving a difficult lifeworld. The economic practices we observed operate on small budgets and marginal gains and are adapted to contend with the daily limitations of precarity. However, these are also highly susceptible to unanticipated pressures such as the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. As a result, the women we interviewed drew on their multiple and varied networks for survival as well as for making sense of their precarity. Faith was one avenue for this, enacted as both a network of support and a practice of agency. Pentecostal churches provided social forms of contemplation, as well as counselling and the emotional support of hope, in the form of both in-person and online congregational services (see also Gornik, 2011; Nyamnjoh, 2019). In seeking to give nuance to the role of religious practice, we therefore focus on the ways in which our research participants upheld their agency through social dimensions of prayer.

We adopt Back's concept of hope as an "attention to the present and the anticipation that something unexpected will happen and emerge from its ruins" (2021: 7). Hope,



then, is not an end point or definitive achievement but an “improvisation across time that links the past, present and not yet realised future” (Back, 2021: 18). From this perspective, we maintain that hope is not simply about salvation, but about empowerment and coping that are sustained in collective networks, rituals, and expressions that provide an avenue for meaning-making in dire circumstances. Although the church was not the focus of our paper, we turned to the articulations of our research participants to understand how they experienced ways in which their spaces and networks of spirituality were recalibrated during the lockdown so as to stir remnants of hope. Prayer was one such practice that became central to the women, as it provided a shared and routinised framework of hope within which to organise their daily lives and express their loneliness and stresses (see also Porterfield, 2005). To the women, hope became the “sustenance of the possibility of an alternative to a currently lived reality” (Lubkemann, 2017: 215).

## **Unpacking the Working Practices of Congolese Women in Cape Town**

In this section, we focus on an in-depth analysis of three differing aspects of working practices sustained by our research participants: business on a shoestring; transnational forms of cross-border trade; and the spiritual practices of contending with uncertainty and forging meaningful support networks.

### *Business on a Shoestring: The Micro-Economies of Street Trade*

Tété is married with three children and together they share a single-bedroom flat. She ran away from her home in Lubumbashi in 2006 at the age of sixteen, travelling first to Zambia, then to Johannesburg, finally arriving in Cape Town. For most Congolese asylum seekers, travelling in these steps is a strategy which is well integrated into their migratory border-crossings (Lekogo, 2008). Without prior networks to provide a safe landing, Tété stayed in a peripheral but affordable township for a while and worked in piecemeal domestic employment to earn her daily wages. However, her concern for her safety was preoccupying in the context of ambient xenophobia. Despite rentals being three times more expensive in the former white suburbs of Cape Town, Tété, like many migrants and asylum seekers, was willing to trade the relatively inexpensive rents in the township for higher ones in the suburbs to avoid possible localised xenophobic attacks and to organise effective forms of self-protection (Uwimpuhwe and Ruiters, 2018: 1131). By 2008, Tété had saved a small sum and she and her family moved out of the township to the suburb of Salt River, where she started petty trading.

Tété sells assorted foodstuffs on a pavement in front of a butchery in Salt River, in a space she negotiated with the owner of the butchery. Her small capital savings of R3,000 (approximately USD200) mean that she needs to carefully ensure a regular supply of produce through entering into fixed arrangements with small-scale wholesalers. The wholesalers provide produce to sell on a commission basis, which allows for a small-

profit, low-risk arrangement for both parties. Such arrangements also support the notion of bounded solidarities and circuits of trust in the building of networks for micro-economies (Nyamnjoh, 2017). Tété's reliable ability to repay the money for the items she collects to sell reduces her transaction costs and increases her profit margins.

Q: You get fish at R40 and sell for R50?

T: R40, me also I selling R50, yes, I do that I take money for dry fish, I give it for owner.

Q: Dry fish?

T: You know Alpha, yes, she do kwanga [cooked manioc paste]. Then she gonna sell for me R15 kwanga, me also I'm selling for R20, I take R5 up. She was doing favour. It was for Alpha. Maybe people she complain, I don't have R20, I give you R17 ... like this, I take R3.<sup>7</sup>

Despite collecting goods from friends to sell before repaying them, her profit margin is relatively low; she makes a maximum of R10 and R5 per bag of fish and kwanga, respectively. The diminutive profits mean that she cannot invest much in the business. Tété outlines her expenses and income:

Before, I buy 10 kg of groundnuts for R250, then I grind it to make small packets. The box of 10 kg of turkey I buy for R350, then my sister gives me dry fish for R40 and I add R10 to make profit for bread. Then small money to buy the other stuff to put on the table. But now, no more capital.<sup>8</sup>

On average, prior to lockdown, Tété earned between R300 and R500 (US\$20–30) in her six-day working week. The devastating effects of the lockdown on Tété's business meant that the money she had saved was partly used to stock up on food before the lockdown, and she was left with R800. She was then faced with having to work from home, and before long two months of outstanding rent had accumulated on her flat. Tété states that "since lockdown, I didn't sell because I don't have stuff. I don't even have stuff at home, everything was finished before lockdown."<sup>9</sup> Importantly, Tété's trading is operationalised as an ongoing negotiation that requires agility and energy to balance how she secures her work and home spaces.

This relates to the social reproduction of gendered norms, through how the relations of domestic life shape working practices. The women we spoke with referred to their family commitments and their juggling of economic activities, child-minding, and caring responsibilities, often prioritising their partner's working patterns over their own. For these women, the need to take charge of household income and budgeting is crucial to stretching the income as far as possible into the month. Tété explains that "my husband also he makes piece work, he comes to me with R2,000, maybe R1,500, I add to pay for the rents." Her stringent budgeting practices are honed to stretch minute gains to cover various expenses, particularly food and rent. Her business also operates largely through transactions of small value and marginal gains, and her working practices

of business on a shoestring extend from streetspace to homespace, where she pays a premium rental for a small space to secure her family's safety. Across the women we spoke with, we have observed that such working practices are not transitory; rather, the women have been involved in these activities for a considerable period of time, revealing the ongoing nature of their precarity.

### *Transnational Working Practices: Cape Town–Johannesburg; Cape Town–Lubumbashi/Kinshasa*

As a way of circumventing the challenges of multi-dimensional precarity, some of our research participants opted for cross-border trade between Cape Town and Johannesburg and Cape Town and DRC, respectively, with the latter referred to as "*achat correspondance*," (loosely translated as purchase via correspondence). Transnational trade is heavily reliant on family and friendship networks to procure both rudimentary and luxury consumer items from Cape Town, while food items are sent from the Congo through formal and informal channels via freight and trucking. It also involves trips to Johannesburg to purchase foodstuffs from Mozambique to sell to the Congolese diaspora in Cape Town. These networks transfer not only goods but also money, and in the period of lockdown in South Africa, we learnt how money was regularly sent from the DRC to family members in South Africa (Cirolia et al., 2021). The micro-circuits of cross-border trade are dominated by women, and contrary to the view that there is one-way traffic of goods from South Africa to other countries, research reveals multi-directional flows of foodstuffs, goods, and money between the Congo and South Africa.

Blessing, who lives in Salt River in a single room with her son, her ailing mother, her sister, and her daughter, operates a translocal business that entails travelling to Johannesburg two to three times a month by rail or road. She buys Congolese food and vegetables that come in from Mozambique and resells the goods to the Congolese community in Salt River and Woodstock (a neighbouring suburb). Given the perishability of the vegetables, she operates mostly on credit with her customers and collects the money later to avoid losses. These networks of trust and interdependence ensure the survival of her business. However, with her limited capital of R6,000 (US\$400), she is unable to realise expansive profits because she cannot take advantage of bulk buying. To try to save on transportation costs she travels by rail, but with unforeseen delays and breakdowns, the vegetables go off, further impinging on her capital: "I was always coming with the train, sometimes you reach with *pondu* (fresh cassava leaves) like this, all *pondu* bad. Now you can throw the things, then your business is start rolling down, down, down."<sup>10</sup> Opting for bus transportation, though expensive, is a surer way of getting her goods to her clients in time: "Now I was trying now to take the bus. Now the bus is expensive, and now the business is going down because I don't have enough money..."<sup>11</sup> The logistics of doing business on a shoestring set Blessing on the back foot, and with limited capital, she can hardly buy sufficient goods to yield much gain. She explains further how she operates her business:

Blessing: I go there [to Johannesburg], buy something, I come here [Cape Town], I go there [Johannesburg]. If I see some clothes, some cassava, whatever, I just buy and come sell here [Cape Town]. That one now [that is how] I survive only like this.

Q: And did you make enough profit?

Blessing: That one is only small, you only pay the rent, just eat, to eat sometimes is not enough. I don't have capital, you see, to buy a lot of stuff because if you go there in Jo'burg, if you have money, nice money you can buy lots of things. And that a lot of things you can get nice benefit. Now if your money is small, you can get only small things. I was buying only that *pondu*, *manioc*, and fish, dried fish ... and then come back and sell here.<sup>12</sup>

In a subsequent interview, we asked Blessing how much of her income she spends on the single room she rents in a flat. She said that “for rent it's 3.5 [R3,500].”<sup>13</sup> The limited flow of resources is a core part of her story. However, the relationship between long-distance transactions undertaken by Blessing epitomises the demand for and consumption of things “national,” hence the need to travel out of Cape Town to source Congolese foods. Given that her business entails travelling to buy goods, the arrival of the pandemic curtailed her business activity, and she was left without an income-generating activity. When we spoke with her at the end of June 2020, she was left with R2,000 out of her original R6,000 capital and faced three months of unpaid rental. By September, she had R500, only enough to buy a box of fresh fish and a bag of salt to start the business of sun-drying salty fish that she intended to sell from home. Her story reveals both the significance and the fragility of transnational networks of trade and support.

Finding a niche market that will yield some profit despite having a small amount of start-up capital is a major preoccupation for Mawit, who relocated to Cape Town from Lubumbashi in 2018. She had hoped to establish herself as a hairdresser. Unable to get a permanent job or set up a salon, she resorted to plaiting hair from her home and she is sometimes called to plait at a client's home. Part of the income she generates from her work is saved to buy goods to send to Lubumbashi. She explains:

Sending things to Congo to be sold, that's what I really like ... And I don't need a lot [of money] either, that's not an issue for me. With R1,000 I can send a load. Like here, I saw really nice, branded house slippers for kids, Louis Vuitton and the likes. So, with R1,000 I can buy about four or five pairs. I send and she [a cousin] sends the money. I just need to have something I can call mine so I'm not depending on people or staying idle ... If you buy something here for \$10 (approximately R180), there they can sell it for \$15 (approximately R270). The shoes are R99.99. That's almost \$5. Back home, they sell it for \$20.<sup>14</sup>

Mawit's diminutive capital echoes the negligible amount of profit that she makes, taking into consideration the logistics of operating such a business, the toing and froing to shops and transportation agencies, and having to wait weeks for the goods to reach their destination and then be sold before the money is sent to her. Her business is characterised by intermittent periods of waiting. Significantly, the business is propelled by information

and communication technology, especially the social media platforms WhatsApp and Facebook: “First, I take pictures and put it on my WhatsApp status. When people take notice and admire it, they ask about the price and I tell them. Then they ask how much it will cost when it gets to Lubumbashi and I tell them.”<sup>15</sup> While Mawit waits for the goods to be sold, she spends time window-shopping and posting photos of items on Facebook or on her WhatsApp status. Uploading these pictures on the various platforms advertises her business and establishes her position as the go-between for transnational consumption. Her business is largely dependent on kin and friendship ties to sell and buy respectively, as well as on trust that the money will be sent immediately. When she is not personally buying goods to send home, she has friends who entrust her with money to shop for them so that they can sell goods as well. This is when she makes some quick but marginal profits. She explains:

I bought those ones [jackets/pullovers and sneakers] for myself and took pictures of them and put them up on my [WhatsApp] status. My elder sister’s daughter liked them and asked me how much they were. I told her [R150], and she sent the money for five jackets.

Q: And what about the sneakers? I see they’re going for R250, R300, R340 ... How many pairs have you already bought?

M: I got five of the ones for R250, and then the ones for R340, I got seven of those.<sup>16</sup>

Understanding the hard work involved in sustaining marginal gains requires comprehending the range of avenues asylum-seeking women rely on in refining their working practices. The transnational dimensions of Mawit’s and Blessing’s work often require the mobility of persons and goods and protracted lines of credit and returns. Mawit’s transnational entrepreneurial activities describe various boundary crossings that generate a complex array of “backward and forward” economic linkages (Guanizo, 2003: 680). Whereas goods and services often come from the home country for diasporic communities to reproduce their culture abroad, Mawit’s form of business is the reverse, with goods leaving Cape Town for the Congo to open up Mawit’s world to her family and friends at home, making them part of the global circulation of consumption. These findings suggest that while this kind of transnational entrepreneurship is seen as operating “from below,” it is not simply an ephemeral activity undertaken by isolated, risk-taking migrants, but rather an endeavour embedded in social fields of reciprocity and obligation that straddle national borders and activate ties (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000). However, despite these various forms of transnational activities that women like Mawit and Blessing survive on, the outbreak of COVID-19 exposes the fragility of cross-border circulations and leaves them destitute when borders are closed.

### *Challenging Precarity: Religion, Faith and Hope in the COVID-19 Crisis*

The everyday facets of marginal gains and transnational networks are key in cushioning the precarious livelihoods of asylum seekers. But when transnational circuits are partially

suspended and the pressures of rental and putting food on the table prevail without options of state assistance, prayers become one fallback which the women lean on to survive the crisis. In South Africa, as elsewhere, the abrupt nature of the lockdown at the start of the pandemic left many people, including asylum seekers, ill prepared, plunging them into further precarity. This is seemingly evident for the women in this study on whom the onus of taking care of the household rests, and whose trade and income have been curtailed. The pressures on them because of their inability to provide for their children, their growing rent debts, and rising stress levels have led most of the women we spoke with to turn to the church for moral and spiritual support. They revealed the varied social arrangements of Pentecostal churches, pastors, and church groups that offer them ways of dealing with the stress of being unable to provide for their families during the pandemic, and they attested to how the social act of prayer, discussions with a pastor, and at times the discipline of fasting help in maintaining hope and calming anxieties. In our interviews prior to and during lockdown, the women also referred to the importance of these spaces and networks in dealing with the violence and humiliations they encountered and felt subjugated by.

Blessing succinctly captures how she deals with her pressures:

You see, too much stress. I'm go to hospital, they say eh, your blood pressure is high. This country is too much stress, yeah. Si [if] you want to take stress ... yooh! You gonna die! I'm go to pastor, he only encouraged me ... He prayed for me. I'm talk to pastor, I'm very free to my heart. He say I must pray God he gonna help. You see like these days, I was worry, ah! I don't have food, I don't have nothing, you see.<sup>17</sup>

Hope is drawn in a variety of forms from prayers, religious sermons, and virtual meetings with the pastor and spiritual community. Tété, too, has experienced extreme stress in lockdown and describes how she prays for help:

I tell you my sister, I am in trouble! If this lockdown is not end this month end, we all gonna die of hungry. But what can we do? We must stay at home and pray to God to help us. It is only prayers now that can help us. Every time I pray for three days, then I stay again, and I pray for three days. Only God my sister that can help us.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, having lost her job as a casualised laundry lady at a hotel and unable to benefit from the state-run Unemployment Insurance Fund because she is an asylum seeker, Joyce has been left destitute. By July 2020, she had not received her salary (R3,200 monthly) for four months. Her rent is R2,000 a month and the monthly school fee for her daughter is R500. Under normal circumstances, she is left with R700 for food and utilities, which she struggles to stretch to make ends meet until the next pay cheque. The pandemic has revealed that for Joyce, Mawit, Blessing, Mary, and Tété, their precarity is added to by being prevented from accessing state welfare aimed at cushioning the effects of poverty brought about by COVID-19. This welfare was reserved for citizens and those with Section 24 refugee status. Joyce's experience dovetails with Chin's argument that migrant workers as well as asylum seekers are "foreign bodies" treated as "disposable

economic subjects” (Chin, 2019: 540). Despite her desperation, Joyce refers to her moral conundrum and how her religion provides a stable perspective:

I can't say because I'm suffering, I must go to steal, I must go to do this, you see! You can steal you going to hell. Now you start to condemn God, oh God why I'm in hell like this. Everything God knows. That why I always pray. Nothing is more than God. I always pray God must help. Because I try to myself [I do my utmost], try, try, but nothing is happening. But I must involve God in my case, God can do something.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas religious practices prior to lockdown were social practices sustained by regular meetings at church, during the pandemic Joyce has retained the continuity of her hope by connecting online with her community. She also watches TV channels of megachurch preachers such as Prophet T.B. Joshua of the Synagogue Church of All Nations, which make an element of faith readily available in her own domestic space. Joyce comments:

I like watching that channel a lot because he preaches very well. This time of lockdown is stressing, but he tells us not to give up, that it is not gonna last forever. His preaching really fortifies me to continue to hope because only God will see us through this.<sup>20</sup>

As Daswani (2010) elaborates, Pentecostalism is not simply about the individual message of salvation separate from the secular domain of people's worldly circumstances. Its messages, images, and sounds come into presence in people's day-to-day activities, actively mediating between their marginal economic positions and their aspirations for a better life. In this sense, we might view hope not necessarily as a transformative practice in the first instance, but nonetheless as an empowering practice that allows these women, if not to overcome their dire situations, to confront and live with them. To live with hope, therefore, is to “believe that it is worth taking the next step” (hooks 2003: xiv–xv, cited in Back, 2021: 5). Our fieldwork testifies to the centrality of prayers and popular religious practices, as well as counsel with trusted clergy, in the lives of these women as they make sense of the profound challenges they face (Jacobs, 2019).

## **Conclusions: Working Practices Within and Beyond Asylum**

In this paper, we have looked at the precarious working practices of asylum-seeking women to understand their ways of making and sustaining their marginal gains in a context of profound uncertainty. Their precarious lives expose the diversity of their working practices and simultaneously show us the dynamic configurations that shape migrant survival – the ways in which they come to rely on their networks and build their repertoires of survival and hope in fundamental ways (Butler, 2006). In the process, we have entered into conversations about highly local economic strategy, and paired these with readings about global networks and spiritual practices that have often been studied in silos. This amalgam provides a vantage point from which to present a more complex analysis of the interfaces between precarity and agency than simple narratives about either agency or deprivation and thus adds unique value to the paper.

While practices of self-employment and informal trade allow the women to simply survive, it is apparent that they are positioned in particular ways by their explicit exclusion from the labour market as well as their erratic status as asylum seekers. Many women face the challenge of lack of status without recourse to public funds and associated welfare safety nets. For the women whose stories are told here, trading can be a crucial strategy for earning money outside of the strictures of low-waged labour. However, in the event of a pronounced crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, their marginal gains are obliterated and leave them in a deeply uncertain and precarious situation. While we are not in any way celebrating these forms of marginal gain, we note that we need to recognise the array of such working practices in the context of multi-dimensional precarities, as both limited by discriminatory structures and as a composition of hopeful and creative ways of making meaning. When these working practices falter under extreme duress, survival is based on social adaptations and reckonings, including drawing in transnational and local networks of support and spiritual practices of hope.

While literatures on informal economies, the working practices of asylum-seeking women and resurgent practices of religious spirituality in urban settings have often been disaggregated, our fieldwork reveals the entangled nature of the places of home, work, and spaces of hope. Practices of prayer, both regular and social, appear to offer connectivity and support, and a constitutive sense of “we” (Jacobs, 2019; McCormack and Salmenniemi, 2016). Working practices are therefore defined by an intersection of the contextual conditions in which work is undertaken and their constraints; by the pragmatic arrangements of buying, selling, and saving; and by the ways in which meaning-making is pursued. The working practices of asylum-seeking women make visible the multi-dimensional context of precarity in which everyday bordering is central; the arduous task of juggling work and household budgets; and the pursuit of hope to maintain connection and provide solace. This sense of hopefulness, rather than a simplistic optimism, is eloquently echoed by Coleman, who posits that in austere times pessimism and hopelessness can be both “flattening and enlivening,” resulting in “hopeful pessimism” that acknowledges “being worn out by debt and austerity and a resistance to this wearing out” (Coleman, 2016: 100). This invites creative ways of seeing and thinking of asylum as neither the cruel regulation of “otherness,” nor a temporary injunction accompanied by a prohibition of rights, but as a recognition and incorporation of human agency in a volatile world.

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## Notes

1. Interview with Mary, Cape Town, 26 February 2020. All names used are pseudonyms provided by the research participants.
2. South African Government (2008).
3. Former African National Congress liberation fighters during the apartheid era.
4. The DHA offices where applications may be submitted are in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, Durban, and Musina.
5. Interview with Vince of PASSOP, Cape Town, 24 February 2020.
6. Interview with Vince of PASSOP, Cape Town, 24 February 2020. A Section 24 permit allows refugees to remain in South Africa for a specified period of two years, and it is renewable upon expiry.
7. Interview with Tété, Cape Town, 12 May 2020.
8. Interview with Tété, Cape Town, 18 April 2020.
9. Interview with Tété, Cape Town, 18 April 2020.
10. Interview with Blessing, Cape Town, 09 April 2020.
11. Interview with Blessing, Cape Town, 09 April 2020.
12. Interview with Blessing, Cape Town, 01 May 2020.
13. Interview with Blessing, Cape Town, 01 May 2020.
14. Interview with Mawit, Cape Town, 25 March 2020.
15. Interview with Mawit, Cape Town, 04 June 2020.
16. Interview with Mawit, Cape Town, 25 March 2020.
17. Interview with Blessing, Cape Town, 01 May 2020.
18. Interview with Tété, Cape Town, 18 April 2020.
19. Interview with Joyce, Cape Town, 14 July 2020.
20. Interview with Joyce, Cape Town, 14 July 2020.
21. South African Government (2008).
22. Agreement.

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## Prekariat, Genehmigungen und Gebete: Arbeitspraktiken von Kongolesinnen in Kapstadt

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel liefert eine ethnografische Studie der Praktiken kongolesischer Asylbewerberinnen mit befristeter Aufenthaltsgenehmigung in der informellen städtischen Wirtschaft Kapstadts. Der Artikel zeigt, dass die Überschneidungen von befristetem Aufenthaltsstatus und Geschlecht sowie die Besonderheiten der Diasporaströme und -siedlungen das Prekariat des Alltagslebens noch verstärken. Wir beschäftigen uns damit, wie Prekariat durch die von uns definierten „Arbeitspraktiken“ geformt wird. Zu diesen Praktiken gehören die alltäglichen Überlebenstaktiken, die mit geringen Mitteln und transnationalen Netzwerken aufrechterhalten werden. Wir zeigen ebenfalls auf, wie in Krisenmomenten – einschließlich der COVID-19-Pandemie – geringe Gewinne und transnationale Netzwerke fragiler werden. In diesen traumatischen Momenten erweitern sich die Arbeitspraktiken um die Hoffnung und das Gebet als soziale Formen der Bewältigung des verschärften Prekariats.

### Schlagwörter

Südafrika, Prekariat, Arbeitspraktiken, geringe Gewinne, raumübergreifende Netzwerke, Kongolesinnen, Gebete