

Xenophobic Experiences of Foreign African Women in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex links between poverty, the gendered nature of xenophobia and the related experiences of foreign national women and their struggle to survive while residing in a predominantly informal settlement in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Using feminist methodology, the paper focuses on 12 foreign African women who relate their stories of vulnerability and experiences of xenophobia; a phenomenon they assert is not common in their own home countries. The empirical data discussed in this paper include the women's motivations for their migration to South Africa and locate this discourse within the broader African socio-cultural, political and economic context. Further, data elicited from the interviews provide insight into the various "shades" of xenophobia as experienced by these women. The paper contributes to the debates on the promotion of women's rights and gender equality as a prerequisite to poverty alleviation and ultimately economic growth in Africa.

Keywords: African women; xenophobia; low-income communities

Introduction

The International Organization for Migration (IOM 2011, 108) defines "xenophobia" as the "attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons, based on the perceptions that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity". In Fanon's (1967) conceptualisation of the colonialist mentality, he argues that xenophobic violence is testimony of internalised oppression, and that through institutionalised racism Africans tend to emulate their oppressors.



Moreover, the author is of the view that irresponsible comments made by the Zulu monarch, King Goodwill Zwelitini in April 2015 – when he stated that foreign nationals are enjoying wealth and services that are meant for local citizens – were perceived as a primary cause of a spate of xenophobic attacks against foreign nationals across the country (Adam and Moodley 2015; Hans 2015; Muthuki 2013). Researchers such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), Neocosmos (2011), and Piper and Charman (2016) argued that in the post-1994 era, such anti-migration sentiments stem from the politics of nationalism and the dire socio-economic challenges experienced in the country.

The atrocious reports of xenophobic incidents in South Africa which occurred in 2008 and peaked in 2015 have been recognised by civil society and international organisations as a global human rights and social justice issue that is largely influenced by economic globalisation and migration policies (Holscher 2016a; Landau 2014; Nyamjoh 2006). The extent of the physical, social and emotional trauma that victims of xenophobia, in particular women and children, have been subjected to, needs urgent attention.

On an international level, empirical evidence illustrates that in the past decade there has been an upward trend in xenophobic attacks in countries such as Germany, Russia, Sweden, Norway, France and Finland (Crush and Ramachandran 2017; Holscher 2016b; Muthuki 2013). In South Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC 2008) estimated that 2.5 million foreigners were legal immigrants who resided and worked in the country. Further, it is estimated that about 200 000 foreign nationals in South Africa come from countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Somalia, Pakistan and India (Statistics South Africa 2015).

Researchers such as Muthuki (2013), Van der Westhuizen and Kleintjies (2015), and Holscher (2016a) argued that South Africa's colonial and apartheid history has contributed to fragmentation of social cohesion and anxieties about change that have manifested in anomie and violent attacks against foreign nationals. In contemporary times, Muthuki (2013) aptly stated that South African citizens tend to perceive foreign nationals as a threat to their access to basic services, resources and employment opportunities. It is important to consider Fanon's (1967, 46) argument that "the struggle is concerned as much with freedom from colonialism as with the liberation from the suffocating embrace of Western hegemony". Moreover, writers such as Nyamjoh (2006), Everatt (2011) and Holscher (2016a) have argued that in both the Global North and Global South we have witnessed through re-actualisation of boundaries, an obsession with exclusive citizenship and the need to belong as a form of nationalism that paradoxically excludes others. These writers have argued further that such preconceived fears and anxieties have been fuelled by economic globalisation, underscored by neoliberal capitalism and the intense competition for work, housing and access to basic services.

Bearing the above deliberations in mind, this paper provides qualitative evidence from the voices of 12 foreign African women who were residing in a low-income community in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and their experiences of xenophobia. This paper begins by providing an overview of the background to the research study. Using the feminist social work theory, this article deliberates three important themes that are closely connected: the search for a better life, Ubuntu: rhetoric or reality, and survival strategies. The paper contributes to the debates on the promotion of foreign national women's rights and gender equality as a prerequisite to dealing with the feminisation of poverty in Africa.

Background and Problem Formulation

It is widely acknowledged that xenophobia is an anti-migration sentiment reflected in irrational fear and mistrust by citizens of foreign nationals in a country (Hervik 2015). Hence the term "xenophobia" refers to preconceived negative perceptions towards those persons who do not have citizenship in a country (Adam and Moodley 2015). Foreign nationals are by their very status vulnerable to xenophobia which is a global phenomenon; not unique to the context of South Africa (Muthuki 2013). In the past decade, we have witnessed xenophobic attacks against foreign nationals towards people from other countries in both the Global North and Global South and which have been associated with mistrust and fear. Unfortunately these attacks have led to much human rights violations across the globe and can no longer be ignored (Awan 2010; Kubota 2016).

Proponents of structural humanist thinking such as Holscher (2016a); Van der Westhuizen and Kleintjies (2015), and Muthuki (2013) have argued that the two primary reasons for African immigrants leaving their countries of origin voluntarily are for better economic prospects and social stability. Chiweshe (2016) explained that not all foreign nationals experience xenophobia in the same way as some are well integrated in society and enjoy the same benefits as locals. Neocosmos (2011), however, notes that the paradox is when foreign nationals enter the country they experience challenges integrating into local communities as they are seen as intruders and as competing with locals for jobs in the formal work sector and for access to already strained and limited state resources. In the province of KwaZulu-Natal and in particular predominantly informal settlements surrounding the Durban city centre, spates of xenophobic attacks occurred in 2015 which were fuelled by food insecurity, high levels of unemployment and dire poverty (Sunday Tribune 2015). These reports described attacks on foreign nationals in other provinces such as Gauteng, Mpumalanga, and the Western and Southern Cape (Van der Westhuizen and Kleintjies 2015).

In these provinces, across both urban formal and urban informal communities, such negative preconceived perceptions had been a source of much tension between largely Black South Africans and foreign nationals of African origin. Muthuki (2013, 119) who conducted qualitative research with foreign national students studying at a South African tertiary institution, provided evidence that violence and attacks against foreign

nationals, in particular women, are unfortunately two forms of gender-based violence that have been normalised in ways in which South Africans interact with minority and vulnerable groups. Evidently, foreign national women who reside in low-income communities in South Africa, by virtue of their status, face triple jeopardy since they are at the bottom rung of the social strata and are at the intersection of social and economic exclusion and thus are vulnerable to exploitation and violence.

Foreign national women of African origin and who are residing in South Africa are, however, not a homogenous group since they come from different countries such as those in anglophone and francophone countries in Africa. Subsequently it is important to acknowledge that language barriers especially for those who hail from francophone Africa, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, face economic exclusion as they do not get the same job opportunities as those who come from anglophone Africa. It is, however, positive to note that section 3 of the South African Refugees Act (South Africa 1998) and the 2007 integrated victim empowerment policy of the national Department of Social Development do ensure legal protection for victims of xenophobia and provide foreign nationals with supportive services to help them to reintegrate into communities from which they have had to flee because of gross human rights violations and attacks. Patel (2013) does, however, warn that there is a blatant gap in the translation of these policies and legislation into practice by social workers and this contributes to the complexity and lack of adequate services for victims of xenophobic violence, in particular women and children.

In order to deal with the research problem, the following research questions were formulated to provide a focus for this study:

- What are the socio-cultural practices through which women of African origin perceive South African gender norms and how has this challenged their own gender norms?
- How did the xenophobic attacks in 2015 affect the daily lives of women of African origin?
- What were women of African origin's suggestions for transformative action?

Research Methodology

This qualitative study was underscored by the feminist social work theory which has traditionally been influenced by feminist theories to raise critical consciousness, to provide an analysis of gender oppression, and to empower women to transform and take control of their lives (Dominelli 2002; Sewpaul 2006). Feminist thought in social work research and practice has over decades played a fundamental role in not just acknowledging the oppressed and subordinate position and conditions of women in society (Dominelli 2002; Orme 2002). In fact, Baines (2007) warns that if social workers are not prepared to adapt their knowledge, assume new roles and make the

adjustments required for embracing feminist social work theory, the profession stands the risk of becoming marginalised. Dominelli (2002, 66) argues further that feminist social work exhibits “such a rooted sense that to be caught up in feminism is to be caught up practically in changing one’s consciousness and the way things are done”.

This research took the foreign national women’s experiences of the world as the starting point of its analysis, and the central focus was on helping these women to understand the correlates of poverty, gender relations and xenophobia on their experiences and their life choices. This meant that by rooting the women’s daily struggles in their social positions as African women who were immigrants residing in an impoverished community affected by xenophobia, the stigma, discrimination and guilt that they felt were removed (Baines 2007; Dominelli 2002).

The Research Context

Bhambayi in KwaZulu-Natal, like other informal settlements in South Africa, is characterised by high levels of unemployment, dire levels of poverty and limited access to food security. The community is located in Inanda which is about 35 km outside of the city of Durban. The specificity of this community as compared to other predominantly informal settlements in the Inanda region is the mix of people who have migrated from the rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Somalia. The dominant language spoken by the residents in the community is isiZulu.

Selecting the Participants

Using the feminist methodology the researcher was guided by a four-pronged simultaneous process of assessment, engagement, planning and implementation from June 2014 to December 2015 (Marlow 2001). The assessment phase consisted of a comprehensive literature search of the topic: experiences of foreign African women using the feminist worldview which focused particularly on the interface of poverty, gender relations and xenophobia. The engagement phase involved several meetings with the Bhambayi community committee members regarding the objectives of the study and ideological position of the researcher.

The researcher was mindful of Baines’ (2007, 41) assertion that “it is commitment, intense involvement and the potential to affect human capital enhancement that guide the selection of participants in a feminist study”. Hence for the purposes of this study, 12 foreign national women were chosen using the following guidelines:

- they were women of African origin who had been residing in South Africa for at least two years;
- they were willing to engage in a discussion of gendered oppression and its link to their experiences of xenophobia; and

- they were willing to exchange ideas and share their life experiences in a group setting.

Baines (2007, 86) describes the profound impact of the feminist methodology as creating the “socio-emotional and a political space for the researcher and participants coming together to create an engagement of unconditional positive respect, hope, to pose questions and learn from one another”. The data collection process entailed strategies for identifying the foreign national women, engaging in open dialogue with members of the community, engaging the participants in a dialectic reflexive process, recording and analysing the data that described their experiences of gendered oppression, and jointly engaging in strategies to take action. The research process allowed the women the opportunity to examine the commonalities of their life experiences alongside the specificities of their particular gendered and economic life positions.

I embraced Morris’ (2006, 145) assertion that the feminist methodology encompasses “a circular process of understanding, connecting, empowering, taking action and reflecting on the action to formulate new action within a partnership free from hierarchy and that the researcher and the participants were equal partners in the research process”.

Data Collection Process

Two semi-structured interviews and one focus group session were conducted with the women. The semi-structured interviews gave the researcher an opportunity to clarify the objectives of the study, to explore whether the women were willing to participate in the focus group and to assure them that they were equal partners in the research process (Baines 2007). Each narrative shared during the interviews provided insight into how living in an impoverished community at a time when xenophobia was rife in the Inanda region and surrounding communities had a profound impact on their life choices. The semi-structured interview schedule and focus group guide had mainly open-ended questions based on the xenophobic attacks in Durban in 2015 and how these experiences affected their daily lives.

During the data collection process, a major challenge experienced by the researcher was that it took four months to obtain verbal and written consent from the women and to convince them to share their life stories about a sensitive topic at a time when the South African government was deporting foreign nationals to their home countries. The researcher was mindful that in the feminist methodology, facilitating ongoing mutual negotiations and a deep sense of purpose and opportunity for the women to share their life experiences is integral to the research process.

Data were collected by a postgraduate student who had been doing her fieldwork in Bhambayi for the past two years. An advantage was that this student was from Zimbabwe and she had a prolonged engagement with the women in the community which contributed to the trustworthiness of the data (Marlow 2001). Enabling the

women to tell their own stories and speak of their experiences in both the interviews and focus group session was integral to the feminist ways of gathering knowledge and understanding of the world (Dominelli 2002). The duration of the interviews and the focus group session was 1.5 hours and the topics covered included factors that led them to leave home, and the impact of xenophobia on their lives and future aspirations. The focus group triangulated the themes that emerged from the interviews. Both the interviews and the focus group session were audio recorded and transcribed, and field notes were taken. The power hierarchy between the researcher and the women was replaced by an egalitarian and genuine relationship and the researcher was mindful of describing the women's narratives as a collective story so that individual contributions were not identifiable (Baines 2007).

The ethical guidelines outlined by Marlow (2001) were respected as follows: no harm to the participants, assurance of confidentiality and anonymity when publishing research findings, participants not having unrealistic expectations of the study, and voluntary and informed consent. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal to conduct this study.

Since this study presents the findings from a small sample of 12 foreign national women, the findings cannot be generalised. However, prolonged engagement and the rich descriptive details shared by the women about their life experiences in both the interviews and focus group served to enhance the truth value and trustworthiness of the findings (Marlow 2001).

Marlow (2001, 64) discusses an ethnographic approach to analysing qualitative data and which was applicable to the purposes of this study. Marlow (2001, 65) contends that "there is likely to be a circular movement back and forth between the raw data in the transcripts and the more abstract determination of what topics will go into the ultimate report whilst being guided by existing literature and feminist social work theory". As such, the researcher was constantly mindful of interpreting the women's life experiences in relation to gender oppression as constructed by the complex interplay of socio-cultural, human rights and economic forces (Dominelli 2002).

Three important themes that are closely connected and that emerged from the data analysis are discussed below: the search for a better life, Ubuntu: rhetoric or reality, and survival strategies.

Discussion of Findings

Table 1 presents the biographical profile of the research participants.

Table 1: Biographical profile of the sample group of foreign African women

<i>Participant number</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Country of origin</i>	<i>Educational level</i>	<i>Duration residing in community</i>
1	35	Married	Zimbabwe	Grade 12	5 years
2	35	Married	Zimbabwe	Grade 9	5 years
3	36	Married	Zimbabwe	Grade 10	5 years
4	40	Married	Zimbabwe	Grade 12	8 months
5	47	Married	Zimbabwe	Grade 10	6 years
6	38	Married	Zimbabwe	Grade 11	6 years
7	45	Married	Zimbabwe	Grade 7	18 months
8	42	Married	Mozambique	Grade 12	2 years
9	39	Widow	Zimbabwe	Grade 12	3 years
10	42	In committed relationship	Zimbabwe	Grade 11	3 years
11	38	In committed relationship	Zimbabwe	Grade 8	3 years
12	50	Widow	Zimbabwe	Grade 8	3 years

Table 1 reveals that 6 of the 12 participants were aged 35–39 while 6 of them were between 40 and 50 years of age. Two of the women had lived in the community for a period of six years, three had resided in the community for five years, four had resided in the area for three years and two had lived in the community for less than two years. The mean duration of the women residing in the community was 3.1 years. All of the women had not completed secondary school. It was not surprising to note that 11 of the 12 women were from Zimbabwe and 1 was from Mozambique. The most recent statistics identify 2.5 million Zimbabweans residing in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (Statistics South Africa 2015).

Table 1 illustrates that eight of the women were married, three were cohabitating and in committed relationships and two participants were single as they were widows. The findings revealed that all of the women were undocumented foreign nationals and none had asylum status or work permits to reside legally as residents in South Africa at the time of data collection.

All of the women worked as domestic workers for at least 20 hours a week in the more affluent surrounding communities, north of the Durban city centre such as Umhlanga, Phoenix, Durban North and Avoca. Arising from the legacy of apartheid and despite the proximity of these urban formal communities to the predominantly informal settlement of Bhambayi in the Inanda region, there are blatant marked disparities in access to basic services, resources and job opportunities across these communities. The foreign national women were keenly aware that they were paid lower remuneration rates at their

workplaces compared to local domestic workers. Many of the women in this study had revealed that they earned approximately R120 a day as a domestic worker, while South African domestic workers working in the same communities were paid up to R170 per day. Muthuki (2013) stated that gender inequities, power imbalances, as well as being perceived as an economic threat by local South Africans were primary factors contributing to xenophobia. In the province of KwaZulu-Natal, where the poverty and unemployment levels are of the highest in the country, the lack of social cohesion among people of different races, the negative preconceived stereotypes, the high levels of poverty, and dissatisfaction with service delivery were perceived by the participants as some of the causes of xenophobia in South Africa. This perception is discussed further in the theme below.

“The Search for a Better Life”

One of the major contradictions of the xenophobic attacks against foreign nationals both in the Global North and Global South is that it has contributed to a deeper awareness and understanding of how the interplay of poverty, social solidarity and human rights profoundly impact gender norms and the identity of women (Muthuki 2013). When asked about their motivations for leaving their home country, all of the participants stated that they voluntarily left in search for better job prospects and improvement of quality of life for themselves and their families. Some of the sentiments shared by the women were as follows:

My family and I were starving in our home country.

Poverty brought me to this country.

We don't even have food on the shelves in the supermarkets back home.

We came in search for better jobs and more money.

I'm not planning to go back home as it is better to stay in this informal settlement than to stay in a formal house in Zimbabwe with no food.

In my home country even if I want to sell tomatoes, people don't even have a dollar to buy vegetables. Here I am selling tomatoes and I am able to at least buy bread.

The findings of this study corroborate the assertions made by Landau and Monson (2008) who explained that foreign nationals leave their countries of origin voluntarily for economic reasons and the search for a better quality of life. A further question asked in the interviews was about their perceptions and experiences of xenophobia in South Africa. The women revealed that foreign women, by their very status are vulnerable to crimes and xenophobia in South Africa. Muthuki (2013, 119) boldly stated that violence against foreign national women are “normalised in ways in which the South African society interacts with minority and vulnerable groups”. The following statements attest to these perceptions:

The biggest challenge I face living in this country is theft. My passport and TV was stolen. I could not report this crime to the police because of my illegal status and fear of being arrested.

As a foreign African woman, I have a constant fear of being raped as criminals believe that they can get away with crimes simply because we are not from here.

At the time of conducting this research, xenophobia had reached unprecedented levels in communities across South Africa with violent attacks against foreign African nationals in April 2015 in KwaZulu-Natal. Empirical evidence revealed that foreign nationals who resided mainly in informal settlements or townships where xenophobia often manifested in forms of crime and a fight for limited resources, bring forth a public awareness of the structural challenges such as dire poverty levels, unemployment and lack of housing as uncertainties that already exist in these local communities and in the wider society (Adam and Moodley 2015; Landau 2014; Nyamjoh 2006). The perceptions shared by the women in the interviews and the focus group session corroborate Muthuki's (2013) qualitative findings that foreign African women faced a form of violence because of their gender and were thus more vulnerable to crimes as compared to their male counterparts. Van der Westhuizen and Kleintjies (2015, 121) added that one of the primary causal factors of xenophobia was poverty and that negative attitudes, perceptions, emotions and behaviour regarding foreign national persons were because people were desperate and did not want to compete for jobs with people from other countries.

A central focus of the interviews and the focus group was on raising the women's consciousness about the complex interplay of power, gender and living in a poverty-stricken community where putting food on the table was a daily struggle that profoundly contributed to their decisions to either remain in South Africa or to go back home. The sentiments shared by the majority of the women revealed that despite their vulnerability to crime and experiences of xenophobia they preferred to live in South Africa. The researcher was mindful to not reinforce the foreign national women's feelings of stigma, discrimination and self-blame by reiterating that the xenophobic experiences were connected to structural and socio-political problems that were beyond their own locus of control. In addition, for many of the women the collective sharing of their life experiences in the focus group session became a safe and liberating space in which they sought alternative ways of transforming their own life choices and increasing their bonds and collective support networks. This theme is explored in detail in the discussion that follows.

Ubuntu: Rhetoric or Reality?

In terms of social networks and building social capital, four of the women from Zimbabwe and the one woman from Mozambique expressed that Black South Africans were largely hostile to them and this was contrary to their own experiences in their home

countries where foreign nationals are treated with respect and dignity. This can be observed from the voices of some of the women who stated that:

In my home country we are respectful to foreigners and help them where we can.

Here South Africans behave like they are better than us.

I have overheard people in taxis talk badly about foreigners. They say that foreigners set up shops which takes away jobs from South Africans.

I don't have any local and isiZulu women friends as they always gossip about Zimbabweans.

The sentiments from the above excerpts illustrate the hostility that five of the women were subjected to by local South Africans. In addition, these women indicated that these sentiments are against the philosophy of ubuntu, which embraces Afrocentric values of respect for the dignity and worth of all and reinforces a sense of community spirit and affirmation for others irrespective of race, colour and ethnicity. Adam and Moodley (2015) and Muthuki (2013) have argued that the xenophobic violence in the 1990s and beyond cannot be isolated from South Africa's racial past and attitudes of superiority to the rest of foreign nationals in Africa. It is important to take note that such negative experiences as stated by the women in this study reflect the anxieties about societal change in the post-apartheid era, and manifests in forms of moral anomie and negative stereotypes about the other (Fanon 1967). Muthuki (2013) argued that such negative encounters with foreign nationals are not the cause of a breakdown of social solidarity and social cohesion within South Africa but they symbolise the existing inescapable contradictions and structural uncertainties that exist in wider society. In Fanon's (1967) words "xenophobia may be perceived as a fragile sense of national consciousness by the national bourgeoisie to mimic its western counterpart".

Evidently, the other seven women stated in the interviews that they had nurtured positive social support systems and networks across the different races in South Africa. Some comments made by these women were as follows:

During the xenophobic attacks I took my children and went to stay with my friend in Phoenix.

I got protection from an Indian family who just took me in.

The leaders in this community called a meeting to tell locals to respect and protect their foreign brothers and sisters. No foreigner was attacked in this community.

My neighbour took me and my children in during the attacks in neighbouring communities and she promised to keep us safe if the attacks started in this community.

It is important to acknowledge that many African countries played a significant role in the anti-apartheid struggle and the consequential democratic freedom enjoyed by all South Africans since 1994. The Constitution of South Africa (South Africa 1996) reflects principles of tolerance, inclusivity, diversity, social justice and human rights for all. The voices of the seven women revealed that they had nurtured positive relationships with local South Africans, especially with local women, and these bonds were not exclusive to the community in which they resided but transcended racial and class boundaries. The seven women expressed much gratitude to the positive calibre of leadership in this community as the leaders had taken the initiative and responsibility to engage in open dialogue with all who resided in Bhambayi to reinforce the communitarian values espoused in the African philosophy of ubuntu. Evidently for these seven women, ubuntu was perceived as reality and not rhetoric.

Survival Strategies

It is positive to note that the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (2010), the Constitution of South Africa (South Africa 1996, 7) and the South African Refugees Act (South Africa 1998) are foundational pieces of legislation that provide protection and that ensure that foreign nationals enjoy the right to dignity and privacy, access to information, basic social services, compensation and restitution while residing in the country. Van der Westhuizen and Kleintjies (2015) stated that these human rights ensure direct access to basic social work services that are available to foreign nationals who reside in South Africa. The majority of the women in this study were aware of these important pieces of legislation and through contact with social workers who provided services in the Inanda region, they were able to receive much needed information, protection and supportive services. During the xenophobic attacks in 2015, the women stated that they were made aware by social workers of the camps that were set up in surrounding communities to assist foreign nationals to reintegrate into the communities from which they had to flee because of these attacks.

There were two support mechanisms identified by the women which helped them to cope and survive with their situation. Seven of the women mentioned private household-based systems (non-kinship ties) and organisation-based systems such as faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, the Department of Social Development, and community-based organisations such as the Siyathuthuka crèche, the women's club, the Sinokuhle sewing club and the community leaders that provided support during the xenophobic attacks in the city of Durban.

The combination of these support systems (non-kinship and organisation) provided them with the much needed physical, emotional and social support. Two of the women stated:

Every week the members from the church would visit my house to pray and support me and this helped me cope.

I meet the women's support group every second week and this helps me a lot as I also talk to them about my problems.

During the outbreaks of the xenophobic violence in 2015, the National Minister of Social Development, Bathabile Dlamini, appealed to social workers to become involved in the provision of supportive counselling to victims of xenophobia and to strengthen long-term prevention programmes at community level (Adam and Moodley 2015). Even though the women in this study appreciated the organisational and professional support, it is also important to bear in mind that these seven women were acutely aware that the informal non-kinship support networks that they nurtured were unsustainable and ad hoc in nature. They stated in the interviews and the focus group session that by virtue of their illegal status they constantly lived in fear of being deported back to their home countries. Writers such as Van der Westhuizen and Kleintjies (2015) and Holscher (2016b) have argued that the social work profession's role in dealing with xenophobia as a human rights and social justice issue calls for the need for reorientation and the training of social workers. Additionally, practitioners need to embrace a radical consciousness shift in order to provide effective transformative intervention services to foreign national women as well as to advocate for changes to national migration policies and legislation (Van der Westhuizen and Kleintjies 2015).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The voices of 12 foreign national women in this qualitative study conducted in a predominantly impoverished community called Bhambayi have shown that their experiences of xenophobia were profoundly linked to structural poverty, economic exclusion and gender inequalities. The findings of this study corroborate other African scholars such as Adam and Moodley (2015), Holscher (2016b), Muthuki (2013) and Van der Westhuizen and Kleintjies (2015) who have argued that xenophobic attacks against foreign national women are normalised in ways in which South Africans interact with minority and vulnerable groups, and it is thus acknowledged as an ongoing human rights violation influenced by colonialism, apartheid, globalisation and migration. Consequently, the social work profession is challenged in contemporary times with the complexity of detecting and responding appropriately to threats and/or outbreaks of xenophobic violence which is a human rights issue not unique to South Africa (Holscher 2016b; Muthuki 2013; Van der Westhuizen and Kleintjies 2015). The urgent need for preventive actions at a global and local level is emphasised.

Social workers' commitment to dealing with xenophobia as a human rights issue entails providing foreign national women with information on their legislative rights of immigrants and intercultural tolerance through community awareness programmes. It is important that there is close collaboration between the departments of Health, Social Development, and Education in order to relate multidisciplinary social work intervention programmes for foreign national women directly to objectives that include poverty reduction, access to material compensation, better access to economic resources, job opportunities, and greater gender equality. The undergraduate training

programmes at higher education institutions should include knowledge and skills on the promotion of foreign national women's legislative and policy rights and gender equality as a prerequisite to poverty alleviation and integration into South African society. This study represented a limited sample of 12 foreign national women of African origin residing in an impoverished community and does not reflect foreign population groups residing in contemporary South Africa in a representative way. The author thus recommends further qualitative research to be conducted with foreign national women beyond Africa who reside in the different provinces across South Africa.

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