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Exploring Exploitation in Southern Africa: Gender in the Heritage Tourism Sector

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the place of women in the heritage and cultural tourism (HCT) sector with a particular focus on exploitation. It specifically considers the often-overlooked issue of gender, particularly among those who form the backbone of this industry. The objective was to investigate the potential existence of exploitative practices affecting these women in their daily lives. The analysis makes use of an intersectional methodology to consider the complex and nuanced nature of the situation. It employed an exploratory research methodology using purposive snowballing to examine the well-being of women working in the field of HCT within seven southern Africa countries using semi-structured interviews with service providers operating in both the formal and informal economy. The findings reveal that the industry subtly subjects its female workforce to various forms of exploitation and highlights the concerning reality that, even in the twenty-first century, situations resembling Kafkaesque scenarios can still arise for this vulnerable group. The study emphasizes the need for a fresh perspective that underscores the importance of conducting further critiques to enhance visibility and protection for this vulnerable group in the HCT industry. It also develops a novel diagrammatic wheel of exploitation to highlight and potentially address these issues in the sector.

Keywords: Women, Heritage and Cultural Tourism, Southern Africa, Wellbeing, Exploitation, Wheel of exploitation

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Introduction

David & van der Merwe (2016), claim that the heritage and cultural tourism (HCT) sector has become more popular compared to other types of tourism. They predict that HCT represents a major future growth activity in global tourism demand. Consequently, culture is increasingly being utilised as a tool for marketing and branding tourism destinations (Ramires et al., 2018). In support of this, Rogerson (2012) suggests that many southern African countries are incorporating HCT as a niche product to diversify their tourism economies. As a result, HCT remains a significant sector that contributes to job creation, especially for women, in the regional economy of southern Africa. However, Seager (2009) points out that while tourism is a significant industry worldwide and plays a vital role in development, poor third-world countries experience an increase in various forms of exploitation of women due to the rapid development of tourism. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), women make up the majority of the workforce in the tourism industry, both directly and indirectly (ILO, 2022). HCT, as a relatively new niche, has been implementing numerous projects and programs aimed at upskilling, empowering, educating, and integrating female service providers from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds into the tourism sector in southern Africa. As a result, an increasing number of women have joined the HCT industry through a range of occupations in both a formal and informal capacity (See diagram 1). HCT employment requires a broad range of categories of workers as it is spread across various sub-sectors. As regards to the formal work, employment in the HCT can take place in direct tourism services where there is a possibility to progress from junior to senior levels. Examples of these are archivists; archaeologists; conservationists; museum curators; cultural specialist; events coordinators; tourist guides and educators. Within each of these areas, there are a number of different roles and specialisations, many of which require different training, skills and experience (Centre for Research Collection, n.d.). These employees are usually professional, if not literate with some form of qualification. On the other hand, there are also locals not formally employed directly in the sector, but who have nonetheless carved out livelihoods based on their resourcefulness and steady interaction with tourists. Examples of this include informal employment opportunities in this sector such as crafters who create souvenirs or musicians, storytellers and dancers who perform, while others are tangential to the formal sector such as assistants in catering, porters and the like. These informal or casual employees are often illiterate or semi-illiterate and have no formal education or training.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILOSTAT, n.d.) more than 270 million people amounting to about 8.2 percent of the global workforce are employed in the tourism sector. This figure has almost rebound to the pre-Covid figure provided by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) in 2017 of 275 million people. In addition, the industry continues to be identified as having a high employment multiplier effect (ILO, Frechtling & Horvath, 1999) and it is also said to be characterised by low level access barriers (Saarinen et al., 2009). Its labour intensive nature is thus a major driver of economic growth and job creation, particularly for women. For this reason, the industry is believed to employ more women and minority groups than many other sectors (Hollick, 2003).In the light of this, tourism is often referred to as a "vehicle for gender equality and women's empowerment" (UN Reports, 2011) due to the fact that women form the backbone of the industry (ILO, 2010) and its potential to address issues that predominantly affect them. However, the sector still continues to face deficits as regards decent work. In 2022 the ILO made pertinent reference to the prevalence of informality, long working hours, low

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wages, lack of social protection, poor occupational safety, weak regulation and also gender-based discrimination (ILO, 2022). It is apparent that women comprise the majority of those engaged in this precarious work, particularly in the informal sector (ILO, 2022). In the context of Africa, the Africa Finance and Private Sector Development World Bank (AFTFP) points out that skepticism exists regarding the economic and social benefits of tourism in many African countries (UNWTO, 2019). Christie (2014) attributes this skepticism largely to the lack of accurate economic data needed to evaluate women's contributions to the tourism sector. Furthermore, the ILO reports a deficiency of regionally available data on women's participation in the tourism industry (ILO, 2022). Timothy (2023) also emphasizes the absence of a systematic examination of policies, practices, successes, and challenges within the tourism framework, despite the African continent's rich cultural heritage.

Consequently, given the substantial contribution of women to the workforce in this field, there is a dearth of scholarly literature on the well-being of the female workforce who form the foundation of this industry, particularly in southern Africa. The clandestine and detrimental nature of the exploitation of women in the HCT sector, coupled with other underlying factors, the extent of the problem, and its profound impact on women in both formal and informal economies, have not been thoroughly comprehended or adequately addressed in academic discourse. Therefore, the primary objective of this article is to examine, within the context of southern Africa, the potential exploitation of this vulnerable group involved in the production of this specialised market and consider possible avenues to address it. As far back as 1991 Britton suggested that researchers in tourism have overlooked its significant role in capitalist accumulation, particularly in terms of the nature of tourism production and consumption. Two and a half decades later Baum (2015) observed that workforce research was mainly conducted by hospitality researchers, with only a few studies considering the tourism workforce in a broader tourism or comparative transnational context. Similarly, Cheer (2018) argued that tourism was an industry with a high demand for labour, which could lead to the exploitation of individuals in terms of their labour and human rights. Therefore, it is important for tourism researchers, to examine the connection between modern slavery and tourism within the field of HCT geographies. This article aims to address the gap identified by focusing on a region-wide exposé of the realities faced by women working in the HCT domain within the southern African context. In doing so, it seeks to provide a unique African perspective to the existing global discourse on HCT. Addressing this omission could significantly contribute to ongoing discussions in the field of HCT research as well as wellbeing in the sector.

Literature review

Due to the significant representation of women in the industry, a number of studies have been conducted that specifically focus on women's economic empowerment as well as exploitation within the tourism sector. Besides general global attention, there has also been work specifically on women and sex tourism. This literature review will consider the former both within a global and then southern African context, as sex tourism per se falls beyond the ambit of this particular study. A Global Report on Women in Tourism, published by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in 2010, investigated the active participation of women in the global tourism industry and affirmed that women occupy a significant position within this sector. Although it was indicated that it offers numerous opportunities for their economic empowerment, it also indicated that women are predominantly employed in low-skilled, low-paid, and precarious positions within the tourism industry (UN Women, 2010). A subsequent edition of the report was published in 2021, including both developed and developing countries across four regions: Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe. It aimed to analyse the factors contributing to gender equality within the tourism sector and proposed global strategies to address inequality and promote women's empowerment (UNWTO, 2021). The report examined four key segments of the tourism industry: digital platforms and technology, hotels and accommodation, tour operators, and community-based tourism. In the context of Africa, the report underscored the accommodation and food services sector by focusing on 37 selected countries within the region. It noted that, despite the promising prospects of tourism on the continent and the fact that 69% of women are engaged in the industry, they continue to encounter significant barriers that hinder their full participation in and benefits from these opportunities. The report emphasised that power dynamics in various contexts persistently limit African women's prospects, particularly with regard to mobility, perceptions of work and stereotypes, access to resources, and decision-making authority (UNWTO, 2021). Many of these issues are relevant to the current study and warrant further examination. During the 2019 UNWTO Women in Tourism Empowerment Programme (WITEP) meeting Ghana's Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Afeku, highlighted the "invisibility" of women in the tourism sector. Despite their significant contributions, she stressed the need to enhance their visibility and noted that many women lack necessary skills due to the absence of programs designed to assist them (UNWTO, 2019). On a local level, the 2015 Regional Tourism Organisation of Southern Africa (RETOSA) Conference, focused on "Women in Tourism: Creating Opportunities for Inclusive Development and Social Transformation." Here it was emphasised that although women constitute 75% of the workforce their representation in formal positions on boards and within executive management remains disproportionately low (National Department of Tourism [NDT], n.d.). The conference indicated that only 12% of large tourism enterprises met the target of achieving 50% representation of women in management positions and highlighted the need for ongoing review and evaluation of strategies, plans, institutional delivery frameworks, and the roles of various stakeholders within the industry to ensure accountability (NDT, n.d.).

As regards more academic research, Deen et al. (2014) investigated the role of women in the tourism sector, particularly those managing small accommodation-related businesses. This research highlighted the diverse challenges these women face and showed that while their experiences vary, there were two primary concerns: insufficient training and education to support their business initiatives and limited access to financing. Additionally, they found that some women expressed a desire to connect with others (Deen et al., 2014). Ntajana & Mangwane's (2019) study examined the challenges faced by women

in the tourism sector, focusing on the privileges society affords to men and the impact of socialisation on women's entrepreneurial aspirations (Ntajane & Mangwane, 2019). The study evaluated the validity of the assertion that "It's a man's world" in twenty-first century tourism boardrooms. The findings revealed that women primarily occupy employee positions in tourism organisations owned and managed by men and highlighted the need to support women-led enterprises in the sector. Ntajana & Mangwane (2019) concluded very appropriately by asking: What measures can society, the private sector, government, higher education institutions, and other stakeholders implement to promote gender transformation in tourism, a critical economic driver that predominantly employs women? (Ntajane & Mangwane, 2019: 344). In a 2022 article, Adeola argued that women are essential to economic activity in the tourism sector and purported that tourism had helped reduce gender-related inequalities globally. However, she pointed out that despite ongoing efforts to narrow the gender equality gap, women entrepreneurs still faced challenges that hinder their success. She specifically highlighted Africa, noting that socio-cultural and economic constraints obstructed women's pathways to achievement in the industry and emphasised the need to address these limitations. (Adeola, 2022). Another study by Matiku (2013) examined the factors influencing women's involvement in the production and supply of tourism products, focusing on cultural, social, and economic aspects. It found that through creating handicrafts and selling them to tourists as souvenirs they alleviated financial challenges for their families and also conserved aspects of their culture. The study also highlighted the obstacles women face in producing cultural tourism products and suggested that providing loans could maximize community benefits. (Matiku, 2013). Much of the literature emphasises the predominance of the female workforce in the tourism sector, particularly in Africa and also underscores the critical role they occupy within the industry. It also highlights the inequality in the tourism workplace and reveals that women encounter specific constraints within this sector. It is also apparent that the same factors that historically impeded women's advancement continue to exert their influence in contemporary contexts. These and other studies elucidate the challenges faced by female workers in tourism-related occupations, alongside the cultural, social, economic, and political factors that reinforce gender roles and hierarchies. There is thus a consensus to empower women who are emerging as pivotal contributors to the tourism entrepreneurial landscape. The existing literature on women in the sector indicates a significant gap in research concerning Africa, with even less attention devoted to southern Africa. In particular, the scholarship addressing the HCT labour market has been markedly insufficient, with limited inquiry into the well-being of HCT labourers in this region, especially in southern Africa. Although many scholars examine tourism labourers more broadly, this article represents one of the pioneering investigations into the well-being and potential exploitation of women in southern African countries specifically engaged in HCT services. Thus the primary objective of this is to address this scholarly void by investigating the exploitation of those who are numerically predominant in the HCT industry yet remain subservient, if not marginalised.

Methodology

For the purposes of this article an intersectional approach to methodological analysis was employed to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the cases of female service providers in the HCT sector within a southern African context. To achieve the research goals, key role players working in the HCT sector, both in the formal and informal sectors within their respective countries, were consulted and data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with women working in various cultural-tourism-related areas. These areas included tour operation businesses, travel agents, tourist guiding, cultural villages, artists, museums, educational institutions, accommodations, homestays, catering services, as well as the crafts market. The study focused on the seven southernmost countries that share a border with South Africa: Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, Eswatini, and South Africa included. This limitation was not intended to constrain the potential of the research, but rather to facilitate participant recruitment due to logistical challenges. Therefore, the study group was determined using the snowball sampling (the chain-referral) technique as a form of purposeful sampling. Inclusion criteria was for women from both the formal and informal economy who could provide information on the seven countries' HCT economies. Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were utilised and participants were assured that their personal information would be kept confidential, with the data being used solely for the purposes of research. Most of the HCT female workforce interviewed were Black African, their ages ranged between 25 and 60+ years and most of them had families of their own and relied on the HCT sector for an income.

Results and discussion

Roles of women in the heritage cultural tourism (HCT) sector

Many of the women that were interviewed had become part of the HCT industry as service providers in various tourism destinations, educational institutions and museums. Most however participated in tourism in the entrepreneurial arena through the creation of self-employment by running small business enterprises, micro and medium enterprises such as homestays; traditional cuisine and catering businesses; and other tour operations. At the community level, women created income through the sale of traditional crafts in the form of woven, embroidered and beaded products or participated as dancers, musicians (artists) and as story tellers. It was apparent that most of them came from the informal sector, were thus self-employed and had non-permanent incomes. The responses concerning the advantages of their contributions to the industry exhibited considerable variability. While the research highlighted positive experiences and a wealth of expertise among female workers, it also revealed the significant challenges they encounter within the field. Contrary to the prevalent perception of the industry's beneficial impact on a destination, many female service providers expressed feelings of being unsupported and invisible in the workplace. They identified several challenges, including inadequate wages, lack of job security, sexual harassment, insufficient support from relevant authorities, and exploitation. Racism was another issue that black women had long been aware of, particularly

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where the tourism industry is still predominantly controlled by white male individuals. Also, some felt that "deliberate restriction" and or "a ceiling for career progress" was imposed on women wishing to rank up.

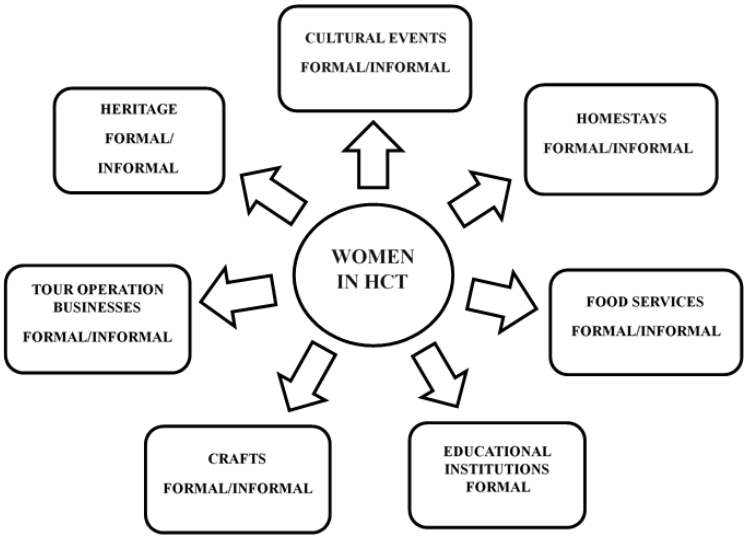

Diagram 1: Women in HCT Subsectors

Tables 1 and 2 present a summative analysis of the data using the following as criteria: employment, position, specialization, finance, education and training, policies and regulations and work conditions. It is worth stating that these are a few of the commonly held and extensively documented perceptions regarding the tourism and hospitality sector and its workforce. However, the identification of a viable solution to address these perceptions appears to be a challenging task, as clear "solutions" are currently lacking. (Iverson & Deery, 2007).

Table 1: Issues experienced by women in HCT in the formal sector

Female Workforce in the Formal Sector
○ Hinderance on professional/career advancement
○ Workplace inequality
○ Discrimination
○ Race
○ Gender segregation
○ Social inequality
○ Negative perception of the industry
○ Lack of data
○ Lack of funding
○ Harassment
Non-compliancy of tourism legal frameworks

Table 2: Issues experienced by women in HCT in the informal sector

Female Workforce in the Informal Sector
○ Seasonality of tourism
○ Informal employment
○ Job uncertainty
○ Low paid and Precarious work
○ Insecurity
○ Poor infrastructure
○ Negative perception of the industry
○ Lack of data
○ Lack of funding
○ Invisibility
○ Harassment
○ Unreliable HCT organisation/programme

Exploitative elements

Cheer (2018) posits that the tourism industry is characterised by a high demand for labour, which often results in the exploitation of individuals with respect to their labour and human rights. Like Cheer, Seager (2009) observes that while tourism constitutes a significant global industry and plays a crucial role in development, poorer nations in the global South are witnessing an escalation in the exploitation of women as a result of rapid tourism development. He emphasises that, in numerous instances, women disproportionately endure the adverse effects of poverty and exploitation within the sector, and this is no different for southern Africa. Several individuals reported experiencing exploitation in their professional activities and identified numerous issues, including transactional cheating, a lack of a gender-inclusive environment, cultural factors affecting women, gender discrimination, sexual exploitation and unequal opportunities. Additionally, some respondents noted the underrepresentation of women in management roles. These factors impeded their legal rights and contributed to their exploitation. In all, the majority of respondents noted that much of the labour undertaken by women is undervalued or marginalised and is often degraded by

prevailing societal norms. This dynamic, in turn, leads to exploitation, with primary manifestations including economic, gendered, sexual, and socio-cultural exploitation. Moreover, these distinct forms of exploitation are intricately interconnected and perpetuated by pervasive gender inequality, which numerous African women continue to endure (Nutsukpo, 2018). As a result, many African women find themselves subjected to the constraints of subordination, dehumanisation, and marginalisation both in domestic settings and in the workplace. It is well-known that women encounter challenges across all areas of development. The HCT sector, is no exception and has also demonstrated detrimental, if not abusive, impacts on those who serve as its backbone. Given the circumstances discussed above, it is evident that bondage and exploitation are pervasive in both the production and consumption of HCT products. Yidirin (2021) contends that the neoliberal government's normalisation of workplace conditions within the tourism sector has led to a multitude of issues, which are manifest in this study. Based on the responses, it is evident that female workers in the southern African region experience exploitation in their daily professional endeavours.

Several factors contribute to the challenges women encounter in the workplace. Extensive research indicates that African society, characterised by its patriarchal structure, perpetuates various forms of exploitation against women (Nutsukpo, 2018). The study highlights instances in which men have obstructed women's pursuit of self-determination and economic independence. Respondents from the formal industry reported that women face significant obstacles in ascending the corporate ladder, noting a "deliberate restriction and/or ceiling on career progress" for those seeking advancement (Osituyo, 2018:181). This dynamic contributes to the underrepresentation of women in management positions. Furthermore, even women in high-ranking roles often struggle to be taken seriously in the boardroom, resulting in feelings of isolation in their leadership positions. An analysis of women's advancement reveals that they frequently must exert twice the effort of their male counterparts and, in some cases, must obtain additional formal qualifications to progress in their careers. Also, some respondents, particularly those in accommodation and tour operations, faced difficulties due to the industry's negative societal perception. Accommodation operators reported challenges in their interactions with both male and female clients. It was revealed that they even experienced harassment from their own spouses. Some individuals did not receive any support from their partners; rather, they were stigmatized as "prostitutes" for managing multiple clients throughout the day and night as part of their business activities. Even female tourist guides received criticism for needing to travel between locations to fulfil their job responsibilities. They attributed much of this negativity to the antisocial working hours associated with their roles. Some even noted they are labelled “prostitutes” solely because of the nature of their work. Nutsukpo (2018) argues that women are conditioned to embrace patriarchal ideas and values that undermine their self-worth, reinforce their perceived inferiority to men, and make them vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. This expectation aligns with cultural norms, but results in socio-cultural exploitation. According to Baxi (2020), quoting Karl Marx and more recent interpreters of his theories, “exploitation is not so much an individual condition as a collective and systemic status”. Baxi argues that situations of dominance and subservience, relating to status asymmetries, routinely result in coercion and exploitation. He refers to this phenomenon as dominance and authority exploitation. For instance, craft producers engaged in informal employment in deep rural areas are predominantly exploited. Owners of established craft shops often acquire their products for minimal payment, leaving these impoverished women at a disadvantage. The shop owners then rebrand and resell these products at significantly higher prices in urban centres, such as airports and malls. Consequently, the original producers seldom realise direct economic benefits, suffering instead from severe back pain and vision problems due to the demands of producing these heritage and cultural items. Many female service providers feel compelled to accept any terms for job opportunities. In this context, the labour market operates more according to productivity-oriented regulations than legal rights. Nilsen (2020) notes that “exploitation begins with the terms on which workers sell their labour power to capital,” a concern that Karl Marx raised nearly a century and a half ago, which remains relevant today.

The study also revealed that some tour operators are "negotiated to the bones" by certain overseas travel agencies. Desperate to maintain business relationships, these operators often feel pressured to accept unfavorable terms, leading to financial losses. Additionally, tour agents face challenges related to customer behavior, including untrustworthy clients who attempt to exploit them. Employers in cultural institutions, such as cultural villages, often treat their female workers - artists and storytellers - as if they are doing them a favor simply because they rely on their talents rather than any formal training or education. As a result, these workers feel undervalued and are forced to overwork for little or no pay, a situation that also affects some freelance tourist guides. Ultimately, these service providers receive minimal benefits from such initiatives. These cases illustrate the asymmetrical relationships that exist between female service employees, clients, managers, and business owners in the HCT industry. Many female service providers are compelled to accept any terms for job opportunities. This exploitation extends beyond labor issues, encompassing dynamics of dominance and subservience rooted in status imbalances, which further perpetuate coercion and exploitation (Baxi, 2020). Unfortunately, the most prevalent forms of exploitation faced by the female workforce in the HCT industry are capitalist exploitation and exploitation rooted in domination and authority. Capitalist exploitation involves capitalists forcibly appropriating the surplus value created by workers (Baxi, 2020). In contrast, domination and authority exploitation occur when individuals in positions of power use their authority, often coercively, to gain advantages for themselves at the expense of others (Baxi, 2020). Another form of exploitation emphasised by feminists and highlighted here is the exploitation of affective labor. Affective labor, a crucial aspect of immaterial labor (Hardt and Negri, 2000), is predominantly performed by women (Oksala, 2016). For example, HCT institutions, such as cultural villages, impose specific appearance criteria on their employees to maintain a certain institutional image. This requirement extends to female front desk service providers in accommodation establishments, who must conform to particular body shape standards (Urry, 1990). Urry (1990) argues that while the creation and enjoyment of experiences for tourists, as well as the benefits for the

tourism institution, rely on the unique attributes of service providers, these qualities are unfortunately undervalued compared to the physical labor they perform. Britton (1999) asserts that management expects employees to possess the personal qualities necessary to deliver the desired level of service. Additionally, Britton notes that this situation highlights the expectation for female service providers to adopt a dual role: engaging in the tourist experience while conforming to social norms shaped by class, gender, and market dynamics that influence the overall product. Regrettably, these sought-after qualities are often unrecognized or undervalued in formal credentials, leading to the underpricing of these skills in the market. Feminists interpret this as exploitation, referring to it as "the exploitation of affective labor" (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 238). Also, female workers, including front desk officers, artists in cultural villages, and sometimes tourist guides, are expected to utilise their emotional and social skills to achieve professional success (Oksala, 2016). However, this study reveals that female service providers do not necessarily see an increase in wages. While appearance and behavior significantly shape customer experiences in service work, where women often provide additional value without compensation, these contributions are typically overlooked due to their normalisation. Nevertheless, it is these extra efforts that encourage clients to return, ultimately boosting the organisation's revenue. By disregarding these supplementary practices rooted in naturalisation, the exploitation of women through affective labour persists.

Some respondents in the formal sector, particularly in accommodation and tour operations, faced challenges due to the negative perception of the industry held by society. In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) member countries, certain occupations are viewed as unsuitable for women, resulting in cultural biases and societal attitudes that limit their opportunities for success in this field. Consequently, this negative perception of women in the HCT sector has hindered their advancement. Nyaruwata & Nyaruwata (2013) suggest that a prevalent gender stereotype in many African societies expects women in SADC countries to prioritize childcare and domestic responsibilities over career development, reflecting cultural norms. Unfortunately, this reinforces socio-cultural exploitation, including the social conditioning of women which promotes patriarchal ideas and values that undermine women's worth, perpetuate their perceived inferiority to men, and make them susceptible to manipulation and exploitation (Nutsukpo, 2022). Some respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace, detailing incidents where male clients crossed professional boundaries, compromising the working relationship and violating decorum. Most individuals encountered harassment primarily in the form of verbal flirtation or offensive remarks. Only one tour operator, who also served as a guide, reported physical harassment, claiming a client touched and groped her during a tour. Another respondent mentioned that her poetry books were denied placement in schools because a figure in authority demanded sexual favours. Female front office staff faced similar issues. Often groomed for their roles when interacting with clients, they encountered disrespect and harassment, with clients assuming they were prostitutes and inviting them to their rooms. However, none reported overt sexual harassment, explaining that they did not perceive these incidents as significant. Their primary reaction to unwelcome sexual advances was to resist and maintain distance from the perpetrator. This study demonstrates that the majority of the female workforce are motivated by a passion for their work in the industry. While these women have accepted that job insecurity is a fundamental aspect of their roles, this acceptance can negatively impact their mental well-being, leading to an unhappy and insecure workforce. The HCT sector remains largely unstable and relies heavily on short-term, part-time, and economically vulnerable contract workers for most tasks. The structure and nature of the tourism industry often contributes to job insecurity, making it difficult for individuals to plan for the future regarding their employment. Despite this, many service providers in the industry have adapted to this uncertainty. Consequently, women from diverse backgrounds, who make up a significant portion of the region's tourism workforce, frequently experience a sense of fatalism due to the limited alternatives available to them. Job security is critical for employees, as it provides stability in both their personal and professional lives. Thus, it can be asserted that the current situation has detrimental psychological effects on those working in the sector, despite the industry's minimal attention to their long-term well-being.

Based on the scenarios described and the reports from respondents, it is clear that female workers in the southern African region face exploitation in their daily professional lives. This exploitation goes beyond labour issues and includes instances of dominance and subservience stemming from imbalances in status. Such dynamics result in coercion and further exploitation (Baxi, 2020). The most significant forms of exploitation encountered by the female workforce in the HCT sector are capitalist exploitation and exploitation of authority and dominance. In contrast, exploitation of authority and dominance refers to individuals in power using their authority, often through coercion, to secure benefits for themselves at the expense of others. Another form of exploitation highlighted by feminists is the exploitation of affective labour, which is primarily performed by women and is a key component of immaterial labour (Oksala, 2016). Other frequently identified forms of exploitation include denial of leadership positions, overwork, economic exploitation, sexual exploitation, socio-cultural exploitation, undervaluation, gendered exploitation, and psychological exploitation. Unfortunately, such exploitative practices are observed daily, as demonstrated by the cases of the participants in this study. Central to these exploitative forms is the relationship between the exploiters and the female service providers in the HCT industry in the region, who ultimately have their fundamental human rights denied. In this industry, most female service providers are forced to sell their labour to capitalists for less than the fair value of the goods they produce or the services they provide, primarily because they do not own the means of production. The prevalence of asymmetrical relationships creates a power dynamic that fosters dominance and exploitation. This study reveals that many female service providers experience various forms of exploitation, resulting in limited employment opportunities and a diminished sense of dignity. Diagram 2, the "Exploitation Wheel", encapsulates several aspects of exploitation, including economic exploitation, denial of top positions, gendered exploitation, socio-cultural exploitation, psychological exploitation, exploitation through affective labour, sexual exploitation, and being overworked and undervalued.

These exploitative aspects align with Di Minico's (2017) perspective, which posits that women, regardless of culture or class, are often viewed as the "other" gender and thus marginalized. Di Minico further argues that women continue to be subjects of oppression despite ongoing demands for equality in feminist movements. She contends that "in a dystopian society, they are doubly oppressed - first, due to political or authoritarian power; second, through male or sexist oppression" (Di Minico, 2017: 71)

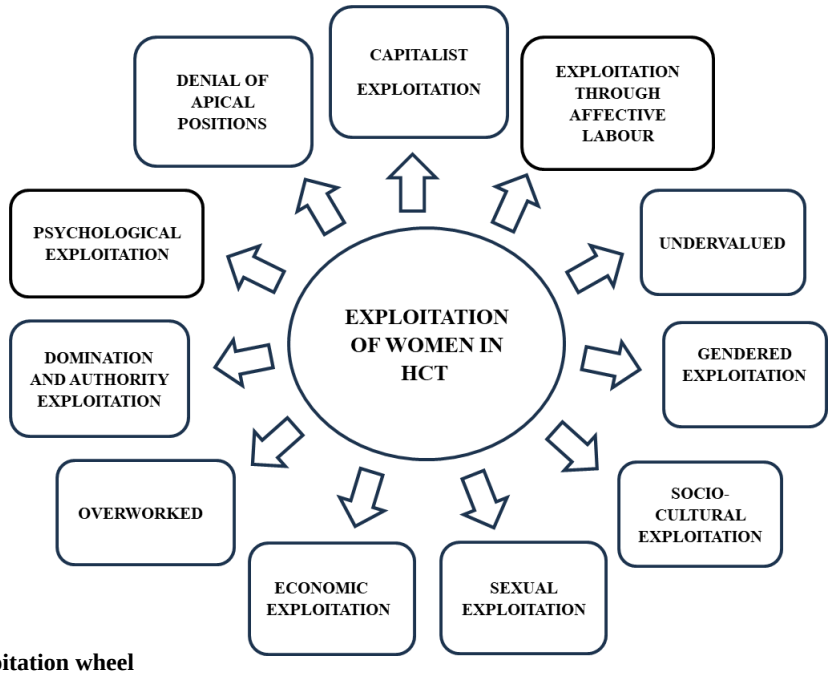

Diagram 2: Exploitation wheel

This exploitation wheel illustrates the negative impacts of tourism development on female individuals essential to the industry. It depicts forms of exploitation of female service providers in HCT industry in southern Africa. These effects stem from capitalist overproduction and unsustainable practices within the HCT sector. Yildirim's (2021) assertion that government support for these conditions in tourism workplaces has resulted in numerous challenges remains relevant, even within the HCT sector in southern Africa. While respondents acknowledged the financial benefits of the industry, their dignity was consistently undermined by poor working conditions and an acute awareness of their unequal treatment by both the industry and its wealthy consumers. Although women's integration into the industry has yielded some physical benefits, significant concerns remain regarding their social capital, participation in civil society, and access to services, particularly in the area of HCT. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) and UN Women assert that "the world is failing girls and women," highlighting that no country has yet achieved gender equality (UNSDG, 2023). The limited opportunities for these women within the industry are insufficient, especially against the backdrop of rampant capital exploitation, gender and racial discrimination, and underrepresentation in management, among other challenges. As demonstrated in this study, female service providers continue to experience significant exploitation from both national and regional tourism agencies, as well as from affiliated clients, navigating a system that hinders their pursuit of opportunities in the global tourism sector. These findings support Duffy et al. (2015), who argue that cultural structures in less economically developed countries obstruct women's participation in the labour force. Consequently, women are often relegated to domestic roles and subordinate positions, facing considerable barriers in the workplace, while men engage more freely in the public sphere of the community.

Conclusion

This article explored the position of the female workforce in various roles in the HCT domain in seven countries in southern Africa. It provided the current state of the wellbeing of the female workforce in the industry and investigated the nature of the exploitation imposed on these key players in this domain. It was evident that bondage and exploitation are prevalent in both the production and consumption of HCT products. It also indicated that the inherent nature of the industry has predominantly hindered the establishment of a socially equitable and sustainable model, as well as the protection of its valuable resource: the female workforce. Instead, capitalist exploitation and pervasive gender inequality remains a dominant force in this context. Cheer (2018) argues that recognising and critically examining the prevalence of exploitation within the tourism sector is essential, given that tourism represents one of the most pervasive industries globally and serves as a fundamental pillar of development. Furthermore, the UNSDGs and UN Women call for collective action, urging nations to accelerate their efforts to empower women and girls, especially through improved monitoring practices and addressing data gaps concerning critical gender issues (UNSDGs, 2023). This study sought to address these gaps and uncovered subtle yet significant indicators that the organisational environment does not sufficiently support the advancement of women. In light of the ongoing challenges encountered by female service workers, it is evident that the region lacks adequate infrastructure to

safeguard the well-being of one of its most valuable assets: female service providers. Moreover, advancements in the HCT sector have not substantially enhanced the welfare of women employed in the HCT sector. Although women constitute a significant source of human capital for sustainable development, particularly within the HCT sector, there remains a lack of attention to the potential exploitation of female service providers in this domain. Furthermore, in light of the numerous challenges that women in the workforce continue to encounter in HCT workplaces in the southern Africa region they appear to have made limited strides in adopting an intersectional approach. Intersectionality elucidates how various characteristics - such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, age, and disability - intersect and shape the experiences of marginalised individuals and groups (Lawson, n.d). In essence, this framework acknowledges that each person experiences discrimination and oppression in unique ways. The findings of this study indicate that the female workforce in the HCT industries across the southern African region contends with additional dimensions of their identities and exacerbating challenges, including racism, racialised sexism, ageism, and classism, which impede their ability to fully realise their potential within the industry.

The majority of female service providers demonstrate a strong work ethic and exhibit a commitment to delivering high-performance services, thereby ensuring a seamless experience for their clients and organisations. However, they often do not receive equitable compensation or recognition, nor are they afforded adequate protection; instead, they are frequently subjected to exploitation (See diagram 2). Phorne-In underscores the implications of being marginalised in everyday life, asserting that "If you are invisible in everyday life, your needs will not be thought of, let alone be addressed in a crisis situation" (Phorne-In, 2020). The findings of this study and the UN DESA Global Dialogue resonate with Jones's (2022) concerning portrayal of the female workforce in the HCT industry: that "tourism has a strong element of theatre, which is part of its charm, but also makes it easy to ignore what is going on behind the scenes as it is to buy garments made in sweatshops…" (Jones, 2022). While tourism development may, in theory, contribute to gender equality and empower women, there is still much work to be done in practice to fully utilise the potential of this industry, especially in terms of supporting women who work in this sector. There is an urgent need to evaluate the progress and protection of women within the context of the HCT in the southern African region, incorporating various mechanisms. A primary focus of this assessment is to facilitate women's economic independence and ensure their protection. Although this endeavour may be complex and require a comprehensive understanding of the unique circumstance's women face, it remains essential. It is imperative for HCT institutions to prioritise the well-being, work-life balance, and job satisfaction of their employees. Most importantly, there is a pressing need to enhance the visibility and representation of women within the tourism sector as a whole. The exploitation wheel is indeed one component that can highlight and alert those in the HCT sector to take cognisance of the challenges women face and go some way to improve their situation.

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