

# Xenophobic encounters: sociological perspectives on the experience of migration in South Africa

## Abstract

With migration currently dominating global political and economic debates as more migrants and refugees flee wars in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan and other unstable countries this paper presents part of ethnographic data collected through field work<sup>a</sup> with migrants in Johannesburg as part of a contribution towards understanding the complexity of this phenomenon. The data was collected over a period of three months and drawn from focus group discussions, interviews with key informants and self-administered questionnaires. These findings confirm that migrants in Johannesburg live in 'fear' and even 'ashamed' they were living in a City with such high levels of migrant hostility, citing unjust economic practices from corrupt public officials and lack of protection in the face of violence, dislocation and rejection in a culturally diverse society around Johannesburg. Although the migrants indicated that they felt welcome with the UPCSAs congregations, there was enough evidence to conclude that the congregations are not competent and do not have a strategy to minister to the now predominantly migrant congregations. The paper argues that understanding these realities was helpful in sketching the details for emerging sociological themes that emerged in relation to lived social experiences of migrants with regards to engagement with society, Recognition and Human Dignity, Shame and Vulnerability, Competition and Compassion fatigue.

**Keywords:** migration, xenophobia, transformation, society, development, South africa

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**Buhle Mpfu**

School of Religion Philosophy and Classics (SRPC), University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

**Correspondence:** Buhle Mpfu, School of Religion Philosophy and Classics (SRPC) University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Email [buhlem202@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:buhlem202@yahoo.co.uk)

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## Methodology

This study employed field work over a period of three months and data was collected through instruments; three focus group discussions, interviews with key informants and self-administered questionnaires. Names, places and positions of participants in this study were anonymised to protect their identity and data was collected through pre-designed questionnaires for 29 subjects (13 females and 16 males) who took part in the three focus group discussions. The questions were designed to gather information about age, length of stay in Johannesburg, economic status, living conditions, their experiences and perceptions about living in Johannesburg. The first focus groups<sup>b</sup> was comprised of 13 participants from a congregation with 90% migrants, 9 of the participants were from Cameroon, 1 from Zimbabwe, 2 from the DRC and 1 local South African and 5 of these participants were female.

The Table below is a summary of the demographic data of participants, collected through a self-administered questionnaire. The response rate for questionnaires was 29 out of 30 (96.7%) (Table 1).

### Mean age of the participants: 34.1 years

As the table above reflects, the mean age of the participants was 34.1 years and only 16 (55%) of these were female, while youth were represented by four, two males and two females. The longest

resident male respondent reported having been in South Africa since 1998, making it 17 years since he has been in Johannesburg. The latest arrival came to South Africa in 2013. Of the 29 participants, 11 (37.9%) reported being gainfully employed, 6 (20.7%) self-employed while 7 (24.1%) were not employed. Most of the migrants were legally documented to live and work in South Africa, with only 6 out of 29 (20.7%) reporting being undocumented.

As the IOM (2013) has noted, there are increasing numbers of displaced women fleeing wars and poverty alone side male migrants globally. According to a study conducted by McDonald,<sup>1,c</sup> cross border migration into Southern Africa from elsewhere in the continent is increasing although it remains an 'eminently manageable process', as opposed to the popular stereotype of an uncontrolled flood of migrants sneaking under fences and crossing crocodile-infested rivers to get into country.<sup>d</sup> Statistics in this study show 6 out of 29 (20.1%) do not have legal documents to be resident in South Africa as some of the participants indicated that they were facing challenges with processing of documents when they come to church they were hoping to get support and assistance.<sup>e</sup> The findings of this study demonstrate the perception that churches are not doing anything noticeable in providing support in this regard.

<sup>c</sup>Cited from McDonald DA<sup>1</sup> (On Borders: Perspectives on international Migration in Southern Africa. New York: St Martin's Press.

<sup>d</sup>Similar observations have also been made in a study on perceptions of migration and immigration conducted by Crush<sup>2,3</sup> who note that South African citizens' perceptions are 'a mixture of half-truths and misleading stereotyping'.

<sup>e</sup>The researcher has attended worship services in Mayfair and Kensington and held conversations with migrants on various occasions, as a member of the church. On one occasion, I was asked to write a falsified letter stating that one member was employed by the church so that he can process an asylum permit. I explained that it was not possible to do that as it is a criminal offence. However, this experience left me wondering what it is that the church is doing to address these challenges.

<sup>a</sup>This research was part of field work conducted during my PhD research which lasted from 2012 to 2015.

<sup>b</sup>This first focus group discussion held on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2015 and 5 of these participants agreed to be interviewed on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2015. The majority of participants in the second focus group were from Malawi (7 males and 4 females) and 2 local male South Africans. The third focus group took place in the afternoon of the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 2015, with 6 participants (2 females, 2 males and 2 youth; 4 of them of them migrants from Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Malawi and Zimbabwe and 2 local South Africans).

**Table 1** It is of summary for demographic information of participants

Respondent number (RN)	Age	Gender (G)	Year of entry into SA	Legally documented to live in S.A.	Economic Status (ES)	Accommodation status (AS)		
						Live by self	Sharing with Relatives	Sharing with friends
1	40	M	2010	No	Employed	–		
2	26	M	2010	No	S-Employed	X		
3	18	F	2013	Yes	N-Employed		X	
4	19	M	2006	Yes	N-Employed	X		
5	18	F	2001	Yes	N-Employed		X	
6	34	F	2011	Yes	S-Employed	X		
7	49	M	1998	No	N-Employed	X		
8	22	F	–	–	S-Employed		X	
9	28	M	–	Yes	N-Employed		X	
10	19	F	2001	Yes	N-Employed		X	
11	32	M	2012	No	S-Employed	X		
12	53	F	1999	Yes	Employed	X		
13	41	M	2010	No	Employed	X		
14	33	M	2001	Yes	Employed	X		
15	30	F	2005	Yes	Employed	X		
16	30	F	2008	Yes	–		X	
17	34	M	2004	Yes	S-Employed	–		
18	30	F	2009	Yes	Employed		X	
19	25	F	2012	No	S-Employed		X	
20	61	F	1970	Yes	Employed		X	
21	19	M	2008	Yes	N-Employed		X	
22	37	M	2004	Yes	S-Employed		X	
23	54	F	1998	Yes	S-Employed	X		
24	33	F	2008	Yes	Employed	X		
25	34	M	2009	Yes	S-Employed	X		
26	50	F	2001	Yes	Employed	X		
27	43	F	2005	Yes	S-Employed	X		
28	39	M	2003	Yes	Employed			X
29	37	M	2013	Yes	Employed	X		

E/S, economic status; AS, accommodation status; RN, respondent number; G, gender; S-Employed, self-employed; N-Employed, not-employed

It also emerged that some migrants were self-employed and running their own businesses although some of these businesses were directly affected by the xenophobic violence.

I'm one of the people who was affected with that xenophobic thing we were having a shop in Soweto, we lose the shop, we lose everything you know simply because of the name of the foreigner, nothing else, simply because you are a foreigner (Abdul, Focus group Participant 30 Aug 2015). In the statement above, Addul felt that his business was targeted for xenophobic violence because he is a foreigner and he was forced to shut his business down. Similar comments were shared by other participants as they described how they have been economically affected by violence targeted at foreigners; a challenge which most participants felt the government was not doing enough to

address. For the migrants, being a foreigner is a huge disadvantage and poses a security risk in Johannesburg as they are often and easy target, and they pointed out that they 'are living in fear' because they are foreigners.

**The lived experience of migrants in selected congregations (material needs)**

This section will discuss the findings from the study with regards to the material needs of the migrants under the themes; housing and accommodation, food parcels and school fees and social networks as means of survival for the lives of migrants in selected congregations (Figure 1).

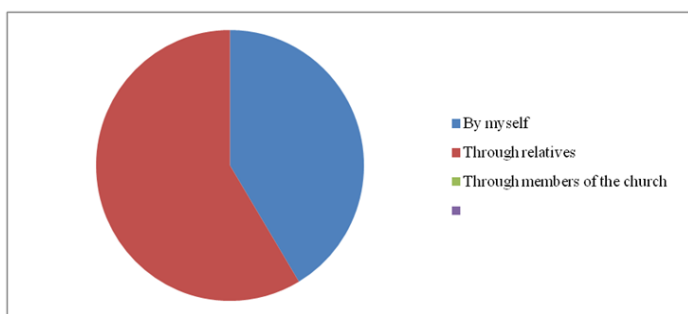


Figure 1 How did you get accommodation?

### Housing and accommodation

In the table above 15 (51.7%) of the participants reported having own accommodation while 11(37.9%) were living with relatives and/or friends and one sharing accommodation with a friend. This data collected through a questionnaire also indicated that 12 out of 29 (41.4%) of the participants got accommodation by themselves and the majority of the respondents (58.6% Or 17) were assisted by their friends or relatives. None of the respondents reported the church being involved or of assistance in seeking accommodation. This indicator suggests that the UPCSA is not providing shelter to migrants as a form of assistance as they settle in Johannesburg. Although some participants mentioned that they were provided temporary shelter during the period of xenophobic violence there were participants who felt that the church is not doing enough to address migration issues and has failed in many ways.

I think the church does not address these migration issues, they don't, or if they do they don't do it enough... What I want to say is that the church has failed in many ways and our leaders, our politicians as well, our community leaders also have failed in many ways that they have not taught our people (Steve, Focus group participant, 30 Aug 2015).

The above statement from one of the participants expresses the incompetency of the congregation in providing a ministry to migrants. The statement also expressed the disappointment of the participant of all the leaders in the church and communities who seem to have ignored the needs of the migrants, according to the participant.

### Food parcels and school fees

the church has been helping a lot through my school fees so that my parents can have a bit of the financial burden taken away from them...the church has helped us a lot even in food parcels they have given us before at a time where we could not even afford food (Focus group participant Mayfair, 30 Aug 2015) (Table 2).

Table 2 Assistance with school fees and food parcels

Support from congregation	Yes	No
	11	14

Question 7 sought to establish whether the participants had received any support from the congregation and the questionnaire was designed to provide space for any details in that regard. 14 out of 29 respondents (48%) reported that they had received support from the church while 15 (52%) reported that they had not received any support. Those who indicated receiving support used the space

provided in the questionnaire to explain that most of the support came through food parcels (once in a while) and the school fees paid for children going to school through the Presbyterian Educational Fund (PEF). 4 participants did not report any data on this variable.

### Social networks

One variable was the social networks' status of the participants. Question 5 was designed to determine the closest contacts to respondents between friends, relatives and church members in their order of priority. As Table 3 above shows the 15(51.7%) reported being in close contact with both friends and relatives while 9 (31%) of the respondents were in close contact with relatives with only 5(17.2%) reported being in close contact with church members. These statistics show that most respondents prioritized friends and relatives as close contacts in their networks, than church members. Goldenberg<sup>4</sup> has alluded to the significant role that networks play in society point out that the network theory itself is premised on the fact; "that modern society is not disorganised, nor is it becoming so. On the contrary, though there has been significant change in the fundamental character of society, it is adaptive change in the nature of social order rather than mere disruption of an earlier order with no replacement." In his regard, the new migrant communities in Johannesburg are not disorganised communities, but they should be viewed as emerging social networks and order and not disruptive individuals or communities.

Table 3 Responses for social networks: (Who are the closest people you contact?)

Closest people in contact	Friends	Relatives	Church Members
	15 <sup>6</sup>	15	5

<sup>6</sup>Note that some respondents appear in both sections between relatives and friends as they are in close contact with both

### Lived experiences of migrants within the church

This section discusses the data and the findings from the study with regards to the lived experiences of the migrants within the church. This data is thematically presented through the following subthemes; 'us and them', worship and liturgy and church and diversity as means for understanding the lived experiences of migrants in selected congregations.

#### Us and them

These are people that we worship with and we regard them you know as brothers in Christ and we don't ever think that they are going through such because myself being a local person I don't experience it and we take it for granted that these people are treated the same.

A local participant used words such as "these people", "them" to refer to foreigners and in some cases participants themselves spoke about the church as if they are not a part of it. The use of the terms; "these people" and "them" sometimes used in the same sentence with "us" are not inclusive and worsen the exclusion of foreign national in local communities. The participants kept saying 'they' to refer to the church and as Spielhaus<sup>5</sup> rightly observed, the increasing use of antagonistic categories such as "you" and "we", "our culture" and "your community" did not support integration in Germany and although he was referring to the German context, Riem Spielhaus' observations are true for the South African context because we cannot expect migrants to feel welcome in congregations and communities then keep using labels such as, "them" or "those people" as if they do

not belong with us. Even when you are speaking your language it's not seen good, it's seen like kwerekwere, something that is not seen as good like a foreigner can never be good like a South African, it's a kind of complex superiority.

Participants alluded to language barriers, discrimination and often use of derogatory names they are given by locals because they can speak local South African languages who confirmed the use of derogatory term *makwerekwere*,<sup>f</sup> a name given to foreigners due to the inability of foreign migrants to speak local languages was confirmed by participants in this study. Examining Xenophobia as a response to foreigners in post-Apartheid South Africa,<sup>6,7</sup> also alluded to this when he noted, "many aliens do not speak local languages. This creates a communication barrier and often militates against them....even when police are looking for illegal African aliens to apprehend, they do so by checking the language they speak." This creates feelings of cultural disorientation for migrants and perpetuates miscommunication between migrants and locals when they go to the shops, schools, work, restaurants and other places of social services. As a result, unscrupulous employers, insensitive public officials and opportunistic locals take advantage of these language barriers and exploit foreigners. Language is an important part of cultural identity and pride, so when it cannot be expressed in the public space this causes a loss of sense of identity.

### Worship and liturgy

Further to the socio-demographic variables that were also measured, Questions six to 10 sought to determine the experiences of the respondents within the church context and with regards to liturgy and worship and whether they felt welcomed and involved. As reflected in Table 4 above, 29 of the respondents (100%) indicated that they feel welcomed in the congregations, 27(93.1%) reported that they find it easy to relate and worship with local South Africans and the same number of 27(93.1%) of respondents pointed out that talk openly about their country of origin within the church than outside the church. The category of participants reporting that they do not find it easy to talk openly was young people. As reflected in the comment provided by one young participant below:

**Table 4** Table for statements 6-10 in section B: (Worship and liturgy experiences)

	Number	Percentage %
Feel welcomed by local church	29	100
Find it easy to relate and worship with locals	27	93.10%
Talk openly about country of origin	27	93.10%

It is easier to be surrounded by South African who have the same faith as you, than those who don't" (19 year old female participant, response on a questionnaire, 26 April 2015).

Although the migrants within the selected congregations feel welcomed and find it 'easier to be surrounded by South African who has same faith as you,' there was no evidence to show that the style of worship has been developed to integrate or reflect the presence of migrants. During the field visits to the congregations, the researcher noticed that hymns, the order of service and the style of worship

<sup>f</sup>Makwerekwere is a derogatory term used by local South Africans to refer to people who are from outside South Africa. The word is taken from the poor pronunciation of words.

were western and representative of the previously dominant white population in all the congregations that were investigated. Findings from this study also show that local South Africans move out of the congregations that are receiving more foreigners. This is paradoxical in that contrary to the trend of local South Africans moving out of congregations where migrants are coming in, South Africans prefer to employ foreigners at home than their local brothers and sisters as reflected in the statement that follow. Although loyalty and honesty has been cited as some of the virtues that foreigners possess strongly against their local counterparts in the job market, there seems to be more cooperation between migrants and locals at the level of individual than group encounters. This is an interesting phenomenon and it deserves a deeper investigation in a separate study so that we can shed light on the complexity around this phenomenon.

According to Kapuscinski,<sup>8,g</sup> there is evidence of different human encounters scattered across the planet as proof of cooperation—"remains of market places, of ports, of places where there were agoras and sanctuaries, of where the seats of old universities and academies are still visible, and of where there remain vestiges of such trade routes as the Silk road, the Amber Route and the Trans-Saharan caravan route". He further explains that "All these were places where people met to exchange thoughts, ideas, merchandise, and where they traded and did business, concluded covenants and alliances and discovered shared goals and values. The "Other" stopped being a synonym of foreignness and hostility." The significant observation that Kapuscinski<sup>8</sup> makes is that people had three choices when encountered with the 'Other':

- They could choose war
- They could build a wall around themselves
- They could enter into a dialogue

Although these findings point to negative reception and treatment of foreigners by local South African, it is important to point out that not all South Africans are not accepting. There are South Africans who have not chosen war or building walls around themselves, instead they engage; as participants confirmed in the statements below.

### Key themes which emerged from the study

**Recognition and human dignity:** One of the key themes that emerged from the interviews was the need for recognition. In the below statement, Don demonstrates feelings of excitement about being recognised as a human being and being valued. This is an expression of feeling respected and finally given attention after feeling rejected and unwelcome. This is an affirmation of human dignity, a feeling of being valued and recognised after enduring feelings of rejection and loss of human dignity to a point of losing hope about being in Johannesburg.

I'm very happy with this topic when we are talking like this, really I can feel like uuuh people *now, they want to know who am I, people are coming to me.* Because really before I was feeling like no, it's not important for me to be in South Africa.<sup>9</sup>

The statement was pointed out by Don when he was interviewed in at the church office where he usually works as a caretaker and cleaner in the congregation, felt that his experience was being made more

<sup>g</sup>Ryszard Kapuscinski,<sup>8</sup> Encountering the other: The challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," New Perspectives Quarterly, vol. 22# 4 (Fall 2005). Accessed April 11, 2013.

visible and valued. This turned out to be a special day for him as he reported to the church office, not as a cleaner; but wearing a suit and coming for an appointment for the interview. This suggests that the ordinary experience for this migrant is one of indignity and living on the margins of society. More participants echoed similar sentiments that suggested a struggle for recognition and acceptance in the new society they find themselves in. For example Ruth mentioned that she enjoys being in South Africa and emphasized that this is her home.

I see South Africa it's still a good place to be in and I really enjoy being here It's actually my life now. *This is where I live, this is where I breathe, this is where I eat and sleep.*<sup>10</sup>

The above statement, 'this is where I live, this is where I breathe, this is where I eat and sleep' speaks about location (live), health (breathe), safety (sleep), important needs for humans to survive. Ruth demonstrates some form of resistance against xenophobia and life threatening tendencies to marginalise the 'other.' She does this through an affirmation of being alive and in existence in a place which she has the right to call home. As I mentioned on the profile on the participants, Ruth has been in South Africa from for 15 years and came with her Ghanaian parents aged 5. She is frustrated with the South African Department of Home Affairs for their failure to process her permits despite her having been in the country for 15 years and as a result, she cannot register to study at University even if she passed her matriculation examinations and makes her feel denied an opportunity to pursue a dignified life.<sup>11</sup>

In another profound statement which demonstrate the lived reality of migrants engagement in public spaces and how they feel unrecognised as human beings with a dignity like any South African, one focus group participant drew from the metaphor of a tree and its fruits;

*I'm not a fruit that fell from a tree and they must come and eat. I have a father, I have a mother, I have friends, I have a family, I have a country, and I have a home also. So people must not look us like I'm coming from nowhere, I didn't fall from a tree.*<sup>12</sup>

Don, also exclaimed, "I am realising that in South Africa I'm nothing" to express his disappointment at the lack of value for his human dignity in South Africa with similar concerns raised during the focus group discussions as most participants called on the church to act.

**Shame and vulnerability:** One of the themes that engaged in the light of social engagement with migrants was shame which characterized the feelings of migrants regarding how they are treated in South Africa as foreigners. As Don expressed his disappointment during the focus group discussions 'I feel sad, and ashamed because this is not the image that when I'm in SA I want portrayed' (Focus group participant, 26 April 2015). Most participants shared their experience of living in fear after the violence against foreigners that broke up in Isipingo in Durban during March 2015 and indicated that they felt unwelcome in South Africa and even "ashamed" they were here. By comparison, participants found being at church better than living in the public psyche within the Johannesburg communities and indicated that they feel safer while at church like one of the participants who pointed out, "*I don't feel safe*, and sometimes I use public transport when going to work, you can't even talk, you can't even speak your own language (Focus group participant, 26 April 2015).

We lose everything you know simply because of the name of the

foreigner, nothing else, simply because you are a foreigner (Abdul, Focus group Participant 30 Aug 2015).

Most participants expressed concerns at the selective application of law by public law enforcements agents and felt that foreigners are not protected against violence and crime in South Africa, a country that prides itself as a 'rainbow nation', we are yet to see justice for all 'who live in it' as the freedom charter states. Movement of people is not a new phenomenon and as the Journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski's has argued, our history is a story of communities and small tribes of people encountering one another; "encounter with other people, has always been a universal and fundamental experience for our species" (in Suarez: 2008:10). According to Mnyaka(2003), the presence of the 'other' (the foreigner) is often understood and experienced as a security issue, the 'other' is seen as a threat to the well-being of a person and to his or her cultural, religious and social life. Participants were aware of the threats and one participant mentioned; *we are living in fear just like we are foreigners* (Focus group participant, 30 Aug 2015).

**Competition:** Another theme that was consistent with the lived experiences of migrants within the selected congregations investigated during this study was competition. As John pointed out;

I will say because of the competition in Johannesburg and anger everybody will agree with me that foreigners in Johannesburg are definitely not welcome like you should expect. As one interesting theme that emerged from the study with regards to engagement with migrants in their lived experiences in public spaces, competition for jobs and scarce resources between locals and foreigners were identified by the participants as one of the reasons for tensions between foreigners and migrants in Johannesburg. During the interviews and focus group discussions, respondents also complained about how unfairly they were treated at work places even despite the fact that most foreigners work hard harder than local South Africans, to a point of reporting at work even when they are not feeling well. They attributed this commitment to the scarcity of jobs and the challenges that foreigners have to endure in the event that they lost jobs. you see a foreigner who is sick, they will try as much as possible to go to work, ..... do their work diligently, they want to put in their all and their best, they want to keep their jobs because they know how difficult it is to get a job..... but South Africans will be saying its weekend they want to socialise.

In the statement above, Rachel argues that foreign migrants are more committed to working hard and always ready to face competition as they honestly seek to earn a living than their local South African counterparts. This implies that they understand the challenges they have to overcome in order to keep the jobs. As we can also see in the comments below, one local South African participant confirmed that foreigners are hardworking compared to fellow South Africans. Many participants also felt that they are always treated unfairly by local South Africans because they are not South African. This is despite the fact that some foreigners are running their own businesses and provide employment opportunities for local South Africans. This is reflected in the statement by Rachel below;

I'm having that saloon *I'm the only foreigner in that saloon....*And sometimes they will be busy; I will sit alone like there is nobody to communicate with. You know when they talk the language and going on and sometimes if a customer comes looking for me, they will divert the customer with their language and there is nothing that I will do because I'm not South African.

**Compassion fatigue:** One of the sub-themes that emerged from the study under the theme of incorporation of migrants was the fatigue that characterises local South African communities with regards to traditional practices previously rendered strangers in the past. When Abdul speaks of the “spirit of Ubuntu” (Abdul, Focus group participant, 30 Aug 2015) was from the concept of African communal life which is based on an African worldview which places emphasis on “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (lit: ‘a person is a person because of other people’), a construction that views people not as individuals, but individuals only in relationship to the community and the world of nature around them. This concept derives from the readiness to share and care for one another, and as Dion Foster has noted, “the essential unity between self and others, as well as the self and the entire Kosmos, is a vitally important aspect in relating the African world view to an integrated approach to consciousness.

I’m not trying to be racist or what, to be honest, the church has a lot of duties and we can’t keep putting more duties for the church and the church becomes so full with duties, that we can’t possibly handle it because we don’t have manpower, (Steve, focus group participant, 26 April 2015).

Just as we are seeing the same fatigue in Europe where migrants fleeing wars in Syria are stranded in borders as the leaders avoid responsibility to care in defiance with the international law, similar fatigue has also been confirmed by Orobator<sup>13</sup> during his field work in East Africa when he postulated that; Refugees are rejected by host communities for whom their presence portends disaster for their already strained economic and ecological resources. Quite clearly, for “many Third World Countries...refugees (and migrants)<sup>h</sup> represent an unacceptable strain on their limited resources.” This situation has severely compromised the much-vaunted African spirit of solidarity, generosity and hospitality. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was reasonable to promote these virtues.... As Jonathan Bascom has argued, “Today supportive evidence of ‘African hospitality’ for refugees has become harder to find”.

## Conclusion

This paper presented data collected through field work and drawn from focus group discussions, interviews with key informants and self-administered questionnaires and categorised the findings in relation to lived experiences of migrants as lack of *Recognition of Human Dignity, Shame and Vulnerability, Competition and Compassion fatigue*. These themes concur with the findings from other studies which have observed that migrants in Johannesburg live in ‘fear’ as they are easy targets from xenophobic violence in the hands of corrupt public officials and lack of protection in Johannesburg. There is a need for

<sup>h</sup>Emphasis on migrants is mine because in this study the terms ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’ were used interchangeably. This is because in South there are no clear distinctions between refugees and migrants as they are all categorised in the same bracket. Although this was initially a gesture to Africans who supported South

Africa during the struggle against colonialism and apartheid, the system has proven to be a challenge in the light of growing intolerance and increasing numbers of foreigners in the country.

the South African government to demonstrate consistent commitment to addressing violence against foreigners and not respond only when there are attacks. Such a commitment should translate to visible ongoing programs which comply with the international standards and protocols governing the movement, arrests and detention of people across states.

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None.

## Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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