

The High Price of Gender Noncompliance: Exploring the Economic Marginality of Trans Women in South Africa

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Abstract

This study brings trans women to the forefront of global discourse on gender-based economic inequalities. Such discussions, often lacking intersectionality and narrowly focused on cis women, have frequently overlooked the distinct economic obstacles trans women face in cisheteropatriarchal societies. Grounded in critical trans politics and intersectionality, this research explores the lives of five trans women in South Africa, examining the contextual norms, practices, and policies that shape their experiences of economic inclusion and exclusion. Findings reveal that economic marginality for trans women is upheld by social institutions prioritizing cisgender norms, reinforcing biology-based gender binaries that render those existing outside these frameworks vulnerable, disposable, and disenfranchised. This structural economic bias is reflected in four key areas: (a) patriarchal family systems enforce conformity to cisgender expectations through abuse, financial neglect, and rejection, displacing trans women into precarious circumstances, including homelessness and survival sex work; (b) cisnormative workplace conventions demand legal gender alignment as a precondition for organizational access and employability, shutting out trans identities lacking state recognition of their gender; (c) institutionally entrenched anti-trans stigma creates heightened scrutiny and discrimination during hiring processes; and (d) a gender-segregated labor system undermines trans women’s ability to participate in both “male” and “female” jobs due to nonadherence to traditional, biologically defined gender roles. These cisgender-privileging norms intersect with racism and colonial-apartheid legacies, compounding economic difficulties for trans women. By mapping the economic conditions of historically invisibilized trans women, this study deepens the scope of economic transformation theories. It calls for a trans-inclusive, intersectional model of economic justice, advocating for institutional cultures that embrace diverse gender expressions beyond static gender classifications.

Keywords

cisgender norms; economic exclusion; gender binary; gender economic equity; labour systems; South Africa; trans women

1. Introduction

Trans women embrace self-chosen identities as women, rejecting the gender meanings ascribed to their male-assigned bodies at birth (Salamon, 2010; Stryker, 2013). Attitudes, systems, and practices that rigidly adhere to traditional, binary understandings of gender perpetuate discrimination against this gender-transgressive population of women (Silva et al., 2022). This discrimination, stemming from embodied gender noncompliance, impacts how trans women participate in many societal systems, including the economy (Greene & Ervin, 2024; Stryker, 2013). For example, the National Trans Discrimination Survey (Leppel, 2016) conducted in the US found that a staggering 14% of trans women were unemployed in comparison with 6–8.9% of the general population. In South Africa, this economic marginalization translates to considerable structural barriers in terms of economic security, employment, and income for many trans women, who on average earn less than R2,000 per month, or USD 130 (Van der Merwe et al., 2020). Beltran et al. (2019) explain that trans women face pervasive economic exclusion across various global settings due to their deviation from culturally entrenched gender norms.

Nyeck et al. (2019) found that heterosexual, as well as lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals who performed their gender in non-normative ways, were less likely to be employed than heterosexual persons conforming to gender norms. Additionally, the monthly earnings of heterosexual men and women, as well as gay and bisexual men who did not adhere to gender norms, were on average 30% lower than those of heterosexual men who conformed to gender expectations (accounting for socio-demographic characteristics and job type). Although the study does not exclusively investigate trans people, it reveals that being gender diverse, regardless of sexual orientation or gender category, is a source of significant economic vulnerability and disadvantage. Leppel (2016) adds that discrimination in hiring practices is driven by negative institutional perceptions of trans identities, particularly when gender expression doesn't conform to cisnormative ideals. Here, the concept of cisnormativity refers to the assumption and belief that being cisgender is the norm and default state of being (Serano, 2007). The term cisgender refers to individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth (Aultman, 2014). Non-normative gender expressions, therefore, predispose trans women to higher unemployment rates and increase workplace discrimination, especially for trans workers and job seekers who have not undergone medical transition (Reisner et al., 2016). This has devastating implications in terms of access to basic human rights like housing and social security. Harrisberg (2019) uses the example of a Cape Town-based trans activist group, Sistazhood, explaining how the inability to secure housing prevented the opening up of a bank account, which prevented the securing of employment.

In 1994, South Africa transitioned to a democratic system, promoting equality and inclusion after a long history of colonial oppression based on race, class, and gender (Kehler, 2001). This transition included constitutional protections for trans identities, prohibiting discrimination based on gender, sex, and sexual orientation (Klein, 2009). However, these acts, along with policies governing labor systems, have failed to specifically recognize and address the economic rights and freedoms of trans people (Isaacs et al., 2020). There remains a significant lack of non-discrimination employment policies for LGBTIQ individuals, including trans women, in government institutions, reflecting ongoing structural prejudice and challenges in implementing gender diversity policies (Akala, 2018). Where such policies do exist, South African trans women are often grouped within the broader LGBTIQ community, which tends to prioritize the interests of gay and bisexual men (Isaacs et al., 2020). Existing gender development frameworks, which focus on cis women's experiences, fail to address the intersection of sexist and cissexist oppression that compounds the

economic marginalization of trans women (Johnson, 2015). Here, the term sexism refers to prejudice or discrimination based on a person's sex or gender (Rose, 1979), while cissexism denotes the belief that being cisgender is superior to being trans (Stryker, 2013). This lack of trans visibility in feminist and queer development practices prevents trans women from being adequately represented and integrated, both economically and politically, into South Africa's national development plans. Addressing the unique discrimination and social exclusion faced by trans women, especially in the workplace, is urgently needed.

Social variables such as age, gender, education, marital status, health and (dis)ability, ethnicity, and race have been shown to powerfully mediate the status of a labor force (Bowen & Finegan, 2015). However, theorizing about gender's role in labor participation often overlooks the subordination of trans women. For example, the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill in South Africa does not explicitly address trans women in its definition of gender discrimination (Isaacs et al., 2020). In addition to gender, trans women also contend with the impact of culture, race, and socio-economic-political history in the post-apartheid context. This lack of intersectionality, where women's economic inequities are framed through a reductive cisgender-focused lens, marginalizes trans positions. As a result, gaps exist in capturing trans women's stories, perspectives, and histories in economic discourse. This discursive exclusion blinds scholars, activists, and practitioners to the social structures and processes that perpetuate trans women's economic vulnerability. Acknowledging this limitation, this study seeks to qualitatively investigate the economic experiences of trans women in South Africa. It aims to deepen understanding of the social structures and processes that perpetuate trans women's economic exclusion from a critical stance.

The framework informing this study is critical trans politics (CTP), enhanced by intersectionality. CTP provides an institutional critique, enabling the structural examination of the economic injustices that trans women face in a country like South Africa, where divisions of gender, race, and class persist. CTP fundamentally challenges the assumption of neutrality within social institutions, critiquing how structures like healthcare, law, education, and family reinforce cisnormativity and the gender binary (Spade, 2015). Here, the concept of the gender binary is understood as a classification system that divides gender into two distinct and opposite categories: male and female (Laqueur, 1990). CTP questions how binaried social systems, such as places of work and government regulations, privilege cis people while relegating trans individuals to subordination and vulnerability. Central to CTP is the idea that trans oppression is perpetuated through institutions that impose rigid, administratively determined gender categories, placing those who do not fit neatly into these categories "in danger" (Jourian, 2017). By incorporating intersectionality, CTP also emphasizes how gender intersects with race, class, and (dis)ability to shape the economic oppression of trans women. Unlike mainstream trans rights movements, which often focus on inclusion and legal reform, CTP seeks to dismantle oppressive systems and the logics upon which state, civil society, security, and social equality are founded, rather than merely achieving recognition within them (Spade, 2015). Embracing this radical political philosophy, this study seeks to deconstruct and dismantle the institutional structures and cultural processes that reinforce the gender binary and thereby uphold the economic marginalization of trans women.

2. Methods

This study forms part of a larger project that qualitatively and critically, explored South African trans women's experiences of inclusion and exclusion across healthcare (Shabalala & Campbell, 2023), educational (Shabalala & Campbell, 2024), and economic contexts. This particular study presents the findings from the third focus

area of the project—economics. Drawing from a critical narrative approach (Fraser, 2004), the authors use narratives to understand better the social structures that perpetuate the economic alienation of trans women by answering the following questions:

1. What narratives of economic inclusion and exclusion do South African trans women share?
2. What are the gendered norms, practices, and societal structures that influence these experiences of economic inclusion and exclusion, for South African transwomen in the labor system?

The analysis seeks to understand how trans women’s narratives of economic struggle are influenced by the larger sociocultural and political environment, actively breaking down these narratives to deconstruct and challenge the reproduction of power and oppression embedded within trans women’s experiences.

2.1. Participants

This study included five trans women living in South Africa. Two participants (pseudonyms Phumeza, aged 29, and Mpho, aged 22) lived in Gauteng, a culturally diverse, urban province with strong infrastructure and economic opportunities, despite deep economic inequalities amongst its population. Two participants were from Limpopo (pseudonym Shanduka, aged 30, and Lerato, aged 29), and one was from the Northern Cape (pseudonym Laila, aged 29). Both the provinces of Limpopo and the Northern Cape are rural and economically poorer with less infrastructure and development, and fewer economic opportunities. Importantly, the voices of these participants are not meant to represent the entire trans community in South Africa, given the heterogeneity of trans people’s experiences. However, these voices are powerful examples of trans women’s economic contexts and the rules that shape them. Instead of searching for a singular narrative, CTP as a framework seeks out “multiple, competing, and conflicting renderings of reality” (Pasque et al., 2012, p. 13), encouraging intersectionality and complexity.

2.2. Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used where a poster was designed and shared online by the first author through various social media channels which included WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. The poster was distributed through user online networks and interested individuals contacted the first author to participate in the study.

2.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured, individual telephonic interviews were conducted over two months during 2021, lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. Participants were asked about their personal experiences in the South African labor system (e.g.: “How has being a trans woman impacted your experiences at work?” “What difficulties do you typically experience when accessing employment?” “What has been positive about your experience in employment settings?”). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

2.4. Data Analysis

In order to “avoid the perils of both individualistic and social reductionism that have plagued the human social sciences for generations” (Tappan, 2005, p. 50), a critical narrative methodological frame was adopted

to analyse trans women's lives in South African economic contexts. Critical reflection was adopted as a key methodological component to inform the analysis, which focused on meaning-making, adopting a holistic approach as opposed to a categorical one to analyze stories. Within this frame, the focus was on holistically deconstructing the assumptions, ideas, and social rules that surface through the participants' storytelling (Fook & Gardner, 2007) about their experiences navigating family structures and employment contexts. Drawing from the idea that individual stories are better told and interpretively made sense of within broader structural and institutional narratives they are situated in, this study drew upon a narrative frame introduced by Fraser (2004) that proposes an overlapping phased analytical procedure that embraces the analysis process as flexible.

As actively engaged enquirers, the analysis process began by reflectively listening to the stories as they were narrated (Kleinman & Copp, 1993; Olson & Shopes, 1991). After carefully listening to the stories, through transcription, the narratives shared were intimately engaged with (Fraser, 2004). Following this, each of the individual transcripts was immersed in, noting the themes that emerged in the stories as well as the types of stories (Fraser, 2004). To minimize the risk of looking at the stories through a single isolated lens, the participant experiences were explored and unpacked along various dimensions—namely, the intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural, and structural dimensions (Fraser, 2004). Stories that may be otherwise considered personal were explicitly examined for their interpersonal, cultural, and structural aspects. As an extension of the previous phase, this phase involved linking the themes that emerged to larger societal structures and systems of power (Fraser, 2004). This entailed an exploration of the hegemonic discourses and broader social conventions that framed the understanding of the stories. Through translating narrative content into a formal written analysis, the last step of analyzing was a formal written presentation of the stories (Fraser, 2004), recognizing the interpretive process that had pulled different parts together to create a story of its own.

3. Results

Four salient themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (a) financial neglect in families: a tool for control and enforcing conformity to cisgender norms; (b) living on the edge: homelessness, precarious living, and vulnerability; (c) hiring discrimination and hypervisibility; and (d) a gender-divided workplace: problematizing gender incongruence and the demand for legal gender recognition as a precondition to employability.

3.1. *Financial Neglect in Families: A Tool for Control and Enforcing Conformity to Cisgender Norms*

Participants experienced familial rejection often in response to them deviating from the gender identity and related gender script, assigned to them at birth. This deviation resulted in the withdrawal of financial support, which often had a considerable socioeconomic impact. Here Lerato begins by explaining that family and society go “hand in hand”:

I mean, they were supportive but some or most [of the time] they were not....My family was so, so discriminative and stuff like that....Because even now, I am on a journey to transition. So, it's hard for me because they are family. They are society.

Lerato describes her family as an extension of broader society, including its prejudices. Lerato felt unable to speak to her family about the painful discrimination she was experiencing at school because of her identified

gender expression, due to the social disapproval she felt from them. “Some other days I would not report things [at school]. I would feel like my parents are going to be involved and they will know I am wearing skirts at school. So, it was an embarrassment for me.” In this example, Lerato reports being unable to draw from family support at home because she believed it would create further tension and conflict. As a consequence, she was left to manage the rejection from her school and family systems alone.

Mpho’s experiences of family rejection because of her gender identity and expression align closely with Lerato’s. Mpho explained how her father “always says bad things. He’s so negative. So, there are three occasions where he violated me....I went to him so he can take me to school in his car and I was wearing a dress and he was like, “Take off that shit!” What he does, he never speaks to me like he’s speaking to a person. He always speaks to me like he is speaking to some kind of an animal....There’s no love, no care....He once beat me in front of people.” Her father’s command—“take off that shit”—is a powerful illustration of his expectations of how gender should be expressed in his home, in terms of behaviors and appearance. This example could be understood as a form of gender policing where Mpho was experienced by her father as disobeying the gender script assigned to her at birth, and in response he needed to enforce more acceptable gender norms onto her.

A similar incident was shared by Phumeza with her father: “Ja, he would actually tell my brother that whenever he sees me with anything that is for women or playing dress-up, he must just beat me.” Phumeza’s deviation from this normative script, resulted in her family withdrawing financial support from her. Here her family rejects her gender identity and gender expression through financial neglect which has severe consequences for Phumeza’s future:

I only went to school for those two years, which the next two years were when he disowned me....He was able to look me in the eyes and tell me....I made you who you are today....The thanks I get from you is you being who you are? Then I don’t have money to then take you to wherever you want to go.

These examples of gender policing and financial neglect as a punishment for gender congruence must be understood within the context of other intersecting factors that Lerato, Mpho, and Phumeza face as young, black women living in post-apartheid South Africa. Due to their race and class, economic dependency on family becomes more pronounced in contexts where poverty is pervasive, and job opportunities are limited. Against this backdrop, the withdrawal of financial support is not merely an exertion of control but a direct threat to survival. Many simply cannot afford to leave their family homes or cover even their basic needs without familial support, let alone transition-related expenses such as hormone therapy or surgeries. This economic vulnerability allows families to maintain control through financial neglect, leaving these women with very few avenues for asserting their autonomy.

3.2. Living on The Edge: Homelessness, Precarious Living, and Vulnerability

Compromised relationships with family had a considerable negative impact on the economic capabilities of these participants. Familial rejection exposed some to vulnerabilities and precarious living conditions, while familial acceptance was associated with increased self-confidence and better financial access and security. For example, Phumeza left her family home because of how her father regulated her gender. She described an incident where her father explained: “I cannot have a homosexual child.” Phumeza noted:

He said [that] his sperms never popped out a homosexual. So, he can never raise a homosexual....He is expecting a guy from me. He is expecting a child who will carry the family name. He is expecting a man who is going to marry a woman and all that. So I then departed and started my life.

Phumeza's later descriptions of her experiences of homelessness, lack of psychological safety, and social and economic security emphasize her vulnerability as a consequence of this decision:

It was very difficult because now you're used to having people who are beside you. So, now you have to start on your own in a community where you don't know anyone; live in a place where you're also scared of what's going to happen. You're also on your own wondering what's going to happen tomorrow? How am I going to survive today?

Here Phumeza's narrative demonstrates the powerful fall-out leaving home, in the form of a reduced sense of safety in the environment and world around her, economic insecurity and vulnerability, and homelessness.

Lerato's experiences are similar. She also describes this link between familial rejection of her gender identity and gender expression, and punishment through withdrawal of financial support, which pushes Lerato to leave her family home. This decision is seen in her narrative to have an immediate economic effect:

We are unemployed and our families have kicked us out of the houses. We are homeless....I have to hustle myself for food and everything. Family does not support that much....They were supportive, but some, or most, were not....At home, everything you do for yourself. You buy groceries for yourself, you buy food for yourself because your family won't provide. You have to go to health facilities for yourself, everything you have to buy.

Lerato described how she turned to sex work as a way of taking financial care of herself:

So, I had to become a sex worker because people didn't understand. I had to go and stay in town and work there and then that's when we became sex workers and we met some other trans....We did sex work to pay our rent, to buy groceries, and stuff like that.

Both Phumeza and Lerato found themselves living outside of their families' protection, struggling to meet basic needs for health, shelter, food, and education. Here, family rejection is revealed to have powerful negative economic consequences for these women. However, not all participants' narratives included this theme of familial rejection, that led to such economic vulnerability. Laila shared affirming stories of acceptance within her family. On the evening she decided to disclose her gender identity she explained:

My dad was actually....I was actually surprised because I know my dad. He always wants to be in control and in command. And he always has the last word, but he was so calm that night, he was cool. And then he was like, "Whatever makes you happy as an individual." I think because he is an educator, hence, he understands me more clearly.

Phumeza shared a similar narrative of the acceptance and protection she received from some members of her family, particularly her mother:

If I am able to accept it [my identity] and if my family accepts me then I don't feel that any other person would have much visibility in my life. Because, if my family they are happy and also within myself I am happy, then everything is just a roll in a park. But if...I discredit myself and my family does that too then it's easy for other people to do that too. It's very easy.

Phumeza's and Laila's narratives speak to the protective power of family support and acceptance of their gender identities and gender expressions. Neither had to make the choice between expressing their identified gender and receiving familial acceptance, inclusion, and support. As a result, both were afforded a degree of economic protection within the family system, as they were able to establish themselves as young adults. This is in strong contrast to Lerato's experiences, who as a consequence of her familial rejection, pursued sex work as a means of taking financial care of herself. This precarious situation is intensified by the high levels of unemployment and poverty disproportionately impacting black communities across South Africa, leaving individuals like Phumeza with limited avenues to rebuild life independently. In communities where unemployment is already widespread, sustainable work is even more difficult to secure for those who must also contend with discrimination based on gender identity. South Africa's deeply racialized economic landscape further compounds these challenges; black trans women, already marginalized by the structural legacies of apartheid and ongoing societal bias, face compounded barriers to survival with minimal access to institutional support.

3.3. Hiring Discrimination and Hypervisibility

Through hiring processes participants reported discrimination in the form of hypervisibility that exposed them to scrutiny and negative bias, disadvantaging them as job seekers. Lerato described how her gender became a source of discrimination during a job interview:

They asked me this question: "If we give you this job, what are you going to do?" Then I told them that I am a parent. I have a daughter and so I had to provide for her. So, for them, it was like: "You're a trans* woman but you have a daughter?" So, that thing triggered everything. Discrimination started: "How come? You are not okay. You should go and see a psychologist because this thing of yours is a disorder." It wasn't necessary for them to ask me those questions because it was an interview, where I had to come to work, not to be asked about my gender....It was in a very judgemental way, in a very degrading way.

During this interview, Lerato's gender identity and her life more broadly, became the focus of enquiry, instead of her unique skills, personality, and the contributions she could make to the job she was being interviewed for. Lerato's social identity was scrutinised and pathologised as a psychiatric disorder that she should seek psychological assistance with. This was one instance in a pattern of interactions Lerato had endured during hiring processes where her identity as a trans woman was the focus: "After my matric, I tried to apply to a few jobs in a few places. So, for them, the issue was that I was a trans* woman...whenever I went to an interview, whenever I would wear my clothes, they would call me names."

Upon successfully entering organisations, participants reported little organizational protection when reporting instances of discrimination. Phumeza explains:

I've encountered a lot because I even had to say this to this other woman...who stood beside the gate terrified of me and told me about my sexuality and all that. Then we went to the hearing. However....HR was not well aware of what LGBTIQ is. Hence, I'm saying that they only know that...a trans* woman is "a gay" too. A trans* man is "lesbian" as well. They were not aware of the differences and this and that.

Phumeza's experiences speak to poor knowledge and awareness of sexual and gender diversity, as well as a lack of workplace policies that address this type of discrimination, allowing for the perpetuation of these stigmatizing practices. Lerato's and Pumeza's accounts illustrate a narrative of economic marginalization which is gendered. These narratives highlight current South African labour practices that are unlawful, and institutionally disadvantage trans women from fairly participating in the labour economy. For black trans women, this discrimination is compounded by the racial and economic realities that already marginalize them. In South Africa's highly competitive job market—especially more challenging for working-class black individuals—these exclusionary practices significantly narrow the economic pathways open to trans women. The hiring discrimination faced by individuals like Lerato and Phumeza extends beyond gender identity, deeply interwoven with the intersecting forces of race and class. To add, many black trans women come from low-income backgrounds, where access to quality education and stable employment is limited, making formal jobs a critical means of economic security. Exclusion from the job market, however, leaves them with few alternatives, often forcing them into precarious, informal work—such as sex work—simply to survive. This ongoing exclusion intensifies their economic vulnerability, locking them into cycles of poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization that become difficult to escape.

3.4. A Gender-Divided Workplace: Problematizing Gender Incongruence and the Demand for Legal Gender Recognition as a Precondition to Employability

Participants reported experiences of a South African labour system that used gendered employment practices which disadvantaged them as trans women. Here participants explained how access to employment opportunities was regulated by institutional conventions that required trans women to align their gender expressions to their legal gender categorization, as assigned to them at birth. For example, Phumeza explained:

I had an incident at work whereby I came in...being who I am. So, now because I had not changed my gender marker and my sex—my ID still presented as male, my sex was still male, as well as my name...it became a problem now when they saw what they saw and when they saw what was written on the ID. It became confusing to them. [They said:] "You are not the person that we're seeing in the ID. There is confusion." Then I had to tell them: "What you see is this, what the ID says is going to be worked out."

The organization operated on the assumption that a person's self-designated gender will always match their legal gender categorization, which is not the case for trans women. Phumeza's narrative reveals gender as not merely personal property, but a legal construct that has a powerful impact on economic participation.

Similarly, Laila described her work environment:

They were like: "You are male. Everything [about] you says you are male." I was already busy with the transition but then my ID wasn't changed yet and a lot of documents [weren't either]. So, I needed to

change that first....They said: "You must submit every pre-authorized document that states that you are now transitioning, since when are you transitioning, and where are you now. Can we pronounce you as a woman?" They were questioning a lot of things. They were questioning a lot and they would put you in such an awkward position....They would want to see if my breasts [were] real breasts."

In order for Laila to access employment in this example, she needed to align her expressed gender with her legal gender categorization. This requirement suggests that gender is seen as a fixed construct in these hiring processes, which excludes people who have rejected this assigned gender categorization. Here, Laila's identity required legitimization through documentation, and because of this, her right to self-determination was undermined.

This demand for legal alignment highlights how employability becomes conditional upon navigating complex bureaucratic and legal processes—a task particularly challenging for black trans women from working-class backgrounds, who often lack the financial means or social support to update their gender markers. Economic marginalization among black trans women, who are frequently unemployed or underemployed, fuels a vicious cycle: without a stable income, they cannot afford the legal and medical procedures required to change their documents, and without these documents, they encounter persistent barriers to employment. These requirements disproportionately disadvantage black trans women, who bear the compounded burdens of economic inequality, systemic racism, and bureaucratic exclusion.

Furthermore, participants in this study described a labour system focused on rigid and restrictive divisions of labour based on stereotypical gender roles. These divisions rendered the participants in this study, as trans women, undeserving and unfit for particular roles that had traditionally been allocated to cisgender women. Shandukani described her experience: "Last of last year, they were hiring from the community. I couldn't get those jobs because they were for females and I'm a 'male.'" Phumeza made a helpful reflection:

So, let's say you are applying for a receptionist job and I happen to go there. It becomes something to them...having me become a receptionist. "How are you going to go about doing what we say a woman would do for the job?" So it's more of a disadvantage....[They would say:] "How are you going to cope with doing those things because you are a 'man?'" Yes, they know what you are, but for you to do "women's" stuff, [they question if you] are you going to be able to handle the pressure and all that.

Both Shandukani and Phumeza describe these experiences as a denial of their womanhood where they were evaluated and found unfit for these occupational roles based on their legally allocated gender.

Yet, there were also positive accounts of inclusion in these narratives which provide insights into how change and reform may be possible. Shandukani, for example, described how organisational culture influenced her sense of being understood, seen, and validated:

I'm also a tutor. I am a tutor and I felt included in the organisation where I am working. They understood me from the very first day [they saw me]....I am working in an environment of males but...the level of respect is very high.

Phumeza shared a similar experience of how the act of being seen and visible within her workplace as a trans woman impacted her self-esteem:

I think it was last year on Women's Month when I had to be an MC of that event for all the women. We were celebrating Woman's Day and my HR actually said that I needed to share my whole story and the essentiality of me being in the company and me being who I am. So, then, that made things very, very easy because now, if I taught 30 or 40 women, then 100 or 200 men are most likely to be educated by these women that I have taught [on] what a trans* person is and what I am and what they need to see when they see me all the time at work.

Here Phumeza was able to own her self-assigned gender identity and related experiences. Such validation is powerful in the face of a pervasive history of institutional silencing.

4. Discussion

The narratives shared by the five trans women in this study bring to light the economic marginalization they endure within a cisgendered South African society that systematically benefits, supports, and protects cis individuals while isolating and excluding trans identities from meaningful economic participation. The structural mechanisms that uphold trans women's economic marginality were captured through four key themes identified in the narrative analysis: (a) patriarchal family systems enforce conformity to cisgender expectations through rejection, financial neglect, and ostracization, driving trans women into precarious circumstances such as homelessness, survival sex work, and other forms of vulnerability; (b) organizational conventions grounded in cisgender norms reject trans job seekers who cannot provide legal proof of their gender, effectively shutting them out of employment prospects; (c) heightened gender discrimination and scrutiny, particularly during hiring, due to entrenched anti-trans stigma in the workplace; and (d) a gender-segregated labor system enforcing traditional gender roles, excluding trans women from "male" and "female" jobs because they do not neatly fit into these biology-defined binary classifications. Each theme is discussed below, with attention also given to the compounding effects of racial disenfranchisement on trans women's economic well-being in post-apartheid South Africa.

First, family structures were revealed to be governed by cisheteropatriarchal values that privilege cisgender, heterosexual norms, and male authority (Mauldin, 2023). The familial rejection that trans women face due to non-compliance with the gender rules imposed by family systems leads to increased economic vulnerability. Trans women's embodied gender transgressions are policed through emotional, verbal, and physical abuse within the family unit. Family systems also police gender conformity by withdrawing financial support. This financial control, combined with the ostracization they encounter, often results in homelessness, posing serious threats to their socio-economic security. Fineman (2013, p. 307) observes that strained relationships between trans people and their families limit access to resources necessary for "growth in the present" and to "build and preserve possibilities and opportunities for the future." The consequences of familial rejection and displacement lead to struggles for economic survival, making it difficult to access basic rights such as food, shelter, healthcare, education, and mobility—all commodified essentials in largely capitalist societies like South Africa. According to Shelton (2015), trans people experience higher rates of homelessness than cis individuals. A study by Carpenter et al. (2022) revealed that trans women are also less likely to be employed, have higher poverty rates, and report greater food insecurity compared to cis people. Kattari and

Begun (2017) found a connection between homelessness and survival sex among trans individuals in the US, a link further highlighted in this South African study, where participants reported engaging in survival sex to secure basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. Altogether, the stories of the trans women in this study divulge that existing outside the bounds of cisgender norms exposes them to severe economic danger—conditions marked by instability, unpredictability, precarity, vulnerability, and “living on the edge.” Additionally, black trans women from working-class communities are particularly more vulnerable to homelessness, as limited social support systems and the enduring legacies of apartheid leave them with fewer opportunities for upward mobility. The entrenched racial inequalities within South Africa’s economic system intensify their precariousness, making it even more challenging to break free from cycles of poverty, homelessness, and financial survivalism after being ostracized by their families.

Second, while trans women experience economic displacement due to gender prejudices within family microsystems, they are also subjected to a cisgender-oriented labor system when seeking work that does not require them to abandon their authentic identities. Trans identities are often expected to align with the gender marker on legal documents to be accepted as credible and employable by cisgendered organizations that uphold the colonial view of gender as a fixed classification (Brewster et al., 2014; Sheridan, 2016). Employment practices rigidly operate on the cisnormative belief that an individual’s self-identified gender must align with their legally assigned gender. Consequently, trans women, especially those without legal recognition, are frequently questioned and dismissed during recruitment when discrepancies arise between legal documents and self-identified gender, leading to job exclusion. This reflects how employment settings and industries are rigidly structured around a cisgender-biased binary model that accommodates cis workers while persistently problematizing and isolating trans individuals whose gender identities may not align with their birth-assigned legal classifications. Kelly (2019) confirmed that companies overemphasize binary gender norms. The institutional demand for legal gender congruence, which favors cisgender individuals, fundamentally constrains trans women’s rights to equality, dignity, and freedom of expression within organizations. While the entrenched gender binary disadvantages all trans women, black trans women are disproportionately affected by the intersection of racial and economic inequalities in South Africa (Shabalala et al., 2023). The legacy of apartheid continues to shape labor market structures, where black workers, particularly from working-class backgrounds, face more employment barriers (Kunnie, 2018). Additionally, cisgender-privileging systems in workplaces assume access to resources needed for legal gender recognition—resources that many black working-class trans women lack due to poverty and limited social support networks.

Third, institutional expectations of cisness require compliance with stereotypical gender presentations aligned with legal classifications of “male” and “female” to participate in the workplace without undue scrutiny. The trans women in this study, who do not align with cisgender norms, reported significant gender-based discrimination in employment settings. This aligns with global findings indicating high rates of workplace discrimination against trans people (Boncori et al., 2019; Dietert & Dentice, 2009). An EU-wide survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) found that 54% of trans respondents experienced discrimination or harassment due to being perceived as trans. Similarly, a US survey of 6,436 trans men and women reported that 50% faced workplace harassment, and 44% experienced hiring discrimination (Grant et al., 2011). Participants in this study described excessive scrutiny in the workplace, driven by stigmatizing societal discourses that frame trans identities as “other” and pathological (Battle & Ashley, 2008). For example, Lerato was turned away from a job interview and advised to seek treatment,

being perceived as “sick.” This underscores the hypervisibility of trans women in the workplace, where their stigmatized gender embodiment overshadows their unique skills and professional contributions. Ryland (2013, p. 2222) describes hypervisibility as “scrutiny based on perceived difference, which is usually (mis)interpreted as deviance,” resulting from being identified for one’s “otherness.” Hypervisibility deprives individuals of agency over how they are perceived by others (Brighenti, 2007; Lewis & Simpson, 2012). It is a form of dehumanization (Allen, 2021; Petermon, 2014) that, as theorized by Buchanan and Settles (2019), renders personal identities invisible, reducing individuals to their marginalized group membership. Hypervisibility fosters hostile, unwelcoming environments for trans women, predisposing them to discrimination and alienation (del Carmen, 2023; Shabalala et al., 2023). This ultimately leads to higher underemployment rates and keeps some trapped in survival sex work (Nuttbrock, 2018). In South Africa’s racially stratified society, black working-class trans women experience compounded discrimination from both gender and racial stigma, where blackness, particularly when associated with poverty and transness, becomes a layered marker of “otherness,” attracting intensified scrutiny and marginalization.

Fourth, trans women’s economic exclusion is also aggravated by navigating a labor system that upholds gender fundamentalist conventions, dividing work along traditional binary constructs of “man” and “woman.” This gendered division has historical roots in patriarchal, gender-segregated societies that established hierarchical separations between men’s and women’s roles (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997). Gendered labor divisions in contemporary culture continue to be reinforced by stereotypical views of what work is suitable for “men” and “women.” While the impact of this division on the economic subordination of cis women is widely discussed, less attention is given to its effect on trans women. According to this study’s findings, the gendered division of labor creates layered structural barriers for trans women, who are often seen as unfit or undeserving of roles historically reserved for “women” (Hausman, 2001). This is because gender essentialist frameworks remain committed to imposing a “male” identity on trans women, treating gender as biologically fixed and unchangeable. At the same time, trans women are excluded from roles traditionally assigned to “men” as they do not conform to performative ideals of masculinity. These combined exclusions deepen their economic marginalization within a gender-binariated labor system that limits access to fair employment. Historically, in addition to cisheteropatriarchy, South African labor structures have also been shaped by racial capitalism, systematically excluding black individuals, particularly those from poor and working-class backgrounds, from economic power. This intersection of race, class, and gender imposes compounded disadvantages on black working-class trans women, routinely excluded from employment due to racial bias, gender essentialism, and socio-economic precarity.

To contextualize these findings against the backdrop of intersectional barriers, it is essential to note that participants in this study were primarily black trans women living in townships and rural areas in post-apartheid South Africa. Therefore, in addition to navigating cisgender-dominated systems, they face socioeconomic struggles within a racially unequal socio-geographical landscape that limits their access to resources. US studies reveal that non-cis black individuals fare worse economically than their non-cis white counterparts due to intersecting racial and gender discrimination (Carpenter et al., 2022). Similarly, this study indicates that the economic marginalization of trans women is inseparable from the racialized disenfranchisement shaping their lives. Gender norms that penalize non-compliance with cisgender standards intersect with racial and class-based inequalities, exacerbating trans women’s economic marginalization. Together, these multiple structural factors systematically restrict black trans women’s access to the resources needed to survive and thrive in South Africa’s historically challenged economic

landscape. These compounded inequalities increase vulnerability to poverty, underemployment, homelessness, survival sex, financial survivalism, and social alienation. Overall, this reveals that the economic marginalization trans women experience transcends gender subordination alone; it is also inseparably tied to the politics of blackness and class in South Africa.

However, amid these discriminatory experiences, trans women also reported significant stories of social inclusion, particularly in workplaces that emphasize gender diversity. Inclusion was primarily experienced in institutional contexts that provided them the freedom and agency to self-determine and share their stories despite competing institutional interests that sought to silence them. As Rundall and Vecchietti (2010) describe, gendered agency is the extent to which a person is free to choose and authentically express themselves as their preferred gender. Shuman (2015) argued that sharing a personal narrative that reveals experiences that might otherwise remain hidden can have a significant impact by disrupting and challenging hegemonic oppressive paradigms. Trans women's experiences of visibility and positive representation within organizations promoted gender diversity, reducing stigma, fostering a sense of belonging, increasing access to supportive networks, creating advocacy opportunities, strengthening allyship and empathy, and ultimately boosting job satisfaction and well-being. Therefore, a key part of the solution to achieving gender equality lies in increasing trans representation within organizations, giving trans voices the power to shape organizational cultures and systems.

5. Limitations

While employing a sample size of five individuals is suitable for a qualitative, critical, exploratory study, the results are not a comprehensive understanding of the real-life experiences of all South African trans women. Instead, the research sheds light on prevalent ideologies, customs, and structures that uphold the social and subsequent economic exclusion of trans women in South African society. The viewpoints of others who typically do not conform to traditional gender norms, for example, trans men, are absent from this narrative. Nonetheless, following trans* epistemological principles, this study celebrates the variety and diversity of trans perspectives, acknowledging that there is no uniform trans experience.

6. Conclusion

This study places trans women's experiences at the heart of discussions on gender economic inequality. Traditionally, these conversations have centered on cis women's struggles, often overlooking the unique economic barriers faced by trans women. Highlighting the historically silenced economic narratives of trans women uncovers new perspectives on gender-based economic injustice, promoting a more expansive, nuanced, and trans-inclusive approach to women's economic transformation.

Through this critical narrative inquiry, the high material cost of resisting societal expectations of cisness becomes evident. This study demonstrates how economic marginalization for trans women is embedded within social institutions that uphold cisgender norms, particularly in family and workplace settings. The culture within these economic institutions reinforces biology-based, binary gender classifications that render those who resist these categories vulnerable and disposable. Non-compliance with the cisnormative demands of family structures and workplaces invites scrutiny and exclusion, constraining trans women's ability to participate in and benefit from these essential economic structures. This limits their capacity to

survive and thrive within society. The material consequences of nonconformity to institutional gender expectations include homelessness, survival sex work, precarious living conditions, and restricted access to vital resources like food and healthcare, stemming from both familial displacement and blocked employment opportunities in cisgender-privileging economic structures. For black trans women in the post-apartheid South African context, this economic marginalization is further compounded by intersecting layers of systemic racism and class-based capitalist oppression, deepening their economic precarity.

The insights presented in this study enable a deconstruction of the narrow cisgender assumptions that facilitate the economic marginalization of trans identities in society. Its innovative contribution lies in mapping, exposing, and challenging the institutionalization of cisgender frameworks that privilege cisgender individuals and leave gender-diverse identities isolated and excluded. The study proposes that achieving genuine economic justice requires a radical re-engineering of institutional structures to embrace diverse expressions of gender and to reject restrictive practices that discriminate based on gender.

7. Recommendations

7.1. Practice

As Kelly (2019) argues, workplaces must foster institutional cultures that move beyond rigid gender categorizations. To advance genuine gender equity, organizational practices should challenge entrenched binaries by implementing gender-inclusive hiring processes, creating trans-affirming environments, and adopting broader understandings of gender that embrace flexibility and fluidity. Additionally, it is essential to create spaces where trans voices are empowered to shape and influence organizational culture actively.

7.2. Policy

Achieving meaningful economic inclusion requires confronting labor systems that consistently frame gender-transgressive bodies as non-normative, unintelligible, and outside the ordinary. Policies must directly address the exclusions trans individuals face, ensuring their inclusion is integral to broader gender equity efforts. Anti-discrimination laws should explicitly protect trans individuals within labor markets, safeguarding their rights and enabling access to economic opportunities by dismantling cisnormative requirements for legal gender conformity. Policies should allow individuals to identify beyond the confines of static, birth-assigned legal gender categories.

7.3. Theory

This study calls for dismantling ideologies that structure institutions in restrictive ways, enforcing rigid categories and demanding adherence to them for individuals to be seen as legitimate and credible in the workplace. Theoretical frameworks must continually critique how cisgender norms are institutionalized in employment settings. There is a need for frameworks that envision a world free from restrictive gender categorizations. Further innovative research is essential to fully account for the structural experiences of trans people, expanding gender equity discourses into inclusive frameworks that honor gender diversity in all its expressions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The interview transcripts generated and analyzed during this study are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality. However, transcripts may be made available upon reasonable request to the authors, subject to ethical and privacy considerations.

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