

CASUALISATION OF WORK IN CONSTRUCTION, AND THE PLIGHT OF WORKERS IN BLOEMFONTEIN

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ABSTRACT

Casualisation in the construction industry is influenced by unemployment or lack of decent jobs. Casualisation is defined as the procedure of employing people either on a daily, weekly or monthly basis for an undefined task or specified job without issuing a permanent contract. The study explored the reasons why unemployed people are choosing to become casual workers, and the challenges that they face in the construction industry. A qualitative research approach was used in the study to answer the question “*What does it mean to be a casual construction worker in Bloemfontein?*” In-depth interviews were used to collect the data. The findings show that unemployed people are choosing to become casual workers because they are failing to get permanent jobs in the private and public sectors due to lack of the requisite education and training. The findings also show that casual workers are victims of exploitation through payment problems. In addition, clients are failing to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for casual workers. The Department of Labour in South Africa must therefore start to tackle casualisation and compel people who are using casual workers to pay them standard hourly rates (wages) and provide safety protections for them.

Keywords: casual worker, construction, decent job, unemployment, well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

Most unemployed people are struggling to get a decent job, and they choose to fight poverty and inequality by becoming casual construction workers. Bamidele (2011) defines casualisation as a method of employing people without issuing a permanent contract. Casualisation in the South African labour market dates from the time of apartheid, when racial policies were designed to deliver secondary education and job-market opportunities for non-white individuals in South Africa (Lilenstein et al., 2016). The lack of decent job opportunities for both uneducated and educated people makes South Africa one of the most unequal societies in the world, producing high levels of poverty. Although there has been a slight change in the poverty headcount ratio between 1993 and 2010, dropping from 56% to 54% over the period (Lilenstein et al., 2016), the rate of casualisation is still high, because of the significant number of unemployed youth in South Africa.

Casualisation is adopted in industries where the demand for employment is highly variable and where entrepreneurs are trying to avoid employing people in permanent positions in construction work, port work, migratory farm labour, and other jobs that require manual labour or unskilled workers (Bamidele, 2011). Most contractors have adopted the method of employing general workers through casualisation in South Africa, with the aim of maximising profits while keeping up with the competition, by making use of cheap labour (Okafor, 2007). People in developing countries are the victims of labour exploitation, which is evident in poor salaries, wages and a salary arrears system, poor motivation, and other ills that negate the intentions of decent jobs (Bamidele, 2011). This study is motivated by the fact that the problem of casualisation keeps growing, and little is being done to eradicate this problem in the South African construction industry, despite the existence of institutions such as the Department of Labour in South Africa, which governs labour practices through constituted employment acts.

2. CASUALISATION AND ITS ILLS

Casualisation can be defined as the procedure of employing people without a clear written contract, which is commonly designed for a short period, or the contract duration is not stated at all by the employer (Fapohunda, 2012). Bamidele (2011) states that casualisation is the procedure that is adopted by most construction entrepreneurs to make work less secure, by employing people as freelancers and on an occasional basis or on a short-term contract, instead of offering people either a fixed-term contract or a permanent contract. Okafor (2007), cited in Fapohunda (2012), asserts that casual construction workers are often victims of loss, including absence of a medical care allowance, no job security or promotion at work, no gratuity and other severance benefits, no leave or leave allowance, freedom of association that is often jeopardised, no death benefits or accident insurance at work, and no negotiation or collective-bargaining agreement.

Casualisation, which should be cause for concern for the Department of Labour in South Africa, may be the effect of having opened the economy to external forces with free-market principles, which may now be continuing to exert an influence on the nature of labour utilisation (Anugwom, 2007). Most construction entrepreneurs conceive of the construction industry as driven by unskilled labour under the supervision of either the foreman or the site manager, and they are manipulating labour employment regulations by minimising labour costs, through socialisation (Anugwom, 2007). The construction industry has adopted the strategy of socialisation so as to align the industry with economic restructuring that favours limited overhead costs by companies. Besides the designed strategies, policies and regulations to protect casual workers are either lacking or are poorly implemented, to the extent that casual workers are manipulated and cheated in the construction industry, through reduced salaries or wages and poor health and safety services provided to them (Okoye et al., 2014). Casualisation in developing countries, such as South Africa, is commonly practised in cities, because most people are migrating from the rural areas to the urban areas to seek decent jobs, and failure to find such jobs forces them to become casual workers (Yen et al., 2015).

3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this exploratory study, with the purpose of collecting data for and developing a casual workers model for this study. A qualitative research approach was adopted as Tracy (2013) maintains that it is useful for understanding a range of social issues, such as behaviour, or the reason for becoming a casual worker in Bloemfontein. Yin (2011) defines qualitative research as the process of collecting research data while embracing a mixture of orientations as well as methodological considerations, through a possible multiplicity of interpretations of human events, the inherent uniqueness of these events, and the methodological variations available.

The researchers used in-depth face-to-face interviews to answer the research question “*What does it mean to be a casual construction worker in Bloemfontein?*” Semi-structured interviews facilitate collection of data from respondents, according to Ritchie et al. (2014). The interview protocol contained open-ended questions. The chosen sampling technique was non-probability sampling, due to the fact that the study was not statistical. The researchers adopted purposive sampling to select the interviewed participants, as Ritchie et al. (2014) state that participants are chosen a the “purpose”. The sample size of this study was 18 participants, and the majority of them were aged between 25 and 35 years old. The study was conducted between December 2016 and January 2017. The interviews were recorded using cell phones, and the researchers later transcribed the data in a field book. The data collected was analysed by focusing on the central research questions and eliminating responses that did not answer the research questions. Selection of the participants was unstructured, and the participants were chosen from the side of the street, where they stand every day to market their availability to do casual work. The study thus interviewed only people that are involved in casual work in Bloemfontein, South Africa. All the interviewees were uneducated, meaning that they had not completed their basic education (Grade 12).

4. FINDINGS, AND ANALYSIS

The main research questions guided the researchers to interview the participants and to analyse the interviewed data. The demographic information obtained shows that 72% (13 out of 18) of the participants interviewed were youth aged between 25 and 35 years old, while 28% (5 out of 18) of the participants were older men, aged between 45 and 50 years old. The race of the participants was black, and there were no female participants. Consequently, it can be concluded that black males are the ones choosing to become casual workers in Bloemfontein. The research question is answered in the following subsections, culminating in the development of a casual workers frame model.

4.1 What it means to be a casual worker in Bloemfontein

4.1.1 Definition of casualisation

Most of the participants described casualisation as the procedures adopted by unemployed people, where they stand at the side of the road close to the traffic lights in town, seeking construction employment in the form of renovating existing houses or building new houses, or other casual work, such as cleaning the yard or “hard manual labour jobs”, where they are employed without a contract and accept any amount offered to them by their employers.

4.1.2 Reasons for becoming a casual worker

The majority of the participants explained that their reasons for becoming casual workers were that they were struggling to get employment in the private and public sectors because of their educational background, since they have not completed their basic education (high school). One of the participants explained that his parents passed away while he was still a teenager, and that he never had anyone to encourage him to go to school, so he chose to become a casual worker, rather than become a thief. Another participant explained that he had grown up working in the manufacturing industries in the townships of Bloemfontein. However, when the economic recession began and the firms embarked on mass layoffs, he was affected. In other words, being laid off influenced his decision to become a casual worker, where manual physical work could be undertaken despite a lack of education.

4.1.3 Challenges experienced by casual workers

Most of the participants explained the problems that they encounter as casual workers. The main problem is poor or late payment of wages, since the majority of their employers fail to fulfil their promises related to the agreed-upon payments. The following is a response that one of the participants gave:

One of my clients once took me to renovate his house, painting, and to install new tiles. After I completed the work, he paid me half of the agreed payment and promised to pay me the rest of the money in town. And when I arrived in the town, he instructed me to wait for him, as he was going to withdraw money from the ATM. And that was the last time I saw him, as he drove away without saying any word.

The participants explained that their employers are oppressors (bullies). They said that some employers force them to work overtime, by threatening not to pay them if they do not cooperate with their instructions, or they refuse to take them back to town. Another challenge that the participants highlighted relates to the lack of employment, and they explained that they often go for a month without having any work, especially in winter.

4.1.4 Getting employment

All the participants explained that they walk to town early in the morning and stand at the side of the road, close to the traffic lights, where passing motorists who need assistance related to construction work or garden work will pull over and discuss the job description and the wages they are prepared to pay for the job. Other participants explained that they had placed advertisements on streetlight poles in town, marketing their skills, and that they often received calls from clients seeking their services (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: A casual worker's advertisement

4.1.5 Personal protective equipment (PPE) and site induction

The majority of the participants explained that their employers do not provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for them. When an employer provides PPE for a casual worker, the employer will usually deduct the cost of the equipment from the worker's wages. Another participant asserted that employers do not care about the health of casual workers. He firmly believed that employers care only about production. The participant explained that one is exposed to diseases when one does paintwork. He responded as follows:

When you paint a house without wearing a dust mask, you breathe the paint you're exposed to, diseases relating to lung problems, you struggle to breathe, and you get a headache.

The same interviewee reported that when they are installing tiles, they prefer to wear knee caps, because they spend the whole day on their knees installing the tiles.

Regarding the issue of site induction, the participant responded as follows:

In 2016, I was taken to a construction site in Kimberley to work for three days, and I never heard of the word "site induction", what is site induction, and how does it help me.

There is no site induction taking place, because most of the time we carry out small jobs which are straightforward without complications.

Medium contractors are the one stressing the subject of site induction, while small contractors don't even talk about it.

The textual data and the literature reviewed show that there are links between the dominant factors pertaining to casualisation in the construction industry. Figure 2 represents an attempt to link the identified factors. The figure shows that casualisation can be linked to serious economic challenges, in the form of poor job opportunities, failure to provide large-scale permanent employment in the industry, inability to standardise and police earnings in the industry, and the collapse of production entities where mass employment can be found in manufacturing. There are also regulatory factors to be considered. Such factors are not unconnected to poor social protection for casual workers and poor enforcement of labour laws in the industry.

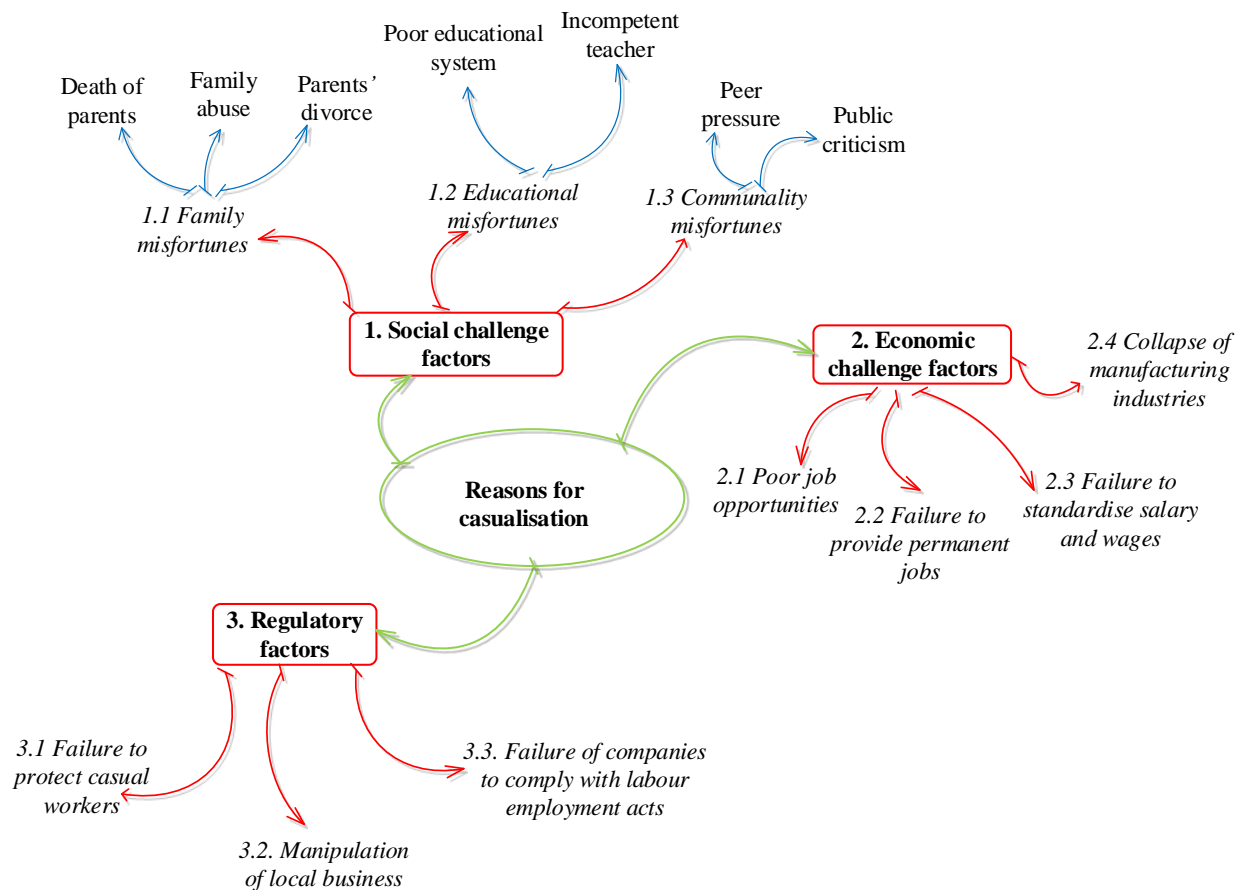


Figure 2: Casual workers frame model

The situation is compounded by the social challenges that have to be overcome by people involved in casual work. For instance, it's hard for someone with a complete lack of education and training to exit the general labour levels in the construction industry. There will be many such individuals without apprenticeships at the bottom levels of the industry. Figure 2 shows the factors that society should understand and address if casualisation is to be reduced in the construction sector.

5. DISCUSSION

Figure 2 shows a casual workers frame model, which highlights the factors influencing society, in particular the reasons that motivate youth to become casual workers in the construction industry. These factors were identified and grouped based on highlighted characteristics, as follows: social challenge factors, economic challenge factors, and regulatory factors. Social challenge factors involve the social lifestyle of the society and the social circumstances that influence unemployed people to become casual workers. The results show that unemployed people who choose to become casual workers are often victims of family, educational or community misfortunes. Economic challenge factors are characterised by the state of a country with regard to production and consumption of goods and services. Economic challenge factors include poor job opportunities, failure to provide permanent jobs, inability to standardise and police earnings (wages) in the industry, and the collapse of manufacturing industries. The manufacturing sector in South Africa is declining, as Mavuso (2014) indicates. The Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) in

2013 reported that while the manufacturing sector accounted for 20.9% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of South Africa in 1994, its contribution has since declined to around 12% (Mavuso, 2014). Economic challenge factors are critical, as Fapohunda (2012) asserts that the method of employing construction workers through casualisation in developing countries is a threat to the desired level of economic growth and development of a country. Regulatory factors pertain to the concept of management of employment acts. Regulatory factors relate to failure to protect casual workers, manipulation of local business, and non-compliance of firms with labour laws. Non-compliance is most worrying, as in South Africa, casual employees have the same rights as permanent employees if they work more than 24 hours in a month. Every employer must regulate the working time of each employee:

- *Following the provision of any Act governing occupational health and safety,*
- *with due regard to the health and safety of employees,*
- *About the code of good practice on the regulation of working time issued under section 87 (1) (a); and*
- *the code of good conduct issued by the Minister of Labour under section 87 (1) (a) will contain provisions concerning the arrangement of work and in particular, its impact on the health, safety, and welfare of employees (Department of Labour, 2004).*

6. CONCLUSION

An exploratory study on the behaviour and characteristics of casual workers is the focus of this paper. As the number of casual workers is increasing, and companies (private and public) are failing to provide permanent jobs for uneducated people in South Africa, the ills of casualisation look set to continue. The data collected in this study reinforces the perception that casualisation is a negation of decent jobs. The construction industry in South Africa appears to have stagnated in recent years, and growth is not predicted for the near future. This bleak situation is one of the reasons for the increase in the number of casual construction workers in South Africa. The reasons why unemployed people are choosing to become casual workers are explained in the casual workers frame model. The frame model discusses issues pertaining to social, economic and regulatory challenges. Social challenges relate to family, educational and community misfortunes. Economic challenges include casual workers' difficulties due to poor job opportunities, lack of adequate permanent employment, failure to standardise and police earnings in the industry, and the collapse of manufacturing industries in Bloemfontein. The study presented here is not exhaustive. The subject of the casual worker should be investigated over a longer period, so as to understand the reasons why unemployed people are becoming casual workers, and the casual workers frame model should be refined.

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