

# South Africa - Invisible hands: Women of Marikana

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**When we think of Marikana we think of the infamous event that took place on 16 August 2012, leading to the death of 34 striking miners. Scholarly analysis takes this further than the event to broader labour-capital relations. While useful, the examination of Marikana through this lens tends to privilege the production sphere and lends itself mainly to the exploration of the workplace; the workers, their employers and the union. In this article, the author argues that exclusive reliance on this lens is inadequate and inevitably results in many silences, one of which is the silencing of the reproduction sphere and, by extension, women.**

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## Introduction

To fully understand Marikana the event, one has to understand Marikana the location, and hence realities and conditions on the ground. Such an analysis is useful because it sheds light on the space of social reproduction and allows us to look at the position of women who are usually ignored when talking about the mines. The inclusion of women’s experiences in the Marikana narrative allows for both a more nuanced reading of the massacre and a broader understanding of what we mean by the ‘class struggle’, which takes us beyond the point of production. When we include questions of social reproduction we are better positioned to create a conversation between the worlds of home and of work and, in the case of Marikana, illuminate conditions of life and forms of resistance beyond the mine gates. When we view Marikana from the household or community level, we see how mine labour itself is reproduced, and thus are able to analyse the symbiotic relationship between the productive and reproductive spheres – a critical fault-line in the present crisis. The benefit of such an approach, then, is that it enables a more holistic and in-depth reading of the role different actors play in sustaining a mining economy that is still fundamentally premised on the sale of cheap labour power, in turn reproduced on a daily basis by the invisible labour of countless women.

### Accumulation, social reproduction and mine labour

What then do we mean by social reproduction? For Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas (2011, 3) social

reproduction includes the 'biological reproduction' of the labour force, 'the unpaid production in the home of both goods and services' and 'the reproduction of culture and ideology'. Brown et al. (2013, 89) make use of the idea of 'everyday' social reproduction that incorporates a more expansive field of everyday life. For them, it is about the creation and maintenance of social relations including the recreation of life and, most importantly for the purposes of this article, 'the ability to replenish or reproduce labour power' on a daily basis. Yet, the necessary labour of 'feeding people, looking after the sick, infants, keeping warm, feeling safe, maintaining a sustainable environment or satisfying emotional needs' primarily falls on women. As James (2012) argues, the daily burden of reproductive work thus not only saps women's time and energy, but confines them, defines them and shapes their lives, their very existence and relationships. In short, the actors who become visible when emphasising the everyday necessities involved in social reproduction are women and their work in the household.

The reproductive work done by women at home is not simply 'housework', but, moreover, work for the benefit of the owners of capital and its expanded reproduction. Workers' ability to perform at their best and hence maximise the production of surplus value relies heavily on the unpaid work of the women (Brown et al. 2013, 92). It would be a blunder, Federici (2008, 2012) argues, to look at housework as a personal service, or a labour of love. While it is indeed unpaid, housework produces not only use value but also underpins the production of surplus value, thus contributing directly to the accumulation of capital (Ibid.) by extending the working day of women, taking away not only resources from the household, but also from women's freedom and autonomy (Weeks 2009).

Reproductive work, therefore, is a crucial component of the reproduction of the capitalist economy as whole, and at the same time subordinated to its imperatives and crises. Feminist Marxists and autonomous Marxists argue that the family and women's labour serve as pillars for the market and women as cushions (Dietrich 1983; Federici 2012) and shock absorbers in times of crises (Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2011). Their reproductive work, while marginalised, is necessary for capital accumulation (Weeks 2007). Without the work performed by women in the household 'the reproduction of capital is impossible,' argues Dietrich (1983, 56): 'the economy would collapse if household work were not done.' Yet treating the household as a 'bottomless well' contributes to the demands and expectations placed on women and is not without consequences. 'If too much pressure is put on the domestic sector to provide unpaid care work to make up for deficiencies elsewhere, the result may be a depletion of human capabilities' (Elson 2000, 28 in Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2011, 1).

Looking at Marikana from the perspective of social reproduction helps to broaden the spotlight from the point of production to the wider nexus of working-class relations - of family and of community - that are organised around the mine and structured by its demands and rhythms. The platinum strikes of 2012 were not only a response to low wages or the crisis of production. They were also a response to the crisis of social reproduction, for the struggle for a living wage, which would enable workers and their families to reproduce themselves on a daily basis under increasingly harsh economic conditions [1].

### **'Town women or country wives'**

While a reading of Marikana through social reproduction illuminates the role of women, it also tends to homogenise their position and lump them together. In this article, however, I make a distinction between wives who renew the mine labour force within the areas from which migrants originate, - the Eastern Cape, Lesotho and Mozambique - and mistresses who maintain and reproduce their capacity to labour on a daily basis, within easy access of the mines at Marikana.

The position of most women in Marikana is that of mistresses to mineworkers. It is they who look after the migrant workers day in and day out, as opposed to their legally recognised wives, who remain behind. While most of them have lived together with their mineworker partners for years, some as long as 25 years, servicing them, fetching water, preparing meals and washing dirty, ore-ridden work-suits and reproducing their labour, having children and raising them, and acting as caregivers to mineworkers when they are sick, they remain mistresses. Their precarious position as mistresses and dependence on men's wages mean that they are at the beck and call of their male partners, their lives dictated by men and the mines.

The older mistresses initially moved to Marikana in the early 1990s from the traditional labour-sending areas, to look for employment or to join boyfriends or husbands who were no longer remitting money home. The relocation was their way of ensuring that money reached them and the rural households. Others moved as an attempt to salvage marriages that were on the brink of breaking down or after hearing that their husbands had 'town women'.

While these were initial motivations, they seem to end up living apart from their partners or husbands, or even divorced and living as girlfriends with new partners. After the breakdown of marriages or relationships, these women seldom move back to the villages, choosing instead to settle in town, taking up with other mineworkers as their partners. Consequently, they no longer consider themselves 'country wives' but what Moodie et al. (1988) and Moodie and Ndatshe (1994) call 'town women'. In short, it is town women who do most of the work that daily reproduces the material and immaterial conditions of mineworkers. Without the work of these women, the men would not be productive workers, nor could their labour costs (wages) be so low.

### **Life in Marikana**

Some of the mistresses in Marikana live in family units with their male partners. The majority of them, however, live in the nearby informal settlement Wonderkop, which is less than 400 metres from the mineshafts. For people to enter or exit Wonderkop they have to go past the mine. As you enter the informal settlement, on one side are small hills (koppies) that divide the community from the shaft, less than 200 metres both ways, which were the site of the August 2012 massacre. Further down are more mineshafts directly facing the settlement, then the mine hostel and family units. These lead to the taxi rank, which forms part of the heart of the settlement. Workers and community members alike wander between these spaces with ease. [2]

With little distinction between workers and ordinary residents, it is all too common to find an unemployed resident hopping on a mine bus or a worker residing in the mine hostel spending countless nights inside the settlement or going to buy traditional food or beer inside the settlement. Girlfriends live between the family units and the settlement, they spend their days at the family units washing and cooking for men and returning to the settlements at night to sleep. The living arrangements, the everyday activities, the relations between workers and non-workers all blur the divide, and lives in the spaces are intertwined.

As a result of the connections, the mines feature prominently and daily in the lives of women. Their day-to-day conversations are peppered with stories from and about the mines. The workers' daily language and ways of expression also borrow from the mines. Work activities, challenges and victories are embedded in everyday greetings and conversations. When neighbours are talking over their 'fences' about the well-being of families or women are queuing for water or asking a shop owner for credit, the mines are evoked. There are many ways this was expressed; below are examples of different women's responses when I asked women about their well-being:

*'We are trying . . . every morning you hear someone was shot, someone was killed, the police did this and that . . . it is painful for us . . . it is painful';*

*'It's not easy, every day you are reminded . . . my brother is at home . . . he can't get his red ticket or something like that';*

*'They shot his leg . . . the bullet is still in his hip bone . . . or spinal cord';*

*'We can't be fine . . . my parents, now they have to care for their son . . . so young . . . where have you ever heard of that?';*

*'No one is fine here, no one . . . how can they be, mmhh?';*

*'We will get there . . . it's difficult . . . no money . . . no life here . . . we will only be fine when it is all over, when we get the R12,500, when that Farlam Commission is over . . . asijiki [no turning back].'* [3]

Conversations after the massacre were about those who were shot on the hill, and the funeral arrangements. Over their fences or across their shacks in conversations, neighbours talked about those who were missing, women who were suspected to have been raped or harassed by army and police officers and how this was as a result of their demand for a living wage. After the Marikana Commission started, community members could be seen outside making transport arrangements, confirming attendance of the Commission hearings, giving each other feedback on previous proceedings.

Similarly, when women talked about approaching shop owners for groceries on credit, the mines were evoked: 'sometimes I get bread from him . . . even isishebo like cabbage or potatoes, . . . meili-meal . . . and I just tell him I'll pay him when I get money from my husband' (Interview 10, Marikana, November 2013), 'they know we don't have money . . . no one has been working since the strike began . . . when the strike is over and we get our R12,500 (the amount demanded by workers), we will pay them' (Interview 4, Marikana, November 2013).

Mine work, therefore, is not foreign to women in Marikana. It is not something they interface with once a month through the wage-slips, or merely as economic or employment hubs: instead, it, drives, organises and orders their lives.

Unlike their counterparts in the villages, women in Marikana hear daily about the underground working conditions not only from partners but from their networks in the settlement; their neighbours, people from the same villages as them (homeboys/girls) and other women. These are not only discussed during the strike, but form part of the everyday ways of being and doing; when people are relaxing in their stoeps (front entrance). Women in Marikana are witnesses when men get home later than usual because of overtime work, when men miss a monthly target or when someone's partner has sustained an injury at work. Because they live and converse with mineworker neighbours, their own partners and their friends, they identify with happenings inside the mines. They know when an essential machine used in underground operations is broken, when working places are closed owing to unstable rock structures, when mine buses are running late or not operating, when copper cables are stolen resulting in unproductive shifts. They know when there are inspectors visiting a shaft. They are kept, directly and indirectly, in the loop. They know intricate details about how the mines operate, not just wages. Likewise, they know how these affect them.

During my research period, one of the shafts in Marikana was shut down. Mine inspectors had discovered faulty headlamps and stopped all operations, preventing workers from going underground until all headlamps were fixed and the shaft inspected again. While workers could not

go down the shaft, they reported to work daily, starting late and finishing earlier than usual. Women whose partners were working at the shaft detailed how this had altered their lives. They informally talked about their increased workload; having to prepare breakfast, an additional meal they hardly prepare when men start work early. They joked about the increase in their laundry as men were wearing regular clothes to work instead of work-suits. Some women were expected home earlier than usual to prepare meals before men returned from work. When asked about the changes in their routine, they eloquently explained what happens when their men do not go down the shaft: 'the things that take up their time are eliminated . . . they do not wait for the cage which we are told can take hours to arrive . . . they do not have to wait to shower . . . they simply hop on buses waiting outside,' thus making it home earlier than usual (Interview 6, Marikana, November 2013).

Work routines and experiences are not always communicated verbally but conveyed through demands in their time and relationships, and in how these alter already-established rhythms and daily chores. An injured partner for example requires attention and her time, and is her responsibility if he is not hospitalised. A missed production target affects her budget and a grumpy and exhausted partner comes home to her. Part of her service is to uplift and encourage him.

Most areas of their lives are affected by the mines and mine working shifts. There are days when the local police station is closed during the day or residents are turned away because police or officials are not available until afternoon. Informal operating hours are sometimes based on knock-off times of the workers. The local community office is also closed during the day and only opens in the afternoon when workers are back from work. In a nutshell, the rhythm of these women's everyday lives and the community at large is dictated by the mine and its activities and demands.

This immediacy of the mine in women's lives and the community at large has a bearing on how they understand and make sense of workplace struggles. Their relationships with and service work for mineworkers leave little room for detachment. Women identify very closely with and draw minimal distinction between themselves and the mineworkers; their identity is intimately linked to their role in this mining community and their relationships with workers. They do not see the meagre wages and resulting strikes as affecting only the workers, but themselves and their community at large.

The women in Marikana are therefore deeply aware of how mine work affects and shapes their lives. While women working in mining may see their relationship with mines as a public role, women in Marikana identify much more closely with mine routines. Although they are not mineworkers themselves, they share worker consciousness because of their proximity to the mines and relationship with workers (Porter, 2011). Their role as women, and identification with the men, the mines and mining community underpin their common-sense, taken-for-granted attitudes to the world. Consciousness about mine life and mine work pervades their ways of seeing their lives. They know more; as a result they care more about what goes on in the mines. As we will shortly see, this influenced their support for and cooperation with the 2012 strike and their dedication to attending, daily, the Marikana Commission of Inquiry hearings.

Women's subjective and collective position helps us see how they identify with mineworkers and their struggle on the shop floor. Community struggles help us connect the dots between economic, social, political and personal crises and how these can be gendered and manifest on the ground.

### **Locating the crisis**

Understanding the geography and administration of Marikana is essential to understanding how social reproduction occurs. Marikana is divided into two sections administered by different municipalities: the Rustenburg local municipality, and the Madibeng local municipality, both falling

within the greater Bojanala district municipality.

While the area has seen tremendous growth, people are not benefiting equally: some are reaping sour rewards and others sweet. Much as the new economic growth is creating new upwardly mobile classes, it is also creating many poorer communities – and this despite the Social and Labour Plans that have been drawn up by mining houses as strategies for socioeconomic development of the areas where they mine. [4] The Rustenburg local municipality, for example, was reported to have 38 informal settlements, the majority of which are characterised by grim poverty, the absence of government services, limited basic infrastructure, no running water and poor sanitation. [5]

Wonderkop is divided into two: a formal settlement known as Emzini, where the road is tarred, has running water, ‘decent’ houses with electricity, and an informal settlement known as Enkaneni by isiXhosa speakers and Nkaneng by seTswana speakers. Its geography closely resembles that of ‘tribally’ segregated former apartheid townships, with most seTswana speakers living apart from isiXhosa, xiTsonga and seSotho speakers. But this is also a former Bantustan area, hence ‘tribal’ origins seem to determine the presence or absence of services. The informal settlement is located on a farm registered to, and under the local administrative control of, the Bapo-ba-Mogale traditional authority, which receives royalties from the mine but prioritises its ‘tribal’ subjects for the services these revenues fund. [6] Local governments also favour their constituents, leading to neglect of the informal settlement and, by default or design, migrants. As a result, the informal settlement, despite its proximity to the formal settlement, lacks basic infrastructure.

The lack of basic services, for migrants, symbolises lack of respect. Migrants feel left out and uncared for by the local government, by traditional authorities and by the mining corporations. None of these structures seem to care, support, safeguard or consider their needs or interests. Even in post-apartheid South Africa, migrants say, they continue to be the sacrificed for the benefit of capital and to the detriment of their livelihoods.

At the root of the migrants’ narrative are the multilayered ways the mines eat away their lives through what they describe as harsh, harmful and humiliating working and living conditions, the exclusions they face from traditional authorities because they originate from distant lands, and thus belong to different tribal or ethnic groups, and finally the ruling party, which has blurred and in some instances erased the line between government services and privileges for party members. Their stories capture the conditions under which labour power is reproduced and the nature of the post-apartheid order for many black mineworkers. Their chronicles of daily struggles for survival show how they navigate crises in the absence of services.

### **Unequal benefits**

There are many other ways in which unequal benefits are spread not only between classes, but also within the working class in Marikana. As in other tribal areas around Rustenburg, jobs, when available, are reserved for locals. This job reservation policy tends to be enforced more for women than men. It is when there is no local woman willing to do the job that they get passed on to migrants, or when migrants ‘front’ (pose) as locals or bribe authorities that they get jobs.

Women and men reported bribing corrupt mine officials or contractors with anything between R3000 for temporary jobs, and up to R10,000 for permanent jobs. Traditional authorities who are tasked with stamping reference letters which confirm that the work-seeker is indeed a part of their community have also been reported to solicit bribes. While unemployment is general and affects the entire population, this seems to be intensified for migrant women. Employment is not the only area where migrant women and men are relegated to the edges but this applies too to basic government



services such as clinics, schools, houses, water and proper roads.

In Wonderkop, the road is another clear example of how 'development' by local government and benefits from the mines are unequally distributed. The first few streets close to the shafts and hostel are tarred and connect to the part of the community where most locals reside. These tarred roads, however, are bursting with ditches and potholes. As you go deep into the informal settlement where the migrants live, the tarmac disappears altogether and gravel starts. This is against a backdrop of properly tarred and well-maintained mine roads that bring in the advanced mining equipment and take the ore out of the community for processing and beneficiation elsewhere.

Because there are mud roads, when it rains no car can drive in or out of Wonderkop. As a result services are compromised. Emergency vehicles have had to turn back, abandoning sick people, because it had rained and the roads were undrivable. Women narrated losing family members in the middle of a rainy night because the ambulance could only drive 'up to Fish's place [a local pub] where there is tarred road'. One of the women interviewees recounted the night when her newborn baby was sick and died in the middle of the night. 'No vehicle could enter Wonderkop,' and as a result she sat through the night holding her infant's corpse until mid-morning when roads were dry and vehicles could enter safely. At times even hearses have had difficulty entering Wonderkop to pick up a dead person or to drop them off at the burial site; in such cases men in the community carry the coffin to the graveyard.

Considering that this is the way they have lived for so long and nothing has been done about it, the community interprets it as lack of concern for their needs by the state and the mining company operating in Marikana. A woman at a meeting shortly after the massacre said, 'Zuma . . . the ANC . . . the government only cares about votes . . . and mines only want our husband's [labour] power . . . they just take, take, take and never give us anything' (public meeting, Marikana, August 2012).

While the formal settlement has brick houses with running water and electricity, the informal settlement mainly has makeshift shacks made up of scrap corrugated-iron sheets. The sheets are usually gathered from the mine dumps, mine stores, sometimes from nearby landfill sites. Only a few can afford to buy new corrugated-iron sheets and others sacrifice and only buy new sheets for the roof and the rest of the shack relies on used sheets. In most yards there are usually many families, sometimes 10 to 15 shacks occupied by different families. They all usually share one pit or long-drop latrine, or ask from neighbours or use the nearest bush when they do not have their own long-drop latrines.

The shacks are small, ten feet by eight, and are used as a kitchen, a bathroom and a bedroom, meaning they cook, wash and sleep in the same room and have no privacy. When it rains, one woman whose shack was tattooed with holes said, 'you try find a dry spot and stand the entire night'; another said, 'we . . . sleep on the floor or move the bed to the centre of the shack so that we are far from the side walls with seepage' (Interview 8, Marikana, November 2013). If it is very windy, the shacks can be easily uprooted. An interviewee said, 'we do not like rain or wind here, they're an inconvenience' (Interview 4, Marikana, November 2013).

While some of the shacks have electricity, most of it is informally and sometimes illegally connected with light-duty household cables. The state has no interest in delivering services to an informal settlement, they say. As a result, those amongst them who work with electricity in the mines connect it for some households. The light domestic cables usually run along on the ground instead of heavy-duty industrial cables above ground.

There is no running water in most parts of the settlements. At best there are taps in the yards or street but for 15 months since the Marikana strike, most have been dry. While water pipes can be

seen all around the mines, circling the community, community members struggle to get water to drink. As you enter Wonderkop there are scores of women queuing or looking for water, and young boys pushing wheelbarrows filled with water drums. Searching and queuing for water seems to be one of the main activities that consumes women's time, starting from the minute they awake.

Women in the parts of the informal settlement with no running water and dry taps reported waking up in the early hours of the morning, between 2 am and 4 am daily, to get water for their male partners to bathe in before they go to work. By 5 am queues are long and taps just dripping so it is not possible to fill many buckets at a time. There is informal rationing done by community members that prevents one from filling more than two buckets or drums at a time. Drop by drop, during my research phase, taps were increasingly drying up, and that had been the case since the miners' strike in 2012 and was intensified by January 2013. [7] Areas that seemed to have normal water supply were the formal settlements and the first streets of the informal settlement where the local councillor stays.

While muddy roads compromise residents' access to health care, however, what really undermines their access are ethnic and tribal politics that play out in the local clinic.

There are two clinics in Wonderkop: the community clinic and the mine clinic, which services mineworkers. Community members who, in emergencies, have sought help from the mine clinic told stories of being turned away. This was the case even after the massacre, as Wonderkop residents were injured from confrontations with police. Women who were shot by police while awaiting a meeting were refused service by the mine clinic; it was only after pleading with clinic management and nurses on duty that they agreed to treat some of the women. Others, anticipating refusal to be treated by the mine clinic, went home to treat their wounds.

The community clinic, meant to service all community members, has been absorbed into tribal politics that have led to migrant women sometimes being refused service. In focus group interviews, meetings and interviews, migrant women narrated stories of nurses and administrators who refused, ignored or turned them away for failing to respond to instructions given in the local language. To be serviced they have had to learn the local language, seTswana, or, when they can afford a taxi fare, seek help from clinics in other communities.

Unclear local jurisdictions have also played a role in health care provision. With Marikana falling under two different municipalities, there have been instances where ambulances have arrived at the scene of an emergency only to tell residents that their area falls under a different municipality. While they sometimes help, they often refuse to take the sick person, insisting that the 'appropriate' ambulance be called.

Women described incidents where children were playing and 'one fell into a ditch' and an ambulance was called. A respondent noted:

*"we called the ambulance in Rustenburg because they are faster . . . they came . . . but did not take the child . . . instead they called for an ambulance in Marikana which only arrived after 2 hours and the child was dead by then . . . I'm not sure if the child was already dead when the first one came but I know that when the second ambulance came the child was gone already . . . when we reported this to the local councillor he told us to go to Malema [8] our father."* (Interview 3, Marikana, November 2013)

Those who have changed political allegiances to Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters have been subjected to slurs by the local councillor and their issues neither taken seriously nor addressed.



Challenges facing the migrants penetrate to the youngest generation. Most schools, for example, teach in seTswana. There are scarcely any local schools, especially high schools, which teach in isiXhosa and xiTsonga, the languages widely spoken by migrants. Children of migrants consequently have had to attend schools where all subjects, including English and Mathematics, are taught in seTswana.

Migrant parents reported that when their children move to Marikana, they tend to repeat grades in their first two years in the local schools. From conversations with women, it seemed that it is only when their children have picked up the local language, usually after two or three years, that they are able to perform at their best. Mastering the local language, women stated, 'becomes a problem when they move back' to their areas of origin, as 'they forget how to read and write' in their home languages. Accordingly, the older children tend to drop out of school after failing the first or second time.

Additional to these challenges, women noted that their partners' wages remain low and do not meet their families' basic needs. Hard-pressed on every side, women have had to engage in other livelihood strategies to sustain their families. To supplement the wages of their male partners, some sell goods or services, or rely on state social grants, especially the child support grant, [9] and community stokvels. [10]

The goods sold range between legal and illegal goods; from traditional beer to cannabis. Income from these activities is seen as their only way out of poverty since their 'partners are refused a living wage'. To keep their families from starving, women and other community members have had to go 'against their morals', as one interviewee said. Faced with desperate times, women mention being forced by circumstances to revisit, modify and abandon some of their ideas about dignity in order to feed and clothe their families.

While the child support grant is sometimes sent to the rural homestead where some children are cared for by grandparents, some use it to supplement the household income in Marikana. The child support grant is not received by all those in need, however. Several women who gave birth in their home towns, or who were not using the same surname as their children (since they are not married to the fathers of the children), experienced difficulties when registering and claiming the child support grant.

Women told stories of being sent back and forth by government officials while trying to apply for the child support grant. One respondent noted the need for 'first the affidavits to confirm you are indeed the mother of the children you are claiming for, not relatives trying to milk the system' (Interview 10, Marikana, November 2013). Before getting the affidavits and if they are lucky and find their local police station open, they are interrogated by police. When they bring the affidavits, and after hours waiting in unmoving queues, they are sometimes told about another missing document from their files, or an incorrect stamp, as was the case with one of the women. She was told her baby's birth certificates did not have the correct stamp, and after being sent back and forth between different government departments and the police, she was told to return to the hospital where she gave birth, over 800 kilometres away, to get the correct stamp. This woman was battling to cover taxi fares to town, let alone a bus fare back to her village to get a hospital stamp.

As a result, she temporarily suspended her mission for state support. Instead of being assisted, she felt like she was being punished, her life made difficult and her poverty ridiculed. In the meantime she continues without state support and one by one her children are leaving school, first her daughter because she is too weak to focus in class and lately her son. They struggle in Marikana and have stopped sending money to the villages, yet her partner, her children's father, toils underground, drilling rocks, extracting platinum.

The exploitation of workers underground is seen by many women in Marikana as an extension of their marginalisation, an attack on their dignity and contempt for their contribution to the country's economy, its 'growth and development', hence they sympathise with workers when on strike and join in solidarity with them.

### **Women and the platinum strike**

The difficulties, the poverty, the lack of care from the state, discrimination by local government officials and traditional authorities, their close identification with workplace struggles, the pressure exerted on women as reproducers of labour power, all combined to stir them to action as women, to join in the strikes across a range of background or frontline activities. [11]

Their everyday experiences, the discussions within the community, on street corners, union and community offices, taverns and tuck shops seem to cement the support and legitimise the strike. Workers' daily interface with poverty, their squalid living conditions, constantly striving to make ends meet, waking up daily to gamble with their lives underground yet struggling to put food on the table, is something most women said they could bear no longer, hence their resolve to support and stand by the workers even with 'stomachs sticking to their backs'.

From interviews with women, strikes seem to be more than material gains but equally about reclaiming the dignity of their partners and their own dignity. The fact that workers still face humiliation, through employers' refusal to pay a 'living wage', seems to strengthen them. [12] For community members and women, Marikana is a struggle for a decent and better life, life that can only be achieved if workers get a living wage, are able to feed their children, educate them and put decent roofs over their heads. They do not think they have anything more to lose because, with circumstances as they are, workers are not able to make ends meet, and life is squeezed out of them through their living and working conditions. Some workers, while sweating and braving dangerous conditions underground daily, have had to cut ties or suspend them with their families in the labour-sending areas because they cannot afford to support them.

The solidarity between most members of the community and striking workers has also led to community members, even local taxi drivers sometimes, keeping an eye out for strikebreakers, taking note of those who go to work during strikes. During interviews with strike committee members, women sometimes called to report scab labourers or those seen making their way to work. This kind of support for the strike is not only because they live in Marikana but also because of personal, ideological and social identification with the struggles of the mineworkers.

In the early stages of the strike, prior to the massacre in August 2012, often Marikana women's involvement was to support the women whose husbands were not coming back at night, hiding from police harassment, and to supply workers who were on the hill with food and credit to make phone calls. Later however they took a more proactive role.

After the massacre, when close to 270 workers were arrested, [13] it was women who kept the strike alive. Even when police began hounding others in their homes, they were outside the court protesting and demanding the release of their partners. A month after the massacre, women organised their own march demanding that the police and army leave their community and stop harassing them and their children. When most men were not sleeping in their homes after the massacre because of the brutal harassment by police, women say it was they who kept families together, and who could gather in the community even after the government called for a state of emergency.

Women played a key role not only in the strike but also at the Commission of Inquiry. With some men back at work and others injured and back in their villages, and thus not able to attend the Commission, it was women who religiously attended most of the hearings. The women in Marikana, because of their location, their proximity, could readily attend, unlike those who lived in the countryside.

Women who were searching for employment had to stop in order to attend the Commission hearings daily on behalf of their partners, relatives and siblings. Some of the women who were employed lost their jobs because employers got tired of giving them days off to attend the Commission. Furthermore, in attending the Commission they also faced intimidation from the local police. [14] Despite the cost of the Commission to them, they persisted. When the Commission proceedings were moved to Centurion, some 125 kilometres away in Pretoria, it became increasingly difficult for men to attend. [15] Women had to step in and go to the Commission, abandoning all tasks, responsibilities and their needs for the sake of partners who could not listen for themselves.

Their actions cannot merely be seen as fulfilment of domestic duties: they reflect a higher commitment, a closer identification with the struggle than fulfilment of spousal duties. When we appreciate their actions for what they were, part of a class struggle, we can see how the reproduction space is not distinct but is also in dialogue with the production space at the political level. Seeing women's role therefore as that of supportive partners does not do justice to Marikana. Instead it reinforces the idea of women's domesticity, casting them as the 'other' and misleads us into believing that 'men were on strike and women at home' (Porter:2011 , 266). Yet in Marikana this was not so: women engaged in the struggle, they did not detach themselves as is sometimes expected (Parpart: 1986, 36).

In ways remarkably similar to the great British miners' strike of 1984 (Beale 2005 ), women boosted and maintained the morale of their men, thus enabling the strike to continue for as long as it did. Instead of forcing their male partners to go back to work, they have taken on additional income-generating activities and have been active in seeking support for their cause from other women-based organisations across South Africa. The support from other diverse groups from outside Marikana has been crucial in keeping the morale high and taking the struggle forward. To date, those who have resources continue to share what little they have with the rest.

Since they are also the ones who tend to be involved in community saving schemes, mainly stokvels, during the strike some were able to draw on that money and also on networks established through cooperative stokvel activities, to sustain families in the absence of wages. Women's good and amiable relationships with tuck shop owners, who usually gave families food on credit during strike actions, also added to the help.

Marikana, then, was as much a women's as it was a men's struggle. In Marikana the strike reinforced the links between home and work. Workers were not made to feel as if they were being unfaithful to their families by being involved in such a prolonged strike, despite its impact on the financial position of the household. To understand Marikana the event, one has to understand Marikana the location, the invisible labour of women and their influential resolve to see justice achieved for the workers. The extensive networks that kept the strikers alive are as important as the militancy of the strikers themselves. The strength of Marikana was not only in the production space but also where it had its roots, at home.

## **Conclusion**

It seems to me that women's work in the home is not supplementary, but rather central and crucial not only for the accumulation of capital, but also for resisting it, including through sustained strike action. Women, therefore, should not simply be seen as homemakers who make no contribution to the mines, or households as tangential spaces. Rather, we need to see women's reproductive activities as critical in simultaneously holding together the mines and shaping their politics of production.

It seems that production targets set for workers are also indirectly set for women as they have to make do without their partners, often working longer hours to make up for their absence. They are the ones who frequently have to make adjustments at home based on what is happening at work, even underground. They are a part of and have thoroughly assimilated the life of mineworkers. Thus we ought not to think of Marikana as only a men's struggle, or simply a workplace struggle. It was a struggle that touched the core of women's lives, it was a communal struggle for better living conditions that could only be accessed through a living wage. Women, while sometimes in the background, were protagonists and they kept the strike alive.

In Marikana, the connections between the community and work are vivid and thus it is not possible to speak of 'reproduction as external to production, of home as separate from work or of a life external to capitalism'. Rather, as Brown, Dowling, Harvie and Milburn put it, 'production processes and social reproduction are in perpetual dialogue in all spatial realms and at all times' (Brown et al. 2013, 92). To appreciate this dialogue between the two spaces we need to acknowledge the gendered dynamics of Marikana, rather than ignore or homogenise those involved.

Marikana collapses the distinction between home and work; it was as much about the mines – the workplace – as it was about the living conditions of workers and their families and the role of women, the ways in which they reproduce mine labour at no cost to capital, thus putting more pressure on the already resource-stretched households and communities. Part of what labour scholars have to contend with as they search for answers and meanings of Marikana is to engage seriously with the household. In this article we have drawn attention to the role of women and interrogated the different crises faced by workers and their families. We have argued that fragments of the meanings of Marikana lie in the living conditions of workers and their partners. To look at women and the reproduction space as tangential would be to obscure the very heartbeat of Marikana.

The social, political and economic relations in Marikana converge in daily struggles characterised by marginalisation. When we situate the actions of women within the class struggle, we can begin to join the dots of the multilayered crises experienced in Marikana, giving attention to the levels of poverty, the daily violence through social exclusion faced by the working class, but also to an experience of solidarity that extends well beyond the workplace into the everyday lives of worker communities and the women (and men) who hold them together.

**Asanda Benya**

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## P.S.

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## Footnotes

[1] Between October 2011 and December 2012, I was conducting my PhD research on women  
mineworkers in a mining complex near Marikana. As part of my research, I lived in a mine  
residence and worked with mineworkers underground. When the Marikana massacre happened  
in August 2012 I was living in Rustenburg, about 40 kilometres northwest of Marikana. As some  
of my co-workers were personally affected and their siblings missing and others injured during  
the massacre, I started visiting the area and working with the women in Marikana.

[2] For a detailed map and notes on the geography of Marikana, see Alexander et al. (2012,



[3] The 'Farlam Commission' refers to the Marikana Commission of Inquiry, which was appointed by the African National Congress (ANC) government in the aftermath of the massacre, and led by retired judge Ian Farlam. As will be seen below, the Commission originally held its hearings in Rustenburg, but these were later moved to Centurion in Pretoria. Not without good reason, the wives and mistresses of the slain and injured mineworkers believed the Commission would deliver justice not only in the form of legal and political accountability, but also material compensation for the families of its victims. They attended the hearings religiously, but ultimately would be disappointed. For its part, 'asijiki' became the slogan of the Economic Freedom Fighters, the new radical political party that emerged in opposition to the ANC in 2013, and took up the cause of the Marikana miners and their families.

[4] Social and Labour Plans are a requisite condition of the new mine licensing system defined by the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act of 2002.

[5] Informal settlements have been on the rise in mining towns and a key contributing factor has been the 'living-out allowance', a small pay increment for mineworkers who choose to find their own accommodation instead of using the mine hostels. On this and the other settlement types emerging around Rustenburg, see Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2011); Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu in this issue; and also Ashman and Fine (2013). A detailed report on the state on informal settlements in Rustenburg can be found at HDA (2012). See also HDA (2012) and Mail & Guardian (2013) for a full report on conditions in Marikana and the report on lack of water.

[6] For an overview of the historic relationship between tribal land ownership and the appropriation of mineral revenues by traditional authorities in the Rustenburg region, see Capps and Mnwana in this issue. As with neighbouring chieftaincies, the Bapo-ba-Mogale traditional authority has recently signed a deal with Lonmin to convert its royalty stream into a direct equity stake. However, not all locals are benefiting from these arrangements and there have been several cases against traditional leaderships in the region (including the Bapo-ba-Mogale) who misuse mineral revenues and neglect their 'subjects'. Some have been accused of corruption and not servicing communities, instead using their power and the wealth for self-enrichment. See, for example, Claassens (2012), a case also discussed further by Capps and Mnwana in this issue.

[7] The Madibeng municipality was in the news in January 2014 for lack of water provision to communities within their jurisdiction. See Mail & Guardian (2014) and also refer to Mail & Guardian (2013) for a full report on conditions in Marikana and the report on lack of water.

[8] Malema is the Commander in Chief of a new rival political party. Workers and community members alike are drawn to him, saying he was the first to visit Marikana after the massacre and give support to the workers, families of the slain workers and the community at large. He has been very active in Marikana since the massacre of 16 August 2012 and a number of community members who were once ANC supporters are now supporting Malema's newly formed party, the Economic Freedom Fighters.

[9] According to the South African Social Security Agency, the child support grant is given to primary care-givers of children younger than 18 when parents are earning less than R34,800 for single parents and a combined income of 69,600 for a married couple.

[10] A stokvel is a community saving scheme where members contribute an agreed amount, and either receive a lump sum at the end of the year or a payment that rotates between members

monthly. To increase their returns members are usually encouraged to borrow money from the stokvel and return it with interest. It is up to the individual member what they do with the money: they can either loan it out or use it in their households and return it when it is wanted by the group, at a reasonable interest rate. At the end of the year or in time of need like prolonged strikes, the money is split up and members receive their share. This is repeated every year and women reported that it is their saving grace when times are tough.

[11] For a complementary account of women who were involved in the platinum strike as workers in their own right, see Ntswana's Briefing in this issue.

[12] For detailed discussions of the 'affordability' of the R12,500 living wage demand, and the producer narratives around it during the strike, see the Briefings of both Bowman and Isaacs, and Forslund in this issue.

[13] On the day of the massacre and in its immediate aftermath, 270 strikers were arrested and detained at police stations around Rustenburg, where a number were tortured. All were then charged with the murder of their 34 colleagues, under the apartheid-era 'common purpose' doctrine.

[14] See Hlongwane (2012).

[15] Even those who worked night shifts had at least been able to attend during the day when the Commission was in Rustenburg