



# Coping with Microaggressions: Migrant Servers in Upscale Restaurants

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns  
Cape Town, South Africa

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BEACH BLVD

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**Cover photo:** Restaurants at the Blouberg beachfront. Photo by author.

# Location

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South Africa attracts migrants from across southern and eastern Africa. The refugees described in this case report immigrated to Cape Town from Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo.



In Cape Town, restaurants are in shopping malls, along the seafront in wealthy areas like Sea Point and Camps Bay, and in upscale market areas like the V&A Waterfront and the Central Business District. Most of the people who work in those restaurants live at a distance in the northern suburbs or the townships like Joe Slovo and DuNoon that are sandwiched in between the northern suburbs.

Townships are semi-formal settlements where most of the poor black people who make the underclasses of South Africa stay. Although there are formal houses built by the government, these settlements are also characterized by makeshift shelters known as shacks. These areas are always expanding as new arrivals occupy surrounding areas. The shacks are usually powered via illegal connections to the electricity grid. Base map imagery © Google 2020.

# Introduction

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Most African migrants living in South Africa have seen or experienced xenophobic attacks in the townships and on the streets of cities like Durban and Johannesburg. These attacks are a response by poor black South Africans to the presence of African migrants who are perceived as taking away jobs, and whom politicians blame for increasing pressure on social services. The attacks are fueled by the populist rhetoric of politicians determined to divert attention from their persistent failures at service delivery and their unchecked corruption. Xenophobic attacks are a big problem for migrants, but migrants also experience daily microaggressions that are symptoms of the larger problem of xenophobia but tend to be overshadowed by the grand narrative. This report explores the microaggressions that foreign restaurant servers face in their workplaces and how they learn to cope with them. These microaggressions are directed at immigrants by people from different racial groups, both intentionally and unintentionally.

## Definition of Microaggressions

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The term “microaggressions” refers to intentional and unintentional, verbal and non-verbal negative behaviors directed at an individual, a particular racial group, or a minority community (Agarwal 2019). These chronic discriminatory stressors are typically subtle and frequent, but “because of their cumulative characteristic, they are more harmful than acute stressors,” (Rivera et al, 2010: 68). Because they occur almost daily “these can often be ignored in the workplace because there is no explicit intent to degrade, exclude or discriminate,” (Agarwal 2019) as the perpetrators mostly commit microaggressions out of ignorance. In the examples below, microaggressions have the effect of reminding migrant servers that they do not belong.

# The Author's Position in Cape Town and Experiences with Research

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Some of the microaggressions I discuss here were my own experiences or those of my colleagues where I worked. Others I heard about from friends working in various parts of the city. Although I have moved on with my life and career, my friendships with these individuals have not been shaken, and we still communicate via social media. As a migrant and former waiter, I still consider myself an “assigned insider” to this group of migrant servers (Irgil 2020). We all share the stories and laugh about them together.

I focus on this subject because minor, mundane incidents are part of the story of xenophobia towards African migrants in South Africa and need to be shared. When I read Tafadzwa Zimunhu Taruvinga’s groundbreaking memoir, *The Educated Waiter*, I related strongly to his experiences. Taruvinga’s book is about his experiences working at a restaurant in the small city of Makhanda, where he was an Economics undergraduate at Rhodes University, where I am now a Ph.D. student. Many African migrants face microaggressions similar to what my friends and I encountered in the workplace. However, in telling these stories it is not my intention to present myself or my colleagues as victims of an unfair system.

## Scenes of Microaggression

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This section gives a few examples that I or my colleagues and friends experienced while working in restaurants in Cape Town. After presenting these scenes, I will analyze why migrants take these jobs despite the prevalence of microaggressions, and then explore the effects of these microaggressions on migrant wellbeing and integration.

### Scene 1: Gene

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Genevieve,<sup>1</sup> a Congolese waitress at a family restaurant in Platteklouf Village in the Northern Suburbs of Cape Town, was working four, four-person tables (called four-tops) on her Tuesday night shift. Genevieve is affectionately known as Gene. It was then that a lady with three kids walked in. Gene greeted her and ushered them to their seats. She introduced herself, handed them menus and asked if

<sup>1</sup> All the names used in this research are not the real names of the informants.

she could bring them something to drink. The lady told her to give them a bit more time. Gene went to stand at the far end, keeping an eye on them. The kids went to the play area. The lady grabbed the day's paper and started reading, occasionally checking her phone. After about fifteen minutes, Gene went to check on her, but she waved her away, telling her that she would signal her when she was ready to place her order. More guests trickled in, and Gene's other tables filled up. She took their orders, punched them into the computer and went downstairs to fetch their beverages.

While Gene was downstairs, the lady she had left reading the newspaper called her kids from the play area and stormed out without saying a word. The next morning, she phoned the restaurant manager<sup>2</sup> to complain about a waitress "with a weird accent" who messed up her birthday by failing to serve her and her family on time. The operator phoned Gene and told her she had been suspended for a week, pending a hearing. She did not give Gene a chance to speak as she was not interested in hearing her side of the story, stating that "the customer is always right." At the hearing, the operator told her in front of the restaurant's attorney that, "In other cultures, people's birthdays do matter." Gene signed her first warning for the year and went back to work.<sup>3</sup>

## Scene 2: Keith

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Keith is a Zimbabwean waiter at an upmarket restaurant at the Century City Canal Walk mall. An old man walked into the food outlet, pointed to Keith and said, "I want you to serve me." Keith complied and ushered the man to a table by the window where he would have a picturesque view. Keith introduced himself with a smile. "Where are you from?" the old man asked. "I am from Zimbabwe sir," Keith responded. The old man said, "Oh good old Rhodesia. I am also from Rhodesia. So, which town are you from?" Keith was annoyed,<sup>4</sup> but did not want to show it, so he calmly responded, "I am from Chinhoyi, the town to the north-west of Harare sir." "Oh, you mean Sinoia, the district service center with the famous caves. I did not know that it is now a town. I am from Salisbury, the capital city. Rhodesia is such a beautiful country. I miss home," the old man concluded. Keith was agitated but knew he would be suspended or fired if the guest complained to the operator that the waiter was rude because he had argued with him.

## Scene 3: Costa

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When evenings are quiet, especially in the middle of the week, the manager usually dismisses all the servers around 8pm, except for one who is experienced and efficient. One Tuesday evening, a Zimbabwean named Costa was selected to remain on the floor as others folded their aprons and headed home. An old white couple walked into the shop, and Costa greeted them and ushered them to a table. When Costa introduced himself, the old man looked at his wife and smiled, then told Costa that

<sup>2</sup> This term refers to the person who is usually assigned to oversee the daily operations of the restaurant. In most cases the operator is also a minority shareholder or business partner.

<sup>3</sup> An employee would be fired on accumulating three warnings in a year.

<sup>4</sup> Rhodesia refers to the unofficial state that replaced the British colony in what is now Zimbabwe in 1965-1979. It is associated with the colonial era and modern-day white supremacy.

he wanted to be served by someone who speaks Afrikaans.<sup>5</sup> When Costa explained he was the only server that night, they told him to call the manager, Andre, who could speak the language. After reiterating what Costa had told them, Andre suggested they had two options, either to communicate with the waiter in a language he understood or to walk out of the restaurant. The old man then apologized to the manager and asked him to let Costa come back to serve them. “Your manager is rude” the old man whispered to Costa.

## Scene 4: Peter

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Mai Tino<sup>6</sup> was a regular guest at one of the busiest restaurants at the V&A Waterfront. Most of the experienced servers avoided serving her as she often demanded extra food for free and complained over petty things. The managers also knew this but pretended to like her because she was friendly with the operator of the restaurant. Mai Tino always sat at her regular table and would send someone to speak with the operator. Most of the servers did not like to take her orders in the presence of the operator because Mai Tino demanded extras and the operator just nodded in agreement. That put them in an odd position as the operator did not like the free extras but tolerated Mai Tino who was her favorite regular guest. If Mai Tino came to the restaurant when the operator was not there, she could also text their boss letting her know that so and so was playing or not doing any work.

One day, Peter, a confident and promising young waiter from Zimbabwe arrived at the table intending to serve her, but Mai Tino did not bother to respond to his questions. Instead she scrutinized him from head to toe and then signaled the manager to come to the table. “Why are you sending this inexperienced waiter to me? I do not like that! He looks dirty after all!” The manager apologized and made sure Mai Tino would be served by one of the senior waiters.

## Scene 5: Tatenda

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In 2011, South Africa’s parliamentarians were debating *The Protection of Information Bill*, which would impact the operations of journalists. Two middle aged men walked into a restaurant on the Blouberg beachfront. Tatenda seated them and went to get the beers they requested. When he came back, they were debating the merits of the *Bill*. One of them turned to Tatenda and asked him, “Excuse me, where are you from, brother?” When Tatenda told him that he was from Zimbabwe, the guest went on to say, “I understand in your country journalists can be arrested for exposing corruption by the politicians. Do you know anything about the legislation that is applied to censor them?” The other guest shook his head, laughed hard, and said, “This guy is only a waiter. How would he know that?” Tatenda calmly

<sup>5</sup>Afrikaans is one of eleven official languages of South Africa along with English, isiNdebele, Sepedi, seSotho, seSwati, Tswana, XiTsonga, Tshivenda, isiXhosa and isiZulu. It is the home language of some seven million South Africans, and the third most common language after isiZulu and isiXhosa. Afrikaans is the first language of South Africa’s mixed-race people (known as Coloureds) and of many white South Africans.

<sup>6</sup> Instead of calling mothers by their birth names, Shona people prefix the name of the first-born child with “Mai” which translates to “Mother of.”

explained Zimbabwe's draconian *Access to Information and Protection of Privacy of Act*<sup>7</sup> and the negative impact it had on investigative journalism.

# What Drives African Migrants into the Hospitality Industry

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In the face of these microaggressions, why would African migrants in South Africa choose to work in such a hostile environment? Most of the migrants employed in the restaurants of Cape Town are from Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe. Many are educated and would prefer to work in different sectors of South Africa's economy if permitted. They include trained teachers, university degree holders and technical college graduates. However, they work in the hospitality sector because they face obstacles in other sectors, especially government delays in issuing work permits. Serving in the restaurant allows them to earn money for rent and food while exploring more lucrative options. I spoke to one qualified teacher working as a waitress because she did not have enough money to send her qualifications to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).<sup>8</sup> She could not teach without the SAQA evaluation. Even when she raised the required amount, the evaluation process took place at a snail's pace. She also had to register with the South African Council of Educators.

I am also friends with a graphic designer who left his family back in Zimbabwe, as what he earned back home was inadequate to sustain his wife and two kids and his younger siblings. His widowed mother expected him to help as the first born in the family.<sup>9</sup> When he arrived in Cape Town, he had no money. However, his friend found him a job at the family restaurant where he was working. He worked extra hours to raise rent money and buy a laptop so he could start applying for jobs after he got home late after work. Working as a waiter helped him invest in the equipment that he needed to find his line of work. The same applies to two other friends now working in the music industry, one as a singer and one as a music producer. Both saved enough to set up studios which now produce recordings.

<sup>7</sup> AIPPA was only repealed at the beginning of July 2020.

<sup>8</sup> SAQA provides an evaluation certificate stating the local equivalent of the qualification obtained at a foreign institution.

<sup>9</sup> It is common practice among black Africans that a brother or sister who makes it financially is expected to take care of the parents and younger siblings, sometimes even including the extended family members. Commonly known as "black tax" in South Africa, this practice impacts the ability of black professionals to save and build generational wealth.



Some get into the service industry to earn money to pay fees for their studies. Claude arrived in Cape Town from the French-speaking DR Congo barely able to speak English. He joined his brother, a student at the Cape Peninsular University of Technology (CPUT), who was working as a waiter to pay his study fees and rent. When his brother brought him to one of the managers, Claude was recruited as a barman. The job helped him pay for the English lessons at the Belville Public Library. Six months later, he was promoted to a waiter which paid much more. A few years later, Claude also enrolled at CPUT for a Civil Engineering degree. He paid the fees himself through his waitron work.

## Debunking Myths

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In 1990 when I came back to South Africa from exile, eight out of every ten workers at a restaurant were South Africans, the remaining 20% was filled with either Malawians or Zimbabweans. Today 100% of the workforce is non-South African...The percentage of South Africans working in a restaurant must be higher than that of non-South Africans. That's a new economy we are advocating for, in the agricultural sector as well.

The statement above was uttered by South Africa's Finance Minister, Tito Mboweni, just a few days into the lockdown phase after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Zimbabweans and Malawians do not constitute 100% of the hospitality workforce, but his statement might have drastic implications for migrants. We are already seeing the backlash from local truck drivers who are burning delivery trucks driven by foreign nationals.

The "casualization" of labor in the hospitality industry is something the South African government has known about for decades: migrants are treated like disposable human beings with no protection from the government. There are no laws protecting African migrants. If a South African employee is disgruntled with their treatment in the workplace, they have unions and the CCMA<sup>10</sup> to turn to (Nortier 2019). However, foreign nationals who dare to launch complaints through the CCMA experience unfair representation and their cases take longer. Also, migrants in the hospitality sector have no employment benefits. A conversation with a friend who works at a popular restaurant franchise revealed that migrants only "earn as they work," meaning they earn an hourly rate of R23 (equivalent to USD 1.36), with the rest of their earnings coming from tips.<sup>11</sup>

Foreign servers are often the hardest workers. As Malan (2017) highlights, "they do come with a radically different attitude toward work, invariably born of desperation." But their desperation makes them susceptible to exploitation by callous employers who don't have to worry about them seeking legal retribution. Some migrants are shouted down by their employers in front of the guests if they make mistakes, and they rarely protest as they know they would be fired on the spot.

<sup>10</sup> The [Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration \(CCMA\)](#) is a dispute resolution body established by the Labour Relations Act, 66 of 1995.

<sup>11</sup>While there are some restaurants with a fixed minimum wage, in those that pay an hourly rate, no one checks or cares whether the waiter got anything close to minimum wage or not. It is in such restaurants that waiters are classified as "casual workers."

# The Effects of Microaggressions on Integration in the Workplace

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Workplace microaggressions have a negative impact on migrants' self-esteem, and therefore on their effort to integrate into work teams, as they are reminded that they are not part of the host society. Some learn to cope and soldier on with their work. Others turn this negative into a positive. One migrant said he turns a blind eye on microaggressions by working harder and remaining calm and nice to his guests. As a result, he earns more than the manager at the end of the month because of his tips. He seems to get satisfaction from that and uses it as his form of revenge.

Yet, some fail to cope. One migrant I know from Malawi said she left a toxic workplace where she was constantly on the receiving end of microaggressions about her accent. She said she realized that if she stayed longer, she would lose confidence and make mistakes she would have to pay for, since many restaurant owners deduct from servers' earnings to cover any slip ups in their service.

Integration is a two-way process in which the immigrants and the host population make efforts to accept and accommodate one another. This is not the case in restaurants where foreign nationals are the ones making the effort to integrate, while the clients "other" them in return. Some restaurant operators do see the need to build strong united workforces and organize workshops for their staff and trips to the wine farms, affording the employees time to bond as a unit.

## Conclusion

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Microaggressions are not just about race. Derogatory and denigrating messages are also directed at foreigners. Not every microaggressor intends to insult the recipient, people sometimes do it out of ignorance. But migrant servers cannot easily cope with microaggressions. Some break down and quit the job. Migrant exploitation is used by government officials to divide people at critical moments. It is often up to restaurant operators to see the value of building a united workforce with local and foreign nationals.

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# About the RIT Project

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The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

## Our goals are twofold

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Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

## Why now?

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The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

## For more on RIT

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On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

[www.refugeesintowns.org](http://www.refugeesintowns.org)

# About the Author

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**Barnabas** is a Ph.D. student at Rhodes University, and was previously a Curator and Assistant Researcher at the University of Cape Town's Centre for Curating the Archive. He is a Zimbabwean who moved to Cape Town in November 2008 and is currently based in Makhanda in the Eastern Cape Province. He has since studied, worked, and lived with fellow migrants from Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Somalia, and Rwanda, among other countries of origin. He is interested in the experiences and treatment of migrants by host populations and immigration authorities. He also writes about contemporary art from Southern Africa. Barnabas studied at Midlands State University in Zimbabwe, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Stellenbosch.

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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