

Mamas behind the wheel

Female taxi drivers in Rustenburg

Driving taxis is a tough job for women. There are gender issues related to working in a male-dominated environment, the disruption of family life, fear of hijacking, rape, and your taxi being stolen, writes **Patricia Pinky Nkete**.

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, there are three modes of public transportation, namely minibus taxis, buses and trains. Studies by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Van der Reis reveal that 65% of South Africans travel by taxis and only 20% by bus and 13% by train. According to Arrive Alive and Sauti people prefer to use taxis because they are accessible, convenient, run late night services, and pick up and drop off commuters at their homes, compared to buses and trains.

The taxi industry in South Africa emerged in the wake of the apartheid government's policy of economic deregulation initiated in 1987, and the majority of the black population started using taxis to travel from rural to urban areas to work. The 'minibus' taxi is, thus, a common form of public transport in contemporary South Africa and is still mostly used by commuters from black working-class communities.

According to ILO and Arrive Alive the South African taxi industry consists of about 150,000 minibus taxis and 185,000 workers. Most of the workers are black male taxi drivers – which means the taxi industry is male-dominated and in many respects considered as

an exclusively male profession. Less than 2% in the industry are women and many of them carry out the administrative work for the taxi associations, write Barrett and ILO. However, in an era that has witnessed accelerated female emancipation and recruitment in traditionally male-dominated industries, there has been an observable, be it small, presence of female taxi drivers on the road, which could suggest that the masculine domination of the taxi industry is being challenged.

The focus of the study from which this article is based was on women taxi drivers employed in the male-dominated job. Studies in the field of women in precarious occupations tend to focus on mining, food, retail, and footwear and clothing industries, argue Kenny, Mosoetsa and Van der Westhuizen and Ralushai and little is known about female taxi drivers. In general, literature on the taxi industry focuses on issues such as the history of the industry, violence, recapitalisation policy, accessibility of transport for women residing in rural areas and disabled people, trade unions and organising, ways to improve the taxi industry, road safety and male taxi drivers' behaviour.

The literature clearly suggests that the taxi industry was never meant to include women. Van Schalkwyk states that the under representation of women became evident when he only came across one female taxi owner after visiting a number of minibus taxi ranks in the Western Cape, North West and Gauteng provinces.

As this is the case, it is apparent that there are few scholarly studies that focus on female taxi drivers in South Africa. Apart from Khosa's study, there are newspaper articles and a blog called City Search Blog on the Internet on female taxi drivers.

The goals of this study were to explore the perceptions and experiences of female taxi drivers in Rustenburg. The aims were therefore to investigate the challenges female taxi drivers faced and the kind of strategies they employed to cope and survive in the taxi industry.

The study contributes to previous ones on male-dominated industries, particularly in the informal sector and also in precarious work. The study also provides an understanding of the lived experiences of female taxi drivers and the challenges they face on a daily basis. Finally, the study aims



Taxis at a rank in Rustenburg. Credit: Patricia Pinky Nkete.

to influence transport policies, to understand the issues female taxi drivers grapple with and thus, make sure that the industry is a safe working environment for women.

Of the 13 black female taxi drivers who work in the Rustenburg taxi industry who were interviewed most are in their 50s (7) – the oldest is 62 years old and the youngest 34. There are very few females in their late 40s (3). Out of the 13 participants, only one female refused to disclose her age. All of the women who participated in the study are parents. Most of the participants are divorcees (7), a considerable number (5) are single, and one of the participants is a widow.

Building from Khosa, this article explores a number of critical issues surrounding gender relations in the South African minibus taxi industry. Through interviews and observations, the study aimed to capture the possible challenges that female taxi drivers face and examines what strategies these women employ to cope in their workplace.

There are three main types of job categories that exist in the minibus taxi industry: taxi operators/owners, taxi owner-drivers and taxi drivers. The interviews were conducted

with women across all the categories. Most are taxi operators, followed by owner-female drivers, and lastly female taxi drivers.

CHALLENGES

One of the major challenges for female taxi drivers includes striking a balance between working odd hours and family responsibilities as well as safety issues.

Even though both men and women are affected by the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities, women are considered to be most affected by work-family dilemmas, especially when children come into play. The literature contends that one of the reasons for this is because of traditional gender roles where women were confined to the home, argues Easton. Another reason for women to experience 'multiple role conflict'/work-life balance is the fact that 'organisations are still structured and function in ways that do not always support women's career patterns and their need to integrate work with family responsibilities', wrote Cha and Frone.

So it is not surprising for the present study to come out with

the same conclusions. Striking a balance between working odd hours and family responsibilities for female taxi drivers refers to the struggle to run their homes while still remaining committed to their jobs. Taxi driving is highly competitive and time consuming. Because of the extreme hours that the women work it is difficult for them to take care of their children, manage their houses, and attend community activities, such as *stokvels*, funerals and church.

Felicia, a divorced mother and taxi driver, said:

'Eish ausi [sister] as a single [divorced] mother of six children, this job is not easy because even though I knock off at 4:30 pm I get home late because I must drop the taxi off at the owner's house. I also stop by the garage to fill the petrol tank to avoid long queues the following morning. I then take it to the owner's house and after that catch two taxis to my house.'

'By the time I get home, the children are sleeping, sometimes they do not eat or they eat bread because I am too tired to cook. And in the morning when I go to work usually they are still sleeping. So it is very difficult. I spend minutes with them. While at work, I ask myself if they bathed

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thoroughly, if they ate... Since I am not there to see them off to school, I wonder if they went to school or not... It is very sad that my job is so demanding that I cannot be a mother to my children. It is very bad that you do not know about their whereabouts because you are hardly home with them.’

Kgomotso, a 58-year-old mother of one and taxi owner, observed that being a mother who drives a taxi is the most difficult thing to do. She said:

‘When Didi [her daughter] was young, it was difficult to leave her at home. Even though my mother has been supportive helping me with my child. But you worry a lot, asking yourself what if she gets fits [epileptic seizures, Didi suffers from epilepsy] and I am not around. Even if my mother calls me, I cannot run home because I work in the opposite route to our home. The job is tiring to the point that you cannot do house chores.’

Lerato, a 56-year-old single parent of three who owns two taxis expressed similar feelings in finding a balance between driving a taxi and handling family responsibilities. She said:

‘Although I have children who are teenagers and can take care of themselves while I am at work, being a single parent with no relatives around makes it difficult to balance work and home affairs. You must remember that even though I have two taxis of which I drive one, it doesn’t mean that everything is smooth sailing, I have to work the same way I was when I was employed to make money and pay the taxis’ instalments.’

The above stories indicate that these women struggle to balance their work and family

responsibilities. Although work-family balance affects all working women in society, what is unique about these female taxi drivers is that their jobs require them to leave their houses at the crack of dawn and knock off late in the evening. Unlike women who work 8 am to 4 or 5 pm jobs, female taxi drivers do not have the opportunity to leave their houses when their children are awake and after making sure that everything is in order before heading for work. They are also unable to cook supper for their children when they get home.

The work-family balance challenge gets better when one has strong support systems, such as receiving help from parents or extended family members (which is a common thing amongst the black culture) and the age of the children. Some of the participants indicated that it would not have been possible to work in the industry if it was not for the help of their parents. Others said that their children were old enough to take care of themselves, which put them at ease. However, one participant said that even though her children are teenagers, they are still young: they need to be supervised and monitored.

SAFETY ISSUES

The minibus taxi industry is known to be a dangerous business where people often get harassed, hijacked, and even killed. So, not surprisingly, women in the study mentioned that the lack of safety was a serious concern to them. For them, fears relating to rape and being hijacked are of great significance.

This is what Pat said – with a very sad face when she spoke about her general sense of physical safety:

‘Eish ausi [sister] this work is not safe, we are afraid of being raped and hijacked. I have never been raped or hijacked but I have heard so many stories of people being hijacked and killed. There is too much crime in this country. But what can we do?’

On the other hand, Kgomotso mentioned that issues of safety for her related to being sabotaged by her male colleagues:

‘Darling, the taxi industry is not safe. These men burned my taxi in an attempt to get rid of me. There is a lot of theft that takes place at the rank. They steal even tyres (from parked vehicles).

Sweetness is a 62-year-old divorced mother of three who is among the few females who started driving taxis in the early 1970s and currently owns five taxis. When asked if she has ever felt unsafe at work, she responded:

‘Well, back then [when she was a taxi driver] things were different. It was safe to be a female taxi driver and male passengers would never attempt to rape you but now eish! Since you always hear on the news about women being raped all the time – the taxi industry is not safe because you might be raped while at work since in the early hours we transport more men going to the mines than women.

Lesego, who is a 54-year-old mother of one and owner of two taxis referred to the fear of being raped as well:

‘Even though I have never been a victim of rape, it is scary to drive at night or in the early hours of the morning because fellow colleagues have been hijacked and we come across men who are bitter so you will never know when your D day to be raped is.’

Domestic workers *Imbizo*

Space to engage

With regard to the issue of safety, all women reported feeling unsafe at work. This issue was of concern to the female taxi drivers since they were vulnerable. However, for female operators, even though they acknowledged high rates of hijacking and rape, safety is a thing of the past that they reminisced about. The biggest fear they now have is that their taxis can be stolen and their drivers killed.

Rape is one of the pressing challenges that South African women and children face. According to Rape Crisis between 2011 and 2012 there were 64,514 sexual offences reported and that in South Africa, the official statistics say 'a person is sexually assaulted or raped as often as every eight minutes'. Due to stigma attached to rape, many incidents of rape go unreported. Rape Crisis states that the numbers could be higher.

CONCLUSION

Due to the exploitative nature of the minibus taxi industry where employers do not adhere to the law, which is meant to protect the employees, female taxi drivers find it difficult to balance their highly competitive jobs and family responsibilities. With regard to safety issues, female taxi drivers experience 'double vulnerability' compared to their male counterparts, as they are more likely to be hijacked and raped. ^{LB}

Patricia Pinky Nkete is a Sociology masters' student at the University of Johannesburg. This article is based on a presentation made at the South African Sociological Association Annual Congress at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth.

It was a day of solidarity, organising and fun at the Gauteng domestic workers, *Imbizo* in Soweto, Johannesburg in September. **Janet Munakamwe** writes on some of the issues that were discussed.

ISSUES

The *Imbizo* gave the 1,000-plus domestic workers who came – organised and unorganised, locals and migrants – a rare opportunity to talk to the Minister of Labour, Mildred Oliphant, who was in attendance together with labour inspectors who advised on pressing issues for the workers.

In a question and answer session various issues emerged mostly to do with unfair working conditions and lack of clear job descriptions.

Said one worker: 'I don't know my job really, whether I'm a cook, gardener, and security guard, nanny or dog carer. I really need your advice on this.'

Other issues that were raised included:

- Sexual harassment – where extreme cases reported involved rape.
- Working more hours without being paid for overtime.
- Wage cut-offs including irregular pay.
- Employers' resistance to register workers for UIF. If employers did not register workers for UIF, workers were encouraged to call labour inspectors to come and assist.
- Divided solidarity between locals and immigrants.
- Immigrant workers being reportedly scared of joining unions because of documentation problems and therefore preferred to organise as social, ethnic or national networks. Immigration problems to some extent also account for failure to access UIF and maternity benefits.
- Employers' preference of immigrants with the aim of exploiting them.
- Department of Labour (DoL) inspectors should also visit domestic workers' workplaces.
- Labour offices are for all workers to freely consult.
- Skills training should be encouraged so that domestic workers can move to other jobs.