

Racial and Migrant Inequality in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Case of the 2012 Marikana Massacre

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Abstract. This article investigates the 2012 Marikana massacre as a lens through which to understand the persistence of racial and migrant inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite the formal dismantling of apartheid, systemic socioeconomic disparities remain deeply entrenched, particularly within extractive labour sectors. The massacre exemplifies how democratic promises have failed to dismantle racialized structures of economic exploitation and exclusion. Focusing on the concepts of racial capitalism and deportability, this study analyzes how racial and immigration status function as intersecting mechanisms of marginalization. Through theoretical synthesis and critical review of secondary literature and policy analysis, this study explores how Black and migrant workers are simultaneously devalued and disciplined by state and corporate interests. The findings demonstrate that racial inequality is sustained through exploitative labour relations, institutional violence, and unequal access to public services, while migrant workers face added layers of legal precarity, xenophobic exclusion, and social invisibility. These overlapping systems create a structural configuration in which Black migrant workers remain especially vulnerable. The article concludes that addressing these injustices requires policy frameworks that confront racialized capitalism and protect migrant labour rights, thereby fostering a more equitable and inclusive social order in contemporary South Africa.

Keywords: Racial Inequality, Immigrant Inequality, Marikana Massacre, Structural Violence.

1. Introduction

On August 16, 2012, during a wage strike at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, South African police opened fire on striking miners, killing 34 and injuring dozens more. The massacre was the deadliest use of force by South African security forces since the end of apartheid. It shocked a nation that had at least officially transitioned to democracy nearly two decades earlier. Far from receiving recognition or negotiation, the protesting workers, mostly Black and many of them migrants, were met with militarized violence, reflecting the deep entrenchment of socioeconomic inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa. The Marikana massacre thus became a symbol of the "unfinished revolution," highlighting how formal political change failed to dismantle the economic and legal structures of racialized and colonial capitalism.

This event also underscored the layered vulnerability of migrant workers from neighbouring countries such as Lesotho, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. Bound by restrictive immigration laws that

tie legal residency to employment, these migrants faced the threat of deportation if they joined protests or strikes. Their precarious legal status amplified their exposure to employer exploitation and state violence. The massacre revealed not just the continuity of racial inequality, but also how immigration status operates as a second axis of exclusion, one that legalizes disposability and denies access to citizenship rights.

This paper takes the Marikana massacre as a case study to investigate the intersection of racial and immigration-based inequalities in contemporary South Africa. Drawing on theories of racial capitalism and deportability, the paper analyzes how apartheid-era legacies endure through capitalist labour regimes and exclusionary legal structures. Through close secondary data analysis, the paper explores how racial and migrant identities become entangled in sustaining socioeconomic hierarchy. The aim of this research is to reveal how these inequalities are not only parallel but structurally co-constitutive, and how their intersection makes certain populations, especially Black migrant labourers, especially vulnerable to systemic violence, exclusion, and economic immobility.

2. Reappearance of racial inequality

The 2012 Marikana massacre starkly exposes the persistence of racial inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. Although apartheid was formally dismantled in 1994, the political transition did not dismantle the deeply entrenched racial and economic hierarchies that structure South African society. Scholars have pointed out that the mining industry remains a site where these enduring inequalities are particularly visible [1]. At Marikana, Black miners, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the workforce, were subjected to harsh and exploitative labour conditions: long working hours, inadequate safety protections, and extremely low wages that failed to meet basic subsistence needs [2]. The economic marginalization of Black miners is mirrored in their residential conditions. Most lived in informal settlements near the mines, lacking access to clean water, electricity, and sanitation [3]. These living conditions reflect not only material deprivation but institutional neglect and the enduring racialized geography of South African cities and industrial zones. This deprivation reinforces a cycle of poverty and renders upward mobility increasingly unattainable for Black families.

To understand why these conditions persist decades after the end of apartheid, it is essential to apply the theoretical lens of racial capitalism. Cedric Robinson defines racial capitalism as a system in which capital accumulation depends upon the differentiation and exploitation of racially subordinated populations [4]. Racism is not incidental to capitalism in this model. Rather, it is a constitutive element of its formation. In South Africa, the mining economy was historically structured on the exploitation of cheap Black labour, regulated through pass laws, segregation, and forced removals. Though these formal mechanisms may have been repealed, their economic logic persists. The Marikana massacre exemplified racial capitalism in practice. When striking workers demanded a modest wage increase and improved living conditions, they threatened not only the profit margins of multinational corporations but also the racialized structure of labour itself. Rather than negotiate, the state responded with violent repression: police opened fire, killing 34 miners in a single day. This was not an isolated event but a continuation of the racialized policing of labour that has long served to maintain economic order [5]. In this context, Black labour continues to be valued for its productivity, while Black life remains expendable when it challenges capital.

The role of the state in this tragedy underscores its complicity in the reproduction of racial inequality. Then-Police Commissioner Riah Phiyega publicly defended the police actions, framing them as necessary to restore order [5]. Her defence exemplifies how state institutions work to suppress labour dissent and protect elite interests. Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence

helps illuminate this process: violence does not always occur through direct force, but also through institutional arrangements that systematically deny people the ability to meet their needs [6]. In Marikana, the state's refusal to address workers' concerns, combined with its readiness to deploy lethal force, constitutes structural violence that disproportionately harms Black communities. These inequities in labour and housing are compounded by systemic disparities in education and healthcare. Access to quality education remains highly unequal in South Africa, with schools in predominantly Black areas often underfunded, understaffed, and lacking basic resources [1]. As a result, many miners have limited formal education, which restricts their access to skilled, safer, and better-paid employment opportunities [3]. Educational deprivation thus becomes both a symptom and a mechanism of economic marginalization. Furthermore, healthcare access is similarly stratified. Public health facilities in communities like Marikana are under-resourced and poorly equipped to deal with occupational injuries and chronic illnesses endemic to mining labour. Without adequate healthcare, workers are rendered more vulnerable—both physically and politically—to exploitation. These conditions, including poor health, limited education, and insecure labour, interact to form a structure in which Black miners are trapped in intergenerational cycles of disadvantage [7].

Taken together, the disparities in labour conditions, living environments, education, and healthcare reflect a broader architecture of racialized exclusion. Although South Africa's post-apartheid constitution guarantees equality, its political economy continues to operate through logics of disposability, extraction, and control. The Marikana massacre, far from being an exceptional moment, was a violent reassertion of this racialized economic order. These conditions, including economic exploitation, institutionalized neglect, and state-sanctioned violence, do not merely reflect inequality but actively reproduce it. As the Marikana massacre tragically revealed, Black workers in South Africa continue to be treated as expendable: their labour is indispensable, but their lives remain politically devalued.

3. Inequality of immigrant status

The intersection between immigration status and structural inequality significantly heightened the vulnerability of migrant miners during the Marikana crisis. A substantial portion of the striking workers originated from neighbouring countries such as Lesotho, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe [4]. These migrant miners were disproportionately concentrated in the most precarious and lowest-paid positions, where they faced intensified forms of economic exploitation, restrictive legal conditions, and deep social marginalization compared to their South African counterparts. One key concept that illuminates this condition is “deportability,” which refers to the persistent threat of removal faced by individuals whose legal presence is conditional and revocable [8]. In South Africa, migrant workers' residency permits were typically tied directly to their employment contracts, giving employers extraordinary leverage over their lives and movement. Under the country's immigration regime, participation in undocumented strikes or collective actions could lead to immediate cancellation of work permits and subsequent deportation [4]. This legal precarity functioned as a form of labour discipline, deterring organization and effectively criminalizing protest. At Marikana, employers exploited this dependence with impunity, enforcing wage suppression and stricter labour controls in the knowledge that migrant workers had limited institutional protections and few viable avenues for resistance. This system institutionalized a migratory wage gap, where the constant threat of expulsion deprived migrant labourers of the bargaining power necessary to advocate for better conditions. Migrant workers became a hyper-exploitable workforce, not merely because of economic need, but because their very presence in the country could be rendered illegal the moment

they engaged in political dissent [9]. In this context, legal status became a tool of extraction and control rather than a safeguard of rights.

Beyond the workplace, xenophobic sentiment further compounded migrant miners' isolation. Many local South Africans, including some fellow workers, perceived migrants as economic competitors, blaming them for job scarcity, strained public services, and wage stagnation [10]. These perceptions translated into widespread social exclusion, making it difficult for migrant workers to access adequate housing, build community ties, or find solidarity in labour struggles. As a result, migrants in Marikana experienced a form of double marginalization: they were exploited by employers and simultaneously rejected by the communities in which they lived and worked. This exclusion extended well beyond the labour market. Migrant families faced persistent barriers to accessing public services such as education and healthcare. In the educational system, for example, immigrant children were routinely marginalized through language obstacles, documentation challenges, and institutional neglect [4]. These barriers curtailed long-term prospects for upward mobility and reinforced patterns of exclusion across generations. The children of migrant miners were thus trapped in the same structural conditions that had shaped their parents' lives, limiting access to better futures even before adulthood. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and exacerbated these embedded vulnerabilities. Emergency measures and public relief efforts often excluded non-nationals from basic provisions such as food assistance, unemployment benefits, and medical care [8]. These omissions revealed how citizenship operates as a gatekeeping mechanism of structural exclusion, determining not only who receives state protection but also who is deemed worthy of survival in times of crisis. Migrants, already at the margins, were pushed even further outside the bounds of state concern.

In this light, the inequalities faced by migrant miners at Marikana cannot be interpreted merely as a byproduct of economic hardship. Rather, they result from the convergence of multiple systems of power: immigration law, labour markets, xenophobic social dynamics, and institutional neglect. This interlocking configuration produced a particularly vulnerable population, one systematically silenced, exploited, and rendered disposable. Thus, the Marikana massacre should not only be viewed as a labour dispute turned violent but also as a tragedy of conditional belonging. Migrant workers were not treated as full participants in a democratic society but as bodies permitted to labour, only so long as they remained compliant and invisible. Their legal status, far from offering protection, became a mechanism through which they could be punished for asserting their humanity.

4. Structural differences and intersectional mechanisms of racial and immigrant status inequality

Racial and immigration-based inequalities operate as distinct yet interwoven systems of exclusion, producing layered forms of social and economic marginalization. While often studied separately, their interaction reveals a deeper structure of intersecting oppressions. These overlapping mechanisms not only constrain socioeconomic mobility but also reinforce one another, compounding disadvantage over time. This section synthesizes interdisciplinary research to explore how racial and immigrant inequalities are co-constituted through legal frameworks, capitalist labour regimes, and public discourses.

Racial inequality, particularly in contexts such as the United States, Britain, and post-apartheid South Africa, is deeply rooted in historical systems of white supremacy, institutional racism, and capitalist extraction. Cedric Robinson's theory of racial capitalism contends that capitalism has always relied upon racial hierarchies to produce surplus value through the systematic exploitation of racialized labour. Within this framework, Black and Brown workers are not only underpaid but

positioned as socially expendable. Immigration policy further compounds this inequality by encoding racialized exclusions into law, systematically denying immigrant populations access to employment, healthcare, and full civic participation under the guise of legal regulation.

A critical distinction between racial and immigrant inequality lies in the unique legal precarity associated with migration status. The concept of “deportability” illustrates how immigrant workers are subjected to intensified vulnerability, as their right to remain in a country is often contingent upon continuous employment and political compliance. Immigration legislation in many contexts allows employers or the state to revoke residency permits if migrant workers participate in strikes or protests, rendering them legally invisible and economically disposable [4]. This legal vulnerability intersects with racial discrimination and xenophobic nationalism, exacerbating exclusion across multiple domains. Racialized immigrant communities often experience fractured labour solidarity, deepened economic insecurity, and heightened exposure to state surveillance and repression [5]. Moreover, the intersection of gender with race and immigration status produces a compounding effect on inequality. It emphasizes that migrant women face disproportionate declines in physical and mental health due to socioeconomically rooted workplace discrimination, intensified by racial and gender bias [10]. It shows that racial and immigrant inequalities do not operate in isolation but intersect in ways that reproduce structural subordination across employment, healthcare, and social integration.

Structural economic exclusion remains a central axis where immigrant status and racialized labour converge. Minority immigrants are disproportionately concentrated in precarious, low-wage, and hazardous occupations. It argues that disinvestment in racialized communities and exploitative labour regimes are co-dependent processes that reinforce marginalization [10]. These inequalities are magnified by spatial segregation and limited access to public goods. For example, the research shows how Latino immigrants in the U.S. are framed through ethnocentric narratives as “illegal,” “monolithic,” and undeserving, leading to stigmatization, restricted healthcare access, and blocked opportunities for social mobility [10]. These discourses naturalize exclusion and devalue the lives and labour of entire communities.

Furthermore, the impact of racial capitalism and legal precarity is particularly evident in public health outcomes. It documents how racist policy structures and anti-immigrant frameworks have led to chronic under-resourcing of health systems for minority and migrant communities, producing higher rates of occupational illness and mortality [11]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these disparities were laid bare: immigrants and racialized workers were overrepresented in frontline, high-risk jobs, yet excluded from relief programs, health protections, and legal safeguards [8]. Even as educational levels among some minority groups rise, systemic segregation and labour market stratification continue to block meaningful socioeconomic advancement [12].

In sum, while racial and immigrant status inequalities differ in their institutional origins and modes of enforcement, they are structurally entangled. Racial inequality is rooted in historical regimes of colonization and white supremacy, while immigrant inequality is often enacted through legal exclusions and national border regimes. Yet both are mobilized by capitalist states to manage surplus labour, regulate mobility, and preserve elite power. To address these inequalities, reforms must go beyond isolated legal protections or diversity programs. What is needed is a structural rethinking of how race, migration, and labour intersect in global capitalism, including the expansion of migrant rights, equitable access to public services, and dismantling racialized narratives of belonging and worth.

5. Conclusion

This paper has used the 2012 Marikana massacre as a case study to examine the structural roots and intersectional nature of racial and immigration-based inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa. By applying the frameworks of racial capitalism and deportability, the analysis revealed that the massacre was not an isolated tragedy but rather a culmination of long-standing systemic violence against Black and migrant mineworkers. These workers, primarily Black South Africans and immigrants from neighbouring countries such as Lesotho and Mozambique, were concentrated in the lowest-paid and most dangerous roles, living in degraded housing and enduring substandard access to healthcare and education. Their vulnerability was not only economic but also legal and political, as their right to remain in the country was tied to employment, which in turn curtailed their ability to strike or protest.

The significance of this analysis lies in its demonstration of how racial and immigrant inequalities not only coexist but also mutually reinforce one another. Racial capitalism ensures that Black labour remains cheap and expendable, while immigration policy functions as a tool of labour control, rendering migrant workers more compliant by threatening their legal status. The massacre thus exposes the post-apartheid state's complicity in sustaining a racially stratified economic order. Even as the political regime shifted to formal democracy, the underlying logic of racialized exploitation persisted, now rearticulated through the language of market efficiency, border security, and social order. The state, far from acting as a neutral mediator, aligned itself with mining corporations, deploying lethal force to silence demands for dignity and fair compensation. This highlights the enduring power of structural violence, where institutions normalize inequality and render it invisible until moments of rupture, such as Marikana.

Looking forward, the Marikana massacre should not be remembered solely as a moment of police brutality but as a mirror reflecting the unfinished struggles of post-apartheid transformation. If South Africa is to move toward a more just and equitable future, a number of structural interventions are essential. First, labour protections must be extended to all workers, regardless of immigration status, including the right to organize and protest without fear of deportation. Second, residency rights should be decoupled from employment, thereby reducing the precarity that enables employer abuse. Third, there must be investment in universal access to quality healthcare, education, and housing, particularly in mining communities that have long been sites of racial and economic dispossession. Finally, national efforts must address xenophobia and racial prejudice, both in policy and public discourse, to ensure the full inclusion of migrants and racial minorities in South African society.

Without such reforms, the deep-rooted structures that enabled Marikana will remain intact, reproducing inequality and violence in subtler but no less damaging forms. Only by addressing these overlapping systems can South Africa move toward the promise of a democracy that values all lives equally, regardless of race or national origin.

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