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The homeless in historical context

Seán Morrow

This article puts homelessness in South Africa in a historical context. It relates contemporary homelessness to changing political, economic, agrarian, domestic and gender matters, and suggests that homelessness is more a manifestation of problems in these areas than an issue in its own right. The article is based on interviews in rural, small town and urban environments in the provinces of Mpumalanga, Limpopo and Gauteng. These reveal the isolation and lack of social networks amongst the homeless people interviewed, and the extensive presence of homelessness not just in cities but also in small rural centres.

Keywords: homelessness; history; oral testimony; South Africa

1. Introduction

This article records histories of misery and deprivation. It is not possible to find in them even the grim humour that can arm a person against adversity. These are records of the lives of people who eat from dustbins, sleep under shop fronts and bridges and in graveyards, whose personal lives are generally in disarray, and for whom there is no comfort or support from a nuclear or extended family.

It is difficult to decide what tone should be adopted in recording such intense personal tragedies. The lives of these social casualties demand pity, although not sentimentality. They demand an attempt at understanding. Above all, they require an acknowledgement that ‘there but for the grace of God go we’.

This article is based on the histories of 45 homeless individuals in one part of South Africa, recorded in the first half of 2005. Their lives are obscure and some would say not respectable. These are, to borrow Cosmas Desmond’s (1971) phrase, ‘discarded people’. However, their stories help us to understand not just their own situation but also the wider contemporary society and how it has come to be like this. This theme is not limited in place or time. Just as a focus on the ‘sturdy beggars’ of sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century England can tell us much about the forces at work in that society, so can the stories of the homeless, the vagrants and the street people of twenty-first-century South Africa tell us much about the broader society of which they are part (Hill, 1964:259–97).

This article is thus an attempt to illuminate the problem of homelessness, which is part of the larger phenomena of poverty, migration, changes in family structure and changes in agriculture and other economic sectors. It examines the personal histories of these 45 homeless and sets them in a broader historical and social context. These 45 participants do not necessarily represent the whole population of the homeless, nor is the area where they were interviewed representative of the country as a whole. However, there is much to be learned by listening carefully, sympathetically, but also critically to their voices, and setting them in the context of historical and other scholarship.
2. Place, time and the individual

The materials for this article are the sources cited, the interviews with the homeless, and interactions with colleagues in this study. The interviews are at the core. They were conducted with social awareness and great linguistic skill by Joseph Makola, an experienced research assistant, in small towns and rural areas of southern Limpopo and western Mpumulanga, in substantial provincial centres, notably Polokwane and Nelspruit, and in and around the cities of Pretoria and Johannesburg. The rural parts of these areas are characterised by large-scale commercial farming interspersed by former homelands; by the proximity of the largest conurbation in the country; by the relative proximity also of impoverished Mozambique, the source of many migrants to South Africa, and of Swaziland; and, at a greater distance but still linked by many ties, by the presence of the heavily populated province of KwaZulu-Natal.

There was no difficulty finding appropriate people to interview. Homeless people were evident everywhere. Among the places where they were to be found were taxi ranks, cemeteries, street corners and the vicinity of possible places of employment. There seemed no reluctance to be interviewed, even when a woman was being interviewed by a man. Women are, nonetheless, probably under-represented in this study. The time of day can be important. For instance, an attempt to interview two women at Groblersdal taxi rank, prostitutes who depend on men for whatever accommodation they may find day by day, foundered on the fact that by 11 in the morning they were already too drunk to speak coherently. Some homeless people are too mentally disturbed to make an interview possible. The stories of such people are important. They are not, however, represented here.

A historical account that does not take the pulse of individuals is likely to be lifeless and inadequate. To emphasise that homeless people have their own varied personalities, strengths, weaknesses and prejudices, six interviews from small rural towns are therefore featured in some detail. This brings individual traits into view, and the broad framework outlined above encompasses and illuminates these cases.

We interviewed homeless people as we encountered them, and did not attempt, apart from visiting a variety of environments, to choose a representative sample. Our ethnographic method did not lend itself to this. Figure 1 shows where interviews took place, as well as other places mentioned by the six highlighted informants. Table 1 shows the number of times certain themes that seemed important to the 45 interviewees in explaining their plight were emphasised. This is a crude distillation of often nuanced responses, but it gives an idea of the main concerns of the homeless in one part of South Africa.

It is striking, and perhaps not surprising among such a dispersed and demoralised group, that personal problems rather than broader issues in South Africa’s political economy figure prominently. Lacking a broader explanatory framework for the disaster that has overwhelmed them, they often tend to focus on the proximate causes of their homelessness such as family problems and illness.

3. Definitions

The question of how homelessness might be defined has exercised all the authors in this special issue. In this article, a reasonably wide definition is assumed. For example, can we define a woman as homeless who ekes out an existence in the vicinity of shebeens and taxi ranks, sheltered most nights under one roof or another in return for sexual favours? Is an unemployed man homeless who slips into a mine hostel and shares accommodation
with a friend until he is ejected by the authorities or the friend asks him to leave? Can a shack be called a ‘home’? Can we exclude from the housed, for instance, those huddling overnight in cardboard constructions in a trading area? Ultimately, such questions suggest the limitations of this study: the fundamental question, in the end, is not ‘homelessness’, but rather how to understand the combination of factors that go to make up the grinding poverty of which homelessness is one manifestation.

4. Politics
South Africa has a history of state-sponsored homelessness, which is one reason why evictions from overcrowded and insanitary city-centre buildings, or from land reserved...
for structures other than informal dwellings, is such a sensitive contemporary issue. Besides the underlying socio-economic factors such as agrarian change and migration that can lead to homelessness, the South African government, pursuing its agenda of separating races and ethnic groups through the Group Areas Act of 1950 and other legislation, moved people from neighbourhoods and around the country, often with very little provision in the ‘homelands’ for those who were relocated to these supposed ancestral homes. These policies did not in themselves create conditions of absolute homelessness, but they uprooted communities and added new elements of instability to communities often already in crisis (Western, 1981; Platzky & Walker, 1985).

5. Land

Homelessness occurs for many individual and social reasons. Any starting point in discussing it is therefore to some extent arbitrary. However, the land and how it has been and is worked by the people who live on it is a good place to begin, and it leads also to questions of industrialisation and migration and their relationship to homelessness (see, for example, Bundy, 1979; Beinart et al., 1986; Keegan, 1987, 1988; Murray, 1992; James, 2007).

To a considerable extent, the story of homelessness is one of changing agrarian patterns. This is not a simple story, and it varies throughout South Africa and the southern African region. Historically, South African commercial agriculture, which means for the most part white agriculture, was built on the near destruction of an incipient black peasantry. At the same time, the freezing of agrarian patterns in reserves, later renamed ‘homelands’, can be argued to have artificially preserved communal forms of land tenure. In most parts of South Africa, these communal enclaves became overcrowded and environmentally degraded, making it essential for labour to flow outwards to the mines, industries and commercial farms of ‘white’ South Africa. Similar forces came to bear on neighbouring territories, aided by the deliberate policy of encouraging recruitment from such areas, as these migrant labourers were isolated, cheap and malleable. This undermined the bargaining power of South African workers and fractured the working class. Organisations such as the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WENELA) and The Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA) were set up to facilitate this flow of labour. Communities in countries such as Lesotho, Mozambique and Malawi came to rely on the earnings of migrant labourers. More than that, migration became a way of life that generated its own culture, ethos and expectations.

The economic development of southern Africa was built on cheap labour. The gold mines of South Africa were remarkable not for the quality of their ore but rather for the vast quantity they produced. The route chosen to exploit this resource profitably was to mobilise great numbers of labourers, paid at a very low rate. These men were prised off the land by taxation and the impoverishment of the increasingly overcrowded and environmentally degraded reserves into which the African population was penned, destroying, for the most part, the peasant economy. The other side of this coin was the growth of white commercial farming, which benefited from both the decline in peasant farming and the markets opened by urban expansion and the growth in mining. A milestone in this brutal and extended march towards racial discrimination in South Africa was the 1913 Natives’ Land Act. Sol Plaatjie’s 1916
polemic documents the effects of evictions under the Act, describing the ‘groups of families, moving to every point of the compass, and all bivouacked at this point in the open country where we were passing’ in mid-winter between Hoopstad and Boshof in the Orange Free State (Plaatje, 1987 [1916]:56–7). Land policy and homelessness have long been linked.

While gold and maize were the pillars on which the South African economy rested, these two sectors were also in competition for labour, which would normally mean that wages would be driven up. Yet those in control of both sectors wished to keep the cost of labour low. In time, migrancy, especially from outside the country’s borders, and regimentation of labour on mines and farms provided an abundance of cheap labour. Farm labourers were, as they remain, the poorest, worst housed, most isolated and least educated section of the black South African workforce (for workers on farms and reserves, see Morrow & Vokwana, 2001:137–61).

There was, however, a counter-tendency. As in many parts of the more economically developed twentieth-century world, commercial agriculture in South Africa moved towards concentration in ever larger farms, marginal land was abandoned or devoted to extensive grazing rather than tillage, and mechanisation steadily intensified. Periods of particularly severe economic crisis, like the 1930s, led to large-scale rural distress. One result was the plight of the poor white bywoners (tenant farmers), many of them driven from home by debt and unemployment in the same manner and for the same reasons as those described by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1951 [1939]). The psychic shock and political danger of large-scale white poverty was one reason for the intensification of a racially based Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s, with its promise – which was fulfilled – of ending extremes of white poverty.

The disenfranchised black majority, and particularly the rural workers, had no similarly powerful political force to speak for them. Those who framed apartheid used the state on the one hand to promote white prosperity and on the other to control black labour. The white rural poor were assisted with public works and reserved jobs on the railways and elsewhere. The black rural poor were forbidden to enter the cities and, when they nevertheless did, they were ‘endorsed out’ to the reserves, later homelands. Rural poverty was thus dammed up in these derelict enclaves.

From the 1970s, the National Party began to lose its grip on the black population. Among other things, this led to more mobility. Poor black immigrants, from white farms and homelands, established themselves in increasing numbers in townships, often in conditions of extreme poverty and indigence. Some failed to obtain even the most basic levels of housing and security. These are the origins of the problem of homelessness in South Africa.

Today these tendencies have intensified. There is now no barrier to migration from one part of the country to another, and the result has been the rapid growth of a poor urban population, many living in informal settlements that the authorities struggle to provide with even the most basic facilities such as water, sewerage and electricity. But conditions in rural areas continue to impel people to urban centres, and there seems no reason to suppose that they will soon cease to do so. The least successful of these migrants end up as homeless people. In fact, some well-intentioned government actions, notably the minimum wage decreed for farm workers in 2003, even aggravate these tendencies. As we will see reflected in the life histories of some of the contemporary homeless,
this action led farmers to dismiss and evict farm workers, who then, even less prepared for life off the farm than those who had left deliberately, could find themselves not only unemployed and virtually unemployable but also homeless. Consider the case, biblical in its simplicity, of Caspar Maphateng:

Caspar Maphateng was born in 1954 in Kwanjerere Village, near Louis Trichardt in what is now Limpopo Province. At the age of eight, his mother took him to the Groblersdal area where they worked on a white farm. His labour, for which he was not paid, was required to guarantee accommodation for the family, as his father had another wife in Venda and was not always at the farm. He never went to school. He cannot read or write, or speak English.

In 1978, Maphateng moved to Hendrick Malan’s farm, where he worked for 27 years. He married, paying lobola, and he and his wife had four children. However, with many other long-serving workers on the farm, he lost his job soon after the Labour Department announced the minimum agricultural wage of R600 per month. He received no terminal benefits, nor was he given his blue card (Unemployment Insurance Fund card). His wife and children went to live at Tafelkop.

Maphateng went to Groblersdal, where he lives under bridges and in parks. He knows nothing about any help he might receive from government, NGOs [non-governmental organisations] or churches. He survives through occasional casual work at the going rate of R30 per day. He is losing hope that he will ever work permanently again. His main worry is that he will not be able to support his children. ‘I do not want them to suffer as I have,’ he says.

6. Migration

In all except the formal political sphere, it is in many ways more realistic to look at southern Africa as a single social and economic system than as a series of separate entities. As well as widespread internal migration, cross-border migration has long been a feature of the area, particularly from poorer regions with agrarian economies such as Mozambique, Malawi and Lesotho to the wealthier, more industrialised areas of South Africa and, until the upheavals of recent years, Zimbabwe (Crush et al., 1991, is a good overview; and still valuable is Wilson, 1972). There are also long-standing cross-border movements from one rural area to another.

Until relatively recently, immigration into South Africa was tightly controlled and much of it involved temporary, although often frequently renewed, contract labour at the mines. With the loosening of the compound system that previously determined where workers in mining and some other industries lived, and with the end of confrontation between apartheid South Africa and its neighbours, it has become easier to move, legally or illegally, across South African borders. The country now has substantial numbers of illegal immigrants, although it is not clear exactly how many, from its poorer and sometimes politically troubled neighbours. By definition, illegal immigrants have no identity documents. They may have access to networks of compatriots who will help them but are unlikely to have families to shelter and assist them. If they find work at all, they are likely to be exploited by those willing to employ them knowing that they have no recourse to the mechanisms that protect the rights of South

1Names of individuals have been altered.
African workers. Such migrants do not have access to housing or other grants. They are clearly vulnerable to becoming homeless. Wilson Magonya is an example:

Wilson Nitomba Magonya, who speaks Shangaan, was born in 1960 in Mozambique’s Gaza Province. In this poor area, migration was familiar. Of his five sisters, one is married and living in Bulawayo, in Zimbabwe, and two are married and living in KwaZulu-Natal. Two other sisters have died of AIDS, and his two younger brothers are unemployed in Mozambique.

Magonya attended school until Standard 3. He can read and write, and speak Portuguese. He was drafted into the army in the 1980s during the civil war in Mozambique, after which he worked for eight years, to 1998, as a security guard in Maputo. Then he left for South Africa and had labouring jobs on building sites in Nelspruit and in Garsfontein, Pretoria. He went to live with a girlfriend in Witbank, but was chased away in March 2004 when his money ran out. He has since been homeless. He did not find work in Middleburg, his next destination, or in Ermelo, where he currently lives in the vicinity of the BP garage. He sleeps under shop fronts and survives by washing cars. He is planning to move to Waterval Boven, where he hopes he might get enough money to return to Mozambique.

Magonya has two wives and seven children. ‘Both of my wives are in Mozambique with my children,’ he says, ‘and I am aware that they are waiting for me to bring food but all in vain. My nightmare is the great hunger that I’ve experienced in Mozambique.’

7. Identity, language and ethnicity

Seen from this level of society, many of the factors assumed to be prominent amongst the housed and adequately nourished become less so. Ethnicity does not seem to be crucial, or, where it does assume importance, it is as a designation used by those in positions of power to exclude certain categories of people from opportunities of one kind or another. Often excluded from certain kinds of work by a lack of English or Afrikaans, and illiteracy, the homeless are nonetheless often multilingual, and establish, or have established in the past, relationships ranging from friendship to marriage with people from ethnic groups other than their own. This is a level of society where the struggle for mere existence does not tend to leave much room for pondering identity. There is, in any case, substantial evidence that identity is seldom fixed and that it can shift, sometimes radically, in the consciousness of particular individuals over their lifetime. Charles van Onselen’s (1996) outstanding study of the sharecropper Kas Maine – often itinerant although never quite homeless and moving through several personas over a long life in tune with changing social, political and economic conditions – alerts us to the complexity and mutability of identity in twentieth-century South Africa.

8. Authority, secular and religious

The views from the bottom of society are very different to those from its pinnacle, or even different to those of people clinging to the middle and lower slopes. For the very poor, authority is on the whole to be distrusted. Where disaster is the norm, when something good does appear from above it can seem arbitrary or capricious rather than part of a process of planned upliftment. Also, ‘authority’ seen from below
appears all-enveloping, including not just government in its various forms, and economic authority, but also religious organisations and even NGOs. This is probably true everywhere, but certainly there are cogent historical reasons for the South African poor to be particularly suspicious of what looks like social welfare but may in fact be a Trojan Horse bringing with it the hidden agenda of social engineering.

It is thus perhaps not surprising that the 45 interviewees in this study appear to have little contact with authority of any kind. Sometimes, there is active hostility to officialdom. There may be good and specific reasons for this, such as being an illegal alien. Some are aggrieved parties who see authority as conspiring to persecute them. For example, there are men whose homelessness results from court orders barring them from their dwellings because of accusations that they have abused their partner or other family members. What is relevant here is not the truth or otherwise of the mutual recriminations in such cases, but rather the way they can lead to homelessness, and make people reluctant to have anything to do with officialdom. Gordon Mahlangu is an example:

Gordon Sphiwe Mahlangu was born in 1961 near Hazyview, Mpumulanga, and raised by his uncle in Kabokweni, White River, because his mother was a poorly paid farm labourer who had been abandoned by her husband. He left school after Standard 5, and worked for 12 years as a labour tenant on a sugar estate and then as a cleaner in Machadodorp.

At Machadodorp, Mahlangu met and married Ethel Mabaso, another cleaner. He paid lobola of R2500. They had four children and built a four-roomed house in Pienaar, south of Nelspruit. In mid-2001 he was dismissed from his job, unfairly he claims, receiving a package of R9000. The money soon ran out, and the family started to disintegrate, with allegations of domestic violence and child neglect, and accusations on both sides of extramarital affairs. His wife opened a case of sexual harassment against him, alleging that he had made advances to her younger sister, who was looking after their children. She then divorced him. In late 2003, a court order was issued forbidding him to approach within 500 metres of the house. Since then he has lived rough in Middleburg and Groblersdal, making a meagre living by washing cars.

Mahlangu ‘deeply hates’ civil servants because the police and social workers applied pressure until he was separated from his wife without, he claims, proper investigation. ‘The government,’ he says, ‘is applying every possible pressure to chase male people from their own homes.’

However, it goes further than this. Most people seem unaware of grants and other assistance that might be available to them and are hostile to officials, who they say are characterised by corruption and nepotism. Rightly or wrongly, they expect to be rebuffed and they therefore take no action to contact those who might assist them. They seem to know almost nothing about any NGO initiatives, and even the churches seem socially distant and inaccessible, with the exception of some individual acts of kindness from clergy. As reflected in these interviews, these people are indeed outcasts, falling outside the purview of secular civil society and religious organisations that would, or should, be willing to assist them.

One would imagine that if ever a group of people were in need of Marx’s opium of religion, it would be the homeless. To them, it might indeed be ‘the sigh of the oppressed
creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions’ (Marx, 1992 [1844]:244). Yet it seems that few if any of these particular homeless people are part of any religious community, and that the comforts of religion, at least those expressed collectively, are not or are not seen to be available to them. Approaching religion as a social phenomenon, it is perhaps not surprising, although doubtless at odds with the expressed beliefs of all South African religions and sects, to find that the pariah status of the homeless in the secular sphere is echoed, on the whole, in the sphere of religion.

9. Family and friends

Almost by definition, the subjects of this study demonstrate failures of nuclear and extended families. If extended families are potential sources of support, they are also, and have always been, the focus of tensions connected to gender, relations between generations, property, inheritance, sexual relations and responsibility for children (see Carton, 2000, which critically examines ‘traditional’ African families). However, although it would be wrong to romanticise extended families in any historical context, in modern times they have certainly come under increasing pressure from changes in social relationships, work and housing. The reciprocity that enabled them to function has come under strain. Also, those who are illiterate, as many of the homeless are, find it difficult to keep in touch with their families, and there are many reports of people losing contact with siblings and other relatives. When marriages break up as they often do, particularly under the strain of unemployment and extreme poverty – especially where lobola has not been paid – a rift appears not only in the relationship between a man and woman and the children that they may have, but also between the family structures of which they are part.

Yet even in the dire circumstances of homelessness some people do stay together. Matthias Mashabela lost his farm labouring job of more than 30 years. Now he and his wife live together on the streets of Groblersdal, sleeping under shop fronts, and under bridges when it is raining, their two children living with Mashabela’s sister. A remarkable story, which also raises the grim question of old age in the context of homelessness, is that of Simon Tabane and his wife:

Simon Tabane was born in 1932 in Maleoskop, southeast of Groblersdal. He went as far as Standard 2 in school. In 1955, he went to Benoni where he was a domestic worker for Green, a stockbroker. Five years later Green was arrested for fraud, but Tabane lived with the family, assisting Green and her children until her husband was released from gaol in 1979. After Green’s death in 1984, Tabane worked for his oldest son and his wife. He left the Greens’ employment in 2000 after a long illness that he believed was caused by the ancestors. He should be undergoing traditional treatment for this, but lack of money makes this impossible.

Tabane is married to Dora Mohale, from Bloemfontein, and they have one child who lives in North West Province. When he left the Greens, he and his wife lived in Dennilton with his younger brother and his wife. However, the two women quarrelled and they left. Now, the couple live around Dennilton, sleeping in front of Kattie’s Fried Chicken. He feels he cannot work again, and they live on his wife’s pension money. He is not getting a pension because his identity document is incorrect and the officials have not so far rectified it. He does not have friends. ‘My friend is my wife,’ he says, ‘and we are always together.’
Friendship also comes under severe strain in the context of homelessness. Repeatedly, interviewees spoke of friendships in the past tense, as characterising a time when there was some sort of settled life. With some notable exceptions, relationships between the homeless seem temporary and unstable, no doubt reflecting the nature of their lives.

10. Gender

More men than women were interviewed for this research. Women appear to be under-represented in terms of the total homeless population, as indicated by the Human Sciences Research Council survey of the homeless (see Kok et al., this issue). Gender issues run strongly through many of the interviews – many of both sexes are homeless as a direct result of these issues, which relate on the one hand to marriage, property and children, and on the other to love, loyalty and betrayal, fidelity and infidelity. Typically, a man will say he lived together happily with his wife until he lost his job. Then, it seems often to be the case that the wife took up with someone else, and left the husband, taking the children; or, if the woman or her family controlled the house, the man was evicted and in some cases the wife’s new partner moved in. Women, typically, say they took up with a man who promised marriage, and perhaps bore him a child only to find that he already had a wife to whom he returned, abandoning her. They are, in fact, archetypal stories, the universal subject of folksong and popular literature, embodied in the lives of contemporary South Africans. Precious Dhlomo’s story is one such:

Precious Ntombenhle Dlomo was born in KwaZulu-Natal in 1964 and brought up by her mother, who worked on the sugar plantations in Shongweni. Her parents separated when she was young. Her two sisters are married and living in Soweto. Her only brother was shot dead, in Merafe Hostel, Johannesburg, during the political violence between Inkatha and the ANC. Because of financial constraints, she dropped out of school in Standard 7.

Dlomo worked as a cleaner in a restaurant in Durban and then as a domestic worker in Ladysmith until 1995. She married in 1993, her husband paying lobola of R2000. They moved to Tembisa in Gauteng, but separated in 1999 because she did not bear children. Her husband became involved in another relationship, and sometimes brought his girlfriend to their shack. He beat his wife when she objected to this, to the point where she had to be admitted to hospital. Social workers advised her to leave her husband, and she moved to Nelspruit where for two years she sold vegetables in the market. She then lost her job and therefore her rented room. Since then, she has lived in a ‘cardboard shack’ behind the Shopright-Checkers store in the centre of Nelspruit. She survives ‘through boyfriends’ money and food’. She knows nothing about any assistance she might get from government, NGOs or churches.

Dlomo attributes her homelessness to her ‘sexually unreproductive status that caused my husband to have an outside relationship’.

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1 Inkatha is a political movement with a largely Zulu power base that clashed, often violently, with the ANC during South Africa’s political transition in the 1980s and 1990s.
There is also Ntombi Mchunu:

Ntombi Susannah Mchunu was born in 1969 in Ga-Mothiba, outside Polokwane, in Limpopo Province. When she was eight, her parents separated and her father took her to his original home in KwaZulu-Natal. Thus she was brought up as the only child of another marriage in her father’s new household. She attended school until Standard 8, leaving in 1989.

Mchunu worked in restaurants and hotels in the Durban area until 2003, when she fell pregnant by her boyfriend, a taxi driver from Belfast in Mpumulanga with whom she went to live. However, he never paid lobola, ‘instead he kept promising over and over again’. The child died ‘of an unknown disease’. This caused conflict between the couple, and the boyfriend started a relationship with another woman. Eventually, he chased her away and she now lives in Ermelo, approaching ‘every man or woman who could help with either food or accommodation for a night’, spending ‘most of the time next to the shebeens and taverns because I hope to get help from those places’.

Mchunu is ‘seriously heartbroken’ about what her boyfriend has done to her. She feels ashamed to disclose her personal problems to others. She therefore does not consult social workers or other officials.

As can be seen in the case of Mahlangu, and as was true for some others interviewed, men as well as women may feel they have come out the losers in gender conflicts.

11. Conclusion

This article has aimed to give the reader a sense of the magnitude and the many dimensions of South African homelessness. To restate the point made at the beginning of the paper, having no home is a manifestation of fundamental social problems to do with the rural economy, migration, gender relations and the other issues to which the testimonies in this article bear witness. Any attempt to confront homelessness in contemporary South Africa must start with a sober recognition of the formidable, many-faceted and historically rooted nature of the problem.

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