

# WORKPLACE INEQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION ON INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE IN SELECTED HOTELS IN DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *Contemporary workplaces consist of diverse and different cultural and ethnical backgrounds. This varied work environment offers prospects for employers to generate and encourage organisational strategies that value and manage diversity while eliminating workplace inequality and discrimination. This research explores employees' experiences of workplace inequality and discrimination on individual development and organizational performance within South African hospitality contexts.*

**Design:** *This article is focused on selected hotels in Durban, South Africa and employs a qualitative case study within the social constructivist/interpretivist paradigms utilizing observations, informal discussions, and semi-structured interviews to obtain data. Purposive sampling with the help of snowballing was used to obtain the required data and was analysed using Thematic Analysis and computer software NVivo.*

**Findings:** *In its general findings, the study demonstrates the prevailing workplace inequalities and discrimination within the hospitality industry in the case under scrutiny. More specifically, the results of the study show deplorable working conditions affecting mainly black employees. Racism, sexual harassment, and inequality; remain endemic because of discriminatory and exploitative practices which prevents career development and leading to increased work-related trauma among employees and accumulated stress thus affecting their performance.*

**Keywords:** Career Development, Discrimination, Equality, Hospitality, Prejudice, South Africa, Inequality.

## INTRODUCTION

The focus of research in Human Resources Management in the 21st century has been to improve people management practices and eliminate workplace inequality and discrimination. Although many anti-discrimination laws were passed to protect workers in organisations, the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2016b) reports that workplace inequality and discrimination remain a global problem. The increase of organisational policies intended to eliminate these problems and enhance workplace inclusivity (Tolbert & Castilla, 2017) has also failed, with these same problems continuing to surge and torment employees in the workplace (Marafuga et al., 2017; Marchiondo et al., 2018). According to Hennekam et al. (2017), workplace inequality and discrimination are cause of concern in the hospitality and tourism industry in general.

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2019) states that one in ten workers worldwide is employed in hospitality and tourism (Walmsley et al., 2019). South Africa's hospitality industry is the fourth largest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Vettori, 2017) in the country. A report by Maynard (2020) states that 330,385 people were employed in the restaurant and hotel sector in 2019. The hospitality and tourism sector provide opportunities to marginalized and vulnerable groups (i.e., school leavers and women). The recurrent theme has been the need to protect these groups from mistreatment in organisations from the employers. However, the UNWTO (2019) asserts that 54% of women worldwide are employed in tourism and hospitality. Although tourism and the hotel industry contribute significantly to global, regional, and local employment, toxic working conditions, exploitation, and discriminatory practices have been reported. Early studies report deplorable working conditions in the hotel industry compared with other sectors (Walmsley et al., 2019). In recent studies, several scholars (Mooney et al., 2017; Rao & Goel, 2017; Ruiz-Palomo et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2020; Falvey, 2021) mention similar appalling working conditions of employment in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Nevertheless, South Africans were subjected to workplace inequality and racial discrimination until the end of apartheid, which has affected society and workplace relations since then (Khumalo, 2018). Furthermore, Webster & Francis (2019) reported that inequality and discrimination in South Africa continue to be the nation's most severe socio-economic challenge. The problem remains entrenched 27 years after apartheid was ended. Despite the achievement of democracy, the dominance of white investors in the tourism industry in South Africa has enabled managerial and superior positions in hotels to be occupied by white employees (Webster & Francis, 2019). This left the marginalised and disadvantaged black employees as cleaners, housekeepers, porters, and waiters in low-paying and non-decision-making jobs.

This study purports to explore and better understand employees' subjective experiences of workplace inequality and discrimination on individual development and organizational performance in the hotel industry. The aim is to provide a contribution for human Resources (HR) practitioners to create a productive workforce and assist towards improving working conditions and employment relations in their respective organisations. In so doing, it is expected to contribute to a better understanding of workplace inequality and discrimination on individual development and organizational performance with focus in Durban, South African, situated in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal. By understanding these perspectives, hotel management can develop approaches to improve the productivity of employees and reduce or eliminate inequality and discrimination by implementing consistent HR policies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "*workplace discrimination*" occurs when an employee feels intimidated, insulted, or humiliated based on race, ethnic origin, gender, physical or mental disability (SAHRC, 2016). Hotels are a core component of the hospitality industry and, as such, are one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors, creating a quick entry into the workforce for youth, women, and migrant workers (Baum, 2013). A report by International Labour Organisation concluded that hotel working conditions are frequently characterised by unsocial and irregular working hours, splits and weekend shifts, night shifts, or holiday shifts, which intensify stress in workers with family responsibilities. Casual, temporary, seasonal, and part-time employment is related to insecurity, moderately low pay, job instability, limited career opportunity, high subcontracting and outsourcing, and a high turnover rate.

Employees in every hotel are the most important resource in guaranteeing its strength and sustainability. Tarkang Mary & Ozturen (2019) argue that employee conduct impacts the efficiency and productivity of the whole organization. However, the performance of employees exposed to inequality and discrimination suffers, as they can lose concentration and work in a counter-productive manner, which can be disruptive (Castleassociates 2019). Therefore, the duty of hotel management is not to orally assert the requirement for and importance of employees but rather to be conscious of their work, needs, and expectations, to take an interest in their sentiments, and to create a suitable working environment and a common corporate culture in the workplace. Consequently, motivating employees can positively influence their performance, which can in turn positively impact service quality and hotel occupancies (Mhlanga, 2018). According to Stamolampros et al. (2019), leadership and cultural values are better predictors of high employee satisfaction, while career progression is a critical reason for employee turnover. The quality of human potential plays a significant role and is a vital factor that influences the running of a company, its wealth, and its sustainable development (Park et al., 2019).

### **Challenges in South Africa**

The South African government is struggling to dismantle the influence of apartheid (Mthant, 2017; Webster & Francis, 2019). According to Aviles (2019), South Africa is facing challenges in overcoming the inequality instituted by apartheid, despite decades of political transformation. Workplace inequality and discrimination remains deeply entrenched in decades of colonialism and apartheid. The White South African population owns most businesses and believes in workplace racial discrimination (Aviles, 2019). Racial discrimination and inequality have an influence on many phases of employees' dealings with the Organization, including career development, recruitment, learning and promotion. Considering the damage apartheid did to employment relations, the enactment of the South African government's Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policy is intended to address the economic and social disadvantages associated with being non-White. The objective was to change the previous racial differences through the targeted redistribution of asset wealth and abundant opportunities. Nevertheless, this effort has resulted in capital relations that produce and reproduce, while inequality remains principally unbroken (Webster & Francis, 2019).

Webster et al. (2017) stated that post-apartheid South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world. The wealthiest 10% of the population earn 60% of the national income and own 95% of all wealth (Webster & Francis, 2019). This situation perpetually obliterates any prospects for social justice that people are fighting for. Festus et al. (2015) reported that during the apartheid years, the South African labour market played a critical role in developing its economy. The labour market was utilised to divide society. The White government achieved this by enacting legislation that divided the labour market along racial lines, to the disadvantaged people of colour (Festus et al., 2015). Despite amendments, these legislations today are arguably very complicated than most other countries because of the country's political inheritance and the significance of protecting fundamental employee rights. Webster et al. (2017) concluded that South Africa had made no progress in tackling inequality in the post-apartheid era.

According to BBC (2021), Black South Africans comprise nearly 80% of the economically active population but hold only 14% of top management jobs. In 2017, the Equality Commission revealed that White employees had 67% of top positions. In the private sector, approximately 70% of top managers are White, whereas more than 70% of top managers in governmental jobs are Black. In hotels in South Africa, Jinnah et al. (2015) confirmed that

Whites occupied most managerial positions, finding that 78% were White managers, while administrators fell equally among White, African, Asian, and Coloured people.

During covid-19 pandemic, most hotels had to lay off some employees; salaries were reduced, some were asked to take voluntary leave, others had their routine duties and positions altered, and some had their working hours reduced (Wong et al., 2021). Given the current environment of uncertainty, the impact on the hospitality industry rendered most of the people in hospitality jobless. Migrant and Temporary workers were the first to shrink, after which permanent employees felt the impact as hospitality companies were hard-pressed to cut costs (Dogra, 2020). The overall impact on job losses impacted the hospitality industry in SA and globally very badly.

### **Working Conditions in Hotel Industry**

According to a Mordorintelligence (2021) report, South Africa is a top tourist destination in Africa. Approximately 10.5 million tourists visited South Africa in 2018, a 1.7% growth over 2017. However, the revenue generated from the hotel accommodation sector increased to R16.7 billion in 2018, which was only a 0.5% rise compared to 2017 (Mordorintelligence, 2021). The country has many individual hotel properties that extend across the main cities of SA. In addition, South Africa has approximately 192 hotels that belong to international brands, which is high for Africa (Mordorintelligence, 2021). Nevertheless, 90% of enterprises are small, medium, or micro-sized and employ fewer than 10 people (Vettori, 2017). The remaining 10% are major enterprises, including foreign-owned companies such as Sun International, Hyatt, Sheraton, Radisson, and Holiday Inn (Jinnah et al., 2015). These large hotels employ only 1.4% of the South African hotel industry employees.

A study by Warden et al. (2018) in the South African hospitality sector found that working hours, wages, management practices, and work environment safety were the key issues many hotel employees believed were not adequately addressed. Similarly, many employees in the South African hotel sector felt significant stress and burnout due to the working environment. In similar studies, several researchers (Jinnah et al., 2015; Vettori, 2017; Burke & Hughes, 2018) observed that the types of shifts in hotels create stressful conditions. Additionally, stressful work-related conditions in hotels were noted to cause deterioration in interpersonal relationships in the workforce (Altintas & Turanligil, 2018). According to LaMarco (2019), poor interpersonal relationships result in negative attitudes, confusion, and constant conflict. Rodríguez (2021) stated that when the workplace environment is unfavourable, stress and demotivation are created; relationships will become tenser, resulting in lower productivity.

Lashley (2020) noted that the Hotel industry is susceptible predominantly to possible illegal action and a negative reputation through unintentional involvement in sexual exploitation. Neo-slavery oppresses the powerless through low pay and employment practices that serve the employer's interests (Lashley, 2020). Black workers in the hospitality sector in South Africa, whether local or foreign, occupy low-paying, informal jobs in which they enact non-strategic decisions; they lack autonomy and primarily serve others (Vettori, 2017). However, these employees in low-level jobs require mentoring to enhance their skills and become productive (Gürtler & Gürtler, 2019), which is not happening well because of workplace discrimination.

Lashley (2020) pronounces that many employees are incarcerated by poverty stemming from low pay. The legal minimum wage they receive does not match the living wage level, and investors argue for priorities that augment their benefits, with little concern for the impact of their actions on employees. Research by Deery & Jago (2015) reveals that low wages, stress,



overwork, and interpersonal tensions are key drivers of dissatisfaction in the workplace. These results are supported by Tan et al. (2020). In many organisational settings, sexual harassment and exploitation are still prevalent (Davies, 2018), and employment practices strengthen gender inequalities (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2017). However, according to Davies (2018), promotion criteria remain highly gendered. Furthermore, in some cases, the criteria are racial (Kang et al., 2015); those with identifiably Black names receive significantly lower compensation (Mithani & Mooney Murphy, 2017). This has also resulted in workplace inequality and intensified unequal compensation systems (Abraham, 2017; Briscoe & Joshi, 2017) in our societies today. Low-level workers have successfully contributed to the development of hotel industries in the 21st century, yet they are not valued much by the employers.

## METHODOLOGY

A generic qualitative study using observations, informal discussion, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews was used to fulfill the research objectives. The interviews were conducted in Royal Hotel in Durban. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling refers to a participant's intentional choice of qualities (Etikan et al., 2016). To gain additional participants, the researcher used snowballing sampling (Parker et al., 2019). This is the method of expanding the sample by asking one participant to recommend others for interviews. Data were collected until it reached saturation at the ninth participant. Data saturation refers to a point in data collection when there is no additional new information emerging from new participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

After data was collected through observation, information discussion, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews, the data was transcribed using the computer. This was manually verified, reading the transcript and correcting mistakes as the computer software was not 100 percent accurate in capturing some words. Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis through the NVivo statistical software. Maguire & Delahunt (2017) describe thematic analysis as a technique for investigating qualitative data and a standard method for analysing semi-structured interviews. The technique enables themes, patterns, and ideas to emerge, which the researcher can then interpret (Javadi & Zarea, 2016).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Sample Description

The participation rate reflected gender imbalance, most employees were female, making up 67% of the sample, while the rest, 33%, were male participants, indicating that the industry could be more inclined towards female employees. The analysis shows that most respondents, 9 were South African. However, foreigners comprised one-third of the sample, which was a good representation. Five (5) were Zimbabweans and one (1) Ugandan with temporary appointments. All respondents were of the African race. Whites and Indians were turned down to participate for unknown reasons. The average age of the participants in the study is 32 years of age. Many respondents were between 30-39 years of age, which represents 9 of the participants. This indicates maturity and experience in the industry. Those between 20-29 years old were 6. These young generations are inspired to move and require motivation to be kept engaged. It was noted

that 40% of respondents had matric certification, 6% matric and Diploma, 13% ordinary level, and 6% advanced level certificate only with post-matric qualifications, 33%.

## Analysis and Discussion

The first theme that emerged was recruitment and work experience. Recruitment and selection policies govern how new employees are sourced and hired. This policy category guides the organisational conceptualisation of the value of new human capital and which skills and values are in demand. They also govern hiring practices and the orientation provided to new employees (Noe et al., 2006). The process of recruitment and promotion were explicitly revealed as areas which may be contaminated by systematic racism in the organisation.

Most respondents handed in their CVs and were later called for potential job openings. Many of the participants interviewed voiced the absence of opportunities to apply for a higher position. Although participants acknowledged that Blacks were qualified and had the potential to be promoted to certain levels, many limiting factors affect the human resources ethics in the tourism industry in South Africa. The first observation is the colonial legacy of apartheid, which includes land ownership. Most of the hotels are white, family-owned, and likely to be affected by nepotism that depends on a family trust bias that affects the human resources ethics of most tourist resources. In my view, this is the main reason why there is a lot of racial bias in the tourism industry in South Africa. For example, one of the participants highlighted that most of the managerial positions in their hotel are not advertised. In most cases, they only see a new manager or supervisor arriving. This discourages most biracial and black employees in this hotel feel discouraged to further their studies and skills because they know that promotion is based on race.

This suggests that despite the promotion, Blacks in the Hotel industry in South Africa have limited authority in the industry's affairs and operational influence. Many participants believe jobs are more frequently given based on contacts than merits. However, this recruitment and selection process contribute to the creation of workplace inequality (Koivunen et al., 2015). There room for growth is minimal in the hotel industry. Ebrahim (2015) observed that hotel employees resigned due to a lack of personal development and professional learning opportunities. Therefore, in my opinion, until the racial bias in economic inequality is addressed, black people will have limited access to professional growth and ownership in the tourism industry, especially hotels.

The next theme examined respondents' emotions in terms of their work experience. According to Zheng et al. (2021), emotions in the workplace depend on freedom (essential versus immutable), relativeness (aggressive versus egoism), and skill (quality versus enjoyment-oriented). This theme explores the participants' emotions on their first day at work and the work environment. Respondents had high expectations, especially seeing that it was their first job.

However, their expectations were not met. Participants noted that monotonous work responsibilities make the hotel a boring place. Most participants believed that the work situation did not meet their expectations, and this was a negative connotation. Racism, frustration, lack of equal opportunities, lack of respect, and poor treatment from other race groups are regular occurrences in the hotel industry, which respondents did not expect. Employees are required to be standing in their positions all the time. However, another emotional view shared by black employees in hotels was that foreign employees are the most preferred in the workplace. This discouraged many from wanting to join or stay in the industry.

According to Chaudhry et al. (2017), the working environment impacts organisational performance. Given the mixed responses shared by the participants on their first experience in the hotel, the participants were asked to describe their work environment. While some six (6) expressed a positive view of the work environment, others nine (9) held a negative view. The working conditions, according to many of the participants in the study, are appalling and toxic. This observation corresponds with recent studies (Mooney et al., 2017; Walmsley et al., 2019; Ruiz-Palomo et al., 2020; Falvey, 2021), which indicate that working conditions in the hospitality industry are not always pleasant. Despite the race issues mentioned above, no observed legislative instruments are set in the hotel industry that monitors and uphold constitutional and legislative laws. Most participants were on contract employment, making it difficult for organizations like SACCAWU to monitor and evaluate adherence to human resources legislation. It was also interesting and shocking to observe that no hotel I interviewed had a supportive worker's union committee. From this observation, I also ascertain the emotional abuse that discourages any growth in professional skills and engagement in these tourist establishments.

South African Employment Equity Act (EEA, 1998) prohibits unfair Discrimination at the workplace against an employee in any employment policy or practice based on demographic factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, colour, nationality, etc. The Human Rights Framework prescribes the human rights entitlement and standards whereby countries are obliged to certain principles of equality and non-discrimination.

Discrimination in the workplace was over mentioned by participants. This theme uncovered various types of Discrimination occurring in the workplace in the hotel industry in South Africa. The psychological impact of Discrimination in the workplace emerged as the main theme across all participants. Among the most common microaggressions reported was privileged treatment of individuals from certain backgrounds, as well as discriminatory statements on assignments. All 15 participants revealed having experienced workplace discrimination: while all reported experiencing it frequently. The most reported form of discrimination was based on racial identity (15). Of those who did not report an incident of racial discrimination, 13 took no action because they thought that it would yield no conclusion, lacked trust of the system, or feared retaliation or fired from work. The number who reported an incident of racial discrimination, 2 said that they were dissatisfied with the way in which the situation was handled. Most of the participants lack faith in the established mechanisms in addressing this issue in the industry. Participants also reported experiencing sexual harassment. Nine (9) of the fifteen (15) participants interviewed revealed that colleagues and/or supervisors often comment on their bodily appearance and/or private life or marital status; eight (8) noted being the subject of suggestive jokes of a sexual nature; six (6) indicated having experienced inappropriate behaviour such as touching, while four (4) had received sexual messages from colleagues and/or supervisors.

All participants reported that inequality and Discrimination harm their development and psychological health; however, the findings showed that the impact was more significant for the foreign workers as they are forced to work hard and paid less, as reflected in the narrations. As the results of this study underline, the emotional effects of workplace inequality and Discrimination on the participants resulted in feelings of irrelevance, loss of identity, humiliation, hopelessness, and a sense of inability and consequently having no purpose. This could be reflected in the political conflicts in the society suggesting urgent intervention. Promotion is limited to the Black people, and Whites and Indians join and is easily given high

positions with more money. This will continue to create hostility in the workplace. However, according to the Decent work Principles; psychological well-being is one of the crucial components of a joyful life. According to Hayes & Nutman (1981), individual fulfillment comes from being involved in the labor force, where one can enjoy the significance of being an employee. Each participant held different jobs in the past, but still, they all value their work, irrespective of the inhuman treatment they are subjected to.

It is clear from the findings and literature review that workplace inequality and Discrimination's impact on an individual's sense of identity can be quite significant. This lowers morale and affects the performance of the company. Some participants acknowledged that they wanted to resign from their current jobs but were having difficulties getting one. This highlights the different degrees of personal impact experienced by some individuals because of losing their job. While all felt the effect, its consequences manifested differently among participants – for example, some participants questioned why they worked hard and paid less. There is no promotion and had limited time to study to improve themselves.

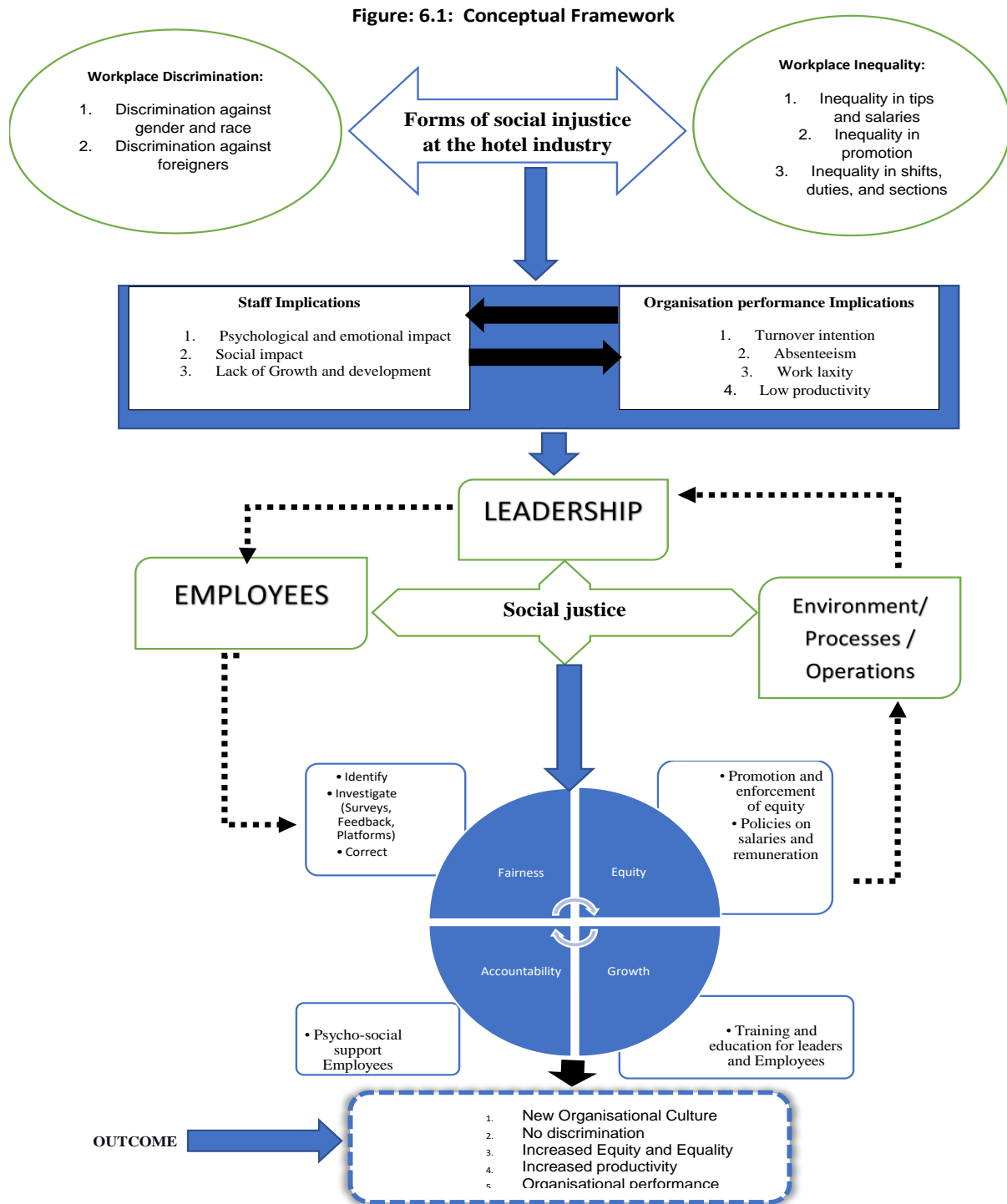
The interviews also highlighted the importance of maintaining good relations at the workplace, as this provides invaluable moral support and encouragement. However, it was noted that Black supervisors fear whites as a result they do not have the confidence to question what is happening. The findings show that because of Discrimination, the participants could not better focus on development and improving their work. They expressed concern because of poor working conditions and the non-protection of Black employees from harassment and exploitation.

It is worth noting that a poor working environment and its high stress encourage boredom, fatigue, and psychological and emotional impact as experience by the participants in the hotels. According to Colella & King (2018), the opportunities for development, knowledge transfer, and learning arise as a function of the size and structure of people's networks and patterns that characterise their daily workplace dealings. Additionally, the behaviour barrier emanates from supervisors who wish to deny minority workers self-sufficiency and freedom to learn.

The Figure 1 shows the challenges identified in the study. The conceptual framework illustrates the implications and the process to follow to try to redress the difficulties identified. The changes must start with leadership, creating a balance between employees and organisational processes and operations. This framework will help managers in organisations. I argue that it is important for managers to extremely deal with workplace inequality and discrimination work as these are serious problems. Managers sometimes repudiate that they are doing anything indefinable; they assert that they apply normal scientific principles.

Employees are looking for social justice at work in return for their service, and since this is elusive, their motivation and morale are low, as demonstrated in this study. They are being segregated, and there is inequality in policy implementation (for example, promotion, and resource allocation, among other things) and discriminatory tendencies favour the people of colour over Black employees, thus undermining Employee Equity Act principles and other legislation. Social justice will be achieved if management insists on fairness, equity, growth, and accountability, involving all employees in the organization. Regularly training employees and providing psycho-social support to the affected employees may change the working environment and bring morale.





**FIGURE 1  
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

## CONCLUSION

The study emerged from the findings that recruitment in the South African hotel industry is not formal and lacks a well-structured human resources department; workplace inequality and discrimination affect interpersonal relationships and decrease organizational morale. Workplace inequality and discrimination are high in the workplace affecting mostly the workers. The study recommends some policy strategies that stakeholders can implement to address the current problem at hand:

- Hotels must train senior managers how to handle and eliminate these problems. The education of senior managers should be undertaken by a designated and independent source and ensure minimal self-regulation and control of the subject. A regulatory mechanism might need to be explored and established in this regard.
- The government and SACCAWU should start awareness by teaching and training employees about their rights as workers to reduce the psychological burdens they face in their day-to-day work. Furthermore, the training could also be expanded to sensitize employers about their obligations and responsibilities in fighting against inequality and discrimination at work. Continuing learning and education about workplace inequality and discrimination is necessary to anchor an anti-racist understanding and culture in the Hotels. There is a lack of common awareness about racism and manifestations of discrimination in the workplace and what to do about them, and support for employees facing racism is not adequate despite the availability of progressive legislation.
- Organisations need to generate open dialogue between employees and employers on matters related to inequalities and discrimination in the workplace. This must involve all employees in the organization. Also, Stakeholders must encourage bi-annual conferences on equality and discrimination to help people understand the seriousness of this problem.
- Working conditions should be improved irrespective of nationality and avoid exploitation rather than abuse that might have sexual gender abuse connotations. Measures should be taken to ensure that working hours and overtime work for both local and foreign workers are properly calculated and recorded, and that each worker has access to his or her record. Regular inspection by government inspectors is required to ensure compliancy to the laws.
- The government through Ministry of Tourism and Trade Unions must strengthen the monitoring mechanisms by conducting regular surveys to check the progress in eliminating inequality and discrimination and promote social equality among all classes.
- Improved channels of interaction and more responsive management practices in organisations can assist in lowering the negative perceptions and tensions evolving from workplace inequality and discrimination treatment.
- The Ministry of Tourism, in partnership with Hotel Industry, should develop an inclusive training framework, comprising of implicit bias, to commence from basic awareness and understanding towards progressive transformation and submission of diversity management principles for the various roles and responsibilities in companies, namely leadership, managers and employees, in organisations. The Ministry of Tourism should make implicit bias training compulsory for all employees.
- Managers and Supervisors should be given the tools and awareness to detect racism and racial discrimination in their groups. Additionally, there should be accountability procedures for all managers to support a zero-tolerance approach to racial discrimination, racism, or any other forms of discrimination at workplace. Trade Unions should provide education and training opportunities for staff counselors and other support personnel (e.g., peer support) covering awareness about cultures and anti-racism.

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