



# Health Access for Informal Workers in Durban, South Africa

## Xolisile's Story

**X**olisile Mhlongo is already setting up a stall by the time Durban's mynah birds begin chirping on a weekday summer morning.

She arrives at Warwick Junction market at four thirty every morning, six days a week, to begin preparing the cow's head meat and dumplings that she sells to customers passing through this busy transport hub.



Photo: WIEGO

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**X**olisile, who lives with her family in KwaMashu, is part of a community of more than 6,000 traders who sell their goods and services in this bustling market on the edge of the city. Approximately 460,000 people pass through the area daily. Her stall is located together with about 30 other bovine head sellers in an area of the market bordering on Warwick Avenue, which they share with other vendors selling plates of cooked food and fresh vegetables.

Setting up shop as a bovine head seller requires hard work and coordination, especially since the space they work in lacks the necessary infrastructure for catering. Xolisile and her co-workers hire barrow operators to bring their cooking utensils from storage every morning when they arrive. They must also arrange for the delivery of water in 25 litre containers and pay a supplier to bring paraffin to fuel the prima stoves which they use to boil the meat once it has been cleaved from the bone.

Xolisile sells an average of 20 cow heads daily, although this number increases on Fridays and at the end of the month. These must be purchased from a butchery five kilometres away, and delivered by mini bus taxi. The stock needed to make the dumplings is purchased from a supermarket nearby. All of this must be organised by Xolisile herself. For these efforts, she charges R35 (3.02 USD) for a generous piece of cow's head meat served with a dumpling, which is usually shared among three or four people.

This has been her morning routine since she first began working full time in the market in 1998, after the birth of her first child. Xolisile, who had completed grade 11, wanted to return to school to become a social worker, but it wasn't easy with a small baby. Instead she followed in her mother's footsteps as a bovine head trader. She needed an income to provide for her firstborn, but her chosen livelihood nearly took her life after a near-fatal accident in 2010.

That particular day began as normal with Xolisile



Photo: WIEGO

and her fellow traders setting up shop. Just after six thirty that morning, while she was pumping the prima stove to get a flame going, the lid came off, dousing her with paraffin and setting her alight. Flames engulfed her shoulders, chest and upper arms and scorched her face. Because they lacked fire safety training or equipment, her fellow traders threw a bucket of water over her, unaware that this would only aggravate her burns further.

Once the flames had been put out, she walked over to Lancer's road clinic, a local primary health care facility about fifteen minutes from the market, in a state of shock. Xolisile was badly burned. Even her eyelids and the inside of her mouth were scorched. She needed specialist care, and was transferred to Addington hospital, a government-run facility on the Durban beachfront. The clinic didn't even have an ambulance to get her there, but the nursing sister kindly took her in her own car.

Xolisile spent three months in Addington hospital recovering from her burns. Every day, the doctor came to check up on her and administer her treatment. During this time she made a conscious effort not to worry about her business as this would just cause additional stress and raise her blood pressure.

Being unable to work for an extended period of time due to ill health or injury can have a devastating impact on a trader's business. Xolisile was fortunate to have an assistant who kept her stall running, but she nearly lost all her goods because she couldn't renew her trading permit while in the hospital. Luckily, on the day the municipal officials arrived to confiscate her goods, her mother – who traded on a neighbouring stall – was able to persuade them to back down by explaining the situation and showing her own valid trading permit instead.

Today, if an accident like this happened in the crowded bovine head market, things might be different. This is because Xolisile and her fellow traders have recently participated in an occupational health and safety training course run by a trader-led Phephanathi (Health & Safety) Council, which is supported and facilitated by Asiye eTafuleni (AeT), an NGO working with traders in the market to improve their infrastructure.

The training covered fire safety, first aid and occupational health and safety. Xolisile explained that, as part of the fire safety training, they learned about the different types of fires, and how some types must be put out with a fire extinguisher or sand. If someone is burning, like she was, the traders now know that they shouldn't throw water on them. Instead, they should cover them with a wet blanket and roll them on the ground.

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The training also taught them how to protect themselves from other hazards associated with their work. For example, wearing boots protects one's feet from falling objects and spills, and goggles shield one's eyes from shards of flying bone and splats of oil. At the training, their instructor, Samantha, also helped them understand the importance of taking breaks between intensive bouts of labour, such as when cleaving meat from the bone.

Taking time off work to care of one's health is often seen as a waste of time among the traders, who work long hours, five or six days a week. As Xolisile explained, when you are a bovine head seller, you don't think about your health or how your body is feeling, you just ukufukuza 'work like crazy' because you need the money. Now she makes an effort to rest between tasks, and for the first time, she has become aware of how her joints and feet sometimes ache from the hard physical labour and long hours of standing. She has also passed on some of the advice

from the course on healthy living to her four children, encouraging them to drink water when they are thirsty rather than fizzy cold drinks.

The training has helped her see that it doesn't pay to neglect one's health needs because one is worried about the money: *impilo phambili imali lyalendela* 'you must put your life first; the money will come after'. The problem is that conditions in the market since the time of her accident haven't changed. Traders are forced to run their businesses in an overcrowded space without the necessary infrastructure. The drains become blocked on a regular basis, the bins overflow and traders are forced to do business without toilets, water or lighting. How can they put their knowledge from the health and safety training into practice in such an environment, she asks? Only if the traders organize will they be able use a collective voice to demand a safer working space.



Photo: WIEGO

**About WIEGO:** Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org).