

# Curbing Precariousness Facing Non-Standard Employees in the Private Security Industry: Employers' Viewpoint

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## Abstract

The pervasiveness of precariousness facing non-standard employees in Zimbabwe's private security industry has for long become a major cause of concern, specifically as the global demand for decent employment is gaining momentum. This qualitative research study examined strategies applied by and challenges facing employers in curbing precariousness among the predominantly fixed-term contracted employees in the private security industry in Zimbabwe. The study involved 15 participants who were purposively identified from the Security Association of Zimbabwe, the largest employer association in the industry. A major finding of the study was that the nature of business service in the security industry led companies to engage personnel mostly on a fixed-term contractual type of employment. Such employment was found to be associated with poor and decimating conditions of work for the security personnel in the industry, and that much of their work life was enveloped in intense precariousness. The major impediments amplifying the failure to tackle employee precariousness in the security industry include the existence of fragmented relationships between two divergent employer associations in the industry, the prevalence of unregistered security firms, perceived improper regulation of the industry, and weakened employee representation by workers' committees and trade unions operating in the industry. It is the study contention that the creation of an enabling environment to redress unfair and poor working conditions facing security guards is indispensable. Government lobbying to restructure the business regulatory framework is considered fundamental to the independent and autonomous functioning of the industry, and a precursor to tackling aggravated employee precariousness.

**Keywords:** precariousness, non-standard employment, non-standard employees, fixed-term contract, employers' association, private security industry



## Introduction and Background

In the contemporary world of work, the use of non-standard employment arrangements has intensified (Doerflinger & Pulignano, 2016; Keune & Pedaci, 2019; Lorquet et al., 2018). Non-standard employment denotes contractual arrangements that deviate from the full-time, indefinite and two-pronged relationships characteristic of standard employment (ILO, 2016; OECD, 2019). These contractual arrangements present in the form of temporary, part-time, on-call, multi-party or self-initiated employment often associated with flexible and discontinuous workloads (ILO, 2016; Lorquet et al., 2018). Most dominant is the temporary, non-standard employment form which is based on fixed-term, casual and seasonal contracts (Kalleberg, 2018; Keune & Pedaci, 2019). In many parts of the world, the fixed-term contract has predominated in the workplace (Aleksynska & Muller, 2015; Zekić, 2016a). Non-standard employment is becoming an unending and naturalised feature at work (De Stefano, 2017; Mathekga, 2016). Partly, the intensified preference for non-standard contractual arrangements is associated with business demands to achieve flexibility and to cope with employment rigidities (Bessa & Tomlison, 2017; Brandl et al., 2019; De Stefano, 2017).

Non-standard employment arrangements have been found to be deepening precariousness for employees (Keune & Pedaci, 2019); an emerging challenge within the landscape of employment relationships (Larsen & Mailand, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). Precarious employment refers to irregular, insecure and uncertain work (Kalleberg, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). Although employee precariousness is not confined to particular groups of workers, it is reportedly intense among non-standard employees (ILO, 2017; Paolucci, 2017; Kalleberg, 2018; Lansbury, 2018). Precariousness is considered a major negative change that employees face in the modern world of work (O'Brady, 2021).

Precariousness in employment manifests in the conditions of work. Keune and Pedaci (2019) found that non-standard employees, typically regarded as “outsiders” in the labour market face exclusion from the benefits normally associated with full-time and open-ended employment. A lack of social insurance coverage, little or poor pay, restricted institutional power, limited training and career prospects intensify precarity for non-standard employees (Jansen et al., 2017; Mathekga, 2016). Although standard employees are often regarded as core assets that need to be developed and retained through good wages, employment security and career growth prospects, non-standard workers face limited employment, income and career security (Hendrickx, 2018; Johnstone, 2019). They are subject to marginalisation at work and fall prey to confrontational relationships with employees on full-time, indefinite contracts (De Stefano, 2017; Svalund & Berglund, 2018). Consequently, affected employees may become dissatisfied and disengaged, leading to diminished performance, productivity reduction and attrition in enterprise specific skills, innovation and competitiveness (Arrowsmith, 2018; Bessa & Tomlison, 2017; Gore & Uzhenyu, 2017). However, not all non-standard employees face precariousness (De Stefano, 2017). Highly skilled

employees may see temporary employment as offering more stability, flexible career opportunities and better remuneration (Robinson et al., 2019). Also, non-standard employment may be regarded as a way out of unemployment in a labour market characterised with high unemployment (Svalund & Berglund, 2018).

Redressing employee precariousness remains central to employment relationships. Particularly in the case of non-standard employees who are largely engaged in precariousness, reducing their insecurity is an imperative (Bessa & Tomlison, 2017; ILO, 2016; Paolucci, 2017). O’Brady (2021) found that trade unions use their institutional power to foster inclusivity and to resist precariousness. Through organising conferences, raising awareness, sharing information and regularly communicating on vital issues, trade unions can provide support to non-standard employees, further enhancing employee voice and promoting quality working employment for this often marginalised group of employees (Daemane, 2014). Collective bargaining and labour-management partnerships are regarded as key processes for establishing enterprise and industry level agreements that can help reduce precariousness among employees, standard and non-standard (Gopalakrishnan & Brindha, 2017; Kgapola & Smit, 2017; O’Brady, 2021). Designing monitoring mechanisms and policies can be of significance to securing labour protection and providing safety nets for non-standard employees (Lorquet et al., 2018). For example, policies can be formulated to facilitate upskilling and reskilling for such workers, thereby enhancing their employability upon contract termination with their current employers (Keune & Pedaci, 2019). Enforcing observance of legislative enactments can help safeguard non-standard workers against vulnerability in the labour market, for instance, by regularising their contracts after specified periods of continued service (Kalleberg, 2018; OECD, 2019). Industrial action in the form of regulated strikes has been used as a tool for defending and securing the interests of non-standard employees (De Stefano, 2017).

### **Zimbabwe’s Private Security Industry and Evidence of Precariousness**

The private security industry in Zimbabwe is growing (Gore & Uzhenyu, 2017). Companies in this service-oriented industry provide security and protection of persons and property (De Waard, 1999; Mariwo, 2008). The phenomenal rise of the industry is credited to an increase in crime, opening of new business ventures, the emergence of luxurious homes and acquisition of large properties; all in need of security protection (Gore & Uzhenyu, 2017; Mariwo, 2008). Criminal activities are on the increase in Zimbabwe, in part owing to the high levels of unemployment. As a result, businesses and individuals have sought the services of private security companies to protect their investments (Gore & Uzhenyu, 2017). Zimbabwe’s private security industry is labour intensive, with most of the employees being semi-skilled and mainly on non-standard forms of employment, particularly fixed-term contracts (Gore & Uzhenyu, 2017).

Precariousness has remained an inescapable experience for the predominantly non-standard workers employed in the private security industry in the country. Past studies on this industry have established employment conditions that have continued to

exacerbate the precariousness of the private security workforce (Gore & Uzhenyu, 2017; Mariwo, 2008; Nyandoro et al., 2016). These include the following:

- low wages and underpayment or non-payment of wages;
- long and illegal working hours;
- lack of health and safety provision;
- lack of social protection;
- rampant casualisation;
- lack of career opportunities;
- unlawful termination of employment contracts; and
- sexual harassment.

These working conditions have resulted in higher job dissatisfaction among the non-standard employees in the private security industry (Gore & Uzhenyu, 2017; Nyandoro et al., 2016).

### Study Rationale, Main Objective and Research Questions

Research attention on the precariousness of employment exists. For example, O’Brady (2021) points out the factors that drive precarious employment, Heras (2019) investigated mitigatory strategies against precariousness, Keune and Pedaci (2019) studied union strategies against precarious employment, and Mathekga (2016) explored labour exploitation and non-standard employment. Despite efforts to redress precariousness, evidence points towards an expansion of this phenomenon internationally and predominantly among non-standard employees (ILO, 2016; Kalleberg, 2018; Keune & Pedaci, 2019; O’Brady, 2021; OECD, 2019). Redressing employee precariousness remains fundamental to promoting decent employment. This study aimed at comprehending the strategies and barriers with regard to curbing precariousness facing non-standard employees in Zimbabwe’s private security industry. The following questions guided this inquiry:

- In what ways have the employers in the private security industry attempted to redress the precariousness facing their employees, who are mostly on non-standard contracts?
- What are the main factors that have an impact on the attempts to curb the precariousness and in which way can the identified barriers be remedied to promote decent employment in the industry?

## Research Design

### Research Approach

This research followed a qualitative research orientation to

- describe the employers' views about the manifestation of employee precariousness in the security industry;
- understand employer strategies implemented to curb the precariousness; and
- understand the challenges that employers in the industry face in their attempt to curb the precariousness.

A qualitative approach was found suitable for the study as it helps capture rich insights of the situation from the views of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was based on a case study of the key employers' association in the private security industry, the Security Association of Zimbabwe (SAZ). The case study design appropriately guided the investigation by facilitating for in-depth inquiries (Bryman, 2012).

### Research Participants

The study participants were employers or employer representatives, drawn from the SAZ, the largest employers' association in the private security in Zimbabwe. A list comprising 85 members of SAZ was provided through the office of the study gatekeeper. From this list, 15 key informants were purposively selected to participate in the study. Aguinis et al. (2019) are of the view that purposive sampling enables the selection of key informants who possess vast amounts of information. The profiles of the participants who are considered rich informants on the operations of the security industry are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Participants' profile

Participant (P)	Gender	Years in the security industry	Hierarchical level	Educational attainment
1	Male	5–9	HR Manager	Bachelor's degree
2	Male	10–15	HR Director	Master's degree
3	Male	10–15	HR Director	Bachelor's degree
4	Male	5–9	HR Manager	Bachelor's degree
5	Male	1–4	HR Consultant	Bachelor's degree
6	Male	1–4	HR Officer	Bachelor's degree
7	Male	15+	Director	Diploma

Participant (P)	Gender	Years in the security industry	Hierarchical level	Educational attainment
8	Female	1–4	HR and Administration Manager	Diploma
9	Male	10–15	Director	Diploma
10	Male	15+	Operations Director	Bachelor's degree
11	Female	10–15	HR Director	Bachelor's degree
12	Male	15+	Managing Director	Bachelor's degree
13	Male	15+	Managing Director	Diploma
14	Male	10–15	HR Manager	Diploma
15	Female	5–10	Designated Agent	Bachelor's degree

As presented in Table 1, 12 participants were male and three were female, occupying various management positions in organisations found in the security industry, with diverse years of service experience and possessing educational qualifications that ranged from a diploma to a master's degree.

### **Data Collection**

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. The use of the semi-structured interviews allowed for open-ended questioning and probing for in-depth information. This type of interview enabled the researcher to prepare an interview guide, which is regarded as flexible in allowing a discussion about unanticipated issues of the subject under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The interview guide comprised questions that were open-ended in nature, enabling more probing and the generation of rich, detailed and unforeseen data. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in Harare at the times agreed with the study participants. Telephonic interviews were arranged with some participants for follow-ups on certain issues raised by the participants who may have had busy schedules which did not permit for adequate face-to-face interaction. On average, each interview lasted about 40 minutes. The conversations were recorded electronically, with the permission of each participant, and field notes were taken during the interaction.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher sought clearance from the SAZ President and gained access to the participants using an assigned gatekeeper from the SAZ. A list of the employers was provided for the research purposes. With the assistance of the gatekeeper, key informants were selected. Telephonic and email appointments were then made with each target research participant. The right not to take part in the study was respected.

Some target participants could not participate owing to busy work schedules. A total of 15 participants consented to the study. The right to participants' privacy was not infringed upon in the collection of data and all participants were assured of the confidentiality of the data they provided. The findings are reported without any form of deception or misinterpretation. The use of identifiable names was avoided in the report and analysis of the findings.

### **Strategies for Ensuring Quality and Rigour**

To ensure quality data were collected, the researcher identified and targeted key informants who provided in-depth information based on the experience and knowledge regarding the key issues that this study sought to resolve, as guided by the research questions. Moreover, the research findings were shared with the SAZ members through their President and the study gatekeeper to corroborate the accuracy and interpretation of the data. The use of direct quotes to report verbatim information ensured the trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher applied the ATLAS.ti computer software package to analyse data. The software assisted in organising, managing and analysing the information (Hwang, 2008). From the interview transcripts, initial themes were identified, guided by the research questions. The initial themes were then refined, aligned and categorised in line with the study questions (Williams & Moser, 2019). Major themes were then selected and integrated with the relevant literature on employee precariousness to create main conclusions. The coding process using the software package enabled the creation of meaning about the strategies and impediments to redressing the unrelenting state of precariousness that security employees face.

### **Findings**

The research data are presented in three major themes: employers' viewpoint of the precariousness facing non-standard security personnel; strategies adopted to redress precariousness; and the impediments to curbing the precariousness.

#### **Theme 1: Understanding Employers' Views on Employee Precariousness in the Industry**

The participants acknowledged that security personnel were at the heart of safekeeping services offered by the industry to incalculable clients across the country. Despite this vital role, their conditions of work were said to have remained debilitated. Most employers averred that their companies engaged employees on temporary contracts, running typically on a three-month renewable cycle. A common sentiment expressed by the participants was that the temporary nature of business contracts entered into with clients necessitated the engagement of security personnel on short-term rather than long-term or indefinite contracts:

Contracts between firms and clients are temporary or can be terminated at any time as deemed fit by the clients. For example, when guards on site commit misconducts, such as sleeping on night duty, clients may abruptly seek alternative security services. We also experience reduced demand for security services particularly with organisations that operate seasonally. Such reasons make it difficult for us to keep employees on long-term or permanent contracts as this may be costly. In instances where contracts are terminated, we give preference to previously contracted staff once the demand for our services increases. (Male, Managing Director, P13)

Our operating environment is highly unpredictable so much that we cannot hire staff on long-term or permanent contract basis. (Female, HR and Administration Manager, P8)

There was an acknowledgement by most study participants that the nature of the contracts offered to employees in the industry increased worker vulnerability. It was their shared view that many employers in the industry were taking advantage of the temporariness of staff and their low literacy level to offer poor work conditions. The conditions specified in Table 2 were opined to be rampant and increasing worker uncertainty in the industry.

**Table 2:** Manifestation of employee precariousness in the industry

Unprocedural and premature termination of employment contracts
Overworking employees with minimal rest periods
Delays in salary payment
Paying less than the minimum prescribed industry rates
Weak trade union representation and trade union incapacitation
Unpaid or meagre overtime allowances computed based on low wages
Poor terminal benefits
Inadequate protective clothing
Lack of medical aid and social security coverage

The above exploitative conditions of work were said to be widespread in the security industry. Threats of non-renewal of employee contracts and summary dismissals were held as typical in this industry, and employees were left with little choice but to adapt to abusive conditions such as underpayment and overworking:

The private security industry in the country is constituted of about 30 000 employees, with a majority of them on short-term temporary contracts. We continue to receive reports alleging unfair labour practices, mostly against small or unregistered security firms. For instance, we have an industry bargaining agreement which provides that the maximum work hours for a security guard are 48 per week or 12 per day over a 4-continuous day-cycle before taking a 3-day rest. However, some of these firms extend



work hours for their staff to 60 or more hours a week, with little or no rest and often uncompensated overtime work. (Male, HR Director, P3)

Generally, it was the contention of the study participants that exploitative labour conditions were predominant among small and/or unregistered security firms which barely upheld operating standards. In contrast, larger security companies made reasonable efforts to remunerate personnel fairly and often complied with industry-wide agreements and regulations aimed at promoting decent work conditions.

## **Theme 2: Redressing the Precariousness Facing Security Personnel**

Employers can play a key role in the fight against precarity. One study aim was to understand strategies initiated by employers to redress insecurities and uncertainties facing non-standard employees in the private security industry.

It is the study finding that employer interventions redressing employee precariousness were initiated largely at company level than at the industry level. The existence of a bargaining forum at the industry level did little to support parties in negotiating sound agreements over conditions of employment. The participants unanimously enunciated that poverty wages were paid to staff in the industry attributing this to poor collective bargaining coordination. It was found that the industry collective bargaining over minimum wages had last been held in 2014 and was set at a paltry RTGS\$214, one of the lowest in Zimbabwe. As an attempt to improve on the remuneration considering the economic challenges that incessantly eroded employees' income, a RTGS\$100 cost-of-living adjustment and RTGS\$62 hardship allowance were awarded for six months effective March 2019.

However, many employers were said not to have complied with the industry agreements:

Nothing compels us to pay the hardship allowance and trade unions have no power to tell us what to do regarding the cushioning allowance. (Male, HR Officer, P6)

Generally, the big companies in the industry pay well above these industry minimums. However, the challenge lies with smaller security companies who underpay their staff, including their failure to implement any set collective agreements. (Male, HR Manager, P1)

Underpayment of wages was believed to be common among the majority of small-sized and unregistered security companies in the industry. Despite the low wages in the security industry, the participants shared that some security companies were not complying with the minimum agreements citing financial incapacity. Non-compliance and underpayment were said to be rampant as employers took advantage of the desperate situation of their personnel who needed contract renewals and who were without any means for alternative employment in a grim labour market environment. Nevertheless, some organisations, particularly larger ones were found to be paying

higher minimum wages of between RTGS\$500 and RTGS\$700 (from approximately 2019), with other financial incentives added to the minimum wage.

The provision of uniforms, safety shoes and firearms to the security guards was identified as a key requirement to promoting occupational safety and security. The participants, however, shared that many security companies failed to provide these key tools, with some asking prospective employees to purchase safety shoes as one of the requirements to getting employed. Reports of such practices had become widespread in the industry and efforts to tackle such malpractices were said to be a key challenge:

I know of a sizeable fraction of companies that dresses their security staff pretty well in terms of adequate protective clothing expected of a security guard, although many firms require their staff to bring own regalia, or be supplied by the company and later deducted from their income. The reason being that employees are temporary and companies cannot retain the uniforms to allocate them to different personnel in their future recruitments. (Female, Designated Agent, P15)

Despite the existence of endemic exploitative labour practices in the private security industry, particularly among upcoming and unregistered small players, the participants shared that some of the companies offered training opportunities and other benefits to all their staff:

We train our new recruits on the job. This enables employees to increase chances of employability upon expiry or non-renewal of their current work contracts. (Male, HR Manager, P4)

Like many big companies in our industry, we are able to offer loans, canteen meals, groceries and the encashment of leave days for our employees. This often leads to better motivation of our personnel who often are unable to obtain bank loans or make credit arrangements due to their non-permanent employment statuses. (Male, HR Director, P2)

The participants acknowledged the existence of a provision in the Labour Amendment Act (No. 5/2015) requiring industries to negotiate terms aimed at circumventing the continuous engagement of employees on fixed-term contracts, failure of which such employees become permanent. This is regarded as a legal strategy to prevent employee precariousness. The participants, however, stated that the nature of the private security industry made it impossible to offer permanent contracts to its employees:

Our business clients rarely negotiate permanent service contracts and as such fixed-term contracting is the only way to survive in this business. The law has not taken into consideration the diverse industry and business situations. To manage costs as well as survive under our kind of business set-up, there is need to run contracts flexibly. We are, however, negotiating around the issue to ensure compliance. (Male, HR Consultant, P5)

By and large, the interviews revealed that to maintain a sense of security and certainty for their security employees, organisations developed tailor-made interventions, with little progress at the industry level. Mostly, the participants observed that the creation of safety nets for workers was largely at the discretion of management than a product of negotiation, even at the company level.

### **Theme 3: Impediments to Curbing Precariousness in the Industry**

Redressing the widespread precariousness that security personnel face has remained a major challenge. Below are the key obstacles that the research participants raised.

#### *Fragmented Relationships among Employers*

The study found that employers in the industry were organised along two representative associations, which for long had been involved in confrontational disputes. Participant 3, who sits on the industry executive council, revealed that the SAZ represented the largest association with 23 000 employees whereas the alternative association had around 7 000 security personnel. It was the contention of most participants that employers from the smaller alternative association take shortcuts in their security services:

Often, they charge clients less for their security services and then compensate through lowering employment standards by way of underpaying, overworking, and failure to provide protective clothing, resulting in a negative industry image about the adherence to fair labour standards. (Male, Operations Director, P10)

Competing relations that exist between the two employer associations are not healthy. At the end of it all, business and employees become the victims. Such fractured relations can only serve to delay the industry from speaking with one voice in dealing with staff welfare issues. (Male, Managing Director, P12)

Disputes between the two employer associations were a norm and resulted in poor bargaining outcomes:

Collective bargaining in the industry is not well-coordinated. Industry meetings lack logic. Employers in the small association are former military personnel who use their political connections to evade the law and engage in rampant casualisation of labour and unfair labour practices. These employers are not committed to attending industry meetings and negotiations, and when they do, the interactions are mired by continuous disputes. (Male, HR Director, P3)

The fragmented relationships between the two existing employer associations were believed to be pervasive and rendering the effective collective regulation of human resource matters a major challenge in the industry.

### *Perceived Improper Regulation of the Industry*

The findings revealed that security firms in the private security industry were regulated in terms of the Private Investigators and Security Guards (Control) Act (Chapter 27:10) Part III, which vested a state appointed controller with powers to issue, renew or cancel operating licences for private security guard companies at the controller's discretion. These unconstrained powers given to the controller were perceived to be a major challenge to the autonomous functioning and self-regulation of the industry, especially the operations of the employment council, which was registered in terms of the Labour Act of Zimbabwe:

We cannot independently deal with non-compliant security companies as these quickly run to seek protection from higher powers. The next thing your company is under some sort of investigation from the controller's office. The controller is powerful and has excessive powers that outstrip the freedom of employment councils to enforce labour standards. Another challenge is that there is no full-time controller, rather the Ministry of Home Affairs irregularly appoints the regulator, leading to more delays and inconsistencies in decision-making processes. This in turn, affects the functioning of our industry, including dealing with employee rights and welfare. (Male, Director, P9).

The controller's extensive powers are a threat to the independent operation of security companies and the industry as a whole. Had we been solely operating in terms of the Labour Act like the rest of the employment councils in the country, perhaps issues about monitoring adherence to set agreements may have been under control. (Female, HR and Administration Manager, P8).

The participants expressed hope for the apt regulation of their industry to promote industry self-governance. They affirmed this as key to monitoring and enforcing fair labour standards in the private security industry.

### *Prevalence of Unregistered Security Companies*

The study found that the private security industry was populated by a significant number of unregistered security businesses that were neither members of the two employer associations nor registered with the employment council. Although a precise number was not stated, it was a shared understanding by the participants that reports were awash with the existence of such firms. Employees were alleged to be approaching the designated agents of the employment council with claims of unfair terminations only to learn that their employers were not registered with the council or employer associations. To monitor the implementation of agreements was therefore difficult or almost impossible. In addition, the unregistered organisations were alleged to be offering security services to clients at lower rates and would trade off by engaging rampantly in unfair labour standards. It was expressed that the continued existence for many of the unregistered security companies was owing to the close relationships between the owners of the businesses and the regulatory authorities, who offered them protection

against any possible legal backlash. This was regarded as deterring council efforts to inspect and punitively act against alleged malpractices by unregistered companies:

We have employees coming to report unfair labour practices, however, a significant number of such companies are not registered or known in the industry, making it quite a challenge to assist resolve the disputes brought before us. (Female, Designated Agent, P15)

Mostly, the unregistered companies use their political links to remain in operation, and often charge their clients paltry service fees than our industry standards, as a way to get more business. Consequently, they engage in labour malpractices to offset for the reduced business service fees. Attempts to challenge their existence remains elusive due to their strong links with powerful authorities. (Male, Director, P7)

The participants expressed concern over the continued existence of the unregistered companies that offer squalid security services and perpetuate a bad name for the industry as a key employer in the country.

#### *Trade Union Pluralism and Weakened Employee Representation*

Two trade unions exist in the private security industry, and a lack of collaboration was opined as having a significant impact on the capacity of the labour bodies to advance employee interests and secure favourable conditions of work and employment. The participants shared that the trade unions failed to speak in a single voice whenever opportunities for engagement arose and appeared to be more in competition with each other. As a result, employers found it difficult to work in unison with these competing trade unions. Membership to both trade unions was reported to have declined, attributed mostly to the temporary nature of employment contracts offered in the industry and an observed general reluctance by employees to join these associations:

Trade unions are severely incapacitated and their revenue collection appears to have dwindled over time. Most employees are on short-term contracts of about three months, and have no assurance that their contracts would be renewed. For such staff, affiliating with trade union is considered a cost, especially given that they receive low wages. To strengthen trade union capacity under such situations is tough. Employers may take advantage of these challenges and offer incentives to trade union officials in exchange of the officials keeping their members under control. (Male, HR Manager, P14)

It was also raised that trade union and workers' committee representatives in the industry had limited knowledge regarding issues of industrial relations:

Engaging in meaningful negotiations with trade unions is rather a waste of time. Their representatives lack the basic skills needed for effective engagements. (Female, HR Director, P11)

The study established the commonness by security companies to hire semi-literate personnel, with little regard for their academic qualifications. Employers were of the

view that the learned individuals shunned jobs in the private security industry or if they took the contracts would not stay longer than the contract duration. All these factors were identified as having a negative impact on the bargaining power of employee organisations:

Trade unions have no power to tell us what to do. (Male, Director, P9)

Furthermore, it was expressed that many small and unregistered security firms in the industry did not allow their employees to form workers' committees or dissuaded them through such means as threatening not to renew employment contracts once lapsed. Where workers' committees were allowed to operate, the voice of such representatives (also on temporary contracts) was said to be stifled, with little or no contribution to decision-making. This made it difficult for the representatives to voice their concerns against the aggravated conditions of employment acclaimed to be pervasive in the industry.

### *Dysfunctional Collective Bargaining*

The research found that the collective bargaining machinery in the private security industry had become largely dysfunctional as a result of the several factors already highlighted. These include the existence of fragmented relationships among employers who failed to show a united front during negotiations with trade unions, incapacitated trade unions, and the prevalence of unregistered security firms whose activities were difficult to monitor:

The private security industry operated as a sub-sector under the employment council for the commercial sector. SAZ represents the majority of employees registered in the private security industry, thus contributing approximately 85 per cent to the total revenue for the employment council, in comparison to almost 15 per cent collected from the smaller employer association. As deliberations to form an employment council independent from the commercial sector took shape, the smaller association organised itself and registered the employment council, with much help from powerful politicians. Despite representing less than a quarter of employees in the industry, this association enacted into the constitution, a provision that gave them seven seats in the employment council, against three for SAZ, the bigger association. For long, this protracted dispute centred on representation at the employment council has affected the negotiation processes in the industry. There have been numerous complaints alleged against employers from the smaller employer association. These allegations relate to poor worker conditions for security guards who mostly are on temporary contracts. Collective bargaining on its own cannot solve the constitutional provision as the law has not been kind to our efforts to solve the anomaly. Meaningful collective bargaining over wages last took place in 2014. In short, we are saying until this constitutional problem is addressed, acts of unfairness against employees will continue to give the industry a bad image as an employer and negotiations without resolving the constitutional irregularity will not bring much. (Male, HR Director, P3)

Resolving the aforementioned challenges was said to be central to the effective functioning of the private security industry and subsequently the industry capacity to resolve the incessant claims against unfair working conditions facing its employees. All participants averred a need for the proper regulation of the industry in terms of the Labour Act of Zimbabwe (Chapter 28:01) instead of the current order perceived to be a major source of the numerous problems that are bedevilling the industry. The participants were unanimous that this major legal milestone would set the pace for the amendment of the constitution to reflect the reality on the ground and help resolve issues of bargaining representation. This includes bestowing authority on and independence of the council to monitor and deal with “problem” employers. The capacitation and empowerment of worker representatives were identified as central to promoting sound employment relationships. Cultivating an environment of openness, integrity, trust and collaboration between employers or their associations on one hand, and employees or their organisations on the other hand was central to redressing concerns over the debilitating working conditions facing security staff.

## Discussion

The security industry in Zimbabwe is predominantly labour intensive, relying on the services of security guards to offer protection to both life and property. The data indicate that fixed-term contracting, a non-standard form of employment, remains widespread in the country’s private security industry, corroborating earlier conclusions by Mariwo (2008) and Gore and Uzhenyu (2017). Similar observations have been made at the global level with non-standard employment regarded to have become the leading form of employment, particularly fixed-term contracting (De Stefano, 2017; Mathekga, 2016; Zekić, 2016a). Fixed-term contracting in Zimbabwe’s private security industry was necessitated by the existence of short and uncertain business contracts entered into between security guard companies and their service clients. In turn, temporary contracts were seen as a strategy of managing labour and the associated costs. Under changing business contexts, the need to maintain flexibility, including adjusting labour requirements, is regarded as vital to business survival and the management of labour costs (Hendrickx, 2018; IISOE, 2017).

The study found that employees in the private security industry face much precariousness at work, particularly in small and unregistered organisations. Working conditions were said to be exploitative, characterised by underpayment, overworking, unfair termination of contracts, poor employee representation and inadequate provision of protective clothing. For long, these conditions have remained characteristic of Zimbabwe’s private security industry (Gore & Uzhenyu, 2017; Mariwo, 2008; Nyandoro et al., 2016). Consequently, the aggravation of employment insecurities and susceptibility mostly among non-standard employees becomes inevitable (Keune & Pedaci, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019). Confirming De Stefano’s (2017) finding that not all non-standard employees face precariousness, this study points to the existence of

large security companies that pay wages above industry rates, offering employee personal loans, training opportunities and other benefits to their fixed-term workforce.

O'Brady (2021) found that precariousness had become a major challenge in the contemporary world of work. Little action has been taken by employers in the security industry to develop robust measures for curbing employee precariousness. Even the existence of the law did little to deter unscrupulous security employers from subjecting their employees to poor working conditions. Legislation is seen as central to the protection of employees against unfair labour standards (Kalleberg, 2018). Zimbabwe's Labour Act (Chapter 28:01) is aimed at advancing social justice and democracy in the workplace and compels all employers in the private sector to observe the fundamental rights for employees, regardless of the contract type. Outlined in the latest 2015 Labour Amendment Act is a requirement for industries to conclude agreements that determine limits on contract duration and renewal for fixed-term employees. Although such regularisation can help to protect non-standard employees against job insecurities (Jansen et al., 2017), it may present a major implementation challenge for most of the private security companies that rely mostly on temporary business contracts and/or that lack the capacity to negotiate long-term service contracts.

The negotiating machinery for the private security industry was described as generally non-functional owing to several operative challenges such as employer representation irregularities. With collective bargaining limited to the cost of living and hardship allowances since 2014, most employees earned poverty wages and faced appalling working conditions. Even in the case of a limited number of agreements concluded at the industry's employment council, the refusal to implement the infrequent agreements was said to be widespread. For many of the security companies, undercutting on wages and employment conditions was identified as a strategy to compensate for their lack of competitiveness in business. Nonetheless, research contends that collective bargaining can be used to secure agreements that curb employee precariousness and redress the demand for business flexibility (Bondy, 2018; Heras, 2019; Hlatshwayo, 2017; Kgapola & Smit, 2017). At company level, a few security employers were said to provide safety nets for their staff in the form of training, higher wages and better service conditions. These employer interventions are significant in enhancing the security of employment as well as prospects of employability for non-standard employees when their contracts with their current employers run out (Kalleberg, 2018; Lorquet et al., 2018; Zekić, 2016b).

The private security industry is fraught with fundamental challenges that impede the redress of precariousness facing its non-standard workforce. The existence of confrontational relationships between employer associations in the industry is weakening the capacity of employers to deal with unprincipled security firms that engage in bad labour practices. Cohen (2018) regards the creation of strong relationships and interactions among employers as fundamental to effective labour governance. Strong coordination between the existing employer organisations in the private security



industry would enable the development of sturdy processes for dealing with non-compliant security firms, particularly on issues regarding working conditions. One major challenge compounding precariousness in the private security industry is its regulation. With extensive regulatory powers conferred upon the controller, the efficacy of the industry's employment council to enforce or monitor companies' compliance with agreements is reduced, particularly when the companies have strong political connections with government officials. This, to a larger extent, threatens the autonomous existence of employment councils established to function as self-regulating bodies, with little government intervention (Madhuku, 2015).

The prevalence of unregistered security firms was found to be perpetuating precariousness in the private security industry. These organisations are accused of undercharging their security services as a way of attracting and retaining clients. To offset possible losses, such companies underpay their employees, refuse to pay for overtime and do not provide their employees with the necessary protective clothing. Under such circumstances, employee precariousness deepens and can result in their disengagement and shoddy performance at work as affirmed by Gore and Uzhenyu (2017). The data also reveal the incapacitation by employee representative organisations to defend the rights and interests of security workers both at company and industry levels. Particularly, the existence of trade union pluralism in the private security industry has been established to affect union representation, as officials from the two unions compete rather than collaborate to fight precariousness. Parku and Lamptey (2018) found that trade union pluralism had a tendency of fuelling rivalry and competition among labour unions, resulting in failure to effectively defend employee interests.

Other factors identified as affecting the capacity of employee bodies to effectively defend and represent employee rights and interests in the private security industry include low literacy levels by union and workers' representatives, a lack of industry knowledge, low membership, and the fear of losing jobs or threats of non-renewal of temporary contracts. Previous studies have indicated the negative influence that these factors may have on the advocacy and defence of interests and rights, especially for non-standard employees (Heras, 2019; Keune & Pedaci, 2019; Kgapola & Smit, 2017; Lorquet et al., 2018). Gore and Uzhenyu (2017) established that employees in Zimbabwe's private security industry were mostly semi-literate and that this worsened their work circumstances as employers used it to undermine employee rights. Poor employee representation and a lack of sufficient industry knowledge dismember the power of labour bodies to constructively engage with employers and to redress employment conditions.

## Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Legislative changes that promote the self-autonomous and independent functioning of the private security industry are needed. The employment council

for the industry can jointly engage the Ministries of Home Affairs and Labour with a view of streamlining the regulatory processes. This would be significant to the effective functioning of the industry's regulatory processes and vital in redressing the precariousness facing the predominantly non-standard employees in the industry.

- Dialogue between the two existing employer associations is required to help redress the fragmentation that has an impact on the functioning of the employment council and its capacity to redress the widespread precarity in the industry. Dialogue will facilitate the setting up of governance frameworks and standards that can be used as a measure for monitoring compliance by the security organisations, particularly with regard to adherence to minimum employment standards.
- Employers in the industry can help to capacitate trade unions through funding training, workshops and conferences. This will help to build confidence and industry knowledge, resulting in better representation of employees.
- As revealed in the findings, big security guard organisations have established safety nets for redressing employee precariousness. Parties at the industry level can create a framework of minimum employment standards and also recognise and reward by certifying organisations that comply with set standards.
- The proliferation of unregistered security firms may be dealt with via the legal route. Unregistered companies need to be identified. The law should be allowed to take its course in punitively dealing with such companies, including unscrupulous employers who use their woven political nets to perpetuate employee desolation.
- To reduce the period of unemployment for the temporary employees previously contracted in security guard organisations in the industry, the employment council can keep a database that facilitates the re-engagement of employees with employers in need of security guards. This can help to enhance employment security.

## Conclusion

The study determined that fixed-term contracting is the dominant form of employment in the private security industry. This categorises employees as non-standard. Employment on a non-standard basis is inevitable when security companies are contracted for their services mostly on a temporary basis. The conditions of employment facing security personnel have remained precarious, characterised by unfair labour standards such as poverty wages, uncertainties over contract renewals, overworking, and inadequate provision of safety clothing. Interventions to redress the debilitating working conditions have largely been driven by individual employers at the company level rather than the industry level.

With the exception of a few large security firms, the development of safety nets to improve the employment circumstances for security guards has remained elusive for most companies in the industry, particularly for small and unregistered firms. Several barriers have been identified. Fragmented relationships exist between the two employer associations in the industry, compounding the incapacity to work in unison to resolve industry challenges, including the decimation of working conditions. The industry is regulated by a state-appointed controller whose excessive powers impede the independent functioning of the industry's employment council established in terms of Zimbabwe's Labour Act (Chapter 28:01). This perceived improper regulation has created further impediments to the industry governance, such as the failure to rein in the unregistered security companies, which mostly are responsible for undercutting and short-changing on labour standards.

The efficacy of the industry's collective bargaining machinery to deal with labour concerns is hampered by obstacles. Employer representation at the bargaining table is adjudged improper, as the employer association representing fewer employees has more than double the number of seats than the larger association, presenting an unfair advantage when decisions are to be made. Trade union pluralism has weakened the capacity of trade unions to effectively defend and advance employee interests in the private security industry, with adversarial relationships acclaimed to be the order of the day. Illiteracy concerns and the inability to comprehend industry information by employee representatives are cited as key contributing factors of failure to effectively redress the predicament facing the vastly non-standard security workers, who for long have remained enveloped in precariousness. Achieving decent work remains significant to the enculturation of flawless employment relationships in the world of work.

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