

# FACT SHEET ON FOREIGN WORKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

OVERVIEW BASED ON STATISTICS SOUTH AFRICA DATA (2012-2017)<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

- **Percentage of the workforce born outside South Africa**

Approximately **5.3% of people of working age** (15 years to 64 years) **across the whole of South Africa** were **born outside South Africa**.

- **Foreign-born migrants are more likely to be employed than South Africans**

A foreign-born migrant with the same age, gender, and level of education, belonging to the same 'population group' and living in the same place as a South African, has a higher probability of being employed than a South African.

- **But ... foreign-born migrants are also more likely to be employed in precarious work – or in the informal sector - than South Africans**

1. There are 2 million international migrants (those who are foreign-born) of working age (15-64) in South Africa. This represents 5.3% of the labour force.

<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Zaheera Jinnah, Assistant Teaching Professor (University of Victoria); Research Associate (ACMS)

2. Migration, both international and internal in South Africa continues to increase.
3. There was a 1.4% increase of international migrants of working age (15-65), between 2012 and 2017.
4. In real numbers this means that in 2017, there are 2 million international migrants of working age, an increase of 651 000 from the 1,3 million people recorded in 2012.
5. Migration occurs for a range of reasons.
  - a. People move from rural to urban areas, from one province to another (internal), or across international borders (international migration).
    - Among international migration most move for work, studies, business, trade, or family reasons (voluntary migration).
      - Some have valid travel documents such as passports and visas (documented migrants), and some do not have either a valid passport and/or a valid visa that fits their purpose of travel and/or length of stay (undocumented migrants).
      - There are no credible statistics on the number of undocumented migrants in South Africa.
    - A smaller number of international migrants move because they face a risk of persecution in their home countries (forced migrants, such as asylum seekers or refugees).
6. International migration is dominated by regional mobility from the Southern African Development Community (SADC).
7. There are more men than women who are international migrants.

- **Labour:**

1. Unemployment in South Africa is high and increasing.
2. Unemployment has increased for both South Africans and international migrants in the 5-year period. Among international migrants there is a 2.8% increase between 2012-2017 and for South Africans by 2.7%.
  - a. However international migrants have lower unemployment rates than South Africans. In 2017, the unemployment rate for South Africans was 28% while for international migrants it was 18.4%.
3. The Trade industry provided the most employment opportunities for migrants.
4. Migrants are more likely to be employers, and own account workers (self employed than South Africans).
5. Migrants are more likely to be informally employed and therefore face precarious employment conditions.
  - a. 27.1% of migrants work in the informal sector compared to 15.7% of South Africans.
  - b. 12.4% of migrants work in private households as gardens, nannies and domestic workers compared to 7.7% of South Africans in this sector.

- **Gender:**

1. Women have higher unemployment rates compared to men, regardless of migration status or country of birth.
  - a. In 2017, 29.8% of women were unemployed compared to 26% among men.
2. Unemployment for both sexes increased in the 5-year period but at differing rates.
  - a. Unemployment rates for South African women increased by 2.6% in the 5-year period to 30%, but decreased for migrant women by 3.7% to 24% in the 5-year period.
  - b. Both South African and migrant women are more likely than men to work in low skilled occupations.

## Key analysis

This fact sheet is based on statistics released by Statistics South Africa in its 2017 Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) (Report No. 02-11-02 (2017)), and analysis undertaken by the African Centre for Migration & Society.

The statistics offered here present a **partial** picture of both mobility and employment. The limited scope of the migration module in the QLFS, and the five year gap in its administration on the one hand, and the fluidity of migration on the other, means that there is much **we do not know** about migrant and employment in South Africa. Similarly the informality of employment is not completely captured in this survey.

The evidence we do have is both sobering and not surprising:

### It's the economy...

First the economy is not performing well. Unemployment in the country is dangerously high. Even if we consider the narrow definition of unemployment in the QLFS, which excludes a count of discouraged job seekers, a third of the country's residents are without work, and almost a fifth rely on the informal sector. The latter is characterised by poor employment conditions such as long hours, dangerous work, low wages, and little social protection. In other words, even when people do have jobs, it is not enough to escape poverty. Indeed, the reliance on the informal sector suggests that millions of people in South Africa are facing multiple and intersecting barriers to realising a decent life.

Second, **race and gender matter in South Africa**. Black women continue to have the highest unemployment rates and the least desirable jobs. Among migrants as well, migrant men enjoy higher employment rates than migrant women.

Third, **migration is here to stay**. South Africa has implemented a range of stricter immigration policies and border control measures nationally. In local areas xenophobia remains a reality. Yet, migration is a strategy for survival for both low-income South African households and those in the SADC region.

Historical inequities in wealth, underdevelopment, poverty, and unemployment, as well as an economy that does not create sufficient jobs, means that moving is often the only option for survival.

---

### **African Centre for Migration & Society**

The ACMS is an independent, interdisciplinary and internationally engaged Africa-based centre of excellence for research and teaching that shapes global discourse on human mobility, development and social transformation. The ACMS is one of the continent's leading institutions for research, teaching and outreach on migration.

### **African Centre for Migration & Society**

School of Social Sciences  
University of the Witwatersrand  
P.O. Box 76, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa  
Tel: +27 (0)11 717 4033 | Fax: +27 (0)11 717 4040

[info@migration.org.za](mailto:info@migration.org.za) | [www.migration.org.za](http://www.migration.org.za)

---