



# THE LABOUR MARKET SITUATION OF WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS IN ZIMBABWE AND SOUTH AFRICA: COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

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# I. South Africa

## Women's migration in numbers

South Africa hosts nearly 3 million migrants, the largest number on the African continent. 57% of South Africa's migrants are from other SADC states, but the migrant population is very diverse, with origins in 149 countries.

The percentage of migrants (male and female) as a proportion of the population in South Africa is 4,8%, compared to the SADC average of 1,6%. The proportion of women migrants (out of all migrants) is 43%, numbering 1,2 million in 2020. The predominant nationalities of women migrants in South Africa are Zimbabweans (310,000), Mozambicans (116,000), Basotho (106,000), Congolese (30,000), Malawians (25,000) and Liswati (23,000).

Just over 900,000 South Africans have migrated to other countries, 51% of whom are women, but only 10% of these migrants (men and women alike) have remained in the SADC region. The rest of this country case study therefore focuses on South Africa as a migrant destination country rather than as a country of origin.

## Employment of women migrant workers

Women migrants in South Africa are diverse, working at low, medium and high skill levels. In 2017,<sup>1</sup> 26.3% of all employed women migrant workers in South Africa had completed secondary education, and 19% had some tertiary education. The proportions are slightly lower when including women migrants who are unemployed, and employed South African women are about 5% more likely than their migrant counterparts to have secondary or tertiary education. (StatsSA 2020: 17).

Migrant women have a 9,5% higher labour force participation rate and are more likely to be employed than non-migrant women in South Africa, but they also have a higher rate of employment in the informal sector. (StatsSA, 2020) This indicates higher numbers of migrant women in low-skilled professions, with a willingness to work in undesirable positions rather than remain unemployed.

## Key employment sectors

Key sectors of employment for women migrants in South Africa include domestic work, agriculture, hospitality, and informal trade. Because there are almost no legal pathways for low-skilled labour migration into South Africa, there is a high level of irregular migration in each of these sectors, making women workers increasingly vulnerable to abuse by employers who exploit their migration status.

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<sup>1</sup> 2017 is the most recently available StatsSA data combining information on migration and labour. New data was collected in the 2023 Quarter 3 Labour Force Survey, but this was not yet public at time of publication.

## Domestic Work

Up to 200,000 migrant domestic workers are employed in South Africa (ILO 2022), and 95% of domestic workers in the country are women (StatsSA 2023).<sup>2</sup> South Africa's labour laws have led the region in formalising labour regulations and social protection coverage for domestic workers. However, in practice enforcement of these laws is weak, and the sector remains highly informal, with poor working conditions.

## Agriculture

An estimate of 48,000 women migrants in South Africa work as farmworkers. Like domestic work, agriculture is an entry point into the labour market for women migrant workers in the region and is characterised by informality and abusive working conditions. Both women and migrant workers are more likely to be hired as seasonal, casual or part-time workers, leaving women with insecure livelihoods and without critical protections such as maternity benefits.

## Informal Trade

While there are no official statistics on informal traders, it is an important sector of employment for women migrants. A study of men and women migrant traders in Johannesburg (Peberdy 2016) found that 54% experience prejudice because of their nationality, 46% experience verbal insults against their business, 24% experienced physical attacks by South Africans, and 19% experienced police abuse. Although there are a few traders' forums in Johannesburg which accept migrants, most explicitly exclude non-South Africans from membership.

One quarter of women migrants are working as domestic workers, and another 28% of women migrants are working in "elementary occupations"<sup>3</sup>. The Figure below shows that women migrant workers are less likely than non-migrant women to work in professional and elementary occupations. Between 2012 and 2017 there was a decrease in the likelihood of all women in South Africa to work as professionals. (StatsSA 2020) In 2017, about 30% of women and men migrants worked in skilled professions. (Crush et al, forthcoming)

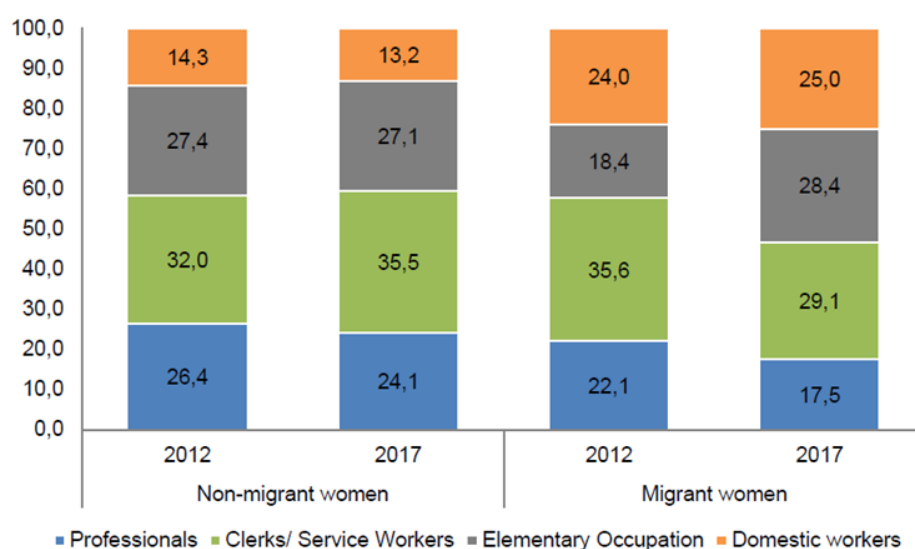
### ***Figure 4: Occupations of migrant and non-migrant women in South Africa***

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<sup>2</sup> This is according to data on occupation ("Domestic Worker"). When data on employment sector ("Private households") is analysed, there is a higher overall number, and the percentage of those who are women drops to 76%.

<sup>3</sup> The occupation categories include (i) Professionals (legislators, senior officials, managers, professional, technical and associate professionals); (ii) Clerks and service workers (clerks, service workers, shop and market sale workers); (iii) Elementary occupation (skilled agricultural, fishery workers, craft and related trade workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers, elementary occupation); and (iv) Domestic workers.





Source: StatsSA 2020

## Labour Migration Policy

South Africa's country's legal and policy frameworks play a central role in shaping migration in the region: both directly, as they impact the daily lives of millions of migrant workers in South Africa, and indirectly, by setting legal precedents for its neighbour states. In February 2022, a Draft National Labour Migration Policy was released for public comment. The draft policy notes the vulnerability of women workers and migrant workers and commits to upholding the international guidelines setting standards for their protection, specifically mentioning the importance of labour rights enforcement of migrants in an irregular situation. At the same time, it also increases restrictions on migration, foreign owned businesses, and employment of foreign workers.

Over the last thirty years, post-Apartheid government has granted immigration amnesties for hundreds of thousands of migrants through various sector and country specific amnesties. In particular, the Zimbabwe Exemption Permit and Lesotho Exemption Permit have been the region's most effective example of regularising migration for low-skilled labour.<sup>4</sup>

The Immigration Act (2002) explicitly makes it an offense to assist or help an "illegal foreigner", in any way, except for necessary humanitarian reasons. However, South Africa's progressive Constitution grants the right to education and other social services to "everyone", and this is frequently used by civil society organisations to ensure that all migrants, regardless of status, can access health care, education for their children, and fair labour practices, among other provisions.

<sup>4</sup> In 2021, the Ministry of Home Affairs decided not to renew ZEP and LEP permits; civil society objections have led to successful court challenges and an interim extension until November 2025.

## Recruitment practices

The recruitment and placement of workers is regulated by South Africa's Employment Services Act (2014), which includes the prohibition of fees charged to workers. However, the high levels of irregular migration and informal employment fuel unfair and fraudulent recruitment practices, social media is widely used for fake and deceptive recruitment of domestic workers, and migrant women are particularly vulnerable as migration status may prevent them from working with registered agencies. In the agricultural sector, labour brokers recruit and hire migrant farmworkers on behalf of farmers, using short-term contracts and disguised employment to evade labour laws and social protection requirements. South Africa is a target destination for human trafficking in the SADC region, and women and girls are especially vulnerable to forced labour in domestic work, sex work, and drug trading.

## Working conditions

Women migrants in South Africa are more than twice as likely as South Africa women to be working without a contract, indicating informal employment arrangements. (StatsSA 2020) They are almost 10% more likely than non-migrant women to work excessive hours (defined at over 45 hours per week). Although comparative wage data is not available, qualitative reports from the domestic, agriculture and hospitality sectors suggest migrants often earn lower wages than non-migrants, even when doing the same work.

## Social protection

Migrant workers are included in some, but not all, social protection schemes. All migrant workers, including those in an irregular situation, are provided for in the Compensation Fund for Occupational Industry and Diseases<sup>5</sup>, while only those with permanent residency, asylum seeker, or refugee status are eligible for the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). Migrants have access to public health care and education but are excluded from the social grants provided by Department of Social Development, except in the case of permanent residents.

However, migrant workers face numerous bureaucratic and operational challenges registering for and claiming these funds, especially if they return to their country of origin with outstanding benefits. Due to discrimination, migrant women often struggle to access public health care services and schooling for their children, especially if they are in an irregular situation. Sectors with high levels of female migrants, such as farmwork and domestic work, often have low levels of oversight from the Department of Labour, and therefore employers do not register workers for social protection schemes, excluding them from important maternity, injury and unemployment benefits.

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<sup>5</sup> Domestic workers were excluded from the occupational injury fund until a landmark Constitutional Court ruling in 2019, which overruled the exclusion on grounds of discrimination, and allowed for retroactive claims back to 1991.

### **Migrant and non-migrant women workers in South Africa: Comparative findings on employment status and education levels.**

*(Data from South Africa's 2017 Quarterly Labour Force Survey)*

1. 4.5% of women in South Africa in 2017 were foreign-born migrants. (This is up from 3.1% in 2012.)
2. Migrant women are more likely than non-migrants to be employed (exact percentage increase varies by definition of employment).
3. Of unemployed women, non-migrant workers are more likely than migrants to be in long-term unemployment (of 12 months or more).
4. Working migrant women in South Africa (aged 20–64) are more likely than working South African women to have had no schooling and are less likely to have completed secondary or tertiary education.
5. When comparing all women (including employed and unemployed), migrant and non-migrants have equal levels of tertiary education.
6. Almost half of women migrant workers (49%) are in informal employment, while this is the case for only 29% of non-migrant women.
7. 25% of migrant women in South Africa are employed in domestic work.
8. 17% of women migrant workers in South Africa are professionals.
9. While 22% of young South African women (aged 15–24) are not engaged in employment, education, and/or training, this is true for only 44% of young migrant women.

## **II. Zimbabwe**

### **Women's migration in numbers and historical context**

Historically, Zimbabwe was a major regional destination for labour migrants and forced migrants. White settlers from Europe and South Africa settled in the country to farm expropriated land, and migrant workers from neighbouring countries, including women, were employed in the colonial economy as farmworkers, mineworkers and domestic workers. In the 1980s, after independence, Zimbabwe received large numbers of refugees from Mozambique as well as skilled migrants from other countries to help build the post-colonial economy (Chikanda & Crush, 2016).

However, since the 1990s, Zimbabwe has become the largest origin country of migrant workers in the region, with UNDESA (2020) reporting 1 243 000 migrants of Zimbabwean origin in the world, 911 981 of whom (73%) are resident in other SADC countries. Zimbabwe is also a transit route for migrants from neighbouring countries on the way to South Africa. Labour migration from Zimbabwe has been characterised by many challenges, including brain drain, irregular migration, lack of a mechanism for social protection of migrant workers and lack of up-to-date statistics on labour migration (IOM 2021).

## Stateless descendants of migrant workers

While the UNDESA statistics show over 250,000 migrants in Zimbabwe (for 2020), the official government statistics on migrant workers record only 25,963 (for 2023) (ZimStat 2023). A major reason for the scale of this discrepancy is that a majority of those counted in the UNDESA migration numbers are not actually migrants, but are Zimbabwean-born children and grandchildren of migrant workers who came from Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia in the mid-Twentieth Century.<sup>6</sup> They have never lived in their migrant ancestor's country of origin and they do not have any documentation regarding their citizenship there. However, neither are they Zimbabwean citizens. They are generally still referred to in society as Malawians or Mozambiquans, and although they can be issued with Zimbabwe ID documents, these will be marked as "Alien". Many of these are descendants of farmworkers, still living in rural areas without access to the knowledge, paperwork and offices needed to claim and process citizenship. Until 2013, this was further complicated by Zimbabwe's prevention of dual citizenship, which required them to renounce another citizenship (which they did not have) to be recognised as full Zimbabwean citizens. They are thus effectively stateless.

This phenomenon is invisible in migration literature, statistics and policymaking, and more research is needed to understand the scope and context of their experience. Importantly, a similar situation may apply to the descendants of migrant workers in other countries in the region.

## Employment of women migrant workers in Zimbabwe

Data on women migrant workers in Zimbabwe is limited, with only 9700 enumerated in 2020 ILOSTAT datasets and 8000 recorded in 2023 ZimStat reports, making up 31% of the total 26,000 migrant workers reported on by ZimStat. Noting the limitations of this data, it shows that women migrant workers have a 47,4% labour force participation rate, which is 12,6% lower than native-born women and 5% lower than male migrant workers. The dominant employment sector is agriculture, which is in line with data showing that migrant women in Zimbabwe are more likely than native women to work in low skilled occupations.

## Labour Migration Policy

Zimbabwe's National Labour Migration Policy (NLMP) was adopted in 2020, with a predominant focus on protecting Zimbabwean emigrants and harnessing the benefits of outward migration. Its strategic objectives are:

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<sup>6</sup> This is not recorded in literature on migration in Zimbabwe but was corroborated in interviews with representatives from Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, the General Agricultural and Plantation Workers' Union, and the Labour and Economic Development Research Institute of Zimbabwe. Other possible reasons for the discrepancy between UNDESA and Zimbabwe's LFS numbers are that the LFS has a minimum working age cut-off (usually 15) under which migrants are not counted. Moreover, the usual LFS sampling procedures do not capture large groups of migrants living communally (such as on farms) or in institutions, or who actively refuse to take part. However, the age element is likely to explain only a small part of the variation in numbers, and other countries also have the same limitations in their LFS versus census data, not explaining the especially large difference in the Zimbabwean case.

1. To enhance labour migration governance for strengthened protection and empowerment of Zimbabwean migrant workers in line with international norms on safe migration and decent work for all.
2. To harness and maximise the benefits of (inward and outward) labour migration for national development, including through remittances and investment promotion and functional labour market information systems

The NLMP aims to enact measures and bilateral agreements to address these challenges. Measures relevant women migrant workers include:

- Recognise the standards set for migration and decent work by international, continental and regional frameworks and treaties, and consider ratifying the ILO migrant workers conventions C97 and C143.
- Prioritise a gender-sensitive approach to labour migration.
- Domestic principles of the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).
- Facilitate social protection benefits for migrant workers in the host countries and for foreign workers in Zimbabwe.
- Facilitate more efficient payment methods for remittances from Zimbabwean migrant workers, and reintegration programmes for return migrants.
- Emphasise pre-departure training and guarding against propaganda in recruitment.
- Call on countries of destination to enact legislation that prohibits and punishes xenophobic discrimination and violence

## **Recruitment practices**

The NLMP identifies the need to develop comprehensive guidelines for recruitment, to prevent abuse of the process, violation of workers' rights and improve regulation and monitoring of private employment agencies. Current legislation regulates private employment agencies and prohibits fee-charging to workers. However, substantial regulatory gaps, limited oversight, weak enforcement, and insufficient institutional capacity leave workers, especially women, vulnerable to abusive recruitment and human trafficking.

High levels of irregular migration and informal employment fuel unfair and fraudulent recruitment practices. Zimbabwean women are targeted by informal agents for exploitation and human trafficking into Namibia, Botswana and South Africa. In countries of destination, women migrant workers are vulnerable to fake and deceptive recruitment practices. In recent years, there are increasing instances of Zimbabweans recruited as migrant domestic workers to Arab States, where they often face abusive conditions and have in some cases required government intervention for repatriation.

## **Working conditions and social protection**

While limited statistical data is available on working conditions, qualitative reports on the working conditions of sectors employing Zimbabwean low-skilled women migrants consistently report a variety of decent work deficits, including sub-minimum wages, excessive working hours, inadequate rest periods, unfair and summary dismissals, and lack of paid public holidays, annual leave, sick leave, or family leave. Zimbabwean migrant workers,



especially in an irregular situation, often do not report labour violations for fear of dismissal or deportation.

Although Zimbabwe has explored agreements for portability of social protection benefits for workers who have returned home, currency inflation and long-term economic instability in the country complicate payment transfers, and most workers prefer to continue earning benefits in foreign currency. In one of the few successful examples of portability in the region, the Zimbabwean government continues to transfer pensions payments to Malawi for Malawian workers who have returned home.

## **Skilled migration out of Zimbabwe**

The healthcare and care work sector are currently one of the most important channels for emigration of skilled labour both within and out of the SADC region. Zimbabwean health workers, including doctors, nurses and caregivers, are actively recruited to work in the United Kingdom. 2023 data show Zimbabweans are the second highest recipients globally of “Skilled Worker (Health and care only)” visas to the UK. In the same year, Zimbabwe was added to the World Health Organization’s “Health Workforce Support and Safeguards List”, which indicates pressing health workforce challenges, and intends to discourage destination countries from recruiting healthcare workers from these nations, to protect their local health workforce (WHO 2023). Although the UK prohibits recruitment from “red listed” countries, in practice employers and agencies continue to hire from Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwean teachers have long been recruited to work in South Africa and other countries in the region (SACE 2011). Zimbabwe has bilateral agreements to export teachers to Rwanda and Namibia. “Brain drains” caused by the emigration of skilled workers has been a key factor in the weakening of Zimbabwe’s healthcare and education systems in recent decades.



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