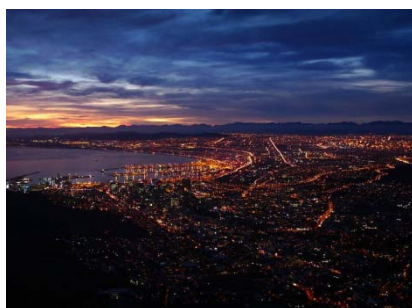


# MIGRATION AND GENDER IN SOUTH AFRICA

## Following bright lights and the fortunes of others?



### Overview

Internal migration in South Africa has a strong gender dimension. Historically, the apartheid-era migrant labor system meant that predominantly black African men moved to urban areas without their families. After the abolition of influx controls in 1986, many women relocated to join their partners. However, existing research shows

that increased female labor supply was poorly absorbed, leading to rising unemployment among black African women.

Von Fintel & Moses (2017) document the gender-specific incentives to relocate within the borders of South Africa. In particular, they investigate whether female migration has followed the same routes as male migration for the purposes of maintaining family ties, or whether these movements are economically profitable for women who have an incentive to migrate independently. Their findings have important policy implications for patterns of urbanization throughout Africa.

### Key Results

- **Migration, for both black African men and women, is not primarily driven by marriage and familial considerations.** Female labor market participation has increased substantially while marriage rates have declined; women no longer migrate for reasons related to the family alone.
- **Women do not move to regions where their own incomes increase after migration.** Instead, women migrate to regions with better overall economic conditions and higher incomes among cross-racial reference groups.
- **Public service provision is likely to be an important determinant of women's decision to relocate.** In the absence of labor market or family-related incentives to migrate, better public services are an incentive.

### By

Dieter von Fintel and Eldridge Moses

The Growth to Empowerment (G2E) program within GrOW examines the impact of economic growth on women's economic empowerment.

MARCH  
2018

No. 13

## Background

Gender, as a focal point in the understanding of internal migration decisions, processes and outcomes, has a relatively short history dating back to the early 1990's, when migration studies increasingly directed attention to the paucity of studies documenting female migration. Much of the literature in the early years of internal migration research in Sub-Saharan Africa implicitly assumed that the majority of migrants were men and by omission, resigned women either to the roles of caregivers in the sending region or companions to men through marriage or dependence, despite the growing presence of women in migration flows. This restrictive lens through which the migration of women was viewed meant that even as migration research evolved, it remained largely insensitive to the specific drivers of autonomous female migration.

Part of the reason for the inattention to women in migration flows are methodological limitations: analyses of permanent migration generally occurred for relocation over long distances, while the bulk of female migration occurs within regions; rural women tend to move to small towns, semi-rural employment hubs, and the informal settlements on the peripheries of small cities. This has resulted in migration analysis at the inter-regional level understating the mobility of women.

There is some evidence to suggest that the nature of female migration has changed substantially in recent years. In the two decades since the end of apartheid, profound changes in marital arrangements, fertility reductions and increases in educational attainment levels may have contributed to more independent decision-making by women. Migration patterns and motivations therefore appear to be more complex than simple disequilibrium models would suggest and therefore warrant a closer investigation of the role of gender in migration motivations and outcomes.

## Methods and Data

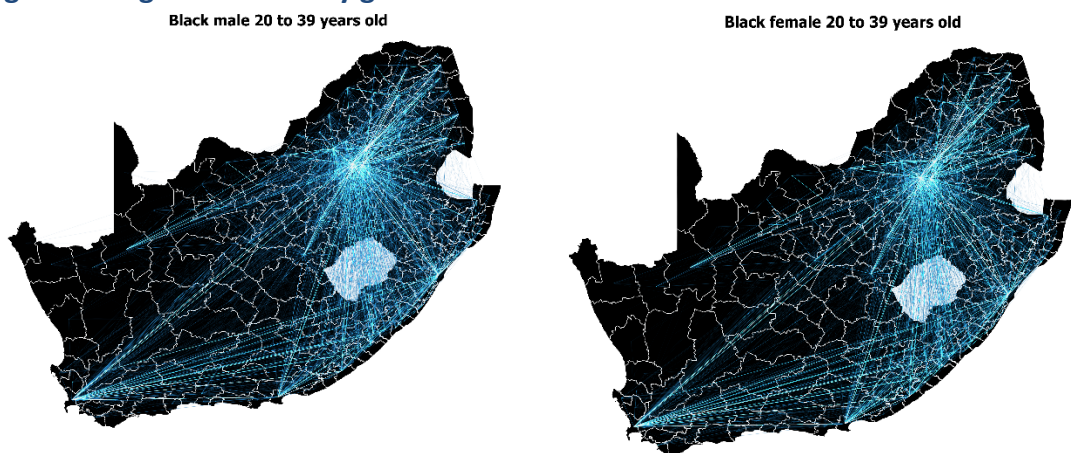
Von Fintel & Moses (2017) study total internal migration flows over 234 South African municipalities, using a gravity count model. The sample is limited to black Africans aged 20-39, recorded for the year prior to the 2011 Census night. This specific population of interest is driven by two considerations: firstly, young individuals are more likely to move in search of jobs, and are in the age group where marriage is most likely; secondly, black African influx controls to urban areas have been rescinded, so that limiting the sample to this group makes it possible to test whether historical migration patterns matter more than current socio-economic or familial considerations. The analysis is also separated by gender to reflect differences introduced by the apartheid (male) migrant labor system and the rapid feminization of the labor market more recently.

Each municipality is regarded as being a potential sending and destination region for migrants. However, the authors purposefully limit the sample to avoid capturing return migration by discarding all flows away from metropolises and towards rural municipalities. In the case of semi-urban municipalities, bi-directional flows are included.

Figure 1 shows that prime-aged men and women follow similar patterns of migration in the decade up to 2011. This pattern departs from previous distinctions, where male migrant workers travelled long distances from rural areas to urban centers, and women

only moved over short distances. Empirical analysis shows that this convergence is not because women now “follow” men. Rather, women follow “overall” economic activity and public services. The authors distinguish between two types of expected income differentials as pull factors, namely expected income premiums that are specific to migrants, and regional expected income differences that accrue to the general population or groups of which they are not members. The goal in doing so is to establish whether relocation is motivated by actual economic benefits that go to migrants, and not overall economic activity that may benefit non-migrants. These concepts may be disconnected, with aggregate economic activity not necessarily translating to household income potential for migrants. This is especially true if migrants experience barriers to entering the destination labor market successfully.

**Figure 1. Migration flows by gender**



## Main Results

Migration, for both black African men and women, is not primarily driven by marriage and familial considerations. Although female migration patterns tend to follow those of men, increased female labor force participation in the last two decades suggests intentional co-migration is no longer the dominant reason for female migration.

Women do not move in response to increases in other women migrants’ incomes. The authors find no statistically significant relationship between migration flows and women’s migration income premiums. Instead, black African women tend to move to regions where the earnings of (both black African and white) men are high. This implies women migrants move based on information about earnings potential which generally does not accrue to them. This might explain why migrants generally face higher unfulfilled expectations and lower subjective well-being.

Public service provision is likely to be an important determinant of women’s decision to relocate. Given that women no longer move primarily for family reasons, nor do they appear to relocate in response to labor market benefits that accrue specifically to them, the authors posit that a third possible explanation for observed patterns in female migration is that women consider better service provision important in their migration decision. This is evidenced by a positive association between the effective targeting of the Child Support Grant in a region and female migration flows to that region.

## Policy Lessons

- Because public services matter for women's migration decisions, **public resources must be managed more effectively in order to provide services** where the labor market does not provide sufficient opportunity.
- The low absorption rate of women migrants into the labor market necessitates that the barriers that currently prevent entry into the formal and informal job sector be adequately addressed. **Fewer restrictions on the informal sector might improve labor market attachment for women.**
- **Patterns of urbanization in Africa will not only depend on the growth of formal and informal job opportunities, but also on the extent to which service provision in rural areas continue to lag those in urban areas.**

## Further Reading

Fintel, D., & Moses, E. (2017). Migration and gender in South Africa: Following bright lights and the fortunes of others?. *Regional Science Policy & Practice*.  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rsp3.12106/abstract>

We gratefully acknowledge funding from the **Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW)** initiative, a multi-funder partnership between the UK's Department for International Development, the Hewlett Foundation and the International Development Research Centre.

The **GrOW initiative** funds 14 research projects aimed to empower women to participate in economic activities, providing evidence that can inform social and economic policies to improve poor women's lives, while promoting economic growth.

**Research Project – G2E (Growth to Empowerment)** is a project of the GrOW initiative: Pathways for shared prosperity: Understanding the links between women's economic empowerment and growth.

### Information

<https://www.uni-goettingen.de/grow>

### Contact

Sophia Kan | [skan@uni-goettingen.de](mailto:skan@uni-goettingen.de)

### Suggested Citation

GrOW G2E. (2018). *Migration and Gender in South Africa*, 2018:13. Goettingen, Germany: University of Goettingen.

 [facebook.com/growg2e/](https://facebook.com/growg2e/)

 [#GrOWG2E](https://twitter.com/GrOWG2E)

©2018 University of Goettingen

## Partners



International Development Research Centre  
Centre de recherches pour le développement international