GENDER LINKS
FOR EQUALITY AND JUSTICE

Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance

POLICY BRIEF
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Triple Jeopardy: Xenophobia, Gender and Diversity in South Africa

Gender Links Cottages welcome Pachedu, an SA-based NGO, that supports LGBTIQ refugees. *Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna*

Introduction

Xenophobia is not only an attack on people perceived to be foreign; it is a threat to human rights, public safety, social cohesion, and inclusive economic development. In South Africa, migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking women and LGBTQI people face intersecting forms of discrimination based on nationality, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression. These inequalities can heighten their exposure to exclusion, exploitation, gender-based violence, hate crimes, and barriers to justice, healthcare, protection, and economic opportunities.

Persistent inequality, unemployment, misinformation, ineffective migration governance, competition for limited resources, and political rhetoric that scapegoats foreign nationals intensify these

QUICK FACTS

- **2.63 million** international migrants in South Africa; of these, **167,000 are refugees and asylum-seekers, primarily from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, South Sudan, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe.**
- **4.1%** of South Africa's total population were foreign migrants.
- **42%** of international migrants in 2024 were women or girls; men comprised about **58%**.
- **406 xenophobic incidents** were recorded (2022-2025), resulting in 75 deaths.
- Overall, KwaZulu-Natal (85) and Gauteng (79) had the highest numbers; Western Cape saw a significant decline but remained a hotspot.
- Major urban municipalities were most affected: City of Johannesburg (58 incidents), eThekwini/ Durban (49), and City of Cape Town (28).
- Violence is the most common type.
- Harassment, extortion, and threats are prominent, with extortion and health xenophobia on the rise.
- **6,134** people displaced, **810** shops looted over 3 years.
- Approximately 160,000 repatriated to home countries since June 2026.
- Organised Anti-migrant movements are growing: Groups like *Operation Dudula* and *"March and March"* have gained visibility and operate outside legal frameworks, contributing to institutionalised exclusion and violence.

harms. Women and LGBTQI people may be particularly vulnerable when xenophobic prejudice intersects with sexism, homophobia, transphobia, poverty, insecure immigration status, and limited access to documentation and support services.

This policy brief examines how xenophobia emerges and takes root, tracing regional patterns and its particular expression in South Africa. It considers how social, economic, political, and institutional forces affect women and LGBTQI people, as well as how harmful narratives and discriminatory language normalise prejudice and violence. It identifies practical policy measures to strengthen protection, improve access to services and justice, counter misinformation, prevent violence, promote accountability, and foster safer, more inclusive communities.

Key terms and definitions

Language shapes public perceptions of migration and foreign nationals in South Africa, either promoting understanding or reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Accurate, respectful language helps counter misinformation, protect human dignity, and prevent prejudice from escalating into xenophobia.

An **asylum seeker** is a person seeking recognition as a refugee in the Republic.[1]

Characteristics (included in the Prevention of Hate Crimes and Speech Act)
(a) Age; (b) albinism; (c) culture; (d) disability; (e) ethnic or social origin; (f) gender; (g) HIV or AIDS status; (h) language; (i) nationality, migrant, refugee or asylum seeker status; (j) occupation or trade; (k) political affiliation or conviction; (l) race; (m) religion; (n) sex; (o) sexual orientation, gender identity or expression or sex characteristics; or (p) skin colour.[2]

Gender-based discrimination refers to any distinction, exclusion or restriction made based on sex that has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.[3]

Harm means substantial emotional, psychological, physical, social or economic detriment that objectively and severely undermines the human dignity of the targeted individual or groups.[4]

Hate Crime[5]
3. (1) A hate crime is:
(a) an offence recognised under any law (here-inafter referred to as an "underlying offence"), excluding the common law offence of crimen injuria or an offence referred to in section 4(1); and
(b) committed by a person who is motivated by their prejudice or intolerance - (i) towards the victim, the victim's family member or the victim's association with or support for a person with one or more characteristics or a group of persons who share one or more of the charac-teristics; and (ii) which was based on one or more of the actual or perceived characteristics.

Hate Speech Crime[6]
4. (1) *(a)* Any person who intentionally publishes, propagates, advocates, makes available or communicates anything to one or more persons in a manner that could reasonably be construed to demonstrate a clear intention to:
(i) be harmful or to incite harm; and

1 Refugees Act 130 of 1998, South Africa Government
2 Prevention and combating of Hate Crimes and Hate speech Act No. 16 of 2023, SA Government 2024)
3 https://www.justice.gov.za/nap/nap-20190227.html, accessed 30 September 2026
4 Prevention and combating of Hate Crimes and Hate speech Act No. 16 of 2023, SA Government 2024)
5 Prevention and combating of Hate Crimes and Hate speech Act No. 16 of 2023, SA Government 2024)
6 Ibid

(ii) promote or propagate hatred, based on one or more of the grounds, is guilty of the offence of hate speech.
(b) Any person who intentionally distributes or makes available an electronic communication which that person knows constitutes hate speech as contemplated in paragraph (a), through an electronic communications system which is:
(i) accessible by any member of the public; or
(ii) accessible by, or directed at, a speci?c person who can be considered to be a victim of hate speech, is guilty of an offence.

Migrant: According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), a migrant is a 'person who moves away from his/her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons.'

Racism is the belief that someone of a different skin colour/race or ethnic group is in a position of power over others based on physical and cultural attributes, as well as economic wealth, involving hierarchical relations in which the 'superior' race exercises domination and control over others.[7]

Racial discrimination is any act or omission, including a policy, law, rule, practice, condition or situation which directly or indirectly imposes burdens, obligations or disadvantage on, or withholds benefits, opportunities or advantages from, any person on prohibited grounds of race, ethnic or social origin, colour, culture, language and birth.[8]

Related intolerance is intolerance connected to the racial or ethnic background of an individual or group. It is the combination of racism, racial discrimination or xenophobia with prejudice or discrimination based on some other factor, such as gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion or language.[9]

Refugee means any person who has been granted asylum in terms of the Refugees Act.[10]

Xenophobia describes attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to a community, society or national identity. Xenophobia is not merely dislike of foreigners; it is prejudice, exclusion, discrimination, or violence directed at people perceived to be outsiders.[11]

Historical and regional context

South Africa receives migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from elsewhere in Africa and beyond. Its history of apartheid, racial classification, inequality, forced movement, and exclusion provides important context for understanding contemporary debates about belonging and citizenship.

A system of engineered inequality

Contemporary xenophobia and migration debates cannot be separated from South Africa's history of racial classification, forced removals, and engineered inequality.

Between 1960 and 1983, apartheid laws forcibly removed approximately 3.5 million black South Africans from their homes, segregated communities, and deprived them of

7 https://www.justice.gov.za/nap/nap-20190227.html, accessed 30 September 2026
8 Ibid
9 Ibid
10 Refugees Act 130 of 1998, South Africa Government
11 https://www.justice.gov.za/nap/nap-20190227.html, accessed 30 September 2026

political and citizenship rights. The Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970 designated black people as citizens of often unfamiliar "homelands," enabling the state to treat them as foreigners and migrant labourers in South Africa. These policies displaced millions into overcrowded, under-resourced areas and severely disrupted livelihoods, social networks, and communities[12] and created a long-lasting pattern in which citizenship and belonging were racially defined, and internal migration was tightly controlled through pass laws and influx control. Black South Africans were treated as temporary sojourners in "white" urban areas, and forced displacement became a normal feature of social and economic life.[13]

Apartheid also entrenched a migrant labour system rooted in South Africa's mining economy. From the late nineteenth century, black men were recruited from rural areas and neighbouring countries to work in mines under restrictive contracts. At the same time, influx-control and pass laws limited their ability to settle permanently in urban areas. Workers were often housed in single-sex compounds and separated from their families for extended periods. This system treated black workers as temporary outsiders in the cities where their labour was essential, reinforcing patterns of displacement, precarious employment and exclusion.

This history continues to shape how South Africans understand belonging, citizenship, and migration:

- **Contested citizenship:** Apartheid-era laws made citizenship conditional, racialised, and revocable. This legacy complicates current debates about who "belongs" and who is seen as a legitimate claimant to rights and resources.
- **Normalised forced movement:** Millions experienced displacement as a routine feature of life. This history can make it harder to distinguish between lawful control of migration and unjust collective exclusion or forced removal.
- **Inequality and competition:** Apartheid entrenched spatial, economic, and social inequalities that persist today. People often blame migrants for competition over jobs, housing, land, and services rather than addressing structural exclusion.
- **Racial and ethnic classification:** Apartheid's racial categories and homeland politics left enduring assumptions about who is "truly" South African and who is an outsider, even among African citizens.
- **Distrust of the state:** Forced removals, pass laws, and arbitrary enforcement created deep mistrust of immigration and documentation systems, which can affect both citizens and non-citizens today.

A person cannot be illegal; actions can. Migration laws classify unauthorised entry or visa overstaying as criminal offences. In the same vein, migration in South Africa is not a crisis - it is a normal human pattern for a country sharing borders with six others. Framing migration as a crisis suggests extraordinary responses are needed, rather than robust, sensible management and better governance.

Aimée-Noël Mbiyozo for the Institute for Security Studies (ISS)

Why people come to South Africa

A combination of regional conditions, historical patterns of cross-border movement, and wider global displacement trends shapes South Africa's migration flows. In 2025, South Africa hosts more than 167,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, South Sudan, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe. Many

[12]Forced removals and migration: a theology of resistance and ... https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S0256-95072013000800003&script=sci_arttext
[13]Forced Removals in South Africa - South African History Online https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/forced-removals-south-africa

have fled conflict, persecution, political instability, economic insecurity, or serious human-rights violations in their countries of origin.[14]

Unlike many neighbouring countries, South Africa does not generally accommodate refugees and asylum seekers in designated camps. Instead, most live in urban communities alongside South African citizens and other residents while applying for refugee status. They must therefore find housing, employment, education, healthcare, and other essential services within existing public and community systems.

This approach can support freedom of movement, independence, and social integration. However, it can also expose refugees and asylum seekers to poverty, insecure employment, barriers to public services, discrimination, social exclusion, and xenophobic harassment or violence.

People migrate to South Africa for diverse and often overlapping reasons, including:

- **Conflict, persecution, and human-rights violations.** Armed conflict, political repression, targeted violence, discrimination, and threats to personal safety may force people to leave their countries and seek international protection. LGBTQIA+ people are at particular risk in countries with restrictive laws and practices.
- **Political instability and insecurity.** Weak institutions, political unrest, contested elections, corruption, and deteriorating security conditions can disrupt everyday life and create uncertainty about people's safety and future.
- **Economic hardship and unemployment.** Limited employment opportunities, poverty, food insecurity, and declining economic conditions may encourage people to seek livelihoods and greater financial stability elsewhere.
- **Climate-related pressures and disasters.** Droughts, floods, extreme weather, environmental degradation, and declining agricultural productivity can undermine livelihoods, increase food and water insecurity, and contribute to displacement.
- **Family reunification and cross-border networks.** People may move to join relatives, partners, or established community networks that can provide accommodation, information, financial support, and assistance in finding work.
- **Opportunities for trade, education, and employment.** South Africa's relatively large and diverse economy, educational institutions, and regional commercial networks attract students, skilled professionals, traders, entrepreneurs, and people seeking employment.

These motivations are not always separate. Conflict, political instability, economic insecurity, environmental pressures, and family considerations frequently interact, making migration a complex decision shaped by both immediate risks and longer-term aspirations.

Effective policy responses combine lawful migration governance with a clear commitment to non-racial citizenship, equal protection under the law, and redress for the structural exclusions that continue to shape life chances in the country.

> *"The violence against our fellow Africans, on South African soil, is not a spontaneous eruption of popular anger. It is a manufactured process. And it's a damning indictment of governance failure across the SADC region. When leaders fail to deliver jobs, when corruption bleeds our economies dry, when basic services fail, the desperate or easy play is to spread hate."*
> Geraline Fraser Moleketi, at a meeting of the SADC Gender Protocol Alliance ahead of the SADC HOS Summit, August 2026

[14] https://www.unhcr.org/us/where-we-work/countries/south-africa?dataset=POP&yearsMode=range&selectedYears=%5B2012%2C2025%5D&level=OPR&category=PTY&fundingSource=ALS&compareBy=%5B%22category%22%5D&levelCompare=%5B%5B%22OZAF_MC_ABC%22%5D%5D&viewType=chart&chartType=bar&contextualDataset=BUD&tableDataView=absolute

The legal and policy framework

South Africa has a progressive legal and policy framework **for international immigration, asylum seekers and refugees** that is anchored in the Constitution and implemented mainly through two statutes - the Immigration Act 13 of 2002 and the Refugees Act 130 of 1998 - supported by the 2017 White Paper on International Migration and relevant international and regional treaties.[15]

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa is grounded in principles of human rights: equality and non-discrimination; human dignity; freedom from violence; and access to justice and protection by law, including the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. "No person may, directly or indirectly, discriminate unfairly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth, and that national legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination; Section 10 provides that everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected (Everyone describes all people in the Republic, including non-nationals.[16]

Solidarity event hosted by FEW and UNHCR. *Photo: Pachedu*

The **Refugees Act 130 of 1998** gives domestic effect to South Africa's international and regional refugee obligations and establishes the asylum system, and could be one of the most.

The **Immigration Act 13 of 2002** regulates entry, stay, work, study, business and departure of foreign nationals who are not seeking asylum[17]. The Act is being progressively aligned with the 2017 White Paper's vision of a more development-oriented, skills-focused, and regionally integrated migration system, including proposals around SADC mobility and expatriate engagement.[18]

South Africa also has a strong legal and policy framework for **anti-discrimination, including xenophobia and related intolerance**.

The **Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act No. 4 of 2000** prohibits unfair discrimination, hate speech and harassment and requires the State to promote the constitutional imperatives enshrined in section 9 of the Constitution.

South Africa's National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance was approved by Cabinet in February 2019 and formally launched in March 2019. The NAP provides for data collection, a rapid-response mechanism, improved access to justice, protection of non-nationals' constitutional entitlements, and the integration of migrants into communities. The NAP's implementation period covered 2019/2020 to 2023/2024. Its objectives should therefore be reviewed, renewed, and linked to current national priorities on social cohesion, public safety, migration governance, gender-based violence, and local economic development.

[15] Home Affairs https://www.gov.za/about-government/government-system/home-affairs , accessed 30 September 2026
[16] The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996
[17] South African Government, Immigration Act 13 of 2002
[18] White Paper on International Migration for South Africa July 2017 https://www.dha.gov.za/WhitePaperonInternationalMigration-20170602.pdf

The **Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Act 16 of 2023** aims to enforce South Africa's international and constitutional obligations against racism, discrimination, xenophobia, hate crimes, and hate speech. It establishes offences, penalties, prevention measures, and reporting requirements related to hate crimes and hate speech. The creation of this legislation in South Africa represented a groundbreaking moment in Africa, as no other country on the continent had implemented similar measures. By recognising and attempting to respond to hate victimisation, South Africa reaffirmed its commitment to democratic values and demonstrated its unequivocal intolerance for any form of discrimination or prejudice.

Read together, this legislation and policy framework is strong. It uses a rights-based approach that requires migration and refugee laws and enforcement to be applied lawfully, fairly, and without discrimination, collective punishment or incitement. However, the legal and policy framework is only as good as its implementation.

Systems abused

Corruption, dysfunction, and abuse of systems across the Department of Home Affairs are well documented. These system failures have resulted in misconceptions and false narratives that fuel anti-migrant sentiment. The most recent indictment of South African systems is clearly laid out in the outcomes of a 2024 investigation into Home Affairs, released in 2026.[19]

The **Special Investigating Unit (SIU)** documented that South Africa's immigration system has effectively functioned as a "marketplace" where visas and permits were sold to the highest bidder.

- **Corrupt officials selling permits:** Home Affairs officials accepted payments ranging from R500 to R3,000 via eWallet, cash hidden in application forms, or in-kind benefits (such as covering private rent) to issue visas and residence permits unlawfully.
- **Fraudulent asylum claims:** Syndicates helped foreign nationals fraudulently obtain asylum seeker permits without merit, often without assessing the asylum claim, enabling later applications for permanent residence and citizenship.
- **High-profile exploitation:** External actors, including religious figures (e.g., Prophet Shepherd Bushiri) and entertainment personalities, allegedly exploited influence and fabricated documentation to secure fraudulent residence permits.
- **Digital manipulation:** Applications were expedited via WhatsApp, with approvals followed by immediate payments; cell phone analysis revealed direct communication between officials and beneficiaries of fraudulent permits
- **Financial gains:** The SIU traced over R181 million in financial gains linked to beneficiaries of fraudulent visa applications underpinned by fake documentation.

Consequences of a corrupt and dysfunctional immigration system - as highlighted in investigations like the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) inquiry - span security, economic, institutional, and social impacts:

National security and border integrity

- **Uncontrolled entry and evasion of oversight:** Weak verification allows individuals to bypass standard background checks, gain unauthorised entry, and manipulate movement control systems without proper record-keeping.
- **Identity theft and crime exploitation:** Criminal syndicates and unauthorised actors obtain legitimate passports or permanent residence permits through collusive practices, such as biometric manipulation,

[19] Special Investigating Unit on outcomes of Home Affairs investigation https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/special-investigating-unit-outcomes-home-affairs-investigation-23-feb-2026

enabling transnational crime and money laundering.

Economic and public resource strain

- **Fiscal losses and tax revenue drain:** Unlawful employment, fraudulent business setup, and illicit financial transactions bypass tax laws, significantly reducing revenue for public services.
- **Resource burden:** Systems unable to enforce residency or permit limits place unplanned strain on urban infrastructure, public healthcare, housing, and social services.
- **Deterrence of legitimate business:** Rampant corruption distorts markets, discourages foreign direct investment, and disadvantages businesses that follow lawful visa and employment processes.

Institutional integrity and governance

- **Systemic corruption and illicit enrichment:** Corrupt networks turn public administration into a "marketplace," enriching bad actors through illicit kickbacks, undisclosed bank transfers, and laundered property assets.
- **Erosion of public trust:** Widespread fraud undermines faith in public institutions, law enforcement, and regulatory compliance, both domestically and internationally.
- **Procedural bottlenecks:** Systemic abuse creates administrative backlogs and delays, penalising bona fide applicants, skilled workers, and refugees who seek lawful status.

Social and Security Risks

- **Risk of exploitation:** Vulnerable applicants are forced to rely on illicit intermediaries or corrupt officials, leaving them exposed to extortion, fraud, or labour exploitation.
- **Social tensions:** Undocumented residency, unvetted labour entry, and perceptions of systemic corruption fuel societal friction, anti-immigrant sentiment, and public unrest.

Increasing hostility

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)[20] has tracked South African public opinion through the long-running South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). Tracing attitude trends from early baseline surveys through recent post-pandemic surveys, their 2026 report reveals several key structural shifts in anti-migrant sentiment.

Rising perception as economic and security threats: Anti-immigrant sentiment is not new in South Africa; baseline hostility has remained comparatively high since long-term tracking began in the early 2000s. Waves of overt anti-immigrant sentiment spiked around major national events and crises, notably surrounding the widespread xenophobic violence of 2008 and 2015. Immigrants are increasingly viewed as economic competitors and security risks. The belief that immigrants drive up crime rates rose from 64% in 2018 to 77% in 2025-a stark 13 percentage point increase over a brief period. While historical anti-immigrant sentiment fluctuated in waves, post-2020 data show a more sustained, aggressive upward trend rather than temporary spikes.

Geographic Concentration: Anti-immigrant sentiment has surged most sharply in specific regions, particularly KwaZulu-Natal, where the share of adults unwilling to welcome immigrants grew from 23% in 2021 to 45% in 2023, reaching 60% in 2025. Mpumalanga,

[20] https://hsrc.ac.za/news/research-outputs/going-from-bad-to-worse-a-rise-in-anti-immigrant-sentiment-in-south-africa/, accessed 7 October 2026

Gauteng, and Limpopo have also seen notable decreases in welcoming foreign nationals. Unwillingness to welcome foreign nationals reached record highs, particularly in urban and industrial hubs under acute economic strain.

Shift Across Class Lines: In earlier survey rounds, anti-immigrant views were distributed relatively evenly across different socio-economic strata, affecting both lower-income and higher-income demographics similarly. Recent surveys demonstrate that hostility has intensified disproportionately among working-class, unemployed, and low-income populations. This shift mirrors deepening economic precarity, high unemployment, and deteriorating municipal service delivery in lower-income townships and informal settlements.

Misconceptions and false narratives fuel anti-migrant sentiment[21]

Misinformation, exaggerated statistics and political rhetoric often shape public debate about non-nationals in South Africa. Migrants are frequently blamed for unemployment, crime, pressure on public services and other deep-rooted socioeconomic challenges. However, available evidence challenges many of these claims and points instead to systemic problems such as inequality, weak governance and inadequate service delivery. This section examines common myths about non-nationals and contrasts them with the realities revealed by official data and research.

The Myth	The Claim	The Reality
There is mass overpopulation of illegal foreigners	South Africa is swamped by 15 to 40 million undocumented and legal foreign nationals, making up a massive portion of the country.	According to UN DESA the actual number of international migrants is roughly 2,63 million, which accounts for about 4.1% of the total population-aligning closely with global norms.[22]
Foreigners "Steal" Jobs	Foreign nationals take employment opportunities away from local South Africans and cause high unemployment rates.	Rather than undermining South Africa's economy, immigrants contribute around 9% of GDP and have a positive net impact on the government's fiscus[23]. Foreign workers actually generate roughly two jobs for citizens per immigrant worker.
Migrants drive high crime rates	Foreign nationals are responsible for the majority of violent crimes, drug dealing, and illegal activities.	Criminal justice and correctional services data show no statistical link between higher migration levels and increased crime. Undocumented or foreign nationals make up a very small fraction (around 2.3%) of the total prison inmate population.[24]
Foreign nationals are intentionally undocumented	Foreigners prefer to live in the country illegally and flout the rule of law.	Many individuals fall into undocumented or irregular status due to severe administrative backlogs, high costs, and inefficiencies within the Department of Home Affairs, rather than an intentional disregard for the law.[25]
Foreign nationals overburden public healthcare	Foreign nationals collapse or heavily drain the national public healthcare system.	Given that foreign nationals make up only 6.5% of the population, it statistically impossible for immigrants to be responsible for the healthcare system's failings. strains on public hospitals stem primarily from internal governance failures, corruption, and resource mismanagement rather than migration.[26]

[21] Aimée-Noël Mbiyozo, Senior Research Consultant, Migration, ISS, June 2026, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/anti-migrant-myths-that-have-been-allowed-to-fester-in-south-africa accessed 30 September 2026
[22] United Nations (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024: Key facts and figures. UN DESA/POP/2024/DC/NO. 13 UN DESA data, International Migration Stock 2024 https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock accessed 30 September 2026
[23] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and International Labour Organisation (ILO), How immigrants contribute to South Africa's economy. Geneva and Paris: ILO and OECD Publishing, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264085398-en.
[24] Kaziboni, A., Lancaster, L., Machabaphala, T., & Mulaudzi, G. (2022). Scapegoating in South Africa: Busting the myths about immigrants. Institute for Security Studies, Southern Africa Report. ISSN 2617-8206 (Print), ISSN 2617-8214 (Digital). https://issafrica.org
[25] Ibid
[26] Ibid

How disinformation and AI exacerbate anti-migrant sentiment

Understanding and countering anti-foreign national disinformation is crucial in South Africa's current context of heightened social tensions and election preparation. The research was conducted to uncover how coordinated online campaigns weaponise real-world grievances - such as unemployment, crime, and public service failures - to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment and undermine trust in state institutions.

Given the high risk that these tactics could incite violence and civil unrest, the study used an AI-assisted, human-validated approach, analysing a randomised sample of public social media posts collected between 30 May and 30 June 2026. This methodology combined expert-driven keyword identification, advanced machine learning tools, and rigorous data validation to systematically map the disinformation ecosystem, assess the threat level, and inform strategies for both digital and real-world intervention.

What Social Media Reveals: Anti-Foreign National Disinformation and Hate Tactics in South Africa

Key takeaways: Research conducted by Tales of Turning (2026)[27]

- **Coordinated amplification:** Research by the non-profit Tales of Turning found that 27% of the analysed anti-foreign-national social media content was linked to a coordinated disinformation network using bot and disruptor accounts rather than organic public outrage.
- **Exploitation of real grievances:** The campaigns exploit genuine social issues-such as high unemployment, crime, pressure on public services, and housing shortages-by redirecting frustration into hostility toward foreign nationals, framing them as illegal invaders or economic threats.
- **Manufactured consensus and tactics:** Networks use divide-and-rule tactics, coded language to bypass content moderation, and high-emotion triggers (e.g., red emojis, urgent captions like "BREAKING"). The constant repetition of slogans creates a false illusion of widespread public agreement.

Women and migration

Women refugees and asylum seekers face heightened risks and discrimination within South Africa's asylum system. Women - sometimes pregnant or solely responsible for children - must undertake costly, exhausting journeys to renew permits, endure hostile treatment and long queues without adequate facilities, and face robbery, assault and threats of sexual violence.

Gender-based violence, harassment and coercion: Migrant and refugee women may face sexual harassment, intimate-partner violence, trafficking, and abuse during journeys, at borders, in accommodation, at work, or when seeking services. Survivors may be turned away from shelters, social services or police assistance because of nationality, documentation status, language, family composition, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

Labour exploitation and economic exclusion. Women are concentrated in domestic work, informal trading, agriculture, hospitality, care work and other poorly regulated sectors

[27] Tales of Turning. (2026). What Social Media Reveals: Anti-Foreign National Disinformation and Hate Tactics in South Africa. DataEQ social media data, May 30 - June 30, 2026.

where wage theft, excessive hours, unsafe conditions, harassment and dismissal without remedy may be common.

Barriers to appropriate healthcare and documentation. Migrant and refugee women often encounter delays, refusal of care, language barriers, unaffordable costs, or discriminatory treatment when seeking maternal, reproductive and general healthcare.

Risks to children, family unity and education. Documentation problems, poverty, frequent permit renewals and discrimination can prevent children from obtaining birth registration, enrolling in school, accessing healthcare, or remaining in education. Women caring for children alone may be unable to travel, work, or attend appointments without risking lost income or leaving children unattended.[28]

Migration, diversity and inclusion

Consensual same-sex sexual acts remain criminalised in 61 countries and punishable by death in six. Africa accounts for 32 of these states.[29] By contrast, South Africa's Constitution guarantees the rights of all people regardless of sexual orientation.[30] Same sex marriage has also been legal since 2006, when the Civil Union Act came into force, which makes South Africa a destination for those fleeing persecution based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

South Africa receives refugees from African countries where restrictive laws and practices criminalise or suppress diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions. Many have fled discrimination, persecution, violence and exclusion. Yet LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers often face discriminatory questioning, public outing, humiliation and the misapplication of refugee law, resulting in rejected claims and prolonged insecurity. Their intersecting identities as LGBTQIA+, Black and foreign further expose them to employment exclusion, harassment, violence and discrimination.[31]

Gender-based violence, harassment and coercion: Migrant and refugee LGBTQIA+ people may face sexual harassment, intimate-partner violence, trafficking, and abuse during journeys, at borders, in accommodation, at work, or when seeking services because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

Labour exploitation and economic exclusion. LGBTQIA+ migrants and refugees may be denied work or dismissed because of prejudice, identity documents that do not align with their gender expression, or discriminatory assumptions. Insecure status and limited job options can increase dependence on exploitative employers, partners or intermediaries.

Barriers to appropriate healthcare and documentation. Migrant and refugee LGBTQIA+ people may encounter delays, refusal of care, language barriers, unaffordable costs, or discriminatory treatment when seeking maternal, reproductive and general healthcare. They may face stigma, confidentiality breaches, misgendering, denial of gender-affirming or other appropriate care, and reluctance to disclose relevant information to providers.

Solidarity event hosted by FEW and UNHCR. *Photo: Pachedu*

[28] Amnesty Internation South Africa, Living in Limbo: Rights of Asylum seekers denied, 2019
[29] https://www.equaldex.com/issue/homosexuality, accessed, 5 October 2026
[30] The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, S9(3)
[31] Amnesty Internation South Africa, Living in Limbo: Rights of Asylum seekers denied, 2019

Exclusion from protection, shelter and justice. Survivors may be turned away from shelters, social services or police assistance because of nationality, documentation status, language, family composition, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. Transgender and gender-diverse people may be placed in inappropriate facilities or exposed to further harassment.[32]

The cost of Xenophobia

Xenophobia in South Africa has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the immediate targeting of migrants. Xenophobic violence causes deaths, injuries and displacement, while racial profiling, fear and mistrust deepen social divisions within communities. It also disrupts township businesses, employment, rental income, regional trade, and industries that depend on migrant labour. At the national level, recurring anti-foreigner hostility damages South Africa's diplomatic relations, weakens investor confidence, discourages tourism and undermines its reputation as a regional economic and political leader.

Human and social cost

- **Violence and death:** Attacks by vigilante groups have led to injuries, beatings, and multiple deaths across major cities. Between 2022 and 2025, Xenowatch recorded 406 verified incidents resulting in 75 deaths. This translates into an average of 102 xenophobic discrimination incidents per year.[33]
- **Displacement:** Thousands of people have been forced to leave their homes, seeking safety in churches, police stations, or border camps. According to official government repatriation tallies, more than 160,000 people have been helped home by their respective governments following the resurgence of anti-migrant violence and vigilante campaigns. Many additional migrants returned privately, relocated to safer areas within South Africa, or sent their families back to their home countries independently.[34]
- **Racial and cultural profiling of South Africans:** South Africans themselves face harassment and humiliation from vigilantes. For instance, local residents with darker complexions or those wearing Islamic attire (like the hijab) report being stopped in public spaces by anti-migrant groups and forced to prove their citizenship on the spot by speaking local vernacular languages.
- **Disruption to daily neighbourhood life:** Residents lose access to convenience stores (spaza shops) within walking distance that provide essential micro-goods on credit, forcing them to rely on more expensive, distant commercial malls.
- **Community Division and Fear:** While many local township residents report living peacefully alongside migrant neighbours (such as local tailors, hair braiders, or mechanics) whom they know and trust, vigilante tactics - such as threatening to burn down properties - create fear, mistrust, and division within local neighbourhoods.[35]

[32] Amnesty Internation South Africa, Living in Limbo: Rights of Asylum seekers denied, 2019
[33] https://theconversation.com/xenophobia-in-south-africa-states-complicity-with-gangs-and-vigilantes-is-threatening-its-ability-to-govern-285280
[34] TRT Afrika. "South Africa's Anti-Migrant Unrest Led Over 160,000 Foreigners to Flee." July 21, 2026. https://www.trtafrika.com/english/article/d3feadc0a85d.
[35] Anyadike, O. and Nkala, O. (2026) 'South Africa feels the economic cost of anti-migrant xenophobia', The New Humanitarian, 5 August. Available at: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2026/08/05/south-africa-feels-economic-cost-anti-migrant-xenophobia (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Economic cost

- **Disruption of the local township economy:** Foreign-owned "spaza" (convenience) shops generate nearly 3 million jobs and contribute over 5% to South Africa's GDP. Attacks, arson, and forced evictions targeted at migrant shopkeepers directly eliminate local income streams, income for South African landlords, and access to essential, credit-based micro-goods for residents.
- **Loss of cross-border trade and revenue:** Cities like Johannesburg serve as regional trading hubs where cross-border buyers spend hundreds of millions annually (e.g., in the Jeppe Street wholesale market). Xenophobic violence, harassment, and rigid enforcement actions have reduced bus passenger traffic from neighbouring countries by around 30% and hit wholesale suppliers hard.
- **Severe agricultural and industrial labour shortages:** Key sectors dependent on migrant labour-such as agriculture (e.g., sugar cane harvesting and horticulture) and textile manufacturing-face immediate labour shortfalls as workers flee violence and immigration raids, threatening local supply chains.
- **Loss of property income and local jobs:** Many South Africans who lease space to migrant traders-such as landlords renting out backrooms or garages-lose vital household rental income when these businesses are looted, burned, or evicted. Additionally, local South Africans employed by migrant-owned businesses lose their livelihoods when these enterprises are forced to shut down.[36]

While economic frustrations like unemployment and poverty often fuel xenophobia, the resulting violence exacerbates these issues by further damaging the economy and reducing opportunities for everyone.[37]

Reputational damage cost

- **Strained regional trade and bilateral relations:** Tensions and violent flare-ups strain South Africa's diplomatic and economic relationships with neighbouring African countries, harming cross-border trade, the movement of people, and regional cooperation. Experts have warned that xenophobia jeopardises $42 billion in annual trade links with the rest of Africa, which accounts for over 30% of South Africa's total exports.
- **Loss of investor confidence:** Media coverage of violent incidents creates an image of social and political instability, discouraging both domestic and foreign investors from committing capital to the country.
- **Tourism and business:** Anti-foreigner sentiment and violence harm the country's

appeal to international and regional travellers.[38] Regional African travellers make up a massive portion of international arrivals (accounting for over 75% of international arrivals in South Africa). Fearing safety risks or fallout, tourists from countries like Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, and Zambia often shun affected destinations.[39]

[36] Anyadike, O. and Nkala, O. (2026) 'South Africa feels the economic cost of anti-migrant xenophobia', The New Humanitarian, 5 August. Available at: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2026/08/05/south-africa-feels-economic-cost-anti-migrant-xenophobia (Accessed: 9 October 2026).
[37] King, S. (2026) Xenophobia in South Africa and how it is affecting the economy, Mooney Ford Attorneys. Available at: https://www.mfp.co.za/general-interest/xenophobia-in-south-africa-and-how-it-is-affecting-the-economy/ (Accessed: 9 October 2026).
[38] Landau, L.B. and Misago, J.P. (2026) 'Xenophobia in South Africa: state's complicity with gangs and vigilantes is threatening its ability to govern', The Conversation, 17 June. Available at: https://theconversation.com/xenophobia-in-south-africa-states-complicity-with-gangs-and-vigilantes-is-threatening-its-ability-to-govern-285280 (Accessed: 9 October 2026).
[39] Nkosi, S. (2026) 'SA's anti-immigrant protests drive away crucial African tourism', Daily Maverick, 28 June. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-06-28-sas-anti-immigrant-protests-drive-away-crucial-african-tourism/ (Accessed: 9 October 2026).

Why urgent action is required now

Xenophobia in South Africa is **not a series of isolated incidents** but a **persistent national threat** to human rights, public safety, social cohesion and constitutional democracy. Xenowatch's 2022-2024 reporting documents recurring incidents across the country, particularly in urban and economically marginalised communities.

The growth of **organised vigilante activity** makes the situation especially urgent. When groups assume responsibility for checking documentation, restricting access to services or removing perceived foreign nationals, immigration enforcement shifts outside lawful state institutions. This normalises collective punishment, increases the risk of violence and weakens the rule of law. Political rhetoric that portrays migrants as a collective threat can further legitimise hostility and deepen mistrust in democratic institutions.

Coordinated disinformation is intensifying these risks. Research conducted in 2026 found that 27% of analysed anti-foreign-national social media content was linked to coordinated networks using bots and disruptor accounts. Such campaigns exploit genuine public grievances, circulate exaggerated claims and manufacture the appearance of widespread agreement. The speed and reach of this content increase the possibility that online hostility will translate into discrimination, vigilantism and physical violence.

Corruption and dysfunction within the immigration system are reinforcing public resentment. The Special Investigating Unit found extensive permit fraud, manipulation of administrative processes and more than R181 million in financial gains linked to fraudulent visa applications. These failures penalise legitimate applicants, erode public confidence and allow migrants to be blamed for problems rooted in weak governance and institutional corruption.

The consequences are particularly severe for migrant and refugee **women, children and LGBTQIA+ people**. They face heightened exposure to gender-based violence, workplace exploitation, exclusion from shelters, barriers to healthcare and education, documentation difficulties and limited access to justice. Poverty, disability, insecure legal status, language barriers and dependence on informal employment further compound these risks.

South Africa already has a strong constitutional and legislative framework, but implementation has not kept pace with the threat. The National Action Plan's implementation period ended in 2023/2024, while organised vigilantism, institutional failures and digital disinformation continue to evolve. But without sustained prevention and early intervention, existing pressures related to unemployment, inequality, housing and service delivery can continue to be redirected towards migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Urgent action is therefore required to renew the national response, strengthen accountable migration governance, enforce hate-crime protections, counter incitement and misinformation, and establish effective early-warning and rapid-response systems. Delay will allow discrimination and unlawful enforcement to become further normalised, making future violence more difficult - and more costly - to prevent.

PushForward 4Equality

WHAT WE (CIVIL SOCIETY AND CITIZENS) CAN DO

- Verify migration statistics and avoid sensational headlines.
- Humanise affected communities without exposing victims to further risk.
- Challenge hate speech and misinformation.
- Produce content in local languages.
- Monitor government and political accountability.
- Establish local dialogue forums.
- Include migrant representatives in community decision-making.
- Develop early-warning and rapid-response systems.
- Address disputes through mediation rather than vigilantism.
- Promote joint community projects involving citizens and non-citizens.

WHAT THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO

- Policy implementation: Implement anti-xenophobia policies and hate-crime and hate-speech legislation, with measurable targets and public reporting; improve documentation and asylum-management systems. Coordinated implementation through a renewed national action plan with named lead institutions, time-bound targets, and public reporting;
- The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development should coordinate the plan;
- Department of Home Affairs should report on documentation backlogs, processing times and anti-corruption controls;
- South African Police Service and the National Prosecuting Authority should respond quickly to threats and attacks; record xenophobic motives accurately; report on xenophobic incidents; investigate hate speech, crimes and organised incitement, and protect victims and witnesses;
- Municipalities should maintain local early-warning, mediation and rapid-response mechanisms. Ensure equal access to essential services, including basic health and education.
- Officials and politicians: Avoid political language that collectively blames migrants for South Africa's socio-economic crisis.
- Review progress at least annually with civil-society and migrant-community participation.

WHAT BUSINESSES AND EMPLOYERS SHOULD DO

- Prevent nationality-based discrimination.
- Comply with labour laws.
- Avoid exploitative wages and unsafe conditions.
- Provide clear mechanisms for resolving disputes between workers and customers.

South Africa can address migration challenges without treating migrants as enemies. Effective solutions combine lawful migration management, accountable governance, human rights protection, accurate public information, and meaningful community integration.

30 Gill Street
Observatory
Johannesburg
South Africa

www.genderlinks.org.za

Phone: +27 (0)11 487 2829
www.facebook.com/GenderLinks
https://x.com/GenderLinks
https://www.linkedin.com/company/gender-links