



State of Women's Employment and Education in South Africa

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Abstract

DEEP-IDEA SA Workshop provided an update on the British Commission-funded research project between the Universities of Plymouth, Reading, and Cape Town, focusing on the inclusion of women in construction and the potential positive impact of digital technology. This keynote speech commenced with a visualisation of the beautiful, rural countryside of the Eastern Cape during the late 1960s. Exclusion from mathematics and science subjects applied to all black Africans; additional limitations existed on women, for example, limitations of movement and job opportunities; and the legal status of minors, reversed only by the 1996 final Constitution. Applying cultural-historical activity theory provides insight into progress made, but also the magnitude of the challenge that faced South Africa in 1994, persisting to date. Women now fulfil a range of roles, many at management level, particularly evident in the banking sector, administrative roles, and within the police service. In the construction sector, however, fewer women are employed, although in the informal construction sector, which has grown slightly faster than the formal sector, women have established and lead construction companies. Nationally, women constitute 51% of the population. In education, females have overtaken males at the secondary school level, and now predominate in tertiary enrolment. Registration of women is limited in areas of: electrical infrastructure, engineering, architecture and built environment. Exclusion from mathematics (as opposed to mathematics literacy) and science limits entry to technical qualifications. The unemployment level remains a source of concern, with youth between 15 and 24 years of age at 62.4%, disproportionately affecting young women. The Presidential Youth Initiative, part of the Basic Education Employment Initiative, recommenced in 2025 to offer 200,000 school assistant opportunities. These statistics provide the agenda for participant discussion, including obstacles to mathematics provision.

Keywords: Young women, employment, education, cultural-historical activity theory, historical legacy

1. Background to Workshop

DEEP-IDEA SA refers to the Digital Equity Enabling Platform for Inclusivity, Diversity, Equality, and Accessibility in the South African construction industry. The research partnership of Dr Oladinrin and Dr Alencastro, both of the School of Art, Design and Architecture, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business, Plymouth University, UK and Professor Windapo of the Construction Economics and Management Department within the Engineering and Built Environment Faculty of the University of Cape Town (Oladinrin et al., 2025) is supported by the British Council. This workshop explores strategies to advance digital equity within the South African construction industry. The scope includes examining existing digital divides, identifying barriers to inclusive participation, and showcasing innovative tools and

practices that foster inclusivity, diversity, equality, and accessibility in construction-related education, practice, and policy. The comparative research of Dr Rana, of Construction Management, University College of Estate Management, Horizons, Reading, UK (Rana et al., 2025) provides insight into the exclusion of women in Brazil, despite their achieving higher education. This article derives from the keynote speech, which contrasts the historical legacy with the current status of South African women in education and employment, and is supplemented by additional relevant references.

2. Introduction - the South African historical context

Time-travel back in time, to the mid- to late 1960s, during the apartheid era in South Africa. We are

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travelling to the Eastern Cape. For those who have never been there, we find rolling green hills, covered in lush, green vegetation, and with homesteads dotted around the hills. Looking for water, we go down to a river running down through a gorge to the sea. When we reach the sea, we find a wide sandy beach with rocky outcrops. Looking out to sea, we would likely see a pod of dolphins swimming past. In this beautiful, rural countryside, there is a young woman whom we will name Nomusa. A young woman who walked with other school children from the area across the countryside to reach school, and had probably achieved what in those years was a Standard five pass – now Grade 7. Nomusa would like to find work in one of the towns or cities, such as Gqeberha (then Port Elizabeth), eThekweni (then Durban), or Cape Town.

However, there were obstacles a young woman would encounter:

- First, she would not be able to travel without the express written permission of her husband or father, but they would probably be away from home, working in the coal, gold, or other mines.
- Second, if Nomusa did manage to reach town, as some young women did travel without permission, what employment was available to her? Jobs were restricted by apartheid-defined race, but also by sex. Women – all women, including the privileged women, were excluded from many jobs. Nomusa could, however, work as a Domestic Worker or as a Nanny.
- Third, Nomusa would not have been able to conclude a legal contract without the signature of her husband or another male relative. All women – including privileged women – were not legally considered adults, and so could not conclude a legal contract alone.

Now, we look around to consider this room and recognise where we are currently. We are in a room with many women, many with tertiary education, who are legally able to conclude contracts. The example above was used because this address explores the realities of women in education and employment today, and particularly to highlight the challenges for women within the context of the construction sector. The theoretical approach considers all aspects through the lens of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). We commence with the historical context as it provides us with insight into how we got here, and addresses the social and cultural contexts from the perspective of the object of our activities, and the constraints within which we work.

The example of Nomusa highlights the legal constraints within which women existed, not so many years ago, with restrictions on movement, educational quality, and opportunities to earn an income. Equality – in theory – was attained officially, with the *Bill of Rights*, which is

Chapter 2 of the *Constitution* (Republic of South Africa, 1996). There are too many to list in this context, but South Africa has also signed a range of International Conventions; African Union (AU) and Southern African Development Corporation (SADC) Protocols; and introduced a range of statutes to provide equality of opportunity and protection to women. For those interested in pursuing the statutory and policy documents (Commission for Gender Equality, 2023). There is no doubt that we have made progress, but it is erratic, and we need to work towards ensuring that any steps moving us forward are maintained. Returning to the question of how we got here, the introductory vignette ensures that we acknowledge that we have made progress, but equally, that we do not underestimate the size of our challenge, as it existed in 1994, and continues to date.

3. Where are we now?

We may use observation: in addition to all the women present today, let us consider what we observe outside these walls.

In preparation for this address, some recent experiences are noted and reported as follows:

- When visiting my local police station to have documents certified, a young woman Constable assisted us. I observed another Constable walk through, and she stopped to talk to a third woman, who looked like the senior, although I could not see her badge.
- At my local bank, the majority of employees are women, including those in senior positions, and the Security Guard at the entrance was also female.
- At my local Hypermarket, virtually all the cashiers and customer care employees are women, although the management is mainly male.
- Driving on the way to the shopping mall, there was the usual line of male roadside work-seekers on the pavement, some carrying paint rollers, some spirit levels, and some sitting on the ground playing a board game, while they wait.

These simple observations present our first indication of the differences between economic sectors. Therefore, it is useful to consider our national demographic statistics. Once we have that picture, we can compare the breakdown by sex in levels of education and employment.

3.1. South African national demographic structure

Our national demographic picture is drawn from the Mid-year 2025 Population Estimates, provided by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), which put the national population at 63.1 million, of which 51% are women. The nation has grown by 6 million since 2002

(StatsSA, 2025b). Figure 1 Illustrates the national demographic breakdown in 5-year steps, illustrating the predominantly young population:

3.2. National statistics on education

In South Africa, everyone has a right to basic education, as stated in the Adult Basic Education (ABET) Act

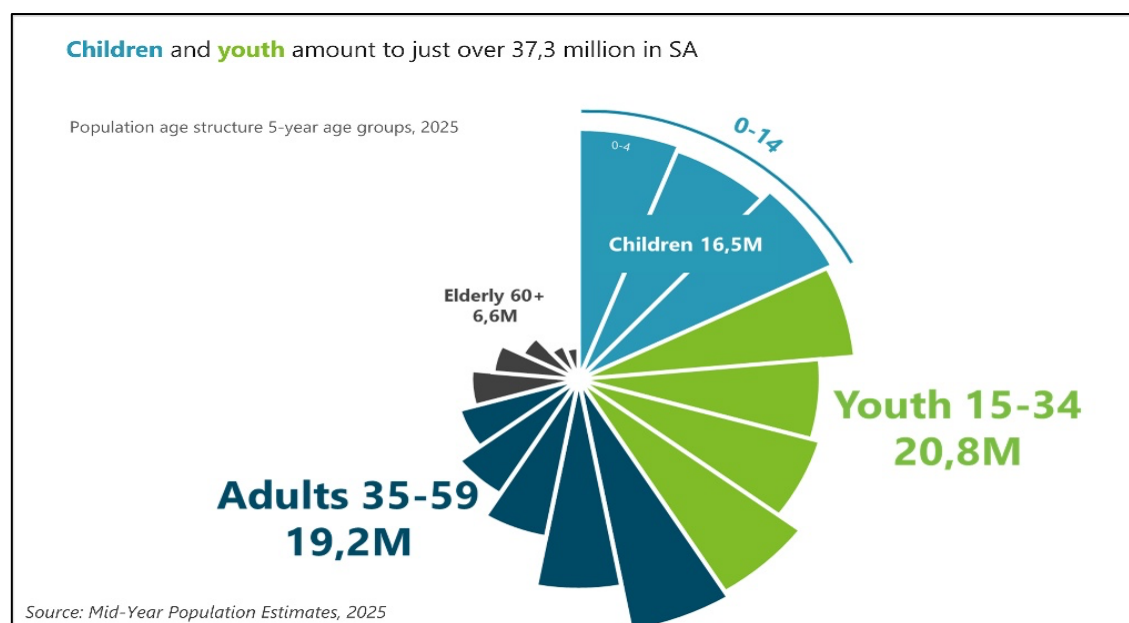


Figure 1: National demographic breakdown in 5-year steps
(Maluleke, 2025a: 9)

Figure 1 shows that the group of most interest to us is aged 15-34 – the group we assume will be in further and higher education, or moving into employment. Looking further into the StatsSA information, specifically relating to women, we note that there is a drop in the number of children that a woman is predicted to have – fertility drops from an average of 2.78 children per woman in 2008, to 2.21 in 2025 (StatsSA, 2025b: 2).

Why is this significant? A drop in female fertility – internationally - appears to correlate with an increase in the level of women's education. The World Bank has investigated whether this is simply a correlation or whether there is a causal link. A World Bank Blog article is useful because it derives from research in African countries, concludes that there is a causal link between increasing female access to education and a reduction in childbearing (Pradhan, 2015).

(Republic of South Africa, 1996). Additionally, since 2022, all Early Childhood Development Centres (ECD) have been transferred from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the transfer of responsibility; but the concept of the transfer: is included in the *National Development Plan 2030* (Republic of South Africa, 2011); gave effect to a decision of the African National Congress in 2015, and President Ramaphosa mentioned the transfer in the 2019 State of the Nation Address, for full details of transfer see (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022). The intention is to provide a better foundation to give effect to the human right that all children should be allowed to develop to their full potential, for details confirming the contribution of ECD to later success in life (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), n.d.).

The StatsSA Census figures for 1996 and 2022 illustrate the improvements made in education overall. Table 1 illustrates the overall national improvement in levels of education.

Table 1: Improvements in national educational levels, particularly secondary education

1996	2022	1996	2022	1996	2022	1996	2022
No schooling, Primary/less		Some Secondary		Completed Secondary		Post-school	
47.5	19.5	31.1	31.6	13.8	35.4	6.6	12.7
StatsSA Census 1996 & 2022 - in percentages							

(StatsSA, 2024: 15)

Table 2 shows the level of attainment in Tertiary education by sex, in percentages.

to 38.3% in 2011, and to 48.8% in 2022 (StatsSA, 2024: 18)

Table 2: Improvements in the balance of males and females at the Tertiary education level

1996	2022	1996	2022
Male		Female	
8.6	12.3	6.7	13.1
StatsSA Census 1996 & 2022 - in percentages. Female attainment closed the gap and slightly surpassed males			

(StatsSA, 2024: 17)

What subjects are women studying in tertiary education?

The StatsSA Census 2022 highlights that women remain in the minority in specific fields. Particularly of relevance to the construction sector are: Electrical Infrastructure, Engineering, Architecture and the Built Environment. Table 3 illustrates. What are the national figures on women currently registered in further and higher education?

Although progress has been made in the levels of educational achievement, the South African national unemployment statistics remain a persistent source of depression for all. The latest StatsSA 2025 Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) provides the figure of 32.9% unemployed, with the expanded rate at 43.1% (StatsSA, 2025a: 8). The following Figure 2 illustrates comparative growth in the formal and informal sectors:

The formal sector, which has traditionally provided the

Table 3: Fields of education by sex, in percentages, illustrating where females are in the minority

Fields of education	Male	Female
Electrical Infrastructure	82	18
Security & Intelligence Services	68.4	31.6
Military Sciences	75.8	24.2
Engineering	80.6	19.4
Architecture & Built Environment	70.6	29.4
Computer & Information Sciences	61.5	38.5
Philosophy, Religion & Theology	66.1	33.9
Agriculture Agricultural Operations & Related Sciences	64.9	35.1

(StatsSA, 2024: 44)

3.3. The statistics on employment by sector

In 1996, only 21.4% of the working-age population had at least completed Secondary education; this increased

majority of employment opportunities, accounted for 68.1% in the first quarter of 2025, decreased by 245,000, but the informal sector increased by 17000.

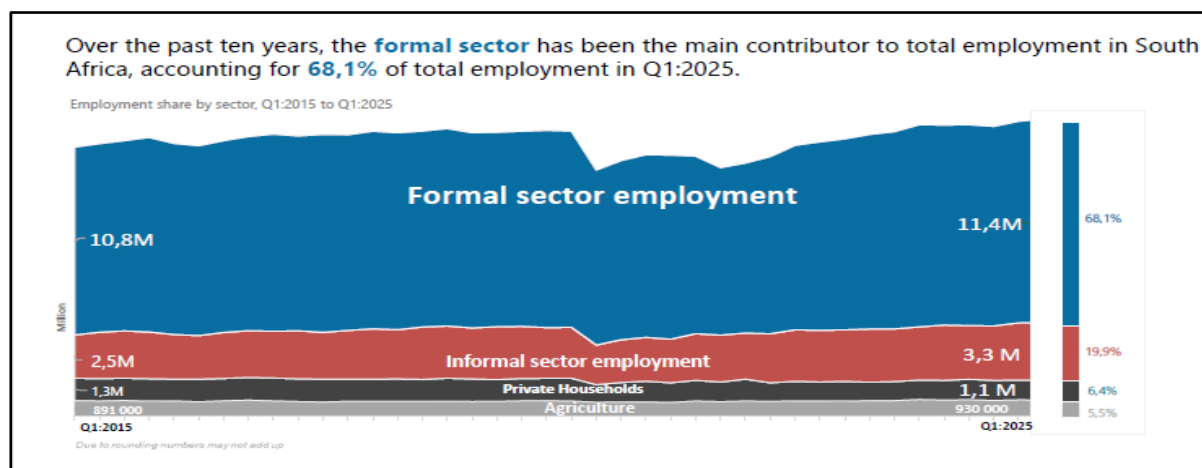


Figure 2: Comparison of formal and informal sectors, illustrating the growth of the latter sector (Maluleke, 2025b: 13)

There are regular debates among economists about the size of the informal sector, with many viewing the informal sector as the new site of business, particularly in banking, wholesale, and retail. The nature of the construction sector remains a significant source of employment, including sub-contracting of a range of artisan roles, as well as labour and semi-skilled roles, providing income for a range of roadside work-seekers (Hammond et al., 2016).

The graduate unemployment rate increased to 11.7%; however, that is still significantly less than the unemployment rate for those with a “matric” (Grade 12), and for those with less than Grade 12, the percentages are 34.9% and 39%, respectively. The key unemployment rate is that rate for youth between 15 and 34 years, which stood at 36.9% in 2015, but has increased to 46.1% in 2025 Q1. Figure 3 below provides a detailed breakdown, illustrating the challenge of youth unemployment for those between the ages of 15 and 34.

Blade Nzimande, noted that although access to education by women has improved, the labour market continues to prioritise employment of males, and within employment that pay discrimination against women persists (Siebritz, 2022). An initiative specifically focused on youth, the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI), which forms part of the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI), was implemented in 2020 across all nine provinces. One of the most popular interventions was that of education assistants and general school assistants (Siebritz, 2023). This PYEI intervention was reintroduced in 2025 as phase V, with a target of 200,000 job opportunities, and an increased focus on reading and literacy (Government Communications and Information System (GCIS), 2025).

3.5. *Considering employment and education together.*

Looking at our picture on education, women are now more likely to pursue tertiary education, but are not participating in the science, technical, and engineering

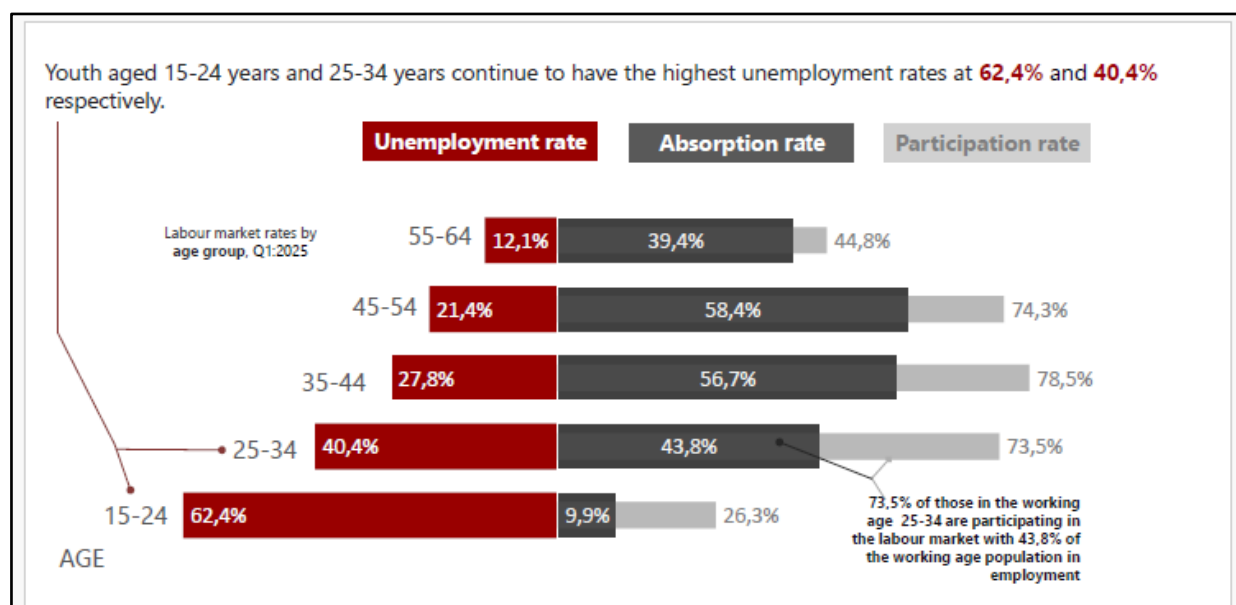


Figure 3: Youth Unemployment by age range with absorption and participation rates

3.4. *Unemployment rates of women*

The QLFS for Quarter 1 2025 records that the construction sector had reduced by 119000 jobs (Maluleke, 2025b: 31). Young persons between the ages of 15-24 and 25-34 have the highest unemployment rates. Additionally, young females aged 15-24 years: 37.1% were not in employment, education or training (NEET) in this quarter, which is a 1.0% percentage point increase from the comparative Quarter 1 of 2024 (Maluleke, 2025b: 27).

The following media reports indicate the focus on women in employment and some of the initiatives implemented. In a speech to the Ministerial Higher Health Roundtable on Youth Health and Wellness, the (then) Minister of Higher Education and Training,

type programmes. Does that constitute an answer as to why women predominate in some sectors more than others, and is this the main factor in the construction sector?

From some informal research, conversations and anecdotal reports, these are some minor observations. One factor that immediately emerges is the gatekeeper effect. This is not new, but it continues. The gatekeeper may be the owner of a small business, for example, a franchise. While at some petrol stations, we can find women filling vehicles. Speaking with local petrol attendants and forecourt management, one response I had was that the management prefers for women to work as cashiers.

In larger organisations where we find Human Resource people conducting the recruitment, one reservation about young women is that they may require maternity leave. I have recently been pursuing the situation for young women on Learnerships (for international visitors, Learnerships lead to an occupational qualification – comparable to apprenticeships). Theoretically, on Learnerships, young women are entitled to maternity leave. However, several complications arise, including payments into the Unemployment Insurance Fund to which learners on Learnerships are now entitled, and practical questions of how to accommodate the knowledge component of the qualification when the others have completed the programme.

A surprising negative view I experienced some time ago, when trying to consider a woman for a forklift driver position: the person objecting was the union shop steward, who, in all seriousness, advised me that women could not drive forklifts because it would prevent them from becoming pregnant.

In construction, from personal experience of informal contractors, it is notable that many informal contractors will talk with pride about their fathers and grandfathers, who have worked in construction before them, particularly stressing that they were quality conscious, and would require sub-contractor builders or artisans to redo work that was not to standard. Is it the depth of legacy that women lack in integrating into construction?

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- One area of research into gatekeeping that is more limited is what exactly constitutes workplace culture, and how does that impact employment?
- ## 4. Conclusion
- Overall, unemployment remains a key issue; however, the informal sector continues to grow despite all obstacles. Women are enrolling for tertiary qualifications more than men, but what are the obstacles to them enrolling for the science and technology programmes? Is it the subjects they are offered at school? One of the current debates is whether too many students are enrolling for Mathematics Literacy instead of pure Mathematics. Does the apartheid legacy linger in the form of resistance to – rather than statutory exclusion from – Mathematics and Science?
- These statistics and questions provide a background for further discussions and presentations on progressing towards a digital transformation.
- “Dream big and aim higher”* – anonymous.
- ## Note from post-speech discussion
- A workshop participant pointed out that many students are not able to study pure mathematics because some schools do not have teachers able to deliver the subject. Therefore, the systemic exclusion from mathematics in basic education is one of the factors prolonging exclusion from technical and engineering careers.
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