



Social Polarisation and Migration to Johannesburg

Jacqueline Borel-Saladin, Migrating out of Poverty Working Paper 11

Cities in South Africa have experienced an increase in internal and regional migration coupled with a transformation in the occupational structure of the urban workforce. Social polarisation theorists argue that the decline in the manufacturing industry has led to a rise in high-wage, high-skill employment and low-wage, unskilled jobs in urban areas, creating a growing divergence between sectors. Proponents of the social polarisation theory also argue that unskilled immigrants often fill the increasing number of low-wage jobs. Evidence to corroborate the social polarisation theory is, however, weak.

In order to explore the role of migrants in the social polarisation of the Johannesburg workforce, the study used household survey data and population census results for the Johannesburg region of South Africa from 1980 to 2007. Contrary to what social polarisation theory would suggest, the findings showed that while the numbers of low-skill workers did increase, the absolute growth in the numbers of higher-skilled, higher-paid managerial, professional, associate professional and technical workers was two and a half times greater than that amongst low-skill workers. Thus, the findings support a conclusion of growing professionalisation, not one of social polarisation. Furthermore, immigrants to the Johannesburg region are well represented in professional, semi-skilled and unskilled employment sectors and therefore the occupational and educational distribution of migrants is not dissimilar to that of the native working population.

Disaggregated results indicate different employment gains for male and female migrants to Johannesburg. The percentage of female migrants in employment across all skill levels increased between 1980 and 2007. In comparison, employment in semi- and unskilled jobs for males, both migrant and native, decreased during this period. The findings are seen as an indication of increasing unemployment amongst both low-skilled native and migrant men. Instead of social polarisation, the emerging occupational structure of Johannesburg is one with a growing professional class made up of native and internal migrants and at the same time a growing unemployed, unskilled workforce. The author suggests that this is likely to be because the level of wealth generation is not sufficient for the emerging professional classes to employ the unskilled workforce.

Based on these findings, the Migrating out of Poverty RPC makes several recommendations for further research ...

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