

AGF RESEARCH · FACT-CHECKED · 2026

How Long Until It Was Worth It?

How hard it really is for Africans to succeed abroad

Getting a job abroad is easy. Getting *your* job is not. Four rungs, a measured timeline for each, and an honest read on which countries actually let an African arrival climb them.

70.9%

of immigrants are employed — getting a job is not the problem

41.4%

work below the level they are qualified for

26.1%

pay gap for sub-Saharan African origin — against 9.0% for Europeans

75%

of that gap is not getting the same jobs, not being paid less for them

1. Get a job

EASY

70.9% of immigrants across the OECD are employed, against 72.1% of the native-born

2. Get a job that fits your skills

HARD

41.4% of non-EU citizens in the EU work below the level they are qualified for

3. Get paid like a local

VERY HARD

34% less on arrival, 21% at five years, 17% at ten — the gap never closes

4. Your children do better

LIKELY

children of immigrants out-educate their parents everywhere — but only 1 in 5 reach a higher-skilled occupation than their father did

The four rungs of succeeding abroad, with the measured outcome on each (OECD; Eurostat; OECD Catching Up?).

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01 · The Short Version

“Will I succeed abroad?” is the question underneath every migration decision, and it is almost never answered with numbers. It can be. The research measures four separate things, and they have very different answers.

- **Getting a job is easy.** Across the OECD, **70.9% of immigrants are employed** against 72.1% of the native-born — and immigrants actually *participate* in the labour force at a slightly *higher* rate, 77% against 76%.
- **Getting the job you trained for is hard.** **41.4% of non-EU citizens in the EU work below the level they are qualified for** — the highest rate of any group.
- **Getting paid like a local is harder still, and never finishes.** Immigrants earn **34% less** than native-born workers of the same age and sex on arrival, **21% less at five years, 17% less at ten** — and there the curve flattens.
- **The biggest return lands on your children, but it is not automatic.** Children of immigrants gain **1.3 more years of schooling than their own parents** against 0.7 for children of the native-born — yet **only 1 in 5** of those with non-EU-born parents ends up in a higher-skilled occupation than their father held.
- **And it is measurably harder for Africans than for other migrants.** Workers of sub-Saharan African origin face a **26.1% pay gap** against native-born workers — against 9.0% for European or North American arrivals in the same countries. **Three-quarters of that gap is not getting the same jobs; only a quarter is being paid less for the same job.**
- **Which country you choose changes the answer more than anything you personally do.** Five-year exit rates run from **15% in the United States to 75% in the Netherlands**; the government fee bill for a family of four runs from **\$510 to \$122,000**; time to citizenship from **3 years to 11**.

Succeeding abroad is not one achievement. It is four, they take different amounts of time, and most people only plan for the first one.

02 · The Four Rungs

The cover chart is the whole report in one image. Most migration advice, and almost all recruitment marketing, is about rung one. That is the rung that is *already* easy. The difficulty is concentrated in rungs two and three, and the payoff is concentrated in rung four — which arrives twenty years after the decision that caused it.

03 · Where Africans Actually Go

Before the rungs, the map. There were **45.8 million international migrants from Africa** by mid-2024 — and the single biggest fact about them is that most never left the continent.



Fig 2 — Where African migrants are, and the corridors they travel (UN DESA 2024; IOM World Migration Report). Corridor ranks are among African corridors.

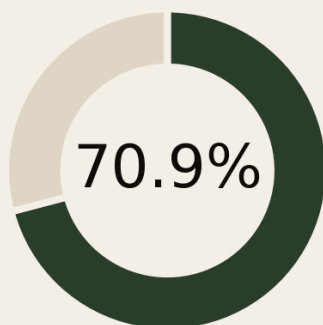
The largest African migration corridor on earth is **Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire** — not any route to Europe. Free movement under ECOWAS, geographic proximity and long-standing labour ties do the work. The biggest corridors leaving the continent are North African and post-colonial: **Algeria→France at about 1.5 million** (fourth largest), **Morocco→Spain** and **Morocco→France** at over a million each.

The largest African countries of origin in 2024 were **Egypt, Sudan and Morocco**, ahead of South Sudan, the DRC, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Somalia, Algeria and Zimbabwe — a list dominated by North Africa, conflict-affected states and the Sahel rather than by the Anglophone West and East African countries that dominate diaspora conversation in London and Houston.

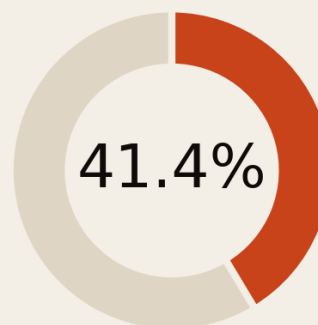
If you are reading this in Europe or North America, you are in the minority of a minority: outside the continent at all, and outside the largest corridors within it.

One destination deserves separate mention because it is systematically under-discussed. Saudi Arabia's 2022 census recorded **715,000 nationals of sub-Saharan African countries**, 5.3% of the Kingdom's foreign population. As *The Visa Treadmill* found, the Gulf states offer no realistic citizenship pathway at any price. For millions of Africans abroad, rungs three and four of this report are not available at all.

04 · Rung 1 — A Job



of immigrants across the OECD
are in work — against 72.1%
of the native-born



of non-EU citizens in the EU
are working below the level
they are qualified for

Getting a job is not the problem. Getting your job is.

Fig 3 — Employment against skill match (OECD; Eurostat). The two numbers describe different regions and cannot be combined — but they describe the same experience.

The employment gap between immigrants and the native-born across the OECD is **1.2 percentage points**. That is very close to nothing. And on labour force participation — working or actively looking — immigrants come out *ahead*: 77% against 76%.

This deserves stating plainly because it contradicts the political narrative in most destination countries.

Immigrants are not failing to work. They work at essentially the same rate as everybody else, and they look for work harder. There is also genuine progress: in the EU, the employment rate of non-EU immigrants rose **6.6 points in eight years**, from 59.4% in 2017 to 66.0% in 2025.



Employment rate of non-EU immigrants in the EU — up 6.6 points in eight years

Fig 4 — Employment rate of non-EU immigrants in the EU (CReAM/RFBerlin).

Verdict on rung one: easy, and getting easier. If your fear about moving is that you will not find work, the data says that is the wrong thing to be afraid of.

05 · Rung 2 — The Right Job

Here is where it breaks. **41.4% of non-EU citizens in the EU are over-qualified for the job they hold.** Highest of any group, and highest of all among non-EU-born women. It has improved slowly — from 45.9% in 2014 to 39.6% in 2024 for the non-EU-born — but it remains the defining feature of migrant employment in Europe.

Now put that beside who Africans abroad actually are: **46% of sub-Saharan African immigrants in the US hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and about 61% of Nigerian-born immigrants** — well above both the foreign-born and native-born averages.

The people most likely to be working below their training are the people who arrived with the most training. That is the whole difficulty of succeeding abroad, in one sentence.

The mechanism is not mysterious. Qualifications earned in Africa are frequently not recognised, not understood, or not trusted by employers who have no way to benchmark them. A Nigerian pharmacy degree and a British one are not treated as interchangeable, and the process for converting one into the other is slow, expensive and administratively brutal. Meanwhile rent is due.

Verdict on rung two: hard, and it is the rung that decides everything above it. Credential conversion is the single highest-return administrative act available to an African professional abroad, and it is boring enough that most people postpone it until the first job has already set their trajectory.

06 · Rung 3 — Equal Pay

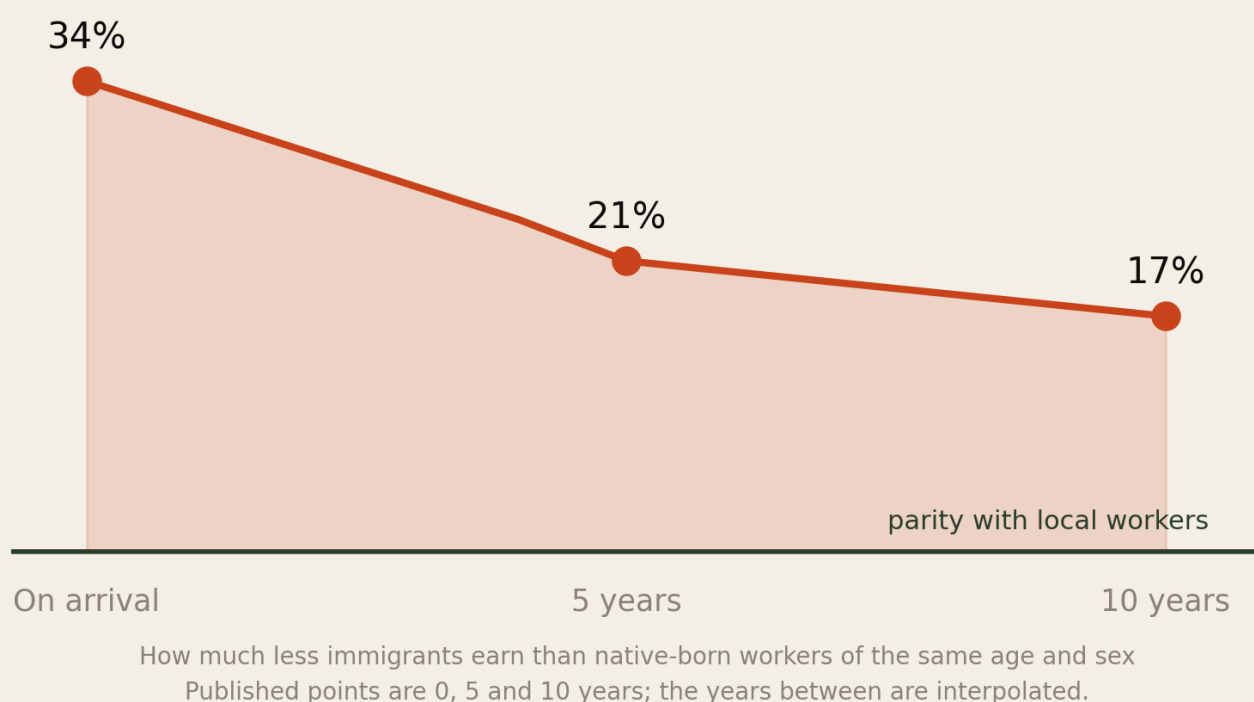


Fig 5 — The immigrant earnings gap over time, across the 15 OECD countries with comparable data (OECD International Migration Outlook 2025).

On arrival, an immigrant earns **34% less** than a native-born worker of the same age and sex. After five years, **21% less**. After ten, **17% less**. And then the line flattens.

First, most of the closing happens early. Thirteen of the seventeen points close in the first five years; only four more close in the next five. The window in which your position improves fastest is the window in which you are newest, least settled and most likely to accept whatever is offered.

Second, and more importantly: two-thirds of the gap is not direct discrimination. The OECD finds it is composition — immigrants are concentrated in lower-paying *sectors* and lower-paying *firms*. And the gap narrows mainly because immigrants move to better-paying firms and sectors over time.

The gap does not close because employers eventually decide to pay you fairly. It closes because you leave.

07 · The Africa Penalty, Measured

Everything so far describes immigrants in general. A 2025 study in *Nature* covering **13.5 million individuals across nine countries** answers the Africa-specific question, and the answer is not comfortable.

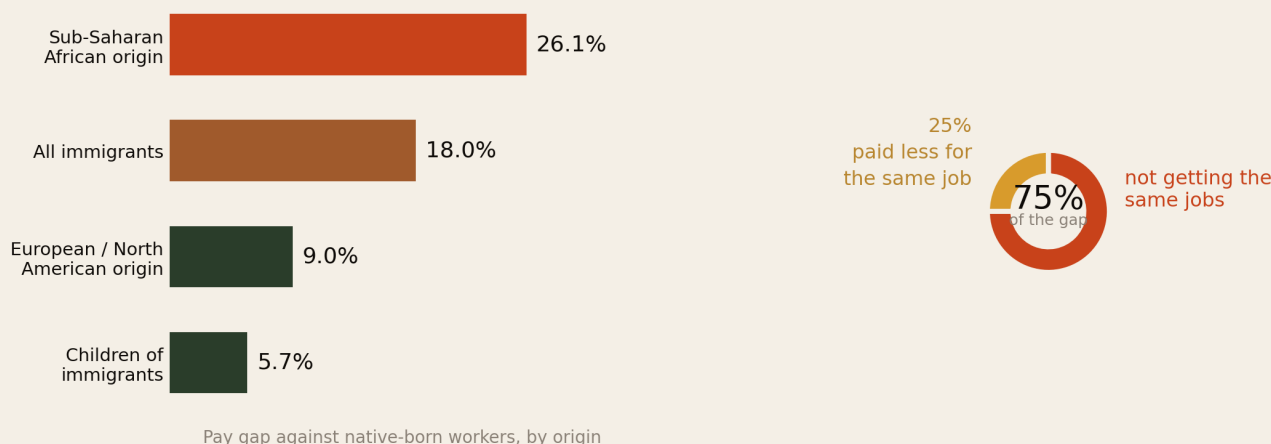


Fig 6 — The immigrant–native pay gap by origin, and its causes (*Nature*, 2025, summarised by IESE). Nine countries: Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the US.

Immigrants overall earn **18% less** than native-born workers. But that average conceals a very wide spread by origin:

- **Workers of sub-Saharan African origin face a 26.1% pay gap** — the steepest of any regional group in the study.
- **Workers of European or North American origin face 9.0%.** Same destination countries, same measure, less than half the penalty.
- **Among children of immigrants the overall gap falls to 5.7%** — but it stays elevated for those of African and Middle Eastern heritage.

So the honest answer to “is it harder for Africans?” is **yes, measurably, by roughly three times the penalty faced by a European arrival in the same country.**

And now the part that matters most

Three-quarters of the gap is not getting the same jobs. Only one quarter is being paid less for the same job.

Read that carefully, because it reframes the whole problem. **Once an African migrant is in a given job, they are paid close to what a local in that job is paid** — the residual quarter is real and it matters, but it is the smaller half of the story. The overwhelming majority of the disadvantage happens *before* that: at the point of access. Not being hired into the higher-paying occupations, firms and sectors at all.

The OECD's parallel finding lines up exactly: **the concentration of immigrants in lower-paying firms within the same industries accounts for about 27% of the earnings gap at entry**, and much of the convergence over time comes from immigrants shifting into better-paying firms as they gain experience and credentials — plus working more hours, which explains around a quarter of the initial gap by itself.

The researchers' own policy conclusion follows: closing the gap requires **improving job access — language training, credential recognition and pay transparency — rather than equal-pay initiatives alone.** Equal-pay law addresses the quarter. Access addresses the three-quarters.

For an individual, the translation is blunt: **your effort is better spent getting into the right room than on being treated fairly once you are in it.** The unfairness is concentrated at the door.

08 · Rung 4 — Your Children



Fig 7 — Intergenerational mobility, European OECD countries (OECD, *Catching Up? Intergenerational Mobility and Children of Immigrants*).

The honest answer to “was it worth it?” is frequently: **not for you — for them.** Section 07 gave the sharpest version: the pay gap falls from **18% for immigrants to 5.7% for their children.** Most of the penalty is a one-generation cost. Children of immigrant parents gain **1.3 more years of schooling than their own parents**, nearly double the 0.7-year gain among children of the native-born. In every country studied, children of low-educated immigrants do better than their parents.

But it is not a guarantee. **Only about 1 in 5 people with non-EU-born parents ends up in an occupation requiring a higher skill level than their father's.** Children of immigrants also show lower attainment and weaker learning outcomes than children of native-born parents in most European OECD countries.

For African families specifically there is a complication worth naming: **the first generation often arrives highly educated and lands in a job below its level.** When the comparison for the second generation is the parent's *job* rather than the parent's *qualification*, mobility looks stronger than it is. When it is measured against the qualification, some second generations are running to stand still.

09 · The Timeline

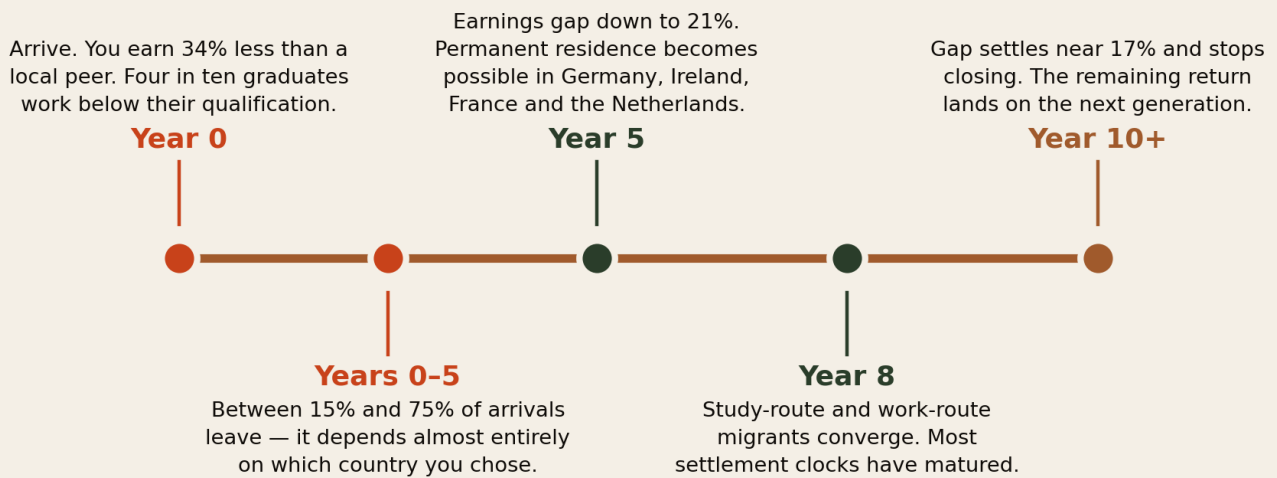


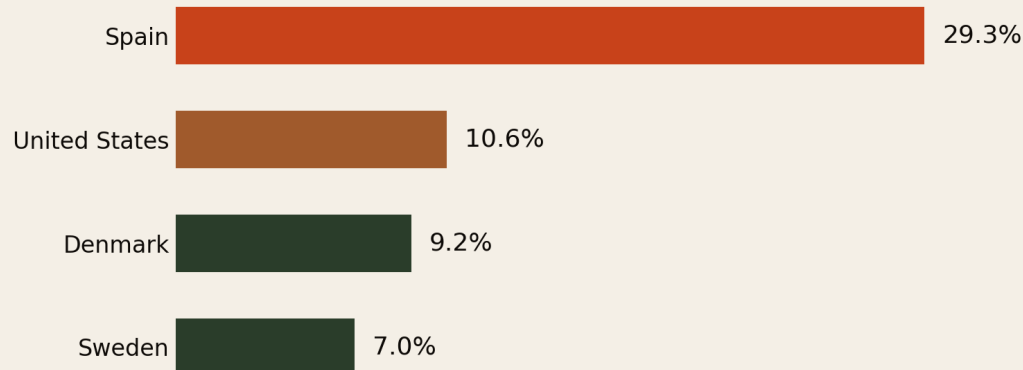
Fig 8 — The measured milestones. Sources as cited throughout; the line between them is drawn, the points are published.

- **Years 0–2, the shock.** Worst pay, worst job match, highest costs, thinnest network. Nearly everything people describe as “failing abroad” is this phase being mistaken for the destination.
- **Years 0–5, the sorting.** Between 15% and 75% of all arrivals leave, depending overwhelmingly on the country. This is also when the earnings gap closes fastest.
- **Year 5, the first real gate.** Permanent residence becomes possible in Germany, Ireland, France and the Netherlands. The pay gap is down to 21%.
- **Year 8, convergence.** Study-route and work-route migrants stop looking different. Most settlement clocks have matured.
- **Year 10 and beyond, the plateau.** The gap settles near 17% and stops moving. Whatever return is left belongs to the next generation.

So: roughly five years to security, ten years to your economic ceiling, and one generation to the full return. Anyone selling a faster version of this is selling something.

10 · Which Countries Deliver

Before the judgement calls, here is a measured comparison: the actual immigrant–native pay gap in four of the nine countries in the *Nature* study.



Immigrant–native pay gap, selected countries from the nine studied
(Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, US)

Fig 9 — Immigrant–native pay gap, selected countries (*Nature*, 2025). The full study covers Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the US.

The spread is four-fold — 7.0% in Sweden against 29.3% in Spain. That is the same person, the same qualification, a different border. It is the strongest single piece of evidence for the claim running through this whole report: the country you choose does more than anything you do. Note that this measured ranking does not map neatly onto the scorecard that follows, and it should not — a country can have a narrow pay gap and a punishing retention rate.

	Getting in	Getting hired	Staying	Fee burden	Speed to permanence
Germany	5	4	2	5	5
Canada	3	4	5	4	4
Australia	3	4	4	3	3
Ireland	3	5	3	4	4
France	4	3	5	4	4
United States	2	3	5	3	3
Japan	2	3	4	5	4
Singapore	3	4	3	5	3
Netherlands	3	3	1	3	4
United Kingdom	3	3	3	1	2
Gulf states	4	4	2	3	1

5 = best 1 = worst · AGF's own assessment. "Staying" uses measured five-year exit rates for Europe, the US and Canada; elsewhere it is an estimate from settlement design.

Fig 10 — AGF's scorecard, built from the sourced figures across this report and its companions. A judgement, not a measured index. "Staying" uses measured five-year exit rates for Europe, the US and Canada; for Australia, Japan, Singapore and the Gulf it is an estimate from settlement design.

Germany is the best place to arrive and one of the worst places to stay. It scores top on entry (the Opportunity Card lets you come without a job offer), top on cost (€0 tuition, low fees) and top on speed to permanence (citizenship in five years, three with strong integration). And then **67% of arrivals leave within five years**. Whatever Germany is doing to attract people, it is not converting them.

France quietly outperforms its reputation. Cheap degrees, moderate fees, five-year citizenship, and a **26% five-year exit rate** — the lowest in Europe. People who go to France stay in France.

The Netherlands is the sharpest warning on this chart. High salary thresholds, a hard age cliff at 30 — and a **75% five-year exit rate**, the highest in the OECD. Three out of four people who move there are gone within five years.

And the UK, still the default in most African family conversations, scores worst overall — driven by a fee burden of £77,414 for a family of four on the 10-year route and the longest settlement clock on the list. What it still has is language, degree recognition across Anglophone Africa, and the densest African professional networks anywhere. Those are real. Just price them.

11 · Asia, the Gulf & Australia

The scorecard above now includes them, but three of those rows need explaining, because two of them do not behave like the others at all.

Australia — slow, expensive, and it holds people

Australia runs a points test with a nominal floor of **65 points**, though real invitation scores sit well above that because of competition, and the government has confirmed a points-test reform in the 2026–27 Budget aimed at younger, higher-skilled, stronger-English applicants. The detail is not published yet, which is itself worth knowing if you are planning around it.

The clock is long: **four years of lawful residence plus twelve months holding permanent residence**, and then a citizenship application that currently takes **12 to 20 months** from lodgement to ceremony. Call it six to seven years in practice — slower than Germany, Ireland or France, faster than the UK's 10-year route.

The African population is real and growing but heavily skewed: **224,160 South African-born people** lived in Australia at June 2024, up 28.1% in a decade, and sub-Saharan African ancestry accounted for about **1.3%** of the population at the 2021 census. Australian research finds the same pattern this whole report describes — some strong integration outcomes alongside a substantial group facing persistent barriers to work matching their skills, plus documented racism and social isolation. **The honest read:** Australia is a settlement country by design, so the ladder's top rungs genuinely exist. It is just a long, competitive, expensive climb.

Japan, Singapore and the rest of Asia — cheap, orderly, hard to enter

Asia's striking feature is cost. As *The Visa Treadmill* found, the all-in government fee bill to citizenship for a family of four is roughly **\$780 in Japan** — the cheapest complete path in the world we costed, with naturalisation itself free — and about **\$2,890 in Singapore** and **\$2,420 in South Korea**. Against the UK's £77,414, that is not a rounding difference.

What Asia charges instead is difficulty of entry and difficulty of belonging. Japan and Korea have small, tightly-managed skilled-migration channels and expect working-level language. Malaysia requires ten of the preceding twelve years before naturalisation is even possible. **China is the second-largest destination for African students in the world** — about 81,500 — but study there rarely converts into settlement.

The Gulf — where the ladder ends at rung two

This is the part of the picture the diaspora conversation most consistently ignores, and it involves roughly **three million Africans** working in the Middle East and the GCC.

1. Get a job**AVAILABLE**

~3 million Africans work in the Middle East and the Gulf

2. Get a job that fits your skills**AVAILABLE**

possible in the professional streams — not in domestic work, where most African women are

~~**3. Get paid like a local**~~**NOT AVAILABLE**

no route to local-equivalent status; pay is set by nationality-tiered contracts

~~**4. Your children do better**~~**NOT AVAILABLE**

no birthright citizenship, no naturalisation in practice — the ladder has no fourth rung

Fig 11 — The same four rungs, applied to the Gulf. Rungs three and four are not slow there — they are absent.

Every timeline in this report assumes the ladder has four rungs. In the Gulf it has two. There is no path to pay parity with nationals, because pay is structured by nationality rather than by role; and there is no naturalisation to speak of, so the second-generation return that Section 08 identified as the real payoff of migration simply does not arrive. Children born there do not become citizens.

There is genuine reform to report. Saudi Arabia formally abolished the *kafala* sponsorship system for private-sector expatriate workers in June 2025, replacing employer-tied residency with contract-based employment covering roughly 13 million foreign workers, with guaranteed annual leave, rest days and wage protection.

And there is a caveat that matters enormously for Africans specifically. The reform covers private-sector employees on formally registered contracts. **Domestic workers — household staff, drivers, caregivers — are on a separate implementation schedule with different eligibility.** That is precisely where most African women in the Gulf are working. Saudi Arabia hosts nearly four million migrant domestic workers, including an estimated **150,000 Kenyans**; more than **350,000 Ugandans** work abroad, largely in the Gulf, remitting about **\$1.7 billion** a year.

The documented conditions in that sector are serious and should not be softened: passport confiscation, unpaid wages, withheld food, and physical and sexual violence against domestic workers. One Ugandan monitoring initiative recorded **at least 164 migrant worker deaths in 2025 alone.**

For a professional on a Gulf contract, the trade is explicit and can be a good one: high tax-free pay, no permanence, and a plan to leave. For a domestic worker it is frequently not a trade at all.

The practical conclusion is not “avoid the Gulf”. Millions of families are sustained by those remittances and the professional streams can pay very well. It is that **the Gulf should be entered as a fixed-term earning decision with an exit date, never as a settlement plan** — and that anyone advising a family member heading into domestic work there should check the contract, the recruiter and the destination country's bilateral labour agreement before anyone gets on a plane.

12 · What Actually Moves It

Sorted by how much difference each makes, based on the effect sizes in the data:

- **Which country you pick.** Larger than any personal factor measured here. A 60-point spread in five-year retention, a 240-fold spread in fee burden, an eight-year spread in time to citizenship.
- **Whether your qualification is recognised.** This is the difference between rung one and rung two, and it is where 41.4% of people get stuck.
- **Which sector and firm you land in first.** Two-thirds of the pay gap. And it compounds: the first job sets the second.
- **Whether you move employers deliberately.** The gap closes because people switch, not because they wait.
- **How long you stay.** The curve rewards years — up to about ten, after which it stops.
- **Language.** Not measured directly here, but it gates entry to the higher-paying sectors in every non-anglophone country on the scorecard. Germany is the clearest case: admitted in English, employed in German.

Notice what is not on that list: working harder. Every immigrant group in this data already participates in the labour market at above-native rates. Effort is not the binding constraint, and telling people otherwise is one of the more damaging things the diaspora tells itself.

13 · Who Has It Hardest

- **Women.** Over-qualification is highest of all among non-EU-born women. They carry the skills penalty and the caring load simultaneously.
- **Mid-career arrivals.** Arriving at 35 with fifteen years of experience means having the most to convert and the least time to convert it.
- **Regulated professions.** Doctors, nurses, lawyers, engineers, accountants, teachers — the harder the licence, the longer the detour. A software engineer can be hired on a portfolio; a pharmacist cannot.
- **People in small communities.** Networks do a large share of the hiring in every country. A Malawian in a small European city has thinner support than a Nigerian in Houston, and it shows up in outcomes.
- **Those in the Gulf.** Nearly 7 million Africans live in Asia, largely in states with no realistic citizenship pathway at all. Rungs three and four are not available at any price there — the ladder simply ends at two. Covered in full in Section 11.

14 · The Playbook

- **Choose the country for retention and permanence, not prestige.** This is the biggest lever you have and you only get to pull it once. A country where 75% leave in five years is telling you something.
- **Start credential conversion before you move, or in month one.** Not year three. The 41.4% figure is people who postponed it and then could not afford to stop working.
- **Treat the first job as a five-year decision, not a survival decision.** Two-thirds of the pay gap is sector and firm. Where a choice exists, take the lower-paying job in the higher-paying sector.
- **Plan to switch employers at least twice in the first five years.** That is the documented mechanism by which the gap closes. Loyalty to your first employer abroad is expensive.

- **Learn the language to working level, not conversational.** In Germany, the Netherlands and France, this is the gate to the sectors that pay.
- **Judge yourself against year five, not year one.** The shock phase is the phase, not the outcome. And if you do leave, half of Europe's arrivals do the same — that is the statistically ordinary choice, not a failure.
- **Be explicit with yourself about rung four.** If the real return is your children, then school choice, language and network matter more than your own promotion. Many families discover this after optimising for the wrong rung for a decade.

15 · Method & Limits

What this report is: a synthesis of OECD, Eurostat and national data on immigrant labour-market outcomes, assembled into a four-rung model and a timeline. Data as at 12 August 2026.

- **Almost none of this data is Africa-specific.** The OECD and Eurostat series cover all immigrants or all non-EU citizens. African migrants are inside those numbers, not separated out. Where African-specific data exists — education levels, diaspora size — we say so and cite it.
- **“Success” here is economic.** Nothing on this ladder measures safety, belonging, dignity, family closeness or whether people are glad they went. Those matter at least as much and this report is silent on them.
- **The earnings curve interpolates.** The published points are arrival, five years and ten years — 34%, 21% and 17%. The years between are drawn. (*Our earlier report quoted roughly 23% at five years from a proportional description; the directly published figure is 21%, used here.*)
- **The Fig 10 scorecard is AGF's judgement,** not a measured index. The inputs are cited; the 1–5 weighting is editorial and reasonable people would score it differently.
- **Exit rates cover different cohorts** — European figures for 2010–14 arrivals, US and Canadian for 2010–19 — and “exit” conflates returning home with moving to a third country.
- **Intergenerational figures are European OECD averages** and mask enormous country variation. The “1 in 5” occupational-mobility figure compares to the *father's* occupation specifically.
- **The Nature pay-gap study covers nine countries, not the whole OECD,** and its 18% headline is a different measure from the OECD's 34%-at-entry figure — the OECD tracks the gap by years since arrival, the Nature study measures the standing gap across the whole immigrant workforce. They are complementary, not contradictory, and should not be compared directly.
- **Corridor ranks are among African corridors,** and exact migrant counts are published for only some of them. We give numbers where they exist and ranks where they do not.
- **Australia, Japan, Singapore and the Gulf have no measured five-year exit rate** in the OECD series used here, and the Nature pay-gap study does not cover them either. Their scorecard rows are estimates from settlement design and fee data, and are flagged as such on the chart.
- **Gulf conditions data is drawn from IOM, monitoring organisations and journalism** rather than from official labour statistics, which those states largely do not publish. Death and abuse figures are documented cases, not comprehensive counts — the true totals are very likely higher.
- **Selection effects run through everything.** People who stay are not a random sample of people who arrived, so ten-year outcomes describe survivors.

Principal sources

OECD International Migration Outlook 2025, including Immigrant integration: the role of firms; OECD, Catching Up? Intergenerational Mobility and Children of Immigrants; Eurostat migrant integration statistics; CReAM/RFBerlin on EU migrant employment; OECD on return migration; Nature (2025) on the immigrant–native pay gap across nine countries, summarised by IESE; UN DESA International Migrant Stock 2024 and the IOM World Migration Report on destinations and corridors; Walk Free and IOM on the Gulf; Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Journal of Intercultural Studies on Australia. Full inline links in the web edition.

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