

## **An Exploration of the Gender-Migration-Development Nexus: The Impact of Labor Migration on Women's Empowerment**

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### **Abstract**

The feminization of labor migration is a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon. Though not often center stage of migration policy and debate, migrant women have become powerful agents of change as well key actors in influencing social and economic development in their countries of origin. This paper explores the complexities of a system in which labor migration is controlled, produced, and understood; its impacts on women and the society at large; and the sustainability of such change for future generations. Through a case study on female migrant women from Senegal, this article aims to demonstrate how the migration experience and subsequent return of women to their home countries leads to positive and sustainable social and economic changes at household, community, and national levels. However, in order for this occur, it argues that governments must play a key role in supporting and protecting women prior to, during, and after their migration experience while encouraging their return home.

### **Author's Note**

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During my first trip to Senegal in 2012, I became interested in the relationship between migration and development, especially I spent that summer living with a host family, in which the father worked abroad in France. Coura Niang, the mother, took care of three children, operated her own shop in town, managed household finances (including her husband's remittances) and organized a community women's savings group. She also gave loans to women to help them migrate independently to other countries for work. During this time, I began to realize the multiplicity effects migration can have on women's empowerment in social and economic domains. I

returned to Senegal twice in the following years, during which I had the opportunity to interview wives of migrants, and many migrants themselves (both men and women) and representatives of NGO's and government bodies. I even had the opportunity to contribute to migration related projects with local NGO's, including in organizing an entrepreneurship workshop for returning migrant women.

**Keywords:** Migration, development, women, Senegal, empowerment, remittances.

## Introduction

For the past decade, the number of women migrating independently for employment opportunities has increased dramatically, especially for low skilled labor in the service industry. However, much of the existing research on female labor migrants has focused on their economic impact and on top down approaches to development, namely through policies initiated to increase or decrease migratory flows<sup>1</sup>. The discussion has also tended to ignore the impact of gender on development outcomes. Lastly, it has not thoroughly addressed the lasting impacts of labor migration as a channel for social and economic empowerment, especially for future generations of women in migrant-sending or origin countries.

This article examines the relationship between Migration and Development (M&D) and the gender dimension, aiming to address these gaps and highlight the potential of female labor migration as a sustainable force for social and economic change in the developing world. Instead of simply approaching the “female migrant” as a subject of study, this paper analyzes the complexities of the *system* in which migration is controlled, produced, and understood, and in which gender relations are both constructed and followed<sup>2</sup>.

This article is divided into three sections: an exploration of the migration-development-gender nexus, the repercussions of labor migration on women and society in origin countries, and the role of government policy in addressing female labor migration, followed by a case study on migrant women in Senegal. It aims to make sense of how programs and policies can be revised and remodeled to better empower migrant women while eliminating the negative implications of migration. Finally, the research in this paper is not representative of all involved in M&D in Senegal nor their attitudes towards migrant women; it aims to instead reflect the complexity and multi layered reality of women’s rights and international labor migration in the country and on a global scale.

## Migration and Development (M&D)

International labor migration is a defining feature of the global economy. For instance, the migration of West Africans to Europe for employment purposes has long been at the forefront of political discourse and media debates<sup>3</sup>. However, the problem is that international migration is often simplified, the boundaries between voluntary and forced migration and their causes and implications blurred. Debates have also largely ignored the gender dimension, omitting the nuances of female labor migration compared to that of men (or children)<sup>4</sup>.

The continued simplification and lack of contextualization of labor migration by policy makers and other practitioners has resulted in problematic management of migratory flows<sup>5</sup>. In Western countries, an overwhelming majority of policies aim to damper such flows due to fears of migrants as national security threats, as pollutants of well-established cultural and religious hegemonies, and of the economic implications of migrants flooding local labor markets and taking jobs away from local citizens<sup>6</sup>. On the other side of the spectrum, governments in migrant-sending countries have largely encouraged migration as a means for national development.

Seldom explored in research on M&D is the opposite side of the global transfer of work and the longstanding implications migratory flows have on the

socioeconomic development of origin countries. Origin or migrant-sending countries are doubly affected by labor migration as they both gain and lose valuable human, social, and financial capital<sup>7</sup>. While presumptuous to claim that labor migration is an end-all strategy to lift developing countries out of poverty, exploring both its positive and negative implications can shed light on *how*, and for *how long*, it could realistically lead to national socioeconomic development.

### **The Role of Women in Migration and Development**

Today, women account for over 50 % of international labor migrants<sup>8</sup>. The recent increase of women migrating internationally can be partially attributed to the growing demand for service work (among other low-skilled labor) in certain industrialized countries. The feminization of international labor migration is also characterized by women seeking jobs abroad independently of their families<sup>9</sup>. Migrant women have become powerful and independent generators of income and unique agents of social change in their communities and countries of origin. Globally, an overwhelming amount of evidence shows that investing in women, educating them, and allowing them to work increases a country's standard of living and level of education while decreasing fertility rates, infant mortality rates, health concerns, and poverty levels<sup>10</sup>.

To narrow down implications and make concrete resolutions, it is imperative to determine how migration affects the socioeconomic development of economies and women in particular. It is also important to assess the sustainability of labor migration as a long-term vehicle for socioeconomic development as well as its impact on the wellbeing and capabilities of future generations in terms of education, health, and employment as well as intergenerational equity. In addition, an exploration of the environmental effects of migration, such as the migrant's acquisition of new norms regarding sustainable practices or capital to fund environmentally friendly products or services, has rarely been explored and merits further inquiry.

The impact of labor migration on development can be measured by the Commission of Sustainable Development (CSD)'s Indicators of Sustainable Development. Two core indicators for evaluating living standards and intergenerational equity include 'The Proportion of the Population Living Below the National Poverty Line' and 'The Ratio of Share in National Income of Highest to Lowest Quintile'<sup>11</sup>. In terms of basic economic growth, the Gross National Product (GNP) per capita measures the level and extent of total economic output and reflects changes in total production of goods and services<sup>12</sup>. As a population's education is crucial in "promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of people to address environment and development issues", relevant indicators include 'Gross Intake Rate into Last Year of Primary Education' and 'Adult Literacy Rate'<sup>13</sup>. Lastly, in this case, 'Remittances as Percentage of GNP' is crucial as it indicates the extent to which remittances sent by migrants are a major and stable source of external financing<sup>14</sup>.

When measuring how migration affects women, core CSD indicators include 'The Share of Women in Wage Employment in the Non-agricultural Sector', which indicates the extent to which women have access to paid employment and equal employment opportunities and in general the flexibility of the labor market and the

economy's capacity to adapt to changes over time<sup>15</sup>. In addition, 'The Total Fertility Rate', 'Under Five Mortality Rate', 'Nutritional Status of Children', and 'Contraceptive Prevalence Rate', are important as they indicate accessibility and quality maternal health services and mothers' awareness and education of family planning, child nutrition and health, and fertility<sup>16</sup>.

Other indicators include the Human Development Index (HDI), the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Inequality Index (GII). The United Nations created the HDI in order to emphasize that people and their capabilities, rather than economic growth alone, are the ultimate criteria for assessing national development<sup>17</sup>. The HDI assesses life expectancy, literacy rate, number of years of schooling, and standard of living by gross national income per capita<sup>18</sup>. The GDI in turn assesses gender gaps by determining disparities between women and men in three dimensions of human development – knowledge, health, and living standards – by utilizing the same indicators as the HDI<sup>19</sup>. Lastly, the GII reflects gender-based inequalities in reproductive health, measured by maternal mortality and birth rate; empowerment, measured by share of female parliamentary seats and attainment in secondary and higher education; and economic activity, measured by female labor market participation rate<sup>20</sup>.

In addition to these indicators, when assessing development for women, considering only an economic perspective is problematic. The reciprocal relationship between migration and development aligns more comprehensively with the capabilities approach to human development, propagated by Amartya Sen. This approach views female development as a subset of human rights and focuses on women's agency, expanding women's decision-making power and her ability to choose freely without violence, retribution, or fear<sup>21</sup>. It also aims to increase women's economic and social roles in influencing and informing society for future generations<sup>22</sup>.

### **Labor Migration in Origin Countries: Repercussions on Women & Society**

Analyzing female labor migration and the various capitals it generates sheds light on ways in which mobility impacts the economies and societies of sending countries and women themselves. The UN emphasizes, "Migration is not in-itself a solution. It can also have negative impacts ranging from human trafficking and migrant exploitation, to dependence on remittances and brain drain"<sup>23</sup>. Among the most researched economic effects of migration is remittances, or funds transferred from migrants abroad back to family members in their home countries<sup>24</sup>. Remittances are understood to fuel cycles of dependency, in which economies become reliant on the labor force working abroad, and citizens increase their conspicuous consumption of everyday goods rather than investing in productive channels<sup>25</sup>. They have also been proven to increase inequality between migrant and non-migrant families and areas for generations<sup>26</sup>.

Despite these negative repercussions, World Bank data indicates that a 10 percent increase in remittances directly decreases the number of those in poverty by 1.6 percent due to their multiplier effects on the economy<sup>27</sup>. Various studies have also shown that remittances can narrow the gender inequality gap regarding employment and education, as female migrants generally send more remittances and at more frequent time intervals than male migrants<sup>28</sup>. Female migrants have also been

noted to remit to the caretakers of their children, which were often other women<sup>29</sup>. When sent and received by women, remittances increased household spending on children's healthcare and education, especially for girls<sup>30</sup>. This extra income also serves as a safety net, allowing family members to engage in high-risk profitable opportunities such as investing in or starting their own businesses<sup>31</sup>. Migrant remittances have also been shown to increase domestic savings and contribute to shared financial responsibility between parents<sup>32</sup>. By sending and receiving funds, women emerge as breadwinners, a role typically attributed to men in many societies, which ultimately enhances their social status and can improve gender equality over generations<sup>33</sup>.

Labor migration also results in a variety of long-term social implications. Among the most cited negative impacts is brain drain, or the flight of highly skilled and educated citizens to work abroad, depriving home countries of their prized professional labor force<sup>34</sup>. Other negative effects are thought to stem from social networks between migrants abroad and their compatriots at home<sup>35</sup>. Social networks can create a "culture of migration", or the accepted notion in society that equates migration with the only means to success in life, leading to higher rates of out-migration<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, membership in migrant networks or associations is thought to function along gender lines<sup>37</sup>. Men's associations regroup around ethnic ties and hometown affiliations, whereas women's groups are multi-ethnic, multi-national, and multi-lingual, anchored in their country of destination rather than of origin<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, due to gender specified labor markets, it is more difficult for women to find job opportunities and they can be pressured to only migrate alongside their husbands or family members<sup>39</sup>.

Labor migration also results in the accumulation of human capital gained by working abroad, such as qualifications, interpersonal skills, and notions of independence<sup>40</sup>. As economic migration is ultimately a question of choice, a migrant woman's potential impact on development relies in part on her awareness of her capabilities and rights<sup>41</sup>. Evidence shows that the impact of human capital is mediated by gender relations, and returning migrant women face more challenges capitalizing on their skills and knowledge gained abroad than men. Women who left their families behind face especially significant stigma in their communities upon return to their husbands and children<sup>42</sup>. Migrant women may also face gender-biased government reintegration policies and microloan or grant programs, which makes it more difficult for them to start businesses<sup>43</sup>.

Lack of awareness can also make women targets for human trafficking, abuses in the workplace, harsh working and living conditions, and low wages<sup>44</sup>. They may also have more issues reintegrating upon their return home well as causing family and intergenerational tensions<sup>45</sup>. When reintegrating into the family without support from social services or solidarity groups, women might be expected to resume their traditional roles as household caretakers<sup>46</sup>. Research also shows that migration negatively impacts children's health and education, as strain from separated families can lead to psychological effects for children, and changes in parenting can be disruptive to a child's development<sup>47</sup>.

Nonetheless, social networks have shown to create substantial 'brain gains' as they facilitate the flow of information, capital, ideas, and human resources back to home countries. Despite promoting gendered labor markets, social networks have also reduced migratory risks and costs and greatly facilitated the journeys and

employment of women to similar regions<sup>48</sup>. In addition, they have allowed women to create solidarity groups through which they work together to advance their standard of living and advocate for more equitable gender relations in their communities<sup>49</sup>.

Through labor migration, women can increase their well-being by acquiring knowledge about gender equality and broader societal attitudes and practices regarding education, childcare, maternity health, family planning, and political participation<sup>50</sup>. Subsequently, women can adopt new norms while living away from home, such as child rearing practices, or attribute more importance to key factors for child development such as nutrition, maternal health, and education. They can also learn to reject traditions or practices with harmful implications such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)<sup>51</sup>. Research from Moldova, for example, showed that returning female migrants were less likely to accept and more likely to report domestic violence after being exposed to gender-based violence protection programs abroad<sup>52</sup>. Similarly, in Ghana, returning migrant women were more likely to use birth control and delay their own marriage and that of their children than non-migrant women<sup>53</sup>.

Many migrant women essentially return with a newfound sense of financial and economic independence, higher self-esteem, and specialized knowledge and skills, which are invaluable assets in the domestic labor market<sup>54</sup>. They can overcome challenges when informed about migratory risks prior to their journeys and often succeed in returning and capitalizing on their experiences with support from organizations and other women. In some countries, female-specific return and reintegration schemes organized by the government, NGOs, or international organizations can combat the lack of opportunities for women and help manage difficult family situations. Migrant women also have the potential to transform gender roles in a broader context by setting examples for younger generations. In Senegal, for example, the international flow of Senegalese businesswomen has inspired the next generation of young females to focus on entrepreneurship<sup>55</sup>.

Thinking critically about the migration-development nexus through a gender lens reinforces the fact that labor migration leads to positive impacts at the individual, familial, and societal levels. However, this cannot be categorized as simply an improvement or erosion of a woman's position in society. Rather, it is a catalyst for restructured power and social asymmetries related to gender in countries of origin<sup>56</sup>. In the same vein, the positive effects of female migration are not automatic or everlasting<sup>57</sup>. They can only be sustained in countries where adequate systems exist and are prepared to address and support this type of large-scale change<sup>58</sup>.

### **The Role for Government Policy**

The preceding analysis makes clear why migrant women require a great deal of social support before, during, and after migration in order to ensure retention of skills and a sense of empowerment upon their return home. Social assistance, however, is not possible without institutional support. Even when grassroots programs provide these services, they must be backed up by supporting national, regional, and local authorities.

Existing policies and programs dedicated to assisting migrant women range from migrant-friendly financial products to social assistance schemes. For example, some governments invest in the development of free banking applications to reduce

the costs of remittance transfers and invest in financial literacy training programs to educate women about investment and financial management to promote saving of remittances and income<sup>59</sup>. Other programs encourage networking and mentorship opportunities between female migrants abroad and women at home through portals, conferences and events<sup>60</sup>. Pre-migration services spread awareness and encourage husbands to take over household and caretaking responsibilities while their wives are abroad. Post-migration services, including mentorship programs and professional development workshops, help women retain and capitalize on knowledge and skills they have accrued abroad<sup>61</sup>. Other programs encourage the return of women through job placement and recruitment schemes in countries of origin<sup>62</sup>.

Despite the diversity of such initiatives, most governments in developing countries fail to protect migrant women's rights, create legal avenues for migration, or facilitate their full economic and social participation in both host and origin countries. A contributing factor is the lack of female representation at the government level. According to a UN Women study, women account for only 22.8% of national parliamentarians in the world, serving in eleven as Heads of State and in nine as Heads of Government<sup>63</sup>. Developing countries, especially those dominated by traditions of patriarchy, put women at risk of becoming the victims of discriminatory migration policies and programs<sup>64</sup>. Country-wide gender dynamics represented at national levels by scholars, policy-makers, and media outlets can also result in discriminatory, gender-blind, or otherwise misleading news coverage and research<sup>65</sup>.

At the 2010 Global Forum on Migration and Development, recommendations for government intervention in M&D included increased decentralization and cooperation between levels of government, shared responsibility between government and non-government actors, and a refocus on grassroots development programs<sup>66</sup>. The Migration 4 Development umbrella organization declared that governments around the world must give more ownership of M&D processes to migrants, NGOs, and civil society actors<sup>67</sup>. Examples of specific government strategies are to be further discussed below in the Senegal case study.

Governments and policymakers can enact a number of laws and regulations to simplify emigration procedures, create more avenues for safe and legal migration, ensure the portability and protection of migrant rights and their full participation in societies of origin and destination, and lower remittance transfer costs<sup>68</sup>. Subsequently, they can support and recognize existing migrant associations, cooperate with regional and local authorities, and collaborate with NGOs, multilateral institutions, and other stakeholders<sup>69</sup>. Most importantly, governments can recognize migrants as inclusive actors in M&D processes, build their trust and leadership, and favor institutional change through decentralization<sup>70</sup>.

The lack of women at top levels of government can be combatted through decentralization and bottom-up development strategies to empower female migrants. Focusing on small-scale actors, including non-governmental organizations and civil society, can give women more of a voice in implementing development policies and programs. In order for the government to enact these measures, however, institutions must be ripe for change. Only then can migration have the potential to be a long-term instrument for promoting development and equal gender roles in society.

## Case Study: Migrant Women in Senegal

### Methodology

Figure 1: Map of Senegal with areas visited.



Source: Author's own.

The data in this paper was collected through an ethnographic methodological approach: a combination of participant observation, fieldwork, and semi structured interviews with representatives of organizations (directors and staff), government authorities, and migrant men and women. The organizations included national NGOs, international NGOs and multilateral institutions in several locations around Senegal (see figure). Additional information was also gathered during a summer internship with two Senegalese NGOs.

Additionally, the NYU Institutional Review Board (IRB) exempted this study from needing formal approval for international human subjects research.

### Migration and Development in Senegal

For the past two decades, Senegal has been in the throes of a socioeconomic crisis. Desertification has devastated the agricultural sector and 70% of the population it employs. The devaluation of the national currency (CFA) in 1994 resulted in an economic recession, and the population has quadrupled since 1960<sup>71</sup>. Currently, 61% of Senegalese are under the age of 24<sup>72</sup>. A young population combined with a weak private sector has expanded the informal economy, which now employs one out of every two Senegalese, the majority being women<sup>73</sup>. Combined, these factors have resulted in high job instability, an unemployment rate of 14%, and a rising labor emigration rate<sup>74</sup>. Increasing numbers of Senegalese nationals are migrating abroad in search of employment<sup>75</sup>. These flows have brought a mass influx of capital in the form of remittances. In 2015, the estimated yearly total of migrant remittances surpassed 1.6 billion US dollars<sup>76</sup>. In addition, according to a 2011 World Bank report, remittances were mainly used on daily consumption (58.5 percent),

health and education (13.2 percent together), and rent (12.6 percent)<sup>77</sup>.

Labor migration from Senegal is categorized as low skilled and circular: migrating with the intention of finding any possible work and returning as soon as possible to rejoin their families<sup>78</sup>. As Senegal is a community-oriented society, priorities of family and roots dominate. Even abroad, migrant workers remain linked, whether informally between families or formally within migrant associations<sup>79</sup>. The culture of migration is also partially perpetuated by social factors that stem from polygamy. According to interviewees, households with multiple wives are pressured to have more children in order to increase the chance that one of them migrates and brings the family prosperity.

Migration has also become fully integrated into the fabric of culture and society<sup>80</sup>. The international migrant is often seen as an beacon of socioeconomic success and individual achievement<sup>81</sup>. Emigration is also driven in part by a post-colonial sentiment that the Senegalese must “go out and fight” to spread knowledge of their country and bring back success in terms of knowledge and capital<sup>82</sup>. The Senegalese view their pride and social status as integral to their identities, especially if they are migrants<sup>83</sup>.

Commonly seen with migrant returnees is the tendency to share success stories of high paying jobs and good living standards in the “El Dorados” they have found in Europe and elsewhere<sup>84</sup>. Migrants reported that disclosing the difficult realities of migration would be deemed culturally unacceptable and could be perceived as an effort to dissuade others from succeeding through migration. This is problematic as it contributes to perpetuating a vicious cycle – creating a glorified image of migration as an easy passage to wealth and higher social status<sup>85</sup>.

In spite of these pressures, some organizations in Senegal are actively combatting the culture of migration. One such organization is the Project to Support the Promotion of Youth and Women’s Employment (PAPEJF), which aims to create employment for young men and women<sup>86</sup>. Due to the decline of the agricultural sector, PAPEJF focuses on training young Senegalese to raise livestock, garden, fish, and manage commercial activities — which are made more attractive through the implementation of innovative technologies<sup>87</sup>. The director, Monsieur Diatta, emphasized the importance of retaining young people in agricultural work in rural areas to disincentivize their migration to urban centers.

### **The Feminization of Migration**

Women in Senegal have also become more present in migratory flows. Professor Dembe Fall from the University of Dakar describes the “rebellion” of women who see migration as an “aspiration for emancipation”<sup>88</sup>. Fall, along with other academics in the field, points out that female migration in Senegal is, however, not new. For decades, women have migrated from rural to urban areas in the country. International migration to Europe, the United States, and the Middle East is a more recent phenomenon<sup>89</sup>. According to the 2010 UN Report, between 1997 and 2001 the percentage of labor migrants from Senegal constituted 18.2% of the female population<sup>90</sup>. In 2002, the census showed a rise to 25 percent<sup>91</sup>. In 2008, the MAFE (Migration between Africa and Europe) survey data showed that 65 percent of females migrated internationally compared to 52 percent of males in their migrant sample pool<sup>92</sup>. These data also showed Senegalese migrant women found

employment abroad in the low-skilled sector or temporary or seasonal jobs in the informal economy, such as import-export activities, cleaning, caretaking, tailoring, sewing, or hairdressing. In general, female migration from Senegal has also become transnational as women travel between countries for employment. An association of Wolof hair braiders in New York, for instance, uses their profits made in the US to migrate to France to buy goods, upon which they return to sell them in Senegal<sup>93</sup>.

Despite the growing feminization of migration, women continue to face significant barriers to migration and return. Women have the right to travel and apply for passports and visas, yet they face barriers due to gender divisions in social networks and labor markets, and differences between various social and cultural norms depending on their ethnic group and community of origin<sup>94</sup>.

Since membership to migrant networks is gendered, it can prevent many women from migrating<sup>95</sup>. In Paris for example, migrant women from Senegal, Guinea, and Mali congregate together despite their differences, while Wolof men from the same village in Senegal form a tightly knit affinity group. These gender divisions can partially impede migration, as it is not as easy for women to connect with others that desire to migrate outside their community or country. Many interviewees claimed it was improbable that a woman would connect with a man working abroad to help facilitate her migration (this may be seen, though rarely, between family members)<sup>96</sup>.

The social acceptance of and attitude towards migration varies by ethnic group. For the Mandinke and Hal Pulaar, it is seen as an immoral activity largely associated with prostitution and fear of women abandoning their household roles<sup>97</sup>. Conversely, the Wolof group has begun to accept women's labor migration as shown by their increasing presence in the import-export industry overseas<sup>98</sup>. Historically, the Jola group has promoted seasonal female rural-urban migration to Dakar. Around the country Jola women are recognized as independent for "running the household", and as such face less constraints as potential international labor migrants<sup>99</sup>.

These attitudes also vary considerably from urban to rural areas. Those in urban areas are more accepting and open to change<sup>100</sup>. In rural areas, tradition still reserves migration as a primarily masculine activity, though this attitude is changing<sup>101</sup>. For instance, the international NGO CARTIAS published a recent report of household data which showed that husbands encouraged their wives to work abroad, claiming they were more "economically efficient" and sent home larger sums of money than men<sup>102</sup>.

In addition to migrating, women face obstacles upon returning home, specifically with social and professional reinsertion. Many can be expected to return to their pre-migratory social roles as some men see migration as a transitory period for their wives, especially in rural areas<sup>103</sup>. In his research, Professor Dembe Fall found that when Senegalese women migrate, they discover a new society, only to return and realize the one they came from hadn't changed at all. He referred to this dichotomy as the struggle between "tradition and modernity" and claims that in order for migration to benefit women, it needs to be accepted by both women and men in their home society.

In regard to professional reinsertion, women also face difficulties accessing capital to engage in entrepreneurial activities upon their return. According to the World Bank, only 13 percent of women in Senegal currently use a formal financial product or service<sup>104</sup>. Data from the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF)

showed only 10 percent of women in Senegal are considered financially included, and 67 percent of those rely solely on informal services<sup>105</sup>. Lack of financial education and access to formal financial institutions greatly inhibits a woman's ability to accrue credit<sup>106</sup>. Therefore, even if given a loan, women are unlikely to be granted financial services such as savings accounts, digital payment methods, and insurance<sup>107</sup>. A vicious cycle begins where banks are unwilling to lend to women without credit or trust them with other forms of financial assistance.

MAFE data shows that only 34% of return migrants were female, suggesting that return migration is minimal<sup>108</sup>. This can partially be explained by a major lack of support for them upon return (i.e. social and financial assistance, psychological guidance). Secondly, in migrant-receiving countries, NGOs offer support and assistance for "vulnerable migrants" (which mainly target immigrant women and children). This assistance can take the form of assistance with finding employment, housing and childcare, and generally facilitating integration into the host country. Such programs can strongly dissuade migrant women from returning home<sup>109</sup>.

### **The Role of Government in Migration and Development**

Macky Sall, the current president of Senegal, has pursued a number of immigration-related policies in areas of protection, security, migration and development, diaspora involvement, and migrant return and reintegration<sup>110</sup>. Two government programs specifically that have targeted migrant women (at least to some extent) are *FAISE* and *HOM*. The most publicized government project is *FAISE* or the "Investment Support Fund for Senegalese Abroad." This program focuses on the Senegalese diaspora and funds their business projects abroad and upon their return<sup>111</sup>. Since its creation, over 122 projects and 1 million USD has helped the Senegalese develop businesses in sectors from livestock farming, fishing, handicrafts, and sanitation to information and communication technologies<sup>112</sup>. *FAISE* has also contributed around \$9,000 yearly to help migrants return to Senegal<sup>113</sup>. The majority of *FAISE* grants have been given to women in the Senegalese diaspora.

Another program is *HOM* or *Help of Migrants*. *HOM* is an online platform developed by the regional agency of development in the town of Sedhiou, Senegal. The program is free, online, and aims to connect migrants abroad with migrant associations and development projects in their localities of origin to facilitate their productive investment at home<sup>114</sup>. *HOM* also strives to support local and regional authorities with project management, promote decentralized development planning in coordination with migration flows, and connect the diaspora with entrepreneurs in Senegal<sup>115</sup>. Staff admitted that only about one in ten migrants assisted by *HOM* was female, as "women in the diaspora are more interested in starting their own businesses abroad than returning to start businesses in Senegal"<sup>116</sup>. The reasoning behind this can also stem from women's insecurities and fears of returning and reintegrating both professionally and socially.

The government implemented a new migration policy in April, 2019, with assistance from the International Organization for Migration (IOM)<sup>117</sup>. The new policy prioritizes integrating gender differences in migration policy, particularly in assuring that migrant women do not face discrimination when seeking employment and receive adequate social protection and legal assistance both abroad and upon

their return<sup>118</sup>. Despite these recent commitments, most government efforts have thus far focused on supporting female migrants' investment in the country and assisting with voluntary return programs, rather than on supporting and protecting temporary migrant workers. Subsequently, government management of migration is highly centralized and lacks coordination between national, local, and regional authorities<sup>119</sup>. Authorities have also focused on spreading awareness to limit clandestine migration rather than promoting migrant rights abroad<sup>120</sup>. The Superior Council of Senegalese Abroad, which aimed to foster dialogue between the Senegalese diaspora and migrants and the national government, was suspended in 2013. As a result, Senegalese nationals working abroad have limited legal protections<sup>121</sup>.

### **The Positive Potential of Female Migration in Senegal**

Despite the obstacles faced and lack of policies and programs to support female, evidence points out that female migration is positively affecting Senegalese society well beyond the economic realm. Case studies have shown that migration has helped women gain a higher level of self-esteem and an increased ability to influence gender norms and negotiate gender-related responsibilities<sup>122</sup>. Senegalese researcher Cheikh Babou studies Wolof women hair braiders in the United States and their impact on the gender norms of the traditional Wolof household.<sup>123</sup> His research shows that the majority of husbands were eventually employed by their wives' hair salons and took over household and childcare tasks, so their wives could work longer hours. These women in turn contributed significantly to household expenses such as the rent, utilities, and groceries<sup>124</sup>. Their increased monetary contribution shifted power relations, giving Wolof women a larger voice in decisions about reproductive issues, investment priorities, childcare, and work schedules<sup>125</sup>. Babou concludes with the claim: "Money is gradually displacing nonmaterial sources of prestige and authority, such as blood and gender. While traditional social hierarchies continue to retain much symbolic significance, honor and self-worth are increasingly defined by people's ability to accumulate money and satisfy economic needs"<sup>126</sup>.

In Senegal, it is evident that gender power dynamics and roles are changing, at least at the household level. A number of Wolof female interviewees insisted on having financial independence as a result of migration while also remaining faithful to traditional and Muslim values of respect and loyalty to the husband in the household. To symbolize how Senegalese women integrate their newfound social and economic position into existing gender roles, one woman referred to the Wolof proverb "*ñaariloxooy takk tubëy, ñaari loxooy takk sër*" or "It takes two hands to tie pants, and it takes two hands to tie a wrap [skirt]"<sup>127</sup>.

In another interview, Madame V, a returned Senegalese migrant woman from Geneva, had returned to Dakar after a 40-year career to run an NGO which supports and promotes women's roles in the government roles and in peace building<sup>128</sup>. When I inquired about her decision to return, Madame V claimed she felt a strong pull to return and join the struggle for gender equality in her home country: "We need to educate the women of tomorrow about the concept of gender and not fall back on the clichés of feminism. We cannot fight for gender parity by focusing only on the professional agenda, but must reconcile the professional with the domestic role of the woman in Senegalese society"<sup>129</sup>. As Madame V suggested, the

feminist agenda in Senegal seems to uphold that economic and social empowerment and domestic responsibilities (and traditional gender norms) go hand in hand. This more gradual approach is also seen as strategic in gaining acceptance from the male population.

In Senegal, men are increasingly more involved in the fight for women's rights and accepting their migration as a path to success. Several male interviewees noted that Senegalese women are driven and have high goals. A young man in Dakar noted, "One thing we've noticed is that women work better than men. In Senegal, they are harder workers than men. Men spend too much time partying, drinking, and wasting money. Women are more family minded."<sup>130</sup>

On a larger scale, migrant women are increasingly seen as role models, as they change perceptions about the role of women in the workplace<sup>131</sup>. Interviews with CARITAS staff showed that migrant women who return to their communities of origin were viewed in a different light<sup>132</sup>. Since they return wearing nicer clothing and more material possessions, they are associated with a higher social status. Another staff member reported that returning migrant women have the power to change mentalities, particularly if they can reinsert themselves professionally and engage in productive activities upon return<sup>133</sup>. If these women successfully start their own businesses upon return, they exemplify success for other women in the community<sup>134</sup>. Many interviewees emphasized that migrant women motivated younger generations to pursue entrepreneurship and dissuaded them from the idea that migration is the only path to success<sup>135</sup>.

A migration specialist from the IOM also agreed that migrant women were models of success for future generations due to their ability to travel independently and acquire resources<sup>136</sup>. Through the IOM, I connected with one woman who, after years of working in France, imported a large van to Senegal and started her own transportation business in her village<sup>137</sup>. Another woman I spoke to had imported sewing machines from France back to Senegal to create jobs for women in her village<sup>138</sup>. These case studies illustrate how migrant women can bring positive change to their communities.

While these economic and social changes are profitable for the individual woman and her family, they occur mostly at the micro-level. Contributing to large scale social and economic development will require a critical change in mentalities to accept migration as a possibility for women's empowerment<sup>139</sup>. In order to extract changes from the micro-level to benefit the society and economy at large, the government must take a crucial stance in empowering migrant women and translating their development potential onto a national scale<sup>140</sup>.

## Conclusion

*Will female labor migration continue to have positive implications on the socioeconomic development of women in countries of origin, and is this change sustainable?*

The answer depends on the country; as this study shows, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and historical differences determine how migration is perceived by the local population and managed by society. Analyzing the gender-migration-development nexus also requires a micro-level and community-based approach with female members of society, who in some countries are ignored by policy makers and

researchers alike. While economic impact can be extracted from quantitative data, measuring social impacts is incredibly challenging. Both do not occur overnight, yet social changes are subtler and thus more difficult to recognize and evaluate. For social change to diffuse from the individual to the family or household, to the community, and finally to the national level, can take decades.

Women have potential to be strong agents of change, but they need support from institutions and from other women. Advancing their status in developing countries requires that they be at the center of program and policy creation. Without implicating women from the start and giving them a productive role in society, governments will see social change rapidly evaporate into thin air.

While focused on Senegal, the outcomes of this research have global implications. Labor migration has been recognized as a path to socioeconomic empowerment around the world. The key themes in this paper are transferrable. Obstructing, devaluing, and restricting mobility for women is not limited to Senegal or West Africa. It exists around the world, even though migration is managed differently in every country.

In order for labor migration to contribute to social and economic development in migrant sending countries, it must be addressed with grassroots policy and programs which start from the community-level and be recognized globally as a phenomenon with potential to catalyze gender equality. Government practice and policy should address the social dynamics of female migration through 'return migration' schemes, legal protection of migrant women's rights, facilitation of skill and knowledge transfer through exchange platforms, and promotion of entrepreneurship and solidarity in migrant women's groups. Through such policies and practices, countries can contribute to economic growth while simultaneously empowering women in their societies, both economically and socially.

Future research would undoubtedly benefit from an in-depth exploration of the environmental impacts of female labor migration in developing countries, and the sustainability of circular migration in particular. It would be particularly interesting to explore whether women have brought back sustainable practices from abroad, such as recycling or cooking with gas stoves instead of open fires. Another potential subject of inquiry could be whether remittances or migrant businesses have contributed to addressing environmental degradation or pollution.

## End Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Bachan, 10
- <sup>2</sup> Andersson, 12
- <sup>3</sup> Bachan, 11
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Piper, 4
- <sup>10</sup> Bradshaw & Castellino, 4.
- <sup>11</sup> *United Nations*. “Indicators of Sustainable Development: Guidelines and Methodologies Third Edition”, 48.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, 75.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, 57.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, 85.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, 80.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, 53-54.
- <sup>17</sup> “Human Development Index”.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> “Gender Development Index”.
- <sup>20</sup> Human Development Report 2016 UNDP.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> “Examining role of labour migration for sustainable development.” *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs*.
- <sup>24</sup> “The JMDI Handbook - Migration for Development: A Bottom-up Approach”, 24.
- <sup>25</sup> “Migration and Development: Perspectives from the South”, 18.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> “Gender, Migration and Remittances”, 1-2.
- <sup>29</sup> Ratha, 7.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, 4.
- <sup>31</sup> “Women and International Migration, World Survey”, 21-22.
- <sup>32</sup> Ratha, 7.
- <sup>33</sup> Sijapati, 8.
- <sup>34</sup> DeHaas, 233.
- <sup>35</sup> “The Migration-Development Nexus: A Transnational Perspective”, 16.
- <sup>36</sup> Toma, 37.
- <sup>37</sup> Stecklov, Carletto, Azzarri & Davis, 9.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 91.
- <sup>39</sup> Toma, 44.
- <sup>40</sup> “The JMDI Handbook - Migration for Development: A Bottom-up Approach”, 25.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid, 26.
- <sup>42</sup> Fleury, 18.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> “Women and International Migration, World Survey”, 20.
- <sup>45</sup> “GMG Issues Brief No.3”, 4.
- <sup>46</sup> Sijapati, 5.
- <sup>47</sup> Fleury, 19.
- <sup>48</sup> “Women and International Migration, World Survey”, 29.

- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Piper, 11.
- 51 Toma, 86.
- 52 Fleury, 17.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Hagan et al, 1.
- 55 Toma, 86.
- 56 Piper, 25.
- 57 Taylor, 15.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 "The JMDI Handbook - Migration for Development: A Bottom-up Approach", 54.
- 60 Ibid, 36.
- 61 Ibid, 87.
- 62 Ibid, 78.
- 63 "Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation."
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 "Migration and Development: Perspectives from the South", 9.
- 66 "The JMDI Handbook - Migration for Development: A Bottom-up Approach", 28.
- 67 Ibid, 22.
- 68 Ibid, 24.
- 69 "Engaging Diasporas as Development Partners for Home and Destination Countries: Challenges for Policymakers", 54.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Ibid, 77.
- 72 Ibid, 33.
- 73 Ibid, 77.
- 74 "Senegal Unemployment Rate 1994-2017."
- 75 Ibid, 80.
- 76 "Enhancing Financial Capability and Inclusion in Senegal", 27.
- 77 Cisse, 4.
- 78 Maggi, Dame et al, 145.
- 79 Ibid, 146.
- 80 Ibid, 81.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Cisse, 22.
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 Toma, 81.
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 Ndiaga Fall Diatta, personal communication
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 Papa Dembe Fall, personal communication.
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 "Migration, Remittances and Gender-Responsive Local Development", 25
- 91 Toma, 86.
- 92 Ibid, 87.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Papa Demba Fall, personal communication.
- 95 Ibid, 90.
- 96 Coumba Fall Venn, personal communication.
- 97 Ibid, 85.
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- 100 Toma, 82.
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- 102 Rose Sagna, personal communication.
- 103 Toma, 120.
- 104 “Enhancing Financial Capability and Inclusion in Senegal”, 38
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- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Ibid.
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- 110 *Workshop 2015 - Senegal Chapter*, 4.
- 111 Ibid, 11.
- 112 "FAISE : 122 projets de Sénégalais”.
- 113 Ibid.
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- 115 Ibid.
- 116 Lamine Ba, personal communication.
- 117 “Politique Nationale de Migration du Senegal”
- 118 Ibid, 22.
- 119 "Senegal Overview The World Bank."
- 120 *Workshop 2015 - Senegal Chapter*, 11
- 121 Ibid, 12.
- 122 “Migration, Remittances and Gender-Responsive Local Development”, 25.
- 123 Babou, 17.
- 124 Ibid, 12.
- 125 Ibid, 12.
- 126 Ibid, 18
- 127 Ibid, 19.
- 128 Coumba Fall Venn, personal communication.
- 129 Ibid.
- 130 University student in Dakar, personal communication.
- 131 Toma, 86.
- 132 Rose Sagna, personal communication.
- 133 Jacques Niouky, personal communication.
- 134 Ibid.
- 135 Ibid.
- 136 Salla Mbaye, personal communication.
- 137 Ibid.
- 138 Professor Doudou Gueye, personal communication.
- 139 Ibid.
- 139 Bachan, 26

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