FROM SENEGAMBIA TO SPAIN
Migration process and social integration

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ABSTRACT: Migration from Senegal and The Gambia to Catalonia in Spain is a family strategy for mobility, deeply rooted in a genuinely dynamic reality where history, politics, geography, economics and religion play a determinant role, together with culture, education, gender and personal options. Throughout the stages of the migration process from home to destination and from there to social integration, crucial transformations take place. Women, regardless of their weaker position in gender relations, develop interaction strategies in their role as reproducers of traditional values or primary agents of change within the family and the community. With children bridging the gap between tradition and change, women lead the way in building and consolidating a life project where Senegambian migrants can become creative, thoughtful, responsible citizens working together for a truly intercultural and pluriethnic society.

The history of African migratory flows coming from Senegal and The Gambia to Spain and namely to Catalonia is recent in time and "unique" due to the lack of ties in history, trade or culture (language or religion, for example). Three migration periods can be traced, starting at the end of the '70s, then increasing with new contingents in the '80s and finally consolidating through family reunification in the '90s.
Either way we should bear in mind that population movement in this region of sub-Saharan Africa is part of the history of its people, of its conquests as well as of the trans-Saharan trade routes or the rural-urban exodus. At present, transcontinental migration is an institution of its own (Guilmoto, 1998), wherein individual determinants and structural factors are marked by economic and family characteristics. We mustn't forget that migration is not only integrated in the lives of African migrants, but also in the domestic groups in their place of origin, their expectations and actions. Population movements reveal a genuinely dynamic reality and cover a broad, ongoing and complex migratory field which transcends formal boundaries, be they political, geographic, linguistic, colonial, religious or residential.

In general terms, in the Senegambia region\(^1\) out-migration is perceived as a family strategy, undertaken by one or several of its members, and manifests in two large well-defined and clearly differentiated migration patterns: survival and mobility (Findley y Ouedraogo, 1993).

a) Survival strategies: also known as South-South moves. This type of migration is regional and mixed, where men and women move from rural areas to the cities or to neighbouring countries and work as temporary hands in the construction sector or domestic service (housekeeping). Precariousness of family groups in the places of origin implies that this sort of rural-urban movement is a way of covering for or completing basic needs in the family’s axial diet (rice, oil, sugar, etc.) and, in the best of cases, some health emergencies (transport to the nearest health centres, medication, etc.)

b) Mobility strategies: known as South-North flows. This migration is primarily adopted by men, who undertake transcontinental moves towards Europe, the United States or to other farther African countries such as Nigeria or Libia. The family makes a

\(^1\) The term Senegambia is used with geohistorical and ethnolinguistic criteria, although politically they form two independent nations, Senegal and The Gambia.
significant financial investment (sale of livestock and goods) to meet the first expenses of one of its young members, their prospects being a more diversified economic basis for the family and the promotion of the group's socio-economic status. These expectations are initially fulfilled in many cases with the improvement of homes, the construction of a solid cement unit, the purchase of farming tools or children's education. It is also seen as a support in paving the way for the migration project of a family brother or a close relative. This type of migration is further conceived in the long run as an impulse for community development in terms of infrastructures and services (building of mosques, health centres, ambulances, schools, etc.). Cooperation activities take place when several members of the same village migrate to a common destination and organise to carry out a joint project, for which they often make proposals for development aid to NGOs or apply for partial funding of the budget from public resources in towns with a significant African population (Maresme, Girona, etc.).

Two issues are of vital concern in this type of economic migration which pursues a strategy of mobility. First of all, the family does not make such a considerable investment in just any of its male members, but selects those with the greatest chances of success in the implementation of the project. Secondly, its members belong to "emission sources" from the village's political, religious, health or financial elite. That is, they are sons of an authority figure (mayor, village chief, etc.), of historical descendants of the ancient nobility, of the Imam (religious leader), the marabout (religious and health specialist), or members of livestock or trading families.

It is therefore clear that migration is a selection factor in itself, beginning at the place of origin. Those fleeing poverty follow a survival strategy. The older members enjoy a privileged position within their gerontocratic societies; those who reach old age² are considered "monuments" and are part of the elders council. The sick are not in the physical condition required for a long, complex, solitary and uncertain journey. Hence those leaving are young, strong, healthy and brave members, with better skills, more

preparation and greater assertiveness. That is, those who argue that people emigrating to Europe do so pushed by poverty and hunger are referring to the wrong group in this case. There is no doubt that this type of migratory movement is built upon an economic basis, as a result of international inequalities and push-pull factors. But it is also true that there is a personal decision taken by the subject to seek out new, better opportunities and a more promising future. Underlying these personal reasons are curiosity, creativity, adventure or ambition (Kaplan, 1993).

To this effect and without underestimating its crucial importance, several studies by authors such as Domingo et.al. (1995) or Recolons (1996) reveal the complex economic-political-cultural plot present in the topic of migration and criticise prevailing concepts and theories about migration when they focus on an excessively exclusive determinism of economic factors. The interplay of other variables (personal, gender, support networks, etc.) opens the door to a broader, more adequate and sounder reformulation for building knowledge concerning migration movements, their flows and back flows.

Another important group of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, originally from the former Spanish colony of Guinea, have a longer migratory tradition and are strongly identified with Spanish cultural patterns (language, religion and education, primarily), their socio-demographic composition is diverse as is their sociolaboral integration. Unlike them, Senegambian migrants "appear on the scene" precisely when the need is pressing in tasks on the Catalan farmland. To this effect, Anna Cabré (1991) states that "...they are admitted grudgingly, only if the needs of a segmented labour market indicate the need for special workers willing to engage in the tougher, more dangerous or precarious jobs, generally in conditions of relative or absolute underpayment."

This is why the African population is basically considered an economic immigration, inserted in contexts of economic crisis and widespread social cutbacks. They usually occupy precarious positions in "labour niches" such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing or services, very often underground economy jobs. Migration thus
becomes an administrative obstacle course and develops into a survival dynamics. This is why social integration/social exclusion are key concepts in the theoretical framework of migration studies, because the processes and consequences they produce are clearly related to a dichotomy of positions which defines the conditions of inequality in contexts already unequal. These will define as a result the degree of access to and use of resources (labour, legal, health, education, housing, etc.) which are not always stable nor equitable in all areas, sometimes not even in a few.

African women, on the other hand, are generally "invisible" subjects whom people identify solely with certain social domains or traditional practices detrimental to health (like female genital mutilations), and are being confined to the margins of gender issues in the theoretical and political discussion on migrations (Juliano, 1996), although not so with regards to their reproductive potential as viewed under the perspective of "social security contributions". The construction of inequalities is two-fold in the case of these women. With financial and legal dependence on their husbands, with illiteracy and their limitations in language and contact with the host society, and therefore from a starting point of exclusion, African women are denied or hampered in the full development of their capacities, autonomy and independence; that is, in their most essential rights, thus legitimising relations of power and dominance based on ethnicity, class and gender. Through migration processes the forms of social integration/exclusion in the host society combine with gender systems already existing in the African societies of origin to produce a social construction of this difference in terms of subordination (Gregorio, 1998).

- **General characteristics of the population and contexts of insertion:**

  The Senegambian population in Spain is mainly of rural origin. We must bear in mind that in The Gambia for example, data from the 1993 census indicates that 80.6% of men and 87.2% of women live in rural areas, while another source, the Household Economic Survey (1992/3), shows percentages rising to 83.5% in the case of men and 92.2% for women. However it is important to stress that urban areas are undergoing strong demographic growth, not only proceeding from inland rural migrants, but also
from the increase of incoming migration from countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mali or Guinea Bissau, for either political or economic reasons.

The ethnic composition of Senegambia is diverse, although as an ethnolinguistic region it shares a common historical and cultural origin. Among the largest groups, we find the Mandinga people, a majority in The Gambia tracing its origins back to the medieval empire of Mali; the Sarahaole, who settled in the far Eastern areas of Senegal and The Gambia and belonged to the ancient empire of Ghana; the Fula, originally a nomadic pastoral people from Western Sudan, have settled throughout Western Africa seeking pastures for its livestock, and the Wolof, the majority group in Senegal, who are descendants of the great Wolof empire. Other neighbours are the serer and djola fishing groups, and the aku, bambara and manjako. The Muslim religion is predominant in about 90% of the population, with important fraternities in Senegal.

In the general context of kinship relations, we should emphasise that the system is based on patrilineal ideology and virilocal residence (established in the husband's family unit), thus composing extended families with polygenic marriage arrangements (they can marry up to four women).

Issues related to schooling among the population should also be considered, not only because of their importance as socio-demographic indicators but also as background experience that enhances integration in the host society. Three clearly differentiated levels of education ought to be mentioned: the Koranic school, the "modern" school and adult education. The specificity of each of these is defined by the area in which they are developed (origin and destination), by the objectives proposed by each, teacher typology, methodology employed, the use of language and the knowledge that each affords in the varying fields of application of this knowledge.

In both The Gambia and Senegal, formal schooling is public, non-compulsory and begins at the age of seven. In rural areas it is on the rise as a substitute for the madrassas, traditional Koranic schools which held strong until recently as a bastion for
learning the Koran, Arabic reading and writing and preserving Islamic rules. The teacher is usually the village's own Imam or an elder with scholarly knowledge of the Koran, called the karamo. Girls must stop attending as soon as they have their first menstruation period (considered a contaminating element), while primary schools offer girls access to an egalitarian education with no age limit. To this effect, Mary Douglas (1991) states that "it is not difficult to see how contamination beliefs can be used in a dialogue of claims and counter-claims to a social category. As we examine contamination beliefs, we discover that the sort of contacts considered dangerous also involve a symbolic dimension. Some contaminations are used as analogies to express a general view of the social order, and ideas about sexual dangers are better understood when interpreted as symbols of the relations between the parts of society, as configurations which reflect a hierarchy or asymmetry applied in a broader social system."

At modern schools, although education is free, children must buy their uniforms, books, benches and tables. In a study carried out in The Gambia by UNICEF in 1991, it was shown that 44% of tables and 40% of chairs in all schools surveyed were contributed by the pupils themselves. This causes high absenteeism and dropping out, mainly among a group subject to gender discrimination: girls. In The Gambia³, 59% of boys and 49% of girls attend primary school, while in the adult segment, about 25% of the population has had access to formal schooling in varying degrees and continuity. In Senegal⁴ the figures are even lower, with adult literacy at 19%, of which 29% is female, and children's education at 59%. Secondary schools are scarce and their location is often in urban areas. Access to this type of education is strongly conditioned by socioeconomic factors and directly related to the economic and political elites of these countries.


In rural areas, the percentage of women with access to formal education is limited, because priority is given to sons since expenses required by this type of education cannot be met by the family economy, a subsistence economy based on farming and livestock. As we remarked earlier, a good part of remittances sent by migrants from abroad are assigned to schooling for both boys and girls of the domestic unit they belong to. We should nevertheless keep in mind the strong feeling of mistrust among people towards the kind of education and values being transmitted in schools known as "modern". Memorising and repetition techniques are a part of the educational system, as well as punishment for disobedience and breaking rules. Close attention should also be given to another significant figure available from the School Facilities Survey, funded by UNICEF and carried out by The Gambian Ministry of Education in 1998, whereby 54% of primary school teachers do not have the proper training required for teaching. More than 85% of secondary school teachers have the right degree, although the report stresses that the majority are of foreign nationality, mainly Nigerians and refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Thus we see that the Senegambian migrant population coming to Spain has a low formal schooling level, where illiteracy in the case of women rises to 83% and stands at 72% for men, while 87% of the total population have followed a Koranic education (Kaplan, 1998). The availability of institutional adult schooling in the host society depends on the migrants' residential enclaves. Attendance among men prevails while women are present in far lesser numbers and, in any case, their attendance is irregular and lacking stimulation. It is rather a place to meet with other women of their community, with no particular expectations as far as learning the language or reading and writing are concerned. However, we should stress the interest shown and demands made along these lines by the African migrant women themselves when the contexts of insertion make it possible. It is within this reality and as a result of this need that the first interdisciplinary workshops (health, social services, schools for adults, and anthropology) were set up in Spain (1992-94) and held in Salt, Girona to pave the way for a broader process towards literacy.
This is how women begin to express their first demands for "schooling", relating them to public health issues such as what are the interactions between breastfeeding, the postpartum amenorrhea period, the taboo of puerperal sexual abstinence, sexual relations, contraception and family planning in the host society setting, where organisation and space distribution of marriage relations are different, the union is primarily monogamic, with a fortunately drastic fall in child mortality, where the financial cost of bringing up children is high and a large family size is no longer functional, and where nutrition patterns in pediatrics are strict and strange when compared to those followed in their countries of origin.

On the other hand, we should bear in mind that in the relations between doctors and patients, verbal and non-verbal communication is strenuous and, we might add, there is a lack of cultural knowledge and a sometimes biased orientation of health programmes aimed at this population, together with varying attitudes among the health personnel which, from an ethnocentric approach, may favour, hinder or interfere with medical recommendations and prescriptions. It is then understandable that Senegambian women are interested in adult schools transmitting contents which focus on peremptory and relevant issues about and for their social integration. Along these lines, Paulo Freire (1989) wrote that "education implies that educational contents, programmes and methods must be adapted to the end they pursue, and its objective must be to enable awareness of reality because reality cannot be changed until the person discovers that it can be changed and that he himself is able to do so. Education thus understood is a process of seizing control of reality which grants access to unknown areas of experience by means of a spiral movement of coding, decoding and recoding rising from the people involved." We should not forget that human beings are creators of culture insofar as we are able to reflect upon the specific context we are in and provide answers to the challenges facing us. So another level of analysis in the study of African women in migration processes is one which considers their integrating role in the host society through the expression of priority centres of interest. This integration involves not only learning new values and patterns; it also
implies creating, developing and participating in a whole set of strategies which empowers them as true protagonists of change and as intercultural advocates.

- **The migration process:**

Senegambian migration has been asymmetric in terms of gender, as men in the society of origin have traditionally undertaken the role of migrating. Women remain in the household unit, carrying out basic tasks and generating subsistence means for the group's survival in their role as main food producers, biological and cultural reproducers, carers and administrators of the domestic economy. Once men have attained a certain degree of stability as far as work, legal status and housing, the complex procedures for family regrouping commences. Thus, the beginning of the migration process for women is induced, compelled by the will to reunite with their husbands and start or continue building the family. Motherhood becomes their primary life project. Children born in Africa travel on occasion with their mothers, although they generally do so in stages due to budget reasons, while others remain in the domestic unit of origin, in care of its members or are otherwise given over in adoption to other women in the group as a way to make up for the sterility of some of them or as a gratification/compensation for their parents' departure (Reveyrand-Coulon, 1999). This leads necessarily to a rearrangement of tasks and responsibilities in the family sphere.

In the case of the Senegalese population, whose arrival in Spain is more recent than that of the Gambians and who use other networks and itineraries, we should emphasise that for a large number of this contingent migration is temporary, fluctuating and multiresidential. Their aim is to work as street peddlers during the tourist season for six months, and then return to Senegal for another six. Therefore, at the beginning these migration projects do not envision family regrouping at destination in the future.

Sluzki (1979) points out that the migration process has five stages, each with its own characteristics and intrinsic processes. The first is the *decision-making* stage, and here
we should stress that men and women have different motivations, some of which have already been mentioned. In the case of men, this decision is "voluntary" (a controversial term, both theoretically and ideologically), while for women the decision is induced by the determination to bring the family together with the husband. A second stage, called "migratory limbo", refers to the geographic itineraries, time invested, situations and contexts experienced during the journey, from origin to destination. For men this stage is longer in time and more complex with regards to other variables involved in forming this stage. Women take a straight leap which is sometimes a true transplant from the village in Africa to the city at destination in Europe.

The third stage concerns the so-called overcompensation period, where migrants are still not aware of the problems they will have to face and where many of the experiences they endure are discordant. Men encounter the satisfaction of having reached the white man's or tubaab's "paradise", the discovery of a new reality they have dreamt of, yearned for and been mystified by for so long. No doubt this reality is quite a bit more complex, complicated, unjust, wretched and insolidary, and it is here that they discover it has little to do with their expectations or with the achievements other migrants have told of or with the "triumphant" return and display of financial success during their visits to Africa. This is when they must face the omission/concealment/distortion of crucial information about issues concerning ethnic identity (they are a visible, identifiable and marginable minority), legal identity (regular or irregular status, they are or they aren't, they are here or they aren't here), or work identity (employment segments exclusively for migrants, exploitation), and others.

On the other hand, most Senegambians put together their family project at destination, even though unions are established between the families in their places of origin, without either of the members of the couple having to participate or be present during the negotiations and marriage settlement at the mosque. This implies that women very often "get to know" their husbands at destination and are subject to a significant space dispersion with regards to other women from their community who
could offer support during this initial stage for the couple and in the migration process. Their main objective is building the family and being able to prove their fertility. In Africa the birth of a married adult woman’s first child is the door to the world of motherhood, through a rite of passage legitimised by the elder women of the community, who are primarily involved. And this is the great difference between the two migration flows occurring in Spain in the 80’s and 90’s. The first women have mostly been initiated into the knowledge of motherhood in Africa, while the later women are younger and primiparous at destination and lack not only previous knowledge but also the female traditional networks of enculturation and training ensured by the elder women, who are now absent in the new context of migration. So for these Senegambian women the centrality of the universe of motherhood is what shapes their first years at destination and the learning attached to their own migration process.

Furthermore, a set of changes take place throughout the migration process in terms of time, space, social relations and culture, which undoubtedly require a transformation. Travelling changes in its modes (means of transport), its aims, its routes, its distances and in the company with which it is done. In mental structures, there is an experience of the social dimension of time whereby activities, for example in the case of women, are limited to vital spaces which are constrained, small, dark, solitary and empty. A redistribution of roles ensues as well as an inversion of work activities. Now it’s the men who go out to work in the fields, while the women are no longer bound to the earth, to community tasks or to open space. Time passes slowly when the traditional activities which shape a gender identity disappear. For the men, the rhythm is too accelerated, strict and rutinary.

A fourth stage in this migration process speaks of a period of decompensation or a crisis period, when the family tries to create a new reality as a unit. Here the role played by African migrants is a struggle in three senses:
a) between resistance to the religious and cultural values of the society of origin, keeping traditions within the home as guardians of the customs and ties with the community of origin; 
b) between the transgression of values with regards to their culture of origin, where new practices and new roles come into play in answer to old dilemmas; and 
c) between the production of new adaptive strategies focussing on central issues such as food, sexual and reproductive health, mother-child relations, gender relations, literacy and insertion in society and the labour market, amongst others.

I insist that centering our attention on the women as transmitters of culture within the family, whether as reproducers of traditional values or as a primary influence and agents of change, sheds light on their greater predisposition to identity transformations in their perception of the migration process. The tradition itself of having played leading roles in African society and being the prevailing motivating force in changing and revitalizing ancestral structures as tireless creators of strategies (Sipi, 1997), paves the way for these women to become involved as new and active "actresses" within their own community and within the host society in general. As already mentioned, while it is true that their position in gender relations is the least powerful and most marginal, they do not take on the role of victims in these situations; instead, they develop forms of interaction which encourage the improvement or transformation of these relations (Bermúdez & Kaplan, 2003). Moreover, these women contribute to the promotion of new patterns of solidarity and are agents of cooperation beyond the boundaries of their own group.

Also worth emphasising is the nature of Senegambian associative life in Spain, both for men and for women, with the presence of formal and informal organisational networks centred on facilitating intra and interethnic relations, helping in the negotiation of claims (prayer halls, Muslim cemeteries, etc.), handling burocratic transactions (repatriation of the dead, for example) or aiding in individual processes of the African community itself. In any case, this assistance, which is invisible to strangers' eyes (Díaz, 1999), suggests support aimed at maintaining and fighting for the respect
and dignity of these people and their cultural background in situations of vulnerability, marginality, estrangement or suffering. The role played by community members as spontaneous or professional mediators should also be mentioned. Their presence speaks of a valuable effort made by migrants to participate in their own integration as well as in building bridges for a more intercultural society.

The end of this stage comes with a sense of lamentation and sorrow, evidence of their uprooting is confirmed through their children and they are overcome by migratory mourning, an experience which is understood as "the process of reorganising the personality that takes place when something significant for the subject is lost" (Atxotegui, 1997). For Víctor Cabré (1993), these mourning processes have to do with the "ensemble of emotions, thoughts and cognitions...that appear because of the separation or loss with regards to aspects peculiar to the migrant and which are an inherent part of his or her identity." This is where the perception of inhabiting different worlds is consolidated and where loyalty conflicts emerge.

Thus we come to the fifth phase of the migration process, known as transgenerational. To the "natural" intergenerational conflicts we must now add intercultural conflicts. Traditional generational processes are transformed by cultural and social changes, by values and by the decrease in fecundity. Children are no longer a safeguard for old age, not even for the reproduction of tradition. Despite the ambiguities and the personal and cultural conflicts which may arise, the role played by children favours the acceptance, questioning or transgression of social and cultural representations. Indeed, as the need to interact with the host society arises (schools, outings, neighbourhood, social and health services, etc.) through the activities and the processes and evolution of the children, other levels of communication appear within marriage and family relations, in other areas which can now be shared in terms of participation and co-responsibility, and involve deep changes in gender relations between parents. These are part of a broader and more long-term process of experimentation and learning in social integration, where the myth of going "back home" begins to fade as they focus on securing advantages and reducing
disadvantages. The adaptive process allows both men and women flexibility in following traditional norms, and this in turn, with time and through their children as bridges, will modify social, cultural and personal attitudes towards the events of life in the society of destination, in both practical and ideological terms.

Finally, the learning of these migration and social integration processes, in line with Freire’s pedagogy of liberation (1989), implies conquering the freedom to be and to choose. The basis of a migration process in its multiple areas is to activate options to choose from, in order that the Senegambian migrant population may be the creator of its own process. "Naming the world, reading reality, their own reality, is a right denied to many men and women, whether because of their illiteracy or because, though familiar with the alphabet, they cannot participate due to their marginality" and, I would add, their condition as foreigners. Like all human beings, migrants must be makers of their own story and adopt a creative, thoughtful and responsible role with regard to their new reality, in forging and consolidating their life project and in building a society with structures that reflect genuine pluriethnic and intercultural relations and opportunities.
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