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Gender, the International Community and 'best practice' interventions in migration and development

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About MigChoice

MIGCHOICE: Testing the impact of interventions on migration decision-making in West Africa

African migration is overwhelmingly intra-continental. Within West Africa most migrants move within the sub-region.[1] Migration to Europe has become a matter of significant European policy concern. But there is a need to better understand the relationship between poverty, livelihoods and mobility. This study seeks to understand how development interventions at a range of scales impact the choices people make to move or stay or influence their choice of destination. How and to what extent do development interventions affect people's migration aspirations, decisions and movement? MigChoice is a collaboration of African and European academics and is funded by FCDO in conjunction with IOM.

Why this Policy Brief?

Numerous development interventions are aimed at young people as 'potential migrants'. The EU is currently committed to spending up to 10% of its Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (around €8.9bn) on 'addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement' as well as 'supporting migration management and governance'.[2] Migration is often un-gendered, but gender makes a difference to experiences of opportunity and chances along the journey. This briefing focuses in particular on the relationship between gender, development interventions and migration. Programming aims to be gender-

[1] https://reliefweb.int/report/world/africa-migration-report-challenging-narrative

[2] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0298_EN.html

responsive, many organizations and government agencies claim to mainstream gender. However, often gender is reduced to mean and address women. In contexts of rampant and unreconstructed patriarchy this is undoubtedly necessary. However, a near exclusive focus on women and girls in mainstreaming gender is blind to how programming in migration and development, which often aims at either deterrence or re-integration, creates a category of vulnerable young man.

Our evidence

Over an 18-month period from 2019-21, MigChoice researchers talked to dozens of young people aged 18-35 across 15 field sites in three West African countries – Guinea, The Gambia and Senegal. We also interviewed a range of policy makers and programme officers from governments, national and international organizations. The conclusions here are drawn from this in-depth and ethnographic work.

Key messages

The evidence from our research allows us to draw out three points of learning when engaging with questions of what 'best practice' in migration and development in relation to gender should consider:

1. Gender is more than woman and girls. An exclusive focus on women can do damage in a variety of ways: it can empower in the right circumstances, but it can also infantilise and undermine for its exclusive focus. Data that essentialises and aggregates between two sexes hides complicated dynamics of gender, because of patriarchy.
2. Patriarchy is a social structuring device and as such sustainable and adaptable. It forms and regulates social hierarchies and in this works against emancipation, usually to the detriment of the young, the female and the disabled or otherwise non-conforming. It expresses as 'neutral' or 'objective' and is deeply sedimented in political, economic and social structures.
3. Masculinity changes over time. Particular groups of men, especially young men, are vulnerable too. Masculinity specifically changes for migrant men or those identified as 'potential migrants' who are pressed to perform different masculinities depending on age, audience and context and may render them vulnerable.
4. Development interventions impact on contexts in which everyday situations contest, negotiate and accommodate gender norms in interaction with a variety of other characteristics (age, ethnicity, class etc.). Becoming man is not easy, in particular when mediated by development activities that are aimed at intervening with decisions on migration.

Gender, migration & development

Both migration and development are gendered. But what does that actually mean, especially when we are engaged in sites across continents? In much of research, as well as practice, it is agreed that a gender responsive approach begins with the understanding that development is about power and politics, as much as it is about social structures and economics.[3] Interventions, framed within such strategic vision, in the context of migration and development would then need to ensure that women and girls have equal voice and rights or are empowered towards such equality. Development interventions also need to be alert to power-differentials suffered by others, such as disabled individuals. The SDGs are clear when they declare that no one is to be left behind.

There are various ways in which projects seek to be gender-responsive. They include:

- Disaggregating data by gender, or more accurately sex; yet this is not enough as it may ignore entrenched inequalities that are often less visible as we accept a particular kind of masculine world as the neutral and standard-setting state of play.
- Insisting there be a quota for women on migration-development related projects; yet, in the case of migration it is mostly 'young' men who are regularly represented as a security threat at every step.
- Boosting women's ability to participate and lead in decision-making processes; yet, they often do not address misogynistic attitudes in the face of opposition on traditional or cultural grounds;
- When thinking of gender as only women and girls, we are leaving people behind. Gender is more complex and in our research we have begun to see migration and development practices which create a specific group of young men as vulnerable in different ways.

Thus, if an approach to development is to be gender responsive it needs to take care to develop a wider sensibility of what gender is and note that often when our expressions are seemingly 'un-gendered', we are setting the masculine as norm and thus doing harm to all those who do not conform to that norm.

[3] DFID, 2018, *DFID Strategic Vision for Gender Equality. A call to action for her potential, our future*. London: HMSO.

Gender in Migration and Development Interventions

Think gender, not women

Programmes often support women, but do not think about the wider context or infrastructure within which women and men work. The result may be that women's livelihoods are further undermined. A clear example of this comes from our research in Kankan, Guinea, where the regular income available from market gardening undertaken by women has become increasingly attractive to men – young men in particular. Projects that aim to boost a sector dominated by women are designed such that beneficiaries already need to come with certain skills, such as literacy or technical skills – skills that few women have. As a result, this situation offers a position for intermediaries – as supervisors, treasurers or agri-entrepreneurs – to young men, many who engage with such opportunities eagerly.

In other words, **programming for social and economic promotion has re-invented patriarchy in market gardens that provided women at least a degree of autonomy from their husbands and social position of subordination**, if not also a way to avoid poverty in some polygamous family constellations and thus support the woman's children in a way which is in her control. Whilst entrepreneurial and skill innovations may have positive outcomes for the young men by improving their social status a little, the innovations encroach into important spaces for women, who do not have access or the prerequisite eligibility to participate in this kind of development intervention. Even if it achieves the short-term goal of deterring young men from migrating temporarily, as our interviewees say it does. Social structures are intervened with to the detriment of women and those who depend on them. This is in addition to the challenge received from men in hegemonic positions which claim that emancipation of women undermines family and social cohesion – which it of course does as it is a direct challenge to the patriarchal structures of male-run families. The excuse that this is an influence of 'western morals', hides negotiations between different forms of gender relations, including matrilineality and challenges to the 'elders'.

Opening a space for men was ironically made possible by the way that programmes focused on women in the first place. **Where an exclusive focus on women's emancipation might be appropriate on occasion, it also has the consequence of distancing the women and thus ensuring that patriarchal hierarchies are kept intact**. The activities were not seen in the context of the wider social order, women stand apart by the support they are receiving. This enables the masculinization of market gardening – especially when it is understood as 'professionalising' this activity through skill and technology improvement. The idea of 'professionalizing' precisely draws on notions of men being superior where women are seen as only doing inferior support services through their gardening. Patriarchy is kept alive and functioning, and with that established hierarchies of power are not challenged either – including to the detriment of those men who do not or cannot conform to local notions of hegemonic masculinity.

Only some men need apply

The requirement for programme beneficiaries to already have a level of necessary skills, resources and influence is not limited to market gardening. Interviews with young men in Louga,

Senegal show an overwhelming sense that development interventions are out of reach not only for young women, but also for many young men. **Masculinity changes over the course of a life, but ultimately a hegemonic version re-invents itself – including through placing primacy on age.** For example, technically, it is almost impossible for a non-literate young person to access finance or micro-credit, and even if it were, interest rates are prohibitive. But gaining access to skill training that often precedes access to finance to build up a business, is restricted to a particular profile one has to have to be 'seen' and rated as eligible. Thus, **whilst there is an un-gendered beneficiary category – 'eligible youth' – in development interventions, those men and women who have no, or a different education found access impossible.**

Programme officers and other policy professionals are aware of this. One of our interviewees for a programme in the Senegal explained the difficulty of young men in their family vis-à-vis the male patriarch who has decision-making power over the rest of the family, who owns the land and sometimes even goes so far as to dictate participation in development programmes or to register their son without their knowing.[4] In those conditions, migration is often regarded as being the only way to escape these generational hierarchies and gain the status of the social elder.

These dynamics make young men vulnerable which is expressed vividly by this interviewee from The Gambia:

> *There were elders insulting us: 'You are nothing! Look at your colleagues who leave to Europe. You are here sitting doing nothing'. So, I went through a period when I was frustrated. I said to myself: 'What am I doing here in the country? My father is not alive, my mother is not alive. I am not married. I will also go'*[5]*.*

The vulnerability of young returnees

It is not only development interventions for young people that promote structural inequality, rendering young men invisibly vulnerable. Most mobile people are young men; mobility – including return – is thus gendered in particular ways. **The return and reintegration of young men after a phase of migration can also leave them deeply vulnerable**, as a complex example from our research in The Gambia shows.

Bakau has a tourist industry. Our young man narrates that soon after his arrival in Bakau he was marginalised because he embodied the representation of an 'unsuccessful' migrant, even though he had picked up important skills during his migration (in addition to having become a tailor).

Once back in The Gambia, he successfully integrated into the informal tourist sector. Eventually he was 'expelled' because he is a returnee, in addition to being identified as a descendant of 'strangers', a socially meaningful category in most of West Africa. Thus, the combination of being identified as stranger, having been abroad and now being able to out-perform his peers drawing on a range of skills he learned during his migration (though not his professional trade), he was marked for ousting. His peers, similarly under-privileged and lacking hegemonic masculinity, instituted a repressive approach targeting his attempts to engage in livelihood activities. He was run out of town.

[4] Key informant interview, Senegal, August 2020

[5] Interview, Kerewan, March 2020

Out-performing, which would be regarded as success in the eyes of many from the Global North – he was entrepreneurial after all – made him such a threat to the community that they expelled him, leaving him without recourse to any livelihood in that place. Interventions that are not attentive to such sedimented structuring mechanisms not only reinforce established gender hierarchies, but also introduce new vulnerabilities. Similar effects can also be observed when people are engaged in re-integration activities targeting (forced) returnees and not opening such interventions to the local community.

Gender, Patriarchy and Masculinity

So what is gender?

Gender is often either confused with sex as a statistical category or reduced to 'women' or 'womenandchildren'. As a result, development interventions can end up creating structural vulnerability or making the structural vulnerability of young men worse. Including by establishing quota based on statistical sex categories in the allocation of spaces without careful consideration of local and social context. So, what is gender? Gender categories are socially constructed, and especially when it comes to men there are varieties of masculinity within and across societies and within and across continents. When development initiatives intervene in societies they are gendered – often explicitly so. In the context of migration this has consequences.

I**n order to understand gender, it is also important to understand patriarchy.** In the way that societies are ordered from the highest legal instruments in a country all the way to everyday activities of instilling values into our children and engaging with friends and neighbours they are imbued with patriarchy as a structuring device. This is, in part and along with racism, a legacy of colonialism – inherited through European philosophical notions of the 16th to 19th century when philosophers (e.g. Kant, Hobbes, Rousseau) thought about how societies should be ordered and governed and missionaries imposed a particular meaning of 'family'. What then is patriarchy?

And what is patriarchy?

Gender relations across West Africa were complex historically.[6] Norms were more plural with matrilineality, polygyny and the maintenance of separate residences by spouses making social ordering more diverse.[7] The introduction of linear patriarchal structures – a legacy of European modernity and colonialism that spread a particular kind of warfare, phallocentrism and male domination over women[8] – means that women often do need protection and empowerment. 'The (liberal) state', explains McKinnon, 'coercively and authoritatively constitutes the social order in the interest of men as a gender ... The state's formal norms recapitulate the male point of view on the

[6] Macé (2017) 'Dépasser le patriarcat pour mieux définir les féminismes africains ?' in: Wayack P. and Sawadogo, N. *Travail, genre et sociétés* 2 (38):187-192

[7] Miescher, SF (2005) *Making Men in Ghana* Bloomington: University of Indiana Press

[8] Uchendu, E. (2008) Masculinities in Contemporary Africa. Senegal: Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa, page 9

level of design'.[9] Importantly then, **patriarchy is not to be confused with a blame-game approach between individuals and between the sexes – patriarchy is a structuring device deeply sedimented into the order of societies** in which men, women, children and, most importantly, institutions participate.

As Cynthia Enloe explains, 'patriarchy is a system – a dynamic web – of particular ideas and relationships. That system of interwoven ideas and relationships is not brittle: it is not static. **Patriarchy can be updated and modernised. It is stunningly adaptable**'.[10] Since any intervention is an instrument of power, patriarchy is also reproduced across the globe. This is especially so in the context of migration and development interventions which always carry a mix of coercion and paternal care. Where the focus is on women – which in itself can be infantilising, rather than empowering – little attention is paid to men, especially young men in the process of becoming.

Young, Male and Vulnerable

Masculinities and the labelling of men

Like women, men are imbued with over-drawn characteristics that make them so. A man must be strong, father children, have a wife (or wives), own land, build a house and take care of the extended family or alternatively honour the extended family by working towards its prosperity. A man must protect economically, physically and morally. This is a very generic – almost caricatured – portrayal of hegemonic masculinity, but very common in descriptions from research in the MIGCHOICE project. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as 'the currently most honoured way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it …'.[11] In other words, if not reality, it provides a benchmark for judgement.

But there are also other constructions of masculinity that are legacies of colonialism, aristocratic society and expressions of (contemporary) racism where the African and black man is said to be lacking in intelligence, wit and drive. This narrative today is found when **young black men are identified, including by their own societies and peers, as lazy and/or criminal**; and such narratives abound in relation to young, male, 'potential migrants'. Europe constructs these as threat. For example, in Senegal, development staff and local leaders alike refer to young people as 'lazy', and 'looking for an easy way out'. Our ethnographic work has come across this in our other countries of research as well. 'Just sitting around and drinking tea' (les grins de thé) would be a common image Guineans use to describe the so-called lazy young men – this will be familiar across much of West Africa. Sitting together, sharing a tea-making and tea-drinking ritual does, of course, not actually indicate that these men have nothing to do.

[9] MacKinnon, C.A. (1989) Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, page 162

[10] Enloe, C (2017) The Big Push – Exposing and challenging the persistence of patriarchy Oakland, CA: University of California Press, page 16

[11] Connell, R. W.; Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005) Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept *Gender and Society*, 19(6) 829–859, page 832

Yet, even if the problem is located as a 'lack of jobs', the solution by those who intervene is formulated as 'self-employment' – a recurrent, dominant and cross-cutting perspective in most migration and development activities. Such entrepreneurship imagines a particular kind of economy for which the structural circumstances are often not available, subsistence entrepreneurship is looked down on as being less than what is expected. In effect then, if young people do not produce 'business projects', it is constructed as their 'choice' or fault to end up marginal, a deviation. Hence, those young men who do not or cannot engage in entrepreneurship activities – for which ever reason – find themselves vulnerable.

Hegemonic masculinity and the diaspora

Diaspora engagement can also create new forms of hegemonic masculinity, which in turn entrench vulnerability. The instinct of donors to make use of the diaspora creates contradictions as several of our interviewees engaged in programming noted.[12] Thus when projects make use of successful members of the diaspora, they of course advertise migration as something that can help fulfil familial obligations, lead to individual success, autonomy and influence. Yet, as our research in The Gambia most clearly showed but as was also noted by research in the Senegal[13] and Guinea, such 'success' also puts enormous pressure on relationships in a (village) community which benefit from diaspora engagement. In particular it makes land more expensive, leading to conflicts in families and leaving those who live abroad with an impossible task to manage emotional, social and economic relations, in addition to managing the geopolitics of interventions on migration instituted by donor governments and the international community.

Hegemonic masculinity is still alive and kicking …

We should not lose sight of the continued prevalence of discrimination against women, but rather need to be attentive to a wider range of gender vulnerabilities, which may change with age as indicated above. **Whilst particular groups of young men may be rendered vulnerable in their phase of youth, this may change just as particular kinds of vulnerability change for women with an unfolding life.** This was made clear by an especially frank farmer from Guinea, who explained why women are excluded:

> "*In our communities, women are a work tool. So we also have to prevent this woman from knowing how to do everything that men do, because economic power can enable her to have political power. The woman must accept to take the underside of the earth, that is to say that in our societies, she must always submit to the man. Otherwise, the yam trade should be reserved for women, but we men refuse to give them our tubers, because we don't trust our women. We also refuse to allow them to become rich and one day to start deciding and ordering, because the command is in the economy.*

[12] Interviews, programming officers, various implementing organizations, June to September 2020

13 See also Sinatti, G. (2014) 'Masculinities and Intersectionality in Migration - Transnational Wolof Migrants' in: Truong, T., Gasper, D., Handmaker, J., Bergh, S.I. (eds) *Migration, Gender and Social Justice – Persepctives on Human Insecurity* Springer: Heidelberg, pp. 215-227

I recognise something, we are hurting our women, look, they take part in all the production, but sometimes after the harvest we go, we buy the motorbikes and for them we don't buy anything, we even refuse to transport them. May God have mercy on men, we have too many sins against our women. But they must not be made aware of this situation, otherwise they might revolt".

Such an analysis is, however, very rare. Other farmers with whom we spoke explained instead that women are excluded because they are 'too fragile' and it is too difficult a stage, involving sometimes harsh negotiations with traders, which the men want to spare women from.

In conclusion

Patriarchy is not going away…

In conclusion, understanding everyday gendered social order is indispensable to avoid creating vulnerability structures for young men (and not just women and children – which subsumes and infantilises these young men in addition to their difficulties of exclusion and becoming) as they haven't anywhere to go (socially, in terms of their obligations, economically and emotionally).

… and yet: Moving forward

What can be done based on the understanding achieved here and the call in the SDGs not to leave anyone behind? First, as patriarchy, like racism, are structuring devices governments and international organizations can work to address not only the visible forms of gender discrimination but improve by being attentive to the more invisible ways in which patriarchy keeps re-inventing itself and gender is negotiated on an everyday basis. All policy and laws have an impact on women *and* men not in positions of privilege – young men are regularly vilified, if not criminalised. To which purpose does this happen? An answer to the question will guide constructive governing that strengthens *all* youth. Second, thinking relationally, not just in terms of generations, but also policy and economic sectors, living arrangements, religious contexts and wider social norms, needs to be taken into account in a context specific way, rather than by way of universal handbook guidance. Lastly, to migrate is to be entrepreneurial, it requires a certain aptitude, and it gains migrants skills. Governments, in particular donor governments, may reflect, rather than be driven by prejudice as William L. Swing, former Director General of the IOM said in 2018.