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Gender and Migration: Transit Sub-Saharan Migrants to/in Morocco

Nadia EIAMRI

Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Morocco

Introduction

Irregular migration makes headlines in everyday news and has always been a controversial topic around the world because of the political, economic and social complexities it creates. Morocco, due to its geographical coastal proximity to Europe and the Spanish enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla, plays a significant political, economic and migratory bridge-role between sub-Saharan countries and the European Union. Besides, many sub-Saharan migrants consider Morocco as a passage to European territory. In fact, the country has become the busiest transit country in North Africa since 2018. The classical destination countries tend to intensify migration regulations and border control strategies, which compel migrants to cross the borders using ‘illegal’ means and methods. For Papadopoulou (2005), transit migration is “*a consequence of restrictive migration policies and the “containment” trend in the neighboring states: the more restrictive the classic destination countries, the more likely are migrants to “get stuck” in the buffer zone.*”¹ Eventually, a great number of sub-Saharan migrants, whose prior aim is the European Eldorado, end up trapped for months or even years waiting in Morocco and looking forward to finding the right opportunity to cross the borders. In recent years, the number of irregular migrants detected on the Western Mediterranean route, stretching across the sea between Spain and Morocco, has increased significantly. While in 2014 the detected cases reached 7243, in 2018 the number increased remarkably to 57034 detections.² Almost 37,000 people had emigrated using irregular methods via the Western

¹ Aspasia Papadopoulou, “Exploring the Asylum-Migration Nexus: a Case Study of Transit Migrants in Europe,” Global Commission on International Migration, no. 23 (2005): 5. Available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/42ce4fa24.html>

² FRONTEX, “Migratory routes,” accessed November 10, 2019, <https://frontex.europa.eu/along-eu-borders/migratory-routes/western-mediterranean-route/>



Mediterranean migration route in 2018.³ As a result, Morocco became the first country of departure for migrants from Africa in 2018, while Spain became the most important gateway to Europe. This drastic growth in the number of detections and migrants' shift of routes reflect the constantly changing patterns of irregular migration.

No one can deny that migration has helped millions of people to enhance their living conditions in both origin and destination countries and has offered enormous opportunities to forge safe and prosperous lives abroad. As a result, migration is a significant process that realigns individuals' aspirations and living conditions from several dimensions. Castle, for example, points out that "*the experience of migration embraces every dimension of human existence*"⁴. On the other hand, the concept of gender, since the seventies, became the centre of social debates. The emergence of gender schools of thought has illuminated the prevalent perception of social structures, which were entrenched and taken for granted for a long time. In feminist theory, gender is seen as a "*matrix of identities, behaviours, and power relationships*" that are culturally established in accordance with sex, then disseminated and perpetuated within a particular society. This means that the principles of gender, which involve the ideals, expectations, and behaviours or expressions of masculinity and femininity, regardless of similarities, will vary from one society to another.⁵ Feminist scholars have strived to explicate the hierarchical social structures including the economic, cultural, and political inequalities between men and women. They have relentlessly sought to hammer down gender stereotypes and biases in different aspects of everyday life. Therefore, the social, economic, and political performances of both women and men have been highly influenced by the societal and cultural perceptions of femininity and masculinity.

Gender has become a critical and challenging instrument used in different fields of research for the aim of analysing gendered socially constructed inequalities. The fundamental objective is to improve individuals' status and enhance longer-term development outcomes for

³ Mehdi Lahlou, "Migration Dynamics in Play in Morocco: Trafficking and Political Relationships and their Implications at the Regional Level," Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture (MENARA) Working papers, No. 26 (2018): 4.

⁴ Stephen Castles, "Twenty-First-Century Migration as a Challenge to Sociology", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33, no. 3 (April 2007), 351-371: 3.

⁵ Monica Boyd and Elizabeth Grieco, "Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory," *Migration Policy Institute*, (2003): 2. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/women-and-migration-incorporating-gender-international-migration-theory>.



all individuals. Migration studies are one of the research areas that were primarily viewed as a male-centred phenomenon. Early scholarly research on migration focused, for a very long time, on discussing migration-related issues without highlighting the significant implications of women's experiences and gender differentials. The invisibility of women or the gender-biased assumptions in migration research resulted, initially, in an excessive focus mainly on women's migration. However, either by focusing mainly on women or by adopting 'add and stir' approach, researchers were able to bring to light women's experiences of mobility. Yet, these approaches are still inadequate to explore and investigate the impact of gender on individuals' lived experiences of migration. Later on, several researchers acknowledged the crucial importance of gender in migration processes. Along the same lines, this study's essential objective revolves around the examination of irregular 'transit' migration from a gender perspective. Although sub-Saharan migration to Morocco is not a new phenomenon, the presence of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa became more noticeable in the last fifteen years, particularly in big cities. The topic of irregular transit Sub-Saharan migration in Morocco had been previously addressed in some considerable and informative reports and studies. Yet, to my knowledge, the relationship between gender and migration is seldom acknowledged, and the importance of gender intricacies during migration experiences remains equivocal and unrevealed. So far, researchers, addressing migration-related issues within the context of irregular Sub-Saharan migration in Morocco, either presented the phenomenon as male-dominated or occasionally tackled women's migration. In clearer words, women's participation within the changing patterns of sub-Saharan migration has remained under-explored. In a bid to fill in this gap and to counter these assumptions, I argue in this study that gender, as a constitutive factor of power division, societal roles, and expectations, produces multiple differentials and unequal opportunities and outcomes for Sub-Saharan women and men along the entire process of migration. Therefore, this research seeks to contribute to migration studies by enhancing our understanding of gender in several aspects of irregular migration. The second crucial objective is to examine how race, religion, and gender intersect and how this intersectionality is demonstrated in Sub-Saharan African women's and men's experiences of irregular 'transit' migration in Morocco. These indicators are hypothesized to produce different aspects of vulnerabilities and inequalities. This research aims as well at examining the impact of migration on socially constructed patriarchal gender roles. The study is going to examine

migrants’ experience starting from deciding to migrate until the living conditions in what is considered as the potential final transit country to the ‘European dream’.

The main research questions that the study endeavors to answer are: How does gender affect and is being affected by migration? Does migration deconstruct the patriarchal gender roles and empower women migrants throughout the process of migration or does it barely perpetuate and reshape them? What are the manifestations of gender and race intersectionality within the context of irregular Sub-Saharan migration in Morocco? How do migrants’ legal status and Morocco’s migratory new law affect Sub-Saharan migrants’ living conditions and their aspirations?

Methodology

Methodologically, the study employs an eclectic approach to address and gain insights from multiple dimensions. It juxtaposes socio-economic, political, and historical approaches to build up a comprehensive understanding of the factors that affect sub-Saharans' migration. Gender, however, remains the most important dimension throughout the entire analysis. It is worth emphasizing that the essential objective is to explore irregular ‘transit’ migration processes from the perspective of migrants themselves. The thesis employs social and intersectional theories for being most appropriate to understand better the way socialization produces gender inequalities during the entire migratory processes. For the analysis, Carling’s model (2005) is very useful to identify the reciprocal impact of gender and migration.

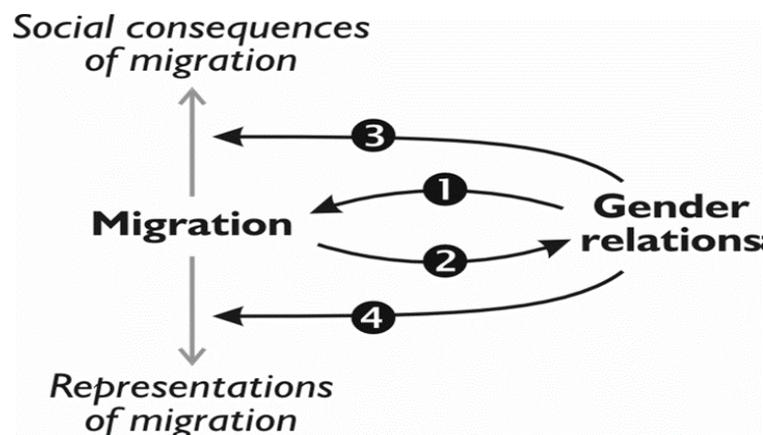


Figure 1: Different forms of causal analysis of the gender dimensions of migration.



He identifies four different causal relations between gender and migration. The first arrow indicates gender's impact on migration, such as the degree of choice in deciding to migrate. The second arrow refers to migration's effects on gender. The third arrow highlights gender relations' effects on the social consequences of migration.⁶ Finally, the fourth Arrow indicates the way gender relations determine the representations of migration by academics, policymakers, the media and migrants themselves. Based on Carling's model Mahieu (et al. 2015) categorized these four relations into two groups: The first is the influence of gender on migration and it consists of arrows 1, 3 and 4; then the influence of migration on gender that includes only arrow 2.⁷

Regarding the research method, this investigation relied on a mixed-methods approach. Mixing multiple methods is a valuable strategy to “*counterbalance*” and to overcome both methods' shortcomings, which will make achieving comprehensive empirical documentation possible.⁸ The qualitative method consists of observations that aim at analyzing spontaneous behaviors before and during data collection. The observations had helped to construct a vision of the target population, such as providing information about their common location. It also prepared the ground for developing the questions for the survey and the interviews as well. Interviews are also a very important research tool in this study. The interviews consist of semi-structured narrative techniques, as this type of interview enables free narration and provides the interviewees enough space to express their lived experiences. The semi-structured interviews, besides, promote free interaction between the researcher and the interviewee, which is something necessary when talking about migration.⁹ The interviews were conducted in April 2019 with eight sub-Saharan migrants (four women and four men) and took place in Fés. Finally, some reports, news and documentary videos are included as they provide further information to which I may not have access.

⁶ Jorgen Carling, “Global Migration Perspectives: Gender Dimensions in International Migration,” Global Commission on International Migration, No.35 (2005): 7.

⁷ Rilke Mahieu, Christiane Timmerman, and Petra Heyse, “Gender-Sensitive Migration Research: Theory, Concepts and Methods,” in *New Dynamics in Female Migration and Integration*, ed. Christiane Timmerman, Marco Martiniello, Andrea Rea, Johan Wets (New York: Routledge, 2015), 13.

⁸ William G. Axinn and Lisa D. Pearce, *Mixed Method Data Collection Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 58.

⁹ Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 18.



Data collection in this study also relied on the quantitative method. Questionnaires, unlike interviews, consist of structured questions (multiple choice and yes/no questions). At the outset of the fieldwork, I collected 74 questionnaires in Tangier between May and June in 2018. Then, during a period that lasted from January to February 2019, I gathered 38 questionnaires in Fés. The questionnaire is divided into three stages: the pre-stage, the journey, and then the potential transit-stage. The pre-stage exposes the cultural aspects and gender roles in migrants' countries of origin, which heavily influence motivations and making the decision to migrate. The second stage tracks the migrants' journey to Morocco, including planning, threats and obstacles that both women and men migrants undergo. The aim is to unfold the way the hardships and jeopardies are gendered. The last stage in my research paper, surely not in the migration process, is the potential 'transit' phase. The significance of examining this migratory phase through the lens of gender pertains to a deeper analysis of the way gender influences the staying period in the transit country, and it seeks to question whether migration is adequate to deconstruct and reconstruct the structure of gender roles and relations.

Thesis structure

The structure of this paper is designed into two parts. The first part consists of three chapters. The first chapter is devoted to defining migration-related key concepts. It provides an extensive review of how each type of migration is conceptualized by examining prominent scholarly studies, reports, and international conventions. The objective is to identify the international principles and criteria that characterize and distinguish each category of migrants. On the other hand, the second chapter's fundamental aim is to discuss the incorporation of gender in migration studies. The chapter starts by tracing the evolution of 'gender' and discussing the socialization process in patriarchal societies. First, it is important to understand the impact of gendered power-division on women's and men's opportunities and roles. Having discussed the development of the concept of gender, the following step is to scrutinize the incorporation of gender in migration research. The discussion is initiated by a review of feminist researchers' critiques of migration theories, and then it is followed by tracing the stages of incorporating gender in migration studies. The last sub-chapter sheds light on manifestations of the 'feminization' of migration. The third chapter in the first part provides a historical overview of sub-Saharan migration patterns to/in Morocco.



The second part consists of four chapters. The first chapter provides, at the outset, two forms of contextualization. The first objective is to contextualize this study within the existing studies and reports on sub-Saharan migration in Morocco and then to evaluate their strengths and their shortcomings. The second objective is to contextualize this study within the current socio-political relations that affect migration policies. After that, the chapter introduces the adopted methodology and methods for this study. It then presents migrants' socio-demographic profiles without using gendered analysis in order to demonstrate the importance of gender. The second chapter analyses and discusses in detail the data of migrants' socio-demographic profiles from a gender perspective. The aim is to highlight the cultural specificities of the sub-Saharan region since they play a very significant role in determining the propensity to migrate. The following chapter addresses the gendered aspects of the migratory journey from their country of origin until arriving in Morocco. Finally, the last chapter of the thesis is devoted to exploring migrants' living conditions in Morocco as well as their impression of their interaction with the local population. It focuses as well on examining the intricacies that characterize the intersectionality of gender, race, religion, and migration. Then, at last, the chapter addresses migrants' aspirations and plans for the future.

Results and discussion

This dissertation seeks to develop a gender-sensitive approach to the implications and changing patterns of Sub-Saharan irregular 'transit' migration in Morocco. The aim is to highlight the invisibility of women and unraveling the manifestations of gender in irregular migration-related issues, such as the propensity to migrate, the legal status, and the survival strategies. The study concludes that both gender and migration have an ambivalent impact on women's and men's experiences of migration. The results captured numerous factors that create gendered vulnerabilities and differentials. The study's collected data showed that women and men, on the contrary to what is assumed, experience some commonalities but several differences during the entire process of migration. First, despite the assumption and the historical fact of matriarchy in some communities in the sub-Saharan region, women have less tendency to migrate. The prevalent multiple gendered divisions of power and expectations in migrants' patriarchal home countries influence inevitably making the decision to migrate. Data



and reports show that gender inequality in the sub-Saharan region impedes women's empowerment and their access to decision-making positions, especially with regard to education, which is one of the most important pillars of empowering girls and women. The latter is characterized by a wide gap and imbalances in terms of access and dropout. Eventually, sub-Saharan women have less access to financial resources and cannot afford the expenses of the journey unless their families help them.

The process of irregular migration puts individuals in serious life-threatening circumstances. Reports and studies usually focus on the sea routes and the catastrophic number of human losses but very little information is known about the vast land route that connects sub-Saharan countries to North African countries. The findings showed that the journey from home country to Morocco in the desert may take days or even weeks, depending on the geographical proximity, and it is fraught with different forms of dangers. Armed revolt or trafficking gangs are a real nightmare for migrants. Lack of financial resources also increases women's vulnerability to undergo trafficking or sexual exploitation by different perpetrators. The discussion of secondary sources also unraveled the way some female migrants manage survival strategies during their journey to Europe. Some female migrants opt for turning their vulnerabilities to empowering elements to remain alive and to pursue their prior intentions.

Gender also molds several aspects of migrants' lived experience in Morocco. An anti-essentialist notion of gender has to acknowledge that gender mediates and is mediated by other socially constructed characteristics. In this study, the intersectionality of gender, race, and religion manifests in several aspects of migrants' experience in Morocco. Female sub-Saharan migrants, due to the gendered cultural repertoire on the history of slavery and race, confront sexualized prejudices and harassment. Moving from a patriarchal society to another patriarchal society does not improve women migrants' status. Women migrating independently, despite the increasing vulnerability, gain more freedom to become the decision-makers than when they are with their husbands. The findings demonstrate at the end of the second part the failure of the security-based approach and the inadequacy of the human-based approach to alleviating the flows of irregular migrants. The dream of reaching European borders still allures the



majority of the survey's respondents, which triggers other new assumptions that can be related to Bailey's notion of "*permanent temporaries*"¹⁰.

Shortcomings and recommendations

This thesis also recognizes the existence of some shortcomings. First, the difficulty of approaching the studied sample resulted in some limitations. Being incapable of conducting the interviews necessitated the establishment of a degree of confidence with an interviewee and then convince him to play the role of a mediator to facilitate my meeting with other interviewees of his entourage. This has indeed created limited access to data on other religions since all interviewees are Muslims, but it also reflects the enclosed environment where the Muslim Sub-Saharan live. The religious diversity of the interviewees would have enriched the discussion by having diverse points of view and more information on religion since it is a significant factor as well.

The second shortcoming is the evaluation of Morocco's exceptional regularization and integration programs. The fact that there have been very few regularized migrants within this study did not allow deeper analysis and evaluation of Morocco's exceptional law of regularization and the programs that target the integration of irregular immigrants. I recommend for future researchers to overcome this pitfall by including Sub-Saharan beneficiaries from regularization. Besides, studies on migration focus very often on addressing migration issues from migrants' perspective with no consideration to the receiving population. I could not include this topic in this current study due to time restrictions, but I am willing to explore it in my future research. Adding another survey that highlights the Moroccan population's insights on irregular transit migration would enrich the discussion. This survey is going to capture the perception of irregular migration from the perspective of the receiving population and shed light on their interaction with the Sub-Saharan community.

¹⁰ Adrian J. Bailey, Richard A. Wright, Alison Mountz, and Ines M. Miyares "(Re)producing Salvadoran Transnational Geographies", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92 no. 1 (2002): 130. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8306.00283>



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