FINAL SCIENTIFIC REPORT

PROJECT: C20019: GENDER, RETURN MIGRATION AND REINTEGRATION IN THE GAMBIA, GUINEA AND SENEGAL
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This qualitative research engages with the social contours of return migration and reintegration focusing on gender aspects inherent to the reintegration process.

Whilst gendered analysis has become increasingly mainstream in studies on migrant integration, the incorporation of gender analysis in the study of reintegration is still less frequently applied (c.f. Anghel/Fauser/Boccagni 2019). In this light, our research focus is to elicit the ways in which gender plays out in the return and reintegration process of returnees and in the institutionalised support. Our aim is to contribute to a more nuanced discussion surrounding gender dynamics inherent to reintegration. The second objective is to invite to think of ways how to address gender-related challenges more appropriate in the international and national return and reintegration landscape, so as to avoid the reproduction of gender inequalities within the existing return support infrastructure.

The study is based on a multi-sited ethnography, using a variety of fieldwork methods. We focused on three groups of returnees: 1) migrants seeking institutional support before returning to Gambia, Guinea or Senegal, 2) returnees only seeking support after arrival, and 3) returnees seeking no support. In order to investigate the temporal dynamics of return processes, we opted for a longitudinal study design.

The study shows that in the West African countries under study, a return is commonly viewed as the opposite of a successful life and simply not envisaged. Hence, migrants return to a hostile environment, in which they face numerous economic, social and psycho-social obstacles. These challenges vary according to the society's expectations and reflect the dominant gender roles.

Furthermore, families and communities play a crucial role in shaping the multi-dimensional reintegration process of returnees. Considering the family, a 'negotiated return' - with the consent of the family - facilitates the reintegration process for both female and male returnees.

Moreover, return migrants are victims of gender-based stigma. Female returnees are predominantly stigmatised for returning alone, while male returnees are stigmatised for returning empty-handed. Given returnees' gender-related challenges, gaps in the return and reintegration support landscape regarding gender-sensible approaches need to be addressed.

Lastly, it was found that the reintegration process of female and male returnees is still very fragile and far from complete between the first and second interviews (T1 and T2). Thus, joint efforts consisting of material and non-material institutional support and of informal support (e.g. family and community members) are required to enable returnees to cope with their complex reintegration processes.

Key words: return migration, reintegration process, gender, support

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND METHOD

Theoretical Background

Gendered analysis has become increasingly integral in migration studies, and it is well accepted that societal conventions of gender and gender relations can affect migrants' experiences throughout all stages of migration: from the decision to migrate, how to migrate, the integration processes in the countries of arrival, to remittance behaviours, and decisions to return (c.f. Benería et al. 2012). While during the 1980s and 1990s, research had mainly covered the experience of women (women's studies), it is nowadays widely recognised that "gendered experiences of migration and return are about experiences of *both* women *and* men (and of other identities)" (King and Lulle 2022:53). Yet, the incorporation of *gender analysis in the study of reintegration* in the countries of origin is either not addressed (e.g. recent textbooks on gender and migration by Christou and Kofman 2022; Mora and Piper 2021), or less frequently applied (c.f. Anghel/Fauser/Boccagni 2019). Furthermore, although, there exists a large body of literature on the topic of return, few studies emphasis on gender dimensions inherent to the *reintegration process* (Strachan 2019). If gender is covered in mandated research, it is mainly addressed in terms of sex ratio or in reference to support schemes (c.f. IOM 2020, Samuel Hall, 2021). Thus, there exists still a gap in in-depth studies on gender in the process of reintegration. Lastly, while there is a growing body of literature on "sustainable return and reintegration" (Kuschminder 2017a, b) and on research focusing on *reintegration as a complex process*, it remains still unclear, how this process can be best conceptualised (Lietaert and Kuschminder, 2021). In sum, there is doubtlessly further scope for longitudinal research on the multifaceted and multi-dimensional reintegration processes (Majid et al. 2022).

It is against this background of the return migration context, that we situate our research. The overall aim of this project is to get a better understanding of how gender shapes patterns of return migration and the process of reintegration, and how patterns of return migration and reintegration impact upon gender in the Gambia, Guinea and Senegal. This overall aim contained four more specific objectives:

1. To elicit the ways in which gender plays out in the return and reintegration process.
2. To evaluate how family/household members of returnees and communities perceive the interlinkages of gender and return dynamics.
3. To identify divergences and similarities on how governments and development actors frame their return policy discourse and migrants' personal experiences so as to optimise policy and support initiatives.
4. To analyse how in migrants' views gender acts on support measures.

Method

The study is based on a multi-sited ethnography with a transnational approach. In order to analyse the impact of institutional support upon migrants' reintegration processes, we defined three groups of returnees: 1) migrants seeking institutional support by IOs and NGOs prior to return, 2) returnees only seeking support after arrival, 3) returnees seeking no support.

Between the years 2021and 2022, 106 semi-structured interviews with (potential) return migrants were conducted across five countries: the Gambia, Guinea, Germany, Senegal and Switzerland (29 women and 77 men). We engaged with a heterogeneous sample of returnees: variable ages (16-62), family situations, migratory experiences and occupational backgrounds, ranging from low-skilled to high-skilled occupations. Given that the reintegration process into migrants' home countries is at the core of your study, we had a wide range of countries of

departure (e.g. European countries, North-African states, the US, etc.). In accordance with the longitudinal research design, 36 returnees were interviewed twice in an interval of approximately six months (20 women and 16 men).

The gender ratio among returnees was balanced in Senegal (21 female; 24 male). However, access to female returnees had been more difficult in Guinea, which led to a gender imbalance in the total sample. Moreover, due to travel restriction during COVID, we were unable to collect sufficient data in the Gambia. Therefore, pursuing further fieldwork in Gambia was not an option, because the data would not have not been robust enough.

In order to analyse how return and reintegration processes are embedded in the social environment, nine focus-group discussions with community members and 44 interviews with family members were conducted in rural and urban areas. Additionally, 42 key actors were interviewed in the field of return across all five countries. The interviews were conducted in Diola, English, French, German, Mandingue, Peul, Portuguese-Creol, Soussu, and Wolof. They were recorded, transcribed and coded according to content analysis.

Our research design – encompassing multiple locations and a multi-sited terrain of relations, has proved to be beneficial in three regards: 1) it allowed to gain in-depth understanding of the individual process of migrants' reintegration; 2) it enabled to trace the transnational institutional support measures from European countries, respectively from countries along the 'West Africa - European migration routes' to the countries of origin, and 3) it allowed to compare differences between all countries under study in how gender and other aspects of intersectionality, such as age, educational background and ethnicity, play out in return migration.

MAIN RESEARCH RESULTS

Key Results of the Overall Reintegration Process
According to returnees of all three researched groups, a reintegration process is achieved when return migrants have found their place in the society, and when they are able to continue to support their families. However, in Guinea and Senegal, a return is commonly viewed as the opposite of a successful life, and thus it is simply not envisaged. Therefore, returnees often face social disproval and misunderstandings in their home countries. Hence, it is difficult for all migrants to reintegrate in this hostile return environment, even for those who had secured status and carriers abroad, and for those who return well-prepared (e.g. with financial assets). A return despite the risk of social disapproval also requires a great amount of courage and physical/ psychosocial strength. Moreover, it was found that the reintegration process is still very fragile and far from being complete between the first and second interviews (T1 and T2). This result can be explained with diverse setbacks and adversities returnees face during their reintegration process, independent of their gender and institutional support.

The Reintegration Process according to the Three Research Groups
Participants who were seeking institutional support prior and after their return (group 1) assess their transnational support to be helpful (e.g. return projects). It reduced their pressure to generate an income for their families and to reintegrate socially. Yet, without additional support, long-term economic integration is not guaranteed. Moreover, access to the support system is challenging, because returnees often live far away from the support institutions, and the procedures are complicated and time consuming.

Returnees who benefited from support after their arrival (group 2) highlighted that their assistance (e.g. housing support, qualification trainings, etc.) helped them to navigate their

reintegration upon arrival. They considered their support, however, as being too short and insufficient. Another challenge was found regarding the respect towards authorities. Some research participants changed their views and attitudes towards authorities while being abroad, which manifested itself in training courses addressed to returnees.

Return migrants who returned well prepared without any institutional support (group 3) frequently avoid to declare their return to their social environment, because they constantly have to justify their decision to return. Moreover, vulnerable return migrants in need of institutional assistance are often not able to benefit from support, because they do not fit into the strict criteria of the donor-driven support landscape.

Gender Return Migration and Reintegration

Returnees have to make efforts and prove that their behaviour conforms to the dominant social norms, including the dominant gender roles. In general, men are expected to support the family, be worthy of the community's trust and not invest the common property in onward migration. Women are expected to adapt to their role as working women/wives and not to be too autonomous. Although, a re-adaption to the dominant gender roles is a prerequisite for reintegration, all research participants reported difficulties in their readjustments. Furthermore, due to strict gender roles in Guinea and Senegal, new skills and knowledge returnees acquired abroad will only be used, if they do fit into dominant gender roles in general and in the informal and formal labour market in particular.

Return migrants are victims of social stigma. Female returnees are predominantly stigmatised for returning alone, while male returnees are stigmatised for returning empty-handed. The longitudinal approach further reveals that the stigma attached to women is more persistent over time than those attached to men. Although, female and male motivations to migration are similar, for instance to improve the economic situation of their families, the society evaluates these motives differently; rather positively for men and negatively for women. Moreover, marriage is generally viewed as a means of social integration for women.

Reintegration in the economic dimension is a challenge for all returnees, but slightly more difficult for women. Due to their difficulties in securing employment, women are more compelled towards an associative engagement. Moreover, especially in rural areas, they are faced with additional hurdles, such as with financial constraints and inheritance rights (e.g. disadvantages in land acquisition).

Lastly, women who stayed behind are often blamed for the unsuccessful migration of their husbands or sons. They are often accused for not having been a good mother or wife, which caused the failure of migration plans, or of being responsible for their husbands' longing, and thus provoking their return.

The Institutional Support

Considerable differences emerged among the various key actors in all countries under study with regards to the definition of reintegration and to the importance they attach to the topic. There exist, for instance, fundamental discrepancies between European policy interests in return and the West African countries' commitment in this field. The European policy perception of return - viewed as a suitable tool for reducing immigration rates, and its perception of reintegration - seen as a means of preventing emigration, stays in sharp contrast to the policy interest of Guinea and Senegal. By and at large, both governments are not interested in the return and reintegration of migrants, because they heavily rely on remittances, and emigration is perceived as a safety valve for high unemployment rates, particularly among young people.

In Germany and Switzerland, economic reintegration is viewed as the primary factor for long-term reintegration. Not surprisingly, the majority of return and reintegration programmes focuses on individual counselling for future income-generating activities in the countries of origin. Vice-versa, in Senegal and Guinea, counsellors call for support measures that take better into account the social dimension of reintegration; such as a stronger anchoring of return assistance in the social environment of the returnees, which is considered as a crucial factor for a maximum benefit for institutional support and reintegration (e.g. return projects).

The need for psychosocial support of returnees is highlighted by all NGO and IO representatives in the West African context, but less so among European actors. It has been found that psychological problems of returnees considerably hinder the concentration during professional trainings or qualification courses, and they also affect the building-up of return projects.

Counsellors engaged in return and reintegration assistance across all countries under study have an ambiguous approach to gender. On the one hand, they are reluctant to mention gender differences, explaining it mostly due to lack of experience with female returnees. On the other hand, they generally attribute a higher vulnerability to women than to men, especially to women with children. This approach results in more flexibility to negotiate assistance for women (e.g. the postponement of departures). Yet, it also leads to major shortcomings in support schemes for vulnerable male returnees. This finding points to further discriminations regarding aspects of intersectionality playing out in the support system, e.g. being either too young or two old for institutional support.

The Role of the Community and Family
Families and communities play a crucial role in shaping the social, economic and psycho-social reintegration process of returnees. Return migrants are under constant public scrutiny, and they need to re-gain the trust of the community. This implies that they are expected to show efforts, such as the willingness to accept any kind of work or to proactively engage with the community while being diligent and modest. To gain trust is particularly difficult for returnees who have incurred debts, or for those who have sold common possessions in order to finance their migration. However, most of our research participants reported difficulties to engage with the community, especially upon their arrival, because of stigmatisation and/or poor physical and psychological well-being (e.g. depression, disorientation, hopelessness, etc.).

Considering the family, a 'negotiated return' - with the consent of the family - facilitates the reintegration process for both female and male returnees. If the return takes place without approval of the family, or if returnees have accumulated debts among family members for their emigration, a smooth reintegration is significantly more difficult. Thus, we highly welcome new approaches of early-interventions among family members prior to migrants' return, as implemented in some European countries (e.g, IOM Germany).

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

In Guinea and Senegal, a return is not envisaged and generally viewed by the society as the antithesis of a successful life. Hence, migrants return to a hostile environment, in which they face numerous economic, social and psycho-social obstacles. These challenges vary according to society's expectations and reflect the dominant gender roles. Furthermore, we found that the family plays a crucial role in the reintegration process of returnees. A negotiated return with

the family and/or institutional support that also benefits directly or indirectly family and community members, paves the way to a better reintegration (e.g. return projects).

The relatively young institutional support landscape in Guinea and Senegal is fragmented, complex and highly driven by external donors, such as European development agencies, NGOs or IOs. The wide range of different actors with their variegated understandings of return and reintegration considerably hampers the coordination of support. This results in differences in access and conditions of support, which impacts upon returnees' reintegration. Moreover, there is clearly a lack of gender-sensible approaches in return and reintegration support measures. So as to avoid the reproduction of gender inferences in the support system, a sensitive approach to the individual needs of the returnees - beyond gender stereotypes - needs to be put in place. Hence, it is pivotal that the support landscape becomes more accessible, inclusive, and more tailored to the individual needs of returnees.

FURTHER SCIENTIFIC EXPLORATIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Avenues for Further Research
Our study shows that female migration, especially women who migrate on their own, is less pronounced in Guinea than in Senegal. That being said, we see a need for more in-depth studies on the growing phenomenon of international feminine migration and return migration in general and in the countries under study in particular. Chiefly, the return of women who migrated on their own and/or the return of children – which would have gone beyond the scope of our research – warrants more academic attention in Guinea and Senegal. Consequently, one of the key issues is to take on board more policy-driven research on gender-sensible return migration support in the contexts of departure and arrival. Further considering the institutional support, we find it crucial to examine the potentials of collective return initiatives and projects. Finally, an area, which has largely escaped the attention of the scientific community is the informal support provided by families, friends and communities in all stages of return and reintegration. Accordingly, more research attention should be paid to the complex interlinkages between informal and formal return and reintegration support.

Policy Recommendations
The scientific results call for the following main policy recommendations:
Increase Social Awareness
The way families and communities receive returnees deserves more consideration.

Return and Reintegration Strategy – International, National and Regional
The support system needs to be improved regarding coordination, interinstitutional collaboration and geographical distribution - within and beyond the return landscape.

Recognise the Diversity of Needs
Return migrants are a very diverse group with wide-ranging support needs. Thus, needs-based approaches should be implemented, including gender-sensible counselling interventions; e.g. encouraging counsellors to broaden the professional spectrum attributed to gender in return projects.

Address Gaps in Psycho-social Support
Additional psycho-social support is needed, particularly for vulnerable male migrants; e.g. for those who have experienced trauma or who are excluded from support because of their age (for either being too young, or too old).

Strengthen Sustainable Support

An increase of investment in more sustainable support schemes is required. Training courses are not sufficient without follow-up interventions; e.g. support to access the labour market. A close follow-up of reintegration interventions is necessary to guarantee maximum assistance.

Align Support

Beneficiaries should be informed in advance and in a clear way and about each programme step. Transferability gaps in transnational support should be addressed (e.g. long waiting times in Guinea and Senegal to receive support granted prior to return).

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