

FEMALE MIGRATION IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE: THE JOURNEY OF RETURNED MIGRANTS

This research project is part of the “*Safety, Support and Solutions along the Central Mediterranean Route*” programme funded by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) which objectives include improving the understanding of migration trends by governments, humanitarian agencies and national organizations in a bid to formulate appropriate responses for vulnerable communities. Under this programme, six countries in West and Central Africa (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, and Senegal) conducted research projects in 2018 and 2019.



Focus group with female returned migrants, IOM, 2019

This research is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methodologies conducted in four stages :

- **Exploratory interviews** with returned migrants;
- **Focus group discussions with returned migrants** (women and men) and their families;
- **Phone profiling interview** of returned migrants (more than 100 interviews);
- **Field investigation** in Abidjan and Daloa on the **perception of female migration in Côte d'Ivoire** (more than 150 interviews).

INTRODUCTION

Of the more than 6,700 migrants assisted in their voluntary return by IOM Côte d'Ivoire between January 2017 and August 2019, 25% are women. This proportion is particularly high compared to other countries in the region such as Burkina Faso, Guinea or Mali, which do not exceed 5% of women among the migrants assisted for voluntary return.

This research aims to explain and facilitate an understanding of the irregular migration process of Ivorian women along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR), through the **experience of female returned migrants who received IOM assistance.**

RETURNED MIGRANTS' PROFILES

The majority of female returnees interviewed are between 31 and 35 years of age. Most of them are single, have at least one dependent child (although in 66% of cases, they travelled alone) and an education level equivalent to secondary school. Before their departure, the vast majority of them (79%) were employed, mainly in the trade sector.

MOTIVATION AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

According to female returnees interviewed, the lack of professional opportunities, economic precariousness, weakened family solidarity, myth of the “Western Eldorado”, desire for women’s emancipation or the fact of knowing someone who has already made the journey are all factors that would encourage women to leave their country in order to improve their living conditions and those of their families.

49%

OF WOMEN TOOK ALONE DECISION TO MIGRATE

44%

OF WOMEN FUNDED ALONE THEIR JOURNEY

Migration is seen as an opportunity to acquire financial autonomy that would enable women to achieve “well-being” and provide a better future for their children.

80%

OF FEMALE RETURNED MIGRANTS LEFT THE COUNTRY TO SEARCH FOR A JOB.

Irregular migration of Ivorian women along the CMR would be considered as an individual survival strategy (unlike men, for whom it would be more of a family strategy or an experience to be attempted as an initiation rite), entailing a form of solitude during preparation but also at the time of return.

THE EVOLVING NATURE OF WOMEN MIGRATION PROJECT

The majority of female returnees leave Côte d'Ivoire by air (71%) and on a regular basis (in 52% of cases) heading to European or Maghreb countries (specifically Tunisia and Morocco) as their destination. Their migration is irregular (e.g. in Morocco and Tunisia) as they do not obtain a residence permit allowing them to stay and work legally.

The migration project often evolves in line with the difficulties encountered in the countries of transit and destination, such as multifaceted situations of exploitation, but also during encounters with smugglers. The country of destination may become the country of transit, exposing women to new risks.

WORK CONDITIONS AND SURVIVAL DURING THE MIGRATION JOURNEY

70% of the women worked during their migration journey.

Only **31%** of them were able to save and send money to Côte d'Ivoire, especially to their children.

ABUSE AND PSYCHOSOCIAL TRAUMA

During their journey, women were overexposed to physical and psychological violence whether in the workplace, on the road or in detention. The abuses experienced may have taken many forms including unpaid work, sexual violence, racism, prostitution or sale of human beings.

“Most of these female migrants were raped, either on the road or in the desert. The perpetrators were armed, so you could not cry. All you wanted to do was protect your children.”

Interview with a female returned migrant

DOUBLE STIGMA UPON RETURN: THE DUAL STATUS AS WOMEN AND MIGRANTS

Difficult living and working conditions in transit and destination countries are the main reasons for the return of the female migrants interviewed in Côte d'Ivoire.

In addition to the psychosocial traumas associated with the journey, women are likely to be stigmatised on their return, suffering judgement, shame and even rejection from their families (especially in situations where the woman returns with a child or pregnant). These situations compromise their sustainable (economic and social) reintegration.

“The return and difficulties associated with it, rather than migration per se, made me regret the decision to leave: I should have known that if I had stayed at home I would still have had my money. I would have had savings, whereas now I have nothing. I face now a twofold challenge: the fatigue of what I experienced in Algeria, and the disappointment of realizing that I have lost everything.”

Focus group with female returned migrants

IMPACT OF FEMALE IRREGULAR MIGRATION ON CHILDREN

Whether children accompanied their mother on her journey or stayed in Côte d'Ivoire, irregular migration has an impact on the physical and psychological health of children. Children who have migrated suffered severe trauma that requires care on return and those who remain at home seem to have less access to basic social services in the absence of their mothers.

75% of women had at least one dependent child before their departure.

Only **15%** of them travelled with at least one of their children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION: ADDRESS THE LOSS OF FINANCIAL AUTONOMY AND DIFFICULTIES ASSOCIATED WITH THE RETURN

- Invite all actors (and in particular those involved in the National Reintegration Plan currently being finalised in Côte d'Ivoire) to include offers of services adapted to women whose economic situation has been weakened by migration.
- Identify market needs and highlight the skills acquired during migration and possible training needs.
- Identify structures that can accompany women in a structured project.

2. SOCIAL REINTEGRATION: PROVIDE A HOLISTIC RESPONSE TO THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPACT OF MIGRATION

- Identify the offer of services and the actors involved in the psycho-social sector in Côte d'Ivoire.
- Assess access to services for returning migrant women.
- Assess the needs and envisage a capacity building of the competent structures for a sustainable reintegration of returning migrants.

3. INFORM AND SENSITIZE LOCAL COMMUNITIES ON THE DANGERS AND ALTERNATIVES TO IRREGULAR MIGRATION

- Strengthen the government's strategy for informing and raising awareness among the population.
- Identify and train local/community structures that could implement these activities in localities with high migration potential and rely on regional committees.