

# Migration and women's voice and agency in Senegal

## Introducing a new survey

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Millions of poor households around the world rely on migration to improve their economic circumstances and, increasingly, for resilience in the face of a changing climate. In vulnerable contexts, slow-onset climate impacts like water scarcity, rising temperatures, and more variable weather conditions are diminishing local economic opportunities and increasing food insecurity. Such climate impacts are projected to accelerate migration patterns, particularly out-migration from rural areas (Rigaud et al., 2018; SVR, 2023). While news reports on climate migration often emphasize communities leaving an area en masse due to a natural disaster, climate migration due to slow-onset climate shifts, which gradually lower crop yields and hinder agricultural livelihoods, more commonly implies a male household member migrating within a country, often seasonally, in order to send remittances back to his family.

This kind of male out-migration can shift both household and community dynamics (Koirala, 2023; Langill et al., 2023; Maharjan et al., 2012; Pandey, 2021). Within a household, the absence of a male head of household can improve women’s decision-making and control over resources. However, it can also reduce their time autonomy by overburdening them with work. If the woman left behind has a mobile phone, she may be expected to consult with her husband on household and personal decisions (Hannaford, 2015).

At a communal level, substantial male out-migration could lead to a renegotiation of gender relations within rural villages. Women may be handling cash and financial resources, moving across wider spatial boundaries, and engaging with a more diverse set of individuals and groups as they take on roles and activities formerly occupied only by men. Along with “left behind,” within agricultural communities, the term “feminization of agriculture” is frequently used to describe the demographic shifts spurred by significant male out-migration from rural areas (Slavchevska et al., 2016). Empowerment can facilitate political knowledge and participation (Patnaik, 2021; Bleck and Michelitch, 2018; Chhibber, 2002; Girard, 2014), and a “critical mass” of empowered women might change community discourse and decision-making (Agarwal, 2010). However, women may also have less time to participate in community activities if the workload in their own household has increased due to out-migration by other members. Moreover, there is limited evidence on whether “feminization of agriculture” and shifts in intra-household decision-making translate into broader shifts in power dynamics within communities.

Given these complex dynamics, there are a number of questions about how male

out-migration might shift women’s voice and agency within rural communities: Under what local political, economic, and social conditions does male out-migration from rural areas shift women’s decision-making roles in community governance? Does the absence of key male household members—who often negotiate access to local leaders to make requests for the household as a whole and may play important roles in informing women within their households about politics and local affairs—isolate women within the household? Or, does their absence open up opportunities for women to interact in public affairs in new ways? How may these relationships differ based on women’s position within their own household, e.g. whether they are married to the migrant himself or to the head of the household, or based on the views and characteristics of traditional leaders in their communities? Is any relationship between migration and women’s voice and agency in community governance conditional upon shifts in women’s decision-making roles within their own households, or are these different dimensions of agency impacted differently (if at all)?

In this project, we bring new data to bear on these questions of how out-migration relates to women’s voice in household and community decision-making and governance. Specifically, we study women’s empowerment and political participation in rural Senegal, where male migration to urban areas is a common phenomenon. Like most countries in the Sahel region, and many others in sub-Saharan Africa more generally, Senegal’s economy is dominated by agriculture and faces challenges related to climate change. This note describes summary statistics from survey data we collected from about 1,000 women in 144 representative rural communities across Senegal. We show that there is substantial variation across women and households in terms of male out-migration as well as female empowerment and political participation, and we conclude with a brief discussion of potential associations to be explored in future work and how this evidence could inform programming.

## 2 CONTEXT AND POTENTIAL PATHWAYS FOR CHANGE

A large share of the literature on the impacts of rural out-migration on gender relations analyzes South Asian contexts (see also [Hadi, 2001](#); [Mahapatro, 2018](#); [Fakir and Abedin, 2021](#)), and findings may not be transferable to sub-Saharan African countries and specifically to Senegal. For example, marriage traditions vary across contexts, and women who move villages to marry, as in Senegal, may find themselves

in a more disadvantaged intra-communal position than women in within-village marriages. Differences in household size also matter, because household structures play an important mediating role concerning the effect of male migration on female empowerment (Desai and Banerji, 2008; Doss et al., 2022; Rajkarnikar, 2020), with potentially different effects for spouses of migrating household heads and other women such as daughters-in-law. Notably, countries in the Sahel region, including Senegal, are among those with the largest households anywhere in the world, with typical household sizes that are well above those in South Asia. Households are particularly large in rural areas; in our data from rural Senegal described below, the median household includes thirteen people, including seven adults.

In this project, we interview women in rural Senegal to understand how male out-migration from rural areas relates to intra-household decision-making and women’s voice and agency in community governance. We examine a number of potential mechanisms and pathways for changing gender relations. For example, women’s workload and engagement in the household’s agricultural activities, time use, social networks, group memberships, and mobility all may change with the out-migration of a male household member. Community leaders consulting with households on community affairs may newly consult women on village affairs if male heads of household are absent. To understand these dynamics, we ask women who they talk to most frequently about community development and village affairs, whether they have contacted various local officials in recent periods, which aspects of household decision-making and economic activities they are playing a role in, their perceived agency within those activities, whether they are ever consulted by local leaders about their views, time use, and perceived norms about the role of women in households and communities.

### 3 SAMPLING APPROACH AND DATA

We conducted the face-to-face survey introduced in this report in the fall of 2024, interviewing about 1,000 randomly sampled women aged 18-64 in rural Senegal. Our sample is spread across 144 villages, consisting of a nationally representative sample (35 villages), representative samples in the three focus departments Kaolack (30 villages), Matam (29 villages), and Sedhiou (30 villages), which represent different agricultural conditions, and a set of 20 villages in centrally located Thies and Diourbel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The sample initially consisted of 145 villages, with one additional village in Matam, but one village refused participation in the survey.

Our survey of women forms part of a larger data collection effort, the Senegal Migration Panel (SMP), with an interdisciplinary team that aims to better understand and help policymakers broadly learn about the relationships between climate change, extreme weather events, economic pressures, and migration decisions. SMP traces migration of all households and their members in these 144 villages, and we link this data to the surveyed women, providing us with detailed migration information on women’s communities, households and husbands, if married.

We focus on Senegal, on the western edge of the African Sahel, because the country has seen a surge of internal migration since the turn of the century, driven by environmental difficulties facing the agricultural sector (Ba et al., 2018; Bachan, 2018). Senegal is densely populated for the region, with rural areas that remain heavily reliant on rain-fed agriculture and pastoralism, and with related resource allocation challenges. Senegal is projected to be one of the countries with the highest share of internal climate migrants relative to its population by 2050 (Rigaud et al., 2021).

## 4 INITIAL SUMMARY STATISTICS

We present a first set of summary statistics in Table 1 to lay out the variation that we observe in our sample in several key domains: Respondents’ marital and within-household status, the migration status of their male household members, respondents’ role in household decision-making, their mobility within the village, their political participation, as well as several basic household characteristics. To measure women’s role in important aspects of household decision-making, we use survey questions based upon the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)—a tool launched by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), and USAID’s Feed the Future and widely used to measure women’s empowerment within rural areas in low- and middle-income countries (Alkire et al., 2012). To measure women’s role in community governance, we rely on a set of survey tools developed by the Evidence in Governance and Politics Metaketa V project on Women’s Action Committees and Local Services (Hyde et al., 2022) and an additional set of survey tools from CGIAR’s research initiative on Gender Equality (Adida et al., 2023; Kosec et al., 2024).

Table 1: SUMMARY STATISTICS

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
<b>Marital status</b>					
Not married	0.146	0.35	0	1	961
Married to non-head	0.300	0.46	0	1	961
Married to head	0.555	0.50	0	1	961
<b>Migration status (<math>\geq 3</math> months away)</b>					
No male migrant in household	0.321	0.47	0	1	944
Male migrant in household, who is not head	0.243	0.43	0	1	944
Male migrant in household, who is head	0.280	0.45	0	1	944
Migrant husband, who is not head	0.044	0.21	0	1	944
Migrant husband, who is head	0.112	0.32	0	1	944
<b>Migration status (<math>\geq 6</math> months away)</b>					
No male migrant in household	0.485	0.50	0	1	944
Male migrant in household, who is not head	0.231	0.42	0	1	944
Male migrant in household, who is head	0.184	0.39	0	1	944
Migrant husband, who is not head	0.033	0.18	0	1	944
Migrant husband, who is head	0.067	0.25	0	1	944
<b>Decision making</b>					
Number of agric. activities in which woman participates	2.387	1.52	0	5	961
Number of non-agric. activities in which woman participates	2.795	1.71	0	6	961
Number of domains where participating in livelihood decisions	2.163	1.73	0	6	961
Makes decisions in all domains in which she is active	0.519	0.50	0	1	961
Owens land solely or jointly	0.334	0.47	0	1	960
<b>Mobility</b>					
Visits important locations regularly	0.391	0.49	0	1	961
Number of important locations visited regularly	0.967	0.88	0	4	961
<b>Political participation</b>					
Discusses political views with others	0.373	0.48	0	1	961
Participated in political group activity in past 6 months	0.615	0.49	0	1	960
Participated in other group activity in past 6 months	0.817	0.39	0	1	961
Contacted official/leader/politician in the past 12 months	0.355	0.48	0	1	943
Was approached for political input	0.153	0.36	0	1	940
Women in village were approached for political input	0.274	0.45	0	1	940
Contributed to joint community activity	0.453	0.50	0	1	961
Voted in presidential election	0.604	0.49	0	1	961
Perceived medium or high extent of influence on policymaking	0.163	0.37	0	1	952
Current ambition to have influence on policymaking	2.791	2.01	1	10	952
Aspiration to have influence on policymaking	4.686	2.70	1	10	923
<b>Household characteristics</b>					
Head has at least primary education	0.271	0.44	0	1	944
Woman has at least primary education	0.249	0.43	0	1	961

Most of the women in our sample are married, and a large share are married to the household head. Note that if a head of household is married, the husband will be identified as the head more than 99% of the time; the vast majority of women identified as household heads are unmarried or widowed or otherwise without a husband. The three groups listed in the table—unmarried women, those married to the household head, and those married to another household member—will play an important role in additional analyses we plan to conduct. In many households, the head’s wife will live together with women married to other members, and it seems reasonable to expect that male out-migration will affect women in the household differently, depending on which men migrated and in particular whether the

household head migrated.

Out-migration by male household members is also common, especially seasonal labor migration. More than two-thirds of the sample have a male household member who has been away for at least three months, and more than half have a male household member who has been away for at least half a year. Heads of household appear to be away for relatively shorter durations than other men. For household heads, the share that is away for 6+ months is less than two-thirds of the share that is away for at least three months, while for other men this share sits above three-quarters. Women migrate much less commonly, and generally do so permanently and for marriage.

We capture empowerment by way of two sets of variables. First, we measure intra-household decision-making by asking about the number of economic activities that our female subjects participate in (in terms of agricultural activities including grain farming, garden farming, and harvest processing, as well as livestock raising, and separately non-agricultural activities including self-employment or running a small business), the number of domains where they are involved in making decisions (including, e.g., household purchases), whether they are involved in decision-making in all areas in which they are active, and whether they (solely or jointly) own land. We observe substantial variation across all of these measures and find that only half of the women in our sample are able to make decisions across all of their activities.

Second, we measure empowerment in terms of female subjects' ability to move beyond the household, specifically to visit locations such as the market, a hospital or doctor, an urban center, or the homes of non-household family and relatives. Only about four in ten women in our sample visit any such location regularly, again suggesting both a potential empowerment gap and meaningful variation that we will set in relation to migration patterns in future analyses.

We next turn to a battery of indicators of political participation and involvement. Here, we first ask about specific events and activities that female subjects may have experienced or engaged in. This includes both active participation (e.g., joining a meeting, contacting an official, or voting) and passive involvement as a signal of respect of women's views (e.g., being approached for political input), as well as a measure of perceived political influence. Second, we ask about subjects' ambitions and aspirations with respect to their influence on policymaking.

Many women are broadly involved in some kind of group activities, including political group activities. Six in ten sampled women voted in the presidential election, and more than a third had contacted a political leader within the past year. Yet, at the same time, few subjects believe that their political input is particularly

highly valued. Only one in six women have been approached for political input, and about the same share say that they think they have a medium or high degree of influence on policymaking. We also see a gap between subjects' general aspirations to influence policy, with an average that is near the middle of a ten-point Likert scale, and their current ambitions to actually try and do so, which sits below a value of three on that same scale on average.

## 5 LOOKING AHEAD

This brief, initial summary of the data we have collected suggests two initial observations. First, there is a meaningful degree of variation in both our measures of female empowerment and political participation, suitable for an analysis of the determinants of this variation. Rural Senegal is a setting in which some women hold decision-making authority within their households and their communities, while many others still do not, and we will try to learn from these differences.

Second, we observe a substantial amount of (often seasonal) male out-migration in the households of our female sample. Moreover, these migration episodes involve men from all different rungs of the typical household status ladder, including those who are married and those who are not, as well as household heads and subordinate members. This variation, and variation in exposure to out-migration in general, will help us parse the extent to which migration, household power dynamics, and female empowerment and participation are associated with one another.

We believe that insights drawn from our survey can contribute to a still-developing body of evidence on migration, household dynamics, and female empowerment, and will be able to inform programming in these areas and the broader field of climate change adaptation. For example, our study can highlight which forms of community engagement can be most readily activated, how migration support programs to build household resilience in the face of climate change could affect women's empowerment, or how such effects might critically depend on the structure of beneficiary households. We will continue to explore these questions in future analyses, with an eye toward relevance for programming.

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