

Migration, Marriage and Fertility Change in Senegal: Evidence from a Qualitative Study

by

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Main issues:

Like in other African countries, Senegal is characterized by increasing internal and international migration. In a context of economic and agricultural crisis, people seek new ways to assure their own daily life as well as that of their families and migration is a key survival strategy in such a context. Migration is also strongly implicated in marriage and family formation where it retains its economic justification but with a major goal of enabling payment of the multiple marriage related expenses as well as ensuring future security for the new couple and potential offspring.

The migration-fertility relationship can be conceptualised at two different levels. First, at the individual level, how does the experience of migration interact with the migrant's reproductive values developed in the place of origin? In particular how do the new values, ideas, knowledge and personal situation to which migrants are exposed in the destination place transform their attitudes concerning reproduction? How do these dimensions affect their personal agency over reproductive behaviour and their potential to realize specific reproductive goals? At the community level migration may impact on reproductive behaviour and outcomes both of those who do and do not move irrespective of whether the community is a migrant provider, receiver or part of a circular migration circuit. Community level reproductive behaviour may be stimulated by new ideas, new constraints and general social transformations initiated and catalysed by migration but fertility consequences of migration may also be more structural – often related to changing nuptiality precipitated by deficits or excess of those wishing to marry. The impact of migration on the local economy and the economics of marriage may also have substantial fertility repercussions.

To examine both the effects of migration on the couple formation process as well as on reproductive goals and behaviour, the following issues should be examined:

- 1- How do gendered attitudes towards marriage and reproduction vary according to the social and economic environment?
- 2- In what way do the migration goals (purely economic, marriage, studies, adventure...) vary in different communities?
- 3- How do different aspects of the migration process (place of origin and destination, temporary or permanent nature of movement, motivation for migration, integration into the new environment...) interact to transform attitudes towards dating, marriage and general family formation?
- 4- In what ways has migration (and the potential resources available from migration) modified marriage and fertility expectations in the wider community? And with what impacts on actual marriage dynamics?

The general context

This paper addresses these questions to different degrees using data from communities which exemplify the key migration patterns outlined in the session themes especially the impact of rural-urban migration on fertility changes and the impact of international migration on fertility behaviour in the country of origin

This study focuses on Wolof in three contrasting communities in north-west Senegal. In this Muslim population kin relationships and networks remain an important dimension of social organisation and support. In more rural areas most marriages still occur within the kin group and are often arranged by the families. Polygamy is widespread but with different patterns of wife acquisition according to the socio-economic context. Hence the common features that link these people together are nuanced according to the different settings.

Data and methods:

In order to capture the diversity of experience of and attitudes towards marriage and reproductive behaviour, as well as perceptions of change, a cross-sectional qualitative study of three different socio-economic settings is used: a rural village, a small town and Dakar, the capital city. In Dakar two largely Wolof areas were sampled in order to exploit the variability in this socially and economically heterogeneous urban environment. In total 122 in-depth interviews with men and women of different ages and marital statuses focused on respondents' personal biographies including marital and reproductive histories as well as their reproductive goals and decision making. Background information on childhood, education and professional trajectories was also collected. In addition 14 focus groups complemented the individual biographies and 9 interviews with couples (interviewed separately) in Dakar concentrated on couple dynamics and reproductive decision making. The contrasting sites were chosen in order to understand how different socio-economic conditions can shape attitudes and behaviours related to contraceptive use, sexuality, and ultimately reproductive goals. Interviews were conducted by Senegalese graduates, tape recorded and translated into French. All matched the sex of interviewer and interviewee. NUD*IST-QSR software was used to code and manage the data.

The local migration context

The original aim of the research was to examine the impact of child mortality on reproductive decision making. Migration was not an issue we had expected to study in depth but its importance for respondents' daily lives appeared spontaneously in the narratives and therefore, in the course of data collection, respondents were probed on their personal migration experiences.

In order to identify the relationships between migration, marriage and fertility, various dimensions are considered. Both the socio-economic context of the place of origin as well as individual characteristics influence the type of migration. The predominant form of migration also impacts upon non-migrants in the community whether they are part of the personal network of a migrant or not. In a context where temporary migration is the norm the wider community will adapt to the inflow of new ideas and the expectation of outside resources to the degree that these may become essential for continued economic and family life. To an extent this is what we observe in the village and the small town where out-migration is a critical component of the local economy. Although some of this out-migration may become permanent, it was locally expressed as long-term, temporary out-migration in order to earn sufficient money to be able to return and settle back in the local community. From the perspective of a cross-sectional study it is impossible to judge the extent to which the temporary status of migrant reflected the ultimate

reality but certainly that was how it was represented by the respondents. In contrast Dakar is largely a destination rather than a source of out migration. This is not to say that people do not leave Dakar, but often these movements are part of a career progression rather than going to seek one's fortune. In Dakar the interviews showed people who are separated from parts of their social and family network and often from what they still see as their roots in the rural areas. We are able to identify some of the constraints this more atomised society has on their reproductive behaviour.

Migration, marriage and fertility

In the village the majority of the migration was internal migration to coastal ports. Droughts, population growth and increasing material demands and cost of living meant that many young men could not earn an adequate living locally and, critically, could not amass adequate resources to go through the whole marriage process (bridewealth, festivities, etc.) and start a family life. Migration has thus become essential in order to marry and reproduce – yet undertaking migration increases male age at marriage, decreases the supply of men and thus increases female age at marriage and contributes to inflationary marriage costs. However the actual experience of migration which includes sexual contacts with the less conservative girls in urban areas seems to be undermining one of the purposes of marriage – access to a sexual partner. Villagers perceive an increasing reluctance to initiate marriage on the part of men for this reason and also because they fear the financial demands which will be made on them in the immediate and long term, and their inability to meet these demands. The interviews provide little evidence that this out-migration is directly influencing attitudes towards fertility control. The indirect impact of increased material demands may have a longer term influence on attitudes to costs of children but as yet this remains largely unexpressed. Thus in the village migration affects fertility largely through its structural influence on postponed age at marriage with knock on effects for both men and women.

The impact of out-migration on fertility in the small town was much greater. Different forms of migration were identified, largely dominated by men, the most important being migration, or potential migration of young and middle aged men to Italy. This is having a major impact on fertility, through its influence on nuptiality and spousal separation. 'Italian' migrations are always seen as temporary – to make a fortune – although they appear to persist for many years. Relative to non-migrants 'Italians' are extremely wealthy and invest their money in both construction of well-equipped villas, and wives. The unlimited wealth of these migrants was perceived to have an inflationary impact on marriage costs with the impact of hindering marriage for many. In the hope of acquiring a migrant in the family potential non-migrant marriages might be refused. Italian migrants usually return every couple of years for a month during which time they may remarry. They have high incidence of polygamy – because they can afford it. However the long periods of spousal separation mean that fertility is much reduced but not through deliberate reproductive decision making nor it seems, through any desire for smaller families. It was frequently expressed that they could afford large families and therefore had few constraints. Italian migration not only impacts on the fertility of their wives but on the marriage dynamics of the general population. Young non-migrant men are insecure about initiating marriage plans partly because they fear rejection if a better offer from a migrant appears, but also because they fear that they cannot meet local expectations of resources and consumption for marriage. In general age at marriage is increasing because non-migrants and internal migrants are struggling to amass adequate resources, although 'Italian' migrants can and do marry younger girls.

In Dakar, the heterogeneity of the population means that it is difficult to separate the impact of migration on fertility from all the other changes. A perceived contrast between the village and the city parallels the romanticised representations of past compared to present reality. The village reflecting the idyllic life of the past or of the pre-migration area is an important image held by many in the city and a part of the justification for fertility control. Were they in the village, where it is “easy” to raise children properly, where there are no undesirable badly brought up street influences, where food is wholesome then there would be no need for fertility control. However living in the city and therefore being migrants away from this idyll and away from traditional kin support for childcare, people feel obliged to control fertility in order to bring up children properly. Substantial housing pressure stimulated by in-migration to the capital is forcing people to delay marriage and reduce their fertility goals. For men who have migrated to the city traditional virilocal marriage is rarely possible so they face an additional financial and logistic constraint at the start of their conjugal lives further delaying marriage. In-migrants to Dakar face multiple contradictions between the social norms and cultural values they bring from their place of origin and the realities they have to deal with. Usually the economic constraints predominate leading to delayed marriage and fertility control but men often represent these changes as being against their desires in contrast to women who generally want fewer children.

Conclusion

Our findings highlight the need to collect data in order to enable researchers to link the various dimensions of the migration process with family building. Within one ethnic group in a small geographic region we have observed a huge diversity of migration-fertility relationships influenced by the specific contexts. In the village and the small town, different types of out-migration are, in a way, ensuring continuity in reproductive behaviour of a minority whilst having major impacts on the ability of others to fulfill their reproductive aims, whereas in Dakar in-migration is part of a whole package of social, economic and value change.

In contrast with individual level quantitative data (however sophisticated the multi-level modelling) these qualitative data show that migration is transforming marriage (and therefore fertility) at various levels. We can look at how the lived experience of migration, exposure to new ideas, and availability of extra-community resources allows individuals to aspire to and achieve particular family formation projects. Through the interviews with the relatives of migrants (parents, wives, fiancés etc) and non-migrants who are either unwilling or unable to become part of the migration phenomenon it is clear that the impact of migration on marriage and fertility goes well beyond the experience of individual migrants but is modifying attitudes and behaviour through the whole community. Postponement of marriage for men has knock on effects not only for women in general but for adult sisters of unmarried men now obliged to remain at home to help parents until the arrival of a new sister-in-law. Less directly, but probably as pertinent in the long run, is the fact that remittances and return migrants’ resources are fuelling a consumer boom and previous luxuries are now becoming necessities. Inevitably in the near future this will impact upon parental investment in children and perception of the costs of children – as is already observed in Dakar.