IMIS Working Papers

Gender Norms and the 'Backway'

Migration Aspirations, Experiences and Social Tensions around Women's Land Migration from The Gambia towards Europe

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1. Introduction

In November 2016, Gambians were alarmed by the sudden death of a female football star, 19-year-old Fatim Jawara, goalkeeper of the national team. Fatim died on a small fishing boat headed for Europe from the Gambian seashores when it capsized in the Mediterranean (BBC News 2016). Her death brought back discussions on irregular migration the country was facing, while bringing to the fore that it was not only men, but also young women who were embarking on the journey. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2016) observed that in 2016, 12,000 Gambians, mostly youth, reached Italy and Greece; this made The Gambia one of the top countries of origin for 'irregular' migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa at that time.

The phenomenon of migration towards Europe from The Gambia is locally known as 'backway' migration. The term refers to travels through North Africa towards Europe overland and/or by boat towards the shores of southern Europe. The Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBoS) projected that around 38,500 Gambians, primarily young men, left The Gambia between 2013 and 2017 through the backway to Europe (GBoS 2018). In their research on the socio-economic profiles of migrants arriving in Italy, the IOM found that while about 80% of all migrants arriving at that time were men, the male share among Gambians was even higher, at 91% (Achilli et al. 2016). Also, women on average spent significantly less time on the journey than their male counterparts, with 1.4 years to reach Italy for women compared to 1.7 for men. According to the study, this may be due to the fact that family or friends organised their journey in order "to reduce risks and exposure to exploitation" (ibid.: 26). While such explanations might be valid for the majority of women from West African countries, women from The Gambia were actually more likely to spend longer time *en route* than their male counterparts. It is the purpose of this paper to engage with the phenomenon of Gambian female 'backway' migration, and the gender norms and practices related to it, to find out about potential specific gender norms and practices related to migration in The Gambia.

Key social indicators show how women in The Gambia continue to be disadvantaged when it comes to social or economic participation, let alone autonomy in various decision-making processes concerning their lives. They are ascribed passive roles within family and society, and are expected to conform within parameters mainly set by men. In terms of access to education and employment, for instance, women are disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts. Women are equally disadvantaged when it comes to financial freedom, as society expects men to take care of them and their needs. In terms of labour force participation, more men (63.9%) participate in the labour force compared to women (43.1%) (GBoS 2018); of these, most work informally.

In most studies on the role of female migration, women's mobility is understood largely from two perspectives: marriage or family reunification on the one hand, and economic or labour migration on the other. The first form is centred within the socio-cultural, family, and domestic realm in which women operate, unlike their male counterparts who dominate the economic workplace and are unhindered by domestic responsibilities (Kofman 2004). Hence, most of the early literature assumed that women primarily migrated for marriage or family reunification both within and across borders (Fleury 2016). The second strand of the literature, or what is commonly conceptualised as the 'feminisation of migration', deals with economic and labour purposes for migration. Piper observed that the "feminisation of work and migration is largely the outcome of increasing informalisation, casuali-

sation, and precariousness" (Piper 2009: 1). She argued that women increasingly migrate on their own, often to enhance their families' livelihoods and to ensure their own economic survival.

In her assessment of how family contexts of migrant networks shape the economic integration of women in destination countries, Toma (2016) noted that in the literature, women were either classified as (passive) companions to their husband or as (more active) independent economic or labour migrants. According to her, however, the line separating family reunion and independent migrants is very thin in the sense that economic conditions can equally trigger families to move, and that even single women are not perfectly autonomous, and may follow family links (ibid.). Narratives that make a distinction between (more economically active) male and (less active) female migrants are problematic and largely espouse the patriarchal assumptions that situate women in the policy and research field. In The Gambia, Sylvia Chant and Alice Evans (2010), while noting the gendered dimensions of access to resources, found that young women faced more barriers to migration than their male counterparts, in addition to being disadvantaged economically, for example because they were more often engaged in low-paid informal work than men were.

This explorative qualitative study focuses on the migration decision-making of Gambian female 'backway' migrants in relation to their gendered experiences before, during, and after the journey. It concentrates on their management of agency by empirically approaching the issue from two sides: that of the migrants themselves, and that of their social environments. We interviewed young women who had taken the 'backway' but who often needed to return before reaching Europe, as well as family members and elder representatives from their communities. Through this, we can consider why women leave, how they link this to gender and the expectations from their social environment attached to it, and finally how they are in turn perceived by their social environment.

While 'gendered' also means that men have specific gendered experiences in irregular forms of migration (see Prothmann 2018 on Senegal), we focus on the situation of women and girls, as this has been much less explored. Also in West Africa, women are struggling for more equality, self-determination, and economic liberalisation (Perry 2005) against persistent patriarchal norms and structures. Migration is a long-established strategy to express and gain more personal independence, while potentially enabling the individual to take more economic responsibility for their family. Accordingly, Jolly and Reeves (2005) identified the fact that women might migrate to seek economic improvement for themselves or the family, to escape from gender discrimination, or to conform or challenge gender norms (ibid.: 10). We therefore focus on women and the broader economic and socio-cultural factors that shape clandestine migration. The analysis goes beyond a case description of migrants and their specific journey and focuses on processes of meaning-making of gender roles between the migrant herself, her family, and her community. Exploring the agency of these female migrants provides an opportunity to understand how patriarchy continues to circumscribe the role and opportunities of women within the Gambian society (including the diaspora), but more so the power dynamics that transform the landscape of gender relations, particularly on the family and the broader societal level of the community. As the empirical section discusses, while family conditions are a central motivational factor, families of female 'backway' migrants have little or no say in decision-making.

With our study, we contribute to broadening understandings of West African female migration and migration-related gender roles, a rather neglected dimension in the West African migration literature, as further discussed in Section 2 of this Working Paper. The Gambia as a country case is chosen

due to its considerable share in migratory flows towards Europe amidst highly masculinised migration norms around the 'backway' phenomenon. Further insights on our methodology are given in Section 3.

In Section 4, we present our empirical analysis. This is divided into three parts. The first looks at factors driving female migration by considering aspirations from the migrant and the family perspective. We show that the economic role assumed by young women, though masculinised, adds to migratory aspirations as young women just like young men react to limited economic opportunities contrary to family and community expectations. The second explores the gendered challenges faced by female migrants on the journey. Here, we show that while networks are relevant for migrants' journeys, they can be equally problematic and carry some specific challenges for women. The third part discusses women migrants' decisions to return and their experiences in society and family after their return. The final part, Section 5, concludes with the discussion of our findings and some key takeaways.

2. Insights from the Literature and Development of Research Questions

The academic debate around female migration and gender from West Africa is slowly evolving, with scholars examining the complex interplay between gender norms, migration motivations, and the socioeconomic consequences of migration – both for women and the societies they leave and join. Historically, studies of migration in West Africa largely focused on male-dominated labour migration, overlooking the nuanced experiences and contributions of female migrants (Adepoju 2004; Flahaux/ De Haas 2016). Although research has increasingly acknowledged how women are not only mere passive followers in migration processes but often active decision-makers with unique motivations and challenges (Jolly/Reeves 2005; Mahler/Pessar 2006; Sakho et al. 2011), "much of the literature on West African migration ignores gender perspectives or tends to focus on women 'as' gender while men are portrayed as, perhaps unwittingly, neutral or un-gendered" (Setrana/Kleist 2022: 58). Against this background, Setrana and Kleist identified specific feminisations in West African migration: among domestic labour to urban centres and neighbouring countries, in migration and mobility resulting from women's cross-border trading activities in West Africa, as well as an increasing share of women in low-skilled labour migration towards the Middle East and Gulf countries, where women often work in the domestic sector as well. There has also been an increasing number of women identified in migration flows overland from West Africa northwards who travel alone and decide to do so as independent economic actors (Mixed Migration Centre 2018).

One important theme in researching about migrating women is the role of gender norms in shaping these migration patterns. Patriarchal structures and traditional gender roles in West African societies influence who migrates and under what circumstances. Vives Gonzalez (2012) explored the gendered dimensions of Senegalese migration to Spain, highlighting the idea that family expectations and social networks significantly influenced women's migration decisions; factors both encourage economic migration while also imposing cultural constraints regarding traditional roles in marriage and motherhood. For many West African women, migration can be both an opportunity and a form of resistance against restrictive societal norms. Some women migrate to escape gender-based violence or forced marriages, while others pursue better economic opportunities, education, or independence abroad (Mixed Migration Centre 2018). Scholars like Castles, De Haas and Miller (2014), or Adepoju

(2004) for West Africa have emphasised the agency of female migrants, arguing that their decisions often challenge traditional gender roles by seeking greater autonomy and economic self-reliance. While in many cases women state similar reasons to migrate as their male counterparts (Sakho et al. 2011), their decisions are always taken in a gendered social setting. As Sakho and Dial (2010) described for Senegal, it is the economic ambitions of Senegalese women, but also the pressure to provide for their families that drive them into clandestine migration as primary or supplementary breadwinners, especially in contexts of economic hardship. With this, they in turn challenge existing gender norms on the male being the primary breadwinner (Kleist 2017). Thus, just like male migration, female migration is shaped by the structural inequalities between the genders and brings along different consequences regarding gender norms (Setrana/Kleist 2022). The scholarly observation of women challenging gender norms in West Africa through more independent and economically motivated migration is not that new. As early as 2000, Antoine and Sow had observed an increasing trend of autonomous female migration, with women making independent decisions to migrate and challenging traditional norms (Antoine/Sow 2000).

The issue of female migration is also closely linked to broader discussions about migration governance and border control (Amelina/Lutz 2019). Policies in countries of origin (Sakho/Dial 2010), transit (Bosworth et al. 2018; Casas 2017; Tyszler 2018), and destination (Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2018; Ribas 1999; Vickstrom/González-Ferrer 2016) all may facilitate, hinder, or complicate the movement of women in gendered ways. In many cases, restrictive immigration policies push West African men and women into irregular migration channels, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking, exploitation, and detention. Some recent studies have explored the gendered complexities of West African migration journeys when taking irregular routes. Dinbabo, Badewa and Yeboah (2021), for example, discussed how West African migrants face socio-economic inequities that affect their decision-making during these perilous crossings. They emphasise how women encounter distinct challenges due to gendered inequities, including limited access to resources and information, which can hinder their ability to make informed migration decisions. The authors also highlight the heightened vulnerability of women to violence and exploitation during transit. These gendered risks influence both the motivations for migration and the safety of women throughout their journeys. The Mixed Migration Centre (2018) illustrated various challenges that female refugees and migrants travelling overland face in origin, transit, and destination countries, such as limited access to healthcare, social stigma, and discrimination; these can further complicate their migration experiences. Such insights reveal the necessity of more carefully considering gender-specific factors in the broader discourse on migration and underscore the need for more focus on gendered experiences on increasingly dangerous routes to get a fuller picture of the realities of migrants on the move.

The body of literature on gender and migration in the West African context so far remains patchy, with significant gaps regarding overarching trends and dynamics as well as subregional nuances, similarities, and differences. Existing studies also tend to neglect the pre-migration phase, including the complex reasons that drive women to leave their countries, and what this means for the societies they leave and potentially return to (Fleury 2016; Kofman 2004). Empirical works also engage more with larger countries, which also account for more intercontinental migrants, such as Nigeria (Carling 2006; Rufai et al. 2019; Unigwe 2008), Ghana (Amoako/Apusigah 2013; Awumila/Torvikeh 2018; Ferenschild 2011; Nowak 2009), and Senegal (Díaz et al. 2012; Sakho et al. 2011; Tall/Tandian 2011; Vause/Toma 2012; Vives Gonzalez 2012; Vives/Silva 2017). However, gendered migration experiences are shaped by both global gendered political economic conditions and local socio-cultural contexts

(Kofman 2004; Piper 2009). We can only further explore the role of contextual factors and regional trends through more qualitative in-depth studies that illuminate the social and cultural factors influencing women's migration decisions. Understanding the nuances behind these decisions is particularly crucial for Gambian female migrants, whose stories are often overshadowed by narratives that focus on male migration, considering the high outmigration from the small country in comparison to their population. Our study allows for a richer understanding of their motivations for leaving, the challenges they face, and the socio-cultural factors that influence their migration trajectories.

We also include a perspective on women's experiences after returning without having reached their desired destination. Many migrants have to return before reaching their destination, and with it their migration goals – which then itself leads to the societal stigma of unsuccessful migration (Schuster/ Majidi 2015). While women who manage to migrate and return with financial gains or enhanced social status often gain respect in their communities – although this is by far not always the case (Diker et al. 2021) – those who return without achieving their migration goals may particularly experience shame or be confronted with disappointment by their environment. Just as many men are, they tend to be seen as having failed in their journey, leading to negative societal perceptions and marginalisation (Vickstrom/González-Ferrer 2016). This societal reaction to returning migrants also further reinforces traditional gender roles, both for men and masculinity (Kleist 2017; Strijbosch et al. 2023) and women and femininity, placing pressure on women to finally align with expectations of motherhood and domesticity instead of fighting for economic independence. This can limit their ability to actually leverage any new skills or resources gained during migration, and may lead to a form of marginalisation within their own communities (Mixed Migration Centre 2018). They may feel compelled to conform to prescribed gender norms from which they had tried to withdraw in the first place (Dinbabo et al. 2021). This stabilising effect of gender norms in return before migratory successes is also reinforced through a dominance of narratives around successful migration, which usually celebrate positive stories of male migrants, while the narratives surrounding women migrating can be fraught with cautionary tales that emphasise risks and failures (Isike 2017; Vives Gonzalez 2012).

Return-related migration policy and control also fail to adequately address gendered inequalities. Recent literature indicates that assisted voluntary return and reintegration, in short AVRR, programmes often inadequately address the specific needs and challenges faced by female returnees in West Africa, as they frequently overlook gendered factors such as societal expectations, access to economic opportunities, and psychological support, which can hinder successful reintegration (Bhat 2023; Dinbabo et al. 2021; Diker et al. 2021; Sacchetti 2016). This failure to account for gender dynamics results in the continued marginalisation of women, undermining the overall effectiveness of these policies.

Against this background concerning the current state of the literature, this study intends to make two contributions: First, it aims to contribute empirically to the West African migration panorama and scholarship by showing how female migrants from The Gambia reach the decision to migrate, move on, stay, or return and the consequences of this decision on their relationships to their families and communities. What factors shape women's migration decisions, and how does it impact the migration outcome? Primarily, the study asks which gendered aspects the agency of female 'backway' migrants has, and what lessons can be learned from these women's decisions regarding gender roles and their influence on migration patterns. The study also gives some indications of currently manifested and potentially changing gender roles within Gambian society.

Second, we hope that this empirical evidence from Gambia will help to expand the conceptual approaches to understanding the gendered nature of migration, particularly irregular migration routes and migration routes that are associated with a high level of risk. Conceptually, we therefore follow the framework set by Grieco and Boyd (2003) to understand the factors that influence women to embark on the backway and the outcome of their decision. In *Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory*, Boyd and Grieco stressed the importance for migration theory to take into account all influences that shape gendered migration experiences, spanning from more gender-neutral macrosystemic causes of migration to the micro-level individual responses to them. This way, "[m]acro-structural forces are no longer seen as having a 'neutral' or 'unified' impact on homogenous groups of migrants" (ibid.: 29).

All stages of an ideal-type migration process – pre-migration, the transition across country borders, the time in the receiving country, and the potential return – have different outcomes for women due to gender relations, roles, and hierarchies. In this case study, we will focus on these three stages advanced by Boyd and Grieco to discuss the experience of female 'backway' migrants. Could these migrants hold on to their goals? How do they retrospectively view their decision considering their experiences in transit and the destination region, in the cases that their travel had been successful? Our case sample includes mainly women who are returnees[1] but also one migrant who actually reached Europe (see the methodology section below). This provides us an opportunity to depict the position of women in different stages of the migration journey from a country-of-origin perspective. Since migration has already taken place, we are interested in understanding the forces that influence their migratory decisions in relation to the outcome of those decisions.

During the first stage, the decision to migrate is shaped by many factors, including systematic and macro-factors that make migration more or less possible for women (Grieco/Boyd 2003). These factors include gender relations and hierarchies; status and roles of the individual; and structural characteristics of the country of origin. Gender relations and hierarchies within the family affect the migration of women because it is usually the family that

> "both defines and assigns the roles of women, which determines their relative motivation and incentive to migrate, and controls the distribution of resources and information that can support, discourage, or prevent migration" (ibid.: 14).

In other words, the social possibility of women migrating is largely linked to their position in society and what roles are assigned to them within the family. Hence, the culture of the sending society has an influence on whether and under what conditions a woman will migrate or not.

This also synchronises with the wide-spread perspective of the family, which positions women as subordinates and 'dependents'. However, in instances where female migrants assume economic responsibility (as seen in our cases), the decision to migrate may be influenced by the family, but it is by no means entirely dependent on their family's opinion about their decision. The macroeconomic factors that shape the political economy of the country of origin, including the state of the economy as well as the extent to which the country of origin is connected to the global economy, also contribute to migration decision-making (Grieco/Boyd 2003). The nature of the economy of the sending so-

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[1] In this study, 'returnee' refers to a person that has come back to the place where she used to live before migrating, without ever having reached her destination.

ciety – including but not only its ability to provide jobs, and the types of jobs it provides – also influences incentives to migrate. Accordingly, macro-characteristics can interact with gender relations and influence decision-making in sending communities about who decides to migrate and when. Hence, we show that migration has been seen as an opportunity by young women – just like young men – to escape the poverty and lack of economic opportunities that characterise The Gambia.

At this point, it is important to shed light on the concept of family and community as crucial societal institutions to better understand the interaction of women's roles and status within a particular socio-cultural context. On the micro-level, the family and society impact women's status and roles, which affect women's likelihood to migrate (ibid.). The family is a subset of the community, particularly in rural areas when members of family settle in the same community. Boyd and Grieco suggested paying attention to factors like location (rural/urban), the family's size, and its structure (extended/nuclear), as well as women's marital status and position within the family (daughter/wife), her reproductive status, her age, and her occupational status in relation to her position in the family.

Traditionally, Gambians live as an extended family within compounds (Eastman 1988) along patrilineal lines. In contemporary times, we find both families living in a predominantly nuclear arrangement, as well as in extended structures. While all families in The Gambia are extended to some degree, nuclear family setups are especially more present in urban settings, as a result of occupational and education-driven urbanisation and the availability of smaller housing units and financial means to pay rent or loans. However, there is a thin line separating the nuclear family and the traditional extended family, which remains the most common type of family unit. This is indicated in average household sizes, which are significantly higher in rural than urban settings, but average eight members per household (GBoS 2024). As urbanisation has continued, the extended family has slowly been giving way to the nuclear family, when children who are expected to bear economic responsibility buy their own compound and move out of the house to start their own family rather than joining their parents' family compounds. Some do move out and rent places and only live with their wife(s) and children, while their parents remain the heads of their own household. Within such a family structure, children (especially female) are seen to belong to their parent's family, particularly when unmarried and matured.

The extended family is what links the various nuclear families through bloodlines and could also be extended to mean the community as a whole. Families may even choose to live together in the same compound and community and share similar economic activity, as will be shown in the 'Basse migrant case' in our sample. The female migrant lived with her extended family, ranging from grandfathers, uncles, aunts, siblings, and cousins. Sometimes, three generations live together, particularly when early marriage is common and each member is expected to play a specific, highly gendered role. Except for the 'Germany case', who lost her parents, all our cases fall within the type of the extended family with a patrilineal structure, albeit with minor variations. For instance, while the Basse migrant lived with an extended family that directly made the decisions, the 'Lamin migrant' lived in an urban setting but was connected to her extended family in the rural community. The extended family can be a part of the social safety net, yet can also have constraining influence. In the 'Barra case', the sampled migrant was, for example, given away for adoption to a person within her extended family. This was both a strategy to strengthen family bonds and to reduce her parents' financial responsibility, a common strategy in The Gambia particularly when there are many children to feed. Children within such a setup are expected to contribute to the family income (Eastman 1988), especially the less the parents can provide due to ageing. Hence, having more children, including adopted

ones, is seen as equally prestigious as an investment or insurance. Given that polygamy is very common in the Gambian context, the marrying of more women makes the household hierarchy even more complicated and differs from family to family. The multiple obligations in which coming-of-age children find themselves in when considering how and where to earn money to contribute to the household income add to the search for options to do so, as we describe in the analysis.

As the second stage in the migration process, we look at the journey itself, including the situations of crossing borders and being confronted with border security in various modes, including those clearly gendered. According to Bosworth, Fili and Pickering, "practices of border securitisation have created a more hostile and violent environment for women, leading to higher incidence of rape and sexual violence in militarised border zones" (2018: 2182).

The third stage of the migratory process – arrival and stay – is also characterised by different treatment of men and women. Grieco and Boyd (2003) identified three factors for this, of which two are also relevant for our case. First is the gendered role of entry status for the ability to integrate and settle. Given that we included a case of a migrant who actually made it to Europe, we give some insights into how migration policy of the destination country interacts with female migrants, and how they navigate through these challenges. The second factor is the effect of the migration on women's positions in their families through the adoption of new economic roles and responsibilities.

Our study is a micro- and local-level analysis of migration decision-making throughout the experience of female 'backway' migration from The Gambia and how migrating women are perceived by their families and communities. As shown above, the phenomenon of the 'backway' has largely been reserved for men due to their expected social role as breadwinners, but recent incidents, including the death of goalkeeper Fatim Jawara, have brought the activities of female migrants to the fore despite their relatively small size. While the literature on clandestine migration still mainly takes men into account, the fact that women are also embarking on the journey requires that we explore and highlight its gendered nature.

3. Methodology and Case Selection

This report is based on an analysis of qualitative interviews and background information around four migrant cases. Many empirical studies either focus on the migrants or on the 'left behind' family members. Instead, we apply a case approach. In three sample regions of The Gambia, we selected one woman who had migrated along the backway in the past and returned to the community she had initially left. The research team conducted interviews with these three returned migrants. Each of these migrants' interviews is complemented by two additional interviews with (elder) family members, and with (elder) representatives of her community. The migrants agreed to have the family and community members interviewed about their perspectives on her migration project. The family and community interviewees know the migrant and her family. Based on their position, they can reflect on what her decision-making and migratory experiences – in their eyes – meant and mean for her, the family, and the community.

In total, we conducted ten qualitative interviews in four different locations: Lamin, Basse, and Barra in The Gambia, as well as a rural town in Southern Germany. In three cases, the migrant women had returned to The Gambia. In the material on their cases, we find particularly lively reflections by people from the migrants' social environments, such as their (disillusioned) expectations regarding the migrants' migration attempts. The three cases are complemented by one migrant currently living in

Germany. Given her difficult migratory history and certain personal circumstances, no interviews were carried out among her family or hometown community. Overall, the recruitment of female Gambian migrants in Germany willing to give an interview turned out to be difficult. More so, the recruitment of a Gambian migrant in Germany that would allow us to also conduct interviews in her hometown community did not prove successful.

The interviewed migrants were identified through snowballing based on pre-existing relationships with migrant organisations. They were selected for factors of a wide variation regarding their place of origin (two rural versus two urban cases), as well as their mode of travel (one travelling by sea, two by land). In contrast, the migrant residing in Germany reached Europe by air travel, which she only revealed over the course of the interview. Because finding an interview partner in Germany proved particularly hard and because her experiences contributed unique insights to our questions, we nevertheless kept her case in the sample. The 'Germany case' is also different because she is the only one who made it to the desired destination and thus far has not returned to The Gambia. The variation in cases and locations allows us to have insightful perspectives on the common elements as well as the differences in terms of motivations to leave, challenges confronted on the journey, at the destination and upon return. For interviews with family members and community leaders, the migrants were asked to name individuals that were involved in the decision-making or meaning-making. Then, we as researchers, usually facilitated by the migrants, contacted these individuals and asked for their perspective on the case and on female migration in general. This led to relative diversity within these two groups, with some family members (uncle, grandfather) and community members (deputy *Alkalo*[2], wife of the *Alkalo*, local councillor, village's development-community member). For the case of the Germany migrant, no family or community members were interviewed due to her experiences of severe violence in her village.

We conducted these interviews in August and September 2021. The interviews were facilitated by semi-structured questionnaires, conducted in Mandinka, Wolof, and English. The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. The migrant interviews were held without the presence of family or community members. The audio recordings were transcribed, translated into English, and systematically summarised for analysis, which covers both content and hermeneutic elements. In the following, we refer to the four cases as the 'Lamin case', the 'Basse case', the 'Barra case', and the 'Germany case'. This grants the interviewees sufficient anonymity, yet indicates the current place of living, which also implies some of the social-environmental context that the migrants face based on their localities. Our qualitative approach, with multiple views about similar events, particularly enables us to effectively navigate various narratives that can shape female 'backway' migration in The Gambia. As we will show, only the different and differing narrations on female 'backway' migration help to improve the analytical grasp of the phenomenon.

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[2] An *Alkalo* is a title in Gambian local government. It is most closely comparable to a mayor or to a village headman or village chief.
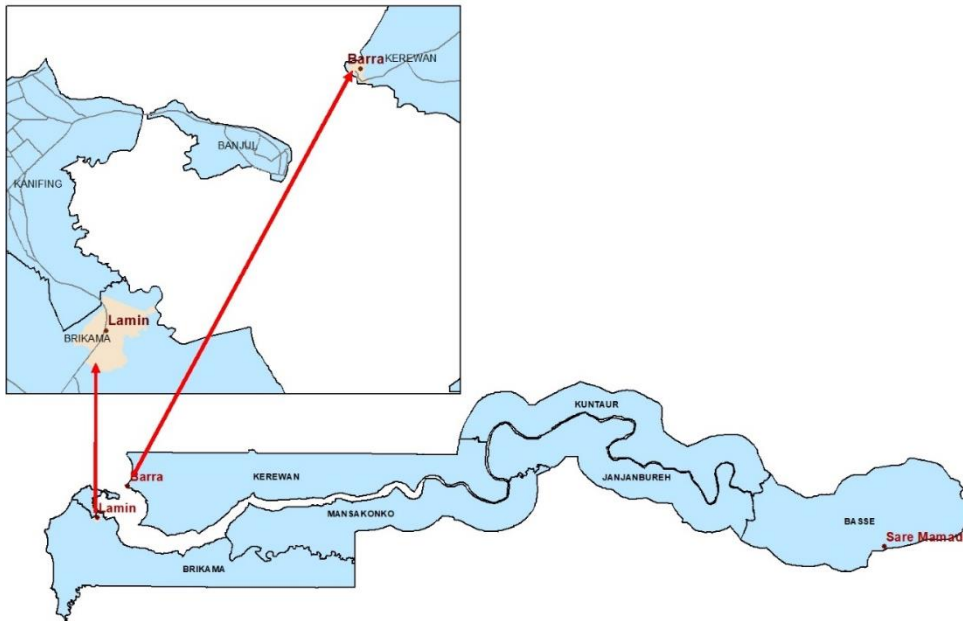
Figure 1: Locations of our cases in The Gambia. Illustration by the authors, based on graphics by The Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBoS).

4. Empirical Analysis

In the following, we present the decision-making and experiences of our interviewees as migrating women, and contextualise it with the perceptions of their family and community members that we interviewed. In doing so, we seek to make more visible the tensions that arise between female migrants' agency and the societal roles they are ascribed.

The empirical section is divided into three parts which follow the chronological order of migratory experiences and include one specific focus in which gender is relevant at that point in time. The first part looks at the initial migration aspirations of the interviewed, including their *gendered personal contexts before deciding to migrate* from their own perspective in relation to that of family and community members. The second part looks at the *gendered experiences along the journey*, concentrating on the particular challenges women face *en route*, and how this changes their perception of the overall endeavour. The third section finally examines their decision to return and the roles in family and society after coming back, highlighting the *gendered consequences of failed migration and return*. Here, we explore in more detail again not only their own views, but what family and community members make of their return.

4.1. Gendered Personal Contexts before Migration

In this chapter, we analyse what is expected of young women as members of society when it comes to migration, what migrants' relatives and community members think they should (not), can(not), or must (not) do because they are female members of society, and what the migrants themselves make of this.

As we will show, while women's desire to migrate and the means they use are often similar to their male counterparts, gendered differences shape how female 'backway' migration is discussed in The Gambia differently than male 'backway' migration. These discussions are infused with gendered socio-cultural and economic power relations. The role of women is precisely defined as serving the family and its household, as an elder of the 'Barra migrant' put it:

> *"As for the females, their mothers would raise them and turn them into decent figures in society. The ladies would be taught manners, how to dress, cook, clean, how to farm, learn about marriage, but also go to school to gain knowledge." (B2)*

In line with his, young women are generally not expected or even allowed to migrate on their own by the family. Another elder in Barra described the normalcy of men being absent versus women being present in the community:

> *"Men do not sit, and not only this backway thing. We all know that in any community where you go, you find only women there, and whatever you call for, only women will answer. We all know that men are the ones known to be migrants. Even though I know women could also be, but finding greener pastures is known to men because finding greener pasture always goes with facing difficulties, and only men can face that." (B3)*

According to him, therefore, "the female migrants are the ones that affected the community the most, that is clear to everyone" (ibid.). In this view, women leaving destabilises the social nature of community life in The Gambia.

Another statement of an elder in Basse gives further indications about the migration norms that specifically apply to women:

> *"It is not good for a woman to travel by herself, especially going through the backway. If you are a polite child and your parents are alive, the best thing is for her husband to take her abroad. A woman should be wherever her husband is, but she should not go by herself." (C2b)*

Thus, women who depart in the company of their husbands can be excluded from the norm of women staying. Yet, according to him, embarking on the backway is norm-breaking for women – at least as long as her parents are alive. The accepted norm of women's migration is therefore after marriage, as co-migrants to their husbands. This indirectly prevents them from primary responsibility for taking care of the family while abroad, since the husband would fulfil that role.

These rather conservative norms do not reflect the aspirations and decision-making considerations expressed by the women migrants interviewed, who expressed two motivations. First, there was an economic motivation: Contrary to the elder's perceptions cited above, changing gender roles mean that young women increasingly also can, have to or want to become primary providers for their family. There might be a greater tendency for this to happen when there is no male 'breadwinner' (which relates to the elder's acknowledgement of the changed conditions of having dead parents). Under such conditions, the eldest female child assumes economic responsibility for the household. However, women in these cases are usually expected to contribute financially as much as they can, but are not responsible for decision-making within the family, including their own migration choices. Whenever women (want to) leave, it thus becomes a contested matter, in which finally the will of the migrant prevails only through her action, which we will explain below. Secondly, there is a strand of motivation concerning security: Sexual and gender-based violence are common features of many marriages in The Gambia, which young women escape through migration. This is particularly visible in rural areas (though not restricted to them); women often face arranged (child) marriage, and af-

terwards are relegated to their reproductive role, and physical abuse between couples still remains more common than in urban areas. We will discuss the motivational longing for security in the next stage of the journey.

4.1.1. Young Women as 'Breadwinners'

Economic hardship and lack of opportunities have been cited as a major driving force for migration in The Gambia in recent years. However, these notions have mainly been linked to male migrants, who not only dominate the burgeoning literature but traditionally are expected by family and society to be the breadwinners of their families. In recent years, women increasingly play the role of breadwinners in female-led households, but they do not set the cultural norm. We find this strand of motivation in our cases in Lamin and Barra. After her father's demise, the Lamin migrant experienced taking on a role that "as the first child, I was the backbone of the family" (A1). She came to be the one held responsible for the daily sustenance of the household, as well as for her younger siblings' education costs. Her case is similar to that of the Barra migrant who equally became responsible for the welfare of the family. As the eldest child, she also assumed economic responsibility of the household. From her meagre business before leaving, she would cover her mother's rent and contributed to the monthly household food budget, as well as her siblings' school fees (B1). It was also from that business that she raised the funds for her boat trip.

This stands in tension to the traditional understanding of men carrying the responsibility of providing economically, while women are responsible for household chores, reproduction, and raising children. Particularly in rural communities, women are largely excluded from economic life. The lack of economic opportunities amidst growing economic hardship, such as, for example, that perceived by the Basse migrant's elders, indicates that women remain even more economically dependent in rural communities. According to these elders, women play a minor role in feeding the family, mainly limited to harvesting rice on family premises:

> *"If we had a rice farm at all, she can join her mother and do rice cultivation and in doing that, she can also contribute to feeding, but since we do not have a rice farm, I do not see the importance of a daughter in contributing to feeding the family. In addition, today if you hear that a woman has given birth to a male child, even if that male child does not become hardworking and successful, that is better than giving birth to a female child. If a man hears that his wife has given birth to a female child, immediately he panics because he will start thinking about how to raise the girl child." (C2a)*

His perception reflects how even the overall value of women for society is limited because of their passive economic role. This is more prevalent in rural areas, where the great socio-economic inequality between men and women allows for even tighter control of men over women. Particularly relevant for migration, young girls are confronted with social atrocities such as early and forced marriage (which will be discussed further below). These further underscore the multiple, diverse, and compounding inequalities that together add up to a wide palette of emigration motivations for young women. Embarking on the backway journey can mean running away from the economic hardship in which they remain in no small part because of the unequal educational, labour, and marital situations they face.

Compared to their counterparts in more urban settings, women in rural areas often find it more challenging to raise money. The extremely limited occupational and educational opportunities in the rural communities have made older men downplay the role of women as consumers, and not as poten-

tial contributors. This even extends to the value of female school education. One of the Basse migrants' family elders explains, "[t]he financial contribution of a daughter in rural areas only happens if she is fortunate to be educated and secure a job" (C2a) – hinting at education being a potential game changer for young women. His brother chipped in to remind him of "the girls that went to school and graduated, but ended up selling soap at the market" (C2b). They then agreed that the aim of the Basse migrant in travelling was to avoid following her elder sister's fate of remaining jobless after graduation.

Overall, there are rural-urban differences which speak to the uneven development of job and income-generating infrastructures in The Gambia. This inequality informs the narratives about the aspirations of female 'backway' migrants. While women in bigger towns are perceived to do petty trade and can even save money at the bank, "there is nothing in this community that a woman can have" (C2b).

On the other hand, migration is generally perceived as a good outlet to escape poverty by migrants' family and community members. There is an understanding, particularly in rural areas, that the women who get married and taken to Europe by their husbands or even those who have succeeded with 'backway' migration end up being the ones that build the compounds in the bigger towns. The family of the Lamin migrant greatly appreciated the remittances that their woman migrant was able to send when she earned money in Nigeria, before she continued her migration northwards. Notably, they used the money she sent to support her younger brother's 'backway' migration.

After having depicted some of the norms that young women see themselves confronted with regarding their economic role in the family, we will now go further into detail about how the women themselves explain their migratory ambitions in relation to economic responsibility. All three cases of the returned 'backway' migrants mentioned growing economic pressure within the family amidst the increasing lack of economic and employment opportunities for why the backway journey became attractive to them. They felt a duty to extract their families from their current economic conditions. According to the Barra migrant, for instance, "[t]he living conditions are very hard. I wanted to make enough money to help my parents, and give them a better standard of living" (B1). The petty trading she had been engaging in beforehand could not take care of them in a way that she felt sufficient. She had seen some of her (female) friends make it to Europe, and the changes that this brought to their lives and those of their families in the same village (B2).

Notably, the interviewed migrants particularly mentioned their urge to support their mothers, who took charge of the family in their absence (Lamin and Barra) or the neglect (Basse) of a male figurehead in their nuclear family. As mothers, they did not have the possibilities to raise family income, so their offspring became more responsible. All these cases noted that they wanted to 'honour' their mothers in the face of hardship. At the same time, the mother's socio-economic conditions were also a motivating factor for male migrants as well. This indicates that their urge is based on their knowledge about the challenging responsibilities which mothers can have in The Gambia rather than on an overly strong gender-based relationship between female kin. The co-dependence that mothers can fall into is omnipresent. The patriarch of the Barra migrant's family states that:

> "My daughters are educated. After they have completed [school], there is no way out, the only thing left would be to get married. And, if they have husbands who are poor like me, then it becomes difficult. Try your best to help them out because no matter how small it is, it can help in a big way." (B2)

This shows that female education, even in peri-urban areas, does not necessarily mean more economic activity. The co-dependence becomes particularly visible in the case of the Basse migrant:

> *"My father abandoned my mother, he does not do anything for her, he does not even allow her to eat from his rice, nor us, his children. We're living in the house like that. If we have food, it is because my mother went to her father's house to bring something for us." (C1)*

The Basse migrant tried to overcome this co-dependence through migration, as the "dream that I have was that my mum is suffering, so I want to make sure that I rescue my mum from that" (C1), by buying her a compound in the urban coastal area, where her mother could move in with her siblings. Her dream was inspired by previous rural-to-urban migration, as well as by fellow Gambians from rural areas that have left the countryside to buy houses in the urban coastal area. Overall, an increasing number of young women own houses, which had not been the case until recently, and most certainly has been fuelled by female migrants. All three migrants we interviewed in The Gambia talk about wanting to buy houses for themselves and live in the urban area.

However, the family's economic situation is not the only motivation for young women to take the backway. Instead, it is accompanied by a personal ambition to be economically active. They want to take care of themselves financially and not depend on men. While all three migrants interviewed in The Gambia highlighted this, the Barra migrant nailed it down most specifically by stating, "[y]es, I am a woman, but I also want to provide for myself and for my family. My mum has one son and three daughters. I take responsibility and aid her in a lot of things" (B1). Thus, migrating to Europe becomes a way for young women with little or no income to support the needs of the family and to create personal financial independence.

Thus, although the traditional ideal of women is to not have to take care of the family financially, the migrants' social environment is aware of and acknowledges young women's ambitions to support their families and particularly mothers. Although they receive appreciation for taking over more economic responsibility when the family is in need, their gender nonetheless prescribes what they are supposed or not supposed to do within family and society. Their role as breadwinners in the eyes of family and community members is not enough justification for them to embark on the backway. Because of this, they often leave unannounced. In order to look closer at the need to keep their backway journey plans a secretive venture, we will now go more into detail about the tensions around migration decision-making.

Gambians are generally rather secretive about travel plans, not only in the case of backway, to say nothing of female 'backway' migration. They fear not succeeding when it is known by everyone. People generally like to see themselves succeed before announcing it, for example by reaching their destination, especially to people outside the family. Hence, as few people as possible are informed about the trip.

According to the interviewed family members, female family members are not supposed to leave until they are married or join other family members abroad. Respected migration roles for women are thus explicitly free from primary economic responsibilities. While elder family members were not opposed to young women engaging in economic activity within the country, they were opposed to their decision to do so by migrating. The decision to migrate, despite their crucial economic role in the family, is not granted to them. Rather, such a decision is left to elder family members, or more ideally their husbands after getting married.

The interviewed elder male family members saw young women as not only ambitious but impatient, and their migration aspirations as the result of peer pressure. For instance, the patriarch of the Barra migrant family, although at the same time acknowledging economic hardship as major driver of female migration, laments:

> *"Women's minds are fickle. May God forgive me because a lot of them do things based on what their friends are doing. Some would travel anywhere in Europe; make money and they would see these things and try to do the same. This is one of the reasons why most of them try to use the backway to travel." (B2)*

Thus, he acknowledges young women's overall economic prospects in migrating, but nonetheless sees them as misled by their peers, and he downplays their feelings of economic responsibility or ambitions.

Consequently, prospective migrants risk being denied the right to leave by the family if they ask for permission. Even and especially family members, more particularly elders, are therefore only informed on short notice, for example at the day of departure (Lamin), after departure (Barra), or not at all (Basse). In the latter case, she chose not to communicate before arriving at the destination for the fear that "I will be asked to return" (C1). The appropriateness of her fear was confirmed by the patriarch of the family: "The family would not have allowed her to go because in our cultures and traditions, the only time our daughters travel is when they are getting married or visiting our relatives" (C2a).

The patriarch of the Barra migrant's family also lamented that he was not involved in her decision-making, highlighting her foolhardy disobedience:

> *"It is necessary to sit and talk to the family and know about their ins and outs, that way they will confide in you and talk about whatever. In doing so, a lot of things that may bring difficulties for them can be avoided, because if she had gotten permission before going, then my wife [the migrant's grandmother and namesake] and I would have looked for other alternatives and let her friends go. Some might listen and some won't." (B2)*

Oddly, he demands elders to be included in decision-making while indicating that inclusive communication with the family would have ended the migrant's plans for sure. As the migrant's travel endeavour failed, ending in an extremely risky situation, he was then able to make her fully responsible for the bad decision based on the lack of communication. Although her means of travel, the boat, is known to be particularly life-threatening, the norm-driven fears he expressed are not limited to 'backway' migration only, but also apply for travelling within the region. This becomes obvious in the Lamin migrant's case. Her initial migration was not the backway towards Europe, but overland to Nigeria, where she spent two years and eight months before deciding to migrate further towards Europe (see also further below). She borrowed money from a Nigerian lady in The Gambia. Her uncle remembers that "the family was angry with her, especially our parents. They said we shouldn't have allowed her to go because it is not safe and anything can happen on the journey" (A2). In comparison, "a man should be the one who should go find something and bring it home, but a female decided to go, it's not easy" (A2), and thus,

> *"[i]f she was a male, they would not have been that angry… [M]y nephew Absa's brother has also gone through the backway, but they were not angry with him because as a man, wherever you go you must face difficulties." (A2)*

Interestingly, all the cases we interviewed in The Gambia had a history of migration within the family. However not surprisingly, it was mostly young men that had embarked on the backway journey be-

fore the women did so. For the men, it was acceptable, because men are expected to suffer to ensure their family can live a better life, not the woman.

Families' disapproval of women migrating goes beyond the years of expected dangers for the migrant. It is also a means to avoid stigmatisation. Their disapproval is grounded in their status within society and what is expected of families, particularly when it comes to raising a girl. Young women leaving means they are viewed within society as not valuing their daughters, even though they might not have had a say or might not have been aware about their whereabouts. All the elders interviewed talked about their subsequent stigmatisation in the community. For instance, one of the Basse migrant's grandfathers noted:

> *"They saw it as if we didn't value our daughter, because even a man is not fit for this journey, to say nothing of a woman. Therefore, upon hearing that our daughter embarked on this journey, they saw it as us not caring for our daughter – that was another difficulty we face with our neighbours." (C2a)*

As expressed in the secrecy around their ventures, these young migrant women do not approve of this family perspective. Like young men, they are ambitious and want to take care of themselves and their families. While the families' view is that the young women should wait for and hope for a male provider, particularly husbands, these young women want to be financially independent and in control of their affairs. Hence, there is a clear disconnect between expectations of the family and the migration ambitions of the women. For the female migrants, their role as a significant, and possibly the primary contributor to the household budget gives them some freedom to make their own decisions, independent of the family. However, family pressure means they should fall in line according to their paradoxical role of providing for the family within the (overly) limited economic opportunities they have.

Nevertheless, the young women we interviewed had expected these restrictive family structures, and managed to circumvent them by seeking the necessary support from friends and other networks instead of their (elder) family. Both the Basse migrant and the Lamin migrant raised money from outside the family to finance their journey, either through a companion (see also further below) or through a Nigerian lady facilitating the reception in Nigeria. Only the Barra migrant received support from an uncle, who dissuaded her from migrating but ultimately contributed financially to her boat ticket. The Germany migrant, who would definitely not have received consent to migrate by the family, was even supported by a stranger who paid for her trip to Germany.

Community members outside the concerned migrant's families interestingly may have a better general understanding about women's ambitions to embark on the journey, even if they acknowledge the dangers of the endeavour. All the interviewed community representatives recognised that women 'backway' migrants shared similar ambitions as those of young men, as for example the *Alkalo*'s wife in the Basse migrant's case:

> *"Women have the same ambitions as men. Looking at it, it's all because they help who have no one to help them. When the female reaches, she will do the same thing that the male will do for her mom. She should work as much as the male will work." (C3b)*

To sum up, migration serves as a potential solution to the economic ambitions of female migrants just as it does for their male counterparts, but it also allows them to overcome biased gender norms that restrict them from contributing larger amounts to the family income. At the same time, this is nonetheless implicitly hoped for or even explicitly expected. However, although gender roles are indeed changing when it comes to taking on these economic responsibilities within families, particular-

ly in urban areas, perceptions within families regarding the (migration) decision-making among women remain restrictive. This reflects the prevalence of traditional ideals of women as economically less responsible for the family, and dependent on their husband when it comes to migration; these ideals are often reinforced by elder (mostly male) family and community members. This is particularly the case in rural areas, probably in part due to the severe lack of socio-economic opportunities for women there, and the dependence women have on male family members. The latter also contributes to the prevalence of gender-based violence towards women as common cultural habitus, which will be discussed below.

4.1.2. The Role of Gender-Based Violence

In the previous section, we examined the economic responsibilities informants felt for their families as well as the increased economic independence young Gambian women strive for when considering and planning migration. We also outlined the narrow scope of decision-making that young women often have, in particular concerning travel abroad. Patriarchal structures are embedded in socio-economic norms in Gambian society, despite increasing calls for parity. Notwithstanding their contribution to family, community, and national development, women are often reduced to their roles in the household, while men are supposed to fend for the family. Acknowledging that Gambian women are not a homogenous group that all experience gender inequalities in the same way, gendered ideals in the patriarchal nature of Gambian society prevail that all members of society are aware of and many experience in similar ways. Thus, although economic reasons have been advanced in the literature as the main motivational factor for 'backway' migrants, the ambition to leave in order to escape the subordinating positions, including exposure to violence within the family that women face, may also play a role.

Therefore, further interrogating how hierarchical structures open a window for gender-based sexual violence against women leads us to further investigate migration aspirations for young women in The Gambia. The unequal social roles ascribed to the genders prepare women for their subordinate role in marriage and family. This subordination is, for instance, expressed in the high numbers of childhood marriage. Although slowly decreasing, still one-third of young women aged 20 to 24 had been married before the age of 18 in 2018; 7% even before turning 15. In rural areas, these shares are particularly high. 44% of all women between 20 and 24 had been married before turning 15 (GBoS 2019). Most often, such marriages are arranged.

Although a childhood marriage does not necessarily lead to an abusive marriage, they at least create economic and social dependence for the young women, as they come to fulfil their household-oriented roles at a particularly young age. As our research reveals, patriarchal structures in the Gambian society, exacerbated by abusive relationships, forced marriage, and early marriage, contribute to the reasons young women migrate. In both cases of our sample from rural areas, gender-based violence decisively played a motivating role. Both the Basse migrant and the Germany migrant left in order to escape abusive relationships with their husbands, whom they had been forced to marry at a very early age.

The Germany migrant was motivated to leave entirely because of her abusive family setup. The option of migration only opened up years after she left her village. Due to her father's early death, her mother had been abandoned by the family and her stepfather became responsible for her at the age of ten. Since she was partly responsible for taking care of her own expenditures at that age, including

school fees, the stepfather soon married her off to an older man against her will. Early marriage is a strategy adopted by families that are economically challenged, who give their daughters away with the hope that the new husband – who is formally responsible for her – will take care of her. Young girls often have no decision in this process, as the decision is made by the family, usually the father or male guardian. The case of the Germany migrant reflects the extreme conditions under which young girls can be forced to marry against their wish: "When my stepdad forced me to get married, I refused… So, one night I was sleeping, I did not know what happened to me. I just wake up in a room... You know, I see my hands tied, my legs" (D1).

Her husband visited her frequently to sexually abuse her. When she managed to escape, she fled from the village into a big city and lived an anonymous life in hiding. After continued living in the urban coastal area, she enrolled in school and even started tertiary education. However, her stepfather discovered her and came to take her back. She reported the man to the police but with hardly any effect, as the police decided to release him. This forced her back into constant hiding.

With the increased pressure to hide, she came to a point where she wanted to end her life. It was then that she was 'saved' by a man who helped her to travel to Germany, by arranging and paying the visa and plane ticket. Hence, the motivation for her was to escape physical abuse and gender-based violence, the small size of Gambia and the close social networks in the country making hiding in urban areas problematic as one can easily be located. Her escape to Germany was unplanned and gave her a chance to leave the danger of further abuse.

The case of the Basse and Germany migrants, while similar to some degree, are also different with regard to their motivation. While the woman who went to Germany was entirely motivated by a fear of violence, the Basse migrant was motivated by a mixture of economic ambition and a thirst for personal freedom for herself and her mother due to the highly discriminatory family arrangement they were living in due to her father's neglect of his wife's and her children's needs:

> "My father abandoned my mother, he does not do anything for her, he does not even allow her to eat from his rice nor us, his children. We were living in the house like that. If we have food is because my mother went to her father's house to bring something for us." (C1)

This situation mirrors common dynamics within Gambian society, occurring mainly in polygamous households because husbands can show preferential treatment to some of their wives while abandoning others, especially under tight economic conditions. The Basse migrant pins her motivation to leave down to

> "the condition of my parents and I unable to provide for my mother, and I saw others her age living a good life, my friends the same thing, my sibling's friends too living a comfortable life, while we don't have anything and we are not living well – that's the reason why." (C1)

Thus, by migrating she aspired to leave her compromising situation, and with it change that of her mother and siblings who were all affected by a life in economic deprivation due to their high dependence on the male breadwinner. She took her decision around the time of a major traditional Muslim holiday, when her father's economic discrimination became particularly noticeable. Other children in the village, including her half-siblings, received new festive clothes to wear – one important element of the festivities – while she and her direct sibling did not, evoking "a lot of thinking", sadness, and physical isolation that she experienced before "deciding to go" (ibid.).

Leaving in secrecy vis-à-vis her relatives, the Basse migrant's family was not directly involved in her decision-making. Yet, her decision to leave was highly influenced by the family indirectly. The family's economic dependence and the resulting deprived economic condition convinced her to leave through the backway.

Interestingly, the Basse migrant was also forced into an arranged marriage when she was around 17, shortly before she left. She was betrothed to an old man she did not want to marry, "but my mother said since we are sent out of the compound by my father, if I don't get married to that man she will disown me, and that's why I got married; I don't want the man" (C1). Although she did not mention her marital status as a primary motivational factor to leave, it became obvious that the gender discrimination her mother experienced also contributed to her getting married at an early stage. In contrast to the Germany case, however, the Basse migrant managed to avoid moving in with her husband but continued to live with her mother until she left.

Her family's elders in the interview explained – without formulating any direct criticism towards the migrant herself – that her behaviour contradicted traditionalised gender ideals:

> *"When it comes to our cultures and traditions, a married woman is known for staying at home, and if the husband wants, he can take her abroad, open a business for her, or do whatever for her, provided that she is in her husband's control and everything is okay. But if that is not happening, that is what led some women doing things that are not right. Therefore, a woman should always follow her husband's advice and do whatever he asked her to do." (C2a)*

They went on to explain that if a wife is disobedient, her husband would also have the right to not "perform his duties as a husband" (C2b) and favour a potential second wife. It is interesting how they used that twist to indirectly comment on the normative deviation of both the migrant herself as well as her mother.

As the following section also discusses, the Basse migrant's migration in fact also served the purpose of further undermining her marriage. Thus, although she did not draw on her disapproval of her own marriage to motivate herself to leave through the backway, she nonetheless profited from her travels in emancipating herself from her husband, and thus avoided stepping into a potentially similarly unhappy and dependent marriage that she saw her mother in.

Considering the two sample cases in which gender-based violence influenced young women's migratory ambitions in comparison to economic ambitions, two things can be observed. First, women stand in a dependency continuum towards male family members that exposes them to the risk of losing control over their own private life even before entirely attaining it through adulthood. This can be reproduced insofar as they end up in sexually abusive marriages at an early age, and the high dependence this creates can also affect the next generation. Secondly, regarding migration ambitions, there is a spectrum of how directly this might influence their decision to leave. In some cases, the violence is so predominant that fleeing is regarded as rescue – independent of any adjacent economic needs that might be fulfilled through migration as well. In other cases, abusive relationships more indirectly create a condition that challenge everyday life beyond the mere (fear of) physical or sexual abuse. It is then the impact of this traditional dependence that drive these women's aspirations to migrate.

To sum up the gendered personal contexts before migration, we see that women migrants may have similar economic ambitions as male migrants; however, they face more scepticism from their families and communities regarding the appropriateness of migration as a means to follow those ambitions.

Additionally, their ambitions not (only) fulfil their personal aspirations, but are greatly informed by their motivation to fulfil a social position as breadwinners of their families, while also facing a more limited say in how to fulfil these responsibilities than their male counterparts face. Clearly, there is a disconnect between the aspirations of female 'backway' migrants and the hypocritical family and community expectations of the role of women, demanding family support amidst limited economic opportunities, and at the same time obedience to elderly male decision-making.

4.2. Gendered Experiences on Irregular Migration Routes

In the next step, we highlight the migrants' gendered experiences *en route*. We specifically pay attention to the challenges women are confronted with travelling over land on the so-called 'Central Mediterranean' route, occasionally comparing it to the other modes of travel, such as boat and plane. Although the experiences are unique in each of our cases, their stories speak broadly to the vulnerability migrants are exposed to on irregular travelling routes. Nevertheless, migrants experience some of these dangers differently based on their gender. We identified gender-based violence, exposure to human trafficking networks, and reproduction as three risks that particularly affect women. We look at how the women migrants in our four cases described these challenges and how they dealt with them. Going beyond the individual dimension, we also look at how family and community members approach gender-based vulnerabilities *en route*.

In their decision to migrate, migrants not only picture their future life, they also face the question of how to get to their destination. There are two main routes currently used by migrants heading towards Europe by irregular means from The Gambia, both referred to as 'backway': the Central Mediterranean route (up to Libya overland and onward by boat to Italy), which involves travelling through various countries by land within West and North Africa, and the boat route along the Western Mediterranean along the coast of West Africa (from The Gambia to Spain by boat). Both routes are used by migrants to Europe.

The choice of routes, destinations, and means of transportation are determined by pre-existing social networks. Networks aid migrants to different extents, for example by providing information about the migration process and the destination – including job opportunities. All the migrants in our sample relied on networks of friends or acquaintances to help facilitate their journey and to compensate for the absence of family support.[3]

In case of the Germany migrant, whose trip (including its destination) was proposed to her by a German tourist to The Gambia whom she had met at the beach, her 'network' has a minimal size: one spontaneous encounter with someone made her trip possible, even giving her access to a formal visa and travel process (by air) which she would not have received if she had been on her own, let alone having developed the urge to travel, which had not come to her mind until then. The Barra migrant used the Western Mediterranean boat route. Motivated by her desire to assist her mother, her decision to travel was decisively influenced by fellow migrant role models, young women she had known in Barra that made it to Europe, seemingly living a good life there. Since they had succeeded in taking the boat, she relied on the recruitment networks existing in the coastal part of the country.

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[3] Considering the dominant role that (extended) family plays in life organisation in The Gambia, it is noteworthy that family networks are rather excluded from these processes, most probably for reasons of family disapproval as depicted in the previous chapter.

Differences in the means of reaching Europe have gendered variances as well. The Lamin and Basse migrants both travelled along the Central Mediterranean route, although the Lamin migrant started her journey towards Europe from Nigeria, where she had migrated to around two and a half years earlier. The Central Mediterranean route became popular for migrants from West Africa after the fall of Ghaddafi in 2011 and peaked in popularity before 2017, when awareness about the inhumane conditions for migrants in Libya during the war there increased. While the Lamin migrant moved to Nigeria long before going on the backway due to a connection she had to a friend in Nigeria, the Basse migrant travelled northwards directly from The Gambia. To do so, she depended on a male co-traveller. A "boy" from a neighbouring village with whom she planned their joint leaving became her central link to the backway. Companionship seems to have been key for her to be able to leave. The companion was, to her, "the one who knew the way" (C1).

In the case of the Lamin migrant, it was first a female friend that brought her to Nigeria. The Nigerian woman lent her money in order to finance her trip, directed her, and linked her to other Gambians in Nigeria who accommodated her while she was there. This setup proved successful, and she could support her family back home to a degree that financially enabled her little brother to leave on the backway towards Europe while she was gone, and make additional savings for herself. While in Nigeria, she made a new friend whose uncle offered to finance and organise their backway trip towards Europe, and she took the opportunity. Again, he was supposed to pay for their transportation, which they were supposed to refund through paid work upon reaching Tripoli in Libya.

As becomes clear by the – however different – approaches of women migrants to their migration endeavours, migrant networks are key for female 'backway' migrants. Yet, this also holds true for their male travelling counterparts. We argue that the high dependence on networks implies certain gendered twists, that both affect women migrants directly *en route*, and indirectly because of their standing in the community.

First, while migrating via their networks, women appear to be more prone to become victims of sexual violence and abuse along the Central Mediterranean route than men. Abuse and exploitation as well as other human-rights violations of migrants crossing the Sahara to the North African coast have been documented by international organisations and increasingly also in academic research (see, e.g. Bartolini/Zakoska-Todorovska 2020). The migrants highlighted in this paper all noted the gendered nature of violence. The Basse migrant witnessed how men sexually abused women travelling alone on the backway: "For example, on our way wherever we spend a night, men will want to sleep with those women that went alone and whosoever refused, they will beat them and forcefully sleep with them" (C1). There is no clear pattern which would indicate that relying on networks would protect female travellers from experiences of sexual abuse. As observed in the 'Barra case', embarking on a boat carries less risk of sexual abuse in comparison to fellow migrants travelling overland.[4] However, there is no indication that this was the reason why the Barra migrant chose that mode of travel over the land route.

Another factor that might mitigate the exposure to gendered vulnerabilities along the Libya route is travelling with a male companion, as in the case of the Basse migrant. From her narration, one can deduce that women travelling alone are more likely to be exposed to sexual abuse, including rape.

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[4] Instead, women helped with the cooking onboard. This reflects gendered differences in how women perform their domestic role even along the trip.

Travelling with a man, she noted, prevented other men from abusing her. Aside from sexual violence, women also suffered from torture, particularly when their vehicles were attacked by bandits. Although one woman was mercilessly beaten by bandits, she felt protected by her male companion:[5] "I did not face any difficulties based on my gender because I went with a man and wherever he is, we are always together" (C1).

Recognizing the protective role her male companion played regarding assaults by third parties, almost ironically, her setup created another gender-based situation challenging her journey: She became pregnant by the man she travelled with. Whether or not her case falls into sexual exploitation is hard to tell. According to her, the man was not her boyfriend but travel companion and supporter. Although she did do menial jobs along the way, she depended on him for food and protection. As a first-time migrant, without any link or information to destination countries, she thus heavily relied on his company. Her pregnancy, however, became her biggest challenge on the journey, even forcing her to return home, as will be further discussed in the subsequent chapter. It suffices to conclude here that pregnancy is a gendered vulnerability factor that the migrant did not factor in when planning the journey. While crossing the Mediterranean was the only major danger she was aware of that came up in debates prior to her leaving, pregnancy remained a hidden risk against the success of completing the journey. Thus, travelling with men can circumvent the risk of sexual exploitation, yet also keeps women dependent on their male co-travellers.

We could conclude from the 'Barra case' that using the routes of former (female) migrants can protect people from experiencing sexual violence. However, the heavy reliance on pre-existing networks also leads to new risks, such as human trafficking networks. These can be interwoven with people who the migrants trust, such as the uncle of her (Indian) friend in the case of the Lamin migrant. While her initial networks that brought her to Nigeria turned out to be successful, her on-migration to Europe was triggered by her repeated reliance on networks. She and her travel companion, the Indian friend, were sold without their knowing, and only realised it when they reached Niamey in Niger where they were captured and locked up by their buyers on several occasions before reaching Libya:

> *"I came to know that he sold us before reaching there, because when we reached Niamey, that's where the buyer connects you with another individual. That individual will come calling your names to identify you among others and board you on a vehicle and go with you. That is the time you know that you have been sold off." (A1)*

Trafficking networks of female migrants from Nigeria are known to be based on the sexual exploitation of the trafficked women. The Lamin migrant did not specify whether she experienced sexual abuse. In any case, her case reveals a second gendered twist that a high dependence on networks carries: Trafficking networks, as one particular form of organised networks, contain their own gendered risks. Although male migrants can also experience trafficking, the difference is that women are further exposed to sexual abuse. As explicitly noted by the migrant: "Even male migrants still experience the same thing, but because as a female you are abused sexually, and that is the disadvantage of being a female migrant" (A1).

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[5] It should be noted, however, that the risk of violence and sexual exploitation does not only threaten females. Although more seldomly discussed, men and boys also face physical violence and sexual abuse on the Central Mediterranean route (Ayalew 2019; Bartolini/Zakoska-Todorovska 2020).

Thus, the Lamin migrant ended up in established trafficking networks for female migrants from Nigeria towards Europe. This not only ravaged her initial 'successful' migratory trajectory economically, but also exposed her physically. Nonetheless, she decided to return not because of the trafficking experiences that she had made, but because of the deteriorating security in Libya at the time and the resulting lack of economic opportunities, as will be discussed in the subsequent chapter.

Within families and communities, it is known that female migrants potentially face gender-based challenges *en route*. Yet, it is not something that is made a subject of discussion. Neither family members nor community leaders mentioned exposure to sexual violence as a specific danger; instead, the dangers of the backway are described rather vaguely. In the argumentation, there is a tendency to blame the women because they exposed themselves to the dangers of the travel, as exemplified by the Lamin migrant case: She was not supposed to leave, with the road supposedly being too dangerous and not suitable for women.

When asked whether the migrant faced any kind of discrimination upon her return, the Lamin migrant's uncle explained that migrants' challenges should not be made a matter of discussion:

> "Whenever a woman travels, no one knows what will happen to her there. When the family talks about it, I tell them whether they can handle and face their problems, because you cannot discuss your problem with everyone" (A2).

To sum up, sexual and gender-based violence, exacerbated by the danger of human trafficking as well as reproduction itself, are gendered challenges that women migrants can face. Though the stories are different, sexual and gender-based violence are risks that migrants are exposed to especially when using the Central Mediterranean route to Europe. Other modes of travel carry fewer such risks; however, due to the high dependence on networks for the choice of routes, women are unlikely to be able to choose their mode of travel based on their hopes of averting their exposure to these risks.

4.3. Gendered Consequences of Returning after Failed Migration Efforts

We next turn to the experiences the female migrants have after calling their journey off because they could not or did not want to continue. We look at the reasons with which they justified their return, as well as the consequences their decision has had for them. Our cases show different conditions under which a female migrant may feel forced to cut off her backway journey and return home. While the Barra migrant was forced to return due to her boat capsizing, those travelling along the Central Mediterranean route were confronted by gendered challenges that contributed to their return decision. To reflect the decisions to return by the three migrants who returned, we also discuss the decision-making in the case of the Germany migrant, who, in contrast to the other cases, successfully reached her destination.

Returning home, as much as it can be a possibility for any migrant at various points during their migratory endeavour, was not the envisaged option for the migrants we interviewed. Instead, it is an expression of the failure of their migration aspirations. Their biggest worry returning home was not only linked to their own disappointment in failing to achieve their migration ambitions, but also the stigmatisation that came along with it from family and community members. This fear of being discriminated against and stigmatised by family and society is also gendered. The reason why they left in the first place was to be successful despite gendered restrictions. Returning empty-handed usually means coming back to the same poverty, the same gender restrictions, and the same entrenched economic despair they tried to lift themselves out of. The protracted economic burden was cited as a

disappointment by the interviewed family members as well as community members, because the expectation of anybody who has migrated is that when they return, they will come with new economic resources. Nevertheless, due to the challenges highlighted above, three of the migrants in this study evaluated their options and decided to return home.

In the case of the Germany migrant, returning home was not an option she considered. For her, reaching the destination and never having to come back was the primary goal of leaving. In her case, gendered challenges after arrival can be found in the field of immigration and integration policies that, according to Grieco and Boyd (2003), conceive and treat women as dependent. Migrants who escape abuses are not likely to return when the destination country provides more safety compared to their country of origin. Now that the Germany migrant is far away from the abuses she escaped from, returning is not an option. This is reinforced by her having two children on her own. She is fearful that returning to The Gambia would expose her daughter to gender-based discrimination. She highlighted female genital mutilation (FGM) as a key argument for why she would never consider raising her daughter in The Gambia. Despite a difficult asylum process, she was ultimately allowed to stay in Germany. She believes that it is because of her daughter that she was given asylum. Hence, staying in Germany will help prevent her worrying about the future for herself and her daughter.

The other three migrants, never having reached their destination, had varying but decisively fewer chances to decide whether to continue the journey onwards, or to go back. In the case of the Barra migrant, that decision-making spectrum was actually non-existent. She was forced to return because the boat she was travelling with capsized off the coast of Mauritania, with a death toll of 58 people (IOM 2019). The Barra migrant was among the roughly 80 people that survived the incident. In fact, her family and community first thought she had died as well, and it was only two days after the accident when they became aware that she was alive.

For the Lamin migrant, whose journey ended in Libya, the decision-making spectrum was decisively broader. After spending four years on the backway, she made her decision based on a more long-term consideration in relation to the external conditions she was facing. The work she was doing turned less and less profitable, while she remained the 'economic backbone' for her Gambian family. She could no longer support them the way she used to while in Nigeria. "There were inadequate job opportunities and it was not safe for anybody" (A1), she explained in leading up to her decision. Although the initial goal of her backway journey was to reach Europe, she had had the chance to fulfil some of her migration ambitions on the way. This led to her staying in Libya for a long time, turning it into an unintended destination rather than a transit country. When staying in Libya did not fulfil the purpose of her migration efforts anymore, she adjusted her plans according to the travel options she had, and joined a return and reintegration mission by the IOM that was offered to 'stranded' migrants in Libya.

Unlike the Lamin migrant who weighed her options before deciding to return, the Basse migrant had to return due to an unplanned pregnancy. Just as her migration decision, also the return decision was taken by the man she travelled with, who also impregnated her and organised her return with the promise of supporting her future remigration attempt once he made it to Europe (which he never did). In hindsight, the Basse migrant reflected that having more control over both the migration planning and necoming pregnant:

"If I had known earlier that these were some of the difficulties I would face, I would have planned better my-self. I had also faced other challenges on my way but would not have gotten pregnant, but I was not expecting that." (C1)

After a relatively straightforward journey up to Algeria, the Basse migrant's journey stopped there, after spending ten days sleeping in the streets, running away from the police, and being unable to find work, with food becoming a major challenge. Still, according to her, "[i]f it was not for the pregnancy, I would have continued until I successfully reached Europe, but because I was pregnant and the journey was hard, that was the reason I returned" (C1).

Notably, it was her travel companion (and father to the unborn child) that made the decision for her to return when she in fact had not (yet) wanted to. Based on her general dependence on him, which increased even more after becoming pregnant, she could not go on without his approval. He convinced her by promising that he would find a way for her to join him once he reached Europe, but in fact he himself had to return shortly after. He had paid for her return trip, while she struggled with the failure that her return would mean. This underscores the continued dependence that she was in during her migration attempt. She felt as if she was not able to make the decision on her own, regardless whether or not the pregnancy made the journey onwards actually impossible or not.

All returned migrants interviewed for this study faced challenges within their communities after returning, linked to stigmatisation, as well as continued economic pressure – especially from their families. All the migrants expected their return to be viewed problematic by those who they left behind. Their families had no decision in their return, just like their departures. The migrants' reappearance thus came asa surprise to them. In order to mitigate some of the immediate reactions from community members, the Barra migrant waited until after dark before entering the village. After that, she immediately moved away from the village to stay with her aunt in the urban coastal area for two months. Her family wanted to protect her from the surveillance of the community. Given the high number of shipwreck victims in the small village, and with numerous friends of the surviving migrant having died, her survival generated some appreciation within the community, but also negative comments. The family feared that the discussions they noted in the village could further traumatise her (B2).

Both the Lamin migrant and the Basse migrant isolated themselves when they returned. The Lamin migrant's uncle observed:

"When she came, she spent a huge time indoors, many of her friends left her and she doesn't usually go out. The only time she goes out is when she goes for business and return home after that and be in her room. She was stressed…" (A2)

Also the Basse migrant decided to withdraw from community exposure physically: "I do not go out, I'm always in the house. I do not even chat with people in the family, I am always in bed or sitting by myself" (C1). This continued over the course of three months. She also felt discriminated by other community members, particularly other women, that "backbit" (C1) her:

"They say it to my face. The females in the community discriminate against me. Some were saying, you see she thought she was a male and now she returned and did not come with anything except pregnancy" (C1).

Here, the Basse migrant indicates how the community not only saw her leaving as a contradiction to her gender, but that her return in pregnancy was proof of her misguided self-perception. She had the impression that former unsuccessful male returnees had been stigmatised less, even though they had spent longer times, sometimes years on the journey.

Her impression of a different treatment by the community was, however, not shared by the Lamin migrant, who observed similar stigmatisations of male returnees she knew. On the contrary, since her return, she feels that men that do not belong to the family are the ones who accept her the most. The Barra migrant also felt stigmatised by individuals in the community.

Beyond the broader community reactions, which the migrants managed to navigate by using temporary withdrawal strategies, they felt ambiguous reactions from their family members more directly. First, they were relieved to see their loved ones again. Mothers who had often been considered the most affected by the migrants' departure were also often considered the happiest upon their return, as in the cases of the Lamin and Basse migrants. Also the Lamin migrant's uncle underscored the supportive role he took towards his niece when it came to emotional stabilisation: "She was stressed, but I told her to be patient because life is not easy. She had gone on the backway and could not reach it, but met her family in the same condition she left them in, it's not easy" (A2).

However, their families' immediate relief stands in tension with the disappointment regarding the economic hopes they had had – and their families' general disapproval of female migration in the first place. The family elder of the Barra migrant, while expressing the family's solidarity for her, emphasised that it was the family's generosity that made it possible to forgive her for having made the mistake of leaving:

> "[In Barra,] almost everyone is related to everyone. We solved the problems by having conversations with one another and accepting that mistakes do happen and we aren't so different from one another. Our forefathers were close and none of these dramas happened during their time. We solved it as a community and forgave one another." (B2)

He also emphasised that he had since established stronger reporting networks about people's daily whereabouts within the family that would make the secretive leaving of his grandchild impossible in the future.

The Basse migrant's family members also stressed that they did their very best to comfort her after her misfortunate return. Still, when "we saw that she returned in peace, we only made efforts to see how best she can go back to her husband" (C2a). Certainly, with these efforts, they did not act in the interest of the migrant herself, who had withdrawn from her husband even before leaving, and also had not planned on joining him again after returning. According to the elders, it was a contested matter within the family whether she would need to fulfil her role as wife, which she had escaped from in the first place. The elders we interviewed took a stance that ended up being more in line with their gendered traditions than with the migrant's desires, who continued not to live with her husband after her return.

Overall, despite the sympathy for their individual misfortunes, the migrants felt generally negative reactions to their journey from both family and communities. Although these feelings of negative perception by failed migrants are not only felt by women, women's returns nonetheless trigger reactions by society that reinforce the Gambian society's ideal of women not migrating in the first place. Family support forges pathways for them along which they are supposed to reconstitute their female social roles as non-migrants, obedient family members, and wives. In other words, unsuccessful return of female migrants has a reconstituting effect for gendered role ascriptions.

Gendered expectations are also reified in the broader community upon the occasion of a woman's unsuccessful return. For example, the community leaders in Barra expected a 'normalisation' of

women's desires to travel. They considered the shipwrecking incident to be "instructive" for poten-
tial female migration in the community in the sense that

> *"if they [the boat migrants] had succeeded in the journey, even the old women would join in… No woman*
> *would be left here… Unfortunately, the incident happened and a lot of things happened. For the men's part,*
> *I don't know, but for the women, I don't think we'll hear about anyone travelling on the backway. A lot of*
> *them don't speak of it again, though some boys still plan to go on through the backway if an opportunity*
> *presents itself." (C3)*

These unsuccessful departure attempts thus supposedly guide women back onto the 'right' path, but
they do not necessarily have that same effect on men. This both reflects and recreates ideals that for
men, it is normal to travel even under risky circumstances – but for women, it is not.

Returning also means that the respective migrant has to reorient herself economically. The families'
disappointment about migrants returning without money was widely cited by family and community
members. They are "unlucky" (C3), as a community leader in Basse called it, while generally describ-
ing the backway as a "chance" that only lucky people can benefit from. Thus, they do not necessarily
make the migrant responsible for their "mischievous" endeavour. Nonetheless, their return causes
disappointments that migrants are confronted with after they return.

The family usually does not provide economic support to returned migrants, which was also the case
in our sample. They explain this by the fact that they simply do not have the financial means to do so,
which is not surprising considering the reasons why they left in the first place. According to the fami-
ly members we interviewed, it is that economic support that is mandatory for successful reintegra-
tion, while they could only provide psychological support.

In order to circumvent some of the challenges of the economic impasse that returnees can end up in,
international donors in collaboration with governments have increased their reintegration support
offers to returning migrants. The most comprehensive facilitator of reintegration for returning mi-
grants in The Gambia, as elsewhere, is the IOM, which offers financial 'reintegration packages' to
those who apply for them.

Receiving reintegration support from the IOM depends on the awareness and contacts that enable
migrants to actually get in touch with IOM offices. Both the Lamin migrant and the Barra migrant had
been in contact with the IOM, while the Basse migrant did not receive support from the IOM. Quite
simply, she had not been aware of the existence of such support. She was from the most remote ar-
ea of the cases under study, where information on access to reintegration packages is least dissemi-
nated.

The IOM's support had most impact on the economic situation of the Lamin migrant. The funding
enabled her to rebuild the roof of her family's house, which had recently collapsed, as well as to start
a fast-food business. According to her, that business is what "we [the family] are depending on for
our survival" (A1). One could conclude from this that the Lamin migrant performed the economic
role following her return relatively well, and that the family could link this to her migration history.
However, and most notably, this is not the case. Instead, she felt disrespected for not being able to
contribute as much as compared to while she was gone up until the present:

> *"It has been difficult for the family to understand me up to now, because they still feel that I wasted myself*
> *and my money, and that I could have made it and be someone else and not the way I am today" (A1).*

The Lamin migrant case shows that returned migrants who had been able to support the family relatively well while abroad might still be stigmatised for their return if they cannot provide the same financial contributions, and they return before succeeding with their entire migration attempts. The Lamin migrant herself admitted that her expectations regarding her on-migration to Tripoli were not met, as she had "expected to build a good house, as to buy a compound, have a better life" (A1). The "only" success was the funding of her brother's 'backway' migration, which she raised while in Nigeria. This, together with the constant support to the family's daily expenditures, could be regarded a major contribution, but does not carry as much weight. One way she felt "disrespected" by the family at the time of our interviews was the daily arguing with family members about the reduced financial contributions, since she does not provide as much as she used to.

The Lamin migrant's uncle explained where the disappointment comes from. "The way our family is that when you return from Libya or abroad, they think that you will come with a huge amount of money" (B2). In fact, the Lamin migrant suspected that she would be stigmatised as soon as she made the decision to return, indicating that she knew about the mismatch of expectations concerning returns, and regardless of her own awareness of her relative previous success. Her family's disappointment triggered them to draw a rather paradoxical conclusion about her migration altogether. The motivation of the Lamin migrant to migrate had been based on the fact that "the work I was doing was not sufficient enough for my needs and family needs" (A1). Her migration then came to be regarded a waste of time, even though she provided for the family economically for a number of years. Returning without the fortune that the family anticipated has undermined all of her migration efforts. Notably, she herself agrees with this interpretation when she reflects that her situation before migrating was better than after returning: "I was here working and earned respect from everybody, spending on my family and I was with the family so I had the respect at that time, but now I do not have that" (A1). Ultimately, it is this lack of respect that makes her question the success of her migration. Neither she nor her family measured the success of her endeavour by the support that she could continuously provide while away, but by the lack of accumulated money available after returning.

While her experience of family disappointment seems to be independent of her gender, it is interesting to look at which solutions the family sees for her situation. As her uncle put it, "We advise and motivate her not to go again but let her remain here and continue with her business and if God helps her to find a good man, then she can get married" (A2). In his eyes, her (good) fate yet again depends on her marital status, being able to finally fulfil her gendered role in becoming a wife.

Interestingly, the Lamin migrant also got married after returning – thus fulfilling the expectations her uncle had presented. Following her economic ambitions, she plans to expand her business into a restaurant, but also to invest part of the money she will earn into moving away from her family to "a place where I will have my freedom and peace of mind" (A1).

The economic situation of the Basse migrant is decisively different from that of the Lamin migrant. She had not raised any money during her short time abroad, and had actually spent family resources for her travels. After her return, the continued lack of employment opportunities has inhibited her ambition to support her family financially, just as before leaving. Hence, "if I have the finances, I will go right now… I will go back through illegal routes to reach Europe" (C1). The only aspect she would do differently next time would be to consult a marabout (a Muslim religious leader) before leaving, and to take her travel documents, which she hadn't had during her first trip. Her migration experi-

ence, with all its challenging facets – conditions in Algeria, dependence on her companion, pregnancy (and miscarrying the baby after returning), stigmatisation after return – did not actually discourage her from another attempt to fulfil her ambition to build a compound for her mother by raising money abroad. This continues to oppose what her elders would want her to do – return to her husband, and certainly not migrate as a woman.

In contrast to the Basse migrant's very specific hope to remigrate soon, the Barra migrant would not consider attempting migrating again. Reflecting on her experience, she even stated that she would in fact not have attempted it in the first place if she had known more about the risks. She even took up an active role in advocacy work against the backway in collaboration with IOM's sensitisation campaigns. Together with IOM staff, she now frequently travels across the country to raise awareness about the dangers of 'backway' migration. This work generates a little extra income. Initially, she had received information from the IOM that "they would open places for us to work at, like businesses for instance. They would put us in workshops, give us money" (B1). However, beyond the involvement in the sensitisation work, she did not receive any such support yet, and was still waiting for it at the time of our interview, many months after her return.

The Basse migrant and the Barra migrant came to contrary conclusions about reattempting migration. For both, migrating and returning did not change the economic preconditions. However, while this experience renewed the motivation to migrate for the Basse migrant, the Barra migrant weighed her options differently afterward. The prediction of her elders, that the community's shock about the dreadful shipwreck would demotivate people to attempt migration, has proven true, at least for her.

5. Discussion and Conclusion: The Gendered Agency of Female Gambian 'Backway' Migrants

The diversity of our cases and the in-depth inquiry of them has enabled us to explore female migrants' motivations and experiences throughout the migration process. In order to better understand Gambian women's experiences of and agency within 'backway' migration, we used Grieco and Boyd's (2003) framework. We have followed their approach of looking at migration decision-making along all three stages of the (ideal-type) migratory process: pre-migration, transition across boundaries, and post-migration.

We showed how gender relations in society, including women's roles in the family, shape gendered migration experiences and decision-making. It is the family that

> *"both defines and assigns the roles of women, which determines their relative motivation and incentive to migrate, and controls the distribution of resources and information that can support, discourage or prevent migration" (ibid.: 14).*

As our findings show, the role of women within Gambian society, particularly from the family perspective, is to stay behind and wait for a husband to take care of them. Within the family, migration is a responsibility of male children and not of the female. Women are not supposed to leave at all, or only with or following their husband or another family member. However, our cases show that women are indeed embarking on the backway due to changing power relations within the family, or in order to challenge their assigned roles. We argue that their assumed role as breadwinners of their families, a role largely ascribed to young men but increasingly also fulfilled by women, is driving young women to the backway. As breadwinners, they have to provide for the families' economic sus-

tenance; due to the lack of opportunities in the country, 'backway' migration becomes an option for some, despite family disapproval. This goes in hand with ambitions of young women that see economic success as one way to become more independent of the family.

While similar reservations also account for young men approaching the backway, the backway stands in even greater opposition to the ideals and norms that are ascribed to being a woman in the Gambian society. By leaving, women act against persistent gender norms and are confronted with potential gendered risks during the journey. These norms also affect the ambitions of young women to leave. This is particularly the case in rural settings. Some women that embarked on the journey, while motivated by their personal and family economic conditions, also use it as an opportunity to escape abusive relationships and forced and early marriages. In contrast to their decisions, relatives often disapprove of female family members migrating on their own; this disapproval occurs despite acceptance of the role that female migrants play by leaving. This occasionally creates frictions, especially in situations where the migrants feel less respected, or that their contributions remain unacknowledged by family.

The second stage of the migration process explored by this study is the journey. We found that pre-existing migration networks, no matter how limited, are very crucial for female migrants. The information and support rendered by these networks not only inspire but enable the migrants to embark on the journey or even the mode of travel. Acquainted females can serve as migrant role models, or as points of connection within the network. However, the disadvantage of the reliance and trust in such networks is that women can be sucked into human trafficking networks, where they are further exposed to gender-based violence. Our cases show that female 'backway' migrants have indeed been exposed to trafficking networks and abuses, including rape. Women can also be challenged by their reproductive role, specifically, by getting pregnant while on the journey. While gender-based violence is a recurring theme, it is hardly discussed within the family and when it is, the woman herself tends to be blamed. Hence, the lack of safe space within the family in particular makes it difficult for women to share their stories, particularly those related to sexual violence. Families express the perception that women are not supposed to leave except for family reunification, not only because the journey is dangerous for them, but because they are still considered as a group that needs to be 'protected' from these dangers as a result of male-dominated decision-making processes within families. The community also reproduces idealised stereotypes on a more generalised level that support this role of family.

While some studies have indeed revealed some gendered findings about migrants that actually manage to make it to Europe (see, e.g. Achilli et al. 2016 for the IOM), they overlook the fact that many migrants go through thorough decision-making processes and multiple struggles before and along the way without ever making it there. These studies therefore cannot reveal the normative negotiation practices that women who return without succeeding in their migration attempts go through. These negotiation practices have so far remained largely unexamined.

The stories of the women migrants presented in our explorative study, and the assessments their relatives and community members have shared as well, all point to the persistence of a patriarchally structured society that upholds a range of barriers for girls and women, assigning them passivizing societal positions and putting them at risk of gender-based violence before migrating as well as *en route*. In contrast, the stories presented here also reveal women's agency in demanding changes in Gambian society related to intergenerational roles and gender equality. Here, we find an astonishing

range of ways to engage with the *status quo*, especially by expressing dissent through emigration as a concrete action, and less so by voice. The spectrum of dissent ranges from taking on economic responsibilities for oneself and the family, managing to leave through pathways that are not framed as being open for women by tapping resources and networks available to the individuals, and interest-related travel arrangements. After returning, they again confront challenging social contexts that seek to reinforce gender inequalities based on the failure of women's migration attempts. However, these women were indeed able to keep their goals of taking up economic responsibility for themselves and their family through creating self-employed work, or by not dismissing migration as an option despite the social environment's reinforced scepticism as well as the subsequent greater awareness of the challenges of irregular migration journeys. It is important that research as well as public and political discourses acknowledge women's migration through irregular routes like the backway as an expression of their longing for individual development as well as for societal change, which is not limited to, but includes demands to overcome gender inequalities.

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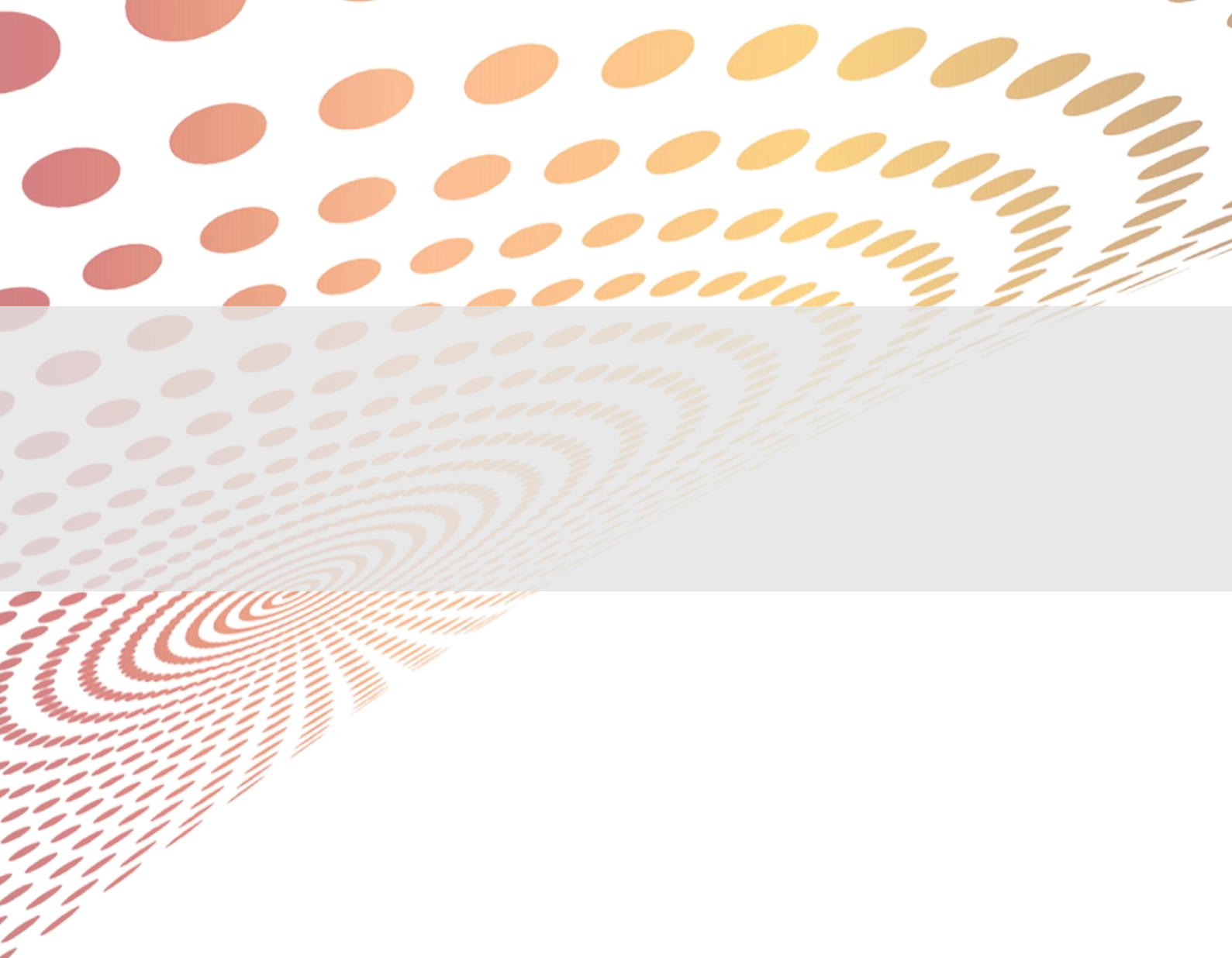
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Annex: List of Interviews and General Characteristics

Case	Information on locality	Interviewees		
		Migrant (1)	Family Member(s) (2)	Community Leader(s) (3)
Lamin (A)	· urban area, relatively close to the coastal region · data collection date: 7 August 2021	· interview A1: migrant · age: 31 · migrated at 23 · returned after 7 years · marital status: married · education: senior school · occupation: business · ethnicity: Fula	· interview A2: migrant's uncle · age: 27 · visiting the migrant's compound at time of interview; otherwise lives in the rural areas with other parts of the family; his brothers are the household heads since the migrant's father is dead · marital status: single · education: senior school · occupation: driver · ethnicity: Fula	· interview A3: assistant chairlady · age: 40 · elected by traditional village committee · marital status: married · education: no formal education · occupation: petty vendor · ethnicity: Wolof
Barra (B)	· rural area in the coastal region · data collection date: 15 August 2021	· interview B1: migrant · age: 27 · migrated in November 2020 · returned after 7 days · education: junior school · occupation: business · ethnicity: Serer	· interview B2: migrant's grandfather · age: 76 · family elder with numerous wives, many children and even more grandchildren · marital status: married · occupation: electrician	· interview B3: treasurer of the village development committee · age: 40 · was encouraged to join the committee board by the chairman because of his engagement with soccer in the community · marital status: married · education: primary school · occupation: business

Basse (C)	· rural area in the back country · data collection date: 14 August 2021	· interview C1: migrant · age: 21 · migrated at 19 · returned after 6 months · marital status: married · education: primary school · occupation: unemployed · ethnicity: Mandinka/ Fula	· interview C2: group interview, 2 interviewees (brothers) · both are household heads, 'grandfathers', to a compound which accommodates more than 175 people		· interview C3: group interview, 2 interviewees
			(C2a) Grandfather, male · age: 57 · marital status: married · education: not educated · occupation: farmer · ethnicity: Mandinka	(C2b) Grandfather, male · age: 76 · marital status: married · education: not educated · occupation: farmer · ethnicity: Mandinka	(C3a) Deputy Alkalo, male · age: 45 · marital status: married · education: Islamic school · ethnicity: Mandinka	(C3b) Alkalo's wife · age: 40 · marital status: married · education: not educated · occupation: farmer
Germany (D)	· from rural area in Northern Gambia · interview in Germany · data collection date: 27 September 2021	· interview D1: migrant · age: 20-25 · migrated in September 2017 · marital status: married (in Germany, Islamic wedding) · education: college · occupation: unemployed	---		---	