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Mind over (what doesn't) Matter: De-stigmatizing mental health from Senegalese women's perspectives

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May 2019

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Abstract

As a matrilineal and collectivist society, Dakar is an urban space where the woman is at the center. With this in mind, it is possible to understand all the pressures women in urban Senegalese society face. Women are the center of the household, thus being responsible for the family, finances, and the social aspect of welcoming visitors. In addition to these factors, women in Senegal also deal with community expectations and responsibilities since there is larger emphasis on the community, rather than the nuclear family in Senegalese society. This paper examines how these two aspects of Senegalese society (matrilineality and collectivity) affect the individual experiences of eight women living in Dakar. By highlighting each narrative as a unique one, this paper argues for an individualized approach to mental health, which can include both positive and negative experiences. Since the term “mental health” is a negatively charged term in Senegalese society, this paper frames it as one’s thoughts, feelings, and emotions, so as to truly discover what can happen with the elimination of a charged term. The collectivist and matrilineal nature of Senegalese society in general, and the fast-paced structure of an urban space like Dakar more specifically, creates close interpersonal relationships, prayer, and unintentional emotional support circles as ways for women to move forward with their everyday lives. Although collectivity and matrilineality are what create societal pressures for these women, it is these same two factors which foster the ability to move forward with social coping mechanisms, which in turn creates the “what truly matters” mentality of Senegalese women.

Keywords: mental health, women, social gatherings, religion

Introduction

“She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her, and happy is every one that holdest her fast,” (Proverbs 3:18). This verse from the Old Testament, characterizes the construct of wisdom with female pronouns when describing the value placed behind such. Although this verse is talking about wisdom, it can still be attributed to the value God places behind women and how others should value them as well. Attributing the woman to the tree of life demonstrates her unquestionable role as the source of life itself and the foundation of human growth.

This biblical allegory highlights how women are viewed by others, but in this paper I am looking to do the opposite: discovering how women view themselves and their roles in society and the family. At the same time, I am also reflecting upon how the matrilocality of Senegalese society, and the idealized picture of the woman as the foundation of the household, affects the daily pressures women experience in urban Senegalese society. As the center of a collectivist society, the woman has to remain open to caring for all and extend herself to those beyond her nuclear family. When problems arise, it is often the woman taking care of others, so what happens when the woman has problems of her own? This leads to the creation of different gatherings of women who come together to solve communal women’s problems. However, these gatherings, unwittingly turn into emotional support groups for women’s individual problems that they help one another solve.

The idea for this project was sparked by a conversation with my host mother about the pressure she feels to always be happy and “on” for her family. She expressed having to be present all the time for her family, as she is the face to both those who live in the household, as well as guests who come to visit. She provided an example that whenever one of her children is

sad or has a problem, she is the one they turn to for help. Additionally she is always welcoming visitors into her home, who mostly come to visit with her. She expressed how this can sometimes take an immense toll on her “stress,” (a term she herself used). She described this “stress” as dealing with the responsibilities of being a mother and wife; and sometimes feeling sad and alone in her struggles. Such struggles she identified are how difficult it is to be a woman in Senegalese society, especially when it comes to the demanding role of women in the household often limiting what she can do on the outside. This is why she relies on the social circles of close friends to support her, as she does for them. These circles sometimes involve a pooling of resources such as time or money, in order for the women to help each other in times of need. My host mother expressed that without these social circles, she might not be able to function as she does everyday.

For this research project, I interviewed individual women about their experiences in urban Dakar, and asked if things that they deal with on a daily basis such as, family, religion, and finances, cause them pressure and stress and if so, how do they cope. From my conversation with my host mother, I learned that there is a large social aspect that exists in the lives of women in urban Senegal. Thus, during my observations of different social gatherings of women, I looked at the social dynamics that exist between women when they gather for different reasons, and seeing if these gatherings provide them emotional support. I need to ensure that my research does not lead to generalizing these experiences to all women in Senegal because that is just what I am trying to prove; even in a collectivist culture such as Senegal, the individual experience with regard to thoughts, feelings, and emotions, should be treated as an individual perspective that cannot be generalized to the rest of society, regardless of the similarity of two people’s situation.

This may seem paradoxical, that on the one hand Senegal is a very collectivist society, but that taking care of one's mental health is a very individual thing. Nevertheless, a collectivist society can exist, where people rely on and care for one another, without everyone thinking in the same way. Even in a collectivist society not everyone has the same mentality as each other because each person has different thoughts at different times and reacts differently to their own situation. It is virtually impossible to have the same mind as someone else, but it does not mean one cannot live in a collectivist society where people rely upon one another to help solve individual problems. The beauty of a collectivistic culture such as the one in Senegal is how these uniquely individual perspectives can come together and create a sense of support for one another.

Like the different ways individuals identify themselves, mental health is defined differently by cultures and societies across the world. Therefore, I am not using the term "mental health" in my research since there are many connotations associated with the term. Rather I am focusing on the individual's experience since two people rarely have the same mentality. This approach to understanding the perspectives of different women across urban Senegal, is an approach we must make towards mental health in general, which can help to further destigmatize the often universal negative connotation with which it is associated.

Mental health is our thoughts, feelings, emotions, both positive and negative. Just like physical health, mental health is a journey; it is not always positive and not always negative; not always invigorating and not always debilitating. This is mental health; it is defined by each person because each person experiences it differently. Thus, in this project, I am looking to discover how the women I interview define their mental health and how their thoughts, feelings, and emotions, are affected by their daily experiences in Senegalese society.

Through this project, I am looking to understand how individual women in urban Senegal define their mental health and the coping mechanisms they use in order to move forward with the challenges they face. I am looking at women specifically because of the matrilocality of Senegalese culture, and how this, places immense pressures on the woman compared to other individuals in society. I am arguing that in order to understand mental health in this context, one cannot generalize a perspective, regardless of the collectivist nature of Senegalese society. Generalization fosters the negative stigma associated with mental health because “collectively” Senegalese society views mental health negatively. I argue for this individualized approach to understanding mental health by first asking how different generations of women understand their situations and the various pressures placed on them by society and religion. Then, I look at women of lower socioeconomic status, in order to compare their stressors to those of women of higher socioeconomic status. From these findings, I introduce the next section which talks about the perception of happiness in Senegalese society specifically, and a non-Western society at large. I then conclude with discussing how the collectivist nature of society fosters the various coping mechanisms the women I interviewed use in order to move forward with their everyday lives.

Methodologies and Literature Review

Women in all cultures face many pressures from tradition, religion, society, etc. In Senegal, some of the daily pressures put on women are in the fields of economy, age hierarchy, religion, and family. All of these pressures make it difficult for women to live freely without feeling some constraint on how they move in society. However, despite this limited movement,

women find ways to gain agency, and to empower one another through the creation of different support groups related to the fields mentioned above.

Since part of my research question is discovering what mental health looks like in Senegalese society, I had to find a different way of identifying this term, since mental health means different things for different people. Thus, my research has centered on discovering how aspects such as religion, socioeconomic status, age, and tradition affect the mentality of women in urban Senegalese society and how they cope with such pressures. This idea of asking about daily pressures led me to understanding how such pressures affect the mentality of the different women and how each views her situation. I conducted seven individual interviews with women of different socioeconomic statuses and of different ages, and one group interview with two housekeepers. This paper only contains pseudonyms so as to maintain confidentiality of the interviewees. Religion is an important aspect of Senegalese society, so this was one of the first questions I asked in how it may add to the daily experiences of women since there are set rules and guidelines created by organized religion, for how women should move through society.

Embedded within Senegalese society is the facet of Islam, a large factor that determines how society is constructed and the various expectations placed on the individual. Although there are limited actions of what women can do in the performance of Islam, the woman is seen as the symbol of the family and the foundation for the building of a great religious leader. According to the Murid brotherhood, the ideal woman is thought to be unchallenging to the brotherhood and is someone who loves the power structure present in the brotherhood, although it is excluding to her (Bop, 2005, p. 1114). Thus, the woman is idealized to maintain this perfect image of complete obedience and trust in the brotherhood, in order to emulate this to her children who it is

hoped will become great leaders. The woman is made to be this symbol of ultimate piety, even though she cannot engage in many of the religious tasks that would give her more of a connection to the divine.

Since women are limited in how they can practice Islam in terms of biological impurities they face, they come up with alternative ways to actively practice their religion. Women have worked within the limits created by religion to gain power and to empower one another, one such way being participation in the *dahira*. The *dahira* is a religious association in which both men and women, separately, participate. These associations meet to collect money to support a marabout, or religious leader, that the members of the group choose allegiance to (Bop, 2005, p. 1109). Women use these groups as tools to express their spirituality publicly and as a member of such a group, one is considered to be a true believer. They also believe that allegiance to a marabout will provide spiritual support to overcome different hardships they may face (Bop, 2005, p. 1109). However, these *dahiras* are not just ways to show devotion to religion: “There are other, especially social, reasons explaining women’s commitment to *dahiras*. They constitute autonomous spaces where women can meet, where they can give and receive support from other women,” (Bop, 2005, p. 1109). Although these groups are formed with the initial purpose of gathering funds to support a marabout, they evolve into spaces, especially for women, to provide one another support and to discuss their daily lives with women in similar situations. It is an opportunity to leave their daily pressures at the door and to just be themselves, gaining support and being empowered by other women.

In addition to pressure from an ideal created in religion, women in Senegal also face pressure from their families and communities in terms of providing funds for certain needs. This

became another point I wanted to cover in my interviews, especially with those conducted with women who work as housekeepers and who moved to Dakar from rural villages. In Senegal, the nuclear family is not of primary importance; every family member, no matter how distantly related, is one's obligation to care for. Often, this obligation of care falls onto the matriarchs of the household. Women are feeling more and more pressure to find ways to make money because of their constant obligations in providing goods and services to their families and communities (Guérin, 2006, p. 554). Such community obligations consist of making donations to the imam, contributing to the community tax, providing funds for ceremonies, and housing nieces and nephews who are away from their parents (Guérin, 2006, p. 554). The struggle women face when becoming more and more in charge of household finances, is that they have limited ways in which they can obtain such capital. "More and more women are assuming the role of head of household, yet they continue to face difficulties in obtaining paid employment. The only option-self employment-is equally challenging because women's access to property, land, and credit remains limited," (Guérin, 2006, p. 550). This limited access to gaining capital is another way in which women must be creative in their means of fulfilling obligations. They must navigate a society and a system which limits them, in order to find means to become independent and thus gain a level of empowerment.

I asked each woman if she has or had a job at some point in her life, to understand more about what could add to the daily pressures she may face. Some women in Senegal engage in self-employment and more informal ways of gaining capital since many women have to also care for the family, and thus cannot have formal employment where they leave the house all day. A study was conducted by Safiétou Kane (2013) in Grand Yoff, about women in lower

socioeconomic positions navigating the limitations they face when needing to provide for their families. In her study, Kane (2013) found that “almost all women in the sample were responsible, financially, for themselves and their children,” (p. 50). In many cases, these women do not have the financial backing of their husbands to provide initial capital to them to begin their business or to purchase different commodities to sell. Thus, many of these women engage in microcredit circles or *tontines* where groups of women in one neighborhood, or from one ethnic group, or from the same place of origin, etc. gather together and contribute a fixed amount of money either weekly or monthly to a pot which one person gets each rotation (Guérin, 2006, p. 556). The person is sometimes selected randomly, or it is based on the most immediate need. Even women of higher socioeconomic classes engage in *tontines* because they can have different purposes other than providing basic necessities for one’s family. Some *tontines*, like *dahiras*, are for gathering money for religious purposes like ceremonies and for giving donations to a religious leader of the community (Guérin, 2006, p. 557). These *tontines* also provide a way for women to save their money by using their allegiance to the *tontine* as an excuse to use with relatives who ask for funds (Guérin, 2006, p. 557). Many women put their savings into the pot of the *tontine* so as not to be tempted to use all their money at once, and to also take time to think about what they really need. Thus, *tontines* exist as both ways of supporting and helping one another, and also as a way for the individual to save oneself from rash decisions and purchases.

Although *tontines* provide many resources for women, they also can be a pitfall for women who are in lower socioeconomic positions, and who are truly on their own in terms of financial support. In her article on women’s relation to money in Senegal, Isabelle Guérin (2006) states a common issue amongst *tontines*:

In addition to goods and services, honor, prestige, humiliation, shame, and even disgrace can be exchanged. To be indebted or to be the recipient of a good or service-making the distinction between a debt or a gift is largely a question of semantics-is to manifest and express one's identity. (p. 559)

The vulnerabilities of some women come to full-focus when engaging in these microfinance groups. There is not always a full reciprocity that is exchanged, especially for women of lower socioeconomic status, as seen in the study conducted by Kane (2013) in Grand Yoff. In her article she highlights the important of social capital that women engage with in these microcredit groups. "Microfinance models and programs tend to rely on the poor's support systems, especially their social networks..." (Kane, 2013, p. 51). Microcredit groups are formed out of one's social network which is important because an element of trust needs to exist in order to know that all loans will be paid back, and that each woman will contribute her share each rotation. As a result of debts not being paid, social ties have the possibility of being severed, thus decreasing the social, not just financial, support system of women. When assessing the success of microcredit groups, it is important to keep in mind the different situations of women in Senegal and how not all are able to pay back debts, because of all the pressures to care for their families and to also make sure their spouses are not ashamed. Kane (2013) found in her study, that many of the women were unable to pay back their loans because they gave all their money to their husbands to make it seem that they (the husbands) were the sole providers (p. 53). Women who are just trying to provide for their families experience more tension of the individual vs. the community conflict than men do, because of these domestic obligations to their children, and because of the limited opportunities for obtaining capital. Their support systems are invaluable to

their survival, but unfortunately are sometimes at risk because of their many obligations of being the sole providers for their families, and societal pressures of maintaining the man-to-woman hierarchy.

Since these *tontines* are limited to women who have the means of engaging in them, I kept the question of social groups open, to include those other than *tontines*, and also to understand more about different groups that exist for different purposes other than distributing money. As seen with the *tontines*, groups of women that have an initial purpose unrelated to providing support and empowerment to one another, turn into such support groups while the women meet to exchange whatever there is to exchange: money, goods, etc. The social rather than material aspects of these meetings are what provide the women emotional support in addition to material support. Another such group is the *Dimba*, a group created for women to provide resources related to reproductive health, child health, and women's health, but one that has turned into a support group for women in precarious situations (Niang, 1994, p. 39). The *Dimba* groups are present in all ethnic groups in the southern part of Senegal, Mali, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau (Niang, 1994, p. 39). To be allowed access to such a group, a woman has to be in one of following four categories: women who are infertile, women who had stillborns or children who died at a young age, women who have twins, and women who have adopted orphans, (Niang, 1994, p. 40). Each *Dimba* group has a leader who is usually an elderly woman trained in the medical field and who has knowledge of women and babies' illnesses. There are some men present in each group, who are responsible for treating couples with STDs and taking care of certain religious practices of healing that only a man can perform (Niang, 1994, p. 40). In addition to providing healing support, the *Dimba* also becomes a place for women to exchange

their personal stories and to empower one another to overcome the challenges they are facing.

They also advocate for one another in their respective households. For example, the *Dimba* has the authority of removing a woman from her home if her husband is not treating her well while she is pregnant (Niang, 1994, p. 41). In situations like these, the *Dimba* become more than just a resource; they are a voice for women when they may not be able to use their own.

Despite the added pressure of being a woman of low socioeconomic status, such women tend to have more freedom in their movement, quite literally, in Senegal. Dance is an integral part of Senegalese culture, usually present at religious and cultural ceremonies. However, with the spread of Islam, some dance is deemed illicit and thus restricted by Islamic religious leaders (Heath, 1994, p. 88). Many higher class women who are wives of religious Muslim men, denounce the practices of some women who engage in dances such as sabar dances, which are thought to be more illicit in their style and which are not associated with a particular religious ceremony (Heath, 1994, p. 92). There is a Wolof notion that those who dance freely and without restraint, belong to a lower class and are more concerned with sexual pleasures; “restraint is the hallmark of high status,” (Heath, 1994, p. 95). This notion could stem from the fact that higher class people and those who live in Dakar (where there is pronounced Wolof representation), have had more interaction with the West through education, and thus are made to notice such promiscuity that is not even a notion in the minds of those who perform the traditional dances. Women who do not have such contact with the West, are more likely to come from rural areas and different ethnic groups, and are able to move more freely in society and dance without restraint since there are less societal expectations for them to maintain, or that they care about maintaining. Class is a western concept that many people in rural areas do not understand as they

see a community of people as all of the same status, working together for the greater good of the community. However, with the imposition of the concept of class in Senegalese society, comes the adoption of caring about one's reputation; a concept that those in rural villages and those deemed of lower socioeconomic status, don't have. This idea of class affects the ability of women to be expressive and shows how women of "lower status" can interact more freely with society since there are not as many social pressures to maintain. Thus, women's unrestricted dance becomes a form of soft power and resistance by women of lower socioeconomic status as Deborah Heath (1994) states in her article, "On one level, dance, as an expression of resistance, reveals something about the partial autonomy of women in the gender politics of urban Senegal," (p. 88). Women gain this autonomy to express themselves freely, without worry about what those of higher status think. They use their direct resistance against the politicians or powerful leaders who try to prohibit their seemingly illicit dancing, and use dance as a soft power to gain autonomy in how they move throughout society.

Despite their ability to engage in more resistance because of less societal pressures, women of lower socioeconomic status are more subject to abuse and neglect than women of higher status, which can further add to the stressors of their everyday lives. A study was conducted in Dakar in 2017 about the epidemiological and clinical aspects of reported cases of domestic violence. The researchers found that more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the victims described in the cases they obtained were housekeepers, and in 82.4% of the cases the women were not educated (M. M. Leye et al., 2017). This striking data shows the vulnerable positions housekeepers often are placed in, and how they are treated by the families they work for, as well as by Senegalese society at large.

Despite this direct resistance, there are still other stressors added to the lives of some women in Senegal whose husbands live abroad. Since the 1980s economic crisis in Senegal, many men will go abroad to seek better opportunities for work and then plan to bring their fortunes back home. They feel that the only way to maintain a better life in Senegal is to go abroad to make enough money to sustain such a better life. In Wolof, the term for an immigrant's wife is "jabarou immigré," (Hannaford, 2017, p. 1). With this term come connotations of women who are "opportunistic gold-diggers, forsaken lonely hearts, and naive dupes," (Hannaford, 2017, p. 1). The romanticized perception of the West is not only held by those who emigrate, but also by their wives who firmly believe that their husbands will come back with all this fortune. However, the harsh reality that many men face is that they do not have such luck in maintaining a fortune for their families back at home. Many men will conceal this harsh reality from their wives, in fear that if they found out what humble conditions they were living in, their wives would lose respect for them (Hannaford, 2017, p. 8). While their husbands are abroad, many of the wives have to step up and become the household head and provider for the rest of the family. Alternatively, many women will move in with their in-laws and thus, become inferior to the elder women of the household (Hannaford, 2017, p. 3). In addition to the loss of power in some situations, especially when they move in with their in-laws, many women in transnational marriages also lose an aspect of agency and control in their relationships to their husbands, as stated in the book, *Marriage Without Borders* by Dinah Hannaford (2017):

Senegalese women discuss at length their soft power within a marriage: using incense, food preparation, sex, and various forms of adornment as key tools of negotiation and influence within their marital unions. Women in transnational

marrriages cannot take advantage of these resources and thus wield considerably less power within their marriages than their counterparts in non-transnational marriages. (p. 9)

Women in these distant relationships lose their ability to exert soft power over their spouses through the various resources mentioned above. They lose this sense of agency, of using their physical presence to gain influence over their husbands and to empower themselves through creative ways. Thus, this inability to have agency over one's life, both in familial relationships and spousal relationships, is another stressor added to the daily lives of some Senegalese women.

Empowerment is an important aspect of my research, because it is what comes from these social circles in helping the women move forward in their daily lives. Thus, I had to find a way to define empowerment in the context of these women's lives, so as not to impose my own understanding of such. A study was conducted on the shortcomings of Demographic and Health Surveys' (DHS) methods of defining women's empowerment in Sub-Saharan African countries. The authors of the study, Jessica Heckert and Madeline Short Fabic (2013), argued that DHS cannot use the same survey questions in analyzing this factor as they do in South Asian countries. The reason for the need for different methods is that women move differently in Sub-Saharan African countries, such as their ability to go unnoticed in the public sphere and their ability to have control over their own finances. Heckert and Fabic (2013) interviewed gender and health experts in Ghana, Mozambique, Senegal, and Uganda, asking them their perceptions of the current DHS questions on empowerment and how they should be adapted for societies in these four countries (p. 324). Some of the interviewees expressed the need for the survey to include questions about women's perceptions of their husbands' families and communities, and

the various expectations they receive from such. They also expressed an issue with the current survey prioritizing the individual woman's experience without regard to how her behavior and experience is affected by her community. Women's empowerment in seeking reproductive healthcare, participating in economy, making household decisions, and feeling empowered in the pursuing of their legal rights, are all affected by their familial obligations and expectations from their communities. A lot of the women's decisions are based on them thinking about their families and communities and what will be best for them, rather than the women themselves. The pressures women receive from their families and communities are what affect their ability to be empowered in various aspects of their lives. The DHS has to consider the heavy influence and importance of the collective over the individual in Senegalese society, specifically in the lives of Senegalese women. Therefore, I had to keep in mind the collectivity of Senegalese society when talking about empowerment. In order to do this, I asked if the women find themselves gathering with other women of similar situations in order to discuss their problems and help one another through situations they may be facing. I did not ask about how they as individuals solve their problems, because this would not be attributable to these women's lives in the collectivist society that is present in Senegal.

Although there are various support groups for women in Senegal as described above, there is still a prominent issue with how mental health is perceived in Senegal, which in turn limits people, more specifically, women's abilities to discuss their stress openly. One study was conducted by Monteiro et al. (2014) on policy perspectives and attitudes towards mental health in Senegal. The researchers interviewed health workers in urban and rural Senegal to discover such community perceptions. They found that most Senegalese primary care providers are not

equipped or trained to deal with mental health issues (Monteiro et al., 2014, p. 2). They also found that “interpersonal conflict and daily stresses were the top precipitants of hospitalization in a group of 1,025 adult psychiatric patients,” (Monteiro et al., 2014, p. 3). Since mental health is treated and viewed in the most extreme standards, most people who are hospitalized for mental illnesses are a result of not having an outlet to deal with their stress and conflict. The study found that health workers themselves describe mental illness as only a serious diagnosis such as schizophrenia, or anything that makes someone not fit into the social norms of their society (Monteiro et al., 2014, p. 5). So as not to imply this negative definition of mental health in my research, I instead asked women about how they find their happiness, hoping that this would help me discover more about how they perceive their situations. Mental health is immediately viewed in a negative, extreme way without much practice of going to an outpatient psychologist. Therefore, this leads to the creation of emotional support circles within organizations of people, specifically women, that were not originally intended to provide such emotional support. It is this invention of emotional support circles and the factors that cause the need for such support, that I am examining in this research study.

I think my background as an American psychology student who also suffers from mental health issues affects my research because of the want to define the women’s issues as similar to my own. However, I know I cannot do this if I am trying to accurately portray the women’s situations and feelings. I am also a white American which can affect how I perceive what I observed as I entered the spaces of interviews and other social gatherings. My whiteness is a visible marker that I am someone who is not from the country and who is not familiar with the cultural practices. Thus, while in these spaces, I had to ensure that I did not take up too much

space when in these private spaces. The normal routines of undoubtedly changed by someone new being present in the space, but there was an opportunity of me being embraced into their gatherings since I was invited into their space. As an American, I also have to remember that I am coming from a society where relations between men and women are framed differently, where the support of women to each other is not the same, where solidarity is not expressed the same way, where family does not have the same meaning, etc. I also have the hindrance of not being fluent in French or Wolof which prevented me from engaging in a more fluid conversation with the women I interviewed. With this inability to speak the language, I had to bring a translator to most of the interviews, and although the translator was always a Senegalese woman, there was still a barrier in the conversation since the interviewee would most often speak directly to the translator, instead of me. On the other hand, I think my own experience with mental health issues, and being a woman myself, helped me relate more to these women and be able to share more of my own experience with them. I was also younger than most of the women I interviewed which helped me by the women wanting to explain more things to be since there is a big value placed on elders educating the younger. I am also a foreigner which motivated them to want to explain things even more to me and to make sure that I understood since I am coming from the outside. I was also trusted and allowed into more private spaces because I too am a woman.

Findings and Discussion

From Generation to Generation

I began this project knowing that I wanted to interview women of different generations in order to understand the different pressures they may face from society, religion, and their roles in

their households. I found that the interviews I conducted with the younger women, were longer and more in depth than the interviews I had with older women. The younger women were more open to a discussion and provided longer answers to the questions I asked. Perhaps this is because I myself am younger, so I found it easier to relate to these women. Also, both interviews with the younger women were conducted in English, which provided more of an opportunity for me to ask follow-up questions. In interviewing the younger women, I found that they both feel pressure from society to get married, and subsequently, pressure from the expectations that come with being a married woman; expectations backed by the discussions conducted with the older women.

One woman I interviewed, Mathe, is in her mid-20's and spent time abroad obtaining her bachelor's and master's degrees. I wanted to get her perspective on the pressures she may have felt from her family when she came back from her time in Europe, after finishing her studies. She recalled that upon her return, her parents immediately began discussing with her the need for her to begin considering marriage since she had finished her studies and, therefore the right time to find a husband. She conveyed to me that there is this loss of appeal when a woman starts working and has a salary, because men become afraid to get married to her since she is so independent. Upon hearing this, she was really discouraged and thought that her parents were stuck in the past. She understood that as a young woman, it is important to have a job and to be strong because if she were to just rely on her husband, she will not be able to survive. How is she to know if her husbands will one day just stop caring for her? There is no assurance from a husband that he will constantly provide. However, she said that upon reflection, she recognized

that her parents were right in the fact that it is difficult to move in society as an unmarried woman, and that it was essential for her future that she become married.

Another woman I interviewed, Aicha, is also in her 20's and is currently working a full-time job. I opened our interview by asking her if she feels any pressures from her family, as did Mathe, regarding marriage since she is approaching the age where most women get married in Senegalese society. Like Mathe, she explained this inner dichotomy that exists with her feelings about marriage. On the one hand, she is afraid to get married because that means she will have to move into her husband's mother's house since Senegal is a matrilineal society. She knows this will not be easy to move in with another family, and that some of her independence will be lost since the woman of the house makes all the decisions, and in this case, it would be her husband's mother. She put this dilemma into perspective, though, by saying that problems are unavoidable; that there is no way of living life without having problems. She knows that she will have problems in her life, regardless of what she does, so it is a matter of how she is going to face these problems rather than avoid them.

On the other hand, she is excited to get married and have a family of her own. She even described the hope that marriage will bring "living in better conditions, physically and mentally because when you get married, you have more accessibilities, you get mature." After she discussed this point about improving conditions "mentally," I followed up and asked her what she meant by this. She replied:

You will be more at ease in society. When they know you are married, they will respect you and when you move to another house, you have a kind of freedom because you can make your own decisions...you will try to manage to make things perfect even if perfect

doesn't exist...But in terms of your own improvement, maybe socially or in a professional way, you can make it happen. In the house, you have to obey what the mother says or what your husband says.

In terms of making decisions in her own house, she meant making decisions about her own children and smaller family, rather than the larger family, of which the mother of the house has agency over. However, she emphasized this respect that comes with being a married woman in Senegalese society. Being married, as she described, brings this level of maturity to a woman, a maturity that she has to develop since she has moved into a different social sphere, and there is a different expectation for how she will move in society. She told me that society expects a married woman to take charge in her responsibilities and to exude an ideal created by both religion and society. There are clear rules and responsibilities outlined for a married woman in both religion and society, such as caring for the family and portraying a dutiful believer in God, so as to model this for her children. She highlighted that children follow whatever their mothers do so society, "wants the Muslim woman to be respectful, to live according to the Muslim principles because she is an example, even in the society. We see that the woman is the sustenance of the society. It is up to her to make balance in the society. That is why we have to be respectful in our behavior and way of dress." A woman is responsible for balancing all these different aspects of the Senegalese way of life: religion, family, society, and community; all of which I will later discuss in my interviews with older women. As a young woman who has seen older women as role models, Aicha now knows what will be expected of her when she accepts the status of a married woman. It is also seen that when a woman gets married, she is seen as truly worshipping God since marriage is recommended by law. It is also a common belief that

God is brought into each marriage. Having this belief helps one to respect religion more since every blessing in a marriage is seen as a gift from God. With this in mind, it is up to each woman to uphold these responsibilities, as the doing of such is seen as her devotion to God.

At the same time, Aicha discussed how as a younger woman, she has more freedom to move in society. Although more respect is gained when one becomes married, an unmarried woman has fewer responsibilities that she has to uphold and be concerned with. As she described:

I think that now I have, I can call it power. Because when you're not married yet you have time to fulfill some of your dreams. You won't have difficulties in terms of going out with your friends or dealing with your passions...right now I can make it happen. But when you get married with the charge you have at home with preparing dinner or lunch or something like that, you won't have time at all. But right now you have time to make everything happen, if you have the means you can make everything happen. You can interact with people and meet new people from time to time. You can finish your studies and without pressure and without any problems or difficulties...at this age you are living with what we call independence.

After Aicha had just described all the expectations from society for married women, and how with this comes more respect, she then told me about all the independence she has as a younger woman. She does not have a family of her own to think about and to provide for, so she has the time to set out in fulfilling her dreams and passions. She enjoys the life she has now, especially since she does not have to answer to a husband or mother-in-law, as she would have if she were

married. At the same time, she is still thinking about her future as a married woman and is looking forward to this next chapter in her life.

I spoke with a Christian woman in her late 60's, Mamma Faye, in order to get her perspective on the pressures she may feel as an older, Christian woman in a predominantly Muslim country. I interviewed her after my first interview with a younger woman, Mathe, so I was able to confirm what Mathe had told me about expectations to get married, from the information I got from Mamma Faye. She described how one of the stressors she faces as an older woman is when she has an older daughter who is not married, and is concerned for her well-being and future for when she (Mamma Faye) is no longer around. She also discussed how she is concerned about having enough money to provide for her family since, as Mathe described, it is not feasible to be solely reliant on the husband to provide:

It's a hard-working woman who can make it in this society. Men alone cannot deal with all the expenses in the house because life is expensive nowadays, especially when you have kids. I live right now with three of my sons and their wives. On top of that there are other people coming to the house that I have to take care of, so it is difficult. In Senegal people are used to having three meals a day which are breakfast, lunch and dinner and each of them is expensive. We're thanking god we're having the minimum to survive. She explained how when she first moved to Dakar to live with her husband, she wanted to start working when she had her last children so as to be able to help generate income in the household. Her husband was a teacher at the time, and she knew they could not rely on his salary alone to afford the necessities for all their children. It is often that all the domestic responsibilities are placed on the woman such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the

children, but many times she also has to also go out and work in order to ensure that the domestic responsibilities can be completed; lunch cannot be served if there is no money to buy the necessary ingredients. In her older age, Mamma Faye now finds herself responsible for her own husband who is older than she is, and who is dependent on her to provide transportation for him. She is now the sole possessor of their finances, and he comes to her when he needs to go somewhere and pay for his transportation. Thus, on top of worrying about her grown children and their children, she also worries about her elder husband who is more reliant on her than ever to provide for his needs, something he can no longer do for himself.

She also described the aspect of educating her children in the ways of Christianity and how this is another responsibility of a married woman and mother, but how living in a predominantly Muslim country does not affect her ability to do so. She highlights that although it is her responsibility to raise and educate her children in her family's faith, they (her children) have the opportunity to change their religion and practice the one that they find themselves in most align with. Also, if her daughter were to marry a Muslim man and then become Muslim, she expressed that this is okay too because of the structure of Senegalese society.

Aside from the domestic responsibilities of married women, there are also obligations to the community and to the larger family. I interviewed another older woman, Mamma Tal who described the different *tontines* she participates in, and how each *tontine* serves a specific purpose in helping different communities. One of her *tontines* involves women in the neighborhood in which she lives, and its main purpose is to give money each month to two women who are chosen by lottery. The main use for the money by each woman, is to fund different ceremonies each is responsible for hosting, such as baby namings, weddings, and

funerals. Mamma Faye described the importance of such a *tontine* (she is also a member of the *tontine* with Mama Tal):

There is always stress at home...you learn that one of your family members has passed away and you have to financially help for the funeral. Or they tell you that one of your family members is at the hospital while you don't even have a thousand CFA in your pocket and you have to figure out where to get money.

The women are the sources of providing for their extended families in any respect. They are the first ones people in the family come to when they need help. This added obligation of focusing on not just the nuclear family, but also on the family at large, creates a wider scope of the pressures placed on women, especially older women whose families have extended with the growth of their children.

In addition to the obligation of a woman to host religious ceremonies for her family, she is also seen as a provider for her community. The other *tontine* Mamma Tal is involved in, is for women of her home community that now live in Dakar. They meet each month to gather money primarily for the people of their home community, and then agree on what the money should go towards in terms of improvements for their home community. I observed such a meeting, and saw how they discussed, ever so passionately, how they were going to build a new maternity wing in the hospital back in their home community. They also discussed how they had made such efforts to build a new mortuary, but how the community back home was ungrateful for this project since they thought it had turned out too small. Even though the women took so much of their time and resources to make this project happen, they still received criticism from their

community. However, Mamma Tal reassured them that if they listened to all the critics they would never accomplish anything.

The Unheard Voices

One of the main motivations for this project was to discover and learn about a field that not many have taken an interest in, or even thought about in Senegalese society. I wanted to ask the questions many do not think to ask, and listen to the voices that are often undermined. Thus, I could not complete this project without including the perspective of those who are often overlooked, not just in Senegalese society, but in universal societies at large. These “unheard voices” are those of the housekeepers who come to Dakar to find work, and whose lives are full of so much depth and complexity, it is a must to inquire about.

I was put in contact with a woman named Athia, who serves as an outreach coordinator for women coming to Dakar find work as housekeepers. She puts them in contact with families who are looking to hire, but also advocates for these women when need be. She, along with a man and another woman, volunteers to help these women without expecting anything in return. When I asked her what motivated her to help these women she told me, “As a mother, I care about everybody, especially women. And I don’t expect anything in return.” As I interviewed her, I could sense her passion for helping these women, through her voice and facial expressions. She cares so much for each woman who walks into her doorway and only wants the best for them. She also knows how many people don’t even think to inquire about these women and who don’t care to be their advocates as she said, “Many things happen in Senegal, but people don’t dare talk about it. And that is a great pleasure to have you here trying to find out some solutions or just talk about it.” She greatly appreciated my coming to speak with her and some of the

women she asked to come, because she saw this as a way for their stories to be heard by the larger public. Through the intonations in their voice and the passion that was difficult not to notice, I could tell that they were not given much opportunity to talk about their frustrations. Although some things that were said were difficult to hear, I was fortunate to be in that space where a level of trust was established amongst us to share and discuss something that many don't inquire about.

Athia shared some of the logistical information with me, about how she coordinates the work for the women and what happens if there is a negative situation. She explained that many of the women who come to her, come from peripheral areas around Dakar and she is the first person they come see when they arrive. After finding a family for the women to work in, she arranges a fair and just salary for the family to pay. Sometimes, despite the arrangement beforehand, the family neglects to pay the salary on time, jeopardizing the financial situation of many of the women. In cases such as these, Athia and her team advocate for the women and demand that they be paid. However, some cases are beyond Athia's control. She told me of one woman who became pregnant by one of the family members in the house she worked in. The family wanted to terminate the pregnancy and fire the housekeeper, out of fear of disgrace for their family. In this situation, Athia removed the woman from the house and ensured that she would be able to keep the baby, as per her wish. When there is a termination of work, the women have to go back to their villages because there is nowhere for them to stay in Dakar without work. In these situations, there is a *tontine* between the housekeepers where each woman contributes 2,000 CFA each month, and then the women who need the money to go back home will receive the money that month. They also have time to come together once in a while and

discuss with Athia and each other, the difficulties and frustrations they are facing in their homes. Athia serves as a mentor for many of these women, whom without her, would not have anyone in their corner upon their arrival to Dakar. She stressed to me that this group she created is not a formal association recognized by the government; it is simply a way for her to provide assistance to those who are so often overlooked by such beauracrices. She just wants to help as many women as she can without any political involvement. For her, it is clearly not about the money or the prestige; it is simply her extending her care and motherly protection to those beyond her own children.

The two women Athia called to come meet with me were both housekeepers who have their own families in Dakar, as well as back in the villages from which they came. One appeared to be in her late-20's while the other was significantly older, about mid-50's. The younger housekeeper shared how there is much pressure on her to send money back home because none of her siblings have finished their schooling, making jobs very limited. She has four children of her own and a husband without a salary-paying job, making her situation very difficult. I found this interesting, especially since she was around the same age as some of the younger women I interviewed. These younger women expressed the many opportunities of being young and unmarried, as this is a time to fulfill one's dreams and gain enough education to do so. However, this opportunity is only accessible to women of higher socioeconomic status who have the support and backings of their families. I saw this woman sitting in front of me, so young yet also so tired and frustrated with her situation. I could only imagine how her life would be different if she had been given the same opportunities as the other young women I interviewed. The older

woman expressed similar sentiments, as she also has a family to care for in Dakar as well as in her village.

As I asked about the women they work for, a passion was ignited in the younger woman's voice as she began to talk about her boss. She has many frustrations with not being paid on time, when she knows the family has money. When I asked about her relationship to the woman she works for she said, "Where I work, they criticise and don't trust you. Whatever you have to do has to be in their presence because they are too complicated...they don't care about your kids or your needs." Unlike many of the live-in housekeepers I have observed during the time I have spent in upper-middle class households in Dakar, these women seemed to not have a good relationship with their bosses. They only got breaks at mealtimes, and their bosses would only talk to them when they needed something done.

To compare these housekeepers' situations to those of live-in housekeepers, I interviewed one woman who has been working about the same amount of time for her family as the women Athia introduced me to, but whose relationship with the family is very different. The housekeeper, Fatou, is somewhat related to the family she works for which is how she came in contact with them. The woman of the house brought her to Dakar about four years ago after her (Fatou's) own mother had passed away. She is given room and board in the house, while responsible for completing household chores for the family. She conveyed to me that she has always felt a part of the family and that she is treated like another one of her boss' children. When I asked her what she sees in her future, she described her dreams of playing soccer which is one of the reasons why she wanted to come to Dakar. However, she feels too shy to ask the family for an opportunity such as this because she feels like she owes them so much for bringing

her to Dakar and does not want to ask for so much. From this interview I learned that in a situation like Fatou's and the live-in housekeeper who works for Mamma Faye (I asked Mamma Faye about her relationship to her housekeeper and she said she is like on of her daughters), it seems that live-in housekeepers are able to establish more of a relationship with the family. However, this is just what it seems to be from an outsider perspective. I will never be able to get the full picture from the women I interview because they may be holding back information out of fear of jeopardizing their jobs. From what I have observed, there is more of a relationship between women and their live-in housekeepers, but not the same relationship as they (the bosses) have with their own children. There is limited access and opportunities for the housekeepers than there would be for the children of their bosses.

As I was processing the information shared with me from the interview with Athia and the housekeepers, there were some background conversations happening between the women. I later understood, through translation, that they were talking about how they (the housekeepers) wished to have a kind boss who would take care of them and have empathy towards them. This conversation was prompted by the questions I asked about the women's relationships to their bosses. Perhaps they had never thought this type of relationship to be possible, until I brought up the possibility of an alternative situation, or perhaps this is something they have always longed for. Can this relationship only come once trust is established between the housekeeper and the woman of the house, and can this trust only come if the housekeeper lives in the house? In my conversations with older women of higher socioeconomic status, they expressed how they prefer to keep personal issues within the confines of their homes. Sharing personal information bonds women together, because the sharing requires an immense amount of trust. Women sharing with

their housekeepers is a sign of a great bond between them, causing the women to see the housekeepers more as their own children and less as employees. There is a blurring of class, something that does not happen with the housekeepers I interviewed as they expressed, “They (their bosses) don't allow you to sit with them and talk. They always will show you that they are your boss and nothing more.” This something “more” seems to exist only in the relationships between live-in housekeepers and their bosses, but one can never truly know as an outsider, if these types of close relationships actually exist.

Regardless of the type of relationship between the boss and the housekeeper, one thing is clear: women of lower socioeconomic status do not have access to the types of opportunities that women of higher socioeconomic status do. They move differently in society: they are not treated with as much respect, and they have an immense amount of pressure on them to provide for their families back at home. They are the beacons of hope for their communities to move to the city and make enough money to provide for their families. With the many obligations and expectations resting on their shoulders, and the limited opportunities to complete such, women who are housekeepers face a life of struggle. With little time for themselves and not enough money to join a *tontine* or some other type of social circle, they must find alternative ways to cope with their situations.

What is happiness?

An issue that arose in most of my interviews was the concept of happiness and my wanting to know how the women define their individual happiness. This is a popular concept in the United States where we are always asking each other what makes one happy. This construct is so important to people in the U.S. because there is this belief that everything you do in life

should make you happy, and if it does not, then to figure out how it can. There is always a need to conceptualize things in terms of happiness, or else we fall into this hole of depression, and find ourselves unable to find a solution to any of our problems if there is no “light at the end of the tunnel.” We also define our problems as things that don’t make us happy. Therefore, when we attempt to solve our problems, we focus on the individual and use individual coping mechanisms to get through the problem. Thus, in order to try and conceptualize coping mechanisms used by urban Senegalese women, I asked how they define their happiness, hoping that their answers would lead me to understanding more about the coping mechanisms they use to reach such happiness.

During my interview with Mamma Faye, I realized that how I understand happiness is in a Western context and that this constant need to define happiness comes from a lack of community in the West. When I asked Mamma Faye about what makes her happy (trying to understand how she deals with the daily stressors she described) she explained to me that African women don’t think of happiness. They are not asking themselves, with every activity they do, if that makes them happy, or if they are happy in that exact moment. She highlighted all the issues she has to deal with in terms of her family and community, and how she can sometimes forget about these stressors when she meets with her friends:

Sometimes you need to forget about things because a lot of stress may reduce your life expectancy. If you were supposed to live 50 years, you will only live 30 years. Because you cannot consider all the issues you’re facing, you have issues coming from your mother’s side, you have issues coming from your father’s side and household issues, sometimes there’s issues from your family-in-law. You need to be strong, you need to be

religious and ask God to help you and your family. We're all the time stressed...You cannot be really happy with all those because you're always going through something. She described that in order to find some solace in her daily life, she has to try and forget all the issues resting upon her shoulders. If she does not try to forget, than she has no opportunity of enjoying the joyous moments in life. She knows that she will always have problems and that there is no world where her problems will cease to exist. Even younger women feel this same way, as expressed in my interview with Aicha when she said, "Problems, we can't avoid them; we never know what kind of problems we may have." All that she, Mamma Faye, and all other women who express this similar sentiment, have control over is how they cope with these problems. For Mamma Faye, this coping consists of meeting with friends and discussing problems, but also forgetting about these problems entirely when she leaves the home, which is often the source of her problems. It is not that she is repressing her worries and frustrations; it is that she is trying to enjoy the presence of those around her, something that can only be done if she tries to forget her stress. For her, it is not about being happy, but about appreciating her world and community.

Another woman I interviewed named Mamma Guèye, struggled to conceptualize her happiness when I asked her if she has time for herself and to make herself happy. She was troubled when I asked how she conceptualizes her happiness, because she could not think of a time when she did something solely for herself. She explained that Senegalese society does not operate based on individual happiness:

Maybe it is a Senegalese characteristic, I don't know, but...having time for me, as an individual is having time for others. I do not see what I would do by myself, by myself, I

don't see that; work maybe, but work is equally work for the others. Staying at home is investing myself for others, for the family, my son....my husband... I find pleasure through the group, the others. It is even hard for me...to say 'the others' because the others is part of me. What am I?

She described how passionate she is about her work and travelling for said work, something she no longer does as often. She appreciates having more time to spend with her family and to go to family events and ceremonies. However, she does miss this aspect of discovering different parts of Senegal and understanding how different regions operate. Even though she no longer does something as often that once brought her much joy, she is now able to find joy in spending time with her family. She explained to me that in Senegal, a woman is responsible for organizing and taking part in family events, but how she enjoys doing this and is glad she has more time to devote to these activities.

That being said, she does not define her happiness as coming from spending time alone or doing something purely for herself; her happiness comes from what she does for others. What I gathered from this, and other interviews, is that happiness in American society is conceptualized as something measured by the individual, but in Senegalese society it is defined by the community. People find themselves happy by doing things for others, which in turn brings about the social circles that are used to cope with and solve problems. In the U.S. we think about solving problems on the individual level, often by seeking help with therapists in one-on-one sessions; but in Senegalese society it is about gathering together in groups and discussing, something I delve into in the next section.

How do we move forward?

“How do we move forward? How do we find ways to pick ourselves up and keep moving along, with all the challenges weighing us down?” These are questions people often ask themselves when confronted with many struggles. Sometimes, well most times, it seems like it is impossible; impossible to see the “light at the end of the tunnel.” For as long as I can remember I was taught that to move forward you have to look within yourself, and only then can you rely on others for help; it’s the individual who has to do the initial work.

Perhaps it is because the U.S. is a very individualistic society, where the individual is at the center of almost everything, that there is this great emphasis placed on self-improvement and self-care. However, through my research, I found that Senegalese society’s process of moving forward is the complete opposite. It seems to rely on two types of relationships: those between persons and those between the human and the divine. These two types of relationships manifest themselves in unintentional social circles, mother-daughter relationships, and prayer; all ways that women in urban Senegalese society cope with the challenges they face.

In urban Senegal, it is more difficult to gather than in rural societies because there are different demands that come from living in an urban environment. There is often a lack of time since many women work, as well as take care of their own families. Most often, women meet for a specific purpose such as *tontines* for gathering money, and when they are planning certain events such as wedding ceremonies. However, these spaces often turn into social circles when the women gather and discuss. As Aicha told me:

Most women, they have it, even if they don’t know they are in the kind of circle where they meet, even if they don’t see it like that...you can see in the afternoons, people when

they finish having their lunch, they sit together and talk...even if this is not something formal.

Socialization is an integral part of Senegalese culture. Everyone is always socializing with one another, even in spaces that are not intended for such. They may initially discuss the issue at hand that caused them to gather, but the spaces quickly turn into discussing and sharing personal problems with one another. One such gathering I was told about is a type of *tontine* called *lekket*. In these gatherings, women dress up and only have to pay 500 CFA to be a part of the circle. One woman gets the pot of money each month, but they also meet to socialize and discuss. This type of circle is like a *tontine*, in that there is a pooling of money, but it is not solely for this purpose. As the woman who told me about this type of circle explained, “this is a meeting for them (women) to meet and forget about their problems.” This practice of trying to forget one’s problems in a moment of gathering, seems to be a common one amongst the women I interviewed. In the U.S., forgetting one’s problems is seen as a negative way to cope with one’s situation, but amongst Senegalese women, this is seen as the only way to move forward. If they don’t try to forget their problems, they will continue to dwell on them and will never accomplish anything. They know that there will always be problems, but rather than think about these problems, they find ways to cope with them by enjoying the company of their friends. Even at the *tontine* I observed (although most of the time was spent discussing who owes what and how the women are going to help the people of Joal) small circles broke out amongst the women, talking to one another about their personal problems at home. As Mamma Faye told me when I asked if the women in her *tontine* discuss their personal problems:

Yes, we do that too, if anybody has problems in their household, they let us know. We help them with any good ideas and give them good advice. Everybody is dealing with some problems in their household, and if you try to hold them to yourself, it may become complicated. But if you talk for example with someone like Mamma Tal, she can give you ideas about staying in your marriage and be strong. Because your kids will grow someday, and the problems you're facing will come to an end.

However, some women I interviewed discussed that they are more hesitant in sharing their personal problems in a group setting. They only care to share with their close friends or people within their home, because they feel that they cannot trust some of the women in the larger community. As one woman of a higher socioeconomic status told me "you want privacy in your house meaning you don't want people to know that you're going through." This concern partly comes from having to maintain a good reputation that comes with being of the higher class.

Women of lower socioeconomic status also find ways to gather, but these revolve more around social support than money exchange, because of the lack of means to engage in such *tontines* with high fees. Athia, the leader of the informal housekeepers' organization, expressed that she often creates a space where women can come meet with one another on their time off. However, this time is limited for them since many of them have to work second jobs in order to meet the needs of their families. Nevertheless, this type of gathering does exist where women feel comfortable to discuss their problems with one another and find ways to move forward.

When I discussed with Mamma Gueye about her involvement in the public health sector, she told me that she is often invited into the homes of the women she sees in regards to teaching them about sexual health. These women create their own social circles which they then invite

Mamma Gueye to, so she can offer a space of answering any questions and addressing any concerns in the comfort of the home. She discusses with them how to take care of themselves and their children, and how to best advocate for themselves when it comes to sexual protection. She described having sessions on self-esteem and advocacy so the women understand that they have great and important roles in society. She said it is not just about physical health, but also about social support: “That was not just giving care to the health side.....cares... medical consultation and everything but there was also the social aspect And..... they went together, they went hand in hand. One could not go without the other.” In these spaces, the women discuss with one another how they can empower each other to advocate for their health and how best to deal with the different situations they face. She emphasized how important it is for these women to be empowered and to advocate for what is best for their sexual health, because they cannot create vulnerable situations for their children.

Younger, unmarried women find that they have more opportunities to gather and socialize with one another because of their fewer responsibilities in the home. Aicha told me that she and her friends from high school created a circle for themselves to meet at least once a month, in order to ensure that they stay in touch. She describes it below:

We call it after my friend because it was created by this friend, but unfortunately she passed away and that’s why we still call it this. We meet each month and were friends from junior high. We said why not create something that could help us find time to meet, to talk, to have fun...we make the tour to each other’s houses. We don’t need to give money because when you talk about money, some people won’t come because they don’t have money. So when we come we can make tea...and talk about everything.

She discussed the limits presented to some women once money is involved in the gathering. Thus, to make it open and accessible to all, they don't involve the financial contribution aspect. They discuss all that is going on in each of their lives and find ways to help one another as best they can, whether that be through giving advice or just providing comfort. They also find time to discuss larger problems they find in their society and how they can go about fixing them. As she told me "We can bring solutions, but we won't bring solutions if we don't talk about the problems." Within Senegal's collectivist society, unintentional social circles are constantly created, where people discuss not only their problems, but also societal problems at large. It is this openness that allows for real change to be enacted and for people to feel comfortable in voicing their opinions. This is one of the reasons why Senegal has remained a peaceful country compared to the rest of the world: people find they can coexist, despite their differences, because they are open with one another.

The interpersonal relationships which provide the ultimate emotional support are those between mothers and daughters. Senegalese culture dictates that parents and children should have a relationship filled with respect and distance; that children should not know all the details about their parents' personal lives. Therefore, I was surprised when I found out from multiple younger and older women, that they do in fact have close relationships with their mothers and daughters, respectively. The first young woman I interviewed, Mathe, was also surprised by this close relationship that developed with her mother when she was around fourteen years old. Mathe explained that at this age her mom first approached her and told her that she had to know all about her mother's life; that they must not keep anything from each other because Mathe was her only daughter and they had to be close. Ever since this initial moment of sharing, Mathe and

her mother have maintained this close relationship where they share everything with one another. Mathe describes her mother's initial motivations for sharing her personal life with her daughter as the following:

When I was around 14, sometimes she was trying to explain to me (her personal life), without me asking, 'you should know that because you are no longer a little girl.' I was like 'why are you telling me all this? I'm still young' She said that sooner or later we are going to have to be very close because I can't go without you and you can't go without me and the two of us together can manage the family.

Her mother sees Mathe as her best friend; as the only other person, because she too is a woman, in the house with whom she can share her personal life. There is a level of distance that must be kept between women and men in terms of modesty and respect, but with another woman, everything can be shared. Before Mathe herself knew that she would gain so much from a close relationship with her mother, her mother knew they had to be close in order to support one another and to also support the family. Thus, even when Mathe was young and confused as to why her mother was breaking this boundary between them, her mother knew that eventually their relationship would turn into the one it is today.

Mathe and her mom share everything with one another; there is nothing Mathe feels uncomfortable discussing with her mother, and vice versa. At times, this close relationship has some strains in terms of generational differences, which in turn, reflects on Mathe's relationships with women her own age. She explained to me that she tries to explain to her mother that she (her mother) has to advise Mathe according to her own generation. Although her mother is very forward-thinking and more modern than most women her age, Mathe still finds herself

explaining to her mom why she cannot limit her to do certain things. Mathe explained that this type of relationship is not common between most mothers and daughters, which is why she is forever grateful for the type of relationship between her and her mother.

Some older women that I interviewed also expressed such a close relationship with the younger women in their house. Mamma Faye told me that when she has a problem to discuss, she first turns to her daughter-in-laws who live in the house with her, and to her live-in housekeeper who feels like another daughter. It is the matrilocality of Senegalese society that plays an integral role in facilitating such close relationships between older and younger women.

Although the social support circles help women move forward with their situations, the interconnectedness between women within the household, especially women of different generations, is what provides a more immediate outlet for support. There is no need to plan a gathering ahead of time, or to walk outside the home; the support system is built into the home because of the matrilocality of Senegalese society. Although this matrilocality can distance already close relationships between mothers and daughters when the latter gets married, it also brings women closer from different families, and in turn, creates a community of women both inside and outside the home. It is this aspect of matrilocality which fosters intergenerational relationships. It's these types of relationships which bring the older generation more in touch with the changing times, and which allow the younger generation to be empowered by the values and lessons their mentors have to teach.

For women of lower socioeconomic status, who do not have the time to meet with one another and discuss their problems, prayer is the method they use in order to move forward. It is a method which does not require the gathering of many people and which can be done at any

time, without objection from their bosses. When I interviewed the housekeepers from Athia's group, they expressed that there is no problem to pray in the households for which they work. In Senegal, prayer is something everyone can do, no matter the gender, class, or age. Thus, it cannot be restricted by their bosses because this would be against the values Senegalese culture is founded upon. Work can be paused for prayer since this is something so highly regarded and practiced in society. Prayer is actually the only thing that the women don't find a problem with in their relationships to their bosses. Therefore, prayer becomes an outlet during the work day, for the housekeepers to release their frustrations and find strength to move forward with their day. They pray to God for their children and family to be safe and healthy, and that their work will provide them with the means to live a sustainable life. They put their trust and faith in God to listen to their prayers, because this is the only way they can imagine themselves moving forward with all the challenges lined up against them.

Women of higher socioeconomic status also find prayer as an outlet for the pressures they face in everyday life. When I asked some of the women if they feel pressure from religion in the ways they move through society, many expressed how religion is the one thing they do not feel any pressure from; in fact it is a way in which they can truly express themselves. As Aicha explained to me:

It is not a problem at all because we have been living with it in a very simple way. It is part of our behavior, part of our education...it is part of our identity. When you take your religion as your identity, it won't be difficult at all for you to follow...When we talk about religion, we are talking about God. We know that everything depends on Him, everything will go back to him, so you won't have difficulties...but when you think of religion as

really hard and something difficult to deal with, you will have problems to really enjoy your religion. When you know that praying helps you to solve your problems and helps you to have piece of mind, you will not feel pressure.

Prayer is intertwined with the individual's relationship to the divine. For many women, putting all their faith in God and believing that God controls all the inner workings of the universe and all the aspects of their lives, provides a sense of solace in the minds of the women. They believe that someone is watching out for them and has a plan for them where everything will work out. No matter how difficult the challenges may be right now, there is a belief that God has placed these challenges for the women, and that there is a plan in the end where everything will make sense; where there will be a reason and a purpose for each challenge they faced.

Thus, the great emphasis placed on religion in Senegalese culture does not hinder, but rather amplifies the experience of women in urban Senegalese society. Prayer is the only coping mechanism that I found through my interviews, which does not rely on another person or people, but rather relies on the individual's relationship to the divine. In fact, it is one of the only aspects of Senegalese culture that is focused on the individual and that is most often done alone. Prayer is a form of meditation, which is one of the reasons why the women I interviewed find it so healing, and as a release from the pressures of their daily lives. Although many of them expressed enjoyment in talking to others who understand their situations, prayer becomes a way for them to have some time alone and communicate with God, who they know they can trust. This complete faith in a higher power is something many people do not understand or cannot fathom in the U.S. There is always this want by the individual to control every situation and try and predict all the outcomes. However, in a culture that places great emphasis on religion and

devotion to God, there is more desire to live in the moment and appreciate all that one has, thereby creating a more positive frame of mind.

Conclusion

This research provided me with many insights into the lives of women in urban Senegal, but also left me with more questions than I could have ever imagined. With all research, it is impossible to put one's assumptions and preconceived notions aside. Thus, I went into many of my interviews expecting my assumptions to be validated. I expected to hear that religion creates ideals for women which dictate how they can move in society, thus adding more to the pressures and challenges they face. I expected that all housekeepers are mistreated by their bosses and that there is no personal relationship between a woman and her help. I expected that the older and younger generations don't interact in many ways and that their experiences of society do not overlap at all. Finally, I expected to hear more about the individual experience, not in relation to others.

I began my research with all these assumptions, provided by my positionality as an American woman so deeply rooted in the study of Western psychology. I did not take into consideration the collective aspect of Senegalese society and how this could reflect greatly on the types of questions I was asking. What I found is that this exact aspect I forgot to consider, is what defined my entire research in the end. As a non-Western country so heavily based in collectivity, Senegal has no such aspect of individualism in its society. Everything operates around the idea of people supporting and providing for one another. This aspect of providing is especially characteristic of the woman's experience in Senegal. However, this is not an

experience that women think of as being a negative one. Yes, they see it as stressful and something they are always worrying about, but this does not mean they would have it any other way. The collective nature of Senegalese society does not provide a space for women to even think about changing their experience and role as provider to the household. There is stress and there are experiences that take a toll on the inner workings of women's minds, but these are not experiences they think about changing; just ones they find ways to cope with. Thus, in Senegalese society it is not about changing what makes one stressed, but rather accepting that these stressors are a part of one's life and finding ways to deal with the challenges. These coping mechanisms are essential so that women can continue to move forward and provide for others who rely so heavily on them.

Although these ways to cope are pretty common among Senegalese women in general, they do differ based on the different aspects of individual's lives. Women in urban spaces, where there is not much time or space to gather, find that they create unintentional social circles which provide group support for the different challenges they face. Although I did not have an opportunity to interview women in more rural spaces, I understood from the women I interviewed in Dakar, that because of the busy lives they lead, and because of the fast paced movement of the city, there are only times to gather for specific purposes such as planning ceremonies and engaging in *tontines*. However, in these spaces, there becomes an opportunity for women to socialize and discuss each other's problems, to which they can all offer solutions.

These solutions do not result in telling each other to change their situation, but rather to find a different way of thinking and perceiving their challenges. There is no conceptualization of changing one's situation, but rather finding a way to re-think a situation so it is possible to move

forward. This type of re-thinking and reframing is found in intergenerational relationships, interpersonal relationships, and human-divine relationships. The latter type of relationships are one of the only ways for women of lower socioeconomic status to cope with their situations since they have even less time and resources to gather than women of higher socioeconomic status.

Since my research is so heavily based on individual experiences and since I only interviewed a select amount of women, I cannot make general assumptions about the collective mentality of women in urban Senegal. The thing about our minds is that we all have different ones; we all think differently in some regard. There are no two exact minds who think alike and who agree about every single issue. To me, that is the most beautiful aspect of our minds; they are all so different. I also cannot even say I know all the inner workings of the minds of the women whom I interviewed. I cannot ensure that they told me exactly how they think because one, they could have been keeping things from me as someone they don't know well, and two, sometimes we can't even put into words all that we think. I can only report on what I was told and just be grateful to have had these conversations with such incredible women I am so fortunate to have met.

Although Senegal is a collectivist society, there is no collective identity or mentality. This is something to keep in mind when thinking about the questions I was left with after my interviews, which could serve as grounds for such further research. I want to investigate more about why happiness is not something many of the women I interviewed conceptualize. Where did this idea of not conceptualizing happiness come from? Since individual happiness is not thought about because of the collective nature of society, then where did this collectivist idea come from and how was the West created in such an individualistic manner? I would also like to

focus more on the experiences of the housekeepers and understand more about their reasons for coming to Dakar to find work. Is it just in order to provide money for their families or is there an inner desire to come to a bigger city with seemingly more opportunities? Finally, I would be interested in getting a male perspective on the woman's experience in Senegalese society and try to understand why there is not more support from men, especially if the woman is seen as the foundation for creating a noble and righteous next generation. Why does the matrilocality of Senegalese society not reflect on the men providing more support to the women, considering the great emphasis on the mother in both religion and community? There are so many directions in which this research could go, but what I see as most important is just talking to more people, something I was limited in doing with the short time I had to complete this project. It is talking to more people that is integral to this project since there are no two minds that are the same.

This larger conclusion is something that can be applied to any society in any part of the world, and is how we should start thinking about mental health in general. What I learned from the various women I interviewed is that it is not about changing, but rather coping with a situation and how this is something we can apply to how we deal with mental health across the world. Rather than trying to change what may be hindering our abilities to live our individual experiences, we should focus on what ways we can cope with what we are presented with. Such ways to cope are focusing on what truly matters, and for these women that is caring for one's family, which will always be accompanied by stress. With the collective and matriloal nature of society, women cannot simply change these stressors or their roles since others rely so heavily upon them. Thus the mentality is this: we cannot waste all our energy on trying to change our situation, but we can discover, by leaning on one another, how to move forward.

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