Jabaaru Immigré ak Goor Jaarin: Migration, Marriage, and Emigrants’ Wives in Senegal

Sophia Patterson
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Patterson, Sophia
Academic Director: Monika Brodnicka
Project Advisor:
Trinity University
Anthropology and French
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Table of Contents

Table of Contents 2
Acknowledgements 2
Abstract 3
Introduction 4
Literature Review 5
Methods 12
Positionality Statement 14
Ethics Statement 14
Results and Discussion 16
  Family Support and Conflict 16
  Building and Maintaining a Marriage 18
  Public Perceptions 22
Conclusion 26
Appendix A 28
Bibliography 29

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Abstract

This research studies the community of women in Senegal whose husbands migrate to other countries for work. I examine how migration has impacted their marriages and their understanding of their roles as wives. I aim to answer the following question: How does migration affect women’s relationships with their husbands, their roles and responsibilities as wives, and their standing in society? To answer this question, I interviewed six women whose husbands work abroad. Before interviewing these women, I will arrange an initial conversation so we can get to know one another. This pre-interview also will allow me to determine other potential participants, as I am to use a snowball sampling method. The official interview may be one-on-one, but I am also open to group interviews should women know other women they would like to join. This research aims to understand how Senegalese women interpret their relationships with their husbands, as well as how larger Senegalese understandings of marriage have adapted to the realities of globalization. As part of this project, I aim to explore how notions of global security extend beyond traditional definitions into the spheres of family life and the home, particularly for transnational families.
Introduction

In Senegal, economic pressures have driven rising migration to neighboring countries, Europe, and the United States. For some Senegalese, clandestine immigration appears to be the only way to better their and their family’s financial situations, despite its dangers. For others, education in Europe or the United States offers a path to higher salaries and future careers abroad. While women do migrate, the phenomenon is more common among men, leaving many Senegalese women without their husbands for extended periods of time. Besides questions of the long-term feasibility of such migration patterns for Senegal’s development, we must also ask how migration impacts the relationships of those who are involved, namely the men who leave their wives and the wives left behind. For Westerners who view marriage as a partnership based in love, these migration schemes appear unsustainable. But for many Senegalese women, their husband’s migration creates minimal changes in their everyday lives and may actually lessen some of the challenges of marriage. Thus, research surrounding transnational marriages must consider the emotional and financial aspects of these relationships. In keeping with the theme of this program, it must also consider how transnational couples and families take part in the making of a new form of global security, one defined by financial security, family ties, and strong connections to place and community. This project will focus on the experience of these wives, aiming to answer three questions. First, how does migration affect marriages, women’s roles as wives, and their understandings of this role? Second, if and when husbands’ absence creates a lack in their wives’ lives, what social relationships develop to fill this gap? Third, how do concerns over fidelity and appropriate women’s behavior influence how emigrants’ wives relate to their communities and develop new relationships?
Literature Review

This project is part of a growing body of research which examines the impacts of globalization on migration patterns and transnational migrants. Most of this research, however, has focused on migrants themselves—who are generally men—not on the communities they leave behind. Like several other recent works, this project aims to highlight the role of non-migrant spouses in these migration dynamics, rather than as passive women left at home or as “women left behind,” as they have sometimes been described.1 In Senegal, migration is an enormous social and economic force, with one in ten Senegalese households having a member living abroad and half of all Senegalese having a relative living abroad.2 In 2020, 9.4 percent of Senegal’s GDP, $2.3 billion, came from remittances from Senegalese working abroad. Senegal receives the fourth largest amount of remittances in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the ninth largest by share of GDP.3 Besides the opportunity to study the economic impacts of remittances from migrants, Senegal’s high international migration rates compared to other Sub-Saharan African countries create a unique environment to study non-migrant wives who remain in Senegal.4 In Wolof, the existence and widespread use of the term jabaaru immigré for emigrants’ wives, or the non-migrant wives of men living overseas, illustrate their prevalence and cultural importance.

Research on jabaaru immigré, and on emigrants’ wives in Africa in general, generally focuses on three key dynamics. First, research has examined the material and financial aspects of migration and remittances. Second, authors have studied issues of family conflict, surveillance,

and control which many emigrants’ wives experience. Finally, research has considered questions of love and intimacy in these transnational relationships. These questions are most relevant to my research, but it is also essential to understand other aspects of transnational marriages.

For Senegalese women, having a husband abroad can be a source of both status and material wealth.\(^5\) Marriage in Senegal is generally tied to material value, and women hope to marry respected, financially successful men—literally men “worth something”—known as *goor jaarin*.\(^6\) This material aspect of marriage is heightened when husbands live abroad, and migrant husbands are seen as successful, regardless of the reality of their financial situation abroad. Migrants’ reputation as financially successful means that unmarried women and their families prefer potential suitors living abroad to ones living in Senegal, regardless of their actual qualifications or financial success.\(^7\) Emigrants’ wives play a large role in the continuation of this view of emigrant men, dressing well and sharing their newfound “wealth” to reflect positively on their husbands.\(^8\) Women often behave in this way regardless of their husbands’ actual success, practicing the value of *sutura*, or discretion, by hiding their husbands’ potential problems. In her study of transnational marriages in Touba, Beth Buggenhagen further examines how men’s hopes for economic success and women’s consumption practices—e.g., beautiful clothing and contributions to family members, which reflect husbands’ success abroad—combine to drive migration for labor. Women project wealth and success on behalf of their husbands, but they also can use this wealth to raise their own prestige in their home communities.\(^9\)

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7 Hannaford and Foley, “Negotiating Love and Marriage in Contemporary Senegal,” 216.
8 Hannaford, 60.
Emigrants’ wives in Senegal find that remittances can be a source of prestige, but also a source of conflict and confusion in their marriages. Hannaford discusses the disconnect between women’s expectations and the actual remittances they receive, describing how women often feel that their husbands are either being stingy or do not understand the reality of living costs in Senegal. Buggenhagen describes a similar dynamic for Murid migrant traders and their wives in Touba, as anticipated and projected prosperity contrast with the challenges, financial and otherwise, of women with absent husbands. This disconnect is particularly stark for young women, who do not benefit from the authority which older women may enjoy. For Senegalese wives, remittances are a path to financial security and status, but they also demonstrate their husbands’ love and care, as I will later discuss.

Financial tensions in transnational marriages are often coupled with family conflicts. Specifically, wives often clash with their husband’s families, particularly during the period of see yi, the time a new bride spends with her husband’s family. When husbands migrate for labor, this period may be extended indefinitely, forcing women to tolerate tense home situations long-term without the aid of husbands, traditionally their greatest ally. These situations are exacerbated by the expectation that good wives will muun, or endure, challenges. Thus, women often do not complain to their husbands or families to protect both their husbands’ reputations and their own. Various scholars have discussed how these already fraught family dynamics become more tense with the introduction of money and remittances. Kringlebach explains how many Senegalese women who marry foreigners choose to do so because they feel that family

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10 Hannaford, Marriages Without Borders, 62.
11 Buggenhagen, “Prophets and Profits,” 375-76.
14 Hannaford, 56.
relationships in Senegal are “morally compromised by the relentless search for monetary gain”\(^\cite{15}\). While this statement cannot be generalized to all Senegalese families and relationships, it mirrors research which shows that co-wives and family members often interfere with women’s access to remittances, creating intense conflicts. These conflicts become particularly serious both because husbands are not present to mediate and because wives feel that do not have the normal avenues to reinforce their relationships with their husbands, for example, cooking, sexual intimacy, and their appearance. In particular, loss of sexual intimacy often means a loss of emotional intimacy, as the bedroom is a space for women to exercise power and influence, and a space for respectful discussion and relationship building\(^\cite{16}\). Without these ways to reinforce their relationships, emigrants’ wives often fear they are being undermined by family or being forgotten by their husbands.

So far, I have discussed literature which focuses on the challenges emigrants’ wives face because of financial constraints or family competition. It is also important to consider the challenges which these women face due to their husbands’ jealousy and desire to control their wives. In Senegal, women who dox rekk, or walk too much, are seen as promiscuous, and there is much concern from both husbands and families over women’s movements outside the home\(^\cite{17}\). While this culture is increasingly changing, particularly in urban areas, the phenomenon of male migration and the emigrants’ wife has created a new anxiety over female infidelity. The cultural stereotype of the unfaithful wife with a husband abroad is widespread, despite the absence of many genuine examples, and contributes to a culture of mistrust and anxiety over emigrants’


\(^{17}\) Hannaford, “Technologies of the Spouse,” 45.
wives. Hennaford discusses how wives are thus paradoxically more controlled when their husbands are absent, as normally relaxed, respectful marriages are tainted by mistrust and suspicion. Husbands use various means to control their wives' movements, from requiring them to seeyi for longer period of time to constantly checking in with phone and video calls to paying neighbors or family members to check in on their wives. Technology also exacerbates existing inequalities in marriages, as evidenced by the fact that, while some women must share their every move with their husbands abroad, most women know nearly nothing about their husbands' lives abroad. While Western audiences may view technology as a means for geographically separated couples to remain connected and strengthen their relationship, research on emigrants' wives in Senegal actually shows the reverse: that technology creates tension and mistrust between spouses, as men use it to surveil their wives in response to cultural concerns over women's behavior.

The final important aspect of the literature on transnational marriages, and the aspect most relevant to my research, is research on love and intimacy in these relationships. While transnational marriages are not simply about love—as with many marriages—it is important to consider love when researching them. Much of the scholarship on contemporary marriage and love in Africa works to challenge the idea that African marriages are transactional relationships devoid of love or emotion. With transnational marriages in particular, economic motives are intertwined with courtship and romance; we cannot study these marriages as purely economic or purely romantic, but rather must examine the intersection of love and practicality.

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21 Hennaford, 89.  
In Senegal, married life is tied to material value, as previously mentioned. Women hope to marry a *goor jaarin*, a respectable, financially successful man, and husbands are in turn expected to *yor*, or take care of, their wives.\(^{24}\) Thus, while migration has certainly contributed to the commodification of love, this existing notion of love as support—financial and otherwise—underlies this transition. In her study of family relationships in Ghana, Coe discusses a similar dynamic, as both adults and children understand sharing material resources as a way to express emotion. Similarly to the way Senegalese wives view their husband’s remittances as proof of their love and care—and not simply representative of their financial success at the time—children in Ghana identify love with adults who are willing to support them financially.\(^{25}\) These existing understandings of love as material are often heightened in cases of migration, as money becomes one of the only ways to show care and love.\(^{26}\) Hannaford emphasizes how, contrary to a perceived global move toward a more companionate marriage ideal, transnational couples are increasingly choosing to privilege other ideals, e.g. that of material support.\(^{27}\)

As part of studying transnational marriages through the lens of love and intimacy, it is also important to consider how emotional attachments may be described in terms other than “love.” Love is not a universal category; instead, its practices and discourses are shaped by religion, history, and culture.\(^{28}\) In Senegal, it is believed that women do not fall in love immediately, but rather they *miin*, or acclimate, to their relationships with their husbands.\(^{29}\) This is just one of many ways in which definitions of love and relationship expectations in Senegal


\(^{26}\) Hannaford, “Intimate Remittances,” 94.


differ from supposedly universal values. It is important to understand transnational marriages in Senegal as a convergence of culturally diverse understandings of love, financial and family pressures, and global migration trends. For emigrants’ wives, as for all wives in Senegal, marriage is at once an intimate experience and a path to financial security, a source of independence and of family conflict and control.
Methods

This project aims to answer three questions related to emigrants’ wives in Senegal. First, how does migration affect marriages, women’s roles as wives, and their understandings of this role? Second, if and when husbands’ absence creates a lack in their wives’ lives, what social relationships develop to fill this gap? Third, how do concerns over fidelity and appropriate women’s behavior influence how emigrants’ wives relate to their communities and develop new relationships? This qualitative research consisted of interviews with women whose husbands have migrated. I spoke to six women from varied socioeconomic backgrounds and ages. These women lived in various parts of Senegal, and one woman has now rejoined her husband abroad. The women’s husbands live and work in a variety of foreign countries, including the United States, Germany, and Brazil. I found my participants through Senegalese women’s Facebook groups and recommendations from community members, and through snowball sampling.

I tried to arrange an initial introduction with each participant before the interview. This first meeting was informal and often virtual and allowed me to introduce the project and get to know the participant. I did not record these initial conversations or take notes. After this initial meeting, the participants had the choice to participate in the research. If they chose to do so, we arranged a second meeting, which lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. The main questions from these interviews can be found in Appendix 1. Participants had the choice of individual interviews or focus groups, although I recognized that some women would likely not prefer focus groups depending on how sensitive they find the topic. Ultimately, none of my participants chose to participate in focus groups. Since each participant consented, I recorded all the in-person interviews. I conducted the majority of my interviews over WhatsApp by recording the questions and allowing participants to record their answers. While this method did not allow for
the exchange possible in a traditional interview setting, it allowed me to speak to a greater range of participants, including ones who live outside Dakar. In terms of scheduling and location, I allowed the participants to choose the location, but also had a backup location and was willing to pay for transportation should it be necessary. I was also aware that conducting interviews during the month of Ramadan might prove more challenging. I tried to conduct interviews early in the day and to schedule my interviews early in the ISP period to create time for potential rescheduling.

I used two main methods to analyze my data. First, I engaged in a kind of informal analysis with participants at the end of their interviews, asking them if there are other comments they would like to make and what they believe to be major conclusions from our interview. Through discussing interviews with participants, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of my interview data. This step also helped me avoid analyzing data in a prescriptive, potentially incorrect way. The second step of the analysis involved coding my interview transcripts for specific themes. I used both these coded themes and my discussions with participants to derive conclusions from my research.
Positionality Statement

I understand the research process as a way to create and share knowledge, with the ultimate goal of benefitting society; research does not exist only to create knowledge, but to create knowledge which helps us solve social problems and create justice and equality. In this project, I study how Senegalese women whose husbands have migrated abroad feel about their marriages and their role as wives to absent husbands. As a white American young woman, I will likely have different understandings of marriage, gender, and gender roles than the women with which I speak. Thus, while conducting research, I will have to work to understand marriage and these women’s experiences through their own cultural lens. Further, I will have to balance my own opinions on these women’s experiences with their own perceptions of their marriages as fair or unfair, happy or unhappy, etc. I will have to recognize that these women have grown up within a different cultural framework and thus have different expectations and standards for what makes marriages successful and fulfilling. I hope that this study allows me not only to examine marriage practices in Senegal, but also my own understanding of marriage in a Western context.

Ethics Statement

I took several precautions to protect my participants and to allow them to engage safely and freely in my research. First, I introduced my research to each potential participant before beginning the interviews in order to allow them to understand the process and to give them the time to ask questions. I then used informed consent forms, written in French, which outlined the parameters of my research and informed my participants that they would be recorded and quoted, should they consent. In order to protect these women’s anonymity, I assigned each participant a
pseudonym. I associated all field notes and recordings with these names and dates, not with any personal information. In addition, I communicated to my participants that they could stop the interview, ask me to stop recording, or ask me to strike their comments at any time, including after the interview was finished. Finally, I concluded each interview by allowing the participant to share their own insights and analyses with me, as well as to reflect on the interview in general. In doing so, I hoped to be able to include these women’s voices in my work, as opposed to treating them as raw data to be analyzed separately.

In addition to my efforts to avoid any negative impacts by protecting my participants’ confidentiality and privacy, this research will also have several positive impacts on its participants. First, I aimed to give these women the opportunity and platform to speak. In Senegal, women often endure—muuñ—marital and other challenges without spaces to complain or process their experiences. I hope this study gave women the chance to share their experiences, both for the value of speaking in itself and with the intention of making others more aware of their challenges. Second, this research adds to a growing body of literature on the impacts of globalization and migration on the families and communities “left behind.” I intend to use this research to emphasize the importance of these communities’ narratives, with the ultimate goal of policy changes which benefit both migrants and their families at home.
Results and Discussion

These interviews revealed three major takeaways about the status of emigrants’ wives in Senegal. While my findings confirm many aspects of the existing literature, I also found several new themes which further elucidate these women’s situations. Wives of emigrants find themselves in a complicated position socially and economically. While the role of emigrant’s wife is not uncommon in Senegal, concerns over these women’s status and safety mean that women’s own personal challenges also come in contact with larger social discourses surrounding migration, women’s roles, and wealth. For the women I interviewed, the changes and challenges brought about by their husband’s migration came in three forms. First, participants expressed the importance of family, both as a source of support and as a challenge. Second, they described changes in how they build and maintain their marriages. Finally, they explained how public perceptions influence their experiences as emigrants’ wives.

Family Support and Conflict

As previously discussed, family is a source of both essential support and ongoing conflict for emigrants’ wives. The role of family became particularly clear as I attempted to answer my second research question. (If and when husbands’ absence creates a lack in their wives’ lives, what social relationships develop to fill this gap?) In attempting to discover what social relationships women developed to fill the gap left by their husband's absence, it became clear that, for many of these women, these relationships already existed. Specifically, these relationships existed in the family setting, both that of the natal family and that of the husband’s family. For women who lived in a separate family home or with their families while their husband was abroad, their family was an essential source of support, both interpersonally and
practically. Further, women who continued to live in the same neighborhoods did not feel the need to develop new relationships because they had both existing relationships with family and existing friendships and connections within their communities. When asked if she made new friends or new connections while her husband was abroad, Madame Ndiaye said “Non, parce que j’ai grandi ici, on a des amis, on a fait des cours ensemble, on a resté la même quand on est marié.” [No, because I grew up here, we have friends, we went to school together, we stayed the same even when we were married.] For women like her, the question of developing new relationships seems illogical, since they already have support systems within their families and communities.

The situation is slightly different for women who live with their husband’s families after marriage. While these women also find social support in their new families, this support is accompanied by conflict as women attempt to fit into the expectations of their new families, a challenge which is exacerbated by their husbands’ absence. For women living with their family in law, reliance on family connections is often restricting; while the assumption that family is the only necessary social support means that natal families are essential for their married daughters who live with them, it also means that married women living with their families in law are discouraged from looking beyond the family for friendships or connections. If the natal family provides all the support necessary for a young married woman, then why should the family in law not be assumed to provide the same to its new daughter-in-law?

This pressure to assimilate into and ultimately rely on the husband’s family is furthered by concerns over married women’s behavior and safety. While women are expected to invest their time in their new families, emigrants’ wives are expected to doubly invest, sometimes even actively avoiding those outside the family circle to remain faithful to their husbands and to avoid
perceptions of infidelity. Thus, these women are encouraged to stay at home, to not make new friends, and to invest their energies in becoming part of their new families. One participant, Madame Diop, who lives with her family in law described how she stays home most of the time to avoid the criticisms emigrants’ wives face when they spend lots of time in public, either for social or economic reasons. Her one relationship outside the family is with the wife of a friend of her husband—a connection which is acceptable because of the woman’s connection to her husband. Even the time she spends with this friend, however, occurs in her husband’s family home. While Madame Diop did not complain about this situation, her reference to what people might think should she spend social time outside the home makes it clear that she is aware of the role that stereotypes of infidelity play in her situation, both through public perceptions and through her own husband’s concerns about her behavior. I will return to the question of stereotypes and public perceptions in the final section of this discussion.

**Building and Maintaining a Marriage**

While emigrants’ wives must navigate their changing, often conflicted relationships with family at home without the support of their husbands, they also encounter challenges within their marriages. For couples who marry shortly before the husband migrates, building a functioning, caring relationship is a challenge. For other couples, maintaining their longstanding marriages requires effort and flexibility. Women face several unique challenges, but they also make use of technology and other creative solutions to maintain their relationships.

The primary challenge for emigrants’ wives is that of communication. Just as husbands often struggle to communicate the realities of life abroad, wives struggle to explain the situation at home to their absent husbands. In particular, women find communication difficult because of
pressures to muññ, or endure challenges, and because of cultural taboos against criticizing family. The issue of communication is particularly salient for women who live with their families in law. Not only should they tolerate problems because that is how good women should behave, but they are also expected to get along with their new families. This often means ignoring unfair divisions of labor, criticisms from mothers-in-law, and unequal division of remittances. When women do complain, they often find their husbands unwilling or unable to resolve the situation. Madame Diop explained how she experienced a conflict with one of her mother-in-law’s co-wives, who was angry that Madame Diop had been assigned certain responsibilities which should have been assigned to one of the co-wives. When Madame Diop told her husband about these problems, he was not able to do anything about the situation, and she felt that she was just souring the time they were able to spend talking. Eventually, she stopped telling her husband about challenges at home because, as she explained, it was not worth the trouble of trying to explain a situation which he could not even change. For Madame Diop, communication which did not lead to change—and which instead potentially concerned her husband—was not worth it. Instead, she tolerated the problems on her own, preferring to present a positive image of a good wife to her husband and his family than to risk the consequences of complaining.

While Madame Diop’s situation is not unique among women who live with their families in law, it does not fully represent how emigrants’ wives build and maintain their marriages while their husbands are away. Distance certainly does provide challenges, and women often face social pressures to tolerate difficult situations, but they also have found ways to maintain and even strengthen their marriages. Social media and video calling in particular have become ways for women to overcome distance to keep their families connected. For some women, social
media allows them to connect with those living abroad, making their husbands seem less distant. One woman, Madame Cisse, explained how she reconnected with her future husband, an old childhood friend, on Facebook while he was living in Germany. They had a long-distance relationship for a year before deciding to marry. After they married in Senegal, he returned to Germany before she rejoined him a year later. For this couple, relationships at a distance were not the exception, but rather the norm; until recently, they spent more time talking over WhatsApp than in person. As Madame Cisse and her marriage illustrate, social media can facilitate genuine connections for transnational couples, leading to strong marriages and families.

Another woman, Madame Fall, described how new technology has allowed her children to stay in close contact with their father. When I asked her if she feels that her children have a close relationship with their father, she responded that, in addition to the fact that her husband returns to Senegal twice a year, her husband also talks to the children frequently through WhatsApp video calling. Her children are even able to initiate conversations with their father without her help, since the technology is simple and accessible, which allows them to have a more personal relationship with their father. Further, this technology makes life easier for Madame Fall; while she still must perform much of the day-to-day work of caring for the children, she has more emotional support because her husband is able to partially parent the children, even if it is at a distance. Like Madame Cisse, Madame Fall spoke very positively of technology, crediting it with allowing her to maintain her marriage as if her husband were not even gone. Contrary to scholarship on emigrants’ wives, which often emphasizes technology’s role in surveilling and controlling women, these women looked to technology as a necessary tool for a successful transnational marriage.
For the women I interviewed, their personal challenges as wives of emigrants are furthered by larger concerns over how to be a good wife. Both societal expectations and personal worries mean that wives of emigrants are very conscious of if they are performing their roles correctly, and of if their marriages are successful. Madame Cisse, whose husband returned to Germany soon after they married, described the social pressure she felt after her marriage to immediately present herself as a wife, not as the woman she was before marriage, even though her husband was gone.

“Les gens ne te voient pas forcément comme vraiment marié, parce que ton mari n’est pas là…c’était pas très très facile à vivre, marié, vivre dans ta famille. Les gens te voient, ils attendent un changement de toi, que tu changes, comment tu parles avec eux, comment tu t’habilles, tout ce que tu fais tu dois changer. Et voilà, ton mari n’est pas là.” [People do not necessarily see you as married, because your husband is not there…it is not very easy to live, married, to live in your family. People see you, they expect a change from you, that you change, how you speak with them, how you dress yourself, everything that you do, you must change. And yet your husband is not there.]

As a newly married woman who did not fit expectations of how a wife should act, Madame Cisse struggled to identify with her status as a wife. She identified several markers of a married woman—how she speaks, how she dresses—but ultimately returned to her husband’s absence as the main barrier between her and being a “real” wife. This question—how to be a wife without a husband?—informed my development of this research. For some women, it appears that the solution is in other social acts—in mothering, for example, or in dressing and behaving as a married woman should. But for other women, no amount of acting like a married woman outweighed their feeling that, as a wife without a husband present, they were not a real wife.
Only when their husbands returned home, temporarily or permanently, did these women feel that they were actually wives, both in their eyes and to their communities.

Public Perceptions

As I conducted my interviews, it became clear that the image of the emigrant’s wife is much more complicated than just that of a poor woman left behind. Many women described how the Senegalese public pities emigrants’ wives, expressing concern over their vulnerability, financial challenges, and lack of safety and protection. Alongside the image of the sainted emigrant’s wife, however, these women also face harsh criticisms for their behavior and are subject to heightened concerns over infidelity and appropriate women’s behavior. Women find themselves self-policing their behavior at the same time that family and their communities restrict their mobility and freedom. In addition to this stereotype of the sexually loose, immoral emigrant’s wife, emigrants’ wives also find themselves as an object of envy, as women in their communities express a desire to marry wealthy men who work abroad and can support them. These messages, combined with the complex experience of being an emigrant’s wife, mean that these women often find themselves unable to express their situations to others without both confirming and denying expectations.

One participant, Madame Diallo, clearly demonstrates how public perceptions of emigrants’ wives are complicated and often inconsistent with their actual experiences. Madame Diallo married her husband while he was abroad, although they knew one another previously. She was young when she married and found that being married immediately restricted what behavior her community deemed appropriate. When her friends wanted to go out dancing, her mother forbade her from doing so, citing concerns that she would cheat on her husband, get pregnant, or behave in a way which reflected negatively on her husband and family. It is unclear
whether Madame Diallo’s mother was actually concerned that she would be unfaithful to her husband, but it is clear that she considered the perception of possible infidelity just as damaging as actual cheating. At the same time that Madame Diallo found herself subject to suspicion for simply talking to a man in public, she also found that her friends envied her situation and wanted to take her place. They wanted a husband abroad who could support them, send money home, and raise their status in the community. They even asked Madame Diallo if her husband could find them husbands abroad. Viewed as both immoral and as incredibly lucky, Madame Diallo actually struggled greatly in the early years of her marriage, feeling isolated, struggling to raise her children alone, and feeling that she could not adequately communicate her situation to her family or friends without seeming unfaithful or ungrateful.

Madame Diallo’s situation illustrates both the complicated, often inaccurate image of emigrants’ wives and a larger reality about emigrants’ wives in Senegal. While they are perceived as a community with consistent experiences, emigrants’ wives often have little in common with one another and with the stereotype of the emigrant’s wife. When asked how Senegalese view emigrants’ wives, most women cited media and popular stereotypes, but they spoke from a place of general cultural knowledge, not some special insights they had as members of the in-group of emigrants’ wives. Madame Fall, for example, described how “souvent dans les médias Sénégalais il y a des témoins sur les immigrants…des critiques aussi qu’avec la distance c’est pas facile de vivre le mariage convenablement.” [Often in the media there are testimonies about immigrants, criticisms also that with distance it is not easy to be properly married.] Others spoke about their personal experiences, but they did not identify these experiences with a larger pattern which women like them face. These women’s pronoun use further illustrates this point; when asked what Senegalese think of emigrants’ wives, every participant referred to emigrants’
wives as “they” or “I,” not as “we,” in their responses. Thus, it is clear that the “community” of emigrants’ wives is more of a demographic and academic category than a genuine community. While these women share many experiences—although their experiences are more diverse than the literature might suggest—they do not share the social relationships which make up a community. Further, while they are all certainly the wives of emigrants, they do not self-identify strongly as such, and they do not identify with other wives of emigrants purely because of their shared situation.

When asked what Senegalese think of emigrants’ wives, Madame Ndiaye told me she could not really say, describing the “community” of emigrants’ wives as “un milieu que je fréquente pas” [an environment which I don’t frequent]. She clearly did not see herself as a participant in this milieu, but rather as a woman who happened to share an experience with other women. Returning to my earlier discussion of these women’s pronoun use in their responses, one can see that, while my participants viewed themselves as emigrants’ wives, and other women as emigrants’ wives as well, they did not see themselves as part of this perceived community. I posit that these women do not identify with the “community” of emigrants’ wives precisely because it is sensationalized in the media. They are not the stereotypical emigrant’s wife as described in newspapers and TV programs, so they do not feel that they are part of the community. Crucially, however, emigrants’ wives do believe this woman exists. She is the emigrant’s wife to which the media refers and whom the stereotypes describe, and perhaps she is part of a community, but they are not part of it, and thus do not identify with it. When participants described how the media views “them” as unfaithful and immoral, or as vulnerable and victimized, they referred to this imagined emigrant’s wife. But because they do not identify
with her—as she is a caricature of their real challenges and experiences—they do not identify with the community of which she is presumably part.

While the idea of a community of emigrants’ wives is certainly inaccurate, it remains useful for discussing these women’s shared experiences, and the times when their experiences diverge. All emigrants’ wives must resolve family concerns, issues of marital growth and maintenance, and the public perceptions which occasionally reflect and often distort their experiences. These women address their problems in ways which fit their socioeconomic status, religion, ethnic group, and region—communities with which they identify far more than that of emigrants’ wives.
Conclusion

Much of the existing literature on emigrants’ wives in Senegal emphasizes the conflicts and challenges these women face: critical mothers-in-law, jealous husbands, limited financial resources. While these themes were certainly present in my research, they were accompanied by positive father-child relationships, strong friendships, and hopes for the future. This is not to say that the literature on emigrants’ wives is inaccurate—for the issues it raises are very serious and merit discussion—but rather that it does not fully illustrate the normalization of these women’s situation. In Senegal, the emigrant’s wife is a cultural mainstay—and a cultural stereotype—precisely because migration is so common and because these women are not unique. My interviews demonstrated that emigrants’ wives do not view themselves or their positions as dramatic, life changing, or as a marker of social distress in the way Western audiences do. Rather, for my participants, migration and their status as emigrants’ wives are simply practical realities with which they must live. This does not mean that these women do not have problems with their situations, for they do. Rather, it means they generally do not view emigration as unique or as a social problem. Research on emigrants’ wives, and on transnational marriages as a whole, has often problematized what is simply a reality of life for those who participate in these relationships.

Studying emigrants’ wives sometimes requires treating these women as a community, but we must remember that this imagined community does not exist for most emigrants’ wives. As I previously discussed, emigrants’ wives often view other emigrants’ wives as a “them,” and they do not necessarily identify with these women. It is thus important that we study emigrants’ wives not as a demographic group, but rather as a collection of women—women from different socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic groups, religious traditions, and political leanings—
experiencing the effects of migration in their personal lives. For these women, being an emigrant’s wife is simply another aspect of their identities, and it is often the least important one. We should read this disidentification not as a sign that emigrants’ wives do not inhabit a complicated place in Senegalese society, but rather as a sign that their position is more complex than a single identity. Thinking about emigrants’ wives as a community can mean flattening their experiences and deferring to a single image of an emigrant’s wife. Understanding emigrants’ wives as women influenced, but not defined, by Senegalese migration patterns allows us to better understand not only their individual experiences, but also the collective needs and challenges of emigrants’ wives as a whole.
Appendix A

1. Décrivez l’histoire de votre mariage.
2. Quand votre mari a-t-il quitté le Sénégal? Et pour quelles raisons? Combien de temps a-t-il passé à l’étranger? Revient-il fréquemment?
3. Décrivez pour moi les changements dans votre mariage après que votre mari est parti.
4. Pour les femmes avec des enfants
   a. Avez-vous plus de responsabilités maintenant? Pensez-vous que votre mari est présent dans la vie de vos enfants?
5. Pour les femmes dans les mariages polygames
   a. La relation entre vous et votre co-épouse, a-t-elle changé quand votre mari est parti? Est-ce qu’il y a des conflits au sujet des paiements/versements?
6. Comment est votre relation avec la famille de votre mari? A-t-elle changé quand il est parti?
7. Pensez-vous que quelque chose vous manque quand votre mari n’est pas ici? Avez-vous trouvé de nouveaux amis ou relations?
   a. Des autres femmes? Votre famille?
8. Qu’est-ce que c’est l’attitude des Sénégalais envers les femmes des émigrés?
   a. Quels sont les discours sur les femmes d’émigrés?
   b. Pensez-vous qu’il y a déshonneur sur les femmes des émigrés au Sénégal? Etes-vous plus jugé ou plus critiqué que les autres femmes? Ou l’inverse?
9. Avez-vous d’autres remarques à ajouter?
Bibliography


