

Policy Brief No. 3

The Trajectories and
Experiences of Malian Girl
and Young Women Guides
to Blind Beggars in Senegal

Migration, Gender and Social Justice: Connecting Research and Practice Networks



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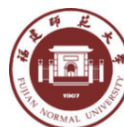
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Executive Summary

There is a large body of literature on labour migration in West Africa that is focused primarily on the experiences of males, as men have traditionally been seen as economic actors, and women and children as dependents. But in recent years, research into women and young people who migrate throughout the area for economic reasons has been gaining ground. In the case of the seasonal migration of blind beggars from Mali to Senegal, the Malian girls and young women accompanying them as guides have thus far been overlooked in the literature and ignored by government officials, despite their visibility on the streets of Dakar. Based on research conducted in areas of origin, transit and destination in Mali and Senegal, this policy brief shows that, due to cultural relativism, girls and young women engaged as guides for the blind do not necessarily fit the prevailing social constructions of 'children' and 'gender' upon which current migration and human trafficking agreements in the region are based. Various recommendations are made to better align such policies with the experiences and needs of this group of female migrants.

Policy Brief No. 3: The Trajectories and Experiences of Malian Girl and Young Women Guides to Blind Beggars in Senegal

This policy brief is adapted from a chapter authored by Codou Bop and Thanh-Dam Truong, 'Complexity of Gender and Age in Precarious Lives: Malian Men, Women and Girls in Communities of Blind Beggars in Senegal' in Truong, et al. (eds) (2013) *Migration, Gender and Social Justice: Perspectives on Human Security* (Heidelberg: Springer). The chapter and brief were prepared within the IDRC-sponsored project 'Migration, Gender and Social Justice', and are based on research undertaken by the Groupe de Recherche sur les Femmes et les Lois au Senegal (GREFELS). The research team consisted of: Codou Bop, Fanta Cissé, Fatou Binetou Dramé, Aissa Haidara Touré, Ndèye Sokhna Guèye and Cheikh Ibrahima Niang.

For additional insight into the findings of the research, see:

Moens, Bruno et al. (2004) *Study on the Practice of Trafficking in Persons in Senegal*. Bethesda, Maryland: Development Alternatives, Inc. (USAID). Available at: http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/moens_2004_study_practice_trafficking_senegal_4.pdf

Ndiaye, Ababacar (2009) *La traite et le trafic des filles entre le Mali et le Sénégal: Analyse juridique de la situation des filles guides de mendiants et domestiques au Sénégal au regard de l'Accord de coopération, de la loi et des instruments juridiques*. Dakar: Groupe de recherche sur les femmes et Lois au Senegal (GREFELS).

Introduction

Cross-border migration within West Africa, particularly for seasonal work, has a long and well-researched history, stretching as far back as pre-colonial times. Typically, male migrants were the focus of this research, as women and children were consistently perceived as dependents rather than economic actors in their own right. Much of the currently available literature on children as migrants in West Africa focuses on child trafficking, the use of fosterage practices

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(traditionally for education and apprenticeship) as a way of accessing children's labour for economic exploitation and the recruitment of child soldiers, with types of work often classified along gendered lines (girls as domestic and sex workers, boys as soldiers or manual labourers).

New attention is being paid, however, to the economically motivated migration of West African women and girls, who are increasingly seeking opportunities across borders as a means of gaining independence and accruing savings for their futures. West African children, in particular, migrate from rural to urban areas for work in a number of informal sectors not necessarily determinable by gender, demonstrating a level of precociousness and economic agency not generally attributed to individuals under the age of 18.

Large numbers of migrant children are known to engage in begging in Dakar, Senegal's capital. Despite the visibility of Malian girls guiding blind adult male and female beggars in public places, however, the literature is devoid of any reference to girls participating in this mode of livelihood. For example, a 2007 UNICEF study on child begging in Dakar asserted that boys constitute the quasi-total population of child beggars and that 90% of the child beggars in the city are boys who have been sent away from home to religious schools for an Islamic education. Of the 600 children surveyed, none were female.

This policy brief is based on multi-site research that took place in Mali and Senegal. It draws on the data gathered on the migration of Malian girls (under 18 years of age) and young women who migrate as guides to blind beggars who are their kith and/or kin. In Mali, field visits and interviews were conducted with local authorities and resource persons who command a good knowledge about the migration of adult blind beggars and their young female guides as well as returnees.

These interviews took place in Bamako, Koulikoro and Kayes. Interviews with male and female Malian blind beggars afflicted with *Onchocerciasis* and *Trachoma* (river blindness) and their young female guides between the ages of 10 and 26 took place in Dakar. The resulting qualitative data fill in gaps in knowledge with respect to the nature of girls' involvement in begging, how they were drawn into it, what their perspective is on the work and the conditions in which it is undertaken.

Research findings

Begging as a way of making a living is complex and involves many relations and factors to be taken into consideration. The data show that blind Malian men and women enter into begging because earnings from farming, as well as other means of support from their communities and families in the home country, have failed to suffice. Migration for begging is seen as a temporary activity, meant to earn enough capital to secure property or an alternative mode of livelihood that can ensure a desirable living situation back in Mali.

This type of migration is actually circular and seasonal in nature. Malian beggars make the decision to migrate to Dakar in the dry season based on interrelated considerations including the timing of Ramadan, a holiday linked with the giving of alms and the display of Muslim piety; the depletion of food and other supplies in Mali; and the availability of dry living quarters in the streets of Dakar that might otherwise be flooded by rain in the wet

'This type of migration is actually circular and seasonal in nature.'

season. Moreover, since the Senegalese economy is currently faring better than that of Mali, beggars also hold the belief that the culture there is more generous in terms of giving donations. All told, begging in Dakar can bring in earnings twice or three times higher than in Mali.

Information on locations in Dakar where donations are likely to be higher and where support from Malian migrant communities can be found is mainly circulated by word of mouth and through evidence brought back by returnees. Despite great discomfort and extremely poor living conditions during transit and temporary settlement in Dakar, circular migration to beg in Senegal with the help of a non-blind girl or young woman is repeatedly undertaken until a desired amount of savings is reached.

The preference for girl guides rather than boys is both social and economic. Boys older than 9 to 12 refuse to be involved as guides for blind beggars because they

feel it is shameful work. Boys who are engaged in begging are typically beggars themselves for their own profit or for Islamic schools. Beggars prefer to use very

'Five types of arrangements between blind beggars and their girl children and young woman guides ... emerged from the research.'

young girls (under the age of 10) as guides, and once the girls enter into this activity they can remain indefinitely. Moreover, girls are believed to inspire more pity and thus can spur higher donations.

Five types of arrangements between blind beggars and their girl children and young woman guides, as well as with Senegalese female beggars who are their neighbours, emerged from the research. All of the types are a result of the different trajectories through which girls and young women became guides and the positions they occupy in a web of relationships through which migration for begging is organized.

The first type involves those who serve as guides for their biological fathers who are blind. The second type involves those who were required by their parents to travel to Senegal to guide a blind beggar in exchange for financial or material resources for the parents. The blind beggar in this case may or may not be related to the girl though kinship, but would come from the same community. This arrangement is called 'lending', and is a modification of the cultural practice of child fosterage

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in other countries of West Africa traditionally meant to ensure the education and trade training of children whose parents could not provide it themselves. Under this practice, the child as a subject with the right to an education through apprenticeship becomes a source of labour that can be lent for a return at a later date.

The third type involves those who are married to the beggar they guide, typically young women and girls who may be forced by their fathers to marry the beggar before leaving Mali. This type of marriage can sometimes be carried out by force, especially for the younger ones. The fourth type of arrangement involves those who are 'rented out' on a daily basis by their Senegalese mothers (who are also beggars) to a blind male beggar with whom they share the same work or living sites. Being old, widowed or divorced, these women earn through their own begging in addition to the services provided by their girl children to the adult male beggars; the children do not receive any compensation

due to the fact that the agreement is made between the adults.

The fifth type involves those who independently migrated to Senegal in search for jobs as housemaids, but could not find work and have ended up becoming guides for beggars. Unrelated to the beggars through kinship, they work for earnings in a strictly economic relationship.

Among the five types of arrangement, the second and third types come close to the criteria of deception and force used in the UN's definition of trafficking in the Protocol on the Prevention and Punishment of Trafficking in Human Beings especially Women and Children of the *United Nations Convention against Transnational*

'The fifth type ... provides the possibility for some autonomy for the girls.'

Organized Crime (UNCTOC). The first and fourth types of arrangement come under the direct supervision of biological parents.

The fifth type of arrangement, however, provides the possibility for some autonomy for the girls. Those who provide guiding services in return for a fee can keep one-third or one-half of the daily earnings and often manage to save enough to buy goods that they can take back to their origin areas. Some also save enough to buy property or set up income-generating activities in Mali upon their return. Their companionship with the beggars can occasionally lead to a relationship of affection and love, and even marriage. In these cases, the pair continues the same arrangement of their work, though the guides can remain somewhat independent since they have become indispensable partners for the beggars and succeed in negotiating an equal share of the earnings.

Regardless of which type of arrangement the girls ended up in, unmarried girls setting off from Mali to become guides imagined migration and urban life to be

'... unmarried girls setting off from Mali to become guides imagined migration and urban life to be exciting.'

exciting, with many economic opportunities that would enable them to shop for their marriage trousseaus and possibly buy gifts for their parents. Older girls hoped to earn enough to buy a house for the family or set up a business. Stories of hardship rarely travel back to the places of origin in Mali.

The migration of blind beggars and their girl guides is often undertaken by train, whereby the beggars are

allowed to ride for free (perceived as destitute) and the girls sit between the cars in front of the toilets, a location considered too dangerous to monitor by the railroad employees. However, as the railroad system

'Once in Senegal, the beggars and girls live in close quarters in crowded conditions with poor sanitation and an increased risk of illness.'

becomes more privatized, travelling by bus, truck, canoe (for some parts of the trip) or by foot has become more common.

Once in Senegal, the beggars and girls live in close quarters in crowded conditions with poor sanitation and an increased risk of illness. Self-medication is practised by buying medicines brought illegally from Mali or Nigeria. In cases of serious illness, beggars and guides go to local health centres or private clinics where they have to pay the full costs of treatment.

Girl guides do not have access to schools in Senegal and are kept entirely within Malian-beggar communities.

'... conditions of their vulnerability vary depending on their age, type of guidance arrangement and their relationship with the beggar.'

Few of them speak Wolof, the principal language in Senegal. Some of those interviewed had become victims of sexual violence and robbery, or were in conflict with boys living in the neighbourhood. The beggars are suspicious of the host communities and have no information or access to banking services; they keep their money to themselves. This makes them vulnerable to attack and theft in their living quarters or in the streets.

The young women and girls who guide the beggars spend much of the day on their feet. They are hardly fed, surviving on leftovers from cheap restaurants or bits of meals left by their Senegalese neighbours. Under such circumstances the exploitation of the guides is more intense—particularly those who are biological daughters, wives through forced marriage or 'loaned' guides.

Despite the fact that these young Malian female guides are frequently exposed to hazardous living conditions, strenuous work and violence, the conditions of their vulnerability vary depending on their age, type of guidance arrangement and their relationship with the beggar. Most of the young children take the responsibilities of an adult yet work without pay. Young women can engage in an emotional relationship with the male blind beggars and negotiate a position as an equal partner and gain autonomy. Some may achieve a position of

authority *vis-à-vis* their blind husbands. In this respect, the relationships between the guides and the beggars may be considered to be fluid and non-traditional in terms of adult-child role typology.

There is a fairly robust legal, administrative and programmatic web in place to protect children from exploitation, maltreatment and human trafficking in West Africa. However, Malian girls working as guides for beggars unfortunately remain outside such programmes and provisions for several reasons.

Senegalese law on trafficking in human beings includes protection for children (defined along international standards as those who are under the age of 18) who

'... Malian girl guides are essentially invisible and left out of programmes that would protect them.'

are taken across borders for exploitation, regardless of their consent, however it may have been obtained (e.g., through deception). But the concept of childhood in West Africa, specifically for girl children, is not solely dependent upon age. A child may be considered an adult based on her size and strength, level of economic dependence, her marital status or other socio-cultural factors. Applying this rigid (age) definition of childhood in situations such as this has met with resistance for fear of punishing the wrong people or overly restricting young people's cross-border mobility. The question of when childhood labour and migration become trafficking in West Africa has yet to be resolved, and in the meantime Malian girl guides are essentially invisible and left out of programmes that would protect them.

This reality is evident in light of the research into child begging in Dakar that failed to mention girls, the unsuccessful attempt by the Senegalese government to repatriate child migrants and the donor-funded voluntary return migration programme that paid for hundreds of trafficked Malian children—none of them girls—to return home from Senegal and provided startup funds for income-generating activities.

Conclusion

The knowledge gleaned from this study allows researchers and policy makers to grasp the way the situation is currently seen institutionally and contrast it with the reality as lived by blind beggars and their girl guides. There is complexity to the situation with respect to the girls' motivations, pathways of migration, relationships with their beggar counterparts, and their living and working experiences. It is important to note that there is a range of positions between victimhood and agency. Young girls forced to follow the blind beggars either under the customary practice of levirate (the

'There is complexity to the situation with respect to the girls' motivations, pathways of migration, relationships with their beggar counterparts, and their living and working experiences.'

sometimes compulsory marriage of a widow to a brother of her deceased husband), or deceived to follow a neighbour or friend of the family clearly fit the UN definition of Human Trafficking. Girls who came autonomously in search for domestic work and end up guiding beggars do show evidence of agency. Leaving their homes for a foreign land to carry out such strenuous activity proves they can be agents having unique personhood (though their expectations may have been misplaced due to incorrect information about the living conditions at the destinations). Nonetheless, they face major structural constraints in achieving their own wellbeing and in maintaining their personal security with regard to health, housing and income.

Implications and recommendations

- *Strive for continued improvement of the knowledge base about the migration of children and young adults as members of migrant begging communities to ensure that the ILO Conventions on the Minimum Age for Employment, No's 138 (1973) and the Worst Forms of Child Labour, No. 182 are also made applicable to them.*

Research into the migration of children and young adults generally and in West Africa specifically is typically donor-driven and thus complies with a specific policy framework. In the present research, however, disaggregating the target population between 'children' and 'youth' is highly problematic because using chronological age does not capture the actual maturity of the

'Strive for continued improvement of the knowledge base about the migration of children and young adults as members of migrant begging communities...'

children and young people who take responsibilities as adults. Furthermore, culturally in West Africa (and elsewhere) one may speak of a 'social age' given the diverse ways in which qualitative attributes are accorded to persons.

Migration under forced marriage or deception by kith and kin should be addressed through preventive measures such as targeted advocacy initiatives for prospective migrant children and families, at times of the year when they are likely to be on the move (i.e., between

crop seasons and Ramadan). Such measures should avoid a top-down and instructive approach, and use one based on an active process of dialogic enrichment and mutual understanding on the significance of using girl children as guides in migration for begging from the economic perspective as well as considering the legal and social implications, and on the possibility of viable alternatives.

Research should aim at helping governments to ensure that migration does not harm the children, irrespective of whether they migrate with their parents or independently, and instead help them to prepare for productive employment when they reach working age.

- *Work toward a more nuanced anti-trafficking approach that is sensitive to children's agency in pursuing economic activities across borders.*

Child migrants are certainly vulnerable to exploitation and other dangers as they migrate, work and live, but

'Work toward a more nuanced anti-trafficking approach that is sensitive to children's agency in pursuing economic activities across borders.'

they are not always necessarily victims by virtue of their participation in economic activities or their biological age. Recognition of this fact can alter the way in which their needs and vulnerabilities are addressed in host communities.

An alternative approach to poverty alleviation and children's rights based on an understanding of the changing relationship between migration and livelihoods, the particular contexts in which child migrants make a living, and the corresponding power relations between children and adults is needed to come up with a child- and youth-centred approach.

There is a need to provide support to organizations in civil society working on women's and children's rights and to mobilize an anti-trafficking approach that does not focus on the illegal aspects of migration, but on the structural causes behind the motivations to migrate.

- *Respond to the unique situation of Malian girl guides to blind beggars in Senegal.*

Because the experiences of young girls in begging communities have a profound impact on them in the short term and could have significant implications for their futures—in line with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and the Organization of African Unity's African Charter on the Rights and Well Being of the Child as well as the Protocol on Human Trafficking—measures must be found to ensure that the needs of those who have been forced or deceived are met.

These may include the following:

- Inclusion of girl guides in voluntary bilateral programs of repatriation
- Cooperation with local authorities, including human rights and women's organizations, the children's parliament in both countries and Imams, to ensure that girl guides who live in the community of Malian beggars are included in immunization programmes appropriate to them.

