

Senegal

“Our hope is that there will be investment in our towns”

Aïssata is a Senegalese woman who lives in a village of 5,000 inhabitants, 15 kilometers from the Senegal River. Her Sahelian village has a long religious tradition and the inhabitants rely mainly on agriculture, raising livestock and fishing. In the face of difficulties caused by drought and desertification, the migrant population is a vital source of income and support for the community.

Aïssata has never left the village, nor has her husband who has a brother in France. The brother occasionally sends them money that Aïssata uses to supplement her income. The couple has four grown children. Two of the boys study at the madrassa (Koran school) and help with agricultural work because they do not have jobs. Another son, who lacked the funds to migrate to Europe, emigrated to the Congo. It was Aïssata who got together the 225,000 CFA (345 Euros) necessary for his departure, hoping he would be able to find the means to migrate to France himself.

“It is impossible to compare women who receive remittances each month with those of us whose livelihoods come only from agriculture. Agriculture is not profitable. It is enough to feed oneself but one cannot earn enough to pay for clothes or satisfy other needs. Many families of migrants do not farm anymore. They buy rice from the harvest.” Aïssata’s daughter has finished school, but does not want to work in the fields. She coordinates awareness raising activities for an NGO, mainly on the theme of genital mutilation, a practice that is dwindling in the region. Aïssata explains that “usually it’s the men who migrate. There are no women who decide to migrate. For a man who wants to build a family it’s normal that he makes the decision to migrate, especially when he has no work and nothing to do here in the village.”

The opportunities for youth in Senegal are very limited, but the possibilities to migrate are also becoming more scarce. In addition, considering that retired migrants return to their places of origin, women understand that their only option is to work toward improving the situation where they were born. “There are fewer migrants. People continue to migrate but it is less profitable today. Now, our hope is that there will be investment in our towns.” They hope that the efforts of migrants who have already constructed schools, mosques and clinics, now will move towards the creation of factories and work for young people.

Women are organizing themselves. Aïssata, who is 58 years old, is involved in the social activities of the community. She is the president of a 200-member group for the promotion of women, a cooperative that owns 45 hectares of farmland. The women work hard but consider it necessary to create other sources of revenue in which following generations can work, particularly for girls who have other aspirations. “Women’s workloads within the household have increased. They are tired, supporting all aspects of household management. Women are obligated to manage the work of the fields that was left by male migrants.”

The women of the cooperative have never received remittances to support their activities. They contribute a sum every month and use a part of their produce for their own consumption, while the rest of the profits are saved. The last harvest, for example, allowed them to save 100,000 francs CFA (150 Euros) in addition to contributions. The connections between their village and France through migration, however, have permitted partnerships with organizations in France and Senegal to be established, resulting in the construction of a well for the cooperative and financial services.

Women now hope to develop their activities in dyeing, commerce and hair-dressing to keep their daughters in Senegal and provide them with work. Furthermore, Aïssata, who is a midwife, hopes that women of the next generation will be able to find work in the public health sector, an even more probable possibility now because her village might be selected for the construction of a hospital.



It is estimated that the immigrant population represents 3% of the Senegalese population, among whom only 16% are women. Remittances reached 3% of the national GDP (500 billion CFA francs, or US \$ 1.1 billion, according to the IMF). In a country that is overwhelmingly rural (59% of the population), and impaired by poverty and drought, the organizing and solidarity efforts of all emigrants and local people, together with the individual and collective remittances, are key factors in the development of the fragile communities of origin.
