

Long-distance marriage in the Louga region



By Marie Ruwet

Part 1: Research

Migration and Long-Distance Marriage in the Louga Region

The Louga region, located in north-western Senegal, is mainly agro-pastoral and characterised by a young and dynamic population. According to the 2023 General Population and Housing Census (RGPH-5), it has 1,125,908 inhabitants spread over 25,619 km², with an average density of 43.95 inhabitants per km². The fertility rate is 5, slightly below the national average, and the economic dependency ratio, at over 99%, reflects the heavy pressure on human and economic resources.

Local economy and vulnerabilities

Louga's economy is based mainly on agriculture and livestock farming. Rainfed agriculture, the main source of subsistence, remains highly vulnerable to climatic hazards, soil degradation and lack of equipment. Livestock farming covers a large part of the territory (65%) and is a key activity for more than 80% of the population. However, this combined agriculture-livestock economy remains fragile, prompting a significant proportion of the male population to migrate to other regions or abroad in search of more stable incomes.



Migration dynamics

Louga is one of the regions most affected by migration in Senegal. The main factors include the impoverishment of agricultural land, recurrent droughts, the lack of local jobs and the social prestige associated with leaving. Since the 1970s, strong migration networks have facilitated successive departures. A survey by the Bureau d'Analyse et d'Orientation Stratégique (BAOS, 2022) indicates that 58.5% of migrants from Louga leave for Europe and 39.5% for other African countries.

The Survey on Migrant Remittances (EMTFS) conducted in 2009 reveals that nearly 63.5% of remittances from Senegalese migrants are destined for rural areas, including Louga. Migrant remittances play a major economic role. Louga accounts for 11.9% of total remittances to Senegal, affecting nearly 30% of the rural population. These remittances, whether formal or informal, exceed 10 billion CFA francs per year and often represent 90% of the total income of beneficiary households. They finance daily consumption (food, health, schooling), but are also used to build houses, mosques or collective infrastructure such as boreholes, according to the study by T. Bruzzone (2006). These resources transform the local economy and strongly influence family and social strategies.





Long-distance marriage and family organisation

Long-distance marriage is a direct consequence of male migration. Men leave to work abroad, leaving women to manage the household and raise children on their own. This situation is reinforced by social norms and patrilocal structure, as well as by the cost and difficulties of family reunification procedures.

The majority of women remain in Louga, while a minority are able to join their husbands abroad. While managing daily life, women develop complementary economic activities such as small-scale trade or market gardening. They thus become central players in the local economy and in maintaining households. Long-distance marriage relies on financial transfers, remote communications and short visits by migrant men. It illustrates how migration shapes social structures, strengthens women's economic autonomy and redefines marital and family relationships.

Public policies and support programmes

Aware of the impact of migration, Senegal adopted a national migration policy in 2018, revised in 2023, aimed at managing migration flows, protecting migrants and maximising economic benefits for local development. The country has signed bilateral agreements with several states, including France and Spain, to facilitate the movement of people, promote local development and enhance security. The government also supports returning migrants through programmes offering financial and technical support to set up local economic projects. These initiatives aim to reduce irregular migration and stimulate sustainable employment.

To strengthen women's economic empowerment, several programmes have been set up:

- FAISE (Support Fund for Investment by Senegalese Abroad): support for economic initiatives by women in the diaspora, assistance in implementing projects and strengthening networks of women entrepreneurs.
- Tekki Fii: initiative in partnership with the European Union to provide employment and training opportunities, finance micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and specifically include women.
- Yaakaar Initiative: fund to finance youth projects, with a focus on girls and young women, in the fields of economics, culture, sport and entrepreneurship.
- Regional programmes for the protection of vulnerable migrants: funded by the Trust Fund for Africa, these programmes provide access to healthcare, education, housing, and psychosocial and legal support for women and young migrants.



Challenges and prospects

Migration offers significant economic opportunities for households in Louga, but it also creates social challenges. Public policies must take migration realities into account in order to support local development, the reintegration of returning migrants and the economic empowerment of women. Long-distance marriage, a deeply rooted phenomenon in the region, is an indicator of the social transformations brought about by migration and illustrates the ability of families to adapt to economic constraints and traditional structures.

Louga thus illustrates a paradox: male emigration generates resources and social status, but increases the burden of responsibility on women, making them the pillars of family survival and the local economy. This system highlights the interdependence between migration, the economy, gender and social organisation, and underscores the importance of an integrated approach to supporting households, promoting equality and strengthening community resilience.



Part 2: Field testimony

Testimony in Lenona, Louga village

After completing the research outlined earlier, I visited Leona, one of the villages around Louga, to meet women living in long-distance marriages. There, I was able to discover another side of the reality of these marriages. In many villages in the region, men have migrated abroad, leaving their wives behind to adapt to their absence. These marriages, often arranged between families, sometimes begin while the husband is already overseas. In some cases, he returns only briefly to consummate the union before leaving again. Other women discover after their wedding that their husband has decided to depart, without consulting them.

Once married, women often live with their in-laws, where they may face verbal or physical abuse, especially from mothers-in-law or the husband's brothers. Even when not mistreated, they remain under pressure, constantly monitored and judged. At first glance, the husband's absence might seem to offer them more freedom and autonomy, since they are not caring for him daily. However, in reality, polygamy being widespread in Senegal, women must manage the household and family responsibilities fully.

In these long-distance marriages, women often feel “imprisoned” or “enslaved.” Leaving the house or walking around the village can spark rumors that they are involved with another man. A woman whose husband is abroad is expected to stay inside until his return, and any deviation may be reported to him, potentially resulting in repudiation without recourse. Despite living in seemingly beautiful houses, many women have little to no income, as some husbands share their resources among multiple wives or stop sending money over time. To survive, some women start small businesses, such as shops or restaurants.

Husbands are scattered across the globe, in Spain, Brazil, Belgium, France, Italy, often having left legally with proper documentation, working in retail, construction, or running businesses. Many stay abroad for years, promising to bring their wives eventually. Communication mainly occurs via phone, making these relationships emotionally challenging, with the absence felt keenly by both women and children.

Through their testimonies, this article reveals a reality at the intersection of migration and tradition, where long-distance marriage is both a social institution and a profound personal challenge.

Pseudonyms are used for all women interviewed to protect their privacy.



Portrait of Ami, who suffered numerous verbal and physical abuses, particularly from her husband's brothers, who had left to work in France at a Carrefour supermarket. Her in-laws did not like her and always spoke badly of her to her husband abroad. They separated several times, until she opened her own restaurant to gain independence and provide for her children.



Portrait of Radhi, divorced from her first husband, who now lives in France with another Senegalese woman. She has a son to care for and is still waiting for money from her ex-husband to support him. In the meantime, she works as a teacher in the village, but her salary is very low. She therefore lives with her mother in a small room.

Portrait of Adama, victim of numerous verbal and physical abuses from her in-laws. Her husband, who had been living in France for eight years, returned only to conceive a child with her. One day, she gathered her courage and left the marital home to return to live with her family.





Portrait of Fatou, whose husband is in Italy. She has no problems with her in-laws and feels comfortable there with her children. The only thing she misses is her husband's presence and the love she can only receive from afar.

Portrait of Adama, whose husband has been in Brazil for eight years. She has five children and decided to open a grocery shop to support her family.

