



# 19. Irregular migration and vulnerability of Ivorian women returnees<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *This chapter describes the migration journey of Ivorian female returnees assisted by IOM, from the time they start preparing for the trip until their return to Côte d'Ivoire. It draws on a participatory study conducted in 2018 and 2019 in Côte d'Ivoire, during which a mixed qualitative and quantitative methodology was adopted. It finds that – whereas broader female migration can be beneficial for the women themselves, their circles and society – women returnees experience additional challenges. In their case, migration has tended to reinforce their economic precarity and psychosocial vulnerability. The various forms of exploitation they suffered en route, the fact that they left their children behind, and the stigma attached to their return without having fulfilled their migration ambitions, are all elements that can make long-term economic and social reintegration more complex.*

## 19.1. The migration context in Côte d'Ivoire

Côte d'Ivoire, which is a Member State of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), is a country of destination for many West African migrants. It has more than 5 million foreign inhabitants – about 25 per cent of the country's total population (Côte d'Ivoire Institut National de la Statistique, 2014) – primarily from ECOWAS countries.

For many years, Ivorians only rarely resorted to irregular migration, as the domestic economy was booming.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, however, the number of people claiming to be Ivorian citizens and arriving on the coast of Italy leapt to 13,000, an increase of almost 230 per cent over 2015, placing Côte d'Ivoire in fourth position among countries of origin in West and Central Africa. That trend was confirmed in 2017, when nearly 10,000 migrants claiming to be Ivorian nationals arrived on the coast of Italy, placing Côte d'Ivoire third, after Nigeria and Guinea, among the top West and Central African countries of origin (IOM, 2018). In 2018, while the number of irregular migrants arriving in Italy by sea fell overall, Ivorian migrants remained in the “top 10” of nationalities

<sup>1</sup> Geographic scope: Côte d'Ivoire, transit and destination countries (Tunisia, Morocco and Libya).

<sup>2</sup> IOM Côte d'Ivoire.

<sup>3</sup> Real gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 7.4 per cent in 2018, compared with 7.7 per cent in 2017. The economic outlook remains favourable, with real GDP growth of 7.0 per cent in 2019 and as yet unknown for 2020. See African Development Bank (n.d.), available at [www.afdb.org/fr/countries/west-africa/cote-d%E2%80%99ivoire/cote-divoire-economic-outlook/](http://www.afdb.org/fr/countries/west-africa/cote-d%E2%80%99ivoire/cote-divoire-economic-outlook/) (accessed 26 May 2020).

arriving by that route, accounting for 5 per cent of all arrivals and representing the second-largest West and Central African contingent, after Nigerian migrants. At the same time, Ivorian migrants represented the third largest West and Central African contingent arriving irregularly in Spain, accounting for 4 per cent out of about 3,000 declared arrivals (IOM, 2019:14, 19).

According to information provided by the Italian and Spanish Interior Ministries for the period January–April 2019 (IOM, 2020:14–20), Côte d'Ivoire remained among the top 10 countries of origin declared by migrants registered on the Italian and Spanish coasts: it ranked ninth in Italy, with 3 per cent; and fourth in Spain, with 13 per cent of total arrivals from every region in the world; it ranked third in Italy (after Guinea and Senegal); and third in Spain (behind Guinea and Mali) of total arrivals from West and Central Africa.

The Central Mediterranean Route taken by the Ivorians is one the world's most dangerous. Many migrants die in the desert or drown at sea, and there is a high risk of exploitation: 69 per cent of migrants aged 25 years or over surveyed for a study (IOM and UNICEF, 2017) reported treatment akin to human trafficking. That figure rose to 77 per cent for young people under the age of 25 years. The study specifically considered migrants still on the move and victims of human trafficking, and is therefore not representative of all migrants.

## 19.2. Methodology

The information presented in this chapter was collected and analysed as part of a study conducted in 2018 and 2019 in Côte d'Ivoire, "Migration féminine en Côte d'Ivoire: Le parcours des migrantes de retour" (Women's migration in Côte d'Ivoire: The journey of returning migrants), under the project Safety, Support and Solutions Business Case in the Central Mediterranean Route. As it considers only women returnees receiving assistance from IOM – people who for the most part had given up on their migration projects – it is not representative of all women migrants from Côte d'Ivoire. The experiences recounted by the women returnees are generally more negative than those of women who migrated successfully and who are not covered by this chapter.

A collaborative approach was adopted, in order to involve all migration stakeholders in Côte d'Ivoire in the research process (government, donors, migration research and data-collection institutions, United Nations agencies, civil society and returning migrants).

The research was structured using a mixed methodology (qualitative and quantitative) with a four-stage data-collection process: (a) exploratory interviews (seven) with returning women migrants; (b) focus group discussions (four) with returning men and women migrants (selection criteria: age and last country reached before their return to Côte d'Ivoire representative of migrants benefiting from return assistance from IOM Côte d'Ivoire) and their families and friends; (c) telephone survey to profile migrants having returned at least six months previously (104 interviews with women returnees selected at random after having applied the criteria of age and last country reached); (d) field survey in Abidjan and Daloa on the perception of women's migration in Côte d'Ivoire (168 interviews with 84 women and 84 men selected at random from the community). Abidjan (six communes chosen for their high migration potential) and Daloa both have the potential to generate high levels of migration, and were identified thanks to the information collected from the returnees.

## 19.3. Pre-departure profile of women returnees

Seventy-five per cent of the women interviewed lived in Abidjan in the six months before their departures and 69 per cent currently lived there, but only 37 per cent were born there. The country's economic capital is a transit, departure and destination urban centre. The fact that it is easy to operate small informal businesses in Abidjan draws women wanting to settle there in better economic situations and/or to finance their journeys. Settling in Abidjan is thus one step in the search for higher incomes and greater opportunities, as is migration abroad: they are stages towards the same goal. If conditions in Abidjan are not favourable, then the search will be continued abroad.

Of the women who participated in the phone survey, 81 per cent were 35 or younger. In terms of marital status, most of the returning women were single (65%) and 10 per cent were married. Before their departure, 75 per cent of the women were providing for at least one child; that figure rose to 85 per cent at least six months after their return, including those who became pregnant during the trip. In most cases, the women did not travel with their children, leaving them instead in the care of others in Côte d'Ivoire. In 75 per cent of cases, the women migrated alone. Forty-eight per cent had at least a secondary school education.

Before their departure, 79 per cent of the women had jobs. Most of those interviewed worked in trade (66%), but others worked in services (21%) or the food business (11%). Before departure, 53 per cent of the women earned a monthly income of over CFAF 50,000 (USD 86), bearing in mind that the minimum income in Côte d'Ivoire is about 60,000 CFAF (USD 103). In addition, 57 per cent said that they were receiving financial aid from their families (25% from their friends) before departure.

## 19.4. Economic migration in the hope of more stable living conditions

The majority of the people interviewed (92%) in places with a high migration potential during the field survey of perceptions considered that women were migrating more than before. During the same survey, 72 per cent of those interviewed said that they knew at least one woman in their circle who had migrated regularly or irregularly. In 75 per cent of those cases, that woman had migrated alone; 64 per cent had migrated for economic reasons; and 19 per cent for family reasons. In Côte d'Ivoire, single mothers are subject to huge economic and social pressure, and this can compel them to take to the road and run the risks along the Central Mediterranean Route.

According to the women returnees, they had left Côte d'Ivoire in search of jobs that would enable them to attain better living conditions than those currently available in Côte d'Ivoire. The returning women (in particular those providing for children) seemed to present economic migration as a necessity to achieve satisfactory financial independence.

In order to have some level of comfort and safety compared with the overland route – which men have a greater tendency to take – the women preferred to fly to countries with no entry visa requirement, in particular Tunisia and Morocco. The women interviewed headed for two main geographical areas when leaving Côte d'Ivoire: Europe (in 53% of cases, especially France, Italy and Spain) and North Africa (in 39% of cases, especially Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria).

Most of the women had taken less than three months to decide to leave. In addition, 44 per cent had preferred not to inform their families and friends of their migration plans, mainly out of fear that they would try to dissuade them – they had planned to inform their entourage of their departures once they had reached a country of transit or final destination.

*“Life is more difficult now: more expensive, less work. The way things are in our country, we don’t feel like staying in Côte d’Ivoire. There’s no point in studying because no one’s going to look at your diplomas and experience. That’s what pushes us to leave.”*

*Focus group discussion with women from among the returnees’ families and friends*

Sixty-one per cent of the women spent CFAF 1 million (about USD 1,686) or less to finance the trip out of Côte d'Ivoire, the amount fluctuating depending on the destination. According to the statements of the women interviewed, 44 per cent financed their journeys using only their own funds, while 56 per cent also drew on funds from families and friends, without necessarily saying what the money would be used for. The initial cost of the journey was increased by additional costs such as unpaid forced labour, usually as cleaning women (domestic work), or ransom, in particular for those detained in Libya and whose families back home were asked to pay. When a ransom is demanded, the migration of a family member can have a socioeconomic impact on the entire family.



### **Box 19.1.** From final destination to transit country – the case of Tunisia

Most of the women interviewed for this study had experienced Tunisia either as a country of transit on the way to Libya and Europe or as their final destination. Since Ivorians do not require an entry visa (they need a work certificate if they want to work regularly as soon as they arrive and, after 90 days, a resident permit, failing which they will find themselves in an even more vulnerable situation and be forced to stay in the country if they are unable to pay the fine), they often travel first to Tunisia, to work and save to send money back home, then leave once they have saved enough. Some women use a middleman to buy the plane ticket (about CFAF 500,000, or roughly USD 823) and especially to have a first contact on arrival and find a job, usually as a domestic employee. They admit that they could buy the plane ticket themselves but say that they need a middleman, as they know no one locally who could house them on arrival and help them find work. What many of them do not know is that they were “placed under contract” before leaving Côte d'Ivoire, that their passports will be confiscated and that they will not be paid during the “first five months” in Tunisia. Their wages will be paid to the person who facilitated the trip and helped them find work, even though most of them thought that the middleman had been paid with the money they had handed over in Côte d'Ivoire. What usually happens is that the new employers have paid a sum to the smugglers, and that is the “debt” that the migrant must reimburse to her new employer by working for free for five months. Those five months, during which the woman receives no money, are assessed, according to what we were told, at about CFAF 650,000 (about USD 1,120).

The women described situations akin to human trafficking: 18 hours of work per day, 7 days a week, without seeing the light of day or getting enough to eat. It is not easy to leave this first job, without a passport, without any connections who may be able to provide aid. In addition, most of the women do not know that, although they entered the country legally, they have to pay a fine if they leave after three months. The migrants have no choice but to accept their working conditions, as they know no one on the spot and benefit from little protection because of their irregular situation and lack of a valid resident permit. Because of this precarious situation, some of them are tempted to continue the journey on to Europe via Libya. Some of them, unable to pay the fine, have found themselves unable to return home.

## 19.5. Deteriorating and increasingly precarious economic situation of women returnees

Before leaving, 79 per cent of the women had jobs; six months after their return, only 53 per cent did. In addition, 87 per cent worked in trade, in small, relatively unstable businesses, in order to meet the family's daily needs, and rarely recovered the level of income they had before leaving. According to their statements, the monthly income of the returning women surveyed dropped sharply after migration. Before their departure, 53 per cent earned a monthly income in excess of CFAF 50,000 (USD 86); at the time of the survey, only 20 per cent were earning that amount.

Most (70%) of the women returnees worked during the journey, in order to pay their way but also to be able to continue onwards. The working conditions they described were very harsh (physically exhausting work causing sickness, ill-treatment at the hands of their employers and no pay, among other things). Almost all the women (95%) having found work laboured in the service sector (domestic work). In 43 per cent of cases, the work was unpaid, and in 25 per cent of cases, it was forced, most often to pay back the people who had "facilitated" their trips, or who were members of human trafficking and smuggling networks.

In addition, the financial aid provided by their families to the returning migrants had decreased, from 57 per cent before departure to 38 per cent after their return, even though the women earned more from their economic activities before departure. One explanation for the decrease, which was also observed for the aid provided by friends (dropping from 25% to 17%), could be the worsening social ties between the migrant and her family. Some families were asked to pay during the migration, lowering their capacity to save. Thanks to the amount they received as reintegration support from IOM in the context of the joint IOM/European Union Emergency Trust Fund project,<sup>4</sup> returning migrants are able to meet their basic needs during the first few weeks and months following their return.

Among the very few women who were able to save some money during their migration, only 21 per cent managed to save more than CFAF 1 million, or barely enough to cover the costs of the journey.

The decision to abandon a migration plan while in an irregular situation resulted in a worse and more precarious economic situation for the women returnees (and their children). The difficulty of economic and social reintegration has prompted some returning women to think about migrating again, in the belief that, this time, they will be luckier in terms of both working conditions and their ability to reach Europe, if that is their plan.

## 19.6. Irregular migration and the risks of human trafficking and smuggling

Of the women who said that they had left Côte d'Ivoire as regular migrants, most left for countries that did not require entry visas from Ivorian citizens, such as Tunisia and Morocco. They did not, however, have the papers they needed to work legally in those countries on arrival or to stay beyond the 90 days of a tourist visit. Migration is not necessarily irregular from the outset, but rather becomes so during the journey (notably owing to the inability to obtain a resident permit, the fact of being unable to apply for one or to pay the fines to leave the country), exposing the women to serious risks.

Of the 48 per cent of the women who said that they had migrated irregularly, 59 per cent said that the decision had been influenced by their families and friends. It would appear that, before leaving, most of the people interviewed had a fairly good idea of the risks associated with irregular migration, but were not fully aware of the consequences. When they were (although the information provided by acquaintances on the spot may not be reliable), the risks appeared to be offset by the idea that luck might accompany them on their journey.

<sup>4</sup> The amount provided for reintegration in the context of the European Union Emergency Trust Fund project to migrants receiving assistance for their return to Côte d'Ivoire is CFAF 165,000 (USD 281) for an adult and CFAF 140,000 (USD 238) for a child.

The women returnees could not define, and did not have a clear understanding of, what a smuggler was, and they tended to conflate facilitator or travel agent, smuggler and trafficker. The study revealed that 38 per cent of the women surveyed had contacted a *coxeur* (a middleman) or a smuggler when they left Côte d'Ivoire (with whom they had been put in touch by a relative or friend in 67% of cases), who facilitated the trip (production of travel documents, job search and such). Those planning to migrate were placed “under contract” when they left, putting them in situations akin to human trafficking (confiscation of passport, and forced and unpaid labour to pay back a “debt” that the migrant was not even aware of).

## 19.7. The psychosocial impact of migration

Most of the women said that, throughout the migration journey, they had been victims of various forms of human exploitation, such as forced labour, sexual violence or prostitution. Most of the abuse occurred in the workplace (58%), showing how difficult it is to integrate socially in the country of transit or on the road (39%). The abuse often affected the migrants' physical health.

Most of the women met with spoke of times when they had to use their bodies, voluntarily or by force, to stay alive and continue on their way, as they had no aid. The experience left serious psychosocial scars that were difficult to share with friends and family on their return.

*“I left for Tunisia alone. I did it to help my brothers. But things went wrong: the work was hard and after I fell ill. A friend suggested that I leave for Europe via Libya. We were in the desert and we spent two months in this place surrounded by garbage. They sold us, me and the other Congolese girls. Our Ivorian brothers told us to wait before going to Italy. They sold us to the Nigerians, to guys in prison. It was clearly prostitution. They beat me, really hard, I thought I was going to die. I did not want to be a prostitute. I jumped from the second storey and fled. In the meantime, my mom had died and I had no one who could send me money. That’s how I got to know the father of my child and he helped me.”*

*Focus group discussion with returning women*



### Box 19.2. From the dream of Europe to the nightmare of sexual slavery in a Libyan campo

"In the campo in Libya, in Sabratha, food was a problem. So I went to see Mélissa (an Ivorian coxeur). She said, 'My sister, my brother-in-law wants you. Think about it.' I was really angry. Her brother-in-law, a Malian, sent his bodyguards to get me. They said, 'It's the law of the jungle here, who do you think you are?' He took out his weapon and said, 'You want to die?' ... He hit me and abused me. He told me that if I continued to resist, I would never leave for Italy. I tried to flee and they came looking for me. He wanted to get me pregnant. After a month, I wasn't pregnant, he thought I was taking medication not to become pregnant. He couldn't understand because the daughter of his friend has become pregnant. I told him that I was sterile, so he hit me with a gas pipe. He said, 'So all the work I did, for nothing?' It was my own Ivorian sisters who came and told him that I was joking, that I wasn't sterile. He hit me again. He was obsessed with me. This went on for about three months. I became pregnant. Then the Libyan police attacked the campo. They didn't want to end up in prison. Since I was pregnant, they wanted to flee with me. Everyone was sick, we walked, we wanted to give ourselves up to the police, we were afraid of the rebels. That's when I found myself in prison, pregnant... I had pains, and since the baby's father had hit me a lot, they did an ultrasound and told me, 'The baby is dead in your stomach.' I count myself lucky that I didn't catch AIDS."

Exploratory interview with a woman migrant returning from Libya

## 19.8. Twice stigmatized: as women and as returning migrants

On their return to Côte d'Ivoire, the women can face double discrimination, as women and as returning migrants (who gave up on their plans to migrate). The statements collected show that returning migrants are stigmatized, by their friends and family, and by society (especially in the case of women, if they become pregnant en route, either voluntarily or by force – for example, if they were raped).

In addition, the fact that the returning women migrated irregularly may have had a negative effect on the family and social unit. For those who travelled as a family, several said that their husbands disappeared (in particular when the campos were attacked); for those travelling alone, having left their children in Côte d'Ivoire, the shame of having turned back can make them put off getting back in touch with their children, prolonging the children's precarious situation, notably in terms of access to school and health care.

For over half the returning women interviewed, their migration saga lasted between six months and two years (52%) and, for 36 per cent, it lasted more than two years. Some women did not want to leave for any length of time; their goal was to migrate (usually regularly) to work and save enough to engage in an income-generating activity in Côte d'Ivoire. Their migration tended to be lengthened by their encounters with networks of smugglers and traffickers, the difficulties of migrating regularly, the harsh living and working conditions, and their irregular status.

*“The return and the difficulties of return, more than the migration itself, made me regret the decision to leave: I should have known that if I stayed home, I would still have my money. I would have savings whereas now I have nothing. As a result, I have two problems: the fatigue caused by what I experienced in Algeria, and the disappointment of realizing that I’ve lost everything. When I got back to my village, all my friends were better dressed than me: I went to Algeria to earn a living and I came home with nothing.”*

*Focus group discussion with returning women*

## 19.9. Conclusion and recommendations

This study covers exclusively women migrants returning to their countries after having given up on their migration project; it is therefore not representative of the cases (possibly more frequent) of successful migration. Irregular migration along the Central Mediterranean Route has tended to heighten the economic and social vulnerability of women migrants returning to Côte d’Ivoire. In the context of this study, recommendations were formulated with a view to drawing up policies and establishing programmes adapted to the specific migration experience of women returnees.

Those recommendations are to:

- (a) **Heighten awareness**, so as to promote safe and orderly migration, by informing people about the dangers of and alternatives to irregular migration;
- (b) **Ensure the long-term economic reintegration of women returnees**, by, for example, inviting all stakeholders to offer services adapted to women whose economic situation has been weakened by migration, and by identifying structures that can work with the women in a structured project;
- (c) **Deal with the psychosocial impact of migration**, by identifying needs and the national response in the sector.



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