

TESTIMONIES OF MIGRANT WOMEN WORKERS FROM SENEGAL



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Fambaye NDOYE

December 2020

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PREFACE

With Strength and Resilience

This publication aims at presenting testimonies by those whose plight is widely discussed – but who rarely have the chance to speak for themselves: migrant women workers. Isolated and excluded during migrations full of obstacles and traps, their fate is played out mostly behind closed doors. How can we combat these women's vulnerability?

This work is a valuable contribution by women trade unionists, principled activists who combine solidarity with workers in the field. A far cry from slogans and declarations of principle, the present publication highlights the violence and harassment that women, in general, and migrant women, in particular, endure. Our comrade Fambaye Ndoeye uses simple language to describe very extreme situations in the everyday realities of migrant women workers' largely unseen as they pursue more dignified lives.

African women fleeing poverty are deprived of their most basic rights, trapped in informal labour, and socially stigmatised by racism and xenophobia. The International Labour Organization's Convention 190 against violence and harassment at work of 2019, and its Convention 189 on domestic workers, which entered into force in 2013, specify clear global standards. However, standards can only meaningfully impact women's lives if institutional responses are effectively attached with civil society efforts and enforced.

I congratulate all those who have enabled the publication of these testimonies. This grassroots work – realised despite the interviewees' distance and isolation – is an invaluable feat that all RSMMS members will use to good effect. We will pursue our Senegalese sisters' analytical documentation to support African women's daily struggles – and their remarkable will – to progress.

*On behalf of the Trade Union Network for
Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Migration (RSMMS),
Naima Hammami
Deputy Secretary General of the Tunisian General
Labour Union (UGTT)
December 2020*


Secrétaire Générale Adjointe chargée des
Relations Arabes, Internationales et de l'Émigration

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE 3

INTRODUCTION 5

TESTIMONIES 7

Harassment at Work, A Mobile Reality 8

A Life without Rights in Mauritania 11

An African Migration 14

Tolerance Boosts Resilience 17

A Mixed-Race Activist in Tangiers 20

No Way Out in Saudi Arabia 23

A Senegalese Woman in Benin 26

Legality is an End in Itself 29

A Migrant Childhood 32

Despite the Pain 35

Unrealised Dreams 38

An Uncertain Future 41

Enough Was Enough 44

Become Legal and Claim Your Rights! 47

UNION VIEWPOINT, ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 50

INTRODUCTION

Migration was long regarded as something that men do. Women migrants were unseen, their experiences overlooked. Yet Senegalese women have been migrating since the 19th century, mainly during the colonial era, when they were sent to France to work as domestics. Family reunification programmes of the 1960s viewed women as passive companions in migration. Now, however, the mass movement of women is a reality that leaves no one indifferent, and the “feminisation” of migration requires us to protect female migrant workers.

Women’s national and international mobility are largely individual paths of emancipation and empowerment. Along the way, women are an integral part of the job market and fully contribute to the economic and social dynamics of their home and host countries. They contribute to their family and community development by sending money to build schools and houses, to cover health and education expenses, especially family events like baptisms, marriages, and deaths. They also support the community through associative and technology transfer projects. Yet migrant women most often have inhumane and degrading working conditions and are exposed to all types of abuse, exploitation, slavery, and human trafficking.

In 2019, the 108th Session of the International Labour Conference adopted the first international legal standard to fight against violence and harassment at work. Convention 190 addresses the concerns of millions of workers, and is accompanied by Recommendation 206, which draws attention to the plight of labour migrants, especially women and male workers in the informal economy. It is against this background that we wish to bear witness to the situation of these migrant women: in terms of rights violations, harsh working conditions, violence and harassment at work.

During this global health crisis, female migrant workers need even more protection. The global implementation of unprecedented, momentous and emergency measures, border closures, social distancing mandates and general lockdowns have significant repercussions on the work environment, especially for workers in precarious situations. Mainly employed in the informal economy and the service sector (hospitality, catering, domestic work, business, caregiving, etc), female migrant workers are particularly exposed to the risk of violence and all types

of abuse. It is crucial to keep track of female workers who migrate to and from Senegal, listen to them, identify the various violations of their rights and better define the resources and the most effective individual and community strategies to address them.

In response to civil society outcry against the uptick in rapes and crimes against women, on 10 January 2020, Senegal adopted Law No. 2020-05 that criminalises rape and paedophilia and includes a provision on harassment and indecent behaviour.¹ This concern is also set out in Article 21 of Senegal's National Interprofessional Collective Agreement (CCNI)².

Collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation seeks to give voice to women migrant workers and open the way for reflection on means of protection, prevention, and repression based on Convention 190, Recommendation 206, and Senegal's rape and paedophilia law. "TESTIMONIES OF MIGRANT WOMEN WORKERS FROM SENEGAL" sheds light on these women's migration and professional paths. Their testimonies have led us to draft a series of specific recommendations, presented in the second part of this publication. I invite you to learn more about these female migrant workers through their moving and disturbing stories.

I warmly thank my team: Ms Ouleymatou Diallo, Mr Oumar Fall, El Hadji Souleymane Diallo, and Ms Aïssatou Thioub, who have helped present these moving personal accounts. I am also very grateful to Mr. Sami Adouani and Ms. Lina Zekri of the PROMIG-FES project for their commitment to producing this publication and congratulate Moez Ben Ismail on his fine illustrations.

Fambaye NDOYE

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¹ Between 2017 and 2018 there were 668 cases of sexual violence against minors, according to the Committee for the Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children (CVLF) and the Association of Women Jurists of Senegal (AJS) in 2019.

² which states: "The Parties to the present Convention undertake to promote and guarantee the right of everyone to work in an environment free from violence and harassment, by adopting an inclusive, integrated approach (including decent work objectives, respect for fundamental principles and rights at work and gender considerations) to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence and harassment at work." (non official translation).

We pay tribute to these women migrant workers who have agreed to share their daily lives and intimate secrets with us, at the risk of scratching deep open wounds.



TOULAYE

Harassment at work, a mobile reality

After losing both her job and her husband, Toulaye, mother of three, moved to Italy in 2010 to provide for her family. She has suffered sexual harassment at work in both her native Senegal and in Italy.

Unfairly dismissed in Senegal

Toulaye graduated in finance and landed a salaried position in a bank in Senegal. But after resisting her superior's sexual advances, she was unfairly dismissed. "I quit from the bank where I was working in Senegal because one of my immediate superiors had designs on me. He knew I was married, but he kept making indecent proposals. When he realised that he would never get his way, he found a reason to have me dismissed." Her workstation got robbed, and despite being seriously wounded, she got fired without compensation. Toulaye couldn't do anything against this unfair dismissal because at the time, her husband, whom she lost after, wasn't working, and the family could not afford a lawyer.

After her husband died, Toulaye decided to emigrate, leaving her children behind with a heavy heart. She had to find a job and support her family. Since Italy doesn't recognise Senegalese diplomas, Toulaye had to put her diplomas aside and search for a job, any job: She had to earn money to survive and support her family in Senegal. "I've done a lot of odd jobs, babysitting, caring for the elderly, trading, and sometimes domestic work. [...] I don't have a particular occupation. Every time I see a job offer and feel I can do it; I go for it. Sometimes, I have a little free time even when I am under contract. I take those opportunities to do some housecleaning or babysitting on the side."

Non-recognition of Senegalese diplomas

Toulaye's visa eventually expired, and she fell into the world of undocumented migrants, forced to live in hiding and hide to work. She then started to work as a domestic – and her real problems began. "I was put in touch with a Tunisian woman whom I worked for as a cleaning lady. She lived with her husband and two children and was always blackmailing me and threatening me, saying, "If you leave this house, the police will send you back to Senegal. Then one day, she started making sexual advances to me, and as I refused, she made me leave the house in the middle of the night without paying me the month and a half wages she owed me." Toulaye's illegal situation deprived her of any recourse, and her employer knew it.

Toulaye is up against Italy's migration policy, which has become more coercive and repressive. Undocumented migrants are denied protection from any labour law. They have no entitlements and are at the mercy of crooked employers.

“I was also exploited for two years in a house where I was only supposed to take care of an old lady. Her daughter, who had hired me, forced me to do all sorts of domestic chores: cleaning, laundry, cooking for the family, and so forth.”

Toulaye had similar experiences until she got her residence permit, following a tortuous administrative process full of unpleasant surprises. With that document in hand, she registered at a recruitment agency that supplies her with job offers.

Legality without justice

Her ordeal was not over. With this agency, she was hired to care for an old man who lived in a very large house. Toulaye suspected that he was observing her all over the house, including in the toilets. “One day, I noticed the same object that was in his office sitting in the bathroom. Unsure of what it was, I put a towel over it – and before I had finished showering, he knocked on the door to ask why I had covered the object. Then I knew it was a camera!” When Toulaye complained to her agency, they did nothing. On the contrary, concerned about keeping their client, they advised her to forget the matter so she wouldn’t get into trouble with justice.

“Toulaye” is a pseudonym. The interviewee preferred to testify anonymously.



SOPHIE

A Life without Rights in Mauritania

Her unsuccessful job search in Senegal (her home country) led Sophie, 37, single, and graduated hairdresser, to try her luck abroad. Learning about employment opportunities in Mauritania, she didn't think twice. "When I got there, I realised that the reality was quite different, "Hairdressing didn't pay as much as they had told me."

Hassles at the border

To reach Mauritania, Sophie travelled overland to Rosso in Senegal and crossed the river. She had her vaccination card and 50 euros. But getting into Mauritania was painful and full of frustrations, especially from customs officers and the police. The paperwork cost a fortune. Then, after changing euros into Ouguiyas¹ at the bank, Sophie had to shell out 1,000 Ouguiyas for a photograph, 500 for photocopies, 1,000 for the police to return her ID card, and another 1,000 for the police officer to open the exit gate. Her savings were gone – and that wasn't the end of it. The memory of “the lady who does the body search tells you to take off everything right down to your bra, and she has all your luggage emptied out – down to your underwear – and jokes about it with her colleagues” still stings.

A life without rights

After rapidly becoming disillusioned by the reality of hairdressers in Mauritania, Sophie had no choice besides domestic work: babysitting, caring for the elderly, or cooking in private homes. She chose the latter and was hired without a contract, the usual practice. But she also had no residence or work permit.

Sophie says employers use this vulnerability to have other household chores done besides those agreed in advance. “When they hire you, it's only to cook. But soon after, they ask you to do the housework and the laundry, take care of the elderly people and other very difficult tasks.” Sophie has to accept the injustice and exploitation, mainly for fear of retaliation: “If you don't do what they say, they can accuse you of stealing and fire you without pay. [...] I think they regard coloured people as their slaves. Despite what is said, slavery is not over in Mauritania.”

Sometimes Sophie can cook up to 5 times a day, as each household member can ask her to prepare a different dish. She spends the whole day on her feet in the kitchen – without eating because her employers don't share meals with her, and she doesn't dare to help herself. She also sleeps in the kitchen because bosses don't want any contact with Black employees. “Even when they pay us, some employers prefer to throw the money on the ground for us to pick up.” In three years, she has worked for several families, always hoping to find better conditions. But her hopes have continually been shattered: harassment, violence, and racism are part of everyday life for domestic workers in Mauritania.

¹ Mauritanian currency: 1,000 Ouguiyas equal US\$25.

In her misfortune, Sophie was even sexually blackmailed by a very famous public figure who was supposed to help her get a job. Shocked and reluctant to call the person in Senegal who had made the recommendation for fear of stirring up trouble between them, she said nothing. Later she learned that the former had a bad reputation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic Sophie says that she is among the confined domestic workers since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. To keep her job, she no longer goes home on her day off because her employers fear that she will catch the virus and infect them. As a result, she and her co-workers have been working non-stop, 24/7. Sophie decries that domestic workers are left to fend for themselves and have no association to defend their interests and rights. She says that when a domestic worker goes to court, she gets no justice.



ANNE

An African Migration

Coming from the Congo, Anne had chosen Senegal to do her higher education. She never thought Senegal would become her country of emigration. However, under the weight of heavy family obligations and having the right to work in Senegal, Anne resigned herself to taking a hard job that would cause her great distress.

After brief stays in Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire, Anne decided to go to university in Senegal, where she obtained a master's degree in corporate and marketing communications and journalism. After graduating, she went home to begin her career but found out that the circumstances were not promising. Anne decided to return to Senegal and landed a job as a receptionist and social media officer in a call centre.

Despite her young age, Anne bears significant family responsibilities and obligations. She provides for her two sisters, who are at university: one is doing her master's 1, and the other is in her first year of faculty. Anne supports the family on her own and has to work, even under harsh conditions. "I put up with everything because I earn enough to cover my basic expenses and those of my family."

Psychological harassment at work

Anne's need to make money is a psychological burden. Her workplace is far from what she had imagined. Besides the language barrier, her employer is not very easy going. She is moody and makes Anne's life a misery. A receptionist, Anne must handle pressure from the clients and harassment from her boss, who plays the employees off against each other. At times, Anne can't bear the situation any longer, but she has to take it upon herself to survive and support her family. Despite many promises, she has never had either insurance or medical care.

Anne has finally understood that all these drawbacks are related to the fact that she is a foreigner. She suffers from her employer's lack of appreciation and habit of saying, "You're no use to me! I am here doing everything for you...you are making me lose money!" Anne does her very best, and sometimes wonders whether the woman has mental problems: "She will praise you, saying you're a good employee and behind your back she will tell the opposite to your supervisor." That of course lowered her motivation and showed up in her work. But Anne has come to terms with her situation. "I work more because I have to because I want to. Since I need the money, I have to put up with everything." Fortunately, Anne has never experienced physical violence or sexual harassment at work or in everyday life.

"Since I need the money, I have to put up with everything"

Faced with COVID-19 The COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly difficult for Anne because of her responsibilities. For the past three months, Anne has been telecommuting, but is not being paid because the company isn't earning any money. The first month she received her salary, but the second month she started to feel the pinch. Anne says, "It's hard to get paid when there's no money coming in." She can't expect much help, not even from her Embassy – "They are doing their best to help, but what used to be free isn't any longer" – and the Association of Congolese students abroad to which she belongs, can only offer administrative support. Anne continues working from home, without benefitting from the 70% of her salary, following measures decreed by the Senegalese government to prevent workers from unfair dismissals or unpaid temporary layoffs. Fortunately for Anne, her company has announced that it will reopen soon.

This person prefers to share her story anonymously: "Anne" is not her real name.



ZEYNA

Tolerance Boosts Resilience

After getting a contract to record an album in Sweden, Zeyna moved to France, following the advice of her sister, who lived there with her two children since 2007. Despite of a lower secondary education certificate BFEM), a degree in computer science, a laboratory assistant certificate, and a proven musical experience in Senegal, Zeyna has been working in France as a professional carer for 11 years. The job centre and the French National Association for Professional Job Training (AFPA) enabled her to train and obtain a diploma in France.

The home care retraining sector

Zeyna has been fortunate to get permanent contracts through recruitment agencies, which spares her the usual difficulties migrant workers have in accessing formal employment. “I’ve had two contracts, both of them permanent. There is no unemployment in this branch because the demand is very high. You only have to find a good company. My unlimited contracts were drawn up, signed, read, and approved by my employers and myself.”

However, after the director of her first agency left, Zeyna had problems at work. She no longer felt safe because she got no supervision or support from her employers. Besides, she was repeatedly paid late. Zeyna eventually resigned and moved to another agency, where she’s been working ever since, and which is respecting her rights. “In this company, work has been going well. We are well supervised; salaries are paid on time. Bank holidays, annual leave, and Sundays are paid 25% above the regular rate. They also pay overtime.”

Bosses know the laws inside out and can easily get around them, while employees, can only rebel or take legal action, when faced with problems. “And if they do, they lose their jobs,” Zeyna says, especially because they’re not entitled to paid unemployment unless they resign by mutual agreement with the employer. “If you want to leave and can’t reach an amicable contract termination with your boss, you lose all your rights. Sometimes you stay with a company for months and months without any work and you have to resign.” Zeyna explains that she has seen a lot of people quit, lose all their social benefits, and be forced to start again from scratch. She also complains that agencies can close down their health insurance policies overnight, leaving the workers to bear their own costs in case of illness. She calls on Unions to give migrant workers a voice and for their home countries to start support programmes.

Zeyna prefers an approach that would enable to reduce difficulties at work. For example, she considers racism a generational problem as most of the people she works for are very old and have not been around people of colour. One day, while looking after a lady, the woman looked at her and said, “I feel embarrassed.” Zeyna asked why. The answer was clear “Because you are Black.” With her philosophy and experience, Zeyna was able to handle the situation and win over her patient, who finally accepted her with

A tolerant reaction to racist remarks

somewhat ironic reasoning: “Anyway, who can tell whether I will not get along better with you than with a white woman?”

Zeyna has been verbally humiliated in her patients’ homes. Sometimes it was just a look or a way of speaking “I’ve worked in the homes of people who sat in front of the television yelling, “These dirty Arabs, these golliwogs, these immigrants – they’ve come to plunder our country!”” Zeyna sees herself as a missionary who must fulfil her mission no matter what. She advocates overlooking certain behaviours that she considers trivialities. “You can’t spend all your time answering them. That doesn’t help at all.” She also calls for tolerance – especially for people with pathologies like Alzheimer’s disease and autism. “I accept it – not for lack of dignity but out of maturity,” she says.

Faced with COVID-19 Zeyna benefits from her agency awareness-raising campaign, and masks and hand sanitiser distribution. “Each month, we received two packs of 50 masks, a pack of 50 gloves, and two bottles of sanitiser.” The municipality and her health insurance company also provided masks. She’s authorised to travel for professional reasons, yet she is under constant stress for fear of inadvertently infecting her elderly patients or bringing the disease home. “I’m always out and about. I’m with people in the metro, on the bus, and on trains. I protect myself – but one never knows.”

Zeyna is not the interviewee’s real name. She preferred to share her story anonymously.



LATIFA

A Mixed-Race Activist in Tangiers

Latifa, 44, was born in Dakar to a Moroccan father and a Senegalese mother. After obtaining her low secondary education certificate (BFEM) and a degree in hospitality management, she did an internship before landing her first job in a hotel in Senegal. In 2006, following the recommendation of her French husband, the couple moved to Morocco. Unable to continue working in the hotel business for health reasons, Latifa decided to trade products from Senegal.

Health problems pushed Latifa to become a travelling salesperson

In Morocco, Latifa was soon recruited by Club Med. But after an illness and surgery, she became incapacitated and had to give up the job because “I was no longer allowed to lift heavy things.” She had to find another activity to be financially independent and turned to trade. “I decided to go into the business of importing Senegalese products like fabrics and soaps.” Faced with difficulties to formalise her activity, she decided to join an association that tours Morocco exhibiting products from different countries.

Despite rumours to the contrary, getting Moroccan residency is difficult. “Before, it was easier. Now it’s complicated: You need an **Administrative paradox** employment contract to get a residence permit, and you’ve got to have a residence permit to find a job.” This makes it very hard for migrants to become legal. Latifa goes on to say that “Even if King Mohammed VI offers lots of residence permits each year, most women can’t get them. Therefore, the majority of female migrants work informally and are undeclared.”

“It’s uncommon for coloured people to get good jobs. Moroccans don’t even want us to work as waiters in restaurants. We usually get assigned to the kitchen – out of sight.” Latifa knows a lot about her compatriots’ difficulties because she belongs to the Association of Senegalese of Tangiers, whose members meet to talk about their living and working conditions in a country where laws and lifestyles are much unlike their own. The authorities in Tangiers assume all foreigners are migrants in transit to Europe, which is hard on those who want to settle down and take advantage of local opportunities. According to Latifa opportunities are mainly limited to the informal economy.

One would think that racism can’t exist between Africans or that mixed-race people are spared. But Latifa says that the reality is quite different and sometimes much harder to bear. “It’s not easy to work with Moroccans because they are a bit racist and have no qualms about it. They act as if they were superior [...], calling us “Africans” – as if they were not Africans. One time I had to break an employment contract because I could no longer stand the way I was treated,” she says, bruised by insults and remarks about her origins.

**Injustice
is normal**

Some migrants have experienced so many injustices in Morocco that they think that's just the way it is. Others accept their lot only to avoid reprisals because they have no residence permits. Latifa says this applies to domestic workers without contracts, who can be better exploited and forced to live in undignified conditions. "They sleep in basements without toilets and often are not allowed to call their parents." Most migrants come to Morocco with contracts faked by illegal immigrants and are surprised by what's in store for them. That happened to one poor woman who was promised a job in a hair salon when in fact she was destined to work as a domestic servant. Once women start working behind closed doors, they can't just get up and leave because employers take their passports at the airport. Luckily, Latifa was able to rescue one such migrant in Kenitra. "One day, her boss forgot to turn off the Wi-Fi, so she was able to reach me. I gave her number to my uncle, who lived in the same city, so he could help her recover her passport. But the boss refused to give it back. Latifa says the case was eventually taken over by the consulate. The woman was able to move to Casablanca.

**Faced with
COVID-19**

Latifa was unable to carry out any commercial activities during the four months of lockdown. Nevertheless, Moroccan state aid enabled her to survive the lack of income. According to her, domestic workers have been economically and socially battered by the pandemic. Finding a job during this period was a struggle. Many were evicted from their homes. Latifa calls on the Senegalese authorities to do more to help migrants in Morocco. Despite the Moroccan King being very fond of the Senegalese people, their preferential treatment is coming to an end.



AWA

No Way Out in Saudi Arabia

Awa, 51, is married with two children. With no diploma or vocational training, she managed to get a good job as a domestic for a Spanish couple in Senegal. Unfortunately, in 2012, a friend persuaded her to migrate to Saudi Arabia.

Awa has not escaped this new migration trend of Senegalese women who have been migrating to Gulf Cooperation Council countries in recent years. Since the 2000s, low-skilled women have been heading for Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Dubai. Awa is a victim of Saudi traffickers colluding with Senegalese recruiters.

“We went to the house of the Senegalese smuggler to sign our contracts. Like all our papers, they were written in Arabic, which we couldn’t understand. We only received our travel documents at the airport the day we left,” says Awa, who had no way of knowing what she was getting into. On arrival at the airport in Saudi Arabia, her new boss took all her documents and her phone. On Saudi soil, none of the promises were kept. Awa’s alleged salary of 500,000 CFA francs was cut down to 125,000², and she had to pay 500,000 CFA francs to the middlemen, from her first earnings. Faced with such injustice, Awa and few other Senegalese women tried to rebel for better pay. That only made their situation worse. “We decided to stop working because our salaries were much lower than agreed, but that created more problems. One of my compatriots argued with her Saudi boss who had taken her phone. When we could no longer reach her, we sought help from the Senegalese Embassy – in vain.” Awa also tells of a friend from her village in Senegal. The latter had been recruited for housework but had to look after an old lady. At first, she refused, but Awa was able to have her change her mind. “I urged her to stay and do the work because Saudis could easily get her transferred or charge her with theft and get her locked up.”

Despair and isolation brought on by traffickers

Measly wage In Saudi Arabia, domestic workers lose all their human and social rights on entering the employer’s home. “You become the handyman, not to say the family slave,” says Awa, who had to do all the household chores. “It’s hard work! You never get to rest. You work all day long doing everything: the cooking, the laundry, the cleaning, the babysitting, and so forth. For measly wage, they have you clean the huge carpets that should be cleaned by professional launderers.”

Exhausted by overwork that required standing for long periods of time, Awa got sick, and her feet swelled up. She says she became ill from meeting the “spirit that haunts the house” (Awa brags about being

² A salary of USD 230 instead of the USD 920 originally agreed upon.

clairvoyant) which is said to have caused the illness of the boss's son. Unfortunately, when Awa got sick, she wasn't even allowed to take a rest, much less sick leave. "When I came back from the hospital, I went right back to work. One day I became weak and collapsed. I had to pull up a chair to sit in to keep working." She points out other kinds of harsh treatment reserved for domestic workers. Her friend was sold after fighting with the employer's daughter. The latter was making her life a living hell. Fortunately for the friend, the new family couldn't stand her crying all the time and paid for her return ticket to Senegal. "They are not all bad" Awa concludes.

Such is Awa's harsh reality. Fortunately, it has not included sexual violence or harassment at work. She has begun to regret her decision to give up her job back home. "In Senegal, I had a good, well-paid job with Spanish people who treated me nicely. I earned 80,000 CFA francs at the beginning and after some years 100,000. [...] My employers were reluctant to let me go." All that Awa wants is to go home to Senegal. But she first has to complete her contract to get her travel documents back. "My contract is coming to an end, and my employers are beginning to treat me better. They offered me gifts, even a gold ring. They got me a two-month return ticket [...], but I will never come back to work in Saudi Arabia."

Awa's only relief is that, in response to complaints, Senegal's Criminal Investigations Division (DIC) dismantled the smuggling ring that organised her trip.



AMINATA

A Senegalese Woman in Benin

Aminata, 45, left her in-laws 18 years ago to join her husband in Benin. With no diploma or vocational training, she has still not been able to get a residence permit. A housewife in Senegal, she used to do hairdressing in her free time. Confronted with the harsh realities of life in Benin, she had to find an income-generating activity to help cover family expenses and chose catering.

Culinary adaptation

Catering in Benin is not easy for a Senegalese woman as most Beninese are not used to spending a lot on food, says Aminata. Preparing Beninese dishes doesn't involve much expense, so they're sold at low prices, whereas the very costly condiments used in Senegalese dishes like rice and fish make preparation expensive.

Fortunately for Aminata, "Benin is located at strategic crossroads. Senegalese people coming from Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Congo pass through here with their merchandise and often come to eat at my place." She has also learned to cook Beninese dishes, which she sells on Fridays – and it's the Senegalese who order them.

Unfortunately, Aminata had to close her premises, which were in the way of a public modernisation project. Now she has to cook at home and then

A challenged project

go and sell her dishes at her husband's workplace, which seriously reduces her turnover. "I used to have to prepare 25 kilos of food, but now I can just sell 3," as not everyone is willing to eat in the street. Aminata deplores the rise in evictions during the pandemic – mostly of foreigners, including Senegalese, Nigerians, Burkinabe, Cameroonians, and Congolese, who make up most of the business tenants. "Nationals, for the most part, are motorbike taxis drivers, and Beninese women trade in the markets. Most Beninese work from home. It's mainly foreigners who rent business premises."

Improve your social status, and then you can go home

Aminata also complains about high taxes. As a tenant, she pays taxes to the municipality and the state. But if the owner of a building owes back taxes, all the businesses are immediately closed. Besides, the rent is often very high because lessors demand a year's rent in advance when the monthly rent between 80,000 and 150,000 CFA francs has to be paid even if the business is slow.

Aminata acknowledges that her situation is not an easy one. But returning home empty-handed is out of the question. "In Senegal, if you don't have money, you don't get any respect. You're practically excluded from society. It is the search for a better social status that drives us to emigrate." A significant number of needy Senegalese

women, especially widows, don't dare return home, explains Aminata. She also emphasises that the Beninese are very welcoming. Foreigners have no problem integrating, and Beninese men respect women and don't harass them.

Faced with COVID-19 Aminata has not been working since early March. With the pandemic, people avoid buying food on the street. She is going through a very difficult financial straits, despite help from the Senegalese Association and the Senegalese Consul in Benin.



SOKHNA

Legality is an End in Itself

Sokhna, 55, single, has been living in Spain since 2004. After failing to obtain her low secondary certificate BFEM³ and without the means to continue studying in private institutions, she took several competitive exams without success. Then Sokhna left her native village for Dakar, where she worked a few years as a domestic worker before flying to the region of Vigo in Spain on 29 March 2004, at her cousin's invitation.

³ BFEM: Brevet de fin d'études moyennes.

Sokhna arrived in Spain with the unique and sole goal of working and earning a living. She got her first job thanks to the intervention of her cousin, who had returned to Senegal before her arrival. The latter had recommended Sokhna as a domestic worker to a Spanish family.

Spanish Trade Union facilitates integration

Sokhna understood her shortcomings early on and sought a solution from the Workers' Commissions (CC.OO.). "I knew when I came that I had to integrate. Therefore, I took language classes to improve the little Spanish I had learned at school and communicate better. I also trained for almost two years in a cooking school to master the Spanish cuisine since I only knew the Senegalese one," she says, full of praise for the Spanish Trade Union support.

Sokhna's determination paid off, and she managed to have her situation regularised. Signing a formal employment contract with her employer enabled her to get a residence permit. "I have a residence card that states why I'm in Spain: I'm here to work!" boasts Sokhna, who tells us that she then set about learning her rights and the prerogatives of her bosses. "If you work in a home, you have to know your rights, and your boss has to know his. You have to do your work well and know your obligations."

Sokhna is accommodated by her employer. She feels her boss treats her like a family member. "I thank God that I don't have any problems because we both know our rights." She says she was well informed before signing her contract and negotiated her work schedule, holidays, days off, tasks – everything that can cause misunderstandings. She's free from Friday evening until Monday morning and gets annual leave to visit her family in Senegal.

However, she admits that the working relationship is not always rosy. "There are some little things I can't talk about. But in general, I haven't had any major problems at work yet. My contract protects me." Sokhna says she hasn't heard of violence or workplace harassment in the region where she lives, as employers don't want to be charged with abuse, violence or exploitation, or taken to court. Sokhna argues that racism is not systematically related to labour relations. Unequal treatment occurs based on skin colour (black and white). Since racism can't be eradicated, it is essential to do everything legally.

"My contract protects me"

Faced with COVID-19 Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March, Sokhna and her employers have left the city to avoid the notorious virus. She says she's free, her rights are respected, and there's a good climate in the house. However, she acknowledges that fellow Senegalese can't find work and are going through a hard time, as their families in Senegal depend on them. She also indicates that she got this information through her contacts in the Senegalese Association in Spain to which she belongs.

"Sokhna" is a pseudonym. This interviewee preferred to speak anonymously.



NDELLA

A Migrant Childhood

Ndella, 36, single with no children. She becomes an orphan after her mother's and father's death at ten months intervals. Following tradition, Ndella briefly moved in her elder sister's marital home. But the living conditions and atmosphere were not right, so young Ndella left primary school in her hometown Kaffrine (253 km from Dakar), to join her other sister in the Senegalese capital and seek work to support herself.

Tested by life When she got to the district of Yoff, Ndella found that her other sister was married and living with her husband in one cramped room. At age 13, Ndella had to fend for herself. The accommodation was her biggest challenge as landlords were reluctant to rent a room to such a young girl. In the evening, she would go to an elementary school to sleep on a small mat in a classroom, with the complicity of the school's very understanding guard. Ndella would leave each morning at 6 AM before the teachers and students arrived. Later, she managed to rent a room for 12,000 CFA francs a month with two friends. But the girls weren't working regularly and couldn't always pay the rent – and were frequently expelled.

Ndella describes harsh working conditions attributable to the absence of a contract. A simple verbal agreement, based on both parties' commitment and goodwill, is no guarantee of your rights: working hours aren't respected, days of absence from work after illness are unpaid, wages are paid late, and workers get fired without notice or compensation. "Sometimes you even have to fight or seek intervention from a third party to get your pay," she adds. **Labour law is crucial** These difficulties prompted Ndella to migrate in search of less restrictive working conditions. After seven years of domestic work in Dakar, she took the desert road to try her luck in Mauritania. But two years of being a domestic worker in Nouakchott taught Ndella that the situation was much better in Dakar. She then decided to return to Dakar to continue her life. Besides her lack of diploma or vocational training, doing the same job since she was a child has given her a lot of experience in the field. Her work is highly appreciated, and she manages to have long-term work (10 years in the same house).

Young girls are the most exposed "We are the most exposed to violence and harassment at work, especially those who are still young" says Ndella. "The bosses, their sons, and even the guards never stop blackmailing us sexually and touching us. The husband of one ex-boss chased me everywhere, making abusive comments. I refused but he kept on. Because I didn't want to cause problems in the family, I quit after three months." Ndella says one of her friends got pregnant after a relationship with her boss.

“The man pressured her not to tell his wife, and the girl eventually returned to her village. The child is seven years old, and the father still hasn’t recognised it,” she says. She recalls a similar story from 2004, when a 16-year-old girl from Taïba got pregnant from her boss, after working as a servant in his house for three years. His wife, who knew about it, offered the girl a lot of money to have an abortion, which she refused. Later, the girl went with her older sister to force the man to acknowledge paternity – but in vain. Ndella says she advised the girl to report the case to the police, but the girl didn’t, preferring to give birth in the village and later return to Dakar to look for work.

Ndella criticises how some female employers behave: “Some female bosses are jealous and can’t stand having well-dressed servants.” If they think their husbands are interested in you, they threaten to fire you or to get criminals to beat you up. “If you want to find a job, don’t go well-groomed, or they’ll think you’ve come to steal their husbands.”

Faced with COVID-19 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ndella hasn’t worked for four months. She was told to stop going to work because she could catch the virus while commuting and cause infection. With no income, she has exhausted her meagre savings. She explains painfully that the landlord is going to evict her soon because she has many rent arrears. She says, ironically, that she plans to organise a march of domestic workers to denounce their harsh living conditions during the health crisis.

A cry from the heart Ndella urges the Senegalese authorities to apply the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers to enable them to overcome this economic insecurity. “This will enable us to enjoy the full use of our rights, and get higher wages and improve our working conditions,” says Ndella, while expressing appreciation to the National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Senegal (UNSAS) for organising domestic workers. She calls on the ILO and the Senegalese Social Security Fund to join their cause.



ADAMA

Despite the Pain

Adama, 32, single with one child, currently lives in Dubai after having a painful experience in Saudi Arabia and returning to Senegal. The eldest of her family and having lost her father at a very early age, Adama had to help her mother, who had no income, raise her siblings and provide for their daily needs. With no diploma or training (she stopped her studies in 4th-grade primary school), she tried her luck in Saudi Arabia in 2014, after signing a contract which contents, she did not understand.

A contract with unknown content

When Adama arrived in Saudi Arabia, she did not know what she had committed to because the contract had been negotiated behind her back by Senegalese middlemen. “I was hired by Senegalese who recruit women, or should I say, ‘sell’ Senegalese women like me, hiding the truth about the living and working conditions that await them. [...] Their mission is to find Senegalese women workers, but they don’t even care about their working conditions, let alone where they live. Yet they make a lot of money on their back.”

After waiting five hours at the airport in Saudi Arabia, Adama was finally met by a woman who drove for many kilometres, making detours to her very large home. “Whoever organised my trip didn’t even come to meet me when I arrived. He didn’t know my employer or her house. I could have been killed without him knowing,” she says.

Being the only servant in the building (R+2), Adama not only did the housework; she also looked after the children. She worked around the clock with no breaks, and her boss woke her up at any time of night only to annoy her. She had to cook up to four meals a day and was not offered any food or drink. Even the cat was treated better than her, says Adama. She paid for her meals out of her pocket, with the secret help of the driver.

Adama suffered lots of verbal abuse and bullying. “They shout at you for nothing, criticise your work even if it’s a good work, to make you suffer, turn the house upside down, and force you to make it tidy,” deplores Adama. She was never physically or sexually assaulted but has kept deep emotional scars.

Profound emotional suffering

All this suffering for a salary of 150,000 CFA francs⁴ that wasn’t enough to cover her personal needs! Adama could no longer bear the boss’s abuses and didn’t want to respond to them, either. “They provoke you, yet you have to control yourself at all cost because, in Saudi Arabia, it’s too risky to be arrested by the police,” she says. She decided to quit, but her boss refused to return her passport, claiming she had paid the middlemen 300,000 CFA francs for Adama’s pocket money. “I was shocked that Senegalese could treat their compatriots like this,” she lamented helplessly. Fortunately, she had a residence permit, and with a friend’s help, after 16 months in that alien place, she fled with a colleague to Jeddah.

⁴ Senegal currency: 150,000 CFA francs equal US\$280.

**Escape
the trap**

“We managed to get to Jeddah, where we were independent. We started working freely, without constraint, and we were treated right! Without any contractual ties, employers knew that if we weren’t happy, we could leave whenever we wanted, and they paid us twice as much,” says Adama. For three months, she received threatening and intimidation calls, but that didn’t worry her because she was free in Jeddah.

Then, in 2017, Senegal decided to repatriate all its undocumented citizens living in Saudi Arabia, including Adama. The Senegalese State

**A return
with no future**

provided Adama and her friends with reintegration assistance after undergoing certifying training. They were asked to create an EIG⁵, but funding promises went unfulfilled. “The wait was long and uncertain,” Adama said. She had to support herself and her family, and she decided to try her luck – in Dubai. “Despite what I had gone through for four years in Saudi Arabia, I decided to return to the Gulf.”

**Faced with
COVID-19**

Three days after arriving in Dubai in March 2020, Adama was placed under COVID-19 lockdown. She still has no residence or consular identification card, but fortunately, the government extended the deadline until December 2020. Adama managed to get a job as a shop clerk – without a contract because, “After my bad experience, I would never again work under contract in the Gulf. I prefer to have a flexible working relationship so that I can leave if I’m unsatisfied.” She says she went to Dubai to earn money and wants to return and invest in her country. “I don’t plan to stay here for good.”

⁵ Economic Interest Grouping (EIG).



OULIMATA

Unrealised Dreams

Senegalese Oulimata Gueye, 31, has been living in Morocco since 2014. From a modest family and with her father being old, she left school early to look for work in her home country. In 2011, Oulimata got a degree in hairdressing, the profession of her dream. Later, she tried her luck in Morocco and was only 25 when she first set foot in the country.

Oulimata did not drop out of school by choice. “I wanted to work when I was young because my oldest sister had no income, and my elderly father was struggling to meet our daily needs. I had to help out. That’s why I quit school and trained to be a hairdresser. It is only later that I got tempted to migrate.”

The wrong choice

After graduating, Oulimata was able to work in a salon in Senegal, fulfilling her dream “to make hairdressing my profession.” But an uncle in Morocco encouraged her to migrate. Oulimata had to buy a return ticket at nearly 500,000 CFA francs, knowing that she would stay there. “It’s the only way. They don’t ask if you have a visa: they want to know if you have a “residence” or a job contract – and I didn’t have either.”

When she arrived, a Moroccan couple offered her to babysit their five-month-old baby. That was her first job. She did it with a lot of love and high hopes because the couple had promised to sort out her administrative situation. But they never did. Oulimata stayed five years in that job, which was supposed to be temporary. She stayed that long because she was hopeful, and also because the head of the family treated her like his sister. “The baby’s father was so kind. He told me I was a sister. We talked a lot. [...] As for his wife, she was very hostile. She didn’t like me very much! She was jealous of me,” Oulimata says. Finally, Oulimata decided to acknowledge her false hopes and quit. “One day, I was fed up. I told them I was going back to Senegal, although I was staying in Morocco.” She blames the wife for the fact that she never got regularised, and has bad memories of the woman, “At the table, she always served me the smallest plate, so I never ate my fill. I started buying little treats that I would stuff in my bag to eat in my room.” She says she often contributed to the family’s food budget, hoping to be allowed to learn her boss’s recipes. Her boss didn’t want her to, but because Oulimata was very curious, she ended up becoming a real *cordon bleu*. Still far from realising her dream of being a hairdresser, in August 2019, she paid 300 dinars application fees to a private recruitment agency. She thinks she is better off with an agency. “When an agency offers you a job you don’t like, they look for another.”

Unfulfilled promises

Domestic exhaustion “At the beginning, I had one day off every two weeks. But before taking my free day, I would be forced to do a whole lot of extra chores, and I would leave – exhausted – with a two-hour walk to my place.” She also complains of the hellish pace. “You’re on your feet from morning till night. Every time you finish one thing, they give you something else to do – until late at night. There’s no time to rest. For a pittance, they wear you out – until you ache all over,” complains Oulimata, who also had to put up with shouting and criticism from other family members. Unable to take it any longer, she decided to stop.

She’s currently working for another family and says, “I made the conditions crystal clear before starting this new job.” However, with no resident permit, she still doesn’t have a contract.

Faced with COVID-19 The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted Oulimata’s almost-bearable work situation. When the pandemic got much worse (between 2 March and 11 April), she had travelled to an isolated area with her boss. The change was very hard on her: “I was working day and night in a huge house. I would wake up at 5 and start working after morning prayer, from 7 am till 7 pm: cooking, cleaning – everything,” says Oulimata, who hopes her situation will return to normal now that they’re back in her boss’s house.



MAMA

An Uncertain Future

Divorced with one child, Mama, 28, moved to Tunisia in 2017. A bakery Manager in Senegal, she accompanied her aunt to Tunisia for a two-month medical treatment. But her fate took an unexpected turn, and Mama remained in the country to work.

The young Senegalese woman had no idea that she would stay that long in Tunisia. Her aunt advised her to stay and work, and recommended her to a Tunisian family, where Mama ended up working as a domestic servant. It was there that her suffering began, she says, admitting that it was just a hint of what was to come. After a few months, she was transferred to a relative of her employer, who had three children. On top of doing all the housework, Mama also had to take care of twins and their big sister. "That lady gave me a hard time," confides Mama, who is forced to do domestic work because she has no diploma.

Never-ending work Mama believes that her aunt was far from suspecting the true nature of these people. She says those were the three long-standing and most harder months of her life. "My boss was always furious. When she had problems with her husband, she would take it out on me, pounding on my door in the middle of the night and screaming as if it was my fault. She would make her children cry and then yell at me to go and comfort them. She made me work night and day. I had no time to rest." Mama finally told her aunt about her ordeal. However, she thinks her aunt couldn't comprehend how awful it was.

Eventually, Mama quit her job after standing up to her boss. Her boss, who got angry at her husband, suddenly came to Mama's room and started shouting that she should go and take a shower because she stank. Mama snapped and fought back. Then, at 1 am, she went outside to cool down. A neighbour called the police, and she almost got arrested. "Fortunately, the husband intervened and said I was with him. The police were about to take me away, and since I didn't have a residence permit, they definitely would have sent me back to Senegal."

But with significant expenses, especially for rent, Mama couldn't be choosy while looking for another position as a domestic. "I had no one to help me, and I didn't want to find myself broke at the end of the month." Downheartedly, she said that her bad luck brought her a new boss, who not only made her do all the housework but also wash her car and even her dog.

Boss's appalling anger

Finally, Mama resigned. But in her third job as a domestic servant, she encountered the same problems, if not worse ones. She only got to eat in the evening after she went home. All that suffering for peanuts!

Three years have passed without Mama realising any of her plans. She doesn't earn enough to pay her rent, let alone satisfy her own needs, much less send money to her family. That said, she maintains that not having a contract is not so bad. "Working without contracts means employers can fire us whenever they want – but it also means that we can leave if we're not happy with the conditions."

However, Mama slams the difficulty in getting a residence card. "They are reserved for foreign students alone. [...] A permit is only valid for a year, and you have to wait seven months to get it," she complains. She also says that some conservative Tunisians are racist, though she has never experienced any violence or sexual harassment – she does everything to avoid men, especially her bosses' husbands.

Life in Tunisia is so hard that "Sometimes you want to go to Europe. But the only way to get there is to take a boat across the Mediterranean where lots of people die on the way. We don't even know how many. But Black people here are so fed up they're ready to take the sea route despite all the risks." Mama also says that there are lots of trafficking scams. "Tunisian traffickers charge migrants 3,000 dinars⁶ to bring them to Italy, and you must pay before you depart. They wait until everyone is in the boat, and then they call the police – so migrants lose their money and get caught."

Faced with COVID-19 With the coronavirus pandemic, Mama has gone through moments of anxiety and prays hard that she won't become infected. She went for three months without working, but fortunately, her boss sent her food every month, and she also received 40,000 CFA francs aid to the Senegalese diaspora.⁷ Mama has resumed work but has arrears in rent, water and electricity bills. She pleads for the penalties for migrants in irregular situations to be reduced. "At the airport, before leaving, we have to pay 3,000 dinars or 600,000 CFA francs! That's too much."⁸

"Mama" is a pseudonym for an interviewee who preferred to remain anonymous.

⁶ The equivalent of US\$1,000.

⁷ The Senegalese authorities have set up a pandemic solidarity fund for Senegalese abroad who are in precarious situations.

⁸ Tunisia charges foreigners who stayed in the country illegally a special departure tax.



KINÉ

Enough Was Enough

Kiné, 50, mother and wife, originally from the Gambia, has been living in Mauritania for more than seven years, where she joined her mother, a restaurant owner, after the death of her eldest son. With no education or vocational training, Kiné was determined to earn a living in Nouakchott. She always took whatever job was available – sometimes working as a domestic servant, at others in catering, or on her account, to support herself. Raised by her grandmother, she mastered all the household tasks, which has earned her a lot of appreciation from her bosses.

At first, Kiné was afraid to leave the Gambia⁹, which was all she knew, and where she worked in a fish factory. Besides, she didn't know what work she would do when she got to Mauritania. But as her grandmother had taught her to cook, she decided to cook for Mauritanian families. Shortly after her arrival, her mother returned to Senegal because her business in Mauritania was slow. Kiné chose to stay, determined to make the best of it: "You have to have a strong character, personality, and dignity to survive working in their homes."

A hellish pace Kiné cooked up to three different dishes for a single meal because they had different tastes and needs (intolerance of salt, chili pepper, etc.) and every family member had to be satisfied. She had swollen feet from standing up all day with no comfortable place where to sleep after working long days, and with no breaks or rest. "It's very hard," Kiné repeats. But the worst for her was the humiliation and discrimination. "My ex-boss didn't want me to approach. He used to say that Senegalese women stink. I was often in the street, and after serving them dinner, I would go to sleep in the spot under the stairs," says Kiné. She adds that she sometimes had to insist on getting paid, and she even had to work for a simple lodger who could easily have left without paying her.

Kiné has never been a victim of sexual harassment. She wouldn't let it happen! She condemns such disgraceful situations. "One maid once told me that her boss asked her to bring him juice every day, and when she got to his room, she found him naked." Fortunately, she says, the girl listened to Kiné and refused to play her boss's game despite him trying to convince her that no other domestic servant ever refused. She concedes that some girls can easily be swayed – while others manage to keep their dignity.

Constant sexual harassment

Little domestic girl According to Kiné, Malians bring 10-year-old children to work as domestic servants in Mauritania, where they are beaten and suffer verbal abuse. The children have degrading living conditions like sleeping in kitchens or beneath the stairs. In one home where she worked, the boss mistreated a little 10-year-old servant. The woman kept hitting her for petty reasons – sometimes because the girl talked to her child

⁹ The Gambia is a landlocked country within Senegal.

or simply because she was veiled. Kiné often defended the poor little girl. But the situation got worse and worse. Finally, Kiné managed to reach the girl's mother and convinced her to take her home. "I told her that if she didn't fetch her daughter, she risked being killed and that money wasn't worth the wickedness she was suffering."

Some employers do not respect foreign workers' rights, says Kiné from experience. **Corruption faces justice**
After working in a restaurant for two months without being paid and not knowing where to get help, she went to the police, thinking that would solve her problem. "I had looked in vain for someone to help me before I went. But the police said they would only help me if I agreed to share my wages with them."

Retraining to get ahead Things were no better with a new employer, despite her forceful character: "I don't let myself to be pushed around. I always protest. I refuse to accept shouting, humiliation, belittling, overwork, and hard chores. I tell them that they don't have the right to disrespect me only because I'm working for them." But domestic work was always the same. So Kiné decided to stop that job. As she grows older, she says, she needs rest and some comforts.

Now Kiné sells juice and ice cream. "I bought a fridge to go into business for myself." However, since she's such a good cook, former bosses keep asking her to come back. But Kiné says she's done with housework. For the rest of her life.

Faced with COVID-19 Kiné says that the coronavirus pandemic has seriously affected her current work. With lockdown measures forcing street vendors to stay indoors, her earnings have plummeted. She can't sell from home and is facing financial difficulties, especially having not received the aid for the Senegalese diaspora.

"Kiné" is a pseudonym for an interviewee who preferred to remain anonymous.



MAME

Become Legal and Claim Your Rights!

Madame Bousso, 56 and married, has been living in Spain since 1993. She left secondary school in her third year to get vocational training, but her typing certificate didn't help her get a job in Spain. After briefly working as a domestic, she turned to trade after a short experiment as a domestic servant.

Unrecognised diploma

Madame Bousso was disappointed to learn that her qualifications were not recognised in Spain and couldn't help her get a job as she had thought. "The Senegalese diploma has no equivalence in European so you can't use it to work."

Once in Spain, she quickly had to find a job to support herself. She began taking Spanish courses and launched a small trade business on the side – something she had never done before. "I had never tried trading in Senegal, but in Spain, I had no choice," she says. After learning Spanish, she tried domestic work but was soon discouraged by the difficult conditions. "I spent two hard years as a domestic servant and knew it wasn't the job for me." She couldn't bear the insecurity and rights violations that are a normal part of domestic work. "A friend who worked as a domestic for three to four years kept being fired after six months and then rehired six months later – so her boss didn't have to give her a permanent contract. But you can't do anything about such abuse." Having no other choice, she returned to commercial activities. Madame Bousso has managed to have her situation regularised. With a residence permit, she can access all job opportunities and benefits. She also doesn't have to worry about being controlled by the authorities. "I have a 10-year renewable residence permit. I can also apply for citizenship if I want." But legality has its price. "Every month you have to pay social security, which is very expensive, and the sales place you occupy – up to 500 euros a year. These amounts are automatically taken from your bank account."

Regular status guarantees security

"When you register with social security, they give you money to cover your monthly costs, if needed." That was true for her during the COVID-19 pandemic and for her friend who works as a domestic. "My friend notified the National Employment Institute (Instituto Nacional de Empleo) that she had lost her job and got 400 euros per month during the six months she wasn't working."

Madame Bousso denounces some inconveniences related to her commercial activities. "Beyond the fact that nationals get the best sales spaces, your space is often given to someone else, when you go on leave, with the excuse that you were away too long." Fortunately, spaces are not assigned at the beach, although that wasn't always the case. It took a

A never-ending struggle

long fight with the support of the Spanish Trade Union, the Workers' Commissions (CC.OO.) to change things. "At first, we were chased away from the beach each time we set up to sell. But we had to fight with the support of the Union and finally got the right to trade there."

Madame Bousso says she lives in a city where domestic workers and other migrant workers are not subjected to physical or sexual violence or harassment. «I have never personally experienced or heard of violence or sexual harassment where I work, or in the fish factories where many other women work.» She also tells us that such complaints are taken very seriously and judged fairly. "We have the same rights regardless of our skin colour."

Faced with COVID-19 During the COVID-19 pandemic, Madame Bousso has had to remain home for four months. Going out to work was not allowed. Despite her social security coverage, which entitles her to a subsidy, she's got problems paying her rent and sending money home. The allocation is not much compared to what she usually earns doing business. However, her biggest fear is to catch the disease. She even cancelled a hospital appointment for fear of being infected. "Besides money issues, there's the question of health and survival. We pray to God that nothing happens to us." As the regional president of a *Dahira* (a group of Muslims from the same Senegalese brotherhood), Madame Bousso also organises solidarity during the crisis. "Every month, the association receives food [...] from the Spanish authorities, which is redistributed even to non-members. You only need to show your *padron*¹⁰ proving that you live in the region."

¹⁰ Short for *empadronamiento*, the residence certificate issued by local authorities.

UNION VIEWPOINT, ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Geographical distribution of our interview targets

We conducted more than 30 interviews but could only use information from half of the interviewees. The women interviewed are spread across the following countries:

- **emigrants** : Italy, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania and Benin;
- **immigrants**: Guinea Bissau, Congo, Italy and Togo;
- **intercity migrants**: Kaffrine and Sandiara.

We used various methods to reach these women – through migrants we support, the families, and contacts with associations. At our request, RSMMS collective focal points helped us reach out.

Advantages of the interview device

All the interviews were conducted using the WhatsApp messaging and Voice over IP service, which was well suited to the context (COVID-19 lockdowns, transport restrictions and bans on gatherings) and the fact that most of our interviewees were in different geographical locations.

1. All the women already had WhatsApp installed on their smartphones and knew how to use it.
2. Using WhatsApp requires no external assistance.
3. The women could talk on their headphones while working.
4. Most interviewees had Internet connections at work. We sent Internet connection passes to those who did not.
5. The women could do the interview discreetly, without drawing their employer's attention.

The difficulties

1. Numerous interruptions during the interviews often caused the interviewees to lose their focus, leading to repetitions.
2. Sometimes we had to wait days for an answer and ultimately lost contact with the target person.
3. Some migrant women were reluctant to open up to someone they didn't know.
4. Raising subjects considered taboo caused some women to withdraw from the interview.
5. Some audio messages were inaudible, either because the interviewee did not want those around her or her employer to hear what she is saying or because of a poor connection.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

1. The women generally entered their host countries legally, with an employment contract or on an invitation, and sometimes through family reunification, leading to residence cards. Most stayed past the legal residence limit or after their contracts ended, which made them “irregular”.
2. Most migrant women had very little formal education and no vocational training, allowing illegal recruitment agencies and traffickers to furnish them with fake contracts that they signed without reading. Violations committed by middlemen continue in European host countries. Almost all the women interviewed work in the informal economy, mostly as domestic workers.
3. Women with degrees realise, upon arrival, that their diplomas are not equivalent to those delivered by the host country. As a result, they see themselves forced to take informal jobs that do not correspond to their professional qualifications, which leads to lawless situations.
4. Almost all the interviewees have suffered violence or psychological and emotional harassment at work. Few of them were willing to talk about their deep emotional scars, saying, “I can’t tell you everything” or “I’d rather not talk about that”. However, one can guess their profound personal discomfort when the person pauses or disconnects as soon as a particular question or subject is raised. Sexual aggressions are often referred to as something that happened to a friend or a neighbour.
5. All migrant women have experienced or continue to experience different degrees of racism in European and Arab countries, both in everyday life and at work.
6. Female migrant workers are often unaware of the means to obtain justice for the violation of their rights. But more importantly, they are afraid or lack the confidence to take labour disputes to the competent authorities of host countries.
7. Almost all the migrant women interviewed were unaware of the International Labour Organization (ILO), much less its legal instruments, and knew little about labour laws in their home countries.
8. These migrant women mostly belong to associations that act as community solidarity groups. They are not members of a Trade Union Organisation, despite acknowledging the value of such organizations.

9. Almost none of the migrant women were satisfied with the support from their diplomatic or consular authorities in terms of access to employment and assistance with labour disputes.
10. With respect to their jobs, all interviewees have been brutally impacted by COVID-19. Lack of social security coverage puts them in difficult economic straits, compounded by the stress caused by lockdowns and fear of catching the disease. The women often receive material aid (food and disinfectants) when housing is their priority.

PUTTING CERTAIN PROBLEMS INTO PERSPECTIVE

The regulatory framework creates vulnerability and precariousness

An irregular administrative situation is the first cause of insecurity and exposes the worker to precariousness. We are at the heart of the access to decent work problem. When migrants, especially those in irregular situations, have labour disputes, they lack legal assistance and are afraid to go to court. Besides, private employment agencies have no interest in respecting employee rights in the face of their clients who have little regard for them. The COVID-19 pandemic's socio-economic effects enable to focus on the need for inclusive social protection systems that allow migrants to benefit from the same social guarantees as nationals.

Recognition of professional qualifications and diplomas

Most migrants have no professional skills that are valued by the labour market in their country of destination. The few with occupational training in their home countries realise that their diplomas have no equivalent in their host countries, whether in Europe or Africa.

Modern slavery and forced labour

The issue of modern slavery and forced labour is evident in the accounts of domestic workers hired under the kafala ("sponsorship") system in the Middle East, which takes other forms on farms in southern Europe.

Intrinsic racism

Attention to and treatment based on skin colour remain topical. Discrimination, racism, and xenophobia pervade all the testimonies – from all countries.

Migrant worker unionisation

Migrants are not getting Trade Unions support and, their social rights are not respected –employers aren't much bothered with migrant workers' rights issues. Should migrants go to Unions, or should Unions approach migrants? Organising migrant workers, whatever their status, is a matter of solidarity and struggle to the International Labour Movement.

Help from authorities representing migrants' home countries

Migrants in irregular situations are reluctant to go to their diplomatic representatives. When they do seek help, it is denied to them.

Inaudible international labour standards

ILO standards aim at guaranteeing labour rights and social benefits to all workers – without discrimination. However, most migrant workers know nothing about them. It is crucial to promote the relevant conventions and ensure their ratification and application by States.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Get real!

Social protection for migrant workers must be a priority and an issue for rights defenders. We call on States to extend their social security and social protection systems to all migrants without discrimination. Social protection for all should no longer be a slogan but a reality in conformity to the various international commitments¹¹. Access to basic social services must be attached to humanitarian – not statutory – considerations. It's time for these instruments to serve as a reference for all social policies at government level.

Make rights more accessible

Labour inspectorates in host countries must vigorously enforce the law because migrant workers suffer tremendously from firms abusing and violating their social rights. States must better monitor the application of their legislation and the implementation and harmonisation of international conventions and treaties.

Each embassy and consulate must have a solicitor to provide free services for labour disputes affecting nationals, both legal and illegal.

For more consistency

We must continue developing strategies to combat irregular migration, which encourages exploitation and abuse and fuels the phenomenon of modern slavery. A lot of money has been spent with little impact on current and potential migrants. The fight against clandestine migration cannot be limited to raising awareness and funding individual projects. It must follow a holistic approach that integrates employment policies, offers vocational training, and stimulates economic sectors that have employment potential, as well as redirect existing, draft, and adopt suitable migration policies and programmes.

¹¹ The ILO Recommendation 202 on social protection floors; Convention 143 on migration in abusive conditions and the equality of opportunity and treatment of migrant workers; Recommendation 151 on migrant workers; SDGs 3 and 8 relating to access to basic social services; and Goal 15 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).

More recognition

Within the framework of international cooperation, countries should address the issue related to non-reciprocity and non-recognition of diplomas in Objective 18 on global compatibility in the Global Pact for Safe, Orderly and, Regular Migration. It is time to implement Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) because most women with no qualifications have had long periods of informal training in businesses such as dressmaking, hairdressing, and catering. Unionising migrant workers is the only way for workers' organisations to get to grips with their problems and properly formulate their demands during collective bargaining. Grassroots actions that tangibly affect the living and working conditions of migrant workers and earn their trust are needed. Trade union representatives in court must also know more about migrant rights to effectively help them. While it is up to the individual migrant to approach a Trade Union, that only happens when they are well informed. In this respect, pre-departure awareness raising can be useful. Trade union membership and commitment can help migrant workers integrate and should be promoted in their home countries.

Effective international labour standards

We have found that most migrant workers are unaware of the provisions contained in international labour conventions. Moreover, almost all the countries where migrant women are employed as domestics workers have not ratified either ILO Convention 189 on domestic workers' rights or Convention 181 on private employment agencies. The standard cannot be considered an end in itself. A strategy that promotes the standard and enhances its ratification, and monitors its implementation, remains crucial.



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