



European  
Research Area

# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## Migrant families: Living together or across national borders?

MAFE PROJECT Policy Briefing No. 5

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*Project overview: The Migrations between Africa and Europe (MAFE) Project focuses on all phases of the migration process, encompassing migration, return, routes of transit, economic implications and transnational relationships. Its findings are based on multi-sited and comparative surveys, including over 5,000 retrospective longitudinal interviews with individual migrants and non-migrants in six European countries and three African countries, and 4,000 interviews of urban African households, conducted in 2008-2009. The four main areas of the MAFE Project's enquiry are: (1) changing patterns of migration over time; (2) determinants of migration; (3) economic integration of migrants, and re-integration of returnees; and (4) transnational families and networks. For more information visit: [www.mafeproject.eu](http://www.mafeproject.eu).*

### Key findings: Family life between Africa and Europe

- **Three-quarters of the migrants interviewed in the MAFE Project were part of a nuclear family, meaning that they had a spouse and/or children. For two out of five of these migrants, migration led to the creation of a transnational family structure, where at least one member of the nuclear family was living in another country. The proportion of transnational families was especially high for Senegalese migrants, but less so for Congolese and Ghanaian migrants.**
- **Across all destinations, migrants with transnational family arrangements had typically been in Europe for less time than those in unified or re-unified families. Amongst Senegalese migrants in Europe, men were more likely to have transnational families than women, and for all three African groups undocumented migrants were more likely to have them than documented migrants.**

- **Of those migrants with families, reunification in Europe was far from universal, with one quarter of Ghanaian and one third of Congolese migrants being reunified at the time of the survey.** Reunification was even less prevalent amongst Senegalese families.
- **Contrary to policy assumptions, African migrant families did not always reunify in Europe; in fact, a significant number of all family reunification took place in the country of origin.**
- **Households in Africa typically did not contribute to the financial costs of migration for their members with only one fifth of Ghanaian households, and one quarter of Congolese and Senegalese households making a contribution.** In all cases, children of household heads were the most frequently supported.
- **A high proportion of households in Africa had access to international social networks and received remittances.** Spouses, children and siblings of the household head were the most frequent remitters, but in some cases more extended kin also sent remittances.

## Family arrangements of African migrants in Europe

**The organization of family life and patterns of migration differ between countries in Africa.** Differing family norms in the African countries where MAFE research was conducted are important for understanding migrant family formations. In Senegal, polygamous marriages are more common than in Ghana or the Democratic Republic of Congo; child fostering is more frequent in Ghana. In all three countries split families are common, with nuclear and extended family members sometimes residing overseas.

In all three African countries covered by the MAFE survey, **international migration to Europe was initially dominated by men. More recently, a feminisation of these flows has occurred from DR Congo and Ghana<sup>1</sup>**, but this is less so for Senegal, where a stricter gender hierarchy is in place. Thus, transnational family relations may be mediated by social norms in the country of origin, but also by destination country family reunification policies and migrants' legal status in Europe.

**African migrants and their families: Living together or across national boundaries?**

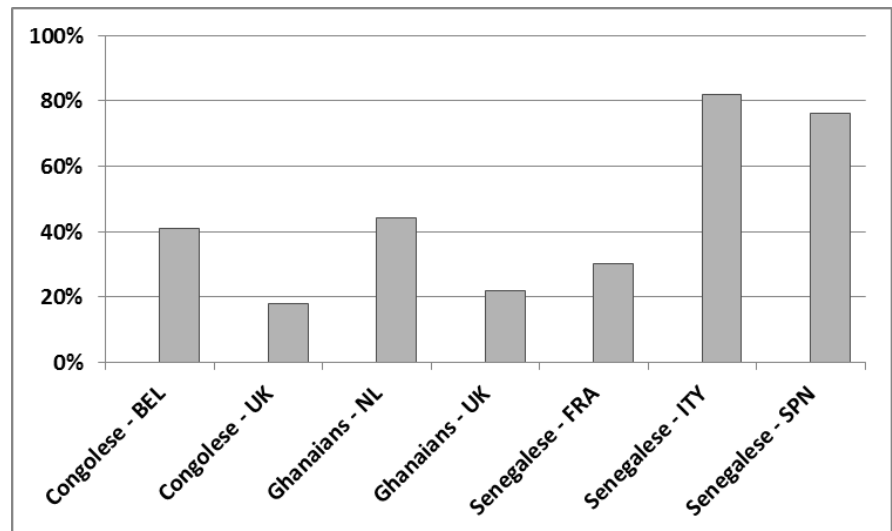
**Transnational family arrangements, where at least one member of the nuclear family is residing in another country (usually the country of origin) exist in all European destination countries that were part of the MAFE project survey.** However, across different MAFE destination countries, the incidence of transnational families varied widely.

**A significant proportion of Senegalese migrants in Spain and**

<sup>1</sup> Defined as females making up a larger proportion of international migrants.

Italy, Congolese migrants in Belgium, and Ghanaian migrants in the Netherlands who have a family, were living in a transnational family (see Fig 1). In the case of the Netherlands and Italy, there appeared to be a strong correlation between transnational family arrangements and undocumented migration in particular<sup>2</sup>.

**FIG 1. PERCENTAGE OF AFRICAN MIGRANTS WITH A FAMILY WHO WERE LIVING TRANSNATIONALLY, BY COUNTRY OF DESTINATION**



In contrast, in the case of Ghanaian and Congolese migration to the UK, transnational family structures were much less common (see Fig 1). The latter is somewhat surprising, given the relatively short history of migration between DR Congo and the UK, in comparison to Congolese migration to Belgium. The UK findings may relate to policies on family reunification, which have historically been stricter in Belgium and the Netherlands, even if more recently the UK has placed increasing emphasis on constraining family reunification<sup>3</sup>.

## Reunification of spouses and children

Family reunification is a major policy concern in Europe, with a commonly-held view being that the migration of young men leads to significant subsequent migration of family members. **Data from the MAFE survey show that of those couples living in transnational arrangements, reunification in Europe was relatively common, but this differed between African migration flows.** So, for example, amongst Ghanaian and Congolese migrants who were residing in Europe, 66 per cent of Ghanaian couples and 52 per cent of Congolese reunited after a 10-year period of separation. However, family reunification was much less common for Senegalese couples, as just 18 per cent of married migrants were re-united with their spouses after being geographically separated for 10 years<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup>These data, which are the result of multivariate analysis, are not shown in this policy brief; please refer to MAFE Working Paper 30 in the 'Key resources' section for more information.

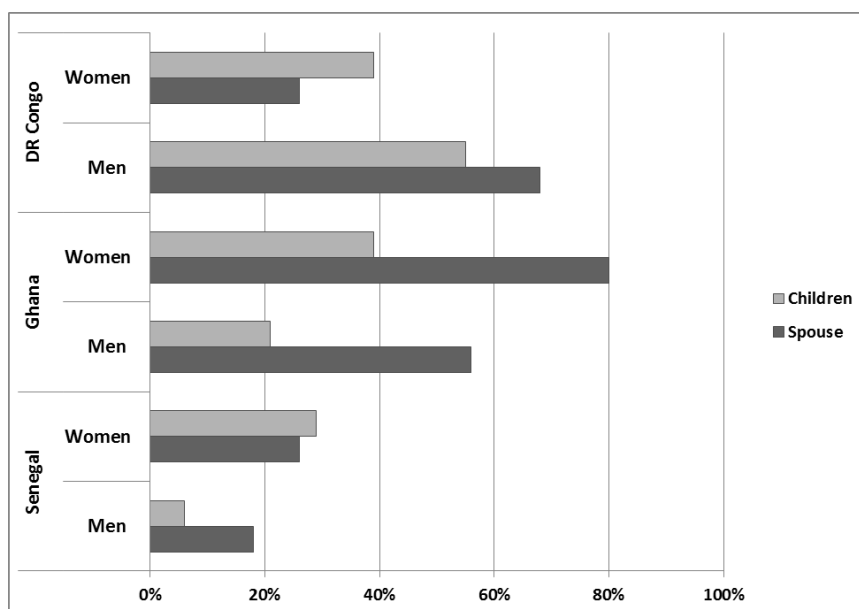
<sup>3</sup>For Ghanaians, it may also relate to the different characteristics between Ghanaians in the UK and in the Netherlands as the former tend to have higher levels of education.

<sup>4</sup>These data are not shown in this policy brief; please refer to MAFE Working Paper 30 in the 'Key resources' section for more information.

**Reunification in Europe amongst parents and children was typically less common than spouses reunifying:** Among Ghanaians and Senegalese, 28 per cent and 10 per cent of parents, respectively, had reunited with their children after 10 years of separation, whereas 49 per cent of Congolese parents reunited with their children over the same duration. Senegalese migrants again proved to be a relative outlier in parent-child reunification trends: fewer Senegalese had children at the time of their migration to Europe, and those who did were more likely to leave them behind in Senegal.

**In general, women and men had different rates of reunification in Europe with both their spouses and their children, showing the gendered dimensions of reunification** (see Fig 2). Ghanaian and Senegalese women were more likely to reunify with their husbands who were abroad than men with their wives who were in Europe, while in the case of Congolese migrants, men were more likely to reunify with their wives who were already in Europe. Additionally, Ghanaian and Senegalese mothers were more likely to reunify with their children than fathers, and Congolese fathers more likely to do this than mothers.

**FIG 2. PERCENTAGE OF MIGRANTS WHO REUNIFIED WITH THEIR SPOUSES AND/OR CHILDREN IN EUROPE AFTER 10 YEARS OF SEPARATION, BY GENDER**



Importantly, **family reunification did not necessarily take place in Europe: it also took place in the country of origin and to a greater extent.** When taking into account those migrants who have returned to their origin country from the respective European survey countries as well as those who have reunited in Europe, over half (52 per cent) of Ghanaian migrants who were married at the time they left for Europe eventually reunited with their spouse in Ghana while only 25 per cent reunited in Europe. As for Congolese couples, 37 per cent reunited in DR Congo as opposed to 24 per cent who reunited in Europe. Amongst Senegalese couples, reunification at destination was virtually equal to reunification at origin (16 per cent and 14 per cent, respectively).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> These data are not shown in this policy brief; please refer MAFE Working Paper 30 in the 'Key resources' section for more information.

## Transnational links: Social networks, remittances and support

Transnational family relationships also manifest themselves in terms of access to social networks, remittances and support for migration. MAFE research shows that in many cases, households in sending countries are affected by outward migration, and not just through remittances.

### Remittances and support

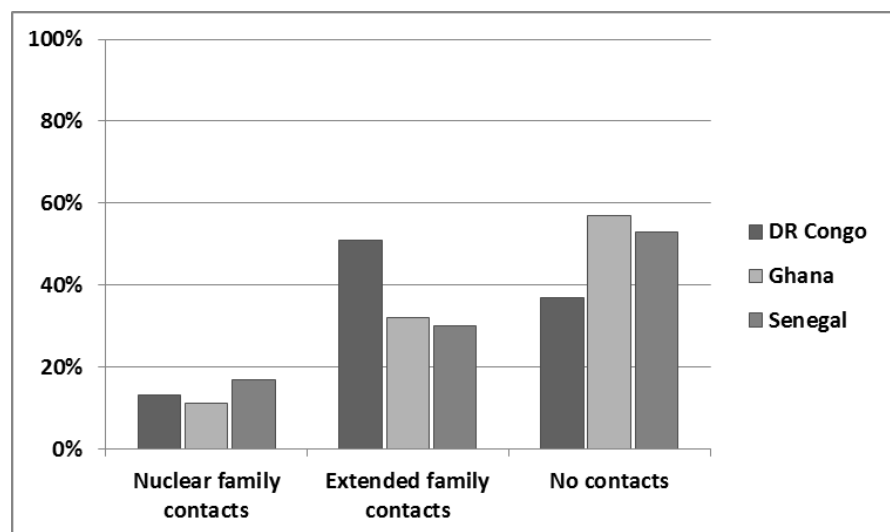
**Less than a third of migrants received support in terms of funding for their initial migration from urban households surveyed in sending countries in Africa:** 27 per cent in Senegal, 26 per cent in DR Congo and 19 per cent in Ghana<sup>6</sup>. This is a surprising finding as current migration theory emphasizes migration as a household-level strategy. Those who did receive support were most likely to be children of the household head, although support for spouses and siblings was also relatively common.

Despite these low levels of support for migration, **around half of urban households surveyed in sending countries received remittances from abroad:** 56 per cent in Ghana, 49 per cent in DR Congo and 49 per cent in Senegal. Migrants within the nuclear family were the most likely to remit, yet a significant number of households also received remittances from siblings and other, more extended kin<sup>7</sup>.

### International social networks

**A significant percentage of urban households in all three countries indicated that they had links with migrants living outside the country** (see Fig 3).

**FIG 3. URBAN HOUSEHOLDS WITH LINKS TO A FAMILY MEMBER ABROAD**



<sup>6</sup> These data are not shown in this policy brief; please refer to MAFE Working Paper 30 in the 'Key resources' section for more information.

<sup>7</sup> As discussed in MAFE Briefing Paper No. 4, MAFE data also show that remittances increase as migrants spend more time abroad, reflecting the robust nature of remittances over time.

In all cases, extended family contacts were the most common type of link, pointing to the existence of social networks beyond nuclear family ties<sup>8</sup>.

**In the case of Ghana and Senegal, the vast majority of the migrants that households were linked with resided in the Global North** (86 per cent and 78 per cent, respectively). This stands in contrast to DR Congo, where 47 per cent of migrant contacts were living in other African countries.<sup>9</sup>

**The frequency of contact between households in Africa and migrants abroad is very high** with the majority of households having weekly contact and the majority of other family members reporting weekly or monthly contact with migrants – ranging from around 60 per cent in the case of DR Congo to 75 per cent for Ghana. Phone is by far the most popular way to stay in touch, reflecting the widespread use of mobile phones in Africa. By contrast, the number of households which had received a visit from a migrant in the last 12 months varied widely, from just 16 per cent of Ghanaian households to 38 per cent for Senegal and 85 per cent for DR Congo – although the latter figure reflects the location of most Congolese migrants in African countries, rather than in Europe.

## Policy implications

- **Family reunification happens in both Europe and, importantly, also in countries of origin. Yet undocumented status makes it less likely for migrants to reunite with families in their country of origin.** This is due to a combination of families not being able to reunify if a migrant is undocumented and undocumented status being associated with a lower probability of return (see MAFE Briefing Paper No.3 for more details on this).
- Reunification is a gendered affair with men and women reunifying at different rates in the various European countries. **Family reunification policies need to take into consideration the potential gendered effects of these policies.**
- While it was found that relatively few households had contributed financially to family members' migration, **MAFE results show that remittances go to a wide range of people, not only the nuclear family**, suggesting that policies which seek to facilitate remittances are likely to have a broader impact than is sometimes assumed.
- Findings also show that around 40 to 60 per cent of African urban households have contact with international migrants, with many staying in touch via mobile phone on a very frequent basis. This attests to **an active transnational family life that characterises migrant realities, and policies can be more effective if they take such realities into account.**

<sup>8</sup> As discussed in MAFE Briefing Paper No. 3, having an adult family member abroad was among the significant determinants of migration to Europe identified by MAFE research.

<sup>9</sup> These data are not shown in this policy brief; please refer to MAFE Working Paper 30 in the 'Key resources' section for more information.

## Key resources

Mazzucato V., Schans D., Caarls K., and Beauchemin C. (2013) 'Migrant families between Africa and Europe: Comparing Ghanaian, Congolese and Senegalese migration flows.' MAFE Working Paper 30. Paris: MAFE Project, INED.

Beauchemin, C., Caarls, K., Nappa, J., Mazzucato, V., Schoumaker, B., and Mangalu, J. (2013) 'Migration and Family Life between Congo and Europe'. MAFE Working Paper 31. Paris: MAFE Project, INED.

Caarls, K., Schans, D., Mazzucato, V., Quartey, P., and Tagoe, C.A. (2013) 'Transnational families between Ghana, the Netherlands and the UK'. MAFE Working Paper 32. Paris: MAFE Project, INED.

Beauchemin, C., Caarls, K., and Mazzucato, V. (2013) 'Senegalese migrants between here and there: An overview of family patterns'. MAFE Working Paper 33. Paris: MAFE Project, INED.

González-Ferrer, A., Baizan, P. and Beauchemin, C. (2012) 'Child-parent separations among Senegalese migrants to Europe: migration strategies or cultural arrangements?' MAFE Working Paper 17. Paris: MAFE Project, INED.

Baizan, P., Beauchemin, C., and González-Ferrer, A. (2011) 'A reassessment of family reunification in Europe; the case of Senegalese couples.' MAFE Working Paper 16. Paris: MAFE Project, INED.

*MAFE working papers and briefing papers are available online at: [www.mafeproject.eu/publications](http://www.mafeproject.eu/publications)*

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