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A person with a backpack is walking away from the viewer on a dirt road. In the background, a city skyline is visible under a sunset sky. The image is overlaid with digital circuitry and data lines, symbolizing migration and technology.

THE HUMAN COST OF THE **BACKWAY**

A Case Study on Labor Outcomes
and Demographic Shifts in The Gambia

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Abstract

Migration is an increasingly influential demographic force in the 21st century, especially in low-income, high-youth-population countries like The Gambia. This study examines the demographic characteristics and labour force outcomes of Gambian youth migrants in Europe, and the broader implications for population structures, skill distribution, and socio-economic development in the country of origin.

Focusing on youth aged 18–35, the research employs a qualitative, demographic case study approach, integrating primary interviews with secondary data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two Gambian migrants in Germany and Spain, and one returnee in The Gambia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to reflect key migrant experiences across different stages of the migration cycle. While the small sample limits generalizability, the qualitative approach is methodologically justified for its capacity to uncover detailed life-course dynamics, labour transitions, and integration challenges often missed in large-scale quantitative surveys.

Findings indicate that Gambian migrants are overwhelmingly young males from rural areas with limited employment options. Irregular migration, facilitated through trans-Saharan and Mediterranean routes, leads to integration into informal labour markets—typically agriculture, construction, and domestic work—characterized by precarious working conditions and limited social mobility. Meanwhile, remittances play a critical role in household survival and rural development, accounting for an estimated 31.5% of household income in some communities. However, these gains are offset by brain drain and youth outmigration, contributing to labour shortages and demographic imbalances in The Gambia, particularly in the agriculture and education sectors.

This research contributes to migration-demographic scholarship by illuminating how youth migration affects labour force composition, return migration integration, and the sustainability of population systems in origin countries. Policy implications include expanding vocational reintegration schemes, improving safe migration channels, and addressing rural employment deficits to reduce emigration pressures.

Keywords: ***Migration, Youth Migration, Demographics, Labour Force Outcomes, Socioeconomic development.***

Introduction

Nestled in the western part of Africa, The Gambia is one of the continent's smallest mainland countries. It has a population of about 2.5 million people and spans 10,700 square kilometres. The country is almost surrounded by Senegal, except to the west, where it borders the Atlantic Ocean (World Bank, 2023). Migration has had a significant socio-economic phenomenon in the Gambia in recent decades, driven by several factors, such as political instability, unemployment or limited job opportunities, and other economic challenges (Suso, 2019). Many Gambians, particularly young men aged 15 to 35, have emigrated to European countries such as Spain, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom in search of better job opportunities and to support their families back home (Faal, 2020). Most of them emigrated through the high seas of the Mediterranean or the treacherous Sahara Desert to reach Europe (Jawo, 2024).

This paper seeks to examine the demographic trend and characteristics of Gambian migrants, the labour outcomes they faced in their destination countries, and their implications on the socio-economic implications in the Gambia. It especially seeks to understand the type of labour Gambians are engaged in abroad and the impact of the Gambia's labour market, remittances, brain drain, and challenges faced by both voluntary and involuntary returnees from Europe.

Research Questions

- What are the key demographic characteristics of Gambian migrants?
- How does migration impact the labor force in both The Gambia and the destination countries?
- What are the labour force outcomes (job market integration, skills development, remittances) for Gambian migrants?

Global Migration and Gambian Migration

People have always been on the move, in search of refuge or opportunities to escape poverty. The world is witnessing a substantial movement of people across regions, especially from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe (de Haas, 2014; International Organization for Migration, 2024). Today, an unprecedented number of individuals live outside their countries of origin or birth. The global population of international migrants is approximately 281 million, representing about 3.7 percent of the global population, and this has nearly doubled since 1990 (IOM, 2024). In the past decades, migration from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe has significantly increased, with migrants coming from countries like The Gambia, Senegal, Mali, and Guinea-Bissau. These migrant's travel via the Sahara deserts or the high seas of the Mediterranean to Europe to escape poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and unequal opportunities, especially the opportunity to access education (De Haas, 2008). The Gambia, currently under a political transition after 22 years of misrule by former President Yahya Jammeh, has limited resources and employment opportunities, which have seen the rise of a steady migration flow towards Europe, with different hotspot locations for irregular migration within the Gambia (Altrogge et al., 2021). Speaking to Gambian migrants reveals that they predominantly travel via irregular routes to destinations like Spain and Italy, where many enter the labor force in low-wage sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work. On the other hand, young Gambians, particularly from rural areas, are increasingly migrating to urban areas in search of opportunities to improve their living standards, and most of them dwell within the Greater Banjul Area (D. Author, personal communication, May 8, 2025).

Who are the Migrants? Unpacking the Demographics:

Gambian migrants are typically young adults, predominantly males, mostly falling between 18 and 35. This demographic is often drawn from rural areas where unemployment is higher and opportunities are limited compared to peri-urban and urban parts of the Gambia (Faal, 2020). Although historically male-dominated, migration patterns in The Gambia have begun to include more female migrants, particularly in the context of domestic and service work abroad, who also take part in irregular migration journeys (Altrogge et al., 2024).

One of the most important aspects of migration from The Gambia is the remittance economy (Ceesay, 2020). Migrants often send money back to their families, contributing significantly to the Gambian economy (Zanka & Altrogge, 2019). The remittance inflows in The Gambia in 2024 reached US\$776 million. These inflows accounted for 31.5% of the country's benefiting families in rural areas and supported local businesses (Gibba et al., 2020).

Labor Force Outcomes in Destination Countries

Gambian migrants in destination countries typically find employment in the informal labor market or low-skilled jobs. As discussed in Oberoi and Sheil (2023), many Gambian migrants work in agriculture, construction, hospitality, or as domestic workers (Oberoi & Sheill, 2023)

As 'Kintiba,' a Gambian migrant in Germany, explained, 'While these jobs provide us with essential income, they are often characterized by low wages, long working hours, and limited job security' (personal communication, May 15, 2025), One interviewee, whom we'll call 'Sarjo,' highlighted that in many cases, Gambian migrants in Italy lack proper legal documentation, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation and poor working conditions (personal communication, May 18, 2025). .

While some migrants gain new skills or formal qualifications in their destination countries, these advancements do not always translate into opportunities upon return to The Gambia. Skill transfer remains a challenge, as the Gambian job market is not always equipped to absorb highly skilled returnees, contributing to a cycle of brain drain (Onwutalobi, 2020).

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative method and approach to explore the migration process from The Gambia to Europe, underpinned by demographic data. While the sample size is small, these Deep-Dive interviews serve as representative case studies that humanize the secondary data. They provide a thick description of the socio-economic pressures that statistics alone cannot capture.

Qualitative Data:

- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two Gambian migrants in Spain and Germany and a returnee in The Gambia. Participants were selected based on purposive sampling. To ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper when citing direct quotes or paraphrased information from interviews (e.g., 'Kintiba,' 'Sarjo,' 'Jabbi-Kassama'). All participants provided informed consent before their interviews between May 15 and 20, 2025. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key insights into migrant experiences and labor outcomes."

Data Analyses:

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic analysis was used to examine interview responses, identifying key themes such as labor market integration, remittance dependency, and skill transfer.

Ethical Implications

The research project features various ethical implications, which are presented below.

Voluntary participation

First and foremost, all interviewees were interviewed based on their discretion, so it is voluntary, without anyone being coerced or pressured.

Privacy and Anonymity

The importance of respecting privacy and desires for anonymity applies to both the interviewees and the respective returnee migrant who shared his insights.

Findings and Analysis

Demographic Characteristics of Gambian Migrants

The typical Gambian migrant is a young male, usually between 15 and 35 years old. Many come from rural regions, where unemployment is high, and economic opportunities are scarce (GBOS, 2018). The migration process often begins with the desire for financial independence and better life prospects. However, migration is not always a permanent solution. In many cases, Gambians migrate to countries like Spain or Italy temporarily before either returning or seeking permanent settlement (Kebbeh, 2013).

Labor Force Integration in Destination Countries

Gambian migrants primarily work in low-wage, low-skilled sectors, such as construction, agriculture, and hospitality. Many migrants enter the informal sector due to a lack of legal documentation, which results in lower pay and reduced labor rights. Despite this, Gambian migrants often form tight-knit communities in their destination countries, providing mutual support and sometimes establishing businesses (Hunt, 2020).

A returnee, 'Jabbi-Kassama,' reflected on skill development abroad: 'In my case, as a Gambian, I gained some form of skill development during my time in Germany, although it is often limited to the sectors in which I work. Skill transfer is a challenge, with limited recognition of foreign qualifications and underemployment when I return to The Gambia. Some of my colleagues remain underemployed in agriculture and manual labor, even after gaining some skills abroad' (personal communication, May 20, 2025).

Impact on The Gambia's Labor Market

Migration has significant implications for The Gambia's labor market. Brain drain is critical, as many young, skilled workers leave for better opportunities abroad. This exacerbates shortages in vital sectors such as education, healthcare, and technology (Gajigo & Chouchane, 2014).

However, the flow of remittances is a vital source of income for many Gambian families. These remittances help support households, pay for education, and improve living conditions, thus improving the quality of life for many who remain in The Gambia.

The Gambian economy also faces labor market gaps, especially in the agricultural sector, as many young men and women seek opportunities abroad. This creates a dependency on older generations and can disrupt local farming systems (Afrobarometer, 2024).

Discussion

Social and Economic Impacts of Migration

Migration from The Gambia has both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, remittances have played a key role in reducing poverty and improving many families' access to education, healthcare, and housing. Migration also has a social impact, as it often leads to changes in family structures, with children raised by one parent or extended family members.

However, the brain drain remains a significant challenge. The Gambia loses many of its skilled and educated youth to migration, which limits the country's ability to develop key sectors. Additionally, the integration of returnees remains problematic, as the Gambian job market may not be prepared for highly skilled individuals returning after years abroad.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

To address these challenges, The Gambia should focus on improving local job opportunities, particularly in agriculture, education, and technology sectors. Policymakers should also focus on developing skills training programs to help migrants integrate better into the labor market upon their return. Furthermore, enhancing migration policies that allow for safe, legal migration.

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