

A Study of Sub-Saharan African Immigrant Civic Engagement in Morocco

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Abstract

Morocco is a major gateway destination for immigrants across Africa, serving as a historic bridge between Africa and Europe. In recent years, many African migrants intending to immigrate to Europe find themselves “stuck in limbo” in what was once largely a transit country. Yet, despite this growing population of now relatively permanent immigrants in Morocco, limited research exists on the civic and political lives of this sub-Saharan immigrant community. This research examines the factors that shape the civic and political participation of sub-Saharan African immigrants in Morocco, particularly Rabat and Tangier, focusing on the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community leaders in addressing their barriers to social and political integration. This study employs mixed ethnographic methods, using Tangier and Rabat as distinct case studies, to identify a common pattern in sub-Saharan immigrants’ political behavior and collective voice.

Preliminary findings from fieldwork conducted in Tangier suggest that sub-Saharan immigrants face substantial obstacles to civic and political participation, including legal limitations, language difficulties, and racial discrimination. Despite these many challenges, however, the political voice of this community has been provided some outlet through the critical work of NGOs operating in a precarious, authoritarian context. Through in-depth interviews and site visits with six key NGOs and community leaders, I find that they are able to offer vital support through legal aid, vocational training, childcare, and psychosocial services. Ongoing follow-up research with NGOs and community leaders based in Rabat—namely the Antiracist Group of Defense and Accompaniment of Foreigners and Migrants (GADEM), the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (ADFM), and Women in Conflict Zones (MZC)—will offer additional insight into whether similar theoretical dynamics hold throughout the country of Morocco, particularly amid large-scale anti-corruption protests organized by Gen-Z activists. Importantly, this research fills a critical gap in the literature by illustrating how migrants use informal methods of civic participation, such as word-of-mouth networks, online communications, and NGO-led workshops, to confront political exclusion and intimidation.

Introduction

Morocco is a major gateway destination for immigrants across Africa, serving as a historic bridge between Africa and Europe. In recent years, many African migrants intending to immigrate to Europe find themselves “stuck in limbo” in what was once largely a transit country. Yet, despite this growing population of now relatively permanent immigrants in Morocco, limited research exists on the civic and political lives of this sub-Saharan immigrant community. This research examines the factors that shape the civic and political participation of sub-Saharan African immigrants in Morocco, particularly Rabat and Tangier, focusing on the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community leaders in addressing their barriers to social and political integration. This study employs mixed ethnographic methods, using Tangier and Rabat as distinct case studies, to identify a common pattern in sub-Saharan immigrants’ political behavior and collective voice. I argue that for a highly marginalized population such as the recent immigrants who find themselves stuck in Morocco, the work of NGOs can prove to be vital for this community to have any sort of political voice and make even small advances in attaining basic services and protections from the political system in which they find themselves.

The paper proceeds as follows. I first provide a brief overview of the authoritarian political system of Morocco with attention to the regime’s treatment of and policy responses toward its growing sub-Saharan immigrant population. I then turn my focus toward research on what might be considered a relatively new category of immigrants—those who have been caught in limbo between their homeland and their preferred destination—in this case Western Europe. These “permanent transit migrants” represent a unique population that typically find themselves in countries that are ill-equipped to handle an influx of newly permanent immigrants. Whether in the once-transit country of Morocco of Africa or the origin and transit country of Mexico that

now is home to thousands of Central Americans who were denied access to the United States, this phenomenon of transit migrants who become permanent immigrants is a growing trend around the world. Our understanding of how well or poorly these immigrant communities are integrating with their new “home” countries is limited but scholars are now beginning to turn their focus toward this question. This study hopes to contribute to that growing research. After a review of this literature, I provide a brief discussion of my methodology and data collection efforts to date (this is a work-in-progress) and then present my findings before concluding with a discussion of the implications of my research.

The Moroccan Political Response to Sub-Saharan Immigrants

To make sense of Moroccan immigration policy, one must first consider the Moroccan *Makhzen*, which literally means “warehouse” in North African Arabic derived from the verb *kazana*, meaning “to store” (Saffari et al. 2017, 114). Today, the usage of word *Makhzen* is synonymous with the elite Moroccan governing institution (Saffari et al. 2017, 114). In the context of the weaknesses of Morocco’s formal political processes, immigration is the symptom of a broader problem exacerbated by existing government issues, which Moroccan political scientist Abdeslam Maghraoui attributes to three factors: (1) a built-in constitutional bias in favor of the king at the expense of the parliament, (2) a discredited electoral process, and (3) ineffective democratic parties (2001, 78). By analyzing the authoritarian regime of King Hassan II, who ruled for 38 years until his death in 1999, Maghraoui argues that, without legitimate, modern democratic mechanisms that enforce constitutional principles and constrain the centralized authority of the *Makhzen*, which is centered around the king, the monarchy will continue to be the “supreme legitimator” of the political process, and anti-systemic forces will be forced to intervene for the betterment of the nation (2001, 82).

While Morocco is officially a constitutional monarchy, there is a clear imbalance between its claims of being an open democratic system and a Constitution that grants sweeping and largely unchecked powers to an unelected head of state (Maghraoui 2001, 78-79). Combined with an administrative process of electoral restructuring, reward, exclusion, and co-optation, Maghraoui affirms that the political process was never intended to be a tool for “political change from below” but rather a mechanism for “elite control and renewal from above” (2001, 80). Finally, Maghraoui claims that the democratic political parties in Morocco, namely the nationalist Istiqlal and the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), are too weak to challenge this structure because they, too, waver between “nationalism and democracy” and have “resigned themselves to playing the game of clientelistic politics sponsored by the Interior Ministry” (2001, 81-82). In a system already marked by low voter turnout and deep alienation among urban youth, driven by apathy and mistrust of Moroccan political processes according to public opinion surveys, the issue of immigration enters a landscape in which marginalized groups have to rely on informal networks because formal channels serve as “rubber stamps” for royal decisions (Maghraoui 2001, 80, 78).

To complicate matters further, recent scholarship sheds light on how this vicious cycle of concessions—hinged on the Makhzen gaining legitimate political control—has continued despite the revised 2011 Constitution and the 2014 and 2017 regularization campaigns, which still leave sub-Saharan migrants without formalized legal rights or citizenship (Maghraoui 2001, 83). Moroccan political scientist and constitutional law scholar Aisha Kadaoui provides a nuanced look at how this disconnect between the Makhzen, NGOs, and sub-Saharan migrant communities is created by design to further the appearance of monarchical legitimacy and stability. Under the reign of King Mohammed VI since 1999, Kadaoui argues that constitutional inconsistencies,

state control, and monarchial executive control make Morocco a hybrid between a “façade democracy” and a case of “competitive authoritarianism” (2023, 1403). Notwithstanding the illusion of democratization and the political regime’s failed attempts to implement major constitutional reforms, the Makhzen’s response to the Arab Spring in 2011 and the subsequent social unrest, followed by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, points to reactionary democratization efforts (Kadaoui 2023, 1403).

By contrast, these actions illustrate a strategy of crisis management to maintain popular support and legitimacy rather than a genuine political will to democratize the regime (Kadaoui 2023, 1403). By focusing on “defusing crises and modernising the political sphere without democratising the internal structures,” Kadaoui shows that two things can be true at the same time: Morocco can implement the New Migration Policy, which encompasses the post-2011 governance paradigm, “as responses to crisis” while maintaining structures that leave sub-Saharan migrants without legal rights and in legal limbo (2023, 1402). In this light, the rights proclaimed in the 2011 Constitution have “not been implemented in any real and concrete way,” preserving the stability of the Makhzen at the expense of sub-Saharan migrants’ political agency (Kadaoui 2023, 1415, cited in Hirech 2023).

In “Syrian Refugees’ Lived Experiences in Morocco,” Hannah Chenok affirms the migrants’ legal complexity and ambiguity. Chenok explores the in-betweenness of Syrian refugees in Rabat who occupy a similar status to those of sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco. With the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, one of the worst humanitarian crises in the 21st century, more than five million refugees fled the country (2017, 10). Chenok confirms the reactionary nature of Morocco’s 2013 overhaul of the migration and asylum systems through numerous plausible theories (2017, 5). In one theory, the timing of the Moroccan government’s

migration policy announcement came only one month after the NGO GADEM released a report critical of the Moroccan government's migration policies (Chenok 2017, 5). In Chenok's second theory, she argues that Morocco's migration policies are informed by an evaluation published by the United Nations Committee on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, which are suspiciously close in timing (2017, 6). Professor Kelsey Norman of the University of California, Irvine argues that "this timeline of events has led GADEM and other civil society organizations to conclude that the primary motivation behind the King's announcement of reform was international shaming: Morocco despises humiliation on the international stage" (Chenok 2017, 6, cited in Norman 2016, 430).

These moves by the Makhzen point to a kind of managed liberalization, absent on the part of the monarchy a genuine desire for transformative migration and asylum policies. In the effective absence of state-recognized citizenship and relevant programs for migrant populations, Chenok demonstrates the need for NGOs in this in-between stage. In one testimonial, Houmam, a 25-year old cook at a Syrian restaurant in Rabat without United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recognition, residency, or citizenship, said that "There is not a refugee system [in Morocco]...the Moroccan government did not help with refugee law" (Chenok 21, 2017). A lack of official recognition from the Moroccan government further complicates migrants' path to legal rights, which the UNHCR even admits "complicates their access to the labour market and keeps them in a certain precariousness" (Chenok 8, 2017). Syrian refugees like Houmam face a serious dilemma: follow the path of regular migrants to obtain a legal residency card but lose essential UNHCR services or remain recognized only by the UN and lack legal status in the eyes of the state (Chenok 8, 2017).

Migrants in Morocco

Building on this sociological framework of institutionalized precarity, Anitta Kynsilehto corroborates that, while the New Migration Policy initiated a dramatic shift in recognizing migrants' presence, an absence of a concrete integration policy forces migrants to "make do" through "informal and entrepreneurial strategies" (2023, 159). Through the lived experiences of migrants, this means that they oftentimes find themselves in endless trainings organized by civil society organizations that do not materialize into long-term employment, demonstrating an issue not in the quality of the training but rather in the disconnection between NGOs and Moroccan employers (Kynsilehto 2023, 163-164). For instance, a migrant named Prince described accumulating a "pile of certificates" ranging from electrician skills to human rights, only to be met with employers who claim, "there are Moroccans for the job" (Kynsilehto 2023, 163). This reliance on the migration services industry keeps migrants in a constant state of "existential uncertainty," where their de facto or everyday integration, from working and learning the language and culture to establishing families, remains unrecognized by a Makhzen (Kynsilehto 2023, 167). Kynsilehto suggests that these issues are emblematic of broader patterns of social stratification and a lack of societal solidarity that prevent sub-Saharan migrants from feeling like they are part of a larger community (2023, 168).

From a broader sociological perspective, social anthropologist Sébastien Bachelet of the University of Manchester engages with this existing body of scholarship that reflects the theme of migrants' semi-permanent yet uncertain legal status. In "Fighting against Clandestine Migration': Sub-Saharan Migrants' Political Agency and Uncertainty in Morocco," Bachelet writes that irregular migrants live in a "space of nonexistence," meaning that they are physically and socially present but are without substantive legal rights despite democratic reforms that

would guarantee their full belonging in society (as cited in Coutin 2000; 2018, 204). As migrants “navigate a hostile and uncertain context in Morocco... ‘looking for their lives,’” balancing survival, political organizing, and migration to Europe, NGOs provide one of the very few opportunities for stability and community for this vulnerable population (Bachelet 2018, 203). Drawing on ethnographic research, Bachelet captures the political objectives and operations of AMSAM, a Rabat-based association of irregular sub-Saharan migrants “created because irregular migrants wanted to exercise control over a precarious situation in which they seemed powerless” (2018, 202).

While migrant political agency is at times contradictory and manifold due to their uncertain status and many policy priorities beyond regularization, AMSAM acts as “a bridge between migrants and NGOs” during a time when these partnerships are critical for political dissent and central to political life (Bachelet 2018, 209). Bachelet writes that AMSAM’s seemingly contradictory mission of “fighting against clandestine migration” was a strategic effort to expose the true realities of the irregular journeys, effectively transforming failed border-crossing attempts into field missions that used migrant testimonies to spread awareness about the brutality suffered at the hands of border control authorities (Bachelet 2018, 205-206). Bachelet stresses that the uncertainty irregular migrants face is not accidental, but rather a byproduct of external geopolitical pressures, where Morocco acts as a partner in European migration management, and a response to colonial legacies as migrants seek to “re-claim their grandfathers’ rights” (Bachelet 2018, 203). Bachelet illustrates that institutionalized uncertainty serves to reinforce the power of the Makhzen and keep migrants disempowered (Bachelet 2018, 3, cited in Griffiths 2013, 280).

Sociology researcher Cynthia Magallanes-Gonzalez argues that sub-Saharan activists and community leaders are well positioned to support other migrants in this current landscape, as, without them, many migrants would not have the information, networks, or resources necessary to stay in Morocco or travel to Europe. Magallanes-Gonzalez posits that these leaders function as critical intermediaries able to navigate the many complexities of the migration industry and are appointed to their roles based on their time spent in Morocco, their engagement with the community, their level of education, and the social networks they have built with other leaders. Even when they are unable to profit from the migration industry or when state institutions fail to offer vital social services, sub-Saharan migrants can exert their social capital to improve the lives of members of their communities in Morocco, occupying a wide array of roles, ranging from community leaders and migrant activists to educators. Their work is deeply political and humanitarian in nature, as they leverage their lived experiences, often as regularized migrants themselves, to help others contend with irregular life in Morocco, while also challenging the Makhzen's management of the migration industry.

Sub-Saharan migrants' ability to "act as brokers who 'bridge a gap' between migrant communities and donors or the state" stems from their trust, legitimacy, and cultural competency within migrant communities (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021, 994, cited in Stovel and Shaw 2012, 141). However, leaders with legal residency still remain in a precarious position without long-term economic or legal security. These community leaders often must rely on other benefits, such as social capital, visibility among international NGOs, or invitations to prestigious conferences, in exchange for their labor, with Moroccan migrant activist Younes articulating that "it's really hard to defend yourself when you're too close to precarity" (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021, 1004). Magallanes-Gonzalez notes that sub-Saharan migrant activists view their systemic exclusion

from monetary gain as a form of racial or national discrimination, with some citing cases of European development workers profiting from the migration industry despite lacking on-the-ground experience (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021, 1003). Magallanes-Gonzalez cites multiple instances in which the Moroccan state and NGOs, such as the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH), create human rights reports policy recommendations—which are necessary to justify their organizations’ funding—that would not be possible without migrants’ local insights (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021, 1003-1004). Thus, although sub-Saharan migrant community leaders gain social status within their own communities, Magallanes-Gonzalez’s accounts show that they view their roles as both a blessing and a curse in their interactions with the Moroccan state and NGOs.

Methodology

To fulfill the objectives of this research project, preliminary qualitative data were collected from sub-Saharan African migrants as well as individuals with consistent contact and experience working with them. Using mixed ethnographic methods, five in-depth interviews were conducted with six individuals in Tangier, including three NGO staff members, two of Rwandan and Cameroonian descent, respectively, and one Moroccan; two Nigerian immigrant women who will be referred to as Abigail and Faith; and one local Cameroonian community leader referred to as Jacques. Participants were identified through snowball sampling, particularly suited to this transient, hard-to-reach migrant population. The three organizations included in the preliminary findings are the Organisation des Jeunes Africains (OJA), Association 100% Mamans, and Délégation Diocésaine des Migrations (DDM). Site visits were also carried out at each of these NGOs, where informal conversations were held with other staff members and beneficiaries. Conducting interviews with NGO staff was essential for

understanding how these organizations address barriers to migrant integration. These preliminary interviews will be followed by additional interviews using a similar sampling and methodological scheme.

For context, OJA, founded in 2008 in Tangier, is an international non-profit organization that promotes youth leadership and socio-cultural development among young Africans. The organization has supported over 250 self-entrepreneurs and organized more than 200 events, fostering socioeconomic integration for African youth in Morocco. OJA is a member of multiple associative networks, including the Tangier Protection Working Group (GTP). Association 100% Mamans, established in 2006, supports single mothers and their children, focusing on social reintegration, vocational training, and legal assistance. With a staff of around thirty and a comparable number of volunteers, the organization has served over 1,500 mothers and continues to be a key player in social advocacy in Tangier. DDM, created in 2011, addresses migration-related issues along Morocco's northern coast. It offers medical, social, psychosocial, educational, and legal support to vulnerable migrants. Through a holistic approach, DDM coordinates with civil society and local institutions to facilitate migrant access to essential services. With their diverse approaches to migrant support and advocacy, these organizations offer critical focal points for understanding the civic and political participation of sub-Saharan migrants.

At DDM and Association 100% Mamans in particular, conversations with staff from the psychosocial, legal, and outreach units offered multiple perspectives on service provision. All interviews were conducted in English, except for the DDM interview, which was conducted in French with the assistance of Dr. Taieb Belghazi as a translator. Additionally, a two-hour interview and extensive follow-up were conducted with Jacques in Tangier. This connection was

facilitated through a former SIT student. Jacques offered insights into informal leadership and grassroots organizing within the sub-Saharan migrant community. This connection also facilitated a visit to the home of a Nigerian family, where Abigail and Faith shared their experiences. Their voices were critical for capturing the gendered dimensions of integration. Two sets of interview questions were used: one for sub-Saharan migrants (16 questions) and another for community leaders and NGO staff (9 questions). For the interview with Association 100% Mamans, a revised three-question set was used upon request to focus on public awareness and advocacy campaigns. Each interview was guided by a prepared set of questions, while intentionally allowing space for conversations to develop organically.

This research project was approved by the SIT IRB committee. Initial contact with the participating NGOs was made via WhatsApp, and formal approval to proceed with the interviews was obtained from each organization. Prior to beginning each interview, participants provided verbal consent to take part in the study, including consent to audio-record the conversations for the purpose of accurate transcription and analysis. Participants were informed that their personal identities, as well as any other identifiable details, would remain confidential throughout the research process and in all published materials. They were also reminded of their right to decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview at any point. For clarity in presenting the findings while protecting participant anonymity, the two Nigerian migrant women are referred to as Abigail and Faith. The exact positions and titles of NGO staff members are withheld to maintain confidentiality, though their contributions are included under general organizational perspectives.

NGO Results

OJA

The interview and site visit at OJA provided greater understanding of the organization's role in supporting the socioeconomic integration of sub-Saharan African migrants in Tangier. As a youth-focused NGO with extensive experience in migration, entrepreneurship, and capacity-building, the staff member at OJA positioned the organization as both a direct service provider and a bridge between migrant communities and institutional structures in Morocco. The “Work for Integration Project” stands out as a key initiative, providing services in business planning, entrepreneurial training, and skills development for migrants aged 18 to 48. The project trains participants in developing business plans, supports them in pitching their entrepreneurial ideas for funding, and equips them with essential skills to navigate Morocco’s job market. As an important intermediary between sub-Saharan migrants and the government, the staff member emphasized the importance of community engagement, with staff members working directly with migrant communities to ensure widespread integration. This approach is particularly effective for migrants who face language barriers, such as native English speakers who do not speak Arabic or French, the most spoken languages in Morocco, respectively.

OJA’s staff, including several members who are themselves sub-Saharan migrants, prioritize building deep-rooted relationships within the community and with allied groups, enabling the organization to better understand the needs of its clients and provide tailored support. This personal connection is crucial, as migrants often find it difficult to trust external organizations. Additionally, as a member of GTP, a coalition of more than 30 associations working on migration issues, OJA collaborates with other organizations to share resources and coordinate efforts to ensure the equitable distribution of aid. Despite these efforts, the

interviewee emphasized that sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco continue to face significant barriers to civic and political participation, including discrimination and the fear of deportation. Nonetheless, OJA offers a unique space for migrant integration and empowerment, particularly in the economic sector, equipping them with the skills and resources needed to adapt to their new environment and pursue entrepreneurial ventures.

Association 100% Mamans

The site visit to Association 100% Mamans provided a deeper understanding of the organization's holistic support model for single mothers, including both Moroccan and sub-Saharan African women. The interview was conducted with a staff member specializing in communications, inside the organization's dedicated podcast room—an initiative used to amplify women's stories and engage the wider community. The staff member emphasized that equity is a core principle guiding their work; services are provided without distinction based on nationality or origin, aiming to create an inclusive environment for all women. The visit included a tour of several facilities, such as the psychosocial support unit, a daycare center, and housing accommodations where single mothers can stay free of charge until approximately six months postpartum.

To promote long-term economic and social integration, the organization offers professional development programs such as job skills training and cooking courses. For mothers with young children, the organization provides childcare support, including a kindergarten for children aged three to six, where they can begin learning both French and Arabic, which is essential for successfully navigating the Moroccan education system and broader society. Additionally, the organization fosters leadership within its community through an informal alumni network. Former beneficiaries are encouraged to take on leadership roles and support

new mothers navigating similar experiences. This peer-led approach reinforces a sense of solidarity and shared experience among the women, while also strengthening the organization's capacity to reach and support those in need.

DDM

The interview with a staff member from DDM, conducted with the assistance of Dr. Taieb Belghazi who translated from French, offered a detailed overview of the organization's work in Tangier. DDM is dedicated to supporting the well-being of sub-Saharan migrants, focusing particularly on improving their health, economic, legal, and social outcomes. One of the organization's key strategies involves leading sensitization campaigns designed to inform migrants of their legal rights. These campaigns cover issues ranging from access to education to protections against mistreatment by Moroccan authorities. According to the interviewee, these initiatives have contributed to increased engagement from migrant communities, as individuals become more aware of the avenues available to them for redress and advocacy.

Another important element of DDM's approach is the community relays program, which fosters representation from different African nationalities residing in Morocco. Through this program, designated representatives, such as the example given of a Senegalese community leader, can voice the specific concerns and needs of their communities. This model has created a platform for dialogue, allowing for more targeted support and better communication between migrants, organizations, and local authorities. Despite these efforts, the interviewee emphasized that major hurdles to civic and political participation remain for sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco. Socioeconomic challenges, such as securing stable employment, housing, and access to essential services, often take precedence over civic engagement. Additionally, the lack of proper residency documentation further discourages political participation, as many fear

deportation if they are seen engaging in political or civic activities. The interviewee concluded by recommending the expansion of Morocco's regularization campaigns to enhance the inclusion and integration of sub-Saharan migrants.

Immigrant Participant Results

Jacques, the Cameroonian Community Leader

The interview with the local Cameroonian community leader, conducted at a coffee shop in Iberia, a neighborhood near Tangier's Medina, provided important insights into the lived realities of sub-Saharan migrants navigating civic and social life in Morocco. Having arrived from Cameroon in 2012 with the initial goal of reaching Europe—a recurring aspiration among the migrants interviewed—he now finds himself settled in Morocco. His reflections highlighted the centrality of informal community networks in fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support. Personally, he noted that most of his close friends in Morocco are Nigerian. Throughout the conversation, the interviewee frequently received WhatsApp messages from fellow migrants requesting his assistance with submitting residency paperwork, underscoring his role as an informal leader and trusted intermediary within the migrant community. His experiences with Moroccan authorities have been marked by repeated arrests and forced relocations to the southern part of the country, specifically to cities such as Tiznit and Agadir, which he described as routine and often dehumanizing.

The interviewee also noted everyday experiences of racial discrimination, recalling specific instances where Moroccans would cover their noses when passing him on the street. His proficiency in French has made his integration somewhat smoother compared to peers from Anglophone countries, who face additional linguistic and bureaucratic barriers. Despite his collaborations with various NGOs, he expressed skepticism about their capacity to enact

meaningful change, pointing to the outsized influence of European stakeholders in shaping organizational priorities and limiting grassroots agency. In a follow-up conversation held in Charf, in the eastern part of Tangier, while accompanying him to an interview with his Nigerian migrant friends, his testimony further underscored the necessity of both formal and informal leadership styles within the sub-Saharan migrant community, particularly in contexts where institutional support remains limited.

Abigail and Faith, the Nigerian Immigrant Women

The experiences of two Nigerian immigrant women, gathered during an interview at Faith's home in Charf, an eastern neighborhood of Tangier, shed light on the everyday realities and gendered challenges facing sub-Saharan female migrants in Morocco. Both women, Abigail and Faith, migrated from Nigeria with aspirations of reaching Europe, a journey they ultimately abandoned due to the journey's high costs. Now settled in Tangier, they rely on street begging to support their families. Faith lives with her husband and their four children, aged between four and eleven, including twins, while Abigail has two young children, aged eight months and two years. During the interview, which took place amid the everyday rhythms of family life—Faith was preparing white rice and beef stew, staples of Nigerian cuisine—the women shared the daily hardships they face. Faith expressed frustration over high rental costs and frequent complaints from her landlord regarding noise levels.

For both women and their families, the language barrier also poses a major obstacle; while Faith's daughter speaks proficient Arabic and assists with translation, everyone else struggles with even basic phrases, complicating interactions in schools and public services. The difficulty their children face in integrating into the Moroccan education system remains as a particular concern, as all their classmates speak Arabic. Furthermore, while they have accessed

some support from organizations such as OJA and Caritas, the women questioned what more could be done by others to alleviate their precarious situation. The intimate conversation in Faith's home highlighted the necessity of economic integration for participation in civic and social life, especially for sub-Saharan migrant women.

Discussion

A key theme emerging across all the interviews and site visits is the centrality of socioeconomic stability as a precondition for meaningful civic and political participation among sub-Saharan migrants in Tangier. At DDM, OJA, and Association 100% Mamans, organizational staff consistently emphasized that migrants' immediate priorities center on basic needs, such as housing, employment, and health care. This pattern was particularly salient in the testimonies of Abigail and Faith, who explicitly linked their inability to engage civically to the economic pressures of supporting their families. Similarly, both DDM and OJA staff underscored that while migrants may care deeply about civic issues, basic needs often eclipse participation in formal civic or political spaces. The interviews also revealed that fear of deportation and legal precarity remain structural barriers to civic engagement, a theme echoed by OJA and DDM's staff and the Cameroonian community leader, both of whom highlighted the risks associated with migrants' undocumented status.

Another cross-cutting theme is the significance of community-led and peer-supported initiatives in fostering inclusion and resilience. OJA's reliance on migrant staff members and community outreach, DDM's community relays program, and 100% Mamans' alumni support network all reflect a broader pattern of migrants organizing through informal and semi-formal structures. These models serve not only to build trust within communities that are often marginalized by state structures but also provide critical entry points for leadership development

and advocacy. Furthermore, linguistic barriers, particularly for migrants from predominantly English-speaking countries, surfaced across the interviews as a persistent obstacle to integration, with implications for both social and civic participation. Finally, several participants, including Jacques and staff at OJA, critiqued the dominance of European actors in shaping NGO agendas, suggesting that donor-driven models may limit the scope for grassroots agency and self-determined participation among migrant communities.

Limitations and Future Considerations

This study faced several limitations that shaped both the scope of the research and the depth of insights gathered. The most significant constraint was time, as the research was conducted over the course of one month, during which weekends, public holidays—including International Workers’ Day—and rescheduled interviews reduced the time available for data collection and follow-up conversations. These constraints limited the number of interviews that could be conducted and affected the ability to build long-term rapport with participants, particularly those from vulnerable communities where trust in outside researchers and institutions is already low. Additionally, the language barrier was a notable challenge. The inability to speak Arabic or French substantially narrowed the pool of both NGO staff and migrants who could be engaged directly.

This required deliberate efforts to ensure that the voices captured were not only from predominantly English-speaking migrant communities but also reflected a degree of diversity within the broader sub-Saharan migrant population. However, these efforts were not always successful. At Association 100% Mamans, for instance, only one staff member spoke fluent English, which restricted the perspectives captured to those from the communications unit. This limited access hindered opportunities to engage with other departments, such as the legal team,

which may have provided additional insights into the organization's advocacy strategies and service delivery models.

For future research, it would be valuable to expand the range of case studies to include migrants who are actively engaged in protest movements or other forms of direct political action related to migrant rights and justice. Including such actors would deepen understandings of the ways migrants navigate and challenge the constraints of legal precarity and discrimination. Additionally, more attention should be given to exploring the dynamics of collaboration among NGOs themselves, such as through GTP and other coalitions that play a role in shaping advocacy strategies and service coordination. Where possible, interviews with local and national government officials would further enrich the analysis, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the policy landscape and the ways in which state actors engage—or fail to engage—with migrant communities and the organizations that support them.

Conclusion

This research underscores the complex realities of civic and political participation among sub-Saharan African migrants in Tangier by examining their lived experiences alongside the work of organizations and leaders supporting them. The findings illuminate how migrants' engagement in civic life is shaped not only by legal and institutional barriers but also by socioeconomic constraints, community networks, and informal leadership structures. Migrants often prioritize immediate needs such as employment, housing, and safety over formal civic or political activities. However, this does not imply disengagement from these spheres of influence. Instead, participation is frequently expressed through informal channels, such as community organizing, peer support networks, and participation in programs led by NGOs and other civil society groups.

The study further highlights how organizations like OJA, Association 100% Mamans, and DDM act as crucial intermediaries by providing direct services and amplifying migrant voices and creating pathways for civic engagement. These organizations play a role in bridging the gap between migrants and the state, though the influence of international stakeholders and the dependence on external funding often constrain the scope of their advocacy. These findings underline the need for trust, representation, and accessibility in fostering effective civic participation efforts, particularly among vulnerable migrant communities who experience systemic discrimination and fear of deportation. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics through case studies that focus on migrant-led protest movements, transnational solidarity networks, and cross-organizational collaborations that challenge existing power structures and foster new forms of civic participation.

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