Mashriq & Mahjar 12, no. 2 (2025), 112–135
ISSN 2169-4435

Asma Ben Hadj Hassen

BEYOND TRANSIT: TUNISIA AS IMAGINED, EXPERIENCED, AND NEGOTIATED BY MIGRANT WOMEN FROM WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA[1]

Abstract
This article critically examines spatial categories such as countries of origin, transit, and destination within migration discourse, arguing that these classifications fail to capture the complexity of migrants' trajectories and aspirations. By centering the lived experiences of two sub-Saharan migrant women, Fatou and Christine, the study draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Tunisia and a feminist methodological approach to explore how migrant women navigate non-linear and ambivalent paths shaped by legal precarity, gendered labor, motherhood, and evolving migration policies. For some women migrants, this North African country, which has been undergoing radical political change since 2011, can be seen as a destination for work or study but can also become a place of transit for varying lengths of time and vice versa. Rather than progressing toward Europe or returning home, their journeys reflect constant negotiation, compromise, and strategic adaptation. Mobilizing Camille Schmoll's concept of autonomy in tension as a form of constrained agency enacted under structural vulnerability, the article highlights how migrant women engage in everyday practices of resistance and care within extended periods of uncertainty. I argue that, beyond their simple status as transit or settled migrants, these women are transforming and being transformed by the Tunisian space. It is a space where they embark on a process of learning and self-assertion. By foregrounding their voices, this work contributes to feminist migration studies and offers a grounded critique of the transit paradigm.

خلاصة
تدرس هذه المقالة بشكل نقدي الفئات المكانية مثل بلدان المنشأ والعبور والوجهة في خطاب الهجرة، لأن هذه التصنيفات تفشل في التقاط تعقيد مسارات المهاجرين وتطلعاتهم. من خلال التركيز على التجارب المعيشية لامرأتين مهاجرتين من جنوب الصحراء الكبرى، فاتو وكريستين، تستند الدراسة إلى العمل الميداني الإثنوغرافي في تونس ونهج منهجي نسوي لاستكشاف كيفية تنقل النساء المهاجرات في مسارات غير مباشرة ومتناقضة تشكلها هشاشة الوضع القانوني، والعمل المبني على النوع الاجتماعي، والأمومة، وسياسات الهجرة المتطورة. بالنسبة لبعض المهاجرات، يمكن اعتبار هذا البلد الواقع في شمال إفريقيا، والذي يشهد تغييراً سياسيًا جذريًا منذ عام 2011، وجهة للعمل أو الدراسة، ولكن يمكن أن يصبح أيضًا مكانًا للعبور لفترات زمنية متفاوتة والعكس صحيح. بدلاً من التقدم نحو أوروبا أو العودة إلى الوطن، تعكس رحلاتهن مفاوضات مستمرة وتسويات وتكيفًا استراتيجيًا. توظّف هذه المقالة مفهوم المفكرة كاميل شمول للاستقلالية في ظلّ التوتر كشكل من أشكال الفاعلية المقيّدة

Asma Ben Hadj Hassen is a PhD student in social anthropology at Bayreuth University. Email: Asma.Ben-Hadj-Hassen@uni-bayreuth.de

التي تنشأ في ظلّ الهشاشة الهيكلية، وتُسلّط الضوء على كيفية انخراط النساء المهاجرات في ممارسات يومية من المقاومة والرعاية خلال فترات طويلة من عدم اليقين. وأُجادل بأنّ هؤلاء النساء، بعيداً عن كونهنّ مهاجرات عابرات أو مستقرات، يتحوّلن ويتغيّرن بفعل الفضاء التونسي. فهو فضاء ينطلقن فيه في رحلة تعلّم وتأكيد الذات. ومن خلال إبراز أصواتهنّ، يُسهم هذا العمل في دراسات الهجرة النسوية، ويُقدّم نقداً موضوعياً لنموذج العبور.

INTRODUCTION

As I turn right to enter Mama Grace's hairdressing salon, nestled on the corner of a large private university, a striking sign immediately catches my attention. It spans the width of the salon, making it impossible for pedestrians to miss. At its center is the image of a Black woman adorned with an indigo turban and large, circular earrings. On either side of the sign, "GRACE BEAUTY" is boldly written in capital letters, while beneath, in smaller font, are the various beauty services offered: "pedicure, nails, wigs, hairstyles, and African braids," along with a Facebook page and contact numbers.

This is not my first visit to Grace's salon. She is a tall, slender woman from Côte d'Ivoire who has lived in Tunisia for nine years. However, on this particular Sunday, she had invited me to meet a group of migrant women, as Sundays are their day off, a time when they often gather at her salon to have their hair done, talk, and reconnect. As I approached, I overheard Grace conversing in a blend of French and Tunisian Derija with two Tunisian men, likely the workers who had installed the new sign. Beaming with pride, she welcomed me inside.

Inside, the space was alive with activity. At two large hairdressing stations, clients sat getting their hair braided. A woman waited her turn on a sofa at the far end of the room. Wigs and extensions in every shade were stacked in a corner, and new artificial grass had just been laid along one wall. Before I could sit down, Grace introduced me to the group. The women, in the midst of their animated conversations about family, work, and life in Tunisia, were undisturbed by my presence.

Grace's salon is a gathering place, not only for her fellow Ivorians but also for women from all over West and Central Africa, who share their difficulties, the burdens of daily life, and their

relentless quest for survival. It is a space where, during the long, stifling summer afternoons, I would lose myself in the hubbub of conversations, laughter, teasing, gossip, and complaints.

Just as I was preparing to leave, Christine stepped through the curtain. I had not seen her in years. Once determined to leave Tunisia, she now stood before me to promote an event organized by her association in partnership with an international organization. Christine, formerly undocumented and deeply disillusioned, had become a visible community leader, helping others navigate the same landscape in which she had once struggled. Her transformation, like that of many sub-Saharan migrant women in Tunisia, unsettles conventional frameworks of migration in North Africa.

By following the life trajectories of Christine and another woman, Fatou, this article examines how sub-Saharan women's evolving and often ambivalent relationships with Tunisia challenge dominant categories such as "transit" and "destination." Their complex experiences disrupt the presumed linearity of migration pathways and expose the limits of institutional classifications that seek to fix people in predefined roles. I argue that Tunisia should be understood as a space of continuous negotiation and migration rerouting, neither strictly a point of departure nor a site of settlement. Within this liminal space, migrant women assert agency as they make decisions about mobility or immobility, continually adapting their goals and aspirations in response to shifting constraints.

Since the 1990s, Tunisia has undergone a notable transformation in its migration landscape. While still a country of emigration, it has also become a destination and a hub of circulation for sub-Saharan migrants. Unlike neighboring Algeria and Libya, early waves of sub-Saharan migration to Tunisia primarily consisted of highly skilled individuals, students, civil servants, and professionals. The temporary relocation of the African Development Bank (BAD) to Tunis further reinforced this pattern, drawing many Ivorians and their domestic staff to the capital's peripheries. In his pioneering work on sub-Saharan immigration in Tunisia, Camille Cassarini has demonstrated how this community has established itself, highlighting the factors behind the settlement of the Ivorian community, for whom Tunisia has become an increasingly preferred destination and a site of perceived social success.[2]

The 2011 revolution and subsequent civil war in Libya significantly reshaped these patterns. As Libya descended into conflict, thousands of migrant workers crossed the border and sought refuge in Tunisia, many of them housed temporarily in the Choucha camp.[3]

While some were resettled in third countries or returned to their countries of origin with International Organization for Migration (IOM) assistance, others remained in Tunisia, particularly those whose asylum claims were rejected or who refused resettlement. Many of these individuals, including women, relocated to urban centers such as Tunis, Sfax, and Medenine.[4]

In the aftermath of these shifts, Tunisia became increasingly framed by policymakers, media, and even some academic discourse as a transit country. Yet this label masks a far more complex reality. Sub-Saharan migrants do not necessarily view their trajectories in terms of fixed stages or geopolitical boundaries. They experience Tunisia not as a clear-cut stopover but rather as a space where movement, waiting, and settlement blur into one another. As scholars have shown, the notion of "transit" is shaped by a Eurocentric, destination-oriented logic that often overlooks the social worlds and lived realities of migrants.[5] This is particularly true for women, whose experiences tend to be rendered invisible or secondary in both policy and scholarship.

Although the profile of people on the move is increasingly diverse, the archetypal "transit migrant" continues to be imagined as young, single, male, and unskilled.[6] This narrow framing obscures the realities of sub-Saharan women, who now make up a significant but undercounted share of the migrant population. Precise data remains elusive. The National Institute of Statistics (INS) reports 58,990 foreigners in Tunisia, with approximately 20,000 from sub-Saharan Africa. Other estimates suggest numbers closer to 50,000.[7] According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), around 15,000 people are registered as asylum seekers or refugees.[8] However, the number of women among them remains undocumented. Qualitative research reveals that many women are employed across various sectors, including domestic work, informal trade, care work, and entrepreneurship.[9]

Despite growing attention to migration in Tunisia, the gender dimension remains largely overlooked. When sub-Saharan women do appear in the literature, they are often depicted through narrow frames as victims of trafficking, precarious labor, or gender-based violence. These portrayals, while rooted in real risks, often overlook women's agency, aspirations, and everyday strategies of survival, resistance, and reinvention.[10]

This article builds on and contributes to a growing body of feminist research on gendered migration in North Africa. Notably, Ahlam Chemlali's work has been essential in documenting how migrant women experience Tunisia not only as a space of containment

and immobility but also as one of resistance and continuous movement.[11] My analysis builds upon and extends this framework by focusing on long-term settlement and the evolving subjectivities of women, such as Fatou and Christine, who inhabit Tunisia in nonlinear and negotiated ways.

By centering the narratives of Christine and Fatou, this article contributes to feminist migration studies by offering a gendered and empirically grounded critique of the transit paradigm. While scholars have increasingly challenged its linear and reductive assumptions, few have placed women's lived experiences at the heart of this critique. Drawing on Camille Schmoll's notion of "autonomy in tension," I argue that sub-Saharan migrant women in Tunisia inhabit a suspended space of mobility. In this autonomy, aspiration and immobility are constantly being negotiated.[12]

By "zooming in on individuals' lifeworlds," this text explores the tensions that arise between the expectations of migrants and their actual experiences, what they wished for, and where they found themselves.[13] In doing so, it seeks to show how political categories fail to capture the complexity of decision-making, the aspirations, and the logic of people on the move. By paying attention to the different forms of coping and negotiation, I hope to contribute to a more nuanced and diverse image of sub-Saharan migration in North Africa.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section situates Tunisia within regional and scholarly debates on migration and critiques of the "transit" category. The second presents the feminist ethnographic methodology, including reflections on positionality and the challenges of conducting research in precarious contexts. The third section explores the life histories of Fatou and Christine, offering an in-depth account of how they navigate labor, legality, motherhood, and marginalization. The final section discusses how these cases challenge dominant mobility frameworks and contribute to rethinking migrant agency through the lens of autonomy in tension.

RETHINKING TRANSIT AND GENDER IN TUNISIAN IMMIGRATION

Since the 1990s, the concept of "transit migration" has gained traction in academic, policy, and media discourse, particularly in the context of European border externalization strategies. It was initially used to describe migrants temporarily residing in countries like Tunisia while organizing their onward journey to Europe.[14] This framing often implies a linear movement, from an "origin" to a "destination," with

transit functioning as an intermediary stop, both geographically and temporally.

However, a growing body of literature has critiqued this conceptualization for its Eurocentric and state-centric assumptions. Scholars such as Sylvie Bredeloup and Jocelyne Streiff-Fénart argue that the notion of "transit" reflects more the priorities of European migration management than the realities of migrants themselves.[15] In North Africa, the label has been used to categorize sub-Saharan migrants, particularly those from West and Central Africa, whose actual intentions, experiences, and durations of stay are far more varied. Rather than merely "passing through," many migrants remain in countries like Tunisia for years, often in situations of legal limbo, informal labor, or semi-permanent settlement.[16]

To move beyond these rigid spatial categories, recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of migration trajectories. Scholars argue that mobility is best understood as a fragmented, non-linear, and contingent process.[17] As Joris Schapendonk notes, individual pathways depend not only on migrant agency but also on "social networks, brokering services, helping hands, un/expected encounters and policy interventions."[18] These insights invite a reconceptualization of transit, not as a stage or status but as a socially and politically constructed condition that varies by context.

In Tunisia specifically, scholars like Cassarini have shown that sub-Saharan migrants increasingly arrive not with the intention of reaching Europe but for study, work, or family reunification.[19] Although the figure of the "transit migrant" is typically imagined as young, male, and single, the demographic and experiential realities in Tunisia, and across North Africa, are far more complex. The increasing feminization of migration in the region has not been matched by a corresponding focus on women's experiences in either scholarly or policy literature. When women are mentioned, they are frequently depicted through narrow tropes of vulnerability, particularly as victims of trafficking, sexual violence, or extreme precarity, rather than as complex actors navigating mobility, family, labor, and survival.

Feminist scholars have begun to challenge these omissions. Recent scholarship critically examines the gendered experiences of sub-Saharan migrant women in North Africa, highlighting how migration policies and urban environments intersect to shape their lives. Jane Freedman's work emphasizes how European migration policies generate specific threats for female migrants in Morocco, including sexual violence and exploitation, by creating an environment of insecurity. Inka Stock highlights how motherhood and kinship

obligations shape decisions around mobility and return in countries like Morocco. Far from immobilizing women, these ties often serve as strategic and emotional anchors that guide their choices. Leslie Gross-Wyrtzen's ethnographic research in Morocco reveals that the state's "humane" migration policies, while purportedly prioritizing human rights, have instead expanded the border regime by re-spatializing it into urban centers.[20] This process confines Black migrants, particularly women, to marginalized urban spaces, limiting their mobility and survival options. In Tunisia, Chemlali's study focuses on Ivorian migrant women in Bhar Lazreg and introduces the concept of "gendered stuckness." The term *bouger* (to move) and the phrase *prison à ciel ouvert* (open-air prison) encapsulate the paradox of constant motion without progress, illustrating how EU containment and Tunisian domestic policies create a state of immobility that affects women's agency and survival strategies.[21]

Schmoll's *Les damnées de la mer* offers a compelling framework for understanding how migrant women in the Mediterranean space exercise what she calls "autonomy in tension," a form of constrained agency that emerges in retention centers and which she defines as "the troubled space-time of the migration process between vulnerability and projection towards a better life."[22] Schmoll shows how women adapt, endure, and make meaning in marginal spaces, even as they remain embedded in multiple forms of structural vulnerability. She identifies the body, domestic space, and digital space as key arenas where migrant women negotiate their autonomy. Through what would be considered banal and everyday practices related to beauty, care, and digital connectivity, women create spaces of resistance, navigating the constraints imposed by migration policies. She emphasizes that this autonomy must be understood within the context of power structures and social relations that guide and structure migration and asylum.

This article draws on and extends this feminist literature by situating migrant women's experiences in Tunisia within a broader critique of the transit paradigm. Rather than viewing Tunisia as a temporary stop, I propose to understand it as a liminal space of endurance, negotiation, and partial belonging, where women mobilize multiple, sometimes contradictory strategies to survive, stabilize, or move forward. These strategies, whether working in domestic labor, forming families, or creating community-based initiatives, are not expressions of full autonomy, nor signs of passivity. They are situated responses to overlapping constraints shaped by law, economics, kinship, and gender. By bringing together feminist theory and grounded ethnographic data, this article offers a gendered, bottom-up

critique of the transit framework, highlighting how migrant women in Tunisia navigate mobility not as a route to elsewhere but instead as a space of ongoing, tense negotiation, of self, of place, and of future.

METHODOLOGY

My methodological approach is grounded in feminist ethnography, which emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participants, the importance of reflexivity, and close attention to power dynamics and emotional engagement in the field. Feminist ethnography is not only about studying women; it is about listening to their stories on their own terms, understanding the social structures that shape their lives, and critically reflecting on the position of the researcher.[23] It seeks to "make women's experiences visible" not by speaking for them but by creating space for their voices to be heard and taken seriously.[24] This approach is shaped by a feminist sensibility that insists on recognizing and addressing hierarchies of power particularly those related to gender, race, class, legal status, and other intersecting forms of marginalization.

As a Tunisian researcher, I entered the field with a dual position: both insider and outsider. I shared the cultural, linguistic, and social context of the host society in which my interlocutors lived, but I did not share their national or migration background. This positionality shaped the dynamics of trust, disclosure, and discomfort in our interactions. My participants often addressed me not only as a researcher but also as a Tunisian asking about local racism, xenophobia, or seeking help navigating bureaucratic systems. These moments were ethically complex: I was implicated in the very structures they were confronting, even as I sought to document and critique them.

The process of building trust was neither quick nor linear. Our relationships unfolded over years and through different life stages marked by job changes, births, and increasing legal precarity. I first met Fatou in early 2019 through a well-known figure in the Ivorian community in Tunisia. We exchanged contact information and stayed loosely in touch. My relationship with Christine was more regular and sustained. I met Christine and her husband in 2019 at an informal church where they were praying. I offered to care for their young daughter during the service. Over time, I witnessed her pregnancy, the birth of her second child, her employment in a hotel, and eventually her decision to leave that job. Our relationship lasted until I moved away from the city. Even after that, we kept in contact through WhatsApp, exchanging occasional messages over the years.

When I resumed fieldwork in 2023, I spent time with both women in informal settings, accompanying them to the market, visiting their homes, and sharing conversations over meals. These everyday interactions, often with their children or partners present, created the conditions for deeper, more open dialogue. The interviews themselves were unstructured and open-ended, conducted in French mixed with Tunisian Derija, and took place in domestic spaces shaped by routine interruptions—crying children, cooking, phones ringing—which became part of the ethnographic encounter rather than distractions from it.

Ethical dilemmas were ever-present. Both Christine and Fatou were undocumented at the time of our interviews. I was acutely aware of the risks of exposing their vulnerability through this research. For this reason, I obtained verbal consent after several informal conversations about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any point. I used pseudonyms and changed identifying details to protect their privacy. Family dynamics also posed challenges. In both households, husbands were sometimes present during the interviews. Their presence occasionally limited what the women felt comfortable sharing. I remained attentive to non-verbal cues and always allowed the women to guide the pace and direction of the conversation. The presence of children also shaped the interviews, grounding our discussions in everyday domestic life and care work, and complicating abstract talk of migration, borders, or policy.

The political climate of 2023 further shaped the research. Following a speech by the Tunisian president in February 2023, both women described heightened fear, insomnia, and social isolation. On the evening of 21 February, during a meeting of the National Security Council, President Kais Saied made a statement in which he referred to the "hordes of illegal migrants from sub-Saharan Africa." He argued that "urgent" measures were needed to halt this "incessant flow," which he claimed was leading to "violence and crime." He also asserted that irregular immigration was part of a "criminal enterprise" initiated at the start of the century to alter Tunisia's demographic makeup, turning it into an "exclusively African" country and undermining its "Arab-Muslim" identity. In the wake of the speech, a violent campaign was launched against migrants. Many were arrested, pursued, detained, or deported to the Algerian and Libyan borders by the security forces. The climate of fear led Tunisian employers to dismiss workers and landlords to evict tenants. The African Union condemned the remarks, and countries like Côte d'Ivoire and Benin have started procedures to repatriate their nationals. My conversations

during this period with my interlocutors became more intimate and politically charged as we tried to understand why Tunisia, a country they had lived in for many years, had turned increasingly hostile. These moments blurred the boundaries between research and solidarity. I was no longer simply a researcher documenting their lives. I also became a witness to their resilience and vulnerability in real time.

After transcribing the interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis, focusing on recurring themes in their narratives: movement and immobility; legal liminality; domestic labor and care; and resistance and adaptation. Rather than aiming for generalization, this article theorizes from the particular foregrounding of the subjectivities of two migrant women to illuminate how gendered experiences of migration in Tunisia unsettle dominant categories like "transit" and "destination," and reveal forms of autonomy even in deeply constrained circumstances.

FATOU'S JOURNEY: FROM STUDY TO DOMESTIC WORK, A SEA CROSSING, AND BACK AGAIN

A few days after giving birth to her second child, Fatou invited me to visit her newly rented flat in Sousse, a coastal city in central-eastern Tunisia. The day was oppressively hot. The streets were silent under the weight of the sun; shutters were drawn, windows barricaded. The taxi wound through the outskirts, near the industrial zone, and stopped at a modest home. Fatou welcomed me warmly, her four-year-old daughter nearby and her newborn son asleep.

Fatou is the eldest of six children from Dabou, a town south of the Côte d'Ivoire. She has been responsible for her siblings' education since the death of her father in 2009. She studied computer science to earn a degree of Technicien Supérieur (BTS). While waiting for her final defense and diploma, she learned about Tunisia for the first time from a "brother" already living there with his wife.[25] The family's financial situation was becoming increasingly untenable. Fatou, unwilling to miss the opportunity, opted to forego her defense and diploma. Her cousin told her about an agreement between the Ivorian and Tunisian governments that offers scholarships to cover all expenses. Tunisia has become a "second chance" destination for many African students who cannot gain access to European universities.[26] So Fatou decided to take advantage of this opportunity and pursue a two-year course in hotel management in Tabarka, a popular tourist town in the Jendouba governorate. However, she planned that once she had finished her studies, she would return to Abidjan, where hotels were opening and offering job opportunities.

In 2017, Fatou arrived in Tunis via Tunisia Carthage Airport, the main air gateway for travelers. She did not need a visa because of the special visa regime between her country and Tunisia, which allows Ivorian nationals to stay in the country legally without a visa for up to ninety days. Her cousin paid for her plane ticket. Upon arriving, her initial joy became concern when she learned that her application to the tourism school had been rejected. Her cousin told her she should wait longer to get into the program. However, he offered her a job with a family in Jendouba. The family was seeking someone to care for a Tunisian mother and assist with her medical needs. The job involved collecting the money her children sent her from Europe via the Western Union. In return, she would receive a salary of 450 dinars (USD 143).

Despite the setback, Fatou was encouraged by her cousin's words and accepted the offer. She was especially motivated when she converted her Tunisian dinar salary to the CFA franc. She believed that the salary was good enough to cover her family's expenses and allow her to help her six younger brothers attend school. However, Fatou's job turned out to be more difficult and complex than she had expected. The woman, who lived alone and was bedridden, left Fatou in charge of all her needs: her hygiene, daily personal care, and food. Even though Fatou felt professionally demoted by this first experience, she continued to work for six months without a salary. Doubts crept into her mind. When she asked the woman, she was told that her "brother" had received all the money but had not given it to her. She realized she had been "put under contract" (*mise sous contrat*). In the context of Ivorian immigration, recruitment (placement) involves various actors and is based on the principle of "bringing in"; that is, an intermediary agrees with a Tunisian employer to bring in one of his compatriots to do a job. In return, the agent receives the salary for the first five or six months. As with domestic workers in the Middle East, care work in North Africa has been racialized in recent years, linked to changes in migration. When her six months were up, Fatou returned to the Tunisian capital "sad and depressed because 'my life had been failed, I was under penalty.' "[27] All migrants who overstay their legal stay are fined twenty dinars (around USD 6) weekly. However, because of the difficulties in gaining access to legal residence, most migrants who settle in Tunisia quickly become undocumented and can accumulate exorbitant fines. They can then not leave Tunisian territory or regularize their stay in Tunisia without first paying these fines. Faced with this situation, Fatou abandoned her studies and devoted herself to work under pressure from her family (*ma famille m'appelle*). She became fully involved in domestic work, juggling households, moving between towns, and saving her income. Her experiences working for

Tunisian families have not been without violence, harsh working conditions, racism, and, above all, the feeling of contempt she feels when she tells her friends about her job, which is often "exhausting, tiring, and frowned upon," especially for someone who was a student and likes academic study.[28] Her story complicates the term "transit." Fatou did not arrive with the intention of passing through Tunisia. She planned to study and return to Abidjan. But transit became her condition not by choice but through the closure of legal, educational, and economic options. Her presence in Tunisia was not a transit by design but by exclusion.

The following year, in 2018, Fatou told me, "La mer m'a appelée" (the sea called me).[29] Before that, she did not know that Tunisia was only 150 km away from the Italian island of Lampedusa. Her friends were determined to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, where they hoped there would be no more problems, questions about penalties, or hardships. She paid an Ivorian smuggler DT 3,000 (around USD 961) to make this happen. The smuggler split the money in two, giving half to the Tunisian fisherman who owned the boat and keeping the other half as a commission. On a calm evening in August 2018, the boat set off from Sfax, the second-largest city and primary departure point for boats. The boat had the Tunisian captain and his two colleagues, along with nineteen sub-Saharan migrants. After two hours of sailing, Fatou discovered a hole in the boat's surface, and water was leaking. Panic set in, and a fight broke out between the Tunisian fishermen and the angry young migrants. The migrants accused them of ripping them off, claiming that the boat had been punctured from the start. The boat overturned, and only nine people survived that night. The next day, surrounded by the ship's wreckage, Fatou had the idea of waking up her colleagues and asking everyone to speak up and not remain silent. She wanted people to explain why they had come on this adventure. Some were still crying. The vast, empty sea stretched before them, their stomachs rumbling with hunger. Hope faded with the waves as they were tossed about, adrift, with no land in sight. The horizon was just a black line without any sign of human habitation. Then, a glimmer of hope appeared: a boat breaking through the waves. Relieved and frightened at the same time, Fatou could not believe her eyes. A Tunisian coastguard boat intercepted their boat and took them to the nearest port. Since the introduction of the Schengen space and the restriction of opportunities for regular migration to Europe, the Mediterranean has been transformed from a mythical and historical space of connection into the "highest wall in the world," a border zone into a carceral seascape.[30] As in Fatou's case, the crossing can be dangerous and precarious. Many factors come into play, such as the

quality of the boat, the skipper's skills, the weather conditions, the provisions available, and so on. In this case, they were welcomed by the local population. During interception operations, navy officers could resort to violence. Fatou reports that the guards were "nice" to them and tried to calm them down. At the port, the survivors were met by IOM staff, who recorded their arrival and asked them a few questions. As her health deteriorated, Fatou was transferred to a hospital in Sfax for treatment.

Months later, Fatou returned to Sousse, her former home, and resumed her search for work. She still remembers the incident with intense emotions but considers herself lucky to have survived. When we met, she frequently checked her Facebook profile for news of her friends and acquaintances who had just embarked on a boat journey to Italy. Social media channels have become a platform where people share job opportunities, advertise products that have just arrived from their home country, post announcements about boat crossings, celebrate arrivals, mourn shipwrecks, and search for missing people. It took some time for Fatou to recover from the traumatic experience.

Even though many migrants attempt the crossing several times, Fatou decided to forget about the idea of crossing. She explained that "God has already spoken to me. I will not be stubborn anymore. Never again. Here are the papers you need."[31] The young woman took the first failed attempt as a divine message that she would accept "her destiny" and would no longer insist on going to Europe. As a form of reconciliation with this new decision and acceptance, she resumed her work as a housekeeper. She was hired by a Franco-Tunisian couple as a nanny and housekeeper. At a friend's birthday party that same year, she met the man who would become her husband. He was a migrant from Central Africa who had come to Tunisia before her to study catering and hotel management. After graduating, he got a job in a cake factory. Unlike Fatou, who is in an irregular situation, her husband has a temporary residence permit. To get a residence permit in Tunisia, migrants need to have a work contract or be enrolled in an educational institution. However, to get a contract, they first need a valid residence permit. This rigid legal framework, coupled with a securitarian approach to immigration, leaves many sub-Saharan migrants in precarious legal limbo, facing the constant threat of detention and deportation.[32]

Marriage has brought stability to Fatou. A year after her wedding, she gave birth to her first daughter. Her life changed: she was no longer a single student but a mother. She describes this change: "I have become very protective," she confides. "I do not make rash

decisions; I think things through."[33] Fatou's new life as a mother has changed her personality, perceptions, and plans. Fatou cannot be impulsive now that she is a mother. For her, if a migrant mother decides to take the boat to Europe, she must send her children back home. The situation of sub-Saharan migrant mothers in North Africa is complex. As Inka Stock has shown in the case of African migrant mothers in Morocco, motherhood shapes the migratory experience of these women; it can be a motivation to move and a source of immobility.[34]

Stock has also shown that having children conditions the decision to leave for Europe and return home. Mothers with children, especially those born from mixed couples or along the migration routes and in transit countries, are afraid to return home because of the stigma attached. However, Fatou told me that she had seriously considered returning to Côte d'Ivoire at the beginning of the summer of 2023 and had even tried to contact the IOM to sign up for the voluntary return program. But the desire to pack her bags did not come without reason. She had been thinking about it since the Tunisian president's speech.

> I want to see if I can go back. I decided to contact IOM. But my husband talked me out of it. He told me it was not a solution. We are still thinking about it; we have children. I don't know if we will find a school, I am afraid. Most of the sub-Saharan have gone to Italy or the Ivory Coast. Many have also died in the water. It is a bit complicated. We are looking at what projects we can set up.[35]

Fatou explores the possibilities that lie ahead. She is thinking about her children's future if she stays in Tunisia. The right to education is guaranteed to all children without exception, but there are barriers such as language. She also points out that the president's anti-immigrant rhetoric is accelerating many migrants' plans to cross the Mediterranean, while others have decided to return home. We can see that decisions are far from straightforward and are the result of negotiations involving other members of the family or community.

Fatou's experience challenges simplistic ideas about the linearity of migratory routes and the role of Tunisia in migrants' imaginations. Her original plan was to continue her studies abroad, which would have enabled her to find a decent job in her own country. Based on the existing channels between Côte d'Ivoire and Tunisia, she left to temporarily settle in the North African country, complete her

studies, and return to Abidjan—her plan for the future. Tunisia was part of an ambition to improve her familial and economic situation, an aspiration for self-growth and a desire for social mobility by seizing opportunities elsewhere. Europe was not a destination for her at this stage. She said:

> I have a husband, two children and a roof over my head. If I were allowed to finish my degree in computer science or hotel management, I would have a diploma in my pocket. I'm versatile; I don't have a fixed idea, and I must adapt.[36]

CHRISTINE'S JOURNEY: FROM TRANSIT MIGRANT TO COMMUNITY ENTREPRENEUR

I first met Christine, a Cameroonian woman, in 2020 at an evangelical church in Tunis. At the time, she was angry and disoriented, trapped without a residence permit, work, or a way forward. Tunisia, meant to be a stop on her journey to Europe, had instead become what she called "an open-air prison."[37] Today, Christine is the founder of an informal association supporting migrant women. Her transformation from frustrated migrant to community leader illustrates a gendered and nonlinear migration experience that defies simplistic understandings of "transit."

Christine's journey began in 2016, after she completed her degree in French literature. Confronted with her family's difficult financial situation, she decided to leave academia and seek employment in the job market. In 2016 she took a job in a restaurant but soon reconsidered her decision after receiving encouragement from a friend in Dubai. Her friend promised to help her find work in the emirate, which Christine viewed as a "paradise of wealth."[38] With this support, Christine secured a tourist visa and traveled to Dubai, hoping to seize the opportunity.

Upon her arrival, Christine was hired by an Emirati family, where she shared household duties with an Ethiopian woman. While the Ethiopian woman handled the cooking, Christine's role was to clean the large house. "The work never ended; we started at 5:30 a.m. and finished at 2 a.m."[39] The harsh conditions and mistreatment led Christine to leave the family and take another job with an Egyptian family. In this new role, she performed household chores and cared for a three-year-old autistic girl. Although the woman of the house was kind to her, Christine still felt psychologically uncomfortable despite the attractive pay.

During a holiday in Cameroon, Christine decided not to return to Dubai. "I was exhausted; I wanted to stay in the country and return to my job in the restaurant," she recalled.[40] However, her mother insisted that there were better opportunities abroad and persuaded her to continue seeking work elsewhere. Initially preferring to travel to Europe, Christine was eventually directed by a friend of her older sister to potential job opportunities in Cyprus. To reach Cyprus, however, she would need to pass through Tunisia, a country she had never heard of and initially viewed unfavorably. Yet, driven by her desire to support her family financially, she decided to try her luck in Tunisia. Her sister's friend, who is, in fact, an intermediary woman who organizes trips between Tunisia and Cameroon, promised to assist her in obtaining the necessary papers for her journey. The cost for the trip was three thousand dinars (USD 1,000), with Christine paying an initial instalment of fifteen hundred dinars. The woman arranged for Christine to acquire student papers, which were used to secure a visa.

While the role of the facilitator or broker is still strongly characterized by the male figure, I have met women brokers in Tunisia. These women have lived in Tunisia for a long time, which has enabled them to master the Tunisian context, build up their address books, and accumulate migration capital. This capital includes strong social networks and connections with Tunisian intermediaries and employers. All these resources allow them to navigate between Tunisia and their country of origin and to engage in transnational commercial activities to bring in people and goods.

In 2018, Christine arrived at Tunis-Carthage Airport, where she, along with other migrants, was met by an acquaintance of the intermediary woman who had facilitated her journey. This person took them to an apartment in Tunis. Upon arrival, Christine inquired about her planned trip to Cyprus, only to be informed that there was no such trip and that her journey had ended in Tunisia. Among the other Cameroonians in the apartment was Franck, who would later become Christine's husband. Franck, a talented footballer, dreamed of becoming a professional player in Europe. However, like Christine, he soon realized that Europe was an elusive ideal.

Despite the shock of her circumstances, Christine found comfort in her fellow compatriots' presence. Although she had initially wanted to return to Cameroon, her family urged her to stay and wait for better opportunities. They sent her money to help sustain her until she could find work. A few weeks after her arrival, Christine secured a job as a receptionist in a café, followed by a position as a dishwasher in a hotel.

Christine and her husband eventually settled in one of Tunisia's coastal towns, where she took on various odd jobs to support her small family. However, after the birth of her second child, she lost her position at the hotel, which marked the beginning of a period of frustration and disappointment. The challenging economic conditions, combined with her deteriorating health, prompted her to reflect on her experiences as a woman in Tunisia. During this time of introspection, Christine made a decisive choice: she would no longer work as a dishwasher or cleaner.

Christine embarked on her entrepreneurial journey, seeking funding from a European development agency to launch her nursery for migrant children. Her application was successful and she received the first installment of funds. In 2023, after our meeting at Grace's salon, Christine invited me to visit her rented house. She had converted one floor into a daycare for migrant children and made her home on the other floor. Despite the challenges posed by the complex administrative procedures in Tunisia, Christine spoke proudly of the support she had received from local officials, including those from the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Employment and the municipality, who assisted her in navigating these bureaucratic hurdles.

Before establishing her daycare, Christine had already become a prominent figure in migrant activism, earning the respect of the Cameroonian and broader migrant communities, where she was regarded as a leader. She founded an association dedicated to the rights of migrant women. While the association remains informal in terms of its administrative structure, Christine's influence has grown, and she is frequently approached by local institutions, municipalities, associations, private universities, international organizations, the media, and researchers. The association, established in 2020, focuses on "the well-being of migrant women" through "social integration."[41] It is also active within the Cameroonian and evangelical communities, maintaining strong connections with migrants. Christine has participated in various training courses and workshops aimed at empowering migrants.

The emergence of a management infrastructure for African migration has paralleled Tunisia's rise as a country of immigration. This development, fostered by the post-revolution political and democratic transition, has brought migration into the focus of various actors, including municipalities and local associations, with support from the IOM and European funding agencies. Christine has capitalized on this new landscape of civil society, meeting new people and seizing the opportunities it offers. Through her active engagement,

she has raised her profile and distinguished herself within her community.

Within a few months, her association went from simply taking part in activities to officially partnering with other organizations. Because of this new status, Christine was invited to attend events and training courses focused on migrants' rights and entrepreneurship. Her role is to act as an intermediary between these organizations and the migrants. In this dynamic of migration management, community association leaders such as Christine provide the link and become the spokespeople for the voiceless. Christine's profile also embodies a double symbol: that of the migrant and that of the woman. She describes her journey as a "success story" and herself as an "empowered woman." She calls on migrants to avoid "clandestine migration" and to take the initiative to integrate into Tunisian society, which she thanks "for the opportunity to live and do business."[42] Although this role has given a new meaning to her migration, it has had little impact on her administrative and material situation: she does not have a residence permit and she still awaits a positive response for her asylum application with the UNHCR. When her father died, she was unable to return to Douala to say goodbye to him. She was turned back at Tunis airport because she had to pay a fine for being in the country illegally.

DISCUSSION

Like Fatou's case, Christine's story further complicates the idea of transit where Tunisia, originally intended as a place of transit, becomes a place of settlement. Meeting her husband marks a decisive turning point, adding to the family's pressure to see emigration as more than an individual project. Tunisia, once seen as a place that was "not very favorable," had become a place where it was possible to live thanks to love.[43] Her small family has grown to include three children, and her desire to travel has gradually diminished. Her life is not without tension and stress because of her role as a mother and her commitment to community work.

Fatou and Christine both benefited from these existing infrastructures of mobility, yet Tunisia was never their intended destination. Christine hoped to continue her journey to Europe via Cyprus; Fatou planned to study in Tunisia and return home. Instead, both found themselves immobilized, not by choice but through legal restrictions, gendered labor expectations, and family obligations. Their stories reveal how the notion of "transit" is often less a phase chosen by migrants and more a condition imposed by structural forces.

Migration studies often rely on push-pull models to explain departure, but such frameworks fall short in capturing the complexity of these two women's stories. Their narratives reveal a complex interplay of motives: moral duty, economic necessity, and personal aspiration. Family figures prominently, both as a source of support and as a force of pressure and sacrifice. Christine's migration was initiated by her mother and redirected by her sister's friend; Fatou was driven by economic responsibility for her siblings and the shame of unfinished studies. In both cases, migration is shaped by asymmetrical gender dynamics that frame mobility as obligation and self-denial.

Yet both women also pursue individual aspirations, for dignity, achievement, or reinvention. Fatou, despite being a respected domestic worker, internalizes her exit from education as failure. Christine presents herself as a leader, curating a narrative of transformation, even as she navigates daily marginality. My interlocutors seldom use terms such as "transit," "destination," or "passage." Instead, they use emic words like "adventure" to describe and give sense to their journey. I join Sebastien Bachelet, who emphasized that migrants from West and Central Africa in Morocco "seek to improve their lives ('being comfortable') rather than reach a specific location."[44] They are not necessarily aiming for a specific destination, such as Europe. On the contrary, their primary objective is to improve their general living conditions and quality of life. This implies they seek economic progress and personal well-being opportunities rather than a fixed geographical destination. The migration project is not a static process but rather one that is subject to constant adaptation, adjustment, and negotiation, where places are more than just geographic points of passage.

Tunisia, in these accounts, emerges as a place of paradox: exclusion and belonging, precarity and possibility. It resists easy classification as either a place of transit or of settlement. Instead, I propose thinking of Tunisia as a space shaped by what Schmoll describes as autonomy in tension. Fatou and Christine live in an extended present shaped by uncertainty, blocked pathways, and social insecurity. Nevertheless, within this ambiguity, they attempt to construct meaning and open possibilities. Fatou describes "adaptability"; Christine speaks of becoming "tough and mature."[45] These are repertoires of coping and resistance, tools that allow them to endure, improvise, and reimagine their place in an unstable environment.

The two women have reoriented their lives within a space that was originally meant to be temporary. For Christine, transit was imposed through deception. For Fatou, it was the product of

institutional abandonment and legal exclusion. They still feel that they have not reached a final destination. However, they have begun to reshape their goals, identities, and relationships in response to the realities of a space meant to be provisional. At the heart of these transformations is a persistent form of agency, which can be understood as autonomy in tension. Fatou and Christine do not claim complete control over their circumstances, yet they act with care, intention, and develop a *savoir-circuler* within the limits they face. Their agency is expressed not only in big decisions but in small, daily negotiations: managing work, raising children, and leading associations.

Their stories also expand our understanding of the spaces where this autonomy unfolds. The body, the domestic sphere, and the digital world all serve as arenas of constraint and expression. Fatou's body is at once overworked and endangered, first through care labor and then through the failed sea crossing, yet it also becomes a site of moral reckoning and survival. Christine's domestic space, transformed into a nursery, becomes both a family home and a community institution. Both women use social media to construct visibility and maintain moral credibility, whether by posting achievements or staying informed about dangerous crossings.

But the tension in their autonomy is not confined to physical or digital spaces. It stretches across time, law, relationships, and selfhood. Both women reconfigure their timelines in response to blocked futures: Fatou turns away from the sea after nearly drowning and reimagines stability as a form of progress. At the same time, Christine transforms what was meant to be a layover into a long-term project. Their legal status, or lack thereof, does not entirely immobilize them. Instead, they navigate the constraints of illegality with a kind of strategic pragmatism, engaging with institutions, applying for asylum, and seeking recognition, even as they remain invisible on paper. In these legal gray zones, they find ways to move, organize, and work.

Neither woman makes decisions alone. Their choices are shaped through constant negotiation, with husbands, children, sisters, pastors, and friends. Relational bonds are not only burdens; they are also frameworks of support, accountability, and moral responsibility. In every step, their autonomy is filtered through care.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined the life trajectories of two West African migrant women, Fatou and Christine, whose experiences in Tunisia

defy dominant narratives of linear migration. Their stories reveal how Tunisia, rather than functioning as a mere space of transit or a destination in the classical sense, becomes a site of suspended mobility, negotiation, and constrained possibility. Through their everyday practices of care, adaptation, and claim-making, Fatou and Christine transform a place of exclusion into one of partial belonging.

These women's experiences challenge the Eurocentric and gender-blind assumptions embedded in the transit paradigm. While official discourse often reduces Tunisia to a staging ground en route to Europe, the lived realities of migrant women show that "transit" is not a fixed phase; it is a condition imposed through legal precarity, border externalization, and systemic neglect. By foregrounding their voices, this article contributes to feminist migration studies by theorizing "autonomy in tension": a mode of agency exercised not in the absence of constraint, but through navigating care work, motherhood, insecurity, and moral responsibility under conditions of legal and social liminality.

This complex and nuanced reality stands in stark contrast to the current trajectory of migration governance in the region. In July 2023, the European Union and Tunisia signed a so-called "strategic" memorandum of understanding, focused on curbing so-called "illegal" migration. The agreement provides financial and technical assistance to the Tunisian coastguard, including patrol boats, drones, radars, and surveillance infrastructure. Framed as a solution to both migration control and Tunisia's economic crisis, the memorandum has drawn sharp criticism from civil society organizations for exacerbating migrant vulnerability.

For many, the consequences are already visible: intercepted at sea, unable to regularize their status, and barred from returning home due to unaffordable fines, increasing numbers of migrants find themselves trapped in an ever-deepening state of limbo. Tunisia becomes a space of immobilization, where time stretches indefinitely, rights are deferred, and life unfolds in prolonged uncertainty.

By tracing Fatou's and Christine's lived experiences, this article makes visible the ethical and political stakes of how we understand and categorize migrant lives. It calls for a rethinking of migration as a process of constant negotiation, shaped by gender, legality, family, and the shifting architecture of border enforcement. In March 2025, Fatou returned to Abidjan to start a "new life" after spending many years in Tunisia. Christine, by contrast, remains in Tunisia. Her husband was arrested and detained by Tunisian authorities, but thanks to her

community network, she was able to mobilize a lawyer from a local organization and secure his release from detention.

NOTES

[1] I am deeply grateful to my interlocutors, whose generosity, insights, and trust made this research possible. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive feedback, which greatly enriched this article. My sincere thanks go to the members of the Lifewords in Crisis colloquium, organized by Professor Andrea Behrends, for their valuable input. This research was supported by funding from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS).

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[36] Fatou, interview by author, Sousse, Tunisia, July 2023.

[37] Christine is not the only one to describe the situation in these terms. Scholars have also used the term "open-air prison" to characterize this space. See Chemlali, "Treading Water in Transit," 5214.Chemlali.

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