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Well-being amid (im)mobility struggles: Youth's experiences in Casamance, Senegal

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Background Large numbers of young people worldwide, especially in the Global South, wish to migrate but lack the capacity to do so, with potentially detrimental consequences for their well-being and mental health. Termed 'involuntary immobility', this phenomenon is numerically larger than migration, but remains for now a largely underexplored area of research. Focusing on young Senegalese living in Casamance, this paper contributes to the limited literature on the implications of immobility for subjective well-being. It does so by (i) considering different degrees and types of involuntary immobility and their intersections, (ii) laying out the implications of (interacting) social and spatial immobilities for well-being with particular attention to youth's agency in navigating a lack of capabilities, and (iii) by accounting for heterogenous experiences taking a gendered approach.

Methods For this study, 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18- to 39-year-olds in Ziguinchor region, recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Thematic analysis was employed on verbatim transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews.

Results Our study reveals a nuanced reality where aspirations to (temporarily) move abroad coexist with aspirations to stay in Casamance. Participants' life aspirations and overarching projects clash, however, both with a lack of capabilities to move abroad and to enact these locally. This pervasive immobility decreases life satisfaction and generates negative emotions, such as stress, anxiety, discouragement, and distress. Despite these obstacles, our findings also underscore the agency and resourcefulness displayed by the youth as they navigate their limited control over life choices and paths.

Conclusions Involuntary *spatial* immobility exacerbates the dominant experience of *social* immobility, magnifying its effect on youth's well-being, revealing a previously unacknowledged phenomenon. Our findings further emphasize the pressing need for a more cohesive alignment between migration policies and information campaigns on one hand and the real experiences and challenges encountered by their intended audience on the other.

Keywords Immobility, Aspirations, Well-being, Resourcefulness, Casamance, Senegal

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Introduction

The implications of migration for health are increasingly documented, with a growing body of research illustrating the inequities that migrants face in accessing healthcare [1, 2], which frequently results in deteriorating health in destination or transit countries [3–7]. International mobility concerns around 281 million people [8], yet many more would like to emigrate but are not able to do so. While 16% of adults expressed a desire to permanently migrate to another country if given the opportunity [9], the current global reality reveals that only 3.6% of the world population resides outside their country of birth. The majority of aspiring migrants, hence, are prevented from realizing their desire, a phenomenon that Carling [10] termed ‘involuntary immobility’. Despite being the numerically larger phenomenon, its implications remain largely unexplored.

This paper aims to address this gap by examining how unfulfilled (migration) aspirations and involuntary immobility might affect subjective well-being and mental health. We thus focus on the earliest stages of migration - the formation of migration aspirations within the context of broader life aspirations – whose implications for health, particularly mental health, have, to our knowledge, rarely been studied. We explore these questions in the context of West Africa, a region marked by high aspirations for migration to the Global North but significant restrictions on international travel, expecting widespread involuntary immobility as a result. More specifically, we zoom in on the region of Casamance, in the south of Senegal, where a record-high 45% of the youth aspires to migrate permanently abroad [9]. In comparison, data from the 2013 and 2023 population census reports estimate that only 1.2% and 0.9% of the population, respectively, emigrated in the five years prior to each census, with approximately two-thirds of these emigrants being young people and mainly heading towards Europe. Notably, females represent a higher share of emigrants than males until the age of 34 [11, 12].¹

Culture of migration and involuntary immobility

In the simplest terms, researchers have described migration aspirations as referring to the belief that migration is preferable to staying [16, 17]. In contexts as diverse as Mexico [18], India [19], or Senegal [20], among others, a ‘culture of migration’ [21] has taken root, glorifying a livelihood centered on migration over locally oriented, sedentary lifestyles and aspirations (like farming or

schooling). This trend is largely bolstered by the dearth of income-generating opportunities within local economies. In such contexts, many young people become virtually obsessed with moving abroad despite information campaigns and testimonies of return migrants having faced terrible journeys [22, 23].

Anthropologists have gone even further to argue that the object of migration aspirations becomes a matter of personhood or identity (i.e. migration is not about where you are, but who you are) [24]. In patriarchal contexts, men, especially, expect and are expected to migrate to provide for their families. The pressure to achieve material success, mainly through international migration, has led scholars to argue that migration represents a marker of the ‘transition to manhood’ [18], the experience that ‘turns a boy into a man’ [25]. This experience not only holds cultural significance but also facilitates men’s integration into the matrimonial market upon their return, symbolizing the validation of their worth as migrants. Taking part in the *voyage* can hence define the status of young people in the collective imagination, feeding a binary and antinomic vision of society: either you are a migrant and thus a Very Important Person (VIP), or you’re a nobody [26].

Yet, in the same contexts where migration is a deeply engrained cultural norm conditioning transition to adulthood and providing important means in the quest for empowerment, international mobility is highly restricted, what Kleist and Thorsen [27] label a ‘mobility paradox’. In recent decades, regular migration (to the Global North) has grown increasingly challenging for citizens of low-income countries, owing to progressively restrictive and selective migration policies alongside escalating socio-economic inequalities [27]. High aspirations to migrate combined with increasing legal and financial barriers to migration create a situation of involuntary immobility [10], which might be particularly harmful in societies with a long tradition of emigration to the Global North and “is likely to sustain or even deepen inequalities within origin societies” [28] as well as between countries, reinforcing the dominance of the Global North.

Consequences of involuntary immobility for subjective well-being and mental health

Having a desire to migrate, which never gets realized, might affect people’s personal aspirations, behavior, subjective well-being and mental health [29]. People who have their hopes set on leaving might be less likely to invest in resources for local livelihoods or locally relevant skills. Such involuntary immobility may also lead to negative human development (psychological, physical) outcomes not only for individuals and households but also for entire communities by preventing broader economic and social change [29].

¹ Note that these numbers are likely to underestimate true emigration rates as they do not account for irregular emigration due to a lack of reliable data. The data collected on migratory routes (Atlantic and Sahelian with arrivals in transit countries, pushbacks, mortality), however, show that the desire to emigrate at all costs remains strong despite awareness campaigns [13], and exacerbated by the fishing crisis [14, 15].

These ideas are in line with the work of Sen [30], who emphasizes the importance of enhancing people's *capabilities* for improving their well-being: empowering them with the freedom to choose and pursue their goals, and enabling them to function in ways they value. In contrast, the absence of opportunities and resources necessary for individuals to live lives they value – termed *capability deprivation* – is highly detrimental to their well-being. Expanding upon Sen's work, de Haas [28] highlights the significance of the *freedom of mobility*, understood as the “ability to decide where to live, including the option to stay at home” [28], as central to individuals' well-being.

However, apart from a few case studies and ethnographic accounts - e.g. [31–35], these dynamics remain largely underexplored empirically. Conrad-Suso [36] documents pervasive feelings of hopelessness and despair among young Gambian men who were unable to migrate or whose attempts were unsuccessful. They felt stigmatized as ‘lazy and cowardly’ with dire consequences on their day-to-day life: unable to work or to function, they would often only sit at local cafés, something referred to locally as having the ‘nerves syndrome’ [32, 37]. Similarly, Jónsson [35] draws on the concept of a ‘generation-in-waiting’ to refer to the Soninke youth in Mali “awaiting the passage to adulthood that was traditionally secured by migration”, but that is now blocked for many. Involuntary immobility thus complicates these young men's construction of meaningful livelihoods and social identities.²

Limitations of prior work and present contributions

This paper aims to contribute to the still limited literature on the implications of immobility for subjective well-being from the perspective of young Senegalese living in Casamance. In doing so, we aim to extend and nuance prior work in three main ways.

Broadening the lens to encompass various degrees and types of immobility

While innovative in many ways, the work discussed above suffers from several limitations. First, it predominantly sees migration aspirations as a binary and unequivocal state. Most studies assume that people either (firmly) aspire to migrate or not. This binary thinking is inadequate for capturing the grey zone in between, as Zickgraf [39] noted with respect to the distinction between migrants and non-migrants. On the one hand, there is variation in the *degree of firmness* of migration aspirations: these should be better understood as existing along a spectrum [40]. On the other hand, aspiring to move abroad may coexist with aspiring to stay and imagining a

good life locally. This latter point illustrates the often *conflicted nature* of (migration) aspirations [41, 42].

Second, previous literature often takes a narrow perspective on involuntary immobility, ignoring its social component. This disproportionate focus on unfulfilled *migration* aspirations and involuntary *spatial* mobility diverts attention from another form of immobility with important consequences for subjective well-being: social immobility. Many contexts characterized by high levels of migration aspirations, such as sub-Saharan African (SSA) societies, are also struggling with economic decline, weak job creation, high unemployment, strained educational systems, and soaring social and territorial inequalities [43]. These challenges are compounded by high demographic growth rates - over +2.9% in Senegal, with a mean age of 19 according to the latest Senegalese Census of 2023 [44] - a demographic trend that many SSA countries have yet to translate into significant socio-economic advancements.

In this context, youth face constrained economic and social prospects for transitioning into social adulthood - such as employment, marriage, family establishment, and provision for their families and elders - underscoring the persistent limitations in opportunities in the region [44–46]. Meeting these culturally-defined obligations is, however, a key part of becoming a respectable adult, or, in short, ‘somebody’ [47, 48]. Honwana [49] uses the notion of ‘waitthood’ to refer to the precarious state of waiting for adulthood, a status increasingly unattainable to a large share of young people in Africa. The frustration, boredom, hopelessness, and even despair that accompany these experiences of social immobility are increasingly documented [49–53]. In such a context where traditional pathways to a successful future, such as via higher education, seem to be blocked, international migration offers youth an alternative means for social becoming [45, 54]. As international migration is increasingly unavailable, it becomes urgent to examine how the *intersection* of both *spatial* and *social* involuntary immobility shapes youth's well-being and mental health.

In this paper, we extend prior work by broadening our perspective to encompass different *degrees* and *types* of involuntary immobility, as well as their *intersection*. Acknowledging the non-binary nature of (im)mobility aspirations, we do not exclusively focus on the most extreme cases of unequivocally firm migration aspirations. Furthermore, we recognize the need to embed considerations of involuntary spatial immobility within broader experiences of social immobility, and thus study how the intersection of these two experiences shapes mental well-being.

² An emerging literature on those stuck in transit or endlessly awaiting decisions on their asylum application in destination countries similarly point to negative mental well-being consequences [38].

Acknowledging the creative agency of youth in navigating intersecting immobilities

A third limitation of most previous work is underestimating youth's creative potential and agency in striving to overcome immobility. A large span of the literature has so far portrayed an entire generation of youth as a passive generation-in-waiting, as victims of a postcolonial and neoliberal geo-political order that denies them agency [45, 55]. An exclusive focus on the structural mechanisms creating involuntary immobility and on its negative (psycho-social) consequences, such as hopelessness and discouragement, overlooks youth's creative potential and resilience in navigating different forms of immobility. As Ungruhe and Esson [45] also argue, concepts such as waithood "speak of and for youth, without taking their explicit engagement with the future into account." Instead, their study focuses on the creative strategies West African men deploy for enacting social becoming, such as through professional football. Similarly, Ceesay [33] shows how involuntarily immobile young Gambian men take advantage of the resources and opportunities provided by the tourism sector and the development of ICTs (Information and communication technologies) to develop new informal economic activities such as beach or cyber hustling. While acknowledging the influence of macro-level structural forces, Katz [56] delineates in this regard three distinct forms of agency – i.e. resilience, reworking, and resistance - to understand youth's responses to their marginalization and precarious conditions.

Our paper responds to calls for more approaches that take into account the "active role of youths in engaging with and shaping means and pathways of social becoming" [45]. In particular, we explore youth's wellbeing and agency, through their own ideas, visions and actions towards overcoming their lack of capability. While also recognizing the constraining force of macro-level structures, our examination deliberately focuses on youth's individual responses to their marginalization, drawing upon Katz's identified forms of agency for deeper insight.

Examining how experiences of immobility are gendered

A fourth limitation of existing work is that it almost exclusively focuses on male experiences of involuntary immobility - exceptions include [34, 41]. In patriarchal contexts such as West Africa, it is mainly men who expect and are expected to emigrate, and they still very much dominate emigration flows [57]. Men are also expected to be the main, even sole, economic providers for their families. Yet, in a multiethnic and multicultural context such as Senegal, with certain ethnic groups being matrilineal, whereas others are only more recently patriarchal, the reality is much more nuanced [58]. Furthermore, though less studied, even in patriarchal societies,

women have long been economically active - both to increase their own personal revenues and to contribute to the household. The independent migration of women is on the rise [58] and is a way to increase access to productive assets (such as land, information, finance, and education) and economic opportunities to escape patriarchal social structures and improve their autonomy and status [59]. Thus, migration aspirations should be analyzed as gendered desires to embody the figure of the migrant [60]. Overlooking women's perspectives on and lived experiences of involuntary immobility is, therefore, an important omission.

In this paper, we extend previous research by exploring the ways in which experiences of and reactions to involuntary immobility may be gendered.

Methods

Study design and Senegalese context

To assess the potential well-being implications of immobilities, we adopt a qualitative approach based on grounded theory [61]. An iterative methodology was applied through two rounds of fieldwork in the Summer and Fall of 2022. An explorative visit and discussions with local experts in Dakar, Thiès, Louga, and Saint-Louis informed the choice of Casamance for the systematic data collection. The methodology is detailed further in Supplementary Material 1 following the COREQ (Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research) checklist [62].

Between 2014 and 2018, Senegal recorded among the highest levels of economic growth in Africa, consistently above 6% per year [63]. Despite a growth slowdown following the COVID-19 pandemic and Ukraine's invasion by Russia, Senegal continues to be among the most stable and strongest growing economies in sub-Saharan Africa [64, 65]. Yet, the country has a relatively low employment-to-population ratio and high Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) rates amongst the young, as well as substantial gender gaps [66]. The Human Development Index for Senegal stood at 0.511 in 2021, ranking 170th out of 191 countries [67]. These development features are embedded in an expanding demographic context: with its young population, Senegal exhibits a high dependency ratio and fertility rates conducive to fostering population growth [67, 68].

Up to the 1970s, Senegal was mostly a country of immigration, while emigration flows were mainly intracontinental. Since the 1980s, Senegal has notably transitioned into a country marked by emigration, with a significant surge in flows directed towards Western destinations. In West Africa, in particular, migratory systems and frameworks were established within the historical context and legacy of colonization. As such, aspired destinations may reflect this past while not always matched with

preferential migration policies for citizens from former colonies, which may, in turn and along other factors, lead to the geographical diversification of migration trends [69]. The prevalent aspiration for migration towards the Global North [70] indicates a deeply ingrained ‘culture of migration’ within Senegal. Increasing migration restrictions and national campaigns aimed at discouraging potential candidates from migrating have made (legal) migration to Europe and North America increasingly difficult. Yet irregular, boat migration continues unabated to the resounding slogan *Barca ou Barsaq* (Barcelona or death) [71].

Geographically isolated from the rest of Senegal by the Gambia enclave, Casamance witnessed the emergence and growth of the separatist Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) in 1982. This movement, persisting to this day, remains a source of ongoing political instability in the region. Moreover, despite a rich ecosystem and fertile soil (hence its surname, ‘Grenier du Sénégal’), Casamance has the highest incidence of poverty across the country [44]. Given the notably challenging economic and social circumstances, particularly impacting the youth in this area, along with ongoing political instability, many view emigration as the most viable pathway to success, despite the inherent risks involved [72].

Although the Soninke, the predominant ethnic group in Casamance, were among the earliest to depart from Senegal [73], international migration among the Casamançais remains understudied. Existing scholarly attention has primarily centered on the migrations of the Murid Brotherhood and the Wolof, the primary religious and, respectively, ethnic groups in Senegal, originating from the Senegal River Valley and the Cape Verde peninsula of Dakar [74]. However, with tightening migration controls in these traditional emigration zones, there has been a noticeable rise in the visibility of migration from Casamance, evident in the increased use of ‘pateras’ – wooden fishing boats – departing directly from the region [74].

Ethics and research team

Before the field visits, ethics approval was granted from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (main affiliation of the first author AD).

The field team was composed of AD, a French national, PhD student in Economics and Health Sciences at a Belgian university, and research assistant (RA) Sylvestre Diatta (SD), a Senegalese national, cartographer/geographer, trained as such from the University Assane Seck of Ziguinchor, who translated from Wolof or Diola according to the participant’s preferred language of exchange.

Recruitment

Participants were purposefully selected among men and women aged 18 to 39, specifically targeting those with lower or medium levels of education and lacking a stable permanent job, since this subgroup is often highlighted in migration literature for having strong migration aspirations but low abilities to realize them.

We expect age and gender to shape the relationship between immobility and well-being. Hence, we made efforts to have two age brackets (18–25 and 29–39), representing the younger and older segments of young adulthood, represented evenly in our sample, as well as both men and women – the latter being frequently overlooked in prior literature.³ We further diversified the profile of our interviewees in terms of residence contexts -recruiting both in urban and rural areas, as these factors influence local livelihood opportunities.

Participants were recruited by purposive and snowball sampling with careful attention paid to diversifying our points of entry, both in terms of contacts (face-to-face, through telephone, via networks of the RA) and location (from different neighborhoods of Ziguinchor, in the town of Elinkine, and the island of Carabane as well as regions north of Ziguinchor). In total, 35 participants were interviewed. All interviewees signed consent forms and were given participant info sheets with contact numbers before each interview.

Participant characteristics

The 35 interviewees can be divided in 4 broad categories: 9 women aged 18–25; 9 women aged 29–39, 8 men aged 18–25; and 9 men aged 29–39. In terms of education, participants had completed primary ($n=7$), secondary ($n=20$) or higher education level ($n=8$). The vast majority did not have a fixed job ($n=26$, including 6 students, 5 *Jakarta*⁴, and 15 engaged in informal activities (like trading fish or merchandises, cultivating, breeding, *piroguier...*), 4 were self-employed (e.g. as entrepreneurs or farmers) and 2 employed. The sample contains participants living in rural ($n=16$), residential housing ($n=6$) and urban areas ($n=13$). The majority was born in the place of interview, while some had moved there from other regions in Senegal, or from Guinea. Almost all participants, nonetheless, identified themselves as locals to their current place of residence, i.e., as ‘Ziguinchorois’ when in Ziguinchor, and similarly for those interviewed in Elinkine and Carabane.

³ We did not exclude LGBTQ+ participants but did not come across individuals who identified as such, therefore couldn’t include them in our sample.

⁴ Jakarta motorcycles, integrated since 2011 as urban transportation [75].

Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the authors for this study (available in Supplementary Material 2) to cover the following five themes: (i) Present situation and place-related attachments, (ii) Evaluation of present situation vis-à-vis past aspirations, (iii) Projects, life aspirations, and well-being implications, (iv) Migration aspirations and well-being implications, and (v) Well-being interpretation, link to spirituality and overall assessment. The progressive nature of the interview guide allowed the interviewers to ease into migration-related questions and get a sense of the importance of such aspirations within the interviewee's broader life aspirations. The interview guide was validated by all authors, the RA, and an expert on psychosocial well-being and mental health from the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Well-being was approached as a global state of different internal and external forces experienced by an individual, comprising physical, psychological, cognitive, social, economic, and emotional domains. The interview guide was designed to initially capture the respondents' personal understanding of well-being and the contributing factors, encompassing social, physical, and financial dimensions. To evaluate subjective well-being, our main outcome of interest in this paper, we distinguish between (i) a cognitive component – the way people evaluate their life as a whole in relation to a self-imposed ideal [76] – and (ii) an affective component – the affective evaluations of the emotions people experience in their daily lives, such as sadness, fear, anger, joy, etc. [77]. It also included inquiries aligned with the WHO's (World Health Organization) definition of mental health, namely “a state of well-being wherein an individual recognizes their own capabilities, copes with everyday stresses, maintains productive work, and contributes positively to their community” [78].

Interviews were mostly conducted with both members of the field team present, in French, Wolof, or Diola, from participants' homes or public spaces. At the end of each interview, a debriefing occurred, and phone credit was provided as compensation.

Analysis and reporting

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into French⁵ by AD and SD. All transcriptions were verified, corrected, and anonymized by AD. Field notes were added to complete the verbatim transcription with emotions perceived by the interviewers and interpretation of gestures or voice tones.

We used a thematic approach to analyze the data and employed the NVivo 14 software to assist in the coding of the interview material. After becoming acquainted with the data, initial codes were formulated by the lead author (AD) taking a grounded theory approach combining inductive and deductive coding, leading to the development of themes [79]. Three overarching themes emerged, in line with the research questions and the structure of the interview guide: aspirations, capabilities (inspired by the aspiration-ability framework of Carling [10]), and well-being. In the subsequent phase, inductive codes were derived from the interviews to develop the sub-themes (e.g., co-existing (im)mobility aspirations) or to unveil new themes (e.g., youth resourcefulness). Finally, the refinement of these themes was achieved through collaborative discussions involving three authors (AD, IR, and ST), coupled with reiterative reflections informed by existing literature, and enriched by background and context information provided by the two remaining co-authors (VP, NS).

Results

The findings are presented by the major themes identified during the coding, quoting participants using their coded names to ensure confidentiality (only the field team ever knew their identity).

Mixed and dynamic (im)mobility aspirations

Given the prevalence of migration aspirations in Senegal (based on the Gallup World Poll [9]) and based on exploratory conversations in the first field visit, we expected a large share of Senegalese youth to be an aspiring migrant. Indeed, 23 of the 35 interviewees replied positively to the question ‘*Ideally, if you could, would you like to live elsewhere?*’. Probing further, however, revealed that their (im)mobility aspirations were more nuanced and complex, with aspirations to migrate coexisting or clashing with aspirations to stay, in different combinations.

Firm aspirations to stay

Regardless of their gender, age, and location, the youth we spoke to do not aspire to become an ‘émigré’, permanently living abroad, nor do they see migration as the primary path to achieving their life projects. Most participants want to build a life in Casamance. Some are firm in their preference to stay:

Lynaga, ♀ 23, Ziguinchor: I prefer staying here in Ziguinchor. If I have everything here, I prefer living here.

Camiba, ♂ 24, Carabane: (...) for me it didn't really interest me (referring to migrating). If I have some-

⁵ The original transcriptions were analyzed in French – with two researchers native (AD, VP) and two bilingual (ST, NS) – but reported on in English.

thing to do here, it's better for me. I really feel better here.

Most participants expressed a desire to move ahead in life, ideally within Casamance. They are strongly attached to Casamance through their personal roots and social ties, and because of the beauty of the region and its nature. Regarding the latter, Casamance's fertile lands are indicated to hold promise for the future, even if there is currently a lot of 'untapped potential'. Furthermore, several interviewees felt attached to the rich socio-cultural and religious life of Casamance, an important facet of their social identity.

Dibidi, ♀ 31, Ziguinchor, when asked if and why she feels attached to here: Because I was BORN HERE (laughs). I've lived here, I know Ziguinchor better than... other regions. (...) what I like is being close to my family, that's the most important, especially having the support of family. (...) There are leisure opportunities in Ziguinchor, especially the Navétanes (seasonal activities) during the rainy season. All the young people are taking part, participating.

Bobiba, ♂ 31, Ziguinchor: (...) being in contact with animals, in contact with plants (...) there are the 'zicroulas', the 'thiantes', that is to say religious events which we organize every Thursday, I participate because that's my life and then I'm 'goor yallah' (servant/child of God) as they say. I'm Baye fall (Sufi Muslim brotherhood) so I go to the thiantes (gatherings, events spiritual practices, chanting, and communal activities), it's part of my leisure, it's part of my acts of worship.

Coexisting (im)mobility aspirations

In many cases, aspirations to stay coexist with aspirations to move, albeit to move temporarily. For some, this stems from an intrinsically motivated desire to see the world, experience cultural differences, and discover other environments. A 'global horizon' [80] is shaped already in high school and reinforced via social interactions with prior migrants, but also social media, TV, and the internet more broadly. These imaginaries of migration motivate a desire to explore the world, often for a temporary period, to gain valuable experiences. Participants mention European countries, as well as Brazil, the United States, and Canada, as ideal destinations to discover other cultures and ways of living.

Kamago, ♂ 34, Ziguinchor: Wouuh! If I could (go abroad to live and/or work)? Of course, like everyone, like you, sometimes it's good to go sightseeing

elsewhere, visit, see the cultural difference, something like that. Go and make discoveries; go and come back.

In other cases, the main motivation for temporary mobility is to gain experience, either through studying or working abroad for a few years, with the intention to return. In fact, such a foreign experience has instrumental value in the home community, allowing the interviewees to 'better return' in Ziguinchor, a place where they feel 'at peace' and 'at home'.

Dichsa, ♂ 33, Ziguinchor: Seriously in Ziguinchor, I feel at peace, I really feel at home. Even if sometimes... the dream today, for success, we wish, well... we really want to travel but it's not for here (laughs) (...) Maybe go explore abroad; That's... that's my dream. There you go, I'm not hiding it, it's a dream truly... it's a dream that I will want to achieve forever. (...) Me if I had this possibility, to go outside, to continue my studies and to have the possibility of working for a few years; I would work there to BETTER make my life here and return and have this strength that would allow me to BETTER help others.

We can thus see such aspirations for temporary mobility and (long-term) staying aspirations as coexisting (though sequentially).

These aspirations lack, however, concreteness and are not translated, for the most part, in actual plans⁶, for two main reasons. On the one hand, most interviewees would prefer to leave legally, but legal pathways to reach Europe or North America – the main desired destinations – are almost entirely blocked. On the other hand, for either legal or clandestine migration, one needs financial means that are beyond the reach of our respondents. As such, these aspirations to temporary migration remain in the realm of unattainable dreams or unrealistic opportunities for improving their life locally, and do not lead to intense feelings of involuntary spatial mobility.

Conflicting (im)mobility aspirations

In other cases, aspirations to migrate and to stay are rather conflicting. Interviewees experiencing such a clash would also like to stay in Casamance, but feel a strong pressure to move abroad, usually to provide for the family.

⁶ Four participants had actually (attempted to) move abroad, one legally and three clandestinely, but were either repatriated or had to return earlier than planned. While still wishing to temporarily move abroad, none have concrete plans for enacting such desires.

Eldadi, ♂ 30, Elinkine: Everyone would like to stay at home and find a job but it is the lack of means and the other sacrifices we make that push us into this (i.e. into migrating). (...) Now our younger brothers who are students and our older brothers are counting on us who have work and it is we who do everything for them because they have studied but do not have anything to rely on; that's difficult. This is why we want to go to Europe at all costs.

In some cases, as the quote above illustrates, the source of the pressure is diffuse, stemming from the dominant cultural narrative in Senegal which portrays migration as the best (or only) way to achieve a secure livelihood for one's family. In other cases, pressure comes directly from one's close family:

Lygico, ♀ 29, Ziguinchor: I like staying here. But my sister who's in France, she insisted for me to join her there; so I told her that I wanted to stay here. But she still expects an answer because she keeps on... insisting.

These quotes highlight the tension that arises in some cases between individual desires to remain in one's current location and the expectations of young people's families and communities for them to migrate. These findings echo those of Mata-Codesal [81], who demonstrated how households in rural Mexico can compel certain members to migrate abroad, even against their own wishes. Distinguishing between individual and collective (im)mobility aspirations, as proposed by Rodriguez-Pena [42], offers a more nuanced conceptualization of the conflicted nature of such aspirations. It also facilitates a deeper exploration of how intra-household power dynamics influence decision-making regarding mobility and immobility [60].

Social (Im)mobility

Locally embedded life aspirations

Our participants hold a diverse array of life aspirations. In the younger group, some are contemplating further education or remain uncertain about their future pursuits. However, a majority of the sample has life projects explicitly targeting opportunities within the region of Casamance or more broadly within Senegal. Among these aspirations, a notable number express interest in joining the military, becoming electrical technicians, engaging in trade, agriculture (crop cultivation or animal herding) or fishing, setting up their own businesses (shops, cooperatives, transformation companies or hotels), or pursuing professional sports (football or taekwondo). While some have initiated actions in this direction, these endeavors generally persist at an early stage of development.

Kalaci, ♂ 31, Ziguinchor: Well... for me it's... (...) becoming a CEO whom (...) this city must respect. For me this is my objective and here when we say 'Kalaci,' we will say (name of start-up he created) and (...) we put this project forward (...). A big company that will allow our little brothers, those who are in entrepreneurship and who don't have jobs to come to this company. For me it's a source of pride; it's not that's having billions but at least in your environment you feel that you have IMPACTED others.

Capabilities and lack thereof

Participants' life aspirations and overarching projects clash, however, with a lack of capabilities to enact these locally. We refer to the condition where individuals are hindered in their capacity to improve their socio-economic status or achieve their life aspirations as 'social immobility'.

When asked what they would need to fulfill their life aspirations, the youth interviewed were, for the majority, deploring the lack of employment opportunities but also of financial means for education and professional support through mentorship or guidance.

Dichsa, ♂ 33, Ziguinchor: (...) for me the only difficulty compared to the reality of the area, uh... THERE IS A DEVELOPMENT PROBLEM. (...) today if we speak in this context, we will immediately question the crisis! Certainly it's because of that, the Casamance crisis.

Moreover, while some mention a lack of means to study, many interviewees do not see studying as worthwhile because of widespread unemployment among graduates. Those who invested in higher education are especially frustrated by their inability to reap the benefits of their investments and attempt to reorient themselves towards professional training.

Keamme, ♂ 29, Ziguinchor: I need means, means. At that time if I find someone who will pay me to finish the training, the remaining two years; I am going to take up the offer to finish my training to become a state nurse. At least I would know that I would have a professional diploma. (...) There you have your bachelor's degree, your master's degree, even a doctorate; you do not work. Either you take competitive exams or you are going to do more, pay for more training in a private establishment to have a professional diploma. After this diploma, you can apply and get a job.

Yet, for many, the frustration also comes from a pervasive lack of control over their life trajectories, which not only limits economic opportunities but also undermines their capabilities. Only a minority of individuals who pursued education beyond high school had the opportunity to select their fields of study autonomously. Owing to the limited availability of university placements, many young people find themselves enrolling in courses that do not align with their preferences. Many participants refer to this as “I’ve been oriented” or “they oriented me...” in passive voice. Securing employment in a field of study not personally chosen is perceived as an added challenge within an already precarious situation.

This lack of tangible means and opportunities not only prevents one from achieving one’s own life aspirations but also from providing for one’s family, a deeply ingrained sense of responsibility. For some, it also means postponing life plans of building a family due to their precarious situation.

Lymadi, ♂ 21, Ziguinchor: (...) if I don’t have a job, I’m not going to bring a woman to also put her in trouble, I can’t.

Youth resourcefulness

Despite the reported lack of control over their life course and experiences of social immobility, the youth interviewed cannot be depicted as a ‘generation-in-waiting’. Although most participants in our sample were formally unemployed or inactive (23⁷ out of 35), with only three exceptions, they were actively engaged in various informal economic activities, such as street-selling, pirogue-driving, agriculture, or animal husbandry. Among these, six participants were involved in one activity known as ‘Jakarta’: young men working as taxi scooter drivers either as a long-term informal job or between other employment or studies. Despite its risks –nonetheless lower than those associated with irregular migration - this trend is increasingly popular among West African youth and beyond, especially among young uneducated, but also among graduates who struggle to find formal sector jobs commensurate with their qualifications.

Through these mostly informal economic activities, some were working towards their life projects by putting money aside. Others were simply contributing to their own personal needs, and, in some cases, marginally to those of their family. A few participants have had access to bursaries, jump-starting their capacity to progress in their endeavors. Our evidence strongly challenges the perceived ‘lack of ambition’ that overlooks the resilience

and ambitious spirit of this young population who, even in constrained circumstances, strives to make meaningful contributions.

Disasa ♂ 25, Ziguinchor: I manage to take care of my personal needs and others’ also, my family, my little sisters and my cousins for example. (...) Me personally my goals were to go study outside (...) for which reason since the first year, I began to put the bursary money aside; I wasn’t eating. (...) Afterwards I said to myself, no, I have to create other things because I... I listened to an audio book (...) This is what changed my mentality a little. I said to myself “well... I have to start entrepreneurship”. And since then alamdoulilah I have somewhat achieved my goals because the money that I kept on the side, it’s what allowed us (...) built this (referring to the startup).

Participants actively try to overcome the economic situation they find themselves in by engaging in numerous (informal) economic activities. Notwithstanding, their efforts may go unrecognized by the broader community, as is reflected in their self-identification as ‘jobless’. It seems their own perception of their economic endeavors follows society’s expectations of such activities: after listing several daily occupations, several participants concluded by saying they were not doing anything (especially those engaging in associative activities, regardless of their extensive commitment).

Well-being implications of involuntary immobility

As discussed in the methods section, subjective well-being has been conceptualized as comprising an affective and a cognitive evaluation of one’s life as a whole in relation to a self-imposed ideal (Diener et al., 1985). To obtain a more culturally and socially informed view of such an ideal within our population, we started by asking participants about their own interpretation of well-being (*‘For you, what is well-being?’*). It appeared constitutive of aspects stemming from (i) physical and psychological well-being - a calm mind and inner joy; (ii) economic well-being related to status, ability to meet basic needs and financial independence, or providing material support to one’s family; (iii) cultural well-being - living in harmony within a supportive community, surrounded by ‘good people’, living in peace, in a soothing environment; (iv) interpersonal well-being related to the acquisition of knowledge and personal achievement through positivity, having self-control and making reasonable choices; (v) behavioral well-being concerning stability, both professionally and personally; and (vi) spiritual well-being – following one’s religion and living in faith.

⁷ Among the remaining interviewees: 6 were students, 4 self-employed and 2 in stable employment.

Cognitive component of subjective well-being

Among the participants, 11 expressed satisfaction with their current situation, 5 remained neutral, and a staggering 19 participants conveyed - often vividly - dissatisfaction with their present circumstances. Moreover, when questioned about their present situation in relation to past aspirations ('Does your current life correspond with what you imagined a few years ago?'), merely 3 participants regarded it as better than anticipated, 7 held a neutral stance, while a significant majority (25 individuals) perceived it as falling short of their initial expectations.

Seemingly, the biggest contribution to a reduced life satisfaction stems from the overall negative evaluation of their socioeconomic situation, namely the absence of financial, material, and social status. Remaining jobless was indicated to deeply impact well-being, fostering overthinking and psychological distress.

Elawsa, ♀ 34, Elinkine: Well-being is linked to work. If today I had a job here in Elinkine that allowed me to earn money, something good for me; I would have done it and I wouldn't go anywhere.

Camiba, ♂ 24, Carabane: I really feel like myself when I'm working. But if you don't have clients how can you work? Then I'm angry all the time.

Several participants also underscored how unemployment may lead to harmful behaviors like self-harm, prostitution, and substance abuse – access is easy given the context of production and circulation in Casamance -or irregular migration, of which the dangers – including the trafficking of young girls - are increasingly recognized among youth.

Emotional component of subjective well-being

Our findings indicate that the primary impact on the participants does not stem from unfulfilled migration aspirations, but rather from their social immobility. If anything, spatial immobility only adds to their frustration. Participants negatively evaluate the perceived social stagnancy and experience emotions such as stress, anger, fear of failure, sadness, disappointment, discouragement, and distress.

Lykhba, ♀ 24, Ziguinchor: I feel a great emptiness within me. (...) I didn't believe that after getting my baccalaureate, I would stay there sick and I can't find anything to do.

Eldadi ♂ 30, Elinkine: Ah when you think about that, you know that it hurts your heart. (...) Because at the moment it's difficult to earn something, (...) you can't even have a good machine to do your job,

it's difficult. All this traumatizes you and almost makes you sick; it can make you stressed sometimes, you will be angry at anyone who touches you, you will argue with someone who did nothing to you because she found you in a moment of stress and discomfort.

All participants mention the stress that failing to provide for their parents and family generates, illustrating the immense burden lying on these youths under the form of a responsibility that they want to live up to.

Keamme, ♂ 29, Ziguinchor: I often get stressed. When, for example, my sister or my brother or my mother asks me something (...) (sad face) one day my little sister asked me to pay her 1500 for a book I can't even give her this (...) her eldest, big brother; he can't even pay for his book. It really hurt me. That day I, I -, I'm not myself, I'm so sad. (...) It's a bit complicated frankly speaking (tears in his eyes) but we live with it.

Tihesa, ♂ 29, Ziguinchor: The problem isn't me; If it was just for me, I can handle it. But the problem is those who count on me and I can't do anything for them. That's it... that's the situation that hurts me. This is where the sensitivity is. I don't want to disappoint my family.

Heterogeneity of impacts

The lack of control over their life course deprives our participants of capabilities and leaves the aspiring migrant especially frustrated and helpless. Being the firstborn, a woman, or both is also a factor accentuating the effect of involuntary immobility on well-being, as we discuss below.

Well-being following a spectrum of migration aspirations - In line with our hypothesis, individuals harboring strong migration aspirations appeared to be profoundly impacted by involuntary immobility. Whether contemplating long-term or temporary migration, some perceive international migration as an escape from their current circumstances. A vicious circle hence unfolds: migration is not affordable because of social immobility, yet social immobility persists because migration is not an option. The inability to migrate amplifies the sense of being trapped, intensifying the frustration of stagnating in life due to the intersection of social and spatial immobility.

Elawsa, ♀ 34, Elinkine: I was working at the village camp but there was a change and now I'm sitting here and I don't know what to hold onto (...) Until now I cannot have something that I can glo-

rify myself of having achieved or that I have worthily obtained through my work; I still can't get it. Because when you think about the past, it will make you cry, (sad face) it's difficult because (...) saving money and leaving here to go somewhere and finally they repatriate you and you come and stay here without doing anything; it's difficult (...) When I'm stressed, I lock myself in here (...) I don't go out, I usually drink water then go to bed. Sometimes I don't eat because I avoid leaving the room to pick on someone.

Family role as an additional burden - In Senegal, regardless of gender, the eldest child in a family bears a significant responsibility to support their parents and younger siblings, imposing a unique form of pressure.

Despite aspirations to stay within the country, our data reveals familial pressure among this group to seek opportunities abroad. The dual burden of spatial and social immobility hence weighs exceptionally heavily on the eldest child, leading to significant emotional distress.

Beamdi, ♀ 24, Ziguinchor: The minimum is to be able to meet your needs. You know sometimes, your little brother can come and ask you for a 100 CFA coin (laughs); you have to find that coin to give him because you can't tell him that you don't have one every time. (...) You know, that's what makes being an elder seem a little difficult (laughs). (...) Waking up every morning and wondering how to do something like this, how to get some money when you're not working? With all this, we cannot speak of peace of mind. (...) I don't see the point to do the studies I did and then come and stay here. You see, staying here to do household chores and everything is complicated.

Gender inequalities in the face of immobility - While women have typically been overlooked in prior research on involuntary immobility, often due to the perception that they are not the primary providers for the family, our results show that women are not less likely to expect (and sometimes may be expected) to emigrate.

Elbidi, ♀ 32, Elinkine: If I go there, that's good, I stay working - If here it doesn't work, I can see if I could earn my living elsewhere to help my parents deysaan (pity, please).

Lyvidj, ♀ 24, Ziguinchor: My elders left (...) Since then (...) you think about that you tell yourself 'good, me sooner or later, I will do that; I will get there.' And there you go, you start making your plans in your head.

Women in our sample also feel pressure to provide for their families and hence the negative implications of social immobility. Both women and men experience social pressures originating from societal expectations, as illustrated in the quotes above by Beamdi, Elbidi, and Lyvidj.

Furthermore, for certain young women, constraints imposed by societal expectations—whether in choosing a sport, selecting a field of study as mentioned earlier, or adhering to patriarchal, religious, or traditional norms—have hindered them from realizing their aspirations.

Keradi, ♀ 24, Ziguinchor: I don't have a goal on what I want to become because sometimes (...) In Senegal what we want to become does not depend on us.

Thus, women face an additional layer linked to a lack of control, often reflected in limited autonomy over choices such as their field of study or job applications. As they tend to face gender inequalities on top of economic ones, they end up facing more constraints in fulfilling their aspired paths and are thus more exposed to well-being implications.

Sources of resilience

When asked about coping strategies for everyday challenges or moments of distress, respondents cited various activities such as playing football, engaging in sports, socializing with friends, listening to music, watching series, practicing patience, staying at home, connecting with nature, and seeking work opportunities whenever available.

Dibidi, ♀ 31, Ziguinchor: I have a love of chickens, especially when I enter my henhouse; I forget everything, that's it (smile). Sometimes I take refuge there when I... I feel bad, I take refuge in my henhouse and then that's it when I see the chickens I feel better.

The activities in which participants engage serve not only as a means of keeping themselves occupied but also as a way to maintain hope. For some participants, entertainment is essential in keeping their spirit and in turn, their hopes up, with hope being in itself a form of resilience mechanism, very different from one person to another. Moreover, religion, particularly through belief and prayer, appears to be a cornerstone of resilience for most of the sample. Faith serves as a source of strength for many, fostering profound acceptance of their circumstances. Additionally, participants in our study derive vital support from their relationships, which encompass connections with family members and friends, both locally and abroad.

Boseba, ♂ 23, Ziguinchor: it is thanks to our religion that we are correct, avoid doing certain things. It pushes you to ACCEPT many things and situations.

Dichsa, ♂ 33, Ziguinchor: when I think about my situation, it hurts. It's VERY PAINFUL like I told you. (...) But I don't know I don't know what drives me. I have something inside me all the time that... that drives me. (...) And if I say that today I – if I am lucky enough not to be there, I would say it is thanks to my education. And if I talk about my education, it's tradition and faith; Having people is already an asset for me. Helping people every day with what I have, the energy I have, the service I provide them; This is already a success for me.

Yet, beyond friends and family, having someone to confide in about their situation appears to provide solace and offer a cathartic release of emotional burden. At the conclusion of the interviews, some participants explicitly expressed gratitude towards the interviewers, warmly acknowledging the opportunity to share their feelings and the beneficial impact it had on them.

Beamdi, ♀ 24, Ziguinchor: you gave me the opportunity to release part of what I had always kept, what I had never talked to my family about. (...) It's sensitive because you're right, it's the first time I've expanded on everything I just said. Sometimes I chat with my aunt and tell her that I want this and that but I never tell her; I only point out to her that my failures hurt me. I don't bring that out, I don't put it on my face. I never let that show.

Camiba, ♂ 24, Carabane: I don't answer these questions well because I didn't last long in my studies, but frankly they are touching because they make you dream of many things; you see? You even awakened my mind but since I'm used to uh... (laughs) sharing with people, it really awakened my mind eh.

Discussion

This study aims to shed light on the implications of involuntary (im)mobility for the subjective well-being of young Casamançais in Senegal. It does so by (i) considering different degrees and types of involuntary immobility and their intersections, (ii) laying out the implications of (interacting) social and spatial immobilities for well-being with particular attention to youth's agency in navigating a lack of capabilities, and (iii) by accounting for heterogenous experiences taking a gendered approach.

Involuntary social immobility, a widespread challenge

Our main finding is that in Casamance, the challenges of involuntary social immobility overshadow those of spatial immobility. In contrast to prior research arguing that in Senegal and West Africa more broadly, young people's 'career planning' is almost exclusively directed towards the international labor market [82–84], for the most part, our interviewees expressed life aspirations that were *locally* embedded. Unlike conclusions drawn by Conrad Suso [36], Gaibazzi [32], and others [85], the youth we interviewed did not express overwhelmingly strong migration aspirations that overshadowed other life aspirations. Our research highlights a more nuanced reality where aspirations to (temporarily) move abroad coexist with aspirations to stay. The young people in Casamance whom we interviewed do not see their migration aspirations as contradictory with their goals of pursuing (life) projects within their own region. This illustrates the non-binary and complex nature of (im)mobility aspirations.

Despite their desire to establish stable livelihoods within Casamance and support their families and local communities, most of the youth we interviewed lack the necessary opportunities and resources to realize these life aspirations at home, trapping them in a state of 'social immobility'. The prevalent inability to progress in life among the majority of our interviewees underscores the complex interplay between personal aspirations and the socio-economic environment, hindering their realization.

Participants cannot successfully fulfill their aspirations, not because of a lack of ambition, but rather due to a complex web of systemic limitations, ranging from inequalities and limited employment opportunities hindering their independence and future prospects to educational disparities marked by restricted access, misalignments between educational preferences and diplomas, and a dearth of mentorship and guidance programs. This leaves young individuals without crucial support structures to navigate their career paths. Beyond these challenges, social and familial pressures to adhere to traditional expectations further curtail their freedom to pursue individual aspirations.

These multifaceted challenges reveal a deeper narrative of capabilities deprivation and disempowerment in the pursuit of life goals, aligning with the work of Sen and Nussbaum [86]. Our findings resonate with de Haas' conceptualization of the freedom of mobility as "people's capability (freedom) to choose where to live, including the option to stay" [28]. We observed rather high levels of deprivation in this respect. On the one hand, our participants are deprived of their capability to migrate abroad either directly through failure of visa procedures or indirectly by lacking the resources to get a passport, for instance, the first step of international mobility. On the other hand, they are also deprived of economic

opportunities that would enable them to fulfill their life goals locally within the foreseeable future – described by Schewel [87] as a lack of ‘capabilities to stay’.

Ill-being amidst intertwined forms of involuntary immobility

A key finding emerging from our study is that experiencing involuntary social immobility significantly impacts the subjective well-being of youth. This effect becomes even more pronounced for those youth who also harbour migration aspirations while lacking the capabilities to move abroad. In other words, involuntary *spatial* immobility compounds the implications of *social* immobility.

In addition to constraining their pursuit of culturally defined adult roles, such as starting a family or contributing to personal and community development, social immobility exacts a toll on the subjective well-being of young individuals in Casamance, affecting various dimensions. Specifically, we documented effects on both the cognitive and the affective dimensions of subjective well-being. Many participants experiencing involuntary social immobility also experienced life dissatisfaction and a range of negative feelings and emotions including stress, anger, fear of failure, disappointment, discouragement, and distress. Their sense of being stuck and hence their ill-being was further amplified if they also aspired to migrate abroad but were unable to do so. These findings parallel but also expand those of Ayeb-Karlsson [34] in the context of immobility amid climate change, which underscore the potential for enduring ‘internal damages’ resulting from involuntary immobility. We find social immobility to be mainly responsible for these implications, while spatial immobility intensifies the youth’s sense of ill-being.

Even though there was no explicit mention of depression, our interviewees self-reported significant feelings of hopelessness that warrant further attention. It is essential to note, though, that our study did not attempt to evaluate psychiatric conditions in our participants but restricted itself to collecting participants’ own narratives about their state of well/ill-being. Such narratives cannot be analyzed without reference to the cultural context in which they are embedded and the ways in which mental health concerns, such as depression, are perceived. Depression tends to be underdiagnosed and is often a taboo topic in Senegal, linked to negative perceptions and associated with Western influences [88, 89]. The clinical symptoms associated with depression might also be less known, especially when occurring somatically more than psychologically. Furthermore, many interviewees expressed reluctance to share their anxiety and distress with relatives or close friends, fearing stigma, which may illustrate the taboo surrounding mental health issues in Senegal.

Lastly, given the cultural emphasis within the Senegalese society on preserving social image, maintaining dignity, not losing face, and adhering to social norms [88, 89], interviewees might have downplayed the depth of their negative emotions. Consequently, the interviewers observed notable inconsistencies between certain respondents’ verbal statements and their nonverbal cues, such as their facial and body expressions. Some appeared to respond wearing ‘a social mask’ during the interviews: smiling and laughing despite expressing anxiety or, exhibiting signs of sadness and distress throughout the interview while asserting feelings of happiness and resilience towards the end.

It is thus crucial to acknowledge the cultural context in which mental health is discussed as this will significantly shape the reporting of mental health concerns. A longitudinal approach, re-interviewing the same person over time and thus establishing a trustful relationship, ideally with a professional trained within the context, would surely further enrich such findings.

Navigating immobilities: between resilience and reworking

Participants frequently articulate their dedication to life goals and a deep-seated desire to contribute to their families and communities, showcasing a passionate yet frustrated longing to actively engage as agents of development. This frustration is reinforced by a discrepancy between their capabilities and endeavors, and the societal acknowledgment of their efforts. They find themselves caught between societal expectations and their own experiences, echoing the tension highlighted by de Haas, where the “feeling of deprivation is real” [28]. This dynamic reinforces the discourse tying their value to their ability to ‘stay at home’, perpetuating a detrimental cycle of involuntary immobility.

For some interviewees, the inability to achieve their life aspirations – including but not limited to migration aspirations – traps them in a vicious circle of discouragement and hopelessness. The tangible manifestation of this immobilizing effect is a reluctance to pursue (further) education or take up other local investments. Lack of education, however, limits options for both local livelihoods as well as for international migration, thus posing a threat to long-term human capital accumulation. These dynamics resonate with what development economists studying poverty have termed an ‘aspiration trap’. Ray [90] and Genicot and Ray [91] argue that the unattainability of what the poor aspire to plunges them into a trap. If the perceived aspiration gap – i.e., the difference between what individuals aspire to and what they are realistically able to achieve – is too large, individuals – anticipating that even with high effort, may not manage to reach their goals – give up altogether and adjust their aspirations downwards [92]. This, in turn, discourages

forward-looking behavior and longer-term investments (e.g. in human capital), and hence individuals' capabilities, creating a vicious circle, as recent theoretical and empirical work has shown [91–93]. On an aggregate scale, such aspiration traps (or failures) discourage economic and social change, thereby posing obstacles to overall development [93, 94].

However, most of our interviewees managed to break such vicious cycles, thanks to various resilience mechanisms providing strength and comfort. Our findings mainly underscore the agency and resourcefulness displayed by youth as they navigate their limited control over choices and life paths. Far from passively waiting for a way out of their precarious situation, most of our interviewees were actively seeking to improve their circumstances through a range of informal economic activities and/or institutional engagements. The forms of agency they exhibit could be described in Katz's terminology as somewhere between *resilience* and *reworking* [55, 56]. Engagements can be seen as a form of *resilience* as they allow them to survive – both economically and mentally – but also as a way of *reworking* and improving the unfavorable circumstances they find themselves in. However, we cannot quite qualify these as forms of *resistance*, as interviewees themselves often internalized the conditions of exploitation and oppression they faced and did not really attempt to subvert them.

Consider, for example, the Jakarta motorcycle culture, acting as a social shock absorber and attracting young individuals due to its accessibility as an informal economic activity [75, 95]. The widespread adoption of this phenomenon has garnered criticism from older generations, who fear risks to road security and noise pollution, and seem to underestimate the limited opportunities available to the youth, creating tension within the population [96–98]. Yet, in such a constrained context the Jakarta phenomenon is increasingly a venue for socio-economic mobility for youth to circumvent unemployment or the need to emigrate [99, 100]. The development of informal economic activities thanks to the Jakarta is, however, also linked to illicit activities (drug trafficking, prostitution) which have social and health repercussions [101]. The quick and easy financial gains can enable young people to take responsibility for themselves, help their families, save money with the aim of improving their business (switching from a Jakarta to a motorbike or taxi later on), or alternatively to prepare a migration project.

These findings resonate with those of Van Meij et al. [55], Ungruhe and Esson [45] and Ceesay [33] who similarly demonstrate how participating in football academies in Ghana or engaging in hustling in the Gambia represent individual endeavors to navigate social immobility without directly challenging established power structures.

The majority of our respondents navigate obstacles with the intent of avoiding a vicious cycle of discouragement and preserving hope throughout their young adult years as they build towards their life perspectives. This resilience underscores the importance of comprehending not only the challenges posed by involuntary immobility but also the adaptive strategies, strengths, and resourcefulness that young individuals deploy. Initiatives should consider building on these strengths, as many of them actively seek opportunities for growth.

Diverse perspectives

Gendered approach

Prior literature on involuntary immobility – both spatial and social – in West Africa tends to focus exclusively on men [32, 33, 37, 45, 55]. Previous studies have overlooked women based on the argument that they are not expected to migrate, at least not independently of family reunification, nor to provide for their families.

Despite conventional perceptions that women would typically aspire to stay at home, the young women we interviewed often harbor migration aspirations as strong as, if not stronger, than those of men. Yet their capabilities to migrate are even more limited than those of men. Often less educated, and less able to mobilize their families' resources to support their move abroad, they can draw on less material and social capital to migrate. We also confirm the prior findings that women have a lower propensity than men to realize their migration aspirations [102]. It is, therefore, not surprising that Sub-Saharan African women remain a minority in international out-migration flows [103].

Furthermore, our findings show that young women also harbor professional aspirations of becoming 'a somebody,' and feel the expectation (and pressure) of providing for their families, at least for their parents and younger siblings. Yet, female employment rates in Senegal lag significantly behind those of men, with nearly half of young women aged 15 to 29 being NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), more than double the corresponding rate for young men [66]. Although women are more engaged in informal employment [104], they are as vulnerable to social immobility as men, if not more because of gender inequalities or discrimination. Indeed, on top of the effects of involuntary immobility that are similar for men and women, women are more exposed to a lack of control over their own lives through cultural traditions and societal expectations. As such, they are more likely to experience intense feelings of capability deprivation and emotional ill-being (see also Nussbaum's work [105]).

In sum, migration and professional aspirations are increasingly aligned between young men and women in Casamance, but women experience added layers of

capability deprivation. This may put them at greater risk of involuntary immobility, both with respect to its spatial and social dimensions. Our findings underscore that the implications of involuntary immobility are as pertinent for women as they are for men, highlighting the need for future research on these matters to adopt a gendered perspective.

Broader landscape

While our results primarily illuminate the experiences of Casamance's youth, they also provide insights applicable to a broader demographic, including young Senegalese and youth facing challenges in realizing mobility-related or life aspirations.

Youth in Casamance have similarly high emigration aspirations as in other regions in Senegal, but potentially lower capabilities to emigrate, at least towards the Global North. Casamance is not one of the traditional areas of emigration towards Europe, which implies that migration networks and infrastructure are likely not as widespread as they are in other regions, such as Dakar, Saint Louis, or along the valley of the Senegal River (like Matam). This puts youth in the region at a higher risk of involuntary spatial immobility. In terms of economic opportunities, the Casamance region boasts greater hydraulic and hydro-agricultural and thus economic potential compared to the eastern part of the country. This suggests that social immobility may be a less prevalent experience in this context than in others. Yet, employment rates in the Ziguinchor region are significantly lower than those of the neighboring regions, according to the GlobalData-Lab (e.g., for women [106]).

Generalizing our findings requires careful consideration of Casamance's unique context while recognizing the broader resonance of the themes uncovered for young Senegalese or young people in other contexts in the Global South who find themselves unable to fulfill their mobility-related or life aspirations. Further research with a larger and more diverse sample could contribute additional perspectives, leading to a more profound understanding of the challenges and complexities surrounding youth aspirations, immobility, and well-being.

Societal relevance of our findings

Our study provides a nuanced exploration of the dynamics underlying (im)mobility and well-being, delving into the aspirations and experiences of the youth in Casamance. It urges caution in categorizing all young people as 'aspiring migrants': although young people tend to share migration aspirations, the nuances and the real desire to migrate or stay are sometimes more complex than they seem, thus leading to a potential overestimation of the number of aspiring migrants. Furthermore, it underscores how information campaigns aimed at

dissuading youth from emigrating by stressing the risks of irregular migration cannot be effective without increased opportunities for staying better in place. With its "Emerging Senegal Plan", the country is committed to fostering socio-economic change towards greater well-being. Yet, employment policy remains at a strategic level and would benefit from public investment in projects with high labor potential [107], especially in a current context characterized by high and complex informal employment dynamics sustained and demographic growth [108].

Furthermore, by highlighting the agency, resilience, and rootedness of youth, we advocate for a comprehensive understanding of capabilities and the acknowledgment of associated mental health issues, going towards care for their well-being alongside increased economic opportunities. Policies, practices, and interventions should intervene in the mental health sector [109], and awareness should be raised on the existing programs and undertakings of governmental and non-governmental actors tailored to increase socio-economic integration of youth, whom are often unaware of opportunities available to them. This recognition is vital not only for the immediate welfare of the youth but also for shaping future generations and the broader demographic and socio-economic landscape of Senegal, a pressing political challenge of the presidential elections of 2024.

Conclusions

Involuntary *spatial* immobility exacerbates the dominant experience of *social* immobility, magnifying its effect on youth's well-being. These intersecting forms of immobility restrict young people's pursuit of culturally defined roles as adults, such as starting a family or contributing to their own and their community's development. They further expose the unrealistic nature of both migration and dignified staying options. Our study illustrates how these experiences of involuntary immobility significantly impact young people's subjective well-being, revealing a previously unacknowledged phenomenon. These mental health implications and well-being concerns are frequently overlooked in Senegal, partly because of cultural norms that stigmatize such issues. They require, in our view, urgent academic as well as political attention.

Our findings further emphasize the pressing need for a more cohesive alignment between migration policies and information campaigns on one hand and the real experiences and challenges encountered by their intended audience on the other. Specifically, migration and development policies discouraging mobility, often without addressing the social immobility that underlies it, would benefit from a thorough comprehension of the lived experiences and aspirations of the youth in the region and beyond. This is all the more important when considering the demographic situation of the country.

Finally, more recognition in both academic and public discourse of youth's resourcefulness amidst multiple layers of capability deprivation has the potential to enhance their socio-economic integration and, in turn, well-being and human capital.

Abbreviations

COREQ	Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research
ICT	Information and communication technology
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MFDC	Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
RA	Research Assistant
VIP	Very Important Person
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
WHO	World Health Organization

Supplementary Information

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Supplementary Material 1

Supplementary Material 2

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Author contributions

IR and ST developed the idea and research question, which was then translated to the context of Senegal and Casamance by AD, VP, and NS. AD, IR, ST designed the interview guide (available upon request) that was verified by VP and NS. AD collected the data and coded it. AD, IR and ST drafted the overall article with inputs and feedback from all co-authors.

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Data availability

Information on data and materials are available upon request directed to the corresponding author AD. However, due to ethical concerns, supporting data cannot be made openly available.

Declaration

Ethics approval and consent

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, as well as in accordance with the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and the European privacy legislation, i.e. the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Ethics approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of

the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration under the reference UG-EB 2022-Q. All participants gave written informed consent. Participants who accepted to receive the study's updates and results were contacted and provided with a summary of the article submitted for publication, translated into French. Further details on the methodology followed are drafted following the COREQ checklist, available in Supplementary Material 1.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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