Labour market situation of sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco: the case of call centers

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Today, sub-Saharan migrants are found in a big variety of jobs in Morocco, ranging from journalism and engineering to nursing, construction work and street vending. Some of these jobs are typically associated with disadvantaged migrant workers in countries worldwide, like domestic work or construction work. Others, like journalism or teaching, are activities that are less specific for migrants’ positions. Compared to European countries, where migrants’ integration into the labour market typically started with lower level jobs, Morocco, at its beginning of becoming an immigration country, shows a different picture: migrants are entering the labour market from below and at the same time in mid-level and higher level positions which require specific skills and education.

Drawing on fieldwork in Rabat and Casablanca in 2013, the paper will look at some key points around migrant work in call centers and then turn to the question how these phenomena relate to what the concept of labour market segmentation has described for western immigration countries. Rather than representing a thorough analysis of the applicability of segmentation theory to the Moroccan case, the paper puts together some points for discussion. In this context the term “migrant” does not refer, as is common in French language publications on Morocco, to vulnerable migrants in precarious situations but is used in its broad sense to designate people who have moved from their country of origin to another country and have stayed there for a certain amount of time.

Call centers as one major employment sector for migrants

There seem to be two sectors that are dominant and integrate more migrants than others: the construction sector and that of call centers. The work in call centers
primarily asks for an ease in speaking French and, for most positions with outbound calls, some sales talent.

4 Official numbers are not available but according to estimations of the association of Senegalese call center workers in 2013 around 10,000 Senegalese nationals are working in Morocco’s call centers— to which nationals of other sub-Saharan African countries need to be added— and who represent more than 20 per cent of the number of (mainly Moroccan) people officially employed in the sector. This compares to a country wide percentage of foreigners of less than one percent and shows the job wise importance of call centers for sub-Saharan. To many migrants, call centers are the only sector where they can find work despite an educational background suited for other fields.

5 Call centers represent one of the well-functioning and growing sectors of the Moroccan economy in need of workers and since their introduction to Morocco about 15 years ago their sales figures have been growing. While other areas of foreign direct investment have not been extremely successful in creating jobs in Morocco (El Wazani and Souaf, 2006), this does not hold true for call centers. Their number reaches almost 500 and the Moroccan association of client relation (AMRT) estimates that they employ more than 45,000 people— which only includes registered centers and official contracts. The need of workers is visible through the call centers’ numerous advertisements as well as in their recruitment strategies: some of the bigger centers use the so called « parrainage » system offering their Moroccan and foreign employees bonuses of 1 000 dirhams (around 90 €) if they recruit a new successful employee. Several centers recruit parts of their staff via websites and skype calls directly in Senegal, at times even paying for their plane tickets to Morocco.

6 Given the high unemployment rate in the country, specifically among the « chômeurs diplômés », the Moroccan government aims at keeping numbers of foreign workers low and giving jobs to Moroccan nationals in the first place. The labour code stipulates that employers are allowed to recruit foreign nationals only if special skills are needed and no Moroccan can fill the job— with the exception of Tunisians, Algerians, Senegalese and the foreign spouses of Moroccan citizens. However, the interest of call center employers shows to be different from that of the government as they recruit numerous non Moroccans anyway. This situation leads to employment of many sub-Saharan national despite a high unemployment rate among Moroccans and to many different ways of circumventing the law.

Migrants’ employment conditions in call centers

7 Employment conditions vary a lot among centers. However, with the exception of Senegalese nationals who have the same employment rights as Moroccans, only few sub-Saharan call center workers get an officially recognised work contract. One major reason for this is the Moroccan labour code which makes it difficult for call centers to legally employ sub-Saharan nationals other than Senegalese (or spouses of Moroccan citizens) if they work in the most common position of a « téléopérateur » or « téléconseiller », i.e. the person that talks to clients on the phone. In sum, the practice ranges from not giving a contract at all and paying cash to giving contracts that are recognised by the Ministry of Labour and that include all social security payments. The practice does not necessarily depend on the size of the center.
Some small centers give contracts to their sub-Saharan employees and pay social security contributions while some big and well known centers don’t allow their employees to take a copy of their contract home and ask them to sign pay slips in the center without handing out a copy to the employee. The aim of these call centers seems to be to not leave any traces of the employment of sub-Saharan nationals. In consequence, the workers are unsure what kind of contract they have signed and if health insurance and taxes are taken from their salary or not. Other centers give internship contracts to their employees, transfer their salaries to bank accounts, pay health insurance and social security contributions to the CNSS (caisse nationale de sécurité sociale), taxes are taken from the employees’ salaries - which means that their situation is a good example of what some authors call « semi-legal » (Kubal 2012). Semi-legality, as Kubal (2012) uses it, refers to the many different nuances that exist between the often used simple dichotomy of « legal / illegal » with reference to migrants and their relation to the law. For example, while a migrant might not have the right to work, he or she might still pay taxes, insurance contributions and sign work contracts as is the case for many sub-Saharan call center workers in Morocco.

Some centers request from their sub-Saharan employees that their papers are « en règle », i.e. that they have a valid residence permit. This causes a problem for many migrants since a work contract and a rental agreement are required to get a residence permit. A common practice of those workers is to sign in private educational institutions so they officially have a status as a student and can ask for a student residence permit. This can be quite costly for the concerned « students » as private educational institutions ask up to 2 000 dirhams (around 180 €) for inscription.

**Migrants’ background and working conditions**

Sub-Saharan nationals working in call centers in Morocco have various backgrounds, are overwhelmingly in their twenties and come from West or Central African countries. The most represented nationalities seem to be Senegalese, Cameroonian, Congolese and Ivorian. Some are current students wanting to earn money beside their studies, others are former students waiting to find a job that fits their university education while others again come to Morocco to earn some money and find out about possibilities that the country can offer them. Educational backgrounds range from uncompleted high school to university degrees. Most see their work in call centers as a temporary situation which helps them earn some money for a certain goal or until a better opportunity is found. However, specifically Senegalese nationals come to Morocco explicitly in order to work in call centers and to many migrants their call center job means they can send back remittances to their families. Among Senegalese employees, there are numerous ones who used to work in call centers in Senegal before but chose to migrate to Morocco since payment was much higher there.

Like employment practices, working conditions vary a lot between centers and many interviewees mention the routine they feel from their daily work. Adding to the routine, a major concern mentioned by interviewees is the stress they experience regularly. In order to reach the target number of sales or successful calls that call agents are required to do, supervisors closely monitor the activities of subordinated staff and immediately give feedback or ask for personal meetings if they are not satisfied by communication techniques or sales numbers. Some supervisors send messages with feedback and
suggestions to the screen of a call agent while he or she is talking to a client. This constant control creates a feeling of stress to employees, especially if supervisors mention that they might be released if sales figures do not go up.

Job stability varies and depends, next to an employee’s sales ability, on the center. Some Senegalese migrants who have work contracts and are employed in big and well-known centers that have long time relationships with their partner companies in Europe have had their jobs for several years and are likely to keep it. Other interviewees who used to work in call centers that do not give proper contracts report about being laid off with one day’s notice and being asked to write a letter of resignation themselves if they wish to receive the last month’s salary.

For some migrants, however, their main concern is to keep the job they started and getting their salary at the end of the month. Specifically in what are commonly called « small centers » in Casablanca, i.e. centers that are known to accept various nationalities without giving contracts to their employees, migrants report about difficulties of staying employed. When starting a new job in a call center, workers usually get a short training on techniques how to talk to their potential customers on the phone and about the product they are going to sell.

At times, workers do the training and start their calls to potential customers but are fired after only a few weeks, sometimes without receiving any payment at all or a lower sum than was agreed on originally. It is obvious that centers take advantage of the informal employment situation and fire as they like without regarding workers’ rights or the personal situation of their employees. Some migrants continue searching for a stable call center jobs for months, starting in various centers and being sent off after the training or a few weeks work.

Signs of segmentation?

How does this snapshot of migrants’ work in Morocco relate to explanations on labour market integration in the literature? One approach to explain minorities’ integration into the labour market is that of labour market segmentation and of dual labour markets. Processes of labour market segmentation refer to the fact that people’s chances of getting jobs are not equal and do not only depend on their human capital but also their gender, race, ethnicity and legal status.

Some have defined segmentation as “...the failure of the labour market to treat its participants even-handedly, in that it accords significantly different opportunities to otherwise comparable people” (Ryan 1984, in Leontaridi 1998 p. 77).

One of the well-known predecessors of the segmentation approach is Micheal Piore (1979) who posited that international migration is caused by a permanent demand for immigrant labour that is inherent to the economic structure of developed countries. In his studies on the functioning of labour markets and migrants’ positions within them, Piore draws on the concept of dual labour markets and combines it with several other arguments. The dual labour market hypothesis posits that the labour market is split into a capital intensive primary sector and a labour intensive secondary sector – which gives rise to a divided labour market and creates distinctions among workers. The primary sector of the labour market is characterised by stable jobs where career advances are possible. Jobs in the secondary sector are unsecured and usually lie at the bottom of the
job hierarchy. Jobs that migrants are concentrated in tend, according to Piore, to be unskilled, low paying and to carry inferior social status. They often involve hard or unpleasant working conditions, rarely offer chances of advancement toward better-paying, more attractive job opportunities and are usually performed in an unstructured work environment, involving informal relationships between supervisor and subordinate.

While today the idea is regarded as too simplistic and migrants are thought to be found in different labour markets that are part of one continuum, it is Piore's understanding of the coexistence of lasting rates of unemployment together with a demand for migrant labour and his explanations about why migrants can be found in these jobs that seem interesting in the Moroccan case. In order to further explain segmentation phenomena, Piore draws on migrants' motivations: while native workers are associated with motivational problems in these jobs since they carry little prestige and give a small salary, migrant workers do not necessarily face the same problem, since they come as target earners and, in the beginning of their migratory career, keep the origin country as social reference.

The unemployment in Morocco has been high for many years, specifically among the youth, but the economy asks for foreign workers, specifically if we look at call centers (and some other areas like the construction sector). Jobs in call centers, as recruiters describe their experiences, are not seen as proper jobs by Moroccans and are often not accepted as a good way of breadwinning.

Some university graduates refuse jobs as call center agents. Migrants, many of whom dispose of a university degree make their way to Morocco in order to do this work and can be considered target earners. Many migrants have a specific goal in mind and have a family in their origin country that depends on them or don’t have any family support to ensure their survival in Morocco.

The working conditions in some centers recall what Piore describes as secondary sector jobs: they involve unpleasant working conditions, do not dispose an outlook for career advances and are unsecured, mainly due to the legal situation for foreign workers. However, this is not the case in all centers and specifically Senegalese nationals can be found in more secure positions where, on top of regular contracts, advancement to a better position within the company is possible.

A point that is specific to the Moroccan setting is that of language in call center work. Unlike the jobs that Piore refers to in his work and migrant jobs that are often taken as examples in other works referring to segmentation theory (cleaning, jobs in hotels, nursing), call center work requires some skills that are not a given ability for all Moroccans, i.e. fluency in the French language. Call center staff in most cases does not require specific diploma and high school graduation (baccalauréat) is not systematically asked for, however, fluent French is a must in the overwhelming part of call centers.

While schooling in (francophone) sub-Saharan countries is exclusively in French and French language fluency is therefore not considered a special skill, this proves to be different in Morocco where schooling is overwhelmingly in Arabic. The question is in how far we can qualify call center work as low skilled as is usually the case with jobs analysed in segmentation approaches. We should also ask whether this specificity of the French language in this setting is linked to some positive stigmatisation of sub-Saharan migrants. Stigmatisation is often seen as one factor that contributes segmentation and the concentration of migrants in certain jobs. Among call center recruiters in Morocco, sub-
Saharan migrants seem to have the reputation of speaking good French which could contribute to migrants being easily recruited in call centers.

Call center work in Morocco also does not figure among the lowest paid jobs as is the case with the jobs analysed and argued by Piore with regard to native workers’ motivation. The average salary is usually around 3 500 dirhams (if centers pay as promised) while the minimum salary is about 2 200 dirhams. It needs to be taken into account if we want to analyse motivational factors of employees and social status of the job.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


