Migration is increasingly affecting women too. This has not always been the case. The fact that younger men migrated over considerable distances more easily than women led, particularly during the historic migratory movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, to a surplus of men in the host regions.

The aspects of migration are also explained by Jürgen Leib, Günter Mertins and Karl-Heinz Dehler in their book “Bevölkerungsgeographie” (Population geography). However, according to the United Nations Human Development Report, women accounted for 49.2% of global migratory movements in 2005. The increase is particularly noticeable in Africa, where the percentage of female migrants rose from 43.1% in 1960 to 47.8%. Whereas, in the past, female migratory movements were inhibited by misogynistic legal and social obstacles, women’s right to mobility is now increasingly acknowledged.

The repercussions of such trends are also making themselves felt in Germany, where more and more African women are finding a new home. According to the German Federal Statistical Office, out of a total of 271,431 Africans living in Germany in 2010, only 117,510, i.e. 43%, were women. However, analysed by region, it emerges that there were considerably more female migrants than male from East Africa, for instance, (21,396 compared with 16,775) and the same applied to certain countries of origin, such as Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ghana.
The cramped quarters of Awa Karoak and her children, migrants from the Ivory Coast, measure just nine square metres. She is trying to make a new life for herself in the Moroccan capital, Rabat.
Morocco is a popular transit point for emigrants from countries south of the Sahara. This young woman from the Congo has found temporary lodging with a family in Rabat.
As the role of women in international migratory movements comes increasingly to the fore, so the debate on gender mainstreaming that aims to achieve gender equality at all levels of society recedes into the background. This is because, if male and female migration are assumed to have the same underlying causes, making a gender-specific distinction is of limited interest in scientific terms. There is no point in focusing on female migration unless it can be linked to more gender-specific features than push factors such as poverty and pull factors such as better prospects in terms of living standard and career.

A study of African women in North-Rhine Westphalia by Nadine Sieveking proves that this is indeed the case. She concludes that women’s migration paths differ from those of men. Whereas, for example, reuniting the family is a priority for women, men emigrate primarily to give their families better and more secure livelihoods and living conditions. Since men and women have different reasons for migrating, they often face divergent obstacles.

According to experts, the growing proportion of African women in international migratory movements is partly due to socio-cultural, religious, economic and political changes in their regions of origin. The improvement in education opportunities alone is giving women easier access to information and resources. This enhances their chances of competing successfully in the international education and labour markets as well, and opens up perspectives beyond the traditional role of housewife and mother. Even though reuniting the family is still the main motivation for female migration, women are embarking on studies or taking up employment in the host country so that they can earn a living.

Although the schooling, training and international mobility of women are now more readily accepted in many African societies, one gender-specific difference that remains is access to resources. This is an obstacle to African women’s self-development and independence, and so they also see migration as a means of liberation, allowing them to escape the control of family and society. Apart from providing an opportunity to gain qualifications, it also helps them to emancipate themselves from the patriarchal system.

For many women, migration opens the door to a new world of greater equality but it also has its shadowy side, with risks like human trafficking, abuse and exploitation at the workplace. This is especially true in the absence of any legal and secure form of labour migration. A report by an expert meeting of the African Union (AU) therefore calls for the recognition of gender-specific obstacles to international migration and special protection for women’s rights. However, despite the obstacles, there is no stopping them: women are on the move!