

## Gender differences in naturalization among Congolese migrants in Belgium

Why are women more likely to acquire Belgian citizenship?

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### Background and objectives

Migrants from DR Congo are currently the largest population from sub-Saharan Africa living in Belgium. Since the early 1990s, they have more than doubled, from around 15 000 in 1991 to more than 30 000 in 2006 (Schoonvaere, 2010). This increase in numbers of Congolese migrants results in large part from the growing numbers of asylum seekers from DR Congo and the slowing down of returns since the early 1990s, which coincide with the political and economic crises in DR Congo (Schoumaker *et al.*, 2010; Sumata, 2002).

The number of Congolese migrants who have acquired Belgian citizenship has also increased drastically (quadrupled) since the early 1990s, from 4 000 in 1991 to more than 18 000 in 2006. In relative terms, the percentage of Congolese migrants with Belgian citizenship grew from 27% (1991) to 61% (2006). This rapid increase is thought to result partly from changes in laws in 1999, which facilitated access to Belgian nationality<sup>1</sup> - and to the deteriorating political and economic conditions in DR Congo that have diminished the prospects of return. The acquisition of citizenship of the host country is often considered as an indicator of integration (Vasileva and Sartori, 2008), and this positive trend also reflects to some extent an improvement of the integration of Congolese migrants in Belgium.

Interestingly, males and females migrants have not contributed to the same extent to the increasing trend in acquisition of Belgian citizenship. Data from the population register indicate that female migrants from DR Congo have been more much likely to change their nationality than their male counterparts (Schoonvaere, 2010). A recent survey among Congolese migrants in Belgium (MAFE survey) confirm the large gender gap in the probability of changing nationality, and the greater weight of women in the overall increasing trend in naturalization.

In this paper, we explore gender differences in naturalization among migrants from DR Congo in Belgium. First, we measure gender differences in probabilities of acquiring Belgian citizenship using two data sources (population register and survey among Congolese migrants in Belgium). We then test several hypotheses to explain the higher rate of naturalization among Congolese women compared to their male counterparts. This is done using a quantitative biographic survey among Congolese migrants in Belgium and in-depth interviews with 20 Congolese migrants (half males and half females, half with Congolese nationality and half with Belgian nationality).

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the minimum length of legal stay before applying for Belgian citizenship was reduced to three years, compared to seven years before 1999 (Schoonvaere, 1999).

## Gender and change of citizenship: a brief literature review

Empirical literature on the effect of gender on naturalization has shown contrasted results. Research among Algeria-born people in France indicates that females were more likely to apply for naturalization than their males counterparts (Kofman, 2000). Akbari (2008) also showed that females from developing countries (excluding Mexico) in the US were more likely (odds ratio around 1.25) to naturalize than their male counterparts (controlling for various socio-economic variables) (see also Yang, 1994). Similar results were found among migrants from several Asian countries (China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam) living in the US, but the opposite was found for women from the Philippines (Yang, 2002). In Canada, DeVoretz and Pivnenko (2008) found that males were more likely to acquire Canadian citizenship than their male counterparts. In Switzerland, Wanner and D'Amato (2003) indicate that the differences between males and females have changed over time.

The theoretical literature also suggests ambiguous effects of gender on acquisition of citizenship. The differences between males and females can be traced to differences in costs and benefits associated with changing citizenship (Yang, 1994; Alvarez, 1987), as well as to differences in the requirements of naturalization and the likelihood to fulfill these requirements. Some arguments suggest that the benefits of acquiring the citizenship of the destination country are greater for males than for females, mainly because males may be “more likely to work at jobs where citizenship may be an advantage” (Yang, 1994, p. 455). Other arguments suggest that females should be more likely to acquire the citizenship of the host country. In this paper, we explore the following hypotheses to explain the higher propensity of migrant women from DR Congo to acquire Belgian citizenship.

*Vulnerability hypothesis.* This hypothesis suggests that the benefits of changing citizenship are greater among females than among their male counterparts because of their greater vulnerability (Alvarez, 1987; Yang, 1994). Alvarez (1987, p.341), working on Hispanic women in the United States, suggests that “citizenship means freedom from repressive occupations and/or domineering spouses”. Yang’s results in the United States were also interpreted as providing “mild support for the hypothesis that women have stronger motivations than men to acquire citizenship in order to free themselves from repressive marriages or occupations” (Yang, 1994, p. 472). Congolese women may be more vulnerable than males in various respects. This is apparent notably in the high percentage of single mothers (Schoonvaere, 2010) which has increased over time.

*Requirements hypothesis.* Females may be more likely to change nationality because they meet the requirements more easily than their male counterparts. While the requirements are currently the same for males and females<sup>2</sup>, females may be more likely to meet some requirements. For instance, obtaining Belgian citizenship is facilitated by the fact of having worked for several years with a *A work permit*. Congolese women are over-represented in some jobs affected by shortages (notably nurses), and may have easier access to the labor market than their male counterparts. In contrast, males are much more likely to start their stay as students, and may have less relevant work experience than females. Women may also be more likely to obtain citizenship through marriage with a Belgian national, which could explain part of the differences between males and females.

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<sup>2</sup> Since 1984, males and females have to meet the same requirements (Centre pour l'égalité des chances, 2008).

*Return hypothesis.* One of the benefits of changing nationality is to acquire political rights of the host country, as well as to gain access to certain types of jobs (Yang, 1994). However, given that dual citizenship is not allowed for people from Congolese origin<sup>3</sup>, acquiring Belgian nationality also means losing the rights associated with the Congolese citizenship (political rights, access to some types of jobs, e.g. civil servants). Reintegration in the host country may thus be hampered by having lost the Congolese nationality. Preliminary qualitative work suggests that males are more willing to return than their female counterparts<sup>4</sup>. They also commonly seem to have political ambitions in their origin country. Our hypothesis is that the cost of losing Congolese nationality is greater among males than among females.

These hypotheses should not be viewed as competing. For instance, it may be that females are more likely meet the requirements, and at the same time that the costs of changing citizenship are higher among males than among females. We also suggest that there may be strategy of sharing the costs and benefits linked to the acquisition of citizenship: one of the partners (more often the wife) will obtain the benefits of changing citizenship for herself and her children, while the other partner (the husband) would limit the costs by keeping the Congolese nationality.

## **Data & methods**

Three data sources are used. Data from the Belgian population register are used to compute rates of naturalization among Congolese migrants. The major strength of this data source is that it is exhaustive, and allows computing naturalization rates among all migrants. However, a serious limitation of register data is that very few variables can be used to predict naturalization.

Survey data is used to compute the probabilities of changing nationality, to measure differences in probabilities of Belgian citizenship acquisition among males and females, and to test several hypotheses for explaining the differences among males and females. The data come from surveys conducted in Belgium and in DR Congo in 2009-2010 as part of the MAFE project<sup>5</sup>. The Belgian sample comprises of 278 Congolese migrants (who left DR Congo at age 18 or more) living in Belgium (including irregular migrants and asylum seekers). The Congolese sample (which will be soon available) comprises non-migrants (around 1200) as well as return migrants (around 400) living in Kinshasa. The sample of return migrants from Belgium living in Kinshasa will be merged with migrants currently living in Belgium<sup>6</sup>.

One of the strength of the MAFE surveys is that they include very rich retrospective data, covering notably migration histories (including return migrations and failed returns), histories of migration attempts to other countries, employment histories, family histories, as well as

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<sup>3</sup> It is forbidden in DR Congo, and allowed only for some nationalities in Belgium.

<sup>4</sup> The fact that males were more willing to return has been observed in various contexts.

<sup>5</sup> MAFE is an international research project on Migration between Africa and Europe, coordinated by INED. Event history data was collected in three African countries (Senegal, Ghana, DR Congo) and six major European destination countries of African migration (France, Spain, Italy, The Netherlands, United Kingdom and Belgium) as part of the project ([mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/](http://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/)). The data was collected by the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, and by the University of Kinshasa in DR Congo.

<sup>6</sup> The same questionnaires were used in Africa and in Europe, allowing merging data files from several countries

‘administrative histories’ (work permits, stay permits, changes of nationality). These data allow computing time-varying indicators of vulnerability (economic conditions, family structure, housing...), work status (type of employment, work permit...), and return attempts that can be used to test our hypotheses.

Discrete-time event history models will be used to measure the trends and the determinants of naturalization among Congolese migrants. These models allow including time-varying variables as well as fixed variables. Table 1 summarizes the main variables that will be used in the event history models.

Table 1. Summary of variables used in explain gender differences in naturalization, MAFE surveys

Variables
Dependent variable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acquisition of Belgian citizenship</li> </ul>
Fixed variables
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Age at arrival in Belgium</li> <li>• Number of children in Belgium / in DR Congo</li> <li>• Indicators of perceived vulnerability</li> <li>• Expected length of stay at arrival</li> </ul>
Time-varying variables
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Years since arrival in Belgium (duration variable)</li> <li>• Duration of legal stay in Belgium</li> <li>• Years of employment in Belgium / type of work permit</li> <li>• Nationality of partner at marriage</li> <li>• Perceived economic conditions</li> <li>• Family structure (single without children, single mothers/fathers, married with children...)</li> <li>• Attempts of returns to DR Congo or migration to another country</li> </ul>

In-depth interviews among Congolese migrants will be conducted from September to November 2010. The interviews will cover the three main hypotheses (vulnerability, requirements and return), as well as the differences of meanings of citizenships between males and females, and the possible strategy of sharing costs and benefits of citizenship acquisition in the couples.

### **Preliminary results**

Both population register data and MAFE-survey data show that Congolese women are significantly more likely to acquire Belgian citizenship than their male counterparts. Life table estimates (using MAFE Data<sup>7</sup>, Figure 1) indicate that ultimately almost all Congolese migrant women acquire Belgian citizenship (95% of women have acquired Belgian citizenship after 35 years of stay), while a significant proportion of males do not change their nationality (around 40% after 35 years of stay). Event history models also show that the overall increase in

<sup>7</sup> These preliminary results are based on data collected in Belgium. Further analyses will include data on returnees from Belgium living in DR Congo.

probabilities of citizenship acquisition has largely been driven by the increase among females (Figure 2). In contrast, males' probabilities of becoming Belgians have been relatively stable since the early 1990s.

Figure 1 : percentage of congolese migrants who had not acquired Belgian citizenship, by number of years since their arrival in Belgium (source of data : MAFE survey)

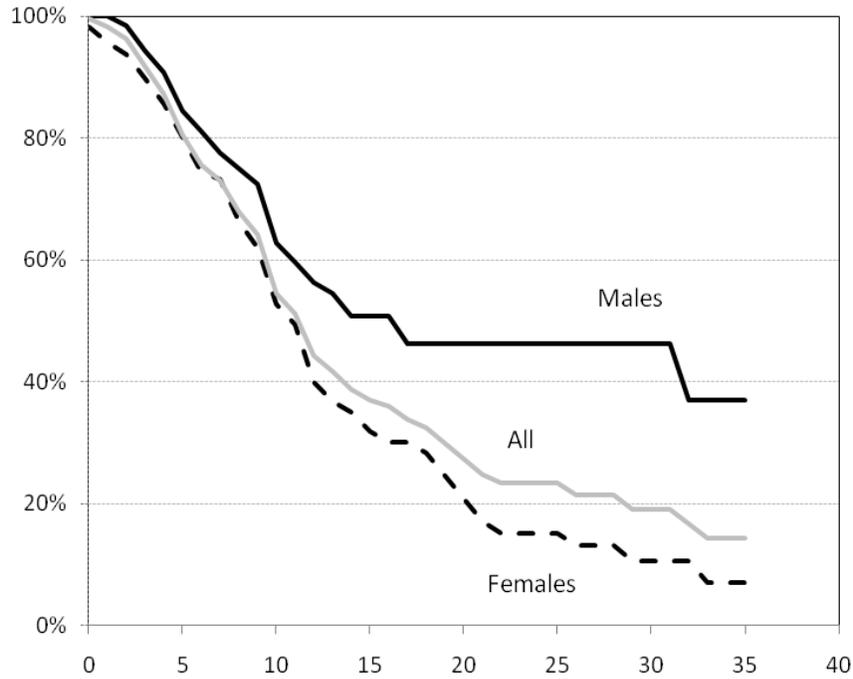


Figure 2 : Probability of acquisition of Belgian citizenship among congolese migrants (controlling for duration of stay) since the 1980s (source of data : MAFE survey)



Preliminary quantitative models suggest that neither the vulnerability hypothesis, nor the requirement hypothesis fully explain differences among males and females. Further analyses will use more refined indicators of vulnerability, and will integrate indicators for the return hypothesis. In-depth interviews will provide

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