

Negotiating access and belonging: Recounting the lived experiences and challenges of migrant women returnees in Nigeria

Samson Adewumi

Abstract

The study explores the lived experiences of women migrant returnees in Nigeria. It aims to highlight the motivation and push factors for migration, understand the challenges and lived experiences of migrant women, and appraise their integration and sense of belonging. Through referrals and purposive sampling, a total of 20 migrant women were recruited and interviewed. The inclusion criteria include those who have lived and worked in the diaspora for a minimum of 5 years and 2 years as a returnee in Nigeria, respectively. The exclusion criteria involve women who migrated with families and those considered professionals. Themes were identified with the NVivo (v.12) qualitative software and the Content Qualitative Analytical tool employed to interpret these themes. The need for migration for many women includes access to improved economic life, infrastructure, and amenities, means of sustaining families in the home country, and improved social and political security. The lived experience of women migrants in the diaspora includes sexual harassment, rape, forced and inhumane labour practices, low wages, isolation and depression, and xenophobia. For many returnees, the challenge includes unemployment, integration, family support, inflation, and financial insolvency. The quest for integration and belonging is limited for many returnees. The paper argues for more robust migration policies and a well-established policy of integration for migrant returnees. The study recommends a more monitoring effort of the activities of the Nigerian border. This recommendation becomes crucial with the porous borders in Nigeria through which people, including women, migrate to other countries illegally and undocumented.

Keywords: *women, vulnerability, labour, migration, well-being*

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About the author:

Researcher, Department of Sociology, University of Zululand, South Africa. Email: adewumiS@unizulu.ac.za

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1. Introduction

The idea of women migration had long remained unsearched with a large focus on men. The traditional idea of migration was largely conceived as a reserve for men (Nhengu, 2020), even with evidence of women being present and involved as dependent in the migration journey either as spouses, wives, or daughters (Oucho, 2011; Arora & Majumder, 2021). The continuous spread of civilization and global awareness has continued to increase women's autonomy and independence for migration, although major differences in migration challenges including discrimination, exploitation, abuse, and other health-associated risks exist between men and women, with women on the lowest end (Ola, 2023). The need to recognize the role of women in migration should not only dwell on characterizing data by sex but also lay a foundation for understanding the crucial role of gender relations at every phase of the migration cycle.

Migration research is often interrogated through the financial and economic benefits narration. However, analyzing women migration should consider other social interpretations including gender norms and culture. Migration can be empowering for women through employment and education opportunities (Lagakos, 2020). In contrast, women's migration studies show evidence of vulnerabilities rather than opportunities for many migrant women. Migration for many ignites vulnerabilities in terms of human trafficking, sexual abuse, unemployment, gender discrimination, and segregation (Oyebamiji, 2014; Paynter, 2024). Nigeria is no exception. For instance, the Nigeria has high drive of women migration as compared to the male counterpart. While this might be a wave of change globally, the Nigerian explanation calls for intervention. The National Bureau of Statistics in the last quarter of 2022 estimates that about 51.5 percent of women migrants left the country with a differential effect of 48.5 percent of males. Women migrate like any other migrants for economic prosperity, access to basic needs, and social and political stability. Recent trends in migration studies reveal that women migrate because of the decreasing cultural norm of dependence on the male gender, and more importantly, the autonomy and freedom enhanced by civilization. Thus, while it cannot be entirely neglected that many migrant women are making social and economic progress, there is still evidence of depression, psychological challenges, marital conflicts, and financial insolvency among many migrant women (Akanle, 2022). This forms part of the nub of this study.

Available studies on women's migration are lacking in context leaving out issues of integration, especially for migrant women returnees. For instance, available women migration studies with a Nigerian perspective include Oucho's (2012) analysis of migration decision-making of Kenyan and Nigerian women in London through cultural, family, and network interaction. Oyebamiji's (2014) thesis assessed life across borders of Nigerian women immigrants in Durban, South Africa, and experiences of migration and survival of Nigerian women (Akanle, 2022). Other studies include Worlu's (2011) immigrant Nigerian women's self-empowerment through consumption as cultural resistance; the leadership experience of immigrant Nigerian women in New York City (Muoka, 2016), and a more recent study on gendered asylum in the black Mediterranean: two Nigerian migrant experience of reception in Italy (Paynter, 2024). Other studies include rural-urban migration in developing countries (Selod & Shilpi, 2021) and COVID-19 and migration (Fielding & Ishikawa, 2021). Without a doubt that there are sparse studies on women migration, the bulk of available studies have been conducted outside the Nigeria setting, although with Nigeria's focus and lack the interrogation of the challenges and dynamics of integration for women migrant returnees. This research gap conveys the originality of this paper. In part, the objectives of the paper are to understand the push and motivational factors for women migration, the lived experiences and challenges, and the implication of integration, access, and belonging for women migrant returnees. This study intends to contribute to migration studies through the interrogation of integration, access, and a sense of belonging for many migrant women returnees in Nigeria.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Push factors for migration

Recent changes in economic and social structure accept the interplay and gender involvement of both men and female in migration. Advances in women's participation in migration can be attributed to two main forces. The first phase explains the continuous deprivation and declining quality of life, with predominant effects on women at the rural level of society (Popoola et al., 2017). The second was the increasing spate of separation and divorce that seems to have eroded the trust many women have in the institution of marriage (Amare et al., 2021; Aghatise, 2004). Thus, these two antecedents were the major events that

characterized women's migration beginning in the 1970s in Africa (Rufai et al., 2019). In recent times, women migrants have now improved in terms of their social and financial standing with the ability to migrate from rural to urban areas. This development creates a new pathway and change in the social system and an alteration in communal worldviews concerning the responsibilities of women in societal development, with the understanding that these roles can be more effectively managed by searching for opportunities through migration (Bourne & Solomos, 2007; Fielding & Ishikawa, 2021).

Baudasse and Bazillier (2014) argue that gender inequality and labour market conditions represent the issues that motivate women's migration. To address this, it is important to promote gender equality and high-skilled women as a means of dissuading migration. In essence, women with high-skilled qualities are likely to migrate (Baudasse & Bazillier, 2014). In contrast, recent commentary suggests that low-skilled women form the bulk of migration in most African countries (Sözer, 2021). This reinforces the arguments about the high influx of women migrants with low skills through undocumented and illegal migration pathways (Sajuyigbe & Fadeyibi, 2017).

A critical reflection on migration data reveals an increasing trend of women migration compared to men in some parts of African countries (International Labour Organisation, 2020). Similar data also explains that women account for about half of the global migrant population (ILO, 2020). These explanations demonstrate and uphold some underlying drives spurring women's migration globally. Studies have also shown that women, often migrate to seek and improve their autonomy status, harness, and develop human capital prowess, and self-confidence, including the desire to create and establish some semblance of authority in the families as well as among friends and communities (Achenbach, 2018; Sözer, 2021; Amare et al., 2021). This self-worth tendency, according to Sithole and Dinbabo (2016), explains the psychological desire for migration, a more nuanced drive from the commonly known economic reasons. Migration can be used as leverage for women's employment and access to education and making independent decisions. However, this independence can further exacerbate the vulnerabilities of migrant women (Abizu, 2018; Arora & Majumder, 2021).

Women's preference of destination may also be impacted by inequitable social institutions that inhibit their economic, social, and political potential. Gender standards may

affect women's migration by defining their cultural expectations. Discriminatory social institutions in foundation countries may affect women's choice to migrate in different ways. Women's decision to migrate might be supported by a need to get free from gender-specific discriminatory practices. For instance, women may migrate from sexual molestation and abuse, and others from social stigma and the pressure of being separated or divorced as a woman (Achenbach, 2018; Amirapua et al., 2022). However, gender discrimination in social institutions may restrict the ability of women to migrate as well (Adepoju, 2006; Ajaero & Madu, 2014). For instance, a woman who depends solely on her spouse may find it extremely hard to plan migration.

2.2. Women migration in perspective: issues and challenges

The glass-ceiling effects manifested by cultural and social norms have continued to put women migrants at the underneath rung of the occupational pyramid (Amrita & Mishra, 2011; Berhanu & White, 2000). Studies show that a large constituent of undocumented migrant women are employed as housemaids and factory workers (Bongard & Nakajima, 2015; Dinbabo & Badewa, 2020). These women are exposed to sexual harassment, rape, defaults in payment, and other forms of physical abuse and assault (Lo lagoon, 2014; Bau et al., 2022). Women migration represents an element of gender discrimination. Women migrants encounter different challenges more often than men in the process of migration and integration (Masanja, 2010). For migrant women returnees who are empowered with new perspectives and realities, there is evidence of social challenges as a requirement for adjustment to the new realities of their origin (Luisa et al., 2014; Fielding & Ishikawa, 2021).

Migrant women suffer healthcare accessibility challenges and have limited opportunities to integrate socially and politically (Kan & Mukhopadhyay, 2022). There is evidence indicating that a substantial number of migrant women have skills and educational qualifications that are either not recognized or in tandem with the kind of job they do (Mberu, 2005). Women migrants tend to settle for jobs in the informal sector more than men that are largely unprotected from labour legislation (Baudasse & Bazillier, 2014; Jolof et al., 2022). Destinations of most migrant women treat them as workers with sparse understanding or no legal rights; a recipe that has increased the spate of abuse and other forms of molestation (Jensen, 2017). Migrant women face racism and discrimination. They are generally conceived by locals as intruders who have come to take their job opportunities.

While migrant women often take jobs neglected by the locals, they have been evidence of attacks and racism against migrant women (Kan & Mukhopadhyay, 2022; Lagakos, 2020).

Patriarchal dominations in most African societies where migrant women are domiciled generate some expected role behaviours from women such as perceiving and expecting women to be more private. These views of African women as traditional homemakers have been challenged by the feminist movement that assumes the role expectations of women are characterized by enslavement. The role expectations of women in the broad society are perceived as discriminatory with ensuing psychological challenges including mental distress for many migrant women (Derks, 2013; Mueller et al., 2023).

Women represent most migrants in the cohorts of persons with low educational and skills qualities, who migrate undocumented, compelled by economic demands and expectations. In effect, many of them end up with unsafe and indecent employment that is devoid of human safety and dignity (Mendola & Pera, 2021). Women migrants are more likely to be exposed to physical and verbal abuse, restrictive ties that constrain their potential to a particular employer, and conditions in movement, association, and remuneration that are unfair when compared with the work rendered (Sonalde & Banerji, 2008).

Migrating to a new clime for economic reasons no doubt depicts strain and vulnerabilities to migrants, irrespective of gender. However, the biological characteristics of women make them more vulnerable to sexual and gender-associated violence and assaults (Sharma, 2011). These abuses have a multi-layer impact on women's well-being including unplanned pregnancies, sexual infections, and other health-related problems (Pablo, 2010; Selod & Shilpi, 2021). Migrant women are at risk of different forms of stress and mental disorders compared to men (Omoyeni, 2013; Nzabamwita & Dinbabo, 2022). The fact that women fall in the greater part of the population who accept insecure and poorly remunerated work further exposes them to more exploitative conditions. Thus, it is safe to argue that migrant women are largely constrained and exploited in terms of the societal benchmark and how women are overly perceived by social, economic, and cultural interpretations.

2.3 Vulnerability Theory: Theoretical Explanation

The main assumption of the vulnerability thesis validates the position that people or individuals in a certain situational context can become weak and exposed to the vulnerability of risk and uncertainty (Mackenzie et al., 2014). The vulnerability analysis can be lengthened to explain the motivational factors for undocumented migration with the risk of exposure to

abuse, torture, and economic hardships (Mendola & Pera, 2021). Women migrants are often exposed and vulnerable to certain unhealthy situations including prostitution, and forced labour work lacking decency and dignity, which can be explained by situational factors such as poverty, socio-economic constraints, deprivation, and the challenge of social support (Gilodi et al., 2021). The notion behind the lack of opportunities, increased economic hardships, and the expectations of living a fulfilling economic life are all debates around the triggers for migration for many women (Mendola & Pera, 2021). It is safe to argue that women migrants can be considered vulnerable to migration challenges because of their socio-economic expectations and quest for an improved standard of living.

Mackenzie et al. (2014) propose different classifications of vulnerability. The idea of inherent vulnerability is conventionally classified as the intrinsic disposition of human conditions; that is, a type of vulnerability that is connected to human corporeality, dependency on others, and emotional and social nature on the one hand. On the other hand, the concept of situational vulnerability refers to the outward context and this may be affected by personal, social, political, and economic factors in which individuals live. The last phase of Mackenzie et al. (2014) classification demonstrates the inherent inequalities in social and economic status, dependency, and the push that could expose a person to being vulnerable to danger or exploitation in the context of migration.

The dialectic of inherent and situational vulnerability may be described as either dispositional or occurrent (Mackenzie et al, 2014). For example, being exploited in the real sense depends on a range of factors, including socio-economic conditions, location, and welfare, and the effect of these vulnerable factors may vary considering the causes of the vulnerability, the level of welfare provision in the country of destination among others (Nhengu, 2022). Unarguably, the socio-economic living circumstances can also impact the extent of vulnerability. Women migrants can be considered vulnerable on several layers of influence including the challenges of unemployment, the desire to create and change the social environment for the family, and the quest for improved security of lives, particularly for those migrating from conflict zones to a more secure environment.

As the global labour market continues to change with increasing labour demands across the globe, the surge in migration continues to be on the rise. Women are reportedly migrating in hordes and are often the drivers of migration in the case of family migration

(Brown, 2017). The argument perused in this paper, through the vulnerability discourse is to situate a narrative on the vulnerability of women in the context of migration and understand the myriads of factors influencing women's intention to migrate. The role of the vulnerability analysis cannot be overemphasized in the understanding of women's migration discourse. The theory is assessed in terms of its use in understanding the plight of migration, particularly among women migrants. However, the theory can be argued to have limited interpretation to the understanding of migration analysis, as not all persons, especially women become vulnerable to migration challenges.

3. Materials and Methods

The study's philosophical assumptions support the interpretive research philosophy. This is considered important to produce a qualitative understanding and interpretation of the narrative of access and belonging, and the lived experiences of migrant women returnees (Saunders et al., 2009). The need to expand the discourse of migration studies from the prism of the interrogation of negotiating access and belonging by women supports the use of the exploratory research design. The study population comprised selected migrant women returnees who currently reside in Lagos metropolis, Nigeria. A total of twenty (20) migrant women returnees were recruited. The inclusion criteria include those who have lived and worked in the diaspora for a minimum of 5 years and have lived not less than 2 years as returnees in Nigeria. The exclusion criteria, on the other hand, exclude migrant women who migrated with families and those considered professionals. This sample size appropriately justifies the tradition of qualitative study with emphasis on the use of a small sample size for deep uncovering of opinions, feelings, and expressions of research participants.

The recruitment procedures began with identifying six (6) women migrant returnees through a social welfare platform in Lagos State, Nigeria. Subsequent referrals were later made, and contacts were established with other women migrant returnee who also resides in Lagos State. After having explained the rationale of the study to all the identified migrants' women, it was discovered that only twenty (20) had the prerequisite to participate and provide in-depth insight into the research problem. The transcendental phenomenology sampling strategy was adopted. This is justified to make sense of the views and perspectives of the lived experiences of women migrant returnees. In other words, it seeks to create a

symbolic interaction of the migratory journey, lived experiences and challenges of migrant women returnees (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The migration narrations of women migrants are socially constructed and to generate appropriate meanings into these narrations, the phenomenology research design becomes justified to unearth deep qualitative meanings and insights through the semi-structured interviews approach.

The migrant women were identified from different strategic locations in Lagos State. Their characterization showed a mix of low- and middle-class Nigerians whose intention for traveling was to improve their economic conditions. Some of the low-income respondents went as far as obtaining loans to embark on the journey, while others had to save for several years in a bid to fulfill the dream of migration. African countries were the choice of migration for many migrants, except a few who migrated to other European and Middle East countries.

The study employed the semi-structured interview approach. This allows the unveiling of additional questions and ensures that clarity is given to all responses (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). An interview guide was also used to guide the flow and sequence of questions and responses (Saunders et al., 2009). The range of questions enquired probed into the motivating factors for migration; the lived experiences and the array of challenges for migrant women after returning to their home country. There are common challenges known with the interview method of data collection such as vagueness and non-clarity in responses, as well as the tendency of misunderstanding between the interviewer and respondents (Yin, 2016). These challenges were addressed in this study by ensuring that the questions were all designed in the English Language as understood by all respondents. Possible misconceptions between the respondents and interviewer were controlled by avoiding any leading and repetitive questions during the interview (Yin, 2016).

All the interviews were recorded, and additional notes were taken to further provide lucidity if ambiguity was observed. The interview commenced with a brief introduction of the aim of the study and voluntary participation was emphasized. Data quality was ensured through Trochim and Donnelly's (2007) four measures of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of data. The credibility of the qualitative data was ensured by reflecting all the opinions and views of the respondents in the analysis and results, while transferability supports the idea that the results become transferable to other contexts. The dependability was ensured by complying with all ethical

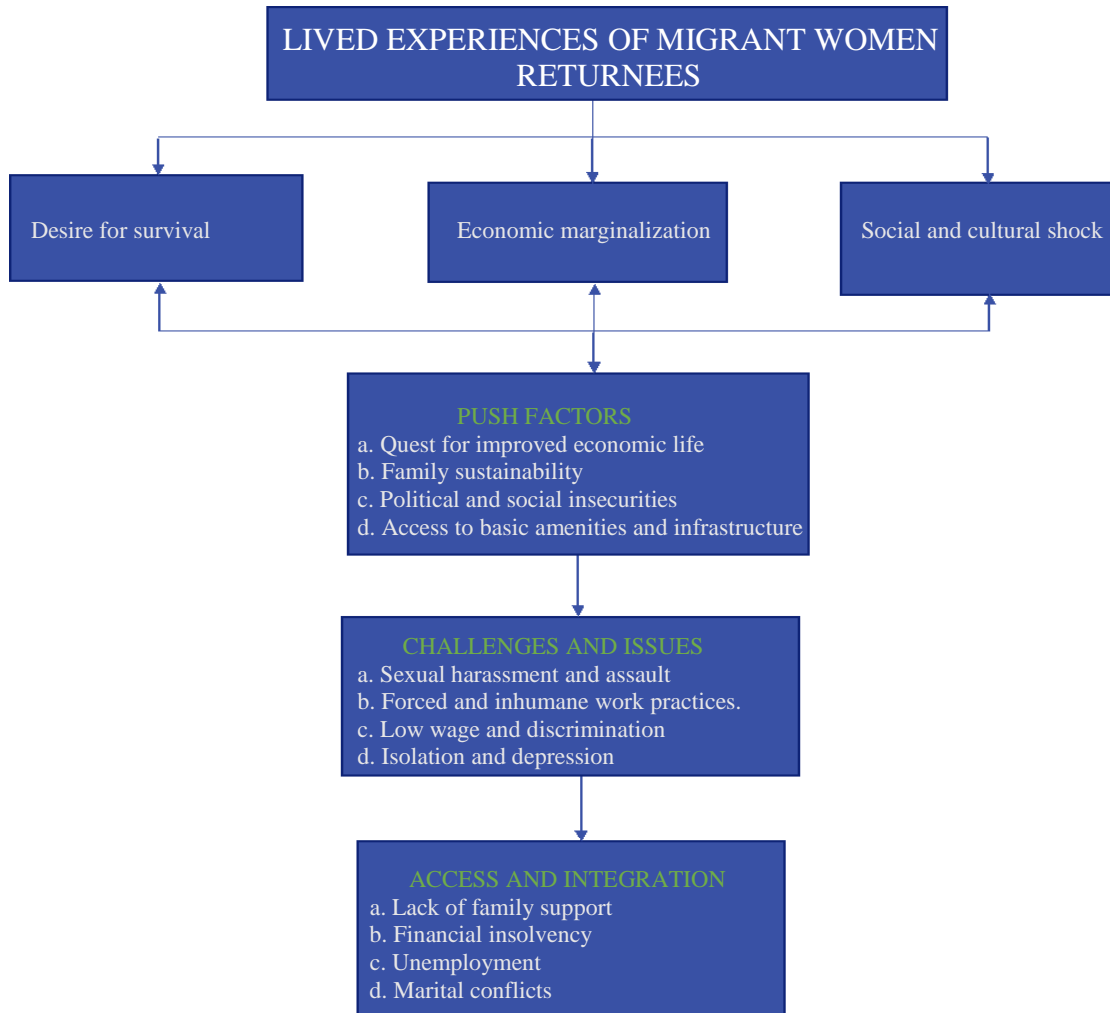
procedures. Lastly, it was ensured that there is a strong relationship between the data and results through confirmability. The NVivo (v.12) qualitative software was employed to make sense of the data by identifying relevant themes and sub-themes. The most frequently identified themes and sub-themes were further analyzed with the Content Qualitative Analytical tool. The Content Qualitative Analysis provides clear meanings and insights into the emerged themes and subthemes.

The study complied with appropriate ethical procedures in the recruitment of the respondents and conduct of the study. For instance, the anonymity and confidentiality of all respondents were strictly protected, and a consent note was shared indicating willingness to participate in the study. The questions of safety and mental well-being of all respondents were given careful consideration in a manner that the environment where the study was conducted was of high standard devoid of any harassment. In addition, all questions that could trigger an emotional undertone were avoided. Before the commencement of the study, the consent and permission of all respondents were sought and granted by signing the consent forms. The question of the physical and emotional safety of respondents was also safeguarded and given clear priority. It was ensured that the study environment was safe and free from any physical harm. In addition, all respondents were protected from any emotional harm during and after the study.

4. Results

This section explains the drive and motivating factors that compelled women to migrate, the lived experiences while in the diaspora as migrants, and the challenges of access, integration, and sense of belonging for returnees. It was demonstrated through the analysis of the import of the Vulnerability Theory in the lived experiences of women migrants, and the quest to negotiate access and belonging.

Figure 1 explicates the synopsis of the findings, revealing the interaction among compelling drive and factors that sprout the intention to migrate, the ensuing consequences and challenges, and how these relate to the issues and assumptions raised in the Vulnerability Theory.

Figure 1*Lived experiences and challenges of migrant women returnees*

Source: Author compilation, Adapted from Tade and Olaitan (2023).

4.1 Drive and motivation for migrating

Participants were asked to narrate the reasons for migrating to understand the motives why people, especially women embark on migration. It was explained by most of the participants that one of the motivating factors for migrating is the quest to have access to an improved economic life considering the low performance of the Nigerian economy. While there have been different economic policies formulated in the interest of improving the lives of Nigerians, it was explained that much of the benefits are yet to be evidenced in many Nigerians, as the challenges of economic sustainability continue to be a far cry.

Most of the participants argued that even though they are not professionals who are skilled in any professional job, they believe that migrating to other climes will offer them

more improved economic life through engaging in menial jobs and other non-professional artisans' works. This perhaps, explains the increasing number of Nigerians, especially women who against all odds want to migrate, even with little or no skill. Similarly, while the reason for migrating by many might be genuine owing to the current economic woes of Nigeria, it is, however, important to highlight that migrating without possessing any professional skills often ends with disappointments.

Rather than not, the search for economic sustainability still supports the reasons for migration. This narrative was shared by one of the participants:

I migrated for an improved economic life. I cannot afford to be quiet and stay while I cannot attend to my children's needs since I separated from their father. Their father is not financially responsible to them, and I thought since the Nigerian economy is not favourable to many of us, I thought it would be wise to migrate to work. I mean any work a woman can do since I am not skilled in any professional job. You might be wondering and surprised, but the truth for me is that I left this country because I believe nothing can make sense here again and I think most women who migrated share these ideas too.

The implication of this analysis can be drawn from the worsening situation of many migrant women who migrated illegally without adequate planning for survival. There is evidence indicating that migrant women are more susceptible to economic and psychological hardships because of poor migration planning (Arora & Majumder, 2021). The insinuation would be for migrant women to be developed in terms of skill acquisition before embarking on migration. This is important as it will aid in quick transition and integration into the labour market of destinations and tends to relieve any envisaged economic challenges.

Another participant, a single woman who used to work as a hairstylist in the Lagos metropolis shared similar sentiments as follows:

I was a hairstylist before I migrated to Libya 7 years ago. The idea was sold to me by one of my cousins that it is far better economically in Libya than in Nigeria, and you know as at then, the Nigerian economy was not at its peak again such that patronage became exceedingly low and it somehow difficult for me to feed and take care of myself. I had to sell all my equipment in a bid to raise funds for my travels. Do not forget, I was promised all manners of jobs

there and how swiftly I will recover financially. So, for me, I will say I migrated in the quest to improve my economic life.

The quest to maintain family sustainability, especially for those with aged parents was also justified by several participants. Some of them argued that they are the breadwinners of their families, and it is unlikely for them to continue with this responsibility in Nigeria. Thus, pursuing financial prosperity overseas through migration was considered the appropriate thing. Many of the respondents further contended that as the economic and social conditions of Nigeria continue to deteriorate, they must search for a green pasture. While these contentions are not far-fetched, this paper argues that the route and means of migrating seem to defile this objective, as many migrated through unsafe and undocumented pathways contrary to established international laws on migration.

Aside from the desire to provide for the elderly and parents, many migrant women highlight the need to provide for their immediate families at home, including the sustenance of their children. This narrative supports cases where the spouses are out of jobs, thus failing in their financial responsibilities to sustain the home. These testimonials reveal some sort of cultural shifts in Nigeria, where women are often not expected to take the financial responsibilities of the home, but rather provide care, nurture the family, and the development of the children. One of the participants submitted as follows:

I migrated mainly because I was tired of the promises of the Nigerian government. I cannot afford to see my elderly parents die poor like that. I migrate firstly in their interest, so I can be able to give them a good life at least before they get very old and die. I cannot withstand the fact that with all their investment in me and my siblings, I would not be able to do anything substantial for them before they die. I found that not pleasing and I felt one of the fastest ways to make it financially was to migrate as I was not finding my path here in Nigeria.

Another participant reiterated the following on the push factor of family sustenance in the home country.

My husband had been left without a job for the past 6 years and every attempt to try and get a new job has not been yielding fruit, so I had to be the one to try this time around. I tried back in Nigeria, but nothing was forthcoming. Do not forget I am not a professional and have never worked before. But with the situation of my husband, I had to embrace the opportunity to leave Nigeria to

work in another African country so that I could sustain my children and support my husband for the time being.

The responsibilities of government across the globe include the protection of lives and property and by extension the assurances of political and social security. These responsibilities are constitutionally provided by political leaders who are elected to various political offices. The consistent political and social conflicts rampaging the affairs of the country have continued to threaten the peace and stability of the country on many grounds. The sentiments shared that support their migration intentions are in tandem with the current insecurity that has held Nigeria bound in recent times. One of the dilemmas is the recent trend of kidnapping across the country. Respondents report fear of being kidnapped and paying a ransom before being released or being killed, and in most cases, ransom is being collected and victims still end up being killed. This position stems from a global concern for migration as countries with consistent insecurities also have evidence of people migrating from the insecurity zone to a safer country.

I have had many near-death experiences here in Nigeria and this was the primary reason why I migrated. You can see that the country has been overridden by attacks by Boko-haram sects and others who now kidnap as a profession. I had been a victim of kidnapping before, and I knew what I went through before my release after my family and friends rallied around to set me free with ransom. After this ugly, a friend introduced an opportunity to migrate to me and I accepted. Although the experience was largely bitter as a woman, I did that because of the uncertainties about the security of life in Nigeria.

For others, the need to have access to basic amenities and infrastructure for improved and general well-being sprouted their motive to migrate.

Everybody has their reasons for migrating. I had my business here before, so I was not doing badly. But it got to a point where my business was greatly affected by a lack of basic amenities like electricity and good roads. So, I decided to migrate to a country like the United Arab Emirates that has great basic amenities, at least to see how I can integrate and continue my business there. As you know, the experience has not been that rosy, and this is part of the reason I had to return.

4.2 Challenges and lived experiences

Many of the challenges explained by most of the participants include sexual harassment and assaults, forced and inhumane labour practices, low wages, isolation and depression, and xenophobia. Migrant women have been reported to be victims of sexual harassment and assault as migrants across the globe. Of interest lately, is the surge of sexual harassment against migrant women domiciled in some of the Northern African countries, including Libya. Migrant women have remained a subject of ridicule and are being subjected to different forms of unhealthy treatment. The Nigerian government is no doubt lacking the willpower to take decisive action as this practice continues unabated. There have been an increase in reported cases of migrant women, particularly from Nigeria who have been victims and continue to receive a dose of sexual molestation and harassment from their employers.

The analysis is supported by the continued economic woes of Nigeria and how this has continued to promote the influx of women migration. While this is evident, the trends of sexual harassment and assault against women will continue as migrant women are perceived as desperate for continued exploitation by their employers (Bau et al., 2022). Unless the Nigerian government addresses the escalating economic hardship and border control measures, women migrants will continue to migrate for survival and be exposed to several gender-based issues in their destinations.

There are many instances where migrant women who refuse to be sexually assaulted or abused are being injured and, in some cases, resulting in death. Often than not, the perpetrators are left untainted while others continue the heinous act sighting the desperation of migrant women and the economic woes in their various countries, including Nigeria. One of the participants explained her experience as follows:

When I first got to Libya, I found out that it is very common to hear how women are being sexually abused. This act is common among women who are employed as housemaids. I had a similar experience when I could not get any other job aside from being a housemaid and domestic helper. My case is not different from others. I was often sexually abused by the man who employed me and sometimes his brothers whenever the wife and others were not home. I have been injured before while I was trying to avoid his sexual advances.

Another strategy often employed to perpetuate sexual molestation and harassment against migrant women is the promise to offer unemployed migrant women jobs. Upon acceptance and understanding of the urgent need of these women, the perpetrators then begin to strike with their sexual abuse. One of the returnees from Turkey had the following testimonies to share.

My case was a bit different from other cases of sexual molestation and abuse against migrant women. When I got to Turkey, I was introduced to an agent who promised to get me a job so I could settle in as soon as possible. After meeting him, I noticed his advances toward me on the phone and how he tried to touch my body on one of the occasions I went there. He tried to force himself and have his way with me. He told me that failure to cooperate with him meant he would not be able to get me a job, and even if I went to report him, the authorities would do nothing about it because I am a foreigner.

Women migrants, and migrants in general, are often subjected to different inhumane labour practices considered not appropriate for the locals. There have been many reported cases of inhumane labour practices that migrants are being subjected to. Another perspective to understand the trend of inhumane labour practices against women migrants is the conditions and pathway of migration. For instance, many women migrate inappropriately and against globally accepted standards. In other cases, they migrate through the sea and others had to spend months through the desert before arriving at their destination. These movements are all against conventional migration policy. In essence, it is expected that migrant women survive through involvement in heinous strands of jobs, particularly because of the lack of appropriate documentation.

Yes, it was a huge risk, but I had to embark on it for survival. Upon arrival, the story was different from what we were told in Nigeria before we got there. The promise was that some jobs would be waiting for us that we would have to choose from these available jobs. It was when I got there that I knew it was all a lie and that without appropriate documentation, I could not do anything near a decent job. I ended up with some jobs that lacked any form of decency just to survive.

Many married women migrate without family and end up being alone for a long period without family bonding. For others who are yet to start a family, migrating comes with a lot of negatives including having to be alone, especially in a new climate. This

development has resulted in several depressed persons among many migrant women. Aside from the concern of depression, isolation, and leaving alone as migrants have continued to expose many women to untold hardship and abuse. The general perception that women, especially those with family must not be too separated from their family in a typical African cultural set-up has been relegated as many women continued to migrate neglecting the importance of family ties and bonding.

I left my family back home and migrated to South Africa. I must be sincere to you sometimes I often ask myself if I made the right choice or not as I continue to miss my family a lot. There are times I will be at work and all that is passing through my mind is my family. I used to miss the family ties and bonds we shared. I used to miss my two children especially. I also miss my husband as I must keep myself for him and it has not been easy. I felt I had been isolated, and I noticed depression was taking a whole on me then.

Another participant recounts through her personal experience as follows:

I fell into depression when I was in Libya. This was consistent and happened several times. I often missed my family a lot and I felt lonely and isolated. When the pressure became too much, I had to confide in a friend who suggested I visit the hospital. Upon my visit to the hospital, I was diagnosed with depression. This continues for a long time, and I begin to lose concentration on all the things I do even work. In order not to destroy my mental health, I had to come back to Nigeria.

Many migrant women are discriminated against in terms of access to health facilities and in competing for job opportunities among others. This argument shows a great deal of concern in terms of the inhumane and unjust treatment of migrants, especially women. For instance, there are shreds of evidence that migrants are competing with locals with available scarce jobs and exerting pressure on the health care system. The analysis explains the situation in many African countries. The South African case is a good example where politicians have continued to politicize the question of accountability and service delivery with frequent calls on the infringement of migrants. This situation explains the unwillingness of politicians to address issue-based discussion but rather puts migrants at the endpoint of hostility, xenophobia attacks, and discrimination.

Before I left for South Africa then, I was pregnant, and I did not know this until I got to South Africa. I commenced maternity immediately to avoid complications. At the hospital there in South Africa, I saw firsthand discrimination. I will be in the waiting room for several hours and nobody will be willing to attend to me because I am a migrant, while the locals are expressly being attended to. I could not afford to register at the private hospital because of the huge expenses, so I opted for free medical health care with the public hospital instead.

Discrimination in access to employment and unhealthy competition against migrant women has remained a serious strain for many migrant women. This position was contended with evidence of the frequency of employment discrimination against migrant women across all sectors of the economy. One of the respondents explains how she has been intentionally discriminated against for jobs she merited.

You can imagine all I went through because I was a migrant woman. I had thought that all would go well upon my arrival, and I would quickly settle in with a job. Unfortunately, the case was not as I thought. I faced a lot of discrimination and stereotypes during my job-hunting days. All of these were because I am a migrant woman. I had been told severally that I had come to compete and take their jobs and that I must go back to my country. The challenge was not an easy experience.

4.3 Integration and sense of belonging

Many migrant women returnees experience a lack of family support, financial insolvency, and unemployment. Respondents explained the challenge of family neglect and support, and how this has made life more difficult for them since their return. The lack of family support and negligence reinforces the inability of migrants to meet the expectations of their family and relatives while overseas. In a typical African setting such as Nigeria, there are a lot of expectations from people living overseas. Many family members have become contemptuous of anyone who lives overseas and could not meet up with this expectation. The fact, however, remains that many migrants, including women, go through a lot for survival while overseas and often fall short of these expectations. These expectations are culturally laced, and many migrant returnees are culturally bound to fulfill them for ease of integration and a sense of belonging (Nhengu, 2022). The implication of this analysis is the likely occurrence of segregation and alienation between members of the same family. The struggle for integration and a sense of belonging in this

sense reflects some of the challenges migrant returnees had to contend with after a bad migration experience in their various destinations. For many of the returnees, the psychological traumas from deportation culminate into another phase of integration and sense of belonging challenges in Nigeria.

I have not been receiving the adequate family support I desired for a proper integration since my return to Nigeria. I believe I did my best in terms of assisting people the little way I could while I was overseas. Remember I did travel as an undocumented migrant woman, and you know what this means in terms of securing a good job to make good income. So that affected the extent of what I could make and assisted family members and relatives with. But I did my best. You know that people are not always satisfied. So, in their mind, I think they are paying me back for the lack of support I have been receiving from them.

The perception that men are saddled with the financial responsibilities of the home is gradually fading as the Nigerian economy bit harder. The present economic challenges require financial support and cooperation from both the husband and wife for a healthy home. The general opinion shared by most of the respondents explains a situation where they have been unable to continue supporting the family financially since their return. This scenario explains the impact of the rising inflation that has culminated in the liquidity of many small businesses and the escalating rate of unemployment.

I have been financially insolvent, and this is affecting my family. I have not been able to receive the support I need to revive my financial position, even if it means starting a small business. I have not been able to receive any help in this regard despite doing my very best. I understand this is taking a serious toll on my husband as I have not been able to support him since my return. The rising cost of things and unemployment is not helping matters. I am hoping I get the needed support for a holistic integration as soon as possible.

For many single migrant returnees, the challenge is related to marital conflicts as many of them have been faced with the cultural pressure of having a family. This explains the cultural and social crisis that comes with migration as many single returnee women are often perceived as arrogant and non-submissive. This perception was narrated by one of the migrant returnee women who shared her ordeal in the quest for integration and creating a family of her own.

I have been traumatized since I came back from Oman. I have not been able to get a suitor who is serious about marriage, and I am no longer growing younger. I understand that a lot of men here in Nigeria often think that when a single woman travels overseas, she has gone for prostitution and cannot be submissive to them according to cultural and social expectations. I am a victim of these expectations as most men are scared that I will not be submissive after marriage. This has caused me a lot in terms of my ability to integrate back into the system.

5. Discussion

This study accounted the lived experiences of migrant women returnees in Nigeria. The Nigerian model offers rich research debates in the context of the influx of human migration. Empirical evidence from migration studies has been used to understand the diverse range of economic and social challenges of countries, whose citizens migrate in droves. Its importance has continued to offer strategic policies for the understanding of human trafficking and other migration offensive practices, especially among children and women.

The paper demonstrates the reasons and motivations for women migration. These include access to improved economic life, and access to basic amenities and infrastructure. This analogy can be explained by the absence of basic amenities including electricity, and access to good and healthy waters, good roads, and health care provisions in Nigeria. Family sustainability was also rated as a motivation for migration. This argument supports the intention to build a formidable family through consistent financial support from migrants to their loved ones back home. The fallout from this intention is the avoidance of poverty by families of migrants in Nigeria. Political and social insecurities have also forced many migrant women to migrate in avoidance of the frequent ethnic and religious conflicts, with the recent being kidnapping. Similar studies have been reported in migration literature (Paynter, 2024; Oucho, 2011; Odimegwu & Adewoyin, 2020).

The paper also explains the challenges and lived experiences of migrant women. Many migrant women reported sexual harassment and assault, forced and inhumane labour practices, and low wages. There has been evidence of denials in accessing medical facilities, and equal access to compete for employment opportunities (Omoyeni, 2013; Mendola & Pera, 2021). Findings also reveal the incessant cases of depression among

migrant women due to long absence from family and relatives (Ola, 2023; Amirapua et al., 2022). This explains one of the conundrums of migration for people who migrate without family, especially women. The dimension of sexual assault and molestation takes the forms of physical assault and forceful raped in some instances. A number of these inhumane treatments have been reported to authorities without any hope for justice (Mackenzie et al., 2014; Jensen, 2017). These challenges support a call for the rejigging and monitoring of Nigerian migration policies to protect the interests of migrants. Several studies have reported the challenges and experiences of migrant women (Dinbabo & Badewa, 2020), with few on migrant women (Dinbabo & Badewa, 2022; Fielding & Ishikawa, 2021). Redirecting focus on employment creation and enabling a working environment where women can compete are issues that can be deployed to address the continuous spate of migration in Nigeria.

The question of integration and building a sense of belonging for migrant women returnees comes with some reactions including the challenge of lack of family support and financial insolvency. Many migrant women desire that they receive the needed moral and family support possible so they can commence their integration process earnestly. Similar studies have shown the challenges of lack of family support for the integration of many migrant women returnees (Odimegwu & Adewoyin, 2020; Jolof et al., 2022). A shift in the financial standing of many migrant women returnees also depicts one of the integration challenges they have had to deal with. Many migrant women returnees are constrained by the challenge of commencing a family of their own due to the stereotypes attached to women migrants in this part of the world. These stereotypical behaviours are no doubt laced with cultural and social norms that perceive women migrants as difficult and non-submissive. Studies have reported similar integration challenges for migrant women (Odimegwu. & Adewoyin, 2020; Akanle, 2022).

The findings support the assumption of the vulnerability thesis. Vulnerability analysis argues that people in certain situations can become weak, helpless, and vulnerable to risk. Placing this supposition within the narratives of the challenges and lived experience of migrant women, migrant women can become vulnerable to unhealthy and life-threatening situations like sexual harassment, and most times death that can be possibly explained by situational circumstances, including the desire for improvement of

economic life, security and the protection of lives and property. In other words, migrant women can become vulnerable considering their economic and social status desires.

6. Conclusion

The discourse of migration has long remained a debate among African countries, including Nigeria. Unarguably, there has not been any serious attempt to reduce the ascending rate of undocumented migration, especially by women on the part of the Nigerian government. It is important to argue that any serious attempt to address the surge of unlawful migration from Nigeria must be thoroughly accessed and implemented. This is important as the drivers and challenges of women migration are unconnected from the poor implementation of appropriate policy and monitoring frameworks. In the case of Nigeria, an all-inconclusive policy, implementation, monitoring, and women empowerment are critical to addressing the upsurge of women migration. The study also argues for a framework that supports an appropriate reintegration of migrants' women returnees for a positive contribution to the social, political, and economic landscape of the country.

The study canvasses for a more strategic policy evaluation as the most potent pathway to addressing migration challenges. This suggestion connotes that migration policy and action plan must be strongly adhered to and employed as a standard for reshaping the Nigerian image. The Nigerian government must strategically align these measures with national imperatives for positive results. The study recommends more monitoring effort of the activities of the Nigerian border. This recommendation becomes crucial with the porous borders in Nigeria through which people, including women, migrate to other countries illegally and undocumented. This effort must follow with appropriate legislative sanctions on adherent Nigerians. Future studies can interrogate the sociological implications of migrant women returnees.

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