Irregular Migration as Survival Strategy: Narratives from Youth in Urban Nigeria

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Background to the Study

The phrase "giant of Africa" is associated with Nigeria due to its large population—which constitutes one-sixth of the continent's total—and also because of its geopolitical significance and the size of its economy. However, the prevalence of extreme poverty in Nigeria and other West African countries functions as a major push factor for youth migration in the subregion. In 2018, World Poverty Clock reported that Nigeria has more people living in extreme poverty than any other country in the world. Additionally, in the third quarter of 2016, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2016) revealed that the overall unemployment rate had risen to 13.9%, with the youth unemployment rate having risen to 25% from 24% in 2015. These economic trends, coupled with other variables such as political instability and rising waves of conflict, have led to an increasing number of youths in certain categories leaving Nigeria for other countries perceived to hold greater promise.

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Nigerian youths, defined here as individuals aged 15 to 35, constitute the largest population in a growing flow of migrants from Global South countries in search of a better life in Europe and other major destination countries (De Haas, 2008). Much of this movement is in violation of the migration norms[1] of destination countries. Defining *migration norms* as all policies and laws that govern the movement of people from one country to another, this chapter will hereafter refer to movement that contravenes these norms as *irregular migration*. The terminology to encapsulate irregular migration has undergone critique by various scholars and policy makers over the years (see Ikuteyijo, 2013). Labels such as illegal migration, undocumented migration, unauthorized migration, and clandestine migration are among the many that have been used. According to Ikuteyijo (2013), debates arose over different political and ideological viewpoints surrounding these descriptive terms. For instance, Koser (2005) criticized the use of "illegal" to qualify migrants for two reasons. First, the term "illegal" connotes criminality, whereas most irregular migrants are not criminals. This was corroborated by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Non-Citizens, which recommended that countries of destination refrain from treating immigrants (even those without valid documents) as criminals (as cited in Koser, 2005). Second, defining irregular migrants as illegal would amount to denying their humanity and the rights to which they are entitled, irrespective of their status (Guild, 2010; Ikuteyijo, 2013).

Irregular migration occurs outside the regulatory norms of the origin, transit, or destination country and can refer to three groups of migrants: those who arrive in a clandestine fashion (i.e., enter and stay illegally in the considered country), those who arrive legally (for instance, on the basis of tourist or student visas) and then overstay the period for which their visa/permits are valid, and asylum seekers whose claims have been rejected and who have not left the country as required (Ikuteyijo, 2013). The criminalization of irregular migration involves punishments ranging from imprisonment to outright deportation.

Apart from economic push factors, the trend toward the securitization and militarization of borders as a measure to check illegal entry into countries of the Global North has been identified as another major driver of

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[1] Historically, these norms, which stipulate documentation and other requirements, have been subject to change. For instance, moving from Nigeria to the United Kingdom required no visa until the introduction of the entry visa requirement soon after independence.

irregular migration. Securitization includes the use of modern security infrastructure, such as the closed-circuit television for surveillance. The continued criminalization of irregular migration is seen as another factor that incentivizes perpetrators to devise means of evading security agents (Davitti & Ursu, 2018).

The migration of the youth is also precipitated by the recruitment of foreign labor by Global North countries where the twin factors of an aging population and declining birth rate are at play (Akinyemi & Ikuteyijo, 2009). Other pull factors that affect youth migration, especially at the international level, include prospects for getting a better education, increasing earning power, and improving living conditions through access to better infrastructure and public amenities.

The bulk of irregular migration in Nigeria occurs among youth aged 18 to 35. Members of this age cohort tend to be mobile, as most are unmarried and have the energy to relocate, unlike older people, who are more likely to be married, with more commitments and less energy to withstand the rigors of migration (Adepoju & Hammar, 1996; Ikuteyijo, 2012). Irregular migration can involve acute hardship, such as wilderness trekking and crossing waterways in unsafe vessels. The Mediterranean Sea has become one of the most popular routes for irregular migrants in recent times (Brenner, Forin, & Frouws, 2018). In 2016, over 20,000 youths involved in the Mediterranean Sea crossing were reported to be from Nigeria (Nwalutu, 2016; Ojeme, 2016). In addition, in the first quarter of 2017, hundreds of irregular Nigerian migrants were deported from various destinations, including Italy, Libya, and South Africa. Overall, in comparison to other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, irregular migrants from Nigeria dominate migration to Europe and North America and represent 25.5% of all West African migrants living in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (De Haas, 2008).

While the bulk of previous studies have concentrated on trends of irregular migration and factors that motivate it (Adepoju, 2000; De Haas, 2008; Haugen, 2012), less attention has been paid to acquiring a socially embedded understanding of the experiences of irregular migrants. This study aims toward closing that gap by contributing to the understanding of what motivated youths found to be susceptible toward irregular migration—that is, youths in four major Nigerian cities who fell into one or more of these categories: they were unemployed, in their final year in a tertiary education institution, or on the mandatory national youth service.

The study also explored the experiences of returnee irregular migrants in these four locales.

MIGRATION IN POSTCOLONIAL NIGERIA

The postcolonial migration era in Nigeria, the period from independence in 1960 through the early 2000s (Adepoju, 2010), witnessed the highest volume of labor migration from various parts of the country to the main administrative and urban economic centers. Likewise, the number of destinations, both for internal and international migration, was greater than during the precolonial and colonial eras. The postcolonial era can be described as the most eventful of the three epochs (i.e., before, during, and after colonialism) in the sense that a number of major forces shaped the history of migration, not only in Nigeria but across Africa. Since the period after independence, migration in Nigeria has been characterized by emigration as well as substantial amounts of internal migration (mostly rural to urban) (Meagher, 1997). For instance, during the oil boom years in Nigeria (1970s to early 1980s), Nigeria assumed the status of a significant destination country for immigrants from other West African countries, and immigrants accounted for almost 2% of the population (Shaw, 2007).

The extent to which immigration during this period was accurately measured is unclear (Black, Ammassari, Mooillesseaux, & Rajkotia, 2004). The major index of immigration was unskilled workers from neighboring countries. The consensus of the literature is that, in the 1970s and 1980s, very few Nigerians would likely have opted to emigrate because domestic working conditions were attractive and internationally competitive (Black et al., 2004). However, the euphoria of the oil boom did not last, and the government of Nigeria expelled many foreigners in 1983 under the guise of "national security." Afolayan (1988) reported that one of the excuses given by the Nigerian government was the fact that most of the foreigners, especially Ghanaians, were engaged in illicit activities like street begging and prostitution.

Other major events of the postcolonial era that affected the course of migration in Nigeria include the establishment of more administrative centers, with the creation of new states and the Abuja Federal Capital territory and, most notably, the civil war which lasted for three years from 1967 to 1970. Ikuteyijo (2013) found that another key factor that determined migration flows in Nigeria was the lopsided development in the

creation of more employment opportunities and infrastructural facilities in urban centers at the expense of the rural areas. This is perhaps one of the most significant impacts of Nigeria's postcolonial migration history, as the effects are still observable today.

Youth migration also took on another dimension in the postcolonial era as young people sought advanced educational opportunities outside the borders of the country. The mass exodus of Nigerian students could be explained by the twin factors of declining standards of education in the country (Jumare, 1997) as well as increased incidences of "escaping" to the Global North to avoid the impact of structural adjustment austerity measures and attendant political instability. Most young Nigerians who went abroad to further their education after the 1970s did not return to the country. This was a sharp contrast from what was obtainable in the colonial era (Adegbola, 1990; Adepoju, 1991; Afolayan, 1998). In fact, according to Rachael Reynolds (2002), in the late 1990s and early 2000s there were more Nigerian academics in the United States than in Nigeria, with many not assuming jobs in relevant fields and working instead as taxi drivers, factory workers, or in other unskilled or low-skilled occupations.

However, the migration of Nigerian youth to other countries in the postcolonial era was not limited to the educated class alone but was rather, as has been described, "highly diverse" (Blench, 2004, p. 7). The mass exodus was facilitated by cheap air tickets and the possibility of legal entry without visas.

Human Trafficking as a Form of Irregular Migration

Human trafficking is the third most profitable criminal enterprise globally, after drug trafficking and illegal arms transactions (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2003; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2011). It has also been described as the modern form of slavery, which, like older forms, involves the trading of human beings as commodities. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines human trafficking as

> recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of

a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. (UNODC, 2011, p. 7)

The United Nations estimates that 2.5 million people are in forced labor (including sexual exploitation) at any time as a result of trafficking (Goldin, Cameron, & Balarajan, 2011).

Although, human trafficking cases can have varying dimensions, there are certain characteristics that mark them out: people are abducted or recruited in the country of origin, transferred through transit regions, and then exploited in the destination country (International Organisation on Migration, 2007). Also, trafficking can be classified in terms of space and movement in two ways: internal and international trafficking. While internal trafficking takes place within the borders of a country, international trafficking involves movement of victims outside the borders. In some cases, however, the internal may lead to international trafficking, as in the case of young women and children who are recruited from remote rural areas and moved to urban centers, before being moved out of the country. This takes the form of step migration.

Human trafficking differs from human smuggling in two ways. First, whereas human trafficking can take place within or outside national boundaries, human smuggling is always about movement across boundaries. Also, while human trafficking may involve some elements of coercion, fraud, or deception, human smuggling is usually more voluntary, and the participants are often aware of the purpose and legal implications of the movement. The issue of consent has been a subject of major debate, as underage children cannot give consent. Also, the consent of parents is often obtained under false pretenses, for instance, by traffickers who promise that children will have access to education or vocational training, and a better life, at the ultimate destination (Ikuteyijo, 2013).

Human trafficking has tremendous negative effects on the victims, the countries which serve as primary sources for human trafficking, the receiving countries, and even the global community. Many trafficked persons die prematurely in the process of trafficking, while the future of those who survive it becomes uncertain as they are denied the opportunity for proper mental and physical development. Also, many of the children and young persons who could have contributed positively to the growth and development of their countries were denied this opportunity. This has an indirect way of negatively affecting the development of the countries that are the primary sources for trafficking in persons.

Network Theory

In migration discourse, network theory explains migration dynamics at the micro level, including how connections among actors influence migration decisions. For instance, it explains how individual migrants are linked with friends or family members and provided with information about job opportunities, both before and after arrival at their destination. Other theories may explain the interactions between push and pull factors and their influence on the decision to migrate but fail to account for why migration persists even after these factors have diminished. The movement of people from one place to another often leads to the establishment of a process of "cumulative causation" (Brown & Bean, 2006) or what Massey (1987) has termed "chain migration." The study of networks, particularly those linked to family and households, permits understanding migration as a social product—not as the sole result of individual decisions made by individual actors, or as the sole result of economic or political parameters, but rather as an outcome of all these factors in interaction (Boyd, 1989). Because most migrants do not know about the relative price of labor between their own country and country of destination, they rely on information from friends and relatives, which often signals opportunities in the labor markets of destination countries (Sassen, 1995). The network theory is relevant to the explanation of how potential trafficked victims are recruited. In most cases, this recruitment is done through close social networks of friends, relatives, and other acquaintances,

The network also provides an important means through which migrants acquire social capital, that is, the repertoire of resources such as information, material assistance, as well as social support that flow through social ties (Brown & Bean, 2006)—which could either be kin, communities, or institutions like churches, mosques, or other professional or religious groups. Network theory is especially useful for analyzing irregular migration because it helps us to understand how migrants get to be introduced into processes, as well as how relationships are sustained over time.

Political Economy Theory of Migration

The political economy theory of migration encompasses a larger framework than the network theory: it explains the interplay of factors affecting migration flows and, thus, is considered to be a more holistic macro-theory. In some literature, political economy theory of migration and

international migration theory are equated because they share similar features (Brown & Bean, 2006). The political economy theory of migration highlights three principal categories of international migration, namely micro, meso, and macro levels. The micro level focuses on factors influencing individual decisions to migrate, analyzing how potential migrants weigh up the various costs and benefits of migrating (Boswell, 2002). They include the values an individual places on migration as well as his/her expectations of the benefits accruable from such a venture. The micro level is all about the individual migrant.

The meso level of explanation locates migration flows within a complex system of links between people. Two concepts are particularly important for meso theories, namely systems and networks. Migration is assumed to occur within a migration system, and this could be explained in terms of how people are linked by economic, political, and cultural ties as well as by migration flows. Thus, the conditions generating movement are understood as the dynamics of relations between two or more people, rather than a set of objective indicators. The social networks include both social as well as symbolic ties which could either be strong or weak. The contents of such ties, however, include transaction obligations and reciprocity. It also entails the control of information among the group as well as access to the resources of others (Brown & Bean, 2006).

The macro level, which is the context in which migration occurs, emphasizes the structural, objective conditions which act as push and pull factors for migration. This could be explicated in terms of economic, political, and cultural settings. In the case of economic migration, pull factors would typically include economic conditions such as unemployment, low salaries, or low per capita income relative to the country of destination. Pull factors would include migration legislation and the labor market situation in receiving countries. The macro level also encompasses political variables such as laws aimed at regulating spatial mobility and other national or international migration norms. Macro level push factors would include involuntary displacement, which could be due to state repression, fear of generalized criminal violence, or civil war (Boswell, 2002; Crisp, 1999; Taylor, 2000; Usher, 2005). The situation in some parts of Nigeria like Jos and Maiduguri,[2] as well as outside the country in other parts of

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[2] The Jos crises were mostly ethno-religious in nature, and these crises have been ongoing for years, since the 1980s up until 2018. The crises in Maiduguri are mainly caused by the Boko Haram terrorists, and this began from 2002 to 2018 and still persists.

West Africa (e.g., Liberia), and especially in the Middle East, where violence has displaced many individuals, and families could serve as points of reference for push factors on the political platform.

Data and Methods

Research Design

This study was inspired by the concept of interpretivist research design, which emphasizes the collection of data in the naturalistic setting. The study, therefore, attempted to make sense of the phenomenon of irregular migration in terms of meanings that actors, in this case youths, bring to it. This was accomplished by the collection of a variety of data using personal experience, life history, and interviews, which described the meanings and problematic moments in the lives of the research participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Except as otherwise stated, where quoted in this chapter the language as actually used by participants (including slangs, colloquial speech, proverbs, etc.) is retained in its original form.

Location of the Study

The study was carried out in four major cities in Nigeria: Lagos, Ibadan, Ile-Ife, and Benin City. The choice of these cities was informed by their characteristics in relation to irregular migration. Lagos State is the commercial capital of Nigeria and the most cosmopolitan city in the country. The state also boasts an international airport, which is the busiest in the country. Apart from the location of the airport, the city of Lagos has many other accessible land and sea routes in and out of the country. For instance, the Apapa Sea Port is an exit route, while the land borders at Badagry, Idi Iroko, and Seme provide opportunities to exit Nigeria by land. Ibadan is a famous nodal city which connects the other parts of the country with Lagos State. Ibadan also hosts the premier University of Ibadan (the first in Nigeria) and other landmarks which make the city attractive to migrants from other parts of the country. Ile-Ife is often referred to as the center of civilization as it boasts a number of institutions, such as the Obafemi Awolowo University (formerly University of Ife) as well as other important sites and landmarks. Benin City is the capital of Edo State and is well known as the hub of human trafficking in migration literature. In addition,

all these cities have one common feature: the presence of a federal university and a large population of youth.

Study Population

The study targeted youths who were unemployed, those in their final year at a tertiary-level education institution (i.e., public universities and public and private polytechnics), and those engaged in Nigeria's compulsory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). Youths who fell in one or more of these categories were prone to view migration as a survival strategy in light of Nigeria's high unemployment and bleak economic prospects for wage earners. Also included were youths who had already been involved in irregular migration and had returned to the country either voluntarily or via deportation. In this study, youths who fall into these categories are collectively referred to as "youths susceptible to migration."

Sampling and Data Collection

The purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. To select participants for focus group discussions, a pre-survey questionnaire was administered to youths susceptible to migration (as defined above). Separate focus group discussions were held for males and females, and in all 11 focus group discussion sessions were held. The inclusion criteria included whether participants were familiar with the process of irregular migration, a factor determined by asking questions about their first-hand experiences or knowledge of the irregular migration experiences of family members and acquaintances. The focus group discussions were facilitated using both vignette and free listing methods to obtain data on the attitude of youth toward irregular migration. Some of the thematic outlines of the focus group discussions included motivation to migrate, role of social networks, migration experience, and so on.

To reach the returned youth migrants, the snowballing or referral method was used. The referrals were at both individual and institutional levels. At the individual level, persons who knew youths who fell under the category of returned migrants referred the researcher to them, while some other returned migrants were sourced through the National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons and other Related Offences (NAPTIP). The returned migrants constitute the hard-to-reach or "invisible" population since, unlike the other categories of youth who were

more accessible, the returned migrants had to be located through referrals. A total of 7 returnees were captured for data collection, plus an additional 63 youth who had not yet left the country but were susceptible to irregular migration.

Ethical Considerations

In a study of this nature, there were a number of substantive ethical issues to be addressed. Practical steps were taken to protect the integrity of participants and to ensure that the study did not have a harmful impact on them. For instance, they were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Hence, pseudonyms are used to identify the individuals whose narratives are quoted in this chapter. Given the fact that returnee migrants constitute the invisible or hard-to-reach categories because of the circumstances surrounding their departure, they were all informed about the aim of the research, and pseudonyms were used to represent their views. In addition, their informed consent was sought before the commencement of the interviews, and they were free to discontinue with the interview at any point. Other ethical considerations were followed strictly, including disclosure of identity and maintaining the confidentiality of all participants.

Sociodemographics of Participants

Besides the 63 study participants who were considered susceptible to migration (students in their last year of tertiary education, unemployed youth, and youth corps members), the study included 7 individual returnee irregular migrants who were purposively selected. It is commonplace for qualitative studies to consist of relatively fewer samples than quantitative studies. What is missing in terms of numbers is gained in terms of depth of information sought from participants (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Through interviews, their life histories were collected with a view to analyzing their experiences during migration. Selected cases for the key in-depth interviews comprised three females and four males who had left the country in an irregular manner.

The age range of the returnee migrants was between 19 and 39 years. The three young women left from Benin City, Nigeria, to go to Italy and Libya, while the four young men emigrated to Switzerland, Belgium, Libya, and Gambia, respectively. The majority of the returnees were

unemployed secondary school dropouts who cited inability to cope and lack of support as reasons for dropping out of school. Also, a majority of the selected cases were from polygynous families (with their fathers marrying more than once, an average of three wives). Furthermore, most of the cases were from large families, with the most having 19 children in the family and the least having 7 children. The number of children a family has may have implications on the quality of care and attention received by children in that family. Lastly, all selected cases were deported from destination or transit countries, with the exception of only one who returned to Nigeria after fruitless efforts to cross to Europe from Algeria.

The age range of other categories of respondents—those unemployed, serving in the NYSC scheme, or in their final year in a tertiary institution—was from 15 to 35 years. The majority of these individuals (89%) were single, and more than half (55%) were male. In terms of religion, Christianity was the dominant religion among the respondents, as 73% of them were Christians.

Results and Findings

Awareness and Attitude of Youth to Irregular Migration

Youth who constituted the vulnerable groups (final-year students in tertiary institutions, youth corps members, and unemployed youth) were asked a number of questions to determine their familiarity with the concept of irregular migration. The majority of the participants said that they understood the meaning of irregular migration. Ironically, most of them demonstrated ignorance of formal immigration procedures, as more than half of them did not have a valid passport, which is the basic, minimum requirement for international migration. However, most of them knew someone personally who had traveled out of the country through illegal means like forging a passport, patronizing unauthorized agents, and traveling to "Europe by road"—as irregular migration is referred to in the popular idiom. Most of the youths showed positive attitudes toward irregular migration, stating that the end would justify the means. They demonstrated a consensus of opinion that migrants were far better off than those who stayed behind because they had access to a better quality of life. As Bola, a 29-year-old female unemployed youth from Osun State, asserted: "Sincerely, those who migrate outside the country often live far better than we in Nigeria. They enjoy constant power supply, good weather, eat

good diet and to a reasonable extent, they are secured." Along these same lines, Joseph, a member of the National Youth Service Corps from Oyo State reported: "We value money, not integrity, here in Nigeria, so youth want to go abroad to make money. When they come back, they will have integrity."

The positive attitude toward irregular migration expressed by most of the young people in the study rested on a shared belief that life is better abroad. It was also tied to a shared perception of "success" as being able to travel abroad. Hence, most of the youth did not consider irregular migration as a crime but as just being practical (or as one respondent put it, "diplomatic") or "smart." Most of them were of the opinion that those who traveled abroad tended to return "better" than they were when they left, and that, therefore, traveling abroad by "whatever means" was justified.

Reflecting this point of view, Efosa, a 25-year-old male Youth Corp member from Benin City, observed:

> To me, I cannot see any criminality in adopting any means whether irregular (illegal) or regular (legal) to go abroad. There is a difference between being "criminal" and being "diplomatic." Those who leave Nigeria by irregular means are just being diplomatic. Irregular migration is not a crime.

George, a 19-year-old undergraduate from Lagos, said

> I know some people who have travelled abroad and when they got there they were doing odd jobs. The reason most people traveled is that because in our country things are very difficult. People graduate but no jobs, so they want to leave and try their luck outside.

Similarly, Gabriel, a 27-year-old male final-year student in Lagos, reported:

> I have an uncle who traveled by ship to Germany. Looking back today, he is not regretting it because he is doing well. He told me it's worth it because what he is enjoying there could not be obtained in Nigeria.

Besides the individual young person's awareness or understanding of irregular migration, the motivation to migrate was also key to understanding the dynamics of the irregular migration experience. Therefore,

participants (especially the returnee migrants) were also asked what motivated them to migrate.

Motivation to Migrate

Returnee migrants were asked what factors motivated them to leave the country when they did. A look through the responses given by all the respondents to this question echoed the push factors inherent in the Nigerian society. As young men and women who were not sure of what their future in the country could be, they all ventured into the alternative line of action that is leaving the country for greener pastures abroad. The quest to make ends meet constitutes the major motivation for all the respondents. All of them were at the time of departure not satisfied with their respective statuses, economically and academically. Yakubu, a 39-year-old male returnee migrant back from Gambia, noted:

> After seeing some people who had traveled and returned to live flashy lifestyle or maybe he or she has sent some cars home to their families and from there you begin to develop the interest of traveling too. You begin to nurse and plan to go. So as you are planning then you meet the connection men.

Francis, a 20-year-old male returnee migrant back from Libya, who was motivated by the information available to him about job and life prospects in Europe, had this to say:

> I was hearing some of my friends saying they wanted to travel at the barbing saloon. So I just decided to go with them. I had the mindset of going to hustle and make it. I am a footballer and I believe that when I get to Italy, I will survive.

Juliet, a 30-year-old female returnee migrant back from Italy, reported that her quest for better education was used as bait for her to be trafficked to Italy. She noted:

> During the first term holiday in my SS one, a family friend told my parents that he would take me to Italy to continue my education. My parents succumbed to the idea because they felt that in Italy my education would be unhindered and my prospect of getting a job after school was higher than in Nigeria.

A similar situation happened in the case of Gina, a 19-year-old female returnee migrant from Libya, who had dropped out of secondary school in Nigeria due to the inability to pay her school fees. She reported that she had to drop out of school since there was no funding for her education. She was introduced to the syndicate who promised to help her secure good employment in Paris. She was informed that there were opportunities for hairstylists; hence, she hurriedly enrolled in a school to acquire the skills of hairdressing. However, she was taken to Abuja under the guise of obtaining her international passport, and from there she was trafficked to Libya. Another participant, a 21-year-old female returnee from Libya, shared a similar story, as her quest to further her education coupled with the inability of her parents to sponsor her dream led to her falling victim to human trafficking.

The absence of an effective social security system in Nigeria, whereby indigent youth can still meet their educational aspirations, is another key motivation for migration. Some of the respondents had poor economic backgrounds, and the pressure of having to fend not only for themselves but also for their younger relatives made them easy prey for agents of irregular migration. In most cases, the youth (especially women) were promised greener pastures abroad only to later realize that they had become victims of human trafficking.

The next theme explored was respondents' perceptions about how migration could serve as a survival strategy in the absence of essential services and an enabling environment for youth to meet their basic needs and thrive in Nigeria.

Migration as Survival Strategy

Both the youth who were susceptible to migration and those who were returnee migrants agreed that irregular migration was a viable strategy for youth to survive Nigeria's economic downturn. The idea that migration offers a more comfortable life was widely held among the participants. Most expressed the belief that irregular migration promised economic benefits. For instance, Adisa, a 21-year-old participant, said that the unfavorable exchange rate between the Naira and other foreign currencies was sufficient incentive to leave the country. Migration was also seen as a way of being helpful to their family members. Daniel, a 24-year-old unemployed respondent, offered the example of someone he knew who had left Nigeria for Spain and was living a much better life and was able to

financially assist his family after his return. He maintained this stance despite the fact that in Spain his acquaintance was reportedly doing menial jobs, or work that the migration literature describes as the 3Ds: dirty, dangerous, and demeaning.

Returnee Experiences During Migration

As a baseline for assessing the actual experience of irregular migration against the expectations of youth who were susceptible toward and inclined to migrate, the study also interrogated the experiences of returnee youth migrants.

Returnee migrants were asked to relate their experiences on the journey, and quite a number of facts were revealed. Persons who were smuggled had the liberty to do what they wanted in the course of the journey. For instance, they had to engage in a number of menial jobs to survive, and they also had access to the money earned in the process. Some of them had to disguise their identity (e.g., by wearing veils or hijab) anytime they were going to buy things from the market. The men had to engage in some menial jobs that their self-esteem would have prevented them from doing in Nigeria. Yakubu, a 39-year-old male returnee migrant from Gambia, reported that he had to work as a shoe cobbler and later as a barber in the destination country. He maintained that these were some of the jobs he would not do in Nigeria.

Sullivan, a 37-year-old returnee male migrant who had traveled to Switzerland, said he worked as a morgue attendant and also served as a drug courier just to make ends meet. In most cases, the returnee migrants embarked on the journey through the land route, and they all reported having to go through long and tortuous trips in the desert. Francis, a 20-year-old male returnee back from Libya, reported that in the course of the journey they were moving from one place to another and ended up spending hours in the desert in the middle of the night. He reported that several fellow migrants were lost in the desert. Juliet, a 30-year-old female returnee migrant from Italy, reported that some of the girls died at sea in the course of the trip. She remembered that about 160 girls were moved in three "Zodiac ships" (possibly a reference to a maritime company), and two of the ships suddenly developed mechanical faults in the middle of the sea. Six of the girls reportedly died before the ship could be rescued. The surviving girls were eventually picked up by prospective patrons or employers, illicit or otherwise, when the ship finally berthed in Madrid.

Role of Social Networks

A number of studies have explained the role that migration networks play in stimulating migration streams between a specific country of origin and countries of destination (Boyd, 1989; Faist, 2000; Haug, 2008). The role of social networks in irregular migration has been studied extensively (Brown & Bean, 2006; Massey, 2003). Social networks serve as sources of information as well as provision of supports to migrants in terms of finances or other logistics. Respondents were asked what role social networks, particularly friends and relatives, played in their movement. The majority of the returnee migrants had the support of their parents and friends in the course of the journey. Yakubu, a 39-year-old male returnee migrant back from Gambia, recalled that while in Gambia (a transit country) another irregular migrant got a job in a Scandinavian country and had to return to Nigeria to source money for the trip. He said:

> When I was in Gambia, there was a driver living in the same house with me who had a driver's license. Many of us who were transit migrants came together and used his driver's license to apply for job in one Scandinavian country. One of us was so lucky to be selected and he quickly came back to Nigeria to inform his parents who gave him money to process the necessary travel documents and he got the visa and travelled.

Francis, a 20-year-old male returnee migrant back from Libya, reported that he financed his journey through the sale of his father's house. He said:

> My father's house was sold and I used my share to facilitate my travel to Libya. My father had four wives and seventeen children. I am the seventh child. I know many people who had used the sea route; many of my friends have gone through the route. Before they left Nigeria, I knew and about two weeks after they left, an Italian phone number called me and they told me they got there (Italy) safely. Many boys in my area have gone through the sea.

Not uncommonly, the decision to migrate does not rest with the individual but, rather, with family members. Often, it is the family that decides who travels and how to support him or her. Yakubu, a 39-year-old male returnee migrant back from Gambia, recalled:

Relatives and friends play very supportive roles; for example, my elder brother called me one day and said there was a man in his church who helps young people who want to travel out. The man is a musician who helps people to travel out with his band. My brother provided the money for passport and gave the man some money on my behalf. He gave the man about 150,000. I went with the man to play at an occasion which was allegedly taken to the embassy. After a while, the effort was thwarted and I am not sure he has collected his money from the man.

Sullivan, a 37-year-old male returnee from Switzerland, also noted that he sent money home through Western Union when he was in Switzerland. He noted that he realized that the money he was sending home had given him a higher social status among his peers, even when none of them had an idea of what he was doing to survive abroad. This statement corroborates the perspective of intending migrants who expressed the opinion that migration added to the migrant's social status at home.

OTHER FINDINGS

The narratives from participants in this study revealed the motives and experiences of youth who were either inclined toward, or had already engaged in, irregular migration as a strategy to escape Nigeria's economic hardships. The majority of the participants perceived irregular migration as a "great opportunity." This perception explains the general positive attitude toward irregular migration among youth who were susceptible to migration.

Most of the youths expressed fear of the future and viewed irregular migration as a survival strategy to escape an existence of poverty and powerlessness in Nigeria. This attitude, however, was also influenced by radio, TV, music, and other popular culture and media representations of destination countries as El Dorado. "Been to," the popular term for people who have visited foreign continents, especially Europe and America, attributes a level of social status. There is also the phenomenon of naming a Yoruba child who was conceived or born abroad "Tokunbo," meaning "from overseas." The presence of a returnee migrant, especially from Europe and America, at social gatherings adds glamor and prestige. In such gatherings, musicians and other praise singers often eulogize migrants, not mindful of the source of income or nature of work the migrants are engaged in abroad. At the other end of the spectrum are

popular songs such as "This Is Nigeria" by rapper Falz The Bahd Guy and "Nigeria Jaga Jaga" by Eedris Abdukareem, which offer critical social commentary on life in Nigeria. Falz's hit song, a takeoff on Childish Gambino's "This is America," spotlights issues such as political corruption, drug addiction, and unscrupulous preachers. In contrast to representations that celebrate lifestyles in Europe and North America, these lyrics portray Nigeria as a place anyone who could would want to leave.

Additionally, the study revealed that, although the youths demonstrated a high knowledge of the processes of irregular migration, they had very little knowledge, and displayed ignorance, about official migration laws, regulations, and procedures. For instance, the majority of students enrolled in their final year at various tertiary education institutions and who wanted to travel abroad did not have passports. Similarly, the study participants had little, if any, knowledge of employment prospects and labor regulations (work permit requirements, terms and conditions of service, etc.) or rights of migrants in destination countries. The lack of knowledge displayed by the participants in the study, including returnees, suggests opportunities to introduce curricula in secondary schools that would provide a more realistic, data- and information-based assessment of economic opportunities abroad and accurate information about the requirements, risks, and potential rewards of emigration.

Returnee migrants had bitter tales to tell, as what they expected was different from what they experienced in the journey. The youth participants in the study most often decided to leave Nigeria in search of greener pastures based on speculative information about availability of jobs in the countries of destination and without adequate information on the labor norms in those countries. The realities of irregular migration were usually a far cry from the expectations of the migrants. Most of the migrants resorted to the 3Ds (dirty, demeaning, and dangerous) (Adepoju, 2003; Wolffers, Verghis, & Marin, 2003) kind of work to survive at the destination. The migration experience of returnees was also gendered. Male returnees paid their ways through the journey using travel syndicates, while the young women were tricked into embarking on trips.

Overall, the role of social networks was crucial, as most of the migrants were motivated by or relied upon social networks to embark on the journey. The study revealed the impact of this factor as most of the respondents (vulnerable and returnee migrants) recounted the important roles played by relatives abroad. The returnee migrants all reported that they were "lured" to migrating by either friends or relatives, and youths who

had yet to migrate also reported that their sources of information about migration were mostly friends and relatives. In most cases, these sources painted exaggerated pictures of reality in destination countries. This factor supports findings in the literature on migration networks and the nature of communications between migration networks in sending countries and diaspora communities in the countries of destination. The findings suggest that destination country networks tend to paint a positive picture of living conditions in order to save face (Boyd, 1989; Faist, 2000; Haug, 2008).

Conclusion

The study examined the experiences of returnee youth migrants who left Nigeria through irregular channels, as well as the perceptions of other youths who were susceptible toward migration, that is, youths who were unemployed, in their final year at a tertiary-level education institution (public universities and public and private polytechnics), and those engaged in Nigeria's compulsory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). These youths' collective perception of irregular migration as survival strategy to escape harsh economic conditions in Nigeria was not borne out by the experience of the youths who actually left the country and returned. Furthermore, many of the returnees were stigmatized by friends and relatives and thus failed to improve their social as well as economic status.

Nigeria was the first African country to domesticate the Palermo Protocol prohibiting human trafficking and smuggling (Ikuteyijo, 2018), but there are apparent gaps in these policies. Government efforts focus mainly on punishment and enforcement against trafficking, while fewer efforts have been focused on rehabilitation, resettlement, and reintegration of returnee migrants. More proactive measures are needed to address the issue of irregular migration, especially in the form of human trafficking and smuggling.

In terms of level of awareness of the processes and forms of irregular migration, the youths demonstrated a very high awareness level about avenues to engage in irregular migration, which was corroborated by the focus group discussions. The study also showed that most of the youths had positive attitudes toward irregular migration for the sake of making ends meet, expressing the view that "the end justifies the means."

However, the majority of the youth participating in the study, both those susceptible toward migration and returnee migrants, demonstrated a high level of ignorance about the requirements of legal means of

migration. For instance, among the final-year students in tertiary institutions, the majority of those who wanted to travel abroad did not have passports, which is the minimal requirement for international migration. They also exhibited ignorance of other key information such as labor regulations and rights of migrants in destination countries.

The majority of the respondents got their information about destination countries from informal sources like friends, relatives, and social media. Most of this information is exaggerated or wholly inaccurate. This suggests an opportunity for secondary school-based curricula about the rights of migrants and international migration norms and procedures.

In terms of the experiences of returnee irregular migrants, the study revealed that circumstances leading to their decision to leave the country resulted from influence and active support from family members. Many of the youth returnee migrants in the study reported that their parents were not only aware of their plans to migrate irregularly, but also provided them with financial and other support to embark on the irregular migration journey. All the female returnee migrants reported that they left the country with the knowledge of their parents. Although, in some instances, the women were taken out of the country under the guise of securing better education and employment, some parents were privy to the activities of the illegal syndicates involved in the trafficking and/or abducting of their daughters and yet still endorsed them. There is therefore the urgent need to also educate parents.

The study also revealed the role of social networks in irregular migration. Most of the returnee migrants had the support of people within their respective networks, such as friends, relatives, and, in some cases, organized criminal elements. The youth reported a high level of collaboration among international criminal syndicates, which in some cases included government officials.

The study found that for youth who are susceptible toward migration, the increasing youth unemployment rate in Nigeria is a major push factor. Between 2002 and 2005, over 200,000 students graduated from various universities in Nigeria and over 70% of them were added to the figure of unemployed youths in the country (Nigerian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). This trend, coupled with growing security challenges in Nigeria, explains the surge in irregular migration that Nigeria has been witnessing in the recent past, particularly among the youths. The situation is exacerbated by the strict visa regimes introduced by most major destination countries, which push Nigerian youth to clandestine migration practices. The

combination of variables create opportunity for criminal cartels to capital-
ize on the desperation of susceptible youths.

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