

RISKS AND VULNERABILITY OF NIGERIAN MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT TO EUROPE

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Abstract:

Nigerians moving towards the shores of Europe seeking asylum, refugee status or for better socio-economic condition have been observed to be engaging in irregular mode, crossing the Mediterranean Sea routes to Europe not minding the grievous implications. This study examined the risk and vulnerability of Nigerian migrants in transit to Europe. The study adopted the use descriptive research design was adopted for the study. Snowballing sampling technique was utilized and secondary data were derived from the report, published articles, and journals.

Keywords: Migration, Irregular, Mediterranean Sea, Nigerians

Introduction

The origin of desert crossing in Africa could be traced back to the 8th century. The concept started with the Trans-Sahara trade which connected North Africa, West Africa, and the Mediterranean region. Inter-regional integration that existed was not mainly on economic grounds but promoted socio-cultural relationships through education and religion. The pre-colonial arrivals of the northern migrants to the west established desert routes and desert gateway; cities such as Sijilmasa (Morocco), Sanhaja (Algeria), and Ghadames (Libya) had to stop over due to the volatile condition of the journey (Cartwright 2019). However, the decline of the sub-Saharan trade and the formation of a new state by European masters made the Sahara movement unpopular and illegal. The diplomatic relations and multilateral agreement between Sub-Sahara Africa and North Africa were initiated with Libya's open immigration policies in 1992 and the establishment of the community of Sahel Saharan States (CEN-SAD) in 1998 between Libya and six other African states. The commission later grew to 29 member states, which was an attempt to reactivate regional integration between Sahel state with its objectives to implement the free movement of people and capital for CENSAD citizens (Sylvie and Oliver, 2011).

The open border policies aided labor and transit immigrants from West African countries towards North African states. The privatization of Libya's economy made Libya a destination and transit state towards the European border. The movement of migrants toward North Africa reinstated the role of Agadez in Niger and Gao in Mali as important transit cities toward North Africa. The mass expulsion of sub-Saharan migrants in 2000 and criticism of Libya's open immigration policies by the European Union further hardened Libya's frontiers and strained migration in the desert and along her coastal lines. This event fueled the dehumanization of immigrants in transit by border guards and non-state actors and also pushed migrants to take precious routes serving as prey to non-state actors (Human Rights Watch, 2006 and Albert 2009). However, the surge of Sub-Saharans crossing the Sahara Desert toward North Africa in an attempt to enter Europe has increased the fatality rate in the Sahara. The study intends to investigate the risk and vulnerability of Nigerian migrants in transit to Europe.

Methodology

The study employed the use of both primary and secondary data while a descriptive research design was adopted. The researcher employed snowballing sampling technique to distribute 113 questionnaires to migrants while a purposive sampling technique was also utilized to conduct interviews with immigration officers and experts in the field of migration. Secondary data were derived from the reports of the International Organisation for Migration, Italian Ministry of Interior, and other published articles, and journals while the collected data were thematically analyzed.

Demographic Data Analysis

Table 1: Gender Distribution of respondents

| Gender | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|------------|------------|
| Male | 97 | 85.8 |
| Female | 16 | 14.2 |
| Total | 113 | 100 |

The table shows that there are 97 or 85.8% male and 16 or 14.2% female out of the total sampled population of 113 respondents. The risks identified by the irregular migrants include the following;

Are you aware of the risk of migrating illegally?

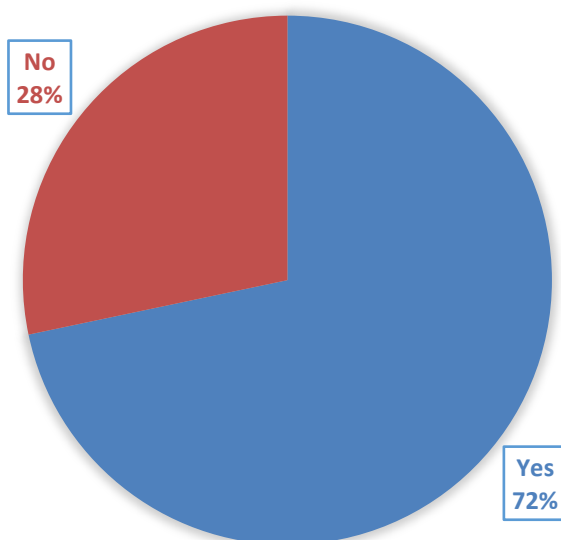


Figure 1: Pie Chart Showing the Awareness of Migrants of the Risks of Migrating Illegally

It is interesting to note that majority of migrants stated to be aware of the possible dangers of plying illegal routes to Europe.

Table 2 Showing Irregular Migrants Risks during Transit

| Risks | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------|------------|------------|
| No-Risk | 17 | 15 |
| Financial | 8 | 7.1 |
| Disease | 7 | 6.2 |
| Documentation | 3 | 2.7 |
| Being caught | 14 | 12.4 |
| Unfavorable Weather | 8 | 7.1 |
| Starvation | 10 | 8.8 |
| Frauds and Bandits | 8 | 7.1 |
| Death | 38 | 33.6 |
| Total | 113 | 100 |

The data presented above reveals the risks faced by Nigerians in their movement toward the Sahara and the Mediterranean region aiming at the European shore using the Libyan and Moroccan gateways to Europe. The study reviews that 15% of the respondents attested that they had encountered no form of risk during transit. The respondents stated that there were a lot of challenges during transit but did not encounter any threat to life (Nigerian migrant, Interviewed in Edo State, Nigeria, January 2020). Meanwhile, 7.1% of the respondents indicated that limited funds was a risk during transit. It was discovered that certain risks could be avoided when a migrant could afford to pay for certain services during transit. In some cases, at military checkpoints, border patrol guards collect kickbacks from irregular migrants, and those who could not afford the incentive are at risk of arrest and detention. This

situation is responsible for migrants taking up jobs in transit countries to finance their journey towards their desired destination countries. 6.2% of the respondents asserted to be exposed to different types of sicknesses and diseases such as Hepatitis, Malaria, Tuberculosis and HIV, during transit. The poor working condition of migrants in transit cities have adversely deteriorated migrants' health due to the odd jobs they do. Furthermore, male and female respondents claimed to have worked as commercial workers, while some others claimed to have taken up menial jobs such as farm guarders, security guards which have opened them up to different degrees of abuse, fatigue and infectious diseases.

However, 2.7% asserted to have taken the risk with false documentation while 12.4% of the respondents imperiled being caught at checkpoints and control posts. It has been observed that majority of Nigerian migrants had their passports with them but lacked the required transit document to their departure states because they are legally covered in desert gateway states up to Mali and Niger thanks to the ECOWAS protocol on free movement. However, Nigerian migrants' designation changes when moving up north outside the ECOWAS boundaries. This situation makes them vulnerable to state and non-state actors especially security forces because they lack the legal credential or valid documents which makes them subject to arrests and deportation. Furthermore, research findings have shown that migrants' safety has been put at more risk-taking, precious and longer routes to avoid security checks which make the journey more adventurous and deadly. However, 7.1% of the respondents noted that the unfavorable weather especially the heat and volatile nature of the deserts especially the lack of water and food, this is supported by 8 percent of the respondents who asserted the fact that starvation was one of the dangers they were exposed to. 7.1% of the respondents stated that they were disposed of valuable of possession such as money and jewelries by desert bandits. Similarly, respondents maintained that were duped by smugglers because some failed to keep their promises or disappear into the air with their money, while 33.6% of the respondents said to have been associated with the risk of death. According to respondent interviews, some migrants claimed to have survived gunshot wounds from bandits' attacks while some of their colleagues died. Sea drowning was also highlighted as migrants said to have been scared of the sea storms and wave, shaky and overcrowded boat while crossing the western Mediterranean Sea (to) Spain.

The risks involved in irregular migration is often death with a total estimate of 1,790 deaths recorded between 1996- 2013 in the continent of Africa.(IOM) stated that most of the death(s) that occurred in Africa were located in the Sahara Desert, Northern Niger, Southern Libya, and Northern Sudan. It has also been identified that these countries serve as a gateway toward the Mediterranean Sea via Europe. Research findings have shown that starvation, dehydration, drowning, physical abuse and sickness are the top risks faced by migrants in transit and are also responsible for the majority of migrant deaths while in transit. However, some of the risks and causes of migrant death are preventable because majority of Nigerian and sub-Saharan migrants were taken advantage of by human smugglers and traffickers who abandon migrants intentionally leaving them to their fate.

Figure 2 below shows the challenges often encountered by the migrants during transit. It shows that a great number of the irregular migrants see finance, security, and health as the major challenges they had during transit.

What is the major challenges that you were confronted with during your trip?

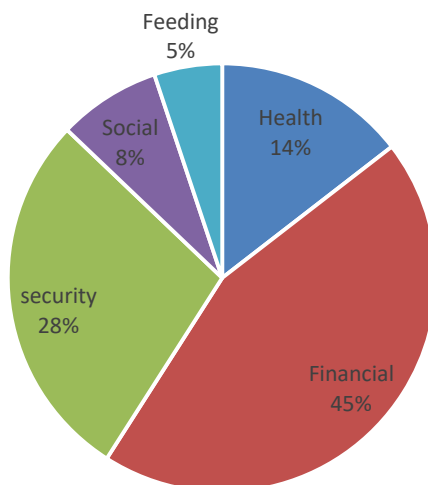


Figure 2 Pie Chart showing the challenges confronted during the trip

In addition to the empirical facts gathered, according to the migrant's respondent statement, they explain that they took up jobs in transit countries in order to make up a living in this country. Majority of them asserted that they did menial jobs such as house maids as well as served as attendants in gardens, hotels and bars. Some also claimed that they were involved in illicit activities such as drug trafficking across the borders. Moreover, the female migrants explained that they survived by using what they have to get what they want, and some admitted their involvement in prostitution; there were also statements of men who were involved in gay prostitution in order to make a living and proceed to their destination countries (Interview Benin, February 12, 2020). According to a respondent, she stated that "...sometimes, when money finishes along the road and you get stranded along the way, you don't have any other alternative than to pick up underground jobs." The statement above shows that irregular migration is an expensive journey with significant physical, mental and monetary cost. Research findings revealed that migrants face discrimination in transit countries respondents complained of being underpaid and harassed by employers. This is in line with the findings of OHCHR (2016) which states that: "Migrants are often unable to have their labor rights protected because they are in an irregular situation." It was also discovered that migrants who could not speak certain languages are often subject to abuse and discrimination.

Health: (acute) lack of access to medical facilities; migrants are challenged with so many health challenges according to the migrants' respondent statement. They further explained to have been endangered with several unknown sicknesses and diseases some also reported to have feared HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as Malaria, and Tuberculosis (Interview Benin, February 12, 2020). This is indicated in OHCHR (2016) report that Migrants often begin their journey in good health. However, the complexity of the migratory experiences during hazardous journeys results in poor physical and mental health outcomes. It has been observed that lack of access and medical services are the major humanitarian challenges of migrants in an irregular mode. A medical facility becomes a barrier to migrants often needing urgent healthcare assistance because they fear they could be

detected and handed over to state authorities. Similarly, respondents claimed that undocumented migrants are often not given a medical condition and that those who fell sick in police custody were not given proper medical attention but rather left to die of otherwise treatable ailments.

Irregular migrants are often victims of human traffickers, kidnappers, and physical abusers because migrants lose their right to protection and dignity of life the moment they embark on the journey. Some of them are sold into slavery for sexual exploitation, labor exploitation, or simply become hapless victims of organ harvesting. According to a respondent, he asserts that irregular migrants often end up in detention centers and get deported (Interview with migration experts 2020). This is in line with the study of the Global migration group (2010), which states that migrants, especially irregular ones who lack legal status and the ones who are victims of smuggling and trafficking, are particularly vulnerable to detention and restriction on their freedom of movement, or deprivation of their liberty, usually through enforced confinement, either in the receiving country or during transit (by land or sea). A respondent stated that:

Detention centers are administrative measures. It is also called a holding place to confirm your nationality especially if you are seeking asylum or apprehended in an illegal mode. Transit nations see it as one of the best ways to stop irregular migration and also protect their country (Interview Ibadan, 17 January 2020).

This is also supported by the findings of Hamood (2006) that asserts that thousands of migrants are held in Libya's police stations, prisons, and camps around the country. Some are held temporarily for a matter of days, while others are left to languish in cells for months and even years.

Another respondent stated that detention centers are screening centers where irregular migrants are been apprehended. Migrants are kept in these facilities for proper screening and identification. Pending the time they are repatriated back to their country (Interview Ibadan, 16 January 2020).

In response to this above a respondent stated

That detention centers are focused on people trying to come in. For me, I don't think it is a lasting solution. It is for European countries to support Africa to have a more reliable economy, and responsible political system.(Interview Ibadan, 19 January 2020).

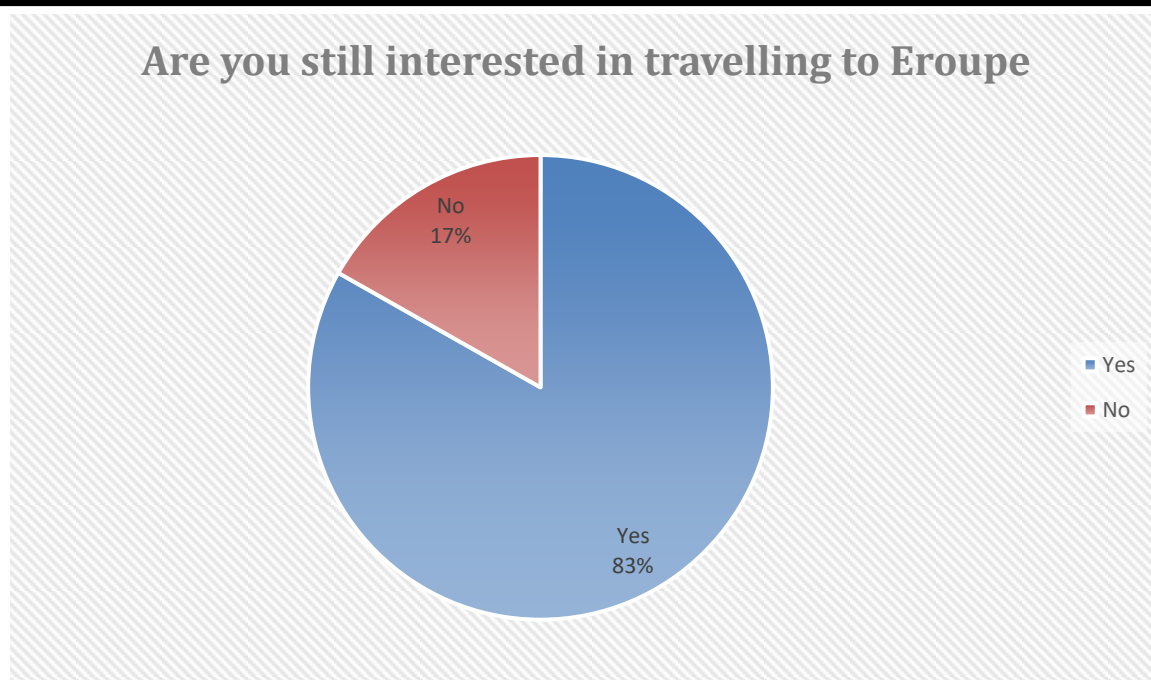


Figure 3: Pie Chart showing migrants' interest in traveling to Europe

All of these lead to the fact that irregular migration is dangerous and full of life-threatening risks which should have ordinarily discouraged prospective irregular migrants from taking the same route. However, most irregular migrants still show keen interest to return to Europe despite the risk involved if they have the opportunity. This study therefore recommends that the integration process of Nigerian migrants needs to be investigated with a majority of returnees still willing to migrate back to Europe.

Conclusion

This study has offered a reflection on the risk and vulnerability of migrants on transits to Europe which includes suicide crossing across the Sahara to North Africa, the Mediterranean to Europe with an unrelenting number of people losing their lives in this process annually. Thus, these irregular migrant routes have brought about a rise in the cruel and brutal process of migration. Unfortunately, the socio-economic state of Nigeria and sub-Saharan countries have created an absence of an unrecognizable risk among desperate people who seek to use the north African states as transit camps for irregular entry into the shores of Europe. The culture of these hazardous journeys associated with deaths and dehumanization is an unethical mode of transit migration, which is contradictory to safe and healthy migration. Some recommendations can be made now. First is the force behind Nigerians' returnees and deportees who are still willing and making ways to migrate back to Europe this must be probed deeply into finding long-lasting solutions to keep young Nigerians from running away from their country at such a great cost knowing the consequences of migrating irregularly. Furthermore, irregular migration from Nigeria is likely to increase from the global economic meltdown and the strict regulation of the pandemic. The countries already affected and to be affected by this problem should equally thoroughly implement and enshrine asylum and management policies that are fully in line with the international human rights standards.

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