

Understanding irregular migration from the socio-cultural context: The implication for social work in Nigeria.

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Abstract

Like the rest of low- and middle-income countries, Nigeria continues to battle irregular migration, especially among its youth. Amidst the drivers of irregular migration, economic and political factors have received much attention. Using the qualitative data collection method, an in-depth interview (4 respondents) and a focus group discussion (14 participants), the study looked at the socio-cultural factors that trigger youths' irregular migration. The finding provides enough evidence that factors such as belief systems, family and society influence, and maintaining social identity trigger youth to engage in irregular migration. The finding sheds light on social work's development in Nigeria, particularly in its call for local inclusion and understanding of social problems' socio-cultural context. Additionally, it gives insight to social workers as they champion interventions to curb irregular migration. It recommends the inclusion of migration studies in school curricula.

Keywords: Irregular migration, socio-cultural, youth, social work, development, Nigeria.

Introduction

Irregular migration is a humanitarian catastrophe and is a top issue for governments worldwide. According to the world migration reports, about 281 million people were estimated to be migrants in the year 2020 (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2022), and before then, 106.9 million people were estimated to be irregular migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers (McAuliffe, & Khadria, 2020). The report further cited Nigeria as the 7th-ranked country among the top 20 countries for irregular migrants in Africa.

A conservative estimate of migrants from Nigeria in the United States [US] and United Kingdom [UK] was about 300,000 in 2016 (Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS], (2016). There were reportedly 10.5 million irregular migrants living in the United States as of 2017 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), (2017). Although the actual number of Nigerian irregular migrants could not be accounted for due to the complexity of irregularity,

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reports indicated that they constitute the highest number of all irregular migrants in the US and UK (Olaoluwa et al., 2019; Uchechukwu, 2022). About 29,723 Nigerians have overstayed their United States visas since May 2019 (Olaoluwa et al., 2019; McCauliffe et al., 2019). Some migrants travel abroad with the proper documents but with the covert intention of not returning when due, thereby overstaying their visa, which makes them irregular migrants. In contrast, others travelled using different fraudulent means.

In a quest to curb irregular migration, the government of the United States of America changed its visa application and renewal procedures in August 2019, in part because Nigerians are responsible for the majority of overstays in America from the African continent (Olaoluwa et al., 2019). Between 2011 and 2018, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) carried out a program with the European Union's help to help the Nigerian government reduce unauthorized immigration in Nigeria. This is in collaboration with the Federal Government of Nigeria and relevant governmental agencies, such as the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), the Network of Civil Society Organizations against Child Trafficking, Abuse, and Labor; and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP). Among the achievements of the programme are the presidential approval of the Immigration Amendment Act of 2015 and the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act of 2015, which repealed the earlier Act and renamed the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons (NAPTIP), respectively. It works to establish standards and severe consequences for migrant smuggling while also reflecting modern migration management and border control. However, the latter legislation replaced the old Immigration Act 1963 (UNODC, 2018). According to the Vanguard report, the battle against irregular migration is yet to be won, even though the government has carried out various interventions. Furthermore, as a result, the Executive Director of the Global Initiative against Illegal Migration (GIAIM) claimed that the Nigerian government alone could not control irregular migration among Nigerians (Mikairu, 2022).

From the foregoing, the battle against irregular migration requires a concerted effort to win. Based on this, scholars such as Nwafor et al. (2022), Bronstein et al. (2012), and Diaconu et al. (2016) pointed out that the social work profession has much to contribute to migration-related issues. Since the issue of irregular migration is internationally recognized and relevant to the social work profession (Nwafor et al., 2022), understanding the socio-cultural context of irregular migration is vital to social workers. It is, however, crucial to consider how and why members of particular societies are more likely to participate in irregular migration. Hence, this study focused on the social and

cultural factors driving migrants to analyze their potential for irregular migration.

It is essential also to note that the social work code of ethics requires that social workers consider socioeconomic and cultural factors, such as family values, the influence of religion, and spirituality, inherent in their service environment as they guide them in proffering the relevant intervention (Social Work Degree Center, 2020). This is crucial because Nigerian social workers push to include indigenous knowledge in social work curricula (Onalu & Okoye, 2021; Chukwu et al., 2022; Onalu & Ingram, 2023; Onalu et al., 2023). The concern for inclusion is based on the observation by social work scholars that the imported social work knowledge is saturated with Western ideology, philosophies, models, and theory and does not fit into what Nigerian social workers should apply at home (Okoye, 2014). Therefore, they are advocating that local knowledge should be integrated into social work as it helps to understand the context of social problems and address culturally sensitive issues in Nigeria. However, the call for including indigenous knowledge is to ensure quality training for students who will become culturally competent. In other words, to produce socially competent professionals knowledgeable about Nigeria's socio-cultural realities.

Although irregular migration involves numerous factors, including political and economic factors, it is also crucial to consider how and why members of particular societies are more likely to participate in irregular migration. This study examined the potential for irregular migration by highlighting the importance of social and cultural variables in comprehending the driving motivations behind irregular migration. Earlier studies found that economic factors are the primary motivation for irregular migration (Ikuteyijo, 2020; Nwafor et al., 2022; Khairi & Wahab, 2018; Italian Center for International Development [ICID], 2017). Browne (2015) believes that the purpose of migration transcends economic reasons. Khairi & Wahab (2018) discovered that the state's administration, in particular, drives irregular migrants through discrimination, marginalization, and repression. However, this study examined the potential for irregular migration by highlighting the importance of social and cultural variables in comprehending the drivers of irregular migrants. Although Nwafor et al. (2022) gave insight into the role of social work, there is a need to explore the relevance of socio-cultural knowledge in addressing irregular migration. Therefore, this study is set to bridge this gap.

Methodology

Study area

The study area is the Idemili-South Local Government Area [LGA], one of the 21 LGAs in Anambra State. The state is located in the southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria. According to an online population registry, about

6,358,311 people live in the state, growing by 2.4% annually. With 992.1 people per square kilometre, Anambra is one of Nigeria's smallest states geographically (together with Lagos and Bayelsa) and ranks among the ten states with the highest population density (Igwenagu, 2022). As a result, most state indigenes turned to migration as a replacement method of subsistence due to the state's high population density and strong competition for resources (Nwajiuba, 2005; Anambra State Government, 2017). However, approximately 32.17 percent of the locals in the study region reside abroad. The prevalence of foreign migration in this area necessitated the study.

Sampling procedure

The study sample was derived from two towns in Idemili South using purposive sampling techniques. The study accommodated only the youth because they are generally the major perpetrators of irregular migration; therefore, they are in the best position to provide appropriate information on the issue. The age range of the selected youth for this study is 15–24 years. However, the age bracket of this study was chosen following the Nigerian definition of youth. Another rationale for choosing the age bracket was that it is considered the prime age when people are eager to take all kinds of risks without considering the implications.

Data collection

The data collection process passed through the scientific rigour of the qualitative research method. Focused group discussions and In-depth interviews were used to collect data from 20 respondents. Gender was considered when choosing the sample for the study because it was considered significant. The focused groups comprised two homogeneous groups of eight respondents each (one for male and one for female sessions). In-depth interviews with four purposively chosen youth leaders within the study area were also done (two males and two females). With permission from the respondents, discussions were recorded with an electronic recorder, while research assistants were featured as note-takers. The researchers were proficient in the Igbo and English languages, as both were used to communicate. The researchers collectively developed the research instruments.

Data analysis

The researchers examined the collected data both individually and collectively after having them translated into English. The data were arranged into themes to classify responses. The researchers made sure the collected data were compared with the notes taken to ensure accurate reporting of responses.

Results

Demographic characteristics of participants

All sampled respondents were locals of the area under investigation and majored in Christian belief, with only 2% practicing traditional religion. Among the participants, 81 percent had completed at least their secondary education, and 19 percent had completed their further education. Males comprised 50.0% of the participants, as did females (50.0%). Only 7% of respondents worked for the government, and 15% were unemployed, so the majority (78%) relied on various financial ventures to survive. The IDI respondents were youth leaders and had at least completed high school.

Evidence of irregular migration among the youth

The results of the study show that the majority of the respondents intend to travel abroad. Further inquiry to ascertain their mode of travel revealed that they had no plans to use the legal migration system. They were certain that they would take advantage of any available opportunity to travel abroad, regardless of whether it was legal because they considered going abroad more important than the method of travel. The participants were of the view that they have nothing against anyone who wants to leave the country by any means. All the respondents acknowledged knowing someone abroad who is an irregular migrant. They also admitted the considerable dangers associated with irregular migration, but their responses suggest that staying abroad is more crucial than one's means of migration. Buttressing further on this, a participant stated thus:

Migration is an everyday thing in this country, both regular and irregular. I know many people who have travelled and are still planning to travel. I don't know how they do it, but we all know they aren't all that genuine. There is one in my neighbourhood who travelled abroad recently. I don't know how he succeeded, but he is in Italy as I talk. He is not the only person. I know so many of them. If I happened to find any opportunity, I would leave too (Chuks, male respondent).

I know someone from my community who engaged in irregular migration, and he died in the process. It is not only him; many youths have died while engaging in irregular migration, but at the same time, many others have also migrated successfully. Every young person in this country, including myself, wants to travel abroad, legally or illegally. It is better to die while trying than stay in this country (Tobi, male participant).

Socio-cultural realities influencing the decisions of irregular migration

As findings have shown, the high rate of irregular migration by younger adults in Niger hinges on several factors. Amongst the factors identified in this study

by the participants, family, societal/peer pressure, belief systems, and a lack of patience were the most mentioned.

Family/societal influence

We discovered that there is a connection between family/societal/peer pressure and irregular migration. We equally discovered that many people want to travel abroad because of the respect accorded to Nigerians living abroad whenever they return to the country.

It's now common to live abroad. Most communities have overseas-based associations, just like my community. It's not as if they are the richest, but this special respect is attached to them, especially when they attend a ceremony for their members in the village. For instance, in my church, the abroad-based members usually come for special thanksgiving or Church Harvest, and they receive special recognition because they are from abroad. After watching them, every youth will become desperate to belong to the overseas-based association, no matter what it takes. The desperation to travel is greater among those who can't afford it. That's why they struggle to travel, not minding if it's illegal (Jude, male participant).

Furthermore, from the participants' narratives, we discovered that parents/families whose son-in-law resides abroad are given so much prestige that parents now pray and encourage their daughters to marry someone abroad regardless of their immigration status. One of the participants noted that more and more people judge good husbands by where they live. See the narrative below:

Our parents, especially the mothers, cherish abroad-based in-laws. They are most happy when they are invited to babysit abroad. So, because of these things, our men understand why they must travel abroad, which, to a large extent, breeds desperation. (Nelo, female participant).

Women like to testify of God's miracles in churches during prayer gatherings, giving testimony about how their daughters wed good abroad-based husbands, and their expected postpartum visit overseas is one of the highest miracles. In contrast, women whose daughters did not marry abroad-based spouses don't get much applause like the former when they stand to testify (Amara, female respondent).

Belief system

The data also showed that belief systems, such as superstitious, harmful, and religious ideas, all influenced irregular migration. Most of the FGD participants, who believe in "divine destiny", were of the opinion that a person's fate determines their success in life. Participants thought that because

destinies are different when some people fail in a certain venture, others may triumph in the same venture. The FGD participants were found to have a high prevalence of this belief. Buttressing further on this, one of the respondents said that;

.... travelling abroad through fraudulent means is risky, but everybody must not succeed because destinies are different; some may die, and yet some may succeed and become billionaires! Some people are created to succeed no matter what they do (Tochi, male participant).

A friend was deported in 2011 because his documents were incomplete, but surprisingly, another friend who I believe travelled with such documents succeeded. According to him, he was detained initially, but later he escaped. He is still there now. I know that some people are destined to be rich; that's why they succeed in anything they do., including engaging in irregular migration (Tobe, male participant).

The respondents indicated various views, including the traditional practice of employing spiritual artifacts for success and the support of spiritual leaders like pastors. According to the responses, people rely on spiritual practices like prayer and charm, depending on their religious beliefs, to engage in any endeavour they see as risky and potentially fatal. One of the respondents said that;

Many people prepare spiritually. Do you know that people use charm to cross the border without documents, and it works for them? And as a result, they convince their friends to join them, believing in the charm; unfortunately, they are not aware that the charm does not work on the sea, it disappoints inside the water, and that is why many of them die on the sea (Chuks, male respondent).

Buttressing further on this, another respondent stated that:

With prayer, you can surmount any obstacle. That is why it is advisable to pray very hard before travelling abroad, whether regularly or irregularly. When my brother wanted to travel abroad, it was revealed to a pastor that he would be deported. The pastor then invited my brother for a deliverance prayer to surmount the challenges. Regrettably, my brother left without going for deliverance. He wouldn't have been deported if he had gone for that prayer. Of course, if you pray very well, you will succeed even if you pass through the desert (Afam, male respondent).

The study results show clear evidence that participants are willing to risk irregular migration as long as they are spiritually ready, notwithstanding the risks involved.

Maintaining social identity

All the participants noted that in Igbo culture, young men are expected to serve their masters for six to nine years before receiving financial assistance from the Master to start their businesses. Our participants' narratives revealed that many youths are not ready to follow the proper procedure again. As a result, they turn to different forms of illegality, and irregular migration is one of them. Buttressing further on this, one of the participants stated thus;

Unfortunately, our young men are no more patient enough to serve their masters anymore, and some steal from their masters and are sent packing. If you check, most people who engaged in irregular migration were sent back from their place of apprenticeship....they want to make money by all means. They want to prove to their master that they will survive without them. That is why they can do anything, including risking their life in irregular migration (Amara: female, FGD).

Discussion

Irregular migration among the youth is a global issue that has adverse implications for any nation. However, some sociocultural factors are responsible for this, necessitating paying more attention to how it happens in different parts of the world. This study explored the socio-cultural factors predisposing the youth to irregular migration and, more importantly, how these factors are maintained within the prevailing social and cultural system to induce desperation for international migration among the youth. Results revealed that irregular migration among the youth has socio-cultural underpinnings transferred through learning as people are vested with more respect when they reside abroad. The youth then resort to travelling abroad, taking all kinds of risks.

Consequently, the finding aligns with that of Suso (2019), who found that perceptions and imaginations associated with migration in the Gambia are socioculturally embedded. Culturally, people attain social prestige when they are financially independent and can support their families financially, but this is not easily achieved due to the current economic hardships in Africa. However, international migration appears to be the easiest route to social prestige, so migrants have not only attained social prestige but have become role models in Africa (Suso, 2019). Ying-Chi Lai et al. (2013) discovered that pursuing higher social standing and the attainment of social recognition influence the behaviour of migrants. Koshel & Yakovenko (2020) also agreed that a quest for public recognition influences migration. According to Elijah (2014), people who come back from abroad have more honour and influence in decision-making in their locality, unlike others.

While families were found to play an important role in facilitating irregular migration, as do society and peer groups, participants believe in spiritual

preparation, such as prayers or charms, before embarking on irregular migration. In Africa and Nigeria, people are especially highly religious, and when they make unlawful and risky decisions, they still hold tenaciously to God, believing in a divine solution (Nwafor et al., 2021). This way of life does not discourage irregular migration but increases it among Nigerian youth. Frequently, family members initiate migration and contribute their financial, spiritual, and material resources to make the journey feasible (Akhigbe & Effevottu, 2023). Ikuteyijo (2020) found that the decision to migrate youth rests with their families because the family decides how to support them. He discovered that parents actively promote and influence their children's desire to travel overseas, irrespective of their means of travelling. However, the ILO (2011) stated that the desire to migrate illegally will intensify when migration is striving in a particular society. Similarly, Altai Consulting (2015) discovered that irregular migrants are not always in the worst financial situations; circumstances, social pressure, and feelings of inequality in society drove them. More so, Cherti and Grant (2013) found that while poverty is rarely a factor that motivates irregular migration, a culture of migration in any society is a motivating factor.

Regarding how these sociocultural factors are maintained, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory holds that people pick up behaviours from the social environments in which they are raised. Many Nigerians still believed their potential would be realized abroad, making migration their only means of making ends meet. Others believed they were destined to succeed in any journey, including unauthorized migration. Hence, our findings show that these perceptions prevailed in the research area; unsurprisingly, most participants who indicated their desire to travel abroad had a propensity toward irregular migration. There is a significant outflow of unauthorized migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa to other regions of the world, which may not be unrelated. ILO (2011; 2015) emphasized that where IRM has been working in a given society, the pressure to migrate would grow. Due to the prevalence of these offensive myths in the study area, educating young people about the truths surrounding irregular migration is important. This guarantees they base their decisions on facts rather than opinions about irregular migration.

Regarding what should be done, it is essential to mention that social work professionals received training for this position. Social workers are trained to educate the public about the dangers of irregular migration. This will lessen reliance on belief rather than fact. Understanding the sociocultural context of irregular migration is critical to a successful intervention to curb irregular migration in different countries. It is also important to note that social workers must look for research and data on the efficacy of interventions not just for majority populations but also for various cultural and racial groups to perform

evidence-based practice (Social work degree centre, 2020). *Cultural competence* is a professional social work requirement outlined in the Social Work Code of Ethics. The Code stipulates that social workers should be knowledgeable about social diversities and existing 'ways of life' (cultural awareness) and utilize such knowledge to solve societal problems. This will enable social workers to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of such culture and how it influences human behaviour.

The study's finding shows that an individual's choices and behaviour are controlled by the society's culture where the individual is socialized. However, because the culture in which a person is socialized plays a significant role in shaping and moulding the person's decisions, understanding the culture allows social workers to factor out characteristics shared by a group and how it influences the individual. More significant than this, there is a considerably lower chance of carrying out intervention or assistance that will be ineffective or harmful to the client. From the findings, about 90% of the sampled youth aspire to travel abroad, yet there is a dominant perception they have that could breed irregular choice of migration. However, these perceptions are socio-culturally embedded, as found by the study and other related studies (Suso, 2019; Ying-Chi Lai et al., 2013; Koshel & Yakovenko, 2020). This finding will, however, enable social work professionals in their intervention to curb irregular migration by deconstructing the negative imaginations of aspiring migrants in Nigeria.

Moreso, social workers were trained to respect 'values' and accept their clients irrespective of their values. However, understanding the client's values is essential to comprehend the impact of social and cultural factors that contribute to irregular migration. This will guide professional intervention on the issue of irregular migration without undermining the rights of the migrants within the context of the particular society. Findings from the study aroused the need for the profession to intensify efforts in curbing irregular migration and assist the government by contributing to policy-making.

Finally, a study of this nature has its limitations. One is the tiny sample that only serves as a snapshot of one state. Thus, the researchers support comparable studies in other parts of the country. The study overlooked pertinent data from people beyond 35 that would have been essential for this study because it only focused on the opinions of young people between the ages of 18 and 35. Therefore, views from people of diverse ages should be included in future studies. Despite these obstacles, the study's findings are essential for social workers, legislators, the government, and other organizations in their attempts to halt irregular migration in Nigeria.

In conclusion, it is therefore recommended that migration studies be included in social work training where the study findings and related knowledge on migration will be properly dissected. Social workers should engage their clients by organizing sensitization programmes on radio, television, social media, newspaper, etc., on the dangers of irregular migration. They can achieve this by collaborating with other professions, the government, and immigration departments. The role of social workers, such as advocates, brokers, educators, counselling, mediators, change agents, and facilitators, is required in addressing irregular migration in Nigeria. The applicability of social workers' roles has been documented in the literature (Kagan, 2016; Maschi et al., 2011; Nwafor et al., 2022; Segal et al., 2019; Smith, 2017).

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