

The Experiences of and Challenges Faced by Nigerian Women Trafficked for Forced Labor: Implications for Faith-based Organizations and Policy Makers

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Abstract

The study is an attempt to identify and narrate the challenges faced by and experiences of Nigerian women in transit and destination countries. Although progress has been made in examining different aspects of Nigerians' vulnerability to trafficking in Europe, the literature has yet to focus on the experiences and challenges as they concern only women in Nigeria, transit countries and, more precisely, Italy. In this study, we aim to answer the following questions: (1) What are the socioeconomic characteristics of potential female Nigerian migrants? (2) What are the challenges faced by and experiences of female Nigerian migrants in transit countries like Libya, Mali, and Niger? (3) What are the challenges faced by and experiences of Nigerian female migrants in Europe, particularly in Italy? (4) Is there any platform that can bring together the efforts of faith-based and governmental organizations in this regard? This qualitative study was conducted in Nigeria using a phenomenological approach. The data were collected through key-informant interviews with 18 women who were selected using a purposive sampling method and the data analyzed using Colaizzi's method. Among the findings is that potential Nigerian female migrants are the breadwinners of most Nigerian families, and the pressure on them exposes them to being trafficked. Nigerian female migrants reported physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. The implications of the findings for government at the local, state, and federal levels are discussed.

Key words

Poverty, prostitution, faith-based organizations, women trafficking, Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigerian women are currently being trafficked due to their economic vulnerability in Nigeria. Since the 1980s, the numbers have continued to increase. According to Neil (2017), a stream of a few hundred women per year increased to about 1,500 in 2014 and grew to 5,600 in 2015, and at least 11,009 Nigerian girls and women arrived in Italy in 2016. Previously, these women arrived on planes with visas and engaged in menial jobs in Europe, such as hairstylist, house helper, and nanny. However, beginning in the last decade, many young Nigerian women have attempted irregular travel to Europe, through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea (Kazeem, 2018), and these desperate migrants are transported across borders through a vast illegal network (Olukoya, 2019). This has exposed Nigerian female migrants to many challenges and difficult experiences that have defied government efforts to stop them.

Economic vulnerability decreases women's ability to become economically independent, increasing financial reliance on male partners and, in turn, increasing the risk of being trafficked to Europe and abused (Salawu, Okedare, Reed, Kiene, & Fawole, 2022). Nigeria's women's situation at the moment is akin to a state of emergency, a dire crisis that requires urgent, exceptional, and extraordinary remediation (Simeon, 2018). This crisis is also at a critical point where crucial decisions must be made in order to avert impending doom. Unfortunately, Nigeria's increasing poverty level has enormous impacts, especially on women. Women are victims of and worse hit by poverty (Anyebe, 2017; Boyi, 2019; Eboiyehi, Bankole, & Eromonsele, 2006), and this economic vulnerability has left them vulnerable to forced labor in transit and receiving countries in Europe, specifically in Italy (Ezeibe, Oguonu, Ajaero, Osadebe, Agbo, & Uwaechia, 2021; Olubukola, 2020).

In order to migrate to Europe, Nigerian women are usually assisted by human traffickers. In the context of this article, human trafficking refers to the exploitation of a person for labor, services, or commercial sex (United States Department of Justice, 2022). These human traffickers are Nigerians who recruit, harbor, and transport women for services such as prostitution through the use of force or coercion. Most of these women are promised good jobs and educational opportunities if they travel to Europe, but there are continued reports of Nigerian women being forced to engage in forced labor, especially prostitution. There are also reports of Nigerian women being trafficked through Libya, Mali, Niger, and Tunisia (Aderemi & Adewole, 2022; Ugwukah, 2022). According to Kelly and Tondo (2016), although a lucrative sex trafficking market has existed between

Nigeria and Italy for over three decades, the number of unaccompanied Nigerian women coming into Italy on migrant boats from Libya has increased dramatically. They further stated that around 1,500 Nigerian women arrived by ship in 2014 and that the number had risen to 5,633 in 2015. There are also reports of Nigerian women engaging in drug peddling in Europe. In addition, some of these Nigerian women never get to Europe but are sold into slavery in transit countries.

Rationally, it would be expected that potential Nigerian female migrants would retrace their steps, and that the number of those who engaged in migration to Europe would have reduced. But the reverse is the case. More Nigerian women are still engaged in migration to countries organized by their so-called “benefactors,” sometimes referred to as “madams,” and the numbers of ghastly stories of the sad experiences of Nigerian women and their ongoing vulnerability to forced labor continue to increase (Akor, 2011; Chiara, Romaioli, & Contarello, 2022; Chisholm, Mark, Unigwe, & Katona, 2022; Olujuwon, 2008). It is on this premise that this research tries to uncover the challenges faced by and experiences of women coerced into forced labor in transit and in Europe. In this study, we aim to answer the following questions: (1) what are the socio-economic characteristics of potential Nigerian women migrants? (2) What are the challenges faced by and experiences of Nigerian women migrants in transit countries such as Libya, Mali and Niger? (3) What are the challenges faced by and experiences of Nigerian female migrants in Europe, particularly in Italy? and (4) Is there any platform that can bring together the efforts of faith-based and governmental organizations in this regard? Studies have reported the vulnerability of women to internal forced labor and trafficking in Nigeria (Antolinez-Domínguez & Jorge-Barbuzano, 2021; Paasche, Skilbrei, & Plambech, 2018), but little is known about their experiences and the challenges they face, or what policy makers and faith-based organizations could do to change the situation.

Methodology

Design

This study was carried out using a qualitative method through a phenomenological approach. A qualitative method enables a better and deeper understanding of a phenomenon, people’s experiences, and the context. The phenomenological approach describes the stories of people who have actually lived through a particular experience and their perceptions of it, which helps us understand what it is

like to experience a specific situation or life event (Creswell, 2013).

Participant Recruitment and Setting

The 18 female participants were selected through purposive sampling, aged 18–35 years. This category was deemed fit because they possess vital experience of forced labor in transit and destination nations. With respect to Europe, only Italy was chosen because most cases of women being coerced into forced labor have taken place in Italy. According to the International Organization for Migration (2006), Italy is home to the second-largest number of Nigerians and is the most important destination for Nigerian victims of trafficking. The study was conducted in Nigeria's Delta State because most young women here have migrated, are planning to migrate, or have been repatriated to Nigeria from abroad.

The participants were potential migrants, returnees/transit returnee migrants, and those who were already in Europe either working or looking for a job. The participants were selected for their knowledge about the vulnerability of women to forced labor. Purposive sampling leads to better insights and is time-saving due to the fact that participants are information-rich. Potential migrants, those who have already migrated, and returnees are information-rich and best suited to answering and providing answers to the questions. The age range of 18–35 years was chosen as being the age at which Nigerian women are most exposed to human traffickers, and the participants' mean age was 26.5 (see Table 1 below for full details).

Data Collection

Data was collected primarily through Key Informant Interviews. This approach was used to secure unique knowledge about the research topic from participants. It was carried out through phone calls (regular phone calls and WhatsApp phone calls), as this allowed for a free flow of ideas and information. This was also necessitated by the distance between the researchers and the participants and the high cost that would have been involved in travelling to interview them. Before each interview, participants were told about the basis of the interview and the reason they had been identified as good potential sources. Undertakings were given that neither names nor places of residence would be disclosed at any stage, enabling them to feel safe in providing the relevant information. All interviews were conducted in English.

Table 1
Participants' Details

| S/N | NAMES | AGE | GENDER | OCCUPATION | STATUS |
|-----|------------|-----|--------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. | Ada | 19 | Female | Undisclosed | In Europe |
| 2. | Oghene | 28 | Female | Undisclosed | Returnee |
| 3. | Funke | 25 | Female | Undisclosed | Returnee |
| 4. | Uyiwmen | 20 | Female | Undisclosed | Relation of a resident in Italy |
| 5. | Ruth | 18 | Female | Undisclosed | Returnee |
| 6. | Osazevbide | 30 | Female | Undisclosed | Transit country |
| 7. | Irivboje | 28 | Female | Student | Prospective migrant |
| 8. | Dukpe | 29 | Female | Business | Returnee |
| 9. | Uwagboe | 30 | Female | Hairdresser | Returnee |
| 10. | Chinyere | 23 | Female | Undisclosed | In Europe |
| 11. | Uvbi | 18 | Female | Undisclosed | In Europe |
| 12. | Sewuese | 35 | Female | Tailor | In Europe |
| 13. | Ogenekewe | 35 | Female | Tailor | Returnee |
| 14. | Ighayezomo | 28 | Female | Undisclosed | Prospective migrant to Europe |
| 15. | Noami | 29 | Female | Undisclosed | Returnee |
| 16. | Aigbe | 27 | Female | Undisclosed | In Europe |
| 17. | Emwinghare | 27 | Female | Undisclosed | Prospective migrant to Europe |
| 18. | Uduguome | 28 | Female | Undisclosed | Prospective migrant to Europe |

Data analysis

The 7-step Colaizzi technique was used to analyze the data collected in the interviews. Colaizzi's method of data analysis is an approach to interpreting qualitative research data, identifying meaningful information and organizing it into themes or categories (What is Colaizzi's Method, 2020). The following outline of the method is given by Wirihana, Welch, Williamson, Christensen, Bakon, and Craft (2018): (1) Read the transcript to be familiar with the data; (2) Identify and extract significant statements and phrases; (3) Formulate meanings; (4) Group all formulated meanings into categories, clusters of themes, and themes; (5) Define all emergent themes into an exhaustive description; (6) Describe the fundamental structure of the phenomenon; (7) Return the findings to participants to seek verification.

Literature Review

Poverty and Education

Economic indices show that women tend to earn less than men in Nigeria. This

means women have fewer savings than men and are disproportionately represented in the informal economy. They have less access to social protection, and are more likely to be burdened with unpaid care and domestic work, causing them to drop out of the labor force. Women also make up the majority of single-parent households (United Nations Women, 2020). More and more, it is women who are shouldering the financial responsibilities of their families. In fact, more women, especially in urban centers, are beginning to make use of formal and informal education, which makes wives or unmarried women more financially stable than their husbands or siblings. Thus, “as more women get education and enter paid employment, and some men lose jobs, traditional breadwinning roles are challenged and, sometimes, inverted as growing numbers of women become family breadwinners” (Akanle & Nwaobiala, 2020, p398).

The result is women who work from morning till night to make money to cater for their families and relatives, sometimes without any consideration of the effects on their health. What these Nigerian women want is for their children, brothers and sisters, or husbands to be okay. Consequently, despite the risks to their own health, including the danger of poor pregnancy outcomes and maternal death, and the impact on the family's long-term food security, women are often the first to stop eating in order to ensure the supply of food for their family (Phillips, 2009; UNAIDS, 2012). According to Mohindra, Labonté, and Spitzer (2011), gender norms regarding women's behavior as requiring self-sacrifice also reduce women's health-seeking behavior, implying that they will frequently forego essential medicines and put their own lives in danger during times of economic hardship. Women are often at the receiving end of economic challenges in the family and this seems to be escalating in Nigeria, as more men are beginning to abandon responsibility for the upkeep of the family and leaving it to their daughters and wives.

In Nigeria, especially in rural areas, most families, due to poverty, rarely consider university or even secondary education for their female children. They feel that girls are a liability because they will eventually get married. Accordingly, a lack of economic resources limits girls' ability to be economically independent by reducing their opportunities to receive an education or enter into a trade. Education provides a platform from which women can exercise better control over their individual destinies. It is essential for reducing poverty, ensuring a sustainable planet, minimizing unnecessary deaths and illnesses, eradicating gender inequity, and promoting peace (Henshaw, 2019). Most of those who might be interested in opening businesses in the market do not have the economic means to do that, which makes

them dependent on their fathers, brothers, or husbands. According to research carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers, Nigerian women are more likely than men to be unemployed, are over-represented in informal and vulnerable employment, and are paid less than men (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020). Many women, especially young girls, are on the streets hawking a variety of articles. When they make any money and bring it home, everyone feeds on it.

Sexual Exploitation in the Workplace

Sometimes women are sexually exploited with the promise of economic benefits. This especially affects women who serve as family house helpers. The boss, who is the man of the house, rapes and threatens to throw out the girl or woman if she exposes his abuse of her to anyone, including her family members. These abusers in Nigeria wield significant power over their victims. In fact, if the victim summons the courage to tell her father, she is silenced, due to the attendant repressive stigma that accompanies such abuse (Thomas-Odia, 2022). According to Ayub and Adegboyega (2020), forms of sexual exploitation in Nigeria include persistent unwanted sexual behavior or advances directed at workers, including job seekers, at the workplace by colleagues, superiors, supervisors, or employers, among others, which may impede or compromise their capacities to figure or actively participate in organizational activities. In Nigeria, 64% of women reported having been sexually harassed in their workplace, which continues to be a prevalent public health issue and a violation of human rights associated with numerous negative consequences, such as reduced job satisfaction, poor job performance, and poor mental health, as well as trauma.

Spousal Neglect and Single Motherhood

According to Chioma (2021), 36% of currently or previously married women have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional trauma at the hands of their spouses. Many women are single mothers because their men have run away to evade the burden of maintaining a family. Some women are abandoned when they become pregnant; they give birth and bear the burden alone. The woman is impregnated, left to carry the pregnancy, allowed to fend for herself and her unborn child, and even the child after it is born. When the woman has endured all these things, the man returns to take the glory. When the woman asks him for money for anti-natal and other necessary medications, he will refuse. Such situations are

almost traditional in most parts of Nigeria and occur because Nigeria does not have the laws that would require men to pay for childcare and support. Even the political will to implement these laws is lacking in Nigeria. What the woman sees is mockery and shame from neighbors, friends, and even faith-based organizations for being a single parent. In reality, this has empowered men to evade their responsibilities, roles, and obligations and impose this burden on women.

Findings

The present study involved 18 participants, each planning to migrate, in transit, or currently in Europe, or individuals who were deported or returned on their own.

Potential Migrants

Participants who are planning to migrate insisted that it is because of their current situation, that is, the harsh economic conditions, that they are considering migrating.

Still willing to migrate notwithstanding the possible consequences.

When asked why she was planning to migrate to Europe despite having no family there, Emwinghare stated:

The poverty level in my family is too high. If I stay here, I will die of poverty. At my age, I am not getting any younger. My mates are already calling me to tell me that there is money there. My junior ones at home need someone to pay their school fees (cries).

Another participant, Ighayezomo, said:

My mother has nothing to help my life with. In fact, she has tried. From my primary school to my secondary school, she has been the one taking care of me. I feel that our condition cannot continue to remain like this. Hence, there is need for me to travel out to look for anything as far as it can give me money, there is no problem.

Unemployment

Most young people in Nigeria have no job, and this affects women the most. When asked her reason for planning to migrate to Europe, Emwinghare mentioned:

I finish school, for five years no work. I cannot pick the calls of some of my class mates because they will asked me what I am doing. I will do anything to go to Italy. In fact, I am planning on selling my late father's land and leaving this place.

When asked about how she intends to go to Europe notwithstanding her lack of papers, Uduguome responded:

Oga, you are asking too many questions. Are you not in Nigeria? You see work to do and get money, my brother, I cannot continue to beg for money oh. I know someone who will work on the papers for me. When I reach Italy, I will pay the person, or you have the link. I will pay oh.

Spiritual Attack

Some informants' belief that there are supernatural forces that have been hampering their success in Nigeria. When asked about her motive for leaving Nigeria, Irivboje explained:

I heard that powers from my village is affecting my family. If I remain here I will never make it. My friends are telling me about Italy. I will go there and see, I know their powers cannot get me there.

She further stated:

Don't you see that those girls that cannot make it in Nigeria, when they go to Europe especially Italy, they will be sending money to their family to build houses for them. Did their family witchcraft affect them in Italy? You have seen what I mean.

Returnees Recall their Reasons and Experiences

Participants who were able to get out of Nigeria through transit countries such as Libya shared their experiences. Some of the reasons they gave for taking the

dangerous path through Libya in order to get to Europe were grouped under the following sub-headings:

Peer pressure

Informants reported that they were influenced by their peers into taking the dangerous path of going to Europe through Libya. When Ruth was asked why she chose this route he responded:

I was told by one of my friends that someone promised to take her to Europe through Libya. She told me that if I wanted to make it, I should gather money so that we could both pay for the trip and go to Europe. We will not stay much in Libya before the ship takes us to Europe.

For herself, Funke revealed:

I see my friends on their status, with beautiful pictures of Italy. I thought about it. I contacted one of them and she told me that she passed through Libya with the help of one woman. She sent the number to me. That was how I came to Libya and saw hell.

Low cost

Some participants stated that the Libyan route is less expensive than paying for direct migration costs to Europe. When Uwagboe was asked about her decision to take the Libya route notwithstanding the various warnings from the Nigerian government, she remarked:

You know how much it costs to board a flight from Nigeria to Europe. Myself, na Italy dey my mind. I do not have that big money. I prefer to take Libya even though it wasted my time and nearly took my life.

The returnees from transit countries recall their experiences and the challenges they faced. Some of them reported being physically and sexually assaulted.

Rape

Rape is a sexual assault against the will of the victim in which the aggressor uses force or threats. Some of the respondents reported that they were raped in Libya en route to Europe. When Oghene, a returnee from Libya, was asked about her

experiences in Europe, she replied:

I was raped, raped and forced into prostitution, and I had a child who died due to lack of care. I cannot even tell if I have the disease now. I am afraid of going for test.

In another vein, another returnee, Funke, who returned from Mali, stated:

Initially I refused to join forced prostitution in Mali, but I was tortured with rods and electric wires, with live current, I had to give it to them. In fact, I saw some dead people, and I had to sleep with up to ten men a day.

Furthermore, Uyiwmen explained that:

My sister said she was kept in one empty hall in Libya, beaten, and raped by men who were kept in charge of the camp. She said that any act of escape is responded to with a gunshot.

Starvation/ inconducive environment

With respect to food and other health requirements, Osazevbide was asked about how she managed to feed herself. She said:

In the place we stayed in Niger, they promised to move us to Europe. There were too many people, poor toilets, no sanitary pads, starvation due to one meal per day, and several beatings.

On her own experience, Dukpe explained that:

When you refuse to do the bidding of those who brought you, they will not give you food. When hunger finishes you for two days, you will beg them to use you for anything provided they give you food.

Motivating Factors and Experiences in Europe

Participants were dissatisfied with their experiences and the challenges they faced, but some stated that it is the best way to achieve their life goals.

Motivating factors

Lack of good work

Participants expressed dismay with the level of poverty in Nigeria, which is what

propelled them into taking the dangerous path to Europe. When asked about why she migrated to Europe, Sewuese explained:

Nigeria is not in better shape, there is no good work to do there in Nigeria. I am employed by a company in Nigeria, but I do not like the salary. In fact, if I remain there, my future is threatened.

Another informant, Uvbi, revealed that:

Since I am in Europe, at least, even though at all at all, I still see small work to do which pays me higher than what my mates are getting in Nigeria. So I have no reason for still remaining in Nigeria. I made the right choice notwithstanding the losses I incurred. Na so life be.

On a further note, Chinyere said:

I am a graduate. I finished school and for three years I found nothing to do. I had to sell my late father's land so that I can fund my trip to Europe.

Peer pressure/societal pressure influenced my decision

Peer pressure occurs when people do something because they want to feel accepted and valued by their friends. Some participants, when asked how their friends affected their decision to migrate to Europe, revealed that the pressure was intense. According to Uwagboe:

My mates who travelled to Europe told me that making money is very easy over there. I see them buying their own personal house in Nigeria. And the respect that people are giving them makes me ashamed.

Chinyere was of the view that:

My family is poor. I am their only hope. I came to this country to survive and to provide for my parents. My brother, life no easy, but it is better here than in Nigeria.

Nigerians, especially the youth, value luxury and material status. A high material status is believed to give one status among one's peers. In the words of Ada,

Since I have been in Italy, anytime I return, I spray money, and even old people greet me with respect. People that used to overlook me are trying to chat me on Whats.App. I have gotten respect.

Experiences of Nigerian Women in Europe

Forced prostitution

Two participants reveal how they survived in Europe. When asked about her survival strategies, Sewuese explains that “*the woman that brought me here insists that I must do prostitution so that she can recover the money she spent.*” Another informant, Chinyere, said:

That woman who brought me to Europe forced me to take an oath to do whatever she said. When I took the oath, she told me that I will be having sex with men and she will be collecting the money. There was nothing I could do because we swore in the oath that anyone who went against the rules would go insane.

Physical violence

Nigerian women suffer from physical violence because their customers who come for sex know that they have no legal backing to support them. According to Sewuese:

Sometimes after sexual intercourse with a customer, he will beat me. Hit my head on the bed, which put me out, and there is nothing I can do. When I report to my madam she will say that it is part of the business. That I should close my mouth to avoid arrest.

Chinyere said:

Some of them when they discover I am a Nigerian prostitute, some of them insist on unprotected sex. If I refuse, they will rape me. But before the rape he would have beaten me very well and weakened my body.

Service with little or no pay

Participants lamented that they were paid little money because of the fact that they were from Nigeria. When asked about how much she makes in a day, Dukpe stated:

Most of the white men love small girls to sleep around with, especially Nigerian girls. They also feel that we receive lower money for their sexual satisfaction. We don't even collect this money most times but our madam

that brought us to Italy.

Ada corroborated this: “*We are priced like animals. But what do we do na [please]. We need the money abeg [honesty]. E better past to stay for Nigeria where nothing dey happen. [It is preferable to suffer in Europe than remainin Nigeria].*”

Psychological trauma and insults

Participants reported how they received various forms of insults from their neighbors in Italy. According to Uvbi, “*some of the people living in our compound sometimes insult us like black pigs, dogs, and other unprintable names. They treat us as if we are lesser human beings.*” Ada revealed that “*sometimes when I remember all the dirty words that people tell me, I cry in the night. But what will I do na, I must survive. Someone even called me carrier of STDs.*”

Sexual diseases and unwanted pregnancies

Some of the participants insisted that they were forced to engage in unsafe sex. According to Ada:

These men will tell you initially that they will use protection, but when it is only both of you in the room, they will insist on unprotected sex. I am afraid of them killing me, so I agree. To be honest, I have HIV now. I am receiving treatment.

Aigbe, when asked if she had been pregnant, said:

I have been pregnant many times. I do abortion. The peels I took did not work. I am even tired of all these abortions. Sometimes, it is even in the fourth month I will discover that I am pregnant. I usually took risk and go for abortion. If I give birth now, I cannot have any money to survive again.

Suicide and homicide

Some Nigerian women trafficked to Europe sometimes decide to end their lives and the lives of those who trafficked them. When Ada was asked if she had ever contemplated suicide, she responded:

Since I began this prostitute work, life has never been the same. When I

stayed sometimes in the Nigeria I wish death. I curse the day I was born. I wish that this life is not worth living.

According to Uyiwomen,

My sister in Europe said that she is going to poison her madam so that she can be free from her slavery. She said that her madam is using her as a sex slave, collecting most of the money she makes from her customers. When she kills her she will run to another city to avoid police radar.

Religious manipulation

When asked if she had taken any oath of allegiance to her benefactor in Italy, Uvbi responded:

My pastor in my church prophesied that he is seeing me in Europe. So when someone introduced me to this Italy trip, I went to him and he told me that it is a confirmation of his prophecy. To my surprise, he took the money from church purse or wherever and told me that I should pay for my trip to Italy, but ensure that I start a branch of the church there and be returning the tithes and offerings.

In her own narrative, Chinyere recalled that:

I told my pastor about the fact that I will be going to Europe even without knowing any job to do. He said that the Lord will guide me in any work and due and prosper the work of my hand. He even quoted Psalm 23 and Psalm 90.

Also shedding more light on the issue of religious manipulation, Ada recalled:

When I arrived Italy, the woman that hosted me and others forced us to take oath with her. We swore with something that looks like charm that we will forever be submissive with her. After that she called some girls that gave us narrative of girls that broke the oath and went mad and some were caught and deported to Nigeria. This made me afraid of even telling my family what I am into.

Discussion

The present study shows that the victims of human trafficking are often

Nigeria's most marginalized citizens. In other words, more young women are still willing and able to leave Nigeria, notwithstanding the eventualities. The reason for this is that poverty, lack of employment, family demands, and spiritual attack are motivators of Nigerian women's migration to Europe. This reinforces the report of Akor (2011) that human traffickers are interested in young girls and women to force them into exploitative sexual and commercial activities, and the research of Eboiyehi, Muoghalu, and Bankole (2016) who found that the increase in the proportion of women breadwinners in Nigeria is a result of the economic recession, while the experience of women breadwinners is a product of the patriarchal gender roles and gender relations which are embedded in the fabric of Nigerian society. Akor (2011) reported that poverty is largely responsible for the migration of Nigerian girls and women for prostitution abroad and that there is little prospect of the menace of the trafficking of women being eliminated from Nigeria in the near future unless the specters of poverty, unemployment, and all the other push and pull factors are adequately addressed.

Studies also identified unemployment as a major driver of Nigerian women's migration to Europe. Nankobe (2018) discovered that unemployment in Nigeria is a push factor, forcing some of the women to emigrate from Nigeria, and the hope of finding work in Italy can be seen as a pull factor, attracting some of the participants to migrate to Italy. Nigerian women migrate in the search for business opportunities, and upon arrival in Europe, all of them became their families' main breadwinners through remittances, with no one questioning their source of income (Plambech, 2017). Women's main concern seems to be their families' demands. Young Nigerian women are nowadays driven by dreams, fantasies, wishes, and demands from family and friends to make it abroad just to satisfy family expectations, often under dangerous circumstances, and show resilience in dealing with unforeseen situations, tensions, and conflicts (König & de Regt, 2010). Nigerian women allow themselves to be trafficked to Europe due to the economic situation, which they feel cannot get better if they remain in Nigeria. Hence, they risk the journey through the hills and valleys of Libya, Mali, and Niger just to get into Europe.

This study also shows that peer pressure and the low cost of migration makes them take this dangerous decision of migrating to Europe with no means of sustaining themselves en route, and it results in their rape and starvation, and enduring unhealthy environments and practices in transit camps and elsewhere. Nigerian women are lured by their friends to travel to transit countries such as Libya, Mali, and Niger because of the cheap cost. This agrees with the research findings of

Inyama (2021), where he analyzed the motivating factors that push young people from Port Harcourt to migrate. He discovered that peer influence, access to information, and the activities of covert agents who live within the same community as these young people provide easier access to information related to undertaking illegal migration abroad through these unsafe routes. Migrating from Nigeria to other countries is costly for those without the finances and the right papers.

In these transit countries, Nigerian women are raped. This mirrors the accounts by Press (2017) that Nigerian women in Libya are kept in hotels, and if any attempt is made to run away, the woman will be killed by their “benefactors.” They are raped by many guests, and they are usually told that if they know what is good for them, they should submit. This situation of widespread abuses and rapes is especially concerning as it causes enormous damage to migrants, including mental and physical trauma, infections by communicable diseases (such as HIV/AIDS), and unwanted pregnancies. Estimates indicate that nearly half of the women and children along this route experienced sexual abuse multiple times and in multiple places. Furthermore, sexual abuse appears systematic and widespread at security checkpoints and at the border with Libya (Bruni, Koch, Siegel, & Strain, 2017). Several scholars have emphasized that sexual assault, rape, forced marriage, sterilization, forced prostitution, military sexual slavery, and human trafficking are ongoing phenomena that Nigerian migrants in Mali experience (Ghosh, 2009). Shedding further light, *Sabara Reporters* (2022b) explained that in Mali, Nigerian women were kept in female sex workers’ houses, where they were forced to take drugs and then became addicted. It was also revealed that men in Mali would come in to choose girls as sex partners or they would come to pick them up for hard labor. Women who refused would be hit with heavy sticks like animals. Women who refuse to engage in forced prostitution in transit camps are starved of food or health needs. In Libya, Nigerian women were succumbing to diseases, starvation, and dehydration in an environment in which deadly insects abounded (Elusoji, 2017).

Furthermore, studies have found that Nigerian women migrants in Europe take the decision to travel, not because they have no job in Nigeria, but because they are not satisfied with the type of pay they receive in Nigeria. In a study carried out by Bello, Ajayi, and Asuzu (2018), they identified lack of satisfaction with pay and lack of contingent reward as determinants of why many women in the medical profession are leaving public hospitals in Nigeria, especially public hospitals in Calabar, Nigeria. These Nigerian migrants are not illiterates, and they have some work experience. However, in Europe they are compelled to work in jobs that un-

dervalue their skills, and many of the employers are reported to be unfriendly and exploitative (Obi, Slosse, Bartolini, Dessein, & D'Haese, 2022). Contingent reward helps employees measure their organizational and societal importance and value, which relates to the quality of their remuneration (Ghazanfar, Chuanmin, Khan, & Bashir, 2011). Also, women migrant workers were pressured by the standards set by their peers and families and also wanted to be held in high esteem. According to the findings of the Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (2022), women migrants in Italy are wealthy from prostitution, have a good socio-economic position, and are not susceptible to unfavorable social attitudes, being in fact held in high regard due to their increased earning potential.

The results show that in addition to forced prostitution, Nigerian female migrants are physically assaulted because they have no legal support or backing. In Italy, Nigerian women forced into prostitution are compelled to have sex with anything from four to twelve men a day. Put crudely, these women, unlike drugs that are used only once, can be used repeatedly before they are ultimately discarded (Agbu, 2003). Furthermore, Nigerian women in Italy are increasingly young, many being unaccompanied minors when they arrive. The violence and exploitation they face when they are under the control of these gangs is getting worse, and they are essentially treated like slaves (Kelly & Tondo, 2016). According to Aghatise (2004), Nigerian women migrants suffer abuse due to the fact that they exist outside of the established legal framework, do not speak Italian, have no contacts in Italy other than those of their exploiters, and have had their travel documents seized. This ongoing and continuous human abuse is the result of the lack of legal backing for Nigerian women in Italy, but also the lack of proper strengthening and enhancement of effective legal means for international cooperation in criminal matters for the purpose of suppressing any form of abuse of Nigerian migrants (Ogwezzy, 2012). Findings also show that some Nigerian prostitutes in Italy are paid little and they are insulted and bullied. De Haas (2006) explains that exploited and marginalized Nigerian migrants are prey to Europeans who profit from cheap immigrant labor and sex, and that their often undocumented status makes them easier to exploit. Unfortunately, instead of targeting the abusers, it is the Nigerian migrants are punished and stigmatized while having their rights denied.

The study also reports that Nigerian migrants are exposed to and contact sexually transmitted diseases and abort unwanted pregnancies. Peano (2013) states that many women have suffered death, violence, and deportation on this account. but for individual Nigerian women contemplating migration, either they do not really believe such things can happen, given that Europe is idealized as a place of

wealth and ease where situations of extreme hardship do not exist, or if they do believe it, they feel that it will not happen to them. Auli, Mejía-Lancheros, Berenguera, and Pujol-Ribera (2015) state that Nigerian migrants know that their trade makes them vulnerable to STI/HIV/AIDS and they want to protect themselves. The main risk comes from their clients, since they ignore whether their clients have any type of disease, including STI/HIV/AIDS. Auli et al. (2015) further revealed that Nigerian female migrants could not always wash after intercourse and knew that when a condom breaks, they are directly exposed. With regards to abortion, the research carried out by Farina and Ortensi (2011) showed high levels of abortion rates among women from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Cameroon, and Cape Verde, and somewhat lower levels for Egyptian and Algerian women, though still higher than those found for Italian women .

The results of this study reveal that participants contemplated suicide and also homicide. This is consistent with Burke's (1976) assertion that socio-cultural factors associated with migration and the situation of the migrants are important factors in attempted suicide. With regards to homicide, Winders (2014), in his study "New Immigrant Destinations in Global Context," reported that high poverty and frustration are among the reasons immigrants consider homicide as a means of showing their discontent with their situation.

Another very important finding of this research is the role played by religious manipulation. Unlike previous studies that tend to hypothesize that it is only among traditional African religions that religious manipulation is used to persuade likely victims to agree to travel, this study also found out that even organized religion partakes in this manipulation. In the research by Tondo and Kelly (2017), they aver that the abuse of religious and cultural belief systems in Nigeria has proved a deadly and effective control mechanism for traffickers involved in the recruitment of women destined for the sex trade in Europe. A hugely profitable and well-organized criminal industry has been operating between Italy and Nigeria for more than two decades, but the UN's International Organization for Migration said in 2006 it had seen an almost 600% rise in the number of potential sex trafficking victims arriving in Italy by sea over the previous three years . Providing further insights on religious manipulation, Baker (2018) has exposed the fact that the Juju oath sex trafficking trade is particularly lucrative and nearly impossible to prosecute due to the fact that the oath-taking ceremony, conducted by a "juju" priest and performed in front of a carved wooden idol, is typically accompanied by animal sacrifice and incantation. Sometimes the victim offers snippets of her fingernails, pubic hair, menstrual blood, and undergarments, which the priest binds

into a small bundle which is blessed and sealed; this ensures the silence of the victim and prevents her revolting against her oppressors in Italy. *Sahara Reporters'* (2022a) research revealed how a woman was tricked by her church pastor into joining others in Libya where she was promised there would be a decent job for her, such as working in a hair salon.

Nigerian women began migrating to Europe in the 1980s in response to the demand for low-skilled labor in areas such as agriculture, house help, and some part-time jobs in private homes. However, the burden of sending remittances to their families in Nigeria meant some of them found it hard to make ends meet, and they had to seek alternative sources of income, which became prostitution. Also, some of these Nigerian women migrants in Italy had taken out large loans, which they had to pay back within a specified period. This was the opportunity that Nigerian traffickers in Europe, especially Italy, saw and used to their benefit. These Nigerian traffickers usually entice young Nigerian women to migrate to Europe with the promise that there are good jobs waiting for them. When they arrive, their passports are taken from them and they are coerced into prostitution, with no legal or social support.

Implications for Policymakers, Stakeholders, and Faith-based Organizations

The economic vulnerability of Nigerian women, which makes them vulnerable to human trafficking and abuse in transit and destination countries, has implications for policy-makers, concerned stakeholders, and even faith-based organizations (FBOs).

First, the situation reveals that there is a lack of empowerment for youth, especially women, in Nigeria. Take the issue of how these young Nigerian women are forced into the position of being breadwinners for their respective families and the fact that they have no jobs” and even after getting jobs, their expenditure far outweighs their salaries. This shows that the government is falling short in its responsibility to provide empowering initiatives and programs that will meet the challenge of defining gender policies that will be in tandem with and impact positively on the overall development goals (Ejumudo, 2013). The Nigerian government in 2006 adopted the National Gender Policy in 2006, which has been to a great extent sidelined. The policy stated as follows:

The government must be proactive in its commitment to addressing problems affecting women and to ensure the mainstreaming of women's issues in the formulation and implementation of all policies and programs. The policy expressly

highlights the problems faced by women in various sectors of the economy, such as education, health, employment, agriculture, legal reform, legislative protection, and in decision making (National Human Rights Commission, n.d).

Second, the situation reveals that socio-cultural factors have affected women in that they now see society as only for men. They have accepted their situation. The government should start looking at cultural influences that tend to make women economically vulnerable. Thus, if our cultures do not favor women, the government, as an integral body that unites all Nigeria's cultures, should not allow such cultural influences to take root and dominate; indeed, it is the government that has the greatest power to influence situations in the communities (Odotu, 2016). The government needs to use legal instruments to challenge cultural norms that tend to make women economically vulnerable, which leads to their abuse and subjugation. There is a need for a re-orientation by individuals, groups, institutions, and agencies (both governmental and non-governmental) on gender equality issues that will translate into attitudinal change and response, which is germane to the efficacy of gender equality and women's empowerment in Nigeria (Ejumudo, 2013). The government of Nigeria (at local, state, and federal levels) has failed in its duty to remove those artificial and institutional barriers based on religion, culture, or traditional considerations that have incapacitated women's economic progress and economic independence (Ovute, Dibia, & Obasi, 2015).

Third, the situation highlights the fact that, despite all the narratives of Nigerian women abused in destination countries in Europe, governmental efforts through the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) have failed to achieve their aims. Women continue to be willing to be trafficked to Europe. Sensitization is key to reducing the vulnerability of women to abuse necessitated by their economic condition in the origin, transit, and destination countries. This is where FBOs have liaised with NAPTIP on the issue of sensitizing Nigerian women, especially the youth, in religious gatherings, because FBOs often have a good understanding of the local context, speak out for the disenfranchised, deliver higher quality services, mobilize energy and resources, contribute to consensus-building, and connect local communities with higher authorities (World Health Organization, 2006). The current predicament of Nigerian women in Europe is partly due to the lack of adequate sensitization and capacity building by FBOs, which are essentially charitable institutions created to improve social welfare (Weiss, 2020) and also religious instruments of social transformation in contemporary times that provide human development services such as education,

health, and social services (Baiyeri, 2019).

To drastically reduce the number of Nigerian women in Europe exposed to prostitution, government in Nigeria—local, state, and federal—needs to look for ways to empower Nigerian women. Special centers and institutes could be created to provide free formal and informal education and empowerment programs for young women. This would, to a great extent, keep them busy and less susceptible to being lured abroad. According to Ovute et al. (2015), empowerment is the provision of a conducive environment or opportunities for women to contribute their share to the social, political, and economic development of a nation. Scholars have emphasized how the lack of empowerment encourages women to engage activities that are inimical to their wellbeing. Qayyum, Iqbal, Akhtar, Hayat, Janjua, and Tabassum(2013) point out that young women are vulnerable to sex work due to a variety of situations, some natural and some manmade, including lack of economic resources, illness in the family, lack of education, poverty, debt burden, sex for enjoyment, peer association, family neglect, domestic clashes, and spousal drug addiction.

In addition, political will on the part of the government is essential. It is not all about creating agencies such as NAPTIP; the government need to help link NAPTIP with FBOs in Europe, especially in Italy, which could be achieved through the Nigerian embassies there. This is because no matter how many policies are formulated by the government, however many programs are designed, and however much is invested in human, institutional, and infrastructural requirements, all this will remain dormant unless activated by the appropriate political will and genuine commitment that can be expected to translate gender-responsive policies, programs, and activities into concrete reality (Ejumudo, 2013).

There are several faith-based organizations spread across Nigeria. For young women to gain the skills and knowledge they need, they should be provided with scholarships by those FBOs. When Nigerian women are educated, they are better placed to survive economically and challenge certain norms in Nigeria and outside that abuse their fundamental human rights. Education, according to Aimua (2021), includes skills and knowledge, and enables women to control their destinies and make effective changes to their communities, while women with better developed cognitive skills are less likely to be abused.

Furthermore, a lack of sensitization seems to be making Nigerian women more susceptible to trafficking. FBOs should initiate sensitization courses in secondary and tertiary learning institutions. In this awareness campaign, young Nigerian women could be told to seek other options such as hard work, patience, and dili-

gence rather than considering the option of being trafficked to Europe. For better understanding, sensitization, otherwise known as awareness raising, using case studies and by discussing the nature and causes of trafficking, and the damage it causes to victims (UNODC, 2011) could be employed to achieve the desired results.

This study contributes new data on the vulnerability of Nigerian women, to forced labor in Europe and has implications for policymakers and faith-based organizations. One limitation of this study, as opposed to other qualitative studies, lies in the limited number of participants. Also, the fact that all the participants in this study came from Delta State, and that the focus was on Nigerian women immigrants in Italy, affects the level to which the results of the study can be generalized. The fact that interviews were conducted using phone calls and WhatsApp calls meant that the familiarity which could have been established through face-to-face interviews was absent; such familiarity would probably have increased the participants' willingness to share sensitive information. However, these limitations do not hamper the findings of the study, which are trustworthy, genuine, and dependable and provide a significant insight into the challenges faced by and experiences of women in Nigeria, as well as in transit and destination countries.

Conclusions

This study highlighted the challenges faced by and experiences of Nigerian female migrants in transit and destination countries, mainly in Italy. The results of the study confirm that Nigerian women in transit and destination countries are subject to physical, sexual, spiritual, and psychological violence. To reduce the economic vulnerability of Nigerian women in Nigeria itself, and in transit and destination countries, policy makers, religious leaders and faith-based organizations need to be more proactive and involved, especially in social support initiatives such as sensitization about irregular migration and forced labor, as well as the provision of free counselors for potential migrants and returnees. Thus, actions aimed at reducing Nigerian women from falling prey to human traffickers in the future need to be taken by the government with the support of religious leaders and faith-based organizations to create an atmosphere in which women are legally, culturally, and socially supported. Future studies could focus attention on Nigerian women's experiences in Asia, and explore differences in the experiences of Nigerian women migrants in Europe and Asia. They could also specifically analyze

why Nigerian women are migrating to Asia, looking at the remote and immediate causes, vis-a-vis the socio-cultural factors.

The positive effects of comprehensive programs focusing on vulnerable populations such as Nigerian female migrants in Italy prove the need for effective collaboration between policymakers and faith-based organizations and the need to prioritize initiatives aimed at empowering women and reducing their vulnerability to forced labor in Nigeria, as well as in transit and destination countries. The findings of this study should contribute to programs aimed at reducing women's economic vulnerability. Other aspects such as socio-cultural determinants should also be explored, since they influence the decision-making of Nigerian women migrants, which results in the various forms of abuse they suffer in different areas of the world. When the Nigerian government or religious leaders are designing intervention programs, those interventions can be made more appropriate by proper consideration of the findings provided by studies like this that explore the motivations fueling Nigerian women's migration to Europe.

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