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AHMR is an interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal created to encourage and facilitate the study of all aspects of human mobility in Africa, including socio-economic, political, legal, developmental, educational and cultural aspects. Through the publication of original research, policy discussions and evidence-based research papers, AHMR provides a comprehensive forum devoted exclusively to the analysis of current migration trends, migration patterns and some of the most important migration-related issues.

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Editorial

Professor Mulugeta F. Dinbabo

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The *African Human Mobility Review* (AHMR), published on August 30, 2026, is now available in Volume 12, Number 2. This edition compiles current, thorough, and innovative research on various aspects of human migration throughout Africa. Each of the five research pieces adds to the current discussions about the dynamics and trends of migration. The AHMR's solid interdisciplinary foundation, extensive international network of scholars, and seasoned editorial board ensure that published material promotes informed discourse and evidence-based policymaking.

We sincerely thank the publisher, writers, reviewers, and members of the editorial board for their support and dedication. The journal's growth and quality are maintained by their combined efforts. We are committed to enhancing the AHMR's scholarly significance and worldwide visibility as it develops. Examining current migration trends, new issues, and policy-relevant information influencing human movement throughout the African continent is made possible by this subject.

The first article, authored by Lamin Saidyjen and Safiatou Drammeh and titled **"My Future Is Not Here: Youth Perceptions and Migration Intentions in The Gambia"** draws on a quantitative research design grounded in analyzing and interpreting numerical data to test hypotheses, find patterns, and generalize results to a wider population. In The Gambia, where irregular migration to Europe continues to escalate, this study investigates the relationship between youth perceptions and migration intentions. The goal was to ascertain whether young Gambians' plans to leave permanently are influenced by perceived economic opportunity, social affiliation, and personal hope. A structured questionnaire was disseminated to participants as part of a quantitative cross-sectional design. The Smart Partial Least Squares (SmartPLS) statistical software program for structural equation modeling and the statistical software for descriptive statistics were used to examine the data. The results demonstrate that migratory intentions are strongly, negatively, and significantly impacted by perceived economic opportunity.

The second article, by Mouhi Eddine Sadaoui and Souad Azizi, is titled **"Navigating Borders and Screens: ICT Practices and Digital Migratory Mimicry in the Sub-Saharan Boza Journey."** This study focuses on Cameroonians who pass via Morocco on their way to Europe. The study illustrates the conflicting role of

ICTs at various stages of migration through a novel, hybrid, multi-sited technique that combines biographical interviews, digital narrative cartography, and virtual ethnography of a “*boza*” Facebook community. Although these technologies offer vital tools for empowerment and survival, they also create new vulnerabilities and strengthen digital imaginaries that could promote the perpetuation of movement patterns. In order to explain how idealized success narratives that circulate online can encourage irrational aspirations and high-risk migratory behavior, the study presents “digital migratory mimicry.” Therefore, by emphasizing emotive and communal digital dynamics, it goes beyond rational-choice approaches.

The third article, by Supreme Edwin Asare, Edmond Akwasi Agyemang, Michael Addaney, and Kofi Takyi Asante, is titled “**Childhood Experiences, Self-Efficacy, and Migration Aspirations Among African Youth: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.**” This systematic review examines the relationships between childhood experiences, self-efficacy, and migration aspirations across African contexts. A life-course view is supported by the findings, which show that negative childhood experiences are linked to higher goals for migration, while pleasant experiences are linked to lower expectations. These associations may be mediated by self-efficacy. Significant variation persists despite consistency across several situations and study methods. It is unable to draw judgments about causality because the majority of the evidence is cross-sectional and retroactive. Rather, the results point to a systematic relationship between childhood and adolescent experiences and subsequent aspiration patterns, underscoring the necessity of long-term studies. In addition to challenging adult-centered migratory governance, these associations highlight the significance of youth opportunity, education, and child welfare within larger policy frameworks.

The fourth article, by Bezawork Ayele Kassa, is titled “**Migrant Women in the Labor Force in South Africa: A Mixed-Methods Analysis.**” Using a mixed-methods approach, this study investigates migrant women’s labor-market access, working conditions, and employment networks in South Africa. Results show that while migrant women actively engage in the workforce, informal networks, legal status, and gendered labor-market segmentation have a significant impact on their employment prospects. Many work in low-paying, unstable, and unofficial jobs where there are few labor laws and a considerable danger of exploitation. Long hours, low pay, and abuse are frequent working circumstances that reflect migrants’ limited access to official employment prospects and minimal bargaining strength. Although social networks and middlemen are essential in helping migrant women find work, structural obstacles still prevent them from being fully included in the economy. The study highlights the need for policies that improve workplace conditions, protection, and employment access while providing empirical insights into the interconnections of migration, gender, and labor.

The fifth article by Amina Mohammed Bashir and Abdul-Maliq Yekeen Oku, is titled “**Human Capital Flight: The *Japa* Phenomenon and Nigeria’s Economic Growth Assessment.**” Using an ex-post-facto research design, this study employs

a Vector Error Correction Model (VECM) to examine the short- and long-run relationships between gross domestic product (GDP) and net migration, workers' remittances, foreign direct investment, and exchange rates. The results demonstrate that net migration considerably lowers Nigeria's economic performance, suggesting that skilled people's departure affects the country's ability to produce. The report also connects the increasing "*Japa syndrome*" to both stronger international pull factors and worsening home push factors, like unemployment and economic distress. According to these results, migration is a major structural issue that needs immediate policy action. The loss of human capital cannot be compensated for by remittance inflows alone. In order to retain competent individuals and promote sustainable national development, the report suggests policies that encourage economic growth, job opportunities, and a favorable business climate.

Finally, I encourage researchers, academics, and students to actively participate in the journal by pursuing creative research that makes significant practical and societal contributions. Potential contributors are encouraged to submit innovative, thorough, and pertinent research that advances understanding and tackles current issues. Contributors can enhance scholarly conversation, increase the journal's academic impact, and foster interdisciplinary dialogue by offering new viewpoints and critical insights. Maintaining involvement will guarantee that the magazine continues to be a dynamic forum for critical analysis and the sharing of evidence-based knowledge.

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“My Future Is Not Here”: Youth Perceptions and Migration Intentions in The Gambia

Lamin Saidyjeng¹ and Safiatou Drammeh²

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between youth perceptions and migration intentions in The Gambia, where irregular migration to Europe remains persistently high. The objective was to determine whether perceived economic opportunity, social belonging, and personal hope influence young Gambians' intentions to leave permanently. A quantitative cross-sectional design was used, with a structured questionnaire administered to 88 young Gambians aged 18–35 years. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software for descriptive statistics and the Smart Partial Least Squares (SmartPLS) statistical software program for structural equation modeling. The findings show that perceived economic opportunity has a strong, negative, and significant effect on migration intentions. Young Gambians who believe decent work and fair income are unavailable at home are substantially more likely to intend to migrate. In contrast, neither perceived social belonging nor perceived personal hope shows a significant relationship with migration intentions. These results demonstrate that economic perceptions are the dominant driver of migration intentions among Gambian youth, while social and psychological factors play a minor role. The findings are useful, because they shift policy toward improving young people's perceptions of local economic opportunity through visible job creation, entrepreneurship support, and credible success stories, rather than interventions centered on hope or social cohesion alone.

Keywords: Perceived economic opportunity, social belonging, personal hope, push factors

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INTRODUCTION

“Why do young Gambians risk death and detention to reach Europe when most know the dangers of the ‘Backway’?” Understanding why young people take such risks has become one of the most pressing social and policy concerns in The Gambia over the past decade. Thousands of young Gambians have attempted the irregular journey known locally as the “Backway”—an overland route through Niger and Libya followed by a dangerous sea crossing to Italy or Malta (Vitturini and Bellagamba, 2024). Many have died or been subjected to detention, torture, and forced labor along the way (Forrest and Steel, 2023). Despite these well-documented risks, migration intentions among Gambian youth remain persistently high. Surveys conducted by Afrobarometer and The Gambia Bureau of Statistics indicate that most young people aged 18 to 35 would leave the country permanently if given the opportunity (Afrobarometer, 2024). This persistence suggests that economic explanations alone, such as poverty and unemployment, do not fully account for why some young people intend to migrate while others with similar conditions do not (Hall, 2023).

The Gambia’s economy is characterized by high youth unemployment, limited formal-sector jobs, and heavy reliance on remittances from family members abroad (Ayeni and Shaib, 2020). Agriculture, which employs a large share of the population, offers low and seasonal returns (Losch, 2022). The tourism sector, once a major source of employment, has been unstable due to political transitions and external shocks (Seyfi and Hall, 2020). In this context, migration is often seen as a rational strategy for improving one’s life. However, existing research on Gambian migration has focused heavily on economic push and pull factors, including wage differentials, household poverty, and remittance flows (Drammeh, 2025). While these factors are important, they do not explain the variation in migration intentions among young people who face similar material conditions. Two young men from the same village with the same level of education and family income may hold completely different plans—one actively saving for the Backway and the other intending to stay. This variation points to the role of subjective perceptions: how young people see their own future in The Gambia, whether they believe opportunities exist for them locally, and how they imagine life abroad (Gaibazzi, 2019).

The literature on migration and development has increasingly recognized that perceptions, aspirations, and social expectations shape migration decisions alongside objective economic conditions (Helbling and Morgenstern, 2023). Concepts such as the aspirations–capabilities framework have been used to understand how people form migration intentions based on what they desire and what they believe is achievable (De Haas, 2021). However, limited empirical work has applied this lens to The Gambia using quantitative methods. Most existing studies are qualitative in nature, drawing on small samples or ethnographic fieldwork in specific communities. A quantitative approach that measures perceptions across a sample of Gambian youth can identify which perceptual factors are most strongly associated with migration intentions (Conrad Suso, 2020). This study addresses that gap.

The objective of this paper is to examine the relationship between youth perceptions of their future in The Gambia and their intentions to migrate. Specifically, the study investigates three perceptual dimensions: perceived economic opportunity—whether young people believe they can find decent work or start a business in The Gambia; perceived social belonging—whether they feel valued and included in their families and communities; and perceived personal hope for the future—their general sense of optimism or pessimism about where their lives are headed. The study then measures how these perceptions are associated with the strength of migration intentions among young Gambians aged 18 to 35.

The research employed a quantitative cross-sectional design based on a structured survey administered to 88 respondents across five regions of The Gambia, including both urban and rural areas. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software for descriptive statistics and the Smart Partial Least Squares (SmartPLS) statistical software program for partial least squares structural equation modeling to examine the relationships between perceptual factors and migration intentions.

The paper proceeds as follows: The next section provides a literature review and the theoretical framework guiding the study. The methodology section then describes the survey instrument, sampling strategy, and analytical techniques. Results are presented subsequently, followed by a discussion of the findings. The paper concludes with policy recommendations and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic determinants of migration

Research on migration intentions among young people in West Africa has grown considerably over the past two decades. Early studies focused mainly on economic factors, such as unemployment, low wages, and household poverty (Lazarsfeld and Zawadzki, 2025). These studies found that young people from poorer households were more likely to express a desire to migrate (Milasi, 2020). However, later research showed that economic conditions alone do not explain why some young people intend to migrate, while others with similar incomes do not (Méndez, 2020). This finding led researchers to examine social and psychological factors.

Social belonging and migration

In The Gambia specifically, several qualitative studies have explored why young people take the Backway route to Europe (Jinkang et al., 2023). These studies found that peer pressure, family expectations, and the desire for social status play important roles (Cui et al., 2016). Young Gambians who have returned from Europe, even after a difficult journey, are often seen as successful. This social recognition encourages others to attempt migration (Leichtle, 2025). A few quantitative studies have also been conducted. One survey found that over 60% of young Gambians aged 18 to 35

would migrate if given the chance (Bah et al., 2024). Another study found that having a relative abroad was strongly associated with migration intentions (Manchin and Orazbayev, 2018). However, these quantitative studies did not measure perceptions of the future or feelings of social belonging. They focused on objective variables like household income, education, and employment status.

Hope, aspirations, and migration intentions

Outside The Gambia, migration researchers have developed concepts such as perceived opportunity and relative deprivation (Williams, 2017). Perceived opportunity refers to what a person believes is possible for them locally, regardless of actual economic statistics (Monusova, 2020). Relative deprivation compares one's own situation to that of others, especially migrants abroad. Studies from Senegal and Ghana have shown that perceived lack of opportunity is a stronger predictor of migration intentions than actual unemployment (Frohnweiler et al., 2024). Young people who believe that hard work will not lead to success in their country are much more likely to plan to leave (Bakina et al., 2019). These findings suggest that subjective perceptions deserve more attention in quantitative migration research.

Research gap

A gap remains in the literature on The Gambia. No quantitative study has examined how perceived economic opportunity, perceived social belonging, and perceived personal hope for the future together influence migration intentions among Gambian youth (Méndez, 2020). Most existing quantitative work uses secondary data from large surveys that did not include these perceptual questions. This study addresses that gap by collecting primary data through a structured questionnaire administered to 88 young Gambians.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by the aspirations–capabilities framework developed by Hein de Haas (2021). The framework proposes that migration is not simply a response to poverty or wage gaps. Instead, migration happens when people aspire to something that cannot be fulfilled in their current location, and when they have the capability to move. Aspirations are shaped by what people see, hear, and learn from family, friends, media, and diaspora communities. Capabilities include financial resources, education, social networks, and physical ability.

Crucially, the framework rejects a linear relationship between poverty and migration. Very poor people may lack the capability to move. Very wealthy people may have no reason to leave. Migration intentions are strongest among those with moderate resources and high aspirations—precisely the demographic that characterizes many Gambian youths (Drammeh, 2025).

Applying this framework to The Gambia, many young people see images of European prosperity on social media and hear stories from returned migrants. These exposures raise their aspirations (Drammeh, 2025). At the same time, local job opportunities are limited, and agricultural work is seasonal and low paying. For many young Gambians, the gap between what they want and what they can achieve at home is large (Ceasay, 2016). Whether this gap leads to migration intentions depends on their perceived capabilities, which include access to money for the journey, contacts along the route, and information about risks. The aspirations–capabilities framework, therefore, provides a useful lens for understanding why perceptions of the future matter. It moves beyond simple push–pull models and puts the individual’s own view of their situation at the center.

Linkage between the framework and the study variables

The three perceptual variables in this study are derived directly from the aspirations–capabilities framework. This framework emphasizes that migration decisions are shaped by the interaction between aspirations (what people desire) and perceived capabilities (what people believe they can achieve). Each of the three variables captures a distinct dimension of this interaction.

First, perceived economic opportunity reflects the capability dimension of the framework. Young people assess whether they have realistic pathways to achieve economic stability in The Gambia. When perceived economic opportunity is low, the capability to achieve aspirations locally is diminished, making migration more attractive. This is the core mechanism of the framework: when local opportunities are perceived as insufficient to fulfill aspirations, migration becomes a rational strategy (De Haas, 2021). This logic directly informs Hypothesis 1, which predicts that lower perceived economic opportunity is associated with stronger migration intentions.

Second, perceived social belonging captures a social and relational dimension of capability. The framework recognizes that migration decisions are embedded in social networks and relationships (De Haas, 2021). When young people feel excluded or undervalued in their communities, their social capability—the support and recognition that enable them to thrive—is weakened. This social exclusion may increase migration intentions as individuals seek belonging elsewhere. Conversely, strong social belonging may anchor young people to their communities, reducing the appeal of migration. However, as noted in the literature, social dynamics can also work in the opposite direction: family expectations and peer pressure can push young people to migrate, even when they feel socially included (Cui et al., 2016; Leichtle, 2025). This ambiguity is reflected in Hypothesis 2, which predicts that lower perceived social belonging is associated with stronger migration intentions, while acknowledging that the direction of the relationship is not entirely certain.

Third, perceived personal hope directly relates to the aspirations dimension of the framework. Hope reflects the belief that one’s goals are achievable and that the future holds promise. The framework suggests that migration intentions are strongest

when aspirations are high but local capabilities are perceived as insufficient. Hope may amplify this effect by motivating action and risk-taking (Refaeli and Itzhaky, 2022). Alternatively, hope may reduce migration intentions by fostering optimism about local possibilities—if young people believe their situation will improve, they may be less inclined to leave. This theoretical ambiguity is why Hypothesis 3 is posed as an open question rather than a directional hypothesis. The study empirically tested whether hope is positively or negatively associated with migration intentions.

In summary, the aspirations–capabilities framework provides a coherent theoretical foundation for this study. It explains why perceptions of economic opportunity, social belonging, and hope matter for migration intentions, and it provides clear logic for each hypothesis.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the aspirations–capabilities framework, this study constructs a conceptual framework (see Figure 1) with one dependent variable and three independent variables. The dependent variable is migration intentions. This is defined as the strength of a young person's plan to leave The Gambia permanently or for more than one year (Milasi, 2020). The independent variables are three perceptual constructs.

The first is perceived economic opportunity, defined as what a young person believes about their chances of finding decent work, earning a fair income, or starting a business in The Gambia (Sumberg et al., 2020). The second is perceived social belonging, defined as how a young person feels about being respected, valued, and included in their family and community (Afonso et al., 2023). The third is perceived personal hope for the future, defined as a young person's general sense of optimism or pessimism about where their life is heading over the next few years (Polovina et al., 2021).

Control variables are included to isolate the effects of the perceptual variables. These are age, gender, education level, current employment status, household income, and whether any family member has previously migrated abroad.

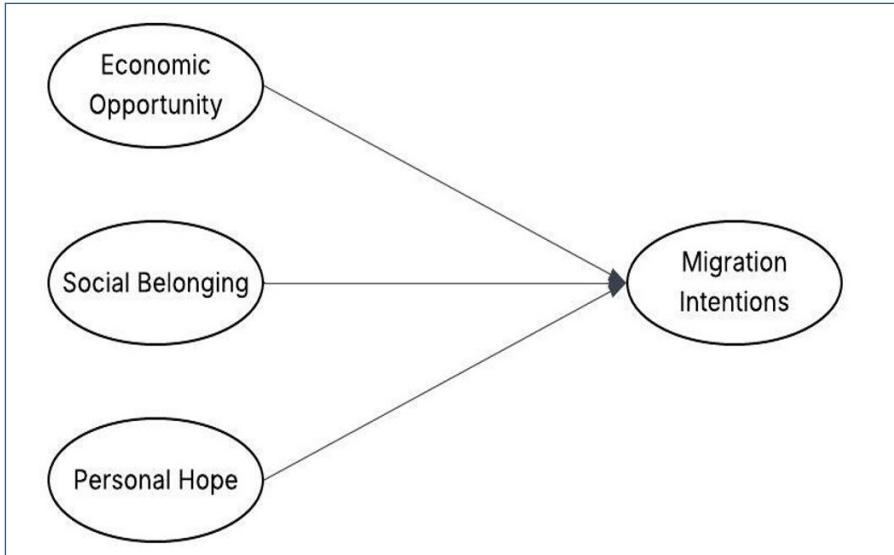
The study hypothesizes the following:

- H1: Lower perceived economic opportunity is significantly associated with stronger migration intentions among youth.
- H2: Lower perceived social belonging is significantly associated with stronger migration intentions among youth.
- H3: Perceived personal hope for the future is significantly associated with migration intentions among youth (direction unspecified).

For perceived personal hope, two competing possibilities exist. Low hope may be associated with stronger migration intentions if young people see no future at home. Alternatively, low hope may lead to resignation and weaker intentions. The study tests these relationships using path modeling in SmartPLS. Because the sample size is 88, SmartPLS is appropriate, as it handles smaller samples well.

The conceptual framework assumes that perceptions are measured through multiple Likert scale items in the questionnaire. Each construct will be tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha. The next section describes the methodology in detail.

Figure: Research Framework



Source: Author's design (2026).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employs a quantitative cross-sectional research design. The objective is to examine the relationships between perceived economic opportunity, perceived social belonging, perceived personal hope for the future, and migration intentions among young Gambians. A cross-sectional design is appropriate because data are collected at a single point in time. However, this design cannot establish causality; the study examines associations rather than causal relationships.

Population and sampling

The target population consists of young Gambians aged 18 to 35 resident in both urban and rural areas of The Gambia. A sample of 88 respondents was selected using purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling ensured that participants: (a) were aged 18–35 years; (b) resided in one of five regions of The Gambia (Banjul, Kanifing, Brikama, Farafenni, and Basse); and (c) represented both urban and rural areas. Snowball sampling was employed to reach additional participants through

referrals, a technique that is particularly useful when studying populations that may be difficult to access due to the sensitive nature of migration intentions.

Initial contacts were made through community leaders and local organizations, who identified eligible participants. These participants then referred the researcher to other eligible individuals within their networks. The researcher approached 120 potential respondents, of whom 88 completed the survey (response rate: 73.3%).

Data collection

Data were collected between January and March 2026 using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire has four sections. The first section gathers demographic information, including age, gender, education level, employment status, household income, and family migration history. The second section measures perceived economic opportunity using five Likert scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The third section measures perceived social belonging using five Likert scale items. The fourth section measures perceived personal hope for the future using four Likert scale items.

Migration intentions are measured using three Likert scale items adapted from Milasi (2020). Items include: “I plan to leave The Gambia permanently” (MI1), “I am actively preparing to migrate abroad” (MI2), and “I would migrate if given the opportunity” (MI3). Each item uses a five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The use of multiple items allowed for assessment of internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.880$).

The questionnaire was piloted with 10 young Gambians to ensure clarity and comprehension of the items. Minor adjustments were made to wording based on the pilot feedback.

Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, descriptive statistics and reliability tests were conducted using SPSS. Cronbach’s Alpha was calculated for each perceptual construct to assess internal consistency. Second, SmartPLS 4 was used to conduct path modeling and test the hypothesized relationships between latent variables. The small sample size of 88 is suitable for SmartPLS, because partial least squares handle complex models with smaller samples effectively (Hair et al., 2019).

The measurement model (outer model) was assessed using indicator reliability (outer loadings), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted, AVE), and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio, HTMT). The structural model (inner model) was assessed using path coefficients, bootstrapping (5,000 samples), and R^2 values.

Ethical considerations

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. They were fully informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were assured that their responses would not be shared with any third party and that no identifying information would be included in any publication.

Methodological limitations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of non-probability sampling (purposive and snowball) limits generalizability. The over-representation of males (72.7%) and individuals with family members abroad (59.1%) means the findings are most applicable to these subgroups. Second, the cross-sectional design cannot establish causality; the study shows associations, not causal effects. Third, the perceived personal hope construct had two indicators (PH2 and PH3) with outer loadings below 0.70, suggesting the need for a more validated hope scale in future research. Fourth, the study relied on self-reported migration intentions rather than actual migration behavior; intentions do not always translate into action. Fifth, social desirability bias may have affected responses, particularly on sensitive questions about migration.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the data analysis conducted to examine the relationship between youth perceptions (perceived economic opportunity, perceived social belonging, and perceived personal hope for the future) and migration intentions among young Gambians. The study employed a quantitative cross sectional design. A structured questionnaire was administered to 88 respondents, and the data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics and reliability analysis, and SmartPLS 4 for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships.

The results are structured as follows: first, the demographic profile of respondents is described; second, descriptive statistics of the key variables are presented; third, the reliability of the measurement instruments is assessed; fourth, the measurement model (outer model) is evaluated; fifth, the structural model (inner model) and hypothesis testing results are reported; and finally, the findings are summarized.

Demographic profile of respondents

Data were collected from 88 young Gambians aged between 18 and 35 years across various regions. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Profile	Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18–27 years	26	29.5%
	28–31 years	20	22.7%
	32–35 years	42	47.7%
Gender	Female	24	27.3%
	Male	64	72.7%
Education	Bachelor	22	25.0%
	Diploma	24	27.3%
	Postgraduate	28	31.8%
	Secondary	14	15.9%
Employment	Employed	60	68.2%
	Self employed	10	11.4%
	Student	8	9.1%
	Unemployed	10	11.4%
Income	Low	26	29.5%
	Medium	62	70.5%
	High	12	14.6%
Family member abroad	No	36	40.9%
	Yes	52	59.1%

Source: SPSS output (MIGRATION DATA 2026).

The sample consists of predominantly males (72.7%), which reflects the reality that migration intentions are more commonly expressed and acted upon by young men in The Gambia. The largest age group is 32–35 years (47.7%), indicating a relatively mature youth cohort. More than half (59.1%) have at least one family member who has migrated abroad, which is consistent with the role of migration networks. Employment status shows that 68.2% were employed but given the high prevalence of informal work in The Gambia, this does not necessarily indicate stable or decent employment. Notably, 56.8% of respondents reported medium income, while 29.5% reported low income, and 13.6% reported high income.

Descriptive statistics of variables

All constructs were measured using multi-item Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The descriptive statistics for each indicator were computed using SPSS. Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation for each indicator. The construct mean was calculated as the average of the indicator means.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Indicators

Construct	Indicator	Mean	Std. Deviation
Perceived Economic Opportunity (EO)	EO1	3.61	0.988
	EO2	3.41	1.035
	EO3	3.82	0.810
	EO4	3.75	1.177
	EO5	2.80	1.166
	Construct mean	3.48	
Perceived Social Belonging (SB)	SB1	4.02	0.816
	SB2	4.00	0.802
	SB3	4.02	0.816
	SB4	3.82	0.865
	SB5	3.84	0.801
	Construct mean	3.94	
Perceived Personal Hope (PH)	PH1	3.95	0.741
	PH2	4.18	0.687
	PH3	4.18	0.865
	PH4	3.84	0.908
	Construct mean	4.04	
Migration Intentions (MI)	MI1	3.55	1.568
	MI2	3.02	1.695
	MI3	3.68	1.658
	Construct mean	3.42	

Source: SPSS descriptive statistics (MIGRATION DATA 2026).

The mean scores for perceived economic opportunity (3.48) and migration intentions (3.42) are around the midpoint of the 5 point scale. Perceived social belonging (3.94) and perceived personal hope (4.04) are slightly above the midpoint, indicating that respondents tend to have moderately positive perceptions of social inclusion and personal optimism, but only neutral to slightly negative perceptions of economic opportunity (Mahadevan et al., 2019). Migration intentions are moderate on average, but the high standard deviations (above 1.5 for MI items) indicate substantial variation among respondents.

Reliability analysis

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha for each construct. Table 3 summarizes the reliability coefficients.

Table 3: Reliability of Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Perceived Economic Opportunity (EO)	5	0.784	Acceptable
Perceived Social Belonging (SB)	5	0.862	Good
Perceived Personal Hope (PH)	4	0.821	Good
Migration Intentions (MI)	3	0.880	Good

Source: SPSS reliability output (MIGRATION DATA 2026).

All Cronbach's Alpha values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that the measurement instruments are internally consistent and reliable (Kotian et al., 2022).

Assessment of the measurement model (outer model)

The measurement model was evaluated using SmartPLS 4. The assessment included indicator reliability (outer loadings), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted, AVE), and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait Monotrait ratio, HTMT) (Ali et al., 2022). Because the SmartPLS report (SEM migration analysis) did not compute composite reliability or AVE automatically, these were calculated manually from the outer loadings.

Outer loadings and convergent validity

Table 4 presents the outer loadings for each indicator, as obtained from the SmartPLS output. All loadings are above the recommended threshold of 0.60, and most exceed 0.70. The AVE for each construct was calculated as the mean of squared loadings.

Table 4: Outer Loadings and Convergent Validity

Construct	Indicator	Outer Loading	AVE
Perceived Economic Opportunity (EO)	EO1	0.733	0.539
	EO2	0.734	
	EO3	0.816	
	EO4	0.726	
	EO5	0.659	

Perceived Social Belonging (SB)	SB1	0.820	0.645
	SB2	0.847	
	SB3	0.883	
	SB4	0.614	
	SB5	0.782	
Perceived Personal Hope (PH)	PH1	0.749	0.525
	PH2	0.475	
	PH3	0.505	
	PH4	0.913	
Migration Intentions (MI)	MI1	0.942	0.806
	MI2	0.814	
	MI3	0.940	

Source: SmartPLS outer loadings (SEM MIGRATION ANALYSIS).

Note: For perceived personal hope (PH), the loadings for PH2 (0.475) and PH3 (0.505) are below 0.70, which may indicate weak indicators. However, they were retained as they contribute to content validity, and PH4 has a very high loading (0.913). The AVE for PH is 0.525, which still meets the minimum threshold of 0.50. For EO, the AVE is 0.539 (>0.50). For SB and MI, AVEs are well above 0.50, confirming convergent validity.

Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Nagwovuma et al., 2024). The square root of the AVE for each construct (diagonal values) should be greater than its correlations with other constructs. Table 5 presents the inter construct correlations (from SmartPLS latent variable correlations sheet ‘complete’, rows 263–267).

Table 5: Discriminant Validity (Fornell Larcker Criterion)

Construct	EO	SB	PH	MI
EO	0.734			
SB	0.543	0.803		
PH	0.715	0.568	0.725	
MI	-0.564	-0.038	0.061	0.898

Source: SmartPLS output (2026).

Note: Diagonal values (bold) are the square root of AVE; off diagonal values are construct correlations.

The square root of AVE for EO (0.734) is greater than its correlations with SB (0.543) and PH (0.715), but note that the correlation between EO and PH (0.715) is very close to the diagonal value, which may indicate some overlap. For MI, the diagonal (0.898) is much larger than its correlations with any other construct (absolute values 0.038–0.564), confirming good discriminant validity for the dependent variable.

Overall, the measurement model demonstrates acceptable validity and reliability, allowing for structural model testing.

Assessment of the structural model (inner model)

The structural model was assessed to test the research hypotheses. This involved examining the significance of path coefficients, collinearity, and model fit (Stein et al., 2017).

Path coefficients and hypothesis testing

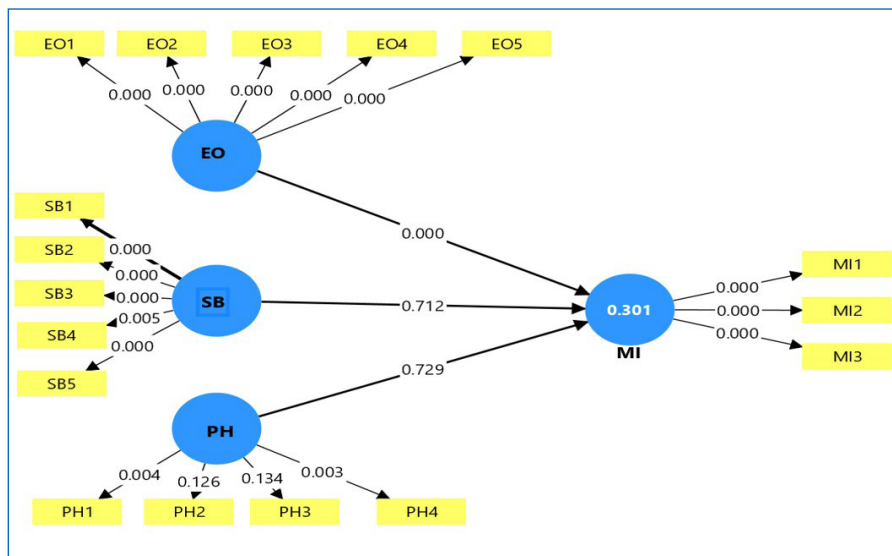
The path coefficients were obtained from the SmartPLS bootstrapping procedure (5,000 samples). Table 6 presents the original sample (O), sample mean (M), standard deviation, T statistics, p values, and bias corrected 95% confidence intervals for each path.

Table 6: Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Std. Dev.	T Statistics	P Value	95% BC CI	Result
H1	EO → MI	-0.564	-0.548	0.127	4.455	0.000	[-0.838, -0.338]	Supported
H2	PH → MI	0.061	0.054	0.177	0.346	0.729	[-0.281, 0.383]	Not supported
H3	SB → MI	-0.038	-0.053	0.102	0.370	0.712	[-0.241, 0.148]	Not supported

Source: SmartPLS bootstrapping (SEM MIGRATION ANALYSIS).

Note: BC CI = Bias corrected confidence interval (95%). P values are two tailed.

Figure 2: Structural Model

Source: SmartPLS output (2026).

Collinearity and model fit

Collinearity among predictor constructs was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The SmartPLS output did not include VIF values for the inner model. Still, given the correlations among EO, SB, and PH (see Table 5), collinearity is not expected to be a major concern, as all correlations are below 0.80.

Model fit was assessed using the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). The SmartPLS report (sheet 'complete,' rows 280–290) indicates that SRMR values were not computed due to algorithm settings.

Summary of hypothesis testing

Table 7 summarizes the results of the hypothesis testing conducted using PLS-SEM path analysis with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. The table presents the standardized path coefficients (β), p-values, and support status for each of the three hypotheses examining the relationships between youth perceptions and migration intentions.

The findings demonstrate that only Hypothesis 1 is supported: perceived economic opportunity exerts a strong, negative, and highly significant effect on migration intentions ($\beta = -0.564$, $p < 0.001$). This confirms that young Gambians who perceive limited local economic opportunities are significantly more likely to intend to migrate permanently. The model explains 32.1% of the variance in migration intentions ($R^2 = 0.321$), indicating a moderate explanatory power.

Conversely, Hypotheses 2 and 3 are not supported. Perceived personal hope shows a positive but non-significant relationship with migration intentions ($\beta = 0.061$, $p = 0.729$), while perceived social belonging demonstrates a negligible negative association that does not reach statistical significance ($\beta = -0.038$, $p = 0.712$). The confidence intervals for both non-significant paths included zero, confirming the absence of statistically meaningful relationships.

These results suggest that in the context of profound economic precarity, economic perceptions dominate social and psychological factors in shaping migration intentions. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are examined in the following discussion section.

Table 7: Summary of Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Lower perceived economic opportunity significantly increases migration intentions.	Supported ($\beta = -0.564$, $p < 0.001$)
H2	Lower perceived personal hope significantly increases migration intentions.	Not supported ($\beta = 0.061$, $p = 0.729$)
H3	Lower perceived social belonging significantly increases migration intentions.	Not supported ($\beta = -0.038$, $p = 0.712$)

Source: Data analysis results (2026).

DISCUSSION

Summary of findings

The primary objective of this study was to examine the relationship between youth perceptions and perceived economic opportunity, perceived social belonging, and perceived personal hope for the future and migration intentions among young Gambians. The findings show that perceived economic opportunity is the dominant driver of migration intentions, while perceived social belonging and personal hope do not exert statistically significant effects.

The most robust finding is that perceived economic opportunity has a strong, negative, and highly significant association with migration intentions, with a path coefficient of -0.564 ($p < 0.001$). This means that young Gambians who believe decent work, fair wages, and business opportunities are unavailable in The Gambia are substantially more likely to intend to leave permanently. This result aligns closely with the aspirations–capabilities framework, which argues that migration occurs when people hold aspirations that cannot be fulfilled locally and when they possess the capability to move (de Haas, 2021). In The Gambian context, when young people

perceive no realistic pathway to achieving economic stability, migration becomes a rational strategy for survival and advancement.

The path coefficient of -0.564 indicates a strong negative relationship between perceived economic opportunity and migration intentions. The R^2 value for migration intentions was 0.321, indicating that the three perceptual variables together explain 32.1% of the variance. This finding is consistent with migration research across West Africa, where unemployment and low wages have been identified as primary push factors. However, this study goes beyond objective indicators by demonstrating that perceived opportunity matters independently. Two young people with identical income and education may hold very different migration intentions simply because one believes hard work will lead to success locally, while the other does not.

Non-significant findings for social belonging and personal hope

Contrary to the study's hypotheses, neither perceived personal hope nor perceived social belonging had a statistically significant association with migration intentions. The path coefficient for personal hope was 0.061 ($p = 0.729$), and for social belonging it was -0.038 ($p = 0.712$). These non-findings require careful interpretation. In a context of profound economic precarity, where chronic unemployment is the daily reality, economic considerations simply overwhelm social and psychological factors. When a young person struggles to meet basic needs, whether they feel hopeful or strongly connected to their community may matter little for the migration decision. Migration is a survival strategy driven by material necessity, not by emotional states or social bonds.

Interestingly, the direction of the relationship for personal hope, though not significant, was positive (0.061). This suggests that higher hope might be associated with slightly higher migration intentions. Hopeful young people may be more proactive, willing to take risks, and confident in their ability to succeed abroad (Refaeli and Itzhaky, 2022). Hope could function as an enabling factor for migration rather than a protective factor against it. For perceived social belonging, the non-significant finding may reflect that the construct measured general inclusion, whereas migration literature often emphasizes peer pressure or family expectations. A young person who feels socially included but whose family expects remittances may still intend to migrate. The near-zero coefficient (-0.038) may represent an averaging of opposing forces. Future qualitative exploration is needed to unpack these dynamics.

Comparison with previous research

These findings align with research from Senegal and Ghana, where perceived lack of opportunity emerged as a stronger predictor of migration intentions than objective unemployment (Frohnweiler et al., 2024; Bandyopadhyay and Želinský, 2025). They also resonate with Méndez's (2020) finding that subjective expectations matter more than objective conditions.

However, the non-significant findings for social belonging differ from qualitative studies in The Gambia that emphasize peer pressure and family expectations (Cui et al., 2016; Leichtle, 2025). This discrepancy may reflect different constructs measured or the limitations of quantitative methods in capturing social dynamics. The positive direction of the hope coefficient, though not significant, warrants comparison with literature where hope functions as a motivational factor encouraging risk-taking.

Theoretical implications

These findings contribute to the aspirations–capabilities framework by demonstrating that economic capability specifically, perceived economic opportunity dominates the aspiration dimension in contexts of extreme economic precarity. When economic conditions are dire, the gap between aspirations and perceived capabilities is so large that other factors become secondary. This suggests the framework may need refinement to account for context-specific dominance of certain dimensions.

Policy implications

If policymakers wish to reduce migration intentions among Gambian youth, they must focus on changing perceptions of local economic opportunity. First, the Government of The Gambia should invest in public communication campaigns showcasing young Gambians who have succeeded without migrating. Second, entrepreneurship support programs should be expanded and made accessible across all regions. Third, while hope and belonging remain important for well-being, they should not be expected to reduce migration intentions unless paired with tangible economic improvements. Finally, these findings should be integrated into the National Youth Policy and migration management strategies.

Study limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, non-probability sampling limits generalizability. The over-representation of males (72.7%) and individuals with family abroad (59.1%) means findings are most applicable to these subgroups. Second, the cross-sectional design cannot establish causality. Third, the perceived personal hope construct had two indicators (PH2 and PH3) with outer loadings below 0.70, suggesting the need for validated hope scales in future research. Fourth, the study relied on self-reported migration intentions rather than actual behavior. Fifth, social desirability bias may have affected responses. Sixth, objective economic conditions were not measured. Seventh, different migration types were not distinguished.

Directions for future research

Future research should use larger, more representative samples and longitudinal designs. Qualitative studies should explore why some young people with poor

economic perceptions choose not to migrate. Researchers should measure peer pressure and family expectations directly. Further research should examine the role of information and media in shaping perceptions, and comparative studies across West Africa could reveal context-specific factors.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the relationship between three perceptual factors: perceived economic opportunity, perceived social belonging, and perceived personal hope for the future and migration intentions among young Gambians. Using quantitative data from 88 respondents and employing SmartPLS for analysis, the study tested three hypotheses.

The findings are clear. Perceived economic opportunity has a strong, negative, and statistically significant association with migration intentions ($\beta = -0.564$, $p < 0.001$). Young Gambians who believe decent work, fair income, and business opportunities are unavailable in The Gambia are substantially more likely to intend to leave permanently. This confirms that economic perceptions are the dominant driver of migration intentions in this context.

In contrast, neither perceived personal hope for the future nor perceived social belonging showed any statistically significant relationship with migration intentions. The path coefficients were close to zero, and p-values were high (0.729 for hope and 0.712 for belonging). When economic conditions are perceived as dire, social and psychological factors appear to play little role in the migration decision. Migration is understood as a survival strategy driven by material necessity rather than by emotional states or social bonds.

The study concludes that reducing migration intentions among Gambian youth requires addressing their perceptions of local economic opportunity. The aspirations–capabilities framework provides a useful lens: young people hold strong aspirations for economic stability. When they perceive no realistic pathway to achieve those aspirations locally, migration becomes a rational choice. Social belonging and personal hope, while important for general well-being, are not the levers that influence migration decisions in this specific context.

However, these findings must be interpreted in light of several limitations. The use of non-probability sampling limits generalizability, and the over-representation of males (72.7%) means the findings are most applicable to young men. The cross-sectional design cannot establish causality; the study shows associations, not causal effects. Additionally, the perceived personal hope construct had two indicators with weak loadings, suggesting the need for validated hope scales in future research.

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Navigating Borders and Screens: ICT Practices and Digital Migratory Mimicry in the Sub-Saharan *Boza* Journey

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Abstract

This study addresses methodological and theoretical gaps in digital migration studies. It explores the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on the imaginaries and migration trajectories of undocumented sub-Saharan migrants, notably Cameroonians en route to Europe via Morocco. Drawing on an innovative hybrid, multi-situated approach that combined in-depth biographical interviews, digital narrative cartography, and virtual ethnography of a *boza* Facebook group, it revealed the profoundly ambivalent role of ICTs across successive stages of the migratory journey. For undocumented migrants, these technologies serve both as empowering survival toolkits and as sources of vulnerability, while contributing to digital imaginaries that may encourage people to replicate migration patterns. The research advanced the notion of “digital migratory mimicry” as an analytical framework for understanding how idealized success narratives, circulating on social media platforms, can reinforce unrealistic aspirations and mimetic orientations toward high-risk migration. This work goes beyond rational-choice models to apprehend undocumented migration as a process intricately shaped by individual affective dynamics and collective digital practices and imaginaries, thus providing new conceptual perspectives for digital migration studies.

Keywords: ICT practices, sub-Saharan undocumented migrants, *boza* Facebook groups, map-elicitation interview, virtual ethnography, digital migratory mimicry

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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies, previously luxury items reserved for the affluent, have become accessible across all social strata. Researchers (Diminescu, 2008; Hamel, 2009; Dekker and Engbersen, 2014; Frouws et al., 2016; Akanle et al., 2021) who explored the relationships between migration and digital connectivity drew attention to the reshaping of mobility dynamics, with ICTs now deeply integrated into migratory processes and experiences. Formerly a lonely and arduous undertaking, irregular migration is nowadays increasingly shaped by digital connectivity, though access to mobile technologies remains uneven (Hamel, 2009; Zijlstra and Van Liempt, 2017).

Undocumented migrants rely on mobility technologies to navigate the journey's complexities (Schaub, 2012; Zijlstra and van Liempt, 2017; Gillespie et al., 2018). Social media platforms, messaging applications, and mobile devices play a central role by providing critical resources for information, network building, and journey planning (Porter et al., 2012; Frouws et al., 2016; Seymen, 2017; EU, 2018). However, as previous researchers (Van Esseveld, 2019; Nedelcu and Soysüren, 2020; Schöpke-Gonzalez and Schaub, 2023) have shown, these same technologies can also function as instruments of surveillance, exploitation, and misinformation, intensifying vulnerability and underscoring the paradoxical nature of ICTs in migration contexts.

Building on an interest in the digitization of the migration process, this study pursued two objectives. It first sought to explore how ICTs are used throughout the journey by sub-Saharanans following non-conventional migratory routes to cross the Morocco-Europe border. These migrants face unique challenges associated with the irregular nature of their mobility, raising important questions about ICTs' role in the digital navigation of uncertainty and the shaping of the migratory experience. The second aim was to explore ICTs' role in the popularity of irregular migration despite its deadly risks. We hypothesized that social media, particularly Facebook, functions as a web of "digital migratory mimicry." By this notion we mean the socio-numerical process by which digital narratives of successful unauthorized border crossings may reinforce the dynamics of aspiration and imitation, thereby contributing to the reproduction of irregular migratory flows (see forward section "Digital mimicry networks").

DIGITAL PASSAGES: HOW ARE ICTs RESHAPING SUB-SAHARAN IRREGULAR MIGRATION DYNAMICS?

The field of digital migration studies is highly interdisciplinary, with diverse contributions from social sciences and humanities highlighting the pivotal role of ICTs in shaping migration globally. Researchers like Leurs and Prabhakar (2018: 247) emphasize how ICTs have "altered a variety of migration dynamics." In 2015, the images of Syrian refugees making their "digital passage to Europe" left a particularly lasting impression (Gillespie et al., 2018: 1). In the sub-Saharan African context, the transformative impact of mobile telephony and Internet infrastructure on mobility began to emerge as telecommunications operators "introduced a substantive and

accessible communications infrastructure to large parts of the trans-Saharan space for the first time” (Schaub, 2012: 127). This has revolutionized various aspects of people’s lives, particularly their national, transnational, and intercontinental mobility. Unquestionably, mobility has always existed, but as Nyamnjoh (2013: 108) points out, “What is new today are the forms and dynamism that it has taken as a result of advances in ICTs and transport networks.”

Investigating the impact of ICTs on migratory mobility, researchers first noticed a close relationship between Internet access and the desire or intention to migrate. In a study that targeted 50,953 individuals in 29 African countries, Grubarov-Boskovic et al. (2021: 1818) concluded that “on average, simply accessing the web was connected to a higher propensity to aspire to move abroad, and even more making preparation to do so.” However, their study’s lack of specificity regarding the type of information accessed by participants limits the scope of its conclusions. Further investigation into the content and sources of information consulted should enhance our understanding of this relationship.

ICTs appear to influence the decision-making process by providing key information. According to Frouws et al. (2016: 3), one of the main reasons why irregular migrants and refugees consult virtual networks is “to gather information about suitable destinations and routes as well as integration in their intended destinations.” Europe’s African diaspora stands as a valuable source of information and many migrants use social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, to connect with their European-based compatriots (EU, 2018).

When a migrant decides to embark on the journey to Europe, ICTs assume heightened importance, while smartphones become essential tools for navigating highly perilous routes (Schaub, 2012). Frouws et al. (2016: 3) showed their usefulness for “acquiring passports and legal documents, information about best destinations, routes, and information in transit, cost of migration routes, smuggler contacts and warnings about scams and/or fraudulent smugglers as well as closed routes.”

Researchers also frequently highlighted ICTs’ social dimension as an often-predominant factor in understanding how migrants appropriate ICTs to their needs, in transit and in destination countries. Seymen (2017) points out that migrants continue to rely on ICTs for the maintenance, building, and mobilization of their social networks. Similarly, Porter et al. (2012) show how ICTs enable the use of social networks, as the migrants advance on their journey. Moreover, Akanle et al. (2021) note that ICTs are primarily used to maintain connections with close relatives, friends, and peers. Other research (Tall, 2004; Hunter, 2018) underscores additional functions, particularly the transfer of remittances to the country of origin, which typically emerges as a critical priority for migrants, once they attain a certain level of economic and social stability in the destination country.

Besides the significant benefits offered to migrants and their families, ICTs’ negative impacts, particularly in contexts of surveillance and exploitation, also drew scholarly attention (Schöpke-Gonzalez and Schaub, 2023). Opas and McMurray

(2015) show how the perception of Eritrea as an omnipotent and suspicious state fosters self-censorship among Eritrean refugees in Rome, compelling them to self-censor their ICT practices. In her study on ICTs' impacts in refugee communities, particularly concerning kidnapping cases, Van Esseveld (2019) revealed that technology can exacerbate trauma rather than provide support, thus intensifying vulnerabilities and extending distress to the victims' relatives. The findings from these last studies challenged the prevailing view that ICTs inherently promote positive migration outcomes.

Despite these valuable insights into ICTs' role in irregular migration, a critical examination revealed that most researchers focused on specific aspects of the migration process and did not present a holistic exploration of the use of ICTs throughout all the phases of the migratory journey. Such limitation was due either to the migratory status of the study population at the time of research or to the approach's "degree of digital-media-centric-ness" (Leurs and Prabhakar, 2018: 250). Stremlau and Tsalapatanis (2022: 67) confirm our hypothesis by stating that because they did not study the whole process of African migration to Europe, most researchers were "unable to find clear evidence of a general reliance on ICTs and social media during all stages of a journey."

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE PERSISTENCE OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION FLOWS: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Over several decades, international migration analysis was dominated by the *neoclassical theory* that conceptualizes migrants as rational actors looking to maximize their anticipated economic returns (Todaro, 1969). This approach has been criticized for its economic determinism, disregarding intricate migratory motivations and broader structural and social determinants (Portes, 1997). In response to the neoclassical paradigm, the *new economics of labor migration* (Stark and Bloom, 1985) re-frames migration as a collective household strategy to mitigate economic risks. Furthermore, *migration network theory* (Massey et al., 1993) emphasizes the self-sustaining nature of migration, as social connections facilitate and perpetuate it through cost- and risk-diminishing feedback loops.

Though influential, these approaches have considerable shortcomings in accounting for irregular migration. De Haas (2010) contends that expanding network ties do not automatically result in self-sustaining migration flows, since migration-facilitating and migration-undermining processes go together. This criticism aligns with a wider re-evaluation of *cumulative causation theory* (Massey, 1990) as overly emphasizing migration's inexorability once triggered. Instead, De Haas (2010) advances a richer understanding via the *aspirations-capabilities framework*. Subsequent migration decisions result from individuals' perceived opportunities, mediated by their group processes and collective imaginaries. Building on this view, Schapendonk (2014) refutes static network theories by arguing that migrants shape networks through their active participation in forming, maintaining, or breaking

social connections. His “network work” concept stresses contextual, relationship-specific understanding of social capital, thus reiterating De Haas’s emphasis on aspirations and capabilities. This dynamic conceptualization underscores migrants’ agency and the networks’ context-dependent effects.

Nonetheless, most of these theoretical approaches function in a paradigm assuming rational decision making as using relatively accurate information. Yet, as Carling and Schewel (2018) point out, migration aspirations are often formed through complex social constructs, as well as imaginaries having tenuous connections with factual realities. Migrants and prospective migrants now engage in digital socialization, accessing real-time information through “smartphones and Internet-based communication tools such as WhatsApp and Facebook for migration” (Borkert et al., 2018: 8). An often-overlooked key aspect is ICTs’ role in shaping contemporary migration imaginaries, as most research focuses on their functional and utilitarian dimensions. Indeed, the specific mechanisms through which digital imaginaries³ might perpetuate irregular migration flows have not yet been fully investigated. This gap is particularly apparent when considering sub-Saharan’s irregular migration to Europe, in the context of digital transformation of migration processes (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014; Zijlstra and Van Liempt, 2017).

This literature review first demonstrates the lack of theoretical analyses assessing the role of digital imaginaries, alongside economic and social determinants, in present-day irregular migration flows. Second, it identifies the need for empirical research on how these imaginaries can perpetuate irregular migration by inducing mimetic desires and irrational risky behavior. The following section outlines the problem statement and research objectives framing this study.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

This study addresses the methodological and conceptual gaps of earlier studies using a dual-pronged focus. First, it adopts a holistic approach to ICTs’ role in undocumented sub-Saharan migrants’ experience, analyzing the whole migratory process from initial aspirations through transit and residence in Morocco. This analysis highlights interconnections between physical and virtual spheres that form “hybrid spaces” (De Souza e Silva, 2006: 263) where digital and physical realities intertwine. Second, it examines digitally mediated imaginaries, focusing on how social media platforms generate and circulate selective representations of migration success that may reinforce aspirations and mimetic orientations toward high-risk migration.

The first research question explored how ICT use is integrated into the migration experience of undocumented sub-Saharan migrants transiting through Morocco, focusing on the holistic, qualitative, and subjective dimensions of this relationship, and examining the hybridization of physical and virtual spaces along their journey.

³ Digital imaginaries are defined here as collective representations of migration success and opportunities, constructed and disseminated through digital networks.

The second research question investigated how digital imaginaries circulating through social media—particularly within *boza*⁴ Facebook groups—contribute to shaping migration aspirations, and how digitally mediated success narratives may encourage mimetic orientations toward high-risk migration.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Reconstructing the digital dimension of the irregular journey through map-elicitation interviews

In the first phase, fieldwork was conducted in Mohammedia (Morocco), where a modest yet noteworthy population of undocumented sub-Saharan migrants lives. Their presence stems from three factors: the city's medium size, its strategic geographical location between Casablanca and Rabat, and established sub-Saharan social networks that facilitate the reception of newcomers. Mohammedia is a haven offering undocumented migrants greater discretion, relative anonymity, and the ability to navigate daily life with reduced policing and security pressures.

The research design integrated biographical interviews and digital narrative cartography.⁵ This method relied on the use of Google Maps for participatory drawing of migratory routes and “map-elicitation interview.”⁶ The interview structure evolved in a linear diachronic manner,⁷ pausing at key locations to discuss significant biographical crossroads and trace the evolution of the journey. The combination of participatory digital mapping with map-elicitation interview permitted the reconstruction of life paths and migratory routes, while unveiling the meaning ascribed to the journey.

Five participants were recruited through purposive, criterion-based sampling, mainly through direct field encounters in Mohammedia; one participant was introduced by another interviewee. Eligibility required being Cameroonian, having undertaken an irregular overland journey, being undocumented in Mohammedia, having used ICTs during the journey, and having developed an onward project toward Europe by the time of fieldwork. Case selection sought variation in gender, age, migration trajectories, and digitally mediated mobility (see Table 1). The focus on Cameroonians reflected their established local presence, Cameroon's relatively

⁴ The term *boza* signifies “victory” in several West African dialects. It is used to denote successful border crossing in sub-Saharan irregular migration contexts. The term encompasses two distinct levels of achievement: *petit boza* designates entry into Morocco, emphasizing its comparatively moderate challenges, while *grand boza* denotes the more ambitious passage to Europe. This hierarchical distinction underscores the graduated challenges migrants encounter in their northward adventure.

⁵ Narrative cartography merges geographic mapping with storytelling to visualize narratives on a map, representing spatial relationships between places, characters, events, and emotions.

⁶ By “map-elicitation interview,” we mean a technique using a map as a memory aid during a biographical interview, similar in principle to photo-elicitation interview (Harper, 1988: 65–66).

⁷ A life story does not adhere strictly to a chronological narration of events, but rather reflects a complex temporality, intertwining past and present. The diachronic approach aimed to guide participants in connecting their current migratory trajectory to previous life journeys.

developed Internet infrastructure, and the long Cameroon–Morocco distance,⁸ which offered greater scope for examining ICT use across successive stages.

Adult participants provided oral informed consent after explanation of the study purpose, data use, and the voluntary nature of participation. The two younger participants (15 and 16), unaccompanied and without a parent or legal guardian in Morocco, provided oral assent after the same explanation and were interviewed jointly throughout. Identities were anonymized; trauma-sensitive interviewing, voluntary pauses, participant-controlled pacing, and the unconditional right to withdraw protected participants' autonomy and reduced risks of retraumatization (Hugman et al., 2011).

Table 1: Study participants' sociodemographic profiles

Participants	Sociodemographic Profiles
Patrice	A 39-year-old, from Yaoundé, left school a year before graduating due to financial difficulties. After working various small jobs, including as a DJ and equipment repairer, he migrated through several countries before arriving in Morocco in late 2016. Despite repeated attempts to cross into Ceuta, he remained unsuccessful. After two years in a migrant camp near Casablanca's Ouled Ziane station, he moved to Mohammedia, working briefly at a football academy before securing a job at a call center.
Marie	A 36-year-old mother of three, including twins born in Algeria, from Douala. After a difficult childhood marked by her father's alcoholism and the loss of both parents, she was separated from her siblings and adopted by relatives. Denied formal education, she took on early domestic responsibilities. Returning to Douala, she worked street jobs to rebuild stability. Seeking to escape poverty, she migrated to Morocco, facing abuse, exploitation, and hardship. For the past four years, she has lived in Mohammedia with her twins and partner, alternating between housekeeping and begging when work is scarce.
Christian	A 32-year-old, from Yaoundé, left university after his father's death plunged his family into financial hardship. Seeking work abroad, he migrated with guidance from a friend who reached Europe. In Morocco, his maritime attempt to Spain failed, and harsh conditions in a Ceuta migrant camp led him to abandon another try. Now in Mohammedia, he lives with other migrants, relying on roadside donations and saving for a new migration attempt.
Jamal and Aboubakar	Jamal (16) and Aboubakar (15), cousins from Yaoundé, left school and modest backgrounds to migrate together for work and support their families. Initially unknown to their families, they adapted to challenges by shifting from costly maritime routes in Tunisia to land crossings from Morocco. Despite multiple failed attempts to enter Ceuta, including brief entry into Spain before deportation, they now live in Mohammedia, relying on informal labor to survive and fund future migration attempts.

Source: Authors' own work

⁸ The participants' Cameroon–Morocco journeys, characterized by non-traditional transit routes, took approximately 12–24 months to complete.

The small number of interviewees reflects the intensive and methodologically exploratory character of the research design. Map-elicitation required repeated two-to-four-hour sessions, averaging five encounters and 10–20 hours of interaction per participant over six months. Its exploratory application with undocumented sub-Saharan migrants also gave the study a methodologically experimental dimension, requiring a manageable sample and sufficient time for participants to become familiar with the technique. This favored reflective, unpressured engagement, participant welfare, and detailed trajectory reconstruction rather than statistical representativeness.

All interviews were conducted in French and manually transcribed by the researcher; quotations reproduced in the article were subsequently translated into English by the same researcher. Transcripts were organized in a comparative synoptic matrix structured around three stages—pre-migration, the journey to Morocco, and residence in Morocco—and recurrent analytical dimensions, including migration motivations, ICT uses, information seeking, financing, critical events, hardships, and onward projects. This enabled chronological within-case reconstruction and thematic comparison across cases.

Exploring the migration imaginary through the virtual ethnography of Facebook groups

The second phase of the investigation incorporated a virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) of a *boza* Facebook group. The aim was to better understand its members' digital practices and interactions, and assess the role of digital content in constructing an idealized image of the undocumented journey.

The process of virtual ethnography began with the compilation of a list of relevant groups using Facebook's integrated search engine and keywords frequently associated with migrant discourse, such as *boza*, *bozayeurs*,⁹ *aventuriers* (adventurers), *soldats* migrants (soldier migrants), and *infos* migrants (migrant updates). This online research identified 72 groups (12 private and 60 public). The researcher subsequently joined 19 groups to observe the nature of content and establish selection criteria.

Group selection prioritized specific factors: moderate size for analytical relevance and feasibility; active participation; diverse member profiles (migrants in transit, successful migrants, smugglers, etc.); quality of exchanges; and relevance to the research focus. Following these criteria, the private group named *VRAI BOZA INFOS 100% GRATUIT* was chosen (see Figure 1).¹⁰ In July 2022, it had around 71,000 members, frequent and high-quality interactions, a diverse range of participants, and content aligned with the research objectives.

⁹ *Bozayeurs* refers to undocumented sub-Saharan migrants attempting/having successfully crossed borders.

¹⁰ Access to the *boza* Facebook group was gained via a membership application, which was duly accepted by the group administrators before the initiation of data collection. Observation was carried out using personal Facebook accounts, with a peripheral, non-participatory strategy, avoiding direct interaction with group members.

Figure 1: Cover photo of the private Facebook study group

Source: Private Facebook study group; archived screenshot collected by the authors.

Data collection focused on July and August 2022, two months characterized by favorable weather and heightened migratory activity. Indeed, given the richness of the *boza* group content, saturation was reached after the collection of 295 posts. A predefined data collection grid recorded publication dates, authors, content descriptions, interaction metrics, “technodiscourses,” and “technographisms” (Paveau, 2019a, 2019b).¹¹ This structured approach enabled a detailed analysis of thematic trends, communication modes, and group interaction dynamics.

NAVIGATING THE IRREGULAR MIGRATION JOURNEY WITH ICTs: A FLEXIBLE AND STRATEGIC USE

Cameroonian undocumented migrants dynamically adjust their ICT use to the specific challenges and opportunities of each phase of a journey. This adjustment is influenced by their changing needs to communicate, be informed, and navigate, as they move from one stage to another. This section presents the interview findings on how ICTs are used throughout the irregular journey.

¹¹ Following Paveau’s (2019a, 2019b) work on the analysis of digital native discourses (ADN), a typology of migrants’ Facebook posts was created based on the collection and analysis of the most used technographisms among undocumented sub-Saharan migrants. Paveau (2019a: 12) defines “technodiscourses” or digital native discourses as “productions created online, in a connected environment – whatever might be the devices, the interfaces, the platforms or the writing tools –, in the writing or speaking spaces afforded by internet, and not likely, after digitalization, to migrate from pre-digital writing and editorial spaces towards digital connected spaces.” As regards technographism, Paveau (2019b: 6) defines it as “a plurisemiotic production, combining text and image in a digital native multimedia composite, produced by technological tools and gestures and introduced into the norms of digital native discourses.”

Understanding the role of ICTs in pre-migration decision making: Evidence from Cameroonian narratives

A chronological analysis of the migration journey revealed that ICTs were already present in the initial decision-making phase. This crucial first stage warrants particular attention to understand how digital content may enter into the formation of migration aspirations. Hamel (2009: 10) highlights the subjective and cognitive dimension of the migratory process: “The act of migration begins in the mind.” By exposing individuals to idealized representations, ICTs contribute to the construction of migratory imaginaries. Participants’ narratives illustrate the diverse digital stimuli accompanying the emergence of migration aspirations.

Christian (see Table 1) describes the inspiration drawn from social networks:

We see the stars, you see the shoes, the clothes, you look at fashion. You tell yourself, “Maybe one day I’ll be like that, a well-dressed star.”

For Christian, these images reinforce the appeal of a better life abroad. A similar dynamic appears in Jamal and Aboubakar’s narratives (see Table 1), particularly through videos of iconic migrant success:

We used to see that on Facebook, the short videos of people in Europe who had crossed over, like for example, Francis Ngannou,¹² the boxer. He passed through here [Morocco]; he was an adventurer. He became a world champion. Currently, that’s what’s causing many Cameroonians to leave.

These curated digital representations selectively highlight positive outcomes while downplaying the substantial risks inherent in irregular migration. Such selective success-story portrayals contribute to an idealized migration imaginary in which would-be migrants can envision similar pathways while the difficulties of the journey remain largely outside the digital frame.

Marie’s (see Table 1) case discloses an additional facet of digital mediation: transnational networks through which migration-encouraging messages circulate. Via WhatsApp communication with a compatriot in Algeria, she was regularly exposed to messages highlighting opportunities while downplaying possible hardships. For instance, her contact urged her:

It’s great here, sis, you gotta come. You’ll see, you can make some money and stuff.

¹² Former “adventurer,” Ngannou is now a globally recognized iconic figure in the field of mixed martial arts.

By emphasizing economic opportunities while omitting structural difficulties, such digitally mediated communication can reinforce idealized perceptions of migration outcomes through an elusive and aspirational discourse.

Patrice's (see Table 1) case reveals another dimension of ICT use: online information became part of a broader comparative reflection on social and political conditions. His exploration of conditions across different nations accompanied the development of a critique of Cameroonian governance. He stated:

When a society is poorly organized and mismanaged, it's not the ordinary citizen who is to blame; it comes from the government, from our leaders. That's why, in our country, we have corrupt leaders, white-collar criminals. ... It's the leaders themselves who are the problem.

His account illustrates how digital information can become intertwined with political dissatisfaction within the gradual construction of a migration project.

The interviewees' experiences reveal three recurrent forms of digital mediation in migration decision making: success narratives, migration-encouraging communication, and digitally informed socio-political reflection. As aspirations became concrete projects, ICTs shifted from an aspirational to an operational function, providing prospective migrants with informational resources, such as advice on routes, transport means, potential dangers, useful contacts, support networks, and practical tips to structure their migration planning. Christian illustrated this transition: Before departure, a friend in Spain sent him Messenger voice messages guiding him through successive stages of the route.

The paradox of digital connectivity: ICTs and migrant experiences en route to Morocco

The participants' testimonies demonstrated ICTs' complex and dual role in transit phases. Mobile technologies function simultaneously as instruments of empowerment and potential sources of vulnerability within journeys marked by insecurity, exploitation, and difficult material conditions.

At the most fundamental level, ICTs can serve as survival toolkits. Patrice's (see Table 1) experience illustrates how digital access to real-time information can prevent life-threatening situations. His daily checking of crowdsourced security updates on Facebook enabled proactive risk assessment:

I learned that Boko Haram¹³ had committed attacks ... so, I convinced my group to turn back.

¹³ Boko Haram, a radical Islamist group founded in Nigeria (2002), is particularly feared by undocumented migrants due to its numerous terrorist attacks, kidnappings, and raids against civilians, security forces, and government targets, causing thousands of casualties and massive population displacements.

This instance shows how instant access to vital information via digital networks can prevent potentially disastrous consequences.

Smartphones' vital role within migration processes is again emphasized by Christian's (see Table 1) stark observation:

If you don't have a phone, you'll have enormous problems.

This statement underscores migrants' dependence on digital technologies for navigating unfamiliar territories, accessing vital information, maintaining support networks, and organizing subsequent stages.

The communal aspect of ICT usage emerges strongly in Jamal's (see Table 1) testimony:

Thanks to the phone, you can call someone for help if you get stuck.

Social media, particularly WhatsApp, enable migrants to build support networks for exchanging vital information regarding routes, danger zones, and employment opportunities. These digital solidarity networks can also empower collective action against exploitation, as demonstrated by Aboubakar's (see Table 1) experience in Tamanrasset (Algeria), where a gold trafficker refused to pay one of their companions after weeks of backbreaking work:

We spread the word. Guys from the network leaned on him, and he finally coughed up the owed cash.

However, while ICTs serve as a vital resource for empowerment and solidarity in the transit setting, their loss can deepen migrants' existing vulnerabilities. Marie's (see Table 1) experience demonstrates how these digital lifelines may be violently severed. Near Abuja (Nigeria), her group was deliberately split by a smuggler and his accomplices; some companions were ambushed, beaten, robbed of money and phones, and left unable to warn Marie of the attackers' arrival. She recounted:

When we arrived at the motel, and time passed with no sign of the others, something was wrong. They arrived at the hotel armed. The guys wanted our money; ... they took what we had and left.

This incident illustrates how losing access to ICTs can dramatically increase migrants' vulnerability within already violent transit environments.

These findings unveiled the ambivalent dynamics of ICT use in transit zones. While serving as survival toolkits, offering empowerment, information access, and solidarity building, they may also deepen existing vulnerabilities when phones are lost, confiscated, or misused within already precarious and violent environments.

This underscores the mixed role of digital technologies in migration trajectories, oscillating between being vital supports and potential hindrances.

Staying connected, moving forward: ICTs and migrant duality in Mohammedia

Undocumented sub-Saharan migrants in Mohammedia displayed an ambivalent relationship with ICTs, reflecting their contradictory aspirations: seeking normalcy while pursuing unfinished migration projects. Settling semi-durational lives in this city, migrants maintain their longing for crossing into Europe. This duality is particularly evident in their digital practices, as their “always-on” smartphones’ connectivity transforms Mohammedia into a mega “hybrid space” (De Souza e Silva, 2006), where urban physical spaces overlap with digital network spaces through which migrants connect to previous locations and desired destinations.

The completion of the *petit boza* (crossing into Morocco) represents more than a physical border crossing. For migrants, Morocco has become a psychological threshold where Europe feels tangibly closer, as Christian (see Table 1) explained:

The difference is that when you were in Oran [Algeria], you told yourself: “I’m still far.” But here in Morocco, you’re in a positive position. You’re at the end of the journey, and you’re perfectly focused.

ICTs serve multiple everyday purposes, particularly maintaining emotional connections with family. Patrice (see Table 1) noted:

The phone allowed me to do certain things: dialogue with people who could soothe your heart, because with my child’s mother, we talked on the phone. She lifted my spirits, and lifting spirits is very important.

Migrants’ digital communications in this context have a dual function: maintaining vital family ties, while strengthening emotional resilience during this liminal phase. However, digital communications also become sources of distress when conveying news about family illness or death. At the same time, ICTs can serve as virtual escape routes from such stresses and daily monotony. As Aboubakar (see Table 1) explained:

It’s mainly for distraction, because here, if you don’t have a phone, ... maybe your head feels like it’s overheating. You’re not at ease because you’re not in a good mental state.

They engage with multiple platforms, as Jamal (see Table 1) described:

For me, it’s Facebook and WhatsApp for talking, TikTok for watching videos, also YouTube for music, and Nigerian series that sometimes play in Hausa.

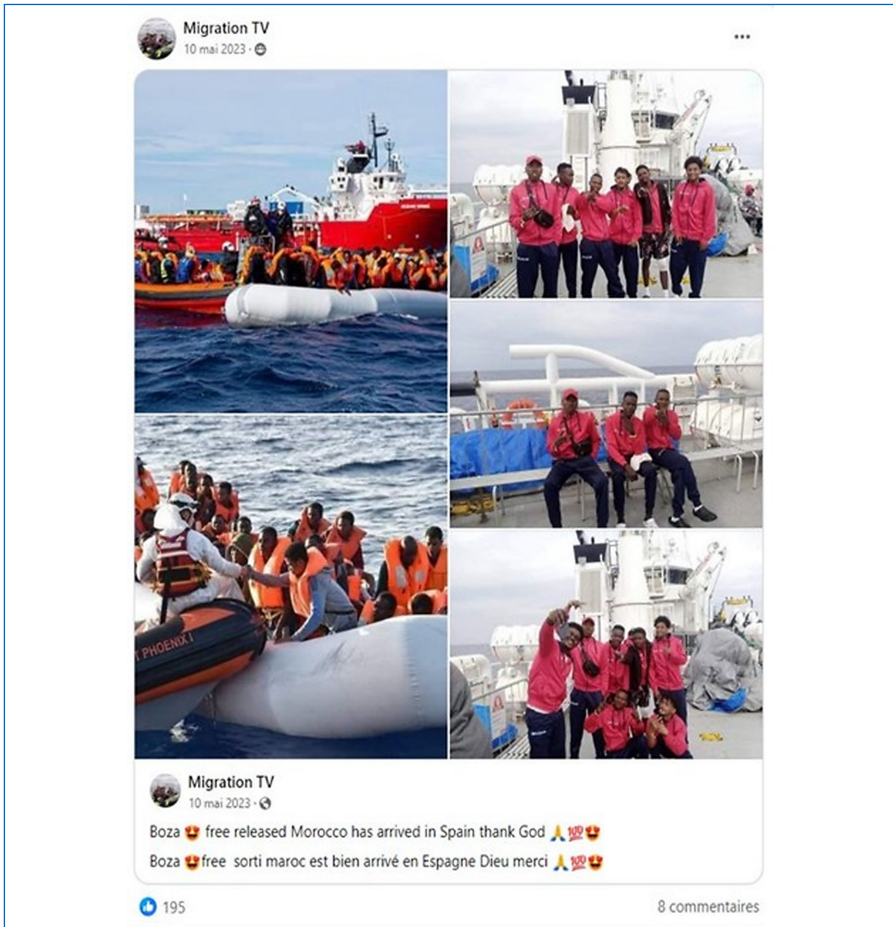
For those still pursuing European migration, Mohammedia remains a temporary base for unfinished projects under financial constraints. Jamal and Aboubakar (see Table 1), for instance, had already made two unsuccessful attempts near Tangier and continued seeking money for another. ICTs then become crucial tools in planning *grand boza* attempts, mainly through WhatsApp chats, Facebook groups, and other digital networks. Christian (see Table 1) explained:

It's a group of adventurers. Those who've taken the route, they give you leads, tips to strike. You can get phone numbers, trusted smugglers, everything. They tell you where to go, who you can contact, like this, like that.

This digital networking provides real-time coordination and security measures as a vital support for both Mediterranean crossings and fence-scaling operations at Spanish enclaves (Ceuta and Melilla).

ICTs serve a final purpose: reporting successful crossings (see Figure 2) and producing digital content that simultaneously celebrates individual accomplishments, nourishes the aspirations of would-be adventurers and inspires those already on the road. These narratives rapidly spread within migrant virtual communities, especially *boza* Facebook groups. The following section shows how the digitization of success stories contributes to a collective imaginary of achievable migration, framing European border crossing as an endeavor within everyone's reach, despite its dangers.

Figure 2: Sub-Saharan migrants celebrating a successful *boza*



Source: Facebook content from the study group; archived screenshot collected by the authors.

DIGITAL MIMICRY NETWORKS: HOW *BOZA* GROUPS CURATE BOTH SURVIVAL TIPS AND DEADLY BEHAVIOR

This section focuses on the inner dynamics of *boza* Facebook groups, where individual practices intersect with collective narratives. In virtual realms, two forces converge: migrant networks' empirically-grounded knowledge and seductive fictions of smuggling economies. Their intersection forms the basis of digital migratory mimicry, in which lived experience coexists with idealized representations of unproblematic *boza*.

Boza Facebook groups: Between vital information and dangerous illusion

The online ethnography of the Facebook study group (VRAI BOZA INFOS 100% GRATUITE) revealed two predominant dynamics that reflect the specific logics underpinning the group members' digital behavior and distinguish the practices of undocumented sub-Saharan migrants from those of (pseudo-) smugglers.

For undocumented migrants, *boza* Facebook groups primarily serve an informational function. Navigating the complexities of irregular migration, they rely on these communities as accessible and trustworthy sources of information at every stage of the journey. This relentless search for information drives them to *boza* groups, where they use their digital skills and Facebook's affordances to facilitate their migration efforts. Building inclusive and reliable digital spaces is a crucial, widely shared goal among *bozayeurs*. They share informative content ranging from practical advice and personal testimonies to warnings about potential dangers, thus constructing a community knowledge base serving as a kind of collective mentorship through the hardships of the irregular journeys.

However, the virtual community's information dimension is often undermined by (pseudo-) smugglers who steer *boza* groups toward their interests, compromising the group's credibility and informative reliability. This creates constant tension between genuinely useful information and potentially manipulative misinformation. Navigating online amid these disparate influences, undocumented migrants must rely on their discernment to avoid the pitfalls of disinformation.

Smugglers are ubiquitous agents, present across all stages of the journey, in both physical and digital spaces of *boza* communication and transaction. In *boza* Facebook groups, they compete intensely to enlist migrants, skillfully exploiting the platform's affordances to disseminate promises of guaranteed crossings and frame *boza* as an easy enterprise. They employ carefully crafted visual communication strategies to maximize their posts' impact, meticulously selecting texts, images, and videos in order to compose visual arrangements balancing appeal and credibility (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: A typical *boza* technographism



Source: Source: Facebook Reel (<https://web.facebook.com/reel/331033885815041>); archived screenshot collected by the authors

Figure 3 represents a prototypical technographism in which a smuggler combines migrants' favorable video testimonials, a paternalistic endorsement: "*Bon discours; je suis fière de vous*" (Good speech; I'm proud of you), and positive emoticons (happy smileys) to craft an integrated rhetorical composition that:

- generates irrefutable social evidence through the video format that enhances the authenticity of the migrants' crossing, turning their subjective experience into an undeniable marketing argument;
- establishes a paternalistic dynamic through the enunciation of the phrase "I'm proud of you," coupled with friendly emoticons that create a fake caring relationship masking transactional reality;
- deploys emoticons as affective amplifiers, as the use of positive ones creates a semiotic association between migration attempts and guaranteed positive outcomes.

These promotional strategies can foster an illusory perception of reality among undocumented migrants. Smugglers intentionally minimize irregular migration's risks, presenting *boza* as a secure way of achieving migratory aspirations. Such framing can create a sense of urgency that may encourage hasty, impulsive decisions to engage the smugglers' services. They make profits from increasing demand, reinforcing their presence in cyberspace, an effective recruitment platform where they vie for potential candidates.

The manufacturing of migration imaginaries: Boza Facebook groups as a crucible of mimetic migratory behavior

Certain contents disseminated through *boza* virtual communities carry high-stakes repercussions. Through attractive technographisms glorifying *boza* free (successful crossing to Europe), they contribute to idealized collective narratives that appeal to would-be migrants. A telling example comes from a group member's reaction to a successful crossing narrative: "*Que mon tour soit aussi meilleur comme le votre les vrais boza*" ("May my turn be as prosperous as yours the true *boza*"). This fervent comment uncovers the following key dynamics:

- Aspirational cycle: the expression "my turn" suggests that each presumed achievement provides tangible evidence of possible success for others, reinforcing expectations of reproducible outcomes.
- Temporal projection: the future-oriented wishful phrasing, "May my turn be as prosperous as yours" exemplifies how digital narratives fuel migrants' temporal imaginaries.
- Social validation: the designation "real *boza*" creates an implicit hierarchy that authenticates only successful crossings.

What is particularly significant about this apparently innocuous comment is how small-scale personal expressions can aggregate into collective expectations. Repeated across similar digital interactions, micro-aspirations may form a shared perception in which success appears reproducible. Statements such as "my turn [next]" following success stories reinforce participants' expectations about migration outcomes, while likes and shares increase the visibility of certain narratives over others.

Through these mechanisms, digital migratory mimicry emerges as a process whereby collective digital narratives inflate successes while minimizing challenges. The imaginary of easy achievement may reinforce unrealistic expectations and mimetic behavior, encouraging would-be migrants to envisage similar high-risk journeys.

The romanticized digital portrayals of *boza* free contrast sharply with the material, physical, and legal hardships of irregular migration, which remain largely absent from celebratory narratives. This selectivity also extends to interpersonal communication. Recalling severe hardships along the journey, Patrice (see Table 1) explained:

Even our parents do not know what we have been through.

Such selective disclosure contributes to an uneven circulation of migration experiences, where successful outcomes remain more visible than the hardships preceding them, potentially reinforcing mimetic aspirations.

Figure 4: Digital storytelling's impact on the migratory journey



Source: Authors' elaboration, reconstructed from the original Napkin.ai diagram.

Figure 4 captures this dynamic of digital storytelling in migration pathways, illustrating how social media provide conduits of both information and illusion within a feedback loop that may reinforce migration cycles. Digitized narratives of successful migrants undergo idealization that strips away the harsh realities of migration. These sanitized stories then contribute to digital migratory mimicry and unrealistic expectations among would-be migrants. Narrative transformation and its potential effects on migration decision making illustrate the broader process through which digital technologies both inform and mislead, shaping contemporary migration imaginaries through a complex web of influence.

DISCUSSION

The interview analysis demonstrated how digital content can shape migrants' perceptions and decision-making processes. Whereas Grubanov-Boskovic et al. (2021) quantitatively linked Internet access to a theoretical migration propensity, our qualitative study revealed the intricate mechanisms through which this influence may operate. Circulating success narratives, migration-promoting discourse, and digitally-triggered political consciousness form a digitally mediated web of influence that can shape migrants' perceptions and decisions. Internalizing digital scripts that act upon their imaginaries, prospective migrants gradually envision themselves on the road. These scripts frame both what they think is possible, and what they believe should be done to overcome oppressive conditions. This aligns with De Haas's (2010) assertion that aspirations and capabilities shape migration decisions, as ICTs structure these aspirations through selective representation.

While previous literature (Porter et al., 2012; Frouws et al., 2016; Seymen, 2017; Zijlstra and van Liempt, 2017) confirmed ICTs' utilitarian role in transit zones, our study revealed the necessity of transcending utilitarian reasoning to embrace a critical perspective on their ambivalence. Interviewees' narratives graphically depicted this techno-ambivalence, demonstrating how ICTs are context-specific, acting both as a lifeline and a liability. This finding resonates with Van Esveldt's (2019) account of how traffickers and smugglers manipulate these lifelines as instruments of terror and exploitation.

Upon arrival in Morocco, ICT use undergoes another transformation, while maintaining its ambivalent nature. Digital practices observed in Mohammedia—ranging from WhatsApp chats to social media networking—illustrated a condition of connected liminality, enabling migrants to sustain emotional ties with their home communities, while strategically navigating the precariousness of their “not-yet” status. Extending Diminescu's (2008) concept of the “connected migrant,” these findings highlight the opportunities and tensions of digital double presence, as migrants live concomitantly in the now-and-here and the not-yet. This liminal interconnectedness questions the linear conceptualization of migration (Schapendonk, 2012). Indeed, the migrants' journey emerges as a continuous negotiation of hybrid temporalities and spatialities, rather than a unidirectional mobility between fixed points.

The virtual ethnographic study of the Facebook group demonstrated how digital platforms mediate between subjective individual experiences and collective meaning-making, illustrating ICTs' dual role in facilitating physical mobility, while contributing to symbolic frameworks through which mobility is imagined and normalized—with the *boza* group functioning as a digital crucible where essential information and exploitative practices collide.

The study uncovered the formation of a sophisticated discursive architecture that reframes migratory pathways through a dialectical interplay between utilitarian knowledge transmission and aspirational myth-making, generating an epistemically contested space wherein migrants must critically negotiate competing truth claims.

While prior research (Frouws et al., 2016; EU, 2018) established the informational dimension of virtual networks, our findings revealed how digital interweaving of factual data and aspirational narratives places emphasis on the outcome (arrival in Europe) while obscuring the process (violence, precariousness, exploitation). Migrants not only passionately consume these digital narratives; they also contribute to their reinforcement and ritualization by liking, sharing, and commenting. This participatory engagement resonates with Latonero and Kift's (2018) framework of the "digital infrastructure of movement," which positions social media and digital technologies as constitutive elements of migratory journeys. However, we extend this conceptualization by illustrating how these infrastructures may shape migratory imaginaries and decision making well in advance of physical mobility, broadening the temporal limits of digital mediation within migratory trajectories.

Through narrative sanitization, downplaying hardships, and over-celebrating success stories, potential migrants may become more receptive to digital migratory mimicry. Before manifesting in concrete action, this phenomenon operates within the psychological framework of aspirational cognition, whereby group members imagine themselves as future successful migrants before physically undertaking the journey. Appadurai's (1990) concept of "mediascapes" illuminates this cognitive mechanism. Much like traditional media shaped how we see the world, modern social media function as digital mediascapes through which imaginary worlds of migration circulate, often sidestepping material and temporal realities. *Boza* Facebook groups propagate a curated representation that reduces years-long, complex migratory trajectories into singular moments of triumphant arrival, constructing a deterritorialized "imagined world" where geographic mobility seems easily attainable.

Smugglers strategically exploit mimetic desire to move by using digital mediascapes as amplifiers of successful crossings, creating a feedback loop that may reinforce migratory aspirations and risky behavior. These communication approaches reflect a broader professionalization of smuggling practices. While Sanchez (2017) observed smugglers relying on territorial knowledge, this study revealed how they now combine geographical expertise with sophisticated digital strategies, navigating virtual roads as effectively as desert trails. In the process, smugglers can subvert *boza* informational groups, transforming them into symbolic marketplaces of aspirations. This finding echoes Andersson's (2014) "illegality industry," in which actors monetize the production and management of migratory desire and illegality itself, creating an economy built on commodified aspirations. In this digitally mediated *boza* ecosystem, the undocumented journey may become more accessible in imagination, while remaining treacherous in execution.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The interview component involved five Cameroonian participants residing in Mohammedia, while the virtual ethnography focused intensively on one Facebook group; these materials cannot support statistical generalization beyond the cases examined. Moreover, the qualitative, cross-sectional and retrospective design cannot establish prevalence or causal relationships between digital practices, imaginaries, and migration decisions. Digital migratory mimicry should therefore be understood as an analytical proposition grounded in these materials rather than a universal mechanism. Comparative and longitudinal research across nationalities, routes, platforms, and migration stages is needed to assess its broader applicability.

CONCLUSION

This study included three significant contributions. Methodologically, it combines biographical interviews, digital narrative cartography, and virtual ethnography to trace the entanglement between hybrid physical and digital migratory spaces. Empirically, it adopted a holistic approach to examine how undocumented sub-Saharan migrants make strategic and ambivalent use of ICTs across successive stages of their journey. Conceptually, it questioned the relevance of dominant theoretical frameworks by proposing the notion of digital migratory mimicry to understand how digitally mediated imaginaries may impact affect-driven decisions and mimetic behavior, advancing a conceptualization of irregular migration's persistence as a digitally and affectively influenced process. Finally, these findings highlighted the limits of rational risk-based information campaign programs on which migration governance is based, demonstrating the need to engage with the emotionally, socially, and symbolically charged aspects of digitally mediated imaginaries in designing interventions better suited to the hybrid ecosystem of undocumented migration.

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Childhood Experiences, Self-Efficacy, and Migration Aspirations Among African Youth: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

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Abstract

Understanding the developmental antecedents of migration aspirations is critical for evidence-based migration governance in Africa. While structural factors driving irregular migration are well-documented, the role of childhood experiences in shaping youth migration aspirations remains underexplored. This systematic review synthesizes evidence on the relationships between adverse and positive childhood experiences, self-efficacy, and migration aspirations among African youth. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, we searched Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, African Journals Online (AJOL), and Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) for peer-reviewed studies published between January 2015 and December 2025. Inclusion criteria required empirical studies examining relationships between childhood experiences and migration aspirations among African populations. For the quality appraisal, we used the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). A random-effects meta-analysis was conducted when sufficient homogeneous studies were available for pooling. Of the 4,041 identified records, 68 studies met the inclusion criteria, of which 42 contributed to the quantitative synthesis. Adverse childhood experiences were positively associated with migration aspirations (pooled OR = 1.67, 95% CI: 1.32-2.11, $k = 28$), while positive childhood experiences showed protective effects (pooled OR = 0.58, 95% CI: 0.41-0.82, $k = 19$). Across $k = 7$ studies providing mediation data, self-efficacy was associated with 34–47% of the observed association between childhood experiences and migration aspirations, suggesting a candidate pathway requiring longitudinal verification. Migration narratives from family, peers, and digital media moderated these relationships, amplifying aspirations among youth with moderate self-efficacy. Geographic concentration in West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal) and methodological heterogeneity limit generalizability. Findings support life-course approaches to migration governance that address childhood adversity as an upstream

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determinant of migration aspirations. Policy recommendations include strengthening child protection systems in high-emigration areas, developing youth self-efficacy programs, and integrating balanced migration information into educational curricula. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs and expand geographic coverage beyond West Africa.

Keywords: Migration aspirations, adverse childhood experiences, self-efficacy, Africa, systematic review, life-course, youth mobility

INTRODUCTION

Migration in Africa is a predominantly intra-African phenomenon. The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024) data indicate that the majority of African migrants reside within the continent, with major corridors connecting West African countries, southern African labor migration circuits, and East African cross-border mobility. International migration beyond the continent represents a statistically smaller but disproportionately studied share of African mobility. Within this larger category, irregular movement toward Europe through the Central Mediterranean Route has attracted sustained policy attention: the IOM documents over 28,000 recorded deaths on this route since 2014, underscoring the risks associated with unauthorized movement. Despite sustained deterrence efforts, risk awareness campaigns, and policy interventions, irregular migration continues to attract significant numbers of young Africans. The persistence of both intra-continental and international aspirations raises critical questions about how migration aspirations are formed, normalized, and sustained over time, particularly in contexts where risks are widely acknowledged yet do not function as sufficient deterrents.

Research from Ghana and across the West African migration corridor has documented the deep cultural embedding of migration within local social structures. Teye and Yebileh (2020) demonstrate that in high-emigration communities of the Bono and Bono East regions, migration functions as a normative pathway to adulthood, social recognition, and masculine identity. Awumbila and colleagues (2019) show that remittance-dependent households actively socialize children into migration expectations, creating intergenerational transmission of mobility aspirations. Kandilige and Adiku (2020) document how returnee reintegration challenges in Ghana's migration-prone districts reinforce rather than diminish community-level migration cultures, as returnees' accounts are selectively interpreted to maintain optimistic migration narratives.

These findings establish that migration aspirations in African contexts are socially produced through childhood and adolescent socialization rather than emerging spontaneously at the point of departure. A growing body of empirical research challenges the assumption that migration aspirations originate solely in adulthood. Ethnographic and qualitative studies across Africa demonstrate that ideas about migration often take shape much earlier, embedded within childhood and adolescent

socialization processes. Thorsen (2014) shows how adolescent boys in Burkina Faso internalized migration as a culturally sanctioned pathway to masculinity through peer narratives and community rituals. In Ghana, Hashim and Thorsen (2011) found that even non-migrant children anticipated future migration, particularly in households characterized by economic strain or prior migration experience. More recently, Crivello (2015) documented through longitudinal research in Ethiopia how children's aspirations, including migration intentions, crystallize during middle childhood and remain remarkably stable into adolescence. These studies established that understanding adult migration decision-making requires examining the biographical antecedents formed during earlier developmental periods.

The developmental psychology literature provides theoretical and empirical resources for understanding how early-life experiences shape later decision-making. Research on adverse childhood experiences demonstrates that exposure to trauma, neglect, household dysfunction, and instability during childhood is associated with altered risk perception, diminished future orientation, and increased tolerance for high-risk choices in adulthood (Hughes et al., 2017; Merrick et al., 2019). Conversely, positive childhood experiences, including stable caregiving, mentorship, educational engagement, and community belonging, are associated with resilience, enhanced self-efficacy, and expanded perceptions of locally available opportunities (Traub and Boynton-Jarrett, 2017; Bethell et al., 2019). Emerging research from African contexts suggests these patterns apply to migration outcomes. Bah and Batista (2024) demonstrate that Gambian youth with histories of childhood adversity show elevated willingness to undertake dangerous migration despite awareness of risks. Lloyd et al. (2022) provide experimental evidence that adverse childhood experiences alter reward processing and risk calculation in ways that may increase susceptibility to high-variance choices, such as irregular migration.

Self-efficacy theory provides a mechanism linking childhood experiences to migration decision-making. Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, defined as beliefs about one's capability to execute courses of action required to achieve desired outcomes, develops through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social feedback, and physiological states during childhood and adolescence. Recent applications of self-efficacy frameworks to African migration contexts have shown promising results. Schewel and Fransen (2022) demonstrate that Ethiopian youth with higher self-efficacy are more likely to act on migration aspirations, while Flahaux (2022) shows that Senegalese returnees with diminished self-efficacy following migration failure are particularly vulnerable to re-migrating. The relationship between self-efficacy and migration aspirations appears conditional on perceived local opportunity structures, with self-efficacy operating protectively where local pathways are perceived as viable but amplifying migration aspirations where local opportunities are blocked (Van Hear et al., 2018).

Digital media has emerged as an increasingly important factor shaping African youth migration aspirations. Birkvad (2019) documents how Senegalese youth

construct migration imaginaries through selective engagement with social media content depicting diaspora success. Schans and Optekamp (2022) maintain that digital platforms enable the circulation of curated migration narratives that systematically over-represent success while filtering out accounts of failure. Recent work by Adegoke (2023) and Vorvornator (2025) shows that Ghanaian youth in high-emigration areas engage with migration-related content daily through WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook, shaping their perceptions of migration feasibility and desirability. These digital environments interact with childhood experiences and self-efficacy in complex ways that existing theoretical frameworks only partially capture.

This review and meta-analysis address this gap by synthesizing empirical evidence on the relationships between childhood experiences, self-efficacy, and migration aspirations among African youth. Guided by PRISMA 2020 standards, we address three explicit research questions: (a) What is the nature and strength of associations between adverse and positive childhood experiences and migration aspirations among African youth? (b) Does self-efficacy function as a mediating pathway between childhood experiences and migration aspirations, and what is the evidence for this mechanism? (c) How do migration narratives from family, peers, and digital media interact with childhood experiences and self-efficacy to shape aspiration formation? By integrating life-course theory with the aspirations-capabilities framework, this review contributes a developmentally informed perspective to African migration scholarship and generates recommendations for migration governance and youth development programming that are proportionate to the strength of available evidence.

METHODOLOGY

Protocol and registration

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The review protocol was developed for database searches and followed established methodological standards for systematic reviews in migration studies.

Eligibility criteria

Studies were included if they met several distinct criteria. First, empirical research design: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. Second, examination of relationships between childhood or early-life experiences and migration aspirations, intentions, or related constructs. Childhood and early-life experiences are defined in this review as exposures occurring from birth to age 18, encompassing: (a) adverse experiences including abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, parental absence, economic hardship, child fostering, and educational disruption; and (b) positive experiences including stable caregiving, mentorship, school belonging, community participation, and economic security. These are treated as conceptually distinct

constructs with potentially different mechanisms; exposure type was examined as a moderating variable in subgroup analyses. “Related constructs” in migration outcomes refer specifically to: stated desire or willingness to migrate (aspirations); concrete plans to migrate within a defined period (intentions); and preparatory actions such as savings, social network activation, or visa applications (preparatory behavior). These outcome types were examined in moderator analysis, given established differences in their theoretical standing.

Third, studies focused on African populations either in African countries or African-origin populations abroad, where the latter were eligible only if they examined pre-migration aspiration formation or re-migration aspiration rather than post-migration integration outcomes.

Fourth, published in peer-reviewed journals between January 2015 and December 2025. The 2015 start date was chosen to align with the period of heightened scholarly attention to African migration aspirations following the Mediterranean migration crisis and the introduction of ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) frameworks into migration scholarship. The peer-reviewed criterion enables consistent quality appraisal using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) but is acknowledged as a limitation that compounds publication bias risk, given the substantial empirical migration literature in gray sources, including IOM reports and institutional working papers.

Fifth, available in English or French. French-language terms were included in all database searches; the African Journals Online (AJOL) was searched in both English and French. Arabic- and Portuguese-language databases were not searched, limiting representation of North African and Lusophone African scholarship. Studies were excluded if they: (a) did not include empirical data; (b) focused exclusively on forced displacement or asylum seeking without examining aspiration formation; (c) examined only post-migration adaptation without reference to aspiration formation; or (d) lacked sufficient methodological information to assess quality, defined as absence of reporting across two or more of: research design, data collection method, sample characteristics, and at least one relevant outcome measure. Seven studies were excluded on criterion 4; this criterion was applied independently by two reviewers, with disagreements ($n = 2$) resolved through discussion with the third reviewer.

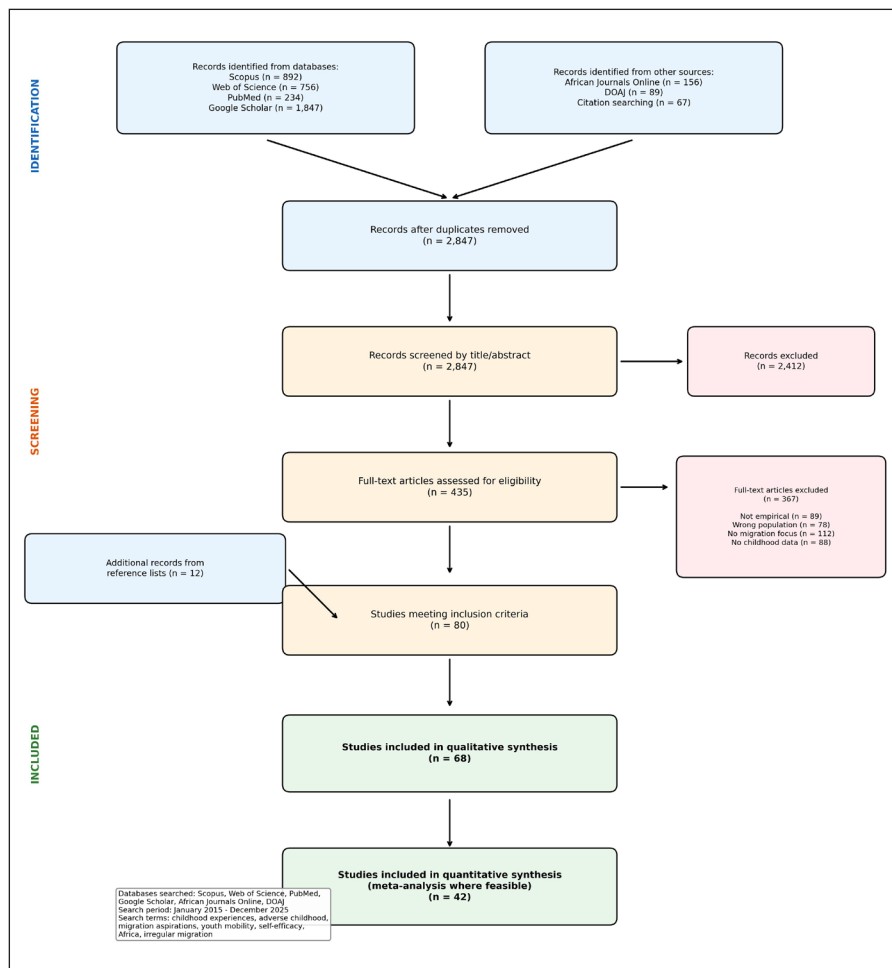
Information sources and search strategy

Systematic searches were conducted across six databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar (first 200 results), African Journals Online (AJOL), and Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Search strings combined terms across three domains: (1) childhood experiences (adverse childhood experiences, OR positive childhood experiences, OR childhood adversity, OR childhood trauma, OR child abuse, OR child neglect, OR parental absence, OR child fostering, OR household dysfunction); (2) migration constructs (migration aspirations OR migration intentions, OR emigration, OR irregular migration, OR youth mobility,

OR desire to migrate); and (3) geographic focus (Africa OR African OR West Africa OR sub-Saharan). Database-specific syntax adaptations were applied. Searches were conducted between October and November 2025, with final updates in December 2025. Reference lists of included studies and relevant reviews were manually searched to identify additional eligible records.

Selection process

Retrieved records were imported into the Rayyan systematic review software and deduplicated. Title and abstract screening were conducted independently by two reviewers using pre-specified inclusion criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, with a third reviewer consulted for unresolved cases. Full texts of potentially eligible studies were retrieved and assessed against the inclusion criteria by both reviewers. The selection process is documented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Source: Data extraction

Data were extracted using a standardized form capturing: study identification (authors, year, country, publication); study characteristics (design, sample size, population, setting); childhood experience measures (ACEs, Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs), specific adversities); migration outcome measures (aspirations, intentions, preparations); self-efficacy and agency measures; narrative exposure measures; statistical associations and effect sizes; and qualitative findings. For quantitative studies, we extracted odds ratios, correlation coefficients, regression coefficients, and 95% confidence intervals where reported, or calculated these from available data where possible.

Quality appraisal

Methodological quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018), which provides category-specific criteria for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies. Two reviewers independently appraised each study, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Quality scores informed sensitivity analyses but did not determine inclusion, consistent with recommendations for comprehensive systematic reviews (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006).

Synthesis methods

Quantitative synthesis employed random-effects meta-analysis where three or more studies reported comparable effect sizes for similar constructs. Odds ratios were the primary effect measure; where studies reported other metrics, conversions were applied using established formulas. Heterogeneity was assessed using I-squared statistics and Cochran's Q test. Subgroup analyses examined variation by geographic region, study design, and population characteristics. Publication bias was assessed using funnel plots and Egger's regression test. Where meta-analysis was not feasible due to heterogeneity or insufficient studies, narrative synthesis following the Synthesis Without Meta-analysis (SWiM) guidelines was conducted (Campbell et al., 2020). Qualitative findings were synthesized thematically, with attention to convergence and divergence with quantitative patterns.

RESULTS

Study selection

Database searches identified 4,041 records. After removing 1,194 duplicates, 2,847 records underwent title and abstract screening. Of these, 435 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Following full-text review and supplementation with 12 records from reference list searches, 68 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the qualitative synthesis. Of these, 42 studies provided sufficient quantitative data for inclusion in meta-analytic synthesis. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram detailing the selection process.

Study characteristics

Of the 68 included studies, 42 provided sufficient quantitative data for meta-analytic synthesis. The remaining 26 studies contributed to qualitative synthesis only. These comprised 18 purely qualitative studies using interviews, ethnography, or narrative methods; five mixed-methods studies where the quantitative component lacked sufficient reporting for effect size extraction; and three quantitative studies reporting associations in forms that could not be converted to odds ratios. Compared to the 42 meta-analytic studies, the 26 qualitative synthesis-only studies were more likely to be

qualitative in design (69% vs. 0%), more likely to be located in West Africa (71% vs. 62%), and more likely to have been published before 2020 (54% vs. 36%). They were less likely to use validated ACE instruments. These differences suggest the meta-analytic subset may over-represent more recent, instrument-based research; this representativeness constraint should be considered when interpreting pooled estimates.

Table 1: Characteristics of included studies (n = 68)

Characteristic	Category	n (%)	Key Findings
Publication Year	2015–2018	15 (22%)	Early studies, primarily ethnographic, focus on migration culture
	2019–2022	32 (47%)	Growth in quantitative designs; ACE frameworks applied
	2023–2025	21 (31%)	Increased attention to digital narratives; life-course approaches
Region	West Africa	44 (65%)	Strongest evidence for ACE–aspiration associations
	East Africa	11 (16%)	More attention to refugee contexts; less childhood focus
	North Africa	6 (9%)	Transit migration emphasis; limited developmental data
	Southern Africa	4 (6%)	Internal migration is dominant; childhood data are sparse
	Multi-country	3 (4%)	Comparative designs; methodological heterogeneity
	Cross-sectional	31 (46%)	ACE scales adapted; OR estimates available
	Qualitative	22 (32%)	Rich narrative data; biography–aspiration links
Design	Mixed methods	12 (18%)	Triangulation of mechanisms; self-efficacy paths
	Longitudinal	3 (4%)	Limited; most substantial causal inference potential
Population	Youth in origin	42 (62%)	Primary evidence-based; aspiration formation focus
	Returnees	14 (21%)	Retrospective childhood accounts; re-aspiration
	General population	8 (12%)	Migration items embedded; less specific data
	Children/adolescents	4 (6%)	Current childhood; early aspiration emergence
	High ($\geq 4/5$)	29 (43%)	Robust designs; clear reporting
Quality (MMAT)	Moderate (3/5)	26 (38%)	Minor limitations; usable data
	Low ($\leq 2/5$)	13 (19%)	Significant limitations; sensitivity analyses

Source: Author’s analysis of the 68 studies included in the systematic review

Adverse childhood experiences and migration aspirations

Twenty-eight studies examined relationships between adverse childhood experiences and migration aspirations, with sufficient methodological homogeneity to permit meta-analysis. Random-effects meta-analysis yielded a pooled odds ratio of 1.67 (95% CI: 1.32-2.11, $p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals reporting higher levels of childhood adversity had significantly higher migration aspirations than those with lower exposure to childhood adversity. Heterogeneity was moderate ($I^2 = 58\%$, $Q = 64.3$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting meaningful variation across studies.

Specific types of adversity showed varying effect magnitudes. Parental absence due to migration was most strongly associated with offspring migration aspirations (pooled OR = 1.89, 95% CI: 1.45-2.46, $k = 22$), consistent with intergenerational transmission of migration as a normalized livelihood strategy. Economic hardship during childhood showed robust positive associations (pooled OR = 1.52, 95% CI: 1.21-1.91, $k = 31$). Child fostering experiences, common across West African contexts, showed positive but more variable associations (pooled OR = 1.38, 95% CI: 0.98-1.94, $k = 11$), with effects contingent on fostering quality and duration. Emotional neglect and household instability showed consistent positive associations in qualitative accounts, though quantitative data were sparser.

Subgroup analyses revealed geographic variation. West African studies showed stronger ACE-aspiration associations (pooled OR = 1.82, 95% CI: 1.41-2.35) compared to East African studies (pooled OR = 1.34, 95% CI: 0.91-1.97), potentially reflecting differences in migration culture density and narrative exposure. Studies using validated ACE instruments showed larger effects than those using single-item or ad hoc adversity measures, suggesting measurement sensitivity influences observed associations.

Positive childhood experiences and migration aspirations

Nineteen studies examined positive childhood experiences in relation to migration aspirations. Meta-analysis yielded a pooled odds ratio of 0.58 (95% CI: 0.41-0.82, $p < 0.01$), indicating protective effects whereby higher levels of positive childhood experiences were associated with reduced migration aspirations. Heterogeneity was substantial ($I^2 = 67\%$), reflecting variation in PCE operationalization across studies. Qualitative synthesis identified specific protective factors. Stable attachment to at least one supportive caregiver consistently emerged as protective, providing emotional security that reduced the pull of migration as an escape. School belonging and educational engagement expanded perceptions of local opportunity, with several studies documenting that youth who felt valued in educational settings were less likely to view migration as necessary for self-actualization. Mentorship relationships with non-parental adults provided alternative sources of guidance and validation. Community belonging and participation in local institutions strengthened identification with place and social ties that migration would sever. Economic

stability during childhood, while related to structural factors, also contributed to psychological security and future orientation.

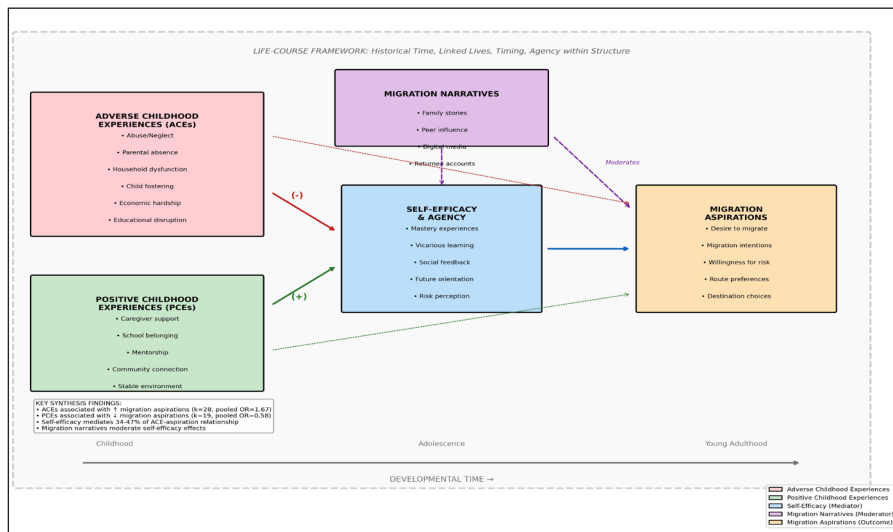
Importantly, PCEs and ACEs were not simply opposite poles of a single dimension. Several studies have documented that youth experiencing both significant adversity and protective factors show attenuated aspiration effects compared with those experiencing adversity alone, suggesting buffering mechanisms. This pattern supports resilience frameworks, emphasizing that protective factors can mitigate the impacts of adversity without eliminating exposure effects.

Self-efficacy as mediating mechanism

Fifteen of the 68 included studies examined self-efficacy in relation to childhood experiences, migration aspirations, or both. Seven of these 15 provided formal mediation data adequate for synthesis; the pooled mediation estimates reported below are drawn from this subset ($k = 7$). Readers should note that the mediation pathway, while consistent across these studies, rests on a relatively small evidence base. Self-efficacy showed complex relationships with migration aspirations, depending on perceived local opportunity structures. General self-efficacy was negatively associated with migration aspirations in contexts where local opportunities were perceived as accessible (pooled OR = 0.72, 95% CI: 0.54-0.96, $k = 7$), suggesting that confident youth directed agency toward local pathways.

However, in contexts of severely constrained local opportunity, self-efficacy showed non-significant or positive associations with migration aspirations, as confident youth directed agency toward migration as the most promising available arena for capability deployment. Mediation analyses across the seven studies estimated that self-efficacy mediated between 34% and 47% of the association between childhood adversity and migration aspirations. Adverse childhood experiences were associated with lower self-efficacy development; lower self-efficacy was in turn associated with higher susceptibility to migration aspirations, particularly when migration was framed as achievable through collective support and established networks. These mediation estimates are cross-sectional and should be understood as candidate pathways for longitudinal investigation rather than established causal mechanisms.

Figure 2: Conceptual Synthesis Diagram



Source: Authors' own conceptualisation, informed by Bandura (1997) and Elder et al. (2003).

Migration narratives and moderation effects

Twelve studies examined how migration narratives from family, peers, and digital media interact with developmental factors to shape aspirations. Narrative exposure was positively associated with migration aspirations (pooled OR = 1.45, 95% CI: 1.12-1.88, k = 12), but self-efficacy levels moderated this association. Among youth with moderate self-efficacy, narrative exposure substantially amplified migration aspirations, as success stories provided vicarious efficacy information suggesting migration was achievable. Among youth with very low self-efficacy, narrative exposure had weaker effects, as even positive migration stories seemed out of reach. Among youth with high self-efficacy and access to local opportunities, narrative exposure had a limited impact on aspirations. Digital media emerged as an increasingly important narrative channel in recent studies. Social media platforms circulated curated success narratives while filtering out accounts of failure, creating systematically biased information environments. Youth with limited alternative information sources were particularly susceptible to these biased narratives. However, digital platforms also enabled access to risk information and counter-narratives, with effects depending on platform usage patterns and information-seeking behaviors.

Thematic synthesis of qualitative evidence

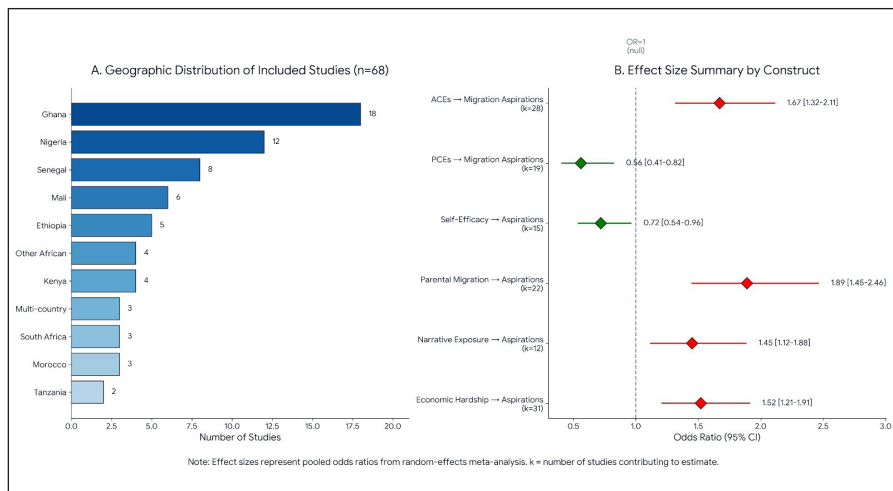
A qualitative synthesis of 34 studies (22 purely qualitative, 12 mixed methods) identified several cross-cutting themes that elaborate on quantitative patterns.

Theme 1: Childhood as a formative period for aspiration crystallization. Qualitative accounts consistently documented that migration aspirations emerged during childhood and adolescence, often before age 15, rather than arising suddenly in adulthood. Early experiences of deprivation, family separation, or exposure to migration success created enduring orientations toward mobility that persisted despite later information about risks.

Theme 2: Self-efficacy as a double-edged phenomenon. Youth narratives revealed that self-efficacy operated differently depending on perceived opportunity structures. For some, high self-efficacy supported the pursuit of local pathways despite challenges. For others, high self-efficacy, combined with blocked local opportunities, intensified migration aspirations, as confident youth sought arenas where their capabilities could yield returns.

Theme 3: Narrative absorption versus critical engagement. Youth varied in how they engaged with migration narratives. Some absorbed success stories uncritically, internalizing migration as the singular path to achievement. Others engaged more critically, weighing multiple accounts and considering risks alongside benefits. Critical engagement was associated with higher education, diverse information sources, and mentorship relationships providing alternative perspectives.

Theme 4: Protective relationships as alternative anchors. Youth who did not develop migration aspirations despite exposure to adversity consistently reported at least one significant protective relationship, whether with a caregiver, an extended family member, a teacher, or a community mentor. These relationships provided alternative sources of validation, belonging, and guidance, reducing the appeal of migration as a route to recognition and success.

Figure 3: Evidence Distribution and Meta-Analytic Summary


Source: Authors' analysis of data extracted from the studies included in the systematic review

Table 2: Thematic and Quantitative Synthesis of Evidence

Construct	Studies (k)	Effect Direction	Pooled OR (95% CI)	Qualitative Themes
ACEs (composite)	28	Positive	1.67 (1.32-2.11)	Childhood deprivation shapes enduring mobility orientation
Parental migration absence	22	Positive	1.89 (1.45-2.46)	Intergenerational normalization; modeling
Economic hardship	31	Positive	1.52 (1.21-1.91)	Perceived lack of local pathways
Child fostering	11	Variable	1.38 (0.98-1.94)	Contingent on fostering quality
Educational disruption	14	Positive	1.44 (1.08-1.92)	Truncated local opportunity perception
PCEs (composite)	19	Negative	0.58 (0.41-0.82)	Buffering through alternative pathways
Caregiver support	16	Negative	0.52 (0.36-0.75)	Emotional security; local validation
School belonging	12	Negative	0.61 (0.43-0.86)	Educational engagement; future orientation
Mentorship	8	Negative	0.54 (0.34-0.86)	Alternative guidance: critical perspectives
Self-efficacy	15	Context-dependent	0.72 (0.54-0.96)*	Mediation 34–47%; opportunity interaction
Narrative exposure	12	Positive	1.45 (1.12-1.88)	Vicarious efficacy; biased information
Digital media use	7	Positive	1.61 (1.18-2.19)	Curated success narratives; aspiration amplification

Source: Authors' own work

Note: *Effect for self-efficacy is in contexts with perceived local opportunities; associations reversed or null in blocked opportunity contexts.

DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, no prior systematic review has jointly examined childhood experiences, self-efficacy, and migration aspirations among African youth within a life-course framework. This review synthesizes evidence on these associations across 68 studies and finds that adverse childhood experiences are positively associated with migration aspirations, that positive childhood experiences are inversely associated with migration aspirations, and that self-efficacy represents a candidate mediating pathway between childhood experiences and aspiration formation. The relationship between self-efficacy and migration aspirations depends on perceived local opportunity structures, and migration narratives from family, peers, and digital media moderate these associations. These findings are consistent with life-course perspectives on aspiration formation and carry implications for migration governance and youth development policy, subject to the limitations of a predominantly cross-sectional evidence base.

Childhood adversity and the formation of migration aspirations

The robust positive association between adverse childhood experiences and migration aspirations (pooled OR = 1.67) confirms and extends previous qualitative observations from West African contexts. This finding aligns with Thorsen's (2014) ethnographic work, which documents how Burkinabè youth experiencing deprivation and family disruption developed enduring orientations toward mobility. The powerful effect of parental migration absence (pooled OR = 1.89) supports Mazzucato and Schans's (2011) transnational families framework, which emphasizes how parental migration shapes children's developmental trajectories and future aspirations. The present synthesis demonstrates that this intergenerational transmission operates through multiple mechanisms: direct modeling of migration as a livelihood strategy, normalization of family separation, and exposure to remittance benefits that frame migration as successful. The findings extend the developmental psychology literature on adverse childhood experiences to migration outcomes, an application that has not been systematically examined.

Hughes and colleagues' (2017) meta-analysis established dose-response relationships between ACEs and health outcomes; the present review identifies analogous associative patterns for migration aspirations that warrant similar systematic longitudinal investigation. This extension is theoretically significant because it connects individual developmental trajectories to population-level migration patterns, bridging micro-level psychological processes with macro-level demographic phenomena. The moderate heterogeneity across studies ($I^2 = 58\%$) suggests that, while the overall association is robust, contextual factors shape its magnitude and warrant further investigation.

Protective factors and resilience pathways

The inverse associations between positive childhood experiences and migration aspirations and patterns consistent with resilience frameworks were noted, though the protective interpretation requires longitudinal confirmation. This finding aligns with Bethell and colleagues' (2019) demonstration that positive childhood experiences predict better adult outcomes independently of exposure to adversity. The qualitative synthesis revealed that stable caregiver relationships, school belonging, and mentorship offered alternative sources of validation and belonging, reducing the appeal of migration as a means of achieving recognition and success. These findings have important theoretical implications for the aspirations–capabilities framework.

De Haas (2021) conceptualizes migration aspirations as emerging from perceived opportunity structures, but the present review demonstrates that subjective perception of opportunities is itself shaped by developmental experiences. Youth with positive childhood experiences appear to perceive local opportunities more favorably, not necessarily because objective opportunities differ, but because their developmental histories have equipped them with self-efficacy, social connections, and future orientation that make local pathways seem viable. This suggests that the aspirations–capabilities framework would benefit from integration with life-course perspectives that attend to how capabilities and aspiration-relevant perceptions develop over time.

Self-efficacy as a conditional mediating mechanism

The finding that self-efficacy mediates 34–47% of the relationship between childhood adversity and migration aspiration advances understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying aspiration formation across the seven studies providing formal mediation data ($k = 7$). This estimate should be interpreted with caution given the limited evidence base. However, this substantial mediation effect indicates that adverse childhood experiences do not directly produce migration aspirations; instead, they operate partially through their effects on self-efficacy development. This finding aligns with Bandura's (1997) theorization that self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, and social feedback, all of which may be disrupted by childhood adversity.

The context-dependent nature of self-efficacy's relationship with migration aspirations represents a novel contribution to migration theory. In contexts where local opportunities were perceived as accessible, higher self-efficacy was protective against migration aspirations (pooled OR = 0.72), as confident youth directed their capabilities toward local pathways. However, in blocked opportunity contexts, self-efficacy showed either no association or a positive association with migration aspirations. This pattern suggests that self-efficacy amplifies engagement with whichever pathways appear most promising, whether local or migratory. This finding

extends Schewel and Fransen's (2022) work on Ethiopian youth by demonstrating the moderating role of opportunity structures across multiple African contexts.

Digital narratives and aspiration amplification

The significant association between digital media exposure and migration aspirations (pooled OR = 1.61) confirms emerging qualitative research on social media's role in shaping African youth migration imaginaries. Birkvad (2019) and Schans and Optekamp (2022) documented how digital platforms enable the circulation of curated success narratives that systematically over-represent positive migration outcomes. The present synthesis provides quantitative evidence supporting these observations across multiple studies and contexts. The moderation of narrative effects by self-efficacy levels carries implications for information interventions. Youth with moderate self-efficacy were most susceptible to narrative amplification effects, as success stories provided vicarious efficacy information suggesting migration was achievable for people like themselves. This finding suggests that media literacy interventions may be most effective when targeted at this moderate-efficacy group, enabling critical engagement with migration narratives without undermining self-efficacy that could support local pathways.

Ghana and West Africa within broader African migration dynamics

The concentration of evidence in West Africa, particularly Ghana, reflects both the region's prominence as a migration origin and the development of research infrastructure examining migration dynamics. Teye and Yebleh (2020) and Awumbila and colleagues (2019) have established that Ghana's Bono and Bono East regions represent particularly dense migration cultures where mobility is deeply embedded in social structures. The stronger ACE-aspiration associations observed in West African studies (pooled OR = 1.82) than in East African studies (pooled OR = 1.34) may reflect cultural differences. However, methodological variation across regions cannot be excluded.

The Ghana case illustrates broader patterns while also revealing specificities requiring attention. Ghana is neither conflict-affected nor experiencing economic collapse, yet irregular migration persists, challenging simplistic crisis-driven explanations. The present synthesis suggests that in such contexts, developmental factors operating over the life course may be particularly important in explaining migration aspirations. This finding aligns with the African Union's (2018) recognition that addressing irregular migration requires attention to youth opportunity structures and developmental pathways, not only immediate push factors.

POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Evidence synthesized in this review generates several provisional policy directions and research priorities. These recommendations are framed as directions consistent

with the correlational associations identified; establishing causal relationships that would fully substantiate them requires the longitudinal research identified in the fifth recommendation.

First, migration governance frameworks should consider life-course perspectives that recognize childhood as a period during which aspiration-relevant dispositions, including self-efficacy and perceptions of local opportunity, are formed. This would require coordination between migration authorities, child welfare agencies, education ministries, and youth development programs. This recommendation is provisional, as the observed associations do not establish that intervening in childhood conditions would alter later migration aspirations.

Second, child protection systems in high-emigration areas warrant strengthening on child welfare grounds, and the associations identified here suggest they may also be relevant upstream factors for migration-aspiration formation. These include addressing parental absence, supporting foster care quality, reducing economic hardship through social protection, and maintaining educational continuity. The evidence is consistent with but does not prove this intervention logic.

Third, youth development programs may benefit from integrating self-efficacy-building with meaningful expansion of local economic and educational opportunities. The evidence base for this recommendation rests primarily on $k = 7$ mediation studies and should be qualified accordingly. Building self-efficacy without expanding local opportunities may, as the evidence suggests, redirect agency toward migration rather than local pathways.

Fourth, information interventions should move beyond risk awareness toward comprehensive migration literacy that enables critical engagement with narratives, balanced understanding of outcomes, and informed decision-making. This recommendation is supported by evidence on narrative moderation effects and is consistent with an agency-respecting approach to migration governance.

Fifth, future research should prioritize longitudinal cohort designs and structural equation modeling that can test the childhood experience-self-efficacy-aspiration pathway as specified in this review. Such designs would allow mediation analyses with appropriate temporal ordering and would substantially strengthen the evidence base for the policy directions above. Geographic expansion beyond West Africa is needed to assess generalizability. Development and validation of culturally appropriate, age-sensitive measures of childhood experiences and migration aspirations would strengthen future syntheses.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, geographic concentration in West Africa reflects two distinct sources: genuine concentration of empirical migration-aspiration research in the region, reflecting research infrastructure and funding. It also reflects the review's own language criteria (English and French only), which excluded Arabic-language North African scholarship and Portuguese-

language Lusophone African research. Both sources are acknowledged as constraints on generalizability.

Second, reliance on cross-sectional designs in most included studies ($n = 31$) precludes definitive causal inference; observed associations may reflect unmeasured confounding, recall bias, or reverse causation.

Third, retrospective measurement of childhood experiences in adult populations introduces recall bias, with current aspirations potentially coloring recollection of past experiences.

Fourth, heterogeneity in construct operationalization complicates synthesis; ACE and PCE measures varied substantially, as did migration-aspiration indicators (desires, intentions, preparatory behavior) and, importantly, self-efficacy instruments, which ranged from validated general scales to single-item proxies.

Fifth, some studies contributed multiple effect sizes for different adversity types or subgroups; dependency was addressed through composite effect size selection and three-level models where clustering was substantial, but residual statistical dependency cannot be excluded.

Sixth, the peer-reviewed-only inclusion criterion, while enabling consistent quality appraisal, excludes gray literature, including IOM and World Bank reports and institutional working papers, that contain substantial empirical migration research in African contexts. This criterion compounds publication bias risk beyond what is captured in funnel plot analysis, since published studies systematically over-represent significant findings.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review synthesizes evidence on the associations among childhood experiences, self-efficacy, and migration aspirations in African contexts. The findings are consistent with a life-course perspective on aspiration formation, showing that adverse childhood experiences are positively associated with migration aspirations and that positive childhood experiences are inversely associated with them, with self-efficacy as a candidate mediating pathway. These associations hold across diverse study designs, geographic contexts, and operationalizations of childhood experience, though with meaningful heterogeneity. The evidence is predominantly cross-sectional and retrospective, precluding causal inference. The claim that childhood adversity causes migration aspirations, or that positive experiences prevent them, goes beyond what the reviewed data support. What the evidence does support is that developmental experiences during childhood and adolescence are systematically associated with later aspiration profiles, in ways that warrant longitudinal investigation.

These associations challenge adult-centric approaches to migration governance and support attention to childhood conditions as part of a broader evidence-informed policy agenda. Effective migration governance informed by this evidence would attend to childhood welfare, educational quality, and youth opportunity as

components of a comprehensive framework, while acknowledging that the causal mechanisms underlying these associations require further empirical testing before confident intervention claims can be made. Migration aspirations are expressions of individual agency and should not be treated as outcomes to be reduced; the appropriate policy goal is ensuring that aspirations, wherever they lead, are formed based on adequate information, genuine choice, and safe pathways.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This systematic review synthesizes published research and does not involve primary data collection from human subjects. This review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines for systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Migrant Women in the Labor Force in South Africa: A Mixed-Methods Analysis

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Abstract

Migrant women's participation in the labor force is shaped by intersecting inequalities of gender, migration status, and class. Despite these structural constraints, migrant women make significant economic and social contributions, sustaining households, communities, and key sectors of the economy. This study examines migrant women's access to the labor market, the working conditions, and the networks migrant women use to secure employment. Using a mixed-methods approach, the quantitative data was collected from 201 women migrants, and the qualitative data was collected from 20 women migrants through interviews. Five individuals living in Cape Town and Johannesburg participated in key informant interviews. Purposive sampling was used as a sampling technique. The qualitative and quantitative strands were integrated using explanatory sequential design. The findings revealed that while migrant women participate actively in the labor force (82.6%), their access to employment is often shaped by informal networks, legal status, and gendered labor market segmentation. Employment is predominantly concentrated in low-wage, insecure, and informal sectors (40.4%), with limited labor protections and exposure to exploitation. Working conditions are frequently characterized by long hours, low pay, and vulnerability to abuse, compounded by migrants' limited bargaining power and restricted access to formal employment channels. The study highlights the central role of social networks and intermediaries in facilitating job access, while also underscoring structural barriers that constrain migrant women's economic inclusion. These findings contribute empirical evidence to debates on migration, gender, and labor in South Africa and point to the need for targeted policy interventions to improve labor market access and working conditions for migrant women.

Keywords: Migration, women, employment, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, mainstream migration discourses within the African continent have been heavily criticized for adopting a male-centric or gender-neutral lens that obscures the distinct experiences of women. To address this, feminist migration theories have increasingly challenged the traditional “push–pull” economic models by centering women as independent, active agents of mobility rather than passive dependents following male relatives (Mbiyozo, 2018). Scholarship focusing on African transnational movements demonstrates that women strategically deploy international migration to achieve economic autonomy, resist rigid traditional patriarchal norms, and forge new structural identities (Semu, 2020). However, while feminist migration frameworks highlight this agency, they also underscore the profound vulnerabilities unique to women’s migration pathways. Women face disproportionate exposure to exploitation, restricted welfare access, and gender-based discrimination in both transit and destination labor markets, especially when migrating into highly unregulated and invisible sectors like domestic and care work (Mbiyozo, 2018).

To capture the multidimensionality of these experiences, recent African migration scholarship has heavily integrated intersectionality—a framework tracking how multiple axes of social stratification co-constitute one another. In the context of African displacement and integration, scholars argue that a migrant woman’s lived reality cannot be understood through the lens of gender alone; instead, it is shaped by the simultaneous, compounding operations of gender, legal status, race, and cultural expectations (Mawire and Mokoena, 2025). For example, undocumented African women migrating to regional hubs like South Africa often confront “triple discrimination” fueled by intersecting systems of xenophobia, racism, and cultural patriarchy (Mbiyozo, 2018). By analyzing migration through an intersectional framework, contemporary literature exposes how institutional policies and border management structures reinforce inequalities, demonstrating that the structural inclusion or exclusion of African migrant women is dictated by their specific social location along these overlapping axes of power (Semu, 2020; Mawire and Mokoena, 2025).

Globally, migrant women are disproportionately represented in service sectors, particularly in care, domestic work, and personal services. The literature confirms that a large proportion of migrant women work in care and domestic roles, driven by global demand for such labor (Baison, 2021; Lightman, 2024). This pattern reflects broader sociological concepts like the global care chain, where female migrants provide care labor across borders (Gröschl, 2025).

Europe (especially Northern, Southern, and Western Europe) and Northern America consistently appear as major receiving regions for migrant workers. These regions concentrate a significant share of female migrant labor, particularly in service, domestic, and health-related sectors (Johnneson, 2025). The participation of migrant women in South Africa’s labor force represents a critical intersection of gender,

migration, and economic integration that has significant implications for both social policy and economic development. Historically, migration within and into South Africa was shaped by apartheid-era labor systems that predominantly mobilized male workers, while women's mobility was restricted or primarily associated with family reunification (Von Fintel and Moses, 2017). However, recent decades have witnessed a notable feminization of migration, as increasing numbers of women migrate internally and internationally in search of employment opportunities, often in contexts of limited formal labor absorption and persistent socio-economic inequalities (Von Fintel and Moses, 2017; Muzeza, 2023). In South Africa, migrant women's labor force participation is embedded within broader patterns of gendered labor market segmentation, where employment in informal and precarious sectors, such as domestic work and hospitality, is disproportionately common (Mfolo, 2023; Shamase and Sekaja, 2025).

Despite improvements in overall female labor force participation since the end of apartheid, women continue to face entrenched barriers including unequal access to formal employment, limited social protections, and culturally shaped domestic responsibilities that constrain economic participation (Weir-Smith and Dlamini, 2024). These challenges are compounded for migrant women whose legal status, intersectional disadvantages, and labor market marginalization often result in informality, low wages, and insecurity (Raniga and Fitshane, 2022; Zinatsa and Saurombe, 2022a, 2022b). Empirical studies (see, for example, Frattini and Solmone, 2022) further suggest that female migrant workers may increase competition for low-skill jobs, affecting both migrant and non-migrant women's employment prospects. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing inclusive labor and migration policies that not only facilitate economic integration but also address gendered inequalities in the South African context. This article synthesizes empirical evidence on migrant women's labor force participation in South Africa, emphasizing the structural drivers, employment outcomes, and policy challenges illuminated in recent literature. The research also explores how these women navigate the host country's socio-economic landscape to build resilient, underground networks that sustain their families and themselves, which is rarely addressed in the literature. Research also fails to address the unique institutional barriers migrant women face, such as the non-recognition of foreign qualifications by professional bodies and the complex interplay of xenophobia and gender bias in formal corporate hierarchies, which this research addresses. The remaining parts of this paper are structured as follows: (a) literature review; (b) methodology; (c) findings, data, and analysis; (d) conclusion; and (e) recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (2018) promises gender-responsive migration governance and decent work standards for migrant women through non-binding but widely endorsed policy commitments (Guild,

2018). At the continental and national levels, the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights affirms women's economic and labor rights and requires African Union (AU) member states to eliminate gender discrimination in employment (AU, 2003). Recent AU initiatives, including Model Laws on Labour Migration and Gender Equality, further encourage harmonization of gender-responsive migration governance across Africa. In South Africa, these commitments are reflected in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996), which guarantees equality and prohibits discrimination based on gender and nationality, and in labor legislation that applies to all workers. The National Labour Migration Policy (2021/22) provides a comprehensive framework for managing labor migration in line with human rights and decent work principles, explicitly recognizing the vulnerability of migrant workers, including women, and promoting equal treatment, protection from exploitation, and improved labor market governance (DEL, 2021). Together, these global, continental, and national frameworks form an interconnected legal architecture aimed at safeguarding migrant women's labor rights, although implementation gaps remain a persistent challenge.

In the early 1990s, almost all countries in the world foregrounded the promotion of women's rights, expansion of labor policies, and care of women (United Nations, 1995a, 1995b; UN Economic and Social Council, 1995). Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, the government took a leading position by introducing significant policy changes pertaining to women's rights. In this regard, the adoption and implementation of legislation governing migrant women's labor as part of national policy were among the bold steps taken toward the extensive expansion of access to social security benefits and creative approaches to pressing social needs (Crush et al., 2005; Dodson and Crush, 2015).

International Labour Organization (ILO) data indicate that migrant women form a substantial share of the global migrant workforce. In 2022, migrants accounted for 4.7% of the world labor force, with about 64.9 million migrant women participating in destination countries' labor markets (ILO, 2024: 8). However, significant gender gaps persist: the employment-to-population ratio for migrant women was about 48.1% compared to 72.8% for migrant men, reflecting barriers to labor market access (2024: 8). Regions such as Eastern Europe, Northern America, and sub-Saharan Africa show migrant women's participation below their non-migrant counterparts, suggesting regional variation in labor market integration (2024: 33).

Empirical evidence from South Africa's official statistics reveals stark gender disparities in labor force participation among migrants. According to Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) data, the proportion of employed female immigrants (18.2%) was substantially lower than that of male immigrants (45.8%) in 2022, highlighting persistent barriers to employment access for migrant women. Female migrant labor force participation is also lower than that of internal migrants, with broader patterns showing that women are more likely to be economically inactive or discouraged jobseekers compared to men, even when

actively seeking paid work (Stats SA, 2022: 15). Zinatsa and Saurombe's (2022a, 2022b) studies, using qualitative research underscore the structural obstacles that constrain migrant women's access to the labor market. Studies of tied migrant women—who migrate primarily as dependents of male partners—demonstrate that despite possessing human capital, many tied migrant women experience labor market immobility, informality, and precarious employment conditions in South Africa. These labor market subjectivities are shaped by intersecting dynamics of gender, migrant status, and racial exclusion, which restrict formal employment opportunities, even when legal entitlement exists.

Regionally focused empirical work shows that labor force participation among African female migrants in Gauteng—South Africa's economic hub—is closely linked to socio-demographic characteristics, including education, marital status, and country of origin. Secondary data analysis of the 2001 and 2011 Population Censuses revealed that the majority of female migrants working in Gauteng come from Zimbabwe, hold secondary education, and are actively engaged in the labor force (Mfolo, 2023).

Types of work, occupations, and sectors

Data on sectoral employment of migrants highlight structural patterns in occupational segregation. Stats SA migration reports show that migrant workers in South Africa are concentrated in private households (18.4%), followed by construction and wholesale/retail trade, with variations in employment across sectors shaping men's and women's different labor market opportunities (Stats SA, 2024a, 2024b). Female migrants are disproportionately found in jobs within private households, a sector historically dominated by domestic work and care labor, suggesting a gendered occupational segregation reinforced by labor demand patterns (Stats SA, 2023: 30).

Academic theses focusing on specific provinces provide further evidence that informal and low-skilled work is the dominant form of employment for African female migrants. In Gauteng province, the largest share of African female migrants is employed in the informal sector as domestic workers or related helpers, underlining the concentration of migrant women in low-wage and casual occupations (Mfolo, 2023). Additionally, qualitative research into Zimbabwean women migrants working in the hospitality industry in South Africa reveals that many migrant women accept precarious, low-paid jobs in restaurants and related services. These occupations are characterized by low and irregular wages, long working hours, and unstable employment conditions—features typical of precarious labor markets that offer limited security or advancement (Muzeza, 2023).

Working conditions

Empirical literature (see Hlatshwayo, 2019; Baison, 2021; Johnson, 2022) consistently documents precarious working conditions faced by migrant women in South Africa.

Domestic service—a major source of employment for many migrant women—is often informal and poorly regulated, exposing workers to exploitation, lack of labor rights protection and unsafe conditions. Studies focusing on migrant domestic workers, such as Basotho women crossing the Lesotho–South Africa border, illustrate how the absence of formal support structures and union representation increases vulnerability, particularly for undocumented workers. These conditions magnify the risk of exploitation and socio-economic insecurity for migrant women engaged in domestic labor (Chakawa, 2025).

Quantitative statistics further show that gender disparities in employment extend to both internal and international migrant groups, with migrant women showing higher rates of economic inactivity and lower rates of employment relative to male counterparts. These disparities reflect structural barriers in labor market access and highlight how working conditions for migrant women are shaped by gendered labor market dynamics, documentation status, and social obligations that influence job-search behavior and participation (Stats SA, 2022).

Broader work in South Africa also points to the importance of coping and adaptation mechanisms in understanding migrant women's labor experiences. Survey-based research indicates that migrant women may accept any available job role—even those well below their skill level—to secure economic survival, in the face of non-acknowledgment of their qualifications due to strict labor policies and limited opportunities in the formal sector (Ncube et al., 2020).

Existing research often treats migrant women as a homogeneous group, failing to consider important subgroups such as country of origin, legal status (documented vs undocumented), educational level, and duration of stay in South Africa. This study fills this gap, because this information masks crucial differences in labor outcomes and barriers. By incorporating survey data with in-depth interviews, the study captured both patterns and lived experiences, enriching interpretation. The study also reflects the resilience of migrant women, despite the challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Social science researchers (including Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Babbie, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Beyene and Dinbabo, 2019) prefer the use of quantitative and qualitative research to determine whether there are differences, convergence, or some combination (Creswell, 2009: 213). This study employed a mixed-methods research design integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of migrant women's labor force participation in South Africa. The quantitative component consisted of a structured survey administered to 201 migrant women; however, the limitation is that it does not capture the diversity of migrant women across provinces and sectors. This survey collected socio-demographic information, labor force status, employment sector, working conditions, and perceptions of barriers to formal employment. Survey instruments were developed drawing on established labor and migration questionnaires used

in South African contexts, adapted to reflect the specific experiences of migrant women. For the qualitative component, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposive sub-sample of survey respondents to explore subjective experiences of labor market integration. Additionally, to contextualize findings and incorporate expert perspectives, five key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with experts from the Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa (SIHMA), one government official, an employer of migrant women, and a religious leader engaged in migrant support. KIIs are recognized as valuable for providing macro-level insights on policy, institutional practices, and community-level support mechanisms affecting migrant livelihoods (e.g., methodological approaches in broader migration studies).

Participants for both survey and interviews were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling; because of that, results cannot be generalized to all migrant women. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative interview transcripts were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to labor force engagement. The integration of these methods enabled a robust empirical assessment of migrant women's labor market participation in South Africa, combining breadth with depth.

FINDINGS, DATA, AND ANALYSIS

Participants' background and demographic information

South Africa possesses a complicated migration history determined by historical, economic, and political aspects (Badewa and Dinbabo, 2023; Sithole et al., 2023). It is evident that since the fall of apartheid, migrants have chosen South Africa as their preferred destination on the continent, often traveling via other SADC (Southern African Development Community) countries. The main sending countries are Angola, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal (Crush and Williams, 2002; Dinbabo and Carciotto, 2015).

The empirical analysis clearly shows that most of the participants were between 26 and 35 years old (39.3%) and between 36 and 45 years (36.32%). A smaller proportion of participants were aged 18–25 years (10.95%) and 46–59 years (9.45%), while only 3.48% were 60 years or older. According to Stats SA's records based on Census 2001, 2011, and 2022, in 2001, the median age of women migrants was 37 years, whereas in 2011, the median age of women migrants had dropped slightly, which was 30 years. Based on the information obtained from Stats SA (2022), the median age of women migrants had increased slightly to 33 years in 2022. Besides, most participants had attained primary education (63.2%), followed by those with secondary education (21.9%). About 14.4% had attained tertiary education, while a very small number (0.5%) could only read and write. This configuration of educational levels has substantive implications for socio-economic outcomes: educational attainment is closely linked to labor market prospects, income potential, and health outcomes, with those holding tertiary qualifications typically

exhibiting better employment rates and improved health indicators relative to less-educated counterparts. The field data also indicated that most of the participants were either married or in a union (40.3%), followed closely by single individuals (35.8%). Participants who were widowed accounted for 12.9%, while those divorced or separated made up 10.4%.

The demographic information included individuals from various nationalities, such as Ethiopians (20.9%), followed by Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) nationals (18.9%), and Zimbabweans (15.9%). Other represented nationalities included migrant women from Somalia (9%), Eritrea (8.46%), Nigeria (5%), Cameroon (5%), Mozambique (1.99%), Malawi (1.5%), Congo Brazzaville (1%), Lesotho (1%), and Rwanda (0.5%). According to different studies, including Crush and Williams (2002) and Dinbabo and Carciotto (2015), migrants have traveled to South Africa from nearly all other African countries, since the fall of apartheid.

Table 1: Background and demographic information

Variable	Category	N (%)
Age	18-25 years	22 (10.95%)
	26-35 years	79 (39.3%)
	36-45 years	73 (36.32%)
	46-59 years	19 (9.45%)
	60 years and above	7 (3.48%)
Education	Know how to read and write	1 (0.5%)
	Primary	127 (63.2%)
	Secondary	44 (21.9%)
	Tertiary	29 (14.4%)
Marital status	Single	72 (35.8%)
	Married/in union	81 (40.3%)
	Divorced/Separated	21 (10.4%)
	Widowed	26 (12.9%)
Nationality/Country	Zimbabwe	32 (15.9%)
	DRC	38 (18.9%)
	Nigeria	10 (5%)
	Cameroon	10 (5%)
	Ethiopia	42 (20.9%)
	Somalia	18 (9%)
	Eritrea	17(8.46%)
	Malawi	3(1.5%)
	Mozambique	4(1.99%)
	Congo Brazzaville	2(1%)
	Lesotho	2(1%)
	Rwanda	1(0.5%)

Source: Author's field survey (2025)

Migrant women’s status in South Africa

South Africa hosts a large number of refugees and asylum seekers, especially those who fled war-torn and politically unstable nations, including Somalia, DRC, Congo, Rwanda, and Ethiopia (Nzabamwita and Dinbabo, 2022; Sithole et al., 2023). These are people who leave their home countries to seek safety and protection. In this study, the majority of respondents were either asylum seekers or refugees, jointly constituting over 52% of the sample. Fewer respondents held either permanent residence or a relevant visa, accounting for 12.9% and 19.9% respectively. A notable portion—14.9%—selected “Undocumented” indicating that they were residing in South Africa without the necessary authorization from the Department of Home Affairs (DHA).

Table 2: Migrant women’s status in South Africa

Women’s Status	Frequency	Percentage
Refugee	51	25.4
Visa holder	40	19.9
Permanent resident	26	12.9
Undocumented	30	14.9
Asylum seeker	54	26.9
Total	201	100.0

Source: Author’s field survey (2025)

Duration of stay in South Africa

The data indicated that a significant majority of respondents (87.6%) have resided in South Africa for more than 12 months, suggesting a relatively well-established population within the sample. This was further underscored by the small proportions of participants who have been in the country for shorter periods: 9% for 6–12 months, 3% for 3–6 months, and just 0.5% for less than 3 months, out of a total sample size of 201 individuals. These findings point toward a community with extended engagement in the South African context, which may have implications for issues such as integration, access to services, and social inclusion.

Research on migrant settlement patterns supports the idea that longer durations of stay are often associated with greater degrees of social integration, language acquisition, and economic stability. For instance, Chikanda et al. (2020) argue that migrants who have remained in South Africa for longer periods tend to develop more robust support networks, gain better access to employment opportunities, and navigate institutional systems more effectively than newly arrived individuals. This aligns with the current findings, as the dominant presence of long-term residents in the sample may reflect a population that has begun to solidify its place within South African society.

Moreover, the low percentage of respondents who have been in the country for less than 12 months suggests limited recent inflows or possibly that the study captured a population that had already undergone initial resettlement. This could be indicative of a saturation point in migration for the surveyed group. According to Vearey (2016), studies on migrant populations often underrepresent newly arrived individuals due to their precarious living conditions, lack of formal documentation, and mobility, all of which can restrict their participation in research. The implications of this data are particularly relevant in policy and program design, as the needs and challenges faced by recent arrivals can differ markedly from those who have been in the country for longer. While long-term residents may seek pathways to permanent residency or integration, newer migrants often face acute challenges related to housing, employment, and legal status (De Haas, 2010).

Table 3: Migrant women's stay in South Africa

Time Frame	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 3 months	1	0.5
3 to 6 months	6	3.0
7 to 12 months	18	9.0
Over 12 months	176	87.5
Total	201	100.0

Source: Author's field survey (2025)

Employment rate

Many migrants move primarily for work opportunities—either to escape poverty or to remit income back to families in their home countries (Dinbabo and Carciotto, 2015; Dinbabo and Badewa, 2020). This high employment rate among migrants reflects patterns commonly discussed in migration literature, where economic motivations are a primary driver of migration (Castles et al., 2014). As such, a high labor force participation rate (like the 82.6% indicated) is not surprising.

The field data shows that 82.6% of migrants are employed, while 17.4% are not working. The unemployed group reflected on structural and systemic barriers, including legal restrictions on work for asylum seekers or undocumented migrants, language barriers, non-recognition of qualifications, lack of local work experience, discrimination or xenophobia, and gender dynamics, where migrant women may be more likely to remain unemployed (Dustmann et al., 2016). According to the data presented in Table 4, 82.6% indicated that they work, while 17.4% stated that they do not work.

Table 4: Employment Rate

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	166	82.6
No	35	17.4
Total	201	100.0

Source: Author's field survey (2025)

The study examines how participants' documentation status relates to their employment situation. The data show that 81% of the asylum seekers/refugees are employed. Visa holders (85%) have a better chance of getting a job; 86.7% of undocumented migrants are employed, and 80.8% of migrants with permanent residence status are also employed. The literature demonstrates that a female migrant's documentation status fundamentally dictates her employment reality because of the intersection with gendered and racialized barriers. Whether trapped by restrictive "dependent" visas or the total legal exclusion of being undocumented, these women are systematically funneled into informal, isolated, and highly feminized sectors—such as domestic work and elder care—where they face severe "brain waste" and professional deskilling. Ultimately, this lack of secure legal status strips them of regulatory protections and creates an invisible, precarious work environment where employers can weaponize the threat of deportation, locking migrant women into cycles of economic exploitation, substandard wages, and heightened vulnerability to workplace harassment and violence (Mawire and Mokoena, 2025).

Table 5: Cross-tabulation of legal status by employment status

Legal/Migration Status	Employed (n)	Not Working (n)	Total (N)	Employment Rate (%)
Asylum seeker/ refugee	85	20	105	81.0%
Visa holder	34	6	40	85.0%
Undocumented	26	4	30	86.7%
Permanent resident	21	5	26	80.8%
Total	166	35	201	100%

Source: Author's field survey (2025)

Employment

The field data clearly indicates that informal self-employment is the most common work situation, representing 40.4% of respondents. Working without a contract (28.9%) is more common than working with formal contracts in either the public or private sectors. Only 6.6% of respondents work for a public organization with a contract, and 18.7% for a private company with a contract. A small proportion (5.4%) legally own and operate their own businesses. The data also imply that a significant proportion of the workforce is engaged in informal or uncontracted work, which may indicate, on the one hand, economic instability and a lack of legal protections, or, on

the other hand, a thriving informal economy. Only about 38.3% are in more formal, legally contracted employment (public or private sectors, and legal business owners).

In South Africa, asylum seekers and irregular or undocumented migrants participate in the informal economy as a survival strategy (Nkomo, 2019). Women work in the beauty industry as hairdressers, as domestic workers, and in sex work (Richter et al., 2014; Walker and Oliveira, 2015). The current study also confirms that undocumented migrants participate in the informal economy. Informal self-employment being the most common work situation for migrants (33.3%) aligns with literature that identifies informality as both a necessity and a vulnerability. As noted by Palmer (2017), many migrants turn to informal self-employment due to barriers in accessing formal employment, such as lack of legal documentation, recognition of qualifications, language barriers, and discrimination. Informal self-employment often lacks legal protection, social security, or access to credit and market opportunities. These migrants are effectively “working for themselves” but in a constrained environment, shaped by limited access to formal opportunities and systemic exclusion.

Nearly a quarter of respondents work without a contract, which highlights the precarity and exploitation risks that characterize many migrant work experiences. As Anderson (2010) discusses, the absence of contracts can mean undeclared work, lack of labor protections, and power imbalances that leave migrants vulnerable to wage theft, long hours, or sudden dismissal. Employers may exploit migrants’ immigration status or their lack of legal recourse to avoid formal obligations. Only a small share of migrants (public: 5.5%, private: 15.4%) are employed with formal contracts, especially in the public sector. These findings echo studies by Causa et al. (2021), showing that migrants face limited upward mobility and underrepresentation in secure, high-quality jobs. Formal employment often requires documented status, proof of education, language proficiency, and social networks—barriers many migrants cannot easily overcome. A very small proportion of migrants legally own and operate businesses, which reflects both entrepreneurial potential and institutional obstacles. While some literature (for example, Kloosterman and Rath, 2001) praises migrant entrepreneurship as a driver of innovation and urban economic growth, others (for example, Jones et al., 2006) warn of self-exploitation and the marginal sectors in which these businesses often operate. Regulatory hurdles, lack of access to finance, and discrimination can keep migrant-owned businesses in low-revenue or unstable sectors.

Table 6: The work situation

Work Situation	Frequency	Percentage
I work for a public organization with a work contract	11	6.6
I work for a private company/person with a work contract	31	18.7
I have my own company/business with all the required legal papers	9	5.4
I work for a company/person without a work contract	48	28.9
I work on my own informally (I sell things/I offer my services to multiple people)	67	40.4
Total	166	100.0

Source: Author's field survey (2025)

How migrant women get work

Studies show that migrants with more “bridging” social capital (ties with non-migrants, or with more established, formal actors) are more likely to also use formal job search methods, and to have better outcomes (higher wages, job quality) (Lancee and Sarrasin, 2015). Strong networks (especially “close ties”) improve the likelihood of getting job offers via networks (Goel et al., 2020). The most common method migrant women get work is presented as follows: the majority (62%) found work via fellow migrants, suggesting strong reliance on social networks within migrant communities. Many studies find that friends, relatives, and co-nationals are primary sources of job leads, information about work, and referrals. In South Africa, for instance, research on Zimbabwean migrants in Cape Town found that referrals and vouching within migrant networks were key in opening up jobs (especially in the restaurant sector) (Silubonde, 2014). Similarly, undocumented Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg used social ties to overcome precarity in private security jobs (Singh, 2019).

Thus, the 62% figure aligns well with the broader consensus that social networks constitute the primary channel for many migrants in entering work, especially in less formal or segmented labor markets. The fact that 18.1% used private recruitment agencies and 5.4% used national employment agencies suggests that formal intermediaries play a secondary role in job placement for many migrants. This pattern is consistent with literature pointing out that formal agencies may require credentials, processes, documentation, or fees that are less accessible to migrants (Ahmed, 2011). Private agencies are more flexible or less stringent in screening; so, migrants might access them more than public agencies. Some studies show private recruiters working through informal networks or ethnic networks themselves (Bloch and McKay, 2015). About 8.4% secured jobs via websites (digital platforms) and 6% through their own efforts (applications, walking in, etc.); this suggests that formal impersonal channels still play a small role in migrant job finding. In the broader

literature, use of online job boards or websites is more common in advanced labor markets, but migrants often lack local ties or digital literacy, which constrains uptake (Ahmed, 2011). Impersonal formal methods (like agency and public offices) are often dominated by locals with strong local credentials; migrants might be disadvantaged in competing through such channels (Ahmed, 2011).

Table 7: How migrant women get work

Access to work	Frequency	Percentage
Via fellow migrants	103	62.0
Via private recruitment agency	30	18.1
Via national employment agency	9	5.4
By own means	10	6.0
Via website	14	8.4
Total	166	100.0

Source: Author's field survey (2025)

A South African Department of Employment and Labor (DEL) official in a KII confirmed that migrant women are predominantly concentrated in three areas: domestic work, the hospitality sector (restaurants and hotels), and informal retail or micro-trading.

The vast majority of migrant women remain trapped in the informal economy—specifically domestic work and informal trading—where employers operate largely off the grid, away from statutory protections, and the concentration is largely driven by lower barriers to entry. (Participant from the South African DEL Office).

Workplace issues

The survey results revealed that 57 respondents (34,3%) did not report any workplace issues, making this the largest single group. This finding is important, as it suggests that while some workers experience challenges, a notable proportion perceives their work environment as relatively stable. However, the majority—nearly three-quarters of respondents—reported at least one workplace issue, which highlights the persistence of labor-related challenges in South Africa. The most prevalent issue was the lack of rest or annual leave; this was linked to unreasonable and compulsory after-hour work, which often involved excessive hours and violent employer behavior (26.5%); this affected more than one in four respondents. This aligns with existing literature, which shows that South African workers, particularly in low-wage sectors, often face excessive working hours with limited leave entitlements (Bhorat et al., 2020). Such practices undermine work-life balance and may contribute to fatigue, reduced productivity, and poor mental health.

Poor safety standards and health risks also emerged as major concerns. This is consistent with studies indicating that occupational health and safety compliance in

South Africa is uneven, with higher risks in industries such as mining, agriculture, and construction (Clarke et al., 2019). Inadequate safety measures not only expose workers to accidents and long-term health hazards but also reflect gaps in the enforcement of workplace regulations. Less frequently reported issues, such as forced labor, workplace violence, and contract violations are nonetheless severe. The literature highlights that while such cases are relatively rare, they are often underreported due to fear of retaliation or lack of awareness of labor rights (Crush et al., 2024). Even at low prevalence, these issues represent serious human rights concerns.

Overall, the findings underscore that while some workplaces in South Africa appear to function without major challenges, the majority of workers face at least one form of exploitation or labor rights infringement. This reflects broader systemic issues in the South African labor market, including weak enforcement of labor laws, informal employment practices, and socio-economic inequalities.

Access to workplace leave benefits

The findings suggest that workplace leave benefits for migrants remain limited, with the majority of respondents excluded from access. Over half (68.1%) of respondents indicated that they do not benefit from any form of workplace leave, a figure that aligns with literature showing that migrant workers are often excluded from formal labor protections and benefits due to precarious employment, informal contracts, or discriminatory workplace practices (Crush et al., 2024).

Among those who do have access, sick leave emerges as the most common type of leave, selected by 17.4% of respondents. This trend reflects existing studies that show that while sick leave is sometimes extended to migrant workers, it is often limited in duration or informally negotiated rather than guaranteed by contract (Benach et al., 2010). Annual leave and maternity/paternity leave appear in only 10.4% and 8.5% of responses, respectively, and these are often accessible only in combination with sick leave rather than as standalone entitlements. This suggests that formalized entitlements such as paid annual leave and parental leave are less accessible to migrants, consistent with reports that migrants—especially in low-wage or informal sectors—face significant barriers to claiming these benefits (Socha-Dietrich and Dumont, 2021).

The combination of patterns provide further evidence of inequality. For example, while some workers benefit from multiple leave types (such as the 5.5% who have access to sick, maternity, and annual leave), these cases are rare and likely tied to employment in more formalized sectors. By contrast, only a handful reported maternity leave alone (0.5%) or annual leave alone (1.5%), underscoring how isolated access to these rights is uncommon for migrants.

In summary, the data reflects a dual reality also noted in international research: while a small portion of migrants employed in more formal or regulated environments may access a range of leave benefits, the majority remain excluded, with little to no entitlement. This exclusion reinforces broader vulnerabilities migrants face in the

workplace, limiting their ability to balance health, family responsibilities, and rest, and exacerbating existing inequalities between migrant and non-migrant workers.

The employment official confirmed that migrant women are being exploited:

The most rampant violations we find regarding migrant women are no leaves, breaches of the National Minimum Wage Act and the Sectoral Determination for Domestic Workers. Employers routinely don't give migrant women leaves and they underpay them, knowing they are hesitant to complain. We also see massive non-compliance with the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act (COIDA) and the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF)—employers simply do not register them. Long hours, lack of overtime pay, and no formal contracts are standard infractions in these audits.

Access to medical insurance

According to Crush and Tawodzera (2014), migrants in Southern Africa encounter exclusion from formal health systems due to legal, financial, and administrative challenges. Similarly, research by Vearey (2016) emphasizes that the absence of medical insurance significantly limits migrants' ability to access healthcare services, particularly in cases of emergencies or chronic illness management. The limited insurance coverage among migrants can be attributed to precarious employment conditions, undocumented legal status, and the high cost of private healthcare. Studies further suggest that most migrants rely on out-of-pocket payments, community support networks, or public healthcare facilities, which are often overstretched and under-resourced (Hunter-Adams and Rother, 2017). This creates a situation where migrants are left vulnerable to untreated illnesses and long-term health inequalities.

The findings revealed that the majority of migrants (74.1%) do not have access to medical or health insurance, while only a small fraction (8.5%) reported being covered. This situation is consistent with existing literature, which highlights that migrants often face systemic barriers to healthcare access, including lack of insurance coverage. In conclusion, the data illustrates a significant gap in healthcare coverage for migrants, aligning with broader literature that stresses the urgent need for policy reforms to improve access to affordable health insurance and inclusive healthcare services.

Underutilization of professional skills due to non-recognition of qualifications

Recent scholarship on migrant women in South Africa indicates that underutilization of professional skills is closely linked to the non-recognition of foreign qualifications and structural barriers in the labor market. Migrants with overseas credentials often must undergo complex, lengthy, and costly evaluation processes with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA); yet many employers still fail to recognize or value these qualifications, thereby limiting skilled employment opportunities for migrant women despite their formal training (Crush et al., 2005). This non-recognition

contributes to the phenomenon of deskilling or brain waste, where highly qualified migrant women are channeled into precarious, low-skilled, and poorly paid jobs that do not reflect their educational backgrounds, reinforcing gendered and xenophobic labor market segmentation. Studies further show that prejudices against foreign education and bias in recruitment practices exacerbate the exclusion of professional migrant women from appropriate roles, deepening economic marginalization and underemployment (Dietz et al., 2015). These dynamics not only underutilize valuable human capital but also constrain the broader socio-economic contributions migrant women could make to South Africa's economy.

The qualitative data obtained shows that even if migrant women are qualified and have professional skills, their qualifications are non-recognized. These participants spoke candidly about their experiences:

I am a graduate of nursing in Zimbabwe, but when I came to South Africa, I couldn't get a job in my qualification. Now I am working as a salesperson in a boutique for survival. (Participant from Zimbabwe).

I studied my Master's and PhD in South Africa, and I apply for positions in my area of study. And most of the time, I will be short-listed for interview[s], but I don't get employed, because I am not South African citizen. (Participant from Ethiopia).

Informal trading as a vehicle for independence

This theme echoes the literature that positions informal trading as a critical livelihood strategy for the unemployed in contexts of high formal unemployment. Informal trading provides direct income generation and reduces reliance on unstable formal job markets, enabling traders to exercise economic agency and contribute to household welfare (Willemse, 2011; Rogan, 2013). This is corroborated by Participant 9:

Since I began selling goods on the street, I am able to support my family without waiting for someone to hire me. I pay school fees and buy groceries from my earnings. (Participant 9, Somali woman).

At first, it was survival. But now, I am saving to expand—to buy more stock and maybe rent a small stall. (Participant 10, Congolese woman).

Although the informal sector is often labeled “survivalist,” research shows that many traders hold entrepreneurial aspirations beyond immediate subsistence. Informal enterprises, especially in the street food sector, express desires to grow and innovate, challenging perceptions that they are only temporary survival strategies (Williams and Kedir, 2019). According to this participant:

Before, I had to wait for job opportunities that never came, Now, I decide when and how much I work. (Participant 8, Congolese woman).

Respondents frequently highlight autonomy as a central benefit of informal trading. Literature on informal economies points out that traders exercise individual agency and self-determination, especially where formal employment opportunities are scarce, making informal trading a route to self-managed economic activity (Willemse, 2011). This participant expressed her concerns:

The city officials sometimes move us on, and we have no permits or secure place to trade. I worry about fines and confiscations. (Participant 9, Somali woman).

Despite gains in autonomy and income, informal traders contend with structural constraints, such as regulatory hostility and lack of formal recognition. This reflects broader findings that poor policy environments and lack of supportive infrastructure can restrain the capacity of traders to fully leverage informal trading as a sustainable vehicle for independence (Willemse, 2011; Tshuma and Jari, 2013).

Interventions: NGOs, employers, and FBOs

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs) are increasingly recognized in the literature as critical grassroots actors, especially in contexts where migrants distrust formal institutions (Clarke and Ware, 2015). Churches' role as trusted spaces aligns with studies showing that relational and cultural legitimacy is central to women's empowerment. NGOs play a significant role in bridging the gap between policy intentions and lived realities. Many participants acknowledged that NGO-led training and advocacy programs contributed positively to their empowerment journey.

SA signed all conventions related to the protection of migrants. The constitution of SA also protects the rights of everyone, including migrant women. Besides that, there is [the] Immigration Act, which protects all migrants. There is also the Refugees Act and other various Acts and policies that protect the rights of migrants. In practice though, there are problems. You see, migrant women's rights are not protected. For example: when migrants approach the healthcare facilities, they are asked for ID or documents and a lot of other barriers, which limit their access to important services. So basically, there are quite a number of legal instruments, but the application is a challenge. (Expert 1 from SIHMA, Cape Town).

Related to opportunities for women migrants, another expert from SIHMA pointed out:

There are opportunities for women in general due to the initiatives related to reducing gender inequalities. But the opportunities are primarily for SA citizens, and a smaller chance of documented migrants could benefit. We see women helping their families and sending remittances, but there are a lot of works to be done when it comes to integrating migrant women in empowerment programs and projects. There are many organizations that support migrants. For example: in Scalabrini Centre, there are programs (hospitality courses, language and computer skill training) for migrants. (Expert 2 from SIHMA, Cape Town).

Related to migrant women's participation in the labor force, an employer and a church elder commented:

Most migrant women are concentrated in the informal sectors, because a lot of them are undocumented and which keeps them as disadvantaged. Most of them are domestic workers, restaurant waitresses, and [run] informal businesses. We support them financially and guide them how to get and renew their documents. (Church elder, Cape Town).

During the recent joint task force blitzes, inspectors act like we are running human trafficking rings. They point to missing UIF registrations or lack of written contracts for casual weekend staff. But the reality of the hospitality sector is that it's highly transient. Many migrant women use false identity numbers or asylum documents to get the job, because they are desperate. We don't have the biometric tools of Home Affairs to verify if a green ID book or an asylum paper is 100% genuine. When the Department finds a violation, the blame is placed entirely on the employer, ignoring the fact that the regulatory system itself is broken and confusing. (Employer, Cape Town).

The integration and socio-economic survival of migrant women in South Africa is heavily reliant on a complex support framework driven by institutional advocacy, faith-based networks, and localized employer dynamics. Scholars argue that South Africa's immigration policies systematically neglect gendered realities, leaving female migrants to navigate severe structural barriers when entering the labor force (Farley, 2019). To bypass this state-level exclusion, SIHMA and the Scalabrini Centre actively publish critical policy research and implement targeted vocational initiatives, such as the *Women's Platform*, which provides language and skills development to help women transition out of economic precarity (Assenza, 2019). In tandem, FBOs serve as vital alternative safety nets, offering legal counsel, entrepreneurial support, and essential psycho-social care to combat the isolation experienced by irregular migrant women, especially in instances of domestic service (Nicholson, 2018; Makhata and

Masango, 2021). However, the daily labor reality for these women heavily depends on their employers. While restrictive national frameworks cause reluctance on the parts of many businesses and households to formalize contracts for refugees or asylum seekers (Nyabvudzi and Chinyamurindi, 2020), qualitative evidence shows that individual, sympathetic employers frequently operate through informal networks to shield female workers from xenophobic sweeps and extreme systemic exploitation (Baison, 2021).

CONCLUSION

At the global level, the protection of migrant women's labor rights is grounded in international human rights and labor standards frameworks. The convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) obliges states to eliminate discrimination against women in employment and ensure substantive gender equality in law and practice (UN Women, 1979). The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) further establishes non-discrimination and basic labor protections for migrant workers irrespective of sex (Pécoud and De Guchteneire, 2006). Complementing these are key International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, including Convention No. 97 and No. 143 on migrant workers, Convention No. 100 on equal remuneration, Convention No. 156 on workers with family responsibilities, and Convention No. 189 on domestic workers, which is particularly significant given the concentration of migrant women in domestic and care work (ILO, 1949; 1975; 1951; 1981; 2011).

This study examined the labor market participation and outcomes of migrant women in South Africa using empirical evidence. The findings indicate that migrant women are an important yet structurally disadvantaged segment of the labor force. While migrant women demonstrate relatively high rates of labor force participation, they are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, informal, and insecure forms of employment. Compared to native-born women, migrant women face higher unemployment risks, lower earnings, and limited access to employment benefits and labor protections.

The analysis further shows that human capital characteristics such as education and work experience do not translate into equivalent labor market returns for migrant women, suggesting the presence of systemic barriers including discrimination, legal constraints related to migration status, and limited access to social and economic networks. These challenges are compounded by gendered norms and caregiving responsibilities, which further restrict migrant women's employment opportunities and upward mobility. Overall, the evidence underscores that migrant women contribute meaningfully to South Africa's economy but remain marginalized within the labor market. Addressing these disparities is not only a matter of social justice but also essential for inclusive economic growth and labor market efficiency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the empirical evidence presented in this study, it is clear that migrant women in South Africa's labor force continue to face structural inequalities shaped by gender, migration status, and labor market segmentation. The findings highlight migrant women's concentration in low-paid and insecure work and higher level of economic vulnerability. These patterns point to gaps not only in labor market outcomes but also in the effectiveness of existing policy and institutional protections. Against this backdrop, this study proposes targeted, gender-responsive and migration-sensitive interventions aimed at improving labor market inclusion, strengthening legal protections, and advancing decent work opportunities for migrant women in South Africa.

Based on the findings, several policy and institutional recommendations emerge:

- **Strengthening legal and labor protections:** Policies should ensure that migrant women are protected under labor laws. Improved enforcement of minimum wage legislation, workplace safety standards, and anti-discrimination measures is critical, particularly in sectors with high concentrations of migrant women.
- **Improving access to decent work and formal employment:** Targeted labor market interventions, such as skills recognition programs, job placement services, and support for transitions from informal to formal employment can help migrant women access better-quality jobs that match their qualifications.
- **Facilitating skills recognition and training:** Mechanisms for recognizing foreign qualifications and prior work experience should be strengthened. In addition, tailored training and upskilling programs can improve migrant women's employability and earning potential.
- **Enhancing access to social services and childcare:** Expanding access to affordable childcare, healthcare, and social protection would reduce care-related constraints and enable migrant women to participate more fully and productively in the labor market.
- **Promoting inclusive migration and labor policies:** Migration policy should be better integrated with labor market planning, with explicit consideration of gender dimensions. Data collection efforts should also be improved to better capture the experiences of migrant women and inform evidence-based policymaking.

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Human Capital Flight: The *Japa* Phenomenon and Nigeria's Economic Growth Assessment

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Abstract

This study assesses the economic impact of the *Japa* phenomenon on Nigeria from 1981 to 2024. The research was conducted to evaluate how mass migration and the resulting brain drain affect national productivity and whether worker remittances provide a sufficient economic dividend to offset labor losses. Using an ex-post-facto research design, the study utilizes a Vector Error Correction Model to analyze the long-run and short-run relationships between gross domestic product and key variables, including net migration, workers' remittances, foreign direct investment, and exchange rates. Empirical analysis reveals that net migration exerts a significant negative impact on Nigeria's economic performance, suggesting that the exodus of skilled professionals depletes the country's productive capacity. While home remittances contribute positively to the economy ($\beta = 0.2114\$$), their long-run impact remains statistically insignificant ($p = 0.1812\$$) in offsetting labor losses. The findings also indicate that the intensity of this migration syndrome is driven by deteriorating domestic push factors such as unemployment and economic hardship coupled with increasingly attractive international pull factors. These results suggest that the *Japa* syndrome represents a critical structural challenge necessitating immediate and drastic policy intervention. The study highlights that relying on remittance inflows alone is insufficient to compensate for the loss of human capital. Consequently, these findings are vital for policymakers to prioritize strategies that accelerate domestic economic growth, enhance employability, and improve the business environment to retain talent. Strengthening these areas is essential to transition from a "run-for-your-life" migration mindset toward sustainable national development.

Keywords: Brain drain, remittance flows, diaspora dividend, labor channel, technology transfer, Vector Error Correction Model, Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Human mobility has emerged as a defining characteristic of the twenty-first-century global economy, reshaping the socio-economic landscapes of both sending and receiving nations. In the Global South, migration is frequently driven by a pursuit of better economic opportunities, political stability, and improved quality of life. However, for Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, this mobility has taken on an increasingly urgent and desperate character, colloquially known as the *Japa* syndrome. Derived from the Yoruba language, the term translates to “fleeing” or “escaping” from a state of entrapment, danger, or desperation (Liu, 2023; Okonkwo, 2024). The intensity and cultural significance of this movement have gained such global prominence that *Japa* was officially recognized as a 2024 entry in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Distinct from historical patterns of circular labor mobility aimed at educational advancement with the intent to return, the contemporary wave is characterized by a “run-for-your-life” mindset that professionals and youth increasingly view as a permanent exit strategy (Okonkwo, 2024).

This desperation is rooted in a deteriorating domestic environment where systemic push factors including hyper-inflation, persistent unemployment, structural insecurity, and macro-monetary instability have converged to create what scholars describe as a “rock-bottom” socio-economic condition (Bello, 2023; Olumayo and Abiri, 2023; Nwobodo, 2024). Consequently, individuals seek “green pastures” for basic survival rather than merely “greener pastures” for incremental career progression (Abdul-Maliq et al., 2024). These domestic push factors are further intensified by aggressive international pull factors, as developed economies in the Global North actively recruit Nigerian professionals to fill structural labor deficits created by aging populations (Smith, 2024; *Vanguard*, 2024a, 2024b). This mass exodus is particularly disastrous in the health and education sectors; for instance, Nigerian universities reportedly lose up to 60 percent of their senior academic staff to brain drain within five-year cycles, while the national healthcare system faces a structural crisis following the emigration of over 16,000 doctors (Lawal, 2025; Zakir, 2025).

The macroeconomic implications of the *Japa* syndrome are multifaceted, reflecting a complex migration–development nexus. On the labor channel, the ceding of skilled labor represents a profound “brain drain” that depletes the domestic productive base, diminishes the quality of essential public services, and creates a severe deficit in national productivity (Abdul-Maliq et al., 2024). On the financial channel, however, the Nigerian economy has become increasingly dependent on diaspora inflows through workers' home remittances, which reached approximately US\$21 billion in 2022, effectively rivaling traditional revenue sources such as oil (PWC, 2022). This dynamic creates a fundamental policy dilemma: does the “diaspora dividend” of financial inflows provide a sufficient stimulus to compensate for the structural loss of expertise and youth productivity? Empirical evidence remains divided on this issue, with some studies pointing to the positive household

impacts of remittances, while others warn that human capital flight creates long-term structural dependencies and drains vital human resources (Adeseye, 2021; Abdul-Maliq et al., 2024).

This study contributes to the empirical literature by using a Vector Error Correction Model (VECM) to assess the impact of human mobility on the Nigerian economy over a 44-year period from 1981 to 2024. The primary objective is to determine the extent to which the *Japa* syndrome has affected Nigeria's economic growth, specifically evaluating whether the positive contributions of home remittances can offset the negative effects of net migration. Furthermore, the research analyzes the performance of key macroeconomic variables including capital formation, exports, imports, foreign direct investment, and the moderating role of the exchange rate to understand if the desperation to migrate is justified by a structural collapse in domestic productivity. By providing robust, evidence-based assessments, this paper aims to guide Nigerian policymakers in developing strategies to stem human capital flight, enhance domestic talent retention, and foster a more inclusive growth environment.

Globally, these push factors intersect with aggressive recruitment policies in the Global North such as the United Kingdom's Health and Care Worker Visa and Germany's skilled immigration legislation designed to offset labor shortages caused by aging demographics (OECD, 2023). Similar labor export dynamics occur in developing nations like India, the Philippines, Ghana, and Kenya; however, Nigeria's situation is distinct due to the rapid, concentrated depletion of essential workers without institutional frameworks to capture return mobility (World Bank, 2022, 2023).

Research gap

Despite the growing body of literature on migration and development, no empirical study to date has utilized a Vector Error Correction Model (VECM) over a 44-year longitudinal dataset (1981–2024) to simultaneously evaluate the offsetting dynamics of both the labor channel (net migration) and the financial channel (home remittances) on Nigeria's growth domestic product (GDP) growth. This study fills this empirical gap.

Research objectives

The study pursues the following objectives:

- a) To evaluate the long-run and short-run impacts of net migration (labor channel) on Nigeria's economic growth performance.
- b) To examine the extent to which workers' home remittances (financial channel) offset the economic losses induced by human capital flight.
- c) To evaluate the moderating influence of exchange rate volatility, capital formation, trade flows, and foreign direct investment on national productivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual framework

Japa: The word *Japa*, as described by Liu (2023), Abdul-Maliq et al. (2024), Okonkwo (2024), among others, means run away, elope, escape, or run to safety. While the word is of Yoruba origin, the phenomenon it describes mass migration of youth and professionals from developing to developed countries is a world-wide phenomenon.

Diaspora: This word has a Greek origin, *dia Speiro*, meaning to sow, scatter, or disperse. The word is often used to describe the Jews who live around the world as a result of their dispersion. In more recent and contemporary discourse, the word is used to describe tribes, races, or nationalities that have large populations of their citizens in other countries.

Workers' home remittances: Workers' home remittances (WHR) or home remittances, (HR) as they are also called are monies and other items of monetary value sent home by immigrants to relations back in their home countries (Buch and Kuckulenz, 2004; Abdul-Maliq, 2018; Ratha, 2025).

Diaspora dividend: This term describes collectively, the benefits (financial, material, and otherwise) that migrants bestow, confer, or attract to their home countries. It may also include other gains directly or indirectly from a country's citizens living abroad, such as the home remittances explained above, foreign direct or portfolio investments initiated, attracted, or facilitated by them or by acquaintances for the home countries, (Abdul-Maliq et al., 2024).

Greener pasture: This refers to a society perceived to be better or more favorable, attractive, or potentially offering greater opportunities than one's own present country or society of abode.

Green pasture: When someone reaches what can be described as rock-bottom level in their home society, especially in the socio-economic sense, any other society is deemed better than their own. That person is therefore looking for green, not greener pasture (Abdul-Maliq et al., 2024). It is like leaving a brown pasture to a green one.

Theoretical framework

While no single migration–economic growth theory exists per se, this study anchors its analysis in three theoretical paradigms: human capital theory (Becker, 1964), the new economics of labor migration (Stark and Bloom, 1985), and the brain drain vs. brain gain framework (Docquier and Rapoport, 2012). Human mobility influences national development through three primary channels.

- a) The labor channel: Grounded in Becker's (1964) human capital theory, this channel reflects the physical loss of skilled human capital. When experts and trained professionals emigrate, the ceding country suffers a structural deficit in aggregate productivity (Dafiel, 2025).
- b) The technology transfer channel: This refers to the expertise migrants bring to host countries. In the Nigerian context, this manifests primarily as an uncompensated "brain drain" in health, education, and engineering (Lawal, 2025; Zakir, 2025).
- c) The financial channel: Anchored in the new economics of labor migration (NELM) theory (Stark and Bloom, 1985), this operates through workers' home remittances (WHRs). These transfers act as private income safety nets for households; however, their macroeconomic growth impact depends on whether they are invested productively or spent on basic consumption (Afolabi and Osabuohien, 2023; Ratha, 2025).

Review of empirical studies

Empirical assessments of migration's impact on economic growth show conflicting results. Clemens (2014) argues that economic development increases the tendency to migrate until an economy reaches an upper middle-income threshold, as rising aspirations outpace domestic growth. In contrast, a study on Algeria using a VECM reported that the impact of migrant remittances was negative in both the short and long runs (Belmimoun et al., 2014). For Nigeria, the data is equally complex. Some researchers find a positive and significant relationship between remittances and GDP, noting that diaspora inflows reached US\$21 billion in 2022, effectively rivaling oil revenue in its contribution to the economy (Adeseye, 2021; PWC, 2022). However, recent quantitative studies conclude that the danger inherent in the *Japa* syndrome outweighs these financial gains (Umeh et al., 2024). The survey of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023) reveals that the perception of danger does not retard the migration mindset, confirming the assertion that *Japa* is a survivalist decision to escape domestic instability (Liu, 2023). Furthermore, the role of social media has altered the migration landscape, making the desire to *Japa* more intense than historical trends suggest (Seluman et al., 2024). Ultimately, while some identify beneficial effects of remittances, the predominant empirical view remains that human capital depletion negatively impacts domestic productivity (Borjas, 2019; Ngere et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design and source of data

This study adopts an ex-post-facto research design to assess the longitudinal impact of human mobility on the Nigerian economy. The analysis uses multivariate annual time-series data covering a 44-year period from 1981 to 2024. Secondary data were sourced from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI)

and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) database. This period was selected to capture multiple cycles of Nigerian migration, from the post-oil boom era to the contemporary *Japa* syndrome.

Model specification

The study is formulated within a standard economic growth framework where GDP serves as the proxy for economic growth and the primary dependent variable. The target independent variables are Net Migration (NM) and Home Remittances (HR). To ensure the model is robust and accounts for other macroeconomic drivers, several control variables are included—Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF), Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Exports (EXPRT), Imports (IMPRT), and the Exchange Rate (EXR) as a moderating variable.

The functional relationship of the growth model is specified as follows:

$$\text{GDP} = f(\text{HR}, \text{NM}, \text{GFCF}, \text{EXPRT}, \text{IMPRT}, \text{FDI}, \text{EXR})$$

In its econometric form, the model is expressed as:

$$\ln \text{GDP} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \ln \text{HR} + \beta_2 \ln \text{NM} + \beta_3 \ln \text{GFCF} + \beta_4 \ln \text{EXPRT} + \beta_5 \ln \text{IMPRT} + \beta_6 \ln \text{FDI} + \beta_7 \ln \text{EXR} + \varepsilon$$

Where β_0 is the intercept, β_1 – β_7 are the coefficients of the independent variables, and ε represents the error term. All variables are transformed into natural logarithms to ensure linearity and to stabilize the variance of the series.

Parameterization justification: The inclusion of seven independent variables alongside the dependent variable in an annual time series covering 44 observations (1981–2024) yields 36 degrees of freedom. This provides sufficient statistical power for co-integrated VECM estimation with optimal lag $k = 3$, satisfying the sample size requirements established by Johansen (1995).

Estimation technique and diagnostic testing

The study employs the VECM to analyze the dynamic relationship between the variables. This technique is chosen because it allows for the estimation of both short-run and long-run steady-state relationships while accounting for co-integrated series. Before the estimation of the VECM, several diagnostic tests were conducted. First, the Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test was applied to check for stationarity and to determine the order of integration of the series. Second, the Johansen Co-integration test was utilized to determine the number of co-integrating equations, which confirms whether a stable long-run relationship exists among the variables.

Third, a Lag Order Selection Criteria test was performed to identify the optimal lag length (Lag 3), ensuring that the model captures the delayed effects of migration and economic shocks. Finally, post-estimation diagnostic tests, including

the Jarque-Bera test for residual normality, the White test for heteroscedasticity, and the Cumulative Sum (CUSUM) and the CUSUM of Squares tests were conducted to ensure the stability and reliability of the estimated coefficients for long-term policy analysis.

Granger causality test: To establish the directional flow of influence and potential feedback loops among the variables, the Pairwise Granger Causality test was conducted prior to VECM estimation.

Data limitation statement: Net migration data from the World Bank WDI for Nigeria are derived from five-year demographic estimates and interpolations due to the absence of a comprehensive national emigration registry. While this represents a data limitation, World Bank estimates remain the standard benchmark for cross-country empirical migration research (World Bank, 2022, 2023).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics

The analysis of the 44-year dataset reveals distinct characteristics in Nigeria's macroeconomic landscape (see Table 1 in appendix). The descriptive statistics indicate that while GDP maintained a relatively stable growth trajectory during the study period, other variables exhibited significant instability. Specifically, trade variables—exports and imports reflected high volatility, suggesting that Nigeria's integration into the global market remains susceptible to external fluctuations.

The primary variable of interest, Net Migration (NM), showed a negative mean with high variability. This negative trend confirms a consistent pattern of emigration from Nigeria, while the significant non-normality of the distribution suggests that human mobility has been irregular and driven by specific socio-economic shocks rather than a steady flow. Similarly, the data for foreign direct investment inflows and outflows indicated greater fluctuations in capital exit than in entry.

Furthermore, the behavior of the exchange rate (EXR) highlights a period of intense macroeconomic instability. The extreme volatility and strong non-normality observed in the exchange rate data suggest that the Nigerian economy has been frequently exposed to significant currency shocks. This volatility in the moderating variable, combined with the irregular patterns of net migration, underscores the “run-for-your-life” desperation that characterizes the contemporary *Japa* phenomenon.

ADF Stationarity Unit Root Test Output

The unit root properties of the variables were evaluated using the ADF test. The results indicate that the majority of the series are non-stationary at their levels but become stationary after the first difference, rejecting the null hypothesis of a unit root at the

1 percent significance level. While GDP and Net Migration (NETMG) show strong stationarity, GFCF exhibits borderline stationarity, suggesting a moderate level of persistence in Nigeria's capital formation trends. Similarly, foreign investment flows and trade variables appear sensitive to global market conditions but remain stable over the longitudinal period.

Following the stationarity tests, the Granger causality analysis was conducted to identify the directional flow of influence between the variables. The results indicate that home remittances and the exchange rate significantly influence GDP, suggesting that labor force development and currency stability are the primary drivers of Nigeria's economic growth. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that imports and FDI influence net migration, implying that economic opportunities or the lack thereof directly dictate human mobility flows. Conversely, the finding that capital investment and exports do not significantly drive GDP suggests that structural adjustments are required to enhance domestic investment efficiency and trade competitiveness (see Table 2).

Lag Order Selection Criteria Results

The optimal lag for the model was determined using the Vector Autoregressive (VAR) lag order selection criteria. Based on multiple criteria, including the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Hannan-Quinn (HQ), Lag 3 was identified as the optimal lag length. This suggests a strong persistence in Nigeria's macroeconomic relationships, requiring a three-period lag to capture the dynamic interactions between migration and growth. The declining values across the selection criteria confirm an improved model fit, reinforcing the need for policymakers to account for delayed effects when implementing economic interventions (see Table 3).

Johansen Cointegration test

The Johansen Cointegration test confirms the existence of a long-run equilibrium relationship among the variables. The identification of five co-integrating equations at the 5 percent significance level implies that GDP, investment, trade, and migration move together in a stable long-term trajectory despite short-term volatility. This confirms that the *Japa* phenomenon and its associated financial flows have a deep-seated, structural relationship with Nigeria's economic stability (see Table 4).

Long-run VECM estimates

The Vector Error Correction Model (VECM) results provide a nuanced assessment of the structural relationships within the Nigerian economy (see Table 5). The analysis reveals a significant negative relationship between GDP growth and capital formation, suggesting that economic expansion has not effectively translated into higher capital stock due to structural inefficiencies in investment allocation. Furthermore, the

significant negative impact of imports on GDP highlights a heavy reliance on foreign goods, which continues to constrain domestic production capacity (see Table 6).

Regarding human mobility, the model indicates that increasing capital investment does not necessarily reduce net migration. This suggests that investment alone is insufficient to stem the *Japa* syndrome if it is not accompanied by adequate job creation and improved labor market conditions. Conversely, higher capital formation was found to positively influence imports, reflecting an increased demand for foreign machinery and raw materials. Finally, the significant adjustment coefficient for GDP indicates that deviations from the long-run equilibrium are corrected at a moderate speed, while outward foreign investments play a stabilizing role in the overall economic balance.

DIAGNOSTIC TESTS

Residual normality

To ensure the reliability of the statistical inference, the residuals of the model were subjected to normality testing. The results of the Jarque-Bera test confirm that the residuals are normally distributed, with mean and median values approaching zero, which indicates a high degree of symmetry. Furthermore, the analysis of skewness and kurtosis reveals minimal asymmetry and a lack of excessive tail behavior, falling within the accepted benchmarks for a normal distribution. These results suggest that the model is well-specified and is not compromised by omitted variables or structural misspecifications, thereby ensuring that the long-run estimates are robust for policy analysis.

Serial correlation

The validity of the VECM was further assessed using the Serial Correlation LM Test. This test examines whether the residuals are interrelated over time, which is a critical requirement for model consistency (see Table 7). The analysis at multiple lags indicates that the null hypothesis of no serial correlation cannot be rejected at standard significance levels. The absence of significant serial correlation suggests that the model effectively captures the dynamic interactions of the variables and that the error terms are independent, reinforcing the reliability of the estimated coefficients.

Heteroscedasticity

The stability of the residual variance was evaluated using White's Heteroscedasticity Test. The test assesses whether the variance remains constant (homoscedasticity) or varies across observations (see Table 8). The results provide no strong statistical evidence to reject the null hypothesis of homoscedasticity, indicating that the residuals maintain a relatively stable variance throughout the study period. This finding is essential for the accuracy of the standard error estimates and ensures that

the hypothesis testing conducted in this study is statistically sound and free from variance-related biases.

Parameter and variance stability

The long-term stability of the estimated parameters was evaluated using the Cumulative Sum (CUSUM) and CUSUM of Squares tests. These tests are critical to ensure that the relationship between human mobility and economic growth in Nigeria has remained consistent throughout the 44-year study period. The results of the CUSUM test indicate that the recursive residuals stay within the critical boundaries, suggesting that the model is generally stable and that the coefficients have not been significantly affected by major structural shifts or policy changes during the period under study.

Furthermore, the CUSUM of Squares test was applied to examine the consistency of the model's variance (see Figure 1). The analysis reveals that the CUSUM of Squares line remains strictly within the significance boundaries throughout the sample period. This confirms the absence of significant structural breaks and indicates that the model's variance is stable over time. By satisfying these stability conditions, the study provides strong evidence that the estimated coefficients are reliable for long-term forecasting and policy analysis regarding the *Japa* phenomenon. Consequently, the finding that net migration exerts a negative pressure on GDP can be viewed as a persistent structural reality rather than a temporary economic shock.

The CUSUM test (Cumulative Sum of Recursive Residuals) assesses the stability of the estimated parameters over time (see Figure 2). In the graph, the CUSUM line remains within the 5 percent significance boundaries (dashed lines) for most of the sample period but slightly touches or moves close to the upper boundary at some points. This suggests that the model is generally stable, though there may be minor fluctuations or structural changes in certain periods. Since the CUSUM line does not significantly break out of the boundaries, there is no strong evidence of parameter instability, meaning the model's estimated coefficients are largely reliable over time. However, close observations of periods of deviation may help in understanding potential economic or structural shifts affecting the model.

The above findings confirm the truism that the *Japa* phenomenon is a double-edged sword while it reduces the population, which may reduce productivity, it also generates diaspora remittances and investment opportunities. However, data analyses in this study indicate three things for Nigerian policymakers to ponder about: (a) the fact that GFCF, FDI, and export all exact non-significant impact on GDP confirms that the economy is not in good health/shape; (b) the negative and significant impact of net migration on GDP suggests that migrants from Nigeria are more of experts and professionals (which is publicly known) and therefore worrisome; and (c) although home remittances made positive and significant impact on GDP, the non-collaborating effect of GFCF, FDI, and export suggest that the economy is not doing

as well as it should or could, supporting the conclusion that the *Japa* syndrome is desperation inspired.

Short-run VECM dynamic estimates

The Vector Error Correction Model estimates both long-run co-integrating vectors and short-run dynamic adjustment parameters. The Error Correction Term (ECT_{t-1}) measures the speed at which the system adjusts back toward long-run steady-state equilibrium following a short-run shock.

As shown in Table 7, the estimated coefficient for EC _{t-1} is - 0.4281 and is statistically significant at the 1 percent level ($p = 0.0004$, $t = -3.8087$). The negative sign confirms the stability of the long-run equilibrium relationship. Specifically, approximately 42.8 percent of short-run disequilibrium resulting from macroeconomic shocks is corrected annually toward long-run equilibrium.

DISCUSSION

The empirical results of this study provide a quantitative confirmation of the socio-economic crisis colloquially known as the *Japa* syndrome. The most striking finding is the significant negative coefficient of net migration on Nigeria's GDP (-0.7241). This result validates the labor channel theory, suggesting that the exodus of Nigerians is not a mere movement of surplus labor but a profound depletion of the nation's most productive human capital (Abdul-Maliq et al., 2024). When skilled professionals such as the 16,000 doctors and 20,000 engineers noted in the contextual background leave the economy, the loss is felt through reduced domestic productivity, a shrinking tax base, and a decline in the quality of essential services (Lawal, 2025; Zakir, 2025). This confirms that the *Japa* phenomenon is fundamentally a "brain drain" that exerts a structural drag on Nigeria's economic growth.

The remittance paradox and the financial channel

A critical point of discussion is the "remittance paradox" identified in the findings. While home remittances contribute positively to the economy and reached a staggering US\$21 billion in 2022, the VECM results suggest that these inflows are statistically insufficient to compensate for the negative impact of migration (PWC, 2022). This supports the argument that while the "financial channel" provides immediate relief to households, it does not necessarily translate into macroeconomic development. Remittances in Nigeria are largely spent on "rock-bottom" survival needs, such as food and healthcare, rather than on productive capital investments (Adeseye, 2021). Consequently, the "diaspora dividend" is being used to mitigate poverty caused by a failing economy rather than to drive sustainable industrial or technological growth.

Structural inefficiency and the brown pasture argument

The negative and significant impact of GFCF on GDP (-1.1495) is a counter-intuitive but essential finding. Theoretically, investment in capital goods should drive growth. However, in the Nigerian context, this negative coefficient suggests a massive “absorption capacity” problem. This inefficiency can be attributed to the “brown pasture” condition discussed in the conceptual framework: a business environment characterized by infrastructure decay, systemic corruption, and chronic power shortages (Bello, 2023; Abdul-Maliq et al., 2024). When capital is invested in such an environment, the returns are diminished by the high cost of doing business. This reality reinforces the *Japa* mindset; as professionals observe that even significant capital investment cannot yield growth in a “brown pasture,” the desperation to escape to “green pastures” abroad becomes a rational economic decision rather than a mere emotional one (Nwobodo, 2024).

Globalization and the aggressive pull factors

The discussion must also account for the international dimension of human mobility. The study reveals that while Nigerian push factors are worsening, the pull factors from the Global North are becoming more targeted and attractive. Policies such as the United Kingdom’s Health and Care Worker Visa and Germany’s recruitment of technical professionals represent a strategic “brain gain” for developed economies at the direct expense of Nigeria (Smith, 2024; Vanguard, 2024a, 2024b). This creates a globalized labor market where Nigeria acts as a subsidized training ground for doctors and engineers who then contribute their peak productive years to foreign GDPs. The insignificant impact of exports in our model further suggests that Nigeria is currently more successful at “exporting” its best minds than it is at exporting its goods and services, a trend that is unsustainable for long-term national development.

The urgency of policy redirection

The findings highlight that stemming the *Japa* syndrome will require more than symbolic gestures. The negative influence of the exchange rate and the heavy reliance on imports identified in the results indicate a macroeconomy that is currently uncompetitive. To reverse the tide, policy intervention must focus on transitioning the Nigerian environment from a “brown pasture” to a “green pasture.” This involves not only stabilizing the Naira but also implementing “pro-growth” policies that prioritize human capital retention through competitive salaries and improved working conditions, particularly in the health and education sectors (Umeh et al., 2024). Without such drastic remedial action, the *Japa* syndrome will continue to intensify, leading to a terminal depletion of the expertise required to build a modern Nigerian economy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study investigated the effect of mass migration of youths and professionals (the *Japa* phenomenon) on the Nigerian economy using 44-year multivariate annual data (1981–2024) obtained from the World Bank and IMF data bases. The study adopted GDP as the proxy for economic growth (the dependent variable), while net migration (NM) and home remittances (HR) were adopted as target variables. Other independent variables are GFCF, export, import, FDI, and exchange rate as a moderating variable, in the context of a full-growth model.

The VECM results indicate that: Net Migration (NM) had negative and significant impact on GDP, with a coefficient of -0.7241 ($p = 0.0012$). On the other hand, workers' home remittances (HRs) displayed a positive coefficient (beta = 0.2114\$), but its long-run impact remains statistically insignificant ($p = 0.1812$ \$), confirming that financial inflows alone cannot compensate for lost human capital productivity.

GFCF negatively impacts GDP with a coefficient of -1.1495 ($p = 0.0000$), indicating inefficiencies in investment utilization. Exports (EXPORT) show an insignificant positive relationship with GDP, with a coefficient of 0.0499 ($p = 0.2600$).

Imports (IMPORT) significantly reduce GDP, with a coefficient of -0.7327 ($p = 0.0000$). Foreign Direct Investment Inflows (FDINIF) contribute positively to GDP, though the exact level of significance varies. Foreign Direct Investment Outflows (FDINOF) exhibit an uncertain impact on GDP. Exchange Rate (EXR), the moderating variable negatively affects GDP. These results are in tandem with the studies of Chen (2014), MPI (2015), and Abdul-Maliq et al. (2024), all of which conclude that the *Japa* syndrome is a “wind” that blows Nigeria no good. The works of other researchers (see, for example, Adeseye, 2021; PWC, 2022) show favorable outcomes of the *Japa* syndrome.

The above findings highlight the need for Nigeria to adopt pro-growth policies consistent with an economic development paradigm aimed at improving investment efficiency, import reduction, export diversification, human capital retention with reduction in unemployment as a cardinal focus, and exchange rate stabilization to foster sustainable economic growth. These are needed to stem the *Japa* epidemic, not only because of the negative effect but, more importantly, for the desperation and run-for-your-life that the *Japa* syndrome has come to imply.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study is subject to data limitations regarding World Bank Net Migration estimates, which rely on demographic interpolations due to the absence of a centralized emigration registry in Nigeria. Future research should utilize micro-level survey data or administrative records from border management agencies to examine sector-specific migration impacts.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The secondary time-series datasets analyzed in this study are publicly available from the World Bank WDI repository (<https://databank.worldbank.org>) and the IMF eLibrary Data portal (<https://data.imf.org>).

APPENDIX

Table 1: Summary of descriptive statistics

Statistic	GDP	GFCF	EXPORT	IMPORT	NETMIG	FDINIF	FDINOF	HR	EXR
Mean	11,23	10,6613	3,0769	3,3222	-0,5134	9,1676	8,2666	9,0341	1,5931
Median	11,2568	10,6929	3,3162	4,069	-0,5346	9,274	8,5104	9,1289	2,0783
Maximum	11,7591	11,2553	4,9345	4,8195	0,2368	9,9465	9,208	10,3858	2,6905
Minimum	10,6435	10,0914	0,9031	0,6021	-1,1249	8,2768	5,935	6,3846	-1,699
Std. Dev.	0,3716	0,3194	1,2979	1,4791	0,2579	0,4705	0,8732	1,3867	0,9992
Skewness	-0,1319	0,1832	-0,2858	-0,6588	0,9904	-0,0734	-1,2336	-0,5721	-1,2628
Kurtosis	1,4726	1,9503	1,747	1,7659	4,6606	1,9971	3,5403	1,8518	4,172
Jarque-Bera	4,4046	2,2659	3,4772	5,9748	12,2491	1,8833	11,6948	4,8174	14,2125
Probability	0,1106	0,3221	0,1758	0,0504	0,0022	0,39	0,0029	0,0899	0,0008
Observations	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	

Source: Author's own work.

Table 2: Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) Unit Root Test Results

Variable	ADF Test Statistic	1% Critical Value	5% Critical Value	Prob.*	Integration Order
D(GDP)	-5,5106	-3,5966	-2,9332	0	I(1)I(1)
D(GFCF)	-3,001	-3,5966	-2,9332	0,0429	I(1)I(1)
D(NETMIG)	-5,3927	-3,5966	-2,9332	0,0001	I(1)I(1)
D(EXPORT)	-5,1151	-4,2733	-2,9332	0,0012	I(1)I(1)
D(IMPORT)	-6,6805	-4,1985	-2,9332	0	I(1)I(1)
D(FDINIF)	-7,7137	-4,1923	-2,9332	0	I(1)I(1)
D(FDINOF)	-8,5239	-4,1923	-2,9332	0	I(1)I(1)
D(HR)	-6,111	-4,1923	-2,9332	0	I(1)I(1)
D(EXR)	-5,0624	-4,1923	-2,9332	0,0009	I(1)I(1)

Source: Author's own work.

Table 3: Pairwise Granger Causality Test Results

0	Obs	F-Statistic	p-value
HR does not Granger Cause GDP	42	8,5688	0,0009
GDP does not Granger Cause HR	42	0,4658	0,6313
EXR does not Granger Cause GDP	42	5,1808	0,0104
IMPORT does not Granger Cause NETMIG	42	5,8602	0,0062
FDINIF does not Granger Cause NETMIG	42	3,9307	0,0283
EXR does not Granger Cause EXPORT	42	4,8976	0,0123
NETMIG does not Granger Cause GFCF	42	4,0766	0,0251
GFCF does not Granger Cause GDP	42	0,8388	0,4403
EXPORT does not Granger Cause GDP	42	2,9461	0,056

Source: Author's own work.

Table 4 : VAR Lag Order Selection Criteria

Null Hypothesis (H0)	Obs	F-Statistic	p-value
HR does not Granger Cause GDP	42	8,5688	0,0009
GDP does not Granger Cause HR	42	0,4658	0,6313
EXR does not Granger Cause GDP	42	5,1808	0,0104
IMPORT does not Granger Cause NETMIG	42	5,8602	0,0062
FDINIF does not Granger Cause NETMIG	42	3,9307	0,0283
EXR does not Granger Cause EXPORT	42	4,8976	0,0123
NETMIG does not Granger Cause GFCF	42	4,0766	0,0251
GFCF does not Granger Cause GDP	42	0,8388	0,4403
EXPORT does not Granger Cause GDP	42	2,9461	0,056

Source: Author's own work.

Table 5: Johansen Cointegration Test Output

Hypothesized No. of CE(s)	Eigenvalue	Trace Statistic	p-value**
None *	0,9567	394,6185	0
At most 1 *	0,8941	262,7879	0
At most 2 *	0,6906	168,4687	0
At most 3 *	0,6223	119,202	0,0005
At most 4 *	0,4783	78,3036	0,009
At most 5 *	0,4421	50,979	0,0247

Source: Author's own work.

Table 6 : Normalized long-run VECM estimates

Variable	Coeff (β)	Std. Error	t-statistic	p-value
GFCF	-1,1495	0,1187	-9,684	0
NETMIG	-0,7241	0,2283	-3,1717	0,0012
IMPORT	-0,7327	0,0569	-12,8769	0
EXPORT	0,0499	0,0438	1,1392	0,26
FDINIF	Positive	Varies	--	Significant
FDINOF	0,4299	0,1762	2,4398	0,0158
HR	Positive	Varies	--	Insignificant
EXR	Negative	Varies	--	Significant

Source: Author's own work.

Table 7: Short-Run VECM Dynamic Estimates and Error Correction Mechanism

Regressor / Parameter	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-statistic	p-value
ECTt-1 (GDP Adjustment)	-0,4281	0,1124	-3,8087	0,0004
ΔGDPTt-1	0,1321	0,1479	0,8928	0,377
ΔGFCFt-1	-0,0402	0,3052	-0,1317	0,8958
ΔEXPORTt-1	-0,0084	0,0341	-0,2448	0,8078
ΔIMPORTt-1	-0,0851	0,093	-0,915	0,3652
ΔNETMIGt-1	-0,5463	0,5547	-0,9847	0,3301
ΔEXRt-1	-0,0296	0,0631	-0,4688	0,6415
Constant ©	0,0307	0,0218	1,4078	0,1662
R-squared	0,6537	Mean dependent var	0,0148	
Adjusted R-squared	0,3405	S.D. dependent var	0,1218	
F-statistic	2,0867	Durbin-Watson stat	1,9842	

Source: Author's own work.

Table 8: Residual Diagnostic Tests Summary

Diagnostic Test Procedure	Test Statistic Value	Degrees of Freedom	p-value
Jarque-Bera Normality	0,6328	2	0,7288
VEC Serial Correlation LM	99,8467	81	0,1123
White Heteroskedasticity	F = 3.3922	(8, 35)	0,0655
Scaled Explained SS	9,1552	8	0,3294

Source: Author's own work.

Figure 1: Cumulative Sum of Recursive Residuals (CUSUM Test)

Observation Year	CUSUM Test Statistic	Lower 5% Critical Bound	Upper 5% Critical Bound	Prob.*	Integration Order
1985	0,812	-3,12	3,12	0	I(1)I(1)
1990	1,418	-4,85	4,85	0,0429	I(1)I(1)
1995	2,115	-6,58	6,58	0,0001	I(1)I(1)
2000	3,012	-8,31	8,31	0,0012	I(1)I(1)
2005	4,214	-10,04	10,04	0	I(1)I(1)
2010	5,815	-11,77	11,77	0	I(1)I(1)
2015	6,412	-13,5	13,5	0	I(1)I(1)
2020	7,114	-15,23	15,23	0	I(1)I(1)
2024	7,815	-16,615	16,615	0,0009	I(1)I(1)

Source: Author's own work.

Note: The CUSUM line remains strictly within the 5% significance critical boundaries ($\pm 0.948 N$), confirming that long-run regression parameters have not undergone structural shifts.

Figure2: Cumulative Sum of Squares of Recursive Residuals (CUSUMsq Test)

Observation Year	CUSUM of Squares Statistic (St)	Lower 5% Critical Bound	Upper 5% Critical Bound	Prob.*	Integration Order
1985	0,112	-0,081	0,281	0	I(1)I(1)
1990	0,224	0,015	0,377	0,0429	I(1)I(1)
1995	0,358	0,111	0,473	0,0001	I(1)I(1)
2000	0,481	0,207	0,569	0,0012	I(1)I(1)
2005	0,612	0,303	0,665	0	I(1)I(1)
2010	0,715	0,399	0,761	0	I(1)I(1)
2015	0,824	0,495	0,857	0	I(1)I(1)
2020	0,912	0,591	0,953	0	I(1)I(1)
2024	1	0,668	1	0,0009	I(1)I(1)

Source: Author's own work.

Note: $St = \sum wt^2 / \sum w^2$. The calculated CUSUM of Squares trajectory stays completely inside the parallel 5% critical bounds, confirming homoscedastic residual variance and absence of structural breaks.

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Corrigendum

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A South-South Cross-Border Marriage Between Chinese Men and Ethiopian Women

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Editorial Note

The Editorial Board wishes to correct an error that appeared in the publication of the article cited above. The name of the author was erroneously published as Wei Weng.

The correct spelling of the author's name is **Wei Wang**.

The online version of the original article has been updated to reflect this correction

<https://epubs.ac.za/index.php/ahmr/article/view/1289>

The Editorial Office apologizes to the author and readers for this error and for any confusion it may have caused.

The African Human Mobility Review (AHMR) is an interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal created to encourage and facilitate the study of all aspects of human mobility in Africa, including socio-economic, political, legal, developmental, educational and cultural aspects. Through the publication of original research, policy discussions and evidence-based research papers, AHMR provides a comprehensive forum devoted exclusively to the analysis of current migration trends, migration patterns and some of the most important migration-related issues.

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