

Benin Women and Migration: Issues, Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

This paper surveys the origin and contending issues in Benin women's migration to Europe and America. It historicizes diaspora migration from a gendered perspective. Through textual analysis and oral interviews, the study identified the economy, family unrest failed politics, limited education opportunities in Nigeria, and other social and natural factors as critical factors fuelling women migration in Nigeria. The study also found that issues of domestic violence, trafficking, sex abuse, racial discrimination as well as socio-economic disparity that these women seek to run away from in Nigeria have paradoxically become some of the major challenges they face living in the Diaspora. It is against this background that the paper therefore examines Benin women and their migration into different parts of the globe. The study also delves into the different challenges that surround the issues of migration in Benin. The prospect of migration is also carefully examined. The analyses the impact of Benin women in the diaspora on societal development. It concludes that womanhood and sisterhood among women need to triumph over racial and cultural differences to engender a mutually beneficial gender relation; and a concerted defense of women's rights in the diaspora.

Keywords: Benin Women, Diaspora, Issues, Challenges, Prospects

Introduction

The history of Diaspora migration and the development of human migration did not begin today. It is imperative therefore to clarify that the history of migration either from one community to another or from one country to another dates back to antiquity. Confirming the above assertion, Telsaçm and Telsaç rightly posit that; “The phenomenon of migration has a background as old as the history of humanity and a powerful dynamic that has a great place in the social memory of people.”¹ These ebullient scholars further maintain that; “The migration journey of mankind which started from the first ages, witnessed the individual and mass migration actions of people who moved to survive in better conditions compared to their current life in their geography.” This implies that right from the ancient period, the quest for migration has been one of the phenomena

of humanity. Human beings right from time had embarked on migration, and several factors like the search for greener pastures, security, the search for jobs, and other purposes have been identified as some of the fundamental and traditional reasons for migration. Telsaçm and Telsaç, argue that; “In ancient times when the concept of property was not yet known in terms of social acceptance, migrations emerged mostly due to shelter, disaster, security and not being able to reach enough food.”³ However, they continue thus; “The constantly changing and adapting structure of human beings to new conditions has also caused the reasons for migration to change over time. With the adoption of settled life, the concepts of city and state emerged, and in line with this development, the boundaries determined by the sovereign power and the rules determined by the power holding the authority to live within those boundaries came to the fore.”⁴

In recent times, the concept of diaspora has gained the attention of scholars and writers due to the immense contributions they bring to the table of politics at the international and local level. Leela stated that scholars have accepted that the diaspora is that ethnic group living outside its hometown but with continuous identification which warrants political, economic, and emotional relation with its hometown as well as members of diaspora living in other countries outside their hometown.⁵ The understanding of diaspora could be traced to the speed at which international migrations of people take place given the unprecedented advances in information and telecommunication technology. Lien and Jeanne rightly posit that it is the new modes of technology that have increased the proliferation of diaspora. They have taken good advantage of cyberspace which has improved their ability to mobilize and achieve any goal they seek to achieve.⁶

International migration in Benin City started to gain more ground in the 1980s due to several factors particularly the impact of the structural adjustment program. This paper is divided into 5 sections. The first section briefly examines women in traditional Nigerian society, the second section looks at the development of Benin women’s Migration to the diaspora, and the third and fourth sections analyses the reasons for Benin women’s migration to the diaspora and their role in societal development respectively. The last section examines the issues, challenges, and prospects women faced in the diaspora. The paper concludes and briefly recommends on how to curtail the high rate of international migration affecting the advancement of developing Nations.

Women in Traditional Nigerian Society.

Benin Kingdom is located in the south-south region of Nigeria. The city is one of the oldest and renowned city states in Sub-Sahara Africa. Benin kingdom is mentioned in most studies of early African development because of its peculiar political leadership and advanced artistic craftsmanship. To conceptualize the nature of women in traditional African society, certain questions always come to mind, such as; what is the condition of women in traditional Nigerian society? How were the Nigerian women been viewed and classified? What was the role of women in traditional African society? These questions, no doubt, if attended to, will assist in clarifying the ambiguity facing individuals and researchers in trying to understand and appreciate the history of Nigerian women in the study of their migration to the Diaspora. Abubakar posits that;

“Traditionally, naturally, women remained mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives, and thus women generally played a significant role in both societal phase and home affairs. Apart from that, throughout Nigerian history, women stood as the *sine qua non* to the household incomes that are generated from obvious works like small business crafts, house-to-house commercial exchanges, and bilateral agreement of contributions.”⁷

As evident above, Abubakar was able to clarify that in Nigeria; women were seen, traditionally to be mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. Besides their genital clarifications, they were assigned and accorded pivotal roles in societal development. Their (women)’s role as seen above spread across their immediate family and span through to the general community participation. A lot of businesses were said to be taken care of and managed by the women in traditional days. Hence, the women were seen as supportive of both their family growth as well as the community at large. However, in some parts of Nigeria, women’s roles were restricted. Some parts did not recognize nor allow for women’s participation or involvement in public services. In such places, women were only allowed to perform domestic duties. On the contrary, there are other places in Nigeria, where women were allowed right from time to participate in public work or community services. Adumbrating on this, Abubakar continues:

In addition to that, women’s roles are initially led by their respective ethnic differences, which have basement from the religious teachings. In the north, for example, Islamic norms are generally shaping the common way of life of the people, women are confined to their households, and they are not allowed to willingly perform unnecessarily roaming beyond premises nearby. As far as tradition is concerned, once they get married, they cannot grumble any disturbances simply because marriage in Islam is misinterpreted absolutely.⁸

The above conditions of the women in traditional Hausa land and the women in other traditional communities have been argued to be differing. For instance, women drawn from Ogoni ethnic nationality, the Ijaw, Igbo, Yoruba, and the Ibibio ethnic nationality of the ancient Eastern part of Nigeria, are unique and differ from one another. Particularly, the Eastern region had a more different and distinct cultural background from those of the Northern part of the country. Contrary to the Hausa women and their restricted role, the women from the southern part of Nigeria, according to Abubakar contributed immensely both at the family level and in the community at large. Capturing this thought further, he therefore noted; “In the south, traditionally women had economically important positions in interregional trade and the markets, worked on farms as major labor sources, and had influential positions in traditional systems of local organization.” Specifically, commenting on the Yoruba, he had this to say; “In Yoruba tribe from the southern region of the country, who mostly live in the south-western part, women had received Western-style of education in the latter century before twentieth, so they occupied positions in professional skills and to some extent in politics.”⁹

The Ogoni women, like their Igbo and Ibibio counterparts, were business women, in their traditional days and were known for their novel assistance to both their immediate family and in community building. The case of the Aba Women Riot in the past is a pointer to the fact that

women in the Eastern part of Nigeria were heavily involved in political participation. Women in the traditional Benin society, have been identified to play supplementary roles to their male counterparts. They assist them in every area of family development. They work primarily on their husband's farms and take the burden of selling off the produce from the farms either in long-distance trading or within the locality. Even household chores are shared according to age, although the responsibilities are clearly defined among the male and female children in the family, carrying out such tasks is often through the supervision of the older gender in the family.¹⁰

The experiences and the roles of women in traditional Nigerian society vary. It is noticed from the above that while some sections of the country accorded earlier community participation to women, some other parts of the country, denied them this concurrent recognition. In short with time, in history, we are told how women eventually began to face alienation and discrimination from their male counterparts. With the contact of the British Missionaries and the subsequent domination of the governance in Nigeria, we saw how men were accorded more political participation than their female counterparts. This scenario, no doubt, led to more genital discrimination between both sexes in Nigeria. History reveals that able-bodied Nigerian men were gradually taken through the slave trade to work in foreign countries. These continued in different phases in the history of time. This experience brought about the idea of the beginning of Nigerians, like other African countries migrating to Western nations. As the men initiated the migration, the women, thereafter, were seen to follow their husbands and later most of them began to travel overseas also, based on different affecting factors.

Historicizing the Development of Benin Women's Migration to the Diaspora

Records show that Nigerian (men and women) migration antecedents have accounted for an increasing number of individuals. A Plethora of men and women have been noticed for their continuous migration to other countries. Akinrinade and Ogen made the above clarification when they posit that; "With a population of over 140 million which makes it Africa's demographic giant, Nigeria has become increasingly involved in international migration worldwide. The international migration of Nigerians could be dated back to the pre-colonial era."¹¹ The writers further noted that; "It effectively began with the Hausa transnational links that found its best expression in the trans-Saharan trade, especially between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries."¹² This implies that the first history and origin of human migration in Nigeria originated in the Northern part of the country. As evident above, this period was said to take place during the era of the trans-Sahara trading which was witnessed in the 14th to 16th centuries. They went on to submit that; "This period also witnessed pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina. The trans-Atlantic slave trade, however, marked a significant milestone in the forced movement of Nigerians to the New World."¹³ In agreement with the scholars cited above, Adepoju, in his research contends that; "The colonial era equally witnessed large scale labor migration required for plantations, mines and public administration from Nigeria to such countries as Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Benin Republic and Ghana.

During this period and parallel to migration to other African countries, Nigerians also migrated first to the United Kingdom and later, the United States also became a destination point primarily for the pursuit of higher education."¹⁴

Some scholars also believe that some of these migrants decided to stay back even when the original idea was for them to return to Nigeria to take the positions left by the departing British colonial administration. It should be noted that during this period, most of the migrants were mostly men. The women during this period only constitute an insignificant population. In addition to this, it is noteworthy to state that such migration took place both before and after the independence in 1960. On the migration continuation after the independence in 1960, de Hass opines thus; “After independence in 1960 the quest for education and greener pastures continued in earnest.”¹⁵ Akinrinade and Ogen further put this argument and narrative inter alia:

The economic downturn in the country in the early 1980s due to the collapse of crude oil prices alongside sustained political repression and violence appears to have exacerbated the exodus of Nigerians abroad. Since the 1980s the waves of migration to Anglo-Saxon countries have been complemented by the remarkable movements of Nigerians to Germany, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Ireland, and the Gulf States.¹⁶

One fundamental thing to be observed given the above is that Nigerian immigration experiences are not only traced to Western countries but also to most African countries. Studies have shown that even within the African continent, many of the Nigerians have continued increasingly migrate to countries like Botswana, Ghana, Gabon, and South Africa. Specifically commenting on the Nigerian migration to South Africa and their reason for the migration, Adepoju, opines that; “some highly skilled Nigerian migrants have even found the booming economy of South Africa a convenient alternative to Europe, North America and the Gulf States. In all these modern migrations there has been an increasing tendency by Nigerian migrants towards permanent residency.”¹⁷

In Nigeria, while migration started with men who were first taken out for slavery and the eventual few men who were later sent out for educational pursuit, the few women who later joined subsequently, joined either to meet with their spouse who had established themselves in Diaspora. The women who started migration therefore traveled to meet with their spouses, for economic or job security or educational attainment. It is imperative, however, to clarify that most of the recent Nigerian women who later joined the migration train did so in recent years, as the world began to witness an increasing interest in the Feminist Movement. This is what can be termed as ‘feminization’ migration. This was however not peculiar in Africa, but was also on a global scale. In 2017, of the 4,316 Nigerians repatriated from North Africa, 80 percent of whom were women were repatriated from Libya. 4000 had departed from Edo state, some of whom were trafficking victims or vulnerable to trafficking.¹⁸

The desire to assist the family experience better life, was a strong motivation for Benin women migration to diaspora in the early 1980s. The harsh economic conditions of the structural adjustment program introduced in 1982, hits Nigerian citizens differently in every region. The Benin women had always wanted financial freedom even in the way they involved in trading activities or assisting their husband in raising a family. The high rate at which people in Nigeria migrated to other countries for greener pastures, led to most women becoming a victim of

trafficking. One female interviewee stated that it became a norm for most girls to travel abroad in their community and take care of their family¹⁹. In fact, since the 1990s, one can hardly find a house in the upper area (in Benin), where one or more female are not outside the country, catering to the needs of their families back home. International migration in this period was with the support of the family. Some of these women who travelled abroad noticed that their families were taking advantage of them, while they work tirelessly outside the country, the results of their sweat are sometimes misused and abused by their families back home. In reacting to this, most of these women in diaspora, decided to equip themselves for self-development.

In an interview conducted with Mrs. Eunice Kpodee who is currently residing in Rivers State, explained as an elderly woman her knowledge about the new trend of women migration in the 19th and 20th centuries. Mrs. Kpodee who is still looking vibrant and energetic stated some of the reasons that necessitated the migration of some of her peers then to foreign countries. According to her, “In the past, migration was once considered an act by single, male laborers looking for work; but today, migration has increasingly been featured in the lives of women that it is gradually submerging its male counterpart.”²⁰ She further concludes in her remark that as of today, “women are now more than ever migrating as a means of meeting their own economic needs rather than migrating to join their husbands and families.”²¹

The feminization of migration has also stemmed from the demand for services including that of domestic workers, nurses, teachers, and other professions typically dominated by women it is also still the case however, that women often accept, or are forced to work in jobs that men will not do. Telsaçm and Özlem argue that; “The phenomenon of migration is increasingly maintaining its place on the agenda day by day. Experienced economic, political, demographic, social and environmental developments keep international migration alive.”²² Here again, it can be seen, as the above scholars had posited that factors like economy, politics, and other factors are the prime reason that most often drive migration movement across the globe. They go on to defend that; “Because global warming cannot be stopped and the average world temperature increases and melts the glaciers in the polar region, a stronger disaster and natural causes title has been added to these factors. In addition, endless political instability and wars are the biggest reasons for forced migration in the last ten years.”²³ Telsaçm and Özlem however pointed out that:

Due to the dynamic structure of migration, its factors and effects differ. Migration is not just an area of interest for researchers. States also tend not to be unprepared for migration and to produce policies for sustainable migration management. In this respect, a large number of international cooperation are made. Migration is not only a problem for the destination country but also causes great changes in terms of origin and transit countries.²⁴

Given the above, it can be deduced that the hallmark of migration remains dynamic. Its factors and effects are distinct. Besides this, we also read because of the above the attendance problems and challenges bedeviling the quest for emigration and immigration. For instance, there is this argument that a certain State may be less or more exposed to immigration due to its present geographical location. For example; it is inevitable that countries with low social and economic

development, underdeveloped human rights, and countries with internal conflicts or on a migration route will encounter the reality of migration. People hardly migrate to countries with low economic values. Countries with high insecurity challenges likely experience low or do not always experience immigration. Today, Nigeria is one of the countries with flashpoints of insecurity challenges, low economic growth, better or quality education, and other important factors. This is typically why countries like Nigeria experience more emigration than immigration. For migration therefore to take place, in any country, like Nigeria, there must be some fundamental factors that push people to migrate to another country. Hence, in the next phase, an attempt is made to look into some of the causes of female migration in Nigeria.

Reasons for Benin Women's Migration to Diaspora

Studies have shown that there are many reasons for global migration. These factors have been identified to cut across diverse countries. Hence, these factors are not necessarily peculiar to the Nigerian condition. However, this section tried to consider at least four of the most fundamental causes of migration within the Benin experience. To continue with the quest of trying to unravel some of the most appropriate causes of Nigerian women's migration to other countries, it is imperative to be first faced with such questions as; what then could have been the actual fundamental factors for the contemporary Nigerian women migration to other major countries of the world? And what are the most likely features that one could trace as activity of a vast majority of these Nigerian women in the Diaspora?

As earlier postulated in this work, Akinrinade and Ajibewa reechoed the views that “migration is a function of the laws of uneven development and that the high level of economic development attained by industrialized countries confer on their people and workers, in particular, a high level of per-capita income which attracts migrants from less developed countries.”²⁵ The point to be understood here is that most of the Nigerian women who traveled to other countries either did so in consideration of the high level of workers’ salaries, better working conditions, good healthcare system, and services cum better and timely education programs. The usual frequent Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike that has become a norm yearly, in Nigerian education, is another fundamental factor why most young contemporary Nigerian women who are passionate about studying, are more likely to consider traveling abroad than studying here in Nigeria. Putting this thought into a single intellectual basket, Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya summaries inter alia:

Thus, unemployment, violence, environmental degradation, lack of an enabling social infrastructure, political repression, and extreme poverty have been found to induce large-scale migrations of Nigerians to the developed world. The dominant media, political, and academic discourses on the demographic mobility of Nigerians see a wave of desperate people fleeing chronic poverty, repression, and violence and trying to enter the elusive Eldorado of the developed world.²⁶

It is pertinent to note that while poverty and many other factors are responsible for some of the recent migration in Nigeria, on the contrary, one must not accept all of these assertions. For

instance, in the case of poverty, it is partially incorrect, according to De Haas that “majority of Nigerian migrants are not among the poorest and are from relatively educated and reasonably well off backgrounds especially if we take into consideration the high cost of the journey. Empirical and theoretical evidence strongly suggests that higher incomes and improved education and access to media and information will give more people capabilities and aspirations to migrate.”²⁷ It is important to emphasize in detail, the causes of women’s migration to the diaspora.

Economic and its Related Factors

The Benin women to a large extent have a common motive with their men’s counterparts as a reason for migration to foreign countries. Today, one of the most popular reasons why Nigerian women are traveling overseas is said to be influenced by economic considerations. The rate of lack of job opportunities and the alarming rate of unemployment in Nigeria has forced many Nigerians (men and women) to travel abroad in search of jobs to secure their future and have a means of livelihood. The desire to support their families to find financial freedom has pushed many young Benin women to travel outside the country. Arsenault confirms to us that: “Poverty is the main trigger of numerous social problems. People can make illegal attempts to shelter and feed. Such initiatives create huge income inequalities and deepen the problem.”²⁸ Also, Haas buttresses that; “Unfortunately, there is a linear relationship between income status and health. It becomes almost impossible for people who cannot earn enough income to receive the health services they deserve.”²⁹ The effect of poor economic experience most often leads to an inability to get enough food. It also brought about a lack of job insecurity. Others include a lack of clean water, poor healthcare services, and most often resulting in abject poverty. In a similar line of this thought, Telsaçm and Özlem buttress thus:

If it is necessary to make an assessment based on economic reasons; it should be noted that issues such as lack of access to food, inaccessibility to health services, inaccessibility to clean water, insufficient wages, lack of job security, and unfair distribution of income trigger international migration movements. Migration due to economic reasons also creates strong effects. These effects directly affect the economy of both the origin country and the destination country.³⁰

One of the fundamental things noted from the above quotation lies in the fact that due to the poor economic situation affecting a given country, citizens from such poor economic nations, most often find their alternative means of survival and livelihood outside their country. In pursuit of this realization, many of these migrants often took to diverse means as routes to travel out. One implication about this is that in such a scenario, the employee supply for the country to which they aimed to travel, usually increases, while wages decrease correspondingly. Telsaçm and Özlem further summarized that; “A similar effect is experienced in rental houses and offices of the target country because, in line with the rising demand, rents increase at the same rate. It is also possible to talk about the existence of a placebo effect caused by immigration in the rise of rents. It also

creates negative effects for the country of origin. For example, areas that have lost population are difficult to develop and sometimes ghost villages and towns appear.”³¹

Politics and its Related Factors

Another significant factor that causes migration emanates from the issue of bad leadership and failed governance within the Nigerian State. Hence, in Nigeria, the problem of bad leadership has been identified as one of the reasons for citizens (women) migration from Nigeria to other countries; where they believe in conviction that they can get access to basic amenities provided by the government of such country. Because of bad leadership which has continued to bedevil the country, Benin women have over the years experienced exodus migration to different countries of the world. However, this factor is not peculiar to Benin Society, as I can confirm to you that this scenario, most likely happens in third-world countries. Nevertheless, it has been argued in recent research and oral interviews that the situation is particularly visible in Nigeria; where its citizens kept traveling out of the country on grounds of maladministration. For instance, during an oral interview conducted with one Mrs. Tina Eghosa around the age of fifty, several revelations were made by her. This woman traveled to the United States of America when she was in her early thirties. She lived there for about fifteen years but was an undocumented citizen. She came back to Nigeria when she lost her father, but could not travel back. Sharing some of the experiences she had then while in the USA, she confesses that part of the reasons most of them traveled out of the country then, was due to the issue of political instability. She further narrated that; “political reasons made up a large part of the migration movements occurring on a global scale.”³² She also told the correspondent that factors such as human rights violations due to political reasons, persecution, restriction of personal freedoms, inequalities, lack of judicial independence, and military coups constitute some of the main causes for Nigerian migration to foreign nations. Most often, this happens when a country keeps facing political instability and unrest. Whenever there is a force war, there is always its corresponding force migration. This, no doubt, explains the reality in Nigeria.

Human Trafficking as a Cause for Diaspora Migration

There is this common saying that poverty often leads to frustration and out of frustration and hunger one could be forced to go into any kind of act (moral and immoral) just to secure a means of livelihood. This is typically the situation in Nigeria. There is evidence of human trafficking within and out of Nigeria in recent times. At some point, in Nigeria, just like most of the African countries, women were considered to be inferior to their male counterparts. Hence, they were denied some fundamental responsibilities as well as denied access to different public jobs. As reported by Adepoju; “Gender discrimination and unequal working conditions make women and children particularly vulnerable as they are often trafficked into sex work under the guise of becoming waitresses or domestic help.”³³ This situation, affected the Benin women as most of them were victims of trafficking. Usually, the experience where once these women are recruited, traffickers rely on migrants’ unfamiliarity with a new environment, their lack of a social

support net, and their status as undocumented workers to exploit their labour for profit. The thought expression by Adepoju given the above had a more buttressing underpinning when Cox, Owen, and Picton *et al* in their research jointly elaborated that:

Xenophobia... leads many in receiving countries to view migrant women workers as aliens: as inferiors-culturally and socially; as a potential threat to stability; as ‘ fair game’, especially if they are women; without rights, or an ability to obtain redress; with ignorance – about the worker’s culture; as people apart isolated by language and culture, segregated because of differences which increase a sense of threat; as commodities and therefore subject to different standards of treatment, in general, there is widespread reporting of migrant workers being ill-treated, starved, locked up and so on; because of different ways of relating to women arising out of religion and culture making female workers more vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse.³⁴

This is typically one of the causes of women migration in Nigeria and the many-faceted challenges they face daily. An example of such practical experience in Nigeria, according to John and Faith “is the trafficking of teenage girls from Benin Kingdom to Lomé, Togo. The traffickers take the young girls through the West African borders to the Republic of Togo for orientation, which includes practicing prostitution. They are held there for several months until a host in Italy or France is prepared to receive them.”³⁵

Brain Drain as a Cause for Migration

Unlike in the past when Nigerian women were discouraged from going to school, today, on the contrary, they are encouraged to pursue Western Education. Recent data released by most of the international communities have shown that contemporary Nigerian women are seen performing ultimately and excellently in their respective and distinctive educational careers. The reality is that based on their excellent performances during their studies, upon the completion of their studies, these women are easily offered job opportunities. Apart from this, some of these professionals, who may not find a better job in their countries of origin, most often seek jobs in another country where their services are needed and treated with honour. In an oral interview conducted with one Mrs. Osasogie Eghe; a businesswoman, stated that brain drain is one of the major factors necessitating Diaspora migration in recent times amongst men and women from Nigeria, Africa, Asia, and other countries of the world. Mrs. Eghe who traveled to Europe in her late twenties, throws more light on the brain drain and its reason for migration in Nigeria. She stressed that brain drain has been seen most acutely in the healthcare sector; where most Nigerian professionals in the medical sector kept migrating to foreign countries where the health workers were highly in demand. Most of these nurses and health workers, according to her traveled more to Europe, especially in the United Kingdom, where their services are highly welcomed.

It is to be noted that while nurses and doctors who migrated to countries like Europe and North America, benefit more at an individual level through higher salaries. The receiving countries, on the other hand, win a disproportionate benefit through recruiting migrant labor at a

decreased cost rather than repairing the gaps that have been created in their systems. All of these, according to Mrs. Eghe, in turn, “leave developing countries forced to hire foreign professionals at an increased cost to account for these losses.”³⁶ Summarily, there are several causes of migration. In this paper, four of these causes have been highlighted and discussed.

Benin Women in Diaspora and Their Role in the Development of Nigeria

Studies have shown that the Nigerian women in Diaspora have variously and immensely, differently, contributed to the development of Nigeria. Their role ranges from self, family, community, and national development. In this section, an attempt is made to discuss some of the roles that the women in Benin played in the development of their self, their community and national building. It has been identified that Diaspora immigrants contributed in diverse ways, and one of such areas is household poverty alleviation. Commenting on the contribution of the Diaspora women to Household poverty alleviation, Diop and Julia D’Aloisio argue that; “Activities of African diasporas at the micro level are essentially private, personal and informal (as opposed to public and professional), starting with family and gradually extending to institutions that support the family such as schools and churches or temples, with its progression from remitting money to relatives to social investment in communities of origin, with a special emphasis on education.”³⁷ This explains that Benin Diaspora women contributed to tackling the socio-economic challenges of their families. They helped to train members of their families and raise money for the upkeep of their families.

Another area that women in the Diaspora contributed to their family and their state of origin lies in the area of the healthcare system. According to Young and Shih, “A significant proportion of remittances are used for education and health services for family members. Diaspora remittances have reportedly contributed immensely to female education, improved family health, and reduction in infant mortality rates.”³⁸ Many African Diaspora groups also operate scholarship programs for needy students pursuing secondary education in their home communities.” Besides the above, Benin women in the Diaspora also contributed to the area of small-scale business. In an oral interview conducted with Madam Iziegbe, whose occupation is trading, it was revealed that Nigerian Diasporas have supported the development of small-scale businesses. She stated that five out of her seven children live outside the country. And that all her properties in Benin and Lagos were bought by her children living in Overseas. According to her, “They bring stuff like used clothes, electronics, processed food items which she sells here in Nigeria. To her, the decision to send her first daughter to Europe when the daughter was about 19 years old has benefited her more.”³⁹ This said daughter, according to her, was responsible for the subsequent traveling of the other four children. These children have been able to build her a mansion in Benin, where she presently resides. Similarly, Babawale, in his work also confirms this by stating that; “such businesses include hairdressing, fitter mechanics, masonry, carpentry, arts and crafts, and family businesses, usually in the agricultural and retail sectors.”⁴⁰

Apart from direct investments in agricultural activities, there are also indications that the Nigerian women in the Diaspora promote more of their locally-produced foods than their western-

produced foods. Nigerian women, like other African migrants, have continued to prefer African foods to foreign foods in their foreign countries of residence. This according to Sander and Maimbo "...has given rise to several ethnic foods stores wherever significant populations of these immigrants reside."⁴¹ The Benin women have constantly, supported trading activities back home. They patronize their people by exporting local foodstuffs such as dried river fish, Crayfish, Egusi, Ogbolor, dried Okro, Vegetables, and Snails amongst others to their host countries either for personal use or commercial purposes. This food preference no gainsaying, contributes vigorously to job creation within and outside Nigeria. In the area of community and rural development, Nigerian women have also made a significant impact. There is little or no doubt that Nigerian Diasporas contribute substantially to community development by providing financial support for building schools, hospitals, and other service centers in their hometowns and villages.

Finally, Nigerian women in the Diaspora have also contributed in the areas of political and infrastructural development. These women, today, have gained more voice, recognition, and participation in the politics of Nigeria. They have greatly been seen in their wealth of wisdom and knowledge for their continuous role in bringing the dividend of democracy to the people. On infrastructural development, there is no denying the fact that the Benin women in Diaspora have made significant contributions. Studies have shown that most of the industries and businesses established here in Benin City are owned by (men and women) in the Diaspora. These businesses are either being managed by their immediate family members or their associates. In short, most of the technological equipment and tools we have today in Nigeria are brought into the country through the Nigerian Diaspora. Diaspora groups frequently play a critical role in accelerating technology exchange and foreign direct investment in their home economies.

Benin Women Living in Diaspora: Issues, Challenges and Prospects

Generally speaking, migrants often faced one challenge or the other in Diaspora. The same applies to women. While I agree that a vast majority if not all migrants are said to encounter some challenges in their countries of residence, on the contrary, women, unfortunately, are faced with more peculiar challenges than their men counterparts. This section, however, specifically tries to look at some of the challenges facing the Benin women in the Diaspora and some possible prospects as paradigms for resolving these challenges. Despite the great potential inherent in the women whom they sought to improve upon in foreign countries where they would be allowed to showcase their talents, there are, on the contrary, many challenges these women face as compared to men. For instance, in the course of their decision to migrate to other countries, many women tend to have unrealistic expectations. Most times, they usually lacked accurate and proper information on the migration policies, rules, laws, and regulations.

In oral documentation conducted with one Mrs. Imuetinyan Ighodaro, narrated how she made several attempts, to travel abroad because she wanted to make it big. At a point, according to her, "they loaded pineapples alongside with her and three girls from Katsina State through Morocco desert to Europe. She confessed how she was caught on two occasions before she succeeded in arriving in Libya."⁴² She got pregnant for an unknown man due to the constant rape

and molestation. While she was trying to cross the sea, her child fell into the river and died. Imuetinyan was among those that the former Governor of Edo State, Lucky Igbinedion's wife repatriated in 2005. She further narrated that Nigerian migrant women face multiple barriers. These barriers to migrants, according to her occur through regular channels, such as gendered bans on migration, violence, and abuse, discriminatory regulations for residence when depending on a spouse, and only limited access to travel documents. She went on to decry that when these "Nigerian women are faced with irregular migration; they most often face greater abuses during their journey in transit. They faced the same challenge even at the arrival of their destination."⁴³

Like the case of Nigeria, describing such a scenario being experienced in most other African countries and other migrants from across other third-world countries, Imuetinyan goes on to confirm that; "Women in transit may be at particular risk at international borders where special attention is required. Migrants of different genders experience migration and borders differently with a higher rate of mortality at the borders for women and gender non-conforming people than for men." It is paramount to state categorically that no international border can be a zone of exception when it comes to human rights protections. However, it is ironic that governments in most countries do not keep to their regulatory laws regarding migration policies. In most foreign countries, Nigerian migrants, especially their women are seen crossing borders seeking a safer and more secure future, yet these women migrants and asylum seekers' fundamental rights are daily being violated at borders. All of these call for curiosity and greater intellectual concern. Speaking on some of these challenges, Kwar opines thus:

As compared to men, women migrant workers tend to be concentrated in a more limited number of occupations. The migration of women is mostly unrelated to career advancement and skill acquisition. There is enough evidence to suggest that a significant number of migrant women possess skills and qualifications often not recognized or unneeded in the types of work that they perform. Many studies indicate that migration involves deskilling for some groups of women. For example, many Filipino women with college degrees work in domestic service or the entertainment industry.⁴⁴

The above experience(s) best describe the conditions and challenges of Nigerian women in the Diaspora. It was said earlier that most of Nigerian women traveled to foreign countries with skills or good job qualifications. In such a scenario, they most often ended up engaged in different sorts of immoral activities and practices just to earn a living. Such ill practices may include prostitution, child trafficking, and drug abuse amongst others. Kwar further adumbrated that women, more than men, "tend to occupy jobs within the informal sector which is not covered by any labor legislation or social protection. Women migrants themselves lack knowledge of their rights, fear the authorities, and are not organized."⁴⁵

Again, it was earlier established in this work that one of the causes for women's migration is to seek job opportunities. In like manner, most of the Benin women, today, travel out in search

of better jobs to take care of the multifaceted socio-economic challenges facing them as an individual, their immediate families, their community, and for the development of the Nigerian State, at large. In light of the Nigerian reality and predicament, Kavar explains this as follows; “From an individual perspective, most women migrate to overcome poverty and limited viable employment opportunities in their home country. Most see their employment as temporary to achieve certain personal or family objectives (savings to establish a business, build a house, pay debts or for the education of the children).”⁴⁶

These expectations are however marred by some critical challenges. Emphasizing more on this, Kavar goes on to capture her findings in the following phrase; “However, these objectives are difficult to achieve in the short term or over a single contract period due to a variety of reasons.” These reasons, she highlighted, include “Problems with debt bondage, withholding of wages, receiving fewer wages than the original contract, lack of knowledge on money management and savings, among many others.”⁴⁷ It can be seen from the above that the challenges of the Nigerian women living in the Diaspora are enormous. In most cases, there are also indications that the authorities in most destination countries treat Nigerian women migrants with racial discrimination and with little or no legal rights. In cases of exploitation and abuse, the judicial system is not always construed in favor of the abused worker. So far, having discussed some of these challenges, what then are some of the prospects to be recommended as solutions towards coming out of these quagmires?

In response to the above question, it is to be pointed out that despite the difficulties and constraints Benin women face in foreign countries, they (Benin women) are however, open to and offered more opportunities for jobs, financial independence, and improved status in their homes, communities, and country (Nigeria) of origin. Today, according to Mrs. Ruth Edegbe who traveled to the United Kingdom after her First Degree at the University of Lagos, for her Master’s and Doctorate Scholarship Programs, “Nigerian female migrants are now major contributors to their home country economies through their private remittances.” Currently, she is a Director in a federal establishment. To her, she had the best time of her life in Diaspora because she went with a purpose and she came back to contribute meaningfully to her community and the country (Nigeria) at large.⁴⁸ While it has been identified that most migrant lives are at risk in their country of residence, this study, however, recommends that the government of these said Diasporas countries should prioritize the act of saving lives. The lives of their citizens and those of the migrants must be given equal treatment. The respective countries should ensure migrants’ safeties are comprehensively given adequate attention. In addition to this, Diaspora countries must not externalize borders by funding migration to best meet international standards. It is sad that in most countries, such policy formulations are targeted at certain classes of migrants, especially those coming from third-world countries.

Furthermore, a thoroughgoing policy should be formulated and implemented to curb the daily practices of trafficking in persons which have been identified as one of the challenges of Benin women migrants in the Diaspora. Such laws and policies should be reviewed in Nigeria. In addition to the above, it recommended that Nigerian women like their Western counterpart, have

the human right to work, regardless of immigration status. Unfortunately, some countries do not recognize this obligation when it comes to Nigerian migrants. Women's labor migration is disproportionately precarious, in informal, unregulated sectors that put women outside the protection of labor law, with low wages, lack of opportunities for skills development and the risk of exploitation. Despite bringing a range of skills, migrant women are often confined mainly to service sector occupations in less regulated sectors such as cleaning, catering, hospitality, domestic and social care.

Conclusion

This study is a historical investigation into the causes of Benin women migration to Diaspora. Its set goal and objectives includes unraveling some of the issues, challenges and prospects of the Nigeria migrant women in Diaspora, and the impacts of their migration on Nigeria as well as the country of immigration. In Nigeria, it was discovered that some of the most fundamental causes of migration include such factors like lack of employment opportunity, political instability, bad leadership/governance, poor educational system, and the constant domestic violence against women which cumulated in act of human trafficking. These factors are interrelated and are common in other African countries. In Benin City, most of the women either emigrated due to lack of sustainable development or lack of access to much-needed resources for development. Besides these, other common factors that have continued to drive their migration include the daily crisis being witnessed in the country, banditry, kidnapping, political unrest, failed economy.

Again, this research also revealed that due to the poor and almost collapsed state of the Nigerian higher education system, Universities in the United Kingdom, North America, and South Africa often embarked upon recruitment drives for Nigerian students. The striking norms within the Nigerian State, no doubt made educational values in the country discouraging and valueless. Most of our Nigerian women therefore opted for foreign studies. And upon the completion of their program, a vast majority of them worked their way to secure a better job in the country of studies to retain their continuous living overseas. Adepoju argued that; "Nigerian female nurses and doctors have been recruited in large numbers to work in Europe, especially the United Kingdom, the United States, and Saudi Arabia."⁴⁹

In conclusion, this paper submits that while there are debates on the benefits and pitfalls of the Benin women's migration to western countries, one fact that Nigerians must accept is the fact that Nigerian women's migration to the Diaspora is gaining momentum, yearly. There is also no doubt that contemporary Nigerian women had different reasons for their travel abroad. Some were for educational pursuits, others traveled in search of better job opportunities, and some of these women joined their spouses and traveled to live together overseas. In Noll (2006)'s submission; "What has often been termed as the "migration bump" refers to the fact that migration will continue as long as there are large discrepancies between the income generated in the national and host

countries.”⁵⁰ Premise on the above reality, if Nigeria wants to curtail the present high rate of migration from the country, the government must be willing and proactive to provide the necessities of life. The government must also improve its economy and national security. If these factors are given adequate attention, the present high rate of emigration or immigration will certainly be curtailed, reduced, and brought under control.

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