

# **IMPACT OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION ON MENTAL HEALTH OF NIGERIAN FEMALE MIGRANTS: AN APPRAISAL OF SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS**

By

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## **Abstract**

The movement of Nigerian women through the harsh terrain of the Saharan Desert in search of better opportunities has become a growing global concern, driven by poverty, unemployment, and political instability. This study explores the mental health impact of irregular migration on Nigerian female migrants, using a social work perspective. Its objectives are to assess their mental health challenges and examine social work interventions that support their well-being. Trauma and ecological systems theories are applied to understand the emotional, psychological, and social effects of migration, emphasising care that considers individual experiences, social systems, and broader environmental factors. A qualitative content analysis approach was used to examine mental health issues and social work responses, revealing critical gaps in existing literature and data. Findings from Theme One show that Nigerian female migrants experience severe psychological distress, including PTSD, anxiety, and depression, often intensified by gender-based violence and post-migration challenges. Theme Two highlights the vital role of social workers in providing trauma-informed care, legal advocacy, and social support, which are essential in improving mental well-being and reducing psychological stress.

**KEYWORDS:** Irregular Migration; Mental Health Challenges; Migration; Social Work Interventions; Trauma-Informed Care

## **Introduction**

The movement of Nigerian women through the harsh terrain of the Saharan Desert in search of better opportunities is a growing global concern, largely driven by poverty, lack of employment, and political instability (Obikaeze & Iloh, 2023). During their journey, many of these women are exposed to significant dangers such as abuse and exploitation, which only serve to exacerbate their risks and suffering (García-León et al., 2024). While numerous studies have examined the economic and demographic aspects of migration, there is a noticeable lack of focus on how these experiences affect the mental health of Nigerian female migrants (García-León et al., 2024).

Many migrants endure emotional strain due to their uncertain legal situations, social rejection, and isolation (García-León et al., 2024). Factors such as level of education and marital status can also influence mental health outcomes (Obikaeze & Iloh, 2023). Social workers have an important role to play in helping these individuals cope, offering care, guidance, and opportunities to rebuild through healthcare and community-based support (Obikaeze & Iloh, 2023). For migrants to truly find stability in their new environments, access to robust mental health systems is essential (García-León et al., 2024). This research highlights the urgent need to study the psychological toll of irregular migration more deeply, as a means to shape meaningful intervention and policy efforts aimed at safeguarding those most at risk.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the study is to investigate the mental health impact of irregular migration on Nigerian female migrants through the Saharan desert from a social work perspective. The specific objectives are to:

- To assess the mental health challenges faced by Nigerian female migrants during irregular migration through the Saharan Desert.
- To explore social work interventions aimed at supporting the mental health and well-being of Nigerian female migrants in the context of irregular migration.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Framework:**

#### ***Trauma Theory***

Trauma theory provides a framework for understanding how painful and unsettling life experiences leave a lasting impact on individuals' emotions, thoughts and relationships. Drawing from various disciplines, including psychology, sociology and medicine, it goes beyond viewing a traumatic event as merely a moment in time. Instead, it examines how such experiences continue to shape a person's sense of safety, identity and belonging long after the event has passed (Runyon et al., 2024; Foli, 2021). Trauma may result from a single shocking incident, such as an assault or natural disaster, or from prolonged distressing circumstances such as abuse, forced migration or sustained discrimination. In this context, trauma becomes both a personal and collective experience, particularly among communities such as refugees, women or those living in conflict zones (Foli, 2021).

Over time, the theory has evolved to recognise how trauma is influenced by political and institutional structures. Scholars such as Thompson (2021) argue that trauma often mirrors broader societal issues and systemic injustices. Feminist theorists in particular highlight how experiences such as gender-based violence or restrictive immigration policies intensify trauma, especially for women and other marginalised groups. These perspectives illustrate how trauma can accumulate and be transmitted across generations. For example, women following irregular migration routes may

endure not only physical harm but also profound emotional trauma as a result of exclusion, mistreatment or neglect by society. From a social work standpoint, understanding trauma involves addressing not only internal emotional distress but also the external systems and conditions that perpetuate that suffering.

In response to the complex nature of trauma, a range of approaches has been developed to address this issue. One such model, the self-regulation shift model (Benight et al., 2018), emphasises empowering individuals to harness their inner strengths and coping mechanisms to restore stability. Other theories, such as the anxiety buffer disruption model and the conservation of resources theory, explore how trauma undermines a person's resilience by affecting their sense of self-worth and perceived access to resources (Runyon et al., 2024; Foli, 2021). These frameworks inform trauma-informed practices within social work that are sensitive to culture and identity. By considering aspects such as race, gender, class and background, these approaches aim to provide more equitable and holistic support, particularly for those affected by conflict, displacement or systemic marginalisation.

### ***Ecological Systems Theory***

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory outlines how human development occurs through layered environmental interactions rather than as an isolated process. The concept identifies multiple systems that shape individual growth, beginning with the microsystem, which encompasses daily influences such as family and peers, and extending to the macrosystem, which reflects broader forces such as societal norms and cultural beliefs. Situated between these are the mesosystem, which captures interactions between immediate environments (such as home and school), and the exosystem, which involves indirect influences (such as a parent's

job). The theory posits that these systems are interconnected, and changes in one area can trigger effects throughout the others (Tong & An, 2024).

Nevertheless, the framework has been critiqued for its limited focus on social inequalities. While it acknowledges environmental impact, it often downplays how racism, gender inequality and class structures can shape life experiences, particularly for marginalised groups (Renn & Smith, 2023; Tong & An, 2024). In migration contexts, for example, unequal access to services, discriminatory laws and anti-immigrant sentiment disproportionately affect women, necessitating revisions to the theory. Researchers have responded by adapting the model to incorporate greater attention to equity and health-related social determinants.

Furthermore, contemporary perspectives have expanded the model to include biological influences alongside environmental ones. These revisions recognise that development results not only from external surroundings but also from genetic and health-related traits. For instance, a child with a predisposition to anxiety may respond differently depending on whether their environment is supportive or stressful. These refinements enhance the theory's relevance across diverse societies and academic disciplines, including public health, education and community services (Gradinariu, 2022; Renn & Smith, 2023). Overall, the Ecological Systems Theory remains a valuable tool in the social sciences, particularly when adapted to reflect issues of inequality and diversity.

### **Application of Theories**

The impact of migration extends deeply into social life, with mental health emerging as one of the most affected areas. To understand this fully, it is essential to consider both trauma theory and ecological systems theory (Mai-Bornu & Allen, 2022; Ezeanolue et al., 2020). Trauma theory highlights the emotional toll migration takes, particularly when individuals are uprooted or subjected to violence. The concept of "chosen trauma" helps

explain how shared memories among Nigerian migrants contribute to shaping their sense of identity and resilience over time (Mai-Bornu & Allen, 2022).

In contrast, ecological systems theory provides a broader perspective by illustrating how various layers of influence, from the personal to the political can affect mental well-being (Adebayo, 2024). As economic conditions evolve, they continue to shape migration patterns, making it increasingly important to develop sustainable methods of supporting mental health and securing long-term funding (Abdulmalik et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the ongoing emigration of skilled workers creates ripple effects not only for the economy but also for individual and community well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of strategies, with social work playing a central role (Madubuko & Nwaka, 2024).

### **The Concept of Migration**

The movement of people from one country to another is driven by a complex web of personal and societal reasons. In the past, migration was often discussed with reference to specific events, such as large groups leaving East Africa for Europe due to safety concerns and a desire for improved living conditions. These decisions were frequently shaped by economic hardship and concerns about rights, particularly those affecting women and their safety (Tsegay, 2023; Surmanidze, 2023).

In today's world, the impact of global connections cannot be overlooked, as globalisation links nations together and shifts the dynamics between where people originate and where they go (Kappassova et al., 2024). More recently, migration has acquired new significance, with environmental challenges and climate pressures pushing people to relocate, making it crucial to include migrants' voices in these conversations (Praag, 2023). With politics, the economy, and environmental shifts all playing a role,

migration continues to spark debate and remains a key issue for researchers and policymakers alike (Loxa, 2024).

### **The Concept of Irregular Migration**

Irregular migration has become a significant global issue, affecting not only the lives of migrants but also the socio-political dynamics of host countries (Abbondanza, 2023). Irregular migration refers to the movement of people across borders without following the legal rules of the destination country, such as entering without valid documents or overstaying visas. It has become a major global issue because it affects migrants' safety and wellbeing and also influences the social and political systems of host countries (Abbondanza, 2023). At the heart of this phenomenon lies a combination of individual ambition for a better life and the shifting political landscapes shaped by new migration laws and regulations (Onguny, 2023). In many cases, strict and costly legal procedures leave aspiring migrants with few options other than informal routes (Megersa & Tafesse, 2024).

Multiple investigations have highlighted that decisions to migrate through unofficial means are often influenced by factors such as the number of dependants in a household and the local economic climate. For example, in areas such as Kembata-Tembaro, families with more members are more likely to consider these informal pathways due to economic hardship (Megersa & Tafesse, 2024). Conversely, when a region's economy improves, the inclination to migrate without documentation tends to decline, as individuals find more accessible routes within the legal framework (Restelli, 2023). These varied elements make irregular migration a crucial topic for continued research and thoughtful policy-making.

### **Mental Health Impact of Irregular Migration**

Irregular migration has significant psychological consequences for individuals, often increasing the likelihood of experiencing emotional

trauma, anxiety, depression, or stress-related disorders (IOM, 2022). Some researchers suggest that the challenges people face after arriving in a new location can exacerbate earlier traumatic experiences, particularly when adjusting to unfamiliar surroundings (Yılmaz et al., 2024; Lies et al., 2021). Nigerian women who migrate in this manner often encounter even greater challenges, including a higher risk of sexual abuse and unfair treatment during their journey and upon settlement (Bilewicz et al., 2024).

The fact that women frequently contend with specific forms of trauma means their emotional struggles can be even more pronounced. Many find themselves in situations where they are mistreated or exploited, leaving them feeling powerless and uncertain about the future (Yılmaz et al., 2024; Bilewicz et al., 2024). When these gender-related dangers intersect with the challenges of settling in a new environment, they can have a severe impact on mental health, underscoring the importance of support services tailored to address their specific needs (Yılmaz et al., 2024; Lies et al., 2021).

### **Migration through the Saharan Desert**

Female migrants crossing the Sahara Desert encounter numerous severe dangers, including extreme fatigue, violence, dehydration, human trafficking, and exploitation. The harsh desert environment demands significant physical strength, often resulting in severe exhaustion and health issues due to intense heat and a lack of essential resources (Adesanya et al., 2023). Many female migrants face abuse, both physical and sexual, as they pass through unsafe areas (Albert-Makyur & Mbanaso, 2022; Anyanwu & Oddih, 2023). Trafficking is another grim reality, with women, often vulnerable and desperate, being smuggled or forced into labour under horrific conditions (Albert-Makyur & Mbanaso, 2022; Anyanwu & Oddih, 2023). The lack of water means many walk for hours, sometimes days, with scarcely anything to drink (Adesanya et al., 2023).

Despite knowing the risks, many feel they have no choice. Back home, life may be filled with poverty, war, and little hope for change. These conditions drive people, particularly women, to make the difficult decision to leave in search of something better (Albert-Makyur & Mbanaso, 2022; Anyanwu & Oddih, 2023). Often, dreams of safety or earning a decent living feel more compelling than the fear of what might happen on the journey. Cultural expectations, too such as proving oneself or lifting one's family out of hardship, can add further pressure to take the leap (Adesanya et al., 2023; Albert-Makyur & Mbanaso, 2022).

### **Social Work Interventions**

Social work interventions that address the needs of migrant populations, particularly in relation to mental health, are both complex and essential in supporting these vulnerable groups. Research has demonstrated that social support plays a significant role in shaping mental health outcomes among migrants, with increased levels of support linked to reduced psychosocial stress and improved overall mental well-being (Pan et al., 2021). This highlights the role of social workers in helping individuals connect with supportive networks and using approaches sensitive to past trauma (Wang, 2021).

Social workers also contribute by offering emotional guidance through one-on-one support or community-based reintegration activities. While detailed studies on their direct involvement are somewhat limited, many mental health workers are known to collaborate with social workers in migrant-focused work (Guo et al., 2023). Furthermore, navigating legal systems is another area where social workers intervene, advocating for migrant rights and helping to alleviate legal-related stress, which can impact mental health (Nasrudin & Resosudarmo, 2023). Research emphasises the importance of social work efforts, such as community outreach and legal advocacy, in

addressing both emotional needs and legal challenges faced by migrant groups (Long et al., 2020).

### **Methodology**

This research employed qualitative content analysis to explore existing literature on the mental health issues experienced by Nigerian female migrants during irregular migration across the Saharan Desert, as well as the social work responses addressing these challenges. The method was suitable for uncovering recurring themes, patterns, and gaps within various sources, such as peer-reviewed journals, NGO case studies, and reports from organisations like the IOM (International Organisation for Migration). Data were collected from academic databases using specific keywords, and the selected texts were manually coded to identify themes related to trauma and available support systems. The study faced limitations, including a scarcity of literature focusing specifically on this demographic and potential biases related to language and publication.

## **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

### **Theme One: Mental Health Challenges Faced by Nigerian Female Migrants**

Nigerian women migrating irregularly through the Saharan Desert experience significant psychological distress, which is further compounded by their pre- and post-migration experiences. Research indicates a heightened likelihood of PTSD, anxiety, and depression, particularly due to the harsh conditions of the desert and the risks of exploitation (Yılmaz et al., 2024; Lies et al., 2021). The IOM (2023) reports that 40% of women experience anxiety and depression during their desert passage, a figure higher than that observed in men.

Specific gender-based threats, such as sexual violence and trafficking, exacerbate these mental health struggles, often leaving women feeling powerless and fearful (Bilewicz et al., 2024). MSF (2022) case studies

highlight that many women arriving in Europe display signs of PTSD, primarily due to physical and sexual abuse, with numerous others feeling emotionally isolated and disempowered in unfamiliar environments. Post-migration challenges, such as a lack of stable employment, housing instability, and anxiety about deportation, further aggravate the trauma.

According to Lies et al. (2021), nearly 60% of female migrants experience significant stress after migration. The combination of gender-based violence, pre-migration trauma, and the hardships faced upon arrival underscores the necessity of providing mental health care that is both gender-sensitive and trauma-informed. These findings highlight the urgent need for targeted support that addresses both the psychological and structural issues affecting Nigerian female migrants.

### **Theme Two: Evaluation of Social Work Interventions**

The involvement of social workers is crucial in addressing the mental health challenges faced by migrant groups, particularly Nigerian women involved in irregular migration. Studies show that social support is vital in reducing psychological stress and improving mental health outcomes. For instance, research by Pan et al. (2021) indicates that stronger social support contributes to enhanced mental well-being. Trauma-informed care provided by social workers plays a key role in helping migrants feel part of their new communities, thus reducing feelings of isolation and promoting a sense of belonging (IOM, 2022).

Insights from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, 2022) and the Refugee Council (2023) highlight that 70% of Nigerian women receiving counselling reported improvements in PTSD and anxiety symptoms, and 58% saw overall mental health benefits from the support offered. Legal advocacy also proves valuable, as Nasrudin & Resosudarmo (2023) found that it helps ease the psychological stress stemming from uncertain legal situations. While specific studies on social workers in this field are limited,

Guo et al. (2023) suggest that collaborating with psychologists and legal professionals results in more holistic care. Social work techniques, such as community outreach, direct support, and advocacy, are essential in addressing the varied needs of female migrants and reducing the risks to their mental health (Long et al., 2020).

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Social workers play a significant role in advocating for policies that are both comprehensive and sensitive to gender, particularly when it comes to safeguarding Nigerian female migrants and addressing the specific mental health challenges they encounter during migration. A vital recommendation is the encouragement of safe, regular migration routes, in line with the goals of the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2022), to promote SDG Goal 10, which aims to reduce inequalities and enhance migration management.

According to Pan et al. (2021), higher social support has been linked to decreased psychosocial stress and improved mental health, reinforcing the need for trauma-informed approaches and community-based interventions. Social workers are instrumental in championing legal protections for female migrants against gender-based violence, as this type of trauma significantly worsens mental health outcomes (Bilewicz et al., 2024). Guo et al. (2023) suggest strengthening cooperation between social workers, mental health experts, and legal advocates to holistically meet the diverse needs of migrants.

Furthermore, improving access to mental health care through reintegration programmes and counselling is essential for mitigating post-migration stress (MSF, 2022). Nasrudin & Resosudarmo (2023) emphasise the need for policy changes to remove barriers to legal and social care, ensuring that migrant women receive the psychological and legal support they need promptly. Ultimately, embedding social work practices within migrant and

refugee services offers a thorough framework to address both the psychological and legal difficulties that Nigerian female migrants face, helping to alleviate the compounded trauma they experience (Yilmaz et al., 2024; Long et al., 2020).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explores how travelling through the Saharan Desert affects the mental health of Nigerian women attempting to migrate. Their journey is far from safe, as they endure extreme exhaustion, dehydration, violence, sexual abuse, and even human trafficking. All these factors contribute to significant emotional and mental health challenges. Studies indicate that approximately 40% of these women suffer from major anxiety or depression during the journey, and nearly 60% experience severe stress upon arrival in another country (IOM, 2023; MSF, 2022). Many of these women show signs of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), particularly those who arrive in Europe. This is often due to the experiences they endured along the way, including sexual violence, emotional isolation, and constant fear. The impact is often more severe for women, as they face specific dangers that men typically do not, such as rape, human trafficking, and continuous threats to their safety.

Even after the journey ends, the trauma frequently persists. These women often encounter new challenges, including unemployment, lack of safe housing, and legal difficulties. These problems only worsen their emotional distress. On a more positive note, support is available. When women receive counselling or emotional assistance from trained professionals or social workers, their mental health often improves. Research suggests that around 70% report reduced anxiety and fewer trauma-related symptoms.

Access to legal aid also has a notable impact, as it helps ease the stress caused by an uncertain legal status. Social workers who facilitate connections with others in similar situations also play a vital role in

reducing stress (MSF, 2022; Refugee Council, 2023). However, the support available is often insufficient. There is a shortage of resources and adequately trained personnel to provide the necessary care. Therefore, while social work and counselling are undoubtedly beneficial, broader systemic changes are essential, such as improved migration policies, safer travel routes, and wider access to mental health services.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To address the identified challenges, social work practice must be multifaceted and appropriately targeted:

- Implement trauma-informed interventions that acknowledge the complexity of trauma experienced by irregular migrants—including gender-based violence—and promote empowerment and self-regulation.
- Facilitate access to legal support through advocacy programmes that assist migrants in obtaining documentation, navigating immigration processes, and seeking redress for gender-based violations.
- Strengthen community connections through peer-led support groups, cultural orientation, and collaborative partnerships with local NGOs to reduce isolation and stigma.
- Build institutional capacity by training social workers in trauma psychology, cross-cultural communication, and crisis response; and by integrating mobile mental health units at key migration points.
- Engage policymakers by disseminating evidence from this and related research to influence humanitarian funding, immigration reform, and gender protection legislation.

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