

# The Experience of Gambian Migrants in Libya: Understanding Factors that Influenced their Returned

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the experience of Gambian migrants in Libya. The article explores the root causes of irregular migration and factors that influence migrants to return. The article adopted a qualitative method and used a case study design to generate data from different sets of returnees. The study uses in-depth interviews with 50 returnees to enrich the data generated from secondary literature and official reports. The article also assesses the reintegration and support programs offered to returnees to enable them to effectively resettle in the Gambia. While the article underscores the grave implication of irregular migration on the development of the Gambia and the lives of the migrants, significant progress has been made by the government of the Gambia and partners towards the governance of migration. The study found that even though irregular migration still happens in the Gambia, the rate and magnitude have reduced. The article recommends remodeling agriculture and making it enticing for young people as well as supporting young people in entrepreneurship will provide a lasting solution to irregular migration

**Keywords:** Irregular migration, returned, Reintegration

## BACKGROUND INTRODUCTION

This study will explore the experience of Gambian migrants in Libya and examine factors that influence their return to Gambia. The study will also provide an in-depth inquiry into the push factors of irregular migration in the Gambia. The article will also analyze the governance of migration in the Gambia and assess the institutions and policies that coordinate migration governance in the Gambia. The article will also explore the reintegration programs and types of support provided to migrant returnees in the Gambia.

Africa has witnessed an increasing swell of migration in the last three decades. According to studies done by Villa and Pavia (2023) in 2022 136,000 migrants mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa landed in Italy using the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. The African Center for Strategic Studies (2022), indicated that 44% of all irregular migrants originate from Africa. They pointed out that the total of displaced migrants from Africa stood at 36 million in 2022, a 12% increase in comparison to 2021. Studies have shown that the Gambia constitutes a major segment of the African migrants' statistics. Faal (2020) contends that in 2016, out of the 181,436 migrants who arrived in Italy, 11,929 were Gambians. This number represents a 41% increase from 2015 when the number of Gambian migrants in Italy were 8,454. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees (2016), 27% of these migrants were Unaccompanied and Separated Children. Faal (2020) argues that the Gambia is where high number of migrations in Italy occurs. Armitano (2017) provides that in Spain, 8% of the irregular migrants who arrived in 2016 were Gambians. The report provides that between 2014 and 2019, about 40,000 Gambians, mostly youth, entered Europe by travelling

‘illegally’, across the Sahara and Mediterranean to Italy and Spain. Youth migrate from Africa to Europe across the Sahara Desert, and into Libya or Morocco, where they catch up with boats to Italy and other European destinations. Every stage of this journey involves great danger for the migrants. Clemens (2011) argues that the reason for irregular migration is to alleviate poverty among families in Africa.

Studies have shown that recently, significant progress has been made in migration policy and governance in the Gambia. The government of the Gambia has commissioned the National Coordination Mechanism on Migration to provide governance on migration trends through inclusive youth empowerment programs. In 2020 according to IOM, Gambians accounted for 8.1 percent of the total irregular migrants representing the sixth most common nationality of irregular migration in Africa. Cham & Ilke (2023) contends that the government of the Gambia developed the National Development Plan, they maintain that IOM also developed a Migration Profile report for the Gambia, which set out the main policy framework for dealing with Gambian migrants and is incorporated in the National Development Plan. The National Development Plan and its successor Plan the Green Recovery Development Plan provides the government of the Gambia’s commitments to deliver effective governance of irregular migration. IOM (2022) maintains that the government of the Gambia set up a Gambia Diaspora Directorate to prevent Irregular migration and strengthen Global Migration Dialogues and Bilateral Engagement with the European Union (EU). Cham and Trauner (2023) contend that the EU provides the biggest support to the government of the Gambia’s migration governance. Bah & Batista (2022) argue that in 2020, the EU provided €365 million and also provided €38.95 million from the EU Technical Fund to development agencies working in Gambia to provide skill and employability programs for youth in the country. They maintain that the Gambia is part of the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration. IOM (2020) maintains that the initiative is funded by the governments of Germany and Italy to provide enhanced capacity building and business support programs for Gambian youth to enable them to stay in the Gambia. IOM and the government of the Gambia provide support for the voluntary return of Gambians in Libya and provide business enhancement training and grants to facilitate their reintegration IOM (2022). This study is guided by the following objectives:

- To understand the reasons for irregular migration in the Gambia
- To understand the experience of Gambian migrants in Libya
- To understand factors that influence the return of Gambian migrants

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Concept of Irregular Migration

Irregular Migration is the movement of people over some distance from one place of residence to another without following the legal process of traveling. Khalil (2022) describes irregular migration as crossing the boundaries of a defined place by one or more persons involved in a change of residence. Kostas (2017) contends that an irregular migrant is a person who does not possess legal status in a transit or host country. He noted that people go on irregular migration for educational or economic opportunities that their home countries fail to provide them.

Armitano (2017) argues that irregular migration includes movement of many kinds, such as people leaving their countries of origin for economic reasons or to join their families abroad. She argues that Irregular Migration is a complex and multidimensional process that involves different motivations, with far-reaching consequences on the individual and the places of origin and destination. Doofan and Udo (2022) agree that irregular migration continues to have sweeping implications for the African economy. They argue that as a result of irregular migration, Agriculture and other productive sectors of the African economy are stagnated.

Awumbila and Manuh (2008) maintain that migration is a long historical phenomenon that is beyond a

single nation. They point out that movement is an integral part of human existence. The World Migration Report (2022) reveals that the number of migrants across the world as of 2022 stands at 281 million people which represents 3% of the world's population. According to IOM, 50% of this number is economic migrants.

Mehta (2019) claims that unemployment, and conflict produced by bad governance in Africa have been the main cause of irregular migration. He points out that the search for freedom and the pursuit of socio-economic advancement has driven many to undertake irregular migration. Scholars have noted that the implication of irregular migration on the development of Africa is grim, ranging from low development in the productive sectors to the death of viable human capital in Africa. Bah & Batista (2022) reason that from 2017 the rate of irregular migration from The Gambia fell. They claim that this is inspired by the country transitioning from a dictatorship to a democratic government after the 2016 election. The number of migrants according to Bah and Bastista fell from 8,522 in 2017 to only 394 migrants in 2019 and 285 in 2020. This trend is linked to the democratization in the country and the empowerment projects initiated by the EU and other development Cooperation.

### **The concept of Returned**

Migration scholars disagree on the process involved in a migrant's decision to return to their home countries. Schayk (2014) argues that migrant's decision to return to their home countries is often informed by several reasons. He noted that migrants may return to their home countries based on personal, economic, or social reasons. Batistella (2018) also agrees that migrants' return could also be triggered by socio-political phenomena in a host country. Von and Elbert, (2008) argue that uncertain social status in the destination country, discrimination, and language barrier could also facilitate the return of migrants. Waldorf (1995) emphasizes that security and limited economic opportunities for migrants in the countries of destination are part of the reasons forcing migrants to return. Paparusso (2017) also strengthened this argument, he argues that uncertainty for migrants to have economic opportunities results in migrants' decision to return.

Carling and Pettersen (2014) claim that men constitute the highest percentage of return migrants in Africa. He reasons that men often return amidst difficult conditions in host countries due to their strong family ties at home. He suggests that men in their late ages often return as part of their retirement plans. Kebbeh (2013) maintains that migrants' decision to return could also be linked with socio-political improvement in their countries or degeneration in socio-political order in countries of destination. Scholars such as Asampong (2013) agree with Kebbeh. He attributes the volume of irregular migration in Africa to the failure of governance. He claims that improvement in governance in Africa will result in a significant return of migrants to their countries.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### **Pull and Push Theory**

Ravenstein (1885) conceptualized the Pull and Push Migration theory from one of his seminal writings, The Law of Migration. This theory explains how and why migration within or across borders occurs. Some scholars view the push-pull model of migration as too simplistic, Haas (2007) argues that there is merit in the simple notion of the push-pull model. He noted that with its in-built and empirically grounded idea, this theory explains holistically the structural forces that shape migration processes in the world. He contends that explaining migration has conventionally focused on disparities in conditions between place of origin and place of destination. Todaro (1969) posited that migrants were pushed by low incomes in their countries and pulled by better prospects in more affluent areas. Castle (2004) differs from this approach. He argues

that long-standing inequities deriving from centuries of poor countries being exploited by rich ones drove migration, which he points out was perpetuated by the structures of labor markets in richer countries. Haas (2007) contends that migration is influenced by governance failures in countries of origin. Lee (1966) revealed that the desire for opportunities and improvement of one’s life motivates migrants to travel illegally. He confirms that migration takes place when Pull factors outweigh the Push factors. Myrdal (1957) strengthened Lee’s larger concept. He argues that only Push factors are responsible for international migration. Many migration scholars agree that there is a nexus between both, Vanhear (nd) argues that the combination of “Push” and “Pull” factors is responsible for the migrant’s decision to leave their countries. Tapinos (1990) suggests that poverty is not necessarily the factor of irregular migration. He stresses that it is not only the poor who migrate. His view is that governance is a critical push factor of international migration. The United Nations Development Program (2009) also noted that while there may be a strong relationship between migration and poverty, poverty in itself may not be a driver of migration. According to them migrants generally come from countries where democratic rules are absent.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study adopted a qualitative research method. The study utilized multiple case studies as a research design to generate data across various returnee groups and types. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 50 returnees to collect data for this study. The study also used secondary data and literature from IOM to facilitate cross-pollination of data for this study. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed after each stage of the interview. I employ a thematic analysis approach to identify themes and patterns across all datasets. This study has complied with all the ethical considerations for scientific research.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The reasons for irregular migration in the Gambia**

<b>Why do you undertake irregular migration</b>	<b>Response</b>
Economic	37
Security	11
Education	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

Table: Source, Author’s Field research 2023

The findings of this study revealed that economic opportunities constitute the major reason for the irregular migration of youth in the Gambia. The findings show that 37 of the returnees constituting 74% indicated a lack of economic opportunities as reasons for their migration. The findings show that very few employment opportunities existed for youth in the Gambia. The findings show that unemployment is the major push factor towards irregular migration from The Gambia. The findings from the respondents aligned with the larger scholarship and reports on migration in the Gambia. Youth unemployment is prevalent in the Gambia and almost 41.5% of the youth population are affected. The study shows that the rural areas in the Gambia are most affected by unemployment which explains the higher percentage of youth in the rural areas constituting 69.4% embarking on irregular migration. The findings show that youth in the Gambia are typically employed in low-quality and informal jobs. The findings reveal that school drop-out between the age of 15 and 19 is common in rural areas, due to the perception of many that education has little return for them. This based on the findings exposed youth to irregular migration.

The findings also show that 11 of the respondents indicated security concerns in the country that informed

their migration decision. Based on the findings, this period was between 2016 and 2017 during the political impasse in the Gambia. Most of the people in this category cited their differences in political opinion and feared for their lives if the former regime remained in power. Only 2 of the respondents based on the findings of this study revealed education as a reason for their migration. Generally, the study show concern for economic hardship and challenges in getting decent jobs in the Gambia as factors that inform the migration decision of many youth and women in the Gambia.

### Employment to population ratio in the Gambia

Region Administrative areas	Employment Percentage%
Banjul (Urban)	9.7%
Kanifing (urban)	29
Brikama (urban)	8.2%
Janjangureh	3.1%
Mansakonko	4.1%
Basse	5.1
Kerewan	3.7%
Kuntaur	4.0%
National Average	7.6%

Table 2: Source, Gambia Labour Force Survey 2023

The table shows that irregular migration is higher in the regional administrative areas in the Gambia. The finding shows that the unemployment rate in the Gambia was 41.5%. The findings revealed that, based on the Gambia Labour Force Survey 787,811 persons were outside the labor force including 86,204 persons engaged wholly or mostly in subsistence agriculture. The study found that the percentage of the working-age population engaged in the productive sectors of the labor force was 43.6%. This shows the challenges youth in the Gambia face in entering the labor market and accessing quality jobs. The finding also revealed a similar situation for women. According to the findings, the youth’s labor force participation is 38.8% and the adult’s 53.5% respectively. The finding shows that almost half of the youths in the Gambia are underutilized.

### Experience of Gambian migrants in Libya

Question	Yes	No	Percentage
Have you been jailed in Libya?	50	00	100%
Have you been abused in Libya?	50	00	100%
Do you feel safe in Libya?	50	00	100%
Total	50	00	100%

Table 3: Author’s field research 2023

The table shows the returnees interviewed during the study. The findings show that in Libya, immediately after migrants arrive, they are arrested and detained in camps run by different rebel groups. All the returnees interviewed during this study indicated that Libya is prone to high levels of violence and that the migrants

are always victims of such crossfire. Based on the testimonies of the respondents during this study, hundreds of migrants die in detention camps mainly through hunger. The findings revealed worrying human rights violations in Libya. Based on the findings of this study the human rights of migrants in Libya are grossly violated without any intervention from the Libyan authorities. All the respondents revealed that even when migrants are contracted by some Libyans to work for them, they are often not paid wages and when they complain, they are subjected to torture and abuse. The findings show that migrant women are equally abused and their sexual rights violated.

The findings show that migrants suffer tragic shipwrecks and loss of direction in Libyan waters in their desires to travel to Italy or Spain. According to the findings from IOM in 2019, 62 Gambian youth died in a tragic shipwreck on the Coast of Mauritania heading to Libya. The findings also revealed that boats loaded with migrants in the cost of Libya went missing for months without trace. The study found out that almost 200 youths from the village of Gunjur in the Gambia on a boat in Libya have gone missing since 2022. The study also shows that in 2021, 95 migrants from the Gambia died on their way to Europe from Libya.

### Factors that influence the return of Gambian migrants

The study found various factors that influence the migrant’s return to the Gambia. The data collected and the interview reveal that the decision to return to Gambia is influenced by health issues, financial considerations, and fatigue.

#### Health Concern

Question	Reason	Respondents	Percentage %	Total interviewees
Why do you return to Gambia?	Health	21	42%	50

Table 4: Author’s fieldwork

21 of the Respondents in this study representing 42% indicated that they decided to return to the Gambia due to health reasons. They revealed that they decided to return after falling sick severely in Libya. One of the respondents revealed that he decided to come home because he could not tell whether he would survive the sickness. He indicated that he gave up and decided to come back to his family alive. Another respondent also revealed that he fell sick seriously and it wasn’t getting any better. He revealed that he thought he would die if he should continue to stay in Libya. He noted that he told IOM authorities to return him to the Gambia. Another interviewee revealed that he had an accident in Libya which made him disabled. He revealed that because of this challenge, he could not do anything for himself so he decided to return home.

#### Fatigue

Question	Reason	Respondents	Percentage %	Total interviewees
Why do you return to Gambia?	Fatigue	5	10%	50

Table 5: Author’s fieldwork

The study observed that one of the reasons that influenced migrants to return to Gambia was Fatigue. Five of the respondents interviewed noted that they were tired and fed up. One of the interviewees noted that he spent five years in Libya under terrible conditions. He noted that he had trauma due to maltreatment. He revealed that his entire body was in serious pain and that he was exhausted and couldn’t do anything meaningful for himself. He noted that he decided to return home voluntarily to begin a new life in the Gambia.

### Exploitation of migrants

Question	Reason	Respondents	Percentage %	Total interviewees
Why do you return to Gambia?	Exploitation	24	48%	50

Table 6: Author’s fieldwork

24 of the returnees interviewed representing 48% indicated fear of exploitation which made them return home. One of the respondents revealed that criminals would enter his house and request him to give them money he worked for or else risk his life. The findings from the respondents revealed that they were beaten even while they were asleep by their masters. The finding revealed such constant exploitation influenced many Gambian migrants in Libya to return home. The evidence from returnees interviewed shows that Smugglers demand ransoms from family members of migrants when migrants run out of money and can no longer pay, the finding shows that smugglers are often violent and even kill migrants. The evidence from one of the returnees interviewed revealed that Smugglers kill migrants in Libya when migrants’ families delay paying ransom. One of the respondents revealed that kidnappers often torture migrants and call their families so that they can hear what is happening and demand money for the safe release of the migrants. Another respondent revealed that one of his colleagues was killed brutally by kidnappers because his family delayed sending money. One of the interviewees noted that his father in The Gambia had to sell his compound to pay the kidnappers who insisted that they would kill him if the family failed to pay the ransom.

### Number of Voluntary returned Gambian Migrants from 2017-2023

Year	Number of voluntarily returned migrants	Total voluntary returned
2017-2018	6,000	13,362
2019-2020	5,000	
2021-2022	1,162	
2023	1,200	

Table 7: Source Altai Consulting for the EUTF 2022

The table shows that over 6,000 stranded migrants in Libya were supported by IOM to return to The Gambia in 2017-2018. The study found that from 2019 to 2020, IOM supported 5,000 Voluntary Returns migrants to the Gambia. Based on the findings of this study 1,162 voluntary returnees were also assisted to return to the Gambia from 2021 to 2022 and a further 1,200 returnees were voluntarily returned to the Gambia in 2023 with support from IOM through EU cooperation.

### Reintegration of the returned migrants in the Gambia

The study found that the government of the Gambia with its Partner IOM and the EU have taken steps to solve the economic challenges of youth. The government’s policy directives have paid great attention to creating employment and opportunities for young people in the Gambia. The National Development Plan (2018-21) and the Green Recovery Development Plan (2022-2026), have provided adequate attention to providing skills training to young Gambians and make investing in youth a critical government priority. The study found that the government is also embarking on economic reform programs and places the private sector as an engines of growth. The finding shows the government of the Gambia has developed an employment strategy and has committed to creating 150, 000 new jobs by the end of 2026. This will provide an effective reintegration for migrant returnees in the Gambia.

**Government programs towards job creation for migrant returnees**

Project	Description	Implementing institution
Youth Empowerment Grant	Provides 50 thousand Dalasi equivalent to 1000 USD for youth to start small business	NEDI
Youth Revolving Loan	Provides 500 thousand Dalasi equivalent to 10,000 USD to start a small business	SDF
Skills development	Provided grant support to returnees to learn skills to enable them to get employed	NYSS

Table 8: Authors’ Fieldwork 2023

From the table, the study shows that the Government of the Gambia initiated business support and skill acquisition programs to enable migrant returnees to reintegrate and create employment for themselves through entrepreneurship and skill development. The study found that the government through the youth fund has provided grant support and loans to up to 300 migrant returnees to enable them to reintegrate and start a business venture. Through the National Youth Service Scheme, the finding shows that up to 200 youth including returnees have been trained in various sectors of skill to enable them to become self-employed.

**EU initiatives towards job creation for migrant returnees**

Project	Description	Implementing institution
EU-IOM program for Migrant Protection & Reintegration	Migrants who returned voluntarily with IOM	IOM
Gambia Youth Empowerment Project (YEP)	Migrants who returned voluntarily, but without IOM assistance	International Trade Centre (ITC)
Building a Future, Make it in The Gambia (Tekki-Fii)	Migrants who returned involuntarily from Europe	GIZ, ENABEL, IMVF, ITC

Table 9: Source Altai Consulting for the EUTF 2022

The finding shows that the EU Emergency Trust Fund started working in The Gambia in 2017. It was found that the EU projects in the Gambia were to provide Migration prevention, through the implementation of awareness-raising initiatives and protection of migrants, to facilitate the return and reintegration of Gambian nationals, and to strengthen migration governance of the government. The study also found that the EU supports the development of employment opportunities for the youth, to tackle the root causes of irregular migration. The EU provided support to migrant returnees through capacity building, financing support, mentoring, and career guidance to enable returnees to effectively reintegrate into the Gambia.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

To sustain the solutions to irregular migration requires a response from all stakeholders to reduce the number of victims, reintegrate the returned, and provide hope for the returnees. The fundamental basis for control of irregular migration is good governance practices which will strengthen economic opportunities for youth in the country. More awareness should be provided at the local and national levels to de-escalate the trend. Remodeling agriculture to make it enticing for youth and provide a sustainable financing scheme for youth who wish to venture into the business, increasing access to education and vocational training for young people in the region. This would provide them with more opportunities to find meaningful employment and reduce their incentive to undertake dangerous and illegal journeys.



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