

Securitisation of Visa Regimes and Diplomatic Reciprocity: Socio-Economic Implications for Nigerians

Dennis Olufemi Olafeso

Women University in Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the securitisation of visa regimes and diplomatic reciprocity shape the international mobility and socio-economic opportunities of Nigerians. A structured qualitative critical review was undertaken using 20 scholarly sources published mainly between 2020 and 2026, supplemented by official visa and mobility statistics from the European Commission, the United Kingdom Home Office and ECOWAS. Sources were screened for direct relevance to visa governance, migration securitisation, diplomatic reciprocity, Nigerian or West African mobility, and socio-economic outcomes. The evidence was analysed thematically across six domains: security governance, diplomatic reciprocity, education, tourism, business and professional mobility. The review finds that security-based visa governance can differentiate access to legal mobility through nationality-based risk assessment, documentation demands, refusal decisions and policy changes. These effects may be amplified when visa policy becomes a tool of diplomatic response. Nigeria-specific evidence illustrates the scale of exposure: the Schengen short-stay visa refusal rate for applications lodged in Nigeria reached 45.9% in 2024, while UK policy changes were accompanied by a sharp decline in Nigerian sponsored-study visa grants between 2022 and 2024. The study argues for transparent, proportionate and evidence-based visa governance, stronger Nigerian migration diplomacy, and improved implementation of ECOWAS free-movement commitments.

Keywords: visa securitisation; diplomatic reciprocity; international mobility; Nigeria; migration governance

INTRODUCTION

Visas, passports and border controls are central instruments through which states classify and regulate international mobility. Although visas are routinely presented as administrative authorisations, they also express judgments about sovereignty, security, diplomatic trust, migration risk and the perceived value of different forms of mobility. Ullah et al. (2024) describe passports and visas as core technologies for regulating movement in a globalised system, while Mégret (2024) shows that visa law institutionalises substantial state discretion in everyday mobility. Within the broader securitisation of migration, entry controls may be linked to concerns about irregular migration, transnational crime, terrorism and border management (Givens, 2025; Bhanye & Shayamunda, 2025). However, restrictive mobility governance cannot be explained by security alone because historical relations, domestic politics, administrative capacity and economic interests also influence immigration control (Vigneswaran, 2020; Natter, 2024).

These issues have particular significance for Nigerians because international mobility is closely connected to education, tourism, trade, employment, professional development and family networks. Nigeria is also embedded in the ECOWAS regional mobility system, whose 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment remains a foundational instrument of regional integration. ECOWAS continues to identify free movement as a key pillar of regional integration, while acknowledging implementation obstacles and emerging migration-management challenges (ECOWAS, n.d.). Scholarship nevertheless documents tensions between formal regional mobility commitments and restrictive border practices in West Africa (Aniche, 2022; Omotuyi et al., 2024).

Visa policy also has a diplomatic dimension. States may modify entry conditions, fees, processing arrangements or other treatment in response to how their own nationals are treated abroad. Reciprocity can

therefore operate as diplomatic signalling and as an assertion of sovereign equality. Yet the costs of reciprocal measures are often borne by ordinary travellers rather than governments. For Nigerians, this raises a central question: when security-oriented visa governance interacts with diplomatic reciprocity, what consequences follow for lawful mobility and socio-economic opportunity? Existing literature addresses migration securitisation, African mobility, border governance and Nigerian migration diplomacy, but these strands are not always synthesised around the lived opportunity structure facing Nigerian travellers (Laube, 2021; Ochogwu & Babatunde, 2023; Teye, 2022).

The study therefore pursues the following objectives:

1. Examine how visa securitisation and diplomatic reciprocity interact in shaping international mobility involving Nigerians.
2. Assess the socio-economic implications of these practices for Nigerians, with particular attention to education, tourism, business, employment and professional mobility.

The corresponding research questions are:

1. How do the securitisation of visa regimes and diplomatic reciprocity shape international mobility involving Nigerians?
2. What socio-economic implications do these practices generate for Nigerians?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visa Regimes and Mobility Governance

Visa regimes differentiate travellers according to nationality, purpose of travel, duration of stay, documentation, financial capacity and other eligibility criteria. Their legal form is administrative, but their distributional effects are political. Ullah et al. (2024) emphasise the regulatory function of passports and visas, while Mégret (2024) argues that the travel visa is a pervasive legal infrastructure through which mobility can become unequal and discretionary. Visa policy therefore creates different mobility prospects: some passport holders enjoy visa-free or simplified entry, whereas others face fees, interviews, extensive documentation, long processing periods and a material risk of refusal.

This differentiated system should not be reduced to a single security logic. Vigneswaran (2020) demonstrates that immigration control develops through overlapping institutional, political and historical processes. Natter (2024) similarly identifies trade-offs in which states may pursue economic openness while maintaining restrictive migration rules. Visa governance is consequently best understood as an intersection of sovereignty, security, diplomacy, political economy and administrative discretion.

Securitisation of Migration

Securitisation theory helps explain how migration can be reframed from an ordinary social or economic process into a matter of exceptional risk. Givens (2025) identifies a stronger security orientation in immigration politics in Europe and the United States, while Bhanye and Shayamunda (2025) examine the consequences of migration securitisation in Africa, including effects on rights, regional integration and cooperation. Securitisation does not imply that all border-security concerns are illegitimate. Rather, the analytical issue is whether risk claims produce measures that are evidence-based, proportionate and sufficiently differentiated between irregular or harmful activity and lawful travel.

The West African setting illustrates this tension. Omotuyi et al. (2024) show how Nigeria's visa-on-arrival policy and ECOWAS mobility arrangements operate within a contested space between integration and security. Aniche (2022) likewise identifies contradictions between the ECOWAS free-movement framework and restrictive practices affecting Ghana-Nigeria mobility. Obikaeze, Efanodor-Obeten, and Inah (2023) connect porous-border concerns to armed banditry and security governance. These studies support a distinction between legitimate border management and the indiscriminate treatment of mobility itself as a security threat.

Diplomatic Reciprocity and Visa Politics

Diplomatic reciprocity refers here to the adjustment of a state's visa or entry practices in response to the treatment of its nationals by another state. Reciprocity can promote bargaining symmetry, but it can also extend restrictions from intergovernmental relations to private citizens. Laube (2021) demonstrates that externalised border control generates diplomatic side-effects and creates new forms of migration diplomacy. Pastore and Roman (2020) similarly show how European migration externalisation can reshape relations with African states. In Nigeria, migration has long formed part of external relations, making visa governance relevant to wider foreign-policy calculations (Ochogwu & Babatunde, 2023).

Reciprocity should therefore be analysed as both a diplomatic principle and a distributional mechanism. A measure that appears symmetrical at state level may be asymmetrical in social effect where citizens differ in their dependence on international study, employment, tourism, business or professional networks. The relevant policy question is not merely whether a reciprocal response is legally or diplomatically available, but whether it advances Nigeria's interests without imposing disproportionate costs on lawful travellers.

Socio-Economic Channels

Restrictive visa regimes can create direct costs through application fees, document procurement, biometrics, travel to application centres and repeat applications. They can also create indirect costs through delayed enrolment, missed conferences, disrupted commercial meetings, cancelled tourism, lost employment opportunities and uncertainty. Mégret (2024) highlights the consequences of discretionary visa governance, while Teye and Oucho (2024) situate African mobility within broader inequalities in South-South and global migration. Nigeria-specific migration research further indicates that strong mobility aspirations interact with domestic economic and governance pressures (Avenda, 2025; Jimoh & Akinbami, 2026).

Analytical Gap

The literature establishes that visas are instruments of mobility differentiation, migration is increasingly subject to security framing, and African regional mobility commitments coexist with restrictive national practices. The remaining gap is integrative: relatively few studies examine visa securitisation and diplomatic reciprocity together and then trace their combined effects across the socio-economic activities of Nigerians. The present study addresses that gap through a transparent critical review and a thematic synthesis focused on security, reciprocity, education, tourism, business and professional mobility.

METHODOLOGY

Review Design and Search Strategy

The study adopted a structured qualitative critical literature review. The review was designed to synthesise conceptual, empirical and policy evidence rather than estimate a pooled effect size. The revised source base was assembled through structured keyword searches and citation checking across Google Scholar, Crossref-indexed publisher pages, journal and university-press databases, and official institutional repositories. Official statistics and policy materials were obtained from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, the United Kingdom Home Office and ECOWAS. Searches focused on literature published from 2020 to August 2026, while older institutional instruments were retained where necessary to explain the ECOWAS free-movement framework.

Search strings combined terms such as "visa securitisation" OR "visa securitization", "visa regimes" AND "Nigeria", "migration securitisation" AND "Africa", "diplomatic reciprocity" AND "visa", "migration diplomacy" AND "Nigeria", "ECOWAS free movement", "Nigerian migrants", "visa refusal Nigeria", "student visas Nigeria", and "international mobility inequality". Backward citation checking was used where a directly relevant source identified an important conceptual or regional study.

Inclusion, Exclusion and Source-Quality Criteria

Sources were included when they met at least one of the following conditions: direct analysis of visa or passport governance; analysis of migration securitisation or border governance relevant to Africa; examination of diplomatic or externalised migration governance; empirical or policy analysis of Nigerian or West African mobility; or evidence concerning educational, tourism, business, labour or professional mobility. Peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly book chapters were prioritised. Official sources were included where they provided authoritative statistics or regional policy information.

Sources were excluded when they were duplicative, lacked identifiable authorship or publication details, were primarily opinion pieces, concerned migration without a meaningful connection to mobility governance, or made claims that could not be verified against a publisher or institutional record. Source quality was assessed using five criteria: publication authority, relevance to the research questions, methodological or conceptual clarity, recency, and verifiability of bibliographic details. The final analytical corpus comprised 20 scholarly sources and four official institutional/statistical sources. Because the study is a critical review rather than a systematic meta-analysis, the purpose of screening was analytical relevance and source credibility rather than statistical exhaustiveness.

Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis

For each included source, information was extracted on geographical context, research focus, method or source type, and the principal finding relevant to the study. The evidence was then coded into six themes: (1) security and differentiated mobility governance; (2) diplomatic reciprocity and migration diplomacy; (3) education; (4) tourism; (5) business and commercial mobility; and (6) employment and professional mobility. A comparative reading identified areas of convergence, divergence and evidential limitation. Nigeria-specific official statistics were used to test whether broad claims in the literature could be anchored in observable mobility outcomes. No claim about an individual Nigerian's experience was treated as representative unless supported by empirical evidence.

RESULTS AND THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

Evidence Profile of Major Studies

Study/source	Context	Method/source type	Primary focus	Finding used in synthesis
Vigneswaran (2020)	Comparative immigration control	Conceptual/empirical review	Sources of immigration control	Control reflects institutional, political and historical forces, not security alone.
Laube (2021)	EU external border governance	Historical/social research	Migration diplomacy	Border externalisation produces diplomatic side-effects and new bargaining relationships.
Aniche (2022)	Ghana-Nigeria/ECOWAS	Policy analysis	Free movement and restrictive practices	Regional mobility commitments can conflict with national restrictive practices.
Seyfi et al. (2023)	International tourism	Critical tourism analysis	Travel restrictions and geopolitics	Restrictions can affect tourism and international relations beyond

				their immediate policy purpose.
Omotuyi et al. (2024)	Nigeria/ECOWAS	Policy analysis	Visa-on-arrival and securitisation	Nigeria's mobility policy reflects tension between integration and security governance.
Ullah et al. (2024)	Global	Conceptual review	Passports and visas	Travel documents operate as central technologies for regulating mobility.
Mégret (2024)	Global visa law	Legal analysis	Visa discretion and inequality	Visa decision-making can institutionalise unequal and discretionary access to mobility.
Natter (2024)	Comparative immigration policy	Comparative conceptual analysis	Liberal/illiberal policy trade-offs	Economic openness can coexist with restrictive immigration policy.
Givens (2025)	Europe and United States	Review article	Securitisation of immigration	Immigration policy has become increasingly filtered through security politics.
Bhanye & Shayamunda (2025)	Africa	Critical review	Migration securitisation	Securitisation can affect rights, regional integration and migration governance.
Avenda (2025)	Nigeria/Mediterranean routes	Qualitative study	Japa, governance and migration	Domestic pressures and limited safe pathways shape Nigerian migration aspirations and vulnerability.
Jimoh & Akinbami (2026)	Nigeria	Qualitative secondary-data study	Regular migration pathways	Restrictive destination regimes and weak coordination constrain transition to safer regular pathways.

Table 1. Summary of major studies informing the thematic synthesis

Theme One: Security and Differentiated Mobility Governance

The strongest cross-cutting finding is that visa governance increasingly combines routine administration with risk classification. Ullah et al. (2024) and Mégret (2024) show how travel-document systems

differentiate mobility, while Givens (2025) and Bhanye and Shayamunda (2025) demonstrate the wider security framing of migration. The synthesis nevertheless supports Vigneswaran's (2020) caution that restrictive control cannot be attributed to security alone. For Nigerians, the practical result is that lawful travel may be exposed to additional scrutiny where nationality becomes associated with migration or compliance risk.

Official Schengen statistics provide concrete Nigeria-specific evidence. In 2024, the refusal rate for short-stay visa applications lodged in Nigeria was 45.9%, up from 40.8% in 2023, compared with a worldwide Schengen refusal rate of 14.8% in 2024 (European Commission, 2025). A refusal rate does not by itself prove unfairness or securitisation, because applications differ in quality and eligibility. It does, however, show that Nigerian applicants encounter a materially higher level of unsuccessful short-stay visa outcomes than the global average, making transparency, procedural clarity and evidence-based risk assessment especially important.

Theme Two: Diplomatic Reciprocity and Migration Diplomacy

The second theme concerns the movement of visa policy from consular administration into interstate bargaining. Laube (2021) and Pastore and Roman (2020) show that migration controls can restructure diplomatic relations, while Ochogwu and Babatunde (2023) situate migration within Nigeria's wider external relations. Reciprocity may be defensible as a response to unequal treatment, but the evidence indicates that its effects should be assessed at citizen level. A reciprocal restriction can impose costs on students, families, tourists and businesses even when the diplomatic dispute is state-to-state.

Within West Africa, the issue is further complicated by Nigeria's regional obligations. ECOWAS identifies free movement as a core pillar of integration and assigns its Directorate of Free Movement of Persons and Migration the task of removing obstacles and supporting implementation of the protocol (ECOWAS, n.d.). The studies by Aniche (2022) and Omotuyi et al. (2024) nevertheless show that security practices and political tensions can weaken practical mobility. This creates a policy need to distinguish regional security management from measures that unnecessarily obstruct lawful ECOWAS movement.

Theme Three: Education Mobility

Education is one of the clearest channels through which visa rules affect Nigerians. United Kingdom Home Office statistics show that Nigerian nationals were among the major contributors to the post-pandemic growth in international study visas. However, sponsored-study visa grants to Nigerian main applicants fell by 68% between 2022 and 2024 (Home Office, 2025). This period coincided with a major UK policy change under which, for courses starting from 1 January 2024, most international students could no longer bring dependants, except principally those on research-based postgraduate programmes (Home Office, 2024).

The evidence should be interpreted carefully: the fall in grants cannot be attributed solely to securitisation, because demand, affordability, university recruitment and policy changes all influence applications and grants. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how destination-country visa policy can rapidly alter the feasibility of international education for Nigerians. For applicants who have already paid application, testing, document or deposit costs, delay or refusal can translate into substantial sunk costs and lost academic timing.

Theme Four: Tourism and Short-Term Travel

Tourism and family visits are similarly sensitive to visa restrictions because their value often depends on timing. Seyfi et al. (2023) show more broadly that international travel restrictions can affect tourism and geopolitical relations. UK statistics indicate that Nigerian nationals accounted for about 5% of visitor visas granted in the year ending June 2024, placing Nigeria among the larger visitor-visa nationalities (Home Office, 2024a). This volume means that changes in fees, documentation, processing times or refusal practices can have effects not only on individual travellers but also on travel agencies, airlines, hospitality spending and transnational family contact.

The Schengen refusal evidence reinforces the uncertainty surrounding short-term mobility. The relevant finding is not that every refusal is unjustified, but that a high refusal environment increases the expected financial risk of planning international travel. For middle-income applicants in particular, non-refundable costs can make tourism and short professional visits less accessible.

Theme Five: Business and Commercial Mobility

Business mobility depends on predictable access to meetings, exhibitions, negotiations, supplier visits and investment networks. Natter (2024) highlights a structural paradox in which states may seek commercial openness while maintaining restrictive migration rules. This tension is relevant to Nigerian entrepreneurs because commercial opportunities may require physical mobility even where capital and goods move more freely. Restrictive or uncertain visa procedures can therefore create transaction costs through delayed meetings, rebooking, lost contracts and reduced ability to participate in time-sensitive international markets.

The reviewed literature contains fewer Nigeria-specific quantitative studies on business-visa outcomes than on migration governance generally. Accordingly, the study does not claim a measured national loss to Nigerian businesses. Rather, the evidence supports a plausible mechanism that requires further empirical testing. This is one of the areas in which future firm-level or traveller-level data would substantially strengthen the literature.

Theme Six: Employment and Professional Mobility

Employment and professional mobility are affected by both destination-country eligibility rules and the wider availability of regular migration pathways. Jimoh and Akinbami (2026) argue that Nigeria's transition from irregular to regular migration is constrained partly by limited legal pathways and restrictive destination regimes. Avenda (2025) similarly connects Nigerian migration aspirations to domestic economic and governance pressures. When regular professional routes are costly, narrow or uncertain, qualified Nigerians may face delayed career progression, missed conferences, licensing obstacles or reduced access to international networks.

These findings do not imply that states should remove occupational, security or immigration requirements. They instead support a governance approach that separates legitimate verification from nationality-based suspicion and provides clear, timely and reviewable procedures. Predictability is itself an economic asset for workers, employers and professional bodies.

Integrated Analytical Framework

Taken together, the evidence supports a six-stage analytical pathway. First, security narratives identify migration-related risks. Second, these narratives influence visa rules, documentation and administrative discretion. Third, diplomatic relations can intensify or moderate these rules through reciprocity and migration diplomacy. Fourth, travellers experience direct financial and administrative burdens. Fifth, uncertainty or refusal can interrupt education, tourism, business, employment and professional mobility. Sixth, these effects may reproduce unequal access to international opportunities. The framework does not assume that every visa restriction is securitised or illegitimate; it provides a structure for testing when security and reciprocity produce disproportionate socio-economic effects.

DISCUSSION

The revised synthesis answers the first research question by showing that securitisation and diplomatic reciprocity shape Nigerian mobility through overlapping rather than separate processes. Security framing legitimises closer screening and differentiated control, while reciprocity can transfer diplomatic tensions into consular practice. The literature also demonstrates that these processes are conditioned by domestic politics, institutional capacity and economic interests, which prevents an overly deterministic interpretation of securitisation (Vigneswaran, 2020; Natter, 2024).

The second research question concerns socio-economic effects. Here the strongest Nigeria-specific evidence is found in short-stay and education mobility. The 45.9% Schengen refusal rate for applications lodged in Nigeria in 2024 provides a concrete indicator of the uncertainty surrounding short-term European mobility (European Commission, 2025). UK data similarly show that policy shifts can produce rapid changes in educational mobility for Nigerians (Home Office, 2024b, 2025). These statistics do not establish individual discrimination, but they strengthen the argument that visa governance has measurable opportunity implications.

For tourism, business and professional mobility, the literature more clearly establishes mechanisms than Nigeria-wide causal magnitudes. This distinction is important. Earlier broad formulations in the manuscript risked treating plausible consequences as empirically demonstrated national outcomes. The revised analysis therefore differentiates between documented visa outcomes, qualitative evidence about Nigerian migration pressures, and theoretically supported but under-measured effects on commercial and professional activity.

The policy implication is a need for proportionality. Security screening remains a legitimate state function, but transparent criteria, reasonable documentation demands, predictable processing and effective review mechanisms can reduce unnecessary burdens without eliminating border control. Nigeria's diplomatic response should likewise prioritise negotiated improvements in mobility rather than automatic retaliation where the costs would fall disproportionately on Nigerian citizens. At regional level, stronger implementation of ECOWAS free-movement commitments would help prevent security concerns from eroding lawful mobility within West Africa.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the securitisation of visa regimes and diplomatic reciprocity as interconnected features of contemporary mobility governance and assessed their socio-economic implications for Nigerians. The evidence shows that visa systems are not neutral administrative devices. They combine sovereign discretion, security assessment, diplomatic relations and political-economic priorities. For Nigerians, these processes can shape whether lawful mobility for study, tourism, business, employment and professional activity is affordable, predictable and practically accessible.

The revised evidence also requires a measured conclusion. Restrictive visa outcomes cannot automatically be equated with discrimination or securitisation, and the available literature does not support a precise estimate of the total economic cost to Nigerians. Nevertheless, official data show substantial exposure to restrictive outcomes, including a 45.9% Schengen short-stay refusal rate for applications lodged in Nigeria in 2024 and a major contraction in Nigerian UK study-visa grants between 2022 and 2024. These patterns justify closer policy attention to transparency, proportionality and the cumulative costs of mobility governance.

Nigeria should strengthen coordination among foreign-affairs, immigration, diaspora and trade institutions when negotiating mobility arrangements. Diplomatic reciprocity should be used strategically rather than mechanically, with explicit assessment of citizen-level costs. Destination states should apply clear and reviewable visa criteria that distinguish lawful travellers from substantiated security risks. ECOWAS institutions and member states should also deepen implementation of the regional free-movement framework while improving cooperative security management. These measures would better reconcile legitimate border-security objectives with the developmental value of regular international mobility.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research should move beyond documentary analysis by surveying or interviewing Nigerian students, tourists, entrepreneurs, professionals and visa applicants. Such studies should measure application costs, processing time, refusal experience, reapplication, missed opportunities and coping strategies. Comparative research across major destination states could identify whether particular visa designs create systematically different outcomes for Nigerians. Firm-level studies are especially needed to quantify the commercial costs

of delayed or unsuccessful business mobility, while longitudinal research could test how changes in visa rules alter education and professional migration over time.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship or publication of this manuscript.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required because the study relied exclusively on published secondary and documentary sources and did not collect data from human participants or process personally identifiable information.

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