



# Trans-Atlantic Migration and the Rights of Women in Nigeria, 2015-2023

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigated the seemingly menaced by turbulent challenges arising from migration which causes brain drain to the economy of the country. It explores the trans-Atlantic migration and its impact on the rights of women in Nigeria. The rising rate of migration by women in Nigeria is traced to lack of access to information and unaware of their rights and this make them vulnerable to unsafe (irregular) migration and exploitation. In most part of States in Nigeria, if not all, women are often seen as having little say in the decisions that affects their lives (limited decision making power) and this, make them more susceptible to trafficking and exploitation. These study delved into how the impact of trans-Atlantic migration by Nigerian women has portrayed the Nigerian image to the outside world and its impact on the socio-economic polity of the country from 2015-2023. Ultimately, the study adopted mixed theories of push-pull factor and abolitionist theories as a framework of analysis. The study is qualitative in nature and data were gathered through secondary sources such as documented evidences/policy, books, journals, internet source. Findings revealed that when practices or policies in a country of one's origin discriminate against women, for instance, limiting their access to resources or educational opportunities, by hindering their political participation, and their contribution to the society is reduced, there is bond for migration. The study recommended that there is an urgent need for a comprehensive re-orientation of women on their fundamental human rights as well as empowerment of Nigerian women through the Ministry of women Affairs. And abolition of all forms of discrimination melted on women by setting up a task force teams nation-wide to see to its full implementation.

**Keywords:** Trans-Atlantic migration, brain-drain, fundamental human right, push-pull migration, abolitionist theory

# INTRODUCTION

Migration is as old as man, either across an international border or within a State. It is an ancient concept which is multifaceted, and increasingly growing in popularity. Even the ancient bible days shows incidences of migration in many occasions. Migration because of persecution has been formally addressed in international conventions consequent upon the Second World War while employment migration was regulated earlier on as part of international labour law and economic practices. Firstly, how do the expectations, relationships and hierarchies associated with being female or male affect the potential for international migration process and fundamental human right of emigrants? Secondly, how do gender inequalities in the societies of destination affect the experiences of migrant women and migrant men? Thirdly, to what extent and in what ways does migration benefit or disadvantage men and women? And lastly, what steps should be taken to ensure equal opportunities and outcomes for migrant women and migrant men? The participation of women in migration depends on the social roles of women, their right and capacity to make decisions, their access to resources, and the existing gender stratification in countries of origin and destination. The international migrant workers estimation globally constitutes nearly 5 per cent of the universal labour force and it is a core aspect of the world economy (ILO, 2021). It also clearly shows that as a fact, no state can address international migration by itself, since it is a universal concept. And in as much as man's quest is insatiable, so also they quest for better living condition and urge to migrate becomes high especially a developing country like Nigeria. National Bureau of Statistics, (2018) recorded that Nigeria as a country has had more than a million arrivals and departures of foreigners into the country by 2017. Although involuntary migration is an important part of

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Nigerian immigration, the records, as published by the Nigerian Immigration Services and other national agencies, do not necessarily cover refugee inflows. The international migration of women has been insufficiently studied to date with implications for the rights and legal protection of female migrants. The intersections of gender, immigration and labour policies condition the migratory experiences of female migrants in ways that are different to African especially Nigerian men's experience of migration. It is in these spheres that interventions need to be made to improve the working and social conditions of female migrants in ways that can contribute to inclusive growth and structural transformation on the nation.

Evident is the increasing rate of international female migrate across board (Falls, 2017) While international migration in some countries are male dominated, the rate at which Nigerian-female migrate is alarming. However, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported a total of 34,700 refugees entering Nigeria in 2018, with 96.1 per cent coming from Cameroon. The number of Nigerians living abroad reached 1.3 million by 2017, almost three times the 1990 value of 465,932 according to the World Bank Global Bilateral Migration Database (2018). Part of this increase has been driven by population growth and high unemployment in Nigeria, as well as by labour market opportunities in the global north. Educational attainment is also related to the mode of migration, as youth with secondary school education dominate the involuntary migration population.

The attraction of market opportunities is strong for Nigerian skilled migrants, who make up 83 per cent of all Nigerian migrants to Europe, and 46 per cent of those in the United States.

According to Afrobarometer survey (2018) one out of every three Nigerians would like to migrate out of the country. At the same time, immigration policy has become more restrictive in much of Europe and the United States. One key focus has been irregular migration, in particular human trafficking, especially since 80 percent of survivors of trafficking are women. Other various forms of migration are; climate migration, displacement, internal migration, international migration, irregular migration, labour migration, migrant, safe, orderly and regular migration. And there are many factors which prompt Female-Nigerians to migrate to Europe which includes; political instability, insecurity, lack of access to basic education, high unemployment rate, poverty, obnoxious law against women, lack of social amenities, internal conflicts etc. All these challenges create a fertile ground for migration to strive (Frontex, 2019)

### Statement of the problem

Migration of women has always been an important component of international migration (ILO, 2005). As of 2000, the United Nations Population Division estimates that 49 per cent of all international migrants were women or girls, and that the proportion of women among international migrants had reached 51 per cent in more developed regions. Women often migrate officially as dependent family members of other migrants or to marry someone in another country. Female migrants are, however, increasingly part of flows of migrant workers, moving on their own to become the principal wage earners for their families. Most migrant women move voluntarily, while some women and girls are also forced migrants leaving their countries in order to flee from conflict, persecution, environmental degradation, natural disasters or other situations that affect their security, livelihood or habitat. As a key organizing principle of society, gender is central to any discussion of the causes and consequences of international migration, including the process of decision-making involved and the mechanisms leading to migration. However, over the years, Nigeria has gained the unpopular recognition globally as a patriarchal society in which the inalienable rights of women are often subjected to ridicule, extensive abuse, neglect and violations. Cultural, religious and societal norms have arguably entrenched a historical imbalance in power relationships between men and women and have tilted the overall perceptions and roles of women in Nigeria. In Nigeria, it could be said that the abuse of rights of a woman begins from the time she was born and up till the time of her death. In many parts of Nigeria, particularly the North, women who are prematurely and compulsorily betrothed to a man at birth are not allowed access to basic education and are generally burdened with domestic household chores and duties. These becomes the foundation for a lifetime of circular and absolute dependence on a man she does not know, and upon the demise of the man her right to inherit his property is denied and her life becomes miserable because of obnoxious practices and laws which she could be made to undergo as a sign of respect for the deceased husband. These cultural, religious and societal norms and values are arguably at the root of the historical neglect of women in Nigeria. The

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discriminatory trends against Africans and Nigerian women in particular are violations of their fundamental human rights against discrimination, a right recognized in a number of core international human rights instrument. For such mean treatment, a good number of Articles backed up the fundamental right of a woman, which includes; Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which states that all persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. It requires States to prohibit discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. And Article 2(3) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) also contains similar provisions on non-discrimination. The United Nation Sub-commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Human Rights, described prevention of discrimination as the prevention of any action which denies to individuals or groups of people the equality of treatment which they may wish. Article 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) defines discrimination as any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise on an equal footing of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life. Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) also provides for the elimination of discrimination against women in political and public life. Article 5 encourages states to take measures to eliminate prejudices and stereotypes against women. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) also provides that 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'. Article 2 notes that 'everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Universal Declaration without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other matters. And so, these rapid ascendancy of human rights in Nigeria, coupled with Nigeria's prominent role as a signatory to virtually all the core international human right treaties and instruments raised expectations that women in Nigeria may begin to enjoy some measure of protection from archaic and anachronistic practices that subject them to a wanton abuse. However, that's not always true, as the abuse of women right and some sort of gender inequality are evident in our day to day activities in the country. These and some other challenges necessitate a Nigerian woman to leave her country home abode and seek for safety in a far away Europe (migration)

This paper examines the nature, scope and extent of human rights protection accorded to women under Nigeria domestic laws and under international law. It also reflects on why women migrate to Europe which is the key and emerging issues under study.

### **Conceptual clarification**

### Migration

Trans-border migration refers to movement of people across the border (Atlantic Ocean) in order to settle on the continents of North and South America. Africans, particularly, Nigerian-female both voluntary and involuntary (commodification of man) migration is a long-standing and growing phenomenon. Migration in Nigeria can be traced to the era of the slave trade, between 1400 and 1900. It is recorded that over 12 million Africans were exported to Europe and America. And the country (Nigeria) in particular lost about 2 million forced labour migrants. Migration according to Heckert (2015) is the movement of a person or people from one country, locality, place of residence etc, to settle in another. It is not a recent phenomenon as it involves the movement of people from one place to another in search of a better standard of living, this thereby brings about regional integration, which according to (Emesiani et al, 2024; Idigo & Osegbue, 2025), is the process by which two or more nations-states agree to cooperate and work closely together to achieve peace, stability, and wealth. Heckert (2015) noted that youths migrate to Europe seeking for better opportunities, drawn by the allure of greener pastures. However, some overlook the challenges, including cultural adjustment, economic uncertainties, and legal complexities. Fueled by hope, they often ignore these consequences, facing difficulties in their pursuit of a better life in a foreign land. Migration also refers to the relatively permanent movement of people, to change their place of residence (Baldassar, 2014). Like many other developing countries in the world, in Nigeria however, there is a general tendency that youths between the age of 15-25 years migrated to urban areas in search of better opportunities and living conditions in the cities (United Nations, 2013). Idigo (2024) opines that government can create policies that will ensure that the right of migrants especially female



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migrates to social services are protected. Oluyemi and Adeola (2012) on the other hand, stressed that the youth are been preoccupied with this movement because it provides them with work and better opportunities not available in their places of origin. It constitutes an important stage in the transition to adulthood and an opportunity for independent income generation.

Accordingly, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) defined migration as the movement of person or persons, leaving or fleeing their usual residence for diverse reasons.

The interconnectedness associated with globalization has led to increased interdependency of the developing countries on the developed ones. Movement of goods, capital and labor (migration) etc across the globe is swiftly on a very high pace. Though, despite the good aspect of migration lies the ugly part of it on both the emigrant country and the host. Along with the sense of freedom and voluntary migration (new cadre of Nigerian immigrants) which is quite different from the old era of force slavery from the European colonizer through the Atlantic Ocean.

For the present era, women immigrants lie the primary motivating factors, which includes, desire for a better life whether fleeing from political persecution, refugee crisis, economic hardships or a combination thereof. The overall consequences include; displacement, alienation, and the not so enchanting reality of exile.

## **Fundamental Human Right**

Everyone is entitled to human right which includes right to live free from violence and discrimination; to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; to be educated; to own property; to vote and to earn an equal right. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1979 is a key international treaty addressing gender-based discrimination and providing specific protection for women's right. Also CEDAW recommends that state parties must ensure that legislation on gender-based violence provides adequate protection to all women and respect for their integrity and dignity and endorsed all signatories to take all legal and necessary measures to provide effective protection of women against gender-based violence, including effective legal measures, including penal sanctions, civil remedies and compensatory provisions to protect women against all kinds of violence. Nigeria is also a signatory to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, which it has taken the extra steps to domesticate, thus making the Charter domestic law in Nigeria. In addition, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, to which Nigeria is a signatory, requires State parties to enact and enforce laws to prohibit all forms of violence against women, and take all necessary legislative and other measures to eliminate harmful practices. Epidemiological evidence shows that violence is a major cause of ill health among women and girls, as seen through death and disabilities due to injuries, and through increased vulnerability to a range of physical and mental health problems (Krug et al, 2002, Mugawe & Powell, 2006).

### METHODOLOGY

This paper engaged content analysis and is qualitative in nature. We got information on the current status of the subject matter under study. This aided in critical analysis of the phenomenon under study through logical deductions. Data collection process was primarily relied on secondary sources, due to the historical and analytical nature of the study by providing insights into patterns of Trans-Atlantic migration, policy changes, and evolving status of women's rights in Nigeria from 2015 to 2023. The process involved systematic identification, selection and analysis of relevant literature and data repositories like academic Journals and Articles, Legislative and Policy Documents; (Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act 2015, Bilateral Migration Agreements and Gender Equality Policy, UNHCR briefs), Government and International Organizational Reports (NBS, Ministry of Women Affairs, UN Women). Relevance to Research Objectives, Credibility and Authority, Recency and Timeliness, geographical and cultural context and also Availability and Accessibility were adopted criteria's that ensured the reliability, relevance and academic rigor and also guided the study.

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#### Theoretical Framework

The study adopted Push-Pull theory of migration by Lee and abolitionist theory as theoretical framework of analysis. The theory is apt as it best explains the phenomenon under study. The theory hampered on the fact that the reason why women migrate are determined by push and pull factor, which are forces that either induce people to move to a new location, or oblige them to leave old residence. And one of these factors is obnoxious law against women in our society, Nigeria and Africa at large. Pull factor are opposite of push factors. There are other conditions that forces people to migrant to another country, for example, safety from armed bandit, terrorism, kidnapping by ransom, farmers-header's crisis and all forms of social vices. While pull factors are those things that made people to migrant to another country which includes job opportunity, better living condition and most importantly security of life and property of its citizen by the government. However, Ravenstein (1885) first contributes to his paper 'law of migration' to the discipline of population studies. Everett Spurgeon Lee, an American Professor of Sociology proposed the theory of push and pull in 1966 (Parkin, 2010). However, abolitionist theory came under the leadership of William Lloyd Garrison, a Boston journalist and social reformer in 1820. This theory is a political and social philosophy that advocates the abolition of various systems of oppression, inequality and violence. It emerged from the abolition of slavery movement and has since expanded to encompass a broader range of issues like, prison abolition, gender and sexual violence, obnoxious laws etc. The theory called for the prohibition of ownership of people (slavery). It was a movement that was organized to end the practice of slavery. Much emphasis is placed on abolition of all form or practice of slavery which is one of human kind's most deeply rooted institutions. The abolitionist response seeks to restore both the criminal and the victim to full humanity, to lives of integrity and dignity in the community. They advocate the least amount of coercion and intervention in an individual's life and the maximum amount of care and services to all people in the society. Other proponents of abolition theory include, Williams Wiberforce, Fredrick Douglas, John Greenleaf Whittier, Ruth Wilson, Angela Davis and Harriet Beecher Stowe among others.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

# Root causes of Trans-Atlantic migration among Nigerian women in the contemporary society

### **Armed Banditry**

In Nigeria, armed banditry has become a contemporary threat to the national security. As noted by Okonkwo and Idigo (2024), armed banditry and kidnappings for ransom have surged, as the criminal activities have instilled fear in people at rural communities, with disruptions of farmer's farm land. The overlapping link such as herders-farmers' clashes, ungoverned spaces, proliferation of small arms and weapons, unknown gunmen all influencing the current security dilemma in Nigeria. Accordingly, armed bandits can be referred to as gangs of criminals who terrorize and take valuable possessions of the local populations and travelers, such as their merchandise, money, livestock, camels and sheep. The bandits are characterized by cattle rustling, attack, kidnapping at ransom, killings of innocent citizens and rapes as a form of sexual violence against victims (Ojo, et al, 2023). The emergence of armed banditry in Nigeria has triggered the prevalence and multiple killing in the country and this prompt citizen to migrate to another country in search of safety. They threat are multifaceted, multifarious and multidimensional ranging from kidnapping, political assassination, ritual killings, to mention but a few (Utibe, T & Ilufoye, S, 2024) These armed bandits and Boko-haram are increasingly cooperating in recruitment, training, logistics, weaponry and attacks on vulnerable citizens. The society ungoverned spaces offers insights into some of these attacks thereby highlighting the vulnerability of the population to kidnapping for ransom.

# **Terrorism**

According to Enders, Gaibulloev and Sandler (2011), terrorism can be defined as the

premeditated use or threat to use violence by individuals or sub-national groups against noncombatants in order to obtain a political or social objective through the intimidation of a large audience beyond that of the immediate victims'. It involves act or use of explosive device to cause mayhem on the general populace. For

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instance, Boko-haram extremist group has been terrorizing the northern part of Nigeria since 2009 and other sub Sahara region. Idigo (2022) noted that insurgency in northern part of Nigeria threaten security not just in Nigeria but in the sub Sahara region and international community at large.

## Unemployment

Unemployment have over time contributed to one of the reasons for migration of women in Nigeria, Unemployment have been the order of the day especially from young graduates which mostly seek for government white collar employment after education, thus aligning with this submission, Rufai (2019) asserted that females of about 60% were working got employed after they have migrated. To this end, Olaniyan(2017) further identified unemployment as an economic factor which drives women to seek better prospect abroad

### Marriage

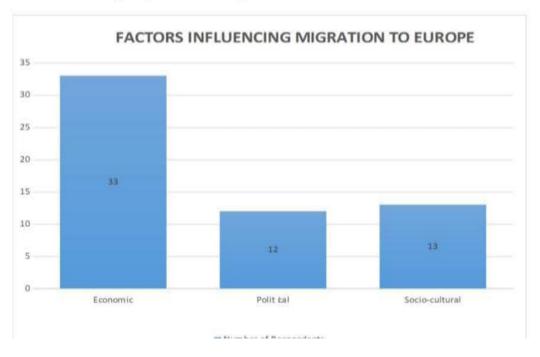
As a socially and legally sanctioned union between two individuals typically involving emotional, physical, financial and social commitments, marriage remains a core life necessity for women which cuts across the globe. According to Rufai (2019); Migration, Labor Mobility and Household Poverty in Nigeria: A Gender Analysis, almost 40% of the females migrated as a result of marriage arrangements

# **Political instability**

As a factor with the likelihood of disruptions, political instability can lead to significant population movement as people leave unstable regions in search of safety and stability. To this end, Chinweuba (2020), noted that many businesses have become defunct, and many multi-national companies have departed the shores of Nigeria. Political instability under-mind development of all sectors, while stability encourages infrastructural development and economic growth, as Idigo (2024) observed that infrastructure in general create job opportunities either directly or indirectly. Accordingly, Evaristus (2020) observed also that political instability in Nigeria is the catalyst behind the unabated collapse of critical infrastructures and sectors. He noted that this results in massive migration of Nigerians to other countries of the world. More so, Ofobuike et al (2025), opines that the role of global community is critical and crucial in shaping prospects for a two State solution

### Pattern of contemporary migration in Nigeria

Fig 1: Factors Influencing Migration to Europe



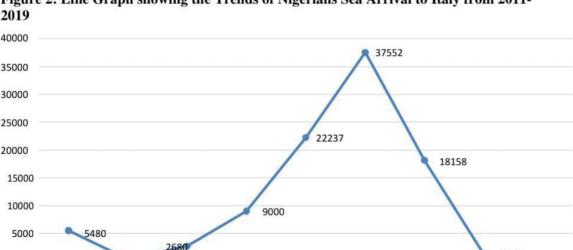
Source: Ezekwe, C.I, Imara J.N & Appolos, E. (2023) Field Data

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2019





2015

Figure 2: Line Graph showing the Trends of Nigerians Sea Arrival to Italy from 2011-

Source: Ezekwe, C.I, Imara J.N & Appolos, E. (2023) Field Data

2013

2014

### Migration of women and its impact

2012

2011

### **Negative impact**

0

Brain drain: This is an act of highly skilled, educated, or talented individual or individuals leaving one's country or region to another in search of better opportunities, higher pay, or improved one's living condition. This act has a significant impact on the country's sector as they leave. It is a vital part of migration as a mass exodus of people, mostly women can lead to brain drain

2016

2017

2018

Security: Depending on the receiving country, they may have no protection or recourse in case of abuse. Migrant women are also affected by gender inequality in the society of destination. Often time, refugee women and girls or those who are displaced are particularly vulnerable when they find themselves in situations where their security cannot be ensured and where they may be subject to sexual violence or exploitation. More so, trafficking of women and girls for prostitution and forced labour is one of the fastest growing areas of international criminal activity. Women who are trafficked are the most vulnerable of all migrants as the process of trafficking involves exploitation, coercion and the abuse of power. Trafficking builds on existing gender inequalities. Trafficked women frequently originate from regions where there are few employment opportunities for women and where women are dependent on others and lack access to resources to change their situation. Trafficked women and girls often believe they will work in legitimate occupations but find themselves trapped into forced prostitution, marriage, domestic work, sweatshops and other forms of exploitation that are similar to slavery.

### **Positive Impact**

Job opportunity: Migrants contribute to the economic development of the countries of their destination through their competencies and skills, and to that of their countries of origin through their remittances and their increased experience when they return to those countries.

Financial assistance: Adding financial responsibilities to the other responsibilities that women have, such as child-rearing, can lead to stress but can also provide women the opportunity of gaining autonomy and experience in decision-making in their various homes. Often, migrant women help other family members to migrate by paying for the costs of the move

Diaspora Remittances: This have become a vital component of Nigeria's economy, providing significant benefits to the country by boosting foreign exchange reserves, supports individual's household consumption,

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contributes to Nations Gross Domestic Products, and help to increase financial inclusion particularly in areas where access to formal financial services is limited

Cultural Enrichment: Emigrants helps to show cast their cultures, values and believe system to the outside world, bringing in different cultures together, enriching the social fabric of host countries. They help to introduce new perspectives, cuisines and traditions, fostering global understanding and cultural diversity.

## **FINDINGS**

The study discovered that job opportunity, better living condition and most importantly security of life and property of its citizen by the government necessitates Trans-Atlantic migration and the rights of women in Nigeria between 2015-2023, during the period from 2015 to 2023, economic hardship, high rate of unemployment, inflation and weak economic policies contributed to a labor exodus particularly among skilled workers commonly known referred Brain Drain.

Also, studies has find out that when practices or policies in the country of origin discriminate against women, for instance, limiting their access to resources or educational opportunities, by hindering their political participation, the capacity of women to participate fully in society and contribute to it is reduced, there is bond for migration.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

No doubt, Trans-Atlantic migration has been a driving force behind economic growth, cultural exchange, and social development, shaping the modern world into a more interconnected and diverse place. However, the fact still remains that its negative impact on the emigrant country state of origin is enormous. In light of the findings that job opportunities, living conditions, and security are key drivers of Trans-Atlantic migration and its impact on the rights of women in Nigeria, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen Economic Opportunities: The Nigerian governments should prioritize sustainable economic reforms that promote job creation, entrepreneurship and skills development, particularly targeting youths and women. This includes investment in the tech, Agriculture, and manufacturing sectors to reduce unemployment and economic migration.

Improve Security Infrastructure: there is an urgent need for comprehensive security sector reform. The government must enhance the capacity of Law enforcement agencies, ensure community policing and address the root causes of insecurity such as poverty, ethnic tensions, and religious extremism.

Advance Women's Rights and Protection: government and civil society must work together to implement gender-sensitive policies, strengthen laws against gender-based violence, and ensure their enforcement. Programs should be designed to empower women economically, socially, and politically thereby reducing the need to seek refuge abroad for basic rights and protection.

Job creation will avert migration which causes brain drain to the nation's economy, empowerment of Nigerian women through the Ministry of Women Affairs and an Urgent need for a comprehensive re-orientation of their Fundamental Human Rights.

Create Safe and Legal Migration Pathways: While reducing forced migration is key, the government should also engage with international bodies to establish legal migration channels that protect migrants' rights and dignity, especially for women who are often vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

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