Migration and the Orthodox Family: Reflections on Declining Solidarity and Weakening Family Ties in Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract

Using information gathered from a systematic desk review the paper examined the relationship between migration and the family based on the the fact that such movement has become part of life in Nigeria given the level of economic hardship that has befallen Nigerians in the recent past.. The high level of international migration even though often supported actively by families of migrants has ironically affected the family as a traditionally close knit social unit. As the paper argues, migration has eroded family solidarity and weakened family ties in Nigeria. Therefore, the paper argues for improvements in economic opportunities in Nigeria in order to curb unnecessary migration and the repositioning of the family to tackle the new challenges imposed by migration of members.

Keywords: *Migrants, Family, Nigeria, Family ties, Solidarity.*

Introduction

The paper examines the nexus between increasing incidence of migration and the state of the family in contemporary Nigeria. It contends that the massive migration in the last two decades in Nigeria may have undermined the orthodox nature of the family especially in terms of weakening both the traditional solidarity and strong ties associated with the family as a social unit. In effect, while migration may have been generated or propelled by the need of people to find better economic and social conditions, the movement of family members across countries and regions of the world may have taken a toll on the nature and solidarity of the family. While the above may challenge our conception of the family particularly the often taken for granted assumption of intimate relationship and physical contact among family members, it raises concerns regarding how the weakening of the family may not bode well for society in the long run.

Migration is the movement of movement of people that involves a change in usual residence across an administrative boundary such as a village, town, district, or country (Kok, 1999). It is a highly visible reflection of global inequalities whether in terms of wages, labour market opportunities or lifestyle; those who migrate may face unequal access to rights and social resources, including the right to seek protection in cases of those fleeing conflict, violence, and persecution (International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2023). Despite the above, migration in recent times and in global discourse is focused on the movement across national borders especially the influx of migrants from the global South to the North. In the above reality, the present paper focuses on international migration and its affects on the family in Nigeria.

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Be the above as it may, migrants are often viewed in their destination sites through a racial lens that shapes their ability to move, enter, find work and housing – economically succeed or fail according to the racialization to which they are subject (Bashi, 2004, 2007, 2013). In agreement to the foregoing statement, Boatca and Roth (2020) asserted that migrants are given access to citizenship in ways so unequal that they might easily describe it as a global hierarchy of citizenship or as the coloniality of citizenship. In other words, there is a level of uncertainty and unpredictability underlying the system which is ultimately influenced by racial constructions. However, all through history, migration has taken place both voluntarily and involuntarily within and beyond one's country in the forms of slave trade, human trafficking, quest for new experiences, fleeing from insecurity and conflict, search for greener pastures etc. According to the International Organization for Migration 2020 World Report, as of June, 2019 the number of international migrants was estimated to be almost 272 million globally and 51 million more than in 2010 (International Organization for Migration, 2019). This source also stated that nearly two thirds of this figure were labour migrants, and while many individuals migrate out of choice, many others migrate out of necessity.

Most times people migrate from areas of limited resources and opportunities to areas where they believe they will have better chances at survival despite their social backgrounds. According to König & Regt (2010) and Foblets, et al. (2018), mobility is inherent in human experience, for we have always been on the move to escape conflicts and disasters or simply to seek a better life today and more Africans are willing to migrate overseas than ever before in modern history. In their opinion, this can be explained by the persistent poverty, high unemployment rates, presence of repressive governments, collapse of educational systems, natural disasters, and civil wars evident in so many African countries.

Furthermore, against the background of strong family bonds in Africa and a highly valued associational life, the decision to migrate and the actions that follow such migration are affected by factors beyond the individual as a single member of the society. In this sense, primordial ties of kinship, family and extended family connections exert influences prior and after migration (Kilkey and Merla, 2011). Consequently, though the media spotlight has focused on the large number of West African migrants passing through Niger on their way to Libya in hopes of reaching Europe, migration through Niger into North Africa has been and remains a long-standing tradition and has since the end of colonial rule been considered a common household strategy to diffuse risk (Charrière and Frésia, 2008; Brachet, 2018).

For a lot of Africans and Nigerian families, migration abroad entails an implicit improvement in the social and economic status of the family. In other words, travelling abroad or what is now tagged 'japa' in Nigeria means enhancing the social respect and standing of the individual's family within the community. Therefore, to belong to this respectable category of the society, family members may pool resources together to help the individual travel abroad and by so doing saddles the individual with the burden of not just making it abroad for himself but for the entire extended family. Be that as it may, though families often come together to help their member relocate, this separation of families by migration often has consequences for family ties and relationships. In view of the foregoing presentation this paper depending on the desk review critically the effects of migration on family ties.

Methods

The study made use of desk review in gathering information for the paper. This entailed the desk review of cogent extant literature and documentary data on migration and the family. The review was guided by the thematic analysis approach (see, Braun and Clark, 2006). It focused on such themes as migration, Africa, Nigeria, family, family ties, family solidarity etc. However, the review excluded documents and materials that are extreme dated i.e.

published before 1999. The systematic analysis of these materials provided information for the consummation of the goals of the paper.

The Family, social solidarity and the decision to migrate

Cursory observation suggests that Africans are usually motivated by their personal dreams and aspirations and often family pressures to go abroad and make it like others. In fact, recent case studies of migration to Europe show that even though people migrate for a couple of reasons, the main driver is the pursuit of better life (Karakoulaki, et al, 2018). In agreement to the above assertion, Wood (2019) stated that most Africans who relocate are motivated by the desire to seek for work or higher paying jobs in other countries because economic hardship and desire to escape poverty are big motivating factors.

Though drivers such as political crises, armed conflicts, insecurity, generalized violence and violation of human rights are behind the migration of individuals in the western African region, the principal drivers of migration in this part of the continent are economic hardship and unemployment (Horwood, et al. 2018; African Union, 2017). Given the dire socio-economic circumstances which act as push factors of such migrations, there is often a very high premium placed on achieving success in the receiving country or environment. Most times this success is captured in terms of making it and overrides every other consideration including the dynamics of such success. In other words, how such migrants make it once they have migrated is not as important as making it. Thus, all that matters is that they come back home with enough resources to make life more comfortable for themselves, their families, and friends.

The decision to migrate, as already indicated, may be produced by pressures from the family directly or even indirectly through the desire of the individual to meet the social and economic expectations of the family. In other words, the pressure from families may be considered source of the influence to migrate.

These influences from the family are often captured in the expectations that the migration of the individual will help in significant ways in improving the socio-economic situation of his kinsmen and family (Castles, 2010; De Haas, 2010; Gheasi and Nijkamp, 2017). Therefore, in an environment in which the success of the group is tied to that of its members, the decision to migrate may be an outcome of the desire to improve one's ability to contribute to the group's survival as well as be better placed to meet such expectations. In recognition of the above, entire family members may pull resources together or contribute in sending its members abroad. These combined efforts of the larger family in sending the migrant abroad are seen by those family members as a fast route to bringing the struggles of the general family to an end through the dividends of migration.

According to Horwood, et al. (2018), migration is central to Africa's socioeconomic landscape as it enhances prosperity, means of livelihood and acquirement of wealth for the individuals and their households. In some cases where the individual is seen to have failed to make it in his home country, the family may exert pressure on the said individual to migrate to places where it is usually assumed that success is much easier to be achieved. This assumption of easy success in Europe could serve as an explanation for the respect and prestige accorded to persons or families that have one of their members living abroad as they are perceived as being wealthy even if they have not yet received any remittances from their migrant member (Tonah and Codjoe, 2020). However, the desire for such respect and social standing hardly fathom the likely impact of such movement on the fundamental nature and functioning of the family as a close-knit social unit brought together by consanguine and marital relationships. There is no gainsaying the fact out of sight may actually be tantamount to out of mind. In this sense, family members that migrate outside the country may be deprived of the expected and normal social cohesion and solidarity of the family.

The above subsists even though technologies like the WhatsApp, Zoom, Snapchat and even the telephone have mediated the physical distance between migrants and their families. However, the role of technology is often subjected to generational factors in the population especially in a developing society like Nigeria. Thus, younger members of the family may much more exploit and utilise these technologies than the older generations of father, mother and grandparents who ideally and traditionally are the foundational roots of the family and its solidarity. Equally, a challenge here is the level of internet penetration in the Nigeria society which is not as high as that of the average western society and still overtly skewed in favour of the youth population. Hence, these traditional ties cemented in marriages and blood are eroded by the contemporary drivers of migration in Nigeria and other developing societies.

Migration and the erosion of family ties

Incidentally, migration has been discussed from an orthodox perspective that focuses on either the impact on national economies or the financial pull behind such movement with very little attention to its effects on the family and how it may impact conventional or traditional family ties. Unfortunately, over the years, family relationships have suffered severe blows from migration either because of one parent relocating or both parents relocating and leaving their children behind with grandparents, aunties, uncles, and other significant others. The first and direct impact of migration on families is the breaking or split of families into several households and the inevitable decline in family functioning (Wahyuni (2000). According to Oluwatosin (2020), migration's impact on families left behind can be seen in the well-being of the children left behind by one or two migratory parents, the health status of the older parents left behind and the well-being of the spouse left behind. According to the author, though income from migrants can help develop the lives of those left behind, migration can also lead to family conflicts and war and exerts a lot of psychological effects on the children. These psychological effects are usually seen where the migrant was initially the main caregiver and emotional pillar of the family. Mazzucato et.al. (2015) and Cebotari et.al. (2017) asserted that a child's psychological well-being can be adversely affected if the mother is the migrant, and such a child is left with the father. These authors are of the opinion that those who have the likelihood of depression are children that are left behind when they are still young.

On the part of the spouses, when one spouse migrates, the bulk of the responsibilities at home is often left for the other partner thereby causing enormous stress mentally, physically and emotionally. Ikuomola, (2015) stated that when men migrate, the women are engrossed in more responsibility and are engaged with more tasks than they would have ever done. These tasks according to the author make life more difficult and stressful as they are faced daily with excessive workload, children to cater for and several other things that were naturally done by the men. Furthermore, pressure and conflict from extended family members can break the existing ties in the family when one spouse migrates (Oluwatosin, 2020). These conflicts according to the author often arise when the women are left behind and their husbands' families want to know their every movement, how they spend money sent to them by their husbands and even make them leave their normal lives to join them in their daily farm works. In some other cases, due to the absence of the younger generation as a result of migration, the older parents' health may get bad. According to White et.al. (2019), the health of the older parents who are left behind may become bad due to emotional stress.

In the opinion of Demurger, (2015), though remittances can be large and make positive contributions towards taking care of the family, more hard work might still be required around the house, and this might lead to psychological pressure and eventual illness of the parents. Apart from the health of the older parents getting bad in the absence of their younger children, the bond between the two generations oftentimes decreases due to the limited communication placed on them by migration. Oluwatosin and Demurger asserted that situations whereby the migrant is the primary caregiver of the parents and he/she

migrates for a better life, the bond gradually reduces, loneliness sets in, depression gradually takes root and the parents eventually become sick. In some cases, most fathers in the above-mentioned situation resort to drinking which eventually leads to ill health and imminent death (White et.al., 2019).

Conclusion

The paper has argued that migration even though often inevitable in human society has the tendency to cast asunder the intimate and close-knit relationship between members of the family. This fact is indisputable despite the enormous role of technological devices in making it possible for electronic and virtual contacts between people. However, the family was traditionally built on a high level of solidarity anchored on the physical proximity of its members. So, the global dispersion of members of the family does not only weaken this solidarity but equally erodes the ties between members of the family.

There is no doubt from a social perspective that technology offers only a poor replacement for face-face interactions and is often the preserve of the young and enlightened especially in a developing society. Therefore, while the family may generate pressures that motivated migration of members and expects to gain social respect from such movement, migration ironically gnaws at the fundamental roots of the typical Nigerian family. As a result, the need to build the economy of the country and create opportunities that would mitigate unnecessary and pecuniary migration cannot be overemphasised. In addition, families in the country need to reposition themselves to deal with such tie weakening event like international migration and build capacities to take full advantages of technologies of virtual contact.

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