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State Failure and Migrant Vulnerability: Nigerian Migrants in Libya's Humanitarian and Trafficking Crisis

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Abstract: *This study examines the experiences of Nigerian migrants within Libya's migration corridor through the analytical lens of state failure and migrant vulnerability. It investigates how Libya's post-2011 political collapse has contributed to the proliferation of human trafficking networks, irregular detention systems, and widespread human rights abuses against migrants transiting through its territory. The study is anchored on Robert Rotberg's State Failure Theory and employs qualitative content analysis of secondary sources, including scholarly literature, reports from international organizations, and credible media publications. Findings reveal that Libya's fragmentation and breakdown of central authority have created a governance vacuum in which armed militias and criminal networks operate with relative impunity. This situation exposes Nigerian migrants to severe forms of exploitation, including forced labour, extortion, detention, sexual violence, and modern slavery. The study further shows that while structural conditions in Nigeria such as unemployment, insecurity, and poverty drive irregular migration, the transit environment in Libya significantly intensifies migrant vulnerability and human suffering. The study concludes that Nigerian migrants' experiences in Libya are not isolated incidents but outcomes of a broader system of state failure, transnational criminality, and weak migration governance. It recommends strengthened international cooperation, improved migration management frameworks, and urgent restoration of rule of law in Libya to mitigate the humanitarian crisis affecting migrants along the Central Mediterranean route.*

Keywords: *State failure, migrant vulnerability, irregular migration, human trafficking, Libya, Nigeria.*

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Introduction

Irregular migration from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe has continued to intensify despite increasing awareness of its dangers. A significant number of migrants attempting to reach Europe pass through Libya, which has become a major transit hub within the Central Mediterranean migration corridor. Reports indicate that tens of thousands of migrants reach Italy annually, reflecting a persistent and growing movement driven largely by poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and structural inequalities in countries of origin (Searcey & Barry, 2017). However, the journey toward Europe is often

marked by extreme danger, exploitation, and systemic abuse, particularly within Libya and along the Mediterranean route.

For many migrants, including Nigerians, the journey begins long before reaching the sea. It involves dangerous overland movement through West and North Africa, including overcrowded transport systems, desert crossings under extreme conditions, and exposure to armed robbery and human trafficking networks. Migrants who survive the Sahara Desert crossing into Libya frequently encounter detention, extortion, forced labour, and physical abuse at the hands of smugglers, militias, and sometimes state-linked actors operating within Libya's fragmented governance structure (Ware, 2018). The collapse of institutional authority in Libya has created an environment in which migrants are highly vulnerable to exploitation with limited protection or legal recourse.

The Central Mediterranean route, particularly the stretch between Libya and Italy, has been widely described as one of the deadliest migration corridors in the world. Thousands of migrants have lost their lives through shipwrecks, overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels, and violent encounters at sea. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2016), this route is the deadliest migration passage globally for Sub-Saharan Africans (Searcey & Barry, 2017). In several reported cases, migrants have also died in the Sahara Desert due to abandonment by traffickers, lack of water, or mechanical failure of vehicles (New York Times, 2017). More recent incidents continue to highlight the severity of the crisis. In some cases, overcrowded dinghies carrying migrants have capsized due to mechanical sabotage or neglect by smugglers, resulting in significant loss of life. The United Nations Refugee Agency has emphasized that smugglers exploit desperation for profit, contributing to widespread human rights violations and preventable deaths (UNHCR, as cited in Searcey & Barry, 2017). These incidents reflect a broader pattern of organized exploitation within transnational trafficking networks operating across North Africa.

Against this backdrop, Libya has increasingly emerged as both a transit and detention space where migrants from Nigeria and other Sub-Saharan African countries are subjected to severe humanitarian crises. The combination of state fragility, armed conflict, weak rule of law, and the proliferation of trafficking networks has transformed Libya into a high-risk environment for migrants (Ware, 2018). Consequently, the growing movement of Nigerians through this route reflects not only migration pressures in the country of origin but also structural vulnerabilities within the transit state.

This study therefore situates the experiences of Nigerian migrants within the broader framework of state failure and migrant vulnerability.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Robert Rotberg's (2002) State Failure Theory. The theory conceptualizes states along a continuum of strength, weakness, and failure based on their capacity to provide essential political goods such as security, rule of law, political stability, and basic welfare services. Central to Rotberg's argument is that the effectiveness of a state is measured not merely by formal sovereignty, but by its ability to maintain territorial control and protect individuals within its borders. Strong states, in Rotberg's formulation, are those that effectively maintain law and order, ensure territorial integrity, and create enabling environments for socioeconomic development. Weak states, by contrast, are characterized by declining institutional capacity, rising corruption, internal tensions, and an erosion of governance structures. These weaknesses reduce the ability of the state to provide basic political goods consistently and equitably across its territory.

Failed states represent the extreme end of this continuum. In such contexts, the state loses effective control over large parts of its territory, and the monopoly over the legitimate use of force is transferred to non-state actors such as militias, armed groups, and criminal networks. Governance

becomes fragmented, rule of law collapses, and citizens (along with non-citizens) are left without meaningful protection from violence, exploitation, or injustice. Rotberg further notes the category of "weak but seemingly strong" states, where authoritarian control in limited urban centers masks deeper institutional decay and widespread insecurity. In relation to this study, Libya fits the characteristics of a failed state following the collapse of its central authority after 2011. The breakdown of governance has led to territorial fragmentation, the proliferation of armed militias, and the absence of effective legal and security institutions. As a result, Libya has become a transit and detention hub where criminal networks operate with relative impunity, particularly in relation to irregular migration and human trafficking.

Within this context, Nigerian migrants become highly vulnerable actors in a failed state environment. The absence of effective state protection exposes them to multiple forms of abuse, including detention, extortion, forced labour, sexual exploitation, and trafficking. The theory therefore explains how state collapse in Libya creates structural conditions that facilitate migrant vulnerability and enable transnational criminal exploitation. It further provides a framework for understanding the humanitarian and security crisis experienced by Nigerian migrants within Libya's migration corridor.

Irregular Migration

Irregular migration refers to the movement of individuals across international borders in violation of immigration laws of receiving states. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2016), it includes entry, stay, or transit in a country without proper authorization, encompassing migrants who are undocumented, unauthorized, or without legal residence status (IOM, 2016). This form of migration has increasingly become a major global concern, particularly due to its association with human trafficking, exploitation, and transnational organized crime.

The phenomenon is largely driven by structural inequalities, unemployment, insecurity, and perceived better economic opportunities abroad. In many developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, young people often embark on irregular migration journeys based on expectations of improved livelihoods, only to become victims of deception by organized smuggling networks (UNODC, 2018). These migrants frequently fall into the hands of recruiters and trafficking syndicates who facilitate dangerous transnational movements under false promises of employment and safety.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design and relies primarily on content analysis of relevant secondary sources. The approach is suitable for examining the experiences of Nigerian migrants within the context of Libya's state failure and the associated humanitarian and trafficking crisis. Data were drawn from scholarly journal articles, books, policy reports, and publications from international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations agencies, and reputable media sources including BBC News and The New York Times. The selection of materials was guided by their relevance to irregular migration, human trafficking, and state fragility in Libya and Sub-Saharan Africa. The data were systematically reviewed and thematically analyzed in order to identify recurring patterns relating to migrant vulnerability, the role of state collapse, and the operations of transnational criminal networks. The findings were then interpreted within the framework of Rotberg's State Failure Theory to provide a contextual understanding of how governance failure in Libya contributes to the exploitation and suffering of Nigerian migrants.

Irregular Migration and Migrant Vulnerability as a State Failure

Empirical evidence shows that irregular migrants are exposed to multiple layers of vulnerability along migration routes. Reports by international agencies indicate that some migrants are coerced or manipulated into criminal economies such as drug trafficking, prostitution, and forced labour, while others are abandoned in transit countries, leading to prolonged suffering and psychological trauma (Daniel & Oluwakemi, 2021). In extreme cases, migrants become stranded and resort to survival strategies such as petty crime, drug use, or informal street economies, often as a result of coercion or structural desperation (UNODC, 2018). These outcomes highlight the intersection between migration, crime, and structural inequality.

From a security-development perspective, irregular migration is closely linked to broader governance and insecurity challenges in countries of origin. Mukhtar and Abdullahi (2022) argue that insecurity, poverty, and weak governance structures significantly contribute to forced mobility and irregular migration flows. Similarly, conflict dynamics in Northern Nigeria, including violent extremism and armed banditry, have intensified displacement and migration pressures, thereby increasing the likelihood of irregular migration pathways (Mukhtar et al., 2022; Abdullahi & Mukhtar, 2022). These conditions demonstrate how internal insecurity in origin states interacts with external vulnerabilities in transit states.

The Libyan context provides a critical case for understanding how state failure amplifies migrant vulnerability. Following the collapse of centralized authority after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya became fragmented, with competing militias and weak institutional structures unable to regulate migration flows or protect human rights (Ware, 2018). This governance vacuum has created conditions where migrants are routinely detained, extorted, sold into forced labour, or subjected to sexual exploitation. Donnelly (2017) notes that many migrants passing through Libya are held against their will in detention-like environments and, in some cases, trafficked into modern forms of slavery.

Racial discrimination further intensifies migrant suffering in Libya. Sub-Saharan African migrants, including Nigerians, are often subjected to racialized violence and dehumanization. Searcey and Barry (2017b) report that migrants are frequently referred to with derogatory labels based on skin color, making them easy targets for abuse and exploitation. Such racialized hierarchies within migrant spaces deepen their vulnerability and limit access to protection or justice. A defining feature of Libya's state failure is the absence of effective rule of law. As noted by Leonard Doyle of the IOM, the lack of functioning legal and security institutions has enabled the proliferation of human trafficking and modern slavery networks across the country (Donelly, 2017). It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of migrants are currently trapped in Libya, where they are exposed to robbery, sexual violence, forced labour, and death at the hands of criminal actors operating with relative impunity (Ware, 2018).

The Central Mediterranean migration route, which passes through Libya into Europe, remains one of the deadliest migration corridors globally. Thousands of migrants die annually in the Sahara Desert or Mediterranean Sea due to dehydration, abandonment, shipwrecks, or deliberate exploitation by smugglers (New York Times, 2017). The scale of mortality underscores the extent to which irregular migration has become a humanitarian crisis embedded within global inequality and weak governance systems. Nigerian migrants are significantly represented within these migration flows. According to IOM reports, Nigerians constitute one of the largest groups attempting irregular migration to Europe, following only Syrians and Afghans in some migration routes. The journey is often organized through complex smuggling chains across West and North Africa, involving multiple actors and high financial costs. For instance, BBC reporting on

smuggling networks reveals structured routes through Niger, Agadez, and Libya, where migrants are systematically moved through established trafficking corridors for profit (BBC News, 2017).

Despite the risks, smugglers often rationalize their involvement by framing migration as a voluntary economic decision rather than coercion, reflecting the blurred boundaries between agency and exploitation in irregular migration systems (IOM, 2016). However, this narrative obscures the structural drivers of migration, including poverty, insecurity, and governance failure in origin states such as Nigeria (Mukhtar et al., 2017; Mukhtar et al., 2018).

In this context, irregular migration must be understood not merely as a violation of immigration laws, but as a manifestation of deeper structural crises involving state fragility, economic deprivation, and transnational criminal networks. Libya's state failure therefore plays a central role in transforming migration routes into spaces of humanitarian catastrophe, where Nigerian migrants experience heightened vulnerability to trafficking, exploitation, and death.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the experiences of Nigerian migrants in Libya are deeply embedded in the broader dynamics of state failure and its associated governance deficits. Using Rotberg's (2002) State Failure Theory, the study shows that Libya's post-2011 political disintegration has created conditions in which the protection of human life is severely compromised, particularly for non-citizens such as irregular migrants. The collapse of central authority and the rise of competing armed groups have weakened the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force, thereby allowing criminal networks and militias to operate with relative impunity.

A key implication of this state failure is the transformation of Libya into a high-risk transit and detention space for migrants. The study reveals that Nigerian migrants are not only exposed to the dangers of irregular migration routes but also to systematic exploitation within Libya's fragmented territorial landscape. The absence of effective rule of law facilitates widespread human trafficking, forced labour, detention, and extortion. This finding aligns with earlier observations that failed states are characterized by the inability to provide basic political goods, particularly security and legal protection (Rotberg, 2002; Ware, 2018).

The discussion further highlights that migrant vulnerability in Libya is not solely a consequence of transit dynamics but also a product of structural inequalities in both sending and receiving contexts. On one hand, conditions in Nigeria, including unemployment, insecurity, and weak governance, contribute to the decision to migrate irregularly (Mukhtar & Abdullahi, 2022; Mukhtar et al., 2022). On the other hand, Libya's institutional collapse amplifies the risks associated with migration by exposing migrants to unregulated and violent environments controlled by non-state actors.

Another important dimension emerging from the study is the role of transnational criminal networks in sustaining migrant exploitation. The findings indicate that migration routes through the Sahara and into Libya are highly organized, involving multiple actors who profit from the movement of migrants across borders. These networks exploit governance gaps and the absence of coordinated international enforcement mechanisms, turning migration corridors into spaces of commodification and abuse. This reinforces the argument that state failure not only weakens internal governance but also facilitates cross-border criminal economies.

The study also shows the racialized nature of migrant vulnerability in Libya. Sub-Saharan African migrants, including Nigerians, are disproportionately targeted for abuse, discrimination, and exploitation. This racial dimension intensifies the humanitarian crisis and reflects broader hierarchies within migration systems, where skin color and origin significantly influence treatment

and outcomes. Such patterns further deepen the structural vulnerability of migrants already exposed to insecurity and exploitation.

Thus, the findings demonstrate that Nigerian migrants in Libya occupy a highly precarious position shaped by the intersection of weak state structures, transnational criminality, and structural inequality. The Libyan case illustrates how state failure extends beyond domestic instability to generate regional humanitarian crises, particularly within migration systems. The study therefore reinforces the argument that migrant vulnerability is not accidental but structurally produced within contexts of governance collapse and inadequate international protection mechanisms.

Conclusion

This study has examined the experiences of Nigerian migrants within Libya through the analytical lens of State Failure Theory. It establishes that Libya's post-2011 political collapse has significantly weakened state institutions, resulting in the breakdown of law and order, proliferation of armed militias, and the emergence of criminal networks that operate with minimal restraint. Within this context of state failure, migrants become highly vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, detention, forced labour, and other forms of human rights abuse. The study further demonstrates that the irregular migration journey from Nigeria to Europe through Libya is shaped by a combination of push factors in the country of origin and pull factors in destination regions. However, the most critical determinant of migrant suffering lies in the transit environment, where the absence of effective governance transforms Libya into a space of systemic humanitarian crisis. Nigerian migrants, in particular, are exposed to severe risks that often result in loss of life, physical abuse, and psychological trauma.

Thus, the findings confirm that migrant vulnerability in Libya is structurally produced through the interaction of weak governance, transnational criminality, and fragmented state authority. The Libyan case illustrates how state failure extends beyond national borders to generate regional and international humanitarian consequences. The study therefore concludes that reforms in migration governance is essential in addition to also broader international efforts aimed at stabilizing fragile states and disrupting trafficking networks operating across migration routes.

Policy Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the humanitarian crisis facing Nigerian migrants in Libya within the broader context of state failure and transnational trafficking:

1. There is a need for enhanced intervention by international and transnational bodies such as the United Nations, International Organization for Migration (IOM), and African Union to coordinate rescue, monitoring, and protection mechanisms for migrants along the Central Mediterranean route.
2. The Nigerian government should prioritize policies that address structural drivers of migration, including unemployment, insecurity, poverty, and weak governance, through sustainable job creation, education, and security sector reforms.
3. The Libyan authorities, with international support, should work towards rebuilding state institutions and ensuring compliance with international protocols on asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant protection, particularly those under the 1951 Refugee Convention and related instruments.
4. International organizations such as IOM, UNHCR, World Food Programme (WFP), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam, and Save the Children should be further supported financially and logistically to expand their operations in Libya and along migration routes.

5. Governments in transit and destination countries should intensify intelligence sharing and cross-border cooperation to dismantle human smuggling and trafficking syndicates operating across West Africa, the Sahara, and North Africa.
6. Social media companies and digital platforms should be held accountable for their potential misuse by traffickers for recruitment, coordination, and exploitation of migrants. Stronger monitoring and reporting mechanisms should be enforced to prevent abuse of online platforms.
7. The United Nations and relevant human rights bodies should conduct continuous independent investigations into human rights abuses against migrants in Libya, with a view to ensuring accountability, documentation of violations, and prosecution of perpetrators.

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