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SOCIAL NETWORKS AND TOGOLESE LABOUR MIGRATION IN NIGERIA (1990 -2020)

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Article Publication Details

This article is published in the **International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Bulletin**, ISSN 3108-1428 (Online) Volume 3 Issue 6 (Nov – Dec) 2024.

ABSTRACT

This paper engages the labour migration experiences and adaptation strategies of Togolese migrants in Nigeria between 1990 and 2020, emphasizing the roles of social networks, kinship, ethnic associations, and religious institutions. Employing historical and descriptive methods, the research contextualizes migration within precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial linkages among Yoruba, Ewe, and Hausa communities, while analyzing contemporary realities through interviews and group discussions. Findings reveal that migration is structured by intersecting dimensions of sex, age, and ethnicity, with men dominating physically intensive and artisanal sectors, women increasingly engaging in trade and domestic services, and youth utilizing migration as a pathway for skill acquisition. Social networks and community-based mechanisms, including rotating credit associations, cultural festivals, and informal arbitration, serve as critical instruments for economic integration, welfare provision, and resilience, though access is uneven and can reproduce inequalities. The study underscores the need for policies that integrate informal migrant systems with formal labour governance to enhance protection, inclusion, and sustainable mobility in West Africa.

Keywords: Labour, migration; Social networks, Togolese, Nigeria

Introduction

Labour migration expanded rapidly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries due to globalization, economic restructuring, and widening inequalities between and within states (Castles, 2010; Castles et al., 2014; Steinbrink & Niefenführ, 2020). As industries globalized, labour markets became more interconnected, creating both opportunities and pressures that pushed individuals to cross borders in search of employment and improved living conditions (Bauder, 2006; World Bank, 2018). In

this global context, social networks emerged as essential resources that shape the migration decisions, aspirations, and settlement experiences of migrants (Massey et al., 1993; Brezzi et al., 2015; Novotny & Hasman, 2015). For Togolese migrants, these global trends and the need for supportive networks abroad directly influence their motivations for moving to Nigeria and their subsequent labour adaptation.

Labour refers to the human effort, both physical and mental, used in the production of goods and services. Todaro and Smith explain labour as a critical factor of production that shapes economic outcomes and social structures (Todaro & Smith, 2020). Their work highlights the importance of understanding labour beyond mere employment to include conditions, rights, and productivity. This definition is relevant for the study as it frames Togolese migrant participation in Nigeria's labour market not only in terms of jobs but also in terms of adaptation and socio-economic integration.

Migration refers to the movement of people from one place to another with the intention of settlement or work. Castles, de Haas, and Miller define migration as a multidimensional process influenced by economic, social, political, and environmental factors (Castles et al., 2014). Their work provides a useful foundation for understanding Togolese movements to Nigeria, highlighting the interplay of structural forces and individual agency. Labour migration combines the dynamics of both labour and migration, where people move to enhance employment opportunities. Todaro and Smith emphasise labour migration as a response to structural inequalities and differential economic opportunities across regions (Todaro & Smith, 2020). This definition situates Togolese migrants within broader West African labour flows shaped by both historical ties and modern economic conditions.

Across the African continent, migration remains predominantly intra-regional, with most movements occurring between neighbouring countries rather than toward distant continents (Adepoju, 2010; Teye, 2022; UN DESA, 2018). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Free Movement, adopted in 1979, reinforced earlier historical relationships by facilitating legal mobility among member states (ECOWAS, 1979). With reduced travel restrictions, West Africans increasingly relied on kinship ties, ethnic communities, and shared languages to navigate host environments (Olsen, 2011; Steinbrink & Niedenführ, 2020). These realities are particularly relevant to Togolese migrants who depend on Yoruba-, Ewe-, and Hausa-linked networks when settling in Nigeria.

Labour migration between Togo and Nigeria has a long historical foundation that dates back to precolonial interactions among the Yoruba, Ewe, and Hausa peoples (Olsen, 2011; Olukoju, 2003). These earlier movements created cultural ties and trading networks that still influence migration patterns today. However, despite this long history, little empirical research has examined how Togolese migrants currently adapt to Nigeria's rapidly changing socio-economic environment. Existing studies focus broadly

on West African migration but rarely explain the unique labour challenges and survival strategies of Togolese migrants in Nigeria (Klöpf et al., 2025; Black et al., 2022). This gap leaves important questions unanswered about how historical connections translate into contemporary labour experiences.

Social networks and community support remain central to the everyday survival and progress of Togolese migrants in Nigeria. Migrant associations, ethnic unions, religious groups, and informal neighbourhood networks offer newcomers housing, credit, training, and emotional support (Massey et al., 1993; Scholarly Anthology Editors, 2022). These structures help migrants cope with cultural challenges, discrimination, and uncertain economic conditions. In addition, the ability to communicate in Yoruba, Hausa, or Nigerian Pidgin strongly enhances migrants' employability and their sense of belonging in the workplace and in host communities (Novotny & Hasman, 2015; Olaiya, 2024). The interaction between community support, language skills, and experiences of acceptance or rejection significantly shapes their labour outcomes.

Awumbila and Mensah emphasise that migrant networks often extend across countries, linking origin and destination communities (Awumbila & Mensah, 2016). This cross-border dimension supports understanding of circular labour patterns and seasonal migration, and explains why Togolese migrants maintain strong ties with communities in Togo.

Critics argue that reliance on social networks can sometimes reinforce inequality, as access to information and resources is not equally distributed (Brezzi et al., 2015; Nijensen & Steinbrink, 2025)..

Adepoju observes that social networks also provide protection against exploitation and help newcomers navigate unfamiliar environments (Adepoju, 2010). The study uses this insight to examine how community support influences employment outcomes, resilience, and integration among Togolese migrants.

Without evidence-based analysis, policymakers and community organizations cannot fully understand the inequalities embedded within migrant support systems. It is based on this background that this study analyzes the extent to which social networks and community support influence the labour opportunities and adaptation processes of Togolese migrants in Nigeria between 1990–2020.

1. Study Area



Figure 2.1: Map of Africa showing Proximity of Togo and Nigeria. Source; (Olukoju, 2003)

Nigeria's geography significantly shapes patterns of labour migration with neighbouring countries, including Togo. As Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria is strategically positioned on the Gulf of Guinea, sharing borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (Olukoju, 2003; Olsen, 2011; Adeola & Ogirima, 2010). Its central location establishes the country as a hub for regional mobility. Major rivers such as the Niger and Benue historically facilitated trade and the movement of people across borders (Olukoju, 2003; Olsen, 2011). For communities along these borders, geographic factors directly influence livelihood strategies, with natural features guiding seasonal and economic activities. Nigeria's ecological diversity—from the mangrove swamps of the Niger Delta to the northern savannahs—creates distinct forms of labour mobility. Northern farmers often migrate seasonally to support cultivation, while southern fishing communities conduct cross-border activities with Benin and Togo. Colonial-era borders did not fully disrupt these continuities, as transnational ethnic groups like the Yoruba and Ewe maintain shared agricultural zones and market networks (Adepoju, 2010; Olsen, 2011).

Urban centres further shape migration patterns. Lagos, Nigeria's commercial hub, lies less than 150 km from Lomé, Togo, forming a corridor for economic exchange (Olukoju, 2003; IOM, 2019). Togolese migrants find employment opportunities in Lagos, while Nigerians use Lomé to access francophone West Africa. In this way, geography functions not only as a physical space but also as a dynamic arena where economic adaptation and cross-border mobility are actively negotiated, linking environmental conditions, urban centres, and social networks.

1. Methodology

This study employs a combination of historical and descriptive research methods to examine the labour experiences and adaptation strategies of Togolese migrants in Nigeria between 1990 and 2020. The historical method contextualizes migration within its long-term cultural and precolonial roots, tracing interactions among the Yoruba, Ewe, and Hausa peoples, colonial policies shaping mobility, and postcolonial economic changes that influenced labour flows. This approach highlights how historical linkages and policies laid the foundation for contemporary migration patterns, while the descriptive method complements it by capturing current realities, including social networks, community support, and informal economic strategies that enable migrants to navigate challenges such as unemployment and housing.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with Togolese migrants in Nigerian cities such as Lagos, Abeokuta, Port Harcourt and Yenagoa providing detailed personal narratives while maintaining focus on key themes like kinship ties, ethnic associations, and financial networks. Group discussions with community associations, market groups, and artisan networks further revealed collective strategies, including information sharing, conflict resolution, and mutual support mechanisms. Data from interviews and discussions were analysed thematically and triangulated with secondary sources, allowing the study to link historical migration patterns with contemporary experiences and provide a comprehensive understanding of how social networks, cultural practices, and informal institutions shape Togolese migrant labour in Nigeria.

2. Results and Discussion

Labour migration in West Africa, and specifically within the Nigeria–Togo corridor, is deeply shaped by gender and age. Between 1990 and 2020, labour migration within the Nigeria–Togo corridor expanded significantly, rising from about 50,000 migrants in 1990 to nearly 200,000 by 2020 (Table 4.1a). This steady growth reflects the increasing reliance on cross-border mobility as a livelihood strategy shaped by ethnic networks, trade linkages, and shared cultural ties. A notable feature of this migration flow is its gendered character: in 1990, males dominated the movement at 70 percent, while females accounted for only 30 percent. Over time, however, women’s participation grew steadily, reaching 45 percent by 2020. This shift illustrates how ethnic labour migration is deeply shaped by gender, with men traditionally concentrated in physically demanding sectors such as construction, transport, and artisanal work, while women have progressively gained visibility in trade, domestic service, and market-oriented activities. The rising proportion of female migrants not only highlights changing economic opportunities in host societies but also underscores the resilience and adaptability of gender roles within the broader dynamics

of cross-border migration between Nigeria and Togo, findings are consistent with established studies on gendered migration patterns in West Africa (Adepoju, 2010; Awumbila & Mensah, 2016).

Dimension	Youth Migrants (Male & Female)	Older Migrants (Male & Female)
Primary Motivation	Rite of passage; skill acquisition; independence	Stability, wealth accumulation, sustaining families
Sectors of Entry	Male: crafts & construction; Female: domestic service, petty trade	Male: workshops, transport, trade; Female: large-scale markets, cooperative leadership
Networks of Support	Apprenticeship ties, kinship, ethnic solidarity	Established trade and ethnic associations
Vulnerabilities	Exploitation, harassment, lack of bargaining power	Market fluctuations, declining strength, reliance on kin
Outcomes	Skill mastery, transition to adulthood	Economic authority, social recognition, remittances

Table 4.1b: Generational Dimensions of Labour Migration. Source: Author’s compilation from interviews and comparative migration studies (Steinbrink & Niedenführ, 2020).

Among youth, migration is often a rite of passage into adulthood. Young men cross borders to serve apprenticeships in carpentry, tailoring, and mechanics, while young women typically enter domestic service or petty trading. By contrast, older migrants occupy more stable positions in markets, workshops, and trade associations. These generational differences in Table 4.1b highlight how labour migration provides both an entry point into adulthood and a long-term strategy for household survival. While economic factors provide the immediate push and pull for migration, the actual configuration of migration flows often reflects the roles assigned to men and women within ethnic communities, as well as the cultural expectations placed on youth. Age and gender intersect with ethnicity to determine which sectors migrants enter, how they access opportunities, and what forms of vulnerability they face. These findings align with analyses that emphasize the intersection of age, gender, and social embeddedness in shaping migrant livelihoods in West Africa (Steinbrink & Niedenführ, 2020), but they contrast with interpretations that prioritize individual economic rationality over socially structured pathways in youth migration (Teye, 2022).

Ethnic Group	Male Migration Patterns	Female Migration Patterns	Ethnic Group
Yoruba (Nigeria)	Apprenticeships in tailoring, carpentry, mechanics; construction work in Lagos and Lomé	Petty trade in textiles, foodstuffs, cosmetics across Lagos, Ibadan, and Lomé	Yoruba (Nigeria)
Ewe (Togo)	Cross-border artisanal training, construction in Nigerian cities	Petty trade and market associations in Lomé and Nigerian markets	Ewe (Togo)
Hausa (Nigeria)	Networks in transport, mechanics, and construction; strong ethnic solidarity in	Limited but growing presence in informal petty trade and domestic	Hausa (Nigeria)

	urban sites	service	
Ethnic Group	Male Migration Patterns	Female Migration Patterns	Ethnic Group
Yoruba (Nigeria)	Apprenticeships in tailoring, carpentry, mechanics; construction work in Lagos and Lomé	Petty trade in textiles, foodstuffs, cosmetics across Lagos, Ibadan, and Lomé	Yoruba (Nigeria)
Ewe (Togo)	Cross-border artisanal training, construction in Nigerian cities	Petty trade and market associations in Lomé and Nigerian markets	Ewe (Togo)

Table 4.1c: Ethnic and Gendered Patterns of Labour Migration. Source: Migration narratives and ethnographic studies of Hausa, Yoruba, and Ewe communities (Massey et al., 1993)

Within these patterns, ethnicity further intersects with gender and age (Table 4.1c), structuring how labour is organized. Hausa, Yoruba, and Ewe youth rely on kinship links to secure apprenticeships in workshops, while female migrants use market associations and rotating credit schemes to sustain cross-border trade. Ethnic solidarity often cushions migrants from total vulnerability, yet it also reinforces clustering in specific occupations and limits upward mobility. Apprenticeship systems in sectors such as carpentry, tailoring, mechanics, and construction sustain this pattern, with senior artisans often recruiting young migrants from kinship or ethnic networks. Taken together, these tables demonstrate how gender, age, and ethnicity overlap to create differentiated but interconnected migration realities. Male youths use migration to achieve adulthood and skill mastery, while women sustain households through trade and domestic service. Older migrants consolidate these experiences into stable forms of authority and economic contribution. The Nigeria–Togo corridor thus becomes both an economic lifeline and a cultural arena where migration reproduces, but also reshapes, traditional roles. These gendered and ethnicized dynamics are not static but evolve with shifting economic opportunities and regional migration flows, making the Nigeria–Togo case an important lens for analyzing the intersection of gender, age, and ethnic mobility. These findings are consistent with theoretical and empirical work emphasizing the role of social networks, kinship ties, and cumulative causation in structuring migration outcomes (Massey et al., 1993; Nijensen & Steinbrink, 2025).

4.2. Rotating Credit Associations, Trust, and Community Savings

Group / Practice	Type of Savings System	Main Characteristics	Socio-Economic Impact
Yoruba migrants (<i>ajo</i>)	Rotating Credit Associations	Members contribute fixed sums regularly; funds rotate among participants	Provides startup capital for businesses, supports household needs, and ensures solidarity
Ewe migrants (<i>tontines</i>)	Collective Savings	Contributions pooled	Promotes small-scale

	Circles	into a common fund used to finance entrepreneurial projects	entrepreneurship and strengthens ethnic solidarity
Hausa migrants (Islamic cooperative savings)	Faith-based Cooperative Systems	Operates under Islamic principles of trust, honesty, and collective responsibility	Enhances trust-based financing, supports trade, and reinforces religious identity
Women migrants (various groups)	Gendered Savings Associations	Women organize independent savings groups to fund petty trade and family expenses	Empowers women, promotes education for children, and expands female participation in trade

Table 4.2: Comparative Features of Migrant Rotating Credit Associations in Nigeria–Togo Labour Migration. Source: Author’s compilation of interviews and comparative migration studies.

Rotating credit associations (ROSCAs) are central to the financial strategies migrants use to integrate into host economies (Table 4.2). Among Yoruba migrants, the practice of *ajo*—community-based savings groups enables workers to pool financial resources collectively, granting access to credit often unavailable through formal banking institutions. In Togo, where many Nigerians are excluded from mainstream financial systems, these associations function as vital instruments of economic empowerment, allowing participants to fund businesses, manage household expenses, and maintain financial stability (Taylor, 1999; Woodruff & Zenteno, 2007). Ewe and Hausa migrants rely on comparable systems: the Ewe organize tontines to support entrepreneurial ventures, while Hausa migrants utilize Islamic cooperative savings rooted in trust and religious norms (Taylor, 1999; Woodruff & Zenteno, 2007). Beyond providing capital, these systems reinforce communal solidarity, as membership is restricted to trusted individuals within ethnic or religious networks, highlighting the inseparability of economic cooperation and social belonging (Brezzi et al., 2015; Bauder, 2006).

Trust is the foundation of ROSCAs, ensuring compliance and accountability where formal legal enforcement is limited. Migrants who default on contributions face social sanctions, including temporary exclusion from associations or denial of future financial support (Brezzi et al., 2015; Bauder, 2006). Such mechanisms demonstrate how cultural practices can substitute for fragile or exclusionary financial institutions, enabling migrants to mitigate economic vulnerabilities while maintaining resilience in unstable labor markets.

ROSCAs also facilitate women’s economic participation, particularly for those excluded from male-dominated sectors. Female migrants establish savings groups to finance petty trading, meet household needs, and support children’s education (Awumbila & Mensah, 2016; ILO, 2019). These gendered adaptations illustrate the flexibility of cultural systems in addressing challenges specific to migrant

women. Women’s savings networks expand economic opportunities and reinforce intergenerational resilience, underscoring the broader social and economic significance of trust-based informal finance within migrant communities.

4.3: Festivals, Religion, and Migrant Social Life as Support Structures

Category	Yoruba Migrants	Ewe Migrants	Hausa Migrants
Festivals	Celebrate Yoruba cultural festivals (e.g., <i>Egungun</i> , <i>Osun-Osogbo</i>) in migrant enclaves, reinforcing identity and cohesion.	Maintain Ewe traditional festivals (e.g., <i>Hogbetsotso</i>), serving as occasions for cultural display and community solidarity.	Observe Islamic festivals (<i>Eid al-Fitr</i> , <i>Eid al-Adha</i>) as communal gatherings that strengthen bonds and facilitate charity.
Religion	Blend Christianity, Islam, and indigenous beliefs; churches and mosques function as welfare hubs offering migrants assistance.	Strong emphasis on ancestral worship and Christian practices; shrines and churches provide moral guidance and crisis mediation.	Islam is central; mosques double as spaces for prayer, dispute settlement, and distribution of alms (<i>zakat</i>).
Migrant Social Life	Form town unions and ethnic clubs that organize welfare contributions, funerals, and collective problem-solving.	Kinship-based associations and dance groups reinforce belonging, while remittance contributions are coordinated socially.	Community associations based on mosques or ethnic ties manage apprenticeships, charity, and social protection for vulnerable members.
Support Functions	Festivals and religion ease homesickness, promote identity preservation, and mobilize resources for newcomers.	Social activities reinforce kinship obligations, helping migrants maintain transnational ties with home villages.	Religion and social associations provide safety nets, reduce vulnerability, and foster solidarity in hostile urban settings.

Table 4.3: Festivals, Religion, and Migrant Social Life as Support Structures. Author’s compilation from interviews and comparative migration studies.

Cultural festivals serve as pivotal mechanisms for migrant integration, identity affirmation, and social cohesion within the Nigeria–Togo corridor. Yoruba migrants, for instance, maintain traditional festivals

such as Egungun and Oro, which provide not only cultural continuity but also economic and social networking opportunities (Table 4.3). These findings align with Steinbrink and Niedenführ (2020) and Castles (2010), who argue that festivals function as both identity markers and social glue, facilitating mutual support, skill sharing, and access to informal economic networks. By sustaining ethnic solidarity, festivals simultaneously allow migrants to negotiate belonging in host societies while preserving ties to their homeland communities.

Religious institutions similarly underpin migrant resilience and social integration. Hausa migrants maintain strong connections with Islamic communities in Togo, where mosques serve as both spiritual centers and sites for social organization, including assistance with accommodation, employment, and legal matters. Christian migrants, particularly Pentecostals, utilize churches not only for worship but also for language training, health advice, and job referrals. These patterns are consistent with Adepoju (2010) and the Scholarly Anthology Editors (2022), who emphasize that religious institutions operate as quasi-welfare structures, offering both material and moral support to migrant populations in contexts of limited state provision. The dual role of religious spaces—as spiritual and socio-economic anchors—underscores their centrality in mediating migrant adaptation.

Festivals and religious gatherings also act as informal governance frameworks, facilitating dispute resolution and arbitration within migrant communities. Community elders or religious leaders mediate conflicts, providing culturally legible and trusted mechanisms of justice in the absence of accessible or impartial state systems. These practices align with IOM (2019) and Olaiya (2024), who note that churches and mosques often extend their functions into governance and welfare, reinforcing communal authority while sustaining social harmony. Together, these findings indicate that cultural and religious institutions are not only expressions of identity but also pragmatic instruments through which migrants navigate economic, social, and legal challenges in host societies.

4.4 Coping Strategies: Kinship, Associations, and Informal Arbitration

Function	Nigeria	Togo	Comparative Insight
Settlement Support	Extended families provide shelter for new arrivals in Lagos and border towns	Kin networks host newcomers in Lomé and rural markets	Both contexts rely on family ties to reduce entry costs
Employment Access	Kin introduce migrants to apprenticeships, transport jobs, or trade opportunities	Kin link migrants to market stalls, domestic service, or trade circuits	Employment pathways are mediated through family trust
Financial Safety Nets	Relatives provide loans during hardship	Relatives contribute to remittances and	Family solidarity cushions shocks in

		emergencies	absence of state support
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Table 4.4a: Roles of kinship networks and coping strategies. Author’s compilation from interviews and comparative migration Coping Strategies.

As shown in Table 4.4a, the centrality of kinship networks in both Nigeria and Togo as settlement support, pathways to employment, and informal financial safety nets aligns closely with the observations of Massey et al. (1993) and Adepoyu (2010). These studies emphasize that extended family ties operate as the first line of assistance for migrants facing insecurity, reducing entry costs and buffering against economic shocks. Kinship networks thus function as more than social connections—they are strategic mechanisms that enable migrants to navigate unfamiliar environments, secure employment opportunities, and sustain livelihoods in contexts where formal state protection is limited or absent. The discussion highlights how migrants actively deploy these familial ties to achieve both immediate survival and long-term resilience, reflecting the agency and adaptive strategies documented in West African migration literature.

Function	Nigeria	Togo	Comparative Insight
Welfare Provision	Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo unions provide welfare funds	Ewe, Hausa, and Yoruba associations support members in Lomé	Associations sustain migrants’ welfare across borders
Conflict Mediation	Disputes resolved by ethnic leaders through arbitration	Associations serve as informal courts, bypassing formal systems	Both contexts trust ethnic arbitration over state institutions
Identity and Belonging	Associations maintain cultural practices and festivals	Ethnic unions reinforce language and traditions	Associations preserve migrant identity in host societies

Table 4.4b: Roles of kinship networks on welfare and Arbitration. Author’s compilation from interviews and comparative migration welfare and Arbitration.

Table 4.4b establishes that beyond kinship, the role of ethnic associations in providing welfare, coordinating savings, and facilitating community belonging as supported by Nijensen and Steinbrink (2025) and Steinbrink and Niedenfür (2020). These associations extend their functions into informal governance, offering platforms for arbitration and mediation when disputes arise, which aligns with the findings of Okonkwo et al. (2024) and Black and Gent (2006) on migrant-led regulatory mechanisms. By combining social support, economic coordination, and conflict resolution, these networks operate as integrated systems that sustain both material and cultural welfare. Their importance in times of crisis—including provision of food, shelter, and financial aid demonstrates that migrants’ reliance on kinship and

ethnic institutions is not merely adaptive but constitutes a deliberate strategy to maintain identity, solidarity, and agency within host societies.

Conclusion

Labour migration along the Nigeria–Togo corridor between 1990 and 1999 is deeply shaped by historical ties, ethnic affiliations, and shared cultural practices that predate colonial boundaries, with social networks, kinship, ethnic associations, and religious institutions playing central roles in facilitating migrants' access to employment, housing, credit, and informal welfare systems where state support is limited. Gender, age, and ethnicity intersect to structure labour experiences, as male migrants dominate physically demanding and artisanal sectors, female migrants increasingly engage in trade, domestic service, and market activities, and youth migration serves as a pathway to skill acquisition while older migrants consolidate stability and authority through established networks. These social structures enhance resilience and survival but also reproduce inequalities by unevenly distributing opportunities and protection, highlighting the dual nature of networks as both enabling and constraining. Accordingly, migration and labour policies in Nigeria, Togo, and within ECOWAS should formally recognise and integrate these informal systems as partners in labour governance, welfare delivery, and financial inclusion, while promoting gender- and youth-sensitive interventions such as access to microfinance, skills training, protection from exploitation, and oversight of apprenticeships. Strengthening linkages between migrant networks and formal institutions, alongside further empirical research on intra-network inequalities and long-term adaptation outcomes, would support more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable labour migration policies in West Africa.

Article History

Received: 05-Nov-2024

Accepted: 15-Nov-2024

Published: 25-Nov-2024

Revised: 20-Jan-2026

Article Publication Details (*rpt**)

This article is published in the [International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Bulletin](#), ISSN 3108-1428 (Online). In Volume 3 Issue 6 (Nov – Dec) 2024

The journal is published and managed by [IRPG](#).

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Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the editors and the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on this paper.

Funding

The authors declare that no funding was received for this work.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The author(s) declare that it is not applicable.

Consent for publication

The author(s) declare that this is not applicable.

Competing interests

The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

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