



International Journal of Criminology & Justice (IJCJ)

ISSN: 3142-8908 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 2 ISSUE 1 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Poly Victimization, Structural Vulnerability, and the Lived Impact of Violence Among Irregular Nigerian Migrants in Libya

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Article Information

Received: May 07, 2026

Accepted: July 20, 2026

Published: August 31, 2026

Keywords

*Irregular Migration,
Libya, Nigerian Migrants,
PolyVictimization, Violent Crime*

ABSTRACT

Irregular migration through Libya has increasingly exposed Nigerians to violent crime victimization, yet limited empirical evidence documents the lived experiences of returnees. This study investigated the forms, drivers, and consequences of violent victimization among irregular Nigerian migrants in Libya using Victim Precipitation and Routine Activity theories. An explanatory-sequential mixed-methods design was adopted, with quantitative data collected to determine the prevalence and patterns of victimization, followed by qualitative inquiry to explain the findings. The study involved 456 purposively selected returnees and 50 in-depth interviews with migrants and key stakeholders across nine high-return states in Nigeria. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, while qualitative data were analysed thematically with NVivo. Findings revealed widespread poly-victimization, including physical assault, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, forced labour, human trafficking, extortion, and denial of basic services. 86.8% of respondents experienced at least one form of violent victimization, while over 62% reported witnessing migrant deaths, particularly in detention facilities and makeshift prisons. The findings further showed that weak institutional protection, irregular migration status, and lawlessness in Libya reinforced repeated cycles of abuse. The study concludes that migrant victimization in Libya is systemic and recommends strengthened bilateral protection mechanisms, rights-based migration governance, trauma-informed reintegration services, and sustainable livelihood support for returnees.

INTRODUCTION

Libya remains one of the most dangerous transit and destination countries for irregular migrants in Africa. Since the Libyan Civil War, the country has experienced prolonged political instability, fragmented governance, and the proliferation of armed groups, creating a protection vacuum in which migrants operate with little or no legal safeguards. In this context, migrants, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa, are exposed to systematic abuse, including arbitrary detention, forced labour, sexual violence, and extortion, often perpetrated with near-total impunity (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022; United Nations Support Mission in Libya [UNSMIL], 2023). The absence of effective state control and accountability mechanisms has further entrenched a climate where violence against migrants is normalized and rarely prosecuted (Amnesty International, 2022). Against this backdrop, this article seeks to identify and categorize the various forms of violent victimization experienced by irregular Nigerian migrants in Libya, examine the underlying factors and structural conditions that contribute to their vulnerability, including legal status, race, gender, and the role of armed groups, and assess the short- and long-term impacts of such violence on migrants' well-being, coping strategies, and reintegration outcomes.

While existing scholarship has extensively examined the drivers of irregular migration, such as economic vulnerability, unemployment, and conflict, as well as the failures of migration governance systems, comparatively

less attention has been paid to the lived experiences of migrants within transit spaces like Libya. In particular, there is a critical gap in understanding the specific forms of violence migrants endure, the mechanisms that sustain such violence, and the enduring physical, psychological, and socio-economic consequences for survivors (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021; UNHCR, 2022). Avenda (2025) argues that poor governance, economic hardship, insecurity, unemployment, and weak institutional structures are key drivers of irregular migration among Nigerians. He further demonstrates that migrants transiting through Libya are exposed to multiple forms of victimization, including exploitation, trafficking, abuse, detention, extortion, and other human rights violations, largely because of their irregular status and the absence of effective protection mechanisms. His findings underscore how structural vulnerabilities and governance failures create conditions that facilitate exploitation and increase migrants' exposure to criminal networks and violent actors. Aborisade (2009) draws attention to the complex relationship between victimization, vulnerability, and criminalization. His work highlights how marginalized individuals often occupy ambiguous positions in which they experience severe victimization while simultaneously being perceived, treated, or categorized as offenders by institutions and society. Aborisade further demonstrates how weak protection systems, power asymmetries, and institutional failures can deepen the victimization of already vulnerable populations, thereby reinforcing cycles of abuse, exclusion, and injustice. Nigerian

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migrants constitute a significant proportion of those transiting Libya through irregular routes, making them a critical population for examining these dynamics. Their experiences highlight how migration status intersects with race, socio-economic marginalization, and institutional collapse to produce extreme vulnerability, thereby providing important insights for designing targeted protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration interventions. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to identify and analyze the various forms of violent crime victimization experienced by irregular Nigerian migrants in Libya, examine the factors that contribute to their victimization, and assess the impacts of such experiences on their lives. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions: What forms of violent crime victimization are experienced by irregular Nigerian migrants in Libya? What are the underlying factors that contribute to the violent crime victimization of irregular Nigerian migrants in Libya? How does violent crime victimization affect irregular Nigerian migrants in Libya?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Routine Activity Theory (RAT) and Victim Precipitation Theory, both of which provide complementary lenses for understanding the patterns and drivers of violent victimization among irregular migrants in Libya. These frameworks are particularly relevant in contexts characterized by weak state institutions, informal economies, and limited accountability, where violence is not random but emerges from identifiable structural and situational conditions.

Routine Activity Theory, originally developed by Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus Felson, posits that crime occurs when three elements converge: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Within the Libyan migration context, these elements are starkly evident. Motivated offenders include armed militias, human traffickers, smugglers, and corrupt state or quasi-state actors who exploit migrants for financial gain or control (UNSMIL, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022). Irregular migrants, particularly those lacking legal documentation or protection networks, constitute highly suitable targets due to their limited bargaining power, restricted mobility, and fear of authorities. The absence of capable guardianship is reflected in the breakdown of formal state institutions following the Libyan Civil War, resulting in weak law enforcement, fragmented governance, and minimal oversight of detention facilities and migration routes (IOM, 2022; UNHCR, 2022). In such an environment, the convergence of these elements is not incidental but routine, thereby normalizing cycles of abuse and exploitation.

While RAT effectively explains the situational dynamics of victimization, Victim Precipitation Theory offers further insight into how victims' structural positioning increases their exposure to harm. Originally advanced by Marvin Wolfgang, this theory suggests that certain characteristics

or circumstances of victims may inadvertently elevate their risk of victimization. However, this study adopts the passive victim precipitation perspective, which emphasizes that vulnerability arises not from individual actions or blameworthy behavior, but from broader socio-economic and political conditions (Wolfgang, 1958; Fattah, 1991). In the case of irregular Nigerian migrants, factors such as undocumented legal status, economic desperation, racial marginalization, and dependence on smuggling networks significantly heighten exposure to violence. These structural vulnerabilities position migrants in environments where exploitation becomes almost unavoidable, particularly in detention centres, informal labour markets, and transit routes controlled by armed groups (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021).

Importantly, the application of Victim Precipitation Theory in this study does not imply culpability on the part of migrants; rather, it underscores how systemic inequalities and constrained choices shape risk environments. Migrants' "precipitation" of victimization is therefore understood as a function of structural coercion and survival strategies within hostile settings, rather than voluntary or intentional actions. This interpretation aligns with contemporary victimological scholarship, which cautions against victim-blaming and instead situates vulnerability within broader systems of power, exclusion, and marginalization (UNHCR, 2022). Routine Activity Theory and Victim Precipitation Theory provide a robust analytical framework for understanding migrant victimization in Libya. RAT highlights the environmental and situational conditions that make violence possible and recurrent, while Victim Precipitation Theory explains how structural vulnerabilities position migrants within these high-risk contexts. The integration of these frameworks demonstrates that violence against migrants in Libya is neither accidental nor isolated; rather, it is predictable, patterned, and deeply embedded within the socio-political and economic structures governing migration. This combined theoretical lens therefore strengthens the study's capacity to explain not only the occurrence of violence but also its persistence and normalization within irregular migration systems.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted an exploratory, descriptive mixed-methods design to provide a comprehensive understanding of the violent victimization of irregular Nigerian migrants in Libya. The mixed-methods approach enabled the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, thereby enhancing the depth, validity, and triangulation of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The exploratory dimension was particularly appropriate given the limited empirical research on Nigerian migrants lived experiences in Libyan transit contexts, while the descriptive component facilitated systematic documentation of patterns, forms, and impacts of victimization.

Quantitative data were collected from a sample of 456

irregular Nigerian migrants who had been returned from Libya through assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes. These respondents were drawn from nine high-return states in Nigeria, selected based on their prominence in return migration flows and reintegration caseloads. The quantitative strand focused on capturing the prevalence, types, and correlates of violent victimization, as well as socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

To complement this, qualitative data were generated through 50 in-depth interviews conducted with a diverse group of participants, including returnee migrants and key migration stakeholders such as officials from National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI), National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), Victims of Migration Abuse Foundation (VOMA), and Pathfinders Justice Initiative (PCI). These interviews provided nuanced insights into migrants lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and institutional responses to migration-related abuses. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder perspectives strengthened the analytical depth and contextual understanding of the study.

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to identify trends and relationships within the dataset. Qualitative data, on the other hand, were analyzed thematically using NVivo, allowing for the systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of recurring themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This dual analytical strategy ensured methodological rigor and facilitated the integration of findings across both data strands.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional review bodies, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, trauma-informed and survivor-centered interviewing techniques were employed to minimize the risk of re-traumatization and ensure participants' psychological well-being. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the study, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Violent Crime Victimization Experienced by Irregular Nigerian Migrants in Libya

An overwhelming majority of respondents (86.78%) reported having experienced at least one form of violent crime victimization during their stay in Libya. This finding confirms that violent victimization is not incidental but constitutes a defining feature of the irregular migration experience along the Libya route.

Table 1: Prevalence of Violent Crime Victimization among Irregular Nigerian Migrants in Libya (N = 456)

The scale of victimization underscores the extreme vulnerability of irregular migrants operating within

Table 1: Forms of Violent Crime Victimization Experienced by Irregular Nigerian Migrants in Libya

Victimization Experience	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes (Experienced victimization)	394	86.78%
No (Did not experience victimization)	60	13.22%
Total	454	100.00%

Libya's fragmented security environment, where legal protection is limited and violence functions as a routine instrument of control (IOM, 2023; UNHCR, 2023). The study found that 86.78% of migrants experienced violent victimization during their irregular migration journey in Libya, demonstrating that abuse is systemic and pervasive rather than incidental. This high prevalence reflects a context of weakened governance and protection mechanisms, allowing armed groups, traffickers, detention authorities, and other actors to exploit migrants with limited accountability (UNSMIL, 2023; UNHCR, 2023). Many respondents described victimization as "inevitable" once they entered Libyan territory, highlighting the normalization of violence within the migration economy (IOM, 2023).

Qualitative testimonies strongly reinforced this interpretation. One female returnee explained that from the moment she arrived,

"We were treated like commodities, not like human beings... I was sold three times... passed around like an object with no value... Every time I thought maybe the suffering was ending, I found myself in the hands of another person... It was as if my life had been reduced to a transaction." Female Returnee/IDI/Lagos/2025

Another migrant described detention as a place where survival depended solely on the ability to pay:

"If you had family... maybe you could eat... But if you had no one, it was like a death sentence. They beat you every day to remind you that your life was worthless without payment... Some were killed simply because no money came for them... Without money, you were nothing but a body they could destroy at any time." Female Returnee/IDI/Lagos/2025

Patterns of Poly-Victimization and Dominant Forms of Abuse

Among those who experienced victimization, respondents reported multiple and overlapping forms of violence, indicating widespread polyvictimization. The most prevalent forms included exposure to migrant deaths (62.17%), physical assault (58.70%), sexual violence (57.17%), human trafficking (52.83%), and arbitrary detention combined with denial of basic services (48.26%). Significant proportions also reported extortion, robbery, and kidnapping.

The high prevalence of exposure to death is particularly striking. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported

Table 2: Types of Violent Crime Victimization Experienced by Respondents

Type of Violence	Frequency (N=456)	Percentage (%)
Experienced Fellow Migrant's Death (Detention, Militias, Kidnappers)	286	62.17%
Physical Assault	270	58.70%
Sexual Violence	263	57.17%
Threats/Intimidation	249	54.13%
Human Trafficking	243	52.83%
Denial of Services (e.g., medical, legal, shelter)	222	48.26%
Extortion (by smugglers, militias, or locals)	187	40.65%
Robbery	177	38.48%
Kidnapping/Abduction	134	29.13%
Religious Violence	18	3.91%

Source: Field Survey, 2024/2052

witnessing the death of fellow migrants, often in detention facilities, camps, or at the hands of militias, traffickers, or kidnappers. These finding highlights death not only as an outcome of violence but also as a mechanism of psychological terror, used to coerce compliance, extract ransom, and deter resistance. From a Routine Activity Theory perspective, such lethal outcomes reflect the convergence of motivated offenders (armed groups and traffickers), suitable targets (undocumented, racially marginalized migrants), and a complete absence of capable guardianship within detention centres and informal camps.

• **Physical Assault, Sexual Violence, and Xenophobic Attacks:** Physical assault was reported by 58.70% of respondents, making it one of the most prevalent forms of victimization. These assaults frequently occurred during arrest, detention, labour exploitation, transit across Libya, or at checkpoints operated by militias and armed civilians. Beatings, torture, and other forms of physical brutality were commonly used to enforce obedience, punish non-compliance, or compel forced labour. In addition to physical violence, many respondents described experiences of xenophobic attacks, often driven by racial discrimination and anti-Black sentiment directed toward sub-Saharan African migrants. These attacks included verbal abuse, dehumanization, targeted harassment, and racially motivated physical violence, reflecting broader patterns of social exclusion and hostility documented in reports by the Amnesty International (2021) and the International Organization for Migration (2022). Such xenophobic expressions not only intensified migrants' exposure to violence but also reinforced their marginalization and lack of protection

within Libyan society.

Sexual violence was reported by 57.17% of respondents, revealing an alarmingly high level of gendered and sexualized abuse. While women were disproportionately affected, particularly through rape, sexual coercion, and forced prostitution, male respondents also reported sexual victimization, which is often underreported due to stigma and cultural barriers. Within the framework of Victim Precipitation Theory, these patterns align most closely with passive precipitation, where migrants' irregular legal status, confinement, social exclusion, and dependency on informal actors unintentionally increased their vulnerability without implying responsibility for the abuse. Sexual violence, in this context, functioned not merely as opportunistic crime but as a systematic tool of domination and control embedded within trafficking networks, detention systems, and exploitative labour arrangements. Xenophobic attitudes further intensified these protection risks by fostering perceptions of migrants as outsiders, criminals, or individuals undeserving of dignity and legal protection. Such prejudice legitimized discrimination, dehumanization, and abuse by detention personnel, armed groups, employers, and even segments of host communities. This environment of hostility normalized violence against migrants, discouraged victims from seeking help, reduced public sympathy, and weakened institutional accountability, thereby creating conditions in which sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse could occur with near impunity.

• **Human Trafficking, Detention, and Denial of Services:** More than half of respondents (52.83%) reported experiences consistent with human trafficking, including forced labour, sale or resale of persons, debt bondage, and sexual exploitation. Trafficking was closely linked to arbitrary detention, as many migrants were kidnapped, detained, or transferred between actors without due process. In addition, 48.26% of respondents reported denial of essential services, including medical care, legal assistance, food, water, and shelter. These deprivations often occurred in detention centres and camps and were frequently conditional upon payment of bribes or ransom. Under Routine Activity Theory, detention centres and camps emerge as highrisk environments characterized by complete guardianship failure. Under interactive victim precipitation, continued engagement between migrants and captors, forced by confinement and survival needs, intensified exposure to repeated abuse.

• **Economic Crimes and Criminal Exploitation:** Extortion, Robbery, and Kidnapping: Beyond physical and sexual violence, migrants were subjected to substantial economic victimization, including extortion, robbery, and kidnapping. Respondents reported being forced to contact families in Nigeria under duress, often while being beaten or filmed, to extract ransom payments. Others were robbed of wages, personal belongings, or identity documents. These economic crimes demonstrate how irregular migration in Libya operates

within a violence-for-profit system, where migrants are commodified as sources of ransom, labour, and sexual exploitation. Economic victimization was not a secondary consequence but a central driver of abuse.

• PolyVictimization and Spatial Contexts of Abuse:

The data indicate that victimization rarely occurred in isolation. Most survivors experienced polyvictimization, enduring multiple forms of violence across several spatial contexts, including detention centres, informal camps, workplaces, transit routes, and residential communities. This spatial diffusion of violence underscores that unsafe conditions for migrants were not confined to exceptional moments such as arrest or border crossing but embedded in everyday survival routines. From a Routine Activity Theory standpoint, migrants' routine activities, working informally, moving between cities, residing in shared accommodations, continuously reexposed them to motivated offenders in environments lacking protection.

Multidimensional Drivers of Migrant Victimization: Legal Status, Governance Failures, Economic Marginalization, and Social Exclusion

The findings indicate that migrant victimization in Libya is driven by a complex interaction of structural, socio-economic, and situational factors, rather than a single causal variable. While irregular legal status emerged as the most significant determinant, identified by 85.75% of respondents, it operates within a wider system of vulnerability shaped by governance failures, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. Consistent with existing literature, undocumented migrants are effectively excluded from formal protection mechanisms, rendering them highly susceptible to exploitation, arbitrary detention, and abuse without access to legal redress (International Organization for Migration, 2022; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). In this context, irregular status does not merely increase risk; it structurally reinforces power imbalances between migrants and perpetrators.

Beyond legal precarity, the study highlights the role of weak governance and fragmented state authority in sustaining environments of abuse. Libya's prolonged instability has resulted in limited law enforcement capacity, competing armed actors, and inconsistent migration control systems. These conditions create opportunities for exploitation by traffickers, militias, and even state-affiliated actors, as accountability mechanisms remain weak or absent. This aligns with broader scholarship on migration in fragile contexts, which emphasizes that institutional breakdown and conflict significantly heighten migrant vulnerability. Economic marginalization also emerged as a key contributing factor. Many migrants reported dependence on informal labour markets for survival, where exploitative practices such as wage theft, forced labour, and coercion are widespread. The absence of regulated employment opportunities compels migrants to accept high-risk work arrangements, often mediated by informal brokers or smugglers. This dependency not only increases

exposure to abuse but also limits migrants' ability to exit exploitative situations, reinforcing cycles of victimization. In addition, social and cultural factors, particularly xenophobia and racial discrimination, play a critical role in shaping migrants' experiences of violence. Sub-Saharan African migrants in Libya are frequently subjected to racialized stigma, which legitimizes their mistreatment and reduces the likelihood of protection or intervention. Such hostility contributes to their social isolation and further entrenches their vulnerability, as highlighted in human rights reports by organizations such as Amnesty International (2021).

Finally, situational factors related to migration routes and living conditions further compound risk. Transit environments, detention centres, and informal settlements function as high-risk spaces where migrants are exposed to multiple perpetrators and minimal protection. These environments reflect what criminological perspectives describe as settings with low guardianship and high offender opportunity, thereby facilitating recurrent victimization.

The findings suggest that migrant victimization in Libya is not solely a function of individual circumstances but is structurally produced through the interaction of legal exclusion, governance breakdown, economic necessity, and social marginalization. Addressing these contributing factors therefore requires comprehensive interventions that extend beyond legal status reforms to include institutional strengthening, economic protection mechanisms, and anti-discrimination efforts.

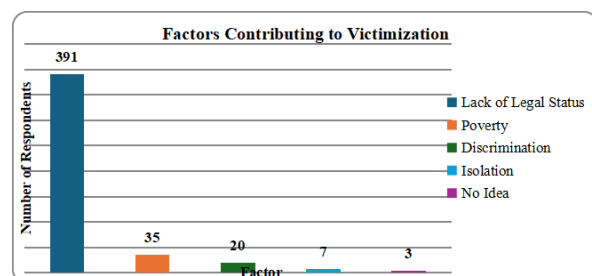


Figure 1: Distribution of the factors that precipitated respondents' victimization

Beyond legal status, poverty emerged as a critical underlying factor shaping migrants' exposure to harm. Economic deprivation compels many migrants to accept precarious migration pathways and exploitative labour conditions, thereby increasing their susceptibility to abuse (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021). Discrimination, particularly based on race and nationality, further compounds vulnerability, as sub-Saharan African migrants in Libya are frequently subjected to dehumanization and targeted violence (Amnesty International, 2022). Language barriers and social isolation also play a significant role, restricting migrants' ability to seek help, access information, or build protective networks, thereby reinforcing their marginalization.

Another notable factor is the role of interpersonal betrayal,

where migrants are deceived or exploited by trusted acquaintances, intermediaries, or even co-migrants. This reflects the informal and often unregulated nature of migration networks, where trust is easily manipulated for profit. Additionally, the broader context of governance collapse following the Libyan Civil War has created an enabling environment for abuse, characterized by weak institutions, lack of accountability, and the proliferation of armed groups (UNSMIL, 2023). Within this fragmented system, violence is perpetrated by a wide range of actors, including Libyan authorities (60.31%), traffickers, militias, civilians, and smugglers. The involvement of both state and non-state actors underscores the systemic and normalized nature of migrant victimization in Libya.

Impact of Victimization

The data in figure 2 highlights the perceived psychological outcomes reported by respondents following their experiences in Libya. Out of the 456 migrants surveyed, 127 respondents (27.85%) reported moderate impacts, including persistent sadness and loss of interest in daily activities. A slightly smaller proportion, 116 respondents (25.44%), indicated severe psychological distress, characterized by symptoms commonly associated with post-traumatic stress, such as flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts. Additionally, 114 respondents (25.00%) described their experiences as mild, reporting feelings of being overwhelmed, helpless, or hopeless. Meanwhile, 99 respondents (21.71%) indicated that victimization had no noticeable effect on their mental well-being.

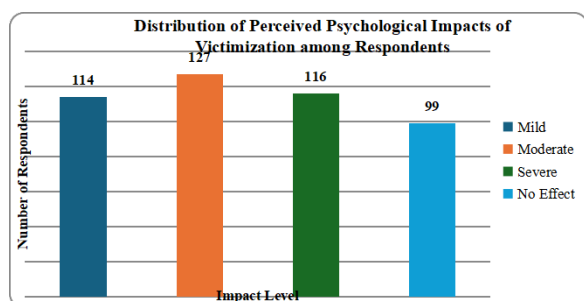


Figure 2: Perceived Impact of victimization experience on the Psychological Wellbeing of Respondents

The study further reveals that the consequences of victimization are profound, multidimensional, and enduring, affecting migrants' psychological, physical, social, and economic well-being long after their return. Psychologically, many respondents reported symptoms consistent with trauma-related disorders, including persistent fear, depression, nightmares, and indicators associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These findings are consistent with prior research highlighting the severe mental health burden experienced by migrants exposed to prolonged violence and detention (UNHCR, 2022; IOM, 2022). Such psychological distress often impairs daily functioning and complicates reintegration processes.

Impact on Physical Health	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	288	63.16%
No	168	36.84%
No Effect	99	21.71%
Total	456	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2024/2025

Physically, respondents reported a range of health challenges, including injuries, torture-related scars, and untreated medical conditions resulting from inadequate access to healthcare during detention or transit. These physical consequences not only reflect the intensity of violence experienced but also highlight systemic neglect within detention facilities and informal labour settings. In many cases, untreated conditions persist upon return, placing additional strain on already limited healthcare systems in countries of origin.

Socially, victimization often resulted in stigma, family rejection, and social isolation. Returnees frequently reported being misunderstood or blamed for their migration experiences, which undermines their ability to reintegrate into their communities. This aligns with broader evidence suggesting that return migration, particularly under distressing conditions, can disrupt social ties and erode community acceptance (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021). The stigma associated with failed migration or experiences of abuse further exacerbates exclusion and marginalization.

Economically, the impacts are equally severe. Many migrants returned with significant debts incurred during their journey, having lost assets or earnings due to exploitation, theft, or unpaid labour. Limited employment opportunities upon return further compound these challenges, trapping many in cycles of poverty and vulnerability. Collectively, these psychological, physical, social, and economic consequences extend well beyond the point of return, significantly undermining sustainable reintegration and highlighting the need for comprehensive, multi-sectoral support systems for returnees.

Discussion

The findings of this study strongly align with existing empirical and policy-oriented literature, reinforcing the conclusion that violent crime against irregular Nigerian migrants in Libya is not incidental but systemic, structured, and embedded within the broader migration governance environment. The documented patterns of trafficking, detention-related violence, extortion, sexual abuse, and exposure to death reflect what scholars describe as a "political economy of migration," in which migrants are commodified and subjected to exploitation for economic gain. This is consistent with reports by the International Organization for Migration (2022) and Amnesty International (2021), which highlight how Libya's fragmented governance, protracted conflict, and weak institutional capacity have created enabling

conditions for systematic abuse by both state and non-state actors.

The persistence and normalization of such violence further corroborate literature emphasizing the role of impunity in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Studies on migration governance in Libya indicate that the absence of effective law enforcement and judicial accountability allows abusive practices to become routinized (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023). In this context, detention centres, informal camps, and migration transit routes operate not merely as administrative or logistical spaces but as institutionalized sites of victimization. These findings challenge dominant humanitarian narratives that frame migrant suffering as an unintended by-product of irregular migration, instead supporting critical perspectives that interpret such suffering as structurally produced and sustained by governance failures and policy neglect.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings provide strong empirical support for Routine Activity Theory. The Libyan migration context clearly illustrates the convergence of motivated offenders, such as traffickers, militias, and corrupt officials, with highly suitable targets, namely undocumented and racially marginalized migrants, in the near absence of capable guardianship. Existing criminological literature underscores that environments characterized by weak state control and limited oversight tend to facilitate such convergence, thereby increasing the likelihood of victimization (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson, 2018). The erosion of state authority following the Libyan civil conflict has further diminished policing capacity, judicial oversight, and humanitarian access, effectively eliminating protective mechanisms and enabling sustained violence.

In addition, the findings resonate with the explanatory framework of Victim Precipitation Theory, particularly its passive dimension. Consistent with prior studies on migrant vulnerability (e.g., Triandafyllidou, 2020), structural factors such as poverty, irregular legal status, social exclusion, and reliance on informal networks significantly increase migrants' exposure to harm. While some elements of interactive victim precipitation are observable, such as engagement with smugglers or informal labor markets, these behaviors must be understood within the context of constrained agency rather than voluntary risk-taking. The literature emphasizes that such survival strategies are often the only available options within restrictive migration regimes, thereby reinforcing that victimization is structurally induced rather than individually determined.

These findings demonstrate that violent crime against irregular Nigerian migrants in Libya is predictable and systematically reproduced, rather than random. The theoretical frameworks applied in this study highlight how environmental conditions, governance failures, and structural inequality interact to produce sustained cycles of abuse. Addressing such victimization therefore requires more than humanitarian relief; it demands structural and

preventive interventions that disrupt the conditions under which violence against migrants is normalized.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, it relies on retrospective self-reports from returnees, which may introduce a recall bias or selective memory, particularly given the traumatic nature of the experiences described. Second, the study focuses exclusively on migrants who have returned to Nigeria, thereby excluding the perspectives of those who remain in Libya or have proceeded to Europe. As such, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of migrant experiences across different stages of the migration trajectory. However, despite these limitations, the study maintains a high level of credibility through methodological triangulation, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative in-depth interviews from both migrants and key stakeholders. This integration of multiple data sources enhances the validity and robustness of the findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of migrant victimization in the Libyan context.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that violent victimization is a pervasive feature of irregular migration through Libya. The findings reveal widespread poly-victimization, including physical assault, sexual violence, human trafficking, arbitrary detention, extortion, and exposure to migrant deaths. These abuses are driven by irregular migration status, weak governance, institutional collapse, and limited legal protection, exposing migrants to repeated physical, psychological, social, and economic harm. The study further shows that the consequences of victimization extend beyond the migration journey, significantly affecting survivors' mental health, livelihoods, and reintegration upon return to Nigeria. The persistence of these challenges underscores that migrant victimization in Libya is systemic rather than incidental and reflects broader failures in migration governance and protection.

The study recommends strengthening bilateral and regional protection mechanisms, promoting rights-based migration governance, expanding safe and regular migration pathways, and implementing survivor-centred reintegration programmes that integrate mental health, livelihood, and social support. Addressing the structural drivers of irregular migration, including poverty, unemployment, and weak governance, is essential for reducing future victimization and enhancing the protection and dignity of migrants.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, this study recommends a shift from predominantly reactive, short-term humanitarian responses toward preventive, rights-based, and accountability-oriented intervention frameworks. First, institutional accountability within Libya must be strengthened. This includes robust international support

for independent monitoring of detention centres, regular documentation of abuses, and mechanisms to investigate and prosecute perpetrators in line with international human rights and humanitarian law. Without credible accountability structures, impunity will continue to sustain violent practices against migrants.

Second, expanding pathways for migrant regularization and legal recognition is critical to reducing vulnerability. Access to legal status, whether temporary protection, residency permits, or humanitarian documentation, can significantly improve migrants' ability to seek justice, access services, and avoid exploitative labour and detention. Legal recognition directly addresses the "absence of guardianship" identified by Routine Activity Theory and reduces migrants' suitability as unprotected targets.

Third, enhanced international and transnational cooperation is essential. Countries of origin, transit, and destination must coordinate through information-sharing, joint protection mechanisms, and cross-border anti-trafficking frameworks. Diplomatic engagement between Nigeria and Libya, supported by regional and international bodies, should prioritize migrant safety, evacuation mechanisms, and survivor protection over purely border-control objectives.

Fourth, reintegration interventions should adopt a survivor-centered and trauma-informed approach. Given the severe psychological, social, and economic impacts identified in this study, reintegration programs must integrate Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), livelihood assistance, skills training, and community reconciliation initiatives. Short-term assistance is insufficient; long-term and holistic support systems are necessary to prevent re-trafficking, stigmatization, and re-migration.

Finally, preventive strategies in countries of origin must address the structural drivers of irregular migration, including unemployment, poverty, limited educational opportunities, and misinformation about migration routes. Community-level awareness campaigns, youth employment programs, and accessible legal migration pathways can reduce reliance on smugglers and diminish exposure to dangerous transit routes.

Implementing these recommendations collectively can contribute to dismantling the structural conditions that enable migrant victimization, transforming migration governance from a system of exploitation into one grounded in protection, dignity, and human rights.

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