"SENDING OUR PETITIONS TO GOD": NIGERIAN IMMIGRANT HEALTHCARE WORKER SETTLEMENT, GENDER AND THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS NETWORKS

Sheri Adekola's research has explored discourses of skills circulation in the case of Nigerian trained nurses. Her research explores migrants' own perceptions of international skilled migration in order to assess the relevance of different theoretical arguments about global skills transfer, for example; brain drain, brain circulation, brain waste, brain train. Her research is transnationally grounded involving fieldwork in Canada (Toronto) and Nigeria (Abuja and Lagos). Sheri teaches at Sheridan College, Toronto, Canada.

Dr. Margaret Walton-Roberts is a human geographer trained in the UK and Canada who focuses on international migration. She is currently an associate professor at Wilfrid Laurier University and associate Dean of the School of International Policy and Governance at the Balsillie School of International Affairs (BSIA), Waterloo Canada. Her research interests are in gender and migration, transnational networks, and immigrant settlement. Her current research focuses on gender and the international migration of health care professionals in the context of India, and international student migration. She has been awarded several external grants for her research, and has published over 18 book chapters, and more than 20 journal articles. Her latest co-edited book, The Human Right to Citizenship: A Slippery Concept, was published by University of Pennsylvania Press.

This paper provides a brief overview of a study aimed at understanding the lived experiences of health care migrants from Nigeria now living in Canada and their individual perceptions regarding their migration experience. We report here on an interesting finding of the research that highlights how Nigerian women migrants cope with the isolating effects of migration and resettlement through a profound attachment to spirituality and religious community networks.

Cet article donne un bref aperçu d'une étude visant à bonifier la compréhension des expériences vécues par les migrants en soins de santé au Nigeria et de leurs perceptions individuelles de leur expérience de la migration. Nous rapportons ici une découverte intéressante de la recherche qui montre comment les migrantes nigérianes font face aux effets isolants de la migration et du réétablissement grâce à un profond attachement à la spiritualité et aux réseaux communautaires religieux.

There has been a steady increase in the number of Nigerians in Canada, with the 2015 census estimating that there were 33,140 people of Nigerian origin in the country (Statistics Canada, 2015), up from 27,650 in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Nigerians rank in the top 11 source countries for Permanent Resident applicants, International Students, and Temporary Foreign Workers. Both current and anticipated trends indicate that skilled African migrants will comprise an important part of the projected growth in the Canadian population. The migration of Africans to Canada is particularly important when

we account for the skills they bring in the health care field. Nigeria is one of the top 10 source countries for international medical graduates in Canada (Health Force Ontario, 2011).

Reviewing the migration process for Nigerian health care workers begins by understanding why they leave Nigeria. A recent systematic literature review by Salami et al. (2016) concluded that the emigration of Nigerian nurses could be attributed to the inability to secure a job, security threats in the northern part of the country, inadequate compensation, unsafe work environments and limited opportunity for career advancement. People also migrate because they lack supportive networks (i.e., institutional, infrastructural, technical, educational, or social support or financing to build or develop) in one location and can find them in another.

Nigeria, like several other sub-Saharan African nations is ethnically diverse (Flahaux and De Haas 2016). There are deep socio-cultural and religious divisions within Nigerian society which are extended to Nigerians in the diaspora. In the process of settling in new places and bringing relatives to join them, Nigerians establish faith-based as well as social, cultural, professional and ethno-cultural organizations and practices. Christians and Muslims cultivate their ethnic and religious identities, often gathering together for contact with their members as well as providing support and serving as a coping mechanism allowing the pooling of resources with those from the same place of origin, background, and religious group. This research examined the experiences of Nigerian health care workers who had migrated to Canada. One finding was the profound role that religious networks play in the settlement process.

Research methods for the study included modified surveys and in-depth interviews with 132 participants, and 13 key informant interviews. The study was transnational, with 59 participants from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in Canada, and 63 participants from Ibadan in Nigeria. For the purposes of this paper we focus on the Toronto findings, and draw out some of the discussions regarding the role religion played in the respondents' settlement experiences. In Canada, data collection occurred between 2015 and 2016. The sampling had a diverse mix of health care workers (those with training prior to emigration and those receiving further training post migration) in order to capture the full range of skilled migration contexts.

The Canadian sample extended in age from under 30 to over 60. The largest number (19 or 32%) fell in the 40–49 age range. In addition, 53 (90%) of the sample were female, and 6 (10%) male. 58% of the Canadian sample were married; 39 of the 53 (74%) women were married while four out of the six men (67%) were also married before migration. Of the married women, 29 (74%) migrated with their families to Canada. Next, over 78% of participants held a diploma or degree and 56% were in the nursing field as either as a Registered Nurse or a Registered Practical Nurse. In short, this is a highly educated mainly female sample. More than two-thirds of the respondents (69%) indicated they had an affiliation with some kind of network, and faith-based associations were most evident, accounting for a total of 66% of the associations respondents indicated.

In addition to the data collection, a list of Nigerian networks and their mission statements was compiled using several internet searches to provide some sense of the range of Nigerian-Canadian networks currently in existence. At least 94 formal Nigerian linked networks were identified in Canada and these ranged in size from a few hundred to a few thousand members. These networks can be categorized into four types: social, ethnocultural (ethnically/territorially delimited), professional, and religious as shown in figure 1. It is important to recognize that many religious organizations not captured in this list have pastors who are Nigerian; however, since only limited information was available regarding the congregation and community orientation, they were not included. Several of these associations assist with settlement, counselling, empowerment, and spiritual prayers to help immigrants. Some even provide financial assistance for those who are in need, and members are always encouraged to contact each other and pray together or offer any assistance to newcomers to Canada.

	Total – n=94	Percentage
Social	25	27%
Professional	13	14%
Religious	4	4%
Ethnocultural	49	52%
Political	1	1%
Not listed	2	2%

Some migrant networks empower their members to pursue their dreams. As one key informant mentioned:

> "One major reason why women join this [faith based] group is the fact that they get to meet and relate with people who are living a life they dream of and esteem… Women find candid support and hope to become who they want to become. Trainings and mentorship are ongoing at no cost to community members and various support is available to meet their needs. Women found the strength to pursue and attain their goals with support every step of the way." (Key Informant Interview: Participant 3)

Participants were asked for their reasons for joining a network or an association. The majority of the participants belong to multiple networks and agreed with the statement that belonging to a migrant network was a necessity. The main reasons given were described as 'cultural', for assistance and due to religious attachments; other reasons include opportunities to socialize, to relieve stress, for educational purposes, to improve quality of life, teamwork, and to receive financial and other assistance. As one interviewee put it, "To praise my God and for financial assistance. While in school, my church provides some money and counselling to those in need" (Interview: participant 9). According to another, "In terms of faith-based, my church supports every family in prayers and helps them to achieve their dreams" (Survey: participant 13). One participant elaborated that "they were the ones that help us to get settled and connect us with people from Nigeria" (Survey: Participant 44). Another interviewee said she joined for support services, saying "You know, they speak your language, they understand where we are coming from, they understand this country and what is needed to be successful here" (Interview: Participant 8). With further probing, she recalled an encounter with members of her husband's community and stated:

> "I didn't even invite myself to the community when I lost my husband; someone told them, and they reached out to me. Even my husband is part of a different social group, and they came around as well. The money to transfer his corpse home and my fare were donated to us since we just came to Canada then." (Interview: Participant 8).

One interviewee also mentioned the need to belong, stating, "In this place, you need to go somewhere to… belong [in] fellowship [with] God with other believers. It's biblical too" (Interview: Participant 2). Another interviewee stated she goes to church to serve God; when she further elaborated, she mentioned, "Yes, every week, we go to worship and thank him for his mercies over us" (Interview: Participant 3). Additional responses include the notion that faith-based associations provide empowerment: "The church is a gathering where we pray and send our petition to God. This has been making me strong despite my predicaments" (Interview: Participant 19). The support women gained from these religious associations is important to the process of settlement, which for some women was marked by a loss of professional identity and a former life marked by greater socio-economic security. As one interviewee said, "Before migrating to Canada, we were very successful. We had money, we live comfortably. We had house helpers, people serve my family daily" (Interview: Participant 2). Another stated, "Before migrating I was living in luxury. My husband was a bank manager, and I was previously working in the bank and later left that job to stay home with my children" (Interview: Participant 13). Some respondents revealed that rather than advance their own personal contexts, migration was seen as key for the future of their children, "Myself and my husband were working at a hospital in the city then. We decided to move in order to raise our boys in a better environment" (Interview: Participant 12). In these cases migration is seen as a personal sacrifice for the betterment of their children, and the comfort of faith and spirituality clearly guided the respondents' internal narrative on this matter, and eased their ability to cope.

For many respondents their migration was a life event that marked other moments of significance for them. They traced key events in relation to the migration event; a married participant with a sojourner spouse stated that "I am a mature woman now. I understand how as a mother, we have to live a sacrificial life for our children. Since being in Canada, I lost my mother and had two children and raised them on my own" (Interview: Participant 11). One stated, "I didn't even want to ever recollect this. It was the hardest part of my life. My husband died the second day we got to this country" (Interview: Participant 8). Spirituality was also deeply embedded in the professional status of many women in the sample, which became clear when asked about why they entered the profession: "I used to dream and see nurses in their uniform, before I got married…I never took it seriously and everything was going down so I went to my pastor and my pastor said God has called me to become a midwife so I went and did the state course" (Interview: Participant 9). Another respondent remarked, "Nursing to me is a gift from God. I dreamt about being a nurse. I spoke to my pastor and I was advised to go through it and that with hard work and prayer, nursing will become a reality" (Interview: Participant 17).

In this short paper we have elaborated on the accounts of female migrant nurses from Nigeria in Toronto, Canada, and their narratives of how they were able to survive their migration and settlement experiences through the assistance of religious networks. In addition to this support, these immigrant women benefited from the additional help provided by migrant networks in terms of financial assistance, community service, and religious or spiritual fulfilment. Our results are consistent with those of other studies (such as Hagan & Ebaugh, 2003; Kalu, 2010, Mensah *et al.*, 2013) that suggest religious institutions play a major role at every step of the migration process, but can offer particular support to women immigrants. Another major finding was that women participate in religious networks more than men, and they seem to belong to more than one network in seeking support to cope with their new environment. The growing importance of this group of migrants to Canada highlights the need to understand their migration experiences in more detail. Further research needs to be conducted to determine the gendered dimensions of participating in different types of networks for migrant men and women.

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