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Mobility Risks and The Gender Questions in Migration Governance: Refocusing the Nigeria-Libya-Europe Route

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Abstract: The article argues that migration governance along irregular migration corridors reproduces the mobility risks and vulnerabilities it seeks to mitigate. Conceptually informed by the Global Compact for Migration and theoretically grounded in feminist political economy, the article conceptualises borders as labour-market technologies that filter migrants according to global labour demands, rather than as mere physical boundaries. The study employed purposive and snowball sampling methods to address the research objectives and to gather 18 respondents divided into two groups: Nigerian survivors and returnees from Libya (Category A) and government, institutional, and transnational authorities (Category B), utilising an interpretivist-oriented qualitative case study design. Questionnaires and key informant interviews were employed to collect data, which were analysed thematically using NVivo 14. Four themes emerged: empirical examination of risk production along the route, gendered dimensions of mobility risks, coping and survival strategies, and understanding effective gendered migration governance. The findings revealed that the governance architecture provides an informal economy of containment, in which securitisation, deterrence-based policies, and externalised enforcement mechanisms shape the intersection of migrants, mobility risks, and systematic exploitation. Female migrants are subjected to sexual violence and forced prostitution; male migrants face labour exploitation, organ harvesting, and kidnapping, while LGBTQ+ individuals encounter compounded violations. Migrants employ embodied bargaining strategies, such as selling sexuality, labour, or ransom, as survival currencies. The paper concludes that migration governance continues to perpetuate the political economy of managed illegality and proposes gender-mainstreamed, rights-based, and disruptive policy changes aimed at achieving safer migration governance in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Mobility risks, risk production, migration governance, Nigeria-Libya-Europe corridor, feminist political economy.

1. Introduction

Managing cross-border migration in the 21st century has emerged as a crucial policy agenda for states and institutions worldwide, as increasing numbers of individuals seek migratory pathways for opportunities, protection, and improved living conditions abroad. Existing studies identify socioeconomic factors, such as poverty, unemployment, and insecurity, as the underlying drivers of unauthorised or irregular migration from Nigeria to Europe (Atem, 2020; Olaitan & Okoye, 2025). In contrast, other research emphasises migrants' agency in relation to their aspirations, capacities,and choices in the face of opportunities and vulnerabilities (De Haas, 2021; Benhayyoun, 2023).

Cross-border travel, particularly along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route, has persisted despite escalating risks, thereby intensifying humanitarian and security concerns. Thousands of migrants traversing this perilous route have fallen victim to discrimination, sexual violence, and forced prostitution (Adeyinka et al., 2023; Van Heugten et al., 2021), in addition to organ harvesting and human commodification (Adesina, 2019), as well as trafficking, smuggling, near-fatal experiences, and forced displacements (Leghtas, 2017). Among the over one billion migrants globally in 2015, 272

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million migrated internationally, with 36 million being African migrants, and 60 million forcibly displaced (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016; Omilusi, 2022). To address this "mobility dilemma," the present study examines mobility risks, production processes, and their implications through a gendered lens of migration governance, moving beyond the conventional discourse of aspirations and capability differentials, as well as income disparities and opportunity asymmetries. Specifically, the study poses a fundamental question: *How do the gender-specific experiences and survival strategies of migrants along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route generate and mitigate mobility risks within the framework of migration governance?* The aim is to elucidate the challenge of gendered mobility risks and to advance a safe, migrant-protective, and gender-responsive architecture of migration governance along this route, in Africa, and beyond. The broader research problem lies in the limited scholarly inquiry into how migration policies objectify deterrent, securitised, and containment-based control that prioritises territorial integrity over the gendered protections of migrants along the perilous Sahara-Mediterranean route. The primary research problem is the challenge of objectively appraising the strengths and weaknesses of migration governance solely as a regime of regulation, without interrogating its suspected role in facilitating the exploitation it claims to combat.

2. Literature Review

Mobility risks encompass intricate hazards and vulnerabilities encountered by migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers as they navigate borders outside established regulatory frameworks. These risks include threats to life, safety, economic security, and personal agency (Sorensen, 2018). Existing literature has established connections between mobility risks and factors such as capabilities, aspiration choices, or push-pull narratives (De Haas, 2021; Adesina, 2021). However, this study investigates the interplay between mobility risks, gender, and migration governance within the context of the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route, utilising the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) as a framework (Hennebry & Petrozziello, 2019). Additionally, it evaluates selected existing migration policy frameworks in Africa, particularly along this route, to assess their effectiveness and identify inherent policy gaps through the lens of compliance with gender equality and inclusiveness (Ogbonna et al., 2023). The subsections that follow analyse the interplay of mobility risks and migration governance; conduct a policy appraisal of gendered migration governance, highlighting challenges and paradoxes; and analyse risk production in migration governance through a feminist political economy perspective.

2.1 Conceptualising mobility risks-migration governance nexus in irregular migration

Migratory flows from Nigeria and other African nations through trans-Saharan and Mediterranean corridors to Europe have increased over the last decade. Yuen (2020, p. 79) notes that "over 445,000 migrants migrated between Niger and Libya in 2016. The majority, more than 312,000 individuals, or 70%, were foreign migrants [African migrants], mainly of Nigerian, Gambian, and Senegalese origin… and nearly 300,000 persons, or 67%, were headed to Libya or countries in Europe." In 2024, there was a case of "146,000 interceptions of irregularly migrating Africans who reached Europe and Gulf countries" (Williams, 2025). These increasing irregular cross-border movements may contribute to states' restrictive, anti-migrant securitisation and exclusive discrimination at transit and destination points (Ogbonna et al., 2023; Camarena et al., 2020). This study examines the objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) for effective migration governance, including facilitating safe and regular pathways, minimising structural vulnerabilities, protecting human rights, and mainstreaming gender responsiveness across migration policies (United Nations General Assembly, 2018). Governance can only thrive on the foundation of effective policy frameworks. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2019, p. 138), migration governance is "the combined frameworks of legal norms, laws and regulations, policies… as well as organisational structures and relevant processes that shape and regulate States' approaches

to migration in all forms, addressing rights and responsibilities, and promoting international cooperation."

Supporting this, the United Nations' International Organisation for Migration [IOM] (2015a, p. 2) advances that: "*Orderly migration requires compliance with international law. The obligation of a State to respect, protect, and fulfil the rights of individuals is paramount. This obligation applies to all individuals within a State's territory, regardless of nationality or migration status, and without discrimination, to preserve their safety, physical integrity, well-being, and dignity. Protecting the rights of individuals includes combating xenophobia, racism, and discrimination, upholding the principles of equality, and ensuring access to protection*". Effective migration governance should prioritise the rights and protection of migrants, particularly vulnerable gender groups, while also fostering the social and economic advancement of sending, transit, and receiving countries. In contrast, deficient migration governance leads to adverse institutional consequences. The study argues that states' restrictive policies within migration governance operational frameworks often recreate and redistribute risks, perhaps indirectly, forcing migrants onto covert routes through border externalisation and visa restrictions that normalise exposure to violence, incarceration, and even death (Smith, 2022; Benhayyoun, 2023).

2.2 Appraising the geopolitics of migration governance along the route

The geopolitics of mobility is characterised by the interplay of geographical space, political power, and the movement of goods, information, and capital. This definition aligns with Hyndman's (2012) conceptualisation of migration as a geopolitical phenomenon that involves state containment practices and power relations. The geopolitics of migration governance encompasses a state's geographical environment and political institutional frameworks. The Nigeria-Libya-Europe migration route begins in Nigeria, passing through Kano to Agadez, Niger, from where migrants converge in Sebha, Libya, before continuing to Malta, Greece, Italy, and other parts of Europe, as illustrated in the map below (see Figure 1).

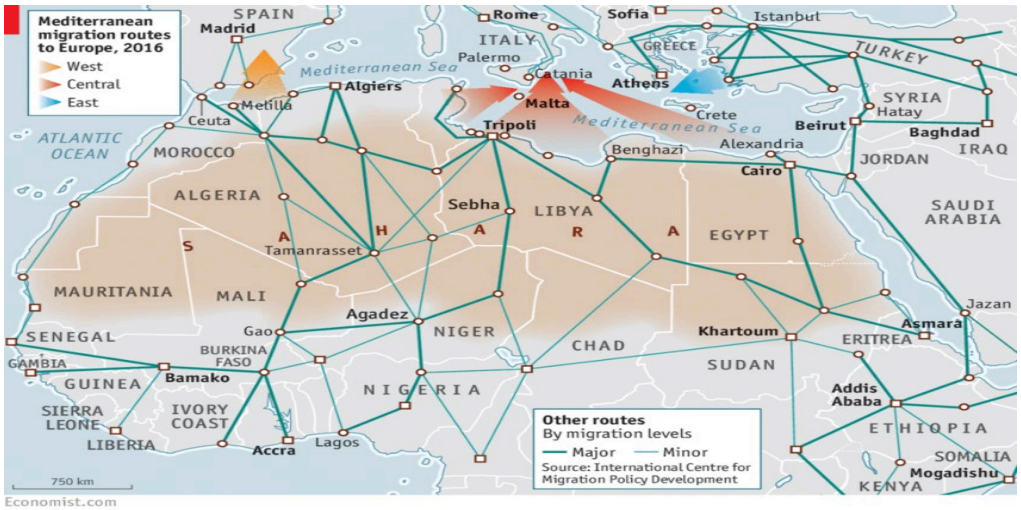

Figure 1: *Map of mediterranean migratory route to europe (Adapted from Benhayyoun, 2023)*

The Nigeria-Libya-Europe migration governance architecture is structured into five (5) primary geopolitical levels of administration, comprising a tripartite framework of states, institutions, and policies. The first is the national level, which serves as the initial stage of geopolitical administration for the route, with Nigeria acting as the sending state or country of origin. Within the national framework are the national policy on migration (International Organisation for Migration [IOM], 2015b), along with various governmental ministries, institutions, and agencies, as well as relevant stakeholders. Due to the drawbacks of the 2015 edition of the National Migration Policy, a revised

edition was implemented in 2025 to incorporate aspects that were omitted from the previous edition (IOM, 2025). Meanwhile, a review by Kanu et al. (2021, p. 182) of migration governance institutions in Nigeria indicates that the institutions involved include:

The Federal Ministries of Education, Health, Finance, Information, Justice, Labour and Productivity, Women Affairs and Social Development, Foreign Affairs, Youth Development, and Interior; the Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons; the National Bureau of Statistics; the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons; the National Planning Commission; the National PopulationCommission; the Nigerian Immigration Service; the Nigerian National Volunteer Service; the Office of the National Security Adviser; other related security agencies; the National Employers Consultative Association; the Nigeria Labour Congress; and the Trade Union Congress.

However, Nigeria's migration governance architecture appears to be deficient due to capacity deficits, inter-agency rivalry, corruption, underfunding, understaffing, and under-digitisation, as revealed by previous studies, underscoring the necessity to enhance the country's national migration framework (Oso, 2024). These findings emerged from a critique of migration policies, institutional operations, and the national government's approach to managing migration within the country. The national migration policy was recently revised to address inherent gaps, including those related to gender mainstreaming. Simultaneously, corruption, understaffing, and under-digitisation are attributed to deficiencies within the Nigerian government and its migration management institutions and agencies.

The second level pertains to West Africa (the sending region) within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which includes the Republic of Niger, Mali, and other member states. Policies such as the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration (2008) and the ECOWAS Labour Migration Strategies and Action Plans (2025-2035) are operational in the West African region; however, they have become moribund and superficial (Adesina, 2019; Urso & Hakami, 2018). Despite the implementation of the free movement Protocol, directed by ECOWAS to facilitate trade and market expansion for regional development, buffer states between Nigeria and Libya, such as Niger and Mali in the Sahelian region, continue to securitise their borders through the imposition of stringent migration laws, to the detriment of vulnerable and marginalised migrants.

The third level pertains to the Region of North Africa (the transit region) within the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), with states such as Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya seeking to promote peace and safer travel. However, ongoing conflicts, particularly in Libya following Muammar Gaddafi’s overthrow during the 2010–2011 Arab Spring protests, have rendered the transit routes increasingly perilous (Yeboua, 2024; Czaika & Weisner, 2025).

Africa’s continental level represents the fourth tier, contextualising the African Union (AU) alongside its various migration policies. The Migration Policy Framework for Africa (2006; Urso & Hakami, 2018) and the African Policy on Migration and Development (2006; Omede & Ngwube, 2017) have undergone revisions, resulting in the Revised Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018-2030), which includes the Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) initiative aimed at improving migration and its prospects across the continent. The essence of these migration policies is to bolster emerging economic policy frameworks for Africa's development. A notable economic policy initiative driving development is the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), established in January 2021 as a flagship of the African Union’s Agenda 2063 (AU, 2018; Chime, 2024). While the AfCFTA prioritises industrialisation and economic integration to strengthen Africa's position in global markets and enhance intra-African trade, the Agenda 2063 is designed to promote inclusive and sustainable development (Aniche, 2023).

Nevertheless, the AU faces challenges related to non-compliance, which appears to involve the sabotage of policies or bilateral agreements by certain African member states. This often slows and undermines the implementation of migration policy recommendations. Furthermore, the initial states of entry for migrants, such as Italy, Greece, and Malta (Omilusi, 2022), along with other European countries like Britain, France, and Germany, collaborate with the European Union and some transit countries in West and North Africa to control migration flows from Africa to Europe, investing roughly $5 to $6 billion annually (Camarena et al., 2020; Adeyinka et al., 2023). Similarly, Osland and Erstad (2020, p. 27) confirm that "Sahelian governments have received significant support from external actors to strengthen border management, migration governance, and other security-related measures that restrict the cross-border movement of people." Insights derived from the assessment of the five levels of administration involved in the geopolitics of migration governance in the context of the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route suggest that states may now indirectly collaborate with non-state actors to restrict or immobilise migrants rather than protect them at sending, transit, and destination points. Ironically, this shift has negatively impacted women and girls, particularly vulnerable migrant groups (Ogbonna et al., 2023).

2.3 Policy evaluation of gendered migration governance: Challenges and paradoxes

Gender is a complex phenomenon, with different meanings for different people. According to Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin (1999, p. 1), gender is "a system of social practices within society that constitutes people as different in socially significant ways and organises relations of inequality based on the difference."

Gender reverberates through the functionality of its characteristic components and dimensions, roles, sexualities, and stereotypes, which are also found in the context of migration and migrants' experiences. This is why Birchall (2016, p. 9) emphasises that "a person's gender, age, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and health or disability shape every stage of the migration experience." Gender shapes migrants' experiences both in transit and at their destinations. Thus, gender is employed here to scrutinise the intersection of mobility risks and migration policies along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route (Van Heugten et al., 2021; Hennebry & Petrozziello, 2019). This study conducts a structured gender-specific review of selected policy frameworks across the five levels of geopolitical administration in the migration governance space of the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route, focusing on gender objectives, implementation realities, and mechanisms for risk protection. The assessment aims to identify gender performance and implementation gaps, as broadly illustrated in the table below (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Gender appraisal of selected migration policy frameworks along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe corridor*

Country/ Region	Institution	Policy Documents/ Frameworks	Core Objectives	Implementation Realities/ Governance Gaps	Gender Performance
1. Nigeria (Sending State - National level)	Federal Government of Nigeria, the National Commission for Migrants, Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (NCRMI), Other Agencies/Ministries and the IOM.	National Migration Policy (2015: Revised Processes ongoing); and Anti-Trafficking Laws and Policy Frameworks	Mainstream migration governance: combat trafficking, manage diaspora engagement, and enhance development linkage	Funding issues, Capacity Deficits, limited digitisation, weak coordination, and poor enforcement of migration protection pacts (Adesina, 2021; Oso, 2024)	Gender is acknowledged rhetorically (anti-trafficking, focusing on women and girls), but has a limited operational framework for gender mainstreaming.

2. West Africa - Regional Level)	The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)	ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol (I979, revised); ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration (2008); ECOWAS Labour Migration Strategy & Action Plan (2025-2035).	Facilitate free movement, enhance regional labour mobility, and promote economic integration.	Protocol-National Enforcement contention; Niger & states' imposition of restrictive migration laws; increased securitisation under EU influence (Adesina 2019; Urso & Hakimi, 2018	Gender is referenced in the labour mobility and protection clause, but there is no strong enforcement mechanism. There are limited safeguards against gender-based exploitation during transit, too.
3. North Africa - (Regional Transit Level)	The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)	Pact for Peace and Security, Regional Mobility and Coordination efforts	Promote peace, cooperation, and regional stability towards safer travel or migration	Political Fragmentation, Libya Instability Post-2011 militia control of migration corridors, detention proliferation (Leghtas, 2017; Adeyinka et al, 2023	Minimal gender mainstreaming; absence of enforceable regional protection frameworks, transit governance heavily securitised and gendered violence largely unaddressed institutionally.
4. Africa (Continental Level)	The African Union (AU)	Migration Policy Frameworks for Africa (2006); African Common Approach in Migration & Development (2006); Revised Migration Policy Frameworks & Plan of Action (2018-2030); Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA); Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA); and Agenda 2063	Promote migration-development nexus; enhance labour mobility, protect migrants' rights, promote economic integration, inclusive development, and a single African Market.	Implementation gaps, states' compliance issues, enforcement deficit, tension between mobility facilitation and sovereignty concerns, migration governance-economic integration disconnect, and persisted mobility restrictions (Aniche, 2023; Chime, 2024)	Strong rhetorical commitment to gender equality and protection; gender mainstreaming; inclusive development language recognising women's economic participation; implementation deficit and lack of direction in the migration-gender nexus (under-institutionalised).

5. Europe (Destination / External Actor)	The European Union (EU)	Externalisation Policies, EU Trust Fund for Africa; Bilateral Libya & Nigeria Agreements	Deter Irregular migration; externalise border control; prevent Mediterranean crossings.	Heavy financial investments ($5-6 billion annually); delegation to Libyan Authorities; Documented Detention abuse; prioritisation of containment over protection (Camarena et al., 2020; Restelli, 2019; Osborne, 2020).	Strong anti-trafficking rhetoric, gender-sensitive humanitarian discourse, and securitisation outweigh protection; the policy indirectly exposes women to forced detention/abuse and men to forced labour.

- Researchers' Compilation, 2026

According to the table, migration management in Nigeria is guided by the National Migration Policy and other anti-trafficking measures. However, despite these frameworks, gender has not been successfully integrated into the country's actual policies and practices (Adesina, 2021; Oso, 2024). Additionally, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) promotes labour mobility and the free movement of its member countries at the regional level. Nonetheless, the limitations imposed by member states through securitisation, enforced by restrictive policies under external influence, adversely affect migrants, particularly women in transit (Urso & Hakimi, 2018). Furthermore, the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) is struggling to promote coordination of mobility, peace, and stability of migration at the regional level of transit, yet it faces challenges due to the persistent political fragmentation and turmoil in the region since 2011, particularly in crisis-stricken Libya (Leghtas, 2017; Adeyinka et al., 2023). At the continental level, the revised MPFA, AfCFTA, and Agenda 2063 present gender-inclusion and migrant rights-based objectives. However, they fail to effectively mitigate mobility risks in practice, as migrants continue to be exposed to a fragmented governance structure and various vulnerabilities along the route (Aniche, 2023; Chime, 2024). Meanwhile, the externalisation regime established by the European Union shifts risk to transit points, such as Libya, through its interventions and bilateral agreements, neglecting gender considerations (Restelli, 2019; Osborne, 2020).

This analysis reveals the gendered deficiencies within the various migration policy frameworks for the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route, illustrating how these shortcomings indirectly contribute to the ongoing production of irregular migration and its inherent mobility risks along the route. When juxtaposed with the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), the study highlights a notable discrepancy between normative commitments and real-world practices. The GCM establishes gender-responsive practices and human rights as its overarching guiding principles (UN Women, 2019). The core objectives of the GCM are imbued with gender-responsive criteria for effective migration governance (Hennebry & Petrozziello, 2019). Explicitly, the GCM objectives seek to "address the…discrimination that migrant women and girls may experience based on, inter alia, sex, gender, age, income, race and ethnicity, nationality, religion, marital and family status, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, health status, pregnancy, place of residence and economic and social situation" (UN Women, 2019; United Nations General Assembly, 2018).

This position, in response to the research questions of this enquiry, demonstrates that gender in the context of migration governance is neither sufficiently incorporated nor adequately represented in existing migration policies in Africa, particularly along the route. Building on the study's central thesis, it illustrates how gender-deficient policies intersect with the production and spatial

redistribution of risks, including other vulnerabilities, within the framework of a deterrence-oriented migration governance, as evident in the Nigeria-Libya-Europe migratory corridor.

2.4 Theorising risk production in migration governance

Political economy examines the social relations of production and consumption, focusing on power dynamics, the means and modes of distribution, and issues of marginalisation, exploitation, and inequality (Benston, 1989). In contrast, feminist political economy has evolved into a global theoretical field that addresses the power and socioeconomic reproduction of inequalities, systematically intersecting gender-blind economics with the core dichotomies at the heart of capitalism (Cantillon et al., 2023). Feminist political economy can therefore be conceived and treated as an interdisciplinary framework that explores the socioeconomic relations of production and distribution through the lens of gender. Marxist-feminist criticisms of global capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s gave rise to feminist political economy, particularly through the work of academics such as Silvia Federici (2019), Margaret Benston (1989), and Maria Mies (1998). The central thrust of feminist political economy is that gendered labour stratification, devaluation, and the systematic exploitation of vulnerable labour from marginalised groups are the main ways in which capitalism continues to thrive (Lee, 2021). In the context of migration governance, capitalism is synonymous with a system that perpetuates mobility risks that it seeks to mitigate for selfish gains. Such risks arise from the commodification of migrants, sextortion, and labour exploitation and stratification through the instrumentalisation of restrictive border filtering along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route.

Feminist political economy redefines borders as labour-market technologies that filter migrants according to global labour demands, rather than as mere physical boundaries. Regine (2018, p. 57) reframes migration governance as a "border-drawing activity" for the categorisation of migrants, directly challenging "physically biased notions of borders". The externalisation of border controls occurs under securitisation frameworks, in both regular and irregular migration contexts. This includes the visa regimes and passport systems in migration governance, which function to create differentials in the migrant population based on their labour-market positioning in a regular migration context (Federici, 2019). For example, in North Africa and Southern Europe, women are often lured into caregiving, domestic work, and sex economies, while men are employed in militia-controlled work systems, including agricultural labour and informal construction sites (Oso, 2024; Adesina, 2021).

In an irregular migration situation, borders are not merely territorial demarcations but weaponised governance instruments that actively structure migrant vulnerability, producing conditions of sextortion, commodification, and stratified labour exploitation. This validates the characterisation of migration governance as a "border-drawing activity" (Regine, 2018, p. 57). Securitised border regimes do not eliminate mobility; rather, they displace it into informal and illicit circuits governed by non-state actors such as smugglers, traffickers, and armed intermediaries. Within these irregular spaces, migrants are rendered economically and bodily exploitable, reaffirming a gendered dichotomy in their experiences (Adeyinka et al., 2023). Risk, therefore, becomes lucrative because it controls migratory labour and preserves illegal networks connecting West Africa, North Africa, and Europe. The integration of feminist political economy into this scholarly enquiry enables a critical analysis of how migration governance produces gendered labour hierarchies through state-oriented border restrictions, which divide labour and place men and women in different exploitative economic positions along the routes. Risk becomes economically viable through securitisation practices and institutionalised primitive capitalist accumulation, highlighting how policy frameworks sustain gendered labour divides and uneven access to protection. The study theorises conclusively that the Nigeria-Libya-Europe corridor exhibits risk-producing dynamics at the intersection of formal policy frameworks, partial enforcement, and the opportunistic expansion of an informal economy controlled by non-state actors, to the detriment of exploited and vulnerable migrants.

3. Methods and Research Design

This section outlines the research paradigm, methods, designs, data collection instruments, and analytical techniques deployed to interrogate the nexus between migration governance structures and the production of gendered mobility risks in the context of irregular migration along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe migratory route. The aim is to examine migration governance paradoxes that culminate in the production of mobility risks through gender-specific perspectives, experiences, and coping mechanisms of migrants, towards prognostic strategies for a safer, migrant-protective, and gender-responsive architecture. The section also illuminates sampling techniques and sample size, ensuring compliance with the necessary ethical procedures. This study is situated within the praxis of the interpretivist paradigm of qualitative research, predicated on socially constructed reality (William, 2024). The interpretivist paradigm is relevant here, as it aims to understand people's real-life experiences in relation to their environment. This approach helps analyse migrants' perceptions of mobility risk and its production vis-à-vis migration governance structures, as well as the gender-specific dimensions of the risks. Participants' subjective experiences play a significant role in shaping their worldview. This study employs a qualitative, non-statistical descriptive research approach, which aligns with the flexibility needed for data collection and analysis by facilitating the emergence of nuanced themes grounded in participants' narratives and real-life experiences.

This study employs a case study research design, focusing on the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route, particularly migrants' perspectives on mobility risk production and solutions, as well as their experiences and survival strategies. A case study is a deep examination of a specific research subject in a real-world setting, concentrating on a particular circumstance to offer pragmatic solutions (Yin, 2009). Meanwhile, purposive and snowball sampling methods wereemployed in this study to examine a real-world issue and propose or recommend real-life solutions. Teddlie and Yu (2007) note that "sampling is a technique used to select and examine a smaller subset of a broader research population to address a research problem." When using purposive and snowball sampling methods together in qualitative research, researchers aim to achieve depth and diversity in the data. Purposive sampling allows the selection of participants with specific characteristics or unique experiences central to the research question, while snowball sampling helps access hard-to-reach or hidden populations. Together, these two methods aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by selecting participants who can offer rich, diverse data, thereby enhancing the quality and accuracy of research findings. The study population comprises 18 target participants on the Nigeria-Libya-Europe migration route. The 18 participants were selected due to the study's case specificity, subgroup representation, and data saturation, which resonate with qualitative research within the interpretivist paradigm. Boddy (2016) notes that saturation is usually reached with 10 to 20 responses in highly homogeneous contexts, and that 12 samples are sufficient to saturate the data in a qualitative study. Therefore, a sample of eighteen (18) participants is adequate to provide depth of understanding and to represent the variety of viewpoints required for an engaging interpretation of empirical findings in qualitative research.

The 18 participants were divided into two groups (A and B). Group A consists of six (6) participants: willing male and female survivors/victims/returnees to grapple with the study's research question, particularly the aspect seeking migrants' perspectives regarding migration governance along the route, as well as the gendered nature and character of the mobility risks that migrants often experience, including the strategies deployed for survival. Group B consists of 12 participants comprising government officials, migration institution officials, and stakeholders along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route. They were selected to share their experiences and expert opinions regarding policy gaps, institutional paradoxes, and governmental inadequacies. They also offer empirical solutions via their suggested recommendations. Specifically, the 18 participants consist of three (3) female and three (3) male Nigerian survivor/returnees who provided migrants' accounts of the journey; two (2) Nigerian diplomatic officials in Tripoli, Libya, who shared transit experiences; three

(3) senior officials of migration institutions in Nigeria, including the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), Lagos; the National Commission for Migrants, Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (NCMRI), Abuja; and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), Abuja, who equally provided insights from the sending country perspective; two (2) major state governmental officials: Kano State Government, Kano, as an exit point in Northern Nigeria, and Edo State Government in Benin-City, as a state in Southern Nigeria with a high rate of irregular migration index (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The population also includes three (3) major stakeholders representing the media, civil society organisations, and academia, including one (1) senior official of the IOM to provide European experience and one (1) senior official of the African Union to provide the African regional account.

Primary data were collected using open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured key informant interviews. The open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured key informant interviews were designed to elicit responses on how migration governance structures construct mobility risks and how these risks can be mitigated or minimised. The rationale for combining key informant interviews and open-ended questionnaires lies in their complementary strengths of depth and breadth. Key informant interviews provide in-depth, nuanced insights from individuals with extensive knowledge or a unique perspective on the topic, while open-ended questionnaires collect data from a wider group, allowing respondents to express their perspectives freely without the interviewer's influence. The combination of both data-gathering instruments further bolstered triangulation and validation of the data findings (Devendra, Bal & Dipendra, 2022). Secondary data were gathered through a documentary review of migration policies, relevant textbooks, scholarly literature, and journals. The researchers' positionality as migration scholars tended to influence the research process; however, they made a conscious effort to adopt a neutral stance, ensuring that both the primary and secondary data were logically triangulated and synchronised.

Thematic analysis, using NVivo 14, was employed to familiarise, examine, deduce, discover, code, and visualise themes that emerged, using a deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using NVivo, the data were transcribed manually, allowing the researchers to familiarise themselves with the significant information adopted as keywords, which were codified and imported into the software, resulting in the development of final themes and sub-themes. The visuals were interpreted through critical cross-referencing with the raw data to ensure that preconceived ideas and biases did not overshadow participants' genuine voices.

3.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the research data used in this study was obtained during the doctoral study of the corresponding author and approved under reference number UFS-HSD2022/1413/23 by the General/Human Research Committee of the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Participants' responses (data) were coded and anonymised to ensure confidentiality. As required ethically, participants were informed that their anonymised responses might be used in future publications. Informed consent was obtained before participants were allowed to take part in the research, which was voluntary. The research adhered to the principle of "do no harm." No participant experienced harm during the interviews or while completing the open-ended questionnaires. Datasets were handled responsibly and stored securely. Participants' identifiers were coded and classified into Category A, comprising male and female migrant survivors and returnees (pseudonymised as A1-A6), and Category B, comprising government officials, migration institutional officials, and stakeholders (pseudonymised as B1-B12). In summary, this research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of data trustworthiness.

4. Presentations and Discussion of Findings

This section illuminates key findings from this interpretivist study by examining the interplay between migration governance and risk production through the lens of gender. Based on the exploration of a qualitative case study and thematic analysis of the data, four major themes emerged: Empirical Examination of Risk Production along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe Route; Gendered Dimensions of Mobility Risks; Coping and Survival Strategies; and, lastly, Grasping Effective Gendered Migration Governance. These themes were interpreted through a collaborative theoretical dialogue between the researchers and the participants, in tandem with the nuances of interpretivism (William, 2024). In doing so, prognostic recommendations informed by the feminist political economy framework, aligned with the core objectives of the Global Compact for Migration, emerged, advancing effective migration governance for Africa, particularly along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route. As expected in interpretivist qualitative case-study research, the theory explains the problem; the findings reflect empirical reality; and the recommendations address structural issues identified by both the theory and the findings.

4.1 Theme 1: Empirical Examination of Risks Production along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe Route

Most participants affirmed that the irregular route from Nigeria, passing through Agadez in the Republic of Niger and Libya before reaching Europe, is primarily controlled by a trafficking and smuggling network.

> *A2: "The Journey to Europe begins with paying members of a trafficking and smuggling network, disguised as travel agents or cross-border middlemen, an agreed amount of money. Then from Kan, we will travel to Niger, and after that, Libya".*
>
> *A5: "Middlemen collect money from us at the exit point in Kano and across the transit points, before we reach Libya. The entire process of living, moving, eating and sleeping in Libya is determined by the smuggling network and traffickers or militants".*

Along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route, risk factors manifest in various forms, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, organ harvesting, abuse, the spread of contagious and transmitted diseases, forced prostitution, coercive detention, physical assault, the commodification of migrants, and death (Benhayyoun, 2023; Serughetti, 2018; Leghtas, 2017). A pictorial illustration of these risk factor components, as revealed in the analysis of data from participants, is shown in figure 2 below:

Figure 2: *Word Cloud showing the risk factor components (Generated by NVivo Version 14).*

Revealing risk factors through the sense-making and more practical lens, participants noted that:

> *A4: "Some of us ended up abused, some lost parts of their organs, some lost money".*
>
> *A9: "We encountered organised extortion, abuse, and, for the girls in particular, rape, while guys experienced frequent ridicule and forced labour".*
>
> *B2: "The journey is perilous due to the possibility of disease, death, and possible injury from wild animals".*

Participants A4, A9, and B2's narratives substantiate that risks are structurally patterned rather than episodic. Accounts of bodily mutilation, organ loss, and systematic extortion reveal entrenched economies of violence embedded within transit corridors, which challenge the essence and effectiveness of migration governance along the route (Camarena et al., 2020; Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016). Migration governance ought to function as an institutional arbiter or refuge, tackling the challenges of migration through effective policies and frameworks, ensuring that the rights, security, and protection of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are guaranteed for safe, regular migration. Indeed, the Nigerian Government and, by extension, its migration governance architecture, in conjunction with IOM and the European Union, report that "over 14,216 migrants returned home safely under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration. Since April 2017, IOM has been implementing the Joint Initiative to address the protection needs and facilitate the return and reintegration of stranded Nigerian migrants in the transit countries." Beyond Libya, the IOM Report (2025) shows that "the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), in close coordination with the Federal Government of Nigeria, facilitated the safe and dignified voluntary return of 154 (96 adults, 58 children) Nigerian migrants from Chad to Lagos via a charter flight on 22 July 2025." Notwithstanding, many migrants remain stranded at transit points such as Libya (Mafu, 2019; Williams, 2025; Czaika & Weisner, 2025).

Meanwhile, critics have accused the EU of double standards in its role in border protection, which contradicts its acclaimed interventions and significant brotherly role towards Africa. For example, "the European Union (EU), through Italy, entered into a deal with the Libyan authorities to keep African migrants in Libya" (Yousef, 2017; cited in Mafu, 2019, p. 6). Additionally, the IOM has been criticised for Western bias in its administration of voluntary return programmes, which are better managed in American, European, and other Western countries than in the context of African migration. To these critics, the EU and the IOM might someday "promote a hegemonic world order in which human mobility would be managed in the interests of the capitalist ruling class" (Pécoud, 2018, p. 1634). This burgeoning conception resonates with Regine's (2018, p. 57) perspective on migration governance as a "border-drawing activity" for migrants' categorisation, directly challenging "physically biased notions of borders." Ironically, African states have continued to close their borders against African migrants, replicating Eurocentric fencing in Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023). This "othering" and "securitised border policing" approach often pushes migrants into irregular pathways. Regrettably, these routes are controlled by non-state actors, such as smugglers, traffickers, and militants (Restelli, 2017; Oso, 2024). This problematic scenario not only unmasks the conditions under which non-state actors and their criminal activities proliferate to the detriment of migrants, but it also shows that the inherent mobility risks do not arise from a migration governance vacuum. The study contends that the migration governance architecture along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe migratory corridor cannot be held solely responsible for producing mobility risks, given the efforts and policy interventions that have been put in place, albeit insufficiently, to address the inherent migratory challenges.

Notwithstanding, through deterrent policies and delegated enforcement arrangements, the migration governance of the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route indirectly incubates an informal economy of containment. This indirect incubation manifests through statist policies of externalisation, securitisation, and policy fragmentation, which produce structured conditions of exploitation,

commodification, and abuse of migrants under the regime of non-state actors who are traffickers, smugglers, and militant migrant traders. The study reveals that while non-state actors operationalise risks, the governance architecture of migration configures the structures within which these risks become systematic and multiplicative.

4.2 Theme 2: Gendered dimension of the mobility risks: lived experiences of migrants

Migration decisions are significantly influenced by gender, which shapes policy choices regarding who migrates, their destinations, the methods of migration employed, and the types of migration undertaken (Oso, 2024). Focusing on the perilous Nigeria-Libya-Europe route, participants provided distinctive experiences and narratives that, while comparable, exhibit notable gendered peculiarities.

> *A5: "The experience was bitter and risky. Many migrants experienced big-time vulnerabilities. Some died. Male migrants' experiences differ from those of female migrants. Queer group members also suffered rape, naked beating and shaming"*
>
> *A3: "Sex was like a random thing for us ladies. If we resist, they will beat us".*
>
> *A8: "Most of the female migrants were constantly subjected to rape or sex without protection, leading to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases".*
>
> *A4: "Those of us boys were treated like slaves and forced to work for no compensation. Sometimes, they are victims of gunshots, maltreatment and organ harvesting".*
>
> *B3: "Men are abused, and they can be kidnapped for ransom. Whenever anyone is kidnapped, family members are called to pay a ransom before they are released"*
>
> *B5: "Both male, female and queer migrants are at the mercy of their traffickers or captors and forcefully exploited multidimensionally"*

To delineate the peculiarities of the various experiences of each gender group, female, queer, and male, the study examines the gender-specific dynamics of mobility risks in the irregular Nigeria-Libya-Europe journey. Four sub-themes emerged from the central theme. They are: Female Migrants' Experience, Queer Group and Non-Binary Migrants' Experience, Male Migrants' Experience, and Shared Cross-cutting Experiences and Vulnerabilities. Data from A3, A4, and B5 revealed that female migrants experienced gender-specific mobility risks, such as sexual violence and subjugation to forced prostitution by their male captors or traffickers. This is considered a form of deprivation and gender-based violence. The experiences of female migrants include sexual torture at the hands of male captors, enslavers, or border guards. A report states that "sexual violence is inevitably part of the experiences of victims who are trafficked for sexual exploitation purposes" (Adeyinka et al., 2023, p. 1). Women are often forced into connection houses, which resemble brothels, where they experience severe exploitation (Oso, 2024).

Meanwhile, studies revealed that not only do women experience sexual violence, but also the queer group (non-binary individuals), such as LGBTQI members. They experience rape, shaming, and other forms of sexual torture along the journey, as revealed by a returnee and an institutional official. Non-binary individuals face heightened vulnerability in transit due to their marginalised social position and visibility, which exposes them to broader forms of violence across migration routes. Their dependency on authorities, combined with gender non-conformity, increases their susceptibility to coercion and potential sexual exploitation (Van Heugten et al., 2021).

In the case of male migrants, findings revealed that they are exposed to forced labour, abuse, and torture. Male migrants are routinely subjected to physical assault, humiliation, organ loss, maltreatment, and kidnapping. They are also coerced into working on farms or in the mining industry (Council of Europe, 2019). While the experiences of female, queer, and male gender groups differ slightly, findings showed that all gender groups , female, queer, and male migrants , experience exploitation and abuse along the route, especially in Libya, as revealed by A5 and B5. The

symmetries in the asymmetrical gendered migrants' experiences of mobility risks along the route help classify the dimensions of the exploitation and abuse, which include "human rights abuse, physical abuse that includes organ harvesting, and social and emotional abuse, including economic, material abuse/exploitation, and kidnapping, among others" (Oso, 2024). A4 added further credence by stating that "whenever anyone is kidnapped, family members are called to pay a ransom before they are released." Such practices are embedded within a marketised transit system in which migrants are commodified according to their gender and circulated within a militia-controlled and smuggling economy.

4.3 Theme 3: Coping and survival strategies: From ingestion of urine-menstrual fluid to sextortion

In the midst of the life-threatening encounters faced by migrants along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route, they have continued to navigate these risks using various survival tactics. Participants revealed that:

> *A6: "Some migrants sometimes drink their urine as an alternative to water when they have nothing to eat or drink, and when a migrant dies, they dump him/her in the desert"*
>
> *B7: "Migrants are treated like commodities. Survival depends on what they offer. Females do offer sex, while males offer labour. Sometimes, females marry their captors".*
>
> *A7: "Girls give sex to captors involuntarily. Just that, what we offered, determined how we were treated. Though female, queer and male migrants offer ransom when kidnapped".*

A6's revelation that some migrants drink their urine to cope with thirst and exhaustion in the desert resonates strongly with Adesina's (2021, p. 226) account of a female migrant who fed "on her menstrual blood" to quench her thirst during the journey. Another coping mechanism identified is sextortion and the offer of labour as collateral for passage or survival, as posited by B7 and A7, which partly aligns with the argument of Van Heugten et al (2021, p. 4) that "the extortion of sexual favours often occurs in addition to financial bribes… Besides gender, the results indicate that age, economic situation, and the availability of a social network influence a migrant's vulnerability." This study contests this notion and argues that while the choice of aspiration, capacity, and income-opportunity gaps may mediate vulnerability through push-pull forces and social networks, gender distinctly configures both risk exposure and survival tactics. For instance, women, more than men, usually run out of money while travelling, leaving them more vulnerable to sexual assault in exchange for in-kind payments, such as transactional rape (Birchall, 2016; Adesina, 2021). Females are most often seen as the victims of sextortion.

Nonetheless, vulnerability to sexual extortion is not entirely feminised. According to participants such as B7 and A7, in line with the argument of Van Heugten et al (2021), male migrants and non-binary individuals are also at risk of encountering sextortion, albeit perhaps to a lesser extent. This reveals a stratified informal migrant market, sustained by risk as currency and sexualised survival tactics employed by migrants, particularly female migrants in Libya. B7 notes that "sometimes, females marry their captors," while A7 reports that "girls give sex to captors involuntarily," revealing further that all migrants, including "female, queer, and male migrants," offer ransom when kidnapped (Oso, 2024). These findings illuminate how migrants negotiate power asymmetries through embodied gender-related bargaining tactics, offering money, labour, or sexuality within a governance architecture that provides fertile ground for political risks to fester and economic opportunities to flourish.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to investigate how mobility risks are constructed by migration governance structures, including how these risks can be mitigated or minimised. Drawing on the feminist political economy framework, the study examines the political economy of border filtering and the

exploitation of migrants' labour. Through open-ended online questionnaires and key informant interviews with returnees/survivors (Category A) and officials from target government and migration institutions (Category B), the study revealed key thematic insights that make a significant contribution to the existing literature. The summary is presented here. First, it reveals that the governance architecture along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe migratory corridor cannot be held solely or directly culpable for risk production, considering its institutional efforts and policy interventions to date.

The study, however, argues that the migration governance structure indirectly incubates an informal economy where risk production and migration containment policies intersect. It notes that while non-state actors operationalise risks, the governance architecture of migration configures the structures within which these risks become systematic and multiplicative. Secondly, the study highlights the symmetries in the asymmetrical gendered experiences of migrants along the route, distinguishing female experiences from those of male and queer migrants within a marketised system in which risks are commodified and circulated within a militia-controlled smuggling economy to the detriment of migrants. Thirdly, the study shows how migrants negotiate power asymmetries through embodied gender-related bargaining tactics, offering money, labour, or sexuality as currencies for passage or escape, thereby providing fertile ground for risks to fester and economically and politically flourish. Lastly, it highlights the paradoxes of effective gendered migration governance and concludes with recommended policy curatives. Overall, the implication is that the migration governance of the route does not merely fail to prevent risk but actively structures and sustains a gendered system of exploitation in which risk or vulnerability becomes a currency, thereby necessitating fundamentally gender-responsive policy interventions.

To realise effective gendered migration governance and address its contending paradoxes, migration governance policy actors must move beyond rhetoric to action, structurally disrupting the informal risk economy that sustains smugglers and militias along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe irregular migratory corridor by creating more regular routes and enforcing stricter punitive laws. According to the findings, this requires expanding safe and regular pathways (humanitarian visas and legitimate labour migration corridors) and encouraging EU-North Africa-West African cooperation on verifiable human rights compliance. The existing policies should be gender-sensitive and gender-protective toward gender mainstreaming. The migration governance architecture of the Nigeria-Libya-Europe corridor must actively embark on community-based reporting mechanisms, cross-border intelligence, and the prioritisation of the protection of women and other vulnerable groups through guaranteed documentation recovery, legal aid, and monitored evacuation frameworks that reduce dependence on criminal and clandestine intermediaries, instead relying on more legal and legitimate migration institutional frameworks. Future research on this study should examine the health implications of the risk factors concerning migrants' experiences, which is an under-researched area.

6. Contribution to Theory

This study integrates Feminist Political Economy (FME) into its focus on migration governance to demonstrate how gendered power relations shape migrants' economic responsibilities, vulnerabilities, and survival strategies within coercive migration regimes. It unveils the four components of the gendered political economy of risk production along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route, as illustrated in Figure 3.

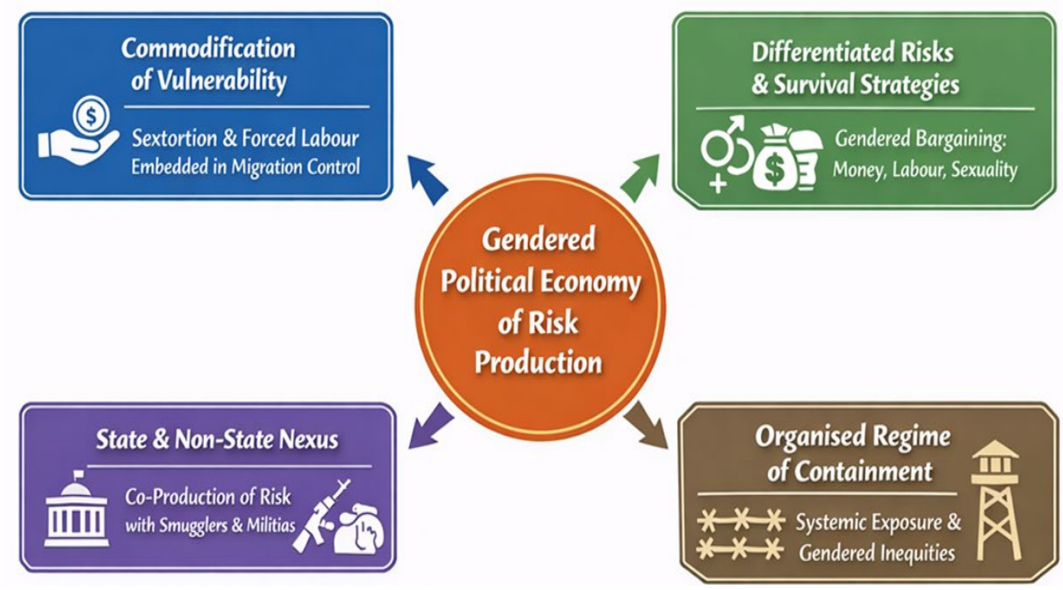

Figure 3: *Integrating feminist political economy of migration governance along the Sahel-Mediterranean*

Flowing from the above diagram, this study advances a new perspective on feminist political economy by reconstructing migration governance not merely as a regulatory framework but as a systematised, gendered process of monetisation. Although previous studies have identified the gendered dynamics of migration and the power dynamics that govern migrants' lives (De Haas, 2021; Mafu, 2019), this study also presents a feminist political economy of migration governance, particularly along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe migratory route. The framework highlights how governance structures perpetuate the gendered political economy of risk production at the intersection of the commodification of risk and vulnerability, which manifests in sextortion and forced labour consequences embedded in migration control practices (Restelli, 2017). This framework also serves as a tool for understanding the nexus between State and Non-State Actors in the co-production of risk through restrictive, securitised, and externalised migration policies (Adesina, 2021; Oso, 2024).

Through the integrated framework, this study expands the frontier of feminist political economy in the context of migration governance not only by outlining gendered vulnerability but also by the differentiated or unequal distribution of risks and survival strategies often employed to negotiate survival, transforming migrants into profit-making commodities at the expense of various gendered bodies, male, female, and queer migrant groups (Van Heugten et al., 2021). The study illuminates the complex interactions among governance, market dynamics, and survival strategies, hypothesising that migrants' strategies in this context rely on gendered bargaining, utilising money, labour, and sexuality as negotiating tools within transit economies. Lastly, the framework reveals how an organised regime of containment produces gendered inequalities through systemic exposure (Birchall, 2016). These insights depict migrants not only as victims of structural violence but as oppressed and discriminated agents within an unbalanced power relation. The study posits that migration governance along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route is enmeshed in the gendered political economy of risk production, which elucidates how policies, institutional practices, and informal markets are consolidated to shape the various experiences of movement, survival, and exploitation. This framework contributes to a better understanding of migration governance and provides an essential foundation for reconsidering policy interventions that can assist governments and institutions in developing a more transformative, gender-responsive approach to managing this and other high-risk migration corridors.

7. Limitations of the Study

Some constraints attempted to limit the generalisability of the study's results; however, these were effectively mitigated. The study provides significant insights into the gendered governance of migration along the Nigeria-Libya-Europe route. Despite the considerable distance involved, primary data for the research were gathered through open-ended questionnaires and key informant interviews, which are well-suited to qualitative case study research.

Traumatised returnees, or survivors, were excluded from participation to prevent re-traumatisation or exacerbation of post-traumatic stress disorder. Only consented returnees/survivors participated, alongside government officials, relevant migration institutions, and other stakeholders.

The scope of the study is extensive, encompassing transnational and intercontinental contexts. Consequently, logistical challenges, particularly financial constraints, emerged; however, the study successfully addresses these issues while maintaining its quality. Collecting data in Libya was complicated due to the country's security situation, leading to the adoption of online qualitative questionnaires and telephone interviews as viable alternatives, which proved effective in yielding robust data from participants in Libya.

8. Declarations

Authors' Contributions: Conceptualisation (A.O.O. & V.B.O.); Literature review (A.O.O.); methodology (A.O.O.); software (A.O.O.); validation (P.V.B.O.); formal analysis (AOO.); investigation (A.O.O. & V.B.O.); data curation (N/A); drafting and preparation (PVBO); review and editing (A.O.O. & V.B.O.); supervision (V.B.O.); project administration (A.O.O.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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Data Availability: Due to participants' confidentiality agreements and ethical reasons, the data are not publicly accessible. However, with the consent of the University of the Free State Institutional Ethics Council, pseudonymised data may be made available to the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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