



The Shifting Landscape of Elderly Care: Implications of Youth Migration in Nigeria

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Abstract. Youth migration, a widespread phenomenon, has significant implications for the health and wellbeing of the elderly left behind. This review paper synthesizes existing literature to examine the complex relationships between youth migration and the health of older adults. The paper explores how youth migration affects the physical, emotional and social health of the elderly. It also examines institutional and policy frameworks in Nigeria to address the health and wellbeing of the elderly. Literature was sourced from relevant databases such as PubMed, Science Direct and google scholar using key words such as Youth migration, elderly health, Nigeria and caregiving. Inclusion criteria for literature was based on scholarly articles in reputable journals within 15years frame (2010-2025) including data/reports from national and international organizations/agencies. It also considered articles that examined youth migration in sub-Saharan Africa especially the Nigerian context with a focus on international migration. Findings from this study provide valuable information on the complex interactions between youth migration, caregiving deficits, social isolation and elderly health. This paper has established that there is high rate of youth migration with massive brain drain especially in the health sector. Specifically, among others, findings indicate that youth migration significantly impacts health of the elderly especially their mental health, although some may enjoy remittances. It however, emphasized that caregiver deficit led to social and economic consequences that exacerbate challenges in the health of the elderly. Consequently, the findings underscore the need for policy and community-based interventions supporting elderly individuals with migrant children. It also advocates that healthcare access and utilization should target elderly individuals both rural and urban settings. Furthermore, there is the need for Nigerian government to provide enabling environment hence discouraging migration of its citizens.

Keywords: Youth migration, Elderly health, Nigeria, Caregiving

1. Introduction

Migration, whether internal or international is a global reality and can be considered an integral part of globalization with both positive and negative influences on economies and societies. While the importance of migration to economic, social, political and health development cannot be overemphasized, its negative impacts on both people and societies are also raising concern across the globe (World Bank, 2023; Korzan et al., 2021; Adepoju & Van der wiel, 2010). In the past decade, the number of people moving within and across borders has been steadily growing, surpassing global population growth rates (United Nations (UN), 2017). According to UN, in 2017, there were 258 million international migrants globally an almost 70% increase compared to the year 1990 (UN, 2019).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, family members play a significant role in the care for elders, providing up to 90% of home care (Chigozie et al., 2024; Kisangala et al., 2024; Essuman et al., 2018) Elderly care seen in the form of institutionalized care in developed countries is rarely seen in this region. Values premised on love and empathy are gradually being replaced by materialism and abandonment, which account for insecurity, increased physical and psychological abuse as well as neglect of the elderly (Aboh et al., 2025; Mudiare, 2013)

Active aging describes the interaction among factors such as maintenance of health and wellbeing, involvement in social activities and overall security or protection which promote optimal health and wellbeing during the process (Walker, 2016). Poverty remains a major challenge in many developing countries including Nigeria. Elderly persons who have retired from the economic productive phase are most vulnerable to experiencing economic hardship

(Animasahun & Chapman, 2017). Since the statutory age of retirement is the cut off for being categorized as an elderly person, majority of these groups of people are not socially and economically secure. They are usually faced with the paradox of dwindling financial resources, increased health challenges and a geometric rise in medical expenses (Odaman & Ibiezugbe, 2014). Provision of social services such as income security, health care, housing and legal assistance positively influence the psychosocial health of the elderly (Oladeji, 2011).

Aging in developing countries is occurring against a backdrop of dwindling financial resources with very little formal arrangement for support of the elderly. Lack of, or very weak infrastructure to address emerging issues on aged care and support are quite evident, unlike in developed countries that have gradual population aging (Togunu-Bickerstett & Akinyemi, 2014). Care and support for the elderly requires that adequate welfare be provided at family and community levels, by strengthening family support and developing community-based programmes on such issues like housing, health, medical and nutritional care, income and maintenance as well as personal social services. Health status of the elderly is a function of the care and support they receive. Chronic diseases suffered by the aged are traceable to lack of or inadequate care and support as well as poor nutrition and physical insecurity (Olayiwola et al., 2010). According to Togunu-Bickerstett and Akinyemi (2014), aging is not just a natural process that reflects biological and physiological changes but a social fact with significant impact on society and culture.

The traditional family structure in most African countries was patriarchal and characterized by an extended family system. It was a close-knit social unit which emphasized care and support for the elderly members in terms of food supply, welfare and security. Elderly care did not pose any challenge because of kingship ties that bonded family members. The elderly were seen as a veritable source of wisdom and knowledge for guidance of the young in the traditional society and they were also held in very high esteem (Ani, 2014). Traditional society believed in aging with dignity and emphasized the importance attached to old age. Aging was viewed as a stage in life where the elderly should be wealthy, and not poor, hence the importance attached to elderly care and support in traditional days (Togunu-Bickerstett & Akinyemi, 2014). However, the traditional extended family which emphasized respect and assistance for the elderly has been eroded by a nuclear family system, rapid economic growth, migration of youths to seek for employment and career opportunities, urbanization and industrialization

Population aging is an essential demographic phenomenon of the 21st century that is fueled by the expansion of elderly adults around the world (Ojijieme, Oi & Chui, 2022). WHO (2021), predicts that the population of the elderly adult to double and outgrow the population of children aged five and below between 2015 and 2050. In low-income countries, socio-economic factors such as inadequate financial and family support are leading inhibitors of healthy aging (Chukwuorji, et al., 2017; Jeste et al., 2013). Therefore, non-conventional financing sources such as remittances are growing more relevant as an alternative source of income. As the number of elderly grows, their economic, social and cultural wellbeing is at risk, especially in developing countries (WHO, 2021). Majority of older adults face various challenges in daily life and often require physical and psychosocial support and regular medical care. The global population of people aged 60 years and above is estimated to rise from 900 million to 2 billion between 2015 and 2050; an increase from 12% to 22% of the total global population, with about 80% of these older people living in low- and middle-income countries (Shrivastava, Shrivastava & Ramasamy 2013).

Remittances have far-reaching impacts in reducing poverty and inequality and in fostering socioeconomic development (Ratha, 2013; Adams, 2011). It smooths out consumption and household expenditures on a micro level since households allocate this additional income for other critical alternative uses such as health. Conversely, some researchers argued that remittances could not adequately compensate for loneliness, poor mental health, and bodily wear and tear associated with labour participation by elderly adults left behind due to migration (Tachibana et al., 2019; Antman, 2010). While youth migration can have some positive financial implications for elderly parents, the overall impact on their health and particularly their mental well-being is very significant. It is therefore essential that policymakers, researchers and practitioners understand the dynamics and complexities of youth migration and its impact on elderly care in Nigeria. By exploring the opportunities and challenges presented by this shifting landscape, innovative solutions that ensure the dignity and wellbeing of the elderly population in the country can be developed.

2. Emerging Pattern of Youth Migration

Migration involves the process whereby individuals leave their own country and become permanent residents of other countries. Annually millions of people around the world migrate to other countries where they become citizens (Urbanski, 2022). The decision to migrate is influenced by a variety of factors and is multifaceted, thus making it complex to generalize a single reason. International migration

towards developed countries in most cases is caused by pull factors (Thet, 2014). The phenomenon of migration has been in existence for centuries and is driven mostly by economic, social-political factors, natural disasters, conflicts, urbanization, as well as population issues (Urbanski, 2022). Frightening economic and political instability may as well be a push for migration trend. This is because, opportunities for job mobility, business ventures, personal relaxation and greener pastures may be opened outside the frontiers of a nation's domestic boundary. Insecurity and political crises could also pose some sort of challenges and hence the desire to migrate. Other reasons span from trade in illicit businesses like drug, human parts/organ to smuggling of contraband goods and services (Umar et al., 2018). In Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African countries, a significant pattern of youth migration is emerging characterized by a move from rural areas to urban centers and a growing trend of international migration often driven by a combination of economic, social and environmental factors. This migration is reshaping both rural and urban landscapes, as well as presenting opportunities and challenges for the region. Migration takes place when the benefits of migration are perceived by migrants to have comparative advantage. The disproportionate economic situation between developed and developing countries is quite apparent as migrants from developing nations in their quest for better employment opportunities are usually pulled by developed nations in need of labour (Urbański, 2022). The recent frenzy for international migration among young people in some sub-saharan countries is alarming. In Nigeria, the new trend has bred the adoption of the colloquial term *japa* among the populace to describe the mass outmigration in Nigeria (Ogunade & Awosusi, 2023).

Migration in sub-Saharan Africa is likely to skyrocket, with the region currently having eight of the ten top countries with the highest international migration rates since 2010 of which Nigeria is one (Pew Research Center, 2018). The increasing levels of political instability stemming from wars, coups, insurgency including trafficking in arms, people and illicit goods has intensified the desire to migrate among residents. The availability of smartphones and internet facilities coinciding with these factors has further increased accessibility to information and the motivation to travel (Kirwin & Anderson, 2018)

Domestic and international migration, plays a critical role in determining evolving population characteristics, mostly in terms of significant youth population, rapid population growth and urbanization (Adebayo, 2024). Nigeria has been undergoing major demographic changes in contemporary times. The issue of rapid population growth motivated by high birth and low mortality rates is one of the obvious trends in this region (Adebayo, 2024). Another

characteristic feature of this region is its youthful population which has consequences for employment, social services and education. 60% of migrants are between 15-34years (International organization for migration (2020). Top destinations: Europe (34%), North America (26%), other African Countries (20%) (Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). Urbanization another important demographic trend in Nigeria, pose serious challenges associated with infrastructure, accommodation, and access to basic services. Kirwin and Anderson (2018), remarked that it was unsurprising to identify urban dwellers in the West African sub-region as more likely to migrate since many urban dwellers have made at least one move from a rural setting. The demographic distribution of ethnic groups is crucial as ethnicity is a key component of the region's politics, identity and social dynamics and also an important tool for addressing conflicts and issues of governance (Adebayo, 2024).

The phenomenon of migration is not restricted to educational accomplishment, age of gender as educated and uneducated, young and old as well as male and female are involved in this act (Popogbe & Adeosun, 2022). Across West Africa, men tend to be more likely to migrate than women, although this differs based on religion. In Nigeria and Burkina Faso, both with significant Christian population, women are at parity with men in their aspiration to leave home, while in Niger where majority are Muslims, women are half as open as men to leaving (Kirwin & Anderson, 2018).

3. Status of Care for the Elderly in Nigeria

The number of persons aged 60 and above globally is estimated to increase from 900 million to 2 billion between 2015 and 2050, with the low- and middle-income countries contributing to about 80% of this population (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2015), In sub-Saharan Africa, it is projected to increase significantly, leading to a greater demand for care. Presently, the region records about 46 million older people, with the number expected increase by 2050 to about 165 million (WHO, 2016). The situation is also similar in Nigeria with the elderly making up about 3.1% of the total population of 191million (National Council on Aging, 2016). Care for the elderly in Nigeria is primarily a family responsibility, with some relying on informal mechanisms like kinship networks and mutual aid societies or formal social welfare programmes and pensions, which are often minimal or non-existent. There is a growing need to develop long-term care systems that can be compatible with cultural values and retain family involvement. Despite a clear normative preference for family and community based long term care for the elderly, government efforts to support these forms of care are very limited. Traditional family-based care remains

the dominant form of care for elderly individuals, with family members expected to provide emotional, financial and practical support. Other informal caregivers such as neighbours and community members also play a vital role in supporting elderly individuals.

Some of the salient features of the aged population are, a dependent population, a period of onset of some chronic diseases, a population with special needs, care and support ranging from health, financial, emotional and psychological needs. Report from several studies, reflect the importance of family, community and government support to the health status of the elderly (Dokpesi & Omoruyi, 2014). Shrinking work capacity and other vulnerabilities resulting in physical, psychological, social, health and financial challenges, authenticate the need to prioritize care and support for these individuals (Ani, 2014). Furthermore, social isolation has been linked to increased mortality at this stage as isolation has been associated with increased blood pressure, depression, dementia as well as suicide in several studies (Ugiagbe, 2018). These challenges tend to be more complex in a country without policies for the age thus exposing them to high risk of ill health and disability particularly from chronic diseases as a result of lack of access to health care. Majority of them are also faced with, loss of vision, diabetes, obesity, tooth loss, bone fracture, arthritis/rheumatism, stroke, Alzheimer's diseases etc. (Ani, 2014). They are also prone to poverty because of their economic redundancy in a society with no dependable social pension for them.

Care for the elderly in Nigeria is a complex issue often linked to a shift in cultural values, with materialism and a decline in traditional family structures contributing to reduced care and support for elders. The emphasis on individual success and career advancement has overshadowed the needs and wellbeing of older family members in contemporary times. Younger generations, as indicated in several studies, often focusing on personal gain and advancement, prioritize their own needs and aspirations over the wellbeing of their elders, leading to a weakening traditional caregiving role (Adamek et al., 2022; Magezi, 2018; Mudiare, 2013). Historically, African societies placed a high value on elders and their wisdom, with family expected to provide care and support. Modernization, urbanization and globalization have eroded these traditional values, prioritizing individual achievement above family bonds (Anugwom, 2023). Intergenerational living, a cornerstone of traditional African family structures, is becoming less common, leading to a decline in the respect and care given to elders by younger family members.

The challenges faced by the elderly include poverty, as a result of reduction or loss of earning power, chronic diseases resulting in financial burdens and

increased utilization of health facilities and elderly abuse often leading to injury, pain, trauma, depression and death. These challenges are further compounded by the poor or unavailability of social security policies for the aged especially in developing countries (Animashaun & chapman, 2017). In some cases, the elderly are subjected to long hours of flight to unfamiliar environments for medical tourism. Such medical interventions are usually sought when they are already in deteriorating conditions and may end up dying in foreign lands, which many Africans view as a taboo.

4. Implications of Youth Migration on Care for the Elderly

Youth migration, while offering potential benefits, can create significant challenges for the physical health of older adults left behind particularly regarding access to care and support. The loss of intergenerational support and increased social isolation can contribute to elevated chronic stress and potentially worsen physical health outcomes. Youth migration can negatively impact the physical health of elderly parents, primarily by exacerbating existing health issues and increasing their tendency to develop psychological trauma. Youth migration while offering economic benefits like remittances can negatively impact the physical and mental health of elderly parents left behind. Studies show a correlation between youth migration and increased stress, social isolation and poor mental health symptoms among older adults. However, the impact on physical health can be mixed, with some studies indicating no significant association between chronic diseases, while others show links to poor self-rated health and increased outpatient visits (Liu, et al., 2021);

Poverty is not only a function of financial strength but also in terms of access to social services (Khan et al., 2017). On this premise, sub-Saharan countries have been considered the poorest in the world with the risk of poverty increasing at old age. Social factors such as disappearing trend of care from children, family and community, government factors in terms of poor pension programmes, social security and health systems all contribute significantly to the dilemma of the aged (Daramola et al., 2019) Elderly individuals may experience reduced mobility, making it difficult for them to access healthcare services. Without younger family members to accompany them, elderly individuals may face challenges in navigating the healthcare system. They are likely to delay or forgo necessary medical care due to lack of support or transportation. Furthermore, without adequate support, elderly individuals may struggle to manage chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension or arthritis.

Despite commendable global advancements in disease management and health promotion strategies, challenges in disability, declining cognition and maintaining social network pose a nightmare to older persons and their families in Nigeria (Animasahun & Chapman, 2017). Due to global improving healthcare, life expectancy is increasing and with it the ageing population. As the number of elderly grows, their economic, social and cultural wellbeing is at risk, especially in developing countries (WHO, 2021). Majority of older adults face various challenges in daily life and often require physical and psychosocial support and regular medical care. The migration of youth means a decline in the level of care and support provided by the children to their aging parents. This can lead to lack of assistance with daily tasks, mobility challenges and difficulties managing chronic conditions. It can also lead to increased loneliness and social isolation for elderly parents, potentially impacting their health. Reduced social interaction and engagement can contribute to a decline in physical activity, mental wellbeing and overall wellbeing. The absence of immediate family support can make it harder for elderly parents to access healthcare and medication especially in areas with limited public transportation.

Remittances have far-reaching impacts in reducing poverty and inequality and fostering socioeconomic development (Ratha, 2013; Adams, 2011) It smooth out consumption and household expenditures on a micro level since households allocate this additional income for other critical alternative uses such as health (Vilar-Compte et al., 2021; Amarya et al., 2018). Remittances are essential sources of income in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, as highlighted earlier. Conversely, some researchers argued that remittances could not adequately compensate for loneliness, poor mental health, and bodily wear and tear associated with labour participation by elderly adults left behind due to migration (Ebingbo & Okoye, 2022). Even where remittances are received, the impact of youth migration still has enormous direct implication for the health and wellbeing of the elderly. The re-organization of the care pattern already established for the elderly can affect their mental health and stability. In some cases, total strangers are brought in or employed as care givers often with minimal supervision from younger family members due to distance. Consequently, the elderly may have access to remittances, but may suffer extortion, maltreatment including verbal and physical abuse, abandonment, insecurity and even death.

5. Pathways for Enhancing Care for the Elderly

Globally, the elderly are emerging as the fastest growing segment of the population, with developing countries having little or no safety net in place for

them (Adelakun and Obue, 2020). With the elderly in Africa speculated to triple between 2020 and 2050, it has become imperative countries within this region pay close attention to this group by developing actionable policies geared towards strengthening informal and formal care for them. Developing long-term care systems in Nigeria requires national coordination, mapping of existing resources, cross-national and exchange and strong partnerships between governments, families, NGOs and the private sector. The following pathways can be explored to achieve care for the elderly.

5.1 Strengthening Informal Care Networks

The absence of formal care giving including cultural prescription for aging has enhanced informal care giving in sub-Saharan countries including Nigeria (Ezulike et al., 2024). As a result of the high youthful population and low life expectancy in Nigeria, this care is usually provided by children, grandchildren, extended family members as well as neighbours and other community members who are young and probably in their middle age (Ikeorji & Ubani, 2024; Tanyi et al., 2018). Informal care giving in Nigeria is deeply entrenched in the African philosophy which emphasizes care giving as the cultural right of the elderly with motives which include spirituality, reciprocity as well as obligation and tradition (Zarzycki et al., 2022; Akinrolie, et al., 2020; Ojembe & Kalu, 2019). The traditional African society rely on this as a veritable medium of care for the aged. However, the current trend of youth migration in Nigeria as a result of economic and security challenges, forcing children to move to other countries, far away from their parents, is a serious threat to this age long tradition of elderly care (Ebingbo & Okoye, 2022)

Despite this challenge, informal caregiving should be maintained by extended family members and community, motivated by empathy, reciprocity, and desire to maintain longevity including cultural heritage, not necessarily an act of responsibility, financial or material benefits. Strengthening community-based care networks can help provide support for the elderly even in the absence of their children and grandchildren. Encouraging neighborhood care initiatives can also help build a sense of community and provide emotional and practical support for the elderly. Establishing elderly support groups can also be considered, as they provide a platform for the elderly to share their experiences, receive emotional support and information on available resources. A well-established informal care for the elderly will improve the social, physical and psychological wellbeing of the aged in Nigeria.

5.2 Formalizing Care Services

Quality life and health for the elderly can be enhanced by access to formal support care services. The benefits of formal support services in complementing family home care cannot be overemphasized. Formal care services reduce the burden of elderly care from family members and relatives especially when they live apart from the aged parents or family member. Formal health services for the elderly in Nigeria despite being almost non-existent, equally suffer several barriers including, financial accessibility as a result of low income and high charges, unfriendly healthcare facilities due to poor attitude of caregivers to elderly care, physical accessibility due to distance and lack of support from family members (Iwuagwu et al., 2022, Ebimbo & Okoye, 2022; Ani, 2014).

Providing home-based care services can help support the elderly in their own homes, reducing the need for institutional care. Establishing institutional care facilities can also provide a safe and supportive environment for the elderly who require more intensive care. Unfortunately, these services are scarce in Nigeria and even where they exist, they are quite expensive with untrained or undertrained care givers (Ikeorji & Ubani, 2024). Another major challenge with institutional care in Nigeria is the cultural attachment to one's home. The elderly in this region are more comfortable receiving care in their homes rather than being cared for by strangers in totally unfamiliar environments. However, in contemporary times, the paradigm shifts in care giving, occasioned by migration of younger family members, intensifies the need to promote formal care giving in Nigeria. Overcoming these challenges, will require the integration of formal and informal care services, with family and community members fully involved. Community Health Extension Workers (CHEWs) in the various Local Government Areas can be trained to provide home care services for the elderly with the support of family and community members at little or no cost. Offering such respite care services can provide temporary relief for family caregivers and help prevent burnout. In addition, a section for geriatric care should be carved out in the Primary Healthcare Centers (PHCs), with facilities, schedules and other services planned to provide comfort and adequate care for the elderly. Same should be replicated in the secondary and tertiary health facilities with doctors, nurses, social workers and other health practitioners specializing in geriatric care.

Furthermore, the healthcare system in Nigeria should leverage on technology. Tele-health Service can help provide the elderly with access to healthcare services remotely, reducing the need for hospital visits. Creating digital platforms can help connect the elderly with caregivers, healthcare providers and other support services including developing mobile health applications that monitor the health of the elderly and

provide timely interventions. Developing policies that support the care of the elderly will also help to ensure that the needs and rights of the elderly are protected. Such policies will raise awareness and mobilize sufficient funding and resources to support the development of social and healthcare services, including programmes for the elderly.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implication

This study has provided valuable insights on the complex interactions between youth migration, caregiving deficits and elderly health. It has established that there is high rate of youth migration with massive brain drain especially in the health sector. Youth migration from Nigeria to other countries is driven by economic, social and political factors thus leading to reduced caregiving support, emotional distress and social isolation for elderly individuals in Nigeria. It emphasized that caregiver deficit led to social and economic consequences that exacerbate challenges in the health of the elderly. Youth migration while increase remittances to the elderly in Nigeria, does not take the place of physical contact and care from loved ones.

Care in the traditional African society is based on intergenerational mutual responsibilities often reflected within families with the children depending on their parents for care and support at the early stage of life and an expected swap in roles when the parents become old (Ani & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2022). Thus, care for the elderly in traditional African society rely on the extended family system, although there is a gradual decline in this mechanism. The anticipated increase in the elderly population coupled with mass exodus of young families will demand government intervention at all levels, through policies geared towards supporting healthy aging. These policies should focus on formal as well as informal care service providers.

In Nigeria presently, there are no policy provisions for informal care givers. It is imperative that policies providing financial support, education and training, access to healthcare services as well as respite be put in place for informal caregivers, to reduce burnout and optimize their care giving role. Also, centers should be established to implement the Senior Citizens Act, enacted in 2018 to provide adequate care and support for the elderly, specifically those above 70years. In addition, the curriculum developed in 2023 to provide standardized care for the elderly covering healthcare, legal protection and social welfare should be fully utilized.

Finally, policies aimed at addressing social, economic and security challenges in the country should be put in place to discourage migration of citizens to other nations, thus maintaining informal care giving. In

addition, retirement for the elderly should be joyfully looked forward to where necessary arrangements such as seamless and regular payments of gratuity and pensions are ensured including adequate coverage for the elderly in the National Health Insurance Scheme.

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