Chapter 6
For the Greater Good: The Economic and Social Impacts of Irregular Migration on Families in Benin City, Nigeria

Allwell Oseahume Akhigbe and Efetobor Stephanie Effevottu

6.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an insight to the relationship between forced migration, economic security and family separation in Benin City, Nigeria. An individual's desire to migrate is often driven by a complex system of interrelated socio-economic, institutional, political, environmental and cultural reasons (Amrevurayire & Ojeh, 2016; Ottoh & Akinboye, 2016). Migration scholars have made attempts to divide migratory movements into two different types: voluntary and forced (Mukhtar et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the division between forced and voluntary migration is often blurry. In the case of Benin City, while some migrants were forced to migrate to escape extreme poverty and economic insecurity, others were pressured by their family members to migrate to uplift their family's status.

Irregular migration routes are often the only option for migrants with low socio-economic status to travel to Europe. In the context of this chapter, we refer to those who have left Benin City as irregular migrants because they have not used regular routes to migrate and do not have the required documents before setting out for their destination. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines 'irregular migrant' as a person who, owing to unauthorized entry, breach of a condition of entry, or the expiry of his or her visa, lacks legal status in a transit or host country (Perruchoud et al., 2011, p. 54). The participants in this study were family members of people who migrated through irregular routes and are currently without legal status in the receiving countries due to their lack of residence permits. This situation makes long periods of family separation inevitable.

A. O. Akhigbe (✉)
Cadasta Foundation, Abuja, Nigeria
e-mail: aakhigbe@cadasta.org

E. S. Effevottu
Department of History, University of Ibadan, Oyo, Nigeria

Nigeria has had a major role in both intra-African and international migration dating back to the pre-colonial period, when migration was associated with the slave trade and warfare. In the colonial era, Nigerians' international migration was mostly driven by the quest for labour opportunities and higher education in the United Kingdom, which was strengthened by Nigeria's colonial ties to Britain (IOM, 2017). During the post-colonial period, the pursuit of higher education and economic reasons have also acted as drivers of Nigerian international migration to countries in the Global North. Since the 1990s, economic decline and political repression has pushed Nigerians to migrate, mostly to countries like the United Kingdom, South Africa, Spain, the United States and Italy (De Haas, 2008). Italy, Spain and Ireland were the dominant destination countries for most Nigerian migrants in the 1990s. However, increasingly restrictive immigration policies in Europe have altered the regular migratory flow, driving most low-skilled migrants to look for alternative migratory routes to Europe (Adeniyi, 2019).

The twenty-first century has witnessed an increase in irregular migration from Nigeria to countries in the Global North. Ango et al. (2014) reported that Nigeria has witnessed a significant increase in irregular emigration due to factors such as poverty, civil unrest, ecological issues and the lack of sustainable livelihoods. In essence, the need to improve the socio-economic security of one's family in Nigeria leads to irregular migration to Europe and even drives families to decide to sacrifice family members and send them abroad.

Against this background, the impact of forced migration on families left behind in Nigeria is a pertinent issue that needs scholarly attention. While studies exist on the socio-economic impact of international migration on Nigeria and Benin City, especially in the form of remittances (Olowa et al., 2013; Odorige, 2016; Ndisika & Esin, 2019; Ndisika & Dawodu, 2019; Yeates & Owusu-Sekyere, 2019), less is known about the implications of forced separation for the families left behind (Haagsman et al., 2015; Mazzucato et al., 2015; Oyebamiji & Asuelime, 2018). This chapter asks two basic questions: (1) How do irregular migrants contribute towards improving the economic security of the families left behind? And (2) what are the social impacts of migrants' absence?

Benin City was chosen as the context for this research because it represents one of the largest hubs of irregular emigration and remittance receipts in Nigeria (Adeniyi, 2019). Benin City is located in southern Nigeria. It is the capital of Edo State and heavily populated by various ethnic groups, particularly the Bini and Esan. The region is widely known for intraregional and international migration dating back to the 1980s, when Italians established businesses in the region. Marriages between Italian businessmen and Bini women also fostered international migration in the region when these women moved to Italy and began conducting business in the textile, leather and jewellery industries. These women also brought other Bini women to work in Italy because of the high demand for low-skilled labour in the agricultural sector (Osezua, 2011).

The collapse of the Nigerian economy during the end of the 1980s due to sinking oil prices led to the loss of businesses, and many of the Bini women in Italy turned to prostitution to survive. They also began recruiting friends and family members

from home, who saw the wealth amassed by these women as motivating factors for them to migrate to Italy. With its long history of international migration successes and organized network of human traffickers and smugglers, Benin City became one of the most trafficked-through destinations in Nigeria, with most migrants believing they would be able to find smugglers to get them to Europe once they made their way to Benin City (Adeniyi, 2019).

Although Benin City is relatively developed compared to other cities in Nigeria, it has also witnessed rising levels of poverty, with over 80% of residents living below the poverty line (Awolabi et al., 2014). A large majority of the youths in Benin City survive by doing menial jobs, working in the private sector for little pay, or owning small- and medium-scale enterprises, including hairdressing, fashion design and petty trading. Due to this intense economic insecurity and poverty, most families are under pressure and see the migration of one or more of their family members as a way out of their current level of poverty.

Traditionally, it was Bini men who usually engaged in international migration, leaving behind their spouse or spouses and children and sending them benefits in the form of remittances; in some cases, the men established themselves financially to pave the way for eventual family reunification (Okojie et al., 2003). The 1980s, however, saw a shift in the pattern of migration as women began taking the lead in initiating international migration, leaving their children in the care of their parents, their husbands or other extended family members, and sending remittances (Osezua, 2011; Odorige, 2016). Single or unaccompanied adolescent migrants also leave their parents behind in the search for sustained economic livelihoods and an improved standard of living for the families they leave behind (United Nations Development Programme, 2019).

This chapter focuses on the experiences and perspectives of the families left behind in Benin City. It discusses the impact of the remittances sent by migrants in the Global North on the economic security and social status of family members in Benin City. In addition, it examines the impact of separation on migrants' relationships with their families. The next section offers a brief background of the previous research that underpins the chapter. This will be followed by a short methodological discussion and two sections that provide the findings of the research: Section 6.4 discusses how irregular migration impacts the economic security of families in Benin City, and Sect. 6.5 analyses the positive and negative social impacts of family separation.

6.2 Irregular Migration, Economic (In)security and Family Separation

Remittances sent by migrants constitute a major source of income for people in Benin City, and a large number of households there are dependent on remittances received from their families in the Global North (Osezua, 2011). A large majority of

these remittances are used by the family members left behind to take care of their daily needs. Apart from the economic benefits, remittances also affect migrants' patterns of family interactions, obligations, kinship networks and expectations in the households left behind because families often attach meaning to remittances and construct values from them (Akanle & Adesina, 2017).

The role that remittances play in providing economic security for families has been well documented (Akanle et al., 2021; Singh, 2017; Olowa et al., 2013; Odorige, 2016). Remittances serve as a basic means of livelihood for family members left behind, as they are often used to establish and support private businesses and self-employment (Oyebamiji & Asuelime, 2018; Ikuteyijo, 2020; Ndisika & Dawodu, 2019). Remittances in the form of cash or goods also constitute a basic source of income that covers the family's necessities of food, clothing and shelter and may allow them to acquire land and property (Odorige, 2016; Ndisika & Dawodu, 2019). Educational advancement is another critical use of remittances. When used to support the academic pursuits of both younger and older siblings, remittances empower young family members with the skills that are necessary to uplift the family left behind and establish them in their local society (Akanle et al., 2021). Moreover, remittances are powerful enough to realign social statuses and priorities in local communities, as seen in the enhanced power of female migrants in decision-making (Osezua, 2011; Ikuomola, 2015). Remittances also serve as a way for the migrant to express love and one's duty to the advancement of the family unit (Singh, 2017). The act of sending money home indicates that the migrant prioritizes the welfare of the family members left behind. Unsurprisingly, the lure of remittances fuels more migration, as other families witness the transformative power of remittances and plan similar migration journeys (Odorige, 2016; Adeniyi, 2019).

In Nigeria, the family plays a pivotal role in the development of an individual. The family is a close unit of kinsmen, related by blood, who care deeply for each other and look out for each other's wellbeing (Osezua, 2011). Like the immediate family, the extended family also plays an active role in care-giving and decision-making, such that one is also expected to take care of them (Bettmann et al., 2016; Adeniyi, 2019). This expanded concept of family and one's duty to uplift family members comes forth strongly as regards irregular migration. The family is part and parcel of the decision-making process, providing support during the actual migration and taking care of the loved ones left behind by the migrant (Carter, 2011).

Irregular migration brings tangible benefits for the family left behind, but comes at great cost to intimate relationships. On the one hand, the migrant's sojourn brings remittances that uplift the entire family. In light of the familial duty of each member of the family, the migrant is encouraged to make the torturous irregular journey to Europe to produce gains for the family (Adeniyi, 2019; Akanle et al., 2021; Osezua, 2011). On the other hand, the strain of separation leads to broken family ties, with some marriages breaking down completely and with children left behind more likely to become social deviants due to the absence of parental care (Ikuomola, 2015; Ikuteyijo, 2020). Intimate relationships such as marriages suffer, as prolonged absence increases the likelihood of both the migrant and his or her spouse seeking

intimacy from others or even maintaining a state of 'transnational polygyny', that is, being married both abroad and at home (Fleischer, 2011). This trade-off between uplifting the family and maintaining strong family relationships is one that every irregular migrant from Nigeria is required to make in light of the worsening economic situation in the country (Osezua, 2011; Ikuteyijo, 2020).

Existing literature discusses the importance of remittances, the role of the family in ensuring the success of migrants, and the breakdown of relationships due to family separation. There is a gap, however, in determining how these considerations play out in countries of origin, particularly from the perspective of the families left behind. This chapter fills this gap by determining how the absence of irregular migrants caters to the economic security of the family left behind in Benin City while simultaneously emphasizing the impact of this absence on migrants' relationships with family members.

6.3   Methods and Data

The data for this chapter was drawn from two months of qualitative research undertaken in July and August 2020 that sought to comprehend the experiences of family members left behind in Benin City. The lived experiences of irregular migrants in the Global North were not explored in this study. This approach was taken largely because there is little academic scholarship that addresses the implications of irregular migration for the families left behind, especially with regards to migrants from the Global South (see, however, Chap. 7). The study therefore aimed to explore the perspective of migrants' families on the impact of remittances received from the Global North on their socio-economic security, as well as on the impact of irregular migration on family relationships.

Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with family members who were left behind and received remittances in three local government areas in Benin City, Nigeria. All of the participants were selected on the basis of having kinsmen who were irregular migrants in the Global North.[1] The semi-structured nature of the interviews gave the respondents the opportunity to create their narratives in a manner that reflected a personal selection of their lived experiences. The interviews were conducted in places where the respondents felt safe, such as in their homes or workplaces, using a blend of English and Nigerian Pidgin to foster easy communication. Each interview lasted for about 30 to 45 min, with the researchers taking notes on important points highlighted during the discussion. Although each of the interviews was conducted in the presence of both researchers, the female researcher took the lead while interviewing female informants and the male researcher while interviewing male respondents.

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[1] According to the information provided by respondents, their family members remain undocumented in Europe. However, we do not know the details of their residence permits or life situations.

Having lived in Benin City for a long period of time, it was easy for us to utilize our social networks to identify persons with family members who had migrated to the Global North, particularly Italy, German, Spain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway and the United Kingdom. Our respondents also referred us to other families of irregular migrants that were willing to share their experiences. Attention was paid to achieving as much gender parity as possible: out of the 30 informants, 17 were men and 13 were women. In contrast, we deliberately selected respondents older than 17 years of age, with 32 years being the average age. The educational qualifications of the respondents were high, with the majority holding at least a secondary school certificate. In terms of occupational status, 12 of the respondents were self-employed, 7 were employed in the private sector, 6 were unemployed and 5 were students in tertiary institutions.

Prior to the interviews, respondents were informed about the nature, aim and purpose of the study. The informed consent of the respondents was also requested, with the assurance that the information provided would be used strictly for academic purposes. To respect and protect the privacy of respondents, their names have been replaced with pseudonyms. With the promise of confidentiality, respondents were quite open in sharing their experiences of the positive and negative impacts of forced migration and family separation. The common background that we as researchers shared with some of the informants also made it easy for them to speak freely with us. The interviews focused on the reasons that had forced their family members to migrate to Europe, the impact of migration on their family's economic security, the difficulties they had experienced due to separation, and the coping strategies they had adopted to deal with the migrant's absence. After each interview, the data generated through note-taking were transcribed and later thematically analysed.

6.4   Economic Impacts of Irregular Migration

Irregular migration has significant economic impacts on the families left behind in Benin City. The fieldwork confirmed that remittances provided family members, especially siblings and parents, with the means to meet their financial needs. Osahon, aged 28, expressed his delight that he could afford to maintain a thriving fashion store business due to the goods sent by his older brother in Spain. According to Osahon,

> My brother has been very helpful in raising the standard of living of our family. He sends all the 'Italian' [good quality] shoes that you can see in this shop. Every three months, he sends down dozens of good shoes for me to sell and earn a living. I was previously jobless, but I can now pay my bills, sponsor the education of our two younger female siblings and take care of our aged mother in the village. (Interview, 28 July 2020)

Osahon's sentiment was shared by most of the respondents, who attributed their means of livelihood to the remittances sent by their siblings abroad. The remittances

allowed family members to create and sustain businesses and thus helped to lift the family out of poverty. The respondents' businesses included hairdressing salons, electronics and appliance stores, fashion stores and automobile parts businesses. This economic impact is particularly important in light of the increasing youth unemployment in Benin City and across Nigeria. The safeguarding of their means of livelihood is thus a critical outcome of forced migration for the youth left behind in Benin City.

Elderly parents are also heavily dependent on remittances for meeting their needs. Elderly respondents attributed their wellbeing to their children, who sent remittances to them from abroad. Ese, aged 65, is an elderly retiree who has a daughter abroad in Germany. She was full of praise for her daughter, whose remittances have been Ese's sole source of income. Although she has three children living in Benin City, they are either in tertiary educational institutions or recent graduates who are not able to cater for her needs.

> My daughter who is abroad is the reason why I am doing well today. She sends me monthly stipends and provides money for us to complete our projects and run our businesses. In fact, this house I am living in was single-handedly built by my daughter. I do not know what I would have done if she had not travelled abroad. (Interview, 29 July 2020)

Ese's comment echoes the beliefs of parents of forced migrants in Benin City who see their children's migration as the best way to enjoy a blissful retirement. This reveals the strong kinship relationships that exist, including the expectation that children are responsible for taking good care of their parents, especially in their old age. This familial duty of migrants abroad was emphasized by parents, who spoke highly of their children abroad in terms of the performance of this duty in spite of their irregular status. Though Ese's daughter remains an irregular migrant, she is still able to send remittances to her aged mother back home. Ese was full of praise for her child abroad while subtly dismissing the contributions of her Nigeria-based children to her wellbeing. Ese's disposition is typical of elderly parents in Benin City, who prefer that their children migrate abroad in order to take good care of them. This preference inspires children and youths left behind to plan their own migratory journeys, so as to receive similar respect from their parents.

However, remittances also led to a culture of dependency among some family members. The regular flow of remittances was critical to the survival of the family, but according to our interviewees, some young family members had become used to squandering these resources. Some respondents noted that some young men used the resources to buy extravagant gadgets and host parties, and that they generally failed to invest the resources wisely. Nene, a 25-year-old sales agent, explained her experience thus:

> My elder sister has been working in Italy for the last two years. She sends us money and goods to sell to support our family. My younger brother, who is 20 years [old], often squandered the money to host wild parties and bought expensive phones and laptops without doing anything significant with it. I reported him to our elder sister, who threatened to cut him off from the money before he changed his ways. (Interview, 27 July 2020)

Nene captures a growing trend of overreliance on remittances by family members left behind in Benin City. Squandering the scarce resources sent by the migrant defeats the purpose of lifting the family out of poverty, thereby nullifying the essence of the migratory quest. In addition, it creates more demands for remittances from the migrant, which may not be convenient or possible to meet. The increasing demand for resources by family members left behind also leads more youths to undertake dangerous irregular journeys to Europe to generate more remittances for the family at home.

6.5 Social Impacts of Irregular Migration

6.5.1 Upward Social Mobility and New Female Roles

In addition to its economic impacts, irregular migration has also had important social impacts on the families left behind and on the social fabric of the people of Benin City. One impact is the increased status of women in the town. The traditional Bini society is strictly patriarchal in nature, with a high regard for male children and subjugation of female children. Inheritance was strictly for men, as women were not entitled to any property or decision-making power. Irregular migration, however, has had an impact on this social dynamic with the increased number of female migrants from Benin City to Europe. The social status of women has risen, with female migrants making important family decisions and determining the recipients of their remittances. Nosa, aged 30, runs a sports betting centre in Benin City that is supported by funds from his younger sister, who is based in Spain.

> My younger sister, who is abroad, is the breadwinner of the family. Although we are three older brothers here in Benin [City], we are all struggling with our small businesses. My younger sister sends money to support our businesses, provides for family projects and instructs us on how to spend the money. Before she travelled, she was nobody in the family, but now we take instructions from her. (Interview, 27 July 2020)

Nosa's statement shows that irregular migration indeed redefines the social dynamic in Benin City. He noted the irony that he and his siblings now took orders and instructions from their younger sister, who became the breadwinner of the family by means of the money she sends home from abroad. Though Nosa and his siblings were not comfortable with the situation, they were resigned to their fate due to the significance of the remittances to their livelihoods. Women are thus able to accumulate decision-making power in spite of their absence. Men, on the other hand, especially those who depend heavily on the remittances of women, lose their standing in the family and often have to obey the directives of female migrants. A 20-year-old female respondent, Sarah, who is a secondary school dropout, explained how this scenario plays out in her family:

> My older sister travelled to France two years ago. She is the third-born in our family of four and has two older brothers. All of us here in Benin [City] are struggling and are living from

> hand to mouth. My sister sends money to each member of the family. We have used the money to build a house for our aged parents, buy land, purchase cars, and support our businesses. Whenever we have family meetings, my sister joins through video call and makes all the major decisions, because it is her money that we use in the family. (Interview, 29 July 2020)

Sarah has witnessed first-hand the power that her older sister wields simply because she is the breadwinner of the family. Recalling that her sister was not considered important when she was in Nigeria, Sarah revealed that she plans to join her sister abroad to become independent and gain a similar form of respect and admiration from her nuclear and extended families.

Migration also improves the social status of the whole family. All 30 respondents acknowledged that their families were well-respected in their local communities by virtue of having a family member abroad. Migration abroad is seen as a symbol of power and affluence. Those with family members abroad are perceived to be of a higher social class and able to afford a better standard of living compared to their peers. This social status was generally accorded to family members irrespective of whether they received significant remittances. Despite the fact that it is now common knowledge that those who migrate irregularly, particularly women, are often victims of human trafficking, their families left behind are held in high esteem and generally envied by the rest of the population. Osasu, a 30-year-old banker, described the improved social status accorded to his family:

> Immediately when my elder brother migrated to Portugal two years ago, our social class clearly improved. We used the money he sent to build a house for our parents and open a boutique and mobile phone store in town. Our relatives and friends now consider us to be important people. My parents are well-respected in the community because they can see how our financial situation improved when my brother travelled abroad. (Interview, 30 July 2020)

Osasu traces the increased prestige that his family enjoys to the material benefits of his brother's journey, which are visible to other members of his community. His brother travelled irregularly to Europe through the Sahara Desert and now works as a bartender in Portugal. Although taking such a job in Nigeria would have been demeaning not only for Osasu's brother, but also for the entire family, he is now celebrated as the sole reason for the improvement of his family's status due to the remittances from his job.

The social status associated with travelling abroad leads other families to put pressure on their family members to migrate and likewise improve their own social status. When asked about what prompted their family member's irregular migration, most respondents admitted suggesting the idea and even putting pressure on the individual to undertake the journey. Omosigho, a 29-year-old artisan, explained how he raised the idea and facilitated his wife's trip abroad to improve their social status:

> My wife was a petty trader selling food items in the market. I know of her friend who travelled to Italy and is doing quite well. I suggested that it was best for her to also travel to see whether it will be better for her. We raised the transport cost and she went by road. Now, she is settled in Italy and regularly sends money for the upkeep of me and our three children.

> My friends and colleagues respect me since my wife is abroad and doing well. (Interview, 27 July 2020)

Omosigho insisted his wife was cultivating a thriving career working with her friend in a hair salon in Italy. He did not admit to the possibility that she had been trafficked for the sex trade, despite the fact that working in a hairdressing salon in Italy is a popular ruse used by traffickers in Benin City to woo unsuspecting victims.

Onome, a 22-year-old make-up artist, described a similar situation, recounting how her parents put pressure on her younger sister to travel to Spain in order to measure up to their friends who had children working in Europe:

> My sister had just completed her secondary school education when my mum and dad put pressure on her to travel to Spain to work there. Three of my mum's friends had their children working in Spain, who built houses for them and sent back a lot of money for their businesses. My parents wanted to have the same benefits and contacted the man that helped my mum's friends to also transport my sister to Europe. She has been there for five years now and has performed even better than those other girls. She has built houses for us and invested in our businesses, including this make-up business I am handling. Because of my sister's support, we are considered rich and important people in my community. (Interview, 28 July 2020)

Onome's experience confirms that migration is highly prevalent in communities in Benin City and is a status symbol for families with children based abroad. The remittances received by the family members left behind enable them to adopt extravagant lifestyles, which makes them the envy of their peers. In turn, these tangible benefits of migration spur other families to adopt irregular means to send their children abroad, with the expectation of similar remittances that will transform their socio-economic conditions.

6.5.2   Negative Impacts of the Absence of Family Members

The interviews revealed that many were pleased with the outcome of the irregular migration journey of their kinsmen abroad because they were able to attain a higher standard of living, maintain a livelihood and achieve higher social status. This status, however, often came at enormous cost to intimate relationships, and separation had other negative consequences as well. First, the family member's absence resulted in the breakdown of intimate relationships, especially marriages. The absence of one's spouse puts enormous pressure on the spouses left behind. Peace, aged 35, explained how the irregular migration of her husband was just too much to bear and resulted in the breakdown of their marriage:

> My husband migrated to the Netherlands five years ago to seek greener pastures. Our various efforts at getting jobs here and managing a business failed, and we decided that he should travel out first, and then I can join him over there later. It has not worked out as planned, and my husband has not once come back home to see me or our two kids in the last five years because he does not have the right papers. Although he sends me money and gifts

> regularly, I can't bear the loneliness anymore. Two months ago, I asked him for a divorce and he accepted. (Interview, 30 July 2020)

Peace's situation reflects the sad realities of many family members who have been separated from their loved ones. Compelled by poverty and the harsh economic climate, these migrants have had to leave their family members behind to seek better opportunities abroad. Before leaving Benin City, most migrants promise to come back and reunite with their families. However, their lack of documentation, combined with strict European migration rules, means that this dream is seldom realized. Instead, migrants have to rely on virtual reunification with their families, which is insufficient. With long periods away from their loved ones, the intimate relationships of irregular migrants slowly unravel. For example, a respondent mentioned that she had not seen or heard from a close uncle for the last 10 years, since he travelled to Europe, due to his inability to secure the right documents abroad.

Second, some of our respondents reported that the absence of parents, particularly mothers, could sometimes result in inadequate support, care and supervision of the children left behind, which could lead to behavioural problems such as falling into the wrong peer groups. Akpos, aged 20, a ride-hailing taxi driver, described how his mother's absence contributed to the poor choices that landed his older brother in jail:

> My mother travelled to Italy 10 years ago, leaving my brother and I in the care of an older aunt. My father has passed away, and my mother felt going abroad was the best way to take care of our needs. She always sent us a lot of money through our aunty, who was too old to supervise us. My older brother got mixed up in the wrong crowd and joined a notorious cult that terrorized the university campus. He was arrested and has been in prison for the last four years. I feel my mother's presence would have helped to guide us in the right path, which could have prevented my brother from becoming a criminal, rather than leaving us in the care of an old aunty who could barely handle two teenage boys. (Interview, 30 July 2020)

Akpos' regret is glaring. He feels his mother's action of showering them with remittances instead of motherly love failed to give them a better life and instead led his brother down the wrong path. His perspective shines light on an often overlooked aspect of family separation: that the absence of migrant parents may predispose their children towards social vices, especially in cases where there are no quality care arrangements in place. The literature's emphasis on the caregiving provided by the African extended family appears to suggest that it is sufficient that extended relatives take care of the children in the absence of nuclear family caregivers (Ikuomola, 2015; Akanle et al., 2021; Ikuteyijo, 2020; Adeniyi, 2019). Our interview findings, as well as our personal observations while living in the region, clearly contradict this claim and show that the absence of parents can lead children to embrace social deviancy despite the presence of the extended family. This is particularly evident in cases where the children receive insufficient attention and support from their caregivers. The findings from our study align closely with research conducted by scholars like Appianing (2013), Fiakuna (2019), and Kusi-Mensah and Omigbodun (2020). The negative impact of parental absence on the wellbeing and health of left-behind children has also been observed in the Chinese context (e.g., Lu et al., 2019).

In addition, the parent's absence can truncate the educational progress of children left behind. Such children are often relocated to live with extended family members and end up losing their educational status and progress. Extended family members are less committed to the development of the children, especially to their educational advancement. In many situations where children are sent to live in the villages, they end up dropping out of school entirely. Osaretin, an 18-year-old woman, explained that her educational advancement was halted when her father migrated abroad:

> My mother and I had to leave Benin City and go to live with my father's parents in [a village] when he travelled to Italy years ago. I was in class three in the town when I left to attend a village school. The quality of education was so bad that I dropped out of school to become a petty trader in the village. If my father had not left us, I would have completed my education in the town and probably gained admission into the university by now. (Interview, 30 July 2020)

Osaretin now works as a sales attendant in a supermarket in Benin City. The job pays her very little, and she traces her limited livelihood options to the migration decision of her father, which led her to lose her educational status. Although her father still sends remittances home, they are managed by her grandparents and extended family, who rarely allocate significant portions of it to her and her mother. Osaretin has therefore gained very little from her father's migratory journey, which has limited her educational pursuits.

However, all 30 respondents were unanimous in insisting that although they missed the migrant greatly and could see the adverse effects of the individual's absence on their relationships, they did not want their family members to return home. Respondents maintained that the economic insecurities they faced, including poverty, unemployment, hostile business environments and poor social amenities, could only be ameliorated by the remittances provided by the migrant to sustain and improve their means of livelihood and social status. The family members left behind were thus willing to sacrifice their strong relationships with the migrants for the greater good of enhancing their economic security. To mitigate the effect of family separation, they used technology to keep in frequent touch with their loved ones abroad, especially through mobile communication, social media chat platforms and video calls.

6.6   Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the relationship between irregular migration, economic insecurity and family separation within the context of Benin City, Nigeria. Our field research in Benin City corroborated the linkage between economic insecurity and irregular migration. Economic reasons such as poverty, low standard of living, growing insecurity and lack of sustainable livelihoods were identified by respondents as some of the major drivers of irregular migration in the region. To escape their socio-economic insecurities, individuals are forced, in some cases with the

support of or even pressure from family members, to emigrate to countries they believe can meet their economic expectations, a situation that has been described as survival migration (Betts, 2013; FAO, 2017; Ikuteyijo, 2020).

The respondents in our field research in Benin City noted that international migration, whether regular or irregular, held immense benefits for their families. The remittances received by forcibly separated families have been very useful in improving families' socio-economic status within their communities, providing them upward social mobility and leading to increased economic security. In addition, due to their economic importance, female migrants have acquired new respect and status in the eyes of their family members in Benin City. It was also confirmed that the migration of a family member to Europe further spurred the migration aspirations of the family members left behind.

Family and friends play an essential role in the everyday lives of people in the Global South, acting as major actors and drivers in migration. Despite this, less attention has been placed on understanding the experiences, fears and hopes of these family members, who are forcibly separated due to irregular migration. This chapter therefore contributes to the literature on irregular migration and family separation, drawing on the lived experiences of families left behind in Benin City. Our findings indicate that irregular migration and forced family separation have adverse effects on the wellbeing of children left behind (see also Chap. 7), as well as on spousal and familial relationships, with family members adopting coping mechanisms to deal with migrants' absence.

Furthermore, while it is not clear to what extent the families knew about the living conditions of their family members in Europe, it seems that some individual family members are indeed sacrificed for the good of the family. While some of the respondents indicated that, as irregular migrants, their family members might not be eligible to participate in formal labour markets or receive welfare benefits in the host countries, they also asserted that the money the migrants earn from their precarious jobs is enough to cover the financial needs of their left-behind family members.[2] Thus, while the respondents expressed pain at being forcibly separated from their family members, they stated that due to the unfavourable socio-economic climate in Nigeria, they preferred to suffer silently than risk the migrant returning home. Although irregular migration may separate families and often strain familial ties, the findings of the study are consistent with earlier research indicating that remittances symbolically connect migrants to their families (see also Haagsman et al., 2015; Mazzucato et al., 2015; Odorige, 2016; Oyebamiji & Asuelime, 2018). Hence, even if risky, irregular migration from Nigeria to the Global North is seen as a joint family project that is expected to yield cogent gains in terms of upward social mobility.

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[2] This notion raises the question of the status of the migrant in Europe. While it is true that the standard of living in Nigeria is much lower than in Europe, it may also be that some of the irregular migrants do not disclose their true legal status or occupation to their family members in the Global South.

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Allwell Oseahume Akhigbe holds a master's degree in peace and conflict studies (2019) from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His master's thesis focused on the challenges and prospects of moving across West Africa without visas under the Protocol on the Free Movement of Goods and People enacted by the Economic Community of West African States and on the problems the protocol poses for cross-border policing. His recent research efforts have been guided by an interest in African borders and the dynamics of the interactions they engender, including border security, migration, West African regional integration and transnational organized crime. Akhigbe has presented his findings in a number of regional and international conferences on borders, migration and borderlands, including the Association for Borderlands Studies conference, the African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE) conference and the EU-Africa Migration Conundrum in a Changing Global Order conference in Joensuu, Finland (2019). He is also a member of the Association for Borderlands Studies, IFRA-Nigeria, the Regional Studies Association and the African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE).

Efetobor Stephanie Effevottu is completing her doctorate in development studies at the Department of History, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. She holds a master's degree in history (2017) from the University of Ibadan and a bachelor's degree in history (2014) from the University of Benin, Nigeria. Her areas of research specialization include migration, gender, peace and development studies. She has published several journal articles and book chapters, including 'Unravelling the Nigerian Irregular Migration Quandary to Southern Europe in the Twenty-First Century' in *Intra-Africa Migrations* (Routledge 2021).