



## UNDERSTANDING THE WHY AND HOW OF LEFT-BEHIND SPOUSES OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS IN NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Globally, the absentee spouse phenomenon is increasingly becoming ubiquitous as a result of emigration, with multidimensional implications for families. In Nigeria, international migration involving one of the spouses is one of the major causes of marital disruption and separation among married couples, especially in Ibadan, Oyo State, with a significant number of left-behind spouses. Although existing studies on international migration have focused largely on remittances, reproductive health, and education, little attention has been paid to the left-behind spouses in particular. Yet, this is significant and crucial as the celebratory-remittance narratives have muted and dwarfed other flip sides, particularly in cases where being left behind was initially rejected or not consensual. Against this background, this article explored the left-behind spouses in Ibadan with a specific focus on the processes (HOW) of migration that led to spouses being left-behind, the purpose of migrants' migration, the reasons and willingness (WHY) to be left behind, the decision-making process, and the family awareness and support of the migration of the significant other. The article adopted the social network theory as its theoretical framework. 41 In-depth Interviews were conducted with left-behind spouses: male (10) and female (20), and their spouses abroad: male (9) and female (2). Twenty-Five Key Informant Interviews were conducted with family members (13) and friends (12) of left-behind spouses and Five Case Studies amongst the left-behind spouses. Left-behind spouses of international migrants are being shaped and re-shaped with various experiences ranging from the aftermath of sociopolitical occurrences to discontent with local circumstances and realities. Their decision-making process to become left-behind mirrors a cooperative effort, encompassing prolonged strategies, family considerations, and occasionally individual choices, highlighting the intricacy of migration decisions. Overall, the experiences of left-behind spouses are dynamic, shaped by personal, cultural, and social factors. Hence, understanding the domains of experiences of left-behind spouses require a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the intricate web of kin and social connections, resilience, and adaptability within the broader context of international migration experiences.*

**Keywords:** *Left behind spouses, International migration, Ibadan.*

### INTRODUCTION

Although international migration involving one of the spouses has been a subject of enduring debates (Akanle, Fayehun, & Oyelakin, 2021; Shwe, Jampaklay, Chamratrithirong, & Thaweessit, 2020; Chipanta, Limbu, Riley, Wasti, & Shattuck, 2019; Ullah, 2017), understanding the implications of being a left-behind spouse and associated reasons in particular remains important and significant. Given the essentialities of remittances to left-behind households, it is not until the processes and reasons of becoming a left-behind spouse are critically examined that the ramifications be accepted or rejected. Between 2000-2010, the processes have accelerated (Castles, de Hass & Miller, 2014), and as continued, the net migration rate from Sub-Saharan countries has become the highest in the world (Adepoju, 2006; Naudé, 2008, 2010; Darkwah & Verter, 2014; Ogunniyi, Adebayo, Olagunju, Ogundipe, Salman, & Francis, 2017). Yet, studies on left-behind spouses have profoundly remained scanty in Nigeria, with the highest population of migrant youths in the global south to Europe (Ikuteyijo, L., 2021). Similarly, while extant studies on international migration have focused largely on remittances, reproductive health, and education, little has been paid to the left-behind spouses in particular, and it is fundamental to bridge this gap in the literature. The continuous splitting up of family members as a result of



international migration has remained daunting and detrimental to the subjective wellbeing and livelihood of those left behind (Gartuala, Visser, & Niehof, 2012). In most cases, these challenges are often muted due to the subjective nature of the problem, the perceived remittance status ascribed to spouses, and the African traditional belief that every couple has a cross to bear in a union.

Spouses of the left-behind spouse and youths migrate for various socio-economic reasons. These includes better livelihoods, job search, family unification (Rufai, Ogunniyi, Salman, Oyeyemi & Salawu 2019) to advanced educational opportunities, profound employment, and abundant opportunities in the global north (Ikuteyijo, L., 2021, & 2020). Wage-gap appears common to migrants due to inequalities amongst international labour markets and the propensity of available opportunities to individuals, although the decisions to migrate are usually influenced by social and kinship networks (Akanle & Orobome, 2019). Others are the fear of discrimination by majority groups, inequality, poverty (Mahendra, 2014a), work opportunities in destination countries (International Labour Organization, 2014; Czaika, 2012; & Shimeless, 2010), and favorable state foreign policy, especially of Canada, which attracts immigrants to develop their economy and human capital deficit. As arguable as emigrants contribute to sociocultural and economic developments in host countries, the migration consequences cannot be overemphasized. Remittances have huge economic development in emigrant countries (De Haas & Plug, 2006) and seem a profitable venture with increased girls' schooling in developing countries and increased health care (Demurger, 2015; Masud & Shahidul, 2014). However, despite the sociocultural and economic developments contributed through international migration with regards to remittances, the magnitude of the migration issues, especially with the left-behind spouses in developing countries, are enormous and daunting (Dominick, Sharada, Wasti, Naramaya, Nokafu, & Christina, 2019). Whereas labour migration has been economically beneficial to household growth and sustainability through remittances (Akanle & Adesina, 2017).

Given this background, there are no doubts that understanding how and why spouses become left behind is essential against all odds. Yet, Nigerian migration research has accorded little attention to the left-behind spouses of international migrants. For internal migration, the prolonged repeated absence of spouses is gaining momentum with capacities for gradual breakdown of family and kinship ties (Ikuomola, 2015). This spousal split-up practice is more magnified considering the propensity of better socio-economic standard of living with regards to the rise in remittances sent by emigrated spouses. Unfortunately, the regular and irregular spousal split-up continues to increase with various socio-cultural issues with unguided forms of cultural practices, beliefs and increased psychological problems on the left-behind spouse (Demurger, 2015). With depression linked to left-behind spouses, a major cause of suicide and suicidal thoughts (Wanyoike, 2014; Izadinia, Amiri, Jahromi, & Hamidi, 2010), and a major causative factor to suicide (Jeon, 2016), the negative consequences can only be disastrous. If the practice of left-behind spouses remains unchecked, especially with the left-behind spouses of international migrants, the notion of single parenting continues to rise with unguided behaviors from the children and the overall wellbeing of the family (Wajim & Shimfe, 2020).

It is equally essential to acknowledge that not all spousal split-ups lead to dysfunctionalities within the marriage or unintended flip-side consequences within diasporic systems. Despite the dysfunctional tenets spouses' international migration presents (Dominick, Sharada, Wasti, Naramaya, Nokafu, & Christina, 2019; Wein & Kashuba, 2012), chances are the process is still at play, highly favored, continuously practiced, subscribed to, and aptly engaged as an alternative route towards a better standard of living. In like manner, besides the highlighted functionalities expressed above, the constructive role of shared resources and information exchange within



social networks in influencing individual lives (Dicolen & Bacongus, 2020) affirms the positive connotations and status that come with having one's spouse abroad.

Hence, this article stands unique as it investigates not only the processes and consequences of being a left-behind spouse but also within a hybridized setting (traditionality and modernity) in order to comprehensively identify, analyze, and explain the domains of experiences of the left-behind spouses. In addition, besides the limited amount of literature in this regard, existing studies have not sufficiently captured the experiences of both genders of the left-behind spouses. Hence, this article stands unique as it captured the experiences of both genders to provide balanced gender data on the problem as well as gaining insight into the issues being empirically investigated. The ultimate research questions of this article are: What are the processes (HOW) of migration that led to spouses being left-behind? What is the purpose of migrants' migration? What are the reasons and willingness (WHY) to be left behind? How was the decision-making process? Were the family aware and in support of the migration of the significant other?

### **Contextualities of Left-behind spouses in Nigeria**

The pursuit of actualizing dreams, living moderate lives, and crafting a future that breaks free from the patterns of parents' unfavorable past is a serious concern in Nigeria. Beyond the bedeviling effect of poverty, a major push factor of Nigeria's International migration (Akanle and Adesina, 2017), majority of Nigerians are unsatisfied with the level of development it has attained post-independence; ironically, it is a richly endowed human resource country. Hence, spouses and how they end up being left behind is not a sudden sequence of events or rash decisions. It is a reality for a number of reasons, including ongoing, conscious and unconscious interactions between the prospective emigrant, the spouse to stay behind, and the society they find themselves in. Findlay et al., (2017), in their study about individuals' experiences with migration, revealed a lot about why and how they decide to move to a new country. Unfortunately, the process has become complex considering the exchange rate of Naira to the dollar in 2024 and the ever-growing number of travel agents involved in the travels and tours business. This complexity has been aided by various factors and considerations that influence these decisions, making each migration experience unique and intricate.

The history of the migration, processes involved, stages that led to the migration, and events that shape the final decision of the emigrant to migrate across international borders are usually phenomenal (Nguyen, Yeoh, & Toyota, 2006), largely influenced by migration networks and usually due to socio-economic reasons relative to each couple. To a very large extent, economic factors have been significantly established as a major driver of international migration (Rufai, (Ogunniyi, Salman, Oyeyemi & Salawu 2019; Tanya & Cecilia, 2012) and create the propensity for spouses to be left behind due to the cost of migration. In order to save costs, they often embark on these journeys alone while the significant other remains behind in search of better job opportunities abroad, better livelihoods, and seldom for family unification (Mistura, Adebayo, Kabir, Motunrayo, & Mutiat 2020), which often lead to the abandonment of the left-behind spouse where migration was not consensual. Other reasons that predispose the migrants to leave their spouses behind include poverty (Mahendra, 2014), work opportunities peculiar with destination countries, which are favorable compared to host countries (International Labour Organization, 2014; Czaika, 2012), and better state foreign policy, which attracts immigrants to develop their economies and human capital deficits.

Studies have also provided strong evidence highlighting the significance of social and kinship networks involving family, friends, and acquaintances as major vehicles aiding the process of international migration (Lei & Desai 2021; Akanle & Orobome 2019) and spouses remaining behind in origin countries. The strong presence of social networks in destination countries has

promoted international migration and allowed more confidence for spouses to accept being left behind. These networks aid the smooth settlement and socialization, supporting and creating a sense of attachment to the destination country (Boyd & Nowak, 2012). The effect of these kinship networks is huge and often a direct indicator of the success or failure of international migration, as they are often the first contact of migrants when they cross international borders. Hence, the relationships and connections individuals have with their social circles impact how they make decisions about moving to a new place. These networks serve as intermediaries, shaping the larger environment, including political and economic factors that contribute to the choices people make regarding migration (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019).

Post-independence migration pattern in Nigeria has taken the form of emigration (Ikuteyijo, 2020), and women are left behind intentionally and circumstantially in many countries (Diagne, 2013; Mascarenhas-keyes, 1990). Africans for ages have migrated for work (Akanle, 2012) and sharply becoming a sustainable African culture and practice, leading to their spouses remaining behind. This factor alone stimulates international migration for family and work purposes (Schoumaker, 2015, Bakewell & Jonsson, 2011) with implications for the family and significantly the left-behind spouses. As such, globalization with its capitalist synchronizing ideology floods developed countries as destinations with greener pastures devoid of indigenous social problems, which seemingly propels actors to the voyage, often unequipped and unprepared for the realities in sight. Yet, studies have documented various dysfunctions and family challenges to globalization (Wilfrid, 2007; Balogun & Olutayo, 2005-2006; Olutayo & Omobowale, 2006; Giddens, 2000) which often affect the spouses left behind and the children who are usually unprepared to assume the realities and responsibilities that come with it.

This globalization ideology is gradually reorienting family members towards foreign values and norms, often detrimental to traditional belief systems with implications for family roles and expectations (Akanle, 2012). More worrisomely are the negative consequences seen with people within the rural-urban domain promoting unsustainable family cultural practices. This is exemplified with the plethora of adolescents and youths, especially within developing states like Nigeria, with the notion of prosperity without hard work, various establishments of lotteries and gambling centers, and uninformed trading activities, with implications for family, socialization, and their upbringing. This was more espoused in Akanle, Adesina, & Ogbimi, (2016), where socialization roles exclusively expected of both spouses are taken up by the left-behind spouse and more problematic in patriarchal societies with emigrant husbands (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003). Within international migration and left-behind spouses practices, the child/children socialization responsibilities are now handled by the left-behind when spouses migrate for work-related reasons (Hettige, 1990). Studies have also revealed dysfunctional consequences of these sharp practices with high divorce and family stress rates, fertility decline/fluctuations, and general atypical family situations with spouses working far away from home (Sardon, 2000; Davidson & Moore, 1996; Roussel, 1989).

Overall, the phenomenon of international migration has significant implications for the lives of those who are left behind, particularly the spouses of migrant workers. Beyond the positive effects of remittances, which largely drive migrants with profound effects on the lives of those remaining behind, the separation of families can lead to emotional and psychological challenges for the left-behind spouses, as well as practical challenges in managing the household and caring for children (Yu, Linxiu, Chengfang, Yaojiang, Di, & Scott, 2017; Lam & Yeoh, 2016). The impact of parental absence on children's well-being has been a subject of much research within diasporic systems. In Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and the Philippines, where there is a high rate of female labor migration, the absence of mothers has been particularly disruptive for children (Lam & Yeoh, et. al. 2016). Likewise, studies have documented mixed results regarding the effects of



parental migration on children's developmental outcomes. While some research indicates that parental migration can lead to declines in children's educational performance and cognitive development, other studies have found more modest or insignificant impacts (Yu, et al., 2017)

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study that informed this article was conducted in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The choice of the study area was informed by the high number of left-behind spouses within the metropolis. Although studies have been conducted in Ibadan, there have not been studies on International migration and left-behind spouses in particular, and it was germane to capture this gap for a comprehensive and complete view of the issues being investigated. In addition, Ibadan is a traditional but yet a modernizing city with peculiarities to both divides. The traditional nature of the city is significant as it allowed us to capture the traditional context of being left-behind as well as the roles of the kinship and social networks interconnected and interwoven with the left-behind spouses. The kinship network and social network that will impact the support systems and decision-making processes and even the experiences and coping mechanisms of the left-behind spouses were better seen within the context of traditionality and modernity in order to have a robust view of the problematic. Hence, Ibadan being a very traditional but yet modernizing city afforded us a clear insight into the interplay of traditionality and modernity in support systems of left-behind spouses. It also created the opportunity to narrate the totality of domains of experiences of the left-behind spouses for deeper and comprehensive insights. Ibadan is the state capital of Oyo and the third-most populous city in Nigeria, after Lagos and Kano, and the country's largest city by geographical area (World Population Review, 2021). The metropolis is located in southwestern Nigeria, located approximately on longitude 305/ East, 7o2/ North of the equator, and 145 East of Lagos (Wahab & Popoola, 2018), a popular urban center in Africa (Akanle, Adebayo, and Busari, 2014) with a growing population of 5,580, 894 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

The research design adopted was an exploratory research design. It was designed to explore the bearings of international migration and the left-behind spouses. Essentially, the study was designed to capture the views of the spouses who have been left-behind due to the international migration of their significant other. The researcher employed a qualitative sequential approach within the study location to obtain data in line with the objectives of the study. This design is appropriate given that issues with the left-behind spouses of international migration are underexplored. The nature of these issues is often culturally subjective, relative to the norms as applied within each culture. In some cases, these challenges are often muted due to the subjective nature of the problem and the African traditional belief that every couple has a cross to bear in a union. Hence, an exploratory study design was apt to unravel current realities and trajectories to understand the emerging family culture and pattern with a view to contributing to the knowledge of international migration and diasporic systems. This is particularly important as the celebratory narratives have muted and dwarfed other flip sides (Akanle & Adesina, 2017). In addition, migration research in Nigeria has given very little attention to left-behind spouses (Ikuomola, 2015). Hence the exploratory design allowed for an explanation of the issues with left-behind spouses of international migrants to gain meaningful insights into the discourse.

Left-behind spouses, their migrated spouses, and kin/social network of the left-behind spouse informed the basic units of research. This allowed us to narrate in totality the experience of the left-behind spouses. The sample size for the empirical research was thirty-five (35) left-behind spouses, twenty-five (25) kin/social networks of the left-behind spouses, and eleven (11) spouses of the left-behind selected across different socio-economic strata within the five (5) urban local government areas in the metropolis. The urban local government areas included Ibadan North, Ibadan North West, Ibadan South West, Ibadan South East, and Ibadan Northeast (National



Population Commission, 2010). The purposive selection of these participants within the urban local government areas stems from the objective consideration of the subject of inquiry, *vis-à-vis* being the densely populated urbanized areas within the metropolis where persons with migrants abroad are located (Akanle & Orobome, 2019). Spouses in the diaspora were interviewed through WhatsApp voice calls.

Non-probabilistic sampling (purposive and snowball) techniques were employed through a multi-stage sampling procedure. Snowballing sampling technique was employed to elicit information from the thirty (35) left-behind spouses, twenty-five (25) kin/social networks of the left-behind spouses, and eleven (11) spouses of the left-behind spouse. The multi-stage sampling procedure included the Purposive selection of Ibadan due to the reasons stated above, the purposive selection of the five (5) urban local government areas in the metropolis, while the Snowballing sampling method was utilized at this stage to identify the participants for the empirical research. This method was best suited as the participants are widely scattered within the study location. The sampling method was used to select participants for the IDI, KII, and Case study.

The study followed strict global ethical standards of research to protect the rights and integrity of the participants and was guided by these ethical considerations: informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, beneficence and non-maleficence, Justice, Individual respect, and Referencing. This was done through appropriate management of informed consent of participants and their willingness to participate. All participants were equally and adequately protected during the empirical research. This includes the adequate provision of information about the purpose of the study, its procedures, objectives, risks, and willingness to withdraw from the study at any time. The respondents' rights and privacy were protected, as well as the data provided. None of the data collected was treated lackadaisically. Risks or bodily harm arising from the study was considered during the empirical exercise. The conduct of the study was carried out bearing in mind to reduce risks towards the researcher and the participants. The principle of equal treatment and human dignity was fully observed during the entire empirical research, and all participants participated voluntarily while their rights were respected. Authors whose works were used and those who contributed directly to the study were fully acknowledged.

## **DATA PRESENTATION AND FINDINGS**

Participants' mean age is 38 years. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of the left-behind spouses were female, (87.0%) were below 50 years of age, and 63.0% were self-employed, while others were civil servants, skilled traders, and students. For marital status, majority of the participants (91.8%) were married, and (6.6%) were abandoned. This implies that they have been left behind by their spouses without formal dissolution of the marriage. The other group (1.6%) were divorced, indicating that they have experienced the formal dissolution of their marriages as a result of the migration. The Yoruba ethnicity group, comprising 84% of the participants, featured prominently in the study, reflecting the nature of the research setting. This shows a strong representation of the Yoruba ethnicity within Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, where the research was carried out. Other ethnic groups included Benin, Igbo, Ijaw, and Urhobo, each making up 3% of the participants, respectively, while Ikwerre and Ogu account for 2% with one participant each.

The majority of participants have been married for less than a decade, with (56.1%) falling within the 1-10 year range. However, 14.6% reported having marriages that lasted less than a year due to abandonment and divorce, while 9.8% have unions spanning 21–30 years. The United Kingdom, with 46%, emerged as a prominent destination for migrating spouses; North America followed closely at 34%, while Europe attracted 9% of migrants. This transcontinental distribution highlights the prevalence of migration of spouses to Western countries. Other continents included Africa and Asia, each accounting for (3%), and the Middle East, with (6%). The predominant



accommodation type of the left-behind spouses is living alone (43.9%). 24.4% resides alone with their children, showcasing a significant number of single-parent households. (12.2%) live alone with kin; (4.9%) live in their mother's house with their children, emphasizing the role of extended family in providing a living environment; and (2.4%) each live with friends and in-laws, illustrating the importance of family and social networks in the absence of a spouse. In addition, 9.8% of the left-behind spouses live with neighbors, showcasing a community-oriented living arrangement, highly driven by their mutual support for the left-behind spouses.

The intricacies of how spouses become left-behind were explored. The historical context and conditions that have shaped the migration of spouses and resulted in spouses being left behind were investigated, shedding light on the processes and purposes of the international migration. The willingness of the left-behind spouse to accept or reject this role and the factors that influenced their decision were equally investigated. Central to this exploration is the question of whose decision it was for the left-behind spouse to take on this role, and what dynamics and considerations played a pivotal role in this crucial determination? Understanding these experiences is essential for a comprehensive grasp of the phenomenon of international migration and left-behind spouses and its impacts on individuals and communities.

### Process of Migration

The responses as regards the process of migration varied amongst the Left-behind Spouses in terms of triggers and circumstances. For some, the migration plan was longstanding, dating back to the early years of marriage and for some, a relocation plan before marriage. Some participants, dissatisfied with the state of affairs in Nigeria, particularly the educational system and employment opportunities, believed it would be better to raise their children in a saner society abroad. With some initiating the relocation plan when their wife became pregnant. Some of the Left-behind Spouses had this to say:

Uh, when I got married, it got to a point that I really do not somehow like the way things are going, uh, in the country. Uh, I did put the educational system here and otherwise so and I wasn't looking forward to, uh, bringing up my kids around here. Uh, because of the way things are going, both in terms of employment opportunities, educational system and all this, I thought it would be better to send them out. So, uh, that was basically, uh, why I, I felt, it is better to send them out. To a saner society or something [SIC] **(IDI/Male/55/LBS/Igbo/Businessman/Married/2023)**.

Actually, there is no particular trigger or anything whatsoever, it has always been an agenda to relocate from the country, post marriage. Because it has always been a plan to have my children raised abroad. So that was actually what necessitated the relocation plan. And everything came to light when my wife got pregnant and we were expecting delivery, so we felt it was high time. we implemented the whole plan. So that's it **(IDI/Male/35/LBS/Yoruba/IT Professional/Married/2023)**.

Other participants offered the historical migration attempts and insights. One Left-behind Spouse noted his spouse's visit to London in 2012, a short stay in the U.S. in 2013, and eventually securing a two-year visa for the United States. Another participant, after a 10-year delay, intended to migrate with their spouse and children, but only the spouse was granted a visa.

We wanted to go together but when he got the visa, he had to go. It's because he is the only one that is been given visa to the UK so I have



to stay back with the children. Initially when we got married, we had delay for good 10years. During the process of delay, we were both trying to go there, so after the last child, we said let's process it, let's go together with the children but he is the only one that was granted VISA. **(IDI/Female/53/LBS/Yoruba/Teacher/Married/2023)**

One of the left-behind spouses affirmed: *He has travelled before to London in 2012, then he travelled again back in 2013 for just 2-3 months, he came back then he now went to US embassy and they granted him 2years VISA. That's when he now travel to US* **(IDI/Female/54/LBS/Yoruba/Business Woman/Married/2023)**. When quizzed, the kin of the Left-behind Spouse had this to say:

Actually, the history started way before I was born. Like my dad has always had the ambition of travelling out, leaving the country to seek for greener pastures. So it was around until they got married and gave back to me, my siblings. Even when all that was going, he was still trying, but it didn't work, but around 2011, he worked and travelled to UK. He has a junior brother that lives in UK. So he sent the invitation and then, he went the embassy and they gave him VISA for 2 years [SIC] **(KII/Female/27/KIN(Daughter)/Yoruba/Graduate and Fashion Designer/2023)**.

Interestingly, one participant's migration journey began in 2020 when a friend suggested considering migration due to the perceived lack of prospects in Nigeria. The participant explored the process, starting with the admission and embassy phases. Despite facing initial denials and a suggestion to reconsider, the participant persisted, eventually succeeding in the appeal process and embarking on the migration journey. The participant put it this way:

It all started in 2020, when I sold a car to my friend, that was the time he told me to contact a friend that I should think of migrating. So it was my friends that influenced me to migrate, because they were saying since I know Nigeria is not working, nothing is in Nigeria for me, I should consider migrating. So I went through the admission process, the admission came, I got the Form A, rented an apartment here in a hostel here. At the end It was successful and I started my journey **(IDI/Male/34/SLBS/Yoruba/Data Management Support Analyst /Married/2023)**.

These diverse range of experiences showcased multifaceted reasons, resilient spouses, and routes spouses take when deciding to migrate irrespective of the newness of marriage and associated challenges of the migration.

### **Purpose of Migrants' Migration**

The reasons behind a spouse's decision to migrate vary considerably among the Left-behind Spouses, offering a glimpse into the diversity of motivations and circumstances that underpin international migration. Economic opportunities were one of the purposes of migration, with many Left-behind Spouses mentioning that their spouses migrated abroad to enhance their family's standard of living, provide their children with access to quality education and secure a more prosperous future. One of the Left-behind Spouses noted how economic opportunities prompted the decision to migrate: *He travelled for the good of the family, for us to improve our way of living and to be able to finance our children's education and to live fine sha. To go and work and make more money for the family* **(IDI/Female/54/LBS/Yoruba/Business Woman/Married/2023)**. Another Left-behind Spouse affirmed:



He migrated for greener pastures so as to be able to give his children a good life and quality life, not the kind of life we live in Nigeria and be able to create a chance for them to have an avenue to have a better life **(IDI/Female/30/LBS/Yoruba/Civil Servant/ Married/2023)**.

The responses highlight the significant role that family considerations play in the decision-making process. This economic perspective is driven by the belief that opportunities abroad can yield higher income, better job prospects, and a more comfortable lifestyle. Education and career advancement abroad, also played a pivotal role in the decision to migrate. For many, the prospect of their spouses furthering their studies, such as enrolling in master's and Ph.D. programs, was a driving force. Additionally, Scholarships and educational opportunities have influenced migration decisions, as individuals pursue higher studies or career development. As shown below, the responses of participants showed a strong commitment to personal and academic growth, reflecting the value placed on education as a means of self-improvement. One of them said: *She was going there for her masters, so after she finished, she got a job over there. She finished her masters 2 years ago* **(IDI/Male/43/LBS/Yoruba/Car Dealer/Married/2023)**. Another left-behind spouse noted: *Yeah, I think. Second or third year. Then he got a scholarship to China. Uh, one university in China like that. So of course, it's a PhD scholarship* **(IDI/Female/33/LBS/Yoruba/Sale & Marketing/Divorced/2023)**. In a particular instance, the decision to migrate is closely tied to religious and ministerial goals, reflecting the desire for the furtherance of God's kingdom. The participant said: *His Migration is based on ministerial advancement, furtherance of God's kingdom. His going was based on request and nomination* **(IDI/Female/35/LBS/Yoruba/Civil Servant/Married/2023)**.

Responses from left-behind suggests that political and economic instability in Nigeria has prompted the belief that conditions abroad are more favorable for family well-being and hence decide to stay behind while their significant other migrate to prepare for their own international migration. A participant pointed to specific events in Nigeria, such as #EndSars 2020 influencing his decision to migrate his family abroad for better livelihood. The participant had this to say:

It was dated back to 2020, of course I believe you knew what happened here in Nigeria. During the EndSars protest. So I was just like okay, no! This is not the working place. Because till date nobody is been prosecuted, nobody is being held responsible for the event that happened. So, it is the event of the country, the way the country is turning into that I would say cemented my mind-set as regards our moving. Because we both wanted to move at the same time **(IDI/Male/30/LBS/Yoruba/Communication Engineer/Married /2023)**.

Another said:

What really happened is that things are not working in Nigeria. So when God now gave him this opportunity, we now sat that together, we discuss about it. God has made it to come to pass. That is how it started, the journey. Because things are not working in Nigeria and we have more responsibility, we have many responsibilities **(IDI/Female/45/LBS/Edo/Hairdressing/Married/2023)**.

The responses reveal that there is a perception amongst Left-behind Spouses that the political situation in Nigeria does not offer the stability and security they seek for their families. Consequently, the Left-behind Spouse desire to protect their loved ones from its potential consequences. The political and economic instability in Nigeria is a compelling driver for the Left-behind Spouse to



remain while the significant other migrates to feed the family back at home. The quest for greener pastures, quality of education and improved job opportunities abroad reflects the aspiration for a better quality of life. The global trend of migration, influenced by societal factors and the perception of a better life outside Nigeria, is evident in these accounts.

### **Willingness and Reasons to be Left-behind**

Many spouses express their initial reluctance to be left-behind, acknowledging the emotional challenges associated with long-distance relationships. These challenges include the strain of separation and the longing for family unity, which can be emotionally demanding. However, practical considerations often came to the forefront, leading to their eventual acceptance of the situation.

Economic factors, particularly financial constraints, emerge as a prominent theme influencing the willingness of spouses to be left-behind. The high cost of migration, which encompasses visa fees, travel expenses, and initial settlement in a new country, poses a significant hurdle for many couples. Left-behind Spouses recognised these financial challenges and opted to stay in Nigeria while their spouse established a foothold abroad, with the intention of re-joining them when resources permit. This is evident as one of the participants put it this way:

Ehnn we would have travelled together but because of money, because if all of us want to go then the money will be too much. So we now decided that he should go first, then after he has acquired his green papers we 'll be able to go and join him over there [SIC]  
**(IDI/Female/54/LBS/Yoruba/Business Woman/Married/2023)**

This corroborates with another participant who said:

Well, I was not really willing because it was, it was an experience I wanted us to experience together, like together as a family. It was a little bit tough but, uh, we just, we just had to do it for the finances, of course, because the flight was really expensive. Hers alone was about 1.2 million, so we could not all move together like that. It was going to be way beyond budget. So it was tough, but it was something necessary that we just had to do  
**(IDI/Male/34/LBS/Yoruba/Research-assistant/Married/2023).**

Understanding the economic considerations within this context is crucial for comprehending the practical challenges and trade-offs involved in international migration among Left-behind Spouses. The well-being and education of their children is another paramount consideration. Participants mentioned their unwillingness to leave their children behind, leading to a choice to stay until circumstances allowed for a family reunion. They believe that staying in Nigeria is essential to provide the necessary support for their children's schooling, as the absence of both parents could hinder their educational journey. This underscored the strong commitment to the well-being and upbringing of their children. One of the Left-behind Spouses had this to say:

Yes, yes, I'm willing, that's the agreement, in fact he wants me to come and stay, I said no, we can't leave our children behind. For both of us to be there, so we have to go with them. And since that one is not yet possible, so I have to stay **(IDI/Female/52/LBS/Yoruba/Civil Servant/Married/2023).**

Another participant gave an exclamation: *Ha! I love my kids. I can't leave my kids alone* **(IDI/Female/53/LBS/Yoruba/Teacher/Married/2023).** In addition, employment and job stability also influenced the decision to be left-behind. Spouses with secure jobs in Nigeria find it challenging to



transition to another country, leading them to stay behind to ensure job security and financial stability. In certain cases, career and business considerations factored into the decision. Some of the Left-behind Spouses expressed the importance of maintaining career or business activities in Nigeria, which influenced their choice to remain behind. More so, the financial aspect and the sponsorship of the migrating spouse also played a role. In some instances, the ability to support the family from Nigeria was a key consideration, making the choice to remain behind a practical one. As evident in the response below, one the participant noted:

It doesn't make sense for me to just leave and go and join her in South Africa and then be staying idle or something like that. I have something doing in Nigeria, so I have a home tie. So, and somehow I was also the sponsor. So, I needed to be doing business in Nigeria to be able to sustain them there **(IDI/Male/55/LBS/Igbo/Business Man/Married/2023)**.

Moreover, several participants mentioned the fear of the unknown as an influencing factor. This fear encompassed concerns about adapting to a new culture and language, navigating the cost of living in a foreign country, and the challenges associated with the migration process. This fear led some to opt for a more cautious approach and stay behind. in Nigeria where they are more familiar with their surroundings. One participant said:

So, basically, you know, going to a new country is like a major change. You have to think of so many things before you go. I know I'm getting myself income, it may not be that much. So the fear of the unknown, if I go to the UK with him, we're starting all over again, how do I cope, how do I look for job. You know the stress mentality of getting job in Nigeria and when you finally get a job, you'll be scared of leaving it because you don't know how you're going to survive **(IDI/Female/30/LBS/Yoruba/Civil Servant/Married/2023)**.

Another participant said: *My work, so to say, and also he just moved to a new place, so let him understand the ground before he thinks of bringing the family along. So that was what necessitated the decision of me staying behind for now* **(IDI/Female/29/LBS/Yoruba/Civil Servant/Married/2023)**. In a particular instance, the participant acknowledged that the host country's culture and environment would not be conducive for them, particularly if they were not from a similar cultural or religious background. She said:

Because Saudi Arabia is actually a Muslim community and I'm a Christian. They are not too flexible for foreigners, especially for new foreigners. Except, I go there, I have my own job as like a contract. It's not a place you can go and start saying you want to look for jobs **(IDI/Female/34/LBS/Yoruba/Public Servant/Married/2023)**.

### **Decision to be Left-behind**

The study revealed that the decision for Left-behind Spouses to remain behind is jointly taken amongst couples of international migration in Ibadan. It was a common trend from responses as both spouses were actively involved in the decision-making process. This reflects a shared sense of responsibility and agreement within the relationship. *It was a joint decision, it's marriage, so no single entity makes a decision in marriage. It was a joint decision, even though it has always been in my plan as from the days of me being single* **(IDI/Male/35/LBS/Yoruba/ IT Professional/Married/2023)**. A left-behind also affirmed:

It was a joint decision, we already knew what it would be, what we'll be getting into. You know, for the most part of our relationship, I've



actually been distant. I've known her for five years and the longest she has only been in Nigeria is 9 months and that was in beginning of the relationship while we we're dating. So, we knew that it wouldn't be me, bringing her back here **(IDI/Male/29/LBS/Ikwerre/Business Man/Married/2023)**.

Although, some participants noted they made the decision to stay behind, while the other spouse respected and supported this choice. These individual decisions were often made based on career opportunities, visa approvals, and other personal circumstances. *No it's my decision, she didn't even want to go. I said no, this is an opportunity you have to take it. So, yeah, it's my decision* **(IDI/Male/30/LBS/Yoruba/Communication Engineer/Married/2023)**. Only one of the participant noted that the decision was from the spouse who had migrated. In this particular instance, the response of the left-behind signified no awareness or involvement in the decision-making process: *No, no, no, no, no, no. I wasn't carried along. Uh, probably, she knew the game she wanted to play from the on go, from the onset* **(IDI/Male/47/LBS/Yoruba/Teacher/Divorced/2023)**.

### **Family Awareness of the Migration**

To conclude this subtheme of investigating how spouses become left-behind, it is necessary to note their families' awareness and support of the migration. For some Left-behind Spouses who made joint decisions, informed their families of their plans and received their support. In these cases, family awareness was high, and the families often offered prayers and encouragement, motivated by concerns for their loved ones' well-being and the prospect of a better future in the host country. *Yeah. Obviously, everybody was carried along. Yeah. They've been very supportive. They little they can. Yeah, very, very. Very, very supportive* **(IDI/Male/55/LBS/Igbo/Business Man/Married/2023)**.

Yes, everyone was aware of the, they were all informed, we carried along. Of course, our immediate family, her parents, my parents, everyone knew and they knew how it was going and why she had to go first and all that **(IDI/Male/34/LBS/Yoruba/Research assistant/Married/2023)**.

In contrast, some participants noted that they opted to delay notifying their families about the migration, often waiting until after the spouse had already departed. Reasons for this varied, but the delayed communication allowed the couple to manage their family's expectations and gain some independence in their decision-making. To buttress this point, one participant said this:

Definitely yeah. they were aware, not given them every detail at every point in time but yes they knew something was in the works and then when it clicked yeah they got informed so yes they were aware yes that's just straight answer. Of course they were in agreement [SIC] **(IDI/Female/32/LBS/Yoruba/Private Administrator/Married/2023)**.

Evidently, the response from the participant corroborates with what her kin had to say:

Honestly, they actually didn't tell anybody but it was just that she was making some moves and I just suspected like the moves were kinda, I was now like, okay is your husband traveling? And she was like, no, no. So I think eventually when he got proper confirmation and all and she was like, yeah he said he didn't want to tell anybody until he was going to be very sure about it, blah blah, blah blah, blah, that he's travel [SIC] **(KII/Female/36/KIN (Elder Sister)/Yoruba/Public Servant/**

**2023).**

Findings shows that mutual agreements between spouses, such as plans for one spouse to migrate initially while the other remains in Nigeria, are reflective of their collective decision-making and commitment to the family's well-being. The response of the Left-behind Spouses were largely in agreement with their spouse who had migrated. Evident below, are responses from a case study of a Left-behind Spouse and spouse of the Left-behind Spouse showing similar motives:

Although, the family of my husband were aware, but my own family got aware when he got there. Because of some reasons, that's why we did not call them in the first place. So when he got there we called them and told them, they even prayed with us [SIC] **(IDI/Female/45/LBS/Edo/Hair dresser/Married/2023).**

My dad is aware. But my wife said that we should not tell her parents. You understand? My dad is aware. He prays with us, but she said that we should not tell her father. But when I get to this place, that is when we will tell him **(IDI/Male/49/SLBS/Urhobo/Auto Mechanic/Married/2023).**

Some left-behind families held mixed views. Though they encouraged the migration but urged immediate reunification. To buttress this point, the responses below were from the Left-behind Spouses and spouse of the left-behind from a case study:

It's not the thing I actually announced, it was when he left that I announced it to the family that he had gone. My mum, you know, she wouldn't want to show it off, but at least if she keeps, she just prays that God will see him through. It's just as simple as that **(IDI/Female/33/LBS/Yoruba/Teacher and Business Woman/Married/2023).**

Yes, they were. But at the moment my family are still in support, while her family feels I ought to have come back to take them along. But I can't be pressured and I usually try to explain to my wife. But If she doesn't want to understand, then i don't know what to do about that [SIC] **(IDI/Male/34/SLBS/Yoruba/Data Management Support Analyst/Married/2023).**

Additionally, a thoughtful study reveals that the families of the migrating spouse have somewhat a higher influence as there were no mixed reaction as regards the migration.

## **THEORETICAL DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The experiences of left-behind spouses in the context of international migration unveil a complex tapestry of narratives, encompassing the decision-making process and why they become left-behind, the purpose of migration, willingness and reasons to be left-behind, whose decision it was for the spouse to be left-behind, and the family awareness and support of the migration. The Social Network Theory provided the theoretical framework as it explains the intricate connections that influence the experiences of these left-behind spouses. These discussions delve into each section with theoretical insights to offer a nuanced understanding of how social network theory applies within study findings and the subject of inquiry amongst the context of international migration.

### **How the spouses become Left-Behind**



The various ways leading spouses to find themselves left behind are a tapestry woven with a myriad of triggers and circumstances. What is new within study findings shows that the prospects for international migration have graduated beyond family considerations of the popular search for greener pastures and a 'better standard of living', to sociopolitical considerations within Nigeria. Delving into their journeys and accounts uncovered a spectrum of influences, ranging from personally-driven long-term plans for relocation even before marriage, which is a new study finding, to a palpable dissatisfaction with the status quo in Nigeria. Elements such as concerns about the educational system and employment opportunities cast shadows on the decision-making process, and with significant geopolitical events like the nationwide #EndSars protest that unfolded in 2020. Ultimately, family considerations emerged as a cornerstone in these narratives, where the well-being and education of children assumed a pivotal role. The study highlighted that for many, the decision to migrate was not a whimsical one but rather a response to a complex interplay of factors influenced by tenets of traditionality and modernity. Intricacies unfolded as some spouses had a history of attempts, navigating through repeated denials and delays before eventually succeeding in their quest for relocation internationally. This suggests the level of resilience amongst spouses, their determination to curb Nigeria's economic issues at all costs, and the silent yearnings within the kin/social networks in the society for a better and affordable standard towards a comfortable living.

Equally noteworthy is the influence of social and kinship networks (Akanle, Adebayo, and Jimoh, 2018), as they played a prominent role in shaping migration decisions, thereby shedding light on the multifaceted nature inherent in such choices. The findings from this study agree seamlessly with the perspectives of Findlay et al. (2017), who emphasized that international migration narratives often unravel the intricate and multifaceted nature of the decisions individuals make when contemplating a move across borders. It becomes apparent that the spouses' journey to being left-behind is not a singular tale, nor is it one that suggests instant gratification of desired dreams and aspirations amongst the left-behind spouses, but rather a rich mosaic of interconnected experiences, aspirations, and external factors whose realities became clearly as days became weeks and weeks became months and years within the left-behind period. In addition, this study agrees with the perspectives put forth by Crawley and Hagen-Zanker in (2019), emphasizing that long-term planning, dissatisfaction with local conditions, and external events exerting influence on migration are in harmony with the existing body of literature on migration dynamics. The consideration of family well-being, as highlighted in this study, resonates clearly with literature that underscores the family's pivotal role as a key motivator for migration (Crawley and Hagen-Zanker, 2019).

While delving into the emotional landscape, a new finding within the discourse became evident when many spouses grappled initially with the reluctance to be left behind in their home country. This is primarily due to the emotional challenges associated with the international separation from their spouses. However, as the narratives unfolded, practical considerations, notably financial constraints, emerged as influential factors steering their decisions to finally accept to remain behind while their significant other migrates abroad. The high cost associated with migration, coupled with a steadfast commitment to the education and well-being of their children, played a significant role in the collective decision to temporarily stay in Nigeria, as the absence of both parents could harm the educational journey of the children. However, the temporary stay in Nigeria was only evident with spouses who were not later divorced or abandoned as a result of the migration.

Beyond the emotional and financial dimensions, other practical considerations as new with the study findings came to the fore. Job stability, career considerations, and an overarching fear of the unknown in a foreign culture especially around religious practices all contributed to the



decision-making process for the left-behind spouses. Notably, the decision to be left-behind did not emerge as a unilateral choice but rather as a joint process in the majority of cases. This reflects a shared responsibility and agreement between spouses, highlighting a collaborative effort in navigating the complexities of migration decisions.

However, in certain instances, the left-behind spouses embarked on an individual decision-making journey, a path that was not only respected but also supported by their significant others. Cases were observed as the left-behind spouse was already established with high-paying jobs and other high income-generating sources. This decision highlights a dynamic relationship amongst spouses where autonomy and personal choices are not only acknowledged but embraced. Conversely, in a few cases, the decision-making process was predominantly led by the migrating spouse, highlighting the collaborative nature inherent in such pivotal life decisions within these relationships. The communication aspect of these decisions was multifaceted. The majority of left-behind spouses opted to inform their families, seeking solace in prayers and encouragement. This shared disclosure emphasized the importance of familial support in navigating the complexities of migration, as well as the tenets of traditionality, where communal living is highly emphasized and engaged. On the flip side, there were instances where spouses chose to delay notifying their families until after the migration had taken place. This strategic delay served the purpose of managing expectations and, in a sense, gaining a degree of independence in decision-making. Furthermore, although not empirically investigated in this study, this finding asserts the observation amongst prospective spouses not publicly disclosing their migration plans more within their social and kinship networks. Although the role of social kinship and social networks cannot be overemphasized, there is an observed notion that pre-informing networks may hinder the migration process.

Conclusively, the decision-making dynamics surrounding being left behind varied, reflecting the uniqueness of each relationship. Some couples navigated this process with mutual respect and collaboration for their respective families, while others leaned more towards individual agency. The role of communication with social and kinship networks, whether immediate or delayed, emerged as a crucial aspect, shaping the overall experience for the left-behind spouses and their families. These nuances add layers to our understanding of the intricacies involved in migration-related decisions within the context of intimate relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Left-behind spouses of international migrants in Ibadan metropolis are being shaped and re-shaped with various experiences ranging from the aftermath of sociopolitical occurrences to discontent with local circumstances and realities. Their decision-making process mirrors a cooperative effort, encompassing prolonged strategies, family considerations, and occasionally individual choices, highlighting the intricacy of migration decisions. Specifically, spouses becoming left-behind was attributed to career contentment, the need to care for the children, and other family responsibilities. Others include financial constraints, visa denial, the cost of migration, and the cost of living in a foreign country. Spouses and the teeming youths are consciously beginning to engage international migration as the final route towards prosperity and comfortable living despite its challenges. It is therefore needful and imperative to acknowledge and tackle external factors, such as economic concerns, especially the deepening value of the naira, and security concerns through policy measures and community-driven initiatives towards a better nation. Overall, the experiences of left-behind spouses are dynamic, shaped by personal, cultural, and social factors. Hence, understanding and addressing the challenges require a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the intricate web of kin and social connections, resilience, and adaptability within the broader context of international migration experiences. It becomes clear



that supporting left-behind spouses necessitates not only recognizing their challenges but also fostering a community that understands and values the strength inherent in their social networks.

Furthermore, to better build the family institution, findings from this study suggest heavily on the need to recognize the migratory role of members within kinship networks and how such roles add to the overall growth of both the nuclear and extended family. Better put, intending persons for marriage should recognize that the unification of families that occurs in marriage is beyond the physical attributes of the woman or man but also the unification of both in-laws. As such, every member or actor within the family at large has a unique contributory role to play, whether within the origin country or destination country. These roles should be embraced as strengths rather than seen as hinderances or blockages to one's growth and developmental decisions, especially around issues of international migration.



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