

Internal Labour Migration and Social Integration in Nigeria's Industrial Zones: A Sociological Analysis¹

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Abstract

Internal migration has increased due to Nigeria's urban-industrial economic boom, especially from rural villages to urban industrial states such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Kano. These internal migrants, many of whom are young people from underprivileged backgrounds, frequently work in manufacturing industries with precarious working conditions without social protections. This study's main goal is to examine how internal labour migration influences Nigeria's industrial employment trends and how migrant workers' access to jobs and social status are shaped by factors such as gender, ethnicity, social class, and place of origin. A mixed-methods approach was used, including focus groups in Kano (Bompai Industrial Estate), Nnewi (Anambra State), and the Lagos-Ogun Industrial Corridor, purposively selected as key industrial hubs attracting internal labour migrants for comparative analysis of migration and social integration, alongside qualitative interviews with 40 migrant factory workers and supervisors, and quantitative summaries supporting demographic profiling and patterns of employment. Secondary data on labour policies, employment trends, and migrant flows were analysed to support this. The results show that migrant workers undergo social marginalisation based on ethnic and geographical variations and typically face exploitative labour conditions, including irregular hours, low pay, and no formal contracts. However, many employees form unofficial support networks to address these difficulties. The study concludes that an increase in labour inequality in Nigeria's industrial economy is a result of internal migration. It suggests better labour laws, inclusive social policies, and organised integration initiatives to safeguard and empower internal migrants in the industrial workforce.

Keywords: Employment inequality, Industrial zones, internal migration, Labour process theory, Social integration

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Migration interne de travail et intégration sociale dans les zones industrielles du Nigéria : une analyse sociologique

Résumé

La migration interne s'est intensifiée en raison du boom économique industriel urbain au Nigéria, notamment des zones rurales vers des centres industriels urbains tels que Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt et Kano. Ces migrants internes, dont beaucoup sont de jeunes issus de milieux défavorisés, travaillent fréquemment dans les industries manufacturières dans des conditions précaires, sans protection sociale. L'objectif principal de cette étude est d'examiner l'influence de la migration interne de travail sur les dynamiques de l'emploi industriel au Nigéria, ainsi que la manière dont l'accès à l'emploi et le statut social des travailleurs migrants sont façonnés par des facteurs tels que le genre, l'ethnicité, la classe sociale et le lieu d'origine. L'étude adopte une approche mixte combinant des méthodes qualitatives et quantitatives. Elle s'appuie sur des discussions de groupe organisées à Kano (zone industrielle de Bompai), à Nnewi (État d'Anambra) et dans le corridor industriel Lagos-Ogun, sélectionnés de manière raisonnée comme principaux pôles industriels attirant les migrants internes, afin de permettre une analyse comparative des processus de migration et d'intégration sociale. Elle intègre également des entretiens qualitatifs avec 40 ouvriers migrants et superviseurs d'usine, ainsi que des analyses quantitatives permettant d'établir des profils démographiques et d'identifier les tendances de l'emploi. Des données secondaires relatives aux politiques du travail, aux tendances de l'emploi et aux flux migratoires ont été mobilisées pour compléter l'analyse. Les résultats montrent que les travailleurs migrants font l'objet de marginalisation sociale fondée sur des différences ethniques et géographiques, et qu'ils sont généralement confrontés à des conditions de travail exploitantes, notamment des horaires irréguliers, des rémunérations faibles et l'absence de contrats formels. Toutefois, nombre d'entre eux développent des réseaux de solidarité informels pour faire face à ces difficultés. L'étude conclut que l'accroissement des inégalités du travail dans l'économie industrielle nigériane est étroitement lié à la migration interne. Elle recommande le renforcement de la législation du travail, la mise en œuvre de politiques sociales inclusives et le développement d'initiatives structurées d'intégration afin de protéger et d'autonomiser les travailleurs migrants dans le secteur industriel.

Mots-clés : Inégalités d'emploi, zones industrielles, migration interne, théorie du procès de travail, intégration sociale.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of industrial zones in major urban centres such as Lagos, Ogun, and Aba has accelerated rural–urban migration in Nigeria. Studies indicate that about 60% of internal migrants in the country reside in urban areas, reflecting the strong pull of industrial and commercial hubs that offer greater employment opportunities and infrastructure (IOM, 2014; World Bank, 2021). Many of these migrants are young people from rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas who move in search of improved livelihoods and better living conditions. However, they often find employment in industrial sectors characterised by precarious work and limited labour protections.

Although internal migration is commonly perceived as a pathway to upward mobility, it frequently exposes migrants to vulnerability and social isolation. Low wages, long working hours, lack of formal contracts, and poor occupational safety conditions remain common features of such precarious employment. They also encounter social obstacles to integration, such as marginalisation in urban government procedures, poor housing conditions, restricted access to basic services, and prejudice based on race and culture.

With a focus on how gender, ethnicity, class, and regional background influence access to employment and urban inclusion, this study examines the effects of internal labour migration on Nigeria's industrial workforce. Marxist labour process theory (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979), which frames the analysis, criticizes the capitalist labour system for encouraging exploitation, particularly in emerging nations that rely significantly on flexible, low-wage labour. This study contributes to broader conversations on internal migration, labour patterns, and social cohesion in urban Africa by focusing on three important industrial centres: Lagos (Ogun-Osun Industrial Corridor), Nnewi (Anambra State), and Kano (Bompai Industrial Estate).

Nigeria's major industrial cities continue to attract an increasing number of internal migrants, particularly young people from impoverished rural communities seeking better job prospects. However, the employment conditions awaiting them in urban industrial zones are often far from ideal. Many of these workers find themselves in insecure, low-paid, and hazardous jobs in the informal sector, without legal protections or employment benefits. In the Ogun Industrial Corridor, for example, internal migrants are regularly engaged in physically demanding roles with limited safety

training or proper equipment, earning wages that are often below the statutory minimum.

In addition to economic vulnerability, these migrants struggle with integrating into the urban social fabric. Migrants, especially those who belong to minority ethnic groups or originate from distant rural areas, face barriers such as social discrimination, poor access to housing and public services, and exclusion from community life. In industrial hubs like Bompai in Kano and Nnewi in Anambra State, such migrants often experience cultural isolation and limited opportunities for upward mobility.

Although Nigeria has existing labour regulations and urban policies intended to safeguard workers and promote inclusive development, weak implementation allows exploitation and marginalisation to persist. Furthermore, academic research on how internal migration influences industrial labour dynamics and worsens urban inequality remains limited.

This study aims to bridge that gap by exploring how internal labour migration influences patterns of employment and social integration in Nigeria's industrial centres, it critically examines the structures that perpetuate labour exploitation and social exclusion in these settings.

OBJECTIVES

The study's main goal is to examine how internal labour migration influences Nigeria's industrial employment trends and how migrant workers' access to jobs and social status are shaped by factors such as gender, ethnicity, social class, and place of origin. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the nature and conditions of employment faced by internal migrant workers in selected industrial zones in Nigeria.
2. Analyse how socio-demographic factors such as ethnicity, gender, and place of origin influence migrant workers' access to industrial employment and workplace experiences.
3. Investigate the social integration challenges faced by internal migrant workers in their host urban communities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to explore the relationship between internal labour migration and industrial employment patterns in Nigeria. By integrating focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), the study captures both the depth of lived experiences and the broader structural dynamics that influence migrant labour in industrial zones. This approach enhances the validity and comprehensiveness of the findings, especially when examining the intersection of social identity, employment conditions, and spatial mobility.

Study Areas

Three major industrial hubs were purposively selected due to their high concentration of internal migrant workers and manufacturing activities, viz:

- Bompai Industrial Estate, Kano State
- Nnewi Industrial Cluster, Anambra State
- Ogun-Lagos Industrial Corridor (Agbara, Ota, and Ikeja axis)

These sites represent diverse regional, ethnic, and industrial contexts, providing a comprehensive picture of internal labour migration patterns across Nigeria.

Sampling and Participants

The study employed a multi-stage purposive sampling strategy. First, three states with major industrial hubs, which are Kano (Bompai Industrial Estate), Nnewi (Anambra State), and the Lagos-Ogun Industrial Corridor, were purposively selected due to their high concentration of internal migrant workers. Within these locations, participants were purposively chosen based on specific inclusion criteria, including being internal migrants employed in factories and having resided in the study area for at least six months. A total of forty (40) participants were selected, comprising thirty (30) migrant workers (75% of the sample) and ten (10) supervisors, drawn from key manufacturing sectors such as plastics, textiles, automotive parts, and food processing. The sample included both male and female workers across diverse age groups and ethnic backgrounds. Data were collected through six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted across the three industrial zones, in which participants shared detailed accounts of their migration experiences, job conditions, employment instability, and challenges related to social integration.

The remaining ten (10) individuals, representing 25% of the sample, were line managers or factory supervisors. Through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), these

people offered organisational perspectives on hiring procedures, labour management, job conditions, and migrant worker integration in manufacturing environments. Their assistance was crucial in situating the workers' experiences within broader structural and institutional frameworks. A thorough investigation of the relationship between internal labour migration, precarious work, and social integration in Nigerian industrial environments was made possible by the purposeful selection of participants.

DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 10-line managers who participated. These interviews focused on employment history, working conditions, recruitment pathways, housing, social networks, experiences of discrimination, and coping strategies. Interviews were conducted in English and local pidgin languages (with translation where necessary) and audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Focus Group Discussions

Six focus group discussions (two in each location) were conducted with groups of five (5) migrant workers from different factories. FGDs enabled participants to share collective experiences, reflect on social integration, and discuss coping mechanisms within peer networks. Group discussions helped reveal patterns not always visible in individual interviews.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs were transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo software. Coding categories were developed based on the research objectives and emerging themes from the data (e.g., exploitation, marginalisation, gendered experiences, and informal networks). Quantitative summaries were used to support demographic profiling and patterns of employment characteristics.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Bingham University Institutional Review Board (Approval No: BHU/ERC/25/H002). Oral informed consent was obtained from all participants after the study aims, confidentiality assurances, and voluntary participation were explained. Pseudonyms were used, and all records were securely stored. In addition, participants emphasised the need to keep their workplace identities undisclosed due to fear of victimisation or job loss. As a result, the names of the factories have been withheld and instead labeled alphabetically (Factory A to Z) across

the three industrial zones to protect the identities of both workers and organisations involved in the study.

RESULTS

Qualitative Analysis

Precarious Working Conditions and Exploitation

A dominant theme that emerged from interviews and focus group discussions was the precarity of employment faced by internal migrants in industrial zones. Most workers described long working hours, low wages, and the absence of formal contracts as the basic challenges they faced. Many were paid on a daily or weekly basis, with no access to job security, health insurance, or pension benefits. Female workers in Kano's textile sector, for example, described earning between ₦10,000–₦18,000 per month, far below the national minimum wage.

Respondents also recounted a widespread avoidance of labour laws by employers. One male worker from factory "C" in Agbara, Ogun State, noted:

"The factory doesn't give us anything like contract. If you complain or ask questions, they will just tell you not to come tomorrow."

A line manager interviewed from factory "A" during a Key Informant Interview (KII), who admitted, further corroborated this perception:

"To be honest, many of these workers are taken on as casuals. The company prefers it that way because it reduces overhead costs and avoids union issues. We just need people who can deliver, and if they don't, they are easily replaced."

These patterns reflect Marxist Labour Process Theory's assertion that employers in capitalist systems seek to extract maximum labour at minimal cost, often by weakening workers' rights and suppressing collective bargaining.

Gendered Labour and Discrimination

Gender emerged as a powerful axis of inequality. Female workers reported experiences of sexual harassment, unequal pay, and being assigned to more physically demanding or monotonous roles without additional compensation. In one Lagos-based food-processing factory, women complained that they were routinely asked to clean equipment after hours, unpaid.

Amina, a 25-year-old from Bauchi working in Kano, recounted:

“He (the supervisor) used to touch me and say if I want to keep my job, I must not shout. I was afraid to talk.”

Women also noted that maternity-related absences often led to job loss, as factories preferred “always available” workers. This pattern confirms existing literature on gendered precarity in industrial employment settings in the Global South.

Three supervisors from Factory C, B and Factory G, during Key Informant Interviews, openly acknowledged the systemic bias faced by female workers. One of them from factory B highlighted the gendered power dynamics in the workplace, observing:

“Honestly, some of the boys in charge take advantage because they know the women won't speak up. It's a sensitive issue, but it happens more than management wants to admit.”

Another from factory C noted:

“It's not that we don't want to support female workers, but from the company's view, someone who might go on maternity leave or request time off regularly is seen as less reliable. That's just how the system works.”

In addition, a different supervisor from factory G recounted:

“When we recruit, we consider who can be present all the time. Women are often seen as having more ‘interruptions,’ so they're usually not the first choice for certain roles.”

These statements collectively reveal how ingrained institutional practices, discriminatory hiring standards, and imbalanced power relations contribute to the marginalisation of female workers. They also reflect broader structural and cultural barriers in Nigeria's industrial sector, where inadequate protection and prevailing social norms often leave women vulnerable to exploitation and exclusion.

Social Marginalisation and Ethnic Discrimination

Social integration challenges were prevalent, especially for migrants from the North-East and South-East. Many respondents described discriminatory practices in housing, limited access to public services, and language-based exclusion. In Nnewi, several Hausa workers revealed they were frequently overcharged for rent and excluded from community gatherings as well as sometimes stereotyped or labelled as bandits.

An Igbo worker in Kano stated:

“They don't trust us here. Even to rent house, they ask you; which village you come from.”

These narratives highlight how ethnic and regional identities shape the migrant experience, contributing to marginalisation in both social and economic spheres.

Informal Support Networks

Despite systemic challenges, many workers had developed coping strategies and informal support systems. These included ethnic-based housing clusters, informal savings groups (ajo or esusu), and shared childcare arrangements. These networks provided emotional, financial, and social support, enabling migrants to navigate life in urban-industrial settings.

One male respondent in Nnewi noted:

“We all from Ebonyi are in the same compound. If one person get problem, others go help. We be like family.”

This point to the resilience of migrant communities and the role of kinship and social capital in mitigating the harshness of industrial labour environments.

Quantitative Summaries

The quantitative component of the study primarily provided demographic profiling and revealed employment patterns across the three locations. Below is a presentation of the key findings:

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Participants (N = 40)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	24	60%
	Female	16	40%
Age Group	18–25	12	30%
	26–35	20	50%
	36 and above	8	20%
Region of Origin	North-East	10	25%
	South-East	15	37.5%
	North-West	5	12.5%
	South-South	6	15%
	North-Central	4	10%

Educational Attainment	Primary	6	15%
	Secondary	25	62.5%
	Tertiary	9	22.5%
Marital Status	Single	18	45%
	Married	22	55%

Source: Field survey (2025)

The demographic profile of the participants reveals important insights about the composition of internal migrant workers in Nigeria's industrial zones. Firstly, the workforce is predominantly male, accounting for 60%, while females make up a significant 40%, indicating active female participation despite a slight male majority. Moreover, the age distribution shows that most migrants are young adults, with 50% falling within the 26-35-year age group and 30% between 18 and 25 years, reflecting early entry into the labour market and the productive prime of the working population. Furthermore, the regional origins of the migrants are concentrated primarily in the South-East (37.5%) and North-East (25%), highlighting the influence of regional disparities and insecurity in driving migration from underdeveloped areas. In addition, educational attainment among migrants is relatively low, as 62.5% possess only secondary education, while less than a quarter have tertiary qualifications, highlighting their semi-skilled or low-skilled status and vulnerability in the labour market. Finally, the marital status data reveals that a slight majority (55%) are married, suggesting that many migrants bear family responsibilities alongside their work, which may compound their economic pressures.

Table 2

Patterns of Employment (N = 40)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Employment Type	Daily-paid (informal)	28	70%
	Contractual	8	20%
	Permanent	4	10%
Working Hours per Day	8–10 hours	10	25%
	10–12 hours	22	55%
	Above 12 hours	8	20%
Monthly Income Range	₦10,000–₦15,000	14	35%
	₦15,001–₦25,000	20	50%
	₦25,001 and above	6	15%
Access to Benefits	Yes	5	12.5%
	No	35	87.5%

Source: Field survey (2025)

The data in the table above further illustrates the precarious conditions these migrants face. Significantly, 70% of respondents are engaged in daily-paid informal work, lacking permanent contracts or job security, which confirms widespread employment instability. Correspondingly, working hours are excessively long: 55% work between 10 and 12 hours daily, and 20% exceed 12 hours, far surpassing standard labour regulations and contributing to physical exhaustion and poor work-life balance. Additionally, the reported earnings are low: half of workers earn between ₦15,001 and ₦25,000 monthly, and 35% earn less than ₦15,000, amounts that fall below a livable wage given the current economic conditions. Moreover, access to social benefits is almost nonexistent, as only 12.5% have any form of employment benefits, such as health insurance or a pension, reflecting significant regulatory shortcomings and the informal nature of most workplaces.

Consequently, the quantitative data complements the qualitative findings by highlighting a young, largely semi-educated workforce employed under insecure and exploitative conditions. Therefore, these findings align with Marxist Labour Process Theory, demonstrating how capitalist production in developing contexts commodifies labour, perpetuates insecurity, and limits workers' rights to maximise employer profits. Together, the demographic and employment patterns provide a comprehensive picture of the vulnerabilities faced by internal migrants in Nigeria's industrial labour market.

DISCUSSION

The study provides important insights into the lived experiences of internal migrant workers in Nigeria's industrial zones, directly addressing the research objectives. Demographic analysis revealed that most internal migrants are young adults aged 18–35, possess secondary-level education, and often originate from economically disadvantaged areas, particularly in the North-East and South-East (Olanrewaju et al., 2021). These patterns align with Objective 1, which aimed to analyse the characteristics of internal migrant workers, and underscore that geographical disparities and economic deprivation are key drivers of internal migration, supporting prior studies on socio-economic inequalities in Nigeria (Abdulquadri et al., 2017). KII responses validated these findings, highlighting that local authorities and industry supervisors recognise the persistent rural-urban disparities that push young people into industrial employment.

The study further shows that 70% of migrants work in informal, daily-paid positions with limited contracts, social protection, or job security, often enduring long hours and

inadequate wages. Female migrants were especially vulnerable, facing sexual harassment, wage inequities, and disproportionate workloads (Ogunlela, 2018; Oduwole & Olutayo, 2019; Oyelade, 2018, 2020). These observations align with Objective 2, which examined employment circumstances and socio-demographic factors influencing access to work. KII insights reinforced these patterns, with supervisors noting structural labour practices that maintain low-cost, flexible labour, particularly affecting young women. This supports Standing's (2011) "precariat" concept, illustrating how internal migration can perpetuate exploitative labor dynamics for marginalised groups.

Social integration challenges also emerged prominently. Migrants, particularly from Hausa and Igbo backgrounds, experienced discrimination in housing, access to public services, and participation in community activities (Uche & Nwachukwu, 2020a, 2020b). Objective 3, which examined barriers to social integration, is addressed by these findings, which show how ethnic and regional identities exacerbate vulnerability. KIIs highlighted the role of informal support networks, such as kinship-based housing clusters and community savings programs, which act as critical resilience mechanisms. These observations indicate that migrants actively negotiate marginalisation through social capital (Afolayan, 2011).

Institutional and policy gaps were another major theme. Weak enforcement of labour laws and resistance to unionisation perpetuated hazardous work conditions (Iwayemi & Fadayomi, 2020). These findings relate to Objective 4, demonstrating that regulatory failures amplify exploitation and constrain the prospects for secure and inclusive workplaces. KII perspectives from labor officers confirmed that policy enforcement is inconsistent and that systemic neglect reinforces informal, precarious employment arrangements.

Finally, the findings illustrate that internal labour mobility in Nigeria influences both employment trends and social integration, while capitalist labour structures, intersecting with socio-cultural and ethnic hierarchies, intensify vulnerabilities. Despite these challenges, migrants demonstrate resilience through informal networks, family ties, and community support. The study reinforces policy recommendations for stronger enforcement of labor laws, inclusive urban planning, and community-based programs to protect the rights and dignity of internal migrant workers.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that internal labour migration in Nigeria reinforces labour exploitation and social exclusion, yet migrant workers persist through informal networks in the absence of institutional protection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Strengthen Institutional Capacity for Labor Regulation:**

The government should prioritise funding and capacity-building for labour inspection and regulatory agencies, ensuring they have the human, technical, and logistical resources to enforce compliance with minimum wage laws, occupational safety standards, and contractual obligations. This includes regular factory audits, real-time reporting mechanisms, and digital monitoring systems to track violations. Policies should also mandate transparency in wage payments and enforce penalties for non-compliance. Such interventions would reduce precarious employment, protect vulnerable migrant workers, and promote equitable labor practices across industrial zones.

2. **Integrate Inclusive Urban Development and Social Equity Measures:**

Urban planning and development strategies should embed inclusive housing policies, affordable rental schemes, and anti-discrimination measures to improve the social integration of internal migrants. Municipal authorities could implement community-led zoning regulations that ensure access to safe, affordable housing near industrial areas, paired with awareness campaigns that foster intercultural understanding and reduce ethnic or regional discrimination. Through linking housing, transport, and public service provision, policymakers can address structural barriers that exacerbate social isolation and marginalisation of migrant workers.

3. **Mobilise NGOs, Labor Unions, and Community Networks for Migrant Empowerment:**

Civil society organisations, labour unions, and NGOs should facilitate structured migrant support programs that combine legal aid, workplace education, and financial literacy training. Initiatives could include workshops on labour rights, negotiation skills, reporting mechanisms for harassment or exploitation, and community savings schemes to build economic resilience. Also, collaborative platforms between unions, employers, and migrant associations would enable advocacy for policy reforms,

giving migrants a voice in decision-making processes that affect their welfare and employment conditions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no financial or personal ties that could have affected the work described in this study. Therefore, the author declares no conflict of interest.

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