

## Media Narratives on Cross-Border Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Exposition

Nelson Okorie\* and Ngozi Okpara

*School of Media and Communication, Pan- Atlantic University, Lagos, Nigeria*

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**ABSTRACT** This study explored the media reports on cross-border migration issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. The agenda-building and development media theories served as theoretical anchors to describe how the media report issues on cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. A mixed method (content analysis and systematic review method) was used to achieve the objectives of the study. The findings of the study identified five predominant issues reported by the media on cross-border migration during the pandemic. These issues were increased cases of forced displacement, increased cases of infection among migrants at borders, rising cases of food insecurity, poor border control management and victimisation of women and child migrants. The study recommends that the media can be used as a platform to enlighten and mobilise individuals to support social interventions to mitigate cross-border migration issues during threatening social realities such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, COVID-19 is regarded as a deadly virus, which has negatively affected sustainable health development. Scholars agree that COVID-19 is a life-threatening disease that has negative and multiple impacts on global economies (Arinze-Umobi and Chiweta-Oduah 2020; Cong and Yi 2020; Islam et al. 2021). Okorie (2021) reasoned that COVID-19 is a pertinent health issue that has disrupted economic and political systems in developing and developed countries. Hence, COVID-19 is a major health threat to economic, political and socio-cultural systems across the globe.

Notably, the global threat of COVID-19 has raised concerns about cross-border migration issues across the globe. Scholars have stated that the pandemic has led to several directives, policies and laws that affect mobility and cross-border migration (Sirkeci and Yucesahin 2020; Shimizutani and Yamada 2021). Khanna (2020) observed that the pervasiveness of COVID-19 has multiple negative impacts on mobility in high and low-resource countries. In the same vein, Shimizutani and Yamada (2021) reasoned that the severity of the pandemic has harmed international migration and global economies. In essence, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively reshaped international migration across the globe.

Worthy of note, the media have been regarded as purveyors of perennial issues such as COVID-19 and migration issues. Afolabi et al. (2020) stated that the media are social constructors of current realities on migration issues in any modern society. Adesina et al. (2020) observed that media are carriers of health information for migration issues related to COVID-19. Hence, the media are veritable carriers of socio-cultural issues in the global community.

Moreover, there have been a number of empirical studies on migration issues in developing and developed countries (Burton-Jeangros et al. 2020; Khanna 2020; Shimizutani and Yamada 2021). Nonetheless, there is a dearth of experiential investigation on media analysis of cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study explored the media reports on cross-border migration issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. The significance of this inquiry is linked with SDG 10.7, which promotes orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of persons within and among countries.

### Research Objectives

The objectives of this research were:

1. To assess the predominant issues reported by the media on cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To identify the practical solutions reported by the media to resolve issues on cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic.

\*Address for correspondence:

E-mail: nokorie@pu.edu.ng, ORCID: 0000-0001-6374-5681

### Research Questions

The research questions this study aimed to answer are:

1. What are the predominant issues reported by the media on cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the practical solutions reported by the media to resolve issues on cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic?

### Theoretical Framework

For this empirical inquiry, the agenda-building and development media theories served as theoretical anchors to describe how the media report issues on cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Agenda building is an offshoot of the agenda-setting theory, which stipulates that the media can set and build an agenda that satisfies the interests or demands of population groups in any modern society. Furthermore, the locus of the agenda-building theory stipulates the process of translating the interests of different population groups to become issues that require attention or decision-making (Cobb et al. 1976; Kim et al. 2011). In essence, the agenda-building theory focuses on the news agenda, which is linked with several events. In this study, the media can report several issues or events of migration linked with COVID-19. Some of these issues are the spread of the virus due to mobility, economic dysfunctions due to lockdown, internal displacements due to the outbreak, etc.

Also, the development media theory postulates that the media can serve as agents of development by providing support to national governments to foster social change and sustainable growth. Furthermore, the theory expounds that the media should be deployed in synergy with the government's efforts to engender development (Anaeto et al. 2008; Baran and Davis 2012). Importantly, the tenets of the theory can be summarised as the 3Ps, which are priority that the media should give to news coverage towards government projects, projects that the media should undertake development tasks that support national policies, and partnership wherein the media should collaborate with national governments and institutions to promote growth and

sustainability (Folarin 2008). Concerning this study, the media can give priority to news reports on migration issues during COVID-19, which link different countries. Furthermore, the media can develop projects in line with government projects, programmes and policies to curb migration issues.

### Migration and COVID-19 Pandemic

The pervasiveness of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to multiple disruptions of political, economic and technological systems in the global community. Scholars agree that the spread of the virus has threatened the sustainability of economic, political and health architectures in developing and developed countries (Cong and Yi 2020; Okorie 2021). Islam et al. (2021) reasoned that the continuous spread of the viral disease has negative implications for the economic and political growth of many countries. In essence, COVID-19 has decimal downturns for growth and sustainability.

Prominently, the increasing threat of COVID-19 has implications for mobility and migration in the international community. Scholars such as Sirkeci and Yucesahin (2020) noted that the spread of the pandemic was triggered by human mobility from Wuhan, China to other parts of the world. In essence, human mobility catalysed the spread of COVID-19 across the globe. Interestingly, international organisations have recognised the strong linkages between the COVID-19 pandemic and international migration. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2020) reported that the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a drastic reduction in cross-border mobility across the globe. The report indicated that there were increasing cases of internally displaced persons and challenges for travellers. In the same vein, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2021) report raised concerns about how COVID-19 restrictions have increased the cases of migrant smuggling and cross-border trafficking. Thus, the prevalence of the pandemic has several impacts on international and cross-border migration.

In the sphere of social inquiry, there have been several studies on migration and the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies such as Khanna (2020) examined the impact of migration on the labour force due to the global COVID-19 pandemic in

India. The study found that the pandemic hurt low-income households with little or no income in India. Furthermore, the lockdown measures for the pandemic have crippled the activities of key sectors of the Indian economy, which has led to the unemployment of low-income earners. It was recommended that the national government should establish resilient systems to curb food security issues triggered by the pandemic.

In the same vein, Burton-Jeangros et al. (2020) investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown on the health and living conditions of undocumented migrants. The study indicated that undocumented migrants were vulnerable to the COVID-19 crisis due to a lack of access to health benefits. The study found that most of the migrants had cumulative challenges to access essential life needs such as food and housing during the pandemic. Furthermore, the results of the study showed that the pandemic negatively affected the income of these undocumented migrants.

In a related study, Weike et al. (2021) explored the effects of media reporting on mitigating the spread of COVID-19 in the early phase of the outbreak. The study maintained that media reporting enhanced the response rate of public awareness as well as the severity of the pandemic. The study recommended that the media should be considered as a health communication tool to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in its initial stage. In essence, the media serve as a veritable platform to identify socio-cultural issues of the pandemic as well as proffer solutions to mitigate the outbreak.

Similarly, He et al. (2021) explored the role of trade and migration in openness and COVID-19-induced xenophobia. The study maintained that the origin and prevalence of the pandemic have increased the cases of xenophobia against Asian descent across the globe. The study also indicated that most of the xenophobic behaviours were reported in liberal democratic countries such as the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Australia. Furthermore, the study found that greater openness to trade increases the possibility of reported xenophobic behaviours. The study concluded that opening to trade and migration will mitigate xenophobic behaviours.

In another study, Shimizutani and Yamada (2021) examined the impact of COVID-19 on migration and household welfare in Tajikistan. The study maintained that the severity of the pan-

demic had a negative snowball impact on the economy through migration and remittance. The study also indicated that the pandemic had an impact on a variety of economic outcomes for households. The study concluded that the impact of the pandemic was severe but temporary on international migration and households.

## METHODOLOGY

A mixed method (content analysis and systematic review method) was used to achieve the objectives of the study. Content analysis was adopted to generate qualitative data on the issues and practical solutions for migration issues during COVID-19. Wimmer and Dominick (2003) observed that content analysis is a systematic inquiry to analyse and interpret manifest and latent content. In essence, content analysis was used to analyse and predict data on media reports of cross-border migration issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. The approach used for the content analysis method was the interpretative approach, which is advantageous for generating rich descriptive data. Furthermore, the interpretative approach is efficient to probe deeper to generate connotative and denotative meanings in qualitative data.

Importantly, four essential stages were undertaken to generate data from content analysis. First, the identification and reading of materials on cross-border migration and the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the construction of units of analysis data was identified such as themes, news stories, news sources, etc. Third, the codes of meaning were generated in terms of alphabetical meaning. Fourth, the coded content was validated to ensure its appropriateness and accuracy.

The systematic review method was also adopted as a methodological approach to achieve the study objectives. Specifically, the systematic review method adopts a scientific procedure to generate, analyse and interpret secondary data. In addition, a systematic review is a protocol-driven approach, which focuses on a topic or subject matter.

Notably, there are essential steps undertaken to generate data using the systematic review method. First, this method was used to search data-

bases such as Google News to identify published news stories on cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were identified and collected using keywords such as “cross-border migration” and “COVID-19 pandemic” on Google News, after which the relevant news stories for this review were independently abstracted. News stories that did not provide information on cross-border migration issues linked with COVID-19 were not considered. Third, the study captured qualitative evidence about cross-border migration issues linked with COVID-19. In sum, twenty-four (24) news stories served as the sample size for the study.

## RESULTS

This qualitative inquiry generated data on media analysis on cross-border migration issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data contains themes, issues and practical solutions to mitigate cross-border migration issues during the pandemic. In addition, the data provided rich descriptive situations on patterns of cross-border migration issues in different parts of the global community.

Table 1 shows 24 media reports about cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the media reports were published by BBC, CNN, UN News and UNHCR. These media re-

**Table 1: Media reports on migration issues for COVID-19**

| S. No. | Title                                                                                                                                          | News source          | Date               |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1      | What will international migration in West Africa look like after COVID-19?                                                                     | Open Democracy       | December 16, 2020  |
| 2      | COVID-19 crisis offers lessons for climate response for refugees                                                                               | UHHCR                | December 2, 2020   |
| 3      | Forced back home by the pandemic, Venezuelan grandmother sees no more choice but to flee once again                                            | UNHCR                | December 10, 2020  |
| 4      | Global trends: Forced displacement in 2020                                                                                                     | UNHCR                | June 18, 2021      |
| 5      | Pushed to the brink: the impact of COVID-19 on environmental migration in Sahel                                                                | Relief Web           | January 21, 2021   |
| 6      | El Salvador: Baseline assessment of irregular migration flows and mobility monitoring of border crossing points within the context of COVID-19 | Relief Web           | March 25, 2021     |
| 7      | Life amidst a pandemic: hunger, migration and displacement in the East and Horn of Africa                                                      | Relief Web           | June 21, 2021      |
| 8      | Bosnia: COVID-19 infections rising in migrants camps                                                                                           | Infomigrants         | April 7, 2021      |
| 9      | Closed borders are not stopping Venezuelan migration, they are making it more dangerous                                                        | The New Humanitarian | May 27, 2021       |
| 10     | Coronavirus: The porous borders where the virus cannot be controlled                                                                           | BBC                  | April 9, 2020      |
| 11     | Venezuela brave brutal migrant route made tougher by pandemic                                                                                  | BBC                  | October 7, 2020    |
| 12     | Heart-breaking conditions in US migrant child camp                                                                                             | BBC                  | June 3, 2021       |
| 13     | Continuing Venezuela exodus and COVID-19 highlight need for global solidarity for the most vulnerable                                          | UN News              | June 11, 2021      |
| 14     | Forced displacement at record level, despite COVID-19 shutdown                                                                                 | UN News              | June 18, 2021      |
| 15     | Conflict, COVID-19 and climate crisis likely to fuel acute food insecurity in 23 hunger hotspots                                               | UN News              | July 30, 2021      |
| 16     | Excluding migrants undermine COVID-19 vaccine rollout                                                                                          | The Conversation     | July 18, 2021      |
| 17     | 18 percent of migrant families leaving border patrol custody tested positive to COVID-19                                                       | NBC News             | August 7, 2021     |
| 18     | Women fleeing Venezuela are being targeted for abuse amid pandemic closure                                                                     | CNN                  | November 22, 2020  |
| 19     | Fact checking claims that migrants on the Southern border are to blame for the surge of COVID-19                                               | CNN                  | August 10, 2021    |
| 20     | Five things to know for August 13: Census, COVID, Afghanistan, migrants and Britney Spears                                                     | CNN                  | August 13, 2021    |
| 21     | Coronavirus variants didn't come from migrants at the border                                                                                   | USA today            | August 6, 2021     |
| 22     | COVID-19 has killed more than Spanish flu, thousands of Haitian migrants at Texas border                                                       | USA Today            | September 21, 2021 |
| 23     | Why US illegal border crossing likely not fuelling COVID-19 surge                                                                              | Wall Street Journal  | August 21, 2021    |
| 24     | Hundreds of Moroccan migrants held in inhuman conditions                                                                                       | Mirage News          | September 15, 2021 |

ports describe the pertinent issues and proffer practical solutions to the issues of cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Issues of Cross-Border Migration in COVID-19 Pandemic**

COVID-19 has disrupted all facets of the global system. The prevalence of the pandemic poses several challenges for cross-border migration for developing and developed countries. According to media reports, the issues of cross-border migration are as follows:

#### ***Increased Cases of Forced Displacements and Refugees***

The emergence of the pandemic has triggered cases of forced displacements in conflict areas. Several media reports indicated that there has been a rise in cases of forced displaced persons in countries experiencing civil war, political unrest and recession. *UN News* reported how Venezuelans were victims of forced displacement due to the downturns occasioned by the pandemic. Also, *UN News* reported that there have been increasing cases of forced displacement and refugees in 2021. Furthermore, the report indicated that the countries affected by forced displacements were Ethiopia, Sudan, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Colombia, Yemen and Sahel countries.

#### ***Increased Cases of COVID-19 Infection among Migrants***

The increasing danger of the pandemic has triggered cases of COVID-19 infection among migrants. For example, *The Conversation* reported how excluding migrants undermines COVID-19 vaccine rollout. Similarly, *NBC News* reported that 18 percent of migrant families leaving border patrol custody in the United States tested positive for COVID-19. *Infomigrants* reported concerns about the increasing cases of infections at migrant camps in Bosnia.

#### ***Rising Cases of Food Insecurity***

The severity of the pandemic has led to food insecurity in many countries. Media reports indicated there were several cases of food crises and

shortages in different parts of the world. *UN News* reported that there were 23 countries facing hunger, food crises and food insecurity, these countries are Angola, Congo, Chad, Central African Republic, Central Sahel, South Sudan, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Madagascar, Mozambique, El Salvador, Colombia, Myanmar, Guatemala, Haiti, Yemen, Honduras and Lebanon. Interestingly, 14 out of the 23 countries are African countries, which are facing the challenges of food insecurity. Also, *Relief Web* reported increasing cases of hunger among displaced persons in the East and Horn of Africa.

#### ***Porous Border Control Management***

The permeating effect of the pandemic has precipitated increased mobility to the borders in different parts of the globe. Media reports have raised concerns about border management issues. For example, the *BBC* reported about the porous borders where the virus cannot be controlled. In the same vein, *The Humanitarian* reported how closed borders were not stopping Venezuelan migration.

#### ***Victimisation and Vulnerability of Women and Children Migrants***

Women and children migrants have become major victims of abuse and health hazards during the COVID-19 pandemic. Media reports indicated how women were sexually abused as migrants from Venezuela and Mexico. *BBC* reported that child migrants were victims of sexual abuse and health conditions at US borders. Also, *CNN* reported how women fleeing Venezuela were being targeted for abuse amid the pandemic closure.

#### ***Practical Solutions to Cross-Border Migration Issues during Pandemic***

In recent times, there have been increasing challenges of cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, media reports indicated practical solutions to the issues of cross-border migration during threatening social realities such as the pandemic. They are as follows:



### ***Conflict Resolution and Ceasefire***

Several media reports mentioned the importance of conflict resolution and ceasefire in countries experiencing war or conflicts. The Secretary General of the United Nations has appealed for a ceasefire in countries such as Ethiopia, to mitigate the pandemic and forced displacements.

### ***Need for Gender Protection***

Several media reports revealed the need to protect child and women migrants, who are major victims of illegal migration and forced displacements during the pandemic. There have been several cases of molestation and sexual abuse against children and women migrants in Colombia and the United States. The protection of these migrants will help mitigate this challenge.

### ***Need to Support Agriculture***

Several media reports indicated that there is a need to boost agricultural production in countries facing food insecurity. The Director General of the FAO has stressed the importance of assisting farmers due to the severity of the pandemic. In addition, the support of agriculture will mitigate the increasing cases of illegal migration and forced displacements.

### ***Vaccination of Migrants at Borders***

More than a few media reports indicated the importance of vaccinating migrants for COVID-19 at border control facilities. This intervention will curb the spread of COVID-19 across the globe.

## **DISCUSSION**

This qualitative-based study conducted a media analysis on cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explores the understanding of cross-border migration, which describes the mobility of individuals within and beyond national borders in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For this qualitative exposition, two research questions were raised and answered. Importantly, the findings of this study have highlighted some significant issues.

This study identified five predominant issues reported by the media on cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. These issues are increased cases of forced displacement, increased cases of infection among migrants at borders, rising cases of food insecurity, poor border control management and victimisation of women and children migrants. Worthy of note, these issues are common experiences of people on different continents of the world. Countries such as Venezuela and the United States were at the forefront of cross-border migration discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, the result depicts a consistent pattern of BBC reports on the issue of border management. These results support the positions of Khanna (2020), who asserted that the pandemic has impacted international migration and labour relations in the global community. In essence, the cases of cross-border migration have led to several socio-cultural issues affecting migrants. These results support the tenets of the agenda-building theory, which postulates that the media can build an agenda on several issues or events of cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. This result implies that the media can predetermine and contextualise issues of cross-border migration. Furthermore, the media can develop the news agenda on issues of cross-border migration during the COVID-19 pandemic to generate public involvement and policy changes for sustainable human development.

Also, the study highlighted four practical solutions to cross-border migration issues during public emergencies. These practical solutions are conflict resolutions in troubled areas, the need for gender protection, the need to promote agriculture and the provision of vaccination for migrants. These practical solutions are priority interventions that will mitigate cross-border migration issues during public emergencies. In addition, these practical solutions require collective efforts from individuals, institutions and national governments to design and implement projects to mitigate cross-border issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. This result supports the position of Weike et al. (2021) that the media serve as a veritable platform to identify socio-cultural issues of the pandemic as well as proffer solutions to mitigate the outbreak. Also, the findings espouse the underlying assumptions of the devel-

opment media theory, which advocates that the media can establish a partnership with government and non-governmental agencies to develop projects to mitigate cross-border migration. This finding implies that there is a need for global solidarity and collective efforts to design and implement priority interventions to mitigate cross-border migration issues during a pandemic. In essence, there is a need to strengthen the collective efforts of the media, national governments and international organisations to mitigate cross-border migration issues during pandemics.

Importantly, the valuable implication of this study is that the media are a crucial carrier of cross-border migration issues in high and low-resource countries. The media serve as a health communication intervention to identify and proffer solutions to perennial issues of cross-border migration, which is also interlinked with issues of insecurity, climate change and gender equity. Furthermore, media narratives on health issues are essential data that can be utilised for policy development, interventions and changes.

### CONCLUSION

Cross-border migration is naturally illustrated as the influx of desperate individuals from Libya and Turkey to Western Europe, from Central America to the United States and from Southwest Asia to Australia. The plague of COVID-19 has negatively impacted cross-border migration, which has led to several health inequalities in the global community. In addition, the media serve as the primary purveyor of information on issues of cross-border migration during pandemics, especially the COVID-19 pandemic.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The media can be utilised as a bridge to establish partnerships and collaborative engagements to mitigate cross-border issues in the global community. In addition, the media can be deployed to enlighten and mobilise individuals to support social interventions to mitigate cross-border migration issues during public emergencies. Furthermore, national governments should design policies that promote health equality and the security of migrants to promote social justice and inclusiveness in societies.

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