

**Life experiences and coping strategies of Nigerian immigrant women**

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**Annotation:** In the European Union, illegal immigrants often face problems that affect their emotional well-being. To date, little is known about the mental health needs of African immigrant illegal women. Therefore, we have studied stress factors, mental health problems and survival strategies of African illegal women immigrants in the EU. 56 illegal immigrant women from Nigeria took part in our survey. It was found that women had to deal with complex stressors created by the social environment. These stressors contributed to feelings of depression and anxiety, which they could cope with with the help of social support and religion. The results reveal the need for culturally relevant tools for screening and meeting the mental health needs of illegal immigrant women.

**Key words:** illegal immigrants; immigrants; stressors; women; migration.

Жизненный опыт и стратегии выживания незарегистрированных африканских женщин-мигрантов

**Жизненный опыт и стратегии преодоления трудностей у нигерийских женщин-иммигрантов**

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**Аннотация:** В Европейском союзе нелегальные иммигранты часто сталкиваются с проблемами, влияющими на их эмоциональное самочувствие.

На сегодняшний день, мало что известно о потребностях в области психического здоровья у незаконных женщин-иммигрантов из Африки. В этой связи, мы исследовали факторы стресса, проблемы с психическим здоровьем и стратегии выживания африканских нелегальных иммигранток в ЕС. В нашем опросе приняли участие 56 нелегальных иммигранток из Нигерии. Выяснилось, что женщинам приходилось сталкиваться со сложными стрессорами, создаваемыми социальной средой. Эти стрессоры способствовали чувству депрессии и беспокойства, с которыми они могли справиться с помощью социальной поддержки и религии. Результаты показывают потребность в культурно значимых инструментах для скрининга и удовлетворения потребностей в области психического здоровья женщин-незаконных иммигрантов.

**Ключевые слова:** нелегальные иммигранты; иммигранты; стрессоры; женщины; миграция.

## **Background**

According to the European Commission, there may be tens of thousands of illegal immigrants in the European Union who entered as temporary residents and overstayed their visas, or are engaged in activities prohibited by their visa, or who entered without a visa. Changes in policy and practice over the past 10 years have exacerbated the problems associated with being undocumented in the EU, making it harder for undocumented immigrants to access health and social services. However, there is little evidence of how the current socio-political environment created by restrictive policies can affect the psychological well-being of African illegal immigrants. To address this gap, this article presents findings on stressors, mental health issues, and coping strategies for 56 undocumented Black Nigerian migrant women. Several studies have examined the mental health status of immigrants. The existing literature indicates that immigrants are subject to specific risk factors that

affect their mental health at various stages of the migration process [1, 2]. African migrants, for example, often migrate to escape conflict, political instability, persecution and economic insecurity. The resulting pre-emigration trauma and violence have implications for their mental health [3]. For undocumented immigrants, the impact of pre-migration stressors on mental health is further exacerbated by various post-migration stressors, including economic hardship, family separation, fear of deportation and discovery, exploitation, vulnerability, fewer family ties, and language barriers. Hacker et al. [4] showed that both documented and undocumented immigrants reported high levels of stress, anxiety, and hopelessness, which negatively affected their emotional well-being. For undocumented immigrants, their feelings of stress, anxiety, and hopelessness were associated with a constant fear of deportation, while registered participants were more concerned about the well-being of their family living in the US. Differences in the factors that cause psychological stress in illegal immigrants illustrate the unique challenges that illegal immigrants face. Other studies have found that undocumented immigrants are at higher risk for depressive symptoms, PTSD, anxiety, and reported that discrimination and undocumented status affect their mental well-being, leading to weight gain/loss, insomnia, anxiety, depression, substance abuse and fear [5].

## **Methods**

This descriptive, qualitative study involved data collection using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Purposive sampling was utilized to recruit an initial sample of women through collaboration with local churches and community leaders. Concurrently, snowballing was employed to recruit additional participants for the study. To be eligible for the study, women had to self-identify as being undocumented, an African immigrant, aged 18 years or older, and be fluent in English or French. For the purpose of this study, having an undocumented status was defined as not having authorized or legally recognized presence in the EU at the time

of the interview. A total of 56 women were recruited and interviewed for the study. Nineteen interviews were conducted in person, while five were conducted over the phone. Interviews commenced with participants being asked demographic information such as their age, country of birth, marital status, educational level, employment status and annual income. To elicit information regarding their mental health concerns and coping, women were asked to respond to the following questions—“do you have any concerns about your emotional well-being? What do you do when you are feeling stressed? The women interviewed received a 50 euro gift card upon completion of the interview. Each interview was audio-recorded and the average duration for the interview was 40-50 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the tenets of thematic analysis. The interviews were audio recorded and analyzed using content analysis. The purpose of the data analysis consisted of three parts: first, to identify topics related to stressors, concerns about emotional well-being, and coping strategies. Secondly, to place the experiences of women in their context, and finally to highlight the realities of women acting as agents. The researcher first reviewed the transcripts to check their accuracy. Each transcript was then re-read with the intent to identify themes and patterns in the participant's experience. During the coding process, the researcher read each transcript and highlighted the texts that were relevant to the research questions and assigned codes to the text. The coding process was repeated for each transcription until they were reduced to topics and subtopics. The data presented in this paper has been summarized into three topics that will be discussed.

## **Results**

This manuscript details our findings on the stressors faced by undocumented Nigerian immigrant women, the impact of these stressors on their emotional well-being, and their coping strategies. In general, the experiences described by the women took place in a hostile environment, where the culmination of politics and

social attitudes had serious consequences for their daily lives and their emotional well-being. Three main topics were identified: experiencing stressors, mental health consequences, and survival strategies. Stressors reported by women included economic vulnerability, uncertainty, and isolation. This led to women feeling sad and experiencing increased anxiety. Consequently, they turned to their social media and religion to cope. Women reported multiple complex stressors. The stressors described by women can be divided into three subtopics: vulnerability, feeling stuck, feeling lonely. Their experience of discrimination is described in detail in another manuscript, but will be briefly discussed in this article. Despite being connected to the social network in the form of friends and relatives in their communities and in Nigeria, the women reported feeling isolated. The isolation of women was often due to the fact that they felt lonely in their experience of unregistered women. The feeling of isolation arose due to the fact that most people "did not understand" the problems they faced.

This sense of "uselessness" was compounded by women's perception that they could not rely on immigrants from Nigeria. Several participants believed that other Nigerian immigrants deliberately hid information from them about how to navigate the system of rules and regulations of the European Union. Women believed that the lack of collegiality and community among immigrants from Nigeria was due to the fact that settled immigrants preferred that newly arrived immigrants go through the same painful and difficult integration process as they did. Thus, in order to get information on how to survive as immigrants, women sometimes had to turn to networks of immigrants from different backgrounds or figure out how to find information on their own.

Women also felt isolated because they could not return to their country of origin to visit their loved ones, given their unregistered status and the fact that the probability of returning to the EU if they left the country was very low. Consequently, several participants have not seen their family for many years. For example, one of the women interviewed, who was awaiting a decision on an asylum

application, came to the EU without relatives and had not seen her family for 12 years. Identifying women as illegal immigrants thus also isolated them because they felt they could not count on the emotional support of anyone. They had to be careful about who they disclosed their status to. It was not easy to find a trusted person, a reliable way out or support.

Several women reported that it was difficult for them to trust people. They feared that they might unknowingly report their immigration status to someone with malicious intent who might report them to the immigration authorities. Thus, secrecy was of paramount importance. However, being secretive about their status and their problems had negative consequences for women, as it often meant that they sometimes did not feel comfortable turning to members of their community for help and useful information that could link them to resources.

The isolation of women was also a result of the discrimination they faced. However, it is important to note that Nigerian women faced discrimination in various aspects of their lives and as a result of being black, undocumented and immigrants. This identity complicated the realities of women in the EU and contributed to their experience of isolation and marginalization.

Many of the stressors that women coped with affected their emotional well-being. The women who participated in the study expressed concern about their emotional well-being and mental health. Emotional well-being was influenced by the socio-political context, immigration status and the life of an immigrant.

The Nigerian women tested reported feelings of sadness when faced with their reality. One participant described how the feeling of isolation caused her great anxiety and exacerbated her depression. More than half (N=41) of the participants reported recurring feelings of sadness and depression during their stay in the European Union. The sadness was linked to the economic problems, isolation and uncertainty women faced. Since women awaiting a decision on immigration proceedings could not leave the country, several participants did not see their family for years. Women described feeling sad about missing their loved ones. The women

reported that their situation and the challenges they faced often brought them to tears. Even talking about their experiences was emotional, as the interviewer had to interrupt at least three interviews to provide emotional support to the participants. However, due to access issues and distrust of healthcare providers, only one of the women interviewed discussed her symptoms with a healthcare professional. Other women dealt with their sadness and viewed it as a normal part of their experiences. Religion has played a central role in how women have shown resilience in the face of their challenges and complex realities. Religion gave women hope and allowed them to believe that their situation would change. Religiosity was especially important to one participant who was detained and separated from her family. One of the subjects told how her faith helped her get through difficult times. Thanks to their religion and beliefs, women found the strength to persevere. For one participant, her religious affiliation and religious community gave her the sense of purpose she desperately needed. She shared her experience of volunteering with a church group and how that experience helped her see the world differently while she was battling depression.

## **Discussion**

Our study examined the stressors, mental health issues, and coping strategies of African illegal women in the European Union. Our findings indicate that Nigerian immigrant women experience severe stress, which has important implications for mental health. Despite the difficulties they faced, these women nevertheless withstood the pressure of a hostile environment and demonstrated resilience, relying on social support and their faith.

As in previous studies looking at the mental health needs of illegal immigrants in the EU, women interviewed reported anxiety and sadness, with some of the women in the study describing symptoms of severe depression. Despite having these symptoms, most women did not have the opportunity to discuss their symptoms with their doctor. This is an expected result as undocumented immigrants face complex barriers

to accessing health care. Difficulties in accessing mental health services have serious implications for women's health and well-being.

Chronic stress and the resulting psychological distress affect health, as uncontrolled anxiety, for example, has been shown to increase the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Even when undocumented patients can access health care, obtaining specialized care such as mental health care can be challenging. Given that undocumented immigrants are likely to seek medical care in primary health care clinics, social protection health workers should be equipped with the necessary equipment and resources to meet their mental health needs. In healthcare settings, culturally appropriate tools are needed to assess the mental health needs of undocumented immigrants. Health care providers need to have a basic understanding of the challenges faced by immigrants, and especially undocumented immigrants, in the current socio-political climate. Lack of awareness or understanding of the realities of life for undocumented people can be a barrier to effective screening and interventions to address their mental health needs. This is especially important for service providers who serve large immigrant communities. It is also vital that healthcare professionals use culturally appropriate screening tools that take into account potential differences in the conceptualization of mental health symptoms among different immigrant groups. For example, compared to the dominant Western notion of the duality of the physical and emotional parts of the body, some immigrants may somatize emotional distress and report physical symptoms].

The findings presented in our article are new for several reasons. First, this study adds a critical, analytical dimension that is often missing from existing literature linking the experience of irregular migrants to their context. Our results demonstrate the relationship of this social context of women and their emotional well-being, a phenomenon that is confirmed in modern literature. Similarly, the women who participated in the study noted changes in the severity of distress and feelings of marginalization in different time contexts. The current hostile socio-political context



meant that their daily lives were characterized by problems that affected their sense of security and undermined economic and social capital. Secondly, this study also adds stories about black illegal immigrants from Nigeria. We found that the black African women we interviewed tended to lack a sense of belonging. It seemed to them that most of the efforts to protect the rights of immigrants and their support focused on the plight of illegal immigrants of Hispanic origin. They also felt excluded from community organizations and advocacy efforts that seemed to only serve the interests of African Americans. Consequently, they apparently lacked favorable conditions to make them feel less isolated.

### **Conclusion**

The psychological problems of Nigerian illegal immigrant women increase their risk of psychological distress. It is likely that the emotional discomfort and social insecurity of the female test subjects will persist until they receive official immigrant status, as well as effective coping strategies and access to psychological help to help them cope with their difficulties. Through the women's stories in our article, social workers, faith communities, and other allies can gain insight into what resources would be most helpful to women in alleviating some of the stressors they face. For the women interviewed, social support provided them with the opportunity to receive support and information that helped them resolve some of their psychological problems.

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