

Oni Isaac Olumayowa

Labor Market Integration of Nigerian Migrants in Moscow, Russia

This article investigates the economic integration of Nigerian migrants living in Moscow. Using qualitative research method, I explore the situations of Nigerian migrant workers and Nigerian entrepreneurs. It shows that African products are getting popular among Russians. Therefore, adding to the understanding of the circumstances surrounding Nigerian migrants' economic integration.

Keywords: economic integration, Nigerian migrants, ethnic entrepreneur

Introduction

Thriving in a society that is different from one's ethnic origin is particularly challenging. The situation is more difficult when one's ethnic community is infinitesimal to other migrant communities in the host society. The inability to communicate in the language of the local community poses a huge barrier when seeking employment [1. P. 31, 2. P. 212]. However, with self-employment, labor market integration and success is often enhanced [3]. Self-employed Nigerian migrants are closely knitted to their ethnic community which is pertinent to creating a niche within the ethnic market [4].

Recognizing the paucity of studies on this group of migrants in Russia, this research fills the lacuna of this understudied aspect of Nigerian migrants by investigating the opportunities created by Nigerian entrepreneurs in the consumption market and the challenges they encounter in operating their businesses in Russia. The aim of this paper is not to give credence to the premise that racism is particular to Russia since almost in all European societies, there are individuals, parties, groups and organizations that believe in the ideological categorization of people [5] but to examine how the Nigerian migrants cope within the economic sphere in Moscow and how their experience has influenced their perception of Russia.

Theoretical Guide

This paper is premised on two theories. The **Segmented Labor Market Theory** and the ethnic entrepreneurship theory. The proponents of segmented labor theory argue the disparity in wages, income distribution, discrimination and unemployment as major labor market policy [6]. This is a response to the hedonic labor market theory that assumes labor market equality for all workers [7]. Citing Michael Piore and Berger Suzanne, Morawska noted that the segmented labor theory is anchored on three major grounds as it relates to international

migration [8]; namely: uneven distribution of resources that extends to labor force in industrial society; demand for cheap, flexible and dispensable labor; and unwillingness to raise labor wages.

The labor market of industrial society is divided into two different categories. The first is the primary sector which is capital intensive offers stable and skilled jobs with good reward packages while the secondary sector is labor-intensive with unstable jobs, low-skilled and offers low remuneration. Migrants face disparity and inequality in the labor market from employers and business owners whose decision is shaped by social and state construct based on social class, race, ethnicity or migration status through corporate policies and practices in the workplace [9]. Thus, regardless of academic qualification, migrants try to eke out survival means aiming at earning money. With employment mainly to earn income and no regard for status these migrants are pushed further into the labor-intensive market structure [10]. Using this theoretical framework together with the ethnic entrepreneurship theory is highly effective in revealing a dimension of coping strategy employed by Nigerian migrants within the economic landscape in Moscow.

This paper is also anchored on the **theory of ethnic entrepreneurship** which explains migrant entrepreneurs using three interactive components; namely: access to opportunities, ethnic characteristics and emergent strategies [3]. The proponents of this theory Aldrich Howard and Roger Waldinger postulate that these interactive components are necessary to understand how ethnic businesses develop [11]. Ethnic entrepreneurship is ‘a set of connections and regular patterns of interaction among people sharing common national background or migration experiences’ [11. P. 3]. Migration to Russia has continued to increase since the disintegration of the USSR [12] which has contributed to the multi-ethnic structure of the country [13, 14].

The first component of this theory describes the market conditions under which Nigerian entrepreneurs create a niche. Such market conditions favour only products that serve to satisfy the needs in an ethnic community [11]. The second component is the group characteristics which are manifested in two dimensions: predisposing factors and resource mobilization [11]. The predisposing factors are the pre-migration skills and goals that an individual or group has which allows them to determine their migration strategies [3]. Other factors that also influence migratory decisions which could aid or constrain resource mobilization include ethnic social networks, charisma and government policies [3]. The last component is the emergence of ethnic

strategies. This component describes the interaction of access to opportunities and ethnic characteristics as the foundation on which ethnic strategies are developed that allow adaptation to their environments [11]. The strength of social capital within the ethnic enclaves is significant in creating a niche for migrant entrepreneurs in the host economy. The ethnic entrepreneurship theory is significant to this study in that it gives a wider understanding of how migrants explore the market economy of their host country.

Research Method

I conducted this study using a qualitative approach to get firsthand experiences of Nigerian migrant in Moscow. In doing this, I used semi-structured in-depth interviews during the fieldwork. The targeted population was Nigerian migrants who are actively participating in the economic landscape of Moscow. Due to the vastness of Russia, the metropolitan nature of Moscow and financial constraints, this work was limited to Moscow. I selected my respondents using purposive and snowballing techniques and also from major stakeholders within the Nigerian community in Moscow. I also visited churches and parties where I met others.

A total of 25 Nigerians participated in the study who are classified into two categories based on their mode of engagement. The first is Nigerian migrant workers who are employed which consists of 18 Nigerian migrants. The second category is Nigerian migrant entrepreneurs who are a total of 7. However, for this study, I use two case studies of Nigerian entrepreneurs in Moscow. This is because of the similarities that they share in the type of products they offer but target different clients. For this paper, I used fictitious names to represent my respondents. I used English during conversation and I sought respondent's consent to record the conversation which I transcribed verbatim.

Analysis of Findings

Finding Employment in Moscow

Economic reasons are one of the major drivers for global migration. The social composition of Nigerians in Russia changed after the disintegration of the USSR and Nigerians are present in more cities in post-Soviet Russia [15. P. 214]. However, like in any contemporary society, there are both active and passive racists in Russia [16]. In his words, one of my respondents who has lived in Moscow for over 20 years, said:

“I have entered a lot of offices since I have been here and whenever I hear “молодой человек” (young man), I know that the next thing I hear is “Ты не иди сюда”. He would not even ask me where I am going or what I am here to do, he will just look at me and say: you are not coming in here.” (Interview 15).

Of course, this is not to presume that this is the overview of the Russians, however, it indicates exclusion from access to social or economic possibilities. The attitudes of the Russians he encountered portrays him as an intruder.

The economic landscape for many Nigerians is difficult to navigate which makes some of them participated in informal employment by distributing fliers in the metro subways and on the streets, selling products such as deodorants on the streets of Moscow [15]. One of my respondents who arrived in 2017 has an informal employment in one of the biggest supermarket outlets in Moscow and for him, it has been a difficult experience so far. He said:

“The supervisor in charge of our team at the supermarket where I worked made me work more and eventually did not pay me my money. After several request, he did not until I reported to the one that he reports to. Even after that, I still did not get my full money. I had to stop working there because I can’t just continue in that place. It’s very frustrating” (Interview 13).

This sentiment was also shared by other respondents who faced economic exploitation from their employers. This is often the situation for labor migrants with limited education and a lack of understanding of Russian. They often work in the informal sector, where the lack of legal protection and insufficient information about their rights have make them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse from recruiters, employers, and authorities [17]. For Nigerians with higher education and good understanding of Russian, they have their share of exclusion. One of my respondents who has lived in Moscow for 8 years, said:

“It’s quite funny that after getting an invite for an interview, you would later be called to answer if you are a Russian citizen and if you say no, they will tell you the job is not for you. Because on the site you registered, you already wrote you are not a Russian and they can view your profile before being contacted” (Interview 20).

The respondent expresses a form of rejection that he experienced during his job search. In a similar instance, another respondent who has spent over three decades in Russia and also has a Russian partner said *“Even if we were better qualified for the job than Russian applicants,*

they would consider their citizens first” (Interview 5). Such preferential treatment is however, not unexpected but in the case of another respondent in a managerial position when asked if he has ever been treated differently because of his skin colour, he said:

‘In terms of psychological acceptance with colleagues at work, yes. In my company when the boss which I am after in rank was to leave, even though I was next in line but because I do not have a Russian passport, the position was given to another. Also, there are some benefits that the Russians in my place of work have that I don't have’ (Interview 8)

The quotation above shows a structural barrier experienced at a workplace limiting the rank the Nigerian migrant could attain within the organization because of his origin.

Nigerian Entrepreneurs in Moscow

First Case Study

Sunbo owns a food business. She was invited and sponsored by her uncle to come to Russia for her studies in 2008 but first had to study the Russian language for two years. By that time when she arrived in Moscow, her uncle who had been living in Russia for over 20 years was an established businessman and was one of the wealthiest Africans in Russia before he left many years after Sunbo arrived.

Like many Nigerians, she had had some teaching jobs but after she had her first daughter in 2014, she could not go to work any longer and since she has a passion for cooking, she started posting pictures of her cooking on social networking sites and started her business. Her mode of operation is based on requests from customers which after she's completed, she delivers at the location of the customers. “Being a student then, I started with just Nigeria students in RUDN. Not long, I started having orders from outside the university. So, people started contacting me after I started the business”. She also has Russians who patronize her “Russians order meals like “jollof rice”, fried rice, meat pie, chin-chin. The few Russians that have tasted my local meals in terms of maybe ‘egusi’ or manka (manaya), or stuffs like that are maybe those that are dating black guys or have African partners”. However, her major customers remain Nigerians and some other African countries. Aside for the support she gets from her family particularly her uncle who sponsored her studies and catered for her. Though She started the business using the money given to her by her uncle, ethnic support is indispensable to maintain her business. “I have a lot of people doing their best one way or the

other. It might be just like telling or informing somebody that you have a wedding coming up, or if you have a birthday, contact Sunbo. That's a big role".

Even though Sunbo could participate in the Russian economic space, she believes that living in Russia is difficult, particularly for Nigerians. Aside from the society that is not incorporative enough for Nigerians, the Russian system itself does not give the avenue to grow, particularly for Nigerians who are not students. In other climes like the United States where foreigners can apply for naturalization after 5 years of being resident in the country [18], it is not the same situation in Russia. Having property such as a house in Russia is a requirement needed to apply for permanent residency which puts a verge on the aspiration of many migrants. To start operating a business in Russia, a residence permit or work visa is important [19].

Second Case Study

Debo is another young Nigerian entrepreneur in Moscow who makes home confectioneries. He is also an alumnus of a university in Moscow who arrived in Moscow in 2011 and went through the Russian language course for one year. From onset, he knew leaving his family in Nigeria for the first time and going to a country with a different language and culture will be challenging but he was prepared to explore the adventures that will come his way. He said: "As Nigerians, we've got this survival instinct anywhere we find ourselves. This has always kept me going since I arrived in this country".

He started his business in 2014 during his second year of study. According to him, he said: "A friend of mine needed a cake for an event, she actually wanted to give it to a Russian to do, but I was like, I can do it. That was because I was always around people that bake, my mum bakes and all that. So, I was like, okay fine, I will do it". That was how it started and continued to make cakes as a hobby for people and gets good compliments. Increased demand afforded him to see the prospect of making cakes and started doing it as a business. His customers were mainly Nigerian students and some other African students in his university and church. "In 2014 when I realized that there was a huge demand for it at that time, I went to Nigeria during the summer and took some training to finesse my skills and perfect it".

Similar to Sunbo's story, he also takes orders online and then bakes from home and delivers them. At the moment, he does his business alone together with those who do the deliveries. The demographics of Nigerians in Moscow are quite small then he decided to expand his market target to include Russians. "I live in Russia, it actually makes more sense because if

you compare the population of Africans living in Russia to Russians themselves, maybe 1% of the total population of Russians, I doubt if it's even up to 1% but then, looking at the demographics, I felt it was easier and better for me to focus on what Russians eat". After some time, he thought that if he wants patronage from Russians then he has to satisfy their need. "I did some training on the proper way of making the kinds of cakes that they will like". For two years now he has focused on Russians and he is getting increasing orders from Russians. "The goal is to cater for both Russians and Africans but then, I already have the African market, the goal is to penetrate the Russian market". Most of his Russian clients are from referrals: "The best way for the kind of business that I do which involves foods and all that is by the referees because they need to taste what you have done before". Debo tries to talk about his business to Russians whenever he gets the opportunity to do such tête-à-tête. According to him, he said: "I have lived in the country and have been in the business long enough to know that these guys need something like a personal touch to get to order something from you."

For Debo, participating within the economic space in Moscow depends on the individual. According to him: "There are lots of opportunities here for Nigerians to explore but the first thing is that it depends on what you want to do". In such an environment like this, being able to satisfy people's wants is important. According to Debo, the life of a Nigerian within the economic landscape in Moscow is determined by the mindset and the networks of people around such a person. In his words, he said: "When I came, I have always had the entrepreneurial mindset right from time even before I left Nigeria and the people that I move with are people are in a way are like-minded. Most of my friends have businesses". At the time of doing this interview in 2019, Debo was in the final year of his master's programme and do not have the intention of moving back to Nigeria. "I'll finish my MBA next year, once I do that, I get my business sorted, get my temporary residence permit. I'll be here for a while. For me, it wouldn't make sense for me to go to Nigeria now because I don't think there's any company that can pay me".

Debo believes that the right psychological view and social capital are important to integrated within the economic space in Russia. He does not have any negative feelings toward Russians and does not plan to leave the country any time soon but instead plans to register his company and continue his operation in Russia. The majority of global migration is labor-related [20] and therefore needs an enabling environment to domicile.

Coping Strategies

Even with the different challenges experienced within the economic terrain in Moscow, these Nigerians would rather find a way to cope than go back to their country. In the words of one of the respondents, *'I have developed a thick skin against such behaviour'* (Interview 6). Living in such a circumstance unperturbed is critical to surviving in the economic landscape for Nigerian migrants. Using the words of another respondents, *'If that's what the company's policy states then I'll just have to accept it'* (Interview 8). The 'thick skin' method has been potent for these Nigerian migrants in ignoring any biases they experienced.

Creating a niche within the Nigerian ethnic enclave is another strategy used by these migrants. Like Sunbo, being unable to continue working as a teacher, she started a business to render services within the Nigerian community. Although but entrepreneurs studied in this research are small scale and operating informally, they still make use of the social media to advertise their products and interacting with Russians contributed to Russians ordering their products.

Conclusion

This paper explores an important aspect of Nigerian migrants that has been understudied in Russia. I expose the circumstances surrounding the difficulty of Nigerian migrants to gain economic integration in Russia and the strategies that they employed to manage the challenges. A review of the government policy on documents required by migrants to have formal employment should be considered and also create an enabling policy that would allow migrants entrepreneurs to operate within a formal economic environment.

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