

Work-life (Im)balance among Nigerian Immigrant Women in Canada

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Abstract

The increase in international migration since the 1980s has raised new and fundamental gender issues that merit further study and understanding. This is especially so within gender and feminist scholarship because as the numbers of international migrants grow, new gender and feminist realities and contestations will emerge. This intersection is noteworthy and particularly deserving of study among Nigerian immigrant women in Canada as they increasingly migrate and confront the established belief that women are usually left behind in international migration. Migration is creating new gender in/equalities, class relational ethos, and tensions that are worthy of study. This article, therefore, contributes to understanding how Nigerian immigrant women in Canada respond to the tensions of competing work-life demands and at what cost. It is based on a purely qualitative study conducted among Nigerian immigrant women in Canada in 2024. Findings suggest that they face continuous and shifting challenges and adopt strategies as they struggle to balance work and life. Hence, women experience work-life balance differently, with varying degrees of conflict between work and family responsibilities and implications for their quality of life. We conclude that Nigerian immigrant women in Canada continue to face the brunt of family-life imbalance, exacerbated by pre-immigration cultural factors associated with patriarchy.

Keywords: international migration, immigrant women, work-life balance, work-life imbalance, women migration, gender roles, Nigeria, Canada

Introduction

The relationship between migration and gender has become one of the central issues of the twenty-first century. Prior to the 1970s, the movement of people and their relatives was largely understood as referring to male migrants and their family members. However, by the end of the twentieth century, a range of factors—including globalisation, increasing feminist consciousness, and female emancipation—had shifted migration trends in favour of female migrant workers (Hussein 2024; Sultana and Fatima 2017). For example, migration trends in Africa demonstrate that women are increasingly migrating at a rate equal to that of men and eventually bringing along their husbands and other family members and sending remittances home to support households, thus renegotiating gender divisions of labour (Setrana and Kleist 2022).

Regardless of patriarchal views of men as the main household decision-makers, women have inevitably gained the ability to voice their opinions in decisions pertaining to their family and migration (Mahapatro 2013). Despite patriarchal limitations, contemporary circumstances have led to a significant change in the expectations and roles of women. Over the past three decades, with the rise of working mothers and shifts in traditional father roles, working couples are grappling with responsibilities and allocation of duties as husbands and wives (Akanle, Adesina and Ogbimi 2016). These changes have implications for women migrants. In Hussein's (2024) work on Afro-feminism and twenty-first century migration processes, migration remains a double-edged sword for women. For example, while it enables them to shift negative representation, confront gender exclusion, disrupt traditional cultural spaces, and oppose patriarchal dominance and exclusion, it can also reinforce gender inequality. Afro-feminism provides a theoretical context for understanding the contemporary realities of African women's migration and their struggles to negotiate agency and deconstruct many years of gender exclusion.

Despite the risks associated with migration, including gender-based violence and stigmatisation, it increasingly enables women to confront their vulnerabilities, primordial gender constructions, class hierarchies, ascribed social positions, and subjectively bestowed identities. Afro-feminism explains and addresses the everyday lived experiences and challenges African women

face in the context of gender relations, class negotiations, and hierarchical constructions of sex (Setrana 2025). This serves to narrate the real experiences of women in the context of patriarchal tendencies (Teye et al. 2025). For Afro-feminism, the intersections of gender, race, and class definitively activate and enable the unique oppression of women. Even though commonly used to jumpstart discussions and actions on the African continent, unfolding realities in the context of international migration suggest the need to move beyond Africa-specific colonial analyses to accommodate international and transnational contexts (Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski 2025; Setrana 2025; Teye et al. 2025; Okeke-Ihejirika, Punjani and Salami 2022).

Afro-feminism is not a unified tradition but a contested intellectual and activist project, and its internal debates are directly relevant to the analytical aims of this article. Scholars such as Oyěwùmí (1997) have challenged the very applicability of gender as an analytical category to pre-colonial African societies, arguing that Western feminist frameworks import gender distinctions that were not integral to African social organisation and that applying them to African contexts reproduces a form of epistemic colonialism. Others, including Hussein (2024), Setrana (2025), and Okeke-Ihejirika, Punjani and Salami (2022) argue that colonialism, globalisation, and transnational migration have so thoroughly transformed African gender relations that these distinctions are now analytically unavoidable and refusing them in the name of cultural authenticity risks leaving African women's structural subordination theoretically unaddressed. For Nigerian immigrant women in Canada, this tension is not merely theoretical; rather, they inhabit a social space where pre-colonial communal logics, colonial patriarchal impositions, Nigerian postcolonial gender norms, and Canadian liberal feminist institutional frameworks are simultaneously operative, producing contradictions that no single feminist tradition can resolve cleanly. Afro-feminism is deployed in this article not because it provides a settled framework but precisely because it refuses to resolve that complexity into a single explanatory register, insisting instead on holding the intersections of gender, race, class, and colonial history in productive analytical tension. It is this capacity for complexity, rather than any programmatic unity, that makes

Afro-feminism the most appropriate theoretical resource for understanding the work-life negotiations of Nigerian immigrant women in Canada.

Afro-feminism enables the interrogation of how structural inequalities and systemic discrimination (such as deskilling, the privileging of Canadian credentials, and precarious work) shape immigrant women's work-life balance. This occurs as they negotiate their agency to balance professional ambitions with family and life obligations. Afro-feminism provides analytical context to understand women's agency, resilience, resistance, self-definition, and subjective negotiations of communal and traditional family roles to achieve strategic balance in everyday life. Using an Afro-feminist perspective allows the article to capture the usually taken-for-granted gendered experiences of Nigerian immigrant women in Canada in a more nuanced way. Afro-feminism thus provides a relevant framework for understanding the work-life (im)balance of Nigerian women in Canada.

According to Edem (2023), Afro-feminism provides strong theoretical remit for epistemic intervention to contextualise Nigerian immigrant women's experiences as they navigate and negotiate their agencies within the complex and complicated labour market and family systems of destination countries, in this case, Canada. As Nigerian women continue to migrate to Canada, scholarship situated within Afro-feminism is vital for advancing knowledge on the emerging realities of African immigrant women, particularly as they participate in the labour market while also negotiating family relationships in ways that are healthy and balanced (see also Oguntola 2022).

Integrating Afro-feminism clearly demonstrates the intrinsic and vital relationship between gender and migration (Nawyn 2010). This is an important contribution of this article because, over the past 40 years, there have been increasing changes in the gender demographics of African migrants, yet scholars have not sufficiently examined these changes from a feminist lens. As they seek to understand women's experiences of migration, there is a need for sufficient attention to African women's migrant experiences and to the meaningful integration of feminism, especially Afro-feminism, into migration analysis—especially in labour studies, to ensure more valid and reliable research and epistemic interventions (Nawyn 2010). Nawyn's call for

feminist integration into migration studies is necessary but insufficient as a framework for understanding African women's migration. This is because its feminist traditions remain largely anchored in North American and European theoretical formations, built primarily around the experiences of Latina and Southeast Asian migrant women, whose trajectories, motivations, and gender negotiations are structurally distinct from those of Nigerian and West African women migrating to Canada. This poses both an empirical coverage and an epistemic problem.

West African women enter mainstream gender and migration literature as variations of already theorised subjects, rather than as subjects whose experiences require new frameworks altogether. The global care chain literature, which is foundational to gender and migration scholarship, was built on the figure of the Filipina or Latin American domestic worker migrating to serve Western households. The Nigerian professional or semi-professional woman migrating to Canada to advance her career while managing transnational family obligations fits this template poorly, and the misfit is theoretical rather than incidental. Afro-feminism's insistence on centring African women's specific historical, colonial, and cultural formations is therefore not an additive gesture to existing literature, but a corrective epistemic intervention advanced in this article.

According to Walizada (2022), migration can have positive impacts by increasing educational and work opportunities, driving social change, and expanding worldviews that support greater gender equality and equity within the context of international migration. International migration is deemed to empower women and promote gender equality by increasing their power to negotiate their agencies within households, enabling them to play significant financial and social roles in both their home and destination countries (Hennebry, Holliday and Moniruzzaman 2017). This is especially so when such migrations are to Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Australia, and member states of the European Union. While much has been made of the benefits of international migration for women (for instance, independence and autonomy, change in gender relations in the context of families, acquisition of new skills and knowledge, and sending home remittances to support left-behind households), much less attention has been paid to its negative impact, particularly at household level.

Those that exist point to spousal conflicts, contested perspectives on women's rights (Manuh 1999), and the dynamics of gender ideologies (Asima 2010). The family-work experiences of migrant women have been left largely unexplored, and this article seeks to address that imbalance.

Canada, as the empirical context of this study, has become the destination of choice among Nigerian migrants (Ola-Lawson and Akanle 2025) and presents a particularly sharp contradiction that Afro-feminism is well-positioned to interrogate. Its self-presentation as a multicultural, gender-equitable destination is not simply a perception among Nigerian migrants but a structurally produced national narrative that performs specific ideological functions. Canadian multiculturalism, as scholars of race and nation in Canada have argued, operates as a framework for managing racial difference rather than dismantling racial hierarchy, producing a national identity in which immigrants are welcomed as contributors while simultaneously racialised as perpetually foreign and channelled into stratified positions within the labour market (Thobani 2007). For Nigerian immigrant women, this means arriving in a country whose institutional frameworks formally guarantee gender equity while materially reproducing racialised labour market segmentation, credential devaluation, and childcare inaccessibility, as this study documents. The gap between Canada's multicultural self-image and the lived experiences of the women in this study is not incidental to Canadian policy but structurally produced by it. Afro-feminism's insistence on naming the intersection of race, gender, and colonial geographies of labour provides the analytical tools to hold that contradiction visible throughout the analysis, preventing it from being absorbed into either a celebratory narrative of migration as opportunity or a simple victimhood narrative of migration as exploitation.

This article begins with an introduction. The next section is a discussion of migration and gender roles in Africa, providing insight into pre-immigration patriarchal contexts and structures that may continue to shape immigrants' lives, social relations, expectations, and activities in Canada. The third section covers immigrant women's work-life balance, situating their experiences within Canada's work-life policy context and highlighting the gendered factors that shape their everyday lives. The methodology section details the research design and procedures adopted in this study. The results

and discussion are presented in three parts: the first examines the work-life (im)balances experienced by Nigerian immigrant women in Canada; the second explores how they negotiate work-life balance; and the third examines periods when work-life balance is not achieved. The article concludes by summarising the key findings and implications.

Migration and Gender Roles in Africa

This section provides important pre-immigration African cultural contexts for the experiences of immigrant women in Canada. This is important because the challenges African immigrant women face in destination countries are often exacerbated by sociocultural factors they were socialised into and internalised prior to immigration (Yijälä and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2010). These social and cultural factors are often associated with African patriarchy.

The patriarchal formations that shape Nigerian immigrant women's expectations and experiences of domestic labour require historicisation before they can be analysed. What the women in this study carry with them to Canada is not "African culture" in any essentialised or primordial sense, but rather a hybridised gender formation bearing the layered marks of pre-colonial social organisation, colonial intervention, and postcolonial restructuring. Amadiume's (1987) foundational work on Igbo gender formations demonstrates that many of the domestic arrangements now naturalised as "African tradition," including the strict association of women with the private sphere of household management and men with public economic and political life, were actively produced and consolidated through colonial labour policies, missionary education systems, and the legal codification of customary law. These selectively froze and rigidified gender arrangements that had previously been more fluid.

The structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s compounded this by pushing women disproportionately out of formal economies and into unpaid or informal care work, further entrenching their identification with domestic labour at precisely the moment when global migration was beginning to offer an exit route (Apusigah 2009). Understanding African patriarchy as a historical product rather than a

cultural constant has direct analytical consequences for this study. It means that when Nigerian immigrant women in Canada find themselves expected to manage both full participation in the Canadian workforce and full responsibility for domestic and childcare duties, the burden they carry is not simply “what Nigerian culture demands” but the accumulated weight of colonial and postcolonial gender formations that migration relocates without dissolving. Afro-feminism’s insistence on historicising these formations is essential to preventing the analysis from inadvertently reproducing the essentialism it seeks to dismantle.

African culture has evolved significantly due to capitalism and Westernisation, redefining women’s roles in the household, society, and workforce, extending their involvement beyond the home. Increasingly, women’s activism and resistance to patriarchy have generated an unprecedented demand for capacity building, such as acquiring a competitive education and skills, capital accumulation, and leveraging migration as a means of negotiating and asserting women’s agency. Women exercise their agency in many ways, including through migration (Kanu, Bazza and Omojola 2021; Antman 2018). Thus, the roles of women in recent times have gone beyond traditional stereotypes of household care. For instance, Nigerian women migrants contribute remittances and expertise, participate in economic and social decision-making, and return investments and technological innovations to their nation, all of which are vital to the survival of their households and society (Akanle 2024).

Issues in Work-Life Balance of Immigrant Women

This section is particularly relevant in understanding the Canadian context relative to work-life balance policies for Canadian workplaces. The concept of work-life balance, as it circulates in both policy and scholarship, rests on a normative subject rarely named but consistently assumed to be a worker with formally recognised credentials, stable contractual employment, and access to institutional support mechanisms, such as flexible hours, parental leave, and subsidised childcare. This subject is not the Nigerian immigrant woman in Canada. As Ferrer and Dhatt (2025) demonstrate, racialised immigrant women are systematically channelled into precarious, low-wage sectors of the

Canadian economy through processes of credential devaluation and labour market segmentation that existing work-life balance frameworks were not designed to address.

The work-life balance literature drawn on in this article, including contributions from Zhao and Hannum (2019), Nsafu, Sheng and Martey (2021), and Shah and Shah (2016), was developed primarily in contexts where the racialised immigrant woman is not the normative subject and where the formal employment relationship can be assumed. To import these frameworks into the analysis of Nigerian immigrant women's experiences without first interrogating their normative assumptions risks reproducing the very exclusions they claim to address. Afro-feminism compels a more foundational question: not whether these women can achieve work-life balance as institutionally defined, but whether the concept of balance, as it has been constructed in organisational psychology and human resource policy traditions, was ever built with them in mind. This article proceeds from the position that it was not, and that an Afro-feminist reframing is therefore necessary to make the concept analytically useful for this population.

For example, Canadian work-life balance policies include flexible hours, paid leave, and employment equity. The objective of these policies is to support families and prevent work-life imbalance associated with stress and conflict (Boamah et al. 2022). These policies are, however, not specifically targeted at Nigerian and African immigrant women who struggle to balance paid work and family responsibilities while also negotiating pre-immigration patriarchal norms and expectations alongside the demands of everyday survival. Canadian policies do not sufficiently reach Nigerian immigrant women, who are often confronted with multiple structural and systemic barriers. Even though significant progress has been made in Canada, and the country comparatively ranks among the best in the world for work-life balance policies (McNally 2025), these barriers remain formidable for these women. Many immigrant women are still confronted with huge wage gaps and little success in work-life balance when compared with non-immigrants (McNally 2025). Nigerian immigrant women also face challenges related to deskilling and credential devaluation among skilled immigrants, precarious immigration status, difficulties associated with the recognition of foreign qualifications and the "Canadian experience" requirement. Hence, there is substantial

inequality in the application of Canada's work-life policies, which often fail to effectively address the real and specific needs of racialised immigrant women, who regularly face unfair treatment and are often channelled into lower-paying sectors of the economy (Ferrer and Dhatt 2025).

Generally, research has shown that women's professional advancement is still more constrained by family obligations than that of men. A study by Zhao and Hannum (2019) shows that migrant women's childcare responsibilities negatively affect employment and income, as pre-migration cultural roles and traditional divisions of labour often persist in destination countries. Gender-based divisions of labour are a significant source of dissatisfaction. The unpredictable nature of twenty-first century work has made it difficult for employees to balance professional and family obligations (Nsafu, Sheng and Martey 2021), particularly for women (Jacob, Sundram and Othman 2024; Shah and Shah 2016).

Flexible work schedules for working parents in the United States lead to increased job satisfaction and employee retention, although men tend to benefit from these arrangements more than women (Zhao, Settles and Sheng 2011). In a similar vein, a study on the experiences and causes of work-life conflict among married Indian professional women found that the influx of mothers into the labour market has made it more difficult to manage the work-life nexus because of a lack of flexibility at work (Srivastava 2007). Also, a study in Ghana found that work-life conflict negatively impacts doctors' job satisfaction, particularly among women, due to incompatible demands, leading to lower performance and reduced job satisfaction (Nsafu, Sheng and Martey 2021). Zhao, Settles and Sheng (2011) argue that ongoing disparities in pay and career opportunities, coupled with unpleasant working conditions, as well as policies that make quitting the job easier than accessing it, reinforce the assumption that women should adjust their careers to meet domestic responsibilities and maintain work-life balance.

Women consistently report higher stress levels than men, particularly full-time mothers with children under the age of 13, who exhibit the highest levels of stress resulting from familial, occupational, and economic factors (Yu et al. 2020). Shah and Shah (2016) add that for parents (especially women) who manage these responsibilities daily, securing childcare can be particularly

difficult in environments where available spaces are limited. Consequently, the career development of working mothers is negatively affected by work-life conflict, including time constraints, stress, and behavioural conflicts (Dizaho et al. 2016). Highly skilled women outsource household chores to reduce time spent on housework, but this is difficult for women in low-paying jobs (Milkie et al. 2025; Raz-Yurovich and Marx 2019). A survey by Wray (2024) indicates that more women are compelled to cut back on or alter their work hours to be able to better manage the competing demands on their time. Nonetheless, although part-time work helps balance work and family life, many employees, particularly women, do not work part-time by choice (Shah and Shah 2016).

Since economic reasons top the motivations for women's migration decisions, Nigerian immigrant women are increasingly becoming integrated into the workforce, leading to conflicts between work and family responsibilities. Khosa-Nkatini, Buqa and Machimana (2023) note that women are taking on greater household economic responsibilities, but the distribution of domestic responsibilities remains inequitable, with women bearing the load for both economic and domestic tasks, heightening tensions between work and family life. While adjusting to the new culture in destination countries, they encounter different difficulties such as balancing the demands of managing their homes, establishing themselves in a new job environment, advancing their careers, sending money home to support their families through remittances, and adapting to their new environment.

Methodology

Given the upsurge in migration along the Nigeria–Canada corridor (Olujobi 2024; Richter et al. 2020), this article employed an exploratory research design to examine the lived experiences of Nigerian immigrant women in Canada. Data were collected in 2024 through ten in-depth qualitative interviews with married Nigerian women who had children and had worked in Canada for at least a year at the time of the research. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling.

The initial participants were drawn from kinship and social networks within the study population. These contacts were identified across various

settings, including among neighbours and colleagues. They were, however, carefully selected and screened in line with the study objectives and methodological considerations to avoid over-recruitment from the same or closely connected kinship and social networks. This was important in preventing redundancy in the data. The women were identified through groups or communities, networks, and associations such as occupational or professional groups, religious groups, and any other Nigerian groups or communities in Canada. The interview tool was employed as a data-gathering method since it has been demonstrated to be effective in gathering real-time and reliable data on women's lived experiences. Virtual means, such as WhatsApp calls, were used to connect with participants.

Data gathered were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Content and thematic analyses were employed through the generation of codes and nodes to investigate the various experiences of women based on their length of stay in Canada, type of job or career, education status, family type, and immigration status. Core ethical principles including informed consent, non-maleficence, and voluntary participation were rigorously observed throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

Work-life (im)balances of Nigerian immigrant women in Canada

Nigerian women arriving in Canada often find that the realities of combining work and family life differ from their expectations of working and exercising agency without having any role conflict or work-life imbalance. They may experience culture shock as they encounter Canada's more individualistic approach to childcare, in contrast to the communal support systems familiar in Nigeria. Career women with young children, especially toddlers, face significant challenges balancing paid work and childcare without the informal support networks available in their country of origin.

Titi, a married 42-year-old woman with four children and living in British Columbia, expressed the following sentiment:

The first challenge I had was my kids. That was a major challenge because I had [a] 4-year-old that cannot start school because they start school at 5-year-old, so I had to pay for her. I had to pay day care service, which can't happen at home. I have several people that would be ready to help, so that was my first challenge. Well, in all sincerity, the start is very rough because for mothers back home, we have support from siblings, parents, relatives, but here, most times, it is you alone. When we got here, we had to start all over again. You don't have any parents to take your kids to. Everything here is about you alone unlike Nigeria; if I'm going out, I can leave my baby in the house and go out and I am very sure they can't just go out because there will be a grandma in the next house. Even when I didn't tell her to watch over [her], she is ready to watch over if she sees them walking around, she will challenge. But here, we don't have that. We had to start over by letting them know you don't just bump out; you must stay in your space.

Titi's account is not simply a story of logistical inconvenience. Read through an Afro-feminist lens, it is testimony to what Hussein (2024) identifies as migration's double-edged character for African women: the simultaneous opening and closing of possibility. What Titi mourns is not merely the absence of childcare, she mourns the collapse of a communal architecture of care that African patriarchy, for all its limitations, distributes across women collectively. The "grandma in the next house," who might intervene when a child was left unsupervised, was not a service provider. She was a node in a gendered network of mutual obligation that, however unequally constructed, functioned as social infrastructure. Canada's individualist model replaces that network with a market-based system, including paid day care, regulated working hours, and age thresholds. For Titi, this is not an upgrade, but a privatisation of burdens previously, if imperfectly, shared. Afro-feminism insists that we resist romanticising African communal structures while simultaneously refusing to accept that their Western replacements are neutral or superior (Okeke-Ihejirika, Punjani and Salami 2022). What the women in this study experience is precisely that refusal made flesh. They are caught between a care system they have left and a care market they cannot yet fully access or afford. Sola, a 32-year-old newly arrived migrant woman who was unemployed and had one child, said: "My school just started almost immediately. So, it was not easy. There was nobody I could leave the child with."

As noted by Shah and Shah (2016), the women also expressed dissatisfaction with the high costs associated with enrolling their children in day care facilities. This was a huge challenge, particularly for those who were financially unstable. The challenge was compounded by Canadian regulations, such as restrictions related to the duration of immigrants' stay and age limits for enrolment, which meant that access to day care facilities was not necessarily automatic. It is no wonder that studies have shown that women consistently have higher stress levels than men (Yu et al. 2020). This stress is due to the conflict between family obligations and career or educational advancement that women experience due to the traditional roles of childcare ascribed to them. Shah and Shah (2019) have noted that, given that women are still primarily in charge of maintaining stability within the home, the gender-based division of labour in households continues to be a significant source of dissatisfaction for working mothers.

Interestingly, the study revealed that all the participants went through similar experiences, especially for the first few months of their arrival in Canada. Christiana, a 54-year-old Ibibio woman who has been in Canada for 17 years confirmed this, saying: "If none of your kids was up to 12 years old, you couldn't leave them at home. You either must put them in a day care, which is quite expensive, or you have to stay with them. So, that was hard."

A third constraint on work-life balance among migrant mothers in Canada is the distance between their workplaces and homes. This problem was reported very often by the interviewees. In fact, it was among the most reported problems. Immigrant mothers want a job to sustain them in their new environment. However, after a long job hunt, they get the job only to discover it is far away, which makes working and caring for their families at the same time difficult. Despite waking up early to take care of their families, many of them lose track of time, get to work late and may not be paid for the day. Low-paid workers are often faced with these challenges. Folake, a 31-year-old Yoruba woman, who had just arrived in Canada shared her experience:

So, my resumption time is 8am. I have to leave home at around six and by the time I'm coming back, it is the same thing. I leave work at four. I don't arrive until 6pm. Mind you, the buses might have a delay, maybe the weather or something, or there's a three-minute delay, five minutes delay. There are times

when I miss the bus and I have to run after the bus, and I'll just cry like, "What the hell is happening? Like, why am I here?", especially during winter. It is so cold and you miss your bus and you're supposed to be at work at 8am. So that was really sad. I remember several times that I had to cry and my husband would just tell me not to worry. It's one of the things that you're going to share as a story sometime. And about two times I had to Uber my way down to work. I'd be like... "Naija babe, how much are they paying me that I'll carry Uber to work? What nonsense!" And if you're late to work, you will not be paid.

Folake's account of her daily commute, waking at six and arriving home at six, crying in the cold when she misses the bus, condenses what Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski (2025) term "cumulative disadvantage" into a single working day. The Afro-feminist intervention here is to name the specific intersectional character of that disadvantage. Folake is not simply a low-wage worker navigating a difficult city. She is a racialised African immigrant woman whose position in the labour market (marked by low-paying work, a distant worksite, and unpaid penalties for lateness) is structurally produced by the same systems that devalue her Nigerian qualifications and channel her into precarious sectors of the Canadian economy (Edem 2023). Her exclamation, "Naija babe, how much are they paying me that I'll carry Uber to work?" is not mere frustration. It is an Afro-feminist articulation of the gap between her self-understanding as a skilled, capable woman and the identity the Canadian labour market assigns her. That she frames it with humour and national identity ("Naija babe") is itself a form of what Setrana (2025) calls "resistant self-definition"—a refusal to internalise the diminishment her circumstances impose.

How Nigerian immigrant women in Canada manage work-life balance

Family support for work reduces work-life conflict, lowering job stress and turnover, while high conflict leads to increased stress and employee attrition (see also Jacob, Sundram and Othman 2024). The extent to which single migrant mothers or married migrant mothers without their husbands present struggle during the initial stages of migration in host countries cannot be compared with those who migrated with their husbands. Findings suggest that shared and collective responsibilities among husbands, wives, and children often make it easy for migrants to settle in. Women with grown-up children

and supportive husbands face less stress compared to those with toddlers and unsupportive husbands. Sade, a 48-year-old married woman with two children, said:

I play a role, my husband plays a role, and my kids play a role. So, in all of these things, it's just understanding and collaboration because to be a wife is not easy in this environment. Then when you have an understanding husband and he's able to take on some of those tasks from you, that makes it a little bit easier. And then, like I said, my kids were a little bit grown when we came here, so we're able to talk to ourselves. So, it's not only one load. It's not like Nigeria where a woman wants to carry everything: she comes back home, she has to cook, she has to jump here, she has to jump there. So, it's basically collaboration. Each person, each member of the family is able to contribute one way or the other.

Sade's account of family collaboration, "it's not like Nigeria where a woman wants to carry everything," invites a careful Afro-feminist reading that resists two easy interpretations. The first is a celebratory narrative in which migration liberates African women from patriarchal domestic arrangements, a reading that would align with liberal feminist assumptions about the West as a site of gender progress. The second is a dismissive reading that treats Sade's relief as evidence of false consciousness, that she has simply adapted to a different form of the same patriarchal bargain. Afro-feminism, as Hussein (2024) argues, refuses both positions. What Sade describes is not liberation but negotiated agency. It is a strategic renegotiation of the gender contract made possible by the specific material and structural conditions of Canada, where the absence of extended family networks makes male non-participation in domestic work practically unsustainable rather than merely ethically objectionable. Her husband's assistance is enabled not by his transformation, but by necessity. This distinction matters analytically because it suggests that the apparent gender progress some of these women experience is structurally contingent, fragile, reversible, and dependent on conditions that could shift. Afro-feminism demands that we celebrate women's agency without mistaking structural contingency for structural change.

Bukky, a 50-year-old married woman with four children, also said balancing work and family life is easier for women with supportive husbands and older children:

When the children were young, you attend to them and then, of course, all of them are older now. You must work as a family. The man helps in the house and the children too. And that's how you balance. One person cannot do it because you get burnt out.

Migrant women without children and migrant women with a spouse and children they left behind express an ease of integrating into destination countries because they have time to advance their education and work if they want to without having to worry about responsibilities at home. Kemi, a 32-year-old single Nigerian migrant mother living in Ontario, said:

Well, my child is not with me. My child is back home in Nigeria. And when it comes to family, having to manage all of us, it's more like I'm single here. I'm just alone here. So, I mean, the only way I get to manage my family back home is just by communication, keeping tabs on them, you know, constant communication and all of that. And yeah, I would say it hasn't been like so difficult to do. It's actually been easy to manage, if I would say. But maybe if they were all here with me, it would have probably been a different moment.

Kemi's quiet observation, "it's more like I'm single here," surfaces one of the most theoretically significant patterns in the data: transnational motherhood as a work-life management strategy. That Kemi has achieved what she describes as relative ease in Canada by leaving her child in Nigeria is not an individual choice made in a vacuum. It is a survival strategy produced at the intersection of race, class, immigration status, and gender, in which the costs of migration are distributed transnationally and borne disproportionately by children and the women (grandmothers, aunts, female kin) who care for them in the country of origin (Hennebry, Holliday and Moniruzzaman 2017). Afro-feminism's attention to the intersections of gender, class, and colonial geographies of labour is essential here. The transnational family arrangement Kemi describes is not a freely chosen flexibility. It is a response to a Canadian labour market and childcare infrastructure that makes full family presence prohibitively costly for women in her economic position, while simultaneously depending on the uncompensated reproductive labour of African women left behind. Her "ease" is therefore produced by a global, gendered economy of care that Afro-feminism names as a continuation of colonial extraction in domestic form.

Flexible work policies contribute to a more manageable work-life balance. Women with high skills in high-paying jobs tend to enjoy these benefits compared to low-skilled women in low-paying jobs. Tinuke, a 35-year-old Igbera mother of one, said:

I'm grateful to work in a community house. So, five o'clock, you're done from work. You can get out of the office and start your day. My company personally has provision for all these things. So, it's working in a company that is able to understand what work-life balance should be. And it's able to help women to achieve that. So, a woman is really in charge of taking her kids to school, making their breakfast, taking them off to school, helping them with homework, taking them to their games, cooking food, cleaning and stuff. You probably need some time to de-stress and my company has those. We have a work-life balance day, that's what we call them. So, I think there are seven days of work-life balance days. It's just to help you as a company worker to be able to de-stress when you need to. And that's separate from your vacation. So, if, for instance, I wanted to rest on Monday because I've had a very busy Saturday or Sunday, I could take that Monday as a work-life balance day. Because maybe I have a lot of school, and maybe like my children's activities throughout Saturday, church, and other activities I have to do, you know, with all of the things. And then on Monday I'm tired, I can't go to work. I can take that one day as a work-life balance day, which is not part of my annual cycle. In the company that I work with, we have so many ways that women can be able to de-stress, be able to fall out of work, and so on.

Findings also suggested that women with flexible work hours are better able to cope with balancing work and family responsibilities. Flexible work arrangements for working parents lead to increased job satisfaction and employee retention, while part-time work can facilitate the balancing of work and family responsibilities (Shah and Shah 2016; Zhao, Settles and Sheng 2011). Such is the case for Mary, a 38-year-old Igbo Nigerian migrant woman, who noted, "The beauty here is you work per hour, so it is my choice to pick the time I know suits me so that it won't affect my home."

When Nigerian women in Canada cannot balance work and life

For one group of women, the consequence of these conflicting roles has been the forfeiture of work or education. While trying to establish themselves in a

new environment with strict rules and policies concerning children's care and welfare, migrant mothers often struggle to manage academic pursuits and family duties, sometimes making huge sacrifice in their careers. These competing demands were frequently associated with mental health issues such as depression. This was reported very often by the interviewees during data collection. Sola, the 32-year-old Yoruba woman married with a child, shared her experience:

You know, travelling, relocation, it happens to cause you a lot of depression. That's another reason why I left school was that I was flopping and failing because there was nobody to drop my son for. Another thing, you can't just leave your child. Even back home in Nigeria, if you don't know somebody so well, you can't leave your child. And me, I came here all alone. I didn't know anybody at all. I was not familiar with anybody. So, there was nobody I could leave my son [with]. So, it's like choosing between your school and your child. So, who comes first? So, I just had to. It's something that you are never prepared for, no matter how prepared you think you are. Even coming here as a single person, it's not easy not to talk of coming as a mom. So, it was not easy. So, I just felt, okay, I don't think this is for me right now. Let me just change to work permits. Then along the line, I will eventually go back to school.

Sola's decision to suspend her studies, "choosing between your school and your child," is the moment at which the Afro-feminist concept of intersecting oppressions becomes most legible in this dataset. Sola arrived in Canada with educational aspirations that constitute what Edem (2023) identifies as the core promise of migration for Nigerian women, which is an epistemic mobility—the chance to accumulate credentials and capital that patriarchal Nigerian structures have made difficult to access. This promise is foreclosed not by formal discrimination but by the absence of childcare, a structural gap that disproportionately affects women and most severely affects single immigrant women of colour. This is precisely the kind of systemic discrimination Afro-feminism insists on naming (Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski 2025). The disadvantage is compounded by the fact that Canada is often portrayed as, and perceived by many of the women in this study to be, a more gender-equitable society than Nigeria. The distance between that self-presentation and Sola's reality, "no matter how prepared you think you are," is not an anomaly or an oversight in Canadian policy. It is, from an Afro-feminist standpoint, the structural invisibility of racialised immigrant women

within a gender equity framework designed around a normative female subject who is white, Canadian-born, and credentialled (Ferrer and Dhatt 2025). Sola's story does not fall through the cracks of that framework; it reveals where the framework's floor was never built.

In similar circumstances, some women revealed that they stayed out of the job market for a while so that they could attend to family needs. This was difficult particularly for women who migrated for economic reasons. Sacrificing their career for family responsibilities is not an easy task, especially for women without support. Bukky affirmed, "Well, you just stay without working for a while, and then if you get a job, you get a job that, you know, will give you time to do those things."

For a second group of women, three constraints shape their ability to balance work and family life: limited informal support systems, the financial costs of childcare, and distances between home and work. In a country that promotes gender equity, they begin to believe that, just as women take on provisioning responsibilities, men should share household responsibilities. Their male counterparts are, however, unlikely to agree. Thus, when the women turn to their partners to contribute to domestic work, the extent to which those partners are steeped in African patriarchal orientations and mentalities often determines whether such requests lead to conflict, sometimes violence, and eventually, divorce. According to Tolu, a 48-year-old Yoruba woman married with three children and living in Manitoba:

It is happening here right now, especially for a couple where the woman did not have a voice in Nigeria and then you come here and discover that this place favours women more than men. The woman has all the power over here. So, if the man still behaves as if they are in Nigeria, there is bound to be [a] problem. Now the woman knows she has power, so that is where the problem is coming from. Nigerian men come here, they don't want to change, and they still want to be Nigerian men in another environment. So that is what causes the problem. In Nigeria, you work, I work. I come back from work, straight to the kitchen. While you sit down, I do everything. It is different over here, unlike Nigeria, where the man will say, "I am the one paying rent, I am giving you money for this and that," but here both of you are doing it together. So, the woman also expects, "If I can change and also be contributing to the home, you too change, help me around the house. Don't just sit down there and be saying 'I am the head of the home'."

Tolu's account of marital conflict, "if the man still behaves as if they are in Nigeria, there is bound to be a problem," opens the most theoretically dense terrain in this study. What she describes is a collision between two gender orders. The first is the Nigerian patriarchal order that the men have internalised and brought with them. The second is the Canadian gender order that the women begin to inhabit and instrumentalise once they discover, in Tolu's words, that "this place favours women more than men." Afro-feminism cautions against reading this collision as simply the progressive Canadian gender order defeating its retrograde Nigerian counterpart (Hussein 2024). Such a reading would reproduce the colonial logic that positions Africa as the site of gender backwardness and the West as its corrective. What the findings more precisely reveal is that both gender orders are systems of power that women must navigate rather than choose between. The Canadian context does not liberate these women from patriarchy. It offers them a different set of institutional levers, legal rights, employment equity, and social services with which to renegotiate their position within ongoing patriarchal arrangements. Crucially, the women who experience the most acute conflict are often those who have provisionally adopted Canadian gender norms while their partners have not, producing what amounts to a household-level culture war in which the woman bears the physical, emotional, and economic costs. Afro-feminism, with its insistence on the intersections of race, class, and colonial gender formations, compels us to ask not only why the men refuse to change, but what structural supports (economic marginalisation, racialised emasculation in the Canadian labour market, the absence of male community networks) make the patriarchal household the last terrain on which immigrant Nigerian men feel sovereign (Okeke-Ihejirika, Punjani and Salami 2022). The violence and divorce that sometimes follow are therefore not merely personal failures but symptoms of intersecting structural pressures that policy frameworks focused on gender equity alone are ill-equipped to address.

From the foregoing, it is evident that there are women who find it very difficult to balance work and life in Canada. This is usually in cases of seriously conflicting and irreconcilable roles and expectations. For migrant women who moved to Canada with clear aspirations and goals, this imbalance leads to tension, disappointments, and challenges. As a result, many are forced

to abandon their original aspirations, such as education, to prioritise family responsibilities.

Conclusion

This article shows that Nigerian women, as a case study of African women, continue to bear the greater burden of family and domestic duties even abroad, which calls for a redefinition of women's roles in the home to create more equal roles. Strenuous family life can hinder women's career progression due to traditional gender inequality in childcare and family chores, which is perpetrated abroad, resulting in fewer work hours for women. Also, inflexible work hours can make it difficult for women to balance their work and family responsibilities. This pressure may result in conflict within the family. As more women become part of the workforce, there is a need for organisations and society to recognise their important role in supporting family development and to provide appropriate support.

Migration is a multifaceted complex social reality that affects every sector of society today. While international migration has positive impacts, gender equality and equity in migration spaces remains crucial if women are to reap the full benefits of migration. Findings in this article show clearly that women migrants continue to experience many challenges, even in developed countries of destination. These challenges have serious negative consequences for the women who must innovate and adapt by adopting coping mechanisms that they do not necessarily find easy. Policies, programmes and scholarship therefore need to pay greater attention to the gendered dimensions of international migration and the unequal burdens they impose.

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