Title: Migration Trends and Workforce Implications among Nigerian Physiotherapists

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Financial disclosure: The authors received no external funding for this study

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Abstract

Background: Nigeria faces a critical shortage of skilled health workers, with workforce density far below the WHO-recommended threshold. This shortage is exacerbated by emigration of healthcare professionals in search of better opportunities abroad. Despite the high emigration rates of physiotherapists from Nigeria, there is currently no documented evidence on the trend and patterns of migration of this group of healthcare professionals. This study examined the trends, patterns, and destination countries of physiotherapists emigrating from Nigeria between 2018 and 2023.

Methods: A retrospective descriptive study design was used to analyse secondary data obtained from the Medical Rehabilitation Therapists Board of Nigeria (MRTBN). The dataset included records of registered physiotherapists, institutions of training, year of graduation, and verification requests submitted for foreign licensure or employment between January 2018 and December 2023. Verification requests served as a proxy for tracking migration.

Results: Between 2018 and 2023, 2,305 physiotherapists emigrated, representing 31.5% of those who had been trained in Nigeria between 1992 and 2023. Migration increased sharply from 2020, peaking in 2022 when nearly half (1,021) of all emigrants within the study period left the country. Of the emigrants, 57.8% were male, with the male-to-female migration ratio reaching 3.5:1 in 2023. The United Kingdom was the predominant destination, receiving 87.5% of all emigrants.

Conclusion: Physiotherapists migration from Nigeria has risen significantly over the past six years, with one-third of the country's trained workforce relocating abroad, particularly to the United Kingdom. This exodus threatens the availability of quality rehabilitation services and underscores the urgent need for policies to improve retention.

Keywords: Physiotherapists, migration, health workforce, workforce retention

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Introduction

Healthcare professionals are the backbone of any functional healthcare system, playing a pivotal role in promoting population health, preventing disease, and providing essential care services that enhance quality of life. A well-functioning society relies on an adequate and well-distributed healthcare workforce to meet the needs of its population and ensure sustainable healthcare delivery. However, Nigeria faces a critical shortage of skilled health workers (SHWs), with a workforce density of just 1.83 per 1,000 persons, far below the WHO recommended threshold of 4.45 per 1,000 needed to achieve sustainable development goals (World Health Organisation, 2018).

The low density of skilled health workers (SHWs) in Nigeria is driven by several factors, including challenges in the education sector that limit the production of a sufficient healthcare workforce, ineffective leadership and management within the healthcare system and economic instability, all of which have contributed to the rising migration of SHWs from the country (Adeloye et al., 2017). The relocation of healthcare workers is part of an increasing trend of skilled workers emigration from Nigeria to Europe and other parts of the world, this mass emigration has been colloquially termed "JAPA syndrome", resulting in a massive brain drain across various sectors of the Nigerian economy. This trend extends beyond healthcare professionals, although accurate data on migration rates across all industrial sectors remain scarce. A study by Adeyanju et al. (2024) investigated the intention to emigrate among a sample of Nigerian youths across the six geopolitical zones, and 77.5% expressed intention to emigrate within the next 5 years.

Between 2008 and 2021, a total of 36,467 Nigerian doctors relocated to the United Kingdom, with a consistent yearly rise from 1,798 in 2008 to 4,880 in 2021. An even higher migration trend was observed among nurses. Between 2002 and 2021, 60,729 Nigerian nurses moved to the UK,

increasing steadily from 1,393 in 2002 to 5,543 in 2021 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024). This exodus of medical professionals is driven by factors of poor working conditions, inadequate pay, limited career prospects, poor institutional support, insecurity and poor economic growth (Olorunfemi et al., 2024; Adeyanju et al., 2024). In source countries, the outflow of skilled health workforce exacerbates existing shortages, overwhelms healthcare infrastructures, and hinders health system sustainability (Wariri, et al., 2024).

The physiotherapy profession is also affected by this trend, although literature on the actual migration numbers is scarce. As integral members of the healthcare team, physiotherapists play a crucial role in rehabilitation, functional recovery, and chronic disease management (Oke et al., 2012; Guerra et al., 2022). Despite the limited data on physiotherapists' migration patterns, anecdotal evidence and professional reports suggest a growing number are seeking opportunities abroad. The loss of physiotherapists to migration poses a significant challenge to Nigeria's healthcare system, potentially reducing access to quality rehabilitation services and impacting patient outcomes. Understanding the extent of this migration and its implications is crucial for workforce planning and policy interventions aimed at improving retention within the country.

This study aims to examine the trend and pattern of physiotherapists emigration from Nigeria, the annual migration rate, and the destination countries.

Methods

Study Design

This study utilized a retrospective descriptive design to examine the trends, patterns, and destinations of physiotherapists' emigration from Nigeria over a six-year period (2018–2023).

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Data Source

The data used in this study were obtained from the Medical Rehabilitation Therapists Board of Nigeria (MRTBN), the regulatory body responsible for the registration and licensure of physiotherapists and other rehabilitation professionals in Nigeria. The dataset comprised secondary data on the total number of registered physiotherapists, their year of graduation, and records of verification requests submitted for foreign licensure or employment between 2018 and 2023. Verification requests are a required step for physiotherapists seeking to emigrate and practice in other countries, and thus serve as a reliable proxy for tracking migration.

All physiotherapists who applied for verification of credentials with the intent to emigrate between January 2018 and December 2023 were included in the study.

Approval for this study was obtained from the Medical Rehabilitation Therapists Board of Nigeria. All data were anonymized prior to analysis, and no personal identifying information was used, ensuring compliance with ethical standards on the use of administrative data for research.

Data Analysis

Data were cleaned and analysed using Microsoft Excel and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables, such as gender and destination countries. Trends over the six-year period were illustrated using bar graphs to depict the annual migration rates and gender distributions.

Results

A total of 7312 physiotherapists had graduated from Nigerian institutions between 1992 and 2023. A total of 39 institutions were offering physiotherapy programs in Nigeria as at 2023.

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Between 2018 and 2023, a total of 2305 physiotherapists emigrated from Nigeria, accounting for 31.5% of the total number of physiotherapists who have been trained in Nigerian institutions. A significant increase in the migration trend was first observed in 2020, with 223 physiotherapists emigrating, a 253.97% increase in migration numbers from the previous year. Almost half of the total number (1021) of physiotherapy emigrants left the country in 2022. This is presented in Figure 1.

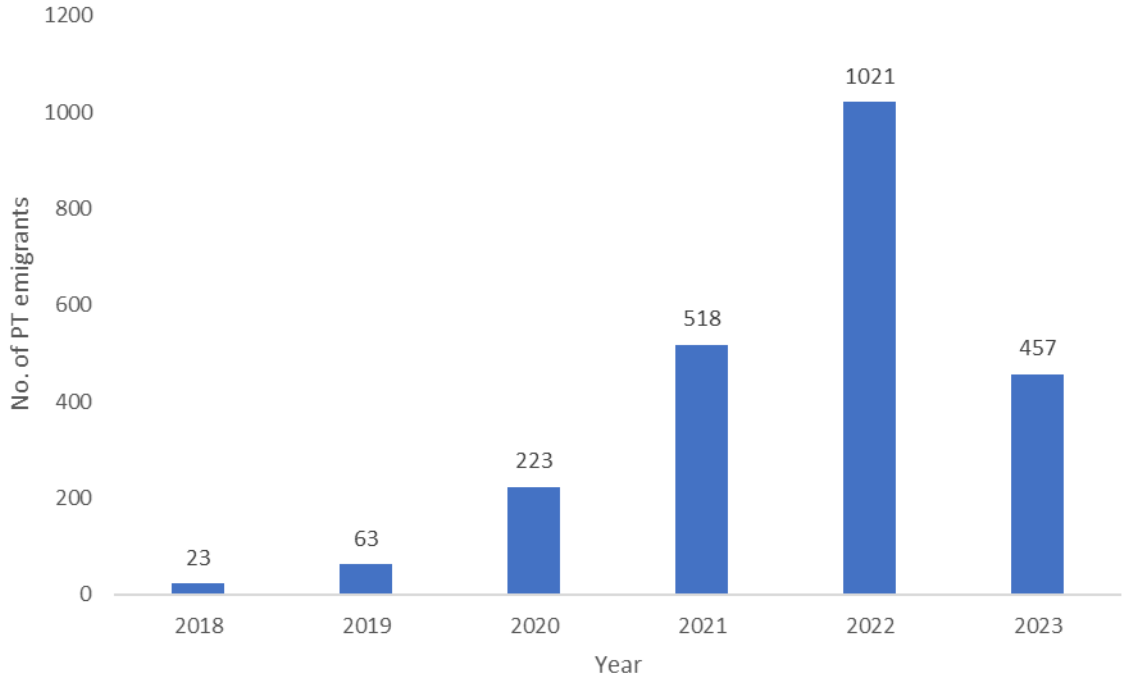


Figure 1: Physiotherapists' Migration Trend Per Year (2018 – 2023)

Figure 2 shows the gender distribution of physiotherapists migration per year. 1333 (57.8%) of emigrated physiotherapists are male, with the highest proportion of both male and female physiotherapists emigrating in 2022. The ratio of emigrating male-to-female physiotherapists significantly increased in 2023, with a ratio of 3.5 emigrating males to 1 female physiotherapists.

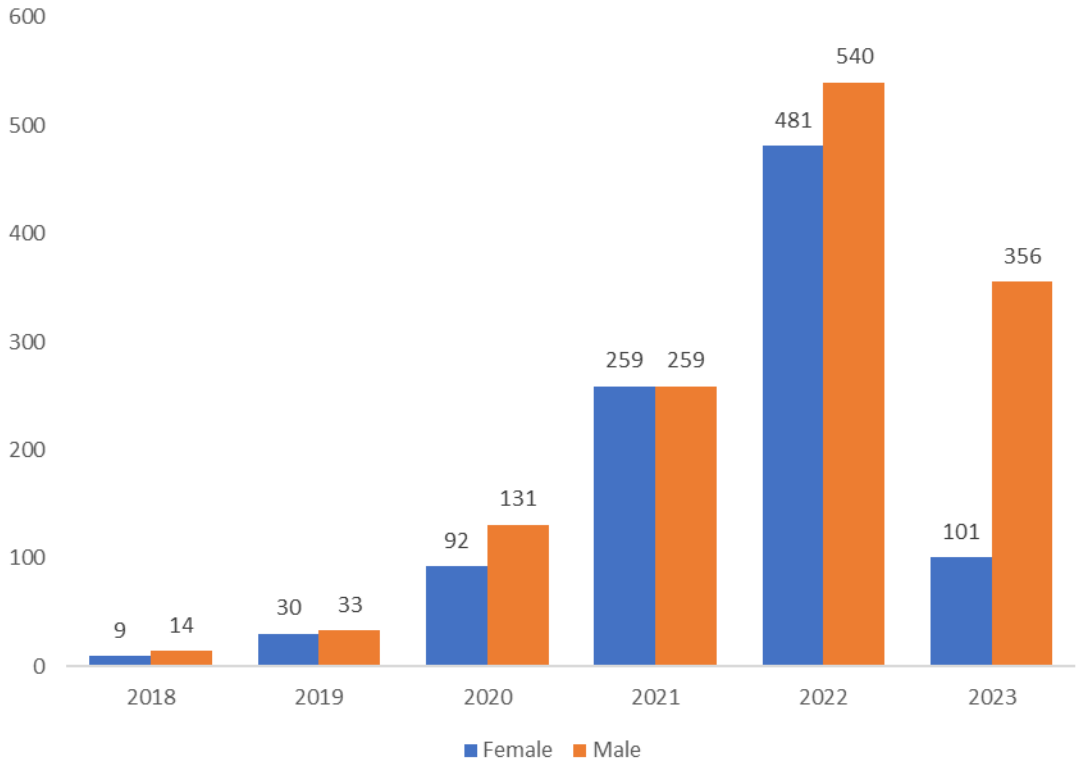


Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Physiotherapists' Migration Trend Per Year (2018 –2023)

Table 1 shows the migration trend of Nigerian physiotherapists by destination country, between 2018 and 2023. Majority (87.46%) emigrated to the United Kingdom, while Botswana, Namibia and Switzerland received the least number of physiotherapy emigrants (0.04%) each. A total number of 24 physiotherapists migrated to other African countries, with Ghana and South Africa receiving 8 (0.35%) of physiotherapy emigrants from Nigeria.

Table 1: Physiotherapist's Migration Trend by Destination Country (2018 – 2023), n = 2305

Destination Country	Female	Male	Total	Percentage
UK	862	1154	2016	87.46
New Zealand	18	48	66	2.86
USA	19	21	40	1.74
Australia	10	26	36	1.56
Republic of Ireland	9	26	35	1.52
Canada	13	15	28	1.21
UAE	10	6	16	0.69
Ireland	5	9	14	0.61
India	5	5	10	0.43
Ghana	4	4	8	0.35
Kuwait	4	4	8	0.35
South Africa	3	5	8	0.35
Sudan	4	2	6	0.26
Belgium	2	2	4	0.17
Germany	2	1	3	0.13
Cyprus	0	2	2	0.09
Malta	0	2	2	0.09
Botswana	1	0	1	0.04
Namibia	0	1	1	0.04
Switzerland	1	0	1	0.04

Discussion

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of physiotherapists emigration trends from Nigeria between 2018 and 2023, highlighting a concerning rise in migration among trained professionals. With over 2,300 physiotherapists emigrating within a six-year span, representing approximately one-third (31.5%) of all physiotherapists trained in Nigerian institutions. This finding indicates a significant reduction in the Physiotherapists workforce in Nigeria that could have far-reaching implications for rehabilitation care delivery in Nigeria.

The data reveal that migration peaked in 2022, with nearly half of the total migration occurring in that year alone. This sharp increase aligns with broader national trends observed among other

healthcare professionals and skilled workers, attributed to economic instability, insecurity, inadequate compensation, and limited career development opportunities within Nigeria. Similar factors have been the reasons why other healthcare professionals especially the medical doctors emigrated out of Nigeria to other nations of the world especially the developed countries (Adebayo & Akinyemi, 2022). Notably, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, intensified global demand for skilled healthcare workers, thereby accelerating the migration of Nigerian physiotherapists and other health professionals seeking better opportunities abroad.

This study also explored the gender dynamics in migration trends. While both male and female physiotherapists are emigrating in significant numbers, the gender gap appears to be widening. In 2023, the ratio of emigrating males to females rose to 3.5:1, suggesting that male physiotherapists may be more mobile or face fewer constraints in pursuing opportunities abroad. Further qualitative research is needed to explore the sociocultural and economic factors contributing to this disparity.

In terms of destination countries, the United Kingdom emerged as the foremost receiver of Nigerian physiotherapists, accounting for 87.5% of all migrations. The United Kingdom is also recorded as the most preferred destination among Nigerian resident doctors (Adebayo & Akinyemi, 2022). This trend may be driven by the UK's streamlined licensure pathways for foreign-trained healthcare workers, as well as recruitment policies aimed at addressing their own workforce shortages. Other notable destinations included New Zealand, the United States, and Australia, which also offer attractive working conditions, career advancement, and a better quality of life. The relatively low numbers migrating to other African countries suggest a preference for more developed health systems, despite geographical proximity. The observed decline in migration between 2022 and 2023 may be attributable to changes in international migration policies and

increasingly high costs associated with the recruitment and relocation of physiotherapists to more developed countries.

The implications of the migration trend observed in the present study are profound, and have far-reaching consequences. Physiotherapists play an essential role in managing chronic conditions, disability, post-surgical recovery, and neurological rehabilitation. The loss of these professionals, in large numbers, compromises the ability of the country to provide comprehensive rehabilitation services, potentially leading to longer recovery times, higher healthcare costs, and increased disability burden among the population. Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa and amongst the most populous nations in the World (WHO, 2016) and with significant disease burden that required large availability of skilled healthcare workforce (Adeloye et al. 2017). Moreover, the exodus of mid-career and early-career physiotherapists could undermine mentoring and training efforts within academic and clinical institutions.

Limitations

A major limitation of the study was the difficulty in obtaining complete records of physiotherapists who had emigrated from a single source within the Medical Rehabilitation Therapists Board (MRTB). This was attributed to the relocation of the Board's headquarters from Lagos to Abuja and the subsequent change in personnel responsible for managing the relevant records. However, this challenge was mitigated by extending the data collection period to allow sufficient time for data retrieval, collation, synthesis, and screening before analysis.

Conclusion

Physiotherapist migration from Nigeria has risen significantly over the past six years, with one-third of the country's trained workforce relocating abroad, particularly to the United Kingdom. The findings of this study highlight an urgent need for targeted interventions to improve retention

in the healthcare sector. The scope of these interventions includes improved remuneration, clearly defined career progression pathways, and enhanced workplace conditions. At the national level, efforts must also focus on strengthening economic stability and addressing the prevailing security challenges in Nigeria.

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