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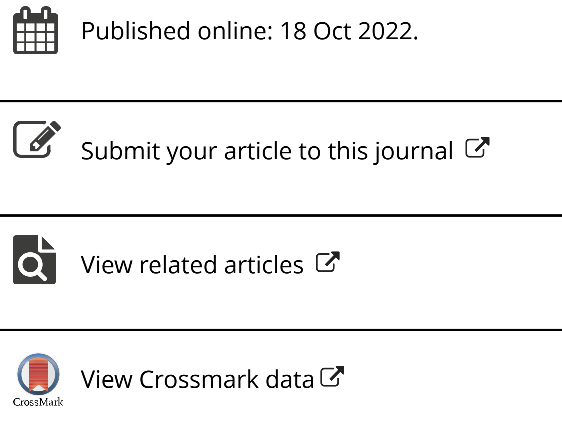
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Suffering for dignity and hope: young Nigeriens choose perilous trans-Saharan migration

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ABSTRACT
Hopelessness and indignity are not captured by standard measures of poverty. This study of the perilous trans-Saharan labor migration from southwestern Niger provides a deeper understanding of the experiences that drive young men to take this significant risk – to their mental and physical health. Within the 10 communities where trans-Saharan migration began, 331 household interviews, 66 returned immigrant interviews and 100 interviews of youth were conducted to understand the motivations of migrants and the material conditions faced at home. The research illuminates the deeply human motivations that drive these decisions including desires for greater autonomy, equitable politics, and productive work.

KEYWORDS
migration; youth culture; work; poverty experiences; soil infertility; land grabbing; climate change; Niger; Libya

Introduction

> No, I won't go anymore. I have telephone numbers of people there. These people keep me informed about the situation in Libya. They tell me the situation is dire … . They kill people with guns … if one is a foreigner, you risk being shot. … One sees all the miseries in the world during the journey. All the miseries to see, if you take the road to Libya, you will see them. … When you get there, you ask yourself why did you come? You have to wait. You can't go back because you risk dying. There are no strategies [to avoid this risk]. … Even though you need money, you have to love your life too. But at home you have nothing, you have no hope. Because you are sitting and you see a fellow who may be your equal, or your little brother or your big brother, go out come back with goods, and you are there with nothing … . How are you going to [just] sit. You too have to get up and do like the others.
>
> –Returned migrant from Libya

When the tragedy of trans-Saharan African migration is raised, most think of the drownings in the Mediterranean Sea that have been widely covered in the media (e.g. Levenson 2020; Povoledo and Pérez-Peña 2018; The Associated Press 2021). Less visible is the suffering of African migrants traveling through and working in Algeria and Libya – along what has been called 'the deadliest human smuggling route on Earth' (McCormick 2017). While data remain limited, the loss of life and human rights abuses suffered in the

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Sahara are likely much higher than the more publicized tragedies in the Mediterranean (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Danish Refugee Council 2016; Miles and Nebehay 2017). Given the dangers and meager returns, why are West Africans, largely young men, embarking on such journeys?

The reasons behind such dangerous journeys have been a topic of considerable interest, with most accounts pointing to current climate conditions (rainfall, temperature), areas of insecurity, or generic poverty (e.g. Foote 2016; Friedman 2016). Food insecurity or climate crises are often treated as 'triggers' for mass movements of people to various destinations (Alessandrini, Ghio, and Migali 2021; Bertoli et al. 2020; Gray and Wise 2016; Henry, Schoumaker, and Beauchemin 2004). But there are reasons to question the explanatory power of climate stress for the upswing, since the early 2000s, of young men embarking on very dangerous journeys to North Africa (Miles and Nebehay 2017; Ribot, Faye, and Turner 2020). Drought, high temperatures, harvest failures and poverty are experiences that are widely felt in Sudano–Sahelian West Africa and that have been present over the whole of young to middle-aged residents' lives (since the early 1970s). Seasonal migration to urban areas or other West African countries is also long-standing, dating back to the colonial era (Cordell, Gregory, and Piché 1996; Painter 1994). Given the risks involved, decisions to cross the Sahara are fundamentally different from these historic migration patterns. One must go beyond considering current weather and poverty conditions to also consider deeper psychological and social crises within the communities sending migrants, as shaped by the slow and silent violence of multi-decade subsistence struggles (Nixon 2011; Watts 1983).

Our research in southwestern Niger explores how the conditions at home, as *experienced* by migrants, their families and community youth, are related to the recent increase of emigration to North Africa since 2012 (Turner et al., in review). Despite the prevalence of environmental explanations for upswings of trans-Saharan migration, it is difficult to empirically identify climate or land degradation as causes of migration (Boyer 2017). Working in an area where trans-Saharan migration has only recently begun, and talking with returned migrants, as well as their families, about their motivations, we examined differences between livelihood resources available to families with and without migrants. Our aim was to illuminate the more complex nexus of factors contributing to departures on these particularly dangerous labor voyages. We will argue that the current material conditions at home (climate, soils, poverty), while dire, are insufficient to explain trans-Saharan migration decisions. Instead, it is the nexus of an economic future without hope, frustrations of perceived injustices and, on a deeper level, a basic search for human dignity that leads young men to risk their lives to break out of their current situations.[1] The focus of our work is the subjective experience at home but the suffering and indignities experienced by migrants in North Africa will be documented as well to more effectively illustrate the depth of the crisis at home.

As outsiders to these communities, it is difficult to learn about the subjective experiences of youth at home. Young men are often not open about, or find it difficult to express, such feelings. Moreover, within the FulBe and Zarma communities of southwestern Niger, there are social norms that favor stoicism and inhibit open expressions of

[1]There has been significant prior work relating emigration to aspiration and hope (e.g. Kleist and Thorsen 2017). Our work differs from this work in its focus on the material conditions that create hopelessness at home.

personal pain, hunger and vulnerability, particularly among men. Moreover, some concerns or feelings may be articulated while others are not. For a young man to point to the futility of farming is to question in part the life choices made by his father and grandfather. Likewise, it may be difficult to directly voice frustrations about their lack of autonomy from fathers or older brothers. During our interviews, such concerns were expressed tangentially or, if mentioned directly, were not discussed to sufficiently reveal the depth of informants' feelings and concerns. Therefore, our interviews alone do not provide a full picture of the strength of the feelings held by our informants. In contrast, we found that returned migrants are quite open about recounting the hardships they endured and their feelings about the migration experience. Learning about their struggles in North Africa, struggles that they were not ignorant of prior to their departures, illuminates to some extent the depth of their perceived hardships at home. The struggles they endure in North Africa provide insights into the level of hopelessness and frustration they feel at home. Examining the subjective experiences both home and away provides a fuller understanding of the situations at home from which they seek to break.

The paper is organized to reflect this approach. Following a short methods section, the following section serves as an introduction both to the study area, including descriptions of livelihood practices and biophysical conditions, and to the economic precarity experienced by study households. Demographic characteristics and the conditions surrounding migrant departures are presented based on interviews with returned trans-Saharan migrants. The prior knowledge of the risks of Saharan journeys held by returned migrants and community youth is also presented. This section provides a basic understanding of the material realities in southwestern Niger that contribute to labor emigration being a key component of household livelihood strategies and why some may contemplate dangerous Saharan journeys. In the next section, the experiences of the migrants during labor emigration in the Sahara are presented. This section depends heavily on the interviews of returned migrants along with the travel narratives recounted by a subset of these returnees. The goal of this section is to provide a sense of the hardships endured by emigrants, many not unexpected by them at their departure, to illuminate the difficulties they face staying at home. The final section builds on the previous two by returning to the conditions at home to consider the subjective experiences of young men that lead them to see trans-Saharan migration as the best of few choices to break out of their life trajectories. The information presented comes from interviews with returned trans-Saharan migrants and community youth.

Methods

Trans-Saharan emigration from southwestern Niger is relatively new, having grown significantly over the last decade after the death of Muammar Gaddafi in 2012 (Turner et al., in review). Like elsewhere in Niger, emigrants from southwestern Niger, by crossing the Sahara Desert, do not intend to continue to Europe and instead seek to find work in Libya and, to a lesser extent, Algeria (Bolouvi 2009; De Haas 2008; Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017). Our research was conducted during June through December 2017 within 10 communities (seven villages and three neighborhoods of larger towns) where trans-Saharan labor emigration first developed in the departments of Say and Kollo of the Tillibery Region of southwestern Niger (Figure 1). Within the 10 communities,

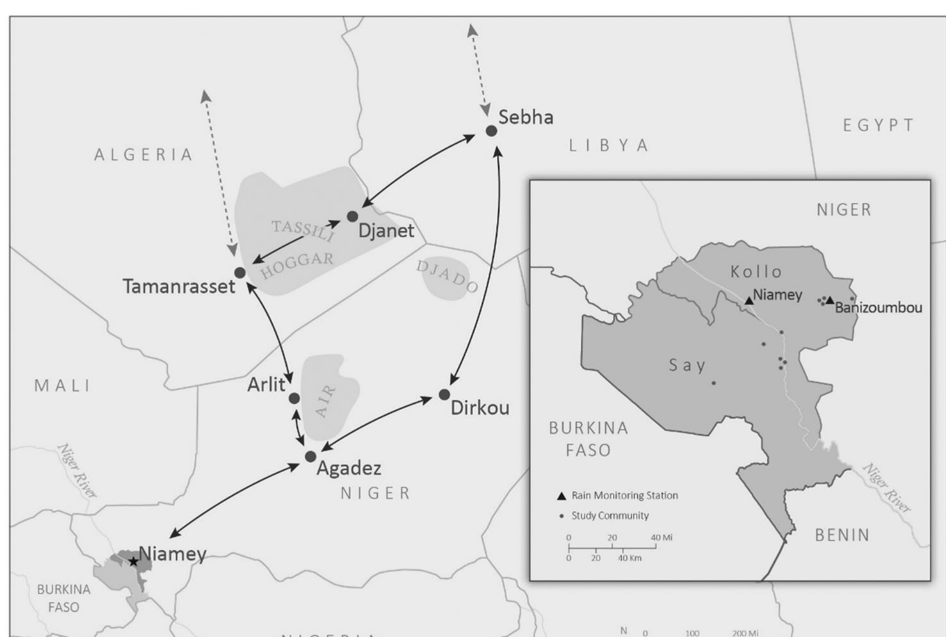

Figure 1. Location of study area with respect to major labor migration routes into Algeria and Libya.

we conducted surveys of the heads of households with (154) and without (177) trans-Saharan migration experience to estimate household land endowment (land cultivated per household adult), indebtedness (value of debts held per household adult), grain self-sufficiency (number of months of household grain need supplied by harvests over previous two years) and food insecurity (number of actions taken in response to food shortage over the previous two years).[2]

Among the 154 households with trans-Saharan migration experience, 66 returned Sahara migrants were available for interviews (58 percent of all returned migrants from the Sahara within the surveyed communities). These migrants were all men and of Zarma or FulBe ethnicity. Information about their education levels, marital status and prior experience with labor emigration was collected. The foci of these interviews were the types of work performed at destinations, length of stay, periods of work, the level of remuneration, and the money saved at their destination from all previous labor migrations lasting more than one year. Further, additional information was gathered on what influenced their decision to embark on Saharan labor migration, their experiences in traveling to and at their Saharan destination, and how their initial views of their

[2]Household members were asked whether, over each of the past two years, they found it necessary due to food shortage to: reduce the quantity of food eaten at meals; reduce the number of meals; reduce adult consumption to support children; accept gifts of prepared food by neighbors; or go a whole day without eating. The sum of the yearly incidences of these measures to reduce consumption of their grain stocks over the two-year period was divided by 10 (total number of possible yearly incidences) as a measure of food insecurity. A fuller description of the methods used to sample communities and households and to interview household members is outlined in Turner et al. (in review).

Saharan destination differed from their experience. These latter questions were asked in an open-ended fashion with post hoc coding of responses.

We asked a subset of the returned Saharan migrants to recount their experiences while on labor migration in the Sahara, gathering 21 migration narratives. Informants were first asked to begin describing their journey to their destination, followed by prompts to describe experiences while at their destination and the conditions of their return. These questions were posed in an open-ended fashion to allow informants to tell their story, emphasizing aspects of the journey as they saw fit. Additional questions were only asked to clarify points made by informants. These narratives were delivered in the informant's preferred language. Recordings were transcribed and translated. Quotes illustrating common experiences of the majority of informants are presented in the results section.

Additionally, 100 boys and young men, ranging in ages from 12 to 19, from nine of the 10 study communities were interviewed. These interviewees had no experience traveling to the Sahara and therefore should be seen as potential migrants. They were chosen from 50 households with Saharan migration experience and 50 without. Beyond basic demographics (age, marital status, schooling, prior migration experience to non-Saharan destinations), interviewees were posed open-ended questions about how they viewed the Sahara and Europe as potential migration destinations, impressions of Saharan migrants held by community members, and whether they plan to travel to the Sahara for work. For those who do have plans to travel to the Sahara, informants were asked about their reasons for making such plans and any risks of such journeys. For those without plans, informants were asked why they chose to not make Saharan plans.

All interviews were conducted in Fulfulde or Zarma by either the first or third author, or by one research assistant in either Fulfulde or Zarma, in a location where privacy could be protected. The first and third authors of this paper have long-term experience in both the Kollo and Say departments (living or working there since at least 1995). Therefore, both are known in the area, which helped develop relations of trust. Still, there remain barriers, as described above, regarding the degree to which returned migrants are open about their feelings about home, especially as they relate to unhappiness with respect to their positions within their families or communities.

Conditions at home

The rural population in the study area is dominated by Zarma farmers and FulBe agropastoralists with the livelihood strategies of almost all, except those who have been able to obtain wage work, dependent on a mix of crop agriculture, livestock husbandry, and labor emigration (Batterbury 2001; Hiernaux and Turner 2002). Among the 331 surveyed households in this study, the averages of the normalized ranks of livelihood practices ranked in terms of their importance in economically supporting the household are farming (0.93), livestock rearing (0.37), labor emigration to other Sub-Saharan countries (0.15), paid manual labor (0.14), commerce (0.08), and labor emigration within Niger and to North Africa (each 0.06). Previous agronomic research has highlighted the particularly low fertility of the soils within the study area (Buerkert, Piepho, and Bationo 2002; Gandah et al. 2003; Hiernaux et al. 2009; Turner and Hiernaux 2015) with the rich more likely in control of more fertile fields (Turner 2016). The proximity of study communities to

Table 1. Household land endowment, debt levels, self-provisioning and food insecurity among households with Saharan migrant members having returned from or currently in North Africa (TSM) compared with all others (No). Reported extent of land farmed and sum of current debts held by households are expressed on a per adult basis. Self-provisioning is the fraction of household consumption needs provided by the 2015 and 2016 grain harvest. The measure of food insecurity is the fraction of the total range of consumption reduction behaviors practiced by households in 2015 and 2016. Sample sizes (n), maximums (Max), minimums (Min), means, coefficients of variation (CV), medians (Med), % of values equal to 0 (%0), and (for the fractional values) % of values equal to 1 (%1) are provided.

	Land (ha/adult)		Debt (FCFA/adult)		Self-provisioning		Food insecurity	
	TSM	No	TSM	No	TSM	No	TSM	No
Max	4.00	7.80	75,000	137,500	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Min	0.00	0.00	0	0	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.00
Mean	1.17	1.38	5091	6913	0.65	0.65	0.28	0.24
Med	1.00	1.00	0	0	0.67	0.67	0.20	0.10
CV	0.66	0.88	2.17	2.35	0.35	0.37	1.10	1.24
%0	1.3	1.7	64.3	65.7	0.0	0.6	36.2	46.6
%1					10.4	11.3	6.6	6.3
N	153	177	154	175	154	177	152	176

Niamey (Figure 1) has also contributed to the loss of village croplands to government projects and sales to urban speculators.

Table 1 presents economic statistics for households with and without trans-Saharan labor migration experience (current or returned migrants to North Africa). Taking account of the infertility of soils in the areas, cropland access is low (1.3 ha/adult), resulting in an average of only 65 percent of household grain needs supplied by 2015–2016 harvests – years when annual rainfall at the two rainfall monitoring stations within the study area was equal and 15 percent above the 1990–2021 mean (Turner et al. in review). Levels of food insecurity are high, with 59 percent of households adopting at least some strategies to reduce food consumption. On the other hand, reported levels of indebtedness are low, with only 35 percent of households holding debt and the median level of those in debt equal to 10,994 FCFA/adult (approximately $20/adult). This reflects in part the limited levels of cash cropping and entrepreneurial activities pursued by surveyed households.

While seasonal or longer-lasting labor emigration to other Sub-Saharan countries has a long history in the study area, trans-Saharan emigration is relatively new, with rapid growth from 2013 to 2016 followed by a leveling off from 2016 to the present (Turner et al. in review). This is despite the EU efforts to tighten border security (borders of Niger with Algeria and Libya) and create alternative jobs for smugglers – with official data showing a decline in crossings at official checkpoints (McAllister 2020). As shown in Table 2, at the time of their departures to North Africa, most of the 66 returned migrants interviewed in this study were young men (average 26 years) with prior experience of labor emigration in either Niger or other Sub-Saharan countries. Fifty-three percent of our informants were married at the time of their departure, while 91 percent were married and 59 percent were heads of households at the time of our interviews.[3]

[3]Within the study area, households are defined as the social unit that controls cropped fields. These often comprise multiple nuclear families including those of fathers, sons and brothers. Of the 66 returned migrants, the average age of those who are or are not household heads is 34 and 28 years, respectively.

Table 2. Characteristics of returned Saharan migrants when they first departed for Saharan destinations, and characteristics of their Saha ran trips. At first departure, migrant characteristics include, age, marital status, education level and prior experience with labor migration within Niger or to other Sub-Saharan countries (SSA). The characteristics of Saharan trips include destinations, their length (in years), and length of time they were gainfully employed (years). SD: standard deviation.

Characteristic	Mean (SD) or %
Migrants at first Saharan departure (n = 66)	
Age (years)	26.4 (7.1)
Married (%)	53
Education level (%)	illiterate (44), primary (41), middle (13.5), secondary (1.5)
Prior within-Niger migration experience (%)	46
Prior SSA migration experience (%)	77
Previous SSA destinations (%)	Ivory Coast (29), Benin (20), Ghana (18), Togo (11), Mali (8), Nigeria (8), Burkina Faso (5), other (2)
# of previous SSA trips	1.52 (1.32)
Cumulative SSA stays (years)	2.10 (2.40)
Types of work performed at SSA destination (%)	Petty commerce (82), unspecified laborer (3), work in trades (2), herder (4), other (9)
Saharan migration trips (n = 73)	
Cash at departure (1000 FCFA)	193.4 (72.6)
Source of cash at departure (%)	Crop harvest sale (16), livestock sale (40), gifts (4), loans (32), commerce (4), other (4)
Destinations (%)	Libya (89), Algeria (11)
Duration (years)	2.58 (2.43)
Number of work years	1.30 (0.88)
Types of work performed at destination (%)	Unspecified manual labor – often agricultural (32), mason assistant – construction (8), commerce (6.5), hauler/porter, handler (9), store assistant (12), unknown (25), other (8)

The timing of trans-Saharan migration fell during an important transition period in many of our informants' lives, from being single to married and, for some, the establishment of a separate household. This is consistent with testimony from returned migrants of the economic possibilities that the higher rates of remuneration in the Sahara could provide and how that income could be used to establish their household and gain greater autonomy from fathers or older brothers. While poverty and the need to support their families dominated their reasons for Saharan trips, the chance to make large amounts of money that would allow them to construct homes and buy land and livestock also figured prominently. Poverty and lack of access to land can be a barrier to both marriage and young men's autonomy within extended family structures.

Most had experience with labor emigration to other destinations prior to departing northward across the Sahara. They departed with variable amounts of cash, averaging 200,000 FCFA raised in different ways to help fund the voyage to an ultimate work destination in either Algeria (11 percent) or Libya (89 percent). All report their impressions before traveling to the Sahara came either directly or indirectly from how Saharan destinations (Algeria and Libya) were described by returned migrants and the money and luxury items they brought back. All of the 100 youth interviewed who planned to cross the desert showed a good understanding of the range of different risks they faced in

Table 3. Reported prevalence of experiences during 73 Saharan trips as described by 66 returned migrants. Unless otherwise noted, the prevalence of each experience is represented by the percentage of the number of trips (n) in which the presence or absence of the experience was specifically addressed. In the case of imprisonment by bandits, the mean and median of the days held and ransom paid are presented.

Experiences	% or Mean (median)	n
En route (to or from)		
Paid official fees at border checkpoints	46	65
Paid informal payments at border checkpoints	47	62
Saw migrants abandoned in desert	23	64
Saw cadavers along route	20	59
Cheated by transporters	61	61
At destination		
Experienced racism	91	69
Not paid for work	80	70
Robbed by bandits	63	70
Imprisoned by authorities	3	73
Imprisoned for ransom by bandits	30	73
Mean (median) # of days held	11.3 (3)	22
Mean ransom payment (1000 FCFA)	177 (150)	19
Victim of violence or severe threat of violence	60	65
Viewed the violence inflicted on others	62	63

such travel. Returned migrants report that they knew of the kinds of risks when they departed, although 67 percent stated that the levels of risks and benefits were different than what they had imagined.

Migrant experiences in North Africa

To get a sense of the danger and risk that migrants place themselves in, we provide information about their subjective experiences through summary statistics and stories told by returned migrants interviewed in this study. These accounts are consistent with those shared by other researchers (e.g. Bensaâd 2002; Brachet 2007; Bredeloup 2019; Grégoire 2004). We recount them here to provide information about the direct experience of members of our surveyed families – experiences that are shared with youth within the study communities. An understanding of the significant hardships willingly borne by our informants provides important context for the dilemmas they experience at home and to which such voyages are seen as potential solutions. These are not trips of adventure by youth to see the bright lights of North Africa. Rather, they are dangerous voyages driven by a deeper set of motivations tied to persistent grinding poverty and migrants' views of themselves as young men. Table 3 summarizes returned migrants' travel and work experiences crossing the Sahara or at their destinations in Libya or Algeria. These data simply provide a sense of the prevalence of different experiences across the 73 Saharan journeys recounted by 66 returned migrants. We elaborate these data through direct quotes and description of travel to and their stays in North Africa.

The major departure point in Niger has been and seems to still be Agadez, despite greater restrictions since 2015 (Brachet 2007; Brachet 2018). For Nigeriens, it is quite easy to travel to Agadez. Their costs are relatively low given that they cross no international borders. Other West Africans, in contrast, pay many bribes to police and military

just to get to Agadez.[4] In Agadez, migrants would wait variable amounts of time (days to weeks) to negotiate and obtain agreement with a transporter. Payment is made up front or through a guarantee to pay on arrival (by relatives at the destination).[5] When asked about whether it was possible to travel to Libya without such contacts, an experienced migrant to Libya (2008–2009, 2014–2016, 2017) explains:

> It's very difficult. You cannot go to Libya without knowing someone there. It's hard. Today if I want to go to Libya, I call a friend first. This friend also, before going to Libya, called a friend. It's like that for everyone. You always have to go through someone else. In fact, it's your friend who finds you a job and tells you to take the vehicle to Agadez. So, as soon as you arrive in Agadez, you give the phone number of your friend who is in Libya to the driver. [This is necessary] as most people travel on credit to go to Libya. So you explain to the driver that this is the number of the person you are going to. Once we arrive, he'll pay you.

Figure 1 shows the historic travel routes toward the border with Algeria (to travel to Algeria or Libya), typically going via Arlit or directly to Libya via towns such as Dirkou. Informants report that during the time of Ghaddafi (before 2011), transport was more organized (with Nigerien government escorts) and regulated, with border crossings into Libya patrolled by Libyan border patrols. Back then, if you were able to get past the border, things were much safer and work was plentiful in Libya. European concern about trans-Saharan migration grew during the early 2000s. These concerns developed over time into a significant effort by the EU to externalize border enforcement through greater controls along the southern edge of the Sahara, for which, starting in 2015, they provided the Nigerien government significant financial support to step up border enforcement (Maurice 2016; Brachet 2016; Brachet 2018; Deridder, Pelckmans, and Ward 2020). As a result, the organization of crossings has changed to circumvent border patrols and checkpoints (Carayol 2019; Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017; Moretti 2020). This had led to a proliferation of alternative routes in the desert with a smaller number of vehicles traveling together. This adds to the risk associated with the crossing since drivers can get lost and passengers are vulnerable when vehicle break-downs occur (Brachet 2018). Vehicles will often break down, stranding migrants in the desert. The story of a young man who sold his sheep and goats to embark on his journey to Libya in 2013 is illustrative:

> It was in Agadez where I had used up all my savings. I contacted several people for help but they had also been robbed. So, I called my family to send me some money. They sent me some money so that I could continue to Arlit. We drove and after a day on the road the vehicle broke down. [Researcher: the vehicle broke down before reaching Arlit?] No, we had taken the road to Dirkou. We had been tricked. We had little water and it was finished [soon after]. We started to suffer a lot because it was very hot. People started to die. We had trouble breathing. It was very hot. We didn't have anything to eat or water to drink.

[4]A migrant from Guinea returning from Algiers, who we had the opportunity to interview, states that his mother gave him 650 USD before he left and by the time he arrived in Algiers, he only had 100 USD left with most of the 550 USD spent at border and police checkpoints in West Africa since he was able to work along the way once he entered Algeria. This is despite the fact that all his papers were in order (passport, vaccination record, identity card).

[5]Given the prevalence of traveling on credit, some report that one is at higher risk upon return (if returning with money) since one is more of a target of transporters and bandits. Still, migrants do have the option to send money home ahead of them to be less vulnerable. The widespread use of cell phones facilitates these transfers, largely through merchants, with none of our informants reporting problems with these systems. Many, though, want to bring goods, particularly electronics (TVs), which will be less vulnerable than money in the pocket to theft, although it does in some cases become 'lost' by transporters.

> We even drank our urine … . We lost a lot of people. We almost died. Among us, there were two friends and myself out of a vehicle that had carried 40 people. We were lying on the sand in pain when a car full of passengers arrived. This car took us to the nearest town. I spent 20 days there before I regained consciousness [ability to think clearly].

Sixty-one percent of our informants state that they were cheated by transporters, as has been reported elsewhere (Table 3). This often takes the form of transporters adding additional charges en route, threatening to abandon migrants in the desert if they don't pay. For example, one migrant to Algeria (2016–2017) describes an event where they had stopped to eat en route:

> We had finished eating and once we entered the vehicle, the driver asked us to pay an additional 5000 FCFA. He explained that whoever refused to pay would be left in the desert. Therefore, we were obliged to pay the additional 5000 FCFA. One of our friends, who refused to pay, was left in the desert.

In other cases, transporters were described as never returning to retrieve migrants who had been left to circumvent checkpoints on foot while the transporter drove through (Brachet 2011; McCormick 2017; Meynial 2018). These checkpoints are located not only at borders but outside towns along the route. The relatively high number of informants reporting to have seen cadavers or abandoned migrants during their Saharan passage is consistent with these portrayals (Table 3). Additional fees are also often charged upon arrival in Libya, with those who traveled on credit or who cannot pay the additional charges kept in makeshift prisons awaiting friends or relatives to pay so that they can be released.

To increase their profits, transporters seek to squeeze as many migrants as possible into their vehicles, leaving little room for water (or food). All migrants report being packed into small vehicles with little food. Double-cabined Hilux Toyota pick-ups are commonly used, with informants, such as a migrant to Libya (2015-2017), describing the 27–35 migrants loaded into these:

> In the vehicle, we are put in as in a can of sardines or wood. In the cabin there are so many of us that we step on top of each other so that blood comes out of our bodies. These carriers don't care about our suffering and the pain we feel. The Arabs think that as 'nègres' we don't feel anything since we are black skinned. … It's like that. They don't care about black people. They think of us as 'nègres' … . If they see that you are not seated well, they push you with their feet. So when you get out of the car, you can't walk, you can't put your feet on the ground. The position you take at the start is this position that you must maintain throughout the trip.

This quote raises the experience of racism that was experienced by virtually all migrants (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005), whether or not they escaped significant hardships or violence in transit or at their North African destinations (Table 3). For many, this is the first time they experienced racism of this kind. What was particularly shocking to Nigerien migrants was the degree to which Arabs did not treat them as Muslim brothers. This deeply affected migrants and explains in part why behavior to them in mosques figured prominently in their accounts of racism.[6] For example, a migrant who had worked in Algeria in 2017 states:

[6]It should be noted, though, that it is in mosques that African migrants had the most opportunity to be in close contact with Algerian and Libyan nationals.

> We in Niger, when you are a Muslim, you are our brother. For us, it's just a difference of cultures. When you see an Arab, he's your Muslim brother. I assure you that even in the mosque they don't want you to touch them. Normally in the mosque it is in a tight row.

Another who had worked in Libya from 2015 to 2016 recounts: 'They don't even want to touch you in the mosque. They don't want to touch our hands or our bodies'. Others refer to a hierarchy among blacks with respect to being accepted in the front row of group prayers. For example:

> No black will dare pray in the first line. They could even shoot you. There are several types of blacks; there are black Arabs. They can put themselves in the first row or line. Also, there are the black foreigners who everyone knows in the neighborhood. They know you are a black foreigner and so they will always call you Abdou or slave. If they tell you you are a slave, you can tell them that all the inhabitants of the north are slaves of God. They will say this is true and then ask you what your name is. And, you will tell them, for example, Issa. And, they'll call you Issa. But, it will not last more than 30 minutes and they will start calling you Abdou again, that is to say slave.[7]

Informants generally saw this treatment as a violation of Islamic faith. Another migrant, with significant experience and economic success in Libya, states:

> If you come and want to establish ties with the Arabs, they totally refuse. For them, the only connection between an Arab and a Black is work. You just do their work. So, there are times, for example, that an Arab may seek a man to work but is refused because the work is poorly paid. In that kind of situation, he may to go to where black people sit to look for work. In this place you can find masons, plumbers, laborers, etc.; this is where black people sit. So this Arab can come to this square and look for the people who refused to do the job as it was not well paid. And if he sees them he's going to shoot them.

This is an extreme statement coming not from a disgruntled migrant but from one who developed good working relationships with Libyan Arabs over time. Whether or not those who refused underpaid work would be publicly shot in this fashion was not confirmed by other informants, but still it points to an attitude where employers view African laborers as obligated to work for them in a way more akin to a slave or servant than through a free economic transaction (laborer selling his labor for the highest price). To such employers, a refusal by Africans to work for low wages was an affront to their honor.

As is suggested by these quotes, the physical struggles of hunger and thirst experienced while crossing the desert are replaced by heightened levels of violence and abuse once arriving at one's destination. With increased international attention and support for border enforcement, violence and abuse by both state and non-state actors has grown (Brachet 2016, 2018). Brachet and Scheele (2022) persuasively argue that debt bondage, prison labor, and hostage taking for ransom are not new to the Sahara, but their prevalence has increased due in part to the externalization policies of the EU where irregular migration of the past has become clandestine (see also Brachet 2018). Migrants are particularly vulnerable in Libya, where the rule of law has broken down during the long period since the first civil war and the assassination of Ghaddafi in 2011. One migrant who arrived in the town of Sebha in 2012 stated that upon arrival he found that everything had changed, and noted:

[7]Abdou is related to the Arabic 'Abd' which refers to 'servant'.

> …everyone wants to run the country and thinks they are the leader. But often along the road one can still find work … . But there are bandits everywhere and as soon as they see black Africans, that's a problem. For them, they see meat, flesh to eat. Some turn into cops to put you in a house and they hit you and threaten you. Then they give you the phone for you to call your people [in country] to come pay and pick you up. They have to give dinars to get you back. And, with each passing day, they [bandits] double the price of the ransom. Sometimes they will ask you for up to 600 dinars in a day. Then it becomes 800 dinars and the next day it becomes 1200 dinars. Your relatives have to come and get you. Even if you are freed, other bandits can still take you along the road. We have seen it all in Libya. We are prisoners [due to the security situation] and in the night the false policemen go around the houses of black Africans to take people hostage. They even kill people sometimes. If we gain work for the month, our employer can ensure our safety; he can stand as one's guarantor. So even if the bandits attack you they [employers] can get you out of the problem.

Another migrant who worked in Libya from 2012 to 2015 states that he was captured twice and describes how he was traded among different criminal gangs:

> I have been taken twice. The first time was in the month of Karem, the 2nd day of Karem, I was even in Karem [to be fasting]. I was looking for a cab to work and some bandits brushed their car in front of me and they picked me up. They took me to a prison, I had to pay 100,000 FCFA or 300 dinars. They sold me to someone for 75,000 FCFA. … and I paid the person 100,000 FCFA to be released. So he had a profit of 25,000 FCFA. I experienced this myself. [Researcher: Wait, wait, you just said they sold you?] Yes, they called someone on the phone to explain that they found a target who has money. They negotiated and they agreed that this [other] person will give them 75,000 FCFA to take me. Then I will pay him 100,000 FCFA [ransom] which allows him to have a profit of 25,000 FCFA. He had come with a gun in his car and he took me.

After describing the second incident, which was a simple armed robbery, the migrant described how he learned to disguise himself while in public:

> It was after this that I began to disguise myself as a soldier. A black friend told me that I looked like a black Arab. He said that if you put on military clothes, you will escape banditry. That's the day that I bought four full uniforms, a camouflaged, light, and Saharan outfits plus one of their black outfits. They are all still with me today. … After that if I went to work I wore my outfit. When I came back, I wore the outfit. At home, I still wore boubous. But, as soon as I went out, I put on military clothes. Because it's a mess in the country.

As suggested by these testimonies, criminal activity in Libya directed toward African migrants can range from robbery to random acts of violence, to kidnapping and extortion. Migrants are careful not to carry cash with them and when they have saved up a sum of money, they are likely to send the money to their families or have it saved for them in a safe place. Employers recognize the vulnerability of migrants to armed robbery and will often hold on to a portion of migrant salaries to be paid presumably when their employment ends (see below). Still, the level of violence inflicted in the process of these extortion schemes is significant. A migrant to Libya (2014–2017) recounts being attacked in Sebha during his first week there:

> the bandits attacked and arrested us. They put us in a prison to lock us up. After a few days, we decided to escape one night … but we were discovered and they beat us until one of us died. I was seriously injured. [Given my condition], one of the bandits got scared and returned me to where I was staying.

Another migrant (2015–2016) describes the practice of inflicting pain on the imprisoned migrant to ensure that those being extorted take the criminal gang's threats seriously:

> When we go out to work, they search us and take everything we have … . When you come back from work, they stop you, they hit you and they take everything you have. There are also people who kidnap you and put you in well-guarded places. If you don't give them 300,000 FCFA they won't let you go. There are many people who build houses where they put up stakes where they can tie people up. These houses are like prisons … . If they take you hostage, they will ask you for a phone number of your close relatives. And, they'll dial the number while hitting you really hard … so your relative knows that you are in their hands and that you are in pain. Also, sometimes they have a long knife and cut you [so that] you scream very loudly so your family will know that you are in pain. So, they ask your family to pay 300,000 FCFA to 400,000 FCFA. If your relatives are in town [in Libya and] can afford it, they'll come and pay to release you. If not, your family in the village [in Niger] will be asked to manage to send the money to release you.

Others report being submitted to electric shocks or being burned with cigarette lighters while on the phone with their relatives. These activities appear to be facilitated by the chaotic and violent situation in Libya where the presence of the state and rule of law is minimal. Our few informants who spent time in Algeria during the same time period do not report experiencing or witnessing kidnapping and extortion there.

Given the problems of insecurity, migrants live clandestinely and will rarely go out of their homes except to work or to go to the mosque. One 2015–2016 migrant says, 'I spent two years in Libya. And every day we are under control. We live in hiding so as not to be caught by armed bandits'. Another, working there during the same time period, states:

> The main difficulty is that you can't go out. If you go out, it's just to go to the mosque and go home to lock yourself in the house. You can't walk around. Even to go to work, you have to call a trusted taxi driver who will come to your doorstep to pick you up. And, on the way back, it's the same thing. And as soon as you get home, you lock yourself in your room. … So, it's your employer that you call to pick you up and the one who will bring you home. So, it's up to you to explain to him that if he wants you to work for him, it's up to him to pick you up and bring you back after work.

One is not safe even while working, as illustrated by the account of a 2015–2017 migrant working as a cargo loader:

> One day they brought us to a store where the police were in the process of seizing migrants. The police seized us and we were put in their vehicle and taken to prison. This is how we went to a jail with over 500 other black people. To get released, you had to pay. Our boss has a Toubou friend who took care of getting us released. [Researcher: Were you in a government prison?] No, I don't think so since once you give them money they release you with no documents. If you are released today, you can be captured again as soon as you are out. Prison has become commerce for them. [Researcher: So if they kill someone, will something happen?] Nothing at all and no one is going to say anything. We actually spent some time with someone's corpse in the prison. They scare us too much [to say anything].

As shown in Table 2, the types of employment found in the Sahara are dominated by manual labor positions such as cargo loaders, mason assistants, houseworkers, or agricultural workers (working in gardens). It is not uncommon for migrants, particularly agricultural workers, to interact on a day-to-day basis not with their employers but with an intermediary. Most commonly, migrants will stand in a public location with many Africans

waiting to be taken for day jobs in the hopes that those day jobs turn into salaried work by month. Standing with hundreds can be difficult, as described by one migrant (Libya 2012–2015):

> You will find yourself on the roundabouts with more than 1000 people looking for a job in the sun. If a vehicle stops and looks for two people to recruit, everyone runs towards the vehicle. So it's the strongest who are chosen. The strongest win.

Another way is to actually be bought from criminals or for the debt owed a transporter. Say a transporter fails to obtain sufficient payment from a migrant or his family, he may obtain what is owed him from an employer who then holds the migrant in peonage. Such debt bondage is very common and can be confused by outsider observers as slavery (Brachet and Scheele 2022). As a 2014–16 migrant to Libya describes, extracting oneself from such situations is difficult:

> In Sebha, they take you to a garden and sell you. You work during the month. Your boss may say that today the money I bought you for is gone. Are you going to continue with me or do you want to be free and go somewhere else? If you … say that you want to go elsewhere, he's going to drive you and drop you off at the side of the road. Then, he will directly call a police officer to come and pick you up [arrest you]. He is going to tell the policeman here is a black man who left my garden and this black man is walking in such a direction. The policeman comes and picks you up and either he takes you to Agadez [repatriation] or they will lock you in a prison. … So, anyone who tells you that they don't sell people there, I can say that they sell people. Because I was bought and sold.

Those who have to travel to their places of work are particularly vulnerable to capture given the time they have to spend on the streets and the need (if transport to work site was not provided by employer) to find a taxi driver who they could trust to not turn them over to bandits or police. This only magnifies the leverage held by employers over migrants. This is most certainly the case for those who work as agricultural workers, given the distances to the work site which increases leverage held by the employer. As a 2013 migrant to Libya describes:

> Most often they cheat us, they take us to remote places [for work] from where one has a hard time being able to come home. They take us to gardens to work on the basis of what we have agreed with them [in terms of wage]. Once we get there they refuse to accept what has been agreed and since it is far away we must accept what they offer us otherwise they will not take us home and we are afraid of being shot on the road [walking back].

As shown in Table 3, 80 percent of our informants stated that they had problems with getting paid the full amount due them for their work. This most often occurs in cases where the employer holds all or a portion of a migrant's salary, with or without stating that this is for safekeeping:

> Also, there are situations in which you work and if you come to claim your salary, your boss will say no to you, I will keep your money. One can work like this for 1 or 2 years. [Researcher: But is it okay for the boss to keep the money?] No, it's not normal. Arabs are not like the French. It's the French who seek to help people in that way. But, Arabs are never going to help someone like that. Because anyway you have a room where you can put your money even if it is under a mat. This solution is safer than the choice the boss made. After working years, the day you want to leave, this money has become a lot, it can even reach millions [of FCFA]. And, if you ask him for the money, he will even try to kill you because

> he will say that you are even trying to take his wife and children. He might even go and report you to the police. He's gonna accuse you of stealing or he'll say you fucked his wife. There are several people I know that this has been done to.

The high daily or monthly salaries enjoyed in North Africa are a major attraction. Still, these salaries are misleading since they don't necessarily add up to saved income. First, living expenses, particularly for accommodations, are high. More importantly, finding work is not guaranteed, and travel delays and imprisonment limit work during the time gone from home. As shown in Table 3, on average only 50 percent of the days away are spent working. Moreover, salaries may go unpaid by employers, income may be stolen, savings may be spent on ransom, savings may be spent on medical expenses, or savings lost when migrants are arrested and repatriated (arrested migrants having no chance to retrieve savings before repatriation). The average reported income savings rate (money saved/time divided by time gone) reported by returned Saharan migrants is 427 FCFA/day at previous SSA destinations and 689 FCFA/day at Saharan destinations. While there are some limitations to these estimates, a savings rate increase of 61 percent is significantly lower than what one would expect from the much higher Saharan salaries reported by our informants (average of 7500 FCFA/day).

Experiences of poverty at home

The previous section provides some context concerning this deadly migration route (McCormick 2017). While very much an undercount due to the hesitancy of families to talk about lost loved ones, reported deaths while on trans-Saharan trips equaled 6.25 percent of the returned and current migrants enumerated in this study combined.[8] The hardships, fear and abuses experienced by returned migrants, while not unexpected, were more severe than they had imagined, with most of the returned migrants we interviewed saying, unprompted, that they would not return to the Sahara unless security and economic conditions changed dramatically. Our interviews with boys and young men (12–19 years old) who had not emigrated yet reveal that they have a clear understanding of the risks, learned primarily from these same returned migrants to their communities. Despite this, 25 percent of them state that they have plans to travel to North Africa in search of work, with very few referring to the risks. Of those without plans, almost all do not refer to alternative livelihoods but instead state that they would like to finish primary and possibly secondary education before considering trans-Saharan migration. Indeed, we find that there is an increase in the prevalence of such plans with age and experience with labor emigration to other Sub-Saharan countries.[9] Given the relative recency of trans-Saharan migration in the study area, the past and future decisions made by our interlocutors do not stem from a 'cultural rite of passage', nor do the risks seem worth the modest gains (at least on average) obtained by such travels. The question

[8]Ribot, Faye, and Turner (2020, 52) stated that two percent of all households (of which 71.5 percent have trans-Saharan migration experience) surveyed in three villages 2016 in Tambacounda, Senegal, reported trans-Saharan migration death over the past 5 years.

[9]A logistic regression evaluating whether migration experience (0,1), age (12–19), membership within a household with Saharan migration experience (0,1) and level of schooling (none, primary, secondary) on whether a young informant had plans for Saharan migration (0,1) was found to be statistically significant (log likelihood $= -43.1$, $p = 0.0002$, pseudo $R^2 = 0.22$ with migration experience ($p = 0.005$), membership within household with Saharan migration experience ($p = 0.41$) and age ($p = 0.02$) all positively related to Saharan migration plans, while having some primary or secondary education was not found to significantly influence Saharan migration proclivity.

we turn to is: why do young men put their lives as well as their physical and mental health at risk in this way?

Our qualitative interviews add insights into their experience of poverty not captured by the economic data presented earlier. This is not short-term food insecurity shaped by drought triggers but life-long grinding poverty near the subsistence floor. In short, they see little hope for a better future for themselves or their families by staying at home. Agriculture and livestock husbandry, the two most important livelihood activities, are seen as having little future, not due directly to climate change but related to low soil fertility and the declining access to agricultural and pasture land. This decline is not related simply to population growth but to the removal of land from production due to the purchase of land by urban elites based in the nearby capital of Niamey. These purchases began with President Seyni Kountché's 'land to the tiller program' of the 1970s that not only sought to give rights to tenant farmers but spurred government functionaries to farm (Ngaido 1996; Turner 1999).

In the Say Department, large land grants to the Islamic University of Say and the Sahelian Center of the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) were also carved out of village land in the early 1980s. This early trend of land appropriation by outsiders has only accelerated over the past decade, with purchases of village land by Niamey elites to serve as weekend homes facilitated in part by the land enclosures tied to the Great Green Wall Program (Turner et al. 2021). Due to a shortage of local pasture, herders have increasingly moved their livestock to Benin and even farther to the southeast in Togo and Ghana (Bassett and Turner 2007). For most, there is little opportunity to fully support one's family with agriculture or livestock husbandry even if rains are adequate (Table 1). Under such conditions of land scarcity, it is difficult for young men to establish separate grain fields from those of their fathers or brothers, a critical step in establishing their autonomy.

It is not surprising that young people generally refer less to agriculture or livestock husbandry and their constraints, a preoccupation of their elders, but instead to a lack of work (of any kind). When asked in a group interview about whether climate change is driving labor migration, one group member, after first noting that a lack of land rather than of water was constraining livelihoods, responded in this way:

> There is only a work problem in Niger. People work and earn 500 FCFA/day or 15,000 FCFA/month. There are [even] guards [of purchased land] who barely earn 25,000 FCFA/month [such guard positions have historically been viewed as good paying, coveted jobs]. With this amount you buy one bag [of grain] and with the rest you can only buy condiments. Thus, you cannot buy clothes, recreation costs, etc. you don't know what to do anymore. So you migrate. On the other hand, if you were to earn 75,000 FCFA [a month], even if you do not save money, you will not migrate. During the rainy season, you can support your children and meet their health care needs. When they get sick, you can buy the medicine.

Following an exchange in which the lack of land was discussed and how this is associated with the purchasing of land by Niamey-based outside investors (merchants and government officials), another group member said:

> In this kind of situation, when the children grow up they necessarily migrate … . It is the rich men alone who profit. These are the 'clerks' [e.g. paper pushers]. Because, if you don't work with the BIC [pen], I don't see how you can satisfy your hunger and solve your problems.

> There are more able-bodied illiterate arms than those who work with the BIC. And, even if you have studied, you need money and knowledge to take advantage of these degrees. Even [to gain employment] in the army, you have to have someone or you have to pay to get in. Here, it is the poor who suffer. It's only during elections that they [the poor] are paid, that's all. And, as soon as the person wins the election, it's over. You won't see him anymore.

These statements reflect widely expressed feelings of young men within southwestern Niger communities. As a young man, you are most familiar with your struggles and those of your father, much less with the relative successes of your grandfather. You are farming in an area with severe biophysical constraints within a political economic system that breeds only deep cynicism. Your decision to embark on Saharan migration, where risk of death is high, is shaped not only by fulfilling the needs of your family but also to take what is the only viable chance to break out of a life of continual subsistence struggle. In a real sense, those who remain at home are viewed negatively. This is reported by returned migrants and also even by interviewed youth, who, while remaining at home, also say that if the two groups are viewed differently, those who do not migrate to seek work are seen as not loving their families or as lacking initiative (Table 4). Saharan migrants are seen as having the opposite qualities and are more important (because of their economic contributions) and more worldly/experienced because of their travels. In short, those who left their families to embark on dangerous trans-Saharan travel are seen as more attached to their families and more responsible, and have greater say in household and community affairs.

Despite its risks, travel to North Africa is thus well accepted within our study communities. A very large fraction of returned migrants inform and consult with their family before departing to the Sahara (Table 2). In addition, all of our respondents stated that there is no shame in returning without goods or cash from North Africa. All those returning are well received and treated with respect. There is a sense among young men that, despite its dangers and indignities, there is little choice but to travel. To be a true man, one must not passively accept one's hopeless future but actively seek something different. In short, one must suffer shorter-term indignities in North Africa to seek dignity and self-esteem across one's life.

Hopelessness is pushing young men from their homes in southwest Niger, but what explains the shift toward North Africa compared to other Sub-Saharan countries despite the risks? One response could be that North Africa represents a high-risk, high-reward choice. Evidence from our interviews presents a more complex picture. The average take-home savings at these destinations are higher than at Sub-Saharan country destinations, but by a much smaller margin than one would expect from wage rate differentials. Most Saharan migrants have prior experience at Sub-Saharan migration destinations. Seventy-seven percent of returned Saharan migrants had previous migration experience in the other Sub-Saharan countries. As reported above, those youth with prior migration experience in other Sub-Saharan countries are significantly more likely to have plans to cross the Sahara (even when controlling for age). Our informants make a clear distinction among the types of work, not just related to pay, obtained at Sub-Saharan and Saharan destinations as a motivating factor (Table 2). For example, a returned migrant with experience in both the Ivory Coast and Libya (2015–2017) compares the two in this way:

> The Ivory Coast and Libya are different. In the Ivory Coast, it is [petty] commerce that works. You can do a day without selling anything. There is no work there. In Libya, there is work

Table 4. Summary of data collected in interviews with 100 young males within the study communities concerning their migration experience, plans for Saharan migration, and general impressions of the Saharan migrants and destinations.

Demographics and prior migration experience	
Age	Mean: 15 years, range: 12–19 years
Ethnicity	68% Zerma, 32% FulBe
Marriage status	96% single, 4% married
Level of education (acquired some schooling at level)	27% illiterate, 37% primary, 36% secondary
Labor migration experience	21% with seasonal labor migration (7% international)
Average (median) months away	6.6 (6)
Type of work on migration	37% manual labor (water/cargo hauler, mason assistant, herder), 53% petty commerce, 10% Islamic student
Plans for Saharan migration	
Currently have plans to embark on Saharan migration	24% with: (a) reasons for these plans: food insecurity and poverty as the sole cause (83%); poverty and the need for money to marry (17%); (b) risks of these plans: crossing the desert (27%), thirst (18%), vehicle breakdowns and or abandonment by transporters in the desert (15%), bandits (35%) or unknown (5%). Percentages are of all reasons and risks mentioned by those with plans.
Currently do not have plans for Saharan migration	76% with reasons for no plans: interested in finishing school first (87%), concerned about risks versus rewards (10%), have no family or friends at Saharan destinations (3%). Percentages are of all reasons mentioned by those without plans.
Impressions of Saharan migration and migrants	
Young men who do not emigrate are appreciated differently (% of all differences cited by 52% informants who state there is a difference)	52% state that they are viewed differently with some among these stating that those who remain are seen as not loving their family (19%), lack initiative or are lazy (26%), and are not as important since they do not contribute sufficiently to the family (43%), are not as worldly and aware of life's demands (11%)
What are the positive features of Northern Africa and Europe as imagined by informants (% of all characteristics cited by informants)	Lots of money (25%), many employment opportunities (28%), abundant food with no hunger (15%), an easy life including a cool climate (21%), don't know (10%)

> everywhere. You can have work contracts per day or per month. You are guaranteed to have at least something to eat. That is why we prefer to go to Libya. Business is luck while work is with effort.

Itinerant trading with thousands of others selling the same product on the streets of Abidjan is 'business', where success depends on luck, but salaried work as a construction worker, hauler of cargo, or agricultural worker is less risky because you get something based on the effort that you put in. Given how markets do not generally 'work' for the poor, this perspective is understandable. Still, these migrants, by embarking on Saharan voyages, have chosen to trade day-to-day economic precarity for heightened risks to life. In addition, the preference for the work in the Sahara compared to itinerant trading in SSA relates also to noneconomic benefits that they receive by spending time in the Sahara. One cannot reduce their motivations to simply a struggle to survive.

Many pointed out, despite the racism they experienced, the positive outcome of learning 'how to work'. Such statements initially confused us. These young men have worked for most of their young lives. But further discussion revealed that such statements distinguish the work performed in North Africa, often under near-slavery conditions, as being a productive activity (actually producing something) resulting from their effort and discipline. The products of work were visible and stemmed less from chance than

with street vending or dryland farming. Despite the racism and indignities they faced, returned migrants say that they individually benefited from new ideas from North African work (masonry, construction, mechanic work, irrigated farming, shopkeeping) that could be used upon their return to benefit themselves and their communities. Consistently, this was the orientation of Saharan migrants: they had little interest in remaining in North Africa or continuing to Europe. Instead, they sought income and ideas to make their lives less precarious back home. Their ability to act on these ideas is often limited by lack of access to capital and many constraints, both environmental and social. Still, being able to think about different futures for themselves in Niger counters some of the hopelessness they felt before leaving for North Africa.

Conclusions

The harsh conditions and indignities suffered by trans-Saharan migrants are horrific – and hidden in marginalized spaces from global view and concern. Our purpose in recounting some of the experiences of our informants was less to expose these unacceptable human rights abuses – as they have been documented elsewhere (e.g. Brachet 2011; McCormick et al. 2017; Moretti 2020) – than to provide some sense of the daily psychic pain at home that drives young men to embark on these dangerous journeys; a decision not made in ignorance. These quests are not driven simply by triggers of drought, insecurity or poverty – which are insufficient to explain the risks these young men take. Instead, these difficult decisions stem from the slow and silent violences suffered at home by rural communities due to longer histories of recurrent drought, persistent inequities, and blocked access to necessary resources and basic services.

Current international and domestic policies can be seen as contributing to persistent inequities and the expropriation of resources available to rural communities. At the same time, the international community (EU) seeks to contain West Africans in these areas devoid of access to environmental or economic capital. These are the roots of the hopelessness that drives young men northward. Their quests, while often resulting in tragedy, are driven by basic and deeply felt desires to be human within an inhumane global capitalist system. To be human is not to passively endure but to learn, seek alternatives and struggle. Trans-Saharan migrants actively submit to a myriad of indignities and hardships to seek dignities and meanings for their, hopefully, longer life courses.

In the end, the silent violence we see pushing young men to take grave risks is deepened by the silence of a global gaze that too often looks away and fails to recount their struggles. This is a violent silence (Kashwan and Ribot 2021) – a silence that allows the grinding violence of marginality to push the vulnerable into deep risk. It is important to note that climate will vary – indeed, it is likely to continue to change and bring new stresses to the Sahel. Nevertheless, addressing the actual – non-climate related – causes of today's dire conditions and hopelessness will certainly make Sahelian families better off under current and changing skies.

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