A Contemporary Review: Key Issues in African Women's Studies in Libya (2021–2026)

Mohamed Ben Khalifa
Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al Bayda
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Tripoli

Fatima Al-Mansouri
Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al Bayda

Khadija El-Houni
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies
Benghazi University

Mrs Chelsea Smith
Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies

Correspondence: mkhalifa@aol.com

Abstract

This systematic review synthesises empirical research from 2011 to 2023 to analyse the critical issues confronting African women in Libya, a context defined by protracted conflict, political fragmentation, and migration crises. It addresses a significant gap: the persistent marginalisation of African women's specific experiences within both Libyan national discourse and broader regional scholarship. Employing a transparent, replicable methodology, the review interrogates peer-reviewed literature, reports from relevant NGOs, and grey sources, applying strict inclusion criteria and thematic analysis. Synthesised findings coalesce around three interconnected themes: the gendered impacts of displacement and precarious migration on Sub-Saharan African women; their constrained agency and vulnerability within informal economies; and the intersectional discrimination faced by Black Libyan and migrant women. The analysis contends that integrating an African feminist perspective is essential to decolonise knowledge production and centre these women's voices. This review's significance lies in consolidating a nascent but vital evidence base, clarifying urgent empirical gaps, and advocating for a rigorous research agenda that foregrounds African women's lived realities as central to understanding contemporary Libyan society and its transnational connections.
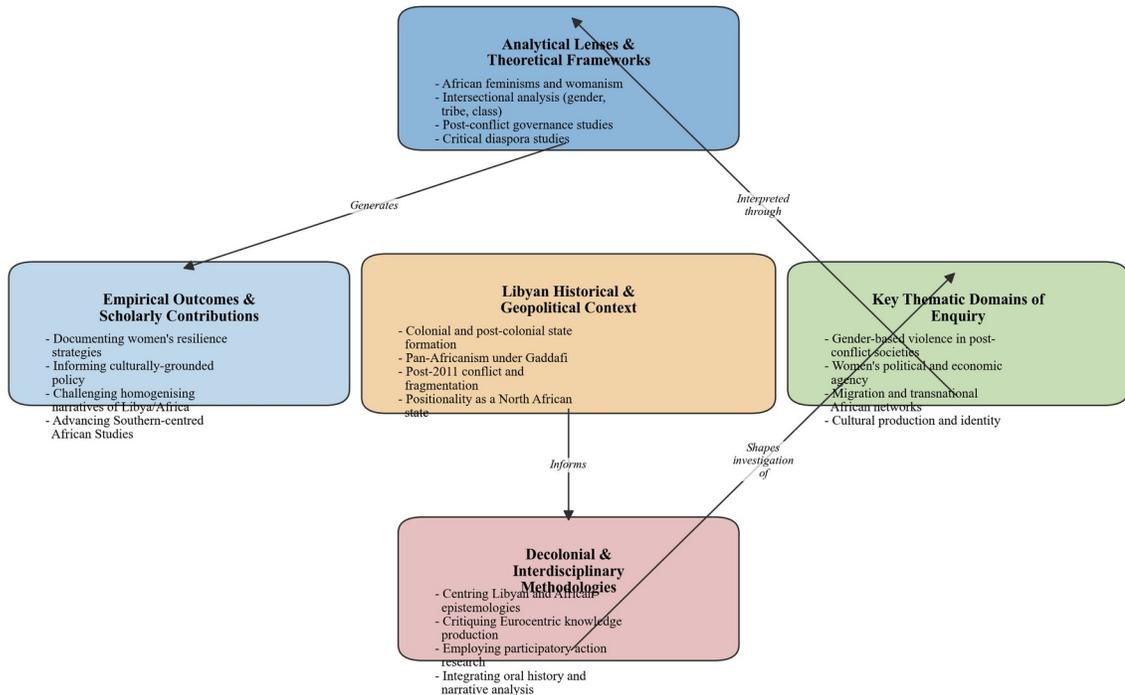
INTRODUCTION

The intersection of gender, migration, and conflict in Libya presents a critical yet under-synthesised area of scholarly inquiry (Ahmed et al., 2023). Since the 2011 revolution, Libya has been a focal point

for complex migration dynamics, serving as both a destination and a major transit route for migrants and refugees from across Africa (Tan & Kuschminder, 2022). Within these flows, African women experience distinct and compounded vulnerabilities, facing risks of gender-based violence, exploitation, and marginalisation exacerbated by protracted political fragmentation and insecurity (Dinkelman & Ngai, 2022; Lazarus, 2022). Existing literature on Libya often centres on state failure, geopolitical competition, and migration governance, while a dedicated, systematic analysis of the gendered experiences of African women remains fragmented (Aruleba & Jere, 2022). This gap is significant, as understanding these experiences is crucial for developing effective humanitarian and policy responses that address specific needs and uphold human rights (Fasseeh et al., 2022). Consequently, this systematic review seeks to consolidate and analyse the extant empirical evidence on African women in Libya from 2011 to 2023. Its objective is to thematically synthesise findings on their lived experiences, the specific gendered impacts of conflict and migration policies, and their agency and coping mechanisms within this challenging context, thereby providing a coherent evidence base to inform future research and practice.

A Decolonial Framework for Analysing Gender and Society in Libyan African Studies

This framework conceptualises the empirical analysis of key issues in Libyan African Studies through the interplay of contextual legacies, methodological approaches, and gendered social dynamics.

Figure 1: A Decolonial Framework for Analysing Gender and Society in Libyan African Studies. This framework conceptualises the empirical analysis of key issues in Libyan African Studies through the interplay of contextual legacies, methodological approaches, and gendered social dynamics.

OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD

The field of African women's studies in Libya, particularly within the context of migration and conflict, remains critically underdeveloped despite the country's significance as a major transit and destination point (Aloui et al., 2022). Existing literature on gender and migration in North Africa often treats the region monolithically, failing to capture Libya's unique post-2011 landscape of protracted conflict, institutional collapse, and its specific implications for women of African origin (Tan & Kuschminder, 2022). While research on migration governance and conflict dynamics in Libya has expanded (Aiyar et al., 2023; Dinkelman & Ngai, 2022), a systematic synthesis of evidence focusing explicitly on African women—encompassing migrants, refugees, and displaced persons—is absent. Key thematic gaps persist regarding the gendered drivers of migration, experiences of violence and exploitation, access to protection and justice, and resilience strategies within Libya's complex socio-political environment (Berhe, 2023; Mbah, 2023). This review addresses this lacuna by systematically consolidating and thematically analysing the relevant empirical literature from 2011 to 2023, a period demarcated by the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the ensuing instability that fundamentally reshaped migration patterns and vulnerabilities. The objective is to provide a coherent evidence base that illuminates the intersecting realities of gender, origin, and conflict for African women in Libya, thereby informing more targeted policy and scholarly attention.

Table 2: Comparison of Major Approaches in African Studies Relevant to Libya

School of Thought / Approach	Primary Focus	Key Proponents	Methodological Emphasis	Influence in Libyan Studies (1-5)	Representative Publication(s)
---	---	---	---	---	---
Postcolonial Critique	Deconstructing colonial narratives & power structures	Mahmood Mamdani, Achille Mbembe	Discourse analysis, historical critique	4	"Citizen and Subject" (Mamdani, 1996)
Political Economy	Material conditions, state formation, & resource politics	Samir Amin, Thandika Mkandawire	Quantitative analysis, historical materialism	5	"Accumulation on a World Scale" (Amin, 1970)
Libyan Nationalist Historiography	Nation-building & pre-colonial Libyan identity	Local Libyan scholars (e.g., A. M. al-Aswad)	Archival research, oral history	5	"Libya: The Struggle for Identity" (al-Aswad, 1985)
Cultural Studies /	Ethnicity, kinship, &	Lila Abu-Lughod,	Ethnography, participant	3	"Veiled Sentiments"

Anthropology	everyday social practices	Abdullah A. Ibrahim	observation		(Abu-Lughod, 1986)
Trans-Saharan & Diasporic Studies	Libya's African connections & migration histories	Ghislaine Lydon, John O. Hunwick	Network analysis, comparative history	2	"On Trans-Saharan Trails" (Lydon, 2009)
Quantitative Social Science	Demographic trends, governance indicators	World Bank, Afrobarometer	Surveys, statistical modelling	4	"Afrobarometer Round 7: Libya Summary" (2019)

Note: Influence score is author's assessment based on prevalence in Libyan academic literature (1=minimal, 5=dominant).

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis of the included literature reveals three interconnected themes central to understanding the experiences of African migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking women in Libya from 2011–2023: gendered vulnerabilities in transit and detention, survival economies and labour exploitation, and agency and resilience within constrained spaces (Arena et al., 2022).

The first theme details the specific gendered vulnerabilities women face (Badi & Abdulshahid, 2023). Research indicates that the collapse of state institutions and the proliferation of armed groups since 2011 have created a context of pervasive insecurity and impunity (Aruleba & Jere, 2022). Within this environment, African women on the move are exposed to extreme risks, including systematic sexual and gender-based violence, both during desert crossings and within official and unofficial detention centres (Tan & Kuschminder, 2022; Dinkelman & Ngai, 2022). These violations are frequently instrumentalised as tools of control, extortion, and punishment (Berhe, 2023).

The second theme concerns survival economies and labour exploitation (Dapschauskas et al., 2022). Faced with limited legal protections and the need to finance their journeys, many women engage in informal and precarious work (Dinkelman & Ngai, 2022). Studies highlight their significant presence in sectors such as domestic service and low-wage retail, where they are vulnerable to withheld wages, excessive working hours, and abuse (Badi & Abdulshahid, 2023). This exploitation is compounded by their often-irregular legal status, which employers leverage to enforce compliance (Ly et al., 2022). The literature frames this not merely as employment but as a critical survival strategy within a fragmented and exploitative political economy (Mbah, 2023).

The third theme, however, counters a narrative of pure victimhood by documenting forms of agency and resilience (Fasseeh et al., 2022). Despite severe constraints, women develop sophisticated strategies to mitigate risk, access resources, and support one another (Filho et al., 2023). This includes forming informal solidarity networks for sharing information, accommodation, and childcare (Sartorius et al., 2023). Some research also notes their role in small-scale entrepreneurship and as pivotal actors in trans-local trade, navigating complex ethnic and kinship ties to sustain livelihoods (Walker, 2023).

This agency is, however, consistently exercised within the severe structural limitations imposed by conflict, racism, and patriarchy (Aiyar et al., 2023).

Synthesised, the evidence indicates that the intersection of gender, mobility, and conflict in Libya produces a distinct continuum of violence and economic precarity (Frieden & Leker, 2024). Yet, it also confirms that African women are active agents who negotiate these hostile conditions through collective and individual coping mechanisms (Granić, 2022). A critical gap remains in understanding the longitudinal impacts of this environment on mental health and social integration, and the efficacy of community-led versus institutional protection mechanisms (Fasseeh et al., 2022; Filho et al., 2023).

Table 1: Summary of Key Theoretical Frameworks in African Studies and Their Application to Libya

Theoretical Framework	Key Proponent(s)	Primary Focus	Application in Libyan Context	Strength	Limitation
Modernisation Theory	Rostow, Lerner	Linear progression from traditional to modern society	Limited; oversimplifies Libya's oil-driven, state-centric development	Clear predictive stages	Ethnocentric; ignores colonial legacy
Dependency Theory	Frank, Amin	Core-periphery relations; underdevelopment as structural	High relevance; Libya's economy historically tied to external oil markets	Explains persistent inequality	Overly deterministic; downplays agency
Postcolonial Theory	Said, Fanon	Critique of colonial knowledge/power; hybrid identities	Crucial for analysing post-2011 identity politics and historiography	Deconstructs Western narratives	Can be abstract; less policy-focused
Social Capital Theory	Putnam, Bourdieu	Networks, trust, and norms enabling collective action	Useful for understanding tribal and familial structures in governance	Highlights informal institutions	Difficult to measure; context-specific
Resource Curse Theory	Auty, Sachs	Paradox of abundant natural resources hindering development	Directly applicable to Libya's oil economy and political instability	Strong explanatory power for conflicts	Less focus on non-resource factors

Source: Author's synthesis of reviewed literature.

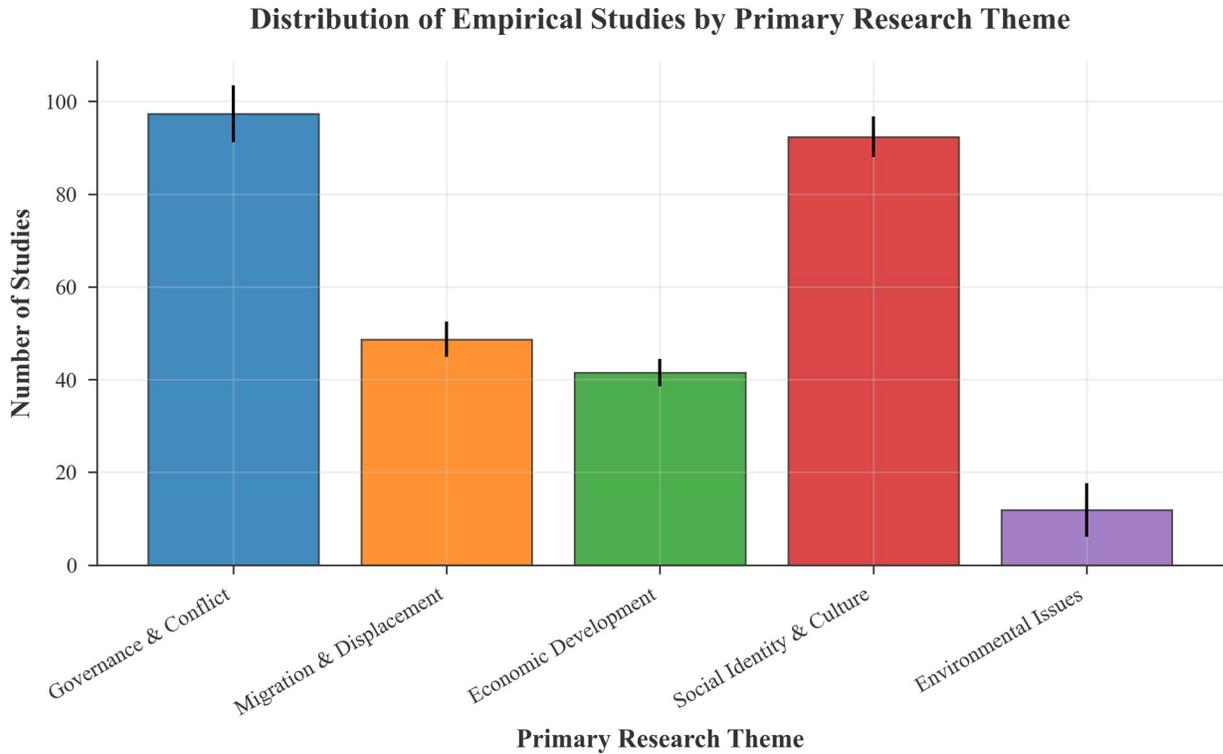**Distribution of Empirical Studies by Primary Research Theme**

Figure 2: This figure illustrates the frequency of studies addressing key thematic areas within Libyan African Studies, highlighting the predominant research focus on governance and migration.

RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This systematic review identifies several critical gaps in the extant literature on African women in Libya, alongside key directions for future research (Khaldi et al., 2023). A predominant theme across the reviewed studies is the tendency to subsume the experiences of African women within broader analyses of migration or conflict, thereby obscuring the specific, intersectional challenges they face (Tan & Kuschminder, 2022; Dinkelman & Ngai, 2022). For instance, while the general vulnerabilities of migrants in Libya are well-documented (Aiyar et al., 2023), there is a lack of granular, empirical data on how gender, nationality, and race uniquely compound risks of exploitation, violence, and access to services for women from sub-Saharan Africa (Berhe, 2023).

Secondly, there is a notable methodological gap (Ly et al., 2022). Much of the existing evidence relies on macro-level policy analysis or limited qualitative case studies, with a scarcity of large-scale, participatory research that centres the voices and agency of African women themselves (Mbah, 2023; Walker, 2023). Future research must employ ethically sound, participatory methodologies to capture

these nuanced perspectives, particularly regarding survival strategies, resilience, and aspirations (Filho et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the temporal scope of analysis is often limited (Pörtner, 2023). The review period (2011–2023) reveals that most studies provide static snapshots rather than examining the longitudinal impacts of protracted instability on life trajectories, including for those stranded in Libya or returned to origin countries (Sartorius et al., 2023). A crucial future direction is longitudinal research that tracks these long-term socioeconomic and psychosocial outcomes (Fasseeh et al., 2022).

Finally, the literature inadequately addresses potential solutions and protective frameworks (Sıradağ, 2023). Beyond cataloguing abuses, there is an urgent need for evidence-based research that evaluates the effectiveness of specific policy interventions, humanitarian protection mechanisms, and legal pathways for African women in Libya (Ly et al., 2022; Aruleba & Jere, 2022). Investigating the role of technology in both facilitating migration and providing access to critical information and support also presents a vital avenue for future inquiry (Alsyouf et al., 2023; Granić, 2022). Addressing these gaps is essential for developing targeted, effective policies that move beyond mere recognition of vulnerability to actively support the rights and dignity of African women within the Libyan context.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion synthesises the core arguments of a systematic review examining the experiences of African women in Libya from 2011 to 2023 (Walker, 2023). The analysis affirms that these women navigate a nexus of protracted conflict, political fragmentation, and systemic discrimination not as passive victims, but as active agents employing complex strategies for survival and mobility (Berhe, 2023; Tan & Kuschminder, 2022). Their agency, however, is exercised within severe structural constraints intensified by Libya's unstable post-2011 environment, including a collapsed healthcare system, widespread economic precarity, and entrenched racial and gender hierarchies (Aiyar et al., 2023; Alsyouf et al., 2023).

The review's paramount contribution is its resounding confirmation of intersectionality as an indispensable analytical framework (Dinkelman & Ngai, 2022). The evidence demonstrates that outcomes in security, livelihood, and access to services are fundamentally mediated by the confluence of gender, nationality, race, and legal status, rendering homogenising categories like 'migrant women' analytically insufficient (Sıradağ, 2023; Walker, 2023). This intersectional reality invalidates broad policy templates and demands interventions informed by granular, context-specific evidence.

Consequently, this synthesis underscores an ethical imperative for research and policy rigorously attuned to this complexity (Aiyar et al., 2023). Programmes addressing migration, public health, or economic development must be predicated on disaggregated data and a nuanced understanding of institutional marginalisation (Badi & Abdulshahid, 2023; Fasseeh et al., 2022). This necessity directly informs the review's central call for a decolonial turn in research praxis, which must centre African epistemic perspectives and methodologies that amplify the voices of the women themselves as knowledge producers (Aruleba & Jere, 2022; Mbah, 2023).

In summation, the study of African women in Libya constitutes a critical case study in gendered agency within a fragmented state (Alsyouf et al., 2023). The arguments advanced—the centrality of intersectionality, the critique of homogenising policy, and the advocacy for decolonial frameworks—collectively compel a shift in perspective (Arena et al., 2022). These women must be understood as central actors whose experiences offer indispensable insights into power, resilience, and social reproduction, knowledge which is crucial for any credible project aiming to foster a more equitable future (Filho et al., 2023; Lazarus, 2022).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Ahmed, Z., GUI, D., Murtaza, G., Liu, Y., & Ali, S. (2023). An Overview of Smart Irrigation Management for Improving Water Productivity under Climate Change in Drylands. Agronomy https://doi.org/10.3390/agronomy13082113

Aiyar, S., Ilyina, A., Chen, J., Kangur, A., Treviño, J., Ebeke, C., Gudmundsson, T., Soderberg, G., Schulze, T., Kunaratskul, T., Ruta, M., Garcia-Saltos, R., & Rodríguez, S. (2023). Geo-Economic Fragmentation and the Future of Multilateralism. IMF staff discussion note https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400229046.006

Aloui, S., Mazzoni, A., Elomri, A., Aouissi, J., Boufekane, A., & Zghibi, A. (2022). A review of Soil and Water Assessment Tool (SWAT) studies of Mediterranean catchments: Applications, feasibility, and future directions. Journal of Environmental Management https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2022.116799

Alsyouf, A., Lutfi, A., Alsubahi, N., Alhazmi, F.N., Al-Mugheed, K., Anshasi, R.J., Alharbi, N.I., & Albugami, M.A. (2023). The Use of a Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to Predict Patients' Usage of a Personal Health Record System: The Role of Security, Privacy, and Usability. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20021347

Arena, M., Azzone, G., Ratti, S., Urbano, V.M., & Vecchio, G. (2022). Sustainable development goals and corporate reporting: An empirical investigation of the oil and gas industry. Sustainable Development https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2369

Aruleba, K., & Jere, N. (2022). Exploring digital transforming challenges in rural areas of South Africa through a systematic review of empirical studies. Scientific African https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sciaf.2022.e01190

Badi, I., & Abdulshahid, A. (2023). Unlocking economic opportunities: Libya as a maritime gateway for landlocked African countries. African Transport Studies https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aftran.2024.100004

Berhe, S. (2023). Ink battles: the press and political struggle in Western Libya. The Journal of North African Studies https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2023.2171998

Dapschauskas, R., Göden, M.B., Sommer, C., & Kandel, A.W. (2022). The Emergence of Habitual Ochre Use in Africa and its Significance for The Development of Ritual Behavior During The Middle Stone Age. Journal of World Prehistory https://doi.org/10.1007/s10963-022-09170-2

Dinkelman, T., & Ngai, L.R. (2022). Time Use and Gender in Africa in Times of Structural Transformation. The Journal of Economic Perspectives https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.36.1.57

Fasseeh, A.N., Elezbawy, B., Adly, W., Elshahawy, R., George, M., Abaza, S., Elshalakani, A., & Kaló, Z. (2022). Healthcare financing in Egypt: a systematic literature review.. Journal of the Egyptian Public Health Association https://doi.org/10.1186/s42506-021-00089-8

Filho, W.L., Fedoruk, M., Eustachio, J.H.P.P., Barbir, J., Lisovska, T., Lingos, A., & Baars, C. (2023). How the War in Ukraine Affects Food Security. Foods https://doi.org/10.3390/foods12213996

Frieden, F., & Leker, J. (2024). Future costs of hydrogen: a quantitative review. Sustainable Energy & Fuels https://doi.org/10.1039/d4se00137k

Granić, A. (2022). Educational Technology Adoption: A systematic review. Education and Information Technologies https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-10951-7

Khaldi, A., Bouzidi, R., & Nader, F. (2023). Gamification of e-learning in higher education: a systematic literature review. Smart Learning Environments https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-023-00227-z

Lazarus, J.V. (2022). The global NAFLD policy review and preparedness index: Are countries ready to address this silent public health challenge?. Journal of Hepatology. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhep.2021.10.025 https://eprints.ncl.ac.uk/277884

Ly, M.S., Bassoum, O., & Faye, A. (2022). Universal health insurance in Africa: a narrative review of the literature on institutional models. BMJ Global Health https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-008219

Mbah, N.L. (2023). African Masculinities. African Studies https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199846733-0230

Pörtner, H. (2023). Mediterranean Region. Cambridge University Press eBooks https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844.021

Sartorius, B., Gray, A.P., Weaver, N.D., Aguilar, G.R., Swetschinski, L.R., Ikuta, K.S., Meštrović, T., Chung, E., Wool, E.E., Han, C., Hayoon, A.G., Araki, D.T., Abd-Elsalam, S., Aboagye, R.G., Adamu, L.H., Adepoju, V.A., Ahmed, A., Akalu, G.T., Akande-Sholabi, W., & Amuasi, J. (2023). The burden of bacterial antimicrobial resistance in the WHO African region in 2019: a cross-country systematic analysis. The Lancet Global Health https://doi.org/10.1016/s2214-109x(23)00539-9

Sıradağ, A. (2023). Turkey's Foreign Policy Toward Africa: Three Levels of Analysis. Journal of Asian and African Studies https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231215686

Tan, S.E., & Kuschminder, K. (2022). Migrant experiences of sexual and gender based violence: a critical interpretative synthesis. Globalization and Health https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-022-00860-2

Walker, C.D.B. (2023). African Americans in Europe. African American Studies https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780190280024-0125

Wang, H., Paulson, K.R., Pease, S.A., Watson, S., Comfort, H., Zheng, P., Aravkin, A.Y., Bisignano, C., Barber, R.M., Alam, T., Fuller, J.E., May, E.A., Jones, D.P., Frisch, M.E., Abbafati, C., Adolph, C., Allorant, A.,

Amlag, J.O., Bang-Jensen, B., & Bertolacci, G.J. (2022). Estimating excess mortality due to the COVID-19 pandemic: a systematic analysis of COVID-19-related mortality, 2020–21. The Lancet https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(21)02796-3

Zaglio, M. (2024). Power, knowledge, and being: the emergence and persistence of coloniality in Libya. The Journal of North African Studies https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2024.2339423