

Chapter 4

Gendered Dynamics in West African Migration



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Much of the discourse on West African migration ignores gender perspectives or tends to focus on women ‘as’ gender while men are portrayed as, perhaps unwittingly, neutral or un-gendered. On the contrary, both men and women migrate from their homes either permanently or temporarily with or without their families. These movements impact on the traditional family system of many countries within the region and the migrants themselves. The traditional notion of the male as a ‘bread winner’ and ‘mover’ has witnessed changes; remittances transferred by both males and female migrants are used to support and improve the wellbeing of households; gender division of labour and its associated roles are re-negotiated when females migrate independently; and some female migrants are abused and exploited at destination areas. The analysis in the chapter thus indicates that there are key gendered dynamics of the impacts of migration on migrants themselves and their households. Additionally, family relations are central in the gendered dynamics of remittances, migration aspirations, and return migration. In the process, masculinity and femininity ideals are negotiated and changed, even if patriarchal norms continue to affect notions of female migration in some settings.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses gendered dynamics in West African migration, with particular focus on practices and discourses concerning the migration and mobility of men and women, and how these relate to family relations and ideals. We examine the

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different migratory behaviours of men and women, the opportunities they face while migrating, the expectations they may be subjected to, and how they cope with different risks and challenges. Additionally, we are curious about how such experiences and the narratives thereof reflect – or challenge – ideals of femininity and masculinity.

Much of the literature on West African migration ignores gender perspectives or tends to focus on women ‘as’ gender while men are portrayed as, perhaps unwittingly, neutral or un-gendered. In contrast to this, we understand both men and women as gendered beings and pay attention to (changing) femininity and masculinity ideals, and how gender intersects with notions of social class, generation, and other categories of differentiation (Crenshaw, 1991). We further emphasize the pertinence of the family in migration. The various relations between migrants and their families may reproduce or challenge gender ideals. They form part of affective circuits, constituting “social formations that emerge from the sending, withholding, and receiving of goods, ideas, bodies and emotions” that link migrants and their family and peers (Cole & Groes, 2016: 2). Such an understanding thus accentuates relationality as well as negotiations and contestations across time and place. It also throws light on the differentiated positions of migrants and their families in transnational or translocal social fields (Levitt & Schiller, 2004), characterized by structural inequalities that shape opportunities and expectations.

The chapter draws on a variety of predominantly anglophone academic sources, including our own studies on various dimensions of Ghanaian migration. It has also benefited from work from the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS), University of Ghana, and other local and international institutions. While we have strived to include examples and perspectives from across West Africa, the chapter gravitates towards Ghanaian migration; a bias reflecting our own research interests. However, reviewing the literature, we did find that the case of Ghanaian migration in a gender perspective tends to be particularly well studied.

We proceed in the following way. After an overview of the main patterns of West African migration in a gender perspective, we move on to discuss migration and the quest for a better future among the youth, followed by a section on changing migration aspirations and immobility. We then turn to the gendered dynamics of remittances, with discussion of different family types and expectations to and contestations of remittances. The penultimate section elaborates on planned and unplanned return before we highlight our main findings and identify gaps in the literature in the conclusion.

4.2 Gendered Migration Dynamics in West Africa – An Overview

Migration has been part of and parcel of West African life for centuries but mainly been portrayed as male-dominated until the 1980s. Female migrants were seen as persons who accompanied husbands, brothers and fathers on the migration journey

to work in cities and other neighbouring countries, though independent female migration has existed as well (e.g. Abdul-Korah, 2011; Awumbila & Torvikeh, 2018; Yaro, 2008). Male and female mobility patterns are and have been very varied, however, shaped by local and international developments that have facilitated or enforced the mobility of various groups and individuals. Likewise, women and men's migration are shaped – but not determined – by gendered social norms concerning the acceptance of and expectations to their mobility as well as economic and political structures, concerning employment, wages, rights etc.

During the last decades, the share of female migrants in West African movements has continued to grow, including an increasing number of skilled and independent women migrating to fulfil their personal and autonomous economic wellbeing (Adepoju, 2006; Awumbila & Torvikeh, 2018), in line with the global femininization of migration. As shown in Table 4.1, the percentage of female migration from the West African sub-region has increased between 1960 and 1980, representing 42.1–45.4%, following the general trend of African migration. From 1980, the proportion has been relatively stable up to now, with slight decreases and increases, representing 45.1–45.7%, slightly below the average of female migrants from all over Africa.

Figure 4.1 breaks down the numbers of migrants from the different ECOWAS countries in 2019, out of the almost ten million West African migrants. The top five countries with high international migrants are Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Among these countries, only Côte d'Ivoire has a slightly higher number of female international migrants than males, possibly attributed to the political conflict in Côte d'Ivoire and following displacement of many women and children (Awumbila et al., 2014).

Both men and women migrate primarily within the West African region, but some also find themselves in Europe and North America, and more recently in Asia. This development may be due to the political and economic crisis that affected many West African countries in this period, prompting new migration patterns, including increased internal and long-distance migration in many contexts. Within the subregion, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment has played an important role. Agreed to by Member States in 1979, the protocol aimed

Table 4.1 Percentage of female migrants from Africa and West Africa

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Region of origin	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
All of Africa	42.2	42.3	42.6	43.0	44.1	44.4	45.6	46.0	45.7	45.3	45.1	46.3	46.4
West Africa	42.1	42.7	43.0	42.6	45.4	45.4	45.1	45.8	45.5	45.3	45.3	46.0	45.7

Source: <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>

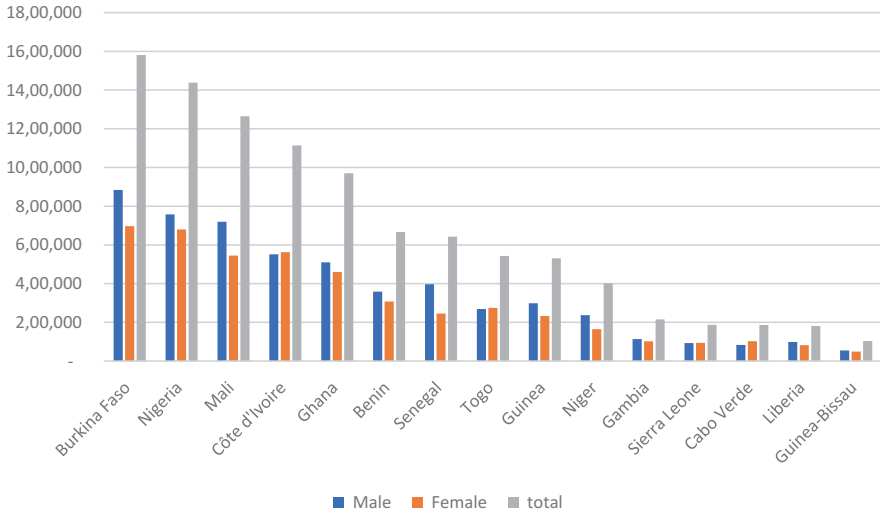


Fig. 4.1 Gender distribution of West African migrants in 2019. (Source: <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>)

at promoting development through free movement of persons, goods and services, facilitating residence and employment in the community. Since its implementation, the region has witnessed increasing labour migration of women, joining the already high numbers of migrating men, following infrastructural development, the increasing production of cash crops, such as coffee, cocoa and groundnut and the development of the mining sectors and oil discovery (Quartey et al., 2020).

4.2.1 *Feminization of West African Migration?*

The developments described above have contributed to changing patterns and trends of West African migration, moving it from a male-dominated experience to an almost equal gender composition, though there are still more male migrants from most countries. Increasing demand for services in e.g. care work across the various neighbouring countries and beyond, including domestic work should be mentioned as an important factor as well. In Ghana, for instance, domestic workers hail from other parts of Ghana as well as from neighbouring countries (Awumbila et al., 2017). Likewise, young Ghanaian women who engage in independent livelihood migration and find work in menial jobs such as *kayayoo* (head portage) in the urban centers have become a significant trend of contemporary female migration. A short historical perspective serves as an illustration of changing gender patterns (refer to Box 4.1).

Box 4.1: Kayayoo Migration from Northern to Southern Parts of Ghana

Contemporary *kayayoo* migration feeds into long-term seasonal, livelihood and (conscripted) labour migration from northern Ghana to the central and southern parts of the country that were established during colonialism. At the time, such migration was pre-dominantly undertaken by men, and women were discouraged to migrate independently, due to unequal access to paid labour, gender ideology and gossip of young single unemployed women as prostitutes and promiscuous. Female mobility was thus mainly linked to men, and marriage constituted an important migration conduit for women – either as wives following their husbands or women visiting family members and marrying a migrant already living there (Abdul-Korah, 2011). During the first years of independence, women started joining their husbands as soon as they got a job, rather than staying behind. Still, the overall trend of marriage as a conduit of women’s migration dominated until the 1980s where young women started to migrate independently to urban centers where they now outnumber male migrants. *Kayayoo* migration has received a lot of attention in the literature (e.g. Awumbila & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; Latoff et al., 2018; Teye et al., 2017) as well as spurred considerable interest amongst NGOs, often reflecting concern – and sometimes explicit moral queries – about the sexual risks and behaviour of these young women that is not usually expressed in relation to young migrant men. Hence, though gender practices have changed, patriarchal norms that problematize women’s mobility as precarious still persist.

Regional and international trade constitutes another important example. Women have been dominant in cross-border trading activities in West Africa for several decades (Awumbila & Torvikeh, 2018: 176), trading in food stuffs, cosmetics, jewelry and clothing etc. Further afield, the transnational trading of West African migrants with China and the recruitment of West African migrants to the Gulf and Middle East countries are significant trends. While earlier West African migrants moved to China for education, later movements include trading activities from Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal as well (Bodomo, 2020). These kinds of engagements have certain gendered dynamics. For the male and female traders plying the West Africa - China corridor, activities are structured along gendered lines, with females engaging in the import of soft commodities while males import hard ones (ibid. 2018a: 73; 2018). These differences seem to mirror gendered trading patterns within West Africa and are further attributed to the differences in capital and the time of entry into this transnational trading arena where men start earlier than women (ibid.).

A third significant trend of feminization is seen in temporary labour from West Africa to the Middle East and Gulf countries. Such migration took off in the 1980s, primarily consisting of male professionals to the petrochemical industry.

More recently, low-skilled labour migration has become prevalent in the domestic, construction and mining sectors. Young women without much formal education now constitute the large majority of West African migrants, reported to count 82% of Ghanaians in this region (Bisong, 2021; Kandilige et al., 2020). There is an increasing number of reported abuses especially among female domestic workers, attributed to a lack of rights and protection, low levels of formal education, migration status, and gender. As a result, first Nigeria and later Ghana banned low-skilled migration to several Gulf Countries in respectively 2014 and 2017, though the former has been reported to be unsuccessful as migrants would relocate to the neighbouring countries and go from there (Bisong, 2021: 8).

The emphasis on male migration as dominant until the 1980s, followed by increasing feminization, can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, we may see it as part of an overall global trend where destinations, modes of migration and types of migrants continue to diversify (de Haas et al., 2020). On the other hand, it can be perceived as an expression of gender-blind research, historically and today, that not only reflects a lack of gender-divided data (Awumbila & Torvikeh, 2018: 175) but also a lack of analytical attention and curiosity. Here we also note the tendency in some studies to portray female migrants as particularly vulnerable, “having little or no agency [while] their experiences as migrants have been constructed around ‘those left behind’, rather than as voluntary migrants” (Bisong, 2019: 4). Our ambition in the remaining part of the chapter is to offer a more nuanced perspective through attention to gendered ideals and practices, how these intersect with other dimensions, and the challenges and experiences of both men and women.

4.3 Migration and the Quest for a Better Future

An important part of the literature on West African migration focuses on social becoming and migration as a (hoped-for) pathways of improvement and adulthood, especially for male youth. In contrast to the celebration of youth in Western countries, adulthood is generally perceived as desirable in West Africa, as the achievement of “a fully recognized position as an adult person in society”, generating status and respect (Prothmann, 2017: 96, Christensen, Utas, and Vigh, 2006). Adult (hegemonic) masculinity is related to strong family values, marriage and provision (e.g. McLean, 2020). The realization of such gender ideals is not necessarily linked to migration. However, in situations of dire living conditions, chronic crises and/or (post)conflict, however, some young men – and women we may add – find themselves caught in a discrepancy between their chronological and social age (Vigh, 2006: 32) where migration constitutes an (imagined) pathway towards proper adulthood.

In Francophone West Africa, *aller en aventure* – going on adventure – is a commonly used term for primarily male youth migration to ‘unknown places’ where the migrant does not have preexisting strong social networks (Jónson, 2008: 18, Bredeloup, 2017). Such migration has a (potentially) transformative dimension as

the migrant turns into a stranger, enabling him to take up work that would not be socially acceptable at home. In the Soninke context in Mali, for instance, this transformation is supposed to propel the young man towards mature manhood as a rite of passage where he detaches himself from his family and later re-attach himself as a matured adult man with a family of his own (Jónson, 2008). Young Malian women migrate as well, however, whether to bigger cities in Mali or further afield, in pursuit of less strenuous lives or the adventures of the city or abroad (Hertrich & Lesclingand, 2013; Konaté, 2010).

Going on adventure may also refer to a quest for more interesting, intense and dignified lives, even if this quest involves risks and suffering (cf. Dounon, 2016). In Bredeloup's words, such adventure is a moral experience where migrants seek "a particular lifestyle [...] to escape their predictable, and possibly, gloomy everyday lives and pursue their dreams" (2017: 134). Other often-used expressions for similar kinds of migration projects include hustling and traveling in anglophone West Africa (Gaibazzi, 2015). Here, as in *aventure*, notions of luck and fate are often central.

While such journeys seem to focus on individual and existential life trajectories of young men, they are also related to the fulfilment of family obligations and the hope of establishing a better and dignified future back home after a successful migration experience. Several scholars have examined the link between breadwinning, caring and respectable adult masculinity in Senegalese contexts, where men are expected to be the main breadwinners despite unemployment and lack of opportunities. Focusing on male Wolof transnational migrants in Italy, Sinatti describes migration in the Wolof context as:

... a valuable avenue that can allow caring for parents and siblings, moving in an ideal progression of manhood, and more broadly advancing one's social standing [...] a means for men to restore their role as economic providers and principal breadwinners, and thus reaffirm their masculinity (Sinatti, 2014: 221).

In this perspective, care, affect, provision and social status and respect is interlinked and demonstrated through monetary and material support to family members. The exercise of this socially legitimized and dominant masculinity ideal – or hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) – revolves around taking responsibility. First for one's parents and then for one's own household in "a transition to manhood and in later progression towards more mature visions of masculinity" (Sinatti, 2014: 220) that ideally ends in becoming the head of an extended family. Migration, then, might make these different steps of masculinity possible through exercising economic responsibility, demonstrating how local institutions and patriarchal norms shape migratory practices and aspirations.

The image of (masculine) success constitutes a transformation of social class realized through migration. This transformation, however, often hinges on migrants' differentiated positions within transnational social fields where "individuals occupy different gender, racial, and class positions within different states at the same time (Levitt & Schiller, 2004: 1015). As Nieswand (2013) has suggested, migrants' performance and consumption of a middleclass lifestyle in the country of origin is

often financed by a working-class life in the country of settlement, perhaps in what would be considered degrading or shameful employment ‘back home’ and/or marked by social and economic deprivation. The image of the successful migrant is upheld through an ‘economy of appearance’ (Cole, 2014) and couched in ‘collaborative silences’ (Nieswand, 2013), however, where disclosure of the harsh realities of migrant lives is evaded by migrants, families and peers alike.

We should be careful, in other words, not to reproduce – or romanticize – overly instrumental understandings of migration as a guaranteed pathway to male adulthood or reify hegemonic notions of masculinity. Amongst the many risks is to ignore women as breadwinners, within and without migration contexts. Indeed, male migration often intensifies women’s provision responsibilities as remittances may be delayed, insufficient or not materialize at all (Kleist, 2017a). Likewise, we may overlook the fact that West African women have been migrating independently for decades, aspiring to change their life and future. Sabar’s study on West African female migrants who came to Israel in the 1990s provides an example. In the words of a Ghanaian woman in Tel Aviv: “I’m just like my sister and my cousin... there are so many women back home that want change... they all want something else. They want to work, save and get away... What kind of future do we have?” (2008: 463). Hence, while most of the literature on migration as social becoming and a pathway to a better future tends to focus on men, this pertains to women as well.

4.4 Changing Migration Aspirations

In as much as male adulthood is associated with migration, especially to western countries, these beliefs systems are transforming due to the continuous frustrations that potential young migrants face in their attempt to reach Europe. Here we should remember the relatively high proportion of non-migrants compared to the smaller percentage – 3.5% as a proportion of the world’s population – of persons who are internationally mobile (UNDESA, 2020). Likewise, we should keep in mind that the vast majority of West African migrants travel to neighbouring countries or within the subregion, rather than to Europe. Emphasis on migration, especially intercontinental migration, as the only or primary means to adulthood or success thus offers a one-sided understanding (de Haas, 2014; Massey et al., 1999). Terms such as “the age of immobility” or as “mobility bias” indicate a growing critique of the lack of analytical attention to immobility in the literature. While media narratives mainly portray a desperate desire of West African youth to reach Europe, studies have shown that half of adults in Sub-Saharan Africa do not wish to move to another country (Esipova et al., 2011; Setrana, 2021; see Schewel, 2015 for a study on Senegal).

Focusing on Ghana, Setrana realized that some young men and women who initially had the desire to migrate, after several frustrations, including strict immigration policies in Europe and North America, made personal decisions not to travel. Rather they adjusted to the conditions at home, and later described their stay as a preferred decision. She found that the (im)mobility processes involved families

and not individuals. For females, their decisions were taken with their families because they wanted their freedom and keep their business while the males also considered the exhaustive family responsibilities. One of the female stayers explained that her decision not to migrate is because she has control over her life in Ghana compared to living abroad. She said:

My brother receives monthly salary of about 1,440 pounds. He is able to save about 900 pounds every month. In Ghana, it is difficult to save. One advantage I have is that I run my own business, employing more than five workers, so, even if I am not at work, the job still progresses. Unlike me, my brother, goes to work at 6 AM and closes at 5:30 PM (quoted in Setrana, 2021: 16-17).

Despite the higher wages abroad compared to what this woman earns in Ghana, the non-economic factors are stronger causing her to abandon her migration decisions. Factors influencing decisions to stay are thus also gendered, be they economic or social.

Changing notions of the desirability of migration are also found amongst parents of and left-behind wives to Ghanaian labour migrants working in Libya and wives to returnees. Migration from Ghana to Libya is dominated by young men from rural parts of Ghana without much formal education who travel to send money to their families and save up for their future, working in construction, masonry or as day labourers. A few Ghanaian women have migrated as well to work as domestics and/or join their husbands but have been exposed to gossip about doing sex work and being promiscuous (Kleist, 2020). Furthermore, Ghanaian women's overland migration has generally been discouraged because of the high risk of sexual violence en route.

Discussing the social meanings of young men's migration amongst migrants' parents and wives, a recent study found that "parents aspire for their sons to migrate either to attain economic success or at the very least to engender a recognition of the need to pursue economic success" (Darkwah et al., 2019: 27). This is in continuation with the notion of migration as a means to becoming a respectable adult and establishing one's own future that has been dominant in these migrant-sending areas. Left-behind wives and wives to returnees did not share this view, however. Whereas migrants used to be considered attractive spouses and boyfriends, Darkwah et al. show that women express disapproval and a sense of discomfort with their partners' (potential) migration, explaining that living apart "breaks the affective ties between parents and children on one hand and spouses on the other" (2019: 27). These findings thus indicate changing gender and family ideals, with more emphasis on co-habitation, accentuating that gender relations and ideals are not static.

4.5 Gendered Dynamics of Remittances

West African migration is thus closely related to gendered family responsibilities, as indicated above. In this section, we discuss how such practices are embedded in – or change – gender relations and ideals, considering different family structures and

kinship models in West Africa and their repercussions for a key motivation for migration: remittances. Whether migration takes place in the context of matrilineal or patrilineal kinship organization, in monogamous or polygamous marriages, or in situations of extended or nuclear families living arrangements, these set-ups shape how the relationships between different migrant or ‘staying’ family members are organized, negotiated and understood, including in relation to sending and receiving remittances.

For poorer families and households, remittances are a central concern from both sending and receiving perspective, imbued with meaning beyond the merely economic aspect (Hannaford, 2016; Wong, 2006). Here we need to take different models of family organization into consideration (Teye et al., 2017). Dominant discourses of gender ideals in West Africa accentuate patriarchal societies, characterized by male heads of households (or heads of families), division of labour organized according to gender and age, often with emphasis on men as main breadwinners, and long-term cycles of reciprocity that might span across generations. Such patriarchal norms and narratives have strong resonance with notions of men migrating to provide for their families while their wives and children (or parents, sisters, cousins etc.) stay behind. Certainly, such migration exists and has been historically dominant in many contexts – and might still be in some localities. Migration patterns are very varied, however, and an idea of men sending money to women as the primary mode of remittances is problematic. Rather, remittance sending and spending tend to take place along gendered lines.

It is an overall trend that women send money to other women and only rarely to men, while men mainly remit to other men as well as to their mothers, wives and sisters. Focusing on northern Ghana, several studies describe how female migrants in the southern part of the country – the so-called *kayayoo* migrants – send food-stuff, household items, and clothes to their mothers (or other female relatives) and remit regularly, in smaller amounts, than sons who would send larger amounts but on an infrequent basis, if at all (Abdul-Korah, 2011; Pickbourn, 2011; Teye et al., 2017). Pickbourn found that households where women are primary remittance receivers spends the double on education than households with a male primary recipient (2011: 74). Conversely, men would spend remittances on investment in farming, housing, and for younger single men, saving up for a bride price and more generally establish themselves in the future. In the words of a woman from northern Ghana:

The females send home [more] remittances than the males. When daughters are there, they think about their parents and buy things to support them. They support the mother with ingredients and support the father too. So the females are supporting more than the males. For the males when they are there, they wait until they are coming home before bringing money, but the females, while they are there, think about the family back home and support” (quoted in Teye et al., 2017: 15).

Such gender-divided remittance flows reflect a division of labour where women are in charge of cooking and household reproduction and men of longer-term material investment. However, this is not the only overall pattern. In polygamous families, both sons and daughters tend to “send all types of remittance to their mothers

because of fears that their fathers may use the remittances on other wives or children” (Teye et al., 2017: 4–5). Likewise, few women send remittances to their husbands, as they worry that their husbands would use the money on girlfriends (or other wives) or think that the man has the responsibility to provide (Teye et al., 2017: 5). Migrant men, conversely, usually send remittances directly to their wives. Yet, a study from Senegal shows that migrant men may also choose to send the main bulk of remittances to their mother, or even a co-wife, for them to pass on the money to the (other) wife, rather than remitting directly, a choice that might be interpreted as reflecting who the migrant trusts or values the most (Hannaford, 2016: 98).

Furthermore, there is a strong cultural emphasis on motherhood in matrilineal kinship societies, such as the Akan in Ghana where both men and women are supposed to support and strengthen their own matrilineal lineage (Adjaye & Osei-Mensah, 2008; Clark, 1999). While migrant men do support their wives and children, Akan “couples [in Ghana] typically maintain separate incomes-dictated by their lineage membership and responsibility-and make separate financial decisions” (Wong, 2006: 373) and maternal uncles traditionally hold a special responsibility towards the well-being and education of their nephews and nieces (Fortes, 1963). Such kinship organization may also shape remittance patterns.

Hence, while it may be an overall pattern that migrant wives do not remit money to – or share their income with – their husbands ‘back home’, gendered responsibilities and practices might change during migration. This and other observations made here emphasize the need for attention to context, change and different kinds of family units and kinship organization. It also reminds us that family relations and remittances might be fraught with different interests and potential conflict. As Hannaford accentuates, remittances do not only constitute economic transfers but also expressions of care and affect, taking on “intensified properties of meaning” (2016: 97) that may range from expressions of love and pride to conflict. Migrants’ inability or decision not to remit to family members – whether parents, siblings or children – might cause a sense of disappointment and even betrayal amongst recipients while migrants themselves might be ashamed of not being able to send enough money or stressed about untenable or unrealistic expectations to them (Hannaford, 2016; Wong, 2006). Such situations might be experienced as gendered, reflecting socio-cultural practices and family ideals of masculinity and femininity as mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, sisters or brothers etc. Yet, the predicament of remittance expectations seems to be shared by migrant men and women alike though it seems to be common that younger unmarried men send fewer remittances and/or prioritize saving up for their own future first or simultaneously.

The ability for migrant women to mother their children from elsewhere is an important aspect of remittances and care. Through social and economic remittances, the traditional role of women as caregivers for their children has been transformed. Despite the fact that traditional childcare is mostly shared among family members and fosterage is common, mothers are generally seen as the most important caregiver. Parents with children living apart from them use technology to keep in touch and care from a distance. Ghanaian migrant women in China, for instance, use mobile phones, laptops and mediums such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype and

Zoom to carry on with their childcaring responsibilities and to avoid being accused of abandoning their motherly duties (Kwami, 2016). They remit to pay for their children's school fees, feeding, hospital bills and daily expenses among others. International migration may thus pay for school enrolment – if parents send remittances, that is.

4.5.1 *Contested Expectations*

We may speculate that with the intensification and diversification of types of migrants, modes of migration and migration destinations, women and men may face many of the same conflicts, expectations, and challenges even though these might still be articulated and experienced through gender ideals and gendered notions of (im)mobility and responsibility. Social class, educational background and exposure to racialization in countries of transit or settlement may be other factors that shape migrant experiences and remittances. Wong writes about Ghanaian women in Canada who had migrated with “lofty expectations: to obtain rewarding jobs, to work hard to support family members in Ghana; to accrue capital; and, eventually, to return to establish a business or to construct a house in Ghana” (2006: 366). Their expectations of a temporary and successful stay were often disappointed, however, as they ended up in precarious and labour-intensive jobs in service, manufacturing or clerical sectors, suffering downward social mobility and status loss. Likewise, they often struggled to send money to their families in Ghana and were faced with unrealistic expectations. A Ghanaian woman in Toronto responded this way in response to the question about family expectations:

I have one sister there [in Ghana] . . . she expects everything. Because I am here, she feels that I have a job, like here you have too much money.... And I told her it's not something I can do [remit] because even with these two children, I'm struggling. So it's not possible that I can take on her children and look after them. They think we just pluck money (quoted in Wong, 2006: 367).

Such frustrations are common amongst migrants who feel that their families ‘back home’ do not understand the many challenges and high living expenses that they be exposed to (cf. Kringelbach, 2015). The situation of the migrant above often applies to men as well but, in this case, the expectation of sisters supporting sisters might be invoked. Or, in other words, it is articulated and experienced through gendered practices and ideals. In Sinatti's study of Senegalese migration to Italy a young man complained about the widespread expectations to migrants as a “a reservoir of wealth [...] I hand out the dough and beyond this, I don't exist”, describing himself as a “milk-cow” (2014: 222). While Wolof migration is generally described as embedded in masculinity ideals of provision, this migrant used the feminized image of being a milk-cow, perhaps expressing his frustration with a situation where provision is delinked from other dimensions of adult manhood, such as responsibility and decision-making.

For migrants with big provision responsibilities or faced with family emergencies, remittance responsibilities are stressful and the inability to support money to family members in need may be experienced as shameful and potentially damaging important relationships. A West African migrant in the UK explained the kind of pressure that compels him to remit home. He said:

I saw it as a duty to cater for my mother and besides, everybody expected a lot from me, so no matter what, I had to send money home once I was abroad, if not regularly, at least, at Christmas. You see, people just start imagining your riches the very moment you travel to the West (quoted in Kyei, 2013: 118).

Finally, we should not forget that just as remittances cannot be reduced to mere economic exchanges but form part of expressions – or expectations – of affect and care, migrants and their families ‘back home’ are not necessarily distrusting or belittling the challenges that their family members abroad may face. Rather, the point is to neither instrumentalize nor romanticize remittance practices and pay attention to how such practices might be reflecting – or articulated as – gender relations and ideals.

4.6 Gendered Dimensions of Return Migration

Like other kinds of migratory movements, return migration and reintegration are embedded in family and gender relations. In Setrana’s study of Ghanaian returnees from North America and Europe, the motive to join family at home was strongest amongst female migrants. About 60% of the female returnees mentioned family as their main reason for return; and homesickness was equally expressed as the second motive for coming back home amongst both women and men (2018: 21). The nature of return migrants’ gender orientation further impacts on their experiences with regards to decision making and experiences upon return, including how they may navigate socially acceptable personal gender views and positions (Arhin-Sam, 2018: 293). Indeed, negotiation processes may result in tension and relationship problems, with female returnees of the view that their male counterparts find it easier to find suitable partners. Women in Arhin-Sam’s study indicated that the men the female returnees met in Ghana were usually backward and they expected them to solely engage in house chores and other reproductive roles. Meanwhile, male returnees felt that potential partners wanted to exploit them because they perceived them as rich.

Return may thus cause renegotiations of gender identities, roles and norms that are intersected with class differences (Wong, 2006). In some cases, migration empowers both men and women, as they might have acquired more flexible gender roles than in traditional and patriarchal societies and through migration experiences abroad. Setrana & Arhin-Sam (2021) provide an illustrative example:

Ama, the 30 years old lady migrated to the Netherlands in search of a better life. In 2009, she decided to return to Ghana permanently. Prior to her decision to return ... she discussed with some of her colleagues to trade in electrical accessories, especially the unused electrical gadgets. With this agreement, she returned to Ghana in 2009 and since then, her friends have supplied her shop with these accessories. ... The business has expanded and employs other Ghanaians as well (quoted in Setrana & Arhin-Sam, 2021: 146).

Female return migrants may also face challenges in ensuring that their values and norms are perpetuated and enjoyed in a male-dominated environment though. Studying Ghanaian migrants in Toronto, Manuh (2003) has argued that they were enjoying favourable conditions in Canada, feeling independent and empowered, and hence with little inclination to return to Ghana. Their male counterparts, however, were more willing to return because of the respect and prestige they would enjoy back home. Similarly, Kleist (2015) has shown how male elite men have become 'big men' in Ghana upon return with careers in politics, business or as traditional authorities, reflecting notions of hegemonic masculinity and expectations to successful return migrants.

4.6.1 Deportation and Unplanned Return

Not all migrants have the choice whether to return or stay though. In the case of deportation or evacuation from migration crisis, migrants are forced to relocate without sufficient preparation that may result in social stigmatization and a sense of shame and loss of social standing for returnees and their families alike, if migrants return empty-handed.

Writing on young male deportees in Mali, Schultz (2020) describes deportation as a serious disgrace that erodes the life chances of young men and disturbs hegemonic masculinity ideals. Their untimely return leaves them in a situation of potential social death rather than the hoped-for embodiment of respectable and dignified manhood, such as marriage. Such situations may constitute social, even existential, challenges of masculinity. How the deportee handles and performs his return and post-deportee life has repercussions for the evaluation of his masculinity, however. Deportees might develop and draw on 'emergent masculinities' (McLean, 2020), highlighting the endurance and ability to deal with suffering during their predicament, even learning and growing from it.

Similar findings have been found in Ghana in studies of primarily male deportation and large-scale evacuation from the civil war in Libya in 2011 (Kandilige & Adiku, 2020; Kleist, 2017a, b, 2020). While some of these returnees were young single men, many were (also) providing for their families as fathers, husbands, or brothers, and some were mature men with extensive family responsibilities. In their case, returning empty-handed precluded them from fulfilling provision responsibilities, causing intense distress for returnees and their families. A man who was

supported by his younger sister upon his return remarked that “my family was expecting more of me [...] and I was expecting to do a lot for myself and my family. If I remember that, I become sad” (quoted in Kleist, 2017a: 335). In the same vein, a wife to a returned migrant explained that her husband has become “depressed because he can’t take care of his own family” (quoted in Kandilige & Adiku, 2020: 12). Such utterances may both be understood as expressions of affect and simultaneous worry about the economic predicament that migrant families face. They thus reflect broader expectations about masculinity as well as very concrete economic challenges.

While much literature on deportation focuses on men, the experience female deportees is described as at least as difficult in the literature. In Cape Verde, female deportees may be subjected to gossip about promiscuous behaviour and sex work and generally judged in harsher tones than men (Drothbohm, 2015) while deported female sex workers in Nigeria are seen as tainting Nigeria’s national image, having “failed as the symbolic bearers of the nation’s morality and image” (Plambech, 2017: 2214, cf. Ratia & Notermans, 2012). Conversely, male migrants’ sexuality is not seen as a theme of national interest, an observation we also recognize from the wider literature. This observation suggests that migratory practices change faster than gender ideals and, in particular, patriarchal norms.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to examine gendered dynamics of West African migration, with attention to differentiated practices and how gender interconnects with issues of generation, family relations, class and status among others. Based on a review of anglophone literature, we identified five overall themes where a gender perspective is prominent: Feminization of migration, migration as social becoming, changing migration aspirations, remittances, and return migration. We have also identified a few gaps, as we indicate below.

Although much of earlier discourse on West African migration has been male centered, the chapter shows that women have always been involved in migration and mobility. What has changed, perhaps, are the reasons for their engagement. Previously, women have mainly been described as joining the migration trail as wives, sisters and daughters but, for at least four decades now, women moving for education, work, and other purposes has become a prominent trend – the so-called feminization of migration. This development reflects changing practices, norms and gender ideals; likewise, it might reflect increased attention to women’s agency, rather than their relationships to men. Furthermore, it is embedded in the transformation of local and global structures, including changing labour markets and advanced telecommunication that facilitates transnational practices, such as long-distance parenting. Yet, we have also shown that women’s independent migration is

still confronted with concern and preoccupation with women's sexual behaviour, an indication that migratory practices seem to develop and change faster than patriarchal norms.

Despite the growing emphasis on women's migration, the literature on migration as social becoming and adventure primarily analyzes migration as a means of achieving and performing adult manhood in situations characterized by few opportunities. Living in such situations also concern young women, however, and women are and have been migrating to change their lives and future, and to support their families. This observation calls for studies on women going on adventure and the gender and family dynamics that such migration is embedded in or constrained by.

Immobility constitutes another important perspective. The literature on involuntary immobility – and disrupted high-risk migration – also focuses primarily on young men, frustrated with strict migration policies and the high cost of migration processes. While important, this is not the whole story. The chapter shows that migration aspirations are in transformation and that some women and men abandon migration plans because they anticipate better opportunities in their home country than abroad. Social class is important to factor in here. Likewise, the appreciation of migration is changing amongst some migrant spouses who express a growing discomfort with their husbands being or going abroad. The idea of an all-encompassing desire to migrate is thus problematic and needs to be nuanced, with attention to differentiated and transforming migration aspirations.

Family relations are thus central in the gendered dynamics of remittances, as we show, challenging the tendency of reducing remittances to economic exchanges. Inspired by the affective circuits approach, we explore how remittances form part of gendered expressions – or expectations – of affect and care in families. This means an accentuation of a rich variety of practices: from conflicts and tension between family members to compassion and understanding of the challenges that family members 'back home' or abroad may face. Here a central point is that remittance practices might be reflecting – or be articulated as embedded in – gender ideals, such as notions of dutiful sons and daughters or good mothers and fathers.

Finally, we have discussed how gender shapes the experiences of and expectations to return migrants, in the case of both prepared and unprepared – or enforced – return. Returnees have to navigate socially embedded masculinity and femininity ideals, often related to provision, responsibility and adulthood. While studies of male returnees suggest that deportation may be experienced as a masculinity crisis, the situation for female deportees is at least as difficult and may be further aggravated by pre-occupation of notions of women's (imagined) sexual behaviour while abroad. More studies of female deportees and the experiences of the families of deportees would be a welcome and much needed addition to the literature.

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