What is the Impact of Transnational Migration on Family Life? Women's Comparisons of Internal and International Migration in a Small Town in Ghana

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The Difficulties of Combining Transnational Migration with Daughter-hood: The Case of Ghanaian Female Migrants

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Abstract

Much scholarship on women’s transnational migration has explored whether women’s roles as wives and mothers have been challenged and transformed by transnational migration. The research presented here explores more closely the differences that transnational migration brings for women as daughters of elderly parents, by comparing their constraints and challenges to those of women who migrate within Ghana. In particular, I examine how migration fits into the life course of women in southeastern Ghana, both in the contemporary period and in the past. I conclude that female transnational migrants face similar challenges to female internal migrants, although their experiences are different in the specifics.

[Keywords: Family, Ghana, Transnational Migration, Gender Roles, Elderly, Care]
Age forty-nine, with a little gray in her hair, Akua was petite and polished in her behavior, highly educated and deeply religious. Born and raised in Ghana, she had worked for some years in the UK before coming to the US and working in the administration of a state university. I had met her family in Ghana, including her elderly and weak mother just days before her death. When Akua returned from her mother’s funeral in Ghana, she called to tell me about it, expressing her regret about not taking care of her mother in the last few years during her mother’s decline. I attempted to reassure her, reminding her that there had been many people living in the house caring for her mother and her mother’s older, blind sister. Akua asked me whether her mother had mentioned any desire for Akua to be there while she was alive, and I said she had rather spoken of Akua’s success abroad.

Akua’s regret about not being present for her mother’s last few years was heightened by her birth order as the eldest daughter. In Ghana, women who are the eldest daughters are particularly called upon to live with their mothers when they “have no strength” or “become weak” as they age. If there are other daughters who are in a better position to care for the mother because of their unemployment or personal circumstances, then they may be asked by the other siblings to return to live with the mother or parents in the elder daughter’s stead. In Akua’s case, four of her mother’s six children were abroad, some in the US and some in the UK. The two who remained in Ghana were both men and were both employed in cities an hour or two away. Her parents considered themselves successful in raising their children, such that so many went abroad and were employed. Because of their financial success, these children had been able to provide care by supporting a more distant relative to live with their mother. Akua felt regret not
only about her mother’s care, but also assumed responsibility for her younger brother’s two adolescent sons who had been living with her mother at the time of her death, and whom Akua had been supporting since they started school. After exhausting legal efforts to adopt them and bring them to the US, she moved to the UK, where she thought she would have a better chance to obtain residency permits for them.²

Akua’s pain about her mother’s death thus seems compounded by her international migration. Despite her remittances which supported her mother’s and nephews’ care, she felt regret at not living up to her responsibilities as a daughter, which required a level of active presence and care at the end of her mother’s life that her international migration prevented. This story might lead us to believe that, as the existing literature on transnational migration and women suggests, transnational migration challenges gendered norms, and in so doing, creates pain for multiple family members and internal conflict for women themselves when those gendered obligations are not met.

But such difficulties in providing eldercare might also be occurring for women who live in Ghana. I was interested in how Akua’s challenges in balancing her migration with her eldercare responsibilities differ from those of women who live in Ghana. I focus on the lifecourse of women who are not transnational migrants, detailing how they combine their urban or rural migrations with the care of elderly parents. Drawing on their stories, I then analyze the similarities and discontinuities between women who migrate within Ghana and those who travel abroad, to explore the facets of international migration that are most problematic and that cause the most pain for the children of elderly parents. In this discussion, I try to pay attention to the perspective of each party—the elderly person, the adult child, and the caregiver, who may be a teenage girl or young woman—aware that a woman may take on all of these roles over the
course of her life. Elderly women in their youth and middle age have taken care of elderly relatives, and children and adults are generally aware that they will at some point be old and in need of care. Parker Shipton (2007) has aptly talked about the reciprocities of care across the generations as a form of “entrustment.”

This paper is part on a series of papers I am writing aimed at understanding how new transnational family structures and household arrangements really are (Portes 2001). In particular, how different are transnational family arrangements from those of people who remain in Ghana? By transnational migration, I am referring to international migration in which people migrants maintain emotional connections and communicative ties to people living in other countries. Akua, for instance, is in touch with her parents, two siblings, and nieces and nephews in Ghana; her siblings and nieces and nephews in the UK; and friends and family in Ghana, the UK, the US, and elsewhere. Often, international migration is not unilineal, but is composed of a series of hops between countries and occasionally a return to the country of origin.

Internal migration has been a longstanding phenomenon in Ghanaian life. What are the different challenges in family life faced by those who migrate for work within Ghana and those who migrate for work abroad? Despite the fact that many transnational migrants around the world migrated internally, whether to cities or other job opportunities, prior to their international migration (Sassen 1998), “too much of the migration literature considers either international migration or internal migration but not both,” thus preventing nuanced comparisons (Trager 2005: 3). This series of papers aims to fill that gap. It argues that family arrangements common in transnational families draw on family traditions established during earlier and contemporary periods of internal migration, whether to fertile farmland or urban areas. Therefore, we need to
understand how women balanced their caregiving responsibilities with their migrations within Ghana in order to truly understand the impact of transnational migration on family life.

**Transnational Migration and Gender**

In the last decade, sociologists, social psychologists, and anthropologists have taken note of the ways that the transnational migration of women challenges traditional gender roles. For instance, when women migrate abroad, they may have better economic opportunities than in their country of origin. The shift in financial contributions to the household may cause changes in the power balance between husbands and wives in decision-making or cause conflict as men and women try to adjust this new economic reality to fit their ideas about what men and women should do (Gamburd 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Women may be able to more easily separate from or divorce their husbands because they are more financially self-sufficient; they may more easily receive legal and police protection in cases of physical abuse or neglect (Holtzman 2000). Female migrants may therefore be less interested in returning to the home country than male migrants (Manuh 2003; Pessar 1999).

A growing literature also examines how the migration of mothers challenges the gendered norms of motherhood. For instance, in their work on Mexican domestic workers in the US, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo & Ernestine Avila (1997) make an argument about the “deep costs” and “raw pain” of transnational migration (549, 554). For these domestic workers, transnational motherhood “means forsaking deeply felt beliefs that biological mothers should raise their own children, and replacing that belief with new definitions of motherhood” that include the ability to fulfill “traditional caregiving responsibilities through income earning in the United States” (557, 562). Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2004) argues that children of migrant
mothers in the Philippines are more likely to express problems with a lack of intimacy, feelings of abandonment, and a commodification of love than the children of migrant fathers. In general, the literature on transnational families has assumed that family structures have been “shaken up” by women’s transnational migration, creating new norms for family gender roles, but also creating suffering among family members whose expectations and idealizations of gendered roles are not met. Akua’s story might seem to illustrate this larger theme, in that her responsibilities as a daughter to an elderly parent were disrupted by her transnational migration, prompting new arrangements for the care of her elderly mother.

The literature on gender and migration has tended to focus more on women’s roles as mothers or wives than as daughters. I suspect that this bias has much to do with the conventions of family life in the West, in which parents are expected to live with their children when they are young, but not when they have grown up. The work on motherhood is also prompted by the romanticization of childhood and the growing emphasis on close, parental attention and nurture as a requirement for a child’s emotional and physical well-being among middle-class American parents (Lareau 2003 on concerted cultivation; see also Ariès 1962). The lack of focus on women’s roles as daughters is also related to how the elderly are cared for in the West, work which is increasingly performed by paid (female) staff rather than female relatives, because of the growth in the safety net for the elderly in the West over the past fifty years. Much of the paid care for the elderly is now provided by immigrant women, as part of the global care crisis in which Western women have solved the problem of combining their care duties with paid employment by farming out their care duties to other women (Hochschild and Ehrenreich 2002).

In fact, many Ghanaian transnational migrants work in the health care field in the US and the UK, and particularly in the field of elder care, working as home health aides. But how do these
women solve the same problem of combining their paid employment with their care duties at home? And how do women who do not leave Ghana address the same challenge of combining work with family reproduction?

I would argue that we need to see eldercare and childcare as intimately intertwined in Ghanaian family life, as family members maintain relationships of reciprocity and distribute and receive resources at different points in their lives. In February 2007, I received a letter from a Ghanaian friend informing me of the death of a woman who had been raising her grandchildren while their mother—the woman’s daughter—lived and worked abroad. My friend, a government bureaucrat and a return migrant herself from Nigeria, commented on this sad occurrence, “One thing I have observed is that many Ghanaians who travel outside with the hope of a happier future, most often have their hopes shattered, especially when they realize that many of those they loved so dearly have passed away and they themselves have become strangers to their own children they left behind.” For a long time, I focused on the shattering of hopes involved in parents becoming strangers to their children rather than the sadness entailed by a parent’s passing away, one who was “loved so dearly.” This paper attempts to address that personal oversight.

**Coming to Understand the Lives of Women who are Migrants**

My research has primarily been focused on understanding the parenting choices of Ghanaian transnational migrants, and to that end, I conducted forty private interviews with parents, whether singly or as a couple. To supplement those interviews and in order to understand how different the arrangements they made were was from those in other families who did not have transnational migrant members, my research assistant Kweku Aryeh and I completed a random household survey in the town of Akropong, a district capital of about 9,000
people, located in the Eastern Region of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service 2002). Ultimately, this effort resulted in interviews with ninety-three caregivers and with eighty of the children they were looking after, a third of whom had parents abroad. The overwhelming majority of the caregivers were women, and they ranged in age from their twenties to their eighties. In the interviews, we asked about their own personal histories, including their own childhoods. From the survey, I learned about the experiences of a cross-section of the town, including people of various social classes and ethnicities, reflecting the social and economic diversity of the town. We interviewed teachers and retired pastors, as well as many charcoal sellers and prepared food sellers, people who could pay for their child’s secondary school education and people who were earning a pittance from the work they were doing. The survey provided a wealth of discourse about childraising, migration, and family life in both the present and the past. The data presented in this paper comes from the interviews with caregivers in Akropong and Ghanaian migrants in the US. Some of the Ghanaian migrants come from Akropong and all are from southern Ghana.

The local population of Akropong is Akan and families have traditionally been matrilineal. However, a long interaction with Christianity has meant that Akropong people value fathers highly, and the historically strong relationship between maternal uncle and nephew has diminished. Rapidly becoming an outer suburb of the capital city Accra, Akropong has a teacher training college, a small campus of the new Presbyterian university, and two secondary schools. I have been doing ethnographic research in this town for the past eleven years. The business of the town—education—has attracted migrants to the town, from across Ghana and West Africa, but young people in the town seek greener pastures in the larger cities of southern Ghana and traders complain about the poor business environment. Although Akropong has been growing over time, the Ghana Statistical Service (2005) calls it a “diminishing” town, because its share of

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the urban population has been declining since 1970, while nearby metropolitan areas such as the
capital Accra and the port city Tema have been growing by leaps and bounds. At first glance,
Akropong seems mainly populated by the elderly, women, and children, as male adults of
working age migrate to other areas of Ghana. These discrepancies are reflected in the 2000
Census: the male and female sex ratios for those aged 0-19 are about equally balanced, but there
are far more adult and elderly women living in the town than there are men (Ghana Statistical
Service 2005).³ While the town itself contained middle-aged people and some elderly of diverse
ethnic origin who had moved to the town for employment earlier in their lives, the vast majority
of the elderly women we interviewed considered themselves Akan people from Akropong, who
had migrated to other towns or rural villages in Ghana in their youth for employment or training
and returned to their hometown after a life change.

Akropong men and women have been migrating in large numbers since the 1890s, when
they traveled to work on the railway, to work in the cities and other parts of West Africa as
skilled craftsmen and as traders, and as cocoa farmers to the valleys west of the hilly area of
Akropong (Hill 1963). Thus, in talking about their own childhoods, caregivers gave an account
of how migration shaped the way that they were raised.

Care in Ghanaian Family Life

Families in Ghana are knit together by reciprocal exchanges in which people give in
accordance with their relative financial strength and physical ability and in which people receive
in accordance with their relative poverty and physical weakness. Because the exchanges occur
over long stretches of time and “debts” in these reciprocal exchanges can be inherited by the next
generation, these flows are critical to a family’s continuation and particularly to the care of
dependents such as children and the elderly, as well as those who are unemployed or underemployed.

While reciprocal flows also exist among church members, friends, and work colleagues, people feel especially obligated to help their kin. The literature on Akan families in Ghana has tended to emphasize the significance of the lineage structure and the relatively weak marital bond in defining kin relations (Bartle 1981; Bleek 1977; Clark 1994). However, the salience of the extended family has been reduced in both urban and rural areas more recently. Churches, particularly the Pentecostal churches which are popular in Ghana, have encouraged family members to contribute more to their nuclear family, rather than to extended family kin (Meyer 1999; van Dijk 2002). However, the nuclear family in Ghanaian ideology has far more permeable boundaries than it does in the West, with extended family members continuing to have rights and obligations—although far less than those due to one’s children and parents. One form those permeable boundaries take is that wealthier members of a lineage are expected to support more needy members (Ardayfio-Schandorf 1996). Thus, elite and middle-class urban families will still accept poorer and younger relatives in their households as house servants, pay for younger relatives’ schooling, and send remittances back to the villages to help with relatives’ funerals, support aunts and uncles, and contribute to family housing. However, they are less likely to let their own children go live with their siblings or parents and they are less likely to return home to live with an elderly parent, practices that were more common in the past. The growing emphasis on parent-child relations over other kinds of kin obligations have important implications for the reciprocal flows which sustain children and elders.
Eldercare is conceptualized as part of a series of reciprocal exchanges which occur between parent and child. A well-quoted Twi proverb reflects this reciprocity of relations across the lifespan, in relation to physical signs of dependency. As one elderly man told me,

*Së wo maame anaa wo papa anaa obi a hwe wo na wo se yi aba de a, edu baabi hwe no na wei* [pointing to his teeth] no ntutu.

If your mother or father or someone looks after you while your teeth are coming in, when it comes to the time where his or her teeth are falling out, look after him or her.

Children who I interviewed were very much aware of these future expectations and could often detail how they would help those who had cared for them, should they become financially successful in future (Author 2009b). Most of them—all the boys and most of the girls—focused on how they could begin to help when they were adults and could remit money, although some of the girls did talk about providing domestic labor (instead of remittances) to their parents and grandparents as they aged.

Given trends towards greater nuclearization of the family, the children of the elderly are increasingly the ones solely responsible for eldercare. It is not obligatory for a more distant relative to care for an elderly person in the way that it is for a biological child, who is likely to be scolded by others for lack of care. However, a more distant relative may do so because she is particularly fond of the elderly person, perhaps because they lived together at some point or the elderly person helped raise her (van der Geest 2002). One woman in her sixties stayed as a child with her grandmother in Akropong while her mother traveled for work to Nsawam, a large commercial town on the railway line nearby. She said that she loved her grandmother more than her mother,
because I lived with my grandmother and she looked after me until she was an old woman. So when she was an old woman, I in turn looked after her.

One documented change in eldercare is that a child is increasingly able to justify his or her lack of care for an elderly parent on the lack of care the parent provided in the past (Aboderin 2004, van der Geest 2002). Because fathers are seen as both wealthier (and thus more able to care) and more negligent in their responsibilities to their children than are mothers, elderly fathers are more likely to be neglected than are elderly mothers (van der Geest 2002). In my own research, some children of elderly fathers have been cajoled or scolded into providing them with financial support, even though those children felt neglected by their fathers as young people, with their school fees or apprenticeship training paid for through their mothers’ back-breaking work.

However, I have also met examples of adult children taking care of their elderly parents who they did not feel close to. One elderly woman had not been close with her mother, but in her middle age had told her elderly mother to come join her in the family house in Akropong. Her siblings—particularly those abroad—had helped by sending remittances to support both mother and daughter.

People in Ghana consider material support to be the most important form of the reciprocal flows between the generations. Emotional closeness is not ignored; rather, material support is taken as a sign of love (Author 2009). Sjaak van der Geest’s statement about eldercare in Kwahu, another area in the Eastern Region, says it best:

Material provisions and money are emotional expressions, proof of loving care.

Money is not a means to keep people at a distance and avoid getting involved in
their lives as it tends to be in industrialized societies. In Kwahu-Tafo, where state-provided material security for the elderly is not available, material gifts and money are the most convincing proof of respect and affection. Money is a gift. It binds people together and creates a future of enduring relationships. (2002, 28)

In my conversations with people, care was often conceptualized as financial assistance, rather than physical, day-to-day care or emotional support. This conception of support privileges the way that most men help others, rather than ways that are more accessible to women. Generally, eldercare is gendered, in that sons are more likely to support elderly parents financially, while daughters are more likely to do the day-to-day chores of cooking, bathing, and companionship (van der Geest 2002). This division of labor results from men’s greater earnings, on average, than women, as well as the gendered division of household labor. However, because women are expected to work and support their families when they can (Clark 1994), women’s financial support of their elderly parents is not considered to challenge gender norms.

One woman, Abena Oforiwa, who returned to live at home to take care of an elderly relative emphasized how care could take other forms besides financial support.

Abena: enye sika nko ara na yede boa nnipa, se wahu?

It is not only money that you use to help people, you see?

Cati: Yeah

Abena: cheen. Se ebi koraab obi wo hω wo nko ara te fie na obiara nni hω ωne wo kasa a time biara woyare. Wunya obi ben wo na wotumi ne no kasa a time biara na woye free.
Yes. If you live alone and you don’t even have anyone to talk to, you will always be sick. If you find someone near you, and you can converse with them, you will always be at ease.

An elderly person, of course, requires both kinds of care: clothes washing, cooking of food, help with bathing and marketing, and companionship as well as cash to purchase items (including food and clothing) and to pay medical bills when they arise. However, financial support is considered more valuable for two reasons: one, it is considered more scarce than women’s domestic labor currently, given the rate of unemployment and underemployment in Ghana; and two, it can be used to purchase domestic labor as a substitute for unavailable family labor.

How care is conceptualized is significant for both internal and international migrants. Care in the form of day-to-day provision of labor requires presence and living with an elderly person—a return migration—whereas care in the form of money can usually best be provided from afar through remittances, and the continuation of migration. Thus, women who migrate, whether internally or internationally, are more likely to provide support to elderly parents through remittances rather than through day-to-day care, as I explore below. They thus take on the ways of support that are associated with men. Because of the emphasis placed on remittances, they are not faulted by others for continuing their migration, so long as they send money home, although, like Akua, whose story we began with, they may end up faulting themselves.

**Migration and Caregiving across Women’s Lifecourse in Ghana**

Many women in southern Ghana move from their hometowns during their lifecourse (for a description of an earlier period see Bryden 1979 and Middleton 1979). Some migrate for some
kind of training, whether to boarding secondary school or for an apprenticeship in tailoring or baking with a successful female businesswoman. Some go to a large city to trade or work, because urban areas offer more business and employment opportunities. Some in government employment—whether the police force, nursing, or teaching—are transferred from station to station across southern and northern Ghana. Some follow their partners or husbands to a village to farm or to their place of government employment. Often, it is young women in their late teens or early twenties who leave their hometowns. Some leave their children behind with their mothers in the hometown to allow them to more easily study or work, and they visit their mother and children on weekends, bringing back money and groceries. Among the various forms of employment that women pursue, trading is the most common—whether in foodstuffs, used clothing, or other goods. Best pursued in urban areas where there are many customers who have disposable income, this work requires regular travel to purchase goods at a cheaper price. Furthermore, some women say that one should not pursue business in one’s hometown because so many people will ask for goods on credit that the business is sure to fail (see Clark 1994).

Women are likely to return to live in their hometowns after a change in life circumstances. The hometown functions as a social safety net in women’s lives. In the hometown, one can live more cheaply than in large metropolitan areas, because often one can receive a room in the family house, built by a father or family head, for which one does not pay rent. Other relatives live nearby, and they may be able to provide financial support and share labor, companionship, and resources. In the hometown, a woman may also have access to land, where she can grow a small food farm, such that she does not have to buy as much food from the market. Women therefore come home to live when their marriage ends, when they are ill, or when an employment opportunity dries up. One woman returned home to Akropong after her
husband’s illness and death, which devastated her financially. Another women came home when a company she worked for went out of business; and a third when she retired from a job in the formal sector.

Finally, women return home when an elderly person in their family requires care. Often, in their stories of return migration, women’s personal circumstances and the decline of an elderly person coincide, which suggests that the reason why they, of all their siblings, were chosen as the ones to live with the elderly person or people is because they were available to do so. Generally, women return home between the ages of forty and sixty, although there is considerable variation due to their personal experiences—in which the financial success of their migration and the strength of their elderly relatives are particularly salient.

The eldest daughter feels a special obligation to return home to look after her elderly mother. If she cannot, because of her employment or family situation, then another daughter may take her place. Or a more distant relative may be asked, if employment or marriage keeps daughters from returning to the hometown. Returning to the hometown to live with the mother or another elderly person generally means a loss of economic opportunities for the daughter, although she may be able to farm or trade a little bit on the side in her hometown. A daughter who returns home generally expects to be supported by her siblings and grown children living elsewhere, particularly those working in government employment in urban areas, who return for short visits to the family home and are expected to bring money and gifts when they do so, although this occurs according to their financial capability. A study of the elderly in the Central Region conducted in the early 1990s found that their children were most likely to provide money for food (91% of the elderly received money for food from their children) and medical expenses (52%), but many elderly received meager and infrequent monetary allowances (Apt 1996).
The daughter returning home may also have to live apart from her own husband and children (see van der Geest 2002), and if her husband does not agree to her going to live with her mother, then her return home may also mean the end of her marriage, a situation which I have heard about. When there has been divorce or separation and grandchildren are young, daughters are likely to return home accompanied by their own children. Other grandchildren of the elderly woman may also be sent to live with these middle-aged women, both to help them in the house and to relieve the burden on their migrant mothers or fathers, who may have difficulty providing good care for their children when they are working during their own migrations. The daughter who returns home inherits the responsibilities of the elderly woman, who may have had grandchildren with her already but has now grown too old or weak to care for them, just as Akua “inherited” the children her mother was looking after, the children of Akua’s brother. The parents of these family grandchildren are expected to visit more frequently and provide more financial assistance—for the children’s school fees and medical expenses—if they are able, but if they are not, the women use their pooled resources from their siblings and other children to care for all the children living with them.

Abena Oforiwa illustrates the general features I have outlined above. She lives in a family house with her older cousin, who she considers her sister, along with eight grandchildren, many of whom are toddlers although the eldest is fourteen with a considerable sense of family responsibility. Now age forty-eight, Abena had gone to work in a sugar factory in a nearby town (Somanya) in her youth, but returned to her hometown when the sugar factory closed. Her mother had been living in the family house and died, leaving her cousin, an elderly woman, living there alone. She explained:
Abena: Okay time a me maame ɛkaa baabi no na kyɛrese obiara nni fie, na me sister nso wɔ Accra. Okay, mebaa ha kakra, mebetena ah, na me ɛwɔ kurom ha but na mente fie ha. But me maame wui no obiara, mmyfra no nyinaa, yen mma no wowɔ enti obia nso mpɛse ɛbetena fie ha. Enti na kyɛrese, obiara nni ha enye fe, enti na ɛkyɛre se ɛbetena ha. Na saa time no na ye cousin baako wɔ ha, eno nso yare obiara nni ne ho, ontumi nsɛre mma abɔnten, na obiara nni fie a na enye fine.

Enti na ɛkyɛse mebetena ha na mebebewe no. eno ka ho na enma me betena ha ena mebebewe me cousin no, a year ni a owui

When my mother died, it meant no one lived here. My sister [her older cousin, also present during the interview] was in Accra. I was here for a little time—I lived in Akropong but I didn’t live in this house. But my mother died and no one, all the children, all our children had given birth so no one wanted to live at home. It isn’t good when there is no one in the house, so I came to live here. And at that time, our one cousin lived here, and she was sick and no one lived here, so she couldn’t get up to go out, and no one was at home, so it wasn’t good at all. And I came to live here to look after her. That’s the only thing that brought me here.

Cati: Mhm

Abena: ɛheen. Enti na kyɛre se mee mebetena ha a na me ba nso pe se ɛkɔye

advuma, otu kwan ɛwɔ se mehwe—

Yes, and so I came to live here, and my daughter wanted to go work; she migrated so I had to look after—

Cati: Ne mma
Her children.

Abena: *sheen, mehwe ne mma no wɔ akyi.*

Yes, so I had to look after her children for her back home.

Abena had earlier said that she had been prompted to move to the family house by her older brother. Such persuasion was no doubt accompanied by his promise to help with the household expenses.

Abena: *Me brother panyin, nea medi n’akyi. ena ose obiara nni fie ha ena maame no nso ne nkoa wɔ fie ha saa a biribi si a obia nni hɔ enti esese meba na me ne mmɔfra no nso betena se ebeyɛ a eno nso n’ani beka. eno nti na ema mebetenaa ha*

My elder brother, the one I come after in birth order, said that no one was at home and the cousin also was alone at home, so if anything happened [to her, such as an accident or an illness], no one lived here. So I should come with my children so that she would be happy. This is why I came to live here.

Not all women are as content to come home to take care of their elderly parents, because of the loss of personal income that it entails. A forty-three year-old woman, Yaa Ofosua, had traveled as a young woman: she had first apprenticed as a seamstress in the commercial town of Suhum. There, she married and worked as a trader. Later, her husband died, and she became involved with another man in a relationship that was much more short-lived. After that relationship ended, she returned home to take care of her mother, who she described as having difficulty moving around and thus unable to prepare food or fetch water for herself. Yaa was less happy than Abena Oforiwa about returning home to care for her mother, because it was
much more difficult to make a living in Akropong than in Suhum. She struggled to support herself, her mother, and her seven-year-old child from a family plot in town. She scrimped and saved to pay her son’s school fees. She also made clothing alterations occasionally and also received firewood and other foodstuffs from helping other farmers. Her mother ran a little bar out of the house and her brother sent money once in a while, but not enough to satisfy her. Yaa wanted one of her ten siblings to take her place in looking after her mother, so that she could migrate again. In the presence of her mother, she stated:

*mewɔnso a enka mepe no se seesei mu no me maame enti, eheen, enti se metumi a, na mafre me nuanom na meka kyerɛ se wɔn se matena me maame nkyɛn a,
mabrɛ enti me nso mekɔ akɔpe adwuma aye. Tesɛ Suhum anaa se Tema, anaa Kumasi na seesei, mekɔ a, menya obi a kde me bekɔ anaa se biribi a ete saa
adwuma wɔhɔ a, menya sika na mede aba, enɛ eyena sika de a, na mede bi abre me maame na kde bi ahwe me ba anaa se biribi a ete saa. See me ne akwadaa no
nso na ebekɔ a na menya bi a na mede bi abre me maame bi. Eno nso dec, na kyerɛse me nuanom, wɔn nso wɔaba, ye dɔso
I would like to tell my siblings that I am exhausted of looking after my mother; I would like to go look for work in Suhum or Tema or Kumasi [all commercial towns or cities] and if I could find someone who could take me on or if I found work, I could bring money back to my mother, and she could look after my child or something like that. Or if I go with my child, I could bring something to my mother. And that would mean that my siblings would come; they are many.
She felt that the obligation to take care of their mother could rotate among her siblings, such that she could migrate to earn money to better support her child and her mother.

Thus, women in this town in southern Ghana curtail their migrations to other cities in Ghana to care of their elderly parents. They migrate for employment and training in their youth, a migration that is often supported by the elderly parents by the migrant leaving her children with their grandmother in the hometown, while the migrant dedicates her energy to her employment or training. Female migrants return to the hometown after a negative change in their personal circumstances or when an elderly parent needs care. This return to the hometown results in the loss of their personal income and a growth in their dependence on kin—generally their male siblings and grown children—who are migrants elsewhere. For some, the return home seems more voluntary; for others, the return home is perceived as a hardship. How is this lifecourse trajectory that I have described for female migrants within Ghana different for female migrants who go abroad?

Transnational Migrants and Eldercare

Transnational migrants are unlike internal migrants because they do not return home very easily but often remain abroad until they themselves are unable to work and are ready to retire, by which point their elderly parents have usually passed away. They are therefore like internal migrants who are unable to return to the hometown because of their employment or marital responsibilities. They therefore cannot fulfill the role of personal caregiver, helping an elderly person with their bathing, cooking, clothes washing, going to the toilet, and companionship that enables an elderly person to preserve his or her sense of dignity (see van der Geest 2002 on the importance of dignity). What transnational migrants can do is provide the financial resources to
pay for the daily expenses of the caregiver and elderly person and the much more burdensome medical expenses which arise (Mazzucato 2008). This role is much appreciated and accepted. Thus, when Abena Oforiwa took care of her elderly cousin, one of the children of the elderly cousin, a migrant in London, called and sent money regularly. Abena’s only complaint is that after the cousin’s death and funeral, she did not hear from the cousin’s child again, to ask how she and her sister are doing or to appreciate the work she did. Her sister, Akosua Yirenkyiwa, had been raised by her paternal aunt and looked after her in her old age, because both of her aunt’s children were abroad, one in America and the other in South Africa. I asked her if it was an obligation for her aunt’s children to look after their mother, and she replied,

*Aane se wɔwɔ hɔ de a, se wahu? Se wɔwɔ de a eyɛ mmera se wɔn na wɔbɛhwe wɔn maame. But wonni hɔ no ena me nso me ne no tenae se me maame enti na me nso eyɛ me maame bi enti metumi akɔhwe no.*

Yes, if they were here, you see? If they were here, it would be an obligation that they look after their mother. But they weren’t here, and I also had lived with her like she was my mother, so I could look after her.

She said that she did not mind doing this:

*Se wɔkaa no, wɔpaa me kyɛw kakyɛɛ me. een, se mennyɛ a, mennyɛ a mɛka akyɛɛ wɔn se mentumi nye, eno dee enye by force.*

When they informed me [of their need], they begged me. If I couldn’t do it, I would have told them that I couldn’t. I was not forced to do this work.

After her aunt’s death, Akosua looked after her father who was sick and died a year later, and then she looked after her mother. During this time, she was able to make a living by relying on remittances from relatives and trading a little bit on the side. Her sister Abena compared
transnational migrants to those in government employment, who might be stationed in the northern part of Ghana: you cannot ask such people to retire, because then where would they get the income to look after their parents? They are considered to have fulfilled their obligations if they visit when they can, to remain in communication through mobile phones, and to remit money.

Ghanaian kinship arrangements are flexible and improvisational (Clark 1994 and van der Geest 2002). These arrangements allow female family members who are in a fragile situation, who are poor or underemployed, to justify their support from better employed siblings or cousins through their care work of elderly relatives or family grandchildren. These reciprocal responsibilities may not always be honored to the extent that everyone is happy with the arrangements. In general, there is some tension all around: the working, migrant siblings feel that there is pressure on them to remit more than they can afford for their own daily needs in a city where the cost of living is expensive, and the caring sibling feels that the money remitted is not sufficient for her needs and those of the dependents under her care. Nor is it necessarily the case that the elderly person receives the best care, but in general, family members organize themselves, as best they can, to care for their most vulnerable members (see van der Geest 2002 on the improvisational nature of eldercare).

Changes in Care of Elderly: From Family Care to Paid Help

Internal migrants who cannot return home and transnational migrants often ask poorer female relatives to take their place in living with their mothers. They are also similar in generally not sending their own children to live with their mothers to help them with their daily chores. Female caregivers recounted that they were sent as children to live with elderly
grandmothers who had no child around to run errands to the market and help with housework. While girls as young as ten years old cannot bear the burden of caring for an elderly person with extensive disability or medical problems, if an elderly has limited mobility or strength, a child can assist with or even perform many of the daily chores that an elderly person might find difficult to do: fetch water, go to the market, and cook food. In case of a medical emergency, a child can run or call for assistance from adult neighbors. A seventy-five year old woman reported that she had gone to stay with her grandmother as a child because her grandmother did not have anyone to send on errands. She stayed with her grandmother until her death. Another seventy-year-old woman explained that she had substituted for her father and his brothers when she was a child to fulfill their care for their mother:

*Kyerɛ se, me papanom na wɔye mmɛrema nko aa, wonni obiara, wonni ɛbea a wɔ hɔ a ɛbehwɛ wɔn maame enti wɔma me betenaa ha.*

On my father’s side, they were all men, so they didn’t have anyone, they didn’t have a woman to stay with their mother, so they brought me to live with her.

Essentially, they took a girl from the next generation to substitute for a non-existent sister.

This became a less common experience among the younger women who we interviewed. The younger women were more often taken in by their grandmothers to assist the children (not the grandmothers) after a parental death or divorce between their parents or to enable their parents to work, rather than for the elderly person’s benefit.

In more recent times, a daughter or a female grandchild was replaced by a more distant adolescent female relative. The migrant children stayed in the city along with their children, and paid for the schooling of the more distant relative who was staying with their mother. We met a thirty-five year-old charcoal seller, Margaret, who went to stay with an elderly cousin in a
neighboring town when she was about ten or eleven years old. Margaret, as a more distant relative, substituted for the woman’s own children and grandchildren who were living in Accra. Because she also received money from the cousin’s children when they visited, she could send money to help her own mother, who was struggling financially.

Me feel sɛ mete me busuani nkyɛn, me na meye biribiara ma no. Enti it is like—

Na okay. . . . ehɔ koraa mete hɔ tɛse mete me maame nkyɛn ara na mewo. Enti
me ara na menoa aduan, me ara na mekɔ market, biribiara me ara na meye, enti
na minni problem biara wɔ hɔ.

I felt that I lived with a relative, I did everything for her. So it was like—Okay. It was like I was living with my own mother. I was the one who cooked the food, I was the one who went to market, I did everything, so I didn’t have any problem there.

We also witnessed many such situations in the homes of the elderly women we visited. The girls who we saw doing this kind of work were generally able to combine schooling with eldercare, such that when they returned from school, they went to market and cooked an evening meal, work that was similar to that of children who were living with middle-aged adults.

I was conducting an interview with a teacher and his wife in a compound house where several unrelated families rented rooms, when we heard a girl scream and cry for help, a girl who I had interviewed the week before along with the sick seventy-eight-year-old woman she was caring for. The couple I was interviewing rushed behind one of the main blocks of rooms to a small kitchen, where the elderly woman had lost consciousness. Two other neighbors who lived in a house behind this one also ran up shortly thereafter. They attempted to revive her, without success. They finally flagged down a taxi to take her to the district hospital, about twenty
minutes away. They called her daughter who was living in a suburb of the capital city, about an
hour and a half away, to let her know about the emergency. During this time, the fifteen-year-
old girl who had raised the alarm was trembling and distraught. She was a distant relative—the
old woman’s maternal uncle’s grand-daughter—who had come to live with the elderly woman to
help her with her daily needs, as she had told me a week earlier:

\[\text{se seesei wanyin na akwadaa biara nso nni ne hɔ a ɔbɛsoma no enti memmra}
\]
\[\text{mentena na memmoa no, se ɔbɛsoma me, na manoa aduan ma no na ne nneɛma bi}
\]
\[\text{wɔ hɔ a na mahorow ama no}
\]

She [the elderly woman] said that now she is old and there is no child here for her
to send on errands, I should come live with her and help her, by going on errands
and cooking food and washing her things for her.

I asked what she did when the old woman was really sick, and she reported that she called the
woman’s children who usually came quickly. When I had talked to the elderly woman before
her collapse about her care, she explained that her children were all living with their husbands in
Accra, so one could not stay with her, and her grandchildren’s fathers wanted them to live with
them and go to school in Accra.\(^5\) She did not seem bitter or sad about this fact, despite the fact
that she herself had come home from her own youthful migration to live with her aunt and then
her mother before their deaths.

A sixty-four year-old woman, Afua, was also living with an adolescent girl. While she
was still physically strong, she valued the girl’s presence, to send her on errands and cook food
for her after she returned from school. I asked her why her own grandchildren had not come to
live with her. Struggling with my uncomfortable question, she said that her children would
prefer to live with their own children and school them in Accra. But then she found a way to
make it a joke: she had found that when they visited her, her grandchildren’s tastes were too expensive, as they liked juice packs (called Kalyppo) and sweet crackers every day. She could not afford to have them come live with her!

Thus, children and grandchildren are being increasingly replaced by more distant relatives, often adolescent girls, who are being compensated for their caring labor by having their school fees paid for by the migrant children of the elderly woman. The adolescent girls living with two women discussed above were previously living in a village several hours away from the town and their parents were unable to pay their school fees. While they did not feel as emotionally close to the elderly women they were living with as they did to their own parents, they valued the opportunity to continue with their education. The tasks that they were performing for the elderly women were not much more onerous than those they performed in their parents’ home. At the same time, because they were explicitly recruited to help in a household that lacked other domestic assistance, these distant relatives are difficult to distinguish from househelp.

I asked who Afua thought would take care of her when she became an old woman, that is, someone without the strength she currently had. She responded,

\[ \text{enye me mma no; see ne wobepo obi na watua ne ka na wahwe me. see, se eye a, meyare saa a, wobaf a ke k. Me ho to me a, na maba. Enti se maye aberewa de a, se mete fie na wem afa obi na wahwe me, see wem nso wemtumi mmeten a ha, na se saa time no nso se obi. . . . abaako beba abeten a cha a, mentumi nhu wem adwene.} \]

Not my children! They will hire someone to look after me. If they can, when I am sick, they will take me to their own house, and when I feel better, I will return
home. So when I become an old woman, I will live at home and they will find someone to look after me, if they can’t come here, or maybe one will live here. I don’t know what they are planning.

As this comment suggests, eldercare is becoming increasingly institutionalized and commercialized in Ghana. People are increasingly relying on hired help for a number of different caring tasks, whether being a caretaker of a house that is being built, taking care of children, or taking care of the elderly. Employees are replacing unpaid family labor. As with hired help elsewhere, people worry about the quality of the care, but some people also seek to avoid conflicts and hurts with relatives about what would be an appropriate exchange by turning to hired help where the terms of the exchange are more explicit. Recognizing the needs of the elderly, the Presbyterian Church in Akropong is building an elder center, where elderly people can come during the day for activities and a meal for a fee.

Transnational migrants are no different from urban migrants in this regard who do not feel that they can give up their jobs to return home. So long as they send money to substitute for their care, these non-returning children continue to be regarded as good children. There do not seem to be difficulties in finding labor for such tasks, as yet, because there are many women who are poverty-stricken and underemployed.

**Conclusion**

The literature on transnational migration has highlighted the challenges in gender norms that the new family arrangements associated with transnational migration bring about. The Ghanaian female transnational migrants would seem to be shirking their responsibilities as daughters of elderly parents, when they do not return to take care of an elderly person’s daily
needs of bathing, cooking, and cleaning. Transnational migrants are less likely to end their migration than an internal migrant, speaking to the relative success of their migrations. However, when one compares the situations of transnational migrants to those of urban migrants within Ghana, there are many similarities, in that daughters who are urban migrants also do not always return, because of their employment or responsibilities to a husband and children. Both are unlikely to send their own daughters to the hometown to live with their elderly parents in their stead, but are more likely to make choices about where their children should live, based on their consideration of their own “best interests,” particularly schooling.

Furthermore, migrant daughters are seen as fulfilling their responsibilities by sending remittances and visiting when they can. Studies of aging in Ghana have found that the middle-aged generation’s lack of financial resources contributes to the crisis in eldercare (Aboderin 2004, Apt 1996). Transnational and urban migration, to the extent it is successful, can give daughters increased resources with which to support multiple households, including the household of an elderly parent. Because women have always been expected to work in Ghana, migrants’ provision of remittances and move away from day-to-day caregiving does not challenge gender norms.

Because money is considered scarcer than domestic labor at this historical point, those migrants who remain in contact, visit when they can, show their gratitude to the caregiver, and send money regularly are appreciated by those who remain behind, provided those middle-aged or young caregivers feel that they are being given opportunities they would not otherwise receive (such as schooling or income) or that economic opportunities elsewhere have dried up (as for Abena Oforiwa and her sister). However, if like Yaa, their caring for an elderly parent means a life of hardship and poverty, then they may resent their return to the hometown and seek to find
another relative to replace them so that they can migrate again. Ghanaian women thus handle the “crisis in carework” in the way that women in the US do: by substituting financial support derived from their employment for their own caregiving labor. The reciprocal relations entailed by employment or reliance on other women, whether adolescent or middle-aged, whether kin or non-kin, can cause conflict, as people’s expectations are not always met.

Transnational migration is therefore not a new phenomenon, creating a crisis in eldercare in Ghana or completely new challenges for women as they balance their family responsibilities and employment. Rather, it exacerbates existing trends and ongoing changes in Ghanaian family life. Migration, both internal and transnational, is, ironically, an attempt by which women seek to solve some of those challenges of sustaining their families in a globalized economy even as migration generates another set of problems for them to navigate.
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**Endnotes**

1. All names are pseudonyms.

2. US immigration laws prohibit the adoption of a relative.

3. The ratio of men to women varies from 86.6 men to 100 women in the 20-24 age bracket, to 50.7 men to 100 women in the 75+ age bracket, according to the 2000 Census of Akropong.

4. A study conducted in four areas of the Central Region in the early 1990s found that 62.8% of the elderly had most of their children living away from them in other parts of the country or abroad. Those migrant children who lived far away tended to visit their parents once or twice a year only (Apt 1996).

5. Of her three children, one daughter ran a bar, another daughter worked as a nurse, and her son installed car alarms.