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Women migrants in Ghana's urban informal sector: Tackling translocal precarity of kayayei

Key policy message

- (Women's) internal migration is a fact, a necessity and a right guaranteed under the Ghanaian Constitution
- Migrants are important economic actors, both within the translocal communities of rural Ghana and the informal urban economy
- The informal work sector needs to be acknowledged in the National Migration Policy, the Migration Labour Policy and the Labour Act
- Policies and programmes need to be revised and implemented to ensure (women) migrants' access to decent housing, health care, legal system and opportunities for education and qualification in both urban and rural areas
- Social marginalisation and the condescension of (women) migrants can increase north-south disparities and endanger national unity, especially in economically challenging times
- Policies and practices need to become gender specific and gender responsive
- Programme implementors and practitioners need to be included in the planning process
- To alleviate migration pressure and to improve livelihood and food security in rural Ghana, women need to be empowered with regards to agriculture, including access to land and natural resources, and to education for sustainable and climate resilient farming
- Basic education, especially Primary and Junior High School education, needs to be improved in Northern Ghana in order to promote the life chances of young people and to prevent ever increasing socio-economic disparities between northern and southern Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Women's circular labour migration is widespread in Ghana. In particular, and due to the economic and infrastructural underdevelopment and the absence of educational and occupational opportunities in their home communities, youth and young women from rural northern Ghana look for jobs in Accra, Kumasi and other Ghanaian cities for individual reasons and to support the household. Locally known as kayayei, many work as informal head porters on markets and bus stations. This is often an ambivalent experience, which comes with opportunities of economic and social mobility as well as precarious living and working conditions (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; Ungruhe, 2014). Women's migration practices reflect the general importance of seasonal internal labour migration in the country, which has been a long-standing phenomenon and forms an integral component of the socio-cultural landscape of Ghanaian society (Teye, 2022). In particular, the movement of people from the rural northern regions to both rural and urban areas in the south, where there are more economic opportunities, has been increasing steadily. This is accompanied by a rise in the number of remittances, as well as knowledge and cultural innovations, flowing back to the north.

The existing economic discrepancies between northern and southern Ghana are further exacerbated by the ongoing ecological and economic crises. The arid and semi-arid regions of West Africa were among the first regions on the planet to be adversely affected by the climate crisis, and have been experiencing its severe consequences for at least two decades. The prevalence of erratic rainfall, heavy precipitation, and droughts, coupled with a decline in biodiversity and soil fertility, renders the prevailing practice of smallholder farming an increasingly challenging endeavour that has severely challenged food security in recent years. The recent national economic turmoil has exacerbated the situation (Government of Ghana et al., 2023). Following the advent of the global pandemic, the country's economy entered a period of significant crisis, resulting in soaring inflation rates. According to the IMF (2024), cumulative inflation from 2020 to 2023 is 89%. As a consequence, northern Ghanaian smallholder farmers cannot afford to buy seeds and fertilizers to a sufficient degree which further accounts for declining harvests.

How do smallholder farmers cope with the situation? For generations, migration has been key for livelihood security in Northern Ghana: It is estimated that between about 75 percent of rural households in Northern Ghana have at least one member who has migrated, either within the rural context or to an urban area (Wehner et al., 2025).

Research findings indicate that migrant households are less vulnerable in socio-economic terms (Steinbrink & Niedenführ, 2020). Therefore, despite or even in the face of the multiple crises, migration remains a lifeline for people in the north of Ghana. The majority of these migrant households are organised on a translocal basis, whereby migrants send remittances, share knowledge and expertise acquired in urban areas, and return to the family farm during the agricultural season. This importantly contributes to sustain the livelihood of the rural subsistence farming household. Generally, women migrants and their remittances play an important role and kayayei, despite experiencing harsh living and working conditions in the metropoles, are part of this (Awumbila, 2014; Ungruhe, Steinbrink and Teye, 2023).

However, despite the importance of rural-urban mobility for rural livelihood security, policies for national labour, migration and urban development continue to fail to adequately recognise its significance. Further, they insufficiently acknowledge the importance of the informal urban sector and migrants' work to ensure translocal household organisation (ILO, 2020). In particular, the rural-urban migration of young women and their work in the informal load carrying business is often condemned and solely characterised as being harmful, leaving positive aspects aside (Talleraas, 2024).

By acknowledging the important role of female labour migration for both individual economic and social mobility and households' livelihood security, this paper addresses the challenges confronting precarious female livelihoods in the urban informal sector and offers recommendations to enhance the conditions and opportunities available to translocally organised female migrants in Accra and beyond.

Kayayei from Gushiegu at Agbobloshie

KEY FINDINGS

(1) Migration planning

…is still not anchored in relevant spatial planning instrument

A review of some relevant documentation has revealed that, although the process of urban growth is widely acknowledged, the term 'migration' is conspicuous by its absence from both the National Urban Policy Framework and the Ghana National Urban Policy Action Plans. These documents were issued by the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development in 2012. It is notable that updates to these significant policy guidelines remain pending. In the context of the prevailing socio-economic and socio-ecological circumstances and anticipated trajectories, both the informal sector and rural-urban migration assume a pivotal role in maintaining livelihoods in the northern regions.

…has not offered sustainable solutions for kayayei

In the past two decades, kayayei have become a national concern. In addition to efforts from NGOs and city authorities, various national governments have since implemented policies and actions to tackle the kayayei phenomenon. These range from, for example 1) supporting impoverished rural families financially to sustain their livelihoods over 2) providing housing and apprenticeship for migrant women in the cities to 3) the "Operation Bring Your Children Home" that aimed at sending the young females back to their northern home communities to end the flow of female migrants to the city. Indeed, several hundred women and families were supported financially to reduce the pressure on young women to provide for the household's income or were given trainings in hairdressing, tailoring and other skills to equip them with more sustainable occupational opportunities (Kyei-Gyamfi et al., 2023). However, all these attempts have neither led to end migrant women's precarity nor increased their life chances: young women still move in numbers and live and work under precarious conditions while trainings have seldom transformed into proper jobs.

Why have these attempts failed? Generally, it has been observed that migration policies in Ghana (and elsewhere) lack coherence as well as participation on the local level. It means that policy targets and local life realities often do not match (Telleraas, 2024). This holds true for policies on kayayei.

We argue that while many of these policies and actions were indeed shortsighted and not sustainable, their fundamental challenge is that they ignore the (translocal) life realities of the migrant women and their rural home communities.

(2) Life in the city…

… is economically precarious

Life in the city is often precarious and many kayayei are confronted with livelihood insecurity [Blija et al., 2024]. In addition, many of them have little formal education and also do not have language skills in Twi or English or Ga, the lingua franca in southern Ghana.

The competition has even increased over the recent economic crisis: there is a tendency of more female migrants offering their services with less customers to serve. Therefore, their income has decreased significantly and ranges from 0 to 60 Cedis per day, depending on experience level, location and general demand.

Especially since the economic crisis hit, it is becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy even the most basic needs. Many kayayei struggle to pay their rent and to have even two meals a day. The nutritional situation has declined and the financial situation negatively impacts the diet: The intake of calories and of proteins (meat, fish) and vegetables has declined. Meals now mainly consist of carbohydrates and fats. Hence, women report a high prevalence of food insecurity.

In addition, most migrant women cannot afford adequate housing and share small rooms in compound or wooden/makeshift houses, without sanitation and decent ventilation. In the formal housing sector, the rent needs to be paid for at least one year in advance. This is a barrier for kayayei so they have to resort to the informal housing market where rent is paid weekly. Many kayayei, for example those working at Makola Market, find nightly shelter in market stalls or even in the open public space like the platforms of Tema Station. The "hyper-modern" hostel in Madina, opened in May 2024, is not mere than a drop in the ocean as it only accommodates a fraction of the tens of thousands of kayayei in Accra (Ghana Web, 2024).

… leaves girls and women exposed and vulnerable

As a consequence of the precarious housing situation and the unprotected work environment, migrant women are exposed to various kinds of risks and exploitation: sexual harassments, STDs, unwanted pregnancies, theft and robbery, pollution and unhealthy working and living environments.

Adequate health care is often inaccessible and unaffordable. Especially mental health is a serious and rampant issue. A study conducted in 2018 found an extremely high prevalence of mental health distress (depression: 86,6%, anxiety:94,4%) among kayayei in Accra (Komesuor & Meyer-Weitz 2023:1). Emotional distress is exacerbated by their low social status: Kayayei face prejudice and social exclusion.
Resentment against this vulnerable group is growing in the challenged economy. Furthermore, kayayei have no access to the formal systems of justice or legal protection. In some areas, we have found informal institutions that offer some kind of social protection, such as strong social networks among the women themselves (Ungruhe, 2018) and also local chiefs who have taken on responsibility. However, these cannot replace formal structures of security and support.
The situation is even more concerning giving the fact that many kayayei are unaccompanied minors: often, children start moving to cities at the age of 14, at times even younger. For them, the level of vulnerability is even higher and the lack of education and future occupational prospects is alarming.

…is a transient stage for most of the kayayei

For most kayayei, migration to the urban areas is not considered as a long-term strategy. Rather, they consider it as an important, but transitional stage. Our research shows that the women have a strong sense of belonging to their rural household and that the absence from their home village is an emotionally strong burden. Therefore, returning to the rural north after some months or years is integral part of their migration projects.

Women are aware that there is hardly any socio-economic mobility for them within the urban space, but they see it as means to an end. Many travel to the city to broaden their experience horizons as young adults and as a chance to escape patriarchal family structures for a period of time. It is seen as an opportunity to accumulate capital to invest into their future or into the future of their children. Aspirations to saving up range from investing into dowry, so they improve their options as future wives, to safe money for further education, skill training or for small-scale business investment or simply to buy commodities like digital devices and fashion to improve standard and status in their rural communities (Ungruhe, 2018).

…is supporting the rural household

Despite the challenging living and working conditions in the urban south, most kayayei are able to contribute to sustaining rural households' livelihoods and improving living standards in the rural north.

In light of the recent multiple crises in Ghana, most of their expenditure goes on their own upkeep. However, women continue to send money home. Our data from a 2022 survey shows that

- 88% of female respondents from the Northern Region send remittances on a regular basis.
- those remittances are used to buy (1) food, for (2) health expenditures, (3) education of siblings or offspring and (4) farming input
- they are aware that they play an important role in securing the households livelihood (81%); 69% strongly agree that they are expected to send remittances. (Wehner 2025)

This is important as the smallholder families in the north require cash to purchase agricultural inputs. In the absence of sufficient funds, they are constrained in their ability to cultivate crops for both their own consumption and for sale. In recent times, since food insecurity is becoming more acute in the north, some young girls are expected to leave for the city so "there is one mouth less to feed", as a 27-year-old kayayoo explains.

CONCLUSION

Despite the experience of increasing urban hardships, women's rural-urban migration into informal sectors are likely to continue. While the existing agricultural labour market in Northern Ghana comes to its limit in absorbing the local and regional work force (Abukari and Al-hassan, 2017), classic goals of modernization and development in Ghana's rural north have not been met and are not likely to be met in the near future. Given the present and future absence of industrial infrastructure, blue-collar jobs will remain unavailable. Also, equipping migrant women with manual skills such as in tailoring and hairdressing may lead to single success stories. However, this strategy cannot, given the lack of demand, provide employment for the remaining masses. In addition, supporting migrant women's families with cash transfers for a limited period may ease hardships for some time. But it is not a sustainable solution as problematic economic and infrastructural conditions in the rural north are not challenged. Further, given the weak state of school education in the north and slow development of the labour-market in the secondary and tertiary sector, governments cannot count on education as a mid- or long-term solution to the challenges in the north.

Due to the weak economic prospects and suitable alternatives in northern Ghana, women's rural-urban migration will remain a strategy to secure households' livelihoods and own increase individual life chances. This is although current living and working conditions in the cities for women migrants are often inacceptable and harmful. Hence, while realistic policies for the development of rural areas need to be implemented, policies likewise need to improve migrants' lives in the cities. Hence, what is essential for their success and the improvement of migrant women's lives is a coherent strategy that acknowledges the important translocal interdependencies between rural and urban areas and hence, takes translocal action.

Entrance to Bathhouse, Agbobloshie

Policy Recommendations

- Acknowledging female migration into the informal urban sector as a norm

Rather than implementing policies that aim at restricting migration, decision makers need to accept the translocal realities of young rural women with no or little formal education as essential part of translocal lives and livelihoods in Ghana. This does not mean to encourage everyone to migrate. It rather means to provide the needed infrastructure for already existing migration practices that play a vital role for rural household economies and food security as well as for women's social mobility both in the rural and in the urban areas. However, policies need to address problematic child labour issues and implement measures that children below 16 will not undertake unaccompanied migrations.

- Women's` rights to the city as a guiding strategy for urban planning and policy making

Policies need to ensure migrant women's rights to the city [see Blija et al., 2024]. Providing safe working and living environments, access to health care, education and the justice system is key. However, these need to be developed according to women's needs. Housing policies need to support existing translocal social networks of women and support these by offering affordable, secure and safe shelter. Urban educational opportunities need to be provided and aligned to women's work schedules. In addition, informal load carrying needs to be recognized as a proper occupation and needs to be included into and complement the Labour Act of 2003. While women migrants need to be protected by the law, their human rights as well as their citizen rights must be acknowledged and safeguarded.

- Facilitating sustainable livelihoods in agriculture – as a national development strategy

Due to the lack of economic development in northern Ghana, the strengthening of the agricultural sector is paramount. This includes capacity building and skills training for women in farming, horticulture and processing of agricultural products and non-timber forest products. National policies therefore need to be directed at developing a sustainable agricultural sector, with special reference to the increasing environmental and climatic challenges. Agricultural extension and training strategies need to focus on sustainable, climate-smart agriculture, including the reduction of expensive petroleum-based products. With reference to the importance of existing translocal migration patterns, local and regional economic cycles need to be strengthened to retain both male and female labour in the agricultural and food processing sector and to increase food security. Farming must remain a meaningful and worthwhile activity, based one of the most important resources in Northern Ghana, family land and healthy soils.

- Sustainable basic education and educational opportunities for talented females

All this does not exclude the need to invest in educational and health infrastructure in the north. Basic numeracy and literacy skills are key to almost any kind of capacity building and skill training. In Ghana, only 54% of children complete Primary School and only 29% complete Junior High School (Unicef, 2020:10).

Statistics further show that particularly in the Northern Region, the share of children with basic literacy skills are 8% only, in comparison to 52% in Greater Accra (Unicef, 2020:14), indicating the huge disparities in primary education attendance level and also the quality of education. 94% of children from Northern reRgion between 7 and 14 years of age do not have foundational learning skills (Unicef, 2020:18). Several studies point to gender differences in school enrolment, participation and performance and highlight that girls in rural northern Ghana are particularly deprived from the benefits of formal education (see Alhassan and Odame, 2015; Mahama and Nkegbe, 2017). Hence, education of northern Ghanaian girls and young women needs to become a political priority.

They need to be equipped with the basic skills and opportunities to become educated and competent citizens. Decent rural school education that also acknowledges young women's role in household and farming activities needs to ensure that every girl has basic learning skills and basic knowledge in key subjects after she successfully leaves junior secondary school. Certainly, this recommendation includes to provide for an adequate number of educational opportunities for talented women to move on with higher secondary and tertiary education. Governments need to implement a scholarship system for these young women to become for example teachers or nurses, professions that are demanded in Ghana's north and beyond.

Best Practice: School Garden at HIBEKI High School near Wale Wale

EDUCATION IN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND HORTICULTURE FOR WOMEN FROM THE NORTH
by Dr. med. Yussuf Yakubu, Hope for Her Foundation Accra

Being a practitioner who has engaged with women from Northern Ghana, I have experienced the plight of women in **sustaining food security** for their families. It is common that women in the northern region of the country engage in subsistence farming. They face numerous obstacles such as illiteracy, limited access to education, lack of resources, and lack of markets. This overtime has compelled many to migrate to the southern parts of the country in search of better opportunities.

These challenges can be efficiently addressed by **educating and training the women in sustainable methods of agriculture and horticulture**. For instance, equipping women with knowledge and skills necessary for soil conservation, use of organic manure, practicing climate-smart agriculture, and relying less on chemical fertilizers would help them raise their production levels, lower their reliance on remittances, and enhance their food security status.

Moreover, women can be made to learn correspondence skills in **food packaging** in order to reduce food waste and improve preservation time for their products. This can be particularly useful in remote regions that suffer from limited market access.

Lastly, it is equally necessary to ensure that there are incentives and adequate measures for women to adopt widespread **sustainable agriculture**. This may be about credit, market, and extension service access. By working together with women, communities, and government agencies, we can help ensure food security and improve the livelihoods of women and their families in the North.

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