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Gendered Dynamics of Transnational Living: A Narrative Inquiry of Ghanaian Couples

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Abstract

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This article examines the gendered dimensions of transnational living among Ghanaian immigrant couples who maintain marital relationships across international borders. Using a narrative inquiry methodology—specifically, in-depth life story interviews—and grounded in symbolic interactionism, gender theory, and intersectionality, the study explores the lived experiences of ten spouses—five women and five men—who live apart between Ghana and the United States. Data were collected between 2021 and 2022. Participants' narratives reveal that while both men and women experience emotional and relational strain, these experiences are shaped in distinctly gendered ways. Women report heightened emotional labor, persistent expectations of fidelity, and long-distance caregiving responsibilities, while men describe social pressure to remarry and a disrupted sense of authority within the marital relationship. These gendered strains are exacerbated by irregular visitations, remittance obligations, and communication breakdowns. The study situates these narratives within broader Ghanaian cultural norms that prioritize male authority and female responsibility for kin care, while also examining how transnational conditions destabilize—but do not erase—those norms. By centering personal stories, the article illuminates how gendered power operates across space, distance, and cultural systems. While limited by a small sample size and the focus on Ghana-U.S. couples, the study offers practical implications for transnational family counseling and support services. This research contributes to feminist and migration scholarship by advancing understanding of how gender, place, and transnationalism intersect to reshape intimacy, responsibility, and identity in global family life.

Keywords: Gender and Migration; Transnational Families; Narrative Inquiry; Ghanaian Immigrants; Transnational Intimacy.

Introduction

How does gender shape the lived experiences of immigrant couples who maintain marriages across international borders? This article explores that question

by examining the gendered dynamics of transnational living arrangements among Ghanaian couples separated between the United States and Ghana. While migration scholarship has long acknowledged that mobility transforms family life, less attention has been paid to how marital roles, emotional labor, and perceptions of intimacy are reconfigured by long-distance separation—and how

these shifts are experienced differently by men and women.

Transnational family arrangements are increasingly common in today's globalized world, driven by economic necessity, restrictive immigration policies, and aspirations for better futures. Among African immigrants—particularly Ghanaians—transnational living often functions as a long-term strategy shaped by visa delays, job insecurity, and educational pursuits. Yet the emotional and relational toll of these arrangements is profound. Long-distance marriages demand the renegotiation of intimacy, caregiving, authority, and communication outside the framework of co-residence—processes deeply embedded in gendered cultural expectations.

This study examines how gender mediates these negotiations by drawing on in-depth narrative interviews with ten Ghanaian immigrants—five women and five men—who live apart from their spouses across national borders. Using narrative inquiry grounded in symbolic interactionism, the research centers participants' lived experiences to explore how they “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) in transnational marriages, and how meanings of masculinity, femininity, and marital responsibility are redefined in the context of prolonged separation.

Ghana offers a compelling case for this inquiry. Its long-standing migration patterns, strong kinship obligations, and enduring cultural norms around gender and marriage create a unique context in which to examine the intersections of intimacy, distance, and gendered power. Yet African perspectives—particularly those grounded in gender analysis—remain underrepresented in transnational family research, which has largely focused on Latin American and Asian contexts.

By centering Ghanaian voices, this article contributes to migration and gender scholarship in three key ways: it brings a culturally grounded African perspective into broader transnational debates; it highlights how gender roles are reworked—not erased—under conditions of separation; and it underscores how individuals actively negotiate structural and emotional challenges through everyday practices. In doing so, the study advances sociological understandings of how macro-level migration regimes intersect with intimate, micro-level realities to produce gendered experiences of transnational family life.

Background and Literature Review

Transnational marriage—defined as a marital arrangement in which spouses reside in different countries while maintaining emotional, legal, or familial ties—is a growing phenomenon shaped by globalization, restrictive immigration regimes, and socio-economic imperatives.

Among African immigrant communities, particularly Ghanaians, these living arrangements are often long-term strategies rooted in aspirations for upward mobility, educational advancement, and family security (Asiedu 2013; Mazzucato 2008). However, such arrangements introduce emotional and relational complexities that are deeply shaped by gender, class, and migration status (Osei et al. 2023).

Scholars have long documented how migration disrupts conventional family structures and reshapes caregiving roles, household labor, and emotional intimacy (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton 1995; Parreñas 2005; Donato et al. 2006). Much of this literature has focused on transnational motherhood, particularly the emotional labor and kin maintenance work women perform across borders. For instance, Parreñas' (2005) work on Filipino domestic workers highlights the affective burden of sustaining family connections from afar. Similarly, Dreby (2010) shows how Mexican mothers and fathers experience separation and strain in asymmetrical ways, with caregiving often feminized and surveillance of fidelity disproportionately aimed at women. Yet, relatively little attention has been given to transnational husbands, or to how both spouses navigate intimacy, authority, and obligation in the context of marital distance (Osei et al. 2023; Onyeze-Joe et al. 2022).

This study responds to that gap by incorporating a gender-comparative and intersectional lens to explore how men and women differently experience long-distance marriage. It draws on Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity to examine how men renegotiate authority under conditions of spatial separation, and on Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality to consider how gender interacts with migration status, race, and class to shape relational practices and emotional burdens. As studies like Baldassar and Merla (2014) show, emotional intimacy in transnational families is not evenly distributed; it is embedded within unequal social hierarchies, shaped by structural constraints, and often reproduced through digital technologies.

The study is further grounded in symbolic interactionism, attending to how individuals interpret, perform, and reconstruct marital roles in the absence of physical proximity. As Mead (1938) and Carter and Fuller (2015) suggest, social identities are continuously negotiated through interaction—even when mediated through calls, remittances, or virtual parenting. Narrative inquiry serves as a methodological bridge between this theoretical lens and lived experience, allowing participants to express how they assign meaning to their roles, responsibilities, and emotional investments. This method captures not only what participants do but also how they feel—offering insight into the emotional texture of transnational living and the symbolic significance of everyday acts such as sending

money, disciplining a child, or managing expectations of fidelity.

While studies of Latin American and Asian transnational families have provided critical insights into caregiving and gender, African family formations remain underrepresented in this literature. African migration, shaped by postcolonial histories, economic precarity, and strong kinship obligations, brings distinct challenges and cultural logics to transnational life (Adepoju 2008; Olwig 2003). Ghanaian families, in particular, have long histories of circular migration, hierarchical gender roles, and deep commitments to marriage and extended family. Studying Ghanaian couples, therefore, allows for a culturally grounded yet globally relevant exploration of how gender roles are reconfigured—not erased—within transnational contexts.

This study contributes to growing scholarship on gendered transnationalism by integrating intersectional feminist theory, symbolic interactionism, and narrative inquiry. It surfaces the affective and symbolic labor involved in sustaining intimacy at a distance, while also attending to how race, class, and legal status shape those emotional burdens unequally. In doing so, the study highlights both the structural constraints immigrant couples face and the agentive strategies they deploy to navigate love, labor, and loyalty across time and space.

The Current Study

This study explores the question: *How do Ghanaian immigrant spouses experience and interpret gendered marital roles and expectations when living apart across international borders?* While marital strain and negotiation are common to all relationships, transnational separation introduces unique pressures on emotional intimacy, role performance, and perceptions of relational commitment. These pressures are not only intensified by distance but are also deeply mediated by gendered social scripts, cultural expectations, and transnational obligations.

Transnational marriage, particularly among African immigrant populations, is not merely a logistical arrangement dictated by migration constraints. Rather, it is a dynamic relational system shaped by sociocultural histories, economic ambitions, and normative ideals of gender and family. In the Ghanaian context, marriage is a central institution through which gender identities and family obligations are enacted and affirmed. Yet, when couples are separated across borders, these normative expectations must be continually reinterpreted, challenged, or upheld under new conditions of distance and constraint. This study aims to understand how such reinterpretations unfold in the everyday lives of Ghanaian transnational spouses.

The research emerges from a broader qualitative project examining how transnational living affects marital satisfaction and family dynamics among Ghanaian

immigrants in the United States. Initial data analysis revealed distinct patterns in how men and women narrated their experiences of separation, particularly in terms of emotional labor, financial responsibility, caregiving expectations, and perceptions of fidelity. These patterns prompted a more focused investigation into how gender fundamentally structures the practice, interpretation, and endurance of transnational marriage.

To pursue this inquiry, I conducted narrative interviews with ten participants (five women and five men), all of whom had previously participated in the larger study and had consented to follow-up interviews. These participants, all currently engaged in transnational marriages—with one spouse residing in Ghana and the other in the United States—were selected for their ability to reflect on the lived reality of long-term separation. The interviews explored a range of topics including emotional communication, gendered expectations around remittances and caregiving, strategies for maintaining intimacy, and tensions around loyalty, trust, and marital authority.

Narrative inquiry was employed as the methodological approach because of its emphasis on lived experience and the meaning-making processes individuals engage in as they recount their stories. This approach is particularly well suited for capturing the emotional texture of transnational relationships, as well as the nuanced ways gender mediates participants' interpretations of love, duty, and identity. Rather than treating narratives as transparent accounts of events, this study treats them as sites where gendered meanings are produced, contested, and negotiated.

Guided by symbolic interactionism, the analysis focuses on how participants construct and reconstruct their gendered selves through social interaction, even in the absence of physical co-presence. In this context, marriage becomes a symbolic space in which participants continuously perform and adjust their roles in response to both distant spouses and broader community expectations. This theoretical lens allows attention to the micro-level processes through which cultural scripts are internalized, enacted, and sometimes resisted, shedding light on the agency embedded in everyday relational negotiations.

By centering the voices of both men and women, this study offers a comparative gendered analysis that is often lacking in existing literature on transnational families. The findings reveal that transnational marriage is not simply a site of logistical compromise but a terrain of emotional negotiation, cultural meaning-making, and gendered contestation. Ultimately, the study contributes to feminist and migration scholarship by showing how gender not only organizes the division of labor and emotional responsibility in transnational marriages but also frames how immigrants imagine, interpret, and sustain long-distance

love and commitment under global conditions of mobility and constraint.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks: symbolic interactionism, gender theory, and intersectionality. Together, these approaches illuminate how Ghanaian immigrant spouses interpret and negotiate their marital roles, relational expectations, and emotional labor across distance. They enable a layered analysis that moves beyond structural explanations of transnational living to foreground how meaning-making, identity, and power operate within the intimate terrain of marriage.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism provides a foundation for understanding how individuals actively construct meaning through interaction—meanings that are not fixed but continually negotiated and revised. Originating from the work of George Herbert Mead and formalized by Herbert Blumer, symbolic interactionism posits that social reality is produced through ongoing processes of interpretation and response. Individuals act toward others and toward institutions like marriage based on the meanings they ascribe to them, which are themselves shaped by social interaction (Blumer 1969; Turner 2011).

In the context of transnational marriage, this framework allows for a close reading of how spouses make sense of their roles and relational dynamics when traditional co-presence is disrupted. Physical separation alters the daily enactments of marriage—such as shared routines, physical affection, and spontaneous communication—and compels couples to engage in new, symbolic forms of interaction. For instance, participants in this study described how remittances, scheduled phone calls, or photos exchanged via WhatsApp became symbolic markers of care and commitment. These practices, though mediated, carry emotional weight and serve as performative acts that reaffirm the marriage despite spatial separation (Dako-Gyeke 2016; Mazzucato 2008).

Moreover, cultural scripts around gender, marriage, and familial obligation are central to how participants interpret their own and their spouse's actions. A husband's decision to prioritize remittance-sending over frequent emotional communication may be interpreted through cultural understandings of masculinity and provision. Likewise, a wife's experience of emotional neglect may be shaped by internalized expectations of marital closeness and support. Symbolic interactionism thus offers a lens to examine how individuals not only perform their roles but also make meaning of those performances within culturally and relationally specific contexts.

Gender Theory

Gender theory provides a critical lens for understanding how these performances are shaped by and help reproduce broader gender norms. Drawing on West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender," this study treats gender as an ongoing, situated activity—one that is enacted, displayed, and reinforced through everyday interaction. Gender is not a fixed identity but a process, embedded in institutions and cultural ideologies, and policed through social expectations.

In transnational marriages, the performance of gendered roles becomes particularly fraught. Migration can destabilize conventional marital structures by disrupting shared space and exposing individuals to new normative frameworks. Yet, as this study shows, transnational living often intensifies rather than diminishes gender asymmetries. Ghanaian cultural expectations around masculinity and femininity—where men are seen as breadwinners and women as nurturers—continue to shape how spouses perceive and evaluate each other's roles, even from afar (Awumbila et al. 2008; Mahler and Pessar 2006). Women are often tasked with sustaining emotional connection, managing extended kin expectations, and absorbing the relational burden of absence, while men are expected to demonstrate care through financial provision.

Importantly, gender theory also accounts for variability and resistance. Some participants—particularly women—challenged traditional roles by becoming the primary economic providers while also navigating expectations of emotional labor. These moments of contradiction and negotiation highlight the fluidity and contextual nature of gender. Transnational living thus becomes a site where gender is both reasserted and contested, offering insight into the adaptability and persistence of patriarchal norms.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, first theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), provides a structural and analytical framework to examine how multiple systems of oppression—such as race, gender, class, and migration status—interact to shape individuals' lived experiences. In this study, intersectionality is critical for understanding how Ghanaian immigrants navigate not only gendered expectations but also the constraints and possibilities afforded by their racialized and migrant positions in the United States.

For many participants, transnational marriage unfolds within a broader context of systemic inequality: limited access to legal documentation, precarious employment, and racialized scrutiny. These structural factors

do not affect all spouses equally. Women, for example, may face exclusion from formal labor markets while simultaneously being held to high standards of caregiving and emotional availability. Men, on the other hand, may struggle to fulfill breadwinner expectations when economic opportunities are constrained by immigration status or racial discrimination (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). These overlapping challenges illuminate how gendered experiences are deeply embedded within broader power structures.

Intersectionality also sheds light on how global hierarchies of mobility and citizenship shape relational dynamics. The ability to travel, sponsor a spouse, or send remittances is unequally distributed and often structured by immigration policy and legal precarity. These realities place pressure on transnational spouses to perform idealized versions of marital loyalty and success, even as they navigate systemic barriers. By accounting for these intersecting dimensions of identity and power, intersectionality enables a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional, financial, and relational labor is unequally organized across gendered and racialized lines.

Taken together, symbolic interactionism, gender theory, and intersectionality provide a robust and integrated framework for analyzing transnational marriage. Symbolic interactionism centers the micro-level, interpretive processes through which meaning is constructed and roles are negotiated. Gender theory reveals how these processes are patterned by cultural norms and institutionalized expectations. Intersectionality situates these experiences within a broader landscape of structural inequality, emphasizing how race, class, and migration status contour the possibilities and constraints of marital life across borders.

This theoretical triangulation moves beyond simplistic binaries of success or failure in transnational marriage. Instead, it foregrounds the relational and emotional labor involved in sustaining intimacy under unequal and shifting conditions—offering a more nuanced and feminist understanding of love, obligation, and power in an era of global mobility.

Methodology

This study employs narrative inquiry to explore the gendered experiences of Ghanaian immigrant couples navigating transnational marriage. Narrative inquiry, rooted in the interpretive and constructivist traditions of qualitative research, centers personal stories as both data and method. It operates on the premise that individuals make sense of their lives through narrative—constructing meaning, identity, and coherence in the telling of experiences (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). This approach is particularly well-suited for examining intimate, relational

dynamics across geographic distance, where emotional complexity, cultural expectations, and individual agency intersect in the everyday management of transnational life.

Narrative inquiry is not merely a technique for data collection, but a methodological framework that treats participants' accounts as situated performances shaped by memory, audience, and context. In the case of transnational marriage, storytelling becomes a medium through which spouses make sense of their roles, justify their actions, and grapple with the emotional and symbolic labor involved in sustaining intimacy across borders. This approach is therefore ideal for exploring how gendered narratives are constructed, contested, and sustained in response to both structural conditions and personal aspirations.

Research Design

The research design is qualitative, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to elicit rich, detailed life narratives. Semi-structured interviews balance flexibility and consistency, enabling participants to share their experiences in their own terms while allowing the researcher to probe specific themes related to gender, marriage, and migration.

The interview protocol was designed around four core thematic domains to ensure comprehensive coverage of key issues:

1. Emotional labor and intimacy – maintaining or struggling with emotional connection across distance;
2. Financial obligations and remittances – expectations of support, money transfers, and perceived fairness in economic contributions;
3. Travel and visitation – experiences of physical reunification, decision-making around visits, and their emotional aftermath;
4. Marital strain and gendered tension – perceived inequities, communication breakdowns, and emotional or relational conflict.

Questions were open-ended and conversational, allowing participants to reflect deeply on their histories, relationships, and evolving marital experiences in the context of migration. This flexible design honored narrative inquiry's emphasis on participant agency and emergent meaning-making rather than rigid question sequencing. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, occurring either in person or via secure video conferencing depending on participant preference and location. They were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes captured contextual cues, non-verbal expressions, and reflexive observations, paying particular attention to how participants narrated turning points, dilemmas, and moments where gendered expectations surfaced.

Participants

Participants were purposively selected from a larger qualitative study on Ghanaian immigrants engaged in transnational living. Ten individuals (five men, five women) were chosen for their ability and willingness to articulate reflections on gendered marital experiences. All met these criteria: Ghanaian nationals residing in the U.S., legally married with at least one spouse in Ghana, and maintaining a transnational marriage for a minimum of two years.

The sample was diverse across age, immigration status (permanent residents, citizens, temporary visa holders), socio-economic background (working to middle class), and length of marriage (5 to 20+ years). This variation enabled exploration of how gendered experiences intersect with structural and biographical factors.

Reflexivity and Positionality

As a researcher with academic and cultural ties to the Ghanaian immigrant community, I engaged with both analytic rigor and cultural sensitivity. My positionality helped build trust and rapport, granting access to cultural nuances that might otherwise be obscured. Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were used to mitigate interpretive bias and critically reflect on my positional influence.

Recognizing the sensitivity of gendered marital experiences, interviews were conducted in environments emphasizing respect, openness, and empathy. Participants were invited to share both events and emotions, honoring narrative inquiry's commitment to capturing the full depth of lived experience.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes, conducted in English either in person or via secure video platforms. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with transcripts reviewed for accuracy.

Participants were also invited (though not required) to share supplemental artifacts—such as photographs, wedding memorabilia, WhatsApp messages, emails, or letters—that illuminated their transnational marital experiences. These artifacts functioned as narrative prompts and contextual aids rather than primary data. For example, a wedding photo was used by one participant to reflect on the emotional gap between marital expectations and prolonged separation, while another used a WhatsApp message to illustrate gendered communication tensions. These materials

enriched storytelling and were referenced during interpretive analysis to deepen contextual understanding. Throughout data collection, I maintained detailed field notes and reflexive memos documenting interpersonal dynamics, contextual observations, and evolving interpretations. Notes captured emotional tones—hesitations, laughter, intensity—that informed later coding and analysis.

Data collection occurred over a four-month period, with occasional follow-up conversations to clarify or elaborate points.

Data Analysis

Data analysis combined narrative and thematic approaches, grounded in narrative inquiry principles and feminist qualitative traditions. This dual strategy facilitated both close engagement with personal stories and identification of broader gendered patterns.

The analysis unfolded in four iterative stages:

1. **Transcription and Familiarization:** Verbatim transcripts were read multiple times to gain holistic narrative understanding. Analytic memos noted tone, silences, contradictions, and emotional emphasis, sensitizing the analysis to narrative form and content.
2. **Initial Coding:** Using NVivo, inductive coding identified recurrent words, phrases, and emotional motifs, covering surface-level content (e.g., “sending money,” “phone arguments”) and deeper interpretive elements (e.g., “doing gender,” “feeling surveilled,” “sacrificing”). Gendered language, symbolic metaphors, and cultural references were carefully noted.
3. **Theme Refinement:** Codes were grouped into conceptual categories reflecting: (1) gendered negotiations of responsibility and care, (2) relational work maintaining connection across distance, and (3) strategies of adaptation and resistance to normative marital expectations. Themes were checked against full narratives to preserve contextual richness.
4. **Narrative Construction:** Analytic narratives highlighted how participants made meaning over time, attending to story structure, emotional climaxes, moral evaluations, and cultural logics. The performative and symbolic dimensions of storytelling were emphasized.

Theoretical frameworks of symbolic interactionism, gender theory, and intersectionality guided interpretation, revealing how participants constructed identities and marital roles within gendered, cultural, and structural contexts.

Intersectionality was particularly central during analysis, prompting examination of how gender intersected with race, class, and migration status to shape differential emotional labor and relational experiences within the trans-national marriage context.

Throughout, participant voices were preserved by maintaining narrative arcs and including extended quotations, honoring narrative inquiry's commitment to lived experience as data and meaning.

To ensure rigor, I maintained an audit trail of coding and memos, and engaged in peer debriefing with qualitative research colleagues to challenge assumptions and refine interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

The study received Institutional Review Board approval, with written informed consent obtained prior to participation. Participants were informed of their rights, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and withdrawal options. Identifying details were removed or altered, and pseudonyms used to protect confidentiality. Minor contextual details were sometimes modified to ensure anonymity while preserving narrative integrity.

Given the sensitive nature of discussions, interviews were conducted in safe, respectful environments with attentiveness to power dynamics, especially given my dual insider/outsider positionality. Reflexive memos documented my positionality and emotional responses throughout. All digital data were securely stored on encrypted, password-protected devices accessible only to the principal investigator; hard copies of consent forms were kept securely per institutional policy. The study aligns with feminist qualitative ethics, emphasizing relational accountability, narrative respect, and ethical representation of participants' lives with care and nuance.

Findings

This study revealed marked gendered differences in how Ghanaian couples navigate transnational marriages, with key themes emerging around emotional labor, remittance obligations, perceptions of marital strain, visitation practices, and decision-making power. These findings illuminate how gender roles and expectations profoundly shape both the practical and emotional dimensions of living apart, confirming the intertwined influence of cultural norms and structural constraints as framed by the study's theoretical perspectives.

Gendered Emotional Labor

One of the most prominent findings was the disproportionate emotional labor borne by women in sustaining marital intimacy across distance. Female participants described engaging in daily communication rituals—phone calls, texts, and video chats—not simply as routine, but as vital acts of relational maintenance that required considerable emotional energy. Ama, a mother and wife, poignantly shared, “I have to make sure my

husband feels loved and cared for even though we are far apart. It's exhausting at times, but I feel responsible for keeping the relationship strong.” This sentiment reflects West and Zimmerman's (1987) notion of “doing gender” as emotional caretaking, whereby women's identities become bound to sustaining connection and harmony.

The symbolic significance of digital communication was heightened through the use of artifacts such as WhatsApp messages and exchanged photographs, which participants brought to interviews as tangible symbols of affection and conflict. For instance, one participant displayed a series of voice notes sent nightly to her husband, explaining that these messages functioned as emotional lifelines amid physical separation. Such artifacts serve as concrete expressions of symbolic interactionism's concept of mediated meaning-making, illustrating how spouses actively construct marital closeness despite geographic distance.

Male participants acknowledged the emotional challenges but often framed affective maintenance as primarily the wife's responsibility. For example, Kwame noted, “I try to call when I can, but I know she's the one who keeps us connected emotionally.” This reinforces culturally embedded gender norms, where men's emotional involvement is secondary to their role as providers. Yet some men expressed frustration with these expectations, describing feelings of helplessness in managing emotional needs from afar, highlighting the fluid and contested nature of gender performances in transnational contexts.

Remittances and Financial Obligations

Financial support emerged as a domain deeply gendered and entwined with cultural kinship expectations. Women often described sending remittances not only to their spouses but also to extended family networks—including aging parents and siblings—framing this as an emotional and moral obligation essential to their identity as daughters and wives. Nana, a male participant, observed, “My wife sends money to her family, but I don't feel the pressure to do the same for her family. In our culture, it is expected that the wife should send money, not the husband.” This gendered double burden situates women as key economic and emotional conduits across borders, an insight that intersectionality helps explain by revealing how gender intersects with familial roles and migration constraints.

Participants frequently referred to money transfer receipts, group chats, and WhatsApp financial discussions as artifacts that underscored the relational labor embedded in remitting practices. These artifacts function as both proof of responsibility and symbolic performances of care, reinforcing how financial support extends beyond economics into the realm of emotional labor.

Men typically described their financial contributions more transactionally, emphasizing remittances as fulfilling immediate needs or practical obligations rather than ongoing kinship care. This distinction highlights gender theory's framing of masculinity as tied to provision but less to emotional labor, reinforcing the asymmetrical burden women face in sustaining transnational family ties.

Marital Strain and Gendered Perceptions of Commitment

Women's narratives emphasized the emotional toll of long-distance marriage, especially during crises like illness or family emergencies. Esi recounted a poignant moment when her father was seriously ill, but her husband was unable to travel: "I had to handle everything alone, and it felt like the distance made it worse. It's hard to feel connected when you can't physically be there when your partner needs you." This account exemplifies "relational overextension," where women absorb emotional responsibilities across multiple domains—spousal, parental, and extended kin—without commensurate support.

Men, while acknowledging marital strain, often framed their commitment in terms of physical presence and provision. They expressed longing for reunion but placed less emphasis on emotional labor, consistent with hegemonic masculinity norms that valorize presence and economic provision over affective involvement. This divergence in narratives aligns with symbolic interactionism, as spouses interpret and perform their roles based on culturally informed meanings, which are negotiated but also constrained by gendered expectations.

Visitation and Long-Distance Relationship Dynamics

Visitation practices further reflected gendered inequalities in mobility and relational labor. Women often took primary responsibility for coordinating visits, especially when children were involved. Afia shared, "I make sure to visit my husband at least once every year. It's important for our relationship, and it's also important for the children to see their father. But it's not always easy to arrange because of the children and my job." Her narrative illustrates how women actively manage the emotional and logistical challenges of maintaining family unity.

Artifacts such as travel itineraries, photos of family reunions, and visa documents presented during interviews served as concrete evidence of these gendered practices. They highlight the symbolic and practical importance of physical visits in reinforcing family bonds and managing transnational roles, further supporting symbolic

interactionism's emphasis on the performative nature of marital connection.

Men's accounts of visitation centered more on practical constraints, such as work demands or visa issues, often without articulating the emotional significance women ascribed to such visits. This gap underscores how gendered experiences of mobility are informed by both cultural expectations and structural barriers.

Gendered Power Dynamics and Decision-Making

Despite women's significant role in managing day-to-day transnational family life—including remittances and kin mediation—major decisions often remained in the hands of men. Women reported exercising considerable agency in practical matters, yet their strategic authority was limited by persistent patriarchal norms that cast men as "heads of households," even when families were fragmented across borders.

This power imbalance was evident not only in decision-making but in whose perspectives were legitimized and prioritized. For example, financial planning and long-term family settlement choices were typically dominated by men, while women's input was marginalized or framed as secondary. This layered inequality reflects intersectionality's focus on how gender, migration status, and cultural norms interlock to produce unequal power relations.

Artifacts such as shared financial spreadsheets or message exchanges about major decisions illuminated these dynamics, revealing how decision-making is a gendered performance embedded in broader social structures.

Discussion

This study reveals that transnational living arrangements among Ghanaian couples are not neutral adaptations to economic opportunity or immigration policy but are deeply structured by gendered norms, moral logics, and unequal power relations. While participants often described their separations as pragmatic or temporary, the emotional, financial, and logistical labor required to maintain long-distance marriages was unevenly distributed along gender lines. In what follows, I explore how five key domains—emotional labor, remittances, marital strain, visitation practices, and decision-making—illuminate the gendered power dynamics embedded in these transnational arrangements. These findings contribute to growing feminist critiques of transnational family life, particularly by centering African immigrant experiences that are often underrepresented in the literature.

Gendered Emotional Labor and the Transnational “Second Shift”

A central finding of this study is the gendered asymmetry in emotional labor. Women, more than men, described themselves as responsible for sustaining relational intimacy across distance—coordinating calls, initiating check-ins, managing family conflict, and emotionally soothing their partners and children. This echoes Hochschild and Machung’s (2012) concept of the “second shift,” with emotional caregiving extending across time zones, not just after paid work, but across oceans. The demands of transnational life intensified rather than relieved women’s emotional responsibilities.

This transnational “second shift” was often rendered invisible in male narratives, reflecting Connell’s (2005) insights on hegemonic masculinity, wherein emotional expression is downplayed or outsourced. Male participants commonly associated their familial role with provision, and while some expressed emotional longing, few described themselves as responsible for maintaining emotional cohesion. This reveals how emotional asymmetry is normalized—naturalized through gendered ideologies that cast women as relational caretakers and men as pragmatic providers. The dichotomy not only obscures the emotional labor of women but contributes to a narrowed and unequal vision of marital intimacy.

Notably, women’s emotional labor was embedded in moral discourses of femininity and obligation. Their narratives drew on Ghanaian cultural scripts of motherhood and wifely duty, aligning care work with moral worth. This moral framing, however, can obscure emotional exploitation: it renders care an obligation rather than a shared responsibility. The internalization of these norms made emotional labor difficult to refuse or renegotiate—particularly for women who feared that voicing their exhaustion might be interpreted as moral failure or lack of love.

Male participants, while less emotionally expressive, were not wholly disengaged. Several men acknowledged missing their wives or feeling emotionally adrift but lacked the language or cultural permission to frame these sentiments as vulnerability. For example, one male participant spoke of “feeling the silence at night,” suggesting a quiet emotional toll that remained unspoken. These reflections suggest that men, too, experience the emotional strain of separation, but often in ways muted by gender norms that discourage emotional openness.

Gendered Logics of Remittance and Kinship Obligations

Remittances emerged as a key site of gendered tension and moral reckoning. While both men and women remitted, women were more likely to frame remittances not

only as economic support but as relational and symbolic acts. For them, remittances were embedded in kinship expectations—expressions of care, duty, and familial solidarity. These dynamics align with Mahler and Pessar’s (2006) “gendered geographies of power,” wherein migrant women’s labor is funneled through moral networks that demand emotional accountability in addition to material support.

In contrast, men’s remittances were more often described in instrumental or bounded terms—targeted primarily at spouses and children and framed as fulfillment of the culturally valorized breadwinner role. These narratives emphasized control, discretion, and duty rather than sacrifice or relational care. This framing reinforced masculine authority in the household and foregrounded provision over emotional presence.

The divergence in remittance logic reinforces unequal kinship burdens. Women’s remittances were stretched across extended familial networks—often without acknowledgment or shared decision-making—while men retained narrowly defined obligations that afforded them greater autonomy and symbolic capital. These findings challenge economic models that treat remittances as gender-neutral and underscore the moral economies through which financial practices are organized and stratified.

At a structural level, women’s expanded remitting obligations were compounded by precarious employment and legal status in host countries. Many described working multiple jobs to sustain remittance flows while meeting their own household needs—highlighting how emotional and financial labor intersect in gendered ways. These overlapping responsibilities, framed as moral imperatives, placed women in vulnerable positions with limited room for refusal or reprioritization.

Marital Strain and the Gendered Experience of Separation

Although transnational separation was emotionally taxing for all participants, the burden was not equally shared. Women spoke more frequently—and more emotionally—about the toll of distance on their wellbeing. They described moments of crisis, unreciprocated efforts at communication, and the disorientation of managing caregiving or illness without spousal support. Their narratives conveyed both personal loneliness and a broader “care deficit” (Parreñas, 2001) produced by migration—where they were expected to care for others while receiving little care themselves.

Men, by contrast, tended to frame separation as strategic: a necessary sacrifice for long-term gain. They acknowledged emotional difficulty but often minimized its

impact, emphasizing financial goals, personal discipline, or future reunification. This gendered divergence in framing reveals how transnationalism is experienced through distinct emotional vocabularies. While men's resilience was coded as stoicism, women's endurance was framed as care—and often expected.

Moreover, the cultural expectation that women remain emotionally available and uncomplaining exacerbated their sense of isolation. As one participant explained, “even when I am tired, I must still smile for him.” This dynamic reflects the “feminization of sacrifice” in transnational families (Dreby, 2010), in which women's emotional suffering is moralized, normalized, and invisibilized.

Visitation, Mobility, and the Gender Politics of Travel

Patterns of transnational visitation also revealed gendered expectations around mobility. Women were more likely to initiate and organize travel to sustain family relationships, especially when children were involved. Despite being constrained by job schedules, childcare, and immigration status, they undertook the emotional and logistical burden of reunification. Men's travel was often framed as optional or conditional—contingent on finances, work, or perceived necessity.

These patterns align with Vaughan et al.'s (2020) concept of the “choreographies of mobility,” where women's movements are often shaped by relational obligation rather than autonomy. Visitation, far from a neutral act, became an extension of women's affective labor—reinforcing their role as emotional glue within the family. This moral obligation to “make the family work,” despite geographic fragmentation, illustrates how even mobility is feminized.

In many cases, women sacrificed income, rest, and personal wellbeing to sustain these visits, often without acknowledgment or reciprocal efforts. Their narratives highlighted the strain of travel logistics, the emotional preparation required to keep the visit positive, and the lingering exhaustion after return. Meanwhile, male participants generally described visitation as meaningful but infrequent, reflecting a differential investment in maintaining physical proximity.

Power, Decision-Making, and the Persistence of Patriarchal Authority

Despite women's increasing economic participation and emotional labor, major decisions—about relocation, finances, and child-rearing—remained male-dominated. Even in cases where women managed day-to-day affairs, men were described as holding ultimate authority. This reflects the persistent influence of

patriarchal authority across transnational space, echoing Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila's (1997) argument that male dominance can be sustained symbolically and materially even across distance.

Participants' accounts revealed both subtle and overt assertions of male power. Women described needing to “consult” their husbands about travel, job changes, or major purchases, even when they were the primary earners. This asymmetry of voice and recognition underscores how deeply rooted gender norms constrain women's strategic agency, even when their labor is central to family survival.

Some women resisted these dynamics—challenging decisions, asserting autonomy, or reconfiguring their roles—but such acts were often described as emotionally costly or socially punished. The persistence of male decision-making authority points to the elasticity of patriarchy: rather than dissolving under migration, it adapts to transnational contexts, preserving symbolic hierarchies even amid changing material roles.

Contributions and Practical Implications

This study contributes to growing scholarship on gender and migration by centering the lived experiences of both male and female spouses in transnational Ghanaian marriages. Using a narrative inquiry approach, it illuminates how gendered meanings are produced, negotiated, and resisted in everyday marital practices across distance. In doing so, it challenges monolithic representations of migrant families and highlights the complex interplay of gender, power, and emotion in transnational life.

Findings also point to the structural factors that contour these dynamics: immigration restrictions that constrain mobility, precarious employment that limits economic autonomy, and cultural norms that valorize gendered sacrifice. These forces shape not only what roles migrants perform, but how they feel about them—and what forms of resistance are possible.

From a policy standpoint, this research underscores the need for family reunification policies that recognize the relational costs of prolonged separation. Support services for transnational families—particularly women—should address not just legal and economic needs but emotional labor and caregiving burdens. Programs that offer culturally responsive counseling, spousal communication workshops, and kinship mediation could mitigate the relational strain documented here.

Practically, this study also suggests that interventions aimed at gender equity in transnational contexts must move beyond economic empowerment to address emotional equity and decision-making authority. Recognizing and redistributing emotional labor, fostering

male emotional engagement, and validating women's caregiving exhaustion are essential steps toward more equitable transnational family arrangements.

Limitations

While this study provides critical insights into the gendered dimensions of transnational living among Ghanaian couples, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study is based on a small, purposively selected sample of ten participants. This sample size, while appropriate for in-depth qualitative inquiry, limits the generalizability of the findings. The selection criteria prioritized participants with recent or ongoing transnational marital experiences and a willingness to reflect on gender dynamics. As such, the study may exclude couples with more ambivalent or less articulated narratives. Moreover, individuals in more precarious migratory, legal, or relational circumstances may have been less likely to participate, shaping whose voices are represented.

Second, while gender was the primary lens of analysis, other intersecting factors—such as migration status, education level, class, religion, and age—were not explored in systematic depth. These dimensions likely shaped how participants interpreted and experienced their transnational relationships, and future research would benefit from a more robust intersectional framework to capture these complexities.

Third, the reliance on narrative data introduces potential issues of subjectivity and social desirability. Participants' accounts were shaped not only by memory and perception but also by culturally inflected expectations about what could or should be shared. This is particularly salient in discussions of marital dynamics, where shame, honor, or self-presentation may influence disclosure. While narrative inquiry embraces subjectivity as a site of meaning-making, these factors may introduce bias and should be considered in interpretation.

Finally, the cultural and scholarly positionality of the researcher likely influenced the data collection and analysis. While cultural familiarity facilitated rapport and nuanced interpretation, it may also have introduced blind spots or assumptions. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process, but the findings remain co-constructed within the research encounter.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could benefit from expanding the sample to include a broader and more diverse range of participants, such as individuals from different regions of Ghana, other African countries, and a wider array of migration destinations. Cross-cultural comparative studies would help illuminate how regional, national, and diasporic

contexts shape the gendered dynamics of transnational living. In particular, comparative research across African diasporas could uncover both shared patterns and divergent experiences shaped by cultural, legal, and socio-economic differences.

Additionally, this study focused on the experiences of married, heterosexual couples. Future studies should aim to include individuals in diverse relational forms—such as long-term partnerships, single-parent transnational families, and queer or non-heteronormative arrangements. This would support more inclusive frameworks for understanding how gender, sexuality, and kinship interact in the organization of transnational family life.

A longitudinal research design is also recommended to trace how gendered roles, emotional labor, and caregiving responsibilities evolve over time, especially in response to life events such as migration, childbirth, legal status changes, and family reunification. Such designs would enable researchers to explore how power dynamics are renegotiated across different phases of transnational living.

Methodologically, future studies might consider mixed-methods approaches that combine narrative inquiry with ethnography, surveys, or policy analysis to provide a more holistic account of transnational family practices. Policy-oriented research could examine how immigration regimes, labor policies, and welfare systems shape the constraints and possibilities for family life across borders.

Finally, future research could explore the following questions: How do immigration policies structure gendered family roles over time? What role do host-country institutions play in shaping caregiving and remittance practices? How do transnational families resist or reproduce patriarchal authority in different cultural settings? Addressing these questions would further deepen feminist and intersectional understandings of global mobility.

Conclusion

This study has explored the gendered dynamics of transnational living among Ghanaian couples, highlighting how long-distance marital arrangements are not only shaped by physical separation but are also deeply embedded in culturally specific gender roles, expectations, and power relations. Through rich narrative accounts from both male and female spouses, the study illuminates how emotional labor, financial obligations, visitation practices, and decision-making authority are unevenly distributed along gendered lines, with women disproportionately bearing the emotional, caregiving, and logistical burdens of maintaining transnational family life.

These findings reaffirm that transnationalism is far from a gender-neutral process. Rather, it is one in which

entrenched patriarchal norms and power asymmetries are both reproduced and occasionally contested across borders. Women, in particular, navigate a complex web of intersecting obligations that encompass emotional support, kinship care, and financial remittances, often without commensurate recognition or reciprocal support. Men, by contrast, continue to be positioned primarily as financial providers and strategic decision-makers, with their emotional labor and domestic involvement less visible or culturally expected. Such gendered patterns of responsibility reflect enduring inequalities in the social organization of family, affective labor, and migration.

By situating Ghanaian transnational marriages within broader feminist, migration, and transnationalism literatures, this study contributes to a more intersectional and context-sensitive understanding of how gender operates within and across national boundaries. It demonstrates that, even as transnational mobility can open new opportunities for economic and social advancement, it often reinscribes traditional hierarchies and gendered divisions of labor—particularly for women, who must sustain family cohesion and cultural continuity from afar under challenging circumstances. These insights underscore the necessity for continued scholarly attention to how intimate relationships are shaped by, and in turn shape, global systems of power, migration regimes, and cultural norms.

In centering the lived experiences of Ghanaian couples, this study also advances efforts to decolonize migration research by foregrounding voices and perspectives from the Global South and challenging dominant, often universalizing narratives of transnational family life. Future feminist scholarship should continue to critically interrogate how intersecting axes of race, class, migration status, and cultural context shape the affective and material contours of intimate life in a globalizing world—illuminating both constraint and resilience in the everyday negotiations of gender and migration.

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