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Gender and Migration: The Reconfigured Role of African Women in Diasporic Family Structures

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ABSTRACT : This study investigates the shifting dynamics of gender roles and family organisation among African migrant women in the diaspora. Drawing on transnational feminist theory and a qualitative multi-sited methodology, the research explores how migration alters women's family responsibilities, agency, and cultural identities. Case studies from African women residing in the United Kingdom, Germany, United States and Canada reveal a paradoxical process in which traditional gender norms are simultaneously challenged and reinforced. Women emerge as key providers and caregivers, but continue to navigate cultural expectations of domesticity and respectability. Findings also highlight the emotional labour of long-distance motherhood and the tensions between generations over gendered values. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender, migration, and transnational familyhood, offering critical insights for policymakers and diaspora communities seeking more equitable gender engagements.

KEYWORDS: *Gender roles, African diaspora, Migration, Transnational families, Women's agency, Kondi - Gulei*

I.　　INTRODUCTION

Migration has long been a defining factor in shaping African families, with economic and socio-political factors driving movement from the continent to different parts of the world. Although, while migration offers financial stability, it also comes at a social cost - disrupting traditional family structures and weakening kinship ties (Esuga & Kadishi, 2025). This perhaps explain why interdisciplinary research in global migration studies has long possess the convergence of gender and migration as a critical focus.

Nonetheless, the diasporic family contexts of African women's complex experiences remain largely under-researched. In the majority of societies across Africa, gender roles have historically been embedded in patriarchal norms that clearly articulated what women are expected to act as culture keepers, caregivers, and emotional pillars of the family. Forced or voluntary migration reconfigures traditional roles in complex and contradictory ways. Since women migrate individually or in family clusters, they become pivotal agents of re-making kinship and culture within the transnational space. This transformation generate pertinent questions: How do migration dynamics intersect with gender hierarchies within African diasporic families? How do African migrant women negotiate the converging expectations of transnational work, motherhood, and communal constructs?

In African diasporic communities - particularly within Western host societies where sociocultural gender norms often differ significantly - migrant women encounter both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, they may gain financial independence and experience upward social mobility. On the other hand, they frequently bear a dual burden: engaging in paid employment while simultaneously performing unpaid domestic and caregiving duties. This study examines these strain by focusing on the role of African women in maintaining and shaping diasporic family structures. It explores how their active experiences abroad serve to deconstruct, reinforce, or transform traditional gender roles, using the lens of feminist migration theory.

Migration as a vector of economic, social and cultural change restructures the daily lives of individuals and families. In the case of women, migration tends to redefine their social roles, not merely within the household but transnationally and inter-generationally. African women migrants in diasporic societies are specific objects of analysis because they are subjected to dual pressures of adapting to the demands of receiving societies while upholding cultural convention from their homelands.

In the context of the Africa diaspora, the family remains a focal unit where the performance and negotiation of gender roles occur. Women often bear the burden of sustaining kinship ties, transmitting culture, and serving as moral pillars of diaspora populations. Their roles are, however, demanding by the reorganisation

of economic interdependencies and the adjustment of gendered delegated roles occasioned by migration. In certain studies, migration is portrayed as a pathway to women's liberation, but in others, the reinforcement of patriarchal attitudes and expectations, especially within closed ethnic enclaves, is emphasised.

Furthermore, diaspora motherhood offers a luxuriant window onto the relational and affective dimensions of transnational family life. The 'long-distance mothering' process, in which women perform caregiving for children abroad in the same manner that they provide care in destination countries, creates visibility around the psychic costs of migration. It overturns traditional conceptualisations of family togetherness and care, calling for a protracted notion of intimacy and responsibility in transnational contexts.

This study therefore seeks to answer two inter-related questions: One, how is migration reshaping conventional gender roles of African families, particularly women migrating alone or together with their families? Two, what distinctive challenges do African women migrants encounter in balancing work life, motherhood, and cultural expectations in the diaspora? This is with the expectation of understanding how African women in the diaspora actively maneuver gendered responsibilities and re-configure existing family structure in transnational spaces.

Statement of the Problem

The migration of African women for economic advancement, education, or refuge radically alters the traditional gendered form of African domestic life. The existing literature often does not adequately capture the complex experiences of these women in the diaspora, especially their dual responsibility as breadwinners and custodians of culture. The gap is that African women migrants remain conceptually excluded from typical migration and diaspora discourse, which tends to subsume their unique experiences under universalised gender roles. This plays down on the cultural and family dynamics to which women of African origin are subjected.
Moreover, contemporary work does not adequately convey the intricate balancing act these women perform daily - balancing paid labour, unpaid domestic work, intergenerational responsibilities, and their own aspirations for economic independence. Efforts to sustain cultural values, uphold family integrity, and perform the care responsibility nature bequeathed to them create a gendered paradox: migration generates new possibilities of engagement while modifying existing traditional models. This study, therefore, seeks to unpack these contradictions and reveal how African women intentionally construct and are constructed within diasporic family life.

Objectives of the Study

This study examines the reconfigured role of African women within diasporic family structures, with a focus on how migration reshapes traditional gender roles. It seeks to:
i.   Analyse the effects of migration on family responsibilities and power dynamics of African women in the diaspora;
ii. Examine the unique challenges African migrant women face in balancing work, motherhood, and sociocultural expectations across transnational spaces.

Research Questions
  i.   How does migration reshape traditional gender roles and family structures for African women in the diaspora?
  ii. What strategies do African migrant women employ in the intersection of work, caregiving, and motherhood under transnational contexts?

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Theorising of gender within migration studies has progressed beyond the male-female binary lens, to include the analysis of vectors of identity such as race, class, sexuality, and legality conditions that migration generates. Intersectionality, as a theory formulated by Crenshaw (1991), provides a critical perspective from which to analyse migrant women's experiences as differentiated rather than homogeneous across socio-political contexts. For instance, the transnational care chain of Filipina maids in the Global North demonstrates how gendered labour is transnationalised and commodified, typically reinforcing global inequalities despite the economic and social empowerment of women (Parreñas, 2001; Anderson, 2010). This perception must not only view the migrant woman as a vulnerable subject but also as a subject that navigates and negotiates complex regimes of power.

Moreover, gendered migration challenges assume a public/private dichotomy, particularly through feminism and the increased prominence of transnational motherhood. As women migrate in great numbers to take care of others, their own children and or spouse stay behind, this generates emotional geographies that reconstitute existing knowledge of kinship and maternal presence (Hochschild, 2000; Dreby, 2010). This transnationalism of feeling reveals the manner in which global labour demands reconfigure close family ties, with technologies and economies of remittances serving as modes of connection and control. Reconsideration of

the canon might require not simply complementing women but reconceptualising migration itself as a densely gendered, affective, and politicised phenomenon.

Current research has shown how diasporic women endorse what Eleonore Kofman (2004) termed *gendered transnationalism* - the construction and sustenance of cross-border networks through affective labour and strategic social positioning. Diasporic women are often cultural agents and mediators; they maintain linguistic habits, religious rituals, and communal institutions that resist the deletion of homeland identities. Through the agency of food, fashion, religion, and folklore, they establish a symbolic link with their homelands while navigating host societies' realities. This two-way engagement positions them as cultural ambassadors, passive carriers of culture as well as active cultural entrepreneurs navigating hybrid identities and belonging (Espiritu, 2001; Al-Ali, 2002).

In political climes, diasporic women are gradually coming into prominence and voice, either through street politics, art forms, or internet activism. Their narratives extend beyond the reductionist explanations of women as passive victims of coerced migration or patriarchal culture. Instead, they realign action in domains that centre concerns on concerns subjects such as racial discrimination, immigration policy, reproductive rights, and homeland politics. For example, African and Middle Eastern women in diaspora have mobilised diasporic feminist struggles that confront Western distortions and enhance internal community nuances (Amireh & Majaj, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). These interventions illustrate that diasporic women are not only cultural custodians and caregivers but also main transformation agents in transnational civil society.

Prominent African scholars such as Akyeampong (2000) and Amadiume (1997) have emphasized that migration involves both disruptions and continuities in gender norms. African women migrants often navigate transnational spaces by engaging with the liberal individualism of host societies while simultaneously upholding communal obligations rooted in their homelands. This dual engagement presents distinct dilemmas: maintaining long-distance parenting relationships, managing the increasing feminization of responsibility, and responding to diasporic pressures to preserve 'authentic' cultural practices.

Besides, African migrant women will reorganise gender in regards to transgressing patriarchal cultures and Western feminist norms. As they engage in wage work, political activism, and public leadership in diaspora, these women are likely to be agents of social remittances - diffusing new gender ideologies, autonomy forms, and civic values to the origin nations (Levitt & Lamba-Nives, 2011). This transnational feedback and framework challenges linear explanations of acculturation or assimilation, rather revealing a dynamic interaction where migration initiates hybrid selves and refigured gender roles. In so doing, African diasporic women challenge essential cultural identities and possess fluid, negotiated personalities who occupy multiple social worlds with strategic agency (Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005; Bastian, 2013).

Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing interest in gender and migration, there remains a paucity of literature that specifically interrogates how African migrant women mediate family structures under the pressures of transnational life. The majority of existing works either generalise female migration experiences across diverse contexts or overlook the cultural specificity of African gender systems. This study addresses this critical gap by providing an empirically grounded, gender-sensitive analysis of African women's roles in diasporic family systems.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an intersectional transnational feminist framework, integrating insights from diaspora theory, feminist political economy, and gendered migration studies. The framework incorporates the following pillars:

Transnational Feminism:

This perspective foregrounds the experiences of women across borders, paying close attention to how global power relations, race, class, and culture shape their migration trajectories. It challenges Western-centric notions of emancipation by centring non-Western women's voices and lived realities (Mohanty, 2003; Levitt & Schiller, 2004). It is particularly useful in understanding how African women navigate dual sets of expectations - those of the host society and those of their communities of origin.

Feminist Political Economy of Migration: This thought line views migration not just as a demographic or economic phenomenon, but as one deeply embedded in global systems of care, labour exploitation, and gender ladders. It interrogates how the labour of migrant women - often in domestic, caregiving, or low-wage sectors - is critical yet undervalued (Parreñas, 2001; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002).

Diaspora Theory: Drawing on Brubaker's (2005) notion of diaspora as a 'category of practice', the study conceptualises diasporic families not as fixed units but as fluid, negotiated, and contested spaces. African women in diaspora often act as nodes in transnational family networks, facilitating both the economic and cultural reproduction of the family across borders.

Intersectionality: Propounded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality allows the study to attend to the overlapping structures of subjugation - such as race, gender, migration status, and socio-economic class - that shape the experiences of African migrant women.

These theoretical strands offer a robust, multidimensional lens through which to examine how African women reconstruct diasporic family life under the pressures of migration.

III.   METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a multi-sited, comparative qualitative approach, feminist-informed research design, In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews of African migrant women in four host country settings (e.g., the United Kingdom, Canada, the U.S. and Germany) were conducted. 20 interviews were conducted with African migrant women aged 25–60, who have lived in diaspora for at least five years and are part of or maintain strong ties to transnational families. Interview questions cover migration histories, family roles, labour and care responsibilities, cultural and intergenerational dynamics. Purposive Sampling was used to ensure participants reflect a diversity of migration pathways (refugees, skilled migrants, family reunification) and family status (married, single mothers, separated, grandmothers). Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of fictitious names. Special attention was given to the emotional sensitivity of topics such as family separation, discrimination, and labour exploitation. The data were interpreted and analysed thematically, following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method enabled the identification of key themes related to gendered family roles, labour, care, identity, and cultural reproduction. Coding was conducted manually through an iterative process, allowing emergent themes to be progressively integrated into the analysis and ensuring a nuanced understanding of the findings.

Empirical Analysis

Reconstituting Gender Roles

Across the study locations, African migrant women reported significant shifts in their gendered roles post-migration. In many cases, migration catalysed an inversion of traditional family hierarchies - women assumed the role of primary breadwinners due to their faster access to employment in care, retail, or service industries, while some male partners face protracted unemployment. However, rather than dismantling patriarchal norms in total, these role shifts often coexisted with persistent cultural expectations around submission, domestic duties, and childcare, producing more demand for women.

A Nigerian woman in the UK, for instance, gave this narration:

"I work full-time, pay most of the bills, take care of the children... but my husband still expects his meals fresh, his clothes ironed, and no complaints. Migration didn't change that part."

Such narratives underscore the paradox of empowerment through income and disempowerment within private spheres, challenging liberal feminist assumptions about migration and autonomy.

Care Giving: Long-Distance Motherhood and Emotional Labour

Participants who migrated ahead of their families or left children in the country of origin, characterised emotional labour than others. These women battled complex emotions of guilt, duty, and desire, even though they sent remittances and coordinated caregiving through extended kin networks. In the Canadian case, Ghanaian and Somali mothers described maintaining daily phone calls, sending gifts, and planning school fees remotely - all while managing demanding jobs in elder care or cleaning services.

A Ghanaian participant noted:

"You feel like you are mothering from a distance... Your heart is in Accra, but your hands are cleaning homes in Toronto."

Such experiences reaffirm existing literature on the feminisation of transnational care chains (Hochschild, 2000) and spotlight the unique psycho-social toll on African women who sustain maternal figures across borders.

Cultural Expectations

Cultural and religious expectations around womanhood, marriage, and respectability continue to exert demand on African women in the diaspora. Participants reported that diasporic African communities often intensified gender policing, with older generations serving as custodians of 'authentic' cultural values. A Kenyan woman in Berlin explained that local women's associations, while supportive, could also become sites of moral surveillance regarding dress, parenting style, or marital fidelity.

Some women described tactful resistance - joining secular women's groups or avoiding public community scrutiny - while others found ways to reinterpret cultural roles to assert agency. The diaspora thus becomes a negotiated space where cultural continuity and gender renegotiation unfold concurrently.

Inter-generational Shifts

The study also found generational divergences in the way gender roles are interpreted and endorsed. While first-generation migrant women often internalised traditional expectations, their daughters - raised in Western

societies - tend to challenge patriarchal norms more openly. These tensions sometimes resulted in family disagreements, but also in dynamic learning and mutual adaptation.

A second-generation participant explained:

"My mom wants me to cook and clean like her, but I tell her, 'Mom, I'm not your generation. We share chores in my home.' And slowly, she's started to accept that."

This illustrates the evolving dynamics of diasporic family life, where migration creates both ruptures and reconnections across generations.

Participant Profiles

Names (Coded as African Indigenous Textile Types)	Country of Origin	Current Location	Family Role	Years in Diaspora	Occupation
Aliindi	Somalia	Toronto, Canada	Single mother	7	Personal support worker
Adire	Nigeria	London, UK	Married, mother	10	Nurse assistant
Kente	Ghana	Birmingham, UK	Divorced, grandmother	15	Church volunteer / retired
Kanga	Kenya	Berlin, Germany	Married, no children	5	Retail manager
Manjak	Senegal	Ottawa, Canada	Married, 3 children	12	Cleaner / part-time student
Bazin	Niger	Texas, USA	Married, 2 children	8	Caregiver
Kita	Togo	Minnesota, USA	Married, 4 children	9	Quality Control
Kondi - Gulei	Liberia	Maryland, USA	Separated, 2 children	6	Nurse assistant
Raffia	Gabon	Aberdeen, Scotland	Divorced, 2 children	11	Human Resource
Kpokpo	Sierra Leone	Winnipeg, Canada	Single mother	7	Entrepreneur
Waramba	Gambia	Frankfurt, Germany	Married, 3 children	6	Medical Doctor

IV.   DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from this study reveal a complex interplay between empowerment and constraint in the lives of African migrant women navigating diasporic family structures. Migration emerged as both a liberating and burdensome force. Women often assumed the role of primary breadwinners, which afforded them financial independence and decision-making authority. However, this shift did not necessarily lead to an equal redistribution of domestic labour or social status within families. Instead, many women found themselves performing 'triple roles' as income earners, caregivers, and cultural custodians - a phenomenon consistent with Parreñas' (2001) observations on transnational mothering.

Another key finding was the reconstitution, rather than elimination, of traditional gender norms. While diasporic contexts introduced women to liberal gender ideologies, cultural expectations embedded in diasporic communities reinforced conservative gender performances. Women navigated these competing norms by developing flexible strategies - selectively embracing aspects of modernity while maintaining roles considered culturally acceptable. This confirms the insights of Mohanty (2003) and Amadiume (1997), who argue for the cultural specificity of feminist agency and resistance.

Also, emotional labour, particularly in the form of long-distance parenting, emerged as a dominant theme. Migrant women felt deep ambivalence- expressing pride in their economic support for family members back home, yet battling emotional guilt and grief over physical absence. These experiences support earlier feminist migration research emphasising the psycho-social costs of mobility (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). The intergenerational shifts highlighted in the study also point to diasporic families as dynamic spaces of cultural negotiation. First-generation women often upheld traditional norms, while their daughters, shaped by host society values, challenged gendered expectations. The resulting tensions fostered critical dialogue, potentially facilitating long-term cultural evolution within the diaspora.

In sum, the study illustrates that African migrant women are not merely passive transmitters of tradition or victims of displacement; rather, they are active negotiators of identity, agency, and family order in a transnational world.

V.   CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of African migrant women in diasporic family structures, focusing on how migration reshapes gender roles and care responsibilities. Drawing on a qualitative, multi-sited methodology and framed within transnational feminist theory, the research has shown that African women in the diaspora inhabit a paradoxical space- one where gendered responsibilities are both transformed and entrenched.

Women navigate these tensions through agency, negotiation, and strategic adaptation, often bridging traditional cultural expectations and new societal norms. While migration offers pathways to economic and social empowerment, it simultaneously reinforces patriarchal responsibilities in new forms. This complex reconfiguration has profound implications not only for gender relations in the diaspora but also for how we theorise family, care, and culture in transnational contexts.

Recommendations

The study recommends:

Policy Recognition of Migrant Women's Care Burdens: Governments and NGOs in host countries should recognise the dual labour (economic and emotional) of migrant women through culturally responsive support programmes such as accessible childcare, counselling, and community-based mental health services.

Gender-Sensitive Integration Programmes: Diaspora community organisations should implement gender-awareness training and support dialogue on equitable family roles to reduce gender-based tension and burdens in migrant households.

Transnational Support Systems: Efforts should be made to facilitate better transnational parenting mechanisms, including digital communication tools, safe remittance systems, and emotional support networks that cater to long-distance caregivers.

Further Research: More longitudinal and comparative studies should explore how inter-generational shifts in gender roles play out across African diasporas globally, including Francophone and Lusophone African migrant populations.

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