

The Woes of the Returnee Female Migrant: Case of Kayayei from Northern Ghana

Bessey Oforiwa Faustina

Department of Sociology Hohai University, Number 1 Xikang Road, Nanjing City, Jiangsu Province-China

Email: bessey2faustina@hotmail.com

Abstract

Women in African have being known to be associational migrants; migrating usually as company to family members. In recent years however, a lot of women migrate for their own socio-economic gains. In Ghana, these women include young and mostly uneducated females from the north of Ghana, who migrate to cities in the south to work as head porters. These women in an attempt to better their economic and social prospects endure the harsh living conditions of the city. They perceive these harsh conditions as a short term pain and sacrifice that must be made for the long term gain of becoming entrepreneurs, buying items for marriage, having enough money to care for family members among others when they eventually return back home.

Using the case study approach, this paper explores the after-city-life of these women; in an attempt to determine the extent to which their socioeconomic status is improved; it also assesses the challenges that these women, their families and communities encounter integrating them back into their lives. Results from the study showed that most of these women eventually go back home having achieved their reasons for migrating to the south, they and their communities and families however encounter many challenges upon the return of some of them because of behavioral changes as influenced by of city life and culture.

Key words: Migration, Kayayei, Poverty

1. Background

Under the scorching sun and busy bustling streets of Accra, women, some with kids strapped behind their backs can be spotted carrying varying weights and heights of loads on their heads. Their way of dressing and the pans or boards they carry usually gives them away as Kayayei.

They form a regular part of the informal transportation and business sector of the capital city. They can be found in every corner and at every turn. To a foreign observer, what they do may appear strange but to an indigene, it is an everyday occurrence therefore little or no attention is paid to them except for the shoppers who keep a keen eye on them whilst they are in custody of their shopping goods or wares; or the market women and shop owners they regularly provide their services to. On sleepy nights in the capital, they can be found in the open space; on platforms at lorry stations; in makeshift temporary wooden structures; stalls used by market women during the day (Bessey, 2014). These women have travelled miles away from rural Ghana to work in the city to earn a living, largely due to urbanization of the city centers opposed to poverty and under-development that plank their places of origin

The women carrying loads on the streets and market centers of Accra are the focus of this research; they are known as Kayayei in the local parlance or head porters; Kayayei(plural) or Kayayoo(singular), the word Kaya is a Hausa word meaning goods or load, Yoo is a Ga word referring to a female; thus Kayayoo (Kayayei) refers to female head porter(s) who carry the load or goods of others over a distance for an agreed fee (Opare, 2003; Awumbila, 2007; Yeboah & Appiah-Yeboah, 2009). These Kayayei form a part of low skilled females who migrate from disadvantaged areas of the Ghana to the urban centers in an attempt to better their future prospects; they are however unable to find work because they do not have employable skills needed in the urban centers especially in the formal sector thus resort to petty trading on the streets of Accra and Kumasi, working as seasonal laborers on farms and as head porters (Hashim 2007).

In the Central Business District (CBD) there is always congestion as traders sell their wares along the streets and alleys, hawkers hold and carry their goods for shoppers on the streets and in front of shops, creating a situation where humans, goods and vehicles are always competing for the limited spaces in the busy space. Access to market centers is therefore very much restricted and nearly impossible (Agarwal et al. 1994); these reasons make it quite easier for the Kayayei to transport goods on their head as they waive their way through the limited spaces and crowds of people and vehicles for a fee; therefore becoming a part and playing a major role in the transport and goods delivery sector of Ghana.



A kayayoo carrying a heap of goods in Accra

Though they play this major and vital role in the transport and private business sector of Accra; very few researches have focused on them. Notable among these are Agarwal et al., 1994; Bessey, 2014; van den Berg, 2007; Opare, 2003; Yeboah & Appiah-Yeboah, 2009 which focused mainly on the demographic characteristics of these women; their reasons for migrating and their survival strategies in the city center. This paper therefore explores the after-city life of these women, focusing on their prospects and the challenges they, their families and communities encounter integrating them back into their lives.

2. The Kaya and Kayayei in Perspective

Migration researches over the years have explored the influx of cities in Africa by rural folks. Everyone with all the available and necessary resources would prefer to stay in their place of birth and where their primary social support units are and not migrant to other areas in search of opportunities. However, living in an imperfect world where natural and human resources are not distributed evenly people are forced to move to satisfy their unmet needs. As shown by various researches conducted in Asia and Africa countries urban migrants in most developing countries tend to be very young men and women between the ages 15 and 25 (Todaro, 1997). Until recent years especially in Africa, the movement of women and girls has almost always been as a result of marriage or marriage related issues. Upon marriage, a woman is expected to leave her natal home and move into her husband's home in another village or town (Opare 2003); thus most of the move when their husbands move in search of jobs or upon the transfer of the husband from one post to another as usually occurs in the formal sector.

At the beginning of the 1990's the movement of a large number of women to city centers was related to education; there is however a recent trend in Ghana where girls and boys with little or no education also move to city centers (Opare 2003); some do so in order to acquire skills for future and others to do any low skilled jobs they may lay their hands on. Among the latter group are the kaya girls who move to the south with practically no employable skills and therefore resort to the carrying of loads on their head for a fee. Majority of these Kayayei are young girls within their teens or early adult life and in their active child bearing age working and living under deplorable conditions in the city (Opare 2003; Van den Berg 2007; Kwankye, Tagoe, and Castaldo 2007; Yeboah and Appiah-Yeboah 2009; Bessey, 2014). Majority of these Kaya girls have low education and hail from the 3 northern regions of Ghana; only few girls from other parts of the country are involved in this business (Opare 2003; Van den Berg 2007; Kwankye et. al, 2007; Yeboah and Appiah-Yeboah 2009; Bessey 2014; Ghana Statistical Service, 2008). Supporting the assertion by Agarwal et.al (1994) that kaya business has become an ethnic occupational niche for women from the northern regions of Ghana.

Factors such as, British colonial policy which promoted the north as a labor reserve for the south hence less development and infrastructure opposed to conscious development efforts of the south for the production of minerals, cash crops and timber products for export facilitated by the creation of ports and harbors on the coast; recent trade liberalization and structural adjustment programs which affected northern development particularly agriculture; erratic rainfall and land infertility by virtue of geographical location close to the savanna belt have contributed significantly to the dominance of northern women in this trade (Awumbila 2005; van den Berg, 2007).

These women travel miles away from their primary social networks to earn a living; in a research by Bessey (2014) she noted that most kaya girls were involved in this dirty, dangerous job for five main reasons; these are, to raise capital for future business ventures, to take care of their families, to go into apprenticeship, to go back to school and to buy wares for marriage; some Kayayei were also found to have multiple of these and other reasons for their involvement in this job. Similar results were also obtained by Opore 2003; Van den Berg 2007; Kwankye et.al, 2007; Yeboah and Appiah-Yeboah 2009.

In Quaicoe's (2005) "*Woes of the kayayoo*"; young girls are faced with several problems in the city, notable are poor housing facilities, poor health care, inadequate sanitation facilities, and harassment by men at their sleeping places (as cited in Kwankye, 2007). These are supported by findings in Bessey (2014) where Kayayei also indicated that a decent place to sleep after hard day's work under the load of Accra; lack of safety and security of Kayayei and their belongings, harassment and exploitation from clients, tax force officials and market women as their main problems. The Kayayei, however sustain all these hardships because they perceive these conditions as temporary; as asserted by Agarwal et.al (1994) being in Accra is seen by the Kayayei as a short term activity which provides an opportunity of putting together capital that would be impossible in the rural area; it is also seen as a short term cost to be paid for long term gain in the form of better occupation, better marriage or purchase of goods necessary for better occupation training.

3. The Prospects and Challenges of the Returnee, Their Families and Communities

Migration is a two way street involving both opportunities and risks; the preparedness and fortitude of the individual and the prevailing conditions at the place of destination, could positively and negatively affect the lives of migrants as well as the lives of people left behind at the origin (Ziblim 2013).

In an interview of 250 respondents Bessey (2014) found only 66 respondents to have been involved in kaya for less than a year; majority of the Kayayei have been involved in kaya business for more than a year but less than 7 years; very few have however been doing this job for over 8 years. Some of the Kayayei have been involved continuously in this business or have stopped and returned back to it in some cases; as noted by Agarwal et.al (1994) many of these girls return back to the rural areas at regular intervals especially during the short rainy season to help their families on the farm and some intend to ultimately go back to their home areas to stay.

According to Beauchem (1999) in CAS and UNICEF report (1999) however most of the Kayayei from the northern regions eventually go back home. Some return having achieved the purpose of their leaving in the first place, that is, they return with monies to start their businesses, others with the wares they have purchased for marriage, others go into apprenticeship which makes their rural folks happy and proud.

Others on the other hand return to drop-off babies they had in the south with their relatives and return back to Accra; and others return with sexually transmitted diseases partly through rape, prostitution and other sexual exploitation and harassment by men in the city. The major problem of most Kayayei in the city is the lack of a decent place to sleep (Quaicoe, 2005; Bessey, 2014) to overcome this challenge some of these female porters exchange sex for a place to lay their head (Ziblim, 2013) these behaviors make them prone to having unwanted children or sexually transmitted diseases which some of them go to drop off in their villages and return to Accra. These situation burdens usually the elderly who are left behind to care for the sick returnees and their children, putting a strain on the already thin resources.

Some also return back to their homes with other health related issues such as chronic and severe headaches, waist and backaches possibly from all the loads of Accra. These may put severe strain on family members and community resources.

At the macro village level, the returnees are impacting the lives of their communities; most of the girls especially the young unmarried ones that return back have turned into white and fair ladies having bleached their skin; this is done with the aim of attracting men not only in the city but also the origin who may pay high dowry for their hand in marriage; the highly the level of attractiveness the higher the chances of multiple sexual relations which may have implication for the spread of STD's in the place of origin (Ziblim, 2013). Some of these women as reported by Ziblim (2013) also fear to go to the farm to help their relatives during harvesting season because they fear working in the hot sun, these has led to many divorce and family breakup cases.

Some also come back with all their fancy clothes and accessories which entice more of their brothers and sisters to also leave to the cities. Peer influence or peer pressure plays a major role where girls who go back to their villages directly sourced their peers to return back with them to the urban centers and engage in kaya business as well, most often leaving out the challenges they face as they strive in the cities and talk only of the money they

make and the things they are able to acquire (van den Berg, 2007). This does not only lead to a breakdown in family or misunderstanding amongst family as some of these girls run away without informing their guardians but leads to low productivity on farms as most of the economically active leave to go bear Accra's load.

According to Vercueil (2004) migration impoverishes rural areas because the most able people tend to leave. Most rural areas are predominantly agrarian in nature as in the case of northern Ghana engaging mostly subsistence farming which does not make use of heavy machinery like tractors but simple tools such as cutlass, hoes etc. which require manual labor. With most of these young women migrating to the urban centers further poverty is created because less labor means low farming and low crop yield and low income. As noted by Adaku (2013) households whose members engaged in temporary migration had significantly reduced farm production; massive cycle of generational poverty may therefore be created because of this reduction and more especially if the emigrants are not able to send remittances home often.

The returnees are also impacting the traditions, customs and values of their communities. Some of the returnees are caught in two different worlds; as most of them leave at very young ages to the city centers they are not properly socialized with regards to the customs and traditions of the rural area; in the cities they hardly find any environment conducive for them to learn these, others who learnt even in the village had to unlearn those customs which may be perceived as archaic in the city (CAS & UNICEF Report, 1999).

Many of the returnees no longer showed respect to their elders or had total disregard for customs and traditions as most returnees behave differently, dress differently and act differently. This makes it difficult for their families and communities to accept them as they are perceived as deviants.

Another challenge that these returnees especially the very young ones face when they return home are who collects the monies they made in the city. Most are required to give the monies to their relatives; those who refuse may have black magic or juju being used against them. These fears have led many to continue staying in the city center.

Others have decided to stay in the city centers because of behaviors they have picked up or they have had children out there in the south without being married and are thus scared the reaction of their folks and other villagers. As reiterated by a kayayoo in Bessey (2014) *'only the dead bodies of some of us would be allowed back into our villages for burial'*.

These problems notwithstanding, migration could also have a positive impact on the origin of migration when migrants send remittances home to alleviate financial constraint of migrant households. Bessey (2014) found that most Kayayei send monies home for the upkeep of their families; therefore migration-induced decline in household labor supply tended to be compensated by the extra effort put forth by the remaining household members (Tutu, 1995).

The returnees also impacts their communities positively when they return back with capital to start their own business ventures; raise monies to go back to school; or go into apprenticeship to be trained with skills which they would not be able to acquire should they have stayed back in the village .

4. Conclusion

Kayayei in Accra and other major cities in Ghana contribute significantly and play a vital role in the transport of goods in the central business districts for shoppers and market women. It is clear also that most Kayayei migrate to Accra and other urban centers from the northern regions in search of better livelihoods for themselves and their families. It is evident that majority of the Kayayei from the northern regions eventually go back home having achieved their reasons for migrating to the south, however they and their communities and families also encounter many challenges upon the return of some of them because of behavioral changes as influenced by of city life and culture.

This paper therefore recommends that government and local development policy decisions should be focused on alleviating poverty in northern Ghana and creating opportunities for these women to acquire basic employable skills, this will curtail their movement to the south in search of opportunities and subsequently minimize the challenges that these women and their families and communities go through upon their return. Soft and accessible loans should also be made available to these women so that those of them who are not educated and cannot find work in the public or formal sector can start their own businesses and not move down south. The Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education policy should also be enforced so that these girls can at least acquire basic education; textbooks and study materials should also be made free and readily available to these areas.

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