

Investigating Class Privilege Among Professional Ghanaian Migrants During COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced people across the world to grapple with insecurities and deep uncertainties while reworking and reconstituting social life in a globally linked “new normal.” This study investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the professional and personal lives of highly skilled Ghanaian migrant women and how they adapted to these challenges. Based on qualitative narrative interviews, the findings reveal that these women navigated crisis and precarity by mobilising local and transnational resources and adopting flexible mobility strategies. The paper demonstrates how gendered care expectations and mobility restrictions expose the friction between class privilege and vulnerability in reconfiguring transnational families.

Keywords: class privilege, skilled migration, COVID-19, gender and care work, transnational families

It's not about the resources you have. It's about reorganising your life, which can be very, very difficult and challenging. – Ofeibea, civil servant (United Kingdom)

Situating COVID Disruptions for Skilled Migrants in Context

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and their families has been well documented. Pandemic-driven government restrictions such as travel bans, quarantines, social distancing, and remote work mandates disrupted daily life. People were forced to recalibrate how they navigated mobility, professional obligations, and caregiving responsibilities. This literature highlighted a distinct divergence of experiences based on socioeconomic status, gender, and

migration legalities. Research on affluent migrants and privileged diasporas, however, is often eclipsed by studies of working-class diaspora and refugee experiences; the latter two frequently emphasise social exclusion and marginalisation. Recent studies have highlighted that pandemic-related control measures created substantial societal, financial, and structural obstacles for migrant workers in precarious situations, amplifying existing inequalities and worsening their situations (Koinova et al. 2023). Widening disparities compounded the power imbalances inherent in global caregiving networks and transnational care arrangements (Lutz 2018). There remains a critical gap in understanding how highly skilled individuals and migrants, especially Africans, navigated and responded to those challenges.

Research on the pandemic's effect on privileged demographics predominantly centres on three groups: international students, academic professionals, and skilled workers in healthcare, technology, and corporate sectors. The literature on international students, whose overseas studies represent key aspirations and strategies for upward economic mobility and capital accumulation, emphasised the disruptions to their mobility and well-being. This work examined how the obstruction of their mobility pathways deprived students of adequate social protection in host countries (Firang 2020; Levent and Aktaş 2023). These students faced sudden campus closures, visa precarity, financial instability, and isolation, with African students among the most exposed (Bimpong 2023; Chasi and Quinlan 2021). The transition to virtual instruction hindered their academic progress and increased psychological strain (Hari et al. 2023). Studies on how families of these students navigated transnational (im)mobilities highlighted a heavy reliance on digital connectivity to sustain cross-border ties; the transnational space became intensely *affective* (Filippou et al. 2026), as digital platforms served as both communication tools and critical infrastructure for psychological and moral support. As host countries often classified them as temporary residents, international students struggled to qualify for vital local relief resources when the pandemic hit. Female students, especially those with dependent family members faced compounded burdens of increased domestic care, heightened isolation, and financial precarity—forcing many to navigate complex compromises between their cultural expectations and their academic obligations (Skyum 2021). Families thus deployed risk-management strategies

to navigate the health risks faced by stranded students, the financial risks arising from disruptions to parents' local employment, and the logistical challenges of maintaining transnational support and care arrangements (Liu and Wu 2025; Wu and Del Rey Poveda 2025).

Another focal point of research on skilled professionals is the pandemic's disruptions for academic professionals. Global lockdowns necessitated a shift to remote work, which dissolved the traditional boundaries between professional duties and home life. This dissolution severely disrupted work-life balance and disproportionately impacted female academics, who struggled to balance demanding remote careers with caregiving and mothering responsibilities, producing anxiety and compromising their scholarly productivity (Bender et al. 2022; Frehiwot et al. 2022). These concessions prompted calls for an "ethics of care" to address structural gender inequalities in domestic labour and academic output (Branicki 2020). Broader research mirrored these domestic challenges, showing how the pandemic exacerbated intersecting inequalities across different regions and institutional hierarchies (Corbera et al. 2020; França et al. 2022; Heath et al. 2022).

Finally, scholarship on other highly skilled migrants explores how remote work paradigms and changing corporate expectations shape their professional and personal trajectories (Wang et al. 2025). Though spared the catastrophic job losses and severe housing precarity experienced by lower-skilled migrants, they faced nuanced challenges such as professional bottlenecks, legal anxieties, and what scholars call "privileged precarity" (Botterill 2017). Many retained employment and relative financial stability as they worked in tech, finance, and consulting, sectors readily adaptable to remote work. Skilled migrant health workers formed the backbone of the pandemic response globally, yet they faced systemic discrimination, credentialing barriers, and disproportionate infection rates (Showers 2023). At the same time, other skilled migrants remained vulnerable to downsizing in pandemic-hit sectors due to restrictive legal and visa status (Purkayastha and Roy 2023). With travel bans and suspended visa-processing, even family emergencies abroad risked leaving them stranded and jeopardising their jobs, homes, and status.

Although existing literature establishes gender as a primary driver of migration decisions and trends (McAuliffe and Bauloz 2024), the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic specifically impacted migrant populations, particularly highly skilled professionals, along gender and class lines, remains a glaring gap in current research. This paper addresses this gap by examining how skilled/professional Ghanaian migrant women reorganised their lives to navigate the disruptions engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining a sociocultural context where female employment is the cultural norm, this Ghanaian case study demonstrates how kinship plays a vital role in fostering women's empowerment, autonomy, and financial independence. Among the Akan, women are strongly encouraged to build their own economic resources and prioritise the well-being of their children over financial dependence on men (Clark 1999; Darkwah 2007; Salifu 2020). These norms shaped how women adapted their livelihood and caregiving strategies during COVID-19 as women's autonomy and decision-making agency demonstrated significant potential in cultivating equitable sharing of domestic and transnational familial responsibilities.

To examine how the pandemic restructured social life spatially and socially, I first present the guiding conceptual framework. After detailing the study context, methodology, and participant demographics, I analyse how skilled migrant women navigated shifting work conditions, care obligations, and migration decisions. I conclude by outlining the paper's contributions to debates on transnational care and skilled labour migration.

Conceptual Framework

This research is theoretically grounded in three interconnected frameworks: transnationalism and mobility, gendered geographies of social reproduction, and the contingent nature of class and capital. Migrant transnationalism describes how immigrants build and sustain networks linking their origin and destination societies, reflecting the lived experiences of diverse populations, spanning transnational families, students, labour migrants and refugees, who maintain continuous economic, social, and cultural ties across borders. This engagement establishes a relational space shaped by personal experiences and cultural bonds rather than the limits of the nation-state (Basch et al. 1994).

Transnational care has emerged as a vital and expanding sector of the global economy as families and care workers move across borders to provide and receive care. Research on transnational families traditionally centres migrant parents who send remittances to secure their children's futures primarily through funding education and providing emotional care (Cebotari et al. 2018; Parreñas 2005). Other research underscores transnational mobility patterns, specifically noting the patterns and frequency of parental visits home or the challenges of older parents visiting their emigrant children abroad (Ferreira 2025). Though shaped by temporary and circular flows, migration decisions are heavily influenced by family relations, and cultural norms and expectations. For globally dispersed families, staying connected requires navigating constant changes in politics, economy, technology, and health crises (Yeoh et al. 2024).

Much mobility research treats mobility and immobility as dichotomous processes. Bélanger and Silvey (2020) argue instead for an interconnected continuum that shapes the migrant experience. The pandemic exposed the fragility of global interconnectedness, what Nehring and Hu (2021) term "fragile transnationalism." State-driven pandemic interventions and the prioritisation of national interests disrupted international travel and support networks. This structural disruption trapped individuals with lives spanning multiple borders in a precarious state of "transnational limbo," deepening existing inequalities. Moreover, nuanced disparities emerged among different migrant populations due to variations in their social, economic, and cultural capital. Dobusch and Kreissl (2020) argue that pandemic mobility regimes were not neutral; they prioritised the movement of some (essential workers or high-status travellers) while immobilising others considered less valued or disposable, reinforcing prevalent inequality across class, gender, and migration status. For highly privileged, skilled migrants, the pandemic acted as both a barrier and an enabler of movement. Leveraging their substantial financial and social resources, these individuals were able to navigate travel restrictions, while restructuring their everyday lives and careers across virtual, domestic, and international spheres.

Historically assigned to women, social reproduction refers to the processes through which social structures, cultural values, and class positions are transmitted across generations. It also encompasses largely invisible and

uncompensated work including cooking, cleaning, family care, and homework, which are not just routine chores but essential economic processes that sustain capitalism and patriarchy (Bhattacharya 2017). A *gendered geography* lens reveals how daily activities sustaining life and labour are mapped unequally across spaces and scales (Katz 2019; Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Winders and Smith 2019). By highlighting this crucial dimension of care labour, a social reproduction lens enables us to investigate the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic reorganised life and work spatially and temporally. First, lockdown regimes expanded and reshuffled unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Second, public health mandates exposed essential and remote workers to elevated health risks, effectively blurring the lines between professional and private life (Stevano et al. 2021). The lockdowns also extended the crises of social reproduction to relatively privileged middle-class households. As highlighted by feminist research, this convergence exacted a disproportionate toll on women, who were forced to simultaneously navigate remote professional demands and amplified home responsibilities (Bender et al. 2022). In the transnational context, women deployed multiple forms of reproductive labour to fulfil competing care responsibilities.

Bourdieu's frameworks of habitus and capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) are fruitful for examining how highly skilled migrants navigated the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Habitus entails one's ways of thinking and acting, shaped by one's social environment; economic capital refers to material wealth and liquidity; social capital comprises the networks and ties that provide vital support; and cultural capital encompasses the credentials, prestige, and skills that enable social mobility and shifts in hierarchical position (Bourdieu 1986). Crucially, for migration and migrants, citizenship, whether formal (legal and institutional) or informal (cultural, identity, belonging), represents a form of capital (Bauder 2008). Furthermore, transnational spaces can foster unique forms of transnational capital. Collectively, these transferable and interconvertible assets enable elite migrants to reproduce generational privilege and advantages across borders (Erel 2010). Highly skilled migrants can strategically convert their cultural capital (degrees, skills) into economic survival or spatial flexibility, such as possessing the digital capital to work safely from home (Wang et al. 2025). Similarly, far-reaching family networks function as essential social capital in this setting. Conversely,

administrative interruptions can prevent migrants from fully leveraging their institutional resources, such as citizenship and resident status, leading to variation in migrant mobility patterns (Jolivet et al. 2023).

Feminist scholars have expanded on Bourdieu's delineation of capital to include other capital, like feminine and emotional capital, to understand the classed experiences of women. These studies explored how women were not merely passive channels for resources, but also independent creators and managers of capital (Huppatz 2009; Reay 2004; Silva 2005). As such, feminist revisions of Bourdieu's categories of capital types and asset convertibility offer vital insights for analysing how migrant women exercise autonomy, make choices, and actively shape their circumstances.

Skilled Ghanaian Migration in Transnational Context

Following its independence, Ghana originally served as a primary destination for West African labour migrants, bolstered by an expanding economy and Pan-Africanist political stances (Akyeampong 2000). However, severe economic crises and political instability from the late 1960s through the 1980s reversed this trend, cementing Ghana's status as a country of net emigration (Peil 1995; Awumbila et al. 2008). Migrating abroad is now deeply ingrained in Ghanaian society, where cultural ideals frame mobility as a crucial step toward socioeconomic success. Rooted in this cultural expectation, the number of outward migrants surpassed a million by 2020 (Twum and Weinreich 2025). A significant portion (46%) live across the West African sub-region, with Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire serving as the primary destinations (Ghana Statistical Service 2023). Global economic shifts and changing labour markets have significantly diversified the geographical destinations for Ghanaian migrants beyond the West African region to the Global North (Arthur 2008; Bakuri 2018; Garba 2017; Mazzucato 2008). The Middle East has rapidly emerged as a critical corridor for domestic and service sector labour (Apekey et al. 2018; Kandilige et al. 2023), while Asia, especially China, has become a pivotal hub for transnational commerce and migration (Kandilige et al. 2024). This movement built a robust diaspora network and fostered active financial, social, and emotional transnational ties. Subsequently, diaspora remittances, amounting to almost US\$8 billion in 2025,¹ have evolved into a significant

driver of Ghana's economic development, providing direct financial support that sustains households and families (Yeboah et al. 2021).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 severely disrupted the local and transnational practices of Ghanaian migrants. Sudden lockdowns and border closures halted circular cross-border mobility and trade, leaving thousands of Ghanaian migrants stranded and compelling them to devise innovative work, travel, digital, and care practices (Afrifa 2024). Research situated within the Ghanaian context offers limited insight into transnational female migration in general (Apatinga et al. 2022; Orkoh 2025). This gap is even wider for highly educated or professional women, whose specific migratory experiences remain vastly underrepresented in existing scholarship (Asiedu 2010). This study expands research on Ghanaian transnational families by analysing how elite and highly skilled women managed the compounding impacts of COVID-19.

Research Methods and Participants

This paper forms part of a larger, multi-sited investigation examining the global mobility of elite, highly skilled Ghanaian professionals. It draws on a qualitative, multi-method design exploring the lived experiences and coping strategies of those navigating international borders and pandemic lockdowns. Crucially, feminist epistemology underscores the value of lived experiences and everyday perspectives in revealing how gendered power dynamics are experienced physically, as well as how individuals actively resist or adapt to these constraints. This paper centres women's voices and lived experiences as they processed and navigated the pandemic emotionally and practically across domestic, transnational, and digital spaces.

First, in 2020, while stranded in Ghana, I conducted informal ethnographic interviews and participant observation within my local and diasporic networks. Second, I expanded the data using semi-structured, in-person and Zoom interviews, with participants recruited through a purposive sampling method, creating a cross-border dialogue that mirrored participants' mobile lives. Finally, I incorporated autoethnography to document my own experiences of navigating pandemic-era travel limits. This approach allowed me to integrate personal encounters and rigorous, systematic analysis to reflect

on the paper's broader themes. As a Ghanaian academic and naturalised United States (US) citizen, I benefitted from distinct privileges in job security, mobility, and access, which enabled me to navigate the complex pandemic-era biopolitical restrictions and international travel with relative ease. My positionality allowed me to move more fluidly between insider and outsider roles, fostering deeper trust with participants who saw me as sharing aspects of their diasporic and mobility challenges during the pandemic.

Characterised by privileged backgrounds and elite credentials, participants frequently leverage multiple resources including social, human, cultural and citizenship capital to navigate global markets and mobility. While the majority reside in primary diaspora centres, namely the United Kingdom (UK), US, Canada, and the European Union, a significant portion maintain active economic ties and entrepreneurial ventures in Ghana. Professionally, the participants represent a broad spectrum of specialised sectors, including finance, healthcare, law, academia, engineering, and the creative industries. These globally mobile individuals have the skills and resources to thrive across borders. Nonetheless, I show that during global crises, their transnational lifestyles reveal a complex mix of both privilege and vulnerability.

Findings and Analysis

To substantiate the forthcoming analysis, I feature extended excerpts from interviews with four women; one in Canada, two in the US and one in the UK. This analysis examines how cultural values, social and transnational networks, and class uniquely influenced how the women balanced work and caregiving during the pandemic. Despite experiencing the same pandemic-related disruptions, the four women relied on differing coping mechanisms driven by specific contexts and available resources. Instead of isolated experiences, these strategies reflect the broader patterns of the larger cohort. Collectively, they expose the inherent contradictions of class privilege, which simultaneously provided resources yet failed to fully buffer families against pandemic disruptions.

“Circulating Care”: Navigating career transition and multiple obligations

Fosua is a finance professional in Canada, a mother of two young children and married to an academic. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, she shouldered the added financial strain of supporting her family in Ghana—all while navigating maternity leave and re-training to switch careers.

When COVID hit us, I was on maternity leave, and I had wanted to use that. I took a year, because in Canada, you can take a year or 18 months. I was hoping I could move to Ghana to at least spend that leave at home, but then the way that news would happen, and these cases, it was always scary. [...] And I didn't want to go back to the healthcare sector. I wanted to switch careers to the financial industry, and so I had to pay to get those certifications... So, I had to spend money on educating myself, upgrading myself, and, at first, the employment that I was doing, it was more of self-employment... It was a contract I had with my company. So, when I was self-employed in that sense, what I was getting as a salary was more of commission. [...].

I had paid to secure a spot at her day care. I just forfeited the money. I took them out... I wanted them to be with me at home... So, working from home in that sense with the kids alongside taking care of my career development was a bit challenging. [...] I had to double as a mother, teacher, and worker at the same time. [...] I went to stores, got the syllabus in there, got my study materials... wherever I could get study materials or reading materials, just so that my kids could still be educated.

And, of course, also take care of the home because over here it's not like you have a family member who would come and stay with you because you have a newborn. No, you do everything yourself. [...] It felt risky to even look for a babysitter because how would you know you're not introducing viruses to your newborn? [...] I think COVID made me do a lot, but I also discovered my strengths. My husband is very supportive, don't get me wrong... but I think mine was a bit more.

We keep joint accounts, and we also have our own accounts. If he has to send money to his family, he lets me know, agree on the amount. OK, I also have to send money home. I let him know we agree on the amount. [...] And my sister also, she had just finished her national service, and she was trying to get a job, and she wasn't retained... She wanted to start her own business, which I agreed

with. So, I sent her some money to support her [...] So definitely, COVID made the demands a little bit more, and I could understand.

In our Akan dialect, we have a proverb that says, ‘Obi hwe wo ma wo se fifi a, wo nso wohwe no ma ne se tutu.’ In other words, if someone took care of you for you to grow teeth, in their old age that their teeth are falling off, you also have to see to them too. You still have a responsibility to take care of your family. [...] Of course, my dad does get pension from his banking job. I try to always send him something small to just support him, maybe his birthday, maybe Christmas [...] I just connected with family on WhatsApp, video calls, Zoom calls. And that made me really homesick. It was a bit challenging because no matter how much you do with video, it was really hard because my dad is old, he’s 82. And another thing is that my dad cannot hear very well. So, when I call him, I have to shout because he doesn’t like wearing his hearing aid in the house.

Fosua’s experience reveals how migrant women, irrespective of class background and despite spousal support, shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic labour and emotional care, while simultaneously balancing wage labour and transnational caregiving responsibilities. She reproduces middle-class educational aspirations at home, taking on homeschooling to secure her children’s academic foundation, and exhibits a resilient, middle-class immigrant habitus of self-reliance to manage the crisis, optimisation, and determination to “up-skill.” Though the certifications represent institutionalised cultural capital by validating her competency in a new field, her economic status is highly unstable during this transition, as she worked on a low-paying commission basis.

Fosua’s transnational relationships demonstrate that migration is not simply individual economic advancement but a complex negotiation of social reproduction, constrained mobility, and gendered class positions. Her determination to advance professionally and support her parents is deeply rooted in Akan cultural values and expectations of what constitutes “good mothering” (Clark 1999); providing for dependents is a societal expectation carrying both moral fulfillment and prestige, reflecting a duty to family and community (Darkwah 2007). Not content to depend on her husband’s income, Fosua capitalised on Canada’s parental leave and the lockdown to pursue certifications that fuelled her career transition, taking contingent work while maintaining childcare. She sacrifices economic security and takes on immense physical labour to preserve her family’s health and her own career

advancement. There is a sharp contradiction between her striving middle-class professional habitus and traditional gender expectations across both local and transnational spaces. She navigated structural isolation and economic instability while being expected to serve as an economic anchor for her relatives in Ghana. Nevertheless, she organised her transnational financial obligations across spatial boundaries. Maintaining separate bank accounts (individual and joint with husband) in Canada reflects the salience of matrilineal kinship for women's autonomy and empowerment in decision-making and strategies of support (Manuh 2001). Her social capital allows her to support her sister's business aspirations and assist her elderly father. Finally, her remark about discovering her strengths exemplifies how systemic societal pressures on working mothers during the pandemic were often reframed as individual resilience.

“Circulating Care”: Navigating childcare under lockdown in the diaspora

Aisha is a Ghanaian physician with her own practice in the US and a mother of two. She is part of a dual-physician household, a marker of high institutionalised cultural capital, with siblings in the UK. Despite facing the immense demands of a dual-physician household and sudden travel bans, Aisha leveraged her transnational and local resources to restructure her childcare support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

My husband and I were going about every one to two years, but starting in 2016, we started being more intentional about going every year... wanting my children to stay connected with Ghana and with their only one set of grandparents left. [...] One thing that was nice is having avenues like, WhatsApp... staying in touch with people that way, but you still lose that physical connection, the seeing people, touching people, all of that.

We had an amazing nanny, because with both of our professions, we have to—we don't have direct family here. The family and friends or friends we consider family, also have their own lives, so you can't always rely on them as much as they want to [...]. We always knew that it was temporary, because she either wanted to go to school or find an actual career. It was November of 2019 she mentioned to us that she had gotten an opportunity to work.

My siblings live in England. My niece had just finished her year abroad in her college, and she was waiting to go into her law programme... She wasn't starting until August of 2020. She had a good break from January to August. We talked it over, and we decided she would come and stay with us for a bit. It would be a break for her. She would hang out with her cousins, and it would give me time to be able to find somebody permanent. So, she arrived in January of 2020, and then the pandemic hit about six weeks later.

It was a miracle, I tell you! I have to just talk about my niece here, because there's no way I could have managed without my niece! It was such a blessing for us. She was able to be home with the children. And my kids absolutely adore her... they just bonded. So, it was a relief for me. It was one less thing for me to worry about going to work... how they were going to keep up with their schoolwork? Who was going to be home with them? She was just here with them the entire time. I do not know how I could have managed all the stresses of work with having to worry about taking care of them as well.

Given that my husband and I both did elementary and secondary school in Ghana, we still have Ghanaian mentality. My children are the kind that come home, and we have extra math books for them. My husband is the math one. I'm the reader. [...] She was able to not just be tech savvy to get them logged into their school lessons, so they did not lose any traction with their school lessons. I think the disconnect with being with other friends was there a little bit, but she filled that void. Number two, she completely understood our need for them to continue to stay active. So, even if the homework wasn't as much, because the schools tried not to put too much on the students, she knew that we needed them to do extra reading and extra math, so they kept up with that.

Our routine was my husband and I, when we came home, our children knew not to touch us. It was a whole thing. They would stand about a foot or so away and air hug us. And because we would have to strip down and take a hot shower before we touched them. [...] For them, not having my niece here who could roll on the floor with them, play with them whenever they wanted to, I think it would have taken a lot from them, because we're [a] very touchy-feely family.

Aisha organised her family life around regular cross-border mobility to Ghana and the UK, which is a key practice of transnational social reproduction, sustaining kin ties and cultural belonging. The pandemic's forced immobility disrupted these circuits, and though social reproduction was rescaled into digital space, it did not substitute for embodied contact. As a dual-earning family, Aisha had the financial capacity to outsource domestic child rearing by

hiring a full-time nanny for their children. She arranged for her UK-based niece to stay with them, providing childcare support that became critical when the pandemic hit, illustrating the family's financial capacity to sustain her. Though a transnational move, this signifies common practices of kin circulating within Ghanaian households to assist with specific needs, such as childcare (Clark 1999). Her niece, who is highly educated and possesses digital literacy, was perfectly equipped to manage the children's educational, social, and emotional needs. Aisha and her husband rearranged their home to create a post-work decontamination zone and daily post-work clean-up routine. This process prevented them from embracing the children immediately, depriving them of essential immediate physical affection and creating an emotional and affective deficit, a void that was filled by her niece providing critical "emotional capital" for Aisha's children (Reay 2004). Her niece's inward mobility let Aisha's household stay relatively immobile, minimising exposure while sustaining the daily labour of social reproduction during intense professional strain as an essential worker. As Silva (2005) suggests, cultural capital must be understood as a relational asset rather than an individual commodity. Through the strategic deployment of cultural capital, linked to a rigorous educational work ethic, specialised knowledge, and transnational resources, middle-class mothers such as Aisha and Fosua actively foster their children's academic trajectory. This systematic transmission of educational and socioeconomic privilege illustrates the empirical mechanisms driving class reproduction.

"Circulating Care": Reorganising cross-border kin mobility

Effie, a physician, and her two siblings, one in healthcare and one in property management, live in the US representing forms of institutionalised cultural capital and an extension of parental cultural capital. Her family operates transnationally, with their emotional bonds and caregiving responsibilities spanning between Ghana and various locations across the US. Effie discusses how COVID reworked their lives, relationships, care work, and mobility.

Before COVID, I probably went to Ghana probably every other year, and it was because my mother wasn't travelling a lot during that time. It's strange, she travels more now than she did then. [...] Since COVID, my parents have actually spent more time in the US. So, we go to Ghana less. [...] My siblings are on the East

Coast... like 2020, 2021 definitely changed how much we travel. We don't travel as much as we used to; it hasn't gone back to normal.

My dad was the one who was here [US] ... my sister works in a hospital, so she was going to work. She was not working from home or an office [like me], right? She had a system that she had set up even before, but now she intensified it. She had a station when you walked into the house to take your shoes off, to clean your hands. She would take off her stuff at the door, put them in a bag, and wash her work clothes separately from the other clothes. She wore gloves. She was very conscientious about not bringing it home. Actually, my dad didn't [get] COVID, at least not until much later, right? After the vaccine is when he got it. My mom was in Ghana, right? She had household help. She's pretty strong and resilient; she was also being very careful. My mom is fastidious, so during COVID times, she made sure that they were masking. When they went to the markets, their masks were on. So, she didn't get COVID. She came to the US ... this is where she got COVID.

He didn't leave until April or so of [20]21, and then my mom came either later in [20]21 or early of [20]22. So, she comes and she goes to the East Coast, and then she comes here for a while. And then she goes back east, and then she leaves. So, most of the time she stays in the US for five to six months. [...] My parents now spend a lot of time in the US, well, because "you guys are here!" I want to go home in February, right? And everyone's like, why are you going home? Because they're here.

I think that if I hadn't been ill, COVID would have hit me differently... because I was just coming out of that when COVID happened. But how have things changed? I think that just the awareness, because I'm in the health sector, the awareness that stuff could happen really fast, and things can really change again. And, also, being careful about travel. I mean, I still travel [...] It made me think about these things and what I'm doing with my life, right? [...] I tend to just kind of coast, and [now] I like being more intentional about what I'm doing. The thing that came for me out of that whole experience, being ill and COVID, is that I'm not afraid to die. I'm afraid that I have not lived enough, right? And so, making sure that I'm having the experiences I want to have while I still have the energy and the time. [...] Like going to this festival. The festival we [siblings] were going to was cancelled the week before, but we decided, it's good to be in each other's company, so we'll just go and hang out together.

During the pandemic, these circuits of transnational family were re-routed but not broken. Much like Aisha, Effie's sibling, who worked on the frontlines, owned a house to care for their father during the pandemic, where they followed strict health protocols. This exemplifies the pandemic-era configuration of social reproduction, in which the boundary between a healthcare worker's professional obligations and domestic caregiving collapses, with her daily sanitisation rituals safeguarding their father's health. Through pooled financial remittances, the family subsidised domestic care for their mother in Ghana, illustrating how reproductive labour associated with the maintenance of the households and risk-mitigating health regimes was structured through transnational paid labour (Coe 2017).

Following her own health struggles and the onset of the pandemic, Effie realised the importance of living with intention. She and her siblings organised regular gatherings to strengthen their bonds and make the most of their time; their mobility is less frequent but more intentional. As a physician, class here manifests as job security and continued income, positioning her to convert mobility into quality time and self-realisation. The pandemic also redefined her family's transnational mobility; both of her parents now spend extended time in the US visiting children across multiple states, reducing the need for routine travel to Ghana. Ghana becomes less a site of regular, obligatory return and more a symbolic homeland, as the US East Coast emerges as the central anchor for the family. Taken together, these activities signal a relatively privileged, professional Ghanaian family with access to resources, legal status (both parents have permanent residence status in the US) and institutional connections that allow routinised transnational movement. This legal status acts as a concrete form of institutionalised cultural capital, whereby state-issued credentials confer advantages of unrestricted global mobility. Effie and her siblings can financially afford to host and care for their parents, reshaping their parents' mobility patterns, characterised by continuous rotation through the households of their successful children. Their mobility is driven by choice and lifestyle, representing a mode of transnational living that few migrants achieve.

“Circulating Care”: Navigating transnational kin care and mobility

Ofeibea, a UK-based legal civil servant, and her finance husband enjoy a professional dual-income lifestyle with family roots extending across the UK and Ghana. She had booked her tickets to visit Ghana in 2020 when the pandemic broke out and lockdown was set in place, interrupting their annual family visits.

We had been in Ghana, where circumstances... My husband was a senior executive where he works, so we had quite a lot of disposable income, lots of helpers, we had a driver, we had two maids.

I was working from home then [when COVID hit], but I was used to the whole family being out all day, children went to school and husband went to work. Now all of a sudden, everybody was at home all day [...] The house was big enough so that everybody could be in a separate corner [...] It wasn't until much later that I reflected that actually that was quite destabilising for me, because I was really used to having these six hours to myself, was quiet, I had my own thoughts [...] I now realised, oh, this was actually a thing for me, especially now that my husband changed jobs in, in the ... that two years, so now his role is remote, he works from home all the time, so I never did go back to being... so my new normal is that I will not have six hours to myself again. [...] Looking back, this is all a lot of reflection, my mental health was suffering; I was not happy.

From the homeschooling perspective, it was terrible... I gave it up. I was just like, my children's education would suffer because of the lockdown, because I cannot teach them. I cannot do what teachers do. This is why I send my children to school.

I had never been away from my parents for more than two years... I hadn't seen my parents for two years, that was a bit difficult for me [...] My parents have never been financially dependent on me in any way. They've never given me the idea that they needed financial support... Everybody's looking after themselves. [...] And then, because of my father's illness, which had started becoming evident in July 2021, we came back in August, and by November, I went back just to see him. Whatever COVID measures were there were observed. I came back before Christmas. COVID measures were observed.

I went for their anniversary, and he was not well. I spoke to his doctors when I was leaving at the end of August. I was not too happy with what I was seeing. So, I stayed in touch just to keep up with his health, and he deteriorated very fast.

My brother moved to the UK at that time as well. The reports he brought, I didn't like them. I wanted to be there myself. When I went, I realised that my mother was doing the bulk of the care work by herself. She's, she's too old, trying to lift him. So, I organised nursing care for him. I hadn't gone with the idea that I was going to go do care work, but I was going to see, which I was then able to sort of help coordinate from the distance when I came back during Christmas and the New Year. He was finally hospitalised in early 2022 and never came out of the hospital.

In fact, that year... 2021–2022, I went to Ghana four times. And I was away for long stretches at the time. Yeah, it could not have happened if I hadn't had the year before with my children at home and my husband learning the household routines, learning to do laundry right, learning to prepare, get some basic food preparation, getting a routine, just understanding how the house worked. If we hadn't had that year, there was no way I could have spent that following year going to Ghana four times up and down, with all the disruption that came with family as well. But they cooked, they did very well. I would cook, I'd leave things in the freezer, they would just warm things up, cook the rice, and all of that [...]. It [COVID] gave us a chance to bond as a family again in a way that we had not for more than five years... The children learnt to do more in the house to help me [...] It's not about the resources you have. It's about reorganising your life, which can be very, very difficult and challenging.

Ofeibea's account underscores the profound difficulty of balancing professional obligations with multiple caregiving duties, emphasising the deep emotional weight of these competing demands. In migrating to the UK, prior to the pandemic, Ofeibea and her nuclear family experienced relative class descent, losing the domestic privileges they previously enjoyed in Ghana and leaving her to absorb that labour. Pandemic restrictions produced vulnerability and isolation through prolonged spatial separation yet simultaneously enabled Ofeibea to reorganise domestic and caregiving duties locally and transnationally. Mobility/immobility during the COVID era operated as both opportunity and constraint for migrants. Strict lockdowns disrupted international visits, constraining her desire to visit her parents and causing emotional strain. For example, her husband's job changed to remote work, further impacting on her need for personal space and quiet time. At the same time, lockdown forced her nuclear family in the UK to become more self-reliant, empowering her husband and children to develop practical skills and to take on greater household duties, which gave her the freedom to make four

extended trips to Ghana in 2021–2022. Pandemic constraints paradoxically built capacity for transnational care provision, contingent on reconstructing gender relations at home. Managing household and work responsibilities during a crisis relied on having adequate resources: a large home, digital connectivity, and socioeconomic support. Ample space prevented overcrowding, reflecting how structural privilege and domestic environment shaped pandemic coping. In her case, though, she prioritised her capacity limits over children's educational optimisation, disrupting the cultural norms of intensive parenting and the "ideal mother" ideology that was pervasive during the lockdown (Cummins and Brannon 2022). Conversely, her ability to work remotely provided flexibility unavailable to working-class women in rigid employment enabling her transnational care trips. Yet this class privilege came with precarity; client work was delayed, creating backlogs during transnational caregiving.

Her journey through the pandemic illustrates a model of transnational caregiving where care is defined by physical presence rather than just financial support. She navigated cross-border healthcare systems, coordinating professional care remotely from the UK. Her frequent, urgent trips allowed her to provide hands-on support to her mother, and to manage her father's illness, hospitalisation, and subsequent funeral. Her ability to afford costly, complex travel (immunisations, testing, and quarantines) underscores a class-based mobility privilege many in the diaspora lack, unable to fund repeated trips or navigate shifting protocols. Her father's care regime shows how class enables access to paid care; while this did not remove her burden, it shifted her role to care manager, coordinating Ghanaian services remotely, providing emotional labour, and intervening during critical moments. Ultimately, transnational care remains gendered despite class resources; Ofeibea, not her brother or male relatives in the UK, organised her father's care, reinforcing cultural expectations that daughters, even those living abroad, assume the responsibilities for managing elder care (Asenso-Agyemang 2023; Coe 2017), illuminating the concept of "gender capital." Even though Ofeibea's parents were fully independent and financially secure, liberating her from remittance obligations, simultaneously managing her household and transnational elder care duties placed a profound emotional burden on her.

Concluding Discussion

Adopting an intersectional lens, I explored how the different circumstances and backgrounds of Ghanaian migrant women shaped the coping mechanisms they adopted to fulfil both their professional and familial roles amid the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic served as a catalyst for reworking how mobility, work, and family life were organised and how class dynamics shaped their strategies in particular ways. Class advantages—financial privileges and professional flexibility—let families adapt to remote and hybrid work, but did not insulate them from the pandemic’s disruptions, which forced a wholesale reorganisation of daily life and household routine. Their narratives align with research demonstrating how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and reconfigured their everyday lives and cross-border movements of transnational migrants in different ways (Asenso-Agyemang 2023; Afrifa 2024).

The analysis highlights important contributions. First, this study underlined the deeply gendered nature of managing work and care. Women continuously balanced professional demands against a complex web of locations, bureaucracies, and family obligations, underscoring a persistent asymmetry in care work. The analysis extends the literature by showcasing that gender norms similarly constrain skilled and working-class women. Their class status enabled families to outsource care but did not exempt them from caregiving responsibilities. Gendered care obligations persisted for all the women in different ways. For women with young children, the pandemic appears to have reinforced conventional gender norms, with limited options for childcare. However, women deployed various resources to navigate loss of childcare options and elder care provision. The shift to more remote flexible work arrangement allowed some husbands to increase their share of social reproductive work, mitigating the burden of care on their wives, showcasing a more equitable distribution of reproductive work within relatively privileged households.

Second, the analysis spotlighted the creative and resourceful strategies women employed to reorganise household routines and balance competing caregiving demands. The pandemic ignited other shifts: strengthening nuclear family bonds, developing household competencies, transitioning careers, and deepening extended family connections. Embedded within “geographies of

privilege,” where gender, class, migration, and citizenship status intersect, these women were able to buffer their families against the pandemic’s disruptive realities. Unequal access to varied resources dictated the women’s abilities to negotiate disruptions, carry out obligations, and navigate travel restrictions. But privilege has its limits; it merely mitigates rather than eliminates vulnerability. Under pandemic conditions, even relatively privileged middle-class women encountered rigid structural boundaries that constrained their agency and capacity to move.

Third, the study illustrated how some women navigated the pandemic’s travel limitations to practise active transnationalism, maintaining continuous cross-border exchanges of financial, social, and cultural resources in multiple directions (Baldassar et al. 2024). These everyday actions reveal deep, global interdependencies, a concept central to “global householding” (Douglas 2006). Transnational networks served as vital conduits, granting some women access to informal caregiving solutions or formal care provisions. For many skilled Ghanaian migrants, the periodic physical visitation model was replaced by digital co-presence and a reliance on the circulation of emotional support over digital infrastructure, including phone calls, Zoom, and WhatsApp, to maintain care relationships and to reconfigure family dynamics in transnational contexts. Maintaining a physical presence and delivering in-person care across the diaspora necessitated negotiations with family on both sides, as they navigated complex travel restrictions. Actively leveraging multi-local family ties to reconfigure geographies of mobility shifted the centre of family life and care to the diaspora for some women. Mobility is, therefore, unevenly distributed and fundamentally shaped by entrenched social hierarchies, such as class, gender, and migration patterns, with citizenship and legal immigration status as critical drivers of movement. Rather than focusing on semi or unskilled African migrants, this study centres an understudied group of highly skilled professional women balancing the intersecting pressures of work and caregiving. The paper contributes to theorising how women strategically deploy capital in its multiple forms and convertibility. The women actively mobilised distinct social, digital, professional, and legal capital to navigate the pandemic and the challenges of maintaining family relationships across borders. While the pandemic era has largely concluded, its enduring effects are still unfolding, most notably in the ongoing transformation of domestic spaces.

This study suggests that future transnational family research requires intersectional frameworks to analyse work-care dynamics across diverse spatial-temporal contexts.

Notes:

1. <https://businessfront.com/finance/news/ghana-foreign-remittances-2025/>

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