

“She Cannot Sit Idle”: Kinship, Class and Gendered Politics of Women’s Mobility

Dorothy Takyiakwaa speaks with Madeleine Wong

Dorothy Takyiakwaa speaks with Madeleine Wong, an African woman migration scholar living and working in the United States (US). The conversation focuses on Madeleine’s intellectual journey and her perspectives on the diverse migration experiences for different African women. It also reflects on Madeleine’s social position and mobilities within the US academy and her connection to Ghana.

Dorothy Takyiakwaa (DT): Please tell us about yourself and how you came to migration studies?

Madeleine Wong (MW): My name is Madeleine Wong, and it is always interesting that I have to explain the Wong because when I write, I do so as a Ghanaian scholar. I am a Ghanaian of mixed heritage with a Ghanaian mother and a Chinese father, so that is where Wong comes from. I was born and raised in Ghana. My mom is from Anum, and I speak Anum and Twi. I pride myself in knowing that I speak a language (Anum) that is spoken by a very small proportion of the population. It is very important to my identity. I went to primary and secondary school in Ghana before going to England to complete my A-Level education. I ended up at Mount Holyoke College in the US for my undergraduate studies, where I was originally on the pre-med track. However, I rediscovered my passion for geography and finished with a double major in biology and geography. I later got a master’s and doctoral degrees in geography. I tried to stay true to my parents’ expectation of health focus, so I chose human geography more generally and migration specifically. I took interest in health geography, combining my biology with geography. It is my experiences of being an education migrant and then encountering a Ghanaian community in Toronto, where I got my PhD, that crystallised my interests in and pursuit of migration studies specifically. Positionality is so important.

DT: What are the key areas that you think are important to focus on in migration studies?

MW: I was an active member of an immigrant church during my PhD in Toronto. I think being very present in the church, the women in the church and I got along; my interactions with them and hearing about their everyday lives and challenges revealed a gap in the migration literature, which did not reflect their experiences specifically, and African migrant women in general. That is how I came to the question of focusing my research on Ghanaian women migrants. Furthermore, the dominant trend in the literature focused often on women who might be considered as traditional migrants, who migrated to join their partners. What struck me from that first project was the importance of kinship—especially the matrilineal system. The experiences of those women were different from what is represented in the literature. I realised how significantly their identities were shaped by their matrilineal kinship system. There was the constant trope of sisters or nieces helping at home. My contribution to the literature highlighted how such kinship systems influence women's experience of migration, their decision-making, how they navigate the everyday life of a migrant and their transnational connections. These women came from different socioeconomic backgrounds—educated, uneducated, in various forms of employment. Some of their experiences were different from the privileged, comfortable life that I have had, and those were my blind spots. It was interesting to see the different strategies they used to capitalise on the Canadian context to make the most of it. Some women cooked at home and supplied local stores, in addition to doing other multiple jobs. That was my first understanding of women not having just one job. If you are going to succeed abroad, you have to do everything. The fact that they were not just submissive, staying at home doing nothing and depending on the man, gave invaluable insights into how kinship systems of descent and inheritance shaped their experiences and behaviours, which was largely invisible in the literature at the time.

DT: Tell me a bit about your mother and father's economic activities and in relation to their social classes.

MW: My mom stayed at home for most of my childhood. She would dabble in small entrepreneurship now and again. My father was a Chinese expat who worked as a manager for the Ghana Textile Manufacturing Company (GTMC) in Tema. We were members of a Chinese club in Tema, and so some of my early friends were Chinese. When GTMC collapsed at the beginning of the neoliberal turn in Ghana, he lost his job. With no other roots in Ghana and coupled with the anti-foreigner sentiments of the time, he left for Hong Kong. He came back after a few months to try to set up a business, but it did not work out, so he left Ghana the second time. At his second leaving, I was 16 years old and the next year I got a scholarship to study in England. So, for a period, I was in a transnational family arrangement. My father supported us from afar; he paid our school fees. My mother was a housewife. She was very savvy. As an expat, my dad was paying foreign fees. When he lost his job, she negotiated with the school so we would pay local Ghanaian fees—as children of a Ghanaian mother—and that is how my brother and I managed to finish. At this school, I was exposed to international scholarships, so I applied and received a scholarship, which allowed me to study at a private girls' boarding school in England for my A levels. From there, I applied to American colleges and ended up in America for my undergraduate studies. So, my life definitely embodies those class dimensions of access, especially access through private education.

DT: How do your upbringing and experiences and the research gaps you identified in the literature shape your research and dissemination strategies?

MW: I brought my observation of my extended family to my research. At some point, our two-bedroom flat had 14 or 15 people living there, including my grandmother, aunts, nephews, and nieces. After my PhD, my research focused on skilled migration. I saw that matrilineality and multiple strategies of survival in Canada addressed one gap in the literature, but it still reproduced the idea that those who migrate from Africa to Canada are working-class hustlers. However, many of my own classmates went to England and the US and others that I met were professionals. The literature did not talk about skilled migrants—especially skilled Africans beyond the brain drain focus. This made me focus on everyday experiences of skilled care workers

such as nurses. A family member who was a nurse in the UK made me see the connection with migration, skilled work, and healthcare. That formed the basis of my next project on nurses in England, due to their high numbers there, and asking questions on their recruitment, recertification, placement, and work experiences in the hospitals. Now, I am fully dedicated to research on highly educated professional workers, as there is less emphasis on them, because people think their experiences are not so dire. In Chimamanda Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story," she shared that her professor could not imagine her writing a story about highly accomplished people in Africa. It is the same thing; the dominant perception is that Africans are poor and it is substantiated with images of Africans crossing the Mediterranean Sea and so on. People who are educated and skilled migrants also experience all kinds of challenges, but the way they navigate those challenges are different.

DT: Can you share with us some striking experiences of the women migrants you have studied and how those came across to you?

MW: Doing a deep dive in matrilineal kinship systems, I concluded that it empowers women in ways that a lot of people do not appreciate. Ghana is a patriarchal society just as most societies. My first sole-authored article I submitted was rejected by one of the top feminist journals at that time because the reviewers questioned the validity of my arguments. The reviewers' comments included: "Are women that empowered in the Ghanaian context? We don't find evidence of that." There is an expectation for women to be submissive to men in a heteropatriarchal society. Gender and sexuality are really important when you do feminist work and centre the experiences of women. You have to factor in the specificities of particular groups of women.

DT: What were some of the specific things that the reviewers thought were not true?

MW: This was in the early 2010s. I was arguing that, for example, in matrilineal societies, many couples do not keep joint financial accounts. The women and men kept separate accounts. Some of the women talked about how they use their income however they want, without consulting with the

husband. The couple sometimes agree to collectively pay the rent or mortgage but aside from that, each makes decisions regarding their own incomes. The reviewers questioned the freedom the women had to make decisions on how they spend their own income, including remitting their nieces, nephews, or sisters. To them, that was not the normative narrative in the literature. The critique was that these women were too powerful or empowered and thus do not fit the perception of African women who are *supposed* to be poor, submissive, dependent on their husbands. Many of the people interviewed knew this. Some said: “Ah, Madeleine, but you know how it is in Ghana.” I say, I do. It was not enough knowing, but to also articulate it, to let others know that it exists too, and that it is important for us to understand how this relationship shapes how women see themselves.

DT: Considering that was the 2010s, there was early literature to support your argument. For example, the 1985 article by Agnes Aidoo titled “Women in the History and Culture of Ghana” focused on women’s significant roles among the Akan, who are predominantly matrilineal.

MW: Yes! When you are stuck in a particular Western conceptual framework, you are not going to branch that far. It takes somebody who is local or comes from that cultural context. This is why positionality is important. It takes someone who is immersed in the local culture, who seeks to understand and takes the extra step to dig deeper. A ground-up qualitative methodology is needed. It is through conversations that these issues emerge and that we understand how important they are to women. Researchers continue to ignore the significance of matrilineal and patrilineal systems. I objected to a paper I reviewed because it diminished the differences in family systems of different groups (i.e., Ashanti and Ewe) and how that could impact decision-making. If you collapse all the women into one group and do not tease out the intersection of ethnicity and inheritance descent, you do not get a nuanced picture. Similarly, class comes into play in different ways. While some will privilege the nuclear family setup over the extended family because the former serves their interests, they are not dissociated from their heritage. They still play roles in their extended families, including supporting family members. It

never is out of the picture in explaining how they engage with families in terms of how they raise their families and those transnational linkages.

DT: This raises important questions about how intersectionality and feminist approaches could help in this work. How do these enrich your understanding of and approach to migration research?

MW: I was exposed to critical feminist scholarship during my doctoral studies, which helped me understand—at least from the western perspective, what feminist analysis allows us to do in terms of centring women, multiple voices, and experiences. I think that is really important. My first project was on women. But I got a sense that there was more to the women's stories. I knew there were gaps. When analysing the gender dynamics at play, you must understand the extent to which women's experiences, women's explanations, and strategies are not occurring in a vacuum. They are occurring in relation to other social and economic relationships and matrices of power within which they are embedded. Feminist analysis also allows us to understand how gendered dynamics of power shape women's experiences. For me, personally, there is not enough written about African women's migration experiences and the diversity of those experiences. The inherent assumption is a male migrant. We almost always have to qualify it by saying female migrant. For me, it is important to explain women's experiences through the migration process at all levels and how they are positioned in relation to power. I think their experiences are obviously shaped by their gender intersecting with other identity categories. Despite critiquing the dominant roles and responsibilities that define men and women's experiences, we cannot collapse and homogenise experiences. I am a geographer and a qualitative researcher, so place, specificity, and context matter. I have researched Ghanaians' migration to Canada, England, and the United States. Each of these migration streams produces different kinds of experiences. Not only from the perspective of Ghana or the migrant, but also the context of reception, whether it is urban, rural, north or south, or immigration policies, they all shape experiences in myriad ways. Feminist analysis allows us to expose the diversity, multiple voices, and epistemologies in understanding the complexities of the migration process.

DT: Would you then say that you are telling a fuller story by being intersectional and feminist in your analyses?

MW: It is revealing and adding to our understanding of all the many factors that shape migration. I know the push-pull, old neoclassical theories are still important to think about, but it is the nuances that are often more interesting. My first PhD supervisor decided not to supervise me because I chose to do qualitative research. She wanted me to do a quantitative survey, with the argument that I will not be competitive in the academy because people with quantitative skills are preferred. I said quantitative projects do not tell me much; I want more. I sought different advisers. Feminist epistemologies and methodologies allow us to research the nuances. Migration can be a traumatic experience for people, and it allows us to see the power dynamics at play and how they shape women's experiences, both in a positive and terrible and exploitative way. Awareness of those experiences that can inform policies, whether in the migrants' origin or destination areas. African women have always been very active in movements within the West African context; we partook in many migration movements, whether it is through religious networks or trading. We are actively engaged in this process.

DT: How does your research connect with the burgeoning corpus of literature on South-South migration, to China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for example?

MW: The world is changing; there are opportunities emerging from so many parts of the world. For some time, certain parts of the world were closed but now, they are open. As other parts of the world have shut their doors or tightened their borders, others open, and humans will always move. China and the Middle East have expanded their net in recruiting various labour and expanding markets for entrepreneurs respectively. The globalisation of different kinds of work has enabled Africans to migrate to different parts of the world. Economic opportunities still dominate the motivations for migration. Restrictive policies are constricting movement for family reunification purposes. As capital searches for cheaper resources, those doors are opening for migrants from Africa. The context of reception is going to be

different. The very different policies and rules operating in the Middle East and China are going to allow for certain kinds of things but not others.

DT: So now, return migration. You mentioned at the beginning that you are navigating the return. What exactly is it about and how does it contribute to the global literature?

MW: In the early 2010s, I decided to come home as often as possible as my way of coping with the fact that I was struggling in the US. I used to save money throughout the year to buy my ticket home. One year, I got very sick while in the US. I came home, and by the time I got back to the US, I had stabilised and was back to normal. I feel that coming home is my medicine; it helps me deal with the racism and other challenges there. Now I come home every year, either in the summer or Christmas, never missing a year. My conversations with those who have returned to Ghana permanently or in phases challenges the unidirectional or linear view of migration. In today's world, many migrants circulate in or maintain strong transnational ties with multiple places, which compel us to rethink notions of identity, belonging, and attachment to place. Feminist analysis allows us to examine how migrants navigate the return and transnational experiences as gendered subjects—involved negotiations of norms and expectations at different scales, from the household to the extended family to transnational or local work opportunities.

DT: I can see, for example, how the family system, social class, and social mobility are connected to physical mobility. Class, support systems, and social networks influence the mobility decisions one can make.

MW: There is an Asante proverb or saying which translates as “a lazy woman is not a good mother.” It is expected that a woman will work. When that feeds into their socialisation, the women then acquire that sense of assertiveness. She cannot sit idle and expect a man to take care of her. The traditional idea is that what the man owns is not hers but his family's. She cannot sit idle; she has to work. Ideas like this implicitly influence decision-making on migration. Extended family or friend relationships may facilitate mobility, including return and integration.

DT: So, what has been the nature of movement for African women?

MW: West African women have always been on the move for various reasons. We have a history of movement and an expectation that women work. These drive the bold decision women make to migrate to different parts of the world, whether to advanced, industrialised societies or to China now. I think China and Dubai now are expansions of trading networks. It is not necessarily new but manifests differently. Before China, people were going to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore; they were already going that far to get goods for the Ghana markets. The movements shift based on where opportunities arise.

DT: What other reasons for migration are there, apart from the economic drivers? How about leisure?

MW: I would say, with the new social media-social influencer age that we live in, I began hearing this term *soft life*. Leisure is part of the soft life. The young people I know, a few of my students and friends, they take the soft life seriously. They do not work above and beyond what is necessary to be able to have a good balance between work and their own soft leisure life. I do not know if they have adopted it here in Ghana. I do not know if it manifests in a sort of leisure. There is a pressure with life that does not allow you to fully embrace that leisure of soft life. For many people, a soft life comes at expense; you need to work for it. I was recently thinking about finding a remote job and then moving to Ghana. Technology has allowed people to generate income to support their soft life; for example, content creators and influencers. I see this section of the population in Africa and beyond can live that soft life, can have migration for leisure because they are tapped into this new economy that allows them to do that. But I think for everyday hustlers, it is very difficult. What is typical is that many have multiple jobs and are connected to family to whom they are responsible. One of my Ghanaian colleagues in the US ships goods home and operates farms and so on. He would say: "I am the first born of both sides of my family and the first to travel abroad. The responsibility on me is immense. I have to help my siblings with school fees." There is responsibility to share, at least to the degree that you can or are willing, and that in some ways constrains your leisure migration.

DT: Are these changing the ways in which migration and class are conceptualised?

MW: The meaning of class may be shifting beyond just the economic dimension to include ideas about prioritising ease, comfort, and aesthetics to perform a certain idea of life beyond your economic means. This soft life may ask us to rethink migration to include lifestyle migration or migrating digitally—to seek soft life elsewhere. But it still boils down to who has the resources and right skills to realise this possibility. There are still enduring structural inequalities that exist and circumscribe migration patterns that reproduce the very class hierarchies the soft life claims to transcend.

DT: That is one thing we flag in this volume, in line with Issa Shivji's argument that the class system based only on education and income is not tenable anymore, especially in relation to African migration. Also, people do not even need to move physically these days. So, we need a rethink of the class system and mobility. And you mentioned xenophobia from the beginning. So, how does the restrictive xenophobic right or the mobilisation targeted at so-called illegal migrants affect women migrants?

MW: I do not know if you saw the debate between African Americans and Africans on social media? When the US government started deporting Latinos, I think an African American said something along the lines of "it is time to also deport illegals who are also coming from the Caribbean and Africa." The African group jumped on it and it was contentious on both sides, especially on social media. When I saw the question, that was the only thing I could think about. This tension exists, and it has existed for a long time between African migrants and particular segments of African Americans within the American context. It takes a lot of education on both sides to understand each other. Some of my friends would say, "Madeleine, you know how hard we worked to get education, find employment and eventually moved to America. Why isn't it possible for African Americans to do the same?" I say in response, "it is not that they cannot do it; rather, the system is set up to always frustrate and constrain them. You come with a different mentality. You know who you are from Ghana; your identity is intact. After 400 years, they

are not treated differently than other (white) Americans. You are Johnny Just Come (newcomer) who does not carry the baggage that African Americans have struggled to navigate. Also, you are perceived as docile and easily governed. The immigration policies are to surveil you.” There is xenophobia. It is racialised but also within the Black community. So, when you hear a rhetoric of “send these illegals back,” which includes Africans, that is when it percolates. The tensions between those various groups are percolating now.

DT: You went through the US system, had your first degree, worked, and are now a citizen. Where do you place yourself within this debate?

MW: I place myself that I am not African American, but I understand the African American condition through both intellectual and selected experiences. I have read enough about it and experienced it through my African American friends who have enlightened me. I think for Africans, not everyone, there is a certain degree of a ceiling beyond which you can never cross in the US. We come in with a mentality that immigrants are here to succeed; we cannot fail and go back home, and so work really hard, which fits into the ethos of meritocracy within America, right? But at some point, you see that you do not belong and should not be in that position. I remember I did not get a leadership position and an African American colleague was the one to explain to me that “it is not because you are not qualified, but because of who you are and what you embody.” Even though I am a citizen, I am never a hundred percent comfortable. You have to come to terms with what gives meaning to your presence there and then find other sources of meaning elsewhere. So, I like teaching, the students, and the feeling that I am impacting them. I like that part of my life because I am fulfilled as a teacher. But regarding my social relationships, family, and identity, I get that in Ghana.

DT: What advice do you have for aspiring African women scholars?

MW: I think, no matter what, do not compromise on standards and integrity, while not also being naïve, particularly if you stay in academia in the West. I would say: come home because there is so much work to do here and not enough good scholars. If I were my younger self and I reflect back on that

year, 2012 or so, just before I came up for tenure, I would have told myself: stay home, it would work out. I would have reassured myself it would work out and I would have been doing very well. I think lots of young people should come home because there are opportunities here. But if you decide to stay in the US or elsewhere, you have to let your work speak for itself. For example, people know me on my campus to be rigorous, flexible, and fair and that I produce good students who have moved on to do PhDs. Find something that you are good at and do it well in whatever institution you are in. But, ultimately, I will say: come home. When you come home aged 30 to 40, you will be fine. You will do more, you will accomplish more by staying here than over there.

DT: This has been a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much.

MW: Yes, thank you. Thank you for being so relaxed so that we could chat.