

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE RETURN OF GHANAIAN FEMALE LABOUR MIGRANTS ACROSS THE GULF, EUROPE AND AFRICAN REGIONS

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors influencing return migration decisions of female Ghanaian labour migrants across the Gulf, Europe and African regions using a multiple case study approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 returnees - 11 from Gulf, 6 from Africa and 4 from Europe. Key findings disclose a complex interplay of factors, including health challenges, family obligations, contract violations, the fear of abuse, and future aspirations as key drivers. Notably, negative factors such as health issues and fear of abuse are found to be dominant among Gulf returnees, while family ties, homesickness and future plans were more common among African and European returnees. This variation in predominant regional factors influencing return decisions highlights that they are highly heterogeneous, fluid and conditional based on the unique spatial and contextual conditions of the destination countries/regions involved. Beyond the regional comparison, the findings also contribute a gendered perspective, further promoting the feminization of migration. The data highlights the need for tailored, context-specific economic, social and psycho-emotional return policies in concurrence with the diverse needs of different returnees, especially female, non-elite returnees as against the usual recent government diaspora engagement policies biased towards skilled migrants. Though the findings of the study cannot be generalized, it fills critical gaps in knowledge on the gendered perspective and spatial dimensions influencing return migration, offering valuable insights for both scholarship and policy.

Keywords: Migration, Return migration, Labour migrants

Résumé

Par l'approche d'étude des cas multiples, cette étude examine les facteurs qui influencent les migrantes ghanéennes des régions du Golfe, de l'Europe et de l'Afrique dans la prise des décisions de rentrer au pays d'origine. 21 retournées dont 11 du Golfe, 6 de l'Afrique et 4 de l'Europe, se sont prêtées à un entretien semi-structuré. L'étude découvre une interaction complexe de facteurs, dont les problèmes de santé, les obligations familiales, les violations de contrat, la crainte de l'abus, et les aspirations du futur en sont clés. Les problèmes de santé et la crainte de l'abus sont notamment les facteurs néfastes dominants parmi les retournées du Golfe, alors que les obligations familiales, la nostalgie et les aspirations du futur sont les raisons communes parmi les retournées de l'Afrique et de l'Europe. Cette variation en facteurs prédominants régionaux est une indication qu'ils sont hétérogènes, fluides et conditionnels selon les conditions spatiales et contextuelles uniques des pays/régions de destination en question. En plus de la comparaison régionale, les résultats de cette étude contribuent également aux perspectives de genres en promouvant la féminisation des migrations. L'étude souligne également le besoin pour une politique de retour à la fois adaptée, pragmatique, économique, sociale et psycho-émotionnelle tenant en compte les

besoins variés des différents retournés, surtout du genre féminin et les non-qualifiés contrairement aux politiques actuelles relatives à l'engagement des diasporas qui ne bénéficient que les migrants qualifiés. Bien que les résultats de cette étude ne soient pas généralisables, ils comblent des lacunes considérables dans la connaissance, surtout du côté de perspectives de genre et de dimension spatiale influençant la migration de retour, offrant ainsi des données de grande valeur pour le bien des études et de la politique.

Mots clés : Migration, Migration de retour, Migrants travailleurs

1. Introduction

Migration is a long-lasting phenomenon in human history, affecting virtually every nation, including Ghana (Manning, 2021). Although some groups exhibit higher mobility and migrate in more diverse ways than others, migration is fundamentally rooted in human nature, reflecting the intrinsic mobility of populations (World Migration Report, 2020).

The 2022 World Migration Report estimated the global number of international migrants to be approximately 281 million, representing about 3.6% of the world's population. Two-thirds (68.8%) of these migrants were identified as labour migrants. Globally, international female migrant workers increased from 68 million, making up 42% of migrant workers in 2017 to 48% in 2019 (International Organization for Migration – United Nations [IOM – UN], 2020). Though there has been a reduction, female migrant workers still occupy a significant proportion of the total international migrant workers (IOM, 2021). As the current number of international migrants has exceeded some projections that were made for the year 2050, it is proof that the factors involved in migration trends are extremely difficult to predict (IOM, 2021).

While continuous increase in the emigration of Ghanaians has been recorded due to various reasons, there has also been an observation and evidence of return migration to Ghana since the mid-1990s (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2014; Setrana & Tonah, 2014).

Asare's (2012) study on labour migration indicates that while many Ghanaians migrate to farther countries outside of West Africa, many of them return to Ghana either permanently or temporarily. According to Asare (2012), the percentage of

Ghanaian returned migrants between 2000 and 2007 increased from 18.6% to 34.6%. During that period, only 153,632 migrants who left Ghana did not return out of the 1,090,972 people who left the country (Asare, 2012). Furthermore, the IOM (2009) as cited by Setrana and Tonah (2014) also reported that about 10% of emigrants return to Ghana annually. In 2020, the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) programme which gathers and analyses data to disseminate critical multilayered information on displacement and population mobility reported that it had tracked a total number of 26 million returnees after operating in 80 countries (IOM, 2021).

In response to the increasing evidence of return migration, many governments, including the Ghanaian government, have made significant efforts to implement different return migration policies with the aim of attracting skilled Ghanaian nationals in the diaspora (Awumbila et al., 2008). The latest return policy initiated in 2019 by the Akufo Addo-led government is the 'Year of Return' with the same goal of attracting Ghanaians in the diaspora back home (UN, 2019).

However, there has been a chronic dearth of information about return migrants, their motives for returning, where they return to, their employment opportunities and income levels, their new social status and levels of reintegration and satisfaction (King, 1978; Houte & Tine, 2008; Setrana & Tonah, 2014).

Research conducted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2006) posits that return migration for female migrants is more complicated than simply 'coming home' and calls for the need to pay special attention to unwilling migrants and victims of trafficking and abduction

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who are more likely to be stigmatized and rejected on their return.

Existing literature predominantly emphasizes the experiences of migrant workers during their stay abroad, usually citing their vulnerability to abuse, exploitation and mistreatment (O'Neil et al., 2016; Temin et al., 2013; UN Women, 2017). The extant literature however often overlooks the multifaceted factors that influence their decision to return to Ghana, especially within the context of their unique countries and regions of destination. The few existing literature exploring the factors also emphasize migration success-failure factors as put forward by the economic theories of migration (Wickramasekara, 2019; IOM, 2021; Bonifazi, 2019). It should be noted that in spite of the continuous existence of substantial wage differentials between the original and destination countries, migrants still return to their countries of origin which are comparatively poorer than their host countries (Dustman, 2003). This suggests that there are other non-economic reasons that drive return migration. However, there is a gap in literature concerning the socio-cultural factors driving the return of Ghanaian female labor migrants, necessitating an intensive inquiry to enhance the understanding of their migration experiences and inform targeted interventions and policies. This study will, therefore, explore the return migration intents of return migrants and the factors that shape them while highlighting the unique regional factors inherent in their return patterns.

2. Literature Review

According to IOM, literature is replete with the decision-making process of migrants on whether to migrate and where to migrate to. However, very little attention has been paid to the return decision-making process of migrants and the factors that affect the decisions made. They further note that though there may be some similarities between the factors that influence the decision to migrate and the decision to return, there are equally some striking differences, thus the need to investigate it (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015).

Despite the different positions, there seems to be a consensus among scholars on the complexity of the

process involved in a migrant's decision to return. This view is shared by Schayk (2014) who indicates that a migrant's decision to return is not a mere one as it is influenced by a number of complex factors and a mixed set of feelings. The subsequent discussions will bring to bear some factors that are known to influence the return intentions and decisions of migrants.

Three typologies of motives for return have been formulated by several scholars (Von et al., 2008; De Haas & Fokkema, 2011; Schayk, 2014; Bonifazi, 2019). The first is the return for familial/personal reasons followed by economic/occupational reasons and then social/patriotic reasons. This is corroborated by extant literature which concludes that return migration is as equally a social process as it is an economic and political process (IOM, 2021; Batistella, 2018; Asampong et al., 2013; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015).

The second typology is push and pull factors of return motives. Push factors include the lack of financial resources, an uncertain migration status in the destination country, and challenges of discrimination and language barrier. On the other hand, pull factors include family ties, nostalgia and national patriotism. Von et al. (2008), however, argue that the pull factors wield a greater force in influencing return migration decisions than the push factors.

Some scholars have also explored the relationship between return intentions and personal attributes such as age, gender and marital status. Carling (2014) in relation to gender and age argued that men are more likely to have return intentions as compared to women, the young and the elderly. In fact, Carling posited that the most likely person to return appears to be a man in his forties who has spent about half of his life in the country of origin. This is because he will most probably see return as a viable option for retirement. This is confirmed by Papparuso (2017) attributing this to the higher possibility of women getting integrated in the host society than their male counterparts. He also establishes that age and marital status have a positive influence on return migration intentions. The older migrants are more likely to have

intentions to return home and have uncertainty about staying in the destination country.

Against these discoveries, however, Waldorf (1995) in an empirical study on international return migration argues that the empirical results did not establish any significant relationship between return intentions and personal attributes, including marital status and gender. Walford's (1995) stance is also supported by Koser and Kuschminder (2015) who found no clear significant relationship between return intentions and personal characteristics (marital status, age and gender).

The IOM (2021) also gives other circumstances under which migrants may return under locational preferences. On the one hand, migrants may return because of an improvement in the economic, social, political or environmental conditions of their countries of origin (IOM, 2021; Awumbila et al., 2008; Asampong, 2013). On the other hand, it could be that the conditions in their destination country have degenerated. Furthermore, some may return as a response to the governments in their countries of origin who are soliciting the return of migrants abroad, especially highly skilled migrants for purposes of contributing to development (IOM, 2021). Contrary to this, however, none out of 80 respondents in Koser and Kuschminder's (2015) study cited the sense of political commitment/patriotism as an influential factor.

In a study by Waldorf (1995) on the determinants of international return migration intentions using survey data, he hypothesized that three time-dependent variables (temporal trend, duration effect and years prior to retirement) greatly influence return migration intentions. A sample size of 30,621 guest workers from five different countries—Greece, Italy, Spain, Turkey and Yugoslavia—was used. It was concluded that the likelihood of a migrant having return intentions decreases both over time and as the length of stay is extended. This finding is corroborated by studies such as Paparusso (2017), Bonifazi (2019) and Kuschminder (2017) who state that the period of arrival influences return intentions.

Though Paparusso (2017) agrees with this view, he claims that time as a variable has both positive and negative relationships with return intentions. On

one hand, he states that the probabilities of intending to return home are reduced at a decreasing rate both over time and as the length of stay is extended (Waldorf, 1995; Bonifazi, 2019; Kuschminder, 2017). On the other hand, he also believes that the longer migrants stay in the destination country, the higher the probability of having intentions to return.

Waldorf (1995) also found a relationship between return migration intentions and residential satisfaction and job satisfaction. The study discovered that migrants who were satisfied with their jobs and/residence were less likely to express interest in returning home. Paparusso (2017) also established that return migration intentions have a positive relationship with current work status such that employed migrants are more likely to be certain about their future and thus express intentions to return. In relation to residential satisfaction, Paparusso (2017) further confirmed that having ownership of a house was also found to influence return intentions as Moroccans who owned a house in Italy were found to have a low probability of having return intentions as compared to those who did not have a house or any property.

Available literature also establishes a positive relationship between return migration and savings. Huntoon (1995), for instance, found that migrants who accumulate savings or assets are more likely to return to their home countries compared to those with no savings. This implies that policies that encourage savings among migrants are more likely to encourage return migration. (Paparusso, 2017; Bonifazi, 2018).

Return migration has often been discussed based on the transnationalism-integration nexus. Carling (2014) postulates that return migration is influenced by the extent to which a migrant is tied to his host country and/or his home country. Thus, a migrant is more likely to return if he is both weakly integrated (weak ties to the host country) and strongly transnational (strong ties to the country of residence). This view is confirmed by the findings of Bonifazi (2018) and Paparusso (2017) who empirically validated the influence of transnational ties on return intentions.

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Carling (2014) also established a relationship between religion and return migration intentions. The research asserts that those who are more likely to return home are those who have a high value for religion in their lives due to the probability of having much more freedom to practice the religion in their home country (Carling, 2014).

Furthermore, the success-failure migration argument in the economic theories significantly influences return migration. Many scholars argue that return migration is positively influenced by the achievement of one's migration goals (Wickramasekara, 2019). The view is also supported by the IOM (2021) who assert that the completion of one's migration goals (education, work contract) significantly influences return migration. Bessey (2015) and Bonifazi (2019) conclude that the success of one's migration goals has a significant effect on the migrant's intention to return home.

Another factor that influences return intentions but is often overlooked by many is the migration contract or the fixed migration time frame. In an article on International Contract Migration and the reintegration of return migrants, Athukorala (1990) mentions that one characteristic of the study's respondents is that the duration of stay in their destination countries is explicitly stated in their contracts and thus, the stated contract period determines when the migrants should return home. When the time is up, they have no choice but to return with the savings and skills they have acquired throughout their stay (Athukorala, 1990; Wickramasekara, 2019).

Another of such factors less emphasized is the issue of health conditions. Schayk (2014) established a double-sided relationship between health conditions and return migration. He submitted that health conditions can influence return decisions in two ways. While it can cause a migrant to stay in the destination country, it can also cause a migrant to return to the country of origin, especially when the health concerns are tied to one's stay in the host country.

3. Theoretical Review

One of the theories that underpin this study is Neo-classical Economics (NE) theory which was initially pioneered by Harris and Todaro (1970) and later elaborated by De Haas (2021). This theory considers migrants as rational income-maximizing actors who decide to migrate after conducting thorough cost and benefit analysis of migration. Return migration is therefore a result of a failed migration experience which did not meet the initial expectations of the migrant. It has, however, been criticized for overemphasizing economic/financial factors while putting no premium on where the migrants return to the social, economic and political environment at home. It also does not account for the interactions that take place beyond the returnee's family/household (Cassarino, 2004b).

The second theory underpinning this study is the structural approach, which aligns with the Neo-classical Economics (NE) theory and the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) theory. However, it extends the success-failure paradigm by emphasizing the influence of contextual factors in both destination and origin countries. This thus covers the weakness of the neoclassical theory and the NELM approach by stating that the return decision-making process and the reintegration process of returnees is not only shaped by the experiences of the migrants in the destination countries but is also greatly affected by the social, political and economic conditions of the area of settlement. In simple terms, return is also a matter of context (Cassarino, 2004b; Setrana & Tonah, 2014). Critics of this theory argue that it may overemphasize structural constraints that may prevent returnees from utilizing their acquired skills.

While neo-classical economics helps explain economically driven returns, the structural approach offers a more holistic perspective by showing how contextual/structural factors (social, political, economic) in both host and origin countries influence return decision, making it a more suitable theory for this study's purpose and findings.

4. Methods

The study utilized multiple case study approach as part of efforts to conduct a comparative analysis across returnee groups. The research design was selected because it allowed for the examination of more than one case. It is described as the application of comparative design to a qualitative research strategy (Bryman, 2016).

A semi-structured interview guide was used for data collection. A total of 21 female returnees from 3 regions (Gulf, Europe and Africa) 11 countries were selected for the study. This included 11 participants from the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Dubai, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan), 4 participants from Europe (Italy and Germany) and 6 participants from Africa (Liberia, Libya and Nigeria). The sample size was chosen based on the concept of saturation – a technique that is used in qualitative research as a criterion for discontinuing the collection and/or analysis of data. This is done on the basis that the data that has been collected is relatively exhaustive and therefore any further collection/analysis of data is not necessary (Saunders et al., 2018). In adherence to this principle, the decision to halt the data collection after 21 respondents was made after redundancy was reached.

The study employed a snowballing and network-driven approach to identify the target population. The initial contact with the first respondent was established through personal relations with someone who belonged to a returnees' association while the subsequent respondents were identified through a snowball sampling technique.

The participants for the study included people who had returned at least one year prior to the study and were situated across four administrative regions within Ghana: Western North, Ashanti, Greater Accra and Bono East. The selection of these regions is evidenced by existing studies by MacGregor (2019) who asserted that the Brong Ahafo region is the region holding the largest number of Ghanaian returnees. This is followed by the Ashanti region, Greater Accra region and the Western region. This

trend was especially noticeable after the implementation of the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program (Macgregor, 2019). Though no contact could be established with respondents in the Brong Ahafo region, some respondents were found in the Bono East region which was previously geographically and administratively part of the Brong Ahafo region. Bono East which shares borders with the Brong Ahafo region therefore shares cultural and socio-economic ties.

The transcription and analysis of the recorded interviews were done by the researchers with the highest level of discretion. The data was analyzed using the inductive thematic analysis approach in order to identify themes and patterns across all datasets. The researchers took time to become familiar with the data set while transcribing the audio-recorded interviews. The data was then coded and examined for potential themes of broader significance. The themes were extracted by analyzing, combining, comparing and graphically mapping how the codes link to one another. The themes were reviewed and given names which are brief and suitably descriptive. The researchers then critically looked for areas that overlap between themes to aid the comparative analysis. The final report was then presented while providing narrative descriptions and representative data extracts (direct quotes from the transcript to support the findings). A comparative analysis was finally done to identify similarities and differences among the findings of the various selected regions. Important ethical considerations for the study comprised informed consent, secure data storage, use of pseudonyms and scrutiny of analysis by peer researchers and supervisors to minimize bias in the study.

5. Findings

The demographic profile reveals that majority of respondents were young adults between the ages of 25-35 (62%), with a significant majority of them being single (85%), of whom almost half are single mothers with 1 to 3 children.

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Their education qualifications were predominantly basic with 47% having completed or dropped out of Junior High School while only 3(14%) held higher degrees.

One-third of respondents were unemployed (33%) while the remaining 48% were working in low-income occupations in the informal sector.

Destination countries varied with Saudi Arabia and Nigeria being the most common.

This demographic data suggests that limited educational qualifications, occupational prospects, challenging economic conditions and heavy family responsibilities likely influenced migration decisions, especially for younger, single mothers who desperately sought improved living conditions.

Table 1: Demographic Information

Age Distribution of Respondents			
Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age Group	25-35	13	62%
	36-45	7	33%
	Above 45	1	5%
Marital Status	Single	18	85%
	Married	2	10%
	Separated	1	5%
Educational Level	No formal education/Primary Dropout	2	10%
	JHS (Complete/Incomplete)	10	48%
	SHS (Complete/Incomplete)	3	14%
	VCT School/Diploma	3	14%
	Bachelor's/Master's	3	14%
Profession	Unemployed	7	33%
	Student	1	5%
	Teaching	3	14%
	Petty traders (food, water, clothes, accessories)	7	33%
	Hairdressing	2	10%
	Salesperson	1	5%
Destination Country	Gulf Region	11	52%
	Europe	4	19%
	Africa	6	29%

Source: Field data, 2025

Factors driving the return of female Ghanaian migrants

The extant literature is filled with various reasons why migrants returned to their countries of origin. The data collected reveal that the decision to return to Ghana by female Ghanaian migrants is influenced by a complex mixture of health issues,

financial considerations, physical exhaustion, family ties and future aspirations. While some decided to return for just one reason, it was an interplay of various reasons for others.

Health Issues

A number of respondents in this study decided to return to Ghana due to health issues. A majority of

these respondents were from the Gulf Region. When asked “When and why did you decide to come home”, the respondents had these to say:

I decided to return after I fell sick. I went to look after a child who was heavier than me so I fell sick. That was my third time falling sick so I decided to come home because I could not predict what next would have happened to me. (Respondent 1, Saudi Arabia)

I fell sick seriously and it wasn't getting any better because the work was more than I could handle. They said my blood pressure was high because the work was not easy. You can't also joke with BP. When they prescribed a drug for me, they didn't buy it for me. I sat down and thought that I would die if I should rely on these people. So, I told them to take me back so that I could return to Ghana because my condition was very serious. That is how I came home. (Respondent 4, Saudi Arabia)

I came back after one year because I fell ill. I came back with an illness and I had also had a motor accident. It wasn't easy for me at all. (Respondent 20, Liberia)

Tiredness and Total Exhaustion

It was also observed that one of the driving factors for return was tiredness and total exhaustion. This theme was solely observed among the returnees from the Gulf and African Regions.

Using statements such as “I was tired” and “I was fed up”, this theme is clearly expressed in the words of the following respondents who lamented:

I spent 3 and a half years in that house. After that time, I told my agent that I was tired and wanted to return home. (Respondent 1, Saudi Arabia)

The stress had become too much. I told them I wanted to go home. They told me that I was not done with my contract. I told them I was aware of that but still wanted to leave. So, I asked them to use my money to buy me a return ticket. They bought the ticket and I came back. (Respondent 5, Lebanon)

I could not take the stress anymore. My waist and my whole body were aching. I could not bend any longer. (Respondent 4, Saudi Arabia)

Fear of Abuse and Mistreatment

A very major cause of return observed among the returnees was also the fear of abuse and mistreatment which even caused some migrants to escape their places of work to return home. The respondents expressed their fear in these responses:

At one point, they realized that I was keeping the money in my underwear and I could not understand their language a bit. I heard my madam's mother suggesting to my madam that they kill me and take the money back. So, one Friday, while I was working, my madam hit me with a stick at the back of my head and I fell... One week after I was beaten, they travelled leaving only their sons in the house. While they were asleep, I ran away from the house and took a cab to the police station. At the police station, I couldn't speak their language, but I told them in English to take me to Africa. (Respondent 9, Iraq)

Looking at the way I was suffering, I decided to stop working. And in Libya, when you tell them you want to stop working, they ask you what the employer has done wrong. When you say he/she has done nothing and you just want to stop, they ask whether, you are sure. Over there too, we used to go home and report to work. So that Thursday evening, my employer knew if I left, I wouldn't come back so he did not let me go home. I ran away and never went back. (Respondent 21, Libya).

Contract and Payment Challenges

Another common reason cited by many returnees was contract and payment challenges. These included issues ranging from unpaid salaries, delayed payment of salaries and undue extension of contracts without payment. When asked why they decided to return to Ghana, some respondents had these to say:

They were not paying my salary. I had to keep demanding my salary before they would pay some. (Respondent 3, Saudi Arabia)

I was fed up. When you combine both jobs, they were supposed to pay me about 2000 cedis but

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they paid me 900 cedis for doing both jobs. ...So, I told them I wanted to return home to visit my sick child. Before I returned to Ghana, the people I was working for bought me a return ticket with my own money thinking I was going to come back after my trip to Ghana. They used 3,600 cedis of my own money to buy me a ticket so I came home empty handed. (Respondent 8, Kuwait).

Completed Contract Period

While others left because the terms of their contracts were not being honored, there were a few respondents who also left simply because the period of their contracts was completed. Some respondents stated:

I signed a two-year contract when I got to the office. ...I was supposed to return in March. I told them I wanted to leave on the 1st of April, and they agreed. They asked if I wouldn't stay for at least a week more. I told them I would not stay even a minute longer and that I wanted to return the same day I came there. So, on that very day when they woke up, my packed bags were by the roadside because I did not sleep that night. I spent it packing all my things. (Respondent 7, Jordan)

When you get to that family, you also do a German course. As I said, after one year, you have to go back. But mostly, if you meet our African people, they suggest that you get married to a German and have a child. That is how it works. I had another family who are Germans but are in another state. They told me that there are opportunities there that if I want, they can help me. But I told them I was not interested in getting married to stay so I came back. After all, my intention was to stay for one year and come back to Ghana (Respondent 12, Germany).

Family and Homesickness

Homesickness and family obligations also played a significant role in the decision to return for some respondents. They expressed a desire to be with their families and children back in Ghana. Some respondents revealed:

I came back to stay with my mother (Respondent 14, Italy)

The family had been on my neck to come back home because I've been there for a long time and things were not really the way they expected it to be so I came back. (Respondent 16, Nigeria)

My mom was growing old and she wanted me to be around, so I came back. ...I had been there for about 18 to 19 years and I think that was enough for me to come back home. I wanted to be around the family and see what to do next. So that's why I came back. (Respondent 17, Nigeria)

I have my family and blood relatives in Ghana. ...Even though I made a lot of friends in Nigeria, that doesn't mean I am a Nigerian. Home is home so I came back to do something tangible here. (Respondent 19, Nigeria)

Future Plans and Aspirations

When asked why they returned to Ghana, some respondents cited future plans and aspirations as the reason for their return. These include starting businesses in Ghana, investing in the economy and giving back to the society. The following responses portray this reason:

Yes, I came back to Ghana to invest in the economy after I had worked and saved some amount. For me, home is home, so I came to start a business since my kids had matured a little too (Respondent 15, Italy)

First, I wanted to set up something in Ghana before I eventually returned. So, I was coming and going back periodically. I was trying to set up my NGO and give back to the motherland. I came back after I had completed all the processes. (Respondent 13, Germany)

Patriotism

Some respondents also returned to Ghana for patriotic reasons. Statements such as 'home is home' and 'my country is my country' clearly demonstrated feelings of patriotism. This is clearly captured in the excerpts below:

For me, home is home, so I came to start a business. (Respondent 15, Italy)

I was trying to set up my NGO so I could give back to the motherland. (Respondent 13, Germany)

I felt that my country is my country. I couldn't really continue depending on someone's country like that. My aim and prayers were that there will be jobs that I can get to do when I return so that I can live in Ghana as a citizen. That is why I came back. (Respondent 18, Nigeria).

6. Discussion

The findings of the study reveal a complex interplay of factors influencing the return decisions of female Ghanaian labour migrants, including health issues, physical exhaustion, fear of abuse, contract violations, family obligations, future aspirations and patriotism. These findings resonate with the works of Schayk (2014), Mommers et al. (2009) and Haase and Honnerath (2016) who found that return migration is influenced by a variety of reasons and emotions. As such, the study affirms the view that there is no single, typical return migration experience (Haase & Honnerath, 2016).

The predominance of health concerns is a major return migration driver, especially among Gulf returnees. Several respondents cited sickness, injuries from accidents, and high blood pressure triggered by stressful working conditions as reasons for cutting short their migration and returning prematurely. The strenuous nature of domestic and construction work, coupled with limited rest, appears to take a toll on the health of female migrants in Gulf countries. Restricted access to quality healthcare due to high costs, language barriers, lack of health insurance, and attitudes of employers, further exacerbated their health challenges. This study's findings confirm the assertion that failing health directly linked to working conditions forced many respondents to return home (Schayk, 2014). It supports the structural approach and further challenges purely economic models of return migration which emphasize the success-failure contrast. It also shows that non-economic factors can dominate financial consideration in return decisions

(Wickramasekara, 2019; Bonifazi, 2019; IOM, 2021).

Another dominant theme identified was tiredness and total exhaustion which found strong grounds mostly among the Gulf and African returnees. Respondents frequently described being "tired", "fed up" and unable to cope with the "stress" of juggling multiple jobs and responsibilities. This theme supports research that shows that migrant domestic workers in the Gulf face extreme work hours, extra unpaid tasks, threatening behaviour, sexual assault, denial of food, lack of rest, and denial of time off or leave (IOM, 2019; Wickramasekara, 2008; Fejerskov & Zeleke, 2020). Such victims, therefore, found returning home and fleeing from abusive employers as the only way out for refuge. The finding further aligns with the study of Waldorf (1995) who established that migrants who were satisfied with their jobs were less likely to express interest in returning home. This finding like the first theme also confirms the structural approach and contradicts neo-classical economics which assumes that migrants endure hardships for financial maximization.

Notable among the factors is the fear of abuse and mistreatment and contract violation which are dominant among Gulf returnees. Some respondents recounted life-threatening experiences of being assaulted, confined, deprived of food and sanitation, sexually harassed, and living under constant threats to their lives. Their narratives confirm the high prevalence of psychological, physical and sexual abuse against female migrant domestic workers across Middle East countries (Oneil et al, 2016; UN Women, 2017), which led to the ban on Visa-20 in Ghana (Kandilige et al., 2019). The demographic data of respondents in this study further demonstrate the prevalence of this issue among women due to their vulnerability with age, marital status and educational level (Oneil et al., 2016; UN Women, 2017). This strongly resonates with the structural approach by demonstrating how social and political conditions in destination and origin countries strongly influence return patterns.

Unmet contractual obligations regarding timely payment of salaries, promised wage levels and termination of contracts, pushed many migrants to

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exit their host countries. Consistent with Asampong et al. (2019) study, breach of contractual agreements remains a common complaint among Ghanaian migrants, leading to loss of trust and premature returns. The vulnerability of migrants to wage theft is well documented in Gulf States where the Kafala system ties workers' legal status to employers, enabling the latter's undue control and exploitation (Nisrane, 2020).

Family obligations and homesickness also underpinned return decisions for some respondents who expressed a longing to reunite with relatives, especially aging parents and children in Ghana. This corroborates research showing that family separation and desire for family reunification are key motives for return migration (Carling, 2014; Dustmann, 2003). It also confirms the findings of several researchers that familial reasons account strongly for the return of some migrants (IOM, 2021; Batistella, 2018; Asampong et al., 2013; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015). However, the current study does not support Akanle's (2012) claim that wealthy migrants are pressured by family to return after extended periods abroad. The prioritization of family connections over economic maximization, especially among African returnees, challenges neo-classical economics theory of labour migration and confirms the social context emphasized by the structural approach.

The study also found that the fulfilment of contractual terms has also been found to significantly influence the return of migrants. This corroborates the studies of Athukorala (1990) and Wickramasekara (2019) who reveal that the contract period of migrant workers influences when they return to their home countries. Thus, migrants are compelled to return with the skills and savings they have gathered when their contract period expires. Similarly, IOM (2021) and Bonifazi (2019) found that achieving one's migration objectives—such as completing a work contract—can trigger return. This pattern, however, was highly prevalent among European returnees, showing how formal migration frameworks can overshadow economic maximization goals. This could be attributed to more effective immigration and labour laws in Europe as compared to Gulf and Africa regions. This challenges the economic maximization theory,

demonstrating that structural factors can override financial motivations.

Additionally, personal aspirations, such as plans to start a business, invest or pursue opportunities in Ghana, inspired returns among respondents who had sufficiently achieved their migration goals. This reinforces Cassarino's (2004a) return of innovation model, which views such migrants as agents of change, willing to transfer accumulated capital for socioeconomic development at home. It also echoes De Haas and Fokkema (2011) and Von Lersner et al.'s (2008) findings that strategic returns are often motivated by national patriotism, long-term career and capital investment plans in origin countries.

Patriotic sentiments also proved to be a significant factor in determining migrant decisions among the respondents. This factor was, however, predominant among the European returnees, totally contradicting the observation of Kose and Kuschminder (2015) who found that among their 80 respondents, none highlighted patriotic sentiments as a reason for their return. This contradiction could be a reflection of methodological differences or changes in migrant attitudes over time.

These findings fundamentally challenge the neo-classical economics theory since return decisions are contextually determined rather than universally economic. It further shows that different regional contexts produce diverse return patterns, backing the emphasis of the structural approach theory on contextual factors within origin and destination countries.

7. Conclusion

This study sought to examine the factors influencing the return migration decisions of female Ghanaian labour migrants across three regions – Gulf, Europe and Africa. It utilized the multiple case study design which made it possible to carry out a comparative analysis of the return motives of migrants from various regions.

The study reveals a complex interplay of health challenges, family obligations, contract violations and future aspirations as drivers of female return migration. It also discloses unique regional dimensions with Gulf returnees largely citing negative experiences such as health challenges,

contractual violations and the fear of abuse and mistreatment. Factors such as family and homesickness and future plans were more associated with the African and European returnees.

Overall, the data highlight important considerations for policymakers. Firstly, the heterogeneity inherent in the various spatial context of the female migrants cannot be oversimplified. The outcomes of return migration are still conditional, unpredictable and fluid. Secondly, the different factors that drove the return of these migrants create different circumstances and experiences, thus calling for specifically tailored economic, social and psycho-emotional support. The data also contribute to the feminization of migration by providing a gendered perspective to the existing data on factors that drive the return migration of female labour migrants. It fills the gap of the recent diaspora return policies which have been biased towards elites while ignoring the non-elite migrants, especially women. Further longitudinal research and country-specific research can provide evidence-based data that can direct policy in this area.

Moving forward, the Government of Ghana should expand assistance to migrant workers abroad facing contract violations, abuse or trafficking and support voluntary return, especially for those in the Gulf region. Distressed migrant workers should also be assisted with safe return travel and exit from abusive employers instead of abandonment. Additionally, return and repatriation processes should be provided for recruits who are unable to complete contracts due to no fault of theirs.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should develop bilateral labour agreements with destination states, especially in the Gulf region to expand regular migration, uphold migrant rights and facilitate return.

Migrant workers also have a responsibility to prioritize conducting thorough research on their intended destination countries before embarking on their journey. It is essential for migrants to obtain comprehensive information about the economic,

social and cultural aspects of their potential destination through reliable sources.

This will help them make informed decisions and plan for unforeseen circumstances. These nuanced approaches will better serve the needs of various returnee populations while maximizing the potential development benefits of return migration and mitigating its human costs.

8. Limitations

A key limitation of this study is its limited generalizability. Due to the small sample size, the results of this study cannot be generalized as it is not representative of the desired population. However, with the principle of data saturation, the researcher collected data till the point where no additional insights were being recorded. This study, therefore, ensured a comprehensive exploration of the data within the range of the sample.

Also, some participants were unwilling to be involved in this study. This was due to the lack of informed consent and debriefing by some previous researchers. However, the researcher adhered to some ethical procedures such as informed consent and comprehensive debriefing processes. Creating a safe and confidential environment for the respondents alleviated some fears and encouraged involvement.

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Conflict of Interest

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