

“AM I REALLY DOING ENOUGH?”

Transnational Ghanaian mothers and fathers and regularisation in Portugal

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Abstract The paper compares the experiences of Ghanaian mothers and fathers in Portugal, showing how legal status and cultural expectations intersect to shape gendered experiences of “doing enough” as transnational parents. Drawing on qualitative interviews and using frameworks of gendered geographies of power and the materiality of care, it examines how both sustain emotional and material ties across borders through caregiving networks, while migration policies structure family reunification limitations. Parents navigate the reproduction and shifting of gender expectations: mothers improve material well-being via remittances yet face emotional strain, while fathers judged by economic provision may adopt caregiving roles. With a growing African migrant presence in Europe, the study offers timely insights on regularisation policies and transnational family care.

Keywords: transnational mothering and fathering, gender, regularisation, Ghanaians in Portugal.

“Estou realmente a fazer o suficiente?” Mães e pais ganeses transnacionais e processos de regularização em Portugal

Resumo O artigo compara as experiências de mães e pais ganeses em Portugal, analisando o estatuto legal e as expectativas culturais. Mostra como estes fatores se cruzam e moldam experiências de género associadas à ideia de “fazer o suficiente” enquanto pais transnacionais. As experiências são analisadas com base em entrevistas qualitativas e nos enquadramentos das geografias de poder de género e da materialidade do cuidado. Evidencia-se como ambos mantêm laços emocionais e materiais através das fronteiras, por meio de redes de cuidado, ao mesmo tempo, que as políticas migratórias estruturam limitações à reunificação familiar. Na parentalidade transnacional, os participantes lidam com a reprodução e a reconfiguração das expectativas de género: por um lado, as mães contribuem para a melhoria do bem-estar material através do envio de remessas, enfrentando, contudo, um significativo desgaste emocional; por outro, os pais, frequentemente avaliados em função da sua provisão económica, podem vir a assumir papéis de cuidado. Num contexto de crescente presença de migrantes africanos na Europa, o estudo oferece contributos pertinentes para a compreensão das políticas de regularização e das dinâmicas de cuidado em famílias transnacionais.

Palavras-chave: maternidade e paternidade transnacionais; género; regularização; ganeses em Portugal

“Est-ce que j’en fais vraiment assez?” Mères et pères ghanéens transnationaux et régularisation au Portugal

Résumé L'article compare les expériences des mères et des pères ghanéens au Portugal, en montrant comment le statut juridique et les attentes culturelles s'entrecroisent pour façonner des expériences genrées de “faire vraiment assez” en tant que parents transnationaux. S'appuyant sur des entretiens qualitatifs et mobilisant les cadres analytiques des géographies genrées du pouvoir et de la matérialité du care, on examine la manière dont les uns et les autres maintiennent des liens émotionnels et matériels au-delà des frontières à travers des réseaux de prise en charge, tandis que les politiques migratoires structurent les limitations à la réunification familiale.

Les parents oscillent entre reproduction et recomposition des attentes de genre: les mères contribuent à l'amélioration du bien-être matériel par l'envoi de remises, tout en étant confrontées à une forte charge émotionnelle; les pères, quant à eux, sont souvent perçus principalement à travers leur rôle de pourvoyeurs économique, peuvent être amenés à assumer des fonctions de care. Dans un contexte de présence croissante de migrantes africaines en Europe, cette étude apporte des éclairages opportuns sur les politiques de régularisation et les dynamiques du care au sein des familles transnationales.

Mots-clés: maternité et paternité transnationales; genre; régularisation; Ghanéens au Portugal

“¿Estoy realmente haciendo lo suficiente?” Madres y padres ghaneses transnacionales y procesos de regularización en Portugal

Resumen El artículo compara las experiencias de madres y padres ghaneses en Portugal, analizando el estatuto legal y las expectativas culturales. Muestra como estos factores se cruzan y moldean experiencias de género asociadas a la idea de “hacer lo suficiente” como padres transnacionales. Las experiencias son analizadas con base en entrevistas cualitativas y en el contexto de las geografías de poder de género y de la materialidad del cuidado. Se pone en evidencia como ambos mantienen lazos emocionales y materiales a través de las fronteras, por medio de redes de cuidado, al mismo tiempo, que las políticas migratorias estructuran limitaciones a la reunificación familiar. En la parentalidad transnacional, los participantes lidian con la reproducción y la reconfiguración de las expectativas de género: por un lado, las madres contribuyen para la mejoría del bienestar material a través del envío de remesas, enfrentando, sin embargo, un significativo desgaste emocional; por otro, los padres, frecuentemente evaluados en función de su provisión económica, pueden llegar a asumir papeles de cuidado. En un contexto de creciente presencia de migrantes africanos en Europa, el estudio ofrece contribuciones pertinentes para la comprensión de las políticas de regularización y de las dinámicas de cuidado en familias transnacionales.

Palabras-clave: maternidad y paternidad transnacionales; género; regularización; ghaneses en Portugal.

Introduction

This paper examines how residency regularisation in Portugal interacts with Ghanaian cultural norms of care. It explores how these dynamics shape gendered experiences of “doing enough” among transnational mothers and fathers. Transnational parenting is increasingly crucial as global migration reshapes family ties, expectations, and caregiving obligations, yet current scholarship remains overly focused on mothers, giving insufficient attention to fathers and the impact of legal status on parental roles. By situating Ghanaian parents in Portugal, we, specifically ask: How do legal and cultural frameworks influence the ways in which Ghanaian parents in Portugal perceive and enact their parental responsibilities from a distance?

The principal goals are to clarify how legal and cultural frameworks shape parental strategies and perceptions of adequacy when raising children across borders, and to highlight under-researched dynamics such as fathers acting as primary caregivers or experiencing emotional strain due to distant parenting. The study employs qualitative, in-depth interviews with Ghanaian migrants, applying theoretical frameworks of gendered geographies of power and the materiality of care to analyse emotional and material dimensions of transnational parenting, caregiving networks, and the influence of migration policies on family separation and reunification.

Main findings reveal that both mothers and fathers depend on remittances and regular communication to fulfil parenting obligations, but mothers especially confront heightened emotional strain and diminished authority due to cultural expectations and legal hurdles. Fathers' experiences are varied, ranging from being validated by material provision to facing substantial emotional burdens and interrupted caregiving. Migration policy delays and residency uncertainties deepen these vulnerabilities, with mothers disproportionately affected by institutional and cultural barriers.

The study concludes that the materiality of care and the sense of "doing enough" among Ghanaian parents are gendered, relational, and shaped by broader migration contexts. By investigating these dynamics, the article contributes a more nuanced understanding of transnational care, the consequences of policy frameworks, and the lived realities of Ghanaian families navigating migration and family life in Europe.

To contextualise the reasons and patterns of emigration from Ghana to Portugal and to Europe more broadly, to better understand the dynamics highlighted in the interviews, it is noteworthy that Ghana ranks sixth among Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries in the emigration rate (OECD, 2022: 6). Smuggling routes and irregular emigration to Europe, the Middle East and the United States have increased, prompting several policy measures (IOM, 2020; Kandilige *et al.*, 2019).

Emigrants accounted for 3% of Ghana's total population of 31 million in 2020 (UNDP, 2020). Official emigration doubled in the twenty first century: rising from half a million in 2000 to 762,000 in 2010 (a 53% increase), and reaching one million in 2020 (a further 31% rise). The main destinations include Nigeria, the United States, the United Kingdom, Côte d'Ivoire and Italy (Knomad, 2020).

Migration occurs for labour, family, humanitarian and educational reasons (OECD, 2022). At the same time, concerns persist that emigrants are disproportionately male and highly educated compared with the general population (OECD, 2022). Youth emigration intentions are particularly high: between 2009 and 2018, 44% of Ghanaians considered permanent emigration, rising to 58% among the unemployed and 56% among those aged 15-24 (OECD, 2022).

Despite these concerns, Ghanaians rank among the top three nationalities — alongside Indians and Bangladeshis — with the greatest income gains from international rather than internal migration (World Bank, 2023: 96). The sharp growth in emigration during the twenty-first century has had a significant impact on the national economy.

Ghanaian migration to Portugal remains small but has grown steadily, offering a relevant lens through which to examine how gendered experiences of transnational parenting are shaped within less established African migrant groups. Official data indicate an increase from 46 Ghanaian citizens residing in Portugal in 2000 to 349 in 2023, with around one-third concentrated in Lisbon, alongside a rise in inflows from 8 to 86 first residence permits (SEF, 2001; AIMA, 2024). When measured by country of birth, the 2021 Census recorded 150 individuals born in Ghana, underscoring the need to distinguish between citizenship

and birthplace as complementary indicators (INE, 2023). In both cases, Ghanaians account for just 0.03% of Portugal's foreign and foreign-born populations, within a broader African migrant population largely composed of nationals from countries where Portuguese is the official language (AIMA, 2024; INE, 2023). This demographic position, shaped by linguistic and postcolonial differences within African migration to Portugal, provides an important context for analysing how legal status and cultural expectations intersect in shaping Ghanaian mothers' and fathers' experiences of "doing enough" across borders.

Sex-disaggregated data show that Ghanaian nationals resident in Portugal were mostly men in 2023: out of 349 residents, 259 were male and 90 female (AIMA, 2024). The same pattern appears in new residence permits, with 66 of the 86 permits issued in 2023 granted to men and 20 to women (AIMA, 2024). Overall, the Ghanaian population is predominantly male, with about two-thirds being men, and largely of working age, at 93%. Educational attainment is more varied: around one-fifth hold university degrees, one-third completed secondary education, and half have only basic education (INE, 2023; GEE, 2023).

Portugal has been internationally recognised for its progressive migration and integration framework, ranking third in the 2020 MIPEx report for its policies on labour market access, family reunification, and education (Solano and Huddleston, 2020). However, this progressive orientation coexists with high levels of irregularity. Many migrants, including Ghanaians, have regularised their status post arrival by working and paying social security for one year — a pathway available until 2024. Yet, as the data indicate, the number of irregular migrants awaiting regularisation (around 32,000 in 2020) has far exceeded those granted work visas (nearly 600), producing enduring vulnerability and social instability (Palos, 2021; Pires, Pereira and Ortiz, 2023).

Recent legal changes have further constrained access to family reunification, despite its formal recognition as a right. While the 2007 Foreigners Law¹ previously allowed applications immediately after obtaining a residence permit, the 2025 revision introduced a general two-year waiting period for most Third-Country Nationals, with limited exceptions for certain partners and dependants. These restrictions are likely to further constrain access to family reunification. Prior to the 2025 revision, approval numbers for Ghanaians were already persistently low (10-15 annually between 2008 and 2024), with a decline observed after 2022 alongside a rise in study and employment permits (Eurostat, 2024).

Literature review

This literature review shows that research on transnational parenting now includes both mothers and fathers. It highlights how Ghanaian cultural norms shape ideas of "good mothering" and "good fathering", linking economic and emotional

1 Lei [Law] 23/2007. *Diário da República*, I série, n.º 127, pp. 4290-4330, revoked in 2024: <https://files.diariodarepublica.pt/1s/2007/07/12700/42904330.pdf> (accessed on 29th December, 2024).

care. The review also considers how global studies address the challenges Ghanaian families face with regularisation. Finally, it notes the lack of research on Ghanaian families in Portugal and the unique difficulties these parents face in trying to "do enough" across borders.

Early research focused on the challenges migrant mothers faced in maintaining emotional and material support for their children despite separation (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Asis, 2002; Parreñas, 2001). Subsequent studies included fathers, showing that their roles now encompass both financial provision and emotional involvement, rather than being limited to the "breadwinner" model (Carling, Menjívar and Schmalzbauer, 2012; Parreñas, 2008; Kilkey, Plomien and Perrons, 2014; Souralová and Fialová, 2017; Poeze, 2019; Pustulka, Struzik and Slusarczyk, 2015). Recent work suggests mothers and fathers can share similar emotional experiences and caregiving roles, though research remains more focused on mothers, with limited direct comparison between genders (Haagsman and Mazzucato, 2021; Souralová and Fialová, 2017).

In Ghana, the ability to provide materially — especially through remittances — is central to notions of "good mothering" and "good fathering," with both mothers and fathers navigating evolving expectations around economic provision and emotional engagement (Coe, 2011; Waterhouse, Hill and Hinde, 2017; Baataar, 2023; William, 2015; Bowen *et al.*, 2022).

Studies of Ghanaian transnational families, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) and The Netherlands, highlight the importance of remittances and the role of extended families in caregiving, with digital technologies facilitating ongoing parental involvement (Caarls *et al.*, 2013; Cebotari, 2020; Dito, Mazzucato and Schans, 2017; Martey and Armah, 2021; Mazzucato, Van den Boom and Nsowah-Nuamah, 2008; Mazzucato *et al.*, 2015; Poeze, 2019). However, restrictive migration regimes and protracted regularisation processes often lead to prolonged separation, emotional strain, and challenges in fulfilling parental roles, with gendered expectations compounding these difficulties (Dito, Mazzucato and Schans, 2017; Dreby, 2006; Kilkey, Plomien and Perrons, 2014; Parreñas, 2001; Schweitzer, 2015; Coe, 2011).

Within this context of constrained co-presence and heightened parental anxiety, comparative research on left-behind children indicates that, while parents often express strong concern about the adequacy of care, children may demonstrate considerable resilience and interpret migration within family strategies (Nazridod, Pereira and Guerreiro, 2019; Cebotari, Siegel, and Mazzucato, 2016). These insights ground the shared preoccupation with "doing enough" among Ghanaian transnational mothers and fathers, situating it within broader evidence on the perceived and lived conditions of children who remain in origin contexts. At the same time, the literature points to gendered differences in children's experiences and responsibilities, reinforcing how parental anxieties and practices of care are embedded in culturally and socially differentiated expectations across transnational family life (Nazridod, Pereira and Guerreiro, 2019).

In Portugal, research on Ghanaian families is limited, as most studies focus on migrants from Portuguese-speaking countries (Machado and Azevedo, 2009).

Existing literature on other migrant groups demonstrates that policy barriers to family reunification and precarious legal statuses reshape caregiving and cause emotional distress, with extended families often assuming primary caregiving roles (Vigil, 2017; Budal, 2018; Pant, 2021; Grassi and Vivet, 2015; Mazzucato *et al.*, 2017; Namuleme, 2019). The few studies on Ghanaians in Portugal emphasise resilience strategies, such as constant communication, remittance-sending, and support from migrant networks, as parents navigate delays in regularisation and financial constraints (Parry, 2020; Appiah, 2023). These findings underscore the need to further explore how Ghanaian parents in Portugal strive to “do enough” for their families across borders amid the challenges of residency regularisation.

Key theoretical frameworks

This study uses three core theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis of Ghanaian transnational parenting and residency regularisation in Portugal.

First, the concept of *gendered geographies of power* (Mahler and Pessar, 2001) highlights how gender roles and relations are simultaneously reinforced and transformed as migrants move between contexts. This approach emphasises that power operates at multiple, interconnected scales — macro, meso, and micro — rather than as discrete units. Macro-level policies, such as Portugal’s residency and family reunification rules, have gendered effects on social networks and on the daily strategies of migrant mothers and fathers. In Ghana, gendered expectations tied to kinship and parenting are reworked by migration.

Second, the study adopts a framework focusing on how *macro, meso, and micro dimensions* shape transnational mothering and fathering (Goldin, Cameron and Blarajan, 2011). Macro-level factors — demographic, economic, and political — shape migration opportunities and regularisation. Meso-level social networks help parents arrange care for children left behind and navigate bureaucracies (*cf.* Carling, Menjívar and Schmalzbauer, 2012). At the micro level, individual agency is framed by one’s position in hierarchies of gender, class, legal status, and family structure. These levels interact dynamically, creating both similarities and differences between mothers’ and fathers’ experiences (*cf.* Goldin, Cameron and Blarajan, 2011).

Third, the *materiality of care* is critical for understanding transnational families. Economic support — such as remittances or paying school fees — serves as both a necessity and a key sign of parental love (Coe, 2011). These material exchanges, central to “familyhood” (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002), can outweigh the value of physical presence. Ghanaian parents abroad are often evaluated by their ability to provide financially (Coe, 2011), intensifying pressure to “do enough”, especially when legal or economic barriers in Portugal undermine their capacity to support their children.

This paper intentionally centers on *transnational parenting and gendered care* rather than general network theories, focusing on how networks of care are shaped by gender and culture. The analysis grounds itself in the Ghanaian context, drawing on insights into care, love, and obligation in Ghanaian families (Coe, 2011).

Overall, by combining these perspectives, this framework shows how legal status, gender, and Ghanaian cultural norms intersect in shaping the real-life experiences of transnational parents in Portugal. This intersection produces both shared and distinct pressures around remittances, suffering, and family reunification.

Methodology

This study employed semi-structured interviews with ten Ghanaian transnational parents in Lisbon, comprising four mothers and six fathers, aged 30 to 57. All were Ghanaian citizens living in Portugal with children residing in Ghana.

We applied purposive sampling to identify transnational parents meeting our criteria. The first participant, a transnational father, referred us to additional respondents. "Snowball sampling" was then used to expand the sample, as participants recommended others who fit the study's objectives (Bryman, 2012).

Interviews were conducted in March and April 2020 by telephone, due to Covid-19 restrictions, which prevented in-person contact and fieldwork. Sessions were scheduled at participants' convenience.

Each participant gave verbal consent after being informed about the voluntary nature of the study, including their right to withdraw at any point and to refuse to answer sensitive questions. Names were replaced with pseudonyms, and all data were kept strictly confidential.²

Two main constraints shaped the process. First, the Ghanaian population in Portugal is small, and few matched our selection criteria. Second, Covid-19 restrictions limited access to potential respondents.

Interviews were conducted in Twi, a widely spoken Ghanaian language, by a Ghanaian researcher (first named-author). They were manually transcribed, then translated directly into English, preserving participants' meanings. We used a denaturalised transcription approach, which focuses on the content and meaning of speech rather than capturing accents, pauses, or filler words. This helped ensure clarity in the transcripts and supported analytical reflection on participants' narratives.

Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes (Bryman, 2012). We focused on: (1) perceptions of transnational parenting; (2) differences in mothering and fathering; (3) gender roles in parenting; (4) caregiving structures within transnational families; and (5) the impact of legal status and socio-economic conditions on parenting across borders.

2 The study followed the Code of Ethical Conduct in Research of the Iscte Ethical Commission.

Profiles of Ghanaian mothers and fathers: sociodemographic characteristics and migration backgrounds

This section describes the backgrounds of Ghanaian transnational mothers and fathers in Portugal, highlighting key traits relevant to the study.

Sociodemographic overview. The study interviewed six men and four women who migrated to Portugal for economic or educational reasons. All participants had one or two children, aged between 2 and 27 years (see table 1).

Family structure and marital status. Among the women, all were single or divorced, while only one man was unmarried. This gendered difference in marital status shapes parenting arrangements and concerns over care.

Education and occupation. Most participants held secondary or university-level education, with three completing lower secondary school. Previous occupations in Ghana included fishing, mining, teaching, filmmaking, hairstyling, and hospitality. In Portugal, they worked in construction, hairstyling, cleaning, decoration, content moderation, and hospitality, and two men and one woman pursued postgraduate studies.

Participants' migration journeys varied widely, with important implications for transnational caregiving and residency regularisation in Portugal.

Migration timelines and legal status. Participants arrived in Portugal between 1997 and 2019, and some had previously lived in other countries. About half initially lacked legal status on arrival, mirroring patterns among Third Country Nationals. The average regularisation wait was two years, but one person waited twenty years. Students typically obtained legal residency the year they arrived.

Family visits and legal constraints. Four participants managed to visit family in Ghana since their migration, while six had not, mainly due to legal limitations such as unstable residency documents.

Family reunification efforts. Among fathers, four began family reunification processes; however, one gave up after an extended delay, and another did not pursue reunification due to future migration plans. Among mothers, two were undertaking reunification, while the others faced barriers like children's age restrictions and financial requirements.

Ethnic and urban backgrounds. Participants represented six Ghanaian ethnic groups: Fante (3 men, from a town in western region), Ashanti (1 man from a town in Ashanti region, 2 women), Ewe (1 women), Akuapim (1 men), Guan (1 woman) and Nzema (1 man). All came from urban centers across three Ghanaian cities, ensuring a range of perspectives on cultural ideals of parenting. This diverse sample provides insight into how legal and cultural pressures, shaped by migration and residency requirements, intersect with varied understandings of "good mothering" and "good fathering". The section underlines how parents' backgrounds influence their responses to the challenges of transnational caregiving and integration.

Table 1 Participants sociodemographic and family composition profiles

Name	Sex, age & marital status	Level of education	No. & age of children	Occupation in (a) Ghana & in (b) Portugal	Perceived salary
Kojo	Male, 37, married	Post-secondary non-Tertiary Education (ISCED 4; 13 yrs.)	Son, 11 daughter, 9	(a) Teaching assistant in public school (b) Interior decorator with contract	Average salary
Akwesi	Male, 57, married	Lower Secondary Education (ISCED 2; 9 yrs.)	Son, 26	(a) Fisherman with local group (b) Hair stylist with contract	Average salary
Emman	Male, 38, married	Lower Secondary Education (ISCED 2; 9 yrs.)	Daughter, 5	(a) Local fishing secretary (b) Baker with contract	Average salary
Adomanko	Male, 38, married	Master's degree (ISCED 7; 18 yrs.)	Daughter, 2	(a) Public servant in education office (b) Master's student	Adequate allowance
Esi	Female, 32, single	Master's degree (ISCED 7; 18 yrs.)	Son, 6	(a) Freelance film director (b) Master's student	Adequate allowance
Eno	Female, 41, divorced	Lower Secondary Education (ISCED 2; 9 yrs.)	Son & daughter, 22	(a) Hair stylist with contract (b) Independent hair stylist	Average salary
Nii	Male, 45, married	Doctoral degree (ISCED 8; 22 yrs.)	2 sons, 9 & 6	(a) University lecturer in public sector (b) PhD student	Adequate salary
Araba	Female, 30, single	Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3; 12 yrs.)	Daughter, 11	(a) Hotel receptionist (b) Cleaner for private families	Average salary
Maame	Female, 38, single	Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6; 16 yrs.)	Son, 14 daughter, 9	(a) Independent business in clothing (b) Content moderator for private company	Average salary
Kwame	Male, 33, single	Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3; 12 yrs.)	Son, 11	(a) Construction worker – tiler (b) Construction worker – onsite assistant	Average salary

Source: Table by the authors, based on the interview participants.

Table 2 Mothers and fathers' migration backgrounds

Name, gender and age	On perception parenting from afar	Family structure and caregiver in Ghana	Earlier migration experiences; year of arrival in Portugal	Legal status / year and reunification process	How often visited Ghana and when
Kojo, M, 37	Satisfied – “I am very responsible as expected, I take care of my household financially”	Extended family (paternal grandmother), wife	Portugal since 2017 for work; entering via another European country on a tourist visa	Regularised – 2019 (2 years waiting) Reunification in progress	2020
Akwesi, M, 57	Satisfied – “We have a good bond and there is no problem between us”	Extended family (paternal grandmother), wife	Transit migration in Côte D'Ivoire (< 1 year); Portugal since 1997 for work; entering without a visa	Regularised – 2017 (20 years waiting) Given up on reunification	Never
Emman, M, 38	Not satisfied – “I do not have total control over raising my daughter”	Extended family (paternal grandparents), wife	Portugal since 2016 for work; entering via another European country on a tourist visa	Regularised – 2019 (3 years waiting) Reunification in progress	2019
Adomanko, M, 38	Satisfied – “I render every single obligation and responsibility as a father to the family a hundred percent”	Nuclear family, wife	2 years in China for study; Portugal since 2019 on a study visa	Regularised – 2019 (less than one year waiting) Reunification in progress	2020
Esi, F, 32	Not satisfied – “I send his father money every month, I am really trying but it is not enough”	Extended family (paternal grandparents), ex-partner	Portugal since 2018 on a study visa	Regularised – 2018 (less than one year waiting) Reunification in progress	2019
Eno, F, 41	Not satisfied – “It's hard because sometimes I am sad and lonely”	Extended family, maternal grandmother	3 years in Norway for work (no visa); Portugal since 2012; entering via a European country without a visa	Regularised – 2019 (7 years waiting) Considering reunification	Never
Nii, M, 45	Not satisfied – “I have been an absent father for about 3 years, and I am not happy about it”	Nuclear family, wife	Portugal since 2019 for PhD; on a study visa	Regularised – 2019 (less than one year waiting) Reunification in progress	2020
Araba, F, 30	Not satisfied – “Not living with my daughter is not easy for me”	Nuclear family, ex-partner	Portugal since 2019 as a refugee; entering without a visa	Regularised – 2020 (1 year waiting) Considering reunification	Never
Maame, F, 38	Not satisfied – “The money and items I send them can never replace my presence in their lives”	Nuclear family, paid nanny	Portugal since 2018 as a refugee; entering without a visa	Regularised – 2020 (2 years waiting) Reunification in progress	Never
Kwame, M, 33	Satisfied – “I perform my expected roles well and my child doesn't lack anything”	Nuclear family, ex-partner	3 years in Germany for work; Portugal since 2019; entering without a visa	Regularised – 2021 (2 years waiting) No reunification plans	Never

Source: table by the authors, based on the interview participants.

Redefining "good mothering" and "good fathering": Ghanaian parents in Portugal and residency regularisation

Ghanaian cultural ideals of parental roles are reconfigured through migration, shaped by residency regularisation and broader structural factors. Using gendered geographies of power (Mahler and Pessar, 2001), the macro-meso-micro framework (Goldin, Cameron and Blarajan, 2011), and the materiality of care (Coe, 2011), this discussion addresses three themes: emotional and material dimensions of transnational parenting, caregiving networks and structural constraints, and the impact of migration policies on family separation and reunification.

The emotional and material dimensions of transnational parenting

The findings reveal both shared and gendered challenges. A central theme in interviews was the emotional strain caused by separation from children, narrated through Ghanaian cultural expectations. In Ghana, "good fathering" is primarily evaluated through financial provision, while "good mothering" combines material support with daily nurturing (Coe, 2011).

All participants in this research came from urban areas, reflecting the literature which suggests that in urban Ghana, "good mothering" entails balancing economic provision with caregiving, as urban mothers are expected both to earn income and care for their children (Waterhouse, Hill and Hinde, 2017; Baataar, 2023). Given the participants' diverse ethnic backgrounds, their experiences could not be straightforwardly mapped onto cultural norms specific to any single ethnicity. This diversity reinforces the need to approach the analysis through broader Ghanaian cultural expectations rather than those of particular ethnic groups.

Against this backdrop, participants in Portugal were aware of these prevailing expectations but articulated and negotiated them in distinct ways shaped by the migration context. Through remittances and digital communication, parents sought to maintain an "absent presence" in their children's lives, a practice also observed in other transnational contexts (*cf.* Carling, Menjívar and Schmalzbauer, 2012; Mazzucato *et al.*, 2015). Mothers, however, reported stronger feelings of inadequacy because maternal presence is viewed as irreplaceable. As Maame, a 38-year-old single mother, explained:

I do not think I am doing enough. It can never be enough because the money and items I send them can never replace my presence in their lives. Not being able to live with my children is unbearable. Sometimes when I want to talk to them, they do not want to talk to me. My child told me I have left them to enjoy life in Portugal and left them with a stranger, it made me sad. In addition to them thinking I have abandoned them, I feel I missed out on many years and milestones in their lives since I came to Lisbon. Even though I pay the nanny well to take care of them, I think no one can take care of your children like a mother does.

While the transnational mothers send remittances similarly to the transnational fathers and contribute to their children's material well-being, their narratives are marked by a heightened sense of guilt and inadequacy. Eno, a mother who is divorced (41 years old), described the emotional toll of her situation:

Trying to be a parent from abroad is different. I have missed out on many important events in their lives because I am here. *It's hard because sometimes when I am sad and lonely, I wish they were here. I feel bad for being away this long*, but it is not my fault. Things just did not go as well as I planned.³

These accounts show that the “good mother” ideal is especially difficult to maintain in migration, where legal and economic barriers hinder family reunification and direct caregiving. This reinforces previous findings on the double burden transnational mothers face, providing both financially and emotionally under precarious conditions (Dreby, 2006; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009).

Transnational fathers, by contrast, show greater diversity in their approaches to parenting from afar. Some express satisfaction in fulfilling the breadwinner role, viewing remittance-sending as the main expression of love and responsibility, as seen in other studies (Kilkey, Plomien and Perrons, 2014). Kojo, a married father, aged 38, stated:

Thanks be to God that I am still able to work and support my family back in Ghana all these years. I send them money regularly through Western Union.⁴ I send *money for their school fees*, materials and money for food. Sometimes I send things through people going to Ghana.

Similarly, Akwesi, married, aged 57, stressed:

Usually, they make demands when we chat. So, in a monetary respect, I send them some money through Western Union and Ghana Commercial Bank to cater for their needs. I send money often to make sure their *needs are well taken care of*.

For the Ghanaian fathers, the ability to provide materially is not only culturally validated but also serves to maintain or even elevate their status as “good fathers” in the eyes of their children and wider family. This pattern aligns with Coe's (2011) observation that children and family members often attach themselves to caregivers who are more financially secure, privileging those abroad who can provide over those who remain but are less able to support.

Other fathers, however, expressed loss of authority and frustration with their absence. Emman, aged 38 and married, reflected:

3 In all excerpts from the interviews, the italics has been added by the authors.

4 The Western Union Company is an American multinational financial services company.

Parenting from here would not be the same as it would be if I were in Ghana. In that situation, I would be present and could supervise everything that goes on, but now I am here and can only communicate on the phone. With Internet data costs and connectivity challenges in Ghana, and my busy work schedules here, it is hard to perform those responsibilities exactly how I did when I was in Ghana. *Parenting is never the same, I am here, and she is there, I do not have total control over raising my daughter.*

This sense of distance and loss of authority resonates with the literature on the gendered geographies of power, where migration transforms but does not erase culturally embedded parental roles (Mahler and Pessar, 2001).

Differently, a father with a university degree (Nii, 45 years old) felt he was "not providing enough for his wife" by not helping her with their child while the father with less school education feels he has "weakened power to discipline/control my daughter" at distance:

I feel a lot of pressure because of the separation from my family. Because I always think *my wife is struggling with her work and raising the children in my absence*. Even though she has access to my salary in Ghana, it is not the same. *I feel pressured because I know whatever I do here has consequences for them at home. I have been an absent father for about 3 years, and I am not happy about it.*

These testimonies indicate that, although financial provision is the dominant cultural expectation, emotional concerns are present among fathers, yet these are generally more strongly and frequently articulated by mothers. As Souralová and Fialová (2017) note, some fathers do share in the pain of absence, but mothers consistently report a heavier emotional burden. Overall, the diversity in fathers' accounts highlights that, while the materiality of care is influential, it does not fully capture the complexities of parenthood; emotional bonds and parental authority remain negotiated and contested, shaped by migration policies, economic constraints, and gendered norms (Mahler and Pessar, 2001; Coe, 2011).

Gendered caregiving: structural constraints

In the context of the aforementioned challenges, both mothers and fathers demonstrated considerable resilience and agency in managing transnational family life. A key similarity between them was their reliance on extended family networks in Ghana to provide daily care for their children, a practice consistent with Ghanaian kinship norms. However, important differences emerged in how caregiving responsibilities were organised. Structural inequalities embedded in migration regimes, combined with prevailing Ghanaian gender norms, produced divergent experiences for mothers and fathers. Mothers, in particular, navigated more precarious caregiving arrangements, shaped by their marital status: all of the mothers in this study were single or divorced, necessitating reliance on grandmothers, ex-partners, or paid nannies for childcare. In contrast, fathers predominantly depended on their spouses or extended family members, aligning with the patrilineal

orientation of Ghanaian kinship systems. Thus, while both mothers and fathers drew on familial support networks, the nature and stability of these arrangements differed significantly according to gender and marital status.

For mothers, migration often means becoming the main breadwinner, which can empower them economically but also creates new dilemmas regarding caregiving authority and social validation. Unlike the established pattern in the literature, where transnational mothers typically leave children with maternal kin (Caarls *et al.*, 2018; Schmalzbauer, 2004), some mothers in this study described situations where fathers or paternal relatives assumed the primary caregiving role in Ghana. Notably, this preference for entrusting children to maternal relatives rather than fathers has also been documented in other contexts, such as among Jamaican mothers in New York, who frequently express reluctance to leave their children in the care of fathers, instead favouring female kin (McCallum, 2018). This shift introduces new negotiations, as mothers abroad must send remittances to fathers or their families to support their children's upbringing. Araba, a divorced mother (30 years old), described the negotiation and loss of agency she experienced:

Before I left, *my daughter's father decided to raise her instead of my mother*. I would have loved to have her stay with my mother because she wanted to help. But he did not want to involve other people and he thought she was old enough to stay with him. He has been doing well since 2019 because *my daughter looks good*.

For some mothers, the lack of supportive kin networks or the illness of maternal relatives forced them to seek alternative arrangements, including hiring paid caregivers. Maame, a single mother (38 years old), explained:

I am not on good terms with their father. When I decided to travel, it was hard for me because my children were very young, and I did not want to leave them with their father too. *I had to contact an elderly woman whom I trusted*, and asked her how much she would take each month to take care of them. We agreed I would start paying her once I started working after I gave her the money I had saved. It was enough to sustain them in addition to the food my mother would send. My mother was terminally ill, so she could not take my children. *I had no reliable family member as they did not support my idea*.

These accounts reveal that while migration can grant mothers the economic power associated with "good mothering" in the Ghanaian context, it can simultaneously undermine their authority over caregiving decisions, especially when fathers or paternal kin contest their choices. This tension is compounded by the lack of social validation from family members who may not support the mother's migration, leaving some women feeling isolated and with diminished power to parent from a distance.

In contrast, fathers in this study generally experienced greater security and continuity in caregiving arrangements. Their children were usually left with their wives or their own mothers, reflecting the patrilineal tendencies of Ghanaian kinship systems. Kojo, a father (37 years old), explained:

My wife and my mother take care of our children in my absence. She is a nurse in a different town, she cannot stay with the children alone because of her schedule, which includes night shifts. In her absence, it is my mother that takes care of them.

Similarly, Nii (45 years old), described a collaborative family approach:

For the sake of not disrupting the boys' education, we decided that my wife would stay with the children in Ghana while I pursue my studies [...] I am on study leave so I have to go back home after my studies and my wife works in the university as well. But my sister picks up the boys for vacations with my family so she can take a break sometimes. We make it work with periodic visits, financial and family support.

Akwesi (57 years old), reflecting the importance of the extended family, noted:

My wife and mother together raised my son. I send them money through Western Union and sometimes for my nieces and nephews. You can bear witness to the fact that the standard of living in Africa is not easy and we depend on each other for support in a family. So, we practise the extended family system a lot in Africa. We have a good bond and there is no problem between us as a big family, and equally I support my nieces and nephews through school.

For fathers, the stability of caregiving networks and the validation of their role as providers are less contested. Fathers do not typically face the same negotiations over who will care for their children, and their authority within the family remains largely intact, even in their physical absence.

At the same time, there are exceptions and variations, as illustrated by Esi, a mother (31 years old) who maintained a good relationship with her ex-partner and was able to negotiate shared caregiving and future reunification:

I told my son's father when I got admission to pursue my master's, but he did not have much of a problem as I explained I will still support him financially. I also arranged with my family (mother and big brother) to pick him up for vacations. I also promised to go home in the summer to visit him. They were all understanding and supportive.

These narratives underscore the dynamic and negotiated nature of caregiving in transnational families, shaped by both structural constraints and individual agency. They also reveal how the ideals of "good mothering" and "good fathering" are not only maintained but also transformed in the context of migration, as parents adapt to new realities and renegotiate their roles within the family.

The impact of residency regularisation and migration policy on transnational parenting

The macro-level context of migration and regularisation policies in Portugal exerts a profound influence on the ability of Ghanaian parents to enact their ideals of

“good mothering” and “good fathering.” Both mothers and fathers in this study reported that protracted and uncertain regularisation processes delayed family reunification and restricted their ability to visit home, generating emotional distress and a sense of inadequacy as parents.

For mothers, the impact of these policies was particularly acute. Many had not seen their children for years, as travelling back to Ghana before securing legal status would jeopardise their ability to return to Portugal. Maame (38 years old), shared:

I miss my children very much. Since I arrived in 2017, I have not been able to visit them because I had to work to get my documents first. I got my first permit in 2019 but since I am a single mother, I have to send money home for their upkeep and at the same time I work to raise enough money to sponsor two children as well. But this year I am going to visit them in Ghana. I have the document that will allow me to return to Lisbon again.

Eno (41 years old), described the long-term consequences of delayed regularisation:

I always had this plan when I was leaving Ghana, I was hoping I could work and get papers so my children would join me. Things didn't work out that way, 'til I came to Lisbon. Even here, I only recently got my permit — that is why it didn't happen. Now, I am not sure I will apply for reunification because they are adults now, almost graduating as trained teachers. I send money for their fees and school upkeep and sometimes things through people going to Ghana since I haven't been able to visit since 2009. I am working to save money so I can visit by Christmas this year now that I have my permit. 11 years is a long time.

For fathers, the experience was somewhat different. Those who managed to regularise their status more quickly were able to visit home and initiate family reunification processes. Emman (38 years old), explained:

Yes, I went home last December and returned in January before Covid-19 got worse. I think it's better to live together as a family 100%. I have started the process; I gathered the documents first when I went home. Not too many documents are needed and the process does not seem complicated, it is okay. Once I follow the SEF requirements, I can do it all by myself.

However, even for fathers, bureaucratic hurdles sometimes forced changes in family strategy, as Adomanko (38 years old) recounted:

While in China, I planned on moving to Portugal with my wife and daughter. But unfortunately, my wife, who also wanted to pursue a Master's in Porto University, was refused a visa on the grounds that, since we are a family, we needed to apply for a reunification visa and not a study permit. This was quite unfortunate because my initial plan was to be here as a family but using school as an alternative, but she was refused a visa. She could not come with me but had to return to Ghana. I will consider the family

reunification process because it looks like the only viable way to reunite with my family here.

These findings reinforce the literature showing that state migration policies directly shape family life and well-being in the transnational context (Dito, Mazzucato and Schans, 2017; Dreby, 2006; Kilkey, Plomien and Perrons, 2014; Mazzucato *et al.*, 2015). The delay or denial of regularisation not only prolongs family separation but also undermines parents' ability to fulfil the cultural and moral expectations associated with "good mothering" and "good fathering".

Difficulties in the regularisation process constrain parents' ability to visit family in Ghana and hinder prospects for reunification. For mothers, these obstacles are particularly acute; caregiving responsibilities and gendered expectations combine with economic and legal barriers to intensify emotional distress, making their experience notably more challenging than that of fathers.

Research highlights that these barriers are not only logistical but also deeply emotional, as years of separation — sometimes up to two decades — can result in significant distress and perceived neglect, despite parents' continued material and emotional support from afar. The legal and economic status of migrant parents, as well as the options for family reunification, are critical in shaping how transnational parenting is practiced and the consequences for family stability. McCallum (2018) further underscores that immigration restrictions can force parents, particularly mothers, into prolonged periods of separation from their children, with communication historically limited to slow and infrequent channels such as postal mail and telegrams. Although technological advances have improved connectivity, the emotional toll of physical separation remains significant.

Recent developments in European migration policy further illustrate these dynamics. The introduction of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in June 2024, has established a comprehensive framework for managing migration and asylum at the EU level, aiming to harmonize procedures and strengthen border management. However, legal entry routes remain limited, with very few work visas issued for migrants from countries such as Ghana, and most migrants needing to regularise their status after arrival. These restrictive pathways, combined with complex and lengthy regularisation procedures, continue to delay or prevent family reunification for many transnational parents.

In sum, these challenges are not experienced equally: migration policies often reinforce or exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities within transnational families, as documented by Grassi and Vivet (2015), Mahler and Pessar (2001) and Parry (2020). Women, especially those with primary caregiving responsibilities, are particularly vulnerable to these intersecting legal and economic barriers. Despite these obstacles, transnational parents maintain aspirations for eventual reunification and continue to provide care across borders, highlighting the need for policies that reinforce the right to all citizens to live in family by reducing obstacles for reunification. These insights set the stage for our concluding reflections on the broader implications of our findings.

Conclusion

Our findings reveal how residency regularisation processes in Portugal, together with Ghanaian cultural norms regarding care, shape the gendered experiences of “doing enough” among transnational mothers and fathers. They reveal that the materiality of care, expressed through remittances, gifts, and the ability to provide, remains central to Ghanaian parents’ sense of fulfilling their obligations. However, this logic is deeply gendered and relational, shaped by both migration policies and cultural expectations.

Both mothers and fathers experience anxieties about “not doing enough,” but these are nuanced by gender. Mothers, despite significant financial sacrifice, often feel their love and commitment are questioned in the absence of physical presence. They report heightened emotional strain and anxiety about the quality of care provided by extended family in Ghana, reflecting the persistent expectation of maternal proximity and oversight.

Fathers, while sometimes validated by their ability to provide materially, are not immune to feelings of loss and inadequacy, especially when unable to participate in daily caregiving or decision-making. Notably, there is considerable heterogeneity among fathers: while some are more able to delegate caregiving to spouses or maternal relatives, aligning with established gender norms, others express deep emotional burdens like mothers. Nevertheless, mothers consistently report a heavier emotional burden due to the significant structural impact of the aforementioned gender norms.

Despite these differences, both mothers and fathers rely on remittances and regular communication to counterbalance the sense of “not doing enough”. These strategies serve as partial substitutes for physical presence and help maintain emotional bonds across borders. However, decisions over caregiving arrangements and the negotiation of gender roles remain points of divergence. Mothers are more likely to express concern over the adequacy of care provided by others, while fathers tend to accept or expect that caregiving will be managed by female relatives, consistent with patrilineal and matrilineal caregiving patterns observed in the literature.

At the macro level, migration policies and residency regularisation processes in Portugal are pivotal in shaping transnational parenting experiences. Delays in regularisation, financial constraints, and bureaucratic hurdles often prevent parents from visiting or reuniting with their children, intensifying emotional strain and complicating efforts to “do enough”. These challenges are particularly acute for mothers, who expressed heightened feelings of inadequacy due to the structural gender perception that maternal presence is essential and cannot be substituted.

The introduction of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission 2020) and the limited issuance of work visas (Pires, Pereira and Ortiz, 2023) illustrate how legal frameworks continue to restrict family life and reinforce gendered vulnerabilities. In Portugal, there is an institutional fragmentation: while work visas fall under the competence of the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, regularisation procedures are managed by the Ministry of the Presidency and formerly by the Ministry of the Interior, creating parallel bureaucratic channels that contribute to uneven access and delays in legal status. As Bezabeh (2017) notes, state migration policies have a direct bearing on the right to family life, making it difficult for families to reunite and maintain close relationships across borders.

This study addresses a key gap in the literature by comparing the experiences of both mothers and fathers, challenging the maternal bias that has dominated transnational parenting research. By applying Coe's (2011) concept of the materiality of care to the under-explored context of Ghanaian migrants in Portugal, the research highlights how cultural norms and legal obstacles co-produce both shared and divergent experiences among mothers and fathers. The findings also foreground the internal diversity among fathers and the persistent emotional costs for mothers, offering new insight into how state policies, kinship structures, and cultural expectations interact to shape the realities of transnational parenting in contemporary Europe.

A key strength of this study is its focus on the heterogeneity of fathers' experiences and the nuanced ways in which both mothers and fathers navigate the intersection of cultural expectations and legal barriers. The identification of fathers who remain primary caregivers in Ghana, supported by remittances from migrant mothers, represents an under-researched dynamic that challenges traditional assumptions about gender and care in transnational families.

The results suggest several policy implications. There is a pressing need to streamline and expedite residency regularisation and family reunification processes, ensuring that migrants, regardless of educational and professional skills, have timely access to legal documentation and the right to family life. The dissemination of information about new legal pathways, such as Portugal's job seeker visa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022), should be improved to reduce obstacles for Ghanaian migrants and others in similar situations.

Limitations of this study include its focus on regularised migrants, which may underrepresent the experiences of those with irregular status, and the lack of systematic attention to ethnic differences (patrilineal *vs.* matrilineal backgrounds) in caregiving arrangements. Future research should address these gaps and further explore the evolving roles of fathers as primary caregivers in transnational contexts.

In conclusion, Ghanaian mothers and fathers in Portugal navigate transnational parenting within a complex web of legal uncertainty, gendered expectations, and evolving family dynamics. Their experiences underscore the importance of inclusive migration policies and support systems that recognise and respond to the diverse realities of transnational families. By illuminating both the similarities and differences in how mothers and fathers "do enough", this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of transnational care and the ongoing negotiation of family life across borders.

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