



Women's transnational migration through football: Possibilities, responsibilities, and respectability in Ghana

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Abstract

The growth of girls' and women's football in Africa, coupled with increased professionalisation in Europe and the United States, has led to rising international migration of African female players. This trend reflects the longer standing culture of independent, transnational migration among African women since the late 1980s and of enlarged possibilities and responsibilities triggered by neoliberal reform across the continent. This article explores how these sporting, cultural and economic transformations have coalesced to influence the aspirations and agency of female youth and young women in Ghana. To do so, we draw on original data from ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana, Sweden and Denmark undertaken between 2015 and 2021. Our findings reveal that for ambitious, talented female footballers, transnational football migration is increasingly viewed as a speculative route to improve ones' life chances and negotiate intergenerational responsibilities to family. Significantly, the article also illustrates that in seeking to produce this highly prized form of migration, they must carefully navigate gendered social norms and hierarchies related to 'respectable' career and life trajectories. The conclusion proposes a critical research agenda to explore the interplay between sporting opportunities, migration aspirations and diverse socioeconomic conditions in Africa.

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African football migration, spatial and social mobility, youth aspirations, feminisation of migration, women's football

Introduction

In an interview with The Women's Football Channel in 2020, Asisat Oshoala, Barcelona's Nigerian striker, six-time winner of the African Female Footballer of the Year Award and first African woman to win the UEFA Champions League described how her illustrious football career began and the trajectory it followed. Born into a Muslim, conservative household in Ikorodu, a city in Lagos State, Oshoala began playing football informally in school and her local neighbourhood. This created tension with her parents who were reluctant to allow their daughter to engage in an activity that conflicted with patriarchal gender norms that sought to confine girls to the domestic sphere. Despite sometimes being subjected to physical punishment and denied basic home comforts and sustenance, Oshoala persisted (Klosok, 2021). Buoyed by the support of her grandmother, she joined FC Robo Queen's, a privately owned women's football club based in Lagos. A move to the senior ranks of the Port Harcourt based top-flight club, Rivers Angels FC, four years later saw her becoming 'more interested', 'passionate' and 'serious' about pursuing a football career and ultimately to a perspective on the game as 'my job ... my profession' (Women's Football Channel, 2020).

Despite ongoing opposition from her parents, standout performances for Nigeria at the 2014 FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup where she was top goal scorer and player of the tournament, helped to quell lingering doubts about following her passion for football rather than a more socially prescribed life course. As with many other African female footballers who have played abroad, the 'visibility' proffered by playing at national team level (Engel and Agergaard, 2015), brought Oshoala's talents to the attention of overseas suitors. In January 2015, she made her first international move, signing for Liverpool, then Women's Super League Champions in England, before transferring to Arsenal, Dalian Quanjian in China and most notably, her current club, Barcelona with whom she has won two European Women's Champions League titles. The interview with Oshoala on the Women's Football Channel finished with her recounting the rationale for establishing a Foundation designed to create opportunities for Nigerian girls to combine education with pursuing a football career:

... it is basically only in support of a girl child, not because I don't care about the male child, but because the environment and the society, when it comes to sport, they are always more supportive of the male athletes than the female athletes ... I can tell my story to these kids. I can play-back everything that happened in my life to them and advise ... I'm just going to say go for your dream, pursue it, try to stay 100% focused, don't give up.

This biographical vignette focuses on a player who has reached the pinnacle of the professional women's game and is inarguably Africa's highest profile female migrant footballer. As such, it does not depict a conventional career trajectory for other West African female footballers. Nonetheless, it serves to animate the key themes we

explore in this article. Oshoala's success is not only testament to but also feeds into a growing understanding of the women's game as a site of *possibilities*. However, in her story we glimpse how actualising these possibilities requires resolve and resilience and careful navigation of social expectations around female *respectability* in a deeply patriarchal society (Adisa et al., 2019). In particular, Oshoala's biography illustrates the significance of family as a key site where African girls' engagement with football as a recreational activity, a potential career path and a route to respectability, is negotiated. But what we see in these negotiations, in the friction between long-standing gendered norms, personal ambitions and the possibilities that Oshoala's talents offered, is a struggle around how she could meet gendered expectations around her *responsibilities* towards her family. The promotion of education for girls through Oshoala's foundation also speaks to the ways in which combining football and education has come to be viewed as critical in the career planning of young African female players. In broader terms, her life story also illuminates the gendered particularities of females' experiences of football in African contexts and their encounters with football migration, aspired for and realised, and, critically for this article, underscores the need to study women's football migration in its own right.

Through a focus on Ghana, this paper addresses three core questions linked to the themes of possibilities, respectability and responsibilities. Firstly, what *possibilities* for spatial and social mobility do female youth and young women associate with football? Secondly, to what extent might football-related migration offer a path to *respectability* and socially recognised life course trajectories for female Ghanaian footballers? Finally, in what ways do familial and societal *responsibilities* impact these players' aspirations for transnational football migration and the strategies they enact in their pursuit of this? In exploring these questions, we bring the fledgling academic literature on African women's football migration into conversation with wider writing on the feminisation of migration in Africa. In doing so, this paper extends the scholarship on how women negotiate their aspiration for migration and how this is shaped by, and shapes, gendered power hierarchies. But, in focusing on football, it also offers a novel perspective for considering how female youth and young women in a neoliberal West African context navigate patriarchal social relations, pursue social mobility, and adapt to shifting responsibilities and career opportunities.

The article begins with an overview of the extant literature on the feminisation of African migration both in the context of football and more generally. This helps to preview the conceptual ideas that we employ. After outlining our methods, we contextualise our findings by detailing what we describe as an incipient feminisation of African football migration. Thereafter, we examine and discuss the findings. The paper concludes by setting out an agenda for future research on the migration of African females through football.

The feminisation of migration in Africa

Conventional migration patterns and trends associated with the African continent, that is, male dominated, indefinite, long-distance, and autonomous are changing (Adepoju, 2008; Crawley and Blitz, 2019). Foremost amongst these changes is that migration is

becoming increasingly feminised (Alpes, 2017; Bakewell and Jónsson, 2013). Put simply, growing numbers of African women are migrating independently within and across international borders to achieve their socio-economic aspirations. There are a multitude of reasons for this, and it is not being claimed that women did not migrate in the past. Scholars of the relationship between migration and gender have observed that the contemporary confluence of neoliberal globalisation, an economic and political model that emphasises the expansion of free-market capitalism, state retrenchment, and global integration (Spector, 2007), alongside improved access to education, particularly in Higher Education institutions overseas, have significantly altered the intensity and form of women's mobility (Babou, 2008; Setrana and Kleist, 2022). This confluence has contributed to the reconfiguration of longstanding gender norms and expectations as part of a diversification and broadening of the perceived and actual income generating possibilities available to women (Adepoju, 2008), with football-related migration now constituting one such possibility to enhance their economic and social status (Agergaard and Botelho, 2014).

On this point that neoliberal globalisation and education have been instrumental in recent migration trends, two scalar themes are prominent in the literature. At the domestic scale, the key migration pattern in many African countries, especially those in West Africa, has been one of increased rural to urban migration with women moving to study and/or work in the informal or formal sector (De Brauw et al., 2014; Gugler and Ludwar-Ene, 1995; Ungruhe, 2014). At the international scale, neoliberal globalisation has catalysed new labour market dynamics and demands, including a need for both low and highly skilled migrants. International migration to the Emirates, Europe, and North America to work in domestic roles as well as healthcare and medicine tends to predominate academic and policy accounts (Kalipeni et al., 2012; Tiemoko, 2004). Scholarship on African football migration has also been attentive to questions of scale both conceptually and empirically. It has done so by highlighting how the transnational experiences of female footballers extends understandings about how gender dynamics operate at multiple spatial and social scales including, the global, state, the community, institutional, and the body. More specifically, this engagement with scale has been shown to reveal how for many women, migration is a 'long and continually reproduced process that starts before any national border is crossed' (Eng, 2014: 183) and entails the navigation of inconsistent and contradictory visions and expectations of respectable feminine behaviour.

The contemporary migration trends outlined above are therefore simultaneously shaped by and are changing long standing gender norms within societies across the continent. Given its socio-cultural, economic and political diversity, generalisations about the impact of gender relations on African migration and vice versa are difficult. For example, Mazzucato et al. (2015) note that the independent migration of women from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Europe is increasingly prevalent, yet comparatively the enforcing of a stricter gender hierarchy in Muslim-dominated Senegal gives women less freedom to move independently and international migration remains a predominantly male endeavour. As Babou (2008) has shown for Senegalese women entrepreneurs in the US, this is often because men feel challenged by women's economic success and fear shifting gender power relations. In the absence of male support,

however, aspiring Senegalese women utilise growing transnational female networks to facilitate their migration.

Therefore, one area of consensus is that when female migration is discouraged, especially in its more independent forms, women are likely to require more effective support from relevant networks than men to be able to migrate (Toma and Vause, 2014). This is important in the context of this paper for two reasons. First, recruitment and referral networks are vital to the transnational migration prospects of African football players (Engh, 2014). Secondly, it makes explicit the idea that many African women are not passive actors who merely submit to their household or family's plans and expectations for their life course. This resonates with Asisat Oshoala's career and the experiences and career paths of female African football migrants featured in recent literature, which examines how they negotiate a range of constraining and enabling variables at play in their migratory journeys (Agergaard and Botelho, 2014; Engh et al., 2017; Engh and Agergaard, 2015).

Gendered geographies of power and questions of agency are central to theorisations of African women's football migration. Engh (2014: 184) has shown how for African players striving to make a name for themselves in the Scandinavian leagues, their 'Intersecting social locations confer upon them different advantages, opportunities and challenges, in home and host societies'. Accordingly, there are empirical examples within and outside of sporting contexts of women circumventing or inverting social dynamics to improve their life chances, and that of their household, by migrating (Agergaard and Botelho, 2014; Kleist and Thorsen, 2017 ; Ungruhe, 2018). In many parts of the continent the rise of migrant women as breadwinners disturbs established gender roles and norms within families (Bakewell and Jónsson, 2013). Souza (2021) argues that this situation is further complicated because promises of and realised altruistic behaviour amongst prospective and actual migrants, tends to be stimulated by a sense of responsibility to remit as opposed to a more intrinsic selfless regard for the well-being of those remaining in the origin context.

As the primary empirical reference point for this paper, Ghana provides a rich articulation of the themes outlined above. The recent census data shows that women now form most of Ghana's internal migrants, particularly along rural to urban pathways (Lattof et al., 2018). Notably, the oft-independent nature of these movements and their association with income generating activities provides scope for some women to challenge traditional social roles and responsibilities (Ungruhe, 2014). While these points are broadly in keeping with wider trends across the continent, it is also important to highlight that more local geographies matter. For example, in Ghana while internal migration is providing some women with new forms of autonomy, this can come with revised obligations to family, which in West African contexts extends beyond the nuclear family to include wider kin, (Awumbila, 2015; König and de Regt, 2010; Setrana and Kleist, 2022) as well as community members (Tufour, 2015). This resonates with wider scholarship on how young people in Ghana negotiate a path to adulthood which reveals that increased personal agency fosters interdependencies rather than autonomy (Langevang, 2008). Hence, social mobility acquired through migration is often an ambivalent achievement.

The picture regarding the international mobility of Ghanaian women is also multifaceted. At a structural level, it is difficult for young Africans more generally to travel to

desired destinations abroad due to a combination of costs and restrictive migration management policies adopted by countries in the Global North (Andersson, 2014). Female migrants in particular often face several gender-specific barriers to enact successful cross-border migration. These include patriarchal norms in home societies that restrict women's mobility and gendered vulnerabilities and risks on the road such as sexual violence. Once abroad, women face the dilemma of having a comparably lower range of acceptable income opportunities while facing increasing financial obligations to care for their left-behind family (König and de Regt, 2010). Nevertheless, the aspiration amongst Ghanaian girls and young women to improve their life chances through international migration is palpable (Apatinga et al., 2022; Dako-Gyeke, 2016a; Osei et al., 2022), with some willing to take considerable risks to realise these possibilities (Kleist, 2020). A key reason for this is that for young people in Ghana, possibilities for employment and quality educational opportunities are now deeply intertwined with spatial mobility (Dako-Gyeke, 2016b; Jones and Chant, 2009; Langevang, 2008). Relatedly, the idea of women migrating to study (with a scholarship) and/or earn an income as part of a household livelihood strategy is gaining currency in Ghana (Apatinga et al., 2022) despite existing gendered inequalities and higher rates of female dropout in education (Jones and Chant, 2009; Nordensvard, 2014). However, as with internal migration, these mobilities are simultaneously shaped by and shaping social expectations of respectable female behaviour and positioning in society. These points are significant for the discussion section because they succinctly demonstrate the nuance occurring in the mobile biographical narratives that are playing out in Ghana, and the complex ways in which these are influenced by patriarchal norms.

Methodology

Reflecting our previous work on African football migration (Darby et al., 2022), the ethnographic approach employed in this study is guided by Marcus's (1995) advocacy of multi-sited field work which seeks to trace the lived experiences and social formations of individuals 'across and within multiple sites of activity'. This facilitated a range of vantage points through which to better understand the aspirations and experiences of female African football players. We selected Ghana as the key locale for exploring the questions at the centre of this study for three reasons. Firstly, as noted earlier, Ghana is a country with a deeply rooted culture of migration (Quartey, 2009), one that increasingly incorporates the independent mobilities of females (Amoako and Apusigah, 2013) and where growing numbers of young people have aspirations to migrate (Coe, 2012). Secondly, as we reveal later, over the last decade there have been efforts to promote football among girls and women in Ghana and this has translated into growing interest in pursuing it as a possible career among young females. Finally, the continent's first full-time residential football academy for girls was established in Ghana in 2013. This academy became a key site for fieldwork, not least because it offered the opportunity to observe and interview young female football players who had aspirations to pursue a football career abroad.

In August 2015, during a two-week period of fieldwork, the first-named author purposively sampled and conducted paired focus group interviews with the first cohort of academy recruits. The 16 female academy players aged between 10–14 from Ghana,

Nigeria and Ivory Coast who participated in the study were chosen because of their status as academy players and as such, they constituted information-rich cases given their lived experiences and career aspirations in football. These interviews were supplemented by individual semi-structured interviews between 2015 and 2021, conducted by the first and last-named authors, with a range of actors involved in girl's and women's football in Ghana who were well versed in and had direct experience of the intersections between football and gender in the country. Participants included football academy staff, administrators and coaches who have worked with youth and senior women's national teams (n. 10) as well as with three active female football players, one of whom represented Ghana.

Sweden and Denmark were the other two sites for fieldwork. Both are increasingly prominent destinations for African female football migrants (Engh and Agergaard, 2015). As such, they represent important settings in the career imaginaries and trajectories of African players, including those academy players interviewed in the first phase of our fieldwork. Their participation in the Gothia Cup in 2017, a tournament hosted annually in Gothenburg that has long provided exposure for young Africans (Engh et al., 2013), constituted a fruitful opportunity to conduct follow-up interviews with eight academy players. Our ethnographic engagements in Denmark arose from the development of close ties between the Ghanaian academy and a Danish girls' academy and professional women's team. To better understand the potential of this transnational channel as a route for West African players and how this might influence their career planning, the first-named author undertook two fieldwork visits to Denmark in 2020 to interview senior club staff and coaches involved in the establishment of the women's academy and senior team (n.4). In total, we interviewed 19 female footballers and 14 actors with varying roles in women's football.

Since many of our research participants were minors, we sought permission to recruit and interview them from the academy they were attached to. All interviews were conducted and recorded with the full informed consent of participants. In the case of minors, assent was given and consent secured from trusted academy staff members who were also present during interviews. We use pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and obscure participants' identities. After completion of the interviews, we engaged in thematic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, we familiarised ourselves with the data by transcribing and digitising our conversations. Following data reduction, the interview transcripts were then manually coded using a combination of open and axial coding. The former enabled the identification and naming of overarching thematic patterns and the latter aided in refining and identifying further codes of relevance to our research questions. This approach allowed for the identification of core themes which are explored in the remainder of this article.

Transnational football migration as a site of *possibilities* for Ghanaian female youth

Transnational migration in women's football is a recent but accelerating phenomenon. Driven by the professionalisation of the women's game in the US and Europe since

the turn of the millennium (Agergaard and Tiesler, 2014), this process has grown exponentially in the early 2020s. The number of international transfers in women's football globally in 2022 stood at 1555, an increase of 20% since 2021 and 45% since 2018, and growing numbers of national associations (n.119) were involved (FIFA, 2022). A similar trend can be seen with regard to the migration of female footballers from Africa. Modest numbers of players, mainly those playing for their national teams, moved to the United States to combine football with education in the early 2000s and in the same period, Scandinavia emerged as a popular destination, particularly for Nigerians (Botelho and Agergaard, 2011). The destinations of female African footballers have since become increasingly diverse and from the late 2010s, the numbers have grown significantly. In 2022, 221 African female players transferred internationally, an increase of almost 300 per cent on the 2020 figures, making the number of transfers from the continent, second only to those involving European clubs (FIFA, 2022).

Despite rising numbers and diversification, transnational migration for women African players remains much less prominent than for men. For example, in 2022, the number of international transfers of male players from Africa to leagues outside the continent stood at 2698 (FIFA, 2022). The fact that women's football in Africa remains impeded by gender inequities and is much less commercialised than the men's game (Bawuah, 2022; Onwumehili, 2020; Saavedra, 2003), leaves female footballers with far fewer transnational career opportunities than men. However, the important point to note in terms of whether playing football professionally overseas is increasingly being perceived by young African female footballers as a route to social mobility is that recent figures are suggestive of an accelerating feminisation of African football migration.

This process is evident in Ghana, where the number of female players who transferred internationally in 2022 (n.38) represented an increase of 90 per cent compared to the previous year, placing Ghana among the top ten nationalities in terms of international transfers of female footballers (FIFA, 2022). That football might be understood as offering realistic possibilities for achieving spatial and social mobility is not only linked to the wider feminisation of Ghanaian migration discussed earlier but also recent progress in popularising football among girls in schools (GFA, 2022) and developing a national domestic league structure (Acheampong, 2022), one that has secured sponsorship and a national broadcasting rights deal. While these developments have expanded the reach and popularity of football, significant barriers remain and female players often struggle to combine football with work and deeply gendered filial responsibilities. As a consequence, the ability of skilled female players to earn a livelihood from football are dependent on securing a contract with a club in the US or Europe or winning a football scholarship at a university abroad.

Those involved in promoting women's football in Ghana have observed expanding possibilities for talented Ghanaian female youth to use football as a migration strategy to pursue educational opportunities, a trend that has been augmented by and is partly attributable to both increasing access to football for girls and the attraction of studying in higher education institutions abroad among West African women (Adu, 2015). For example, a coach who has worked with Ghanaian female national teams at youth and

senior level, explained the growing popularity of girls' football in Ghana by pointing to the possibilities it opens up for using the game to produce transnational mobility and access quality education:

Now people (parents) give us voluntarily female children to get involved in football. Previously it used not to be so. Women used not to have the opportunity of playing football. You find very few ... But their orientation is that we are beginning to have some of our women footballers playing professionally in other places, we are beginning to have some of them with the opportunity to school in the US and other places and now we have elite women football clubs which means we are moving away from the previous situation. (interview, 16 August 2015)

One context where these processes and dynamics are clearly observable is the academy where the majority of participants in this study were based and which has become an important site where aspirations for transnational mobility among talented female youth footballers are forged and nurtured. In terms of their understanding of the possibilities the academy might open up, most initially saw it as a direct route into a professional football career abroad. Effia, for example, saw her recruitment as vital in achieving her ambitions 'to fight for my dream to be a footballer ... I will be a footballer because [academy name] was the best academy in Africa' (interview, 14 August 2015). Fifi, who moved from Ivory Coast to join the academy, articulated similar sentiments, viewing her scholarship as a bridge to transnational mobility; 'I feel very happy because I think of what I want to be in the future ... if I am here, I can have the opportunity to go to another country' (interview, 14 August 2015).

These sorts of perspectives were reinforced by the academy's purchase of a Danish professional football club in December 2015 and the initiation of a girls' youth academy and senior women's team which secured promotion to Denmark's top league, the Kvindeligaen, in 2019. Part of the rationale for this, as articulated by the club's then head of women's football was to create a viable pathway for transnational football mobility for players from the academy in Ghana (interview, 18 June 2018). Indeed, in March 2022, the first Ghanaian academy graduate signed professional terms with the Danish club, a move that, according to the academy website, was expected to 'open the door to more opportunities for talented young women ... to follow in her footsteps and explore potential futures in professional football'.

The proven track record of this academy in developing male Ghanaian football talent for overseas markets (Darby, 2013) and the establishment of a channel into the professional women's game will likely lead to more players using football as a direct migration strategy. The ambition of the academy in this regard was clearly outlined by the former head of the girls' programme in Ghana; 'the women's football industry is changing, it's professionalising, increasing opportunities of employment within the game and I think it sends a strong message if we have a professional footballer' (interview, 18 July 2017). Nevertheless, there was a recognition that ongoing financial disparities between men's and women's professional football in Europe were likely to limit opportunities for female football migrants from Africa to support themselves and family members through football alone. As the then CEO of the Danish club saw it, 'the economics around it (a career in women's football) look different and that's why ... we need to facilitate it in another manner' (interview, 19 June 2018).

The emphasis on creating educational pathways via on-site schooling and partnerships with private boarding schools in the US has effectively provided this alternative approach to enabling transnational mobility for female students at the academy. Indeed, by 2022, 14 academy graduates had moved to these schools with some subsequently securing full student-athlete scholarships at US colleges. This route is viewed by academy staff as a 'safer' migratory project for female academy graduates compared to negotiating the precarity associated with securing and sustaining a professional career in women's football which is often more acutely experienced by African players (interview with the former head of girl's programme, 18 July 2017; Agergaard and Ungruhe, 2016; Botelho and Agergaard, 2011). The perspectives of academy players aligned with this institutional view and were reflective of a developing understanding of the range of opportunities that an academy place offered. As Baako saw it:

When I joined the academy, I thought I was going to be a professional (footballer). That was everyone's for the first time being in the academy. But when I realised that all of the girls were going abroad to the US to study I didn't really understand. We had this headmaster ... who always used this quote 'two legs better, one leg good'. So if you have football and education it is better than just having football. Because if you don't have your degree and who knows, you might break your leg one day ... I like the idea of going to study in the US and playing soccer as well. So, after getting my diploma, I would join a club because I really love football and I am happy I have that opportunity. (interview, 20 July 2017)

The longer-term outcomes that the academy girls anticipated arising from using football to access educational opportunities in the US did diverge. Some had aspirations that did not involve a career in football. For example, Serwa, who at the time of our interview had been in the US for two years, intimated that 'my ambition in the future is to become an accountant. So, after high school, I can get into college and continue to pursue my dream' (interview, 20 July 2017). Others though expressed their intent to pursue a professional career in the game after their studies via the collegiate draft system into the US National Women's Soccer League. This strategy was succinctly detailed by Nana, who had secured a full student-athlete scholarship at a US college; 'I would definitely love to play pro soccer after college - I definitely want to play in the US. I see that there are a lot of opportunities. I will have got a high school and college experience' (interview, 20 July 2017).

The discussion thus far might suggest that the aspirations of and strategies deployed by female youth footballers in Ghana are largely driven by the institutional logic and economics of clubs, academies, leagues and other actors in a globalising women's football industry. While these are influencing factors, the decisions that prospective migrant footballers make, the actions they take and the paths they follow to produce transnational mobility through football are also deeply contoured by local cultural dynamics beyond the football industry. Localised gender power hierarchies and responsibilities, particularly within the household, and shifting notions of female respectability are particularly salient. For the remainder of this article, we explore how these play out in the migratory projects of female youth footballers.

Football, gendered filial responsibilities and respectability

As noted earlier, migration and migration aspirations are deeply contoured by gendered social norms related to responsibilities and expectations (Setrana and Kleist, 2022). The changing landscape of neoliberal reform and expansion of independent female migration in Africa has challenged these norms and has enhanced the status and role of women in the household. However, Awumbila's (2015) work on Ghana demonstrates that gendered power hierarchies and inequalities continue to affect who migrates and why and how decisions are made. It can be argued that these dynamics become particularly visible when we consider females' efforts to enact transnational mobility through football. Despite becoming increasingly normalised, girls' opportunities to play football are frequently constrained by patriarchal gender norms, particularly in the context of the family or household. As Chant and Jones's (2005) work on female livelihoods in Ghana reveals, there are deeply entrenched cultural expectations for girls to play a greater role in unpaid household labour than their male siblings. While domestic labour is deemed to be 'women's work', there are also strong social norms in Ghanaian family systems that require children to start 'giving back' materially to the household from their early teens. These norms arise out of a deeply felt sense of obligation to kin and the pressures it places on children to contribute financially to the household, are disproportionately felt by girls. One by-product of this, which further constrains females' horizons, is that boys tend to get more support to enter and remain in formal education and female dropout from education is much higher (Nordensvard, 2014).

In practical terms, given the increasing importance of school in Ghana as a site where girls are introduced to and play football, these dynamics can limit their access to the game. However, social pressures to contribute to the household through domestic and paid labour have an arguably bigger influence on opportunities for playing football. The impact of these gendered filial responsibilities and expectations on her early experiences in football was well captured by one academy player:

Back at home, people think that us girls ... we do most of the chores in the house while the boys ... are the ones to go outside and do all the moving about and work and everything, so we just stay at home and help our mums cook and then do other stuff. So, we wake up in the morning, we go to school and we come back and help our mum. We don't really go out much, it's just the boys who do that. (interview, 14 August 2015)

Afua, who represented Ghana in three consecutive Under-17 World Cups and played in Jordan and Uzbekistan when she left the academy expressed the impact of gendered filial responsibilities and expectations in equally stark terms:

I think women's football teams in Ghana, there's not a lot of competition like in men's football. And they don't get enough support. The men get support and most men like to play football and their parents support them. But if women want to play football, they say 'come and cook'. (interview, 14 August 2015)

A former Ghana international and head coach of the Ghanaian women's national team at the time of the interview, recalls the continuous efforts and resistance to overcome her family members' opposition to her desire to play football:

My brothers were like, 'You are a woman. Yours is to school. When you finish schooling, go to the kitchen. Go and cook ... for your family to eat!' ... But I want to do what the boys are doing out there [playing football]. ... It was a battle between me and my [elder] brother until it got to a time when he realized there is nothing he could do: 'Even if you beat me, I am going to do it'. (interview, 6 December 2021)

Female youth also negotiate a range of other social norms around what constitutes acceptable 'womanhood' in Ghanaian society that influence their engagement in football. As Bawa's (2016) work illustrates, Ghanaian girls are socialised into understanding that the transition from 'girlhood' to 'womanhood' is intimately connected to becoming a 'mother' and fulfilling the economic and emotional responsibilities that come with motherhood. This echoes Clark's (1999) study which revealed that for the matrilineal Asante, one of Ghana's largest ethnic groups, 'motherhood' and providing for children is a pervasive, normative gender ideal. As she elaborated; 'Asante women explain their financial obligations to feed their children as the dominant bond of motherhood in everyday life' (Clark, 1999: 719). The perception of motherhood as a normative ideal in a woman's life course is also pervasive elsewhere in the country and among largely patrilineal ethnic groups such as the Dagomba in northern Ghana (Ungruhe, 2018).

Several players and coaches spoke about persistent stereotypes that problematised female participation in football in terms of its negative impact on reproductive health, and in doing so raised questions about the extent to which playing football and pursuing it as a potential career was compatible with gender ideals around motherhood. According to Isaac, head coach of a Ghanaian national youth team, the growing number of high profile players who have given birth after their careers is helping to challenge misconceptions about participation in football causing women's infertility. However, this narrative is still widespread among parents and remains a strong reason why some young female players quit football (interview, 6 December 2021). Such was the influence of these stereotypes that Yaya, now playing in the Ghana Women's Premier League, for example, stopped playing at the age of thirteen before returning to the game later in her adolescence. She described being explicitly told by her parents that women who played football were unable to have children and that they would therefore be considered 'useless' in society and by their family (interview, 7 December 2021). An academy staff member with responsibility for pastoral care also highlighted how gendered notions of respectable femininity underpinned how the female players understood their role and place in Ghanaian society;

When you ask the girls 'who in your community, from your background has made it as a woman'? And they see women as only women if they're married with children. That's what makes you a woman. Women who can't have children really would be left and people in society would feel as though they had done something wrong in their life and would be ostracised by the community. (interview, 19 August 2015)

These culturally ingrained ideals can also create tensions in the households of those female youth who wish to devote increasing time to football. We saw this in the biographical vignette that opened this article and in some of the quotes above. But this was writ large in the experiences of our participants at the point when recruitment into a residential football academy became a distinct possibility. In the majority of cases, players experienced strong opposition from family members to their pursuit of football as a potential career path. In terms of recounting the reasons for this, parental concern that football would negatively impact on education, the pursuit of more 'respectable' female careers and the domestic labour and material needs of the family featured prominently. Esmeh, for example, pointed to the significance of the first two issues; 'They (family) didn't support me because my mum, she always wanted me to go to school because she wanted me to focus on my school to get my diploma and be a doctor or something like this' (interview, 14 August 2015). Angela on the other hand, identified the latter as key in how joining her primary school team was perceived by her parents, both of whom were farmers; 'I started going to training but my parents didn't really like that ... because I used to go to training instead of working for them' (interview, 14 August 2015). This was echoed by Serwa who explained her mother's resistance in the following terms: '... in Ghana most of the women think that if you are a girl you are not supposed to play football, just stay home, go to school and maybe do the chores for the family' (interview, 14 August 2015).

Despite these familial tensions, their recruitment into a football academy, demonstrates the agentic capabilities of young female footballers in navigating gendered responsibilities, norms and ideals and curating carefully considered, strategic migratory projects. However, what Esmeh's, Angela's and Serwa's experiences also reveal is that in West Africa, planning for or enacting migration is rarely an entirely individual act. Rather, it is frequently an outcome of collective decision making within extended family units, and often constitutes a household livelihood strategy, one that seeks to diversify income sources and spread risk (De Haas, 2010; Tiemoko, 2004). These collective livelihood strategies are built on a deeply embedded sense of intergenerational reciprocity and obligation through which parents and elderly family members have the care they provided to their children reciprocated in later life (Whitehead et al., 2007). As Coe (2012: 105) put it: 'For Ghanaians, like other West Africans, the reward of parenting is the lifelong ties of obligation among those one has raised'.

It was clear from our interviews that young female footballers saw transnational migration to play professionally or access an education as a vehicle for meeting these obligations to family. This was succinctly summarised by Jojo: 'So, I was saying I would be a footballer in my future but if I get money I will look after my family because they help me and I also help them back' (interview, 14 August 2015). The strength of this cultural norm not only fed into the ambitions and strategies enacted by Jojo and her peers but it was also critical in enabling them to secure the support of family members to enter the academy and use it as a platform for transnational mobility. Indeed, once parents recognised the educational, sporting and transnational opportunities that an academy place offered, many were content to support the path their daughters had chosen. As a former national team player and high-level coach argued, both parents and players 'can now put their trust into football' (interview, 6 December 2021). As she saw

it, while the Ghana Football Association and a growing number of academies emphasise formal education in player development, playing football ‘can make your life a very meaningful one ... also financially, those who are playing outside of this country, they receive good salaries’ (ibid.). This view was shared by Isaac, coach of a Ghana youth national team, who argued that, ‘a lot of parents are beginning to realize that they can make some meaningful earnings from football’. Nonetheless, he did acknowledge that the growing parental acceptance of their daughters’ involvement in football in recent years remains fragile; ‘Still, if [their daughters] do not succeed in football the parents put pressure on them to quit football and marry and start a family. I see this a lot. Often, this is the end of their career’ (interview, 6 December 2021).

On the one hand then, football might be considered to be an example of enlarged possibilities open to girls and young women in Ghana and elsewhere in West Africa. As our interviews show, young female players envisage a professional football career overseas as a pathway to improving their prospects and fulfilling their personal ambitions. But such a pathway is also understood as a potential route to meeting widening responsibilities and obligations, one that requires negotiating often conflicting visions of female respectability. This coalescing of personal aspiration with gendered obligations was not something that our participants carried lightly. Some articulated a deeply felt apprehension when reflecting on the prospect of achieving their ambitions. As Papina, who at the time of our interview was studying at a US high school, expressed it:

Actually, that is something that I’m really scared off. I have a huge family. My mother has 4 sisters and I have lots of cousins and we are all really close. So now I have a huge responsibility. So basically, I have to take care of everyone in the family. I think about that a lot and it really pushes me to work harder. They really look up to me. (interview, 21 July 2017)

This quote illustrates a wider point, elucidated in some of the research on the feminisation of West African migration (Apatunga et al., 2022), which is that migration does not necessarily enable women to secure complete autonomy over their lives. While migration can create a range of possibilities that would not otherwise be open to them had they remained at home, these possibilities frequently bring increased responsibilities. For those who have engaged in a more speculative pursuit of transnational mobility through football outside of a well organised and networked academy, the pressures to succeed are arguably amplified and the likelihood of immobility, spatial and social, are more pronounced. Ama, a former international playing in the Ghana Women’s Premier League points to this burden. Despite being unable to secure a move abroad, she recognised that, ‘I am the head of the family now, everybody depends on me’. While she enjoys the recognition from her siblings and mother, she acknowledged that she struggles with the obligations to her wider family network and people in her community: ‘When you are able to go far, then they will come closer to you. They realize there is something in [for them]’ (interview, 7 December 2021). Reflecting on a trajectory in football which had seen her begin playing in her neighbourhood, combine her studies, including at university, with football before signing for a club in the Ghana Women’s Premier League, all

against her parents' wishes, Yaya addressed the anxieties she experienced at not having conformed to what Ghanaian families would consider a more socially prescribed path:

I am the only one without a job in the family. Sometimes, I think they will be like: we told you, you didn't listen. My parents support me financially and because of this, they still have a say in what I do and what I say. They want me to come home and get a job. Even my sister just called me and asked me to come home and get a job. [...] Going against their will, fighting for my dream and failing will be a whole disappointment. So you can imagine, you completed school, have no family, no job; it appears to be you are ungrateful to your parents. (interview, 7 December 2021)

Yaya's story and Papina's and Ama's fears around living up to social expectations highlight the dilemmas faced by today's young generation of African women and the complicated implications of an emerging feminisation of African football migration. As neoliberalism continues its hold on the continent, female youth are caught up in a complex web of changing societal norms, parental and household expectations and personal ambitions. In seeking to navigate a path through these, there are growing signs that some female youth are turning to football. While it has not been our intention in this article to judge the viability of this strategy or the logic of the decision making around it, it is important to note that progress in the development of the women's game in Africa and in the feminisation of African football migration is but one side of the coin. The other side, however, is that the neoliberal interplay of growing aspirations, opportunities and responsibilities entails the risk of football reproducing gender inequalities and women's social immobility.

Conclusion

In answering our three core questions linked to the themes of possibilities, respectability and responsibilities, this article revealed that, while mindful of the risks, ambitious and talented female players increasingly perceive transnational football migration as a speculative yet potentially transformative possibility to enhance their life chances. This reflects the wider and sustained global neoliberal influence on society that has deeply impacted on women's social positioning, expected life course trajectories and opportunities (Engl et al., 2017). However, for Ghanaian women, football migration does not currently have the same sort of critical implications for their future life projects that it possesses for a whole generation of boys and young men. The latter increasingly look to football as the one pathway to success, respectable social adulthood, and acceptable masculine identities (Darby et al., 2022). Notably, and partly due to the comparably still modest opportunities in women's global football, we found that Ghanaian women tend to combine career aspirations in football with the possibilities football opens up for accessing quality education abroad. Yet, for those women who are keen to enact football related migration, they must navigate highly gendered intergenerational responsibilities to their immediate and extended families. These include but are not limited to undertaking domestic chores as an adolescent, as well as longer term expectations around fulfilling the economic and emotional responsibilities that come with womanhood.

Our findings and discussion illustrate how football in Africa is deeply contoured by gender (see also Saavedra, 2003), and how this impacts aspirations and opportunities for football migration among female players. Against the backdrop of the rise of women's football and football-related migration in Africa, we contend that a fuller understanding of African football migration is not only needed, but that this understanding should emerge through a focused incorporation of insights on the life worlds of female African players. We therefore conclude this article by outlining a set of objectives for a transdisciplinary research agenda that could generate these insights. We propose that a future research agenda should aim to 1) map the most recent patterns and trends of international migration among African female footballers 2) explore and compare football-related migration within different cultural, economic, and political African contexts to understand the impact of migration on female player's families and communities, including the negotiation of precarity and intersectionality identities 3) identify best practices, gaps, and areas for improvement in providing comprehensive support, and ensuring the well-being and rights of female African players 4) conduct longitudinal and multi-sited ethnographic studies to investigate African female player's career trajectories, and the broader impact of migration on their lives. Crucially, by focusing on the dynamics of female African football migration, this research agenda holds great potential in deepening our understanding of migratory aspirations and processes within the context of football specifically and sport more generally. Importantly, it would also enhance broader understandings of the feminisation of African migration, providing valuable insights for a range of stakeholders.

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