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Gender and the return migration process: Gulf returnees in Ghana

Md Mizanur Rahman^{1*}  and Mohammed Salisu¹

*Correspondence:
mizan@qu.edu.qa; mizanur.
rm@gmail.com

¹ Gulf Studies Program
and Center, College of Arts
and Sciences, Qatar University,
P.O. Box: 2713, Doha, Qatar

Abstract

Labour migration in the context of South-South migration is generally conceived as a multidimensional process that comprises three distinct subprocesses: emigration, immigration, and return migration. There is growing consensus that return migration is the least understood of these three subprocesses. In a similar vein, a gendered analysis has become more integral to migration scholarship today; yet one area where gender matters but has not been thoroughly studied is the return migration process. This paper explores how gender shapes the return migration experiences by reflecting on four transnational sites of return migration such as migrants' socio-demographic features, working and living conditions in the Gulf, remittance control and use, and finally return and reintegration. Empirically, this research draws on the experiences of selected Gulf male and female return migrants in Accra, Ghana. The study reports that the gender dimension of returnees' experiences constitutes an avenue of migration research that has the potential to produce a more nuanced understanding of gendered migration scholarship in the Global South.

Keywords: Return migration, Migrant workers, Gender, Gulf migration, Family dynamics

Introduction

The study of international migration has disproportionately focused on South–North migration, that is, movement of people from the Global South to the Global North (Hujo & Piper, 2010; Short et al., 2017). International migration flows show that more people move within the Global South (37 percent) than from the South to the North (35 percent), and the rising South-South mobility is still outpacing that of South-North Migration (IOM, 2022). International migration in the global South is fundamentally temporary with limited scope for permanent settlement. Therefore, the South-South migration is rarely a one-off event; it is rather a multidimensional process that generally comprises three subprocesses: departure from the home country (emigration), arrival at the host country (immigration), and return to the home country and reintegration, that is, return migration. Research tends to focus principally on emigration (the departure phase from a home country) and immigration (arrival in a host country) (Dako-Gyeke, 2016; Oomen, 2013). Meanwhile, there is a growing academic awareness that the return is the least understood among these stages (Negi et al., 2018).

As mentioned research on return migration tends to focus on migrants returning from the Global North to the Global South (Oomen, 2013). Although a certain percentage of returnees from the Global North do indeed move to the Global South, there is a significant return migration flows within the Global South itself. Globally, South–South migration has increased in importance and number (Hujo & Piper, 2010). The most popular destinations for such migration include the six member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Indeed, the GCC States account for the largest movements in South–South migration by far (Fargues & De Bel-Air, 2015). The GCC States host nearly 35 million international migrants out of a total population of 54 million (Babar, 2020:343). Broadly speaking, we can identify three attributes of Gulf migration: (1) it is interregional in geographical scope; (2) it is temporary in duration; and (3) it is primarily carried out by single males and females (Fargues & Shah, 2017; Gardner, 2010; Babar & Gardner, 2016).

Although South–South and South–North migration flows are linked in many ways, research has revealed certain distinct trends that differentiate migration motivations, processes, and implications across this divide (for details, see Castles & Wise, 2008; Short et al., 2017). For instance, South–South migration is less selective and more temporary. Policy debates on South–North migration often revolve around the potential for migrants to attain citizenship, residency, or reunion with family members, while debates on South–South migration focus on migrant worker treatment and human rights issues. South–South migrants are generally poorer and lower skilled (Anich et al., 2014). Despite this, these low-wage migrant workers generate a greater volume of remittances globally, serving the daily necessities of millions of families in the Global South (World Bank, 2016). In labor migration, remittances and return are integral parts of the migration process (Gmelch, 1980; Rahman et al., 2014; Smith & King, 2012; Stark, 1991). In other words, the dynamics of migration, remittance, and return are inextricably linked in the South–South migration process. Therefore, approaching return migration constitutes a methodological challenge for migration research because it requires adopting a dialectical approach to migration, simultaneously considering both the home and the host countries (Girma, 2017; Negi et al., 2018).

With the increasing feminization of migration, scholars have been examining various aspects of migration from the perspective of gender (Halfacree & Boyle, 1999; Donato & Gabaccia, 2015; Piper, 2008; Awumbila et al., 2017; Awumbila et al., 2019; Dessiye & Emirie, 2018; Kandilige et al., 2022). A quick survey of the literature on gender and migration reveals that there is a significant body of academic literature that addresses these issues (Donato et al., 2006; Herrera, 2013; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Cranford, 2006). Scholars have also revealed the ways in which the migration process is intrinsically tied to gender relations (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991; Nawyn, 2010), reaching a consensus that gender is central to all aspects of migration (Girma, 2017). However, despite this consensus, the use of gender as an analytical category is sharply skewed toward the examination of departure from home country and arrival in the host country, leading some scholars to call for more studies on return migration from a gendered perspective (Girma, 2017; Negi et al., 2018; Samari, 2019).

There are numerous studies on return migration that enrich our understanding from regional and global perspectives (Akesson & Baaz, 2015; Conway & Potter, 2009; Ghosh,

2000; Iredale et al., 2003). We can also find a number of studies that examine migration, development, and return migration in West Africa in general and Ghana in particular (Black & King, 2004; Tiemoko, 2004; Flahaux & De Haas, 2016; Awumbila, 2014; Ammassari, 2004; Black et al., 2002; Mazzucato, 2011; Setrana & Tonah, 2014; Wong, 2014; Terming-Amoako, 2018; Yendaw, 2013; Yendaw et al., 2019, 2021; Apatinga et al., 2020). These studies provide rich descriptions of various aspects of return migration, and we have greatly benefited from the insights they provide. However, there is still a dearth for research examining the ways in which gender influences the return migration outcomes. This study attempts to narrow this gap by studying the case of Ghanaian returnees from the GCC States from a gender perspective.

This study explores how gender affects the return migration process through analyzing the experiences of Ghanaian male and female returnees who worked in private security companies in the GCC countries. This research identifies four dimensions of return migration that are influenced by gender; individual migrant characteristics, working and living conditions in the Gulf, remittance control and use, and finally return and reintegration. Structurally, the article first outlines the theoretical issues related to gender and return migration, then it discusses Ghanaian international migration and describes the research methods used in this study. In the subsequent sections, we analyze gender-differentiated patterns with a focus on the socio-demographic profiles of returnees, the nature of work and living conditions in the Gulf, remittance sending and uses, and return and reintegration into the origin community. We conclude with key findings and recommendations for future research.

Theoretical issues

Scholars have categorized return migration in several ways, which have enhanced our conceptual vocabulary (Cerase, 1974; Gmelch, 1980; King, 1978). For instance, Cerase provides a four-fold classification of return migration: return of failure, return of conservation, return of retirement, and return of innovation (Cerase, 1974). Returns of failure are those returnees who are unable to integrate into their host countries, thus this lack of integration provides a strong motivation for their return. Return of conservation pertains to migrants who migrated with a well-planned strategy to return home with enough economic resources. A return of retirement occurs when retired migrants return to their home countries to live out their lives there. Finally, another category of returnees is the return of innovation, who use their savings and new skills to bring about change in their home country (for details, see Cerase, 1974).

King offers a simple classification based on temporal criteria: occasional, periodic, seasonal, temporary, and permanent returns (King, 1978). Occasional returns are short-term and are intended for special events such as holidays, family visits, or weddings. Returns on a periodic basis are best exemplified by the regular movements of 'frontier workers'. Seasonal returns are determined by the nature of the job(s) performed: examples include seasonal agricultural workers and construction workers. A temporary return may be a result of personal or professional reasons (e.g., the expiration of a contract), with the aim of re-emigrating within a short period of time. A permanent return is one in which a person returns home without intending to emigrate again (for details, see King, 1978). Gmelch distinguishes between three main types of return migrants:

temporary returnees (returnees who intended their migration to be temporary), forced returnees (returnees who intended permanent migration but were forced to return), and voluntary returnees (returnees who intended permanent migration but chose to return) (Gmelch, 1980). However, return migration has also been part of an open-ended process of movements back and forth between countries, a phenomenon often called “transnational migration” (Faist et al., 2013).

One of the commonly used analytical framework for return migration is popularly known as the “failure–success” dichotomy. In essence, the failure–success framework for return migration suggests that failure to integrate into the host society leads to a return to the origin country, whereas successful integration leads to either permanent settlement or to the achievement of migration goals and, thereafter, return migration occurs (for details, see Cassarino, 2004; Nzima & Moyo, 2017). From a neo-classical economic perspective, migration of labor is caused by differences in wage rates between countries, and individual migrants choose to migrate internationally to obtain higher incomes (Todaro, 1976). In this case, individual migrants are evaluated independently from their families, leaving their social responsibilities back home unevaluated. Consequently, neoclassical economics views migration as a one-way process and allows no room for return motives other than economic failure in the host country (Cassarino, 2004). Under neoclassical economics, men and women are subject to the same motivations for migration; the framework therefore does not account for gender-differentiated motivations for return. In fact, Chant and Radcliffe argue that the neoclassical economics of migration is “female-aware” and has not shown itself to be “gender-aware” (Chant & Radcliffe, 1992: 20).

The new economics of labor migration provides powerful theoretical insights into return migration by linking the migration decision to potential earnings in the destination region (Massey et al., 1998; Stark, 1991) while also focusing on the *family* as the relevant decision-making unit and viewing migration as a response to income risk in the developing world. The “new economics of migration” posits that individuals are obligated to remit because the migration decision is made and funded by the family for its collective wellbeing. Thus, the decision to emigrate, the decision of what objectives are to be met, and the decision to return are all mutually interdependent (Nzima & Moyo, 2017). From a gendered viewpoint, the new economics of labor migration treats households as homogenous groups that are acting rationally in the collective interest of the household members. Scholars report that migration decisions often reflect power relations and the gendered division of labor, and they are influenced by individual and collective interests (Chant & Radcliffe, 1992; Nawyn, 2010; de Haas & Fokkema, 2010). Case studies have uncovered conflicts and tensions within migrant households emerging from gendered power relations (Nawyn et al., 2009; de Haas & Fokkema, 2010). Several studies have explored the ways in which gendered power relations influence migration and remittance decisions (for a review, see Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991; Wong, 2006).

In the structural approach, the returnee is neither a successful nor a failed migrant; instead, the returnee brings back savings and remittances that have no real impact on economic development because of structural constraints inherent in their country of origin (Hugo, 2003). Regarding gender, the structuralist accounts of migration do not offer much improvement in terms of gender awareness (Wright, 1995; Scott, 1995; Oso

& Natalia, 2013). In addition, research has traced various development implications of return migration on the sending societies (Conway & Potter, 2009; Galipo, 2018). As early as 1980, Gmelch outlined some of the implications of return migration for migrants, such as the challenges of adaptation and readjustment, and the implications of return migration for the home societies (Gmelch, 1980). Many subsequent publications have concentrated on the implications of migration upon home societies, with a focus on the “migration–development nexus” (for a review, see Papademetriou & Martin, 1991; Faist, 2008; Piper, 2009; Yendaw et al., 2019). Thus, the existing literature offers a rich understanding of the relationships between migration, return and gender.

However, the contexts and forms of migration bring about varying implications for gender and return migration. Labor migration from African and Asian countries to the GCC States is viewed as a South-South migration, and it is fundamentally a temporary form of migration (Fargues & Shah, 2018). The Gulf States allow the migrants to maintain ties with their families staying behind in the origin countries, including economic ties through remittances and social ties via regular physical visits to families. The Gulf migration is clearly a circular form of migration in which migrants return home after a few years of work in the Gulf and remigrate whenever new job opportunity arises in one of the GCC countries (Babar & Gardner, 2016). Although temporary migration has become a permanent feature in the Gulf States, it has remained a temporary opportunity for individual migrants, with a slim chance of extending their stay, but no legal means of settling and acquiring citizenship. Therefore, the Gulf States have maintained the migration phenomenon as a temporary one for individual migrants over decades. Due to its circular nature, the Gulf migration provides us with a rich context for analyzing the correlations between gender, migration, and return.

Gender, migration, and return seem to interact in a complex, nuanced way in the Gulf migration context. We can analytically identify at least four distinct dimensions where the experiences of return migration vary across gender lines: (a) socio-economic attributes of migrants, (b) work experiences, (c) remittances, and finally (d) reintegration and remigration. In essence, this study conceptualizes four dimensions of return migration, where gender matters, but are hardly considered as a framework of analysis in the existing literature. This research reflects on these four dimensions through a case of Ghanaian Gulf returnees.

The Gulf migration context

The Gulf States have been a major destination for low-skilled migrants from African and Asian countries. It is common to trace the demand for migrant labor in the Gulf back to the 1973 oil boom. The unprecedented number of development projects which took place, and subsequently, have continued to attract massive flows of migrant labor to the region (for details, see Babar, 2011; Gardner, 2013; Fargues & Shah, 2017). Existing research on Gulf migration has contributed to the broader understanding of migration patterns (Gardner, 2010; Babar, 2011; Fargues & Shah, 2017; Babar, 2017; Jureidini & Hassan, 2019;), the causes and implications of migration (Kamrava & Babar, 2012; Kuptsch, 2006), migrant remittances (Naufal & Genc, 2020; Rahman, 2011), recruitment and the *kafala* system, that is, the sponsorship system used to hire migrants in the Gulf

Countries (Rahman, 2012; Gardner, 2013; Fargues & Shah, 2018), and citizenship and naturalization (Meijer et al., 2021).

The manpower engagement and facilitation policies of GCC countries are somewhat similar, especially in the context of the recruitment, local engagement, and exit of migrant workers (Babar, 2020; Kuptsch, 2006; Rahman, 2011; Shah, 2008). The *kafala* system, a sponsorship or employer-based visa system, is the most preferred means to manage temporary migration in the Gulf States (Shah, 2008; Gardner, 2010). Some common features of the *kafala* system are that it restricts family reunification for unskilled migrants, ties them to a single employer, prevents them from marrying locals, and enforces other restrictions on their rights and movements, forcing migrants into a status as transient workers in the Gulf countries (for details, see Esim & Smith, 2004; Shah, 2010; Rahman, 2013). Thus, the *kafala* system is often criticized for allowing practices and conditions that make migrant workers vulnerable in the Gulf (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011; Dito, 2008; Esim & Smith, 2004; Gardner et al., 2013; HRW, 2008; Shah, 2008).

Broadly speaking, research on recruitment often suggests that recruitment agencies and migrant networks play a critical role in recruiting transient migrants to the GCC countries (Eelens & Speckmann, 1990; Gamburd, 2000; Shah, 2010). The Gulf-based recruiting agencies run and collaborate with branch offices in African and Asian countries to reach out to potential migrants and play a crucial role in bringing them to the GCC States. Migrant networks foster communication with current migrants, potential migrants, and return migrants, often facilitating their recruitment and shaping their lived experiences in the Gulf (Gamburd, 2000; Gardner, 2012, 2014; Rahman, 2011). Although the Arab Gulf countries are predominantly seen as a destination region for single male migrants, the region is also a prime destination for single female migrants from two major destination regions: Asia and Africa. The feminization of labor migration and gender-differentiated patterns of the labor market have become a pervasive phenomenon in the GCC States (Gamburd, 2000; Esim & Smith, 2004).

There are several studies that address drivers of migration and urbanization in Africa (Awumbila, 2014, 2017; Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). According to one report, there were around 3.5 million African migrants in the GCC States in 2017 (Atong et al., 2018). Ghana is both an emigrant and immigrant country in West Africa. Whereas Ghana is home to around 450 thousand immigrants, mainly from African countries, the country also has over one million emigrants living outside the country.¹ According to a KNOMAD estimate, Ghana received around US\$3.7 billion in remittances in 2019, accounting for 5.5 percent of Ghana's GDP in that year.² A number of studies provide detailed accounts of migration from Ghana from historical and contemporary perspectives (Anarfi et al., 2003; Mazzucato, 2011; Wong, 2014; Kleist, 2017; Teming-Amoako, 2018; Apatinga et al., 2020; Yendaw, 2022). Ghanaian migration is broadly divided into four distinct phases: minimal emigration, initial emigration, large-scale emigration, and intensification and diasporization (for details, see Anarfi et al., 2003).

¹ Calculated from the data found on the KNOMAD website on emigration and immigration. Retrieved from the website on the 5th April 2020: <https://www.knomad.org/data/migration/emigration>.

² KNOMAD's dataset for remittance inflows for the year 2019. Retrieved from website on the 5th April 2020: <https://www.knomad.org/data/remittances>.

The first phase (from pre-colonial times up to the late 1960s) saw net immigration but at a level of emigration that was insignificant overall. The second phase (between the 1970s and 1980s) witnessed significant emigration of skilled workers and professionals, primarily to other African countries. The increase of Ghanaian migration in the late 1970s and early 1980s has often been attributed to political instability and economic downturn in Ghana (Alderman, 1994). Over two million Ghanaians emigrated between 1974 and 1981 (Anarfi et al., 2003). Migration in this phase was mainly intra-regional, with a low level of outmigration to the West. The third phase falls between the 1980s and the 1990s, a period that saw the commencement of widespread migration comprising both skilled and unskilled migrants, a surge often attributed to the growing economic decline and political instability in Ghana (Manuh, 2001).

The fourth phase starts since the 1990s until the present, and is marked by the diversification of migration destinations: Ghanaians started moving to various countries in Europe and North America (Apatinga et al., 2020). It was roughly at the beginning of this period that Ghanaian migrants began emigrating to the Gulf countries (Teming-Amoako, 2018). During the same period, the GCC countries started diversifying their labor-source countries, bringing in labor on a large scale (Kuptsch, 2006). Little data is available on the growth in the number of Ghanaian migrants in the Gulf. According to one of the few estimates, roughly 3112 male and 2604 female migrants entered the GCC countries between 2015 and 2017 (Atong et al., 2018). This figure, however, does not reflect reality. We contacted Ghanaian officials at the embassies of the Republic of Ghana in the GCC states for an estimated number of migrants in the Gulf. According to these sources, roughly 75,000 Ghanaians are estimated to be working in the GCC States, distributed among Saudi Arabia; about 27,000, the United Arab Emirates; around 24,000, Qatar; close to 8000, Kuwait; almost 8000, Bahrain; nearly 4500, and Oman; about 3500.³ Given the circular nature of migration control in the region taking place on an annual basis, several thousand migrants join the Gulf labor market, and a similar number or less return to Ghana.

Research methods

This research is fundamentally a qualitative study, based on interviews of a small number of male and female returnees at the Nima-Maamobi, New Town, Alajo, and Madina areas of Accra, Ghana. Research on male and female migration from Ghana to the Gulf States tends to focus on construction workers and domestic workers (Awumbila et al., 2019; Kandilige et al., 2022). Construction workers are male migrants and domestic workers are female migrants. However, studying male and female migrants who are working in different sectors or occupations does not constitute an ideal case for a gendered analysis. We therefore looked for an occupation, where both male and female migrants work in large numbers. In the GCC States, we noticed that many Ghanaian male and female migrants work in private security companies. It is widely assumed that

³ We contacted officials at the Ghana Embassies in the Gulf states and collected estimated figures for each country. We contacted the First Secretary, Consular, of the Ghana Embassy in Doha on Sunday, March 8, 2020, and the Deputy Head of Mission, Ghana Embassy in Kuwait on Tuesday, March 10, 2020. The latter gave us the contact numbers of officials of Ghana embassies in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. However, we still consider the figure 'conservative' because as the officials of the missions intimated, some migrants, especially the domestic workers who are driven directly from airports to their employers' homes in the Gulf are rarely registered with the missions.

security work is a male-dominated niche, yet this is not true in the GCC States, where many educational institutions, government offices, and private companies hire both male and female security personnel for gender-sensitive services. Considering the presence of male and female security personnel in the Gulf labor market, we decided to look at male and female security personnel who had recently returned to Ghana after completing work stints in the GCC countries.

When we went to Ghana for fieldwork, we used our own personal network to locate and identify the potential candidates who worked in any country of the GCC States as security personnel and returned to Ghana recently. One of the authors of the paper is from Ghana, who has a wide social network within the Ghanaian migrants' community in the Gulf, as well as returnees in Accra, Ghana. The study has benefited from this author's extensive personal connections in Ghana and the Gulf. We used the snowballing technique to identify potential respondents in Ghana, a method that made them share their experiences unreservedly, since we had been referred to them by their friends and former colleagues. We sought the assistance of a female undergraduate student to interview female returnees with us. We collected data in Ghana between December 2019 and February 2020. We interviewed 15 male and 13 female returnees, all of whom were Muslims but not all of them traced their descents from the northern part of Ghana. We particularly selected our respondents from these neighbourhoods for many reasons. First, these are highly densely populated areas where close to 75 percent of the inhabitants are Muslims (Owusu et al., 2008). Second, the areas were chosen because illiteracy and poverty are pervasive in these communities (Ibid.), and the youth therein tend to have high aspirations for migrating abroad (Ibid). We selected migrants who worked in the GCC States for at least 2 years for interviews.

We employed an interview schedule with both semi-structured and open-ended questions for data collection. We added specific questions for the male and female respondents to dig deeper into the gender-differentiated patterns of returnees' experiences. The interview schedule covered a wide range of issues, including socio-demographic information; nature of the work and leisure activities in the Gulf; earnings, savings, and remittance transfers and uses; and questions related to present occupations and earning sources as well as future plans to stay or remigrate. We documented the returnees' own views of the migration experiences, complemented by discussions with senior members of the families to get their views. Interviews were conducted in the official language of Ghana (English) as well as *pidgin* (colloquial English), depending on the preference of each respondent. The names used in the text are pseudonyms. Although the discussions were carried out based on broader themes, specific cases are cited and presented verbatim to present migrants' viewpoints and illustrate certain positions. Our respondents are Muslim, but this does not mean that all Ghanaian migrants in the Gulf are Muslims. In the Gulf, there are a large number of non-Muslim migrants who come from different regions of Ghana.

Socio-demographic profiles of returnees by gender

Tables 1 and 2 present the experiences of 15 male returnees and 13 female returnees who worked in private security companies in the GCC States. The male returnees were between 30 and 44 years old, with birth years ranging from 1976 to 1990. For women

returnees, the minimum age was 27 years, the maximum was 34, and their years of birth fell between 1986 and 1993. These findings suggest the existence of gender-differentiated patterns in respondents' age structures: male returnees were older on average than female returnees. We attribute this gendered age pattern to the motivations for migration among Ghanaian migrants in general. For Ghanaian male migrants, migration seems to be a long-term livelihood strategy for immediate and extended family members, whereas for female migrants, it is more associated with the individual's short-term goals, such as marriage, a phenomenon on which we will elaborate in the following sections.

Regarding the educational background of returnees, 10 male respondents had a senior high school certificate (12 years of certified formal education) before traveling to the Gulf, and the other five had only a junior high school certificate (9 years of formal education) (Table 1). Seven of the female respondents had a senior high school certificate, and the other six female respondents had only a junior high school certificate (Table 2). The program of Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) up to junior high school is rigorously enforced in Ghana, leading to relatively high rates of male and female education in Ghana. Given Ghana's colonial past, English remains the official language in the country, it is also used as the medium of instruction and examination at schools. As a result, most Ghanaians are relatively fluent in English. The educational level of returnees found in this study was relatively higher than that found in other studies on returnees in Ghana (Teming-Amoako, 2018), and this is probably due to the nature of their occupation in the Gulf, where the respondents were required to serve in a multinational work environment.

Regarding marital status of the male respondents, nine were married, two were divorced, and four were single. Among the female returnees, eight were married, two were divorced, one was widowed, and two were single. All eight married female returnees were married after returning from the Gulf. In terms of gender-differentiated patterns of marital status, 60 percent of the male respondents were married before their migration to the Gulf, whereas none of the female returnees was married before their migration to the Gulf. We attribute this gendered pattern of marital status to socio-culture and religious beliefs in the Ghanaian society. Whereas Muslim married men are permitted to travel abroad for work, Ghanaian Muslim families usually do not allow their married female members to travel overseas for work, unless they are traveling with their husbands or going to join their husbands. Other studies also report that female migrants tend to migrate when they are unmarried (Teming-Amoako, 2018).

This gender-differentiated pattern of marital status is an important indicator for migration decision-making. In general, male respondents tend to migrate to the Gulf with the aim of establishing a stable life for themselves and their families by building a house, maintaining the family, and covering their children's and siblings' education and other expenses. For female migrants, migration to the Gulf is often a short-cut to save a large amount of money that will help them be a good catch and desirable brides in their local society. As one of our respondents revealed:

I was 23 then, and I knew marriage could come my way at any time. Yet, I had not been able to buy the things a bride needs, and I had no capital to start a trade. So, when the opportunity came for me to travel to Kuwait in 2011, I couldn't let it go.
Returnee from Kuwait, 32.

Table 1 Profiles of Ghanaian male returnees from the Arab Gulf States

Case no.	Gender	Age	Marital status	Years of formal education	Year of first migration and country	Average income per month (US\$)	Average remittances per month (US\$)	Two key recipients of remittances in Ghana	Three key areas of uses of remittances	Planning to stay or remigrate
1	Male	34	Single	9	2013 UAE	370	150	Mother and Father	Rent/Utilities, Education and Food	Leave
2	Male	44	Married	9	2014 Oman	300	200	Spouse and Mother	Education, Rent/Utilities and Food	Stay
3	Male	41	Married	9	2012 Bahrain	300	150	Spouse and Aunt	Rent/Utilities, Food and Education	Leave
4	Male	37	Married	9	2011 Saudi Arabia	320	250	Spouse and Father	Food, Education and Utilities	Leave
5	Male	43	Married	9	2011 Saudi Arabia	320	170	Spouse and Father	Education, Rent/Utilities and Food	Leave
6	Male	40	Divorced	12	2016 Qatar	330	230	Father and Mother	Food, Education and Health Service	Stay
7	Male	38	Married	12	2012 Bahrain	300	200	Spouse and Mother	Education, Food and Health Service	Leave
8	Male	41	Married	12	2012 Qatar	330	200	Spouse and Mother	Education, Food and Rent/Utilities	Leave
9	Male	31	Single	12	2017 Saudi Arabia	320	200	Mother and Father	Rent/Utilities, Health and Food	Leave
10	Male	40	Single	12	2017 Saudi Arabia	320	150	Mother and Father	Food, Utilities and Education	Leave
11	Male	38	Married	12	2016 Saudi Arabia	320	200	Spouse and Sibling	Education, Rent/Utilities and Food	Leave
12	Male	39	Married	12	2015 Kuwait	350	200	Spouse and Mother	Education, Food and utilities	Leave
13	Male	40	Married	12	2013 Bahrain	300	220	Spouse and Mother	Education, Food and Health	Leave
14	Male	30	Single	12	2014 Bahrain	300	100	Mother and Uncle	Utilities/Rent, Food and Health	Leave
15	Male	36	Divorced	12	2014 Oman	300	150	Mother and Uncle	Education, Food and Utilities/Rent	Leave

Source: Authors' fieldwork data

Table 2 Profiles of Ghanaian female returnees from the Arab Gulf States

Case No	Female returnee	Age	Present marital Status	Years of formal education	Years of first migration to the Gulf and country	Average incomes per month (US\$)	Average remittances per month (US\$)	Two key recipients of remittances	Three key areas of uses of remittances	Planning to stay or remigrate
1	Female	32	Divorced	9	2011 Kuwait	350	200	Mother and Father	Marriage Items and Food	Stay
2	Female	27	Married	12	2010 Bahrain	300	200	Mother and Sibling	Marriage Items and food	Stay
3	Female	27	Single	9	2012 Oman	300	150	Mother and Father	Marriage Items and Food	Stay
4	Female	28	Single	12	2011 Oman	300	150	Mother and Sibling	Marriage Items and Food	Stay
5	Female	32	Married	12	2012 Saudi Arabia	320	150	Mother	Marriage Items and Food	Stay
6	Female	33	Widow	9	2010 UAE	370	250	Mother and Father	Marriage Items and Food	Stay
7	Female	29	Married	12	2012 UAE	370	210	Mother and Father	Marriage Items and Food	Stay
8	Female	30	Married	12	2011 Bahrain	300	200	Mother and Sibling	Marriage Items and Food	Stay
9	Female	28	Single	9	2010 Kuwait	350	200	Mother and Sibling	Marriage Items and Housekeeping	Stay
10	Female	32	Married	12	2012 Kuwait	350	150	Mother	Marriage Items and Food	Stay
11	Female	29	Married	12	2011 Bahrain	300	150	Mother and Father	Marriage Items and Housekeeping	Stay
12	Female	34	Married	9	2010 Bahrain	300	100	Aunt and Father	Marriage Items and Education	Stay
13	Female	31	Divorced	9	2015 Saudi Arabia	320	150	Mother and Sibling	Food and Education	Stay

Source: Authors' fieldwork data

All nine married male returnees had children ranging between 1 and 4 years of age. The 15 male respondents were part of families comprising seven to 16 [living] persons at the time of interview. We defined family based on residence (living at the same place and sharing the household). All 13 female respondents were part of families with memberships ranging from seven to 13. Thus, it is a clear trend that the migrants' families were large and required more resources to support. In general, the expectations of household provisioning cut across gender and marital status (Abdul-Korah, 2011; Pickbourn, 2016). In short, the burden of responsibilities for household provisioning reinforces the traditional patriarchal household norms that married men have more responsibility to support the family than married women, and unmarried men have more responsibility than unmarried women, shaping gendered household provisioning patterns among returnees.

Gender-differentiated patterns of work experiences in the Gulf

Irrespective of gender, the Gulf States hire and manage migrant workers through the *kafala* system. In the *kafala* system, a migrant is sponsored by a GCC citizen popularly known as sponsor or *kafeel*, who has full economic and legal responsibility for the migrant during the contract period, including repatriation at the end of the contract. Existing literature elaborates upon the various aspects of the *kafala* system and recruitment procedures in the GCC states (Esim & Smith, 2004; Fargues & De Bel-Air, 2015; Gardner, 2010), so we won't address recruitment methods in this paper. We move on to investigate gendered working experiences.

Our respondents worked in the GCC states with different residency durations. Of the 15 male returnees from the Gulf, five returnees worked in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, four in Bahrain, and others in Qatar, Oman, the UAE. Respondents spent between 2 and 5 years working as security personnel with various private security companies in the respective Gulf States. Seven respondents changed countries after their contracts expired, moving from Oman, Saudi Arabia or Bahrain to Qatar, UAE, or Kuwait. In one instance, a migrant moved from Oman to KSA. However, in all the cases, the only material difference in their lives was the change in salary. Matters related to residence visas, accommodation, and general working conditions remained largely the same. Overall, all the respondents spent a minimum of 2 years in the respective countries, as the initial contracts always have this duration. Under this rubric, migrants must work for 2 years before being "freed" and must pay financial penalties if they seek to terminate the contract before the end of the period to return home.

Of the 13 female returnees interviewed, four worked in Bahrain, three in Kuwait, and two each in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. Respondents spent between 2 and 6 years working as security personnel with various private security companies in the respective Gulf states. Unlike male returnees, none of the female returnees changed their country of work by moving from one Gulf state to the other. Female migrants all lived in shared rooms provided by their companies. Male migrants also lived in company-provided accommodations. Male and female migrants both worked for eight hours daily.

Returnees gained different sets of skills. Male returnees tended to report that they had learned different security strategies they had not previously known (or had not known very well), gained a better understanding of how their colleagues from North Africa and South-East Asia react to issues and emergencies, and improved their spoken Arabic

proficiency through interaction with locals and colleagues. However, they also sometimes felt discriminated against because some locals and companies openly objected to dark-skinned personnel guarding their buildings. Male respondents mentioned playing games with their colleagues, watching football matches on TV, chatting with families back home via social media, and visiting friends. Female respondents also reported major positive experiences in learning different security strategies they had not previously known and improving their spoken Arabic proficiency through interaction with locals and co-workers. Female returnees often reported how proud they were to provide security and protection to fellow women at their place of work. Chatting with roommates and families back home, watching movies on TV, and smartphone surfing, especially social media, constituted the bulk of their leisure activities.

Gender-differentiated patterns of remittances

Gender plays an important role in shaping the derives behind remittance decisions (Rahman & Lian, 2012; UN-INSTRAW, 2006). This section shows how gender influences remittance management patterns. Remittance-sending is closely tied to income and savings. The typical monthly salary of a male returnee was roughly US\$370 in the UAE, US\$350 in Kuwait, US\$330 in Qatar, US\$320 in KSA and Oman, and US\$300 in Bahrain. The salary of male and female respondents was reported to be almost the same across the Gulf. For instance, female respondents earned the equivalent of US\$370 in the UAE, US\$350 in Kuwait, US\$330 in Qatar, US\$320 in KSA and Oman, and US\$300 in Bahrain. This gender equality in salary underscores that we must study gender and salary in *intra*-sectoral, rather than *inter*-sectoral, terms to observe the gender parity in salary payments. However, this does not mean that there is no gender-based economic discrimination in this region. Meanwhile, it seems that men and women get paid equally in the occupation under study, namely the security sector. Nevertheless, it should be noted that our sample size is relatively small, and a larger sample size may produce some differences in incomes, savings, and remittances.

Both male and female respondents were reported to remit between US\$100 and US\$250 per month. However, migrants did not remit the whole of their savings; they tended to keep a portion of their monthly incomes. In-depth interviews reveal that although both males and females earned the same monthly salary, the females saved more than their male counterparts. This is due to the following reasons: First, the females were in the same situation as men, but they had fewer responsibilities back home than their male counterparts. Second, unlike the males, who mostly subsisted on take-out meals, the females cooked their own food every day, leading to higher savings.

Like remittance-sending, remittance-receiving cut across gender lines. For the married male migrants, spouses were often the first recipients of remittances, followed by mothers, then fathers, and in some cases uncles or siblings. For the single male respondents, mothers were also usually the first recipients, followed by fathers, uncles, or siblings. A married male respondent explained, "I remitted an average equivalent of \$100 monthly in support of my child's education, food, rent, and utility bills for the family," and when asked to whom he sent the remittances, he responded quickly, "As a happily married person with a child, my wife was the recipient of all the money I wired home." Female respondents sent remittances primarily to their mothers and then to their fathers, aunts,

or siblings. One female respondent explained that she remitted the money to her mother because “my mother was in charge of purchasing my marriage trousseau, and she was the one I could trust for that.”

Existing literature suggests that unmarried male migrants tend to remit to male members of the family, whereas female migrants tend to remit to female family members (Rahman & Lian, 2009; UN-INSTRAW, 2008). We also found that unmarried female migrants remitted principally to their mothers, whereas married male migrants remitted principally to their spouses. In both cases, female family members were the most frequent recipients of the remittances. Additionally, women who received remittances enjoyed greater status in the family as “remittance managers.” Migration enhanced the interdependence between migrant husbands and their wives back home, as migrant husbands heavily relied on their wives to manage remittances. Mothers of migrant daughters also consulted, if not relied on, their daughters overseas in the use of remittances for competing needs. Whatever the reasons for such gendered patterns in remittances management are, we argue that the management of remittances by women increases their influence in decisions about the allocation of income in the household, and thus contributes to a greater gender equality in the family.

The uses of remittances also varied along gendered lines. Male respondents reported that the bulk of their remittances (90 percent) were used for education, food, and rent/utility bills. Many of the respondents’ families lived in the suburban of Accra in rented accommodations and thus had to pay monthly rent in addition to electricity, water, and gas bills. For those who lived in their own family houses, utility bills were the focus. Even the unmarried interviewees who had no children remitted for the education of their siblings. The onus, however, was highest on those who were married and had children. One male respondent shared the burden of family responsibility as such:

I had to leave behind my three-year-old, lovely identical twins and travel to Oman in 2014. And when I did, I was able to provide my family with daily bread, pay rent, pay utility bills, and school fees. Although I was not able to put up my own house as I planned while working in Oman, I saved my family from the ravages of poverty.
Male returnee from Oman, 44.

For all female respondents, remittances were overwhelmingly spent to procure marriage-related commodities and to a more limited extent for school fees, food items, and rent/utility bills. Because all female respondents were unmarried before migration, and because they viewed their migration plans and their marriage plans as interrelated, their remittance uses were directed overwhelmingly toward marriage expenses.

To understand the returnees’ sense of fulfillment and achievement, we asked all respondents what they wished they could have gained from the Gulf migration but had not been able to achieve. All returnees, regardless of gender, mentioned that they wished they could have bought their own house, gathered sufficient savings, and been able to send their parents to perform *Hajj*—the pilgrimage visit to the holy places. Since all our respondents were Muslims, sending parents for *Hajj* pilgrimage visit constituted a key indicator of economic fulfillment for both migrant sons and daughters. Although their remittances covered other necessities like food, education, healthcare, and marriage, having one’s own house or sufficient savings remained an unaccomplished goal for

returnees. In short, the implications of gender-differentiated remittance patterns impact potential reintegration and future livelihood strategies, as we will explain in the next section.

Gender-differentiated patterns of reintegration and remigration

The experience of migration in terms of reintegration and remigration also varied along gender lines. Male returnees were largely unprepared for their return home. In the return migration context, remittance-use constitutes an important indicator of sustainable return. Therefore, we delved into this category to explore how returnees are economically reintegrating within their local communities. When we asked respondents whether they had invested in income-generating ventures, we identified a gendered pattern in their responses. Out of 15 male returnees, 10 respondents reported that they had used part of the remittances for income-generating activities, whereas the remaining five had not. The 10 respondents invested in sectors such as transportation (buying taxis), small-to-medium size farming, opening retail businesses for spouses and/or mothers, and other domestic businesses. However, all male respondents expressed regret for not having had a clear-cut plan before returning home and attributed their present poor savings to their insufficient incomes in the Gulf.

When asked whether remittances were invested in income-generating ventures, 11 female respondents reported that they had used remittances for income-generating activities such as dressmaking, hairdressing, local restaurant operation, and bakery and retail businesses. Although we found that such small businesses produce insufficient profits, they serve as supplemental income sources. For female returnees, preparing for marriage involved not only funding the marriage ceremony but also investing part of their foreign income for post-marriage responsibilities. This rationale for investing the migration windfall probably stems from the gendered expectations of household provision in Ghanaian society. For example, L. Pickbourn reports that married women tend to supplement food staples, children's school clothing and fees, and other basic needs (Pickbourn, 2016). These obligations for household provisioning after marriage probably constituted an important motivation for our female returnees to engage in various productive activities. Investment in petty trades provides a sustained source of supplementary income that they can allocate to household gendered provisioning duties and thus maintain dignified status within the extended family hierarchy. Thus, female returnees exhibited more prudence and productivity in investments and budgeting for household expenses.

The unpreparedness of male returnees is also reflected in their motivations for remigration. When asked about their plans since returning home, six male returnees mentioned their desire to remigrate, whereas nine male respondents wanted to continue the search for a permanent job in Ghana. These nine male returnees had been engaged in casual jobs since returning home, serving as sales persons, construction workers, night security workers, temporary drivers, and in other low-skilled roles. Returnees who were undecided about remigration emphasized their preference for transient work overseas over irregular work in Ghana, suggesting they were considering an eventual remigration attempt. One male respondent mentioned:

When I returned from Oman in 2014, I thought I would not travel again, but I left for the UAE afterwards. And since my contract ended and I returned to Ghana in June 2019, I am still jobless. The only way I can continue to support my mother, my siblings and be able to get married is to migrate abroad...
Male returnee from Oman, 36.

We also noted that single male respondents were more eager to return to the Gulf than their married counterparts. Correspondingly, respondents who had daughters (especially teenage girls) were more determined to remain in Ghana than their counterparts who had male children.

While we observed that male returnees had challenges in reintegrating into the work force in their home country and had intention to remigrate, we noted different attitudes for female returnees. Female returnees typically returned home with clear plans for Ghana; namely, to get married and live with their newly formed family while seeking supplemental incomes locally. We also noted that female respondents' income strategies tended to be set out as early as during their schooling. We found that most female respondents had learned a particular profession (hairdresser, dressmaking, etc.) after junior or senior high school, before traveling to the Gulf. They could not pursue such professions because of lack of start capital. To earn start-up capital and cover marriage expenses within the shortest possible time, many female migrants found the solution in labor migration to the Gulf. As a married woman explained, "there is no way I can travel to any place within or outside Ghana, except with my husband, for work." Upon return, they seemed to be ready to reintegrate into society, neatly closing the migration circle.

Conclusion

It is argued in this study that analyzing certain transnational dimensions of the return migration process deepens our broad understanding of gender and return migration in general. Methodologically, this research has argued that emigration, immigration, and return are mutually interdependent in the South-South migration context; therefore, it is imperative to view the different dimensions of migration as an interconnected and composite process. This is only possible when we examine the phenomenon from the returnees' viewpoints. We have shown that returnees embody the constant experiences of the mutually interdependent migration process, this will offer researchers the potential to expand understanding of migration beyond a snapshot view of emigration, immigration, or return and reintegration separately. Conceptually, this study has identified and elaborated four transnational dimensions where gender matters but are hardly integrated as a framework of analysis in return migration earlier. Thus, this study has attempted to make a methodological contribution to studying return migration in the South-South migration context. We believe that this methodological approach can be replicated in the study of return migration in other South-South migration corridors.

Empirically, we found evidence that male and female migrants vary in their age, education, marital statuses, and roles in household provisioning and, thus, in their motivations for migration. This study has reported gender-differentiated patterns of working experiences. For instance, we have discussed that working hours, salary, and living conditions were similar for male and female returnees in the Gulf, yet we observed significant gender-based variation in terms of savings and remittances. For

the gender-differentiated patterns of remittances, we have reported that males saved less than females did, and one factor in females' higher savings was that they regularly cooked food themselves, whereas male returnees bought take-out meals. Although both male and female returnees showed a similar range in remittance-sending, they varied in the amount and frequency of remittances, and we have attributed this difference to marital status, household gendered provisioning duties, and migration motivations.

This study has demonstrated that male returnees spent more on family consumption and less on productive investment. We have stated that all female returnees were unmarried, freeing up their disposable incomes for investment purposes. On the other hand, male returnees were usually married or burdened with extensive family responsibilities, and they were required to finance more of the household provisions, thus constraining the disposable incomes available for investment. We have observed that migration of female returnees was clearly embedded in their marriage plans; female returnees were unmarried, and their migration motives were to earn and save money during stay in the Gulf so that they can cover the weddings expenses and invest in post-marriage supplementary incomes. This strategy is reflected in their use of remittances.

This study has reported a gender-differentiated pattern of reintegration and remigration, in which male returnees are less integrated within their local communities in the economic sense and are more exposed to remigration. Whereas female returnees are better situated when it comes to reintegrating into the local economic activities in their home society and are less likely to remigrate. The study suggests that return migration for female returnees is typically a closed process, whereas for male returnees it remains open-ended. In addition, a sustainable return for females is the end of the migration process, whereas for males it leaves the door open for remigration. Scholars have described the ideal return migration situation as the return that isn't followed by remigration, this return is viewed as "sustainable"—the absence of the need to remigrate is the main criteria in this case (Couldrey & Morris, 2004). However, the "sustainable" return migration has come under criticisms because it conceptualizes return as the end of the migration process, overlooking the growing phenomena of remigration and transnationalism (Black & King, 2004; Jeffery & Murison, 2011; Faist et al., 2013; Van Houte & Davids, 2008). As this paper has demonstrated, a group of returnees seek remigration, and remigration can have positive impacts on the home society because re-migrants tend to provide extended foreign incomes for their households. Thus, this study has documented distinct gendered patterns in the return migration process.

To conclude, the phenomenon of gender dimensions of return migration is more complex than it appears. This study has attempted to capture the complexities and nuances in the gender dimensions of return migration, but still more research is needed to understand the gender-differentiated patterns of return migration with larger sample size. Among the lines of research to be developed, it would be interesting to study: (1) gender-differentiated patterns of recruitment; (2) employment and workplace relations across gender line; (3) gender differentiated patterns of leisure and consumption; (4) gender differentiated patterns of sustainable return; and finally (5) case studies involving individual GCC States and sending countries in Africa and Asia on gender and return migration by employing largely mixed methods of research.

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