

# The Migration of Ghanaian Women in the Canoe Fishing Industry

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## Introduction

In Ghana, fishing is one of the major occupations in which gender roles are clear-cut and specific. Men go to sea and women stay on land to process and market the catch both in local and distant markets. This means that without the complimentary role of the women, the efforts of the men will come to nothing. Since fish are a highly perishable commodity, they need to be handled immediately after they are landed. This explains the need for another group of people who have not spent hours at sea to handle the fish. In Ghana, this role has been played by women for centuries and continues to be played by them. The role of women in this economic venture is therefore firmly embedded in the traditions of the people. It is impossible to imagine the fishing industry in Ghana without women.

As in other sectors of the economy, the fishing industry has had its share of innovations which have led to repercussions in the traditional relationships of production and distribution. Formerly, men manufactured their own gear and used physical energy to propel their craft. As they started depending on imported inputs they began to rely on savings accumulated over a period of time supplemented by advances from kinsmen to start their fishing ventures. With the introduction of mechanisation leading to the need for outboard motors, bigger canoes and nets, the initial capital investment went beyond the saving capacity of the fishermen. This was aggravated by high maintenance and fuel costs. Apart from initial help given to fishermen by way of credit to encourage them to use the outboard motor, the financial institutions have not kept pace with the fishermen's need for cash to run their business. The fishermen have therefore had to rely on their business partners and associates, the one group which has a vested interest in their venture – the women fish handlers and processors.

Through this, women have crossed the role demarcation line and are now actively involved in fish production as financiers and sometimes as owners of the means of production. Actually women's involvement in production predates mechanisation. In the Anlo area, the seat of beach seine fishing in Ghana, the purchase of the first beach seine net, Yevudor (European net), is credited to a Woe woman named Afedima, a wealthy daughter of a prominent local man Anatsi (Nukunya 1989). The fact that the beach seine was introduced to the Anlo coast between 1850 and 1860 shows the extent and dimension of the participation of the Ghanaian woman in the fishing industry (ibid.).

## Migration

One of the integral features of the fishing industry in Ghana is migration. In keeping with the seasonal movement of fish, especially the sardinella from July to October, fishermen have developed a tendency to follow the fish to the locality which is experiencing its glut season at any particular time. Such movements last only for a season with the fishermen returning to base at the end of the season. Other types of migration continue over a number of seasons and lead to a semi-permanent or permanent change of residence with the possibility of partial or total integration into the host society. This type of migration is either internal within Ghana or external, taking the fishermen across national boundaries to other West African countries such as Liberia, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon and Gabon.

The mode of organisation of the fishing industry and its resultant dependence by fishermen on their wives and kinswomen for the success of their business poses a problem for the individual fisherman whenever he decides to move from his own locality. He is faced with two options. Either he goes accompanied by his wife as business partner or associate or he finds someone else to play the role of, at least, the business partner; otherwise the economic motivation for the trip will be defeated. The ultimate decision taken by the fisherman depends on his final destination, the type of fishing he engages in and the proposed length of stay. For example, Ewe fishermen who travel in large companies on account of the labour needed to operate one beach seine net, always travel accompanied by women. They usually acquire a tract of land at the beach in their host community, build temporary structures, and live by themselves with their women processing their catch (ibid.).

On short term seasonal migrations, fishermen tend to rely on a local woman who acts as hostess, business associate, guarantor, and mother. She is the one who looks for accommodation for the fishermen when they first arrive, introduces them to the chief fisherman and sees to the payment of their 'beach drink' or fees. She advances them money or guarantees such advances for the purchase of fuel or repairs to fishing equipment. She is referred to as fishmother, *loonye* in Ga. In return the fishermen sell their catch to this local fishmother who renders account to them at the end of the fishing season or periodically as agreed upon. As the season extends to years, the fishermen are joined by their wives. They participate in the fish handling as processor and distributor without ousting the local fishmother. The wives realise that being foreigners, like their husbands, they need local support which is represented by the fishmother.

This role played by the fishmother in seasonal internal and external migration can also be found in extended external migration where migration takes place to an area where local women play an active role in the handling of fish. In some cases the women actually invite the fishermen, advance them money for the purchase or repair of fishing gear and work in partnership with them till the debt is paid. Examples of such a situation can be found in Togo and Benin.

From the above, it is clear that the migrant Ghanaian fisherman is sometimes caught between loyalty to his wife's business interests which are intricately interwoven with his own economic success and role as husband, and his own business security manifested in access to local credit and support represented by the local hostess or fishmother. The lot of the migrant Ghanaian woman, fish dealer or processor, is by no means simple or

straightforward. She is caught in a web of co-operation, competition, conflict and, sometimes, downright hostility from local women. Does she stay at home to avoid all these problems or does she migrate?

### Causes of Migration

The major motive for migration among the female migrants interviewed in Cote d'Ivoire and the Republic of Benin is to join husbands. The success of the move leads to chain migration in which daughters, younger sisters, nieces and other relatives join the wife to help in processing, handling of the fish and other commercial activities which are labour intensive. Widowed, divorced and, occasionally, married women accompany or join male relatives.

Purely economic considerations are also found to be the motivation of some of the women. Like their male counterparts, these women migrate to accumulate capital for a particular venture, such as building or completing a house and to acquire a few consumption items like cloth, household utensils, toiletries, perfumes, etc. Some were pushed out by economic hardships at home aggravated by marriage problems, sickness or the death of a child. A group of female migrants who are operating independently outside any male control were found in Vridi III in Abidjan.

The above classification is not meant to suggest that wives are devoid of any economic motives in migration. The weak position of women in traditional inheritance of property and their virtual exclusion from joint ownership of property with their husbands make it imperative for them to try and seek their own economic security even as they help their husbands. They are expected by their extended families and society at home to acquire something for themselves and for the benefit of other members of the family or lineage.

The interplay of dependence and independence with varying emphasis on the women's roles as wives and mothers, business partners and associates, managers, employees and independent traders, provides a fascinating spectacle.

### Wives and Mothers

As wives and mothers, the women's first responsibility is to their families. It is primarily as wives of the fishermen that they have left home. For most of them, the change in residential pattern alone is enough to emphasize this role. This however, varies with the ethnic origin of the women. For the Ga and Fante, marriage in their home-towns is duo-local (Hagan 1983). The wife lives with her female children and male children under ten years of age among her own male kin. All her cooking and commercial activities take place there. She sends her husband cooked meals and goes to sleep with him in his house, which he also shares with his male kin.

This residential arrangement gives the wife some freedom to organise her domestic and commercial activities. Among the Fante it is not unusual for a woman with married daughters to cook in bulk, dishing out the meals for her daughter's husbands from a central pot. In this situation, one person can do the cooking whilst the others tend to the processing of the fish or any other commercial activity. The residential pattern provides

a good setting for a family co-operative with varying degrees of formal and informal profit sharing commonly found among the Ga and Fante.

When the women move to join their migrant husbands they lose the labour provided by their kinsmen at home. They make up for this loss by keeping their daughters with them and sending for other female relations to join them. Among the migrant fishing communities, no female member of the community is too young to be part of the labour force. From the age of eight years or earlier, girls engage in fish processing, hawking or taking care of younger siblings. This has adversely affected female education.

The women also have to contend with the presence of their husbands in the home and the possibility of their knowing more than they should about their profits and other matters. They have developed techniques of avoiding the scrutiny of their husbands. It appears that migrant Ewe women do not have this problem of learning to live with their husbands since they are used to the same residential pattern in their home-towns.

Not all members of the fishing company travel with their wives. Wives of canoe owners and bosuns invariably migrate with their husbands. Other members either make their own decisions or are encouraged or invited by the company to migrate with their wives. In cases of polygyny, a man travels with his first wife or the wives take turns to go and stay with him.

In the artisanal fishing industry, the conjugal role of women is so intricately bound to their occupational role that it is quite difficult to distinguish between the two. As wives, the women act the varying roles of employees, business partners and associates and independent operators. Each role is determined by the type of fishing engaged in by their men, and circumstances in the locality of operation and the season.

### Business Partners and Associates

In some Fante towns women may be their husbands' business partners. In this instance, the women either sell the fish in its fresh or processed state and then render accounts to the men in return for a share in the proceeds. This mode of operation is not common. A typical example of this was found with the Fante Tenga fishermen at Placondji and Akpakpa Dodome. As soon as a fisherman lands his catch, he hands over the fish to his wife. The wife carries the fish from the canoe and sells it without any interference or even the presence of the husband. The wife renders accounts to the husband when he goes home but she continues to keep her husband's money. She goes with him to the market to pay for inputs needed to repair damage to the nets. In this way the woman acts as sales manager, purchasing officer, accountant, banker, and wife. When questioned about this mode of operation the men at Akpakpa Dodome explained that they spend hours at sea leaving their unlocked palm-frond houses at the mercy of storms and intruders. It is therefore safer for them if the women keep the money, knowing how to protect it in the face of crisis. The younger men are against this mode of operation but are unable to change the tradition. The women also claim that they are protecting the men's interests by keeping their money which could easily be dissipated by them on drinks.

With such financial control in the hands of the women, their honesty is stretched to capacity. This is more so since Tenga, the type of fishing done by their husbands,

involves small quantities of fish. Unfortunately for them, they are not allowed by the local women to sell directly to the consumer and are also frustrated in engaging in other commercial activities. The women are therefore easily accused of misappropriating their husbands' money. To avoid total dependence on their husbands' money and to be able to lay claim to some money they can call their own, the women have developed a marketing technique aimed at helping each other at Cotonou harbour (in Benin).

As soon as the wife of a fisherman unloads her husband's catch, the other women rush in to take some for themselves. After bargaining, they sell this fish to Benin fish dealers who in turn sell to the ultimate consumers. No loss is suffered in this kind of transaction. If the Benin woman offers less than the price agreed between the two migrant women, the seller goes back to get the consent of the original owner before sale. This is to ensure that she makes at least a little profit on the sale. By so doing, the women legitimize the personal profit they make on their husband's catch. To avoid possible trouble they try to hide any personal effects they buy from their husbands.

It was observed that the more common role in this category is that of business associates. This is a continuation of the role the women are used to playing at home. This was observed among the Fante women of Vridi III and Grand Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire, and the Ewe women of Port Bouet and Cotonou. In this instance, the women, mainly wives and relatives, buy the fish from the fishermen and sell it fresh or in a processed form. The profit made by the women is their own money. In Ghana, fishermen do not give their wives daily, weekly, or monthly chop money but give them some capital to trade with. They also give them what is known as 'eating fish,' *yeli loo* in Ga, when they return from fishing trips. It is out of the profits accrued from a woman's enterprise that she is supposed to cater for the needs of her husband and children (Hagan 1983). In the migrant situation, wives receive regular chop money from their husbands but this is normally inadequate for the needs of the family. The women therefore supplement the chop money given by their husbands with their profits from their business. When the fishing business is going through hard times, the men depend entirely on their wives for support since whenever possible, they engage in other commercial activities such as food processing and the sale of cooked food, provisions and alcohol.

Where catches are small, co-operation in business is essential for success. The fisherman must make enough to maintain his gear to continue fishing and maintain the family as far as possible; and the wife must also make enough to maintain the family and, occasionally, act as a source of credit for the husband. Above all, both categories must make enough to take home to make the whole migration venture worthwhile. This is to be observed in the distribution of fish and the bargaining. In the distribution of fish to the women, the maxim, as stated by Mr Defeamekpor, the leader of the Ewe migrant fishermen in Port Bouet, is, 'Everybody must eat.' Even after the bargain has been struck, if the women make a loss on the sale at the market they always come back to plead with the fishermen for a reduction in price. In the bargaining for the fish with the fishermen, the women usually look up to the wife of the boat owner as a natural leader. She performs a balancing act between the interests of the women (including herself) and those of her husband. In cases where local women join migrant women in buying fish from the fishermen, the migrant women get rebates privately in their homes after the transaction, when they ask for them and the fishermen think their demand is reasonable.

Credit facilities given to the women enable them to get as much fish as they can cope with from the men when the catch is good and there is no competition from the local women. The women of the Ewe town of Kedzi developed a very lucrative network with the migrant Ewe fishermen in the republics of Benin and Togo. They used to go round purchasing fish from the different companies. They smoked the fish and transported it to Keta, which was then a very important market centre, for sale. They either kept the money for the companies or gave them to relatives as directed. They also acted as purchasing agents for the fishermen, buying materials for repairing their nets on the return journey. The Fante women also used to export fish from Grand Bassam for sale at the Fante market of Mankessim in Ghana.

In the relationship between the migrant fishermen and their women-folk, the key word is adaptation. Women are therefore found to be playing yet another role in the fishing business. They can be described as employees, shareholders and agents.

### Employees, Shareholders and Agents

This multiple role was observed among the Ga-Adangbe migrant women. They appeared to be the most displaced in the fishing business. In Lomé and Cotonou, the local women use their financial power over their husbands' business to squeeze them out. The local women act as fish-mothers for the migrant Ga-Adangbe fishermen. Some of the fishermen came as a result of being invited by these local fish-mothers who give them loans to purchase part of their gear. The fishermen repay the loan in kind by handing over a part of their catch to the fish-mothers. As strangers and debtors, the fishermen are at the mercy of these local fish-mothers. Their wives are not entitled to any of the catch. To provide their wives with a small income, the fishermen employ them as porters to carry the fish from the canoes to the point of sale on the beach. Payment is made with fish at the discretion of the fishermen. This gives them a chance to be generous to their wives when possible.

In Abidjan, the Ga-Adangbe migrant women are prevented from dealing in fish not by local fish-mothers, but by the mode of operation and local taste. Here, the sale of fish is by auction held by men and it is purchased mainly by men. There is also a special market for male retailers of fresh fish. Women who sell fresh fish usually buy it from the men after they have bought it at the auction. Only those who have access to the market are able to buy. These are mainly Nzima women who can easily claim to be Ivorians because of the national border which cuts through their territory making some Ghanaians and some Ivorians. Unfortunately for the Ga-Adangbe women, the type of fish caught by their husbands, mainly sea bream and grouper, is preferred fresh by the Ivorians and the large expatriate community, so they cannot even smoke it.

Fortunately for this group, the type of fishing, long distance hand-lining, done by their men has given them other opportunities. The men are away five to ten days at a stretch and when they come home they stay for only two or three days. They need the services of women to cook and wash their clothes for them. Two to four women, usually the wife of the bosun and the wives of two or three hard-working men of the crew are incorporated into the company to provide these services. These, together with the men of the company, are considered shareholders or employees. At the end of the accounting

season, they are given a share of the profits, but they do not receive the same amount as the men. The women are grouped together and given the equivalent of a single man's share or pay.

This, however, is not their only source of income. They also act as chandlers for the fishermen. This is reckoned as their private business so they are given loans for it. They purchase the food for the men's fishing trip and are paid when the fishermen return from the trip. They take turns in doing this with the fishermen giving extra money when paying the bills, as a sign of appreciation, when the food requirements have been met. Some of the women also supply the canoes with engine oil. Besides all these activities, the women use the spare time they have when their husbands are away for their own business, mainly the sale of cooked foods. It is not surprising that these women appear to indulge in conspicuous spending beside having completed or being in the process of building houses in their home towns.

### Independent or Free-Lance Operators

This group of independent operators was observed in Vridi III. It consists of Ga-Adangbe women whose presence in Abidjan does not depend on marriage or blood relation with any man in the fishing business. They are mainly between the ages of 20-30, usually unmarried, separated or divorced. They work in companies of three to six consisting of relatives or friends. They have neither ovens, adequate capital nor supply of fish, so they hire ovens from male Moshie fish smokers who have left the business to sell petrol. These women buy fish from Fante fishermen whose wives cannot take the whole catch, left-over herring bait from hand-line fishermen, or, from fish-fryers, fish which has become too fermented for use. They occasionally buy fish from the harbour, but the expenses involved are too much for their meagre capital, rendering the whole venture unprofitable. When they cannot get fish they hire their services to the Fante fish smokers. The service of migrant Ghanaian women to the fishing business or community also takes other forms which can be described as support services.

### Support Services

A group of migrant Ghanaian women work in the market at Abidjan as fish dressers. Having observed that Ivoirian ladies do not like dressing fish, they offer their services in dressing their fish purchases for a fee. Migrant Ghanaian women also operate as food vendors, hawkers, dressmakers and hair-dressers for the fishing community, other Ghanaian migrants and Ivorians. Women traders also act as couriers taking back home from the host countries provisions and personal effects belonging to the migrants. They also help them in the transfer of currency by using the fishermen's money to buy goods and paying for them at home in cedis, the Ghanaian currency. By so doing, the traders have a source of credit and the fishermen have their money transferred so that they do not have to worry too much when they are compelled to leave their host country under hostile circumstances. This relationship is beneficial to both traders and the migrant fishing communities. Apart from the material services offered by women to the migrant fishermen, female spirit mediums and syncretic prophetesses follow the migrants with

their services. They sell herbs and other concoctions and perform rituals meant to give solutions to their health and other problems which are invariably linked with the spiritual.

### Boat-Owners

Cutting across all the various roles mentioned above is the role of boat-owners, who can come from any group. What is needed is capital and the capital can be moved from one section to the other. Ghanaian women in the coastal communities have a philosophy that a woman should not be limited to one occupation. She should be able to move from one to the other or to take on two if possible. Migrant women who are not originally engaged in fishing sometimes use their profits from other ventures for investment in fishing. Migrant women were observed to own purse-seine (*watsa, sieve*), hand-lines and *ali* canoes and gear. These boat owners normally have a male relative who controls or supervises the actual operations.

### Consequences of Migration

Both internal and external migration affect Ghanaian women in the fishing business individually and collectively. The congregation of migrants in locations based on family, ethnic and friendship ties, give the women also a chance to socialise. They form benevolent societies and local savings and credit unions known as 'Susu' groups which help them on occasions of illness, death and birth. This is essential for the women who have to live without the security and support of the extended family. The men appear to be sensitive to the vacuum created by the absence of the family and try to make up for it. One woman in Abidjan remarked: 'They have brought us here and are responsible for us. Our families are not here so they have to be our fathers and mothers.' On the other hand, marriages and liaisons contracted away from home are treated very casually and the women involved end up as losers.

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