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Emotional impacts and coping strategies of left-behind husbands in the Wa West District, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Out-migration of women is sometimes exchanged for the loss of ties with spouses and children in the originating areas. Hence, a qualitative approach was used to investigate the impacts of women's out-migration on the welfare of left-behind husbands in the Wa West district, with a focus on the emotional impacts faced by the husbands and the coping strategies employed to manage the impacts. A semi-structured in-depth interview guide was used to collect data from 12 married men whose wives had migrated to southern Ghana. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The results revealed that the wives' profession, social capital, or both were the deciding factors in their choice of destinations. It was also disclosed that most of the participants were experiencing unhappiness and loneliness. Moreover, it was found that most of them were filled with nostalgia about time with their better halves and lamented the loss of a companion with whom they could converse and feel the overall impact of their wives' soothing words. The study further indicated that most of them relied on diverse coping strategies to assuage the effect of their wives' absence, including lengthy and frequent phone calls and reciprocal visits with their wives. These findings necessitate some interventions from the Wa West District Assembly and the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development to promote family reunion among affected spouses, enhance irrigation farming and make irrigable lands accessible to female farmers, as the recurring out-migration of wives for greener pastures has critical repercussions on the emotional well-being of their spouses.

1. Introduction

Contemporary times have established the global dimension of migration as a reality touching all corners of the world (Adepoju, 2010; United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2017; United Nations World Tourism Organisation [UNWTO], 2009; Williams & Hall, 2000). Migration takes two main forms: internal and international. Globally, around 763 million people are internal migrants; however, most studies focus on the 281 million international migrants as of 2020 (International Migration Organisation [IOM], 2021; McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021; UN DESA, 2017). Estimating the number of internal migrants is challenging due to a scarcity of data and limited development. Notwithstanding, more people are engaging in internal migration because it has become an important livelihood strategy for them (Adepoju, 2010; Manuh et al., 2010; Tanle, 2023). The Ghana Statistical Service (GSS, 2023) disclosed that Ghanaians are quite mobile, with the 2021 Population and Housing Census (PHC) revealing that a third of the Ghanaian population is internal migrants, with the majority being females (52.5%) compared to 47.5% males.

Awumbila (2015) noted that the migration pattern within Ghana has changed because of women's increased participation in previously male-dominated internal migration. Thus, IOM (2009) affirmed that migration temporarily alters gender roles in a household and restructures the pre-migration household dynamics. For instance, the reversal of gender roles, where a migrant wife becomes the breadwinner while her husband takes care of the children and household in her absence. However, a comparative study by Abutima (2019) on the gendered experiences of 400 left-behind spouses in the Northern Region of Ghana reveals contradictory evidence in which entrenched imbalances in gender roles and power relations in the patriarchal system influence the benefits and challenges associated with spousal migration and the ways husbands and wives cope with the absence of their spouses.

Aside from a few of these empirical undertakings, which have attempted to unpack some of these nuances involving this critical budding topic on the consequences of spousal out-migration on their left-behind partners at the places of origin, a literature search on Ghana revealed little published research

on the emotional impact and coping strategies of men left behind by their migrant wives (Apatinga & Obeng, 2020). Although Abutima's (2019), Apatinga and Obeng's (2020) and Tanle's (2023) works investigated critical aspects of the above subject in Ghana, Abutima's work largely dwelt on how entrenched patriarchal norms create disparities in gender roles and power dynamics among married men and women left behind. For Tanle's work, the focus was on the out-migration of married women from the Nandom Municipality and the experiences of husbands left-behind in performing gender-differentiated household chores and farming activities in their wives' absence. With this context, a further scrutiny of the literature indicates that, aside from Apatinga and Obeng's (2020) study which strove to examine the emotional impact of independent transnational female migration on left-behind husbands, to the best of our knowledge, there is no known empirical study within the Ghanaian setting that has qualitatively explored the impact of internal out-migration of wives from northern Ghana to the southern part of the country, and how their left-behind husbands have addressed their emotional needs, such as sexual desires and loneliness. This implies a gap in the Ghanaian migration literature that lends credence to the relevance of this study, which aims to address this critical lacuna in the extant literature on internal migration (Abutima, 2019).

This study investigates the impacts of women's out-migration on the welfare of their left-behind husbands in the Wa West district, with a focus on the emotional impacts they face and the coping strategies they employ to manage these challenges. The following questions are raised in response to the identified research gap:

- 1) Which factors influence the migrant wives' choice of destination?
- 2) What are the emotional impacts on the male spouses who stay behind?
- 3) What coping strategies do these male spouses employ to deal with the emotional impacts of being separated from their migrant wives?

The utility of this study is twofold. First, the evidence generated significantly contributes to bridging a critical knowledge gap in the Ghanaian migration literature by revealing how the out-migration of wives affects the emotional well-being of their left-behind husbands and the strategies employed to cope with their prolonged absence. Second, the study has also provided essential proposals for addressing the emotional difficulties left-behind husbands generally face due to the out-migration of their wives, as a critical step for guaranteeing the stability of marriages in the study area. In general, the study is structured under six (6) key sections as follows: introduction, literature review, methods, results and discussion, conclusion and policy recommendations and study limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1 Overview of female outmigration and its impact on left-behind spouses

Globally, women have been observed to migrate more frequently in recent decades, constituting an increasing share of migrant populations (Awumbila, 2015; GSS, 2021). For this reason, scholarly discourses acknowledge that migration is a driver of growth and a livelihood strategy with significant positive impacts on people's livelihoods and well-being (Azzarri et al., 2011; Yendaw et al., 2019). Furthermore, many female migrants now travel independently, aided by networks of friends and relations (Hofmann & Buckley, 2012). This means that, contrary to other studies such as Carrasco and Obućina (2023) and Toma and Vause (2014), women migrate primarily to join partners, thereby becoming dependent on them. The primary reasons for female migration from rural to urban areas in Ghana can be explained in terms of economic, social, and cultural forces.

The proliferation of industries in urban centres such as Accra, Kumasi, and Sekondi-Takoradi, with accompanying employment opportunities, has triggered a migration of women to these areas (Abdulai, 1999). Rural income levels are also significantly lower than in urban areas (Adepoju, 2014; GSS, 2021). Awumbila (2011) and Kwankye et al. (2009) suggested that rural-urban migration in Ghana has been attributed to the expectation of earning higher wages in the destination area, which is entirely consistent with the principle of comparative advantage. Meanwhile, some women are enticed to move to urban areas by the wealth displayed by friends and relatives who return during Christmas and other festive occasions (Boakye-Yiadom & McKay, 2006; Yendaw et al., 2016). The desire to acquire such wealth lures them to urban areas. Another driver is the influence of the government's macroeconomic policies on female rural-urban migration in the country. Through urban-biased policies, the terms of trade have consistently been favoured over agriculture and the rural areas, and cheap food policies have contributed to wide rural-urban income disparities (Kwankye et al., 2009).

Most of these migrant women are drawn to the social and cultural amenities that are not available in rural areas. These amenities include clean drinking water, electricity, health care, and entertainment. Females also migrate to urban areas to escape traditional family systems and restrictions such as harsh social sanctions, rigid parental control, and expectations. Finally, modernisation and relaxation of roles assigned to women traditionally have led to a significant proportion of female residents becoming involved in north-south migration in recent years. Barlés-Arizón et al. (2013) attributed the changing roles of women to their increased participation in the labour force. Anecdotal evidence, therefore, suggests that some women from the Wa West District leave their spouses and children in the quest to improve their livelihoods. These are a few of the reasons that have emerged in studies on the migration of young girls from the north to the south of the country (Kwankye et al., 2009; Yendaw et al., 2016).

Some scholars have enumerated that female migration might lead to broken homes because male spouses are more likely to seek their sexual satisfaction elsewhere (Shuzhen, 2010). Lu Shuzhen (2010) emphasised the possibility of a break or limited communication due to the work schedule of the female migrant. As pressing issues go unresolved, a lack of

communication might breed mistrust. This may eventually lead to misunderstanding and, hence, the demise of the marriage. Women's migration may also result in the separation in the absence of family reunification policies, and the impact is borne by the children, who grow up without the presence of at least one of their primary caregivers (Shuzhen, 2010). In addition, in households where wives are the breadwinners, their migration will adversely affect or threaten their left-behind spouses. Husbands or men would struggle with taking up new and traditionally female tasks. Thus, the ramifications of female migration may lead to a redefining of roles in the family. Nonetheless, it has been revealed that women's migration has provided them with new opportunities that have improved their lives and the lives of those left behind (Awumbila, 2015). Migration alters economic roles within families, with women earning more money than men, for instance (IOM, 2009).

2.2 Theoretical framing

The study adopted the attachment theory and supplemented it with the push-pull theory to guide the analysis. These theories are apt for this study because many of their theoretical propositions address the research questions, which explored the emotional impacts and coping strategies of husbands left behind by their wives or spouses in the Wa West District due to their migration to major cities in southern Ghana.

Hutchison (2006) averred that the primary characteristics of attachment theory are a sense of security and belonging, as the absence of these qualities can lead to feelings of loneliness and sadness. Attachment, according to Bowlby (1980), refers to behaviour oriented toward attaining or retaining closeness with a preferred individual who provides a sense of security, in this case, a spouse. Indeed, research supports the usefulness of attachment theory in explaining marital relationships (Dainton, 2007; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). These theoretical suppositions addressed how the loss of physical attachment to their migrant wives, which had provided a sense of security and belonging, impacts the emotional states of their left-behind spouses and their strategies to assuage this loss. Though this theory (attachment theory) was not originally developed for migration research, it has been recognised by Dainton (2007) and Feeney et al. (2000) as one of the most influential theories of interpersonal relationships. The theory explains how a detachment of bonds between people could negatively produce emotional impacts or difficulties, such as loneliness and depression (Dainton, 2007; Feeney et al., 2000).

Bowlby (1980) first proposed this theory in 1969. Bowlby (1980) and his adherents explained attachment as the emotional bond between an infant and caregivers (Keller, 2013). Keller (2013) and Scharfe (2017) indicated that this theory assumes that attachment structured in infancy will have an impact on future relationships. From childhood into adulthood, an individual can form multiple attachment relationships with people other than their primary caregiver (Keller, 2013), and this can be extended to the kind of intimate relationships or bonds formed between spouses in later life. Bowlby (1980) believed that attachment in the parent-child relationship is different from attachment in romantic relationships between adults, and that attachment can influence behaviour, cognition, and emotions at any stage

of life, from infancy to adulthood (Honari & Saremi, 2015; Sutton, 2019). The impact of childhood attachment on romantic relationships in adulthood was also mentioned, as individual differences in adult attachment behaviour mirror people's expectations and self-perceptions from past intimate relationships. Bowlby's (1980) theory that attachment would affect a person's romantic relationships is said to have been tested for the first time by Hazan and Shaver (1987). Hence, a substantial body of empirical research demonstrates a connection between attachment and how an individual views romantic relationships as an adult (Sutton, 2019). More precisely, relationships with higher attachment security tend to be more stable, committed and higher quality. Attachment styles can be either secure or insecure (Honari & Saremi, 2015). For this reason, anxious, avoidant, fearful, unresolved, ambivalent, disorganised and dismissive are indicative of insecure attachment styles.

According to Sutton (2019), the attachment theory has a significant advantage over other similar perspectives. This theory is parsimonious, easily testable, and widely applicable to a range of areas: mental health, emotion regulation, personality, family and romantic relationships. She asserted that the theory's applicability stems, in part, from the way it incorporates various significant theoretical bodies of work, including developmental, social learning, socialisation, and social information processing theories. The long-term impact of early attachment experiences and orientations on adult interpersonal interactions, such as the functioning of romantic relationships, caregiving behaviour, and conflict and communication skills, has also been studied by researchers (Sutton, 2019).

Despite the overwhelming utility of the attachment theory in this study, it has some weaknesses. One key drawback is that it appears too general, partly because it was not originally developed for the study of migration. Accordingly, its building blocks have not been able to address all the critical nuances of the study objectives, especially the aspects bordering on the causes of rural out-migration from the Wa West District. The drawback of the attachment theory has been addressed by drawing heavily from the basic tenets of the push-pull theory, previously employed by Yendaw et al. (2016) to investigate drivers of north-south migration in the Wa West district. According to (Yendaw et al., 2016), rural out-migration is influenced by several factors: background characteristics of potential migrants (e.g., age, sex, employment status, education); precarious conditions or push factors at the place of origin (e.g., poor soils, erratic rainfall, high unemployment); migration feedbacks from returnees (e.g., success stories about the destination, visible wealth accumulated, modern lifestyles); and favourable conditions or pull factors at potential destinations (e.g., employment opportunities, high earnings, modern infrastructure). Yendaw et al. (2016) define precarious factors as unfavourable socio-cultural, economic, and physical characteristics at the origin that predispose individuals to hardships and migration. Pull factors, meanwhile, are positive attractions at potential destinations, often discovered through word of mouth, media outlets like television, the internet, and social media.

3. Methods

3.1 Study area

The study was conducted in the Wa West District (WWD) in the Upper West Region of Ghana (Figure 1). The WWD is one of the 261 Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDAs) in Ghana and is part of the 11 municipalities and districts in the Upper West Region. The Wa West District was carved out of the Wa Municipality and established as an autonomous district by L.I 1746. The district is located in the western part of the Upper West Region, approximately between latitudes 9° 40' N and 10° 10' N and longitudes 2° 20' W and 2° 50' W. The administrative capital is Wechiau. In terms of size, it covers a total land area of 1,458 square kilometres. The district shares boundaries with the Sawla-Tuna-Kalba District to the south, Wa Municipal to the east, Nadowli Kaleo District to the north, and Ivory Coast to the west. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census (PHC), the population of the WWD stands at 96,957, with 45,880 males and 51,077 females.

Wa West District was chosen as the study area for several reasons. Firstly, the district is in a region with a negative migration effectiveness ratio (MER) of 72.3, indicating that 72.3% of all internal migrants were departures [GSS, 2023]. The Upper West region's negative MER was the third-highest

recorded during the 2021 PHC. This negative MER is higher than the negative MER (70.7%) recorded during the 2010 PHC when the region had the highest negative MER ever recorded [GSS, 2014a]. Secondly, Wa West District is known for its youth's north-south migration to major cities in the southern part of the country in search of greener pastures (GSS, 2021; Yendaw et al., 2016). The major driving factor behind this continued migration is the poor condition of the soils, combined with recurring dry spells that endanger the district's agrarian economy. Many households (91.6%) engage in grain, legume, root, and tuber farming, as well as livestock rearing (GSS, 2014b). Thus, the district is facing food security and unemployment challenges, which are driving the migration process.

Specifically, four communities in the district noted for female out-migration, namely Meteui, Buli, Oloteng, and Bulingin, were purposively selected as the study sites (Figure 1). These communities were identified during stakeholder engagement with key staff of the Wa West District Assembly (WWDA) and community leaders (Chiefs, Assembly Members, Unit Committee Members, and youth leaders).

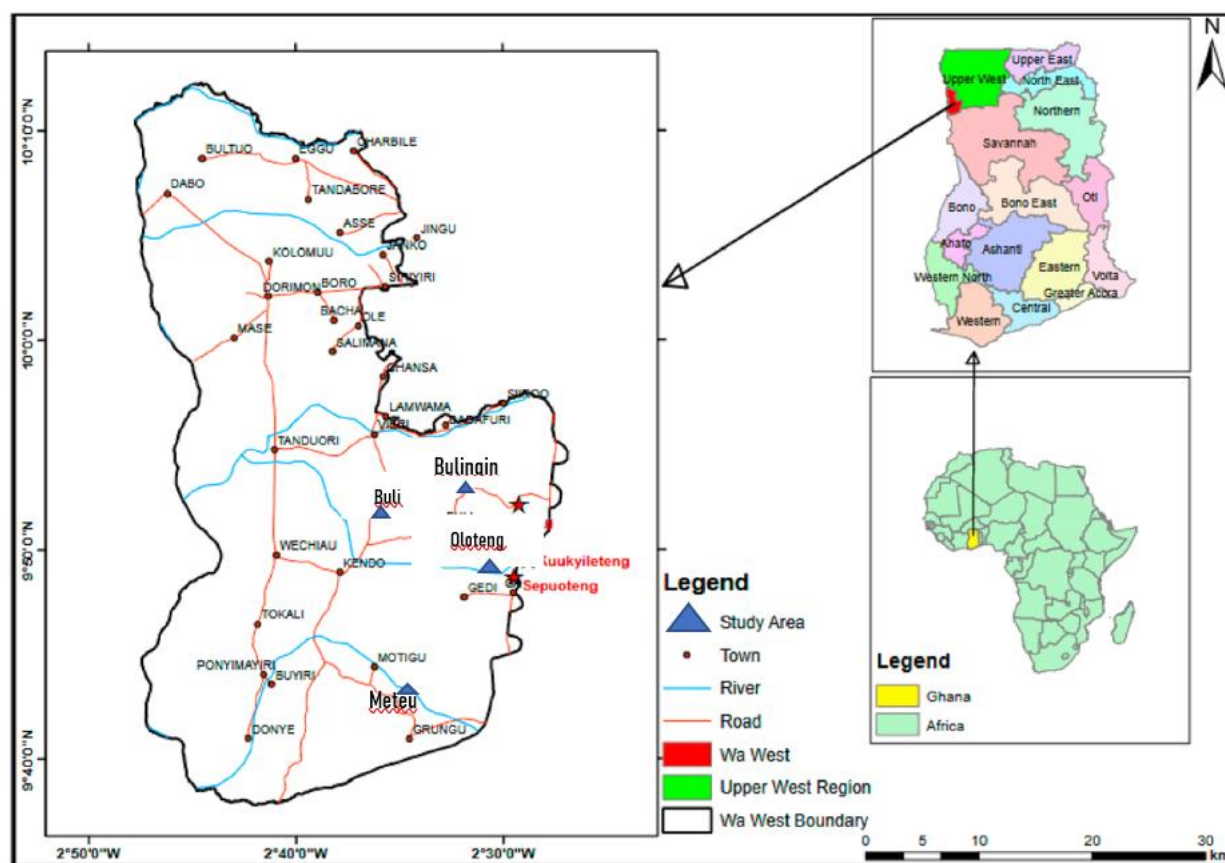


Figure 1: Map of the study district and communities

Source: Department of Geography, Simon Diedong Dombo University of Business and Integrated Development Studies

3.2 Study design, approach and target population

Our study used a descriptive cross-sectional qualitative research design, underpinned by phenomenology and guided by interpretivism. This framework enabled the analysis of left-behind husbands' experiences and coping mechanisms in response to the emotional challenges posed by their migrant wives' prolonged absence. The emphasis centred on

unpacking the participants' personal experiences within their social context (Yendaw, 2019). Key aspects explored included socio-demographic characteristics, decision and reasons for wives' outmigration, emotional impacts of migration, and coping strategies employed. A qualitative approach was the most appropriate considering the nature of the study's objective and the target population. The primary

strength of this research design is its deeper exploration of subjective experiences, which can provide an understanding of the research problem (Yendaw et al., 2019; Yendaw et al., 2016). The inhabitants of the WWD in Ghana's Upper West Region, whose wives had migrated and left them behind, were the target population.

3.3 Data collection and sampling

The study adopted Abutima's (2019) definition of a left-behind husband. That is, any married man living in the Wa West District but whose wife has migrated to any part of the country and has been living at the destination for the past year or more. Twelve (12) married men whose wives had migrated to southern Ghana for better opportunities were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The chosen sample size is within the range that Saunders et al. (2012) suggested as the minimum non-probability sample size, provided qualitative research uses in-depth interviews as a data collection tool. According to Saunders et al. (2012), the range should be between five and twenty-five. Moreover, the 12 participants were obtained based on theoretical saturation of their responses on the issue under study. The study enlisted multiple gatekeepers to address the selection and gatekeeper biases associated with the use of snowballing sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Creswell, 2009, 2014). Also, some gatekeepers became participants in the study (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). A participant for the study should have the following key variables. First, a male resident aged 18 years and older. Secondly, he should be married, but his spouse had migrated to the southern part of the country for at least six months. The GSS (2014a) classified all persons who stayed outside their place of birth for six months or more as internal migrants. Lastly, the husband should be able to communicate in English and any of these local languages: Dagaare, Twi and Wali. The six-month duration was used as the cut-off point in selecting the participants because the GSS (2023) has used a six-month duration to describe permanent migration. Moreover, the authors considered that the six-month duration was long enough for the husbands left behind by their wives to have experienced the impacts of their wives' absence.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The questions were not necessarily asked in a specified order, but they allowed the interviewees to explain and verbalise their experiences. This interview technique was useful because it allowed husbands to describe how their spouses' absence has affected them and their families. The questions covered six broad areas: their socio-demographic characteristics, the decision and reasons to migrate, the socio-economic impact of their out-migration, the emotional impact of their out-migration, and the strategies used to cope with their spouses' absence. Informed consent and voluntary participation were verbally sought and obtained from all participants before the interviews were scheduled and commenced. All participants were guaranteed the right to withdraw from the study at any point, and no coercion or inducement was used to secure their participation throughout the fieldwork. The participants chose the venues for all the interviews. During the interviews, an appreciative and respectful tone was used in the interactions with the husbands (Bailey, 2007). The interviews ranged in length from thirty minutes to forty-five minutes. With their permission, all responses were audiotaped, and

they were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Thus, the interviewees' responses, names and residential locations or communities of origin were expunged. Besides, detailed notes were taken during the interviews. Data collection was done in the first half of 2022.

3.3 Methods of data analysis

The data were organised and transcribed verbatim in preparation for coding and analysis. To ensure uniformity before coding, all the conversations recorded in the local languages were verbatim transcribed into English. Subsequently, data were validated through the membership check approach with five participants who provided in-depth perspectives during the interviews. The rationale was to ensure that their responses were accurately represented and not changed to suit the researchers' agenda (Tong et al., 2007). The researchers used a thematic analysis to make sense of the data after manually coding, and the inclusion of direct quotes from different participants demonstrates the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings and interpretation (Blumberg et al., 2011; Braun & Clarke, 2012; Tong et al., 2007). To protect their identities, the names of the research participants were changed.

4. Results and discussion

Four major themes emerged during the thematic analysis: socio-demographic characteristics of the left-behind husbands, factors that determine the destination choices of the female spouses, emotional impacts and coping strategies. Under the coping strategies, four sub-themes emerged. The discussion of these themes starts with the socio-demographic characteristics of the left-behind husbands.

4.1 Socio-demographic characteristics of left-behind husbands

Table 1 depicts the socio-demographic characteristics of the left-behind husbands interviewed in the Wa West District by age, type of marriage, profession, level of education, religion, wife's duration of stay at the destination, ethnicity, and home community. Many of the husbands were of the Brifor ethnicity (10) and farmers (8), 10 of them practised monogamy at the time of the interviews, and one-third were aged 50 years or older. One husband was a farmer in addition to being a teacher trainee. One of the polygamists had both of his wives migrating, while the other husband had one of his wives migrating. Half of the husbands profess the Christian faith, followed by the traditional (3) and Islamic (2) religions. Most of them are from Buli (4) and Metue (3).

One-fourth have had or are receiving a tertiary education, while the same proportion has never had formal education. Table 1 shows that many of their wives have been internal migrants for one to three years. Although one of the wives' stays is less than six months, the intention expressed by her husband qualifies her as a migrant. Most of the wives' destinations were in the middle and southern regions of the country: Ahafo (Goaso), Ashanti (Kumasi Akwanta, Kumasi Manso, and Nkyemkyemso), Bono (Berekum, Dormaa, and Wamfie), Bono East (Techiman), Western (Bogoso and Takoradi), and Western North (Debiso). Only one of the wives migrated to Tuna in the Savannah Region. This finding supports one of the key characteristics of contemporary

female migration in Ghana identified by Lattof et al. (2018), namely their high participation in intraregional migration.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the left-behind husbands

Variables	Number
Age (years)	
20 – 29	3
30 – 39	3
40 – 49	2
50+	4
Type of marriage	
Monogamy	10
Polygamy	2
Profession	
Teacher trainee	2
Nutrition officer	1
Farmer	8
Teacher	1
Level of education	
Never attended school	4
JHS	3
SHS	1
Tertiary	4
Religion	
No religion	1
Catholic	2
Pentecostal	1
Other Christian	3
Islam	2
Traditionalist	3
Hometown of the left-behind husband	
Metue	3
Buli	4
Woliyiri	2
Others	3
Wife's duration of stay at the destination	
<6 months	1
6 – 12 months	2
1 – 3 years	8
20+	1
Ethnicity	
Brifor	10
Others	2
Region of the wife's destination	
Ahafo	1
Ashanti	3
Bono	3
Bono East	1
Savannah	1
Western	2
Western North	1
Others (i.e. Akuabinkrom)	1

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Based on the research design, the above socio-demographic characteristics cannot be generalised to all left-behind husbands or the general population in the Wa West District. However, some of these characteristics were consistent with

the 2010 PHC data collected by the GSS in the Wa West District, while others were not. Most of the respondents were elderly, farmers, in monogamous marriages, Christians, and their hometowns (Buli and Metue) were among the largest communities in the Wa West District (GSS, 2014a). Nonetheless, according to the GSS (2014b), the district's population is youthful, and the major religions are traditionalist and Islamic. The polygamous nature of the district was attributed to Islam, but the husbands who had more than one wife were either Christian or a believer in traditional religion.

4.2 Factors that determine the destination choices of female spouses

Recent decades have seen the independent migration of married Ghanaian women (Abutima, 2019; Tanle, 2023), but little attention has been paid to the factors that influence destination choices. Accordingly, the study asked the husbands what influences their wives' destinations. They identified the wife's profession, social capital, or both as the deciding factors. Ngmenfaa of Metue explained how his wife's profession as a hairdresser and the prospects of getting clients influenced her travel to Nkyemkyemso.

"She is a hairdresser ... she will be doing people's hair for them and be getting something small, small, and if I need something, she can support me because of that, we realised that for her staying here there is nothing for her to be doing." (Ngmenfaa, 26 years, Metue).

Besides, the above narration and Saan divulged the encouragement they gave their wives to work and earn an income to supplement their household income as heads of households, which conflicts with what (Yendaw et al., 2016) uncovered in their study, where socio-cultural factors appear to play the most vital roles in the migration and destination choices of migrants from the Wa West District. However, this finding supports the key assumptions of the push-pull theory previously applied by Yendaw et al. (2016) in their study, where favourable conditions or lures at the destination, unfavourable factors at the origin and migration feedback of returnees interact to shape the out-migration decisions of potential migrants. The findings further concur with Cortés Castellanos' (2005) claim that the family's decision to migrate is motivated by a desire to increase their income. It corroborates GSS's (2014a) assertion that an individual's decision to migrate is based on the expected stream of earnings at the proposed destination. This result is consistent with those of Adepoju (2010), who reported that in a desperate bid for survival, most people are now migrating to the cities. Yet again, influencing the choice of Berekum was the presence and willingness of Saan's wife's relatives to provide accommodation while his wife worked.

"Okay, her relatives are over there [Berekum], and she can stay with them while working. If not because of hardship, as a man, you are supposed to go out and leave your wives behind to look for something to support themselves. Besides, a woman is not supposed to travel and leave her husband. I asked her to go because I can't travel and leave the house, so that when she gets something small, she can support the farm." (Saan, 40 years, Oloteng).

Though it was the husband's suggestion, the finding is consistent with Hoang's (2011) observation that potential migrants seek out environments with readily available social networks. The husbands' motives and preferences may conflict or converge with those of their wives regarding the migration to the middle and southern regions of Ghana (Hoang, 2011). Despite the support, the husbands complained that it was not right for their wives to travel for work and leave them at home, which concurs with what Abutima (2019) unveiled, where patriarchal norms continue to fuel imbalances in gender roles and decision-making powers between men and women.

Some of the destinations were chosen due to the presence of relatives of the husbands and the economic activities (e.g. farming) in which these relatives are engaged. A 28-year-old respondent stated:

"I am a student, and I always go to school to study. She is here, and my brother, too, has a cocoa farm. So, we decided that she should go there [Bogosu] so that she could help my brother on the cocoa farm there, and she could support me in paying my school fees. So, the main reason for her migration is to go and help take care of the cocoa farm" (Kpiefaar, 28 years, Buli).

The assurance that a wife would be safe with a family member was a deciding factor. For Biirde, if his wife cannot stay with his brother in Takoradi, then the brother must send his wife back home.

"I do not know anybody, which is why I asked her to go to my brother's place. So, if I asked her to go to my place, these days the world is bad, that is why I asked her to go and stay with my brother. So, if she cannot stay there, my brother will allow her to come" (Biirde, 24 years Meteu).

Investigating the factors that influence the wives' choice of destination as part of the decision to migrate confirms that it is rarely the result of individual decision-making. The findings suggest that the destination of a migrant wife had to be consented to by the husband being left behind, which seems to be consistent with other research (see Hoang & Yeoh, 2011), which found that even though migration was set out as a collective family project, it never happens without the man's consent. The timing of the decision to migrate is closely related to the family cycle and major life events (Nauck & Settles, 2001). The above narrations raise three issues. First, social networks at destinations promote migration by helping people integrate into the host communities. Toma and Vause (2014) discovered that in patriarchal settings such as the Wa West District, women need access to and support from migrant networks to migrate. This study thus found that husbands were a huge help to their wives in this regard. Equally, pre-existing kinship relations frequently influenced migration decisions (Ryan, 2007). Second, husbands bemoan what they perceive to be the ideal scenario for spousal migration, in which they, as heads of households, should be the ones migrating to find work and send remittances to their families at the host destinations. Finally, the study recognised that because of recurring dry

spells, poor soil conditions, and a lack of employment opportunities for the youth in agrarian and other sectors of the economy in the study area, the dynamics of the households that should migrate have changed, particularly for men who are the heads. This is consistent with Ghana's national migration policy, which identifies environmentally vulnerable and agriculturally unsustainable regions for north-south migration (Ministry of Interior, 2016).

4.3 Emotional impacts

Démurger (2015), Dreby (2007), Parreñas (2005) and Abutima (2019) acknowledged the gendered consequences of spousal migration and its impact on the experiences of husbands and wives who do remain in the origin communities. According to Hoang (2011), migration entails living and working away from one's family for an extended period. Furthermore, independent migration of women in search of employment and better lives in urban areas where economic activities are concentrated has separated many married couples (Lei & Desai, 2021; Maviza & Carrasco, 2023; Potts & Mutambirwa, 1990; Potts, 2010). Consequently, common themes that emerged throughout all the husbands' stories about their wives' migration were the experience of unhappiness and loneliness.

"I always feel lonely. It is not good to marry, and your wife will be living somewhere, and you will also be living somewhere. I feel pity for myself for allowing her to be somewhere with our child" (Ngmenfaa, 26 years, Meteu).

"I was not happy when she left. I feel lonely whenever I am in my room. When she was around, we talked about issues that would help us one day. My father does not talk to me. I do not feel good because of her absence" (Biirde, Meteu).

Others were filled with nostalgia for their better halves and lamented the loss of a companion with whom they could converse:

"Oh yes, once God created a man to have a wife, you must think of her. I think of her because there are certain things I am not supposed to do when she is around, but I am doing them now. Chatting with her alone is something big, but because of her absence at times, I feel bored. I have no one to talk to" (Kuuvarburo, 38 years, Meteu).

The quotes above attest to their increased feelings of loneliness, isolation, and depression (Shattuck et al., 2019; Yeoh & Lam, 2007), which accentuate the fundamental assumptions of the theoretical framework (attachment theory) used in this study, which emphasised the critical role of the bonds formed between people and how the absence of them could affect romantic relationships.

Nukunya (2016) identified three purposes of marriage in the Ghanaian context: sexual intercourse, the raising of a family, and companionship. A few studies have looked at the relationship between spousal separation because of migration and sexual challenges (Kpoor & Gyan, 2022; Lobnibe, 2005). Most husbands concede that the migration of the female

spouses impedes coitus activity, which may further reduce the fertility rate of couples with one migrant spouse (Yabiku et al., 2010). Below are some of their responses:

“Definitely, you will not be happy. For example, any time I am with my woman and then we are to go to bed, we do a lot of things that give me a peaceful mind. But now, if I go to bed, I must think of the time my wife was with me. Now whenever I go to bed, I cannot concentrate. My mind will be disturbed and even how to sleep ... If I say it is not affecting me, I will be telling lies. Just that I do not have a choice. When you get married without sex, there is no way you will give birth to a child ... if the man does not take care, he will commit adultery, which will affect your woman. Arhaa, it is a challenge” (Ngmenfaa, 26 years, Meteu).

“For a man and his wife's issue, you cannot say you are not affected. Even if her absence affects me, I cannot tell anybody. If you are a man, you are supposed to tell a lie and that one lie will affect you. I can boldly say it is affecting me” (Bierende, Meteu).

“Sexually, her absence is affecting me, but because of self-control, I am managing. If you have a wife and she is not with you, sexually it affects you” (Kuudenieg, 45 years, Meteu).

The responses acknowledged Abutima's (2019) observation that sex is a major concern among husbands left behind. Additionally, the marital stress the husbands are experiencing, as well as the self-control they are exercising in the absence of their wives. They would have had extramarital affairs if they had not exercised self-control. Thus, the importance of satisfying sexual needs cannot be overstated, especially when a wife is absent for an extended period (Nukunya, 2003). Shen (2008) refers to men who are married but whose wives have migrated as 'situational singles'. These men, like other single men, prefer to have other women as partners for their sexual gratification. This finding confirms that migration can be one of the factors that cause marital stress, which can lead to marital dissatisfaction and dissolution (Ben-David & Lavee, 1994; Li, 2018). Lei and Desai (2021) indicated that spatial separation between spouses can lead to marital instability.

Another man stated that in the absence of his wife, he does not feel the full impact of his wife's soothing words, even though they are transmitted over the phone. Ngmenfaa believes that words spoken face to face, accompanied by physical touch, are preferable to those spoken over the phone.

“Anytime I have a problem, she knows that something is bothering me. The kind of words she uses sometimes makes me feel relieved. Because of this travelling, I do not get those words from her again. Even though she can speak to me on the phone, how can I feel her, and give me all those impressive words.” (Ngmenfaa, 26 years, Meteu)?

The findings on the emotional impacts corroborate the key underpinnings of Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory, which underscores that attachment has the proclivity to affect a

person's romantic relationships and hence explains how a detachment of bonds between individuals could negatively produce emotional impacts such as loneliness (Dainton, 2007; Feeney et al., 2000). These revelations similarly reinforce the ideas of Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007), who argue that the migrant spouse's long-term absence can minimise closeness and intimacy in the marital relationship. Moreover, migration disrupts frequent spousal interaction (Li, 2018). The current revelations are, however, incongruent with the evidence unveiled by Abutima (2019), where the patriarchal system engendered male domination in general decision-making and impacted on men's and women's roles differently, including how they coped with the absence of their spouses. For instance, Abutima revealed how males still perceived key household chores such as washing and cooking as female tasks.

4.4 Coping strategies

4.4.1 Frequent and lengthy phone calls

Participants enumerated a variety of coping strategies they frequently use to manage the emotional impacts of their wives' absence. The quotes below clearly demonstrate that the key among strategies employed is lengthy and frequent phone calls with their wives, provided technology permits. Thus, in the absence of face-to-face communication, the mobile phone has become constitutive of emotional registers (Madianou, 2019).

“There is not a single day that I will get up and not call or hear from her. Unless she has a low battery, or where she is the network is not good. As for the afternoon, I am always in class. Therefore, I can say every morning and evening I call her,” (Ngmenfaa, 26 years, Meteu).

“I have decided that I will always make my line active for communication. You know, sometimes when you are bored, you can call her and chat. This is the strategy I have adopted so far to reduce my boredom. The call can sometimes go up to 11:00 pm, and you will feel sleepy. So, you end up sleeping on the call. Sometimes when you feel sad, you can call her to share ideas that may solve problems. That is how I am managing.” (Maase, 39 years, Buli).

The main objective of husbands having these frequent and lengthy calls is to maintain continuous connections with their migrant spouses (Wajcman et al., 2008). The above quotes also support Helmsing's (2003) postulation that technological advancements in communication have made it easy for male spouses to virtually stay present in the lives of their migrant wives despite their physical separation. Maviza (2020) added that current developments in communication contrast with the past, when there were limited means to support connections with families back home.

To maintain their marital lives while living apart, the husbands left behind equally rely heavily on these phone calls (Madianou, 2016). Madianou (2019) argued that mobile phones have become a tool that migrants use to capture visual evidence and a means of staying connected with family and friends back home, as well as increasing the frequency of calls. Additionally, some husbands, like Maase, find that

having frequent and lengthy phone conversations with their migrant wives helps to decrease the boredom, loneliness, and sadness that they experience when they are not physically available to have face-to-face interaction. Married couples separated by migration can communicate on the phone to stay updated on each other's lives and share details of their daily routines (Ahlin, 2020). That is, the widespread use of social media and mobile phones has made it easier for married couples who have separated because of migration to stay in touch and care for each other at a distance (Madianou, 2019).

These husbands' accounts suggest that they used their mobile phones to maintain intimacy with their wives by creating an experience of 'co-presence,' which is a form of being together that is mediated by technology (Ahlin, 2020). Moreover, Wajcman et al. (2008) claimed that the mobile phone may offer a further channel for engaging in and maintaining intimacy at a distance and over the day because of the increasing salience of communication in general. In addition to the phone calls, the exchange of brief, frequent messages that resemble an ongoing "dialogue," according to Licoppe (2004), has created a "connect presence" that has been facilitated by the portability of mobile phones. This helps to maintain the impression of a constant connection that can be activated at any time.

4.4.2 Visits

Conversely, Kang (2018) observed that these mediated forms of communication are still perceived as less intimate than in-person interactions. Even though virtual co-presence is highly valued, physical co-presence – being physically present with the longed-for wife with all five senses (i.e., sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch) – remains the gold standard (Bakuri & Amoabeng, 2023). Hence, some men take time to visit their wives and occasionally, wives also reciprocate these visits as the narrative below depicts:

"Anytime we are on vacation, I always go there. But as for her, she comes home when there is a problem or when she wants to see her parents and goes back. I can go there five times a year based on my vacation periods." (Ngmenfaa, 26 years, Meteu).

"She is learning a trade. Sometimes, when they get a break, she does come. I am also teaching, so during vacations I visit her. In 2021, I visited her twice, and she also came three times." (Maase, 39 years, Buli).

One unanticipated finding was that the husbands visit more frequently than their wives do, and occasionally, their wives' visits are motivated by the need to see other family members (such as their parents or an emergency that necessitates their presence (see Ngmenfaa's quote). Another husband reported that his wife came to see him once a year. Access to and 'affordable' transportation from the host community to the destinations of the migrant wives has increased the urge of their spouses to see them in person (Bakuri & Amoabeng, 2023). Visits are essential in ensuring marital stability because of the physical co-presence they offer (Baldassar, 2011). Baldassar (2016) also noted that one of the modern technologies, mobile phones, expands both the desire for and frequency of visits by enhancing the sense of co-presence over distance.

A few of the husbands mentioned that, in addition to phone calls and visits, having extended family and friends close by lessens their sense of loneliness. Kpiefaar confirmed this as follows:

"Yes, sometimes as a married man, you must interact with your wife. I do not always feel happy since she is out there. If my mother and other siblings were not here, I would always feel lonely. I communicate only with my friends. This situation affects me a lot." (Kpiefaar, 28 years, Buli).

4.4.3 Self-control and taking another wife

Although the left-behind husbands found it difficult to control their sexual urges, family members and friends could assuage their loneliness. Consequently, most of the husbands admitted to practising self-control to deal with their sexual desires despite acknowledging that it is a challenge to put into practice. To them, self-control will keep them from attracting sexually transmitted diseases that they could spread to their wives, and the decision to migrate was a joint one.

"It is a challenge, but self-control is the key. Once you are aware they are not available, you must be patient." (Saade, 70 years, Bulingin).

"My wife did not go there on her own authority. If I see a woman and develop a feeling for her, I must know that I already have a wife, and we do not have any problems. Hence, having an affair with any woman is not good" (Kuudenieg, 45 years, Meteu).

"I am practising self-control. It is not good to be doing bad things that can lead to a disease that you can transfer to your wife. This is very bad; you need to control." (Biirde, Meteu).

Nevertheless, some of the men contemplated taking another wife, but they were constrained by the hardship they were experiencing, which had led to their wives migrating. Some of the husbands wish they had married another wife, but they were constrained by the hardship that led to their wives migrating. The narrative by these husbands, Saade and Biirde, mirrored that:

"Marrying another wife while I am still in hardship will not solve the problem. Accordingly, you have to be patient. It is the hardship that prevents me from doing that." (Saade, 70 years, Bulingin).

"If I have the resources and know I can take care of them, I will marry another woman, but if I do not have the resources, I will not do it. Once there is unity between us, there is no way I will marry another wife." (Biirde, 24 years, Meteu).

Saade's consideration of taking on a third wife despite his precarious financial situation, advanced age and two migrant wives is what is striking about him. The quote from Biirde also confirmed that some husbands would not take another woman as a wife if the marital stability were intact, while

others thought it was disrespectful to their migrant spouses to take another wife while they were away.

"If she hears that I have married another wife, it means I have no respect for her. I will not do that."
(Kuudenieg, 45 years, Meteu).

This result was surprising because the study area is situated in a patriarchal society and described as polygamous, attributed to the Islamic religion (GSS, 2014b). In Ghana, polygyny is only allowed under customary law, but a man must seek his wife's consent. Despite the hesitations against taking another wife, the study is unable to state that these husbands are not engaging in extra-marital relationships, for this reason. Abutima (2019) observed that left-behind husbands feel uncomfortable discussing their sex lives with strangers.

4.4.4 Recreational activities

The study discovered from the in-depth interviews that the left-behind husbands do participate in a variety of recreational activities to cope with the incidents of loneliness and sexual desires. The preferred activities are playing cards with friends till late hours and watching or taking part in football matches.

"If there is a football match, I go there [Metu]. If Metu is playing with another community, I will go and watch." (Biirde, Metu).

"The moment I come home from work and bathe, I go and sit there [parliament near the market] till it is late at night. I like going there because when I am sitting alone, I cannot concentrate, and my mind is disturbed. But when I am with them [friends] at the parliament, we always play cards and do other things." (Ngmenfaa, 26 years, Meteu).

Ngmenfaa and Saan's narrations further disclosed that engaging in their recreational activities keeps husbands left behind from entertaining negative thoughts. Some husbands choose to watch TV or use their internet-enabled phones to view football videos on social media when they are not with their friends.

"Watching TV and participating in other recreational activities can help you erase negative thoughts going through your mind." (Saan, 40 years, Oloteng).

"When my guys are not around, like right now, anytime I am at home, I watch football videos on my phone just to make myself happy." (Ngmenfaa, 26 years, Meteu).

This finding is consistent with that of Zanforlin (2015), who postulated that using smartphones for personal entertainment would substitute for meeting friends or visiting one's family.

Hoang (2011) described migration as living and working away from one's family for extended periods. Migration within Ghana has undoubtedly been a way of life before the 1960s, especially the north-south migration (Agyei & Ofosu-Mensah Ababio, 2009; Lattot et al., 2018). Girls and women from the five northern regions make up many Ghana's internal migrants due to the increasing social acceptance of

female independence and mobility in modern times (GSS, 2021; GSS, 2013). Their decision to migrate has often been a response to a combination of various factors, including environmental, physical, economic, and social factors (GSS, 2014a). Desai and Benerji (2008) assert that migration is a process rather than an event, unlike other demographic phenomena like birth and death. Ghana's national migration policy acknowledges both positive and negative impacts of internal migration as a livelihood or adaptation strategy from the outset (Ministry of Interior, 2016). Depending on who stays behind or migrates, these impacts have different effects on married men and women.

Castells (2009) explained that technological advancements facilitated by globalisation had a significant impact on the migration process because they reduced the cost of travel and communication, enabling people to move to increasingly farther places. Madianou (2019) further added that the condition of mobility increases the need for distant communication and information.

5. Conclusions and policy recommendations

This study establishes that most of the left-behind husbands were of the Brifor ethnicity, and farmers and one-third were aged 50 years or older. Many of their wives' destinations were in the middle and southern regions of the country, which emphasises the socio-economic pull factors available in the middle and southern regions of Ghana, which continue to lure the youth from the northern regions. The study reveals that the wife's profession, social capital, or both are the driving factors that influenced their destination selections. Equally important was the presence and willingness of relatives at the places of destination to provide accommodation. This is a clear reflection of family reunification as espoused in the literature.

The emotional toll that wives' migration took on the left-behind husbands varied. However, the main emotional difficulties experienced by many of the husbands left behind were unhappiness and loneliness. Consequently, most left-behind husbands were overcome with nostalgia for their wives and lamented the loss of a companion with whom they could converse. They did not feel the overall impact of wives' soothing words, though conveyed over the phone. This suggests that the emotional satisfaction husbands obtain from the physical presence of wives cannot be replaced with phone calls. More significantly, the study reveals that the absence of their wives impeded coitus activity.

To lessen the emotional impacts, most of the participants resorted to reciprocal visits with their wives, lengthy and frequent phone calls with them, relying on extended family members and friends for support, and practising self-control to deal with their sexual desires. These findings necessitate essential interventions by the Wa West District Assembly and the Social Welfare Department to promote some form of family reunion among affected spouses, as the recurring out-migration of wives for greener pastures has serious repercussions on the emotional well-being of husbands and marital stability. This can be accomplished by offering skill training to married women in the study area, thereby supporting their spouses, while professional counselling services are recommended for the husbands left behind. Other

social inventions that the district assembly can implement to minimise the female outmigration are to enhance irrigation farming and make irrigable lands more accessible to female farmers. The theoretical contribution of this study is not in doubt, as the findings have significantly filled a critical knowledge gap in the Ghanaian migration literature, where information on how the internal out-migration of wives impacted the emotional well-being of their husbands is sparse, if not completely missing.

6. Study limitations

Notwithstanding the strength of this study, a qualitative research approach, which involves the use of a small sample size to investigate an issue in-depth, is characterised by a few weaknesses that ought to be highlighted. Firstly, the number of participants selected for the study through the snowballing approach might not exactly represent the population in the study area. Second, it is important to note that the study's findings are not transferable as far as generalisation for the entire population in the Wa West District is concerned. We therefore warn that extrapolation of these findings must be done with care. Thirdly, future research should consider this limitation to present a holistic picture of the experiences of left-behind husbands, especially the exact psychological impact of migrant wives on their spouses. Meanwhile, detailed large-scale studies are required on this subject nationwide to fully understand the broader impact of this form of migration in Ghana.

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Data availability

Data will be made freely available on request.

Author contributions

Elijah Yendaw: Conceived the research idea, and discussed with colleague co-authors and came out with the article's structure. Elijah Yendaw, Ada Adoley Allotey, and Bismark Nantomah: Jointly designed the protocol and collected the data. Elijah Yendaw, Ada Adoley Allotey, and Bismark Nantomah: Analysed and interpreted the data and wrote the first draft. Elijah Yendaw, Ada Adoley Allotey, and Bismark Nantomah: Jointly wrote the second draft and proofread the paper.

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