

The Complexities of Transnational Childcare Practices among Ghanaian Families in a Context of Global Pandemic

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Abstract

Childcare remains central in all human societies. This is because it is in children that humans invest their immortality and ensure the continuity of humanity. This partly explains the social collectivism that is brought to bear in childcare to the extent that in some indigenous African societies, the popular axiom is: "It takes a village to raise to raise a child". While the forces of modernity, neoliberalism, and the near-collapse of the extended family system across the world, including indigenous societies, have negatively impacted collective childcare, parents continue to devise creative strategies to nurture their children. The members of the Ghanaian diaspora in the United States of America (USA) often extended invitations to older members of their families, including their mothers, to join them across the Atlantic to help with nurturing their children. This practice of transnational migration of child carers was very efficient in helping children to access Ghanaian cultural values and languages, until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. With the outbreak of the pandemic, one way of controlling its totalizing effect was the imposition of social distance protocols, which at the peak of the pandemic involved a global ban on all means of human crisscrossing the world. This implied that most diasporic Ghanaians had their family-dependent source of childcare supply significantly cut. This phenomenon inspired the paper. Through in-depth interviews with selected Ghanaian families in the USA through social media and phones, this paper explores the impact of the ban on transnational travel on childcare practices among Ghanaian diaspora in the USA. The key findings of the study suggest that the COVID-19

pandemic did not only cripple the economies of the world, it also blocked the alternatives available to Ghanaians to receive an additional source of care for their children.

Keywords: family, childcare, migrant, strategy, values, COVID-19, Ghana, Ghanaians, diaspora

Introduction

Globally, childcare options are influenced by several factors. Transnational childcare practices among Africans in the diaspora are very common, and Ghana is no exception in this regard. Dankyi (2012), writing about childcare for Ghanaian parents living in the diaspora, discusses how parents bring a family relation, especially grandmothers, aunts, older siblings, or cousins, to augment their childcare options. In most instances, these relatives are willing and available to travel, not just because of the opportunities that such a migration process offers for both parties, but also because family members see it as an obligation (Poeze and Dankyi, 2016). Alternatively, some parents send their children back home and leave them in the care of relatives. The involvement of the family in childcare provision usually appears to be the first option for most Ghanaian parents, both at home and abroad, because of institutionalized practices within the extended family system and the consequent obligations of its members (Afrifa 2018).

The use of family care draws on the most desired form of social capital for childcare provision. Theoretically, the concept of social capital includes social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them and the values of these for achieving mutual goals where the reciprocities that beneficiaries receive are based on the value of trust for achieving mutual goals (Baron and Shuller 2000). Studies on childcare practices in Africa and Ghana especially have focused on the possibility of kinship care based on the pragmatic use of high levels of

social capital that ideally ensure care for the needy in the family, especially deprived children and orphans (Oppong 2004). In sub-Saharan Africa, informal care from kin members ensures the socialization, education and general maintenance of children. This kind of arrangement is based on a network of kinship support that ensures the collective care of children. This notion emphasises that the disruptions in social capital within the family can lead to the utilization of formal paid care rather than family-based care or informal care (Goody 1982, Oppong 2004). It is for this reason that most Ghanaians in the diaspora embrace family support in childcare provision.

The institutionalized nature of family-based childcare and its perceived benefits in Ghanaian society motivates the choice of this kind of arrangement even in the diaspora. Several authors have emphasised its advantages, not only for the children but also for the parents, due to the ability of kith and kin to collaboratively and effectively socialize the younger generation by passing on family values and the transfer of indigenous languages, as well as other culturally desirable qualities (Coe 2011, 2012; Dankyi and Poeze, 2016). However, traumatic and destabilizing factors such as the COVID-19 crisis and its accompanying restrictions on travel and lockdowns have had some impact on transnational childcare arrangements. In March 2020, owing to the high number of infections and deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic, drastic measures were taken to stop the spread of the viral infection (Ahrens et al., 2021). Travel bans were issued both domestically and internationally worldwide. Stricter measures such as lockdowns resulted in very strict restrictions on movements and stay-at-home policies (Ahrens et al., 2021).

The outbreak of COVID-19 had a significant impact on transnational families, particularly concerning childcare arrangements. Many were forced to cancel their plans to travel, resulting in a disruption of childcare arrangements. In some cases, this included grandparents or other relatives who were due to provide childcare and were unable to travel

due to lockdowns and strict travel restrictions (Hiebert et al., 2021). This put additional pressure on parents, who had to find alternative childcare solutions at short notice. With borders closed and travel restrictions in place during the pandemic, it was more difficult for members of families to keep in touch with, and/or connect with one another in person (Kiang et al., 2021). This was particularly difficult for families with young children, who were unable to communicate effectively with their relatives (Kiang et al., 2021).

COVID-19 had a dramatic and negative impact on transnational families in the USA, particularly with child care arrangements. For example, the disruption of international travel created issues for families where one or more parents may work abroad and during the pandemic, it has become much more difficult for them to return to the United States to provide care for their children (Hsin and Li, 2020). Furthermore, the lack of access to healthcare, economic hardship and other fears associated with the virus have made it difficult for some parents to maintain their employment, leading to a decrease in income and a lack of resources for childcare (Belgrave, Cimino and Wilson, 2021). Researchers argue that transnational families in the USA are likely to experience negative psychological effects, such as stress and anxiety, due to the disruption in childcare arrangements and the disruption of support systems as a result of COVID-19 (Padela and Gunter, 2020; Panchal et al., 2021). Although studies have highlighted the varying effects of COVID-19 pandemic on transnational families with regards to childcare arrangements, the experiences of Ghanaian transnational parents in the USA have been unexplored, thereby creating a knowledge gap in literature.

In the quest to contribute to knowledge by dealing with the knowledge gap identified in literature, this paper aims to examine how restrictions on human movement due to COVID-19 have influenced transnational childcare arrangements in terms of i) parents' ability to visit their children left behind; ii) sending children to Ghana due to complexities of

combining childcare and work in the USA; and iii) inviting family over to assist with childcare. This paper dwells on qualitative data collected from Ghanaian working parents in the USA (Massachusetts, New York, and Ohio) involved in any of the types of transnational childcare options. The paper is structured in three main sections. The first section is a literature review on childcare and transnational care. The second and third sections discuss methodology, findings and conclusions, respectively.

The Concept of Care, Ghanaian Migration and Transnational Childcare

Tracing the origin of care, scholars such as Oppong (1999) and Daly (2001) posit that care began as a woman-specific concept as it was seen mainly as part of the household chores – unpaid domestic labor. Care was conceived in the context of unpaid domestic labor as part of kinship and marriage responsibilities. The idealized concept of women's roles being the ability to provide care for children has always been considered paramount because of the value attached to them. Thus, care tends to be seen as a gift and or responsibility inside the sphere of kinship or friendship (Bubeck 1995). Based on its description as a domestic role which is dependent on affective ties from familial and friendship relationships, it is perceived more as an obligation than work and therefore not paid. Literature on the nature of the West African family system and the Ghanaian family specifically influences the type of childcare option. To an African, the concept of family is generally more inclusive in depth and span and embraces a wider membership than the word suggests in the Euro-American context (Goody 1982; Boateng 1996; Nukunya 2003; Afrifa 2010). The traditional African family is extended and revolves around joint households. It includes the living and the dead (designated as living dead) as well as the unborn whom the family considers as buds of hope (Awedoba, 2007).

Structural factors such as division of labor and expectations of an ancestor ensures that child care is a collective venture. For instance, among the Bambara of Mali, when an old person retires from work while living next to their sons or daughters, they need to find time to participate in childcare. This is because among the Bambara, access to the status of an elder involves taking care of little ones and inculcating wisdom and good manners in them. An old man or woman who forfeits the role will not access the role of an ancestor. This scenario is not different from the Ghanaian situation, as these features of the family structure render childcare being organized as a collective venture rather than an individual affair (Oppong, 2001).

Therefore, in the African and the Ghanaian context, childcare arrangements within the kinship network are usually established through the delegation of parental roles (kinship fostering) or support within the household from other kin. Children circulate within households depending on their specific needs, such as the health and wealth of the caregiver and their parents, proximity to school, and opportunities to learn a trade or a skill. Therefore, Nukunya (2003) notes, polygyny as a pervasive practice in Africa also served the purpose of shared caregiving due to the prevalence of large households and joint families. This was more possible and congenial where co-residents' children and co-wives were on good terms. Poeze, Dankyi and Mazzucato (2017) indicate that in childcare provision, kinship relationships with parents are very important for the proper maintenance and care of the children. In some communities such as the Dagomba, inexperienced mothers of neonates take a maternal leave from their husband's house and move to their own parents' homes once they have children (Adam 2012). It can be deduced from this description that duolocal residence might also be practiced when mothers have new babies.

Nanbigne (2010) notes that children occupy a special place in the Dagaaba household. A child in the household is supposed to be comfortable and not lack anything. So, arrangements are made such that the child has several caregivers (considered mothers and fathers) at any given time. So, right from birth, the child is given the best care that the family resources can provide. The mother is given a long time off from her normal everyday chores so that she does not only recover from the pressures and challenges of childbirth, but also has ample time to give the child ultimate care. Although this is the ideal, reality may differ depending on the kind of support the mother receives. For a woman who is lucky to have a good mother-in-law, ideal conditions prevail. The time away from the husband's house allows for traditional birth spacing and ensures that weaning is not done in a hurry because another baby is on the way. Again, the nature of polygynous households allowed for collective care from older siblings and co-wives of children once mothers returned from their natal homes.

Apart from the support from polygynous households, scholars such as Nanbigne (2010) and Oppong (2001) also document how other kin provide care for children within the household. Oppong (2004) writes that in the past, the young child was the 'darling' of the family. She cites Tallensi examples from Fortes (1949) where during the first three years, the nursing mother received support from kin to give her enough time to wean and give more attention to the child. Badasu (2004) adds that among the Ewes, the care of young children was the duty of kin or the lineage despite the fact that the mother was the primary caregiver. This is because the child is seen as the center of life and considered a dependent individual who needs to be cared for, socialized and supported by adult members of the family according to social norms and values (Nanbigne 2010; Nukunya 2003). Within the households, grandmothers also played significant roles in childcare provision. Literature on the consequence of family or household structure on child well-being underscores not only

the absence of parents but, to a larger extent, the absence of the grandmother in the household as a major determinant of child well-being (Gordon, Kaestner and Korenman 2008). By remaining actively involved in the rearing of their grandchildren, grandmothers have a helpful effect on the reproductive success of their children as well as the survival of their grandchildren. Studies have shown that children living in an extended family with grandparents have been observed to benefit from the grandmother effect (Gray 2005; Sharma and Kanini 2006).

Clark (1999), writing on mothering and childcare among the Akan, highlights the role of grandmothers in childcare. She describes how grandmothers take care of young children to allow mothers to go about their daily activities in the market. This practice is also common among the Dagaaba. Nanbigne (2010) asserts that the grandmother of a Dagaaba child usually helps in bathing and massaging the child all over with shea butter. As a child grows older and can be carried, she/he is placed in the care of a girl, the daughter of any of the child's mother's brothers. The designated caregiver now becomes the babysitter who is expected to feed, clean, carry and rock the baby while the mother goes about her chores. In some cases, she accompanies the baby's mother to the farm as she works. The babysitter helps in feeding the child and the family also made sure that the caregiver is well-catered for. The belief among the Dagaaba is that the one feeding the child must always taste what the child eats and must also be fed properly to allow the child to be well-fed. Although the mother is expected to do farm work such as joining the other women to sow or harvest, there are certain taboos regarding dos and don'ts on the farm. She cannot, for example, use large hoes used to raise yam or millet mounds. This is seen to be back-breaking work, and a nursing mother is expected to reserve her back for carrying her baby.

More recent studies, which highlight the impact of social and economic changes on traditional childcare arrangements add that there are contemporary adaptations to traditional systems of care that anthropological studies discuss. Afrifa (2018) mentions that despite dynamic and changing economic and social forces as well as migrations that have resulted in the dispersal of kin, family childcare practice is often chosen as the first option when parents need assistance. It is, however, accompanied by different variations, such as instances where family members are paid, or others are given some sort of remuneration. Apart from this, other forms of informal networking are used in childcare provision. Afrifa's (2018) study examined childcare practices in three geographically distinct areas of Accra, and the findings suggested high levels of informal childcare practices largely influenced by family childcare, serving as good social capital for parents through complementary childcare options.

The cultural orientation about childcare influence immigrant Africans and Ghanaians in particular to employ family childcare options when they leave Ghana. According to the Migration Policy Institute (2020), Ghana was the fifth largest country of origin for sub-Saharan African immigrants to the USA in 2018, with approximately 181,000 Ghanaian immigrants residing there. It is important to note that this data does not specify how many of these immigrants migrated with their families, and there are also undocumented migrants who may not be enumerated in official census. One of the key factors motivating Ghanaians to migrate with their families to the USA is the prospect of better economic opportunities. According to a study conducted by the University of Ghana, many Ghanaians migrate to the USA in search of better-paying jobs, higher salaries, and improved living standards (Gyimah-Brempong and Maama-Maime, 2019). This is supported by data from the Migration Policy Institute, which shows that approximately 63 percent of Ghanaian immigrants in the USA are of working age (18-64 years), with the majority employed in service, sales, or management occupations (Migration Policy Institute, 2020). Another important factor motivating

Ghanaians to migrate with their families to the United States is the availability of educational opportunities. Ghanaian families tend to view the United States as a place where their children can receive a high-quality education and have better prospects for the future. A study by the University of Cape Coast in Ghana found that the pursuit of higher education was a key reason why many Ghanaians choose to migrate to the United States with their families (Awusabo-Asare and Kofi Owusu, 2018). This is supported by data from the Migration Policy Institute, which shows that approximately 39 percent of Ghanaian immigrants in the United States have attained at least a bachelor's degree, with many in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Migration Policy Institute 2020).

Migration can strain relationships between parents and children, especially if the migrant parent is unable to be physically present for important family events or milestones. A study by Gyimah-Brempong and Maama-Maime (2019) found that some Ghanaian children experience emotional distress and a sense of abandonment when their parents migrate. In this respect, several arrangements are made to ensure that the family functions as a social unit (Poeze, Dankyi and Mazzucato, 2017).

Literature on transnational families discusses the perception of the family, not as a geographical unit but as a social unit that is maintained across distances and national boundaries (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Poeze, Dankyi and Mazzucato, 2017). Thus, although there is emotional stress associated with geographical separation, certain transnational family practices such as communication, return visits, and remittances are essential in maintaining family ties. As several scholarly accounts have indicated, the whole idea of being in the diaspora influences the manner in which childcare is performed.

Transnational Childcare and Diasporan Parents

Bryceson and Vuorela (2002: 3) define transnational families as “families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood’, even across national borders”. Several reasons account for the existence of diasporan parenting.

Paramount among these are economic factors, as in most instances the politico-economic situations of the home countries of immigrant parents do not support their family’s collective emotional well-being and progress. According to Habecker (2016), immigrant parents generally choose to establish their own alternative cultural communities by linking up with other immigrants who share common ties of ethnicity and Africanness. The desire of most parents is to ensure that their children are exposed to these groups for the expected beneficial cultural influences. In this context, communities such as hometown associations, ethnic and national associations, church and mosques associations as well as alumni associations are favored, established, and joined (Halter and Johnson 2014).

Certain perceptions about immigrant parents’ host countries’ strong assimilation processes inform their decision to preserve their culture through childcare. For instance, language is a key issue of contention. This is because language is viewed as an important means of preserving a people’s cultural heritage. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) assert that the USA is a “veritable cemetery of other languages” due to strong assimilative forces to push immigrants towards monolingualism. Hence deliberate efforts to maintain the identity of immigrants are ensured through counter-pressures that teach mother tongues from the home countries in the communities they build. Diasporan parents attend regular meetings with their children for this and other reasons believed to be crucial to socializing children to understand, adopt, and embrace important values.

Parenting styles are affected by immigration realities. To this end, the concepts of authoritarian, permissive, absent and communicative parenting respectively are used by Habecker (2016) to represent youths' assessment of their parents. In a study of youth from 21 African families, Habecker (2016) confirms that respondents indicated that communicative parenting was the most favorable. From the perspective of the children, authoritarian parenting which allowed parents to impose decisions on them was not much appreciated. This is because in their new diasporan context and in social relations with non-immigrant children, communicative parenting was more utilized by their peers' parents.

Other challenges include absent parenting, where parents leave children with their grandparents, other relatives, or a spouse, and sometimes friends, and later make arrangements for them to join them in the USA. This situation is usually born out of the immigration realities that may separate families for a very long time (Habecker, 2016). For this kind of parenting, annual visits and the use of technology through constant communication over the phone and other media are used to maintain the relationship between parents and their children. Although as earlier indicated, challenges encountered by immigrants inform their decisions to leave children behind until they are able to live together as a family, in other situations, sending children back to their home country is considered an effective disciplinary strategy. These strategies are also employed by other Africans in diaspora. For example, Kufakurinani et al.'s (2014) study on transnational parenting and the emergence of diasporan orphans in Zimbabwe, contended that among Zimbabwean immigrants in the United Kingdom (UK), it was not an uncommon practice for parents to send children home to be disciplined. Thus, in an interview with a study participant who was a teacher, it was revealed that one of the pupils nicknamed 'London' by his peers had been sent back from Britain to do his schooling in Zimbabwe because his parents thought it would stop him from 'going wild'.

The context of absent parenting synchronizes with what Coe (2012) describes as transnational child “fostering” practices among Ghanaian immigrant families and notes that fostering in the West African sense is not based on a Western nuclear family concept. Instead, this entails parenting across a wider distribution of people who assist in the process of childcare, training, and launching the child to adulthood. So, it becomes easier to practice absentee parenting because this arrangement typically fits into a broader, extended-family approach to child-rearing and are thus not necessarily experienced negatively as a type of abandonment. Despite this scenario, findings of Coe’s (2012) study did not investigate the impact of these separations on families. Anecdotal evidence showed that younger children seemed to transition more easily than older children into their parents’ care upon joining them in the USA after an extended separation. In contrast, two people interviewed spoke of personal situations where children grew up in their home countries and came to the U.S. in their late teens. In both instances, the children stopped talking with their fathers because they did not see eye-to-eye on many things.

Children left behind by immigrant parents were considered as diasporan orphans as shown in Kufakurinani et al. (2014), although typically orphans connote challenging childcare due to the absence of parents. The idea as used in the Zimbabwean study shows some flexibility in capturing the problems created by inadequate or non-existent remittances, abandonment and poverty. Rather in this context, it is perhaps more commonly used to capture cases where resources were adequate or more than adequate, and children who were privileged in financial terms. As Mrs. Chinda, a nurse aide at Gweru General Hospital who had witnessed the departure of so many professional healthcare colleagues expressed, “when parents, especially mothers, go to the diaspora, their main goal is to elevate the standard of living of their families; however, in trying to do that they end up spoiling their children.” This is because in a bid not to make their children lack anything, they end up sending in too much

money. Dankyi et al. (2017) writing about a similar scenario in the Ghanaian community claim that immigrant parents give their children too much access to resources and sometimes do not give enough room for their children's caregivers to properly discipline and socialize them. In their study of caregivers of diasporan orphans, it was revealed that most caregivers are relatives whose source of livelihood depends on the parents of the children that they are caring for, and as a result, they tend not to exert their authority on matters of discipline for fear of losing the remittances for their upkeep.

Although transnational families make all efforts to be resilient despite the strain of separation imposed by migration; most of them often use mobile phones so much that their efforts are dubbed mobile parenting or virtual parenting. Such efforts to connect might not be entirely useful as an alternative for face-to-face parenting. However, the use of new communications technologies can facilitate some elements of personal emotional and moral support. Kufakurinani et al. (2014) mention that some parents practicing distance parenting use the phone to micro-manage their children's meals, homework and disciplinary issues. However, the challenges of these new communication technology can be a constraint to most diasporan parents. Issues such as poor connectivity and inability to manage new communication methods might impede the achievement of parenting goals. Nonetheless, parents try to stay alert on the socialization of their children because of the stereotypes about diasporan orphans. These findings are in synch with the case of Ghanaian diasporan parents where anecdotal evidence shows that disruptions in electricity supply affect phone communications. Findings from Kufakurinani et al.'s (2014) study hint that disrespect, drug addiction and teenage pregnancies were associated with Zimbabwean diasporan orphans. These circumstances are influenced by their peculiar circumstances and the kind of care available to the child. Some studies assert that children are likely to misbehave if for instance, they are cared for predominantly by housemaids or relatives who largely depend on the

benevolence of their diasporan parents to survive. In such situations, a relative may not scold a child for a misdemeanor, bad behavior or disobedience for fear of losing financial remuneration from the child's parents. Thus, a break in communication or inability to manage new technology may not only break the emotional bond between parents and their children but it also affects parental ability to micromanage their children's activities.

Another key reason for leaving children back home or sending them home is to have them learn the language and the cultural values. As earlier indicated, although some immigrant parents move to the diaspora to improve the economic status of their families, the presence of their children may impede or delay their upward mobility. This may motivate the desire to have children remain in their home country. The ability to learn a Ghanaian language is considered by immigrant parents an avenue to inculcate the culture of their people in their children as well as an opportunity to facilitate or foster their sense of belonging.

In as much as the study by Kufakurinani et al. (2014) was relevant for understanding the pros and cons of childcare arrangement-related issues among Zimbabwean immigrants in the UK, it is insufficient for explaining the peculiarity of Ghanaian immigrants in the USA with regards to child-care arrangements during the most intense period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The devastating effects associated with the pandemic were extraordinary. Datta and Biswas (2021) attest that COVID-19 had a profound impact on transnational families in the United States, particularly with regards to childcare arrangements. In many cases, grandparents or other relatives who typically provide childcare have been unable to do so because of travel restrictions or concerns about exposure to the virus (Hwang and Mahmood, 2020). This has placed a significant burden on working parents, who had to scramble to find alternative childcare solutions (Hwang and Mahmood, 2020). In some cases, parents were

forced to take leaves from work in order to stay home with their children. This had a ripple effect on family finances, as well as work-life balance (Wang and Zhao, 2020). It is therefore clear that COVID-19 had a major impact on African transnational families in the United States, and that this impact is likely to continue in the future (Le and Baumeister, 2021). The experiences of Ghanaian immigrant families in the USA on childcare arrangements therefore presents a unique vantage point on the effects of the pandemic that is worth exploring.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach as the researcher dwelled on the epistemology, ontology and axiology of the interpretivist research paradigm to conduct the study (Neuman 2013; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). A total of 20 participants were selected as subjects in the study. The eligibility criteria used for selecting participants were that they should be Ghanaian family immigrants that have lived in the USA for a minimum of seven years. This eligibility criteria was important for garnering reliable information from Ghanaian immigrant families, who have were living their normal lives in the USA for a minimum of five years until the COVID-19 pandemic began. This is because their experiences with COVID-19 regarding childcare arrangements was a deviation from the status quo in the five years before the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the intensity of the COVID-19 effects in the USA at the time of data collection, the snowballing technique was the most appropriate sampling technique. In using the snowballing technique, the first participant identified provided the researcher with the contacts of other Ghanaian immigrant families in the USA who could be approached as research subjects. This strategy was used until the researcher arrived at a saturation point of 20 respondents. Three categories of respondents were interviewed. These were: i) parents who had sent children home; ii) parents who were receiving childcare from relatives and iii) parents who had to pay for childcare and

those who had little or no help as a result of the pandemic. In this regard, a total of 20 telephone interviews were conducted. Two focus group discussions consisting of eight participants in each group were conducted on Zoom. The use of telephone interviews and Zoom focus group discussions was due to the high rate of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the USA at the time the data was gathered. Telephone interviews and Zoom focus group discussions helped surmount challenges that face-to-face interactions could present for both the researcher and participants. These included the risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus and possible fatalities. The telephone interviews, although ethical and efficient as a preventive measure against contracting the COVID-19 virus, were bedeviled with the challenge of not having the opportunity to examine the facial expression and other body language of participants during interviews. To address this challenge, the researcher resorted to the use of video calls in some circumstances where it was appropriate to do so. Phone interviews and video interviews were recorded by the researcher and later transcribed and analyzed. Furthermore, the timeframe for conducting the Zoom focus group discussions was prolonged since most of the participants were not used to some features, such as knowing when to mute and unmute their speakers. The use of the Zoom technology enabled the researcher to record the Zoom meetings for the two focus group discussions. The themes relevant to achieving research objectives were identified from the data gathered from interviews and focus group discussions. They were then analyzed to discern the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on childrearing by Ghanaian diaspora families in the USA.

Findings

Childcare Strategies within the Ghanaian Context and Ghanaians in the Diaspora

The childcare strategies among Ghanaians in the diaspora are largely similar to those in their home country. Scholars writing on the childcare strategies among Ghanaians suggest that most Ghanaian households use high levels of informal childcare, principal among which were the reliance on family support (Oppong 2004; Badasu 2012; Afrifa 2018). Although such family childcare has been fraught with challenges due to social and economic changes, several adaptations have been made to it. One of the key adjustments to this arrangement is the monetary aspect. In the past, childcare was not paid for but given in reciprocity for other services and considered an obligation of family members.

In a study conducted among three geographically distinct social groups in Accra, Ghana, Afrifa (2018) classifies childcare into four categories. These are: non-formal care arrangements, semi-formal family care arrangements, semi-formal non-kin care arrangements and formal care arrangements. According to the study, informal childcare was the first choice for most families when it came to childcare. In this sense, there was reliance on grandmothers (both maternal and paternal), siblings of parents, aunts, uncles, older siblings. In some instances, church members, work apprentices, friends and colleagues at work (depending on their availability) were used. The motivation for using this option was the emotional security it gave parents and the flexibility of time (that a child spent in care) that this strategy could give.

Findings from the current study revealed that the childcare options explored by Ghanaian parents in the diaspora also combine informal and formal care. Informal care options include the use of family (grandmothers, siblings, aunts), and friends. Formal care options employ many forms of day care and paid non-family caregivers. Of all these arrangements, the most common is the use of family care. It is also believed to be most reliable. In this case, as other studies have indicated, parents either send their children back to

Ghana or invite a family member to the USA to assist them in childcare provision (Coe 2011). Given the context of the study, findings of this section will be categorized under two major themes. First is the categorization of care givers and second, the objectives sought in caregiving. It is evidenced from this study that the kinds of care providers that parents explored were a) blood kinship (siblings, parents, and in-laws) and b) neighbors and fellow countrymen/women.

In terms of the categorization of caregivers, the study found blood kinship to be the most utilized form of childcare options. One of the key reasons for this option is the flexibility associated with it. Some respondents share their views this way:

When my children were younger, my husband and I agreed that my mother comes in to stay with us and assist with taking care of the children. We do not have a fixed amount that we pay her but from time to time we give her some money (Oforiwaa, Worcester, September 2, 2021).

My husband's mother (I mean my mother-in-law) helps us to take care of our four boys. We used to send them to Ghana when they were a year old or more. But we were able to file for her and she now lives with us and supports us with childcare. When she was in Ghana, we used to send her money for the children's upkeep. But now that she is here, we only take care of her rent and other bills. (Mavis, Columbus, September 4, 2021)

Currently, my sister's husband is still not here. She has filed for him but the process has delayed because of COVID-19. So, I assist her to take care of their two children. We have scheduled our work time in a way that allows at least one

of us to be available all the time for the children (Josephine, New York, October 10, 2021).

From the above perspectives of the respondents who were receiving care from relatives, or offering care, it was observed that kin support from grandparents and siblings of parents is useful and important for childcare. In the case of Mavis of Columbus, the relationship between the children and their grandmother was established before she moved to the USA to take care of them. Although several studies (Badasu 2012) in Ghana show prevalence in the use of maternal grandmothers instead of paternal grandmothers, the latter happened for Mavis because as she further explained, her own mother was deceased. This finding about the children establishing an existing relationship with the grandmother before her arrival in the USA corroborates with what Dankyi et al. (2017) claim. According to these scholars, it was a normal practice for Ghanaian parents in the diaspora to send their children back home to be taken care of by their grandmothers and other relatives until the parents were better positioned to bring them back to the USA.

In the absence of family care, other informal networks are utilised. These include subsidized nanny care through informal networks provided by friends and neighbours. This applies to the category of respondents who had to pay for childcare. In one instance, a friend's mother who is at home taking care of her grandchildren was asked to help with childcare.

My friend, Ama's mum (Aunty Akua) got the chance to come to the USA after she had her child. And since Aunty Akua was always home, my husband and I spoke with Ama to ask her mum to assist us. She agreed to do it, so we drop off our children in their house each morning before going to work. We do not pay her

much; we give her a token at the end of every month (Naana, New York, October 15, 2021).

Naana's case is similar to that of many other Ghanaians who mentioned in interviews that this option of using parents or friends as caregivers was considered reliable. Although the caregiver is not related by blood, as an older woman she was considered experienced enough to provide the necessary care that will promote the culturally appropriate conceptualization of the well-being of the child. Apart from this, this option is affordable and flexible on hours, as parents do not feel compelled to work within strict arrangements that may also be more expensive or unaffordable.

Another dimension to this arrangement is older women/grandmothers who provide subsidized nanny/care services. These women do not only take care of Ghanaian children but provide childcare for other Black children whose parents may not be able to afford formal daycare. One of such women is Araba, a grandmother in Columbus. Her daughter Abena brought her to the USA to support childcare but she extends it to other children for a fee. The payment is on a sliding scale based on the relationship with those who referred the parents to the nanny, and what relationship the former has with the nanny. So, Araba puts it thus:

I charge those I do not know much \$15 but because of Akwasi (Abena's husband's friend) who sent you here, I will take \$10 for each child. I know we have all travelled here and we need to support one another (Araba, Columbus, November 4, 2021).

There is also the reliance on siblings or friends on vacation. This appeared to be another form of support that parents could rely on. Abena explained that her children felt very comfortable with her friend's younger sister who was in college. She said: 'Akosua gets along well with my children. She helps them with their homework and also plays with them.

Sometimes she braids my daughter's hair too. Claudia and Kofi always tell me, "Akosua is a good person."

Several effects were enumerated for both kinship and non-kinship care. These include the strengthening of family ties and bonds, providing assistance with learning languages, and help with homework. Study participants revealed that there are several reasons and objectives for desiring blood kinship for childcare support, these include the notion that family brings in emotional support and peace of mind, and the convenience of flexible hours possible with using family care compared with day care or other forms of care. The use of family childcare is essential because most parents consider it was an avenue of transmitting family norms and values through socialisation. One key desire involved in the effort to transmit Ghanaian culture, is building language skills, which it is believed, can be more easily developed using family childcare. In this sense, the caregiver and parents of the child form a community that can immerse the child in an environment that facilitates learning a Ghanaian language.

My mother is playing a good role here. She speaks Twi with them. Although the children do not speak fluently, they understand it (Oforiwaa, Worcester, September 2, 2021).

I feel happy anytime I see my children speak Ga and Twi. It was part of the reasons why I sent them to Ghana, so they become competent in the language (Mercy, New York, October 17, 2021).

As mentioned above, in the absence of family care, other informal networks are utilised. These include affordable nanny care secured through informal networks. In this context, older women considered experienced with childcare were sought out by parents as an option. In this regard, a friend's mother who is a stay home caregiver to her grandchildren can be asked to help with childcare and also assists with socialisation.

The reliance on neighbours and friends among these Ghanaians in the diaspora is typical of the Ghanaian culture back home. Preference for these strategies stems from the notion that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Thus, despite the new geographical location and attendant socio-cultural changes, this notion of communal childcare still prevails among Ghanaians. With all these arrangements, ample support was provided for childcare either from Ghana or in the USA among transnational families. However, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed different dynamics and challenges that the next section will discuss.

Childcare Strategies and Complexities in the COVID-19 Pandemic Era

The COVID-19 pandemic started in November 2019 and resulted in major economic, social, and cultural challenges. Following the high rates of infection and the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO), several measures were put in place to reduce the rate of infection and curtail the high mortality rates globally. Some key policies include the imposition of a travel ban, lockdowns, and stay-home restrictions. These measures automatically put a strict limitations on movement, and this affected transnational families in different ways.

Generally, movement from Africa to the West is fraught with challenges. Coe (2011) shows that families have challenges with applying for visas for their kinfolk to visit for purposes of offering support with childcare. The key reason for this is the different conceptualization ideals of childcare in the West. In one of the situations that a Ghanaian family respondent discussed, the rationale for travel given to the embassy was support with childcare. This became grounds for visa refusal. According to the embassy, childcare was considered work and the kind of visa being applied for was not appropriate for that. Despite the already existing difficulties, this study revealed that the travel ban as well as lockdowns

impacted a respondent's ability to secure a visa for mother to get to the USA to help her with childcare. She explains:

So, I filed for my mum to come in to assist me with the childcare since this was my second child and I was overwhelmed with combining childcare and working. However, her visa appointment got cancelled because the USA Embassy in Ghana was closed as a result of COVID-19. I was so disturbed (Maame, Columbus, November 5, 2021).

This situation was also the same for others who had secured visas but could not travel due to the ban on non-essential travel.

My aunty was supposed to come early on to support me with childcare. But then my grandmother passed on and she rescheduled her visit to end of March because I was due early April. Everything came as a shock to me when I couldn't do much. I started thinking about how I was going to manage without any family support. With the COVID-19, people were afraid to get into other people's homes and my husband and I had to manage when the baby finally came (Gloria, Worcester, November 7, 2021).

Accounts of the challenges and traumatic situations caused by the effects of the pandemic on childcare arrangements made the researcher inquire about the coping strategies parents used in to address the problematic situation. Gloria responded that she relied extensively on phone calls for directions on what to do with the newborn. Despite the experience with her first child, she still needed some support from time to time.

During the focus group discussions, the challenges of the pandemic to childcare were highlighted. One theme that evolved was how childcare practices in the diaspora lack the

elements that made childcare back home meaningful and effective. These include the contributions due to social capital such as affordability, flexibility, culturally appropriate socialization less parental anxiety. Research subjects also emphasized the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic further worsened the situation. This is evident in the thoughts expressed by respondents:

The way childcare is organized here is so different from the way it happens back home. It is such a joy to have a child and the whole extended family plays a role in their care. But here it is just you and your husband (practically your nuclear family). If you decide to take your child to a nanny, it is very expensive (Joyce, FGD, Worcester, November 12, 2021).

In response to Joyce's thoughts about the expensive nature of formal childcare facilities, Agnes mentioned that there were other subsidized options for most immigrants through friends and church networks.

We all know that formal childcare is very expensive, and one might even end up using almost their entire pay check in order to afford it. But as we may all be aware, most African parents use the informal networks from stay-home grandmothers and sometimes friends. We pay them tokens or some agreed rate of a sort. But with this pandemic, and its accompanying stay-home policy, that option could no longer be explored (Agnes, FGD, Worcester, November 10, 2021).

I had my first child in Ghana before relocating to the USA with my husband. When I had the second child here, it was a whole different experience from what I had back home. So, my husband and I always thought of bringing in family

members from Ghana to support. We filed for my mum to come as we were planning for our third child. Unfortunately, the pandemic slowed everything down. Although my mum got the visa, the ban on travel affected her ability to come when I needed her most! (Gyasiwaa, FGD, Columbus, November 12, 2021).

The pandemic also resulted in difficulties with return visits. The ability of parents who return home from time to time to see their children was badly affected. The case of Linda is a typical example.

My husband and I decided to send our three children to Ghana and pay them visits from time to time. We take turns to visit our children. He visited them for Christmas in 2019 and I was supposed to go in Spring 2020. So, in 2020, I had already booked my ticket and was getting ready to go see them. But the flights were cancelled, airports were closed during the period I wanted to go. I could not be at my daughter's birthday. I sent her gifts, but it did not feel the same. I wanted to be physically present, but the situation could not allow it (Linda, Worcester, September 10, 2021).

The routine and normal ways in which transnational families are managed and maintained gets disrupted when parents are unable to undertake return visits (Poeze and Dankyi 2017). Return visits are essential for both parents and children. They provide opportunities for parents to do welfare checks on their children that gives them firsthand insights and knowledge of what is happening in the lives of their children and their caregivers. The inability of parents to travel back home to visit their children puts a strain on both parents' and children. Children's expectations are not met and this may affect their emotional well-being. Akosua of New York explained:

Although my children are being taken care of by my mother and my mother-in-law, I still cannot just leave them in Ghana and stay in the USA without periodic visits to see how they are faring. I perfectly trust the two caregivers to take good care of my children, but my children still need to see me from time to time (Akosua, New York, September 15, 2021).

Responses from the FGD also hinted that the key motivation for the return visit was not limited to just going to check on their caregivers. It was also an important indicator of how the relationship between their children was faring. According to Lilian, she had left behind three children with the oldest child being 13 years old, and the youngest, five.

I have a distant cousin who takes care of them. My husband lives in Ghana with them. But my oldest daughter always feels like she is the “mother” of the home. I get reports from time to time about her trying to bully her younger siblings. She always feels she is in charge. So, my regular visits help to manage this situation (Lilian, FGD, Columbus, November 12, 2022).

The emotional security and trust attached to the family childcare option give most parents ample assurance that the health and wellbeing of their children will always be ensured. So, as parents, they can have the peace of mind to focus on their work abroad.

One could surmise that during the pandemic, there was a restriction on movements and parents were compelled to stay home with their children. This period gave most families the chance to bond with one another. Although some businesses shut down, when they opened up gradually, most workers had to work from home. But the findings of this study suggest how much of a distraction this was to working parents, especially mothers. Mothers bore the burden of much of this care because care was woman-centered (Dayl 2011; Folbre 2001). In

this regard, since mothers tended to be around their children most, and had primary responsibility to care for their needs, mothers had multiple burdens. They struggled to combine childcare, working from home, and meeting children's educational needs. This was clear from research subjects' observations.

Initially, it was manageable because we were all staying home and not working.

But when my work resumed, the children were doing online learning. Every time I need to pause my work to assist them from time to time. This slows me down and I am always behind schedule (Rita, Worcester, September 12, 2020).

These kids will never go to their dad! Even if we are both home everything is about mummy... Mummy we want chips. Can we have cereal? So, every time I am behind schedule with my tasks at work (Afia, Columbus, October 15, 2020).

These observations corroborate what existing literature highlights about the burden of care being woman-centered Buabeng (2010) and Poeze et al. (2017). Some fathers were involved in childcare. For example, data collected from Yaw suggested his active participation in providing care for his three children.

My wife is a healthcare worker. There was no break for her. I had to stay home and even when we were asked to work from home, I ended quitting my job. This is because my wife's mum who helps us with childcare had travelled to Ghana and could not return because of the travel restrictions. I support my kids with their online learning and their day-to-day activities (Yaw, New York, October 17, 2021).

This case can further be compared to the work of Poeze et al. (2017) about transnational families in the Netherlands indicate that fathers sometimes shift from traditional gender roles in response to the exigencies of the migrant life. Thus, roles typically described

as feminine, such as childcare are adopted by men when couples migrate. Buabeng (2010) contends that married couples who internally migrate to the big cities in Ghana are usually involved in gender role reversal due to the exigencies of urban life. In Afrifa's 2018 study on childcare in Accra, she corroborates Buabeng (2010) that in contrast to their culturally defined gender roles, fathers in this urban Ghanaian setting were actively involved in the care of their children.

Conclusion

This paper sought to discuss the complexities of childcare among Ghanaian parents in the USA at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from the study suggested that besides the already existing difficulties associated with travelling from Africa to the West, restrictions on human movement globally because of the pandemic affected transnational childcare negatively. Parents who send their children back home for family care have difficulties doing so. Similarly, parents' return visits for important events in their children's lives were also curtailed. Unfortunately, families also could not invite their relatives over to help with childcare as they used to do routinely before the pandemic. Findings suggest that the situation was further worsened by stay-at-home policies that made it difficult for mothers to even take their children to informal care networks that were available to them in the USA. The fact that children had to be involved in online learning further compounded the situation for everyone, especially mothers, since the constant distraction from their children negatively affected their productivity. Although the pandemic offered an opportunity for families to bond together, it also made the already daunting task of childcare and maintaining transnational family relationships more complex. These challenges created by the COVID-19

pandemic restrictions disrupted, complicated, and stymied many of the established forms of social capital (kinship and non-kinship) that made childcare possible and effective.

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