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Extending the moral economy beyond households: Gendered livelihood strategies of single migrant women in Accra, Ghana

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SYNOPSIS

This article highlights how single migrant women (SMW) from rural northern Ghana generate livelihoods through the adoption of both market and non-market based strategies by extending and then prioritising moral obligations to community members beyond their immediate households instead of focusing on maximisation of profits. The setting is the Old Fadama market in Accra, Ghana. Communities of old and new SMW build a "moral community economy" through, amongst others, engaging in reciprocal labour, gift giving, childcare and food sharing. Our study reveals the importance of this moral community economy to SMW's livelihood generation and how it is sustained through social relations amongst women, in which also generation, ethnicity and regional background, play crucial roles. SMW give support to and receive benefits from the community through moral obligations and ethnic commitment. The analysis of these strategies contributes to the understanding of the intersections of household, livelihood strategies, gender and markets in urban settings.

Introduction

In Ghana, since colonial times, migration as a livelihood strategy has been gendered. Historically, migrants to the South were adult male seasonal labourers from the North who worked in agricultural, mining and industrial enterprises (Berry, 1993). When women migrated to the South, they mostly did so as dependants accompanying their husbands (Chant, 1992; Lentz, 2006). This pattern changed after the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in 1983 (Awumbila & Ardayfio-Shandorf, 2008; Oberhauser & Yeboah, 2011). Removal of subsidies disturbed rural communities as export produce diverted labour and land from subsistence conventional farming and prospects for non-farm work reduced (Carr, 2008; Ellis, 2000). The effects of SAPs were not gender-neutral. In northern Ghana, in a context of patrilineal kinship and inheritance systems, women bear the brunt of the adverse effects of SAPs (Elson, 1999; Oberhauser, 2010). Girls drop out from school first when parents have too many children to support (van den Berg, 2007) and they are compelled to marry at younger ages (Huijsman, 2012). Women's lives in northern Ghana have become more difficult, financially strained and their ability to adapt to and cope with poverty has worsened due to a rise in women's share of livelihood responsibilities (Chant, 2008; Oberhauser, 2010). (See Map 1.)

The precarious economic situation in the North has pushed mostly young, unschooled (Huijsman, 2012) and often single women to Accra (Awumbila, 2010; Awumbila & Ardayfio-Shandorf, 2008; Brydon & Chant, 1992; Chant, 2010) where they join what hitherto was considered to be a male domain: labour migration in pursuit of a livelihood in the South (Abdull-Korah, 2011). This results in migration being "increasingly feminized" (Adepoju, 2004). Presently, almost every household in northern Ghana has a link with a young migrant woman in Accra (Kwankye et al., 2007; Lentz, 2006).

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Map 1. Map of Ghana showing Old Fadama in Accra.
Source: Accra Metropolitan Assembly.

Young single migrant women (SMW) often start generating livelihoods in the informal sector where they can easily adapt (Hart, 1973). In Ghana, the informal sector comprises about 80% of the country's total labour force, providing employment for more than 50% of the population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2011). The informal economy is gendered (Oberhauser, 2010). Women are labelled as one of the pillars of Ghana's economy and have long been engaged in trading (Akyeampong, 2000; Robertson, 1984), primarily in the food and textiles sectors (Grosz-Ngate, 1997). Women's influence in the Ghanaian marketplace as traders has become an accepted way for women to merge their socially assigned roles as wives and mothers with income generation (Clark, 2000).

Most small-scale studies on these northern migrant women residing in the South that are emerging (e.g., Awumbila & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; Oberhauser & Yeboah, 2011) focus on portering as the livelihood strategy of these women, but once they move to the South, SMW not only work as porters but also as petty traders. The existing studies indeed illuminate the gendered nature of the livelihood strategies of women migrants (Clark, 2000; Oberhauser & Hanson, 2007; Oberhauser & Pratt, 2004). However, the roles of factors such as generation and ethnicity in these non-market based strategies have rarely been explored. Furthermore, when the livelihood activities of SMW are examined the focus is mostly on market-based aspects (Awumbilla & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; Oberhuaser, 2010; Oberhuaser & Yeboah, 2011). This study looks at market and non-market based strategies of SMW in an informal economy and at the role of ethnic ties in their livelihood generation.

Women play a vital role in markets in Ghana and in other parts of West Africa. They set up their own trade, which has largely remained a female domain. There are long-standing class differences between the top and the bottom of the female trading hierarchy, with those at the top referred to as *Market Queen Mothers* (Clark, 1994, 1997, 2000; Robertson, 1983, 1984). Market Queen Mothers is the term used for market women who command the trading of certain specific commodities and represent the women traders in these commodities in the market concerned. In the Kumasi market (Ashanti Region), these market queen mothers are called *Abemma* (Clark, 1997). In our study area, the Old Fadama Market (OFM) in Accra, there are Market Queen Mothers as well. For example, there are tomato Queen Mother, plantain Queen Mother, cassava Queen Mother, and yam Queen Mother.

In this study, our respondents were market women involved in both agricultural and non-agricultural commodities and services, the latter being commodities like enamel ware and second-hand clothing and services like portering and providing cooked food. Each of these commodity groups, agricultural or non-agricultural, are organised by associations (*Ekuo*). We found that our respondents participated in specific associations based on the commodity they sold. These associations provide management, are characterised by specific social structures and enjoy informal support from their members. The associations are coordinated and controlled by women in leadership positions, such as welfare officers, vice-presidents, treasurers, with most elders becoming executive committee members. For the large Kumasi market (Ashanti Region) Clark (1997: 181) describes the *Mpanyinfuo* (Akan term), supporting elders (men and women) who "represent small geographical or network sections of their commodity groups", within which they settle minor disputes. They provide informal leadership for traders whose commodity has no queen/chief and who sell in fringe locations amongst neighbours selling many different commodities.

In the OF market we found 'market mummies' (MM), who are senior women traders who take junior women traders under their wings. The term *market mummy* or *market mammy* is used widely in the study of market women in West Africa. Those considered market mummies in these studies were supporting elders, who are good representatives of successful women traders and who themselves had started trading without having much capital at hand. Amongst others, the following studies documented the role of market mummies: Yeboah and Waters (1997) in women's survival strategies in Ghana 1960–1984; Udong et al. (2010) amongst women fish traders in the Niger Delta, Nigeria; and