

# Parental migration and psychological well-being of children. Longitudinal evidence from Ghana

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## **Abstract**

There is limited evidence on the time-varying effects of migration on the psychological well-being of children who stay behind in African contexts. This study is the first to employ panel data to examine this nexus in the context of Ghana. Data were collected in 2013, 2014, and 2015 from school-going children in the age group of 12-21 years. Using children's self-reports, an analysis was conducted separately for boys ( $N=781$ ) and girls ( $N=705$ ). Results indicate that girls and boys with the mother away internally or internationally are equally or more likely to have higher levels of psychological well-being when compared to boys and girls of nonmigrants. Higher level of well-being is observed amongst girls when parents migrate and divorce. However, parental migration and divorce is more likely to increase the psychological vulnerability of boys. In Ghana, the psychological well-being of children is nuanced by which parent has migrated, marital status of migrant parent, and the gender of the child.

**Keywords:** parental migration, psychological well-being, transnational families, children left-behind, Ghana

## INTRODUCTION

In mid-year 2020, about 476 thousand Ghanaians comprised the international migrant population (United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division, 2019). Other sources put the number of Ghanaians abroad at 1.5 million (Government of Ghana, 2016). More than half of Ghanaian emigrants come from the urbanised regions in the country (International Organisation for Migration, 2019). Furthermore, up to eight million Ghanaians have migrated internally, from rural to urban areas (Molini and Paci, 2015). Many of these migrants are parents who often make a difficult choice of leaving children and other family members behind. There are no official statistics on the number of children who stay behind, but informal estimates show that up to 37% of all Ghanaian children may live without one or both biological parents due to migration (Cebotari, 2020).

Leaving children behind, even when in the care of family members, is a difficult decision fraught with potentially diverse outcomes for the child's emotional growth and potential. Stringent immigration and family reunification policies, the monetary, social and cultural costs of moving, and the instability and incertitude of employment at the destination are some of the factors that strew families across borders, giving rise to transnational families. Understanding the dynamics of transnational families compels one to reimagine how care, love and a feeling of presence must be provided and experienced across geographical spaces (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002).

In Ghana, like in many other sub-Saharan countries, it is very common for children to live with someone other than their biological parents, even when parents are in the country. These norms of social parenthood make it easier for parents to migrate and leave children in the care of family and non-biological caregivers (Coe, 2011; Cebotari, Mazzucato and Appiah, 2018, Mazzucato et al., 2015). In addition to childcare, the fostering family also serves the function of perpetuating culturally desired practices of childcare, something migrating parents wish to

preserve for their offspring. The foster care ensures better childcare in the transitory time period required by the migrant parent to settle socio-economically in their new place of residence. In the absence of parents, children's care is subject to strategies assembled together by the parent, the capabilities of the caregivers, and the informal care economy of the community. Interdependency between family members and distant kin, and reliance on the community is a characteristic feature of the transnational care economy (Poeze, 2018).

Global evidence on the effects of migration on children's psychological well-being is scanty, with studies based on static empirics, who often yield contrasting effects (Antia et al., 2020). Most studies focus on the negative emotional aspects of parental migration on children, especially when the migrant is the mother (Graham and Jordan, 2011; Fan et al., 2010; Jordan and Graham 2012; Parreñas, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, Bang and Kim, 2011). A stream of research also shows evidence of positive and neutral emotional externalities for children in transnational care when looking at specifics of migration such as the stability of care, parental support, and the use of communication technologies (Baldassar et al., 2016; Cebotari et al., 2018; Robila, 2014).

Building on existing evidence, this study contributes in several ways to the literature. First, it uses longitudinal data to assess the effects of parental migration on children's psychological well-being. Owing to the unique nature of data, this is the first study to employ panel evidence to measure psychological well-being of children in transnational care in Ghana and Africa at large. The effects of parental migration on Ghanaian children's psychological well-being have been measured previously using cross-sectional evidence (Mazzucato et al., 2015; Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2017). However, both migration and psychological well-being are dynamic constructs that elude capturing through cross-sectional snapshots. The longitudinal nature of the data allows for the control of unobserved heterogeneity that could have been problematic in previous studies.

Second, the current study looks beyond the classical measure of which parents has migrated and includes characteristics that account for parental marital status, and internal and international migration. We know from studies on divorce and on transnational families that marital discord negatively affects the psychological health of children (Amato and Sobolewski, 2001; Mazzucato and Cebotari, 2017). Transnational families are diverse and dynamic, with parents frequently changing their migration status over the years, and it is common for children to have one parent abroad and the other away internally (Cebotari, 2020). Parental migration also puts pressure on marital relations, and it is common for migrant parents to divorce or separate (Caarls, 2015).

Third, the study integrates children's voices and perceptions of well-being, in that data has been collected from children themselves. Existing literature relies almost exclusively on adult reports to advance the evidence on child well-being, which hinders our understanding of how children experience with transnational care. Studies have emphasised the importance of the child's voice, noting how adults' perceptions of children's experiences might be inaccurate (Caarls et al., 2021; Cebotari, Siegel and Mazzucato, 2016; Jordan and Graham 2012).

Fourth, the study includes a gender perspective to the analysis of child well-being by assessing the effects of migration on the psychological well-being of girls and boys separately. This research adds to the limited scholarship pertaining to mental health in African contexts. Recent studies emphasize that children of migrants may face gender specific challenges when living transnationally and the need to integrate a gender perspective when measuring child well-being outcomes (Antman, 2012; Caarls et al., 2021). To date, we know little of the differences in the psychological health of boys and girls when parents migrate. In this study, psychological health has been assessed using the Total Difficulties Score (TDS) of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), a clinical tool used for scientific and educational purposes (Sosu & Schmidt, 2017).

Scholarship exploring the dynamics of the emerging phenomenon of migration, transnational care provision and its implications on family members' psychological well-being straddles several disciplines simultaneously and is discussed as a background to our study in the following section.

## BACKGROUND

### **Parental Migration and Psychological Health of Children**

What makes transnational migration different is the way the family members mentalise and perform their self-perceived roles in the family in the physical absence of the other. Transformation in the structure of the family and reassignment of caregiver roles is a key feature in research conducted over the years on transnational families (Parreñas 2005). Running a transnational family entails a more complex renegotiation of caregiving arrangements and role responsibilities that, more often than not, could result in negative consequences for those who stay behind, especially children who constitute the vulnerable age group and are made more vulnerable by the absence of primary caregivers. In the context of transnational families, children have been recognized as a vulnerable population for several reasons, particularly for their dependence on parents or guardians for physical, psychological, social and economic needs (Cebotari, 2020; Mazzucato et al., 2015; UNICEF, 2020; White, Leavy, & Masters, 2003).

Children's vulnerability is also attributed to the change in the caregiving arrangement, where the absence of the biological parent is analogous to a reduction in care. In cultures like Ghana where child fostering is the prevalent practice, this disruption can be caused indirectly by migration potentially disrupting the primary parental relationship and leading to divorce (Caarls, 2015; Poeze, 2018). Absence of the parent(s) can impact the child directly because of deprivation and indirectly because of the transformation of the physical and psychological

environment of the child, resulting in problematic coping mechanisms, as chronicled in a number of studies (White et al., 2003; Parreñas 2005; Dreby, 2010; Graham and Jordan, 2011; Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2017; Kharel, et al., 2021). Furthermore, the nascent stages of cognitive development in younger years are characterised by limited capacity for abstraction leading to confusion in the younger child's mind about the reasons for the parents' absence (Piaget, 1964). Most notably, the long-term consequences of childhood care deprivation on brain development (Mackes et al., 2020), cognitive development (Nguyen, 2016), emotional development (McFarlane et al., 2005; Slavich, Monroe and Gotlib, 2011) and their respective implications on psycho-social and behavioural impairments have been pointed out by research in psychology.

At the turn of the century, migration scholarship burgeoned to encompass the processes and experiences that constitute a 'home' and a 'family' that is strewn across borders (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). This critical turn in scholarship was a much-needed attempt at understanding the relevant processes undertaken by migrants, their families and their social networks at a micro level to sustain the idea of home and family (Olwig and Sorensen, 2003). The 'capacity' to participate in the process, defined by financial, temporal, technological, physical and mental resources available to the kin, along with 'obligation' or duty as internalised through cultural values and expectations, social roles and responsibilities like gender or birth order and provisioning of available services at a macro level were expounded by Baldassar (2007) as the key determinants of the caregiving model of transnational families

Growing up in transnational families does not always preordain a poor developmental path for children (Jordan and Graham 2012; Cebotari et al., 2018). It can result in stable, loving caregiving arrangements where children can prosper and benefit from the positive externalities of migration like better standards of living (Antman, 2012), improved socioeconomic position (Wen and Lin, 2012), better health and nutrition (Asis, 2006; Islam, Khan and Mondal, 2019).

However, there is ample evidence to the contrary, predicting escalation in risk of engagement in violent and risky behavior, poor psychological health and poorer educational outcomes for children in unstable care arrangements (Boynton-Jarrett, Hair and Zuckerman, 2013; Fan et al., 2010). Care provided by extant reliable social network is increasingly threatened by growing urbanization, modernization and a resulting dwindling need for family networks (Jones, Ahdzie and Doh, 2009). Instability or inadequacy of care arrangements due to incompatibility or financial constraints are also associated with poorer outcomes for children (Cebotari, 2020; Poeze, 2018). Even in cases where the care deficit is fulfilled by a stable caregiver arrangement, negative outcomes for children's psychological and physical health are noted (Gamburd 2000; Parreñas, 2005; Lei, Liu and Hill, 2018).

The importance of a healthy opportunity of a childhood is best understood by situating the expected impact of migration in theories of child development that indicate best practices when it comes to child rearing. Psychoanalytic work by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1969) have established a theoretical framework to study children's response to a strange situation (parental absence) to ascertain their attachment styles. The object relations theory by Winnicott (1971) specifies that the development of healthy internal spaces depends on the capacity of the caregiver to adapt to the child in the crucial developmental years and creates patterns of attachment that transcend from the nascent transitional phase to every relationship and engagement in life. Notably, Vygotsky's (1978) work explicated the diversity in children's behavior and psychological outcomes to 'culture', which is internalized by children through a process of 'social interaction' with 'more-knowledgeable' members of their community. In this paradigm, the emphasis is placed on the contribution of caregivers and community members, like in the case of transnational care arrangements, in healthy child development, thus not restricting the responsibility to the primary caregiver. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory envisions the child as developing in a 'bidirectional' system of



relationships, comprising of the parents or primary caregivers. The immediate environment, such as the home, school and neighborhood, makes up the ‘meso system’, while the ‘exo system’ comprises of the larger social framework that impacts the child indirectly, such as childcare leave systems, community health services, etc. The outermost level is the ‘macro system’, which is web of values, laws, customs and resources. As per the model, a child’s psychological outcome will be a result of the interaction of all these systems, resonating with the caregiving model that helps understand transnational families (Baldassar, 2007). All development theories persistently underline the relevance of proximity to a parent in crucial developmental stages and the need for proximity in difficult periods of adulthood in determining relational patterns, the development of a sense of security and psychological resilience that finally shape personality and psychological coping mechanisms that manifest in psychological outcomes.

Considering the contribution of the field of psychology to understanding the psychological state in childhood, it is equally important to understand how migration is an activating event that evokes primal patterns impacting psychological well-being. Boss (1999) introduced the idea of two types of ambiguous losses, one where a person is psychologically present but physically absent and the other where the person is physically present but psychologically absent, classifying both as losses experienced with migration. Scholars advanced the idea that migration as a loss is almost as immense as the death of a loved one, but being different as it does not have the finality of death, thus bringing no absolute end to relationships like death does (Volkan and Zintl, 1993). This creates a cauldron of emotions ranging from perpetual postponement of grief to the anticipation of the joy of reunification. The experience of loss is exacerbated as stringent immigration and family reunification policies, economic and social costs of moving and the instability of employment in the host country are factors that can keep families in a transnational situation for a longer duration (Levitt et al., 2017).

Empirical evidence from different geographical contexts indicates a deleterious effect of migration on child psychological well-being. The negative effects on children are emphasised by the migration of the child's primary caregiver, the mother, or the migration of both parents (Jordan and Graham, 2012; Parreñas 2005). Research by Dreby (2010) revealed how economic bargains that lure migrants to leave behind children are hard to achieve and how children might go through periods of acting out, dropping out of school, emotional volatility and resentment, eventually reconciling to apathy towards reunification with parents. Conduct issues amongst children from Indonesia and behavioural issues amongst the Thai children were noted by Jordan and Graham (2011) who employed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire to investigate the psychological well-being of left-behind children in comparison to children who lived with both parents. In China, Wang and Mesman (2015) pointed out the importance of both quality and quantity of parental involvement, and its associations with the level of care provision and psychological health of the child. In Sri Lanka, Wickramage et al., (2015) carried out a cross sectional design study with international labour migrant families to find that children with migrant parents suffered from emotional and hyperactivity issues and two out of five of these children suffered a child psychopathology. A study by Nguyen (2016) found negative cognitive ability scores among children of migrants in India and Vietnam. Further evidence from China, has shown disadvantage for children who stay behind in outcomes such as anxiety, loneliness, and depression, especially when both parents migrate (Gao et al., 2007; Liu, Li and Ge, 2009; Hu, Lu and Huang 2014; Su et al., 2013; Xu et al., 2017). A recent study conducted with Chinese college freshmen, who were left behind by migrant parents in their childhood, found their psychological health negatively impacted in comparison to their peers (Wu et al., 2021). This study brings into sharp focus the vulnerability of children when their parent/s migrate/s while they are still young and the long-lasting impact it can have on the individual's psychological well-being.

A divergent picture emerges from the scholarship in other contexts, where adverse psychological outcomes are not noted. Positive outcomes were observed in certain conditions where children who stay behind are compared to children who live with both parents. Positive outcomes are found in relation to factors like cultural context, quality of caregiving arrangements, gender of the migrating parent, gender and age of the left-behind child, quality and quantity of communication with children, stability of the parental relationship and remittance driven improvements in living conditions of the child. Research from Nepal on the relationship between parental migration and psychological wellbeing of children suggests that adolescents with an international migrant parent had better psychological outcomes than those living with both parents (Kharel et al., 2021). In Ghana and Nigeria, evidence shows no significant difference in psychological health of children when parents migrate abroad as compared to children of non-migrants (Mazzucato et al., 2015; Mazzucato and Cebotari, 2017). Further evidence from Ghana presented equal or better outcomes in measurements of happiness and life satisfaction for children who lived in transnational care (Cebotari et al., 2018). Bolstering the results from previous studies, the study of Cebotari et al., (2018) found the moderating effects of gender of the child, breakdown of the parental unit and dwindling caregiving arrangements as pertinent factors that can change the impact of migration on child emotional well-being.

Among other factors, gender has shaped and punctuated the migration outcomes in many ways, including the psychological well-being of the child. Research has underlined how normative ideas associated with gender were embedded in the larger social context and reinforced gender inequalities that exist, thus, placing gender at the intersection of migration and culture (Dreby, 2010; Yeoh and Lam, 2013; Wickramage et al., 2015; Cebotari et al., 2017). An adverse impact of migration on boys' psychological well-being has been previously noted in the literature. In Moldova, Vanore (2015) found boys to manifest more conduct problems, perhaps due to boy's

tendency to externalise psychological problems. In Sri Lanka, Wickramage et al., (2015) showed disadvantageous emotional and behavioural outcomes for children of migrant mothers, with male children being more vulnerable. In a study comparing the effects of parent migration on life satisfaction of children who stay behind, it was found that Chinese girls show decreased life satisfaction levels in comparison to boys (Wu & Cebotari, 2018). Evidence from Ghana shows that girls' life satisfaction and school enjoyment suffered when the parents migrated internationally and when the mother migrated internally (Cebotari et al., 2018).

Parental migration may also have an effect on marital relations and can expose children to long-term psychological distress. It could be attributed to the migration of one parent and the burden of responsibilities on the other parent or extended periods of separation and lack of certitude over reunification, amongst other factors. Research in Africa has examined the relationship between divorce and migration and found that women and men migrating overseas alone were more prone to divorce (Caarls, 2015). Spouse migration within Africa did not create strife in marital life as multilocal residency is standard practice in many sub-Saharan contexts. Research by Lahaie et al., (2009) highlighted how migrant respondents who were divorced, separated, or widowed were almost three times more at risk of having children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. In her work, Dreby (2010) suggested that divorce after migration of the father could lead to a drop in remittances and communication for the child, especially in the case of remarriage, which results in an emotional and economic loss for the child. In China, research found raised levels of depression and poorer psychological health amongst children who had experienced both parental migration and divorce compared to children residing with both parents (Zhao, et al., 2017). These findings were replicated in Ghana and Nigeria, where worse psychological and well-being outcomes were observed for children who were exposed to both migration and divorce (Cebotari et al., 2018; Mazzucato and Cebotari, 2017).

## **Current Research**

Exploration the literature on the relationship between parental migration and children's psychological well-being unveils specific vital points to be considered when embarking in an empirical analysis. For the most part, the evidence is context specific even when countries under study belong to the same geographical context. As a consequence, the effect of parental migration must be studied individually as characteristics defining the transnational care of children may induce differing changes in psychological well-being.

Drawing on existing evidence, the analysis explores the time-varying effects of different forms of parental migration on psychological health of Ghanaian girls and boys in transnational care when compared with their peers in non-migrant families.

The study will focus on several dimensions that mark the transnational care of children in the context of Ghana. The maternal migration or the migration of both parents, internally or internationally, are often associated with increased distress for children and is part of the current analytical framework. The vulnerability of children is often exacerbated when exposed to the compounded trauma of divorce and parental migration, thus requiring investigation. Furthermore, internal and international parental migration is expected to have differing effects on children, in that international migration usually involves larger periods of separation and parental absence for children. In addition, gender of the child is a significant source of variegation, with girls often found vulnerable when measuring the effects of migration on psychological well-being. The unique context and cultural distinctiveness of Ghana is used to contextualize results.

## METHOD

### **Data**

The data was collected longitudinally across three waves, namely in 2013, 2014, and 2015. Data include self-reports from children and youth in the age group of 12-21 years who attended junior high school (JHS) and senior high schools (SHS) in two urban areas in Ghana with high out migration rates – Kumasi (Ashanti region) and Sunyani (Brong Ahafo region). The study refers to youths as children to reflect the relationship they have with the migrating parent. The data used in this study is not nationally representative, an option considered unsustainable given the uneven concentration of out-migration areas in the national context. Despite not being nationally representative, detailed protocols were followed to allow for future duplication of data.

A stratified sampling procedure was used to collect data from eight low- and high-quality schools - both public and private JHS and SHS. A stratified sampling is considered a preferred choice, as compared to simple random sampling, to ensure representativeness of the sample when the population being studied is heterogenous and clustered in specific geographical areas of the country.

All schools agreed to participate in the study after being asked, and for the first round of the survey a random class was selected from the first two grades. Since SHS follows JHS and both last for three years, classes from the first two grades were randomly chosen so that the same students can participate at least two times in the survey. Subsequently, same students were surveyed in 2014 and 2015 and remained in the study until they graduated.

In the panel, the cohort retention was good; the respondent rates in 2014 and 2015 were 83% and 96%, respectively, in JHS and 82% and 85%, respectively, in SHS, barring students who graduated. Each school was visited twice to collect data from the participants in case they were

absent the first time. Reasons for drop-out from the panel were that children moved schools, graduated, or dropped out of school.

The students filled out the questionnaire independently, with the surveying team supervising them and available for help. The supervision team comprised five trained interviewers who remained the same for all three waves. During data collection spanning three years, students were continuously reminded of the purpose and voluntary nature of the study. The data collection of the project were approved by the ethical committee of the [INSTITUTION]. Of 985 unique responses, 405 participated in two waves, and 350 participated in all three waves. Fourteen completed cases were omitted from the analysis, as they belonged to children orphaned by the loss of both parents, to avoid ambiguity of the reason for parental absence. The students who were finally retained for the study were the ones who participated in at least two waves in the survey.

## **Measures**

This study employs the Total Difficulties Score (TDS) of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) as its dependent variable. SDQ comprises 25 questions that use a 3-point Likert scale- 'Very true,' 'Sometimes true' and 'Not true'. The questions are subdivided into five scales: conduct problems, hyperactivity and inattention, emotional symptoms, peer problems, and prosocial behaviour. TDS is an index that cumulates the first four SDQ scales. The reliability of TDS was established using the Cronbach alpha test measuring the index's internal consistency. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  score of 0.78 produced an acceptable result for internal consistency of items.

The main variable of interest for the study is the status of parental migration, composed of seven different migration conditions: non-migrant, father away internally, father away internationally, mother away internally, mother away internationally, both parents away

internally, and both parents away internationally. Children with one parent away internally, and the other parent away internationally is assigned to the condition of international parental migration.

To control for the effects of divorce and migration an interaction variable between the marital status of the parents and the migration status is used in the analysis.

A set of variables associated with child, caregiver and household characteristics have been selected as controls. One individual characteristic includes the age of the child in full years. Three caregiver related characteristics, education of the caregiver, the quality of the relationship with the caregiver, and the stability of care are included in binary forms. For the measurement of the caregiver's education, 1 indicates secondary education or more. The caregiver of the child can be a parent, a family or non-family member. For children cared for by both parents, the higher education level of the two parents was included. For quality of the caregiver relationship indicator, 1 measures a distant relationship. The stability of care variable indicates whether a child has never changed the caregiver, or changed it once or more times since the parent has migrated. A plethora of studies across time and geographical contexts substantiate the role of the caregiver to emotionally engage with the child as well as help children navigate parental absence due to migration (Lahaie et al., 2009; Fan et al., 2010; Poeze, 2018).

Another covariate of relevance in the context of parental migration is the duration of separation from the migrant parent and composed of three categories: none, less than one year, and more than one year. Studies emphasize the emotional difficulties that children face when separated from their migrant parents for longer periods (Graham and Jordan, 2011; Poeze, 2018).

One socioeconomic indicator is included that summarizes the general living conditions as perceived by the child. In the questionnaire, children were asked to report their generic living



conditions in relation to their peers. This is a binary indicator, where 1 indicates better living and zero otherwise. The generic measurement of living conditions is well accepted in the literature as a reliable indicator, considering that children are often not able to provide accurate measurements of the household monetary and material expenditures (Cebotari et al., 2018).

Child fostering is a common practice in Ghana, and children often grow up with children other than their biological brothers and sisters (Coe, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, the presence of children in the household can be both a source of emotional comfort as well as a vulnerability in the context of scarce resources available to the child (Whitehead, Hashim and Iversen, 2007). Moreover, if the caretaking responsibility of younger children befalls on children, it could potentially increase the burden of domestic chores on older children or girls, which could, in turn, impact their well-being (Whitehead et al., 2007, Owusu, 2013). Hence two household-level variables linked to the number of children in the household are added to the model: the total number of children in the household, inclusive of siblings, and the number of younger children living with the child.

## **Analysis**

This study employs fixed effects regressions, in which all time invariant characteristics are captured in the models, and all changes that may affect children's psychological well-being and parental migration are mitigated by the wave (year) fixed effects. The fixed effects models in this study work with the assumption that all time-invariant characteristics are accounted for, given that they show the same effects at all time. This modelling allows for estimating the effects of change in parental migration status in relation to the change in children's psychological health. In line with fixed effects modelling strategy, the measures included in this study are those that change over time. The models are disaggregated by gender to better capture the dynamic effects of migration on psychological well-being of girls and boys.

The models add cluster of indicators in a stepwise fashion to account for the consistency of effects when measures are added progressively. For brevity, only the full models are presented in the study. Each model also includes interactions between the status of parental migration and marital status. For parsimony, the models display only significant interactions.

The analysis also includes a migration transition matrix, to show the dynamic nature of parental migration in Ghana. The transition matrix presents changes in parental migration status between panel years.

The data was tested for multicollinearity and none was detected. To ensure robustness of results, robust standard errors were estimated and corrected for clustering of observations at individual level.

## RESULTS

### Results

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for all the variables included in the current analysis. Within the study sample, 49 % were living with their parents in Ghana and had not experienced migration in the time period of data collection. A slight majority of children (around 51%) have experienced some form of parental migration. Paternal internal and international migration is predominant, where almost 30% of the children experienced this form of separation. Comparatively, few children (2.92%) live in a care arrangement where the mother has migrated internationally. Internal migration seems more prevalent for mothers, at twice the percentage of children whose mother migrated internationally. Almost 12% of children in the sample live without either of the parents, owing to internal or international migration, with internal migration being more prevalent in comparisons to international migration. Of all children with migrant parents, 33% have also experienced the marital dissolution of the parental unit. The

sample has a slight majority of boys in comparison to girls and the mean age of the children was 15.6 ( $SD = 2.02$ ). The average total difficulties score for the sample is 11.63 ( $SD=5.23$ ).

Table 1 [about here]

The majority of children (81%) reported a good relationship with the caregiver. A little less than half (44%) of the caregivers had received secondary education or more. Of all children in the sample, 29% experienced one or more changes in caregivers. Almost half of the children staying behind had been away from their parents for over a year, at the time of data collection. Almost half of the children (48%) reported a perception of living in better conditions than their peers. Households had an average of 3 ( $SD = 2.14$ ) children cohabiting, with an average of at least one child ( $SD = 1.35$ ) younger than the respondent.

Table 2 depicts the parental migration transition rates between year one and three of data collection. Most of the children (88%) who had non migrant parents remained so across the time period, about 6% transitioning to a situation of the father migrating internally, followed by 4% who experienced internal migration of father or of both parents, while almost none experienced maternal internal and international migration. The migration conditions were relatively stable with a higher percentage of children who transitioned from having migrant parents to a non-migration condition in comparison to the proportion of children who experienced the reverse. Out of the children who transitioned from a migration situation to a no migration situation, the highest (22%) were those whose mother had migrated internally and returned, followed by those whose fathers had migrated internally (15%) and both parents who had migrated internationally (12%). None of the children whose father migrated internationally experienced the mother's international migration and only 2% had their mothers migrating internally within Ghana within the period of three years. Similarly in cases where the mother had migrated internationally, no international migration for the father was noted. Where the father had migrated internally, the transition to mother migrating was limited to 1%.

Table 2 [about here]

Table 3 displays the results from regressions that assess the effect of parental migration on children's psychological well-being. The results show that the internal migration of both parents is associated with a higher psychological distress for girls ( $\beta=3.481$ ,  $p<.05$ ) in comparison to girls living with both parents in Ghana. Having both parents away internationally has no statistically significant effects on the psychological health of boys and girls. Maternal internal migration has a beneficial effect on boys and girls ( $\beta=-9.546$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $\beta=-4.198$ ,  $p<.05$ , respectively), in that it reduces their psychological distress.

Table 3 [about here]

The international migration of the mother has a beneficial effect on boys ( $\beta=-7.581$ ,  $p<.001$ ), but not on girls. However, the interaction terms revealed that boys are more likely to report psychological distress when mothers migrated internationally and were divorced ( $\beta=9.002$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and when both parents migrated abroad and were divorced ( $\beta=5.219$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The higher coefficient of the interaction term between mother abroad and divorced and being a boy may indicate greater psychological difficulties for boys in this particular migration situation. For girls, the effects are opposite, in that they are less likely to report psychological distress when the mother ( $\beta=-9.242$ ,  $p<.001$ ) or both parents ( $\beta=-9.521$ ,  $p<.001$ ) were abroad and divorced. In sum, results show that the presence of parental divorce, when accompanied international migration of parents has negative effects on boys and positive effects on girls.

The father's internal or international migration has no statistically significant effect on the psychological well-being of boys and girls.

Parental migrations' influence on child psychological well-being must be understood in the context of other controls that were included in the model. Most controls do not yield statistically significant results. Duration of separation corresponds with an adverse outcome

for boys, irrespective of the time period. Better living conditions are associated with a better outcome for girls. Having more younger children in the household corresponds with better psychological well-being for girls.

Taken together, the results show that the effects of migration on children's psychological well-being are gendered. Overall, girls in Ghana cope better in psychological terms when parents migrate, as opposed to boys.

## DISCUSSION

The current research has added to the spectrum of studies on how parental migration is related to the psychological well-being of children in Ghana. Certain pertinent patterns gleam through the variegated results of this study. Firstly, migration alone is not necessarily a vulnerability to the psychological health of Ghanaian children. Secondly, there is a gendered dimension to the relationship of various migration conditions and children's psychological health. The gendered effects are twofold, in that (a) maternal migration is a pertinent factor that influences the way children experience with psychological distress, and (b) girls are indeed more likely to benefit from parental migration, even in the presence of parental divorce. Boys benefit from maternal migration (both internal and international) when the parental relationship is stable. The positive impact of maternal migration is reversed for boys when accompanied by parental divorce. At the same time, girls are adversely affected in just one condition, where both parents migrate internally.

Parental migration often calls upon parents to stay separated from children and create circumstances where children are cared for by one parent, relatives and other community members (Coe, 2011). It can be said that migration and the ensuing lack of copresence of the parent are embedded in the life of children in Ghana, perhaps explaining why no substantive negative effects of parental absence on the psychological well-being of children were noted. In

line with social learning model (Bandura, 2001), children have the capacity to internalize cultural and social ideals of what is expected and what is not, reacting to life events in ways that are congruent with the social ideal. As is proposed by the social learning model and previous evidence on children's perception of migration, it would not be outlandish to imagine that Ghanaian children consider migration normal as well as aspirational (Cebotari et al., 2017; Coe, 2011). Contexts where parental migration has negatively affected the well-being of the child left behind in alternative care arrangements are characterised by cultures where the nuclear family model is more prevalent (Gamburd, 2000; Asis, 2006; Parreñas, 2005; Jordan and Graham, 2012; Wickrimage et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2016; Cebotari et al., 2016; Lei et al., 2018), potentially explaining the different results obtained in our analysis.

Data show that over years boys benefit psychologically from maternal migration (not when parents divorce), and girls benefit from it, including when parental divorce accompany migration. These results are different from Mexico (Dreby, 2010), Southeast Asia (Parreñas, 2005; Jordan and Graham, 2012; Yeoh and Lam, 2013), China (Gao et al., 2007; Lei et al., 2018; Wu and Cebotari., 2018), Nigeria and Angola (Mazzucato et al., 2015), and Eastern Europe (Vanore, 2015), where mother migration has been associated with emotional strife and poorer psychological outcomes for children. Ghanaian mothers are often the primary providers in Ghana, and their duty of care does not limit their economic or social mobility (Reed, Andrzejewski and White, 2010; Coe, 2011). The matrilineal kinship system prevails among the Akan community in Ghana, from where many migrants originate. The matrilineal system allows women more mobility, independence, control over their economic resources, access to inheritance, and decision-making powers in the family when it comes to children (Reed et al., 2010; Coe, 2011; Caarls, 2015; Cebotari et al., 2017). The lack of stigma about maternal migration assists their movement internally and internationally. When away, Ghanaian mothers also tend to remit higher amounts at regular intervals and are known to invest most of their

earnings in children (Poeze, 2018). Furthermore, Ghanaian mothers rely on their extensive support network, to find the most suitable caregiver for children while away (Poeze, 2018). The mother's commitment to work outside the home is expected, accepted and supported by society and children. As the mother's copresence is not a cultural or familial given, and child fostering by kin relations is common, it means that children do not always experience a psychological distress when mothers migrate. Moreover, Economic Remittances provide health, education, better living conditions and social remittances like knowledge, new insights and competencies to make the life those left behind richer in many ways than not (Levitt et al., 2017).

Marital discord in relation to parental migration is a vulnerability for boys, but not for girls. Evidence from the child psychology literature points out that divorce can indeed impact boys and girls differently. Overall, boys have a higher prevalence of conduct problems, attention-seeking behaviours, and aggression or problematic interpersonal relationships in the first few years after parental divorce (Henderson, 2013). Furthermore, in cultures where traditional gender roles are vital, boys might not be considered vulnerable enough to be looked after with extra care, especially when mothers migrate. Likewise, masculine ideologies in Ghana do not encourage emotional communication (Poeze, 2018), which may lead to psychological distress for boys when parents migrate. An adverse impact of migration on boys' psychological well-being has been previously noted in other contexts such as in Moldova, and Sri Lanka (Vanore, 2015; Wickramage et al., 2015).

The evidence that Ghanaian girls in transnational care are less likely to be emotionally affected when parents migrate and divorce, is intriguing but perhaps it does not come as a surprise. In Ghana, many migrant parents entrust girls with increased household responsibilities and decision-making with regard to the care of siblings, the use of remittances and household expenditures (Poeze, 2018). Ghanaian girls, when compared to boys, also show higher

aspirations to follow their migrant parents into migration (Cebotari et al., 2017). Combined with matrilineal kinship norms, this enablement may trickle down to girls who are empowered to control their own lives and cope better with emotional difficulties. Furthermore, research has shown that migrant parents invest in girls' well-being and caregiving (Antman, 2012; Poeze, 2018; Cebotari, 2018) and might continue to do so even after parental separation.

The absence of emotional trauma in the context of parental migration may point out on how access to technology makes the 'ambiguous loss' of migration easier to bear when compared to migrants in the past. Work by Baldassar et al., (2016), shows how ICT has perseveringly 'de-demonized' distance, allowing relationships to be sustained through virtual 'continuous copresence' offered by social media. More research is needed to understand the long-term impact of technology on people's relational conceptualizations, dynamics, and emotional lives, but in the context of migration.

This study is not without limitations. The data was collected in three waves over a period of three years, which does not allow to capture the long-term psychological effects of separation due to migration. The selectivity of migration affects the way parents migrate, return, or change their migration trajectories over time. Because of child reports and sensitivity of information linked to parental choices of migration, the data were unable to collect information that would lead to control of migration selectivity. An additional limitation is linked to children misreporting information on some of the indicators due to forgetfulness, lack of knowledge or both. Children, especially the younger one, had difficulties reporting on measurements linked to remittances, period of separation, and the location of parents, among others.

Despite the limitations, this study adds evidence to the African scholarship on migration and the psychological well-being of children. It highlights the potential positive psychological outcomes of migration, especially for girls and when mothers migrate internally or internationally. This study brings evidence to destigmatise parental migration, especially when



mothers migrate, as living transnationally is not necessarily a vulnerability for children's psychological well-being. The premise of a successful migration depends on stable and robust caregiving arrangement, calling for the urgent need to create and implement policy-backed structural support interventions for long-term care support. Currently, no formal policies are targeting children in transnational care or their caregivers in Ghana. Programs aiming to pre-migration information campaigns would benefit children and caregivers, along with formal provisions of social assistance ensured for adults who care for children of migrant parents.

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Table 1

## Descriptive statistics for dependent and independent variables

Variable	Full panel sample		
	%/Mean	SD	N/n
Total difficulties score (TDS)	11.63	5.23	1860
Parental Migration Status			
Non migrant parents	48.92%		904
Father away internationally	15.42%		285
Father away internally	14.18%		262
Mother away internationally	2.92%		54
Mother away internally	6.06%		112
Both parents away internationally	3.46%		64
Both parents away internally	9.04%		167
Parents divorced / separated	33.03%		608
Child is girl	47.53%		976
Child age (years)	15.62	2.02	1860
Distant relationship with the caregiver	19.07%		354
Caregiver's education is secondary or more	43.80%		805
Child changed caregiver once or more times	28.66%		533
Duration of separation: none	52.63%		979
Duration of separation: less than one year	24.03%		447
Duration of separation: more than one year	23.33%		434
Living conditions are better than others	48.39%		899
Total number of children living with the child	2.99	2.14	1860
Total number of younger children living with the child	1.40	1.35	1860

*Notes:* The *n* refers to the number of observations under each category within each variable

Table 2

## Migration Status Transition Matrix: 2013 to 2015

Parental migration status	Non-migrant parents	Father away internationally	Father away internally	Mother away internationally	Mother away internally	Both parents away internationally	Both parents away internally	N
Non-migrant parents	87.8	2.1	6.2	0	1.7	0.2	2.1	904
Father away internationally	7.8	79.3	5.6	0	2.2	3.3	1.7	285
Father away internally	15.3	4	71.3	0.7	1.3	0.7	6.7	262
Mother away internationally	9.4	0	3.1	81.2	6.3	0	0	54
Mother away internally	22.7	0	1.5	1.5	65.2	0	9.1	112
Both parents away internationally	12.5	5	2.5	5	0	70	5	64
Both parents away internally	10.5	5.3	9.5	1.1	4.2	0	69.5	167

*Notes:* all transition rates are in percentage and calculated for each respondent across time. The changes in the migration status over time are reflected in the rows.

Table 3

## Parental Migration and Psychological Health of Children

	Total difficulties score	
	Boys	Girls
	$\beta$ (SE)	$\beta$ (SE)
Parental Migration Status		
Father away internationally	-3.26 (1.932)	1.75 (1.841)
Father away internally	-3.016 (1.689)	0.934 (1.496)
Mother away internationally	-7.581*** (1.608)	1.927 (1.391)
Mother away internally	-9.546* (4.372)	-4.198* (2.052)
Both parents away internationally	-3.392 (2.379)	3.547 (1.898)
Both parents away internally	-4.799 (2.535)	3.481* (1.553)
Parents divorced / separated	1.490 (1.067)	1.372 (2.389)
Mother away internationally * Divorce	9.002*** (1.597)	-9.242*** (1.692)
Both parents away internationally * Divorce	5.219*** (1.336)	-9.521*** (2.192)
Child age	-0.340 (0.395)	-0.159 (0.404)
Distant relationship with the caregiver	0.740 (0.631)	-0.245 (0.543)
Caregiver's education secondary or more	-0.111 (0.619)	0.331 (0.866)
Child changed caregiver once or more times	-0.834 (0.613)	-0.584 (0.685)
Duration of separation: less than one year	3.388* (1.431)	-0.0986 (1.265)
Duration of separation: more than one year	3.325* (1.430)	-0.307 (1.237)
Living conditions are better when compared to other children	-0.327 (0.498)	-0.977* (0.479)
Total number of children living with the child	-0.153 (0.144)	0.124 (0.130)
Total number of younger children living with the child	-0.378 (0.295)	-0.456* (0.208)

Wave fixed effects	yes	yes
Child fixed effects	yes	yes
Unique number of children	376	351
Total number of observations	781	705
R <sup>2</sup>	.008	.006

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*Note. Standard errors in parentheses (adjusted to account for clustering within individuals).*

*\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.*