

# An Exploration of the Roles, Goals, and Social Interactions of Ghanaian Women

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## ABSTRACT

This ethnography study sought to explore the lived experiences of Ghanaian women from urban and rural areas, and their roles in society. Research has revealed that Ghanaian women are on the rise of independence and higher education. Empirical data has identified the popular jobs among Ghanaian women in rural and urban areas as well as how much they value education. Research has also identified the careers which are and are not respected in Ghanaian culture. This study took a unique glimpse into the lives of young Ghanaian college students' and how aspirations and career goals for either gender is the same but differences exist in upbringing. Focus groups consisted of college students, ages 20-25. Native Ghanaian students from rural and urban area of Ghana. Research questions focused on the roles of Ghanaian women in society; specifically, their roles at home and work; their social relationships, specifically their interactions and friendships. Validation strategies include rich thick descriptions, member checking, and journaling. Atlas Ti was used for the data analyses and the following themes emerged; experiences of higher education, white collar jobs, feelings about financial stability, feelings and experiences about marriage and friendship, and the essence of independence. This exploration serves as a means to educate young African American women on the culture and values held so respectfully by Ghanaians which would be the land of many of our ancestors. This is an attempt to understand how Ghanaian women take on the challenge of laying a foundation for women to walk on while having to conform to what a male dominant society expects while still holding on to their own sense of power.

## **An Exploration of the Roles, Goals, and Social Interactions of Ghanaian Women**

Ghanaian women must play a very important role in their societies means to flourish. 'Poverty stifles dreams, or at least the process of attaining dreams' (Ray, 2002). Ghanaian women's goals are motivated by the area they live in and by their parents/families. As young women they learn to adjust their dreams and life's expectations according to what is deemed realistic in terms of their community and families. As a result of social media, young Ghanaian women may dream of becoming like famous Africans and even Americans that have thriving careers as actresses, models, or even recording artist. For many of these young women, if living in a rural area, their parents biggest concern would be their ability to simply find a job that provides a living and supports the family. Dreaming of things such as a celebrity lifestyle are completely unrealistic. The extent to which young people felt that they could achieve their realistic goals depended largely on the support received from their communities and whether they were encouraged to believe in and work towards their goals. In this ethnographic study, Ghanaian women's roles in their society will be viewed from the perspective of young college aged students. Focus groups will be held to receive an overall better understanding of the Ghanaian culture. The focus here is understanding what role these women play in their homes and families. As well as understanding their goals in life and how they were motivated. One very important aspect of this study is looking into social interactions and relationship dynamics between Ghanaian women and the ways they impact each other's lives. This study is designed to take a close look into the lives of these young African women and access the culture sharing patterns of those from different areas. In many other studies, they look at mostly women roles at work

compared to those of males. They may also look at Ghanaian women's ability to conceive and how the number of children she has determines her social status. The main comparison in other studies is low income citizens from rural and urban areas.

Ethel Boateng (2018) found that many young people in urban areas felt that their families and communities, in particular their parents, seek to limit their aspirations. As a result, many do not talk to anyone about their dreams and aspirations, and certainly not someone who wouldn't be able to advise them on how they can close the gap between their aspirations and their reality. Although in urban areas, these dreams could very well be seen as unrealistic, it may not be as far-fetched. After the Education Act of 1960, parents were reluctant to send their daughters to school because their labor was needed in homes and on farms. They also believed that an education would dim their daughter's marriage prospects. However, data from the early 1990's shows about 19 percent of instructional staff at universities being women, and the fact that women dominate the secretarial and nursing professions in Ghana. Parents in urban areas teach their children the importance of education and having a respectable career. Urban youth are intrigued by the higher prestige of white-collar jobs such as: police officers, drivers, doctors, and office jobs. because of the respect these career paths have and wealth earned from them. For many of these young adults, their lived experiences are the main reasons they strive for jobs that can provide financial stability and make their families/communities proud. Women in many countries in eastern and southern Africa have been expected to be provided for by their husbands (i.e. Hansen 1997; Lange 2003), women in Ghana have traditionally and increasingly over the last century gained importance as bread winners (Akyeampong 2000; Robertson 1995). In the Common Era (CE), Ghanaian women are becoming more and more independent as society changes. More single mothers and mothers outside of wedlock are causing women to neglect traditions. The national development of Ghana is largely accountable for single parenthood due to divorce, widowhood, desertion, and job transfers. The number of households that are being led by women are steadily increasing.

A Ghanaian woman's role at work and in her home are essential to a family's ability to thrive. Women in the Ghanaian culture are particularly driven beings due to living in a male dominant world. Most respected career paths are in male dominant fields and if a young woman desires to have a career in that field, her family may discourage her from pursuing these goals. Ghanaian woman may be risking losing their family's financial support. These women may experience sexual harassment in the workplace where men may ask them to partake in sexual encounters to get or maintain a job in a male dominant field. For women, their safety and protection from harassment from bosses and co-workers was another important consideration when choosing their work, according to Ethel B (2018). For women work typically meant street vending, catering, or providing cleaning services. More and more women start to branch out into areas such as teaching, nursing, secretarial and clerical work. According to Miranda Greenstreet (1972) in the lower income brackets, the objective of working women is to expand the family's overall income. Women tend to dominate Ghana's marketplaces. To be a trader has become a 'natural' way for women to fulfil the social expectation of combining their roles as wives and mothers with an income generation. (Clark 2000). According to World Bank, 69.3 percent of women in urban areas are informally employed compared to 5.8 percent employed formally. In rural areas, 26.8 percent of women are employed informally, compared to 1.1 percent employed formally. Ghanaian women work very hard, long days for little to no money. Much of this reason being Ghanaian women lack former education or understand the concepts of starting businesses, getting business licenses, and being able to grow a business. Ghanaian women have to work to have money to take care of their families but although the economy grows it is hard to grow the mindsets of the people when trading is all they've ever known. This is why many women trade, bake, and/or make and sell clothing or accessories. Due to lack of generational entrepreneurial knowledge or formal education these women are still below the poverty line.

Similar to America there are people that benefit from the low-income communities' inability to pursue higher education or inherit entrepreneurial understanding to thrive and work their way above the poverty line. These individuals become successful without any desire to spread the knowledge of escaping poverty or growing your own business from the ground. Everything stems from lack of knowledge. Ghana's informal economy is not taxed, monitored by government, and Ghana's informal sector makes up about 88% of the Ghanaian workforce. Employees in this sector

make minimal profit due to these businesses lack of potential for growth. For years it has helped many citizens survive, causing a level of comfort or satisfaction that leaves majority of the population naïve, vulnerable and impoverished. The idea of formalizing their businesses or looking for employment in the formal sector can be viewed as more of a risk to their survival than an advantage.

Ghanaian women often desire to take after their mothers because they see them as dedicated individuals that will not allow anything to stop them. Although many young Ghanaian women now prefer to go to college and seek more professional careers; they honor their mother's work ethic and desire to have her character traits. Young Ghanaian women are often taught to get married and work as a means to support their husband's primary income. But in this day and age young women who are able to afford it are pursuing higher education. With their education they desire to have jobs that are well respected in order to make their communities proud and support their families. Ghanaian women are raised to get married and they are also taught that the most honorable thing they could accomplish is to bear children. In a study called the Seven Roles of Women (Oppong & Abu, 1987), they held field interviews confirming traditional views on procreation. Given the male dominance in traditional society, some economic anthropologists have explained a female's ability to reproduce as the most important means by which women ensured social and economic security for themselves, especially if they bore male children (Oppong & Abu, 1987).

## Methodology

This qualitative study was initiated with an ethnographic approach to allow Ghanaian citizens to identify their culture sharing patterns. This researcher was immersed in the cultures of three different Ghanaian cities including Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast. This enabled the researcher to acquire diverse information regarding the different lived experiences.

### *Sample and Procedure*

The qualitative data collection techniques included focus groups, semi – participant observations, and informal conversation for this ethnography study. Focus groups allowed participants to communicate openly about their views and personal experiences. Homogeneous sampling was used to gather specific participants in order to produce the most relevant data. We held focus groups with college aged students from two different college students. Purposive sampling strategies were used to recruit participants that would likely produce the most relevant data. Characteristics for participants were college students ages 20-25. Administrators of both the University of Ghana and Cape Coast University, they hand-picked students they believed would be a good fit for our research. In order to achieve optimal results throughout the research process, consent was genuinely informed to each participant, the co-moderator took notes, gave feedback, and asked for confirmation of findings. In each focus group we began by explaining the purpose of this research and why studying the roles of Ghanaian women is important to me as a young black woman. After thoroughly going over the consent form and what all would take place during the focus group, each participant signed them ensuring that they understood. The first focus group was conducted at the University of Ghana and consisted of 5 people, and the second focus group, conducted at Cape Coast University consisted of approximately 10 graduate students. Numerous informal discussions with key community informants helped create a wider view of the culture due to experiences older Ghanaians had in comparison to the younger Ghanaian research participants. This further increased the researcher's ability to understand Ghanaian culture and the ways in which it has evolved. At the conclusion of each focus group, each participant received a Clark Atlanta University T-Shirt and 100 cedis.

## Data Analysis

Atlas Ti was used to cultivate themes and codes for this research data. The initial coding of the data indicated emerging codes/categories and was followed up focused coding which helped to identify sub categories and themes. Validation strategies included member checking, peer review, rich thick descriptions. The co-moderator conducted member

checking by giving a brief synopsis of the notes taken and allow room for clarification or the opportunity to give additional information. Reading the notes taken during the focus groups and listening to the audio recordings allowed the researcher to fully identify themes and codes. The researcher was able to point out differences in the themes and codes that emerged from the different areas of Ghana. The themes were developed from similarities of the participant's responses to the research questions. The following themes emerged: experiences of higher education, white collar jobs, feelings about financial stability, feelings and experiences about marriage and friendship, and the essence of independence.

## Results

It is apparent that cultural views about most themes were consistent among urban participants while differing views were consistent among rural participants. Quotes provide further insight of perspectives shared by participants and helping interpret the cultural differences and similarities of both areas. The themes that evolved and are described below, clearly indicate these topics to be of importance to both groups of participants, just possibly in different ways. An example is the essence of independence being instilled more so in young Ghanaian women raised in urban areas. This does not signify an absence of independence as a value for Ghanaian women in rural areas. There are differences in the way the various themes emerged and are valued by both groups of participants. For those raised in urban areas, the women are pushed harder and taught independence. While those raised in more rural areas are expected to help mother take care of the family and to take pride in themselves on having their own families someday. The essence of independence was mirrored in the way both groups of young women described their life goals.

### Experiences of Higher Education

Participants had different perceptions of higher education although they were all college students. Those located in the urban area were in school and desired to obtain their degrees but their aspirations were what some may consider superficial or shallow. Things such as actresses, dancers, and musicians. In the Ghanaian culture this may represent dollar signs but it does not earn you any respect. While the participants located in the rural area were very determined to obtain their masters degrees and become well established within their desired career field. Each group of participants valued higher education and deemed it a necessity. Participants in rural Cape Coast viewed higher education as opportunities to become successful and escape poverty and hardship. While on the other hand, participants in urban Accra, perceived education as a great opportunity but nonessential to their livelihood. Below are some quotations from the participant exemplifying the above theme.

Female 1: My mom always encouraged us to go to school but her expectations for my brother were much higher.

Male 1: Unlike my female siblings, I was expected to keep going in school. I was always compared to my male cousins and siblings.

Male 5: I want to study abroad to other parts of Africa.

Female 2: I want to finish my master's program and help out in my community.

Female 4: I want to obtain a PhD and become a psychologist.

Male 3: At a certain age why are girls still schooling?

### White Collar Jobs

Many of these young women have been influenced by their mother's work choices/career paths and lack thereof. "I have to respect my mother, by doing the things she expects of me," one female participant stated. Due to the fact that finding respectable white-collar jobs may be more difficult for women, they are expected not to waste time on fantasies such as movie stars, singers, and dancers. On top of that, those are not the type of careers that can gain you respect in your community. It was discovered that their definition of success is greatly defined by your community's evaluation

of your career or job title. The participants had a lot of respect for what their elders and parents deemed as wise career choices as demonstrated by the participant quotations below.

Female 1: My mom is a lawyer. I wanted to be an actress, but now I want to work in health with children.

Male 1: I was expected to help my father out with his business at a young age.

Female 5: There are no jobs for just men, every woman can do the same jobs men do.

Male 2: My first job was charging people to ride my bike.

Male 3: I worked at a bar.

Female 2: I filed paperwork at an office.

Male 4: I worked as a woodcarver.

Male 3: It is appropriate for women to work in offices, libraries, cafeterias, sales, and on farm (but men will do the harvesting).

Female 6: Men do jobs that require much strength like drivers and factories.

Female 3: Not really a good look for a woman to have a job that mostly men do.

### Feelings about Financial Stability

Financial stability typically is more valuable than an education, as some of the words from the participants included below, indicate. Finances and stability come with status and is required over schooling. Keeping the income flowing and providing the family with all necessities is a priority in Ghana. For many Ghanaians' growing up could mean the oldest sibling dropping out of school. As the oldest female in the home, you may be required to stay and take care of home, chores, and youngest siblings while your other siblings attended school and your mother worked to add to your father's income. Children's engagement in economic activity in most parts of Ghana is considered a socialization process to prepare them for adulthood (Osei-Boateng & Ampratwum, 2011). In the Ghanaian culture children acquiring work skills is more beneficial to a family's well-being than education.

Female 1: I take care of the chores at home because mom always works.

Male 1: A woman's work role can't be used in the home for authority, the man is still the man because he provides.

Female 2: Sometimes fathers' income is not enough, so mothers must work.

Female 3: I help my mother and I must sweep the house every day because she works to afford household items.

Female 4: Household needs are met at all cost. It isn't a big deal to have to drop out of school to help support the family.

Female 2: A stable

Female 1: Mothers are buy household supplies and extra things for us children.

Female 4: Females at home take care of younger siblings, cook, clean, take care of home.

Female 5: Mother always told me that an honorable family doesn't require wealth but stability.

Male 5: Men in home fix things and pound fufu, but most of their responsibility is outside of the home.

### Feelings and Experiences about Marriage/Friendships

In the Ghanaian culture, participant responses (quotations included below) indicated that family is the number one priority, which is vital for the development of a young girl into a well-respected woman. Prioritizing an education over your family and your chances at being married and starting your own family is an ultimate familial disrespect. Honoring your family by going out and obtaining status with a husband and respectful career is not seen to be an accomplishment requiring extensive schooling. Therefore, Ghanaian males are not as supportive as they should be when it comes to women and higher education. Fathers in the family are often considered emotionally unavailable. Girls and guys must go to their mothers for emotional needs.

Female 2: I only have formal conversations with my mother. Closer with my dad, he's my friend.

Female 1: Closer with my mother.

Female 3: My father is the more respected parent.

Male 3: I believe a man should be the leader and provider and the woman should get to an element right behind her man not essentially to exceed him.

Female 4: My mother is the provider of my home and pays the bills.

Female 7: My family will marry me, they must approve of my husband.

Female 1: I was taught to get married before having children.

Female 5: I can talk to my mother about life.

Male 1: Having children before marriage is not really a big deal. It just happens.

Male 3: My father just bosses me around, he only cares about how much work I can do.

Female 3: I want to be married before having children.

Female 4: I respect my mother by doing the things she expects of me.

Female 1: When it comes to friends' males understand loyalty more than females.

Female 6: Guys maintain friendships longer, girls hold grudges.

Female 7: You are considered a close friend when my family likes you and are comfortable with you coming over.

Female 5: It isn't very common to be close friends with sister, depends on age difference.

Female 2: Real friends keep each other's secrets and can talk to each other about anything.

Female 3: I was taught to hang on to those that don't lie to me, are genuine, and push me to make good decisions.

Female 1: Girls are too prideful.

## The Essence of Independence

Considering a modern society and culture that's rapidly evolving, it is easier to understand the increasing rate of Ghanaian women desiring to be independent. Majority of the participants were raised in two parent homes and the women were taught to value family. However, majority of the female participants spoke of independence as a necessity, at least for the early stages of adulthood. They didn't deny the inevitable future of being mothers and wives, but it definitely was not at the top of any of their priority lists.

Female 5: Moms encourage girls to go to school and build their self-esteem.

Female 1: I want to work and become accomplished.

Female 2: I just imagine being free and having the money to do whatever I want.

Female 1: Mom expected me to compete with my brother and excel just as much as he did. She would ask me if I wanted to remain in the kitchen to encourage me to work harder.

Female 4: I don't want my husband to marry me and I remain in the house. I was taught to have my own life.

Male 3: I was taught to appreciate women, and I just want to protect the women in my life. But women just want to be independent now.

Female 2: I was taught to be independent and work hard. Can't allow my cousins or brothers to excel higher than me.

Male 5: Society has gotten to a place where the women are doing better than the males individually.

## Discussion

Essentially Ghana's culture has defined the Ghanaian woman as the wife, mother, and supporter. If the woman worked it was only to support the income of the husband and to take care of miscellaneous fees for the needs of the children or household. She would do work such as farming, trading, and/or making and selling goods and clothing. The goal being to help the husband maintain financial stability. During the focus group a male participant admitted that women were expected to remain in the kitchen but times have changed and women are now competition for good jobs. In a

male participant's opinion, "Men are groomed to become leaders and women to be supporters." Why are women still schooling at a certain age," another participant stated more so than questioned. Showing that the only option men have is to respect women's decisions to continue to evolve in their societal roles. But within the same breath there is a lot of confusion as to why women no longer desire just to be the wife and mother.

In some homes, perspectives are changing and guys and girls are expected to get high positions and respectable jobs/careers. The ways the men responded to the questions about women's roles showed the relevance of the original foundation society laid for Ghanaian women. In this day and time, it is acceptable for a woman's desire to be chasing her dreams and obtaining a career. From a Ghanaian man's point of view that is all fine as long as it is not too far outside of societal norms. Meaning, it is fine for a woman to get a higher education and a career in a highly respected position as long as it doesn't cause her to forget what is most important. That being to get married, have children, and support the husband.

One female participant stated, "I'm currently doing my masters and my goal is to become an established psychologist, working and helping in the community. Then hopefully I will be settled and married with children." As shown in that statement, women are now more prone to put their aspirations before the duties of becoming a wife and mother. They are not aiming to neglect their duties to become a wife and mother, but they are exploring life and finding happiness within themselves and their careers first. Her chances of pursuing her dreams and obtaining a higher education can often be limited by her position inside of the household. Explained by the following statement, "If you're first born, you're expected to be the second mother, to cook, to take care of home, chores, and last born child." Men may not fully understand because in the past women have been known to do much less in actual society and it may be hard to accept that now women will be their competition for that big jobs they've applied for. On the average, urbanized, educated, and employed women had fewer children (Oppong & Abu 1987). Ghanaian women aiming to have established careers may suffer socially because in Ghana a woman's main focus should be bearing children inside of marriage. Your capacity to generate social status for your family lies inside of your womb as a Ghanaian woman. Children provide emotional fulfilment and social status, and can contribute to the household economy by helping with domestic and subsistence activities (FledderJohann, 2017).

The way women choose to live is steadily evolving but the already defined purpose for women has yet to be redefined. Gaining respect, honor, and status is the main goal when venturing out from the home. "*I wanted to be an actress as a kid but I changed my mind and decided to develop a skill,*" said one female participant. "*I imagined being free, having money, and doing what I wanted to do. I wanted to be an actress but now I want to be in health and work with children,*" another expressed. Young Ghanaian women are in the process of embracing individuality and it is important to them that in the process they do not disrespect their families or their culture. The relationships that they have with their parents varies in dynamics. Overall, this study introduced the researches to a new view of selflessness. These young people have a desire to live in a way that honors their mother and father, family, and community. For these young Ghanaian women their understanding of womanhood comes mostly from watching their own mothers, but the men, especially from rural areas have a more outdated perspective of what womanhood is. The female participants had a pretty clear understanding of what they planned to accomplish in life and didn't seem bothered or concerned with any of the male participant's statements about womanhood. A limitation of this study would be receiving data from mostly college aged students. If researchers were to expand on this research, receiving viewpoints from different age groups would be imperative. Including religion in the study would give a more in depth look at the foundation of the upbringings and how different that looks for the urban and rural areas. This study could be beneficial to groups and individuals working on worldwide women empowerment. From this study, organizations can be encouraged to implement programs working to develop more young black women into powerful leaders. A study such as this one can give a deeper look into the evolution of womanhood from 'the shadows into the light.'

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