

Stayer youth shaping their transnational family lives

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Stayer Youth Shaping Their Transnational Family Lives:

Experiences and aspirations of migrants' children living in Ghana

by

Onallia Esther Osei

English summary

Most of the information on stayer youth is based on what migrant parents and local caregivers do for and say about these youth's experiences and aspirations. The current body of literature rarely considers the agency of stayer youth and whether and how it evolves. Therefore, this dissertation examines how stayer youth's experiences and aspirations develop over their lives using youth-centric and temporal approaches to highlight the youth's agency in shaping their lives. Taking the case of stayer youth in Ghana, where stayer youth compose as high as 16% of the urban population of school-age youth, this work specifically looks at the agency of stayer youth in shaping their educational trajectories and migration aspirations over time using their social support networks which supplement or complement the support or the lack of support from their migrant parents. This dissertation also shows the agency of stayer youth through digital media, specifically WhatsApp, in sustaining transnational parent-child relationships over time, i.e., maintaining a connection across borders.

I conducted this research by compiling life stories, including youth mobility trajectory maps, interviews, observation, hang-out and conversation moments using trajectory grid, social network maps and interview guides. The most innovative method was youth mobility trajectory mapping, i.e., gathering information about the participants' changing places of residence,

caregivers, family constellations, and educational trajectories. Mapping the youth's educational trajectories entailed showing changing schools, educational tracks, transitions, and pathways in each study participant's life, including who decided each school a participant attended throughout the life course. With all the information I collected about each person using several tools and strategies for 15 months, it was imperative to put stayer youth's agency at the forefront of this dissertation. On the one hand, this investigation relates to the youth's changing experiences and aspirations throughout the time they were separated from their migrant parents. On the other hand, it concerns how they decided to interact with people in their network, including caregivers and parents and other kin, teachers and friends, for resources for their experiences and aspirations. Below, I summarise the key conclusions of this dissertation's empirical and concluding remarks.

The third chapter of this dissertation examined how WhatsApp helps stayer youth to actively sustain their ties with their parents across international borders. Due to WhatsApp's widespread accessibility and low cost, I discovered that most young people used this digital medium or platform to stay in touch with their migrant parents. Furthermore, they strategically used different tools WhatsApp offers to support their existing relationships with migrant parents or modify their relationships with their parents. These tactics, which were dependent on the technical ability of the young people, included scheduling moments of contact with parents, enlisting local and international sibling support, and using silence and brevity (succinctness) to signal a certain message.

Stayer youth who received little support and had a distant relationship with their migrant parents showed agency by having brief discussions, remaining silent, and only contacting their parents in times of need. Others relied on their siblings in their country of origin and abroad for advice on the best times to contact their migrant parents. Stayer youth occasionally requested their siblings to make requests on their behalf when the migrant parents and siblings got along well. Others in a good or relatively good relationship with their migrant parents sustained their bonds based on agreed understandings of the most effective time for communication. No matter how stayer youth maintained their ties with migrant parents through accessible and affordable digital communication tools, they often tried to exercise their

agency through possible varying strategies to sustain whatever bonds they could have over time.

In chapter four, the dissertation proved how stayer youth use their agency to shape their primary and secondary education trajectories, mainly to deal with interruptions in schooling. I discovered three key obstacles that often caused interruptions in stayer youth's educational trajectories: frequent changes in housing and caregivers, financial limitations, and a lack of learning support. Each of the three is an outcome of parental migration, although they often interact and shape schooling interruptions together.

Stayer youth exercise their agency by relying on extensive social network support to overcome observed interruptions. They occasionally discover that local caregivers' and migrant parents' educational help is insufficient for schooling. As a result, these youth ask their siblings, extended relatives who are not caregivers, teachers, and friends for help. These youth do so by enlisting the help of local and internationally based siblings and friends, school instructors, and other adult family members to help them with their schoolwork. Therefore, stayer youth exercise their agency by asking for and accepting help from significant others to supplement the care they receive from local caregivers and migrant parents. Furthermore, even after finishing secondary school, most stayer youth still rely on their extended social network support for the required information to transition into adulthood, including pursuing post-secondary education and planning their own migration projects.

In chapter five, the dissertation shows how stayer youth intentionally pace their desire to migrate to match their actual capabilities. Stayer youth in origin countries, including Ghana, often wish to migrate abroad. But since they often lack the means to move when they conceive these plans, extremely few people really move out of their origin country. The literature, therefore, often portrays migration aspirations as binary: either youth in origin settings want to move or they do not. However, I learned that things are not as straightforward. The migration aspirations, dreams or desires of stayer youth are influenced by various factors discussed through four identified categories or typologies. Some stayer youth have migrant parents who support their wish to migrate and have the resources to enable them to do so at a time that the stayer youth prefer. Another group of young people have migrant parents who can afford but disapprove of the youth's desire to migrate. A third group have migrant parents who support their dreams but lack the resources to help them make such dreams come true. The last group consists of young people whose migrant parents are either not involved in their everyday life or have

distanced themselves from these youth's daily lives and aspirations.

Despite the varying background of identified categories, all stayer youth exercise some agency for their migration aspirations and actions over time. Stayer youth in the first category initially preferred to delay their plans, thereby choosing to wait voluntarily and move out after local higher education completion. But when they encounter higher education difficulties in their origin country, they switch their plan of migrating later to migrating now through the parental support they can get. Those who recognised misalignments between their migration aspirations and needed abilities (the three other typologies) choose to delay their migration while waiting in Ghana for a later opportunity. While waiting involuntarily, these youth take advantage of local career advancement opportunities and a broad social network support to get the required resources for evolving migration desires. Given the evidence, all stayer youth exercise agency for their migration decisions and actions whenever possible.

Overall, this study employed youth-centricity and temporality to show how stayer youth's experiences and aspiration change over time, i.e., dynamics associated with sustaining cross-border parent-child relationships through digital communication technologies, educational trajectories and migration aspirations. Using a youth-centric lens to show how stayer youth experiences and aspirations change over time, this dissertation proves how stayer youth are agents in shaping their lives, even when they are in a vulnerable position due to parental migration. The methodology of youth-centricity and temporality, applied in the dissertation, made it possible to observe and explain what stayer youth do to attain particular outcomes and set specific goals, like finishing high school or aspiring to move through a broad social network support while their parents are away. Moreover, by relying on a wide social network for their experiences and aspirations, stayer youth gain a sense of security in life. Therefore, this work has shown that stayer youth are agentic by how they try to adapt to parental migration over time. Hence, instead of just making policy and applying it to them, these youth should be actively consulted, part of policy making, and engage with pertinent stakeholders to share their needs.