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FROM CONFLICT ZONES TO MARKET SPACES: STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND THE POLITICS OF KAYAYEI IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper analyzes the lived experiences of kayayei, female head porters who migrate from Ghana's northern regions to urban commercial centers in search of livelihood opportunities. It challenges dominant narratives that frame their migration solely as a response to poverty. It argues instead that kayayei are internal conflict migrants shaped by structural violence, marginalization, and unresolved regional inequalities. Drawing on Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park as reference points, the study situates the plight of kayayei within the bigger dynamics of political neglect. It critiques the politicization of head porterage by successive governments, revealing how symbolic interventions have failed to produce meaningful change. The paper concludes by proposing a conflict-sensitive and rights-based policy framework that prioritizes inclusive urban planning, labor protections, and investments in northern development as pathways toward social justice and national cohesion. By paying attention to the voices and vulnerabilities of kayayei, the study calls for a reimagining of Ghana's development and peacebuilding agendas.*

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INTRODUCTION

Migration from northern to southern Ghana has long been a defining feature of the country's internal mobility patterns. Among the most visible forms of this phenomenon are young female head porters, locally referred to as *kayayei* (singular: *kayayoo*). These young women migrate primarily from rural and conflict-prone areas in the north to urban commercial centers in the south, particularly Accra, Kumasi, and Takoradi. These women, often in their teens and early twenties, engage in physically demanding labor, carrying goods for traders and market patrons in exchange for meager wages. The services of *kayayei* have become central to the operation of urban markets. They provide a convenient form of human transport between lorry stations and trading stalls. Yet, their presence in these cities is often marked by extreme vulnerability, exploitation, and exclusion.

This paper examines the complex and underexplored dynamics underlying the migratory experiences and socioeconomic conditions of *kayayei*. While the phenomenon has attracted scholarly and media attention in relation to health risks, labor precarity, gender inequality, and urban poverty, much of this discourse has treated their movement as primarily a matter of economic migration.[1] This paper seeks to broaden the analytic lens by situating *kayayei* migration within a conflict-migration nexus and highlighting how their marginalization in urban settings reflects deeper structures of systemic neglect. Indeed, many of these young women originate from communities bedevilled with protracted chieftaincy disputes, land conflicts, environmental degradation, and political marginalization. Their migration is often an act of survival, a response to the conflicts that push them out of their communities. Upon arrival in the South, however, they confront a different set of challenges, including homelessness, unsafe working conditions, discrimination, and lack of legal protections. The very urban spaces that offer the promise of opportunity often become sites of further neglect and structural violence.

The central argument of this paper is that *kayayei* migration is not only an economic strategy but also an exponent of unresolved conflict and social dislocation in Ghana's northern regions. Moreover, the socioeconomic deprivation these young women endure in the urban South is indicative of broader patterns of marginalization that undermine national cohesion and frustrate peacebuilding efforts. Through a focus on two prominent commercial hubs (Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park), this study illustrates how the everyday struggles of *kayayei* reveal a crisis of inclusion and justice in Ghana's developmental and political frameworks. To achieve this, the paper will be guided by the following research questions: How can the migration of *kayayei* be understood within the context of conflict and structural neglect in northern Ghana? In what ways do their lived experiences in urban centers reflect processes of marginalization? How

[1] Ahlvin, K. (2012). The burden of the Kayayei: Cultural and socio-economic difficulties facing female porters in Agbogbloshie. *PURE Insights*. 1-17. https://wou.omeka.net/s/pure-insights/item/68; Nyarko SH, Tahiru AM. Harsh Working Conditions and Poor Eating Habits: Health-Related Concerns of Female Head Porters (Kayayei) in the Mallam Atta Market, Accra, Ghana. *Biomed Res Int*. 2018:6201837. doi: 10.1155/2018/6201837; Boateng, S., Amoako, P., Poku, A.A. *et al.* Migrant female head porters' enrolment in and utilisation and renewal of the National Health Insurance Scheme in Kumasi, Ghana. *J Public Health* 25, 625–634 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10389-017-0832-1

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does the marginalization of *kayayei* undermine broader efforts toward peace and development in Ghana?

By engaging these questions, the study aims to contribute to existing debates on migration, gendered labor, and conflict by interrogating the voices and conditions of *kayayei* within Ghana's contemporary political economy. It shows how without addressing the structural and conflict-based roots of *kayayei* migration and exclusion, policy interventions will remain superficial, and Ghana's peace infrastructure will continue to rest on fragile foundations.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

To fully comprehend the migratory experiences of *kayayei*, it is imperative to first review the historical and socioeconomic conditions of Ghana's northern regions. Studies suggest that the place is marked by structural neglect, environmental fragility, and persistent conflict. These factors create a hostile environment for young women, prompting migration to the south in search of safety, work, and hope. Yet this migration reproduces another form of marginality, as these young women become informal laborers.[2] in urban centers that offer neither legal protection nor social participation. The *kayayei* phenomenon, therefore, cannot be decoupled from the broader conflict and development crises that continue to haunt Ghana's northern periphery.

These areas, which comprise the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West regions (now reorganized into six administrative zones), have long been characterized by systemic underdevelopment, limited state investment, and recurring social conflicts.[3] The disparities between the north and south of Ghana are not merely incidental but are rooted in both colonial and postcolonial political economies that have structurally disadvantaged the northern sector. Indeed, the marginalization of northern Ghana can be traced back to British colonial rule, which divided the country into two unequal administrative zones: the colony and the protectorates. The north was designated as a labor reserve, supplying cheap human capital to southern industries, cocoa farms, and mines.[4] This labor reserve model ensured minimal infrastructural and educational development in the north, reinforcing its role as a periphery to the more economically vibrant south. Colonial authorities deliberately underinvested in northern education and healthcare, fearing that an educated northern population would resist forced labor recruitment.[5]

[2] Samiliv, T. (n.d.). Kayayei as the backbone of Accra's informal economy. https://sites.utexas.edu/internationalplanning/kayayei-as-the-backbone-of-accras-informal-economy/

[3] Abdulai, A. G., and Hulme, D. (2015). "The Politics of Regional Inequality in Ghana: State Elites, Donors and PRSPs." *Development Policy Review*. 33(5), 529-553. **doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12124**.

[4] Songsore, J. (2003). *Regional development in Ghana: the theory and the reality*. Accra: Woeli Publications; Awedoba, A. K. (2006). *Culture and development: with special reference to the Ghanaian situation*. Accra: Institute of African Studies.

[5] Lentz, C. (2006). *Ethnicity and the making of history in Northern Ghana*. Edinburgh University Press.

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After independence, successive governments, despite rhetorical commitments to national unity and development, perpetuated this imbalance. While the south experienced rapid urbanization and industrialization, the north remained agrarian, dependent on subsistence farming, vulnerable to climate shocks, and underrepresented in national governance structures. Development policies such as the Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA) were launched to address these disparities but were marred by allegations of mismanagement and politicization, further entrenching distrust in state interventions.[6]

The north's fragile ecological zone, marked by long dry seasons, erratic rainfall, and desertification, has exacerbated food insecurity and deepened rural poverty. Climate variability has severely affected rain-fed agriculture, the primary livelihood for most households, leading to chronic food shortages and seasonal migration.[7] These environmental pressures disproportionately affect women and girls, who bear the brunt of household labor and caregiving responsibilities. With limited access to land, capital, and formal employment, many young women see migration as a survival strategy rather than a mere choice.

Studies are clear on the relationship between youth unemployment and gender vulnerability. As has been seen already, unemployment and underemployment are pervasive among the youth in northern Ghana. Structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s, while aimed at economic liberalization, led to the retrenchment of public sector jobs and reduced social spending, a situation that deepened rural marginality.[8] The situation is especially acute for young women who face cultural constraints on land ownership, limited vocational training opportunities, and high dropout rates from basic and secondary education due to early marriage, pregnancy, or poverty.[9] Migration to urban centers, therefore, becomes a gendered response to a lack of livelihood alternatives at home.[10]

It is observable that northern Ghana is not only economically marginalized but also socially volatile. The region has witnessed frequent outbreaks of violent conflicts, often over

[6] Songsore, *Regional development in Ghana*; Abdulai, and Hulme, "The Politics of Regional Inequality in Ghana,"

[7] Derbile, E.K, Bonye, S.Z., Yiridomoh, G.Y. (2022). Mapping vulnerability of smallholder agriculture in Africa: Vulnerability assessment of food crop farming and climate change adaptation in Ghana. *Environmental Challenges*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envc.2022.100537; Fuseini, I and Kemp, J. (2015). A review of spatial planning in Ghana's socio-economic development trajectory: A sustainable development perspective. *Land Use Policy*. (47), 309-320.

[8] Konadu-Agyemang, K. (2000). The Best of Times and the Worst of Times: Structural Adjustment Programs and Uneven Development in Africa: The Case of Ghana. *The Professional Geographer,* 52(3), 469–483. https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-0124.00239

[9] Ghana Statistical Service (GSS). (2014). *Ghana Living Standards Survey Round 6 (GLSS 6):* Main Report. Accra: GSS.; Awumbila, M., and Ardayfio-Schandorf, E. (2008). Gendered poverty, migration and livelihood strategies of female porters in Accra, Ghana. Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift - *Norwegian Journal of Geography*, 62(3), 171–179. https://doi.org/10.1080/00291950802335772

[10] Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf, Gendered poverty, migration and livelihood strategies

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chieftaincy succession, ethnic tensions, and land disputes.[11] Notable examples include the Dagbon crisis in Yendi of 2002, the intractable Bawku conflict, and communal violence in Bunkpurugu and Bimbilla.[12] These conflicts have led to deaths, displacement, the destruction of property, and the weakening of social cohesion. Women and children are particularly vulnerable in such conflict zones, often facing sexual violence, loss of family members, and disruptions to schooling. Migration, in this context, functions not only as an economic necessity but also as a form of conflict avoidance and displacement. Although official narratives and policy frameworks tend to treat Ghana as a relatively peaceful country, these localized conflicts point to a "slow violence"[13] that disrupts livelihoods and exacerbates regional inequalities. Many *kayayei* in the southern cities are thus "conflict migrants" in a broader sense—driven out not only by poverty but by insecurity and institutional abandonment.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE ON THE SITES AND SCOPE OF ANALYSIS

Their study centers on the lived experiences of *kayayei* within the urban marketplaces of Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park in Accra as representative urban sites of convergence between migration, conflict, labor, and exclusion. These locations were selected for their socio-spatial relevance in the everyday lives of northern female migrants and for the layered symbolic meanings they carry within Ghana's urban landscape. Agbogbloshie, situated near the central business district of Accra, is widely known as a dense, multi-ethnic, low-income area marked by a bustling foodstuff market, informal settlements, and a controversial electronic waste dump.[14] It is both a space of economic activity and a symbol of urban marginalization,[15] hosting a large population of *kayayei* who navigate the precariousness of informal labor, insecure housing, and environmental risk.[16] This setting allows for the examination of the convergence of urban poverty, infrastructural neglect, and the socioeconomic invisibility of internal migrants.

Rawlings Park, located within the heart of the Makola Market enclave, is a vibrant commercial zone frequented by traders, transporters, and head porters. It serves as a transitional space

[11] Bukari, K. N., Osei-Kufuor, P., & Bukari, S. (2021). Chieftaincy Conflicts in Northern Ghana: A Constellation of Actors and Politics. *African Security*, 14(2), 156–185. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2021.1932244; GSS (Ghana Statistical Service). (2014). Ghana Living Standards Survey Round 6 (GLSS 6): Main Report. Accra: GSS.

[12] Mahama, E.S. and Longi, F.T. (2013). Conflicts in Northern Ghana: Search for Solutions, Stakeholders and Way Forward. *Ghana Journal of Development Studies Journal* 10(1-2), 112-129.

[13] Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.

[14] Little, P.C. (2022). *Burning Matters Life, Labor, and E- Waste Pyropolitics in Ghana*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[15] Tweneboah, S. & Clottey, E. (2022). Political Vigilante Violence as a Weapon of Empowerment among Socially Excluded Ghanaian Youth. In Boskovic, M, Misev, G, and Putnik, N. (eds.). *Fighting for Empowerment in an Age of Violence.* Hershey PA: IGI Global, 307-322.

[16] Ahlvin, "The burden of the Kayayei"

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between bulk cargo arrival points and retail outlets. This makes it a critical node in the urban logistics chain. For *kayayei*, this space is both an opportunity and a site of daily exposure to physical exhaustion, harassment, and lack of sanitation. Its location at the intersection of formal commerce and informal labor makes it a good place for analyzing how *kayayei* are integrated into, yet left out of, the economic structures that benefit from their labor.

While this paper is not based on new ethnographic fieldwork, it draws on a synthesis of secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, newspaper articles, and multimedia documentation, as well as past field observations. These are used to construct a composite picture of the social conditions, spatial dynamics, and political implications of *kayayei* labor in these urban contexts. By treating Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park as both real and symbolic spaces, the study situates the experiences of *kayayei* within broader discourses on internal displacement, informal economies, and gendered urban exclusion in Ghana.

Presentation of Findings and Discussion

The migration of *kayayei* from Ghana's northern regions to urban commercial centers in the south has traditionally been interpreted through the lens of economic necessity. While it is undeniable that poverty is a significant driver of this internal migration, such an interpretation risks oversimplifying a complex and deeply embedded social phenomenon. A closer analysis reveals that the migratory decisions of these young women are also influenced by the shocks and aftershocks of conflict which are structural, environmental, ethnic, and political. The discussion that follows tries to reframe *kayayei* migration as a conflict-induced and gendered displacement, rather than merely an economic strategy.

Structural and "Slow" Conflict as Migration Drivers

Borrowing from Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," this study similarly observes that *kayayei* migration is a symptom of deep-seated structural violence that manifests as underdevelopment, marginalization, and ecological degradation in northern Ghana.[17] As has been seen already, the chronic neglect of basic infrastructure, healthcare, and education in the north functions as a form of structural conflict that quietly undermines livelihoods over time. These conditions are not simply unfortunate coincidences; they are the result of historical state policies that systematically deprived the region of developmental attention.[18] Over time, this slow attrition of opportunity erodes the social and economic fabric of northern communities, prompting the young, rural, and unskilled women who are especially most vulnerable to migrate southward in search of hope and survival. In this sense, migration is not only a "push-pull" process but also a survival tactic in the face of prolonged institutional failure and latent conflict. While Ghana may not be experiencing civil war, the inequalities between the north and the south constitute a kind of internal displacement, with *kayayei* functioning as internal migrants escaping the non-violent but persistent pressures of abandonment, conflict, and poverty.

[17] Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*

[18] Awedoba, *Culture and development*; Abdulai, and Hulme, "The Politics of Regional Inequality in Ghana,"

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Beyond slow conflict, northern Ghana has also experienced acute cases of violent conflict that have contributed directly to the displacement of individuals and communities. Ethnic, religious, and chieftaincy conflicts have rendered parts of the north unstable and uninhabitable for young women. For instance, the Dagbon chieftaincy crisis in Yendi of 2002, the persistent Bawku inter-ethnic conflict, and land disputes in Nanumba, Bunkpurugu, and Gushiegu have displaced thousands, disrupted local economies, and deepened the insecurity of residents.[19] These violent episodes often result in the destruction of homes, schools, and farms, thereby intensifying poverty and exacerbating gendered vulnerabilities. Young women, especially those without strong kinship protection, are at risk of sexual violence, exploitation, and forced marriage during such crises. In these contexts, migration to Accra or Kumasi emerges as an act of escape and self-preservation, albeit into a new realm of precarity.

The decision to migrate is profoundly gendered. For young northern women, the constraints at home combine with the destabilizing effects of conflict to make migration appear as the only viable alternative.[20] Yet, the migration journey itself and the conditions encountered in the south reflect and reinforce these gendered inequalities. In this sense, one can say that *kayayei* are situated at the intersection of class, gender, and ethnic marginalization. They are disproportionately burdened with the triple precarity of informal labor, gender-based violence, and legal invisibility in the urban economy. Their labor is undervalued and unprotected, and their contributions to urban commerce are often taken for granted. In markets like Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park, their presence is both indispensable and unwelcome. This illustrates the contradictory position of being economically useful but socially marginalized.

This study emphasizes that *kayayei* should be understood, at least in part, as conflict migrants, not in the narrow sense of war refugees. Rather, we need to see them as individuals displaced by a continuum of violence that ranges from structural neglect to physical insecurity. Their stories are entangled in the broader crises of development, conflict resolution, and governance in Ghana. This framing moves the analysis beyond humanitarian pity or gender-based marginalization. It, instead, places *kayayei* within the domain of peacebuilding, transitional justice, and national reconciliation. Their migration stories challenge the illusion of national cohesion and call attention to the need for more inclusive peace efforts that extend beyond political elites and formal conflict zones. As long as northern Ghana remains politically marginalized and developmentally deprived, the migration of *kayayei* will remain not only a socioeconomic issue but also a manifestation of Ghana's unaddressed conflict terrain**.**

Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park as Urban Spaces of Survival and Exclusion

A key finding of my observation of the situation is that Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park as urban environments both accommodate and undermine *kayayei*. These urban spaces function as contradictory spaces of livelihood and dispossession. It can be argued that the arrival of *kayayei* in Accra marks a shift in geography but not in vulnerability. For many of these young women, the urban spaces, particularly in commercial hubs like Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park, offer only a fragile and often dehumanizing form of survival. It is a densely populated

[19] Mahama and Longi, "Conflicts in Northern Ghana"; Awedoba, A.K. (2009) *An Ethnographic Study of Northern Ghana Conflicts: Towards a Sustainable Peace*. Sub-Sahara Publishers, Accra.

[20] Ghana Statistical Service (GSS). (2014). *Ghana Living Standards Survey*

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and contested urban settlement housing thousands of migrants, informal workers, and petty traders. Katherine Ahlvin has noted that people living in Agbogbloshie often suffer from malaria, largely because of poor environmental conditions like open drains and overcrowded housing.[21] Stomach-related illnesses are also widespread, as the area is generally unsanitary and food is often prepared in unhygienic settings. To make matters worse, she notes, animals like goats and chickens roam freely through the slum, exposed to the same unhealthy environment as the residents.

While known globally for its infamous e-waste dump, Agbogbloshie is also a thriving foodstuff market and a key hub in Accra's informal economy. *Kayayei* operate here as head porters for traders, navigating narrow, overcrowded lanes to transport goods under intense heat, pollution, and noise. These young women typically live in makeshift wooden structures or in the open, vulnerable to theft, assault, and harassment.[22] The absence of proper sanitation, potable water, and health facilities contributes to frequent outbreaks of disease and chronic health issues such as malaria, respiratory infections, and reproductive complications. Many *kayayei* report sleeping on cardboard boxes or under vendor stalls, relying on public spaces for personal hygiene, and facing constant eviction threats from municipal authorities during periodic decongestion exercises.

The Rawlings Park, situated within the larger Makola Market enclave, is another key site where *kayayei* operate. As a major commercial center for textiles, plasticware, and general merchandise, the area bustles with economic activity. Yet for *kayayei*, Rawlings Park is a space of daily struggle and social marginalization. Here, they compete for clients, carry heavy loads for long distances without standardized payment, and often endure verbal and physical abuse from traders, shoppers, and market authorities. Unlike male counterparts in the informal sector such as truck pushers or handcart operators, *kayayei* lack occupational associations or collective bargaining units that could offer protection or solidarity. Their labor is not only informal but also unregulated, invisible to labor laws, and excluded from most forms of social protection. In many cases, clients underpay or refuse payment entirely, knowing that the *kayayei* have little recourse. Moreover, Rawlings Park exposes the spatial dynamics of gendered exclusion. While the market depends on female labor, both as traders and as porters, women at the bottom of this hierarchy are rendered disposable. Public toilets charge high fees for use; access to water and shelter is scarce; and security personnel often harass *kayayei* under the pretext of maintaining order. These experiences reflect what Sylvia Chant has described as the "feminization of urban poverty," where women disproportionately bear the brunt of precarious urbanization.[23]

[21] Ahlvin, "The burden of the Kayayei," 12.

[22] Opuni, R.K., Adei, D., Mensah, A.A., *et al.* (2023). Health needs of migrant female head porters in Ghana: evidence from the Greater Accra and Greater Kumasi metropolitan areas. *Int J Equity Health* 22:151. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-023-01947-x

[23] Chant, S. (2013). Cities through a "gender lens": A golden "urban age" for women in the global South? *Environment and Urbanization*, 25(1), 9–29.

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Urban Exclusion and State Neglect

The municipal governance of Accra has frequently framed *kayayei* as symbols of disorder, rather than as victims of structural injustice. Metropolitan authorities periodically demolish informal shelters and attempt to relocate *kayayei* without offering viable alternatives. Policy interventions, such as those proposed by successive governments to "ban head porterage" or repatriate *kayayei* to the north, have largely failed or remained unimplemented. Such responses reveal a limited understanding of the structural drivers of migration and the embeddedness of *kayayei* within urban economies. Despite their centrality to urban commerce, *kayayei* remain legally and socially invisible. Most are excluded from the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), lack identity documents, and are unaware of their rights under Ghanaian labor law. Some attempts by NGOs and faith-based organizations to offer shelter and skills training exist but remain limited in reach and sustainability. Consequently, the urban spaces they inhabit (Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park) remain both essential and exclusionary, hosting *kayayei* as disposable labor in a city that offers neither safety nor social inclusion. Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park, in this sense, are not just geographic locations; they are symbolic of the precarious existence *kayayei* must endure in Ghana's urban centers. While these spaces offer the opportunity for income and survival, they also reflect a broader architecture of urban exclusion and state neglect. The lived experiences of *kayayei* in these markets highlight the contradictions of urban modernity in Ghana—where economic growth coexists with deepening inequality, and where the informal labor of young northern women is essential but unprotected. Any meaningful intervention must confront the political and spatial dynamics of these urban centers and recognize *kayayei* not as burdens, but as rights-bearing citizens deserving of dignity, inclusion, and justice.

The Politics of Head Porterage

I want to turn my attention to the political dimensions of head porterage in Ghana. I am to explore how *kayayei* have been mobilized rhetorically, targeted in policy initiatives, and engaged by political elites, often with little substantive change in their lived realities. As is known, the condition of *kayayei* in Ghana's urban centers is not only an issue of informal labor and neglect; it is also deeply political. Over the years, the plight of these young migrant women has gained increasing attention in public discussion particularly through media reporting, civil society advocacy, and policy debates.[24] Political actors have not been indifferent to their presence; in fact, *kayayei* have become potent symbols of underdevelopment, inequality, and state failure. Yet, rather than inspiring long-term structural transformation, their circumstances have frequently been instrumentalized for political gain.

For years, the plight of kayayei has become a political symbol and electoral rhetoric. The image of the *kayayoo,* largely presented as young, northern, female, and burdened, has been a tool in political narratives about inequality and national development. During election cycles,

[24] Graphic.com, (2025). CSOs urged to campaign against teenage pregnancy among kayayei. *Graphic.com.gh*, June 12, 2025. https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-csos-urged-to-campaign-against-teenage-pregnancy-among-kayayei.html; Nunoo, C. (2024). Kayayei Empowerment Programme launched: 5,000 Female head porters targeted - 2 Hostel facilities inaugurated. Graphic.com.gh, May 22, 2024. https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-kayayei-empowerment-programme-launched-5-000-female-head-porters-targeted-2-hostel-facilities-inaugurated.html

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politicians across party lines have invoked the condition of *kayayei* to signal their commitment to addressing poverty, gender inequality, and regional imbalances. Major political parties included promises in their manifestos to abolish or regulate head porterage, provide vocational training, or establish safe housing for *kayayei*.[25] This pattern illustrates what scholars describe as symbolic politics, the use of social problems as rhetorical tools without commitment to structural change.[26] In this regard, *kayayei* become part of a broader spectacle of poverty politics, where their suffering is acknowledged but not adequately addressed.

As has been noted, various governments have introduced initiatives aimed at alleviating the conditions of *kayayei*.[27] These include the establishment of vocational training programs, temporary shelters, and National Youth Employment modules that are supposed to target head porters.[28] For example, the National Youth Authority has periodically announced training schemes in tailoring, catering, and hairdressing for *kayayei*, accompanied by small startup packages or stipends. Additionally, some NGO and faith-based initiatives have offered short-term relief through health screenings, food distribution, and night shelters. Despite these efforts, the majority of these interventions remain piecemeal, donor-dependent, and poorly integrated into broader social protection systems. Implementation has been marred by weak institutional coordination, lack of follow-up mechanisms, and political turnover that deprioritizes previous initiatives. Many *kayayei* themselves report being unaware of these programs or being excluded due to bureaucratic requirements such as identification cards, proof of residence, or age limits. These gaps reflect a worrying implementation deficit in social protection for informal workers. Moreover, interventions often fail to address the root causes of migration, namely, conflict, regional underdevelopment, and structural exclusion, thus limiting their transformative potential.

The politicization of *kayayei* also manifests in the way political parties and campaign teams mobilize these young women for rallies, demonstrations, and public events. Reports have documented instances where *kayayei* are transported to campaign grounds, provided with branded party merchandise, and promised livelihood support in return for their presence. This practice highlights the instrumental role *kayayei* play in Ghanaian electoral culture, where their vulnerability is exploited rather than alleviated.[29] The visibility of *kayayei* in political campaigns contrasts sharply with their invisibility in policy design, legislative processes, and budgetary allocations. Rarely are *kayayei* consulted in the formulation of policies that affect

[25] NewsGhana. (2016). NDC-Mahama Manifesto: 10k Head Porters to be engaged by YEP. *NewsGhana.com*. September 14, 2016. https://www.newsghana.com.gh/ndc-mahama-manifesto-10k-head-porters-to-be-engaged-by-yep/

[26] Edelman, M. (1985). *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. University of Illinois Press.

[27] Bernard Kusi Appiah, "Wards of 'Kayayes' to enjoy free nursery, another NPP campaign promise," *Myjoyonline.com*. 23 November 2020. https://www.myjoyonline.com/wards-of-kayayes-to-enjoy-free-nursery-another-npp-campaign-promise/

[28] NewsGhana, "NDC-Mahama Manifesto,"

[29] Graphic.com. Kayayei' support Akufo-Addo's campaign with GH¢5000. *Graphic.com.gh*. January 17, 2016. https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/kayayei-support-akufo-addo-s-campaign-with-gh-5000.html

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them, nor do they have collective representation in national labor platforms, urban planning forums, or women's rights councils. This lack of political agency compounds their socioeconomic precarity, reinforcing what Nancy Fraser terms "misrecognition," a failure to accord individuals the status of full members of society capable of voice and participation.[30]

Thus, the politics of head porterage in Ghana illustrates a persistent tension between visibility and marginality. While *kayayei* are highly visible in political discourse, campaign culture, and urban markets, their voices remain absent from policymaking, and their conditions unchanged. Successive governments have politicized their plight without addressing the deeper fault lines of inequality and conflict that drive their migration. Until head porterage is treated not just as a social problem but as a political and structural injustice, efforts to improve the lives of *kayayei* will remain superficial and unsustainable.

Marginalization, Structural Violence, and the Urban Margins

The lives of *kayayei* also reflect intersecting forms of marginality—spatial, gendered, economic, and institutional—that reproduce inequality and reinforce their subaltern status. While poverty and migration are often treated as technical challenges of development, the experiences of *kayayei* point to deeper processes of marginalization and structural violence that are entrenched in Ghana's urban governance and national political economy. These young women occupy what Loïc Wacquant calls "advanced marginality," a condition where individuals are systematically relegated to precarious spaces of economic utility but political invisibility.[31]

Marginalization refers not only to material deprivation but also to the denial of participation, representation, and recognition in key domains of life—employment, education, housing, healthcare, and political voice.[32] For *kayayei*, marginalization manifests in their daily interactions with the city: they are present but unaccounted for in urban planning, needed but unwanted in public spaces, and economically indispensable yet socially expendable. Most *kayayei* live and work in informal, unregulated environments—sleeping in markets, squatting in dangerous zones, and accessing health care through emergency services or charity clinics. Their informal status means they are not eligible for state housing schemes, unemployment benefits, or urban social amenities. This institutional neglect reflects a broader politics of exclusion, where certain populations are systematically omitted from the benefits of development. Moreover, as I have pointed out above, *kayayei* are rarely included in the design of social protection programs or gender policies. As migrant women, they fall through the cracks of policies targeted at "urban poor" (which often center families) and those aimed at "rural women" (which focus on agriculture and reproductive health). This form of policy invisibility contributes to what Fraser describes as **"**misrecognition,**"** a failure to treat

[30] Nancy Fraser, (1995). From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a 'post-socialist' age. *New Left Review*, 212, 68–93.

[31] Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. Polity Press, 2018

[32] Sen, A. (2000). *Social Exclusion: Concept, Application and Scrutiny*. Social Development Papers No. 1, Asian Development Bank; Silver, H. (1994). Social exclusion and social solidarity: Three paradigms. *International Labour Review*, 133(5–6), 531–578.

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marginalized groups as full members of society whose needs and identities count in the public sphere.[33]

The concept of structural violence, introduced by Johan Galtung, refers to the ways in which social structures—economic, political, and cultural—harm individuals by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.[34] In the case of *kayayei*, structural violence is evident in the lack of access to safe housing: Most *kayayei* sleep in unsafe, unsanitary, and exposed spaces, placing them at risk of theft, assault, and disease. As Ahlvin has noted the residence of these residents consists primarily of self-built wooden kiosks and shacks that lack adequate water and sanitation facilities. Residents pay a weekly (sometimes daily) fee to live in shared, rented kiosks. They must also pay to use the facilities, as water, public toilets, and bathhouses have fees attached to them. Yet, the residents consider the prices of their accommodations to be cheap, because instead of paying a rent of 180 GHc in advance for two years, for example, they pay a small fee of 10 GHc per week. However, these fees add up, and many residents do not realize that the accumulated annual costs are often greater within the slum compared to outside of it.[35]

In addition, the *kayayei* have no formal labor contracts, are subject to exploitation and non-payment, and have limited avenues for redress. They also lack health and social services and many suffer from untreated injuries, poor maternal health, and reproductive vulnerabilities without access to health insurance or care. As also noted already, on a regular basis, the life of these young women is replete with exposure to public and private violence. They regularly face harassment from traders, customers, city authorities, and even law enforcement, often without recourse to justice. Structural violence operates quietly, over time, producing normalized suffering and shortened life chances. It is not spectacular like war or famine, but its effects are just as devastating—diminished opportunities, compromised dignity, and an interrupted life trajectory.

The alienation of *kayayei* must also be understood as a form of spatial injustice. Henri Lefebvre's idea of the "right to the city" suggests that all inhabitants, especially those who contribute to its production, should have access to its resources, spaces, and decision-making.[36] Yet, *kayayei* remain on the margins of urban life, physically present but politically absent. They are routinely displaced in the name of urban beautification or market redevelopment, as seen in the 2021 eviction of informal settlers at Agbogbloshie by the Accra Metropolitan Assembly. These actions prioritize aesthetics and elite interests over the needs of informal workers. *Kayayei* are treated not as citizens with rights but as surplus populations whose removal is a sign of development success.

An intersectional analysis reveals that *kayayei* are not simply poor or migrant or female; they are all of these simultaneously, and this compounded identity intensifies their exclusion.

[33] Nancy Fraser, Rethinking recognition. *New Left Review*, 3, 2000:107–120.

[34] Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167–191.

[35] Ahlvin, The burden of the Kayayei, 12.

[36] Henri Lefebvre, Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (eds.), *Writings on Cities*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1996

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Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, we understand that *kayayei* face overlapping structures of oppression rooted in ethnicity, class, gender, age, and migration status.[37] The experiences of *kayayei* in Accra's commercial centers reveal how social alienation and structural violence are woven into the fabric of urban life. Their marginalization is not accidental or isolated but reflects broader patterns of spatial injustice, institutional neglect, and gendered hierarchies. Understanding their condition through the lens of exclusion and structural violence compels us to rethink development not as GDP growth or urban modernization, but as the ability of all citizens to live with dignity, safety, and rights. The question is not only how *kayayei* survive in the city, but also what their marginalization says about the kind of society Ghana is building and for whom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To be able to address the challenges discussed so far, the paper makes the following recommendations.

1. Development of conflict-sensitive national migration policy: I recommend that the government should craft a policy that recognizes internal migration, particularly of *kayayei*, as driven by conflict and structural inequalities. This policy must address both the root causes of displacement in northern Ghana and the vulnerabilities faced in urban settlement areas.

2. There is also the need to formalize and protect informal labor. In this sense, *kayayei* should be recognized as legitimate workers under Ghanaian labor law. This includes access to minimum wage protections, grievance redress systems, and support for forming cooperatives or associations to enhance collective bargaining power.

3. I also propose the need to integrate social protection and urban inclusion programs. Municipal and national authorities must design and implement targeted urban social protection programs, including affordable shelter, health care, and sanitation, within commercial zones such as Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park, where *kayayei* operate.

4. Given that most of these young women migrate to the south due to economic disparities, there is a need to invest in northern development and conflict resolution. Sustainable investment in northern Ghana, which focuses on education, climate-resilient agriculture, youth employment, and local peacebuilding mechanisms, is, therefore, critical to reducing forced migration and ensuring regional equity.

[37] Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.

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CONCLUSION

The migratory story of *kayayei* is not merely one of economic hardship; it is a complex, layered narrative of structural violence, marginalization, gendered vulnerability, and conflict-induced displacement. By tracing their journey from Ghana's conflict-prone and developmentally neglected north to the economic hubs of Agbogbloshie and Rawlings Park in the south, this paper has sought to reframe their presence in urban centers as both a survival strategy and a symptom of broader societal fractures. These young women are not just laborers in the informal economy; they are casualties of a fragmented development model, enduring both slow and acute forms of violence that the state has long failed to adequately address. Political actors have, time and again, instrumentalized *kayayei* in electoral rhetoric, while offering only piecemeal or unfulfilled interventions that fail to address the structural and historical roots of their plight. As such, *kayayei* remain visible yet voiceless—essential to the functioning of the city but excluded from its protections and benefits. Their presence in Accra is a sobering indictment of the unevenness of Ghana's peace and prosperity. To redress this injustice, Ghana must adopt an inclusive and conflict-sensitive policy framework that tackles both the urban conditions of exclusion and the northern drivers of forced migration. This means going beyond temporary vocational programs or relocation campaigns to institute legal, institutional, and social reforms grounded in equity, dignity, and human rights. Recognizing *kayayei* as stakeholders in the national development agenda, and not as peripheral actors, offers the potential to turn their vulnerability into a platform for social transformation and sustainable peace.

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