

## The Everyday Politics of Gender, Work, and Domestic Labour: A Qualitative Inquiry into Changing Family Roles in Contemporary African Households

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### ABSTRACT

Across many African societies, gendered divisions of labour within the household are undergoing gradual transformation as economic pressures, educational attainment, media influence, and cultural interactions reshape expectations of masculinity and femininity. Yet these changes unfold unevenly, often producing tension, negotiation, and new cultural meanings around work, identity, and domestic responsibility. This qualitative study explores how individuals in Ghanaian households interpret and navigate shifting gender roles in the domains of care, domestic labour, income-generation, and family decision-making. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 participants from Accra, Kumasi, Cape Coast, and Takoradi, the study reveals that gender negotiations unfold through everyday cultural politics shaped by tradition, religion, economic realities, and aspirations for modernity. The findings highlight four dynamics: the silent persistence of traditional gender scripts; emerging partnership models based on shared labour; the symbolic politics of masculinity and breadwinning; and the subtle resistance strategies used by women to renegotiate domestic authority. The study contributes to interdisciplinary debates on gender, work, and cultural change by showing how households become sites of cultural negotiation, identity-making, and social transformation.

**Keywords:** Gender Roles, Domestic Labour, Cultural Negotiation, Masculinity And Femininity, African Households

### INTRODUCTION

The transformation of gender roles in African households has become a major site of academic interest across sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, gender studies, and development research. Historically, domestic labour in many African societies has been shaped by cultural expectations that women shoulder responsibility for caregiving, food preparation, cleaning, and emotional labour, while men assume roles related to breadwinning, decision-making, household authority, and public engagement (Ampofo, 2001). Yet with globalization, expanding education, shifts in labour markets, urbanization, and the influence of media, traditional scripts of masculinity and femininity are being re-examined, reinterpreted, and in some cases directly challenged (Aboim, 2010).

In Ghana, as in many African contexts, family life occupies an important social and cultural space. Women's increased participation in formal employment has produced new expectations around shared labour, yet cultural norms continue to assert that a "good woman" should maintain domestic order while a "responsible man" must provide financially (Adjei, 2019). These conflicting expectations generate what Goffman (1977) describes as "gender display"—the ways individuals perform gender roles to align with cultural norms. The negotiation of these

roles—cooperation, resistance, renegotiation—constitutes what Mahmood (2005) calls “everyday politics”: the subtle ways in which people reshape power relations within ordinary settings.

Despite interest in gender transformation in Africa, empirical research often focuses on macro-level indicators or policy narratives, overlooking the intimate, everyday negotiations that occur inside the home. This article therefore explores contemporary households as dynamic cultural sites where gender, work, identity, and power are continuously being reimagined.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding gender, work, and domestic labour in African households requires an interdisciplinary framework that brings together insights from anthropology, sociology, gender studies, cultural theory, and the humanities. Household gender roles are shaped not only by economic conditions but also by symbolic meanings, moral expectations, spiritual beliefs, and cultural histories. This review synthesizes key debates and theoretical perspectives relevant to the study.

### Gender, Culture, and Domestic Labour

Domestic labour is widely recognized as culturally constructed rather than biologically determined. Foundational feminist theorists argue that household roles emerge from social norms that categorize certain tasks as “women’s work” and others as “men’s responsibilities” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In many African societies, gendered socialization begins in childhood, where boys and girls internalize expectations regarding care work, decision-making, and authority (Ampofo, 2001).

African kinship studies highlight that household labour is embedded within extended family systems where gender roles are tied to lineage responsibilities and cultural ideals of respectability (Sudarkasa, 1986). The idea of a “good woman” is historically linked to domestic efficiency, emotional labour, and caregiving, while a “good man” is associated with protection, provision, and authority. These cultural narratives sustain gendered divisions of labour even when socio-economic conditions evolve.

### Work, Modernity, and Family Change

Urbanization, education, and formal employment have reshaped household dynamics across Africa. As more women participate in the labour market, domestic expectations increasingly clash with professional demands, producing what Hochschild (1989) terms “the second shift”—a situation where women engage in paid work but remain primarily responsible for household duties.

Modern influences such as media exposure, global feminist discourses, and women’s rights initiatives have challenged traditional gender ideologies. Younger couples, especially those in cities, tend to adopt more egalitarian models that emphasize shared tasks and partnership (Adjei, 2019). However, these shifts occur unevenly and are often contested.

Anthropological studies show that modernity introduces new ideals of romantic partnership, shared decision-making, and mutual care—yet these ideals coexist with longstanding cultural obligations related to marriage, family honour, and gender identity (Silberschmidt, 2001). As a result, modern household arrangements often combine traditional expectations with new forms of cooperation.

### Masculinity, Breadwinning, and Cultural Identity

Masculinity remains deeply intertwined with breadwinning in many African contexts. Even when women contribute financially, men often feel compelled to maintain symbolic dominance in household provision (Ratele, 2016). Breadwinning is not solely economic but also symbolic: it affirms a man’s identity, authority, and dignity within the family and wider community.

Studies show that when women earn more than their husbands, couples often hide or downplay women’s income to protect male pride and avoid social criticism (Aboim, 2010). Men may resist household chores not because of the tasks themselves but because such duties conflict with cultural constructions of masculinity.

This negotiation of masculinity is intensified in urban middle-class households where economic pressures undermine men’s ability to meet traditional expectations. Silberschmidt (2001) argues that economic disempowerment can lead to “crises of masculinity,” prompting men to reassert control in domestic or symbolic ways. Thus, even as women adopt new economic roles, cultural definitions of manhood remain powerful.

### Domestic Labour as Emotional, Moral, and Symbolic Work

Domestic labour extends beyond physical chores. It includes emotional labour, moral caregiving, and the symbolic maintenance of family unity. Feminist theorists note that women often assume responsibility for

emotional regulation, conflict mediation, and sustaining kinship ties, roles that remain largely invisible and undervalued (Hochschild, 1989).

In Ghana, cultural expectations require women to maintain respectful relations with in-laws, preserve household harmony, and manage daily domestic routines. These roles are not simply tasks but forms of moral labour tied to ideas of womanhood, cultural identity, and social honour (Ampofo, 2001).

Men's household roles are also symbolic. Even when they do not participate in daily chores, their presence as "heads of household" legitimizes family hierarchy and decision-making (Ratele, 2016). The symbolic weight of authority often outweighs the actual distribution of labour.

### Negotiation, Resistance, and the Politics of Everyday Life

Households are not static spaces; they are sites of negotiation, resistance, and subtle power struggles. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "patriarchal bargaining" explains how women navigate male-dominated structures strategically—using compliance, persuasion, silence, humour, or indirect negotiation to influence household dynamics.

Anthropological research shows that women employ tactical forms of agency rather than overt resistance. For example, delaying tasks, framing shared labour as "togetherness," or appealing to love and partnership allows them to reshape domestic roles without provoking conflict.

Meanwhile, men also negotiate changing expectations. Many adopt hybrid masculinities—combining traditional authority with modern teamwork or emotional support—to maintain harmony and adapt to shifting realities (Ratele, 2016). These negotiations reveal the "everyday politics" (Mahmood, 2005) through which gender roles are continuously reproduced and transformed.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework illustrates households as dynamic cultural spaces shaped by four interconnected forces: cultural norms and traditions, modern influences, gender roles, and the division of domestic labour. Cultural norms provide the inherited expectations that define femininity, masculinity, and responsibility within the home. Modern influences—such as education, employment, and media—introduce new ideas that challenge or reshape these traditions. Gender roles emerge at the intersection of these forces, influencing how men and women perceive and perform their responsibilities. The division of labour reflects how these cultural negotiations are enacted in everyday household practices, revealing the subtle politics of gender and social change.

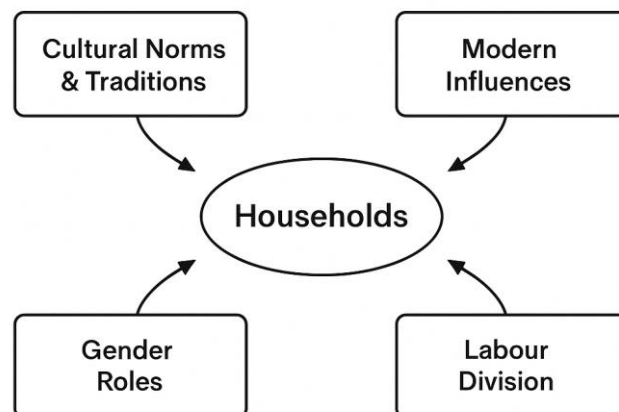


Figure 1

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A qualitative interpretive approach was used to explore the meanings participants attach to domestic labour, gender roles, and family dynamics. This design enables deep insights into lived experiences and everyday cultural negotiations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Sampling and Participants

Thirty participants (16 women and 14 men) aged 23–58 were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling across four urban centres: Accra, Kumasi, Cape Coast, and Takoradi. Participants represented diverse marital statuses, employment categories, and household arrangements.

## Data Collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 45–90 minutes explored experiences of domestic labour, cultural expectations, conflict and negotiation, gender identity, and family power dynamics.

## Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis. Codes were developed inductively around cultural meaning-making, gender negotiations, emotional labour, and symbolic interactions.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and all personal information was anonymized. The study adhered to ethical principles for social research and complied with national guidelines and international standards, including the Declaration of Helsinki.

## FINDINGS

### The Persistence of Traditional Gender Scripts

Traditional expectations remained powerful even in dual-income households. Several women expressed that despite working full-time, they were still expected to perform the bulk of domestic tasks.

One participant explained:

*"Even if I come home tired before him, I am expected to cook. It is the culture. My mother did it, and people will judge me if I don't."* — Ama, 34

Men also acknowledged the persistence of tradition:

*"Sometimes I know she is tired, but I grew up in a home where a woman does the inside work. It's difficult to change that overnight."* — Kofi, 42

These narratives show that cultural scripts remain deeply internalized, shaping expectations despite modern pressures.

### Emerging Partnership Models and Gender Cooperation

A significant number of younger participants described emerging forms of shared domestic labour rooted in partnership and mutual respect. Couples—especially those influenced by education or exposure to global media—reported developing intentional systems of cooperation.

One respondent shared:

*"My husband helps with bathing the children and sometimes cooks on weekends. We agreed that we are both working, so we share what we can."* — Elsie, 29

A male participant echoed:

*"If my wife is cooking, I sweep or help the children with homework. It makes the home peaceful."* — Samuel, 37

These partnership models represent a gradual shift toward shared domestic accountability.

### Breadwinning, Masculinity, and Symbolic Power

Breadwinning was a central component of masculine identity. Many men felt pressured to maintain financial dominance even when their partners contributed equally.

One participant noted:

*"A man must provide. If your wife earns more than you, people will talk. You yourself will feel it."* — Kwame, 33

Another added:

*"Even if she is helping, I still want to be the one paying most bills. It makes me feel responsible."* — Michael, 40

These narratives reveal that shifts in domestic labour do not automatically translate into shifts in symbolic masculine authority.

### Women's Subtle Resistance and Renegotiation of Domestic Authority

Women used subtle strategies to renegotiate domestic power, including withdrawing emotional labour, delaying tasks, using humour, or framing cooperation as love or unity.

One participant shared:

“Sometimes I don’t argue. I just leave the work undone. He will eventually help when he sees I am overwhelmed.” — Adwoa,  
31

Another explained:

“I tell him, ‘Let’s do it together so we finish early and rest.’ He thinks it’s togetherness, but really I need the help.” — Lydia,  
27

These strategies align with Kandiyoti’s (1988) model of “patriarchal bargaining” where women negotiate within patriarchal boundaries.

## DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that African households are undergoing a period of cultural renegotiation. Traditional models persist, yet younger and urban households show increasing openness to shared domestic labour. Masculinity remains anchored in breadwinning and authority, but economic realities challenge men’s ability to maintain these ideals. Women’s subtle resistance illustrates agency and participation in reshaping domestic roles. The household thus emerges as a microcosm of cultural change—where modernity, tradition, media influence, and economic shifts intersect and produce new gender configurations.

## CONCLUSION

Gender roles in contemporary African households are neither fixed nor uniformly changing. Instead, they are negotiated through everyday practices informed by cultural expectations, personal values, economic capacity, and relational dynamics. Understanding these negotiations is essential for grasping broader social changes occurring across African societies.

### Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data supporting the findings of this study consist of interview transcripts containing personal and culturally sensitive information. To safeguard participant confidentiality and comply with ethical guidelines, these data cannot be made publicly available. De-identified excerpts that support key arguments may be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to institutional ethical approval. No quantitative datasets were generated or analysed during this study.

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