

Boys are tired! Youth, urban struggles, and retaliatory patriarchy

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Research in geography and allied disciplines on gendered experiences in Africa have struggled to comprehend the nuances that make up young men's lifeworlds. Influenced by theoretical orientations in urban studies, which demonstrate how music offers a way to explore social dynamics in Africa, we examine the thoughts, actions, and experiences of male youth in Ghana using Guru's popular song "Boys are tired [Boys are tired]." Drawing on interviews and focus groups with young people in Accra, the empirical findings and analysis illustrate how the phrase "boys are tired," and the dispositions it evokes, provides a subversive critique of and protest against the precariousness of contemporary Ghanaian urbanism. Problematically, "Boys are tired" also encourages the (re)calibration of gender relations on patriarchal terms. These insights extend debates around geographies of children and youth and gender relations in two novel ways. First, the vernacular of "tiredness" generates fresh theoretical perspectives on a wider set of questions about youth agency and contemporary gender relations, namely, how young people are implicated in the reproduction of patriarchy. Through doing so, we identify a set of troubling gender relations unfolding in Accra that are conceptualised as "retaliatory patriarchy" which has three constituent elements: entitlement, resentment, and obliviousness. Second, the paper detects reasons why young men in Accra are reluctant to support feminist action and suggests how to counter this trend. These findings support wider efforts, within and beyond the discipline, to better conceptualise and prevent the perpetuation of inequity and oppression along gendered lines.

KEYWORDS

Africa, gender, patriarchy, qualitative, urban, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

James Esson spotted the misogynistic scrawl in Figure 1 on the wall of a busy passageway leading to the University of Ghana's traditional marketplace during data collection in November 2017. Figure 1 attests to concerns that in some African countries, as indeed elsewhere in the world, there is ongoing resistance to the realignment of gender relations on more equitable terms. A recent global study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that "close to

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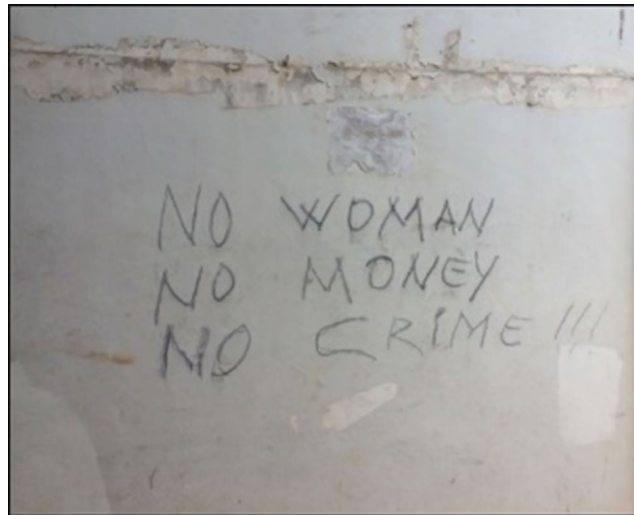


FIGURE 1 Misogynistic scrawl on a wall at the University of Ghana campus in Accra.

Source: Photo taken by Author 1, 2017 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

90% of men and women hold some sort of bias against women ... and 28% think it is justified for a man to beat his wife” (UNDP, 2020, n.p.).

Geographers have long been attentive to the problem of patriarchal oppression and its reproduction. Several studies, whether explicitly or implicitly influenced by black feminist scholarship, have employed an intersectional approach to demonstrate patriarchy's entanglement with the promotion of racist-capitalist inequitable relations (Daley, 2020; Johnson, 2019; Kobayashi & Peake, 1994; Rose, 1990). This work has been complemented by scholarship highlighting the need to recognise patriarchy's empirical complexity and institutional variations both spatially and temporally (Duncan, 1994; Hopkins, 2006; Jackson, 1991; Smith, 1990). In terms of geographical research on gender relations in Africa specifically, a rich body of work can be found using the previously mentioned approaches and addressing similar themes in the sub-disciplines of critical development studies (Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2002; Daley, 2008; Sharp et al., 2003) and geographies of children and youth (Ansell et al., 2018; Jones & Chant, 2009; Porter et al., 2011).

This paper aims to extend the rich and progressive literatures highlighted above by examining gender relations in Accra, with a specific focus on the thoughts, actions, and experiences of the city's male youth. We do so in the context of Ratele's (2008) observation that research on gendered experiences in Africa have struggled to comprehend and convey the subtler intricacies that make up young men's life worlds. This claim may seem odd given the wealth of work on African masculinities, albeit primarily in anthropology and African studies as opposed to geography (cf. Besnier et al., 2018; Broqua & Doquet, 2013; Clowes et al., 2013; Ouzgane & Morrell, 2005; Wignall, 2016). A key argument underpinning much of these studies is that attempts to comprehend African men analytically should begin from a position of acknowledged multiplicity. Yet, as noted by Langevang (2008a), much of the wider literature typically characterises young African men in three ways: emasculated dependents who risk never attaining social adulthood; lawbreakers disrupting the social order; or participants in acts of violence and warfare. We would also add sexual deviants to this list. These characterisations may well contain a smidgen of truth and thus partially reflect the reality on the ground. However, geographical debates, as well as those within the wider social sciences, would benefit from additional empirical and theoretical insights on the everyday lived realities facing young men in contexts like Accra, and the implications of these realities for gender relations.

To achieve our aim, this paper adopts a novel approach influenced by theoretical orientations in urban studies. These orientations encourage explorations that engage with music, art, and literary fiction to illuminate and comprehend the agency performed by Africa's urban residents as they go about their daily lives (Diouf & Fredericks, 2014; Pieterse, 2011). Through these explorations, insights can emerge that provide “more interpretive, phenomenological and relational accounts of social and cultural dynamics and psychological dispositions” (Pieterse, 2011, p. 17). To bring this conceptual perspective into conversation with our focus on examining gender relations, we tap into the Ghanaian music scene where gender relations are a site of much debate. We focus on a song by Ghana's musical icon Guru, specifically, “Boys abrE.”¹ “Boys abrE,” which literally means “boys are tired,” is a term popularised in Guru's (2013) hit song of the same name.

Guru used the phrase “boys abrE” to express the frustrations young men encounter as they try to survive in the city and engage in heteronormative relationships. The phrase has, however, become more nebulous and is now a household

expression in Accra being used by people from all walks of life – students when lessons get difficult; tro-tro (a local commercial bus) drivers when they are being harassed by the police; opposition politicians complaining about the incumbent government's budget; or street hawkers after a rainy day restricts their income-generating capabilities. “Boys are tired” is therefore an apt choice to explore the spatiality of gender relations not just because of its subject matter, but because it provides a clear formulation of Fredericks' argument that “music does not just exist in space and refer to space, the space of music is produced and produces identity and politics through its corporealization” (2014, p. 138).

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we provide an overview of the study and research design. In section 3, we begin by introducing key theorisations of youth agency, starting more broadly before highlighting key works on young people in Africa specifically. We then examine the vernacular “Boys are tired” and illustrate how it can generate fresh perspectives on the ways in which fluctuations in young people's life chances reproduce what youth geographers have termed “negative agency.” Our analysis leads us to argue that “tiredness” provides a subversive critique of structural challenges in urban Ghana that at times may even appear progressive. Problematically, it also fosters unjust gender dynamics. The empirical findings and discussion generate original theoretical insights by showing how vernacular around “boys being tired” exposes subjectivities and “negative agency” that recalibrate gender relations on patriarchal terms. This form of patriarchy, which we conceptualise as “retaliatory patriarchy,” has three constituent elements: entitlement, resentment, and obliviousness. Our conclusions follow this discussion. Key among them is offering retaliatory patriarchy as a contemporary response to an enduring question in feminist scholarship, namely, “how does patriarchy work exactly?” (Duncan, 1994, p. 1178). We also propose that gender equality initiatives in Ghana, and perhaps elsewhere, should engage with and utilise debates occurring within music and other creative mediums to counteract the perpetuation of inequity and oppression along gendered lines.

2 | THE STUDY

Ghana is located on the west coast of Africa. The capital and largest city is Accra, which has a rapidly increasing population that went from less than 400,000 inhabitants in 1960 to 2.2 million inhabitants in 2010 (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2012). In 2016, the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA) had about 4 million inhabitants (Addae & Oppelt, 2019). Ghana's emergence as a key economic hub in West Africa, which in terms of recent macro-economic performance can be linked to the discovery and exploration of oil and gas (Darkwah, 2013), conceals conflicting dynamics informing the longer story of urban growth in Accra. The introduction of neoliberal reforms in the 1980s had a significant impact on Ghana's labour economy, a case in point being the retrenchment of public sector workers (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000), the ramifications of which reverberate through to the present day. Contrary to neoliberal logic, the private sector has not been able to absorb public sector job losses and/or create adequate employment opportunities (see also Gough et al., 2019; Overå, 2007). Limited employment opportunities in the formal economy have consigned more people, particularly young adults, to the informal economy (Gough et al., 2019; Langevang et al., 2015; Wrigley-Asante & Mensah, 2017). The most recent census estimated that 69% of the economically active labour force in GAMA operates within the informal economy (GSS, 2012). Moreover, several communities across the city are experiencing population increases that place additional strains on already deteriorated housing stock and municipal infrastructure (Oteng-Ababio et al., 2017).

To investigate gender relations among young people within the urban context depicted above, we opted to use methods that enable young people to express themselves and share their experiences freely. In Ghana, Langevang (2007) notes that focus groups and one-to-one interviews are particularly effective in this regard. This is because young people tend to find meaning through dialogue with their peers, therefore making group discussions more akin to everyday situations, while also providing understandings of more general issues and subjectivities. Meanwhile, one-to-one interviews offer an opportunity for those who prefer to share their opinions individually. Accordingly, we adopted a qualitative approach involving both semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Moreover, we further applied Langevang's (2007) guidance by identifying young people from different parts of the city, and then encouraging them to form discussions groups based on pre-existing associations. These groups come to consist of people acquainted with each other through work or socialising and are therefore able to better reflect scenarios in which young people are likely to discuss the topics raised in the research.

We appreciate that youth is a context-contingent category (Honwana & De Boeck, 2005). Participants in this study ranged between 18 and 35 years of age to reflect broader Ghanaian understandings of youth as being between the ages of 15–35 (Langevang, 2008b), while also complying with ethical requirements regarding not working with minors. Data collection took approximately 14 months, beginning in April 2017. First, two focus groups were conducted in Korle Gonno (central) and Madina (suburb) respectively. Following direction from participants, in order to ensure a balance between genders and create an atmosphere for free expression, separate discussions were held with young men and women. Each focus group

comprised eight participants who were brought together by a unit committee member (in the case of the young men) and a founder of an NGO (in the case of the young women), and the discussions lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. To be clear, the aim of this paper is to gain insights on the thoughts, actions, and experiences of the city's male youth. But given the gendered nature of the song "Boys abrɛ" and its notoriety, it would be difficult to understand its implications for gender relations in Accra without speaking to men and women. Furthermore, gender is relational, and we contend that engaging with male youth in isolation would have been reductive.

Given the popularity of the song "Boys abrɛ," all the participants had heard it and seen the music video. Nevertheless, we started the focus groups (and subsequent interviews) by playing the video on mobile devices to instigate the discussion. Our aim was not to deconstruct the song's meaning, but rather to use it as a way to stimulate a discussion on gender relations by exploring what it means to be tired and why "Boys abrɛ." The focus groups were therefore more open-ended, and were used as a way to identify topic areas for the semi-structured one-to-one interviews. The main topic areas that emerged were education, employment, politics, and relationships. From the pool of youth who participated in the focus groups, we held follow-up semi-structured interviews with ten individual youth (five men and five women) to more fully explore certain lines of inquiry. We then conducted an additional 30 in-depth interviews with youth lasting between 45 minutes and two hours; comprising 17 men and 13 women using a snowball method. All interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the authors, and in some cases parts of interviews were translated from the local dialect (Twi or Ga) into English. The transcripts were initially analysed using in-vivo coding to identify categories and trends within the text material. However, the outcomes of this approach lacked sufficient depth. This was therefore followed by axial coding to generate more nuanced connections and categories within the data (see Manning, 2017). It was from this latter more nuanced analysis that retaliatory patriarchy emerged.

Overall, the profile of participants spanned geographical lines and income and social backgrounds, with the majority of the youth living in residential areas such as Adenta, Madina, and Ashaley Botwe (suburbs located in the East of the city), Okponglo, Adjiringanor, and East Legon (situated in the North East of the city), Achimota and Dansoman (situated in the West of the city), and Korle Gonno and Osu (central locations). The study was qualitative in nature, but in terms of the socio-demographic characteristics of our participants, there were 25 males and 21 females. Nearly two-thirds (29) were aged between 26 and 35, with the remaining 17 between the ages of 18 and 25 years. All of the young people engaged in the study had some level of education: one-third (15) of them had tertiary degrees, 17 of them had high school/vocational/technical education, and 14 had some form of basic or junior high education. Also 17 were self-employed, 10 were employed, 12 were unemployed, and the remaining seven were in some form of schooling. Out of the working category, young people working in the informal sector represented two-thirds (18), with the formal sector making up the remaining third (9). All names provided below are pseudonyms.

There are some caveats to note with respect to the analysis that follows. First, it revolves around a relatively small sample of youth, and we recognise that participants shared a varied range of experiences. For example, they spoke of different family and household dynamics (migrants, tenants/caretakers, breadwinners, or single parents) and experiences of broken families and newly forged relationships. They also shared unique experiences involving their peers, lovers, and family in their negotiations with the everyday politics of city life. There is not one universal account sufficient to construct a singular story explaining the sense of "tiredness" and everyday life struggles facing urban youth in Ghana. Nonetheless, there are common threads that are woven through many experiences and we highlight these below. Second, we appreciate that there is a danger that our findings could be misconstrued as implying that all young Ghanaian men are apathetic misogynists. This is not our intention, and is not true. Rather we seek to instigate a more candid discussion about the prevalence of patriarchy in contemporary society. Lastly, although difficult to substantiate, it is possible that given the topic of the study was gender relations in Accra, our position as three young men all under the age of 35 – at the time of data collection – may have influenced the responses we received during the focus groups and interviews.

3 | BOYS ARE TIRED: YOUTH AND RETALIATORY PATRIARCHY

We will never stay in this place [struggling] forever
 Time will change for us to be able to speak freely...
 Brother, life has shown me a red card,
 Yet I don't seem to care. (Guru, 2013)²

Jeffrey once asked “what if anything might be distinctively interesting about young people's agency” (2012, p. 246)? In the discussion that follows, we use our empirical data to illustrate how the vernacular of “tiredness” provides fresh perspectives on how fluctuations in young people's life chances intertwine with subjectivities that reproduce problematical structural conditions. The spatially embodied processes and practices through which this reproduction and in some cases deepening of problematic structures happens can broadly be understood as “negative agency.” “Negative agency” can occur as an outcome of purposeful and strategic efforts by youth to resist dominant forces (Jeffrey, 2013). This point is crucial for the discussion that follows, when we point to instances where the phrase “Boys are tired” might seem like a subversive critique of and protest against the precariousness of contemporary Ghanaian urbanism, while at the same time perpetuating patriarchy. This nuanced conceptual understanding of youth agency can be situated under a broader suite of geographical scholarship about young people. This scholarship proposes that in order to paint a more conceptually sophisticated image of young people's experiences, in both Global South and Global North contexts, we must gain insights from their own viewpoint (van Blerk, 2019; Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Young et al., 2017). This is a position reflected in our qualitative methodological approach outlined above.

In the context of research on youth in Africa specifically, scholars have noted that research should remain attentive to both the individual and collective imaginaries youth have of future political and economic conditions and social relations (Durham, 2000; Honwana & De Boeck, 2005; Katz, 2004; Martin et al., 2016). Durham (2000) perhaps captures the intellectual mood best, when noting the twofold challenge facing scholars of youth in African contexts. Specifically, the challenge is how to understand youth as a source of hope for progressive change alongside their potential for social and political sabotage while also understanding them as neither autonomous actors nor as overdetermined victims. There have been some notable theoretical attempts to address this twofold challenge, such as “trying your luck” (Esson, 2015), “managing” (Langevang, 2008b), “hustling” (Thieme, 2018), and “social navigation” (Vigh, 2009). One common trait across these approaches is their effectiveness for thinking through how youth in their respective countries amend their strategies and tactics according to opportunities and constraints. Another common trait is that they often touch on, but leave unanswered, a wider set of theoretical questions about gender relations, particularly how young people might be implicated in “negative agency” pertaining to the reproduction of inequity and oppression along gendered lines.

This brings us to the subject of gender. A particular articulation of age and capitalism is occurring in many parts of the world, whereby young people are experiencing profound social hardships (Jeffrey, 2013). These hardships are more acute for certain groups, depending on geography and characteristics of social difference (cf. Aitken, 2016; Radcliffe & Webb, 2016; van Blerk, 2019). But a consistent theme in studies from a range of contexts is the unique ways that these conditions impact on young men, in so far as young men struggle to achieve the ideals of secure salaried employment and the status of breadwinners, which have been the key markers of adult masculine identity aligned with modernity (cf. Besnier et al., 2018; Jackson, 1991; Nayak, 2003; Rootham et al., 2015; Wignall, 2016). In Ghana, we argue below that it is not just that some young men are *tired* because they cannot live up to these ideals, but that they also believe, despite many staying with or being aware of single mothers who are struggling to support their sons and daughters, that women are the beneficiaries of the current situation. Significantly, we conceptualise these gender relations as “retaliatory patriarchy.”

“Retaliatory patriarchy” is termed as such because it appeared as a response to perceptions that men are losing their grip on control of Ghanaian society. This leads to counter positions that seek the (re)calibration of gender relations on patriarchal terms. Retaliatory patriarchy has three constituent elements that are relational: entitlement, resentment, and obliviousness. These elements are explored further below but can be outlined as follows. *Entitlement* denotes the explicit and implicit belief that some Ghanaians are innately better suited to certain positions of authority, and more deserving of opportunities or special treatment, on account of their biological and social status as male or men. *Resentment* conveys young men's frustration with their current circumstances and limited prospects to improve them, which is compounded by a belief that women are to some extent both the cause and beneficiaries of their predicament. *Obliviousness* expresses how young men were often unaware of or unable to see the everyday signs indicating that they were mistaken about the demise of patriarchy. More importantly, this was coupled with a failure to see how patriarchy coalesced with other structural conditions, such as neoliberalism, to exacerbate their struggles.

In the remainder of this paper we aim to illustrate how these three elements of “retaliatory patriarchy” emerged in and around the following topics: education, employment, and relationships (which covers dating, marriage, and intergenerational relations). The phrase “boys are tired” is repeated throughout the section as a rhetorical device. At times, the phrase might appear to provide a subversive critique of structural challenges in urban Ghana or be a sympathetic quip to demonstrate empathy for the struggles facing young men trying to overcome tricky circumstances. At other times, the phrase and our usage might appear abrupt or even dismissive of our participant's plight. However, we adopt this style to illustrate how

problematic subjectivities and “negative agency” concerning gender relations can become imbedded in a seemingly banal form of urban expression like “boys are tired.”

3.1 | Education and employment

if you are willing to become indebted
 Come and do it and let us see
 you don't have enough money
 but Charlie (friend) u are flexing (Guru, 2013)

Boys are tired! Because contrary to the mantras repeated by their parents, elders, and popular development discourses circulating nationally and internationally (cf. Esson, 2013; Gough et al., 2013; Jeffrey, 2010), formal education is no longer – if indeed it ever was – a guarantee of acceptable employment and allied social mobility because there is a mismatch between the qualifications young people are accruing and the jobs available to them. This situation is not unique to Ghana and is present in other parts of West Africa (see Jones & Chant, 2009). Kwesi, a 23-year-old final year university student living in Dansoman, succinctly explained how “the first degree has become so common it is like a senior high school certificate!” This perception that increasing numbers of young Ghanaians are attending university, and that recent years of high economic growth have failed to create adequate graduate jobs for a rapidly growing youth population, is corroborated by research (Darkwah, 2013; Langevang, 2016).

Boys are tired! But they have not remained passive despite their fatigue. For example, participants highlighted the “Unemployed Graduates Association of Ghana (UGAG),” a non-partisan organisation that seeks to lobby governments and universities about the lack of formal employment opportunities for university leavers (Association of Graduates in Skills Development-Ghana [AGSD-GH], 2019). They also mentioned other more provocative interventions, such as unemployed university graduates going on hunger strike (see Gyasiwaa, 2014) to force the government to relax neoliberal policies halting recruitment in the civil service and/or to release funds for entrepreneurial initiatives. Yet, both cases highlight the gendered power relations and visibility of men in discussions concerning formal (un)employment issues. Four of the five executive members of UGAG were young men and all the named protagonists and coverage of the hunger strikes were dominated by young men.

In this context of high graduate unemployment, boys are tired (particularly those from middle-income backgrounds and struggling to gain a foothold in secure formal employment) of gender equality interventions seeking to improve the life chances of women and girls. Ebo, a 29-year-old unemployed university graduate residing in Achimota, explained that the problem with these interventions is that “we men are now to some extent exhausted of our sex, because the female sex is favoured [in policies] everywhere in the country,” a comment that emerged during a discussion about how, following several years of affirmative action programmes and gender equality interventions, the University of Ghana now admits more women undergraduates than men. This uptake in female enrolment was perceived to be coming at the expense of young men (see also Mabokela & Mlambo, 2015), and was deemed unfair by male participants given that they considered men are the “stronger sex” both physically and intellectually (see also Adinkrah, 2012). Young men felt they were therefore *entitled* to these positions given their view that they are innately better qualified for admittance. Distorting this natural order fostered a sense of *resentment* towards young women, as not only were they taking places that “rightfully” belonged to men, their presence in higher education was further saturating the already overpopulated formal labour market. This situation was aptly captured by Alfred, a 28-year-old polytechnic graduate in Achimota who operates a food delivery service to offices after five years of being unemployed:

Women have taken over the face of the corporate world today. They dominate the banking, insurance, customer service, marketing, and legal space across the city. For such jobs if you apply with a female, with the same qualifications, it is most likely preference will be given to the ladies. They claim women sell better and can woo customers more than men.

The conspicuous but unacknowledged prominence of male youth in debates over the lack of graduate employment opportunities – and the tendency to downplay the fact this issue also affects women – is symptomatic of the gendered spatiality of employment expectations which intertwines with patriarchal entitlement percolating in Ghanaian society, where

formal employment has historically been seen as the preserve of men, with household reproduction and/or market trading associated with women (see also Overå, 2007). These notions of entitlement are in line with feminist scholar Ama Ata Aidoo's (1990) observation that biology is often used to justify and maintain patriarchal relations that privilege Ghanaian men over Ghanaian women. But the focus group discussions also pointed to another form of privilege, the privileging of debates about university graduate employment over broader discussions about youth unemployment. Several of our participants stopped their studies at the junior high school (JHS) or senior high school (SHS) level and had taken on apprenticeships and informal work to make ends meet. Ata, a 24-year-old SHS leaver, living with his parents in a rented single room in Botwe, articulated how this sense of uncertainty around employment prospects and associated fatigue not only impacts university graduates:

If the graduates are crying for jobs, then how about us, the SHS leavers? Only a few go to the university because of fees and the connections. So if you are lucky it's shop keeping, a cleaning job or you follow your mum to the market. I left my messenger job because the boss was overusing me. I now work as a cleaner at the Accra Mall; here too the pay is only enough for transport. But it's better than staying home to receive GH ₵1 every morning from your mother. [Because] The neighbours will be asking; 'you didn't go to work?' I'm tired, I don't even know what to do, Boys abr€!

Intriguingly, while a key source of blame for the rise in graduate unemployment among young men was the increase in young women entering higher education, young men were *oblivious* to the prominent role that they are also playing in the pervasiveness of qualification inflation. For example, high-profile local spiritual figures such as Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams and Pastor Dr Mensa Otabil cloak their religious messages in the neoliberal rhetoric of individuated entrepreneurialism, and actively practice what they preach by engaging in financial speculation in areas such as real estate, banking, and the establishment of private colleges. The creation of these private colleges points to a wider contradiction seen in other parts of the Global South. Specifically, that young men are simultaneously at the forefront of the expansion of private tertiary education *and* protests about poor graduate employment and qualification inflation among men (cf. Young et al., 2017). Ironically, because of the social status that comes with the term "I dey Leg" – which is slang for saying "I am studying at the University of Ghana in Legon" – participants explained that young people, often those from middle-income backgrounds, prefer to retake their high school exams to better their grades. Through doing so, they might gain admission to the more prestigious University of Ghana instead of having to attend a less esteemed private university.

Boys are tired of struggling to translate their educational capital into desired forms of social mobility that will enable them to "flex" – slang used to denote displays of elevated social status through conspicuous consumption and material wealth. This tiredness appears to render them *oblivious* to the point that this discrepancy between aspirations and lived realities is not unique to Accra's male population. Many urban residents find themselves engaged in income-generating activities across the informal sector that were not their chosen livelihood (see also Amankwaa, 2017; Ardayfio-Schandorf et al., 2012; Gough et al., 2019). A message shared in discussions with young women, especially those from lower income backgrounds, who noted how less than ideal income streams are increasingly a necessity as they are left to take care of their children without financial support from the father. Adwoa, a 30-year-old JHS drop-out and single mother who lives in Madina with her mother and siblings, explained how

I have to do three different jobs to survive. Early morning, I go to the university to do my cleaning job. By 11 am, I am back home to arrange my second-hand clothing for the market. I close at 6 pm and around 7 pm set up the table in front of the house for my bread and egg sandwich business. After school my daughter helps me in the market so I can go home and cook. But when there is a leftover food she stays home and helps me to sell the bread and egg in the evenings whilst I get things ready for the next day. I know it's affecting her school but it's not my fault I need to struggle to get food on the table and money to pay their school fees.

Adwoa, that maybe so, but boys are tired! Because it is no longer enough for them to engage in "hustling" – a term used to convey how in the absence of formal institutional support young people manipulate resources and circumstances to engineer opportunities to achieve their social and economic needs (cf. Thieme, 2018). They must also have multiple "side-hustles" to make ends meet, a situation that is physically exhausting. For example, Jojo, a 30-year-old SHS leaver working in the informal sector operating mobile money (mobile banking) and repairing and selling mobile phones, was also purchasing sachets of water in bulk to sell within his residential community before going to work in the morning and on his return

in the evening. Interestingly, while hustling is typically associated with youth in the informal sector working beyond the purview of the State (Thieme, 2018), it was notable that even university graduates with jobs in the much sought-after formal sector were engaged in multiple income-generating activities, akin to hustling, to supplement their salary.

For participants employed in the formal sector, side-hustles took a variety of forms spread across a range of geographies harnessed through the leveraging of social capital and networks. These included providing tutoring services to high school and university students after completing a day at the office; becoming “silent partners” in businesses within the city such as barber shops, “chop bars” (local food restaurants), washing bays, Uber, taxi, and tro-tro (private mini-bus) services; and selling products sent or brought to Ghana by kinfolk residing in the European diaspora or through links to individuals in China and Dubai and through online shopping and marketing. They attributed this situation to the gap between their wages and the actual cost of living in Accra, a difference claimed to be underpinned by two issues. First, employers using the oversupply of educated labour relative to available jobs to negotiate salaries on terms that benefit their profit margins. Second, and a point we address in the next section, the supposedly unrelenting and unrealistic financial demands of prospective female partners, current girlfriends, and wives that are making boys tired (and resentful).

Boys are tired because their employment woes are the result of economic policies determined by old men who are out of touch with the challenges facing young people in their everyday lives. It was noted both in focus groups and in several interviews that key political offices in the country are the preserve of the old. The political domination of Ghanaian politics by older men is a legacy of the colonial regime where older men, not women and youth, were positioned as leaders (Aidoo, 1990). An obvious example of this is that civil servants are required to retire at the age of 60, yet the current President Nana Akufo-Addo began his term at 72 years of age. President Akufo-Addo is expected to contest the next election in 2020, meaning he could still be in office at the age of 80.

On one hand, young people know they can play a role in determining which political party and associated individuals get into power, not just by campaigning but by withdrawing their support. But on the other hand, recent memory tells youth that even if they coalesce and dutifully play their role in bringing politicians to power, they will have limited if any scope to directly influence legal structures, legislation, and enfranchisement because politicians become evasive. Wofa, a 35-year-old JHS drop-out and car spare-parts dealer from Okponglo expressed this as follows:

The politicians sing the same song. They come begging for votes but when they enter the corridors of power they are different. You don't even see them, it's like they are not from this area They claim the constituency is large and the work is big. Okay I won't talk. My voter ID card is under my TV waiting for elections.

On this subject, several participants during a focus group with young men reminded the authors about the 2015 economic budget that was openly ridiculed and dubbed the “Boys aBrE budget” because the solutions offered were based on a misdiagnosis of everyday struggles and would merely perpetuate the conditions causing hardship. There was disappointment among participants because most of them have completed school: they have the key, but politicians have changed the padlock to success. Tellingly, participants were disgruntled with politicians on the grounds of their age and not their gender; many repeated discourses around the greater mental and physical strength of Ghanaian men compared to women, making the former entitled to these roles. Yet, as we shall show below, some of the young men making these claims are turning to their mothers to get their daily bread and emotional support.

3.2 | Relationships

The time is nine o'clock but I have not slept
 At school some teacher wants to take my girl ...
 You still live by your mother's side
 Yet boys want to lay with a girl ...
 Charle [friend] black man, I am left with two cedis
 But I have a girl charle [friend] and she wants to flex (Guru, 2013)

Boys are tired! Because being in a relationship with a young woman is, according to Eazy, a 31-year-old self-employed IT technician living with siblings in a family house in Osu, “potentially hazardous” for one's mental wellbeing and wallet.

The use of the word hazardous may appear somewhat facetious, and it was said with an element of jest. But it is indicative of a theme within interviews and discussions whereby young men in Accra were resentful, because they saw themselves as dupes in a society that is now designed to benefit women materially at their expense. This is a situation that is stimulating a form of intersubjective relations that normalises transactional relationships. Interestingly, a point that was made light-heartedly in a focus group with young women, but that was not mentioned during discussions with young men, was about what is colloquially known as “pay the boy.” This is where an older lady “sponsors” her younger boyfriend financially and provides him with other material needs. These dynamics have also been seen in other parts of West Africa, such as the Gambia (Chant & Evans, 2010).

In the Gambia, and other West African contexts, it is mainly “older” white women from Europe and North America dating young black African men in “pay the boy” type arrangements. These relationships are visible in Accra, but our participants noted that local young women and older women are also “sponsoring” young men in terms of their education, setting them up in business, and providing for their basic needs. For instance, Aisha, a 35-year-old SHS leaver and self-employed provision shop operator in Adjiringanor, narrated how she sponsored a young man through his university education at the University of Education, Winneba. She paid his school fees, supported him with “chop money,”³ and on completion of his studies she used family connection to secure him a banking job. However, a few years into his employment the young man left Aisha for someone else, probably because of his new social status.

The broader topic of transactional relationships was acknowledged with a mixture of disdain and support by young women in the study. For some, material and financial rewards instrumentalise a relationship, leading to an emotional disconnect that in the long term renders the relationship untenable. Others, such as Phoebe, a 21-year-old vocational student and petty trader living with three cousins in a large single room in Osu, adopted a different position and stated:

I don't understand those [girls] who say they are hooked onto one partner. Her! How can you make it? Now guys are bad, so as long as he has not put a ring on your finger you are free. Those [girls] having one, they should be ready because we are coming after their guys. It's drop, add, and share! How can you be ‘going out’ with a guy when he can only afford a day's meal or GH¢2 phone credit? How will you fix your hair, or do the ‘girls girls’ stuff on WhatsApp? As for me, if you tell me you are going out [boyfriend spending time away and potentially cheating] I don't mind, all I need is cash, little love. Girls kasa [Girls are talking].

Similar sentiments are also reflected in the work of Langevang (2008b), who found that materialism is increasingly inherent in premarital relationships among urban youth in Ghana, as young women like Phoebe expect their boyfriends to provide funds to cover their everyday wants and in some cases to even help them establish income-generating activities (see also Bhana & Pattman, 2011). It was in relation to examples like this that relationships were described by young men in terms of having to shrewdly juggle expectations and resources to remain on good terms with your girlfriend, lest you lose her to someone who is better able to “flex” and serenade her with gifts and opportunities to improve her life chances. Kwamina, a 34-year-old retrenched banker from Adenta who sells second-hand shoes at Kantamanto market with his older brother, provided an illustration of this point:

Now the ladies are too demanding; they pretend to like you but love someone else. You can be paying the bills, buying the phone, and doing the top-ups but if you are not steady before ‘your eyes open’ she will be licking ice cream behind your back. The Sakawa boys [internet fraudsters] too are in competition with us because they are reigning now. They come to the hood with their fresh cars, raise the music volume, and rain cash on our ladies.

References to “losing” girlfriends, competing for women, and the use of possessive pronouns like “our ladies” were common during discussions, albeit often said jokingly. Perhaps more worryingly, the young men we spoke with were *oblivious* to how the alleged pursuit of material security among young women, which is perhaps contributing to the prevalence of transactional relationships, is the by-product of asymmetrical power relations sustained and reproduced by capitalist patriarchy. A case in point were discussions around female students engaging in sexual relations with older male university staff in exchange for improved grades and opportunities, an issue alluded to by Guru in the quote above and a topic of debate in the news media recently (BBC, 2020). Young men in the interviews and focus groups saw this situation as just one of many everyday examples of young women using their gender and sexuality to advance their position (at young

men's expense), leading to *resentment*. Not only were young women taking places at university that should have gone to men, but once admitted they were securing a degree via nefarious means.

It was troubling that some young men, notably those who were currently at or who had studied at a tertiary institution, were oblivious to and unwilling to acknowledge the predatory nature of the university staff's behaviour. But it was also troubling that they were unable to appreciate that women are not the beneficiaries of hierarchical and exploitative transactional relations. Aba, a 20-year-old SHS leaver who is retraining as a hairdressing apprentice in East Legon, addressed this point when she shared insights from her sister's plight:

My sis was fooled by this university guy After impregnating my sis, he left Accra and couldn't even pack all his things out. It's been seven years now and she still can't forgive herself because her life has been delayed and her new relationship too is not working. She's a caterer, but work is on and off and so life is not easy with her and the young one.

Aba, this may well be the case, but boys are tired! Because starting a heteronormative family and having your own home are considered indicative features of being successfully masculine, and key indicators that a semblance of respectable adulthood has been attained (see also Dauncey, 2016). Parents and senior family members therefore actively encourage young people to get married. The advice to get married is increasingly difficult and at times seems impossible for young men in Accra to put into action. Why? Because Ghanaian tradition dictates that a man is ready for marriage when he has accumulated the resources needed to perform the wedding rituals, e.g., payment of the dowry and distribution of gifts to the family of the bride (Langevang, 2008a; Nukunya, 2003). Also, unlike in other parts of the continent (Ansell et al., 2018), in Ghana the dowry should not be paid in instalments. The cost of engagements and weddings were a source of resentment among young men towards their prospective (and sometimes current) partners. This was due to a perception that expectations of future in-laws and brides-to-be around the size of the dowry and the scale and grandeur of the wedding ceremony are not in keeping with the resources at most young men's disposal.

Boys are tired of seeing their male friends and relatives place themselves in debt by taking out loans, or using savings accrued over several years and earmarked as start-up capital for a business venture, to cover wedding costs so they avoid having their manhood questioned for failing to meet symbolic and material expectations. This situation was recounted by Kissi, a 33-year-old married man in East Legon who is an administrative assistant and a part-time Uber driver:

Marriages have become expensive and competitive! Women demand for big weddings and as a result most marriages start in debt which marks the beginning of quarrels. Since young men usually do the extravagant weddings out of excitement, with time they tend to blame their women and associate every hardship and challenges in the marriage to the wedding. They [women] also suffer accusations from the extended family, especially when the men are unable to meet their financial obligations to their parents and in-laws.

Boys are also tired of seeing senior male family members similarly feeling the brunt of economic hardship and therefore unable to provide the support expected of them by their sons and nephews. Rather than animosity towards their male elders, for failing to comply with their terms in the intergenerational contract, there were often traces of empathy. This was brought about by a perception that decades of struggling to make it in Accra amidst economic uncertainty, coupled with the demands placed on them by wives, female partners, daughters, and nieces, has also left their male seniors "tired." Relatedly, participants from lower income groups spoke of an awkwardness when their male elders come to them for financial support, because in Ghana it is difficult to ask for financial support from younger kin if you were or are unable to provide them with adequate support to establish themselves (Ungruhe, 2010).

Interestingly, while there was a reluctance to ask male seniors for financial support, young men's reliance on their mothers for emotional and financial support was a subtle but key theme within our data, especially for male youth working in the informal economy or unemployed. As Guru (2013) alludes to above, it is hard to be intimate with a prospective partner and by extension demonstrate your virility as a man if for all intents and purposes you are still dependent on your mother for food and shelter, denoting the circumstances of a child. Papa Jay, a 29-year-old polytechnic graduate who is unemployed and living with his mother and siblings in a single room in Korle Gonno, highlighted his mother's struggles to support the family and the associated sense of shame he feels for being dependent on her and the kindness of other women to make it through the day.

Ghana is hard, the economy is shrinking, we are suffering. My mum for instance can go to the market and for the whole day her sales cannot put something [food] on the fire. She gives us GH¢ 2 each to go and buy cooked food outside for supper. On bad days we have to go and beg with the woman to give us food on credit. Nowadays I am even shy, so I wait on the junction and ask my junior brother to go and beg with the food seller.

Another young man in our study, a 25-year-old tertiary student living with his parents in Adenta called Amazu, illustrated how these employment woes and sense of precarity interact with psychosocial experiences that manifest themselves in performativity aimed at projecting, even if only a facade, a sense of purposeful masculinity. This performativity leads to wariness through repetition without generating material benefits. A set of behaviours also alluded to by Ata in an earlier quote, provides the close to this discussion:

My big brother, who used to be the breadwinner after my mum lost her store at Makola market for failing to pay rent advance, is now jobless because of the dumsor [frequent power failures]. His boss said business is slow so he should stay home. But he goes to town every day for people to see he's working but at the end of the day he brings no money home. He's only wasting [money] transport. [But] It's not easy being a man staying home and taking chop money from your mother. Life in Accra is not easy, a lot of people live a camouflage life.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper used Ghanaian musician Guru's popular song, “Boys are tired/Boys are tired” to explore the thoughts, actions, and experiences of young men in Accra. Through doing so, we provided a much-needed response to concern that research in geography and allied disciplines on gendered experiences in Africa have struggled to comprehend the nuances that make up the life worlds of young men. Interviews and focus groups with young people in Accra highlighted how the phrase “boys are tired/boys are tired” has come to signify the everyday struggles and frustrations young men encounter while trying to forge relationships and improve their life chances, as well as offering a critique of, and protest against, the uncertainty of contemporary Ghanaian urbanism.

In sum, boys are tired of playing by the rules and want to achieve social mobility without bowing to the altar of education in the hope of achieving economic salvation. Boys are tired because secure and well-paid jobs in the formal sector are desired but scarce, while informal income streams are pervasive but precarious (cf. Esson, 2015; Thieme, 2018). Boys are tired because relationships are deemed transactional, and they either cannot afford to enter into negotiations, or find themselves constantly looking over their shoulder as they are worried someone else will come and strike a better deal with their wife or girlfriend (cf. Amankwaa et al., 2020; Bhana & Pattman, 2011). Boys are tired of a political system that positions youth as agents of change with the stipulation they are mobilised and act on terms dictated by their male elders (cf. Diouf, 2003; Kandiyoti, 1988; Ratele, 2008).

In addition to providing these original empirical insights on the everyday lived realities facing young men in Accra, the paper also aimed to identify the implications of these experiences for a wider set of debates about geographies of children, youth, and gender relations. The vernacular of tiredness was used to extend theoretical work on “negative agency” among youth, i.e., “young people's involvement in the reproduction or deepening of pernicious power structures” (Jeffrey, 2013, p. 146). Significant here is our finding that established gender hierarchies, and the associated claims young people can make on each other because of these hierarchies, are being transformed in ways that some young men in Accra believe are working against them and in favour of girls and young women. In Accra, this perceived transformation of social hierarchies was shown to result in subjectivities and forms of agency that we conceptualised as “retaliatory patriarchy,” which has three constituent elements that are relational, namely, entitlement, resentment, and obliviousness. Specifically, due to patriarchal norms and structures, some young men feel entitled to certain material and social benefits and outcomes and become resentful towards women when these are not realised. This rendered them oblivious both to the benefits they have and are still accruing through patriarchy (even during times of hardship), as well as the concomitant struggles endured by women.

The concept of retaliatory patriarchy also adds to a rich and longstanding collection of research in feminist geographies. It provides a conceptual move away from what Duncan (1994) describes as deterministic understandings of patriarchy within theorisations of gender inequality. Moreover, retaliatory patriarchy provides an innovative example of an established assertion in feminist geographies, which is that patriarchal structures are incredibly resilient and versatile (Jackson, 1991;

Mollett & Faria, 2013; Radcliffe, 2006). The concept thus enabled us to further efforts aimed at answering an enduring question within the wider social sciences, namely, “how does patriarchy work exactly?” (Duncan, 1994, p. 1178). Crucially, our response to this question not only used the perspectives of a diverse collective of youth in Accra to demonstrate the cultural variations of this resilience and versatility, we also took an extra step and conceptualised how these traits become constitutive of patriarchy. By doing so, the paper heeded the legitimate concern raised by feminist scholars, which is that research on patriarchy typically “reflects a narrowly white, western and middle-class agenda and that its use is politically counter-productive” (Bryson, 1999, p. 311). Accordingly, we shifted the epistemological and empirical reference point. This enabled a richer understanding of the maintenance of oppression along gendered lines.

In closing, we want to highlight the relevance of our analysis for understanding better the reasons why young men in Accra, and perhaps elsewhere, may be reluctant to support feminist action. This is salient in the context of global initiatives, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, aimed at achieving gender equality. Interventions aimed at encouraging men to support feminist action need to get men to realise, even in these precarious times, the benefits they have and are still accruing through patriarchy and why this is detrimental both to themselves and society (cf. Bradshaw et al., 2018; Collins, 2002; Jackson, 1991). One way to do this, while remaining attuned to patriarchy's empirical complexity, is to infuse gender equality initiatives with context-specific contemporary debates happening through music and other creative mediums (see also Marcus et al., 2018).

In Ghana, for example, we suggest (re)introducing insights from local progressive feminist artists, scholars, and activists. One such example is academic, poet, and playwright Ama Ata Aidoo. Aidoo uses critical fiction to create sites of conversations for the co-existence of multiple narratives and perspectives that dominant discourses about gender relations, such as “boys abrɛ,” may miss. Furthermore, Aidoo (1993, 2000) situates women's struggles in Ghana, and other parts of Africa, within a material and metaphorical excavation of the colonial past (Kumavie, 2011), to enable a dialogue with the post-colonial present and an imagined future free from patriarchal oppression. Infusing gender equality mainstreaming initiatives with insights from context-specific feminist critical fiction would therefore not only advance debates over gender relations but also help to shift the social narrative towards a focus on revealing and undermining the structural conditions that are leaving pretty much everyone tired.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Brɛ in the Twi dialect under the Akan language literally means tired.

² The lyrics have been translated from Twi to English by the authors.

³ Chop money is slang for cash to purchase daily provisions and personal upkeep. The equivalent of pocket money.

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