

## From Boarding School to Freelancing: Food Security Dilemmas of Ghanaian Migrants in Qatar

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### Introduction

Migration is a critical livelihood strategy for people seeking better economic opportunities. However, while migration is often associated with improved financial security for migrants and their families, the experiences of migrants at their destinations vary significantly. Migrant food security is an overlooked aspect of their well-being, shaped by legal, economic, and cultural factors (Crush & Ramachandran, 2024). Although significant research has explored migrant food security in the Global North, studies on low-skilled temporary migrants in the Global South remain limited. In recent years, migration to the Gulf states has become an important destination for low-skilled and semi-skilled South-South migrants from Africa and Asia. However, the literature on this phenomenon has also tended to overlook the food security implications for migrants working in the Gulf.

Research on labour migration from Ghana to the Gulf region has focused on several themes, including the exploitative nature of the employment of temporary Ghanaian labour migrants (Atong et al., 2018; Awumbila et al., 2019; Von Martius, 2017) and the abuse, harassment, poor working conditions, and other difficulties that labour migrants experience on their journey to and from workplaces in the region (Apekey et al., 2018; Awumbila et al., 2019). Other recent studies have focused on the migration industry, the role of brokers and recruiters, and the reintegration experiences of return migrants (Kandilige et al., 2023; Rahman & Salisu, 2021; Von Martius, 2017). Absent from the literature is any consideration of the relationship between labour migration to the Gulf region and individual and household food security, either in Ghana or in the Gulf itself (Owusu, 2025).

Qatar is one of the most significant destinations for African migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. Until recent reforms,



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all migration of workers to Qatar was regulated under the *kafala* sponsorship system. Migrant workers had to have a local sponsor (*kafeel*) to enter, work, and reside in the country. *Kafeels* include placement agencies, companies, institutions, and individual employers who assume legal and economic responsibility for the migrant during the term of their contract (Gardner, 2010; Rahman, 2012). The *kafeel* signs a legal form with the Qatari Department of Immigration declaring that the labour migrant works for them, undertakes to inform the department of any changes in terms of work, and pledges to repatriate the foreign worker upon termination or expiration of their contract (Jureidini, 2016). Until recently, the employee was tied to the *kafeel* for the duration of their contract and could only work for them.

In the years leading up to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the *kafala* system was widely criticized for creating exploitative conditions, limiting job mobility, and fostering dependency on employers for essential needs, including food. With the international spotlight on the country, the Qatari government implemented various labour reforms in late 2020. Migrant workers can now change jobs without employer permission at any time during their employment, including during a six month probation period, as long as they notify their employers within a prescribed notice period. Migrants can also terminate their contract by providing at least one month's written notice if they have worked with the employer for two years or less or two months' notice if they have worked with the employer for more than two years.

Under the new system of labour governance in Qatar, migrant workers are entitled to a minimum wage, food allowance, and accommodation. The minimum wage at present stands at QR1,000 per month. Also, accommodation is set at QR500 and a food allowance at QR300 unless food is provided by the employer (Government of Qatar, 2021). By law, employers are expected to provide accommodation or an allowance to their employees. Migrant workers are accommodated in labour camps or compounds. These gated labour camps consist of low-rise buildings, most of which are in Doha. The labour camps are on the periphery of the city, a location that is socially and geographically segregated from the city centre. The labour camps are owned by Qatari landlords who rent to companies that themselves manage the workforce in the camps (ITUC, 2014). Other significant changes include the right of migrants to terminate their employment contracts and either leave the country unhindered or seek alternative employment. Migrants who remain in Qatar are colloquially known as "freelancers" and are responsible for their own accommodation and food.

Atong et al. (2018) and Awumbila et al. (2019) argue that the turn to the Gulf by Ghanaians was precipitated by the high rate of unemployment, poor remuneration, and increased poverty in the country. Additionally, the movement of labour migrants to the Gulf was facilitated by a proliferation of brokers, recruiters, and employment placement agencies in Ghana (Awumbila et al., 2019; Deshingkar et al., 2019). Migrants to Qatar were primarily recruited as domestic workers, security personnel, construction workers, and drivers (Atong et al., 2018). In terms of overall numbers, Rahman & Mohammed (2023) collected data from officials at Ghanaian embassies in the Gulf that suggest that there are 75,000 Ghanaian labour migrants in total. Of these, Saudi Arabia had approximately 27,000, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) 24,000, Qatar 8,000, Kuwait 8,000, Bahrain 4,500, and Oman 3,500. However, they consider these figures underestimated because some migrants are driven directly from the airport without registering with the Ghanaian foreign mission.

The paper focuses on key questions about how Ghanaian migrants access food, how their migration status influences their food security, and what strategies they use to cope with food-related challenges. The study draws from 58 in-depth interviews with Ghanaian migrants conducted in Qatar in June 2023.

## Boarding School Meals

Most larger companies house their Ghanaian workers in camp accommodation, where meals are provided in communal cafeterias. Employers typically contract catering services that prioritize cost efficiency over nutritional value, leading to repetitive diets that do not align with the culinary preferences of many migrants. As Jureidini–Qatar Foundation (2022) notes, “contractors and employers are always looking at the bottom line, which leads them to cut corners where they can. Some will take the lowest price menus on offer from the caterers.” The food quality in these facilities is a major bone of contention among migrants, with many expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of variety and cultural relevance of their meals.

Companies that feed their workers generally provide three meals daily. Instead of a midday meal, some companies provide a packed lunch to take to the worksite. This regimented system, with its dietary monotony and absence of choice, reminded one migrant of being back in boarding school in Ghana:

I am tied to a company and have a company visa, so we are fed three times daily: morning, afternoon and evening. I have never cooked for myself since I came to Qatar. I mostly eat rice and stew over here. It is like being in a boarding school. Anything over here would not be your preference. In the morning, it is mostly tea and bread. It is rice and soup in the afternoon and the same in the evening as well (Interview No. 47, Qatar, 14 June 2023)

Many Ghanaian migrants interviewed expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the food provided by employers, describing it as repetitive and lacking cultural relevance. As one migrant noted, “The food they serve in the camp is mostly rice with sauce, but it is not the kind of sauce we are used to back home. It is bland and not filling enough” (Interview No. 17, Qatar, 10 June 2023). A second commented, “I do not like going to the cafeteria for food. The food does not taste great to me. It is always rice and some sauce. That does not mean the food is bad because some people eat it, but it is not our local food” (Interview No. 26, Qatar, 4 June 2023). Another avoided company food altogether: “I do not eat the food from the company because I do not like it. They sometimes think I am not even a company staff member because I barely go to the cafeteria for food” (Interview No. 43, Qatar, 12 June 2023).

One strategy to improve the quality and desirability of food consumed is for workers to purchase and prepare their own food in the labour camps:

Even when we were all in the company and were provided food, we did not like it because it was difficult to eat, and hence, though it was not allowed in the company building, we still prepared food as a group and ate. Every member in the room

contributed money that we used to buy foodstuffs to prepare the meals. (Interview No. 28, Qatar, 7 June 2023)

However, many companies bar migrants from cooking in their accommodation. Individuals who disobey are fined and have their cooking equipment confiscated. One respondent described why he disliked eating company food and what happened when he and other Ghanaian workers tried to cook more palatable food themselves:

The company provides us with food and accommodation. The food is served at the cafeteria. Nobody is allowed to cook in the accommodation. We tried several times to cook, but they always passed behind us to pick up the rice cooker and cooking utensils and later fined us for cooking in our room. They have the door keys, so they come around often to inspect (Interview No. 43, Qatar, 12 June 2023).

Smaller companies and/or those without onsite canteens and cafeterias generally hire catering services to deliver meals. Alternatively, they give their employees the monthly food allowance stipulated in the new regulations, typically around QR300 (USD82) per month. While this provides greater autonomy over food choices, it is often insufficient to cover the cost of a well-balanced diet. Many migrants on food allowances opt for cost-saving strategies such as bulk purchasing, communal cooking, and meal rationing:

While at the company, I cooked my food and got a monthly food allowance of QR300. The money was not enough, but I learnt how to manage it. I bought all the groceries I needed from the grocery shops at the malls and the supermarkets (Interview No. 3, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

Ghanaian migrant workers generally prefer to receive food allowances due to the poor quality of company food. As one key informant noted:

I thought the QR300 for food was insufficient for migrant workers, but I spoke to some workers who said that they prefer to be given their QR300 food allowance. It is enough because they do not just eat alone; they come together as a group, put the food money together, buy and cook together, which is much cheaper than an individual doing it for just themselves (Key informant interview No. 2, Qatar, 5 June 2023).

## Freelancing and Food Insecurity

Freelancing is an attractive alternative for many Ghanaian migrants since it potentially gives them more freedom in the labour market and more choice about what food to eat, where, and when. This is an important benefit of freelancing, as one pointed out:

When I was on a company visa, I was not happy with the food provided, but now, I am freelance and do different jobs. I can eat out or cook at home and have access to all the local food ingredients needed to prepare meals. In the industrial area, everyone has access to a kitchen, and it is all about managing money and strategizing

cooking. I enjoy preparing my dishes and deciding what to eat (Interview No. 53, Qatar, 15 June 2023).

Freelancers and company employees receiving food allowances source their food from two primary sources: supermarkets and *baqala* (small convenience shops).

Since I left the company, I have been cooking my own food. I buy foodstuffs from the *baqalas* because I do not have the money to buy in bulk. However, when I am paid at the end of the month, I go to the malls and supermarkets to buy foodstuffs, including rice, tomato paste, chicken, spinach, oils, canned tuna, etc. Still, sometimes I finish them before even the end of the month (Interview No. 1, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

I buy all the items I need from the supermarket, including local foods like yam and plantain, especially when we are paid at the end of the month. However, I buy from the *baqala* when I run out of foodstuffs or have not been paid and am not ready for a bulk purchase. I bought small urgent needs there, considering it is close to our accommodation. Usually, I buy semolina, rice, water, tomatoes and sometimes fruits like oranges and bananas at the *baqala*. But generally, the prices are affordable at the malls/supermarkets compared to the *baqala* (Interview No. 6, Qatar, 31 May 2023)

The pricing and availability of goods in the *baqala* affect dietary diversity, with many migrants consuming monotonous meals due to financial constraints. While supermarkets offer a wider selection of food items, they are often located far from labour camps, making access difficult for migrants with limited transportation options.

Freelancing is an attractive alternative for many migrants since it potentially gives them more freedom in the labour market and more choice about what food to eat, where, and when. This is a positive benefit of freelancing:

When I was on a company visa, I was not happy with the food provided, but now, I am freelance and do different jobs. I can eat out or cook at home and have access to all the local food ingredients needed to prepare meals. In the industrial area, everyone has access to a kitchen, and it is all about managing money and strategizing cooking. I enjoy preparing my dishes and deciding what to eat (Interview No. 53, Qatar, 15 June 2023).

I cook and eat three times daily in the morning, afternoon, and evening. I eat rice pudding in the morning and sometimes tea with bread and fried eggs. In the afternoon, it is usually rice and beans with sauce and chicken or cooked semolina and soup. I eat leftovers from the food I cooked in the afternoon for the evening meal. Also, the weekends determine the food I eat throughout the week (Interview No. 7, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

However, freelancing is often precarious and insecure. Many Ghanaian migrants working in construction during preparations for the World Cup decided to remain as freelancers after 2022, anticipating that they could earn more income than before. In practice, freelancing carries considerable risks since it is not formally recognized under Qatari labour law, and many

freelancers work in semi-formal or informal arrangements, which affects their earnings and job stability. Freelancers can struggle to secure consistent employment, leading to financial uncertainty. Additionally, employers can delay or refuse payment, and informal agreements leave freelancers vulnerable to exploitation.

When freelancers cannot find jobs or steady employment, they turn to the market for 'by day' piecework (referred to as *shobo*). The respondents indicated that *shobo* work only pays QR19–25 (USD7–9) per day, with long work hours ranging from 8 to 12 hours. This provides them with much-needed income, but *shobo* work is inconsistent and short-lived, for a week or two at most, and payment can be delayed or non-existent. Several freelancers said that they were unable to afford three meals a day: "I usually had three meals a day, but since becoming a freelancer, I find it hard to focus on eating as I am also worried about other things and family responsibilities (Interview No. 23, Qatar, 7 June 2023).

*Shobo* has direct impacts on food consumption and nutrition, especially when the migrants cannot afford to buy food. As one freelancer stated: "some days, I have money to buy food, and some days, I just eat what my friends can share with me" (Interview No. 38, Qatar, 9 June 2023). Another noted: "I try to cook my own food when I can, but the cost of ingredients is high. Sometimes, I just eat bread and tea for dinner to save money" (Interview No. 22, Qatar, 12 June 2023). One strategy is to forego one or more of the three meals that Ghanaians prefer to eat each day: "when work is slow, I have to cut down on meals. I make sure my family in Ghana gets their remittance first before I think about my own food" (Interview No. 34, Qatar, 15 June 2023). Finding cheap substitutes for preferred foods and eating the same food every day is also common:

I have been home with no permanent work. I do *shobo* here and there to survive. You are paid just QR19 or sometimes QR25, which takes a long time before being paid. This is what I use to survive. I buy tea, milk, and kubuz (bread), which is just Q1, because you do not want to spend too much money (Interview No. 38, Qatar, 9 June 2023).

This individual also noted that they were effectively stuck in Qatar as they had insufficient income to purchase a ticket to return home to Ghana.

Many migrants rely on community networks, pooling resources to cook communal meals that replicate familiar Ghanaian dishes. Others said they sometimes ate out in a Ghanaian restaurant to consume desirable Ghanaian dishes. However, they were also mindful of the cost of the food at the restaurants: "I do not have any job after the World Cup, so any money I send home will force me into a food crisis. In difficult times here in Qatar, my brothers in this room often help me." Additionally:

I order food from Ghanaian restaurants which sell different Ghanaian dishes. You get to eat what you like, though very expensive and unsustainable, especially if you compare the expenditure on food at these restaurants and your monthly wage (Interview No. 43, Qatar, 12 June 2023).

Many migrants prioritize sending remittances to Ghana over personal expenditures, including food. The desire to support their translocal families back home leads to further rationing of meals and reliance on inexpensive, calorie-dense foods rather than nutritious, diverse diets (Owusu & Crush, 2025). Thus, freelancing (and food allowance) migrants often deprive themselves of nutritious and diverse foods to save money and remit to their family members:

When I send the money home to my son and siblings, it also impacts me here, but I cannot complain; if I do not do it, who will? I have to manage. It is not like they are using the money to do anything for me, but for their consumption. If I want to eat what I want, I might need QR500 every month, but with my responsibilities, it is impossible. I must eat smaller and the same meals all the time (Interview No. 4, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

My family always appreciates the little financial support I send them regularly every month when I am paid, which makes me happy. Sometimes, sending money home puts me in a difficult situation, especially when we are not paid early. I sometimes take foodstuffs such as rice from my friends and pay for them or replace them when I am paid (Interview No. 51, Qatar, 15 June 2023).

Remitting money to my family in Ghana sometimes impacts what I eat. I do not send all the money: sometimes, I leave about QR150 on me for upkeep and food, which is not enough. I am eating the same kind of food all the time. For instance, I eat one way: rice with no variety all the time, because I want to manage the money (Interview No. 1, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

As these accounts suggest, the priority of sending remittances to Ghana exacerbates their own food insecurity as they consume less and less healthy foods in order to get by in Qatar. The pressure to remit is compounded by the need to repay debts incurred through migration, as many migrants pay substantial fees to recruitment agencies and brokers to secure jobs in Qatar.

## Conclusion

This paper explores the intersection of labour migration and food security among Ghanaian migrants in Qatar, shedding light on how migration governance, employment conditions, and economic constraints shape their access to and consumption of food. The findings from in-depth interviews in Qatar reveal a complex landscape in which migrants navigate employer-controlled food provision, financial limitations, and cultural adaptation in their dietary habits. One of the most striking findings from the interviews is the unpalatable nature of company-provided food. Many migrants expressed dissatisfaction with the meals in employer cafeterias, describing them as monotonous, nutritionally inadequate, and culturally irrelevant. The repetitive content of meals also fails to align with the traditional Ghanaian diet, leading to food dissatisfaction among workers. Migrants compared the experience to being in a boarding school, where choice was absent and focused on cost efficiency rather than nutritional value. Furthermore, company policies that bar cooking in accommodation units further restrict workers' ability to supplement their diets, with workers facing penalties for attempting to prepare their meals.

At the same time, there are significant disparities between workers employed by large companies that provide food and those employed by smaller firms that offer food allowances instead. Migrants who receive food allowances often prefer this arrangement, as it provides them with greater autonomy over their diet. However, the minimum monthly food allowance prescribed by labour regulations is insufficient to maintain a balanced diet, leading to cost-saving strategies such as communal cooking, bulk purchasing, and meal rationing. Many migrants rely on affordable food items from local convenience stores and supermarkets, but financial constraints limit dietary diversity.

The transition from company employment to freelancing has introduced different food security challenges. Freelancing offers migrants greater freedom over food choices, but comes with financial instability. Many freelancers struggle to secure consistent work, leading to uncertain income and food insecurity. The interviews revealed that some freelancers reduce their food intake, skipping meals or relying on shared meals within their community networks. Some reported that on days when they had little or no income, they relied on food shared by friends. Others turned to informal and short-term work to sustain themselves, but the unpredictability of such work means that food insecurity remains a persistent challenge.

An important recurring theme in any interviews was the role of remittances in shaping migrants' food security. Many migrants prioritize sending money home over personal expenditures, including food. The need to support families in Ghana often leads to food rationing and reliance on cheap, calorie-dense foods rather than diverse and nutritious meals. Several migrants admitted that they knowingly sacrificed their own well-being to fulfill financial obligations to their families, demonstrating how translocal family dynamics influence migrants' daily survival strategies and food security.

Overall, this study underscores the need for policy interventions that address the food security challenges of migrant workers. While recent labour reforms in Qatar, such as the removal of exit permits and the introduction of a minimum wage, represent steps in the right direction, they do not fully address the broader well-being of migrants beyond wages and legal protections. Migrant workers require food security policies that go beyond employer-provided meals and food allowances, ensuring access to culturally appropriate and nutritionally adequate food. More importantly, labour laws should recognize the vulnerabilities of freelancers, who remain largely unprotected within the current migration governance framework.

In sum, this paper highlights the importance of food security as a crucial yet overlooked aspect of migrant well-being. It also points to the resilience and adaptability of Ghanaian migrants in Qatar, who navigate various challenges to secure food in an unfamiliar and inhospitable environment. Moving forward, policymakers, migrant advocacy groups, and international organizations must consider food security as a fundamental element of migrant labour rights, ensuring that workers do not have to choose between sending remittances and securing their own nutritional well-being. Addressing these challenges will require a holistic approach that combines labour reforms, social protection measures, and community-based interventions that empower Ghanaian migrants to achieve greater food security while working in the Gulf.

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