

A Scent of Home: Cultural Food Insecurity and Coping Strategies Among African Migrants in Qatar

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Abstract

Conventional food security frameworks define food security primarily in terms of food availability, access, utilisation, and stability. Widely used measures such as the FAO's Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) emphasise physical and economic access to sufficient food while largely overlooking its cultural dimensions. This paper argues that such approaches are inadequate for understanding the food security experiences of migrant populations whose wellbeing is closely tied to culturally meaningful foods, preparation practices, and shared eating behaviours. Drawing on qualitative research with 58 Ghanaian migrants in Qatar and 50 returned migrants in Ghana, the paper explores the concept of cultural food security within the Ghana-Qatar migration corridor. The paper argues that many migrants would be classified as food secure according to conventional indicators because they have access to sufficient food through employer-provided meals or food allowances. However, they simultaneously experience profound cultural food insecurity arising from culinary estrangement, limited access to culturally appropriate foods, restrictions on food preparation, and the inability to exercise choice over what, how, and with whom they eat. Migrants respond through adaptive strategies including clandestine cooking, ingredient substitution, purchasing imported Ghanaian foods, patronising Ghanaian restaurants and food vendors, sharing meals, and relying on transnational food remittances and community networks. These practices help sustain cultural identity and a sense of home but remain constrained by labour camp regulations, the kafala employment system, low wages, high food costs, insecure legal status, and responsibility to send remittances to family in Ghana. We conclude food security assessment must move beyond caloric sufficiency to recognise cultural access as an essential dimension of food security. Incorporating cultural food security into migration research and policy offers a more comprehensive understanding of migrant wellbeing and highlights the need for food security frameworks that acknowledge identity, dignity, agency, and belonging alongside material access to food.

Keywords

cultural food security, Ghanaian migrants, Qatar, culinary estrangement, labour migration, food security measurement

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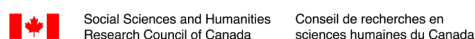
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Cover Image

Ghanaian migrant workers share a meal they prepared together at their accommodation in Qatar.
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Introduction

Conventional definitions of food security are built around four main pillars: availability, accessibility, utilisation, and stability. Metrics to operationalise these pillars (along with their well-known acronyms) include the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), the Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence (HFIAP), the Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS), the Latin American and Caribbean Food Insecurity Scale (ELCSA), the Coping Strategies Index (CSI), the Household Hunger Scale (HHS), the Global Hunger Index, the Food Consumption Score (FCS), the Diet Quality Questionnaire (DQQ), and, most recently, the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) (Coates et al., 2006; Headey, 2026; Jones et al., 2013; Leroy et al., 2015; Manikas et al., 2023). The development and promotion of the FIES by the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) has rapidly made it the “gold standard” for governments, international organisations, and researchers, with proponents arguing for its policy utility as a standardised, cross-national comparative measure of food insecurity (Amir & Khan, 2024; Ballard et al., 2014; Cafiero et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2017). The FIES is a stripped-down version of earlier metrics, comprising eight food accessibility questions, a 12-month recall period, and a binary yes/no response to each. The FIES reproduces many of the limitations of its precursors. It treats food security as a monolithic concept, assumes that all forms of food insecurity are quantifiable, and treats food as a purely physical commodity, abstracted from the socio-economic relations and cultural contexts in which it is produced, distributed, and consumed.

Culture is often assumed irrelevant to assessing food insecurity levels across the Global South (Saint Ville et al., 2019; Sheikomar et al., 2021; Wambogo et al., 2018). The erasure of culture in food security measurement is attributed by Coates (2013) to the “impetus to create a scale with cross-cultural properties (which) meant that items that were not cross-culturally invariant were omitted.” Renzaho & Mellor (2010) suggest that quantitative food security metrics fail the test of cultural pluralism, classifying consumers of a culturally inappropriate diet as food secure simply because caloric needs are met. Further, Renzaho (2026, p. 10) argues that conventional food security frameworks fail because they ignore “the complex interplay of cultural feeding practises, gender-based food taboos and discrimination and hierarchy dynamics.” Individualistic, market-based measurement paradigms sideline the importance of access to culturally appropriate and spiritually meaningful foods integral to cultural identity and tradition. Households and communities may therefore be labelled “food secure” even when this is culturally inappropriate. This obfuscation renders invisible the lived experiences of those for whom food is inseparable from culture, history, identity and belonging (Agada & Igboke, 2016; Muggaga et al., 2017; Trefry et al., 2014). This conceptual gap has prompted the argument that food security must be reconceived to encompass access not only to adequate food, but to culturally appropriate food that is prepared and consumed in ways that reflect people’s histories, collective identities, and social relationships (Alonso et al., 2017; Bikesh et al., 2020; Britwum & Demont, 2022;

Renzaho, 2026). Such a reconceptualisation calls for an analytical approach that is sensitised to cultural difference, attentive to the dynamics of migration and displacement, and capable of fully recognising what it means for people to be and feel food secure.

Several strands make up the newly emerging literature on cultural food security. First, as Power (2008) has argued, non-Aboriginal food security concepts fail to take full account of the traditional food practices of Aboriginal people or Aboriginal conceptualisations of food security. A range of case studies in different geographical contexts provide strong support for this position (Elliott et al., 2012; Gingell & Gallegos, 2025; Lambden et al., 2007; Richmond et al., 2021; Sherriff et al., 2022; Yusriadi et al., 2026). A second, related, thread concerns the relationship between food security and wild foods (Asprilla-Perea & Díaz-Puente, 2019). Research with local communities in Botswana, Kenya, Mali, South Africa, and Mexico identified as many as 615 species used for food (Borelli et al., 2020). Although the collection and consumption of wild foods are primarily associated with rural populations, they are also an essential component of urban diets in some countries (Sneyd, 2013). In Northern Namibia, for example, Nickanor et al. (2024) show that wild foods are consumed by two types of urban households: low-income families to mitigate food insecurity, and higher-income households as a discretionary addition to the family diet rooted in cultural food preferences and heritage.

A third strand in the culture and food security literature focuses on the cultural appropriateness or acceptability (CA) of food. As Britwum & Demont (2022, p. 2) argue, the literature has been “relatively mute about how cultural heritage can be leveraged to enhance and strengthen food security across the Global South.” House et al. (2024, p. 875) define CA as “the qualification of particular foods as appropriate to eat, in a particular manner, in a particular context. It is a relational phenomenon, arising through interaction between the embodied, enculturated dispositions of the eater(s) themselves and the socio-material context of consumption.” Crucially, cultural acceptability “is not simply a property of what is eaten, but also where, when, how, with whom and why.” They argue that CA can be seen either as a static problem to be resolved or a dynamic and negotiated process across six inter-related dimensions (a) existing diets; (b) substitutability, (c) adaptability; (d) alignment with cultural preferences; (e) the context of eating; and (f) the context of food acquisition and preparation.

The final strand concerns the interactions between international migration and cultural food security. Much of the literature in this domain focuses on the experiences of immigrant diasporas and resettled refugees in Europe, North America, and Australia (Lawlis et al., 2018; Maynard et al., 2019; Moffat et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2021). A recurrent theme in this ‘resettlement’ scholarship is the process of acculturation (Berggreen-Clausen et al., 2022; Hadley et al., 2010). Over time, this leads migrants to adapt to new food environments, resulting in shifts toward typical westernised dietary patterns high in fats, sugars, and ultra-processed foods and low in fruits and vegetables (Greenhalgh & Carney, 2014; Hadley et al., 2007; Mycek et al., 2020; Terragni

et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2016). Osei-Kwasi et al. (2020), for example, compare the diets of Ghanaian households in Europe and Ghana and find that in Ghana plantain, roots, and tubers contribute 48% of staples intake, and pasta and potatoes 5%. In Europe, on the other hand, bread and cereals account for 47% of staple intake, and plantains, roots, and tubers only 22%.

Resettlement in or passage through unfamiliar food environments therefore means culinary estrangement, defined as a sense of cultural dislocation, unfamiliarity, and isolation experienced by migrants unable to access, prepare, or enjoy culturally familiar foods (Bakić Hayden, 2024a; Mansour et al., 2020). Migrants become estranged from taken-for-granted timetables, culinary repertoires and traditions, and social practices that guide what people eat, with whom, and how they prepare the food. In the context of migration, these repertoires connect individuals to other migrants and to their families, communities, and countries at home (Baumann et al., 2019). Migrants exercise considerable agency in mobilising cultural repertoires to access culturally acceptable foods or to compensate for the lack of access by, for example, substituting ingredients with local alternatives (Dubowitz et al., 2007; Hayes-Conroy & Sweet, 2015; Ramsahoi et al., 2022). As Qureshi (2026, p. 39) notes, “migrants creatively reconfigure traditional recipes by substituting local ingredients and modifying cooking techniques to approximate familiar flavours, demonstrating a form of sensory negotiation and responsiveness to their new environment.” Furthermore, cooking becomes “a grounding ritual that fosters emotional connection and coherence in unfamiliar environments.” In the alienating work environment of temporary, casual, or seasonal work, conviviality and commensality among migrants become key elements of their cultural food repertoire (Anderson et al., 2014; Bloom et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2004; Meierotto & Som Castellano, 2020). Taken together, these arguments highlight the need to rethink and include cultural access as a form of migrant food security. As Britwum & Demont (2022) suggest, cultural heritage is the “missing link” in global food security whose neglect hampers inclusion and diminishes identity, dignity, and social cohesion.

Literature on the food security experience of the rapidly growing number of African migrants working in the Gulf states is extremely sparse. Very little is known about the food security challenges facing Ghanaian migrants working in the Gulf. This paper therefore makes an original contribution to the literature on African migrant food security. A second major contribution of the study is to move beyond conventional metrics of food security to provide insights into the phenomenon of cultural food security experienced by Ghanaian migrants in Qatar. The paper explores how food is socially embedded in the Ghana-Qatar migration corridor and how Ghanaian migrants’ access to food reinforces their cultural ties and identities. As we show, migrants working in the country’s labour camps can access enough food from their employers, and yet they do not consider themselves to be food secure as a result of culinary estrangement and a lack of access to culturally acceptable foods.

Methodology

The emerging literature on cultural food security has begun to grapple with how best to measure the impact of culture on food security (Akbari et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2023; Alonso et al., 2018; Deen et al., 2025). Renzaho (2026) argues that tools to measure cultural food security are still in their infancy and therefore “more efforts are needed to develop reliable, valid and stable scales to evaluate the impact of cultural food security.” Khan (2026) proposes a sociological food security index for measuring entitlements, power, and cultural resilience in rural Pakistan which may have broader applicability. The emerging literature on the relationship between migration and food security in the Global South has tended to rely on such metrics to capture migrants’ vulnerability to food insecurity in transit and in destination countries (Choithani, 2017; Crush, 2013; Moniruzzaman, 2022; Smith & Floro, 2021). More recently, migration researchers have turned to qualitative and mixed methodologies to explore the complexities of cultural food (in)security among migrant workers in transit and at their destinations (Bakić Hayden, 2024b; Owusu & Crush, 2024; Tawodzera, 2024).

In a similar vein, this study is based on migrant narratives collected in Ghana and Qatar in March and June 2023. The first phase of the research was conducted in Accra and Kasoa, Ghana, involving in-depth interviews with 50 migrants who had spent varying lengths of time working in Qatar and had since returned to Ghana. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling approach with the support of recruitment agencies, brokers, and the Ghana Immigration Service, who had some databases and contact details of the returnees. In the second phase of the field research, we conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with 58 Ghanaian labour migrants in Doha. The interview participants in Doha were recruited through Ghanaian community networks, such as the Ghanaian Association in Qatar, and during regular church services attended predominantly by Ghanaians. These recruitment pathways facilitated trust building and encouraged participation among Ghanaian migrants with diverse occupational and migration backgrounds. The participants were interviewed at length about their migration experiences and history, migration decisions, economic activity, food consumption patterns, access to culturally appropriate foods, and food and cash remitting behaviour.

The migrant narratives were imported into NVivo12 software for systematic coding and analysis. A thematic approach was employed, involving iterative reading of the transcripts to identify recurring themes, patterns, and divergences related to food consumption behaviours, food preferences and cultural food security. Coding was both deductive, guided by the study’s analytical focus on food security and cultural access, and inductive, allowing new themes to emerge from the data. The next section of the paper is structured around the major themes that emerged from the NVivo 12 analysis.

Cultural Food Insecurity and Culinary Estrangement

Qatar's employment regime divides Ghanaian migrants into three groups, with varying degrees of freedom and control over their food choices and diet. By far the largest number of Ghanaian migrants are recruited on fixed-term contracts and, on arrival in Qatar, are housed in the labour camps and presented with foods cooked in industrial kitchens and served to them in large canteens. Conditions in the camps are overcrowded, dehumanising, and completely lacking in privacy (Bruslé, 2010a, 2010b, 2012; Gardner, 2021, 2024; Gardner et al., 2020; Mohammad & Sidaway, 2016). As one of Bruslé's (2012) Nepalese migrants responded: "What kind of place is this?" A second cohort working for smaller companies resides in the labour camps but is entitled by law to receive a monthly food allowance from their employers, which they use to purchase their own food. The third group are so-called "freelancers" who are provided wages along with food and accommodation allowances and can select their place of residence and food. Food availability is not an issue, and an FIES-style questionnaire would undoubtedly find that the migrants were food secure. However, many described how the food was unpalatable at best:

The very day we got there, we learned that we had to do our best to eat everything served. I even got sick as time went on, so I was hospitalised. I don't know where it came from. I wouldn't say the food was the reason I felt sick, but in a way, it was. We mostly ate rice over there. We had colored rice water and other things. It's mostly tea in the morning and rice in the afternoon. The rice is taken with cabbage soup or stew. I found it difficult taking that stew, but I tried (Interview No. 49, Accra, 5 May 2023).

The food provided by the company is subpar. The rice they serve is not enjoyable, and the meat is not cooked well. The rice has been cooked and sieved. There is no starch, unlike the way we cook it in Ghana. Despite numerous complaints, there has been no improvement in the quality of our meals over the nearly two years I have been here. In this room, we rarely visit the cafeteria (Interview No. 49, Qatar, 15 June 2023).

I don't like the food they cook and the sauce at the company. It is always rice, but not too good to eat. The problem with the rice here is the sauce. It is always yellow, and I don't even know what it is. That is not how we Ghanaians prepare our food (Interview No. 43, Qatar, 13 June 2023).

During my first contract employment, the food here felt unsettling to me because they didn't know how to prepare my local dishes. Imagine an Indian person preparing a Ghanaian dish; he does it with less knowledge. As a result, we barely ate the food. We ate food like rice, but the stew they added was very unfamiliar. The stew looked like chopped tomatoes in water, and the fish was sometimes half-cooked (Interview No. 36, Qatar, 12 June 2023).

Some of the companies provide their workforce with passable imitations of familiar home-country foods. As a chef in one camp noted:

My team's number one priority is to offer the workers a taste of home and maybe make their time away from home just a little easier. We offer several different menus such as Asian, African, Filipino, Turkish and Arabic, and we ensure that the lead chef for each of these menus is from the same country or one of the countries it represents. This means they have a good understanding of what the desired taste from that country or region is and are able to recreate it (Peninsula, 2022).

The notion that there is a single "African" menu is, of course, problematic, and none of the respondents in this study cited a specifically Ghanaian menu they had encountered. In addition, to meet the cultural food preferences of the entire workforce would change the cost calculation for employers, and different menus for different ethnicities are certainly more the exception than the norm.

Culinary estrangement manifests in the absence of recognisable foods in the company canteens. But it also means distaste and even disgust when familiar foods such as rice, fish, and sauces are cooked in ways that compromise their familiar consistency and taste. Some respondents felt that the menu might improve if the cooks were Ghanaian, but as one noted, the cooks were primarily Indian and Qatari, and there was little opportunity for Ghanaians to work in the kitchen. A recent study of kitchen behaviour in Ghana notes that cooking is a central activity in every household, deeply embedded in cultural norms and influenced by economic, environmental, and social factors (Qualiquant, 2025). Culinary estrangement in the alien economic, environmental and social environment of labour migration to the Gulf also denies them this "deeply embedded" cultural norm:

Upon arriving in Doha, the company arranged transportation for us and provided accommodation, where six of us shared a room with bunk beds and a small space. We faced challenges with food as we weren't allowed to cook in our rooms. Thus, we had to buy food from the company's restaurant. We expressed our concerns about not being able to eat their local dishes, but some managed to smuggle in electronic stoves to cook rice in their rooms (Interview No. 9, Accra, 28 March 2023).

All forms of culinary estrangement are exacerbated by company policies that bar labour camp workers from cooking food in their rooms. To ensure workers patronise the canteens, the companies hire supervisors and security guards who conduct regular room inspections, confiscate any cooking equipment they find, and levy fines. Workers, therefore, face an unenviable choice: either they eat company food and experience profound cultural food insecurity, or they abandon the objectionable canteens, buy their own food from local shops, and cook clandestinely in their rooms or elsewhere. However, this means eating into their meagre

wages and increasing their vulnerability to more conventional forms of food insecurity. In short, the FIES would likely indicate that canteen patrons are food-secure, whereas those who sought alternatives would be food-insecure. As we argue, viewed through a cultural lens, company-fed migrants experience profound cultural food insecurity, and those who eschew the canteens risk experiencing both standard and cultural food insecurity if they cannot access desirable foods and preparation conditions that would address their deep culinary estrangement.

Wherever possible, Ghanaian migrants prefer to receive the state-mandated monthly food allowance rather than eating in the canteens, as this gives them a modicum of control over what they consume and helps to mitigate the sense of culinary estrangement:

Getting food of your choice is a challenge when you come here. You would not like the kind of rice and soup they prepare here. You would not like their dishes; they taste awful, so we prepare our food and get the food allowance of QR300 (Interview No. 24, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

Similarly, freelancers are potentially able to limit their culinary estrangement by purchasing all of the food they consume out of their own income:

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

Cultural Foods and Cultural Continuity

Ghana is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Africa, and it therefore makes little sense to speak of a single Ghanaian culture in which all migrants are equal participants (Koomson & Churchill, 2021). For example, migrants from the Muslim north of the country have very different culinary tastes and traditions from those from the south (Dakurah & Osbahr, 2023; Kolbila et al., 2025). Additionally, rapid urbanisation and the nutrition transition are exercising a major transformative impact on urban diets (Ahmed et al., 2022; Boatemaa et al., 2018; Green et al., 2020; Holdsworth et al., 2020; Kushitor, 2021; Kushitor et al., 2023, 2025). As Ahmed et al. (2022, p. 1399) note, “diet change is characterised by the increased consumption of certain foodstuff such as rice, chicken, fish, vegetable oil, sugar, and ultra-processed food (UPF), and the decreased consumption of traditional foodstuff such as roots, tubers, and some cereals such as millet.” Morasso & Zittoun (2014) make the important point that “culture” should not be viewed as a bounded, static, and fixed entity. The relevant research question is not what “culture” a person “has” or “is”, but rather, more pragmatically, when, why and for what a person is using a specific cultural element. The recent study by Qualiquant (2025) provides an overview of the cultural elements that make up the typical diets in urban, peri-urban, and rural Ghana (Figure 1).

One returned migrant identified the kind of diet needed to feel culturally food secure:

I have a particular fondness for rice and fufu with groundnut soup. Fufu is a staple dish for us, influenced by our grandparents. They usually prefer eating rice in the morning. Personally, I have two meals a day, with rice in the morning and typically fufu in the evening. I usually don't add meat to my rice meal. The quality of the food prepared in the house matters to me, and I gauge it based on the prices of food I buy from vendors. Food choices in our household are typically decided by my uncle, and we all follow his preferences. My uncle isn't particularly fond of banku, so when his wife prepares banku, she also makes rice for him (Interview No. 2, Accra, 22 May 2023).

Our favourite meal is rice, maize, plantain, and these are very important to us, we even have some planted in our backyard garden. In a day, we eat three times when the kids are home, but when the kids are not around, we skip breakfast and eat lunch and dinner. We normally eat fried yam and noodles as lunch and mostly rice as dinner (Interview No. 7, Accra, 24 March 2023).

A key question is how many of the culturally acceptable foods mentioned in these narratives (and in Figure 1) are physically and economically accessible to Ghanaian migrants in Qatar. One option is to purchase their food at distant supermarkets (in-person or online):

We buy our groceries from the mall nearby, and though local foods are not always readily available, online services have helped us access some of our traditional dishes, including banku (corn dough) and konkonte (dried cassava flour), which are difficult to come by and used to make local dishes (Interview No. 31, Qatar 4, June 2024).

Migrants also seek to maintain cultural dietary continuity by accessing preferred cooked dishes in other ways, including occasionally from restaurants. At the time of the research, there were two Ghanaian restaurants in Doha with many popular Ghanaian dishes on their menus. Others have since opened:

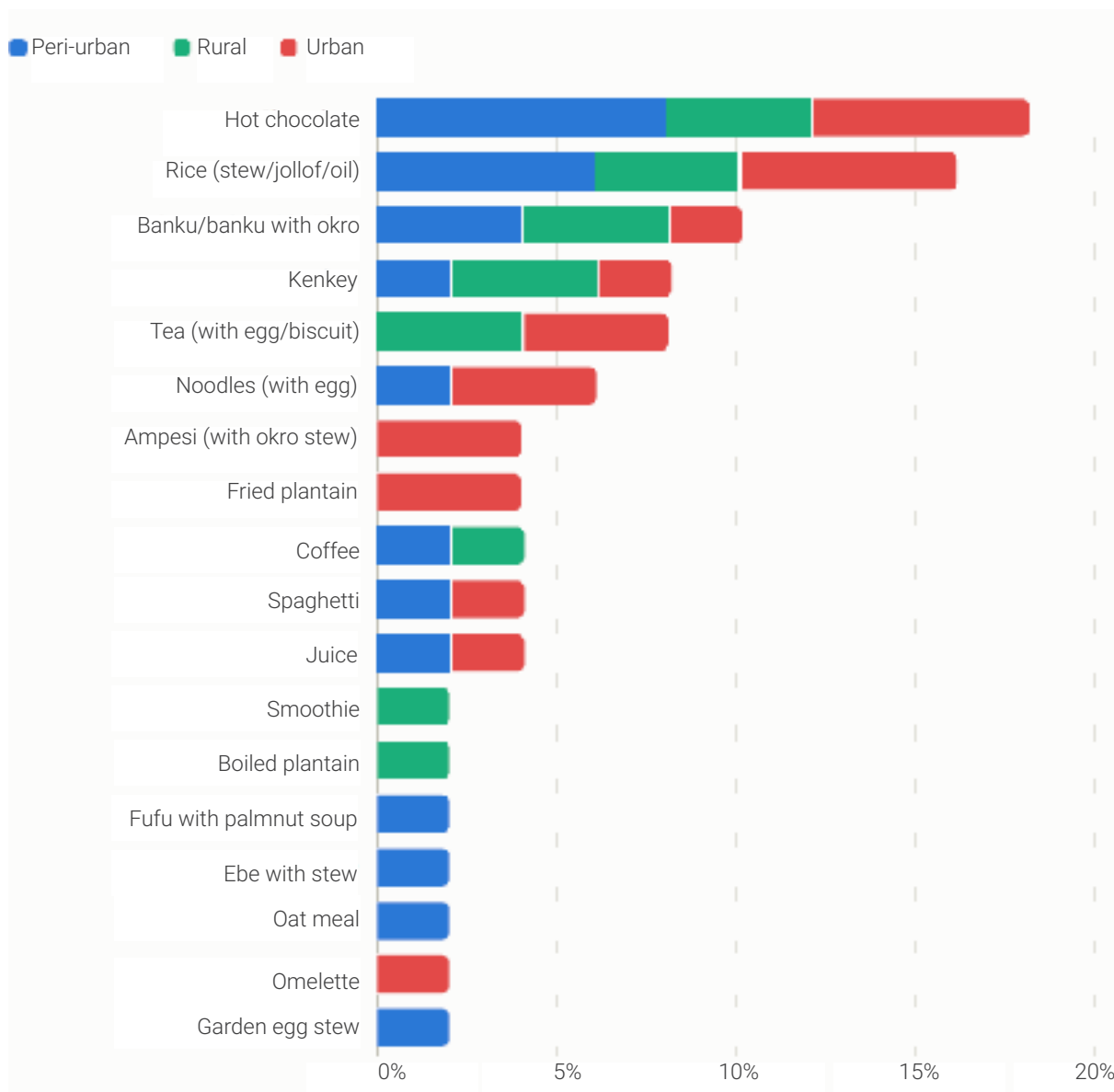
I order food from the Ghanaian restaurant called Asanka Delight. You get to eat local Ghanaian dishes you like and feel connected to, though it is very expensive and unsustainable to eat all the time (Interview No. 43, Qatar, 13 June 2023).

I sometimes order from a Ghanaian restaurant, but not always, because I know I cannot rely on it consistently given my small, basic salary, especially when I have other family expenses. I eat at the restaurant where I work or sometimes bring leftover food from the day's sales and eat it the next morning (Interview No 26, Qatar, 7 June 2023).

Figure 1: Major Foods Prepared and Consumed in Ghana

Variety of meals prepared

share of respondents reporting each meal, by area type



Source: Qualiquant (2025, p. 20)

Another source of familiar cooked dishes is the growing number of food micro-enterprises run by Ghanaian women migrants:

I knew a lady who sold traditional Ghanaian food, such as banku, shito, and stew, and we paid her for it. A lot of Ghanaian ladies here are into that business, I know of two women for now. It gives you a sense of home (Interview No. 36, Qatar, 12 June 2023).

I am a woman. I do not settle for just ordinary foods. I am able to get most of the ingredients I need, even the local ingredients I need to be able to cook, such as yam, cassava, plantain, etcetera. I cook the best quality food, but improvise when I don't get all the ingredients. I looked for substitutes from grocery stores. Sometimes, I also go to the grinding mill to buy corn and cassava dough for my banku. It tells

you how serious I am with my food. See the [dried fish and yam in her living room], I ordered from Ghana. Most of the guys buy, and I cook for them here (Interview No. 54, Qatar, 15 June 2023).

As this woman intimates, the importation of cultural foods from Ghana for sale to migrants is a new and evolving small business opportunity for the entrepreneurial-minded.

We import local foods such as konkonte, local peanut butter, gari, corn dough, and some dried fish to run the restaurant business here. However, we are careful not to send more food than we end up with, nor bring more than we can afford, since it might impact our finances and our ability to cook and sell adequate and preferred food to the public (Interview No. 52, Qatar, 16 June 2023).

Individual migrants coming to Qatar stock up before leaving or ask friends to bring the items with them when they return from Ghana:

Before going to Qatar, I brought food items like garri, shito, Maggi seasoning, groundnut paste, sugar, and some painkillers. When we ran out of these items, we would request them from people coming from Ghana (Interview No. 8, Accra, 24 March 2023).

I sometimes ask someone to bring me food from Ghana. The items I receive include palm oil, salted fish, kokonte, and others. This is because you don't get them here, and to eat right, you need to find means to get some traditional foods (Interview No. 14, Qatar, 2 June 2023).

Whenever some of my colleagues visit or return on vacation, I send them money to buy me gari, red oil and dry fish; these are the items I cannot find here (Interview No. 7, Qatar, 1 June 2023).

Food Practices Under Precarious Conditions

Ghanaian labour migrants in Qatar must navigate psychological stress, labour precarity, and cultural food deficiency. As one migrant noted, they are often “food bankrupt”:

There have been countless times when we have gone bankrupt on food. If someone gives us money to buy foodstuffs, we buy semolina and rice and store them, so when they run out, we roam about because we have nothing on us. Sometimes we get some khubz [a cheap bread wrap], eat it, and sleep. We sometimes pay someone 50 riyals to go back to the market to buy foodstuffs to prepare some soup and store it. This is what we've been going through till now (Interview No. 25, Qatar, 5 June 2023).

Food access and consumption practices reveal how migrants respond individually and collectively, even as their responses are shaped and constrained by broader forces. Food practices are constantly adjusted to cope with unstable work conditions, long hours, and delayed wages:

I am able to eat what I like, and I prepare most of the food myself, though sometimes I buy it. I know I need to eat well to have the energy to work. If I don't, I will fall sick and not be able to work the long hours, so I make sure I eat well. I am able to get most of the foodstuffs I need, including the local ones I need for cooking, such as yams, cassava, and plantains. I make sure to cook to the highest standards and to be food secure, but when I don't have all the ingredients/foodstuffs and the salaries are delayed, I improvise. I eat three times a day, but sometimes I skip the afternoon meal. I don't really take a light breakfast like tea; I can take banku in the morning. I decide with my roommate what to eat (Interview No. 54, Qatar, 16 June 2023).

Migrants talked about changing meal frequency, portion sizes, and food choices during times of financial strain or job insecurity. For example, they prioritise inexpensive, filling, and easy-to-make staples, while culturally important meals that require many ingredients or long preparation times are put off or saved for moments of relative income stability. If imported items are unaffordable, local substitutes are sometimes found:

I usually have three meals a day while in the company. However, since becoming a freelancer, I find it hard to focus on eating because I'm also worried about other things, including the stability of my job. One of my staples here is semolina, which I typically eat with groundnut soup. I buy the ingredients for the soup from the shopping mall; usually, the groundnuts have sugar in them. I even use it for my soup, though I know it's for bread. Groundnuts from Ghana are expensive, so I often opt for a less expensive groundnut and fish instead of catfish (Interview No. 23, Qatar, 5 June 2023).

Migrants receiving food allowances and freelancers regularly depend on collective food practices to manage these challenging conditions. Shared meals with co-workers, informal food pooling, and rotating cooking arrangements all facilitate access to familiar foods while lowering individual costs and burdens. These collective practices also strengthen social bonds and cultural norms of mutual support:

We usually eat together with my roommates, but in the afternoon, one can eat alone if they want to, like with Gari soakings [a popular Ghanaian dessert] or skip and wait. However, in the evening, it's a collective decision. Someone suggests what to eat, whether it's semolina, jollof, or rice balls, and if the majority agrees and we have the means or resources and time, we go for it (Interview No. 23, Qatar, 5 June 2023).

We are like brothers living in one room, so we group to cook to cut the cost. We don't eat only rice. There is something else here that looks like flour. Yes, semolina. We dry it and eat it just like that, with some soup. We improvise to prepare something which is closer to a light soup. We buy tomatoes and some lower-priced chicken, and we use them for the soup. We all decide on what we are going to eat for the evening, and we cook together. We don't really get satisfied when we eat, but we have no option. When we do not have money in our account, we usually go hungry all day. We sleep and drink a lot of water in such instances (Interview No. 25, Qatar, 5 June 2023).

While the migrants show considerable adaptability, creativity, and agency in managing food access under precarious conditions, these food practices should not be romanticised as proof of self-sufficiency or resilience. They made it clear that many of the coping strategies arise out of necessity

rather than choice and are accompanied by sacrifice, exhaustion, and stress:

Now I eat with my brother in this room, who is also looking for jobs like me. We decide what to eat together. We already don't have anything as I speak to you now. We sometimes manage to eat by making contributions to eat in a group, just to share the cost of food purchases. I ate with my friend, and today we hoped to find a job, but unfortunately, that did not happen. Despite the challenges, we remain hopeful that God will make a way for us (Interview No. 32, Qatar, 8 June 2023).

Simplified diets, skipped meals, use of substitutes, and reliance on others for help are seen as temporary compromises rather than sustainable adaptations:

I eat semolina and wheat flour as well. Because the maize I get is far away and expensive, I substitute it with wheat flour. They also have maize flour at the mall. The maize flour cannot just be mixed into the dough. This place is not like Ghana, where you can get everything. Palm oil, for instance, cannot be bought in malls here but can be bought from Ghanaian vendors. We usually feel satisfied after eating and often have leftovers, just like we do in Ghana. Occasionally, we face random food shortages, especially when jobs are scarce. If my roommates and I are not working, we may run out of food due to financial constraints, sometimes skip a meal, and cook only in the evenings. When there is a shortage, we sometimes rely on friends we have helped before. The six of us here have friends we can ask for help, and that's how we survive during food shortages (Interview No. 22, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

Beyond the practice of commensality, there are occasions both religious and secular for participation in larger gatherings where food is shared:

Sometimes there are Ghanaian occasions, such as Independence Day celebrations, where some food is shared and eaten together, or someone brings something from church (Interview No. 25, Qatar, 5 June 2023).

Religious observance plays a major role in the lives of many Ghanaian migrants in Qatar. As these narratives show, food sharing and giving is an embedded cultural food practice for participants and practitioners of different faiths:

The challenge I faced in Qatar was mostly about the money. We used to be paid for a month if we worked for two months, so for the first month, you won't be paid, and if you don't have any other source of income, life will be very difficult for you. I used to go to the Mosque a lot, and sometimes I was approached by some of the Arabs, and they would ask me how many Muslims are in Ghana, and I would reply by saying, only 15 percent of Ghanaians are Muslims.

They were impressed with how often I come to the Mosque, so they offered to help me with food whenever I need it. We even had an Indian man who we stayed with, and he told me that I could go to the shop in front of our apartment and ask for anything I wanted (Interview No. 1, Accra, 24 March 2023).

The pastor in the church I attended in Qatar was very good. He used to buy food and other things for us. He sometimes called to ask if the food was finished. We lied to him because we didn't want to put any pressure on him, but he found out and stopped calling to ask us. He just came around and took us shopping. He was the one who helped when our salary stopped coming. He provided us with food before and after church. That's on Fridays. Tea in the morning and rice in the afternoon. He doesn't do that and expects something in return (Interview No. 16, Kasoa, 24 March 2023).

Weekly religious gatherings are also important cultural meeting spaces for migrants where foods are often prepared and shared, providing temporary relief from dietary monotony and social isolation. However, participation in such communal practices depends on factors such as time availability and income, which are unevenly distributed among migrants due to the nature of their jobs. Crucially, migrant accounts reveal the limits of individual and collective coping in the face of structural constraints. Food practices enable survival and emotional continuity, but they cannot fully offset the impacts of restrictive migration regimes, income inequality, and job insecurity. Recognising migrant resilience requires simultaneous acknowledgment of the impact of structural conditions that make such resilience necessary in the first place.

Constraints on Access to Culturally Appropriate Food

Although food is a central medium for the expression of cultural continuity and identity, continuous access to culturally appropriate food in Qatar is rare. Instead, it is profoundly shaped by structural constraints embedded within the migrant labour system. Access to culturally appropriate foods is directly constrained by the nature of migrant labour governance. Despite recent reforms, the kafala sponsorship regime remains a critical structuring force shaping the everyday lives and food practices of many Ghanaian migrants (Cholewinski & Guttman, 2023; Foley & Piper, 2026; Piper & Saraswathi, 2024). The attachment of many migrants to specific employers under Qatar's sponsorship-based employment framework largely determines where they live in employer-provided or employer-mandated accommodation in the labour camps in Doha. Tied accommodation and industrial kitchens shape food consumption practices away from culturally appropriate foods towards standardised energy-dense and carbohydrate-heavy foods. Food consumption patterns are thus embedded within the broader system of labour control rather than autonomous dietary choices. Cultural food insecurity for many migrants has a structural character rooted in migration governance rather than individual agency.

Even when culturally appropriate foods are available from retail outlets, the ability of migrants to access them is shaped by various constraints, not least the high cost:

They have banned so many things at our accommodation. You can't even warm up water for your tea, so you have no choice but to eat whatever you are given. Ideally, it is better to cook for yourself. We have some Ghanaian vendors here who prepare Ghanaian dishes like fufu and abetier (Konkonte). There are many Ghanaian shops around here in Qatar, but I don't necessarily buy their dishes. Ghanaian food items here are expensive. You may crave something like turkey, palm oil, or gari. The gari sold here is very, very expensive. Yam is also expensive here. A cup of gari is sold here for 60 riyals, which, when converted, is Ghç189, closer to Ghç200. So, I usually let them send some from Ghana to me here. I just have to plead with someone I know who is coming here from Ghana to bring me something from my family so I can get a taste of some Ghanaian dishes. They do not have things like tomatoes, garden eggs, etc. here. I face challenges of things being expensive here. The stuff at the African shops here is way too expensive, so you have to buy one or two things that you think will suppress your cravings (Interview No. 25, Qatar, 6 June 2023).

Legal status further influences access to cultural foods, especially for migrants with inadequate documentation. Those who face contract disputes or delayed residency permits described their heightened vulnerability and food-related constraints. Fear of arrest or of losing a job discourages movement and limits the ability to purchase culturally preferred foods. The cost of legal documentation also affects food consumption and remittances. One migrant gave a perfect personal example of this constraint:

Back when I was earning 1800 Riyals per month, I had to save up 3500 Riyals for my ID application, which meant I had to reduce the amount I sent back home, including for food. I didn't care what I even ate then. Currently, the ID renewal costs 2500 Riyals, and I'm relieved to have obtained it, as it means I can stay in Qatar longer. Recently, I realised that I need to start saving for my ID renewal while continuing to send money home regularly (Interview No. 35, Qatar, 9 June 2023).

Housing influences cultural food practices by affecting migrants' ability to prepare and share culturally appropriate meals. Participants living in crowded shared housing often lack proper kitchen facilities or storage space. Some reported restrictions on cooking or shared cooking areas that discouraged the preparation of traditional meals:

We cook our own food. Every floor has its own kitchen. All the members of the floor contribute to filling the gas cylinders and cooking on the burners. The only problem is the kitchens are not as clean as you expect, and what they are. This place is like being in the boarding school system with individuals from

different upbringings. I have come to tolerate and accept the system. Sometimes you have to wake up early to cook just to avoid certain individuals and nationalities using the same space (Interview No. 7, Qatar, 31 May 2023).

The practice of informally importing cultural foods from Ghana, either in person or through friends and co-workers, is constrained by Qatar's border control and customs regime. One migrant described how all his food was confiscated by zealous Qatari customs officials:

I send money to my wife to buy food items and give to my friends returning from vacation in Ghana to bring to me. I get foods like shito (black sauce), groundnut paste, Gari and some medications like amoxicillin. That is all. People will not agree to bring heavy foods over to you here. Sometimes it comes at a cost. A friend of mine who I used to work with went to Ghana from here, and when he was returning, I told him to come along with malaria treatment and some foodstuffs, but he came to tell me that it was seized and thrown away. All because he put it in his handbag (Interview No. 24, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

Most migrants in Ghana put the needs of their families and households in Ghana ahead of their own. In concrete terms, this means remitting as much as they can each month and sacrificing their own food needs and preferences (Owusu & Crush, 2024). Migrants working in lower-wage sectors, therefore, prioritise sending remittances and saving money over buying culturally significant foods.

Sending money to my family in Ghana affected what I ate. Honestly, I mostly ate beans and gari because, based on my calculations, it would have been difficult and costly for me to choose other foods, especially the more expensive Ghanaian market staples (Interview No.16, Qatar, 4 June 2023).

Remitting money to my family in Ghana sometimes impacts what I eat. I don't send all the money: sometimes, I leave about 150qa (from my basic salary of 1500) on me for upkeep and food, which is not enough, but I manage it. 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).

This economic calculus shows how migrant food choices are tied to broader moral and financial obligations and concerns. On the other hand, there is a reverse flow of culturally valued food remittances from Ghana to Qatar, intended for migrant household members there who have difficulty accessing culturally preferred foods available in Qatari shops. Remitting food is described as a way of fulfilling moral obligations, maintaining social ties, and preserving family food traditions. In this regard, food remittances function as an instrument of cultural reproduction, reinforcing shared identities and foodways along this migration corridor.

Discussion

This is the first study we know of to explore the phenomenon of cultural food (in)security among African labour migrants working and surviving in a Gulf country. Cultural food security is largely invisible within dominant food security frameworks, such as the FAO's FIES, which equate food security with the quantity of food consumed or foregone over fixed recall periods ranging from 24 hours to a whole year. This paper aimed to examine cultural food insecurity among Ghanaian labour migrants in Qatar by moving beyond the conventional focus on quantification of deprivation and hunger. Most migrants consulted in Qatar reported being able to access sufficient food either in labour camp canteens, by purchasing food with their monthly food allowances or wages, or through various food-sharing practices. Instances of real hunger did occur when migrants lost their jobs or could not find alternative employment. But, in general, it quickly became evident from their narratives that cultural alienation from the "sense of home" and its familiar food dishes and ingredients was a major element of how they themselves perceived food security concerns. These findings therefore support recent scholarship arguing that the missing cultural elements of food security assessments lead to conceptual misunderstanding of the subjective experience of food insecurity and misclassify culturally marginalised populations as food secure while overlooking loss of dignity, belonging, and identity (Alonso et al., 2018; Britwum & Demont, 2022; Renzaho, 2026).

Cultural food security refers to the idea that food security is not just about averting hunger by consuming enough calories or nutrients. Rather, it is also about having access to foods that are culturally appropriate, familiar, and meaningful to identity, traditions, social practices, and sense of self. Other elements include the freedom to prepare and consume these foods in customary ways, not being forced to eat "foreign" food by employers; and being able to choose what is eaten, when, how and with whom in ways that matter for identity, belonging, and dignity (Ali et al., 2023; Bikesh et al., 2020; Gingell & Gallegos, 2025; House et al., 2024; Moffat et al., 2017; Renzaho & Mellor, 2010). A key implication of this study, therefore, is that Ghanaian migrants who are likely to be classified as food secure by measures such as the FIES still experience cultural food insecurity. Most migrants have sufficient access to food in quantitative terms; however, their stories reveal that access to culturally meaningful foods is irregular, expensive, and depends on circumstances over which they have little or no control. In this context, following Bakić Hayden (2024a), we deploy the concept of culinary estrangement to capture both the absence of culturally appropriate foods and the presence of foods that are foreign to the palate, unfamiliar, and often indigestible.

As the narrative extracts reproduced in this paper show, all the fundamental elements of cultural food security are transgressed or denied in Qatar by the country's migrant labour regime. The narratives also indicate that cultural food access among labour migrants is shaped by broader structures of which migrants are all too aware, rather than

by individual need or choice. Gulf migration policies, the kafala sponsorship system, legal constraints on collective organisation, the temporariness of residence and employment contracts, and spatial confinement in labour camps all constrain what migrants can eat, how often they can access culturally significant foods, and whether they can prepare their own meals in familiar ways. Despite overall food abundance in the destination country of Qatar, factors such as legal status, low income, work schedules, and housing arrangements combine to undermine cultural food security and imbue a profound sense of culinary estrangement.

Clapp et al. (2025, p. 1) argue that "food security frameworks that ignore or downplay the significance of agency are increasingly out of step with growing recognition of the importance of strengthening human rights – including the right to adequate food – for the world's most marginalised people who typically face the highest rates of hunger, especially in a context of growing power imbalances in food systems." Millions of low-wage migrant workers in the Gulf are among the world's most marginalised and powerless, although their rates of absolute hunger are generally lower than those of other marginalised groups for the reasons given. Ewers et al. (2023), for example, note that while some Gulf migrants succeed in improving their lives and wellbeing through migration, others experience tremendous violence, insecurity, and abuse (see also Diop et al., 2016; Ishii et al., 2020; Salama et al., 2018).

Most of these studies of the insecure, exploitative, and dehumanising elements of working and living in the Gulf focus on nationalities with a significant numerical presence. The narratives of the Ghanaian workers indicate that they face similar challenges and indignities, but insofar as food is concerned, the companies make no effort to accommodate the cultural food needs of this much smaller group of African workers. While it may seem that the migrant labour system deprives migrants of agency, this reading would relegate them to the status of victims who are incapable of resistance and response. In fact, as we highlight, this is a misleading characterisation. The quest for cultural food security motivates migrants to go to considerable lengths to buy foods imported from Ghana, even at exorbitant prices, patronise Ghanaian restaurants with familiar but expensive fare on the menu, arrange for new migrants and returnees to bring them cultural foods from Ghana, and find local substitutes for preferred ingredients. Additionally, the drive for a "sense of home" leads to various everyday acts of resistance, including clandestine cooking in the labour camps, avoidance of "food not fit for dogs" (as one migrant put it) in the industrial canteens, and leaving company employ altogether in favour of freelancing.

Conclusion

In this study, we have examined the character of cultural food insecurity and culinary estrangement among Ghanaian migrants in Qatar, as recounted by the migrants themselves. Having identified the common threads in the narratives using NVivo 12, we selected narrative excerpts that typify their perceptions and observations of the constraints and

challenges they face. Almost all migrants recounted examples of how they respond to cultural food insecurity through adaptive food practices. They adjust their diets, pool resources, share meals, and utilise community gatherings to maintain cultural continuity amid great uncertainty. Migrants also make sacrifices and limit their own food expenditure to support their family members in Ghana through remittances. Cultural food consumption is confined to episodic intervals, for instance, when migrants are paid their salaries or on non-working days, such as Fridays, when they can visit Ghanaian-owned restaurants and religious meetings, and purchase or share meals, making cultural access fragile and episodic. These strategies therefore ameliorate but do not eliminate profound cultural food insecurity. Rather, they serve as coping mechanisms that connect emotions, build solidarity, and challenge inhumane treatment.

Cultural food insecurity is also maintained across borders through remittance practices. Households in Ghana rely on remittances to support culturally appropriate diets, while migrants view remitting for food purchase as both a moral obligation and a means of upholding family roles from afar. These findings, along with other research in Ghana by Owusu & Crush (2024) and in Kenya by Ahmed & Crush (2025), contribute to emerging research on food and cash remittances, demonstrating how migrants actively influence household food security across nations, even when their own access in the destination country is limited. This transnational perspective broadens food security analysis beyond the national level, illustrating how cultural continuity and sense of home are negotiated across nation-states and regions.

This study's perspective on migrant motivations broadens the analysis by linking cultural food security practices to systems of labour control and governance, rather than reducing them to personal choices. In this way, food insecurity among Ghanaian migrants in Qatar reflects larger inequalities embedded in migration systems that regulate not just work but daily life. Recognising food access as structurally influenced challenges depoliticised narratives and emphasises governance as a key area for advocacy and action. Viewing food insecurity as more than calories consumed, but as a form of cultural deprivation, shows how migrants' food practices are influenced by governance, legal uncertainty, and structural barriers, while also functioning as strategies for daily survival and maintenance.

Finally, the research contributes to ongoing critiques of standard food security frameworks that fail to fully reflect the lived experiences of migration and transnational populations. This discrepancy exposes the limitations of food security measures that equate adequacy with caloric intake or purchasing power, raising concerns that standard indicators might conceal culturally rooted deficiencies. By emphasising food as a form of cultural access, this study supports research that argues that food security should encompass culture, social meaning, and agency, as well as nutrition. For migrants under restrictive labour conditions, lacking culturally appropriate foods is not merely a preference but an emotional need. These findings show the importance

of re-evaluating food security assessments in migration contexts where cultural alienation occurs alongside food insufficiency.

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